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Viral Hollywood: How Social Media & Other Emerging Technologies Have Molded the Modern Moviegoing Landscape

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VIRAL HOLLYWOOD:
HOW SOCIAL MEDIA & OTHER EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES HAVE MOLDED
THE MODERN MOVIEGOING LANDSCAPE

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Science with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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2014

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2014

ABSTRACT

There's no denying that the rise of the internet has brought about change in the Hollywood landscape. Fans now use social media, like Facebook and Twitter, to share word-of-mouth about movies both good and bad. In a sense, anyone can use these new "spreadable media" to be a critic. I myself took it one step further and started my own film review blog. I was even published in the College Heights Herald student newspaper for over a year! In gauging my audience's tastes in social media usage and in film, I have uncovered the fact that the hot-button marketing issues and questions that the major studios now face can also apply on a local level.

New online technology has also re-shaped the way we watch movies, thanks to streaming services such as Netflix and CBS All Access. Current trends indicate that online and on-demand video streaming will entirely revolutionize the moviegoing experience. Future research will indicate what this means for traditional movie theaters, as well as gauge the potential for a video streaming "bubble."

Keywords: marketing, Hollywood, Netflix, movie studios, social media, blogs, movie reviews

Dedicated to

Mom and Dad – thanks for never letting me give up on my dreams

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my first and second readers, Mr. Richard Taylor and Dr. Theodore Hovet. Your saintly patience and sage advice are what have made this project possible. Thank you for dredging through the dozens of pages and drafts with me. I am a much better student and man because of it. Our work together has reinvigorated my passion for education, research, and creative writing.

Special thanks go out to Dr. Hovet, Dr. Jerod Hollyfield, and my friends Jacob and Phil for reminding me every day of the joy that comes from watching and discussing movies. That joy is what got me interested in this topic to begin with. It's amazing to have a group like you guys to share thoughts with – a group who's just as passionate as I am!

I wouldn't have my eye as sharply fixed on my future, let alone that of Hollywood, without the guidance of Mr. Chris Connolly. Chris, your lifelong tutelage has given me a purpose and a hunger with which to steer my college education and I can still only dream of finally making it to the big leagues with you and the rest of the Disney clan.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: HOW OR WHY DO THINGS SPREAD?

“A well-known film executive once said that a film is like a parachute: If it doesn’t open, you’re dead”.

- Joseph R. Dominick,

The Dynamics of Mass Communication, 11th ed.

Audience word of mouth has, traditionally, been the most effective method of mass persuasion. In fact, studios and filmmakers consider word of mouth so sacred to the financial success of new motion picture releases that they have spent decades and billions of dollars attempting to control the conversation to their liking. In 1960, Alfred Hitchcock spearheaded a revolutionary publicity campaign for his movie *Psycho*. He required that all theaters playing the film must refuse admittance to patrons who were late for a showing. Lobbies featured cardboard cutouts of Hitchcock pointing to his watch with a written warning:

The manager of this theater has been instructed, at the risk of his life, not to admit to the theater any persons after the picture starts. Any spurious attempts to enter by side doors, fire escapes, or ventilating shafts will be met by force. The entire objective of this extraordinary policy, of course, is to help you enjoy *Psycho* more (“Psycho Trivia”).

“Enjoying *Psycho* more” meant that audiences should be on time to see the film, so as not to miss crucial plot elements. “It has been rumored that *Psycho* is so terrifying that it will scare some people speechless,” Hitchcock said, in a statement prior to the film’s release. “Some of my men hopefully sent their wives to a screening. The women emerged badly shaken but still vigorously vocal” (“Psycho Trivia”). With a production budget of just over \$800,000, *Psycho* went on to become a box office smash, earning an estimated \$32 million in the United States (“Psycho,” Box Office Mojo). This demonstrates the power that word of mouth has in determining a film’s success. Hitchcock knew this, which is why he was so confident in the controversial subject matter of *Psycho* and the unprecedented, “don’t be late” marketing campaign. Today’s mass-market films should look to *Psycho* as a model for how studios and filmmakers should attempt to generate word of mouth; provide something creative, unique, and engaging, and the audience will come.

Today, the Internet offers a faster highway for word of mouth to travel than even Hitchcock could have imagined, even if the foundation of these new tools is rooted in the same old-school movie marketing principles that made *Psycho* a hit. Since social media websites display the likes and distastes of thousands of individual users every second, studios are now trying to figure out the most effective ways to mold these conversations in order to get people talking about their films. This is the same issue that Paramount and Hitchcock ran into with *Psycho*, except nowadays the conversations are happening behind a computer screen instead of in the theater lobby or by the water cooler. Although not every online campaign creates the same amount of buzz, movie studios are utilizing the marketing potential of all social networks to bring audiences to the theater. At

present, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram are poised to revolutionize the Hollywood marketing landscape by facilitating instantaneous word of mouth, leading to both a more social moviegoing experience for consumers and larger profits for studios.

CHAPTER 2

EFFECTS ON MARKETING AND CONSUMER PRODUCTS

Any marketer knows that every company, not just film studios, must formulate new methods of promotion in order to keep their brands relevant. In a sense, movies themselves are like individual brands to studios, and their entire archive is their product mix. Unlike traditional consumer brands, however, movies possess artistic and social qualities. You would not gather up your friends and stand in line at midnight to buy the latest version of Crest toothpaste, but you might do just that if you wanted to see *The Hunger Games*. Researchers W. Glynn Mangold and David J. Faulds remind organizations to “be outrageous” in their article “Social Media: The New Hybrid Element of the Promotion Mix.” In it, they write that “people talk about things they find to be somewhat outrageous.” In order for companies to play a larger role in framing consumer discussions, “. . . products and services should be designed with talking points in mind, to stimulate word of mouth and social media-based conversations” (Mangold & Faulds 363). The marketing teams at Sony Pictures and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer made a valiant effort in this regard while promoting their new horror movie.

The studios hired Thinkmodo, a viral marketing agency based in New York City, to publish a clip on YouTube called “Telekinetic Coffee Shop Surprise” promoting the new *Carrie* film starring Chloë Grace Moretz (CarrieNYC). The two and a half minute video takes place inside of a coffee shop in New York’s West Village and features a

teenage girl reacting violently to having her coffee spilled all over her laptop. To unassuming customers, it appears as if the girl uses telepathy to shove a man against a wall, move tables, break hanging pictures, and even make books fly off of shelves. Patrons flee the store in utter disbelief and terror. Of course, a variety of practical special effects were used to create the scene, such as wire harnesses, remote controlled furniture, and spring loaded books on the shelf.

This shocking video, which has now been viewed nearly 50 million times, created serious word of mouth for *Carrie* near the time of its release. Twitter was sent ablaze with users from all over the world commenting on how cool the video was, using the hashtag #FlexLikeCarrie:



Nothing kills a bad product like good advertising, however. Despite having the necessary online chatter, critics and early audiences swiftly murdered the interest in *Carrie* with mixed reviews and an average “B-” Cinemascore rating (“Carrie,” Cinemascore).

According to Nikki Finke, former editor-in-chief of Deadline Hollywood, “it couldn’t scare up \$20 million [in its first weekend] even as the only horror movie opening this October.” In this case, the social medium in question, YouTube, managed to create word of mouth and even translated some of that buzz to actual ticket sales. However, audiences quickly discovered what a poor film it was and returned to social media to spread word of its inferiority, thus turning many prospective audience members away.

While *Carrie* offers an example of a strong social media campaign that did not turn out to equal blockbuster profits, other research suggests that social networks may not even spawn word of mouth, let alone ticket sales, if not utilized to their full marketing potential. In 2008, Emily Mabry and Lance Porter of Louisiana State University conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of social networking platforms for generating user intent to see *High School Musical 3: Senior Year* in theaters. They compared the results of a survey posted at the bottom of both the film’s promotional MySpace page and the official movie website. Overall, there were 13,803 voluntary respondents. Of those, 12,852 responded from the film’s official website and 951 responded to the MySpace promotional site (Mabry, Porter 6). After examining all the question responses, Mabry and Porter draw the following conclusion in their final analysis:

The results from this study indicate that the official site is more effective in positively influencing intent to see the film. ... Overall, the website had more content and opportunities for interaction. Therefore, this finding reinforces existing literature, which states that increased interactivity positively affects purchase intentions (13).

So why did MySpace fail to facilitate the expected buzz for *High School Musical 3*? The authors go on to state that their findings could be influenced by the limited capacity of MySpace to display interactive content (13). “Whereas the website was effective at influencing intent to see the film, we believe the MySpace page could have been effective at generating awareness and encouraging the spread of awareness through its network of users...” (13). Mabry and Porter’s findings indicate that it is critical for future marketers to understand all attributes of a social networking site if they are to utilize it effectively for promotion. At the time that this study was conducted, there were zero guidelines for proper social media advertising. In more recent years, industry experts like Shama Kabani have provided a template for more profitable social campaigns.

In her book *The Zen of Social Media Marketing*, Kabani illustrates some key tips for all companies seeking to take advantage of the vast consumer audience on Facebook, specifically. “On Facebook, your ad content needs to be less about you and more about the customer,” she writes. Just like some of the most effective films, “the most effective ads typically include four things: a provocative headline, an emotional connection, an offer or call to action, and an image that is memorable or involves faces” (Kabani 169). This is why superhero franchises are so popular. As consumers, we are drawn to Iron Man and Spider-Man because they are recognizable “good guys” that we are hard-wired to feel empathy for since we have seen them portrayed as heroes on lunchboxes, t-shirts, and in comic books for decades. It can be inferred that organizations whose messages do not possess the features of an effective ad fail more often than they succeed, which might be why Tom Cruise’s blockbuster *Edge of Tomorrow* flopped despite being a terrific film. It was a high-concept summer movie that was supposed to start a new franchise for

Warner Brothers in the summer of 2014, but a lack of recognizable characters and an inconsistent marketing strategy, in which the film’s tagline, “Live. Die. Repeat,” was frequently confused for the title, doomed it to failure. Below is an example of how Kabani’s Facebook principles ought to apply to film marketing:



Warner Brothers Pictures has set up a promotional page for Peter Jackson’s trilogy of films based on *The Hobbit*. In anticipation of the release of the second film, subtitled *The Desolation of Smaug*, the marketing team has shared an image of a street artist in California who spent three days rendering this pastel drawing of Gandalf, one of the film’s primary characters.

The image associated with this post is unmistakably eye-catching. The fact that the artist spent three days working on a project that looks this good serves as an emotional connection to the promotion material. By giving her the title of “Hobbit Fan of

the Week,” the marketers have created a provocative headline that will garner the attention and interest of other users interested in earning the same distinction for themselves; thereby fostering user involvement in the promotion of the new *Hobbit* movie. However, the real call for action is in the line which reads “submit your own photo here” with a link to follow. This post meets all the criteria that Kabani lists for effective Facebook advertising. It has been “liked” by 20,523 users and shared by 867 more (“The Hobbit,” Facebook). If both numbers are multiplied by an estimated ticket price of ten dollars and then added together, they translate to potential box office sales of roughly \$213,900. As of October 29, 2014, *The Desolation of Smaug* went on to make roughly \$960 million at the worldwide box office, representing a slight underperformance from *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, which grossed just over \$1 billion worldwide (“The Hobbit,” Box Office Mojo). If the marketing team makes three to five posts a day for the next month leading up to the release of the third film, *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*, the appeal grows and potential ticket sales add up even more.

Author Joseph R. Dominick provides an example of this idea in action – how growing online appeal leads to strong box office performance. In the eleventh edition of his book The Dynamics of Mass Communication, Dominick mentions how Marvel Entertainment, a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company, “routinely places trailers for its upcoming films on MySpace and Facebook.” Twitter is also a source where Marvel frequently shares its content. He goes on to say that the “trailer for *The Incredible Hulk* was viewed 14 million times online, and the film made more than \$135 million at the box office. Social media have given filmmakers new channels to promote their projects directly to the audience” (214).

Since *Hulk*'s successful release in 2008, Marvel has continued to utilize all facets of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to their advantage. In addition to sharing trailers, they have instituted social games on Facebook to facilitate consumer engagement. "Avengers Alliance" is a turn-based, role-playing game that was launched to coincide with the release of *Marvel's The Avengers* in 2012, which went on to become one of the highest grossing movies of all time ("Marvel's The Avengers," Box Office Mojo). Though no direct research exists showing a correlation between the *Avengers* game and the film's astronomical profits, Mabry and Porter's study from *High School Musical 3* indicates that "increased interactivity positively affects purchase intentions" (13). So it is likely that at least most of the Facebook users who spent time playing the game possess some interest in Marvel and/or *The Avengers*.

When Marvel exhausts all promotional potential from Facebook, they turn to other, perhaps more trendy, social networks in order to stay ahead of the competition for consumer's dollars. Within the past year, Instagram has introduced video capabilities to compete with Vine, a popular video-sharing application on mobile devices. Users can now capture and share short, self-made videos with friends over Instagram's social network. Marvel and 20th Century Fox were the first major studios to use this new feature to tease an upcoming release. They showed eight seconds of the first trailer for *X-Men: Days of Future Past* in order to build hype for the full preview, which would premiere on YouTube nearly a week later on October 29th, 2013. Now, just weeks after the release of the film on home video, the Instagram video boasts 10,120 likes and 1,297 comments. The official trailer from YouTube has been viewed nearly 31 million times, over 4 million of which came in the first 24 hours of its original premiere (Hay). Similarly,

Universal Pictures teamed up with pop superstar Beyoncé to release a short teaser on her Instagram account in anticipation of the first *Fifty Shades of Grey* trailer. With Bey's popular song "Crazy in Love" used in the preview, Universal decided to leverage her enormous fan following to build hype for the trailer's premiere on YouTube. As of October 12, 2014 Beyoncé's Instagram teaser claims 478,073 likes and 87,293 comments (#fiftyshades). Universal released the full preview on YouTube worldwide on July 24, 2014. Though the film releases on February 14, 2015, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* preview holds approximately 33 million views on YouTube, which is more than *X-Men* can claim even a year after that trailer's release (Universal Pictures UK). Clearly, anticipation and word-of-mouth are high. So far, Marvel, 20th Century Fox, and Universal have been on the forefront of a new social tool that allows them to mold the conversation surrounding their films, which Mangold and Faulds suggest as necessary for engaging customers in a way that will influence them to buy, or in the case of the motion picture industry, participate in a prestigious, sociocultural product. "Consumers feel more engaged with products and organizations when they are able to submit feedback" (361). *Fifty Shades of Grey* releases next Valentine's Day, which means that there is still time for the online audience to grow even larger.

Just as Instagram can now be used to promote films with video content, other social media and mobile applications are influencing interest in, and sales of, tie-in consumer products. The sale of cutting edge, "gotta-have-it" products leads to heightened word of mouth and demand for a specific brand. Demand is a very traditional factor in the economics of any business, not just cinema. The Walt Disney Company, for example, possesses what is likely the most intricate network of consumer tie-ins of any major

studio in Hollywood. They sell tie-in products at their own stores in malls, advertise them on their own television networks, and turn them into physical experiences at their own theme parks around the world. Chris Connolly, senior vice president of licensing for Disney's Consumer Products division, says that the best way to sell is to provide products worth sharing over social media. "Instead of putting my toys, dolls, or a backpack on social media, I put the coolest, hippest princess t-shirts from Hot Topic on our Facebook pages, and those things get shared all around the world," Connolly said, in a recent phone interview.



“You start getting these ‘OMGs’ in every language... and then they start saying ‘where?’ or ‘what?’ or ‘how can I get this?’”, as seen above in figure 2.3 (Connolly). This reiterates the point that Mangold and Faulds make about people conversing over things they find interesting or outrageous. The Hot Topic t-shirt example is how Connolly and his team are framing online discussions about their products.

Moreover, Disney Consumer Products has found huge success with their mobile applications. “Disney Princess Palace Pets” is a free app for iOS devices that puts users in charge of bathing, dressing up, and reading about the pets of Belle, Snow White, and Jasmine among others. According to Connolly, the app cost approximately \$200,000 to create. “The reason why those animals have taken off [without a movie or television show],” he says, “is because . . . the notion of combining princesses and pets is like combining peanut butter and jelly . . . the idea on the surface is so simplistic that the girls look at it and say ‘I love it. I want to get the Palace Pets.’” Connolly and his merchandising team were recently recognized by Bob Iger, Chief executive officer of The Walt Disney Company, for achieving \$1 billion in profits over the last fiscal year and for creating their own original content for the first time with the Palace Pets (Connolly). In the future, Connolly sees Pinterest, a pinboard-style, photo sharing website, as a medium that is poised to explode. “Being that it’s very visual and photography driven, it has a lot of potential for my [princess] business,” he claims.

So where does the rest of the industry stand on the future of social media marketing? Michael Cieply and Brooks Barnes did a piece for The New York Times about San Diego Comic-Con, specifically, and how it is evolving to provide the best experiences possible to all attendees. “Instead of sweating in lines to see a couple of film clips and grab a glimpse of a star, fans were following their passions into the convention’s nooks and crannies that were offering a deeper level of engagement than the . . . banal presentations by big studios” (Cieply and Barnes). Fans seem to be demanding more “up-close-and-personal” experiences versus the old panel discussions in order to build excitement. For example, Legendary Pictures found success with their

“Godzilla Ecounter,” which they brought to Comic-Con in order to get fans excited for the 2014 release of director Gareth Edwards’ *Godzilla*. This was essentially a pop-up museum exhibit dedicated to all things Godzilla – concept art, set designs, props, and even a tease of what the monster was expected to look like in the new film (Cieply and Barnes). Interactive, personal experiences like this provide catalysts for online discussion where fans can discuss how awesome or how lame it was. This way, legitimate hype can be built for major studio blockbusters a year or more ahead of its release.

Thinkmodo got in peoples’ faces with their *Carrie* prank. Marvel designed a Facebook game for a hands-on *Avengers* experience. Even Alfred Hitchcock had a plan to get people talking about *Psycho*, affecting their usual movie-going routines by not letting anyone into the shows late. By investing in marketing campaigns that provide ample consumer involvement, major movie studios can look to all social media platforms as reliable resources for facilitating word of mouth and maximizing profits at the box office. In the years to come, consumer products will see a boom thanks to photo-sharing networks like Instagram and Pinterest, and all social media campaigns will involve more direct, personal experiences.

CHAPTER 3

THE CASE OF NETFLIX

Although social media serves a purpose as a facilitator of marketing and word of mouth, the internet offers other popular channels for content distribution. CEO of Fandor, a streaming site for independent films, Ted Hope has said that “the missing cog in our entertainment ecosystem is aggregated community, one united by values, interests, and behaviors. ... Doesn’t it make far greater sense to bring films to where the people are gathered and offer it to them where, when, and how they want it?” The first to start fostering such a community is Netflix, a wildly popular online video streaming application that gives users access to thousands of different movies and television programs. It is unclear whether the service, as a whole, might be “friend” or “foe” to the industry. Netflix make both mainstream and obscure Hollywood content ubiquitous in millions of homes around the world, but at the same time, it utilizes analytics tools which lead to the production of consistently great programming – something that movie theaters and television networks have never quite been able to produce. Robert H. Frank, an economics professor at Cornell University, presents some observations on the success of Netflix in a column he published for *The New York Times*’s “Business Day”:

“Films once generated revenue only by mustering large-enough audiences to justify screenings in theaters. Many niche offerings, like Hindi-language movies in medium-sized American cities, were simply not viable. Services like Netflix...

changed all that. Because digital movies cost next to nothing to ship, people can now watch them [on their own time] without having to assemble a posse of ticket buyers.”

With access to niche offerings, as well as blockbuster titles, I liken Netflix to the internet’s biggest party which, unlike free-to-use social networks, customers are willing to pay to gain access to. Brian Stelter of CNNMoney reports that “Netflix ended 2013 with over 44 million [worldwide] members.” And as Ken Auletta tells us in his *New Yorker* article “Outside the Box: Netflix and the Future of Television,” it accounts for over one third of all peak nighttime broadband traffic. Traffic like that is bound to cause tie-ups in streaming speeds, especially in concentrated markets like the United States which accounts for roughly 33 million of Netflix’s subscribers. At the time of this writing, Netflix has entered into an agreement with broadband and cable provider Comcast to improve traffic flow and streaming speeds (Ramachandran).

Questions arise as to why these numbers might be so high. Why all this traffic? What is Netflix doing right that they have to deal directly with broadband providers for improved connections? Auletta offers a few ideas in an interview with Charlie Rose for Bloomberg TV, including the fact that Netflix allows users to watch any and all programming they want without being interrupted by advertisements. The programming generally features high playback quality, depending on the internet connection speed. Additionally, users might feel a sense of empowerment thanks to the technology through which they access Netflix to view their preference of programming. Surely these combined factors are worth the modest monthly charge that is eons lower in cost than a typical cable bill.

Most Netflix users subscribe to the default \$8 fee per month for access, but Auletta also suggests that we might soon see higher fees as a result of increased broadband usage. Small margins come as a result of the high costs of airing cable programs. Auletta's case for cable providers says "why not get out of the program business? Why not focus [exclusively] on the broadband connection in the house? If we do that, our profit margin is 80-90 percent, and maybe we can start charging like electricity. Netflix says, 'if they put a meter on me . . . that's gonna jack up our prices.' Or instead of charging Netflix, the providers could charge the consumer who uses Netflix" (Auletta, Interview)

As the editor-at-large for FORTUNE Magazine, Adam Lashinsky makes sense of Auletta's jargon in the CNNMoney article "5 things I learned from The New Yorker's feature on Netflix." He cites Auletta's text for each of these "5 things." One is that Netflix has "organized its [library of films] into seventy-nine thousand categories – e.g. Foreign Sci-Fi & Fantasy; Dark Thrillers Based on Books – to better predict what you might watch next." This wide variety of subgenre categories indicates Netflix's "ambition to harness its data to serve its business interests and to understand its customers."

"Understand its customers," you say? A clever tool that Netflix uses to record direct feedback and examine customer tastes is its five-star rating system. When a user watches an episode of *The West Wing* and gives it a five-star rating, Netflix tracks the fact that you enjoyed that episode and groups them with the other high ratings. Maybe that user is one of a million others who gave *The West Wing* five stars. If that user then watches a bunch of movies starring Kevin Spacey and gives them all five-star ratings, Netflix notices that you enjoy programs starring Spacey. Again, maybe millions of users

rate the same way. The metrics gathered from these ratings indicate user interest in political dramas as well as Kevin Spacey. Henceforth, the two are mashed together, and users are treated to *House of Cards*, the first of now myriad original programs from Netflix. These original programs are manufactured to be guaranteed hits, based on data mining from previous program views. That's how your profile recommends programs to you. Tracking user ratings and preferences allows Netflix to produce quality content from the ground up, which poses a threat to traditional television and movie-going mediums.

Netflix also employs a business model of releasing all episodes of a single season of television at once rather than an episode a week like traditional network and cable programs. This turns control of the content over to the user; they can choose to digest the programming at their own rate. Many like to spend a day or two over a weekend watching an entire series, commonly referred to as “binge-watching” while others prefer to take in an episode or two whenever they find free time. Still, there are detractors who find that the “buzz” of a binge-friendly model is finite and that *House of Cards* in particular is nothing but dreck.

Michael Hiltzik, author of “The Economy Hub” for the *Los Angeles Times*, explains his negative stance on the series in his article “Netflix, ‘House of Cards’ and the limits of binge-watching junk.” He claims early on that the series is a “pretty sorry spectacle” of traditional “hallmarks of quality” such as “coherent plotting, believable dialogue, and professional acting.” Hiltzik cites Willa Paskin of *Slate* when saying that by releasing all thirteen episodes of a season at once, *House of Cards* is “designed to be binge-watched.” It needs to be “consumed so quickly that there is no time to taste all the garbage we are guzzling down... Apportioned out every week, dissected for plausibility,

judged on execution, *House of Cards* would barely be worth your time.” The art of binge-watching is all about creating buzz, but the question Hiltzik poses is “to what extent can you take that buzz to the bank?”

From there, Hiltzik says it is unclear whether the strong financial performance of Netflix is attributed to the buzz of *House of Cards* or the site’s successful business model. The author measures the site against competing cable channel HBO. Both recorded roughly the same revenues in 2013 - \$4.4 billion for Netflix, \$4.9 for HBO. The two are running neck-and-neck for subscribers in the United States. “This isn’t good news for HBO, which appears to be declining as Netflix gains,” says Hiltzik.

Netflix revolutionized the way we watch movies and television shows. We can watch them from our computers, smartphones, video game consoles, televisions, and tablets – all crucial technological commodities in today’s viral, digital age. However, there are always risks with being the first to offer a product via a hot, new technology. Hiltzik suggests that it is easy for competitors to match your technology if you first offer a “substandard product,” in this case *House of Cards*. “If the video market continues to develop along its current trendline, HBO may start to make itself available as a streaming service, and Netflix’s technological advantage will evaporate” (Hiltzik).

It seems Hiltzik predicted the future, since not only HBO but CBS also recently announced that they would each offer their own online streaming services (Kaplan). That said, Netflix may still maintain a “technological advantage” in the short term. “CBS All Access” launched on October 16, 2014 with access to current seasons of 15 different shows, live streaming of local CBS stations from America’s largest markets, as well as a

5,000+ episode archive of classic CBS shows such as *Star Trek*, *Cheers*, and *Twin Peaks* (CBS All Access). For now, a major gripe about CBS's service is that it does not offer the same unique content that Netflix does. Marc Berman, editor-in-chief of TV Media Insights is quoted in an article for the New York Daily News, saying "I'm a fan of 'Survivor,' so if they were offering another hour of that show that didn't air on TV, that would be really neat – but they're not" (Kaplan). Until CBS works out the kinks of their new online content offering, or until HBO's streaming service goes live, consumers should remain satisfied with the consistent variety of content on Netflix.

Now I want to reintroduce the concept of creating better content through feedback. Hiltzik argued that the quality of the series was poor, but in general *House of Cards* has been warmly received by critics and viewers alike. As the roster of Netflix's original series offerings becomes more diverse with shows like *Orange Is the New Black*, *Arrested Development*, and *Hemlock Grove*, it begs several questions such as how long will it be before Hollywood studios start making films through consumer feedback? How would they gather it? So far, the "broadband bandwagon" seems to be working. Maybe individual studios will all offer their own streaming services someday, premiering new films either in theaters, on the internet, or both at the same time. This concept of creating content through feedback is not limited to worldwide streaming services, however. My own personal experiences in the online medium provide an example of how this high concept works on a local level.

CHAPTER 4

WHAT SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS MEAN FOR AN INDEPENDENT CRITIC

I have often heard clichés about doing your best thinking either on the toilet or in the shower. For me, the latter holds true. It was the fall of my sophomore year, and my favorite holiday, Halloween, was fast approaching. I had told my roommate that, to get in the spirit, I would put my DVD collection and Netflix subscription to the test by watching one horror movie every day during the month of October; the climax would be watching John Carpenter’s original *Halloween* on October 31st. This idea prompted a discussion between us about why we enjoy horror so much, why we detest it sometimes, and what exactly scares us when it comes to not just these kinds of movies, but haunted-house attractions and the like as well. My roommate and I learned much about each other’s likes and disinterests in that conversation. I felt even more enamored with the Halloween season than I had before, simply by talking about scary movies with a friend.

Later on, I went down the hall to take a shower, and I returned to the room with another idea. Despite being a major in the business school, many of my friends and floormates knew me as “the guy who knows a lot about movies”. Since everyone was always asking my opinion on one film or another, I thought it would be fun to find a creative outlet to share my thoughts on more than just the horror genre. I wanted to lend my voice to an overall discussion of movies that my friends and fellow cinephiles at WKU could engage with at their own speed. My goal was to simply make my passion

accessible to everyone around me. I remember thinking “hey, maybe the Herald needs a movie critic!” I ran the idea by my roommate, and he agreed that I should absolutely move forward with it. I contacted the College Heights Herald by e-mail the next day and swiftly found myself a job as a journalist.

I went in to meet with the opinion editor at the time, Zirconia Alleyne. She ran me through all the logistics: how paybills work, AP style, word counts, et cetera. By the end of the meeting, it was time to pick a name for my column. It could not be a generic name; it had to be something that stood out, something edgy. I settled on “The Reel” by no particular “a-ha!” realization whatsoever. Thus, my column was born.

My first review for the Herald student publication came on October 19th, 2012. It was for a horror film that they had sent me to see in theaters called *Sinister*. It was an appropriate selection; one that was in keeping with my “31 Nights of Halloween” marathon idea. “I jumped out of my seat consistently from beginning to end, as did the vast majority of my fellow patrons in theater 7,” I wrote of the film. “There are some classic haunted-house elements in other scenes, such as subdued lighting, creepy music, and jump scares, which combine to create the most horrifying movie experience I have ever been a part of” (Conniff, MOVIE REVIEW: “Sinister”).

It was marvelous seeing my name in print for the first time. I was very satisfied with how the first piece turned out, and I would continue on writing for the rest of the fall semester. However, in early November I started to pursue more ubiquity than what I was previously achieving. I wanted my voice to be equally accessible among WKU students, friends at other schools around the United States, and family from Northern Kentucky

and Indiana to Pennsylvania and North Carolina, so I considered what might be the most effective method for making my reviews accessible and convenient for them. Since even Disney can't advertise traditionally, I decided to start publishing some pieces on a blog using the same name I chose for the Herald: "The Reel Movie Reviews".

From here, I continued publishing reviews both on my blog and in the Herald; often the same piece adapted to meet word count requirements and for grammatical error. Another one of my earliest pieces was a review for the James Bond 007 thriller *Skyfall*. My final assessment was as follows –

"After seeing [the film], I believe one thing is certain: Daniel Craig truly is Bond 2.0, a darker Bond for a new generation, and I'm anxious to get back into field duty with this guy. Sign me up for 'Her Majesty's Secret Service' (Conniff, "Skyfall")."

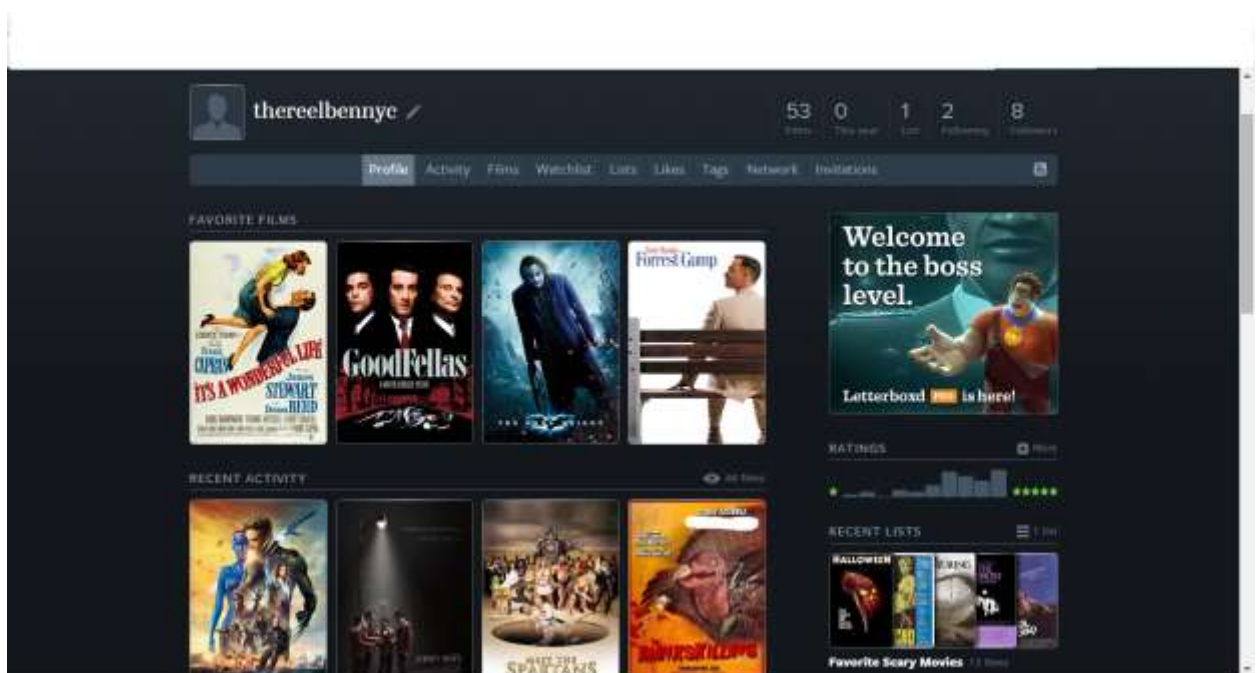


My full review was submitted by my editor at the time, Zirconia A., to the Kentucky Press Association for consideration in the category of “best review” at their intercollegiate awards. On January 25, 2013, it was announced that my piece had been recognized as the finest review out of all the submissions from collegiate newspapers around the state of Kentucky. Needless to say this gave me, a business student adventitious to the world of print journalism, a bit of an ego boost. I finally had the credentials I needed to be taken seriously as a collegiate-level film critic, and I thought that might translate to higher blog traffic and more interaction with curious students through the Herald.

It’s interesting to think about how a piece of paper might suddenly grant me the confidence and credibility needed to be successful in a digital medium. Online readers tend to trust writers who are backed up by a reputable publication, and at least around the state of Kentucky, that’s exactly what I had – a trusted news source that could support my credibility as a well-written, well-spoken columnist. Friends started asking about movies more frequently, and more students whom I am not acquainted with have also inquired about my work. I once received an e-mail through the Herald from a student who complained that I only reviewed “bro movies,” which in my estimation constitutes most action films, buddy comedies, and gritty Oscar-caliber dramas that happen to be male-centric, such as *Prisoners*, *12 Years a Slave*, or *Captain Phillips*. After I received this feedback, I attempted to broaden my horizons by pursuing romantic comedies and animated family films on a more frequent basis. It’s purely coincidence that my next reviews were for the romantic comedy *About Time*, Disney’s smash-hit *Frozen*, Spike

Jonze's *Her*, and Warner Brothers' vibrant *The Lego Movie*. All of these were films that I was excited to see.

Another student reached out to me through a Facebook message and asked me to try out a new social network called Letterboxd – Your Life in Film. Essentially, it is a platform tailored specifically for sharing brief critical opinions and ratings of films. You can also compile “lists” so that friends can see what your favorite movies are. Notice in the bottom right corner of the following photograph how I have assembled all my favorite horror movies into a comprehensive list that I can then share with friends across any social networking platform.



The fact that technology like this exists – technology which allows users like me to visually curate a list of movies with access to posters, trailers, production credits, and links to purchase the films themselves, all in one location – speaks volumes about the potential these social tools have for sharing and interaction when it comes to motion

pictures, specifically. With tools like Letterboxd and Twitter, there are endless possibilities for an independent critic like me to reach an audience and spread the word about my favorite releases. In this way, the work that I have done so far has become similar to what the major studios have been doing with their marketing.

If that wasn't enough, I have firsthand evidence that it is possible for an aspiring, grassroots film critic with no more power behind him than a laptop and a Twitter account to gain international appeal. I was recently approached on Twitter by a young woman in Brazil who had some questions about my short blog post on the film *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*. Her series of tweets stated "Didn't these reviews used to be longer? You mentioned the cast but not the plot. I know you probably don't want to give plot details away, and I don't want this to seem rude, but this looks like a review by someone who hasn't actually seen the film."



I was stunned when I saw my phone buzzing with these alerts! Not only was this girl reaching out for discussion over social media, but she was in Brazil! I was all too eager to explain to her why my *Sin City* review was, at first, so bereft of details.



“My original thought was that it’d be ok w/o plot detail cuz (1) [the plot] is fragmented & hard to describe and (2) fans will see the film anyway,” I replied. Though I was originally set in my ways by refusing to include specifics, I was nevertheless concerned by this inquiry. Thus I re-evaluated my thoughts on *Sin City* and added some plot details to my previously published blog post:

“At some point, the narrative is presented in a slightly disjointed fashion, seeming to try and service as both a sequel and prequel at the same time. I say ‘prequel’ because we have Josh Brolin taking over the role of Dwight from Clive Owen. It works to some extent. The visuals are always eye-popping, and the acting

performances are appropriately zany. But Brolin's segment often feels padded with unnecessary exposition, seemingly for the sole purpose of tying in more characters, like Chris Meloni & Jeremy Piven as a pair of foolhardy detectives. Brolin plays Dwight "pre-facial reconstruction surgery"; this surgery is what would lead him to look like Owen in the first film. We also get to see how Manute (Dennis Haysbert) got that funky gold eye..." (Conniff, "Sin City").

My friend in Brazil was pleased to see these changes. I tweeted a link to the updated posting, and she responded by "favoriting" my tweet; an action similar to "liking" a status on Facebook. Whether this small, personal interaction prompted her to contribute to the commercial success of the *Sin City* movie by buying a ticket remains to be seen, but that is the power these social networks have. With Twitter, it's possible for a critic like me to correspond with fans around the world and influence their decision making, despite being little more than an acquaintance located thousands of miles away.

The interactions I've had with readers have influenced my personal decisions for creating stronger pieces. I became a much stronger writer in my third semester with the Herald because I enjoyed direct interaction with the editor-in-chief, Michael McKay. His wish for me was to become a New York Times-caliber columnist. I still don't consider myself anywhere close to that level, but my writing became clearer and much more organized under Michael's tutelage. With such strong face-to-face feedback, I began to wonder if the interactions I was having through social media were just as powerful. I kept wondering how influential my work has truly been over students on this campus, cinephiles in this town, and friends in other states. On the subject of social media, I was

curious to discover if my reach was truly as worldwide as my Twitter interactions and blog metrics would lead me to believe.

In response to these inquiries, I built a survey using Western Kentucky University's Qualtrics software. In March 2014, I wrote a piece for the Herald titled "Casting Call: Be a Part of 'The Reel's' Experiment" in which I explained the details of the survey to my prospective audience. That article was circulated in print around campus, on my blog, and online at WKUHerald.com. The online publications featured a link to the online survey. "To demonstrate the context and nature of the survey think about your social media usage," I asked of my readers. "Look out for questions similar to these: 'Do you discuss movies most often on Twitter or Facebook? Have you seen or avoided certain movies based on The Reel's recommendations?'"

Results from Qualtrics tell me that, out of the thousands of students who were potentially exposed to this survey content, only eighteen responded. This sample number alone tells me that my influence may not be as great as I originally hypothesized, yet the results still indicate an active interest in my work.

For the purposes of the survey, I chose to limit my analysis to Facebook and Twitter. These are the two sites with which I am most actively engaged when discussing movies and distributing blog posts. Of the eighteen students that responded, 56% use Facebook to find new information about upcoming movies. 56% also said that Facebook is their choice social network for sharing posts about movies they've seen. In response to Question 3 – "which social network might influence you most to see a movie, in terms of the way word-of-mouth (WOM) is delivered?" – There was a tie. 44% said Facebook, 44% said Twitter, and 13% marked "other," citing Tumblr and Google+ as social

networks whose facilitation of WOM most influences them to see movies. 71% of respondents indicated that something they had seen on Facebook and/or Twitter once dissuaded them from seeing a movie. Conversely, 71% also claimed that they had once been persuaded by something they saw on social media to see a movie they were not originally anticipating.

These days, a basic understanding of the audience's social media usage is required if a studio hopes to have a profitable wide release. By adopting Hollywood's approach, I can now ask the serious questions of my own audience. 53% of students surveyed indicated that they trusted posts from friends over those of professional reviewers, indicating that there may be hope for a friendly, neighborhood student critic like me after all.

The final two questions seem to go hand-in-hand. "Has anything Ben has written for the College Heights Herald or The Reel Movie Reviews blog influenced you to see/not see a movie?" and "If you answered yes to the previous question, name the film that Ben influenced you to see/not see." 41% claimed that I had influenced them to see a movie, and 24% said that I had influenced them not to see a movie. Another 24% indicated that I had never once influenced them to see a movie before, while 12% revealed that I had not influenced them to stay away from any particular movies. The movies indicated in response to the very last question were all ones that I had written about, but it was unclear whether I had influenced responders to see or not see their selections.

I can infer based on my verdicts on some of these films if someone was likely to see or not see something. If I were to give a film a positive review, it is likely a reader

will go see it in theaters. A negative review will, more likely than not, prompt the reader to stay away, although some may be curious to see just how bad that film is, or perhaps they are fans of a franchise and disregard critics' reviews. Middling verdicts are tough, as it's really then up to the viewer if they want to spend money on something they think they will like or if they want to wait for a DVD rental. Either way, I saw responses ranging from *The Lego Movie* and *Frozen* to *Need for Speed* and *Getaway* to *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

Although eighteen respondents is hardly a substantial number, the responses I received have begun to indicate that there is indeed a trend among today's young people that WOM is spread and read mostly on social media websites like Facebook. Social media have also offered a place for a budding critic like me to get his word out. Any number of respondents at all would indicate that there is something to be said for the way Hollywood is beginning to assimilate into our viral, social culture.

I thought it might help having a powerful on-campus media distributor like the Herald supporting me. It did at first, but interest dwindled quickly. If I were to conduct research of this nature again, I would try to get more data by appealing to respondents' own motivation. Inherently, everyone wants to be a part of something positive. Researchers Wenemark, Persson, Noorlind-Brage, Svensson, and Kristenson found success by using self-determination theory to stimulate intrinsic motivation in others with a self-administered health survey. Their findings suggest that it's possible "to improve response rates in a way that also promotes data quality and positive experiences for the respondents."

Bill Johnston at surveygizmo.com recommends a simpler approach. He holds that there are five basic tips to follow when attempting to raise your number of survey responses: “share the results, identify other people who care about the results, send a reminder, charitable giving, and tangible incentives do work.” By “charitable giving,” Johnston maintains that you can get people to respond for a good cause, like donating \$10 to the local animal shelter for every response received. For the purposes of my own future surveys, I would offer some “tangible incentive” to those students willing to participate, such as inexpensive cash amounts or gift cards. I did not bother seeking grant money to use for incentives because I wanted to gauge the organic, grassroots power of my work through the College Heights Herald. I wanted to see how many people actually cared enough about this project to participate without the expectation of a reward. I might ask respondents to indicate to me whether they saw or did not see their specific selections based on my influence.

Though I never reached the number of responses I expected to receive, any number at all would indicate the positive impact of my work as a film critic. It also reveals that the questions and concepts that international Hollywood conglomerates grapple with every day can also apply to a local level. The knowledge I gained from my results will continue to influence my future reviews as I strive for more effective ways to communicate and promote a more consistent dialogue between myself and my audience.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: WHAT'S NEXT?

Perhaps the most riveting thing about social and other spreadable media is the fact that they are constantly changing. It's not as simple as something just going viral. Some marketing efforts succeed, and some fail regardless of the amount of people they reach. This is due to the media's inherent nature of facilitating an open forum where anyone can start a dialogue, whether positive or negative. Not a day goes by without a new studio update or an announcement of some new technological initiative. Something reported on Tuesday may ignite a word-of-mouth firestorm by becoming the most talked-about topic on Twitter before falling by the wayside for the next big event on Wednesday. On October 7, 2014, Robert Downey, Jr. went on *Ellen* and insinuated that he may be reprising his role as Tony Stark for *Iron Man 4*. That night, he went on *The Late Show with David Letterman* and denied plans for a fourth film. The internet erupted with so many reports from various media outlets of "Is he?" / "Isn't he?" that it was impossible to discern the truth about Downey's remarks. By scrolling through tweets on October 8th with #IronMan4, one notices differing stories from post to post. @YahooMovies said "After @RobertDowneyJr's appearance on @Letterman last night, we're not really sure where #IronMan4 stands," while @sourcefed added soon after "Did @RobertDowneyJr really just announce #IronMan4?!" Discussion was seemingly tabled for about a week until it was confirmed that Downey would be reprising the role for *Captain America 3* instead of his own sequel. At the time of this writing, Marvel has confirmed that they will

be adapting their popular “Civil War” storyline for *Cap 3*. The issue now is what the announcements of the storyline as well as Downey’s casting mean to competing studio Warner Brothers who, on October 15th, announced a 10-movie slate for its “Justice League” characters between 2016 and 2020. These conversations will undoubtedly change again as more specific details are announced.

Future researchers will need to stay abreast of current technological trends, how they work, and what their potential may be. With the rise of Netflix, CBS All Access, and HBO streaming services, how can the home viewing experience continue to improve? In turn, what will theater owners have to do in order to keep their business relevant when first-run films can be viewed from the comfort of one’s home? This exact trend is currently in its infant stages with The Weinstein Company’s decision to release the summer sci-fi epic *Snowpiercer* digitally on the same day it came to theaters. This move potentially robbed the film of massive profits, since it was made available online to the general public for less than the cost of a theater ticket. Therefore, the question for Weinstein becomes “how can we avoid losing money on *Snowpiercer 2*, or whichever film we decide to release with this ‘same-day-as-theaters’ model next?” Likewise Netflix recently inked a deal to stream the *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* sequel the same day it comes to theaters. Do studios stand to lose money this way, or does Netflix have a large-enough audience that millions of \$8 a month subscriptions can cover costs enough to make *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon 2* an instant hit?

The simple fact that these questions can be asked indicates the obvious influence that the digital age has had on the business of filmmaking. Properties are being marketed through mobile applications, placing Hollywood literally in consumers’ pockets. Word-

of-mouth has found a new home in social media, and studios have been eager to mold the discussions taking place there. However, it is not enough to simply share content. Social media is a conversation, not a sermon. It is important that studios continue to make their properties fun, interactive, and engaging both onscreen and off in order for the business to continue to thrive in our viral world.

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