The Culture Industries
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ABSTRACT
The genealogy of the term “culture industry” is traced through Horkheimer and Adorno to Marx. It was coined to describe the relations of production and consumption of media culture in the mid-twentieth century, in an age of mass produced texts consumed by middle-class and working-class audiences. Since the 1980s, there have been two revolutions in the culture industries: a technological revolution, featuring the emergence of digital media, and an audience revolution, featuring fragmentation, participatory formats, and mobility. The result is a post-Fordist system of cultural production and consumption, best exemplified by gaming. The key insights of the “culture industry” argument remain relevant.

Introduction
Culture industries analyses expose to critical view the workings of culture in mass complex societies. The “culture industry” was a term coined by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1987). Its subsequent pluralization to culture industries is merely the first indication that this topic has deepened and has multiplied its meanings since the two exiled Germans wrote their essay in the United States, during the last phase of World War II. The marriage of culture and industry into a topic of
critical analysis is overtly Marxist. The topic retains its Marxist overtones even as it has attracted broad interest in the last seven decades. This is because the topic is deliberately holistic – linking economics with other life spheres. Even if Karl Marx believed in the single causal direction of economic relationships determining and fully explaining the cultural expressions of society, there is now a strong tradition of seeing economics and culture as mutually determining. Once culture became industrialized, the contours of everyday lives became visibly structured in these industries. The linkage between the two is elusive, but Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay (along with other writings of their intellectual circle such as Siegfried Kracauer [1995], Walter Benjamin [1969], etc.) challenges us to understand how the culture industries operate at the intersection of rationalized production and meaning making.

A primary way to uncover this relationship is to follow it through history. We can divide the production of culture into periods, starting from the traditional pre-industrial phase of “patronage,” yielding to the early industrial dominance of entrepreneurs; “market professionals” metamorphosing into “corporate professionals.” Market professionals seek direct profits from sales of cultural goods, while the corporate professionals, working for large corporations that are often transnational, work for compensation derived from a combination of direct sales, selling of audiences to advertisers, and even government subsidies, as well as political influence.

In each period there is a mix of motivations for the producing class to support the culture makers. Patronage is relatively easy to understand as an activity motivated by the need of an aristocratic order to visibly display power. That reason continued into the nineteenth century, although this was the period when market professionals learned to make culture in order to make money. The opportunity to make money came about because the middle class now had enough disposable income and leisure to buy art reproductions, print, theater, and subsequently music sheets and movies to yield substantial profits. By the end of that century cultural products such as magazines and newspapers became a medium for advertising. With the advent of broadcasting in the first half of the twentieth century, culture became the driving force in promoting a consumer economy. Broadcasting encouraged the rise of corporate professionals. Advertising supported culture was actively encouraged by US governments, while European and Asian polities with older patronage traditions were initially skeptical. But even in these countries the culture industries were recruited for political propaganda even if they were not primarily advertising vehicles. The distinction between capitalist advertising and state propaganda was a superficial one for Marxists.

The above periodization is primarily from the point of view of cultural producers. Culture is, also, a relationship between producers and audiences and we can do a parallel history of different periods based on the audience. This perspective has been pioneered by those who wish to describe formations of working-class culture. The founding father is E. P. Thompson (1966, 1967) with his seminal works on class and labor discipline. While his writings take the long view starting with the feudal age,
and are not particularly oriented to the age of the culture industries, there are histories focusing on recent evolutions of mass audiences.

For example, we can look at the audience histories that Richard Butsch has written from a media studies perspective. He begins his history of the US audience at the dawn of the mass media age in the 1830s (Butsch, 2000). These audiences became socially visible phenomena in the United States in various theater districts in New York, Philadelphia, and other emerging cities. They were mostly male and of mixed classes (the only women present in the audiences were presumed to be “working”). The theater was very active, as audience members shouted out their responses to the show and to each other, continuing the traditions of “conversations across the footlights.” For example, it was customary for the audience to demand that favorite sections of the show (typically a fairly eclectic mix of songs, sketches, and even Shakespeare) be repeated even before the play had ended. After the Civil War there was increasing middle-class affluence and a concurrent domestication of the audience for legitimate theater. People now were expected to be silent during the performance. The “civilized” middle class were now imposing a sense of decorum and deferred gratification upon the working class in the theater. This sense of restraint was extended to vaudeville and the music hall. This transition is a visible trace of the changing class relationships at this time.

The early movie theaters replicated this evolution from rowdy audiences to quiet passive ones. This paralleled and was controlled by film producers as they shifted their productions from short films of various attractions to long-form narratives and even further as synchronized sound films became the industry standard after 1927. Roy Rosenzweig (1983) adds a more explicit note to the taming effect of mass media. His study of the working class in Worcester, Massachusetts at the turn of the twentieth century demonstrates that the early movie theaters competed with and eroded the saloon culture that had been working men’s primary leisure activity. Film is an early example of a mass entertainment medium that initially fits in with everyday life and then changes it. We can find similar patterns in newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting.

Beyond Passive and Active to a Revolutionary Paradigm Shift

These and other studies set up the perennial concern of culture industry analysts to evaluate the passive versus the active role of the people. In the twentieth century, mass media became the dominant form of cultural transmission, which led to renewed concerns about the capacity for the culture industries to indoctrinate passive audiences. Advertisers were willing to spend huge amounts of money to take advantage of the audience’s presumed passive reception and media critics were willing to assume advertisers were right. The 1950s were the historical moment when many
mandarins bemoaned the audience’s passive reception of media. Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique was the most radical lament. It was inspired by Max Weber’s thesis that Enlightenment reason was not leading to greater emancipation but toward an instrumentalization of human life. Horkheimer and Adorno easily traced how the industrialization of US popular culture had the function of reconciling people to their “iron cages” of rational bureaucratic existence. Adorno would go on in the final phase of his career to explore the difference between authentic art with its possibility of emancipation and the industrialized pastiche of art that eliminated this possibility.

The Horkheimer/Adorno thesis came out of a direct examination of the culture industry’s products and ignored the actual response of people to those products. Another way of understanding the culture industry’s audiences emerged rather slowly, throughout the 1960s. This approach, promoted by functionalists, did look at actual responses and emphasized the ability of the audience to reinterpret media messages in order to resist passive acceptance of intended messages. This emphasis on active audience reinterpretation was used by academics identified with the uses and gratifications approach and with British cultural studies.

As these studies gained in influence, some challenged whether such autonomous audience meaning making changed industrial practices. Executives in the culture industries continued to produce and distribute as if they believed audiences were relatively passive recipients of media content. Advertising increased in its support of television, radio, and print throughout the 1980s. Other culture industries supported by direct consumer spending, such as film and recorded music, had flirted with business models based on alternative audiences in the 1950s and 1960s (for example, independent “exploitation” productions combined with US imports of European art films, and in music the quest for a “counterculture” market). Briefly it seemed that a dichotomy had been set up between advertising supporting mass passive audience cultures in contrast to direct purchase business models constructing niched active audiences. But then in the 1970s and 1980s film and music lapsed back into oligopolistic organization with top-down production and distribution practices. There was a renewed presumption of passive mainstream audiences in every business plan of all the culture industries.

Since the 1980s there has been a profound upheaval that can be visibly measured but still resists understanding. Two revolutions have occurred. The more accepted one is the Technological Revolution. This refers to the proliferation of new media and, in particular, to digital technology supplanting previous recording methods in the production, distribution, and exhibition of culture. The other is the Audience Revolution. This revolution is the fragmentation of the formerly massed broadcast audience and the general rise in participatory and experiential content for audiences, ranging from the explosive growth in computer and video gaming to the rise in long-form “quality” TV shows that demand more involvement, such as Lost (ABC, 2004–2010).

This revolution in particular and both revolutions together suggest that an active audience has finally overtly changed the industries. The most recent and perhaps
conclusive trend has been toward increased direct consumer spending on media products. An eye-opening quote from a prominent communication investment research report (a genre that usually favors sober trend-spotting) supports the epochal change: “In a related trend that indicates a seminal shift in audience from ad-supported to consumer-controlled media, time spent with consumer-supported media surpassed ad-supported in 2008 for the first time, a culmination of two decades of secular shift” (Veronis Suhler Stevenson, 2009, 2) The change is driven by the rise in the category of subscription TV, which includes not only cable but also set-top, DVR, and other computer-driven subscriptions. This category only measured 6% of US end-user spending on media in 1976, while in 2008 it hovered around 45%. There has been a less dramatic increase in spending on the combination of home video (DVD and VCR) and film box office, alongside severe decreases in spending on recorded music and newspapers.

Raymond Williams’s (1974) critique of Marshall McLuhan’s technological determinism helps frame the relationship between the technological and audience revolutions. This is because Williams constructs a model of mutual determination between culture and technology by describing a structure of feeling he calls “mobile privatization.” Williams sees its forerunner in the domestic plays of Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov. More to the point, at the time of his writing, Williams was understanding the living room radio and television as primary technologies of privatization. Transistor radios and the Walkman made these technologies mobile even in the analogue age, before the digital breakthrough. Subsequent to Williams’s lifetime, mobile privatization has been accelerated by wired products such as the Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) and the I-pod. In the 1990s the entire technology of media communications was transformed to add Internet connectiviness to Williams’s original description of mobile privatization. His ability to be so prescient in 1977 was not based on his intimate knowledge of emerging personal computing, but his ability to describe preexisting cultural patterns. These patterns shaped the uses to which digital technology would be applied.

For example, social networking has very recently become a phenomenon that is the latest embodiment of mobile privatization. This describes electronic sites that allow Internet users to create communities of “friends” who can share text messages, images, and sounds. Platforms for these sites have been shifting rapidly, such as the sudden rise in 2006 of MySpace, which suffered an equally precipitous fall when Facebook and Twitter became ubiquitous two years later. They were created by small companies and yet have attracted the interest of political parties and large industries interested in the ability of social networks to bring together audiences and citizenries. Some actions have been premature, such as News Corporation’s 2005 purchase of MySpace, while others have still to mature, such as Microsoft’s partnership with Facebook. What can already be concluded is that these electronic spaces will play pivotal roles in the future age of cultural convergence across media and across geographical boundaries. Viral marketing is the electronic version of the old fashioned word of mouth and already has been used to support TV shows, movies, and various
music products. The culture industries are responding to the twin revolutions in a constantly evolving outflanking maneuver. This results in a dialectical logic, as when people use technological revolutions to create new communities which in turn are made into audiences by culture industries using the conglomerating strategy to contain the new technologies.

This is a paradigm shift and creates exciting times in the analysis of culture industries. Something is happening. Because people are spending more directly on media, analysts hypothesize that people are using media in new ways in their culture. Shifts in revenue streams take advantage of both the Audience and Technological Revolutions. The earlier frames of market versus corporate producers and passive versus active audiences obscure the complexities of the twenty-first century, where there has been fragmentation and consolidation, engagement and docility, and the interpenetration of work and leisure time. Market triumph has been followed by the general market collapse of the last few years, while the horizontally integrated media conglomerates seem relatively secure. Digital technology has increased opportunities for do-it-yourself production and distribution (DIY), although to be sure the available products continue to be dominated by the output of a few big corporations. On the audience side, the activities of consuming, playing, and otherwise interacting can be judged as active or passive or as a hybrid. The only clear conclusion is that previous categories have become blurred.

Therefore, analysis of the culture industries needs to take a new look at the relationship between post-Fordist blends of work and leisure and the structures of the culture industries themselves. I therefore have sequenced the rest of this chapter as follows:

- Democratic diversity and industrial formations.
- Convergence and fragmentation of media forms
- The active audience as cultural reflections of the shift to post-Fordist labor practices.

Democratic Diversity and Industrial Formations

“Authenticity" inspired the original cultural theorists to look at cultural industrialization. This is still operative although contemporary industry analysts tend to shy away from such an interpretative category. Instead, many are motivated to examine the culture industries to see if these industries can provide the necessary diversity for democracies. This is certainly a vital goal in the mass representative democracies that have become the model for many nation-states. The diversity-of-voices concern was raised by James Madison in the earliest moments of the United States when the country was both rural and fragmented, and was an inspiration for the freedom of speech clause in the first amendment of the US Constitution. However, the US
experience has not proven that mere freedom of speech will safeguard the ability of diverse views to reach everyone. Therefore, several other countries have mandated that broadcast industries provide diverse content. These results have also been questionable for true Madisonian diversity and many US citizens view such mandates as subverting freedom of speech.

Instead, early twentieth-century US citizens relied on various antitrust laws to break up culture industry monopolies. These laws were designed more to safeguard economic competition and development and less to ensure a democratic plurality of voices in mass media, and plurality remained an elusive goal. As a consequence, in the final third of the last century, the government largely abandoned applying antitrust laws to media, accepting the argument that the proliferation of new media has guaranteed a diversity of voices. New media have provided better outlets for suppressed voices in some countries. Yet their effectiveness is questioned and in older democracies they have not reinvigorated a public sphere of debate. The charge is that cable TV and other dominant media have led to substituting the theatrics of political debate for the actual benefits of diversity. There continues to be the perennial investigation of whether communication industries are actually serving the needs of democracy (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Such an investigation combines issues of globalization and the growth of the culture industries.

Globalization and Media Conglomerates

The continuing trend of technological improvements since the earliest forms of mechanical reproduction has been a globalization of culture. This was first noticed with the 1920s export of Hollywood films, and has of course only accelerated with the latest technological innovations. In the very first instance, right-wing political leaders worried about the international spread of democratic ideals subverting traditional loyalties to the state. Subsequent to World War II, left wingers theorized that the globalization of culture, dominated by US film and information exports, was leading to media imperialism and the spread of neoliberal market values. This model fell somewhat out of favor by the late 1980s since after the initial dominance of US exports there has been a growth in the export of television products from other countries. In addition some scholars have argued that audiences read cultural content in ways that thwart the dominant ideologies and that this is especially true in the reception of foreign cultural products (Liebes & Katz, 1993).

However, there is an acknowledged correlation between the rise of global media conglomerates and the ideology of neoliberal economics (Carey, 1999). Global media conglomerates now dominate the culture industries and their very premise of operation seems to defy national regulation of cultural marketplaces. Many conglomerates hire pundits to explain marketplace wisdom and to denounce government regulations, while these same firms benefit from the erosion of a single nation’s
ability to limit their activities and size. Therefore critical concern finds that it is a seamless effort to go from analyzing global monoculturalism to examining cross-media domination (Miller, Govil, McMurrin, Maxwell, & Wang, 2005; Wasko, 1995).

The rise of new (predominantly digital) media has enhanced opportunities for cross-media marketing, which threatens diversity by recycling the same content across film, television, video games, and more. The new media of cable and home video inspired a particularly relentless consolidation of media industries across media in the mid-1980s. This oligopoly was already in place when digital methods of distribution started appearing in the 1990s and was able to maintain its control of DVD technology, but seems less certain as to what to do in the age of Internet downloads. The news industry has been upended and the music industry has been changed by such downloads, while the film and television industries are still experimenting with the Internet.

A brief summation of the historical transition from vertical integration to horizontal integration will aid understanding of the current pattern of market control. In the first half of the twentieth century, Hollywood and broadcasting pursued a classic model of vertical integration. This is when a culture industry company creates divisions that handle production, distribution, and exhibition within just one medium. The classic factory model of Hollywood studios was to produce films, distribute them, and own many of the theaters in which these films were shown. Even as this system developed the government used antitrust laws to break it up. This culminated in the Paramount consent decree of 1948 that forced Hollywood studios to divest their theaters. In broadcasting, networks tried to produce and distribute shows and own as many stations as possible. The federal regulator pushed back by imposing limits on the number of stations one broadcasting network could own (encoded in a variety of laws going as far back as the Communications Act of 1934 and continuing in a much weaker fashion after Congress passed a law limiting ownership to 39% of the national audience in 2004) and with the finance–syndication rules that separated television production from television distribution and was enforced by the Federal Communications Commission from 1971 until 1995.

The strategy to dominate shifted in the 1980s. Culture industry companies became very interested in horizontal integration. This is when one company owns divisions in several different media such as film, broadcast television, cable television, and more. Nowadays a media company is not worth its salt unless it owns major divisions in at least half a dozen media. There had always been some attempts to do this, such as in the 1920s when US newspapers moved into radio, radio moved into film and recorded music, etc. In other countries with smaller audiences than the United States there had been horizontal integration on a national scale, such as between television and film production in many European countries. Then in the 1980s in the United States there was accelerated pursuit of horizontal integration to create truly “transnational” media companies. In addition, News Corporation – an Australian company – became a nominal US company in order to solidify its transnational status. Sony is the biggest non-US media corporation, although its Japanese orientation has dramatically eroded since the appointment of Howard Stringer as its CEO.
What follows is a brief history of the contemporary wave of media conglomerate building. The strongest precedent was Walt Disney’s visionary use of film and television to promote theme parks and merchandise in the suburban age. His innovations in the 1950s remained somewhat dormant until the cable and video revolution. Ted Turner is the 1980s business executive of the same visionary caliber as Walt Disney in his ability to respond to new media technologies with new business plans. He had already married broadcast, cable, and satellite technologies to kick-start the Turner Broadcasting System (organized from previous companies in 1979). He understood the need to sustain a media conglomerate with a deep library of material and so bought the famous film studio MGM in 1986. Although he was unable to finance the purchase and had to resell it within two years, his action began the wave of culture industry consolidation in response to new technologies. A year previously, News Corporation had taken over Twentieth Century Fox. This seemed merely opportunistic until News Corporation created Fox Broadcasting a year later, amplifying Turner’s strategy to use various media platforms to aggressively sell content. Fox was the first new US television network to emerge and survive since the demise of Dumont three decades previously.

In 1985–1986, all three traditional US broadcasting networks switched ownership. One of the new owners, General Electric (which bought NBC) was an example of an electronic company buying an entertainment distributor. An international event in this trend was the Japanese manufacturer Sony buying Columbia Records in 1988 and then acquiring Columbia Pictures in 1989. Matsushita tried a similar strategy of merging hardware and content divisions when it bought MCA/Universal in 1991. Unlike Sony it gave up on this strategy and sold Universal in 1995. Ultimately General Electric acquired Universal to form NBC–Universal in 2004. In January 2011 General Electric sold 51% of NBC–Universal to the cable operator Comcast.

Other noteworthy expansions occurred when Warner Communications merged with the publishing and cable giant Time-Life in 1989 to form Time–Warner. It acquired Turner Broadcasting in 1995. The 1993 takeover of Paramount film studios by Viacom (previously a television distributor) was significantly financed by the video store chain Blockbuster. The Walt Disney Company had been building itself up internally until it went on an acquisition spree with the purchase of the boutique movie distributor Miramax in 1993 and then buying the mammoth TV network ABC in 1995 (ABC brought many major cable networks into the Disney group). Viacom went on to acquire the CBS network in a 1999 stock swap. The trend continued with the 2000 purchase of Time–Warner by America Online (AOL).

This last-mentioned purchase was the crest of the wave. Time–Warner spun off AOL in 2009. At this point we can generalize that major film, music, and network and cable television operations have been merged by and large into big media companies: Walt Disney Company, Time–Warner, Viacom, News Corporation, Sony, and Comcast. This trend is paralleled in Europe and Latin America with such major media companies as Vivendi (primarily French), Bertelsmann (primarily German), Organizações Globo (primarily Brazilian), and Televisa (primarily Mexican). There
are a few emerging culture industries where distributors remain autonomous (electronic games and e-commerce), but horizontal integration is dominant.

Deregulation and Neoliberalism

This wave of building media conglomerates occurred in a very favorable political environment in the United States and, subsequently, in Europe and Asia. As the economic boom of the immediate postwar period, cultivated by a mix of private and public planning and often financed by governments, became self-sustaining, a political philosophy of neoliberalism gained credence in industrialized countries. This philosophy held that markets were creative and self-correcting to a much greater extent than public regulations and government actions. As neoliberal politicians gained power, they implemented this philosophy with policies that were labeled deregulation. In the United States, this consisted of lifting laws and policies that had placed limits on ownership and business practices, culminating in the Telecommunications Act of 1996. In Europe and Asia this neoliberalism was expressed by allowing private investors to create commercial alternatives to public broadcasting monopolies.

Neoliberal policy tries to enhance competition between media companies by loosening various rules. The result has been debated. A relatively unanticipated and ironic result occurred in US radio when Clear Channel, a billboard advertising company located in San Antonio, Texas, went on a spending spree so that at one point it owned almost 25% of radio stations. The company continues to monopolize radio with detrimental results for public uses of broadcasting (Klinenberg, 2007).

Political Timidity, Rudeness, and Partisanship

Thus deregulation – which supposedly got the government out of the media business – inspired media conglomerates to return the favor by promoting political agendas, particularly those of the government. For instance, Clear Channel became notorious for orchestrating a campaign against musicians who opposed the US government’s war policy in 2003. In general, deregulated media conglomerates give their governments’ viewpoints as often as public broadcasters. Although in the UK it was the publicly owned British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) that expressed skepticism about government statements concerning the Iraqi threat, it paid the price when the British government used the 2003 Hutton inquiry to force the BBC into a more submissive tone, which continues to prevail. Whenever the British government favors commercial competition with the BBC, it has the overtone of intimidating political coverage. Recently it has been revealed that British politicians sought favorable treatment from the commercial News Corporation to scandalous degrees, as deregulation allowed the
company to gain bigger parts of the British audience. In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi took advantage of deregulation to build up Mediaset as a broadcasting rival to public system RAI. After he used his resulting influence to become prime minister, critics charged that he has not been at all reluctant to use both Mediaset and RAI to control the political agenda. Thus deregulation historically (despite neoliberal claims) does not foster media independence from politics as much as it engenders political favoritism.

In the era of horizontal integration such political concerns spill over from news operations onto entertainment divisions. US examples abound in the tense situation of the Iraq invasion: Viacom allowed pro-government pressure groups to force it to delete a biopic of Ronald Reagan from its CBS schedule. The Walt Disney Company decided not to distribute Fahrenheit 9/11. Time–Warner refused to release David O. Russell’s documentary on the first Gulf War. In all these cases, media conglomerates had already financed production. It was fairly obvious that horizontally integrated companies feared retribution from the government against their far-flung enterprises.

These kinds of incidents are in keeping with the expectation that as entertainment companies acquired broadcasting networks, they would also acquire the traditional broadcaster’s political timidity. Networks had historically achieved this by maintaining “objective” coverage of news and avoiding controversies in entertainment. The technological revolution has subverted this “objective” consensus. The clearest example is News Corporation extending the overt right-wing “populism” of its British and US newspapers into its cable (and to a lesser extent broadcasting) news operations in the United States. Its overt partisanship is not timid consensus but brazen narrowcasting. This turn toward broadcast partisanship can be traced back to post-television radio, which was losing its broad audience. Talk radio started in the 1960s and hosts and callers turned increasingly to partisan political topics until its political force became noticeable in the 1980s and 1990s.

Fox and other cable programmers learned from talk radio to reach profitable niche audiences with tabloid news shows such as A Current Affair (WNYW, 1986–1996) and Hard Copy (Paramount Television, 1989–1999). Specifically, when News Corporation moved into US television with its 1986 creation of Fox TV, its CEO, Rupert Murdoch, decided that the new network would compete with the established three networks by pursuing a niche audience rather than the entire audience. Their entertainment programming featured dysfunctional protagonists and rude dialogue. This was noticeable in their two influential hits, Married with Children (Fox, 1987–1997) and The Simpsons (Fox, 1989–current). This rudeness became a general feature of Fox programming. Talk radio already linked rudeness and partisan politics. Cable pundits were increasingly using this formula when News Corporation launched the Fox News Channel (FNC) in 1996. FNC gave its news and opinion shows a shrill right-wing slant. While this strategy curried favor with politicians (mostly Republicans), a deeper motivation is to pursue profitable angry conservative audience segments even at the risk of alienating other significant parts of the broad mainstream. Media vulgarity is a global trend. It fragments the audience and has been linked to a general trend against consensus building in contemporary democracies.
The Active Audience as Cultural Reflection of the Shift to Post-Fordist Labor Practices

From the perspective of the audience revolution, partisanship and fragmentation are part of a general cultural drive. They appeal to “activated” audiences, which are somewhat distinct from active audiences. This inspires culture industries research into the shifting balance between work and leisure. When Adorno and Horkheimer wrote their essay, labor and therefore leisure were organized according to the Fordist model. This presumed first and foremost that home and the workplace were two separate locations and that labor time was quite different than leisure time. The Fordist model was named after Henry Ford and the practices he used in creating his huge automobile company. His company had broken down the work process into simple and efficient steps, which is known as Taylorism. Taylorism also included the idea that work time and output were quite predictable. After a long fight with organized labor the typical work shift was reduced to eight hours (optimally from 9 a.m. till 5 p.m.). The Fordist model presupposed that most work was associated with manufacturing, the prevalence of high manufacturing wages, the decline in the number of people working two jobs, and that only one parent in a family would actually go to work. This also led to predictable leisure habits. Therefore, culture industries could produce and market mass audiences to advertisers (Smythe, 1994).

However, these things have declined to the point where we now speak of a “post-Fordist” era of work. The great changes already underway in the United States in the 1960s became globally apparent by the 1970s and therefore roughly anticipate the revolutions in the culture industries. The three most measurable changes were the return of women to salaried work after their departure from such jobs in the immediate aftermath of World War II; the shift of work in advanced countries from manufacturing to service (in the broad sense of the word) industries; and increasing affluence due to a variety of factors. In some countries wages continued to rise even through the 1990s. The US experience was that real wages did not increase much after the 1970s, but the increase in the number of people working in two- and multiple-income families, together with lower costs of borrowing and lower taxes, also led to the spread of affluent lifestyles. US families led the global consumerist expansion of the final decades of the twentieth century. This rise in post-Fordist labor and middle-class lifestyles was duplicated elsewhere.

Thus we have three trends to consider: the expansion of the work sphere (including women); the shift of work from the well-defined time and space of manufacturing to the relatively more fluid requirements of service (which often involves at-home preparation and shifting time commitments to meet clients’ needs); the spread of middle-class values and consumerist aspirations.

Technologies are successful in as far as they fit into or facilitate these trends. Quite often technologies blur the boundaries between work and leisure as developers seek to streamline work. Post-Fordist labor valorizes the concept of multi-tasking and
flexible scheduling. This is exemplified by the personal computer (PC), which does many things at once for a single user. In the 1950s and 1960s, individual visionaries such as Vannevar Bush, J. C. R. Licklider, and Douglas Engelbart, foresaw and pushed the hybridity of the computer. The switch to a graphic user interface and the development of the mouse eventually made the personal computer a medium of multiple human sign systems, ranging from music to pictures to photographs to text. This therefore encourages the multiple functions of work, entertainment, and information gathering.

Even before the PC was widespread, post-Fordist labor practices were pressuring the temporal schedule of everyday life. The nine-to-five schedule had become a fossil in the service economy. These pressures explain the adoption of pre-digital media technologies that allowed flexible cultural distribution. Not everyone can be home at 8:30 p.m. to watch *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–1992). However, technologies that had facilitated flexible work time could also deliver flexible leisure. An early example of this culture industrial strategy was the marketing of Sony’s VCR – Betamax – for the purpose of time-shifting: recording TV programs at home, to view later. The VCR became the phenomenal media success story of the mid-1970s.

As more people bought the VCR to record TV shows in order to watch at more convenient times, they improvised other uses of the VCR. Exchanges of pornographic video cassettes developed into the video rental market. At this point people were using the VCR to rent mainstream movies and this in turn inspired the development of multiplex movie theaters, which also allowed people greater control of when to see a movie. The dialectic continued as the culture industries moved from the cassette to the DVD in 1996. Time-shifting could largely be accomplished through digital apparatuses (DVRs) and flexible programming, while the enhanced capacity of digital storage devices offered additional features, giving viewers the feeling of more participation.

The PC first reached a mass market because of spreadsheet programs and other time-saving devices. In turn its popularity supported the revitalization of computer games, which in turn supported the universal adoption of color monitors and audio-visual software. At the same time the growth of electronic mail and the Internet reached enough of a mass to motivate dramatically increased adoption of PC use for communication and for telecommuting and other forms of working at home. Email and Internet usage blurred the distinction between work and leisure. Eventually, the PC emerged as a primary training tool for work, but since it is located in the home, such training takes the form of entertainment. This is most apparent in gaming. A study conducted at Harvard Business School established that online gamers develop the ability to interact with strangers via their computers and that this leads to unique work skills for the contemporary work space (Beck & Wade, 2004).

Digital computing has affected the production, distribution, and reception of culture. But its ability to do many things at once often conflates and confuses analysis of the audience revolution.
The culture industries became adept at offering consumers a dialectic between a culture of convenience and a culture of involvement and participation. Involvement and participation are not a response to work pressures on time usage but a reaction to another type of post-Fordist work pressure. The shift to service jobs changes the general social psychology of the worker. These jobs are premised on working well with clients, therefore motivating a rise in “emotional labor,” a term used by Hochschild (1983) to describe the increasing demand on workers to control and use their emotions in order to give value to the client. This is a new work discipline constraint that motivates the desire for compensatory leisure practices. In other words there is an intuitive connection between the rise in emotional labor and the audiences’ desire for mass media simulations of new experiences and engaged emotions. People now pursue experience by playing games and buying DVDs with added features, paying additional sums to watch 3D movies, “quality” television, and more.

The growth of video games is the most dramatic development in the culture of pursuing experience. US consumer spending on video games topped $64 billion in 2004, accounting for approximately 8% of total media spending (Veronis Suhler Stevenson). There are comparable statistics in most affluent nations. Its growth is a counter-trend to time-shifting and multi-tasking since video games in all forms (console, computer, online, and arcade) squander time, at least from the work ethos perspective of late capitalism. The greatest attention grabbers are games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, which takes a minimum of ten hours to play through. These games are evidence that post-Fordist labor has changed what mass culture audiences want – from passive acceptance of linear narratives to active participation in simulations of experience.

Active engagement and time control explains the shift from advertiser-supported media to media directly paid for by the audience. Audiences are motivated to buy a console game or take out a subscription to premium cable rather than just accept the sitcom that a broadcast network is offering on “free” television. They will spend billions of dollars not only on the software and hardware of gaming but also for the virtual assets of online gaming (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, Ch. 5).

**Return to Industry**

The culture industries are continually both shaping and adapting to everyday life. The circumstances of post-Fordist labor have motivated people to pay more for culture than previously. The global populace now pays more directly for mass media even while consuming as much advertising as before.” Traditionally, the culture industries relied heavily on one payment method per industry, both direct and indirect. Indirect payment is defined by payment from sources other than the audience, such as advertisers (including corporate sponsors), governments (subsidies and grants; collection of obligatory license fees), and donations from patrons (a re-feudalization of culture?).
Direct payment includes those who pay per view (PPV), those who pay per product (direct purchase of records, DVDs, etc.), and those who pay by subscription (typical of Internet, cable, and satellite users). Of course, individuals are also responsible for indirect payments either through taxes or increased prices on advertised consumer goods.

Now, every corporation seeks multiple payment methods. For example, public broadcasters in most nations accept advertising, while commercial Internet providers and cablecasters charge for both subscriptions and advertisements. The increases are most prominent in visual media such as films and television. The very latest manifestation of this is that studios obtain increased payment for 3D movies as well as for Internet delivery of films and television shows. The audio (radio and music) and print industries have also been experimenting in seeking multiple revenue streams from the Internet and satellites.

The conglomerate structure of most entertainment industries has allowed them to weather the volatility of new delivery systems. Internet file sharing around the world has been an unprecedented challenge for the culture industries. The companies have not been complacent. They have obtained government protection in monitoring and shutting down file sharing and other computing threats. On the positive side media companies are constantly experimenting with strategies to capture the profitable potential of Internet marketing and distribution. Meanwhile, cultural labor has had to struggle to get these companies to share their new Internet revenues. In general, digital technology has not been friendly to organized labor; most notably, video game labor has had a hard time organizing.

While things are still in flux, the corporate power of the culture industries has not diminished, which brings us back to the issues of authenticity and diversity. For both of these reasons many hope that the radical potential of digital production and distribution may still emerge. The concept of “long tail” marketing is one of the more recent influential concepts inspiring this hope. This model states that without the physical bottlenecks of limited shelf space, Internet distributors can offer vastly expanded inventory and that consumers are responding by buying more low-volume niche items instead of blockbuster top-ten items (Anderson, 2006). More filmmakers are exploring self-distribution, just as more of their compatriots are exploring self-distribution in music and fiction publishing. To date few careers or new companies have actually been sustained by self-distribution and micro sales, but no one can deny the potential for grassroots cultural production to be an entry point for new cultural producers (for a particularly hopeful analysis of film, see Tryon, 2009). For now we must explain the continuation of existing patterns of power in the culture industries and can only wait on whether digital distributions will upset these patterns.

The analysis as well as the state of the culture industries are much more in flux than when Adorno and Horkheimer wrote. We are in the middle of parallel technological revolutions – an audience revolution and the transformation of basic divisions of labor and leisure.
NOTES

1 Raymond Williams (2010) has shown that both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were not as mono-deterministic as many have assumed.

2 I like the distinction between global or international companies and transnational ones. The former are traditional national companies who happen to do much if not most of their business in foreign countries. In contrast, transnational companies have a less certain allegiance to one country since internal power and assets are distributed in many different centers.

3 An exciting fresh approach to the interpenetration of leisure and work is provided by Roberto Igarza (2009), the title of whose book translates as “Bubbles of Leisure: New Forms of Consumer Culture .”

4 Time–Warner had only a minor role as a broadcasting network since its only terrestrial network at the time was the relatively small Warner Bros. Nonetheless its overall size, its importance as a producer for other US networks, and its extensive cable operations easily account for the company’s sensitivity to political pressures.

5 There have been some historical media offerings in which everyone participated and which took on the nature of “media events.” Dayan and Katz (1992) explain that these were often broadcasts of nation-building rituals such as funerals, sports, and state visits by important leaders. Participation consisted of audiences actively suspending normal behavior in order to witness these broadcasts. More recently, Katz and Liebes (2007) have noticed the post-1980s relative demise of such media events and link the demise to audience fragmentation.

6 Frederick Taylor (1856–1915) had used time and motion studies to simplify work and management in various industries. His techniques were adopted worldwide.

7 There was a format competition between Betamax and Matsushita’s VHS at the time. They could have coexisted if people had continued to buy the VCR for time-shifting. However, when they started to buy VCRs in order to rent videos and distributors resisted carrying two different tape formats for rented videos, VHS had too much “external” advantage and Sony withdrew Betamax from the consumer market.

8 In the US context, “free” broadcasting refers to broadcasting that is paid for by advertising rather than by the consumer directly. Even in these cases the consumer has spent the money it takes to buy the equipment for such “free” content.

9 In the nineteenth century, newspaper publisher Charles Scripps observed that people invariably spend the same amount of their disposable income on mass media. Scholars have measured this hunch and found that it was roughly true from the turn of the last century until the 1970s. Since then, media spending as a percentage of disposable income has been rising significantly.

10 Brian Winston (1996) has theorized that corporate suppression of the radical potential of new technologies is practically a historical constant.

REFERENCES


FURTHER READING


