

REACTIVE PARTICIPATORY CULTURE AND FAN REWRITING: GAME OF THRONES AND THE CONTESTATION OF NARRATIVE AUTHORITY

CULTURA PARTICIPATIVA REATIVA E REESCRITA POR FÃS: GAME OF THRONES E A CONTESTAÇÃO DA AUTORIDADE NARRATIVA

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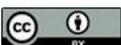
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Abstract

With the rapid advancement of digital technologies, the media landscape has undergone a profound transformation, shifting audiences from passive receivers to active users who can influence media content. This transformation has fostered participatory culture, enabling individuals to intervene in media production processes, generate content, and reconfigure existing narratives. This study examines the impact of participatory culture through the controversial final season of Game of Thrones, focusing on audience reactions, alternative narratives, and creative productions emerging across digital platforms. The study analyzes the fan-produced alternative final season created by Daniel Whidden, which emerged in response to widespread dissatisfaction with the official ending. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the analysis compares the official and alternative narratives by examining narrative coherence and character motivation. In addition, analytical discussions published on TheRinger.com and user ratings from IMDb are incorporated as supportive indicators to contextualize patterns of audience dissatisfaction. This study contributes to participatory culture literature by conceptualizing fan-produced alternative narratives not merely as forms of creative participation, but as manifestations of reactive participatory culture, in which dissatisfaction is transformed into cultural production. Rather than framing audience intervention solely as production-oriented activity, the study situates it at the level of narrative legitimacy and the negotiation of story ownership. The findings demonstrate that media content is no longer

Resumo

Com o rápido avanço das tecnologias digitais, o panorama da mídia passou por uma profunda transformação, transformando o público de receptores passivos em usuários ativos que podem influenciar o conteúdo da mídia. Essa transformação fomentou a cultura participativa, permitindo que os indivíduos intervenham nos processos de produção da mídia, gerem conteúdo e reconfigurem narrativas existentes. Este estudo examina o impacto da cultura participativa por meio da controversa temporada final de Game of Thrones, com foco nas reações do público, narrativas alternativas e produções criativas que surgiram nas plataformas digitais. O estudo analisa a temporada final alternativa produzida por fãs, criada por Daniel Whidden, que surgiu em resposta à insatisfação generalizada com o final oficial. Usando uma abordagem qualitativa descritiva, a análise compara as narrativas oficial e alternativa, examinando a coerência narrativa e a motivação dos personagens. Além disso, discussões analíticas publicadas no TheRinger.com e avaliações de usuários do IMDb são incorporadas como indicadores de apoio para contextualizar os padrões de insatisfação do público. Este estudo contribui para a literatura sobre cultura participativa ao conceituar as narrativas alternativas produzidas pelos fãs não apenas como formas de participação criativa, mas como manifestações de uma cultura participativa reativa, na qual a insatisfação é transformada em produção cultural. Em vez de enquadrar a intervenção do público apenas como uma atividade orientada para a produção, o estudo a situa no nível da



consumed unidirectionally but is actively reshaped through audience participation, offering a conceptual foundation for future research on narrative authority in digital media environments.

Keywords: New Media. Participatory Culture. Convergence. Interaction. Fan Production. Game of Thrones Series.

legitimidade narrativa e da negociação da propriedade da história. Os resultados demonstram que o conteúdo da mídia não é mais consumido de forma unidirecional, mas é ativamente remodelado por meio da participação do público, oferecendo uma base conceitual para pesquisas futuras sobre autoridade narrativa em ambientes de mídia digital.

Palavras-chave: *Novas Mídias. Cultura Participativa. Convergência. Interação. Produção de Fãs. Série Game of Thrones.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, the world has entered a profound and far-reaching process of transformation, one so extensive that it has often struggled to keep pace with the rapid acceleration of technological developments. This fundamental shift has not only affected nearly all domains of social life but has also reshaped modes of communication and the structure of media at their core. In particular, alongside advances in communication technologies and processes of digitalization, traditional media forms such as radio and television have come to be classified under the heading of “conventional media,” while a new mode of communication triggered by digitalization—commonly conceptualized as “new media”—has emerged in contrast to these earlier forms.

The concept of new media refers to a structural transformation in the modes of media production, distribution, and consumption. In this context, with the development of computer and internet technologies, the communication process has evolved from a one-way, linear structure that positioned the audience as passive recipients—characteristic of traditional media—into a multidirectional, interactive framework that transforms users into active participants. This evolution has not been solely technological; it has also facilitated the emergence of new communicative practices at sociological, cultural, and individual levels. Such a transformation has brought about a visible shift in the attitudes and behaviors of media users. Today, individuals no longer merely consume content; they actively engage in processes of content creation, evaluation, and dissemination. While new media grants individuals the capacity to exercise agency over media content, it

simultaneously repositions the audience at the center of interaction. Therefore, the new media environment should not be understood merely as a technological innovation, but rather as a broader social paradigm shift that fundamentally redefines the relationship between individuals and media.

With the interactive affordances offered by new media, the audience's traditionally passive position in relation to media content has undergone a fundamental transformation. Today, the audience is positioned not only as a consumer of content but also as a user, interpreter, and producer. This shift has redefined the nature of the relationship between audiences and media, while simultaneously paving the way for a new media culture in which users are able to intervene in content, reproduce it, and articulate their own voices. It is precisely within this context that the increasing level of audience interaction has given rise to the concept of participatory culture, which has become an increasingly significant object of inquiry within communication studies.

In this study, the dynamics of participatory culture as shaped within new media environments are examined through the case of *Game of Thrones*. The series' ability to reach a vast global audience and to generate intense user interaction across digital platforms -particularly social networks as primary sites of media engagement- constitutes a key rationale for placing this case at the center of the analysis. User-generated content related to the series, including audience commentary, theories, fan interpretations, visual productions, and narrative rewritings, should not be understood merely as social media posts; rather, they function as indicators of the audience's participatory power over media texts. Within this framework, the primary aim of the study is to analyze audience-user behaviors in new media environments by examining participatory culture in conjunction with the concept of convergence. Convergence refers to the technical and content-level integration of different media platforms such as television, computers, and the internet, a process that fundamentally reshapes the ways in which audiences engage with media content. Social media platforms, in particular, enable audiences not only to comment on content but also to produce content, organize collectively, and form communities, thereby expanding the scope and intensity of participatory practices.

Focusing on the final season of *Game of Thrones*, this study conceptualizes the organization of audience reactions across digital platforms and their transformation into alternative narrative production as a reactive form of participatory culture. The study's

original contribution lies in its treatment of fan productions not merely as creative practices, but as contestatory and negotiative interventions directed toward narrative legitimacy and story ownership. Within this framework, the audience is positioned as an active agent that questions, challenges, and reconfigures both consumer roles and narrative authority.

2 THE NATURE OF DIGITAL MEDIA: TRACING THE MEANING OF THE “NEW”

In recent years, academic studies within the field of communication have increasingly focused on the concept of new media, leading to the development of a variety of theoretical frameworks around this notion. The qualifier “new,” in particular, does not merely denote a temporal shift; rather, it points to a comprehensive transformation in media structures, modes of operation, and the relationships established between media and users. Within this context, questions concerning what the term “new” signifies in new media, which changes it encompasses, and how it diverges from traditional forms have become a central topic of debate in communication studies.

One of the defining aspects of the novelty of new media lies in the shift away from the one-way and centralized character of traditional media toward a more participatory, interactive, and user-oriented structure. Accordingly, new media should be understood not merely as a different platform, but as a transformative domain in which modes of communication, the position of the user, and the function of media itself are fundamentally redefined.

“With regard to the relativity of new media, it is useful to address the questions ‘What does new mean?’ and ‘What is new?’ For some media forms that may be considered ‘old’ today were once ‘new’ on a global scale: magazines, records, sound films, videocassettes, CDs, and even MP3 files. The term ‘new media’ was first used in reference to special broadcasts for private television and radio programming in 1984; however, today it refers to the combination of different media made possible through the personal computer (PC), and most notably includes the internet” (Merten, as cited in Arikan, 2020, pp. 11–12).

Considering its scope and impact, the emergence of the internet can indeed be regarded as one of the most significant innovations of the past few decades. Beginning in the early 1990s, the internet generated profound effects, leading to notable transformations across socio-political domains. During this period, developments such as the reorganization of work processes, computerization, and digitalization introduced practices that were new for many individuals and institutions. The internet enabled a wide range of possibilities, including the electronic exchange of documents, the integration of databases, and the creation of new communication channels among individuals, public institutions, organizations, and consumers (Roblek et al., 2020, p. 1). By integrating multiple modes of communication -such as sound, graphics, text, and video- the internet has come to be recognized as a timeless and placeless form of global communication with local, national, and international reach. Owing to these characteristics, the internet should be understood not merely as a technology for producing, storing, or distributing messages, but as a social communication environment that facilitates interaction ranging from individual-to-individual to individual-to-group and group-to-individual exchanges (Timisi, 2003, p. 124).

An examination of everyday routines reveals the extent to which contemporary life has become dependent on the internet and internet-based technologies; without them, both professional activities and communication processes would be severely disrupted. In this sense, the internet has played a formative role in shaping new social structures and modes of organization, including emerging economic arrangements. Moreover, it has enabled, for the first time, global-scale communication among millions of individuals across self-determined timeframes. Manuel Castells conceptualizes this communicative landscape as the “Internet Galaxy,” emphasizing both the rapid expansion of internet use and the social consequences of exclusion from digital networks. According to Castells, the internet’s function as both a communication medium and a model of organization expanded dramatically toward the end of the second millennium. While approximately 16 million people used the internet in 1995, this number exceeded 400 million by the early 2000s, reflecting an unprecedented growth trajectory. Beyond user numbers, however, the internet’s significance lies in the intensity and modes of its use, as contemporary economic, social, political, and cultural activities are increasingly structured through digital networks. Exclusion from these networks, Castells argues,

constitutes one of the most severe and disruptive forms of social marginalization in contemporary societies (Castells, 2020, pp. 31–32).

The global expansion of the internet has not only accelerated communication processes but has also fundamentally transformed users' relationships with media content, enabling practices of interaction, participation, and reproduction. Today, it is difficult to conceive of a world without the internet, as exclusion from it would entail exclusion from contemporary communication dynamics. Moreover, the impact of the internet extends far beyond communication alone; it has become embedded across economic, socio-cultural, political, and entertainment domains, continuing to expand its influence without losing its dynamism.

From a general perspective, new media may be defined as the transfer of all elements of the media field into digital environments and the influence of this digitalization across all stages, from production to consumption. Although the concept dates back to the 1970s, it gained prominence particularly from the 1990s onward with the rapid development of digital technologies, and has since come to directly shape both the technical dimensions and practical forms of contemporary communication systems (Şeberoğlu, 2020, p. 78). According to Binark and Löker (2011, p. 9), the term new media functions as an umbrella concept encompassing a wide range of digital practices and Technologies -such as networked communication, internet-based platforms, Web 2.0 applications, digital media, and virtual environments- that have become embedded in everyday life. These elements collectively reflect not only technological change but also broader social, cultural, and economic transformations, all of which are captured under the rubric of new media.

In contrast to the limitations of traditional mass media and the individual's passive position in relation to content, new media enables the integration of sound, text, and visuals within a single digital environment, allowing users to interact with, respond to, and transform media content (Öztürk, 2010, p. 122). Within this context, the internet occupies a central position in new media, as it facilitates user interaction, access to content, and global connectivity beyond national boundaries, thereby constituting the most prominent component of the new media landscape (Düğer, 2015, p. 156). Moreover, new media provides users with easy access not only to textual diversity but also to visual, auditory, and graphic content, while simultaneously enabling user-generated production.

Today, individuals can engage with new media tools with minimal constraints, transforming these platforms into relatively free communication environments where users with shared perspectives can converge. By overcoming temporal and spatial limitations, such environments allow participation at any time and from any location (Çil & Aytakin, 2015, p. 109).

In summary, the principal innovations offered to users by these technologies can be outlined as follows (Düğer, 2015, pp. 156–157):

- By minimizing the impact of physical distance on communication, new media has rendered geographical separation increasingly insignificant.
- The widespread adoption of new media environments has led to a substantial increase in the volume of communication.
- Communication processes have gained an unprecedented level of speed through the influence of new media technologies.
- New media has significantly expanded opportunities for bidirectional and real-time interaction among users.
- Forms of communication that were previously treated as separate categories have, through new media, converged into integrated and interconnected structures.

Gökçe (2017) conceptualizes new media through six core propositions. In summary, new media cannot be reduced to internet culture alone, as it encompasses broader network-based communication technologies; it relies on computer-based infrastructures for distribution; and it is shaped by software-driven control of digital content. Furthermore, new media represents a hybrid structure in which existing cultural practices intersect with software-based applications, enabling faster and more efficient algorithmic processes, while simultaneously giving rise to distinct aesthetic forms associated with contemporary media technologies.

Lev Manovich (2002, pp. 43-44) situates websites, digital games, three-dimensional animations, photographs, and advertisements within the scope of new media, emphasizing that these digital forms are converted into numerical data through computer technologies and circulated via the same technological infrastructure. Within this framework, Manovich (2002, pp. 51-56) identifies five core principles of new media: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding. Collectively, these principles enable media content to move beyond fixed and singular

forms. becoming reproducible. transformable. and reconfigurable through user interaction. In particular. the principles of variability and modularity play a decisive role in the emergence of narrative structures that remain open to user intervention.

In conclusion. there are numerous interpretations of new media and its defining characteristics. and these assessments can undoubtedly be further expanded. Beyond this diversity of perspectives. the concept of interaction requires particular attention. as it constitutes one of the most distinctive features of new media and is directly linked to the notion of participatory culture that forms the core framework of this study. Within the context of new media. interaction may be defined as the introduction of multilayered communication or the establishment of a reciprocal communicative structure. Another significant contribution of interaction lies in its openness to temporal simultaneity within the communication process. Accordingly. the form and degree of individual or user participation -and the roles assumed within communication- are transformed in various ways through this characteristic of new media (Binark. 2007. p. 21). Through the technological infrastructure provided by new media. traditional one-way or limited two-way communication models have given way to multidirectional and symmetrical structures. enabling users not only to provide feedback but also to engage in interaction. experience participation. and co-produce shared value. At the same time. the interactive capacity and functional affordances of new media have rendered the regulatory and directive control of both message sources and receivers over content increasingly visible (Yanık. 2016. p. 907). In this respect. interaction may be considered the key factor facilitating the transition of individuals from passive media recipients to active users. In line with this view. Ruby Roy Dholakia and her colleagues outline several key elements that should be taken into account in the design of interactive media environments (as cited in Akyol. 2015. p. 27).

User Control: A structure that enables user participation throughout the process and allows intervention in content.

- **Responsiveness:** The capacity to facilitate two-way and/or multidirectional communication.
- **Real-Time Interaction:** The speed at which communication occurs.

- **Connectedness:** A sense of being connected to the wider world rather than confined to a single location or platform (such as a specific website). which may also be understood as a form of multimedia integration.
- **Personalization/Customization:** The degree to which individual user needs can be addressed.
- **Playfulness:** The entertainment value of the media experience.

As Castells (2008. p. 441) argues. the emergence of new electronic communication systems that integrate multiple media forms and enable global interaction has paved the way for enduring transformations in cultural structures. As technology has permeated everyday life. profound shifts have occurred in social organization. displacing many traditional social patterns. Developments described as “new” in new media have reshaped not only communication practices but also economic and social structures. contributing to the reconfiguration of social order (Aydoğan & Kırık. 2012. p. 61). As a result of this transformation. a user profile has emerged that replaces the passive mass audience with individuals who question authority. react critically. and participate directly in media processes. This shift is conceptualized in the literature as *participatory culture*. a phenomenon whose influence extends beyond media into areas such as economic systems and modes of commerce (Askeroğlu & Karakulakoğlu. 2019. p. 515). Overall. this process redefines the socio-cultural relationship between individuals and media. foregrounding users as active producers and transformative agents- an evolution that has become a defining feature of the contemporary media ecosystem and underscores the need to analyze media-driven social change through the lens of participatory culture.

This study revisits Henry Jenkins’s conceptualization of participatory culture by situating it within the context of audience reactions transforming into production. while drawing on Lev Manovich’s principles of variability and modularity as a framework for explaining the technical and cultural foundations of fan-produced narratives. Manuel Castells’s network society approach is employed to elucidate how audience communities organize through digital platforms and intervene in questions of narrative legitimacy.

3 MEDIA'S FREE USERS: "PARTICIPATORY CULTURE"

New media has introduced profound changes to the limited structures of traditional media, giving rise to a communication environment with a broader sphere of influence. Alongside this shift, the network-based architectures and user-participatory interactive experiences of the digital age have produced a new media order that encompasses not only technological developments but also cultural and social processes (Sezen, 2011, p. 232). Within this context, the study focuses on understanding individual influence over media content as enabled by the affordances of the internet, emphasizing not only the consumption of ready-made content but also the emergence of user-based content production. Accordingly, examining participatory culture in conjunction with the concept of convergence contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary new media dynamics.

Research conducted in the field of new media frequently emphasizes the expanding access individuals have to media content, an access that encompasses not only consumption but also individual production processes (Özel, 2011, p. 64). With the affordances offered by new media, users have moved beyond the role of passive consumers to become agents who exert influence over content, intervene in media texts, and even produce alternative versions. Individuals who once occupied a passive position within traditional media now engage with content through the participatory and interactive tools of digital environments, not merely viewing but transforming, reconfiguring, and reshaping media texts through their own interpretations. According to Manuel Castells (2016, p. 173), as individuals display greater diversity within their consumer identities, technologies of mass self-communication enable citizens to assume greater initiative. This process fosters the emergence of a creative audience profile in which individuals reinterpret messages and codes drawn from multiple sources through their own communicative practices.

The active profiles adopted by users and their ability to exert direct influence over media content have foregrounded the concept of participation within the context of new media, giving rise to a new cultural formation conceptualized as participatory culture. The Turkish Language Association defines participation as "the act of taking part or

involvement” (Turkish Language Association. 2021). Within the framework of new media, Christian Fuchs (2016, p. 76) defines participatory culture as a process through which users, audiences, consumers, and fans are directly involved in the production of content and culture. A further and highly influential contribution is offered by Henry Jenkins, who conceptualizes participatory culture as a structure in which barriers to content creation and sharing are low or entirely removed; users actively participate in content production; experienced media producers support less experienced participants; individual contributions are recognized as meaningful; and diverse communities create media products for different motivations (Jenkins. 2018, p. 14). Jenkins’s formulation emphasizes that users are no longer merely consumers of media texts, but active participants in media production processes. Enabled by continuously evolving digital technologies, individuals increasingly adopt more engaged positions toward cultural texts—such as books or films—by critically examining, interpreting, and contributing to the narrative worlds in which they are invested. In this sense, users become agents who directly shape narrative formation by participating in production processes (Akgül & Hekimoğlu Toprak, 2021, p. 47).

Although often characterized as amateur, grassroots creative individuals produce content aligned with their cultural contexts and, in doing so, articulate a form of resistance to dominant representations of popular culture. While opinions may differ regarding the quality or success of these productions, they remain products shaped directly by the creators’ labor. Historically, such amateur producers generated content under constrained conditions; however, due to the lack of appropriate platforms for dissemination, these productions largely remained private and personal. In the contemporary digital era, by contrast, individuals have acquired active user identities and are able to share their content publicly, thereby transferring personal production into the public sphere (Çetin, 2019, p. 158). Today, users increasingly seek not only to consume media texts, but also to interpret them in depth, contribute to their narrative worlds, and position themselves as part of the ongoing meaning-making process. This tendency reflects broader cultural transformations, further reinforced by the interactive affordances of new media technologies (Dönmez & Güler, 2016, p. 158). Within this framework, Terry Flew identifies three distinct ways in which participation is addressed in the new media literature (as cited in Tüzün Ateşalp & Başlar, 2015, p. 162). First, participation is

discussed in relation to the digital divide, referring to inequalities in access to digital technologies. Second, participation highlights the more open and interactive structure of new media compared to traditional media, positioning users not merely as receivers but as active components of content processes. Third, participation is associated with debates on the democratization of media access and use, as facilitated by participatory culture. This tripartite distinction demonstrates that participation extends beyond content production alone, encompassing a broad range of dimensions—from technological access and cultural representation to user experience and media policy. Particularly in its second and third forms, participation signals a dynamic in which users become increasingly visible within media environments, not only consuming content but also intervening in ways that reshape media structures themselves. Alongside the technical infrastructure provided by new media, rising levels of digital literacy and demands for freedom of expression play a decisive role in this process. Participation, therefore, should be understood not merely as an individual mode of expression, but as a structural element underpinning the cultural and political forms of interaction that emerge within contemporary new media environments.

Popular culture reshaped by the processes of digitalization is today conceptualized under the heading of participatory culture. This cultural formation, which supports user autonomy in relation to media content, is distinguished by several key features: the availability of digital platforms that allow individuals to express themselves freely, the provision of rapid and immediate feedback in creative production processes, and the capacity to reach large audiences in a much shorter time compared to traditional social practices (Koç, 2020, p. 907). In particular, the increasing accessibility of digital devices, their widespread adoption, and the practical advantages they offer have significantly facilitated individuals' integration into participatory culture. Mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets, through their portability and accessibility, have effectively eliminated the temporal and spatial constraints traditionally associated with user participation (Bilben, 2017). Within this relatively open environment, some users take part directly in content production, others support these creative processes, while others assume roles such as disseminating and circulating produced content. Consequently, it becomes evident that every individual embedded within this digital interaction network

contributes—at varying levels—to some stage of the production process (Eren Çetin, 2019, p. 41).

Henry Jenkins categorizes the structure of participatory culture into four fundamental components as follows (as cited in Sezen, 2021):

- **Affiliations:** Digital networks organized around specific media texts -such as Facebook groups, message boards, Friendster, MySpace, or online gaming communities- can take both formal and informal forms. These structures enable users to redefine their social identities within media environments and to develop a sense of belonging.
- **Expressions:** Creative outputs such as fan videos, fanzines, digital mashups, fan fiction, game modifications, and user-generated visual designs function as tools through which individuals offer critical and aesthetic contributions to media texts. Such productions transform the audience from passive spectators into participatory aesthetic agents.
- **Collaborative Problem-Solving:** Formal or informal collaborative groups formed to accomplish specific tasks or generate knowledge reflect the collective intelligence potential of the digital age. These formations demonstrate that users engage with digital platforms not only for entertainment, but also for learning and teaching.
- **Circulation:** The process through which media content is reshaped and distributed across different platforms reveals that individuals are not only content producers but also actors who actively direct the circulation of media. In this respect, users become integral components of the dynamics that shape media flows.

In order to properly understand participatory culture, it is also necessary to address the closely related and frequently associated concept of *convergence*. Henry Jenkins employs this concept to explain the transformation of individuals who occupied a passive position within traditional media structures into active users who produce and shape content through processes of digitalization. According to Jenkins, convergence provides a framework for understanding technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes through the circulation of media content. Within this perspective, convergence encompasses the flow of content across different media platforms, collaborations among

media industries. the search for new economic models at the intersections of traditional and digital media. and the migratory behaviors of users in pursuit of preferred media experiences. In its broadest sense. media convergence refers to a structure in which diverse media forms coexist within a single system and content circulates freely across these interconnected platforms (Jenkins. 2016. p. 436).

With the development of new communication technologies. profound changes have occurred in both content production and content consumption. Within this context. the concept of convergence has emerged as a framework for describing the increasing interconnection of different media contents and the platforms that carry them (Geçkin Onat. 2017. p. 280). From the final quarter of the twentieth century onward. rapid advances in technological infrastructures have led previously independent sectors—such as information technologies. telecommunications. and media—to become increasingly intertwined. This process has entailed not only technical integration but also the blurring of boundaries between industries. Media tools that once required distinct infrastructural systems are now easily accessible and operable through a single digital infrastructure. facilitating the emergence of a media environment that enables holistic and multidimensional interaction (İspir & Bilginer Kucur. 2019. p. 162). Convergence thus also signifies the growing integration of different sectors. The historical trajectory from a period in which radio. television. cinema. print publishing. and computer technologies developed along separate paths to the present moment -characterized by shared operational models at both content and technological levels -clearly illustrates the evolutionary transformation of media.

An integrated assessment of these developments suggests that media. once understood primarily as a domain of broadcasting or production. has evolved into a multidirectional. interactive. and integrated system of communication (as cited in Karabulut. 2008). Roger Fidler's schematic representations of media industries over time clearly illustrate this transformation. revealing how previously distinct sectors have gradually converged and how their boundaries have become increasingly blurred. In the model representing 1978. radio–television broadcasting. print publishing. and computer technologies appear as largely separate industries. each operating within its own conventional domain. By contrast. the model depicting the year 2000 demonstrates a marked shift toward convergence. with these industries integrating within a shared digital

infrastructure. This integration extends beyond technical alignment, encompassing fundamental changes in the production, distribution, and consumption of media content. The convergence of traditional media forms into new platforms underscores that this transformation is not merely technological, but also cultural and user-centered, as audiences are now able to engage more directly with content, participate in production processes, and personalize their media experiences. Taken together, these developments support the characterization of the contemporary communication environment as a “convergence era,” defined not only by the technological integration of media systems but also by profound transformations in content structures and user experience. This convergent media landscape provides the structural and cultural foundation upon which participatory practices emerge, thereby setting the stage for the methodological framework of the present study.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is designed within a qualitative methodological framework. Qualitative research may be defined as an approach that focuses on developing an in-depth understanding of phenomena within their own contexts and employs descriptive techniques -such as document analysis and observation -as primary data collection tools (Aydın, 2018, p. 61). Accordingly, in order to analyze, through the lens of participatory culture, the attitudes of individuals who have become active users and content producers due to the affordances of new media, the study adopts a qualitative research approach and employs descriptive analysis as its principal analytical technique.

4.1 Descriptive analysis framework and indicators

Descriptive analysis in this study is structured around four main analytical categories: narrative coherence, character motivation, audience satisfaction indicators, and the mode of intervention in the alternative scenario. The alternative final season produced by Daniel Whidden is examined through a comparative reading alongside the official final season released by HBO. Within this comparative framework, critical

narrative nodes, shifts in motivation, and resolution strategies are descriptively analyzed under these categories. The unit of analysis consists of scene/plot blocks that represent narrative ruptures within the season, along with the justifications of character motivations articulated within these blocks.

Under the Narrative Coherence category, the analysis focuses on the following indicators: (i) the construction and resolution of conflict, (ii) the continuity of the causal chain (cause–effect relations), (iii) narrative rhythm and accelerated resolutions, and (iv) the positioning of the mythological central threat (the Night King storyline) within the season.

The Character Motivation category examines: (i) narrative consistency with previous seasons, (ii) intra-textual justification of character actions, (iii) the graduality of transformation (abrupt rupture versus gradual transition), and (iv) character consistency at critical decision-making moments.

The Audience Satisfaction Indicators category is addressed in a supportive manner -primarily for triangulation purposes -through analyses published by The Ringer and episode ratings from IMDb. These data are employed not as primary analytical material, but as secondary indicators that help render visible how narrative and character-level ruptures are perceived by audiences.

Finally, the Mode of Intervention in the Alternative Scenario category examines which specific narrative ruptures in the official storyline are addressed by Whidden's fan-produced alternative final season. In this context, the analysis evaluates whether the alternative narrative targets structural gaps, inconsistencies in character motivation, or issues of legitimacy surrounding the final resolution. The degree to which fan production intervenes in narrative legitimacy is thus assessed through descriptive analysis.

Table 1

Descriptive Analysis Categories and Axes of Examination

Analysis Category	Axes of Examination / Indicators
Narrative Coherence	Continuity of the cause–effect chain; construction and resolution of the central conflict; narrative rhythm; positioning of the mythological core threat (the Night King storyline) within the season
Character Motivation	Narrative consistency with previous seasons; intra-textual justification of character

	actions; graduality of transformation (abrupt shift vs. gradual transition); consistency at critical decision-making moments
Audience Satisfaction Indicators	Breaking points in IMDb episode ratings; prominent critical themes and recurring thematic clusters identified on <i>The Ringer</i> platform
Mode of Intervention in the Alternative Scenario	Type of narrative rupture targeted by the alternative narrative (structural, character-based, or resolution-oriented); degree of intervention in narrative legitimacy by fan production

4.2 Game of Thrones and audience intervention

Within the scope of this study, the final season and concluding episode of Game of Thrones were selected as the primary analytical material in order to examine how participatory culture is articulated in relation to media content and to understand the role assumed by audiences/users within this process. In this context, the fan-produced alternative final season created by Daniel Whidden was subjected to detailed analysis. In addition, user comments and analytical pieces published on digital media platforms such as The Ringer were reviewed in order to identify audience reactions, expectations, and forms of production emerging in digital environments. Throughout the research process, existing data were evaluated through an interpretive approach alongside content analysis in order to gain a deeper understanding of audience–user interaction. This combined approach makes it possible to examine how audiences are transformed into active users through the affordances of new media, as conceptualized within the framework of participatory culture. The findings offer significant insights into how the boundaries between media producers and consumers become increasingly blurred under the influence of new media and convergence culture. In this respect, the study presents a timely and original contribution within the context of media theory, enhancing our understanding of digital cultural environments in which audiences simultaneously occupy the positions of both consumers and producers.

Game of Thrones is an American epic fantasy television series created by D. B. Weiss and David Benioff, based on George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* novel series. Broadcast over eight seasons and 73 episodes between April 2011 and May 2019, the series unfolds across the fictional continents of Westeros and Essos, depicting a multilayered world structured around political intrigue and prolonged seasonal cycles

(McKinney, 2015). Filmed in multiple countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Iceland, and Morocco, the series gradually expanded its narrative universe and audience reach, evolving from a niche production into a global cultural phenomenon. Achieving widespread critical and commercial success, *Game of Thrones* won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series four times between 2015 and 2019 (excluding 2017) and accumulated a total of 59 Emmy Awards (Deutsche Welle, 2019). Its final episode was watched live by 19.3 million viewers in the United States alone and reached audiences across 207 countries worldwide. Even a year after its conclusion, the series remained one of the most discussed television productions, according to Parrot Analytics (APF, 2021). Recognized as one of the most successful television series of all time, generating approximately \$1.6 billion in revenue, *Game of Thrones* was further commemorated with extensive tenth-anniversary celebrations titled *The Iron Anniversary* in April 2021 (Güngör, 2021).

The focus of this study is audience or more specifically, fan reactions to the final season, and particularly the final episode, of *Game of Thrones*. Despite its long-standing popularity and broad global audience, the series became the subject of intense criticism following its final season. Immediately after the broadcast of the final episode, a wide range of responses emerged not only in traditional media but also across digital platforms: numerous articles were published, hundreds of commentary and analysis videos appeared on YouTube, and satirical visuals circulated widely on social media. These reactions, often organized and amplified by fan communities, significantly increased the visibility of dissatisfaction with the series' conclusion in digital spaces. The final season -especially the concluding episode- provoked widespread global backlash, prompting audiences to mobilize and articulate their discontent. In response, critics, media commentators, and communication scholars approached the controversy from multiple perspectives (BBC News, 2019; Tüfekçi, 2019; McCrae, 2019; Kessler, 2019). Prominent criticisms included the marginalization of carefully developed character arcs from earlier seasons, deviations from George R. R. Martin's narrative trajectory, heightened expectations shaped by the series' prior impact, the decision to conclude the story in eight rather than ten seasons, a perceived shift from sociological to psychological storytelling, parasocial relationships formed between fans and characters, and the belief that the final narrative world diverged sharply from the one fans had internalized over time. These reactions

illustrate the multifaceted ways in which fans engage with media texts. shaped by deep emotional investment. aesthetic appreciation. and personal identification with characters and story worlds. From this perspective. examining both the official final season and fan-produced alternative endings is crucial for understanding narrative intervention and for assessing how fans negotiate their influence. expectations. and agency in relation to existing media content.

4.3 General analysis of Game of Thrones – season eight (final season)

The eighth season of the series. which also constitutes its final season. represents a compelling case study not only in narrative terms but also in relation to its engagement with audiences. the reactions it generated in digital environments. and the ways in which it fostered fan-produced content. The primary reason for selecting this season is that the audience experience extended beyond conventional viewing boundaries. transforming into a media event shaped by participatory culture practices.

The eighth season of Game of Thrones. particularly its narrative construction. character development. and mode of resolution in the final episode. was met with widespread criticism and framed by many viewers as a profound disappointment. This reception did not remain confined to acts of viewing alone; rather. it catalyzed a desire among audiences to intervene in the narrative itself. Fans actively produced critiques. alternative scenarios. and entirely new narrative proposals across social media and digital platforms. Within this context. the alternative final season created by Daniel Whidden serves as a salient example of how audience production became increasingly activated. demonstrating that the narrative ceased to function as a one-directional authorial output and instead transformed into a collective interpretive space.

In contrast to the mythological depth and character-driven complexity established in earlier seasons. the eighth season advances through accelerated and often insufficiently justified narrative decisions. In particular. perceived inconsistencies in character arcs—most notably the abrupt transformation of Daenerys Targaryen—generated a rupture in narrative coherence and weakened viewers’ sense of emotional and interpretive investment. This rupture played a decisive role in motivating audiences to shift from passive consumption toward practices of active criticism. reinterpretation. and organized

reaction within digital environments. This analysis approaches the final season not only as a textual object but also through the lens of media sociology, examining how narrative decisions contributed to the formation of audience responses. From this perspective, the final season of *Game of Thrones* constitutes more than the conclusion of a fictional universe; it represents a media event in which participatory culture became highly visible and operational within new media ecosystems.

One of the most contested narrative choices concerns the rapid resolution of the Night King storyline. The defeat of the central mythological threat—built across multiple seasons—within a single episode disrupted the established narrative economy and intensified the perceived disjunction between audience expectations and authorial decisions. This structural compression rendered the long-term narrative investment of viewers symbolically unresolved, functioning as a key trigger for fan-driven reinterpretations and alternative endings. Subsequent developments further reinforced this dissonance. The escalating conflict surrounding Daenerys's claim to power, her increasing isolation, and the destruction of King's Landing were widely interpreted as insufficiently motivated within the narrative framework. As the justification for Daenerys's transformation remained contested, audience satisfaction declined, and interpretive authority shifted toward digital publics. The violent resolution, culminating in Daenerys's death and the symbolic destruction of the Iron Throne, foregrounded the instability of narrative legitimacy when audience consent is fractured.

The final configuration of power—Bran's election as king, the political fragmentation of Westeros, and Jon Snow's exile—further underscored the extent to which narrative closure was perceived as imposed rather than collectively earned. In this sense, the ending illustrates that narrative legitimacy in contemporary media culture is no longer established solely through authorial intent, but is continuously negotiated through audience acceptance, rejection, and reinterpretation within digital spaces.

Accordingly, fan-produced alternative narratives may be read as manifestations of reactive participatory culture: forms of narrative resistance that emerge in response to perceived breakdowns in coherence, motivation, and legitimacy. The final season of *Game of Thrones* thus exemplifies how convergence culture enables audiences not only to critique media texts but to actively challenge and renegotiate their meanings, boundaries, and endings.

4.4 Fan-produced scenario analysis of the final season of Game of Thrones

The eighth season of Game of Thrones functioned not only as a contested narrative conclusion but also as a catalyst for new forms of audience creativity. The perceived inconsistencies in narrative resolution and character development prompted viewers to move beyond passive consumption and assume active creative roles. One of the most visible manifestations of participatory culture in this context is the fan-produced alternative final season created by Daniel Whidden and published on the YouTube channel Think Story.

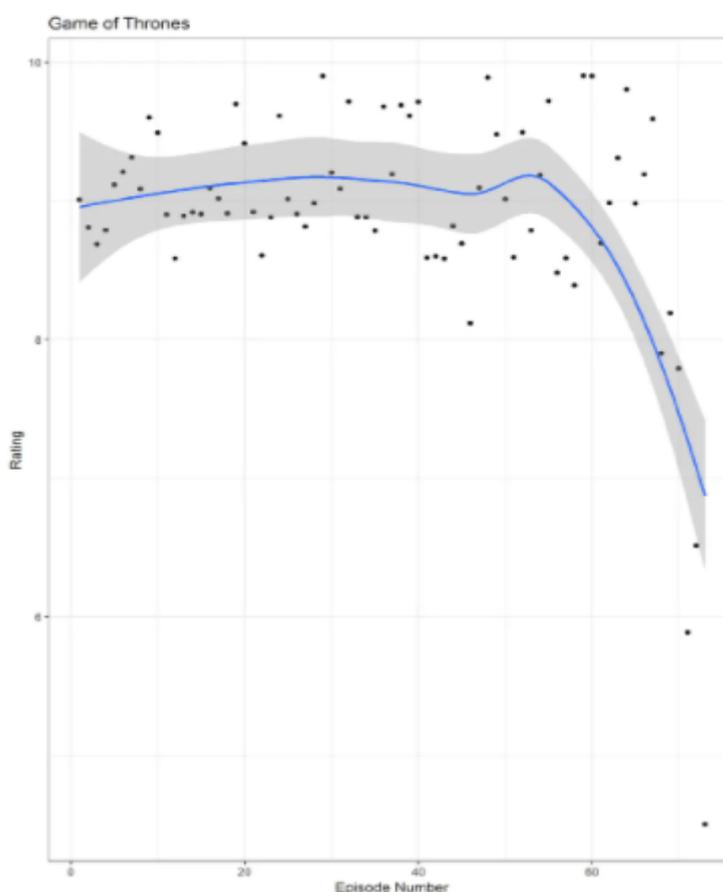
Whidden's alternative narrative does more than propose a different plot trajectory; it directly targets the core structural decisions that generated widespread dissatisfaction with the official final season. Central to this reimagining is the argument that the confrontation with the Night King should have constituted the narrative climax rather than being resolved mid-season. From the audience's perspective, the Night King was not merely an antagonist but the embodiment of a mythological threat developed across multiple seasons. His abrupt and relatively superficial elimination was therefore perceived as undermining narrative coherence.

In the alternative storyline, the battle against the Night King is lost, forcing Daenerys into a major defeat and compelling her to seek assistance from her enemy, Cersei, in order to protect the remaining survivors. This narrative rupture reverses established power dynamics while grounding Daenerys's tragic transformation in a more gradual and justified process. Bran's discovery of the source of magic and Jon's death in connection with this force introduce emotional and philosophical depth, while developments such as Jaime's assassination of Cersei in response to her betrayal and the populace's loyalty to Daenerys provide resolutions that respond to fans' desires for narrative and emotional closure. In this sense, the alternative season should be understood not simply as an individual creative exercise, but as a collective intervention into the narrative. Practices central to participatory culture—rewriting, reconfiguring, and reclaiming the story—become clearly visible here. Such productions signal that audiences claim not only the right to interpret but also the right to create. Audience dissatisfaction with the HBO-produced final season was not limited to individual reactions; it was also substantiated through analyses on major digital media platforms. For instance, The Ringer

compiled extensive viewer responses and critical assessments, demonstrating the scale and consistency of negative evaluations directed at the final season. Similarly, user ratings on IMDb -one of the world's largest online databases- indicate that the final episodes ranked not only among the lowest-rated within the series itself but also among the most poorly received finales in television history. These findings underscore that alternative narratives are not merely speculative “fan fiction” but articulate concrete, audience-driven expectations and critiques of narrative legitimacy (Lindbergh & Arthur, 2019).

Figure 1

IMDb Ratings of Game of Thrones



Source: Lindbergh and Arthur, 2019

As illustrated in Figure 2, although Game of Thrones received a strong overall average rating of 9.2 out of 10 based on votes from approximately 1.5 million users, a marked decline is observable beginning in the second half of the final season. This sharp

decrease indicates that audiences—positioned as active users rather than passive viewers—are able to articulate evaluative feedback on media texts in real time. Such audience responses are significant not only as indicators of a text’s perceived success or failure, but also as revealing measures of viewer expectations, interpretive frameworks, and affective investment.

In order to contextualize the reception of the final season in comparative terms, The Ringer conducted a large-scale analysis based on ratings from approximately 5.000 users, covering episode-level scores for around 1.600 television series. This dataset comprised roughly 130.000 individual episodes and 7.400 seasons, enabling a comparative assessment of Game of Thrones’ final season against other series finales within contemporary television history.

Table 2

Comparative Audience Ratings of Game of Thrones’ Final Season and Finale Episode

Series	Number Of Seasons	Final Season Ranking	Other Seasons Ranking	Final Seasons %	Series	Number Of Seasons	Final Season Ranking	Other Seasons Ranking	Final Seasons %
House Of Cards	6	4.18	8.62	48.4	Are You Afraid of the Dark?	7	1.8	8.7	20.7
Game Of Thrones	8	6.67	9.11	73.2	House Of Cards	6	2.7	8.62	31.3
Two and a Half Men	12	5.55	7.56	73.5	Game Of Thrones	8	4.4	9.11	48.3
Murphy Brown	11	6.01	6.72	74.5	Dexter	8	4.7	8.75	53.7
Scrubs	9	6.37	8.35	76.3	Two and a Half Men	12	4.1	7.56	54.3
Bewitched	8	5.82	7.54	77.3	The Andy Griffith Show	8	4.8	7.91	60.7
Degrassi: The Next	14	5.08	6.5	78.2	True Blood	7	5.2	8.21	63.3

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Are You Afraid of the Dark?	7	6.98	8.7	80.2	Murph y Brown	11	4.5	6.72	66.9
Laverne & Shirley	8	6.35	7.67	82.8	How I Met Your Mothe r	9	5.6	8.26	67.8
Hawaii Five-O	12	6.08	7.28	83.6	Pretty Little Liars	7	5.6	8.23	68.1

Source: Lindbergh and Arthur. 2019

According to the findings, the final season of Game of Thrones ranks among the lowest-rated seasons in terms of audience evaluations, falling within the bottom 10 percent of the overall distribution. More strikingly, the final episode itself is positioned among the most negatively received television content, placing it within the lowest 1.5 percent based on audience feedback. These data indicate that media productions reaching large global audiences may encounter intense backlash when viewer expectations are insufficiently addressed. Audiences and fan communities, capable of organizing rapidly within digital environments, can generate influential responses that range from strong support to severe criticism. The case of Game of Thrones illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity. Viewers from different parts of the world mobilized through online platforms to launch a campaign titled “Remake Game of Thrones Season 8 with Competent Writers.” Conducted via Change.org, the petition initially gathered over 300.000 signatures and, following extensive media coverage, surpassed 530.000 supporters (Bowden, 2019).

In light of these observations, it can be argued that the advent of new media has significantly increased the degree of audience control over media texts. Users, no longer constrained by time or space, can access content instantaneously through digital platforms and intervene at both individual and collective levels. The audience position has thus shifted from passive reception toward an active user profile that provides feedback, influences content trajectories, and, when necessary, directly intervenes in production outcomes. Consequently, it has become increasingly unavoidable for content producers to take audience expectations into account and to acknowledge user demands as an integral component of the contemporary media production process.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Developments in the media landscape have generated profound changes not only in the production and distribution of content, but also in the position and behavior of media users. Initially, audiences participated in media processes primarily through feedback mechanisms; over time, however, this structure has given way to a much stronger user presence characterized by active participation, intervention in content, and even independent content production. This transformation has paved the way for a communication model in which users move beyond passive consumption to become direct participants in content production and meaning-making processes. The continuity of technological innovation and its increasingly pervasive influence on mass media have led to the contemporary period being conceptualized as a “convergence era.” This era denotes a phase of transformation in which not only technological systems, but also media perceptions and user roles, are fundamentally reconfigured.

As the internet has become an integral part of everyday life, levels of interaction within media environments have increased to an unprecedented degree. Individuals have shed their positions as passive viewers and emerged as active users. This shift has not only altered the relationship between individuals and media, but has also dissolved traditional communication boundaries tied to time and space. Users organizing within digital environments—particularly on social media platforms—have become actors capable of directly influencing media content, providing feedback, and contributing, either indirectly or directly, to production processes. Within this context, these transformations have facilitated the emergence of what is defined in communication studies as participatory culture. Fan communities forming around globally influential media texts exemplify this dynamic structure, in which users communicate their opinions, critiques, and expectations directly to producers while simultaneously expanding narrative universes through alternative storylines, character analyses, and new creative outputs.

While this process offers significant potential for content producers in terms of creative input and direct engagement with audiences, it also raises legal and ethical concerns, including issues related to copyright, creative ownership, and content manipulation. For this reason, the possibilities enabled by participatory culture must be

evaluated alongside the limitations and tensions it produces. The findings of this study highlight three core points:

1. In the digital age, the audience is no longer merely an “audience.” but an actor that comments on and produces narrative content.
2. Narrative authority is no longer a unilateral domain; its legitimacy is increasingly negotiated through audience responses.
3. Story ownership has become a contested and renegotiated space between producers and audiences within digital culture.

This study has examined audience/user attitudes and behaviors toward media texts through the case of *Game of Thrones*, situating them within the framework of participatory culture. An analysis of the reactions following the series’ final season and concluding episode reveals that the production’s previously established success was substantially overshadowed by its ending. Open criticism voiced on digital platforms, signature campaigns initiated by viewers, and the production of alternative narratives point to a critical domain that media producers can no longer ignore. Such user-driven actions not only enable content to circulate more widely through social media, but may also result in the original narrative being relegated to a secondary position. In the case of *Game of Thrones*, the fact that a fan-produced alternative final season received more favorable reception (Banim, 2019) further substantiates this argument. From this perspective, the relationship between media producers and audiences necessitates serious reconsideration.

The conceptual framework employed in this study has focused on the development of participatory culture, the impact of convergence on media structures, and the role of users in content production processes. Nevertheless, the social, cultural, and legal implications of this transformation continue to constitute a multilayered field of debate. Future research should therefore examine in greater depth the evolving relationship between media producers and audiences/users, with particular attention to issues of freedom of expression, the degree of audience involvement in content production, and the implications of these dynamics for creative industries. A multidimensional approach to these questions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the user-centered media order shaped by the affordances of the digital age.

The Game of Thrones case demonstrates that. in contemporary media environments. narrative legitimacy is no longer conferred solely by authors or producers. but is also shaped by audience communities. By conceptualizing the transformation of audience reactions into alternative narrative production through the notion of “reactive participatory culture.” this study argues that fan productions constitute not only forms of creative participation. but also arenas of contestation and negotiation directed at narrative authority. In this respect. the research opens a new line of discussion within participatory culture scholarship by focusing on popular television finales. and repositions audience participation in relation to narrative ownership and cultural legitimacy.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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