

Chapter 8

New–Media–Based Attention Implosion and Television Publicness in the Era of Internet–TV Convergence

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses how television captures and organizes the attention of the mass public in the age of media convergence. It is argued that media proliferation and technological convergence have led to a fragmented audience. Paradoxically, audience fragmentation also provides the condition for the powerful return of collective attention in the case of new-media-based attention implosion. This chapter uses the case of the extraordinary (online) popularity of television drama character Brother Laughing in Hong Kong to illustrate the phenomenon of new-media-based attention implosion and the dynamics behind it. The analysis shows that attention implosion is generated by audience members' time-space shifting practices and key individuals' organizational efforts, both facilitated by the new media. It led to the formation of an interpretive public surrounding the fictional character. Implications of the phenomenon on our understanding of the relationship between television, social life, and collective public attention are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

On March 18, 2009, an unprecedented public mourning service was held in Hong Kong. According to media reports, more than 100,000 people participated in the mourning. The person being commemorated was nicknamed Laughing Gor (which means Brother Laughing), a police

officer who died during his undercover mission as a gangster. The mourning service was unprecedented not because of the number of people joining it; it was special because Laughing Gor was a television drama character. The service was conducted online at the Facebook group created for the character. On the day when television broadcast the episode in which Laughing Gor died, the Facebook group already had more than 140,000 members.

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As many people flocked to the Internet to lament the death of Laughing, others urged the television station to alter the story so that the character did not have to die. Responding to the “on-line uprising,” the production team at Television Broadcasting Ltd. (TVB) shot a brief additional scene and put it at the end of the whole drama series. The scene shows that Laughing Gor is still alive and is ready to have his police identity back as his undercover mission finally ends.

The event, in one sense, was highly illustrative of many new developments in the era of Internet-television convergence. As Jenkins (2006a) points out, convergence does not mean the reduction of various communication and media technologies into a single magic box. In contrast, “boxes” continue to pile up around people. Delivery systems diverge. What converges is the content delivered. Convergence in this sense implies new opportunities and new practices of television watching. Certainly, television watching has long been embedded in domestic life in numerous ways such that it never simply means sitting in front of the television set to watch a program (Morley, 1980; Ang, 1985; Fiske, 1987). Yet new technologies are often associated with new practices. In the 1980s and 1990s, the remote control device facilitated zipping and zapping (Bellamy & Walker, 1996), and the video recording machine facilitated time-shifting (Cubitt, 1991). Nowadays, with the Internet, watching television can mean watching missed episodes on the official websites of TV stations, downloading pirated files of foreign television dramas, or watching clips of old or new programs on YouTube. TV stations, in the U.S. at least, discover that Internet viewing of their programs might not depress conventional television viewing substantially. It may even tend to generate higher levels of overall viewing (Waldfoegel, 2009). Hence they develop formats to “encourage viewers to embrace the computer through television” (Parks, 2004, p. 144). Some stations may also offer extensions of the television text in their websites, e.g., by providing additional

information about the personal background and/or everyday life of drama characters (Brooker, 2004; Caldwell, 2004).

Meanwhile, the audience members themselves also contribute to the extension and elaboration of the television text by their various “user-generated-contents” (UGC). Convergence culture thus also raises questions of audience power and agency. While cultural studies scholars have long argued that audience members are active in appropriating and interpreting the meanings of popular cultural products (Fiske, 1987), the emergence of the Internet, especially the UGC sites, provides not only new means of “tele-participation” (Ross, 2008), but also new means for the wide distribution of the audiences’ views and productions.

Traces of all the above developments can be found in the television scene in Hong Kong. However, besides being illustrative of convergence culture, the Laughing Gor phenomenon is also a case of what we may call new-media-based attention implosion. The notion of attention implosion presumes the presence of a fragmented audience produced by the proliferation of television channels and media technologies since the 1990s (Katz, 1996; Webster, 2005). Decades ago, a very limited number of channels would have captured the attention of the bulk of the citizenry. Nowadays, audience attention tends to spread more evenly and thinly over a much larger number of outlets. Of course, the actual extent and characteristics of audience fragmentation vary from country to country. Yet generally speaking, mass television broadcasting around the world has lost at least some of its power in capturing and coordinating the collective attention of the mass public.

Paradoxically, audience fragmentation also provides the condition for the powerful return of collective attention in the case of attention implosion. Besides the Laughing Gor phenomenon, another case in point is Susan Boyle, the middle-aged British woman who captured the world’s imagination through her performance on *Britain’s Got Talent*. Within a single weekend,

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