

SUBMISSION OF WRITTEN WORK

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Flow-Television in a Digital Age

- Survival of the Fittest

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Digital Media and Communication 1, Winter 2014

Digital Design og Kommunikation (DDK), Master

IT-University

The paper encompass 3901 words

12. December 2014

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to identify and explain social dynamics behind the current development in the Danish television industry and to discuss the implications of the changes. The theoretical framework to examine the interplay between behaviour of television viewers and change in the industry is Anthony Giddens' *Structuration Theory* (1984). The development is interesting to exam as it exemplifies how structures enable social organization and mobility to develop and change society through time. The paper puts forward three trends in the viewer's behavioural pattern that act as a catalyst: 1) *multiple choices*, 2) *from engagement to involvement* and 3) *quality over quantity*. The trends affect financial, cultural and political macro-structures that constitute the social system of practises concerning television production. The development can possibly result in a change of the television medium's position in society.

Introduction

Media enables for its users to understand the broader essential perspective on shared cultural understandings (Jensen, 2008,p. 11). The general description of media is as a communicational tool with the ability to mediate between people (Klostrup et al., 2011 ,p.311). The functionality of a given medium and its position in society is a product of usage. The relation between media and humans are therefore grounded in a mutual dependency. But the media ecosystem is changing (Hermida, 2010,p.3), leading to a renegotiation of the understanding of traditional media's purpose and position in society.

In 2013 the American streaming service *Netflix* arrived in Denmark, which enabled a different consumption of television content (Informa Telecoms and Media,p.12). Also, in 2013 a decrease in the general consumption of television occurred even though video-based media usage increased (Sand, 2013,p.1). These factors indicate that conditions and demands for television are changing. As a consequence, norms and conventions that constitute the television industry are being questioned (Jensen, 2008,p.105). This movement is leading towards a content-shift were television as medium and screen format no longer dominates video-based content or genre formats like fictional series.

The digital services introduce new approaches to content production and expand their activities from regular streaming to production of original programs. *Netflix* use big data about their users to produce successful series as *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black* (Informa Telecoms and Media,p.12). *Amazon* invites users to participate in the production of series from generating ideas to evaluating pilot episodes (Amazon studios). Also, crowdfunding sites as *Kickstarter* and *Indiegogo* makes it possible for the public to bypass the regularities of the industry. These communities and platforms like *YouTube* enables for the public to produce and distribute their own content. This indicates a shift in the conditions for Danish television that affect the current social system leading to the following research question:

How can the changed conditions for Danish television be understood through Giddens' notion of structuration?

In order to answer the question the *Theory of Structuration* by Anthony Giddens is presented as the theoretical framework. Afterwards a brief presentation of the development in the Danish television (DTV) industry is undertaken in order to establish a general understanding of the context and the social structures traversing television. Three main trends are then derived in the behavioural pattern of the television viewer by analysing existing theoretical findings. This leads to a discussion of the potential consequences and impact of the changes for the broader understanding of creativity in society. The aim of the paper is to uncover some of the current challenges and potential consequences for the medium, not to form guidelines for the television industry.

When the term *structure(s)* is used in the paper it refers to both Giddens' notion of *structure* as organisational principles and abilities as well as *structures*. The paper deals with DTV as a coherent whole even though the Danish system includes both public service institutions and commercial players. References are made according to the American Psychological Association's system of reference.

Understanding Social Change

Humans' capacity to communicate, establish and maintain interrelation is what constitutes society (Kaspersen, 2001,p.54). Humans' are reflective beings and relate to structures surrounding them through behaviour. The English sociologist Anthony Giddens (1985) introduces the social ontology *Theory of Structuration*. A framework used to holistically understand social change on macro-level in society over time. According to Giddens society is constructed as an interplay between reflective *actors* and a *structure*. Actors are knowledgeable *agents* with the capacity to transform *social structures*. They take intentional action with both intended and unintended consequences, which causes social change.

Giddens' theory is based on the idea that it make no sense to solely focus on the individual as a social product nor on the *structure* as defining for human interaction (Kaspersen, 2007,p.431). The argument being that an individual cannot change structures alone and because structures constantly are changing, the focus should be on the process of social change through time. He therefore introduces the terms *notion of system* and *notion of structure* (Giddens, 1984,p.16). A social system is a behavioural pattern of relation between people that are organized. The repetition of actions made by the individual *agents* reproduces the system. Social systems are based on interrelations between humans as the overall view on practices in society (ibid.,p.25). Social systems are formed by both *structure* and *structures* and change through the process of *structuration*.

The notion of structure or social structure represents the norms and rules that agents follow. It is a set of enabling but also constraining conditions that allows for social transformation to take place. Structure cannot exist without enacted conduct and are constituted by mutual impact of actions, norms and rules (ibid.,p.17). Giddens does not perceive structure as deterministic for the interaction of actors. He perceives the actors as reflective beings that make deliberate and strategic decisions with following consequences. It is important to notes that Giddens in his notion of structure distinguishes between *structural principles*: the most abstract and fundamental structures, *structures*: rules and resources that enables action, and *structural abilities*: the institutional characteristics of social systems (Kaspersen, 2001,p.69).

The process of maintaining a society depends on actors following or acting out rules, conventions and norms but the survival of society also depends on the actors' ability to create new behavioural patterns. According to Giddens, this constitution of society can take place because of actors' *reflexive monitoring* and the *duality of structure* (Giddens, 1984,p.3,15).

The duality of structure is when structure(s) regulates the actors, but the actors also regulate the structure(s) through their behaviour. Rules and norms are created through acting, why structures exist before they are formulated or acted on. Also, the structure provides the actors with stability and security in their everyday life. An example of how structure affects the interaction of actors is the law. The law is a cultural product, created with the intention of shaping behaviour in a specific way. Every day actors make the decision whether to follow or break the law of society knowingly of the potential consequences. The ability to freely make choices and act upon them is what Giddens defines as *agency* (1984,p.9).

Structuration is the process by which social systems are produced and reproduced through social practice over time (Kaspersen, 2001,p.66). The constitution of social systems is enabled by structure(s) and they change through the process of structuration (Giddens, 1984,p.25). The production and reproduction of social systems is created by the interplay of structure(s) and knowledgeable agents. Agents change social systems through actions. However, structure(s) affects the agents' ability to act. Therefore, structuration is seen as a circular process and represents a duality between agents and structure(s) (Kaspersen, 2001,p.54).

Danish Television as Institution

According to Giddens, examinations of structuration must include both an institutional analysis and an analysis of the strategic conduct (Kaspersen, 2001,p.72). Television as institution is influenced by structure(s) regarding ownership, organisation, financing, production and statutory demands (Søndergaard, 2006,p.625). When analysing the history of DTV three defining milestones can be identified.

Firstly, the decision of introducing public service as a regulative norm for content production inspired by England and BBC (ibid.,p.27) in early 1950s. As the name indicates, public service as norm generated a comprehension of DTV as a democratic medium with social responsibility for society.

Secondly, the breach of DR's monopoly in 1988 when TV 2 was introduced caused the television organizations to operate under competitive conditions (Bruun & Frandsen, 2007,p.7). The introduction furthermore raised a need for changing the production perspective from being sender-orientated towards being receiver-orientated. The variety of programs had to reflect the desire of the viewers, as they otherwise would select the competitor's content.

Thirdly, the digitalization of television changed the power relations between the medium and its users (Kolstrup et al., 2011,p.348). This caused a shift in the understanding of audiences from otherwise passive receivers into potential active producers of content (Baym and Boyd, 2012,p.321).

Television is underpinned by structural principles regarding media independency and democratic norms but the structures have changed through the history, redistributing resources and changing the conditions for activities concerning television. The social systems that constitute the institutional characteristic of DTV also alter when the structural abilities change (Kaspersen, 2001,p.69). This is seen when the view on audiences alters and affect the communicational relationship between the medium and its users. These dimensions are already embedded in the social system constituting DTV as an institution with both political and social importance (Bruun & Frandsen, 2007,p.13). The media ecosystem is becoming participatory as enabled by the networked, digital culture and it leads to changes in the conditions for and perspective on television (ibid.,p.3).

New Behaviour Patterns, New Conditions

According to Giddens' a given change in society can be explained by analysing the interplay between the behaviour that lies behind it and the structures that constrains or enables the behaviour. The television viewers are seen as acting, knowledgeable agents in Giddens' terminology. The agency that they execute can be understood as the changing factor that both affects established cultural, political, financial and social structure(s) for television, but their ability to act are affected by same structure(s). This process of structuration can lead to a change of the social system that constitutes the institutions of DTV. Three main trends can be derived by comparing existing knowledge on the behaviour of the television viewer: 1) *multiple choices*, 2) *from engagement to involvement* and 3) *quality over quantity*.

Multiple choices, the market for on demand television, streaming services and the expansion of mobile media has changed the conditions for watching television. To watch television is no longer necessarily situation bound and determined by a pre-scheduled flow of programs (Jensen, 2004,p.20). These new opportunities are enabled by technological development and force the viewer to constantly make choices on what to see, when and where to see it. The trend in Denmark points to an increasing amount of viewers choosing to discontinue their cable television and limiting their access to only a few channels or none at all. Instead viewers turn to streaming services as *Netflix*, *HBO* or in some extend the television institutions' own online services (Allingstrup, 2014). As advertisers follow the mass of viewers the production of digital content will experience a continued financial flourish in pace with the behavioral change among the viewers. Traditional television is therefore experiencing a decrease in their share of the total advertising budget (Danmarks Statistik). Even though, at the moment the advertising money still are to be found in traditional television rather than digital content flow-television will probably face a shift in content importance in the nearest future (ibid.). It is no longer enough to produce content solely for the traditional television and use any leftovers on the digital platforms. Which leads me to the next trend: From engagement to involvement.

The modern viewer wants to be involved in the production of content not just engaged (Hermida, 2010,p.2). This can be seen as a result of the viewer becoming more critical and media reflexive. Viewers are learning the language of media by remixing,

orchestrate blogs or posting videos on YouTube etc. (Nielsen & Pold, 2007,p.192). Through interaction with digital devices and production of content they enter the role of *prosumers*, both producer and consumer of content. This places them somewhere in between the amateur and professional and this affects how they perceive and relate to content (Baym and Boyd, 2012,p.322). The consequence of this development is a shift in that the power relation between the television industry and its audience are changing.

The demand has also changed to a focus on quality rather than quantity. The digitalized viewer does not demand a plurality of content and information but rather expect original content of high quality (Producent foreningen, 2010,p.6). This has led to the production of programs, as *Sjit Happens* where viewers becomes co-producers and help develop the storyline. This trend can also be seen as one of the reasons for terminations of cable packages and why digital services invite the audience to participate in the making of fictional series (Amazon Studios). Meeting the demand for self-produced content of high quality is obviously costly. The activities concerning television production have thereby gained new opportunities through the digitalization, but it also comes with new challenges.

This brief presentation of the three main trends regarding the television viewer exemplifies that agents' actions are enabled by but also influence the conditions, the social structure(s), for the television medium in Denmark in different ways. The changed behavioural patterns of the public pressure the television industry and force it to engage in more experimental practices for producing and presenting television (Baym and Boyd, 2012:324). Even though, the motivation for use of streaming services was not to degrade DTV the behaviour end up affecting social structure(s) and thereby changing the organisation of the social system. It is an example of how unforeseen and partly unintended consequences of agent's actions can affect an established system by pushing established structure(s) – but what are the cultural consequences of this development?

Flow-television in a Digital Age

Johan B. Thompson is arguing that people's actions constitute the foundation of communication (2001:21). When humans act, their behavioural patterns are physical statements. In this perspective the public, intended or unintended, are currently expressing dissatisfaction with the composition of the DTV industry. The trends identified in the previous section can have profound impact on the structure(s) and the future practices in the television industry. The consequences and the impact of the structuration are discussed with a focus on the perception of creativity in the following.

Creativity and Quality Content

The digital development has affected the financial system that underpins commercial television in different ways, which has led to an allocating of resources. This is a key concern when looking at the challenges of DTV anno 2014. I have already touched upon some of the financial challenges that are caused by the structuration in the analysis. Another important consequence caused by the structuration process is of a more transcendent quality: how should the notion of creativity be comprehended in the digital era?

Klaus B. Nielsen and Søren Pold conclude that a consequence of digitalization is that the perspective on and understanding of art and cultural works must be redefined (2007,p.202). In a culture of remixing and mash up cultural work cannot be perceived as ever being final. Pieces constantly transform and develop into something new and different. This process permeates digital culture. The technological development has created and enabled new ways of communicating and expressing opinions and ideas. Nevertheless, Nielsen and Pold still believe that it will be difficult to change the current notion of cultural work (ibid.,p.174). This can be ascribed to a dominant understanding of creativity as bound to special individuals.

Mark A. Runco and Garrett J. Jaeger present a standard definition of creativity: "The creative work is a novel work that is accepted as tenable or useful or satisfying by a group in some point in time" (2012:93f). Creative value is hence enabled by the combination of novelty and social acknowledgment. The approach *Netflix* use to generate new, original content is based on insights about their users' preferences collected on their digital platforms (Gada, 2013:38). This approach exemplifies a

specific perception of creativity.

Mel Rhodes present a notion of creativity where the ability to act or create creative artefacts are bond to the creating individual (1961,p.307). The activities in the television industry reflect this perspective on creativity, where professional individuals act as gatekeepers for creative, cultural content. In contrast Vlad Petre Glăveanu's notion of creativity is based on the understanding that creativity exist in the interaction between a creative individual and the social and cultural context (2012,p.3). The approach of *Netflix* and *Amazon* embodies this understanding of creativity where the quality of an idea is improved by the interplay of professionals and amateurs: creativity is perceived as cultural participation (2010,p.62). But is it possible to ensure the quality of content when professionals lose control with the development process?

It is important to note that quantitative data does not create specific insights on the intentions behind a behaviour pattern, but merely identify similarities and trends. The approaches of the digital services exemplifies that creativity can be made quantifiably – a trait not matched by the traditional self-image of creative fields as the television industry (Gada, 2013,p.38). This means that digitalization of television challenge one of the dominant structural principles for content production, the notion of creativity, making it difficult for the industry to develop.

The digital services' approaches to generate new content does also bring concerns for whether the practices can lead to cultural stagnation because of the foundation are prior preferences. Runco and Jaeger's notion on creativity states that novelty is an essential part of creativity. But what does it mean for qualities as originality and novelty when the process aims at pleasing instead of challenging the viewer? The mind-sets needs to be changed in the television industry regarding the perspective on creativity but the approaches presented by the digital services might not prove useful on a longer term. This can be ascribed to a risk of decreasing the quality, originality and novelty of the content. Media enables its users to question and understand the broader essential perspective of the shared cultural understanding (Jensen, 2008,p.11). Nevertheless, the development raises the question: will the current structuration lead to stagnation in content production by limiting creativity? Studies have shown that creativity often is reinforced by constraints (Sturt, 2013,p.22) so the challenges might end up embracing the creative thinking in the television industry.

The fusion of television and web mean a shift in the structuration of practice from being technology-orientated towards a focus on creative, quality content at both an organizational and cultural level (Allingstrup, 2014,p.34).

The perception of content and creativity is evolving which affects the social structure(s) constituting the television practice. The transformation reflects a paradigm-shift why it can have far-reaching consequences on other levels of society as well. Nevertheless, the public also carries a responsibility, as media are a product of usage. New media are grasped through prior understanding of existing media (Jensen, 2003,p.12). As media play a significant role in the development of culture the aforementioned tendency stress the importance of constantly reflecting upon and challenging the way we understand media and their position in society – who knows, they might have an unrealized potential.

Beyond the Medium

The digitalization forces the television industry to apply different strategies to address their audience (Baym and Boyd, 2012,p.324). The interaction with television is characterized by monologue communication from one sender to a potential large audience (Thompson, 1995,p.35). This particularity of the television medium is what needs to be overcome concurrently with the media system becoming participatory. In continuation of the question processed in this paper it would be interesting to identify and assess the different strategies and tactics executed by the television industry in order to respond to the current and coming challenges. The new digital competitors are presenting an opportunity to get customized content posing a huge challenge for the traditional television to meet. It could therefore be interesting to examine the unexplored potential of the technical character of television medium and identify where television holds momentum compared to digital services.

Conclusion

The relationship between changes in the usage of television and changes in the social structure(s) for the DTV industry can be understood as what Giddens' defines as structuration. Derived from current literature are three trends acting as catalysts for change: *multiple choices, from engagement to involvement, and from quantity to quality*. The behavioural change affects the television industry in profound ways not limited to economic aspects but also organisational and cultural aspects. The analysis has exemplified how television institutions and their viewers engage in a relation of mutual dependency, a duality of structure. This signifies that when viewers' change behaviour it affects the industry on various institutional and cultural levels. Also, institutional structures of DTV both enable and constraint the behaviour of the viewer. The development of the DTV industry has historically been empowered by the changed demand of its viewers. The activities of the institutions are based on norms, conventions and rules that both enable and constrain the behavioural development process of the television viewer. As the digitalization open up new opportunities for media usage and consumption of content, it challenges the established social system. The structuration process exposes change on more abstract levels as the process affect the notion of creativity. It raises the question of whether creativity, as phenomenon, in a digital culture should be understood as contextual or individual.

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