

Convergence Culture: where old and new media collide

Henry Jenkins

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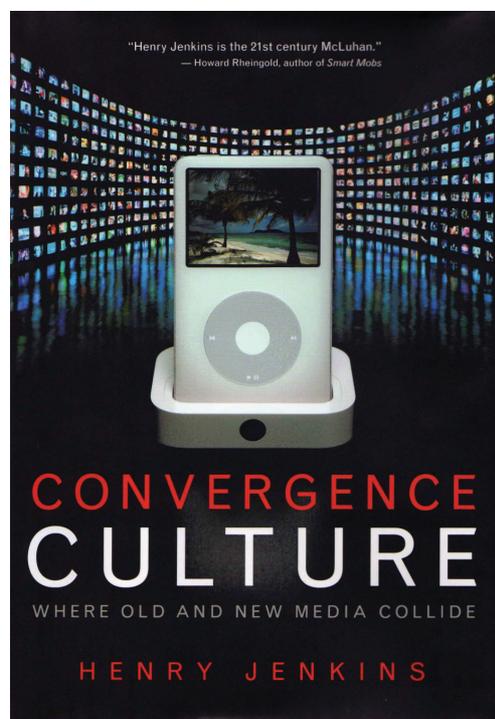
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In the section “Acknowledgements” of the book *Convergence culture*, Henry Jenkins emphasizes that the book is the result of an “epic journey” that had lasted eight years and of the joint effort of many collaborators involved in the construction of the MIT Comparative Media Studies Program, of which he is founder and director. Characterizing the program as a center for “conversations about changes in the media (past, present and future)”, Jenkins also emphasizes his commitment with widening the “public dialogue about popular culture and contemporary life”. In this direction, the work analyzes the relation between society (audiences and media producers) and media (channels and contents), considering the recent (and stunning) technological changes that took place in this environment of intersection between new and old media, the social implications of these transformations and their future trends.

The book is written in a light style allied to recognized academic rigor. Such qualities attract not only scholars but also other people interested in the subject convergence culture: active participants of new communication and information environments, pioneers and creative users of emerging media integrating, according to Jenkins, “fan communities”, “educators involved with informal learning communities”, creators or consumers of popular culture, activists, advertisers, executives and professionals of the media industry. His objective is to



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help common persons to understand how the convergence impacts upon the media they consume and, at the same time, to help leaders of this industry and legislators to understand the perspective of the consumer as refers to these transformations. A glossary in the end of the book lists central terms, many of which with multiple senses, according to the different contexts they are used throughout the book.

Awarded in 2007 with the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Katherine Singer Kovacs Book Award, *Convergence Culture* is one of the most recent books written by Jenkins, together with *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture* (2007) and *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (2006), all of them focusing different aspects of the media and popular culture, none of them published in Brazil. Jenkins, a recognized media expert, very respected in the academic environment, is professor of literature, maintains a blog at www.henryjenkins.org, signs a feature article in the journal *Technology Review* of MIT (<http://www.technologyreview.com/index.aspx>) and is one of the main researchers integrating *The Education Arcade* (<http://www.educationarcade.org/>), a project aimed at promoting educational use of computers and video-games.

Jenkins introduces himself as a quite active fan of the emerging media, highlights his condition as an intellectual in the area, his intensive participation in the discussions “with people from inside the market and legislators”, and mentions his activity as an adviser of several companies mentioned in the book. In other words, he makes clear that he is not a neutral observer of all this. There is one more point to be emphasized: he declares to be optimistic in regard to the democratic potential of some of the current cultural trends in the context of the convergence culture, but admits that not all thinkers share such optimism citing, for example, Noam Chomsky among those who see mainly the obstacles the power of the big media creates for the construction of a more democratic society.

“Welcome to the convergence culture, where new and old media collide, where corporative and alternative media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways”. This is the way Jenkins begins to explain to the reader the way he characterizes the convergence phenomena. He equally recovers the emergence of the concept as an important element of change in the media industry. According to the author, who focused this concept for the first time was the political scientist of the MIT, Ithiel de Sola Pool in the book *Technologies of Freedom* (1983), he considers “the prophet of the convergence of the media”.

Jenkins defines the concept of convergence as a flow of content crossing over distinct media, the cooperation between different media industries and the migratory behavior of the audiences. This flow is strongly influenced by the active participation of the consumers, seen by the author as fundamental for the circulation of these

contents. As the title of the book suggests, for Jenkins, the sense of convergence is above all cultural. It can't be explained by the bias of technology but by recognizing that the frontiers separating creators/producers of contents and their users are becoming increasingly blurred. Jenkins arguments: “If we focus on technology, our battle is lost before we begin to fight”. The choice to adopt a point of view so distant from the technologies seems polemic seeing that one cannot ignore the important role they play in the dissemination of the contents and their very strong implications in the use of the different media they support, even requiring different degrees of skills of the users for access, communication and interaction among peers. The explanation he offers is related to the importance he attributes to participation in detriment to access. While the examination of access would require a greater focus on technologies, participation would emphasize the examination of protocols and cultural practices.

For defining the convergence culture Jenkins elects three key-concepts – convergence of media, participatory culture and collective intelligence. The relation between the three delineates the inciting and very modern theme approached in the book, allowing us to dimension the reach and significance of this new platform of offer, diversified production and use of new media. For better understanding his points of view, let the author speak again:

I will argue here against the idea that convergence can be understood primarily as a technological process – the bringing together of multiple media functions within the same gadgets and devices. Instead, I want to argue that convergence represents a shift in cultural logic, whereby consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections between dispersed media content (p.3)

As to the concept of participatory culture, Jenkins affirms to be against the old ideas of a passive audience:

Instead of speaking about media producers and consumers playing separate roles, we can now see them as participants interacting according to new rules that none of us understands completely. Not all participants are born the same. The great companies – and even individuals in the corporative media – are still exerting more influence than the individual consumer or the total of consumers. And some consumers show more skills than others for participating in this emergent culture (p.3)

The concept of collective intelligence as conceived by Pierre Lévy is taken by Jenkins to emphasize once more that the convergence occurs much more in the brain of each consumer than through devices and instruments, for more sophisticated they might be:

The fact that there is much more information about all sorts of issues that one could possibly keep in mind is one more incentive for talking about the media we consume. This conversation creates the rumor that it is increasingly valorized by the media industry. Consumption has become a collective process (...) and this is what I mean in this book about collective intelligence. None

of us can know everything; each of us knows something; we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills. Collective intelligence can be seen as an alternative source of media power. We are learning how to use this power in our daily interactions in the convergence culture. At present we use this collective power principally for having fun, but soon we will use these skills for more “serious” purposes. (p. 4)

The discourses of the contemporary analysts dealing with convergence begin and end with what Jenkins calls “the fallacy of the black box”. On the contrary to what they believe – that all media contents will flow through one single black box – Jenkins affirms that such concept is reductive. For him, convergence of the media is more than a technological change. “Convergence alters the relationship between the existing technologies, industries, markets, gender and audiences (...) and involves changes both in the way the media are produced and in the way they are consumed”.

In six chapters the author presents a collage of cases representing recent and very expressive phenomena of the media to explain how the convergence is remodeling the relation between producers and consumers. Each of these examples is a particular contribution to the understanding of this process. From TV he selected *Survivor* (2002) and *American Idol* (2000); from cinema, *The Matrix* (1999) and *Star Wars* (1977); *Harry Potter* (1998) is a case originated in the literature. These examples are used for illustrating what happens when people decide to interact with others, participate actively or control the media they frequent.

In the first chapter, Jenkins concentrates on the analysis of the American reality show “Survivor”, a program in which the participants compete for a premium of one million dollars in resistance tests somewhere in the world. But, what is calling the attention of the author is the organized fan community (spoilers) creating itself in the Internet with the intent to conduct a group investigation – benefiting from the individual contributions and the expertise of each participant – for discovering secrets even before the series goes on the air. To map the way these communities act can help us to a better understanding of the social nature of the contemporary media consumption and of the way by which the knowledge transforms into power in the era of media convergence. For Jenkins, this is a vivid example of collective intelligence in action.

In the second chapter, *American Idol* is analyzed from the perspective of the media industry, in an attempt to understand how the reality television is molded by what Jenkins calls affective economics, involving consumers that are invited to engage themselves emotionally and producers who seek to mingle entertainment content and advertisement.

Both of the cases approached so far deal with the tenseness in the relation between the public and the producers. Jenkins asks on one hand about at what point the participation turns into interference and on the other hand about at what point the producers may be exercising

excessive power upon this experience. In the case of the *Survivor*, the producers fear that the revelation of the results to the general public due to the efficiency of the spoiler community may empty the interest for the program. In the case of the *American Idol*, it is the fans who fear that the producers may throw them overboard.

The third chapter examines “The Matrix” as an expressive example of what Jenkins calls transmedia storytelling. The brothers Wachowsky who yarned the narrative, distributed it not only over the film trilogy but also over several other media such as computer games and animated shorts posted on the Web. This way, although the story can only be understood through the films, the keys to clues that can be found in the other media and the consumer movement in online group discussions can enrich the understanding of the narrative. This is perhaps the most emblematic chapter of the book and the readers will certainly find out why.

In the chapters four and five we delve deeply into the kingdom of participatory culture. Chapter four shows how the fans of *Star Wars* are remodeling the saga actively in order to satisfy their fantasies and desires. As the story extends to different media, it is interesting to observe how different expectations are arising from the producers: whereas in the games the consumers are encouraged to generate the greater part of the content, in the films the creative participation is much lower and rarely taken into account by the producers. Chapter five deals with the young fans of *Harry Potter* writing their own stories about Hogwarts and his pupils. The participation policies in this case involve to main questions: conflicts of interest between the fans and Warner Bros. and the conflict between conservative Christians and professors, who see the books as a means to stimulate young readers. In both cases there is a conflict with the producers of the commercial media who do not desist of exercising a greater control over their intellectual property rights.

In the sixth chapter, Jenkins seems to want to redirect his focus by applying his ideas about convergence to the perspectives offered by the US presidential campaign of 2004, exploring what, from his perspective, should be taken into account for achieving a more participative democracy. He repeats that, on that occasion, the citizens were served better by the popular culture - transmission of ideas using different media as a citizen initiative, encouraged by the campaign – than by the news of the big media or by the official political discourses. For Jenkins, the 2004 elections represent an important moment of transition in the relation between media and policy and, once more, all sides presume a greater participation of citizens and consumers, although there is still no agreement with regard to the weight of such participation.

In the conclusion of the book, Jenkins retakes the three key-concepts he elected – convergence, collective intelligence and participation – for exploring the implications of the convergence culture not only for entertainment but for education, reform of the media and democratic citizenship. He underlines once more the

ideas that the convergence culture represents a change in the forms we think our relations with the media; that this change occurs primarily through our relations with the popular culture; but that the skills we acquire can have implications for the way we learn, work, participate in the political processes and communicate with people worldwide.

The author recognizes that the public more deeply integrated with these new behaviors is still quite limited: in its majority we are speaking of white men with higher education. But, to the extent the access of the citizens will be amplified, he sees the audiences strengthened by these new technologies, occupying places, one by one, in the intersection between the old and the emerging media

and demanding for the right to more participation. He alerts thus that the producers who fail to negotiate with this new participatory culture will witness their power decline: “the resulting struggles and compromises will define the public culture of the future”.

By analyzing the cultural, economical and political implications of the new relation between media and society and the resulting cultural transformations, Jenkins offers us at the same time the map of the new territories where the old and the new media collide and a treasure: the essential elements for perceiving what will come about and our possible role in a convergent present/future. 