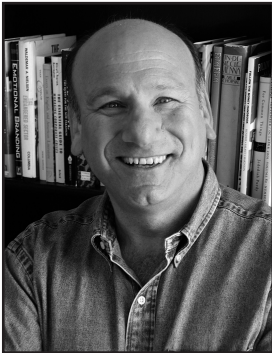


Marty Kaplan, rethinking entertainment

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Marty Kaplan

Martin Kaplan is associate dean of the USC (University of Southern California) Annenberg School for Communication, where he directs the Norman Lear Center, a multidisciplinary research and public policy center which explores the implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce, and society. He regularly comments on the media business for NPR (National Public Radio) and CBS. Before joining USC, Kaplan spent twelve years at Disney, where he was a vice president of motion picture production and a screenwriter; his feature credits include "The Distinguished Gentleman" (writer and executive producer) and "Noises Off" (an adaptation of Michael Frayn's play). Prior to his Hollywood experience, Kaplan was chief speechwriter for Vice President Walter F. Mondale and deputy campaign manager for Mondale's 1984 presidential campaign. Kaplan also has a Ph.D. in Modern Thought and Literature from Stanford University.

What is entertainment?

I think it is the art and craft of attracting and holding attention. It's what the ancient storytellers knew sitting around the fire in a cave to get people to stay there and keep listening. It's what a magician knows when he gets people to pay attention to something else instead of what the trick is. It's what a politician does when he or she tries to get our attention and the attention of the cameras. It's everything that a Wall Street analyst would say is included in the entertainment industry sector, namely movies and television and music and so on... but it is also every technique that a retailer uses to get us to imagine our lives as if we lived in a movie set, and if we buy this thing people will think we are just like the stars they see on television. So, entertainment is the set of techniques and imaginative or artistic tools that someone gets to keep us from noticing that time is passing and to focus on them for as long as they want us.

At the Norman Lear Center (University of Southern California) you explore the implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce, and society. Why is entertainment a key element in our lives?

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We live in an information age; there is an over-abundance of information... what is missing is the time to process all this information. We all have limited time, and everyone is attempting to grab us because they want to monetize that once they have this attention, or they want to make us better people, better citizens, more religious, thinner... whatever the issues are. Although in an information age, the scarcest thing is attention; and since I would define entertainment as the means by which attention is attracted, the control, the economics of attention, is the central way of understanding all sectors of society.

“Infotainment” and “advertainment” are words to which we will have to get used to although they might sound a little bit scary...

Yes... it used to be that people thought there were lines between different sectors of society, different domains, activities, epistemologies... but now those lines have all been blurred! It used to be that, for example, advertising was one thing and content was another, but now content is used to advertise and is part of advertising itself, and advertising is meant to entertain. The information that used to be considered serious and passed along in education was traditionally thought to be boring and difficult, but that's just the nature of education; these are complicated subjects. But now, education believes that it has to be in competition with all

other forms of attention, and so, without multimedia, typography, fancy graphics, interactivity, someone who is trying to explain something complicated has no hope of holding onto our attention. Thus, information has become infotainment, and this is both good and bad. It's good because, if in fact you are still conveying information, then you are meeting the consumer where he or she now lives, but if in order to do that, you are degrading the content, simplifying it beyond recognition, then you are doing damage to the intellectual integrity of the material... so it can go either way.

How is the entertainment industry affecting journalism, politics and culture?

Yes... I would say that in the industrial world you cannot point to a component of modern life that is not affected by entertainment... for example, urban planning. When do people decide to go visit some place? Until recently Bilbao was not a world destination, but when this amazing museum done by a star architect gets put up everyone wants to go see the shiny thing. Well... maybe the stuff inside is different from Disneyland, but the idea of going to a destination because there is a new wonder in marble is similar... Zaragoza is looking for a way to use water features and computers to get people to come, so just in that narrow area of city planning suddenly we meet with the entertainment business and I think that it's true for politics, journalism, culture, education and so on across the board.

Can you draw any "future scenario" related to the role assumed by the entertainment industry in people's everyday lives?

I think that we are all, as we live, telling ourselves a narrative; it's the story of our lives and we are the star. We go through locations, we think of them a little bit as if they were movie sets and other people are characters in our stories. Ultimately it is possible with new technology and the blurring of the distinctions between first live and second live, between physical reality and virtual reality, that it will be harder and harder for people to draw the distinction between what they imagine their life is and what their life really is. I think the ultimate consequence is going to be a flexibility and the concept of what reality is such as we've never had before. The irony is that this flexibility and the definition of reality is something that we find in fields such as new physics or cosmology in which the nature of reality suddenly turns out to be black holes that vibrate in eleven dimensions or in something as ancient as many of the mystical traditions in world religion which say that reality is just an illusion.

You worked at Disney for 12 years, both as a studio vice president in live-action feature films and as a writer-producer under

exclusive contract so you know well the entertainment system and how it works. Do you think is there an hegemony in the entertainment industry in the United States, even in the world, or new emerging media industries based on new ICT and particularly the Internet are beginning to break this consensus?

I think the idea of American cultural imperialism, if it ever was true it is not true now. The globe consists of many centers of cultural production and reception. Yes, Hollywood is an important part of it, but if you look at the planet as a whole the vectors of where things come from and where they go is very complex. It is a big system with many sources to and from, and the notion of anything being an American product anymore is something that you can deconstruct and say "Wait a minute. If it is a movie from Sony, but Sony is owned by the Japanese, and the money for it was co-financed by Germany, and the star was from Canada, and the director was from Australia, why is that an American cultural product anymore?" I think this is more and more true... and I think that if there is a danger it is not the impact of America and Germany on the globe but the emergence of something that some people have called a global monoculture in which there is this new creature which is not any particular nation's but is a kind of mixture of all nations and you can find it anywhere you go. It is not local; it is kind of what used to be called "pigeon English", the vulgar currency that is the lowest common denominator as opposed to this amazing mixture for a diverse bottoms-up top-down localism, glocalism... Instead you have something that you can go to the airports all around the world and don't know you are in any different place, that's not America you're in, you're in something else, the global monoculture that all nations are contributing to and that's my concern, not the dominance of one nation.

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Students usually complain when a professor asks them to watch a black and white movie...What do you think we should teach communication students at university that we are not teaching now?

I think the biggest risk for any student in any field is to believe that the way the world is now is natural as opposed to the consequences of historical forces, political forces, cultural forces... which weren't always this way and which won't always be this way. I think the challenge of education is to enlighten people to the artificiality, to the way in which what they regard as natural and inevitable was in fact constructed socially and politically. Unless you understand that what you see is constructed, then you will take as a given all the power and economic relationships which exist; you

will never say, "Wait a minute... They could change!" So I think the most important way to understand that is to compare how things are now with how they are elsewhere and how they were before. Historical understanding and multinational cross-cultural understandings are the best way to open your eyes, to put things into that broader perspective is the first step towards giving you power to change the things that you think need to be changed.

Do you think Norman Lear is a TV pioneer? Why? What should communication students learn from him?

Yes, and for many reasons! He was the first person to use television, in his case television comedy, to take on the most controversial social topics in America at the time. None of the networks would have thought that topics like racism, abortion, rape, and/war... were appropriate for mass entertainment and he said "yes they are". He dared to portray attitudes on television which/that were not some romanticized ideal notion of what America thought it should be like but rather a depiction of all the edges, eccentricities and particularities of good and bad of what American society was like. He broke a taboo and ever since then television, the most important mass media of our time, has been different because of what he did.

What can communication students and even scholars learn from Norman Lear?

It would be good to understand the before and after. Someone who is not interested in learning and understanding might look at what's in television right now and say "that's just television" and they won't understand that there was a before and an after... because if there was a before and after in the 1970's, then there is a before and an after today in 2008! It doesn't mean that what you see on television right now is the way it is always going to be, it is a consequence of laws, cultural traditions, economic models... so the only way to understand how the things that we have now are particular, not universal is to understand what they were before. I think that students of communication should understand the history of mass media, they should understand for instance at least in the American example, that news was not always regarded as a profit center for big entertainment companies. News was regarded as something that if it lost money was ok because the entertainment side of the company was going to earn the money, news gave people information that they needed to be good citizens. Ever since the mid 1980's that has changed and now the reason that news is on is the same reason that anything else is on... is to attract eyeballs to sell to advertisers. But the only way that a student can learn about

that is to watch the news not just today, but the news of a certain number of years ago. For some other people the news only exists online; to understand what the Internet has done to the concept of what is news is really important because unless you understand the change in the mix of news and opinion, of objectivity and bias that has occurred in the current situation you won't get either angry or happy enough to want to do something about it.

Can you talk a little bit about present and future of traditional media such as television and cinema?

As we are sitting down here today a big Hollywood movie, if it is fairly successful, will make over the course of its run a hundred million dollars, and then maybe when you put it in other media like DVD's and international it will make maybe another hundred million. Every once in a while you get some huge international blockbuster such as Titanic, and it will make four hundred million over the course of many years. In a few days a new video game, Grand Theft Auto IV, is expected to make four hundred million dollars in just one week after its release. That puts what used to be the core engine of the movie business in Hollywood into context; now it is a video game that is more important in terms of the economic impact and also in terms of the cultural impact. In the case of Grand Theft Auto, this videogame is of the genre called "first person shooter", that is to say, you go around and in the story embedded you kill cops and prostitutes. Does that have an impact on the people who use it? We could debate that, we could study media effects... but what you cannot deny is that if you think it has an impact it has potentially a greater impact than the things we usually look at which are movies and television. The migration of people's time and dollars to digital based culture (mobile, online, new platforms...) is going to ultimately overwhelm what we know as traditional media. They will still exist, we still have radio even after television, but I think that the power and the way people spend their time and dollars will be more and more dominated by digital media.

Why are DVRs becoming so popular in the United States?

I think people want to control how they experience content. They don't want "appointment television"; they don't want media executives to tell them how they have to spend their time, when should they consume that content. They also don't like commercials or if they believe the story is boring, they like to be able to speed through it. Consumers are taking control both of how they spend their time and what they want to do with the media that they consume, and DVRs are currently the best way that they can do that. I am sure that, looking back at it, it will be seen as a pri-

mitive device, but right now it is an empowering device for people who say that they want to be in the driver seat of their consumption of entertainment and information.

In response to DVRs' possibility of skipping through commercials, the advertising industry has found in product integration (particularly branded entertainment and product placement) an alternative to continue monetizing content. To what extent might these strategies influence content?

I know that the Writers Guild and the Screen Actors Guild are concerned about the artistic integrity of their work because of the pressure to do product integration, and some writers, producers and actors have power to push back, but the majority do not. More and more we are seeing the consequences of that, but the question is: at what point does the audience say "I don't like this! I am sick of that!" I don't think we've seen yet the audience rejecting content because it is excessively commercialized, but at some point audiences will say, "If you do this I am not going to consume this product." We are watching a cycle play and we still don't know where it is going.

Why is it so difficult, almost impossible, to find a TV network in the United States that broadcasts worldwide news?

I think that the main reason is that no company believes they can make a profit by showing it. I believe that everything on television is profit-driven, but research on this area shows that it is so expensive to do. CNN for example, which has something called CNN International - that programming is only available for one hour a day. If you really want to get worldwide news you will have to turn to a different platform, Internet for instance or radio. My guess is that the distinction between these platforms will vanish in some future years, and the fact that now, to get what you want, you have to make special arrangements, will not be necessary in the future; you will just be paying for a pipeline and a screen and the only thing to be determinant is the economic and ownership model of it. But my guess is that at some future time, with the exception of authoritarian governments, all content will be available at all time and places and to all people.

Politics entered the entertainment age long ago, but they seem to find no boundaries... The YouTube Hit: Barack Obama "Yes We Can" Music Video has been highly acclaimed... What is striking you the most about this last presidential primary campaign?

I'm most interested in the way in which campaigns have lost control of their message. This is a good and a bad thing. It is good

because I think that empowering voters and activist citizens to make their own messages is just as important as empowering journalists to give their perspective or to let the candidates spend money to reach us with their messages. The good side is that it adds to the number of voices and the range of tones available. The bad side is from the candidates' point of view, when you want to say something and there is so much noise out there, it is very hard to reach masses of voters with your own message. I think if you are a candidate, you should be concerned that someone else is speaking for you and to an average consumer they may not know that some message is not yours, it's unofficial and maybe you like it, but maybe you don't. Many consumers are not sophisticated enough to tell the difference between somebody's home-made ad and your real ad. So this can be a risk as well.

You have been in Barcelona several times, and you are familiar with both the Catalan and the Spanish media reality... Which are the main differences between the media industry in Western Europe and in the United States? Would you import or export anything?

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I think the biggest advantage that European news media have is the quantity. You can go to most European cities and there are several newspapers, different voices... in the US in many cities there is only one newspaper. We have monopolies because there is no hunger for the news just in print. I also see in Europe a commitment to one and often several publicly supported networks, because the people in those countries believe that there are some things that the market will not supply on its own and that they should know about them. At the meantime, we in the US are struggling even to keep our one public broadcasting network alive, and more and more that network resembles a commercial network.

I would like to ask you about what has been so called Web 2.0... do you think we are walking towards an Entertainment 2.0?

I believe that entertainment has always been affected by the history of technology. First by the invention of media in the first place and by the growth of different kinds of media and now by the digitalization of content and the universality of broadband, mobility, wireless access, computer generated special effects... I think if entertainment stops evolving now, it will be the first time in human history! I believe that the chances are it will keep going; however, I have no idea where it is going.

Last but not least, in your opinion which has been the most important goal of the Writers Guild of America's recent strike?

The writers were eager to establish a principle that content provided online was something that they deserved a share of the profits from. When the movie studios and television networks first began distributing content on DVDs they said to the writers that this would never be a big business. That was what the writers agreed to in 1988, and of course they've been regretting ever since. Now that content is being provided through a new platform online, they wanted to establish the principle that they should have a percentage of the profits even if, as the studios and networks claim, it is an immature business. They thought that this train was leaving the station and it was worth a hundred day strike.

Entertainment has been present in our lives almost since the beginning of time, and for sure it will never die. Is that the main reason why Walt Disney asked to be frozen?

(Big laugh)... One of the greatest urban legends in American culture is that Walt Disney asked to be frozen. He did not, and he is not. The person who put this story to rest is a Senior Fellow of the Norman Lear Center named Neal Gabler, and his massive biography of Walt Disney, which took five years to write, starts with the question of Walt Disney being frozen. I am afraid that for all those who think it is a romantic idea or a great vision of the future, unfortunately it turns out not to be true.