Is it TV or Social Media?

Various technologies have been introduced into the scientific and mathematical fields over the past few decades, and this process has been rapidly accelerated throughout the 2010s and 20s. As this technological progress took place, social media began its advent into popular culture, moving from more computer-based social media such as MySpace or Facebook towards more smartphone-based platforms. Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, Vine, Twitter, and Reddit all rely on user engagement. Likes, views, reposts - these elements of social media make it an interactive medium that allows creators and users alike to find new creative expression. In her book Engaging Diverse Communities: A Guide to Museum Public Relations, Melissa A. Johnson elucidates a key point of difference between interactivity and engagement:

> *"Engagement is a term loosely used by social media platforms that champion numbers of users or "likes" without realizing that unlike interactivity, engagement requires psychological immersion"* (A. Johnson, 106).

The creators and proponents of new media have continually worked on ways to psychologically tie their audiences and users into their platforms in ways that make them almost necessary to sustain a good quality of life. The transition from cinema to television during the Classical Network Era was primarily characterized by a principle similar to this "illusion of control" in that viewers began to consume media on more personalized terms. Families no longer have to move out in crowds to the movie theater and spend extra money on parking, food, or gas. Consumption of entertainment became a far more liberalized and universal activity with the advent of regular television programming. It became even more liberalized as social media started to take off in contemporary times. Again, the liberalization of media consumption comes with the caveat of the "illusion of control" that several platforms give their users. The nature of

engagement and interactivity can frequently be directly correlated with the type of media produced, yet it is always causally related to it. Television programming has continuously been tweaked and manufactured to draw in the largest audience possible, affecting how its financial and creative stakeholders formulate their ideas for the work they put out. These development, production, and distribution principles also feed into the world of social media creators and artists that propagate their work through digital platforms. Social media is the new television, seen in its conceptualization, execution, and consumption.

The very nature of video platforms like YouTube and TikTok categorizes them as disruptive to traditional television and can be likened to the new world of online streaming. Synchronous viewing has become a thing of the past - gone are the days when the country stopped in its tracks every Sunday night to watch the latest episode of The Wire on HBO. Streaming has now opened audiences to an ever more personalized experience by virtue of binge-able shows that would drop an entire season's worth of episodes in one night. As a result, audiences now have greater control over when, where, and what to watch. This quality makes television production more accessible to beginners or amateur artists, as markets for more niche content have dramatically increased in size and frequency. The internet and social media possess many avenues for artists to get their work out there and have blurred the lines between television and online content. In opposition to broadcasting, the concept of narrowcasting has taken on a novel significance in today's day and age. According to The Dooh Group, narrowcasting refers to a form of communication with digital screens characterized by a limited and selected audience. It is most prominently known for being the opposite of broadcasting and targeting specific demographic groups within particular areas of interest. As an example of how this technique can be used for good, new creators have found ways to fill the spaces that traditional

cable television left regarding the representation of marginalized groups. As cited in Smith-Shomade 2004, Clarence Grier believes that “although narrowcasting targets a specific audience, it has the potential to combine people with like interests, crossing racial, ethnic, and gender lines” (Smith-Shomade 73). Streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime have repeatedly led the push for the representation of marginalized groups on television. At the same time, YouTube and TikTok, by nature, allow for members of these groups to make a name for themselves by utilizing narrowcasting as a means to serve their particular in-groups and educate/inform those in the out-groups.

Cinematic artistry has taken on a new form with the advent of YouTube. For example, we can look at the work of popular content creator and filmmaker Casey Neistat. As a novice filmmaker, Neistat moved to New York City and began a challenge on his YouTube channel - 800 days of vlogging. Neistat promised his audience to commit to recording his life for eight hundred consecutive days and uploading it for everyone to see. What started as a fun challenge for him slowly became an opportunity he quickly seized. Neistat’s production quality improved in direct proportion to the growth of his audience, and he began to treat his YouTube side project as a full-fledged television show. His videos would come out simultaneously every day, creating a sort of faux-programming for his audience to ingratiate themselves with subconsciously. A daily show with a fresh new story every day - this was his appeal, which was repeated by many creators after him yet never wholly replicated.

More so, storytelling as a selling point completely changed the landscape of social media. Creators began to see the potential in short-form content, and they started to create stories that appealed to many while remaining entertaining by their short and digestible lengths. Daily vlogging, podcasts, video essays, commentary channels - all of these genres of content creation

serve as new forms of storytelling that remain to be explored and studied. Audience behavior on YouTube has drastically changed since it was founded. It is now more akin to the television demographic of the post-Network television era than that of early social media, where users would click and scroll without forming any form of emotional or artistic connection with the content they consume.

TikTok took the world by storm in 2018. Despite all the regulatory and privacy concerns it has stirred up in the past few years, it remains one of the most successful and culturally impactful social media platforms ever. The accessibility and ease of use that TikTok provides are second to none and occupy a unique role within today's cultural conversation. In his article "I Turn My Camera On: Notes on the Aesthetics of TikTok," Marlowe Granados discusses the intimacy creators cultivate with their audiences. He notes

> "TikTok's language of the front-facing camera gives viewers an arm's length intimacy that grows with time. It is an intimacy often reserved for friends on Facetime or lovers in bed. And this aesthetic closeness has led to popular videos where TikTokers pretend the camera-eye is their lover…the audience is able to become acquainted with the details and idiosyncrasies of the subject's face, and a bond forms that is much like an unrequited friendship" (Granados 102).

The app allows users to form parasocial relationships with online creators and allow for an interactive media consumption experience. Granados also talks about how TikTok will enable users to uncover topics and issues not traditionally covered by other forms of media (102). Even if they are, they are not as easily accessible as on TikTok. The algorithm that TikTok has

seemingly perfected allows for narrowcasting in a widespread way. For example, certain people may only see videos about woodworking and fishing. In contrast, others may never reach those videos and remain on the side of TikTok which is dominated by cooking and funny cat videos. This "selective breeding" of content allows for a more personalized television-like experience for users that persuades them away from the world of network programming and worrying about whether their favorite TV show is about to be canceled after its latest season. Another unique feature of TikTok is the dopamine rush that it provides to users. Granados describes platforms like Instagram and Twitter as cynical and fake while comparing TikTok to "carefree youth" (103). He discusses using popular dances, joke formats, viral songs, and fashion trends as a way for users to be the creators of their own entertainment - a quality that traditional television simply cannot possess.

Apps like TikTok provide the opportunity for self-authorship - this allows users to create their own genres of content. The criticism that television networks often face involves the recycling of ideas, unoriginality, derivative characters, and repetitive plot points. When the audience is allowed to mold and perfect their content to be precisely what they wish to consume, it eliminates the possibility of the "unhappy customer" - enabling a free flow of ideas and continued improvements to the quality of content provided to each user individually. An example of such content manipulation can be seen in the 'core-core' hashtag videos on TikTok that have gained traction over the past few months. These videos are characterized by their use of moody visuals derived from other forms of popular media, such as television shows and films, and placing them in a montage backed by audio voice-overs, songs, or dialogue from, again, other popular media. These videos typically showcase poignant and dark themes representing the author's self-expression. 'Core-core' videos are prime examples of how self-authorship on social

media allows users to be more than just content observers. They are now the creators. The popularity of these videos, and many other genres of videos, demonstrate the platform's ability to foster new trends and subcultures while also providing a space for individuals to connect and find like-minded individuals. Finding people with similar interests is hardly difficult anymore due to the internet and its evident interconnectedness. However, the ability to create large-scale content as a collective is a novel one that propagates further the idea that social media is now a substitute for television.

An interesting observation about the relationship between television and social media can be made. Many networks today use social media apps for advertising and ornamenting their popular programs. They often even indulge in the trends and conventions of these apps to appeal to the audience they have yet to acquire. These are instances where traditional media is forced to adapt to the changing media production and consumption landscape, further blurring the line between the two. According to a study conducted by Elliot Taylor Panek for the University of Michigan in 2012, media users often choose less immediately gratifying options when given more options and time to consider what to consume. The study finds that social media and other entertainment platforms reward consumers' behavior when it is instant and instinctive. Hence, the algorithms that curate and arrange the content users come across are based on "a certain kind of selection behavior: instantaneous, unconsidered reactions to a large list of options" (Panek 143). Owing to this, television networks have started to use social media to provide their audiences with bite-sized information about their programs to entice the viewers. These snippets are not similar to regular trailers or promos; they are tailored specifically for audiences looking for this instant gratification. They are constructed in a way that fulfills the users' instinctive, subconscious need to be satisfied with their actions on social media immediately, while these

very users remain ignorant of the fact that none of their actions on the apps are wholly their's; intricate algorithms and engagement techniques, on whose development companies spend large amounts of money, carefully orchestrate each of their actions on social media.

Content creators also recognize this quality in their audiences and work hard to extrapolate as much profit as possible from these techniques. Creators like Jimmy "Mr. Beast" Donaldson, who rely heavily on clickbait video titles and thumbnails to attract viewers, actively try to include as many quick punchlines into the first few minutes of their videos as possible in order to satisfy the audience's id-fuelled need to be gripped by a storyline. Jimmy's videos are often centered on large-scale games or challenges that involve large ensemble casts, each of which possesses certain traits that enable them to be put into certain "character tropes,"; almost like characters in a television series. This enables his viewers to form parasocial relationships with each person in his videos and create a storyline they can follow. His views average at around 80 million per video and keep rising. Jimmy's videos would not work as well as they do unless he used specific audience retention and engagement strategies. He is yet another example of television being outmatched by online creators who have the freedom and creative liberties to adjust their content according to their viewers and not the other way around. Audience manipulation is a significant contributor to social media's stranglehold over younger general audiences.

Television has always been an avenue through which large groups can come together to share common interests. Each show has its own fan base and demographic audience, and social media has allowed people to connect and form a group identity around their interests. We see some of the strongest examples of this type of group formation within music audiences. Fans coalesce on social media to show their support for their favorite musicians by sharing their

music, discussing upcoming projects, advertising shows, and various other means. This phenomenon of fandom is not a new one. In fact, in his article Fandom Before "Fan": Shaping the History of Enthusiastic Audiences, David Cavicchi argues that while the nature of "fan practices" has certainly shifted, the way fandoms are created has also shifted from the past (Cavicchi 52). He defines the word fan as having "affinity, enthusiasm, identification, desire, obsession, possession, neurosis, hysteria, consumerism, political resistance, or a combination" (55). Social media has propagated such "fan practices" to a much larger extent than ever before—which can lead us to an interesting discussion regarding parasocial relationships between audiences and creators.

It is key to understand that creators and online artists are not nearly as insulated as traditional media stakeholders are from criticism and accessibility, and are often more susceptible to influence by those who consume their content. The nature of open discussion on the decentralized internet exposes social media creators to far more than just a few choice words from critics. If social media creators want to think of themselves as substitutes for traditional media, they must also think of themselves as artists first and, in turn, hold themselves up to the standards that artists do. John Alford, in his essay for the College Art Journal, named The Responsibility of the Artist in Contemporary Society, claims that "[t]here is no oracular 'artist' whom we must follow and whose knowledge we must trust" (201). His argument leans towards the belief that an artist's work is almost always influenced and guided by their "intuition," which is not always driven by true knowledge. He claims that the feelings we inherit when observing an artist's work, which the artist's knowledge or ignorance may drive, often "gives us some sort of knowledge about ourselves" (201). It is not the artist's job to give their audiences a peek into their own otherworldly intellect or perspective about the world and society in general; rather, it is

more of an introspective and minute process that has an individualized and unique impact. Hence, it is paradoxical that social media creators follow these “guidelines" or “rules” since the very nature of their practice involves input from those they create for. Whether they take these principles into account is up to them, and that decision irreversibly affects how they produce their content. There have been several instances wherein social media content creators have had to come out and apologize for certain behavior they display online or off-camera. Fandoms hold the creators of their entertainment accountable for their actions and refuse to let them be insulated from any form of criticism. For creators, this creates a unique state of balance between personal artistic intent and public perception and digestibility.

Social media has certainly risen to the forefront of entertainment in the last few decades and will continue to advance up the hierarchy of popular culture as time goes on. As technology advances further and becomes easier for both creators and audiences to understand, online content will continue to dominate the creative fields—maybe not fiscally, but certainly culturally.

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