

The Impact of Information Technology on Movie Watching Culture

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It's hard to imagine a world without the ability to drive down the street to multiplex theater to watch the latest block buster film, but this may be where society is headed with technology becoming so advanced that watching movies at home are of the same – if not better – quality than the ones in theaters. Newer technology and the shifting culture of how people watch movies could be reason for the downfall of the multiplex theater with movies being released on streaming services the same day as the release in theaters. The way production companies have profited off movie releases have had to change from the standard: box office profits, at-home DVD releases, then rentals; to releasing movies on streaming services either the same day at the theater release or a few weeks later. Knowing this new option is available, it would not be hard to assume that most individuals would rather save their money by streaming the movie in the comfort of their home than going into a theater, especially after the recent pandemic, COVID-19, which made people more nervous to be close to other people for an extended period of time. This research paper will take a look back at the history of movie, how culture has shifted the way we engage with the theater, how individuals in our modern society is watching movies, and the what the future of movies will look like because of technological advances and constant cultural shifts in the world.

History

In today's world, we have the ability to view movies from any number of services and facilities because of how far technology has advanced and the way movie watching culture has shifted. When asked if you want to watch a new movie that just came out, you no longer automatically assume that it is only viewable in theaters. Your first response may be to ask, "What streaming service is it on?", which is completely understandable based on how common it is for production companies to release their movies on streaming service the same day as their theatrical release. Some movies are even being created by the streaming services themselves, such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and HBO Max, which for some are considered better quality than current block buster releases.

Before this major shift in technology and culture, there were four main phases that movie technology went through, those being: the evolution of the opera house into the movie house, the shift from the theater to the picture palace, the development of the drive-in, and finally the birth of the multiplex theater (Corbett, 2001). Prior to the movie house, opera houses were a place for upper class citizens to distinguish themselves from those of the lower class. It was an outing that only they could do because they had the "class" and funds to do them. However, when this technological shift commenced, leading to what was known as the movie house, a cultural shift happened in parallel in regard to the way people interacted with the theater and where many protestants started believing that the sort of facility was only for the "uneducated and ill-mannered mixed with the great unwashed while indulging in a form of entertainment bereft of any redeeming value," (Corbett, 2001). The theater began as a clear separation between classes that flip-flopped the second it became the movie house, because it was no longer necessary to dress up to go see a show, which was an unnecessary expense for those barely getting by. This is obviously no longer the case as technology continued its advancements, so did the culture around the theater into what we view the structure and ambience as today, "a sturdy combination of architecture, amplified sounds, controlled light, conditioned air, and that strange yellow stuff on the popcorn," (Wasson, 2016). It is now culturally a place for a nice family weekend outing, to

see the newest film with your close friends, to take someone out on a first date, or to go solo when no one else is available to join.

Today's Relevancy

As movie watching culture has continued to evolve into what it is today – an at-home leisure activity – with advanced technology giving individuals the ability to watch movies of the same quality as in theaters, it begs the question of if this cultural shift is changing the quality of movie production. Technological advancements have lowered the cost of production since the rise of films in the 1980s. Waldfogel conducted research on this phenomenon which he later coined the “digital renaissance”, noting how many films were being created yearly since the 1980s. He found that, “the number of new motion pictures produced in the United States rose from about 500 features in 1990 to 1,200 in 2000, and by 2010 had risen to nearly 3,000,” (Waldfogel, 2017). The number of new movies made yearly have nearly doubled since 2010 with approximately 6,000 movies being produced in 2020. It’s hard to imagine that every film that has been created in the past ten years have been of high quality and original ideas. A study done by Bohnenkamp (2015), found that between the year 1999 and 2011 there were over 200 movie remakes and – for the most part – they did not increase revenues, only removed financial risk a new movie may have caused for the production company. With remakes becoming even more prevalent in recent years and knowing that they will most likely not cause a company to lose money, it is encouraging production companies to continue to release low quality movies with zero original content.

In recent years, movie production companies also have to worry about technology programs pirating their movies which could cause them to lose a group chunk of their profits and all their hard work. While the internet has caused problems for them in this way, it also has given them the opportunity to distribute movies through a new avenue such as: online rentals and streaming services. However, movies that are produced through streaming services are more difficult to promote and with a lack of public awareness of their new product release, it could lead to a less than satisfactory opening night. Movie production companies know that this could cause major losses for their company, so in order to balance this financial risk they will choose to create even more movies that may or may not be of the same quality. The same researcher, Waldfogel, speaks on this in a different article stating that “the unpredictability of movies’ appeal raises the possibility that a growth in the number of movies brought to market might substantially increase the surplus generated by movies,” (Waldfogel, 2016). Since creating movies from start to finish is not as cost demanding as it was in the 1980s, movie companies are able to give the green light on more and more projects, knowing that many of them will not appeal to a large audience but will still generate them profits because there is a larger quantity of films for the audience to look pick from. This motivates companies to believe in quantity over quality, because one quality movie won’t bring them the same profit than five less than but still watchable movies. Streaming services such as Netflix rely on “clicks” and overall watch time in order to earn money, so having more opportunities or products for consumers to click on and watch about the first twenty minutes of the show will bring in the profits they desire.

As stated prior, movies being distributed through streaming services are not being promoted at the same level as block buster movies which means much of the viewership they are expecting to bring in already have access to their services and use it frequently enough to be present when the movie premieres. Many movies rely heavily on marketing and promoting as seen through Moon

et. al research, “high advertising spending on movies supported by high ratings maximizes the movie’s revenues,” (Moon, 2010). Not setting aside an adequate amount of funds for promotion can lead to a major loss in revenue from a lack of viewership. Many production companies still will not use streaming services as their way to distribute movies, only allowing their products to be released through the cinema. This can be due to the fact that the companies, “upheld the notion that cinema is made for artistic rather than simply commercial or entertainment purposes,” (Herbert, 2011). When they choose to release films through streaming services they are already subconsciously believing that these movies are of lower quality than the ones they choose to release in theaters.

Even though these films being released are considered lower quality, society has altered the way they watch movies to the point where this factor is not an issue to them. While it is enjoyable to get ready and go to see a movie at the theater, it is more realistic and affordable to watch it in the comfort of one’s own home. So, with this in mind, how will the future of movies look like moving forward?

Future of movies

The way technology has continued to evolve into better quality over time has majorly effected movie watching culture. We have seen how home theaters have advanced into one’s with parallel quality to a multiplex theater. Society has created a culture of leisurely watching the new movie release in their living room due to production companies and streaming services providing new ways to watch their films without needing to leave their home. Although this is beneficial for the consumer and the producer, it will have a major effect on the quality of movies in the future and – to some – has already started.

Based on the research done by past scholars, the rate of which movies will be produced on a yearly basis will continue to increase to a substantial number. It had already doubled from 3,000 to 6,000 films in a ten-year period between 2010 and 2022, so it will not come as shock to see that number double again as technology advances. A high quantity of films will mean fewer original ideas, meaning movie remakes will increase in order for companies to make a quick profit on a movie that they know has already done well and will do well again. It is also safe to assume that more and more of what would have been considered “block buster” films will start to be released on streaming services to match the current and future wave of movie watching culture. This will in turn cause production companies to produce a higher number of films on these streaming services versus what they would have produced for a theatrical release in order to combat monetary losses.

In short, there will be a substantial increase in movies, many of which will be of lower quality or unoriginal. These films will be released via streaming services because society has created a new culture of watching movies at home instead of in a group at the theater. As a result, we will see a large number of theaters begin to shut down permanently, leading our society into a new phase of movies.

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