

My Own Little Television: Implications of the Conflation of Internet Broadcasting and Television Broadcasting in the Korean Context

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Abstract

Internet broadcasting jockey (BJs) has been a lucrative occupation in Korea, but it has not necessarily been a legitimate job. However, the recent boom in independent internet broadcasting shows spearheaded by an online video streaming service AfreecaTV has brought these shows and the BJs into the limelight. Not only do some of the popular BJs earn millions of dollars, but they also garner fandom that surpasses television and movie stars. Whereas the line between these internet celebrity BJs and more traditional type of celebrities (TV, movie) have been clear with neither breaching into the others' realms, the delineation has been less clear recently. Some BJs move into television and some television celebrities are moving into BJ-ing. To go one step further, in 2015, a major Korean television broadcasting corporation decided to create a television show that imitates the structure of internet broadcasting. What is the implication of this increasing ambiguity between television shows and internet broadcasting? In the past, the merit of internet broadcasting has been the instant accessibility and interaction between the BJs and their viewers as well as its relative freedom from censure compared to television. It was connoted as the freedom of average viewer to become the producer of media content. Is this power dynamic rapidly changing with the conflation of internet broadcasting and television broadcasting? I will analyze Korean television and internet broadcasting systems and weave my findings with the theories on media power dynamic to take a stance on the implication of this movement.

Keywords: internet broadcasting, television, broadcasting jockeys, Korea, censorship, sexuality

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Introduction

Television and the internet are converging more than ever before. Through various websites like Hulu or Netflix you can catch up to television shows through your computer. In Korea, there has been a movement to reach a whole new level of convergence: a show is shot with a webcam and broadcast live on the internet with live feedback from the audience through internet chatting box, and then the same content is edited and broadcast on television a few weeks after it already aired on the internet. I argue that this collaboration between webcam streaming sites and traditional television broadcasting corporations are important areas of study for media studies as well as for gender studies because not only will this phenomenon give us a vision into what media would look like in the near future but also because this provides a chance in which sexual minorities or women who have not been equally represented in Korean traditional media can find a way to assert themselves more in the mainstream pop culture scene.

21st Century Media

Screens dominate our lives; it surrounds us in all shapes and forms. Compared to the 20th century when the only available screens were movie screens and television, nowadays, there are smartphones, laptops and any electronic device in between that we carry around. This leads to a decreased influence of one screen on our lives. According to Daniel Chamberlain, any entertainment screen in contemporary society is just one of many screens competing to occupy our attention (Chamberlain, 2010). However, this is not to say that all screens serve the same function and have the same nuances. In fact, each screen is understood to have different functions and even individual screens are perceived differently depending on which country you are looking at. A case in point is how computers are regarded in comparison to other screens. While the U.S views computers as a form of entertainment, from the beginning, computers were hailed as educational tools in Korea (Kang, 2014). Moreover, contrary to other entertainment screens, computer screens are deemed private.

Matter of privacy in relation to computers is an interesting topic in thinking about multiple screens in our lives because some screens are deemed social ones while others like computers are widely perceived to be private: “Whilst television is most commonly associated with the family space of the communal living room, the webcam is strongly connected with the even more personal space of the bedroom and the lone viewer – further re-enforcing its connection with the private and the extremely personal” (Creeber, 2011, p. 597). I agree with Creeber to the extent that the way television is utilized is much more social than the way computers are used. The physical distance between the user and the screen is different for television and computers. For television, you are not inches away from the screen; we watch it leaning back on a sofa several feet away from the television set and it is controlled by a remote control. There is rarely any tactile relationship between the television set and the audiences’ body primarily because it is unnecessary, and secondarily because in a group viewing setting, one person being too close to the screen may hinder other people’s viewing pleasures. On the other hand, the user is only a few inches if at most a feet away from the computer screen. There is a lot of physical relationship between the computer and the user. In the more modern computers, the screens are made as touch screens; the user can navigate her way through the screen with the tips of her fingers. Even if there is no direct touching between the user and the computer screen,

the user uses mouse and keyboards that are connected to the computer to make the screen show what the user wants it to show.

To this extent, although I agree with Creeber's argument that televisions are more social and computers/webcams more private, I disagree that it is merely because of its placement in the home. His argument only applies to people who are living with other family members, while for people living by themselves, the location of the television set and the computer does not matter much because you can get as much privacy wherever televisions and computers are located. Nonetheless, webcams are much more private in the way it is used than the way televisions are used. Just like keyboards and mouse that dictate what is shown on the computer screen, as an accessory to the computer screen, webcams also dictate what gets shown on screen. However, whereas keyboards and mouse are only able to pull up preexisting images (unless you use the mouse to draw something on the computer), webcams directly influence what gets shown on screen. The user captures his or her image through the webcam and their image is reflected back to them through the computer screen for themselves and others that they are interacting with to see. This function of the webcam and the way it is used in making UCCs (user created contents) in Korea is what I will discuss later on in the essay.

New Approach to the Media

The multiple screens that I described above are not merely competing with each other for attention; they are also converging with each other. In what Henry Jenkins calls convergence culture and Fang-Chih Iren Yang and Ping Shaw call interreferentiality, media in the 21st century no longer stand alone as separate entities (Jenkins, 2006; Shaw, 2013). To extrapolate on this concept, television and the internet as well as radio and movies reference each other and influence each other greatly. This interaction happens because each communication medium is trying to stay relevant and without referencing other communication outlets, one cannot stay relevant as an isolated entity. This inadvertently provides the audience with the potential to gain unprecedented agency in the information circuit. As Jenkins accurately expresses, "The current diversification of communication channels is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard: though some voices command greater prominence than others, no one voice speaks with unquestioned authority" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 219). For example, some breaking news and videos emerge through YouTube videos or Twitter posts rather than major network news. This leads to online users getting more credence than ever before in this convergence culture. The Twitter information they posted online or a YouTube video of an incident that the shot with their smartphone can become something that is referenced in major network news programs or newspapers.

This theory on convergence culture and interreferentiality of the media is important in this essay because I will discuss two Korean television programs that took convergence to another level. Entertainment television shows Yetti TV and My Little Television are two shows that actively converge the webcam UCCs with television. Webcams have been popular in Korea for quite a while. A site named Afreeca TV and Daum TV Pot are some examples of sites where live webcam shows take place. The genre of the webcams range from educational and political channels to more bizarre ones such as ones where you can watch a person devour a huge meal during the course of several hours. There are even webcams where sexually explicit activities

take place in the form of live pornography. Regardless of the genre, the content creators who are performing on the webcam can actively interact with the audience through live chats. Especially in the case of Afreeca TV content creators, because they earn their pay through money that the viewers send them through live chats, the creators are in a way, forced to interact with the audience through the live chat by reading some comments, answering questions, and eating or cooking food that the audience requested them to eat. After the live streaming sessions are over, these webcam shows do not just get erased; they are archived on the internet through fan activity. As a matter of fact, if you search online in sites like YouTube, full record of the shows can be found. How and why does this happen? Jenkins argues that it is because of the spreadable character of the media in contemporary society.

Spreadable media is one similar to the concept of “viral” content except it gives more power to the audience than the word “viral”. Viral makes it sound as though the media contents spread by itself whereas spreadable media argues that a certain content becomes popularized because of the actions of all the audience (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). This brings about the issue of piracy to the forefront so we are at the juncture in time when we are stuck in between the old ways of the media and the new ways of the media (aka spreadable media). Although various fan activities including piracy indicate that the old way can no longer satisfy market needs, the mega corporations are still trying to hold onto the old way of measuring viewership and viewing the audience as the passive mass. This is not because the companies are adverse to change but because they do not know how to change and nobody at this point knows what to expect from this change and how to benefit from it. While other companies are undecided as to how they should deal with newfound spreadability and convergence of the media, the companies and the people involved in making the two television shows My Little Television and Yetti TV took matters into their own hands to profit from convergence and spreadability.

Convergence of TV and the Internet

There are two Korean television shows that launched in 2015 which actively incorporated webcams. Yetti TV, which is broadcast on television on Friday nights at 1:30am, for 40 minutes is based off of a live streaming of the show on Wednesdays at 3:00pm on YouTube, Daum TV Pot, Afreeca TV and MyK, all of which are webcam user created content websites that allow direct interaction between the people performing in front of the camera and the audience through online chatting system (Ko, 2015). The televised show will be an edited version of the live streamed broadcast. It is a show that introduces the audience to interesting webcam videos/stars of the week. The two hosts of the show are webcam celebrities who have twelve hundred thousand and eight hundred thousand subscribers on YouTube and Afreeca TV. The two hosts and the people who participate in the creation of the show are what one would call content creators who are a part of the MCN business (Multi Channel Networks). MCN is a media business model where they combine individual content creators on YouTube or other UCC websites so that the content creators can maximize on their profit as well as have a professional system within which to create quality content. In a way, MCN is a management system within which individual content creators rely on to make money and to heighten their recognition in the internet community. Thus, the motivation of the show Yetti TV, according to its website, is to showcase UCC celebrities whom average television viewers may not

have heard of and to familiarize the viewers with the UCC and webcam aspect of the internet.

On a similar note, My Little Television is also a television show that is based on an edited version of a live broadcast of the show that happens on Daum TV Pot once every two weeks on Sundays at 7:30pm. The television air time is Saturday 11:15pm which is one of the prime time broadcasting hours in Korea (Park, 2015). Whereas Yetti TV, because of its time slot, does not garner a whole lot of attention from mainstream media, My Little Television's live webcam broadcast has at least 153,465 people tuned into it and the televised show ranks 10th overall rating among all the television shows broadcast in Korea with 7.8% rating.¹ Contrary to Yetti TV which focuses on creating new stars, My Little Television's content creators are well-known celebrities ranging from actresses, magicians, chefs, to authors and artists. Similar to Yetti TV, My Little Television also has direct interaction with the audience during the live streaming of the show on the internet through the online chatting system. In the edited televised version of the show, a few of the chats get picked out from the endless stream of chats on the chat room and gets introduced through captions.

For both of the shows, the online chat records officially disappear after the live streaming ends (unless the fans illegally copy the live shows with its active chat box). What gets recorded are the few chats that the television program directors deem to be appropriate enough to be introduced and edited into the television show itself. This is a case in point of why some people worry about the convergence of the internet with television. In his book, Henry Jenkins argues that traditional media is still more powerful than the new emerging media (Jenkins, 2006). Even if traditional media posits itself to be interactive, interactivity is limited and the extent to which one has interactivity is structured by the designer so that the audience do not become too powerful. Jenkins calls for our vigilance over what aspect of the new media "gets sacrificed, compromised, or co-opted by media companies as part of this process of mainstreaming the activities and interests of cult audiences" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 151). One of the perks of webcam shows is the direct interaction between the performer and the audience as well as the fact that anybody can be heard either by posting their thoughts on the chat box or creating their own webcam show. However, during the incorporation of the webcam show format into that of a television show, interactivity and equal opportunity for everybody to be heard by the public disappears.

Although webcams and UCCs are popular in Korea, they are by no means mainstream entertainment to the extent that televisions are. Therefore, within the small niche of the webcam shows' fan base, debates and discussions that cannot happen on mainstream media such as topics of sex, gender, and politics as well as religion used to occur aggressively. Moreover, overtly sexual shows portraying half naked women hosts, as well as shows hosted by transgender folks, and cross-dressers or other sexual minorities who are not represent on television screens found the place they were accepted and can express themselves through the webcam shows. However, all these "deviant" aspects of the webcam shows are weeded out in the process of it collaborating with television shows and becoming mainstreamed. The television producers exert their power to whitewash webcam shows and to portray it as benign extension of television without considering the ramifications it may have on the sexual minorities or the "deviant other" who may either feel excluded from this larger

movement of collaboration or no longer feel like the webcam shows are safe spaces in which they can present themselves and not be ostracized.

I argue that this mainstreaming process is closely tied to gender and sexuality issues. The number of women performers who have a steady presence in prime time Korean entertainment television has hit a low point. Apart from a few women celebrities, guest appearances in an episode, or a holiday special episode of the show, there are very few places for women entertainers on primetime television entertainment shows nowadays; it is dominated by male celebrities. Contrary to this television phenomenon, some of the most popular webcam performers are women and there seems to be an equal domination of the market by male and female webcam performers. Moreover, in terms of sexuality, there is only one television celebrity who openly came out as gay and is still able to appear on shows. Even he had to take several years off from acting and performing on television because no broadcasting companies wanted him to appear on their shows. Because of this attitude, there are very few shows that depict sexual minorities on television. However, in individual channel webcam sites like Afreeca TV, there are quite a number of transgender or cross-dressing performers who gain popularity. Needless to say, in the process of the webcam broadcasting collaborating with broadcasting corporations to make television shows, all this diversity is swept under the roof. My Little Television show has had more male performers on than female ones which goes with the current mainstream trend of depicting all-male or predominantly-male shows.

Despite these limitations of interactive television shows there is a potential that this collaboration between television and the internet may bring about some innovation in the way copyright laws are enforced and the way entertainment corporations treat its fans. What I mean by this is that traditional media corporations have been and still are hesitant about what to make of all the fan activities online such as parody videos, fan-made music videos, and other types of fan art that are borderline copyright infringements (Sandvoss, 2005). Although they are appreciative of fans who love their television shows, they cannot decide whether letting people pirate and spread their shows on the internet actually helps them profit or whether these fan activities are actually detrimental to the company's economic success. Even though some scholars go as far as to say that fan activities like the ones cited above are the things that actually keep media companies going in this era of spreadable and convergent media, not many traditional entertainment companies are ready to take the leap of faith in fans (Lothian, 2015).

The above two television shows are, in a way, actually embracing the assumption of piracy by having two separate broadcasting time. There is always a risk of the online live streaming version of the show being copied and spread online days before the show gets edited and aired on television. In other traditional shows with only one broadcasting time on television, spoiling pits producers against fans with knowledge being the object that each side fights to get: "Spoiling is an adversarial process—a contest between the fans and the producers, one group trying to get their hands on the knowledge the other is trying to protect" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 43). This is tied to revenues because most television programs profit through advertisements. The theory is that the more spoilers and pirated copies of the show floating about the internet, that less people are going to watch the actual show that is funded by advertisers.

However, in these two shows cited above, it is inevitable that there will be spoiling and an enormous risk of piracy. Instead of putting all their effort into preventing the inevitable, the producers go the other direction: they inundate the web with many versions of the television show. Especially in the case of My Little Television, there are official clips of untelevised scenes from the live broadcast, as well as exclusive interviews with cast members, and official clips of the edited and televised version of the shows flooding the internet. Ironically, (although further research needs to be done on this matter), because there are so many spoiler video clips online before the show airs on television, there seems to be less pirated videos of the edited televised version of the show floating around the internet. Whereas a brief search of other popular entertainment shows bring up dozens of pirated copies of the televised shows on YouTube or other search engines that is not necessarily the case with My Little Television or Yetti TV. I do not know the full extent as to how these two shows get funded and how their contracts with advertisers work. Moreover, I am not saying that these shows let piracy just happen; I am arguing that instead of confining the medium of transport to the television, the producers of the show incorporate the internet as yet another medium through which they can get their shows to be seen. Although further research is necessary, by the looks of how they navigate the internet fandom, it seems as though they are moving to change the way traditional show producers treated fans (as pariahs).

Advertisement tactics are changing with time. Previously it was all about placing advertisements before, in between, and after shows. Now, the companies are incorporating the products into the shows rather than have their own separate commercials in between programs (Boddy, 2004). Perhaps the above two television programs are an indication that television and marketing tactics will change even further in the near future. Whether this trend would be more empowering or less so for the average fans and audience of television is still up for debate. Nonetheless, in light of Henry Jenkins', argument that piracy is not actually about fans being unethical but about companies unable to satisfy customers (Jenkins et al., 2013), the above two shows are showing an example of how both the fans and the companies can benefit from a television program.

What Does the Future Hold for UCC?

In the above section, I have argued that the convergence between internet shows and television shows has had both a positive and a negative outcome from a media perspective. While it suggests a potential change in the way fans are understood and treated in media market, the two television/internet shows mentioned above seem to take away or erase the space in which women content creators were equal to men and sexual minorities could gain popularity and acceptance. Does this mean that the convergent media culture may not hold a subversive potential? I argue that it could actually be gender subversive in multiple ways.

First, as I have mentioned above, online broadcasting has been a relatively liberal space where people who cannot find footing in traditional media were able to find their niche. Moreover, production-wise, each performer acts on his or her own agenda because online broadcasting is an individual production system, not a collective one. This leads to sexual minorities and women being able to portray themselves online in ways that break stereotypes and undermine norms. Ien Ang says that positive portrayal is not that important when you consider that fantasy plays a role in people's

interaction with visual entertainment (Ang, 2007). I tend to agree with her except that in Korean media, there is almost no portrayal of sexual minorities at all, and in my view, having no portrayal is worse than having a bad portrayal to argue against and raise awareness. In this sense, the television-internet collaboration and the attention it brings to the webcam broadcasting culture could lead to more awareness of gender and sexual orientation issues that have previously been ignored in mainstream Korean media. This potential has not come to fruition yet; the above two television shows still adhere to the larger male-oriented trend of mainstream media with little depiction of sexual minorities. However, just because what can happen is not happening does not mean that it can never happen. Therefore, I argue that more feminist scholars should delve into this realm of convergent broadcasting to figure out a way that such liberating potential of convergence culture can actually come into being without stopping at merely being a potential.

Second, I believe that the different way that they market and interact with online fans may broaden the scope of copyright and fair use so that laws that supported male fan art more than that of women's become more gender neutral. Coppa Francesca and Rebecca Tushnet points out that laws like the YouTube content ID and Digital Millennium Copyright Act inadvertently police women fans' way of self-expression such as fan-made videos more than male fans art like parodic remix (Coppa & Tushnet, 2011). The way the show *My Little Television* goes about navigating the internet is different from traditional way that media interacted with its audience. Rather than just focusing on policing the web for copyright infringements, they provide an excess of clips of the show with web exclusive clips so that there is less need for people to pirate the shows. They are taking heed to internet fandom's needs and trying to satisfy it instead of labeling it as abnormal and illegal. Therefore, perhaps this collaborative show is an indication or proof for change in the relationship between media corporations and fans that may inadvertently bring about gender neutrality in permissible fan activities.

Although some scholars are doubtful about pop culture becoming a medium for feminism, others like Sarah Bennett Weiser argues that just because something is a part of mainstream culture does not mean it can no longer be subversive (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 207). I agree with Banet-Weiser but we must also take into account that the narrative of neutrality and objectivity that runs throughout mainstream media dissuade minorities from challenging the norms set by the dominant culture (Noble, 2013). Therefore, what we as scholars should focus on in media and gender studies is the "neoliberalism's residuals" (Chen, 2013). The people in the category of "residuals" are people who do not have the skills or the resources to make themselves heard, such as older women, women of color, sexual minorities, and the poor. By focusing on these groups of people and their interest during this tumultuous period of convergence culture, perhaps by the end of this period, the people who were unheard and unseen in the media in the previous decades can have more prominence and stake in the formation of mainstream culture.

Conclusion

It is difficult to surmise the path that media and entertainment will take in the future because it is a fast changing market. However, what we know now is that we are living in an era of convergent and interreferential media age. In this essay, I analyzed two Korean television shows that use the traditional broadcasting corporations and

television as well as the webcam technology and the internet as a mechanism for creating and distributing entertainment programs. I argued that even though it is adhering to the standards set by the traditional media, this phenomenon of collaboration between the old and the new media has a potential of subverting the power dynamics between media corporations and fans as well as the societal gender and sexual norms. So far, the shows haven't lived up to their subversive potential in that they still have limited interaction with the audience with the traditional media showing its power over the new media and its audience. Moreover, it goes along with the current Korean entertainment television trend of having predominantly male cast and only a few female ones. Even though the webcam shows themselves have approximately equivalent number of successful female and male performers as well as a significant number of queer content creators, this diversity does not get translated into the television shows. However, I suggest that there is still potential for current transition period in media from separate screens to convergent screens to bring about more diversity amongst performers and power to the audience. More scholars in both media studies and gender studies need to focus on such phenomenon to figure out what way the entertainment media needs to go for everyone to benefit.

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¹ For more information, visit <http://www.tnms.tv/rating/default.asp>