

Mass media schedules and generation Y

Description

According to findings of the Digital Britain Report (2009) the providers of traditional mass media entertainment (eg the BBC, ITV) now speak of "the lost generation" of media consumers who switch with ease between on-demand services, interactive games, and user-generated content (eg YouTube), but tend to be uncomfortable with fixed programme schedules.

Writing in the 1960s, the sociologist David Morley observed that people commonly would eat their main meal at the time of a particular television or radio programme. People who lived alone or were unemployed seemed to welcome the regularity of the television schedule as a way of giving order to their lives. A change in schedule marked a significant moment of transition. Being allowed to stay up late to watch television programs marked a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood. People who did not own a television set would sometimes miss out on the sociability that arises from being able to comment on last night's viewing and the shared anticipation of future programs. People would also use their viewing and listening habits to define who they are, and to identify with a particular group. Whatever the news, the regularity of the news and weather broadcasts would help support a sense of participation. All was well with the world as long as the news was being broadcast. The scheduling of broadcast media provided a way of synchronizing and validating domestic and social life.

New forms of pervasive digital media compound the operations of sociable scheduling. Many homes now have more than one television set; so viewing habits vary throughout the household. Video rental, satellite, cable, pay-per-view, on-demand, and other modes of media delivery, including via the Internet, complicate the role of broadcast media in synchronizing sociability and domestic routine. Furthermore, portable media devices transpose media consumption into transport vehicles and life on the move. Podcasts and vodcasts introduce new routines. Similar to many informational consumer products the schedule may operate outside the daily routine, as when I have to wait for the next release of some item of software. Such schedules may also be nested within other cycles, as in the pattern of repeats within the regular showing of television series on satellite and cable television.

The terms "synchronous" and "asynchronous" have increasing currency in discussions of the current wave of pervasive digital media. Emails do not have to be answered at the same time every day or even when they arrive, phone messages can be recorded and played back later, television programs can be recorded and replayed. The negotiation of schedules is now more nuanced than suggested by the radio broadcasting of the 1960s, and includes the scheduling of windows of opportunity, when files may be downloaded, messages retrieved before they are deleted automatically, and before offers expire. Media schedules are now multiple, overlapping and broadcast the promise of choice as much as content.

But pervasive mass media are clearly complicit in a kind of temporal coordination of activities, bringing people to the same place at the same time, reporting on the same events even though in different places, or even setting up patterns of avoidance, and this is abetted by schedules. These schedules draw on repetition, cycles, and repetitions within cycles. Media consumers may now be selective in the

cycles they latch on to, and in a sense invent. Schedules are not simply imposed, but detected, interpreted, applied, understood, and adopted.

It is not just that the contemporary household coordinates itself by listening to the same radio program every evening at 8.00 pm, but the family deploys whatever means are at its disposal to assert its solidarity through repetition: meals, the weather forecast, when the heating system kicks in, the window for download. The disruption or compounding of a schedule does not necessarily lead to a loss in solidarity, breakdown in the operations of the household, but solidarity will find other cycles to latch on to. This applies to households, but any group that wishes to affirm its cohesion, to attune itself. Are new patterns of media production and consumption really destroying home life as generation X once knew it?

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Category

1. Media

Tags

1. generation Y
2. home life
3. household
4. mass media consumption

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