

Considering the Convergent Awards Show

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The rise of convergent and participatory media has created a new kind of awards show, one in which viewers have more power and relish the opportunity to have their voices heard. Digital media and online fandom have spurred a host of new events—the Webby Awards, the Streamy Awards, the MTV Fandom Awards—and reinvigorated others, such as the Teen Choice Awards. What all of these awards shows have in common is acknowledgement of digital media as a major entertainment category and encouragement of viewer participation. And while none of these shows are without their own controversies or challenges, all are rising in visibility at the same time shows like the Oscars, Emmys, and Grammys are seeing historic lows.

As media culture becomes more participatory and a generation of media consumers that has grown up with social media comes of age, the inaccessible voting practices of legacy awards shows are bound to become problematic and outdated. Younger consumers are becoming increasingly accustomed to awards shows that allow them to have a voice in the nomination and/or voting process, thus shows like the Oscars and the Emmys that exclude viewer participation and are slow to legitimate new media entertainment face a struggle to remain relevant to non-industry audiences. Meanwhile, the 2016 Tony Awards hit a 15-year ratings high thanks to what critics have called a “*Hamilton* bump,” stimulated in large part by creator Lin Manuel Miranda’s masterful use of social media and the play’s avid fan following.

The most prominent and powerful form of viewer participation in the convergent awards show is online voting. Two examples which exemplify the power of viewer-driven

models are The Streamy Awards and the MTV Fandom Awards. Focusing solely on web series and streaming media, the Streamy Awards are something of an Emmys for the online medium. The submission process allows online fan nominations, and one finalist in each award category is based on those nominations. Additionally, the Streamys include two Audience Choice categories derived entirely from number of voter nominations and determined by online voting. Audience Choice finalists are encouraged to include links to the Streamy voting page on their sites. Though the Streamy Awards had a rocky start in 2009 and 2010, Dick Clark Productions became involved in the awards oversight in 2011, and the show has gained enough popularity to be live broadcast on VH1 and Canada's Much network for the first time in 2015 and to launch a new award program for India and South Asia.

Though the MTV Fandom Awards, launched in 2014, lacks the open nomination process of the Streamys, the voting process for the Fandom Awards is entirely fan-driven and takes place almost wholly on social media platforms, with rounds of voting on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Snapchat. The Fandom Awards blurs the line between award and reward, pairing online fan voting with a party and first-come, first-served awards ceremony live at San Diego Comic Con and streamed on MTV. These awards allow fervent, media-convergent fans a stake that traditional awards shows omit—a stake that garnered more than 21 million votes for the 2016 nominees.

While shows like the Streamy Awards and the Fandom Awards are picking up steam, with the exception on the Tonys, legacy awards shows are struggling to engage audiences. The 2016 Oscars saw the ceremony's lowest Nielsen rating in eight years, the 2016 Grammy Awards hit a seven-year low, and the 2015 Emmy Awards garnered the lowest ratings in the history of the show. From the famous Ellen Degeneres Oscar selfie in 2014 to the Emmy Awards' new short form category, which includes a limited number of independent web series, to live streaming nomination announcements, legacy awards shows are looking to

social and digital media to increase their relevance, but viewership numbers suggest that they are not doing so successfully. Furthermore, controversies like #OscarsSoWhite and the disjuncture between critical and popular appeal and Emmy nominations demonstrate just how out of touch legacy awards voters are with everyday viewers. Given the current sensation of disenfranchisement associated with many traditional awards shows, convergent appeals to viewer interaction like those of the Streamy Awards and the MTV Fandom Awards may provide useful models for means of encouraging viewers to feel a stake in legacy awards show outcomes that keeps those shows from becoming obsolete in the face of digital engagement.