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# Rethinking Convergence: A New Word to Describe an Old Idea

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## 1 Introduction and Problem Discussion

The present chapter addresses the idea of convergence as both an abstract concept and as a word ascribed to certain specific phenomena. The first part of this chapter focuses on the former aspect, whereas the second will try to cover the latter. Convergence, the topic of this book, has become a common word used in many different settings, yet it is very unclear what it actually defines.

As a technological issue, convergence suggests the digital revolution that eases the share of media and peer-to-peer content throughout one single platform (Manovich, 2006). From an industrial and economical perspective, convergence also refers to the mergers, acquisitions and strategic management alliances made during the first decade of the twenty-first Century between traditional media companies (print, radio, TV, film) and new media firms focused on the Internet and online markets (Albarran, 2010). As a social phenomenon, convergence also reflects a big change in the way audiences interact, participate and respond, across multiple digital platforms, to both media and personal content flow (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). But Convergence also has been used as a term to depict industrial, economic, regulatory, global, cultural and political characteristics of the contemporary world (Dwyer, 2010).

The very current trend of turning a word into a loaded concept makes it at once useful and pointless. When too many phenomena are given a single word to unite them, the meaning loses clarity, it even fractures, leaving different ways in which to use the term according to specific settings. What are those settings in which convergence makes an appearance, then, and does that simplify, or blur, its space of action?

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The next pages will try to answer that question following an analysis of communication theory inspired by the works of Marshall McLuhan, followed by a look on specific uses of the term *convergence*. The process hopes to present the space upon which convergence has been used to describe the phenomenon of multiplicity of media sources and content, and disentangle the conceptual tool for the nominal aspect it normally takes when defining specific practices.

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## 2 State of the Art and Literature Review

This part of the text addresses convergence from the tetrad proposed by Marshall and Eric McLuhan in *Laws of Media* (1988). It tries to evidence how the idea is not at all new, as it tends to be presented nowadays, and shows that the work of media cannot be conceived otherwise; it can be understood from the four vantage points explained by the McLuhans.

With this idea in mind, it becomes necessary to stop for a second at McLuhan's concept of the *medium*. Marchessault puts it quite clearly when he states that:

McLuhan developed a phenomenological understanding of culture [...] We can note that McLuhan moves from a notion of culture as landscape to one of environment, from spectatorship to immersion, and from the cinematic as an analogy for human cognition to television as the new reality and a new methodology. (2005, p. xii)

Now, this idea of *environment*, according to McLuhan, is quite curious, for it is not some sort of container; when McLuhan mentions in *Couterblast* (1969) that an environment “is a process rather than a container”, he tries to show that “environments are not passive wrappings, but active processes which work us over completely, massaging the ratio of the senses and imposing their silent assumptions. But environments are invisible. Their ground-rules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns elude easy perception” (Innis, p. 386, cited in Kroker, 2001, p. 58).

McLuhan sees *culture* as an environment, that is, as a sort of ecosystem in which all spheres of human action *converge*. Thus, McLuhan's vision is that of a dense and complex culture—similar to the thick description presented by Geertz (1973)—not limited to concepts of tools and objects, but rather in the ways in which they de-localize human ways of perception.

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## 3 Methodology and Approach: Movement as the Principle of Convergence

Convergence has been brought up in contemporary media debate, as a concept, thanks to the work of Henry Jenkins (2006). Jenkins has revisited—at least in principle—Ithiel de Sola Pool's work, trying to present a definition of convergence:

A process called the ‘convergence of modes’ is blurring the lines between media, even between point-to-point communications, such as the post, telephone and telegraph, and

mass communications, such as the press, radio, and television. A single physical means—be it wires, cables or airwaves—may carry services that in the past were provided in separate ways. Conversely, a service that was provided in the past by any one medium—be it broadcasting, the press, or telephony—can now be provided in several different physical ways. So the one-to-one relationship that used to exist between a medium and its use is eroding (de Sola Pool 1983, cited in Jenkins, 2006, p. 10).

This idea from de Sola Pool seems to agree with the notion of *arti-fact* discussed by the McLuhans (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988):

All of man's artifacts—whether language, or laws, or ideas and hypotheses, or tools, or clothing, or computers—are extensions of the physical human body or the mind. Man the tool-making animal has long been engaged in extending one or another of his sense organs in such a manner as to disturb all of his other senses and faculties (p. 93).

The idea of the artifact means here what Marshall McLuhan had often referred to as *medium*. However, there is an interesting issue at hand here. What does it mean to describe language, laws and tools, all at once, as artifacts? Has McLuhan rendered objectification as meaningless? In the terms that the definition is presented, a first answer would seem to be anchored in the idea of extension, which does not only suggest an increase in physical and sensory capabilities but also an ability to restructure the meanings themselves upon which humans structure their cosmological vision. Therefore, the idea of artifact is quite suggestive because of the *logos* which underscores McLuhan's statement.

Let's consider here, for a moment, what the word artifact implies. Its etymology stems from the Latin roots of *arte factus*, which mean *made with art*. This *art* present in the *arti-fact* is, precisely, what the Greek *techne* suggests. Thus, the artifact is more than an object, it is a way of thinking or, maybe, what Simondon (2008) has considered a technical-object: "the individual technical object is not one thing or another given *hic et nunc*, but rather that from which there is a genesis" (p. 42).

It is within this idea of *genesis* that we find the *arti-fact*. Talking about genesis implies thinking of an origin, a place from which something stems and becomes what it is whilst, all at once, the genesis remains anchored to the idea of a succession or concatenation of facts or causes that would drive to an outcome. This dualism is presented by Simondon in his technical-object which, according to de Vries (2008), would hold its ontological value in sequentiality. De Vries arrives to this conclusion when he revisits Simondon's steam engine:

for [Simondon], the steam engine as a technical object is not what we usually call a technical artifact but a sequence of engine designs that displays a certain development. Ontologically speaking, for him, a technical object is not a material entity, but an event, or rather a sequence of events (p. 25).

Although in the terminology used by de Vries the concepts of technical object and *arti-fact* seem to split apart, what becomes key to his interpretation of Simondon's notion is that it evidences the sequentiality inherent to the technical object thought in the light of genesis. The idea of genesis-sequentiality evidences the mobility of

technicality itself: when Simondon addresses the steam engine as an event, and not as an object, what he displays is the continuous work of the techno-logical part of technicity which, far from becoming *concrete* or *reduced* as an ultimate object, highlights the constant mutation of the technical in terms of its own complexity.

Thus, McLuhan's arti-fact would match Simondon's, because they both overcome simple objectuality. Both Simondon and McLuhan evidence a strong interest in what we could call a technical-logos<sup>1</sup> and which highlights the poietic features that frame the development itself of media and mediated reality. Thus, beyond de Sola Pool and Jenkins, it is striking how already in McLuhan, and even in Simondon, the dynamics of the technical implies thinking in convergent themes. The apparent novelty of Jenkins' concept seems to be nothing of the sort. In fact, Jenkins (2006) himself states that just "as Pool predicted, we are in an age of media transition, one marked by tactical decisions and unintended consequences, mixed signals and competing interests, and most of all, unclear directions and unpredictable outcomes" (p. 11). Again, what we believe to be considerably prophetic in de Sola Pool's statements and the renewed interest on the issue developed by Jenkins regarding participative-convergence, had already been addressed by McLuhan in his analysis back in the 1970s.

Let's return to McLuhan for a moment. Quite simply, the tetrad developed by the McLuhans works on a considerable basic structure and upon the four fundamental tenets that function as a single cog, creating what we would later call the *tetradic movement*.

The tetrad constitutes, from the beginning on, a dynamic system which explains the way in which arti-facts "come to life"—if we are allowed to use such idiom—right at the center of interdependent wholeness. McLuhan and McLuhan (1988) state: "Our *laws of media* are observations on the operation and effects of human artifacts on man and society, since a human artifact 'is not merely an implement for working upon something, but an extension [. . .]'" (p. 94). The four tenets upon the tetrad rests are:

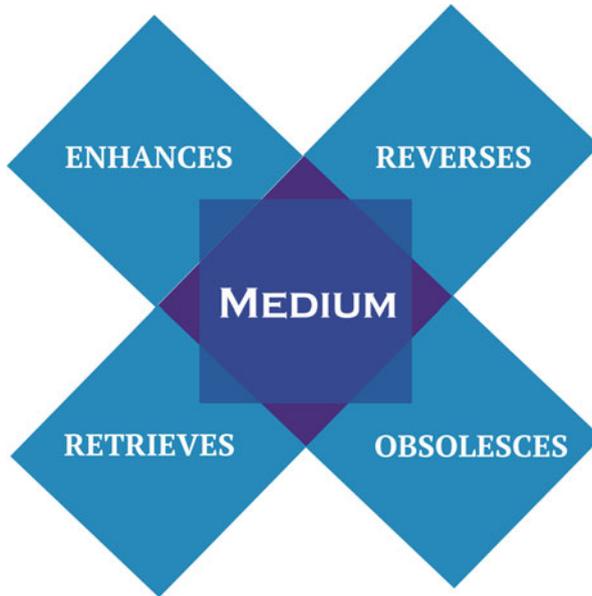
[. . .] a heuristic device, a set of four questions [. . .] They can be asked (and the answers checked) by anyone, anywhere, at any time, about any human artifact. The tetrad was found by asking, "What general, verifiable (that is, testable) statements can be made about all media?" We were surprised to find only four, here posed as questions:

- What does it enhance or intensify?
- What does it render obsolete or displace?
- What does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced?
- What does it produce or become when pressed to an extreme?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a further debate on the techno-logy (or techno-logos) and its relation with the technique, see Roncallo-Dow (2012).

<sup>2</sup> About the tetrad, Marchessault (2005) adds: "[. . .] it is a creative tool for thinking about objects historically and phenomenologically. [. . .]. The tetrad is not a scientific instrument that will reveal hard facts but it is an experimental technique that may open up uncharted relations. *Its dynamic structure seeks to translate the histories embedded in objects into a creative metaphor*" (p. 223).

The four verbs used in the Laws (i.e. enhance, displace, retrieve and produce) are surrounded by semantic markings which grant the idea of movement, a characteristic which becomes more evident in the way they use to render them visual:



Source: Authors; based on McLuhan and McLuhan (1988, p. 129)

This type of structure suggests a multi-directional vectoring of the four tenets, whose directionality traverses the graphical space horizontally, vertically and diagonally.

The way itself in which these interdependent relations between the four tenets are presented evidences the dynamics of a non-linear perspective, which does away with the apparent independence of technical objects, hence, the media. The tetrad highlights that **convergence is not solely the way in which media contents are given new meanings by the users**—something we will address below—**but the way itself in which they hold an interdependent narrative and technicality.** Every ‘new’ medium assumes those which it apparently overrides, and consequently becomes part of the same whole.

This idea is paramount to the development of the argument presented by the McLuhans for their tetrad. In fact, this dialectic suggests that the complexity of technical endeavors can only be conceived within the framework given or, in other words, thinking of all the possible effects such complexity has upon whole. A good example of this point can be found in a 1978 text called *Multi-Media: The Laws of the Media*—(co-authored by E. McLuhan and K. Hutchton), in which Marshall McLuhan (using the first person singular), talking about the automobile, states that

[...]what is referred to in the phrase, ‘the medium is the message’ is not the car, but the complicated ground of services engendered by the car; for example, macadam highways and roads, traffic signals, auto insurance, and the entire world of oil and gasoline, mechanics and parts, and motor car manufacture in general. (p. 93)

In his *Laws of Media*, McLuhan (1988) had already tried to make explicit the metaphorical and relational character of the tetrad. The background argument being what he considered the metaphorical and linguistic nature of all artifacts, which he openly compared with the *outerings* and *utterings* of humans:

all human artifacts are extensions of man, outerings or utterings of the human body or psyche, private or corporate. That is to say, they are speech, and they are translations of us from one form into another form: metaphors. (p. 116)

For McLuhan what was truly relevant was the grammar woven in the arti-facts themselves, in the ways in which they generated meanings. What makes the tetrad show itself is the grammar and syntax of each arti-fact and the way in which they are seen as mobile, and imbued within historical dimensions.

The tetrad is, then, a device (built upon key questions) which displays the truly fundamental grammar upon which the technical fits like a cog on machinery. It is a key element inasmuch as the movement it displays is a movement that—in an Aristotelian way, perhaps—generates change. It evidences the complexity of the technical connected into a synchronic temporality which, dense and complex, leads to a repositioning of the reflection upon the technical from a holistic perspective. That is, it leads to a new ontology (see Berg Olsen, Selinger, & Riis, 2009).

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## 4 Viewpoint on Convergence: A Word to Describe a Process

We have suggested, so far, without really saying it, that every process as an output of technological development represents a dynamic which provides meaning to the things themselves. In the field of communication these dynamics may find a new way to undertake actions, defined by the term convergence which, we have pointed out above, goes beyond the artifact itself and brings it into a dynamic-meaning relationship between those who recognize its value and develop around it a culture of meaning.

It is in the area of culture, then, where we should rethink the possibilities and reach of convergence, to overcome the technological bias. We agree with Rafael Alberto Pérez (2012), who argues that technological gadgets (arti-facts in McLuhan’s discourse) may amaze us more than scientific discoveries have done so far, “which has led the majority of people, whilst enjoying the latest iPhone version, to remain anchored to a perspective typical of the 17th Century”<sup>3</sup> (p. 130).

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<sup>3</sup> Our translation.

This idea presented by Perez leads us to rethink convergence as an absolute phenomenon, and gears us to consider different levels in the communication dynamics from the interpersonal to the mediatized. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first Century, no one could deny the penetration of instantaneous digital communication in various processes, yet at the same time there is no denying the value given to the messages despite the arti-facts, although they may entail the transformation and restructuring of the languages they use.

Thus, we can ask ourselves whether we can understand convergence as a phenomenon with no equal in the dynamic and evolving process of human communication. Let us not forget the ideas of Walter Benjamin (2008), in his statements about the age of technical reproduction, where direct contact between the communicating object and the interpreting subject becomes mediated by a technological device—which we have come to know as a medium—and convergence would thus become nothing but a new arti-fact that sets the dynamics in motion of an already traditional way of making the human communication process into something tangible.

We could think, as maybe Benjamin would have done, of the issue of convergence in terms of the *sensorium*. This idea is particularly enlightening because, on the one hand it lets us grab ahold of the perspective of technical logos inherent to humanity itself as once and always convergent; and, on the other, it brings us back to the *ecological* perspective held by McLuhan about reality, which would find its key aspects in understanding *media* as environments.

Eric McLuhan (2008) remembers how, for his father, the problems regarding *media* always found their focal point in the reconfiguration of the human *sensorium*:

Commenting on something he had written or said earlier, McLuhan (1967) offered these remarks: ‘It is now perfectly plain to me that all media are environments. As environments, all media have all the effects that geographers and biologists have associated with environments in the past. Environments shape their occupants. One person, complaining about my observation that ‘the medium is the message,’ simply said: ‘McLuhan means that the medium has no content.’ This remark was extremely useful to me because it revealed the obvious, namely, the content of any medium is the user. This applies equally to electric lights, any language whatever, and, of course, housing, motor cars, and even tools of any sort. It is obvious that the user or content of any medium is completely conformed to the character of this man-made environment. His entire sensory life arranges its hierarchies and dominance in accordance with the environment in which he operates.’ (p. 27).

Once more, McLuhan (McLuhan & Fiore, 2002) offers a few hints on how to learn to disentangle the possible meanings of the apothegm (i.e. the medium is the message) but he also offers new pointers to understand more clearly his perspective on the *sensorium*:

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without knowledge of the way media work as environments.

All media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical (p. 26).

The words of the McLuhans allow us to understand more clearly the modifications which technological revolution had brought to communication at the beginning of the new century by being determined by the transition from analogue communication to digital, which would then favor one of the main concepts used to describe it: convergence (Grant, 2009).

Although we have already warned that Jenkins (2006) follows the arguments presented by de Sola Pool in order to think of the idea of convergence itself, it is evident that the discussion does not stop there. The reference to de Sola Pool (whom he distances from McLuhan<sup>4</sup>) would enable a step forth, beyond the instrumental, and in a considerably McLuhanesque way, that convergence is not a process that can only be shown through the use of technological applications, but that it takes place, rather, in the minds of those consumers as individuals—that is, as a particular *logos*—and through their social interactions.

According to Niklas Luhmann (2000), what really matters about communication, even in the era of convergence, is the proof itself of the communication process, because the materiality of communication—the technical specifications which make it possible—will always be less relevant: “Communication only comes about when someone watches, listens, reads—and understands to the extent that further communication could follow on. The mere act of uttering something, then, does not, in and of itself, constitute communication” (p. 4).

It is precisely thus that we should address the definition of a phenomenon related to convergence, or to convergent communication. We start from Manovich (2006) by recognizing the content digitalization process which has enabled the erasure of boundaries between content distribution and exhibition, commonly experienced by the traditional media outlets, specially the press, radio and television.

Contents originally produced for one particular medium have become packaged in different formats for their consumption in convergent systems. This industrial dynamic has motivated a good deal of media corporation integrations, acquisitions and mergers with other multimedia firms, or the projection of convergent media groups traditionally regarded as specifically single-medium based in the media industries (Dwyer, 2010).

In a convergent communication environment, audiences have participated further and have taken advantage of the opportunities opened up by new media technologies. In a sense, technological changes are more than just instrumental changes for communication (Orozco Gómez, 2007); they are true transformations which slowly draw new boundaries to a communication culture which was before segmented by bound media.

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<sup>4</sup>“If *Wired* magazine declared Marshall McLuhan the patron saint of the digital revolution, we might well describe the late MIT political scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool as the prophet of media convergence. Pool’s *Technologies of Freedom* (1983) was probably the first book to lay out the concept of convergence as a force of change within the media industries” (2006, p. 10).

Thus, convergence, interactivity and user-generated content become relevant in as much as there are audiences willing and able to interact and participate in its development.

Therefore, one of the main aspects in the construction of a theoretical framework on communication for the new century is the change in definition of the concept of an audience, beyond mere technological issues, in order to avoid the pitfalls foretold by Jesús Martín-Barbero (2007) about “the fascinating achievements of technology that promise the re-enchantment of our disenchanted and unflavored lives”<sup>5</sup> (p. 72).

But media convergence in the twenty-first Century has led audiences to provide instant and simultaneous consumption, through multifunctional devices, for which traditional barriers between media industries, at least from the consumer end, tend to disappear. In their stead, now there is but a moment and a set of circumstances for the contact with the media message. It is the age of the audience.

We share the sentiment of Robert Picard (2003) in his perception that information revolution has kick-started an increase in the speed, flexibility and integration of current forms of communication. This is the true consequence of the process derived from media convergence, from the perspective of the media industries: “The digitalization, new media and information and communication technologies are part of an evolutionary rather than revolutionary change in communication ability. No real new communication ability is being created” (Picard, 2003, p. 154).

Convergence in the media industries, it would seem, is only a reversal of the original media segmentation of the twentieth Century. Convergence is new only because these different media outlets, much like Onassis Oil monopoly, were set apart at the beginning of the technological development, although their contents had not been similarly separated—they remained interconnected through a mixture of adaptations, modifications and, even, the participation of media figures jumping from one medium into the other.

Media convergence, then, does refer to a distinct process of mixing media outlets, languages and finances thanks to technological devices and international commercial practices that allow for both content and financial integration of ideas and capital.

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## 5 Conclusion: Convergence as a Reloaded Term

The first pages of this chapter have shown that convergence as an idea is nothing new. The later few, however, have given certain evidence that, at least from the media industries and the audiences, convergence has implied a change in conception of what media are supposed to provide as outlets. It then begs the question of why do we believe convergence to be such a new trend. The answer, to put it shortly, is in the new ways in which convergence has been used, as a word rather

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<sup>5</sup> Our translation.

than as an abstract concept, in current literature. Since words can develop many meanings, convergence has been used to a variety of aspects in recent years.

Thussu (2002) and Wirth (2006) use convergence to define a *specific* issue of media economics: the expansion of certain media companies into different media outlets, usually stemming from one medium and delving into others quite different in space or scope. This goes along the ideas cited above from Dwyer (2010) and Picard (2003). New international trade organizations and rules, which have promoted horizontal integration, and new market interests, which have set the base for vertical integration, are quite clearly the economic trend of the last 30 years (Sánchez-Tabernero, 2006).

Jenkins (2006), Jenkins et al. (2013) and Deuze (2007), on the other hand, refer to convergence as a process through which new players have started to develop content in media spaces that were not usually available to them. Media companies have begun using, adapting and modifying more material from different sources and have started to combine them in ways that had not been experienced before, or the people that used to be at the receiving end of media outputs have begun to develop their own personal output and set it in motion in open spaces which, on occasion, grant them a larger audience than ever before. Elsewhere, Uribe-Jongbloed (2013) has even expanded that specificity of the word *convergence* by claiming that the institutional bringing together of different source materials and separate media can be considered one extreme of the continuum, under the name of *hybridity*, whereas at the other end we have user participation in which they bring their collective intelligence to produce their own content, and this process could be truly entitled as proper *convergence*.

Convergence as economic expansion into new domains is nothing new, since artists as well as producers have constantly hopped from one medium to the next, even though company names have not behaved in the same manner. For instance, Orson Wells was a radio voice, turned actor, turned director, for three different media outlets, just to name one example out of the myriad that can be found worldwide. At the same time, convergence as the inclusion of different modes and styles into single products, and the use of various sources (including crowdsourcing) into the creation of cultural items, or the participation of former static media consumers—or audiences—in the media creation process, using new channels and forms of communication, although considerably larger now than ever before, thanks to the Internet, is as old a phenomenon as mail correspondence, scientific journals, and many classical forms of art—including the Celtic bard tradition.

The issue at hand, it seems, is not novelty in the genesis of the products, but their *visibility*. Yet, visibility fits into the tetrad presented by McLuhan above. The extension of the human capability of sight (and hearing) through all sorts of media technology is part of the dynamic process of the whole media environment. To use the visual metaphor cited above, it is not the length of the ribbon or band that ties the four tenets which amazes us now; its width does.

Therefore, the way in which Thussu (2002), Wirth (2006), Dwyer (2010), Picard (2003), and Sánchez-Tabernero (2006) or Jenkins (2006), Deuze (2007), and even

more so Uribe-Jongbloed (2013), use the term *convergence* is only a reduced form of the more complex meaning highlighted above from the works of McLuhan and set upon more measurable instances where the process is evident. This multiplicity of uses of the word seems to create a *divergence* in the way in which convergence, as an idea now, is conceptualized. In an open discussion about convergence, which has been key to many academic plights, our first effort should be put into disentangling the weighed meanings of the word, to separate the abstract concept from the working definition of many an academic text. Convergence suffers from the same struggle another common word in our contemporary lingo experienced a couple of years ago: globalization. It becomes entangled into a definition that includes what it is, where it comes from, and what it produces, leading to a loaded term that is at once an object, a cause, and a consequence.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, convergence *is* nothing new. Its discussion, however, *has become* relevant more recently because of the interest in pinpointing the word to a meaning that is less abstract and more defined by current geo-economic and culturally bound ideas. But let us not think that convergence is a new issue in media theory. It was an issue settled by McLuhan long ago.

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<sup>6</sup> See Rantanen (2005, p. 5) and Robertson (1992, p. 8) for a lengthier discussion on how the concept of globalization has suffered from this open usage.

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