

A possible and viable cultural reconfiguration

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JENKINS, Henry; FORD, Sam; GREEN, Joshua
Spreadable media: creating value and meaning in a networked culture.
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Abstract

The review analyses how the release of *Spreadable media: creating value and meaning in a networked culture* opens a new, more accurate viewpoint on the digital media scene, proposing a communicative ecology that reflects the way in which we communicate and relate in contemporary culture: collective, connected, collaborative and participative.

Keywords: digital culture, convergence culture, collective

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It is quite a complex task to write about Henry Jenkins' work. Currently at the University of Southern California – USC directing the *New Media Literacies* project – NML (<http://www.newmedialiteracies.org>), Jenkins has, since his tenure at the MIT – Massachusetts Institute of Technology, making a stand in the study of digital media and its relationship with Communication and Society. It is impossible to discuss media convergence and the concepts of transmediation without referencing *Convergence Culture* and the work of the *Comparative Media Studies* group, created by him a decade ago at the MIT.

The release of *Spreadable Media: creating value and meaning in a networked culture* opens a new, more accurate viewpoint on the digital media scene, proposing a communicative ecology that reflects the way in which we communicate and relate in contemporary culture: collective, connected, collaborative and participative.

We can understand *Spreadable Media* as leapfrogging in Jenkins' already consolidated proposals on digital culture, seeking to unveil the complex and often controversial relationship between academics, the professional world and the connected public when discussing and, especially, living through digital communication. The book's broader proposal is in establishing a sincere dialogue between those that produce and share content in society, and Henry Jenkins' developed a somewhat disappointed notion while following the reactions of the professional market regarding the real comprehension of "convergence culture". According to him:

"Some companies continue to ignore the potential of this participative environment, making use of legal resources to restrict instead of stimulate the communication that emerges from communities, or yet, avoid hearing the public they relate with. [...] This book is geared towards those segments of the media industry that make an effort to more deeply understand their public, and in a wide and systemic view of the environment, is not content in assume simplified forms of 'exploring' or 'leveraging' audiences." (JENKINS, H.: 2013 p.xi)

Spreadable Media is organized in seven chapters, as well as a robust introduction in which Jenkins and his team present the conceptual foundations of a pervasive media environment in which the comprehension of participation goes beyond the boundaries of market and businesses, anchoring itself in social and cultural changes. We can state that the author presents a conscious reformist agenda towards communicative relationships in society. His objective is not to provoke a revolution in the field, but to seek an innovative

consensus between authors and agents towards the clear cultural shift that we are experiencing.

In its first introductory pages, Jenkins' book is very assertive in his position: he does not intend to use known rhetoric connected to authors based on the Critical Theory and Cultural Studies; even less so to accept the neoliberal discourse that sustains the globalized world; he questions the "viral culture"; neither does it intend to worship the technological determinism as leverage for social change.

If we have to infer some determinism in the proposals presented in *Spreadable Media*, it would be that of culture as a factor of change. In Jenkins words:

“[...] to the academics in the media and communication, to the industry professionals and active participants that worry in seeking an inclusive, equitable and robust media panorama: you cannot accept that the evolution of media platforms and creation of content be only a consequence of technological development. [...] It is culture that sustains all these changes.” (JENKINS: 2013, p. Xiii)

The introductory chapter is rather extensive and collates the book's more conceptual content.

Right off the bat, Jenkins questions the complexity of the term “*spreadable*” and its use in the media sector. Like we can notice in the Portuguese language's lack of a better translation for the word, the author indicates that the literal use of spreading (something used for food products) is unable to express his proposal. Yet, he kept the term as the closest expression of his ideas.

In Jenkins digressions over *spreadable*, his readers get the opportunity to follow him in his search of scientific consistency and sustainability for this choice, in an attempt to keep the term from becoming a simple meme. To achieve this, he appeals to Malm Gladwell's ideas² (in a typical market/academy interaction) in which he created the term stickiness to express the creation of content in digital media that has the trait of attracting and creating loyalty in the audience to the point of motivating the sharing of said content. And Jenkins concludes: “*In short, to Gladwell, sticky content is material that people want to spread*”. And, by this spreading, he means the many ways in which this content can be viewed in different information spaces, becoming pervasive.

Having cleared the semantics behind it, we take here the term *pervasive media* (ou yet, ubiquitous media) to express the author's ideas, who explains:

² British journalist and essayist for the The New Yorker magazine since 1996. Author of several books that discuss our contemporaneity, such as *Outliers, The Tipping Point and Blink*.

“Pervasiveness refers to those technical resources that facilitate the circulation of a certain content in lieu of another, to the economic structures that sustain or restrict such circulation, to those attributes of a media content that incite the motivation of the community towards sharing, and to social networks that connect people through the exchange of byter full of meaning”. (JENKINS: 2013, p. 4)

The author’s comparisons towards stickiness concepts – strongly used by the digital industry to represent the market desires of the big players – and those of pervasiveness, linked to the natural flow and inherent community participation, can generate inadequate inference by inattentive readers.

In truth, Jenkins uses the comparison in order to explain, with subtle refinement, just how much models of networked action that emphasize stickiness can damage the emergence of natural content distributed by the community.

Still in the book’s introduction, the reader can get the impression that Jenkins might be taking a more incisive criticism against the logic that massively positioned, generalized and unidirectional websites have on the network. This is but an erroneous impression. Jenkins reinforces that massive replication addresses on the web still offer general interest search and content sharing. In reality there is a coexistence between distributive logic and that of pervasive circulation, which he defends.

Another discussion that stands out refers to the motivation that lead users to spread certain content in lieu of others.

The first idea that comes to mind in this theme gravitate towards words such as "viral" and “meme”, borrowed from biology to explain quixotesque actions employed by the media industry seeking users’ attention and clicks. To him, the concept of pervasiveness is more efficient and contemporary to explain such motivations: the public – with its choices, agendas and values – assume an active and organic role of being the agent, with no need for infections or contaminations due to viral actions. Only content that does not behave according to these agents are capable of viral actions.

Indeed, Jenkins proposes, especially for corporate communicators and their branding campaigns, that one should focus on quality of online presence and coherence of discourse than in action that would eventually stimulate the audience in the viralization of the brand’s messages.

Spreadable Media indicates that participatory culture should be reconsidered and repositioned, integrating the concept of re-elaboration of message and content. According to Jenkins:

“Pervasiveness occurs when massive content is continuously repositioned while penetrating different niche communities on the network. When some material is produced according to the logic of “one size fits all”, it results in inadequacies to the necessities of a given public. With this in mind, the public finds itself compelled to readjust the message according to its informative necessities”. (JENKINS: 2013, p.30)

This idea of a remix and reconfiguration of content reinforces the proposal that pervasiveness stimulates the use of new formats (based on technological advancement) of social and cultural interactions. Even if such re-elaborated content may serve different interests – personal, cultural, political and economical, among others – they end up opening space for new relationship opportunities, with a social meaning of the appearance of new productive niches, and many other manners of perennialization of value of brands and messages.

Thus, Jenkins comprehends participatory culture as something relative regarding the constant social and cultural mutations. Here, he reviews his original proposals of *Convergence Cultura*, coming from a more utopic vision of total participation and independently from audiences (or fans) and proposing a more complex understanding of public participation that nowadays faces corporate and technological obstacles, among others, to allow for the rise of different voices.

Continuing this trend, Jenkins alerts us to the current scenery of media convergence of the network – populated by platforms and environments, which does not favor the spreading of content in an equal and accessible manner for all participants. It is known that each platform offers a give type of agency/mediation that serves to its respective interests. It is also known that the idea of pervasive circulation does not guarantee equal access to tools and technologies, let alone the abilities and competencies to employ them.

On the other hand, still with technological, access and cognition in use limitations in mind, Jenkins points to platforms such as Twitter and Facebook as the best field of circulation of opinions and ideas that are genuinely participative, unbiased by the writing of journalistic brands. They are the *locus* where the pervasive message can break with the paradigms of unidirectional diffusion and the market model of adherence.

Reading *Spreadable Media* invites us to assume that a pervasive participation may generate new media formats in the context of a connected culture. For this, the reader must agree with the author that the media industry and the different markets see the pervasiveness as an irreversible process, and that viralization campaigns distort the necessary human agency in this process.

From this, Jenkins dedicates each of the following 7 chapters of the book to sustain his proposal, analyzing examples and real cases of network as means to explain the viability of the pervasive model.

Chapter 1 discusses the economic and social logic that can house pervasiveness, criticizing the Web 2.0 rhetoric as a vector of business practices that make complex the flow of truly participative content. In the same sense, chapter 2 thoroughly discusses the processes used by the industry to evaluate and bring value to media content disseminated in the network in the past, seeking to identify what the author identifies as residual meanings and new potential values for contents and brands as the respective information circulate through commercial and non-commercial channels. To achieve this, Jenkins proposes that one should look and systemize the valuation of content as a negotiation process that involves intangibility.

Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate the possibilities for the industry to re-characterize their public as active participants in the work of valuing entertainment content. In this block of chapters we find different concepts for public and audience, participation and engagement.

Chapter 3 focuses in the possibilities of reconfiguration, measurement and engagement of audiences in television content, emphasizing the transmedia entertainment portrayed in American franchises such as *Lost*, *Heroes* and *Dexter*. Thus he discusses concepts of engagement and transmediation of this, systems of measurement, audience as a commodity and as an excess of value. Chapter 4 goes deeper in the modalities of participation, indicating a transition from the broadcast era into one of a socially active public. In these two chapters Jenkins appeals to the ideas of network cognitive excess of Clay Shirky.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the reasons behind the rapid and ample spread of certain content. By relating marketing campaigns and civic activism campaigns, Jenkins indicates that pervasiveness possesses an intrinsic relationship with the needs of communities in the network. Content is only spread if it possesses something exclusive to the specific audiences. For this to happen, it is necessary to differentiate and understand how strategic is the relationship between listening and reverberating the audience or only listening to their distant voices.

Chapters 6 and 7 present examples that go beyond the formula of the broadcast paradigm. Chapter 6 exemplifies independent media models and those linked to Catholicism. In chapter 7 the author turns himself to the alternative world, discussing once again the power of replication in piracy groups, migratory ethnical groups on city gangs. Despite operating outside of the norm, such groups constitute cultural goods that, though unable to compete with major

media, have the ability to make themselves present in community and genuine channels in the network.

Spreadable Media, as a whole, seeks to highlight the role of individuals in network as means of propagation of content and the configuration of new information spaces. Jenkins, throughout the book, tries to include and understand the permanent role of massive media in the circulation of information, but also reinforces that the media have a boost in quality and presence should they adopt approach and interaction strategies with the audience organized in communities. For this, Jenkins professes the understanding of transnational informative flows as a possibility to making explicit the diversity of agendas and identities: he goes back to Thomas Friedman and reaffirms that the (media) world is not flat, but pervasive. He allows for the propositional exploration of information flow, of diversified experiences, of open participation, of motivation and facilitation of sharing, of intermediation through lawyers and community evangelists, of the emphasis towards collaboration as a socially significant role.

Spreadable Media is, thus, a lampoon to a cultural reconfiguration of our future, calling for a more inclusive, dynamic and participative media environment.

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