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Title: New Media's Impact on Participatory Culture as Discussed in *Understanding Me, Convergence Culture*, and *Datacloud*

Assignment: Review Essay

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Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide. Jenkins, Henry. New York: New York, New York University Press 2006.

Datacloud: Toward a New Theory of Online Work. Johndan Johnson-Eilola. Cresskill: New Jersey, Hampton Press, Inc. 2005.

Marshall McLuhan: Understanding Me, Lectures and Interviews. McLuhan, Stephanie and Staines, David, eds. Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2003.

The recent cross-pollination of Old and New Media has provided scholars with fertile ground to expound theories and offer analysis of recent trends. If history is any indicator, Old Media will become resituated and rearticulated in new and innovative ways. The ushering in of the Computer Revolution, with hyperbole in tow, has forced many to rethink the relationships we have with technology. While Marshall McLuhan would argue in 1968 that television was a more telling, representative, and participatory medium than print, radio, or movies before it, contemporary scholars such as Henry Jenkins and Johndan Johnson-Eilola would argue that New Media forms, borne out of a marriage of broadcast media and computer technologies provide broader avenues for participatory culture than television could have dreamed of. Here we have not so much of a conflict between the old and the new but rather, a development, a push and pull, and a give and take sort of relationship.

From the offices of *Wired* to the lecture halls of MIT, Marshall McLuhan is hailed as an authority, as a visionary, and a prophet. His works from the 1950s to his death in 1980 showed that revolutionary changes were taking place in the field of Media. The book *Understanding Me*, edited by Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines, is a compilation of many of the scholar's speeches and interviews. Published by MIT Press in 2003, the volume provides a nice introduction to McLuhan's theories and insights.

Many of the passages in *Understanding Me* center around the premise that media forms that were static such as print and radio were out, in favor television, a dynamic new medium that allowed greater audience participation than ever before. McLuhan never argued that print was dead; that would be foolish. Instead he argued that print would see a reincarnation of its previous roles. In the wake of newer media forms, older forms would be reworked and reconstituted to fit into the new order of things. While the book is thought-provoking to be sure, and should be in the library of anyone interested in media studies, it seems that it could have been whittled down, at least a little bit. Though the book may be repetitive in spots, the insights it provides sure make up for that shortcoming.

Early in the book, McLuhan says, "So rapidly have we begun to feel the effects of the electronic revolution in presenting us with new configurations that all of us today are displaced persons living in a world that has little to do with the one in which we grew up (2)." Marshall McLuhan's words spoken in 1959 at a conference for the American Association for Higher Education have never rung truer. At the same talk, McLuhan continues, "The production and consumption of information, that is, is the main business of our time. Culture has taken over commerce (5)."

McLuhan talked about the participatory element of the new medium of television. He argued that television allowed a more immersive experience than previous mediums and that it inherently offered a more engaging experience. When critics sought to argue that television was an inferior medium, he merely compared its advent to the development of print, the telegraph, then radio. He explains: “A mass medium is one in which the message is not directed *at* an audience, but *through* an audience, as it were. The audience is both show and the message (25).” In contrast, print media and radio have very distinct producer-consumer relationships: the author of a text or developer of a radio program produce a commodity to be consumed by the consumer, and this relationship is very much unchangeable. Television, on the other hand, especially with a live audience, allows more participation than previous mediums. McLuhan says, “Let me mention one central feature of the electronic configuration, namely, its strong tendency to reverse producer-consumer relationships. Print over the centuries had established a pattern of producer-consumer relationships. But with the telegraph a century ago the reader of the press had to assume an editorial function unknown to the reader of the pre-telegraph press (8).”

Though much of what McLuhan said in that exemplary first section would be recycled throughout, some new perspectives on participatory culture would emerge by the end of the book. Many scholars today like to point to the participatory aspect of New Media such as blogs and Youtube videos to demonstrate how almost anyone now can produce media. Many of these people have traditionally been mistreated. In the US we often see ethnic minorities, women, teenagers, and homosexuals as usual targets of marginalization.

In light of the Civil Rights Movement that was enveloping our nation in 1967, when speaking to Fordham University, McLuhan addressed the issue of marginalization of minorities and teenagers. He talked about how new forms of participatory culture could stand to benefit African-Americans that had traditionally been down-trodden and discriminated against in the US. McLuhan says, “The Negro is turned on by electricity. The old literacy never turned him on because it rejected him and degraded him (145).” While it would be easy here say that McLuhan is over-generalizing. Perhaps. Still it should be noted that McLuhan was more interested in the social empowerment that was going on in light of the changes made by the information age. It seems that what McLuhan is getting at is this: whereas the older forms of media marginalized the African-Americans, the new forms, participatory in nature, are embracing them.

When reading McLuhan’s work, it is difficult to shake the idea that though television, on some level, was more participatory than print or radio, that this jump was just incremental. The real revolution would not begin to take place until the more widespread use of computers. Videogames would show a participatory element that television could not expect to match in the late 1970s. Increases in computational power would allow mass participation on an unprecedented scale by the mid 1990s. It was really not until the 1990s that this producer-consumer line would begin to blur on a grand scale.

Henry Jenkins, in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* was privy to a more fuller picture of the development of media and the intersection of Old and New media than McLuhan was. Jenkins writes: “Convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and

make connections among dispersed media content.” Whereas McLuhan saw the makings of a cultural revolution of sorts, he saw but “through a glass darkly” as the Apostle Paul would say, this glass was cleared up substantially by the time Jenkins wrote *Convergence Culture* in 2006. While observers liked to speculate as to what the Computer Revolution might bring, it was not until it actually hit, and that changes took root, that observers were able to make sense of it. Regarding the Computer Revolution, Johndan Johnson-Eilola says, “In short, until now, the computer revolution may only, as Zuboff (1989) put it nearly two decades ago, be a ‘revolution’ in the sense of revolving around a point, faster and faster.” While that which is “perfect” or complete is not yet here, recent developments have made clear that we are certainly living in an Information Age of sorts.

But, what does this mean, really? More specifically, what does this mean for the relationship between technology and consumer? What does this mean for the consumer and the producer of media? What changes have New Media wrought? These are all questions posed by Jenkins, who admittedly, doesn’t have all of them. He does however, point us in a plausible direction. Jenkins says: “Much writing about the so-called digital revolution presumed that the outcome of technological change was more or less inevitable. Pool (a media theorist) on the one hand, predicted a period of prolonged transition, during which the various media systems competed and collaborated, searching for the stability that would always elude them.”

If Jenkins has picked the right side, we should not expect Old Media to go away any time soon. Some critics may say that radio is dead. This is only half-true. While radio stations are having more and more difficulty staying open in recent years, they are

having a rebirth on the World Wide Web in the form of Podcasts. Regarding the recasting of Old Media into new roles, McLuhan says (in 1960), “It would seem natural that older forms are put to new uses and discover new roles. The book, for example, in our time has discovered many new functions that it never had fifty or a hundred years ago (35).” Score one for McLuhan.

Jenkins casts much of his findings in light of the changing producer-consumer relationship of the media business. In his first chapter, Jenkins details the complex relationship fans of the show *Survivor* developed with the show, with each other, and to an extent, with the producers. The emergence of online message boards where fans could discuss the show (along with any other conceivable thing) with other like-minded individuals took center stage. While the most devoted of fans enjoyed the show a great deal, it seems that many of them derived at least as much enjoyment from the “spoiling” of the show. Jenkins uses the concept of a “knowledge community” to explain how the group functioned effectively. He explains: “Collective intelligence refers to this ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members. Jenkins reports that the producers of the show were at times forced to put out misinformation in an attempt to confound its audience. This was done in an attempt to keep the *Survivor*’s hardcore following from spoiling all the surprises.

“Searching for the Origami Unicorn” the third chapter, discusses trans-media storytelling in *The Matrix*. Jenkins explains that the movie used viral marketing (short videos on the Web), videogames, and a short animated series to expand its story outside the confines of a traditional two-hour cinematic experience. He says that new Intellectual Properties are more concerned with developing *universes* which to set a movie or book or

game or television series, in the hopes that it could perhaps encompass all four mediums. When producing *The Matrix* movies, the Wachowski Brothers were really looking at things from a New Media perspective. Their story couldn't--and needn't be confined to a two-hour movie. With the advent of the computer and videogames, *The Matrix* story could branch out in multiple directions.

Jenkins' expose on the explosion of fan fiction would further detail this further blurring of the line between producer of media and consumer, and call into question notions of authorship and identity in the regards to the concept of Intellectual Property. While fan fiction first became hugely popular with the *Star Trek* franchise, *Star Wars* would soon enter the fray. While these two franchises have developed, *Harry Potter* took the world by storm in 1997, and has enjoyed a healthy fanfic (short for fan fiction) culture ever since. These chapters detail the stark contrast between how George Lucas of *Star Wars* and J. K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series of books differs from the draconian policies employed by Warner Bros. after they secured the *Harry Potter* license to the movie adaptations. Jenkins explains that Lucas and Rowling both saw early the potential of supporting fanfic and fan-made movies, and did much to support them so that they could become better filmmakers and writers.

Convergence Culture ends with Jenkins explaining how participatory developments in New Media are leading the way for television to become more democratized. The author points to the Al Gore-backed television channel *Current* as an example. He also mentioned the back-cataloging of *The BBC's* content as well to show how Old Media are trying to keep up with the trend. Jenkins says: "Personalized media was one of the ideals of the digital revolution in the early 1990s: digital media was going

to ‘liberate’ use from the ‘tyranny’ of mass media, allowing us to consume only content we found personally meaningful (244).” The push and pull battle between old school producers of media content and new school consumer-producers of media content outline the over-arching conflict of Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture*.

New Media has a participatory ethos whether its proponents dwell on that aspect of its constitution or not. The Information Age is fundamentally participatory in nature because it demands a constant filtering and sorting of facts on the part of the individual. Johndan Johnson-Eilola makes the claim that because we are inundated with data so frequently, we are forced to navigate it actively. A more passive, or naïve person would simply accept everything that he or she has been told. In his book, *Datacloud: Toward a New Theory of Online Work*, Johndan Johnson-Eilola explains how work is changing in the Information Age. He says, “The possibility of agency within these apparently chaotic contexts requires us to adjust some of our assumptions. Our existing models of both communication and work tend to support relatively linear, orderly, modernistic activities and objects. Work in the information age, however, increasingly requires a different approach--one that we have succeeded in cobbling together, but only with limited success (9-10).” This lengthy quote articulates a central theme of Johnson-Eilola’s book: work in the information age is participatory because we are the active agents in ascertaining what to do with disparate data. Sure information is at our fingertips with the computer, but we have to find it, sort it out, and make sense of it. In this postmodernist world, we have learned that things aren’t what they appear, and that there are few, if any, absolutes.

Learning, once believed to occur in a linear fashion, has shown itself to be anything but. Johnson-Eilola says: “We understand, at some level, that culture in the

United States and other countries has shifted away from the production and circulation of objects and toward the production and circulation: industrial economy to information and knowledge economy (11).” We do not live in a world where much of anything fits into a nice, neat, clean package. Johnson-Eilola says: “These examinations work from the premise that our existing lives, our patterns of working, living, and communicating, and our relationships to each other in all of those areas, are dynamic processes of ongoing construction and reconstruction (17).” Learning is anti-linear, if it can be described with a single phrase at all.

Articulation Theory is at the heart of Johnson-Eilola’s framework. He argues: “Most of us are used to seeing fragmentation, in general, as a bad thing. Breakdowns are negative; entropy, although unavoidable, must be resisted. We build, we structure, we connect, we synthesize. We avoid breaking things (24).” Johnson-Eilola then asks whether this breaking down is necessary to understand the ongoing changes that are going on in the wake of the Computer Revolution. In a postmodern society, the author argues, “Subjects are constructed in cultural contexts, including class belongingness, but not without some ability to intervene in that construction (25).” Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall, who drew on the work of countless others, the author argues that postmodernism assumes the very potential of an individual resisting what is going around him or her-- with an inherent ability to alter--to participate in what happens.

Datacloud did not talk about participatory culture very much explicitly near to the extent that Jenkins’ book did, or even to the effect that McLuhan’s did. Still, much of what Johndan Johnson-Eilola said implied participation--be it on the part of the symbolic-analytic worker, on a musical composer, or a blogger. The author reports that a scholar

named R. Reich reports on four changes that should be made to the educational system because of the advent of symbolic-analytic workers. These proposed changes include: experimentation, collaboration, abstraction, or system thinking. All of them assume a high level of engagement on the part of the student.

While some of *Datacloud* is not entirely germane to this conversation, the parts that are can be very telling. Though the book is not chock full of examples of the way that New Media is transforming popular culture (or even academic culture), and the parts that touch these themes are not entirely overt, its arguments still resonate. Why? Because the framework that the author Johndan Johnson-Eilola presents is participatory in its assumptions. Because we live in this society saturated with information, we must actively seek to make sense of it. Few endeavors can be as participatory and engaging as that.

While these three books are all different, it is clear that they talk about the affects of the Information Age on a part of our society. While the scholars may differ as to when exactly this change took place, it is clear that things today are different than they were 50, 100, or 200 years ago, and that each change seem to be several orders of magnitude farther than the last. While the telegraph began to erode the producer-consumer relationship in the 19th century, the changes today are even more substantial. To see how anyone can publish, shoot movies, and modify computer games, is quite astounding when we remember that the tools to do this are barely 20 years old. While these books do not make the same argument in the same way, they all argue a congruent point: living in the Information Age allows and demands a high degree of involvement on the part of society. There is too much information out there to seek it all, we must sift through it like a child

on the beach searching for shells.

Comments: In my review essay, I tied together themes that were discussed between the second week of class in McLuhan to Henry Jenkins in Convergence Culture in the middle, and Johnson-Eilola at the end. I was happy with the theme I was able to pick out, the construction of the essay, and the language I used to describe the literature. This is not to say that I did a wonderfully fantastic job with the essay, but to considering that this is the first assignment I've ever done like this, I was very happy with the result.