

Robinson, M. J. "From Surf to Search to Seek ... Curatorial Culture and the Transformation of Viewer Agency." *Television on Demand: Curatorial Culture and the Transformation of TV*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 17–56. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 22 Feb. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501300288.ch-002>>.

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## From Surf to Search to Seek . . . Curatorial Culture and the Transformation of Viewer Agency

The rite of passage being experienced by today's television viewer may be perceived as merely the expansion of viewing options. However, increased choice has been part of the evolutionary process of television since its inception—the opening of the ultrahigh frequency (UHF) broadcast band to licensees in the 1950s, the legislative establishment of Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in 1967, the expansion of cable systems and creation of superstations and cable networks in the 1970s and 1980s—all created additional viewing options without causing drastic disruption to the traditional industrial practices of programmers. Like all mass media, television was a “push” technology,—programming was pushed to the viewer at a time determined and controlled by the media provider. The advertising time that was inserted into these shows was sold to advertisers and that ad money went back to the producers to fund the development and production of new shows. Even the multichannel transition of the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s did not markedly upset this traditional model.<sup>1</sup>

We are now in what Lotz refers to as the “post-network era,” a new phase of viewing created by the convergence of digital production technologies, internet distribution and traditional television.<sup>2</sup> Over the past ten years the movement to digital distribution of entertainment content, increased availability of high-speed internet in the home, and multiplication of non-television “screens” upon which video can be viewed have transformed television into a “pull” technology: one that places the viewer in control of his or her consumption in a way that elides the traditional agreement between program provider and viewer in an advertiser-supported environment. It is not solely the explosion of viewing options that has created this—the multichannel transition has been increasing

linear viewing options for years. What is different is the development of total viewer control coupled with a long tail of endless choice and a multiplication of viewing platforms. Viewers have become viewersers—viewer-users of television and its related technologies, especially those that are now also and easily consumed via the synecdochal television “set” or through a convergence of technologies, including their mobile phones.<sup>3</sup> The transformation from push to pull culture requires more active engagement in media discovery and consumption by the viewer/user, a phenomenon for which the movement of journalism and music to digitized online distribution has already paved the way. In becoming more active and engaged in the planning of their media consumption, viewers move from surfing to searching to seeking, and ultimately, curating.

### From choosing to curating . . .

In *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Amanda Lotz writes: “New technologies involve new rituals of use.”<sup>4</sup> These new uses change viewer habits, most recently by making viewing more deliberate, and perhaps most importantly— asynchronous and mobile. Developments in technology have completely freed viewers from any attempts by content providers to schedule mass viewing and/or control “flow”—the strategic arrangement of linear programming that guides viewer eyeballs to quantifiable consumption moments.

Lotz describes the characteristics of this new world order of television as “the 5 Cs”: choice, control, convenience, customization, and community.<sup>5</sup> These have huge implications for content producers and distributors and require new fiduciary models for production and distribution. Traditional producers of resource-heavy programs are now in competition with online amateur video which, due to the development of “smart television” now appears seamlessly as one of the viewing options of the standard, traditional viewer controlled via a familiar stick remote.

The increasingly active audience that is now able to customize and alter its consumption strategies is also being confronted with the largest possible choice of televisual content ever available. The cornucopia of choice made possible by new television producers such as Netflix, Amazon Studios, YouTube,

AppleTV, and always-connected always-on app viewing takes television out of the home and into the public sphere in a personal and personalized way. Further threatening the traditional business model of the industry is that digital natives (those born after 1980) have a completely different concept of what both “television” and “television watching” entail.<sup>6</sup> The customization of viewing schedules made possible by internet distribution would not be that threatening to the status quo if there were still network or content producer control over the availability of choices and the number of choices. What has happened simultaneously with the explosion of immediate and eternal syndication made possible via the internet is an explosion of viewing options:—professional, amateur, and pro-am, which can easily go “around” the traditional distribution channels and gatekeepers and directly to the audience which is watching them on a multiplicity of screens, not just the one on the box.

Many different types of software have been developed in an attempt to guide viewers and consumers to particular forms of video on the web and to steer viewers toward shows they may find interesting. These aggregators use algorithms that examine prior viewing choices as a way of predicting what a viewer will be interested in seeing. However, the actual choice of show is often much more complex. Therefore, to Lotz’s list of five “C’s,” I would add a sixth: “curation.” Viewers must grapple with a multiplicity of viewing options, venues, and increased interactivity—with shows and each other. This requires a substantial reenvisioning of their role in the traditional televisual transaction and the amount of responsibility they have for their viewing choices. Their “mission, should they choose to accept it” involves much more active engagement with the medium and transforms them from passive viewers of television to active users of it. The human action of not just choosing a particular text based on availability and accessibility, but actively *seeking* and selecting a particular text based on private or public taste preferences is curation.

## Curationism

Since the late 2000s, “curation” has become *the* buzzword in media distribution and circulation as well as in advertising and social media marketing. It is

impossible to avoid the term curation when assessing discussions of the distribution or consumption of content via the internet, and its usage exemplifies the type of semantic abuse that so often happens to terms that are decontextualized and bandied about in the consumer commons. In 2013, Jay-Z “curated” the music for the Macy’s 4th of July fireworks show in New York Harbor. Curatesnacks.com offers snack bars called “curate,” Maille offers “a beautifully curated collection of mustards” for sale on its website, readers of peaceful-dumpling.com can learn “How to Curate an Ethical Wardrobe: Underwear,” and myriad advice blogs proudly offer curated lists of everything from dog treats to diapers to other advice blogs. While these examples demonstrate the somewhat correct use of the term as synonymous for “selection,” the concept and activity of curating is much more involved.

The term “curate” has Latin and medieval Italian roots and retains its original meaning of “belonging to or having a cure or charge” when it first appears in English in the late 1300s.<sup>7</sup> (This occurs in Chaucer’s *Troilus & Criseyde* in 1374 where it refers to the action of curing or healing.) For the next 400 years, it continues to be used exclusively to refer to healing various ills, both physical and spiritual. Usage of this term to reference “the officer in charge of a museum, gallery of art, library, or the like; a keeper, custodian” dates from a 1667 reference to the “Curator of the Royal Society.”<sup>8</sup> “Curatorial” is, of course, the adjective form of curate and “of or pertaining to a curator.” Its appearance as a term traces to 1734 where it is used in reference to a curator’s duties to organize the faculty in many European universities of the time, and develops predominantly in what could be considered an educational context for the next 100 years.<sup>9</sup> What is important is that regardless of the context, the concept of curating/curation has always carried with it two essential components of meaning: that the curator is “one who has a charge” and that this charge involves “guardianship” or “stewardship” as well as management. Curators are those with substantial knowledge of the holdings of an institution, an understanding of the nature and location of those holdings, and the ability to make those items accessible and contextually meaningful for those who wish to view them (and articulate the value one has found in them).

The recognition of “the curator” as a separate, professionalized entity within the art world is a relatively new phenomenon (post–Second World

War) and one that has and continues to be debated within the professional art world even as its usage outside that field is contested. Kate Fowle, currently the director-at-large of International Curators International and an oft-published voice in curatorial studies posits the current definition of curating as: “caring for the culture, above all by enabling its artistic or creative transformers to pursue their work. This facilitation is done, preferably, with empathy and insight, effectively and with some style.”<sup>10</sup> This definition clearly deviates from the entrepreneurial one advanced by Steven Rosenbaum and other new media workers and theorists for whom curation is “being understood as aggregating ‘manageable, inviting, online experience’ from within the ‘chaos of digital noise.’”<sup>11</sup> Yet both understand that they are in a time “when curating is everywhere being extended, encompassing every kind of organizing of any body of images or set of actions. The title of curator is assumed by anyone who has a more than minimal role in bringing about a situation in which something creative might be done, who manages the possibility of intervention, or even organizes opportunities for the consumption of created objects or orchestrated art-like occasions.”<sup>12</sup> I would suggest that not only are these definitions of curation not mutually exclusive, but also that a comprehensive understanding of the present moment—the *curatorial culture* in which we now find ourselves, benefits greatly from a deep investigation of the traditional curating of the art world and its transformation into the digital realm of the web.

Searches run in Google’s n-gram viewer for “curation,” “curator,” and “curatorial” show a marked increase in the appearance of all three terms in the texts indexed by Google books in the past thirty years. By 2011, this alternate usage had become so widely accepted that the online *Oxford English Dictionary* posted a draft of a new entry that acknowledged the neologic uses of “curate” and legitimized its use in new media contexts: “In extended use: to select the performers or performances to be included in (a festival, album, programme, etc.); (also) to select, organize, and present (content) on a website.”<sup>13</sup> First among the support the online *OED* offers for this new use is an article from the *New York Times* in 1982 which states: “The Kitchen presented three different programs of ‘New Performances from P. S. 122,’ curated by and including Mr. Dennis.” Other examples refer specifically to music or arts festivals until 2006 when the *New York Times Sports Magazine* uses it in a web context: “As

you wade through the millions of words on ESPN.com, you wonder if anyone is curating what reaches the screen.” The most recent example is from 2010 and refers to the expanded role of publishers in networked media industries: “Publishers will be . . . engaged in the business of generating, curating and aggregating content.”<sup>14</sup> What this demonstrates is that the movement of the term “curation” from museum studies and the world of high art to the world of new media parallels the explosion of web-based content and digital distribution.

The problem is—the majority of ways in which this term is being used aren’t actually curatorial—they are what I would characterize as “choosetorial.” They refer to giving audiences the power to make “choices” from a pre-curated or gatekept selection of items. Or, in the most egregious of misusages, “curation” is used to describe “aggregation”—which is machine-based algorithmic choice masquerading as human input, agency, or discernment. Aggregation is the answer to a networked environment in which the possible choices of consumption have become, quite simply, “too big to know.” The ensuing possibility of chaos and need to gain some sort of order, ranking, or coherent structuring of the options opens the door to a new type of monetized web-based endeavor. This has already happened to online journalism as evidenced by the popularity of *The Huffington Post*, *FARK*, and *The Daily Beast*. These sites rely upon automated aggregator programs that search keywords, headlines, and tags to collect related news articles that are then decontextualized from their original source and recontextualized on the aggregator’s portal or website. This has an upside for the reader seeking content on particular topics as it allows viewers to more coherently and efficiently review their consumption options. At the same time, the ad revenue generated by this aggregated content goes to the owner of the aggregated site, not the original sources who paid for the creation of the content. News readers and really simple syndication (RSS) feeds allow for a type of primitive curation, more akin to subscription although they add a level of customization by collating material in which the user has expressed an interest.

Search engines such as Google provide aggregative services through the use of algorithms that assess how useful other searchers for these topics have found various sites as well as the purported “authority” of the sites

to which these pages are linked. Among the dangers here are that search engine algorithms can conflate “most popular” with “most pertinent.” They provide a modicum of both user control and its illusion since the curatorial impulse of the user must, of needs, intersect with the algorithmic organization of the content—which, unlike traditional museum holdings, is infinite and infinitely expanding with every passing minute. Further complicating this is that search engines are, of course, monetized and engage in deal-making that prioritizes certain sites, giving them higher placement in the results. While the word curation may seem to be a synonym for aggregation and is often used as such, in current parlance it is, perhaps more appropriate to think of as “intelligent aggregation.”<sup>15</sup> And yet, it’s so much more than that—it is the creation of context through the placement of selections next to each other.

As web-native content and web-delivered distribution venues have grown exponentially, there has been a greater need for human intelligence in the selection of content,—a need for human discernment to separate the wheat from the spam. As there already existed an activity that was defined by the actions of an expert—the art curator—it makes sense that this term would be first borrowed and then coopted to name this need for human intervention. The distinctions are key: aggregation is automated, it collects data based on metadata such as keywords not sentiment or content comprehension and it is unable to evaluate context and quality.<sup>16</sup> Curation relies upon expertise and connoisseurship,—an understanding of the criteria by which a collection is being assembled—because ultimately the role of the curator is to impart value through contextualization.

The key difference between aggregation and curation is human agency and *evaluation*. Curation is related to guardianship, guidance, custodianship and the careful assessment and evaluation of content prior to its selection and presentation to the world at large. Curatorial culture brings human expertise into the information economy of the world wide web, privileging tastemaking. Curators may start with aggregators, or aggregation to see what the algorithms or even other curatorial-minded webizens have found valuable or selective, but then they make it their own—by adding their own input to present their own choices and contextualize and organize what they have found. It is this



new cyborgian mixture of democratized organic expertise and algorithmic aggregation that defines the new information economy.

## Curatorial culture

In *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, Henry Jenkins theorized the activities of fans and bloggers. Driven by affinity for and an intense involvement with certain televisual texts, these viewers devoted considerable cognitive surplus and time to the creation and sharing of blog posts, unofficial websites, fan fiction, and other nonprofessional labor which created a participatory culture of viewership.<sup>17</sup> In hindsight it is easy to see that these were certainly the first viewers who began to engage “curatorially” with televisual texts. That these subcultures developed around established texts and could be easily quantified and analyzed by market researchers made them a positive site of engagement and an identifiable market for advertisers. At the same time, these engaged viewers were beholden to the programming schedules and availability of the texts they were so enraptured by—structures of scarcity kept programming and access firmly in the hands of content producers and distributors. Their choices, like those made by the many service and good providers claiming “curation” as a unique selling proposition were pre-curated for them by the industry. These sites of distribution, consumption, mediation, and interactivity of and with cultural texts have now become democratized, a transformation also chronicled by Jenkins in his book *Convergence Culture*.<sup>18</sup> Curatorial culture is related to and yet different from convergence or participatory culture and denotes the widespread ability of viewers to now select and contextualize their own viewing schedules without concern for provenance, genre, gatekeeping, licensing agreements, or network programming strategies. It is perhaps the next evolutionary stage which awaits us on the other side of the collision between old and new media.

Curatorial culture is what happens when “everyone” is doing the programming and choosing from among a seemingly endless supply of first-run, off-net, and cable syndicated, professional, prosumer, user-generated, and internet streamed choices. The audience becomes demassified, and best understood as “a collection of niche audiences.”<sup>19</sup> These dispersed niche audiences are

observable but are nearly impossible to quantify, let alone coherently define. Quantifiable audience is the coin of the realm for any content-producing industry. How do you find, count, quantify the media usage of and ultimately sell advertising to a viewer who DVR's *This Is Us* but doesn't watch it during the "live + 7" ratings period; has a season pass to *The Walking Dead* via iTunes; is a season behind on his or her vertical viewing of *Grey's Anatomy* through his or her Amazon watchlist, and is recording the current season for binge watching at Thanksgiving; regularly watches snippets of *Jersey Shore* and *Real Housewives* on YouTube at work; binge-watched the second season of *Orange Is the New Black* the day after the third season "dropped;" never misses PewDiePie's latest video on YouTube, grazes on *Law & Order: SVU* on Hulu from time to time; catches up with *The Sorrentinos* on his or her phone via the TV Guide Network app during the morning commute yet religiously watches Jimmy Fallon on *The Tonight Show* via digital rabbit ears? Participatory and convergent cultures turn consumers into creators and commentators. Curatorial culture turns them into television programmers. The relationship is much more like gallery owner or art dealer to artist—selecting, arranging, choosing, and contextualizing becomes a form of cultural production.

### Preconditions of a curatorial culture

A consideration of recent technological, consumer, and industrial developments and activities reveal the preconditions necessary for a curatorial television culture. While clearly some of these are more important or must precede others, the order in which they appear here is not necessarily an indicator of importance, nor timing. Many of these have happened over a period of time or coterminously with each other, and they are a combination of technological, economical, and cultural innovations, evolutions, and transformations.

- Digitization of content: cultural texts need to be converted into compressed digital formats that are easily distributed through the internet (and easily copied, remixed, and shared across platforms).
- Video and audio content must be able to be distributed (and experienced) as an optimized "stream," not a buffering download.

- Ubiquity of high-speed mobile internet access and the devices through which video and audio content can be streamed to consumers regardless of location, providing “liveness” to their listening or viewing experience that was previously only available through traditional stationary, or home-based viewing venues.
- The development of internet-only media distributors that provide content that is competitive with traditional television. This content can be licensed from traditional mass media outlets, or new material created specifically for internet distribution.
- Traditional mass media content producers must embrace digital distribution through licensing deals with internet-only distributors, or the establishment of their own internet distribution outlets (thus creating an eternally available syndication library of existing shows and established franchises).
- A lowered barrier to entry into production (made possible by prosumer digital technologies) and distribution (enabled by platforms that stream nonprofessional video). Citizen/amateur involvement in the creation and distribution of content must increase and become an attainable possibility.
- Consumers must have their viewing experience reconfigured: nonbroadcast viewing must be naturalized so that viewers perceive no difference between the content they receive over the internet, and that which they have traditionally received through broadcast, cable, or satellite. Their experience of the content must be immediate, continuous, and uninterrupted. It must “mimic” the traditional viewing experience through use of a stick remote or similarly naturalized intermediary. It must also have a low “technological expertise threshold.” This must happen in agreement if not collusion with existing technology producers so as to make the viewer/user experience of changing from on the box (OTB) to over the top (OTT) viewing seamless.
- Social networking sites (either general ones, such as Facebook, or more specific communities like those provided by comments feature of YouTube or the now defunct televisionwithoutpity.com) must emerge as places for discussing, sorting, suggesting, critiquing, and interacting with, in, and around televisual texts. These interactions take place in the new “virtual public sphere” in which all can potentially participate and in which hierarchies of authority are in flux and not beholden to linear or

legacy claims of elitism. This erodes, reifies, and reconfigures the role and characteristics of traditional cultural intermediaries such as professional television critics.

- These social networking sites also, and perhaps this is the biggest difference between choosing something to watch and curating viewing options from the long tail, operate as exhibition venues for the viewer/user/curator. They are public spaces in which the selection, arrangement, and commentary of the viewing choices are presented for observation and review by those outside of the viewers' lived circle of co-viewers, friends, and people with whom they have day-to-day interaction. Regardless of the individual viewer's presence or participation on these sites, the cultural ubiquity of these sites must make our media choices more public and our motivations for those choices more panoptic.

### Metaphors of consumption: Theories of viewership

“Watching television” is itself a concept that requires an orientational metaphor—it is based in our spatial orientation to the activity—and such metaphorical orientations are not arbitrary. They have a basis in our physical and cultural experience.<sup>20</sup> Viewers in the earliest days of television “watching” were much more passive. Television was new and “spectacular”—viewers gathered around the television and “watched it” in the same way listeners gathered around radios to “listen” in the 1920s and 1930s. That the metaphor persists today is an indicator of both its strength and its firm roots in the lived experience of those who engage in the activity. Structural metaphors allow us “to use one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another.”<sup>21</sup> These metaphors “emerge naturally” because “what they highlight corresponds so closely to what we experience collectively and what they hide corresponds to so little. But not only are they grounded in our physical and cultural experience; they also influence our experience and our actions.”<sup>22</sup> We can see this as program discovery and engagement moves through a series of terms—“surf,” “search,” and “seek”—each resonating with a different proportion of passive to active involvement and engagement.

Viewership has long been the subject of considerable social science research and remains quite simply, the elusive quarry of all television program producers and distributors. Throughout broadcast history, the most unpredictable variable in the television industry has been the audience itself. Why viewers like certain shows and not others, is rarely clear and “despite television’s apparently steady success in absorbing people’s attention, television audiences remain extremely difficult to define, attract and keep. The institutions have always and forever had to ‘desperately seek the audience.’”<sup>23</sup> There are some “working theories” that media professionals tend to operate by in living out what they can know about audience behavior. The first is that “people will have consistent preferences for content of a type.”<sup>24</sup> This means that particular genres may see periods of popularity for a particular time which yields genre cycles which are discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 4. The second is that “people’s dislikes are more clearly related to program type than are their likes. In other words, what we like may be rather eclectic, but what we dislike is more readily categorized.”<sup>25</sup> Finally, “linkage is often found between certain types of content and the demographic characteristics of the audience.”<sup>26</sup> This can be observed most explicitly in the “narrowcasting” techniques of MTV and cable networks devoted to programming purposely created to attract a particular segment of the audience (which could then be sold to advertisers interested in that particular demographic).

Much audience and viewership research may seem to be an extrapolation of common sense and there has yet to be offered any intellectually or academically indubitable explanation or algorithm offered to demonstrate what will or will not be “a hit.” In the early 1970s, NBC researcher Paul Klein suggested that “audience behavior is a two-stage process in which a decision to use the media precedes the selection of specific content.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, viewers turned on the set out of habit, because it was after dinner, because they were home and lonely, because it was there and then chose what they would watch from the options that were available to them, a behavior that has also been called “ritualistic viewing.” Ritualistic viewing is having the set “on,” out of boredom, habit, or company and does not privilege content, the television programming is ambient and background to whatever else is going on in the room.<sup>28</sup> What viewers then wound up watching, according to Klein was the “least objectionable

program” (LOP) from among the offerings available at that given time.<sup>29</sup> This least objectionable programming is what Lotz calls “linear content/plain old television” and it and the motivations for viewing it (“companionship, distraction, or entertainment”) are still with us.<sup>30</sup> This passive viewing did not and does not require much from its audience.

Active viewers who turned on the television only when the show they wanted to see was on and turned it off when that show ends, were considerably less likely to exist in large numbers as an audience segment in the era of linear television. However, their activities were theorized as “instrumental viewing.” Instrumental use is tied directly to the content and predicated on the watching of a particular show at a particular time.<sup>31</sup> Instrumental viewing is also the obvious precursor to on demand viewing and the transition from push to pull media that television is currently experiencing.

This transition is reversing the proportion of ritual to instrumental viewers and is driven by the increased production of appointment television—aka Lotz’s “prized” televisual content. It is further supported by technological developments that expand and enable “the viewers’ ability to watch ‘whatever show you want, whenever you want, on whatever screen you want.’”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, as Lotz suggests, we are probably in an era where more than ever, the type of content will dictate not just the type of viewing that ensues but if viewing occurs at all. Some viewers may be paralyzed by “search fright”—in a world where any and all shows you would ever want to watch are available, choosing just one show can seem an insurmountable task.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps most important is the reversal of the traditional scarcities: scarcity of available programming has been replaced by the scarcity of viewer time. This reversal has not yet been fully accepted by the stakeholders of the traditional viewing transaction, even though its impact is clearly beginning to be felt.

## Metaphors of control: The transformation of viewing

The evolution of viewer control has been mostly aided, abetted, and encouraged by technological innovations and program distribution strategies developed by the industry. What the traditional industry did not anticipate,

perhaps, was the space it was creating for disruptors such as OTT producers and distributors to enter the market and begin catering to and targeting the audience that they had created and empowered. Once a viewer decides to watch television or watch a particular show, there is, of course the question of how that viewer watches and interacts with the screen. These interactions can lead to different viewing activities and privilege (and encourage) some forms of activity over others.

The first development that increased screen interactivity and gave viewers more control over their viewing experience was the remote control, which sold convenience, “the” selling point of all durable goods of the 1950s. What the remote did (and does) was to allow “viewer-dominated flow” created by the television user to replace the “programming centered” flow structured by the network.<sup>34</sup> It did this by facilitating a variety of viewer behaviors: grazing (changing the channel during the program); multiple program viewing (watching two programs at essentially the same time by flipping back and forth between them); and orientational searching (using the remote to flip through channels to “see what’s on” upon sitting down to view).<sup>35</sup> The name that came to characterize these activities in common parlance was “surf”— the viewer maneuvering across a wave of programming which, like real waves, was beyond the viewer’s control. The viewer could choose “how” to surf, but the options of where and at what time content was accessible were predetermined by the linear schedule which was, of course, controlled by the network programmers.

Remotes also encouraged and enabled a series of viewer behaviors that interfered with the original covenant of free advertiser-supported content in return for attention to advertisements. “Zapping” is a variation on grazing or channel surfing where the motivation to surf is sparked by the appearance of the commercial. Once viewers had the ability to record shows for playback later, zapping became “zipping,” fast-forwarding through commercials completely.<sup>36</sup> “Muting” silences the commercial, but leaves its visuals displayed, so out of the three activities it is the least odious to broadcasters and their advertisers.

Scholarship on remote control devices (RCD) use boomed in the 1980s and 1990s and examined factors like channel repertoire and the motivations for television watching. The predominantly social-science researchers discovered that while cable subscribers had more channels available than non-subscribers,

large channel repertoire\* did not necessarily result in more diverse channel viewing.<sup>37</sup> (An important point to keep in mind when considering the unending choice of the long tail of OTT on-demand programming.) It also revealed that RCD research itself was methodologically challenged because the activity of remote control use while watching TV had become so “mundane” that research subjects found activity reporting difficult. In other words, use of a remote control had become such an integrated part of the television-watching experience that it was hard to isolate what one did with the remote while watching as a separate activity.†

As the cable and satellite systems expanded their channel inventories, they instituted noninteractive Program Guide channels to provide viewers with an inventory of their viewing options. The current offerings scrolled past the viewer who could input the number of the channel he or she wanted to watch on the remote control at any time, but could not control the speed of the crawl, nor otherwise interact with the screen. In practice, watching the crawl of options could become an evening’s viewing in itself. By the time one reached the end of a 100 channel system, one may have forgotten the show one saw during the crawl that one wanted to watch, or one might sit for repeated cycles of the entire scroll so as to ensure there was not “something better” on another channel (possibly an early manifestation of FOMO). The introduction of interactive or electronic program guides (EPG) that viewers could navigate through and control gave viewers active curatorial power but, the ability to “favorite” channels and create sublists of viewing options also worked against the discovery of new viewing options, making extra-systemic promotional strategies, such as off-the-box advertising even more important for networks seeking to launch new shows and encourage the viewing of new seasons of

\* Channel repertoire is the number of channels regularly or most commonly watched by a particular viewer. Research has discovered that despite an average channel inventory numbering in the hundreds (on most cable and satellite systems), the average number of channels in the average subscribers repertoire is about fifteen.

† This is important to consider given the quick integration of OTT (over the top) viewing options into the banal “stick remote.” Internet viewing originally required a high level of technological expertise as one had to access the content through a computer connected to a DSL or home Ethernet connection and know not just how to connect the computer to the television, but how to ensure that the content “played” correctly on the screen. The ability to change from cable viewing to Netflix with the same ease as one used to flip from NBC to CBS is an important step in the expansion of viewer control as it puts OTT options on a level playing field with all other traditional viewing options available via “the box.”



existing shows. However, the program distributor still maintained control over the range of choices since viewer choice in these cases is limited to the offerings in their tier of service.

Developments in television technology in the 1990s, such as picture-in-picture (PIP), expanded viewer-dominated flow behaviors to allow for concurrent viewing/sampling. The viewer could also use the PIP function to actively search for a show that he or she might rather watch by scrolling through the EPG as the picture in picture. Both of these activities accustomed viewers to second-screen experiences, making the eventual inclusion of mobile as a second (or even third) screen in the viewing transaction possibly inevitable. Eventually, of course, audience control extended to include what “had” been on as VCR, DVD, and now DVR technology made it possible for viewers to time shift

### Cultural shifts in our conception of viewing

Jason Mittell writes about the simultaneous arrival of his first child and his first TiVo in the winter of 2001. What he chronicles in the ensuing pages is that his children are growing up with a completely different relationship to television than he and his wife did—they reject the “now-arbitrary notion that a particular program is only available to be watched at a given time.”<sup>38</sup> “For children in a TiVo household,” he writes, “all television is part of an ever-changing menu of programming to be accessed at our convenience, not a steady stream of broadcasting to be tapped into at someone else’s convenience.”<sup>39</sup> The larger cultural effect of this is “a cognitive shift in how the medium is conceived. For my generation, television equalled its scheduled flow, complete with ad breaks, programming blocks, and a knowledge that other kids were watching the same cartoons at the same time, ready to discuss around the water fountain at school the next day.”<sup>40</sup> As a result, “DVRs reveal the arbitrariness of the television schedule and flow model, but that system still feels natural for those of us who have accepted it as the default for decades.”<sup>41</sup>

In short, the DVR is a service “where recording and time-shifting functionality is complemented by superior navigation, consumer tracking, and the possibility to narrowcast individualized content.”<sup>42</sup> It is a curatorial storage

technology which requires viewers to pull televisual content to them—to make decisions about their interest in a program or series, scroll through EPGs to view options and otherwise interact with the content distributor’s software. This interaction “seductively engages viewers, offering visual pleasures and crucially, a sense of individualized control over forces and quantities [of programming] that seem unmanageable.”<sup>43</sup> It also takes place within a pre-curated ecosystem (the pay tier of channels to which the viewer-customer has subscribed) and one in which ad placement alongside and within EPGs is becoming increasingly popular. Because cable- or satellite service- provided DVRs are provided in conjunction with cable or satellite companies, the DVR is seen as a “bonus” to the distribution service, or the most convenient (and only) way to optimize the service (and an incentive for cable and satellite companies to make it very difficult for viewers to use a third party DVR, such as TiVo, on their systems). DVRs do not allow for the playing of content that is outside the DVR (or the DVR’s manufacturers’) ecosystem. Therefore, DVRs are one way to lock viewers into sanctioned viewing choices, as cable companies have done by providing their own non-TiVo DVRs into which they have integrated their cable tuners. So, while the provision of the DVR as part of a cable or satellite service creates a bond between the distributor and the viewer, it also creates another revenue stream for the service provider. The viewers/consumers benefit from this exchange: they enjoy the freedom of time shifting, ad skipping, and customization of their viewing schedules, but they act out this freedom within the constraints of the distributor and, thanks to the DVR backchannels, under the surveillance of the content provider.

### **DVDs—we learn to binge**

DVD technology, commercially introduced to the home market in 1997 reinvigorated the home video market for films and also created a truly viable direct-to-consumer sell-through market for television.\* The major innovation

\* To be sure there was a television sell-through market produced in the VCR format; however it was a rather stagnant market outside of sales to rental stores. Traditional network seasons are/were 22–26 weeks long with shows that ran between 22 and 46 minutes. Given the two hour limit of VHS tapes, the number of tapes required to distribute an entire season of a show and the resulting shelf space required of the home viewer made the VHS technology both unattractive to and impractical for the

in the TV sell-through market was the box set. Fox's 2000 release of a box set for the first season of *The X Files* is widely pointed to as the watershed moment after which all television content owners sought to package the old and new content they owned into DVD box sets and marketed these directly to the viewing public for individual library creation and home viewing. Derek Kompare states that "the box set materializes all the significant discourses of early twenty-first century media change: high technology, corporate consolidation, user convenience, and commodity fetishism."<sup>44</sup> The addition of "special features" (what Jonathan Gray calls "paratexts") makes the box set "a multi-layered textual experience distinct from television and only obtainable via DVD."<sup>45</sup> DVD box set sales "extend[ed] the reach of the institution of television into home video to an unprecedented degree" culminating "the decades-long relationship between television and its viewers, completing the circle through the material purchase—rather than only the ephemeral viewing—of broadcast texts."<sup>46</sup> It also activates what cognitive psychologists call the "endowment effect"—"the fact that people value objects more when they think of them as their own."<sup>47</sup> Distinctly curatorial impulses and behaviors are activated and exemplified in the purchase of a DVD box set (or an entire series) and the exhibition of said series in one's home. The exhibition of one's viewing choices becomes a social act whose effect is similar to that of exhibiting a work of art that one owns: it is a marker of identity and taste. By 2004 television-on-DVD sales reached \$2.3 billion, and like the film industry, television producers had integrated projected sell-through income as an important revenue stream in their business models.<sup>48</sup>

Kompare ultimately argues that DVD box sets make an intervention into the viewer-text relationship by conflating two previously contradictory modes of cultural production: publishing and flow. Publishing is the creation of cultural products for sale directly to consumers. Flow is based in the more complicated relationship between television content producers, television content

wholesaling, retailing, and home storage and viewing of television. (Kompare notes that a complete release of *The X Files* 202 episodes on VHS would take up over one hundred VHS cassettes and 10 feet of shelf space (342).) Add to this the ubiquity of older television shows in syndication on local broadcast affiliates and the ever-growing number of cable outlets, and there was also an "always or reasonably available" aspect to the viewing of older shows or an inclination to reexperience them in the original medium of appointment or time-shifted television that worked against television show ownership.

distributors, and advertisers. In this model, “producers sell programming to broadcasters, who then sell access to potential viewers—that is, time within programming on their widely distributed channels to advertisers.”<sup>49</sup> The viewer’s experience of texts in the flow model is “premised . . . on the aggregate experience of television over time, rather than on individual texts.”<sup>50</sup> While the individual episodes and series may end, the viewer’s immersion in the televisual flow does not—it is the central experience of television.<sup>51</sup>

The widespread availability of television box sets created and encouraged the pattern of consumption we now identify as binge viewing (the viewing of multiple episodes of a show at one sitting). DVD box sets, whether purchased or rented, taught viewers how to “binge” on what were previously considered (and created to be) texts that were viewed sequentially, but over time. The unintended consequence of this practice has been to accustom pull viewers to a different consumption experience. This has had effects on the linear television industry. It was a death knell to traditionally scheduled network offerings that languished on viewer’s DVRs while awaiting “binge day.” New viewer-empowered viewing patterns were largely reported as the reason for the premature deaths of shows such as *666 Park Avenue* and *Last Resort*, and became part of the argument used by television producers to push for the increased use of the C7 rating to quantify a show’s performance.<sup>52</sup> Binge viewing has also and perhaps most obviously guided the release patterns of OTT content producers and distributors such as Netflix “making available” all episodes of *House of Cards* or *Orange Is the New Black* on the same day. Cable networks that rely upon off-net syndication of popular shows have also catered to viewers inclined to this behavior as seen in TNT’s *Law & Order* “binge-a-thons.”

Time has demonstrated that DVD releases of popular shows do not negatively impact nor negate their syndication pricing. The release of one-season DVD sets is timed to promote the series’s next or current season and has demonstrably aided certain shows in finding their audience and thus returning to broadcast after cancellation (*Family Guy*) or in finding alternative production and distribution venues (*Arrested Development* on Netflix). It has even demonstrated that shows lasting only one season due to poor ratings or overly expensive negative costs, are deemed valuable enough by enough of the population to justify a DVD release (*Pan Am*, *Swingtown*). What is yet to be

seen is if the eternal syndication and accessibility made possible by the internet will erode the DVD market.

DVDs are also the pioneering space-shifting technology. Because of their size they are incredibly portable, as are their players, which were marketed as stand-alone portables, integrated into the “entertainment systems” of vehicles, and of course laptop computers. As computers began to integrate DVD drives and DVD burners into their hardware, two consumer behaviors developed: first, business travelers with DVD drives in their laptops began to use their computers as media consumption devices—to watch a DVD on a plane, to take their television viewing to different locales. This concept of space-shifting or “mobile privatization” as Raymond Williams would call it further transformed the concept of television watching by completely freeing it from the “electronic hearth” metaphors that adhered to it for the first sixty years of its existence and preconditioned the viewing audience for the mobile viewing explosion made possible by the popularity of tablets in the early 2010s.

As DVDs are also a digital technology the increased availability of computers with readable-writable DVD drives created a situation very similar to what happened to the music industry when the computer industry began to incorporate CD players into its hardware: consumers with a lot of storage and computing power began to be able to rip and copy DVDs. While the first stage of this was no doubt the sharing of purchased DVDs among friends, this eventually led to the posting of ripped content to bit torrent sites and YouTube aided by the growing availability of DSL and broadband technology for the home; all of which opened the door that Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Instant Video would eventually stream through.

### **OTT: Viewing outside of the box**

By 2009, nearly a quarter of American households were consuming some television online. Ninety percent of the web viewing took place in the home with new shows being watched by 43 percent of the web viewers and 35 percent watching shows that could be classified as “in syndication.”<sup>53</sup> While these viewing patterns began with computer viewing of video content, primarily on

YouTube, the change in the “television set” itself normalized and naturalized internet viewing in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

As consumers begin to shop for new televisions, they found that their “boxes” had changed substantially for the first time in sixty-five years. New flat screen LED, LCD, or Plasma televisions were rectangular, required no bulky tubes, and did not require the real estate previously needed by their forbearers in the family living space (they could even be hung on walls, like pictures). They were also, increasingly, “smart” (capable of being directly connected to a broadband internet modem via Ethernet cable or wireless). By 2011, “virtually every major television manufacturer embraced the Web-connected set” at CES (the Consumer Electronics Show) and 20 percent of existing sets were already web-connected.<sup>54</sup> Sales of connected TVs were projected to reach 123 million by 2014 with saturation of the market occurring in 2018.<sup>55</sup> These televisions have the ability to deliver online content to the viewer—their connectivity essentially turns them into giant computer screens (or more likely, Netflix, Amazon Instant Video, YouTube, or Hulu viewers). This changes the viewer experience of online content since it makes the “switch” between traditional forms of television (channels and networks delivered through broadcast, cable, or satellite) and online video seamless—all is controlled via one, traditional, familiar, TV “stick” remote.

While web-enabled TVs are one viewing choice, the past ten years has also seen an explosion of internet connected “boxes” in the market. While some of these are extensions of existing content ecosystems (Apple TV), others, (Boxee, Roku, GoogleTV) are more open in the web-based content they allow their viewers to access. These boxes can be updated and changed out more often than the estimated six year average replacement schedule of televisions.<sup>56</sup> This has resulted in a fight for prominence in the connected TV “box” market that is still unwon. In general, all boxes, regardless of provenance do the same thing: stream internet video to the television. Roku, which began as simply an attempt to stream Netflix content to the television, now has over three hundred channels, Boxee embeds social media features to allow users to share and tweet directly from their viewing experience of the web and also has an integrated iPad app.<sup>57</sup> In perhaps the ultimate convergence of new and old, in 2011, Netflix “inked deals with 11 manufacturers to add a one-click button to

remote controls for their Internet-connected devices to access Netflix's video-streaming service."<sup>58</sup> This made the branded "red button" with the company logo ubiquitous on remotes that control Roku, Boxee, Iomega internet streaming boxes, smart TVs from Sharp, Sony, and Toshiba, and internet-enabled Blu-ray disc players from Dynex (Best Buy), Haier, Memorex, Panasonic, Samsung, Sharp, Sony, and Toshiba.<sup>59</sup>

Google, in addition to providing its Android operating system to "smart TV" manufacturers and partnering with Sony to produce Blu-ray players that are also internet ready, (albeit with remotes containing "Netflix" buttons) provides through GoogleTV an interface that allows users to search for a show name or genre and click through its results to whatever web venue they want to view the content on.<sup>60</sup> GoogleTV is complemented and further enabled by Chromecast, a platform-agnostic Google product that plugs into the high-definition multimedia interface (HDMI) port on TVs and streams content from a computer or mobile device to the television via Wi-Fi. (While platform agnostic, Chromecast does come bundled with a month of free GooglePlay music at the moment, so as with AppleTV, attempts to lure users into a particular content ecosystem are standard operating procedure.)

Receiving content through an internet-connected smart TV or a set-top internet streaming box has come to be known as OTT delivery as opposed to OTA delivery. This creates a purely "pull" video environment in which the viewer must choose viewing experiences from a seemingly endless number of possibilities. However, OTT platforms come with content limitations. The four viewing experiences that are absent from over-the-top viewing environments are: "news, sports, reality TV (or any show that relies upon time-sensitive sequential viewing, such as *American Idol* or *The Amazing Race*) and lastly, premium content on subscription channels"<sup>61</sup> Viewers wishing to access the live OTA broadcast channels in their area need to either continue a cable and satellite subscription or invest in a digital antenna to receive the signals through the "ether." While the conglomeration, convergence, and synergy of the past twenty years may have emphasized the larger station group and the national television audience over the local market, the new developments in and saturation of internet viewing technology may, ironically, return cord cutters and early adopters of internet-based video viewing to reliance upon the

local broadcast signals for the experience of “liveness” and immediacy that, at present, only broadcast is providing.\* This has not been lost on producers and network executives whose strategies for maintaining the viability of traditional television service and flow are discussed in great detail in Chapter 4.

Cord cutting and cord shaving are two viewer behaviors that have emerged as a result of the increased availability and ease of access to OTT content. Both have MSOs and satellite distributors worried. Cord Cutters are: “a hard to pin-down percent of TV viewers who have entirely given up their traditional cable or satellite services and found alternative methods to satisfy their television viewing needs.”<sup>62</sup> One interpretation is that cutting the cord is a reaction to and protest against the increasing costs of cable or satellite subscriptions. Another is: “It doesn’t matter that there isn’t an exact percentage of cord cutters. What matters is why people are doing it and how this opens a window that allows us to see how people are going to use television in the future.”<sup>63</sup> Cord shavers are those who merely downgrade their cable subscription in favor of additional viewing options brought to them via the web. Both cord cutting and cord shaving rely on there being a critical mass of content that is attractive to viewers, priced less than cable, and easy to locate and view via the web—conditions created by the development of mobile viewing technologies and social programming guides.

### **Television goes “off the box”**

When the Apple iPad launched on April 3, 2010, mobile viewing truly came into its own. Android tablet makers joined the market with their own devices and a flurry of similar apps appeared for the Android operating system. In 2011, the Kindle Fire brought mobile streaming capacity to the Amazon ecosystem and Amazon Prime provided access to video content in a way that combined the free streaming of Netflix with the electronic sell through (EST) either by the episode or by the season of iTunes. Six years after the iPad’s launch, it is clear that tablets and the increased size of smart phones have had

\* To be sure, live streaming without live broadcast is technologically possible. At present it is used primarily as an adjunct to broadcast. It does not defy logic, however, to expect that stand-alone live “streamcasts” may become much more common in the convergent future.



a substantial impact on the way that people consume all media, but particularly television.

The majority of tablet and mobile phone viewing apps, and all of the ones that offer “live” streaming content are part of the industry’s “TV Everywhere” initiatives—which require that users sign in with their pay TV subscription credentials in order to use the apps. These apps integrate “social television” functions within them so they enable and encourage a variety of viewing behaviors, both old and new. Time- and space- shifting behaviors are already ingrained in the contemporary viewer’s experience. The new viewing activity integrated into these platforms is that of “social television.” For example, the HBO Go app entered the market on May 2011 and was downloaded 2.5 million times in the first six weeks. It is both a viewing and a social television app, with embedded Facebook “like” buttons and also the ability to tweet about content from within the app.<sup>64</sup> It has now been joined by HBO Now and CBS All Access which are viewing apps that do not require purchasers to be current subscribers to any cable or satellite service. These not only make the viewing experience mobile and platform agnostic; as discussed in Chapter 4, but they also completely reorganize the fiduciary relationships between viewers and program providers.

The different types of viewing as well as the variety of ways in which they are being assessed and analyzed by scholars most definitely indicates a liminal stage. We are in a period of flux when traditional rituals and new forms of behavior are coexisting. What is clear is that the transition is being driven largely by demographics. Millennials now outnumber baby boomers and their experience of television has been quite different—it has not been tied to the scarcity of the network era or the increasingly brand-driven efforts of the multichannel television age. It has also not been tied to location or traditional “television set” technology which creates media agnosticism and “new norms of use.”<sup>65</sup> This agnosticism extends beyond the screen that the content is being watched on to what types of content are being perceived as “televisual.” Ultimately, viewers care about finding and accessing the shows they want to see and the stories they want to follow. They are not interested in the fiduciary relationships between advertisers and networks, nor in production budgets and costs. They want their shows where, when, and how it makes the most

sense for them to consume them. And this battle for control over the television schedule, the viewing device, and the viewing experience, (always contested spaces) has now, irretrievably, been won by the viewer.

But, of course, as viewing options expanded, so did the problem of program discovery, a problem which cuts across both the industry/distributor and the individual/viewer subject positions. “If you’re a viewer, it’s too hard to discover, locate, and organize what you like to watch. If you’re a supplier, it’s too hard, too hit-or-miss, and too expensive to find, attract and retain audiences, and the window in which to do so continues to shrink.”<sup>66</sup> As a result, “watching television has become an ‘application’—an involved, multi-step process.”<sup>67</sup> This expands the labor of the audience which must now cull through a seemingly endless range of programming choices for what it is one wants to watch. It also transforms the labor of the programming executive, making the arrangement of their shows into schedules that “flow” seamlessly from one to the other practically irrelevant and the need to tap into or provide curatorial tools through which viewers can find and arrange their viewing diet far more important.

### Metaphors of affinity: Theories of liking

Why do humans like what they like? The answer to this question is the holy grail of all free market capitalists and marketers and of course there are as many answers as there are consultants interested in being paid to create them. The conundrum of human preference and choice has been taken up by psychologists, sociologists, and economists for generations and the addition of socially mediated and motivated “liking” has merely accelerated the interdisciplinary inquiries into the possibilities.

One way to think about our motivations for choosing among varying cultural forms of entertainment is to consider the “job” for which we are “hiring” the cultural text.<sup>68</sup> “People ‘hire’ a product or service, because in the course of living their lives there are different jobs that need to be done at different times. Each job includes some combination of functional, emotional and social dimensions.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, as with Klein’s distinctions, we may always

“hire” linear television to fulfill the role of companion, time waster, background noise. But, the jobs we may hire our curated television content for will multiply—especially as our choices become more exhibited and public through our social media. The sharing of our queues or watchlists and our circulation through online and offline social worlds bring with it pressures to participate in the shared viewing choices of our fellow curators. For those seeking to theorize taste and selection the current moment makes the viewer’s choices more public and discoverable than ever, while simultaneously making the reasoning behind those choices yet more opaque—it’s a Big Data conundrum.

Ultimately, and perhaps essentially, we hire these texts to entertain us and perhaps fill needs not met by our daily lives. In *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like*, Paul Bloom states: “Our main leisure activity is, by a long shot, participating in experiences that we know are not real. When we are free to do whatever we want, we retreat to the imagination—to worlds, created by others, as with books, movies, video games, and television (over four hours a day for the average American), or to worlds we ourselves create as when daydreaming and fantasizing.”<sup>70</sup> Therefore, according to Bloom, we are, as a species, drawn to a world of vicarious experience through which we satisfy an essential desire for pleasure hard-wired into our individual psyches and also arbitrarily evolved through our uniquely human culture.<sup>71</sup> These pleasures “are shared by all humans; the variety that one sees can be understood as variations on a universal theme.”<sup>72</sup> As a result, new pleasures (which Bloom suggests are represented by such varied inventions as “chocolate, video games, cocaine, saunas, crossword puzzles, reality television”) are “enjoyable because they are not that new; they connect—in a reasonably direct way—to pleasures that humans already possess.”<sup>73</sup> The essential pleasures of a love of art (whether expressed through representational painting, sculpture, or performance) and a love of narrative (whether expressed through printed novel, radio soap opera, IMAX projection, or televised screen) then, are a hard-wired aspect of our human existence.

In considering the choice of televisual texts, one might suggest that the enjoyment of narrative tropes and elements that connect to the underlying pleasures we already possess and seek is responsible for both the continued relevancy and popularity of these cultural forms, but also for the lack of

substantial innovation in works meant for “televsual consumption.” The content, representations, and audiences may have nichified, but the overarching narrative genres and forms of storytelling remain very consistent with the criteria of narrative and performative genres established in the first instances of human storytelling.\* Thus the pleasure that we receive from the experiences and things that we choose to spend our time and energy on is “based in part on what we see as their essences. Our essentialism is not just a cold-blooded way of making sense of reality; it underlies our passions, our appetites, and our desires.”<sup>74</sup> This essentialism is reinforced by culture in which we experience a shared familiarity with texts or activities in our public interactions—what social psychologist Robert Zajonc called the “mere exposure” effect— “Mere repeated exposure of the individual to a stimulus is sufficient condition for the enhancement of his attitude toward it.”<sup>75</sup> The reasoning behind this is: “other things being equal, something you are familiar with is likely to be [a] safe [choice.]”<sup>76</sup> After all, “stories are about people, and we are interested in people and how they act. It is not hard to imagine an evolutionary purpose for why we would care about the social universe; indeed, it’s been argued that one main force in the evolution of human language is that it is a uniquely powerful tool for communication of social information—and, particularly, gossip.”<sup>77</sup> This could be one way to explain genre cycles and the popularity of shows that are perceived as similar to existing shows that have been well received.

Curatorial culture’s introduction of the “exhibition” of the choices we find pleasurable complicates this drive to satisfy essential pleasures as well as the communication of social information. Don Thompson describes how art collectors acquire different works of art for their public rooms or gallery donations than they do for private exhibition in their homes or bedrooms.<sup>78</sup> In this case the “signalling” value of the selection (when viewed by others) becomes of social value to the exhibitor of the artwork. The prestige value of demonstrating

\* By this I mean the shared conventions that can be found in all widely consumed and popular narratives – from oral culture through the earliest written stories (*Beowulf*, *Canterbury Tales*) to contemporary offerings of *Transparent*, *House of Cards*, and *Designated Survivor*. Narrative conventions inhere and are reinforced in these and all texts that circulate widely. To be sure, exceptions to these conventions have been explored, but *Tristram Shandy*, *Memento*, and *Twin Peaks* are outliers, and one-off examples – they did not result in genre cycles nor substantial successful imitation because they fail to fulfill the essential pleasure that Bloom identifies.

one's taste and curatorial acumen to others may override personal inclination toward a less "conspicuously consumable" text.

The explosion of niche televisual content made possible by the democratization of production and distribution may make the comparison between the art and media worlds more relevant than ever. Jerry Saltz, the Pulitzer Prize-nominated art critic of *New York Magazine* has said "All art is for someone; no art is for everyone."<sup>79</sup> I do not think it is too far a stretch to consider this in terms of our new televisual environment. The range of human expression and the new ability of all to participate in the creation and distribution of niche content ensures that "the content is out there" awaiting discovery, curation, and exhibition by its various someones. The problem for the media industry, of course is that while: "the investment in stories and ideas that lead to the connections people make online and through social media provides the tools for the beginning of relationships" identified by Chris Anderson as "tribes of affinity," the liminal conundrum and challenge is to determine "consequence of such tribes if they do emerge."<sup>80</sup> Two possible forms of consequence are influence and contagion. Influence is persuasion: it is when one person presents his or her taste preferences and encourages others to adopt them.<sup>81</sup> Contagion occurs when neither the influencer nor the influenced is cognizant that the transmission of a taste preference has occurred.<sup>82</sup> However, as noted in Chapter 3, while online content, conversations, and behaviors can be observed, it remains impossible to reliably quantify the motivations or reasoning behind the sharing and definitively identify the type of influence at work.

Further complicating this transaction is that "A rule of pleasure is that it is an inverted U —when you first experience something, it's hard to process and not enjoyable; upon repeated exposure, it's easy to process and gives pleasure; then it gets too easy, and therefore boring or even annoying."<sup>83</sup> Thus content producers must seek to identify attractive elements within the most popular shows and find a way to replicate them that still satisfies the underlying essential pleasure that caused the tribe of affinity to form in the first place all while not innovating so much as to lose the purpose the narrative serves. In industry parlance and practice, this refers to the genre cycles discussed in Chapter 4.

Regardless of how what one likes is determined, the work of curatorial culture requires thought, planning, arrangement, and presentation. It is time- and

energy-consuming labor that must be expended before the pleasure of viewing (presumably a break from one's labor) can occur. "Curation is about creating a mix" writes Rosenbaum, "a unique blend of discovered, contributed, and created content that makes your connection uniquely yours."<sup>84</sup> An example of this can be seen in an advertisement for CNNgo<sup>\*</sup> that has been running since 2014. In this ad, a straphanger on a subway car is communicating directly with the control center of CNN. He's choosing from the selection of screens in the booth, calling out what he wants to see and in what order: "give me Anderson Cooper 360, then let's go to some sports, then I want weather and then hit me with some Bourdain, can we do that?" The control room programmer is very accommodating, directing his staff to put together this customized feed for the viewer—who is, one would think, about to experience the epitome of curated television. But—just as the control room programmer begins the countdown—"And, we're ready, in 3 ... 2 ... 1 ..." our viewer interrupts—"Oh, hey, this is my stop, I gotta go."

CNN seems not to have picked up on the irony. This ad is not the shining endorsement of its customizable viewing app that it intended it to be. Instead, it highlights the very real frustrations and conundrums of the viewer in a completely on-demand world, even one pre-curated by a network brand. In fact, it could well be read as an endorsement of linear viewing of professionally curated content—especially on mobile when one may want to devote one's time and attention to consuming media rather than getting ready to consume media. The economics of scarcity have shifted. Viewing options are no longer scarce. Instead, the amount of time the viewer has to consume media *and* the amount of time and energy the viewer has or wants to spend finding the media to consume in that limited time are.

What this demonstrates is that our thinking about viewing choices needs to realign to accommodate several interlocking new developments that complicate the viewer/text/distributor relationship in ways that make traditional conceptions of viewership less relevant. The first is that television/video content is now just one choice among many other media consumption options.

\* CNNgo is a "TV Everywhere" app that allows cable subscribers to view CNN content on mobile devices. After authenticating their cable subscription, they can watch a live stream of CNN content or a curated playlist which is what this particular ad is touting.

In the time it took our straphanger to curate his consumption of CNN videos (which he never got to enjoy), he could have read the news content on a different app on his phone. So, while some sort of linear viewing will be with us so long as linear television is—the incidental viewer who has television on “for company” may now be keeping company “on” Facebook instead. The second is that curatorial culture requires more intentionality and less spontaneity than earlier forms of viewing and content discovery. This means that “why people choose” a particular text or collection of texts becomes a much more relevant question than “why people watch.”

“Curating’s just another word for saying  
‘I choose you.’” (No, it’s not.)

One result of the increased attention paid to curation, both as a marketing and new media buzzword and as a professionalized endeavor within the art world is that there is now more literature on the activities, responsibilities, and effects of curators than ever before. Curation as defined and theorized by those in the art world is always about definition, relevancy-making, and information added. The curator emerges as a key figure and guide through periods of tectonic change and the questioning and realignment of traditional authorities and structures.

Curation becomes a crucial activity when one becomes spoiled by choice as well as when the boundaries of what “is” and “is not” in the pool from which choices are to be made become fluid. As visitors to the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibit may have looked upon Marcel Duchamp’s “Fountain” and asked “Yes, but is it art?” today we may look at a YouTube video on our 47 inch flatscreen and ask: “Yes, but is it television?” In both cases, the places of our reception of the texts affect our perception: “I am encountering this urinal in an art exhibit, it is signed by an artist, and it has been placed here by a curator, therefore it is art. I am watching this video on the same device

\* Duchamp’s “Fountain” is the found object urinal that he placed on its back, signed “R. Mutt” and submitted for exhibition. Its creation and exhibition is considered a major event in the Dada anti-art/art movement. “Fountain” resides in the permanent collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which would seem to testify to both its continued identity as a work of art and the power of context to define “art work.”

that I watch network and cable television on therefore it is television.” Unlike Duchamp’s “Fountain,” which relies on context (we do not perceive urinals that are hung on walls in lavatories and unsigned as art); the YouTube experience works in reverse. We perceive professionally produced television shows that we consume on our phones tablets, or computers and short videos and other content that we consume on our large screen televisions as television. A professionally trained and credentialed curator may be required to transform found pieces into art by bringing them into the gallery or museum. However, the transformation of video content into television occurs when the technology of OTT viewing (especially YouTube) converges with the television set and video-capable cell phones and tablets allow viewer-curators to “pull” content across these contexts in a seamless experience. That video content has become television and retains its “televisual identity” as its site of consumption moves across multiple platforms is a result of the democratization of curation.

While contemporary artists (much like contemporary reality stars and wannabes) may rely upon shock, innovation, and assertion—“This is art, because I’m an artist and I say it is” said British artist Grayson Perry—they must still rely upon curators to contextualize their taxidermied horses, 700lbs of individually wrapped licorice candies, or life-size platinum cast of an eighteenth-century Portuguese sailor’s skull bejeweled with industrial diamonds and implanted with the original skull’s teeth in order to monetize these works as “art.” YouTube and Vimeo give aspirant reality television artistes a platform through which to “broadcast” themselves, a way into the context of television. Whether DIY/unbranded video becomes television when and because it is consumed on a television set or professionally produced network branded content remains television because it is consumed via a mobile app is a chicken and egg argument, the shift has occurred. To the industry, content is king, but, to the viewer/curator, context is “prime minister.” The curator

\* These three art works have all been exhibited and sold as art in high-end galleries and are (in order of description): Maurizio Cattelan’s *The Ballad of Trotsky* (2004), Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ *Untitled (Public Opinion)* (1991), and Damien Hirsh’s 2007 *For the Love of God*. (The title of this work apparently came from his mother who is said to have uttered that phrase upon hearing a description of the plan for her son’s new artwork.) More tales from the marketplace of contemporary art can be found in Thompson’s *The Supermodel and the Brillo Box*.



decides the context of the exhibition of the content and how it circulates. This is of increasing importance now that everyone has curatorial power and the platforms through which to communicate and exhibit their decisions.

Curatorial activity brings with it a contextual mandate. Viewing choices are now “to be exhibited” and like catalogs of long-over exhibits, remain discoverable—in our histories, playlists, queues, “recently watched,” “watch now,” and “recommended for you” lists. The effect of this unavoidable exhibitionism inheres in curatorial culture—especially on the level of the individual viewer. Viewers actively add shows to their queues, their playlists, and “watch later” lists. These are curatorial activities that have varying degrees of public exhibition, some of which can be controlled by the viewer. But because of the structures of the technologies and the end user agreements, the opportunity for providers to observe these exhibitions of curated viewing inheres in the entire transaction and observation *always* changes that which is observed. In the introduction to *Viewers Like You? How Public TV Failed the People*, Laurie Ouellette cites an episode of *Roseanne* in which the Connors become a Nielsen family. Offended by the “condescending” remarks of a Nielsen rep, Roseanne mandates that they will subvert the expectations of the elites by watching only PBS.<sup>85</sup> While this, of course, does not ultimately work (the episode ends with Roseanne watching a *Beverly Hillbillies* marathon) it highlights one of the many challenges a curated viewing culture poses for audience quantifiers: how many of these queue choices or playlist additions are legitimately reflective of the viewing intentions and interests of the curator and how many of them are aspirational? I’ve added series to my various OTT lists because they’ve won awards, I’ve heard of them from friends, they’re trending in the online communities with which I interact, or I feel like, as a “good” media scholar I “should” have watched them. While I’m not admitting in print to what I’ve been watching instead, Netflix, Amazon, and of course, the omnipresent Google know.

The convergence of social media and television, in both social media conversations and the embedding of clips from YouTube into social media feeds has also resulted in the reversals of Klein’s two-stage process: the decision to use social media often precedes the selection of specific content—the selection being the curated content of your friends and networks who are simultaneously

having their content selected from them by you (if you engage in curatorial activity on your social media feeds).

### Cultural intermediation, citizen criticism, and the power of social networks

Professional curators are what Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural intermediaries:” experts whose “cultural capital” gives them the authority to adjudicate matters of art and taste and thus to play a significant defining role in what is or isn’t considered an art object (or cultural text).<sup>86</sup> “Cultural capital” in this case is the authority or the “symbolic capital” accumulated by the critic or curator in question “making a name for oneself, a known, recognized name, a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects (with a trademark or signature) or persons (through publication, exhibition, etc.) and therefore to give value, and to appropriate the profits from this operation.”<sup>87</sup> The path to this position of cultural authority for earlier professionalized critics used to be fairly clear: publication in a newspaper or magazine, membership in the Television Critics Association, a regular byline. The question of cultural authority, its achievement, and maintenance, is one that has yet to be definitively answered in the blogosphere—and probably never will be. Klout scores and page ranks indicate popularity but is popularity the new cultural authority? It is more likely that the scale of activity on the internet is turning on “social proof” and a type of crowd-sourced legitimization of either the most popular, most linked, or most social network savvy voices. It is a new stage of participatory culture in which “behaviors that were once considered ‘cult’ or marginal are becoming how more people engage with television texts”<sup>88</sup> In fact, these behaviors may be on the verge of becoming the mainstream viewing experience. The digital age is a world in need of constant curation by its inhabitants—and curatorial impulses and expertise are fast becoming a requirement for responsible digital citizenship. Ethan Zuckerman, writing about the demands of the current cultural moment emphasizes: “The Internet will not magically turn us into digital cosmopolitans; if we want to maximize the benefits and minimize the harms of connection, we have to take responsibility for shaping the tools we use to encounter the world.”<sup>89</sup>

News aggregators such as [www.hitfix.com](http://www.hitfix.com) maintain sections devoted to television (in this case, a section that aggregates television criticism ([tvttattle](http://tvttattle.com)) which was formerly its own website). Many critics maintain blogs in addition to their columns, and, of course, many are publishing in a web native environment as their publications either curtail or eliminate print circulation. Many websites currently offer a mix of “professional” “pro-am” and “DIY” television criticism while maintaining discussion boards where viewers respond directly to each other about the shows they are watching. Probably the most famous and successful of these was Television without Pity ([www.televisionwithoutpity.com](http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com)) which maintained a vibrant message board community, was purchased by NBCUniversal in 2007 and ceased publication as of April 4, 2014. Critics such as Emily Nussbaum (*The New Yorker*) and David Bianculli (NPR) who continue to have national venues for their work remain important to the industry for their ability to create buzz and thus search terms which push new and returning shows further into a networked public sphere where they can be found or stumbled upon by viewers. Simultaneously, as the democratization of opinion distribution fostered by the internet allows “anyone” to be a critic, new critical voices are able to emerge and find their own audiences of taste communities.

Debates about the impact of web-native journalism, DIY journalism, or citizen journalists/bloggers are not new to journalism scholars. “Popular culture” criticism is a topic particularly popular to bloggers. Alexa, arguably one of the most authoritative commercial web analytics companies (and, unsurprisingly, a subsidiary of Amazon); does not maintain a “Popular culture” category, nor index blogs separate from websites, but it does index subcategories of websites under its “Arts” category that clearly signal that the web is alive with sites on the subjects of: “Animation (6,298), Comics (2,332), Entertainment (295), Movies (25,299), Music (49,819), Performing Arts (15,261), Radio (1,759), and Television (7,400).”<sup>90</sup> What is clear from this list is that there is a mixture of industry and “outsider” guides but many are owned by industry insiders with a stake in controlling the content. Since these websites are themselves advertiser-supported, what we see here is an extension of the commoditized space coupled with the pre-curation of viewing choices for the viewer.

The majority of scholarship focused on the rise of the citizen critic-blogger pertains to film critics. What should be noted is that the content of a great many of these sites comes from other sites, most of them produced by professional news organizations (a detail not lost on Andrew Keen in his damning of amateur criticism). The problem for Keen is what he terms an irony “democratized media will eventually force all of us to become amateur critics and editors ourselves. With more and more of the information online unedited, unverified, and unsubstantiated, we will have no choice but to read everything with a skeptical eye.”<sup>91</sup> This is exactly what curatorial culture requires of its citizens: the development of a discerning eye, or at least a refusal to take, wholesale, the opinions of web sources without an investigation of their provenance and authority.

Beyond the blogger or citizen journalist who is attempting to develop his or her own “brand” as a television critic, there are, of course, the citizens who use social media to talk about their favorite shows. These comprise a different type of curatorial activity and a different type of influence upon the watching habits of an interconnected public while creating different types of data streams that may or may not be useful in determining the reach and influence of a particular type of show. Their viability is a reflection and result of the challenges of negotiating the long tail of “everything”: “When people are frustrated with search, they go searching for human curation” writes Clay Shirky.<sup>92</sup> “Curation comes up when search stops doing everything people want it to do, when people realize that it isn’t just about information seeking, it’s also about synchronizing a community.”<sup>93</sup> As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, Nielsen and other quantification/ratings companies have begun to track this activity, but it may well be that these “virtual water cooler conversations” are being had by already-engaged fans rather than encouraging or attracting new viewership. In all of these situations inhere the problem of what Jenkins, glossing Gladwell, calls “one of the great myths of Web 2.0”: the power of the influencer.<sup>94</sup> Jenkins does not deny the existence of influence in the web utterances of others, however, he does qualify it: “that influence typically is contextual and temporal, depending on the subject, the speaker’s credibility, and a variety of other factors. Sure, there are influencers, but who those influencers are may shift substantially from one situation to another.”<sup>95</sup>

Ben Mc Connell and Jackie Huba identify four “types” of citizen marketers in their book of the same name. These subject positions describe particular activities and operate as a taxonomy that can be used to categorize the curatorial activities of Web 2.0 users. In order from most to least curatorial they are:—filters, facilitators, fanatics, and firecrackers. Filters are “human wire services” and the type of citizen marketer whose activity is most curatorial.<sup>96</sup> Filters “collect media stories, bloggers’ rants and raves, podcasts, or fan creations about a specific company or brand and then package this information into a daily or near-daily stream of links, story summaries and observations.”<sup>97</sup> Websites or blogs maintained by these people become curated destinations for other webizens who have an affinity for the topic and the curatorial style of the filter. Facilitators create fan sites or moderate discussion boards. They are “like mayors of online towns” (or gallery or museum owners) and influential within their own online communities.<sup>98</sup> As the owners or managers of these boards they may also establish or institute guidelines for participants and thus shape the presentation of content of their site. Fanatics are filters who weigh in with their opinions. They may or may not provide filtering (curatorial) functions, but mainly, they are the active ones on the message boards. They have distinct ideas about the products they use or the shows they watch and they take full advantage of the interactivity of blogs and websites to voice them.<sup>99</sup> Firecrackers are “one hit wonders.”<sup>100</sup> Firecrackers do not regularly engage in curatorial activity nor have an ongoing interest in organizing and presenting information to others. Their observable online work demonstrates “three principles of amateur content in the social media universe: 1. Memes, even latent ones, can last indefinitely on the web. 2. Social media networks accelerate the spread of memes. 3. People love to mimic what entertains them.”<sup>101</sup> The challenge for those seeking to assess and use the curatorial evidence to further their own product’s (or show’s) online profile, is to accurately assess which type of marketer/curator has created the exhibition.

Ultimately, what we’re talking about here is word of mouth in the digital world. How do television producers and distributors harness the power and activity of social media and the communities it engenders to drive viewers to its programming (wherever that programming may be)? The “digital commons” is a place where discussions that used to take place among

people in close geographical proximity are amplified and publicized, but, in many ways, retain their intimacy and influence. This amplifies Paul Lazarfeld's theorization of "opinion leaders" in the 1940s. Lazarfeld, a sociologist, suggested that "media were less influential over public opinion than a 'two-step flow of communication'—information that flows from media to an influential friend, and then from that friend to her friends."<sup>102</sup> In this transaction with the public (of which the speaker is an integrated part) "authenticity contributes to authority."<sup>103</sup> The authority of citizen critics is dynamic because of its interactivity and it must be maintained by "continuous, productive activity."<sup>104</sup> (Conversely, by avoiding interaction and engagement and operating as a push media, "traditional" broadcast media and its ilk create and maintain static authority—or at least they were able to maintain it until Web 2.0.)

The impact of all of this activity is driven by what James Surowiecki refers to as "social proof." This is "the tendency to assume that if lots of people are doing something or believe something, there must be a good reason why. This is different from conformity: people are not looking up at the sky because of peer pressure or a fear of being reprimanded. They're looking up at the sky because they assume—quite reasonably—that lots of people wouldn't be gazing upward if there weren't something to see."<sup>105</sup> Zuckerman also highlights the effect of this saturation of opinion: "if we keep hearing about a person, place, or event, we register that what we've learned about is important, and we're predisposed to pay attention to the topic."<sup>106</sup> So, while certain "influencers" or "bloggers" may be particularly key in steering audience toward shows or premieres (as they have always been), the sheer numbers of participants in the online world, and the scale of "likes" possible, have an effect because "the crowd becomes more influential as it becomes bigger: every additional person is proof that something important is happening."<sup>107</sup> Jenkins, Ford, and Green use the term "appraisal" (another art world term) to "describe the process by which people determine which forms of value and worth get ascribed to an object as it moves through different transactions."<sup>108</sup> It is a particularly apt use of the term in a curatorial context since it denotes the way value is created "not through buying and selling commodities but through critiquing, organizing and displaying/exhibiting artifacts."<sup>109</sup>

The rise of social networking has brought both challenges and opportunities for content providers and distributors to interact with and encourage viewer behaviors and to observe their curatorial behavior in real time—since it is the crucial “site of exhibition” that distinguishes curation from merely viewer choice. One of the observable results of widespread viewer curation is that it may work against new program discovery. This is what Zuckerman, writing of “digital cosmopolitans” identifies as a “central paradox” of the networked age—“while it’s easier than ever to share information and perspectives from different parts of the world, we may now often encounter a narrower picture of the world than in less connected days.”<sup>110</sup> Zuckerman is most focused on news and information, noting that tools like Google, Wikipedia, and other online repositories of information “help us discover what we want to know, but they’re not very powerful in helping us discover what we might need to know.”<sup>111</sup> At the same time, his warnings are instructive for television viewers and the producers who seek to reach them: “As social media become more powerful directors of attention, we are encountering less media through professional curators or through our own interest-based searches. In giving so much responsibility to our friends to shape what we know of the world, we need to consider the limitations of social discovery rather than just celebrating its novelty.”<sup>112</sup>

While our online “friends” may share their viewing habits with us, and we may share our viewing habits and “likes” publicly, the jury remains out as to whether social media popularity or metrics translate into influence or changes in activity. It is even more difficult to determine if this leads to wider discovery of new programming. Part of this is the challenge of what Eli Parisier calls the “filter bubble” which is created by insular worlds encouraged by the use of Facebook and other social networking spaces as the portal or pre-curator of our web experiences. Zuckerman warns: “As we design online spaces, we need to think through the dangers of making those spaces too comfortable, too easy and too isolated.”<sup>113</sup>

The explosion of new programming options and the conversations around them transform the viewer into a citizen programmer/curator, responsible for discovering and engaging with new programming. To avoid falling into filter bubbles, citizen programmers must exert more energy to “seek out curators

who are sufficiently far from you in cultural terms”<sup>114</sup> Likewise, if you want to discover new programs and alternative viewing spaces OTT and OTB, it requires curatorial work beyond one’s own social community and past viewing habits.

Complicating all of this is, of course “exhibition anxiety,” which I suggest is curatorial culture’s version of the unreliable narrator. Because our curated choices are being exhibited via our online histories, queues, and playlists, how much do we allow the fear of missing out (FOMO) to trump the fear of revealing embarrassing taste preferences (FORETP)? Anyone who has ever tried to “hide” certain viewing choices from others who may share his or her Netflix queue or Amazon playlist, or whose innocent attempt to show a coworker a funny YouTube video has revealed a mortifying secret interest on one’s “Recently Watched” list can attest: we are all curators now, not just because we have moved from “surf to search to seek” but because, intended or not, what we have sought is on display.



