

second-shift

media aesthetics

programming,

interactivity, and

user flows

j o h n t . c a l d w e l l

The show will flow back and forth between the Web and TV. We're going to be laying some new ground (with Homicide.com).

—writer/producer Ayelet Sela on new flows resulting from Web-TV tie-in.

The much-heralded Internet series (Homicide.com) has amassed numerous awards, including two Inovision Awards for Story/Script and Web Design, and a prestigious 1998 *ID* Magazine Media Design Review.

—Microsoft press release promoting Windows MediaPlayer as the means to witness NBC's convergence of the series Homicide: Life on the Streets, the website Homicide: The Second Shift, and a special "Homicide.com" episode.

Both new and old media trade publications continue to invoke modernist notions of "cutting-edge" originality, innovation, and radicality

to promote progress in their respective industries. The "Homicide.com" sweeps-week stunt during February 1999,¹ for example, served as curatorial bait for an eclectic phalanx of trade writers and vested interests intent on promoting the expansion of the digital and dot-com worlds. This event, many surmised, represented the ultimate integration and seamless convergence of old and new media. Since 1997, the website *Homicide: The Second Shift* had depicted life on the flip side of the show. That is, as the prime-time stars left their one hour broadcast "shift," web surfers could watch the precinct and replacement personnel on the Internet during the other "23 hours" of the day. The acclaimed sweeps stunt began with second-shift detectives investigating webcast crimes committed on Wednesday and Thursday of the week. On Friday night, the "first-shift" detectives on NBC's televised series continued the same investigation and sought to solve the ritualistic murders that had earlier been webcast. This search involved a descent into the frenetic and dark world of Internet culture, with producers and consultants bragging that there would be eighty scenes in this special episode rather than the normal forty to sixty.² This dramatized, televisual cyberworld included fake e-mail solicitations, chat rooms, and recurrent hacker interventions.

To solve the murders the onscreen detectives eventually enjoined all members of the composite precinct to help solve the crime online, even as they themselves were shown between acts playing a computer arcade game featuring a female figure blasting away at her animated prey. As the show built up to its cliff-hanger, NBC ended the hour by advertising the website where the narrative would continue after the TV show ended. *Homicide.com* then showed the second-shift detectives continuing the investigation, sifting through video fragments that had earlier been webcast (before) or broadcast (after) the first crime had been committed. The site also gave web users at home the ability to sift through audio and video clips of the evidence itself, to interview the suspects, and to play an online version of the very arcade computer game that detectives of both shifts had played in the analog and digital worlds. Frenetic web use now pervaded each register of reality available in the integrated convergent stunt: the televised cast, the webcast cast, and actual web users all now logged-on, chatted, threatened, downloaded, and played the same digitized video and audio clips and computer games, and sifted through the same clues, in an ostensibly synergistic ecstasy of digital euphoria.

My suspicions at the time about the significance of the critically acclaimed, seamless stunt proved warranted, as the award-winning but low-rated series and integrated site came and then went off the air and offline. And while other shows like Fox's *Freakylinks* and *Freakylinks.com* continued to angle for critical acclaim to get a leg up in the ratings wars

in the next season (by hyping radical aesthetic innovation and online integration with content), the vast majority of TV/dot-com sites today are far less ambitious narratively and aesthetically than these showcased exercises in visionary convergence. Sifting through the various technical and economic interests involved in the Homicide.com stunt suggests that institutional relationships and industrial leveraging may have been far more important than the aesthetic forms that comprised the event. "Authorship" for the show was claimed by many involved in the effort: NBC (which aired the show), NBC Digital Productions (which produced the integrated project), NBC.com (which promoted the show's site on the web), the Homicide.com Internet producer Ayelet Sela (who pitched and then cowrote the televised script), and Barry Levinson and Tom Fontana's production company (which produces and owns the show in syndication). Authorship of this screen-Net stunt was also claimed by the coalition of business partners that created the event, including ZDTV (an internet programming and consulting firm);³ Internet piracy consultants from the Web series "Cyber-CrimeTV" (lawyers Alex Wellen and Luke Reiter);⁴ and the Microsoft corporation.⁵

Each partner leveraged the TV/dot-com stunt to increase market share in its own industrial sector. ZDTV (an Internet "technology publisher whose website covers tales of hacking, [and] electronic eavesdropping") hyped its own marginally rated webcast programming.⁶ Consultant Wellen used the experience to create a segment for his own Net series.⁷ Internet personnel at Homicide.com earned a prime-time television screenwriting credit via the stunt. But Microsoft worked and spun the event with as much intensity as any of the other players. With a summary of the event's aesthetic features as mere icing on its lengthy press release, Microsoft proceeded to promote not just its Windows MediaPlayer as "the" way to access the celebrated synergy,⁸ but also devoted considerable promotional copy to describing the wide-ranging extent and nature of its contractual business relationships throughout digital and electronic media: "With Microsoft, NBC owns and operates MSNBC, a 24-hour cable news network, and (the) Internet News Service at www.msnbc.com. Also, together with Microsoft and Dow Jones, NBC operates CNBC/Dow Jones Business Video. . . . Other new media innovations from NBC include interactive television initiatives with Microsoft WebTV for Windows and the WebTV Network Plus service, Wink-enhanced programming with Wink Communications, NBC InterCast with Intel Corp., electronic program guides with Gemstar, and on-demand video services with Intertainer. . . . Microsoft, Windows, WebTV, WebTV Network, Windows NT, and NetShow are registered trademarks in the United States."⁹ Executives at NBC hyped Homicide.com as if it were akin to the second coming: "more than a simple tie-in between a

Web-site and a television show: *it is an actual convergence of entertainment media.*"¹⁰ Microsoft, however, more deftly deconstructed the subtext of this convergent art form via the (now essential) financial market lexicon: "Founded in 1975, Microsoft (is listed on) Nasdaq as 'MSFT.'"¹¹ Like a predatory male marking its turf, Microsoft invoked an endless series of proprietary, brand-related trademarks. Like an all-knowing conglomerate, Microsoft sketched a networked empire so broad that the sun might never stop shining on its endlessly augmenting parts. Like a boardroom sage turned earnest financial advisor, Microsoft discreetly shared an insider's critically valuable stock investment tip: "MSFT."

As this dense example suggests, cutting-edge accomplishment in digital aesthetics frequently provides pressure points and lucrative contact zones where a broad set of new institutional practices and proprietary strategies interact. This sort of phenomenon begs the question of whether film studies can continue to talk productively about texts, aesthetics, ideology, and identity in new media (all standby analytical perspectives in the field of film studies) without also talking about the industrial landscape that animates and fuels new-media development on a wide scale. Answering such a question, I would argue, unsettles a number of recurrent assumptions and critical tendencies, as I hope to show in the pages that follow.

It is no longer entirely credible, for example, to imagine that digital media is somehow marked by a radical break with traditional media practices. The Microsoft-NBC conglomeration scenario above shows how meticulously managed and refigured "new" breakthroughs have become. Even mainstream, primetime narratives in the domestic sphere, for instance, now provide unremarkable reflections on the now naive and overly optimistic promises of cybertech, the high-techs, and dot-coms. An episode of *The Simpsons* that aired April 28, 2002, for example, showed Bart struggling to develop his own animated series. After zeroing in on the title "Danger Dad," Bart drew crude images of father Homer in various states of tirade, and then pitched his series to legendary DC Comics founder Stan Lee. The animated Lee—whose real-life counterpart was in the process of premiering his own blockbuster film *Spiderman* worldwide five days later—scoffed at the quality of Bart's comic book. This rejection sent Bart to another possible buyer, and a new digital startup—"Better than TV.com"—which launched the rejected project as an animated "online series."

The Simpsons creators and its audience on Fox were critically mocking online culture (which paid Bart and Lisa with "stock options" dispensed from toilet paper rolls), the naïveté of venture capitalists (whose startup on this show went down in the flames of bankruptcy), and the hubris of dot-com CEOs (who somehow imagined they were creating a viable alternative to the Hollywood animation and television industries). Matt

Groening, James L. Brooks, and company were mocking the fact that the newcomers (like the real-world network TV wanna-bes “Mondo Media,” “JoeCartoon.com,” and “Spunky” on the Net) had only actually delivered crudely drawn, QuickTime and Flash animations (which stuttered at glacially slow frame rates), with content that embodied infantile, male, adolescent sensibilities. Celebrated cult breakthroughs like the animated series *South Park* had broken through to cable in 1997–98 precisely because of such qualities. In hindsight, however, this discovery turned out to be the exception that proved the rule. *The Simpsons*/Fox/NewsCorp/Hollywood-versus-dot-com/startup episode, and the Homicide.com/NBC/WebTV/ZDTV/Microsoft tie-in are more than just displays of postmodern cynicism or conglomerate hype. Both examples also stand as forms of institutional and market deployment; both critically exploit digital media aesthetics to leverage cultural capital, visibility, and financial benefit; and both help—through branding strategies and discourses of distinction—to position and value their respective conglomerates in the capital markets.

The emerging and ever-morphing digital mediascape that these examples map challenges the unfortunate gap that exists between political-economy and industry research on the one hand (which tends to ignore texts and forms entirely), and critical studies in the humanities on the other (which tend to avoid issues of economy, commercialization, and industry). Both practitioners and critical theorists invoke aesthetic schemes, albeit in different ways. This chapter examines a range of textual forms used in TV/dot-com sites, and looks closely at several the author considers to be both influential and symptomatic of new forms of user flows: Homicide.com, freakylinks.com, dawsonscreek.com, thexfiles.com; the websites of the TV series *Futurama* and *Sex and the City*; the networks HBO and WB; and fan sites. Furthermore, the chapter seeks to consider the ways that long-standing strategies in television and broadcasting—programming, syndication, licensing, branding, and flows—have emerged as textual engines that prefigure the design of new media forms.

I draw attention to the rather commonplace example from *The Simpsons* cited above not to show that old media has somehow “won” in its struggle over new media. Rather, I suggest that what we might term “convergence media” in the digital era is not defined by any new technically induced or determined quality or capacity, but instead defines itself in the ways that networks and studios use convergence initiatives to implement long-standing industry practices mentioned above. Scholars that ignore such workaday strategies and practices in theorizing new media place their own studies in doubt. Throughout the 1990s, scholars in the fields of visual arts and film studies in particular rushed to embrace digital and new-media forms in conferences and exhibitions as important

parts of their changing disciplines. Yet a recurring pattern in such venues was the attempt to connect digital media with early protocinematic forms (in film studies) and early avant-garde and art-world forms (in the visual arts) that prefigured new media by as much as a century.

As I have argued elsewhere, such scholars somehow managed (through ignorance or intention) to ignore the sixty to seventy years of television and broadcasting history that now seem to have assumed a much more central role in inflecting and defining new media than either film or art-world practices.¹² Television, to many academics in the higher disciplinary castes, represents the world of commerce and easy entertainment. Television's preoccupation with programming and syndication, that is, apparently pales in the face of the theoretical opportunities promised when one presupposes radical experiential and cognitive results from any new technology. I hope to suggest how viewing new media through the lens of old media (and television in particular) can provide a range of insights into the increasingly complex strategies used in the deployment of digital media forms.

I have hijacked and adapted the term *second-shift aesthetics* from the celebrated tie-in cited earlier not to describe digital technologies, interactive programs, or software as bounded objects of analysis; rather, I hope to describe a growing and ubiquitous world of digital that employs traditional and modified "programming strategies" in the design of everything from interface and software design to merchandizing and branding campaigns.¹³ The very term *aesthetics* employed here had largely disappeared from film theory by the 1980s, since it was deemed an archaic approach bound up with the retrograde ideologies of classicism and romanticism. Yet I think the term helps bridge the unfortunate gap that has widened between academic studies of industry, from a political-economic perspective, and critical studies in the humanities. Producers and critical media theorists deploy aesthetic schemes, but to different ends. A concern with texts stands as the common ground between the two professional communities. Textualism, of course, is a dominant perspective in both critical and cultural studies, even though revisionists now propose ways to eclipse it.¹⁴

Media professionals, on the other hand—who (with little prompting) might denigrate the pompous pretensions of critical intellectuals who presume to speculate authoritatively on media—themselves go to great ends to explain, rationalize, perpetuate, and critically evaluate film/video/new-media content. Although the resulting critical discourses rarely seem to intermingle (let alone impact each other), both worlds privilege the stuff at the heart of the aesthetic exchange. For media practitioners this is termed "content"; for critics these are termed "texts." As I have argued elsewhere, it is almost impossible to talk usefully today of conglomeration, globalization, and industry without talk-

ing about texts; and impossible to talk of texts or identity today without also talking about their corporate logic and institutional significance.¹⁵ In some ways this assertion is a reaction to what might be termed the “gnostic” inclinations of critical theory to date; that is, to the tendency to disembodiment and deindustrialize meanings, ideology, power, and identity in theory.¹⁶ The examples examined here suggest that new-media authoring and end-user activities are both integral and strategic parts of most business plans in various media convergence schemes.

first-shift aesthetics: content flows, supertext, and programming strategies

Understanding second-shift aesthetics means re-considering the ways that Raymond Williams’s model of television’s “flow” and Nick Browne’s model of television’s “supertext” have both developed and adapted in the increasingly digital world of convergence media. Both paradigms were used to describe electronic media in the analog age of network television and cable (in 1975 and 1984, respectively), and both strategies have been challenged by recent digital media developments. Williams argued that the most significant object of critical research in television was not the individual programs that critics tended to isolate, but rather the cumulative succession of programs, promos, previews, ads, and bumpers that could create a single flow on a network across several programming hours. While this seemed like a radical idea to many scholars at the time, flow theory actually existed in network programming departments since the early 1950s. Browne’s insight was to link these flow strategies to several practices, including: programming “day-parts” (daytime, prime time, off-prime time, late night, etc.); the political economy of the industry; and the ideologies that managed these temporal, organizing strategies. The composite, televisual viewing forms that resulted he termed the “supertext”—a paradigm that required critical theorists to privilege the contextual “clutter” (ads, promos, and previews interspersed throughout any broadcast) in addition to and together with any specific show being aired.

The supertext proposition allowed critical scholars to begin considering politicoeconomic issues in industry (context) as integral parts of any program (text). Although few critical theorists acknowledged it, the flow/supertext methodologies in effect allowed critics to “discover” some very basic strategies that broadcast and network programming departments had mastered and deployed for decades in industry. Because I am interested in digital form and aesthetics (as well as institutional analysis), I consider these (predigital) programming strategies to comprise what might be termed “first-shift” aesthetics. Programmers have since used various means to attract viewers organized around the concept of day parts, which include the segments: morning, afternoon,

early fringe, prime access, prime time, late fringe, late night, and overnight. "Counterprogramming" tactics can be deployed in any given day part, and involve airing programs that attract and award distinctively different demographics from those of a competing network. In the late 1980s, for example, CBS programmed Monday nights as "women's night" (with sitcoms like *Murphy Brown*) as a counter to the male-dominant demographics of ABC's *Monday Night Football*. The new Fox network achieved much of its success around the same time by counterprogramming edgier fare like the *Simpsons* against the much older demographic in CBS's Sunday evening lineup. From 2000 to 2002, struggling weblet UPN counterprogrammed the ratings dominance of the major networks with what it termed "UPN Mondays." This attempt to grab a foothold in the market share actually consisted of an evening of "black-block" programming: four successive sitcoms involving African Americans (*The Hughleys*, *One on One*, *The Parkers*, and *Girlfriends*). Herman Gray has demonstrated how this programming marquee racially produced, popularized, and circulated "blackness" as one industrial key to the survival of struggling UPN in the "neo-network" era.¹⁷

CBS had demonstrated the effectiveness of another programming strategy, "tent-poling," in the design of its Sunday prime-time lineup since 1980. For many years the network showcased the highly rated and venerable *60 Minutes* to bring viewers "into the tent" (as executives described it); that is, to gather viewers around the less distinguished shows that surrounded it on that evening. A third programming strategy is "hammocking"—a technique by which new and untested shows are launched between two successful and ratings-proven series. NBC repeatedly used this strategy as part of its Thursday night "must-see-TV" campaign in the 1990s, when it premiered a succession of new and untested shows in the much-sought-after half-hour slot between *Seinfeld* and *Fraser*, for example. Such a slot guarantees that any new show in it will have the residual benefit of the ratings leaders that precede and follow it. Programming departments spend considerable efforts deploying other tactics as well, including "stunting" (special episodes that break genre formulas during sweeps weeks), and "seamlessness." NBC championed the latter strategy when it eliminated all breaks between shows on the same network and required each successive sitcom to start midaction rather than with obligatory and standardized (but less attention-grabbing) title sequences. The goal of all of these strategies was to keep viewers engaged with a single network's proprietary, ad-sponsored "flow."

Several fundamental shifts upset the effectiveness of these strategies. Cable, the VCR, the remote-control, multichannel cable and satellite services, video-on-demand, and finally the Internet all promoted a fragmentation of the flow, and thus a precipitous decline of the major net-

works, all of whom had developed and depended upon classical “first-shift” programming campaigns for decades. I would argue that these new technologies did not only increase “churn” (the rate at which viewers cancelled one service for another) or “grazing” (the rate at which viewers turned to and scanned other channel choices while watching a show) but also attacked the fundamental, institutional logic that had served as the very foundation of network television. Producers, programmers, and content developers in the digital era could no longer strategize and sequence their flows around an economy of discrete day-part demographics. Each specific day part had traditionally been linked confidently to the spending practices of very specific audiences sectors—which advertising agencies then focused on in mass target-marketing campaigns, and which network executives custom developed content for. Digital technologies are now integrated widely across industrial sectors and throughout the major media conglomerations. The difficulty of creating or predicting a serial textual composite—within a single convergent multimedia company—makes it very difficult to predict linear viewing patterns, and to realize a viable flow “inside” of the bounded brand of a network. Although programming departments historically have attempted to lock viewers into a linear, sequential viewing pattern within or inside of a single, bounded brand, the Internet, personal video recorders, and multitasking have made this an unrealistic and improbable goal.

second-shift aesthetics: niche-ing, dispersal, and user flows

Many cybertheologists like Pierre Levy and Paul Virilio (following Marshall McLuhan’s lead) have cultivated liberatory and utopian assertions in their characterizations of digital as a cyber-neural-spatial revolution in consciousness.¹⁸ Yet digital media, the Internet, and AOL—all ostensibly responsive “pull media” forms rather than “push media” forms (the latter, an “outdated” type favored by Hollywood studios and network television, according to Nicholas Negroponte¹⁹)—did not end the need for programming strategies. In fact, the dispersed, amorphous world of digital networking and multitasking has made the need for content programming in the digital era even more compelling. After the collapse of the virtual economies of the dot-coms, any good business plan will now at least (attempt to) attest to this fact. Instead of cleanly replacing first-shift aesthetics, that is, the new landscape of convergence has forced content providers to continue to adapt and overhaul the means and goals of programming, in order to succeed in far more volatile media markets. These adapted strategies I term “second-shift aesthetics.” Second-shift practices attempt to bring new forms of rationality to unstable media economies. Venture capital requires this sort of rationality—imagining that such things deliver a requisite predictability as well.

In many ways, second-shift practices are logical responses to several interrelated historical and industrial shifts: from broadcasting to multi-channel narrowcasting; from mass economies of scale to niche economies of scope; and from serial flows to tangential and cyclical flows. Instead of the linear textual compositing model inherent in supertext/flow theory, TV/dot-com synergies now must learn to master *textual dispersals* and user navigations that can and will inevitably *migrate* across brand boundaries. In essence, programming strategies have shifted from notions of network *program* “flows” to tactics of *audience/user* “flows.” Targeted day parts are a thing of the past now that media users can digitally go to almost any content, via multiple channels, at any time of the day or night. Successful multimedia development, therefore, means being able to track, monitor, and predict—or at least respond quickly to—multidirectional user flows and migrations. As a result, digital programmers must develop new units of temporal-user measurement.

Second-shift aesthetics involves the management of ancillary and digital sites that users migrate to from a primary or initial site. In the crudest formulations, network sports and news shows on ESPN or CBS direct viewers to their respective websites (espn.com and cbs.com) to mine the minutiae of sports statistics or financial and “CBS Market-Watch” data. At other times, television networks like the WB use websites (thewb.com) as program indexes and promotional billboards to send viewers back to televised shows. Both of these unremarkable tactics still fit the traditional, unidirectional model of flow/supertext. Yet many other websites design bidirectional or circular protocols in the “click-throughs” they privilege. In the Freakylinks.com/Fox tie-in (fall 2000), online narrative clues directed users to televised plots and clues in prime time, which in turn sent viewers back to the web for further textual elaboration and interaction during the week. The WB’s www.dawsonscreek.com site allowed fans to read the personal diaries of characters in the show, and to “hack” into the private e-mails of those same characters. Such tactics elaborate the kind of “back story” that screenwriters typically include in the production company’s “bible” that orients the series over its lifespan. This kind of second-shift tactic provides discursive grist for narratological analysis that is easily as complex as that offered by any novel. Websites for series as different at HBO’s *Sex and the City* and WB’s *Dawson’s Creek* also allow users to “direct” their own virtual tours of the “actual” sets used in the show as QuickTime “movies” on the Net.²⁰ Again, these secondary textual activities can be viewed, in the traditional critical sense, as stylistic augmentations to some original text. Although complicated, these aggregate texts still fit an easily recognizable aesthetic schema.

The *Dawson’s Creek* and *Sex and the City* sites also allow user-viewers to click and purchase fashions and commodities used by stars on the

show (backpacks and locker paraphenalia on the one hand; t-shirts and martini glasses on the other). Clearly second-shift augmentations here “flow” the viewer outside of any televisual or digital text into the material world of consumerism proper. But the sites go further, and provide what are essentially “narrations” that user-purchasers can employ to choreograph themselves once they enter the world of merchandising. The *Dawson’s Creek* site whispers directorial motivations to the viewer-consumer-actors at home: “Buy like Brad, give like Gwyneth, shop like a celebrity, win a \$5,000 shopping spree sponsored by NeimanMarcus.com.” These second-shift augmentations, while not aesthetic texts in the traditional sense, are still material forms: text-related merchandising scenarios that are being comprehensively programmed as part of allied vested interests.

But what are we to make of flows that exit proprietary texts and merchandising entirely in order to preoccupy the user-viewer in the world at large? HBO encourages viewers, for example, to go to digital simulations (and then to the actual geographic sites) of “the hottest and hippest nightspots” in New York, to bars and restaurants that have no apparent fiduciary relationship to either HBO or the show’s producers. This kind of extratextual dispersal gives at least some second-shift programming the profile of entropy—of a declining, then flat-lined dramatic arc—and is about as far from the hard sell of traditional ad-driven electronic media as one can imagine. Granted, we can always surmise that premium services like HBO are really selling lifestyle and not just bottom-line electronic content. I would argue, however, that more is going on here than general affirmations of cosmopolitanism. Current research shows that children and adolescents in particular are very good at multitasking—at using the web, TV, phone, videogame, and CD player all at the same time. Yet what these HBO viewer-users are *not* doing (in the bars, restaurants, and nightlife of any city) is watching TV. How can this goal be a logical part of any cost-conscious programmer’s plans? The answer, I think, comes in the programming logic of “tiering” and “branding.”

aggregating, tiering, branding

The economic rewards that used to follow from a program’s mass-audience share no longer stand as realistic corporate goals. Media corporations now must try to master the cumulative “aggregation” of audiences from across the fragmented demographic niches that comprise the proliferating, multichannel market. The success of narrowcasting as a programming strategy in the 1980s is said to have ended the “economies of scale” that defined the network era. Narrowcasting succeeded because of its ability to return lucrative, “niche” demographic segments of the audience to program suppliers and networks who could, as a result, charge higher advertising rates. The current media conglom-

erates, however, can no longer sufficiently capitalize their operations by exploiting this kind of limited economy of "scope." Instead, large media companies seek to incorporate diversity and cultural difference (and their attendant revenues) by combining them within a single, integrated corporate structure. The dispersed flows and migrations that I have characterized above—of both texts and viewers—produces highly fragmented revenue streams. Since this kind of fragmentation is difficult to associate with single brand identity, corporations like AOL/Time-Warner/HBO/Showtime/CNN/Turner now specialize in "tiering" numerous brand-inflected niches within the uber-brand. HBO now charges cable and satellite users a gradation of premiums for no less than sixteen "different" channel "tiers." There is no need to go to Lifetime or Oxygen when women viewers have HBO Signature; no need to go to IFC, Bravo, or the Sundance Channel when cineastes and aesthete-viewers can see "cutting-edge," vanguard film on HBO Zone; no need to go to the Disney Channel or Pax TV when children have HBO Family. No need to switch to BET when African Americans are sold on critically acclaimed depictions of African Americans on HBO and its sister brand Showtime (in series like *Soul Food*). No need to switch to general cable channels like MSNBC, either, when HBO news viewers can switch instead to Turner's CNN, an important affiliate in the HBO conglomerate.

What has essentially happened is that individual media conglomerates have attempted to engineer the mannerisms of the multichannel universe within the branded walls of the conglomerate. Brands in the digital era are expected to function in far more extensive and complex ways than they were in the analog age. In the past, a limited set of basic product and trademark names functioned as brands, whose ad agencies sponsored mass-audience television shows in the network era. Branding has now become an obligatory specialization, one that requires continual reinlection as technological, market, and regulatory changes ripple through the industry. Branding aims to market services that are identified not by specific products but by highly individuated and easily recognized corporate personalities. In this scheme, effective branding is frequently praised for having created psychological and empathic relationships with consumers. HBO and its uber-conglomerate have proliferated variants of the mother brand, which invoke cultural difference without straying from the "emotional core" of the original brand. The AOL/Time-Warner/HBO brand is so complicated that most websites within the conglomerate provide either linkages to other corporate affiliates, or schematic descriptions, maps, and users' guides that help the web user understand his location within the uber-brand.

Architects of conglomeration regularly deem such relationship networks in press releases as "synergies." Such practices also show, however, that conglomerates have imposed and adapted flow strategies that

are now intended to work within their proprietary, and newly aggregated, world—even though migrations now flow multidirectionally across potentially endless numbers of channels and niches.

This characterization of intrabrand flows, of course, is the boardroom fantasy of many a corporation. What actually occurs in TV-Net usage is that users migrate in all sorts of directions that can only be loosely encouraged with incentives, rather than controlled in any sense. First-shift flow programming is heavy-handed if compared to the management of dispersed flows that takes place in second-shift arenas. HBO is willing to provide minimal links to its affiliates outside of HBO (with links to “free AOL service,” to AOL Box Office, and to Turner’s Cartoon Network, for example). Other entities try to partner and cobrand in order to steer users to corporations with shared economic interests—even if they are in different sectors of the economy. NBC could viably partner with Microsoft (MSNBC) but not HBO; it could create a portal with Snap.com and ShopNBC rather than with AOL. But even these alliances “leak” on the Net. This inherent leakiness in flow management means that cable executives now strategize (and program) degrees of “stickiness” in the second-shift world (with stickiness being the extent to which providers can induce users to stay with a package of services). At the NCTA (National Cable Television Association) convention on May 15, 2002, management panelists all concurred that the notion of homogenous content “convergence” is, in many ways, a myth. CEOs from Time-Warner Cable, AT&T Cable, Charter Communications, and others asserted that viewer “churn” only improved when companies provided a package of different services within a single delivery system (video, data, telephony, enhanced TV, etc.).²¹

The CEO of Wink Communications (an “enhanced TV provider”) summed up the insight that higher customer satisfaction came from packaging different services and thus “creating value on a single platform.”²² In some ways this notion (of diverse packaging/singular delivery) mirrors the ways that branding (in the age of digital) works by producing diversity and difference within a single uber-brand. But textual dispersal and flow leakiness also mean that content providers must now learn looser forms of management to master programming in the second shift. Other interests and sites can (and regularly do) pull users out of branded confines. Following the pattern established by CBS’s *Survivor* phenomenon, reality shows like ABC’s *The Bachelor* provided Disney/ABC with intrabrand flow and tie-in possibilities. But as each female contestant was exiled from the show, many other news and entertainment shows aired by local stations (KROQ, KISS) or in first-run syndication (*Access Hollywood*, *Entertainment Tonight*) also solicited and then showcased the banished contestants as part of their own proprietary special segments.²³

These forms of regular textual appropriation—across competing proprietary brands and technologies—are now pervasive parts of

media-business practice. Media companies intending to master the second shift, that is, must move beyond unilateral programming schemes in order to master more nuanced and dialogic forms appropriations. In place of the “command-and-control” tactics of first-shift programming, emerged second-shift strategies oriented more like the fluid responsiveness preached in Lao Tzu’s *Art of War*. Matt Groening’s series *Futurama* on Fox, for example, quickly generated a range of “unauthorized” fan sites (like “Can’t Get Enough *Futurama* [CGEF]). CGEF immediately pirated and offered downloads of each and every episode of the series that Fox broadcast. To add insult to injury, a banner ad on the CGEF site soon boasted “the REAL *Futurama* site”—a gesture that essentially taunted the producers, and denigrated the poor content, on Fox’s “official” *Futurama* website. Fox and Newscorp initiated legal threats against the CGEF site that were only partially successful; the pirating and downloading went on. But Fox had by now learned the potential of endless reciprocity now possible in the second shift. The *Futurama* producing staff established that they knew well the forms of appropriation that were going on (and that they were hardly threatened), when they added a prominent title to each televised episode: “*Futurama*, coming to an illegal DVD near you soon.” CGEF countered that their website downloads were still a much better alternative than watching *Futurama* on a “primitive television screen.” And so forth.

Far from being a significant legal case or fiduciary threat in any sense, this back-and-forth textual appropriation was actually just very good business for a marginally rated animated series like *Futurama*. Many other examples of two-way textual appropriations pervade the TV/Net relationship. Second-shift aesthetics, however, are not simply about TV/Net relations. They characterize new initiatives to “brand” or “cross-brand” the world of wireless technologies as well. Walt Disney, Vivendi Universal, and AOL–Time Warner have all recently negotiated deals with wireless phone companies, “with visions of wireless phones becoming hand-held entertainment centers.”²⁴ Universal pictures signed with Nokia to provide “logos and ring-tones” from its recognizable studio properties. Disney is providing “games, graphics and ring-tones” to AT&T so its customers can “individuate” and assign various studio songs and properties to the personality profiles of incoming callers. “Sony Ericsson” is introducing what it terms “multimedia phones” as platforms to promote Sony “franchises” (like *Men in Black* and *Charlie’s Angels*), and as portable PlayStation videogame consoles. While many now characterize such initiatives as evidence of a move toward (non-PC) “ubiquitous computing” and “digitally augmented space”, I would argue that these technologies are also about building a user-relationship in *time*. The multimedia wireless experience is an outgrowth and development of second-shift programming. Defining experience away

from primary or first-shift content by the brand stands as an exercise in affect, and as a relationship-building gesture. One consultant argues that consistency of message, copy, content, or information is not the issue. Rather, "brand consistency lies in core values . . . and identifiable style—not copy."²⁵ This emotional bond—based on "core values" rather than information, and defined by temporal duration in cross-channel, cross-media, and cross-technology configurations—is the key to commercial second-shift programming in the era of digital ubiquity. All of these practices indicate that the real "interactivity" in the digital era is not a user-technical process somehow inherent in the technical interface. It is, rather, a form of responsive, multiparticipant textual interactivity that now programs boundary-crossing content as part of second-shift aesthetics.

grazing, herding, navigation

Convergence television's most effective answer to the instabilities of viewer "grazing" does not always lie in an attempt to "corral" the grazer within a single brand-bounded flow. Rather (to stick with the unfortunate animal husbandry metaphor *grazing*, popularized by media management), many of the most effective countermeasures involve the process of coaxing or loosely "herding" the grazing user across hospitable sites, noncompeting third-party brands, and markets. In many cases what is seen as viewer-user "navigation" is actually strongly affected by built-in limits and channeling dictated by the contractual alliances that a major Internet portal (like AOL, Yahoo, or Earthlink) maintains. As any web user has experienced, the very same search—launched from different portals or search engines—hardly ever produces the same results. The strong-armed tactic of the web provider (corralling) is to delimit and direct "click-throughs." The weak-armed, more subtle—and potentially more lucrative—approach (herding) is to provide inducements for click-through patterns that have the cumulative effect of benefiting the conglomerate and its aggregating parts. Standard branding theory now argues that it is essential to cultivate the inclinations and priorities of third-party sites so that any users you link or send there will be recognized and "harnessed" responsively via online "in-store" promotions. This responsiveness and favor adds value to the sending site or content-channel source as well. As branding consultant Martin Lindstrom argues, if success at this kind of "cross-branding" practice doesn't happen, "failure occurs and synergy is lost."²⁶

When Time-Warner merged with AOL in January 2001, many analysts announced that this marriage of two worlds—"old media" and "new media"—would usher in the final arrival of "convergence." "Leveraging" the proprietary content of Time-Warner, its networks, and its studios, that is, the Internet (dominated by AOL) would at last provide the missing link: a ubiquitous, worldwide, digital pipeline into the home. The conglomerate

ate's stockholder meeting sixteen months later, however, looked far more like a lynch mob than a marriage ceremony. The once "visionary" Time-Warner/AOL CEO Gerald Levin left the company in disgrace. Analysts from Merrill Lynch (with a born-again wisdom driven by hindsight), reversed their many earlier blessings of the corporate marriage and now eulogized, "It's a sad ending. This is the worst acquisition in media history given the decline in market value of AOL."²⁷ NBC's news anchor Tom Brokaw (who also served, intentionally or not, as the de facto spokesperson for a competing conglomerate) offered the last rites to a national audience at the burial. He pronounced the earlier boast (that AOL would prove to be the ultimate delivery route for content) a lie, and characterized the pending divorce between AOL and Time-Warner as the "end of synergy" and the end of the myth of any near-term "convergence."²⁸ One overlooked lesson in all of this analysis, however, was that viable synergies would, arguably, come less from forced marriages of pipeline and content than from programming; less from hard-sell control at the Net portal or cable "gate" (AOL/Time-Warner's original marriage fantasy), than from less-restrictive "value-added" digital user experiences. For those interested in the bottom line—and in a real industrial economy rather than a virtual one—media web strategies today attempt, out of necessity, to develop more effective and responsive management of multidirectional user flows throughout and across second-shift components of the conglomerate.

time versus space/seriality versus simultaneity

Cybertheorists, *Wired* magazine, and scholars of new media have tended to emphasize the impact of digital technologies on space more so than time. This of course follows McLuhan's notions of how electronic media crosses boundaries and collapses geographic identities in the creation of a networked "global village." In some ways, scholars have made mediated geography and space the key to understanding new media. This privileging of space is informed in part by McLuhan's sense of temporal simultaneity, or what he termed the "all-at-onceness" inherent in electronic communication. Television programmers, on the other hand, have been far more interested in the interrelationships between digital media and sequential time. Time has always been the metric that broadcasters have been forced to master. They strategize time to program content and they research and quantify time (rather than "box office") to rationalize their media economies. Programming tactics—adapted from old media—have helped facilitate, prefigure, and implement new-media development; but new-media technologies have in turn altered those same tactics.

The net result of this process should compel scholars to shift from a recurrent emphasis on notions of boundaryless space and collapsed geographies to notions of meticulously rationalized, marketed, and programmed temporality. As this study has suggested, new media

economies—and the dispersed and migrating texts that define them—are not determined wholly by the now familiar schemes of networking, virtuality, and simultaneity. Rather, programming practices in what I have termed the convergent industry's second shift are being rationalized around new forms of textual dispersal, reaggregating flows, and temporal seriality. All of the predictions about digital's utopian promise as a responsive, "lean-in," "pull" technology aside, programmers and the financial interests that deploy them will continue to attempt to "push" content, to brand delivery systems, and to schedule media experience. The austere economies of digital and venture capital after the dot-com crash now favor those making the case that they have mastered such nuances as part of an industrial aesthetics of the second shift.

notes

1. Microsoft, "Detectives to Solve 'Homicide' case Online and On-Air," *Microsoft Press Pass*, February 1, 1999, <www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/1999/Feb99/NBCTVpr.asp>.
2. Matt Beer, "Homicide Cops Get Hands-On Lesson in Internet Crime," *San Francisco Examiner*, February 3, 1999, posted online by *The Kansas City Star*, <www.kcstar.com/item/pages/fyi.pat.fyi/30dab8f8.203.html>.
3. Stephen McLaren, "Sci/Tech: TV and Net Combine to Catch Killer," *BBC Online Network*, February 3, 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/sci/tech/newsid_271000/271660.stm>.
4. Maria Seminario, "'Homicide' Tackles Cybercrime," *ZDNet News*, February 2, 1999, <<http://zdnet.com.com/2102-11-51-3592>>.
5. Microsoft, *Microsoft Press Pass*.
6. McLaren, "Sci-Tech."
7. Beer, "Homicide Cops."
8. See the second epigraph that opens this chapter, in which Microsoft links MediaPlayer with the awards the web coalition has won.
9. Microsoft, *Microsoft Press Pass*.
10. NBC executive Thomas Hjelm, quoted in Microsoft, *Microsoft Press Pass*; emphasis added.
11. Microsoft, *Microsoft Press Pass*.
12. John T. Caldwell, "Aggregating Form and Re-Purposing Content in the Culture of Conglomeration," in *The Persistence of Television*, ed. Lynn Spigel (New York: Routledge, 2003).
13. I use the term *programming* throughout this essay not in the sense that a computer programmer would, but to describe the ways the networks and stations schedule programs and series, usually as part of a "broadcast programming" department.
14. See Toby Miller, "Revising Screen Studies," *Television and New Media* 2, no. 2 (2001): 92; and "Cultural Citizenship," *Television and New Media* 2, no. 3 (2001): 185.
15. John T. Caldwell, "Critical Industrial Practice: Branding, Re-Purposing, and the Migratory Patterns of Industrial Texts," *Television and New Media*, forthcoming, 2003.

16. John T. Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 338–40.
17. For a particularly good analysis about this programming strategy as a production of “blackness” see Herman Gray, “The Travails of Blackness: Black Visibility in the Age of the Neo-Network,” in *Identity Globalization, Convergence: Ethnic Notions and National Identities in the Age of Television and Digital*, ed. John T. Caldwell and Bambi Haggins, forthcoming.
18. See Pierre Levy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind’s Emerging World in Cyberspace* (New York: Plenum, 1997); Paul Virilio, *Open Sky* (New York: Verso, 1995); and Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1964, 1994).
19. See Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).
20. The website for HBO’s *Sex and the City* is <www.hbo.com/city/cm/city_style>.
21. The CEO of AT&T Cable, for example, found that their churn when providing video alone was 2 percent, but that when they added telephony, the churn rate dropped almost in half to 1.2 percent. Public comments on The Future of Cable panel at the NCTA (National Cable Television Association) Convention, cablecast on CSPAN, May 16, 2002.
22. Maggie Wilderotter, CEO, Wink Communications, in public comments as a panelist on The Future of Cable panel at the NCTA Convention, cablecast on CSPAN, May 16, 2002.
23. The *Bachelor* ran on the Fox network starting in April 2002. Weekly installments of the series selectively culled the “most promising” of the female contestants and banished those considered less desirable by the bachelor judging the bevy of women in search of a potential bride. The show culminated as a sweeps-week showcase in May.
24. See Richard Verrier, “Wireless Outlets: Enticed by the Profit, Carriers and Media Giants Aim to Offer More Audio and Video Content for Telephones,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2002, C1, C7.
25. Martin Lindstrom, “Cross-Channel Branding,” *Click Z: Smarter Marketing/Brandmarketing* newsletter, May 21, 2002, <www.clickz.com/brand/brand.mkt/article.oho/t140681>.
26. Lindstrom, “Cross-Channel Branding.”
27. Sallie Hofmeister, “Angry Investors Say Goodbye to AOL Chief,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 2002, A1, A28.
28. Tom Brokaw, on-air comments on the *NBC Nightly News*, April 24, 2002.