Re: Get Real

Here’s how desperate Americans are to be on TV. They will stand in the rain at dawn hoping to be captured by the camera for a split-second on the ‘Today’ show.


People go on the Web in search of attention; they don’t want to give it as much as get it.

Esther Dyson, WSJ Online 3/6/07

This is a brief meditation on the relationship between social networking and television, divided into four parts: Consumer, in which the digital convergence is captured by rear-view mirror thinking; Social Media, in which Reality TV is revealed to be the Internet’s comrade in a noble struggle; Digital Citizen, in which a new narrative form enters the media and the polity; and Citizen Pundit, in which society and democracy are dismantled and reconstructed.

I. Consumer
Welcome to the Digital Convergence, which arrived on schedule in 2006. In the feverish dot-com year of 1996, the digital convergence was launched like a rocket to the moon, heaved aloft upon the expanding surface of the Internet bubble. A decade later, the digital rocket managed to hit its target, despite some drastic changes in circumstances back on earth.

The digital convergence is only now reaching its tipping point: the broadband marriage of Internet and television. Digerati money is still on “convergence” – in essence, watching TV on the Internet (as is now common), and/or watching Internet videos on TV, (which will be common three minutes from now). This equation is familiar – on one side the narrative, and the pitch. On the other, the myriad listeners, viewers and users –the consumers. Between them, the one-way medium.

In the paradigmatic 1996 version of convergence, we “interact” primarily by choosing what to watch on which device. Television’s one-to-many relationship simply expands, rather like that earlier bubble. Each person remains a passive recipient of the active message, which flows around us from more and more sources. You are allowed, perhaps, to play along or buy stuff through your home entertainment center.
The magnates of media imagined that the voice of “the media consumer” would amount to nothing more than a tinny whine within the engine of commerce, as it chunked out increasingly lucrative sales.

In Marshal McLuhan’s classic “rear-view mirror” formulation, a new medium feeds on and echoes the earlier one. Early TV copied radio and vaudeville, the first records reproduced orchestra and opera, early films mimicked theater. Even the ancient bards used the poets’ songs as their sources. Thus, digital media today feeds on and echoes television.

II. Social Media

And yet. A parallel and equally vibrant interactive media track has been with us all the while, the one that enhances personal communication. If manuscripts were written by one and read by many, then letters went from me to you. When the radio spoke to millions with one voice, the telephone connected us in conversation. The Internet arrived on this personal track, greatly enhancing our ability to communicate with each other. But the Internet has unique properties that blend one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many. Thus do we wake one morning to find the information overlords’ palaces in ruins, dismantled by file sharing, bit torrents, cellphone paparazzi and bloggers.

Even the structure of the narrative form - one makes media, the other consumes it – is today in its rear-view mirror phase. What the digital convergence really means is that every television production studio, home computer, satellite transmitter, camcorder, webcam and cellphone is a generator, as well as a consumer, of universally-shared data. The digital convergence of Internet and television is not so much a marriage as a merger, a confluence of information streams into one vast and mighty torrent of undifferentiated zeroes and ones. It moves in any direction, constrained only by the pathways provided.

We can now sense the reality of true media interactivity, courtesy of our own participation in what is collectively called social media. These are tools we have created to connect to each other, where we distinguish ourselves among our peers and star in our own videos. On a separate front, in an as-yet unnamed alliance of forces, TV viewers are gaining unprecedented access to their medium as well. Great swaths of programming have gone "participatory" – we call it, Reality TV. There are comedies and dramas about “real” people, as well as game shows, trial shows, talent shows, call-ins and Oprah-style audience-driven
talk shows. These people are not really “real” – you might say they are playing themselves on television. The appearance of Reality TV at the dawn of the digital age is not a coincidence. These are dual fronts in an epic human struggle to gain control of media, to foment a revolution of Gutenberian proportions.

Gutenberg printed a bible, but that new technology was quickly adapted to commercial applications, including romance novels, religious indulgences, and home remedies, printed and peddled at the entryway of the great cathedrals. These didn’t do much for high-minded pursuits, but they drove the development of literacy. The sad spectacle of Reality TV, in which people debase themselves to be on television, is similarly driving a literacy of participation.

According to McLuhan’s classic, The Gutenberg Galaxy, the medium and the message were joined in the pre-literate human mind, a relationship that was destroyed by the written word. Once written, the message was torn from the mouth of its creator and set adrift beyond ear-shot. The chasm between senders and receivers of information has grown with each improvement of mass media: printing, radio, television. In Understanding Media, McLuhan proposed that television had reintegrated medium and message. He conjures up the viewer, bathed in light, surrounded by images and sound, much as the proverbial caveman would have been as he scanned his horizon for food or danger. The caveman could not only hear and see, he was heard and seen by every being in his world. Quite apart from McLuhan’s dream, television has only solidified the quintessentially modern rift between producers and consumers. Television is the apex of the “medium” divorced from the “message”.

III. Digital Citizen
Because of Reality TV, we are getting used to seeing dumpy housewives and geeky children in a domain once reserved for the brilliant, bad, or beautiful. The dumpy and geeky are, at the same time, getting an education in public performance. You could say that Reality TV – people playing themselves on television – is YouTube by another name. So let’s talk about YouTube:
Meet Geriatric1927. With 2,120,840 views on his YouTube channel and 47,242 subscribers, he is the most popular producer on the site. An octogenarian who loves motorcycles and the blues, what distinguishes him from others can be understood by typing this into the YouTube search box: **Re: first try.** You will find some of the 4,330 videos of people responding to his very first video of himself. There are some posts called **Re: Re: first try** – people responding to each other’s responses. In short, a community. The YouTube **Re:** function is a harbinger of the emergence of a new form of digital citizenship, one in which real people are creating a new kind of reality TV.

IV. Citizen Pundit

Nonetheless, one barrier remains: the citizens’ voice is barred from TV news and current affairs programming, and thus from the powerful role TV plays in shaping policy. TV news programs invite people to provide their opinions, then ghettoize the responses on the Internet. At the same time, commercial news broadcasters have taken liberties, cutting themselves a break on objectivity, on expending resources for news-gathering, and on resisting venal bed-sharing with political and financial interests.
Will *citizens* ever play themselves on television? Can real people, or even “real” people, join the pundits and politicians in the televised policy discourse that shapes our nation?

Real citizens are not entirely absent in the news realm, though they appear as the exception rather than the rule. No network, for example, would cover national elections today without the requisite roomfuls of representative citizens. Carefully vetted, racially balanced, groomed and rehearsed they may be, but they represent a new species, the “real citizen,” clawing their way out of the slime of Reality TV to grab a piece of respectable broadband real estate.

The “September 11 families” rose to heights of power never before obtained by “real” people in the mass media. If viewed as Reality TV, the 9/11 Families can be seen to share a trait with all the jilted girlfriends and eager apprentices who populate that art form – they are *playing themselves on television*. Bereaved and righteously angry victims of tragedy, they proved to be savvy public performers. At the crucial point, their power was extravagant – angry family members stood up and lectured congress during the live televised 9/11 hearings; they were given a few respectful minutes to rant before being hauled away. They reshaped the public perception of 9/11 as well as US intelligence policy. This is a history-making achievement in the struggle of the public voice, the “real citizen,” to gain influence in mass media and the halls of power.

Providing *everyone* with access to being on television is not an insignificant feat. It has been axiomatic that the more “mass” a medium is, the less it can afford to let the public take over. CNN certainly took this view with its much-heralded venture airing YouTuber’s questions to presidential candidates. The question that was most frequently asked of Democratic contenders, whether they would impeach President Bush, didn’t make it into the show. The thousands of questions left unanswered reinforced the old form of narrative, in which someone chooses who talks and everyone else has only the power to listen.

The digital convergence has created the possibility that there will be what I call a “Citizens Channel”, a nationwide cross-platform network of, by and for the people; of high quality, exciting to watch, easy to be part of, and universally understood to be of profound importance to the national polity. With the Internet society as the proving ground of ideas and talent, a Citizens Channel could guarantee that the questions shared by millions would
no longer be ignored or suppressed.

Structurally, the channel would have to have both live and pre-recorded programs, open to the public 24/7, and it would have to be able to shift with the gales of public interests and concerns. Public TV programs, for example, could be redesigned as fast-moving formats that accommodate high-volume, multi-source input from a large number of viewer/participants some of whom speak, some who only vote, and some who are content to simply see themselves on TV:

- **NOW The People** - Public policy discussions where pundits and decision makers are joined by a prestigious new category to TV pundit, the “informed citizen.”
- **My Frontline** - Documentaries that feature citizens who have submitted their personal stories, which elucidate crucial issues. They can expect to question officials directly at the end of the hour.
- **People’s POV** - Current affairs features that focus on people’s real-life problems, and get the whole country in on the act of solving them.
- **Charlie Rose Two-Way** - Arts and culture discussions with creators and thinkers, where thoughtful Americans can join in to ask questions.
- **Interactive Road Show** – Games and contests where everybody has fun and learns a few things.
- **NewsHour Citizen** – People collaborate on investigative research, and can connect to breaking news locations worldwide to interview reporters and talk with the people they are covering.

At times of national crisis, mourning or celebration, when there is talk of war, death, children and taxes, Americans will have a place on television, unleashing a political hurricane on pundits, pollsters and politicians as they participate in the policy life of this nation. When that day comes, and it will, the structure of democracy itself will be echoed, and consumed, by a new kind of media.