



With the advent in recent years of new and powerful tools that effectively provide a platform for "user-generated" content, many have heralded the end of "mass media" as we know it. Having spent the better part of the last several decades bemoaning the manner in which the big media companies brainwash us all into submission with mindless drivel, they are busy polishing their dancing shoes for the forthcoming conga line around Rupert Murdoch's funeral pyre. When anyone with a computer, an Internet connection, and a song to sing can make content, what will "big media" do, except crawl away and die? The answer is, to be succinct, an adapted form of the same thing it has been doing for a century.

Before we revisit the gripes people have with the current state of mass broadcast media, perhaps it is worth discussing a few of its key merits. To wit, the primary unheralded contribution of mass media in general and pop culture in particular to our lives is cultural synchronization. This refers to the phenomenon of there being a canon of "big hits" (songs, movies, etc.) that most people from the same country and/or era are familiar with. Cultural synchronization affords members of a society with common experience that can enhance social interaction. One need look no further than an "80's Party" at a nightclub anywhere in the English-speaking world to see this in action. Particularly within the context of nostalgia, the massive hits of yesteryear provide a touchstone for people from wildly different walks of life.

Classic movies and television, for instance, can provide us with examples we can use when we try to explain something. You could have met someone ten minutes ago, but if you try to explain how someone whispered by referencing "rosebud" from Citizen Kane, they will understand what you mean. Without cultural synchronization vis a vis music, karaoke would clearly be impossible; the whole point is that everyone knows how the original song goes. In short there is a strong, deep-rooted demand in our culture for "big hits". This does not preclude one from pursuing indie films, local rock bands etc. But to deride pop culture entirely as a pox on humanity and sticking only to those cultural artifacts deemed unpopular enough for one's attention is little more than media veganism. Except unlike nutritional veganism, media veganism is completely pointless.

Someone of the aforementioned "media vegan" mindset is often eager to see the precipitous fall of the media industry as users create and post more content. But they completely fail to appreciate that there is a real need for some quantity of banal over-simplistic media. They focus too much on the actual poor quality of Adam Sandler's latest movie or Britney Spears' album without realizing that in many ways these things are mechanisms that connect people together. The important part in these cases is not whether or not the art was good, but whether enough people experienced it to serve the purpose of entering the pop culture folklore.

In some ways, the critically reviled and poorly crafted pop culture elements discussed above can be thought of as a “solidarity good”. A solidarity good is something which has value because everybody subscribes to it. A great example of this in the U.S. is driving on the right side of the road. Our network of roads works because people [generally] stick to the norm of driving on a particular side of the road. Conformity, in this instance, is enormously valuable. Culture is more fluid, though. If you raise a child and completely manage to shelter him or her from all things pop culture, sure they may have read more books, but they may face social difficulties later in life. A more reasoned approach would involve a balance.

In fact, in the new world of hundreds of cable stations and thousands of Internet videos, balance is easier to achieve. Specialized programming will come to occupy a steadily increasing proportion of media consumption, as the "long tail" grows longer. But if there is a central point to this paper it is this: The curve will never flatten out totally. There will always be a demand for the blockbuster (touchstones for cultural synchronization) and there will be very large and powerful organizations meeting this demand. This may or may not include the current big players in the media landscape, but the players of the future will, in all likelihood, be as big or bigger.

This is not a dystopian or cynical prediction however. Although big media companies are seen in many circles as evil purveyors of drek that drag society into an intellectual abyss, perhaps this is not the full picture. For the moment, let us table the questionable business practices and legal techniques of the media industry. Let's focus on the product itself, because it is the content that we are really talking about. If it were true that media companies are engaged in an evil conspiracy to brainwash Americans into servitude, then why do movies and TV shows fail more often than they succeed? If Americans "will buy anything you put in front of them on television", then what happened to New Coke?

The real story is that, as sad as it is to some, the content in the media in a general sense actually does reflect what a plurality of Americans wants to consume. Instead of content being foisted upon the public from above, it is offered up like a buffet and unpopular items are quickly discarded. Insipid pop music doesn't sell because people have been conditioned and brainwashed by corporate overlords. It sells because some people - a lot of people - if not an outright majority of people - genuinely enjoy insipid pop music. Just because you or your cousin isn't one of those people, it doesn't mean they don't exist. To some people, all they really need is a basic diet of cultural synchronization to sing at karaoke or watch with the kids on a Friday night.

Many, such as the aforementioned "media vegans," feel as though people

who are perfectly happy with pop culture and resist further exploration are afflicted with some sort of horrid ailment from which they can be "cured". How could anyone, they wonder, be so complacent with life that they express no curiosity about anything further than their limited cultural purview? Clearly there must be malfeasance at hand. Once we give everyone a blog, or better yet, a vlog, then they will throw off their shackles, awake from their stupor, recycle a can and then participate in a global conversation about how we are all connected to the same consciousness. Clearly, technology will do what acid & activism in the 60's could not - redistribute power from the elite to the common man and bring about a wonderful egalitarian paradise. Or not.

This attitude is highly patronizing and counter-productive. It ought to remind one of the way many evangelical groups feel homosexuals can be "cured", if only enough prayer were applied to the problem. If only we gave every gay person a bible, then they would stop being gay! Well, replace "gay" with "complacent" and "bible" with "blog" and see how much sense it makes. To be sure, the new tools of participatory media will enrich millions upon millions of lives, and have to a large extent already done so. But it cannot be definitively said that fundamental societal structures are in danger of being abruptly overthrown. Capitalism has a funny knack for absorbing and co-opting revolutions. Does anyone else find irony in the tidy profit made by Hot Topic on Che Guevara t-shirts?

More to this point, if there is still sizable demand for the sorts of things only a media powerhouse can produce, then media powerhouses will continue to exist. It could be risky to bet the farm that the current broadcast model will be entirely toppled and everyone will micro-cast to everyone. A safer bet would be that these companies (or new entrants that grow to replace them) will adapt to the new environment. To revisit the caveat in that previous point, even if NBC goes down, whatever replaces it will be as large or larger. If anything, media companies might consolidate (and thus get even bigger) to better withstand their shrinking slice of the pie. In short, whatever the landscape becomes, there will still be very big and powerful companies in it.

But what about, you might ask, the fact that the tools of creation have become so much cheaper? Anyone can cobble together a couple thousand bucks and make an indie film. Get your friends to be in it, edit in the garage, and distribute it over the Internet! True, the tools are more and more commonplace, but talent is not. The chance that the culturally synchronizing touchstones of the future will come out of miscellaneous garages is therefore slim. What are the chances that, for a given subject matter, the best writer, best director, best producer and best cinematographer all happen to be buddies in the same town? The nice thing about a formal industry is that it can gather the financial resources to lure the best talent. And "best", as odd as this may sound, is not meant to be a qualitative qualifier here. For these purposes, "best" means best able to produce

something that will resonate with the preponderance of the American populace such that the work enters the canon of pop culture.

To apply narrative to this idea, let's say a social networking site or blog or some such device connects people together with enormous talent and desire to make a particular film or even type of film. Particularly if they are to work on it full-time, they are going to need money. They need equipment, they need actors, they need to feed their families. So let's say they form an independent production company and then go around trying to raise money for the project (we're assuming they are not millionaires to begin with). Once you start doing this you need to formalize an organization to afford investors some modicum of comfort that they might see their money again. You need insurance, you need permits to film and many more logistical items. Without all these things you are back to making something in your garage. It is probably not your full-time career or at least it is not enough of one to support more than a couple people.

Make no mistake, however, user-generated music, movies, and episodic video content (television) will grow in popularity by leaps and bounds. But there will be no flattening of the power law distribution. The long tail will get longer and the high end of the curve will get higher. One could argue that in a world of so many more choices, with people's tastes spread thinner than ever before, when something hits it big, it will hit way big. Society needs its hits, its touchstones; and



the fewer gigantic culturally synchronized hits we have, the bigger the ones we do have ought to become. Interestingly, even now one can see the interplay between the two parts of the curve. A hit movie comes out and within days bloggers with tiny audiences are aflutter and parodies start hitting YouTube. This is not really a blurring, however, as much as it is a symbiotic relationship between two basically different things.

So what about peer-to-peer file sharing? Won't that screw up everything? Clearly some fundamental business plan changes are afoot. Tower Records has not been the first or the last to adopt "liquidation" as their new business model. The music, movie and television industries are busy realigning themselves to deal with the new landscape, and in some form one can expect that they'll succeed and survive in some way. Again, there is a strong demand for a certain kind of content that requires infrastructure and capital. The media industry of the future will bring to bear this infrastructure and capital up to the point where it is not economically feasible. For example, if the most a studio expects to make on a romantic comedy with such-and-such star is "only" \$2 million, then they will only make such movies budgeted for less than that. In short, the actual hard numbers may be different when the dust settles, but the fundamental mechanisms will survive intact once supply and demand smack the industry into shape.

Amateur content production, particularly written content, has already made a significant cultural and economic impact on the world. But it is important to remember that there is special role for professionally produced big media pop culture in our lives and we should not be so quick to predict its demise. Ours is a system based on evolution and adaptation. If a strong demand exists, it is more likely than not that the demand will get met, and somehow the rich will in all likelihood get richer. To varying extents, these folks have been capitalist leaders for a long time, and they usually didn't get there by being stupid. Rupert Murdoch didn't just open a fortune cookie one day that said, "buy MySpace." Sure, there's a wave coming; but even though some are clueless and many are flailing, others are on to it. How many of them, though? Just enough.