De-converging the newsroom : Strategies for newsroom change and their influence on journalism practice

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of *de-convergence* to analyse recent changes in the newsroom at the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*. While the concept of convergence or multimedia journalism has been introduced worldwide, *de Volkskrant* decided to separate their print and online newsroom. In this *de-converged* model the traditional print journalist has made a comeback, no longer charged with multimedia tasks. *De Volkskrant* initially anticipated the digital age by developing a cross-media strategy in which an integrated newsroom would serve multiple platforms. However, the lack of a solid business model and cultural resistance of reporters hindered these ambitions. By creating a new digital newsroom for all the web titles the chain owns, it is argued that convergence on a vertical level (within a brand) has given way to horizontal convergence (within the publishing house). The article analyses the factors which influenced decision-making and how these forms of (de)convergence affect journalism practice and the newspaper brand. Findings are based on an in-depth ethnographic study.

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Newspapers are struggling with their online strategies. They want to embrace the opportunities offered by the internet and digitization, but have to balance the certainties of their present business model with the uncertainties of a digital future. In the past decade, key questions have been how to integrate websites as new platforms in daily practice and how to handle convergence and multimedia journalism (Boczkowski, 2004; Deuze, 2004; Fioretti and Russ-Mohl, 2009; Kolodzy, 2006; Lawson-Borders, 2006; Quinn, 2005; Quinn and Filak, 2005; Singer, 2004). Newspaper journalists suddenly had to serve a new medium with a different rhythm and news cycle, a distinct writing style and format, and a deviating set of norms. They had to anticipate different expectations of audiences than they were used to. Moreover, digital technology allowed papers to expand their scope and to integrate video and audio in written news stories. Some newspaper companies even expanded into multimedia enterprises. They acquired radio and television stations to truly work cross-platform (Dailey et al., 2005; Dupagne and Garrison, 2006; García Avilés et al., 2009).

At the turn of the 21st century, many scholars and news outlets around the globe had high expectations of the benefits that new technologies would bring. In the cross-media newsroom of the future, journalists of different platforms would be strategically cooperating and sharing content. Theoretically, a convergent and cross-media news organization can continuously target diverse audiences through different platforms with complementary and non-repetitious information. As such it can result in both better journalism and a lucrative business (Fioretti and Russ-Mohl, 2009; Lawson-Borders, 2006; Meier, 2007; Quinn, 2005; Singer, 2004). Conversely, research has also shown that convergence can be used as a strategy for cost reduction, and as such it can be a threat to quality journalism. Changes in production routines and the organization of the newsroom can result in a lowering of quality standards when fewer journalists have to think and work for multiple platforms and have less time to produce more stories (Fioretti and Russ-Mohl, 2009; Huang et al., 2004, 2006; Lawson-Borders, 2006; Meier, 2007; Quinn, 2005; Singer, 2004; Thurman and Lupton, 2008).

This study was prompted by the questions of how newspapers have anticipated the digitization of news in the past decade, how this affected news production and how journalists perceive these changes. To analyse convergence and cross-media strategies in-depth, we conducted a three-month ethnographic study at the Dutch national newspaper *de Volkskrant*. This quality paper was a trendsetter when it came to promoting convergence and cross-media journalism in the Netherlands. In 2006, an integrated cross-media newsroom was implemented in which news was distributed from a central desk to various outlets: the paper, various websites, mobile applications, an online video platform and – as was planned – a radio station as well (Mooij, 2011). However, in 2011, its publisher changed its strategy. They decided that print and online had distinctive dynamics and as such created separate newsrooms for both. The first focuses on producing the daily newspaper, while the latter produces content for the sites of all four Dutch newspapers the publishing chain owns. As a result, the newspaper and the websites are produced in splendid isolation by either print or online journalists who possess specific expertise and a distinct mindset (Tameling and Broersma, 2012).

In this article, we introduce the concept of *de-convergence* to analyse this current trend in the newsroom at *de Volkskrant*. In addition, we distinguish in our analysis

between what we call horizontal and vertical convergence. *Vertical convergence* takes place when a news organization integrates news production for multiple platforms in one newsroom to create a strong multimedia brand, like *de Volkskrant* initially did. *Horizontal convergence* means that a media company organizes news production in newsrooms catered to one specific platform (i.e. a newspaper, television, radio, a website, apps, etc.), but does so for multiple brands. This happens when, for example, a newsroom produces content for various print titles, or different websites are produced in one online newsroom, as at *de Volkskrant*.

By means of this specific case study, our study aims to reveal how strategies for a digital future affect journalism practice at newspapers. At the policy level, economic and efficiency reasons heavily influence decision-making about (de-)convergence. Journalistic reasons are, or become, subsidiary. Conversely, the actual implementation in the newsroom is mainly coloured by cultural issues. Therefore, in this article, we first ask why *de Volkskrant*, like many other newspapers worldwide, decided to focus on convergence and cross-media reporting. Consequently, we focus on the reasons behind the new strategy of de-convergence and the actual implementation of this policy. We then move on to the actual implementation of both the integrated and the de-converged model, and discuss how this was perceived by the editorial staff. Finally, we analyse how daily practices of journalists are impacted by de-convergence.

Our findings are based on a comprehensive analysis of the policy for newsroom change at *de Volkskrant* and a three-month, full-time ethnographic study. From February to May 2011 more than 400 hours in total were spent in the paper's print newsroom in Amsterdam, its political newsroom in the Hague and its online newsroom in Rotterdam. News processes were observed and meetings such as plenary meetings and daily editorial meetings were attended. Furthermore, internal policy documents were collected, as were emails, memos and other relevant written sources. Besides daily informal talks with journalists, 37 qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews of about an hour each were conducted that covered all levels of the news organization, from top management to reporters.[1] The research had full cooperation from the management of the paper and access to the newsroom, meetings and documents was allowed without restrictions.

Convergence and cross-media journalism: Fuzzy concepts

Since the mid-1990s, many scholars as well as observers from within the news industry have suggested that the newsroom of the future would be an integrated one (Deuze, 2004). Digitization, the rise of the internet and the increasing decline in circulation stimulated the search for new audiences and pointed towards the integration of various media platforms. A first strand of research developed models to map the different stages a news organization had to pass to become fully convergent. Although scholars recognized that there was 'no specific catch-all formula or model that fits every organisation' (Lawson-Borders, 2006: 167), the basic assumption was that only when this 'final' stage has been reached, would newsroom innovation be deemed successful.

The EU-funded MUDIA project (Aquino et al., 2002), for example, created a circular model wherein media organizations could eventually reach the phase of 'full convergence' (360°) after passing the earlier phases of *baby steps* (90°), *grass-roots*

initiatives (180°) and *multimedia integration* (270°). The convergence continuum, presented in 2003 as an 'instrument for measuring convergence efforts', also presupposed that media companies should aim for full convergence through the stages of *cross-promotion*, *cloning*, *coopetition* and *content sharing* (Dailey et al., 2005: 151). Finally, while noting that newsroom convergence is complex and cannot easily be 'modelled', García Avilés et al. (2009) distinguished three stages of media convergence: *coordination of isolated platforms, cross-media* and *full integration*. They concluded 'that reality is still different from wishful thinking' and that not every newsroom will reach the 'ultimate' stage of full integration (García Avilés et al., 2009: 301).

Our research into the development of convergence and cross-media journalism at three Dutch media organizations shows that convergence should not be conceptualized as a more or less linear process that is focused on full integration (cf. Tameling and Broersma, 2012). On the contrary, it should be perceived as an intuitive search for the best way to implement technological opportunities, while in the meantime balancing journalistic aims and profitable business models. In this process, policies are reconsidered and new strategies are implemented, because unforeseen consequences occur and economic, cultural and organizational parameters are constantly changing. At *de Volkskrant*, the 'long road to convergence' eventually led to a return to the point of departure. Economic factors were leading in that decision. As Pew's (2011) 'State of the news media' study concluded: 'In any scenario, one issue seems paramount: Money will to a large degree determine where things are going.'

A second strand of research focuses on the implications of convergence for journalism practice – on the pitfalls and opportunities. Findings are usually based on quantitative surveys (Filak, 2004; Huang, 2006), qualitative interviews with a limited number of journalists and managers (Achtenhagen and Raviola, 2009; Dupagne and Garrison, 2006; Thurman and Lupton, 2008) and increasingly on ethnographic research (Boczkowski, 2004; Cottle and Ashton, 1999; Erdal, 2009, 2011; García Avilés et al., 2009; Lawson-Borders, 2006; Meier, 2007; Singer, 2004). These studies present a fuzzy picture of a confused profession. On the one hand, many reporters are convinced that a multitude of news consumers can and should be reached through different platforms and at different times of the day. Sharing content, sources and ideas between different platforms is perceived as very useful and efficient for journalists. Moreover, they believe that being multimedia skilled can provide them with more job possibilities. While some journalists are insecure about their ability to obtain multimedia skills, others value the challenge (Dupagne and Garrison, 2006; Fioretti and Russ-Mohl, 2009; Kolodzy, 2006; Lawson-Borders, 2006; Meier, 2007; Singer, 2004).

On the other hand, journalists and scholars stress the negative effects of convergence and cross-media journalism. They argue that companies seize the opportunity to enforce efficiency in the newsroom and cut costs (Deuze, 2004; Dupagne and Garrison, 2006; Fioretti and Russ-Mohl, 2009; Lawson-Borders, 2006; Meier, 2007; Singer, 2004). The pressure enforced by the 24-hour news cycle on the internet and the requirements to work multiplatform 'reduce the editorial staff's time to research, report, and even think about their work' (Klinenberg, 2005: 55). Pew's (2009) 'State of the news media' report concluded:

> Those journalists surveyed, who come largely from websites linked to legacy media, also believe the Web is changing the fundamental values of the journalism – mostly for the worse. In particular, they are worried about declining accuracy, in part due to the emphasis online that news organisations are putting on speed and breaking news.

Recent studies on 'online-only' newspapers, a strategy to cope with economic and technological changes that is becoming more common, confirms these findings. A longitudinal case study of the *Christian Science Monitor* (Groves and Brown, 2011: 36), that ceased print publication and is now solely published online, for example, shows that 'staffers voiced concerns that quantity was winning out over quality in the quest for page views and unique visitors'. Thurman and Myllylahti's (2009) case study of Europe's first online-only newspaper also illustrates that there is a heavy reliance on agency copy and other external sources. There is less time to talk with sources and to check facts at web-driven newsrooms.

Many scholars and journalists thus fear that cross-media journalism is a threat to the quality of news and consequently to a media outlet's credibility (Fioretti and Russ-Mohl, 2009; Quinn, 2005; Singer, 2004). Because newsroom innovation is often perceived as a threat to traditional journalistic values, it invokes cultural resistance. This obstructs the change of mindset and newsroom culture that is necessary to stimulate cooperation with new colleagues and platforms (Dupagne and Garrison, 2006; Lawson-Borders, 2006; Meier, 2007; Quinn, 2005). However, many studies contend that a strategy that focuses on integrating various platforms and multi-skilled journalists seems, despite these concerns, inevitable. Newsrooms and journalists worldwide strive to become 'multimedia savvy' (Robinson, 2011; Usher and Riley, 2010), because they believe 'the future for journalism is to integrate all that the digital and online worlds have to offer, to improve and renew journalism for generations to come' (Jones and Salter, 2012: 173). From this perspective, the strategy of *de Volkskrant* to de-converge its newsrooms is remarkable. In this strict division between platforms and news flows, print journalists can practise traditional quality journalism without concerning themselves about with multimedia skills.

Multimedia newspaper branding as economic survival strategy

Strategies for newsroom innovation are to a large extent driven by economic considerations. Like many newspapers, *de Volkskrant* has to cope with shifts in audience demands and circulation loss. Readership declined from 366,000 copies a day in 1996 to 252,821 in 2006, when the paper decided to become a multimedia brand (Mooij, 2011).[2] The editor-in-chief and the editorial staff were increasingly worried that the newspaper would not survive in an age of digital news. Provoked by the rise of competitors and ongoing technological opportunities, the integration of new media platforms was regarded essential and inevitable to retain its leading position in the market and to become the most important 24/7 brand for news in the Netherlands. For this reason, the editor-in-chief reorganized the predominantly traditional print newsroom and turned it into a cross-media newsroom in 2006: 'If a consumer chooses *de Volkskrant* he wants to have more channels. He must be enabled to choose' (de Volkskrant, 2006: 15). Additionally, the publisher and the editor voiced their ambition to start television, radio,

(web)magazines and mobile devices as new outlets for the brand. They were both convinced that the investment in cross-media was necessary to anticipate digital developments. Contrary to other news organizations worldwide, the paper did not seize the opportunity to reduce costs by doing more with fewer journalists.

A spatial reorganization of the newsroom was considered the most effective instrument to implement the new cross-media concept (cf. Quinn, 2002). A new integrated newsroom was built in which editors of the old (print) and new (online) media were physically situated next to each other behind a central multimedia news desk. This repositioning of staff had to stimulate cooperation and emphasized that print and online were considered equally important now. At the same time, the management had to balance a current reality with future aims. Despite the loss of circulation, the newspaper was still profitable. 'We had profits of ten, twenty per cent a year. We were very rich. Imagine a company with that kind of profits', said the editor-in-chief who was in charge from 1995 to 2010 (Interview, 21 September 2011). Because the paper was the cash cow that funded the multimedia projects, it continued to take the lead in daily practice. This was made clear in a document in which the cross-media policy was announced:

> Reporters will spend 98 per cent of their time on newspaper productions. This also serves a commercial purpose because the print platform is lucrative. For now, this platform is more profitable than our multimedia projects. The strategy of *de Volkskrant* is based on reality: the newspaper is leading. (de Volkskrant, 2006: 10)

As a result, for almost all journalists print remained far more important than online. One of the print journalists explained:

> The newspaper is dominant in the newsroom. Online is just an extra platform, but it's different and not many people seem to be very concerned with the internet, not even the managers. (Interview, 7 April 2011)

Although the newsroom was physically integrated and reporters regularly published on the website, they never developed a firm multimedia mindset. This can be exemplified in a casual comment made by one journalist who stated that he had always considered 'the paper as my main responsibility' (Interview, 23 May 2011).

New initiatives and acquisitions to become a truly multiplatform brand turned out to be rather unsuccessful. The newspaper initiated a video platform, vk.tv, for which newspaper journalists were turned into video reporters and young journalists with video skills were hired. The team was assigned to make short news videos for the website. However, the considerable efforts and investments were not reflected in the number of viewers who watched the videos or the advertising revenues. The acquisition of the radio station Arrow FM turned out to be a small setback because its licence did not allow the station to substantially broadcast news. Finally, the plans for web magazines and mobile devices required substantial investments that turned out to be unfeasible when the company was hit by the financial crisis in 2008. In a period of shrinking profits and cost reductions, convergence is hard to accomplish (Cf. Quinn, 2005). The cross-media ambitions of *de Volkskrant* thus faded away.

While the ambitions for integrating radio and television within the newspaper organization seemed out of reach, the editor-in-chief was still determined to hold on to the integration of print and online. This strategy was continued until 2010, but when a new publishing house (de Persgroep, the largest newspaper chain in the Netherlands and Belgium) bought the paper in 2009, it stressed the lack of a (lucrative) business model for a multimedia brand. Moreover, it firmly believed that different demands of news consumers and advertisers as well as distinctive news values and deadlines made the integration of print and online pointless (Oremus, 2009). After its editor-in-chief had resigned in 2010, the curtain fell for *de Volkskrant*'s multi-media strategy.

De-convergence as strategy

The new de-converged (business) model that was launched in March 2011 crushed cross-media ambitions. The integrated newsroom was dismantled and all online editors were moved to a separate digital newsroom in Rotterdam, about 50 miles away. The day after they had left, only a few print colleagues openly made note of it, though there had been farewell drinks. One of them looked at the empty desks and simply said: 'Oh, I totally forgot but, of course, they have been moved to Rotterdam.' Another journalist concluded happily while he passed the desks: 'Oh well, now this whole new media thing is definitely over. It's just the paper that matters again' (Observation, 18 May 2011). The rest of the editorial staff did not comment on the move. They just continued what they had always done: writing for the newspaper.

The newspaper journalists in Amsterdam were told to focus on quality journalism while the online journalists in Rotterdam were expected to (re-)produce as many news stories as fast as possible. The former online editors of *de Volkskrant* (*vk.nl*) are now part of, what is disrespectfully called, a 'content factory' in which they team up with former online editors of the chain's other Dutch titles: national quality paper *Trouw*, local Amsterdam paper *Het Parool* and popular daily *Algemeen Dagblad*. The online newsroom is headed by a separate editor and is part of a new autonomous business unit called de Persgroep Online in which all digital activities are organized.

The online newsroom is staffed with 10 newly hired and relatively young and inexperienced journalists. Every morning these web journalists decide who will cover specific topics for all four papers during that day. They continuously scan the wires and other relevant news media on the internet. In a chat program they communicate about the stories they select, and it is the coordinators of the four websites that decide if a story is published on a specific site:

> *Online editor:* I've got a story from Reuters this morning about Alzheimer's. Anyone interested? About 28 million of the nearly 36 million people living with Alzheimer's and other dementias have not been diagnosed.

> *Website coordinator:* Alzheimer's is of course totally *Volkskrant*! … I think it's interesting, so put it online. (Chat, 13 September 2011)

If they decide to publish a story on (one of) the websites, they simply rewrite some sentences, change the headline and add a picture to it. The journalists are not supposed to check facts by phone. There are only four phones in the whole newsroom: one per eight or 10 desks, with all four having the same phone number. When the phone rings, which does not happen very often, the journalist who picks it up has to shout loudly over the news floor to find the colleague needed.

The '*newsroomies*', as the newly hired journalists are being called, are expected to produce 200 news articles per weekday and at least 100 stories on Saturdays and Sundays (de Persgroep, 2011). Therefore, efficiency is an important selection criterion. Stories selected should have a certain 'journalistic quality (content, style, language) so any further editing is not necessary' (de Persgroep, 2011). News on important current events is simultaneously published on all four websites in exactly the same words and a similar layout. Additionally, for every website so-called unique selling points (USPs) are specified. While *vk.nl* is focused on politics, opinion and culture, *ad.nl* pays more attention to sports and showbiz, *trouw.nl* to news about religion, philosophy and the environment and local newspaper Parool.nl focuses on news about Amsterdam. Two designated news coordinators and six editors, who worked before in *de Volkskrant*'s integrated newsroom, produce 'unique' content that has to stress the USP of *vk.nl*. They have to make sure that the site, at least to a certain extent, links up to the reputation of the newspaper and the brand in general (de Persgroep, 2011).

This new de-converged model is mainly driven by economic motives and focuses on efficiency. The main goal of this business unit is to make money with online activities that had always been loss-making. De Persgroep invested in the project by hiring 10 new, relatively cheap but still pricey editors because it expects that the new business unit will be profitable within a few years. This would mean that the sites are able to compete with the three most popular news websites in the Netherlands, i.e. web-only news site *nu.nl*, public broadcaster *nos.nl* and popular newspaper *telegraaf.nl*. The generated traffic is expected to attract and retain advertisers for de Persgroep Online.

Cultural resistance

The de-converged strategy initiated by the publishing house hardly caused any protest from print or online reporters. However, during the years of convergence (2006–2010), the cross-media policy evoked quite some opposition. As argued in much research, changing journalistic culture and the mindset of individual reporters is one of the biggest hurdles to jump (Deuze, 2004; Lawson-Borders, 2006; Quinn, 2002, 2005; Singer, 2004, 2008). A converged newsroom urges journalists to relinquish old traditions and routines and to 'develop new habits toward doing their jobs so they can work together' (Kolodzy, 2006: 29). At *de Volkskrant*, the large majority of reporters did not intend to develop a multimedia mindset. In the interviews, some print journalists argued that being a radio or television reporter is a totally different profession. Producing news stories for the website, even when they contained just text, met resistance as well. One of them aptly summarized: 'It feels nicer to see my work being published in the newspaper than seeing it being published online. The internet is not really my cup of tea' (Interview, 24 March 2011).

Even when it became compulsory to work for both the newspaper and website (de Volkskrant, 2008), many print journalists distanced themselves from online activities or only reluctantly performed these new tasks. They were used to one deadline a day and working with ongoing deadlines for the website interrupted their daily routines. Moreover, print journalists simply did not see how they could add value to the online platform. The internet forces them to be as fast as they can and to (re-)produce news facts but, in their view, competing with the wires does not make sense to them:

> Online journalism is about being fast. If you want to publish the news online as soon as possible, you aren't able to add more information to the bare facts than is provided by the wires, because that takes time. I have to make phone calls for that; otherwise I only can reproduce the story from the wires. In my opinion, that's a waste of time. (Interview, 7 April 2011).

Newspaper journalists have a whole day to gather information that can be added to the bare facts. They feel they provide readers with exclusive knowledge by contextualizing the news. The current deputy editor of *de Volkskrant* argues that this is the most important task of a print journalist:

> Newspaper journalism is a totally different profession. You take your time to consider the story, make phone calls with a few people, and complete the story to get to the truth. For the newspaper, there is only one deadline a day. At that moment we have to be at our best. (Interview, 25 May 2011)

The majority of reporters therefore argue that they cannot combine online and print journalism. They prefer slow journalism that contextualizes news facts to fast factual stories. Asking them to interrupt what they perceive as their main task, i.e. writing quality articles, to produce press agency in their words, type stories for the website is seen as a waste of time and effort:

> Online is about short news stories; people don't read longer stories online. Only with those longer stories I can make a difference, as opposed to online coverage. Our online editors will tell me: 'we don't need your background information, we are a news website, we don't need your specific knowledge to provide context'. (Interview, 29 March 11)

One could argue that these reporters do not want to change their daily habits and are reluctant to work for the website. Fioretti and Russ-Mohl (2009), for example, argue that journalists are conservative by nature; they want to change the world but not their own traditions and routines. However, there seems to be more at play. As Deuze (2004: 145) has argued, journalists are willing to respond to new developments, but they 'want to have a feeling that changes are somehow beneficial to them'.

With hindsight, the lack of a clear businessmodel for cross-media journalism and the half-hearted top-down communication of the management hampered change. The newsroom was integrated but news production was not. The interviews revealed that reporters felt that tampering with the medium that was (the most) profitable did not make sense. Recurrent discussions popped up about, for example, the front page being

composed of news that 'had been given away for free' at the website a day earlier. More-over, when they produced stories for the website they could not write for the newspaper, which felt wrong. When print and online were eventually separated again, journalists felt the new editor-in-chief, who had earlier opposed the cross-media strategy of his prede-cessor, agreed with their mainly covert but at times openly voiced conviction that online was of minor importance.

The strategy of de Persgroep acknowledges observations of scholars that online journalism indeed differs and can, depending on the online strategy, be done by less qual-ified journalists. Singer (2008: 127), among others, argues that less experienced staffers can keep the website updated: 'The role of overseeing such work is largely a managerial one, involving primarily organisational and technical tasks.' The additional online jour-nalists who were hired to work in de Persgroep's de-converged newsroom are less skilled and have less expertise than the experienced newspaper journalists. Moreover, the editor-in-chief of the online newsroom confirms that running an online news platform does not necessitate extraordinary journalistic skills:

> What we do in the online newsroom can be done by everyone. If the boss of Free Record Shop [a chain of entertainment stores] wants to do this tomorrow and hires about 15 suitable kinds of journalistic people he can do it as well. What we do isn't particularly special or difficult. (Interview, 3 May 2011)

That's also why the designated online editors of *de Volkskrant* are happy that they can leave the general news aside and focus on the unique selling points of their site. 'I'm done with the kind of online journalism we have practised in our former newsroom model. In the new model, I can focus on politics, what I prefer to do' (Interview, 12 May 2011). They envy the opportunity to specialize and to produce their 'own' stories instead of reproducing content or creating *shovelware* (cf. Boczkowski, 2004; Paterson and Domingo, 2008).

Although the designated online editors are positive about their new working environment, they do feel they are less valued than their print colleagues. They were, for example, quite disappointed the day after the editor-in-chief of *de Volkskrant* had discussed the news coverage of Osama bin Laden's death in one of the most popular talk shows in the Netherlands (*De Wereld Draait Door*). Asked by the talk show host why readers had to wait about 24 hours for news updates and background stories, he stated that excellent newspaper coverage was worth the wait. He did not mention 'his' news website, which had been updated all day with live blogs, time lines and all kinds of stories by the online newsroom in Rotterdam. The online editors who had worked their hats off were heavily disappointed that the editor-in-chief of 'their' brand had not promoted the website on prime time television. They felt that out of sight, might also mean out of mind.

Print journalists too feel there is a downside to de-convergence. While most of them are kind of relieved that they are not expected to (re-)produce online news stories any-more, if they ever did, paradoxically they do regret the move of the online editors to a separate newsroom. They believe the paper did benefit from the continuous alertness for news and the fast pace that characterizes the online platform. One of the coordinators of the central desk explains that the physical proximity of print and online sitting at the same desk in the former integrated newsroom kept each other alert:

> They asked us quite regularly: have you seen this or that? Or people from the newspaper came to the central news desk with news that the online editors could use for the website immediately. We were helping each other in that respect and that worked out very well. (Interview, 22 May 2011)

The deputy editor agreed and furthermore emphasized that the online journalists were not just focused on the traditional wires but also gathered news from alternative outlets like blogs and social media. He considered this an added value that could inspire the more traditional print journalists. Incidentally, online editors also contributed articles about new media and technology to the newspaper (Interview, 25 May 2011). Conversely, print journalists felt responsible for the website. During the fieldwork in the newsroom we observed that reporters walked by the online editors several times a day. When they had (breaking) news, they would let them know. One day a crime reporter made sure, for example, that a story about an assault was turned into a story for the website as well. When newspaper reporters spotted errors online, these were mentioned and corrected. One of the coordinators of the central desk therefore argued that the separation of print and online caused more inaccuracies on the website (Interview, 22 May 2011).

Implications of de-convergence for journalism practice

Although our results are based on the first six months of the new de-converged model, some initial conclusions can be drawn about the consequences for journalism practice at *de Volkskrant*. First, the new online newsroom has its own editor and this implies that the editor-in-chief of the newspaper is not in charge of the online platform *vk.nl* anymore. While he officially still has jurisdiction, his colleague heading the online newsroom is responsible for all the editorial decisions concerning the website. In practice, their views and interests do not always match, and theoretically, it is even imaginable that they will be faced with a fundamental conflict of interest. The editor of the online newsroom admits that indeed minor conflicts every now and then take place:

> Sometimes newspaper journalists react on headlines or pictures that are published on their newspaper's website. They're wondering: 'Is it necessary to do it like that? We would never do that in the newspaper.' I'm telling them: 'No, we wouldn't, but we're not doing it in the newspaper, we're doing it online.' The online platform has to deal with other conventions. (Nab, 2011)

There seems to be very little cooperation and communication between the two newsrooms. Moreover, when the researcher, after the fieldwork in the online newsroom, returned to the newspaper in Amsterdam, journalists were puzzled when she told them she had been in Rotterdam. What, they wondered, has she been doing there? They had to be reminded that their former colleagues now worked in Rotterdam. In subsequent conversations, they every now and then asked questions about the daily routine in the online newsroom. They were not aware of this because they had not been in contact.

Second, as a consequence of the de-converged model, a separation of knowledge has taken place. The print journalists of *de Volkskrant* are mostly specialists. During their

career they have acquired expert knowledge in specific fields such as finance, health care or politics, which enables them to provide context to the bare news facts. They have built a large network of possible sources where most of their news comes from. This collective knowledge is an important asset of the newspaper. It makes its content (more) unique and distinctive from other (free) news sources. Online editors, on the other hand, are mostly generalists. They aggregate free news of which added value comes from the pace in which it is published and the quantity and variety of available news items.

The online editors who are working on the brand's unique selling points are somewhere in between. They are expected to cover general internet news during regular morning, evening and weekend shifts, but also to specialize in culture, politics and opinion. As a result they can only cover their specific beats irregularly. Working on one article for a whole day, or even a number of days, which is common at the paper, does not fit online journalism practice and the culture of the online newsroom. To overcome these difficulties, and to benefit from their knowledge and expertise, the designated online editors try to keep in touch with their print colleagues. The online editors who focus on politics aim to work in the paper's political newsroom in the Hague for two days a week, while those focusing on opinion and cultural pieces aim for close contact with journalists working on the same topics in Amsterdam.

The diverging rhythms of online and print and the different standards of both platforms thus cause a fundamental difference, which in fact could harm the uniformity of *de Volkskrant* as a brand. This is acknowledged by de Persgroep. A statement of principles says that the identity of a website should not conflict with that of the paper. On the contrary, the site should support its 'sister medium' while the paper should feel confident to forward its readers to the site (de Persgroep, 2011). However, conflicts can easily happen in daily practice. To be lucrative, the website wants to publish news as soon as possible, even when facts are not checked or stories are based on just rumours. The quality newspaper, on the other hand, can be especially profitable when it provides high standard news stories. In other words, the 'best' and most unique articles are exclusively available for print, while the free online platform is the aggregator of fast omnipresent news items that do not always obey the quality standards of the paper.

Third, from a more general perspective this de-converged model challenges the multiplicity of the news landscape and might as such undermine the diversity of information and opinion that is essential for a well-informed citizenry. *Vertical* convergence within the *Volkskrant* brand, i.e. integrating various platforms within one newsroom and applying various outlets to target different audiences, has been stopped. Now the publishing house is implementing a new model of *horizontal* convergence in which it clusters the different outlets (newspapers and websites) of its various brands. All Dutch and Belgian newspapers are using the same content management system (*QPS*) now, while all websites use *Editor*. This encourages the exchange of content at the level of the platforms. While the four websites are fully sharing content, also with their online Belgian counterparts, de *Volkskrant* now occasionally shares articles with the Belgian quality paper *De Morgen*. In this new convergence model the brands become less distinctive which could possibly lead to an increasing level of homogeneity of the news supply and public debate in the Netherlands.

Conclusion

At the start of 21st century many scholars and media professionals believed that a converged newsroom was the ultimate answer to digitalization and the rise of the internet. Reaching the stage of 'full convergence' (Dailey et al., 2005) or 'full integration' (Aquino et al., 2002; García Avilés et al., 2009) seemed to be the final destination in the search for cooperation between different platforms and media organizations. The editor and publisher of *de Volkskrant* initially embraced these conclusions. They implemented a converged newsroom and developed plans to turn *de Volkskrant* into a cross-media brand with multiple outlets. But after five years, and a change of management and ownership, the company changed its strategy. It de-converged the newsroom and ended vertical convergence within the brand. Print and online now have their own newsroom with specific journalistic standards and values. Consequently, a model of horizontal convergence is implemented by the publishing house. The exchange of content in this new model is organized at the level of platforms: the websites are integrated in one newsroom and business unit, while newspapers are encouraged to share articles.

The main reason for the failure was the lack of a solid business model in combination with cultural resistance in the newsroom. After initial enthusiasm, many journalists eventually did not see the added value of cross-media journalism. Producing news stories for an online platform is (still) seen by print journalist as secondary in the hierarchy of journalistic practice. Print journalists wonder why they should spend time on a medium that does not make money and does not seem to value their expertise and skills. De Persgroep has seized upon these sentiments to de-converge the integrated newsroom. The publisher is convinced that newspapers and websites are distinct media with a different rhythm, news culture and business logic. Separating them into distinct organizations should make it possible for both media outlets to focus on their individual strengths and values, and to make both platforms profitable in this new model.

One of the early advocates of convergence, John Pavlik (2001: xiii), argued that 'convergence merely holds the promise of a better, more efficient, more democratic medium for journalism and the public in the twenty-first century'. The experiences of *de Volkskrant* prove that this was overly optimistic. A clear division of skills, expertise and knowledge is taking place in journalism practice. High quality news is produced by specialists for the newspapers, while generalists aggregate fast and free available news for the website. A mutual social environment in which knowledge is shared is lacking. Both platforms are operating under the same brand but they obey to different journalistic standards and are producing different products.

By de-converging print and online, *de Volkskrant* seems to have abandoned the ambition of quality journalism on a variety of outlets. It accepted the apparently supposed 'laws' of online journalism and is now reproducing as much content as fast as possible on its website, while forsaking active fact checking and investigative journalism. To balance this, the designated editors add more unique and focused content to the sites to target the specific audience of a brand. The distinction between print and online seems to be welcomed by the majority of *de Volkskrant* journalists, who acknowledge that working for the website necessitates other skills. Others do regret the de-converge of the newsroom and thus are sceptical about what will happen to 'their' website and the *de Volkskrant* brand.

In the past decade, a general concern has been voiced in scholarship that convergence could as well lead to a diminishing diversity of voices and an ever-escalating race to report the news as soon as possible (Fenton, 2010; Pavlik, 2001; Singer, 2008). Exactly this seems to have happened in the de-converged online newsroom of *de Volkskrant*. The newspaper's standards of quality journalism are not applied online. Instead of adding new voices and angles to print content, the website is reproducing newspaper copy and omnipresent free news just as other competitive media organizations are doing. It results in the homogeneity of news and a shrinking variety of voices (cf. Redden and Witschge, 2010). Finally, while the content of the print and online outlets of *de Volkskrant* diverge, the news on the websites of the four competing de Persgroep brands is becoming more similar.

Many scholars have argued that the new media environment affects the quality of journalism negatively and leads to varying standards of production. Kovach and Rosenstiel even argued that a new *mixed media culture* has 'diluted the stream of accurate and reliable information' (1999: 3). In the case of *de Volkskrant,* this interpretation is way out of proportion. However, the stories its online newsroom is producing are mainly based on the wires and accounts from other media. While many (offline) outlets use these sources as a starting point for reporting, online media tend to treat them as the final story. It is being reproduced without any further investigation or fact checking. *De Volkskrant* is far beyond unique with regard to this kind of online journalism. Paterson (in Paterson and Domingo, 2011: xiv) argues that 'most of the news stories produced online are mere clones of agency wire copy'.

This case study shows that convergence and cross-media journalism are still in a state of flux. While most newsrooms are aiming to integrate platforms, or decide to stop the presses to go 'online-only', our findings indicate a third strategy to tackle the most pressing problem for newspaper companies worldwide: how to find a solid business model for online news without eroding present profits. In the new strategy of de-convergence at the brand level (*de Volkskrant)* and subsequent horizontal convergence on the level of the publishing house (de Persgroep), print and online are considered two different businesses and distinctive branches of journalism. Cross-media journalism has been abandoned and the traditional print journalist has made a triumphant comeback. However, our results indicate that this leads to a divide in journalism. The newspaper upholds the traditional journalism standards of reliable news in the public interest that is important to citizens. The website presents as many articles as possible to news consumers who are looking for the latest headlines. On the one hand, one could argue that the news production naturally adapted to the media characteristics of the internet and the print newspaper by using them as an outlet for fast and slow news respectively. On the other hand, journalism practice in the online newsroom differs that much from the practices of print journalists, that the uniformity of *de Volkskrant* as a brand and its reputation as a quality medium is subordinated to economic considerations. While scholars argue that the quality of journalism might suffer as a result of convergence, the strategy of de-convergence as it is employed in this case also raises questions about the credibility of a news brand and the sharp divide between journalistic values on- and offline.

Notes

1. To assure interviewees that they could speak freely and thus maximize the research outcomes we promised to quote them anonymously. We will only refer to them by means of their function.
2. Figures about the number of online visitors during this same period are not available due to the absence of (reliable) statistics.

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