

Convergence

What does convergence mean?

If you look up the dictionary definition of 'converge' you will find something like 'to move towards or meet at one point'. 'Convergence' is the process of moving towards the same point, a coming together, often to create something new.

Convergence isn't a concept new to Media Studies. Think about the development of cinema: Photographs were first, then a series of linked photographs giving the illusion of movement (film), and then sound was added. Although now taken for granted, the basic technology behind cinema was once considered 'new technology'. The convergence of the various technologies allowed for a new whole.

Convergence and digital television

In terms of your exam, convergence is most usefully observed in digital television. Think about the recently separate technologies that are now important features of many television systems: Television pictures and sound; CD quality, surround sound; interactive, computer-style menus; an Internet connection. This is a very basic outline but as you can see these 'ingredients' lead to a much-enhanced experience. Instead of choosing one of five channels, you can now select from hundreds. Instead of watching a football match from the angle the channel selects, you can choose your own. You can even play along to some TV games shows. The expansion of choice doesn't end there. What about shopping, or banking? Or buying the music you've just been listening to? Convergence has benefits for the audience and the television provider.

The audience

People may complain about new technology that is too complicated and out of date quickly, but convergence generally means that the audience has more choice, or an enhanced experience, or both. Games consoles illustrate this point. You can have a machine that plays games. Or you can have a machine that plays games, CDs, shows DVD movies, allows you to edit your home video footage and put it on the internet for others to see, record your favourite television programme, connect you with others so you can play against them, and use the Internet. Or at least, in theory you can have a machine that does all this and more. Why? Largely because computer technology has seeped into almost every aspect of our lives. And the future? It won't be too long before your home has a wireless network delivering high quality digital media around your home with a high-speed Internet connection. Through this system you will be able to download and access music, films and information from any room in your house. If you think this sounds fanciful look up 'freestyle' or 'mira' on Microsoft's website.

These technologies will make this sort of integration possible, at the same time as significantly altering media consumption habits. Microsoft views the PC as the centre of this technology, whereas others, such as Moxi Digital, see the set top box as the answer. Whichever system becomes the accepted standard, the principal behind it is perhaps the ultimate example of convergence, with computer technology at the heart of the delivery and distribution of all your media consumption.

The institutions

Media institutions have grasped new technologies and the concept of convergence for the benefit of audiences, right? Wrong. One thing drives these institutions: money.

Sony is good example. In offering Playstation 3 it is doing more than selling a games console. It is selling a Sony Blu-Ray DVD player, a Sony stereo system and a Sony system capable of connecting with other Sony products, like a digital camera or a camcorder. If you have a Playstation 3, you can play music by artists signed to the Sony record label, possibly bought over the internet using the Playstation itself. Sony is seeking market dominance and brand loyalty, made easier through convergence. Just like the three letters in the corner of the screen when you watch a certain music channel, Sony products say 'Sony' on them so that you know who made it, as does everyone else. Convergence allows a widening of the range of products a company can sell. Who makes a television that works well with a Sony Playstation? In your exam mentioning Sony in any great detail may not be a good idea as everyone else may do the same. However, the principle is easy to see.

Convergence also allows media companies to enter new areas in which they may not have had a strong position. The internet concerns media institutions for a number of reasons. It isn't regulated, other people are making lots of money using it, and it provides entertainment in a way they don't usually operate. This list could be longer. Some companies have attempted to solve this problem through convergence, Sky for example. In some ways the internet takes custom from Sky in that people can be entertained in other ways. But what if you are using the Internet through your Sky Digital connection? Sky not only enters the Internet arena, it also finds out where you go, what you like to see and presumably then uses this information to modify its existing output. You pay Sky and it gets free market research. And not just that. News Corp., ultimate owner of Sky now owns MySpace. Not only is the technology convergent but so is the business model.

Summary

Convergence is important because it is a principle that allows the enhancement of many aspects of our lives. It is also important because in many ways it is the future of media studies. How can we consider a film without considering the computer technology used to create part or all of it? Or not look at the newspaper website in conjunction with the newspaper itself? Media companies are also investing heavily in convergent technology. Windows Vista looks likely to extend the reach of the home computer still further into the living rooms of the world. There's also the PlayStation 3 to consider, as well as mobile phones that can do more than ever, including take photographs, browse the internet, edit videos, and even make voice calls. As the technologies converge (move to one point) so the possibilities become wider.

Update

Since this article was written we have seen the emergence of PDAs, the iPod and the iPhone and similar devices. These are all further examples of how digital technology is converging. The iPhone in particular is a device which brings the web, photography, video/film and music technology together in one small portable device.

The development of the BBC's on-line service – Iplayer and similar offerings from other broadcasters is another recent example.

The way Media Studies students now have to present their production work on-line in a blog or website is a typical development resulting from the convergence of these technologies.