

**Post-television Audiences on YouTube - Production and Consumption in the Digital Public
Sphere**

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Abstract

Over the last decade, television has repetitively failed to attract a bigger audience or create a participatory form of media consumption, owing to its technological restrictions and a failure to keep up with the changing needs of its consumers. Meanwhile, global platforms like YouTube are gaining up to half a billion users per year, and creators/social media influencers are gaining diverse audiences of hundreds of millions, owing to the platform's interactive nature (Boulianne, 2015). The changes in the parameters of this post-television audience participation and consumption are widespread and have led to cohorts of people refusing to take part in the traditional media institutions, which fail to follow the fast-changing trends and interests. They are disidentifying with this media and instead, moving to the digital public sphere and identifying with works of artists, creators and social influencers with similar ideologies, who have managed to gather increasingly diverse as well as niche audiences with new forms of art like personal vlogs and short-form videos (Burgess and Green, 2018). These changes altogether transformed the private video experience from the living room into one taking place in the digital public sphere where the individual is both the consumer and the producer of texts.

The first part of the paper looks at the audiences of these cultural institutions as well as the shortcomings of traditional media. It also examines in-depth, the popular social media platforms that allow increased opportunities for social curation, participation, and a more democratic interaction with art (Hall and Zarro, 2012). The changes in the models of participation and audience autonomy that have been followed by cultural institutions and now corporate media entities are highlighted as well. The next part will discuss these changes in the audience and the communicative space of YouTube in the context of the three dimensions of the

digital public sphere introduced by Dahlgren (1995), as well as the massification of post-television audiences. The conclusion will place these changes in the context of changing popular art forms and their audiences in the digital public sphere, and the democratisation of the creative process through which this art is made. In this process, this paper will also explore the ideas of interaction and representation in the cultural digital commons for an individual for their various artistic interests.

Keywords: Digital Public Sphere, Television, YouTube, Participation, Audience

INTRODUCTION

To define the nature of terms like ‘television public’, ‘YouTube public’, or the ‘digital public sphere’, Jürgen Habermas’ ‘The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere ’ (1989) is an essential first focal point. He defines the public sphere as a space for debate, discussion and discourse for a collection of individuals and expands upon the political and social aspects of the public sphere. While the text has received criticism for its historical inaccuracies from a feminist perspective (Fraser, 1990), some of the more practical concepts introduced by Habermas prove to be extremely important in understanding the interactions between people and institutions. They are better understood through the lens of James Van Horn Melton, through the introduction of his book ‘The Rise of Public Enlightenment in Europe’ (2001) titled ‘What is the public sphere?’. In this text, he explains in depth the concepts of the public sphere(s) and public(s) understood from the perspective of varying interests. These different publics (e.g. The Theatre Public, The Cinema Public) consist of individuals having their own private experiences, observations and discussions about the different forms of texts they consume. He also comments on the restructuring of the capitalist systems to better accommodate the ‘expanding arenas of sociability ’ and the ‘expanding cultures of consumption ’, relating it to the commodification of literature and the increase of corporate influence in new media.

Many other theorists have joined in on the inquiry of the various aspects of these public spheres and the infinitely possible interactions within them. The combination of public spheres with a digital realm only widened the scope of this inquiry. The ‘digital

public sphere' (Dahlgren, 1995, 2005) was the product of technology's rising interactions with democratic communication spaces and defined the reconfiguration of these communication spaces in the digital realm. The concepts of 'affective communication' and the cultural public sphere (McGuigan, 2005) are crucial in understanding the nuances within the interaction of cultural institutions and the public sphere. The interactions of television/media with the public sphere and its democratic aspects are elaborated upon by Peter Dahlgren in his book 'Television and the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Democracy and the Media' (1995). He writes about the many relevant concerns in this sphere that come up with the rise in consumption of media through the modes of television and the internet and presents the structural, representational, and interactive dimensions to understand these cultural institutions.

Sitting close to the end of 2022, it is difficult to imagine a time without the Internet and the technologies that the internet is tied to. The global impact of these technologies on cultural and democratic institutions has been significant, the scale of which would've been unpredictable for theorists just a few decades ago. Over the last decade, there has been a repetitive failure by television to attract a bigger audience or create a participatory form of media consumption, owing to its technological restrictions and a failure to keep up with the changing needs of its consumers. Television remains an institution of private reception, with negligible audience interventions. Meanwhile, global platforms like YouTube are gaining up to half a billion users per year, and creators/social media influencers are gaining diverse audiences of hundreds of millions, owing to the platform's interactive nature (Boulianne, 2015).

The changes in the parameters of audience participation and consumption are widespread and have led to cohorts of people refusing to take part in the traditional television institution, which fails to follow the fast-changing trends and interests. They are disidentifying with this form of media and instead, moving to the digital public sphere where they are identifying with artists, creators and social influencers with similar ideologies. These creators have managed to gather increasingly diverse as well as niche audiences with new forms of art like personal vlogs and short-form videos (Burgess and Green, 2018). These changes altogether transformed the private video experience from the living room into one taking place in the digital public sphere. The lines between the consumer and the producer of these texts are getting blurred as hundreds of millions of daily users get involved in active commentary and the production of new media and meanings. (Strangelove, 2020).

The first part of the paper looks at the audiences of these cultural institutions as well as the shortcomings of traditional media. It also examines in-depth, the popular social media platforms that allow increased opportunities for social curation, participation, and a more democratic interaction with art (Hall and Zarro, 2012). The changes in the models of participation and audience autonomy that have been followed by cultural institutions and now corporate media entities are highlighted as well. The next part will discuss these changes in the audience and the communicative space of YouTube in the context of the three dimensions of the digital public sphere introduced by Dahlgren (1995), as well as the massification of post-television audiences. The conclusion will

place these changes in the context of changing popular art forms and their audiences in the digital public sphere, and the democratisation of the creative process through which this art is made. In this process, this paper will explore the ideas of interaction and representation in the cultural digital commons for an individual and their various artistic interests.

Television and Post-Television Audiences

Compared to other cultural institutions like Museums or the Theatre, Television is an institution with its own peculiar political and theoretical characteristics. The technology allows the texts produced in a centralised manner to be broadcasted over long distances and received privately by individuals in the comfort of their own homes. There is minimal effort by the audience in the reception of the content, and consumption is the only goal. This ‘centralised transmission and private reception’ (Williams 1974:30) is what makes it a valuable tool for corporate and state propaganda through advertisements, programming and censorship of ideas that go against the values of the state or the corporate structure. Making sense of the quickly evolving state of television proves to have its procedural challenges (Burgess and Green, 2018). The dynamic interactions between the television and the public sphere tested the boundaries of society in a wholly modern way for its time. What is important to note here is the clear separation of the audience and the producer of the media. The audience is reduced to a viewer, a mere consumer of video with no say in their production. They are ‘active meaning producers’

in a space of ‘cultural struggle’(Ang, 1996:17) since for these appropriations they are dependent on and somewhat restricted to the representations in the video.

In this representational aspect, Television falls short. The texts produced for television, from soap operas and weekly sitcoms to the daily news, are always conceived concerning the dominant ideologies. These works represent the creative vision of an individual or a small group of people with obvious corporate and capital interests. From its inception, television has held various functions in the public sphere and the wider society as well. It is a mode of consumption of various media and at the same time a very important instrument for dominant ideologies. In the larger narratives related to television, minorities and niche interests get sidelined, and the ‘illusion of choice’ presented to an individual consuming television only deepens. The writing rooms of these media organisations aren’t free from the dominant ideologies and hierarchies of society like capitalism and patriarchy and these perspectives are sooner or later regurgitated on screen. Ideologies and political messages are distributed to a large number of people without much room for debate or discussion. The media industry has a lot of influence over the topics and formats of discussions in the public sphere. These issues behind the production of television are significant, requiring discussions from a cultural as well as a feminist point of view, especially in the wake of the recent increase in media involvement in politics throughout the world, and terms like ‘fake news ’ taking over our daily vocabularies.

In the 21st century, no other cultural institutions take up as much of an individual’s time as social media. In the digital public sphere, the culture of consumption

of media has evolved to an exponential level, and so have the levels of production of content, compared to just a decade ago. The distribution systems of the internet have only helped increase this 'prosumer' behaviour on a global level. (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010)

In the process, it has created a new post-television audience, with its unique activities, needs and interests. Amateur creators are now reaching levels of popularity never seen before. This has been possible through the corporate recognition of the individual's needs of an interactive platform where it would be possible to represent and create communities for minorities and niche interests as well, creating a somewhat international culture. An individual far from their homeland would be able to watch regional content in their language, and conversely, someone sitting in the remote corners of the world would feel included in global discussions. Social media has made it possible for people from all over the world to connect and share cultures. For example, someone from India can watch a video made by someone from Japan, and someone from the United States can comment on it. Of course, all these processes would require education about and access to technology, as well as a functioning internet connection. Assuming they did, they would have free access to platforms like YouTube with opportunities to express themselves by creating content or engaging with other people's content, although from an amateur understanding. Television was deprived of this form of engagement since people could only privately interact with the texts they consumed. This level of interaction was not possible with the technology, which was limited to one-way communication.

The economic success of these platforms is dependent on audience participation and fostering prosumer behaviour. This leads to an important question regarding the

relationship between the corporate dependence on ‘massified behaviour’ for economical benefits, and the need to promote individual innovation and creativity for cultural gains. (Strangelove, 2020:160) On the platform, viewers are constantly encouraged to interact with the content in many ways. They can ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ the video, comment on it publicly, share the video in real-time with their peers, and show support for the creator by ‘subscribing’ to their channel. The creator side of this platform is free to access and tools are provided for anyone to publicly share content that they want to. The expressive and appropriative freedoms enjoyed by the active audiences and the ownership of these texts on these platforms are very much under corporate control. This manifests in various ways, from acting on copywriting infractions to, in more extreme cases, controlling participation through banning or de-platforming individuals who create misinformation or spread hate.

With all these corporate restrictions in place, YouTube is still the more favourable option for content consumption for many, largely due to the widespread creator base that makes content for every niche interest possible. Even within YouTube, there has been a formation of separate audiences, who all use the platform to follow different interests. As a viewer, the number of options available for content consumption is innumerable and is restricted to only the interests of the viewer. In the same space, we can see content made by corporations, local businesses, families, individuals and amateur creators who are professionals in other fields. There are various forms of art, music, literature, dance forms and different forms of creative endeavours being showcased. Even the process behind the conception of these projects becomes an idea to share through the platform. This has

expanded the idea of representation for individuals in a huge way. The discussion space for any individual interest is not gatekept, making it easier for people to find new representations as well as have multiple representations for their different interests. They can watch a different creator to laugh, a different one to learn about filmmaking, for example, and a different creator who gives their daily or weekly take on political matters. The audience can interact and navigate through this space with ‘relative autonomy’ (Strangelove, 2020)

Youtube as a Communicative Space - A dimensional analysis

Peter Dahlgren thoroughly describes the frameworks of analysis of communication spaces in democracy in his text “The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation” from 2005. In it, he clearly defines three dimensions from which these communication spaces can be understood. These are the structural, representational and interactive dimensions. As the name suggests, the structural dimension relates to the structural aspects of these spaces i.e. the formal institutional features of the space, like issues of ownership, control, regulation and financing, and the influence of these structural features on the state of communication. The representational aspect has to do with the media and its increased massification, and everything from political and ideological communication to the ideas of equality and fairness in communication. The interactional aspect sees how people can interact and participate in these communication spaces in two different forms, the interaction is

between an individual and content, and the other is between an individual and other individuals or a larger group in the digital public sphere(Dahlgren, 2005:149)

In the structural aspect, YouTube presents itself as a constellation of communicative spaces, similar to the optimistic ideas of Habermas in his text related to the circulation of information in the public sphere. Though the technology adds an extra layer of disconnect from human interaction, the communicative links formed through this media span over the globe. For some context, the company was founded by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim in 2005. They aimed to ‘remove the technical barriers faced by non-expert users who wanted to share video on the web’, while the corporation’s goal was ‘to become the primary outlet of user-generated content on the Internet and to allow anyone to upload, share, and browse this content ’ (Burgess and Green, 2018). Even though the scale of this idea did not realise for quite some time, the intent behind the idea of this platform was relevant for the time. And while Habermas would indeed not have been their inspiration behind the creation of the platform, equal participation in the communicative space and ‘removing barriers’ resonates with his idea of the public sphere. This is still only one side of the story though. YouTube is still a capitalist organisation with the main goal of profit, and that has extensive effects on the structuring of the communication space. Their economic model is based on showing advertisements to content consumers, and in that sense, the boundaries of the interactions and representations on the platform are mostly set with corporate goals in mind. An example of this control is the Terms of Services (ToS) of the platform, which every user is required to agree with before they can engage with the site. This TOS does not become a

barrier in participation until more extreme cases, in its attempt to moderate the discussions on the platform.

From an interactive perspective, the platform is built for a post-television audience. The availability of content anywhere, anytime, has allowed users to have personalised interactions with content. They are no longer restricted to their living rooms for consumption. They can do it on the go, in any location they get access to the internet, though most people choose to do it laying down in their beds. The platform gives the users opportunities for social curation of the content that is promoted. As mentioned before, the mechanisms of liking and disliking a video makes up for a democratic display of public sentiment. Likes supporting a video and dislike suppressing them. The consumer is also able to share these videos, further increasing the reach of the content and creating links between people and media, and people and other people. As this happens more and more, the audience becomes an active part of the process of creating content. This is where the interactive and the representational aspect blur into each other. The consumer of the texts is also a producer.

This prosumer phenomenon creates space for contradictions in this communication space. As discussed before, the platform is dependent on ‘massified behaviour’ and ‘individual creativity’ at the same time. A quick look at the top ten channels of YouTube helps us understand this issue a bit more. At the time of writing, the top ten YouTube channels are T-Series, YouTube Movies, Cocomelon - Nursery Rhymes, SET India, Music, PewDiePie, MrBeast, LikeNastya, Kids Diana Show and Gaming, in

that order. All of these channels have a following of more than a hundred million people, with T-Series sitting at the top with around 228 million subscribers. The top 5 are corporate-owned content distribution channels, and only two are individual content creators, namely PewDiePie and MrBeast. These corporate channels depend on massified behaviour for their revenue. T-Series is the biggest music distributor for Bollywood music, and Youtube Movies is the channel distributing all content film-related, including movies as well. With over 158 million subscribers, it promotes itself as a decent alternative to the cinema. SET India provides its users with daily soap operas, something that was previously restricted to Television. The fact becomes obvious here that while small creators are a big part of the platform, it is mostly used as an alternative to traditional means of consumption of traditional forms of media like cinema, music or television. The corporate use of the platforms becomes successful here because of the interactive nature, allowing bigger production studios and entertainment corporations to have their sizable followings. In a communicative space where everyone is represented, corporate cultural products and representations still take the lead.

Conclusion

Art has been subjected to discussion and interaction for millennia. It is a defining characteristic of humans to create, and for other humans to interact with those creations. Cultural institutions have had a major impact on how art can be more widely received

and interacted with. This has been a matter of philosophical explorations throughout time. With the advent of technology, the ways of creating art and the possibilities of interacting with it have only risen, and cultural institutions have evolved. Television represents a new era, for its time of course, for cultural institutions. The television audience was privy to a brand-new form of social and political communication and new ways of artistic engagement as well. With more advances in technology and changing art forms, the needs of the audience have also changed. The digital public sphere has given way to this wave of changing audiences and their interests. The new modes of distribution of texts and public opinion brought about by YouTube are very much aligned with the needs of the post-television audience to interact with the materials they consumed and identified with.

With the introduction to the digital public sphere, the structural forms of communicative spaces have changed to global ones, although still affected by corporate interests. This is in contrast to the centralised transmission and private reception of the technologies of Television. Now the texts broadcasted over the internet can be publicly discussed on social media platforms, giving audiences new ways to interact with the content they consume. These platforms also allow individuals to upload personalised content and provide representation for new ideas, blurring the lines between the producer and consumer of the material. In this aspect, the audience gains a considerable amount of appropriative power to create meanings of their own in the communication spaces of the digital public sphere. Again, in contrast, Television had a strict separation of the viewer and producer of texts in one-way communication. Private consumption and discussion of

media restricted the interactive processes for the audience. Television as a mode of communication of cultural goods is still very much relevant though. While a geographically restricted transmission of a television channel may not have as widespread of an impact on global cultural or political discourses as social media platforms like YouTube or Twitter have, it remains an important point of theoretical inquiry from political as well as cultural perspectives.

YouTube is not the only alternative for all the content consumers out there, obviously. There are many other communicative spaces formed in digital and non-digital public spheres which allow for public discourse and expression of art. The platform becomes a point of scrutiny in this presentation because of the sheer size of its audience. With those great numbers comes great responsibility to maintain and organise the space. Especially as a corporation economically dependent on participation, they have to be careful about the configurations of these spaces for a democratic interaction with content.

Reflections on Methodologies and Future Research

The empirical methodology was used to carry out this qualitative research. As a source of information, peer-reviewed texts by various theorists relating to the subject were studied, analysed and expanded upon. Some of the content on the platform itself proved useful in understanding how to start defining the audiences on YouTube. From a personal point of view, YouTube has been a source of fascination and inspiration for

years. It has been incredibly useful in obtaining new skills and developing pre-existing ones, being a source of discovery for new forms of education and entertainment. This research paper only looks at one specific audience's interactions with one specific platform in the digital public sphere. While it is an important focus of study, it is still only a single manifestation of the interactions within the (digital) public sphere, all of which deserve attention in their own right. The political interactions that happen in these spaces and the wider political effects of digital communication spaces are included in the scope of further research. To better understand audience interactions in virtual space, and the economical aspects of it, the economic incentives for the creators and exploitation in these spaces must be questioned. The changing art forms followed by these audiences are noteworthy from a research perspective as well, from cinema to television to long and short-form video over the internet, each has its own artistic, political and economic influence and impact.

Safe to say, the sprawling digital public sphere allows for new forms of creation, and gaining an understanding of the processes behind these new forms of expression will be extremely important to understand the evolving nature of art and society.

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