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

Jessica Jeanne Johnson
Chapman University, johns284@mail.chapman.edu

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

Jessica Johnson  
Advisor: Dr. Jocelyn Buckner  
Chapman University, Orange, CA  

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 theatre, 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.

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 mediated enhancements, such as microphones, speakers, or video projection.

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 communicating 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 mediated, creates a unique sense of community.

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 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.

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.

Developed Liveness  
The most advanced form of liveness, as is it 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.

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.