

## **Fragmentation versus convergence: University students in Brussels and the consumption of TV series on the Internet**

Victor Wiard & David Domingo,  
Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

**Abstract:** Fragmentation and convergence are core concepts in the theorisation of audiences in the digital age. Through the analysis of the practices and motivations of French-speaking university students in Brussels consuming (American) TV series on the Internet, this article shows how the intersection of these two concepts could contribute towards a more nuanced portrait of the habits of online audiences. Results show a demanding and autonomous audience of students not only in terms of which TV series they are willing to consume but also in terms of the language and subtitles of the content consumed, the flexibility to choose the time of consumption and the technique used to access the content. A combination of media diaries and interviews allowed to reconsider the concepts of fragmentation and convergence, at first sight conflicting, and to put them in dialogue to propose a definition of university students in Brussels as *a fragmented audience in a convergent environment*.

**Keywords:** audience fragmentation, audience convergence, online audiences, TV series, media diaries, streaming, P2P.

### **Introduction: evolution of TV audiences**

The discussion on how we conceptualize news audiences and their environment is a necessary, and maybe sometimes overlooked, step to understating audiences' practices, habits and discourses. Research has shown the difficulties of the media industry to adapt to changes produced by the (not so recent anymore) arrival of the Internet, as well as the slow pace at which the broadcasting system in the US and its networks remodel content production (Mann, 2014: 3). This conservatism of media producers regarding new technologies has generated new opportunities for audiences, who have found new spaces

for content consumption online. Adoni and Nossek have identified changes in television consumption amongst users of computers and the Internet (2001: 22). New 'quality television' (McCabe & Akass, 2007) and 'mainstream cults' (Hills 2002, 2010) produced by old and new players (such as HBO or Netflix) with budgets equivalent to Hollywood productions have become very popular among youth audiences, including those in French-speaking Europe (Glevarec & Pinet, 2007; Donnat, 2009; Combes, 2011; Wiard, 2015). The notion of mainstream cult defines films or TV series that have transcended the dichotomy between mainstream and cult, partially transforming fan like behaviours and cult products into mainstream processes (Mathijs & Sexton, 2012: 63-65). These series are, amongst other products, interpreted and integrated as cultural products within European cultures (Rixon, 2006) by individuals that travel more than ever before, listen to music with English lyrics and watch American TV series in the original language (Donnat, 2009). Despite the fact that the notion of quality television can be controversial (Cardwell, 2007) – and judging it is not the topic of this inquiry –, there is a regained interest in watching TV series by teenagers and young adults for certain TV series.

This research builds upon the tradition of 'uses and gratifications' theory, which showed that media usage is an active process where individuals attempt to satisfy some of their psycho-social needs through selective self-exposure to specific media and contents' (Adoni & Nossek, 2001: 7). If it has been proven that each medium specializes in fulfilling particular needs, though there is interchangeability at various degrees (*Idem*: 7-8). To interpret these processes in a digital environment, the article proposes to focus on two concepts widely used to describe the contemporary media environment: fragmentation (Napoli, 2011) and convergence (Jenkins, 2006). These concepts, which were initially aimed at describing trends in news and cultural media content or the evolution of media ownership, have been broadened in empirical research to describe media production and consumption trends, especially the redefinition of audiences in the digital era. Phenomena of fragmentation and convergence exist since the era of cable and satellite television, but digitization has exacerbated the tensions between the two trends. Both terms represent competing forces creating a tension within media related practices that Couldry conceptualizes as 'market-based fragmentation vs continued pressures of centralization' (2009:447). Though widely used and representative of present and past trends in the media and audiences, they have not often been put face to face, adjusted to one another to expand our explanatory power about media consumption habits. Instead of focusing on the differences that the concepts underline, we propose to put them in dialogue to get a stronger theoretical framework for the analysis of the behaviour of individuals using the Internet to consume cultural content. The article uses qualitative methodologies to test the concepts and their interrelation; it focuses on the analysis of the consumption habits of TV series online by Belgian university students. Because audiences are polysemous and can be defined by place or geography, people, type of medium, content, or time (McQuail, 2010), it is relevant to select a specific sample to empirically test new definitions of the concept of audience. Researchers following the proposals of Napoli (2011) and Jenkins (2006) have

made very valuable points arguing for a fragmentation of the media and therefore its audiences, as well as for a convergence of both media and audiences. The goal of this study is to test how each concept helps explaining how cultural media is consumed online and to explore how they can work together in providing a better description of how audiences behave when it comes to the viewing of TV series online. After constructing a typology of online content consumption, our findings led us to propose to describe the sample as a *fragmented audience in a convergent environment*.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Fragmentation of audiences***

Fragmentation describes both trends in the media and audiences (Anderson, 2006; Napoli, 2011; Tewksbury, 2005; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012) in a digital networked environment. According to Anderson (2006; 27-30), who analysed fragmentation in detail in his book *The Long Tail*, this phenomenon is not unique to the digital era; it occurred until the industrial revolution enabled mass media consumption. Culture had by essence always been local and was determined by geography. Therefore, cultural products and its audiences have always been fragmented a part from a brief moment in history. Napoli sees audience fragmentation as the consequence of the fragmentation of the media environment. A study on the behaviour of fragmented audiences consuming cultural content online needs therefore to consider first the media and the technologies involved.

Napoli defines media fragmentation as ‘the technological processes that increase the range of content options available to media consumers’ (Napoli, 2011). This increase in options has been facilitated by technological evolutions, including the multiplication of fixed and mobile interfaces and possibilities for aggregative content (Couldry, 2009: 441). At the same time, fragmentation generates a fragmented media environment, which complicates the possibilities for content producers to reach the general public (Debrett, 2009 : 810) or to generate revenue from advertising (Tewksbury, 2005).

Napoli divides the phenomenon into inter-media fragmentation and intra-media fragmentation. If inter-media fragmentation focuses on the ‘growth of new delivery platforms’, intra-media fragmentation describes the growth of ‘choices within particular media technologies’ (e.g. television channels or websites) (Napoli, 2011). It seems important to underline that within the definition of inter-media fragmentation, each medium is not considered as a material tool (e.g. a television, a DVD player, a computer) but rather, as a technology, in the sense defined by Raymond Williams (1981): a ‘social institution’ including ‘technical inventions’ (devices and artefacts), ‘techniques’ (particular skills to use them), the ‘body of knowledge’ to develop both devices and skills (in the scientific and engineering world) and, finally, the knowledge to use them in a particular social setting (1981:226-7).

Napoli (2011) states that the current expansion of the number television channels leads to the redistribution of audiences’ attention and thus, to audience fragmentation.

Regarding television, he gives the example of the growing number of cable television networks accessible in the United States: 585 in 2008. The idea of audience fragmentation and its links with cultural settings and technological development has since then been accepted by a wide variety of authors (Siibak et al., 2014: 102; Tewksbury, 2005; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012; Yuan, 2008). However, scholars do not always agree on the extent to which media fragmentation fosters audience fragmentation. In the case of the journalistic content of online news sites, Tewksbury (2005) points out that fragmentation ‘describes the relationship between audiences and information,’ as more content becomes available. He links fragmentation to the specialization of audiences and outlets. On the contrary, in *Beneath the veneer of fragmentation*, Webster (2005) defends that mass media products still resist the tendency of fragmentation by pointing out the lasting importance of the three big American networks (ABC, CBS & NBC). He argues that even with a growing number of channels available people still maintain a certain repertoire. He goes as far as to conclude: ‘even when channels are technically available, they go unwatched’ (2005: 379). In a more recent article, Webster and Ksiazek apply this argument to the Internet and state that ‘audiences are likely to remain concentrated in the digital media marketplace’ (2012: 51). This shows that the dynamics between media and audience fragmentation merit more empirical attention. Media fragmentation relates to the increase in media content consumption capabilities may it be the device, the technique to use it, the source to access it, or the content accessed itself. Audience fragmentation can be defined as the process during which the variety of consumption possibilities increases, giving more audience members more options of consumption (in terms of device, technique, source or content) of a certain cultural product (such as TV series). A fragmented audience is then the result of this process and has many social and economic implications.

### ***Audience Convergence***

Opposed to this general representation of media products and media consumers as shifting towards multiplicity and fragmentation, is the idea of unity and centralization (Couldry 2009: 447). Convergence has often been seen as a process, as the underlying trend fostered by digital technologies in the media industry (García Avilés *et al.*, 2009; Benecchi & Colapinto 2011) that generates this centralization. The concept also has been applied to describe new consumers habits, such as going to the Internet to consume content initially produced for other media.

Convergence is relevant to studies of cultural content and online audiences when seen as a process in which media producers, media production, media ownerships and media contents increasingly span across technological platforms. The use of personal computers coupled with the Internet are main examples of converged media ‘combining elements of television screen, printed text, radio and telephone and require a new type of convergent literacy for their use (Adoni & Nossek, 2001: 22)’. However, according to Henry Jenkins, convergence is ‘more than simply a technological shift,’ (Jenkins, 2004) it is a combination of ‘technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes in the ways media

circulates within our culture... Media convergence refers to a situation in which multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them' (Jenkins, 2006). Important structural changes in the way people consume media lie underneath this phenomenon, because media (including but not limited to electronic and digital media) have 'extended our capacity to communicate' (Jensen, 2010: 15). Jenkins highlights that this process fosters 'the migratory behaviour of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of the kind of entertainment experiences they want' (Jenkins, 2006).

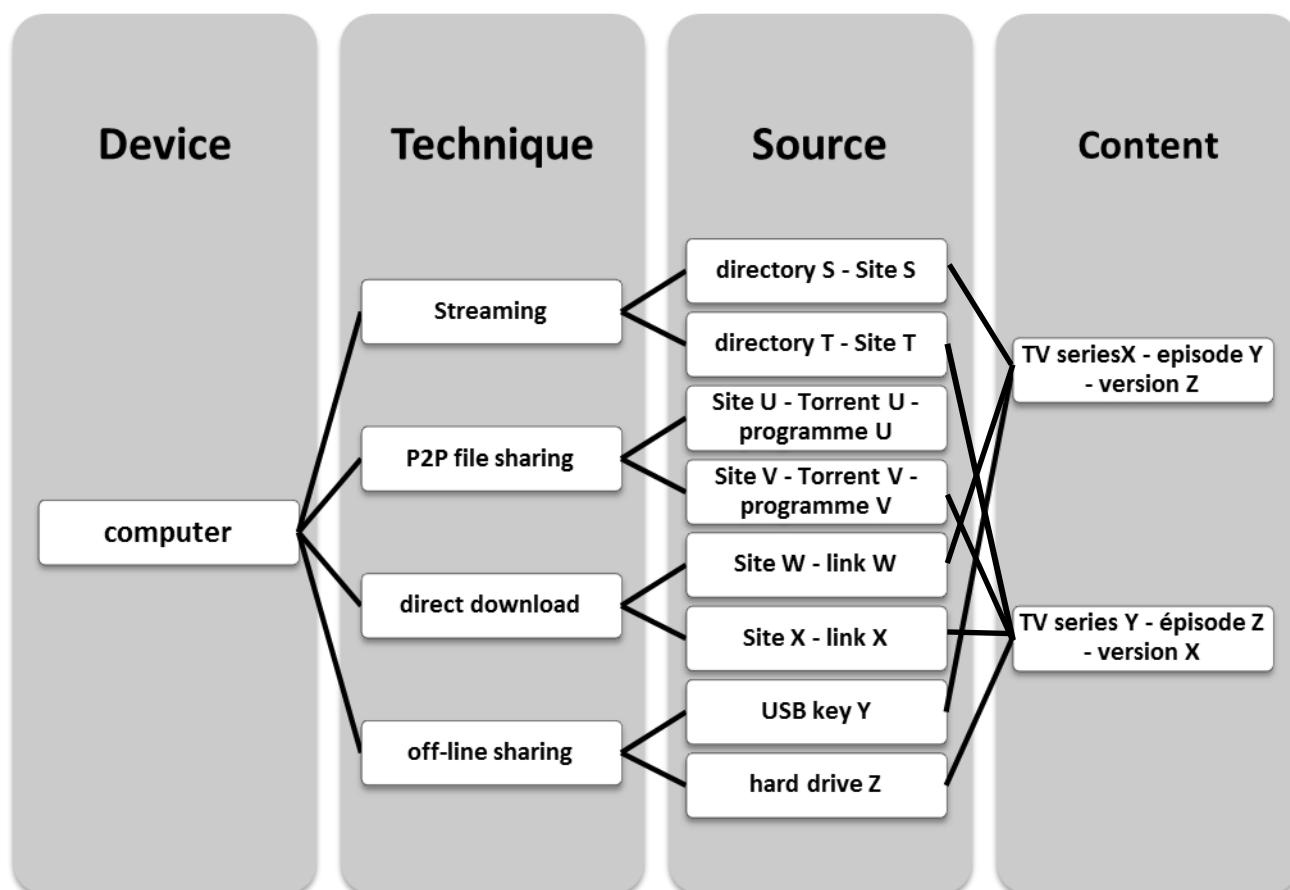
Processes of centralization and convergence towards the Internet may be considered as counterweights of fragmentation, because online sources and techniques render content available regardless of its initial distribution channel. Therefore, within the scope of this study we use media convergence to refer to the possibilities of getting, consuming, sharing and discussing particular TV series on multiple platforms. Audience convergence corresponds to the concentration of audiences that consume common cultural products and share social practices, values and discourses.

Examples of media convergence include reality TV shows combined with online streaming, forums and live chatting (Michelle, 2009). Scholarly work has equally researched fans as one of the most intriguing phenomena of television audiences in the digital age. Convergence enables 'opportunities for audience activity and participation' (Sundet & Ytreberg, 2009), such as multiple (re)creations of content derived from TV series by fans understood as communities (Booth, 2010). Convergence mechanisms and the Internet create a world in which TV series can be watched on computers, for example when episodes are downloaded. On this device, the shows coexist with a variety of other websites, chats, and social networks changing the viewers' experience. It can be a distraction, but also enhance the viewer experience if one decides to explore related websites and forums (Brooker, 2009). The notion of convergence also becomes applicable more widely to people who simply consume TV series (made first for television), if the allegedly banal shift from television to the Internet is seen as an act of audience agency. While researchers have devoted a lot of attention to the more active users, they are a small minority among the audience of cultural content, and we agree with Hermes (1993) that it may be misleading to consider them the 'average consumer'. Thus, we deem relevant to study the habits of the majority that feel that consuming the content is enough, and do not produce anything themselves.

### ***A new typology of media fragmentation and convergence.***

In order to assess whether media fragmentation or convergence leads to changes in audiences, it is necessary to first elaborate a typology that can clearly evaluate both processes in particular cases. We suggest that media fragmentation and convergence may be best described when seen as operating on four levels: the *device*, the *technique*, the *source*, and the *content* itself (as shown on **Figure 1**). This typology is partly inspired by Williams' definition of technology (Williams, 1981). The first level (*device*) designates the growth in the number of material objects giving access to cultural content (desktops,

laptops, tablets, smartphones, DVDs, Blu-ray, etc.). The second level (*technique*) describes the different possibilities of using a device to get the content. Using the example of television, the concept of technique can be used to differentiate cable, satellite and premium television (terms and availabilities vary from country to country). Focusing on cultural content consumption online, we detected four categories: ‘online streaming’, ‘direct download’, ‘Torrent download’ – or ‘file-sharing’ (Newman, 2011)-, and ‘offline sharing’ -the way in which an individual who first downloaded content online can then share it using a hard drive or a flash drive for other individuals to consume it. The third level of possibilities of fragmentation and convergence (*source*) refers to the final location of the content itself. Finally, the fourth level (*content*) relates to the cultural products as intellectual creations, and their discrete instances such as broadcasts, files or discs, which can be considered as *versions* of the same content.



**Figure 1:** Possibilities of TV series consumption online – four levels typology.

To give an illustration, Participant 3 of our study watched one evening the episodes 14 to 19 of the 4<sup>th</sup> season of the TV series *The Big Bang Theory* (the content), on his laptop computer (the device), streaming it (the technique) from the website *dpstream.net* (the source). Participant 5, instead, used Torrents (technique) to download 4 episodes of the 6<sup>th</sup> season of the same series (content) also on his laptop (device). He used three Torrent files (sources) found on the website *eztv.it* to download the files. This classification goes a step further

than the concepts of intra- and inter-media fragmentation developed by Napoli for the analysis of the universe of audiences viewing TV shows on the Internet, as it can also be used to detect empirical evidence of converging practices.

## Research design

The research questions we laid down for this study were: (1) what are the habits and motivations of Belgian young adults using their computer coupled with the Internet to watch TV? (2) Is it possible to elaborate a typology, a classification of the user's online possibilities in terms of cultural content consumption? And (3) how do the concepts of fragmentation and convergence interrelate to analyse this audience?

Webster & Ksiazek (2012) classify studies on audience fragmentation according to their focus in 'media-centric,' 'user-centric,' and 'audience-centric' (2012: 45). This last is a hybrid approach to describe audiences at a macro level. Within this framework, this article proposes a *user-centric study*, to conceptualize and study specific audience profiles at a micro level. The sample was purposefully homogeneous, based on common socio-demographic characteristics. It is composed of sixteen university students.

The fragmentation of online content in thousands of websites, many of them in the limits of legality, makes data collection about online television consumer habits difficult. The methodology chosen for this exploratory study includes *structured media diaries*<sup>1</sup> given to the respondent to fill for a week, and a post diary in-depth interview. The diary takes the form of a structured grid for respondents to report on what they watched, where, and using what technology (for an example of a filled diary, see **Annex 1**). The respondents had the choice of either filling an entry in right after a viewing of content or once a day, and doing so directly on their computer or using a paper version<sup>2</sup>. The main themes covered during the interviews included the TV shows consumed during the week, where (the physical space and the context), for how long, and how they were consumed, as well as the technical means they accessed the content with. This was done so to give a better perspective on the data gathered through the media diaries. The respondents were then asked to contrast what they had written in their diaries with their general habits. The combination of these two research methods enables to gather rich qualitative data. Diaries were useful not only to generate data, but also to build the respondents' – as well as the researchers' – comfort and confidence to speak during the in-depth interviews. Interviews helped confirming diaries' results, as well as contrast the week of completion with other periods of the year to establish practices and habits. In return, the presence of the diaries during the interviews helped the respondents to refer to actual content consumed and to speak about their daily TV series consumption in a more pragmatic way.

Over the last few decades research in Cultural Studies and Reception Studies has led scholars to conduct empirical studies on number of specific audiences: from women reading romance novels or magazines, to fans of science fiction, television and even of TV series (Radway, 1984; Ang, 1985; Jenkins, 1992; Hermes, 1993; Combes, 2011). These studies have shown that there are converging and diverging practices amongst media audiences (as well

of course as amongst members of particular audiences). More recently, the spread of Internet usage and Internet users has led some researchers to turn towards these new forms of content consumption. The high presence of youth and young adults on the Internet as well as the technical capabilities of technology-receptive, educated individuals and preliminary data has led us to the study of university students in Brussels.

The 16 participants of this study were found, selected and approached through a snowball strategy, by asking acquaintances at the university about potential participants and to gradually ask those participants to do the same. The aim was to achieve the greatest possible diversity in terms of personal characteristics within this homogeneous social group. The 16 selected respondents were all between 18 and 25 years old (see **Figure 2**), and 21 on average. The sample is composed of 9 men students and 7 women. At the time of data collection, they were all students at the University of Brussels between the first year of Bachelor and the second year of the master, but following various orientations (ranging from psychology and agronomy, to economics or law). Their housing situations vary from apartment alone or with roommates to living in the familial household with family. Data was gathered between 2013 (10 participants) and 2014 (6 participants).

ID	Dates of participation	Gender	Age	Level of study	Study orientation	Living situation
1	25/03 - 31/03 2013	M	21	Ba1	economics	apartment (2 roommates)
2	23/04 - 29/04	W	23	Ma2	psychology	apartment (alone)
3	27/04 - 03/05	M	24	Ba3	engineering	house (with brother and father)
4	28/04 - 04/05	M	25	Ba2	economics	apartment (with 2 roommates)
5	04/05 - 10/05	W	22	Ma1	communication	apartment and w/ parents (on week-ends)
6	10/05 - 16/05	W	23	Ma1	communication	apartment (with boyfriend)
7	27/11 - 03/12	M	18	Ba1	languages	apartment and w/ parents (on week-ends)
8	02/12 - 08/12	W	19	Ba2	history	house (w/ family)
9	20/12 - 26/12	M	21	Ba3	bio-engineering	house (w/ family)
10	24/12 - 30/12	W	19	Ba2	history	House w/ father or mother (every other week)
11	10/02 - 16/02 2014	M	20	Ba1	art history	house (w/ family)
12	22/02 - 28/02	W	21	Ba3	political sciences	house (w/ family)
13	25/02 - 03/03	M	21	Ma1	bio-engineering	house (w/ family)
14	28/02 - 06/03	M	24	Ma1	journalism	house (w/ family)
15	05/03 - 11/03	M	18	Ba1	law	house (w/ family)
16	11/03 - 17/03	W	21	Ba3 (Transition)	criminology	house (w/ family)

**Figure 2:** General data regarding respondents.



## Results

### *Cable Television in Belgium vs. the Internet*

Results of the media diaries and interviews confirms that there is an audience of students using the Internet to watch TV series. A first significant element to get more insight as to why such individuals turn to the Internet to watch TV series is the accessibility of such content by looking at the media environment in French-speaking Belgium and the others possibilities of watching TV series. Because of its three national languages, Belgium shows a divided audio-visual landscape.<sup>3</sup> The channels provide fictional content such as movies and shows, as well as other entertainment such as game and reality shows. While they broadcast plenty of fictional and non-fictional TV series as well as movies and reality shows, the fictional series appear to be similar in genre if not in content (see an example of the distribution of evening TV content in **Annex 2**). The great majority of TV series are coming from the United States and are dubbed in French, and all relate to law, politics, or the police, as in the well-known 'police procedural' genre, or 'P-P' (Deutsch & Cavender, 2008; Allen, 2007). We found that young adults pursuing higher education are a demanding audience that is not satisfied by this offer. Our respondents were very vocal: 'CSI, it's always the same thing. It pisses me off, I don't watch it anymore' (Part. 5). Instead, all the sixteen participants – which consumed over thirty different TV series and more than 124 episodes –, preferred to watch TV series such as *Game of Thrones*, *House of Cards* or *How I met Your Mother*. Even though the series consumed are of different genres (ranging from fantasy to American sitcoms), most of them seem to fall under the overlapping double umbrella of mainstream cults (Hills, 2002; 2010) or of quality television (McCabe & Akass, 2007), at the very least as considered by them. This active and selective process of going online to watch TV series confirms the assertion of 'uses and gratification theory', which demonstrated that individuals use media content to satisfy some of their needs (Adoni & Nosseck, 2001: 7), and that they are ready to use the Internet to do so.

Often living in apartments shared with other students, not many own a television set and much less have access to cable or premium TV channels. None of the individuals participating in our study paid for television services. They watched mainly American TV series on their computers, sometimes in French but mostly in English and depending on their level of comfort with the language some used English or French subtitles. 'I only watch shows with subtitles because my English is not good enough to watch any without them' (Part. 1).

Multiple versions of the shows are available on streaming websites, Torrent files and downloading sites.<sup>4</sup> This is one of the main reasons why participants choose to use the computer over a television set. While students sometimes want to be able to watch a TV series in French, they often claim that they prefer to consume the original version with subtitles. Talking about the series *The Big Bang Theory* dubbed in French, Participant 5 said:

'For the French version they have to drop jokes because of the translation and that is annoying'. Out of the sixteen diaries analysed, the majority of participants consumed TV series with French subtitles and seven of them did so exclusively. Meanwhile, a small minority watched their series with subtitles in English. Only one participant watched all his shows in the original version, and another one all of his shows in the French dubbed version. As commented by the participants, those two types of consumptions highly depend on the mastering of the English language of the consumer.

At the time of the study, the directories used by students mainly provide links to TV series with French subtitles, and sometimes links to a version dubbed in French. The major difference is that the version with subtitles is made directly from the original version by third party individuals whereas the dubbed version usually comes later, and from a version made for French speaking television or DVDs. Due to the delay produced by this process, the websites cannot offer the latest seasons of TV series dubbed in French. The lack of legitimate online options (Newman, 2011) – such as Hulu or Netflix (its launch in Belgium has only recently been announced) – makes the use of illegal services<sup>5</sup> of cultural content the only possibility for most students craving to stay up to date with their favourite series.

Through the media diaries, we found similarities in practices and habits. Results show a demanding audience, consuming various contents, in various versions. If two participants consumed TV series in the morning and three during lunch, during their week of media diary completion, most TV series were consumed late in the afternoon or at night, as Participant 15 illustrates, he always watches TV series 'in the evening. During the day I'm on campus, or working.' The participants change schedules often; between semesters, but also between months (examination periods-school year-vacations), weeks and days of the weeks. Regarding periods, Participant 1 expressed that 'during vacations, you watch less TV series<sup>6</sup>', and Participant 5 added that 'in fact during exams, it depends. Sometimes I do reward myself with an episode to take a break when I did a good job studying'. Watching TV shows online also enables users to pick the time of product consumption, as opposed to television.

### ***Applying the typology to fragmentation***

In the case of Belgian university students, this study did not find much *device fragmentation*; the participants only used their laptop computer to watch TV series. Fragmentation starts to operate on the *technique* level. We found that students predominantly 'stream' online, and a minority solely uses 'Torrents' to download all of his TV series; a few of them uses more than one technique to access content. Only two students use 'direct downloads' though it is not their only habit to access content. Half of the students mentioned participating in 'offline sharing' during the interviews, though it rarely develops as a regular habit: 'Sometimes I have my hard drive with me. When I go to a friend's house, I occasionally take his new things' (Part. 5). Most individuals have regular habits and tend to favour one technique, but are they tend to be open to others. If Participant 1 'freshly started to use Torrents two weeks ago' and 'only downloaded before

that', Participant 2 prefers streaming, and only *streams* because: 'when you stream you can really pick your moment, (...) with Torrents you have to wait until it's downloaded.' Looking at the third level (*sources*), the growth in the number of websites, hosting services, and Torrents on the Internet is the most obvious sign of media fragmentation. The number of results presented by picking a TV series and typing 'Game of Thrones Torrent', 'Download Game of Thrones', or 'Game of Thrones Streaming' in Google provides an outstanding demonstration of the phenomenon. Participants cited a wide array of streaming websites: *streaming-series.org* and *onechannel.tv* (Part. 1), *projectfree.tv* (Part. 5), *dpstream.net* (Participants 6, 7, 9, 10, 14), *stream-tv.me* (Part. 13), *thebigbangstreaming.com* (Part. 14), *cacaoweb.org/fr* (Part. 15), *trone-de-fer-streaming.com* (Part. 16).

At the content level, we see a number of individuals consuming different versions of often the same content – such as an episode of *Game of Thrones* – through different sources, technologies and files. The importance of interpersonal relations fosters a shared knowledge about TV series. Belgian students use the Internet to watch content that might be considered as 'mainstream' in other countries, but that is not available -at least not in the desired version or when desired- on French-speaking television. Students stay away from television because 'it imposes the time to watch it, when you might not feel like it (Part. 1)', or because 'on TV everything is in French' (Part. 2), behaviours that researchers call audience autonomy (Napoli, 2011; Webster & Ksiazek 2012). In fact, the times of consumption varied greatly amongst the sample though generally most content was consumed while eating, or before going to bed.

### ***Applying the typology to convergence***

There was some degree of media convergence in the flow of *content* consumed by the students. The fact that many of the consumed series have been aired in the US very recently before the Belgian students consumed them indicates the existence of a convergent environment of global scale in which some individuals live their cultural life. Many of the TV series consumed were mainstream cults, and were explicitly described as quality television by the students as opposed to what they think is available on traditional television. The use of the Internet and illegal services to consume TV series seems to be considered as the only way to access content, a reason used by students to define their practices against network television, the device used by their parents. As stated by participants, another important reason for consumption using illegal services is the price. Added to the price of paying television channels, VOD services or DVDs, the price of a television for those who do not own one is deemed not worthy. The computer on the other hand is seen as a necessity for university students needing it for other educational and social purposes. As Participant 8 stated:

Buying a DVD for something I will only watch once or twice and paying it 50€, it's a little... It hurts my heart. (Part. 8)

However, there appears to be a distinction for students between the price value and the cultural and social value of cultural artefacts and content. The social and cultural value of TV series, being disconnected from the price and commercial value is the principal reason why students download and stream illegal content online, added to the feeling of impunity. This state of value of cultural generate discourses justify said practices such as the fact that American TV series producers and actors already have 'enough' money, that products are too expensive or that they would pay if an price deemed honest was asked. Four of the sixteen participants watched at least one episode of the TV series *Game of Thrones* and reported it in their journal. During the interviews we discovered out that eight other students follow the show though they did not consume an episode during the week of the media diary. The main reason was the airing of the third season on American television for the participants filling their diaries in 2013 and the upcoming of the fourth season for participants filling their diaries in 2014. The online directories analysed provided versions of the content in French or with French subtitles for the two first seasons, and only versions with subtitles for the third season. 'I think that everyone is going to watch it: my friends, my sister, and so on, so I watched it. At the beginning, I told myself that I wouldn't go back to this show because the season two finale was so terrible, but...' (Part. 1). The inability to differentiate subgroups of students based on social characteristics (age, gender or study orientation) through the variables studied (language, time, genre, quantity of consumption, etc.) shows the relevance of categorizing them, even temporarily, as an audience. Although some series were consumed only by female students (*The Vampire Diaries*, *Revenge*) or by male students (*Black Sails*), it appears that many shows (*Game Of Thrones*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *The Big Bang Theory*) rallied both genders. The distinction is even more difficult to do based on the ages or their options of university degree.

These three elements – airing of the series and word-of-mouth among interpersonal relationships, as well as impossibility to find clear subgroups amongst students – argue for *content convergence*: an audience which watches certain common TV series at a given moment in time, instead of taking advantage of the media fragmentation offered by the multiplication of technologies. 'People come to you [and say]: Oh cool the third season is out, I like it' (Part. 2). We see a convergence in the demands in term of content because of the social context. All participants admitted to be influenced in their choices of TV series by peers. The same argument is made for other TV series airing at the time of the research, such as the series *How I Met Your Mother* consumed by 6 and *The Big Bang Theory*, by four participants, or *House of Cards* watched by two participants. Altogether, the sixteen participants consumed over thirty different TV series and more than 124 episodes, ranging from one to eleven episodes of the same TV show in a week. Participant 2 consumed more than ten hours of the series *Game of Thrones*. Interestingly enough, across the entire study few episodes of a TV series in the 'Police Procedural' genre and no reality TV shows were consumed during the media diary period.

The argument made by Webster & Ksiazek that 'audiences are likely to remain concentrated in the digital media marketplace' (2012) holds at the *content* and *device* level,

but the *sources* and *techniques* for the consumption of TV series online are clearly fragmented. The influence of major channels or outlets, while still relevant at the level of content propositions is questionable regarding the sources and techniques available to consume it on the Internet. In our study, we found two different profiles of consumer: those who prefer to watch the series using streaming services (*streamers*) and those who prefer to download them (*downloaders* and *Torrent users*). Their habits were different regarding *sources*: We found that in fact *streamers* frequently develop a repertoire of a couple streaming websites and hosting services, in many cases the same across several users, suggesting a convergence at the *sources* level. Participant 2 states: 'In fact, the three [websites] that I use almost all the time are *dpstream*, *streamize* and *1channel*'. 'I go on Project Free TV<sup>7</sup>, I type in the name of a Series and then there are all the links. I know that it works, that's why I do it' (Part. 6). On the contrary downloaders and Torrent users are more inclined to 'randomly scroll through Google results and pick any website making the download available' (Part. 2). Generally they type in the name of the TV series desired, followed by the number of the season and episode, and finally to the word 'download', or 'Torrent'. 'I go on Google, I type in Torrent "something" and that's it. Before it was the same but I would put "download" instead of "Torrent"' (Part. 2). The options are then numerous in terms of which file to download (one episode or more, one season, etc.), the quality of the file researched, in which language and with which subtitles. For this second group of users, fragmentation is the rule in terms of sources.

The notion of participatory culture as defined by Jenkins (2006) – often seen as an indirect consequence of convergence and of new technologies available – does apply here, though not in the way one could have imagined. Participation was detected in students sharing files on a USB key, or in informal discussions about the shows mainly offline. However, users in this study should be described as consumers or users but not as 'fans' as conceptualized by Jenkins (2006), Barra (2009) or Vellar (2011). In fact none of the respondents participated in any kind of online activities related to the series consumed. Some individuals tended to multitask and browse other websites while consuming cultural content. One participant usually 'stays connected to Facebook's chat' but not to discuss the series he's consuming.

### ***Killing two birds with one stone: fragmented audiences in a convergent environment***

Through this article we have argued that Belgian university students as a group of individuals sharing common characteristics and consuming cultural content through illegal online services can be seen, described, and analysed in terms of an *audience* with particular behaviours. We have shown some of the typical practices: using certain techniques to find TV series, consuming different genres as the ones proposed on television, at very flexible times. This suggests a re-appropriation of television and its contents by a demanding audience interested in a variety of series' genres that they (themselves) consider as quality

television and that we can consider as mainstream cults (Hills, 2002, 2010). The results show that university students do not consume (American) reality TV series online, and few are interested in series in the police procedural genre, which contrasts with what is accessible on television. The consumption of international (and mainly American) cultural content indicates content convergence at a global level. The typology established for the analysis of media consumption habits (e.g., the device, the technique, the source, and the content) helps in differentiating current behaviours and uses and provides a useful framework to analyse the complex relationship between users and the Internet, and between media and audiences' fragmentation and convergence in this era that combines multiplicity and centralization (Couldry, 2009). The concepts of fragmentation and convergence are useful when combined to describe the diverse directions of trends at the four different levels, and lead us to describe Belgian university students consuming cultural content online as a *fragmented audience in a convergent environment*. This confirms Adoni and Nossek's argument, which stated that 'technological developments will eventually lead to a convergence of these media and thence, to the partial displacement of television as a distinct medium of communication' (2001: 23).

Respondents felt that Belgian television does not offer what they are looking for, and that is the reason why they turn to the Internet as their technology of choice for TV series consumption. They choose the content they want to consume using the *technique* they feel the most comfortable with and through various *sources*. Users can equally pick the genres of series they like and consume them the way they want, even though that they are very much influenced by peers. According to the typology we developed, one might argue that at first sight there is fragmentation of the audiences' consumption options, through a growing number of *sources* and *techniques*. We established two different profiles of consumer: those consuming cultural content using streaming services (*streamers*) and those who prefer to download them (*downloaders* and *Torrent users*). However, we argue that, to some extent, there is a phenomenon of media convergence at the level of content and that there definitely is media convergence at the level of device: a laptop is used by all our respondents to consume TV series. Despite the increasing diversity of Internet-enabled devices (tablets, smartphones), the socio-economic context of university students in Belgium seems to privilege the laptop as the device of choice. Paradoxically, the reasons for audience convergence towards the Internet might be that this technology is inherently fragmented, because it is flexible and adaptable to multiple needs and uses. Janet Abbate argues that the Internet has survived to this day because of its 'flexibility and diversity in technical design as well as in organizational culture' (Abbate, 1996: 6). The decision to 'keep protocols open to all the users', and the collaborations to develop tools enabled the Internet to 'grow following the needs of its changing users' (Domingo, 2006).

Our respondents portray a much larger and less fanatic set of media use habits than those described by research on fandoms or fan cultures. This audience does fit in the framework of participatory culture, though it does not resonate with and the concept of fandom (Jenkins, 2006), since such individuals do not feel the need to share on social

networking sites about those TV series, to create content, to interact with others online users, etc. They rather use face-to-face encounters to discuss their cultural consumption. Some individuals using peer-to-peer technology can share content from time to time. As generally claimed by the participants, regular French-speaking Belgian cable television and the general media landscape in French-speaking Belgium does not offer the opportunities expected in terms of content, time, and autonomy sought for. Newman describes the unavailability of some legitimate online content to other English speaking countries than the United States (the UK, Australia and Canada) as the motivation for users to find it illegally online (Newman, 2011). The same conclusion was drawn for Belgium, and developments in the areas of IPTV, VOD and other legitimate online uses may change the situation. Television is indeed freer than ever when shared as files or other online means (e.g. streaming or direct download). 'New modes of distribution pose a challenge to our conception of television as a technology, medium, and set of practices' (Newman, 2011), and this ubiquity may consolidate the referential position of the bigger content producers in a context that still leaves room for new producers may reach niche *fragmented* audiences in this *convergent environment*.

The complexity of the behaviours of audiences of cultural content online demands deeper qualitative and quantitative research on the matter. A wider comparative study across multiple types of audiences could provide more insights about the behaviours and trends in online consumption of legal and illegal content. Further development of other concepts that could be applied to online audiences such as audience autonomy (Napoli, 2011), polarization (Webster, 2005) or participatory culture (Punathambekar, 2010; Jenkins, 2006) will also help feeding the scientific debate on audiences behaviours online.

### **Biographical notes:**

**Victor Wiard** is a PhD candidate at Université Libre de Bruxelles and researcher at Innoviris. His work focuses on online audiences of fictional and non-fictional content with a particular attention regarding new audiences and their evolving habits, as well as content production and circulation. Contact: vwiard@ulb.ac.be. +32/ (0)2.650.31.10 Department of Information and Communication Sciences, Université Libre de Bruxelles.

**David Domingo** is Chair of Journalism at the Department of Information and Communication Sciences at Université Libre de Bruxelles (Brussels). His research focuses on innovation processes in online communication. Contact: David.domingo@ulb.ac.be. +32/ (0)2.650.48.48 Department of Information and Communication Sciences, Université Libre de Bruxelles.

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**Annex 1: Page of a diary filled by hand (Participant 1, days 1 to 3).**

Ce que j'ai regardé	Episode(s) et saison(s)	En utilisant quoi? (préciser l'ordinateur, le(s) site(s), le(s) lecteur(s), et logiciel(s) éventuels)	Comment? (achat, location, streaming, téléchargement, Torrent,...)	Pendant combien de temps?	Avec qui?	Où? Et Quand? (spécifier le jour et l'heure).	Commentaire éventuel
HOUSE OF CARDS	S01 EP03	ORDINATEUR DPSTREAM.NET ↓ PUREVID.COM	STREAMING	20 MIN	SEUL	SALON LUNDI 25/03/2013 13H00	DÉJÀ VU MAIS EN REPASSANT
HOUSE OF CARDS	S01 EP11	ORDINATEUR DPSTREAM.NET ↓ PUREVID.COM	STREAMING	40 MIN	SEUL	SALLE À MANGER MARDI 26/03/2013 12H30	EN MANGEANT
//	S01 EP12 13	//	//	36 MIN	//	CHAMBRE 13H15	MIS EN PAUSE
//	//	//	//	20	//	CHAMBRE 07:59	REPRISE DE L'ÉPISODE FINAL DE LA SAISON DE 06 MIDI
CALIFORNICATION	S06 EP10	//	//	26 MIN	//	CHAMBRE MERCREDI 27/03/2013	

**Annex 2: Distribution of evening TV content for RTL-TVI, TF1, and La Une, from the 05/06/2013 to 05/12/2013.**

	RTL-TVI	TF1	La Une
<b>Monday 06/05</b>	game show reality show (cooking show)	'Vive la colo!' 20:50 - 22:40 (FR, TV series) 'Law and Order' 22:40 - 01:05 (USA, P-P)	film film
<b>Tuesday 07/05</b>	film film	film 'CSI' 22:50 - 02:05 (USA, P-P)	reality show (singing) documentary

<i>Wednesday 08/05</i>	<b>'Hawaii 5-0'</b> 20:20 - 22:45 (USA, P-P) <b>'Scandal'</b> 22:45 - 23:35 (USA, Political drama)	<b>'Grey's Anatomy'</b> 20:50 - 22:25 (USA, medical drama) <b>'Revenge'</b> 22:25 - 00:00 (USA, drama) <b>'breakout kings'</b> 00:00 - 01:40 (USA, P-P)	news magazine documentary
<i>Thursday 09/05</i>	film film	<b>'Jo'</b> 20:50 - 22:40 (UK-FR, P-P) <b>'CSI: Miami'</b> 22:40 - 01:05 (USA, P-P)	<b>'Jo'</b> 20:20 - 22:15 (UK-FR, P-P) <b>'Harry's Law'</b> 2h:15- 23:05 (USA, legal drama)
<i>Friday 10/05</i>	<b>'Criminal Minds'</b> 20:25 - 22:00 (USA, P-P) <b>'Law and Order'</b> 22:00 - 22:50 (USA, P-P) <b>'Raising the Bar'</b> 22:50 - 23:45 (USA, legal drama)	<b>'CSI: Miami'</b> 20:50 - 23:20 (USA, P-P) talk show	film magazine
<i>Saturday 11/05</i>	film television film	reality show (singing) <b>'CSI'</b> 00:05 - 02:30 (USA, P-P)	film sport magazine
<i>Sunday 12/05</i>	<b>'Revenge'</b> 20h20 - 22h50 (USA, drama) <b>'Three Rivers'</b> 22:50, 23:40 (USA, medical drama)	film <b>'CSI: Manhattan'</b> 22:35 01:05 (USA, P-P)	magazine documentary

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> As Robson defines it: 'A diary, considered as a research tool, is a kind of self-administered questionnaire. As such, it can range from being totally unstructured to a set of responses to specific questions' (Robson, 1993: p. 254). Diaries have been used traditionally in various research traditions, from Human-computer interaction to Feminist research (Bolger et al., 2003; Czerwinski et al., 2004; Palen & Salzman, 2002). The use of media diaries to record the consumption of media content has been applied as well in a variety of research fields (Gunter, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Spread sheets available upon request to the authors.

<sup>3</sup> As for 2014, there are ten national publicly owned television channels: five Dutch-speaking channels, four French-speaking channels, and one German-speaking channel. This is complemented by fifty-five nationally broadcasted private channels, and local television channels, some accessible via cable TV, other via subscription. In 2012, Belgian television channels represented 58,5% of the French-speaking market share, 41,5% going to television channels from France, mainly TF1, France2 and France3. Together, the three most watched TV channels -RTL-TVI (private, 20,1%), TF1 (private from France, 17,0%), and La Une (public, 14,6%)- accounted for a market share of 51,7% in French speaking-Belgium. For more Data, see the market share study of the C.I.M - Centre d'information sur les medias -, (2012).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note the differences between such services. 'Streaming websites' offer content or a link to content hosted on a third party website. Torrent files contain metadata, which allow users

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to download a file from the computer of other users using dedicated software. 'Downloading sites' provide links to download content directly from the Web browser.

<sup>5</sup> Belgian (and the European Union) legislation considers the services providers illegal, as well as P2P file sharing. The law is not clear regarding the consumption of content using streaming. For the Belgian case, see the 'Loi relative au droit d'auteur et aux droits voisins', (30 June 1994), the 'loi sur certains aspects juridiques des services de la société de l'information' (11 March 2003), and the 'loi relative à la répression de la contrefaçon et de la piraterie de droits de propriété intellectuelle' (15 May 2007).

<sup>6</sup> My translation. All the following quotes from participants of the study are translated by the author.

<sup>7</sup> Project – Free TV (current URL: <http://www.free-tv-video-online.me>) is a streaming website.