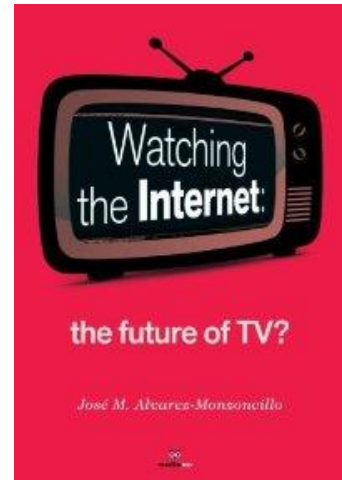


Jose M. Alvarez-Monzoncillo, **Watching the Internet: The Future of TV?** Formalpress, 2011, 242 pp., \$21.51 (paperback).

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The expectation that television would be distributed predominantly over the Internet rather than through the air has been mooted along with the rise of the Internet itself, and now the mobile Internet. Broadband infrastructures being rolled out around the world are premised on this assumption. The business reality of television is that Internet TV has emerged from the early 2000s as a competing delivery infrastructure to HD terrestrial, satellite, cable and mobile TV systems. Delivery systems include Internet protocol (IPTV) and video-on-demand (VoD) variants over managed network infrastructures. Available offerings depend on geographical location, but the better-known streaming TV and film brands include Netflix, Hulu, Mubi, IndieFlix, Youku, Crackle, Fandor, and SnagFilms. Some brands, such as Current TV and Now TV, more clearly model traditional television scheduling practices; there are also hybrid players like Miro. Others, like the much-hyped Joost, now appear to be in a state of suspension, or “no signal,” only to be incessantly replaced by new startup platforms, such as Warner Archive Instant and Redbox Instant. There are a wide variety of subscription and payment mechanisms and strategies, in addition to content search tools. Many of the major broadcasters offer BBC iPlayer-style access mechanisms.



Continuing widespread disintermediation of the value chain for traditional broadcast television (production-distribution-consumption) by the Internet has been a matter of when, not if, and this transition forms the basis of Jose M. Alvarez-Monzoncillo’s book, **Watching the Internet: the future of TV?** These changing economic and cultural logics of how television is distributed and consumed over the Internet are explored in an interesting blend that is part industry diagnostics (and prognostics) and part theoretical observation. The writing style itself is a stimulating mix of report empirics and analysis of media communications and cultural studies.

The affordances of the Internet were always going to disrupt, indeed “creatively destroy” in a Schumpeterian sense, existing patterns of television access for audiences, related business models, and the regulation of Internet television. Alvarez-Monzoncillo argues that this dismantling of traditional modes of distribution has “triggered profoundly utopian visions of the future of the television medium.” (p. 10) Inherent in this transformation are new concepts of audiovisual entertainment in the “tag era” where users “want to create, search, communicate, share, and distribute information and data” (p. 10). In such folksonomy, Alvarez-Monzoncillo quite rightly asks “is the tag the medium?”(p. 166). However, he notes

the inevitable bias of the formulation, quoting G. H. Mead: "the self emerges from the social process" (p. 167).

As a process that has been underway for more than a decade, "television" in its streaming IPTV-VoD forms and institutional categories has been emergent in several guises: on portals that aggregate audiovisual content (both legally and illegally), user-generated content sites (YouTube, Vimeo), copyright infringing sites (e.g., in China and elsewhere), traditional media organization websites, video blogs and social networking sites, podcasts, and mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. In relation to this diversity Alvarez-Monzoncillo makes the useful observation that the actual formats of much of this content (series, films, documentaries, and news programming) remains the same as when it was first distributed through more traditional channels. The book adopts a "phases of television" evolutionary approach that sees television evolving from the public and commercial analogue in the 20th century to the multichannel through to the personal phase of the 2000s and now to the period of long-tail content distribution and "egocasting" (p. 53).

Alvarez-Monzoncillo's predictions about the future of television are generally well informed in my opinion, and he eschews more conventional dystopian/utopian binaries. That said, some of his arguments skate close to a similar polarization. There is a nice collection of terms that intentionally invoke such binaries in "Pyramids versus Ladders" (Chapter 10), where the power and wisdom of collectivities, crowds, participation, and sharing are seen to have both light and dark sides. For example, much earlier in the book, he notes that on current trends as indicated in the net neutrality debate, two kinds of television may emerge. One "that is very cheap, slow and riddled with adverts," and the other a "fast network with high quality content" (p. 18). The former will be open without payments while the latter will see subscription-based access. Furthermore, the free network will be based on P2P distribution while the pay-for-use network will have premium-level content that is gathered and stored on personal video recorders (PVRs).

Other researchers have written about the evolution of the sociocultural, technological, and economic forms of Internet TV that Alvarez-Monzoncillo explores in *Watching the Internet*. For instance, Burgess and Green's book *YouTube* (Polity, 2009) is an important account of the wider impact Google's offspring have on media industries. The authors discuss how YouTube is enmeshed within the emerging media industries; and how it is being used by audiences and amateur producers to modify our ideas of cultural "production" and "consumption." Audiences who want to create their own "remix" content ("broadcast yourself" as the slogan goes) in several genres (films, reviews, guides, apps) are referred to by Alvarez-Monzoncillo as a continuation of Negroponte's 1980s idea of the "return of the Sunday painter" (p. 11). Yet individuals can now make small fortunes from their own "channels" on YouTube. Page views now are a serious advertising currency, and payments by Google's AdSense division mean that people are conjuring ways to make their content go viral. To take one example: a channel called "Greg's Kitchen" out of Brisbane, Australia, created a video called "How to separate an egg white from a yolk." It is evidence of how this kind of video television model attracts vast (mass) audiences: in this case, in the order of 1.1 million page views. This generates significant advertising revenue. But monetization of the Internet is only one among many of the subthemes examined in *Watching the Internet*, so those interested only in business models and economics may be disappointed. Chapter 4, "Financing the Internet and Television," may well satisfy this group of readers, however, and there is some interesting discussion of Internet

advertising as the fastest-growing online sector (pp. 89–90). Chapter 8 looks at low cost, premium, and freemium models. The discussion of advertising revenue and interactivity in Chapter 9 usefully makes reference to new mechanisms such as cost-per-thousand (CPM), cost-per-click (CPC), cost-per-action or acquisition (CPA), and cost-per-influence (CPI) (p. 147).

I've written about the various forms and business models of IPTV in my book *Media Convergence* (McGraw Hill/Open University Press, 2010). Like Alvarez-Monzoncillo, my argument was that the political economy of morphing media industries, together with changing habits and audience tastes, needs to be high up the list of determinative factors when we analyze the kinds of convergent TV businesses that emerge. So I agree with him when he says, "it is a war between the multimedia convergence players" (p. 195).

Turner and Tay (Routledge, 2009) in their book *Television Studies After TV: Understanding TV in the Post-broadcast Era* have also examined these trends in the changing television industry. The strength of the contributions in their edited collection is an assumption of unevenness and divergent global practices, particularly outside the usual Anglophone nations that comparisons are often based on. It surveyed a range of convergent media now implicated in understanding how television is evolving.

Watching the Internet makes some interesting contributions to these debates and usefully historicizes these developments too. However, at points in the book, I found myself looking for a more consistent and integrated theorization of the actual new modes of interacting with these popular Internet television brands, and how they vary in the way they engage with consumers. Consumption, after all, is the broader context in which these branded Internet TV offerings are operating. Alvarez-Monzoncillo's discussion is concerned with television as a "platform of consumption" in several ways, but primarily as it is becoming increasingly individualized and personalized in both private and public contexts. Many of his arguments start around technological points, but these are then explicated in social and cultural terms, debunking myths along the way.

For an alternative approach to a theorizing consumption, Pertierra and Turner's recent book *Locating Television: Zones of Consumption* (Routledge, 2013) analyses traditional television as located within particular "zones of consumption" that shape the way that people are sutured into national, local, urban, rural, or geolinguistic zones. The authors persuasively make the case that television consumption is implicated in the construction of modernities. Alvarez-Monzoncillo also makes this argument, often in a fairly pessimistic way. For example, he argues, "Mass television (broadcasting) has morphed into a segmented version (narrowcasting), as audiences are broken down into lifestyle groups and become uninterested in the rest of society" (p. 198). This reminds me that the evolution of television is emblematic of that preeminent category of media studies being part of the "consciousness industry," as Enzenberger and Roloff argued in their influential book *The Consciousness Industry* (Seabury, 1974). Pertierra and Turner's book aims for an understanding of the sociocultural function of television in a number of national locations: the comparative dimension of their research (including an extensive focus on a Mexican case study) has directly informed the development of the notion of "zones of consumption," as an alternative way of conceptualizing how media are located.

There are many excellent cutting-edge issues discussed in *Watching the Internet*, including so-called "cloud television" accessed via various mobile devices, and the implications of these practices for streaming and storage costs. Important risks like "googlepoly," concentration of ownership, digital divides, and other "diseases" are highlighted. And in that context, the growing importance of regulation is recognized. The author's approach is levelheaded, and he is skeptical about overhyped promises and groupthink Internet progress myths. He brings critical awareness to his account of Internet television, and in the end displays a social realist view of change that involves audience taste cultures, society, the state, economics, and technology.

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