



## The cultural logic of media convergence

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**ABSTRACT** ● Responding to the contradictory nature of our current moment of media change, this article will sketch a theory of media convergence that allows us to identify major sites of tension and transition shaping the media environment for the coming decade. Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences. ●

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The American media environment is now being shaped by two seemingly contradictory trends: on the one hand, new media technologies have lowered production and distribution costs, expanded the range of available delivery channels and enabled consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content in powerful new ways;<sup>1</sup> on the other hand, there has been an alarming concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media, with a small handful of multinational media conglomerates dominating all sectors of the entertainment industry.

Few media critics seem capable of keeping both sides of this equation in mind at the same time. Robert McChesney (2000) warns that the range of voices in policy debates will become constrained as media ownership concentrates. Cass Sunstein (2002) worries that fragmentation of the web is apt to result in the loss of shared values and common culture. Nick Gillespie (1999) points towards a 'culture boom', while Mark Crispin Miller (2002) speaks of an American 'monoculture'. Todd Gitlin (2003) worries about a 'media torrent', whereas Grant McCracken (1997) sees the

'plenitude' of a highly generative culture. Some fear that media is out of control; others that it is too controlled. Some see a world without gatekeepers; others a world where gatekeepers have unprecedented power. They all get partial credit, given the contradictory and transitional nature of our current media system.

This article will sketch a theory of media convergence that allows us to identify major sites of tension and transition shaping the media environment for the coming decade. My goal is to identify some of the ways that cultural studies might contribute to those debates and why it is important for us to become more focussed on creative industries.

Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences. Convergence refers to a process, but not an endpoint. Thanks to the proliferation of channels and the portability of new computing and telecommunications technologies, we are entering an era where media will be everywhere and we will use all kinds of media in relation to each other. Our cell phones are not simply telecommunications devices; they also allow us to play games, download information from the internet and receive and send photographs or text messages. Any of these functions can also be performed through other media appliances. One can listen to The Dixie Chicks through a DVD player, car radio, walkman, computer MP3 files, a web radio station or a music cable channel. Fueling this technological convergence is a shift in patterns of media ownership. Whereas old Hollywood focussed on cinema, the new media conglomerates have controlling interests across the entire entertainment industry. Viacom, for example, produces films, television, popular music, computer games, websites, toys, amusement park rides, books, newspapers, magazines and comics. In turn, media convergence impacts the way we consume media. A teenager doing homework may juggle four or five windows, scanning the web, listening to and downloading MP3 files, chatting with friends, wordprocessing a paper and responding to email, shifting rapidly between tasks. And fans of a popular television series may sample dialogue, summarize episodes, debate subtexts, create original fan fiction, record their own soundtracks, make their own movies – and distribute all of this worldwide via the internet.

Convergence is taking place within the same appliances . . . within the same franchise . . . within the same company . . . within the brain of the consumer . . . and within the same fandom.

For the foreseeable future, convergence will be a kind of kludge – a jerry-rigged relationship between different media technologies – rather than a fully integrated system. Right now, the cultural shifts, the legal battles and the economic consolidations that are fueling media convergence are preceding shifts in the technological infrastructure. The way in which those various transitions play themselves out will determine the balance of power within this new media era.

The rate of convergence will be uneven within a given culture, with those who are most affluent and most technologically literate becoming the early adapters and other segments of the population struggling to catch up. Insofar as these trends extend beyond a specifically American context, the rate of convergence will also be uneven across national borders, resulting in the consolidation of power and wealth within the 'have' nations and some shift in the relative status and prominence of developing nations.

Convergence is more than a corporate branding opportunity; it represents a reconfiguration of media power and a reshaping of media aesthetics and economics. The French cyberspace theorist Pierre Levy uses the term 'collective intelligence' to describe the large-scale information gathering and processing activities that have emerged in web communities. On the internet, he argues, people harness their individual expertise towards shared goals and objectives: 'No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity' (1997).<sup>2</sup> The new knowledge culture has arisen as our ties to older forms of social community are breaking down, our rooting in physical geography is diminishing, our bonds to the extended and even the nuclear family are disintegrating and our allegiances to nation states are being redefined. However, new forms of community are emerging. These new communities are defined through voluntary, temporary and tactical affiliations, are reaffirmed through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments and are held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge. Levy maps the intersections and negotiations between four potential sources of power: nomadic mobility, control over territory, ownership over commodities and mastery over knowledge. The emergent knowledge cultures never fully escape the influence of the commodity culture any more than commodity culture can function fully outside the constraints of territoriality. However, knowledge cultures, he predicts, will gradually alter the way that commodity cultures or nation states operate. Nowhere is that transition clearer than within the culture industries, where the commodities that circulate become resources for the production of meaning and where peer-to-peer technologies are being deployed in ways that challenge old systems of distribution and ownership.

Ultimately, our media future could depend on the kind of uneasy truce that gets brokered between commercial media and collective intelligence. Imagine a world where there are two kinds of media power: one comes through media concentration, where any message gains authority simply by being broadcast on network television; the other comes through collective intelligence, where a message gains visibility only if it is deemed relevant to a loose network of diverse publics. Broadcasting will place issues on the national agenda and define core values. Grassroots media will reframe those issues for different publics and ensure that everyone has a chance to be heard. Innovation will occur on the fringes; consolidation in the mainstream. But that

makes it all sound a little too orderly, since in our transitional moment, the power relations between these forces are being fought over amid much name-calling and acrimony.

Understanding these changes and participating in the debates that will shape the future of media will require cultural studies to revisit and rethink some of its core assumptions. Since these changes occur at the intersection between production and consumption, they will demand detente between political economy (which has perhaps the most powerful theory of media production) and audience research (which has the most compelling account of media consumption). As we do so, political economy will need to shed its assumption that all participation in the consumer economy constitutes cooptation and look instead at the ways that consumers are influencing the production and distribution of media content. Audience researchers will, at the same time, need to abandon their romance with audience resistance in order to understand how consumers may exert their emerging power through new collaborations with media producers. We should not give up our desire to contest the homogenization of our culture, but contemporary consumers may gain power through the assertion of new kinds of economic and legal relations and not simply through making meanings.

We need to move from a politics based on culture-jamming – that is, disrupting the flow of media from an outside position – towards one based on blogging – that is, actively shaping the flow of media. Blogging came into its own during the Gulf War, providing an important communication channel for the antiwar movement. In the Vietnam War era, it took years to build up the network of underground newspapers, alternative comics and people's radio stations that supported the antiwar movement. In the digital age, antiwar activists emerged almost overnight, forming important alliances, sharing ideas, organizing actions and mobilizing supporters, with most of the important work taking place in cyberspace. Others used blogging technology to link together important international coverage of the war, providing an implicit critique of the narrowness of the American media's hyperpatriotic accounts. In some cases, bloggers collected money to send their own reporters to the front so that they could obtain more direct and unfiltered knowledge of what was going on. As blogging has taken off, the form has been incorporated into commercial media sites: *Salon*, the online news magazine, for example, has a number of famous writers and political leaders who regularly run blogs through its website. Mainstream reporters increasingly scan blogs in search of leads for stories that will then be reported more widely through broadcast media. Furthermore, early signs are that blogging may play a decisive role in shaping the 2004 American presidential elections, having been identified as a key factor in propelling maverick candidate Howard Dean into the front ranks for the Democratic Party nomination.

I am struck by the ending of *The Truman Show*, a film that buys into

culture-jamming assumptions. All the film can offer us is a vision of media exploitation, and all its protagonist can imagine is walking away from the media and slamming the door. It never occurs to anyone that Truman might stay on the air, generating his own content and delivering his own message, exploiting the media for his own purposes. Bloggers are rewriting the ending, resulting in a new vision of media politics.

Convergence is 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 viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other users. They are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture, to control the flow of media in their lives and to talk back to mass market content. Sometimes, these two forces reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding, relations between media producers and consumers. Sometimes, these two forces are at war and those struggles will redefine the face of American popular culture. Media producers are responding to these newly empowered consumers in contradictory ways, sometimes encouraging change, sometimes resisting what they see as renegade behavior. Consumers, in turn, are perplexed by what they see as mixed signals about how much participation they can enjoy.

The so-called media companies are not behaving in a monolithic fashion here; often, in fact, different divisions of the same company are pursuing radically different strategies, reflecting their uncertainty about how to proceed. On the one hand, convergence represents an expanding opportunity for media conglomerates, since content that succeeds in one sector can expand its market reach across other platforms. On the other hand, convergence represents a risk, since most of these media fear a fragmentation or erosion of their markets. Each time they move a viewer from, say, television to the internet, there is a risk that the consumer may not return. Sometimes media executives are thinking across media; sometimes they can't extract themselves from medium-specific paradigms. Collaborations, even within the same companies, are harder to achieve than we might imagine looking at top-down charts mapping media ownership. The closer to the ground you get, the more media companies look like dysfunctional families.

Convergence is also a risk for creative industries because it requires media companies to rethink old assumptions about what it means to consume media – assumptions that shape both programming and marketing decisions. If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumer is active. If old consumers were predictable and stationary, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or even media. If old consumers were isolated individuals, then new consumers are

more socially connected. If old consumers were seen as compliant, then new consumers are resistant, taking media into their own hands. If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, they are now noisy and public. Much of this is old news to those of us who have been following debates in cultural studies over the past few decades. But, as John Hartley and Toby Miller suggest in this issue, with varying degrees of pessimism, the idea of the active and critical consumer is gaining new currency within media industries, creating new opportunities for academic intervention in the policy debates that will shape the next decade of media change.

Here are nine sites where important negotiations between producers and consumers are apt to occur:

### *1 Revising audience measurement*

Rethinking the usefulness of the 'impression' in an age of transmedia branding, the American television industry is increasingly targeting consumers who have a prolonged relationship and active engagement with media content and who show a willingness to track down that content across the cable spectrum and across a range of other media platforms. This next generation audience research focusses attention on what consumers do with media content, seeing each subsequent interaction as valuable because it reinforces their relationship to the series and, potentially, its sponsors. Each shift in audience measurement, as Jen Ang (1991) and Eileen Meehan (1990) note, among others, results in shifts in cultural power, with some groups gaining greater influence and others being marginalized. Will fan communities be the new beneficiaries of audience measurement?

### *2 Regulating media content*

Many parents complain that the media floodgates have opened into their living rooms and that they are no longer able to exercise meaningful choices about what media should enter their homes. Historically, media producers sought to appeal to the broadest possible population; self-regulation sought to ensure that all the content produced was appropriate for every member of the family; ideological struggles occurred whenever there was an attempt to broaden the possible themes that could be included within mainstream entertainment. There is now a push away from consensus-style media and towards greater narrowcasting. In this context, consumers are expected to play a much more active role in determining what content is appropriate for their families. Ironically, perhaps the biggest success story in niche media production has been the emergence of an alternative sphere of popular culture reflecting the tastes and ideologies of cultural conservatives, the very groups who are also working to impose those ideological norms onto mainstream media through governmental regulation of media content (see

Hendershott, 2004). Will the tension between narrowcasting and regulation result in more or less media diversity?

### *3 Redesigning the digital economy*

Most believe that the commercializing of cyberspace has significantly undercut the web's prevailing gift economy. There will still be a great deal of free content produced by amateurs and academics, but more and more content will come with a price tag. The choice of how we pay for web content can have enormous cultural implications. Many feel that a shift towards a subscription-based model will result in greater media concentration and the construction of higher barriers of entry to the cultural marketplace, since most consumers will buy only a limited number of subscriptions and are more apt to buy them from companies that can promise them the broadest range of possible content. A micropayment system would allow media producers (recording artists, independent game designers, web comics artists, authors) to sell their content directly to the consumers, cutting out many layers of middle folk, adjusting prices for the lowered costs of production and distribution in the digital environment. Although long predicted, a viable micropayment system has yet to emerge, although there are new signs of life in this area. Which economic and cultural model will dominate in the web environment in the coming decade?

### *4 Restricting media ownership*

In the summer of 2003, following heated debates that cut across traditional ideological divisions, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) lifted many of the existing restrictions on US media ownership. The debate pitted those who believed that technological change had resulted in an explosion of media options against those who saw the present moment primarily in terms of media concentration. Many fear that the FCC rulings will pave the way for even more consolidation within the media industries. Even if they don't, the battlelines drawn between – and within – the two factions may shape future policy debates over the coming decade. One significant consequence of the debate has been a heightened grassroots awareness of the issue of media ownership. Will public dissatisfaction with corporate media be a driving political issue in the coming years?

### *5 Rethinking media aesthetics*

P. David Marshall (2002) describes the emergence of 'the new intertextual commodity', as franchises expand across media channels in response to the opportunities represented by media convergence. His focus is primarily on the economic implications of these shifts, but we should also monitor their



aesthetic implications. In the old system, a work that was successful in one medium might be adapted into other media or used to brand a series of related but more or less redundant commodities. More recent media franchises, such as *The Blair Witch Project*, *Pokemon* or *The Matrix*, have experimented with a more integrated structure whereby each media manifestation makes a distinct but interrelated contribution to the unfolding of a narrative universe. While each individual work must be sufficiently self-contained to satisfy the interests of a first time consumer, the interplay between many such works can create an unprecedented degree of complexity and generate a depth of engagement that will satisfy the most committed viewer. Will transmedia storytelling enrich popular culture or make it more formulaic?

### 6 *Redefining intellectual property rights*

In the new media environment, it is debatable whether governmental censorship or corporate control over intellectual property rights poses the greatest threat to the right of the public to participate in their culture. Take the case of Harry Potter. In public schools across the US, the J.K. Rowling books have been attacked by religious conservatives who want them pulled from libraries or removed from classrooms because they allegedly promote paganism. The publishing industry has joined forces with librarians, teachers and civil libertarians to stave off these attacks on children's rights to read. At the same time, Warner Brothers has been aggressively asserting its rights over the Harry Potter franchise to shut down fan websites. One case centered around the right of children to read the Harry Potter books; the other, their right to write about them. Can these two rights be so easily separated in an era of read-write culture? Will the general public preserve and expand its right to participate or will corporate restrictions on intellectual property use gradually erode away the concept of free expression?

### 7 *Renegotiating relations between producers and consumers*

So far, the recording industry has responded to the emergence of peer-to-peer technologies through legal action and name-calling rather than developing new business plans or reconceiving consumer relations. In the games industry, on the other hand, the major successes have come within franchises that have courted feedback from consumers during the product development process, endorsed grassroots appropriation of their content and technology and that have showcased the best user-generated content. Game companies have seen the value of constructing, rather than shutting down, fan communities around their products and building long-term relationships with their consumers. Which model will prevail?



### *8 Remapping globalization*

Much academic writing on globalization has centered on the flow of western media products into global markets, falling back on old models of cultural imperialism. Yet globalization also involves the flow of goods, workers, money and media content from east to west. The Mario Brothers are recognized by more American kids than Mickey Mouse – even if many of them don't yet realize that Nintendo is a Japanese-based game company. As they grow older, they certainly recognize Asian origins as a marker of cultural distinction. Much as teens in the developing world use American popular culture to express generational differences, western youth is asserting its identity through its consumption of Japanese anime and manga, Bollywood films and bhangra and Hong Kong action movies. A new pop cosmopolitanism is being promoted by corporate interests both in Asia and in the West, but it is also being promoted by grassroots interests, including both fan and immigrant communities, who are asserting greater control over the flow of media content across national borders. What will be the long-term economic and cultural impact of these trends?

### *9 Re-engaging citizens*

Asian American activists use the web to quickly launch a nationwide protest against Abercrombie & Fitch when it releases a line of T-shirts featuring exaggerated Asian stereotypes (for example, 'Two Wongs Make a White'). Hoping to increase its visibility in American culture, APA First Weekend has created a massive mailing list designed to buoy opening grosses for films with Asian or Asian American content. Adbusters produces mock commercials that use Madison Avenue conventions to challenge consumerism and corporate greed. Conservative talk show hosts direct their ire against The Dixie Chicks after one of the performers made negative comments about George W. Bush, resulting in a dramatic decline in their revenues and then a rebound as buying a Dixie Chicks album became a litmus test for antiwar sentiment. Media celebrities, such as World Wrestling Federation superstar Jesse Ventura or action hero Arnold Schwarzenegger, are emerging as important political figures. In such an environment, it is no surprise that activism draws models from fan culture or that popular culture becomes the venue through which key social and political issues get debated. What models of democracy will take roots in a culture where the lines between consumption and citizenship are blurring?

Media and cultural scholars have important contributions to make in each of these spaces. There is an enormous demand right now for public intellectuals who can help the public, policy makers and industry alike understand the stakes in these power struggles. In order to play that role, we will need visibility to address large and diverse publics, credibility to get

our ideas heard in the corridors of power, accessibility to ensure that our perspectives are clearly understood and widely embraced and pragmatism to develop solutions that acknowledge the legitimate interest of all stakeholders. To play that role, we need to shed some of our own intellectual and ideological blinders, to avoid kneejerk or monolithic formulations and to imagine new possible relations with corporate and governmental interests. This route may not lead to radical transformations of the economic and political system, as Miller correctly notes, but we may score some important local and tactical victories in the struggle for political freedom and cultural diversity.

In many parts of the world, cultural scholars have engaged in active intervention in the public debates shaping cultural policy, often working closely with governmental bodies to pursue their interests even where they did not fully agree with the other participants or totally endorse the outcomes achieved. They did so because they knew it was more important to try to influence policy than to remain ideologically or intellectually pure. Hartley notes that we have historically been more comfortable collaborating with state institutions than private corporations. But, in an era of privatization, cultural policy is increasingly being set not by governmental bodies, but by media companies; we lose the ability to have any real influence over the directions that our culture takes if we do not find ways to engage in active dialogue with media industries.

This is why discussions of creative industries need to take center stage as cultural studies enters the 21st century. We need to go into such collaborations and dialogues with our eyes wide open and, to do so, we need more nuanced models of the economic contexts within which culture gets produced and circulated.

## Notes

- 1 I am framing this discussion narrowly to describe trends and debates within American popular culture. Many of these same issues are emerging elsewhere around the world, but they are playing out differently in different national contexts. The ideas contained here will be developed more fully, albeit for a popular readership, in my forthcoming book *The Empowered Consumer: How Convergence Is Changing Our Relations to Media* (working title). These ideas have taken shape through my column in *Technology Review*, which can be found online at: (<http://www.technologyreview.com>).
- 2 See Levy (1997). For a fuller discussion of Levy's notion of collective intelligence, see Jenkins (2002).

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