Post-TV: Piracy, Cord-Cutting, and the Future of Television

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Book Review

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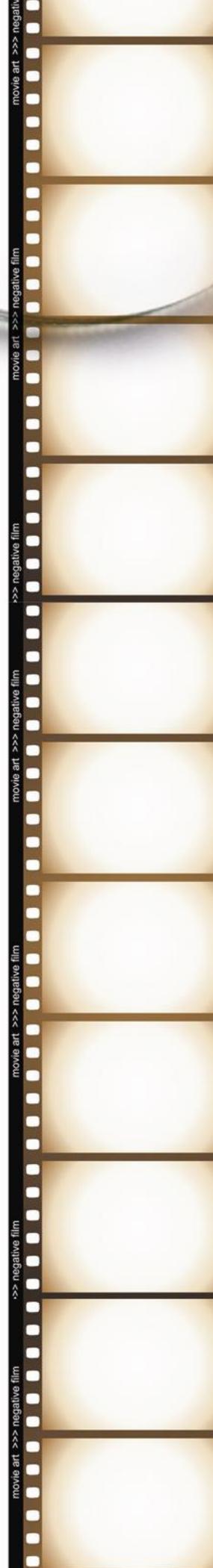
Post-TV: Piracy, Cord-Cutting, and the Future of Television

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In the recent *Post-TV: Piracy, Cord-Cutting, and the Future of Television*, lecturer in Communication Studies Michael Strangelove presents an overview of today's fundamental re-definition of the medium once known as television. The purpose of the author is to explore the audience's rapidly changing relationship to television in the Internet era, and to analyse how this shift is affecting the re-working of both the television industry practices, as well as, the media landscape in general. The text provides critical insights on the more disruptive forms of online audience behaviours, such the current and fast-developing phenomena of digital piracy and cord-cutting, which are critically framed within the broader context of the so-called post-television world. In a nutshell, Strangelove sheds light on those changes in television technology, media businesses, industry structures and audience habits that are shaping today's post-television culture.

Using an audience's perspective, the author addresses the political economic dynamics derived from the clashing and convergence of worlds once disconnected: the telecommunication industry; television, in the sense of media programmers, broadcasters and distributors; and the Internet industry. Although these processes are globally revolutionizing the media sector, *Post-TV* focuses primarily on the television system in the U.S. and Canada, touching only on a second instance issues concerning the U.S. film industry. While the book was published only a few months ago, the media landscape and especially the television ecosystem are in such constant transition that the data and researches employed by the author may soon become outdated. Nevertheless, the relevance of this work lies actually on its novelty and on the fact that it investigates contemporary and crucially important phenomena like digital piracy and cord-cutting. In this sense, the insistence

on addressing almost un-explored topics opens up the floor for further research on the potentially disruptive effects of these online fringe audiences and their newfound viewing behaviours.

Processes of digitization and media convergence have not only revolutionized the way television content is produced, distributed and accessed, but they also accelerated major shifts in the dimension of power and control of television, offering those on the margins effective ways of circumventing and even undermining top-down concentrated television industries (Uricchio 2006). Strangelove addresses digital pirates and cord-cutters exactly as 'those people on the margins,' in other words, those rebellious online audience that emerge as counter-forces against the established television industry practices. These proactive viewers are increasingly seeking for a customizable and multimedia television experience, in the attempt to realize the mantra that media professionals and journalists have been uttering in the past decade: "whatever show you want, whenever you want, on whatever screen you want" (Lotz). In other words they demand a personalized television menu, prêt-à-porter, and possibly for a good price deal. Whereas the author avoids making any predictions upon the future of television, underlying his work emerges a quite optimistic – and almost biased - vision of the potential of the Internet and of digital pirates and cable cord-cutters that are depicted as the pioneers of a post-television era. These viewers indeed are not only legitimating newfound behaviours, but they are also challenging both the traditional notion of television, and the oligopolistic playground of the incumbent broadcasters and distributors. In this sense, Strangelove aims at emphasizing television constraining forces that continue to be confounded by the countermoves of growingly independent audiences who are far more disruptive and autonomous than the offline of the twentieth century (p. 231).

The effects of such online fringe audiences are analysed in the context of the entertainment industry, with a particular focus on sports television digital piracy, which constitutes one of the most controversial cases. Moreover, they are historically contextualised in the broader cultural, social and political economic framework that leads to the construction of the so-called post-television society. Within this scenario, the book covers a vast array of issues, ranging from political economic analysis of online audiences and the relative disintermediation of distributors, to more socio-cultural issues of media diversity and democratization processes in a globally connected world. On the one hand this variety reflects a far-reaching project, on the other though; it might lead to overlook the different nuances of such complex and multifaceted environment, which are more clearly debated only in the conclusions of the book.

Finally, the book's conclusion contrasts the fears that the Internet will merely reproduce dominant systems of power, arguing that the previously fringe aspect of television viewing like digital piracy and cord-cutting, are increasingly affecting the socio-cultural and economic context of television. Thus, even though the degree to which any of these activities will become mainstream remains to be seen, to some extent the effects of such changing behaviours are already visible as it appears that the oligopolistic media system is losing control over audience and content, and it is unable to adapt quickly (p. 242). All this comes to a price though. We should keep in mind that in our post-television culture, the digital environment and its collection of technology-enabled forces does enable circumvention and increased freedom of choices, but at the same time, it also ensures expanded surveillance capabilities, and in the end, government and industry still largely structure online television viewing. Furthermore, issues of power and control nowadays go even beyond audience and industry practices, involving the capabilities of the so-called adaptive agent technologies (Uricchio 2004), and the relatively unexplored power of the algorithm (Beer 2009).

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