[Nick Couldry](#)

More sociology, more culture, more politics: or, a modest proposal for 'convergence' studies

Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk

MORE SOCIOLOGY, MORE CULTURE, MORE POLITICS:

OR, A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR 'CONVERGENCE' STUDIES

[6276 words]

NICK COULDRY, GOLDSMITHS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

The term 'convergence' identifies important shifts in media's material conditions, and many recent writers (from Henry Jenkins to Manuel Castells, Clay Shirky to Clearles Leadbeater) have seen in those conditions the leaping-off point for wider accounts of cultural social and political change. In this article, I want to suggest however that the term 'convergence *culture*' blurs important processes of differentiation and stratification and so blocks a better understanding of the politics of convergence. We need, I will argue, a better account of the sociology and culture of convergence if we are to grasp the political potential, positive or otherwise, of the processes we bundle together under that name.

I discuss Henry Jenkins' account of convergence culture in detail, first, because it has been one of the most prominent narratives we have so far of convergence, and second because seeing its limitations as an argument-*type* helps clarify what are the minimum conditions for an adequate understanding of the (possibly many and diverging) cultures of 'convergence'.

Debates about 'convergence' starts out from two premises. First, key features of the media environment are undergoing some crucial transformations. There is a huge expansion in types of media outlet and interface, and in content circulation across those interfaces. Many people outside media institutions are becoming involved in not just using but producing those interfaces. New forms of commentary (on the world, on media contents, and on others'

commentary on world or media) are springing up online. Underlying these new phenomena is a deeper shift in the economics of cultural production (Benkler 2006) that has its basis in the open architecture of the internet and the benefits that some degree of interactive production have so far seemed to have for large commercial players. Compared with the more closed architecture of earlier media, the internet provides a situation where any person in principle can have access to, and make inputs to, a vastly expanded media environment from any point in space. Today's media environment is not just saturated from particular directions but *supersaturated* from massively many directions, all in interaction with each other.

In other respects, it is worth remembering, media change is not so radical. Earlier claims that traditional media (television, radio, the press) will simply be replaced by 'new media' are wide of the mark, even if the traditional newspaper format is facing severe challenge. In the UK for example, the consolidation of high speed internet access for most of the UK population has been accompanied by an *increase* in television consumption (OFCOM 2009), alongside the obvious increase in internet consumption. Yet people are not increasing their time with media overall, so the explanation must be that multiple media are increasingly consumed concurrently (Woolard 2010). While overlapping consumption need not be convergent consumption (we can easily do unconnected things at the same time), the past five years have seen the emergence of new media habits *based around* convergence (the exchanging of television clips, mash-ups and commentary on YouTube is only the most obvious new habit). The digitalization of almost all media, enhanced downloading and uploading speeds, and the hypertext structure of all online space encourage convergent use. And, as Henry Jenkins rightly emphasises, intertextual linking and mutual commentary about media suit media industries at a time when they must compete ever more intensely for

tradable audience attention in this supersaturated environment without as yet clear models of economic sustainability online.

The second premise of debate on 'convergence culture' is that, as it unfolds, this media tumult will challenge established forms of organization across many domains, from political to cultural production, from corporate decision-making to marketing. But the status of this premise is much less clear than that of the first. Take politics, for example. Few would deny the prevailing *uncertainty* over the substance and sites of today's politics. Multiple forms of globalization have intersected with more specific political crises to put into question national governments' legitimacy and basic capacity to govern (Pharr and Putnam 2000; Sassen 2006; Fraser 2007). Meanwhile the social infrastructure of traditional forms of politics has, in countries such as the UK and USA, been in long-term decline (Turner 2001; Skocpol 2005). If national systems fail to provide the focus for a satisfactory politics, it is possible we will witness some rethinking of the 'politics of politics' (Beck 1997: 99; Balibar 2004: 114) and a rediscovery of 'ordinary politics' (Rosanvallon 2006; Bohman 2007). Possible, but as yet entirely uncertain.

Claims made to see already the direction of a new politics based on the first premise (undeniable shifts in the infrastructure of cultural production) are increasingly common: they range from sales pitches for new types of interface, to attempts to move on from unsatisfactory top-down models of politics, to revolutionary calls to arms: Shirky (2007), Leadbeater (2008), Hardt and Negri (2005). Henry Jenkins' convergence culture thesis falls somewhere in between, arguing that the social practices emerging from media convergence may provide important clues to emerging new forms of politics, or at least their social preconditions, but at the same time beckoning us with infectious optimism into the new world

of connected action he has uncovered through his extensive empirical work over the past decade. Prima facie Jenkins offers an evidence-based account of the new media environment's implications for wider culture and politics - an obvious advance on gestural accounts of change. My argument however will be that, by closing his interpretative circle too quickly and too easily, Jenkins ignores key factors of differentiation and stratification within processes of convergence and so risks a radical misreading of contemporary media's implications for wider culture and politics.

While the following discussion will be quite critical of the argument Jenkins develops, let me acknowledge right away that it is a bold book by an author whose work since *Textual Poachers* has been important for my own. Jenkins' book *Convergence Culture* tells us much of value about the types of cultural economy developing around particular entertainment products in an age of digital media and mobile audiences. In Chapter Two of the book Jenkins gives a vivid picture of the 'transmedia franchise' around products such as *American Idol* (61),[1] and the role of brand tie-ins in reality TV (69-73). His argument that loyal consumers are of great value to media corporations searching for stable advertising income is plausible and resonates to some extent with Joseph Turow's (2007) wider analysis of the changing economics of attention-selling in the media industries. None of this is in question. My aim instead is to identify an important limitation of existing accounts of 'convergence' of which Jenkins' book is at most symptomatic rather than uniquely responsible.[2]

My main focus will be Jenkins's claim that the habits of particular loyal media users will become typical, indeed exemplary, of the wider media audience, and that from this positive consequences flow for politics and public culture. A more adequate evidential base is needed, I suggest, than Jenkins provides. In discussing issues of evidence, two arguments will

intersect: one about what would be a good sociology of what's going on in contemporary media practice, and a second about what would be a good reading of the culture, or cultures, that are emerging from the sum of those practices. Underlying my specific critique is a belief that other more productive framings of convergence are possible.

Who are we talking about?

Jenkins' convergence culture thesis stands, or falls, first of all as a general claim about the transformations to the media environment currently under way. Jenkins moves us decisively on from the idea of a simple transition from old to new media. As media history has regularly taught us (with the emergence of the telephone, radio, television, and home computers), media, like other technologies, develop more often through overlaps and connections between old and new than through simple substitutions: the remediation logic of digital media (Bolter and Grusin 2001) makes such substitutions even less likely.[3] Prima facie, this undercuts the idea that a *single* convergence culture is emerging: why not expect something more diverse and fractured? Yet Jenkins' preference is for general prognosis. We have, he states, both 'a new media system' and 'a convergence culture' (3). The shifts under way are not a shift in technology, but 'a cultural shift' (3).

Before, however, we can move to questions of broader cultural analysis, we need to get clearer on what Henry Jenkins believes is going on with media at the level of sociological description. Sometimes Jenkins expresses this quite cautiously as a matter of 'old and new media interact[ing] in ever more complex ways' (6): who could disagree with that? More often, however, Jenkins' argument involves specific claims not just about technological interfaces but about what media audiences do. He defines 'convergence' as 'the flow of media

across multiple platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want' (2). His book, he writes, 'is about the work – and play – spectators perform in the new media system' (3). Here Jenkins (13-14) draws on Lisa Gitelman's important distinction between a medium as a technologically based delivery system and a medium as a set of 'associated protocols' (Gitelman 2008). Jenkins plausibly identifies the latter, as the place where convergence culture occurs. The term 'protocols' is useful, because it promises to capture the ordered way in which our practices in relation to media are changing, as users begin to deal with the interlocking functionalities of the multiple media devices in their lives (14-15). My analysis of Jenkins's argument will be framed within my wider argument for researching media 'as practice' developed elsewhere (Couldry 2004).

Where things become contentious is in Jenkins' interpretation of what changes are important. So he argues that a key feature of a world of convergent media is 'the social nature of contemporary knowledge construction' (20). Clearly, the opportunities for knowledge sharing have been greatly enhanced, especially in richer countries, by large majorities of the population having regular high-speed access to the web's networking capacities: even before the full growth of social networking sites, social reformers waxed lyrical about new forms of information sharing (Mayo and Steinberg 2007). But *how* social such processes are - and what *type* of sustained 'social' life they produce - is another question.

Here Jenkins reveals the rather curious angle from which he observes this undeniable growth in information sharing, that of specialist media fans: 'to *fully* experience any fictional world, consumers *must* assume the role of hunter gatherers . . . comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups [etc]' (21, added emphasis). But why should those who want to

'fully' experience fictional worlds be a particularly good guide to the general trends of 'convergence culture'? The claim cannot be that they are themselves typical of media consumers, since the key advance in fan studies in recent years has been to show that, for any media object, there is a spectrum of engagement and emotional investment, with each of us differently placed along that spectrum, depending on which object we take (Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998); Harrington and Bielby (1995)). Nor can the claim be that *because* entertainment fans go more deeply into certain popular cultural forms, they have a *privileged* vantage-point on culture as a whole; beyond a certain romantic populism, such a claim has little credibility. We need sociologically grounded reasons for privileging fans as cultural actors in the dynamics of wider convergence practice.

So how can Jenkins' claim to generalise from what particular fans do to wider trends in practice? To his credit Jenkins does not elide the difficulties. He acknowledges that he is studying 'early adopters' of convergence culture's opportunities who, as such, are 'disproportionately white, male, middle-class and college-educated' (23). Some of his examples focus indeed on 'the most hardcore fans, a contingent known as the "spoilers"' (25): a precondition for being a spoiler of *Survivor* is, he notes, having a lot of free time to devote to the arduous research and networking involved (52). Later Jenkins acknowledges that those who go deeply into researching the details of *The Matrix* plot exist 'around the edges' of that product's audience (130). Yet, in spite of these caveats, Jenkins still wants to claim generalizability for what his 'early adopters' do. Here he makes a crucial move after noting these groups' particularity: '*yet right now* our *best* window into convergence culture comes from looking at the experience of the early settlers and first inhabitants' (23, added emphasis). Certainly, early adopters provide *a* window – perhaps the only window - onto the types of

practices Jenkins himself wants to foreground, but why assume that they are the best window onto wider convergence culture?

Jenkins' most plausible argument seems to be that media industries themselves are disposed, for reasons of economic self-interest, to weight their product development towards users who are heavily engaged in their products. This *sounds like* Turow's point noted above (Turow 2007) about the new targeting of advertising strategies on high-value consumers, because it is only those consumers whose trajectories across mediaspace generate stable and sellable patterns of 'attention' for advertising's own consumers. Turow is concerned with how economic value is increasingly seen as tied to techniques of individual consumer tracking that target both regularity and high transaction value. By contrast, Jenkins' media consumers are characterised by high *intensity* consumption. High intensity consumption of a product may, or may not, involve high transaction value (both casual fans and intense fans may buy the same DVD once). And there is no reason to suppose that high intensity users (while undeniably benefiting media producers in some respects through their product commentary seen as unpaid product development) are also consumers whose transaction value is *generally* high: indeed these fans' high levels of free time may be associated with lower work commitments, which would suggest exactly the opposite. So if Jenkins' high-intensity consumers do not generate high transaction value (as in Turow's argument), the supposed justification for their selection as the consumers at whom product development will be targeted must lie elsewhere: either in their exemplarity or their typicality. If exemplarity, that works for particular sectors where producer communities are quite close to fan/consumer communities (games industries?), but why expect such sectors to be typical of media production generally? If fans' benefit to media producers derives from their typicality, then we are back to the implausible premise that Jenkins's argument was attempting to reinforce.

Let's take stock. Arguments *for* generalizing from the specific fan practices Jenkins foregrounds to everyone's practices in relation to media are difficult to find. Arguments *against* such generalization are easier to find, and some, as already noted, are suggested by Jenkins himself:

1. The most intense fans are highly untypical of the general audience in terms of their level of emotional investment;

2. The broader pool of interested consumers from which the most intense fans are taken itself represents just one particular slice demographically (white, male, middle-class, college-educated): the 'convergence culture' thesis must therefore be more widely tested before it becomes useful;

3. More intense fans are likely to have higher levels of disposable time than the general population, simply because intense fandom requires knowledge acquisition and knowledge performance (both of which take time). The following groups with less disposable time are therefore likely to be under-represented among those practising intense fandom: those with heavy job commitments (for example multiple jobs to make ends meet); those with heavy family commitments. And of course there are other types of enthusiasm in contemporary culture which have little to do with media entertainment (playing sport, playing music, gardening, DIY, and indeed civic activism). Yet there is no reason to think that those with the latter enthusiasms or in the former social circumstances are less typical of the *general* audience. So why think that a sub-group (intense media fans) in whom these other groups are *under-*represented is more likely to be typical of the habits and interests which will come to define our cultures of convergence?

4. Jenkins' particular (and for his argument necessary) emphasis on young fans is also a limitation. We can argue that youth are the future (in terms of political hope they no doubt are) but that is very different from arguing that today's young people will continue their current media habits into the future, even as their life circumstances change. In sociological generalization, there is the perennial difficulty of distinguishing major shifts between generations from differences of life-stage. No one is suggesting the age-related factors that shape long-term media habits – owning or renting one's living space, having a stable partner and/or children, having regular paid work – are becoming irrelevant to media use: why should they?

5. A deeper danger is of assuming that, in a process of continuous multidimensional transformation (the media/society/politics interface is nothing less than that), changes that strike us as novel from within that transformation are necessarily the most significant indicators of future development. Put crudely, there is the risk of forgetting the continued importance of the larger frame within which the changes that divert us stand out. This is a danger I have discussed elsewhere (Couldry 2009) by considering the argument that 'the media' as central social reference-points will simply wither away. It arises also in relation to the supposedly transformative potential of 'convergence culture'.

Those are the weaknesses. A strength of Jenkins' argument is that it is not based on a technological determinism. It is a potentially cultural argument about the implications of emerging protocols of technology use. But by relying on examples shaped by highly particular demographic and other factors it is ill-suited to ground generalizations about how media practice is changing. What then does the 'convergence culture' thesis amount to, as a

contribution to the *sociology* of audience practices, beyond a story that media industries want to tell *to themselves* about the new terms on which they will continue to matter?

Is there a <u>culture</u> of convergence?

It is the weaknesses with his argument about convergence, seen as sociological claims about audience practice, that drive Jenkins to make wider claims about the supposed 'cultural' shifts under way through convergence. He claims for example that highly networked fans represent the 'new knowledge culture' which is becoming of increasing importance as other social ties break down (27); elsewhere, just as boldly, he claims that a new 'more democratic mode' of knowledge production is developing which is part of 'a more participatory form of power' (29). Later in the book, Jenkins amplifies such claims through a reading of histories of political innovation or affective marketing as if their driving force was the older history of fan production (61-62; 220): a very partial reading of both politics and marketing to say the least (for the latter, see Andrejevic in this special issue). Jenkins also tends to use the term 'community' uncritically to reinforce a positive impression of the social dimensions of what fans do (37, 160). It is unclear how we would distinguish a 'community' of fans from something less binding or structured. But while 'community' is a notoriously tricky term in all contemporary discourse, the deeper problem of Jenkins's argument is with the word 'culture'.

Even though at many points Jenkins acknowledges tensions within convergence culture, he uses the word 'culture' principally, like many others before him, to identify a shared set of transformations from which certain *common* values and forms of meaning-making emerge. I do not dismiss for one moment the importance of this understanding of culture, or its

potential for being used in critical, non-totalising ways, for example Raymond Williams' critical notion of 'common culture' (Williams 1958). But there is another way of understanding 'culture' - in terms *not* of shared values, but of a common infrastructure for disseminating meaning and symbols in complex *and unequal* spaces of circulation (Hannerz 1992) - which may be more appropriate to convergence. The notion of 'convergence' starts out (the first assumption discussed in my introduction) with the idea that certain types of *articulation* between consumption, production and commentary are now not merely enabled but become routine aspects of media use, and without any special skills being necessary for involvement in such hybrid processes. Such processes become *basic* dimensions in many societies of how large majorities of the population are able to routinely interact with each other. But in whatever sense we talk of convergence culture, an understanding of how the multiple possibilities of convergence are *socially distributed* is essential to grasping the politics of the transformations under way.

Does that suggest there is a thing called 'convergence culture'? Only if we believe that these new modes of articulated action involving media *in themselves* are sufficiently distinct from the multiple conditions and aims of everyday action to be considered in isolation from them. But why believe that? Do we believe in 'television culture', 'radio culture' or 'telephone culture' as unified structures that can be recognised and tracked? The multiple cultures that cluster around media *technologies* are surely too diverse for such an approach to be useful. The argument applies with even greater force to 'convergence', understood as an open-ended set of complex facilities related to media: convergence is simply not *the type of thing* around which it makes sense to expect a 'culture' (in the traditional sense of the word) to cohere. It may be more plausible to see 'convergence' as a resource for *differentiation* between media users, and so - once we take into account the class, gender, ethnic and other hierarchies that

characterize the social spaces in which 'convergence' is practised – a medium of longer-term *stratification*. Regions of convergence practice may cohere if they are underpinned by clear shared interests and affinities (the sort of fan cultures Jenkins has long studied), but such convergence 'cultures' are likely to be *exceptions* in a much larger space of differentiation. implications for the potential politics of convergence. In some locations, convergence 'cultures' may emerge around particular media interfaces (blogging in south Korea perhaps? *Telenovela* commentary in Brazil?) but more work is required to confirm this; in others, it is precisely the stratification of life changes that is the starting-point for understanding how the affordances of media 'convergence' are used by different social groups: see for example Qiu (2009) on the Chinese working class. 'Cultures' of convergence are, then, possible, but the singular term convergence 'culture' is of limited use. This has implications for the potential politics of convergence and researching convergence.

The uneven politics of convergence

In so far as Henry Jenkins' convergence culture thesis attempts to generalize from the fan practices he discusses, it is built on thin sociological and cultural foundations. But Jenkins offers another type of argument about convergence: an argument about politics. Jenkins claims that some of the things early adopters of convergence culture do *already* constitute a new form of politics or at least enact a key means for that new politics. They do so by exercising 'creative intelligence' (235, discussing Pierre Levy (2000)) and the 'collective power' of audiences (4). Jenkins argues that the 'skills' we are now learning within convergence culture as audience members (voting, circulating, commenting, lobbying, and so on) are skills that we will be deploying 'for more "serious" purposes, chang[ing] the ways religion, education, law, politics, advertising and even the military operate' (4). Let's put to

one side issues of generalization (and prediction) and focus on what constitutes 'politics' for Jenkins.

There is no doubt that increasingly broad access to the many-to-many communications space of the web (its potential for what Castells calls 'mass self-communication': Castells 2009) is leading to new practices of monitoring and sometimes challenging institutional power. While Jenkins' examples of institutional porosity relate to entertainment industries (for example the spoiling of the *Survivor* plot: chapter 1), such accelerated collective communication is unquestionably being seen in other domains, such as politics (witness the events of June 2009 in Iran). Jenkins himself develops the link to politics explicitly in chapter 6 when he discusses image mashups made during Howard Dean's failed campaign to become Democratic candidate for the US presidency in 2004; the Obama Presidential campaign of 2008 undeniably offered enhanced evidence of online political mobilization through horizontal networks (Castells 2009: 363-402). To this extent, the technoliberalism of Ithiel de Sola Pool that Jenkins is fond of quoting seems justified: 'freedom is fostered when the means of communication are dispersed, decentralized, and easily available' (11, quoting Pool). Who would not celebrate this? Indeed my own work on media rituals has been oriented towards a horizon where the means of communication become less centralized and more dispersed (Couldry 2003: chapter 8). But the problem with Jenkins' argument lies elsewhere.

Jenkins comments explicitly at times on the gap between the practices he uncovers and a fuller, more democratic politics: 'audiences have a long way to go if they are going to exploit the points of entry that affective economics offers them for collective action and grassroots criticism of corporate conduct' (92). But at other times the sweep of Jenkins' argument is less discriminating. First, Jenkins quotes without qualification the metaphorical use of political

language within the entertainment industries, for example Raph Koster's comment about MMORPG: 'it's not just a game. It's a service, it's a world, it's a community . . . just like it is not a good idea for a government to make radical legal changes without a period of public comment, it is often not wise for an operator of an online world to do the same' (quoted 160). Second, when Jenkins talks of the bargaining and power-play that happens around online entertainment, for example when large contingents of fans challenge industry decisions to withdraw a series, he implies this is a form of challenge to corporate power on a par with any other: 'a politics based on consumption . . . *may* represent a powerful force when striking back economically at core institutions can directly impact their power and influence' (222, original emphasis, cf 63). If Jenkins had provided examples of online consumers using similar practices to 'strik[e] back economically' to challenge the labour policies of corporations or Wall Street bankers' bonus culture (that is, important corporate power in other domains), that would be interesting, but he does not. Third, Jenkins' account of the potential politics of convergence culture risks thinness when he suggests that online talk is by itself positive, if it bridges difference. Here Jenkins' comments are either banal ('the challenge is to create a context where people of different backgrounds actually talk and listen to one another' (235)) or bizarre : '[the game] *America's Army* . . . *may* be more effective at providing a space for civilians and service folk to discuss the serious experience of real-life war than as a vehicle for propaganda' (79). To say that a game *may* generate productive conversations between particular individuals takes us nowhere because it is silent on how any such talk is, or is not, articulated to wider contexts of action and debate.

The problem then with Jenkins' argument is that it works *ostensively*: by pointing to examples of specific convergent practice, and then claiming that in themselves they are already examples of politics; no account is provided of the wider forces that night *connect* such

pockets of talk and action to wider mechanisms of social change and political challenge. This type of argument risks offering little more than the truism: people are collecting and exchanging information in new ways and this is potentially positive for democracy *under conditions yet to be specified* (how could it not be? we are back here, from the perspective of politics, to the weaknesses of Jenkins's account of culture). What of the forces which may be undermining such articulations – the forces of *disarticulation* working against the possibility of a more democratic politics? On these forces, Jenkins is silent. He mentions nowhere the *individualizing* force of neoliberal politics which provides a crucial context for all forms of contemporary politics, including the developments he mentions (see for example Bauman 2001). Might not the individualizing rhetoric of neoliberalism have some role in shaping *whether* convergence actions online *ever achieve the status of* political action, let alone politics that is in any sense progressive? Let's remember that Sarah Palin has lots of friends on Facebook too.

An Alternative Approach to the Politics of Convergence

My point is not that Henry Jenkins' fails to specify his own vision of a progressive politics in *Convergence Culture.* There is after all no reason why he should: his book is not primarily about politics and in any case it leaves little doubt as to Jenkins' broad sympathies with progressive positions. My argument rather is that, first, when Jenkins discusses the proto-politics of 'convergence culture', he provides little evidence that the acts he identifies are likely to be associated with progressive rather than with other sorts of politics; and, second, he ignores some obvious contextual factors which might lead to the appropriation of convergence culture for *non-progressive* politics, above all neoliberal discourse's closing

down of the parameters of acceptable political action.[4] The potential politics of convergence

culture are, on the evidence of Jenkins' book, undecideable.

Inevitable, you might say: how *could* a descriptive account of what people are doing with

media *of itself* provide the key to unlock the new forms of political action that are growing,

unseen, among us? And that is precisely my point. Even if Henry Jenkins has identified

convincingly a *particular* re-distribution of communicative resources (on which I have raised

various doubts), that would still fall far short of identifying evidence, and a causal

mechanism, for wider democratization. Surely there are other conditions of democratization

than merely a shift in communication resources. Nearly 20 years ago Walter Wriston, ex-

chairman of Citicorp and a follower (like Jenkins) of Ithiel de Sola Pool, announced that 'the

new electronic infrastructure of the world turns the whole planet into a market place for ideas

. . . We are thus witness to a true revolution; power really is moving to the people' (Wriston

1992: 176). But the past two decades have offered little sign of such a shift in power. Is there

any more reason to believe in Jenkins' revival of this technoliberal vision two decades later?

The only plausible way to understand the politics of convergence is to develop a better

sociological and cultural analysis of what people are doing with and around media. From that

perspective, we might welcome Jenkins' book for the debate to which it has helped focus, but,

having done so, we need very quickly to give serious attention to a number of factors that

complicate any single account of what convergence 'culture' might be. First, there are the

socioeconomic and cultural forces which are stratifying technological access, use and skills in

a convergent media environment: see for important perspectives Kling (1999), Livingstone

(2002), Van Dijk (1999).[5] Second, there is the long history of research which has brought out

how political engagement is deeply shaped by demographic factors (gender, class, ethnicity),

but also, linking them all, by particular societies' wider discursive economy which distributes social recognition often with great unevenness: Pateman (1970), Croteau (1995).[6] Such stratification of political engagement may, or *may not*, be mitigated by the discursive economy that grows around convergent media: to find out, we need research that is much more sensitive to the possible fissures within emergent cultures of politics, and considers the possible geographical variations between the inclusiveness (or otherwise) of political cultures, whether in China, India, USA, UK, Argentina, Egypt, Mexico, or anywhere else. Third, there are the broader stratifying factors which shape the spheres of action of different types of people in contemporary societies. Let's suppose, for a moment, that almost everyone in *some* societies (plausibly South Korea) can reach the level of interactive skill and literacy necessary to participate in convergence activities. That does not tell us anything about the divergent conditions under which men compared with women put those basic skills to use in any particular society. Here the exploitative *longue durée* of how domestic labour and public status are distributed between men and women remains crucial: indeed it finds its new reproductive means in the skills associated with convergent media (see Ouellette and Wilson's article in this edition). Equally crucial to understanding such divergences are international comparisons, another dimension seemingly ignored in Jenkins' account. What if uses of convergent media are differently stratified in Lebanon compared with South Africa, for example?[7] These are differences we need to understand and they are obscured by the generality of the term 'convergence culture'.

Such an alternative approach to researching convergence would turn, finally, to the conditions under which a newly structured communications environment might, in spite of these deep constraints, nonetheless over time, through the new communicative interaction it fosters, generate new ways of imagining the future of democratic politics. This perhaps is the

18

point where Jenkins' vision and a more sociologically grounded account of convergence might themselves *converge*, but it lies as yet at a distant point on our knowledge horizon. We can look hopefully at the practice and rituals of so-called 'convergence culture' and imagine a new politics springing up, just as in the late 17th and early 18th century political visionaries looked hopefully at the book for signs of humanities' self-transformation. But as yet almost all the content of that vision remains to be filled in. For now, I suggest, it would be more productive to put our visions aside, and attend more closely to the conflicted diversity of what goes on under the hopeful badge of 'convergence'.

Acknowledgement

References

Abercrombie, N. and Longhurst, B. (1998) *Audiences* . London: Sage.

Almond, G. and Verba, S. (1963). *The Civic Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Balibar, E. (2004) *We the People of Europe?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bauman, Z. (2001) *Liquid Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.

Beck, U. (1997) *The Reinvention of Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.

Benkler, Y. (2006) *The Wealth of Networks* . New Haven: Yale University Press.

Bohman, J. (2007) *Democracy Across Borders*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Bolter, R. and Grusin, D. (2001) *Remediation*. Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press.

Castells, M. (2009) *Communication Power* . Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Couldry, N. (2003) *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* . London: Routledge.

Couldry, N. (2004) 'Theorizing Media as Practice', *Social Semiotics* 14 (2): 115-132.

Couldry, N. (2007) 'Communicative Entitlements and Democracy: The Future of the Digital Divide Debate' in R. Mansell et al. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook on Information and Communication Technologies*. Oxford University Press, 383-403.

Couldry, N. (2009) 'Does "The Media" Have a Future?', *European Journal of Communication* 24(4): 434-449.

Couldry, N. (2010) *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism.* London: Sage.

Couldry, N. (forthcoming) *Media, Society, World: From Social Theory to Digital Media Practice* . Cambridge: Polity.

Croteau, D. (1995). *Politics and the Class Divide*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Fraser, N. (2007) 'Transnationalizing the Public Sphere' *Theory Culture & Society* 24(4): 7-30.

Giroux, H. (2004) *The Terror of Neoliberalism*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Books.

Gitelman L. (2008) *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Grossberg, L. (2005) *Caught in the Crossfire.* Boulder, CO: Paradigm.

Hannerz, U. (1992) *Cultural Complexity* . New York: Columbia University Press.

Hardt, M. and Negri, T. (2005) *Multitude*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Harrington, L. and Bielby, D. (1995) *Soap Fans* . Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Harvey, D. (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kling, R. (1999) 'Can the "Net-Generation Internet" Effectively Support "Ordinary citizens"?', *The Information Society*, 15: 57-63.

Kraidy, M. (2009) *Reality Television and Arab Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leadbeater, C. (2008) *We-Think.*. London: Profile Books.

Livingstone, S. (2002). *Young People New Media*. London, Sage.

Mayo, E. and Steinberg, T. (2007) *The Power of Information: an independent report.* Now available from http://www.commentonthis.com/powerofinformation/

OFCOM (2009) 'UK consumers embrace digital communications' 17 December http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consumer/2009/12/uk-consumers-embrace-digital-communications/

Ouellette, L. and Hay, J. (2008) *Better Living Through Reality TV*. Malden: Blackwell.

Pateman, C. (1970). *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pharr, S. and R. Putnam (eds.) *Disaffected Democracies*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Qiu, J. (2009) *Working Class Network Society*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Rosanvallon, P. (2006) *Democracy Past and Future*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sassen, S. (2006) *Territory Authority Rights*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Shirky, C. (2007) *Here Comes Everybody*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Skocpol, T. (2003) *Diminished Democracy*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Takahashi, T. (2009) *Audience Studies: A Japanese Perspective* . London: Routledge.

Turner, B. (2001) 'The Erosion of Citizenship', *British Journal of Sociology* 52(2): 189-209.

Turow, J. (2007) *Niche Envy*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Van Dijk, J. (1999) *The Network Society*. London: Sage.

Williams, R. (1958) *Culture and Society*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Woolard, C. (2010) Speech to MeCCSA conference, London School of Economics and Political Science, 6 January.

Wriston, W. (1992) *The Twilight of Sovereignty* . New York: Scribners.

[1] Unless stated otherwise, page references are to Jenkins (2006).

[2] For a wider exploration of such issues, see Couldry (forthcoming, chapter 5).

[3] Compare Jenkins (2006: 13-14).

[4] On neoliberalism there is a literature that began before Jenkins' book and goes on growing: Giroux (2004); Harvey (2005); Grossberg (2005); Ouellette and Hay (2008); Couldry (2010).

[5] For more detailed discussion, see Couldry (2007).

[6] The recognition of education's role in shaping political engagement goes back even to the original much criticised civic culture thesis: Almond and Verba (1963).

[7] For excellent analysis of audience practices in these two locations, see respectively Kraidy (2009) and Takahashi (2009).