

Welcome to convergence culture

Henry Jenkins

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Last December, a hotly anticipated Bollywood film, *Rok Sako To Rok Lo*, was screened in its entirety to movie buffs in Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Mumbai, and other parts of India through EDGE-enabled mobile phones with live video streaming facility. This is believed to be the first time that a feature film has been fully accessible via mobile phones. It remains to be seen how this kind of distribution fits into people's lives – will it substitute for going to the movies or will people simply use it to sample movies they may want to see at other venues. Who knows?

Many of us have watched over the past several years as cell phones have become increasingly central to the release strategies of commercial motion pictures around the world, as amateur and professional cell phone movies have competed for prizes in international film festivals, as mobile users have been able to listen into major concerts, as Japanese novelists serialize their work via instant messenger, and as game players have used mobiles to compete in augmented and alternative reality games. Some functions will take root; others will fail. Either way, we all learn something about ourselves and our relations to media.

Call me old-fashioned. The other week I wanted to buy a cell phone – you know, to make phone calls. I didn't want a video camera, a still camera, a web access device, an mp3 player, or a game system. I also wasn't interested in something that could show me movie previews, would have customizable ring tones, would allow me to read novels. I didn't want the electronic equivalent of a Swiss army knife. When the phone rings, I don't want to have to figure out which button to push. I just wanted a phone. The sales clerks sneered at me, they laughed at me behind my back. I was told by company after mobile company that they don't make single-function phones anymore. Nobody wants them. This was a powerful demonstration of how central mobiles have become to the process of media convergence.

By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, the search for new structures of media financing which fell at the interstices between old and new media, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they wanted. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes, depending on who's speaking and what they think they are talking about. You've probably been hearing a lot about convergence lately. You are going to be hearing even more.

Much contemporary discourse about convergence starts and ends with what I call the 'Black Box Fallacy'. Sooner or later, the argument goes, all media content is going to flow through a single black box into our living rooms (or in the mobile scenario, through black boxes we carry around with us everywhere we go). If we can just figure out which black box will reign supreme, then everyone can make reasonable investments for the future. Could the mobile be that magic black box?

I don't know about you, but in my living room, I am seeing more and more black boxes. There are my VCR, my digital cable box, my DVD player, my digital recorder, my sound system, and my two game systems, not to mention a huge mound of videotapes, DVDs and CDs, game cartridges and controllers, sitting atop, laying alongside, toppling over the edge of my television system. (I would definitely qualify as an early adapter, but most American homes will have their own pile of black boxes). The perpetual tangle of cords that stands between me and my 'home entertainment' center reflects the degree of incompatibility and dysfunctionality that exists between the various media platforms.

And many of my students are lugging around multiple black boxes – their laptops, their cells, their ipods, their gameboys, their blackberries, you name it. As Cheskin Research explained in a recent report, "The old idea of convergence was that all devices would converge into one central device that did everything for you (à la the universal remote). What we are now seeing is the hardware diverging while the content converges ... Your email needs and expectations are different depending on whether you're at home, work, school, commuting, the airport, etc., and these different devices are designed to suit your needs for accessing content depending on where you are – your situated context."

Lesson Number One: mobile companies will be part of media convergence; they won't own it.

This focus on black boxes has allowed many to dismiss the concept of convergence because they see no evidence that any one console or appliance is apt to dominate the media marketplace anytime soon. Yet, media change is ongoing, the relationships between media are constantly being renegotiated, and each new technology supersedes and destabilizes what has come before. Rather than searching for new technologies to enable us to adjust to the uncertainties of an era

of media transition, we should be looking for skills and practices that allow us to interact with a broad range of different media.

Whether we realize it or not, we are already living in a convergence culture.

Lesson Number Two: convergence is a cultural and social process as much as it is a technological one.

Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences. Convergence alters the logic by which media industries operate and by which media consumers process news and entertainment.

Keep this in mind: convergence refers to a process, but not an endpoint. Media will be converging and diverging for some time to come. There will be no single black box which controls the flow of media into our lives. Thanks to the proliferation of channels and the portability of new computing and telecommunications technologies, we are entering an era where media will be everywhere and we will use all kinds of media in relation to each other.

Our cell phones are not simply telecommunications devices; they also allow us to play games, download information, take and send photographs, or text messages – whether we want to do so or not. Any of these functions can also be performed through other media appliances. You can listen to the Dixie Chicks through your DVD player, your car radio, your walkman, your computer MP3 files, a web radio station, or a music cable channel.

Fueling this technological convergence is a shift in patterns of media ownership. Whereas old Hollywood focused on cinema, the new media conglomerates have controlling interests across the entire entertainment industry. Viacom produces film, television, popular music, computer games, websites, toys, amusement park rides, books, newspapers, magazines, and comics.

In turn, media convergence impacts the way we consume media. A teenager, doing homework, may juggle four or five windows, scanning the web, listening to and downloading MP3 files, chatting with friends, word-processing a paper, and responding to e-mail, shifting rapidly between tasks.

And fans of a popular television series may sample dialogue, summarize episodes, debate subtexts, create original fan fiction, record their own soundtracks, make their own movies and distribute all of this worldwide via the internet.

<http://web.mit.edu/21fms/www/faculty/henry3/starwars.html>
Jenkins on media convergence, film and participatory culture

And what is happening today in India, Japan, or Finland will be happening tomorrow in Great Britain or the United States, even though both are lagging behind in their mobile practices – and more importantly, content which can be accessed in India, Japan, or Finland today will be downloaded later today in the United States, legally or illegally. Convergence and globalization are intertwined.

Convergence is taking place ... officially and unofficially ... within the same appliances – within the same franchise – within the same company – within the brain of the consumer – within the same fandom ... and across national borders. Convergence involves both a change in the way media is produced and a change in the way media is consumed.

For the foreseeable future, convergence will be a kind of kludge – a jerry-rigged relationship between different media technologies rather than a fully integrated system. Right now, the cultural shifts, the legal battles, and the economic consolidations which are fueling media convergence are preceding shifts in the technological infrastructure. How those various transitions play themselves out will determine the balance of power in the next media era.

Another snapshot of the future: University of Southern California anthropologist Mimi Ito has documented the growing place of mobile communications among Japanese youth, describing young couples who remain in constant contact with each other throughout the day, thanks to their access to various mobile technologies. They wake up together, work together, and go to bed together even though they live miles apart and may have face to face contact only a few times a month. We might call it tele-cacooning.

<http://itofisher.com/mito/>
Mizuko Ito's homepage

And another: intoxicated students at a local high school use their cell phones spontaneously to produce their own soft-core porn movie involving topless cheerleaders making out in the locker room. Within hours, the movie is circulating across the school, being downloaded by students and teachers alike and watched between classes on personal media devices.

When people take media in their own hands, the results can be wonderfully creative – they can also be bad news for all involved.

Convergence doesn't just involve commercially-produced materials and services traveling along well-regulated and predictable circuits. It doesn't just involve the mobile companies getting together with the film companies to decide when and where we watch a newly released film. It also occurs when people take media in

their own hands. Entertainment content isn't the only thing that flows across multiple media platforms. Our lives, relationships, memories, fantasies, and desires also flow across media channels. Being a lover or a Mommy or a teacher occurs on multiple platforms. Sometimes we tuck our kids into bed at night and other times we IM them from the other side of the globe.

Lesson Number Three: we are all still learning what it means to live in a convergence culture.

Another snapshot: people around the world are affixing stickers showing Yellow Arrows alongside public monuments and factories, beneath highway overpasses, onto lamp posts. The arrows provide numbers others can call to access information – personal annotations on our shared urban landscape. They use it to share a beautiful vista or criticize an irresponsible company. And increasingly, companies are co-opting the system to leave their own advertising pitches.

<http://www.yellowarrow.org/>
Yellowarrow global public art project

Convergence is both a top down corporate-driven process and a bottom up consumer driven process. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and re-enforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with their significant others. The promises of this new media environment open up expectations of a freer flow of ideas and content. Inspired by those ideals, consumers are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture. Sometimes, these two forces reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding relations between media producers and consumers. Sometimes, these two forces are at war and those struggles will redefine the face of American popular culture.

Convergence requires media companies to rethink old assumptions about what it means to consume media, assumptions that shape both programming and marketing decisions. If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active. If old consumers were predictable and stayed where you told them, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or media. If old consumers were isolated individuals, the new consumers are more socially connected. If old consumers were seen as compliant, the new consumers are resistant, taking media in their own hands. If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public.

Media producers are responding to these newly empowered consumers in contradictory ways, sometimes encouraging change, sometimes resisting what they see as renegade behavior. And consumers, in turn, are perplexed by what they see as mixed signals about how much and what kinds of participation they can enjoy.

As they undergo this transition, the media companies are not behaving in a monolithic fashion; often, different divisions of the same company are pursuing radically different strategies, reflecting their uncertainty about how to proceed. On the one hand, convergence represents an expanded opportunity, since content which succeeds in one sector can spread across other platforms. On the other, convergence represents a risk since once you move filmgoers from theaters to cells one wonders if they will return again.

Welcome to convergence culture. Convergence is the future, but it's happening now. It is not a surprise that we are not yet ready to cope with its complexities and contradictions. We need to find ways to negotiate the changes taking place. No one force can set the terms. No one group can control access and participation. Let's talk. Maybe you can cell me.

<http://www.contextmag.com/setFrameRedirect.asp?src=/archives/199911/TheLastWord.asp>
Jenkins in a discussion about media/violence

<http://convergence.luton.ac.uk/>
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