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EYES WIDE OPEN: THE QUALITY QUESTION



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Some would say that widespread use of the printing press and corollary mass production of books resulted in a product inferior to the centuries-old tradition of literature in the form of a finely crafted illuminated manuscript. Beautifully scripted language was effectively replaced by generic block-faced mechanical type. Expertly hand-painted illustrations were cast aside for mass-produced and crudely shaped images. That is, of course, until one considers the rise of communication between populations and the exchanges of information between peoples previously disconnected from one another. Eventually, the crude medium became far less important than the message.

When it comes to new technologies and advancements in communication, at what point in the birth of a new medium does the surface quality of something become less important than the speed of consumption and exchange? At what point do people decide to forgive old expectations of one medium and open up to the wonderful qualities that a new medium has to offer?

In the world of online video, we seem to be stuck in a purgatory of past and future possibilities -- waiting for people (and brands) to get beyond familiar expectations of what motion media once was, and see the potential of what it can be.

So how do we reach heavenly online video bliss? For one, as with the implementation of the printing press, we need to start redefining what quality means and look at what the Internet has done for motion media.

Picture Quality

Picture quality is and always will be the most immediate way we define the worth of a video. It's the first impression. It can say "I'm a made-for-TV movie" or "I'm a blockbuster Hollywood hit" with one

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glance. Our eyes have been trained through many years of television viewing to judge moving images first and foremost by the technological production value. And since television and movies, to this point, have existed as one-way communication, it seems only fair that we should be so harsh to judge something that we couldn't talk back to.

While the Internet has not yet fostered change in terms of an immediate visceral response to a piece of content, it has forever changed the way we look at picture quality and negotiate the value of an immediate image. Similarly to what video did for film, a handheld flip camera or phone now adds a new dimension to the relationship between the video product and the person. It adds a feeling of intimacy, real-time discovery, and inclusion -- qualities that help break down the walls between images and the viewer. The content is more approachable and brings the user into the conversation more readily, whereas high definition has a tendency to psychologically create an extra wall between the content and viewer.

Quality of Storytelling

Beyond the immediate picture quality, no matter what medium, quality of storytelling is paramount. But how one tells a story and connects with an audience has evolved within the online realm.

First, it's no longer just about shaping the perfect trajectory: story, conflict, and conclusion. Somewhere in between the creation of reality television and the first online video blog, storytelling forever broke through the fourth wall: fiction and non-fiction interweave, real-time communication tools allow for constant connection and influence within a story, and co-development, mashups, and game play lead to endless interpretations and re-inventions of a story.

Yesterday's storytelling techniques are just a skeleton hiding behind the new pioneers of emerging storytellers. When it comes to capturing an audience's attention and imagination online, a 15-year-old with a camera and a Mac book can produce a quality story that can stand up in comparison to that of any Hollywood writer.

Quality of Audience

From a brand's perspective, quality of content has always been about the audience. If it didn't reach the right audience, then the picture and storytelling quality wasn't good enough.

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Today, the fact that we can collect data about the online audiences watching video is even more of a reason to assess the quality of video by the audience attached to it. Does that video inspire participation? Do people come back to watch a second, third, fourth episode? How many people shared it or commented on it?

Being able to effectively target and motivate an audience is just as much a critical part in defining the quality of a video. The ability to connect people and to spark communication is a capability that surpasses the surface value of the highly produced film and television shows of yesteryear.

It's only a matter of time before the medium becomes the message. We just have to listen to what it's telling us.