

Interview – Diálogos Midiológicos 33

‘Convergence and connection are what pushes the media now’

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Interview given to:

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Henry Jenkins is one of the most influential media researchers nowadays. Since 2009, Jenkins is a Professor of Communication, Journalism and Movie Arts at University of Southern California (USC). Between 1993 e 2009, he was the director of the Program of Compared Media Studies at MIT. He is author and/or editor of 12 books about media and popular culture, as: *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (1992), *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (1998); *Democracy and New Media* (2003); *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) [translated in Brazil as *Cultura da Convergência*, published in 2008 by Aleph]; *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (2006); and others. He



also is co-author of the book *Spreadable Media* (2013), translated in Brazil as *Cultura da Conexão* and published in 2004 by Aleph, with Sam Ford e Joshua Green. He has a degree in Political Sciences and Journalism from the Georgia State University, has master's degree in Communication Studies by University from the Iowa and a PhD degree in Communication Arts from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In this interview, Jenkins thinks about convergence and media connections, the influence of media – specially social media – in civil and political societies, besides talking about some challenges of the Communication field in contemporary context. See below the main parts:

Revista Intercom – *The information from the new media and traditional Medias complement each other and often clash. How do consumers of information fit into this new dynamic? What are the main advantages of this new configuration?*

Henry Jenkins – Keep in mind that there is NOTHING is stable about this particular configuration. Everything here is in flux; nothing is predetermined as we think, as this is a moment of prolonged and profound media transition. It is also worth noting that these changes are playing out differently in different national context. I offer this as a warning because you are drawing here language from *Convergence Culture* which I wrote 12 years ago and regard to the U.S. context, and I know just enough about how media change is playing out in contemporary Brazil to know that there are significant differences you would need to factor into your analysis. With that said, the core dynamic of an ever more concentrated mass media and a more participatory networked Communication playing against each other remains fundamental to understanding the situation today. The Mass media industry is learning how to incorporate aspects of a more participatory audience into their core practices – engagement has become a core currency that the industry uses to measure success (with the audience more and more fragmented across multiple media platforms and with social media strategies built into the design of most programming strategies). Some of the push for a more participatory culture has been done in conjunction with the Web 2.0 strategies which seek to contain and commodify the public's desire to have a greater voice in decisions impacting media production and circulation. We've seen, as *Convergence Culture* predicted, skills that emerged through games and recreational media consumption leading more and more political life (which is a core theme of my upcoming *By Any Media Necessary* book). As a result, for example, #blacklivesmatter, has been effective at getting issues into the international agenda and calling out ways that media trivialize or distort news about racial politics, though we are also seeing frightening signs of reaction against racial and ethnic minorities emerging in the context of our current presidential election, which also suggest the shifts in media power I am describing. And we

see phenomenon such as #gamergate, which uses social media to exert mob violence against people who speak up against the lack of diversity in mainstream media. My goal with *Convergence Culture* was to show people ways of doing analysis across media platforms, looking at the set of relationships between different kinds of media, and I would argue this kind of analysis is more and more essential if we are going to understand what's happening in the world today.

Revista Intercom – *Social demands can be communicated and shared quickly through contemporary social media. How can this spreading change the agenda of the major Medias?*

Jenkins – As we look at what's happening in the campaign for the U.S. Presidency right now, both parties are shaped heavily by agendas that are bubbling bottom up through social media. Someone has said that Donald Trump is what you would get if the forum comments on YouTube came to life and walked the Earth, and there's some truth to this. He is all Id and he has consistently pushed the news coverage of the campaign through his late night tweets, saying things that would never fly in an era where broadcast television determined what it was "reasonable" to say. And he seems to continue to be a front-runner, albeit one with a small minority of supporters, despite whatever he says. On the democratic side, we can see issues like immigration reform pushed by the Dreamer movements, radicalized police violence pushed by Black Lives Matter, income inequality pushed by Occupy Wall Street, and drug reform pushed by various grassroots movements, all taking center stage at the debate. This whole campaign would be playing out radically differently in a world where there was no social media. The same thing seems to be happening on network television, where shows with minority casts are suddenly bouncing to the top ranks in ratings, confounding long-standing industry assumptions, in part because of the ability to publicize and mobilize audiences via social media. Does this make the power of Big money disappear from politics or Big Media from the entertainment industry? No, of course not. We are simply seeing a counter-pressure exerted on these institutions.

Revista Intercom – *Is it possible to say that the mediated society is a result – and also feeds – the connection culture and convergence processes?*

Jenkins – I don't know how to answer this because I don't know how to separate out the two sides of your equation here. Convergence and connection are what drives media right now and what insures that media matters at all levels, from the most micro and hyperlocal to the most macro. If our society is mediated, it is BECAUSE of convergence

and connection, because all aspects of our lives are touched by media and because more and more of us have the capacity to communicate our ideas across multiple media channels.

Revista Intercom – *The convergence can be configured as contents flow, by operational point of view, but can also define marketing, social and cultural transformations, by the procedural point of view. What were the main conceptual changes in the field of Communication, after the expansion of the convergence and connection culture?*

Jenkins – For starters, it is much harder to draw classic distinctions between interpersonal, organizational, and mass Communications, for example, when social media and broadcast media interface in ever more complex ways and when content can flow from a hyper-personal network into a larger forum at the click of a mouse. For another, it becomes clearer and clearer that all events are media events insofar as that what matters has as much to do with how they are covered and how they impact discursive flows as it does with what “actually happens” in the real world. Every event has the potential to be absorbed into multiple conversations, reframed as it gets repackaged and recirculated, redefined as they get transformed into a meme on the one hand or translated into broadcast content on the other. All of this means that Communication studies needs to be attentive to many different levels of Communication that may be taking place all at once, requiring more sophisticated tools for cross-media analysis.

Revista Intercom – *How important are government and educational institutions in supporting the facilitation of the access to “environment of spreadability” for the formation of a informed and engaged society?*

Jenkins – Let’s start by defining what would constitute an ideal environment for spreadability. First, it would be one where there is greater public access to the means of cultural production and circulation. There would be opportunities for networks of people to work through problems together by sharing resources and insights. The public has the skills and infrastructure needed to meaningfully participate in such exchanges. There would be a sense that participation matters and thus social supports would be in place to allow more diverse voices to be heard. And there would be a way to translate voice into influence over core decisions that impact people’s everyday lives. For me, these are the expectations citizens should have in a democratic society. We should not assume that new media technologies are inherently democratizing. Rather, we should see them as tools by which we can struggle to more fully achieve the potentials of a more diverse and democratic society. Our task as media scholars is in part to identify places where we fall short of these ideals as well as

point to examples where some of the potentials of a more diverse, more participatory culture have been achieved. Some of these have to do with technological obstacles, which require help at the level of the infrastructure. Some of these have to do with issues of net neutrality, which depend on governmental policies to insure that grassroots movements or individuals are not limited in their ability to gain greater visibility than corporate players. Some of these have to do with access to skills, resources, mentorship, opportunities, etc., which are often issues of access to education and schools and other learning institutions have crucial roles to play in addressing these problems. Some of them have to do with the ways systemic and structural inequalities around race, class, gender, etc., are reproducing themselves in the digital environment, and these struggles need to be understood as part of larger struggles for social justice. Understood in those terms, then, what roles should government and educational institutions play in insuring that a society has the preconditions that enable democracy to work? There are again cultural specificities in the ways that we answer that question. But, public education has historically been understood first and foremost as a means of insuring the broadest possible access to the skills and knowledge necessarily to meaningfully participate in civic life. We might expect, therefore, that in the digital age, educational institutions have a role to play in fostering media literacy skills, in providing opportunities for young people to assert and exercise their voices, in insuring that youth have the mentorship they need to find their way into networks that are going to be productive outlets for their creative energies and social needs, and in fostering serious reflection about the ethical norms which can allow a diverse society to respect all participants and to take ownership over the quality of the information they put into circulation. And governments need to play an active role in insuring the broadest access to the technical infrastructure upon which participation depends and in insuring the freedom of expression needed for a diverse group of people to tell their stories, assert their truths, and express their needs.

Revista Intercom – *Technological innovations and the Communication and cultural transformations often make some concepts obsolete in a short time. In your ongoing projects, is it possible to visualize conceptual and procedural innovations – Communication Field – in the near future?*

Jenkins – I am much better at describing what is happening now than at predicting with any particularity what is happening next. If *Convergence Culture* still gets read more than a decade after I wrote it, it is because it offers a broad description of the dynamics that are impacting the Communication environment – such as the struggles over our terms of participation discussed above – rather than any specific claims it makes about particular technologies and practices. The case studies are there to illustrate larger dynamics: they

are also the signs which allow me to locate broader patterns. The sequence of my recent books map a shifting terrain – from convergence and transmedia to spreadable media to now a focus on the impact of these core ideas on political participation – from production/reception to circulation to mobilization. I think the real challenge for the near term is how to govern in this era of fragmented societies and media. On the political level, we have more and more examples of everyday people asserting their voices in public affairs and more and more examples of collective mobilization around popular causes, but has this translated into greater influence over the government? Many of the activists we interviewed for *By Any Media Necessary* would say not – they see the government as broken and are seeking change through educational or cultural means. On the cultural level, the question is whether we can achieve a more diverse media by allowing more different kinds of people to share their stories. The core debate is still apt to be around the terms of our participation, whether in the form of IP reform or net neutrality or privacy or... The key fights will have to do with terms of service and whether top-down corporate imperatives and bottom-up social demands will ultimately shape what kind of media system we operate within.

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