Impact of New Media in Journalism: A New Tool to Foster Information in Egypt

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Abstract

Today, online journalism offers a new and interesting spectrum of communication capabilities that goes beyond linear writing. Video and audio streaming, graphic animations, hyperlinks, as well as interactive communication and customization are only a few examples of the interesting new features offered by online newspapers.

In the past few years, Egyptian newspapers have launched news sites designed for the convergence of traditional media into the new online environment. Multimedia storytelling was intended to be used to produce omni-directional coverage of the news to foster information and eventually democracy.

Statistics based on a content evaluation of the online editions of the two main Egyptian newspapers in English language, Cairo Times and Al-Ahram Weekly, and the daily Egyptian newspaper in Arabic Al-Ahram Daily, revealed that the country is not producing original content for online publications. And multimedia and interactive storytelling is often a matter of concern.

By using a methodology that combines content evaluation with in-depth interviews with web editors and webmasters, this study describes the “warm” world of converging media in Egypt. This study has revealed important details about the impact that today’s converging media has on online news content in Egypt. Editors, journalists, as well as webmasters foster information for a more “democratic” coverage of national and international news in order to provide an international community of regular users with an authentic picture of the country.

1. Introduction

New media technologies such as the Internet were a generation away when Marshal McLuhan wrote Understanding Media: The Extension of Man, but his theoretical considerations are still of a remarkable guidance.

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Sometimes defined as the “guru” of media culture, he discussed the effects that
technologies such as printing presses, radio and TV have on habits of perception and
thinking in the audience. His study, one of the first theoretical approaches to the study
of media technologies and interpersonal communication, was widely acclaimed by
popular standards while labeled as controversial by those in academic circles.

He suggested that the medium, classified as a delivery system, impacts its
audience more that the message that it conveys. McLuhan’s argument became a book that
in 1967 was published with the title, *The Medium is the Message.*

At that time McLuhan couldn’t apply his theories about media determinism to
the new online environment because computerization had not fully been adopted.
However, he did conceptualize the idea of a medium constructing a global network
where times and spaces are neither uniform nor continuous, a network generating social
developments in the domain of interpersonal communication. McLuhan’s theories
eventually posited the ability of electronic media to unify and retribalize the human
race.

Tackling the angle of the news domain and looking into the world of
converging media this study intends to assess the online environment in Egypt, looking
at the way news writing and reporting changed during the last years, after the massive
introduction of the Internet in the country. By looking at online journalism in Egypt this
study intends to find out whether news coverage became *omni-directional* as a result of
a more sophisticated medium is using new communication capabilities – and because
according to McLuhan, the medium is the message. Because Egypt plays such an
important role in the Middle East peace process the development of responsible online
publications should be a priority in the agenda of the government.

Therefore this study intends to suggest an answer to the following research
question:

**RQ:** *Is the Internet an information tool that is fostering media
convergence in the online news environment in Egypt?*

The news online environment will be looked at as a hot or a cool medium -
according McLuhan’s temperature metaphor. In McLuhan’s definition a medium is hot
if it extends one single sense in high definition and fills its audience with data (radio
and movies are hot medium because they are low in participation). On the contrary it is
cool if it is low definition and little is given and so much as to be filled by the audience
(telephones and TVs are cool media because they are high in participation or
completion). New communication capabilities, such as video and audio streaming, graphic
animation, hypermedia, audience involvement, and customization, are indeed among the
most interesting features of the new online environment that generates a “freezing”
medium. The nature of the new multimedia coverage itself in fact transformed the way
information is delivered. Perhaps now it is best described as *contextualized,* since it

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3 Ibid. 358.
4 I am using a terminology inspired by the work of Pavlik, J. *Journalism and New Media.* (New
York: Columbia University Press, 2001). In this case *Omni-directional reporting* means 360-degree
coverage of an issue allowed by omni-directional imaging.
5 McLuhan, 24-35
6 I am using a terminology inspired by the work of Pavlik, J. *Journalism and New Media.* (New
York: Columbia University Press, 2001). *Contextualized Journalism:* Journalism that utilizes all
utilizes communication features embracing most of the characteristics of old media generating a medium that is high in participation or completion.

In Egypt, during the last few years the Internet fostered the flow of information divulging news that more quickly reaches the audience. Particularly, the Internet seems to have enhanced barriers of time and space originated from the convergence of old media into a new one - the new one using both features of the broadcast and document domains.

The relevance of this study is in researching a geographic area on which today’s communication research yet rarely has focused. This study, in fact, focuses on an environment that is just about to take off and where the Internet should be seen as valuable social and educational tool to foster decentralized and independent thought and eventually democracy.

2. Literature Review

The Internet appears to be the medium that significantly fosters information in the new converging environment. As James Carey suggests: “The Internet should be understood as the first instance of a global communication system. This system in turn, is displacing a national system of communications which came into existence at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the railroad and telegraph, and was perfect in subsequence through television in the network era.”

In an original analysis Roger Fidler’s *Mediamorphosis* describes the new online environment together with its interactive features in a book carrying the same title. This well-documented, fast-moving book illustrates the changes that are currently happening in the new media environment:

Mediamorphosis (meˈde-ə-morˈfa-sis) n. The transformation of communication media, usually brought about by the complex interplay of perceived needs, competitive and political pressures, and social and technological innovations.

In the preface to the book, Fidler explains how he coined the world *mediamorphosis* in 1990 to use it as a working title for an article about the future of newspapers. The word *mediamorphosis* describes today’s evolving broadcasting and inter-personal domains, as well as the document domain.

Fidler’s *mediamorphosis* originated a medium that incorporated the fundamental traditions of its era established media systems. A process that Mike Cuencia prefers to describe as the *televization* of the Internet that brings sounds, graphics and motion on the screen of our computers. According to Cuencia, the web communication capabilities of the new media, hypermedia, audience involvement, dynamic content and customization.

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9 Fidler, R., *Mediamorphosis*.
10 Ibid. xy.
will then begin to look more and more like a form of multimedia that is anything but new television.

And what is *mediamorphosis* and *televisation* of media if not another way of describing the world of converging media? A simple definition would be that it is the combination of traditional media, print, television, radio, and film – with the new technology – namely, cable television, the Internet and datacasting.

Henry Jenkins however prefers to look at the term convergence overcoming the single technological issue. In his work he distinguishes between at least five processes that people confuse when talking about convergence. They are: the technological convergence of “atoms into bits”; the economic convergence like the merge of AOL with Time Warner; the social or organic convergence occurring in individuals’ minds when simultaneously watching TV, doing emails and listening to a CD player; the cultural convergence at the level of storytelling that uses all medium to foster narrative information; and the global convergence of international circulation of media content.  

The complex phenomenon of media convergence has been widely studied from an economic perspective. Among others, the International Institute of Communication published in 1996 a study on ownership and control analyzing economic convergence in different areas of the world.  

Also J. W. Anderson and D. F. Eickelmann’s study entitled “Media Convergence and Its Consequences,” gives an example on how the new-born global communication system operates in the era of media convergence.  

Focusing on the convergence of media in the Arab world they suggest that mass media facilitated journalism in the Arab world that has been dominated by political reporting and ideological commentary. New media, thus, by bringing more of society into public discourse, facilitate a broader-based journalism.

Technological transformations in the world of journalism have recently become a topic of great interest. John Pavlik describes the world of converging media in the journalism field as “… New media {that} include a variety of technologies that performs functions ranging from information, gathering, searching, sorting and communicating, to production, editing, design, distribution, access and display.”  

Pavlik and Dennis in “The Coming of Convergence and Its Consequences” and Pavlik in *Journalism and the New Media* also provide an extensive discussion on the consequences that media convergence is bringing into the society.

Together with Pavlik’s efforts to provide an updated picture of the new online news environment in 2001 the Florinda International University published a report to assess the online environment in the U.S. Another concrete analysis is provided by J.D. Lasica editor of the Online Journalism Review. In one of his online articles he gives an example of the complex transformations occurring in the world of journalism.

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18 Pavlik in Florida International University. *A report on journalism and converged media*. (Spring 2002)
In an article he explains how the technological convergence in the journalism domain of American CNN became an example of such a transformation in the new media environment. After the elimination of CNN Interactive as a separate business unit, news division president Eason Jordan made a strong case for integrating the network's television, radio and interactive divisions. “The days of thinking of each of the dozens of CNN services and units as a separate silo are over. We are all on the same team,” he wrote. “… No longer will a newsgatherer work only for TV or radio or interactive. Correspondents whose expertise is TV reporting must know how to write for Interactive and provide tracks for Radio — and deliver for them as needed.”

Mark Fitzgerald, however, suggests that technology is a big barrier to multimedia coverage. Lack of software to handle newspaper text, online copy and video are often unsolved problems for most online publications.

Numerous studies have been conducted to help journalists to think strategically in the digital age, to teach them how to use the Internet and new technologies to produce better journalism. Online journalism became a new course in many universities, and many private institutions like the Poynter Institute. Computer assisted reporting became the subject of Nora Paul’s book entitled Computer-Assisted Research and a book by Christopher Callahan entitled A Journalist Guide to the Internet. On the same topic a significant contribution is also the one of Dean Tudor, Emeritus Professor of Journalism at the Ryerson Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting in Canada Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto, Canada. In his personal web page on Computer Assisted Reporting and Computer Assisted Reporting and Research, he collected important information on advanced reporting techniques supported by online references.

Ultimately, the core of media communication have became digital documents constituted of bits. “Bits are Bits,” says Nicholas Negroponte in his book entitled Being Digital. They are the smallest element of machine-readable information – such as computers – and constitute the alphabet of digital languages developed to facilitate communication between machines and humans.

An example of good practice is the winner of the 2001 Net Media Award for the Best News Story, accessible from the web site www.net-media.co.uk. This site experimented with new forms of storytelling, such as immersive storytelling in which the reader enters and navigates the news report for an instant. Together with The Guardian, the American Tribune is considered the King of Communication as Robins Wayne named it in a recent publication.

Going back to a more theoretical approach to the study of today’s converging media we can refer to the words of S. Rafaeli: “studying interactivity is the special...”

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21 Nora Paul, Computer Assisted Reporting. (St. Petersburg: Poynter Institute, 1999)
22 Callahan, C., A Journalist’s Guide to the Internet. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999)
25 Immersive storytelling: Storytelling developed in a three-dimensional environment where 360-degree imaging, sound bits and digital texts are used to plunge the user in the world of news
intellectual niche for communication researchers” in the realm of new media. More recent research, in fact, focused on the new interactive capabilities offered by online communication.

The origin of the term interactivity in relation with digital communication dates back to the 1960s, when Theodor Nelson used it for the first time to refer to “non-sequential writing” on a computer. Hypertext and cybertext give the reader the possibility to jump from a text to another through multiple links that change the linear development of a text.

Luis O. Arata explains hypertext and cybertext as other ways to generate literature. According to him literature is moving from its origins in oral traditions to a future that we can hardly envision from current experiments in the new media. “Fixed objects are increasingly perceived as fossilized traces of broader ensembles, organic, in process,” he says.

On the other hand, Mike Cuencia has raised criticism on the importance of studying interactivity. He argues that multimedia, as well as interactivity, is a relatively new concept. Filmstrips with audio-tape accompaniment, multi/projector audio/visual presentations featured in large convention halls, even sound and motion pictures and videos have been produced for decades. Moreover, recipients have always been able to give their feedback to the senders, with letters to editors or telephone calls. We could always change the channel or turn the page to select our source of information. Nevertheless, the Internet made multimedia features available to the mass, and interactivity of common use.

According to Carrie Heeter, S. Rafaeli again is the author who provides the more comprehensive definition of the different uses that can be done with the word interactivity. He defines interactivity as “the extent to which communication reflects on itself, feeds and responds to the past.” Therefore, interactivity is characterized by six different dimensions: 1) complexity of source choices available on the Internet; 2) effort users must exert to get the news; 3) source responsiveness to the user; 4) monitoring of information use by the source; 5) ease of adding information; 6) facilitation of interpersonal communication.

In an analysis that goes back to the first analyses of the communication process Rafaeli’s interprets Internet-based communication as a continuum. The Internet plays with the source-message-receiver features of the traditional communication model, but the traditional pattern one-to-one developed in a more sophisticated one-to-many pattern such as WWW pages operated by major news organizations, many-to-

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many/many-to-one/one-to-many such as subject-oriented discussions in Usenet newsgroups, and one-to-one such as in personal email communication.\textsuperscript{33}

To conclude, and going back to the research question it is McLuhan the one who suggests the more original temperature metaphor. McLuhan’s uses a temperature metaphor to describe features of interactivity. He distinguishes between hot and cool media. Hot media like radio or print extend one single sense in high definition. Therefore hot media are low in participation because the single sense extended in high definition provides well-filled data and no ambiguity of interpretation is left to the audience. Radio is a hot medium because extend one single sense “hearing” in high definition and it spells the data out for the audience. Cool media on the contrary are TV or telephone because they do not expand one single sense in high definition. They are high in participation or completion by the audience that continuously have to interact with the counterpart to fill in the data. TV in fact is for the eyes, and the ears to allow for increased interplay among sense.

To conclude Sherry Turkle prefers the metaphor of solidity to that of temperature. Soft media are those allowing flexibility, nonhierarchical interactivity and facilitate bricolage and simulation.\textsuperscript{34} New media thus are mostly soft.

3. Methodology

The focus of this study are online editions of Egyptian newspapers, a major source of information for the global community that doesn’t have access to the printed editions.

The publications have been selected after conducting a brief survey on the Internet to find out what were the most developed websites in the Egyptian online environment. The population sample for the study, thus, resulted in the online pages of: Al-Ahram Daily, an Egyptian governmental daily newspaper in Arabic; Al-Ahram Weekly, an Egyptian governmental weekly newspaper in English; and the Cairo Times, an Egyptian independent weekly magazine in English.

The publications were also chosen according to the language of the publication and their forms of ownership. Apart from newsworthiness these might be considered the two most important criteria that influence the nature of a publication.

These online publications were surveyed using a content evaluation of the articles published on the front page as follows: Al-Ahram Daily during the first six months of publication starting from July 1998 until December 1998 (n= 25 issues) and the last six months of the year 2001 starting from August 2001 until December 2001 (n=25 issues)\textsuperscript{35}; Al-Ahram Weekly during the first six months 1998 starting from April 1998 until September 1998 (n=25 issues) and the last six months of the year 2001 starting from August 2001 until December 2001 (n=25 issues); and Cairo Times during the first six months of 1999 starting from March 1999 until August 1999 and the last six months of the year 2001 starting from August 2001 until December 2001 (n=25 issues).

\textsuperscript{35} In the case of Al-Ahram Daily the study only looked at the Thursday update in order to be able to compare the results of this content evaluation with the other two weekly publications coming out on the same day.
The first unit of analysis were articles published on the front-page grouped into 13 content categories - according to the same classification of the printed editions. Articles were thus divided into the following content categories: local news, international news, regional news, cultural news, travel stories, entertainment news, business news, health news, sport news, profiles, editorials, feature stories and others.

Advertising was not analyzed in this research that focused only on the news content. Advertising, in fact, appears only sporadically in Al-Ahram Daily and at the time I conducted this research it was absent from the other two publications.

A second unit of analysis was the development of non-linear writing and interactive texts. The number and type of links were content categories analyzed according to the frequency of occurrence. Interactivity was another content category for this unit of analysis. The presence of email addresses for a quick feedback from readers, as well as opinion pools and forums, large archives and search engines and innovative technologies that modified the linear writing of the news are also analyzed with regard to their frequency of occurrence.

Eventually, for a better evaluation of the content of these publications in-depth interviews with web editors were used to uncover the reason behind the changes occurred in the content of these online editions. In-depth interviews with the three web editors Ashraf Khalil for Cairo Times, Amira Howaydi for Al-Ahram Weekly and Ghada as-Shargawy for Al-Ahram Daily, allowed questioning how much new media, such as the Internet, influenced choices of reporters and editors in matters of newsworthiness. The Internet, in fact, often participates actively in reporters, and editors, acquisition and elaboration of information for news stories potentially helping to produce more precise and responsible journalism.


Content evaluation
A brief overview on the Egyptian press is now useful to discover who and what is behind the pages I researched on the Internet.

Under President Mubarak the Egyptian press has been revitalized under a pro-Western policy that since 1980 released more than 300 publications of different types. According to Cairo Times today Egyptian publications can be grouped in four categories:

? State-owned publications like Al Ahram (including al-Ahram Weekly and al-Ahram Daily), Al Akhbar and Al Gomhuriya. Their editors are government appointees, while their reporters and columnists are given a fair amount of flexibility in what they write.
? Publications owned by political parties like Al Shaab, Al Wafd or Al Watan Al Arabi. The party leadership exercises varying degrees of control over editorial policies. All of them are vulnerable to various forms of government pressure if they step beyond certain limits.
? The Supreme Press Council rarely allows an independent publication to register inside of Egypt, like Al Osboa and Al Naba. To get such a license, you have to be informally cleared by all of Egypt's major security and intelligence agencies.

Most Egyptian publications are legally registered abroad, most commonly in Cyprus. Cairo Times is one of these. These publications may get a license to print inside of Egypt (usually at the mammoth state presses, high on cost-effectiveness), or they may publish in the Free Zone or outside (more expensive).  

The first three groups together comprise around 30 titles. The other 270 are subject to a censor, the Foreign Publications Censor, who answers directly to the Minister of Information. However, in 1998 Amin and Napoli concluded that under the current presidency of Mubarak the Egyptian press operates far more freely than under the previous regimes and more freely than in the majority of Arab and African countries.

The editor of al-Ahram Weekly - printed edition - released the following comment when the online edition was launched in 1998: “As we launch our electronic edition, we hope that a new and ever larger public will come to share their opinion [of the journalists writing for al-Ahram Weekly] - and particularly those readers who in the past have had difficulty obtaining access to the print edition of our newspaper.”

According to its web editor Ghada al-Sharqawi, Al-Ahram Daily online was also published, “to give the possibility to those living abroad to read Al-Ahram. It has been created to inform expatriates about local news and public opinion issues in Egypt.”

These statements provide interesting suggestions on the use that Egyptian publications make of the Internet. In 2002 the publication of online newspapers in Egypt seemed to originate from a common desire of informing the rest of the world about a national perspective on the most significant national and international news. This tendency is in fact confirmed by the analysis of the research findings.

Table 1, page 10, shows the content evaluation findings providing percentages of the top five stories published in the first and last six months of publication of each online newspaper.

According to the table, local news and regional news were predominant in all the three publications. Forty-seven percent of the stories posted online by Cairo Times are local news. For Al-Ahram Weekly and Al-Ahram Daily the percentages are lower. Twenty-six per cent in the weekly edition and 30 percent in the daily edition is the total of local and regional news posted online.

In the case of Cairo Times the percentage of local and regional news remained almost unvaried (there was an increase of nine percent), while in the case of Al-Ahram Weekly the percentages decreased (the decrease was of 50 percent) as well as for Al-Ahram Daily (the decreased was of 40 percent).

Generally speaking more local, regional and international news appeared on the front page especially regarding complex issues such as the Palestinian/Israeli clashes. This tendency was particularly evident in Al-Ahram Weekly that, in 2002, showed a very well organized front page in which it was possible to find the news according to the subject. This new version represents an important step ahead from when the publication was posted online for the first time in 1998, and it had a front page that showed a series of lead paragraphs reporting only on the Israeli-Palestinian clashes.

37 www.cairotimes.com
39 This answer again explains a trend that started in the beginning of the 90s, when the first publications in English (including Cairo Times and Al-Ahram Weekly) became available to the public.
Table 1
Number of stories available online in the first and last 6 months of publication in Cairo Times, Al-Ahram Weekly and Al-Ahram Daily

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cairo Times</th>
<th></th>
<th>Al-Ahram Weekly</th>
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<th>Al-Ahram Daily</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local news</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature stories</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Cultural news</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Feature stories</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Cultural news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Feature stories</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>Travel stories</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profiles</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>Travel stories</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business news</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Editorials as well as international news acquired importance recently. In Al-Ahram Weekly 17 percent of the content of the front-page were editorials. In Al-Ahram Daily the percentage reaches the 21 percent. On the contrary in Cairo Times editorials appeared sporadically, although a more recent trend seemed to favorite them to other stories. These percentages have increased during the years; in Al-Ahram Weekly of seven percent while in Al-Ahram Daily of a mere two percent.

The publication of international news was also a new trend. Completely absent in Cairo Times, was always available in Al-Ahram Weekly (a total of about 13 percent), while in Al-Ahram Daily (a total of 11 percent) it was enhanced under a link named US Mirror. International news was rarely posted online in the first online editions of both Al-Ahram publications.

Feature stories, travel stories and cultural stories were also posted online. For Cairo Times they were the second most important type of story posted online, as 28 percent of the online content was constituted by feature, travel and cultural stories. Al-Ahram Weekly had a whole section in the front page that was called feature stories and another called cultural section and travel section. Together they represented the 15 percent of the content of the entire front page. The same percentage was found in Al-Ahram Daily (although in this case these types of stories appeared in the front page only in the format of a linkable titles). In the case of feature stories, travel stories and cultural stories there had not been any substantial change in the amount of stories posted online during the last three years.

The editor of al Ahram Weekly, Amira Howaydi, explained that these changes originated from the need to give an international approach to the publication, and make it more appealing to the foreign component of the readership (which in this case was the biggest one). “People have an easy access to international news though a large number
of other publications online, so we wanted to give them our own perspective on international issues,” said Howaydi.

An exception to this tendency was Cairo Times that from its first online edition had not changed the layout or improved the content. On the contrary, the number and variety of the stories published online had slightly decreased. So, no international news was ever posted online and the publication remained a pure report on the main Egyptian news. Global and cultural convergence didn’t touch this publication that for financial reasons had to stick to its coverage of local news. According to its web editor Ashraf Khalil, “The Internet has not necessarily changed what we do, it has changed what we put online. We always have an eye on what we sell overseas. We tend to choose three or four articles that have a subject of some interest to the international audience, because the local audience can buy Cairo Times.”

According to the three editors, Egyptian audience preferred to access local news from an Egyptian perspective that means from local newspapers. At the same time, they were not willing to go online if they could easily buy printed editions of the same newspapers. Therefore, online newspapers targeted an international audience and web editors became gatekeepers who kept an eye on the audience of expatriates and foreigners interested in knowing the Egyptian perspective on the most current issues.

As a result of a convergence in the content domain, and the pressure of foreign competitors, web editors had to create more appealing publications. Therefore Egyptian online news publications improved the content of their online pages and increased the number of stories posted on a weekly basis. These new publications had been described by their editors as being “Pan-Arab.” Therefore, according to Jenkins’ definition, global convergence fostered international circulation of media content.

**Interactive storytelling**

Before we look at the development of non-linear writing and multimedia storytelling I want to introduce the recent developments occurred in the online environment in Egypt.

Only at the beginning of the year 2002 Internet connections became free in Egypt and the number of users expected to increase drastically.\(^\text{40}\) Table n. 1 shows a consistent increase in the number of users in the last three years.

Overall, a recent survey conducted by Ajeeb.com\(^\text{41}\) shows that on 28 March 2001 there were 3.54 million Internet users in the Arab world, and the number expected to increase to 5 million users by the end of the year. Although penetration was faster in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and in Bahrain, Egypt is one of the leading countries in among the Arab world and together with South Africa in the African continent (see Table 2).\(^\text{42}\)

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\(^{41}\) Ajeeb.com is a Middle East-based portal on the Net that offers a wealth of information on the region in both the Arabic and English languages. Using the latest technologies from Sakhr, the portal offers unique and free services for users, including Arabic machine translation for text in any format, a complete directory of Web sites in the region and a Web search engine. Ajeeb.com, a division of Sakhr Software company, is registered in Dubai Internet City.

The South African research firm BMI-T[^44] in fact, confirmed that Egypt is leading the way in telecommunication reform and liberalization in Africa. The government has become open to privatization and creation of new jobs in the IT sector. The privatization of Telecom Egypt, on hold because of adverse market conditions, is now taking off. The Egyptian company thus will soon take part to the project Africa One that will enhance African economy with the installation of a fiber optics ring around Africa. “Connecting the Dotcoms,” a recent publication appeared in Business Monthly of May 2002 analyses recent successes and failures of the IT business in Egypt.

In the light of these brief introduction it is easier to understand why online newspapers were seen as a one-to-many means of communication like a TV screen or a radio speaker, while the many-to-many communication allowed by interactivity was completely ignored. The medium, in fact, was still used as an old newspaper.

Only one email contact was available for the entire staff of the newspaper that was not often utilized. However, feedback from the readers arrived quickly, to confirm that the Internet could easily reach a larger number of audiences. Amira Howaydi, web editor for Al-Ahram Weekly says that the newspaper’s website registers up to 3,000 hits a day, and that the number increased enormously in the period following September 11, 2001. She explains that: “The online editions mainly serves the purpose of giving information about important facts in Egypt. The publication is in English and that helps the foreign audience in the choice,” she said.

Limited concern was given to the concept of feedback by forums or polls. Although the three web editors said that the number of accesses have increased a lot in the last 6 months, that means after Sept. the 11\(^{th}\), they seem not to pay too much attention to the feedback that they can get from such interactive tools.

[^43]: The difficulty of gathering reliable statistics in Egypt is shown in this data. This data is very controversial since it shows an increase of 260,000 users in five months. Shangonet provides the data reported on the table, while another valuable source Ditgroup attests the number of users at 207,000.

Unfortunately, human and financial resources had never been adequate to supply good technologies for an online original publication. The web editors were also journalists working for the same publication or, in the case of Cairo Times, the editor in chief. This meant that no extra funding was available to hire specialized personnel or buy sophisticated web publishing software.

Research findings also suggested that in 2002 reporting in Egyptian online newspapers was not contextualized as it did not embrace features characteristic of the old and new media. Interactive features such as hypertext and cybertext, video and audio streaming were not entirely utilized in Egyptian publications. Technological convergence was strongly refrained by lack of cheap software and qualified human resources.

A look at the storytelling revealed that online editions have always been a digital copy of the printed ones. Webmasters posted online the articles that have been published by the paper editions, without a new editing for the new medium. Web editors simply selected the articles for the front page and those for the other online sections Al-Ahram Weekly and Al-Ahram Daily posted online around 60 percent of the stories published in the printed edition, while Cairo Times only a 20 percent.

However, articles were generally introduced on the front page by a linkable title followed by a “T” model of storytelling lead. Overall what was missing in Egyptian publications were online articles provided with hyperlinks in which the story has a non-linear development, but develops in hypertexts, video and audio streaming and interactive maps.

However in a second level, the stories did have links to related stories, background stories from the same publication. Cairo Times, instead, did not have links to background or related stories, but had a very powerful link section that gave to the reader the possibility of looking at, among others, sites on human rights, women’s issues and Islam and Christianity. Overall these links showed a willingness to involve the reader in discussions that might broaden his or her view on controversial issues.

Amira Howaydi described her website as “the copy of the printed edition.” Editors were conscious of the enormous possibilities that the Internet offered to their publications, but they did not have enough human and financial resources to utilize such technologically advanced techniques for a more omni-directional coverage of the issues.

On a more general level, these publications were still limited by time (updates happened only once a week apart from Al-Ahram Daily that for its daily character was updated every day), and by space (links to other stories were absent). However, the online coverage differed from the print coverage because it was digitalized. This can be seen as a significant development for the reader. In fact it makes it easier for him to look for particular stories and carry out a subject search in the archives that are free.

5. Conclusions

It always takes a longer time than we expect to realize the potential of a new form of communication – much longer than those who are living through these changes expect. It took more than a century and half, for example, after the invention of the

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45 T-Model: Structure of an online article in contrast with the inverted pyramid model of the print articles. The “T” is described by Poynter’s journalist as a visual representation of the importance that the lead paragraph has in an online publication.
press in Europe before the first novels and the first printed newspapers appeared. At this early stage the printed books were just imitation of handwritten manuscripts.\footnote{Stephens, M. “Which Communication Revolution Is It, Anyway?” \textit{Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly} 75 (Spring 1998): 10.}

The frequent criticism carried against the Internet, thus, have to be understood as a reaction to a new form of communication that is still immature and needs to be improved. McLuhan’s statement affirming that the medium is the message eventually describes a reality that might be too premature to be studied in the case of these three Egyptian newspapers. Maybe because they will pass decades before we understand the real capabilities of this converging medium. However this study suggests that:

Media convergence had an impact on online newspapers in Egypt. Global and cultural convergence improved the content of the medium for a more international circulation of the news. In the content domain this study suggests that “The Medium is the Message” recalling McLuhan’s words. However, technological convergence generated a digital medium that is not ready – mainly for financial reasons\footnote{The country is also not equipped with cables of optic fibers that represent an essential technological component to foster online navigation.} – to use and develop non-linear writing for a more contextualized reporting.

In this respect the Internet in Egypt seems to be only a development of the old one-to-many model of communication that has little impact on the local audience, but promises to shake the “global village.”

So, is this new medium hot or cold? Converging media should be freezing as they are supposed to provide an \textit{omni-directional} coverage of the issue, meaning that all the senses are involved to vehicle as much information as possible. But in the Egyptian online environment the medium seems to be warm – or warming up. Only one single sense, the sight, is extended to high definition. No interplay among the senses is allowed, since video and audio streaming are features belonging to another environment. The information reaches audiences as a global message administered by a single medium: writing. Online newspapers in Egypt are low in participation, as no missing bits, connecting information of a different nature, need to be filled.

\textit{6. Recommendations}

However, as so much importance is attributed to the impact that media convergence has on its audiences, it is important to concentrate on the message that this new medium generates. It is important to keep in mind De Fleur’s words.\footnote{De Fleur, M. “Diffusion of Information,” \textit{Society} 25 (1988): 72-81.} Traditionally, the press claims to serve the needs of citizens in a democracy, by providing them with accurate information about what is happening in the world. But how accurate, complete or distorted by the media is this information? Eventually, De Fleur wonders how the system can be redesigned to serve better democracy and wonders if the press is “forever beyond accountability in assessments of its performance.”