Henry Jenkins

Convergence Culture

Where Old and New Media Collide

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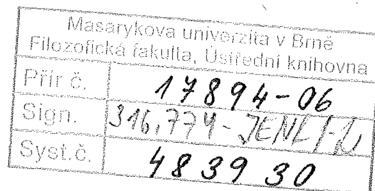
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Introduction: "Worship at the Altar of Convergence"

A New Paradigm for Understanding Media Change

Worship at the Altar of Convergence
—slogan, the New Orleans Media Experience (2003)

The story circulated in the fall of 2001: Dino Ignacio, a Filipino-American high school student created a Photoshop collage of *Sesame Street*'s (1970) Bert interacting with terrorist leader Osama Bin Laden as part of a series of "Bert is Evil" images he posted on his homepage (fig. I.1). Others depicted Bert as a Klansman, cavorting with Adolph Hitler, dressed as the Unabomber, or having sex with Pamela Anderson. It was all in good fun.

In the wake of September 11, a Bangladesh-based publisher scanned the Web for Bin Laden images to print on anti-American signs, posters, and T-shirts. *Sesame Street* is available in Pakistan in a localized format; the Arab world, thus, had no exposure to Bert and Ernie. The publisher may not have recognized Bert, but he must have thought the image was a good likeness of the al-Qaeda leader. The image ended up in a collage of similar images that was printed on thousands of posters and distributed across the Middle East.

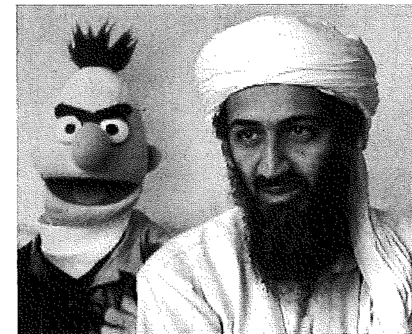

Fig. I.1. Dino Ignacio's digital collage of *Sesame Street*'s Bert and Osama Bin Laden.

CNN reporters recorded the unlikely sight of a mob of angry protestors marching through the streets chanting anti-American slogans and waving signs

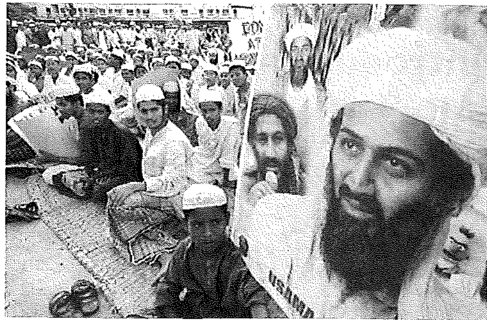

Fig.I.2. Ignacio's collage surprisingly appeared in CNN coverage of anti-American protests following September 11.

depicting Bert and Bin Laden (fig. I.2). Representatives from the Children's Television Workshop, creators of the *Sesame Street* series, spotted the CNN footage and threatened to take legal action: "We're outraged that our characters would be used in this unfortunate and distasteful manner. The people responsible for this should be ashamed of themselves. We are exploring all legal options to stop this abuse and any similar abuses in the future." It was not altogether clear who they planned to sic their intellectual property attorneys on—the young man who had initially appropriated their images, or the terrorist supporters who deployed them. Coming full circle, amused fans produced a number of new sites, linking various *Sesame Street* characters with terrorists.

From his bedroom, Ignacio sparked an international controversy. His images crisscrossed the world, sometimes on the backs of commercial media, sometimes via grassroots media. And, in the end, he inspired his own cult following. As the publicity grew, Ignacio became more concerned and ultimately decided to dismantle his site: "I feel this has gotten too close to reality. . . . "Bert Is Evil" and its following has always been contained and distanced from big media. This issue throws it out in the open."[1] Welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.

This book is about the relationship between three concepts—media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence.

By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. 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. (In this book I will be mixing and matching terms across these various frames of reference. I have added a glossary at the end of the book to help guide readers.)

In the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms. Think about the circuits that the Bert is Evil images traveled—from *Sesame Street* through Photoshop to the World Wide Web, from Ignacio's bedroom to a print shop in Bangladesh, from the posters held by anti-American protestors that are captured by CNN and into the living rooms of people around the world. Some of its circulation depended on corporate strategies, such as the localization of *Sesame Street* or the global coverage of CNN. Some of its circulation depended on tactics of grassroots appropriation, whether in North America or in the Middle East.

This circulation of media content—across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders—depends heavily on consumers' active participation. I will argue here against the idea that convergence should be understood primarily as a technological process bringing together multiple media functions within the same devices. Instead, convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content. This book is about the work—and play—spectators perform in the new media system.

The term, participatory culture, contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands. Not all participants are created equal. Corporations—and even individuals within corporate media—still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers. And some consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging culture than others.

Convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed

into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives. Because there is more information on any given topic than anyone can store in their head, there is an added incentive for us to talk among ourselves about the media we consume. This conversation creates buzz that is increasingly valued by the media industry. Consumption has become a collective process—and that's what this book means by collective intelligence, a term coined by French cybertheorist Pierre Lévy. None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills. Collective intelligence can be seen as an alternative source of media power. We are learning how to use that power through our day-to-day interactions within convergence culture. Right now, we are mostly using this collective power through our recreational life, but soon we will be deploying those skills for more "serious" purposes. In this book, I explore how collective meaning-making within popular culture is starting to change the ways religion, education, law, politics, advertising, and even the military operate.

Convergence Talk

Another snapshot of convergence culture at work: In December 2004, a hotly anticipated Bollywood film, *Rok Sako To Rok Lo* (2004), 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 had been fully accessible via mobile phones.[2] 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?

Over the past several years, many of us have watched 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 mobile devices to compete in augmented and alternative reality games. Some functions will take root; others will fail.

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, or 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.

You've probably been hearing a lot about convergence lately. You are going to be hearing even more.

The media industries are undergoing another paradigm shift. It happens from time to time. In the 1990s, rhetoric about a coming digital revolution contained an implicit and often explicit assumption that new media was going to push aside old media, that the Internet was going to displace broadcasting, and that all of this would enable consumers to more easily access media content that was personally meaningful to them. A best-seller in 1990, Nicholas Negroponte's *Being Digital,* drew a sharp contrast between "passive old media" and "interactive new media," predicting the collapse of broadcast networks in favor of an era of narrowcasting and niche media on demand: "What will happen to broadcast television over the next five years is so phenomenal that it's difficult to comprehend."[3] At one point, he suggests that no government regulation will be necessary to shatter the media conglomerates: "The monolithic empires of mass media are dissolving into an array of cottage industries. . . . Media barons of today will be grasping to hold onto their centralized empires tomorrow. . . . The combined forces of technology and human nature will ultimately take a stronger hand in plurality than any laws Congress can invent."[4] Sometimes, the new media companies spoke about convergence, but by this term, they seemed to mean that old media would be absorbed fully and completely into the orbit of the emerging technologies. George Gilder, another digital revolutionary, dismissed such claims: "The computer industry is converging with the television industry in the same sense that the automobile converged with the horse, the TV converged with the nickelodeon, the word-processing program converged with the typewriter, the CAD program converged with the drafting board, and

digital desktop publishing converged with the linotype machine and the letterpress."[5] For Gilder, the computer had come not to transform mass culture but to destroy it.

The popping of the dot-com bubble threw cold water on this talk of a digital revolution. Now, convergence has reemerged as an important reference point as old and new media companies try to imagine the future of the entertainment industry. If the digital revolution paradigm presumed that new media would displace old media, the emerging convergence paradigm assumes that old and new media will interact in ever more complex ways. The digital revolution paradigm claimed that new media was going to change everything. After the dot-com crash, the tendency was to imagine that new media had changed nothing. As with so many things about the current media environment, the truth lay somewhere in between. More and more, industry leaders are returning to convergence as a way of making sense of a moment of disorienting change. Convergence is, in that sense, an old concept taking on new meanings.

There was lots of convergence talk to be heard at the New Orleans Media Experience in October 2003. The New Orleans Media Experience was organized by HSI Productions, Inc., a New York–based company that produces music videos and commercials. HSI has committed to spend $100 million over the next five years, to make New Orleans the mecca for media convergence that Slamdance has become for independent cinema. The New Orleans Media Experience is more than a film festival; it is also a showcase for game releases, a venue for commercials and music videos, an array of concerts and theatrical performances, and a three-day series of panels and discussions with industry leaders.

Inside the auditorium, massive posters featuring images of eyes, ears, mouths, and hands urged attendees to "worship at the Alter of Convergence," but it was far from clear what kind of deity they were genuflecting before. Was it a New Testament God who promised them salvation? An Old Testament God threatening destruction unless they followed His rules? A multifaced deity that spoke like an oracle and demanded blood sacrifices? Perhaps, in keeping with the location, convergence was a voodoo goddess who would give them the power to inflict pain on their competitors?

Like me, the participants had come to New Orleans hoping to glimpse tomorrow before it was too late. Many were nonbelievers who

had been burned in the dot-com meltdown and were there to scoff at any new vision. Others were freshly minted from America's top business schools and there to find ways to make their first million. Still others were there because their bosses had sent them, hoping for enlightenment, but willing to settle for one good night in the French Quarter.

The mood was tempered by a sober realization of the dangers of moving too quickly, as embodied by the ghost-town campuses in the Bay Area and the office furniture being sold at bulk prices on eBay; and the dangers of moving too slowly, as represented by the recording industry's desperate flailing as it tries to close the door on file-sharing after the cows have already come stampeding out of the barn. The participants had come to New Orleans in search of the "just right"—the right investments, predictions, and business models. No longer expecting to surf the waves of change, they would be content with staying afloat. The old paradigms were breaking down faster than the new ones were emerging, producing panic among those most invested in the status quo and curiosity in those who saw change as opportunity.

Advertising guys in pinstriped shirts mingled with recording industry flacks with backward baseball caps, Hollywood agents in Hawaiian shirts, pointy-bearded technologists, and shaggy-haired gamers. The only thing they all knew how to do was to exchange business cards.

As represented on the panels at the New Orleans Media Experience, convergence was a "come as you are" party and some of the participants were less ready for what was planned than others. It was also a swap meet where each of the entertainment industries traded problems and solutions, finding through the interplay among media what they can't achieve working in isolation. In every discussion, there emerged different models of convergence followed by the acknowledgment that none of them knew for sure what the outcomes were going to be. Then, everyone adjourned for a quick round of Red Bulls (a conference sponsor) as if funky high-energy drinks were going to blast them over all of those hurdles.

Political economists and business gurus make convergence sound so easy; they look at the charts that show the concentration of media ownership as if they ensure that all of the parts will work together to pursue maximum profits. But from the ground, many of the big media giants look like great big dysfunctional families, whose members aren't speaking with each other and pursue their own short term agendas

even at the expense of other divisions of the same companies. In New Orleans, however, the representatives for different industries seemed tentatively ready to lower their guard and speak openly about common visions.

This event was billed as a chance for the general public to learn firsthand about the coming changes in news and entertainment. In accepting an invitation to be on panels, in displaying a willingness to "go public" with their doubts and anxieties, perhaps industry leaders were acknowledging the importance of the role that ordinary consumers can play not just in accepting convergence, but actually in *driving* the process. If the media industry in recent years has seemed at war with its consumers, in that it is trying to force consumers back into old relationships and into obedience to well-established norms, companies hoped to use this New Orleans event to justify their decisions to consumers and stockholders alike.

Unfortunately, although this was not a closed-door event, it might as well have been. Those few members of the public who did show up were ill-informed. After an intense panel discussion about the challenges of broadening the uses of game consoles, the first member of the audience to raise his hand wanted to know when *Grand Theft Auto III* was coming out on the Xbox. You can scarcely blame consumers for not knowing how to speak this new language or even what questions to ask when so little previous effort has been made to educate them about convergence thinking.

At a panel on game consoles, the big tension was between Sony (a hardware company) and Microsoft (a software company); both had ambitious plans but fundamentally different business models and visions. All agreed that the core challenge was to expand the potential uses of this cheap and readily accessible technology so that it became *the* "black box," the "Trojan horse" that smuggled convergence culture right into people's living rooms. What was mom going to do with the console when her kids were at school? What would get a family to give a game console to grandpa for Christmas? They had the technology to bring about convergence, but they hadn't figured out why anyone would want it.

Another panel focused on the relationship between video games and traditional media. Increasingly, movie moguls saw games not simply as a means of stamping the franchise logo on some ancillary product but as a means of expanding the storytelling experience. These filmmakers

had come of age as gamers and had their own ideas about the creative intersections between the media; they knew who the most creative designers were and they worked the collaboration into their contract. They wanted to use games to explore ideas that couldn't fit within two-hour films.

Such collaborations meant taking everyone out of their "comfort zones," as one movieland agent explained. These relationships were difficult to sustain, since all parties worried about losing creative control, and since the time spans for development and distribution in the media were radically different. Should the game company try to align its timing to the often unpredictable production cycle of a movie with the hopes of hitting Wal-Mart the same weekend the film opens? Should the movie producers wait for the often equally unpredictable game development cycle to run its course, sitting out the clock while some competitor steals their thunder? Will the game get released weeks or months later, after the buzz of the movie has dried up or, worse yet, after the movie has bombed? Should the game become part of the publicity buildup toward a major release, even though that means starting development before the film project has been "green lighted" by a studio? Working with a television production company is even more nerve wracking, since the turnaround time is much shorter and the risk much higher that the series will never reach the air.

If the game industry folks had the smirking belief that they controlled the future, the record industry types were sweating bullets; their days were numbered unless they figured out how to turn around current trends (such as dwindling audiences, declining sales, and expanding piracy). The panel on "monetizing music" was one of the most heavily attended. Everyone tried to speak at once, yet none of them were sure their "answers" would work. Will the future revenue come from rights management, from billing people for the music they download, or from creating a fee the servers had to pay out to the record industry as a whole? And what about cell phone rings—which some felt represented an unexplored market for new music as well as a grassroots promotional channel? Perhaps the money will lie in the intersection between the various media with new artists promoted via music videos that are paid for by advertisers who want to use their sounds and images for branding, with new artists tracked via the web that allows the public to register its preferences in hours rather than weeks.

And so it went, in panel after panel. The New Orleans Media Experience pressed us into the future. Every path forward had roadblocks, most of which felt insurmountable, but somehow, they would either have to be routed around or broken down in the coming decade.

The messages were plain:

1. Convergence is coming and you had better be ready.
2. Convergence is harder than it sounds.
3. Everyone will survive if everyone works together. (Unfortunately, that was the one thing nobody knew how to do.)

The Prophet of Convergence

If *Wired* magazine declared Marshall McLuhan the patron saint of the digital revolution, we might well describe the late MIT political scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool as the prophet of media convergence. Pool's *Technologies of Freedom* (1983) was probably the first book to lay out the concept of convergence as a force of change within the media industries:

> A process called the "convergence of modes" is blurring the lines between media, even between point-to-point communications, such as the post, telephone and telegraph, and mass communications, such as the press, radio, and television. A single physical means—be it wires, cables or airwaves—may carry services that in the past were provided in separate ways. Conversely, a service that was provided in the past by any one medium—be it broadcasting, the press, or telephony—can now be provided in several different physical ways. So the one-to-one relationship that used to exist between a medium and its use is eroding.[6]

Some people today talk about divergence rather than convergence, but Pool understood that they were two sides of the same phenomenon.

"Once upon a time," Pool explained, "companies that published newspapers, magazines, and books did very little else; their involvement with other media was slight."[7] Each media had its own distinctive functions and markets, and each was regulated under different regimes, depending on whether its character was centralized or decentralized, marked by scarcity or plentitude, dominated by news or

entertainment, and owned by governmental or private interests. Pool felt that these differences were largely the product of political choices and preserved through habit rather than any essential characteristic of the various technologies. But he did see some communications technologies as supporting more diversity and a greater degree of participation than others: "Freedom is fostered when the means of communication are dispersed, decentralized, and easily available, as are printing presses or microcomputers. Central control is more likely when the means of communication are concentrated, monopolized, and scarce, as are great networks."[8]

Several forces, however, have begun breaking down the walls separating these different media. New media technologies enabled the same content to flow through many different channels and assume many different forms at the point of reception. Pool was describing what Nicholas Negroponte calls the transformation of "atoms into bytes" or digitization.[9] At the same time, new patterns of cross-media ownership that began in the mid-1980s, during what we can now see as the first phase of a longer process of media concentration, were making it more desirable for companies to distribute content across those various channels rather than within a single media platform. Digitization set the conditions for convergence; corporate conglomerates created its imperative.

Much writing about the so-called digital revolution presumed that the outcome of technological change was more or less inevitable. Pool, on the other 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: "Convergence does not mean ultimate stability or unity. It operates as a constant force for unification but always in dynamic tension with change. . . . There is no immutable law of growing convergence; the process of change is more complicated than that."[10]

As Pool predicted, we are in an age of media transition, one marked by tactical decisions and unintended consequences, mixed signals and competing interests, and most of all, unclear directions and unpredictable outcomes.[11] Two decades later, I find myself reexamining some of the core questions Pool raised—about how we maintain the potential of participatory culture in the wake of growing media concentration, about whether the changes brought about by convergence open new opportunities for expression or expand the power of big media.

Pool was interested in the impact of convergence on political culture; I am more interested in its impact on popular culture, but as chapter 6 will suggest, the lines between the two have now blurred.

It is beyond my abilities to describe or fully document all of the changes that are occurring. My aim is more modest. I want to describe some of the ways that convergence thinking is reshaping American popular culture and, in particular, the ways it is impacting the relationship between media audiences, producers, and content. Although this chapter will outline the big picture (insofar as any of us can see it clearly yet), subsequent chapters will examine these changes through a series of case studies focused on specific media franchises and their audiences. My goal is to help ordinary people grasp how convergence is impacting the media they consume and, at the same time, to help industry leaders and policymakers understand consumer perspectives on these changes. Writing this book has been challenging because everything seems to be changing at once and there is no vantage point that takes me above the fray. Rather than trying to write from an objective vantage point, I describe in this book what this process looks like from various localized perspectives—advertising executives struggling to reach a changing market, creative artists discovering new ways to tell stories, educators tapping informal learning communities, activists deploying new resources to shape the political future, religious groups contesting the quality of their cultural environs, and, of course, various fan communities who are early adopters and creative users of emerging media.

I can't claim to be a neutral observer in any of this. For one thing, I am not simply a consumer of many of these media products; I am also an active fan. The world of media fandom has been a central theme of my work for almost two decades—an interest that emerges from my own participation within various fan communities as much as it does from my intellectual interests as a media scholar. During that time, I have watched fans move from the invisible margins of popular culture and into the center of current thinking about media production and consumption. For another, through my role as director of the MIT Comparative Media Studies Program, I have been an active participant in discussions among industry insiders and policymakers; I have consulted with some of the companies discussed in this book; my earlier writings on fan communities and participatory culture have been embraced by business schools and are starting to have some modest impact on the way media companies are relating to their consumers; many of the creative artists and media executives I interviewed are people I would consider friends. At a time when the roles between producers and consumers are shifting, my job allows me to move among different vantage points. I hope this book allows readers to benefit from my adventures into spaces where few humanists have gone before. Yet, readers should also keep in mind that my engagement with fans and producers alike necessarily colors what I say. My goal here is to document conflicting perspectives on media change rather than to critique them. I don't think we can meaningfully critique convergence until it is more fully understood; yet if the public doesn't get some insights into the discussions that are taking place, they will have little to no input into decisions that will dramatically change their relationship to media.

The Black Box Fallacy

Almost a decade ago, science fiction writer Bruce Sterling established what he calls the Dead Media Project. As his Web site (http://www.deadmedia.org) explains, "The centralized, dinosaurian one-to-many media that roared and trampled through the twentieth century are poorly adapted to the postmodern technological environment."[12] Anticipating that some of these "dinosaurs" were heading to the tar pits, he constructed a shrine to "the media that have died on the barbed wire of technological change." His collection is astounding, including relics like "the phenakistoscope, the telharmonium, the Edison wax cylinder, the stereopticon . . . various species of magic lantern."[13]

Yet, history teaches us that old media never die—and they don't even necessarily fade away. What dies are simply the tools we use to access media content—the 8-track, the Beta tape. These are what media scholars call *delivery technologies*. Most of what Sterling's project lists falls under this category. Delivery technologies become obsolete and get replaced; media, on the other hand, evolve. Recorded sound is the medium. CDs, MP3 files, and 8-track cassettes are delivery technologies.

To define media, let's turn to historian Lisa Gitelman, who offers a model of media that works on two levels: on the first, a medium is a technology that enables communication; on the second, a medium is a set of associated "protocols" or social and cultural practices that have

grown up around that technology.[14] Delivery systems are simply and only technologies; media are also cultural systems. Delivery technologies come and go all the time, but media persist as layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment stratum.

A medium's content may shift (as occurred when television displaced radio as a storytelling medium, freeing radio to become the primary showcase for rock and roll), its audience may change (as occurs when comics move from a mainstream medium in the 1950s to a niche medium today), and its social status may rise or fall (as occurs when theater moves from a popular form to an elite one), but once a medium establishes itself as satisfying some core human demand, it continues to function within the larger system of communication options. Once recorded sound becomes a possibility, we have continued to develop new and improved means of recording and playing back sound. Printed words did not kill spoken words. Cinema did not kill theater. Television did not kill radio.[15] Each old medium was forced to coexist with the emerging media. That's why convergence seems more plausible as a way of understanding the past several decades of media change than the old digital revolution paradigm had. Old media are not being displaced. Rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies.

The implications of this distinction between media and delivery systems become clearer as Gitelman elaborates on what she means by "protocols." She writes: "Protocols express a huge variety of social, economic, and material relationships. So telephony includes the salutation 'Hello?' (for English speakers, at least) and includes the monthly billing cycle and includes the wires and cables that materially connect our phones. . . . Cinema includes everything from the sprocket holes that run along the sides of film to the widely shared sense of being able to wait and see 'films' at home on video. And protocols are far from static."[16] This book will have less to say about the technological dimensions of media change than about the shifts in the protocols by which we are producing and consuming media.

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 the folks at the New Orleans Media Experience could just figure out which black box will reign supreme, then everyone can make reasonable investments for the future. Part of what makes the black box concept a fallacy is that it reduces media change to technological change and strips aside the cultural levels we are considering here.

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 adopter, but most American homes now have, or soon 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 dysfunction that exist between the various media technologies. And many of my MIT students are lugging around multiple black boxes—their laptops, their cells, their iPods, their Game Boys, their BlackBerrys, you name it.

As Cheskin Research explained in a 2002 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 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."[17] This pull toward more specialized media appliances coexists with a push toward more generic devices. We can see the proliferation of black boxes as symptomatic of a moment of convergence: because no one is sure what kinds of functions should be combined, we are forced to buy a range of specialized and incompatible appliances. On the other end of the spectrum, we may also be forced to deal with an escalation of functions within the same media appliance, functions that decrease the ability of that appliance to serve its original function, and so I can't get a cell phone that is just a phone.

Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. 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, not an endpoint. There will be no single black box that controls the flow of media into our homes. 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. Convergence isn't something that is going to happen one day when we have enough bandwidth or figure out the correct configuration of appliances. Ready or not, we are already living within a convergence culture.

Our cell phones are not simply telecommunications devices; they also allow us to play games, download information from the Internet, and take and send photographs or text messages. Increasingly they allow us to watch previews of new films, download installments of serialized novels, or attend concerts from remote locations. All of this is already happening in northern Europe and Asia. Any of these functions can also be performed using other media appliances. You can listen to the Dixie Chicks through your DVD player, your car radio, your walkman, your iPod, 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. Warner Bros. produces film, television, popular music, computer games, Web sites, 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, scan the Web, listen to and download MP3 files, chat with friends, word-process a paper, and respond to e-mail, shifting rapidly among 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.

Convergence is taking place within the same appliances, within the same franchise, within the same company, within the brain of the consumer, and within the same fandom. Convergence involves both a change in the way media is produced and a change in the way media is consumed.

The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence

Another snapshot of the future: Anthropologist Mizuko 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.[18] They wake up together, work together, eat 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 telecocooning.

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, desires also flow across media channels. Being a lover or a mommy or a teacher occurs on multiple platforms.[19] Sometimes we tuck our kids into bed at night and other times we Instant Message them from the other side of the globe.

And yet another snapshot: 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 into their own hands, the results can be wonderfully creative; they can also be bad news for all involved.

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

The American media environment is now being shaped by two seemingly contradictory trends: on the one hand, new media technologies

have lowered production and distribution costs, expanded the range of available delivery channels, and enabled consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways. At the same time, there has been an alarming concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media, with a small handful of multinational media conglomerates dominating all sectors of the entertainment industry. No one seems capable of describing both sets of changes at the same time, let alone show how they impact each other. Some fear that media is out of control, others that it is too controlled. Some see a world without gatekeepers, others a world where gatekeepers have unprecedented power. Again, the truth lies somewhere in between.

Another snapshot: People around the world are affixing stickers showing Yellow Arrows (http://global.yellowarrow.net) alongside public monuments and factories, beneath highway overpasses, onto lamp posts. The arrows provide numbers others can call to access recorded voice messages—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.

Convergence, as we can see, is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Corporate convergence coexists with grassroots convergence. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce 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 other consumers. The promises of this new media environment raise 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, corporate and grassroots convergence 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 to stay, 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 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 for media conglomerates, since content that succeeds in one sector can spread across other platforms. On the other, convergence represents a risk since most of these media fear a fragmentation or erosion of their markets. Each time they move a viewer from television to the Internet, say, there is a risk that the consumer may not return.

Industry insiders use the term "extension" to refer to their efforts to expand the potential markets by moving content across different delivery systems, "synergy" to refer to the economic opportunities represented by their ability to own and control all of those manifestations, and "franchise" to refer to their coordinated effort to brand and market fictional content under these new conditions. Extension, synergy, and franchising are pushing media industries to embrace convergence. For that reason, the case studies I selected for this book deal with some of the most successful franchises in recent media history. Some (*American Idol*, 2002, and *Survivor*, 2000) originate on television, some (*The Matrix*, 1999, *Star Wars*, 1977) on the big screen, some as books (*Harry Potter*, 1998), and some as games (*The Sims*, 2000), but each extends outward from its originating medium to influence many other sites of cultural production. Each of these franchises offers a different vantage point from which to understand how media convergence is reshaping the relationship between media producers and consumers.

Chapter 1, which focuses on *Survivor*, and chapter 2, which centers on *American Idol*, look at the phenomenon of reality television. Chapter 1 guides readers through the little known world of *Survivor* spoilers—a

group of active consumers who pool their knowledge to try to unearth the series' many secrets before they are revealed on the air. *Survivor* spoiling will be read here as a particularly vivid example of collective intelligence at work. Knowledge communities form around mutual intellectual interests; their members work together to forge new knowledge often in realms where no traditional expertise exists; the pursuit of and assessment of knowledge is at once communal and adversarial. Mapping how these knowledge communities work can help us better understand the social nature of contemporary media consumption. They can also give us insight into how knowledge becomes power in the age of media convergence.

On the other hand, chapter 2 examines *American Idol* from the perspective of the media industry, trying to understand how reality television is being shaped by what I call "affective economics." The decreasing value of the thirty-second commercial in an age of TiVos and VCRs is forcing Madison Avenue to rethink its interface with the consuming public. This new "affective economics" encourages companies to transform brands into what one industry insider calls "lovemarks" and to blur the line between entertainment content and brand messages. According to the logic of affective economics, the ideal consumer is active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked. Watching the advert or consuming the product is no longer enough; the company invites the audience inside the brand community. Yet, if such affiliations encourage more active consumption, these same communities can also become protectors of brand integrity and thus critics of the companies that seek to court their allegiance.

Strikingly, in both cases, relations between producers and consumers are breaking down as consumers seek to act upon the invitation to participate in the life of the franchises. In the case of *Survivor*, the spoiler community has become so good at the game that the producers fear they will be unable to protect the rights of other consumers to have a "first time" experience of the unfolding series. In the case of *American Idol*, fans fear that their participation is marginal and that producers still play too active a role in shaping the outcome of the competition. How much participation is too much? When does participation become interference? And conversely, when do producers exert too much power over the entertainment experience?

Chapter 3 examines *The Matrix* franchise as an example of what I am calling transmedia storytelling. Transmedia storytelling refers to a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence—one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities. Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience. Some would argue that the Wachowski brothers, who wrote and directed the three *Matrix* films, have pushed transmedia storytelling farther than most audience members were prepared to go.

Chapters 4 and 5 take us deeper into the realm of participatory culture. Chapter 4 deals with *Star Wars* fan filmmakers and gamers, who are actively reshaping George Lucas's mythology to satisfy their own fantasies and desires. Fan cultures will be understood here as a revitalization of the old folk culture process in response to the content of mass culture. Chapter 5 deals with young *Harry Potter* fans who are writing their own stories about Hogwarts and its students. In both cases, these grassroots artists are finding themselves in conflict with commercial media producers who want to exert greater control over their intellectual property. We will see in chapter 4 that LucasArts has had to continually rethink its relations to *Star Wars* fans throughout the past several decades, trying to strike the right balance between encouraging the enthusiasm of their fans and protecting their investments in the series. Interestingly, as *Star Wars* moves across media channels, different expectations about participation emerge, with the producers of the *Star Wars Galaxies* game encouraging consumers to generate much of the content even as the producers of the *Star Wars* movies issue guidelines enabling and constraining fan participation.

Chapter 5 extends this focus on the politics of participation to consider two specific struggles over *Harry Potter*: the conflicting interests between *Harry Potter* fans and Warner Bros., the studio that acquired the film rights to J. K. Rowling's books, and the conflict between conservative Christian critics of the books and teachers who have seen them as a means of encouraging young readers. This chapter maps a range of responses to the withering of traditional gatekeepers and the expansion of fantasy into many different parts of our everyday lives. On the one hand, some conservative Christians are striking back against media convergence and globalization, reasserting traditional

authority in the face of profound social and cultural change. On the other hand, some Christians embrace convergence through their own forms of media outreach, fostering a distinctive approach to media literacy education and encouraging the emergence of Christian-inflected fan cultures.

Throughout these five chapters, I will show how entrenched institutions are taking their models from grassroots fan communities, and reinventing themselves for an era of media convergence and collective intelligence—how the advertising industry has been forced to reconsider consumers' relations to brands, the military is using multiplayer games to rebuild communications between civilians and service members, the legal profession has struggled to understand what "fair use" means in an era where many more people are becoming authors, educators are reassessing the value of informal education, and at least some conservative Christians are making their peace with newer forms of popular culture. In each of these cases, powerful institutions are trying to build stronger connections with their constituencies and consumers are applying skills learned as fans and gamers to work, education, and politics.

Chapter 6 will turn from popular culture to public culture, applying my ideas about convergence to offer a perspective on the 2004 American presidential campaign, exploring what it might take to make democracy more participatory. Again and again, citizens were better served by popular culture than they were by news or political discourse; popular culture took on new responsibilities for educating the public about the stakes of this election and inspiring them to participate more fully in the process. In the wake of a divisive campaign, popular media may also model ways we can come together despite our differences. The 2004 elections represent an important transitional moment in the relationship between media and politics as citizens are being encouraged to do much of the dirty work of the campaign and the candidates and parties lost some control over the political process. Here again, all sides are assuming greater participation by citizens and consumers, yet they do not yet agree on the terms of that participation.

In my conclusion, I will return to my three key terms—convergence, collective intelligence, and participation. I want to explore some of the implications of the trends I will be discussing in this book for education, media reform, and democratic citizenship. I will be returning there to a core claim: that convergence culture represents a shift in the

ways we think about our relations to media, that we are making that shift first through our relations with popular culture, but that the skills we acquire through play may have implications for how we learn, work, participate in the political process, and connect with other people around the world.

I will be focusing throughout this book on the competing and contradictory ideas about participation that are shaping this new media culture. Yet, I must acknowledge that not all consumers have access to the skills and resources needed to be full participants in the cultural practices I am describing. Increasingly, the digital divide is giving way to concern about the participation gap. Throughout the 1990s, the primary question was one of access. Today, most Americans have some limited access to the Internet, say, though for many, that access is through the public library or the local school. Yet many of the activities this book will describe depend on more extended access to those technologies, a greater familiarity with the new kinds of social interactions they enable, a fuller mastery over the conceptual skills that consumers have developed in response to media convergence. As long as the focus remains on access, reform remains focused on technologies; as soon as we begin to talk about participation, the emphasis shifts to cultural protocols and practices.

Most of the people depicted in this book are early adopters. In this country they are disproportionately white, male, middle class, and college educated. These are people who have the greatest access to new media technologies and have mastered the skills needed to fully participate in these new knowledge cultures. I don't assume that these cultural practices will remain the same as we broaden access and participation. In fact, expanding participation necessarily sparks further change. Yet, right now, our best window into convergence culture comes from looking at the experience of these early settlers and first inhabitants. These elite consumers exert a disproportionate influence on media culture in part because advertisers and media producers are so eager to attract and hold their attention. Where they go, the media industry is apt to follow; where the media industry goes, these consumers are apt to be found. Right now, both are chasing their own tails.

You are now entering convergence culture. 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 group can set the terms. No one group can control access and participation.

Don't expect the uncertainties surrounding convergence to be resolved anytime soon. We are entering an era of prolonged transition and transformation in the way media operates. Convergence describes the process by which we will sort through those options. There will be no magical black box that puts everything in order again. Media producers will only find their way through their current problems by renegotiating their relationship with their consumers. Audiences, empowered by these new technologies, occupying a space at the intersection between old and new media, are demanding the right to participate within the culture. Producers who fail to make their peace with this new participatory culture will face declining goodwill and diminished revenues. The resulting struggles and compromises will define the public culture of the future.

1

Spoiling *Survivor*

The Anatomy of a Knowledge Community

Survivor (2004)—the astonishingly popular CBS show that started the reality television trend—does not just pit sixteen strangers against one another. Around each carefully crafted episode emerges another contest—a giant cat and mouse game that is played between the producers and the audience. Every week, the eagerly anticipated results are fodder for water cooler discussions and get reported as news, even on rival networks. *Survivor* is television for the Internet age—designed to be discussed, dissected, debated, predicted, and critiqued.

The *Survivor* winner is one of television's most tightly guarded secrets. Executive producer Mark Burnett engages in disinformation campaigns trying to throw smoke in viewers' eyes. Enormous fines are written into the contracts for the cast and crew members if they get caught leaking the results. And so a fascination has grown up around the order of the "boots" (the sequence in which the contestants get rejected from the tribe), the "final four" (the last four contestants in the competition), and especially around the "sole survivor" (the final winner of the million-dollar cash prize).

The audience is one of the largest in broadcast television. In its first eight seasons, *Survivor* rarely dipped out of the top ten highest-rated shows. The most hard-core fans, a contingent known as the "spoilers," go to extraordinary lengths to ferret out the answers. They use satellite photographs to locate the base camp. They watch the taped episodes, frame by frame, looking for hidden information. They know *Survivor* inside out, and they are determined to figure it out—together—before the producers reveal what happened. They call this process "spoiling."

Mark Burnett acknowledges this contest between producer and fans is part of what creates *Survivor*'s mystique: "With so much of our show shrouded in secrecy until it's broadcast, it makes complete sense that many individuals consider it a challenge to try to gain information

Conclusion

Democratizing Television? The Politics of Participation

In August 2005, former Democratic vice president Albert Gore helped to launch a new cable news network, Current. The network's stated goal was to encourage the active participation of young people as citizen journalists; viewers were intended not simply to consume Current's programming but also to participate in its production, selection, and distribution. As Gore explained at a press conference in late 2004, "We are about empowering this generation of young people in the 18-to-34 population to engage in a dialogue of democracy and to tell their stories of what's going on in their lives, in the dominant medium of our time. The Internet opened a floodgate for young people, whose passions are finally being heard, but TV hasn't followed suit. . . . Our aim is to give young people a voice, to democratize television."[1] The network estimates that as much as 25 percent of the content they air will come from their viewers. Amateur media producers will upload digital videos to a Web site; visitors to the site will be able to evaluate each submission, and those which receive the strongest support from viewers will make it onto the airwaves.

The idea of reader-moderated news content is not new. Slashdot was one of the first sites to experiment with user-moderation, gathering a wealth of information with a five-person paid staff, mostly part time, by empowering readers not only to submit their own stories but to work collectively to determine the relative value of each submission. Slashdot's focus is explicitly on technology and culture, and so it became a focal point for information about Internet privacy issues, the debates over mandatory filters in public libraries, the open source movement, and so forth. Slashdot attracts an estimated 1.1 million unique users per month, and some 250,000 per day, constituting a user base as large as that of many of the nation's leading online general

interest and technology-centered news sites.[2] Yet, this would be the first time that something like the Slashdot model was being applied to television.

Even before the network reached the air, Current's promise to "democratize television" became a focal point for debates about the politics of participation. Cara Mertes, the executive producer for the PBS documentary program *POV*, itself an icon of the struggle to get alternative perspectives on television, asked, "What are you talking about when you say 'democratizing the media'? Is it using media to further democratic ends, to create an environment conducive to the democratic process through unity, empathy and civil discourse? Or does it mean handing over the means of production, which is the logic of public access?"[3] Was Current going to be democratic in its content (focusing on the kinds of information that a democratic society needs to function), its effects (mobilizing young people to participate more fully in the democratic process), its values (fostering rationale discourse and a stronger sense of social contract), or its process (expanding access to the means of media production and distribution)?

Others pushed further, arguing that market pressures, the demand to satisfy advertisers and placate stock holders, would ensure that no commercial network could possibly be as democratic on any of these levels as the Gore operation was promising. Any truly democratic form of broadcasting would necessarily arise outside corporate media and would likely see corporate America as its primary target for reform. Even if the network remained true to its goals, they argued, those most drawn to the alternative media perspective would be skeptical of any media channel shaped by traditional corporate gatekeepers. A growing number of Web services—such as participatoryculture.org and ourmedia.org—were making it easier for amateur media makers to gain visibility via the Web without having to turn over exclusive rights to their material to a network funded by some of the wealthiest men and women in the country. In a society where blogs—both text based and video enhanced—were thriving, why would anyone need to put their content on television?

Others expressed disappointment in the network's volunteeristic approach. Original plans to pay a large number of independent filmmakers to become roaming correspondents had given way to a plan to allow amateurs to submit material for consideration and then get paid upon acceptance. The first plan, critics argued, would have sustained

an infrastructure to support alternative media production; the other would lead to little more than a glorified public access station.

The network defended itself as a work in progress—one that was doing what it could to democratize a medium while working under market conditions. A spokesman for the network observed, "For some people, the perfect is always the enemy of the good."[4] Current might not change everything about television, they pleaded, but it could make a difference. Gore held firm in his beliefs that enabling audience-generated content had the potential to diversify civic discourse: ""I personally believe that when this medium is connected to the grass-roots storytellers that are out there, it will have an impact on the kinds of things that are discussed and the way they are discussed."[5]

At about the same time, the British Broadcasting Company was embracing an even more radical vision of how consumers might relate to its content. The first signs of this new policy had come through a speech made by Ashley Highfield, director of BBC New Media & Technology, in October 2003, explaining how the widespread adoption of broadband and digital technologies will impact the ways his network serves its public:

> Future TV may be unrecognizable from today, defined not just by linear TV channels, packaged and scheduled by television executives, but instead will resemble more of a kaleidoscope, thousands of streams of content, some indistinguishable as actual channels. These streams will mix together broadcasters' content and programs, and our viewer's contributions. At the simplest level—audiences will want to organize and reorganize content the way they want it. They'll add comments to our programs, vote on them, and generally mess about with them. But at another level, audiences will want to create these streams of video themselves from scratch, with or without our help. At this end of the spectrum, the traditional "monologue broadcaster" to "grateful viewer" relationship will break down.[6]

By 2005, the BBC was digitizing large segments of its archive and making the streaming content available via the Web.[7] The BBC was also encouraging grassroots experimentation with ways to annotate and index these materials. Current's path led from the Web—where many could share what they created—into broadcast media, where many could consume what a few had created. The BBC efforts were moving in the

other direction, opening up television content to the more participatory impulses shaping digital culture.

Both were in the sense promoting what this book has been calling convergence culture. Convergence does not depend on any specific delivery mechanism. Rather, convergence represents a paradigm shift —a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture. Despite the rhetoric about "democratizing television," this shift is being driven by economic calculations and not by some broad mission to empower the public. Media industries are embracing convergence for a number of reasons: because convergence-based strategies exploit the advantages of media conglomeration; because convergence creates multiple ways of selling content to consumers; because convergence cements consumer loyalty at a time when the fragmentation of the marketplace and the rise of file sharing threaten old ways of doing business. In some cases, convergence is being pushed by corporations as a way of shaping consumer behavior. In other cases, convergence is being pushed by consumers who are demanding that media companies be more responsive to their tastes and interests. Yet, whatever its motivations, convergence is changing the ways in which media industries operate and the ways average people think about their relation to media. We are in a critical moment of transition during which the old rules are open to change and companies may be forced to renegotiate their relationship to consumers. The question is whether the public is ready to push for greater participation or willing to settle for the same old relations to mass media.

Writing in 1991, W. Russell Neuman sought to examine the ways that consumer "habit" or what he called "the psychology of the mass audience, the semi-attentive, entertainment-oriented mind-set of day-to-day media behavior" would slow down the interactive potentials of emerging digital technologies.[8] In his model, the technology was ready at hand but the culture was not ready to embrace it: "The new developments in horizontal, user-controlled media that allow the user to amend, reformat, store, copy, forward to others, and comment on the flow of ideas do not rule out mass communications. Quite the contrary, they complement the traditional mass media."[9] The public will not

rethink their relationship to media content overnight, and the media industries will not relinquish their stranglehold on culture without a fight.

Today, we are more apt to hear the opposite claim—that early adapters are racing ahead of technological developments. No sooner is a new technology—say, Google Maps—released to the public than diverse grassroots communities begin to tinker with it, expanding its functionality, hacking its code, and pushing it into a more participatory direction. Indeed, many industry leaders argue that the main reason that television cannot continue to operate in the same old ways is that the broadcasters are losing younger viewers, who expect greater influence over the media they consume. Speaking at MIT in April 2004, Betsy Frank, executive vice president for research and planning at MTV Networks, described these consumers as "media-actives" whom she characterized as "the group of people born since the mid-70s who've never known a world without cable television, the vcr, or the internet, who have never had to settle for forced choice or least objectionable program, who grew up with a what I want when I want it view attitude towards media, and as a result, take a much more active role in their media choices."[10] Noting that "their fingerprints are on the remote," she said that the media industry was scrambling to make sense ofand respond to sharp declines in television viewership among the highly valued 18–27 male demographic as they defected from television toward more interactive and participatory media channels.

This book has sought to document a moment of transition during which at least some segments of the public have learned what it means to live within a convergence culture. Betsy Frank and other industry thinkers still tend to emphasize changes that are occurring within individuals, whereas this book's argument is that the greatest changes are occurring within consumption communities. The biggest change may be the shift from individualized and personalized media consumption toward consumption as a networked practice.

Personalized media was one of the ideals of the digital revolution in the early 1990s: digital media was going to "liberate" us from the "tyranny" of mass media, allowing us to consume only content we found personally meaningful. Conservative ideologue turned digital theorist George Gilder argued that the intrinsic properties of the computer pushed toward ever more decentralization and personalization. Compared to the one-size-fits-all diet of the broadcast networks, the coming media age would be a "feast of niches and specialties."[11] An era of customized and interactive content, he argues, would appeal to our highest ambitions and not our lowest, as we enter "a new age of individualism."[12] Consider Gilder's ideal of "first choice media" was yet another model for how we might democratize television.

By contrast, this book has argued that convergence encourages participation and collective intelligence, a view nicely summed up by the *New York Times*'s Marshall Sella: "With the aid of the Internet, the loftiest dream for television is being realized: an odd brand of interactivity. Television began as a one-way street winding from producers to consumers, but that street is now becoming two-way. A man with one machine (a TV) is doomed to isolation, but a man with two machines (TV and a computer) can belong to a community."[13] Each of the case studies shows what happens when people who have access to multiple machines consume—and produce—media together, when they pool their insights and information, mobilize to promote common interests, and function as grassroots intermediaries ensuring that important messages and interesting content circulate more broadly. Rather than talking about personal media, perhaps we should be talking about communal media—media that become part of our lives as members of communities, whether experienced face-to-face at the most local level or over the Net.

Throughout the book, I have shown that convergence culture is enabling new forms of participation and collaboration. For Lévy, the power to participate within knowledge communities exists alongside the power the nation-state exerts over its citizens and corporations within commodity capitalism exert over its workers and consumers. For Lévy, at his most utopian, this emerging power to participate serves as a strong corrective to those traditional sources of power, though they will also seek ways to turn it toward their own ends. We are just learning how to exercise that power—individually and collectively—and we are still fighting to define the terms under which we will be allowed to participate. Many fear this power; others embrace it. There are no guarantees that we will use our new power any more responsibly than nation-states or corporations have exercised theirs. We are trying to hammer out the ethical codes and social contracts that will determine how we will relate to one another just as we are trying to determine how this power will insert itself into the entertainment system or into the political process. Part of what we must do is figure out

how—and why—groups with different backgrounds, agendas, perspectives, and knowledge can listen to one another and work together toward the common good. We have a lot to learn.

Right now, we are learning how to apply these new participatory skills through our relation to commercial entertainment—or, more precisely, right now some groups of early adopters are testing the waters and mapping out directions where many more of us are apt to follow. These skills are being applied to popular culture first for two reasons: on the one hand, because the stakes are so low; and on the other, because playing with popular culture is a lot more fun than playing with more serious matters. Yet, as we saw in looking at Campaign 2004, what we learn through spoiling *Survivor* or remaking *Star Wars* may quickly get applied to political activism or education or the workplace.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, cultural scholars, myself included, depicted media fandom as an important test site for ideas about active consumption and grassroots creativity. We were drawn toward the idea of "fan culture" as operating in the shadows of, in response to, as well as an alternative to commercial culture. Fan culture was defined through the appropriation and transformation of materials borrowed from mass culture; it was the application of folk culture practices to mass culture content.[14] Across the past decade, the Web has brought these consumers from the margins of the media industry into the spotlight; research into fandom has been embraced by important thinkers in the legal and business communities. What might once have been seen as "rogue readers" are now Kevin Roberts's "inspirational consumers." Participation is understood as part of the normal ways that media operate while the current debates center around the terms of our participation. Just as studying fan culture helped us to understand the innovations that occur on the fringes of the media industry, we may also want to look at the structures of fan communities as showing us new ways of thinking about citizenship and collaboration. The political effects of these fan communities come not simply through the production and circulation of new ideas (the critical reading of favorite texts) but also through access to new social structures (collective intelligence) and new models of cultural production (participatory culture).

Have I gone too far? Am I granting too much power here to these consumption communities? Perhaps. But keep in mind that I am not really trying to predict the future. I want to avoid the kind of grand claims about the withering away of mass media institutions that make

the rhetoric of the digital revolution seem silly a decade later. Rather, I am trying to point toward the democratic potentials found in some contemporary cultural trends. There is nothing inevitable about the outcome. Everything is up for grabs. Pierre Lévy described his ideal of collective intelligence as a "realizable utopia," and so it is. I think of myself as a critical utopian. As a utopian, I want to identify possibilities within our culture that might lead toward a better, more just society. My experiences as a fan have changed how I think about media politics, helping me to look for and promote unrealized potentials rather than reject out of hand anything that doesn't rise to my standards. Fandom, after all, is born of a balance between fascination and frustration: if media content didn't fascinate us, there would be no desire to engage with it; but if it didn't frustrate us on some level, there would be no drive to rewrite or remake it. Today, I hear a great deal of frustration about the state of our media culture, yet surprisingly few people talk about how we might rewrite it.

But pointing to those opportunities for change is not enough in and of itself. One must also identify the various barriers that block the realization of those possibilities and look for ways to route around them. Having a sense of what a more ideal society looks like gives one a yardstick for determining what we must do to achieve our goals. Here, this book has offered specific case studies of groups who are already achieving some of the promises of collective intelligence or of a more participatory culture. I do not mean for us to read these groups as typical of the average consumer (if such a thing exists in an era of niche media and fragmented culture). Rather, we should read these case studies as demonstrations of what it is possible to do in the context of convergence culture.

This approach differs dramatically from what I call critical pessimism. Critical pessimists, such as media critics Mark Crispin Miller, Noam Chomsky, and Robert McChesney, focus primarily on the obstacles to achieving a more democratic society. In the process, they often exaggerate the power of big media in order to frighten readers into taking action. I don't disagree with their concern about media concentration, but the ways they frame the debate is self-defeating insofar as it disempowers consumers even as it seeks to mobilize them. Far too much media reform rhetoric rests on melodramatic discourse about victimization and vulnerability, seduction and manipulation, "propaganda machines" and "weapons of mass deception." Again and again,

this version of the media reform movement has ignored the complexity of the public's relationship to popular culture and sided with those opposed to a more diverse and participatory culture. The politics of critical utopianism is founded on a notion of empowerment; the politics of critical pessimism on a politics of victimization. One focuses on what we are doing with media, and the other on what media is doing to us. As with previous revolutions, the media reform movement is gaining momentum at a time when people are starting to feel more empowered, not when they are at their weakest.

Media concentration is a very real problem that potentially stifles many of the developments I have been describing across this book. Concentration is bad because it stifles competition and places media industries above the demands of their consumers. Concentration is bad because it lowers diversity—important in terms of popular culture, essential in terms of news. Concentration is bad because it lowers the incentives for companies to negotiate with their consumers and raises the barriers to their participation. Big concentrated media can ignore their audience (at least up to a point); smaller niche media must accommodate us.

That said, the fight over media concentration is only one struggle that should concern media reformers. The potentials of a more participatory media culture are also worth fighting for. Right now, convergence culture is throwing media into flux, expanding the opportunities for grassroots groups to speak back to the mass media. Put all of our efforts into battling the conglomerates and this window of opportunity will have passed. That is why it is so important to fight against the corporate copyright regime, to argue against censorship and moral panic that would pathologize these emerging forms of participation, to publicize the best practices of these online communities, to expand access and participation to groups that are otherwise being left behind, and to promote forms of media literacy education that help all children to develop the skills needed to become full participants in their culture.

If early readers are any indication, the most controversial claim in this book may be my operating assumption that increasing participation in popular culture is a good thing. Too many critical pessimists are still locked into the old politics of culture jamming. Resistance becomes an end in and of itself rather than a tool to ensure cultural diversity and corporate responsibility. The debate keeps getting framed as if the only true alternative were to opt out of media altogether and live in

the woods, eating acorns and lizards and reading only books published on recycled paper by small alternative presses. But what would it mean to tap media power for our own purposes? Is ideological and aesthetic purity really more valuable than transforming our culture?

A politics of participation starts from the assumption that we may have greater collective bargaining power if we form consumption communities. Consider the example of the Sequential Tarts. Started in 1997, www.sequentialtart.com serves as an advocacy group for female consumers frustrated by their historic neglect or patronizing treatment by the comics industry. Marcia Allas, the current editor of Sequential Tart, explained: "In the early days we wanted to change the apparent perception of the female reader of comics. . . . We wanted to show what we already knew—that the female audience for comics, while probably smaller than the male audience, is both diverse and has a collectively large disposable income."[15] In her study of Sequential Tart, scholar and sometime contributor Kimberly M. De Vries argues that the group self-consciously rejects the negative stereotypes about female comics readers constructed by men in and around the comics industry but also the well-meaning but equally constraining stereotypes constructed by the first generation of feminist critics of comics.[16] The Sequential Tarts defend the pleasures women take in comics even as they critique negative representations of women. The Web zine combines interviews with comics creators, retailers, and industry leaders, reviews of current publications, and critical essays about gender and comics. It showcases industry practices that attract or repel women, spotlights the work of smaller presses that often fell through the cracks, and promotes books that reflect their readers' tastes and interests. The Sequential Tarts are increasingly courted by publishers or individual artists who feel they have content that female readers might embrace and have helped to make the mainstream publishers more attentive to this often underserved market.

The Sequential Tarts represent a new kind of consumer advocacy group—one that seeks to diversify content and make mass media more responsive to its consumers. This is not to say that commercial media will ever truly operate according to democratic principles. Media companies don't need to share our ideals in order to change their practices. What will motivate the media companies is their own economic interests. What will motivate consumer-based politics will be our shared cultural and political interests. But we can't change much of anything if

we are not on speaking terms with people inside the media industry. A politics of confrontation must give way to one focused on tactical collaboration. The old model, which many wisely dismissed, was that consumers vote with their pocketbooks. The new model is that we are collectively changing the nature of the marketplace, and in so doing we are pressuring companies to change the products they are creating and the ways they relate to their consumers.

We still do not have any models for what a mature, fully realized knowledge culture would look like. But popular culture may provide us with prototypes. A case in point is Warren Ellis's comic book series, *Global Frequency.* Set in the near future, *Global Frequency* depicts a multiracial, multinational organization of ordinary people who contribute their services on an ad hoc basis. As Ellis explains, "You could be sitting there watching the news and suddenly hear an unusual cell phone tone, and within moments you might see your neighbor leaving the house in a hurry, wearing a jacket or a shirt with the distinctive Global Frequency symbol . . . or, hell, your girlfriend might answer the phone . . . and promise to explain later. . . . Anyone could be on the Global Frequency, and you'd never know until they got the call."[17] Ellis rejects the mighty demigods and elite groups of the superhero tradition and instead depicts the twenty-first-century equivalent of a volunteer fire department. Ellis conceived of the story in the wake of September 11 as an alternative to calls for increased state power and paternalistic constraints on communications: *Global Frequency* doesn't imagine the government saving its citizens from whatever Big Bad is out there. Rather, as Ellis explains, "*Global Frequency* is about us saving ourselves." Each issue focuses on a different set of characters in a different location, examining what it means for *Global Frequency* members personally and professionally to contribute their labor to a cause larger than themselves. The only recurring characters are those at the communications hub who contact the volunteers. Once *Frequency* participants are called into action, most of the key decisions get made on site as the volunteers are allowed to act on their localized knowledge. Most of the challenges come, appropriately enough, from the debris left behind by the collapse of the military-industrial complex and the end of the cold war—"The bad mad things in the dark that the public never found out about." In other words, the citizen soldiers use distributed knowledge to overcome the dangers of government secrecy.

Ellis's Global Frequency Network closely mirrors what journalist and digital activist Howard Rheingold has to say about smart mobs: "Smart mobs consist of people who are able to act in concert even if they don't know each other. The people who make up smart mobs cooperate in ways never before possible because they carry devices that possess both communication and computing capabilities. . . . Groups of people using these tools will gain new forms of social power."[18] In Manila and in Madrid, activists, using cell phones, were able to rally massive numbers of supporters in opposition to governments who might otherwise have controlled discourse on the mass media; these efforts resulted in transformations of power. In Boston, we are seeing home schoolers use these same technologies to organize field trips on the fly that deliver dozens of kids and their parents to a museum or historic site in a matter of a few hours.

Other writers, such as science fiction writer Cory Doctorow, describe such groups as "adhocracies." The polar opposite of a bureaucracy, an adhocracy is an organization characterized by a lack of hierarchy. In it, each person contributes to confronting a particular problem as needed based on his or her knowledge and abilities, and leadership roles shift as tasks change. An adhocracy, thus, is a knowledge culture that turns information into action. Doctorow's science fiction novel *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* depicts a future when the fans run Disney World, public support becomes the most important kind of currency, and debates about popular culture become the focus of politics.[19]

Ellis's vision of the Global Frequency Network and Doctorow's vision of a grassroots Disney World are far out there—well beyond anything we've seen in the real world yet. But fans put some of what they learned from Global Frequency into action: tapping a range of communications channels to push the networks and production company to try to get a television series on the air.[20] Consider this to be another example of what it would mean to "democratize television." Mark Burnett, *Survivor*'s executive producer, had taken an option on adopting the comic books for television; Warner Bros. had already announced plans to air *Global Frequency* as a midseason replacement, which then got postponed and later canceled. A copy of the series pilot was leaked on the Internet, circulating as an illegal download on BitTorrent, where it became the focus of a grassroots effort to get the series back into production. John Rogers, the show's head writer and producer, said that the massive response to the never-aired series was giving the producers leverage to push for the pilot's distribution on DVD and potentially

to sell the series to another network. Studio and network executives predictably cited concerns about what the consumers were doing: "Whether the pilot was picked up or not, it is still the property of Warner Bros. Entertainment and we take the protection of all of our intellectual property seriously. . . . While Warner Bros. Entertainment values feedback from consumers, copyright infringement is not a productive way to try to influence a corporate decision." Rogers wrote about his encounters with the *Global Frequency* fans in his blog: "It changes the way I'll do my next project. . . . I would put my pilot out on the internet in a heartbeat. Want five more? Come buy the boxed set." Rogers's comments invite us to imagine a time when small niches of consumers who were willing to commit their money to a cause might ensure the production of a minority-interest program. From a producer's perspective, such a scheme would be attractive since television series are made at a loss for the first several seasons until the production company accumulates enough episodes to sell a syndication package. DVD lowers that risk by allowing producers to sell the series one season at a time and even to package and sell unaired episodes. Selling directly to the consumer would allow producers to recoup their costs even earlier in the production cycle.

People in the entertainment industry are talking a lot these days about what *Wired* reporter Chris Anderson calls "The Long Tail."[21] Anderson argues that as distribution costs lower, as companies can keep more and more backlist titles in circulation, and as niche communities can use the Web to mobilize around titles that satisfy their particular interests, then the greatest profit will be made by those companies that generate the most diverse content and keep it available at the most reasonable prices. If Anderson is right, then niche-content stands a much better chance of turning a profit than ever before. The Long Tail model assumes an increasingly savvy media consumer, one who will actively seek out content of interest and who will take pride in being able to recommend that content to friends.

Imagine a subscription-based model in which viewers commit to pay a monthly fee to watch a season of episodes delivered into their homes via broadband. A pilot could be produced to test the waters and if the response looked positive, subscriptions could be sold for a show that had gotten enough subscribers to defer the company's initial production costs. Early subscribers would get a package price, others would pay more on a pay-per-view basis, which would cover the next

phase of production. Others could buy access to individual episodes. Distribution could be on a DVD mailed directly to your home or via streaming media (perhaps you could simply download it onto your iPod).

It was the announcement that ABC-Disney was going to be offering recent episodes of cult television series (such as *Lost* and *Desperate Housewives*) for purchase and download via the Apple Music Store that really took these discussions to the next level. Other networks quickly followed with their own download packages. Within the first twenty days, there were more than a million television episodes downloaded. The video iPod seems emblematic of the new convergence culture—not because everyone believes the small screen of the iPod is the ideal vehicle for watching broadcast content but because the ability to download reruns on demand represents a major shift in the relationship between consumers and media content.

Writing in *Slate*, media analyst Ivan Askwith described some of the implications of television downloads:

> As iTunes and its inevitable competitors offer more broadcast-television content, producers . . . won't have to compromise their programs to meet broadcast requirements. Episode lengths can vary as needed, content can be darker, more topical, and more explicit. . . . Audiences already expect director's cuts and deleted scenes on DVDs. It's not hard to imagine that the networks might one day air a "broadcast cut" of an episode, then encourage viewers to download the longer, racier director's cut the next afternoon. . . . While DVDs now give viewers the chance to catch up between seasons, on-demand television will allow anyone to catch up at any time, quickly and legally. Producers will no longer have to choose between alienating new viewers with a complex storyline or alienating the established audience by rehashing details from previous episodes. . . . Direct downloads will give fans of endangered shows the chance to vote with their wallets while a show is still on the air. And when a program *does* go off the air, direct payments from fans might provide enough revenue to keep it in production as an online-only venture.[22]

Almost immediately, fans of canceled series, such as *The West Wing* and *Arrested Development*, have began to embrace such a model as a way to sustain the shows' production, pledging money to support shows they want to watch.[23] Cult-television producers have begun to

talk openly about bypassing the networks and selling their series directly to their most loyal consumers. One can imagine independent media producers using downloads as a way of distributing content that would never make it onto commercial television. And, of course, once you distribute via the Web, television instantly becomes global, paving the way for international producers to sell their content directly to American consumers. Google and Yahoo! began cutting deals with media producers in the hope that they might be able to profit from this new economy in television downloads. All of this came too late for *Global Frequency*, and so far the producers of *The West Wing* and *Arrested Development* have not trusted their fates to such a subscription-based model. Yet many feel that sooner or later some producer will test the waters, much as ABC-Disney did with its video iPod announcement. And once again, there are likely to be many others waiting in the wings to pounce on the proposition once they can measure public response to the deal. What was once a fan-boy fantasy now seems closer and closer to reality.

While producers, analysts, and fans have used the fate of *Global Frequency* to explore how we might rethink the distribution of television content, the series premise also offers us some tools for thinking about the new kinds of knowledge communities that this book has discussed. If one wants to see a real-world example of something like the Global Frequency Network, take a look at the Wikipedia—a grassroots, multinational effort to build a free encyclopedia on the Internet written collaboratively from an army of volunteers, working in roughly two hundred different languages. So far, adhocracy principles have been embraced by the open-source movement, where software engineers worldwide collaborate on projects for the common good. The Wikipedia project represents the application of these open-source principles to the production and management of knowledge. The Wikipedia contains more than 1.6 million articles and receives around 60 million hits per day.[24]

Perhaps the most interesting and controversial aspect of the Wikipedia project has been the ways it shifts what counts as knowledge (from the kinds of topics sanctioned by traditional encyclopedias to a much broader range of topics of interest to specialized interest groups and subcultures) and the ways it shifts what counts as expertise (from recognized academic authorities to something close to Lévy's concept of collective intelligence). Some worry that the encyclopedia will contain

much inaccurate information but the Wikipedia community, at its best, functions as a self-correcting adhocracy. Any knowledge that gets posted can and most likely will be revised and corrected by other readers.

For this process to work, all involved must try for inclusiveness and respect diversity. The Wikipedia project has found it necessary to develop both a politics and an ethics—a set of community norms—about knowledge sharing:

> Probably, as we grow, nearly every view on every subject will (eventually) be found among our authors and readership. . . . But since Wikipedia is a community-built, international resource, we surely cannot expect our collaborators to agree in all cases, or even in many cases, on what constitutes human knowledge in a strict sense. . . . We must make an effort to present these conflicting theories fairly, without advocating any one of them. . . . When it is clear to readers that we do not expect them to adopt any particular opinion, this is conducive to our readers' feeling free to make up their own minds for themselves, and thus to encourage in them *intellectual independence*. So totalitarian governments and dogmatic institutions everywhere have reason to be opposed to Wikipedia. . . . We, the creators of Wikipedia, trust readers' competence to form their own opinions themselves. Texts that present the merits of multiple viewpoints fairly, without demanding that the reader accept any one of them, are liberating.[25]

You probably won't believe in the Wikipedia unless you try it, but the process works. The process works because more and more people are taking seriously their obligations as participants to the community as a whole: not everyone does so yet; we can see various flame wars as people with very different politics and ethics interact within the same knowledge communities. Such disputes often foreground those conflicting assumptions, forcing people to reflect more deeply on their choices. What was once taken for granted must now be articulated. What emerges might be called a moral economy of information: that is, a sense of mutual obligations and shared expectations about what constitutes good citizenship within a knowledge community.

We might think of fan fiction communities as the literary equivalent of the Wikipedia: around any given media property, writers are constructing a range of different interpretations that get expressed through stories. Sharing of these stories opens up new possibilities in the text.

Here, individual contributions do not have to be neutral; participants simply have to agree to disagree, and, indeed, many fans come to value the sheer diversity of versions of the same characters and situations. On the other hand, mass media has tended to use its tight control over intellectual property to reign in competing interpretations, resulting in a world where there is one official version. Such tight controls increase the coherence of the franchise and protect the producers' economic interests, yet the culture is impoverished through such regulation. Fan fiction repairs the damage caused by an increasingly privatized culture. Consider, for example, this statement made by a fan:

> What I love about fandom is the freedom we have allowed ourselves to create and recreate our characters over and over again. Fanfic rarely sits still. It's like a living, evolving thing, taking on its own life, one story building on another, each writer's reality bouncing off another's and maybe even melding together to form a whole new creation. . . . I find that fandom can be extremely creative because we have the ability to keep changing our characters and giving them a new life over and over. We can kill and resurrect them as often as we like. We can change their personalities and how they react to situations. We can take a character and make him charming and sweet or cold-blooded and cruel. We can give them an infinite, always-changing life rather than the single life of their original creation.[26]

Fans reject the idea of a definitive version produced, authorized, and regulated by some media conglomerate. Instead, fans envision a world where all of us can participate in the creation and circulation of central cultural myths. Here, the right to participate in the culture is assumed to be "the freedom we have allowed ourselves," not a privilege granted by a benevolent company, not something they are prepared to barter away for better sound files or free Web hosting. Fans also reject the studio's assumption that intellectual property is a "limited good," to be tightly controlled lest it dilute its value. Instead, they embrace an understanding of intellectual property as "shareware," something that accrues value as it moves across different contexts, gets retold in various ways, attracts multiple audiences, and opens itself up to a proliferation of alternative meanings.

Nobody is anticipating a point where all bureaucracies will become adhocracies. Concentrated power is apt to remain concentrated. But we

will see adhocracy principles applied to more and more different kinds of projects. Such experiments thrive within convergence culture, which creates a context where viewers—individually and collectively—can reshape and recontextualize mass-media content. Most of this activity will occur around the edges of commercial culture through grassroots or niche media industries such as comics or games. On that scale, small groups like the Sequential Tarts can make a material difference. On that scale, entrepreneurs have an incentive to give their consumers greater opportunities to shape the content and participate in its distribution. As we move closer to the older and more mass market media industries, corporate resistance to grassroots participation increases: the stakes are too high to experiment, and the economic impact of any given consumption community lessens. Yet, within these media companies, there are still potential allies who for their own reasons may want to appeal to audience support to strengthen their hands in their negotiations around the boardroom table. A media industry struggling to hold on to its core audience in the face of competition from other media may be forced to take greater risks to accommodate consumer interests.

As we have seen across the book, convergence culture is highly generative: some ideas spread top down, starting with commercial media and being adopted and appropriated by a range of different publics as they spread outward across the culture. Others emerge bottom up from various sites of participatory culture and getting pulled into the mainstream if the media industries see some way of profiting from it. The power of the grassroots media is that it diversifies; the power of broadcast media is that it amplifies. That's why we should be concerned with the flow between the two: expanding the potentials for participation represents the greatest opportunity for cultural diversity. Throw away the powers of broadcasting and one has only cultural fragmentation. The power of participation comes not from destroying commercial culture but from writing over it, modding it, amending it, expanding it, adding greater diversity of perspective, and then recirculating it, feeding it back into the mainstream media.

Read in those terms, participation becomes an important political right. In the American context, one could argue that First Amendment protections of the right to speech, press, belief, and assembly represent a more abstract right to participate in a democratic culture. After all, the First Amendment emerged in the context of a thriving folk culture, where it was assumed that songs and stories would get retold many

different times for many different purposes. Its founding documents were written by men who appropriated the names of classical orators or mythic heroes. Over time, freedom of press increasingly came to rest with those who could afford to buy printing presses. The emergence of new media technologies supports a democratic urge to allow more people to create and circulate media. Sometimes the media are designed to respond to mass media content—positively or negatively—and sometimes grassroots creativity goes places no one in the media industry could have imagined. The challenge is to rethink our understanding of the First Amendment to recognize this expanded opportunity to participate. We should thus regard those things that block participation—whether commercial or governmental—as important obstacles to route around if we are going to "democratize television" or any other aspect of our culture. We have identified some of those obstacles in the book, most centrally the challenges surrounding corporate control over intellectual property and the need for a clearer definition of the kinds of fair-use rights held by amateur artists, writers, journalists, and critics, who want to share work inspired or incited by existing media content.

Another core obstacle might be described as the participation gap. So far, much of the discussion of the digital divide has emphasized problems of access, seeing the issue primarily in technical terms—but a medium is more than a technology. As activists have sought a variety of means to broaden access to digital media, they have created a hodgepodge of different opportunities for participation. Some have extended access to these resources through the home, and others have limited, filtered, regulated access through schools and public libraries. Now, we need to confront the cultural factors that diminish the likelihood that different groups will participate. Race, class, language differences amplify these inequalities in opportunities for participation. One reason we see early adapters is that some groups not only feel more confidence in engaging with new technologies but also some groups seem more comfortable going public with their views about culture.

Historically, public education in the United States was a product of the need to distribute the skills and knowledge necessary to train informed citizens. The participation gap becomes much more important as we think about what it would mean to foster the skills and knowledge needed by monitorial citizens: here, the challenge is not simply being able to read and write, but being able to participate in the deliberations over what issues matter, what knowledge counts, and what ways of knowing command authority and respect. The ideal of the informed citizen is breaking down because there is simply too much for any individual to know. The ideal of monitorial citizenship depends on developing new skills in collaboration and a new ethic of knowledge sharing that will allow us to deliberate together.

Right now, people are learning how to participate in such knowledge cultures outside of any formal educational setting. Much of this learning takes place in the affinity spaces that are emerging around popular culture. The emergence of these knowledge cultures partially reflects the demands these texts place on consumers (the complexity of transmedia entertainment, for example), but they also reflect the demands consumers place on media (the hunger for complexity, the need for community, the desire to rewrite core stories). Many schools remain openly hostile to these kinds of experiences, continuing to promote autonomous problem solvers and self-contained learners. Here, unauthorized collaboration is cheating. As I finish writing this book, my own focus is increasingly being drawn toward the importance of media literacy education. Many media literacy activists still act as if the role of mass media had remained unchanged by the introduction of new media technologies. Media are read primarily as threats rather than as resources. More focus is placed on the dangers of manipulation rather than the possibilities of participation, on restricting access—turning off the television, saying no to Nintendo—rather than in expanding skills at deploying media for one's own ends, rewriting the core stories our culture has given us. One of the ways we can shape the future of media culture is by resisting such disempowering approaches to media literacy education. We need to rethink the goals of media education so that young people can come to think of themselves as cultural producers and participants and not simply as consumers, critical or otherwise. To achieve this goal, we also need media education for adults. Parents, for example, receive plenty of advice on whether they should allow their kids to have a television set in their room or how many hours a week they should allow their kids to consume media. Yet, they receive almost no advice on how they can help their kids build a meaningful relationship with media.

Welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of

the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways. Convergence culture is the future, but it is taking shape now. Consumers will be more powerful within convergence culture—but only if they recognize and use that power as both consumers and citizens, as full participants in our culture.

Notes

Notes to the Introduction

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9. Negroponte, *Being Digital*.
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14. Lisa Gitelman, "Introduction: Media as Historical Subjects," in *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (work in progress).
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