

TwitterTube

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The Presentational Turn? On the Implications of Twitter for Television's Development in the Digital Convergence Era

I want to focus here on Twitter's implications for television audiences and the ways in which individuals utilize television in Canada and the United States. Beyond this, however, I am interested in the manner in which sites like Twitter might be changing our communication and entertainment practices and our conceptions of those practices. While television's mass media dominance appears to be secure for the moment, it also seems that these emergent platforms are beginning to alter the ways in which users understand and relate to it. This brief paper is an attempt to introduce some thoughts and questions about what P. David Marshall (2010) calls 'presentational media' and its implications for the 'representational media' stalwarts of the mass media era.

In a discussion of Twitter and celebrity, Marshall advances his theory of 'intercommunication', which addresses entities – such as social media sites – that emphasize both media and communication in their facilitation of cultural production and public engagement. This resembles the phenomenon that Axel Bruns (2003) calls 'the produsage of sociality', wherein users collaboratively produce, mediate, and consume cultural material with 'sociality' – the exchange of ideas and knowledge, the construction of taste or affinity based connections, etc. – as the end result. I like Marshall's theory, however, because it emphasizes the importance of the 'self' to this process and the ways in which individuals are celebritized as they participate in social network sites. Marshall addresses the ritualized performance of the self in which users construct their Facebook profiles and Twitter pages with potential audiences in mind. Where once we might have exchanged views and performed our tastes and capabilities only in our immediate environments, it is now possible to construct durable, self-archiving pages that are both less ephemeral and more widely accessible by one's (potential) audience than ever before.

The emergence of what I call the 'personal public' reflects of the changes occurring here. Where television has long been understood to be a window into the public sphere from the private sphere, social network platforms provide this access while allowing audiences to construct their own publics of real-life friends and acquaintances, Internet connections, and, crucially, imagined strangers who may view a profile page or feed (Twitter pages are often fully public and searchable). The sense that any (or all) of these parties might be present at a given moment, in conjunction with the spatial representation of social connections and its archiving capacity, makes Twitter highly compelling. Users can service their publics, and engage with those of others, by offering observations (often simultaneously ludic and phatic), operating as cultural intermediaries by linking to other pages (often with annotations), and directly hailing other users.

All of this is to say that, while Twitter is often thought of as a communication medium, it and other sites of its ilk are really working to complicate the distinction between communication and entertainment. In practical terms, this seems to be interpersonal communication as entertainment, with various other media forms implicated in the process. As we have seen, presentational media offer both a high degree

of social interaction and the capacity to create imagined audiences for the self – personal publics that correspond to some degree to real-life relationships and networks. It may be difficult for representational media to compete with these features once access to high-speed Internet becomes more widespread and social media uptake reaches a tipping point.

While Marshall suggests that these changes are unlikely to diminish the influence of the representational media, I contend that its development will likely be dictated in large part by these emergent presentational social media forms. Certainly, the discussion and debate surrounding programs on Twitter might benefit certain formats, particularly live ‘event’ programming – sports, awards shows, and premieres (my ‘public’ certainly learned more than it wanted to know about my opinions of the 2010 World Cup). At the same time, DVD and on-demand options may continue to be important given that social media tools have the capacity to unify those with anti-mass tastes and bring niche products into the public consciousness. There is reason to think that television in the social media era may oscillate between material that demands to be collectively experienced and that which appeals to increasingly segmented niche markets.

Twitter represents a move from the representational to the presentational, from the recognition of oneself as part of larger public segments to the servicing of personal public in an interactive context. It seems to be clear that it is altering both our communication and entertainment practices and the manner in which we conceive of these practices. In fact, they may be in the process of supplanting television as our most vital cultural forum. Television will persist in the face of these developments, but its composition, role, and place in our rapidly evolving North American mediascape demands increased scholarly attention.

Works Cited

Bruns, Axel. 2008. *Blogs, wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Marshall, P. David. 2010. ‘The promotion and presentation of the self: celebrity as marker of presentational media.’ *Celebrity Studies*. 1(1): 35-48.