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Amanda Marcus

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Effect of Convergence Culture on Spectatorship

Amanda Marcus

ABSTRACT

Media convergence has changed how we receive and process information. No longer are we passive spectators, but we are part of the media we consume. Because of the explosion of technology since the turn of the century and a new definition of spectatorship, producers of media can no longer control how their messages are received; they have to engage their audience and listen to feedback in order to remain functioning. Fellow peers serve as informants or as a new source of media. This also affects our individual identities, which shapes our cultural identity. Social media enables us to present ourselves however we want to be perceived, although the irony is that the wide variety of options can become limiting when we have control over them. This paper also addresses the question of what are the consequences for those whom media convergence makes powerless? For cultures that don't have the opportunity to make their voice heard, we are given opportunity to seek out the information ourselves--going through layers of media which convergence has trained us for. In analyzing the data, we see how media convergence allows us be part of the exciting changes that convergence enables us to bring about individual and cultural change.

Keywords: media, convergence, media culture, media consumption

Media convergence has altered the way our culture receives information. What convergence ultimately represents is "a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (Jenkins 2006: 3). Today we are asked to be more than "passive media spectators" (Jenkins 2006: 3), and to be more involved with the media we consume. In this way, convergence is changing how we consume media. Beyond this, it is "reshaping American popular culture" (Jenkins 2006: 12) in a way that changes how we construct meaning, how we interact with media, and how we identify ourselves. Despite these vast shifts in our culture, however, convergence can never abolish what we consider to be "traditional spectatorship" because how we consume media is a choice. We have the power to be involved with media and to shape our cultural landscape; but we can also choose to be "passive spectators" rather than active participants. The primary problem for convergence in the future relates to this very principle. Media convergence is supposed to enable "every brand [to get] sold" and "every important story [to get] told" (Jenkins 2006: 3). However, despite the growth of technology there are still many voices being shut out. Most of us have the power to choose how we want to use media to our advantage--to change our society for the better or worse. My question is, what are the consequences for those whom media convergence makes powerless?

The concept of media convergence has come about to describe the way in which old media is being incorporated into new media. There are two primary sources of its proliferation: technological development and new definitions of spectatorship. The first simply relates to the explosion of technology since the turn of the century. Today we have numerous devices that enable us to receive media: cellphones, I-pods, I-pads, laptop computers, and so on. This has created multiple avenues for media producers to reach us as well as for us to pick and choose what sources we pay attention to most. This concept refers to selective perception; we are allowed "to follow any number of possible paths to locate and retrieve information according to [our] interests and inclinations at the moment" (Nag 2011: 2).

The idea of "spectatorship" emerged in the 1970s as "a central problem for film studies and was predominantly theorized within a general framework of semiotics" (Hughes 2011: 299). Spectatorship was analyzed from the perspective of how a text (such as a film) positioned the viewer. In these early studies of more traditional modes of

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spectatorship, it was concluded that "film positioned and fixed the subjectivity of its spectators," through its use of codes, representation, and narrative (Hughes 2011: 300). Since then, new theories of how spectators draw meaning from a text have sprung forth. One that is particularly significant is Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model which argues that "meaning [is] not contained within a message but [is] determined in relation to larger linguistic and cultural parameters" (Hughes 2011: 301). He believes meaning is constructed by individuals who receive messages and decode them according to their own conceptual maps. This enables the "birth of the reader" through the "death of the author" (Barthes 1967: 148); meaning that producers of media can no longer control how their messages are received. This has created a need for new communication through media where "power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (Jenkins 2006: 2). The end result is "unpredictable" because it now requires media producers to engage us and listen to our feedback in a cyclic pattern in order to remain functioning.

This is the primary way in which convergence is changing our cultural landscape: by giving consumers more power and thus creating a more "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2006: 3). Edward Said once said that, "The hold these instruments have on the mind is increased by the institutions built around them," meaning that institutions are what shape our conceptual maps. However, what we are seeing today is that institutions depend on the consumers to shape how they then present themselves through media. "The people who decide media content are products of the society, and the necessity to turn a profit requires that the media be in touch with the society's values or lose audience" (Nag 2011: 11). Industries are losing touch with their consumers as individuals use media themselves to infiltrate popular culture. An example of this is the rise of an online website that analyzed Hollywood from a grassroots perspective. The website, "Ain't It Cool News," spread like wildfire among the public. The site "relied on. . . individuals sending. . . information related to the industry," thus, "the success of AICN was based on access to information obtained through anonymous sources" (Owczarski 2012: 4). This demonstrates the power of convergence with respect to "collective intelligence," a way in which "consumption has become a collective process" (Jenkins 2006: 4) where our fellow peers serve as informants or as a new source of media.

Another cultural consequence for convergence is that it affects our individual identities, which shapes our cultural identity. The dynamics of relationships are changing: we add "friends" on Facebook whom we've never met before, we "Skype" people rather than meet up and talk face-to-face, or we find spouses on dating sites like "Match.com." Social media enables us to present ourselves however we want to be perceived: by changing our profile picture, posting certain statuses, or tagging ourselves at specific locations. And furthermore, gaming and virtual realities enable us to be completely different people should we want: we can "overcome the limitation of our own bodies (Grau 2000: 4). All of these things are changing what we value in our lives. As we continue to gain control over our exposure with media, we receive "comfort" because we choose things that "reinforce [our] existing social values" (Nag 2011: 11). The irony is that the wide variety of options can become limiting when we have control over them. This relates not only to the American culture, but to others as well. In China, where Facebook has been prohibited, it has been shown that both producers and consumers who use it are experiencing a "potential blurring of cultural values introduced by social media and new technology" (Lo and Waters 2012: 99). The "Chinese values of harmony, collectivism, and temporal orientation" (Lo and Water 2012: 100) are being challenged as businesses are using social media to reach out to consumers. Worldwide, the usage of social media is shifting our cultural practices through shifting our spectatorship.

Although convergence has had this huge impact on our culture, one cannot say that "traditional spectatorship" has been abolished. "Old" media still exists. In fact, it is an essential part of the definition of convergence itself. Despite that "its content may shift. . . its audience may change. . . and its social statues may rise or fall. . . once a medium establishes itself as satisfying some core human demand, it continues to function within the larger system of communication options" (Jenkins 2006: 14). Ultimately, when we as spectators are given a choice about the media we consume, we can choose to simply sit and watch. "Going deep has to remain an option--something readers choose to do" (Jenkins 2006: 134). Some consumers may not want to "move through the film frame by frame on [their] DVD player" to get the full effect of a film; and the key aspect of convergence is our choice not to do so (Jenkins 2006: 101). If "printed words did not kill spoken words," "cinema did not kill theater," and "television did not kill radio," then new media and cultural convergence will not kill more traditional modes of spectatorship (Jenkins 2011: 14).

How we choose media can open up new possibilities, however, that haven't been fully explored. In our culture, we view convergence as something that enables "every story to get old." However, there is a "digital divide" that is creating a "participation gap" (Jenkins 2006: 23) that silences the voices of many--preventing their stories from getting told. At the beginning of what many viewed as a digital revolution, "optimistic projections emerged about the potential of these new technologies and global networks to create economic opportunity in developing countries. . . give voice and power to the poor, make their governments more responsive and transparent and make the world's best knowledge on any subject available anytime. . .to those who needed it to improve their lives" (Nag 2011: 6). Essentially, developments in technology and the power of convergence can be used as a tool--a way to be active participants in creating change not only for our own cultures, but for others as well. Unfortunately many underdeveloped societies are left out of the wealth of information that we experience in daily lives due to lack of technology and lack of education on its use. It is my belief that we must make a concerted effort to change this. We do have the power to make change and can do so with more than "a mousy little click" that makes us "feel good. . . we could play a role in global politics" (Sreberny 2004: 179). For cultures that don't have the opportunity to make their voice heard, we are given opportunity to seek out the information ourselves--going through layers of media which convergence has trained us for. So in a global culture where "not all participants are created equal" (Jenkins 2006: 3), we must make an effort to be more than passive spectators. While our spectatorship has changed, our options remain open to sometimes sit and watch. Yet, at other times we can branch out and be part of the exciting changes that convergence enables us to bring about.

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