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# “We are Going Live in 3, 2, 1...”: Examining Liveness Amidst Streaming Technology

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# “We are Going Live in 3, 2, 1...”

## Examining Liveness Amidst Streaming Technology

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NETFLIX

xfinity

YouTube Red

BROADWAY HD

National Theatre Live

amazon prime video

hulu

The Metropolitan Opera

sling TELEVISION

CBS ALL ACCESS

HBO NOW

### Introduction

The products of the theatre, film, and television industries are becoming increasingly homogenized. The characteristics that once defined and separated each of them are now being adopted by one another in order to survive in an increasingly competitive market, or are eliminated altogether in the case of “liveness,” as streaming technologies begin to grow in popularity. This fact represents the public’s divergence from the idea of traditional “liveness” and a movement towards a form that is a personalized viewing experience and is widely accessible anywhere at any time. The experience was a key defining element of both film and theatre, and to eliminate liveness for economic advantage will be the vehicle for permanent homogenization. Because of this, it is necessary to redefine and differentiate between liveness and simulated liveness in order to preserve the individuality of the mediums.

### Roots in Performance

Each of mediums of theater, film, and television have implemented their own sense of the “live audience experience,” and initially established themselves as distinct forms separate from one another.

- **Theatre** is a relationship between reality and the imaginary. This relationship takes place in a given space and is dependent upon geographic proximity to that space. Because the performance is staged live with real, human performers, each repeated production is never identical to another.
- **Film’s** inception offered the first diversion from the idea of the traditional liveness of the theatre in that it provided a medium that could transcend time and space while still bringing an audience together in a given space. As film had the ability to be copied en masse, the performance now had the ability to be distributed globally, thereby transcending geographic restrictions and reaching a broader audience base.
- **Television** individualized itself from the previous two mediums in that its content was most often released in serialized episodes that debuted periodically one at a time. Of the three, television was the most accessible, as it could be viewed from the comfort of one’s own home, bringing the performance to the spectator directly.

### The Four Forms of Liveness

Streaming’s accessibility and rapid rate of growth threatens to unify the once varied mediums of theatre, film, and television into one homogenized mass media wherein liveness, once the sole distinguishing factor between them, is experienced in but a single way. There exists a need, therefore, to diversify the meaning of “liveness” within a contemporary context. By defining liveness, future content will be made with the audience experience in mind and serve to preserve the integrity of the three mediums as they once existed. If we are to distinguish between the mediums within the growing streaming culture, we need to further define the different ways in which an audience experiences liveness, understanding that each variation serves a purpose. It is important to note that with increased medium homogenization, it is possible for a performance to inhabit numerous/all of these categories of “liveness,” yet each category is able exist independently of one other.

#### Pure Liveness

- The relationship between a live performer and a live spectator sharing a common space
- A human connection is present between two individuals coexisting within the same room, where the attention of the spectator is fully upon those who have the stage.
- Any defined delineation of a performance space serves as the home of the performer, and the focus of the spectator.
- Pure liveness exists regardless of mediatized enhancements, such as microphones, speakers, or video projection.

#### Broadcasted Liveness

- Occurs when a live event is recorded via camera and exhibited through mediatization
- This form most often accompanies television programming, but can also include live broadcasts distributed digitally, via DVD, or shown in movie theaters.
- Emphasizes that the events a spectator is watching occurring either elsewhere in the present moment, or was completely unscripted and recorded in its entirety at a different time.
- Includes news broadcasts, recorded press conferences, interviews, talk shows, stand-up comedy shows, or reality competitions.

#### Developments and Distinctiveness

As the mediums grew to prominence, each adopted characteristics of the other in order to compete for spectatorship and establish their place within modern culture. Despite the homogeny that occurred at this basic level, each medium’s individual conveyance of “liveness” has always remained intrinsically different to its respective audience base.

- Theatre began to adopt filmic characteristics of incorporating jumps in time, place and action.
- Early film utilized Vaudeville houses to exhibit their films and featured Vaudeville performances.
- Television drew inspiration more from theatre than to film, as in its early days throughout the 1930s and 1940s, television was devoted to the transmission of live events rather than the reproduction of events.

#### Communal Liveness

- The sense of liveness felt solely among the spectators
- Most commonly experienced in the house-seating of an audience, particularly in a movie theatre. Communal liveness is defined by the relationship that grows from all spectators sharing the same focal point, yet simultaneously communication with one another through common responses to what they are experiencing.
- Though no direct communication may exist between individual spectators, the act of sharing the same space and reacting to the same content, be it live or mediatized, creates a unique sense of community.

#### Digitized Liveness

- The most modern form, as it is completely reliant on technology, communication, and social media
- Digitized liveness is felt when a spectator uses social media to connect with other viewers of any form of entertainment.
- Through using a hashtag, participating in a live trivia competition, voting in online polls, blogging, reviewing, commenting, or sharing content, digitized liveness is a point of connection in an otherwise isolated, individualized viewing experience.

- Modern television, however, has grown increasingly cinematic, defined by its complex story structures, varied and copious amount of diverse characters, interconnected plotlines, level of emotional engagement, and overarching aesthetic choices.
- With rapidly decreasing ticket sales, movie theater chains have had to adopt the comforts of home to create an experience an audience would want to seek out. This includes Cinemark’s steady conversion of their traditional auditorium seating to reclining, luxury sofas, AMC’s Dine-in theatres, and AMC’s proposed (but ultimately struck down) idea for “texting allowed” theater screenings.
- Theatre performances have become mediatized, adopting video screens and projections into their productions.

### Streaming: All in One, and Accessibility for All

The rapid global embracing of streaming services across all three mediums has served to streamline all medium individuality into a single means of limited liveness, and spells out the final step in homogenization between the once extremely distinct entertainment forms.

Netflix has been in existence for over twenty years now as a DVD distributor, but its streaming service just half that time, operational since 2007 and with 104 million paid subscribers as of October 2017. Its widespread popularity has been the model for success for other streaming services such as Hulu, Amazon, HBO Go, Xfinity Go, and the like. Theatre perhaps the medium whose liveness is the most severely impacted by this new means of distributing entertainment. Contemporary production companies such as BroadwayHD, National Theatre Live, Met Opera HD, and Shakespeare’s Globe series broadcast their productions into movie theatres and release them on DVD for home viewership. These contemporary broadcasts force the viewer into a position of passivity, the camera, “disturbing the interaction between performer and spectator” through its “selecting angles, zooms, and showing one thing and not another” (Schulze 315, 318).

Despite this homogenization beneath the “streaming umbrella,” the idea of liveness persists throughout all three mediums in the form of live audience interactions via social media: tweets, blogs, comments, and post-performance articles.

### Conclusion

The retention of individuality between the theatre, film, and television mediums is essential to preserving the history and integrity of each form. The three mediums are not only mass forms of entertainment; they are cultural products that each have made a significant impact on global society. If individuality is lost, so then is an element of our culture.

Therefore, for any of the forms to be successfully independent of the other, there exists a need to redefine liveness in order to recognize when the audience experience faces extinction. This can be accomplished by implementing what I have defined as being the “Four Forms of Liveness.” By defining and implementing the forms, creators of entertainment across the three mediums will now have a more intentional focus on the audience experience as it applies to the content they are producing and how it is being distributed.