Media's online migration - will the Internet make traditional media obsolete?

Summary

This section looks at some of the changes that have taken place since the Internet started in the 1990s and asks if the Internet will make the media obsolete.

The Internet's launch in the 1990s generated a lot of research and predictions which painted it as a revolutionary utopian frontier with great potential to revolutionise the media. Technology gurus like Massachusetts Institute of Technology MIT Media Laboratory co-founder and director Nicholas Negroponte and others predicted a future where the transfer of media would be in 'bits and bytes and not atoms".
Others like John Pavlik, in technologically deterministic language, predicted that "in the future , there may be no need for a news organization at all", as "software packages are now available that will write stories automatically based on electronic data feeds transmitted directly by various news sources."[1]

Such predictions and glorification of the Internet set high expectations of the potential of the Internet and its impact on the media with some debates predicting the demise of traditional media at the hands of online media.

1 State of the Internet and the media

The Internet is now the defacto platform for news and the media is increasingly migrating online. As the media evolves from offline traditional standalone media like radio, newspapers and television to an online publishing platform, many new formats and characteristics are emerging

1.1 The Internet Now the defacto platform for news

The Internet is increasingly taking centre stage as the main tool for research, news production and distribution. Journalists, editors and news production staff in the media industry now use the Internet to deliver news in its various formats-audio, text, graphics, and video electronically or via bits and bytes as opposed to atoms, or hard copy (Negroponte, 1995). The media has become reliant on the Internet and some debates say it will eclipse traditional media technologies and make them obsolete.

> "The Internet has become a central part of all things media. From research, newsgathering, everyday communication to dissemination and distribution, the Internet is now a one-stop platform for the media. Increasingly, most media functions are now being re-tooled around the Internet"[2]

1.2   Rethinking Media formats

This paradigm shift from traditional to online media is causing a rethink of traditional media formats like magazines, newspapers and television .Online has become critical for all news media; most complement their traditional outputs with an online presence while others like the *Christian Science Monitor*[3] have changed from a daily print edition to a weekly print edition and a 24/7 daily online publication. The traditional news media migrating online are joining an increasing number of upstarts that have only ever existed online.

As the media evolves from traditional standalone media like radio, newspapers and television to an online publishing platform, new characteristics are emerging. These characteristics of digital and online journalism go beyond the traditional practice of journalism, newsgathering and dissemination and include many new elements

Newspapers like the *New Zealand Herald* for example no longer keep stories for their hard copy morning edition as has always been the tradition, but publish news as it happens on their websites. Likewise, television stations like Television New Zealand (TVNZ) will break a story on www.tvnz.co.nz first before it appears on their One News 4.30pm or 6pm bulletins unless it's an exclusive story. In essence, newspapers and television are now going head-to-head in breaking stories.[4]

2   The growth of the Internet and convergence

The convergence of computer technology and telecommunications is the main impetus that saw the creation of the Internet. The subsequent growth of the Internet is due to its end to end nature and the shortage of physical and economic barriers to entry

2.1   No barriers in participation on the Internet

The introduction of digital technology at the dawn of the Internet in the 1990s is seen by communications scholars as a contributory factor in the advancement of media and spurred the creation of a variety of digital professional and consumers products.
Added to that is the ease of participating and getting connected to the Internet, essentially just getting a computer and signing up an Internet account with an Internet Service Provider (ISP)

"The shortage of physical and economic barriers to entry thus enables a vast profusion of different voices. The principal scarcity on the Internet is attention-getting someone to actually notice whatever it is you have to say"[5]

This ease of participation is increasing the uptake of the Internet and its use and naturally media companies are following audiences online. In the year 2000, there were. 360 million Internet users and today (2009), this figure now stands at 1.668 billion which means one in four people in the world uses the Internet.[6]

From 1994, the Internet grew rapidly from an esoteric medium with a mere 500 websites to a user-friendly platform and by 1998 there were 2.85 million websites, reaching 100 million by 2006.[7]
Online migration by the media began in earnest before the end of the last millennium.

2.2   Web 2.0-A turning point

In 2004 the Internet took a turning point when the Web 2.0 platform was introduced. This platform enabled the deployment of a new generation of software and applications on the Internet which enabled interactivity and collaboration among stakeholders like content providers, internet users, publishers and developers.

"…Some of the characteristics often noted as descriptive of Web 2.0 include: blogging, RSS-generated syndication ,social networking sites like YouTube, Facebook ,mash-ups ,wikis like wikipaedia and other collaborative applications and interactive encyclopedias and dictionaries ,dynamic as opposed to static site content ease of data creation, modification or deletion by individual users advanced gaming"[8]

2.3   The Internet and Convergence

Like the telephone and telegraph before it, which drew upon the advances in electricity, the Internet also drew upon the advances in the development of the telephone and telegraph. The Internet, a convergence of computer technology and telecommunications (telephone) meant that anyone in the world with access to the Internet could communicate in real time. The telegraph, which preceded the Internet by at least 200 years, had made possible communication from point to point in the world, but this was not interactive.[9]**Error! Bookmark not defined.** Nevertheless, the telephone and the telegraph were critical technologies, which "conquered space and time and presaged many of the features of today's media world."[9]
As a result "Everybody was linked to everybody else"[9]

"The prophecy of convergence is this: television sets, telephones,

and computers—and the networks that bind them—are or will become the same. The Internet will be all."[10]

3   Will the Internet make other technologies obsolete?

As the Internet increasingly becomes the defacto platform for news and the media debates are now asking if the Internet will make traditional media technologies obsolete. That debate is highly contested

3.1 Glorification of new technologies

Glorification of new technologies is not a new phenomenon and is a widely contested debate. The birth of television in the 1930s for instance was greeted with optimism similar to that given to the Internet. In an article titled *"The Infant Grows Up"* published in the May 24 1948 issue, *Time* magazine sums up this instance.

> "Television is all the talk—and all the talk is big. Its enthusiasts are sure that it will eventually (maybe sooner) make radio as obsolete as the horse—and empty all the nation's movie houses…"[11]

3.2   Will the Internet make other technologies obsolete

Will the Internet kill broadcast television for example? This is highly contested issue; the technologically deterministic see the Internet eclipsing traditional media completely. Before the invention of television, other claims similar to the *Time* magazine one above were made: the introduction of radio for example was supposed to spell the end of newspapers:

> "…. Radio allowed for the audio collapse of space and time as reports could come live over the air from very long distances. This kind of geographic and temporal transcendence exceeded that of the telegraph and led to an initial insecurity among newspapers that feared for their eventual demise because of radio's timeliness. It also created a national audience."[12]

Newspapers, supposed to have been killed off by radio, are still going strong, and radio, supposed to have been killed by television, is still going strong. In a case of technological history repeating itself, some commentators suggest television and all traditional media are under threat from the Internet and that they will not survive in their current formats. They add that all media will migrate online and that non-journalists will play a larger role as news sources and providers

3.3 Is Television Dead?

So "Is Television Dead?" a research question at www.mobui.com asks. One of the 'Yes' answers comes from none other Vint Cerf, Vice president and Chief Internet Evangelist for Google[13] , the man who played a key role leading to the development of the Internet:

> "85 per cent of all video we watch is pre-recorded, so you can set your system to download it all the time," he said. "You're still going to need live television for certain things - like news, sporting events and emergencies - but increasingly it is going to be almost like the iPod, where you download content to look at later."[14]

Not everyone is convinced that the Internet will kill television, particularly at a time when television viewership numbers are growing. The Nielsen Company reports that American television viewers watched approximately five more hours of television in 2008 than in 2007 and noted that "TV use is at an all-time high..."[15]

The situation is the same in New Zealand where television viewing hit record levels for 2008.[16] These figures validate the argument by those who say television is not dying

Using historical analysis of technology, other debates say that each time a new technology is invented, wild claims of its prowess are made, only to be toned down or corrected after a while..

> "A new technology is a historically relative term. We are not the first generation to wonder at the rapid and extraordinary shifts in the dimension of the world and the human relationships it contains as a result of new forms of communication, or to be surprised by the changes those shifts occasion in the regular pattern of our lives."[17]

4   How far will the Internet transform the media

Based on the changes and challenges in the media so far, it is difficult to predict the future of the media and whether the online media will eclipse traditional media. What's known is that the Internet has considerably changed the way the media gathers and disseminates news.

4.1   The Internet –all the news you want for free 24/7

Traditionally, news was based on schedules in the case of broadcasting, or based on frequency in the case of publications and newspapers. While schedules and frequency have not gone away entirely, broadcasters and publishers now concentrate a great deal on their websites. On the online platform, television and newspapers now go head to head in breaking news as it happens, round the clock.

The Internet has become a source of free news and audiences are increasingly taking advantage of this and those buying newspapers are decreasing, a situation which has seen a fall in newspaper circulation in the last decade. With audiences spending more time on

the Internet, Radio, newspapers and television, the three main traditional sources of news are increasingly migrating online.

4.2 Advertising revenues online not enough to sustain newsrooms.

The challenge the media face however is that while the online platform is now important for their audiences, the revenues they're generating from online advertising cannot sustain the running costs of their newsrooms and are nowhere near the revenues they get in their media traditional formats. Advertising revenues from traditional media started falling way before the global financial crisis of 2008.This financial crisis further eroded revenues considerably and added fuel to the debate on the online migration of the media.

Media organisations globally have responded to the challenges of shrinking advertising revenues and profit margins by restructuring operations and in most cases reducing the sizes of their newsrooms.

4.3 Effects of online migration likely to hit television soon

For now most of the changes have been highly visible in the newspaper businesses which have been mostly affected by the switching by audiences to online news consumption. Debates abound over the future of television which so far has not been affected as much as newspapers due in part to the fact that the online alternatives to traditional television are still relatively inferior and offer a poor viewing experience.

Some of the debates says the growth of online television formats threaten the future of television and that it's only a matter of time before the service gets competitive and starts attracting audiences.

Television executives dismiss any such notion. They say that audiences or online users watch a few television clips online and are doing that over and above their traditional television viewing. The execs say that online is a great advertising space for television in that viewers use it to preview television programs they love and then watch them on television.

Television viewership figures seem to support this notion-television viewership reached a record high in the United States and in New Zealand in 2008.

4.4 Shortcomings of the television versus the Internet debate

There are no clear cut answers to most of the debates and issues on the future of television and the media in an era of increasing online migration. A series of observations and trends however can help understand what is going on. There are several issues that some of the television and Internet debates fail to factor in when weighing the two. Currently, television viewing is heavily skewed in favour of traditional television sets and not on the Internet for several reasons, the main one of which is the practicality of devices, that is the devices that are used to watch Internet television.

Television has existed for 85 years, and the Internet for 15, so television is well and truly developed unlike the Internet, a relatively new technology. Television is one device that can just be plugged in, ready to play, can be viewed by a family and usually takes pride of the place in a living room and offers a good picture quality and a good viewing experience. The Internet on the other hand requires a computer-a personal device which limits the number of people who can huddle in front of it. To be on the Internet requires good broadband speeds. Statistically, if we look at a country like New Zealand, as an example, (population 4.25 million people) , 98 per cent of households have got a TV set (which can be viewed by a family) compared with about 800 000 broadband subscribers most of whom have data caps on their broadband plans. This places a limitation on watching television on the Internet.

What makes the Internet a potential competitor to traditional television is the fact that "85 per cent of what television shows is pre recorded, which means that it can be downloaded on the Internet", according to Google's Vint Cerf . This can only get better once broadband limitations discussed above are resolved. Others say predictions are difficult:

> "The Internet has grown in a way distinctly different from any medium before it. As a result, it is difficult to predict how the Net will change mainstream media and to what magnitude. To say that media will undergo a "paradigm shift" might be an understatement." [18]

Again with technology there are many unknowns and predictions are difficult.

> "The wonderful thing about technology is that people end up doing with it something different from what was originally intended. It is this serendipity that underlies creativity in society and innovation in business" [19]

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