

# Charting and challenging digital media convergence practice and rhetoric through longitudinal media population surveys

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**Anna Westerståhl Stenport**  
The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

**Elias Markstedt**  
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

**Matthew Crain**  
The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## Abstract

This article employs national longitudinal media and opinion surveys from Sweden's SOM Institute as a lens to engage media convergence theory during the period 1995 to 2012. Building on rhetorical analysis of SOM questions, the article both concretizes media convergence theory and promotes a reexamination of default categories of media analysis: content, platform, and user behavior, or protocol. By using a triangular vector composition model, the article shows how theories of media convergence can be critically evaluated using SOM questions as a data set and that SOM questions reflect and construct fluid and flexible relationships integral to media convergence theory. SOM's questions regarding emerging media are embedded in the specific historical context of Sweden's striking, though incomplete and contested, digital transformation. This article is the first of its kind to analyze the content of SOM questions; it does not engage in quantitative survey methodology evaluation. Topical foci are news coverage, digitally networked communication, especially the Internet, and digital cinema. The article further gestures to how SOM questions concretize links between media convergence and political engagement, with specific reference to an accompanying rhetoric on agency and activism that is often abstract. To conclude, we discuss some of the larger implications of SOM surveys with respect to changing media convergence discourse in the 21st century.

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## Corresponding author:

Anna Westerståhl Stenport, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2090 FLB, 707 S Mathews Avenue, Urbana, IL 61801, USA.

Email: [aws@illinois.edu](mailto:aws@illinois.edu)

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**Introduction**

Society. Opinion. Media. Those are the initial components of the name of Sweden's SOM Institute, which conducts cross-sectional and longitudinal population surveys about Swedish media user practices and sociopolitical public opinion. Operating for nearly 30 years, SOM's surveys, data, and analyses comprise one of the world's most comprehensive records of popular opinions about society, politics, current affairs, and media.<sup>1</sup> SOM surveys provide a lens to engage influential media convergence theory from 1995 to 2012. We use SOM questions as a discursive historiographic record, a sounding board on the micro-level that both concretizes and challenges some of the macro-level claims about media convergence. SOM's questions regarding emerging media are embedded in the specific historical context of Sweden's successful, though incomplete and contested, digital transformation. They also relate to convergence practices and theory more generally. Despite the wealth of information relevant for concretizing convergence theory accumulated by SOM surveys, and the survey's impact on media policy and opinion in Sweden, no discursive analysis of the questions and their implications for convergence theory have been undertaken to date. Building on an empirical analysis of the content of SOM questions, our approach promotes a reexamination of default categories of international media analysis: content, platform, and user behavior, or protocol. Analyzing SOM questions with respect to news coverage, digital networked communication, especially the Internet, and digital cinema, this article shows how theories of media convergence can be critically evaluated. It further gestures to how SOM questions can concretize links between media convergence and political engagement, with specific reference to an accompanying rhetoric on agency and activism that is often abstract. To conclude, we discuss some of the larger implications of SOM surveys with respect to changing media convergence discourse in the 21st century.

***Why SOM, why Sweden, why media convergence theory?***

Examining SOM's surveys provides an empirical baseline for evaluating common assumptions about media convergence while also challenging certain aspects of research in this area. Our methodological purchase is that we look at SOM questions, rather than aggregated responses, as primary sources. We are thus tapping into SOM's legitimacy as a respected research institution with a nearly three decades-long history of formulating questions relevant to changes in the Swedish media landscape. This provides a way to investigate media convergence theory via a specific set of concrete examples. We trace the evolution of SOM questions over a period of rapid media and technology change characterized by new devices, new means of access, new applications, and new forms of media engagement. We argue that SOM question material offers a unique window for analyzing the recent transformative digital conversion period in the media industry. The types of questions posed by SOM and the ways in which questions change over time reflect assumptions about and interpretations of the composition and character of media systems and user engagement within a historically specific so-called 'convergence culture'. As such, this article takes up what James Hay and Nick Couldry have called the conjuncturally specific "'now'" of

convergence studies' (2011: 480) and addresses concerns that convergence culture theory has been applied too broadly and too abstractly (Couldry, 2011). At the same time, on a secondary level, this article is meant to present the SOM Institute and some of its data to an international audience.

SOM material comprises a useful data set in several ways. First, it is comprehensive: questionnaires are conducted at national and regional levels and incorporate a large range of descriptors, from age, sex, domicile, and profession to political affiliation or interest, disposable income, media consumption, lifestyle, hobbies, travel, attitudes toward life, and many more. The typical questionnaire booklet comprises around 20 pages with an average of 400 question items ranging from cell phone usage to 'book last read' or 'interest in gardening'. Second, it is representative: respondents are selected at random from national public population records (*folkbokföringsregistret*); in Sweden, these records are among the most comprehensive in the world. Net and gross response return rates are consistently above 50% (Vernersdotter, 2012), which is high for this kind of extensive survey. Third, SOM material is considered impartial and legitimate: data is collected primarily for the purpose of scholarly analysis and subsequent public dissemination. Fourth, SOM survey data permits interdisciplinary analyses and establishing cross-connections across a large number of variables and as developing over time.

Sweden provides an ideal case study to investigate empirical manifestations of media convergence culture because of the country's early access to and adoption of digital media on a broad scale and historically strong tradition of daily media consumption, especially print news (e.g. Hadenius et al., 2008). Sweden ranked number one in two global IT indexes in 2012 (Findahl, 2012: 13); it has a comprehensive fiberoptic cable infrastructure; one of the highest broadband rates of connections in the world per Internet user (97% as compared to 80% in the United States, Findahl, 2010: 16); and a high rate of media consumption online (Sternvik 2010). Television (TV) distribution has been digital since 1999 and general active engagement with Internet media content is reflected in the fact that a third of the population actively participates in file-sharing online (Andersson and Snickars, 2010: 10; see also Marina Ghersetti, 2009: 392).

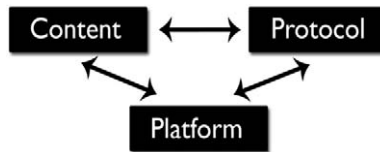
The quick adoption of digital networked media acquisition practices and the prevalence of online file sharing during the first decade of the 21st century reflect certain Swedish cultural and social practices. These include a popular understanding of Sweden as 'one of the most secular-rational and self-expressivity-directed in the world, characterized also by a typically social-democrat legacy of egalitarianism and high degrees of civil trust in the state, where individual autonomy is generated by means of a relatively strong state apparatus' and as an example of so-called 'post-materialist' values which assumes economic, social, political, and ethnic stability (Andersson, 2011: 1; 2. See also Delhey 2009). According to this framework, Swedes believe in individual autonomy as a promoter of subjective well-being, political participation, and social engagement. Swedish IT infrastructure and post-materialist sociocultural attitudes thereby conjoin to form a relevant case study to test some of the media convergence hypotheses developed first by Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983) and perhaps most recognizably by Henry Jenkins (2004, 2008), but increasingly taken up by other media theorists.

In a basic formulation, the media convergence paradigm allows for 'the proliferation of devices, some portable, others linked to the TV or computer, that provide multiple means through which consumers can gain access to desired content' (Tryon, 2009: 7). For Jenkins, arguably the most influential convergence theorist, 'Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences' (Jenkins, 2004: 34). In a convergence paradigm, media evolve in a continuous process marked less by displacement or replacement than by adaptation; the 'function and status' of

existing media are ‘shifted by the introduction of new technologies’ (2008: 14). Of course, these processes have been unfolding since the development of mass media and large scale printing in the late 19th century. But late 20th century developments in computerization and networked communication have propelled an acceleration of media convergence and attendant shifts in what we identify as content, platform, and protocol. Jenkins points to such rapid transformations as leading to new models and forms of participatory culture, to ‘new forms of community’ (2004: 35) and to ‘an era where media will be everywhere and we will use all kinds of media in relation to each other’ (2004: 34; ref Deuze, 2009: 145; see also Bruns, 2006: 1, on ‘produsage’, Larsson, 2011: 1190, on ‘the prosumer’, and Castells, 2007: 247, on related processes of ‘mass self-communication’). SOM grapples exactly with these kinds of transitions as it formulates questions that both contextualize and anticipate changes in the Swedish population’s media exposure and technology usage.

### *Methodology and a model*

The SOM surveys examined in this project relate to Internet access, news consumption, film exposure and cinema attendance, and sociopolitical engagement. By processes of inductive reasoning, we have constructed a model implicit in SOM survey questions that reveals a pronounced destabilization of core media categories over time. This model’s dynamic vector composition is designed to signal the integration of media convergence as central to SOM questions by showing how these implicitly operate on a triangular conceptual model of media relations. Identifying this process within the discursive composition of specific set of survey questions provides a basis for understanding key aspects of the convergence paradigm in ways that abstract theorization elides. The model bridges historiography and analyses of contemporary processes, allows for interpretations across media and genre, and encompasses varied levels of abstraction and complexity. While the model reflects convergence theory’s interest in maintaining fluid and flexible relationships between categories, it provides conceptual specificity to discussions of media content, protocol, and platforms. These are central to any discussion of media convergence theory; analyzing SOM questions shows exactly how and why this is.



To accommodate diversity, heterogeneity, and changes in SOM questions, we intentionally use the terms in a broad sense. *Platform* thereby encompasses both traditional distribution formats (e.g. cinemas or newspapers) as well as vehicles associated primarily with networked computerization, such as the growth of the Internet as a ubiquitous media distributor across devices. Our definition is broader than that of Bogus and Montfort, who exemplify platform as ‘the abstraction level beneath [software] code’. *Platforms* relate to but are not equivalent to the concept of delivery systems and technologies, which are replaceable ‘tools we use to access media content’ (Jenkins, 2008: 13). The terms media *content* and social user *protocol* are definitionally integrated with *platform* in our model. Drawing on Lisa Gitelman’s (2006) influential scholarship, Jenkins describes media as operating on two levels: ‘on the first, a medium is a technology that enables communication; on the second, a medium is a set of associated ‘protocols’ or social and cultural practices that have grown up around that technology’ (Jenkins, 2008: 13–14). Extending Gitelman’s (2006) and Jenkins’ bi-

level model, our SOM data analysis promotes an integrated and interdependent tri-concept media model that separates to a lesser extent between delivery systems as ‘simply and only technologies’ and media as ‘cultural systems’ (Jenkins, 2008: 14). The *platform–content–protocol* model thereby visualizes in a six-vector composition how protocol, platform, and content grow mutually interdependent, fluid and flexible.

## Empirical section

### *Networked digital communication*

*The Internet: platform and protocol.* In 1995, as Sweden’s digital transformation picked up speed, SOM began querying Internet exposure. The first Internet question asked simply whether respondents had access or not.<sup>2</sup> This and other related questions from the mid- to late 1990s posited the Internet to be just another *platform*, a media distribution technology complementing established media like newspapers and TV. Over time, this initial formulation was complemented by questions that correlated *platform* with *protocol*. In 1999, a new question about platform was introduced, this time asking *where* respondents had online access. This modification indicates changes both in platform, whereby the Internet is increasingly made accessible in different locations, and in protocol, whereby users engage the Internet in new ways. By the late 1990s, questions like ‘*Since you started using the Internet, have you increased or decreased your usage of other media?*’,<sup>3</sup> signal uncertainty of how to define Internet in relation to other media. Here, SOM researchers attempted to conceptualize whether and how the Internet functioned as a media platform competing with other platforms (e.g. newspapers in print; TV news) or if it should be conceived as something more than just a platform, with correlating impacts on protocol and content.

SOM survey questions indicate that changes in Internet distribution on the platform level clearly influence user practices: *protocol*. An example of this is SOM’s effort to track long-term changes of *time spent* on the Internet. From 1997 until 2000, the question was merely whether the Internet had been used or not.<sup>4</sup> In 2001, the question was replaced with a 14-point scale asking how long the Internet was used each *day*.<sup>5</sup> The scale ranged from ‘zero’ to ‘over 60’ minutes. In 2004, the scale changed to a 7-point scale, ranging from ‘*not at all*’ to ‘*more than 2 hours*’. As of 2008, the question has had a 7-point scale focusing on how many *times* the Internet was used.<sup>6</sup> As Internet usage protocol evolved, repeated scale makeovers became necessary since a single scale could not encompass all different modes of protocol. A concurrent and related set of questions illustrates the difficulty of keeping up with real-life practices and technological development while producing valid measures comparable over time. Since 2003, a set of questions asks how often and for what purpose mobile phones are used. An item such as ‘surfing the Internet’ (2003, 2006–2009, and 2011–2012) used to be highly relevant, but as of 2012, with increasing use of smart phones, this is not as apparent. Most of today’s practices on mobile phones rely on an Internet connection. Consistent access is ubiquitous for many users, and the question is thereby seemingly redundant, which also signals that user behavior *protocol* changes in conjunction with expanding *content* availability. SOM, however, refrains from assuming ubiquitous access frequency across age, gender, and social group, since that would impact the relevance of its democracy and social engagement questions, thereby providing a specific and empirically grounded counterargument to Shirky’s universalizing stance on access ubiquity and political involvement through social media in *Here Comes Everybody* (2008).

In 2002, connection *type* was introduced to the question battery.<sup>7</sup> This question may initially appear to correlate Internet access exclusively with *platform*, yet it actually signals a profound change in SOM's conceptualization of digitally networked media. The question reflects a key tenet of media convergence theory as it developed at the turn of the millennium, namely the assumption that changes in *platform*, including access speed, effect both *protocol* (how often, when, where, in what social contexts users engage) and *content* (what material is available through the Internet). During the first decade of the 20th century, the Internet transferred from a primarily text-based medium to one driven by sound, moving images, and increased user interaction (Andersson and Snickars, 2010: 28). Internet *content* thus went through significant changes. Simultaneously, *protocols* changed as the Internet moved from a portal-based search site model to one increasingly shaped by peer to peer networks (e.g. file sharing), user generated content sites (e.g. blogs, Wikipedia, YouTube), and social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram and MySpace). Higher connection speeds and dependable access – in combination with lower costs – enabled new bandwidth-intensive user protocols and the generation of new content formats. SOM's *connection type* question thereby allows for a concrete way of understanding the development of media convergence practices vis-à-vis theory. Later questions inquire about the Internet as experienced across multiple hardware platforms (stationary or portable computer, mobile phones, TV, tablets, etc.), which illustrate a transition in the conceptualization of the Internet. It is no longer a *platform* in and of itself, but a media component that has evolved in tandem with and as reflective of changes in *protocol* and *content*.

During a period of rapid increase in Internet usage in Sweden from 2000 to 2006, SOM questions relay the difficulty in anticipating how dominant Internet access would become for media consumption. In 2007, with Internet penetration rates at 84% (as compared with 47% in 2003; Statistics Sweden<sup>8</sup>), the entire question battery dedicated to Internet access was discontinued. This change supports both Jenkins' conceptualization of media convergence as an ongoing 'process' (2004: 34), as well as Manuel Castells' notion of network 'pervasiveness' (2007: 239). From then on, Internet access has been queried in conjunction with access to media technologies in general.<sup>9</sup> Since 2006, SOM no longer asks about physical locations of Internet access or the length of use and instead queries the frequency of Internet usage. This signals both a historical shift that demonstrates Internet pervasiveness *and* a shift toward interest in the protocol and content distributed through the Internet.

Recent SOM questions indicate that what is increasingly perceived as interesting about the Internet is how content is used, produced, and reproduced across the networked digital media landscape. This trajectory mirrors Jenkins' notion of new forms of participatory media culture enabled by media convergence (Jenkins, 2004, 2008; see also Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013). For Jenkins, convergence is more than a technological and industrial phenomenon, it involves an altering of relationships around media practices such as production and consumption that ultimately opens doors for new forms of cultural and political participation. (Parallels to sociopolitical engagement are drawn in a later section of this article.) This change represents SOM's increasing attention to social user protocol and the ways in which protocol impacts both content and platform. In the next section, we show how SOM has included an implicit content–platform–protocol relation in their formulation of questions directly related to news.

SOM's approach to networked digital communication allows us to make three generalized observations. First, SOM questions provide an empirical base-line through which to concretize media theory's convergence claims and provide an independent historical record illustrating the transformative effects outlined in Jenkins' media convergence theory. Second, though the Internet

may have at first appeared to be just another hardware platform, SOM questions reveal the importance of understanding user adaptation to the Internet as involving more than simple adoption of a new media platform and rather as a complex media engagement that directly impacts the associated categories of protocol and content. SOM Internet questions and the triangular *platform–content–protocol* model we employ to discuss their significance thereby illustrate characteristics of contemporary media convergence. Jenkins describes this situation as a ‘kludge – a jerry-rigged relationship between different media technologies’ (Jenkins, 2004: 34), where highly fluid categories are the result of the dynamic nature of the media and communication landscape during the past decade. Third, given that consistency in question batteries is central to longitudinal surveys, the fact that questions and items have been changed relatively often within Internet categories indicates that transitions have been happening quickly, comprehensively, and sometimes unexpectedly. The numerous changes in terms of Internet queries reflect SOM’s integration of Jenkins’ understanding that ‘convergence will be uneven within a given culture’ (Jenkins, 2004: 35) and that it does not happen in a linear manner. For SOM’s mandate of pursuing representative and cross-sectional population surveys, the fact that adaptation of new technology happens differently in different population groups poses challenges that illustrate that charting the contemporaneous development of media convergence is a complicated task (e.g. Rogers, 2003).

*Internet content: news.* SOM devotes significant survey space to news and mass media related questions, which reflect a dynamic tension between news *content*, distribution *platform*, and associated user *protocols*. For example, news content produced by the daily press, which 20 years ago would have been exclusively available in paper form, is now accessed on a computer, tablet, or cellular phone platform. The same goes for TV news content. In addition, several newspapers in Sweden have their own Web TV ‘channels’. Similarly, news aggregators such as Google News transpose the content of newspapers (specific news articles) to a new Internet-based distribution points. These processes support the convergence tenet that ‘hardware [is] diverging while the content converges’ (Cheskin Research; cited in Jenkins, 2008: 15). The triangular model visualizes these changes. What was earlier simply a platform for news (the daily press in paper form) is considered as content when channeled through the Internet platform. SOM surveys reflect this transition as questions on daily news consumption were relatively constant until the late 1990s when questions on Internet access were introduced. In 1996, the first question regarding online consumption of daily press news appeared, indicating that the Internet was viewed as just another platform for receiving news content that appeared relatively similar to the print version.<sup>10</sup>

SOM’s news oriented questions underwent significant changes during the period 1997–2007, reflecting that media production practices and related user protocols were transitioning. Questions about habitual consumption of news content on online and paper platforms (including both morning and evening newspapers<sup>11</sup>) were asked in two separate batteries. These were not hermetically sealed off from each other, since they had a common scale in order to simplify cross-sectional analyses. Using our model terminology, platform was allowed to vary between the two question batteries. Clearly, SOM researchers were interested in the emerging online distribution platform, but since it was difficult to anticipate future development of protocol, the original SOM questions about newspapers remained unchanged. However, in 2003, there was a subtle but significant change when a clarification was included in the newspaper section stating: ‘*The question does not refer to newspapers on the Internet*’. One interpretation of this is that respondents’ protocols were changing, that is, respondents were increasingly equating news content on both platforms,

something that called for a disambiguation of the question. This development indicates a pragmatic realization of media convergence's impact.

In the past, 'evening newspaper' and news Web sites were two separate SOM questions. Since 2007, the news category encompasses both. This modification has been driven by changes in platform and protocol. In 2007, two batteries concerning daily news were revised significantly, reflecting a realization of media convergence practices. Consumption of evening newspaper *content*, whether accessed on paper or online, was merged into a single battery. This signals that *content* was perceived as stable – the term 'news' remains consistent. Yet, a question concerning reading habits of (printed) morning newspapers remains identical since survey beginnings in 1986. The 'news' example and the paper reading habit example suggest that creating cross-comparative time series based on an idea of content and/or platform stability continues to be a significant methodological imperative for SOM.

The continuous reconfigurations of news-related SOM questions during this period show a concurrent destabilization of content as a media category. As platform and protocol change, content, in this case what is meant by 'news', changes as well. Media scholars have shown how news reporting has changed substantially during the past decades, generally moving toward shorter texts, more visual material, and, if on the Web, the inclusion of interactive features (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001:). The two SOM questions referenced above illustrate the difficulty in conceptualizing in the moment what in hindsight is clear: the transformative and interrelated shifts in news content, platform, and protocol. More specifically, our definition of content assumes a tri-vector relationship with platform and protocol; this dynamic relationship is inherent in the very definition, which makes our understanding of content broader and more inclusive. It also visualizes a process in which the platform (Internet) can influence both user practices (protocol) and news content.

Jenkins emphasizes a close association between user interaction and changes in media distribution, what we call protocol and platform. The realization that platform might be closely related to protocol seems to have been incorporated by SOM in 2007. The following formulation is significant: *'If you compare the local morning newspaper on paper and on the Internet, do you think the following assertions fit the paper edition or the online edition best?'*<sup>12</sup> This question assumes that content is tied both to platform and protocol, so that a reader might experience a newspaper's content differently, depending on which platform it is being channeled through and within which user protocol it is being experienced. This implies that content experience and engagement may vary between platforms. Other similar examples indicate that the effects of the platform on protocol and content are increasingly being considered as critical. For example, a question battery regarding radio listening separates habits as distinguishable on separate platforms.<sup>13</sup> In this question battery, items include whether radio programs are listened to on a 'radio set', 'personal computer', or 'mobile phone'. Yet, another question asks whether news has been consumed on a plenitude of platform variations,<sup>14</sup> such as 'news on a TV set', 'TV news on a mobile phone', and 'daily press on a computer'. These examples point to the fact that while seeking to identify usage patterns related to platform, SOM is also chronicling changes in both content and protocol. The questions also correlate with tenets of concurrent media theory. Our reasoning indicates the interrelated nature of media convergence components in the triangular model.

The year 2007 appears to be a turning point for SOM's implicit integration of media convergence theory in its questions. In 2007, the categories 'evening newspaper on paper' and '... on the Internet' were merged together, while the Internet access question was dropped. This period also coincides with the increasing use of Internet on mobile platforms in Sweden (e.g. Westlund, 2011). The triangular model thus illustrates Jenkins identification of an 'era where media will be



everywhere and we will use all kinds of media in relation to each other' (2004: 34). Drawing on the triangular content–protocol–platform model, we further illustrate that the way questions are asked in the SOM surveys have had to adapt as the object of research shifts. As established by Tryon, the proliferation of available media devices during the past decade 'contribute[s] to the "anything, anytime, anywhere" mantra' (2009: 11). Content earlier associated with certain platform boundaries transcend previous demarcations. With news content consumed through different platforms, 'old' platforms, such as newspapers, radio, and TV become content when mediated as podcasts or Web TV through other platforms such as mobile phones, computers, and Internet tablets.

### *Digital cinema*

Though SOM's media usage questions are predominantly developed from traditional mass media or broadcasting platforms, the surveys also ask a number of questions about other media consumption, including feature films. In addition to cinema attendance, questions have regularly addressed feature film exposure in other platforms, including frequency of films watched on TV, access to film channels on cable, number of DVDs/VHS tapes watched or rented, and similar. Since the survey start in 1986, a question asking specifically about cinema attendance frequency has been consistent.<sup>15</sup> This question is part of a lifestyle battery, which queries a number of everyday practices, opinions, and activities. The original question prioritizes both platform (cinema as feature film distribution in a physical location) and protocol (the practice of watching media content outside the home in a location specifically designated for it; situating this question as part of a lifestyle battery also supports the protocol association). Like SOM's question about daily newspaper reading, the cinema attendance question has meant the possibility of establishing long time series with respect to platform and protocol. The content – the feature film or documentary shown in this specific location to a set of visitors – is awarded less importance.

During the period of 2005–2007, the governmental agency the Swedish Film Institute commissioned several SOM questions. These questions signal a shift in attention to film and cinema protocol as related both to content and platform and also correlate with near-simultaneous changes in the way questions were asked about Internet access and news consumption (as discussed above). In 2005, one question inquired specifically about the frequency of downloading film from the Internet.<sup>16</sup> This signals changes in platform access and also that the Internet was beginning to be seen as pervasive (the question does not, for example, ask about film access on a computer, which presumably can involve watching a DVD or CD-Rom on a screen). In subsequent years, a similar question was asked with respect to film streaming, rather than downloading.<sup>17</sup>

Within media convergence discourse, a recurring issue has been the notion of media substitution. SOM survey data on film consumption is consistent with media convergence theory – according to SOM statistics, film exposure has been increasing during the last 10 years, though visits to the cinema have remained largely stable or slightly declined since the 1990s, which indicates that convergence does not equate to substitution (Antoni, 2007; Gherseti, 2008; Hedling and Wallensten, 2006: 9; see also Rombes 2009). This development also illustrates that content converges while platforms diverge. Yet, in 2005, one question addressed specifically the notion of substitution. It asked whether Internet usage had increased or decreased exposure to other media.<sup>17</sup> SOM's use of the term 'media' indicates that as media convergence theory is developing, labeling its constitutive concepts remains problematic. In fact, what the term 'media' refers to in several SOM examples are the dynamic relationships between protocol and platform: 'visits to the cinema' and 'newspaper reading' combine platforms – cinema and newspapers – with social protocol:

attendance at a physical location and the regular practice of reading a hard copy paper to access news.

In 2005, SOM questions in fact addressed film exposure in ways that positioned platform and protocol as correlated. The prevailing assumption was, however, that protocol was influenced by platform (films watched at the cinema or on a TV-device through broadcast, DVDs or VHS). One question concerned the best platform for watching film: public and private TV-channels, VHS, DVD, cinema, or the Internet. Correlating items address protocol: 'best film experience'; 'best value'; 'best audio-visual quality'; 'most comfortable'; 'best watched with others'. This question with multiple items indicates an assumption of stable content: 'film is film', so to speak, yet our triangular platform-content-protocol suggests a much closer association between platform and protocol and that this relationship has significance for content development. Though there is some opening toward a multidimensional model in the 2005 questions, by and large questions remained focused on cinema experience, as one of platform and protocol. For example, *'What is your opinion about each and every one of the following statements about cinema'* and *'How important is the following usually for you when you visit the cinema?'* These questions indicate that a conceptualization of content (film) as possibly influencing platform and protocol has not yet been fully incorporated.

Attention to film as content – that is, what kinds of narratives with sound and moving images are exposed on a screen – is not completely absent in SOM questions during the period 2005–2007, however. Three different questions were asked regarding film genres (items were not identical over these 3 years and included 'action, thriller, comedy, drama', etc.). Questions included: *'Which of the following types of films do you prefer to watch?'* (2005); *'How often do you prefer to watch the following types of film – at home, or at the cinema?'* (2006); and *'How interested are you in watching the following types of film at the cinema?'* (2007).<sup>19</sup> In 2006, there appeared to be an underlying assumption that content was perceived differently depending on the platform. In this formulation, the relationship is driven by protocol: social practices vary between the cinema and the domestic sphere. The assumption is that protocol impacts content. Questions, items, and scales varied considerably during these 3 years, preempting the base for longitudinal study. The correlation between content ('type of film'/genre) and platform and protocol appears to be fluid during these years. The wording also signals a disassociation between the idea of film as a particular kind of social or cultural experience, one associated with the idea of cinema as a platform, to a looser understanding of film as encountered across a number of platforms. This is consistent with media convergence theory.

### *Social and political engagement*

SOM questions address the ways in which media are integral to how societal issues are perceived. Some questions also address how citizens contribute to civic life, including as part of a direct political engagement, such as being a member of a political party, participating in local governance, attending rallies and demonstrations, or contacting politicians or other representatives of civic power. As represented by questions relating to political interest and party identification, both of which have been asked every year since 1986, SOM questions tend to assume a traditional understanding of class voting and party identification (see Franklin et al. 1992; Thomassen 2005). Though these issues are central to SOM's survey design, questions addressing convergence aspects between media and political activism have only recently been asked. These questions allow us to open up a discussion about how people's engagement with online media has a correlation with

their understanding of or contribution to civic life, which is part of what SOM surveys have historically attempted to understand.

SOM has queried a connection between Internet users and political parties and governmental institutions since 1998 via a question about whether respondents had visited the Internet sites of political institutions and parties. This question, however, is based on two assumptions about Internet political engagement. The first regards party identification and interest in established institutions and the second is about one-way communication. The question assumes that visitors to political Web sites go there to receive information. It does not allow for understanding other forms of political engagement online. With our terminology, is it possible that platform might affect political protocol and content, such as political ideologies?

The Internet as a platform has arguably oriented the immediacy of political information away from one-way communication to facilitate a protocol based on two-way communication. Two-way communication – in theory and assuming an open and democratic context – integrates citizen feedback and allows for an individual's distribution of political information through their own digitized social networks. For Castells, two-way (or multidirectional) social network communication is a distinguishing feature of sociopolitical engagement in the early 21st century. He argues that '[t]he emergence of mass self-communication [*protocol*] offers an extraordinary medium [*platform*] for social movements [*content*] . . . ' (2007: 249), though the full impact of these may not yet be fully visible. These arguments correlate with media convergence theory. In a political economy shaped by networks, production of knowledge and information are fundamental factors in the post-industrial society's balance of power, as argued forcefully by Castells (2007) and others (e.g. Bell, 1976; Zaller, 1992; for complementary perspectives see Couldry, 2011: 373). Along these lines, the Internet is an increasingly important power generator, though this function is highly contextual and never absolute (MacKinnon, 2012; Morozov, 2011; Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013). Nevertheless, as Castells maintains, it is a political entity, and one that informs content, platform, and protocol.

In 2010, SOM included for the first time questions along the lines of network communication theory. These questions query changing protocol and include: '*During the past 12 months, have you done any of the following, via social media on the Internet or in any other way, with the purpose of making conditions better or worse (sic) in society?*' Protocol-related items included 'Signed a petition/joined an appeal', 'Contacted a politician', and 'Participated in an event arranged by political party/organization/network'. These items indicate increasing attention to the Internet as a sociopolitical feedback medium. Analyzing the results of this question, Gustafsson and Höglund (2011) conclude that young adults are not less politically active than their parents and grandparents. They report that engagement is simply channeled to a greater degree through social media platforms than is that of their older counterparts.

Connections between media, civic, and political engagement are affected by convergence paradigms. Scholars query whether there are qualitative differences in civic and political engagement as media exposure is increasingly digitized and networked, and whether such changes impact agency and activism. Jenkins' fundamental (and perhaps semi-utopian) proposition is that new models of participatory culture and 'new forms of community' (2004: 35) will emerge in the wake of media convergence. Castells' idea of communication power posits that mass media will strengthen its position as a power nexus, to the disadvantage of the Habermasian public sphere (2007: 258). The popular uprisings in Northern Africa and the Middle East during 2011 and the more recent political unrest in Greece, Spain, and Turkey (spring 2013), for example, have been characterized as facilitated, if not empowered, by social networking services (see e.g. Ghannam,

2011; Shirky, 2011). Similarly, quick dispatching of information about events and political developments through a Web of networked media outlets were seen as contributing to the toppling of governments and military regimes. Increasing political Internet activism leads to questions about whether there are qualitative (and quantitative) differences between online and 'away from keyboard/touchpad' activities.

In a prescient formulation from 2000, Delli Carpini suggested that 'it is possible that the central impact of the new [Internet] technology will be to encourage new forms of engagement that are sufficiently different from our traditional indicators to fall beneath our radar screen' (2000: 348), though this ostensibly utopian conceptualization has been repeatedly challenged since (compare Bratich, 2011; Verstraete, 2011). The relatively limited number and possibly late introduction of SOM questions addressing media convergence in relation to political activism is illustrative. First, media researchers in Sweden seem not to have integrated Jenkins' notion of increased political engagement as actually reflective in real-life practice. Second, the question asked from 1998 about user visits to the Web sites of societal institutions and political parties and the subsequent 2010 question on Internet activism may confirm Delli Carpini's, Castells', and Jenkins' notion that political protocol has changed, concurrent with transformation of the Internet platform. Third, changes in protocol, with a possibly transformative outcome in content (political activism and engagement in politics), engage a relationship between individuals and society. It may be difficult to observe an actual wide spread change in *individual* political attitudes (protocol) that correlates with evolving Internet practices for the reason that an individual user might not view his or her Internet engagement as a political statement. In his research on the debates and trials of the Pirate Bay file sharing site and ensuing political and legal action, Andersson concludes that 'the file-sharers see the activity as mundane, convenient, self-evident, and – at first thought – not particularly political (2011: 13). At the same time, however, changes to *collective* political protocol are observable when it takes on more traditional forms, such as the file-sharing lobbying movement, including the Swedish Pirate Party that gained a seat in the European Parliament elections in 2009 (e.g. Andersson, 2011: 2).

Tracing a dynamic development of sociopolitical engagement that relates recent history with current practices has two advantages. It shows that the triangular model is supported by theoretical frameworks preceding those of Castells and Jenkins. It also indicates that SOM questions represent a certain normative power dynamic: they maintain an emphasis on party identification and political ideology in questions.

## Concluding discussion: SOM and media convergence

SOM questions provide a historical and empirical record of what influential Swedish media researchers have understood as critical in a given historical moment, as well as their estimation of which media and societal issues might have long-standing impacts. At the same time, the institute is a social agent and an observer, a producer of knowledge and an analyzer of opinions. The triangular relationship constitutive of media convergence we have investigated above illustrates SOM practices as well. The development of survey questions and analytical practices represent a dynamic and mutually interdependent relationship between content, protocol, and platform. To use our terminology, SOM's *platform* has changed from paper survey and telephone interviews to include, in a few instances so far, Web survey applications. Usage *protocol* has also evolved. There are generally no more than two lines for each question today (mean length of questions are down from over 115 characters in the early 1990s to 80 characters in 2012), with the explicit goal of

using everyday expressions rather than academic language, and most questions are non-directed close-ended questions. It is clear that contemporary social practices (*protocol* in our terminology) influences SOM question *content*: the Lifestyle battery, for example, has changed over time from being initially aimed toward middle-class and middle-age oriented lifestyle questions to ones that are designed to be more varied across age and class. Questions today include ‘*do you bet on horses?*’; ‘*do you have potted outdoor plants?*’ rather than asking specifically about a garden, with the assumption that a small apartment balcony can accommodate plants. There have also been significant increases in the number of Lifestyle questions. SOM researchers want a larger number of respondents to feel as if their lifestyle is relevant to their analyses of contemporary Sweden.

Forms of networked digital communication epitomized by the Internet are clearly critical to the development of media convergence. Yet, the Internet has not yet been fully integrated into SOM’s methodology. It is currently impossible to reach the same representativeness in respondent selection through an Internet access and distribution process as it is through population records and matched with a postal address. There are also other difficulties inherent in (contemporary) Web survey designs, such as competition from market research and spam e-mail (e.g. Couper, 2000; Porter and Whitcomb, 2003). This will surely change and it is clear that SOM processes will need to address a falling response rate among some younger population groups, for example (Vernersdotter, 2012). One explanation for the declining survey response rate is that younger respondents may be part of an early adopter technology group used to digital processing, rather than completing long paper surveys, which may seem like a thing of the past. Changing the platform of survey delivery to one that is Web-based has several implications for both protocol and content; interactivity and direct feedback are two among them. Dynamic and shifting protocols drive changes in content and platform; content can drive platform (e.g. what kinds of questions and alternatives can be asked over the Web) and protocol (can change someone’s opinion on something); and content is adapted as part of protocol and platform changes.

SOM results also illustrate another aspect of Jenkins’ convergence theory, in that their reports, including titles, reference popular culture and technologically mediated content. For example, a recent collection of reports bears the same title as a famous Swedish soap opera (‘*Skilda världar*’). The rationale here is that SOM reports should show up in occasions where Internet browsers may be looking for something completely different. The reports (content) thus explicitly engage with a social protocol. Reports and results are available in multiple platforms: books, as Web-based text, as downloadable PDFs, and so on. SOM emphasizes openness and accessibility, including being at the forefront of Open Access. The institute wants results to be used, applied, spread, and encountered by as many as possible (this procedure is concurrent with respect to several social media protocols). A selection of SOM questions has recently been translated into English, to encourage international usage. In SOM’s case, these practices reflect an interest in attaining social ‘goodwill’, which is used to recruit respondents who are encouraged to participate in order to further democracy and scientific research.<sup>20</sup>

The triangular model we develop in this article also allows for conceptualizing the complexity involved in methodological concerns of critical importance to longitudinal cross-sectional population surveys on society, opinion, and media in the 21st century. For example, it may be that the current SOM questionnaire methodology and praxis is indicative of an earlier media and delivery technology models, which operated more obviously on a one-way communication model of producer transmission to consumer: active journalism transferring content to passive recipient; a political apparatus pumping out messages to passive voters. At the same time, the questionnaires give respondents an opportunity to give complementary open responses and thereby to participate

in a self-communicating action. SOM is both an actor (opinion shaper) and observer/analyst (it is an independent research institute). SOM surveys thereby reflect aspects of media convergence culture and evidence suggests that some of these aspects will continue to shape SOM surveys and reports during the coming decade.

By analyzing SOM survey questions, methodology and sociopolitical context and function as part of a triangular content–platform–protocol model for media engagement, we can correlate concurrent theories of media convergence with specific examples at a particular moment in time. As part of a rapidly shifting media context, it is clear that SOM has an important role to fill; yet it faces significant challenges as both an analyst and observer of a changing media landscape and as an active agent in shaping a media agenda addressing precisely the very questions it seeks to analyze. SOM survey questions and practices provide a correlate of data for concretizing and exemplifying convergence media theory; the triangular content–platform–protocol model simultaneously offers possibilities for a model that can be applied across genres, technology histories and media. Just like the convergence paradigm suggests, SOM influences the very object it seeks to analyze. Along these lines, the user protocol perspectives gleaned from SOM survey questions offer both quantitative and qualitative examples: they offer concretion to what can otherwise seem as abstract theory configurations.

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### Notes

1. Please see <[http://www.som.gu.se/som\\_institute/](http://www.som.gu.se/som_institute/)> for comprehensive information about the history, institutional and funding structure, methodology, surveys, and publications of the SOM Institute. According to one scholar, ‘their time series are in certain cases unique in international comparison’ (Kullenberg, 2011: 71). For the purposes of this article, we focus on information in SOM’s national surveys, with an emphasis on the surveys geared toward media exposure. Comparable media surveys include the Pew Internet Survey (USA; Pew Research Center), the Eurobarometer (European Union; European Commission 2011), and the ARD/ZDF-Onlinestudie (Germany; ARD/ZDF). Similar to SOM surveys, these cull from national samples (or multinational in the Eurobarometer case), but use different sampling methods (Pew and the Eurobarometer utilize stratified sampling, while ARD/ZDF, and SOM, use simple random sampling). In terms of data collection modes, telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews, or Web surveys are used rather than the mode applied by SOM (postal surveys).
2. Q: ‘*If you have a personal computer in your household, what else do you have?*’, Item: ‘*Internet access*’; used between 1995 and 2000.
3. Used between 1999 and 2005, with items including ‘Daily press reading’, ‘Radio listening’, and ‘Telephone use’.
4. Q: ‘*In the past 12 months, have you used the Internet?*’.
5. Q: ‘*Approximately, for how long would you estimate that you spend on the Internet an average weekday?*’

6. Q: '*In the past 12 months, how often have you used the Internet?*', scale: 'Not once', 'Once or twice the past 12 months', 'Once or twice each half-year', 'Once or twice each month', 'Once or twice each week', 'Several times each week', 'Daily'.
7. Please note that survey terminology used henceforth includes 'question battery', which is a set of question items bundled together with a single title, with the prefatory title question referring to all subsequent question items. Q: '*Do you have access to the Internet?*', alternatives in 1999 included: 'Yes, at home', 'Yes, at my place of work/school', in 2002; 'Yes, at home where I have access with flexible telephone fee' were added, but was replaced in 2003 by 'Yes, at home where I have access with telephone modem'.
8. Statistics Sweden (SCB) Available at: [www.scb.se](http://www.scb.se) (accessed 20 December 2011).
9. Q: '*What types of media technologies do you have access to in your household at the present?*' Items include 'Internet' and 'Broadband'.
10. Q: '*How often do you read any of the following?*'. Item: 'Daily news on the internet'.
11. A clarification is in order here. In Sweden, a traditional distinction is made between morning newspapers and evening newspapers (nowadays essentially tabloids), especially in media analyses.
12. Items included 'Gives deeper coverage', 'Is fun to read', and 'Gives a moment of relaxation'.
13. Q: '*How often do you listen to radio shows in the following?*', asked in 2008, 2010, and 2011.
14. Q: '*To what extent do you consume news in the following ways?*' Note that we have two different levels of platforms; 1st: 'daily news', 'radio news'; 2nd: 'on paper', 'in a mobile phone' (asked 2009–2011). There is also a separate question regarding TV shows on different platforms in 2010.
15. Question: 'How often during the past 12 months have you done the following?' Item: 'Gone to the cinema'.
16. Question: 'How often have you during the last 12 months done the following on the Internet, as part of your private life?' Item: 'downloaded film'.
17. Question: '*How often have you during the last 12 months done the following on the Internet, as part of your private life?*'; Items: 'Downloaded film' (2005–2006); 'Downloaded film/TV-serie' (2007), 'Watched video clips' (2008–2009). In a specific and separate battery asked 2008–2010, the question was '*How often have you during the last 12 months downloaded the following from the Internet?*': Items: 'Radio shows', 'TV shows', 'Feature film', 'Music', 'Books/audio books'.
18. Question: '*Has your usage of the Internet led to an increase or decrease of exposure to other media?*' Items: 'Newspaper reading', 'journal reading', 'radio listening', 'TV watching', 'telephoning', 'book reading', 'cinema going'.
19. In 2006–2007 respondents were asked: '*Which of the following do you consider the best medium for watching films if you consider the following?*'; respondents were asked to consider which of the following platforms they thought best suited for different kinds of experiences: 'Public TV-Channels'; 'DVD'; or 'Cinema'.
20. We are grateful to Frida Vernersdotter for helping to formulate the arguments in this section.

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## Author biographies

**Anna Westerståhl Stenport**, PhD, is Associate Professor of Scandinavian and Media and Cinema Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She has written extensively on contemporary Nordic film and media as well as on transnational European literary modernism and August Strindberg.

**Elias Markstedt** is a Research Assistant at the SOM Institute as well as the Laboratory of Opinion Research (LORE) at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. His work is focused on various methodological issues related to social surveys such as missing data and question wording.

**Matthew Crain** received his PhD in Communications from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His work examines the transformation of media and advertising systems in the digital age with an emphasis on economics, politics, and technology.