

# Editorial

## Convergence Culture

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We are living at a moment of profound and prolonged media transition: the old scripts by which media industries operated or consumers absorbed media content are being rewritten. As those changes occur, we need to work across the historic divide in academic research between work on media industries and work on media audiences. Media companies can no longer be meaningfully studied in the absence of an understanding of how they relate to their consumers. By the same token, consumers, audiences, fan communities, users, call them what you wish, can no longer be meaningfully understood without a better understanding of the economic and technological contexts within which they operate. The articles contained within this special issue of *Convergence*, each in its own way, represents a rapprochement between industry studies and audience research.

In this context, media can be seen as the key drivers and accelerators of a growing integration between culture and commerce. Brought down to first principles, media mediate – between people, communities, organizations, institutions, and industries. In the classic model, a small number of media companies were homogenizing culture through their dominance over the means of production and distribution of media content. And individuals were defined through their roles as ‘consumers’ rather than being seen as producers of – or better yet, participants within – the surrounding culture. Over the past several decades, the expansion of new media resources has led to what Yochai Benkler has described as a ‘hybrid media ecology’ within which commercial, amateur, governmental, nonprofit, educational, activist and other players interact with each other in ever more complex ways. Each of these groups has the power to produce and distribute content and each of these groups is being transformed by their new power and responsibilities in this emerging media ecology. And in the process, the focus on individual consumers is giving way to a new emphasis on the social networks through which production and consumption occur. In this context, it may no longer be of value to talk about personalized media; perhaps, we might better discuss socialized media. We might see YouTube, Second Life, Wikipedia, Flickr, and MySpace, to cite

just a few examples, as meeting spaces between a range of grassroots creative communities, each pursuing their own goals, but each helping to shape the total media environment.

These shifts in the communication infrastructure bring about contradictory pulls and tugs within our culture. On the one hand, this 'democratization' of media use signals a broadening of opportunities for individuals and grassroots communities to tell stories and access stories others are telling, to present arguments and listen to arguments made elsewhere, to share information and learn more about the world from a multitude of other perspectives. On the other hand, the media companies seek to extend their reach by merging, co-opting, converging and synergizing their brands and intellectual properties across all of these channels. In some ways, this has concentrated the power of traditional gatekeepers and agenda setters and in other ways, it has disintegrated their tight control over our culture.

Convergence therefore must be understood as both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets and reinforce consumer loyalties and commitments. Users are learning how to master these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact (and co-create) with other users. Sometimes, these two forces reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding, relations between media producers and consumers. Sometimes the two forces conflict, resulting in constant renegotiations of power between these competing pressures on the new media ecology.

Speaking at the International Communications Association conference in San Francisco on 26 May 2007, Tiziana Terranova took aim at the phrase 'harnessing collective intelligence' coined by media guru Tim O'Reilly and running through the discourse of 'Web 2.0'. Many progressives have embraced Pierre Levy's concept of 'collective intelligence' as one that gives expression to the new links between knowledge and power that are emerging within network culture: people from diverse backgrounds pool knowledge, debate interpretations and organize through the production of meaning. Levy argues that collective intelligence may offer a new model for civic engagement – one which operates alongside but impacts upon the flow of goods within transnational capitalism or the expectations which nation-states place upon their residents. Terranova warns about the re-assertion of corporate power implied by the word 'harnessing'. She argues that the new media companies are 'manufacturing consent' by enabling participation, seeking to contain and control the emerging power of these new knowledge cultures. This push to 'harness' audience power is implicit in current discussions about 'user-generated content', which some see as enabling a more diverse and responsive media culture and others consider as a means of outsourcing ('crowd-sourcing') creative labor. Yet, one might also see the business-jargonesque phrase of 'harnessing' as indicative of a rather inflated self-projection, as media industries assert publicly a power that they fear privately they have lost forever. In our work we talk with professionals throughout the news and entertainment industries (both in the USA and elsewhere); many of them express the fear that they have lost control over their own brands and properties as they get taken up and deployed by consumers and users in diverse, disorganized, decentralized, but very public ways. Look around the edges of

the happy talk about 'user-generated content', and one will see growing surges of audience activism as the public objects to the commodification of the gift economy which has grown up around the participatory culture of the web. The phrase 'harnessing collective intelligence' seems emblematic of the contradictory relations between consumers and producers during this transitional moment in the history of the media ecology.

The current global digital culture should be understood as what Lev Manovich calls a culture of remix and remixability, where user-generated content exists both within and outside commercial contexts, and supports as well as subverts corporate control. The Convergence Culture paradigm represents an attempt to capture this contradictory media landscape, drawing from both political economy and cultural studies perspectives, trying to deal with the shifting relations between media production and consumption. In recent years, the ongoing convergence of the cultures of production and consumption has inspired an emergent (still unnamed) field of scholarship across disciplines, which explores how these new configurations of media power exert an impact on media law, economics, aesthetics, politics, and labor. In his recent book *The Wealth of Networks* (2006), Yochai Benkler promotes what he calls 'commons-based peer production'. Chris Anderson (*The Long Tail*, 2006) discusses the expanded economic potential of niche markets, and Thomas W. Malone (*The Future of Work*, 2004) analyzes how such changes are reshaping the management of major companies. Anthropologist Grant McCracken (1998) discusses this in terms of the 'plenitude' enabled by the proliferation of meaningful and marketable cultural differences. Recent books by this issue's guest editors also explore these issues. Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) describes a world where every story, image, sound, brand, and relationship plays itself out across the widest possible array of media platforms, and where the flow of media content is shaped as much by decisions made in teenagers' bedrooms as it is by decisions made in corporate boardrooms. Mark Deuze's *Media Work* (2007) examines how changes in technology, culture, and society affect the working lives and professional identities of media producers in advertising, journalism, film, TV, and digital games. Deuze focuses particularly on how people in these industries adapt to enhanced demands on their cross-media creativity on the one hand, while attempting to reconstruct their images of the 'audience' as co-creators rather than as (passive) consumers on the other.

The earliest insights into this phenomenon are paradoxical: audiences and industry both seem to be gaining – and losing – power, media control seems to be concentrating and dispersing in the same transitional moment. Everything seems up for grabs with power, wealth, knowledge, and influence redispersed with each shift in the media landscape. Some of this flux originates from the efforts of the global media industries to secure – or rather, win back – their historic control over the production and circulation of culture, part of the process by which all forms of public communication (including news and entertainment, perhaps even education and government services) lie in the hands of fewer and fewer multinational companies. Even as most of the major media corporations consolidated into large corporate conglomerations in the 1990s, there has been a parallel development of media deconcentration and corporate dysfunctionality. Grounded research in the fields of news, advertising and the motion picture industries consistently suggests that infighting and turf wars, slow centralized decision-making

processes, mismanagement, difficulties of building or sustaining a knowledge-sharing work culture, and a general lack of cooperation among different media properties within the same corporation or holding firm are among the key reasons why the mergers-and-synergies model for corporate consolidation generally fails to deliver the expected results. The consolidation of ownership has been widely discussed but much less has been said about the constant splintering, reshuffling, and selling off of parts of these same companies (as, for example, in the much-published cases of AOL/Time Warner and Vivendi Universal). At the same time, we are seeing a push towards outsourcing, sub-contracting, and offshoring, which further decentralizes the media industry. Whether in the movies, advertising, journalism or video-game development, most of the work in these industries is done by independent contractors, loosely affiliated teams, temporarily hired work groups, or otherwise contingently employed creative labor, often spread across translocally situated contexts. Contemporary media production operates through a complex web of mostly temporary connections, links, joint ventures and thus diffuse power relationships between media companies and public stakeholders (including governments and audiences). Within these global production networks, multifunctional entertainment corporations collaborate with thousands of specialized firms under more or less independent ownership – some working from deal to deal, some on long-term contracts, some fully owned subsidiaries. These reconfigurations do not change everything: large corporations have not lost control over the communications environment, media consumption has not totally fragmented, and the global market has not been completely opened up to hundreds of thousands of small or independent companies. We now live in a reality somewhere between the stark fears of media reformers who imagine our brains being subdivided by a cabal of corporations and the idealistic aspirations of digital revolutionaries who foresee mass media being totally displaced by a more participatory culture.

In terms of the management and organization of work, media organizations can be considered to be quite special cases, partly because of the delicate and contested balance between the creative autonomy of culture creators and the scientific management of commercial enterprises. Bryan Turner has written about the ongoing differentiation between linearity and liquidity in consumer cultures with media industries pushing, on the one hand, to rationalize their production through relying on formulas, franchises, and other premarketed material and on the other, to insure audience engagement through innovative, flexible, and expressive goods and services. Examples of linearity in cultural production are predictable iterations of the same franchise (such as the James Bond movies, a soap opera like *Eastenders*, or the *Legend of Zelda* video-game series). Liquid differentiation occurs in the production of groundbreaking, unconventional new media formulas, hybrid genres, transmedia strategies, and complex and demanding storytelling formats. The same companies, or indeed the same professionals, tend to be engaged in both types of production. A formerly linear product tends to get infused with liquid properties in its next instalment, and vice versa. Following Turner, this dialectical production process makes the media industries at once forces for standardization and innovation.

We also need to factor changes in consumer behavior and relations into our understanding of the transitions impacting upon the creative industries. Users are very much part of these same collaborative networks – increasingly understood as another group

which helps to generate and circulate content rather than as simply a market for corporately produced materials. Consumers are now demanding the right to participate and this becomes another destabilizing force that threatens consolidation, standardization, and rationalization. Whatever we do with our media – what we read, watch, listen to, participate in, create, or use – pushes well beyond what is predicted, produced, or programmed by corporate media organizations. Consumers are using the grassroots channels offered by digital and mobile technologies to assert their own control over cultural flows. Alongside the corporate-controlled broadcast or mass media channels, such as those offered through cable television, dot-com websites, or frequency modulation (FM) radio, there is also the bewildering array of community and alternative media, pirate radio, our use of the office photocopier as ‘the people’s printing press’, letters we write, Short Message Service (SMS) texts we send to participate in a TV show or to ask someone for a date, pictures taken with the built-in digital camera of our cell phones and uploaded to photosharing social networking sites like Flickr, postings we make to our own or someone else’s weblog . . . and so on, and so forth. And then, there are the hybrid spaces, corporately created platforms, such as Flickr or YouTube, MySpace or Live Journal, which provide a common environment for grassroots media makers, both individuals and groups, to come together and share what they have created with each other. Such sites are enabling citizen journalists and amateur producers to gain much greater visibility and influence within the culture than ever before. The ‘People Formerly Known As The Audience’, to borrow Jay Rosen’s evocative phrase, are not remaining hidden in the traditional backwaters of grassroots media production (pirate radio, community television, newsletters); rather, their work becomes increasingly central to the contemporary mediascape with YouTube videos themselves developing cult followings, getting referenced through mainstream media, and provoking their own parodies and appropriations. Grassroots intermediaries are creating new value (and perhaps damaging older meanings) around branded content which they ‘spread’ – legally and illegally – across the mediascape.

All these shifts in the ways that media content gets generated and distributed led *The Economist*<sup>1</sup> to ask the fundamental question: what is a media company? Traditionally, media companies would be seen as audience aggregators: engaging in the production of content aimed at mass audiences. Considering the social, technological and economic trends discussed here, such a definition has become problematic. Instead of ‘audiences’, businesses talk about ‘networks’, emphasizing media work as a practice that would (or should) generate endless opportunities for people to form ‘communities of interest’ around content. Just as industry leaders have been rendered white-knuckled and audiences breathless at the accelerated rate of change, academics working on the creative industries have had to struggle to keep pace with the rapid shifts in their object of study.

In this special issue of *Convergence*, we bring together strong empirical work documenting examples of emerging global practices in convergence culture. The writers represented here discuss social-networking software, commercial and public service broadcasting, photography and mobile communications, games, and even manufacturing through the lens of convergence culture. In some cases, they explore ways in which media industries and consumers are working together more closely and in others, they outline conflicts or disagreements, but all of them recognize that media companies and

consumers tread shared space but often with competing and contradictory agendas. Taken as a whole, these articles complicate some of the easy assumptions which shaped the first wave of discourse about Web 2.0, User-Generated Content, and Participatory Culture, offering us perspectives which further complicate our models of what it means to participate within this new media landscape.

This special issue opens with a critical essay by danah boyd, offering a crucial caveat to the emerging participatory and socially networked practices online: a growing concern about the meaning and function of privacy in (especially young) people's lives. Using the introduction of Facebook's 'News Feed' feature as a case in point, boyd argues how the shift from 'private' to 'public' implied in our increased immersion in social networks unsettles existing social norms, particularly regarding exposure and invasion of one's perceived personal space.

Neil Perryman's work on the BBC's transmedia strategy with the TV drama series *Doctor Who* outlines many possibilities available to media producers and users within convergence culture. Perryman's research richly documents the benefits of collaborative, multi-platform practices for hardcore fans, mainstream audiences, media producers and company executives alike.

The articles by Christy Dena and Hector Postigo see games culture as an important location where the relations between producers and consumers are getting renegotiated. Dena emphasizes the kinds of collaboration which emerge within gamer communities and between designers and players within Alternate Reality Games. Postigo, by contrast, emphasizes the conflicts that emerge within modder culture, showing how industry talk about 'user-generated content' breaks down around competing goals and conflicting assumptions about the nature of intellectual property. Dena's work pushes her deeper into a design aesthetic which might support more rewarding play experiences, while Postigo's analysis suggests the need for a new or more flexible regulatory framework which recognizes the creative value created through fan appropriations.

Daren Brabham examines the concept of 'crowd-sourcing', as a testing ground for ideas about 'collective intelligence' and 'the wisdom of crowds'. Crowd-sourcing is what happens when the logic of Web 2.0 gets applied to the design and manufacture of physical goods and services. Drawing on case models, such as Threadless, iStockphoto, and InnoCentive, Brabham tries to identify those necessary conditions which support a profitable, transparent and creatively independent integration of crowd-sourcing into established (profit as well as not-for-profit) business practices. Larissa Hjorth offers one such example of harnessing mass creativity through new technologies in her work on the mobile phone. Grounding her work in South Korean case studies, Hjorth identifies how the ubiquitousness of built-in digital cameras is transforming the nature of photography, enabling people to take new kinds of images and share them across 'imaging communities'. Yet, even as mobile media become platforms enabling sociality, these devices further the capitalist agenda of constructing ('interpellating') citizens as individualized and perpetually connected consumers.

So far, most of the work within the convergence culture paradigm has focused on commercial entertainment: Gun Enli's article extends this model to explore debates which are occurring with public service media. Tapping institutional documents from the British BBC, the Swedish SVT, the Norwegian NRK and the US PBS, Enli explores the value of audience participation for organizations whose charters mandate an appeal to citizens rather than

consumers. These organizations are forced to explore more deeply the relationship of this new participatory culture to education and civic engagement.

Enli's focus on public service broadcast pulls us back towards a focus on what might be described as a socially responsible ethics of convergence culture. Everyone involved – industry and audience alike – believes our culture will become more participatory but there is uncertainty about the terms of our participation. Already, we are seeing signs of backlash against 'the cult of the amateur' even as grassroots media makers are struggling to be taken seriously as part of the overall media ecology. Already, we are seeing growing public activism over issues such as net neutrality or intellectual property, which will help define the context within which future media change occurs. And already we are seeing a growing emphasis upon both formal and informal means of promoting the media literacy needed for all citizens to become meaningful participants in this new culture and to make informed choices in their relationship to commercial media producers. What roles should academic researchers play in helping their culture to adjust to this process of change? If we simply identify best practices, we run the risk of being accused of being apologists for the media industry. If we simply critique, we run the risk of foreclosing possibilities which may further long-standing goals of cultural diversity, civic engagement, and grassroots media power. We need to rethink the categories and perspectives through which we have traditionally framed media phenomena to respond to a profound and prolonged period of media in transition, but we need to do more than that and think more deeply about our roles as academics and our shifting relationships with both media industries and audiences. If the new and emerging paradigms emphasize the relationship between knowledge and power, we need to take more seriously the power we exert – or could exert – as knowledge workers in an emerging creative economy.

## Note

- 1 Anon (2006) 'The Gazillion Dollar Question', *The Economist* (20 April), URL (accessed 17 July 2007): [http://www.economist.com/surveys/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=6794282](http://www.economist.com/surveys/displaystory.cfm?story_id=6794282)

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