

Convergence? | Diverge.

WHAT'S ALL THIS TALK ABOUT "media convergence," this dumb industry idea that all media will meld into one, and we'll get all of our news and entertainment through one box? Few contemporary terms generate more buzz—and less honey. Consider this column a primer on the real media convergence, because it's on the verge of transforming our culture as profoundly as the Renaissance did.

Media convergence is an ongoing *process*, occurring at various intersections of media technologies, industries, content and audiences; it's not an end state. There will *never* be one black box controlling all media. Rather, thanks to the proliferation of channels and the increasingly ubiquitous nature of computing and communications, we are entering an era where media will be everywhere, and we will use all kinds of media in relation to one another. We will develop new skills for managing information, new structures for transmitting information across channels, and new creative genres that exploit the potentials of those emerging information structures.

History teaches us that old media never die. And before you say, "What about the eight-track," let's distinguish among media, genres and delivery technologies. Recorded sound is a medium. Radio drama is a genre. CDs, MP3 files and eight-track cassettes are delivery technologies. Genres and delivery technologies come and go, but media persist as layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment system. A medium's content may shift, its audience may change and its social status may rise or fall, but once a medium establishes itself it continues to be part of the media ecosystem. No one medium is going to "win" the battle for our ears and eyeballs.

Part of the confusion about media convergence stems from the fact that when people talk about it, they're actu-

ally describing at least five processes:

■ **Technological Convergence:** What Nicholas Negroponte labeled the transformation of "atoms to bits," the digitization of all media content. When words, images and sounds are transformed into digital information, we expand the potential relationships between them and enable them to flow across platforms.

■ **Economic Convergence:** The horizontal integration of the entertainment

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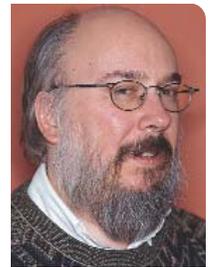
industry. A company like AOL Time Warner now controls interests in film, television, books, games, the Web, music, real estate and countless other sectors. The result has been the restructuring of cultural production around "synergies," and thus the transmedia exploitation of branded properties—Pokémon, Harry Potter, Tomb Raider, Star Wars.

■ **Social or Organic Convergence:** Consumers' multitasking strategies for navigating the new information environment. Organic convergence is what occurs when a high schooler is watching baseball on a big-screen television, listening to techno on the stereo, word-processing a paper and writing e-mail to his friends. It may occur inside or outside the box, but ultimately, it occurs within the user's cranium.

■ **Cultural Convergence:** The explosion of new forms of creativity at the intersections of various media technologies, industries and consumers. Media convergence fosters a new participatory folk culture by giving average people the tools to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate content. Shrewd companies tap this culture to foster consumer loyalty and generate low-cost content. Media convergence also encourages transmedia story-

telling, the development of content across multiple channels. As producers more fully exploit organic convergence, storytellers will use each channel to communicate different kinds and levels of narrative information, using each medium to do what it does best.

■ **Global Convergence:** The cultural hybridity that results from the international circulation of media content. In music, the world-music movement



produces some of the most interesting contemporary sounds, and in cinema, the global circulation of Asian popular cinema profoundly shapes Hollywood entertainment. These new forms reflect the experience of being a citizen of the "global village."

Much as the historical Renaissance emerged when Europe responded to the invention and dispersion of movable type, these multiple forms of media convergence are leading us toward a digital renaissance—a period of transition and transformation that will affect all aspects of our lives. The first Renaissance was a period of political and social instability, and the old monastic order crumbled. Today, media convergence is sparking a range of social, political, economic and legal disputes because of the conflicting goals of consumers, producers and gatekeepers. These contradictory forces are pushing both toward cultural diversity and toward homogenization, toward commercialization and toward grassroots cultural production.

The digital renaissance will be the best of times and the worst of times, but a new cultural order will emerge from it. Stay tuned.

