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“The Way Movies Are Meant to be Seen:” Media Convergence and Fan Professionalization in Turner Classic Movies

Abstract

In the post-TV landscape, television channels such as Turner Classic Movies have sought to reinvent themselves as multi-platform brands in order to profit from and promote fan engagement. This paper interrogates TCM’s growth from movie-distribution channel to multimedia brand. Recently, TCM has rebranded itself by creating spaces for fan play. These spaces can be physical, such as the Hollywood TCM Film Festival, or digital, like the fan-run #TCMParty Twitter hashtag, or even on the channel itself through fan-led programming. TCM applies industry “insider” rhetoric to spaces and activities normally dominated by fans, taking advantage of the contradictions of media convergence and fan interactivity. By creating these digital and physical spaces of interaction, TCM sells fan play as professional labor, blurring distinctions between private consumer and public professional in order to profit from a small but dedicated interactive audience. Through examining TCM’s redefinition of the “professional” as fan labor this paper explores further questions about play, work, and the commoditization of labor in the interactive media economy.

Introduction

As the most high-profile merger of the mid 1990s, the Time Warner/Turner merger of 1995 looms large in television industry studies. Media scholars have repeatedly returned to it in order to analyze the large-scale shifts in media convergence and television production at the turn of the 21st century. Jennifer Holt uses the merger as an example of the staggering ways that the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) deregulation and vertical integration changed the American TV landscape in the 1990s.¹ Similarly, Ayako Suzuki studies the merger as an individual test case in order to track the effects of vertical integration on the cable TV market.² In arguments such as these, Turner Entertainment’s launch of Turner Classic Movies two years before the merger is often a footnote, a single example of Ted Turner’s prescience in turning the cheap, ready-made content of the MGM library into a profitable cable channel. In these narratives,

Turner Classic Movies is swallowed by the

hundreds of other assets controlled by Time Warner. However, a close examination of Turner Classic Movies (TCM) reveals that it is a brand that deals in and profits from the contradictions of the media convergence economy.³ This paper interrogates TCM’s evolution from a subscription-based cable channel to a multimedia brand. As the shape of cable television changed with the advent of the Internet, TCM has changed as well; both distribution and marketing moved Turner Classic Movies from a cable channel to “lifestyle brand” with a strong presence across multiple media. I argue that media convergence culture necessitated TCM’s shift towards the platform model of media distribution, which monetizes producer and fan interactions, and experiential marketing, which fosters active fan involvement with a brand.

Though TCM began as the brainchild of Ted Turner, the man infamous for colorizing classic films, TCM has made its reputation by advertising itself as the TV channel that shows movies “the way

they're meant to be seen: uncut, and commercial-free."⁴ TCM primarily shows content from the Hollywood Studio System era; however its hybridized broadcast-and-platform business model blends traditional television marketing strategies with newer, audience-focused initiatives targeting a loyal fan/subscriber base in television and social media. TCM is a small cable network, with an estimated 85 million subscribers⁵ compared to leading competitor HBO's 138 million.⁶ However, TCM is also a streaming service and a lifestyle brand which markets wine clubs, cruises, an auction, an amusement ride and a film festival.

While TCM continues to diversify how it interacts with fans, I specifically examine three sites of fan interaction—the fan-created #TCMParty hashtag on Twitter, the fan-chosen guest programmer on the TCM channel, and the fan-oriented Turner Classic Movies Classic Film Festival. These three sites exemplify the way TCM and its fans blur distinctions not only between Internet media, television and film, but also between professional and consumer. Through multiple media distribution platforms, from movie screenings to the TCM channel to Internet services, Turner Classic Movies is a microcosmic example of how the television industry navigates the post-TV landscape.

Curation and Convergence: TCM's media strategies

To understand how Turner Classic Movies markets itself towards its fan base, it is necessary to define the contradictions and convergences that have defined the cable channel since its inception. First, Turner Classic Movies is a television channel that shows movies. As Jennifer Holt notes, TCM was started by media mogul Ted Turner in 1993 to monetize his newly acquired MGM library.⁷ This decision has defined the main content of the channel over its 23-year history: American movies from the early 1930s to the mid-1970s, coinciding roughly with the Studio System era of American film history, or what its fans call "Classic Hollywood."⁸ Additionally, this means that TCM presents itself as a media distributor, not a content producer. The cable channel's main content source is films licensed from studios and film libraries such as the Warner Archive, Paramount Pictures,⁹ and Disney.¹⁰ Because many of these films are licensed

from outside sources, audiences have ways outside of TCM to access this content. So, in order to maintain an active subscriber base TCM must turn Classic Hollywood fans into specifically Turner Classic Movies fans. The act of curation is crucial to its success in doing so: TCM produces shorts, interview segments, and introductions for the films, thereby delivering not only content, but also exclusive information about the films and figures featured on the channel. TCM further engages with fans across multiple media platforms, including television, Twitter, apps, the film festival.

Second, TCM is part of a larger entertainment ecology that facilitates this multimedia fan engagement. Time Warner has owned Turner Classic Movies, along with the rest of Turner Broadcasting Systems, since their merger in 1995. As of 2015, Time Warner owns assets in cable networks, digital media properties, basic television, streaming services, feature film, home video, and video game production and distribution.¹¹ Time Warner's multimedia holdings are indicative of the larger media landscape wherein most vertically integrated Multiple System Operators (MSOs) have acquired companies in traditionally separate media. It is these properties of media convergence as well as Turner Broadcasting Systems' purposeful shift in marketing towards active audiences, which allow a cable TV station like Turner Classic Movies to occupy so many diverse and traditionally separate spaces in media.

Though it began in the 1990s cable boom, Turner Classic Movies has been able to make the switch to digital media more easily because its established practices already incorporated key aspects of the platform model. As defined by Parker, Van Alstyne, and Choudary, a platform is a "business based on enabling value-creating interactions between external producers and consumers."¹² This seemingly simple definition encompasses an entirely new way of building value. Traditional pipeline models—more often called "broadcast models" in media—create value when individual producers sell products to dispersed consumers. By contrast, platform models create value by enabling multiple producers and users to interact through the platform. TCM draws most of its content from licensing agreements with outside film libraries, studios, etc. These content producers can (and do)

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find alternate means of distributing their content. However, TCM provides two unique services to producers which are also foundational to platform businesses: content curation, and an interactive audience. TCM’s content curation builds brand awareness, which further allows the cable channel to grow outside of television programming.

As the rise of the Internet and media convergence has made formerly rigid media boundaries more permeable, Turner Classic Movies expanded outside of the domain of cable television. Since 2014, Turner Classic Movies has been making a conscious effort to market itself as a “lifestyle brand.” According to TCM’s former general manager, Jeff Gregor, this re-branding comes from the intent to “provide ways for the fans to gather together as a community” around a shared appreciation for Turner Classic Movies.¹³ This relatively uncomplicated lifestyle brand defines the fan community from the top down, by inviting them to interact with the brand in several ways. These include an annual Classic Cruise chartered on Disney Magic, the TCM Classic Film Festival, a movie screening series in partnership with Fathom Events, the revamped Great Movie Ride at Disney World in Florida, and a wine club. As of 2016, TCM has added two more properties to its lifestyle brand: a fan club called TCM Backlot, and a subscription service called “FilmStruck” in collaboration with Criterion. While many of these properties are partnerships with other studios or brands, FilmStruck is also the result of Turner Broadcasting System’s acquisition of a software company called iStreamPlanet.¹⁴ While TCM markets itself through these various material properties, the unifying marketing strategy behind it, as Gregor points out, is towards a defined fan community. This idea that a cable channel can be a pursuable lifestyle exemplifies the concept of an active consumer base defined by Bernard Schmitt as experiential marketing (1999).

TCM Fan Communities and #TCMParty Fan Labor

Experiential marketing is the attempt by brands to actively pursue a participatory audience. Reacting to the growing media convergence culture, wherein rapid gains in technology and mergers allowed brands to penetrate new areas, Bernd Schmitt identifies four key characteristics that separated

experiential marketing from traditional marketing: a focus on customer experience, consumption as a wholistic experience, customers as rational and emotional animals, and eclectic methods and tools.¹⁵ Each of these experiences is a potential for audience interaction with and therefore value production through sustained, (inter)active consumption. This interactivity can take place across a variety of platforms, from physical spaces of interaction, to emotional identification, to sensory experience, to cognitive appeals.¹⁶ The variety of this form of marketing means that it is almost endlessly applicable, so long as the brand retains an interactive audience. This participatory audience is crucial to the brand because it focuses fan labor towards the brand, thereby producing value not only through passive viewership but also active media consumption. As Mark Andrejevic (2007) points out, this interactive audience is a consumer “prepared to devote time and energy to developing the skills necessary to participate in an increasingly interactive media economy,” who is required by this economic model to strategically manage their consumption practices and seek out multiple ways to engage with the brand.¹⁷ Thus, as the participatory fan engages with the brand across several different platforms, they produce value for the brand on each platform. This results in a mode of brand engagement that is particularly useful for smaller brands like TCM because experiential marketing and multi-platform audience engagement draw more value out of smaller audiences, so long as those audiences remain active participant consumers.

Turner Classic Movies fosters audience participation in the cable channel by creating fan interaction in platforms outside of the channel. TCM has engaged with fans on Twitter through its sanctioning of the fan-created social media hashtag, #TCMParty. #TCMParty was originally developed in 2011 by a fan named Paula Guthat.¹⁸ Her idea was to tweet about films running on the TCM channel at previously scheduled times. From this initial hashtag, the community grew into its own Twitter account. The hashtag works through cooperation: the fan-run @TCMParty account—or increasingly the official @TCM account—chooses a film airing on TCM and tweets out the next scheduled #TCMParty. Because the TCM channel has an estimated 85 million subscribers,¹⁹ Twitter expands

TCM's potential reach to a larger population than its subscriber base. By legitimizing and interacting with the grassroots fans of #TCMParty, TCM builds brand awareness with those fans, and also extends brand recognition into large populations on Twitter.

#TCMParty users recreate a communal viewing experience which extends beyond the isolated television audience by marrying the social forum of Twitter to the home movie viewing experience. #TCMParty users trade facts, jokes, and comments by interacting with each other and with the cable network. In this way #TCMParty users also end up interacting with films usually made decades before. This brings into question the relationship between fan and content. Like the Trekkers discussed by Henry Jenkins (1988), TCM fans are interacting with stagnant media content—in this case, an era of film already passed, rather than a show that is off the air.²⁰ However, fans of the Studio System Hollywood films shown on Turner Classic Movies often were not active—or even alive when the films were originally released; these fan communities thus are not built around the kind of original viewership or producer-fan relationship that Trekkers benefited from.²¹ TCM takes the position of content producer, interacting with and encouraging recognizable fan labor such as blogging and hashtag use that has manifested online around Studio System Hollywood. The pre-and-post-film segments imitate the direct address and visual vocabulary of sports broadcasts, giving the flow an illusion of “liveness,” even though the segments are pre-recorded. This delayed mediation, wherein live fan content is encouraged to “interact” with films’ closed temporal space, creates a temporal disjunction between true live fan action, false televisual liveness, and the closed medium of film. Both film and fan are absorbed into the false liveness of the televisual flow, displacing the original, isolated temporality of the film and the immediate temporality of social media into the delayed, mediated flow created by Turner Classic Movies. In this way, TCM directs general fan labor specifically towards its channel. With few remaining Studio System stars and little original content, Turner Classic Movies must create brand loyalty by making these classic movie fans into specifically TCM fans.

By harnessing fan labor in this way, TCM incorporates the previously missing element required by the platform model: the interactive audience. A platform requires not only multiple active producers but also an interactive audience. This means that for as long as the channel relied on subscription numbers to understand its audience, the channel remained a one-way broadcast model wherein viewers were consumers, not interactive participants. By following #TCMParty metrics, and increasingly inviting fans to have an active role in what plays on the channel, TCM further incorporates tactics of the platform model, shifting its business strategy away from content creation and towards active audience participation.

TCM's interaction with these Twitter users extends beyond social media. In November of 2014, the Turner Classic Movies Channel began a series called “TCM Fan Favorites” wherein the founding fans of #TCMParty guest-programmed a movie. As guest programmers, these fans selected the movie and were interviewed via Skype by TCM Host Ben Mankiewicz for an intro and outro.²² As a space for viewing within the television schedule, these segments confirm Jenkins's statement that media convergence could reshape media aesthetics, because every segment interweaved Internet fan culture, film content, and television flow.²³

A textual analysis of the segment shows how these three media aesthetically intermingle. On the evening of November 29, 2014, the guest programmer was Paula Guthat and the film was *The Lemon Drop Kid* (1951). The segment begins with Mankiewicz addressing the television audience and announcing Paula as the guest programmer. The screen then splits as Mankiewicz and Guthat appear on separate screens. The contrast between Mankiewicz in the well-lit television studio and his pixilated, poorly lit guest aesthetically reinforces their different positions in the media ecology. After interviewing Guthat for a few minutes, Mankiewicz then returns to hosting duties in full screen. He re-addresses the television audience and introduces the film. Then Mankiewicz's image fades into colorful animated text delivering station information, which in turn fades to the opening production card of *The Lemon Drop Kid*. The program cedes full control of the screen to the television personality and the film, but rarely to the guest programmer. As a guest from

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the Internet fandom, the border around Guthat’s image and her pixilation reinforces her place as a temporary guest invited into the television space.

Segments such as these develop a complex interweaving of television flow, movie passive audiences, and social media immediacy. The segments—like all of TCM—are built around films that were not made for television, but are nonetheless adapted into the TCM television flow through the dissolves into and out of the interview bookends.²⁴ Likewise, the segment draws from the aesthetics (through pixilation) and fan expertise of social media. Mankiewicz invites the fan to relay her expertise or opinion when discussing the film, but the spatial and aesthetic divide between the two reifies the divide between professional content distributor and fan expert.

Crucial to these segments is the construction of the fan’s expertise: she is invited to share her opinion not as an academic or professional but rather as a nonprofessional cinephile. Unlike the host, who relays information about the films as an impartial educational voice, the fan is invited to introduce the film because of her attachment to it. She repeatedly addresses her feelings for the film, with facts about *The Lemon Drop Kid* used to strengthen an implicit argument about why she loves the movie. Thus, Guthat’s rhetorical address to the film is a personal connection, rather than a scholarly argument or relay of facts. Since this initial interview, “TCM Fan Favorites” guest programmers have been chosen via two methods that point to this privileging of fan appreciation: a contest wherein fans send 90 second videos of themselves explaining why they love a movie, or through the TCM official fan club, TCM Backlot. While Turner Classic Movies provides fans with opportunities to interact with and even temporarily influence TCM, the channel’s power as the content curator and traditional media brand is textually encoded in this interaction.

TCM’s experiential marketing also pushes media convergence in physical space, as best exemplified by the Turner Classic Movies Classic Film Festival (TCMFF). Started in 2010, the first film festival was advertised as something “truly original when it comes to classic films.”²⁵ This festival set a precedent for the annual event. As conceived by the Telluride Film Festival co-founders who programmed the first event, TCMFF followed the

basic structure of a film festival: multiple screenings across multiple theaters with industry Q&As, red carpet events, and priority access. However, TCMFF differs from the film festivals on which it was modeled in its focus: rather than attracting press and industry insiders, TCMFF was created to be a fan and consumer event. In a *Variety* article on the event, then-VP of programming Charlie Tabesh said: “Associating TCM with an impressive showcase of classic movies is one part, but the other is giving our fans the chance and (the forum) for getting together to grow their passion for movies. That passion is an important part of our brand.”²⁶ This fan-oriented branding worked. About 2,000 tickets to the new festival were purchased from fans across 43 states and several countries.²⁷ While professionals are often paid to attend film festivals (or gain other remuneration in the form of networking opportunities and licensing deals), TCMFF fans by contrast were paying to interact with the TCM brand. Thus, fans’s blogs, tweets and posts at the festival were not simply unpaid labor; fans were actually paying for the privilege to promote Turner Classic Movies. This pay-to-play interaction between TCM and its fans at TCMFF enabled TCM to draw greater value from a small number of fans. It also exemplifies how an interactive economy blurs professional and consumer action, as fans pay to recreate not only the experience but also the professional labor of a promoted film festival, essentially turning professional labor into participatory play.

This fan professionalization was fully realized in the creation of the Social Media Producer position in 2015. The Social Media Producers are twenty active social media-savvy fans who trade their skills in tweeting, photography, and viral marketing for a free pass to the festival.²⁸ Through these methods, TCM Entertainment Marketing both actively courted and passively encouraged fans to boost brand awareness on social media. This temporary platform allowed even closer interaction between producers and interactive audiences. Studios and film libraries increasingly use the TCM Film Festival to announce new restorations and releases of classic films, hoping to use the TCM brand to elevate and amplify their message to consumers. Consumers, in turn, get to watch the new restorations and provide feedback, both on social media, in person, and

through their pocketbooks. With the inclusion of high social media penetration and channel segment taping overlaying a film festival format, TCM Classic Film Festival enacts a physical site for experiential marketing that layers multiple media types in order to promote the TCM multimedia lifestyle brand.

The TCM Classic Film Festival becomes a site of physical interaction, not only between fans and producers, but also between different media specificities. TCMFF programming adapts the film festival model to fit the television channel's needs. The festival screens over fifty films, offers Q&As with knowledgeable guests, some of whom were stars of the productions. However, the channel also tapes interview segments for TCM broadcast. Starting in 2011, TCM resurrected the Chinese Theater handprint ceremony.²⁹ Originally a publicity stunt engineered by Sid Grauman to promote the theater as a Hollywood movie premiere destination, the handprint ceremony was a symbol of Studio System Hollywood nostalgia. As a television channel sponsoring and publicizing the event, TCM appropriates that prestige, and provides the festival attendees a chance to see the famed ceremony live. The taped sites of TCM promotion, from interviews to the handprint ceremony, make the interweaving sites of media convergence physical: film stars, taped by television, observed and discussed on Twitter by fans. These media converge but do not conflict, as all are working towards a common fantasy of professional fandom reclaiming and interacting with lost Hollywood glamor.

Conclusion: From Lifestyle Brand to Multimedia Platform

The theory of experiential marketing allows for a nuanced understanding of the fan/producer relationship. As Andrejevic argues, media producers take advantage of fans by exploiting their free labor.³⁰ By this model, the capital gained by Turner Classic Movies through experiential marketing is not only monetary but also one of exposure: a wider social media presence, a deeper fan connection, and a stronger brand. However, if exposure is the capital gained by TCM, it is also the capital that TCM provides back to its fans. Through guest programming and fan sponsorships, TCM boosts its fans' profiles as well. Paula Guthat, the creator of #TCMParty, runs a theater in Detroit. TCM

promoted her fundraiser online, interviewed her about it during her guest programmer spot and allowed her to stream-watch TCM as a part of her fundraising efforts.³¹ Likewise, social media producers at the TCM Classic Film Festival get not only free passes, but also access to members of TCM Entertainment Marketing and ultimately greater chances for exposure.

This trade in service is inherently unequal; TCM dictates the sites and limits of these interactions and always retains the right to refuse or revoke access. Nonetheless, it is a trade in services, often with tangible reimbursement for these fans. As a result, these interactions commodify and professionalize fandom; fans get to see themselves as part of the Turner Classic Movies brand. This form of experiential marketing, which pays fan labor for the brand through exposure and access, further creates a "lifestyle" brand based not in leisure, but in work: an "entertainment insider" brand. Through guest programming, TCMFF, social media producers, and #TCMFF, Turner Classic Movies invites fans to become part of the entertainment system that they celebrate. Thus, the television channel acts as the mediating platform between Internet fandom and Classic Hollywood.

While the cable channel Turner Classic Movies has borrowed heavily from platform-building techniques in order to engage its audience, the media company has also launched several more traditional platforms as well. The launch of the premium fan site TCM Backlot marks the channel's attempt to directly monetize parts of its fan labor that have previously been free. While the site's name suggests entertainment insider status, the premium options granted to Backlot members show an attempt to bring the disparate fan actions currently spread across social media and beyond under the sole control of TCM. Fans may vote on programming, become a Guest Programmer, attend special events, meet staff, access information on screenings, engage in contests, and more.³² As TCM continues to promote #TCMParty on Twitter and other modes of fan engagement, this \$87 service is an option for those keen to explore enhanced curation. As Parker, Van Alstyne, and Choudary note, this creation of an elite fan group works when it encourages a concept of prestigious membership or access to otherwise inaccessible quality content.³³ As the site launched

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only as recent as April of 2016, experiment into premium fandom is still unresolved.

TCM's second entry into media platforms in 2016 was the launch of FilmStruck, a streaming service. Though its three tiers of subscription streaming options bear a passing resemblance to the Netflix model, TCM and Criterion separate FilmStruck from its contemporaries not through content, but rather through curation. TCM is using the lessons learned from their television channel model, applying them to the streaming service as well. As with the Turner Classic Movies channel, FilmStruck grants users access to exclusive content including theatrical trailers, movie introductions, commentary tracks and more.³⁴ Thus, FilmStruck is a continuation of TCM's practice of mediating films through curated content designed to encourage user interaction.

While media specificity is breaking down in the face of media convergence pushed by large MSOs, this system is still built on distinctions: the distinction between TCM and its fans, the distinction between online media and television, the difference between cable channel and cable operator. With the launch of FilmStruck, TCM's foray into digital streaming with no cable analog, even these distinctions are eroding. However, these erosions also open opportunities for new scholarship on the relationship between consumers, media, producers, and distributors. Turner Classic Movies is an example of a small media company that wields influence through its vertical integration into Time Warner, using the resources and philosophy of vertical integration to grow past television and to rebrand itself as a wholistic multimedia brand.

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Notes

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2 Ayako Suzuki. "Market foreclosure and vertical merger: A case study of the vertical merger between Turner Broadcasting and Time Warner," *International Journal of Industrial Organization* 27, no. 4 (2009): 532-543, accessed April 19, 2016, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167718708001410>

3 In 2004, Henry Jenkins connected the growth of Multiple System Operators (MSO) to a new media convergence culture. This culture is defined by the breakdown of traditional media boundaries and the rise of active consumerism, facilitated by the vertical integration of several different media under vertically integrated companies. For further reading on Media Convergence, see Henry Jenkins. "The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2004): 33-34.

4 TCM was the end-result of a series of disastrous financial decisions for Ted Turner. Turner bought MGM/UA in 1985 for its library, which contained 4,600 titles, as well as the MGM lot and production facilities. However, the FCC (Federal Communication Commission) forced Turner to divest himself of the production facilities to avoid prosecution for monopolization. Turner was forced to sell the UA library, production facilities, and lot back to the original owner for \$1.2 billion. In an effort to monetize the content he had paid so dearly for, Turner first tried colorization, then returned to creating channels using his newly-bought content—including TCM in 1994. For further reading on Turner, see Jennifer Holt, "Vertical Vision: Deregulation, Industrial Economy, and Primetime Design," in *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, the Industry, and Fans*, ed. Mark Jancovich and James Lyons. London: BFI Publishing, 2008.

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16 *Ibid.*, 60.

17 Andrejevic equates participatory consumers in the interactive media economy to entrepreneurial citizens in neoliberal governments, drawing parallels to the asymmetrical self-monitoring required of both. For further reading see Mark Andrejevic. *iSpy: Power and surveillance in the interactive era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas. 2007), 144.

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19 Kilday, 52.

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