

EXPERIENCE: MAPPING CONVERGENCE CULTURE WITH HENRY JENKINS



The questions that Henry Jenkins asks amount to a form of extreme media studies parkour. They are questions that a mapper and navigator at the moving edge of change would ask: What is this newly unfolding media landscape? Where is it coming from? Where is it headed? What is giving it such powerful momentum? What aspects of life-as-we-know-it are being rearranged along the way? What obstacles does it throw up to media designers and theorists? How might we act, as theorists and designers, with it, around it, through it?

Based on what he learned by asking such questions, Jenkins named this volatile new landscape Convergence Culture. Jenkins shows us how extreme media phenomena participate in the making of convergence culture. And we can watch his experimental thinking in action as he tries to understand its emerging media landscape.

His detailed mappings of convergence culture appear in his book: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006). This book is a rich illustration of one person's attempt at extreme media studies parkour. We watch as Jenkins finds new ways to understand media by mapping, navigating, and forecasting this extreme media phenomenon while it is still in the process of unfolding.

Embedded in Jenkins' study of convergence culture is an implied diagram of the forces behind it, its here & now realities, and scenarios of its potential futures. We've created a FLASHPOINT to make Jenkins' mapping visible.

The term "media convergence" has been around for some time. It refers to the sense some theorists have had that media forms and devices are combining in ways that will culminate in a single device. Supposedly, this device will do everything for us: computer-television-phone-book-analogue-digital-film-game-PDA-GPS. But Jenkins has another view. He insists that the force driving convergence culture is not the simple combination of static devices, but rather, complex cultural processes and transitions.

For Jenkins, the major feature of convergence culture that we must pay attention to is that it is a media landscape in motion. Its motion is disorienting. Its features are evolving. This landscape is a process, not a thing or an endpoint. Its media are undergoing a rapid transition from familiar to unimaginable forms, contents, protocols. Here, old media are shifting, but not disappearing. We are, he both warns and celebrates, in a period of prolonged transition. It is a massive cultural and economic shift driven by audiences and their changing relationship to producers and content.

How did media landscapes of today break loose from their moorings and head off in such unpredictable directions? Jenkins maps the background to convergence culture's here & now with a series of case studies. The "lens", or perspective that he uses for surveying emerging territory is the localized look: specific instances of the huge movements that are propelling convergence culture. Looking back in time from local case studies, he maps the forces that have set specific neighborhoods within the broader media landscapes in motion: forces such as technological innovation (new portability of computer and telecommunication devices, digitization), industry change (proliferation of channels, cross-media ownership), cultural shifts (consumers become producers, the end of consumer loyalty to one medium or channel).

This rushing river of change has swept up those who would harness it for business, activist, social, or aesthetic purposes. In each case study, Jenkins shows how particular groups have tried to serve their own interests by steering what is driving convergence culture. Some have been more successful than others.

Jenkins takes what he learns from tracing the forces that unleashed today's here & now of convergence culture, and uses it to forecast how various groups might direct the flow of media change into the future.

He arrives at a series of possible scenarios for the future of convergence culture. These include: Participatory culture, collective intelligence, trans-media flows of content across multiple media platforms, consumption communities.