



## Report

**Media is one system**

20/01/2011  
Faris Yakob



A dynamic system  
Creative Commons, labgust (2009) ©

**Scope**

Technology has changed the nature, speed and relative scarcity of media. As well as reminding us that media is inherently social, 'social media' has begun to dissolve the delineations that we perceive between channels, driving the 'socialisation' of mainstream media and indicating how the mediascape should be understood as a system of interoperating real-time parts.

----

Kevin Kelly, the founder of *Wired* and author of recent book *What Technology Wants* has long posited the idea of 'One Machine' (1) as the next step in the evolution of technology; a single platform with the web as its initial operating system. Thereafter, every new device simply provides another window into that machine.

Media could be understood to follow a similar convergent trajectory. Digital media strips content from its distribution platform, rendering everything as ones and zeroes, which means, as all media inexorably becomes 'digital' it will be increasingly platform-agnostic. Content flows across what we previously thought of as channels, and different parts of the system can affect change in other parts in as-near-as-makes-no-difference-to-real time.

Until digitisation made things even more confusing, what we called 'media' were themselves assemblages of other things. So 'television' isn't actually a clearly defined thing - it's a socio-cultural construct of a kind of content, a distribution platform and a consumption device.

Books, magazines and radio all work the same way. A book is a bunch of words printed on paper, with a certain set of culturally-defined ideas that float around it.

Up until digitalness, you couldn't separate the content from the distribution platform - digital content can be 'unbundled'.

When IBM started talking about the [brave new world](#) of "platform-agnostic content and the fluid mobility of media experiences" (2) in 2006, we weren't really there yet.

Media companies now face the challenge of redefining themselves in a digital world. Previously, they were defined primarily by their distribution platform – a magazine like *Vogue* is, well, a magazine.

In a converged world, *Vogue* may make videos and put them online, or into an iPad experience. How, then, are they different to any other media company – a television station or website publisher?

*The Guardian* have long been working around this, redefining themselves as the 'World's leading liberal voice' – a [larger proposition](#) than being a daily liberal newspaper in the UK (3) which replaces distribution channel with a global community.

But everyone who works with media has to recognise the same challenge.

**The socialisation of media**

Media are inherently social, in the most literal and economic sense. A medium is a conduit for ideas between people. Media have the tendency to operate like solidarity goods – a permanent economic class of goods that get more valuable the more they are consumed.

'Social media' - that which is created by the many, rather than the few - has been a long time coming. Henry Jenkins established the blurring of media modalities in 2006 (4). In a digital world of democratised creative tools and access, everyone who consumes can create and everyone who receives can broadcast.

But it wasn't until 'creation' was whittled down to 140 characters and clipped fragments of the web, as with Twitter and Tumblr, that it became obvious that since everyone was talking and sharing, people were expecting everything else to move in sympathy.

In January 2011, Twitter's new CEO nailed the [company's long-term vision](#) to "instantly connect people everywhere to what's most important to them." (5)

The harbinger of the real time web did more than drive Google to adopt real-time, and then instant, search. One of the key tenets of the Media System approach is that every new channel changes the entire system. So, because

YouTube exists, how we think about 'television' has to change. Regardless of whether or not your campaign has a digital component – the world does.

**"I don't know what TV is anymore."**

The greatest effect of Twitter on the system, however, has been to bring down cultural latency to almost zero.

Jay Leno (7)

**Cultural latency** (6) is a function of the speed of information as it moves through culture. There is a correlation between the amount of time it takes to distribute something, and the amount of time it takes for that thing to have an effect, and consequently the amount of time that thing stays relevant and interesting.

Twitter changes the speed of culture. Information now disseminates so fast; millions of eyes connected to a real time information network, with a social drive to be first, are driving cultural latency down to zero.

It is this low latency media system that brands and culture operate within – it is not restricted to Twitter itself. Twitter provides a real-time return path, a low latency way of interacting with other media.

#### Social TV

As mentioned above, television is an assemblage term, one that is only getting more confusing with the newly minted buzzphrase 'social TV.'

What is social TV? It is going to be one of the key semantic battlegrounds this year, as old and new media collide in the living room. The television industry, having defended its closed network thus far, has begun to realise that opening up to the rest of the system provides an opportunity to regain cultural salience and create more truly shared viewing experiences in real time – the **new water cooler effect**. (8)

People naturally use social media to find other people to watch with and to comment on shows. So, perhaps inevitably, these conversations begin to interact with the TV content. In fact, contrary to the prevailing discourse, it seems that multi-screen viewing and the ability to connect via the social web is driving an **increase in television viewing** (9), as people use the secondary screens to enhance the content or social experience of viewing.

One of the earliest examples came from the MTV show *The Hills* with the Backchannel which let viewers exchange snarky comments in real time while watching the show.

A host of different start-ups have since emerged looking to formalise the grammar, and provide the preferred platform for social TV.

Some, like **Starling**, are looking to enhance the real-time viewing experience, letting you share short comments about what you are watching, that become social objects shared on Facebook or Twitter. Others, like **Miso** (which Google Ventures invested in) and **Philo** export the check-in behaviour from Foursquare, letting you check into shows to earn points and badges.

#### Incorporate the audience

Reflecting the One Machine nature of media is increasingly a way of creating adaptive content experiences that leverage social content and garner the authority of the crowd for brands.

Pulling live tweets into digital content is as simple as parsing an XML feed. Banners began to pull in tweets. **Trident** ran a print ad featuring real tweets. Wheat Thins ran a campaign of YouTube videos in which they tracked down fans who'd mentioned them on Twitter and dropped a truckload of crackers on them.

Then, Old Spice upped the ante – over the course of two days, nearly 200 personal video responses to fan tweets were created.

In the UK, Orange created 'Singing Tweetgrams' – turning selected tweets into a cappella songs – which they followed up with 'Secret Portraits', portraits of influential Twitter users based on their tweets. Elsewhere the Swedish singer Robyn created an online music video that dynamically incorporated tweets featuring the **#killingme** hashtag.

#### Beyond the tweet

However, this isn't simply about pulling tweets into other channels. That's just been one of the easiest ways to create dynamic content experiences that react to changes in the system. The larger opportunity comes from understanding that media IS one system, and that people like it when brands respond to them, publicly.

**"One of the key tenets of the Media System approach is that every new channel changes the entire system."**

We can entirely reverse the historical polarity of advertising media. Rather than trickle down television, we build up from fragments of many conversations, crafting broadcast stories around real people. One example of this way of thinking is the Domino's Turnaround campaign [full disclosure – CPB is an MDC Partners agency]. The campaign started with real customers in focus groups expressing why they don't like Domino's Pizza. This led to a new pizza recipe and an advertising campaign centered on finding the focus group attendees and taking them the new recipe as thanks for their honest response.

This reversed polarity mentality spread to the packaging (**Pizza Proverbs**) and **the menus**, which were user-submitted pictures rather than staged food shots. A similar reversed polarity is at the heart of **Pepsi Refresh** – taking real people and their stories and making those the heart of the mass media campaign.

The key thing is for brands to listen to what people are saying and then incorporate them, and solutions and surprises to delight them, into content and behaviour.

#### Sources

- 1 Kevin Kelly, 'Dimensions of the One Machine', kk.org, November 2007. Available [here](#)
- 2 Berman, Shipnuck, Duffy, 'The end of TV as we know it: a future industry perspective', ibm.com. Available [here](#)
- 3 Faris Jakob, 'What is a media company?', 15 January 2007. Available [here](#)
- 4 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*
- 5 Ben Parr, 'Twitter's new CEO finally nails down the company's long term vision', 10 January 2011. Available [here](#)
- 6 Faris Jakob, 'Cultural latency', 1 July 2009, fastcompany.com. Available [here](#)
- 7 Scott Collins, 'Is the Jay Leno show NBC's cheap shot?', 14 September 2009, latimes.com. Available [here](#)
- 8 Brian Stelter, 'Water-Cooler effect: Internet Can Be TV's Friend', 23 February 2010, nytimes.com. Available [here](#)
- 9 [2-screen.com](#)

#### Further reading

[starling.tv](#)  
[gomiso.com](#)  
[playphilo.com](#)  
[pizzaproverbs.com](#)  
[showusyourpizza.com](#)  
[refresheverything.com](#)  
[adweek.com](#)  
[mashable.com](#)  
[robyn.com/killingme/](#)

[mtv.com](#)  
[clickz.com](#)

#### Related on Canvas8

Dale Herigstad, 'The viewer owns the screen', 6 January 2011. Available [here](#)

Debbi Evans, 'Tvister', 16 December 2010. Available [here](#)

Jack Farrelly, 'Live TV and social media', 21 October 2010. Available [here](#)

Jack Farrelly, 'View2gether and social viewing', 11 August 2010. Available [here](#)

Alan Moore, 'The brand as transmedia story', 23 June 2010. Available [here](#)

Dipak Nayar, 'Pedro & Maria', 22 April 2010. Available [here](#)

Dipak Nayar, 'Football3s', 3 March 2010. Available [here](#)



#### Faris Yakob

Faris is Chief Innovation Officer at MDC Partners, where he is trying to make everything more awesome. In previous roles at McCann-Erickson and Naked Communications he worked on clients including Nikon, Google and Sony.

[View full profile](#)

---

<b>Industry</b>	<a href="#">Advertising &amp; branding</a> <a href="#">Behaviour Communications</a> <a href="#">Media &amp; entertainment</a> <a href="#">Technology</a>
<b>Location</b>	<a href="#">Global</a>
<b>Keywords</b>	<a href="#">Blended Reality</a> <a href="#">Twitter</a> <a href="#">Channel Silo</a>

---