Refashioning Television: Business Opportunities and Challenges of Webisodes

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Introduction

Convergence of media has created both opportunities and challenges to the way businesses reach and interact with audiences. Traditional media content is no longer suitable for modern digital landscapes. The rise of the Internet as a video distribution platform has certainly influenced the traditional television industry. In 2009, more than 85% of U.S. households had broadband access to the Internet, while 81.4% of web users watched online videos (ComScore, 2009). As users continue to adapt the convergence and gain more control over their content choices, television begins to refashion itself to suit digital needs.

Much online video content consists of repackaged television programs (Hansell, 2009). Such an approach provides an alternative distribution channel for traditional television, but competes for identical consumers and resources (Chan-Olmsted, 2004). Facing convergence, executives must manage "old" and "new" media products simultaneously. Many have called for a creation and adoption of repurposed media content through web-specific series, also known as webisodes (see Guthrie, 2007; Stelter, 2008; Vukanovic, 2009).

Webisdoes have been defined as short, scripted episodic and experimental videos intended for the Internet (Kornblum, 2007). They are relatively cheap to produce, usually distributed wide, and less monitored by the FCC compared to broadcasting (e.g., Kornblum, 2007; Wang, 2009). They bring interactivity and personalization to traditional television, serve younger media consumers, (Kornblum, 2007), and are produced and distributed towards specialized niche audiences (Hart, 2008). However, they have not proven profitable under traditional business models (Guthrie, 2007; Stelter, 2008).

Formats and business strategies of this industry remain vague (Stelter, 2008). Clearly, a need to examine the business opportunities and challenges of webisodes exists. Unfortunately, no systematic scholarly research has sought to examine their unique characteristics and business potential. This research aims to address this gap by examining webisodes' structural characteristics, content and business opportunities.

Theoretical Conceptualization and Related Studies

Many researchers have studied media convergence by looking into how the Internet influences the use of old media and traditional business opportunities (e.g., Chan-Olmsted, 2004; Cooper & Tang, 2009; Hass, 2011; Sullivan & Jiang, 2010; Thielmann & Dowling, 1999). They suggest that convergence is a process of industry changes that combine markets and products to meet various consumer needs (Thielmann & Dowling, 1999). Understanding the structural characteristics and the forms of these convergent media products is crucial.

Bolter and Grusin (2002) suggest that media can be divided into two principal structural styles: transparent immediacy and hypermediacy. The Internet as a medium requires a style of hypermediacy, where content holds windowed style of World Wide Web pages that privileges fragmentation, indeterminancy, and heterogeneity, emphasizing process and performance, rather than the finished product (Bolter & Grusin, 2002; Peirce, 2011).

Hypermediacy offers random access, with no physical beginning, middle, or end, serving much less as a story and more as immediate clips of information.

On the other hand, television as a medium requires the logic of transparent immediacy. This style includes "two- and three- dimensional images projected on to traditional computer, film, or television screens" (Bolter & Grusin, 2002, p. 23). Audiences of transparent immediacy hold an immediate relationship to the content of what they are viewing. The content of television is more linear in nature, favored by "dramas, soap operas, daytime talk shows and certain real-life programs" (Bolter & Grusin, 2002, p. 187). Transparent immediacy does not offer user interactivity, and is produced with a clear fourth wall. As such, researchers clearly suggest that television is structurally different from the Internet, and argue that facing convergence, producers must refashion media and include elements of both hypermediacy and transparent immediacy in products (see Bolter & Grusin, 2002; Peirce, 2011)

In addition, interactivity is considered as an "immutable" feature of convergent media products (Bolter & Grusin, 2002; Ha & Chan-Olmsted, 2004;Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997;Ries & Ries, 2000). Researchers believe interactivity creates brand identity, enables greater control over media choice, and encourages direct communication between content producers and consumers (e.g., Chan-Olmsted & Ha, 2003; Lin & Cho, 2010; McMillan, et al., 2008). Ha and James (1998) proposed five dimensions of interactivity – playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection, and reciprocal communication. Chan-Olmsted *et al.* found several interactive programming features that improve users' viewing experience, such as chatrooms, providing additional celebrity information, customizing content, and allowing users to provide immediate feedback (Chan-Olmsted & Ha 2003; Ha & Chan-Olmsted, 2004).

Clearly, interactivity proves a critical concept in communication between a company and its target consumers (Ha & James, 1998). By allowing for two-way reciprocal communication, both the communicator and the audience are able to participate in business dialogue. However, this assumption only proves advantageous if consumers are interested in accessing the digital content. Atkinson (2008) describes interactivity as a reaction on the part of a receiver to earlier transmission from a sender, but recognizes the complications in how researchers have broadly defined this concept over the past four decades. Interactivity can include anything from user-to-system, user-to-user, and user-to-document interactions (McMillan, 2002). It is unclear how businesses have handled this call for interactivity through structure of web videos, although webisode is considered as a hybrid media product that includes both transparent and interactive characteristics (Peirce, 2011). Thus, the following research question is advanced:

RQ1: What are the structural characteristics of webisodes?

Business Opportunities and Challenges

Despite all the structural advantages of webisodes, the financial benefit of Internet broadcasting is still more a manager's wish than a business reality (Ha & James, 1998; Lake, 2001). Most of the web series lack the size of audiences and the revenue that television managers are used to. The entire webisode industry needs serious consideration of its revenue streams and business operation.

Chris Anderson (2006) proposed the long tail model for businesses in the convergent environment by shifting attention towards marketing to a larger number of niches. Because the Internet eliminates the physical barriers of unlimited selection, web retailers' cost is minimized to almost nothing when it comes to storing and distribution. Narrowly targeted goods and services can be as financially successful as mainstream products in today's marketplace (Anderson, 2006).

Other researchers also suggest that the Internet reduces the costs in the value chain, provides companies with new platforms to distribute, allowing for a business to access global markets. However, the Internet has dramatically increased the number of content producers and availability, forcing traditional businesses to reconsider their operation in a world of abundance (see Chan-Olmsted & Ha, 2003; Hart, 2008; Lewis, 2001; Picard, 2000; Venkatraman, 2000). Several revenue streams and business opportunities have been proposed for online content services, including: paid Internet, advertising, free web, and retailing/e-commerce.

With the paid Internet model, consumers pay either flat fees or pay per visit/download in order to access content (Hart, 2008; Picard, 2000).

This approach directly generates profits, but may not be accepted by general media users. This plan works best for specialized content producers, like providing financial and technical information (Picard, 2000). For experienced goods, managers need to build strong reputation, and provide previewing, browsing and reviews in order to profit under the paid Internet model (Chang, Lee & Lee, 2004; Keller, 1998).

Advertising-supported operation is a common model for media businesses. Traditional broadcasting television has been successful in selling audiences to advertisers. However, research suggests that Internet television should push a structure that supports free downloads in exchange for viewing advertisements (e.g., Chan-Olmsted & Kang, 2003; Hart, 2008; Picard, 2000). Commercial webisodes, such as *Ask a Ninja,* have already relied on advertising or product placement financially. However, the effectiveness of webisode ads remains unknown, since there is no third-party measurement of traffic in this new-found industry.

In addition, many businesses provide online products free of charge. Generally, they use these Internet materials as a promotional tool for commercial organizations. Researchers found that television stations used this free-web model to support their offline products and build audience relationship (Chan-Olmsted & Ha, 2003; Greene, 2000; Mermigas, 2001). Television executives also stated that they had been using webisodes to promote their existing shows and to maintain fan interests during the summer hiatus (Glater, 2006; Hibberd, 2007).

Compared to advertising and promotion, retailing/e-commerce is a relatively new strategy for traditional media companies (Chan-Olmsted & Ha, 2003; Ha & Chan-Olmsted, 2004; Lewis, 2001). Researchers suggest that the Internet provides a great opportunity for selling digital goods, as the more an individual used interactive features on a website, the more likely individuals are to buy products (Fitzgerald, 2000; Ha & Chan-Olmsted, 2004). It is expected that fan-based merchandise would be a revenue stream for webisodes, as users would purchase goods related to media materials.

Sole dependence on advertising or e-commerce is not sufficient in today's complex marketplace. Webisode managers may need to apply multiple revenue streams to receive tangible benefits (see Lewis, 2001). Systematic research of the revenue structure and business operations of webisodes is necessary for their survival and profit. Thus, the following research question is proposed:

RQ2: What are the revenue streams and business opportunities of webisodes?

Corporate-Produced Webisodes and User-Generated Content

As discussed, webisodes hold many advantages compared to traditional television. (e.g., inexpensive to produce, less monitoring) (Guthrie, 2007; Shelter, 2008). With these advances, media corporations have begun refashioning television content for the digital entertainment world.

NBC produced webisodes of *Heroes* to accompany the show's fall debut (Hibberd, 2007). CBS also runs unscripted web series for popular shows like *Jericho* and *The Amazing Race.* One of Sci Fi's new programming strategies is creating webisodes to lure viewers to television (Glater, 2006). In addition, many commercial enterprises have collaborated with media organizations in creating web series. Recently, CBS and Saturn launched *Novel Adventures*, a scripted webisode to promote Saturn's new cars (Hibberd, 2008). Branded webisodes are becoming a standardized business approach to help businesses connect with younger consumers (e.g., Kornblum, 2007; Long, 2009; Wang, 2009).

While big commercial organizations are taking an advantage of this digital popularity, webisode production is perhaps more popular among everyday users. Media consumers, such as *LonelyGirl15* and *iJustine,* have become online viral sensations through their personal webisodes (Stelter, 2008; Wallenstein, 2008). Both corporate-produced and user-generated content are scattered over the sea of online video. Due to their intangible products (Stelter, 2008), understanding how corporate-produced web series differentiate from amateurs' is necessary.

It is clear that the content of webisodes vary greatly between one another. Research has found that traditional television generally had better content quality compared to users-generated content (Cha, 2008; Vlachos, Vrechopoulos, & Doukidis, 2003). In addition, revenue streams and business strategies could be varied between corporate-produced and user-generated web series, as established organizations' Internet operations tend to focus on delivering products/services to existing consumers, while amateurs are more likely to run without clear revenue structure (Nel, et al., 1999; Venkatraman, 2000).

However, it is unclear whether other aspects, such as genre, program content and structural characteristics, are different between corporate-produced webisodes and user-generated content. Thus, the following research question is advanced:

RQ3: What are the differences in structural characteristics, content and revenue streams between corporate-produced and user-generated webisodes?

Methodology

This study examines webisodes' structural characteristics, content and revenue streams, as well as the similarities and differences between corporate-produced and user-generated webisodes. Scholars have suggested that content analysis can help compare media content across different groups (Holsti, 1969). Thus, a content analysis of 100 webisodes was conducted.

Sample and Unit of Analysis

The 2010 Streamy Award nominees (101 webisodes) were selected for data coding and analysis. The Annual Streamy Awards are designed to honor the best in web television by the International Academy of Web Television. Although these webisode nominees do not represent a random sample of the current landscape of web videos (such a vast sample would be impossible to achieve), they represent the quality and trend for this newly-developed media form. One show, *Kevin Pollak's Chat Show,* was removed from the dataset, as its length (i.e., 118 minutes) did not match the definition of webisodes (see Kornblum, 2007). The hyperlink provided by the Streamys.org was used as the coding material for each webisode. The most current episode was used as a sampling unit to access variables such as program length, genre, content, and maturity. In addition, the researchers also coded the home page of each webisode's web site to access the variables such as interactivity and hyper structures. 100 episodes and 100 home pages were coded in this study.

Coding

Researchers coded the most current episode and the home page for each webisode for (a) program length; (b) category (corporate-produced or user-generated); (c) genre (comedy, drama, nonfiction, reality, or other); (d) content (alcohol/drugs, economics/financial issues, family/friends, love/romance, music, politics, sex, and violence/crime); (e) maturity (offensive language, sexual act, violent act, and beep); (f) transparent characteristics (character(s) talking to camera, shaking camera, review of previous episode, preview of next episode, and automatic start); (g) hyper structures (links to other episodes for the same program, links to other programs produced by the same company, links to other program produced by a different company, links to Facebook, Myspace, and twitter); (h) interactivity (blogs, comments/feedback/contact, episode synopsis, information about characters, photos/gallery, and search); and (j) revenue streams (paid viewing, advertising, free web, and retailing/e-commerce). All the coding categories are based on the previous literature (e.g., Ha & Chan-Olmsted, 2004; Peirce, 2010; Picard, 2000).

Two experienced coders carried out the coding independently. Coders were trained using a preliminary subset of episodes. Training process continued until the coders were comfortable with various coding categories (see Holsti, 1969). Definitions of categories were provided for coding. All the selected episodes and web sites were downloaded to a computer hard drive for the purpose of coding and intercoder reliability test, as several webisodes update home pages daily.

Approximately 20% of the total sample was randomly selected to access intercoder reliability, including both corporate-produced and user-generated webisodes. An intercoder reliability check using Cohen's Kappa was run on the nine variables that required a judgment call from the coders. The measure of agreement was: .85 for genre; .89 for revenue streams; .90 for interactivity; .91 for transparent characteristics; .93 for category and hyper structures; .95 for content; .98 for maturity; and 1.0 for program length, which indicates a high level of reliability on the coding instrument and across the coders.

Results

A total of 23 (23%) corporate-produced webisodes and 77 (77%) user-generated ones were coded to examine the structural characteristics, content and revenue streams of webisodes. Overall, the average length for each episode was 6.71 minutes.

Among the 100 webisdoes assessed in this study, 38% was comedy, 30% belonged to non-fiction (e.g., news, talk, short documentary, etc.), 26% was drama, 4% was reality TV, and 2% belonged to other program genres (i.e., music video).

In terms of content, family/friends (51%), violence/crime (43%) and love/romance (38%) were the top three topics covered by webisodes, followed by sex (27%), economics/financial issues (23%), music (15%), alcohol/drugs (14%), and politics (8%). In regards to maturity, this study found high instances of violent conduct, offensive language and sexual acts in webisodes. Almost half (49%) of the webisodes included offensive language; 40% showed violent conduct(s); and 18% of these web series had sexual act(s). Nonetheless, only 9% of the 100 webisodes used beep to "remove" offensive language. As to the structural characteristics of webisodes, 58% of the web series included character(s) talking to camera, increasing communication between content creators and consumers (e.g., Peirce, 2011). In addition, a quarter of the webisodes used shaking camera to add a "real feel". However, only 19% applied the structural feature – automatic start (i.e., when one episode ends, the other will start automatically.). Very few webisodes provided reviews for their previous episodes (i.e., 9%), and gave previews for their next episodes (8%).

Webisodes used the hyper structures more than transparent characteristics. About 90% of the webisodes linked to other episodes for the same program. In addition, 55% of webisodes provided links to other shows produced by the same company. However, only 13% of the web series offered links to programs produced by different networks. Webisodes also featured a strong social media component. Nearly 80% of the webisodes linked themselves through more than one social media. Facebook was linked most frequently (85%), followed by Twitter (83%) and Myspace (62%).

Among the six interactive functions (i.e., blogs, comments/feedbacks/contact, episode synopsis, information about characters, photo/gallery, and search), 65% of the webisodes used four or more interactive features. Comments/feedback/contact (84%), episode synopsis (75%), and information about characters (71%) were the top three interactive features. In addition, 63% of the webisodes employed a search option; 52% included blogs; and 45% had behind-scene photos.

Regarding webisodes' revenue streams, 77% of the webisodes adopted advertising-supported operation; half (50%) employed the retailing/e-commerce strategy; 7% operated under the free-web pattern; but zero sought to apply the paid-Internet model. It is also important to note that 41% of the webisodes used more than one revenue stream.

This study also examined the similarities and differences in structural characteristics, content and revenue streams between corporate-produced and user-generated webisodes. As shown in Table 1, corporate-produced webisodes and user-generated ones differed significantly in terms of program genre ($X^2 = 10.19$; $p = .037$). Comedy (42.1%) and non-fiction (34.2%) were the top genres for user-generated content. On the contrary, drama (43.5%) was the top genre produced by corporations. Only 17.4% of the corporate-produced webisodes belonged to non-fiction. Interestingly, this study also found that corporate-produced webisodes showed violent acts significantly more often compared to their amateur counterparts ($X^2 = 5.42$; $p = .020$). More than 60% of the corporate-produced webisodes showed violence; while 33.8% of the user-generated content included violent acts.

Table 1: Program Genre of Corporate-Produced and User-Generated Webisodes

Genre	Corporate-Produced Webisodes		User-Generated Webisodes	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Comedy	6	26.1%	32	42.1%
Drama	10	43.5%	16	21.1%
Non-fiction	4	17.4%	26	34.2%
Reality	2	8.7%	1	1.3%
Other	1	4.3%	1	1.3%

$X^2 = 10.19$, $d = 4$, $p = .037$

Structurally, more than 60% of the user-generated webisodes used the feature – character(s) talking to camera; while only 39.1% of the corporate-produced series employed the same structure. The chi-square test suggests a significant difference ($X^2 = 4.37$; $p = .037$; see Table 2). This study also found that corporate-produced web series were more likely to employ the "auto-start" feature, compared to their amateur counterparts ($X^2 = 4.84$; $p = .028$). Along the same line, corporate-produced webisodes included links to other shows produced by the same company significantly more often than did user-generated ones ($X^2 = 4.32$; $p = .038$). While 73.9% of the corporate series linked to other products from the same company, less than half of the user-generated content sought such a promotion. Nonetheless, user-generated videos gave priority to the social media promo. Almost 90% of the webisodes created by everyday users adopted Twitter for the purpose of promotion; while only 65.2% of the corporations did the same thing ($X^2 = 6.69$; $p = .010$). As to the interactivity, 82.6% of the webisodes produced by corporations had a search option on their home pages; while only 42.9% of the user-generated ones used the same feature ($X^2 = 4.93$; $p = .026$).

Table 2: Significant Differences in Structural Characteristics between Corporate-Produced and User-Generated Webisodes

Structural Characteristics	Corporate-Produced Webisodes		User-Generated Webisodes		X^2
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	
Twitter	15	65.2%	68	88.3%	6.69** [2]
Search	19	82.6%	44	57.1%	4.93* [1]
Auto Start	8	34.8%	11	14.3%	4.84* [1]
Character(s) talking to camera	9	39.1%	49	63.6%	4.37* [2]
Links to programs in the same network	17	73.9%	38	49.4%	4.32* [1]

** $P \leq .01$; * $P \leq .05$

[1] used more frequently in corporate-produced webisodes ($p \leq .05$).

[2] used more frequently in user-generated webisodes ($p \leq .05$).

Finally, as shown in Table 3, corporate-produced webisodes and user-generated content differed significantly in the amount of revenue streams applied in their business operations. The majority (60.9%) of the corporate-produced web series integrated at least two revenue streams (e.g., advertising, retailing, etc.), while more than half of the amateur operations used a single revenue stream. There were 11.7% of the user-generated webisodes run without clear revenue structure.

Table 3: Business Operations of Corporate-Produced and User-Generated Webisodes

Business Operations	Corporate-Produced Webisodes		User-Generated Webisodes	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
No revenue stream	0	0%	9	11.7%
One revenue stream	9	39.1%	41	53.2%
Two or more revenue streams	14	60.9%	27	35.1 %

$X^2 = 6.270$, $d = 2$, $p = .043$

Advertising-supported operation was the most frequently used revenue stream for both corporate-produced and user-generated webisodes, followed by retailing/e-commerce. About 82% of the corporate webisodes included ads and 56.5% had e-stores, while 75.3% and 48.1% of user-generated programs employed these revenue streams respectively (see Table 4). In addition, corporate-produced webisodes used the free-web model significantly more often compared to their amateur counterparts ($X^2 = 16.72$; $p < .001$). Only one user-generated webisode applied the free-web strategy, while 26.1% of the corporate-produced series used the same motif.

Table 4: Revenue Streams Used by Corporate-Produced and User-Generated Webisodes

Revenue Streams	Corporate-Produced Webisodes		User-Generated Webisodes		X^2
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	
Free Web	6	26.1%	1	1.3%	16.72*** [1]
Advertising	19	82.6%	58	75.3%	.531
Retailing/E-commerce	13	56.5%	37	48.1%	.508
Paid Internet	0	0%	0	0%	/

*** $P < .001$;
[1] used more frequently in corporate-produced webisodes ($p \leq .05$).

Discussion

This study sought to explore how the structure, content and business operations of traditional television may change when content is designed exclusively for Internet broadcasting. Results indicate that webisodes used the hypermediacy characteristics more than transparent structures. Most of the webisodes used multiple interactive functions to increase communication between content producers and consumers. Advertising-supported operation and retailing/e-commerce were the dominant revenue streams for webisodes. There were significant differences between corporate-produced and user-generated webisodes in structural characteristics, content and business operations.

This study found that comedy, exceeding drama and non-fiction, became the top one genre for webisodes. Several factors may explain this finding. First, as Bryant noted, "we live in an entertainment age" (Bryant, 2004, p. 392). It is possible that users are drawn to webisodes to fill in a short, otherwise empty period of their day, with humor. Therefore, audience preference could directly influence the content of a show. In addition, advertisers and managers are likely to "encourage" the production of comedies because they believe humor may engage consumers and bring positive images to a brand. Furthermore, comedy is relatively easier to produce compared to drama. In fact, this study found that drama was still the top genre produced by corporations (followed by comedy). There was a significant difference in program genre between corporate-made and user-generated webisodes. Therefore, future research should explore this phenomenon further, as it is unclear whether such a comedic trend is the result of an audience/advertiser preference, or simply because comedic episodes prove easier to create.

A wide use of violence, offensive language and sexual acts were presented across webisodes. Corporate-produced webisodes even showed violent conducts more frequently compared to their amateur counterparts. With an endless option of alternative online content, one would expect producers to utilize these "indecent" materials to capitalize on niche audiences. The less monitored broadcast Internet provides a space for managers to upload web series that may include elements deemed unsuitable for television to attract fans that hold the most purchasing potential.

In terms of the structural characteristics, webisodes used limited transparent immediacy, such as providing previews and reviews. Webisode producers did not catch viewers up with content they may have missed or forgotten in earlier episodes before beginning a program, nor did they entice audiences to continue watching later webisodes in the series through highlights or previews. This unique structural characteristic could explain why the webisode industry finds difficulty in retaining stable viewership. Future studies should focus on how to increase the sustainability and user retention for web series.

As suggested by McMillan *et al.* (2008), interactivity is a critical difference between the Internet and traditional television media. The majority of the webisodes employed user discussion forums, feedback, comments, and background information about characters and episodes. More than 80% of the webisodes linked themselves through both Facebook and Twitter. Everyday users adopted Twitter significantly more than corporate producers. These results suggest that webisodes excel traditional television broadcasting in their structural flexibility and enhanced interactivity. Producers paid special attention to increasing communication between creators and consumers.

Advertising-supported operation and retailing/e-commerce were the most frequently used revenue streams for both corporate-produced and user-generated webisodes. However, more than 11% of the user-generated web series had no clear revenue structure. In addition, corporate-produced webisodes employed the free-web strategy more frequently than their amateur counterparts. They were also more likely to provide links to other programs produced by the same company. Findings suggest that instead of generating direct revenue, commercial media organizations may want to use web series as a promotional tool to market existing or new shows, stimulate fan interests, and build a strong brand image to a large extent. However, the financial promise of webisodes is still vague.

While this exploratory research contributes to the conversation regarding managing hybrid media products/industries in a convergent environment, these initial results should be viewed in context. With an overwhelming number of webisodes uploaded online daily, it proved impossible to conduct this study based on a representative sample. While the Streamy Award nominations are perhaps the most comprehensive list of the various webisodes in existence, it is fair to assume that this sample likely highlights only the most popular. While this study explored the structural characteristics, content and revenue streams of webisodes, content analysis cannot provide insights into the expectations and motivations of webisode producers and/or consumers. Future research should conduct surveys and/or interviews to provide in-depth explanations.

Despite the limitations, this study suggests that webisodes' business opportunities rest in their low entry barriers, structural advantages, and flexibility in creating content and applying diverse business strategies. However, the entire webisode industry lacks of standardized revenue structure and third-party measurement of traffic. Webisode business needs to develop an industry standard, and builds/employs more transparent structures, like webisode guide, previews and recommendations, to retain loyal users. More serious marketing efforts for webisodes are necessary and essential. By initially examining the structural characteristics, content and business opportunities of webisodes, this study yields insights for webisode production and management and encourages future inquiry into this ever-complex marketplace.

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