

Abstract

A five-year case study of an established regional newspaper in Britain investigates journalists about their perceptions of convergence in digital technologies. This research is the first ethnographic longitudinal case study of a UK regional newspaper. Although conforming to some trends observed in the wider field of scholarship, the analysis adds to skepticism about any linear or directional views of innovation and adoption: the Northern Echo newspaper journalists were observed to have revised their opinions of optimum web practices, and sometimes radically reversed policies. Technology is seen in the period as a fluid, amorphous entity. Central corporate authority appeared to diminish in the period as part of a wider reduction in formalism. Questioning functionalist notions of the market, the study suggests cause and effect models of change are often subverted by contradictory perceptions of particular actions. Meanwhile, during technological evolution the 'professional imagination' can be understood as strongly reflecting the parent print culture and its routines, despite a pioneering a new convergence partnership with an independent television company.

Keywords:

Online news, adoption, internet, multimedia, technology, news culture, convergence

Introduction

The regional press in the UK is often depicted as being in a state of acute crisis. Its print circulations are falling faster than ever, staff numbers are being reduced, and the market-driven financial structure is undergoing deep instability. The newspapers' social value is often argued to lie in their democratic potential, and even if this aspiration is seldom fully realized in practice, their loss, transformation or disintegration would be a matter of considerable concern. While digital developments have been regarded as either contributing to crisis or providing a mode of salvation, what is certain is that the internet

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infrastructure is, firstly, inseparable from the media struggle to stay competitive, and secondly, that its presence has broken the classic geometries of media financing.

This study assesses one newspaper's evolving attitudes and practices towards digital opportunities. Its intention is to identify the discourses of journalists in the newsroom culture in a specific period 2006-2011. The period mirrors the second wave of web technologies (Web 2.0) when internet bandwidth increases spread in the UK population and many new social practices of internet use appeared.

The Northern Echo newspaper like much of the UK regional press, belongs to a chain of 17 paid-for titles assembled during a long period of concentration in patterns of ownership in the UK. The title is arguably characteristic of the paid-for UK press, being among those with larger circulation, commercially driven, centred on local communities, overtly neutral, and corporate-owned and run. Practices, organizational principles, and even news sense would correspond to those in many UK regional morning and evening papers. By its morning publication, it belongs to a subset of 19 regional titles that go head-to-head with the national press. Their niche is defined, according to Aldridge, (2007) partly due to 'an unusual level of self-containment.'

In 1921 the Echo was bought by Westminster Press and, after several evolutions, it is now owned by the media company Gannett Company Inc., the largest newspaper-owning company in the U.S.. Newsquest, a subsidiary of Gannett, controls its UK newspaper interests and Newsquest North-East supervises the Northern Echo and its stablemates, such as the Darlington and Stockton Times. Once described as 'the great daily of the north-east,' the paper has had illustrious moments. Its founding editor was the pioneering journalist W.T. Stead and Sir Harold Evans is a more recent luminary. It continues to win awards for quality journalism, especially in the north-east, and its website was in 2011 growing faster than the average in Newsquest titles.

Although the regional press employs most of the paid-for journalists in the UK, its online activities are not closely studied despite an expanding literature on UK national newspapers (e.g. Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Singer and Ashman, 2009a). Temple (2008) pointed out that regional papers were slow to develop websites, adding that their video online was 'uninspired'. In a study of Johnston Press, Singer (2010) found journalists were anxious about user-generated content and protective of their traditional roles. UGC was a valuable extra but needed monitoring if their jobs were not to be undermined. Williams and Franklin, (2007) record ambivalence towards 'web-first' policies in the Trinity Mirror group, replicated below, in a context of shrinking workforces and circulation decline. Focusing on social media, Dickinson (2011) examined uses of Twitter in a regional press newsroom, which was seen by journalists as an important tool for building audiences and source relationships. Differing histories and structures of national and regional press in the UK means their understanding or uses of technology should not be assumed as parallel in speed, direction, or given purposes, and so, by implication it may be imprudent to generalize to the regional press any patterns seen in titles such as the Guardian, Telegraph, Daily Mail, or Sun newspapers, to mention a few with impressive online offerings.

The editorial culture of the Northern Echo evolved over five years responding to perceived pressures or opportunities from inside the organization at Darlington, or from its parent companies in Britain or the U.S.. Mapping the way the journalists frame the interior and external world in relation to digital change is an overall research purpose which can be conceived as a close-up inspection of the evolution of the journalists' conceptions of professionalism, markets and technology. These and other frameworks will be first considered in the context of previous scholarship and theories.

The double vision of professionalism

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The ethos of journalistic professionalism is a site of critical discussion and contest, especially in the UK where the notion of craft has closely rivalled that of the professional. This complex term is evolving in discourse of journalists themselves – and critical scrutiny reveals a scene of instability. Professionalism is most usually seen in journalism studies as involving certain ‘traits’ to be present, or absent, in different clusters of workers, but Aldridge and Evetts (2003) point out it is increasingly an instrumental managerial discourse to effect change and social control, rather than a set of values that might sustain journalistic independence. In this context journalists in Britain are losing their previous sense of social marginalisation, preferring the respectability implied by the term professional. For some academics, the perspectives on professionalism reflect tensions between those who primarily perceive transnational commonalities (e.g. Donsbach and Patterson, 2004; Splichal and Sparks, 1994; Deuze, 2005) and many others, who highlight regional and national nuances and differences in journalism cultures (Esser, 2008; Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Hanitzsch, 2007, Preston, 2009). Such divergencies may be accentuated through the choice of terms to define newsroom or news culture. Globalisation is probably working to harmonise aspects of these cultures although Hanitzsch (2007) cites Asian journalism models that display alternative value structures. On the side of those who emphasise stability irrespective of environmental context (e.g. Splichal and Sparks, 1994; Domingo, 2008a; Hermida and Thurman, 2008), professionalism can be portrayed as being internalized and as being persistently reproduced in editorial cultures with its own forms of inertia – sometimes termed inherited symbolic capital (Kunelius and Ruusunoksa, 2009). In Britain’s market driven news ecology, it is most usual for journalists to consider themselves outside professions proper (Aldridge: 2007 :141).

Distinctive features of online journalism include its interactive potentials, hypertext, and multimedia (Deuze, 2005; Brannon, 2008; Boczkowski, 2004) Accommodation between professionalism and digital dimensions of journalism has been widely studied, especially

focusing on interactivity (e.g. Chung, 2007; Massey and Levy, 1999). Opgenhaffen (2011) cautions against taking such markers as 'interactivity' or 'multimedia' too literally, emphasizing the complexity of making distinctions between individual media online since divergence persists or even increases in 'meta-media' portals such as newspapers, alongside apparent convergence. Heeter's (1989) clarifications of interactivity are useful. Of her six dimensions of interactivity, the three of special interest here are 'ease of adding information', (comments on stories, forums) 'interpersonal communication' (dialogue online between audience and journalist) and 'monitoring of information across users' (web metric analysis). Most facets of interactivity can also be labelled as participatory journalism, embracing user-generated content, comments and social media. Participation raises debates on how far journalists retain gatekeeping functions, or whether their roles are changing to 'gatewatching' as proposed by Bruns (2003), which in turn taps into the wide discourse on collaborative journalist/audience relationships and the potential for 'horizontal' communication as described by Jay Rosen (e.g. Economist, 2011). Such views of change are controversial in that, despite the opportunities and individual examples of collaboration and audience empowerment in selected media, a steady stream of scholarship notes the journalistic retention of gatekeeping functions in the face of audience power (e.g. Thurman and Lupton, 2008; Domingo et al, 2008). Singer and Ashman (2009b) point up the distaste journalists on the UK newspaper the Guardian had for audiences encroaching on their own professional judgment.

Technology, myths, and innovation

Technology is a multifaceted concept. Most journalism studies in the first decade of the century highlight the conservatism of journalism online in respect of technological opportunity (Massey and Levy, 1999; O'Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008; Quandt, 2009; Van der Wurff and Lauf, 2005; Thurman and Lupton, 2008; Michelstein and Boczkowski, 2009). The culture of innovation is marked by 'reactive, defensive, and pragmatic traits,' (Michelstein and Boczkowski, 2009) and Steensen (2009) summarizes the view claiming adoption has been 'slower than idealists predicted'. Domingo (2008a) reflects a broad vein of opinion in saying 'professional culture' plays an unconscious role in failure to

translate idealized potentials of online journalism into working practices. Kunelius and Ruusunoksa (2009) coin the term 'professional imagination' specifically to try to escape the reductive and deterministic implications of professionalism. Domingo (2008a) considers online news innovation is limited by editorial emphasis on immediacy. The net-native site he studied contrasted with three other sites linked to traditional media: it freed itself from immediacy while the others, he felt, gave it increased importance.

The deterministic view of technology promoting change has long given way to views that culture, professionalism and organizational factors shape adoption (e.g. Domingo, 2008b; Garnham, 2000). Michelstein and Boczkowski (2009: 566) say the consensus is now to reject determinism and accept technology is shaped by 'initial conditions and contextual characteristics'. Ursell (2001: 175), drawing on Marjoribanks (2000) and Cottle and Ashton (1999), illustrates this argument saying the studies reveal that 'human goals and judgments...explain how technology is applied.' She concludes that innovation styles will be mediated by the host organisation's 'corporate aims with regard to survival and growth'. This point of view seems well supported by the following study.

Although sometimes in a conservative way, print newsrooms have adopted digital technologies almost without exception. In a study of European news sites O'Sullivan and Heinonen (2008: 243) declared the European journalist is 'more than comfortable' with the transition to the internet which they regard as 'essential' to the news business.

Technologies are, however, formed in discourse as well as being material objects and are integrated into the discursive processes of their environment. A technology is a communication platform and each incarnation depends not only on material objects (hardware), but also on softwares devised, implemented and understood from within organizational networks amongst which it is shared and altered according to its given or created social 'job' (Charters and Pellegrin, 1972). In social shaping theory, 'interpretive flexibility' is a property of technology (Williams and Edge, 1996). Each 'technology'

provides a dimension for symbolic exchanges of one kind or another, but also has structural properties, sometimes linked to physics, that limit activities and possibilities despite scope for unexpected improvisation (Garnham, 2000). Domingo (2008b), reflecting Bijker and Pinch (1987), says emerging uses may reflect a power struggle between actors resulting in a dominant view which effects 'rhetorical closure.' Caution is therefore essential to avoid the tendency to reify technology as external and objective – as a 'thing' to be adopted – whereas it can be constantly adapted and defined by social vision or need (e.g. Garnham, 2000).

Another problem with adoption studies is that writers deploy metaphors such as 'speed' of adoption, with associated imagery such as 'brakes' on development of interactivity (Domingo, 2008a). This implies a notion of direction so that technological adoption has an ideal future with its own 'impetus' toward it, which may be offset by 'inertia'. These analogies often originate outside the discursive reality of actors and may sneak determinist assumptions into academic commentary.

Adoption begs as many questions as it answers. In the case of a newspaper, technology is a component only of a complex interweave of sometimes contradictory equations involving material and ideological realities in and outside the editorial processes. How these processes are viewed and appear to interact is one of the objects of the present study. As Domingo (2008a: 698) says, there is a 'wider web of decisions the researcher needs to trace in order to understand how professional culture and online journalism ideals interplay and materialize in everyday routines.'

Agency, too, has been given more attention in research recently, (Steensen, 2009: 831). His study suggests the power of individual actions in newsroom innovation. At the Norwegian site Dagbladet.no, he found the online journalists believed they had considerable freedom to experiment. Informal structures were allowed to mushroom and

there was a democratic spirit in the hierarchy. While management roles were crucial to innovation, he said, the wider processes were 'random and dependent on individuals'.

These findings partly reflect a study by Zaltman and Wallendorf (1979) that organizations willing to be open and seek out ideas from an external environment are more likely to innovate. Zaltman et al (1972, cited in Slappendel, 1996) emphasise that low formalisation is a characteristic of early stages of innovation. Slappendel points out that researchers tend to develop unduly linear and rational models of process. Rather, she says, innovations do not remain static during adoption but may be transformed by them.

Market-oriented logic

The Northern Echo is a market-oriented newspaper in the classical sense. It was founded in the nineteenth century as the general market system of media took root in Britain. Financing depends on a relationship between advertising and audience share or, perhaps, website reach. Along with the cover price, advertising pays almost all staff wages and all costs including presses and newsprint. The circulation however has fallen sharply in the last decade from over 80,000 thousand copies daily to about 43,000 in 2011.

Like technologies, markets are a dynamic tapestry of perceptions, semantics, metaphors, and material realities. Market explanations of journalism owe much to functionalism. Astley and Van der Ven (1983) note that, in one perspective on organizational development, changes in organizational forms are best explained by internal adaptation or by environmental selection. In this formulation lies a tension between voluntaristic and deterministic frameworks. The professional culture of journalism intersects these positions, having the apparent capacity for agency but contending with perceived and real external entities such as market forces embodied by competition.

Thus, in the functionalist approach, a particular journalism practice exerts an effect on external conditions and maintains the effect. The social action remains because of its success promoting that beneficial effect. Traditionally the benefit in a market system is for the audience share to grow, to which end practices of journalism are devised and established. In the sociology of functionalism or organizational ecology a trait persists when it contributes to survival.

Such functionalist interpretations are reflected in the literature on market explanations of journalism (e.g. Curran and Seaton, 2010; Cohen, 2002), – that the organisation is geared to survive and those actions that promote survival are sustained (Kincaid, 1994). However the selection of ‘beneficial actions’ is value-laden, may not be falsifiable, and as an explanation of human activity they pose a danger of circularity. For this study a key focus is: do journalists evaluate their actions as beneficial or otherwise to their survival, and is that the way they evaluate technology?

Specific questions arising are:

1. How were perceptions about technology and markets structured among selected journalists at The Northern Echo over five years?
2. How far does a functionalist interpretation explain journalists’ narratives of their adoption or rejection of technologies in the period?
3. Do journalists’ narratives reflect a sense of directional change in the way digital practices were incorporated or rejected?
4. What changes in agency and autonomy can be extrapolated from narratives covering the five-year period?
5. Does job status reflect differences in the evaluations of new technologies?

Method

This research is the first ethnographic longitudinal case study of a newspaper’s internet adoption in the UK. As Steensen (2009) points out, there have been few longitudinal

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studies on internet adoption in newsrooms and Karlsson (2011) suggests that most examine U.S. media (e.g. Tremayne et al, 2007). Michelstein and Boczkowski (2009) in reviewing much online scholarship, conclude that journalism studies would 'benefit greatly' from longitudinal accounts of current developments and claim that a missing historical perspective contributes to a current shallowness in the literature. Domingo (2008a) asserts further that: 'We know very little about how online journalists deal with interactivity in their daily routines', nor the rationales for adoption. This study can begin to address that kind of gap.

Many writers (e.g. Boczkowski 2004; O'Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008; Fortunati et al, 2009; Thurman and Lupton, 2008) compare newsrooms or online journalists in one-time static situations. A longitudinal study instead provides insight into dynamic process, and evolution (Karlsson, 2011). The method elicits the narratives in context to give meanings to actions and thus allows a focus on change in professional culture (Kunelius and Ruusunoksa, 2009). The concept of innovation used in the present study follows a definition of Zaltman et al. (1972 cited in Slappendel 1996 :107) that requires only that the organization *perceives* something to be new: 'Research into innovation processes requires longitudinal approaches,' because, 'innovations do not remain static but are transformed by innovation processes.'

Although case study research does not permit generalization to wider populations (Yin, 2003), it may serve in an illustrative way to falsify, validate, modify, or extend, existing theory and suppositions. In terms of theory, the study problematizes generalisations and conceptual categorisations of adoption. Theory that seeks patterns developing around a concrete fact of 'the internet' as a thing, and how it is merged into practice is conceived in terms of the elusive nature of any essences of technology or practices. 'Immediacy,' 'inertia', 'interactivity', 'convergence' and 'innovation' are the slippery substantives under the spotlight.

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Critical discourse analysis of the statements journalists is considered appropriate for opinion on motivation and rationales for action. It provides perceptions as to why certain actions were followed or abandoned, or and is effective to investigate how particular power structures and patterns were formed or maintained. Discourse involves both language and practice (Hall, 2001). Discourse is defined as a group of statements which provide 'a language for representing the knowledge about a topic at a particular historical moment,' (Hall, 1992 cited in Hall 2001: 291) Agency is arguably a theoretical area readily amenable to discourse analysis where individual values and decisions rather than structural realities *per se* are being investigated.

The researcher's subjectivity is a difficult issue. He is a former Northern Echo journalist, (1986-9) which arguably assisted the understanding of the professional routines and assisted in obtaining confidential opinion. The researcher left the employer 20 years ago, and has since contributed to independent critical study of journalism (e.g. MacGregor 2009). Neutrality is assisted by dependence on an externally generated conceptual framework. The theming of responses, associating like with like, and their distillation into argument, is an act of interpretation. Attempts to offset researcher bias and organize responses have been made by setting the analysis in a background of existing scholarship. That in itself, however, can lead to privileging of certain themes and endanger theoretical renewal by applying existing lenses to look at 'new' phenomena (Michelstein and Boczkowski, 2009). The term 'professional imagination' (Kunelius and Ruusunoksa, 2009) is appropriated here, for its explicit recognition of agency, to help appreciate the dynamics between the professional culture and its immediate context. The authors define the term as the 'collective potential for agency inherent in the professional culture of journalists' (p34). The concept is useful for its acknowledgement that professionalism among journalists has a potential to evolve, despite its parallel attribute of stabilizing behaviour (Aldridge and Evetts, 2003). Against many other dimensions of professionalism, it is used

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here because it allows openness to the discourses of actors, without superimposing externally generated terminologies.

Two sets of eight semi-structured interviews up to an hour long were conducted five years apart in the newspaper offices. The extended time-gap allowed for changes in the external and internal understanding of the processes of adoption or rejection of new media and for significant evolution of perceptions and evaluations. Questions focused on dimensions of the past, present, and future covering the uses of multi-media, production routines on- and offline, evaluations of editorial means and purposes, of rationales, and of relations with the audience, as well as descriptions of office procedures and routines. The interviews were open and allowed much freedom to elaborate ideas. In the 2011 interviews journalists were drawn out on 'social media', which had developed strongly in the five years between the interviews. Following Yin (2003), who advocates flexibility, the questions were slightly more focused on agency and decision-making in the second interviews.

It was intended to interview all main seniority levels although in the 2006 interviews, the editor was absent. Extra emphasis was given to senior levels associated with the internet. They included the deputy editor in charge of online, the web technician (not trained as a journalist), the editor, the deputy news editor, and the entertainments editor. The managing director contributed to one discussion in 2011. A matching number of reporters were interviewed, chosen partly for their interest in new media. Levels of authority were retrospectively grouped into four – first, the power structure in Gannett and Newsquest physically located outside the editorial offices (A); second, the managing director and editor in the Darlington offices (B); third, the senior editors on newsdesk (C); and fourth, reporters and sub-editors (D). Documents and press articles about the Northern Echo were used to corroborate public events or actions.

Findings and discussion

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Web images in 2006

The web prior to 2006 was reported by all journalists as being subordinate to the newspaper and dis-integrated from print editorial processes. The web staff, who until 2006 summer had been housed in a room apart from the editorial offices, uploaded only part of the content and often with delays. In 2006 the internet was controversial in editorial thinking. Advocates felt passionately they had been marginalized and believed a recently departed managing editor had lost a battle to move faster into web technology. A web editor post had been abolished. One journalist in his 50s said he had serious conflict with superiors much younger than himself about its 'slow' adoption.

I have had some quite furious rows about the web being regarded as an interference. [Group D]

This web advocate described the general view of the web at the Echo just prior to 2006 as being 'nuisance', while the deputy news editor said the idea of a web-oriented paper was mooted 'five years ago but nothing was done about it'. Another opinion was that already the Echo had 'missed the market'. It seemed a thing apart:

I think it's just because, for me, it's still quite alien, the internet [Reporter, Group D]

The internet was technically awkward to integrate with print editorial content before 2006. According to journalists and the web technician, the methods of uploading were time-consuming. Some journalists felt that the editor was against the net, citing staff reduction and the physical separation of web activity as evidence. The online activities were regarded as subordinate and supplementary to the print versions and the bulk of interviewees evaluated the actual web policies and practices this way. As a publishing medium, it was often framed as a potential 'threat' to print. The quality most commonly

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assigned to it was that it threatened the commercial viability of the newspaper even though most web users were not then considered to be newspaper buyers.

The circulation of the Echo started to reduce and that was seen as a concern, then, from that point, the web output started to be cut back.
(Entertainment editor, Group D)

There were gaps in terminology and activity, compared to evidence of from UK national newspaper websites at the same time (Hermida and Thurman, 2008). There was no multimedia video or audio apart from a pre-web talking newspaper. Blogs were not being written and the term was not in several cases understood. The web, according to one journalist, was 'something we never really thought about till two months ago.' The word 'interactivity' often needed further clarification and then its potential meanings were not replicated between journalists. Under most definitions, interactivity was framed in terms of threat to editorial standards and included a view that it had a hazardous potential for abuse or misunderstandings.

One of the difficulties of giving news control to the public is that they abuse it. [Entertainment editor, Group D]

There had been a crucial instance. A peer-to-peer music site hosted on the Northern Echo's website, 'Revolution,' had resulted in acrimony so fierce that the journalist monitoring the site left employment soon after (no formal tie to the dispute was made by the interviewee). Web activities were also regarded distancing journalists from their sources, producing the deskbound culture that interactivity might usefully redress. Feedback from the public, or delegating writing control, even reviews, to readers seemed fraught with danger.

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Do they know what they are talking about, or are they just beating the drum on behalf of a certain group....once you open the floodgates, you can go down some very dark and dangerous routes. (Entertainment editor, Group D]

On the other hand he agreed strongly the need to let readers feel they had a say in the paper and journalists should 'make them feel important somehow.'

Only one journalist valued email feedback from users though usually it was a complaint.

Linking to outside news websites was never advocated and competitive disadvantage was the common reaction to the idea. A respondent termed linking to news competitors as folly – 'stealing the bread out of your mouth'. Also baffling to all the journalists was the concept of metric analysis of site stories even though its use was becoming routine in several London-based newspaper websites (MacGregor, 2007).

Some 'interactive' initiatives to develop the net had been taken. One was to run a bus in the community aiming to skill the public to build websites. The ill-fated music website hosted on the Echo was another. Lastly, the entertainment editor wanted to archive celebrity interviews online in audio.

Corporate centre asserts control

In summer 2006, when the interviews were conducted, the discourse and practices at the Echo were presented as being in abrupt transition. The internet and multimedia were to become integral to the future. The website was named The Northern Echo whereas it had previously been bundled with other Newsquest titles in 'thisIsTheNortheast'. Web organisation was being revised. The web technician was now to be placed next to newsdesk, which is the hub for content management of the print newspaper. A new web content management system, Martini, was being introduced, which was considered simpler to operate and would enable journalists to upload content immediately it was written if desirable.

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Second, editorial practice was to change. Immediacy and full disclosure was to become the core principle for the presentation of web content. In the new regime all stories except big exclusives were to go online before they had appeared in the newspaper. Exclusives were to go online but be given fuller treatment in the print version. Finally, professional training for multi-skilling was about to begin to enable original online broadcast media content. Previously even still pictures rarely made online editions, according to one editor/reporter.

The controlling force for technological, organizational, and content management changes were not perceptibly originating from the Darlington-based journalists (Groups C or D). In one account, the prime force for change was attributed to a 'think tank' within the building i.e. group B. Most commonly the changes were said to be the requirement of Newsquest headquarters in Weybridge, Surrey (Group A). Many interviewees said the agency for change came from the remote centres of Newsquest power, reinforced by the view that the Darlington editor was understood to think the web threatened newspaper sales. Attempts prior to 2006 to move faster to the web were said to have been resisted by some senior local managers (Group B).

Journalists often used the pronoun 'they' as authors of the change, suggesting an amorphous origin of power. The phrase 'we have been told to' occurred several times and less senior journalists were 'at the mercy of newsdesk'. One claimed there had been 'no guidance' about the way the web was to work. Journalists' outlooks were not always self-consistent. With notable exceptions, the interviewees perceived themselves first as print workers with the web as secondary. Most of them readily advocated and accepted change to practices and mental routines because adjustment was part of the job.

To be fair to staff they have all embraced the web wholeheartedly... In fact one or two reporters who've maybe been here a long time and sometimes

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have difficulty turning on PC let alone getting their heads around concepts of the web.....it's simply a case of 'the story's breaking' and it's just another deadline for them to hit really. (Internet deputy editor, Group C)

Indeed for getting stories and sourcing content, even by 2006 the internet had become crucial to the journalists' work.

The explanations for adapting were not in 2006 commonly given as economic survival but as reaction to visions of technological potentials. "We have been told that the future of newspapers is some kind of multi-level media platform," (Group C). This implies some capitulation to a perception of technology's potentials, and also subservience to an organisational power structure. However the economic frame is indeed present in 2006, with one assertion (Group C) that 'at the end of the day it is all in the balance sheets.' At this time some optimism and adventure were evident besides the wide preference for the goals and procedures of print. Even if it was not good for getting money, its virtue was as a way to build identity. (Group D)

The web images in 2011

Context of change

Five years on, adoption of the internet was one of several parallel developments that included the paper going tabloid and cutting from five daily editions to just two. Heavy cuts in editorial staff included many redundancies and the merging of journalists of different titles at Darlington head offices. Sub editors pooled work on all titles from 2011, and Newsquest journalists went on strike to protect jobs in 2011 early spring.

Decisions and revisions

By 2011 the discourse of editorial culture on technologies was presented in contrasting narratives, that bear affinities and differences with those five years before. Journalists

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considered the adoption of technologies and practices were mostly pushing forward a 'natural' logic. The web had in some senses been integrated into its practices and was now regarded in most rhetoric as mutually supportive and converged with print. Emergent technologies such as Twitter were recognized as opportunities to explore. This is particularly so in video use where practices had been incorporated, and 'web-friendly' styling introduced, such as putting in more embedded clips and including fewer packages. One reporter most occupied in video work said he had a fairly free hand to improvise style, tone, and content.

Mentalities of print persisted as the primary shaping force. Despite multi-media integration and convergence, for example, the internet deputy news editor refused to permit any video going online without an accompanying text story: 'Ultimately we are working for a newspaper, it is still a newspaper,' he asserted. 'If it is a good story you want it in print.' As the web technician added:

Video is just to enhance the story whetherit is never a replacement for the story. It is a secondary thing, we know it is important, but we are going to these jobs ultimately to put them in the newspaper and the video follows that. [Group B]

As individuals, journalists tended to mirror their previous views about their degree of affirmation of the technologies. The notable exception was the editor, whose reported attitudes in 2006 were cautious or negative, but whose visions in 2011 were highly positive. The editor said the web and the paper were well integrated and mutually supportive with the website supporting paper sales as a cross-promotional tool. He introduced the word 'brand' – absent from any conversation in 2006 – to describe the operation, which was now marketed as 'more than just a newspaper'.

A story of harmonious evolution, however, masks an important counter narrative gaining momentum in 2011. The descriptive rhetoric of pragmatic reactivism conceals a

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significant shift in emphasis. Emblematic of this change was a new policy on web content. A decision had just been taken to restrict the amount of material published on the website in terms of both immediacy and quantity. The internet, rather than being a mirror published ahead of print, was to become an incomplete reflection. Editors and deputies said they intended now to publish a 'light version' of available content.

I have moved away from uploading every story in its entirety. My view and it is the view of Pete (the editor) as well, is that it should be a kind of Northern Echo light. And you should get maybe a third of the content that you would get in the print publication.....[Internet deputy editor Group C]

As before, exclusives might be held entirely for the print version.

It is possible to interpret this change as a dramatic withdrawal from the internet's publishing capability. It starkly interrupts of any view of progressive expansion and convergence of online presentation with print. A second significance lies in the dominant narrative supporting the move - that the internet was robbing the paper of sales - while itself yielding too little in return.

A third significance lies in the locus of this particular decision in relation to the organization as a whole. By 2011 the decision-making centre had markedly altered. Although Gannett and Newsquest were said to provide the framework for the internet such as the publishing system, their day-to-day control was defined as more disengaged. Agency in relation to the internet decisions had become more local (Groups B, C, and D). Gannett was not recorded as giving instructions. The editor said they were 'left to their own devices really.' Journalists were aware that the 'light' and cut down online version was breaking Newsquest's 'web first' policy which was understood to mean 'all news

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online as it happens.' The editor agreed the 'light version' policy was devised at the Darlington offices, and the web deputy editor claimed it was his response to talking to readers. Evidence from four readers convinced the deputy editor that they had stopped buying the paper because of the website. The consequent policy change was a 'commercially driven decision' taken because of 'the harsh reality' of manpower shortages and to keep circulation up. Although the new approach was formulated at the newsdesk level (Group C), reporters (Group D) consented readily: The dominant newsroom ethos in 2011 was that paper sales were being threatened by the internet poaching buyers.

Such fears reflect the second main transformation in 2011. This lay in the intensified narrative of economics and resources. Far more pervasive than before were perceptions of shortage of income, loss of circulation, and drastic decline of staff resources. A general air of crisis infused the editorial staff.

We have lost 20,000 sales in two to three years. We are now down to 43,000 sales a day and in 1996 it was 80,000 or so and if we carry on at that rate there will not be a Northern echo in a few years.....[Deputy editor, Group C]

Technology was much more now frequently conceived in association with finances. 'The internet is not paying the wages,' appeared in much discourse. Both the deputy news editor and editor now phrased the evolution of print as 'managed decline'.

Contradictions seemed stark. An acute sense of the internet's failure to deliver material dividend ('only' ten percent of total Echo revenue) was augmented by an sharpened appreciation of catastrophe in print circulation. Stress on financial and resource shortage

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laced all the newsdesk and editors' discourse. Lower down the hierarchy (Groups C and D) the predicament was presented less as facts, more as a mood and 'bunkering down'.

The atmosphere such as this at moment is to batten down the hatches
and protect what we have got at the moment and maybe take a look
again when the sun is shining. (Deputy editor, Group C]

In their rhetoric journalists now perceived relations with the net as a 'balancing act' or 'plate-spinning exercise' – in other words that economic 'reality' put tension into the relationship between the internet and the paper and between central and local control of policy. Where they had been 'throwing everything up online', the reduced and shortened online version had begun. Economies of efficiency, presented as 'good economic reasons', had led the company to advocate 'web first' policies in 2006, but the print newspaper was earning the money. Hence the Echo had moved into an *ad hoc* publishing U-turn. The conception of a digital-only delivery for the brand one day, was widely held. The 'tipping point' had not been reached and the gloomiest view was that the Echo would expire before it was. While the editor was hoping to monetise the digital side many felt that day may come too late. A palpable mood of potential economic ruin infused thinking.

Alongside this economic confusion linked closely to the technologies, we can see local journalistic autonomy over the new media increasing over the five-year period as control became overtly more transparent and localised in Darlington (Groups B, C, D). 'We have a lot of power kept at local level here,' said one new reporter. The control was also seen as less structured and formal. For example the deputy news editor said web policy changed 'week by week' and a young reporter observed: 'I don't always think there is as much strategy as there could be.' (Group D)

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Nowhere was this trend more apparent than in the adoption of social media. Those most regularly named were Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, and blogs. Interviewees reckoned that half the newsroom tweeted by choice. They tweeted on stories they were working on, reasoning that it was what readers wanted. In the week of the interviews, proceedings of a high-profile murder court case were being tweeted by special permission of the judge, a novelty that greatly excited the journalists.

Twitter was mostly regarded as promotional or a news gathering tool. The editor counted his followers (his mark of a successful Twitter account), adding them to follower numbers of other journalists and defining them all as a proxy 'circulation' of the Echo brand – another 10,000 eyes. Journalists too conceived them as adverts for their print stories. Writers adopted or declined social media for almost personal reasons so that joining a social bandwagon merged with a view that 'it might get a few more sales'. The informality of Twitter was seen as a way of defining a writer's personality to a new public. Several interviewees also cited the editor's exemplary role with his enthusiasm for social media.

If Twitter was a pervasive and popular the social medium, Facebook and Youtube enjoyed much less support. Reporters and the editor were vague as to the Echo's Facebook content, uploaded by the web technician. The perceived need to protect unique content had doomed Youtube after a short trial because it was seen as giving away content for free. In general, though, staff were particularly positive about social media potentials. The web technician believed the revolution in attitudes since 2006 was due to reporters' private familiarity with new mobile devices such as the iPhone, iPad, 'smart' phones, and Applications. He suggested the professional attitudes were altered more by news delivery changes in the consumer sphere as by management strategy or orders inside the building.

Innovation and convergence/divergence

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If caution often influenced thinking on web publishing day by day, there was one strategic move that broke new ground. The Northern Echo had just formed a content and staff-sharing partnership with the independent company Tyne Tees Television. The editors saw the 'marriage' as a tap into television expertise and a way to share resources.

I think it is the first stage of a convergence (we are seeing everything converging at the moment) and regional telly and regional newspapers like this will develop similar partnerships.....regional telly doesn't have the on-the-ground resource and reporters that we have so there are opportunities for a marriage...[Editor, Group B]

Two Tyne Tees Television reporters would be based in the Darlington building and the Echo would have access to all Tyne Tees' output. In return the television company had access to Echo prospect lists (news planning schedules) and the partners intended to combine to cover big events such as an upcoming sporting fixture for Darlington at the Wembley stadium in London. It was a relationship of mutual need – a trade of broadcast knowhow against newspaper resources embodied in the information-gathering capacity of its more numerous reporters.

Further innovative strategies included a project to develop Applications (Apps), customised softwares for mobile devices. The Echo pioneered two free sports Apps. From 2010 it began serving as an 'App' developer for external customers. The editor was helping develop this departure from pure news to enterprise. More conventional innovations included a slight reorganization of the website. Content was being presented town by town, no longer reflecting the structure of news presentation in the newspaper.

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What I have started to do online is put all the local content no matter whether it is on a regional page or a local page and put it onto 'town news.' [Web technician, Group B]

Not all were satisfied with Echo web strategies. Two highly critical voices emerged, one who was adamant that the early slow adoption was still crippling digital development, and the other who believed the organizational structure and web policies were wrong. Her perception of German national papers' content provided unwelcome comparisons. She advocated a specialist team for the web. The Echo's digital vision was in her view limited.

I would have original content... when I look at Der Spiegel and Berliner Zeitung they are regional papers with a lot of national news and much easier to navigate...(Reporter/sub-editor, Group D)

Interactivity and the audience

Interactivity, defined roughly as real-time content and comment from a consumer-users, and potential to share gatekeeping, had evolved unevenly over the five years. Almost less frequently than before were journalists aiming to encourage comment on published stories as an end in itself. Although the publishing system forced users to fill in a form which discouraged response, the website home page now presented a list of most commented stories. Opinions of users had changed little. While some journalists welcomed user comments online, they were conceived also as chatter. They were rarely said to influence journalists to revise stories, nor was editorial success measured in terms of its ability to focus comment. On the other hand, there were considerable editing difficulties, and journalists were concerned to edit out comments from organized sources such as the British National Party, which promotes controversial views on race, or the tobacco industry. One skeptical journalist (Group C) suggested that most feedback providers were a form of 'nutter' similar to many letter writers, with the added

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disadvantage that they were less easy to control. The web technical developer, by contrast, lamented the comparative low volume of reaction at the Echo compared to other Newsquest newspaper sites. For him user reaction was one of the clearest indicators of web effectiveness. On social media the story was much more positive, as seen above.

There is no doubt there is now more interaction. Twitter is a good example.' (Editor, Group B).

Rather than interaction, one key measure of site success at this time was given as page impressions, hits and unique users. In 2011 the Echo web traffic had increased by 22 percent annually which was said to be higher than the Newsquest group average. In February 2011 there were 2million hits. Statistics of page impressions for the site – for stories, length of time on a story, and number of pages accessed by individuals on a visit – were available on the technician's computer and centrally updated every 24 hours by Newsquest. However, Web metrics were said to have no influence on story choice or presentation. Journalists said the statistics merely confirmed what they already knew of the likely impact of stories.

All I see is the 'most read' and 'most comments' [seen on the website itself] but I don't get day to day statsit can take a week, in my experience, to get a figure back. [The Editor, Group B]

To be honest if we think it is a good story online, it is – it is generally one that people are going to be interested in.....we know what is going to be massive online....statistics are just to monitor how well the site is performing really. [Web web technician, Group B]

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The extent of disinterest was epitomized by the editor. He said the site metrics were actually unavailable locally and held in Newsquest head office. In fact they were available on a computer a few meters from his.

Interpretations and discussion

The picture presented here serves to problematise web and multi-media adoption as a patterned, regular, or uniform process, in line with much previous research (e.g. Singer and Ashman 2009b, Domingo, 2008a) The notion of adoption is far from easily defined, and is a constant negotiation with technological potentials. That a hard-edged unidirectional flow towards new technologies is an incremental one-way process is sharply contradicted by discourse about convergence practices in that newsroom as relayed by the more web orientated of the journalists. The negotiation process is neither smooth or uniform, and is marked by uncertainty as to which of several actions is rational. Doubt is spread throughout the hierarchy. Large-scale quantitative work in the style of O'Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) needs some nuance when put alongside this close-up inspection of this narrative in formation. At least, there is tension between the micro and macro scales of analysis.

Summarising trends we see:

- ⊙ A cautious attitude to the internet reported of the editor 2001- 2006
- ⊙ A positive attitude by 2011
- ⊙ A general newsroom attitude of a subordinate status for the internet pre 2006
- ⊙ An enforced positive general attitude in 2006
- ⊙ A naturalization of some aspects of the web – 2011
- ⊙ An intensifying narrative of economic gloom entwined with all new media, 2006-2011
- ⊙ Tactical convergence responses – institutional merger with Tyne Tees

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The tension over the value of immediacy highlights these uncertainties. The Echo moved from 'web second' to 'web first' in 2006 but was reverting to a modified 'web second' in 2011. Some policies on volumes online and on immediacy were thus returning to pre-2006 outlines with similar justifications. The about-turn reflects Slappendel's (1996) assertion that innovation is sometimes contradictory and that analysts can too easily develop linear and rational modes of process. Domingo's (2008a) belief that immediacy is given enhanced value in websites of traditional media is questioned in this study.

Individual agency presents itself as an active and variable force in decision-making on the uptake of perceived digital opportunities. Over five years the locus of agency moved from the uppermost regions of the organisation to the newsroom editors and down to reporter levels. Authority seemed much more closely situated inside the newsroom by 2011 compared to 2006 when a significant amount of decision-making was attributed to Gannett and Newsquest. By 2011 external company authority was conceived as advisory, even by the managing director in Darlington, but was perceived as instructional in 2006. Thus external authority (Group A) was sidelined, Groups B and C moved to greater importance, and group D gained significant role and power. The biggest rupture seemed to be between group A and the others. The editor, desk editors, and reporters (B, C, D) became somewhat more harmonized, in a trend that perhaps reflects Steensen's (2009) observation on the democratization of the newsroom during technological innovation. The adoption processes at the Echo can be seen as correlating with a reduced formalism over the five years, echoing Zaltman et al (1972 cited in Slappendel, 1996) and Steensen's findings in Norway.

Nearly all the technologies and decisions were linked to a financial discourse by 2011, even social media. They were harnessed into utilitarian and performative ideals, such as being seen as promotion tools to drive print sales. This tendency was much more marked

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in 2011. Idealism was almost entirely missing from analysis in 2011 whereas in 2006, while not strong, the mood was tinged with open curiosity for digital potentials. Only the social media retained this thread of feeling in 2011.

Thus, echoing Kunelius and Ruusunoksa's (2009) study of managers, the rationales of economics by 2011 had not only been naturalized into digital journalism but arguably the internet had accelerated the process. This naturalization occurred at all tiers of seniority but was most pronounced at editor and newsdesk levels. Technology was generally subsumed into the more urgent narrative of decline and survival, an adjunct to a meta-story of fear whose endpoint was extinction. In functionalist terms, the digital technology was mostly being mediated dependent on its perceived influence on organisational survival, echoing Ursell (2001). The rejection of Youtube is an example.

However this picture that fits a market functionalist explanation of journalism does small justice to the complexity of narratives. 'The market' was conceived with the utmost confusion. There were apparent conflicting logics between hit rates online and print circulation. The journalists were therefore, in 2011, openly prepared to trade hits and accept a lower growth in the website to preserve print sales. Print would be defended at the expense of the online. In tension with these actions – and completely unresolved – was the contrasting view that the long-term future of the brand was digital only.

Newspaper circulations will continue to fall and digital audiences will continue to grow and at some point one will take over from the other and we have to be there when that happens [Editor, Group B]

The metaphors of this tension between long- and short-term survival, and between print and digital presentation of content, were given as 'a balancing act' or a 'plate-spinning exercise'. The deputy editor likened the internet to an 'oil slick', capturing its

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unpredictability. These images attest to the opacity of market logic in the day-by-day lived routines of one newsroom in the first decade of the century. The market functionalist analysis is confounded by the fact that technological opportunity presents itself as contradictions. No single action has a single beneficial outcome without two or three perceived parallel and malign outcomes. The virtuous circle of hit rates to revenue, though weak, is benign, but it is gained by a perceived malign effect on print sales. Any good effect had to be weighed against its cost in time and resources.

The problems deciding correct action extended widely – to the uses and forms of multimedia, to the uses of interactivity and especially by 2011 to the purposes of social media. This sentiment of doubt coalesced around a vague positive notion of investment in the future – heavily curtailed by the intensifying crisis of resources – and at worst, as fear. Michelstein and Boczkowski (2009) say that reactive, defensive and pragmatic traits mark innovation in newspapers, a view corroborated here.

In terms of user-supplied content and interactivity, the evidence suggests this regional newspaper was choosing different options of convergence to those of national and metropolitan papers in Britain. There was little increase in interactive offerings and a steady but mixed enthusiasm for dialogic exchanges with the audience over five years. Gatekeeping and control functions of journalism were barely questioned. There were no changes in the conceptions of responsibility regarding interactive technologies such as data monitoring, feedback, or social media. Although some control of technology decisions had spread down the hierarchy to the journalists, this was not matched by a sharing of control with what they always termed their ‘readers’. Twitter and blogs were mostly being appropriated as ways to disseminate and promote brand content. They were used to trawl for sources rather than instigate critical debate or form a dialogic relationship with users. These impressions do not mirror exactly the findings of Hermida and Thurman (2008) on national or London-based newspapers but fall in line with Singer and Altmans’s (2009)

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study of the Guardian and Dickinson's findings, (2011). Nor does the rejection of web analytics reflect research on metrics covering London-based media. Whereas by 2006, national newspapers were exploiting metric technologies to influence gatekeeping decisions, (MacGregor, 2007), at the Northern Echo journalists felt no attraction to such a course, and relied on experience alone. Such a mindset does not fulfill Heeter's (1989) fourth dimension of interactivity on monitoring. The low uptake of site metrics is probably reflected in many UK regional press titles. The attitude also contrasts with findings of Anderson (2011) in the U.S.. It remains an area for research and further explanation on a supposition that multiple factors in the interpretation of the external environment affect uptake of metric analysis.

It can also be suggested therefore that prior professional imagination inhibited the adoption of digital possibilities. Indeed, the co-option of Tyne Tees TV skills seemed likely to cement a professional distinction between 'broadcast' online and text, and possibly limit further innovation and convergence. Thus, echoing Opgenhaffen (2011), it entailed restoring divergence of professional skills despite being a clear convergence at institutional level, another sign of the see-saw rhythms of adoption.

Overall, digital imagination at the Northern Echo could be said to have been shaped by the institutional culture of print. In most cases, one dominant medium of print defined the hybrid multi-media enterprise. This theme can be developed to suggest there was an anti-convergence process accompanying the assimilation of the internet. Although the internet and the print sections were described as complementary, a parallel trend was occurring: a continuing notional separation of print and digital platforms and a rhetoric, sometimes, of rivalry between them. The web-print conflict in the culture was sharpest in descriptions of the situation pre-2006. It was being suppressed by deep reforms in 2006 but was re-emerging in 2011.

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Likewise, website publishing was in 2011 being unwittingly separated from social media in the journalists' discourses. Although the race to convert social capital of the new media into real money had so far failed, their efforts were being approached as long-term commitment, whereas the older website was now seen more directly as a failing investment. Social media in 2011 retained optimistic associations, just as the value of publishing of Echo content online had become more arguable and perplexing.

There is in effect little 'rhetorical closure' (Bijker and Pinch, 1987) settling on the adoption of technologies over five years, nor an emergent dominant narrative. Technology remains a site of argument, hope, and anxiety, a necessity that was both an instrument of destruction and salvation, steeped in metaphor, but enigmatically linked to the vital equations underpinning survival. This might be either a print newspaper, an electronically delivered brand, or some state of convergence yet to be realised. Lurking as a fate lay brand oblivion. Whatever destiny awaits the brand and its workers, technology is likely to be given pride of place in journalists' discourses as a primary agent of change.

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words

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