‘Make any room your TV room’: digital delivery and media mobility

CHUCK TRYON

In March 2011, Time Warner Cable (TWC) launched an iPad application that would allow its subscribers to stream some of its television content to their iPad, a total of approximately thirty cable channels. Like other digital delivery platforms, the app was announced as a transformative way of watching television and films. The advertisement promoting the launch, ‘Make any room your TV room’, consists of a series of quick cuts between scenes of people watching their tablets, often holding them at arm’s length, in various locations throughout a range of middle-class, presumably suburban houses: a businessman holds it in front of his entertainment centre; another man watches baseball on an iPad propped on his exercise machine; a third follows a cooking show as he prepares a meal in the kitchen; an African American woman watches in a clothes closet, presumably while doing housework; another woman watches with the device propped on her bath, her polished toenails appearing just above the water’s surface. In each case the tablet is placed in the centre of the frame, creating a graphic match that suggests the continued presence of the screen within or near the family home, quite literally placing the iPad at the centre of the media world. At the same time, the advertisement presents most of the scenes as point-of-view shots, promoting the perspective that platform mobility encourages personalized viewing, and all of the subjects appear to be alone; it suggests that the individualized viewer is in control, able to choose when, where and what he or she watches.

The most suggestive shot is of a young boy, the only person fully visible onscreen. He has propped up his tablet against a wall and gathered
a number of toy cars in front of the device, recreating in miniature the staging of a drive-in theatre, while a children’s cartoon plays onscreen, evoking nostalgia for older forms of film watching. Although each of these figures appears onscreen for only a second or two, they are instructive in demonstrating how TWC seeks to position itself within the culture of what I call ‘platform mobility’. Unlike the implied obtrusiveness of television sets that required families to ‘make room’, the iPad transforms any space in the house into a site for consuming entertainment. Furthermore, although television watching was once seen as a communal activity that could bring parents and children together, the viewers in the TWC advertisement all watch individually, a mode that seems visually linked to a sense of personal escape, exemplified by the woman who watches while relaxing in the bath. In each case, the advertisement seems to promote the app’s mobility as offering the user liberation from the mundane aspects of everyday life. Although this advertisement may offer only a fleeting glimpse of viewing practices in the era of digital delivery, it is part of a larger discourse promoting a culture of media mobility. As a result, attempts to depict new formats such as the Time Warner iPad app offer a useful entry point for thinking about how the industrial discourse associated with digital delivery operates to shape the consumption practices of film and television audiences.

This essay seeks to map the ongoing changes in reception and distribution cultures as digital delivery – through streaming video, video on demand, electronic sell-through or mobile phone apps – becomes an increasingly common means through which audiences engage with films and television shows. Although recent scholarship has responded to the ways in which technical developments such as the DVD came to produce new models of engaged spectatorship for both film and television audiences, the DVD itself now seems to be facing its own journey into obsolescence, with uncertain implications for the future practices of film and television consumption. However, while DVDs offered viewers the ability to engage more deeply with their favourite films and television shows, much of the promotional discourses identified with digital delivery has tended to focus on issues of mobility, flexibility and convenience. Advertising and other promotional discourses have tended to link digital delivery to the hectic schedules of ‘on-the-go’ workers and families, giving them the ability to watch wherever and whenever they would like, and providing them with individualized screening experiences that cater to personal tastes and desires. These advertisements promote products and services ranging from mobile phones and film apps to cable and satellite TV subscriptions, illustrating the degree to which platform mobility informs a wide range of domestic and personal screen practices. As a result, the discourses of platform mobility help to define a new mode of spectatorship, one that is associated with active and engaged, but often solitary, viewing. Although audiences continue to watch films in theatres, even attending opening night screenings in order to experience being part

of an even larger crowd, media mobility promotes a more fragmented, individualized notion of spectatorship.

To make sense of these discourses it is important to distinguish between different kinds of media mobility. First, platform mobility, as I define it, refers to the idea that films and television shows can move seamlessly from one device to another with minimal interruption. A viewer might start a film on her living-room television set and continue it later on her iPad or mobile phone. In turn, many of these devices themselves offer varying degrees of mobility. An iPad or laptop might theoretically be used anywhere there is an internet connection and a power source, allowing audiences to carry their film collections with them. Thus, in addition to content moving seamlessly between platforms, the platforms themselves are mobile, allowing people to use them wherever they wish. Of course, effective connectivity is far from guaranteed, and although such services as Netflix and LoveFilm may promise unlimited access, viewers are often constrained by geo-blocking, data caps, streaming rights, and other institutional and economic factors that limit how freely content may circulate. Furthermore, digital delivery not only opens up forms of spatial mobility, allowing us to watch films wherever we happen to be, but also allows for the possibility of temporal mobility, expanding the time-shifting potential of television technologies such as the VCR and the DVR. This time-shifting potential has contributed to a further casualization of the practice of film and television watching, making it possible for viewers to watch according to their own schedule rather than in the discrete timeframes suggested by theatres and broadcasters. Charles Acland refers to this as a ‘rising informality’, a claim echoed by Francesco Cassetti, who writes that multitasking spectators treat films as ‘something to pick up now and put down later’. At the same time, platform mobility also increases the opportunity for repeat viewings, given that users’ access to collections – whether through network websites, Netflix catalogues, or their own personal archives stored on a hard drive or in the cloud – are now easily available to be watched.

I am interested in looking at how these promises of personal choice and media mobility shape media consumption practices. Although video-on-demand (VOD) and other services seem to offer further control over the viewing experience, allowing audiences to escape the demands of driving to a nearby multiplex and watching a film according to the theatre’s preordained schedule, these activities are also caught up in assumptions about the status of films as cultural artefacts, potentially reinforcing the idea of films as a form of fleeting entertainment rather than something that is meant to be collected or purchased for rewatching. Thus, as the film and television industries are entering an era of platform mobility, one that leads to changed perceptions of film and television as media, they are also changing – and, in some distinct ways, conflating – the social and cultural norms associated with each medium. Platform mobility involves not simply the screens and devices through which we access this content but also the ability to provide convenient and seamless access to that content.

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even as users switch between multiple devices. However, although the concept of platform mobility provides the appearance that video content has been rendered intangible, it is crucial to recognize that these forms of mobility have material consequences too. Rather than a single black box, we instead encounter the proliferation of multiple platforms and digital delivery systems, all of which are regularly supplanted by new devices by dint of planned obsolescence, resulting in what Acland calls ‘the outrageous environmental impact of the metals and toxins that constitute our screen world’.  

These platforms also lead us to renegotiate the physical space of our lived environment, upsetting the primacy of the central television set in the family room. In fact the introduction of platform mobility complicates traditional concepts of medium specificity, creating a situation in which many of the technological and physical properties associated with film and television as media may no longer be relevant, forcing us to rethink our understanding of media. As Jonathan Sterne points out, people who watch specific programmes using mobile devices can ‘spend many hours of their lives watching television shows and yet not think of themselves as watching television’. To some extent, this form of denial is enabled by the fact that many viewers consume these shows on laptops, through Netflix, Hulu or YouTube, on tablet computers, anywhere other than a television set, taking what was once regarded as a medium consumed passively and turning it into something watched purposefully. A similar shift affects the domestic consumption of films, with many viewers using their Netflix menu as a kind of database of channels, flipping idly, starting a film and then discarding it quickly if it fails to hold their attention. Finally, as I will argue, these new forms of mobile spectatorship are often, though not exclusively, identified with individualized forms of media consumption, whether or not the consumption takes place on a personal mobile device. Thus, rather than the collective filmgoing experiences associated with film theatres, or even the domestic image of a family gathered around a shared television set, platform mobility engages with a seemingly empowered individual viewer who has access to a wide range of on-demand content at the click of a remote or mouse.

These mobile technologies, then, have the potential to disrupt traditional viewing habits and protocols, and in order for them to fit neatly into the domestic media environment, audiences must be given representations of how new technologies can be incorporated into daily life. Advertisers have therefore created idealized images of how consumers might take advantage of the potentials of platform mobility. These advertisements, much like ‘Make any room a TV room’, typically depict families or individuals in middle-class, suburban homes making use of mobile technologies because of their greater convenience or in order to resolve family conflicts. There is a long history to the depiction of conflicts arising from the introduction of new media technologies into the home. In her seminal analysis of the promotion of television as a
household object, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, Lynn Spigel points out that

the media … published pictorial representations of domestic life that showed people how television might – or might not – fit into the dynamics of their domestic lives. Most significantly … the media discourses were organized around ideas of family harmony and discord.\(^7\)

As Spigel goes on to argue, television in the 1950s was depicted as producing family harmony, bringing parents and children together so that they could share in a viewing experience at home during a postwar era in which family unity received special emphasis. Spigel explores the ways in which advertising discourse promoted the idea that television consumption could help to produce more traditional gender roles by shaping family interactions – practices that persist in contemporary depictions of platform mobility.\(^8\) In addition, she considers how these debates about television consumption and domestic power took on specifically spatial configurations, as a number of women’s magazines sought to determine how television sets would fit into suburban homes, a problem that mobile devices seem to resolve by making any space a potential site for viewing.

However, as Spigel describes elsewhere, the relationship between television and family evolved with the introduction of portable television sets in the 1960s and the roughly simultaneous shift from the Eisenhower era’s static conformity to the Kennedy era’s emphasis on adventure and exploration, a shift that would have profound implications not only for the depiction of gendered viewing practices but for the perceived dynamics of the empowered media subject, turning a passive viewer into an active, mobile one.\(^9\) Amanda Lotz points out, however, that contemporary (that is, post 9/11) depictions of mobile television in the USA are often linked to forms of ‘technological tethering as a part of the cocooning impulse’.\(^10\) This cocooning impulse explains how platform mobility came to be promoted in the USA in terms of its ability to unite families, even while individual family members may watch personalized screens.

These dynamics of platform mobility were addressed in ‘Shining star’, a Verizon television advertisement promoting their new line of Samsung smartphones. It opens with a shot of a father checking sports scores on his phone as he places a star on top of the family Christmas tree, while a remix of Earth Wind and Fire’s ‘Shining Star’ and ‘Santa Claus is Coming to Town’ plays. The camera then pans down to show his wife carrying a box of decorations, while the couple’s daughters watch a children’s holiday cartoon on a tablet computer. Finally the camera zooms forward to show their son playing video games on a console. The different family members are shown in the course of a single take, uniting them physically even as they engage in separate media activities. Thus, rather than the possible discomfort of seeing family members distracted by their mobile devices, platform mobility, reinforced by some nifty camerawork, is shown to


\(^8\) Ibid., p. 37. Spigel notes that the term ‘togetherness’ was coined by McCall’s magazine in 1954, reflecting the emphasis on the nuclear family.


bring the family together, allowing them all to be in the same room without the worry of conflict over a centralized television set.

The advertisements that place emphasis on family dynamics stand in contrast to some forms of promotion in other national contexts. They might be usefully compared to British Telecom’s ‘Flat Six’ series, shown in the UK, which depicts three flatmates attempting to negotiate the demands of college life while juggling each other’s technology needs. The advertisements present an ongoing serialized narrative depicting the students using British Telecom’s high-speed internet service to video chat, play games and watch films. Thus, rather than family harmony, the ‘Flat Six’ advertisements place emphasis on hip, urban youth culture, identifying media mobility with those who may be more likely to become early adopters of the new technologies.

While some recent advertisements have sought to depict cable television and mobile video technologies as bringing the family back together for shared media experiences, more often than not advertisers have shown members of a family engrossed in individual screens, even if they are watching those screens in the same physical location. The images of family togetherness that persist in these advertisements raise challenging questions as to what counts as family harmony in the age of mobile consumption. The advertisements reflect a changed understanding of the locations and practices associated with viewing. Instead of the primetime viewing audience watching at home, the time in which the mobile viewer can watch is transformed to include the subway ride, the exercise regime, the office coffee break or the afternoon housework.

These images of an empowered, active viewer are consistent not only with the promotional discourse about digital delivery but also with the depictions of digital media users in both critical theory and cinematic narratives. Kristen Daly, for example, argues that recent Hollywood filmmaking should be characterized as a ‘cinema of the user’, which she depicts, drawing on the terminology of Gilles Deleuze, as a third regime of cinematic storytelling after the movement-image and time-image. Because these films address (and sometimes depict) an active participatory viewer – or ‘viewser’, to use Daly’s term – these changes appear to be a form of liberation. The user is given the ability to interact with the text, altering it, or at least actively engaging with it in the process of making meaning, much like Keanu Reeves’ hacker hero, Neo, is able to alter the world of The Matrix (Andy and Lana Wachowski, 1999). Like Daly, a number of media scholars have sought to devise a new language for defining this seemingly active viewer. A similar account is offered by Cassetti, who argues that traditional modes of spectatorship, based on passively watching films on a big screen, are ‘no longer very relevant’. Instead viewers ‘intervene’, a process that entails everything from choosing when and where to view a film to what platform will be used, leading Cassetti to conclude that spectators essentially become protagonists who actively shape their viewing experience. Cassetti’s account offers a powerful overview of the diverse practices included under

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12 One of the most frequently cited terms is Axel Bruns’s concept of the ‘produser’, which describes the role of audiences of users in making meaning (and often new texts) in the era of digital media. See Axel Bruns, Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Produsage (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2009).

the banner of film consumption, as users blog, tweet and share reviews, turning films into what Cassetti calls a ‘multimedia project’.

These accounts of active viewing now find their match in advertising and promotional discourse that depicts users in complete command of their media experiences, able to chose their own (prepackaged) paths through a textual system, whether that includes DVD extras or online menus offering a seemingly unlimited choice of films and television shows.

However, although such models of an active, energized viewer are enticing, this account must also acknowledge the ways in which these discourses of an active viewer are linked to large cultural myths about digital capitalism. In fact, given the enthusiasm for these new modes of interactivity and mobility, it is easy to forget that these additional features help turn digital media into what Dan Schiller calls ‘a self-service vending machine of cultural commodities’.

Schiller’s comments emphasize how depictions of empowered viewers obscure the degree to which films and television shows continue to function as commodities. Although platform mobility allows viewers to access them from a wider range of locations, the effect on consumer choice is a little murkier. While streaming services such as Netflix promote themselves in terms of mobility, their streaming catalogue does not compare to their selection of DVDs, and users renting through VOD offerings are often provided with limited windows in which material is available. Furthermore, as Vincent Mosco argues, experiments with digital delivery make it possible for the film or television commodity ‘to be measured, monitored, and packaged’ in new ways, creating what Mark Andrejevic refers to as a ‘monitored mobility’.

This combined fantasy of marketing media commodities and using audience behaviour to sell advertisements is powerfully illustrated by YouTube’s ongoing efforts to turn itself into a centralized hub for niche entertainment ranging from buzzed-about film festival movies to serialized web videos, turning the broadcast model typically associated with television into highly individualized forms of narrowcasting, and ensuring, as the New Yorker’s John Seabrook writes, that ‘those audiences will be even more engaged, and much more quantifiable’.

Thus, although viewers of Hollywood films may encounter new forms of mobility, they do so at the expense of submitting to equally new forms of monitoring and surveillance that contribute to more deeply individualized marketing.

As a result, it is crucial to consider the ways in which the processes of digital delivery have also altered the business practices of the film and television industries. There is substantial unrest over the changes that have been introduced as digital delivery becomes more commonplace. These changes have significantly transformed the traditional models of distribution that have existed digital more or less since the introduction of video and cable television in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when studios, theatre owners and distributors agreed on a theatrical window of approximately six months. Indeed, the introduction of digital platforms unsettles these earlier models, leaving the film industry in a state of flux regarding future viewing practices.
Contemporary promotional discourse for cable companies and mobile media platforms help to naturalize new viewing platforms, while also showing how they will enable users to transcend the limitations of current media technologies. In fact, as a 2011 Time Warner Cable advertisement, ‘Never lose your spot’, sought to emphasize, viewers should be able to move between multiple televisions throughout the house, never once losing their place in the film. The advertisement depicts a young couple, the wife noticeably pregnant, settling in to watch a film on the sofa, the woman struggling to get comfortable while her husband patiently tries to help. The dissatisfied couple climbs up and down the stairs several times, trying two or three television sets and mobile devices and a variety of increasingly absurd positions before returning to the original set and settling in to watch. Here platform mobility magically ensures harmony between the couple, preventing them from having to worry about missing a single moment of the film they are watching. Once again, there is no longer a question of where to put the set; instead, the whole house is transformed into a space for consuming entertainment, one where any room can be a TV room.

Like Time Warner, DirecTV also promises a vision of platform mobility that offers viewers the chance to control their viewing experiences through their Whole-Home DVR service. In the spring of 2011, DirecTV had two television advertisements that were designed to promote the consumer’s ability to shift between several media platforms while watching a film. In one, ‘Love match’, a lone female viewer moves throughout her house while watching a Renaissance-era costume drama, complete with sword fights and a love scene. As she moves from her bedroom to the kitchen and eventually the living room, the action literally spills out into the spaces of her home, suggesting that the woman is totally immersed in the world of the film, despite the interruptions of getting up for a snack or answering a telephone call. In the other advertisement, a male viewer watches a Terminator-style adventure, featuring robots fighting each other with lasers as they crash through the walls of his home. In both cases the viewer is able to pause the action while moving from one room to another before seamlessly restarting the film as the action spills over into the next room. Equally, both viewers are individualized, watching a film alone, although the male viewer’s wife is shown in the background of their bedroom, reading a book while her husband watches a film that is presumably of no interest to her. The film choices are thus clearly marked by gender assumptions, the female viewer engaged with a historical drama, albeit one with plenty of action, and the male viewer watching a futuristic science-fiction film. Furthermore, both advertisements conclude with the action being recontained in a traditional television set, a subtle reminder of exactly where the satellite company would prefer the viewers to watch.

One notable, but limited, exception to this notion of family harmony through individualized consumption was a May 2011 Time Warner Cable advertisement designed to promote their 3D service. This depicts a mother
attempting to round up her children and husband for their weekly ‘movie night’. Her children are each in their own rooms, playing games and chatting with friends on their laptops, while the father works in a home office. Unable to get the family to join her, the mother proceeds to pop some corn and put on her 3D glasses. As the smell of the popcorn attracts the family, they all join the mother on the couch, settling in together to watch the film, while the father, oblivious to his wife’s previous attempts to get his attention, remarks that ‘nobody told me it was movie night’. As the four of them watch together, all wearing their 3D glasses and staring at the screen, a voiceover evokes the discourses of technology and family harmony, remarking that Time Warner Cable is ‘moving technology forward to bring you back to the family room’. The advertisement, which fits neatly within traditional images of family harmony, is significant in its emphasis on promoting the idea of bringing viewers back to the home’s central television set.

A similar TWC advertisement shows a father and son playing baseball on a makeshift field, with golden waves of wheat in the background evoking the nostalgic Americana of Field of Dreams (Phil Alden Robinson, 1989). The father, despite promises to pitch the baseball where his son can hit it, proves unable to throw strikes, prompting his son to worry that they will miss a televised baseball game. The father then takes out his mobile phone and uses TWC’s ‘remote DVR management’ system to ensure that the game will be recorded and that father and son will be able to continue enjoying their moment of family bonding. The advertisement culminates with the two of them on the couch, with TWC ‘bringing technology forward to bring you back together’. Thus mobility is shown not just as a device for reinforcing family harmony but also, ironically, as a means of getting families to connect in front of the main television set. A complementary advertisement targeted towards female viewers, ‘Sample sale or your favorite show on TV?’, depicts a fashionable young woman walking down a city street before passing a store window touting a ‘one day sale’ on a pair of dress shoes. The woman pauses, briefly concerned about missing her favourite show, but like the baseball-hurling father she remembers her ability to use remote DVR management to allow her to enjoy both buying shoes and watching television. Like DirecTV’s advertisements, TWC’s depictions of platform mobility reinforce relatively traditional gendered viewing practices while also implying that mobile technologies can enable families and individuals to have more control over when and where they watch.

As promoted in these campaigns, these informal viewing contexts seem to stand in contrast to the concentrated viewing practices associated with DVD culture. Although a number of scholars have attempted to map the role of the DVD in changing film consumption, in many ways the DVD merely served as an extension to the existing modes of distribution established with the introduction and popularization of the VCR in the 1980s. Film theatre owners were provided with an exclusive ‘window’,

allowing them the right to show a film without having to compete with other versions of that film. Typically this window lasted around six months, although it was gradually shortened after the DVD was introduced, in part because studios saw DVDs as a sell-through commodity and marketed them to film collectors, while VHS was primarily considered to be a rental format. In fact, as Jeff Ulin observes, the average window between the theatrical premiere and the DVD release was five months and twenty-two days in 1998, but by 2008 it had shortened to four months and ten days, a decrease that Edward Jay Epstein attributes to the desire to have the DVD releases of summer blockbusters available for purchase before Christmas. However, despite these changes, the essential window system remained in place, allowing theatres to maximize profit from a film thanks to their exclusive rights to exhibition. More recently, however, this window system has been transformed, in part because one of the primary sources of profitability for studios – DVD sales – has declined considerably, leading studios to seek out new alternatives for selling to audiences.

Yet despite depictions of an increasingly wired world, it is difficult to determine the degree to which mobile video will become a prominent mode of film consumption. According to a recent Nielsen study, only 24.7 million mobile phone users, out of nearly 300 million users overall in the USA, watched videos on their phones. In addition, subscribers watched roughly four hours and twenty minutes of video per month using mobile devices, a relatively brief time compared to the hours devoted to watching on a regular set. These numbers suggest that adoption of mobile media consumption remains far from complete. In fact, as Gerard Goggin argues, the adoption of mobile television has been gradual due to a range of technological, ideological and regulatory factors. Broadband and 3G access remain far from universal, and data limits on most mobile phone accounts make it difficult and/or costly for users to watch unlimited content on their phones. Furthermore, services such as Netflix are required to compete for streaming rights. Unlike DVD rentals, which are protected under the First Sale Doctrine, broadcast and streaming rights curtail this seemingly unlimited mobility, with the result that Netflix has sought to invest heavily in them. In addition, the Time Warner iPad app allows users to stream selected cable channels; however, they can only do so within reach of a TWC wi-fi network in a home that subscribes to their cable service, limiting the physical mobility of the viewer.

Finally, it is important to note that national contexts often shape what kinds of services and features may be available at any given time. As Niki Strange points out, in the UK, for instance, the BBC’s iPlayer has been introduced in the midst of wider debates about the intersections between individualized consumption and public service, in a context of the broadcaster being funded by a compulsory licence fee. Thus, although these factors are subject to change, as technologies improve and as demand for mobile television and film increases, it is important to remain aware that these promises of platform mobility remain relative or conditional.
Despite these restrictions, this emphasis on platform mobility remains a major point of experimentation for the studios themselves. In a March 2011 public address, the chairman of the Motion Picture Association of America and former US Senator, Christopher Dodd, acknowledged that several major studios, including Warner, Sony, Universal and Fox, would be releasing a small number of films through Premium Video on Demand (PVOD) just sixty days after their theatrical debut, for a rental price of thirty dollars per film for a twenty-four-hour rental through DirecTV. Such a move signalled the continued departure from more traditional distribution patterns. Although Dodd applied a more conciliatory tone with theatre owners, acknowledging that filmmakers do not make films for ‘small screens’, the debate about PVOD seemed to crystallize the ways in which digital delivery is altering the film industry. Specifically, Dodd promoted PVOD as an option that could help to alleviate the problems of physical distance and mobility for ‘families with young children, senior citizens, the disabled, and those living in remote areas’. However, despite his attempts to promote PVOD, there was apparently very little interest in the service, in part because only about six million customers had the necessary equipment to purchase and watch a film in this way.

Another recent model of digital delivery supported by the studios involves the decision by Warner to sell several of their highest-profile films – such as The Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, 2008) and Inception (Christopher Nolan, 2010), as well as many of the Harry Potter films – as iPhone apps. Warner’s decision to distribute these films as iPhone apps signalled that they were ready to experiment with new models that could bypass Netflix and other similar services and sell directly to consumers, wherever they happen to be, with the hope of reviving flagging DVD sales. The basic film apps were free, and provided users with a five-minute ‘teaser’ depicting the opening scenes of the films, along with a limited number of extra features normally included on a DVD. The free Inception app, for example, offered a short ‘making-of’ video that explained how the producers created the rainstorms while filming in Los Angeles. The user could also purchase a secondary app, priced at twelve dollars, which included permanent access to the entire film, as well as a number of supplemental videos about the film. Warner used a similar approach with the Dark Knight app, although that film was priced at ten dollars. Unlike the iTunes version of these films, however, the app is limited to a single device. If you purchase the film on your iPad you can only watch it there, perhaps suggesting that Warner hopes users will purchase these films on multiple devices or through several different platforms, or will see them as impulse purchases that can be watched on the go. The app version does offer more special features than are available on iTunes, and it also allows

The concept of digital myths is borrowed from Vincent Mosco, who defines myth as a creative falsehood. Instead, myth reflects the social nature of watching films. In this sense, UltraViolet, rather than enabling content mobility, actively inhibits the ability for consumers to share films with friends who are not included on their UltraViolet account.

In order to make this process work, UltraViolet users would need to create an account and purchase a film, adding a second copy of the film by logging in while away at college, as each household account is allowed up to six users. Despite this apparent flexibility, UltraViolet’s user interface refers to the user agreement as a “kinda, gentler DRM,” sarcastically referring to its user agreement as “ownership.” Certainly users could purchase a digital copy of the film stored in the cloud in a digital locker, but what counts as an “enduring rights” agreement often determines how the film is used. Users might be able to play on multiple devices.

When the film was released, many technology critics noted, UltraViolet, rather than offering users greater mobility and the ability to share access, actually provided studios with greater control over how their content was circulated, with one critic sarcastically referring to its user agreement as a “kinda, gentler DRM.” Certainly users could purchase a film, adding a second copy of the film by logging in while away at college, as each household account is allowed up to six users. Despite this apparent flexibility, UltraViolet’s user interface refers to the user agreement as a “kinda, gentler DRM,” sarcastically referring to its user agreement as “ownership.”

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These promises of mobility and access were further promoted when Wal-Mart – often described as the world’s largest DVD retailer – agreed to partner with UltraViolet to aid consumers in obtaining digital rights to their existing DVD collections. In order to take advantage of the service, people could bring their DVDs to their local Wal-Mart and pay two dollars to purchase digital rights to each title, or five dollars if the consumer wanted to upgrade to a high-definition version. Thus Wal-Mart was essentially asking consumers to pay a second time in order to obtain streaming access to films they already owned. Wal-Mart would continue to face the challenge of ‘going digital’ for consumers who were unaccustomed to paying for something as immaterial as cloud storage, when many consumers were unable to distinguish this facility from digital copies that could be stored directly on their computer’s hard drive. In addition, despite attempts to market UltraViolet as a service compatible with the needs of families, Disney films were unavailable on the service, in part due to Disney’s vigilant protection of its digital rights, making UltraViolet less than ideal as a mobile babysitter, and raising the suspicion that a service designed for greater convenience could actually lead to more confusion and frustration.

The UltraViolet webpage promises there will be ‘no more fighting over the main television when Dad wants to watch football at the same time the kids want to watch cartoons’. It also promises family harmony in other ways, noting that college students would be able to engage in ‘rerun night’ with their parents, even while living in their dorms. In both of these statements there are echoes of earlier modes of television advertising: the father controls the ‘main television’, while the children follow designated viewing habits by watching cartoons; when the child goes away to college, the distance between parent and child is magically erased by allowing family members to continue watching together. In addition, UltraViolet promises consumer control and choice, both in terms of the range of content and in terms of the ability of families to control what content comes into the home. Like the V-Chip, UltraViolet offers filters to block content while still ‘allowing kids the freedom to choose’. Thus, the potential risks of unlimited freedom are curtailed by giving parents more control over their children’s viewing choices.

All of these changes point to a transformation of the experiences and perceptions of film and television viewers. The media industries now have more tools for monitoring consumers, rendering active users ever more visible to advertisers. As William Boddy argues, the media industry will know a viewer ‘by the decisions he has made about how to spend his time, each and every moment of which is recorded by his black box’. Digital delivery enables increasingly concentrated forms of monitoring, as well as targeted advertising to the individualized and fragmented audiences. But the crucial shift entails a more generalized transformation of spectatorship, one that is consistent with the mobile viewer, who is ostensibly empowered to watch films and television shows whenever or
wherever they wish. This temporal and spatial mobility produces a number of changes in the cultures and business of film consumption.

Discourses of platform mobility tap into larger desires for community, in part through the depictions of how these new technologies can be incorporated seamlessly into the suburban, middle-class home, especially in the USA. Much like the popular discourses surrounding television in the 1950s, advertising for mobile phones, portable media players and other forms of platform mobility all help to define the ways in which these media technologies are understood. Personal technologies, it is suggested, can help to reduce family conflict over entertainment, in most cases by offering individualized viewing experiences. Yet, as I have argued, this should not imply that these discourses of platform mobility are determinative. As Cassetti points out, these new devices can, in some cases, become embedded in a socially networked and engaged film culture, one in which users share, blog, tweet and even remix films. Nonetheless, micro-ethnographic examinations of local uses of media technologies often reveal that many users resist and reshape these media discourses to their own purposes. We must, as Shaun Moores suggests, remain attentive to media users’ ‘practical consciousness … of media environments’, even as those platforms evolve and become imbued with new meanings. Thus, even while we recognize the role of industry discourse on media consumption – in all of its different and sometimes contradictory forms – we must also attend to the ways in which platform mobility offers a powerful expression of the cultural desire for a greater autonomy over when, where, how and what we watch.