

Convergence and the new commodities of the media sphere¹

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Abstract

This article began life as an investigation of two relatively new media forms: enhanced TV and branded entertainment. My purpose was not to explain these forms – they are in a sense self-explanatory – but to explore these forms as harbingers of changing relationships between media and audiences. I argue that convergence is the link between these two forms. Drawing on the useful characterisation of convergence as the process by which the internet is *mediatising* and the media are *internetising* (Fortunati 2005), I identify key areas where convergence is facilitating a redefinition of the tacit contract that previously existed between media and audiences. I argue, firstly, that the internetization of television is contributing to a refashioning of the public sphere and, secondly, that the mediatization of the Internet is transforming the basic contract of media engagement from one based on rights to one based on contracts and sales. Both of these trends will have implications for the nature of the audience formations addressed by the media, the ways we understand and practice democracy, and the future of the public sphere. Enhanced TV and branded entertainment are two early and possibly transient symptoms of these changes.

Homogenised TV

Since its introduction across the developed world in the 1950s, broadcast television has played a vital role in the mass communication of the public sphere. Political parties and politicians have used broadcast television to publicize their activities, to persuade the electorate to their points of view, to bolster their credibility, and as the primary instrument of explanation and persuasion in relation to programs of economics, health, education and social security. Advertisers have used broadcast TV to promote products and services. Emergency services have used broadcast television to deliver warnings and guidance to the public on how to handle dangerous situations. Broadcast television has become perhaps the only environment (outside of the polling booth) where most people experience a sense of connection to the public sphere and this was possible because most people watched television. Television and radio contributed to the endurance and stability of political process from the mid to the late twentieth century because the mass media provided the stage-management for the public sphere, by its capacity to efficiently deliver mass audiences for public information. This stage-management concentrated immense

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power and wealth in the hands of entrepreneurial media owners by gifting to them the power inherent in *editorializing the public sphere*.

The *internetization* of television seriously compromises its capacity to continue to host the public sphere since today television is a multi-platform medium. Potentially this multiplication of televisions has profound implications for the reshaping of public life. Even if we consider television's constructed public sphere to have been fraudulent – a counterfeit public sphere - we cannot avoid addressing the problem of how to imagine the real public sphere without access to the masses through broadcast media like television. Yet this scenario is already upon us and demonstrated daily by the persistent shrinkage of free-to-air television audiences, the declining readership of newspapers as opposed to news online, and the reshaping of radio by podcasting.

In the 1950s, limited competition allowed the television industry to develop practices of audience management that, while not easily justified on the basis of audience preferences - like scheduling based on the 'least objectionable program' (Webster, Phalen and Lichty, 2000:164) effectively minimized the diversity between television services (Ross and Nightingale, 2003; Nightingale, 2004a). Such practices ensured that most people were exposed to very similar programs and information. The public knowledge generated by shared exposure creates an imagined public sphere that is all the more convincing to its audiences because the media also represents the public to itself. This in turn exacerbates a mass media phenomenon Niklas Luhmann described as, 'the reproduction of *non-transparency of effects* through *transparency of knowledge*' (Luhmann 2000, 1996, p. 103, italics in original). Luhmann argued that the public believes that it has access to all the relevant information because cross-checking available sources reveals consistency among them. But this consistency is itself a product of limited competition or, in Neuman's terminology, the 'economic pressures towards homogenization' rather than the analysis of diverse sources, so cross-checking simply reinforces the seamlessness of the communication system. In addition, the media routinely represent the public to itself in the form of opinion polls and surveys, and therefore are often the only source of information the public has about itself beyond the local parameters of work and home life. So lack of real diversity of sources and complete dependence on the media for a sense beyond the local of what others might think about social and political issues, allow audiences to assume that the public sphere hosted by the mass media is an accurate representation of what they needed to know to participate as citizens in the democratic process.

Substituting 'free-to-air' with 'user-pays'

In the shift to its new digital platforms, free-to-air broadcasting is being replaced by television commodities and services which invariably involve user-pays or pay-per-view choices. Convergence is hastening the 'disintermediation' of broadcast TV because, as the mass audience fragments, so does the advertiser funding on which the industry relies (Nightingale, 2004). Advertisers are increasingly able to avoid the 'waste coverage' inherent in broadcast TV advertising and to focus specifically on existing customers and prospects who share similar media profiles and can therefore be expected to be more

receptive to the advertising message. In a comment to the *Wall Street Journal Online* (May 23, 2005), Adam Klein of the EMI Group is reported as describing mobile phones as “a very attractive environment” for content delivery because, ‘Whereas people are used to getting content free online, they are accustomed to seeing items tacked onto their phone bill’. While the mobile TV referred to by Klein is in its infancy, it has already gained considerable publicity for its capacity to raise revenue from downloads of broadcast TV program highlights for shows like *Big Brother* and *Idol*.

From a television industry perspective, enhanced formats like *Big Brother* and *Idol* initially offered some hope that free-to-air TV might retain its primary position in the television hierarchy in spite, or perhaps because of convergence. Enhanced TV offered the prospect of bringing fragmenting audiences back under industry control. This view is evident in the publicity for the *Enhanced TV Show and Mobile TV Forum* industry conference (London, September, 2005). The conference was promoted as “delivering the future of broadcasting” by demonstrating the power of both enhanced TV and mobile tv to build program loyalty, increase telephone revenues, and to deliver a new channel (mobile tv) to the television market (www.enhanced-television.com). In this context, the third screen (mobile tv) was presented as a vehicle for the delivery of broadcast program spin-offs, and indeed there is evidence that in 2005 the third screen delivered substantial revenue linked to downloadable highlights. During the 2005 UK series of *Big Brother* for example, the mobile phone operator 3 offered both highlight downloads and live streaming of the program for cell phone screens. Writing for *The Times* newspaper in Britain, Sabbagh (2005) disclosed that ‘Highlights of the reality show were downloaded 360,000 times at 50p a time. A 75p-a-minute live television stream was also watched on 90,000 occasions, according to information released to *The Times*’.

The ‘enhancement’ project replaces dwindling advertiser funding with viewer/user funding. In this scenario, broadcast TV companies continue to control production of television programs and series, but programs are chosen for their capacity to generate revenue directly from the viewer² by including interactive enhancements as part of the initial product design. In this capacity *Big Brother* continues to be a winning format. In its 2006 Australian series, audiences were encouraged not only to vote contestants off the program, but also to vote for whom they thought should stay. Instead of just one phone call viewers now make at least two phone calls – thus doubling the potential income generated by the voting enhancement. This voting strategy doubles as a form of audience research as it provides extremely useful feedback to the production team on what makes contestants popular with the audience, creating a feedback loop that ensures the program is progressively tailored to the interests of its high profit customers. So, when Rob O’Neill reported in 2004 that Jane Roscoe’s research had demonstrated a core fan audience for Australian *Big Brother* of approximately 35,000 fans, the finding was

² It is important at this juncture to question the ethics of the shift of the funding for free-to-air TV from advertisers to the audiences for peripheral services like downloads, alerts and other interactive novelties, at the very least because of the debt burden it is creating for the young. Peripheral services are usually specifically directed at the young who form a strong component of the so-called ‘early adopter’ market. In Australia, mobile phone debt sits alongside debt for other life-essentials like education and motor vehicles. The concern in Australia is that the new debt burdens carried by the young leave them unable to secure the more substantial loans required for housing and employment infrastructure.

quickly translated into an industry revenue strategy where the profitable loyal fan base is offered even more opportunities to pay to participate. This is a text book example of what advertisers refer to as 'profitability targeting' (Duncan, 2005, p. 232-234). In this case, the costs of digital enhancement have been passed on to the consumer-audience, so that enhancements are also spin-offs that deliver independent and increasingly substantial revenue streams for broadcasters, production companies and the telcos. The digital enhancement of its programs therefore has offered broadcast TV a reprieve from the inexorable decline in overall audience size by providing the means to raise additional revenue directly from loyal audiences, who also double as the program's primary online customer base.

The technical arrangements for digital enhancement of broadcast TV are complex, and involve audiences in multiple contractual financial agreements with pay TV companies, mobile phone service providers, telephone service providers, Internet service providers. To access interactive enhancements (e.g. voting, auction sites, chat lines, sponsor links, etc) for enhanced programs like *Big Brother*, viewers have no options other than to pay. The complexity of the processes and agreements by which revenue is both raised and redistributed makes it extremely difficult for the public to protest about these arrangements, or to argue for better or cheaper services, since the enhancements are presented as commodities and therefore not (yet) considered to be communication rights. So because of the financial constraints on participation, the audiences for enhanced TV are not as inclusive as those for broadcast TV and offer a much weaker approximation of the general public than broadcasting did in the past.

And this raises the vexed issue of TV voting. Even though TV voting is routinely represented to the audience as an opportunity to participate in a 'democratic' process, TV voting is effectively a commodity. In a wonderful sleight-of-hand, program presenters borrow the language and style of the hustings to rally viewers to pay to exercise voting rights (Nightingale and Dwyer, 2006). While the emphasis on 'participation' may appear to suggest that TV voting grooms the audience for public sphere activity, the lack of transparency in the voting process and its commercial character must also be taken into account, since the similarities to the democratic principle of one person one vote is strongly challenged by this position. Admittedly, Coleman (2003) has suggested that since democracy is a work-in-progress (each democratic nation adapting the practice of democracy to its own special conditions), the way it is practiced *should be* expected to change, especially if the percentage of the population voting in elections continues to decline. The problem with the television voting comparison is that it promotes a democracy based on vote buying, since in such a system everyone has the option of buying one or many votes, but no one has the option of voting without paying. Where 'participation' should reflect a citizen's right to access services based on public goods, like bandwidth, licensed to service providers by governments on behalf of citizens, this 'participation' rests increasingly on one's capacity to buy enhancements.

Branded entertainment

The internet allows advertisers to cultivate virtual communities among brand customers and contacts and to both personalize and customize their communication with them. However, online communications tend not to have the same emotional impact as television, and so the advertising industry has been searching for ways of producing richer content for online distribution of brand communications. One such adventure has been the investment in branded entertainment. One of the earliest iterations of branded entertainment, involving a return to sponsorship and product placement, was McDonalds sponsorship of the internet game, *The Sims* (Walsh, 2002). This sponsorship allowed game participants to both frequent the McDonalds outlets in *The Sims* and to open their own McDonalds' franchise within the game environment – i.e. to engage with the brand both as consumer and as franchisee. More recently however this type of branded entertainment has been applied to product placement within entertainment products designed for distribution by both the internet and other more traditional distribution means. So for example, the U.S. advertising company, *Hypnotic*, defines branded entertainment as, 'the combination of traditional marketing, entertainment content and branding tactics' (www.hypnotic.com), and specializes in licensing the use of brand names and brand messages in short films or by music artists. The products developed are primarily (though not solely) promoted and marketed through the internet. Just as enhanced TV has been used to internetize broadcast TV, branded entertainment is an advertising industry attempt to mediatize the internet, and to bridge the gap between entertainment and advertising. The reason why sponsorship and product placement have regained popularity, especially in the online environment, is that it has proved effective in taking advertising to the internet sites where target audiences (young males in particular) are active. Rather than using banner ads, pop ups or click through, branded entertainment embeds the advertising in the entertainment product in ways that inseparably meld the brand with the product/content (e.g. Rodgers, 2004) with the aim of consolidating emotional ties between the brand and its consumers.

Other approaches to online advertising have taken advantage of the ubiquity of the brand website, where custom-designed weblogs offer the site user additional benefits like access to expert advice sponsored by the company, or access to the knowledge work of other site users. Genealogy sites like *Ancestry.com* are good examples. They have established themselves as brands that offer access to a wide range of family history research data sources, alongside chat, bulletin boards and managed email. They actively advertise products and services relevant to the interests of their subscribers. Customers are able to make contact with people researching names linked to their own genealogies, to celebrities, or to any names at all. Such web-based services have created thriving family research businesses with active and often diverse global consumer audiences. It is hardly surprising then that in December 2005 the British Media company, ITV, paid the sum of £120m for the website *Friends Reunited*, the parent company of another genealogy site - *Genes Reunited*. The press release stated that, 'The acquisition is part of a strategy to build content based businesses which create and monetize direct consumer revenue for ITV' (www.itvplc.com/itv/news/releases/pr2005/2005-12-06). The decision also seems likely to have been motivated by the popularity of a family history series, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, produced by the BBC in collaboration with Ancestry in 2005

and 2006 (<http://www.scotroots.com/who-do-you-think-you-are.htm>). These industry activities are important because they demonstrate how interchangeable advertising and content development have become in the world of converged media since in this case the broadcast TV content effectively now works as advertising for the brand/websites by motivating new customers to sign up and by reminding lapsed customers to update their knowledge about the site and what it offers. It also demonstrates how central the content work of audience members is to the ongoing work of the brand/site.

In 2001 and 2002, the car manufacturer BMW experimented with a new approach to online advertising by using a series of short films to revitalize the brand and promote the release of its latest model car. It produced a series of eight award winning internet short films made by renowned film directors featuring its new car. The internet (rather than broadcast TV) was used as the primary medium for this viral advertising campaign. The campaign encouraged viewers to send them on to friends and acquaintances, thus using online networking to do the work of distribution. Accounts of the series found in advertising texts (Duncan 2004, pp 386-388) and on the web (www.bmwusa.com/bmwexperience/filmspr.htm) indicate that the initiative was successful as internet advertising [BMW claims the films were viewed over 100 million times, and Duncan that more than 20 million viewers accessed the streaming video website]. The films were also used as a promotional give-away (in DVD form), to launch BMW's own cable channel, and to promote the brand as 'innovative', 'first of its kind' and the sort of company you can rely on. In addition, the films linked viewers to live promotions that exploited the capacity of the internet to generate 'smart mob' activism (Rheingold, 2002). The 'activism' reported by Duncan constituted little more than an act of brand loyalty and curiosity (Duncan 2004, p.387) but it provides evidence that the films and other promotional activities pursued by BMW resulted in strong commitment to the brand among the films' viewers. For reasons that have not been disclosed, the films were removed from the internet on October 21, 2005. Yet this example has now become part of advertising lore – a demonstration of the capacity of internet networking to deliver mass audiences.

The differences between these two examples are interesting. The success of the family history initiatives is a product of the size of the online subscription base for the Internet businesses and the mass appeal of the broadcast programs. While the collaboration between content creators and the internet businesses pushes new subscribers to the online services and some viewers to the broadcast programs, it also delivers a personalized take on national and local history and its impact on ordinary individuals. The television programs contribute 'content' to the ongoing work of both the site and its subscribers, and justify the development and maintenance of both local and national resources (public records, historical buildings and artifacts, etc.). The sites assist the establishment of offline local history groups who educate others in the skills of family history research and in some cases encourage an interest in the study of the impact of history and politics on the everyday lives of ordinary people. While not overtly politicizing site members or broadcast TV viewers, the convergence of broadcast TV and internet sites in this case works to enrich both the online and offline worlds and to promote social responsibility among its constituencies. The BMW example is, on the surface, quite different. While it

proved highly effective in distributing a brand message to millions of internet users, its purpose was primarily oriented to consumption and brand promotion. It refers its audiences recursively back to the brand, and actively distracts attention away from the social, environmental, economic and political issues that surround the motorcar. The BMW films have encouraged advertiser confidence in the usefulness of branded entertainment that doubles as Arts sponsorship primarily because the BMW short films are taken to have proved that the emotion that television provides can be delivered online. Both examples illustrate aspects of the ways the internet operates, 'as an economic space in its own right, an arena for both the production and the consumption of branded content' (Ardvisson, 2006, p. 104).

Ardvisson (2006) has also argued that the internet 'shows a close technological fit with capital's strategic response to mass intellectuality: branding' (ibid, p. 96). In his view, companies like BMW are currently participating in a phenomenon he calls the 'mediatization of consumption' whereby the brand expands beyond its traditional narrow product range (automobiles in this case) into a product array it does not necessarily produce but that bears its name (lifestyle goods like designer kitchen equipment or fashion accessories). Porsche AG is another example. It is a majority shareholder in the Porsche Design Group, a company that includes Porsche Design Studio, Porsche Design and Porsche Design Drivers' Selection (<http://www.answers.com/topic/porsche-design-group>, accessed June 7, 2006). The products developed by Porsche Design include luggage and leather, accessories, timepieces, home products and eyewear, while the Porsche Design Studio projects create the designs for these products alongside transportation, architecture and interior design and design process projects (http://www.porsche-design.com/live/PORSCHE_DESIGN_en.PorscheDesign, accessed June 7, 2006). The (U.S.) Eddie Bauer department store's design for the Ford SUV achieves a similar purpose. A profile of a profitable client group (Eddie Bauer customers) is identified as a good match with the profile of Ford's SUV owners. By targeting the two customer groups both brands stand to benefit. Ardvisson suggests that brands are mediatizing consumption through such arrangements. The brand becomes less dependent on conventional advertising because it is strongly associated with the consumption environments referenced by each brand. In this sense the brand presents itself through 'environment' rather than through 'representation'. He argues that in this context,

The internet has the capacity to create all-encompassing environments centered around a particular brand; environments where all actions, where activity in general, is always already anticipated by the program of the brand' (Ardvisson, 2006, p. 96).

What seems to be happening here is that 'mass intellectuality' is groomed to serve the brand which nourishes an apolitical micro 'public' sphere devoted to itself and its users. The problem is that this productivity is not holistic and the brand therefore embodies a contradiction inherent in informational capitalism, as Ardvisson concedes (p. 137). The brand is increasingly dependent on the social production (participation) of its client base in its world view, but it is reduced in its capacity to control that participation.

Media convergence both produces and exacerbates the crisis in informational capitalism. Converged media require different sorts of content – content that is valued for the contribution it makes to the vitality of an arena of consumption linked to one or many brands. Ebay, Google, Yahoo! and other search sites are valued for their capacity to locate specific information and sites, and to facilitate the trade in branded commodities. Online ‘content’ is increasingly designed around a cycle of inter-linked media forms – for example: product/program releases, website, fan club, fanzine, instant messaging service (IMS), mobile phone alerts, etc. - each designed to maximize the capacity of the content idea to generate revenue and to stimulate the micro publics of brand culture. It is developed as a set merchandisable propositions to serve the brand’s environment of consumption. The diversity of online content requires texts to be multi-purpose, content-delivery hubs – places that offer differential access to components of a core text (or brand) in accordance with consumer interests and willingness to pay. The hub text provides access to the different types of text-related data collected at the site. As a result, the discursive significance of text is diminished as is its potential to contribute to public sphere discourse beyond the apolitical micro spheres of everyday consumption. This makes it impossible for the internet to replace broadcast TV as a host to the public sphere.

Concluding remarks

As Castells (2001, p. 129) has suggested, digital media have amplified and deepened the pre-existing socio-cultural shift from place-based affiliation to ‘networked individualism’. Networked individualism is affiliative, ephemeral and task-based (Castells, 2001, p. 125) - a ‘social pattern’ (p. 131) rather than a ‘community’ [as it is so often described]. This particular shift is linked to processes that can be dated to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and its inherent internationalizing tendencies (Mattelart, 2000). On re-reading early audience researchers like Merton (Merton 1949, 1979) and Lazarsfeld (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), it is obvious that in the 1940s and 1950s the mass media both facilitated and accelerated a shift to voluntary affiliation as the organizational template for social life by creating new forms of social capital linked to media use. Now in the early twenty first century the mass media are being displaced as the primary bearers of commercial messages and, as a result, the place-based voluntary affiliation of the mid-twentieth century is also being replaced by an internet mediated communications system organized through brand-based affiliations.

In this context, the nature of ‘voluntary’ affiliation is becoming increasingly commercial in nature and the space where affiliation is enacted is global and virtual rather than local and place-based. Effectively convergence has assisted a process whereby affiliation has been mediatized [i.e. it is expressed and enacted online] and where identity and agency are prescribed by where we buy and from whom it originates. Brands and branding therefore play a coordinating role in the continuing separation of place from space and in the disassociation of the citizen from the consumer. In spite of its occasional hosting of interest specific net activism (Rheingold, 2002) the brand-based model of communication increasingly dominating the internet seems likely to prove an uncomfortable environment for the type of bipartisan debate that has traditionally characterized understandings of the nature of a public sphere.

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