Toward a Political Economy of Digital Culture: From Organized Mass Consumption to Attention Rivalry

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Introduction

The term "cultural industries" includes "the arts and creative sectors that encompass, but are not limited to, publishing, film, music, photography, design, and tourism."[1] Because of the development of digital technologies in computers and telecommunications equipment, more and more of these activities are being produced, stored, and delivered digitally. One important consequence is that it is less expensive both to both produce and consume cultural artefacts. The increased speed of digital circuits and innovations in computer networks and digital compression technologies make it easier and less expensive to deliver words, music, symbols, and images (in fact, anything that can be digitized) to consumers around the world. The ability of information and computing technologies (ICTs) to facilitate interactive exchanges among those connected to networks makes it more difficult to differentiate consumers and producers as more "consumers" share their writings, images, and music with others. One important example is the recent rapid growth of the "blogosphere" which is widely interpreted as

[1] http://www3.georgetown.edu/grad/cct/10344.html.

competing with the mainstream news media.[2] Another is the rise of massive file sharing via file-sharing software and high-speed networks. The profusion of cultural material available via the networks means that old producers have to compete with a very wide variety of new producers for the attention of audiences.

To be more specific, Table 1 below lists the old and new players in a variety of cultural industries to show how competition of ears and eyeballs has increased.

Table 1. Old and New Players in the Culture Industries

Industry	**Old Analog Players**	**New Digital Players**
Television	ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, HBO, other cable channels and networks	HDNet, YouTube, Yahoo, Google Video
Movies	Major Hollywood Studios	Dreamworks, Lucasfilm, Pixar, smaller production houses
Music	Major recording studios	iTunes, Napster, Grokster, Real Audio, many small audio producers
Books	Traditional publishers	Google, eBooks, many self-publishing individuals
Journalism	Newspapers and TV news	Blogs, on-line news services

The ease with which anything digital can be copied, transmitted, and stored forces the distributors of content to look at new models of distribution. A good example is the creation of iTunes by Apple as an alternative to the distribution of music via physical recordings.[3] The recording industry reported that aggregate sales of CDs dropped precipitously after the introduction of file-sharing software and digital audio players. In record stores near wired college campuses, sales frequently dropped to zero.[4] Even though some of these revenues will be recovered as file-sharing goes legitimate, it is

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogosphere.

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ITunes.

[4] http://p2pnet.net/story/1187: http://www.unc.edu/~cigar/papers/FileSharing_June2005_final.pdf.

unlikely that consumers will go back to purchasing albums that include songs that they really do not want to buy.

In book publishing and other print media, the shift to digital distribution has begun, but until portable high-resolution digital readers become widely available it is unlikely that books, magazines and newspapers will be as strongly affected by file sharing as audio and video recordings. More important for print media is the competition for attention from other media that is driving young people away from reading in massive numbers. In addition, the average price of all but mass-market paperback books is rising rapidly. Textbook and academic journal prices are rising much faster than the rate of inflation.[5] Libraries are acquiring fewer books and journals and dealing with gaps in their collections via interlibrary, so academic books that are not textbooks are now less economically viable than previously. This is a major problem for younger scholars in fields where scholarly book publication is the main criterion for promotion and tenure.

The Role of Government

Political institutions can influence the way in which digital technology is introduced and deployed in a variety of ways. Laws regarding distribution systems can obviously influence the ability of consumers to access digital content. The government generally gets involved in the building of new telecommunications network infrastructure, either directly or via authorization/subsidy of private efforts. The transition to digital television requires administrative and legislative authorization and new forms of regulation. Governments can put an official stamp of approval on new technical

[5] Margaret Webb Pressler, "Textbook Prices on the Rise," *Washington Post*, September 18, 2004, p. E01.

standards and can use government procurement policies to support one form or another of digital technology.

Governments willing to employ industrial policies can subsidize the development of new digital technologies and related industries, as was clearly done in the case of East Asian countries like Taiwan and Korea (copying the earlier success of Japan). But this is only one method: there are many others: e.g., rapid depreciation rules for business taxation, R&D tax credits, negotation of new digital standards, reforming capital markets to make it easier for digital startups to get access to venture capital, etc.

The introduction of digital technologies creates pressures for political and policy change. The movie and recording industries, for example, want to protect themselves from the potential negative effects of file-sharing by making it more difficult for individuals to share copyrighted material. In the late 1990s, they engaged in a massive campaign to educate the public about the evils of digital "piracy" and lobbied governments intensively to enforce intellectual property rights. In the United States, this effort culminated in the passage of the Digital Milennium Copyright Act of 1998.[6] The industry lobbying effort continues with ongoing debates over the so-called "Broadcast flag"[7] and digital rights management (DRM).[8]

Infotainment, Edutainment, and Media Consolidation

One of the consequences of the digital transition is that the boundaries between previously separate industries are becoming fuzzier. There was already some movement

[6] http://www.copyright.gov/legislation/dmca.pdf.

[7] http://www.eff.org/IP/broadcastflag/.

[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_rights_management.

in this direction under analog technologies. In television, for example, the distinction between entertainment programming and other programming, particularly news programming, eroded as networks increasingly focused on ratings and advertising revenues for all aspects of programming. With the ability to package audio and video information in both analog and digital formats and to combine them with the interactive capabilities of the Internet came new possibilities for convergence.

Infotainment refers to the combination of information and entertainment, while edutainment refers to the combination of education and entertainment. We are experiencing, for example, a considerable trend toward infotainment and edutainment in higher education. Professors are expected to entertain classes just as news anchors are expected to entertain their television news audiences.[9] The enhanced use of graphic aids in the classroom via PowerPoint and other types of presentation software is part of this trend. As students, and just about everyone else in society, like to "time-shift", professors find themselves uploading their digital presentations to the web so that students can view them at their leisure. In order to keep classroom attendance up, many resort to making it part of a student's grade.

No one denies that the transition to digital production and delivery of entertainment, information, and education has the potential of having a positive impact on society, but there are obviously many downsides as well. The rivalry for attention leads to a more distracted and possibly harassed public, always looking for ways to filter out unwanted information. Consider, for example, the problem of cleaning out the spam from one's email inbox. Spam filtering software is easily defeated by dedicated

[9] This idea appeared first and most convincingly in Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985).

spammers, but people buy it anyway in an effort to reduce time wasted doing the filtering by hand. More importantly, people who used to get their political information from print and electronic media that, because of their need to attract broad audiences, included multiple viewpoints so that readers could decide for themselves about different issues, now can get access to news that is aimed at narrower audiences with a particular slant on public affairs. As a result, people will be less exposed to views that are in opposition to their own.

Another potential downside is that people will get used to and actually enjoy being presented with too much information, a phenomenon that most of us have observed in our children's so-called "multi-tasking." The child who plays a networked computer game on a laptop while listening to music, watching television, and/or talking to or chatting with friends is a common sight in many U.S. households. In university classrooms, we find students instant messaging and cruising the Internet on their laptops in the classroom.[10] We used to talk about the benefits of multimedia presentation of information, but the idea was to do this with a coherent set of ideas so as to improve learning outcomes for children with different learning styles. How much learning is going on in today's homes and classrooms?

Toward a Political Economy of Digital Culture

Developing a political economy of culture will allow us to look not just at the net outcomes for society as the digital transition goes forward but also to predict who within society will win and lose. The potential losses of old players in the culture industries and

[10] "Law Professor Bans Laptops in Class, Over Student Protest," *USA Today*, March 21, 2006, http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-03-21-professor-laptop-ban_x.htm?POE=TECISVA.

the potential gains of new ones is likely to play an key role in political systems across the globe. We should examine carefully the claims of those pushing the digital transition that citizens will be empowered by access to computers and high-speed networks, especially if there are only a few providers of that access and citizens have little control over the rules and architecture of the system. We should remain equally skeptical about claims that the digital transition will result in "surveillance states."[11] As social scientists, we can inform public debates over these and related issues by applying the methods and theories of political economy and political science to this dynamic new area.

[11] The recent revelations about the Bush administration's massive mining of telephone and SWIFT data ostensibly to prevent terrorism gives these claims more credibility than they had before.