**Video Script**

**Lecture 36 – Convergence & Participatory Culture**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

We’ve done it, folks! We’ve finally reached…the *internet*.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for this lecture. Overall, RTF 308 begins with the cultural conditions that set the stage for film in the 1890s (remember: photography, spectacle, realism, all that stuff). And it ends with the cultural conditions that set the stage for our current media environment in the 21st century. And rather than exploring how we got here through the history of a medium like vlogs, or a company like Google, I want to do that by looking at a *process*—something that your reading for this lecture calls *convergence*.

**Legacy Industries**

We’ve been talking all semester about a few specific industries in the United States: namely film, radio and television. And if I had to identify a couple of fundamental issues these industries were forced to reckon with up through about the 1980s or 1990s, it would be these…

**Problem 1**

First, there are top-down industry dynamics. By this, I mean that power to create and distribute media is mostly centralized in the hands of a few: a few studios, a few radio networks, a few sponsors, a few television networks, a few cable providers, and so on. The little guy—you or me—didn’t have a ton of power to create media and have it seen widely for most of media history.

**Problem 2**

Second, for most of their history, these industries were concerned with appealing to the biggest number of people possible. This is where that issue of lowest common denominator programming comes in, if we’re thinking about television. In order to create a huge audience, and therefore maximize your profits from commercial sponsorships, you needed to create programs that wouldn’t turn anyone off. The result was sometimes—though not always!—shows that were blandly entertaining, at best. This also applies, if we’re thinking about film, to “blockbuster syndrome.”

**Problem 3**

Third, these industries have had to contend with issues of limited bandwidth or scarcity. If we think back to early moviemakers, the cost of film was prohibitive, and also, there’s only so many theater screens to show a movie in the United States.

If we think about radio and television, the FCC regulated the airwaves (which are a limited resource) and granted only certain entities the ability to broadcast programs on them.

What I hope to show you today is how many of these factors change with the onset of digital technology and the internet.

**Activity**

But first, a quick activity. Think of something you did last night or this morning on your phone. Then, take a moment and figure out how you could have done that activity 36 years ago in 1984, and about a hundred years ago in 1920. You know the drill: pause the lecture, jot down a few ideas, and then come on back.

**Megan**

Let’s say this morning, in 2020, I used my internet-connected iPhone to stream Megan Thee Stallion’s new album via Spotify through to my headphones. (Remember, I record my lectures weeks in advance, so Grandma is making a *very hip reference right now.*)

**Walkman**

Obviously, I’d have to be a witch to listen to Meg in 1984, but if I wanted to have a similar solitary music-listening experience back then, I’d have to go to a record store, buy *Purple Rain* on cassette, and then listen to that album through my Walkman, rewinding it each time I wanted to hear “Let’s Go Crazy” again.

**Gramophone**

If we’re talking about 100 years ago, in 1920, we’re really just before the era of the radio at home. RCA wasn’t yet producing consumer radios, so it would be unlikely for me to hear music this way unless I had built a radio on my own *and* lived within range of one of the handful of stations that existed at the time.

More realistically, if I wanted to listen to music on my own, I better have my own room, and a record player **[ANIMATION]** and whatever hot new albums were dropping in 1920. According to a pretty unofficial, not very rigorous Google search I conducted, that record might have been Ted Lewis and His Orchestra singing “When My Baby Smiles At Me.”

**Piano**

And in fact, that Ted Lewis image is of sheet music, not a record. If I wanted to listen to music in my house and I didn’t have a record player—but I was still kinda middle-class—maybe I had a piano. For much of the 19th and early 20th century, this was how lots of people experienced popular music: by someone playing it live at home.

…and what I’m realizing as I’m looking at this photo is that, I think, if you look *very* closely, there’s sheet music on the piano for a song that’s just called “Daddy.” So…you’re welcome for that?

**Apple Big Brother**

I didn’t pick the year 1984 out of thin air. That’s the year when director Ridley Scott, of *Bladerunner* fame, made a Super Bowl commercial for the brand new, about to hit the market Macintosh Computer. I’ve included that commercial in this module for you to watch. As you’ll see, the ad references the novel *1984*, with this Big Brother-like character controlling his army of identical, brain-dead drones through this big movie/television screen.

**Anya Major**

Then we see bright, athletic, Technicolor hammer thrower Anya Major, wearing a tank top with an illustration of the first Mac computer, smashing the crap out of that image.

Looking back at it now, we can see this ad as a visual metaphor for convergence and participatory culture, which go hand in hand.

**Two Pictures**

No more will media be one big giant blaring head indoctrinating an audience of identical consumers. The computer changes those power dynamics. We can speak for ourselves, and to each other, and back to the media using digital technology.

**Wires**

The era ushered in by 1984 and the rise of personal computing, followed by the internet, is colored by two processes:

**[ANIMATION]** The first is digitalization, which is the broad cultural movement towards digital information.

**Analog vs. Digital**

Before we had digital media technology, we had analog media technology. I’m sure you could probably name some analog technologies if I asked you to, and they might look like the stuff on the left of this slide **[ANIMATION].** Records, tapes, books, machines like typewriters and printing presses, SLR cameras, film—these are all popularly understood to be analog. Their counterparts on the right side of the slide **[ANIMATION]** the iPads and smartphones and Oculus Rifts and FitBits of the world are understood to be digital. But what exactly is the difference?

**Quotes**

A very helpful book I am not making you read called *The Media Economy* explains it this way: **[ANIMATION]** with analog technology, an audio or visual signal is translated into electronic pulses; with digital technology, an audio or visual signal is translated into patterns of numbers where the audio or video data is represented by a series of digits made up of binary code—referring to combinations of the numbers 0 and 1.

**[ANIMATION]** Digital content has a number of advantages over analog content, including enhanced sound and picture quality, improved reception, and the ability to be repurposed and packaged across different platforms.

Can I break this down into one very simple slide?

**Digitization**

Why yes I can, and here it is. Digital media is media content that has been converted into binary code. Let’s look at an example.

**Under Pressure**

I’m seizing all of my power as the instructor of this class to use this example to force upon you an excellent song, an arguably perfect song, a song that is **[ANIMATION]** my very favorite song of all time: “Under Pressure” by Queen and David Bowie **[PLAY CLIP OF SONG.]**

**Recording**

This song was released back in 1981. To distribute the single in its original analog format, Freddie Mercury and David Bowie had to record their dulcet tones onto tape…

**Tape to record**

…which was converted into a vinyl 45, which was then sold to discerning music fans the world over. Folks who loved the song as much as I do could listen to it over and over in their homes, but that 45 didn’t do much good in their car, or walking down the street, or anywhere else a record player wasn’t available.

**Media content**

Remembering that media content can now be converted into binary, or digital, code…

**Media everywhere**

…owning the digital file of “Under Pressure” means that I can play it seamlessly on all kinds of computerized devices. This includes on my laptop, in my car, on my phone as I’m walking down the street, through my Bluetooth speaker at home, and so on.

**Wires**

Digitalization also takes care of the issue of scarcity faced by many legacy industries. With limitations only imposed by server space and the financial resources needed to buy it, the internet is basically as big as you want it to be, and it can hold as much content as people will consume. Netflix doesn’t have to find a theater to show all of its thousands of titles, for example, nor a warehouse big enough to store all of those films in reels.

**[ANIMATION]** Digitalization leads to convergence, a process that Henry Jenkins in your reading for this week defines as “the collision of old and new media,” marked by “the flow of content across multiple platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.”

Let’s dig into this a little bit. I think that convergence is best demonstrated with an example.

**GoT**

To use sort of an old example, *Game of Thrones* contentexisted **[ANIMATION]** on cable television, **[ANIMATION]** in several apps, **[ANIMATION]** on Instagram and Twitter and other social media, including podcasts..

**Dinklage**

…as viral clips on YouTube and other platforms…

**Giphy**

…and, of course, as memes. It was in HBO’s interest to produce all of these things, and they did. And the majority of the time, it was *not* in HBO’s interest to demand that they be taken down when they were posted by users. And if you were a fan, you could enjoy all of these things on one device, like a smartphone.

**Black Box Fallacy**

Let’s dig a little bit further into what else Henry Jenkins has to say in your reading. In terms of technology, Jenkins says people thought media convergence would lead to a convergence of technology: one black box in your house that would do everything. However, he calls this the “black box fallacy” because it’s not that simple. Companies are still competitive, and they have not agreed on standards. Thus, you still need a Wii even if you have a Roku, even though both are digital devices.

**Vlogger**

Jenkins also reminds us that convergence means power is no longer all top-down. He says “convergence doesn't just involve commercially-produced materials and services traveling along well-regulated and predictable circuits. It also occurs when people take media in their own hands.”

What are some examples of people taking media into their own hands? Well, there’s blogging, vlogging, tweeting, Tiktok, Instagram Live, any social media, really, YouTube, remixing, fan art, fan fiction, fan vids, and so forth. Anything you make and distribute without the intervention of the traditional media industries. That’s not to say there still isn’t an imbalance of power—YouTube has the servers, the software, all of your data, and the means to make money off of your use of its platform, for example—but you can still use YouTube to your advantage.

**Culture**

Finally, Jenkins reminds us that convergence isn’t just about digital technology. It has cultural effects too. He says “Right now, the cultural shifts, the legal battles, and the economic consolidations which are fueling media convergence are preceding shifts in the technological infrastructure. How those various transitions play themselves out will determine the balance of power in the next media era.”

In other words, convergence leads to new behaviors and social practices, and all of this is in flux as we continue to learn to live in a digitalized world.

**Abbi**

Many of the cultural changes brought about by digitalization and convergence might be described as a move toward a more *participatory culture*. Jenkins defines a participatory culture as one with “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.”

**Likes**

He goes on to say: “A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created).”

This sounds an awful lot like that idea of people “taking media into their own hands,” which we just discussed as an aspect of convergence, no? Participatory culture, convergence, and digitalization—they’re all related but distinct phenomenon, then, all of which move us into an age where more people can create and circulate media, but where power still moves along some well-trod paths.

Let’s go back to our *Game of Thrones* example for a second.

**GoT**

Because of media convergence, HBO enthusiastically circulates *Game of Thrones* content in lots of different places besides just on cable television at the appointed airtime.

**Phone**

Because of digitalization, you can use your phone to watch the show, listen to the HBO podcast, read the Game of Thrones official twitter, and so forth.

**Gifs**

And because of participatory culture, you can like those tweets, tweet about *GoT* yourself, make memes about Bran being super weird, leave comments under YouTube *Game of Thrones* parody videos, and distribute fan fiction about Brienne of Tarth and Tormund having a thousand virile babies and happily ever after.

**Quote**

If you remember one thing about participatory culture, let it be this one. In a participatory culture, there are no clear lines between producers and consumers of media. Some producers, like HBO, might have more money and power than you, the average person with a *Game of Thrones* podcast that only your mom and brother listen to, but you are *still consuming and making media*.

Because participatory culture is newer than broadcast media, we’re still working out tension between legacy producers (who have resources and reach) and newly empowered, participatory audiences (who have digital technology and access to distribution through the internet). I can think of two big examples where old media and participatory audiences butt heads.

**Spoiler Alert**

The first is around spoilers. Does anyone know the *Reality Steve* blog? Any members of *Bachelor* nation out there? If you’ve never heard of him, Reality Steve is a blogger who is extremely well-connected. He can spoil whole seasons of television shows like *The Bachelor* before they even air.

The television industry hasn’t quite figured out what to do about things like this yet. Some shows go so far as to film fake scenes to thwart spoilers—*Game of Thrones* was notorious for doing this. That way fans monitoring the locations where the show was filming wouldn’t be able to make any conclusions about the upcoming season based on which actors were on set each day.

*The Bachelor* seems to go along with it, incentivizing viewers who have more information through their Bachelor fantasy league game, which they feature on the ABC website.

Fans aren’t even in agreement with each other yet about how spoilers should work in a participatory culture. When is it okay to talk about the ending of a movie on Twitter? What about a show? What is it okay to reveal while you’re live-Tweeting? Should East Coast audiences be cognizant of not ruining things for West Coast audiences? I don’t think we’ve settled that yet.

**Yondr**

The other big example, which I’ve been looking into, is the Yondr pouch. Remember back when we were allowed to leave the house and go to things like concerts, or stand-up shows? Well, back in those long, long ago days, venues were increasingly asking live event attendees to put their phones in these pouches.

If you’ve never used one, your phone goes inside, and then the pouch is locked up so you can’t get at it. It has to be unlocked again at a special Yondr station after the show. If you need to use your phone mid-show, you have to go out into the lobby, away from whatever is happening on the stage, and an employee will unlock it for you.

Venues and performers who use these pouches argue that they create a low-distraction environment where the audience can really connect with a performer, but of course, they also help thwart copyright infringement and bootlegging of live material. In the comedy world, which I study, Louis C.K. has demanded their use for his very controversial comeback tour after #MeToo allegations were levied against him. On that tour, he’s been performing new, quite offensive material, in which he often performed new, quite offensive material, and using Yondr pouches kept videos of that material from spreading online.

On the other hand, I had to use one of these pouches when I went to see another comedian, Hannah Gadsby, perform in Austin. In interviews, she’s connected the choice to restrict her audience’s phone use to her recent autism diagnosis. She says that having fewer distractions helps facilitate spreading the mood she’s trying to create, and “I’m very interested in that because on the spectrum, we’re not as prone to be taken by mass mood.”

The reasons may vary (and you may agree with one or the other, or neither) but the effect is the same: a Yondr pouch takes participatory, media-creating power away from audiences. They can’t live-tweet, record, post, or comment on the show in real time.

**Hands**

Media convergence and participatory culture may seem like the air we breathe, especially if you grew up using the internet. But I think, put into context with everything else we’ve learned this semester, you can see how it represents a revolutionary turn in the media industries.

So many of you want to be and already *are* media makers. You’ll be launching your work into this complicated digital sphere, but you might also end up looking for jobs with legacy organizations. Convergence—where old and new media collide—is a good way to understand how these two systems are working side by side.

Participatory culture, convergence, and digitalization mean that audiences have more power than ever to make and circulate media, as well as to speak back to the media industries. And while that’s a good thing, it’s important to remember that we do so on corporate platforms, where data about our participation and behavior is recorded and sold. What we are experiencing is not a simple shift of power from legacy media to the people, but rather a disturbance in many flows of money, influence, media content, and attention. Within this shakeup is an opportunity for people to use new tools to make their mark in media, *and* for new powerful entities like platforms, technology companies, and big data to gather strength.