Participation and Play in Converging Media

Institutional Perspectives and Text-user Relations

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Some future scenarios and main working concepts are currently being reassessed in research on the digital media. Strongly optimistic and technologically deterministic notions of what digitalisation and convergence will do to society and culture are in for widespread criticism. As business interests come to the fore, it becomes more clear that output and use are going to be shaped by the fact that digital media, too, are cultural industries. Mechanisms familiar from these industries have started to make themselves more felt in digital media production: institutional concentration, greater marketisation, and routinisations of production. At the same time, broadcast media find themselves increasingly caught up in the flexible, network-oriented world of digital media.

This industrial convergence of broadcast and digital media is reflected in certain contemporary concerns of academic terminology. Core concepts such as "convergence" and "interactivity" seem to have lost some of their currency. They increasingly look like catch-all phrases whose promise to deliver something truly new now seems to cover up a lack of conceptual and analytical precision. There is reason to believe that "user freedom" and "active participation" should neither be seen as something uniquely new nor conceived in opposition to institutional constraints. Increasingly the institutions are in the business of planning for a wide range of non-professional participation through new technology, and channelling it in ways that strengthen their market position, their legitimacy, and their need for revenue. Issues for instance of empowerment and access are still vitally important; the challenge may be to consider how thoroughly the industry is implicated in their realisation.

The situation seems to call for contributions that look more closely at media-institutional perspectives on convergence, developing them to find new conceptual resources and re-examining existing ones.

Participation and Play in Converging Media (PaP) seeks to chart and conceptualise processes of convergence between broadcasting and digital media. It does so by investigating cross-media formats and other types of hybrid output in the process of being established. It seeks to develop new conceptual resources that are applicable across the proliferation of media platforms, and that address the issues of cooperation and interdependency between them. The project employs an inclusive form of media-institutional approach, bringing together research on broadcasting and digital media. In terms of empirical investigation the project charts institutional processes; how regulatory frameworks, industry structures and policies feed into production, which again shapes output and use. It includes analyses of text-user relations, with a view to understanding these relations in light of the institutional processes that planned and designed them. Also of particular interest is the issue of active audiencehood, which both changes and grows in salience with the growth of formats for non-professional participation.

The project's main conceptual foci are phenomena of participation and play. Both promise to be of crucial interest as the various broadcasting/digital media hybrids establish themselves. Elements of non-professional participation and play have a long tradition in the broadcast media, but have become increasingly prominent as broadcasting converges with digital media. Participation makes for output with a wide appeal, while games are well suited for customising and for generating revenue through telephony charges. This makes it attractive for media institutions to cross-pollinate with the rapidly expanding gaming industry. Interfaces that allow for ever more comprehensive interaction between media professionals and non-professional users/participants seem to become more important both to legitimacy, revenue and competitive force. Hence par-

ticipation and playing may be seen not merely as something users and audiences might want to do, but just as importantly as something the industry sees fit to prioritise, now and in the future.

The main aim of the proposed research project is

- *to chart and conceptualise non-professional participation and game features in hybrid media that combine features from broadcasting with features from digital, personal and mobile media.*

More specifically, the aim is:

- to investigate the way that *modes of participation and play in broadcasting/digital media hybrids are shaped by the media-institutional context*

- to *investigate concrete text-user relations* with their design and interfaces as a point of reference

- to *provide a more comprehensive empirical base* for understanding developments in non-professional participation.

- to *contribute to theoretical and conceptual development* in the area of convergence between broadcasting and digital media

Joint Research Activities

- The *audience participation survey project* (Karlsen, Sundet, Syvertsen, Ytreberg). Current research on media participation lacks large-scale empirical work on the actual extent and forms of audience participation, both through digital media and through more traditional means such as being an interviewee or part of a studio audience. PaP has conducted a survey on participation in Norwegian television, using a nationally representative sample of respondents. Both participation through digital media and by more traditional means are included. Publication from this research will focus on the extent and roles of actual participation, and discuss background variables such as gender, income and age. It will look particularly into the characteristics and preferences of high-activity, repeat participants.

- The *media elites project* (Enli, Maasø, Sundet, Syvertsen, Ytreberg). This is based on 45 structured interviews with Norwegian media industry decision-makers in broadcasting and digital media sectors. Questions revolve around the supply of participation-based formats and output, constraints and drivers in the industry, predictions of future development and informants'

notions of the participating audience. Publications will use this empirical material to discuss media industry mechanisms, issues of regulation, organisation, production and design. The audience participation project and the media elite project have been designed so as to make possible comparative discussions between them.

- The *scenario project* (Fagerjord, Karlsen, Maasø, Storsul, Syvertsen). During PaP's first project year, the concept of "scenario" emerged as an important one for understanding how media elites and policy-makers conceive of future developments. Concrete decision-makings and resource allocations seem to spring from such more basic conceptions of the future. The project aims to investigate how scenarios for future media participation are picked up, developed and put into practice in the media industries.

- The *SMS-TV project* (Beyer, Enli, Maasø, Ytreberg). This project concerns the convergence of television and telephony, as evidenced in the spread of television formats that feature audience participating through SMS and MMS messaging. The project's empirical material is Norwegian, exploiting the fact that Norway is an international leader in the convergence of television and telephony. However it also aims for an understanding of SMS-based TV as an international phenomenon, looking into the general shifts it may herald in areas of financing, production, design and mediated interaction.

- The "*Dialogic mass media*" project. This 3-year project starts up in 2006, is headed by Anders Fagerjord and Tanja Storsul and funded by the University of Oslo. "Dialogic mass media" refers to a number of digital media technologies in which the receiver is also a sender and therefore able to engage in new dialogue. Web and online games are typical examples. The project investigates dialogic mass media conceptually and empirically. Two Ph.D stipends have been advertised on new political arenas in dialogic mass media such as web sites/blogs, and on multi-player computer games.

Some Aims of the Project

- *Exploring joint research and writing*. Activity in the project is based on various constellations of people working on joint projects. In PaP, as in many collaborative media research initiatives, individual projects have varying degrees of affiliation with the main project frame. Their role

vis-à-vis PaP is to develop and contribute specialised insight analytically, theoretically and conceptually, feeding that insight into joint projects and into developing the main frame.

- *Exploring student participation in the project*. The project has recruited a group of master students. They write theses on PaP-related subjects, work as research assistants, generate empirical material for the project and contribute to the project's academic publishing. So far, students have presented at international conferences, gained co-credits on academic articles and carried out interviews that are published on the PaP web page.

- *Media industry collaboration*. Arnt Maasø's and Anders Fagerjord's projects aim for collaborations with television and web industry partners respectively. They are looking to act as consultants in connection with the development of innovative formats and design solutions in areas relevant to their research interests.

- *Training and recruitment for research and project management*. The work on joint research and publication works as a training-ground for junior researchers, particularly for the project's two Ph.D candidates. Joint projects and regular project seminars work to provide a forum for discussing not academic issues, aims, roles, and careers. Since the PaP project started, its two post-doctoral researchers have both secured posts as associate professors. These two now head the joint project "Dialogic mass media", whose research agenda is closely related to that of PaP. Two PaP researchers have moved on to PaP Ph.D stipends.

- *Internationalisation*. The project's main planned publishing outlet is in international refereed journals. Researchers are active in the international ESF and COST research networks. Funding has been secured from the European Science Foundation for an international research seminar in Fall 2006.

- *Dissemination of research*. A colloquium for media industry representatives was held in 2003; one for researchers is planned for 2006. A regular open seminar has been offered throughout most of the project period, from 2005 in collaboration with other digital media research units within the University of Oslo. For 2006 and 2007, 3 seminars are planned that disseminate findings and provide a discussion arena for researchers, students, informants and industry representatives.

Selected publications

Aslama, Minna; Syvertsen, Trine: 'Public Service Broadcasting and New Technologies: Marginalization or Remonopolization?' Forthcoming in the DeBens, Els (ed.) *Media Between Commerce and Culture*. Bristol: Intellect.

Beyer, Yngvil; Enli, Gunn; Maasø, Arnt; Ytreberg, Espen: 'Small Talk Makes a Big Difference: Recent Developments in Interactive, SMS-based Television'. Forthcoming in *Television and New Media*.

Enli, Gunn (2005): 'Fenomenet SMS-TV. Institusjonelle strategier og semiprivat interaksjon'. *Norsk Medietidsskrift* 2005; 12 (2): 116-135

Fagerjord, Anders; Karlsen, Faltin; Maasø, Arnt; Storsul, Tanja; Syvertsen, Trine (2005): 'Vennlige visjoner for digital-tv: NTVs framtidsbeskrivelse som retorikk'. *Norsk Medietidsskrift* 2005; 12(2): 94-115

Fagerjord, Anders (2005): Prescripts: Authoring With Templates. *Kairos* 10.1.

Karlsen, Faltin. 'Media Complexity and User Diversity: Thoughts on a taxonomy of users of multiuser online games' Proceedings from the conference 'Other Players'; 06.12. - 08.12.2004. Published: *http://www.itu.dk/op/proceedings.htm*

Skjøtskift, Tor Brekke: 'Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Stretchtext'. Proceedings from the 'Hypertext' conference, Salzburg 07.09 - 09.09.2005. Published: http://portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=1083356.1083416

Storsul, Tanja; Sundet, Vilde S. (2006) 'Digital terrestrial television in Scandinavia'. Forthcoming in Fausto Colombo (ed.) *Digitalizing television*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero.

Syvertsen, Trine (2004) 'Citizens, audiences, customers and players. A conceptual discussion of the relationship between broadcasters and their publics'. *International journal of cultural studies*. Vol. 7:3; 363-380

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Ytreberg, Espen (2004): 'Formatting participation within broadcast media production'. *Media Culture & Society* 26(5): 677-692.

Basic project information

The project period is 01.01.03 – 15.07.07. Funding is provided by the Norwegian Research Council, to the sum of 5,4 million Norwegian kroner. Additional financial support for affiliated projects comes from the Norwegian Council for Applied Media Research, the Faculty of Humanities and the University of Oslo. The project is headed by professors Espen Ytreberg and Trine Syvertsen. It includes researcher Vilde Schanke Sundet, Ph.D researchers Gunn Enli and Faltin Karlsen, associate professors Arnt Maasø, Tanja Storsul and Anders Fagerjord. 6 master students are currently affiliated with the project. All are based at the Department of media and communication, University of Oslo.

The project web site contains further information on individual and joint research activities, as well as published interviews and a project CV. It has a briefer English-language section. See: http://www.media.uio.no/prosjekter/pap/

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