From YouTube to YouNiversity

Henry Jenkins

(2007)

FYI Henry Jenkins is a professor at MIT and directs the MIT Comparative Culture and Media Studies Program. He has written a number of books on fan fiction and online culture including *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, and *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. "From YouTube to YouNiversity" first appeared in the *Chronicle for Higher Education* in February of 2007.

Consider these developments: At the end of last year, *Time* named "You" its Person of the Year "for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game." Earlier in the year, *Newsweek* described such sites as Flickr, MySpace, Craigslist, Digg, and YouTube as "putting the 'We' in the Web." The business "thought leader" Tim O'Reilly has termed these new social-network sites "Web 2.0," suggesting that they represent the next phase in the digital revolution—no longer about the technologies per se but about the communities that have grown up around them. Some are even describing immersive online game worlds such as Second Life as the beginnings of Web 3.0. All of this talk reflects changes that cut across culture and commerce, technology and social organization.

Over the past few years, we have also seen a series of books (both journalistic and academic) that analyze and interpret these new configurations of media power. In his recent book *The Wealth of Networks*, Yochai Benkler describes the reconfiguration of power and knowledge that occurs from the ever more complex interplay between commercial, public, educational, nonprofit, and amateur media producers. Grant McCracken's *Plenitude* talks about the "generativeness" of this cultural churn. Chris Anderson (*The Long Tail*) shows how these shifts are giving rise to niche media markets, and Thomas W. Malone (*The Future of Work*) analyzes how such changes are reshaping the management of major companies. My own book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, describes a world where every story, image, sound, brand, and relationship plays itself out across the widest possible array of media platforms, and where the flow of media content is shaped as much by decisions made in teenagers' bedrooms as it is by decisions made in corporate boardrooms.

These writers come from very different disciplinary perspectives—business, law, anthropology, and cultural studies—and they write in very different styles. We can't really call this work an intellectual movement: Most of us didn't know of one another's existence until our books started to hit the shelves. Yet taken together, these books can be read as a paradigm shift in our understanding of media, culture, and society. This work embodies an ecological perspective on media, one that refuses to concentrate on only one medium at a time but insists that we take it all in at once and try to understand how different layers of media production affect one another. As such, these books represent a new route around the ideological and methodological impasses between political economy (with its focus on media concentration) and cultural studies (with its focus on resistant audiences). And these books represent a new way of thinking about how power operates within an informational economy, describing how media shifts are changing education, politics, religion, business, and the press.

Many of these books share the insight that a networked culture is enabling a new form of bottom-up power, as diverse groups of dispersed people

pool their expertise and confront problems that are much more complex than they could handle individually. They are able to do so because of the ways that new media platforms support the emergence of temporary social networks that exist only as long as they are needed to face specific challenges or respond to the immediate needs of their members. Witness, for example, the coalition of diverse ideological interests that came together last year to fight for the principle of network neutrality on the Web.

The science-fiction writer and Internet activist Cory Doctorow has called such groups "adhocracies." An adhocracy is a form of social and political organization with few fixed structures or established relationships between players and with minimum hierarchy and maximum diversity. In other words, an adhocracy is more or less the polar opposite of the contemporary university (which preserves often rigid borders between disciplines and departments and even constructs a series of legal obstacles that make it difficult to collaborate even within the same organization). Now try to imagine what would happen if academic departments operated more like YouTube or Wikipedia, allowing for the rapid deployment of scattered expertise and the dynamic reconfiguration of fields. Let's call this new form of academic unit a "YouNiversity."

How might media studies, the field most committed to mapping these changes as they affect modern life, be taught in a YouNiversity?

First, media studies needs to become comparative, teaching critics to think across multiple media systems and teaching media makers to produce across multiple media systems. The modern university has inherited a set of fields and disciplines structured around individual media—photography, cinema, digital culture, literature, theater, and painting are studied in different departments using different disciplinary perspectives. Programs have taken shape through an additive logic (with mem-

bers of each new generation fighting for the right to study the new medium that affects their lives the most). For a long time, my institution, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had a program in film and media studies, a redundant term that strikes me as the rough equivalent of calling the English department the books-and-literature department. For a long time at MIT, books about film were in the architecture library, and those on television were in the humanities library—unless they were about gender, in which case they were in the women's-studies library, or they took a Marxist perspective, in which case they were in the economics library. Such fragmentation does a disservice to students, so that when we ask journalism students to decide whether they want to go into print or broadcasting, or when we ask business students to choose between marketing, advertising, or public relations, we don't reflect the integrated contexts within which media are produced, marketed, and consumed.

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A conceptual shift took place eight years ago at MIT when the program in film and media studies recast itself as the program in comparative media studies—inspired in part by the models of comparative literature and comparative religion. The word "comparative" serves multiple functions for the program, encouraging faculty members to think and teach across different media, historical periods, national borders, and disciplinary boundaries, and to bridge the divide between theory and practice as well as that separating academic life from other institutions also confronting profound media change.

This comparative approach has allowed the program to respond more fully to the needs of students with different career goals, disciplinary backgrounds, and professional experiences. By design, about a third of our master's students will go into Ph.D. programs and pursue careers in higher education; the rest will take jobs as advertising executives, game designers, educational-technology specialists, policy makers, museum curators, and journalists. Many are returning to graduate school after the first phases of their careers, coming with a new urgency and determination to master the "big picture" issues shaping the spaces where they have worked.

To educate such students, we don't so much need a faculty as we need an intellectual network. The program has a large pool of loosely affiliated faculty members who participate in an ad hoc manner depending on the needs and interests of individual students: Sometimes they may contribute nothing to the program for several years and then get drawn into a research or thesis project that requires their particular expertise. Our students' thesis advisers come not only from other universities around the world but also from industry; they include Bollywood choreographers, game designers, soap-opera writers, and journalists. We encourage our students to network broadly and draw on the best thinking about their topic, wherever they can find it.

Second, media studies needs to reflect the ways that the contemporary media landscape is blurring the lines between media consumption and production, between making media and thinking about media. A recent study from the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 57 percent of teens online have created their own media content. As our culture becomes more participatory, these young people are creating their own blogs and podcasts; they are recording their lives on LiveJournal and developing their own profiles on MySpace; they are producing their own YouTube videos and Flickr photos; they are writing and posting fan fiction or contributing to Wikipedia; they are mashing up music and modding games. Much as engineering students learn by taking apart machines and putting them back together, many of these teens

learned how media work by taking their culture apart and remixing it.

In such a world, the structural and historical schisms separating media production and critical-studies classes no longer seem relevant. Students around the country are pushing to translate their analytic insights about media into some form of media production. And they are correctly arguing that you cannot really understand how these new media work if you don't use them yourself. Integrating theory and practice won't be simple. Some students in the entering classes in the program in comparative media studies have had little or no access to digital tools, and others have been designing their own computer games since elementary school. Even among those who have media-production experience, they have worked with very different production tools or produced very different forms of media content in very different contexts.

Responding to these wildly divergent backgrounds and expectations requires us to constantly redesign and renegotiate course expectations as we try to give students what they need to push themselves to the next level of personal and professional development. We have encouraged faculty members to incorporate production opportunities in their courses so that students in a children's-media class, for example, are asked to apply the theories they have learned to the design of an artifact for a child (medium unspecified), then write a paper explaining the assumptions behind their design choices. We may have students composing their own children's books, building and programming their own interactive toys, shooting photo essays, producing pilots for children's shows, or designing simple video games or Web sites.

Before we started our master's program, I went on the road to talk with representatives of more than 50 companies and organizations. They told me that they value the flexibility, creativity, and social and cultural insights liberal-arts majors bring to their operations. They also shared a devastating list of concerns—liberal-arts students fall behind other majors in terms of teamwork, leadership, project completion, and problem solving. In other words,

they were describing the gap between academic fields focused on fostering autonomous learners and professional contexts demanding continuing collaborations. Those desired skills were regularly fostered in other disciplines that have laboratory-based cultures that test new theories and research findings through real-world applications. At a university with strong traditions of applied physics or applied mathematics, we needed to embrace the ideal of applied humanities. And as a result, we have created a context where our students put their social and cultural knowledge to work through real-world applications such as designing educational games, developing media-literacy materials, or consulting with media companies about consumer relations.

Third, media studies needs to respond to the enormous hunger for public knowledge about our present moment of profound and persistent media change. Given this context, it is nothing short of criminal that so much of contemporary media theory and analysis remains locked away in an academic ghetto, cut off from larger conversations. Media scholars have much to contribute to—and much to learn from—the discussions occurring among designers, industry leaders, policy makers, artists, activists, journalists, and educators about the direction of our culture.

At such a moment, we need to move beyond preparing our students for future roles as media scholars, wrapped up in their own disciplinary discourses, and instead encourage them to acquire skills and experiences as public intellectuals, sharing their insights with a larger public from wherever they happen to be situated. They need to be taught how to translate the often challenging formulations of academic theory into a more public discourse.

Academic programs are only starting to explore how they might deploy these new media platforms—blogs and podcasts especially—to expand the visibility of their research and scholarship. Consider, for example, the case of *Flow*, an online

> **The modern university should work not by defining fields of study but by removing obstacles so that knowledge can circulate and be reconfigured in new ways.**

journal edited at the University of Texas at Austin, *Flow* brings together leading media scholars from around the world to write short, accessible, and timely responses to contemporary media developments: In contrast with the increasingly sluggish timetable of academic publishing, which makes any meaningful response to the changing media environment almost impossible, a new issue of *Flow* appears every two weeks.

Blogs represent a powerful tool for engaging in these larger public conversations. At my university, we noticed that a growing number of students were developing blogs focused on their thesis research. Many of them were making valuable professional contacts; some had developed real visibility while working on their master's degrees; and a few received high-level job offers based on the professional connections they made on their blogs. Blogging has also deepened their research, providing feedback on their arguments, connecting them to previously unknown authorities, and pushing them forward in ways that no thesis committee could match. Now all of our research teams are blogging not only about their own work but also about key developments in their fields. We have redesigned the program's home page, allowing feeds from these blogs to regularly update our content and capture more of the continuing conversations in and around our program. We have also started offering regular podcasts of our departmental colloquia and are experimenting with various forms of remote access to our conferences and other events.

We make a mistake, though, if we understand such efforts purely in terms of distance learning or community outreach, as if all expertise resides within universities and needs simply to be transmitted to the world. Rather, we should see these efforts as opportunities for us to learn from other sectors equally committed to mapping and mastering the current media change.