

Citizenship and Consumption: Convergence Culture, Transmedia Narratives and the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

Henry Jenkins' recent publications on convergence have focused on the way that the active audience, equipped with the productive and distributive tools of digital technology might transform the waning public sphere in the USA, at the expense of effectively excluding discussion of the transnational and uneven practices of cultural convergence. However, in his work the stakes of convergence culture are clearly established: empowered consumers (potentially) have an active role in transforming – and democratizing – governments and corporations. This paper will examine what this emergent politicized form of consumption/production means in the context of the unevenness of global participation in the information economy.

By focusing on the tactics of participation that are deployed in the global 'South' through a case study of the consumption of transmedia narratives in Venezuela this paper will demonstrate what is at stake in the shift to a media paradigm of convergence.

Keywords

Convergence Culture, Creative Industries, Digital Divide, Ethnography, Globalization, *The Matrix*, Media Literacy, Transmedia Storytelling, Uneven Development,

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary research on transmedia storytelling situates it in a larger field of convergence culture. Studies of convergence culture have been conducted largely using research and case studies from developed countries, although they do suggest that the practices that constitute convergence culture are global phenomena. One of the key examples used to demonstrate the complexity of convergence culture is the flow of 'Evil Bert'/Osama Bin Laden pictures from one website into the world news through a televised demonstration [5]. This paper will explore how uneven development between regions might complicate the discourse on convergence culture. While convergence culture is global in scale, it is enacted through a multiplicity of localized and material practices. In order to demonstrate and explore local practices I have drawn on fieldwork research conducted in Caracas, Venezuela. After briefly outlining contemporary understanding of convergence culture and transmedia storytelling, the paper will explore what is at stake in transmedia storytelling in the developing world.

Finally, using examples from my fieldwork, I will examine practices of transmedia storytelling reception – but not as a creative or artistic praxis – in Venezuela. Through this I will argue that the global scale of transmedia storytelling takes on drastically different stakes in the context of this localized study.

2. CONVERGENCE CULTURE

Convergence culture marks a shift from traditional models of audience interactions with media. The internet in particular is used to underscore the new potentials of this shift, by focusing on the level of access to media production and distribution that this technology affords the 'typical' consumer. In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Jenkins situates convergence culture in a radically new form of media culture, which is characterized by the participatory power of the audience precipitated by digital networked technology. Behind this is a global system of co-operation between media industries through conglomeration, partnerships and licensing. Jenkins describes the participatory audience as 'migratory' [6], in the sense that they will: 'seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content' [6]. Jenkins emphasizes the audiences' productive role and how this shapes and influences narrative arcs and genres by mobilizing their collective power.

I would like to complicate this brief description of convergence culture by drawing upon two other approaches to the same phenomena. While Jenkins does mention these aspects of convergence culture, the work of P. David Marshal and Marsha Kinder are both far more explicit in placing caveats on the consumer empowerment that convergence culture affords.

In *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Videogames*, Marsha Kinder recognizes that the key innovation of videogames are the choices and challenges posed to the audience through interactivity. To her this suggests a new form of empowerment, albeit one that is defined by consumption. At the game screen the players are constructed as 'consumerist subjects who can more readily assimilate and accommodate whatever objects they encounter' [8]. Thus videogames: 'help prepare young players for full participation in this new age of interactive multimedia – specifically, by linking interactivity with consumerism' [my emphasis, 8]. Kinder reads this link at the textual level, her study conducted with the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) version of *Super Mario Bros: Mario Madness*, notes how

empowerment – and transformation – within the game is always through consumption.

In addition Kinder reads this trope linking interactivity with consumerism at a meta-level, where she recognizes videogames as heralding a new media aesthetic, that she dubs ‘transmedia intertextuality’, and an imbricated form of commodification, the ‘supersystem’. In this configuration, the consumption of one text leads to directly to another through deliberate intertextual linkages forming a contained media supersystem that crosses many media platforms. In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins uses *The Matrix* trilogy as an example of the ‘transmedia storytelling’ [5], the three films containing deliberate lacunae that are filled in by other The Matrix® products, *The Animatrix* collection of anime, *The Matrix Comics*, and the videogame *Enter the Matrix*. I suggest that Kinder’s taxonomy of transmedia intertextuality and the supersystem, relate closely to Jenkins’ more contemporary usage of the term transmedia storytelling. In the earlier work a distinction has been made between the mode of movement between media texts (transmedia intertextuality), and the process of world-making and branding (the supersystem).

The existence of supersystems is also regarded as evidence of the structuring and over determinism of interactive media. P. David Marshall reiterates the tension between commodification and technological empowerment in *New Media Cultures* [11]. Marshall regards the supersystem as a commercial usurpation and structuring of play that is: ‘designed to have a complete system of interaction for the audience with all forms of investment and engagement made possible and realizable’ [11]. This closed system of engagement envisioned by Marshall is the antithesis of the creativity and dynamism that Jenkins associates with transmedia storytelling.

I suggest that transmedia storytelling is double-edged and ambivalent. They are structured, but also shift distributions of power. Kinder’s position that underscores the imbrication of empowerment with consumerism, strikes the delicate balance that the other approaches obfuscate.

3. THE UNDERDEVELOPED WORLD

3.1 Creative Industries

Because transmedia storytelling relies on corporate synergies in order to establish deals between multiple actors, their development is centered in what Saskia Sassen dubs ‘global cities’ [12]. These cities have the infrastructure to support the institutional networks that constitute the creative industries. With few variances these industries are located in the developed world, with several key cities in particular producing a large proportion of globally circulating media.

In the case of Venezuela, the center of the cultural industries for Latin America is usually considered to be Miami, which is located outside of the region [13]. Even though the majority of the region shares a common language, there is little regional media exchange. Since the 1980s there has been a notable drop in autochthonous media production in the region [5]. Néstor García Canclini in *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*, suggests that this is due to the failure of the Latin American cultural industries to develop and integrated audiovisual policy [5]. Terry Flew in *New Media: An*

Introduction, divides convergence into three of interrelated categories, the salient category being that of industry convergence, the process of industry conglomeration [3]. García Canclini is advocating convergence based on the cooperation of the various audio-visual media industries. However, even if this kind of policy were adopted it would be difficult for small region economies like Venezuela’s to engage in world-making because of the lack of infrastructure, and the subsequent loss of talent to offshore centers of the creative economy.

3.2 Media Literacy

Transmedia storytelling suggests a new kind of literacy, which does not only involve the knowledge of multiple media forms but also on the integration of media from these disparate sources. This literacy has the potential to be exclusionary, especially when construed in light of the stakes that it is given by Jenkins. At the end of his chapter discussing *The Matrix* as an example of transmedia storytelling Jenkins gestures towards a wider stakes in the process of ‘reading’ transmedia stories. He states, transmedia storytelling:

...may be the next step in that process of cultural evolution – a bridge to a new kind of culture and a new kind of society. In a hunting culture, kids played with bows and arrows. In an information society, they play with information [6].

Crucial to the importance of transmedia storytelling in the knowledge society, and creative industries is Jenkins’ demonstration of the ways that the audiences of transmedia texts use the internet to coordinate, collaborate on, and conduct research. This suggests that videogames are valuable teaching and learning tools, not just in terms of learning content, but also in developing the skills to use the internet effectively, particularly as producers of new knowledge. This follows the general shift from knowledge to creativity as the focus of learning, which Charles Leadbeater believes is crucial in adding value to the creative industries [9].

3.3 Consumption and Citizenship

New paradigms of knowledge create new forms of global connections, and also new forms of inequalities. García Canclini points out, in the contemporary epoch access to information is the key to being able to act autonomously and creatively [5]. The barriers that already exist have had a significant role in creating a transnational elite that has restructured understandings of national communities. García Canclini’s project is to radically reformulate the rights of citizens’ to definite rights around material consumption rather than abstract ideals. The ability to think, act and make informed decisions is based on access to information that García Canclini argues is the peoples’ by right. Considering the political dimension of Jenkins’ discussion of, the inequalities caused by barriers placed on information are reified and entrenched by convergence culture. He believes that convergence culture is a return to the kind of grassroots approach to democracy on which the USA was founded [6]. His argument is that through increasing access to participation, convergence

culture will reinvigorate the public sphere, and collaborative consensual politics will triumph over the partisan [6]. *If* convergence culture holds this democratizing potential then I suggest that *even access* to it should be a central concern.

3.4 The Black Hole

In *End of Millennium*, Manuel Castells argues that the increasingly central role that information capital plays in the global networked society creates and entrenches regions and areas of both inclusion and exclusion to the benefits of those networks, establishing a class of locations and people that are not valued. He states:

There is also exclusion of people and territories which, from the perspective of dominant interests in global, informational capitalism, shift to a position of structural irrelevance. This widespread, multiform process of social exclusion leads to the constitution of what I call, taking the liberty of a cosmic metaphor, the *black hole of informational capitalism*. These are regions of society from which, statistically speaking, there is no escape... [1].

Even if transmedia storytelling can provide an encounter with the skills necessary for 21st century survival, these burgeoning skills may have no constructive outlet. Underdeveloped countries often lack the resources and infrastructure to support a creative economy. Lugo et. al. in 'Latin America's Cultural Industries Still Play Old Games: From Donkey Kong to Banana Republic', outline the position of Venezuela vis-à-vis the creative industries, arguing that the current state of the global industry effectively excludes smaller economies from developing their own industries, a position which is echoed by Aphra Kerr and Roddy Flynn in 'Revisiting Globalisation through the Movie and Digital Games Industries' [7,10]. For the remainder of this paper I will examine the practices of the audiences of transmedia storytelling in an environment of exclusion, using a case study of Venezuela.

4. EXCLUSION

Jenkins acknowledges that the experience of convergence is uneven. He states: 'audiences outside the "developed" economies often have access only to the films and in some cases, only to pirated copies that have scenes missing' [6]. This example reflects just one of many conditions which may face the audience of a transmedia story during the process of world-building that makes their experience significantly different from those described in Jenkins' US focused case studies. In these cases, the material conditions in which media consumption takes place have impacted on the reception of the transmedia world in that location. However, in this section I will demonstrate that the disparities are potentially more extreme than Jenkins suggests.

4.1. Reading Not Writing

In the gigantic mall of Sambil, in Caracas, the three shops selling videogames were mostly empty, but often outside them children would congregate, to watch the displays endlessly repeating the start sequence of *Super Mario Sunshine*, or *FIFA Football 2005*. Reduced to watching an interactive media, these children were –

at that moment at least – locked out of participatory culture, readers in a world increasingly defined by the interplay of reading and writing, observers in a media paradigm characterized by action.

This I believe is a problem of considerable significance. One of the ways that Jenkins situates transmedia narratives in convergence culture is through the considerable body of fan writing and productions that many of them have generated. He points out that this has changed the notion of literacy to include production: 'we should not assume that someone possesses media literacy if they can consume but not express themselves' [6]. Even if the audiences have access to the various media of the transmedia world, their literacy can only be gauged by their contributions.

In Venezuela the publicly situated context of digital media consumption and production makes it difficult to develop this kind of literacy. While users demonstrated competency in using fan resources – by finding maps for *Half-Life: Counter-Strike*, looking up episodes of *Charmed*, and searching for FAQs and walkthroughs – there was no demonstrable acts of production. At least not in the context convergence culture, where the appropriation of a text is emphasized, rather productions in the internet café environment were focused on school and work.

This area constitutes a crucial unevenness in the notion of convergence culture. The empowering possibilities of transmedia narratives are available to participants in a country like Venezuela, only as spectators. Participation is limited by sparse access to privately owned PCs, and despite the users' having highly developed consumptive literacies, production was focused on work-related activities rather than playful explorations of transmedia worlds. I suggest that the context of use in Venezuela places a premium on 'constructive' use of the short amount of time most users have at the computer interface. Thus they either throw themselves into work or play, avoiding the ambiguity of productive play.

One of the ways that audience production impacts on global power dynamics is by challenging corporate ownership of the product through fan production. This challenge I suggest is focused in certain areas of the globe. However, Venezuela posits its own peculiar challenge to corporate ownership. Rather than the nebulous area of fan-production, the challenge stems from the clearly illegal way that most digital media is obtained in Venezuela. While media owners in this case have a much clearer pathway to asserting their legal rights, without the support of local government this is impossible. Furthermore, to return to Garcia Canclini's argument about citizenship and consumer rights the ethical position of media owners in this case is similarly unclear as it is when intellectual property rights are used to shut down fan-based productions in the developed world.

4.2 Closed Circuits?

The main criticism that has been asserted in relation to convergence culture is that it creates a system of interaction for which every possibility is fully realized. Jenkins' approach emphasizes the audiences' productive role and how this shapes and influences narrative arcs and genres by mobilizing their collective power. He does not explicitly address the notion that it structures and contains creativity, rather his argument focuses on

how convergence culture rescales the potential of the audience to challenge corporate ownership of media content. The discussion can be read in the context of Deleuze's notion of the society of control; what occurs through the internet is the modulation of audience participation into a metastable relationship between audiences and the media producers [2]. This is evident in the strong corporate presence in, and control over, the structures of control. The productions of fans are imitated by corporations as promotions, the participation is encouraged and organized into channels, and individuals productions become genres of, and assets within, the supersystem.

But can audience products always become a product within the supersystem? In Venezuela this is not the case, and furthermore intellectual property violations are used to create profits for producers, rather than circulated in a process of negotiation and community building. However, the illegal production of transmedia materials is prolific in Venezuela in a different context, as a visit to any street market demonstrates. Among the pirated DVDs, toys, games and CDs there is a space for traditional handicrafts that have used transmedia imagery without a license. This folk art represents a tactical move from the artisans, whose livelihood is under threat due to the many pressures of globalization. The presence of this kind of material on the street – a wooden nightstand painted with Strawberry Shortcake, a piñata in the shape of Shrek, or Spiderman – demonstrates the power and ubiquity of transmedia storytelling, and also a dimension of the phenomena that indicates a tactical dimension underlying its omnipresence.

Convergence culture is in Jenkins formulation a new form of media culture. It is apparent though that through convergence culture old practices have been invigorated. This point is not lost on Jenkins, who points out that the phenomena of convergence culture is just as much about renewing approaches to old media as it is about new media. However, here I wonder how far this idea of renewal and redefinition can be taken. In this context artisans have produced objects that are parts of transmedia worlds, but also have a meaning and use within another circuit or circulation of meaning that is entirely dependent on context. The *Spiderman* piñata that I saw hanging in *El Parque De Este*, is a very specific local materialization that enacts the global. While the shape and color of the piñata place it in a global transmedia world; its context of use and contents situate it in another symbolic terrain – that of the fiesta. An area that Garcia Canclini in *Transforming Modernity: Popular Culture in Mexico* characterizes as a:

ceremonial readaptation, a new state for a torn community that finds in the fiesta a means to reassert those elements of its identity that come from the past and, in changes, a way to update the representation of its hardships and inequalities as well as its historical cohesion [4].

This piñata is perhaps an extreme example, but I suggest that it demonstrates a challenge to the idea that transmedia worlds structure all possible meanings, as Marshall contends. In this case the global transmedia object is able to evoke a historic continuity that stems from a specific localized context. This imbrication

and interplay of context highlights the inequalities that underlie convergence culture.

5. CONCLUSION

Convergence culture invokes a new form of consumption that is participatory and a subtle renegotiation of power dynamics between producers and consumers that accompany it. Not so much a new phenomena as amplification, through digital media, of the productive and distribution power of the audience. This paper has concentrated on demonstrating how this phenomenon also amplifies the scale of unevenness and inequality between the overdeveloped and developing world. Convergence culture, marks a shift in thinking about the relationship between the audience and media producers but the impact of this shift in overdeveloped economies should not overshadow the new forms of sociocultural stratification that it produces.

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