

As the 21st century dawns, it seems nearly impossible to follow developments in technology, business or journalism without encountering the word “convergence.” If we are going to think clearly about journalism’s present and future, we’re going to need to understand different meanings of this term and their implications.

Let’s start with a little history. From its origins in physics and mathematics (referring, for instance, to rays of light or non-parallel lines), the word “convergence” began to be applied to media and communications in the late 1970s or early 1980s. It won’t be easy to figure out who first used the term in this context, but communications scholar Ithiel de Sola Pool clearly helped popularize it. In his landmark 1983 book, “The Technologies of Freedom,” Pool wrote of the “convergence between historically separated modes of communication.” He argued that “electronic technology is bringing all modes of communications into one grand system.”

Pool conjured up an image of a future where all content would be stored digitally, delivered over a network and obtained through electronic devices. When the World Wide Web emerged some thought that this future was near. But a few years later, it seems clear that it still is quite some time away.

Most informational content is created and stored on computers. And more and more people are spending more and more time online. But while the Internet has changed people’s patterns of media usage, it is far from dominant as a distribution channel. Traditional media — especially television — occupies much more of the average American’s time than does the Web.

For complete digital convergence to become a reality, we’ll need to see technological changes in every stage of the information infrastructure:

- The use by media companies of digital content management systems to store and deliver information to multiple platforms.
- The proliferation of wireless Internet access.
- The transformation of television, as TV sets add access to the Internet, content storage capacity and the ability for viewers to interact with the screen.
- A new generation of portable devices that come closer to replicating the advantages of paper.

While these technology developments will take time to unfold, it’s already possible to use the word “convergence” to describe media companies, their organizational structures and the work of their employees. Within this framework, we can identify at least five different mean-

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ings of “convergence.”

At the corporate level, “convergence” means the ownership of multiple content and/or distribution channels. AOL Time Warner or the Tribune Co. would be examples of this **ownership convergence**. It’s a hot topic in the United States, where the Federal Communications Commission is reconsidering rules that prohibit cross-ownership of newspapers, TV stations and cable systems.

Ownership convergence does not necessarily require shared editorial decision-making or other kinds of collaboration across distribution platforms. Tribune Co., for instance, owned both a newspaper and a broadcast station in Chicago for decades during which they operated with very little interaction. But in recent years, Tribune has increased the amount of cross-promotion and content-sharing between print and TV. These kinds of activities, which became commonplace among U.S. newspapers and

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Illustration by Troy Cummings

TV stations in the 1990s, can be labeled **tactical convergence**.

Just as ownership convergence does not necessarily imply collaboration on tactics, tactical convergence between newspapers and TV stations does not require common ownership. In most markets, in fact, TV and newspaper partners are separately owned. The partners assume that cross-promotion will drive newspaper readers to watch the local news and TV viewers to read the newspaper.

The more aggressive the goals for convergence, the more likely that job descriptions and organizational structures will change. Here are a few examples of what can be called **structural convergence**:

- The Orlando Sentinel, which launched a 24-hour local cable news channel in partnership with Time Warner Cable, created a staff of “multimedia editors”

(most from broadcast backgrounds) who coordinate between the two newsrooms, arrange on-air “talk-backs” for print reporters and produce original TV programming.

- Startribune.com, the Web site of the Minneapolis Star-Tribune, hired a TV photographer and producer to serve as an online “multimedia reporter.” She covers news events, shoots video, takes still photographs and creates multimedia presentations for the Web site.

- The Indianapolis Star and WTHR-TV, the local NBC affiliate, agreed to share the salary of a “director of news partnerships” whose job was to foster content collaboration between print and TV.

Among journalists discussing convergence, no topic generates more heated debate than whether it is likely or desirable for individual journalists to report a story using multiple media tools. What I’ll call **information-gathering convergence** is particularly controversial for print reporters, who don’t see themselves becoming “backpack journalists” — being required to carry video cameras or audio recorders as they do their jobs.

Some reporters are already being asked to gather information in multiple formats. Consider the Topeka Capital-Journal, where reporters are routinely expected to tape-record their interviews and bring them back to the newsroom for presentation on the paper’s Web site.

With every new medium has come a series of conventions for presenting information — or, to put it another way, for telling stories. As we move toward Pool’s “one grand system,” it is reasonable to expect that **storytelling convergence** will evolve for each of the three new digital platforms: desktop computers, portable devices and interactive TV. We can

already find some interesting examples of new storytelling forms on the Web.

So where do we stand today? Convergence in media organizations is clearly most prevalent in its ownership and tactical forms. The progression toward information-gathering and storytelling convergence will be slow. But as it occurs, new kinds of jobs will need to be created, and many require new skills.

I’m still not convinced that we are moving into an era when a single journalist needs to do it all — report, write, take pictures, shoot and edit video, and present his or her stories on the Web. But in the converged media organizations of the future, the journalists who best understand the unique capabilities of multiple media will be the ones who are most successful, drive the greatest innovations and become the leaders of tomorrow. [E](#)

This article is adapted from a chapter Gordon wrote for an upcoming book tentatively titled “Digital Journalism: Views from the Horizon,” to be published by Rowman & Littlefield.