CONVERGENCE CULTURE, REVISITED

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Abstract

In this transcript of oral remarks, some of the key themes of our earlier works will be revisited -- especially "Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collided", but also "Spreadable Media: Creating Meaning and Value in a Networked Culture" and "By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism". From the earlier book, I return to such key concepts as convergence, transmedia storytelling, collective intelligence, and participatory culture, exploring what has shifted over the past fifteen plus years, and what new issues confront us as we move more deeply into an era defined by the collision between old and new media.

Keywords: convergence, transmedia, storytelling, participatory culture, collective intelligence.

"Merhaba, my friends in Turkey. I was invited by your host to reflect a bit about my book Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide (Jenkins, 2006), and what comments I'd make today about the current state of digital media. This video was recorded in Times Square just at the time Convergence Culture was coming out, and it captures some of my own exuberance about the changes we were seeing in the culture around us."

[Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibJaqXVaOaI]

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YAKINSAMA KÜLTÜRÜ ÜZERİNE GENEL BİR GÖZDEN GEÇİRME

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Özet

Bu makalede başta "Cesur Yeni Medya" ve henüz Türkçeye çevrilmemiş olan "Yayılabilir Medya: Ağ Bağlantılı bir Kültürde Anlam ve Değer Yaratmak" ve "Gerekli Olan Herhangi bir Medya Yoluyla: Yeni Gençlik Aktivizmi" olmak üzere çeşitli kitaplarımızdaki ana kavramlar gözden geçirilmektedir. Cesur Yeni Medya adlı kitaptaki yakınsama, transmedya hikâye anlatımı, kolektif zekâ ve katılımcı kültür gibi kavramları yeniden ele alarak son 15 yıldır bu temalarda gerçekleşen değişimleri ortaya koymaya çalışacağız. Eski ve yeni medyanın çarpışmasının belirleyici olduğu bir döneme doğru dalarken, bizi hangi yeni meselelerin beklediğine değinmeye gayret edeceğiz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: yakınsama, transmedya, hikaye anlatımı, katılımcı kültür, kolektif zeka.

"Türkiye'deki dostlarıma selamlar. Üsküdar Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi ev sahipliğinde gerçekleşen 5. Geleneksel İletişim Günleri'nde "Cesur Yeni Medya" adlı kitabım ve dijital medya hakkında konuşma yapmak üzere davet edildim. Linkteki video tam "Cesur Yeni Medya" kitabı çıktığı dönemde Times Square'de çekilmişti ve benim o dönemde çevremizdeki kültürde gözlemlediğimiz değişikliklere dair heyecanımı yansıtmakta."

[Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibJaqXVaOaI]

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Introduction

We're definitely in a moment of transition, a moment where an old media system is dying and a new media system is being born, an era when spectatorial culture is giving way to participatory culture, where a society based on a small number of companies controlling the storytelling apparatus is giving way to a much more complex mediascape where average citizens have the ability to seize control over the media technology and tell their own stories in powerful new ways.

If we go back over thousands of years of human history, the most important stories were re-told many times around the campfire—they belonged to the folk. As we moved into the twentieth century, those images now belong to major media companies who claim exclusive ownership of it. What we're seeing is, in the digital age, as the public began to take media into its own hands and begins to assert its right to retell those stories, the public are taking media without the permission of copyright holders, and innovating, experimenting, recontextualizing, responding to those images in new ways.

We take control of the media as it enters our lives—and that's the essence of convergence culture. Convergence culture is a world where every story, every sound, brand, image, relationship, plays itself out across the maximum number of media channels. It's shaped as much by the decisions made in teenagers' bedrooms as it is by the decisions made in the Viacom boardroom. So a discussion list online or a Wikipedia function according to collective intelligence where the group as a whole can put together knowledge in a more complex way than any individual member is capable of doing.

What is Convergence?

So having heard that, I thought it would be helpful to map the key ideas and debates about media in 2006, when the book first came out. One of the core assumptions of the book is that convergence is a process, and not an endpoint; a logic, and not a product. In other words, people at the time were trying to figure out which black box all the media would flow through. And instead, I was making the argument that there will always be shifting relationships across different media platforms, that at certain moments in time a media may grab our attention, may be central to the way our culture operates—and we can think about the mobile phone at the current time as one of those devices—but that the logic of seeing every story, every image, every sound in our culture travel through every available media appliance is the central concept of convergence. And finally, convergence is about the meeting of old and new media. It's not about new media displacing legacy media, new media and old media are going to intersect each other, are going to relate to each other, in ever more complex ways—and I think the last almost twenty years since that book was written have borne that out. We are seeing constantly shifting re-

lationships between old and new media, but there are very few stories of the current moment where we don't see both old and new media at play.

Transmedia Storytelling

This focus on the interrelationships between media led me to the concept of transmedia storytelling. So, transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purposes of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Phew—that's a long definition, lots of fancy words in it—essentially, though, we're saying that stories are told across media with each media carrying the load that platform is capable of performing. In such a context, we are constantly bringing information together that we experience, that we encounter, from different media sources.

Consider the example of the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, which is maybe the most large-scale systematic example of what we mean by transmedia storytelling to date (Yockey, 2017). So there was a world, the *Marvel universe*, which was built up through comic books over a forty, fifty years period, individual titles simply being part of a larger storytelling system. As those titles began to move to the screen, we have both individual films focused on individual protagonists, but also moments—the Avenger films—where those protagonists come together, in ever increasing numbers resulting in a rich, though some might argue an overpopulated, cinematic system. At the same time, we can see television picking up some of the secondary characters and exploring their stories, but sometimes with references back to the larger cinematic universe. Meanwhile, comics continue to generate new characters, new stories, innovating and testing ideas that will loop back into the larger story system. And finally we can think about games as another space where storytelling is taking place, where we learn things about the characters, particularly their capacity for action, that are central to the experience of the cinematic universe.

We might think of *Netflix* as a really interesting platform where we see the intersection of old and new media. *Netflix* is a space for distribution for film and television content, but they're both radically redefined as they enter into that space. We used to say, "It's not television, it's *HBO*." Now we might say, "It's not *HBO*, it's *Netflix*," right, and the experiments of *Netflix* dropping a whole season of a show at once, allowing us to binge watch it at our own pace is part of that story. So is the globalization of *Netflix*. From an American point of view, we're seeing more international television content than we've ever seen before; we're seeing co-productions with various countries around the world that are introducing new stories into the global television system. My PhD student, Şebnem Baran (2018) is currently finishing her dissertation here at the USC Cinema School and is writing specifically about Turkey's role in that global televisual system, looking at Turkey as a growing regional powerhouse, producing television that is consumed across much of the Middle East. Also,

Turkey is generating formats that are being remade for the global market, and Turkey television producers with aspirations of jumping into the *Netflix/Amazon* matrix and getting their content seen directly. But as this takes place, she's arguing that Turkey television exerts a global influence, but also bumps up against global standards of what quality television looks like, which is going to change the melodramatic traditions that Turkish television producers have drawn on in telling their stories.

Yet, these producers—commercial and otherwise—are influencing each other in new and often unpredictable ways. If we go back to the superhero story, we can see the Arab world introducing and embracing superheroes: some superhero stories are produced by top-down producers—for example, *Burka Avenger* from Pakistan tells the stories of women's struggles for educational rights through a superhero lens. We also might consider a grassroots video by a non-profit organization, shot in a Syrian refugee camp, that uses Batman to introduce people to the experience of the refugee crisis. In these examples, we see media from below—not just amateur or fan media, but also media from non-profits, educational groups, activist groups, religious groups, trying to insert their messages into the larger mediascape. We see these alternative forms of media organizations existing side by side with commercial media producers from various countries trying to break into the global media marketplace.

Participatory Culture and Convergence

Convergence Culture also explored the core concept of participatory culture. A participatory culture is one where there are relatively low barriers to engagement, where there's strong support for sharing what you create with others, where there's informal mentorship in which more experienced media producers help train those with less experience, where participants believe that their contributions matter, and they care about what others think about the stuff that they've created—that creates a climate where all kinds of groups for all kinds of reasons are producing media, circulating it often through digital networks, producing the media through whatever tool is available to them, whether it is the recording function of their mobile phone, camera or microphone for podcasting, or tape recorder, or the camera that I have pointing at me right now—all are devices which allow us to produce and share media with each other all over the world.

So, when we think about participatory culture, we can think about various configurations of participatory culture (Jenkins et al, 2009; Jenkins et al, 2016). These configurations include affiliations—memberships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around various forms of media; expressions—producing new creative forms, such as digital sampling, video-making, mash-ups, memes, gifs; collaborations—problem-solving and working together in teams to complete tasks and develop new knowledge that would

be beyond our individual capacities; And finally, circulations—shifting the flow of media, taking pieces of media from one place to the other, creating conversations around media produced by someone else but spread by members of a particular community. So we put all those together, and we have this very dynamic space I call participatory culture. Now I should stress: we don't live yet in a fully participatory culture, we live in what is a more participatory culture than we had twenty years ago—more people are participating, more media is being shared—but plenty of people are locked out of that media ecosystem, and we need to be concerned with the barriers to entry that remain in creating a more participatory culture.

Again, we can think about how participatory culture intersects with mass media culture. Consider two examples as they intersect the creative industries: the first is the crowdfunding that took place around *Veronica Mars* (Jenkins, 2013)—here fans were able to raise money to support a favorite television show, and pave the way for a feature film that emerged from it. And the second is *Timeless*—a time travel show that was produced for American television. It was canceled due to mediocre ratings (Andreeva, 2017). Within hours of its cancellation there was a massive online campaign to bring it back, and three or four days later the network reversed its decision to cancel the program and brought it back from cancellation. Timeless returned on the air two or three weeks ago. Both of those shows represent examples where the decision-making of mass media producers and networks is being affected in a profound way by social media, by various forms of participatory culture, and in particular, by fan activism.

We could think about a huge success like *Black Panther* as growing out of that same dynamic. *Black Panther* has done phenomenally well worldwide, it has had week after week of topping the box office and besting other films, many of which were predicted to do as well or better. A lot of its success in the United States reflects the efforts of the African American community to rally around this film using *Twitter* and other social media. Research has shown that black Americans are disproportionately represented on *Twitter* as a platform, compared to their percentage of American society; they've found ways to use social networking effectively for both cultural activism, promoting films like *Black Panther* or shows like Scandal, and political activism—for example, Black-LivesMatter. So there's a kind of large output of social media around *Black Panther* ; church groups have organized busloads of people to go from their congregation to the screenings; and fan communities are out in front of this film celebrating the emergence of new kinds of characters, new kinds of design aesthetics, new kinds of stories that enter the *Marvel Universe* via *Black Panther*.

Some of this is what we mean in my subsequent book as "spreadable media" (Jenkins et al, 2013). People often call this viral media, but viral to us has a connotation of infection or contagion. The idea of viral media is something

takes over your mind, you lose control—and this metaphor of viruses doesn't really capture this moment where in fact individuals and collectives online have greater power in impacting the flow of media in their culture than ever before. So we describe this process as spreadability. Participatory culture doesn't just involve creating new kinds of media or remixing media, it also involves spreading the message in new ways, and therefore altering the conversation that's taking place around media.

Activism and Convergence Culture

I'm very interested at the moment about how that affects activism. Consider two examples of how the superhero story has become a rallying point for political activists (Jenkins, et al 2016). In one, a Sikh in New York City chooses to dress as Captain America, and goes around protesting the stereotyping of brown people in America. In the other, Superman has emerged as an icon for the DREAMers, undocumented youth fighting for citizenship in the United States. There's a character, Kal-El from the planet Krypton, whose parents sent him away to a new world in search of a better life, who crosses the border in the middle of the night, gets adopted by an Anglo family, who teaches him to hide who he is and where he comes from, and he nevertheless goes out to fight for truth, justice, and the American way, while wearing ethnic garb—that is, the Superman costume was made from the blankets his mother wrapped him in when they sent him away from his home country. This is a powerful story for thinking about the experience of immigration in the United States. In both of these cases, grassroots communities are taking the images produced by mass media as the resources for their own expression, creating media that's meant to be circulated, tapping larger networks of supporters and activists, and using it to shift and redirect our conversation around the issue of immigration in the United States.

Convergence Culture and Collective Intelligence

Another overarching concept in *Convergence Culture* was collective intelligence. Pierre Lévy (1999) tells us that in a networked culture, we can work together to solve complex problems that would baffle us individually. The idea of collective intelligence is that the Renaissance man is now a myth—no one could possibly know everything in a world where there's so much complex information—but everyone knows something. And what individual members know can become resources for a community on a need-to-know ad hoc basis. As people in an online forum are discussing their favorite television show, all kinds of expertise out there, all kinds of knowledge, come into play. The participants are each watching the show closely, all seeing slightly different things; they're correcting each other, debating with each other, and they're bringing expertise from other spaces together to solve problems. The same

thing takes place around activist movements, which is why activists have been so effective at mobilizing, because this combined capacity of thousands of people in a network working together allows them to do things that would have been unimaginable when a protest was organized by a much smaller group of people.

Our most recent book, *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism* (Jenkins et al, 2016), tells that story—we interviewed more than 200 young activists, we explored how social change takes place in their lives, what role they play in struggles for social justice. We can see these new activists at play, for example, in the current gun control debate in the United States, where high school kids from Florida have been successful at rallying national walkouts in opposition to the National Rifle Association. These activists are networked but their tactics work across media; they deploy whatever resources the community has at hand, their message travels rapidly across the networked communication sphere, and they connect and collaborate with a variety of other groups. All of the mechanisms of participatory culture are now turned toward the political realm.

Network and Convergence Culture

But we're also seeing convergence culture at work when we look at the current President of the United States. Donald Trump is often described as a reality television star—that's partially true, he was the host of *The Apprentice*—but he comes from a varied media background. He was also a star of professional wrestling at one point in his career, he was also involved in shock jock radio, he's was involved in running beauty pageants as major events. So the Trump we know is a figure that was built up across a number of media forms, all of which are seen as somewhat peripheral by the mainstream culture—they're all sort of slightly disreputable—but his disreputability, his refusal of political correctness, is one of the things that his supporters are really drawn to.

Trump is not simply a televisual president—we've seen television presidents since John F. Kennedy in the 1960s—Trump is a networked president. Trump is someone for whom *Twitter* constitutes a central aspect of his identity—no matter how much his staff tries to tell him to stop tweeting, he continues to do so, and those tweets are affecting, for better or for worse, the fortunes of Trump and global perception of the United States. Trump in some ways represents the worst of a networked culture—he's doesn't take ownership over the messages he circulates and whether they're accurate or not, he uses Twitter in ways that inflame conversations and calls people out, calls people names. He exemplifies what we want to teach our young people not to do when they move into the social media realm, but he also represents why even powerful people turn towards social media as a resource, because it allows them to connect in new ways with communities and shift the conversation.

Conclusion

I hope this discussion provides a glimpse of convergence culture, then and now. Convergence Culture described a culture in the process of becoming; we now are much deeper into that process of media change; the platforms have changed, new practices have emerged, new institutions have gained power, the number of participants online has expanded, and social media and video streaming play larger roles in our lives. But, the core concepts–convergence, participatory culture, transmedia storytelling, collective intelligence, and spreadable media–still carry analytic weight in helping us to understand the world we live in.

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