



Life on Cloud Nine: How Entertainment During Mass Quarantine in China Provides Potential Insight into the Future of Social Interactions

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The world as we knew it changed in a blink of an eye in January 2020 when a novel coronavirus emerged in Wuhan, China, and led to the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic. The Chinese government acted swiftly to contain the spread of the virus. By mid-February, at least 48 cities and four provinces in China covering nearly half of 1.4 billion people were put under government-imposed lockdowns. Flights and trains were canceled. Buses, subways, and ferries were suspended. Factories were shuttered and schools closed. Public and private gatherings were postponed. Only one person from each household was permitted to go out every two days. Hundreds of millions of people, healthy or sick, were stuck in their homes under quarantine.

Against this daunting backdrop, the Chinese Lunar New Year in February, typically peak time for the entertainment industry, brought unique challenges for live TV entertainment programming. Quarantine means no personal contact, making it nearly impossible to record those immensely popular studio shows that feature witty hosts

and favorite celebrities helped by a crew of studio technical experts engaging with enthusiastic live audiences. “Cloud entertainment,” produced with zero physical contact between hosts, guests, audiences, and technical crew, was born under this new reality of mass quarantine and strict social distancing. As an illustration, iQiYi, one of the largest online video sites in the world, debuted its online interactive programming “Cloud Recording” series. The “Cloud Recording” music show features songs remotely requested by audiences, performed by singers at a separate location, and dedicated to the loved ones of the requestors. Another game show records masked celebrity reciting scripts of popular dramas, and the recording is passed on to other celebrities in different locations to continue the guessing game. Sports series are transformed into video recordings of superstars attempting various fitness challenges at home to compete against each other. These shows are fundamentally different from the grassroots individual viral video sharing promulgated by social media, as they are created and produced professionally by large entertainment media companies in China and are broadcast online as substitutes for regular live TV shows that typically reach hundreds of millions of people. iQiYi, for example, is founded by China’s largest online search engine, Baidu, and boasts nearly six billion hours of service per month. Each step in the sequence of this type of programming is filmed at separate times and places and connected together partly through live online interactions and partly through video blogging and editing.

These shows cultivate a new form of social interaction born from mass quarantine—they transcend the limitations of time and space, shortening the emotional distance, and bringing a “sense of company” to people isolated at homes. Their uniqueness and novelty lie in the fact that human interactions are digitally joined together, and the meaning of the purported stories are constructed while stripped of mutual human physical presence. The instantaneous reflective process classically represented by Symbolic Interactionism and demonstrated through studio-based, live, interactive shows is absent in “Cloud entertainment.” For the viewers, the cloud blurs the line between a real participatory experience and taking a simulated role in a synthetic story.

These changes are closely linked to changes already underway in social interaction. Our daily lives across the globe have increasingly moved from physical to digital. We work with emails, shared digital files, and virtual desktops. In a personal domain, we go online to not only play games, order food, and shop for clothes, but also exchange congratulations and insults, and spread cheers and rumors. Now with the unprecedented uncertainty weighing on our collective mind, we are moving entertainment to “cloud nine,” literally and figuratively, to evade calamity on earth. A life lived virtually is hastened and legitimized.

Yet, this swift change brought about by entertainment media innovation in China may prove to be a double-edged sword. On one hand, the new entertainment format helps ease the emotional strain on ordinary people who are cut off from social interactions, desperate for some feel-good, family-oriented wholesome “chicken soup” for their weary souls. They fill the void of interactive programs and introduce a sense of normalcy and shared comradery at a time when people are isolated at homes and the outside world seems to be spinning out of control with death and suffering. On the other hand, if human actions can be segmented, choreographed, framed, edited, and pieced back together from different times and spaces, it begs the question of how authentic such interactions actually are. We have already started doubting how much Facebook life or TV realities shows bear any truth to reality. What about the copied and pasted human interactions? Are we ready to wholeheartedly embrace them if the entertainment industry suddenly discovers that cloud programs bring more profit with shorter production cycles, lower cost, and wider distribution platform, and decides to pursue them aggressively? What about propagandistic governments using this format to take people’s actions out of context and manufacture happiness or defiance? Is it going to be another trick up the sleeves of the “deep fake” schemers to exploit popular sentiment with a few easy clicks of their mouse? So far the entertainment industry has been paradoxically resilient against the de-interaction of humans in the digital age with shows, dramas, movies, and reality series mostly produced with and focused on intimate in-person human interactions. With more and more countries across the globe under lockdown, will we see more of the same concept spread in entertainment

industries worldwide? In the United States, the Presidential debate between Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden on March 15 became the first audience-free Presidential debate since 1976. Most recently in late April, Netflix started creating a social distancing anthology series where writers meet virtually and cast films themselves with the director guiding actors remotely. What happens if the type of cloud entertainment, born out of the necessity of crisis yet exploiting our forward inertia towards “internet-of-things”, takes hold after the global COVID-19 pandemic is finally over? Like the unpredictability of the pandemic, there is no known formula to chart the exact path of continued innovation in online entertainment under this fast-changing environment. Every challenge presents an opportunity. Let’s hope that the newfound convenience, efficiency, and profitability of social interactions broken down into pieces and reconstituted like juice from concentrate won’t completely take over the old-fashioned, warm-bodied human contact in entertainment that reflects the true meaning of social interactions. It is time that a diverse group of social stakeholders comes together to engage in purposeful discussions and make deliberate decisions about how we want our social lives to continue in the post-pandemic world.

