

INTERNET AFFORDANCES AND MULTIMEDIA JOURNALISM PRACTICES IN THE ROMANIAN ONLINE PRESS

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Abstract: *The present research aims to explore multimedia journalism practices in online media and identify the range of Internet affordances incorporated, by analysing the content of 120 articles produced by Romania’s top four most read online news platforms: www.digi24.ro, www.libertatea.ro, adevarul.ro, and observatornews.ro. The main research question was “How diverse are the multimedia practices on the selected journalism platforms?”. The findings show that the four newsrooms use a bi-medial digital narrative, which is largely mixing text with photographic content. The analysed digital news packages lack multimedia elements such as video, audio, or graphic content. This aspect led us to the conclusion that the level of information-gathering convergence and presentation convergence is low.*

Keywords: *internet affordances, multimedia journalism, digital narrative, information-gathering convergence, presentation convergence, ownership convergence.*

Introduction

The current study seeks to investigate multimedia journalism practices in online media and to observe the range of Internet affordances incorporated. We identify four possibilities of affordances that Internet tools bring to the production and consumption of online journalistic materials in the specialized literature: interactivity, customisation, hypertextuality, and multimediality/convergence (Deuze, Bardoel 94). These terms refer to the relationships that emerge in the trinomial *media institution - journalists - content consumers* - as well as the *empowerment-disempowerment* dialectic that surfaces from these relationships. In the intersections formed, we find various intensities of communication democratization or hegemony.

Interactivity involves making the user part of the news experience (Deuze, Bardoel 94). In other words, the reader has at his/her disposal a series of tools through which he/she can become part of the imagined community created around the digital platform of the media institution. In the context-driven discussion of metaverse technology, this window of possibility widens and gives way to immersiveness. Immersiveness would, hypothetically, entail total participation in the digital narrative. The use of virtual reality glasses, for example, would put the reader “on the spot”, but it would also amplify

interaction with the bubbles created around published digital articles and, implicitly, those created around a media brand.

The second term, customisation, refers to the tools through which media platforms offer users the opportunity to create a profile through which they choose which types of content they are exposed to. Content filtering is determined algorithmically and starts from the operation of ticking some areas of interest. Personalized content is the result of hybridization between “push”¹ and “pull”² content (Deuze, Bardoel 95), since in an online environment we find both typologies.

The third affordance, hypertextuality, describes the informational enrichment of journalistic materials that can be achieved through the incorporation of internal and external links in an online media product.

Finally, multimodality, refers to the convergence of classic media formats (text, image, sound) in digital narration and packaging (Deuze, Bardoel 95). That is, the level that newsrooms reach through the content mix, a mix that should be richer, more relevant, and more syncretic in covering the respective subject.

At the same time, these affordances are not designed as a public service (van Dijck, Powell, de Waal), and can equally be used for malevolent purposes (Bafană, Ioniță; Vanghelescu, Petre, Trajchevska; Petre, Trajchevska). Nevertheless, it is beyond the purpose of the present paper to address the dark side of Internet affordances. In this study, we will concentrate on the dimension of multimodality, specifically on the relationship between multimedia journalism and convergence, both of which we will define further below.

Multimedia journalism and convergence

Multimedia journalism marks the emergence of a new journalistic practice that can only be understood in the context of media convergence. Multimedia journalism is conceptualized in scientific approaches from two perspectives (Deuze 140): one focusing on the creation of materials through the selection and combination of several types of content (text, audio, video, graphic elements, etc.) and one focusing on the suitability and distribution of the media product through various channels (website, e-mail, mobile application, social networks, etc.). The two definitions should be understood as a possible finish line of newsrooms from a production without convergence to a production with total convergence (Deuze 140). In other words, under the auspices of the imperative of convergence, at this moment, hypothetically, we can encounter editorial departments that are in a transition process towards the practice of multimedia journalism, with varying degrees of integration into the

¹ media content formats to which the consumer is exposed without having the option to choose.

² media content formats that the consumer chooses to be exposed to.

professional routine. In this theoretical perspective, the specialized field of journalistic content production is crossing a turn from monomedia culture to multimedia culture, in which the role of the multitasking journalist is increasing (Paulussen 198). But, in addition to the cultural factor, there are others that contribute to the logic of multimedia journalism such as institutional, organizational, and technological factors (Deuze 139). As we will see below, these factors are related to convergence.

Because of its numerous phenomenological references, convergence is a difficult concept to define. Media convergence, in communication sciences, is a theory that describes the genesis of a single communication medium generated by recent technologies by combining other mass media (Chakaveh, Bogen). From the research perspective, the term covers the processes of production, distribution, and use of digital media services (Chakaveh, Bogen). Convergence is explained as the “flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences” (Jenkins 2).

At the level of practice, the typology of the event should determine the nature of the convergence chosen, the depth of the report, the structure and size of the team sent in the field to cover the subject (Quinn, Filak qtd. in Şuţu 40). In other words, media convergence is also the production and dissemination of news in the most optimal environment for the reported event (Quinn, Filak qtd. in Şuţu 40). “Enthusiasm varies for this process that the industry terms «convergence», which seems to bring with it a limitless number of potential new tasks for journalists to fit into their workday” (Singer 2). Furthermore, from the perspective of participatory culture, convergence describes two flows through which media content is produced, one that is professional (“corporate convergence”) and one that is amatorial and related to a great extent with user-generated content (“grassroots convergence”) (Jenkins). At the same time as we’ve seen above, convergence also refers to cooperation and collaboration between newsrooms by practising some types of exchanges such as “cross-promotion of projects, cross-media advertising sales, news sharing, partial integration of newsrooms” (Deuze 140-141).

In this paper we will use the following definition of convergence:

“is a multidimensional process that, facilitated by the widespread implementation of digital communication technologies, affects the technological, business, professional, and editorial aspects of the media, fostering the integration of tools, spaces, working methods, and languages that were previously separated, in such a way that journalists can write contents to be distributed via multiple platforms, using the language that is appropriate in each medium” (Group 29).

This conceptualization covers the multiple processes referred to by the term convergence integrating the entire parts of media outlets. One of the classifications in the specialized literature, which reveals this complexity of the phenomenon in institutionalized production of journalistic content, indicates five dimensions of convergence: 1) ownership, 2) tactics, 3) structural, 4) information-gathering and 5) presentation (Gordon qtd. in Șuțu 56). This taxonomy intersects with the factors that influence multimedia journalism logic that we listed above.

Ownership convergence occurs within media trusts, where they promote each other „and share content in the case of print, online, radio and television media platforms owned by the same owner” (Șuțu 56). So, ownership convergence refers to how the same content crosses the distribution platforms of media organizations that are part of the same network and is tailored to that delivery channel.

“Tactical convergence describes partnerships and understandings through which companies that have different owners choose to work together on certain projects”, but the gains generated by the partnership are kept separately in those media outlets (Șuțu 57-58). The sharing of information between a television station and a newspaper is one of the most popular practices. (Șuțu 57-58).

Structural convergence refers to changes in editorial management (Șuțu 58). Thus, there are changes in working practices and in the editorial team, by changing the job description or by co-opting some multimedia producers and editors (Șuțu 59).

Information-gathering convergence is the collection of information in several types of formats (Șuțu 60). “In the United States, this type of convergence is at the centre of a controversy, which calls into question the ability of a single man to produce quality content for several types of media” (Șuțu 60). Critics assert that while multimedia journalists are capable of productively reporting everyday news, they are unable to oversee significant events that need a lot of collaborative work from several editors (Șuțu 60).

Presentation convergence describes the extent to which media companies capitalize the interactive potential of television, radio, and the Internet to achieve the specific qualities of each medium used by journalists (Șuțu 61). Journalists must integrate their writing with other aspects (pictures, audio, and video) in the news-making process while using a digital medium to communicate with the audience; this is a task that is more difficult than it first appears to be (Șuțu 62). In this process, journalists are challenged to find the logical and accessible thread of the story, by coordinating the components of writing, graphics, audio, and video (Lanson, Fought qtd. in Șuțu 62).

Awareness of convergence in newsrooms involves two aspects. The first one is concerned with the editorial employees' understanding of the organization:

“Journalists around the world who once thought that they worked for a newspaper, a television station or a Web site are realizing that they work for an information company - one that expects them to unite with former competitors in the common interest of delivering that information”

(Singer 2).

The second one is that of the appropriation of convergence culture in the journalistic content production, which opens “a non-linear world in which any story, narrative, sound, sign, image, and relationship unfold through a large number of media channels” (Freire 4). Empirical research has shown that journalists believe that the policy of convergence in newsrooms brings clear advantages (Singer 1), and the use of several types of content is a motivation for better reporting (Keriazes). Also, “journalists perceive experience in a converged newsroom as a career booster, say they enjoy working with colleagues whose strengths differ from their own and admit that convergence has led to respect for people in other parts of the news organization” (Singer 1). However, studies have also indicated that although journalists are inclined to embrace innovative technologies as part of the future of news, the text remains the foundation for news sites (Thurman, Lupton 2). This aspect produces “changes in the grammar and function of news video when used online” (Thurman, Lupton 2), for example. Concurrently, cultural and technological disparities in methods like newsgathering and dissemination, as well as a lack of training to allay worries about the alleged complexity of new media forms, may impede the diffusion of convergence inside the newsroom (Singer). Other factors influencing the adoption of convergence in media outlets are time, money, revenue creation, reader clicks, and the willingness to change for the future ahead (Keriazes). Often, small newsrooms tend to not embrace complex digital packaging and truly rich multimedia stories are only done by large media organizations (Gitner qtd. in Hernandez, Rue 72).

Methodology

In order to make sense of some actual practices of multimedia journalism at the level of Romanian selected media platforms I started from the following research questions:

1) What is the level of information-gathering and presentation convergence on the analysed platforms?

2) What is the degree of ownership convergence on the investigated news sites?

Regarding the first research question, our exploratory premise was that the analysed platforms illustrate a low level of information-gathering and presentation convergence. In terms of ownership convergence, we assumed that the platforms digi24.ro and observatornews.ro would show an increased degree, while the sites libertatea.ro and adevarul.ro would reveal a lower one. We considered that the affiliation of a media organization in a network that can ensure the mix of distinct contents is a variable that influences this typology of convergence.

The present research started with the identification of the corpus. To achieve this step, we resorted to data mining, processing the open public data existing on the brat.ro platform³, in the “Audience and Internet Traffic Study” section. We processed the data from audited Romanian websites classified as “General news” and “News and analysis” (Figure 1).

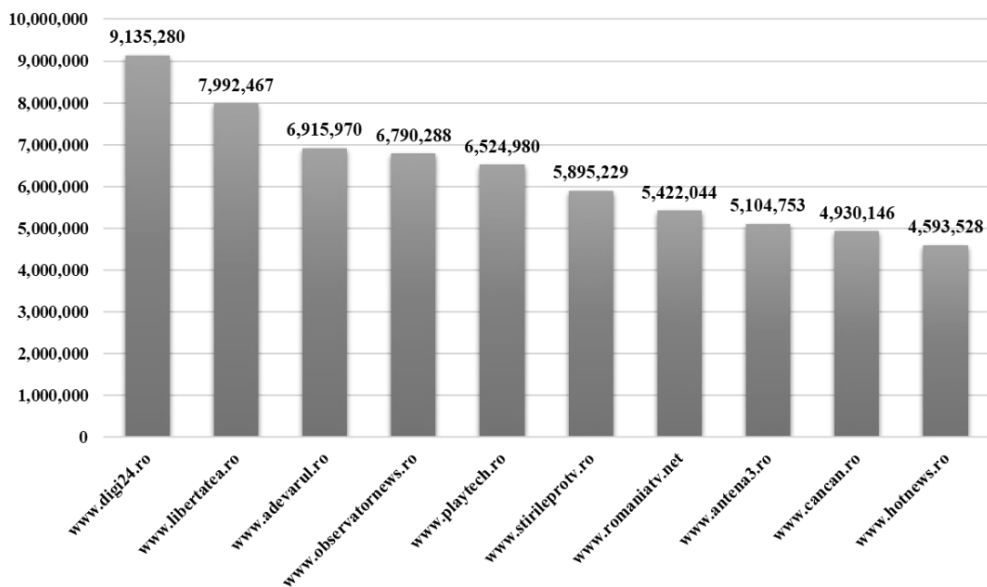


Figure 1 – Distribution of online media platforms in Romania by the highest number of unique customers. Source: open data published on the brat.ro platform in May 2022, processed by the author

We chose the first four web pages - www.digi24.ro, www.libertatea.ro, adevarul.ro, and observatornews.ro - based on the unique customers who used all types of devices (desktop/laptop/smartphone/tablet) to access journalistic materials. The next step was to choose the corpus of journalistic articles. We

³ The platform of the Romanian Transmedia Audit Bureau (BRAT). BRAT is a Romanian non-governmental body that has among its activities the audit of print media circulations and the measurement of traffic on media platforms.

select the last 30 articles published on a Saturday from the “Latest news” columns of the four platforms to follow how multimedia journalism was integrated as a routine in the newsrooms of Romania’s most read news platforms. Thus, a corpus composed of 120 news resulted. We intended for the resulting corpus to include journalistic materials that are part of the normal news flow and are not determined by announced or planned events. This aspect allowed us to observe the phenomena in a logic of multimediality in which information management is theoretically determined neither by prior content preparation nor by time constraints. Furthermore, the resulting corpus covers a diverse range of internal and external news, implying a workflow that includes both hard and soft topics. Local politics, international politics, the economy, society, culture, sports, technology, and entertainment are among the topics covered.

We used content analysis as a research technique, coding the collected articles as follows: bi-media digital narrative materials, tri-media digital narrative materials, quadruple media digital narrative materials based on text, photographic content (cover photo, insert photo, photo gallery), audio content, video content, graphic content, social media content, Google Maps.

Research results

The first regularity observed in the corpus was a high use in the four newsrooms of journalistic materials that most frequently use a bi-media digital narrative. 93 of the 120 articles examined combine text with only one other type of content (Table 1). The libertatea.ro platform has a proclivity for more advanced presentation convergence. In this case, we came across journalistic materials with bi-media, tri-media, and even quadruple media digital narratives.

Platform	Bi-media digital narrative materials (text + one other type of content)	Tri-media digital narrative materials (text + two other types of content)	Quadruple media digital narrative materials (text + three other types of content)
digi24.ro	26	4	0
libertatea.ro	20	9	1
adevărul.ro	22	8	0
observatornews.ro	24	6	0
TOTAL	93	26	1

Table 1 – Distribution of types of digital narratives. Source: data collected and processed by the author

The text is frequently accompanied by photographic content, which is followed by video content and social media content (Table 2). In our research, we found no audio or graphic content in the news. These characteristics reveal

a low and homogeneous level of information-gathering convergence and presentation convergence.

Platform	Articles with photo content	Articles with audio content	Articles with video content	Articles with graphic content	Articles with social media content	Articles with Google Maps content
digi24.ro	30	0	3	0	2	0
libertatea.ro	30	0	4	0	5	0
adevărul.ro	30	0	7	0	2	1
observatornews.ro	20	0	15	0	1	0
TOTAL	110	0	29	0	10	1

Table 2 – Distribution of content types. Source: data collected and processed by the author

Although we found materials that use photo galleries to add substance and veracity to the subject, this is a rare practice (14 articles). Insert photos and photo galleries are mostly used by the editors at observernews.ro (Table 3). At observernews.ro, the gallery sometimes also contains video content. Another recurring practice is the use of agency photos (Profimedia, Inquam Photos, Agerpres, Mediafax Foto, Reuters, EPA Images, Hepta photo), other Romanian media institutions photos (bizbrasov.ro, stirisuceava.net, newsbv.ro, Gorj online), image banks photos (Getty Images, Guliver Image, Foto Shutterstock), foreign media institutions (Sozcu, www.westfalen-blatt.de), Romanian public organizations (ISU⁴ Timiș, ISU Gorj, ISU Bistrița Năsăud, Călărași County Council, Border Police), foreign organizations (FIFA, NASA, Moscow Patriarchate) or Instagram pages (Victor Dorobanțu⁵). There is a scarcity of in-house photographic content production, and this is related with the fact that most of the news are outsourced from Romanian and foreign media outlets and Romanian and foreign press agencies.

Platform	Articles with photo galleries	Articles with insert photo
digi24.ro	2	1
libertatea.ro	1	3
adevărul.ro	3	7
observatornews.ro	8	12
TOTAL	14	23

Table 3 – Distribution of types of photographic content. Source: data collected and processed by the author

⁴ Stands for Inspectorate for Emergency Situations.

⁵ Romanian actor from “Wednesday” Netflix TV show.

Observatornews.ro uses video content the most in the production of online news, considering that it benefits from the video content produced by Antenna 1 television for broadcast. Although we would have expected digi24.ro to integrate more video content in its journalistic materials, because it is the news site of a television station, the collected data indicate that at observatornews.ro the ownership convergence is more significant than at digi24.ro. In all 15 articles from observatornews.ro where we identified video content, the video was the story broadcast in the news log. Instead, at digi24.ro we recognise only 2 materials that also contained the video that was broadcasted in the televised news. Therefore, only at observatornews.ro we encounter an important level of ownership convergence, which can be linked to the media outlet's position in the Romanian media ecosystem. The platform is part of Intact Media Group, like Antenna 1 television station. We did not expect to identify a prominent level of ownership convergence in the case of libertatea.ro or adevarul.ro because they don't have broadcasted channels in their portfolio to rely on, but we have been anticipated that on digi24.ro this phenomenon will manifest. It did not. This aspect needs to be investigated further by analysing the organizational practices of production.

In the case of the other articles, the source of the video content is diverse: foreign media institutions (902.gr, ABC News), Romanian media institutions (TVR), video-on-demand subscription platforms (Netflix Romania), education platforms (Mind Quest), NGO (Cred în România/ I believe in Romania), bloggers (Solo Expeditioner, PilotPhotog, ArhivaDYF), sports institutions (European Aquatics), specialized media channels (Military TV), music bands (Migos ATL), other institutions (Chandra X-ray Observatory). These contents are taken over from the entities' YouTube channels.

Regarding the integration of social media posts, we have noticed that the content is being outsourced from Twitter pages (The Institute for the Study of War, Ministry of Defense UK, U.S. Air Force, Ursula von der Leyen, Maryam Moqaddam⁶, Reuters), Instagram pages (Victor Dorobanțu), and Facebook pages (Volodimir Zelenski, Dacian Cioloș⁷, Mădălina Turza⁸). Twitter posts are those that are the most integrated in the materials.

Conclusion

This study shows how the various levels of convergence across the newsrooms are influencing the multimedia journalism practice. The findings reveal that the four newsrooms most often than not use a bi-medial digital narrative, which is mixing text with photographic content. Therefore, the level of information-gathering convergence and presentation convergence is low. This can be

⁶ Iranian actress, screenwriter, and director.

⁷ Romanian politician.

⁸ State adviser in the chancellery of the Romanian prime minister.

generated by the fact that a sophisticated information-gathering and packaging would involve delaying the execution and delivery time of the content and entailing increased production costs, which can affect the sustainability of the platforms. Also, the editorial policy of practicing online journalism from the office, with a deep decrease of the field reporting component, by using the materials of Romanian and foreign press institutions and Romanian and foreign press agencies as sources can be another explanation. Furthermore, another variable that can influence convergence is the article's genre. The levels of convergence in the feature genre for example could be higher. So, one of the hypotheses for further research could be: If the editorial strategy is aimed at increasing the volume of articles published daily, the convergence of information-gathering and presentation is precarious.

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