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Twenty-First Century Media



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Introduction: 21st Century Media



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Cynthia Baron

The articles in the winter 2016 issue of *The Projector* illuminate key developments in contemporary film, media, and television through research that considers corporate entities, audience responses, and the evolution of a landmark television franchise. Individually and together, the three articles provide a useful context for analyzing trends in cable and online programs and platforms, for they examine the choices and practices of entrepreneurs, viewers, and content creators as transmedia narratives become an integral part of consumer society.

The authors shed light on an array of technological, economic, and cultural factors that shape popular media *and* ways in which people access “television” and other online content. As their research shows, it has become increasingly important to consider how programming and online content is delivered, for this aspect of the programming-audience interface affects ways that content is created and interpreted. As author Anne Major notes, scholars must now consider “the processes, stakeholders and cultural implications of digital delivery” in their research on all forms of media.

Major’s article, “Powering Premium Content: An analysis of Ooyala’s Online Video Distribution Services,” focuses on Ooyala, a third party online video distribution service that creates pay walls and provides consumer analytics for premium content providers. Her research reveals that online video distribution “services are subtly transforming online viewing practices and becoming key stakeholders in developing the standards and practices associated with digital” and “over-the-top” of programming services that allow, for example, “viewers to click on and buy a Dolce & Gabbana bag while streaming an episode of *Sex and the City*.” Major’s collection of case studies – on Ooyala’s work with Miramax, the PAC 12, the Vienna State Opera, and Nigerian-based Iroko.tv – illustrate ways that online video distribution companies create “interactive viewing experiences with profitable revenue opportunities” for corporations and media conglomerates.

Michael L. Wayne's reception study, "Middle-Class Viewers and *Breaking Bad*: Audience and Social Status in the Post-Network Era," contributes to ongoing discussions about quality television by illustrating that this cable series, celebrated by critics for its moral ambiguity, is sometimes read as unambiguous thriller. Wayne's research found that viewers with graduate-level education tended to see "*Breaking Bad* as a narrative of moral transformation and Walter White as a complicated anti-heroic protagonist." By comparison, audiences with high-school or college education saw "the show and its protagonist as a traditional heroic narrative." Wayne notes that "these findings highlight the ways in which traditional and post-network modes of engagement coexist." In the closing segment of his article, Wayne explores questions arising from the discovery that all the respondents accessed the program online and saw television programming in general as new media, a development taken up in the third and final article.

"*The Simpsons* as a Blockbuster Transmedia Franchise" by R. Colin Tait reveals that "over the course of its historic, nearly twenty-seven year run, *The Simpsons* has not only evolved in tandem with the changes in the television industry," its marketing strategies reveal it is "a corporate product" influenced by the movie-blockbuster era "from which it emerged." Moreover, as Tait demonstrates, *The Simpsons* exemplifies "transmedia storytelling" and illustrates ways that a "contemporary franchise can expand into new media arenas, from CD recordings, . . . movies and movie spin-offs, to the DVD explosion in the late 1990s, the wholesale conversion into high definition images, streaming platforms, and iPhone mobile apps." Using his study of *The Simpsons* to illustrate broader trends in contemporary media, Tait shows that each of these steps not only represents "a reflection of the time that the series has been produced, but the myriad ways it has adapted to the many changes in the industry since its debut in the late 1980s." Taking readers through those steps, Tait shows that "adapting to new media outlets . . . made the franchise one of the most valuable pieces of intellectual property in the early twenty-first century."

The research studies by Anne Major, Michael L. Wayne, and R. Colin Tait offer invaluable insights into contemporary media – and serve as a reminder that there are countless areas to explore in this vast field. *The Projector* is committed to publishing research that makes the invisible operations of contemporary media visible and that provides ways to better understand factors shaping content creation and audience perspectives. We encourage scholars to submit studies that will make it possible for *The Projector* to publish work that effectively continues the lines of research so strongly marked out by Major, Wayne, and Tait.

**Powering Premium Content:
An analysis of Ooyala's Online Video Distribution Services**



Image Credit: <http://pulsosocial.com/2014/08/11/telstra-acquiere-ooyala-por-usd-270m/>

Anne Major

The proliferation of online video distribution (OVD) platforms and apps operating “over-the-top” (OTT) of broadcast and cable delivery services have forced legacy media companies to respond to ongoing technological, industrial and cultural shifts in distribution. As an emergent sector, OVD also poses methodological and theoretical challenges to scholars investigating processes, stakeholders and cultural implications of digital delivery. Accepting Lisa Parks’ call for scholars to examine “the politics of infrastructural intelligibility,” and develop “a form of criticism that leads to investigations of the raw materials, resources, labor, affect and energy required to sustain a system,” this paper critically analyzes Ooyala, one of the largest third-party OVD services (81). OVD services comprise part of the infrastructure of digital and OTT distribution, enabling publishers to upload and stream videos, manage video libraries, create paywalls, and view real-time content analytics. Despite their relevance and roles in the mediascape, OVD services have received limited academic and mainstream attention. Attempting to address this literature gap, this study examines OVD infrastructures undergirding the burgeoning OTT industry sector—using Ooyala as a case study. Promoting itself as the leading service for “premium” content providers, Ooyala is an especially fruitful site for conceptualizing the evolving OVD marketplace, and interrogating how video content is privileged in online distribution.

Contrasting with material communication’s visible infrastructures (e.g., satellites, pipelines, cell towers, phone lines, etc.), Ooyala and other OVD services operate through invisibility. Differing from Parks, who explores material infrastructure’s political, social, and cultural implications, this paper explores Ooyala’s ‘invisible hand’ and its implications. Deconstructing Ooyala’s operations, which are often free of public scrutiny, illuminates how business-to-business OVD services are subtly transforming online viewing practices and becoming key stakeholders in developing the standards and practices associated with digital and OTT delivery.

Founded in 2007, Ooyala is a Cloud-based “software-as-a-service” (SaaS) platform sold via subscriptions. As a third-party media distributor, exhibitor, data aggregator, and marketer, Ooyala must be conceptualized within the networked-information economy.¹ Its services enable content publishers to distribute online videos and stream content across multiple devices.

Whereas online video platforms (e.g., Vimeo and YouTube) are designed for uploading content, Ooyala and similar companies (e.g., Brightcove, Kaltura, and Longtail) allow customers to host videos on their own websites. In doing so, these emerging OVD services grant content publishers more control over distribution and analytics. For instance, Ooyala's "Backlot" provides a user-friendly interface for publishers to upload and schedule video content, manage video libraries, create pay-walls, set up live video streams, and view real-time content analytics. The company's video distribution model differs from peer-to-peer (P2P) websites like BitTorrent that cull copyrighted video content and make it available for free download.² Instead, Ooyala—which worries about customers' profits—aims to distribute online content for money. Ooyala's model is in direct opposition to more informal P2P platforms that allow endless reproduction and global transmission of content at no charge. The company's services represent emergent efforts to achieve P2P's scale and scope without sacrificing centralized and monetary control. Thus, Ooyala and similar services give online publishers more control over managing and monetizing licensed videos.

When writing about the infrastructure of "connected viewing," Joshua Braun uses the term "transparent intermediaries" to describe OVD third-party services. He employs a broad approach, arguing that these companies create "ready-made distribution infrastructures" that are intimately linked to the "possibilities and constraints of contemporary connected viewing" (139). Connected viewing refers to an imagined ideal of viewer engagement, which media companies have sought to achieve by integrating social networking and digital technologies with traditional modes of media consumption.³ As an exemplar transparent intermediary that provides social networking services, data aggregation, and monetization opportunities, Ooyala partially fulfills and constructs the ideals of connected viewing. Focusing on Ooyala raises more specific questions about OVD companies' agendas and corporate strategies—i.e., why are they pursuing the role of invisible intermediary? By grappling with streaming technologies, online video remediation and brand differentiation within the increasingly complex OVD marketplace, Ooyala embodies characteristics unique to the evolving modes of OTT and digital delivery.

Ooyala's ultimate goal, according to founder Sean Knapp, is "to be to TV what Cisco is to network computing" (Liyakassa n.p.). Cisco, through hardware and software development and sales, was integral to the emergence and, now, evolution and maturation of network computing infrastructure. Whereas Cisco largely manufactures and sells commercial and household networking hardware (i.e., datacenter products, routers, and security appliances), Ooyala creates software as subscription services for online video publishers. Comparing itself to Cisco reveals Ooyala's desire to become a major intermediary in the distribution and management of licensed video content. Knapp believes traditional TV will continue to pursue online audiences and revenue streams—i.e., require OVD services and software—and Ooyala is in a unique position help provide the infrastructure necessary to achieve these goals. However, as an intermediary company, Ooyala has no direct financial stake in quality or specificity of video content. Ooyala does not generate revenue from ad placement or video views; instead, it monetizes its client's content for a monthly fee. Describing Ooyala's business strategy, CEO Jay Fulcher stated, "Ooyala has 500-600 customers and we've really focused on the premium content market and that's the lion share of the business. We decided quite a while ago that 95% of the content we all consume today and will to consume is premium TV content moving online" (Liyakassa n.p.).

Promoting itself as the “power” behind premium content, Ooyala targets a high-end constituency willing to pay high subscription fees to meet the rapidly changing professional standards of digital delivery. Ooyala, Kaltura, and Brightcove represent the “big three” third-party OVD services, and their clients include primarily broadcasters and corporate websites. Ooyala’s closest competitor, Brightcove, offers player-specific analytics, which allows publishers to evaluate video players and/or embedded content. In contrast, Ooyala’s software implements syndication rules (i.e., geographic restrictions, domain regulations, and pay-walls) to specific videos and groups of videos—allowing for bundling options.⁴ By fusing analytics and/or advertisements with video content, rather than a video player, Ooyala’s software grants publishers increased control over specific videos and collates more precise data concerning viewership. Ooyala clients are privy to real-time analytics about viewership patterns through its distinct “Backlot” interface. The “backlot” interface allows content providers to see “heat maps” of where their videos are playing, and indicates the websites syndicating their videos.⁵ Ooyala, therefore, appeals to publishers who want to manage a large video library, generate viewership data, and accurately gauge their content’s return on investment.

As modes of digital delivery become increasingly ubiquitous, it is necessary to question how video content is privileged for online distribution. Christian Sandvig argues that the Internet’s distribution architecture “provide a complex, tiered system firmly biased toward large and well-capitalized media producers who have access to special networks (CDNs) and dedicated downstream bandwidth” (236). Sandvig refers to business dealings between content and network providers (e.g., peering arrangements), and new distribution networks (e.g., content delivery networks) that privilege the delivery of particular content. Ooyala constitutes another part of OVD infrastructure, which is also shaping the standards and practices of “premium” content delivery. Examining Ooyala raises questions about the definitions of “premium content,” and how this category is transforming as the OVD marketplace evolves. On one hand, “premium” designates a tier of content providers that publish high-demand videos (e.g., sports rights holders, broadcast and cable networks, and Hollywood studios). However, “premium” also distinguishes content that meets professional streaming standards and generates revenue. Providing management and monetization services that uphold high professional streaming standards, Ooyala has an explicit stake in marking certain video content as premium, and perpetuating this distinction.

Ooyala’s stake in “premium TV content” is explicitly financial—i.e., they do not care about the content quality or its aesthetics. To them it is all “ones and zeros.” However, they do care about customer’s brand image, analytics, facilitating business-to-business relationships, and growing internationally. Highly visible intermediaries like YouTube are widely understood as “platforms,” which Tarleton Gillespie describes as catchall term interpreted differently by advertisers, end users, and professional content providers. Although Ooyala is at times referred to as a platform within industry and promotional discourse, the company exclusively provides back-end services for professional content publishers. Ooyala incorporates services that ensure future vitality within a rapidly changing marketplace. In doing so, the company influences how publishers manage and distribute content. Therefore, in essence, as Ooyala continues to develop infrastructural software their transparent facade extends into business-to-business marketplace as technical, strategic, and analytic intermediaries—all in an effort to remain an integral part of the OVD marketplace.

Methodology

Analyzing infrastructure is, according to Brian Larkin, a “categorical act,” requiring decisions about “which aspect of which network is to be discussed and which parts will be ignored” (330). Examining OVD infrastructure as a set of technologies, services, and business-to-business relationships, I approach Ooyala as a case study to investigate how the company’s professional services and technologies are shaping categories of “premium” content providers, and dictating standards and practices as digital delivery develops. More specifically, Ooyala’s dealings with Miramax, the PAC-12 Conference, the Vienna State Opera House, and a Nollywood streaming platform, Iroko.tv are examined. Among other things, case studies allow scholars to explicitly analyze companies’ business practices, and discern how emerging markets and businesses grow and evolve. This methodology is particularly applicable for conceptualizing the rapidly changing OVD marketplace. Focusing on Ooyala’s dealings with specific “premium” publishers reveals how, as an exemplar, Ooyala has evolved over time to remain relevant and in demand. More importantly, this analysis makes visible Ooyala’s hand in forging OVD infrastructure, and—by extension—transforming content.

Examining Ooyala’s interactions with “premium” clients also offers a more infrastructural lens for understanding processes of media convergence. Often, the infrastructures underlying processes and practices of convergence go overlooked by media scholars. For example, Jenkins, Ford and Green’s recent book, *Spreadable Media*, makes important links between critical media scholarship and actual industrial practices. The authors assume a perspective that consciously celebrates and reflexively analyzes the Internet’s “participatory” media cultures. In doing so, *Spreadable Media* forges a shared language and opens new avenues between critical media scholars and industry professionals. Foregrounding terms such as “convergence,” “participatory,” and “spreadability,” reifies conceptualizations of digital media as always already capable of gaining ubiquitous circulation. Moreover, focusing on participatory practices and the digital circulation of media texts risks reducing digital distribution to a process of “dis-intermediation.” Dina Iordanova describes dis-intermediation as “a process whereby direct access to content makes the intermediary in a supply chain obsolete” (3). In other words, dis-intermediation eliminates the middleman. Thus, digital distribution is often assumed to forge more direct relationships between consumers and producers. However, as an intermediary party, Ooyala is indicative of what Patrick Vonderau describes as “re-intermediation” (720). Rather than eliminating the middleman, Ooyala integrates essential operations of traditional distributors, and creates new professional standards and practices for online video delivery.

Ooyala and the OVD marketplace

Placing the nascent OVD sector in conversation with video and DVD industry studies yields a productive and more historically grounded framework for investigating Ooyala’s roles in the OVD sector. Paul McDonald conceptualizes video and DVD industries as distinct from film distribution or broadcast delivery structures largely because video and DVD business models support different revenue streams (3). According to McDonald, it is, “more appropriate to think

of video as a business which is closer to clothing or, to choose a media comparison, book publishing” (4). By integrating hardware (e.g. video tapes, VCRs, DVDs, etc.) and software (e.g. copyright and format) elements, video and DVD industries are dispersed across consumer electronics industry, and the copyright and retailing industries. In many ways, the OVD sector is akin to video and DVD industries. However, as Vonderau argues, the digital world is a “*mise-en-abyme* where infrastructures are infinitely built into each other, creating anomalies that again become part of a system” (726). Because the OVD marketplace is rapidly evolving, Ooyala must stay relevant by asserting its role as part of the OVD infrastructure, acquiring brand-name clients, and creating flexible software that can be implemented into a bevy of services.

Ooyala’s focus on monetization services for “premium” content publishers is inextricably linked to the broader professionalization of online videos. Ooyala and similar companies emerged in conjunction with the professionalization of online video production and distribution platforms. John Caldwell examines the professionalization and incorporation of user-generated content, which began in the early 2000s. According to Caldwell, broadcast networks like NBC and ABC implemented professional software tools that allowed fans and users to generate and upload videos on official network websites (287). Similarly, YouTube began as a site for individual users to upload videos. Now, YouTube is a major global video platform used by corporate entities and individual users alike.

Ooyala’s eye towards distributing and monetizing “premium” TV content was central to its business model from the outset. After working for Google, brothers Bismarck and Belasar Lepe, and colleague Sean Knapp built an interactive video player with embedded monetization opportunities. Stating that these video players will, “allow viewers to click on and buy a Dolce & Gabbana bag while streaming an episode of *Sex and the City*,” Knapp reveals Ooyala’s vision of a business model specific to premium TV content.⁶ Thus, Ooyala’s initial goals were to help remediate and transform TV content as interactive viewing experiences with profitable revenue opportunities.

The 2008 economic crisis also increased demand for third party OVD services as media companies’ workflow and spending habits shifted. Under economic pressures, media companies became more aware of in-house spending on online videos. Third-party OVD services were a logical response to over-spending. In an interview Knapp reiterates this point by stating:

The name of the game for a lot of these divisions in these individual companies is simply to survive 2009. They can’t do that when they’re spending millions of dollars on staffing and millions of dollars on technology, to do something that we Ooyala can simply provide for them at a quarter of the cost or a tenth of the cost of what they’re currently paying. We have an entire team focused on all of that platform and on all of that technology. They’re simply just outpacing any efforts that they can actually rally internally. The current market is forcing people to make intelligent decisions with their money. (Moon 270)

Although media companies began co-opting online video platforms to circulate professional video content before the economic crisis, the downturn certainly made third-party services attractive economic alternatives to in-house entities.

In-house OVD services are major competitors to Ooyala and similar companies because they deny highly coveted relationships with relevant content rights holders. For example, Major League Baseball's (MLB) subscription-based OVD platform, MLB.TV is operated by MLB Advanced Media (MLBAM). In 2009, MLBAM obtained a geo-location technology patent, which blacks-out baseball games to subscribers in regions where said game is accessible on cable.⁷ In-house entities can also develop content-specific features. MLBAM's optical tracking feature has been promoted as enhancing the experience of baseball viewing by using digital effects to chart the ball's movement and quantify every play with precise data about distance, velocity and player stats.⁸ Because of its content-specific expertise, MLBAM has become an expert sport OVD service. Built around its geo-location patent and lucrative broadcast deals, MLBAM is becoming a major OVD intermediary. In August 2015, MLBAM began operating the National Hockey League (NHL) website, streaming service, and mobile apps. To compete with in-house entities, Ooyala has forged relationships with various types of players, expanded into international markets, and promoted its expertise in analytics and video management for premium content providers.

Ooyala's Technologies and Services

In their analysis of the informal media economy, Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas describe technologies as properties that formalize media practices "when they become central to media businesses" (27). Ooyala's technologies and services enable publishers to precisely manage videos and develop and actualize revenue streams—i.e., they incorporate advertisements and pay-walls into video content. By integrating advanced data system technologies, Ooyala ensures a high level of transparency for content providers. Proprietary analytics and algorithms are crucial commodities for streaming platforms, third-party OVD services, and other tech companies. Netflix, for instance, aggregates a host of analytical data about viewers, taste preferences, and the popularity of specific videos, but exercises discretion in regards to viewership, subscription, and demographic information. Because Ooyala provides similar analytical services for their clients, the company is a logical solution for smaller, specialized OVD platforms to meet evolving professional standards in the marketplace.

Ooyala's centralized model of distribution and patented analytic algorithms are an attractive selling point for content publishers, and have become integral to the company's continued relevance. Not only does Ooyala enable clients to discern content analytics, as a cloud-based service, it aggregates this data. Although Ooyala does not generate revenue from video advertisements or a video's "impressions," it certainly benefits from online viewership as more views allows for more data. Collecting, analyzing, and operationalizing data—in various forms—is large component of Ooyala's services. By aggregating data, Ooyala provides broader insight about online viewers' habits—a commodity they can sell. For instance, Ooyala publishes quarterly reports detailing trends and patterns regarding online viewership. Titled "The Global Video Index," these reports are available on Ooyala's website, and are widely referenced within technical and industry trade journals and blogs. Ooyala is cited as a leader in content analytics and part of its success is due to the company's video-centric approach. Ooyala's data expertise is a valuable selling point to "premium" content publishers, as the purpose of content production is

to ultimately create sales. Online video advertising is riddled with imperfections and misplacements, and Ooyala attempts to refine approaches that monetize its clients' "premium" content.

For instance, Knapp and Ooyala's affiliated software engineers patented a new type of functionality that gives video content publishers more immediate and fluid control over paywalls and advertisements embedded on video players. The published patent for "Goal-based video delivery system" describes the technology as follows:

The creator of a particular video may use trial and error in an attempt to maximize revenue. Specifically, the creators may allow the users to view a certain amount of video for free prior to paying to watch the entire video. The point within the video at which the free viewing ends is referred to as the "paywall", and the period between the beginning of the video and the location of the paywall is referred to as the "free preview window". To determine the effect that different paywall locations have on revenue, during a first testing period the creator may set the free preview window to be one minute. After the first testing period, the creator may have a second testing period during which the video is provided with a five-minute free preview window. After the second testing period, the video creator may compare the percentage of users that paid to view the video during the two testing periods to decide which paywall location will result in higher revenue. Based on the result, the video creator may maintain the paywall location, revert to the old paywall location, or try yet another paywall location. (Hoofien et al. n.p.)

This patent allows content publishers to immediately alter the moment a paywall disrupts a video, and adjust how much money it charges to view the entire video. Companies like Sportfive, the largest rights holder for German, French and other European football clubs, utilize Ooyala's paywall capabilities because these sporting events not readily available on US broadcast or cable television. Ooyala also developed live streaming video events for retail companies like Sephora and Whole Foods. Ooyala's paywall capability enables these retailers and rights holders to directly sell their respective products through a streaming interface.

Ooyala's "Goal-based video delivery system" patent was tailored to ensure publishers' control over payment mechanisms. Ooyala built this paywall patent upon Google's embedded payment system patents, which allow users to pay for content without disrupting viewing sessions.⁹ Ooyala adjusted Google's patents by integrating functions that allow publishers to track viewing habits in real time, and alter payment operations when necessary. As ready-made technologies, Ooyala's paywall functions offer new standards and practices for the monetization and management of videos within the OVD marketplace. Moreover, by enabling content providers to control paywall mechanisms, Ooyala's technologies subtly transform online viewing experiences.

The Miramax Experience App

The growth of mass-market SVODs (e.g., Netflix, Hulu Plus, and Amazon Prime Instant), and the proliferation of “cord-cutting” have greatly impacted the American OVD marketplace. As cable customers “cut” subscriptions, more viewers access content on OTT devices, streaming platforms, and mobile apps. Subscription video on demand (SVOD) and advertising-based video on demand (AVOD) platforms are becoming alternatives to TV Everywhere (TVE) apps available to cable subscribers. The March 2015 release of HBO’s direct-to-consumer SVOD platform, “HBO Now,” marks an important change in the American OVD sector. Whereas the TVE app, HBO Go, was only accessible to cable subscribers, HBO Now is a stand-alone subscription platform. Moreover, competition amongst mass-market SVODs has inflated licensing costs for high-demand Hollywood content. Lucrative streaming agreements make Hollywood studios more inclined to license content to mass-market SVOD platforms, and less inclined to create direct-to-consumer streaming platforms. Examining the unsuccessful Ooyala-powered Miramax Experience app shows how Ooyala is navigating changes in the OVD marketplace. Tracing Ooyala’s role in promoting the Miramax app, and its subsequent dealings with the PAC-12 Conference, Vienna State Opera, and a Nollywood SVOD platform offers a rich map of the evolving OVD marketplace. Attending to Ooyala’s relationships with these content providers raises questions about the company’s positioning as an OVD expert specializing in the management and distribution of premium online content.

In 2011, Miramax’s former CEO, Michael Lang, hired Ooyala to launch an on-demand rental program, the Miramax Experience App, via Facebook. Ooyala developed “Ooyala Social” specifically upon Miramax’s request to integrate an online video platform within the studio’s Facebook page.¹⁰ The Miramax Experience app was designed to promote the Miramax brand and monetize previously released titles. Using Facebook Credit and PayPal, Ooyala facilitated rental payments, and its “Ooyala Social” service enabled users to watch rentals across various devices, set up group viewings, and play interactive games on Facebook’s platform.¹¹ Thus, Ooyala helped remediate Miramax’s theatrical content as online social experiences while hyping Facebook’s new payment services. Even the title “Miramax Experience” points to the app’s fulfillment of connected viewing ideals with interactive engagement and seamless viewing experiences. However, Miramax’s licensing deals with Netflix and Amazon Instant restricted economic rationale for maintaining an interactive, studio-branded rental app on Facebook’s platform.¹²

The Miramax Experience app no longer offers movie rentals. The defunct rental app is now a site for Facebook users to view, share, and spread Miramax video clips and trailers. The short-lived Miramax Experience points to Ooyala’s uncertain intermediary role within the OVD landscape. As competition for streaming major studio-owned content grows, major SVOD platforms are willing to pay up Hollywood studios for streaming licenses.¹³

Increasingly, Hollywood studios are licensing content to major SVOD platforms, indicating a growing consolidation of market power among a few dominant SVOD platforms. Consolidation within the American mass-market SVOD sector calls into question the possibility for Ooyala and similar companies’ ongoing relationships with major Hollywood studios. However, Ooyala’s clients include smaller SVOD platforms that specialize in streaming niche and international

content to US subscribers, and studio-owned content to subscribers in international markets. In March 2014, Miramax and Sony Pictures Television licensed content to SVOD platform, Telly Plus, which streams a variety of Hollywood and niche international content to Middle Eastern and North African subscribers and is one of Ooyala's clients.¹⁴ Growing broadband penetration and mobile data services have spurred speculation on the profitability of streaming platforms in emerging geographical markets. SVOD platforms like Telly Plus and Nigerian-based Iroko.tv operating on venture capital and other sources of funding have little competition since mass-market SVODs are largely unavailable in emerging international markets. Ooyala and similar companies provide specialty SVOD platforms with the professional interface and services to manage their respective content libraries, comply with global streaming licenses, and process subscription payments. Since the global SVOD sector is still nascent, Ooyala's relationships with pay TV providers remain a major source of both revenue and analytics.

The PAC-12 Conference App

Ooyala's business dealings with the PAC-12 conference demonstrate how the company is maintaining relevance as the American OVD sector evolves. TV Everywhere has provided Ooyala opportunities for new business, but these opportunities are contingent on broadcast and cable networks' precarious relationships with cable providers. For instance, cable providers initiated TVE to compete with OTT platforms, and clamp the "cord-cutting" phenomenon. TVE employs authorization procedures to allow pay-tv customers' access to content across a variety of internet-based devices and services. Ooyala and similar companies are poised to fulfill TVE standards by implementing authentication procedures, and streaming videos to multiple devices via TVE mobile apps.

In 2012, the PAC-12 Network employed Ooyala to stream collegiate sporting events for its mobile app. Because the PAC-12 Network has carriage agreements with specific cable providers, its streaming app requires users to authenticate their cable subscriptions. Ooyala offers a rational solution for authentication procedures, and therefore has a stake in upholding the TVE business model. However, as an intermediary party, Ooyala does not decide whether TVE authentication services are necessary. Instead, Ooyala asserts its relevance by promoting its proprietary services and technological expertise as "engaging" online experiences of TV content.

Leveraging existing relationships with social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), Ooyala developed an interactive programming guide for the PAC-12 Network app that maps out important sporting events and news formatted to individual fan's preferences. Like the Miramax Experience app, the Pac-12 app enables users to stream videos alongside social media applications. Acting as the intermediary between social media platforms and the PAC-12 Network, Ooyala asserted itself as a necessary OVD service. Moreover, content providers can market social network capabilities to promote their platforms as sleek, interactive experiences of video content.



The Pac-12 Network app

Image credit: <https://gigaom.com/2012/08/29/pac-12-ipad-app/>

Ooyala CEO, Jay Fulcher stated in a press release that, “The web and iPad experiences blur the line between broadband and traditional broadcasts, and are hallmarks of a new way of distributing entertainment—in this case sports—reaching digital consumers on their schedule, on their preferred screen and with a more engaging experience.” Fulcher promotes Ooyala as possessing the Midas touch, instantly transforming broadcast sporting events into interactive experiences of PAC-12 content for consumers. Whether the app creates an “engaging experience” for users is irrelevant to Ooyala. However, the company does have a stake in perpetuating and shaping particular industry trends like “interactive” video features. By integrating social networking features, Ooyala fulfils demand for “engaging experiences” of content and asserts its relevance in the marketplace.

The Vienna State Opera

Unstable relationships between cable providers, broadcasters, and content publishers, and competition from in-house OVD divisions indicate the constantly fluctuating OVD marketplace. Ooyala must sustain its intermediary role by forging new relationships with diverse players. Braun notes that as a generalist intermediary, Ooyala supports a plethora of online video providers, and “must by necessity focus their resources by caricaturing and categorizing the customers, perhaps even channeling them into particular and desirable use cases” (135). In its dealings with Vienna State Opera and Samsung, Ooyala leverages its OVD expertise to forge new digital routes for elite cultural events.

The Vienna State Opera employed Ooyala to transmit operas and ballets via live streaming and on-demand distribution directly to Samsung’s pre-installed Smart TV app. This partnership between manufacturer and cultural establishment is a novel marketing tactic, promoting both the Vienna State Opera and Samsung smart TVs. According to a press release, the Vienna Opera House chose Ooyala for its ability to “rapidly deploy a high-quality solution with sophisticated business and technical requirements.”¹⁵ As an OVD expert, Ooyala implemented technical operations to maintain the scarcity and fidelity associated with the Vienna State Opera’s elite ballets and operas. Ooyala adjusted its existing services like geo-location, pay-walls, and live

streaming to fulfill this campaign. To stream these events, Ooyala transmitted two parallel HD-quality live streams from different camera angles, created secure payment and authentication procedures, and implemented distribution windows for viewers to access videos in “primetime.” Therefore, Ooyala dictated the standards and terms that future ventures between hardware manufacturers and cultural institutions can employ for similar endeavors.

Iroko.tv

Ooyala’s goal to “be to TV what Cisco is for network computing,” requires the diversification of business ventures and international expansion. The company must strategically position itself in particular markets to acquire elite, large-scale, or profitable clients. In 2013, Yahoo! Japan hired Ooyala to handle all of its video content. Prior to this deal, Ooyala positioned itself as a contender for Yahoo! Japan’s business by increasing its presence in Asian markets, and making international agreements with large telecommunication firms like Australia’s Telstra.¹⁶ In August 2014, Telstra bought Ooyala, solidifying the company’s international presence. Ooyala maintains the same management team, and operates as an independent subsidiary of Telstra.

The status of “premium” content publishers like Miramax, the PAC-12 Conference, and the Vienna State Opera clearly benefit Ooyala’s reputation. Less apparent is Ooyala’s stake in servicing smaller SVOD platforms like Telly Plus, and Nigerian-based Iroko.tv. Because major companies like Netflix and Amazon Instant maintain a massive subscriber base and acquire a large licensing budget, smaller SVOD platforms struggle to compete.¹⁷ Telly Plus is owned by San Francisco-based, Telly, which has launched multiple algorithm-based video apps including a social video sharing service for Twitter.¹⁸ Ooyala’s motivation for servicing this platform is likely related to Telly’s association with Twitter. However, as a start-up based in Lagos, Nigeria, Ooyala’s incentive for servicing an unknown brand like Iroko.tv is its potential for growth. Despite its prolific video production, Nollywood’s industrial economics are opaque to outsiders due to factors like rampant piracy and undocumented distribution deals. Nollywood videos have primarily been distributed through informal networks like video stores and markets that are largely peripheral to dominant global media networks.¹⁹ Thus, Nollywood videos are not conventionally categorized as premium content. However, Iroko.tv’s considerable library of 5,000 exclusively licensed videos, and the global demand for Nollywood videos likely peaked Ooyala’s interest in servicing the OVD upstart.²⁰

Because of Nollywood’s “informal” economy, Ooyala played a role in legitimating Iroko.tv’s videos as “premium” content. Using Ooyala’s services, Iroko.tv created revenue streams through strategic advertising placements, implemented subscription pay-walls and geo-blocking features, and designed a mobile app for sub-Saharan customers.²¹ To ensure “premium” streaming quality, the platform’s interface is clearly organized with a searchable catalog of titles. Each video is prefaced with a warning about Iroko.tv’s license policies to prevent piracy, and the video player ubiquitously bears the Iroko.tv’s logo. In 2013, Iroko.tv and Ooyala worked with Nokia Lumina to create a mobile app available to subscribers within sub-Saharan countries.²³ Iroko.tv then began streaming Hollywood, Korean, Telenovela, and Bollywood titles for subscribers in sub-Saharan African countries.²² Licensing Nollywood titles for global subscribers, Iroko.tv is poised

to become a major SVOD platform in emerging African markets. In doing so, Iroko.tv has distinguished its status as a “premium” content provider.



Iroko.tv platform

Image Credit:

<http://assets2.irokovt.com/www/images/videos/poster/default.png>

Offering a plethora of international content goes beyond Iroko.tv’s initial goals to legitimize, monetize and stream Nollywood videos. Since Ooyala’s services are necessary for Iroko.tv to comply with global streaming licenses and manage its large content library, Ooyala has a stake in cultivating the platform’s growth. Ooyala constructs a flexible infrastructure granting SVOD platforms ‘ready-made’ possibilities for expanding business models. Through Ooyala’s analytics, services and expertise, Iroko.tv gained insight about viewership, forged valuable relationships with online ad agencies, and later implemented a subscription tier of service. More importantly, Ooyala’s services have helped facilitate Iroko.tv’s expansion into original content production. Employing analytics via Ooyala’s services, Iroko.tv works directly with directors and producers to craft storylines that promise maximum return on investment.²⁴ Ooyala’s software helped monetize and manage Iroko.tv’s licensed videos, but its analytics have directly impacted Iroko.tv’s original content production processes.

Conclusion

Ooyala’s ‘invisible hand’ in transforming content is precisely because of its transparent business-to-business services. The company’s back-end service model shields it from public scrutiny while its algorithm-based technologies and analytics affirm its expert status. Ooyala’s crafted self-promotion as the power behind premium content assures content providers a high degree of quality and a profitable return on investment. Such transparency and assumed business-to-business neutrality makes it especially necessary for media scholars to critically question how Ooyala and similar services are constructing OVD infrastructure.

My study has demonstrated how Ooyala employs its flexible technologies, analytic expertise, and relationships with various players to maintain its relevance within the rapidly changing OVD

marketplace. To ensure future vitality, Ooyala recently acquired a European online ad firm, Videoplaza. Over time, Ooyala and Videoplaza will become an integrated advertising and distribution "platform."²⁵ The company will, therefore, have a more direct financial stake in the quality of its content publishers. With the acquisition of online ad firms, Ooyala can funnel its precise analytics into more efficient advertising models. As OVD intermediaries incorporate ad firms they have more power to define "premium" content. Therefore, it will be necessary to continue examining how Ooyala and similar companies are dictating the standards and practices of digital delivery.

Notes

¹ Yochai Benkler discusses the networked-information economy and the Internet's commercialization and subsequent barriers of entry for non-commercial ventures. See: *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

² Mats Bjorkin provides an explanation about Peer-to-Peer systems as it relates to online distribution. See: "Peer-to-Peer File-Sharing Systems: Files, Objects, Distribution" in *Cultural Technologies: The Shaping of Culture and Media in Society*, ed. Goran Bolin. New York: Routledge, 2012. pp. 51-63.

³ Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson define connected viewing as a "multiplatform entertainment experience," relating to broader trends in the media industries that aim to integrate social networking and digital technologies with traditional modes of media consumption. See: *Connected Viewing*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

⁴ For more analysis of Ooyala's technical features see Edmond Lau's "How do Ooyala and Brightcove Compare?"

⁵ Joshua Braun discusses Ooyala's backlot service in *This Program is Brought to you by . . . Distributing Television News Online*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. p. 247-258.

⁶ See Cliff Edwards' "There's Gold in Mining Streaming Video."

⁷ For more information on MLBAM patents, see Mark Newman's "MLB.TV granted landmark U.S. patent."

⁸ For more information on MLB.tv features, see Maury Brown's "The Biggest Media Company You've Never Heard Of."

⁹ To access Google's patent, see Florian Buronet al., "Click-to buy overlays." Patent US8458053. December 17, 2008.

¹⁰ For more information about Ooyala's relationship with Facebook, see Will Richmond. "Ooyala Gets Social with Facebook Integration."

¹¹ For more information about Ooyala Social, see Josh Constine’s “Ooyala Social: A Quality Customizable Platform for Selling, Renting, and Sharing Video Through Facebook.”

¹² For more on Mike Lang and Miramax’s digital distribution strategies, see Staci Kramer’s “Mike Lang Leaving as Miramax CEO.”

¹³ Wallerstein discusses rising costs of streaming licenses, see Andrew Wallenstein’s “Studios to Reap \$6.8 Billion From SVOD Syndication in 2015.”

¹⁴ For more information about Miramax and Telly Plus deal, see Todd Spangler’s “Startup Telly Inks Sony, Miramax Deals for Video-Streaming Service in Middle East and Africa.”

¹⁵ Claire Plaisted discusses Ooyala’s dealings with the Vienna State Opera in “Vienna State Opera Selects Ooyala to Livestream the World’s Largest Repertoire of Ballet and Opera to a Global Audience.”

¹⁶ For more regarding Telstra’s acquisition of Ooyala, see Evelyn Rusli’s “Video Publishing Platform Ooyala Raises \$22 Million, Prepares for Major Asian Expansion.”

¹⁷ Stuart Cunningham and Jon Silver discuss the multiple barriers of entry for emergent SVOD platforms with competition from major players like Netflix, Amazon Instant and Hulu. See: *Screen Distribution and the New King Kongs of the Online World*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

¹⁸ For more information about Ooyala’s dealings with Telly see, Devindra Hardawar’s “Telly, formerly TwitVid, wants to find videos you’ll love — now with 7M users.”

¹⁹ Ramon Lobato defines Nollywood as an “informal” screen industry. See: *Shadow Economies of Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 2012.

²⁰ For more information regarding Jason Njoku’s dealings with Ooyala, see Sarah Lacy’s “Why this Nigerian Movie Mogul Ditched YouTube.”

²¹ For more information about Iroko.tv’s features, see Milicent Atieno’s “iROKOtv Brings Hollywood, Bollywood and Telenovela to Africa.”

²² Ben Rooney discusses Nokia and Iroko.tv’s deal in “Nokia Signs Lumia Deal with Nigerian Movie Service.”

²³ Tambay Obenson discusses Iroko.tv’s content expansion in “Iroko.tv.com Expands - World’s Largest Online Distributor of African Content Adds American Titles.”

²⁴ Greg Francese discusses Iroko.tv’s employment of analytics for original production in “The Power of Information: iROKO Boosts CPMs with Online Video Data.”

²⁵ Kelly Liyakasa discusses Ooyala's acquisition of Videoplaza in "Ooyala Acquires Videoplaza to Expand Into Fast-Growing Video Advertising Market."

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Middle-Class Viewers and *Breaking Bad*: Audience and Social Status in the Post-Network Era



Image Credit: <http://www.unspoiledpodcast.com/category/television/breaking-bad/>

Michael L. Wayne

Scripted original series produced by cable networks are more closely associated with post-network era American television's elevated cultural status than any other type of programming. Frequently, cable crime dramas like *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) and *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) are credited with improving the overall quality of television content. As Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine argue, however, the discourses associated with television's "cultural legitimization" work to distance contemporary texts and viewing practices from the medium's low-status past. Yet, audience research has largely shied away from addressing such issues. To begin filling this gap in the literature, this article focuses on viewers and their relationship to a single hour-long, prime-time cable crime drama, AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013).

This analysis begins by briefly describing the historical trajectory of prime-time crime drama on American television. Next, this article brings critical audience analysis into conversation with scholarship addressing television's elevated status in the post-network era. After describing the methods used to recruit respondents, and detailing the composition of the sample, viewers responses are presented in conjunction with critical responses to *Breaking Bad*. The findings indicate that there is a relationship between formal education and the acquisition of the knowledge and codes necessary to fully appreciate culturally legitimated crime drama. In particular, "high-status" viewers (defined as those with graduate-level education or high-status white collar occupations) possess the necessary cultural knowledge needed to understand *Breaking Bad* as a narrative of moral transformation and Walter White as a complicated anti-heroic protagonist. Viewers who lack such status markers understand the show and its protagonist as a traditional heroic narrative. Collectively, these findings highlight the ways in which traditional and post-network modes of engagement coexist. This article concludes with a brief consideration of the role technology plays in post-network audience reception

and some thoughts about the future of audience reception research in light of the post-network era programming boom.

Crime Drama as Genre

During the network era (from the early 1950s to the early 1980s), television was a domestic medium (watched at home) with limited content produced by three over-the-air broadcast networks.¹ Responding to the realities of the market, network era producers created content that conformed to the least objectionable programming theory of audience behavior. This approach was largely based on the belief that the absence of objectionable material was more important to the success of a given program than the presence of any other textual features. As a consequence of production guided by this logic, scripted television became a bland medium devoid of social, intellectual, or artistic issues. In this industrial context, NBC's *Dragnet* (1951-1959 and 1967-1970), which began as a radio program, came to define the prime-time crime drama. In this first police procedural, the police officer is depicted as a public hero and, thus, the legitimate arbiter of moral authority. As Jason Mittell notes, "One of the representational strategies that *Dragnet* uses to solidify this worldview is the use of overt binary oppositions, such as law versus crime, order versus chaos, and efficient system versus rogue individualism" (146). Such binaries were consistent with other elements of 1950s culture that served national myths about stability and American contentment. The definitive moral conclusions offered by this show are particularly important because they encourage the ideological belief that large-scale social problems can be meaningfully addressed at the individual, rather than the systemic level (Gitlin). In many ways, it was this ideological fealty to the status quo that characterizes the genre throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Lane).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the narrative focus of crime drama shifted from catching criminals to the daily lives of "ordinary" cops. In moving away from the morally dichotomous model of the earlier police drama, *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987) acquired a degree of cultural legitimacy that had largely been denied television, in general, and crime dramas, in particular. As one of the shows that ushered in what he calls the "second golden age," Thompson claims the show "brought something truly different to prime-time television" (60). Indeed, *Hill Street Blues* was denser and less viewer-friendly than most network-era dramas. More recent shows that rely on this narrative template include *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005) and *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993-1999). Although protagonists in these shows are depicted as complex in relation to earlier dramas, police officers remain the legitimate arbiters of moral authority with personal shortcomings thrown in for texture. In *NYPD Blue*, the protagonist, Detective Andy Sipowicz (Dennis Franz), begins the series as a racist, sexist, alcoholic who perjures himself in open court. Yet, the remainder of the series can largely be understood as a tale of his redemption following a series of tragedies including the deaths of his first wife, his oldest son, and two partners.

If shows like *NYPD Blue* continued the trend towards more complex crime drama that began with *Hill Street Blues*, then network crime drama in the post-network era reflects a reversal. Shows like *NCIS* (CBS, 2003-present) and *CSI* (CBS, 2000-2015) demonstrate that "police series on broadcast networks have largely embraced a mode of storytelling that might be called 'high-concept' television: based on simplified and episodic storylines, distinct visual styles, and the potential for expanding franchises" (Nichols-Pethick 153). Like Todd Gitlin's arguments regarding network era television more broadly, contemporary scholars understand prime-time network crime dramas in ideological terms. In *CSI*, for

example, forensic science generates unambiguous conclusions which ideologically support the notion of the state as the legitimate arbiter of moral authority (Hohenstein). In doing so, the show also denies science's complicated and often conflicting roles in the criminal justice system. Yet, in spite of declining ratings (Stelter), network crime dramas are still produced with the intent of building "coalition" audiences composed of viewers from a variety of demographics.

By the late 1990s, however, the number of available alternatives to traditional network content exploded as cable channels began producing scripted television series intended for niche audiences. Unlike network television which is entirely dependent on revenue from advertisers, cable networks rely on different economic models. As a consequence of these economic realities, cable crime dramas differ from their generic predecessors and their network contemporaries in three significant ways. First, protagonists in cable crime dramas are no longer exclusively agents of the state, like police officers, or pseudo-agents, like private detectives. Second, cable crime dramas are often "anti-heroic" narratives. Among critics, discussions of television's contemporary "golden age" are seemingly inseparable from discussions of the "anti-hero." Typically, the term refers to the central distinction between traditional heroes who lack moral flaws and anti-heroes whose moral flaws are directly related to the unfolding dramatic narrative. Third, post-network cable crime dramas frequently feature serialized narratives. The long-form storytelling and serialized narratives of original cable series are seen as more engaging than the episodic narratives of network procedural dramas.

Yet, there is little empirical research examining the ways in which audiences have responded to generic shifts in the crime drama or how viewers have responded to the medium's elevated status. Furthermore, the value of such work is limited by additional factors. Surveys on media engagement, for example, typically "fail to take account of the possibility of a 'canon,' or hierarchy of television texts" which is particularly problematic given the increasing cultural significance of prime-time cable dramas (Wright 365). In addition, Nielsen ratings, which cannot be considered research in an academic sense (Meehan), are stripped of useful demographic information when published in the television trade press. To move beyond these issues, in the next section, insights from critical audience analysis are considered alongside scholarship addressing post-network legitimating discourses to foreground the ways in which understandings of *Breaking Bad* might vary with viewers' social locations.

Cultural Legitimation and Audience Reception in the Post-Network Era

The most relevant discourses in relation to post-network television's elevated status are the legitimating discourses that align the medium with the traits of more culturally validated forms. According to Newman and Levine, "One of the central strategies employed in discourses of television's legitimation is comparison with already legitimated art forms, such as literature and cinema" (4). They explain:

Deep immersion in a season of a premium cable drama like *The Sopranos* is thus described by analogy to reading a thick nineteenth-century social realist novel by Balzac, Dickens, or Tolstoy. But the more ubiquitous legitimating strategy is cinematization: certain kinds of television and certain modes of experiencing television content are aligned with movies and the experience of movies. (5)

As this reference to *The Sopranos* indicates, original series produced by premium cable networks have

accrued more prestige than any other type of programming in the post-network era. Of course, professional critics play a central role in the propagation of legitimating discourses. As “cultural intermediaries” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 325), critics help create broader social views of what constitutes good or bad television. Furthermore, their approach to evaluating television frequently reflects the dominant cultural hierarchy and its views on mass and popular culture. As legitimating discourses seek to align television with highbrow culture, it becomes possible for middle-class audiences to treat television as a form of cultural capital.

In one sense, doing so necessitates that middle-class audiences understand television as class-appropriate leisure. For example, in her qualitative research exploring the differences between American and French elites, Michele Lamont finds that upper-middle class American men value any “kind of activity that can be read as a signal of self-actualization” (92) including “play[ing] chess, learn[ing] a musical instrument, exercise, diet[ing], go[ing] to the museum, get[ting] involved in the PTA, sav[ing] the rain forest, [and] tak[ing] classes” (99). Furthermore, as an indication of the desire to maximize one’s own potential, leisurely engagement with intellectually demanding cultural forms “can be taken to indirectly signal high ranking on the moral, cultural, and socioeconomic status hierarchies” (Lamont 100). This orientation explains, in part, why middle class audiences who once considered television a “passive and mediocre” (Lamont 98) use of leisure time would celebrate “culturally legitimated” post-network television if they believe such content is “‘original,’ ‘edgy,’ ‘complex,’ and ‘sophisticated’” (Newman and Levine 81).

In another sense, the increasing status of post-network television allows some content to acquire value that is similar to that of objectified cultural capital. As Pierre Bourdieu explains, the central mechanism by which the privileged activate their culture resources is by converting them into tastes for high status cultural forms (*Distinction*). When these forms are institutionalized within educational systems and consecrated by “cultural intermediaries” such as professional critics, they become “misrecognized” as qualitatively superior and then become imbued with symbolic power. Furthermore, such forms are coded in ways that require knowledge and receptive frameworks to fully enjoy their consumption. As a consequence of such social relations, elites activate “objectified” cultural capital through the consumption of cultural objects that require high “virtual” cultural capital to consume in ways that conform to the views of sanctioned critics (Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”).

Beyond consuming the “right” cultural objects, treating television as a form of cultural capital could also involve middle-class audiences emphasizing the distinctiveness of their consumption practices. A significant body of research asserts that cultural consumption among high-status individuals varies substantially from that of previous eras (Peterson and Kern). According to Douglas Holt, the breakdown of traditional boundaries separating highbrow and lowbrow culture results in the objectified form of cultural capital being supplanted by the embodied form (“Distinction in America”). He explains, “Class differences in American consumption have gone underground; no longer easily identified with the goods consumed, distinction is becoming more and more a matter of practice” (103). Specifically, contemporary forms of embodied cultural capital are reflected in the difference between “critical” and “referential” reception of cultural texts (Holt, “Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?”).

Critical reception is more common among individuals with high levels of cultural capital (HCC). Holt notes, “Applying a formal interpretive lens, HCCs read popular entertainment as entertaining fictions that are potentially edifying but that do not reflect directly the empirical world” (Holt, “Does Cultural

Capital Structure American Consumption?” 9). Such readings are similar to the Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz’s notion of “critical” interpretations. In their study of cross-cultural interpretations of the prime-time soap opera, *Dallas*, Liebes and Katz find that viewers who offer critical interpretations of the show discuss the program as “a fictional construction with aesthetic rules” (100). In addition, critical interpretation involves “awareness either of the semantic or syntactic elements of the text or of the roles of the reader as processor of the text” (117). By semantic criticism, Liebes and Katz mean that viewers might make an inference about the theme of the program or about the producer’s narrative aims, or they might reflect on how a show presents reality. By syntactic criticism, they mean that viewers might be aware of generic conventions, of the dramatic function of characters and narrative events, of the economic realities of television production, of their own responses to the program, or of the program as having been constructed.

In contrast, among individuals with low levels of cultural capital (LCC), the value associated with any and all content is closely related to personal identification. Holt describes this as referential reception that applies a “classificatory system used in everyday life to cultural texts” (“Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?” 9). Referential reception resembles Herbert Gans’ notion of the user-oriented public who has little concern for authorship and instead chooses “culture for the feelings and enjoyment it evokes and for the insight and information they can obtain” (104). This public places little stock in critical evaluation instead preferring word-of-mouth judgments from those in their social circles. In addition, referential reception resembles the “middlebrow personalism” Janice Radway finds in her investigation of The-Book-of-the-Month Club during the 1920s and 1930s. In creating a culture that opposed the highbrow imperatives of academics and professionals, the ideological foundation of middlebrow literary culture is the recognition that reading is a highly variable experience. Thus, the club’s selections both require and support a worldview in which taste is a reflection of individual, idiosyncratic selves. In the context of referential reception, the importance of individual subjectivity, what one thinks and feels about a given cultural text, leaves little room for externally validated prestige systems. As a result, status hierarchies are not particularly significant for individuals engaging with culture in this fashion. For those attracted to cultural texts that speak directly to their current life situation, the appeal of a given show that feels “real” can neither be diminished by negative critical evaluations nor elevated by positive ones. Following a brief description of methodology, this article uses critical audience analysis to address post-network audience reception among *Breaking Bad* viewers paying particular attention to modes of engagement that align television with highbrow culture (cultural capital) by invoking the discourses of legitimation described by Newman and Levine.

Methods

Respondents were recruited in a mid-sized American city in the mid-Atlantic region as part of a larger project addressing the reception of cable crime drama. Using the distinction between “basic” and “premium” cable shows to facilitate audience reception research by limiting the scope of the analysis, this project examined audience engagement with nine prime-time cable crime dramas: *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *The Closer* (TNT, 2005-2012), *Dexter* (SHO, 2006–2013), *White Collar* (USA, 2007-2013), *Burn Notice* (USA, 2009-present), *Rizzoli & Isles* (TNT, 2010-present), *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-2014), and *Homeland* (SHO, 2011- present). This research did not explicitly recruit viewers of *Breaking Bad*. Yet, as it happens, sixteen of the respondents who were viewers of these various cable crime dramas were also viewers of *Breaking Bad*.²

This study was conducted in late 2013. Data collection occurred at a variety of physical locations depending on individual availability and preference. Interviews lasting between sixty and ninety minutes were digitally recorded and transcribed by the author. Field notes were taken after each interview. Interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic text analysis method that combines the use of deductive coding and inductive coding. As all respondents have socioeconomic backgrounds that can be considered middle-class, the sample is divided by educational attainment and occupational status. Individuals with any amount of post-graduate education or a high-status occupation are considered “high-status” middle-class viewers. Occupations are considered high-status if they have scores above eighty on the Nam–Powers–Boyd Occupational Status Scale (Nam and Boyd). Viewers without post-graduate education or a high-status occupation are considered “low-status.”

It must be noted, however, that operationalizing social class for qualitative social scientific research is notoriously difficult. Although the middle-class/working-class divides that informed past efforts were not as neatly separated as they often appeared, recent changes in class structures and broader shifts in the nature of work have further complicated this issue. As such, it is necessary to keep in mind that social class, as categories and as lived experiences, are complex, fluid, and malleable. With these qualifications in mind, the sample includes nine “high-status” viewers and seven “low-status” viewers. Eleven are men and five are women. Fourteen self-identify as white, one self-identifies as Hispanic, and one self-identifies as Asian. Of the nine “high-status” respondents, five have post-graduate degrees. Among the seven “low-status” respondents, only three have earned Bachelor’s degrees.

In this sample, only five of the sixteen respondents pay for cable or satellite television at their current residence.³ The remaining eleven respondents report that they do not watch live television. All sixteen respondents pay for internet access at their current residence although, for many, the expense is included as part of their rent. Fourteen respondents are current Netflix subscribers. For those without legal means of accessing cable crime dramas like *Breaking Bad*, there are a host of less-than-legal means available. The TV-torrent distribution group EZTV, for example, uses web bots to make new television shows available for download within several hours after they first appear. In contrast, Sidereel is a TV show link aggregator that allows audiences to find content that is available through a “livestream.” The wide accessibility of post-network television content is one of contemporary television’s defining elements. In fact, none of the respondents in this sample reports that access is a consideration when making television choices.

	Name, Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity	Education	Occupation
1	Brian, 26, M, white	MA	copywriter
2	Cindy, 30, F, white	MA	graduate student
3	Jamie, 23, M, white	BA	graduate student
4	Jim, 34, M, white	BA	librarian
5	Josh, 26, M, white	MA	graduate student
6	Louis, 24, M, white	BA	engineer
7	Matt, 26, M, white	MA	graduate student

8	Steve, 34, M, white	MA	scientist
9	Tim, 25, M, white	BA	financial analyst

	Name, Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity	Education	Occupation
1	Aaron, 27, M, white	HS*	musician
2	Amy, 22, F, Asian	BA	grant administrator
3	Beth, 22, F, white	BA	researcher
4	Gina, 18, F, white	HS*	student
5	Mary, 22, F, Hispanic	HS*	student
6	Rick, 26, M, white	BA	HR specialist
7	Wes, 19, M, white	HS*	student
			*some college

The variety of mechanisms through which these respondents engage with television content reflects a fundamental reality of “convergence culture” (Jenkins). Digital technology renders once distinct media forms indistinct at the level of data (binary code). Before the emergence of digital technology, one could not confuse television and film as media forms. They were produced by different companies. They were distributed by different technology and industrial arrangements. Although there was a degree of overlap, as in the case of movies broadcast on television, nonetheless, film and television remained distinct. In the context of convergence culture enabled by digital technology, such distinctions are less salient. As a result, this research addresses audience reception of content that was initially intended for television audiences. Thus, the specific mechanism by which an individual viewer engages with television content is less significant than the nature of that engagement.

Middle-Class Viewers and *Breaking Bad* as Culturally Legitimated Crime Drama

Largely a cult success at the beginning of its five season run (Deadline Team), at the time of these research interviews several years later, *Breaking Bad* was seemingly inescapable. Walter White, the show’s protagonist, begins the series as a mild-mannered high school chemistry teacher.⁴ After being diagnosed with cancer, he begins producing and dealing methamphetamine (“crystal meth”) to ensure his family’s financial security after his death. The show is primarily concerned with White’s transformation from every-man to criminal mastermind. *Breaking Bad* showrunner Vince Gilligan describes the protagonist’s character development as “a story that takes Mr. Chips and turns him into Scarface.”⁵ Although *The Sopranos* demonstrated that audiences are willing to stick with anti-heroic protagonists despite morally reprehensible behavior, Tony undergoes little moral development over the course of the series. If anything, he doesn’t change at all. In contrast, *Breaking Bad*’s audience watches White become a sociopath. For example, in season one, it takes White several days to build up the

courage to kill Krazy-8, a drug dealer imprisoned by White and his partner, Jesse Pinkman (“Cat’s in the Bag . . .”). By the conclusion of the second season, White coldly watches Pinkman’s girlfriend Jane drown in her own vomit following a drug overdose (“Phoenix”).

Although the show’s anti-heroic protagonist is the focal point of the show and its audience, a considerable amount of attention was also given to White’s wife, Skyler. Much of this attention, however, was negative. As Anna Gunn, the actress who plays Skyler, wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed piece during the show’s fifth and final season, audience antipathy towards the wet-blanket wife of a beloved protagonist resulted in outright misogyny. Describing the internet vitriol directed at her character, Gunn reports, “A typical online post complained that Skyler was a ‘shrieking, hypocritical harpy’ and didn’t ‘deserve the great life she has.’ ‘I have never hated a TV-show character as much as I hate her,’ one poster wrote. The consensus among the haters was clear: Skyler was a ball-and-chain, a drag, a shrew, an ‘annoying bitch wife’” (n.p.). Ultimately, Gunn concludes that “most people’s hatred of Skyler had little to do with me and a lot to do with their own perception of women and wives. Because Skyler didn’t conform to a comfortable ideal of the archetypical female, she had become a kind of Rorschach test for society, a measure of our attitudes toward gender” (n.p.). At the show’s conclusion in 2013, in part due to accessibility via Netflix, the show’s audience had grown substantially.

This research finds that the reception of *Breaking Bad* as a post-network text and middle-class viewer’s understandings of the show’s protagonist vary with social location. “High-status” respondents understand the show in the broader context of post-network television. Tim, a twenty-five year-old business owner several years of experience in the financial sector, explicitly compares *Breaking Bad* to another culturally legitimated drama. He says, “I think it’s just as entertaining as *The Wire*, it keeps you on an edge just as much *The Wire*, but it’s not going to have, for me at least, the long lasting social impact. It’s not going to challenge long held beliefs that I’ve had.” When asked to elaborate, Tim continues, “You’re basically wrestling with the plight of one character. It’s great. It’s a lot like *The Sopranos*. One person is carrying it and a lot of how you feel about the show rests solely on how you feel about that character’s evolution.” Rather than addressing *Breaking Bad* in reference to other culturally legitimated shows, Louis, a twenty-four year-old software engineer, sees the show as situated in a specific post-network context. He says, “I really like *Breaking Bad*. I guess because it is able to make these really awful scenes and somehow actually put them on everyday cable. That’s really interesting to me. It’s a very intense show, and that’s why people get hooked on it.” He also invokes legitimating discourses noting, “There’s also a lot of literary things that are going on in *Breaking Bad*. There’s references to Walt Whitman, but there’s something really Kafkaesque about it. There’s something also kind of Samuel Beckett about it, especially the episode with the fly.” In Louis’ comments, audience reception comes to resemble what Shamus Khan describes as the “ease of privilege.” In his analysis of an elite prep school, he finds that traditional patterns of cultural consumption among elites have been replaced as students “are taught to move with ease through the broad range of culture, to move with felicity from the elite to the popular” (161). Incorporating Kafka, Whitman, and Beckett into his thoughts about *Breaking Bad*, Louis succeeds at doing just that.

Beyond the ability to move between popular and elite culture, Louis’ feelings about “the episode with the fly” touch on other relevant issues. After listing the litany of literary references quoted above, Louis adds, “The episode with the fly could be a play. I really like that episode.” The positive attitude toward this specific episode is notable. “Fly” takes place almost entirely within the confines of a meth lab concealed beneath an industrial laundry facility. In a narrative sense, the episode details the process by

which White and Pinkman catch and kill a housefly. This particular episode resulted from *Breaking Bad*'s budgetary restrictions. According to Gilligan, "We were hopelessly over budget . . . And we needed to come up with what is called a bottle episode, set in one location" ("Vineyard").⁶ The episode is often described as one of the show's most polarizing. It has been widely praised by critics for its cinematography and directing, and for the dynamic between White and Pinkman. Sepinwall, for example, speculated that "Fly" may be "the best bottle show ever" characterizing the episode as "an instant classic" (n.p.). Among many fans, however, the lack of plot development and heavy-handed symbolism result in declarations of "worst episode ever."⁷ In this context, Louis' positive feelings about this episode once again indicate a degree of alignment between "high-status" middle-class audiences and cultural elites like television critics.

Unlike "high-status" middle-class viewers like Tim and Louis, "low-status" respondents understand *Breaking Bad* without reference to broader post-network era television landscape. Rick, a twenty-six year-old working in human resources, says, "If I step back and think about what the actual plot line of *Breaking Bad* it's so insane. [laughs] Somebody once described it as a 'high stakes thriller' and that's the level I watch it on. I'm not too interested in the characters or discussions of morality, or family stuff. It's more just the thrill ride of it I like." Similarly, when asked what he likes about the show, Aaron, a twenty-seven year-old musician, simply says, "It's fun, it's real fun." Among television critics, this type of appreciation is one element associated with the label of the "bad fan." Coined by *New Yorker* television critic Emily Nussbaum in response to audience attitudes towards the final season of *Breaking Bad*, she claims, "All shows have them. They're the *Sopranos* buffs who wanted a show made up of nothing but whackings (and who posted eagerly about how they fast-forwarded past anything else)" ("That Mind-Bending Phone Call on Last Night's 'Breaking Bad'" n.p.). Nussbaum goes on to assert that, "some fans are watching wrong." In a later piece, she explains that, "This sort of audience divide, not between those who love a show and those who hate it but between those who love it in very different ways, has become a familiar schism in the past fifteen years" ("The Great Divide: Norman Lear, Archie Bunker, and the Rise of the Bad Fan" n.p.). She continues:

This is particularly true of the much lauded stream of cable "dark dramas," whose protagonists shimmer between the repulsive and the magnetic. As anyone who has ever read the comments on a recap can tell you, there has always been a less ambivalent way of regarding an antihero: as a hero. Some of the most passionate fans of *The Sopranos* fast-forwarded through Carmela and Dr. Melfi to freeze-frame Tony strangling a snitch with electrical wire. (David Chase satirized their bloodlust with a plot about "Cleaver," a mob horror movie with all of the whackings, none of the Freud.) More recently, a subset of viewers cheered for Walter White on *Breaking Bad*, growling threats at anyone who nagged him to stop selling meth.

Yet, there is little doubt that the "bad fan" label has class connotations.

In fact, in the same column Nussbaum argues that the emergence of the "bad fan" can be traced back to *All in the Family*'s (CBS, 1971-1979) racist, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, and homophobic working-class buffoon and stereotypical head of the sitcom household Archie Bunker. Bunker is particularly relevant for discussions of the anti-hero in TV's third golden age because *All in the Family*'s creator Norman Lear has famously claimed that the character was supposed to be hated by audiences who were

believed to be increasingly socially liberal. Yet, as one sitcom historian observes, audiences liked Bunker but, “Not in an ironic way, not in a so-racist-he’s-funny way; Archie was TV royalty because fans saw him as one of their own” (Austerlitz 114). Furthermore, at the conclusion of the article, Nussbaum invokes the binary between active and passive viewing before lauding shows that encourage active engagement, “There’s a lot to be said for a show that is potent without being perfect, or maybe simply perfect for its moment: storytelling that alters the audience by demanding that viewers do more than just watch.”

Referencing Nussbaum’s position, Matt Zoller Seitz, an equally highbrow critic who writes for *New York Magazine*’s online shingle *Vulture*, writes:

If you seek to deny or minimize the parts of art that don’t fit your reductive interpretation of Walt as a basically decent man, or a man who moves with a purpose and is somehow “badass,” as opposed to the complex monster the show has actually presented over five seasons, you are in fact, as Nussbaum wrote in her piece on the scene, watching the show wrong. In fact, you’re trying to turn a smart show into a stupid one. And you really should ask yourself why. (n.p.)

This comment contains both the legitimating discourses associated with post-network television (“art”) as well as more traditional archetypes of class-based distinction including assumptions regarding the “bad” fan’s lack of intellectual capabilities (“reductive interpretation”) and admiration of machismo (“badass”). In addition, Zoller Seitz accuses such audience members of perverting a celebrated text (“you’re trying to turn a smart show into a stupid one”) and exhorts them to engage in a bout of self-reflexive assessment (“you really should ask yourself why”) which is itself class-specific behavior. Among the respondents interviewed for this research, none offered reductive interpretations in line with this conception of the “bad fan.” However, like the understandings of the show itself, understandings of *Breaking Bad*’s protagonist also vary with class status.

“High-status” middle-class young-adults offer characterizations similar to Zoller Seitz’s “complex monster.” Brian, a twenty-six year-old copywriter at an online marketing firm, claims that over the course of the series, White “was slowly admitting that [his criminal activity] wasn’t for his family. It was for [himself]. [He] loved it and [he] was so happy. I feel like you [as the viewer] feel the tension. He was finally being happy and finally ‘breaking bad’ and living freely, but he also lost his life and destroyed his family.” As Brian notes here, *Breaking Bad*’s narrative ends with the death of its protagonist. The series’ final scene, White collapses with a fatal gunshot wound in a super-lab he helped build with a look of satisfaction on his face as federal agents storm the building (“Felina”). Although he succeeded in providing financial security for his family, by the conclusion of the series he is estranged from them. In fact, Brian understands the show through this framework. He says, “That’s how the whole show is torn. The whole show is torn by him discovering himself and also destroying other peoples’ lives. I thought it was awesome and fun to watch the ending.” Josh, a twenty-six year old graduate student with a master’s degree in psychology, offers a similar interpretation. He understands *Breaking Bad* to be a show that has “been turning the hero into the villain.” He explains, “It’s really a test to see how long you going to stay with this guy you’ve kind of been complacently conditioned to always root for, no matter what.” Here, Josh offers a critical interpretation reflecting awareness of the semantic elements of the show (Liebes and Katz 117) as his comments include inferences regarding *Breaking Bad*’s thematic elements and the intentions of the show’s creators.

In contrast, “low-status” viewers interpret White in unilateral terms. Wes, a nineteen year-old undergraduate, finds “a basically decent man” saying, “I really like the fact that Walter White stands up for his family, and is doing anything for his family. I just admire that characteristic of Walter. He’s stubborn to help his family, even though he has cancer.” This celebration of a protagonist’s commitment to family resembles the understanding of heroes within “lower-middle culture” who typically accept the validity of traditional institutions (Gans 111). Yet, in this instance, to embrace White for his loyalty to his family requires that one ignores the damage the character brings to other families. In line with referential reception, Mary, a nineteen year-old community college student, offers an opposing but equally unilateral reading. She says, “Every decision that Walter, especially, makes is something I wouldn’t do or couldn’t imagine myself doing. I don’t really think that people deserve to die in general, but if there is anyone that deserves to die, it probably could be him.” Quite clearly, Mary relates to White as a real person and in turn relates this real person to her own real world (Liebes and Katz 100). Taken together, “low-status” middle-class viewers’ readings of *Breaking Bad* do not exalt White the “badass.” Nonetheless, they do not offer nuanced takes on a “complex monster.” Rather, their discussions of *Breaking Bad*’s anti-heroic protagonist lack the conflicted moral allegiance typically associated with viewer attachment to such characters. For these middle-class viewers, there is a disconnect between the protagonist’s moral ambiguity that is encoded into this post-network crime drama and the decoding schema which understands this particular character as if he were a traditional network era television hero. It is one thing to “root for the bad guy,” as the saying goes, but it is quite another to root for a sociopath as the embodiment of virtue.

Conclusion

Using interviews with sixteen middle-class viewers, this article claims that the significance of post-network television’s increasing cultural status varies with, but is not determined by, social location. Unlike earlier research addressing middle-class American television audiences (Press), the data presented above identifies significant variation among middle-class viewers. Among “high-status” viewers, those with any amount of post-graduate education or a high-status occupation, *Breaking Bad* is frequently conceptualized as a form of cultural capital. This finding differs rather dramatically from Lamont’s observation that television is a devalued leisure activity among upper-middle-class American men. If watching television was once outside the realm of middle-class appropriate behavior because of its association with a lack of intelligence and intellectual curiosity, then, the social processes of post-network era television’s cultural legitimation have mitigated the significance of such associations and some kinds of television have become middle-class appropriate. For middle-class viewers with less status, however, *Breaking Bad* is understood as another television show whose value is unrelated to critical acclaim or the lack thereof. Perhaps then, it should not be entirely surprising that the reception practices associated with “low-status” viewers are loudly derided by cultural elites who enact and reproduce status hierarchies.

In a broader cultural context, this article also demonstrates the ambiguous nature of the relationship between cultural consumption and social class. When addressing social class in America, these issues are further complicated by the American tendency to claim middle-class status as the normative identity. Yet, this work begins to connect the broader social processes through which objects and knowledge become cultural capital with the specific practices and discursive resources that allow class symbols, knowledge, and identities to be constructed as meaningful. In contrast to fan studies research

which examines communities of consumption in relation to specific texts, this article adds to the growing body of television studies scholarship that understands watching TV as behavior situated within the new media environment created by digital technology (Tryon and Dawson). Moving away from notions of the audience defined by fan productivity, this work opens a new direction for empirical study within television's increasingly fragmented landscape.

Paradoxically, many of the issues associated with the emergence of television as a form of new media remained on the periphery while conducting this analysis. Although the majority of respondents in this sample are Netflix subscribers, it seems the few who are not are sufficiently adept at navigating digital technology that access was a non-issue. As a corollary to access, issues related to mobile viewing also were not significant for the respondents in this sample. The ability to watch "anytime, anywhere" was largely taken-for-granted. No respondents reported watching television content on their cell phones. Tablets, laptop and desktop computers were discussed interchangeably. Engaging with streaming services on a computer or through a television with an additional device like Google's Chromecast or Amazon's Fire TV Stick (auxiliary devices that plug-in to a digital television's HDMI port) was not a meaningful distinction. Given the declining profitability of home video (Lieberman), the absence of DVDs in middle-class viewers discussions of post-network television is not particularly surprising. Collectively, these respondents engagement with *Breaking Bad* as a manifestation of television as new media seem to point to the old industry saying that "content is king." As a rare point of continuity with network era television, middle-class viewers' engagement with this post-network crime drama is driven by their desire to engage with a particular show, personalities, etc., rather than driven by a desire to engage with television through a particular platform or in a particular (cultural or physical) space.

Nonetheless, there are reasons to suspect that the significance of content is declining as the radical expansion of content choices in the post-network era ensure that producers are fighting for ever slimmer slices of the audience. Since 1999, the number of scripted series produced for cable channels has increased by 1000% (Littleton). In 2014, more than seventeen hundred series aired during prime-time (Goodman). Furthermore, without considering digital outlets, at least 350 new and returning series have been ordered for 2015's television production cycle. Despite audience fragmentation and increasingly diverse content that spreads across platforms, however, the idea of television still has a significant amount of cultural currency. Netflix, a digital content provider rather than a traditional television network, continues to market its products as television. Amazon, a company original built to deliver physical goods to consumers' homes, does the same. Although industrial and economic changes have destroyed the traditional television calendar and new shows now appear year-round, Netflix tells subscribers about "seasons" of its political drama *House of Cards*. In addition, with serialized narratives and viewers who now "binge watch" streaming video, Netflix still organizes its content into roughly thirty or sixty minute chunks it calls "episodes." Similarly, YouTube allows users and producers to organize content into "channels."

Ultimately, the future of television audience research depends upon qualitative scholars' willingness to expand the kinds of material that constitute data. Critical audience analysis in the post-network era has the potential to make significant contributions to scholarly understandings of meaning-making within the context of a convergence culture. Yet, to do so, the obsessive concern with the productive activities of media consumers must be replaced with a more diffuse focus on the multiplicity of ways in which individuals do or do not engage with digital media. By using methodological techniques including content analysis, cyber-ethnography, close reading, and "passing ethnography" (Couldry) as supplements to traditional audience research, for example, qualitative data gathered from online fans,

professional television critics and media academics can all be understood to reflect broader shifts in the reception practices of post-network audiences.

Such methodological triangulation would create opportunities for media studies to return to the audience-centered analysis that helped define the field while also providing a much needed complimentary perspective to the glut of contemporary scholarship addressing media industries. Using integrated conceptions of cultural engagement rather than defining consumption in terms of specific media systems or cultural forms, critical audience analysis focusing on television reception can make significant contributions to our understanding of the relationship between digital media and categorical identity (race, class, and gender) by examining the ways in which individuals move through increasingly media social worlds without the exaggerated emphasis on notions of “users” or other forms of the hyperactive consumer.

Notes

¹ The term “network” has multiple connotations in relation to American television. The phrase “network television,” for example, typically refers to the “big three” commercial broadcast (over-the-air) television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) that dominated American television between the early 1950s and the late 1980s. In this usage, the term “network” distinguishes free, over-the-air television from fee-based, cable television. Yet, when used in the phrase “television network,” the term describes any channel. In this case, both NBC and CNN are television networks despite their differing economic and technological foundations.

² Like the larger project which argues that the central narrative unit of crime dramas the post-network era is the season, here respondents are defined as viewers if they report watching a minimum of two complete seasons of *Breaking Bad*.

³ This is not representative of the American television audience. More than 90% of American households pay for cable or satellite television service (Bajaj) which typically costs \$90 per month (Manjoo).

⁴ The character’s “everyman” identity is further supported by the actor chosen to play White. Prior to *Breaking Bad*, Bryan Cranston was most familiar to television audiences for his role as Hal, the father in the family sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle*.

⁵ “Mr. Chips” is a reference to Mr. Chipping, a beloved school teacher, who is the protagonist in the novella *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* which was adapted for both film and television. “Scarface” is a reference to either the 1932 movie inspired by the life of Al Capone or the 1983 film remake of the same name in which Capone is replaced by a Cuban immigrant turned drug dealer named Tony Montana.

⁶ The episode saved \$25,000-35,000 which was the sum required to move production trucks to a new location (Sepinwall).

⁷ The phrase “worst episode ever” is a reference to fans’ hyperbolic responses to content they find disappointing which are often expressed online. The phrase itself is a reference to *The Simpsons*.

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The Simpsons as a Blockbuster Transmedia Franchise



Image Credit: <http://deadline.com/2011/10/the-simpsons-studio-reacts-to-cast-demands-we-cannot-produce-future-seasons-under-current-financial-model-179243/>

R. Colin Tait

In his review of a new episode of the retooled cartoon show, the Comic Book Guy writes, “Last night’s ‘Itchy & Scratchy’ was, without a doubt, the worst episode ever. Rest assured that I was on the Internet within minutes, registering my disgust throughout the world” By 2002, criticism of the show’s quality had become more widespread. In October of that year, an essay for MSNBC bluntly titled “The Simpsons Has Lost Its Cool” by Jon Bonne claims that The Simpsons, “once an honest, irreverent portrait of the American family [had] become tired . . . he Simpsons – a show that has redefined television for a generation of viewers and is arguably as influential as I Love Lucy or Star Trek – seems to be gathering momentum on a downhill roll toward mediocrity. When the mighty fall, they fall mightily.” (Henry 35)

According to critics, fans, online communities, and worst of all, the Comic Book Guy, *The Simpsons*’ best days are behind them. Both in terms of the fan community surrounding the show—where the prevailing wisdom is that the series peaked in its seventh or eighth season—and in terms of the series’ current cultural status within the canon of Quality TV programs, the series and discourses surrounding it have largely treated it as if it were a static object. Such a narrow view occludes the fact that over the course of its historic, nearly twenty-seven year run, *The Simpsons* has not only evolved in tandem with the changes in the television industry, it has also led the way for blockbuster franchises within the conglomerate Hollywood era. A property that emerged from the Fox network as Rupert Murdoch built the station from the ground up in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the series has the DNA of its corporate parent. The series’ success can also be tied to its early employment of blockbuster film strategies—including the launch of thousands of ancillary products ranging from t-shirts to iPhone apps—and its behavior

not simply as a television property, but one that employs marketing strategies of the film and television industries.

Given this, I will argue that *The Simpsons* is best understood as a blockbuster transmedia television franchise. By employing terminology traditionally used by film scholars such as Thomas Schatz to describe the fusion of marketing and ancillary strategies, my aim is to show that *The Simpsons* (1989-present) is a corporate product that exemplifies the time period from which it emerged, and that some of the strategies it has employed are often associated with movie blockbusters. That *The Simpsons* absorbed the marketing logics of other, more famous tentpole franchises such as *Star Wars*, *Transformers*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and every Disney product line should alert us to the idea that we need to move beyond frameworks that simply deal with the television show and toward considering the franchise within the burgeoning field of media industry studies.

In addition to *The Simpsons* being a landmark example of television, the franchise is also an example of Henry Jenkins' "transmedia" storytelling within convergence culture (2008). *The Simpsons* franchise exemplifies Jenkins' discussion of transmedia storytelling and requires a more nuanced understanding of ways that media franchises migrate between industries. The series provides a blueprint for how a contemporary franchise can expand into new media arenas, from CD recordings, ancillary industries such as comic books and t-shirt sales, and movies and movie spin-offs, to the DVD explosion in the late 1990s, the wholesale conversion into high definition images, streaming platforms, and iPhone mobile apps. Each step not only represents a reflection of the time that the series has been produced, but the myriad ways it has adapted to the many changes in the industry since its debut in the late 1980s. Thus, to understand how *The Simpsons* remains crucial to our consideration of the conglomerate Hollywood era, we need to consider the show as a transmedia franchise. As a television show that expanded into other fields, *The Simpsons* shows how a series can not only survive but thrive in the convergence era.

Not only has *The Simpsons* survived some of the most tumultuous changes that took place within the media industries of the past thirty years—a time marked by corporate takeovers, increased concentration of ownership of media products, conglomerates swallowing up smaller media companies (as in Disney's takeover of Miramax, Pixar, Marvel and most recently, Lucasfilm)—the franchise continues to thrive as it expands outward into new media outlets. Contrary to the theories of Jenkins and others, *The Simpsons'* migration into DVD boxed sets, a number one movie, an iPhone game, and finally to the streaming platform *Simpsons World* have allowed audiences to shift their allegiances to the franchise to whichever medium best suits their consumption habits.

Thus, *The Simpsons* remains an anomaly within the contemporary media industry. Its longevity and stability is perhaps the most unique thing about it. In an era of reboots, remakes and sequels, *The Simpsons* has somehow stayed relevant without "rebooting." New media platforms have allowed it to cultivate new audiences. Strangely, this seems to be a result of both its non-evolution (cartoon, family doesn't age, voice actors are the same, same irreverent attitude) and its evolution (transmedia, format change, games, apps). In this sense, we need to address the series in a non-evaluative fashion, tracing the history of the series to account for *The Simpsons* odd paradox of evolution and stasis.

Relocating the series within the larger media industry means considering the multiple points of entry available for viewers and fans of the show. First and foremost, *The Simpsons* survived and succeeded not simply because of its status as a venerable TV series, but by adapting to new media outlets that made the franchise one of the most valuable pieces of intellectual property in the early twenty-first century. There are already excellent qualitative or reception-based analyses of episodes in Jonathan Gray's, Matthew Henry's, and Jason Mittell's writings on the series, but we have yet to situate *The Simpsons* within theories of transmedia storytelling and convergence culture. By doing so, it becomes possible to see that, as a television program, *The Simpsons* reverses the standard rules of adaptation by expanding outward from the "low" form of television towards more lucrative markets, such as film, DVD, and eventually gaming.

Accordingly, this essay will deal with the series, its episodes, and its adaptations from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first centuries. From its beginning, *The Simpsons* blazed the way into new youth markets, first by way of merchandising (Bartmania!), CD sales, then to the lucrative DVD market, which became one of the most profitable ways for studios and networks to recoup their investments and produce a new form of fandom. The series' movement into spin-off industries, including video games, comic books and finally movies, breathed new life into the series with every new node of media. Next, *The Simpsons* conquered the multiplex with *The Simpsons Movie* (Al Jean, 2007) opening at number one at the box office with a nearly 75 million dollar opening weekend, and ultimately producing a worldwide gross of nearly half a billion dollars (boxoffice mojo). Soon after, *The Simpsons* conquered the theme park arena, with the successful debut of *The Simpsons Ride* in 2008, and later the expansion of a life-sized Springfield where theme park patrons can sample Duff beer or visit Moe's tavern at Universal Studios Florida. Next, the series adapted to the demands of the new high definition format, fully instituted by the U.S. government in 2010. Then the team partnered with video game giant Electronic Arts to come up with *Simpsons Tapped Out* in 2012, an iPhone app that allows players to build a virtual Springfield on their phones and play with some of the series' most memorable characters. Finally, with the purchase of *The Simpsons* exclusive cable rights for 750 million dollars, FXX (the cable and satellite channel owned by FOX) the franchise entered the streaming and app-based economy by simultaneously releasing the *Simpsons World App*—an interface that allows cable subscribers to stream famous clips and every *Simpsons* episode to their televisions or mobile devices. The move brought the franchise into the binge-viewing arena with a historic twelve day marathon dubbed "every Simpsons ever."

Far from fading away, *The Simpsons* continues to prove itself not only one of the most valuable but also versatile franchises, and each of these moves adds value to the increasingly lucrative intellectual property. *Simpsons Tapped Out*, to cite one example, is one of the most downloaded iPhone games of all time. It continues to expand the franchise laterally, breathing new life into what has previously been considered a static object by scholars and critics. The franchise's various revenue streams are occasions when *The Simpsons* expansion into different media forms adds value to the franchise and its massive story-world. This trajectory includes moments in which *The Simpsons* pivoted away from previously lucrative markets, as in the case of *The Simpsons* DVD boxed sets in favor of the streaming *Simpsons World App* (Adams 2015). The decision involved strategic bets on the part of its corporate parent in a bid to keep the series profitable and relevant to consumers' evolving tastes in the era of mobile technologies like the iPhone. The story of media in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century and *The Simpsons* are inexorably linked. As we will see, there are various points where these histories overlap and

where technologies and delivery systems that have interfaced with *The Simpsons* provide a road map that shows where we have been and where we will likely go in the near future.

The Evolution of *The Simpsons*

A panel at the 2015 ATX Television Festival entitled “The History & Evolution of *The Simpsons*” provides an appropriate frame for a discussion of the series and its transformation over the past twenty-five years. Its conversion to HD is only one of the latest evolutions that the series has undergone since its debut (Tait 2009). This change has had two effects. First, it acts as a public record, documenting American television’s conversion to digital and HD formats to follow U.S. government mandates. Second, it allows for more detailed animation, expanded storytelling, and new jokes by utilizing the previously unused edges of the frame.

The dynamic new opportunity raises several issues. For years, pan and scan (the process by which a film is converted to match the TV format) has butchered the outer edges of the movie frame for conversion to TV. This process is also seen as the point of absolute difference between the two formats. Put simply, traditional TV resembles a square (the 4:3 ratio, such as the one that the Simpson family used to possess) while film is displayed in widened rectangle (16:9). Thus, *The Simpsons* conversion to HD might change the meaning of TV by obscuring these differences. Where we used to know we were watching “TV” because of the square image, HDTVs’ resemblance to film and its shared rectangular shape pose problems of definition. *The Simpsons* entry into HDTV, then, corresponds to changes in the industry and the wholesale conversion of consumers to the widescreen TV industry.

Perhaps more importantly, we can see the series as a transmedia product that evokes the multiple points of entry for consumers, as Jenkins explains in *Convergence Culture*. According to Jenkins, “convergence is marked by “the flow of content across media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences” (2). *The Simpsons* is the signature product of the FOX network, not only as the network’s most consistent performer but as the only show to run continuously for the majority of the station’s existence. Its migration across media platforms and its rabid fandom epitomizes Jenkins’s description of convergence culture. *The Simpsons* is not only a product, but also a blockbuster franchise. It is a pioneer in the animation media, which subsequently became a fully-fledged television genre and spawned countless imitators. Likewise it is an arcade, console, and app-based video game. It is a twenty-season DVD boxed set. It is a t-shirt, beer, and action figure line. It is a number one movie that has profited over half a billion dollars at the box-office. Finally, the TV series has rebooted itself multiple times in order to adapt to the changing TV formats, including the aforementioned HD conversion and the movement away from DVD sales toward streaming platforms. None of these iterations can be considered separate from the TV franchise, and all iterations not only expand its transmedia story world but also its value as significant piece of intellectual property.

The Simpsons conversion to the high definition format is only the latest in a series of evolutionary steps that have led to the present moment of transmedia blockbuster history. The 2011 HD conversion is not only a re-boot, but another radical transformation of the series. As a show that has *always* been about TV (Gray 2006), one sequence foregrounds this transformation,

while simultaneously promoting, if not advertising the HD conversion. In the opening, Bart Simpson writes “HDTV is worth every cent” on his characteristic blackboard scrawl, and images of high definition televisions are featured in a store window display and the Simpsons’ house.

The wholesale HD conversion of the series represents a new investment on the part of corporate parent FOX, which continues to promote *The Simpsons* as the anchor of the network’s lucrative Sunday night programming. Finally, as high definition signals erode the formerly rigid boundaries between movies and television, the transformation of *The Simpsons* in the new millennium is emblematic of the shifts in viewing technologies (hardware), viewing patterns (reception), and the erosion of the questions related to what is being consumed, whether it is television, movies, or other streaming products.

The Simpsons as a Transmedia Blockbuster TV Franchise

Critics’ view that *The Simpsons* is in decline might stem from seeing the series as a “mere” television program - or worse, a comedy - rather than a blockbuster transmedia franchise. Yet *The Simpsons* is a landmark TV series, and became one by utilizing the logic of blockbuster franchises such as *Star Wars*, and evolved via expansion across ancillary markets and platforms. *The Simpsons* is an example of transmedia storytelling, described by Henry Jenkins as

a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (2011)

The Simpsons conforms to this definition and expands it, for each episode contributes to a larger story world by introducing new characters or locations, and each iteration or duplication into different media nodes (videogames, comic books, theme park rides, iPhone app) does the same.

Even in its early days, *The Simpsons* evolved across media outlets, beginning as cartoon shorts on *The Tracey Ullman Show* (FOX 1987-1990), then airing as a Christmas special (“Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire,” 1989), and then finally being broadcast as a series on the fledgling FOX network. That the series has remained a FOX mainstay since the early days of Murdoch’s network, where generations of shows have come and gone, is evidence of the series’ resilience. We should also note that *The Simpsons*’ innovative use of animation, as described by Jason Mittell in his article “Cartoon Realism,” ushers in a moment for network programming that corresponds with the new logic of transmedia products and Hollywood convergence. Indeed, as Mittell suggests, *The Simpsons* is “an important case study to examine issues of niche marketing, genre mixing and postmodernism that mark our understanding of contemporary media” (15). While Mittell is concerned with the ways in which the series is “circulated,” his essay was written before the advent of the “transmedia” moment, and thus misses the opportunity to frame the series within the context of conglomerate Hollywood.

For Jonathan Gray, the series’ status as an animated show allows it to transcend traditional boundaries associated with television. These crossed borders include the show’s adoption of a “film style” that blurs distinctions between media (66). Gray also observes that

The Simpsons' existence as an animated show also allows its writers and artists seemingly infinite scope for characters, settings, or effects. *The Simpsons* can go anywhere, add any number of characters, or create any effect without the hassle of building sets, hiring new actors, or contracting a CGI (computer-generated imagery) studio. This gives the writers considerable freedom to set up shop on any generic site with great ease and no economic burden. (67)

In other words, *The Simpsons* came into existence defying the rules thought to distinguish television and film production. The series continues to transcend the boundaries between film and television product. This hybridization made it ideal for the burgeoning field of transmedia storytelling and the ideal franchise in the conglomerate tentpole era.

The series, its transformations, and its wider circulation are best understood in relation to the larger media industry, as described by Schatz in his essays on “The New Hollywood” and “Conglomerate Hollywood” (1993, 2008). Combining Jenkins’ writings about transmedia storytelling with Schatz’s chronicle of the Hollywood industry from the mid-1970s to 2015 allows us to view *The Simpsons* not merely as a single television series, but as a transmedia blockbuster franchise with multiple nodes that expand into various outlets, which include the newly formed recording arms of the show’s corporate parents, the burgeoning DVD market, and the new streaming platforms available in the mid-2010s.

Schatz recognizes the value of franchises to Hollywood restructured by mergers, corporate takeovers, and the fusion of the television and film industries. Schatz considers two early examples of the blockbuster phenomenon to illustrate the importance franchise films have when studio priorities are impacted by new corporate ownership. Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975) prefigured the blockbuster phenomenon, enjoying “success via theatrical release and multiple sequels, as well as an aggressive licensing and merchandising campaign that spawned video games, theme-park rides, and myriad other tie-ins” (“Conglomerate” 20). *Star Wars* (1977) took these strategies further and became the model for filmmaking and franchise marketing from the moment of its release onward. As Schatz explains,

the most significant of these films was *Star Wars*, the ultimate New Hollywood commodity – a hip-ironic, genre-blending, male action movie whose characters are essentially plot functions, and whose plot was strategically “open” to reiteration, licensing, and serialization. *Star Wars* surpassed *Jaws* as Hollywood’s top all-time box-office hit and quickly evolved into the model New Hollywood “franchise” – i.e., the blockbuster-spawning entertainment machine that exploited and expanded the original hit in an ever-widening range of entertainment products. (“Conglomerate” 20)

Schatz’s characterization of *Star Wars* as a “blockbuster-spawning entertainment machine” with an “ever-widening range of entertainment products” (“Conglomerate” 20) can be applied to *The Simpsons* franchise. Indeed, the show’s savvy and ironic acknowledgement of its status as a show and a product marks it as one of the earliest examples of media that acknowledges “its own

characters' status as popular icons and whose circulation and reception is worked out into the 'text' itself" (Collins 336).

The series' status as a pop culture icon has allowed it to critique its corporate parent. For Matthew Henry, *The Simpsons'* often hostile relationship to FOX, and FOX News in particular, gives it the freedom to critique the networks' politics. At the same time, the franchise remains one of FOX's most valuable commodities. Henry's description of the series' origins is useful to consider, insofar as it recounts the show's history, the FOX network's rise, and the way that the fortunes of both are inexorably tied to one another. For Henry, placing "*The Simpsons* within the context of the television system" illuminates "the potential for oppositional content" and exposes "the limitations to that imposed by the show's position as part of a global media empire as well as a merchandising phenomenon" (22). Thus, to "fully understand *The Simpsons* it is important to know how it first came to be and why it found a comfortable home on the newly formed Fox network, which appeared as a challenger to the Big Three networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) in the mid-1980s" (Henry 22). Paradoxically, as the unparalleled success story of the network, it also means that however subversive the show claims to be with its satire, it is forever tethered to the history and rise of the "Fourth network" (Kimmel 2004).

According to Henry, the burgeoning FOX network needed to "make a name for itself," not only by way of offering "edgy" content, but also by promising "established talents" extraordinary creative freedoms at the network (26). One of the network's early coups was luring James L. Brooks (of *The Mary Tyler Moore* [1970-1977], *Rhoda* [1974-1978], *Lou Grant* [1977-1982] and *Taxi* [1978-83] fame) to FOX. As Henry notes, "Fox made an implicit promise of greater creative freedom, a chance to be more daring in language and content and, for the most part, little network interference in the day-to-day production process" (27-8). Thus, for Henry, the series' success has depended on its ability to offer ostensibly subversive entertainment, while simultaneously making significant contributions to its corporate parent and lining the pockets of all who stand to profit from the now-mammoth franchise.

"Look at Me, I'm the Mascot for an Evil Corporation!"

Two examples, one from the show's iconic opening sequence and another from *The Simpsons Movie*, demonstrate the fine line the franchise treads in engaging audiences and delivering profits to its corporate conglomerate parent. In the first example, "directed by" iconoclast artist Banksy (2010), the sequence critiques the globalization of the series, complete with stereotypical Asian workers, surrounded by hazardous chemicals, doing cel animation by hand, and children grinding up bunnies and whales to stuff cheap Bart Simpson dolls. Next, a dismembered dolphin head is used to seal the boxes for these products. Finally, DVDs are made by punching holes in the metal using a sad looking unicorn. The sequence ends with a zoom-out from the workers' cavern to a prison camp, complete with walls and a banner that reads "FOX."

Gray's commentary about the opening sequence and its paratexts are illuminating here, because he praises its open-endedness. As he explains, "the sequence works precisely because it doesn't offer its own answers, instead posing a whole slew of questions" (2010). Moreover, the sequence's use of "peppy" music provides the occasion for viewers to pause and ask important questions about the state of corporate global capital and *The Simpsons'* role within it. As Gray

notes, the “sequence therefore poses a dilemma and a problematic that must be solved or reconciled” and which “requires discussion” (2010).

Another example of the series’ ironic stance towards its corporate parent comes in the middle of *The Simpsons Movie*. Here, Bart Simpson dons a black bra on his head and declares “look at me, I’m the mascot for an evil corporation!” On the one hand, in creating a warped image of Mickey Mouse, Bart seems to be commenting directly on the Disney corporation (as the series has throughout its history), and on the other, savvy viewers will understand that Bart Simpson and company have effectively “stood for” the myriad ancillary products that have kept Fox afloat, particularly during its turbulent beginnings as a TV network. One takeaway is to suggest that, recalling postmodern theorists like Fredric Jameson, the cultural logic of postmodernism renders everything, including highly-charged and volatile political statements, as just another product. In this way, we can see the series serving two mandates: the consumers who effectively “buy in” to the franchise’s savvy political stances, and the corporate parents who profit by allowing such stances to thrive on their networks.

This logic can be extended to FOX’s use of the series across media. FOX does not care whether we think of the franchise as a television series or a film entity. Moreover, as a satellite company, movie-studio, newspaper syndicate, TV network(s), a lack of distinction is crucial to FOX’s early TV franchises and partnerships. The logic extends to the creative producers as well. As James L. Brooks, Al Jean, Matt Selman, and animator David Silverman stated in 2015, the franchise is under tight control of these producers, who have worked on all of the iterations of the series as it has migrated across media. Jean, for example, directed *The Simpsons Movie* while still attending to his duties as the series showrunner; Brooks, Jean, Selman and Silverman were crucially important to the creation of *The Simpsons Ride* for Universal Studios (2008). Finally, the entire team of writers and showrunners had significant creative input into the mechanics of *The Simpsons: Tapped Out*, the highly-ranked editor’s choice iPhone app that contains content from mainstays of the series writing staff (2015).

Canon vs. Non-Canonical Content, Paratexts Abound

In his essay, “Strategies of Storytelling in Transmedia Television,” Jason Mittell describes the original franchise property as the “mothership” and elaborates on the challenges inherent in expanding franchises into new arenas. He states that “television storytellers must privilege the mothership by designing experiences that can be consumed by viewers in a wide range of ways without sacrificing coherence or engagement, regardless of how aware they may be of the paratextual extensions” (256). Yet tight control over the “mothership” of the narrative and the ancillary media outlets feeding the franchise’s story define *The Simpsons* as a transmedia blockbuster franchise. Thus, *The Simpsons* explodes the false dichotomies that scholars and critics have made surrounding media properties, particularly the increasingly slippery distinction between television and film. More to the point, these ancillary products potentially become their own islands in the *Simpsons*’ universe, standing alone *and* bringing people back to the “mothership.” In the convergent, conglomerate, transmedia era, these islands tether people to the franchise, and are emblematic of how new interfaces to experience a story world is a key strategy for the franchise’s longevity.

In his book, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and other Media Paratexts*, Jonathan Gray writes about the problems inherent in considering the television and film industries as separate. He states that “film has never been (just) film, nor has television ever been (just) television” (4). Rather, he calls for the foundation of “off-screen studies” that can “make sense of the wealth of other entities that saturate the media, and that construct film and television” (4). My use of Gray here is strategic, insofar as it suggests that there are ways apart from traditional and existing methods from film studies or television studies to analyze the show, and that the “spread” of *The Simpsons* requires us to address the franchise’s “extratextual spillage” (“Springfield Sprawl”). Following Gray, we might say there is nothing outside of *The Simpsons* ancillary universe that does not contribute to the transmedia story world. Viewed in relation to the conglomerate and convergent era, the more stops along the synergistic corporate chain the better for its content owners, as *The Simpsons* and its revenue stream amply prove. In other words, we can read *The Simpsons* as a text and as a series of paratexts, because “a film or program is but one part of the text, the text always being a contingent entity, either in the process of forming and transforming or vulnerable to further formation or transformation” (“Springfield Sprawl” 7). Gray notes that in the contemporary media universe, it is possible to interact with a franchise without ever making contact with the main text (“Springfield Sprawl” 34). The irony of the current moment is that although *The Simpsons* is still a highly rated and profitable television series, its ancillary products and industries may be more profitable and important in the convergent, conglomerate era.

This is to say that it may now be impossible to discern which “mothership” audiences and consumers are drawn to. *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* had more than five million daily players in 2013 (a number that has doubtless increased by the time of this writing), which is just *slightly* under the series 6.2 million weekly viewers in 2015 (Snierson, 2015). That these numbers are close to one another, although one audience interacts with *The Simpsons* on a daily rather than weekly basis, indicates that the individual nodes for *The Simpsons* content are able to exist in stable, separate universes. It can also be argued that *Tapped Out* has partly fueled the series resurgence in the ratings, which has increased slightly over the past several years – a development that is not only impressive given its long run, but seemingly impossible considering the consensus that the show is past its prime. Only by linking the series’ transmedia universe can we explain the series’ growth.

The Simpsons, Genre Specificity and Serialization

In a 2014 article, *Time* magazine television critic James Poniewozik deftly describes a contemporary view of the distinction between comedy and drama. As he explains, “Comedies, like *The Simpsons*, create immersive worlds rather than propulsive narratives . . . instead of creating ‘bingeable’ television, the series expands outward, like a cloud, or maybe a spiral galaxy extending from a center” (n.p.). He continues, explaining that viewers “can live inside it, jumping from point to point, discovering new corners or echoing themes, skipping from season 2 to season 23 as if through a space-time wormhole.” Poniewozik also muses about the transformation of television in the wake of the digital and streaming eras. He invokes *The Simpsons*’ transformation and ultimately how the franchise redefines itself yet again:

TV is still figuring out what it's going to do with streaming and what streaming will do to it. But one thing that excites me about *Simpsons World* is that it suggests that different kinds of streaming can work better to show off TV's different strengths—and thus to celebrate different kinds of TV greatness. Not all “Golden Age” TV—or whatever you want to call it—is about stories that drive in a straight line from this thing to the next thing. Some is about world-building that allows you to skip from this thing to that thing to that thing. (n.p.)

So, for Poniewozik, *The Simpsons* transmedia world-building does not rule out the non-serialized content usually associated with transmedia storytelling, but more importantly its narrative story world is consistently enhanced via flashback episodes, *and* movements to other media forms. This lateral movement across media and within the series can be seen in the episode that evokes the Beatles coming to America, a creative choice that serves several purposes simultaneously. On the one hand, it acts intertextually, where the series finds material to satirically emulate, then inserting its own brand of irreverent humor. On the other hand, it operates as a doorway through which viewers can participate in the music of the episode that can later be purchased at a store. One such attempt, the album entitled “The Simpsons Sing the Blues” (1990) was one of the first offshoots into different media forms. Making an album did not follow the logic of serial, episodic or cumulative texts, but it was emblematic of the many ancillary products that would emerge from the show throughout the years and ultimately define the franchise as the sum total of its many constituent parts. This album was followed by another in 1997, “Songs in the Key of Springfield,” which featured music from various episodes of *The Simpsons* nearly ten-year run.

As Colin Harvey sees it, the phenomenon of transmedia storytelling and media is not a recent one. Indeed, as he describes it, “transmedia storytelling is more fruitfully understood as a broad category to describe instances of convergent storytelling but also varieties of pre-digital, licensed tie-in production that anticipate convergence, as well as contemporary cross-media production” (278). For Harvey, this category can be expanded to include works that emerged before the digital era and ones that involve “elements of the analogue and the digital” (278). Echoing this view, Jenkins notes that transmedia storytelling in a pre-digital era include Walt Disney, L. Frank Baum, and J.R.R. Tolkien, whose works all create immersive story worlds (2011). Harvey's description of transmedia storytelling can also be complemented by Derek Johnson's history of transmedia entertainment. Johnson examines media examples that could be considered expansive, evoking Michael Kackman's work on *Hopalong Cassidy*, Avi Santo's writing on the *Lone Ranger*, and the various ancillary properties associated with these cowboys. Johnson's work provides a framework for considering *The Simpsons* as a blockbuster transmedia franchise important to the analogue and digital eras, and a phenomenon that illuminates developments in various moments of transmedia history. Describing the contemporary film and media landscape in ways that allow us to appreciate the significance of *The Simpsons*, Johnson points out that

Transmedia entertainment makes a great deal of sense in the context of convergence, offering content that can be liberally extended and multiplied across a range of possible cultural experiences. Yet transmedia entertainment is intellectually useful as a concept not for its newness but because it can help articulate a longer history of production and consumption from socialized exchange of culture. By conceiving transmedia entertainment in historical terms, while also understanding its evolution in the contemporary context, we can better

understand the real interventions that spreadable media might make within traditional cultural models. (n.p.)

The Simpsons, then, acts as a living, evolving historical record that testifies to the development of a transmedia franchise as it takes place in real-time. Johnson's perspective reminds us that moments in the "history of production and consumption" are simultaneously opportunities to consider "transmedia entertainment in historical terms" (n.p.). *The Simpsons* is a series that is still in process, and so an artifact that allows us to view shifts in the entertainment industry during the past twenty-five years and beyond. It allows us to link the series' use of licensed tie-ins (t-shirts, toys, etc.) to a particular moment in American media history when the infrastructure was in place for products to appear on shelves. The release of "The Simpsons Sing the Blues" corresponds with the CD boom, just as its status as one of the bestselling DVD boxed sets of all time corresponds to the DVD boom of the mid-1990s.

While these expansions into various media forms do not necessarily add to the serialized nature of the show, they enhance the value of the brand and recirculate it for fans. Derek Kompare's work on TV's syndication boom in *Rerun Nation* and Barbara Klinger's work in *Beyond the Multiplex* present two methods through which we can read the series' expansion. For Kompare, the syndicated version of *The Simpsons* does not necessarily need to be consumed in chronological order, as the series' episodic structure makes it easily digestible in short bursts. For Klinger, the purchase of the DVD boxed sets reflects an even larger investment on the part of the fan and spectator, as their purchase links them to the larger market forces and ultimately the studio responsible for the show's production. Likewise, Jonathan Gray's work on "paratexts"—reading strategies that exist outside of the text but otherwise enhance its overall meaning—can help us to define the moments where the show "spills" out extratextually and allows viewers to become players within ancillary products -- as in the various *Simpsons* videogames that have emerged since the series began (*Show Sold Separately*). Regarding this enhanced experiential dimension, Gray characterizes *The Simpsons*' video game promotional material as offering "as much *Simpsons* as an equal segment of the television show" (Gray n.p.). Thus, these paratexts "create an image of the game (as suitably *Simpsonesque*, as meta and playful in approach, as several games in one) while also authoring *The Simpsons* text at the paratextual, overflowed outskirts" (ibid.). Regardless of the interface (serialized or DVD consumption, or hands-on play) each individual point-of-entry only enhances the experience of *The Simpsons* fan, both adding to the storyworld and the consumer's investment in it.

Marsha Kinder's important work on children's commercial television in the 1990s also provides ways to see *The Simpsons* as a blockbuster transmedia franchise. In her book *Playing With Power in Movies, Television and Videogames*, Kinder explains that the ideal consumer of media is someone who does not distinguish between media forms, and instead explores or consumes the "intertextual relations across different media" (2). For Kinder, the ideal object of study is the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cartoon, which moved from comic book, to cartoon, action figure, video games, and finally movie property. In analyzing each iteration, Kinder's project is to prove that "children's television and home video games [not only] construct consumerist subjects who can more easily assimilate and accommodate whatever objects they encounter . . . [this] combined mode of spectatorship helps to account for the extraordinary success of that commercial supersystem of transmedia intertextuality" (3). As *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is a franchise contemporaneous with *The Simpsons*, we can see many of the same rules applying to

both shows particularly how audiences consumed *The Simpsons*' "commercial supersystem of transmedia intertextuality" in a similar fashion to the *Ninja Turtles* franchise. If anything, *The Simpsons* universe only continues to expand outward, both in terms of its storyworld but also in terms of its commercial supersystem, as embodied in the streaming app "*Simpsons World*."

"Hello '*Simpsons World*,' goodbye free time! Seriously."¹

At the most extreme and recent end of *The Simpsons* transmedia field is *The Simpsons: Tapped Out*, a standalone mobile iPhone/iPad app that allows players to build their own Springfield in the vein of *SimCity* and other popular games. What is different in this case is the franchise's ability to update the app to promote new material within the series. In this sense, game players are involved with the franchise as it evolves in real time. More often, the player will be alerted to something that will happen in the series that will inform both the narrative of the series and the game. In other cases, watching the series will unlock clues within the gameplay or introduce new characters who make their debut simultaneously.

Released in 2012, the game has been credited as a property that brought old *Simpsons* fans "back into the fold" (Fitz-Gerald 2014). The app has a "game runner," a former *Simpsons* and *Futurama* writer named Stewart Burns, whose job it is to provide new content for the game that stays within the continuity of the series, and provides interactive updates that ensure players will keep clicking. Updates include themed events, such as the game's annual Halloween "Treehouse of Terror" series tie-ins, where players get the opportunity to dress the residents of Springfield in classic costumes (such as Bart's *Clockwork Orange*-themed costume), or advance certain plot points, such as a mysterious pond that breeds donuts and will be used to promote the episode's content featuring a Godzilla satire.

The game even has its own writing staff, who work on the game and the tv series, and make sure that the game conforms to the overall tone and content of *The Simpsons* proper. Importantly, the game can build hype (an important consideration in Gray's work on paratexts) for upcoming episodes and the series itself. Stewart Burns describes the process in the following manner:

It was probably almost two years ago, when we first started doing some small updates that tied into new episodes of the show. It seemed like a nice back-and-forth promotion: The game promotes the show, and the show is essentially promoting the game, because people are getting the game because they know and love the show and want to build their little Springfields. We try to have the updates be a little bit of a pre-story to the actual episode so that it's sort of something that would lead up to what's about to happen in the episode. A lot of times, the premise is they're getting ready for something to happen, or they're doing something that wasn't in the show but makes sense: This is what led up to them deciding to go to the Grand Canyon, if the show starts out with them at the Grand Canyon. (Burns qtd. in Fitz-Gerald).

In Burns' view, the game's success has to do with the myriad ways people consume media. He suspects that there are people who are *Simpsons* fans who are "just busy, and they've stopped watching TV because they've grown up since when they first saw it" (Burns). Also, the city-

building game model has a great deal of appeal to players, as evidenced by the long life of *Sim City* and its ancillary video game franchises, including *The Sims* and other imitators. Finally, the growth of the freeware industry on cell phones offers yet another medium-specific experience for players. As the best-selling game phenomenon *Angry Birds* proved, these games can also be phenomenally profitable.

Simpsons: Tapped Out illustrates the blockbuster credentials of the franchise. It debuted as a number one iPhone game in 2012 and has remained on the top of the iTunes download chart since its debut, currently at #34 of all time (iTunes store). The revenues from the game are not surprising if you consider the years of brand recognition built into the game's release. According to Eddie Makurch, by 2013 (one year after the game came out) *The Simpsons Tapped Out* had not only generated over \$100 million in life-to-date digital net revenue," it had been in the top 20 iPhone grossing games in the United States for all but 12 days" since it launched. By 2013 the game had more than "5.4 million daily users" (Gibeau qtd. in Ankeny, 2013) and contributed to Electronic Arts \$1.04 billion in profits for that fiscal year (Makurch).

Devotees of the game have the option to play within the story world and receive insider information about what will occur in *The Simpsons* series. *The Simpsons World App* is evidence of the series' evolution and its status as a blockbuster phenomenon. Launched in October of 2014 to accompany the FXX network's "Every Simpsons Ever Marathon," the app transforms the series yet again for contemporary audiences. Using the app or streaming interface, a viewer can now access curated playlists of episodes, scenes ranked by viewer clicks and the creative team, and every single episode of the series. As the series has been one of the most tightly controlled pieces of intellectual property in the contemporary era, the series' success can be linked to the adage of supply and demand. The internet era has been defined by audience access to every imaginable form of video, provided most prominently via YouTube, but it was only after *The Simpsons World* app provided a user interface that viewers could interact with clips rather than the individual episodes of the series.

Regardless, the app finally lets the series exist on the level that presumably works best in the contemporary streaming era in the era of YouTube. Clips, rather than taking away from the franchise, are the ultimate encapsulation of fans' desires to watch and re-watch their favorite scenes on a micro, rather than a macro, level. As many of *The Simpsons* best jokes and lines exist on a micro level, the viewers/users ability to watch these moments marks another transformation to the series. Alan Siegel describes the site in the following manner:

For visitors of *Simpsons World*, picking through the giant heap for slivers of comedy is surprisingly easy. The site's search function (accessed by clicking on the pink doughnut icon in the top left corner of the screen) is a work in progress – FX says that in 2015 fans will be able to search every word of dialogue in the show's history – but you can already use it to, say, figure out the episode from which your Simpsons-addled brain has just pulled some random, obscure reference." (Siegel 2014).

In this sense, the app can be seen as both a repository of the best bits from the series, but also a massive multimodal and multimedia database. Thus, the app provides further proof of the series'

stunning transmedia evolution over the course of its quarter century and anticipates further interfaces and reception portals that may come in the near future.

Returning to the Springfield's Mother Ship

There are alternate ways of considering *The Simpsons'* extraordinary survival since its launch in 1989. Setting aside assessment of the series' textual qualities, there is value in considering its evolution across media industries. *The Simpsons* can and should be considered a corporate, conglomerate product that followed the model of the movie blockbusters. This marketing approach disproves distinctions between film and television products and shows that the series behaved as a transmedia product since its debut.

The series' success illuminates particular moments of change in American media industries. Each of *The Simpsons'* adaptations led the way (its success in DVD sales) or followed (its change to HD and the streaming portal *Simpsons World*). Either way, we can pinpoint moments in which one ancillary product after another provides audiences with more ways to interact with the franchise in line with their own consumption patterns. Today, if viewers want to watch *The Simpsons'* greatest episodes, they can do this on *Simpsons World*, but they can also consume it in any other form they would like, including watching short clips, curated playlists of episodes, or searching by line. *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* gives viewers additional options as they can either design their own Springfield as a self-contained, standalone universe, or follow the links in the story world that lead them back to the main text. In each case, *The Simpsons* proves to exhibit blockbuster behavior and a prime example of transmedia storytelling spread across various media platforms and ancillary industries.

As the series continues to gain audience share and moves towards the creative team's goals of a thirtieth season, there is no doubt we will see the show evolve in tandem with the larger media industry. As a franchise ranked among the pantheon of blockbuster transmedia franchises such as *Star Wars*, *Transformers*, and *Avengers*, one thing is for certain. As long as *The Simpsons* continues to make money, Homer, Bart, Marge, Maggie, Lisa and the other residents of Springfield will be available to consumers in one form or another.

Notes

¹ Al Jean quoted in Siegel 2014.

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