

Working with Convergence Journalists

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When one thinks of 18th Century publishing, Benjamin Franklin's era, the mental image is that of Ben scratching aphorisms on parchment with a quill, setting type by hand and pulling the press lever to ink broadsheets. Franklin was a "one-man band" who knew how to do everything in his "newsroom" including soliciting advertisements and selling news on the streets.

Welcome to the future. Although thousands of reporters still work traditionally in media conglomerates, there are a growing number called upon to use multiple media and to act as publishers by running their own blogs, for example. Not long ago, one could be a reporter/writer. Now, mainstream and new media journalists handle print, web, video and sound. They work in "convergence journalism", a euphemistic way of saying they are "one-man bands," much like Franklin but with a broader reach than Franklin ever had. Smart PR practitioners are adjusting to convergence journalism to make their media relations work more effective.

There always have been reporters in small markets who did everything in a newsroom, but the newsrooms tended to be of one type – newspaper, TV or radio. The difference now is that reporters at every level are expected to use multiple media. Take, for example, descriptions from recent job ads on the web site of *Editor & Publisher* magazine. There was a job for:

- A city beat reporter who would break news on the web and had to be proficient with "words, pictures and video."
- An Associated Press sports editor who had to coordinate with multimedia, graphics and broadcast.
- A "virtual" editor to oversee "all editorial content of the online newsletters and other online publications."
- A TV station web reporter to write news copy for TV and print.

There were several jobs for traditional editing, writing and reporting, but the number of listings for "jacks of all trades" was surprising. As one journalist said, "You can't just be a print reporter anymore." Even schools of journalism have gotten into the act. The University of Missouri offers "convergence journalism" with concentrations in information graphics, international journalism, investigative reporting, online journalism, photojournalism, print reporting, print editing, print design, television-radio reporting and television news producing.

Major media have moved into multimedia and convergence even though there isn't much revenue yet in it for them. That is why new journalists have less time but more ways to publish than before -- blogs, vlogs, columns, reportage, e-mail correspondence, live blogging. Accuracy is still at the heart of what they do, but it is harder to be in-depth under the pressure of multiple deadlines or no deadlines at all. (Live blogging is "you are there" journalism that is both dramatic and susceptible to error because it reports as events occur with no editor between reporter and reader to crosscheck what was written.) Journalists themselves have expressed concern that reporters rushing to meet online deadlines lose a chance to report stories more deeply. But, that hasn't stopped the move to new media and convergence:

- Sports reporters write stories for newspapers' online and print editions and run their own blogs. Newspapers like the Louisville Courier Journal are going to bat for their reporters to be able to blog in press boxes at games (see www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=31&aid=124649)
- Print reporters and photographers have been turned into videographers as an added duty and their images go straight to a newspaper's web page.
- A radio journalist placed his National Public Radio (NPR) sound piece online with photos and gained the most e-mailed story for 48 hours and one of the top 10 stories on NPR's web site for the a week. (See www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=101&aid=124679)
- Journalists are building searchable databases, maps and graphic representations or taking advantage of those that have been placed on the web such as *maplight.org* or *pollster.com*. They are stocking photo and audio galleries, timelines, maps, data-driven graphics, Q&A's', quizzes and games.
- Veteran TV news reporters have abandoned TV to launch specialty online news channels where they can report in greater depth. (See *StoryBridge.tv*)
- News organizations like Time Magazine have warned reporters to contribute more to its web site – or else.
- Media like CNN have launched user-generated video shows while the Washingtonpost.com has launched HD video podcasts.
- Major media have changed their entire newsrooms to take advantage of new media and convergence. (See <http://blogs.pressgazette.co.uk/editor/2007/04/03/multimedia-inside-the-new-telegraph-newsroom/>)

- Some media have done away with full-time journalists and gone to community-based news gathering, such as *ohmynews.com*. These journalists are amateurs in the best and worst sense of the word.
- Other media have returned to “roots” journalism and provide resource documents for others to use, such as *thesmokinggun.com* or *cryptome.org*. Documents come from government bureaucracies, courts and police beats, and the web has the space to accommodate an infinite number of them.

Consequences of convergence journalism

There are three immediate consequences of convergence journalism:

- There is less time to report stories when one is responsible for multiple media.
- There is more pressure to print stories that gain readership, if one depends on building readership as a publisher.
- There is less pressure to report “boring” but essential information with low readership, if one is a publisher.

Sensationalism builds traffic. See the *drudgereport.com* as an example of a self-appointed journalist who has built readership for himself with often gossipy stories. Unfortunately, Drudge’s approach to reporting does not apply to most journalism beats, which report for the record and not for traffic building. It is hard to self-publish and gain readers when one is looking at the inner workings of the Agriculture Department and pending Farm Bill, for example. This presents a conundrum for convergence journalists and PR practitioners. When one is self-publishing, there is a tendency to go where readers will follow rather than where a story should lead. For PR practitioners trying to get information out, there is a challenge in framing news to help convergence journalists do their jobs. How does one present information to interest readers and help a busy journalist?

Work with the convergence journalist

Basics remain in convergence journalism. There are three guidelines to media relations – accuracy, media service and deadlines. However, with more media outlets and less time, the guidelines are more important than ever. Essentially, PR practitioners should ask themselves what the message is they are sending, what is known about it and what needs to be known.

“Accuracy, Accuracy, Accuracy.” Joseph Pulitzer’s admonition in an age of converged media is a PR practitioner’s first task. There is no excuse for a PR practitioner to fail in providing correct facts about a product, service or

organization, or in supporting messages with relevant proof points. For the most part, facts should be stored on an organization's web site and open to all. The challenge is to keep facts updated and accessible. Press rooms can become cluttered over time, and because organizations change constantly, facts about them change as well.

The second task of accuracy is to provide a depth of facts to reporters that they don't have time to dig for themselves – that is, if information is not readily available on the internet. A major factor changing the work of new media journalists is the internet's depth of resources, but unlike the past when there was too little information, there is too much now. Often, material is not easily accessible or is wrong (from an organization's perspective.) Today, an organization's sins live forever online as do distortions: Source material can help or embarrass. PR practitioners should be eager to excavate information for journalists in order to circumvent the past, to rectify it or to add new information. One will hear resentment that a practitioner is doing a reporter's work, but there will be more of this as reporters produce multiple media with little support.

A third task of accuracy is transparency. Let facts carry a story. Eschew adjectives and adverbs. Deal with reporters straight up and openly and become known for that. A PR practitioner should sell but resist overselling, even if a story comes off as less than scintillating. The practitioner's task is to marshal facts to make a story interesting. That doesn't require hype but deeper understanding of a story and of its relevance to a journalist's target audience. This has always been true but is more important now.

More than ever, reporters are clients of PR practitioners, albeit reluctant clients who don't trust "flacks." It has always been true that PR practitioners stand midway between clients who pay them and reporters. Helping reporters tell accurate stories is a critical task in getting key messages out, and it is as needed as ever. The notion that one can "get around" to answering media calls is false in an era of convergence journalism. One should return calls promptly. A definite yes or no is better for a reporter than "we'll get back to you" without getting back. Tell reporters what their chances are rather than stringing them along. Letting the media know where they stand allows them to find other sources they need without being compromised by placing expectations on a source that won't produce.

Deadlines are often shorter and require more effort to meet. That is why PR practitioners should move more quickly. This means as well that.

- PR should have direct access to stores of facts that reporters need.
- Reporters should have access to those stores of facts as well, if they are not proprietary.

- Facts should be indexed or databased in ways that both PR practitioners and reporters can find answers quickly.

PR practitioners should make media information interactive – charts, graphs, searchable databases – to make the journalist’s job easier. Many are doing this by modifying traditional press kits, but the move now should be toward nontraditional press kits optimized for and placed on the web where media have rapid access to information with high data usability. Think web site first and traditional media second. A typical convergence press kit might include the following items, several of which require collaborative work with videographers, sound technicians and programmers:

- Blog entry on product, service or issue with links to resources giving greater detail.
- Press release with links to video clips of people quoted and resources giving more detail.
- Use of RSS (Really Simple Syndication) web feed for fast download and aggregation
- Downloadable color photos in jpg formats.
- Video clip for posting on YouTube or reporter’s web site that demonstrates the product, service or issue and is creative enough to go viral.
- Video clips of individuals quoted in materials.
- Links to resources needed for reporting a story in greater depth.
- Downloadable data in spreadsheets and/or databases.
- Case studies with links to companies and individuals who are the focus of the study. Video clips of interviews with these individuals
- Podcast discussing product, service or issue.
- Timeline tracking development of product, service or issue.
- Frequently Asked Questions with answers containing links to resources, video, audio and data that deepen the story.
- Promotional quiz or game with low-cost rewards for right answers.

There may not be a need for all of these items in every convergence press kit, but several of them might be desirable. Clutter can be an issue that works against one, so convergence press kit design is an important element. Kits

should be presented in a way that busy journalists can riff through them quickly for what they need to report and download elements rapidly without technical difficulty. This is easier said than done, especially if PR practitioners are new to convergence technologies. The simplest design is to use a document (press release or blog entry) as the central source with links to all other elements that hang from it like Christmas tree ornaments. In the process of reading the information, a reporter can also elect to go deeper where necessary and to download what he or she wishes to use.

A final task for the practitioner working with convergent reporters is to think global and not local. With the web, there is no local and one cannot fence data into one country or town. What goes on the internet is open to all and so it should be targeted that way as well. We saw in the early 2000's the breakdown of regional product announcements for a major electronics manufacturer. Specifications for product released in Japan were on the worldwide web instantly and available to enthusiasts in Norway, as well as California and Rio de Janeiro. Plan all announcements as world announcements with tailoring to specific audiences, even if the message to these audiences is that they will not get a product or service in the immediate future.

Convergent journalism provides more opportunity for PR but that also means more work. If PR practitioners are unafraid to take on the extra burdens of helping reporters who employ multiple media, they will reap the rewards of cooperation. As convergence continues to develop, practitioners will need to learn the skill sets reporters use in their jobs. PR in an era of convergence is lifelong learning.

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