Failing to Communicate:
Learning from Failures in Convergence

Suzanne Berman
Hofstra University
suzanne.berman@hofstra.edu

Victoria Geyer
Hofstra University
victoria.geyer@hofstra.edu

Mary Ann Allison
Hofstra University
mary-ann.allison@hofstra.edu

Davis Folger
Brooklyn College

Margot Hardenberg
Fordham University

Barbara M. Kelly
Hofstra University

Robert Licata
Hofstra University

Ithiel de Sola Pool was among the first to describe what he called the convergence (community technology) modes. This paper reports on a roundtable discussion among communication scholars at the New York State Communication Association 2007 Annual Convention, where the theme was *Failing to Communicate: Learning from Mistakes*. Among the specific areas of interest were the communication processes, ownership, and mental models related to convergence as it relates to technology, civilization and societal impact. The first exploration is the discussion of the failures and disappointments arising from the convergence evident in the practice of journalism. This discussion then moves to the larger question of the failures and disappointment arising from media convergence and lack thereof throughout civilizations. The discussion concludes with lessons learned from examining the failures and disappointments of convergence and moves forward to hopes for the future.

Introduction

This paper reports on a roundtable discussion among communication scholars at the New York State Communication Association 2007 Annual Convention where the theme was Failing to Communicate: Learning from Mistakes. Among the specific areas of interest were the communication processes, ownership, and mental models related to convergence as it relates to technology, civilization and societal impact. Varying failures, lessons and future hopes for convergence were explored in this roundtable discussion. A discussion of parallel thought focused on journalists and media corporations failing to use the technology that convergence lends to enhance rational debate and cultural discourse. Instead, the lesson learned is that media and journalists today move toward sensationalism and entertainment. This discussion segued into the area of media ownership and whether the concept of interface convergence is akin to a business model of convergence. The discussion also focused on communication processes and how they relate to convergence of civilization past and present with specific discussions regarding mental models in civilization, an examination of communication processes before

convergence (specifically the Enlightenment) and today (specifically in academia) and how public relations practitioners and their audiences are communicating.

Failures and Disappointments Arising from Convergence in Journalism

Currently there is ineffective journalistic convergence within television production. Television networks are attempting to incorporate convergence into their traditional television programming formats, but their efforts are falling short. One specific example of this ineffective convergence production is evident in the program titled, *I Caught* on ABC. The introduction to this program featured news host, Bill Weir asking,

> *"Question. What happens when television and internet video come together in a whole new way? The answer. I Caught. So what is I caught you may ask? Well, we all know there in an internet revolution swirling around us 24-7 and you are part of this revolution, trust me…behind the videos there are amazing stories and that is where I Caught comes in...I Caught will report and try to put it in context."*

This introduction attempts to acknowledge the omnipresent cultural transition from traditional communication mediums to modern-day convergence. However, the majority of the stories portrayed on *I Caught* fail to meet the notion of "amazing stories." Rather, viewers watch various clips of mundane, mainstream entertainment. *I Caught* caught Filipino inmates dancing to Michael Jackson's "Thriller", a feature story following engaged couples learning how to dance, in order to appear professional on their big day, and another feature story which follows the rise to fame for Lisa Nova, an aspiring actress that made parody videos of famous celebrities on *You Tube* and later was cast in Fox's *MAD TV*.

Local news is another disappointment with the possibilities that convergence could lend to today's mundane, recycled local news rundowns. The local news outlets are missing the main ingredient of convergence –citizen journalism. Local news producers are utilizing the concept of citizen-journalism merely as an accompaniment to their traditional format, as opposed to embracing the revolutionary possibilities it can lend to more in-depth, quality reporting of the local news. Presently the anchors of local television news frequently remind their viewers to share their stories and pictures by e-mailing or uploading their photos and videos to their local news channel's website. When local news producers decide to use these user-generated videos and cell phone captured photos, what does the viewer see? Viewers watch video and photos of angered passengers on Jet Blue flights stuck on the tarmac at John F. Kennedy airport in New York. Where is the citizen journalism? Where is the video of a citizen reporting the story, in their words from the airport tarmac?

Failing to understand both the technological and social implications of convergence render this type of communication obsolete and inhibits the ability to discover new and potentially better ways of interacting not only through television, but across other media and cultures. According to Edelman's 2005 Trust Survey, peoples' trust has shifted from authority figures to "average people, like you." The average person does not want canned, neatly packaged messages; the average person wants to engage and be engaged in conversations."

The notion of adapting to a changing technological world is not a new idea. Marshall McLuhan suggests that the technological is merely an extension of ourselves contending,

> *"the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. Thus, with automation, for example, the new patterns of human association tend to eliminate jobs, it's true. That is the negative result. Positively, automation creates roles for people, which is to say depth of involvement in their work and human association that our preceding mechanical technology had destroyed. Many people would be disposed to say that it was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or message."* (McLuhan, 7.)

This same idea is evident today as we try to understand how the merging of many different types of information services will impact the kind of information we receive as well as our own capabilities of receiving it. Different mediums impact people differently. When we read a book for example, we imagine things and when we see something on television, the image is given to us. As pointed out by Caleb Crain in a recent article in *The New Yorker*. The mere choice of television over print is changing a nations' conversation with itself (139). Crain states that while it may be enjoyable to read a magazine whose principles you despise, it would be unbearable to watch such a television show. Therefore, in a culture so heavily based on visuals, we may be less likely to spend time with ideas we disagree with, ultimately limiting societal discourse.

Failures and Disappointment Arising from Convergence of Media

Has Neil Postman's claim that we are amusing ourselves to death become blatantly apparent in this whirlwind of convergence? Today's media is by and large owned by approximately five large entertainment conglomerates; Fox, GE, Disney, Time Warner and Viacom. The content on these media conglomerate's newscasts and primetime programming must sell advertising time, in order to become profitable for the business of these conglomerates. Thus, inhibiting the advancement of the depth convergence can lend to journalism. Are the media conglomerates providing the celebrity driven programming and entertaining clips on *You Tube* for the advertisers, rather than providing real news and new insight on social issues to their audiences?

Similarly, public relations practitioners are resisting allowing their publics to take the lead in creating messages, fearful that permitting them to do so could alter the organization's brand. Ironically convergence has isolated the communicators from their audiences. Have the communicators failed to recognize how to use a technology that could be so inclusive?

Failures and Disappointment Arising from Convergence (or lack thereof) of Culture

Important as technological convergence is, however, it often blinds us to the very important—and often invisible—convergence of culture that is arising, in large measure, from human immersion in electronic media and the inescapable messages circulating through global society. Despite scholars and observers bringing this cultural convergence to our attention (Allison 2005 and Jenkins 2006 as examples), it appears to be difficult for humans to focus their attention on these social rather than physical and technological changes. As civilizations converge, we are, in some cases appreciating and learning from each other, but in others, we are clashing, hating, and often destroying each other. Sometimes this is conscious; sometimes, not.

Since the days of the Scientific Revolution, there has been a need for classification, specialization, and analysis. This Revolution, which was so much a part of the Enlightenment, demanded that things be put into categories or classified, in order to be measured and understood. This process was simplified by the inventions of the printing press, with its linear approach to information, and the index, which provided conceptual linkage among the data.

The classification and categorization practices of the Enlightenment intensified in the Industrial Revolution of the 19th Century. The specialization of work within the factory was routinized and gradually spread to other industries: in the newspaper these specialties would gradually include the pressman, the typesetter, the reporter, the columnist, the editor and the publisher. Newspapers also began to offer specialized sections within an edition. In addition to news, opinion and classified ads, they added sports, fashion, entertainment, arts, science, comics, and the rotogravure - hiring content specialists to cover each field.

Education began to specialize in the 19th century as well when the one-room schoolhouse was remodeled on the factory plan, giving rise to grade-specific classrooms and textbooks, and high schools put students on an assembly line, going from teacher to teacher and room to room. Household spaces too became dedicated to particular function within the Victorian home, giving rise to terms such as nursery, scullery, chamber, morning room, study and den.

By the 1920s, practitioners in a variety of professions had begun to specialize as well. Doctors no longer treated the entire person, but focused on eyes, feet, bones, and organs, while lawyers specialized in corporate law, criminal law, or tort law. In that same period, however, a trend toward convergence was beginning in a number of areas. In domestic architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright was one of the first to articulate the process. Wright spoke often of a form of family life that would later be called togetherness but which might well have been called, convergence. His public areas – formerly parlors, dens, and dining areas - converged into a single area known as "living space." His kitchens, formerly private space, flowed into the living space. By permitting the specialized spaces of the house to merge, Wright and his adherents also began the breakdown of the boundaries between specialized activities, yet another form of convergence.

With the observation of our daily routine activities today, the implications of convergence become quite apparent. Office workers ride their train with laptops, typing away at work that has somehow converged with their journey home. Customers in a Penn Station coffee shop use a stool and table to access Starbucks' WiFi. A quick observation and one may see a man braced with a laptop, Blackberry and a cell phone, all in operation simultaneously. While dining in a sports bar, one can observe at least ten televisions broadcasting ice hockey, football, and baseball in defiance of the old, dedicated, seasons. At major supermarkets we are now able to buy items that historically had their own shops on Main Street.

So what will convergence mean to us, and to our way of life? The Enlightenment's categories, classifications, and boundaries may no longer be viable even in academia, where they originated. Universities and Colleges across the country have specialized academic departments, and having the qualifications to teach in one department almost automatically disqualifies a candidate from teaching in another. The generalist, aka the convergent, need not apply.

In Schools of Communication these specializations may break down into Journalism, Media Studies, Public Relations, or Speech Communication & Rhetoric, and Radio, Television, Video and Film, all of which maintain rigid boundaries. Yet as convergence intensifies, these boundaries may no longer serve the best needs of many of the students, whose future will lie in a

converged environment. Can Broadcast Journalism remain separate from Radio and Television? Where is the boundary between Rhetoric and Public Relations?

Programming and resources are neatly delineated as well, driven in part by the distribution of funds, or the numbers of students selecting a particular major. Even the terminology suggests that the barriers are unlikely to fade away soon. For example, are faculties "sharing" the resources, or do they "belong" to all of us? Is it a "video camera" or a tool for an on-site journalist? On such minor points are many battles waged.

Can the structure of the academy be a place for holistic education, bringing disciplines together? Or will the categories of the Enlightenment retain their hold on our thinking? And does it make any difference?

Lessons Learned in Media

In the communication field, specifically in public relations, until recently, organizations communicated with their publics in a two-way asymmetrical model as outlined in 1984 by public relations theorist, James Grunig (28.) This model employs social science research methods to increase the persuasiveness of a message. Although feedback is an essential part of this model, organizations are more interested in getting the public to comply with their agenda, then meeting the needs of that public. Fortunately, it was soon discovered that an aware public would not continue to be so malleable so a more advanced model was adopted. The new model was a symmetrical model that favors an approach where organizations and their publics adjust to each other. It stresses a two-way communications rather then a one-way persuasion. An extension of the symmetrical model is essential in this new era of convergence.

As media companies and the journalists working for these companies write within the platform of convergence, perhaps they too are taking away that very two-way communication model, which makes push-pull technology successful.

Lessons Learned in Civilization

On a larger scale, globalization is forcing a—sometimes welcomed, sometimes very unwelcome—convergence of civilization. Often we focus on the easier-to-see technological changes rather than the more complex and more difficult to analyze convergence of ideas, customs, and entire civilizations. When we do not explicitly attend to these changes, major schisms in society often arise. We do not, as a society or as a global species, converge. One historical example: Larson (2002) points out that the crusade against the theory of evolution didn't begin until the 1920s. Darwin (2003/1859) published the *Origin of the Species* in 1859 and evolution became the generally accepted theory in public discourse over the next few decades. It wasn't until the 1920s—when high school education became common in the United States—that the lack of convergence on this idea became visible.

Hopes for the Future

The new technology of today's converged world goes far beyond the machines of McLuhan's world. These technologies, particularly the Internet, have empowered the public in a

way that has never been seen before. The content, or the messages, are now being created, owned, deciphered and distributed by the public at large and the distinction between the organization and the public is becoming blurred. In this world, who then owns the message and who then, is in control of it? The public empowerment, derived from technology is forcing the media, and communicators of all kinds to re-examine their role and their models of distributing information. In order to embrace convergence, all communicators, from mega-media conglomerates and public relation practitioners to community leaders need to give their audiences access, dissent and the opportunity to simply share experiences (Talbot, 6.) The question we need to be asking is how can we use our technology and our skills to increase our ability to see, understand, and work with cultural divergences and well as convergence?

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