Cyber social networking is helping to fuel the current Iranian protest against recent election results. But with Iran’s government trying to stem the opposition's mobilization by actively removing opposition Web sites and attempting to slow down social networking portals such as Facebook and Twitter, the world is being deprived of information concerning this major political movement. Iranian censorship of the Internet is not unique. The Chinese government tried to shut down dissidents’ online use at the time of Tiananmen. Other nations face such roadblocks to cyber information. This issue of The Convergence Newsletter offers two articles examining problems of Internet access in Ethiopia. We also present a study focusing on India’s use of media, examining how and where convergence in that country takes place.

Fulbright Scholar Alice Klement provides a view from what she calls the “wrong side of the digital divide.” Her article offers insight into Ethiopia’s technology shortfalls, which she says interfere in the advancement of media convergence and are compounded by governmental censorship of Web sites.

In a related article, Addis Ababa University graduate student Sileshi Yilma addresses student concerns about university censorship of Web sites that are important tools in the research of social and political issues.

We leave you with research by Dr. John Cokley of the University of Queensland who presents quantitative findings from a 2008 convergence journalism workshop in Delhi, India. Participating journalists from across India provide insight into media consumer needs and just how those needs are being met.

Speaking of meeting needs, be sure to take notice of our upcoming August issue focusing on convergence in the classroom. This issue offers information you can use in the classroom when helping students navigate ever-changing media convergence. For instance, University of South Carolina Instructor David Weintraub writes about the increasing need to prepare journalism students for a growing freelance market.

We here at The Convergence Newsletter want to hear from you. We’re especially looking for contributors to our planned second international issue of the year, in October, and our February issue on developments in newsrooms. TCN welcomes feedback from all our readers. You can e-mail us at convedit@mailbox.sc.edu and you can comment on all articles at The Convergence Newsletter blog, http://convergencenl.blogspot.com/.
Contact Robert Pyle, editor of The Convergence Newsletter, at convedit@mailbox.sc.edu.


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Featured Articles

Commentary From the Wrong Side of the Digital Divide

The "Imprisoned" Internet of AAU

Meeting Media Needs: What You Learn When You Ask Your Students Questions

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Conferences, Training and Call for Papers

July 16-17: Journalism in the 21st Century: Between Globalization and National Identity, Melbourne, Australia

July 16-18: JEA/NSPA, Intense Journalism Conference, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

July 16-18: Bellingham Visual Journalism Conference, Western Washington University, Bellingham

August 5-6: National Association of Black Journalists Convention and Career Fair, Tampa, Fla.

August 5-8: AEJMC Annual Conference 2009, Boston

November 5-6: Convergence and Society: The Changing Media Landscape, University of Nevada, Reno


November 24-26: International Conference on Computer Sciences and Convergence Information Technology, Seoul, Republic of Korea

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>>>Featured Articles<<<

Commentary From the Wrong Side of the Digital Divide
By Alice Klement, a 2007-2009 Fulbright Scholar in Ethiopia

Ethiopia’s technology challenges often start with electricity, or its lack. If belg, moderate “little rains” from February to May, fail as they did last year, government rationing of power is likely until the heavy winter rains arrive between July and September. Without these rainfalls, public officials say, the country’s hydroelectric dams controlling the source of the Nile cannot power the capital, let alone the country’s rural areas. Others complain, however, that blackouts are induced, with the government selling rationed power to its neighbor, Sudan.

A blackout is a blackout, whatever the reason. Sometimes on schedule, more often not, lights go out in patches of Addis Ababa, with computers stopping immediately and video cameras, audio recorders and mobile phones stopping eventually. Last year, such “power shedding” lasted roughly 12 hours, usually 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., once a week. Now, blackouts stretch 24 hours, sometimes twice a week. Institutions such as hospitals are exempt.

In 2007, when the government opened 13 regional universities and announced more to come, Addis Ababa University quickly became the premier trainer of faculty and successfully negotiated to keep electricity flowing on campus. This year’s policy for AAU, also site of the country’s only graduate journalism program, is not yet clear. Even under the best conditions, Ethiopia is tough for tasks, such as convergence, that rely heavily on technology. Consider the country’s small base: approximately 1.9 million mobile phone subscribers and 30,000 Internet subscribers, plus those who frequent Internet cafes in urban areas, in an estimated population of 80 million. They are often frustrated by poor or nonexistent service. Yet Ethiopian Telecommunications Corp., a state-run monopoly, appears immune to complaints.

Of course, some online trouble is unpredictable and uncontrollable. In February, for example, Internet and telephone service was drastically cut throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa when three fiber-optic cables were simultaneously cut in the Mediterranean. While French engineers worked to restore connectivity, many Internet users noted only a blip for a day or two, but Ethiopians had no alternative routing and lost online access for a week.

How did, and do, media cope here? By and large, government media – ETV, the nation’s one television station, and Radio Ethiopia, its largest radio station – are powered by generators so that production, if not reception, is not greatly impaired. Three privately licensed FM stations and most newspapers may not be so fortunate. Any teaching of journalism, and specifically media convergence, has to address such physical challenges. Even with electricity flowing, however, the daily effort of education, and any real attempt at media convergence, is difficult. Limited bandwidth and high demand prevents all but glimpses of Web sites, let alone intelligent searching. Documents usually have to be downloaded painstakingly for hours in the middle of the night.

Censorship compounds problems. The Ethiopian government, for example, cut text messaging during the country’s 2005 post-election violence and did not allow service to restart until millennium celebrations in 2007. As laid out in last year’s U.S. State Department Human Rights Report:

The government restricted access to the Internet and blocked opposition Web sites, including the sites of the
OLF, ONLF, Ginbot 7 and several news blogs and sites run by opposition diaspora groups, such as Ethiopian Review, CyberEthiopia.com, Quatero Amharic Magazine, Tensae Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian Media Forum.

On August 29, a statement by the New York-based NGO Center Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) stated that reliable sources reported that its servers were inaccessible to users, and that emails were not coming through to CPJ. These reports emerged at the same time CPJ was investigating the detention of The Reporter editor Amare Aregawi. The Reporter also alleged blocking of its Web site for four days during this time. CPJ’s Web site was also inaccessible at other times during the year.

(U.S. State Department, 2008)

The Convergence Newsletter article that follows this one and is written by Sileshi Yilma, a university instructor studying for a master’s degree at AAU, relates how this can thwart even basic student research.

AAU’s graduate program, funded from the start by Norwegian aid, may have experienced its first real challenge to theoretical convergence with its fifth batch of students selected for the academic year 2007-2008. In August, after the governments of Norway and Ethiopia squabbled, Ethiopia asked some Norwegian diplomats to leave. They took with them almost the program’s entire faculty and funding. So the journalism program’s only hope for immediate survival was to converge 33 broadcast and print students into one class on reporting and writing for print, broadcast and online. Oddly enough, under circumstances perhaps unacceptable in more rigid academic circles in Europe or the United States, students came to understand and practice the broad range of skills necessary for successful media convergence. The benefits became obvious during internships, when broadcast students traditionally assigned to ETV crossed media to print at the daily newspaper Addis Neger, for example.

Africans understand the battles they face in practicing and teaching even the least technologically complex journalism. Earlier this year, Emevwo Biakolo, dean of the School of Media and Communication at Pan-African University in Lagos, Nigeria, announced a conference on “Journalism and New Media Technologies in Africa: New Technologies, New Practices and the Renewal of Media Training in Africa.” While the professor observed what he says is “a paradigm shift in the global practice of journalism,” he suggested that “in Africa, the changes are less noticed.” Yet Biakolo identified the key theme of the August conference as the transforming role of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) in journalism practice: problems of funding, capacity, and inadequate infrastructure. And, he insisted: “No less germane are questions of policy as governments struggle to come to terms with the aspirations of industry in virtually all African countries. From the point of view of the academy, inadequate training facilities conspire with inadequately-prepared faculty and out-of-date curriculum to keep the continent playing catch-up.”

References

Alice Klement was a 2007-2009 Fulbright Scholar in Ethiopia. She can be reached at alice.klement@gmail.com.

The “Imprisoned” Internet of AAU

By Sileshi Yilma, Addis Ababa University Graduate School of Journalism and Communication

Student A, who requested anonymity because the issue of access to the Internet is sensitive, recently joined the Graduate School of Development Studies at Addis Ababa University. He often prays so that his teachers will not give him an assignment that requires online research.

The reason is not because of the shortage of computers at the university, or because Student A, who recently joined the Graduate School of Development Studies, hates visiting computer laboratories; rather it is due to the reported blockage of Web sites related to his field of study. "The field I am studying is related to variety of disciplines such as politics. However, it is very difficult to conduct online research on sensitive local political issues." The student blames the government for censoring some Web sites.

Student B, who also requested anonymity, is a post-graduate student at AAU’s Institute of Language Studies. He echoes Student A’s concern: "Our teachers always give us assignments which require thorough online research. For instance, if the issue is about literary criticism of the Ethiopian government, it is difficult to have an access to such topic on the Internet."

The Open Net Initiative (ONI), an Internet monitoring and surveillance project, recently identified Ethiopia as one of two countries in sub-Saharan Africa to carry out widespread Internet blocking. The other is Zimbabwe, according to Fortune, a local weekly English newspaper. In a 2006 report on the region, ONI condemned Ethiopia’s Internet censorship: "The government blocks Web sites of opposition parties, sites representing ethnic minorities, sites for independent news organizations, and sites promoting human rights in Ethiopia."

The Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation (ETC), however, does not acknowledge any censorship. Such silence does not satisfy some students. Says Student B: "ETC monopolizes the telecom industry in the country. Since it is the only operator of telecom pipes in and out of the country, ETC has the capacity to block access to Web sites linked to opposition blogs."

Andrew Heavens, journalist and blogger based in Khartoum, Sudan, doubts Student B’s explanations. On his blog www.meskelsquare.com, Heavens (2007) writes: "It is never certain that a site has been blocked because – given the state of ETC’s overloaded circuits – who knows, it might still be a technical glitch."

AAU’s Information and Communication Technology Development office says it is responsible for computer and Internet-related services at the university. The office, with 36 employees, administers and provides information technology support for the five AAU campuses.
Sources at the ICTD office, who also requested anonymity because they are not authorized to discuss such issues, say the office does filter some Web sites. However, they say the office does not have the authority or personnel to block political Web sites. "We have special software that is an open source for academic institutions. The software filters dating and pornographic sites we think are not appropriate for our students," says one ICTD source. According to this person, if AAU students encounter censorship of crucial Web sites for their online research, the ICTD office swiftly entertains such complaints and is collaborative in granting access.

Many AAU students say conditions prior to the nation's controversial 2005 general election were relatively better for browsing. However, as Student A notes, after the election ended in bloodshed, Internet censorship triumphed all over the country. "Some sites started to appear either as 'the page cannot be displayed' or 'this site is blocked,' " recalls Student A. According to ICTD sources, prior to the 2005 election, AAU students could browse Web sites critical of the Ethiopian government. Examples included organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International. These organizations now say their sites are blocked or difficult to access inside Ethiopia.

At AAU, even students conducting online research about Internet censorship face challenges. The irony, as Student B says, is that it is difficult to access Web sites that provide information on Internet censorship. Despite his prayer, Student A’s teachers continue to give him assignments that require online research. This student and others do not know for sure when they are going to be freed from such censorship. As Student A observes: "Only God knows."

References


Sileshi Yilma, a first-year student in AAU’s Graduate School of Journalism and Communication, has taught English at Haramaya University.

Meeting Media Needs: What You Learn When You Ask Your Students Questions

By Dr. John Cokley, University of Queensland

Many Western journalism educators, especially those working in convergent media, conduct workshops for their colleagues in developing countries. Nongovernment organizations (in my case the Malaysia-based Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting...
Development, AIBD) hire us to pass on outside knowledge to locals so that media routines and coverage can be improved.

However, the concept of importing improvements may sound a little neo-colonialist to most of us, so this article discusses a practical remedy that can be included in workshop plans and that in the case of an Indian workshop led to new ways of thinking about places where citizen journalism and convergence might occur.

In-country workshops can be understood in two main frames:

- One-way asymmetric forms of communication (Childers 1989, p. 87) in which information is brought by a contractor from afar and delivered in intensive, instructivist mode to a group of locals in a very short time frame (say: five days). The instructor then departs, leaving the workshop participants to deal with and digest the new information as best they can.
- Two-way symmetric communication events (p. 88) in which the contractor arrives with information to share but specifically plans that the locals will share information in return.

I adopted the second stance during a five-day convergent journalism workshop in November 2008 for journalists from Prasar Bharati (All India Radio and Doordarshan Television) in Delhi, India, a week before the terrorist attacks in Mumbai.

I led the workshop, and the participants were 19 journalists (13 men, six women) from their early 20s to 59 years old, and from a range of bureaus around India including Delhi, Lucknow, Hyderabad, Tiruchirapalli, Silchar, Dehradun, Gorakhpur, Ahmedabad, Dharwad, and Nagpur. Each participant completed a skill and interest audit questionnaire before the workshop commenced and the returns demonstrated a wide range of backgrounds, news worker experience and digital technology skills.

The group could be described as a convenience sample representing many journalists around the world who are undergoing technological change (Cokley, 2008, pp.163-164): some ahead, some beginning, some with no experience of digital technology in their workplace at all.

The approach as a whole depends on establishing a "constructive alignment" (Biggs, 1999, p. 25) between the students and the course content, which means making what I have to offer as relevant to the participants as possible and as quickly as possible. This is approached using focus group methodology (Kitzinger, 1994, p.103) on days one and two and a three-step "audit, analyze and apply" process based on work explained in Cokley & Eeles (2003) on days three through five. The theoretical foundation – or starting point – is that convergent journalism takes place within networks of both people and equipment (Fornäs et al., 2007, p. 118) and these have to be identified and described in order to be understood and used effectively. The whole group (participants and contractor, interacting as described by Kitzinger, 1994) works through describing the most relevant networks for the workshop.

Participants come up to a white board in front of the class and write their contributions at the same time as these are discussed generally. First, Indian media audiences were identified (their perceived interests and news needs, and the media reception and transmission technologies available to them); second, the social and cultural as well as professional networks the journalist-participants observed or were in themselves; and third, the networks (mostly equipment) used by media publishers.

Once the discussion is exhausted and all available suggestions have been written on the board, these are recorded (in writing and digital pictures) and discussed later during the workshop as necessary.
Within the audience network session, the focus group investigated audiences’ perceived interests and news needs, the in situ technologies (Cokley, 2008), and the public forums available to each audience group.

**Table 1: data from workshop focus group, India seminar, November 2008**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience interests and perceived news needs</th>
<th>In situ technologies available to audiences</th>
<th>Forums available to audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>SMS messaging X 5</td>
<td>Community halls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power interruptions X 3</td>
<td>Local cable TV networks X 2</td>
<td>Queues (in banks, at bus stops, hospitals, movies, railway stations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price rises X 2</td>
<td>Street plays</td>
<td>Any public gathering (hotels, markets, campuses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad roads X 2</td>
<td>Non-government organizations (NGOs)</td>
<td>Chaupals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District festivals</td>
<td>Documentaries</td>
<td>Polls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By-elections</td>
<td>TV screens in shopping malls</td>
<td>Phone-in programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India’s highest civilian award ‘Bharat Ratna’ conferred on Hindustani classical vocalist Pandit Bhimsen Joshi</td>
<td>TV X 4</td>
<td>Point-to-point buses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serial bomb blasts X 2</td>
<td>Newspapers X 3</td>
<td>Parties / social gatherings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal infiltration from Bangladesh</td>
<td>EDB / kiosks</td>
<td>College campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious terror</td>
<td>Bus panels</td>
<td>Irani hotels (low-cost restaurants known for sandwiches and fast food)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic recession</td>
<td>Metro (underground rail network)</td>
<td>Workplace offices / campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembly elections</td>
<td>Out-of-home networks</td>
<td>Tea shops</td>
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<tr>
<td>Right-wing terrorism</td>
<td>Community radio / low-powered FM radio X 3</td>
<td>Toddy shops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trafficking in women and children</td>
<td>News on phone</td>
<td>Parks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-border terrorism (Maoists from Nepal)</td>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>Pangalles and Murukkan kada in Kerala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State separatism in Hyderabad</td>
<td>Emails</td>
<td>Malls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery admissions (child care)</td>
<td>Internet X 2</td>
<td>Local political meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure (roads and power) X 3</td>
<td>Bluetooth</td>
<td>Self-help groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs and employment X 2</td>
<td>Pen drives</td>
<td>Citizen journalism sites (<a href="http://www.merinews.com">www.merinews.com</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil issue in southern India</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most interesting for this article among the findings are the social-cultural and political forums the Indian journalists identified (Column 3 in Table 1, above). Institutions such as the chaupal, Irani hotels, toddy shops, point-to-point buses, and shops such as Murukkan kada were unknown to me before this workshop. I had been aware of the phenomenon of tea shops (for public discussions), but queues as a regular site for ad hoc discussion had never occurred to me.

During the focus group session, an explanation emerged: In a country such as India with so many people (>1 billion) but scarce service resources, queuing is much more prevalent than in Australia, New Zealand, Iran, Singapore, Japan, or the United States, where I have previously conducted observations. Queuing, and the (perhaps inevitable) resulting group discussions, is thus also likely to be observable in countries such as China, Indonesia, Russia, Mexico, Pakistan, Brazil, Bangladesh, and Nigeria where populations are high but resources are scarcer, compared with other high-population countries such as the United States and England. In the same way, the political unit Gaon Sabhas was unknown to me as a site for public discussion and decision-making. The chaupal is worth focusing some attention on. Chaupal is a public space for civil society in India owned by residents of a village:

Nobody can claim to have an individual ownership of it...it is a place where villagers of all ranks, ages, castes and faiths can sit together and discuss serious and non-serious issues. (Mishra, 2002, p.1)

Traced to the Vedic period of Indian history (2nd-1st millennia before the Christian era, concluding around 600 BCE), the chaupal concept arguably predates the Habermasian "public sphere" relating to the 17th century AD (Mishra, 2004, p. 2). Chaupal was well known to, and deployed by, civil activists such as Mahatma Ghandi and since then by politicians, planners, writers and filmmakers (Mishra, 2004, p. 2). Since at least 2001, chaupals across India have been sites for at least 10,000 rural internet kiosks run as small businesses by local entrepreneurs – normally farmers in their homes (Slack & Rowley, 2005) – as communication hubs for other farmers and local residents, allowing them to browse, send e-mails, chat, and access a range of online services such as health assessment, agri-consultancy, e-governance and education (Rangaswamy, 2006, p. 165-166). Sometimes the kiosks are networked wirelessly, other times through cable, and there were initial government subsidies to allow setup and development (p. 166).

The two-way symmetrical learning design I adopted for this in-country workshop on convergent journalism effectively allowed me to discover new knowledge by exploiting the focus group method’s feature of interaction both among participants and between participants and me, the learning facilitator. The new knowledge gained included identification of chaupals, Gaon Sabhas, Irani hotels, toddy shops, point-
to-point buses, shops such as Murukkan kada, tea shops (for public discussions), and queues as a regular site for ad hoc discussion, and useful for inclusion in discussions about sites where convergent journalism could occur. And it became evident that for the participating journalists, the new knowledge lay in the identification of these known cultural concepts as sites for convergent journalism.

There are obvious limitations. This study investigated one in-country workshop for 19 broadcast journalists in only one country. But even that experience has proven crucial to later discussions in Australia where I discussed my "discoveries" with international graduate students and learned of similar but culturally specific institutions in other countries.

From the small (47,000 square kilometers) landlocked country of Bhutan, north of India with a population about 635,000, journalism master's student Kinley Wangmo (2009, personal communication) told me of women's associations known as Amtsu Tshogpa, and of civic institutions called Gups and Chimis, which represent similar sites for study. Back from field work in China, social scientist and doctoral candidate Ted RosenBlatt (2009, personal communication) brought forward information about the danwei – a cultural, political and economic work unit at the heart of Chinese society and a very real site for public and private news exchange; and from the United States, Ph.D. candidate Ellen Strickland told me about "the U.S. institution of the town hall meeting" (2009, personal communication; see also Bryan, 2003). In Australia, community hall meetings are not routine participatory communication sites, but in times of natural disaster such as Cyclone Larry in 2006 and the 2009 disastrous fires in the southern state of Victoria, the halls became evident as important media and communications sites. Church services and state fairs in many cultures also start to look like fruitful sites for this research.

And given that the Indian workshop was just one of many workshops by a wide range of AIBD contractors in many countries, each adopting a range of educational methodologies, comparisons are open to be drawn in future research and publications.

Note also that this article takes no account of the interests and perceived news needs in the first column of Table 1, and these could also be usefully studied. Theoretically and practically, the culturally India-specific concepts of chaupals, Gaon Sabhas, Irani hotels, toddy shops, point-to-point buses, shops such as Murukkan kada, tea shops (for public discussions) and queues, as well as their potential equivalents in Bhutan, China, the U.S. and Australia, constitute regular sites for ad hoc discussion and should be investigated in future studies.

Many of the other items in the data set, including news on phone, street plays, puppet shows and AVRS, also offer opportunities for fruitful research. Based on existing literature (Tilley & Cokley, 2008) these all appear to be likely candidates for research in citizen journalism as well as convergent journalism, and development and application of these spheres could benefit communities not only in India but elsewhere.

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July 17-18
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Convergence and Society: The Changing Media Landscape
University of Nevada, Reno
Nov. 5-6
http://Newsplex.sc.edu/
Call for Papers deadline: June 15

JEA/NSPA Red, White and True Conference
Washington, D.C.
Nov. 12-15


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International Conference on Computer Sciences and Convergence Information Technology
Seoul, Republic of Korea

Nov. 24-26


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