

# Adapting the mass media to new digital uses

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## **Abstract:**

When an innovation opens a new possibility, either traditional players appropriate it and grow, or else new players emerge to seize it in their stead. In audiovisual and digital technology, growth used to be based on a utopian idea about the freedom to create — often contrasted with the traditional media, deemed to be too rigid or too regulated. To cope with this rapid innovation that analysts described as a “menace”, broadcasters and audiovisual firms had a choice between two strategies: compartmentalization or integration, each with mixed results. Paradoxically, innovators in digital technology have borrowed the principles of mass production, despite the risk of making a break with the original utopia of the freedom to create. In reaction, new hybrid players are looking for a compromise that does not compromise their principles.

## **The original utopia: Freedom of creation**

New digital creations are built on the principles of accessibility and availability, safeguards of the freedoms of expression and creation. Everyone may create, and everyone may watch. A claim is often made to these principles to oppose traditional stakeholders in the audiovisual industry — deemed inaccessible by nature, sometimes elitist, and often derided as being in the pay of political and economic forces. Accordingly, the topics with which digital creators deal are freed from the pressures of editorial choices or audience ratings. For example, few programs about popular science are broadcast on television whereas this topic represents a large pool of activity on digital platforms — with the risk of it being hard to separate what is true from what is false (for instance, systems of recommendation may “like” a video on a popular topic in astronomy and link it to a website that showcases the flat Earth theory).<sup>1</sup>

As for formats, contents are no longer bound by broadcast schedules, nor by broadcasting regulations. For instance, online networks still have not adopted clear guidelines about presenting advertisements, and some product placements in video creations can be seen as disguised advertising. A more important problem: the application in France of the Évin Act for restricting smoking and alcoholism.... We have to admit that even institutional players contradict each other. For the SNPTV (Syndicat National de la Publicité Télévisée, a trade group of advertisers), the platforms that host videos on the Web are not “on-demand audiovisual services” even though the CSA (Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel) has issued warnings to YouTube.

This rejection of any restraints has had an impact on the social status of content creators. They have the freest status possible, namely as self-employed entrepreneurs. Given their multidisciplinary approach, they have slipped out of the collective agreements that used to shape labor law in the audiovisual industry. Anecdotal but very tellingly, the media do not know what to call this new profession. Names range from “video-maker” to “youtuber” (even for those not on YouTube). Creators have often talked about their difficulty finding the right institutional contacts. How can they

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). All websites have been consulted in July 2019.

protect intellectual property rights? How can they claim royalties, in particular when the mass media broadcast their images? How to register their business for coverage by retirement and health insurance funds?

Unsurprisingly, the CNC (Centre National du Cinéma), SACD (Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques) and SCAM (Société Civile des Auteurs Multimédia) have started attending professional meetings (in particular, the Web video festival Frames in Avignon).<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, a Fédération des Métiers de la Création Audiovisuelle Diffusée sur Internet (more frequently called the “Guilde des Vidéastes”)<sup>3</sup> has been set up for Web creators.

## **Compartmentalization**

Initially, the traditional producers and makers of audiovisual products adopted a very defensive stance toward the creators of Web contents. Traces of this can still be seen in the editorial remarks that the media make about these “influencers” and especially in their heavy-handed condescension toward them. While Article 13 of the recent EU copyright directive has been analyzed for the protections it offers against illegal uses on the Internet, the debate about this directive could have been an opportunity for raising questions in an official setting about the right to quote, criticize, create.

Faced with the menace from the platforms that host digital contents, television stations soon realized they needed to maintain a direct relation (without intermediaries) with the consumers of their broadcasts. Broadcasters invested in their own online platforms, whence the upsurge of “on-demand audiovisual services” (such as MyTF1, MyCanal or 6Play), where the creation of user accounts and the collection of data with the user’s consent are seen as a first step toward potential prospecting for commercial purposes. Recently, the major TV stations, realizing that the dispersion of the audience over several platforms was hampering growth, have been looking for forms of synergy, in particular through the Salto project for over-the-top services (OTT).

This change is not just technological. For their catalogs of videos on demand, streaming services have had to renegotiate electronic transmission rights with producers. Each group now has its own rules for a television that will “catch up” — seven days later, thirty days later, three months later or even two years later — after a program’s first or most recent broadcast. Bargaining over contracts will lead to a variety of formulas that will, we suppose, be a complication for Salto.

A catalog of videos on demand is, by definition, not “linear” and is continuously accessible on line. On these platforms however, more than three quarters of the contents actually streamed are viewed during the first ten days following the release date. This quick depreciation of contents is typical of news and sports but less characteristic of entertainment and fiction. Having changed very little, the methods for promoting contents are still organized around the usual relations with the press. They take account of the digital dimension only in a very narrow sense. Besides, viewers often see trailers or teasers that ask them... to turn on the television. We can have doubts that this is an effective way to inform people that a complete catalog is available! There is, therefore, no long-tail distribution on these platforms, which boost “fresh” contents and synchronize contents on line with broadcasts on TV. Ten days later, the video falls into the catalog of “back releases”, most of which will no longer be streamed before the permissible period of transmission has expired. Depending on the opportunities available, producers might try to stake out a position in the digital marketplace with their own streaming platforms<sup>4</sup> or with partners for paid video on demand (VOD), subscription video on demand (SVOD) or free video on demand (FVOD). Once all these forms of circulation are lined up after each other, a video falls into a chronology that used to be specific to a movie but now

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<sup>2</sup> <https://framesfestival.fr/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://guilledesvideastes.org/>

<sup>4</sup> For example: <https://mytaratata.com/>.

seems typical of all cultural contents. The new FVOD platforms have their place at the end of this chain.

Among end consumers (who are not aware of the complex legal questions surrounding the use of audiovisual contents), the idea has formed that the streaming platform holds contents “captive” before “releasing” them later on. So, some consumers decide to wait for the contents to become available. This belated consumption of culture and entertainment underscores, for these users, the cleavage between two worlds, since a sort of elite has emerged who has access to contents much earlier. Piracy draws from this situation a sort of libertarian approval.

This compartmentalization of access by traditional broadcasters has left the field open to the creators of digital contents, who have proven their ability to rebound by adopting “short circuits of publication”. This opens the way to fake news, which circulates faster than reports by journalists. Even though editors have had to adopt digital practices to speed up their production but without abandoning their fact-checking efforts, the information initially published and circulated on line often tends to be sensational, while waiting for journalists to post contents added as corrections to the initially released information.

## **Enlisting creators**

During a first phase, traditional broadcasters felt that their brand image was strong enough for them to move into the digital realm and that the latter would bring them an audience to whom they could pitch their programs. Official television stations designed Web pages for their broadcasts or series with the idea that televised exposure would be enough for them to exercise digital influence. This somewhat simplistic approach was then corrected by developing features that cost very little to produce (a necessary condition under the business model): short runs, samplers and, sometimes, videos, bonuses and spaces for user reactions.

Given the need to refresh formats and attract new talents, while maintaining their control on various economic scales, producers and broadcasters tried to work more closely with the new players. For this, M6 depended on Golden Moustache; and Canal, on Studio Bagel. Less capitalistically, France Télévisions developed Nouvelles Écritures; and Arte Creative backed coproductions. Although broadcasters imagined attracting people from video-makers’ online audiences toward their own platforms, these creators did not always play the game — contrary to their proclamations about the original utopia of accessibility. They were often wary lest their communities, suddenly cut off from the contents, react negatively to their creations now being uploaded to broadcasters’ platforms. They were also wary because the contents were “diluted” on these platforms within a very large supply of video products and, in particular, of movies sponsored by television stations and endowed with substantial budgets. One reason for their success in the digital realm had been the scarcity of quality contents on video-sharing platforms, where they had been lucky enough to attract attention fast. These video-makers also felt cut off from a direct relation with fans and their feedback. Ultimately, the feeling of a loss of freedom often won out owing to the slow process of “validation”, even though there was no censorship (apart from standard reminders about the audiovisual industry’s obligations). Even today, the platforms of television stations are not perceived to be “spaces of creation”, except perhaps for Arte Creative and MyCanal (with the new approach Canal+ Décalé).

## **Platforms become mass media**

Owing to their strongly growing audiences, video-sharing platforms have themselves become mass media. Given the limitations related to both the reduction of the available surface on screens and the exponential swelling of video catalogs, algorithms for searches and recommendations have to make a choice about what to “push to the top” of lists. This choice is, it can be argued, algorithmic instead of editorial, but it is like the choices made by program schedulers on television.

A consequence of all this is the requirement for an optimized referencing of contents. Creators have had to become experts in marketing the contents of their videos (a skill that used to belong to the media) by, in particular, understanding the science of metadata: titles optimized for click rates, descriptions adapted to key words, thumbnail images designed for visibility in the listing of search results.... Video-makers have soon understood that they should not pay attention so much to the count of the number of views as to the number of minutes viewed and to the curve of audience dropouts as a video plays. They have learned the trade of audience measurement by using the data from Médiamétrie! They have also learned about online posting and its promises. Each video is narrated like an event, with a trailer as well as a scheduled time and date. Video-makers have access to all the data needed to identify the right day and time for maximizing the audience. They have realized that “online prime time” is Friday at 5 P.M., a slot running from a period of “access” on Thursday to a time of “replays” Sunday evening.

What is more surprising is that, to “play” with the algorithms that favor the frequency and regularity of uploads, video-makers have been led to design mass productions with series or seasonal runs. This acceleration of the video-making process has forced them to reorganize in work teams and specialize. The multitasking creator has thus become a player, who now hires authors, editors and so forth. Those lucky enough to be supported by traditional broadcasters have adapted by imitating. Having set up their own production units, they can now sell programs to the media that incubated them.

## **A new generation of creators**

The creatively talented now better understand the issues and know how to use the levers for financing their production plans.

Online advertising — already jeopardized owing to its low level of income — has recently come under pressure from its clients, who no longer want to be associated with videos that are of poor quality, cause anxiety, spark moral controversies, or are illegal under copyright law. The “economic” regulation now being imposed on platforms collides with the original utopia of the freedom of creation.

The gigantic volume of online videos is forcing platforms to adopt automated, general rules, which can hardly be adjusted to individual cases. Now and then but ever more often, a video-maker posts to his online community that one of his videos is being abusively distributed for free. Meanwhile, platforms have customized their offer, as they let algorithms propose videos as a function of the user’s browsing/viewing history or centers of interest. This practice gainsays the original utopia of accessibility. These algorithmic hurdles create user bubbles and hamper the discovery of cultural products. Creators who take a stance on political, economic, environmental or social issues are legitimately asking a simple question: “Is my message only seen by an already convinced audience?” If so, the message has to be sent to leap over algorithmic hurdles.

By definition, the mass media have broader, general (less targeted) audiences. The presence of creators from the digital realm on television is changing the perception of the TV industry, which can now be seen as a way to bypass algorithmic filtering — but only if a compromise is worked out without compromising one's self. Some media have taken the reverse route: adopting a strategy that, turned toward a niche instead of a mass market, incorporates digital procedures in traditional programming formats to appeal to audiences that cannot be reached by television. As examples, I might mention: Brut for journalism, Vice for documentaries or Colors for music.<sup>5</sup> Their points of attraction are the emancipation from traditional methods of promotion and the choice of a marketing approach based on a community instead of an authority. They are, by design, more demanding but also more penetrating.

By using highly reactive, flexible techniques to make videos and thanks to their familiarity with social networks, these new hybrid creators are proof (as if any were needed) that we can no longer reason using the opposition between the “mass” and “digital” media.

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<sup>5</sup> Respectively: <https://www.brut.media/fr>, <https://video.vice.com/fr> & <https://colorxstudios.com>.