❖ Tracing Audiences and New Media

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Abstract

The historical progression of audience research has almost always been inextricably linked to the advancement of media technologies. From the large screen spectacle of cinema complexes, to the privacy of television boxes, the intimacy of portable media devices to the personalised experiences of the internet , the way in which audiences interact and relate to media products, often in a constant state of flux, has long been shaped by shifts in media technology. In a media environment that espouses a landscape of highly varied forms of media content, media audiences and media entertainment behaviour, it is prudent to scrutinize just how contemporary audiences are affected by the technology around them, and where mass media content is situated in a landscape that is constantly growing in scope. How is current audience behaviour affected by current media technology, and how does this behaviour affect their relationship to media content? This paper provides an overview of the current media landscape and considers the way in which audience behaviour has evolved with shifts in technology.

Introduction

The catchcry of technological change and advancement has long been one that espouses improvements in design, experience and overall result. For entertainment technologies, shifts and changes throughout history have not only demonstrated increased sophistication, they have also resulted in the actualisation of a gradual shift in the way audiences relate to media content. Specifically, the medium of visual entertainment is one that offers audiences the most impact, and is also most likely to be affected by changes in technology. This paper aims to provide an overview of the current media landscape and considers the way in which audience behaviour has evolved with shifts in technology.

Background

The history of the relationship between media content and its reception by the audience is long

and often extremely complex. Originating from within the cinema as the earliest form of technology-assisted media platform, early analysis of audience study research revealed a trend for examining the audience's relationship with media content as an internal process of understanding and identification within a mainly cinema setting. Early theorists such as Baudry (1986) and Metz (1986) were concerned with how spectators related to the projected text before them, and positioned spectators as either passive observers or active participants in the "reality" of the spectacle. There was also an effort by theorists such as, again, Metz (1986) and Browne (1986) to understand how meaning was imparted through cinematic devices, and how spectators were positioned in relation to the text to understand the meanings the images imparted. Finally, Andrew Tudor (1974) took into consideration the sociology of the movie-going experience, and how other audience members and the experience of being part of a "mass" audience influenced individual audience members, both consciously and unconsciously.

The role of sound in the cinema also plays an important role within the relationship between audience and media content. Sound has the capability to assist in the creation of a sense of reality through successful placement of speakers within the physical environment of the theatre itself, as well as the use of the 5.1 surround sound system to generate a sensation of being "in the action" for the audience. The soundtrack within a cinema theatre is not necessarily restricted to the film (Doane, 1986). Gianluca Sergi (2001) explains the impact of an existence of an audience soundtrack in addition to that created by the film. This additional soundtrack not only acknowledges the presence of the audience within the context of the film viewing experience, but also manifests itself as a "visible" way in which the audience can react (by laughing, crying, demonstrating shock) and relate to the film by showing approval or disapproval (clapping and booing, or laughing in inappropriate spots) (Sergi, 2001).

Developments in technology have resulted in multiple conditions outside of the cinema setting in which spectators can also interact with the spectacle. The cinema was a setting that could be considered restrictive as spectator behaviour, and the theories that surrounded it, were limited by the fact that, no matter how cognitively, emotionally or psychoanalytically audiences engaged with the film, they were still placed in a position of witness to a finished product. Once the spectator and spectacle is removed from the cinema setting, and other forms of media are introduced into the relationship, the way in which it is negotiated necessarily changes. The internet, television, and the availability of films and television shows on VHS and DVD, now allow the audience other avenues through which to access and relate to media products.

With developments in media technology increasing at an unprecedented rate when compared to the last twenty years, an exploration of the relationship between media content and media audiences necessarily needs to include the latest forms of portable personalised media that has been introduced into the convergent media mix. This aspect of the media landscape has received little attention that the author can find (at the time of writing), and requires further investigation with questions of spectatorship in highly personalised situations necessarily raised.

Audiences and the development of Mass Media Technologies

Mass media technologies, the hardware medium through which media content is displayed and distributed, do not only fulfil the sole function of presentation, but are often an integral part of

an overall viewing experience that encompasses environment, medium, and viewer into an integrated encounter with media content. Initiated by the advent of the internet age, an environment and culture emerged where content from the traditionally segregated streams of film, television, radio and even literature appeared to break free from the constraints of medium and became increasingly merged.

Loosely defined, these convergent media forms can be grouped into three main areas of development: 1) Online media; 2) Cross platform media; and 3) Portable media.

Online media

Since the popularisation of the internet in the early 1990s it has been mostly populated by entertainment orientated media, from fans sites to official websites promoting films and television networks, all facets of the entertainment industry have found a home on the internet. Increasingly, with improvements in transmission and download speeds, a variety of radio and television shows have also found an avenue through the internet.

Communications protocols such as BitTorrent (Tamilmani, 2008) allows for the live streaming of content from television channels, allowing spectators to download and view selected programming of their own choosing. There are a variety of methods through which television content is delivered. Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) (*Economic Times*, 2008) is a way of providing access to digital television content through networks related to the computer using internet protocols and often a broadband delivery service. It is typified by content that is of premium quality, usually high quality Standard Definition (SD) or High Definition (HD), and offers a select series of programming for viewing. IPTV is typically supplied by a service provider, meaning access to content is restricted to single users on a contractual subscription-based arrangement with internet providers who offer the IPTV service (*Economic Times*, 2008).

In competition with IPTV is internet television, defined as a "quick-to-market" system (McLuhan, 1964) that utilises existing internet infrastructure – such as broadband ADSL, Wi-Fi, cable and satellite – to deliver a variety of content at varying levels of quality to general internet users. Both internet television and IPTV have been utilised by commercial and business groups as a means of content distribution. Video streaming sites such as YouTube and AOL video that offer User Generated Content rather than professionally produced programs, and the 2006 trial of ABC America's streaming of popular television shows such as *Lost, Desperate Housewives, Commander in Chief* and *Alias* (Ahrens, 2006), are good examples of the differing nature of internet television and IPTV respectively.

A report published in *The Washington Post* detailed the results of the ABC trial and found that viewers were willing to watch internet advertising in exchange for the opportunity to watch free content, a fact that interested many commercial bodies. Of the four programs on offer, *Lost*, the highest-rated, was able to attract an average of 15 million viewers a week, almost equalling the average television viewership for the entire second series of the show within the USA (*Lost*, series two, averaged 15.5 million viewers) (*The Hollywood Reporter*, 2006).

The increased appeal for an online approach to mainstream content distribution can be attributed, to a certain degree, to viewer behaviour with potential audiences – especially younger audiences – spending more time online than "in front of the box" watching television

(Ahrens, 2006). Recently, a report in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (2007) announced the establishment of the free online television service, "Joost", which boasted the ability to offer high quality, full-screen, full-length programs as well as select from a suggested range of channels and search for programming not promoted. It also offered the functionality of the internet where navigational and toolbars at the top of the screen allowed viewers to search for other online information related to the program of choice, essentially combining the website functionality of the internet with the broadcast capabilities of television.

Other efforts to merge "traditional" forms of television content with online programming have involved the use of the internet as a periphery function where websites house "extras" associated with specific programming, such as cast interviews, production vlogs, additional footage and contestant information. In the case of reality television shows this element of the production carries an importance equal to the magnitude of the on-air broadcast where short video segments made with the same high production values as the on-air show offer viewers additional access to the artificial "world" of the show, a process that enables the producers to "draw the viewer in", thereby sustaining their long-term interest in the program.

Cross-platform media

Defining what constitutes convergent media must, necessarily, take into consideration not only the developments in hardware that have modified the media landscape of recent years, but also trace how such developments have changed the behaviour of content disseminators within the media hierarchy. With new media devices and, especially, developments in mobile telephony (which promise increased immediacy, intimacy, portability and customisation), mass media companies are taking great interest in the possibility of cross-platform, cross-media content.

The connectivity afforded by devices such as mobile phones with 3G capabilities fosters an environment wherein traditional and new media practices are combined (Aguado and Martinez, 2007). Traditional media practices involving the reception of journalistic and entertainment media are re-married to an array of new practices (such as blogging, online gaming, podcasting and so on), through the co-existence of supporting functions on increasingly portable hardware devices (Aguado and Martinez, 2007). For media companies, the mobile phone represents a new, and as yet, untapped avenue through which to capture the attention of a generation of mobile audiences who have little loyalty or patience to follow traditional methods of viewership (Aguado and Martinez, 2007).

In a society where "faster, higher, and more instant" is equated to "better", many viewers have little time for the weekly development of storylines when they can access a whole season on DVD. Likewise, media content and advertisements are no longer restricted to traditional forms (television, billboards, radio). Taking advantage of the constant presence of the phone and other such portable devices, as well as the identity forming bonds that are created with ownership of such a device – for example, one is seldom able to leave the home without one's mobile phone – many media companies are developing content that can be distributed through different types of media at the one time.

In Spain an expert panel comprised of the country's mobile phone operators, public administration representatives and media groups (Aguado and Martinez, 2007), found that as a

result of the growing cultural significance of the mobile, and since the popularisation of 3G technologies, business and media companies are now beginning to develop content specifically designed for the device. Incidental content designed to promote brand names, celebrities or media products are "applied to devices" (Aguado and Martinez, 2007) in the form of wallpapers, ring tones and hardware design. Specific content that originated from established forms of media, such as spin-offs of popular television shows, are reported to have been imported onto a mobile phone format with varying levels of success. Additionally, what is referred to as "cross-media strategies" is described, whereby:

…the distribution and consumption of coherent media contents through the combined use of different media such as mobile, TV, radio, PC internet games [and] SMS participation in radio and TV programs constitute paradigmatic cases of cross-media use (Aguado and Martinez, 2007).

What is described is an environment where, as a result of the capabilities of new media devices and a growing disparate pattern of behaviour in contemporary audiences, a diversification of media content delivery has emerged, one that has produced a blurring of boundaries between "traditional" and "new" media practices.

Portable media

The 1980s and 1990s were defined by the arrival of portable entertainment devices such as the Walkman (1979 in Japan) (Hormby, 2006) and the Discman (1984 in Japan), (Sony History, 2008) which marked a change in music listening patterns for a whole generation and, eventually, viewing and interactive patterns of behaviour for generations to come. Listeners were liberated from the home, school, car or office by the ability to listen to music of their own choosing (purchased or recorded), at a place and time of their own choosing, through the privacy of the earphone, neither disturbing or being disturbed by other people.

2001 saw the release of the iPod (Apple Computers Incorporated, 2007) as the next incarnation of the portable media device. Initially catering exclusively to music, the iPod now allows for a range of media products from video to photos and, more recently, access to the internet. It retains the mobility pioneered by the Walkman and Discman and enables the user to create and define their own personal tastes through a variety of media content while keeping them connected to a wider community orientated around the technology, software and content associated with the device via continuous updates and products offered through online stores.

Increasingly, audiences are being offered greater control over the nature and intimacy of their interaction with media content, each other, and their environment of habitation. Adding further possibilities to the buffet table of media content and hardware are the online, video and photo capture and reception, flash memory storage, wireless connectivity and synchronicity functions, all of which are made possible by the third generation of mobile phone technology (3G) (International Telecommunications Union, 2005).

Results from a recent Frost and Sullivan (Reuters, 2008) study, published on the Reuters website, forecasted a new trend in mobile phone multimedia use. Studies into the practices and trends of more mature mobile markets (identified here as South Korea and Japan), have revealed that in addition to launching their own local mobile standards, growing interest has

also been shown in developing television content aimed specifically at the mobile phone. While the technical specification of said content and an ensuing working business model is still in its early stages, "mobile operators are in the process of looking at deliver options" and it is anticipated that other markets in the region, including "Singapore, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand", will start to adopt similar models as mobile networks and multimedia broadcast standards are addressed and improved (Reuters, 2008).

Announced at the Worldwide Developers Conference (WWDC) on the 9th of June 2008, the next generation iphone with 3G capabilities boasted the ability to synchronise the functions of both a desktop computer and mobile phone through increased connectivity and accessibility (Jobs, 2008). In addition to the access and use of software that exists on the phone and computer, the iPhone's ability to connect to the internet and Apple Computer Inc's online server, *Mobileme*, is proclaimed to allow ultimate portability with all the functions of the desktop computer available and updateable from the iphone. In addition to these developments, the capabilities of the 3G network offers the ability to download and stream a greater range of audio and video content, thereby providing access to internet television and radio as well as online stores such as iTunes (Jobs, 2008).

With such a variety of media functions available on the singular device of the mobile phone, and one that combines many of the functions of other portable media devices, the mobile phone is establishing a position of great eminence in the current and future media landscape.

Changed audience viewing behaviour

The mass media audience, which has long been perceived by theorists and media producers as passive "couch potatoes" (Livingstone, 2008) to be mindlessly fed content is, like any anthropological group of beings, a sophisticated, diverse and discerning community of individuals whose navigation of media content is highly nuanced and particular to specifics tastes, interests and, increasingly, technological proficiency. The disparate viewing behaviour of the audience reflects a reaction to the diversity of contemporary media content, and is highlighted by the rash of development in media technology, as is previously described. Far from the "couch potato" of the past, audiences are seen to be reactive, interactive and, occasionally, contributors to the overall media landscape.

The portability and ease of access to a multitude of media sources afforded by developments in media technology has resulted in a shift in the way in which audiences are seen to relate to media content. Alain J.J Cohen (Cohen, 2001) uses the term "Hyper-Spectator" to describe an audience placed in a multi-access environment where readily available media sources on VHS and DVD have enabled audiences to cross-reference and simultaneously access both the knowledge and memory of a media text, as well as the actual texts themselves. Compared with audiences of a purely cinematic and early broadcast television era, where interaction with media sources such as films and television programs were limited to single viewing situations, the availability of programs and films on VHS and DVD has enabled audiences to create their own systems of interpretation, understanding and alignment. In addition to the physical ownership of specific texts – the act of which engenders notions of power and authority previously refused to the audience – the presence of a multitude of texts allows the audience to control their level of engagement with the media content. They are able to immerse themselves in one text while, at the same time, extricating themselves from that text's

narrative situation to draw extra-textual references:

…this exponential hyper-spectatorship is a differential variant of the…mirroring of filmic apparatus itself, one of the multiple facets of the complex mind, split into its dual programmes of doing and its programme of self-observing, or its multiple structure switching back and forth between exhibitionism and voyeurism (Cohen, 2001).

The act of "switching back and forth" (Cohen, 2001) is articulated through the notion proposed by Anna Everett of an audience's "digitextual" (Everett, 2003) relationship to media content. Expanded from the literary term "intertextuality" to include digital texts and productions, digitextuality describes a process whereby the connections and meanings between texts can be discerned not only by the act of allusions (as in intertextual situations), but through physical structures as well. Citing the structure of the internet as an example, Everett sees the act of physically inserting links from one media text into the body of another – for example, the placing of a flash video clip into the body of a web page – as an expansion of the "earlier [textual] practices of bricoloage, collage, and other modernist and postmodernist" practices into the digital age (Everett, 2003).

The implications of digitextuality for audiences are situated firmly in their relationship to a multiplicity of texts that co-exist both in actuality and in the consciousness of each audience member. In order to understand the variety of digitextual media content that has arisen as a result of this crossing of media platforms, audiences are required to develop cross-referential viewing behaviours as well as a capacity to form an understanding of the digitextual links – both semiotic and aesthetic – that informs the bulk of contemporary media content (Everett, 2003). As a result of the digitextual nature of media content, both in relation to the orientation of content and the generation of meaning, audiences are necessarily positioned as active partners in the overall media landscape, a role that has become a key factor in the marketing of mass media content.

In an attempt to appeal to a more sophisticated, media savvy audience, major content producers have endeavoured to engage and involve the audience in more than just the narrative of a media product. "'Behind-the-scenes'" footage and documentary features on DVDs are an attempt to generate a sense of inclusion for the audience by promoting the importance of the "inside knowledge" afforded by special features on DVDs. In what theorist Barbara Klinger (2001) describes as the "hardware aesthetic" the amount and quality of special features on a DVD, as well as the technical quality of the actual DVD itself, is paramount in catching the attention of discerning audiences whose position in relation to the media text is accordingly elevated to that of a fellow producer or practitioner through participation in the critique of a DVD release of a film or television series based on its technical merits.

This focus on the technical merits of a film flatters an audience's sense of equality and generates a sense that their ability to engage with a media text is not purely confined to the processes of understanding, appreciation and interpretation. It is also part and parcel of a process of integration in which audiences consolidate the public spectacle of a media product into their own private space. Klinger (2001) notes an "increasingly dynamic interplay between film, private life and public enterprise" whereby the act of purchasing and ordering private collections of films and television shows, and their related home theatre technologies, allows spectators to situate the films as part of their own private viewing environment. Through the

act of organising the films according to individual methods of arrangement, audiences are creating new contexts under which the films are perceived. Collections that are orientated by actor preference remove generic stigmas from a film's classification with the onus of demarcation placed on chronology or actor group. Likewise, a series of films organised according to alphabetic order diminishes actor and generic preference. Consider this level of control, in addition to the optimisation of viewing and aural conditions within the home theatre and the creation of "a home-made universe out of…cinematic trophies" (Klinger, 2001) does, indeed, give the audience a sense of ultimate control within their own private space.

In an environment where home entertainment technology has progressed to a level that equals often ageing theatrical complexes, the very fact that mass media producers have found more commercial success in offering to share their, albeit packaged, secrets as an additional incentive to savvy media customers is testament to the narrowing of the producer/audience gap. It might be said then that the availability of VHS and DVD has allowed audiences to create their own forms of interpretation, orientation and organisation into which the media product is but a part of their overall media experience.

Fandom: Technologically enabled audiences

Perhaps the clearest demonstration of the way in which media technologies have enabled audiences a deeper level of involvement in the texts they admire is to examine the impact technological development has had on the experience of fandom.

For a long time in the history of mass entertainment, cinema and its live action equivalent, theatre, reigned supreme as the only visual form of entertainment. Audiences were exposed to the product of the stage or screen under single viewing situations where interaction with the narrative was mostly restricted to spontaneous comprehension and brief discussion following the often one-off event. With the advent of television in the 1940s, a new form of technology-assisted mass entertainment media emerged. With it came a spate of regularly serialised shows that were broadcast directly into the living rooms of millions of people at the same time. The result of such broad exposure saw the rapid growth of communities of like-minded individuals whose loyalty to the narratives, characters and the longevity of the shows they followed only strengthened the longer the shows were on air (Jenkins, 2002).

Mass and simultaneous distribution of the same content drew the attention of numerous individuals at the same time with the attachment that developed for these television programs eventually becoming the basis for the creation communities recognised as fans (Jenkins, 2002).

The formation of these fan communities eventually led to the development of methods of communication and interaction. Fan magazines provided an outlet for dedicated fans to publish articles expressing their opinions on the progress of storylines and the plights of various characters, allowing for a previously private process of critiquing and analysing to be brought into the public (Jenkins, 2002). The circulation of fan magazines among a select readership sparked debate and further contribution, adding volume to the voice of the audience through their participation. Audiences spanning great distances were united through the circulation of such fan magazines that saw an expansion of the notion espoused by the theorist Janet Staiger of an active participation in the public sphere through talk:

Even if the audience has been perfectly bourgeois and quiet during the movie, talk happens afterwards…Part of that spectoral use seems clearly to be personal but other values are social – the creation of communities of people who use the text as objects which to construct networks of attachments, discovery, and, sometimes, authority and power…(Staiger, 2001).

While talking about films with friends keeps the film "alive" within the context of social networking and popular culture for the duration of the discussion, published articles entrenched the works in the public sphere through print. The very act of producing commentary on a semi-permanent medium, such as a magazine publication, gives both the commentary, and the work to which the commentary refers, a historical relevance that discussion alone cannot attain. Once committed to paper, a record of the interaction between the media product and the audience is produced, one that not only accounts for its presence, but also documents the magnitude of the encounter and its significance in the wider scope of the media and popular culture landscape.

Written works relating to various aspects of a favoured television show – whether critical, analytical, informative or appreciative in nature – afforded the audience a semblance of involvement in the media texts they admired. The organisation of fan communities provided a place where these views could be expressed within the safe environment of fellow enthusiasts whose ability to comprehend and accept the motivation of critique and criticism was guaranteed (Jenkins, 2002). Secure within the structure of such communities, fan activism developed as a by-product of the level of affiliation fans felt for their favourite show, and perhaps for the first time, demonstrated to media producers both the presence and power of fan communities.

In 1966 NBC produced the first season of the science fiction series *Star Trek* (later known under the retronym *Star Trek: The Original Series*), that although not immediately successful in terms of ratings, gathered a dedicated following of fans who were instantly drawn to the futuristic storyline and idealistic blend of race and gender, at least for the time. NBC threatened to cancel the show after its first season had delivered minimal ratings and generated lacklustre interest from advertisers. The series was prolonged only at the behest of Lucille Ball, co-founder of the independent production company *Desilu* (Stanley, 2008) which was responsible for developing the show. At the end of the second season cancellation was again threatened when an unprecedented letter-writing campaign from the series" fan base persuaded NBC network executives to allow production of a third season to proceed (Solow and Justman, 1996). Despite the fans" best efforts, the series was eventually cancelled in 1969 at the end of its third season, however, the co-ordinated effort displayed by its fans both surprised the series" producers and demonstrated for the first time the potential for audiences to directly affect and participate in their favourite shows.

The strength of the fans" response, and the reaction of the network to such pressure, was seldom repeated in the history of television, however, the event did signal a foretaste in the way media producers negotiated their relationships with the wider audience. The advent of the internet allowed fan communities to take their groups online into an environment that provided greater access to a larger number of individuals who shared similar interests and passions. Where previously the connections of their community had been sustained through the publication of fan magazines (Jenkins, 2002), the internet provided an avenue through which a

wider variety of fan works could be disseminated to a greater variety of people. The existence of web pages dedicated to specific films, television shows and actors not only allowed for the publication of fan works, it also produced a physical representation of the different groups of fans whose interests bound them together in a virtual community. As a whole, the community utilised the web pages as noticeboards, soap boxes and the virtual equivalent of the Speaker's Corner, where information, images, updates and opinions are expressed on a public forum. Fans became reporters, photographers and reviewers within their own communities, notifying each other and other interested parties of the latest developments of their favourite star, film or television show.

The collective power of fandom and, in particular, fandom as it is manifested online is illustrated by the response to its existence by mass media companies. In what can only be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the albeit marketing importance of these grassroots organisations, mass media companies have often demonstrated an eagerness to engage with selected fan organisations in an effort to establish direct links with the audience. In a somewhat "if you can't beat them, join them" approach, mass media companies regularly supplement their official websites with links to a selection of authorised fan sites that are often able to gather a wider scope of information on particular projects that may be logistically or legally feasible for official outlets. The wish to retain as much legal and financial control over their productions is still present, of course, with the prevalence and popularity of fan sites also often drawing threats of legal action from media companies over copyright infringements. More often, however, the decision is made to embrace collaboration with the producers of fan sites through the legitimisation of a select few which not only negates the "unauthorised" websites and video postings, but also allows for a level of supervision of the information released.

At times, links with fan websites can prove valuable to companies wishing to protect the secrets of their productions. In 2000 the producers of the reality series *Survivor* released a miss-information campaign relating to the location of the next instalment of the show through their official website, which was subsequently picked up a number of fan sites. The distribution of this "leaked" information resulted in successfully diverting attention away from the actual location of the series and thus allowing the company to retain the "surprise" factor on which the show so heavily relied (Jenkins, 2002).

Fans of cinematic presentations were able to engage with the media product of their choice through discussion and interpretation, bringing it into the wider consciousness of popular culture by simply engaging in conversation, and keeping it present within the public sphere by sharing opinions and thoughts. With the growth of fan groups centred on the rise of television, its stars and its shows, a new method of interaction developed between the audience and the media product.

Published in fan magazines, discussion regarding the merits of storylines, character arcs and accuracy revealed an audience that was heavily vested in both the development of the narrative as well as possessing a thorough knowledge of the mythology from which the narrative originated. It was, perhaps, a natural progression then that the next stage in the evolution of these writings was the production of fiction related to the original narrative. Fan fiction first originated within fan magazines as extrapolated storylines surrounding favourite characters, and has since grown to include published novels bearing storylines independent

from the original (Jenkins, 2002). Science Fiction is the genre that is the most popular, leading to a series of books inspired by films such as *Star Wars* and *Babylon 5* and television series such as *Star Trek, Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Doctor Who*. Fan-written companion books have spanned a variety of genres and formats, with action films holding the main stock of potential for the creation of publications promising the "inside scoop".

The ease of internet uploading has allowed fans to now bypass the slightly more arduous task of arranging and organising printed publication with the online publication of both written and audio-visual fan works dedicated to the exploration of the star or storyline of popular films and television shows. The wealth of websites dedicated to re-writing aspects of the *Harry Potter* narrative is testament to both the popularity of the series and its characters, as well as to the depth of knowledge and familiarity of the narrative's avid fans.

Fan fiction allows audiences a unique way of engaging with their favourite media product. Many works of fan fiction demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the narrative world and the histories of the characters that inhabit them, a depth of knowledge that is in no way inferior to that of the professional writers on whose ideas the narrative originally germinated. This level of interaction allows the audience to physically participate in the extension of the narrative world of the film or television show, and play an active part in generating aspects of the narrative that, although not "official", retains as much significance within the wider realm of popular culture as the original. Once entered into the public consciousness the possibility of the plotlines developed by fan fiction often spark as much debate and intrigue as the official versions. Fan fiction empowers audiences, giving them almost equal control over the fate of their favourite narratives in the most direct way possible; that is by participating in the creation process itself. The lives and plights of favourite characters are changed to fit their interpretation of the narrative world, and far from simply viewing, reacting and discussing the results of another's work, the fan bypasses the creator altogether to create what they view as the most appropriate version of the narrative.

Through the process of creating their own works, fans have achieved, to a limited extent, an active voice in the life and mythology of the characters and narratives they so avidly follow.

Online fostering of Audience/Producers

As mentioned, online mediums have allowed for the growth of fan works, both in textual and audio-visual format. The development of Web 2.0 facilities, such as YouTube, AOL and so on, have not only allowed for fictional fan works to be hosted and shared online, but for any works that fit the specified technical requirements to be uploaded without the need for an accompanying website. This has resulted in the birth of a fairly new notion of the User Generated Content (UGC) (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, 2008). The presence of such content has resulted in a paradigmatic shift in the approach to the structure of the producer/audience relationship, one where the distinctions between both roles have become increasingly distorted.

Audiences are no longer restricting their range of viewing to professionally produced media products and are diversifying, instead, their viewing habits to include a variety of UGC, ranging from short clips found on video hosting sites, to fictional stories published on fan sites, to the perusing of another's photos and activities on Facebook (Grace, 2008). It is for this reason that

the distinction between what constitutes a "producer" and "audience" has become increasingly blurred. As the definition of what constitutes media content grows, the distance between the producer and the audience narrows until it becomes virtually impossible to differentiate between the entertainer and those being entertained.

Indeed, the term "audience", which traditionally denotes a person who witnesses a performance, becomes problematic as the notions of media content pathways become increasingly convoluted. We are all becoming "viewers" (Harris, 2002) in an environment where the distinctions between "mainstream" media – denoting professional, proper, authentic – and "grassroots" media – denoting amateur, unconventional, underground – narrows significantly and, at times, crosses over. The structures of these two forms of media still exist in an institutional manner, however, the disparate viewing patterns of contemporary audiences browsing and grazing across varying media forms, coupled with the shift in the definition of what comprises "entertainment" media, has, in effect, affected a grassroots revolution of sorts in the way the "audience" as a whole is considered. When YouTube clips and Facebook photos constitute a large portion of media entertainment viewing behaviour then the "audience" of one can just as easily become the "producer" of another.

The popularity of UGC among these viewers, and the viral way in which they are found, popularised and promoted through word-of-mouth recommendation, dramatically increases the exposure of specific works within the wider viewing community. Oftentimes the accessibility of prosumer filming and editing software means that many original works of enthusiasts outside of "professional" media circles receives a large amount of attention from the global viewer community which, in turn, attracts attention from the "top" of the hierarchy. Increasingly, media producers are "discovering" content created in the grassroots – mostly posted on video hosting and social networking websites – and are then bringing them to mainstream distribution, hoping in the process to inherit the ready-made audience base that developed organically in the grassroots.

An interesting case in point is the online show *Quarterlife* which was pitched as a show to the ABC (America) network but was initially rejected (Cieply, 2007). After minor re-writing, the series was produced online and broadcast through MySpace and its own website. The popularity of the series online caught the attention of ABC rival NBC and it was picked up for televised broadcast in early 2008 (Carter, 2007). Poor ratings resulted in the cancellation of the show after its pilot screening, however, the influence of the wider viewing community, and the attention that traditional media outlets are paying to online forms, signals interesting developments in the relationship between traditional and non-traditional media as well as audiences and producers.

The production of original works by viewers has allowed for a form of public self expression that spans a range of quality and originality from the cutting of photos to music, to scripted short films and, as is demonstrated by the example of *Quarterlife*, the production of broadcast worthy serials. While the internet has provided an avenue for the housing of these self-created works, it has also provided a medium through which "professional" works are disseminated and distributed, often illegally. The ease of access to these "professional" works has resulted in the emergence of an interesting phenomenon that sees the viewer changing the way in which an audience engages with a narrative. Fan fiction works demonstrate a viewer's ability to interact

with the mythology, characters and storylines of established narratives, and while these are relevant to the wider popular culture environment surrounding the work, little direct change is affected on the actual initial narrative itself.

With the availability of prosumer editing software and the proliferation of "professional" footage online, the creation of a multitude of re-edited works that are based on original "professional" media content has appeared. These re-edited works directly demonstrate a viewer's re-working of an existing narrative and often results in the creation of a distinct new narrative that is unique and removed from the context of the original. The *Brokeback* series that appeared on YouTube at the end of 2006 demonstrates this eloquently with the creation of short "trailers" that borrowed the *Brokeback Mountain* theme and applied it to existing footage from famous blockbusters of the time. The most famous example being the *Harry Potter and the Brokeback Goblet* clip (Rai2121, 2006) which, through a combination of music from *Brokeback Mountain* and re-edited footage from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, suggested an intimate relationship between Harry and Ron, the likes of which were found between the two main characters in *Brokeback Mountain*. Other examples include the re-editing of footage from *Sleepless in Seattle* (demislw, 2006), which shifts the genre from a romantic comedy to a horror film, and the re-editing of footage from *The Shinning* (neochosen, 2006) to present it as a feel-good family movie.

Through the act of restructuring these clips, the viewer demonstrates an understanding of the basic workings of genre and storytelling as well as an ability to re-contextualise individual images – a skill that is not restricted to "professional" media producers as is evidenced by the popularity and convincing nature of some of the top-end re-cut trailers. Activities that would have been shared privately between fans in the past are now, through the far-reaching nature of the internet, widely spread beyond international boundaries and presents alternative forms of entertainment based on mainstream content that elevates the creators of that content to a level akin to the providers of the original footage.

All these online/offline forms of user-produced content demonstrates the visible vocality and activity of the contemporary audience, a vision of the audience that had previously been largely difficult to describe in any depth based on the individual and private nature of interactions of actions such as web navigation, film collection and multimedia multitasking (Livingstone, 2004). Many aspects of this interaction are still largely untraceable, however, the view logging capabilities and comments of video hosting sites has at least allowed a traceability to one aspect of contemporary audiences" media behaviour.

Conclusion

The audience relationship with producers and media content has changed dramatically over the past few decades and especially within the last twenty years. The modernisation of media technologies, and the emancipation of the media image from the cinema or television screen onto portable devices, has moulded a new generation of audience members capable of absorbing a wide variety of content at the same time, one that is no longer content to wait for content on a weekly or daily basis. The proliferation of prosumer filming and editing softwares, and the rise of Web 2.0 technology, has also provided an avenue through which audience

members themselves can create content that often substitutes mainstream products that are deemed too long or too outdated for a modern audience's tastes. The challenge facing media producers now has, perhaps, shifted from trying to generate loyalty for particular brands, stars or shows, to developing ways of capturing the attention of a mobile audience capable of generating their own entertainment. Given the preference for bite-sized content, and the wandering attention span of the contemporary audience, it is conceivable that a change in narrative and distribution approach is warranted.

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