The Impact of Media Convergence on the Sustainability of Community Radio Stations in Limpopo Province

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Abstract

Understanding the impact of media convergence on the sustainability of South Africa's community media industry is critical for grassroots implementation. As traditional newspapers, television, and radio merge with social media, websites, blogs, and podcasts, community radio stations should adopt converged formats to remain relevant. This study investigated how media convergence affects the survival of community radio by identifying its challenges and opportunities and propose strategies for sustainable integration.

Through qualitative in-depth, unstructured interviews with journalists and station managers in Limpopo province, the study explored convergence's roles, obstacles, and journalistic practices. Findings revealed a strong commitment to convergence, highlight adaptive strategies, and offer insights into managing its effects. The study applied media dependency and social responsibility theories as practical frameworks for guiding community radio in rural areas.

Introduction

The advent of media convergence has driven traditional media to change production systems in a quest to adapt to new technologies and a new way of doing things. As a result, traditional media outlets, such as community radio stations in rural areas, have encountered difficulty adjusting to this new media culture due to a lack of resources required for convergence (Osunkunle, 2013). According to Fang and Repnikova (2022), community radio station audiences have grown since media convergence was implemented. This is because it allows several avenues to receive news and provides a range of ways to interact with listeners. As a result, media convergence benefits rather than destabilise community radio's operational activities.

Hessler (2021) concurs that community radio has sustainability issues such as lack of financial support; consequently, media convergence has only aggravated challenges because it introduced bad journalistic practices, untrained staff, and digital migration adaptation abilities, among others. This shows that, since financial constraints have been a major concern in the sustainability of community radio, media convergence will be difficult to achieve due to the demand for resources. Moreover, Okinyi (2019) maintains that since financial constraints remain the most crucial barriers restricting community radio's ability to sustain itself, some stations are funded adequately and can run a successful convergence radio.

Moreover, well-resourced community radio has the potential to handle media convergence because most challenges in this sector stem from a lack of resources. Ajibade and Alabi (2017) add that community radio stations that are challenged financially have experienced a decline in listenership due to the transition to multiple platforms and new production styles, aiming to maintain audience engagement. This indicates that scarcity of infrastructure, such as internet access, poor network connectivity, and digital skills shortage, among others, contributes to sustainability challenges that prevent media convergence in rural radio stations.

For this reason, community radio becomes the least effective media outlet for development in adapting to the digital migration era (Allocott, Gentzkow and Yu, 2019). Van Rooyen (2019) points out that converged

radio has affected the affordability of community radio stations because it came with the requirement of internet access, which may have affected radio's mandate of remaining the cheapest information tool for the poor. As a result, most people in rural areas rely on frequency radio since they are impoverished and cannot pay for the data required to access converged radio. This implies that only a few individuals in remote areas will have access to convergent radio. This is because radio stations might fail to meet the needs of media convergence, and listeners might encounter issues. For example, media convergence necessitates the use of smart devices to connect to the radio, implying that listeners must own these tools to access converged radio. In this instance, people tend to listen to traditional radio since it is more accessible and less expensive if such resources are unavailable (Buckley, 2020).

Wallace (2013) asserts that despite the challenges of sustainability brought by media convergence, community radio has the mandate to accommodate both the rich and the poor. This is because community radio carries the obligation to ensure that local content reaches the targeted audience cheaply and affordably (Mhlanga, 2016). Buckley (2020) argues that commercial radio stations often handle media convergence because they are resourceful and profit-driven radio. Smith and Anderson (2018) contend that community radio's quality is frequently influenced by its resources. This indicates that community radio has a slight chance of accommodating media developments meant to advance the dissemination of information to the public. This is because the scarcity of resources has been an alarming factor that has brought different perceptions about whether community radio can realise media convergence (Ferguson & Greer, 2017).

As a result, conventional community radio has increased the expenses of accessing radio programming because listeners have had to acquire data and have smart devices to tune in than it was when utilising traditional radio. This is so because converged radio does not function with frequency signals but is rather designed to be driven by the internet, which comes at a cost (Correia, Vieira & Aparici, 2019). Okinyi (2019) states that the convergence era negatively impacted community radio and traditional media organisations depending on the resources each radio possessed. For this reason, community radio's challenges have arisen from diversification, stylisation, and innovation that came with integrated media.

According to MDDA (2020), most South African rural community radio stations rely on MDDA for financial stability and have struggled to manage media convergence in comparison to well-funded urban community radio stations. This indicates that the community radio station pushed itself since it did not want to fall behind owing to low resources.

Therefore, this study suggests that community radio aims to keep up with modern media technology since it has more significant influence over the spread of news than traditional media outlets (Asy'ari, 2018).

Literature Review

Media dependency theory

Media-dependency theory argues that audiences use media to achieve specific satisfaction and goals. This contends that the media can meet people's needs by providing information at the appropriate time. The theory employs a multi-level framework to describe how people, media, and society interact (Zhang & Zhong, 2020). This is supported by Ball-Rokeach (1985), who contends that media dependency theory was developed in response to the media's ongoing evolution and dominance in human space. As a result, media dependency theory is defined as the idea that people rely on the media for trustworthy information to meet their needs and achieve their goals. It is regarded as the practice of routinely and excessively consuming information through the media (Jung, 2017). Therefore, this study indicates that society cannot achieve its needs unless it relies on the media, as people are accustomed to absorbing media content that impacts their lives positively and negatively (Kim, 2020). The media advises individuals on how to behave, think about current events, and act in certain situations, making it difficult for society to function without the media in their daily lives (Khalifa & Khalifa, 2020). Drula (2015) adds that the media, the public, and broader societal structures interact closely and that these three roles rely on one another to achieve their goals. In addition, their media dependence is driven by an increased demand for electoral information in which media convergence is involved. For example, people use online platforms to find out what is going on around them. As such, this theory indicates that community radio stations depend on media convergence to stay relevant in integrated mediums through disseminating information that meets people's needs.

Social responsibility theory

This theory holds that media and journalism should be focused and committed to society or the people who consume news through reading, watching, and listening (Apata & Ogunwuyi, 2019). It is also known as the idea that governs any media action that has a responsibility to society, culture, and the economy (Asaad, Saeed, & Ahmad, 2023). As noted by Apata and Ogunwuyi (2019), social responsibility theory demonstrates how

it should be applied in newsroom settings to show the public that press freedom is now accompanied by accountability and responsibility. Therefore, this theory outlines the proper way for the media, particularly community radio stations, to cover social issues and always put its responsibilities first in action to avoid being considered irresponsible by news consumers. This theory imposes a social obligation on community radio stations operating under the media convergence era to ensure that they perform their responsibilities of educating people, entertaining, and informing the public without fail despite the sustainability challenges they are facing in rural areas. According to this theory, community radio stations should be able to fulfil their civic obligation, which includes uncovering the truth, reporting well-balanced news, and ensuring objectivity in their news dissemination (Coe, 2018).

Media Convergence and the Reshaping of Mass Communication

Jensen (2022) defines media convergence as the integration and interoperability of computing networks, information technologies, and adaptable digital information through intelligent platforms, applications, and devices. Babbie (2021) adds that the fusion of digital media, computing and information technologies, communications networks, and information content creates media convergence. This indicates that convergence has transformed how communication is received and extended news dissemination channels (Donders& Raats, 2015). Fosu and Akpojivi (2015) argue that media convergence can offer a few positive qualities in its current condition, including more straightforward use, lower costs, and the degree of digital convergence is more significant in community radio stations. Meikle and Young (2017) add that integrated media allows combining traditional and digital media into a single formation portal. For instance, (text, images, audio, and video). This brought some benefits, such as content management system convergence that makes it simpler to manage content (Jamilah, Utami & Kurniadi, 2020). In addition, media convergence provides a unique way to depart from this established structure. Changes in ownership, structure, collaborations, information collection, presentation, and the rapid growth of digital technologies help foster media convergence. Moreover, audiences mostly prefer using mobile phones to obtain information. This is because they prefer to obtain news from the Internet rather than the radio (Tkach and Williams, 2018).

The role of Media Convergence on society

The emergence of media convergence has impacted society as it has created a shift in how people respond to news and interact with one

another. It has contributed to several people purchasing their own smart devices, such as laptops, iPads, and smartphones, with the aim of seeking access to news on the internet (Han and Sohn, 2016). Margulies and Uddin (2019) argue that there are some advantages which news consumers enjoy under media convergence. For instance, news consumers have the freedom to choose platforms to consume information rather than relying on a single medium. They also have catch-up platforms where they can download the content (Koirala (2021). Media convergence encourages citizen journalism because, upon its arrival, the number of civic journalists has increased. People now have their own platforms to generate news content without relying on the mainstream media. As such, this has also contributed to revenue generation for both the media and civic journalism because audiences are able to stream the content. (Bell and Shine, 2015). Johnston (2020) adds that media convergence played an important part during Covid-19 because it allows media organisations to integrate channels and work virtually. Since then, most media companies have preferred incorporating multiple mediums rather than operating just on one platform.

The benefits of convergence on community radio stations

According to Kim (2019), media convergence has also brought a lot of benefits to community radio stations in terms of enabling content creators to use various tools to generate customised content for the targeted communities. It has also brought changes in the receiving of information. It has enabled people to have freedom of choice in terms of which media platforms to use. For example, the choice of using radio, online streaming, podcasts, and through social media outlets such as Facebook.

Jensen (2022) adds that media convergence has also brought skills to manage advanced technologies towards integrating smart devices with the actual radio. It has enabled news consumers to catch up with the aired content at their flexible time, download it, and share it with other people. This indicates that community radio stations in rural areas have benefited in terms of employing new media dynamics and broadcast stylisation. Traditional radio also uses media convergence to strengthen its advertising stream of income. This is because they advertise for their clients on multiple platforms, more than before (Doudaki & Spyridou, 2015). This demonstrates that media convergence has stretched revenue avenues for community radio rather than waiting for donors for financial support (Hassan & Elmasry, 2019).

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative inquiry to investigate the impact of media convergence on the long-term sustainability of community radio stations in South Africa. It explored the perceptions of radio station managers and journalists. The study used purposive sampling to acquire data from three community radio stations in Limpopo. This study aimed to investigate the challenges, opportunities, and strategies used by community radio stations throughout the convergence age. By examining the perspectives of both station managers and journalists.

Empirical data was gathered using qualitative methods, and in-depth, unstructured interviews were conducted with three station managers and twenty-seven journalists from PFM, Univen FM, and Makhado FM. The participants interviewed had considerable media experience, particularly station managers, whereas journalists typically had roughly five years of journalism experience. Interpretative strategies were also used to generate pertinent research questions about media convergence.

The study used thematic analysis to examine the identified themes that arose from the collected data. These themes were further explored and analysed to identify significant potential strategies, possibilities, and challenges that media convergence presented to community radio stations in rural Limpopo.

Findings

To determine the findings gathered from community station managers and journalists, it was important to understand how these participants perceived media convergence and its impact on community journalism. This enabled the researcher to acquire a more comprehensive description and shared understanding of the phenomena from different perspectives.

All participants agreed that media convergence had a significant impact on redefining community journalism by bringing new broadcasting styles to disseminate information, improving digital skills, and providing various means of communication. Participants also agreed that while media convergence has benefited their community radio stations, they are still battling to stay afloat due to financial restrictions. The results of this study refuted common misconception that community radio stations in rural areas do not use media convergence.

Theme 1: The role of media convergence in community radio journalism

The managerial staff found the following responses on the significance of the role media convergence played in community radio stations. The results indicate that participants had an in-depth understanding of the role of media convergence. The findings demonstrate that convergence had significantly influenced the reshaping of community radio journalism in Limpopo province. One of the roles was to transform how communication was received traditionally into a modern digital format.

Results further contend that media convergence's role was to encourage the integration of numerous platforms to transmit a single message to the audience. These findings imply that community radio stations in Limpopo are managed by station managers who are knowledgeable and experienced in media convergence. This is so because station managers demonstrated the ability to understand the concept. This, of course, contradicts the widely held belief that inexperienced managers and journalists controlled most community radio stations.

When it comes to the journalists themselves, results indicate that most participants outlined the role of media convergence based on their knowledge and views on this question. Most participants agreed that media convergence's primary role in community radio was to encourage the integration of multiple media platforms to communicate information to the public. Furthermore, these findings suggest that most community radio stations have incorporated their stations with other platforms to improve their production.

This theme implies that community journalists and station managers possess the necessary knowledge of the role of media convergence. As a result, participants indicated that media convergence has a positive impact in rural settings, even though limited resources typically characterise community journalism. The findings show that the emergence of media convergence has caused a shift in the media landscape in rural Limpopo.

Theme 2: Opportunities and challenges of media convergence in the sustainability of community radio stations

The results indicate that among the outstanding opportunities presented by media convergence was the bringing multiple access to disseminating information to the public. All participants have realised the importance of this opportunity in their radio stations. However, the results demonstrate

that station managers had different perspectives on what the opportunities for media convergence are. However, most of the participants agreed that multiple access to information is the greatest opportunity that media convergence presented for sustaining community radio stations in Limpopo. As such, results indicate that participants maintain that extensive access to information has contributed largely to the success of integrated community radio stations.

Most participants indicate that station managers use integrated platforms to improve audience engagement using social media like Facebook. All participants further outline that media has made community radio journalism flourish. As a result, most participants indicate that because of media convergence, audiences can make their comments easily and faster during a talk show. This result implies that media convergence has simplified the way audiences receive information and how such information is conveyed. Consequently, this has caused a significant shift in the community media space. For instance, radio did not have online streaming, but today, they can choose the platform they can access.

The results reveal that participants recognise the importance of cross-platform collaboration at the community radio level. They criticised how people used to sit beneath a tree and tune into wireless. Both journalists and managers indicate that convergence has made things easier for both listeners and broadcasters. Listeners no longer have to carry a radio or struggle with making calls whenever they want to engage broadcasters. In the era of media convergence, listeners could use various platforms to connect to radio anywhere. For instance, people have smartphones; they can connect to access the radio in the comfort of their homes. As a result, this has created a freedom of movement while tuning into radio and enables people to do something while connected to information. Therefore, these results indicate that media convergence has taken the lead in the spreading of information.

This implies that community radio stations in rural areas use a variety of news instruments to inform their listeners. Although this is widespread among mainstream media organisations, these findings revealed that community radio has joined in prioritising the incorporation of diverse modes of communication to offer current news to their audience. The research findings in this theme indicate that opportunities for media convergence enable community radio to break news, have comment sessions and have multiple access to news content.

THEME 3: *Media convergence strategies for the sustainability of community radios*

- ***Digital media training***

Understanding the significance of media training in enhancing the ethical standards of journalism and preparing media practitioners to carry out work. Results indicate that community radio stations have employed strategies to handle challenges presented by media convergence at both managerial and junior levels. Most of the participants indicated that media training workshops were used as a strategy to solve challenges faced during the integration by community radio stations. Although other participants argued that the media convergence strategy involved hiring enough experienced employees, participants also agreed that having enough media-trained personnel might alleviate the issues that community radio stations encounter during media convergence.

Moreover, the results show that community radio stations cannot afford to hold workshops on their own; MDDA provides this training for free. This suggests that these community radio stations receive funding and media training workshops from advertisers and agencies. As a result, all participants agreed that their community radio stations depend on sponsors for media training. Most participants indicated that the provision of media training had been the greatest strategy in helping station managers and journalists handle challenges brought by media convergence. This implies that station managers and Journalists have undergone media training regarding media convergence and have acquired skills to manage all the challenges they come across at the managerial and editorial levels.

The results indicate that even though participants indicated that they undergo media training for media integration. The findings demonstrate that there is a need for adequate digital training to assist journalists with limited knowledge. This is so because some journalists do not have media qualifications, and that means they still need more knowledge regarding digital media. As such, the findings further demonstrate that digital training programs are limited in community media, and journalists rely on prior knowledge and expertise to keep the stations going. Participants agreed that digital skills are the most essential instruments for dealing with new media technologies in all media entities. The research findings demonstrate that although community journalists and station managers use media training to address issues brought forth by media convergence due to limited resources more training is therefore needed.

Theme 4: Practicing ethical journalism under media convergence

It is very important for every media organisation to outline the founding ethical principles of journalism in any evolving media developments. The results indicate that all their community radio stations practice ethical journalism and that their work meets ethical standards. Most participants agreed that the managerial leadership of the stations is fit to hold office and always ensures that stories are edited and verified and that they have followed all ethical standards in all their news coverage. However, other participants argued that community radio stations mostly suffer from ethical knowledge because some staff members are not trained or have previously attended media ethics training.

These results demonstrate that, although some community radio stations still lack ethical standards in the delivery of their news content due to not having media-experienced managers, the selected community radio stations seem to have managers who possess media ethical knowledge and expertise. According to the findings, most of the station managers have graduated in the media space and have full knowledge of the area. Therefore, this indicates that these community radio stations may be in rural Limpopo, where resources are scarce, but ethical standards are prioritised. Participants indicated that they adhere to journalism ethics. However, they further agreed that merging various platforms into traditional radio has created a new set of media adherence which focuses on internet etiquette, which differs slightly from what traditional radio adheres to. However, adhering to ethics is not easy, especially when there is still a lack of ethical training.

The results indicate that Journalists and managers undergo ethical training once a year. As such, this shows that these community radio stations somehow lack professional media specialists who can pass such knowledge and expertise without depending on MDDA and SANEF training. Although these community radio stations claim to adhere to basic ethical standards of digital media and journalism, a lot of unethical behaviour occurs among internet users who are otherwise citizen journalists. This implies that addressing media ethical adherence in a community radio is still a need.

These results indicate that a community radio should have a requirement that qualifies it to be a fully-fledged radio, which includes, among others, a good managerial structure. However, most participants agreed with the preceding assertions that a community radio station should have a complete management structure to help provide quality, factual, and credible news to listeners. The results show that these community radio

stations are short-staffed in areas such as news editors, field reporters, and producers. This implies that all three community radios combined still lack key departments, such as HR officers and editors, and a shortage of skilled journalists, among others. Therefore, results indicate that the ethical standards of journalism are still compromised, and assistance is needed in this regard.

Conclusion

This study explored how media convergence affects the sustainability of community radio stations by identifying the problems and opportunities created by convergence. It also identified potential strategies and solutions to secure the long-term viability of community radio stations and incorporate media convergence into their regular operations. Qualitative data gathered from in-depth and unstructured interviews shed light on the roles of media convergence, possibilities and problems, methods, and journalism practice throughout the media convergence age.

The results indicated that community radio stations used convergence media. These radio stations were able to investigate its influence and benefit from it. However, these community radio stations continue to lack funding to strengthen their convergence radio stations. The participants agreed that community radio stations need greater resources to maintain media convergence. The findings will help refute the widely held perception that community radio stations in rural areas do not use media convergence.

Based on the findings, the study proposed that the government provide more suitable funding for community radio stations to create the resources needed for integrated media platforms. The findings suggested that community radio should focus more on media convergence to generate revenue through online advertising on various platforms. The study also recommended that community radio hire experienced journalists and competent managerial personnel who can handle various tasks such as financing and editing space. The study further recommended additional research into the impact of media convergence on the long-term viability of community radio stations in South Africa's areas other than Limpopo. Many topics still require further exploration using different population sizes and case studies from community radio stations on this topic.

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