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When Television Became Old – Facing Evolutionary Challenge

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A short paper on the Technology and Cultural Form of Web Drama.

Keywords: Media Studies 2.0, Post Television Studies, Television as Software, Web Drama, Good Old Political Economy

CRISIS – WHAT CRISIS?

Media Studies has been undergoing something of a crisis – having more or less established its disciplinary identity it finds itself under threat of dissolution in response to the rapid development of digital cultures. So I want to frame my observations round the calls for a Media Studies 2.0 that have occasioned a good deal of debate in the UK since last SCMS met.

The *Media Studies 2.0* idea was first articulated by David Gauntlett in his blog in 2007. In January 2008, William Merrin developed Gauntlett's pointed intervention - Merrin's reflections are prompted by the anxiety that, as a media academic, his knowledge and competencies are increasingly irrelevant to the students he teaches,

Media studies was an academic product of the broadcasting era. It developed out of a concern with mass society and issues of mass communication, mass persuasion and the formation and control of public opinion. (Merrin 2008)

Now, however, it is absurd to be a media studies lecturer when,

...your students know more about media than you do. We know the discipline and the texts, ideas and arguments but our students surpass us in their knowledge, use and navigation of the contemporary media world: they are at home in it; we're always playing catch-up. (Merrin 2008)

Importantly, Merrin understands this as much more than a problem of a teaching staff being unable to keep pace with the latest gizmo available in permanent upgrade culture,

What is fundamental is the way in which these users are reconfiguring their own social relations and expectations and producing entirely new modes of experience and knowledge. This is where the gap lies. This is the world we no longer share with our students. (Merrin 2008)

POST-TELEVISION STUDIES: TRANSFORMATION AND MUTATION?

Television Studies provides an apparently obvious case of new paradigms emerging in response to changing objects of study. The anxious argument rehearsed anecdotally by media academics is that the cultural form that we all identified as television is disappearing. The ways that we defined our object of study suddenly seem inoperable. Ask your students what they are doing when they watch the BBC's iPlayer or other VoD service – they probably won't tell you that they are 'watching telly'. Television studies has defined the medium through the development of Raymond Williams's idea of 'flow'; television was characterized by the continuous relationships of one programme segment to another. This in turn was highly influential on conceptions of televisual narration (see Ellis' *Visible Fictions*, 1982) and through audience research which identified the importance of the schedule in determining and reflecting the rhythms of daily family life, as well as the importance of the television as a material technology situated in specific domestic spaces used by particular peoples at different times. According to traditional TV studies, this assemblage of institutions, peoples, spaces and technologies produced particular regimes of ideological reproduction and commercial exploitation.

However, these medium specific qualities are mutating as TV hybridizes itself. Televisual content can now be experienced not just in the domestic living room, but in every room of the house on multiple sets, on PCs, laptops, on mobile phones whilst waiting for a bus, on the train, in clubs, pubs, shopping malls and airport lounges. The televisual has overflowed its twentieth century

channels and is dissolving into the material textures of the everyday. If the ways in which television was defined no longer apply, then the critical question becomes what is television now? If television was defined by technological scarcity (Ellis 2000), flow, and the schedule, but is now experienced as plentiful, fragmented, and individualized, then is it still television at all?

However television has not disappeared, just as cinema did not disappear with the rise of television itself, or painting with photography, or photography with digital imaging. Certainly audience share for terrestrial channels is in slow decline, and audience behaviours are changing. But the gradual pace of these changes definitely does not argue for a sudden and wholesale rejection of existing methods. In the UK the internet advertising market exceeded the TV market for the first time last September – but only by about 4%. For sure this is a major milestone in the history of UK TV and the rise of other platforms. However it's a very gradual process – moreover it's a process of mutual historical interdependence, a co evolutionary process in which the big beasts of mass media are adapting to the new ecosystem. The excitement of the decline of mass media through the rise of UGC doesn't actually match the available analysis – Burgess & Green's You Tube study for instance found that 42% of the most popular content over their sample came from traditional media sources. Old media and new combine and circulate in newly symbiotic patterns. The internet makes social networking possible but depends on the communications pipework of the cold War command control communicate infrastructure. Whilst there may be a few epic and epochal battles between the old dinosaurs and the new monsters of the early 21st Century media ecosystem like the Berlusconi State's prosecution of Google in Italy, by and large down in the undergrowth the group formerly known as the audience are happily augmenting their mainstream media consumption through more and more ways of timeshifting (a concept from the 1980s) and social networking (arguably the genuinely novel process).

What should the strategic responses of our discipline be to these shifting sands? How do we navigate so as to ensure a continuity of our best traditions

of criticality with a continuing relevance to students, universities and industries?

TELEVISION AS SOFTWARE

There are still many places where tradition serves us and what's more these are places that continue to hold students interest. However the more we move away from a format like the TV series to new hybrid online formats, to the world of 360 degree programming and participatory media we do find ourselves having to introduce new methods –where our own traditions meet those of HCI, systems design and software engineering. Here the emphasis is in media as software – once television becomes software it feels like new territory (even though I would argue that we've been heading here since the availability of videotape)

Web Drama a site where televisual narrative form meets new practices of social networking. It is therefore a fruitful site for investigating where TV mutates. Here we begin to see ways that User Generated Content has created its own aesthetic; a set of stylistic tropes and social networking conventions that are drawn from the behaviours of non-professional media users. The world of UGC has become the context for new forms of web based entertainment fiction and art. Here for instance the wobblyscope First Person address of camcorder cultures becomes the webcam confessional that has become the 'mastershot' of many web based video forms. (Vlogs were 40% of all YouTube UGC in Burgess & Green's sample) The burgeoning field of Web Drama and online '360 degree' TV spin offs have developed a new diegetic world where there has to be a reason for the camera to be present. The mark of the user, of presence and of technology, has become a precondition.

Examples:

eg. *Happy Slip*, (2006 –) the NY Filipino nurse who has become a web star with her sharp ethnic comedy creating soap operas in which she plays every part. See her range of merchandise!

eg. *Human Pet* (Oct 2006) in which a series of what look like authentic ransom videos were posted online and the audience were invited to help save the victim through their interactions. Eg *World Without Oil* (2007) 'Play it before you live it' distributed ugc drama on Peak Oil and of course *The Guild* (2007). To observe the world of web drama over the past four years is to observe an accelerated hot house laboratory producing the monsters the mutations and the models for the future of televisual storytelling. (see VonViral on Ning for the best collection)

GOOD OLD POLITICAL ECONOMY

What I want to stress is that to understand whats going on here we need to celebrate the creative energy but also understand the determining context of good old political economy – an approach from Media Studies 1.0 that will serve us well if we are to retain any analytic purchase on the hyperbole of Web 2.0 and its Long Tail.

We are familiar enough in old TV studies with the idea that TV is a mechanism for delivering eyeballs to advertisers. We now are in an era where that attention can be measured in ever more precise ways – so although the basic political economy principle remains the same the scale and the modes of its online uses demand new forms of inquiry into the relationships between online marketing, programme form and audience experience.

Its clear that lower barriers to entry into the media market mean an exponentially widening field of availability of media all competing with each other for the attention and subsequent capitalisation to reach profitability. These enterprises are competing very heavily for users, therefore marketing and promotion are key. *These economic conditions have a direct effect upon the media form and the user experience.* The web media user constantly finds herself hailed, solicited, invited to connect. Community management has become the starting point for web marketing – web media invite the user to join, to create a profile, to post blogs or other announcements, to make links, to invite other friends and so on. This is not because media providers just want us all to play nice and have lots of warm friendships. It is because they

are seeking, in a crowded, transient marketplace characterised by a nomadic audience to create *brand engagement*. For users this means that our web media experiences are interrupted by, suffused with and sometimes nearly drown in a sea of advertising and sponsorship content. Pop ups, banners, sponsorships, product placements, interactives and virals that pretend not to be ads are all characteristic of this media ecosystem. Our behaviour becomes data that can be sold on without our understanding and then be used to maintain consumption in whatever segment of the Long Tail our habitus is identified with.

In a more global sense this consequence for users is that our media liberation is even more powerfully tied to a global system of production that is clearly unsustainable. The apparent liberation of the nomadic web media surfer in this light is more like the confinement of the force fed goose engorged on a diet of virtual consumption sufficient to ensure that a steady flow of actual spend is produced.

However for most of us the consequences of the economic base become invisible through their ubiquity or bearable – to be part of a community, to have to encounter lots of ads, many of them mildly entertaining, to have our very specific modes of consumption facilitated – these all seem like small or non existent prices to pay for 24/7 on demand vibrant media.

Despite this intensification of the regimes of consumption through online branding of various kinds the jury on the conventional profitability of web media is still out. Its worth noting that according to *The Guardian* news story in its *Technology* section Apr 9 2009 You Tube will actually lose \$470m this year – despite its wild success. The ad revenue just doesn't balance out the high operating costs where the first copy principle of media economics is overturned and it costs the same to serve a video clip to each user. So although the general principle of eyeballs to advertisers still maintains the fact that it costs the same (in bandwidth and storage terms) to serve each YouTube Video is a new characteristic of media political economies. Despite this Google were prepared to pay \$1.6bn for You Tube in Oct 2006. This

exemplifies one of the principles of financing media innovation. It doesn't matter that your income stream doesn't match your costs if you can create enough press attention and buzz to attract a buyout. This is one of the real meanings of the 'attention economy' – if you can focus attention on your brand you will make money even if there is no actual cash flow. Media start up business plans are characterised by an argument that revenue will match costs at a certain point but at 5 or 10 years all investors will have exit options based on the idea that the company IP will be bought up by a much bigger player. That's actually one of the ways the way that new web 2.0 entrepreneurs are making big money – through speculation on unproven future income – exactly as they did in the good ole Web 1.0 crash. Bebo are a good example. In 2007/8 the teen dominated social network system Bebo were all over the press with reports of their ground breaking web drama *Kate Modern* which was the first UK web drama product to attract attention through its innovative mix of product placement, advertising and sponsorship. *Bebo* claimed that the first series of the show attracted 25 million total views with an average of only 150 000 views per episode. One of the ways they achieved this was by ensuring that the KM videos ran automatically on the Bebo Homepage. The other was to have a powerful PR operation. The Audience is here understood as a fan to be cultivated and 'engaged' in online advertising. Funding therefore comes from Product placement and sponsorship by major brands eg Microsoft, Orange, Disney and Paramount, Kraft Foods, Procter and Gamble, and New Balance.

Product placement and sponsorship is sold by agencies or sales' teams to brands 'media buying' teams. The Costs depend on online advertising metrics. Which now of course have the Ability to measure not only CPM (cost per thousand eyeballs) but also, how long does your mouse 'hover', how long do you spend on a site, how often do you 'click through' to a product site from a sponsorship logo and How often do ads lead to purchases ? Here the attention economy is salami sliced into high value layers that can be packaged up and sold to advertisers. So for instance 2 major plotline integrations, a Minimum of 2 Video inclusions per plotline and a Minimum 20 product placements / Mentions plus Branding across character profiles was

on offer by Bebo for another series in 2008 at £425k for six months. For £100k you could have bought 'Bespoke integration', consisting of: 1 major plotline integration, a minimum of 2 video inclusions, and 2 product placements.

Throughout 2007 Bebo was discussed in online tech gossip as valued at £1bn – (see Arrington, 2007) - it was sold in Mar 2008 for \$850m to AOL – and its numbers have been in decline since. Column inches, press attention and buzz here create economic value way beyond the pennies you or I might get in a revenue share agreement online or by selling branded stationery. The LG15 studio also relaunched themselves the same year as EQAL with a \$5m investment dedicated to promoting online brand engagement.

CONCLUSION

The continuities running through this period of radical change are massive, the weaving of the 'old' and the 'new' is, as the examples above illustrate, incredibly dense and varied. This is not adequately matched by a cleanly separated 'traditional' and a 'mark 2.0' media studies. Our job, as teachers, has never been to merely celebrate media, in either its novel or historical forms. Our task has surely been to equip students with the critical vocabulary to understand ethics and economics as well as aesthetics, ideology as well as technology. Yes, we need new histories of the strange and sticky new forms emerging from the primeval soup of the internet and for this we need an intimacy of engagement with new forms. We need more than anything to allow our field to grow by drawing upon its traditions of critical analysis and reflexivity, and by never forgetting to follow the money.

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