Unsettling TV: Social Connectivity and Television in the Post-Network Era

by

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DEDICATION

For my parents
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ABSTRACT

This doctoral project analyzes the socio-cultural implications of social television through a lens that takes into account the influences of a number of factors – the role of technology, audience practices, and industry logics. The dissertation posits that contemporary social television taps into long-existing practices that have been central to the experience of watching television, shifting away from perspectives that frame social television as a recent development that emerged from the fusion of social media and television. This limited perspective negates the reality that television has been rooted into practices of sociality from its early days, and elides the long history of experimentation with social television. Furthermore, it suggests a “before” mode of engaging with television that is devoid of the practices that have come to be associated with the social television phenomenon.

The dissertation’s importance derives from the contributions it makes to scholarship about liveness and television, sociality within television, and critical media industries. The project explores industry logics that are tied to sustaining myths about technology as a powerful instrument deemed capable of instituting radical societal transformations. These myths about technology have been manifested through experimentations with interactive television and earlier social television prototypes and reveal an instinctual belief in sociability as a fundamental motive for engaging with television. Case studies on the NFL, and cable networks AMC and Bravo,
provide a more nuanced understanding of this instinct toward sociability. The dissertation proposes a theory of telesociality to explain the matrix of relations that structure interactions between the viewer and the text, between viewers, and between viewers and the industry. Telesociality emerges as the heart of the audience’s relationship to the television text and affords new understandings of liveness and sociability, suggesting both are moored into the everydayness of television and critical to the ways in which audiences interact with and experience television. More importantly, it suggests that the industry-audience dynamic is rooted in the affordances of sociality that television provides the audience, and the pleasures of television are revealed through aspects of play and bonding that define social television in the contemporary era.
INTRODUCTION

Birthing a new industry? The Rise of Social Television

In 2008, Chloe Sladden then Vice-President of Special Projects for the short-lived television network Current TV, envisioned using Twitter as an inventive method to liven up the presidential debates. Dubbed Hack the Debate, Sladden and her associates used Twitter to provide live commentary on the debate inviting the audience to participate in the ongoing
discussion. Staff monitored Twitter feeds and contributed to the commentary taking place on the platform. Some of the more interesting real-time conversations were also overlaid on the television screen instituting the first documented organized live-tweeting event around a television show.

This single act would precipitate a number of developments within the television industry. First, it signaled a new focus for Twitter, a company still struggling to formulate its identity. Evan Williams, co-founder of Twitter and at the time, the presiding Chief Executive Officer lured Sladden away from Current TV to head up the newly formed media development team at Twitter. On a wider scale, the idea of live tweeting television shows proved fascinating to an industry beset by anxiety over changing audience practices and threats to long-established business models. Live tweeting emerged as an essential component of “social television”, which soon became the latest buzzword for the industry.

Popular narratives surrounding the development of social television would hone in on a few “key truths.” These truths emerged out of assumptions built on a persistent rhetoric around the impact of emerging and new technologies on television. The emphasis on new became a focal point in the ways in which social television was discussed and imagined within the popular press and trade magazines. The predominant narrative in these publications defined social television as a hybrid term used to describe the fusion of social media and television and highlighted the phenomenon as a recent development in television viewing practices fueled by the rise of social media. The contemporaneous development of “second-screen” apps, mobile companion apps used to marshal the audiences’ attention towards specific content also underscored the recentness of social television as both technology and practice encapsulated in
headlines such as “TV Goes Social - The Rise of the Second Screen,” “Why TV is Going Social,” or articles discussing the lessons that have emerged within the social television industry in its “succinct two-year history” from a 2012 Fast Company article.

In crafting social television primarily in terms of recent audience practices and emerging technologies, the implications undergirding industry and press discourse centered on the potential it offered for revolutionizing the advertising and television industry. This “new” convergence between television and social media signaled fresh opportunities for creating more engaged viewers and consequently amplifying advertising reach beyond the primary television screen. Advertiser-supported television derives its legitimacy from its ability to produce content that can serve as an effective mechanism for marketing goods and services to the audience. According to political economist Dallas Smythe, audience power, that is the imperative consumers face to purchase food, clothing and other goods within a monopoly capitalist system, is what is at stake in commercial media transactions. Audience power, he argued, was the chief commodity for sale – it is that which is produced, marketed and sold to advertisers by the media industries. More recently, developments such as the rise of audience fragmentation and time-shifting practices had threatened to derail the ability of media institutions to effectively produce and capitalize on this audience power. The emergence of social television was therefore seen as a welcome innovation to counter this rising threat. The prevailing rhetoric suggested that social television through its capacity to corral unruly audiences would ameliorate the negative consequences of audience fractionalization and time-shifting by driving audiences back to viewing television on a live schedule, and could potentially bring forth new promotional opportunities for creating buzz and attention around a show.
To the degree that it matters, the heady optimism apparent in these assumptions and headlines about social television can be easily dismissed as the sort of hype that accompanies new technologies or potential innovations to existing practices. Hype has long been a steady companion in television’s history emerging out of and contributing to the myths that develop around technologies. Vincent Mosco has argued that the debate about the truthfulness or falseness of these myths, although important, does not get at the heart of what is truly important to know about myths. He suggests, “Myths are stories that animate individuals and societies by providing paths to transcendence that lift people out of the banality of everyday life. They offer an entrance to another reality, a reality once characterized by the promise of the sublime.” Social television cast as a potential savior for the television industry was achieving near myth status in the eyes of its proponents.

Mosco is hardly the first to draw connections between technology and the sublime. Speaking about the sublime more generally, historian David Nye argues, “The history of the sublime from antiquity shows, if nothing else, that, although it refers to an immutable capacity of human psychology for astonishment, both the objects that arouse this feeling and their interpretations are socially constructed.” Others have drawn attention to the ways in which the myths surrounding technology approximates the fervor characteristic of religious practices, casting analogies between faith in a spiritual being and faith in the power of technology to transform societies. David F. Noble in his book, The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention argues “modern technology and religion have evolved together [to the point that] the technological enterprise has been and remains suffused with religious belief.” Noble’s argument begins with the premise that during the Middle Ages, the relationship between Christianity and technology underwent a transformation, such that “technology had
come to be identified with transcendence, implicated as never before in the Christian idea of redemption.”

Our “obsession with technology” is the lasting legacy of this conflation of technology with transcendence: “we routinely expect far more from our artificial contrivances than mere convenience, comfort or even survival. We demand deliverance.”

Lewis Mumford has deemed this ideological belief system “mechano-centric religion” while James W. Carey and John Quirk wrote that the utopian ideal within which technology is often framed imbues the technology with a degree of “secular religiosity.”

These similar perspectives echo what Leo Marx has termed the “rhetoric of the technological sublime” emerging out of his book, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America. For Marx whose conclusions emerge through the analysis of literary texts, the most popular sentiment expressed in this rhetoric was a belief in the power of technology to “annihilate time and space” embodying a progressive narrative suggesting technology could not only approximate the logic and functionality of human beings, but potentially could surpass it.

I draw attention to these persistent myths about technology in an effort to foreshadow part of the argument I make in this dissertation about the cultural and economic significance of this turn to social television. It foregrounds the concerns of this dissertation which is rooted in situating the rush toward social television within a cultural framework that explores the ways in which myths about technology, audience practices and industry conditions have all contributed toward building the infrastructure that upholds social television. Thus my aim in drawing attention to these myths is not centered around dispelling these myths, although the idea of social television as new is one I contest often. Rather I begin my analysis of social television from the
standpoint that the motivations guiding social television initiatives in the present reflect a much longer storied history of television and the implications embedded in the potential uses of the “watercooler effect.” I argue that social television is very much about these myths, that the very effort to institute social television practices both in the present and in the past emerges out a recurring optimism in the ability of new technological artifacts to improve the commercialization opportunities of television. The key question framing this dissertation project is as follows: How does social television unsettle or reaffirm our understanding of television both within its industrial context, but also as a cultural product? The latter concern translates to: How does social television solidify our understanding of what television means to its users, and how is this meaning sustained despite the technological disruptions that have come to dominate discourses about the current state of television?

The project therefore is about refining our understanding of social television, which necessitates moving beyond the industry discourse to carefully analyze and explore the relations embedded within the developing infrastructure. In thinking about infrastructure here two definitions readily come to mind, the idea of infrastructure as “material forms that allow for exchange over space” and the ways in which its “embeddedness” and “taken-for-grantedness” sets up a relational structure such that its definition cannot be separated from the ways in which it is used. What is at stake here is recognizing that there is a fundamental difference between the ways in which social television is talked about and the set of techno-relations critical in refashioning or remaking sociality around television. Social television becomes meaningful in the ways in which it promises to exploit cultural practices in service to economic concerns. It is a product of the times, embodying the ideals and logics of what is often described as the “cultural economy moment,” which has alternatively been defined as a shift in cultural policy making
whereby culture is increasingly thought of as a resource, or is now seen as “part of a wider and more dynamic sphere of economic activity.”

But rather than imagining social television as this external agent working to transform the television industry, my argument centers around the idea that social television is simply tapping into existing modes of practices that have been central to the experience of watching television. In some ways the term social television is a misnomer creating artificial boundaries between what television is and the social uses of television. It suggests a “before” social mode of using television that did not embody the practices currently associated with social television. My thinking here is in line with numerous other scholars who take issue with how the term social has been appropriated in contemporary contexts discounting the notion that all media is and has always been inherently social. The contemporary “age of “social media” transforms the word social into a loaded term such that it is increasingly only seen as a site of economic value useful in the creation of markets and aggregating user behavior.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that social television as a technological artifact produces subtle differences in the practices of sociality around television. José van Dijck and Thomas Poell have argued that the rise of technologies such as Facebook and Twitter have instituted a new social media logic that is increasingly central to everyday life. This social media logic which consists of four elements - programmability, popularity, connectivity and datafication - are integrated with and often overlap the mass media logic that was dominant through a significant portion of the twentieth century. Importantly, van Dijck and Poell argue that the emergent social media logic is “pivotal in understanding how in a networked society social interaction is mediated by an intricate dynamic of mass media, social media platforms, and
offline institutional processes.”

This provides a needed impetus to thoroughly investigate the resultant dynamics in play by mapping out “the complex connections between platforms that distribute this logic, users that use them, technologies that drive them, economic structures that scaffold them, and in institutional bodies that incorporate them.”

With all this in mind, I propose here a theory of telesociality, which emerges out of long-standing visions projected upon television generating from the affordances offered up by live modes of engagement with the medium. Telesociality encompasses the broader “dynamic matrix of relationships” inherent to human sociality. It is moored into understandings of the everydayness of television viewing and its positionality as a domestic technology. Telesociality affords us the opportunity to rework the definition of social television beyond the limited range offered up by industry narratives, that are overrun by a focus on practices intended to increase the monetization potential for advertisers and the television industry as a whole. It emerges from within a shared sphere of cultural activity drawing upon the affordances of the medium that binds together liveness and sociability and serves as a declaration of the innate qualities of intimacy and playful interactions constituted within television viewing practices both past and present.

These shared spheres of cultural activity draw parallels from James Paul Gee’s concept of “affinity spaces.” Gee embraces the term affinity spaces to describe the sort of environments (spatially proximate or not) where people might gather together, not necessarily with a singular goal in mind, but ostensibly through some form of loose affiliation focused toward some common endeavor. Affinity spaces he notes privilege the relationships that develop among people with similar interests, rather than along specific identity markers such as race, class,
gender, age and so forth. Affinity spaces are neither static nor linear, but rather dynamic spaces where creative exchange occurs amongst users of varying skills and abilities. The flexibility of these affinity spaces also allow for varying levels of user participation and engagement.

Affinity spaces serve as a productive metaphor in thinking through the varied practices and ranges of use enabled through social television. Part of what makes television social is the notion of it as a form of play, what Sutton-Smith refers to as “vicarious audience play”. He notes television allows viewers to navigate the extent to which they want to engage with the text, how they watch and identify with other people at play, but also in the ways in which they can turn it off at will, discontinuing the play action. To that I would add, that the interactions that take place beyond the show, talking about characters or plot events, taking part in polls and reviewing extra-textual material or even sounding off about likes and dislikes (anything related to the television text) extends the boundaries of audience play of the sort that Sutton-Smith imagines.27 This expanded understanding of audience play offers more clarity on telesociality and what it entails. Telesociality reflects a mode of human sociability, where within the context of television, liveness emerges as a defining quality for performing sociality.

Trying to make sense of the ways in which liveness matters to telesociality is complicated by the fact that liveness theoretically occupies complex and often divergent narratives both narrowly within television studies, and media studies more broadly. Debates about liveness and television have focused on perspectives that assume it to be fundamental to television’s form, its ontological essence, or alternatively an ideological construct used to justify the norms and practices that have shaped and continue to shape the industry’s operations and logics. A fairly common perspective is to conflate the live transmission of television events – “information,
crisis, catastrophe” with the ontological properties of the medium, suggesting television is at its best or takes on its purest form when it covers events in real time. Mary Ann Doane, the source of the aforementioned “information, crisis and catastrophe” perfectly illustrates this perspective, writing:

Television’s greatest technological prowess is its ability to be there – both on the scene and in your living room (hence the most catastrophic of technological catastrophes is the loss of the signal. The death associated with catastrophe ensures that television is felt as an immediate collision with the real in all its intractability – bodies in crisis, technology gone awry. Television catastrophe is thus characterized by everything which it is said not to be – it is expected, predictable, its presence crucial to television’s operation. In fact, catastrophe could be said to be at one level a condensation of all the attributes and aspirations of ‘normal’ television (immediacy, urgency, presence, discontinuity, the instantaneous, and hence forgettable).  

Media scholar, Herbert Zettl also argued for seeing liveness as fundamental to television, marking this as the key difference between film and television. In his estimation,

“Live television … lives off the instantaneous and uncertainty of the moment, very much the way we do in actual life. The fact that television can record images and then treat them in a filmic fashion in no way reduces the aesthetic potential and uniqueness of television when used live.”

Expanding his argument to include time and motion as a function of this liveness. Zettl writes

…the television image is continually moving, very much in the manner of the Bergsonian durée… Each television frame is always in a state of becoming. While the film frame is a concrete record of the past, the television frame (when live) is a reflection of the living, constantly changing present. The live televised event and the event itself exist in the same present… Obviously, the filmic event is largely medium dependent, while television in its essence (live) is largely event dependent [emphasis Zettl].

Offering an alternative perspective, Jane Feuer, who largely disagreed with the notion of liveness as the ontological essence of television, argues instead that the liveness discourse emerged as the industry sought to formalize the “television flow,” the continuous sequence of textual images to
its audience, punctuated by breaks such as changes in programming or commercial pauses. In her article, The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology, Feuer acknowledged the technological and perceptual factors that had contributed to seeing liveness as ontological, but in her estimation, the idea of liveness as television’s essence was actually a myth, an ideological construct of the industry designed to “exploit…the contradiction between flow and fragmentation in television practice.”32 She writes, “In terms of mode of address, I have argued that notions of “liveness” lend a sense of flow which overcomes extreme fragmentations of space.”33 Feuer uses conclusions developed by Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow around the idea that television has been largely identified with liveness for a number of factors including the “closeness, availability and interpellative nature of the television image itself,” to argue that as television in fact becomes less and less a “live” medium, in the sense of an equivalence between time of event and time of transmission, the medium in its own practices seems to insist more and more upon an ideology of the live, the immediate, the direct, the spontaneous, the real.34

This insistence on an ideology of liveness leads Feuer to conclude that “television’s self-referential discourse plays upon the connotative richness of the term, “live” … [to evoke] suggestions of “being there” … “bringing it to you as it really is.”35

The ideological framing of liveness gets taken up in a different context by Eddie Patterson and Lara Stevens, theatre scholars concerned with articulating new ways of seeing theatrical liveness as it intersects with new modes of production. Patterson and Stevens, in a case study of Australia’s Royal National Theatre’s All’s Well That Ends Well (NT Live) production, suggest the production filmed and simulcast to a global audience adopted what they term a “Super Bowl Dramaturgy” in its production process, which coalesces around adapting an aesthetic that parallels the Super Bowl televised event. Patterson and Stevens argue the Super
Bowl follows a familiar structure characterized by “pre-game entertainment, interviews and analysis;” “landmark commercials from major brands;” “half-time entertainment;” “expert opinions;” “an award ceremony” and the game itself broken up into two halves. They make a compelling case for considering the ways in which the NT Live performance adapted this structure for its production, but I am more interested in two sub-observations that emerge in their analysis. First, they acknowledge that both the NT Live production and the Super Bowl need to cater to two different viewing publics – the in-person audience at the site of the event, and the viewing audience at home. In catering to the latter, the production is forced to evoke a “sense of the event.” In their words, it attempts to “capture and transmit the ambiance of the live event.” Technologies of screen production get deployed, they argue to produce an “imitated reality,” which in some cases can surpass the “sensory experience of the live event” offering up an experience that is “seemingly more intimate than that of a spectator who shares the physical and temporal space with the players/actors.”

The second observation emerges in response to technical difficulties at one of the “live” productions of the NT Live show in Melbourne coupled with the fact that the “live” showings in the United Kingdom could be scheduled within a four-week window from the original theatrical showing performance. In the former scenario, although the show was broadcast simultaneously with theatrical performance, technical difficulties led to delays as the reel had to be rewound a number of times to get both the sound and the image playing correctly. Parks and Stevens point to the technical difficulties and the delayed shows to signal the ways in which liveness functions in service to branding. The liveness promised to viewers is an artifice, an illusion used to inspire affective resonances in the viewers drawing on assumptions about what liveness connotes – “presence, immediacy, authenticity, community, ephemerality and unpredictability.”
The descriptions offered here by Parks and Stevens on the carefully scripted nature of these “live” theatrical productions draw attention to the suspicious lens often cast upon liveness. At issue for Feuer and others who view liveness through a hermeneutics of suspicion is the careful attention given during the production process to scripting “live television.” The production apparatus remains largely invisible to the audience and the implication is liveness functions as a tool to manipulate connectivity and exists to further the commercial aims of the media institution. Paddy Scannell who takes a phenomenological approach to understanding liveness in the television context offers a different reading of the constructed nature of liveness. The hidden apparatus does perform ideological work to be sure, but Scannell argues it is also undergirded by a hidden care-structure that works in service to the viewer. The mode of production is hidden so as to “produce guarantees of reality-and-truth as the basis of genuine experiences for viewers.” Scannell argues that the management of liveness that proves to be a source of consternation for many scholars has utility in that it reveals the communicative experiences of the everyday human situation. It is geared towards enhancing the experience for the viewer, “to make it alive” and as his elaborate illustration of the processes involved in replaying a soccer goal reveals, it allows the viewer to relive moments of intense emotional affect.

Emerging thus out of these observations is a way of thinking about liveness in pseudo terms, whereby liveness as a concept is not just tied into debates about temporality and simultaneity, but also about the feelings it invokes in the audience. Parks and Stevens barely touch upon this idea, more interested in making claims that highlight the ways in which theatrical performances are increasingly mediated by adopting strategies made popular with the Super Bowl. However, these themes can be pulled out from their analysis, and from the other
theoretical considerations of liveness that have emerged in the past. The takeaway theme that I draw upon here much more forcefully is the relationship, fully expressed or not, of the audience to perceived liveness. The pseudo-liveness allows for talking about liveness in two critical ways. First, I focus on the ways in which liveness can be displaced onto other registers beyond the temporality assumed by a literal interpretation of the term. It takes on a double meaning in the temporal sense of the schedule, where the industry uses the time of the broadcast as a cudgel for managing the audience, but also in the meanings afforded to liveness having to do with presence, and being connected. The re-orienting of liveness towards shared viewing is critical to the industry in the ways in which social television is managed and presented to the viewing public, but also correspondingly attaches itself to the ways in which the same public experiences and comes to enjoy the sociality of television.

What I am talking about here are the ways in which liveness is displaced away from the broadcast transmission unto the moment of reception. Liveness becomes fundamental to telesociality because it approximates the need for “immediacy, presence, connectedness, affect, intimacy” and so forth; qualities that have often been traditionally seen as anchored to the debate about televisuality and liveness. To be clear, what I mean to suggest here is a way of thinking about liveness not simply in relation to broadcasting events live as they occur, but also as it relates to live viewing – watching television as it is transmitted as opposed to watching on a delayed schedule at a moment of convenience. This displaced quality of liveness similarly evokes sensory experiences in the viewer, and is closely yoked to the ways in which sociality is enacted and experienced.
Georg Simmel writing about the sociology of sociability talks about it in abstract terms suggesting an idealized form of sociability that emerges simply out of the desire humans have to form associations with one another. Critical therefore to his understanding of sociability is this drive or “impulse toward sociability” innate to all humans, which above all comes out of a desire to belong. Thus he writes

But, above and beyond their special content, all these associations are accompanied by a feeling for, by a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others.42

Simmel’s perspective is useful not only in terms of the affective resonance he attaches to the impulse towards sociability, but just as important is the connections he makes to play and to the value of talk in and of itself. Simmel thus notes, that “sociability is the play-form of association”, one best expressed through the banal practice of conversation.

In sociability, talking is an end in itself; in purely sociable conversation the content is merely the indispensable carrier of the stimulation, which the lively exchange of talk as such unfolds. All the forms with which this exchange develops; argument and the appeals to the norms recognized by both parties; the conclusion of peace through compromise and the discovery of common convictions; the thankful acceptance of the new and the parrying-off of that on which no understanding is to be hoped for – all these forms of conversational interaction, otherwise in the service of innumerable content and purposes of human intercourse, here have their meaning in themselves; that is to say, in the excitement of the play of relations which they establish between individuals, binding and loosening, conquering and being vanquished, giving and taking. In order that this play may retain its self-sufficiency at the level of pure form, the content must receive no weight on its own account; as soon as the discussion gets business-like, it is no longer sociable; it turns its compass point around as soon as the verification of a truth becomes its purpose.43

Simmel’s usefulness to this project theoretically derives from the importance he places on talk. It reflects an understanding of social television that speaks to the ways in which people interact with one another, providing an underlying basis for telesociality. Where I depart from him,
however, is the lack of importance he devotes to the text or the content of the talk. Here, he argues the content is merely the excuse for the ritual of talking or being sociable with one another. Although I see the bonds of sociability as a critical element of telesociality, I would argue instead, based on the evidence compiled within this project, that the heart of the social television experience encapsulates more than the quest for sociability. It embodies two sets of relationships – the relationships viewers form with one another, hence the need to watch communally (live viewing), but also the relationship that exists with the text. Collectively these two relationships are the defining elements of telesociality, out of which emerges a social television framework with both socio-cultural and economic implications for television.

There is a non-materialistic quality to telesociality in the sense that we can say it is driven by instinct, and that it reaches deep within to touch at those very emotional registers that drive people to relate to one another in social settings. At the same time, the instinct toward sociability in this context, is not divorced from the broader logics of cultural production that have been in place since the medium’s early days. It emerges out of television’s capacity to draw out feelings in the viewer, with the text standing in for the outward manifestation of producer strategies’ to emotionally engage with the viewer. It is firmly rooted in historically understandings of television as an intimate medium, that firmly encases viewers within the circle of the narrative. By that logic, its purpose is to fulfill and to reconcile the affective yoke between the viewer and the text. The shared experiences that unfold as viewers collectively interact with the television text, serve both to enhance the emotional connection to the show, but it is also cathartic in nature, offering viewers the opportunity to express and release the pent-up tensions and feelings that come up in the viewing process.
Telesociality offers up an entry-point into understanding the role of social television in the contemporary era, and what meanings can be attached to the ways in which it manifests in everyday practices and routines. It serves as the bedrock for exploring the questions that frame this dissertation project, which as stated above seeks to explore social television’s impact on contemporary industry practices, and correspondingly the role it plays in serving the needs of the audience. The answers to these questions are revealed through four chapters that work through the historical factors that led to the emergence of social television to specific case studies highlighting how social television is enacted on the ground in the present-day. Chapter One contextualizes the emergence of social television from a historical lens. Based on an understanding of telesociality as historically associated with television production logics and the circulation of television texts, the discussion and analysis here provides both a historical and theoretical framework for understanding the current focus on the phenomenon. Within the chapter, I propose that in order to fully understand the development of social television, we must revisit early technological myths and the sustaining logic about the impact of interactive television on the future evolution of television. These logics I argue are embedded in visions that sought to enhance the engagement potential of the medium. At various points, interactive television and later on social television have been presented as technological solutions to the ever-present concern for audience engagement. Here, I deliberately counter the narrative that suggests social television is a recent phenomenon, highlighting early research into the potential of social television, proposing instead that the sustained interest in social television exists because at some level it spoke to and tapped into inherent constructions of television as a social medium that could best be exploited through live viewing practices.
Chapter Two delves into the continued assumptions around social television that emerged during the 2010s, and focuses on the development of Twitter and its role in formalizing an economic model for social television. Despite the centrality of Twitter in this narrative, I argue a confluence of factors – social, technological and cultural – were collectively responsible for forging a vision for social television and help to explain its trajectory. Society-wide transformations such as the rise of a mobile technology culture, and a growing cultural experience centered around visibility and engaging in public discourse, were critical in explaining this shift. Similarly, returning to the idea of technological myths, the emergence of a sensibility around technology as a tool for measuring and quantifying previously unknowable qualities, also proved crucial to the formation of both Twitter and the subsequent social television economic infrastructure. In contrast to the earlier experimental phase, present-day circumstances appeared more favorably attuned to the possibility of maximizing the economic potential of social television. The turn to social television prognosticated a future where the quest for greater audience engagement seemed at hand under the guise of catering to the audiences’ desire to socialize around television content.

Chapter Three follows this discussion into the establishment of a social television culture with the first of a series of case studies that examines the impact of social television on television’s mode of operations. In this chapter, I focus on the NFL, the leading sports league in the United States, which is important not just because of its institutional hold on television but also because it serves as a stand-in for mass-media ideals of television viewing. As a holdout to the broader shifts transforming the television industry, the NFL initially proved resistant to the allure of social television. However, as the chapter demonstrates, changing circumstances led the NFL to increasingly accommodate social television practices in its overall strategy, albeit with a
tight grip that reflects the general culture of the organization. Nonetheless, in making a gesture toward greater social television activity, the NFL illustrates the broader significance of social television as a practice that is embedded in the everyday environment of television entertainment.

The importance of social television in everyday practices also emerges in the final chapter, which considers how social television manifests in cable networks, AMC and Bravo. Both networks were eager to embrace social television and they have implemented strategies that carefully script out play rituals for the audience. These play rituals have spurred the development of products, platforms and experiences that naturalize social television through a framework that privileges the networks’ commercial imperatives, and which furthermore has benefitted from the audiences’ capitulation to these ideals. At the same time, the chapter assertively makes the case for a more nuanced understanding of the audiences’ motives. On the one hand it does make sense to acknowledge how audiences have largely adopted the norms naturalized by the industry. Yet, it is myopic to deem audience activities simply as an act of submission to the commercial aims of the industry. Audience members willingly take part in these rituals, in part because these norms are rooted in, and expose the underlying attributes of telesociality. Telesociality emerges as the heart of the audience’s relationship to the television text, and the pleasures of television are revealed through the aspects of play and bonding that define social television in the contemporary era.

Methodological Approach

This dissertation project predominantly situates itself under the broad category of media industry research, and is concerned with exploring the discourses, representations and meaning
brought to bear on social television and out of which has emerged a set of cultural and economic practices. The project relies on an industrialization of culture approach to understanding the media industries, which has alternatively been termed critical media industry studies by Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz and Serra Tinic. In a review article summarizing the concerns of critical media industry studies, Havens notes, it is engaged in understanding the “lifeworlds that media industry professionals inhabit, the discourses through which they understand those lifeworlds, how those discourses arise and change, and how they produce particular representational regimes within commercial media texts.” Of particular interest to this project is the material effect of these circulating discourses, that is the industry lore that emerges from these discourses, which in turn produces a “seemingly irrefutable logic of how systems should operate.”

The project’s close attention to the belief structures that undergird the workings of the television industry, has prioritized research sites that account for the master narratives it generates about itself – the hype and trade stories that circulate around its mode of production and products – as well as the concrete practices that make up its day-to-day and long-term approach to producing television content. My approach here draws on John Caldwell’s exhortation to study critical industry practices – its “deep texts, rituals and spaces” – through a model that includes the industry’s deep texts, emic interpretations drawn up by industry practitioners, critical industrial geographies, and liminal industrial rituals. The rationale he offers suggest these key sites offer productive venues for understanding industrial reflexivity, how it is used to convey meaning and furthermore he makes a proposal for considering these objects as intricately bound to the industry; they are integral to its construction and help define its internal and external significance. Thus he argues, “these forms of mediation should not be viewed as mere flak for the truth-bound ethnographer digging for some deeper key to industry …
in many ways these mediations are the industry. Consequently, what I have done here is adopt and repurpose his method by examining newspaper and trade press articles, conducted reviews of promotional and marketing materials offered up by the industry, analyzed interviews and other presentations given up by industry professionals, and personally experimented with many of the technologies that have been used to drive social television.

The bulk of my research, however, was conducted through extensive analysis of trade press and newspaper articles. The historical considerations in play here made these articles a productive site of analysis, and a crucial strategy I adopted was to expand the scope of what constitutes trade press articles. As a result, I also focused on examining reports and other papers that emerged from technology conferences, for example the International Conference on Information Technology Interfaces, and professional organizations such as the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineer (IEEE). The technical reports produced for these trade conferences and associations, proved particularly useful in providing detailed accounts of the experimentations and features included in early social television prototypes. Additionally, these reports also provided insights into the motivations and assumptions that guided these early researchers. The other sources for my news and trade press analysis include online news sources, as well as databases such as Lexis Nexis, and Proquest, which was particularly useful for historical newspaper reports. I also paid particular attention to advertising and Hollywood trade press, such as Advertising Age, Variety, and extensively reviewed news from tech web sites including Mashable, Techcrunch, Gigaom and others.

Press reports, company blogs and other business reports proved very useful in examining promotional and marketing material, especially in terms of establishing timelines for Twitter’s
development, and the NFL’s engagement with and approach to social television. Beyond that, however, I also attended the National Cable and Telecommunications Association Conference (NCTA), where I was able to attend panels focused on social television and on sports programming. Attendance at this conference, produced an opportunity to talk to professionals in the social television analytics industry, and the opportunity to demo their products and services. In the instances, where I could not directly attend these conferences such as MIPCOM – the global entertainment content marketplace – I was able to view panels and other presentations online. The extensive video repository of industry conferences online, led to a great cache of interviews from executives and other employees of Twitter, Bravo, AMC and the NFL.

Between 2012 and 2016, I downloaded and interacted with several second screen apps, many of which are now defunct. These apps include *Get Glue, Miso, Viggle* and *Zeebox.* I also used several sports second screen apps, from the NFL, ESPN and Sports Illustrated, AMC’s *Story Sync* app over several seasons, and Bravo’s *Play Live.* All of these apps – especially the sports app, and the Bravo and AMC apps, were critical in informing some of the conclusions that emerge in my case studies. As a quick example, I used the NFL’s *Draft Xtra* app and ESPN Sportscenter, during live broadcasts of the NFL Draft to draw comparisons in the services of both companies. Published case studies from tech developers, for example CoverItLive, who partnered with the NFL, and A Different Engine, creator of Play Live for Bravo also proved useful for understanding the functionality of these apps, and the trajectory of their development.

The use of these apps brought me in close contact with actual audiences, but the audience research that makes up the latter part of this project took on two key approaches – non-intrusive observation of audience practices on Twitter and interviews with nine Twitter users by Skype.
This approach was driven by a need to achieve *verstehen* or understanding of the range of practices and norms that have developed amongst social television participants. My observations took place in 2015, where I followed several participants during the first half of AMC’s *The Walking Dead* sixth season, and Bravo’s *Real Housewives of Orange County*. Prior to the start of each season, I used Sysomos data to randomly select participants from each show that I could follow on Twitter. During each live broadcast, I observed the practices and interactions that emerged with some of these participants, but also reviewed and analyzed during non-broadcast moments, the networks that developed amongst these participants. The former was useful for understanding how live tweeting works in practice, while the latter helped formulate an understanding of sociality as a whole. At the end of the observation period, I asked several participants to take part in semi-structured interviews, as a way of gathering additional insights from the practices I had observed. Ultimately, I followed 104 people across Bravo and AMC’s sites, and conducted nine interviews. The guiding process for both the industry and audience portions of this project was to work towards theorizing from the ground up, a framework for understanding industry and audience approaches to social television, and articulating its overall significance to the television.
NOTES


9 Ibid., p. 9.

10 Ibid., p. 5.


13 Ibid.

14 From the media perspective, the watercooler effect refers to the idea that fans historically would gather together by the office watercooler to discuss television shows from the previous night. This was seen as a amplifying practice in that it influenced the shows that people would watch, as the incentive to be part of the conversation would lure in new viewers to the show.


20 See Couldry, Nick, and José Van Dijck. "Researching Social Media as If the Social Mattered." Social Media Society 1, no. 2 (2015). doi:10.1177/20535515604174 for a more thorough discussion on the ways in which the term social has been recalibrated. Ulises Mejias also takes issue with the redefining of social in his book, Off the Network.
van Dijck and Poell draw upon work by David Altheide and Robert Snow who outlined a mass media logic as the key institutional norm in the 1970s. Altheide and Snow suggested that the mass media logic had pervaded every facet of society to the extent that it had become the defining organizing structure for most institutions and was often perceived as “natural” or “neutral” in most contexts.


Ibid.


Roger Silverstone in his book Television and Everyday Life writes extensively about the everydayness of television and how it is embedded into the routines and rituals of our daily practices. He notes, “It is the place of television in the visible and hidden ordering of everyday life; in its spatial and temporal significance; in its embeddedness in quotidian patterns and habits, as a contributor to our security.” (p. 19). Rogers further elaborates noting, “Television is very much part of the taken for granted seriality and spatiality of everyday life. Broadcast schedules reproduce (or define) the structure of the household day.” (p. 20).


Ibid., 284.


Ibid., p. 5.


Ibid., p. 19.


Ibid.


Patterson and Stevens borrow the concept of “imitated reality” from Rinehart who writes about the mediatization of sports. Rinehart argues that the technological advancements in sports broadcasting and the introduction of more elaborate filming techniques emerged as a solution to the problem of trying to recreate the sensory experience of the live sporting event leading to the production of an “imitated reality” in the sports broadcast. See Rinehart, Robert E. Players All: Performances in Contemporary Sport (Drama and Performance Studies). Indiana University Press, 1998


Ibid., p. 156.


Ibid., p. 168.

Ibid., p. 259.


Ibid, p. 119.

Ibid, p. 115.

I used countless resources here and also drew on blogs and other smaller web sites focused on news about social television technologies, and recaps from insider trade conferences.

Zeebox changed its name to Beamly in 2014, and has since transitioned away from the second-screen business. It now creates social content for advertisers and marketers.

I ended up speaking to three Bravo fans, and six fans of The Walking Dead.
CHAPTER I

Talking Social Television: Historical Attention to Social Interactivity and Television

“Television is what we do, television is the thing that holds our attention. Television is the thing that evermore fuels and creates the culture. It's the main topic on social media.”

Michael Wolff, Author and Critic

In May 2012, trade publication Advertising Age (in conjunction with analytics firm Trendrr) released the first in a series of two charts intended to map out the burgeoning social television ecosystem. These charts, now relics of a specific moment within social television’s history, are instructive in what they reveal about the prevailing understanding of social television at the time. A brief skim through either of the charts discloses the convoluted and messy nature of the social television environment in 2012 and 2013. Advertising Age’s approach to mapping out social television hinged on the idea of incorporating companies with tenuous links to social television. As an example, the 2012 chart had a category called “Generic Social Networks” with platforms such as YouTube listed. The lack of a clear and defined boundary collapsed any sort of meaning around the term, but it also introduced a frenzy in the ecosystem that saw countless start-ups jump on the bandwagon.
Fig. 1.1: Both versions of the Ad Age/Trendrr Social TV Ecosystem Chart
Many of these emerging startups especially those designed to be used by the public are now shuttered, folded into other businesses, or have changed organization focus. Take the case of Get Glue, a check-in and second screen app that was once the most successful app in the genre with 4.5 million registered users, but shut down its service in December 2014. The platform, which was founded in 2008 as a recommendation service, entered the second screen market a year later, one of the first to do so. Get Glue started off as a check-in app, similar to Foursquare. The idea was users could receive stickers and points for checking into television shows (and movies). Users could then redeem these points for discounted services and goods from entertainment companies. The check-in feature was presented as a way for viewers to connect with one another, and so the Get Glue app also included a chat interface where viewers could carry out discussions while they watched the show.

The company initially saw some success, and entered into a partnership with DirecTV, and other major networks and film companies. In 2012, Get Glue announced a merger with Viggle, a competitor providing a similar range of services. The merger eventually fell through due to a lack of financing, and in November 2013, Get Glue was acquired by i.TV, another start-up attempting to gain traction in the social television market. i.TV originated as a TV guide app with the capability to remotely schedule some DVR units, mainly TIVO units and thus this sale was a new direction for the company. Following its purchase of Get Glue, i.TV changed the name of the app TVTag in January 2014 and revamped the service to focus more on “curated moments,” that is identifying key moments in the show where conversation could occur and organizing activities on the platform around these moments. The new service lasted less than a year as i.TV announced in December 2014 the TVTag app would be shut down permanently effective January 1, 2015.
By 2014, a number of other apps had also gone through a similar process. The Yahoo app, IntoNow – a combination TV guide and social television app – was shut down by the company in January 2014. Miso, another check-in app, was absorbed by TV Remote app, Dijit in February 2013, but Dijit eventually sold the app to Viggle. In September 2014, Viggle shuttered the Miso app. Consolidation of the marketplace continued as many startups transitioned away from providing direct support to customers and towards backend support for the networks’ in-house apps, or worked to support advertiser campaigns tied to second screens. Viggle the last hold-out in the third-party second screen app market was recently purchased by another start-up, Perks.com, a mobile rewards company. There was some overlap in the business strategies of both companies as Viggle established its niche in the second screen landscape by offering users the opportunity to earn tangible rewards such as gift cards, prizes and cash for watching television shows, or playing interactive games and quizzes on the app.\(^4\)

The simplest conclusion that emerges from these examples above might suggest that the second screen phenomenon (and social television more generally) was just a fad, which has since petered out.\(^5\) Yet, I bring up these examples because they speak to the heart of this chapter which asks simply why social television? In other words, what factors led to the emergence of an industry-wide focus on social television? What historical precedents can we turn to explain the development of this trend, and most importantly, what does the turn to social television reveal about long-standing industry beliefs about the audience and its relationship to television? My starting point for this analysis disputes the notion that social television is a recent phenomenon, arising out of technological developments, and the cultural transformations that emerged through user interactions with social media and mobile apps. Rather, I see connections between the frenzied drive to develop social television technologies with the much longer history of
experimentation by the television industry with technological innovations. As this chapter will illustrate, the push toward social television began much earlier than popular discourse might suggest and is inextricably linked to efforts to introduce interactive technologies into the television viewing experience. Both the earlier experimentations with interactive technologies and those of social television emerged out of the perceived desire of audiences for more enhanced engagement with the medium.

I argue that audience engagement as a strategy used by the industry takes on a number of registers. A textual register embodied in the storytelling practices favored by the industry, technological register emerging out of the myths that have been passed down about technology, which fuels an unerring optimism in the power of technology to foster economic growth and progress, and a social register based on assumptions on the multiple pleasures and benefits available to viewers by interacting with one another.

To some degree, social television in practice incorporates elements of all three registers, although it favors the latter two. Its importance derives from the renewed focus it brings to live viewing, not just for the industry, but also as a relational experience for the audience. The inexorable march towards social television, independent of industry manipulations, articulates the norms around social television that speaks to possibilities embedded in live viewing. Live television viewing derives its significance both from the economic implications to the network, as well as from the degree to which it is moored into the intimacy and sociality afforded by the medium. Television has historically been imagined as essential to the fabric of everyday living and experiences, and the everydayness of television draws currency in part from its capacity to foster connections between viewers. Live viewing is implicated in this ability of the medium to
foster connections between members of the audience. Furthermore, through its emphasis on immediacy and presence, it also serves as a critical affordance for re-imagining television as an interactive medium. The connections between watching television in real time and social television are important therefore not only for understanding the economic rationale for embracing social television, but because they help to frame the rise of social television historically and its development as emerging out of and occupying a critical juncture in the push toward interactive television.

There are fundamental reasons for aligning social television under the umbrella of interactivity. At its most basic level, social television is dialogic. It involves conversation, the “live and direct talk normally and normatively between two people.” In that sense therefore it is interactive, requiring the participation of two or more participants. At the same time though, the essence of social television dialogue stems from the television text itself, and the text needs to be structured to invite that dialogue or conversation. Paddy Scannell uses this understanding of dialogue as interactive to explore how liveness is managed on television. He argues that liveness is more sophisticated than simply recording events live, and draws comparisons between surveillance cameras, which simply record events as they transpire to live broadcast transmissions, which are produced intentionally to draw the interest of viewers. Thus he writes, “The liveness of radio and television broadcast is not some inherent technical property of technologies of production, transmission and record. It is the worked at, achieved and accomplished effect of the human application and use of technologies whose ontological characteristic is immediate connectivity.” The orientation towards immediate connectivity emerges both in relation to the audience and the text, which is Scannell’s main premise here, but also in the connectivity between viewers. The connectivity emerges through the dialogical
properties of television, a point that Scannell also makes arguing that television interaction emerges from the importance of talk to the medium.

The communicative ethos of radio and television is oriented towards the norms of everyday talk between people. It endlessly produces the situational space between broadcasters and their listeners and viewers as that of conversation. The proxemics of broadcasting are fundamentally oriented to interactions between people as persons, not the domain of the purely personal at one extreme, nor the purely impersonal at the other, but the intermediate zone of interpersonal interaction whose communicative medium is talk. 

Live viewing therefore becomes essential in pushing forward this “shared continuity of experience” necessary for fostering the dialogic component embedded in the television viewing process. If dialogue then is seen as interactive, social television and its resultant technologies emerge therefore as a bridge, a technological solution to the age-old problem of realizing the interactive potential of television. By capitalizing on the audiences’ innate desire to be social with one another, the impact of social television rests on the ability to transform these social experiences through technological frames and devices into a mode of being that allows for full audience engagement. This brings me back to my earlier point, where I suggest that social television and its development rightfully needs to be understood as part of a much longer historical trajectory centered around developing viable interactive television technologies. The long-standing belief in the advantages of interactive television fueled much of the early experimentations with social television, but also the continued hype that emerged following the Hack the Debate event. The idea that the innate interactivity embedded in the social relations that emerge around television could be harnessed and developed into a viable interactive television infrastructure energized social television advocates.
Tying social television into a broader historical analysis that accounts for experimentations with interactive technologies makes sense on a number of levels. Methodologically, it opens up a space to contextualize social television using Rick Altman’s crisis historiography framework, which provides a useful blueprint for understanding how representational technologies come to be named and for tracing out the negotiated and contested terrain that is crucial in calibrating how the technology comes to acquire meaning and how it is used. Altman argues against research approaches that assume technologies have determinate properties that serve as essential constructs in outlining how the technology is defined and how it evolves over time. Instead, he offers the alternative view that “the definition of any representational technology is both historically and socially contingent.” As a result, these technologies are subject to a crisis of identity in the nascent stage of development that emerges out of jurisdictional conflicts amongst competing interests and potential beneficiaries of the technology. The crisis of identity stemming out of these jurisdictional conflicts can be attributed to the multiple identities that technologies take on as each stakeholder struggles to assert dominance in naming the technology or in defining its features and properties. Eventually, the technology settles into a “stable” configuration, which nonetheless is hardly immutable, but rather remains a social construct that is “both ongoing and multiple.” Implicit in this framework, is the acknowledgment that new technologies are subject to and judged by the standards of its antecedents, thus it is important to consider and contextualize both existing modes of the technology as well as any dead-ends or failures along its lineage.

This perspective draws additional clarity from Megan S. Ankerson’s work on “read-only” web technologies. Her analysis of two commercially-produced web projects from the mid-1990s underscores the weakness in casting strict divisions between technological eras – what has often
been termed versioning within the context of the web. Essentially, her argument goes, these strict divisions between past and present “fail to engage with more complex ways that people, texts, institutions, technologies, and economies interact, develop particular qualities and logics, and change over time.” What she reveals through her case studies are specific instances where “core components of the “read-only” web” are reconfigured and articulated as characteristic of Web 2.0 practices.

Both Altman and Ankerson provide some useful context for understanding the failures that marked the beginning of this chapter, but also offer up new avenues for understanding social television that are not so tightly skewed towards the industry’s current approach to defining the concept. As the latter chapters will suggest, tensions exist between the industry and audiences’ understanding of social television. What matters here though is understanding and defining social television from a much broader scope than the set of practices that have come to dominate the industry narrative. To that end, I now offer an expanded definition of social television that marks the analytical boundaries for this project. Within this context, social television is built upon an affective mode of engaging with television that draws upon a longer history of audience behavior, and is inextricably linked to a mode of interaction that heavily favors engagement with technology.

**Defining Social Television**

From the perspective of the industry, social television takes on a number of dimensions explicitly linked to the business of making and selling television. Accordingly, ABC Netmarketing, a digital marketing firm, offers this definition in its digital marketing glossary:
Social TV usually refers to the use of social media platforms to enrich the experience of consuming a TV program and to possibly extend his [sic] audience. Social TV encompasses:

- use of social networks to announce and promote a TV program before broadcasting
- use of social media to bring interactivity in TV programs
- to give an echo to program before, during and after the broadcast (by promoting the use of a Twitter hashtag for instance)
- use of social media to reinforce TV ads.¹⁵

In practical terms, this limited understanding of social television produces a constricted form of industry-led social television practices. The primary, and possibly the most common practice is the focus on live tweeting. Since the early days of the *Hack the Debate* live-tweeting event, many television shows, from dramas to reality TV, and across networks from premium channels to broadcast, have integrated live tweeting into their programs. Often, these live tweeting sessions involve the cast and above-the-line crew members such as directors, show-runners and writers, tweeting alongside fans, and providing behind-the-scenes information or responding to fans’ questions. Live tweeting has become endemic to the broadcast process to the extent that most shows incorporate it as part of the audience viewing experience to varying degrees.

From the audience’s perspective, however, live tweeting endorses the creative team’s commitment to its audience’s allegiance. There is a mutual reciprocity taking place where “fans” obtain benefits for committing to the show. From direct interactions with the producing team or actors, these fans are given access to “special or extra content” such as behind-the-scenes information or insider perspectives on the action taking place on the screen. This backchannel becomes an active hub where live, rapid, and quick-fire social interaction can emerge around a television show for fans and the creative team.
Besides the focus on the backchannel, another popular mode of social television activity championed by the networks involves direct audience integration with the television show. In this mode, Twitter once again features prominently, as in the case of the reality show, *The Voice* – a music competition show. The show in its most recent seasons introduced the concept of the Twitter Save, where during the elimination phase of the show, fans have a five-minute window to tweet the name of one of three contestants they would like to save from elimination. Following an instant tally, the recipient of the most votes is “saved” and allowed to continue competing in the show. This particular form of social television activity is most common among reality and game shows, and within the last several years, a number of shows have attempted some version of integration, that allows the audience more “interactive” feedback with the show.\(^\text{16}\)

Other forms of audience integration occur on shows that adopt a post-show chat format; as in shows such as *Bachelor Live* on ABC, and the *Talking Dead* on AMC. These live shows are intended to be a vehicle for reflecting on the most recently aired episode. They feature a host and a series of invited celebrity guests. As the hosts and guests conduct a lively debate on air, the audience receives prompts to tweet questions to the guests or respond to polls through Twitter and other web/mobile apps. Some of these questions are integrated into the show, and on occasion part of the ongoing Twitter conversation is overlaid at the bottom of the screen similar to the format employed by the *Hack the Debate* show.

The use of second-screen apps, defined as mobile and tablet applications with enhanced content, has also emerged as a popular form of social television activity favored by the industry. As the introduction to this chapter notes, several third-party applications initially seemed
destined to dominate this market but recently network-owned apps have since taken over. The enhanced content offered to participants varies, but common offerings include the option for viewers to share content with others, take part in trivia contests and other gaming options, or to “check-in” to shows similar to the check-in options offered up by location apps such as Swarm, Hop-Over or even Facebook. Not surprising, second-screen apps have proven popular with the major sports leagues, as well as leading sporting networks such as ESPN, and CBS Sports, enabling a range of features including the ability to review team stats, standings, and player profiles, watch videos and interviews, and in some cases the option to chat with other fans. Similarly, the flexibility to offer behind-the-scene features has also proven popular with other content providers. For example, *The Walking Dead*’s StorySync offers a synchronous app experience where content is automatically delivered to the app that matches up with the live broadcast. In such cases, the synced content can provide the audience with previous plot details, polls, trivia and background on the characters within the show (as well as biographic information on the actors and actresses).

All of these practices seem designed to capitalize on the live-viewing experience, with the highest degree of interaction or enhanced content reserved for those viewers who watch the television show in real-time as it airs. The appeal of social television to the industry resides in its ability to indulge the fantasies of television networks and executive producers as a panacea to reduce audience time-shifting. Indeed, the idea that social television returns audiences to a linear viewing remains a critical part of the discourse around the phenomenon. Certainly, in the very early days of social television, this idea was seen as a critical advantage of the phenomenon and why it appeared to be one of the most promising recent television innovations. The economic value of ad-supported television has been centered around the ratings system and reports by both
Nielsen and Twitter, touting the relationship between increased social television chatter and show ratings pushed forward a narrative sets up this idea that social television could be used to return audiences to watching television live.\textsuperscript{18}

Part of this focus on live viewing can be attributed to a general anxiety about the current state of the television business and tensions over its future direction. The generally accepted consensus on the state of the contemporary industry marks this period as one filled with instability, with longstanding production norms and practices facing significant challenges. Writing about the transitions that have taken place in the television industry, Amanda Lotz has characterized the history of television into three broad periods. She argues for the first forty years of its existence, “the network era,” television modes of production and its business practices were fairly stable. However following a brief transition period, which she terms the multi-channel transition era, television has moved into a post-network era, characterized by increasingly complex and complicated modes of operation.\textsuperscript{19} The post-network era she writes has unsettled long-standing production processes, financing models and even audience viewing and consumption practices. This turn of events has produced a need to reassess contemporary understandings of what television is, which is complicated by the fact that the new norms of the post-network era continue to be worked out and have yet to exist within a stable configuration.\textsuperscript{20}

The current hype by the industry and the push toward designing commercially viable social television practices dovetails neatly into this discourse of industry anxiety. As imagined, social television putatively offers a way out of the impasse created by migratory audience patterns of behavior in which convenience trumps network schedules and ratings metrics. Therefore, the significance of social television to the industry is linked to its ability to colonize
the dialogical affordances of the medium and restructure audience activities into potential sources of revenue. The idea of social television emerging out of industry anxiety is important to note, not simply as an observation of historical circumstance, but it also derives significance given the context of the history of interactive television. Persistent rhetoric positioned interactive television as the next logical advancement in television, one that offered more sophisticated and participatory modes of engagement with the medium. The promise of interactive television as the harbinger of good fortune – both literally and figuratively – to the television industry is an important part of the narrative that has been replicated with the advent of social television.

A distinction nonetheless needs to be made between the industrialized logics of social television – the ways the industry coopts sociality – and a more theoretical framing that sees social television as an outcrop of human sociality that fosters connections between viewers, but also between viewers, the text, and the production apparatus. The industry’s realization of social television is simply a contrivance, an artificial manifestation of the interactions embedded within social television. Of utmost relevance conceptually, is the word social, which serves as the essential fabric in these relationships and embraces the sort of modality that turns the practice of viewing into a participatory mode of engagement. The concept of participatory culture has become an entrenched area of study among scholars concerned with audience and fan studies and can be seen as a manifestation of this shift towards increased participatory tendencies in society enabled by the growing abundance of connected technologies.\textsuperscript{21}

Despite its explicit connection to technology and to contemporary modes of participation and engagement, social television need not be seen as a primarily modern phenomenon. Rather, it embodies the historical conceit of television’s water-cooler effect. The idea of television’s
water-cooler effect informs early and foundational understandings of the audience’s relationship to the text, but also to one another in the sense that television has functioned to encourage people to reflect upon and discuss the content they watch with other like-minded viewers. Raymond Williams in talking about the audience as active participants, who enjoy talking about television shows writes

[There is] the desire of users to participate in the textuality of the text, to engage in its narrative, to re-sequence texts on their own terms, and to find new and imaginative ways to do so even when the text does not specifically encourage choice, engagement or activity. Such a perspective on interactivity is to see the audience as active and aware participants in the media process, and not as the cultural dupes of marketing techniques or authorial intent.

While I am far from suggesting that television viewing is similar to the process of reading a book, there are some broad parallels centered on the viewer’s desire to tease apart the narrative, break down plotlines and characters and just generally find consensus, or dissension with other viewers’ perspectives. Commonsense understanding of television as a social institution is therefore centered on the idea of people gathering to watch in social settings, both domestic and public, or to talk about favorite shows with others at work or in the home as a form of social ritualization, and such sociality is embodied in the rituals of television viewing. Social television therefore reflects the desire for companionship, connectedness and community that has been a fundamental characteristic of television historically and institutionally.

Put another way, social television is about presence – being present in the sense of having a temporal connection to the broadcast, that is watching live – but also in the sense of being oriented towards some action. Being present necessarily invokes an affective potential seen in the capacity of participants to affect others through their interactions and to be affected in turn. It is by virtue responsive, reflected in practice through expressive behaviors such as presenting
opinions about the text, engaging in debates with others, or even simply seeking reassurance or a validity check by following along with others’ perspectives or reactions. It distinguishes between what has often been termed passive viewing – a term I generally object to since it carries the implication that such viewing is devoid of reflexive thought – and supposedly “active” modes of viewing.23 Passive and active modes of viewing have also been described as lean-back and lean-forward engagement respectively, although these terms also prove to be too simplistic and imply that lean-forward viewing involves more audience engagement or enjoyment than lean-back viewing modes. Presence emerges out of affective responses – perceptual, cognitive or motor – in the sense that psychologist, Silvan Tomkins describes when talking about affect. Thus, it is both about feeling but more accurately reflects innate impulses towards geared towards the socialization of affect; the desire to engage in a complex feedback system that embodies “affect contagion.” Tomkins writes affect contagion

is critical for the social responsiveness of any organism. It is only when the joy of the other activates joy in the self, fear of the other activates fear within, anger of the other activates anger within, excitement of the other activates one’s own excitement that we may speak of an animal as a social animal.24

This orientation toward affect contagion within the context of watching television is what marks out the social television audience as a distinct category. It highlights the idea that for some members of the audience, the joy of watching a television show is not simply embedded within the text itself but in sharing that experience with others, employing a form of imagined togetherness that reflects one’s own understanding and enjoyment of the text, but also a broader sense of communal responses to the text. The social television audience therefore is one that is more attuned to seek out the opinions of others, and to proffer up their opinions, thus being present with the television text in a manner that requires attentiveness both to the text itself and
to the broader audience for the text. There is an intensity of experience between the text and the viewer that is magnified through interactions with others.25

More importantly though the idea of social television as being present with the text, offers a productive model for exploring the reasons for its co-optation by the industry, and why its evolution can be traced back to earlier efforts by the industry to introduce interactive television. Social television simply by virtue of its interactivity, but also because of its capacity to induce affective responses in the audience provides a compelling reason for the industry focus on the potential of social television technologies. Interactive television traditionally has been about the industry’s effort to realize more economic value out of its audience, and exploring the rhetoric that sustained and continues to sustain development in this area is crucial to understanding how and why social television came to be by the 2010s.

What is Interactive Television?

But then what is interactive television? Granted, a firm understanding of interactive television remains in flux, rooted in the much larger conceptual debates surrounding interactivity. Scholars concerned with defining interactivity within the rubric of interpersonal communication exist at one end of the spectrum. The perspectives offered here focus on social interactions between people, either face-to-face, or through mediated technologies. On the opposite end of the spectrum are scholarly approaches that consider interactivity solely through the lens of the user-technology interface. There is little to no consideration given to user-to-user interactions in this analysis.

Jens F. Jensens, who has written extensively about interactive television, summarizes the former perspective as emerging from a sociological framework whereby interactivity is seen as
“the relationship between two or more people who, in a given situation, mutually adapt their behavior and actions to each other.” What can be abstracted from this framework is the notion that interactivity is very much about participation and social connectedness primarily in real-time among a group or groups of people. Technology may be allowed in these interactions, but the interactivity stems from the actual connections and exchanges that take place among the various participants.

On the other hand, alternative theories of interactivity privilege the interactions that take place between people and technology. These viewpoints are more concerned with articulating the ways in which interactivity transforms media from a one-way broadcast model to a two-way mode of interaction, whereby users can exert control and manipulate the broadcast content via technological means. The viewpoints advanced here can be summarized by Rockley Miller who defines interactivity as “a reciprocal dialog between user and the system” requiring “the active participation of the user in directing the flow of the computer or video program, a system which exchanges information with the viewer, processing the viewer’s input in order to generate the appropriate response within the context of the program.” Thus he concludes, interactive media are “media which involves [sic] the viewer as a source of input to determine the content and duration of a message, which permits individualized program material.”

In general, the development of interactive television from the industry’s perspective has tended to privilege the second perspective given the huge emphasis here on technology. The overarching consensus tends toward (although not exclusively so) on providing a two-way communicative system that provides an intelligent feedback mechanism, which is responsive to the choices and inputs delivered by users. Technological advancements such as the provision of
multiple programming options and information services activates user choice in this scenario. User choice “empowers” viewers to control the technology, which transforms it from a push model of delivery towards a pull model through which viewers can directly engage with specific types of content and information. Conceivably the two-way nature of this form of interactive television serves a dual purpose. The focus on choice and convenience is advantageous to users, but it also provides a form of direct feedback that can be leveraged by the industry for the purposes of marketing and advertising.

The above understanding of interactive television centered around technology is best articulated in a 2001 Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Notice of Inquiry (NOI), suggesting interactive television be classified as, “a service that supports subscriber-initiated choices or actions that are related to one or more video programming streams.” Included in this definition is a clear demarcation between interactive services and the main video signal. The NOI outlines a number of interactive services including electronic programming guides, the ability to select alternative camera angles, chat rooms and e-mail services, and critically in light of second screen apps, access to a “graphical interface, e.g. a screen or screens that wraps around the video signal(s) being displayed, which provides supplementary information related to the video display or the opportunity for “t-commerce” (the purchase of merchandise related to the displayed video signal).”

In briefly outlining the broader debates surrounding interactivity, I am most interested here in setting up a foundation for exploring the relationship between social television and interactivity. Social television draws upon both theoretical frameworks – those who see interactivity as residing mainly within the domain of interpersonal communication and those who
are more concerned with technology, the ways in which it functions as, and embodies interactive traits. Given the place of technology in the operationalized definition of social television, and the approaches to interactivity that just as significantly have captured the interest of the television industry, the most salient debates here center on the perspectives that have been focused on developing better loopback systems between technology and users. Within this specific context, a particular resonance for understanding social television and its connections to interactivity emerges in the writings of P. David Marshall. In parsing out the fundamental transformations that have emerged in the media industry, Marshall focuses on the new media industrial economic model. Interactivity, he notes, is the engine that drives this new economic model; one in which the individual user is highly privileged and hailed through a discourse of choice and personalization. He writes, “it [enables] users to fabricate their own stories, their own connections, and their own social networks.”

To properly outline what he means by interactivity, Marshall highlights three essential and related components. The first has to do with cybernetics, and Marshall suggests the interactive systems produced take the individual user as a key focus of the production process and thus incorporate “a structure of feedback loops that make the experience containable within a given system.” Interactive systems also have to be “smart” in the sense that they can anticipate and cater to a user’s desire. This he argues is crucial because the end goal of smartness is making the technology simple enough that it can assist users in becoming producers. Finally, Marshall argues these interactive technologies also have to facilitate social connectivity with others. The creation of social connective interfaces reveals the true motives for the development of these interactive technologies. Drawing on White’s (1996) concept of transactional spaces, Marshall argues that these social connective technologies produce “transactional spaces, spaces of
exchange that allow for other services and perhaps other products to be inserted.” Ultimately then it is social connectivity that drives the economic engine of this new media industry. The creation and development of strong social bonds help to expand the reach of economic productivity in two ways – via channeling and spreading. Spreading allows for expansion of the network through repeated invitations to other members of the network, while channeling works as a gateway, that filters interactivity through a number of carefully managed technologies aptly illustrated with the development of network and third-party second screen apps.

Marshall’s conceptualization of interactivity, transposes neatly into the ways in which social television was/is technologized. The emphasis for the industry has been the careful orchestration of users’ activities and habits. This view of social television involves the social engineering of the audiences’ natural inclination to bond over mutual interests, in this case television. The social engineering “channels” the audiences’ habits through technology using second-screen apps or through scripted practices such as live tweeting. Spreading occurs somewhat spontaneously; it emerges out of the relationships that the audience and participants have developed beyond the confines of the show. It functions as a desirable outcome of the channeling, enabling media institutions to capitalize on the social bonds that audiences have nurtured. Spreading, however, also invokes the notion of the “networked audience.” The concept of the networked audience emerges in the writings of Alice Marwick and danah boyd, stemming out of digital communication practices. They note, “it consists of real and potential viewers for digital content that exist within a social graph, and thus “it is both potentially public and personal.” As a result, networked audiences facilitate the management of social relationships of varying degrees of intimacy. Tying the notion of the networked audience into spreading reveals the importance of “publicness” as an important register in mediated social
television. The public nature of the social television interactions is intended to move the boundaries of the practices beyond the core participants to the much larger networks the participants inhabit. This creates the potential for every single member of the extended network to become part of the social television audience. Thus, mediated social television depends heavily on the audience as an important cog in promoting and recruiting others to indulge in a show. It recasts the fundamentals of social television in ways that best serve the interests and needs of the media institution.

Consequently, what is particularly germane to this project are the actual ways in which the term interactivity has been appropriated and understood by the television business, and how that informs the ways in which technology is developed and pushed out to unruly audiences. Thus, I am most interested here in the industrial and marketing discourses that have long sustained the development of interactive television and how that informs the emergence of new platforms as well as new providers of these technologies. More importantly, shining a historical lens over earlier instantiations of interactive television developments, in particular the hype and rhetoric that emerged in the nineties, prompts apt comparisons and a corollary to emerging discourse and industry strategies that have been engendered around social television. Additionally, it represents a more accurate understanding of the development of social television that rejects the notion of social television developing spontaneously with the advent of social media.

This approach returns the project to its broad focus on charting out a historical lineage for understanding social television technologies and for highlighting a persistent industry approach to technology that is fundamentally fueled by optimism at its potential to create new spaces for
commercialization. Furthermore, the logics that sought to turn television into a two-way real-time interactive medium have been replicated and amplified in the development of social television technologies. At its core, the logics that sustain this strategy are fueled by the belief that interactive television – and subsequently social television – will yield new and improved transactional spaces for marketing and harvesting revenue from audiences and advertisers.

**Interactive TV: Forerunner to Social Television**

On December 14, 1994, Time Warner launched its experimental Full Service Network (FSN) in the Orlando, Florida area. The Full Service Network, billed as a one-stop shop for interactive shopping, gaming and video-on-demand came with high expectations based on its potential to offer over 500 channels to users. Ostensibly, the FSN project was billed as a simple pilot initiative intended to flesh out the ways in which interactive services could be channeled into a viable commercial product, but Time Warner had much grander objectives in mind. Reportedly, the company expected to roll out the service to 85 percent of its customer base by the end of 1998. The overriding optimism fueling the development of the Full Service Network was riding on the belief that interactive television would transform the television industry and provide new lucrative opportunities for the marketing and commercialization of products through the television set. This broad sentiment was succinctly reflected in remarks made by then CEO and Chairman of Time Warner, who noted at the launch:

The debut of the Full Service Network is a turning point for the communications industry… With digital interactivity, consumers are in total control of the programming they bring into their homes … [and] over the long-term, the FSN opens up a new world of distribution opportunities for every division of Time Warner. It will challenge us to do more of what we do best, create the most innovative information and entertainment content in the world.
Notably, the heady excitement expressed here by Levin was a widely shared perspective echoed by many players within the telecommunications, technology, and television industries. Major telecommunication companies such as Bell Atlantic, US West and GTE also announced company-sponsored interactive trials, that incorporated a variety of technology options and services, as did network studios such as Paramount and Viacom. The range of services offered by these companies differed, although the ultimate focus in building out interactive television infrastructures was to provide an integrated service that combined internet and broadcast features in an effort to create a super network, and was capable of delivering a rich multimedia experience for television consumers. For example, an Interactive Video Data Service (IVDS) system from TV Answers touted the ability for viewers to “order, watch and pay for pay-per-view programs, instantly bank, pay bills, order and charge TV-offered products on their credit cards, be counted in TV polling, or even order pizza right off their TV screens.”

Yet the concentrated interest in interactive technologies that emerged in the early nineties might be best understood through a historical lens that takes into account the much more storied history between interactivity and television. The earliest attempts to introduce interactive services into television reportedly began in the 1950s through the television show, Winky Dink and You (1953-57), with the introduction of what by today’s standards would be considered primitive interactivity involving a clear sheet of plastic placed over the television screen on which children could draw to help Winky get out of scrapes.

To be clear, Winky Dink and You falls far outside the standards of contemporary understandings of interactivity. The “magic window” used by the children was hardly a technological marvel, and did not truly enable any sort of control over the content on the screen,
nor did it truly direct the narrative. Instead, the system worked by carefully managing the children’s’ activities. For example, if Winky Dink needed to escape from a mishap, the children would receive instructions to draw a bridge or maybe a ladder to help him get out of the scrape. However, the ladder or bridge would not actually appear on the screen, so it was in reality just meant to encourage activity and concentration on the part of the children. The show proved to be very popular with children, and ran for four years before its cancellation over fears about radiation from the television screen. The significance of *Winky Dink and You* in considering the history of interactive television comes from its pioneering role in imagining television as more than a one-way broadcast device. *Winky Dink and You* was also instrumental in opening up the possibility for monetizing these sort of two-way interactions. The popularity of the show proved to be a lucrative endeavor for the producers who made a fortune on the sale of the Winky Dink kits.

By the 1970s, the idea of television as a potential two-way device began to gain more currency and interactive television evolved with the introduction of more elaborate hardware interfaces with the ability to capture customer input. One of the most prominent trials that emerged during this period involved Qube, a 30-channel cable system launched in the Columbus Ohio area in 1977, and later expanded to other cities. In promos for the service, Warner Amex Cable (the service provider) emphasized how Qube opened up an opportunity for viewers to “talk back” to the television. And just like the interactive television experiments of the 1990s, the discourse around the service focused on the possibilities of creating new transactional opportunities through the Qube system such as home banking and shopping.
The Qube system was innovative in that it consisted of a proprietary remote control filled with a number of buttons that recorded viewers’ responses to prompts, which could then be used to control the narrative on the screen or as an instant poll resource. Many of the features launched through the Qube cable service have transitioned into essential or commonplace technological features contained within the experience of television today. For example, Qube launched the first pay-per-view service with sports events and featured fee-based movie-rental option for subscribers. It also featured music channels similar to the on-demand channels that are now a staple on most cable systems, and launched the first home shopping channels through its auction services. Qube also introduced several shows or channels that have transitioned into well-known cable networks such as the children’s show Pinwheel, which eventually morphed into the channel Nickelodeon and a music show Sight and Sound, which led to Music Television (MTV).
In contrast to *Winky Dink and You*, the interactive features of Qube did allow viewers the option of controlling the narrative. The instant poll option was a popular feature on the game shows and talent contests that aired on the channels. Viewers could play along with contestants on game shows, by guessing or predicting how the contestants would respond to questions, or they could vote for contestants on talent shows. Sports viewers could also interact with the device, for example, predicting plays during local football games, a feature that would feature prominently in subsequent interactive ventures, such as ABC’s Enhanced TV. Despite the promise of interactive television ushered in by Qube the service only lasted six years, and Warner Amex cancelled the service in 1984.

John Carey who writes extensively about the history of interactive TV points to three main factors that contributed to the failure of the Qube cable service. Carey cites the prohibitive cost of the service was a main factor. The monthly subscription for Qube ran four times the average cost of a cable box. In addition, the overhead for Warner Amex was quite significant, and the service suffered from reliability issues. Carey also cites the low production values of Qube programming and the low rates of use among subscribers as other factors contributing to the service’s eventual shuttering. Warner Amex’s primary motivations for launching the service should not be discounted. Carey contends Warner was motivated in part by a desire to grow its cable franchises and used Qube’s innovative features to impress and woo regulators. 47
Following the failure of Qube, interactive experiments continued within television although the next big wave occurred in the nineties accompanied by the hyperbole and sense of optimism aptly demonstrated in Levin’s statements on the Full Service Network. Notably, and presaging the rhetoric that emerged with social television, over-the-top headlines appeared in the press with titles such as “Silicon Valley sees Gold in Interactive TV,” “The Jackpot in Television’s Future,” and “The Revolution of the Mind: How Computer Technology Will Put Power in the Hands of the People.” Some suggested that these interactive technologies would bring about a “total transformation” of the future, through “interactivity, mobility, convertibility, connectivity, ubiquity, and globalization.” Underlying all this positive talk was the sense that
interactivity would lead to new sources of revenue for the techno-communication industries and for advertisers as well. Although there was some expectation that adoption would be slow, practitioners were convinced that the potential surpassed any initial start-up costs. They further believed that as the quality of service improved, and as the cost of access dropped, many more consumers would become fully active participants of interactive television and would eagerly adopt the services making the initial investment a worthwhile endeavor.\footnote{52}

To be fair, in context, these sentiments are symbolic of a particular moment in history, reflecting the broader techno-optimism sweeping the nation during this period. Coming in the early days of nationwide adoption of the Internet, the prevalent wisdom envisioned these grandiose visions of its potential, embodied in the persistent belief suggesting the next step was the development of this super “information highway.” Patrice Flichy, writing about this historical moment, introduces the concept of the “imaginaire” to describe the myths and ideologies that sustained such technological visions. In charting out early discourse surrounding the eventual development of the Internet, he turns to the rhetoric that emerged in the early 80s and 90s around the vision of building a national information infrastructure for the United States. Originally proposed as the National Research and Education Network (NREN), multiple stakeholders (politicians, educators and technologists) endorsed this idea of building out a super highway, captivated by what they perceived to be its revolutionary capacity. Flichy draws on quotes from Democratic Congressman, Rick Boucher who describes the development of the National Research and Education Network (NREN) as

\begin{quote}
a major step on the road to the future information infrastructure of the nation. This future ubiquitous network for voice, video and data communications of all kinds will connect homes, schools and workplaces. It will constitute an essential
\end{quote}
ingredient for our future economic competitiveness and will open new worlds of information and services for all of our citizens.\textsuperscript{53}

Expressing related sentiments, James Keller a chief contributor to the project talked about it in these terms.

Even the most basic connection should enable users to act as information sources as well as destinations. In this way, development of the NII offers a potential paradigm shift in communications, publishing and human interaction comparable to that effected by the Gutenberg press. Information Infrastructure is an enabler of both free speech and efficient markets. It can help overcome barriers of information and create opportunities to convene regardless of geographic, physical or financial constraints.\textsuperscript{54}

The overlying optimism Flichy notes, produced a “phantasmagoric utopia” centered on the idea that “if we build it, they will come.”\textsuperscript{55} This phantasmagoric utopian vision received significant support from the Clinton and Gore presidency who were committed to the idea of developing a National Information Infrastructure (NII) that would serve as “an interactive network for both entertainment and work.”\textsuperscript{56}

More importantly, the techno-centric logic that fueled much of this discourse was over-determining in that it assumed the “freeing of information” and the deployment of a broad range of new technologies would override long-existing cultural practices that users had embodied. The rhetoric took on a liberalizing ideology that suggested users would have access to a wide-range of information, and more control over the ways in which they accessed and used this information. This ethos of the “internet imaginaire” produced similar expressions of optimism in the television industry. Fueled by the rhetoric of change that emerged during this period, television network executives and telecommunication service providers were emboldened at the notion that the emerging technologies would yield new markets and would transform the relationships between the industry and its audience.
For the television industry specifically, the idea of more control focused on turning viewers from passive consumers of content to active users, hinging on the idea of active meaning more susceptible to commercialization opportunities. The idea of developing a technology with more access points to consumers, and more direct means of interaction seemed irresistible to the industry and to advertisers. This broad optimism received support in part from the deregulation policies that became a hallmark of the Clinton-Gore administration. No longer encumbered by restrictions on the types of services they could offer consumers, telecommunication companies eagerly sought out the lucrative television industry as an opportunity for future development and innovation. At the same time, the television industry was aware that it needed to innovate to stay ahead of the changing television landscape. Although practices like time-shifting or narrowcasting (catering to niche audiences) were not fully entrenched yet, the emergence of cable and rise of upstart channels like Fox and UPN had begun to disrupt the long stable practices of television, in a time when it had been dominated by the Big Three networks (ABC, CBS and NBC). Capitalizing on the audiences’ affinity towards socializing around television seemed like a logical next step. The confluence of all these factors therefore created the perfect environment for experiments with social television technologies.

**Early Experimentations with Social Television**

The lasting legacy of the interactive television experiments of the nineties can be seen in everyday technologies now available to consumers such as the Digital Video Recorder (DVR), Video-On-Demand (VOD), and electronic programming guides (EPG). Indeed, significant research and effort in the intervening years helped to direct advances in these technologies. The ethos of the Internet imaginaire left an imprint on technology development, one that also played
a considerable role in the advancement of social television technologies. Besides the utopian discourse that fueled belief in the potential of the Internet and the possibility of building out a new information superhighway, Flichy notes the utopian vision of the Internet was also gripped by the idea of creating virtual communities similar to but more superior to the traditional notions of community bounded by geographical limitations. These perspectives were heavily influenced by Howard Rheingold’s work, *The Virtual Community*, in which he details online community spaces such as The Well characterized by richly rewarding social and intellectual interactions. As Flichy notes, “The Internet was presented as helping to recreate a social link and to breathe life into public debate and, more generally, into democratic life.”

The idea that the Internet could emerge as a space where geographically dispersed groups of people with shared common interests could congregate became a key focal point for research and commercial initiatives seeking to tap into the potential of the Internet. Television seemed ready-made for such research via its built-in potential to forge communities of interest, and also because it already inspired discussion and exchange of ideas expressed popularly through the idea of the TV watercooler. By the late nineties, several research endeavors emerged seeking to understand how Internet technologies could be used to facilitate social interactive spaces for television audiences. These early interventions into social television technologies were on the one hand about technologizing social activities around television, but also reflect a desire to reach through and capture something essential about television. In other words, what they reveal is a belief in the idea of television as a social medium, and the optimism that this sociality could be directed technologically.
These early experiments into social television diverged along two paths. First were the experiments conducted in research labs – mainly through academic and industry partnerships – that were conceptual rather than practical, and focused on the possibilities of not only transforming everyday practices through technology, but also on pushing the boundaries of what the technology could reasonably be expected to accomplish. Alternatively, there were the purely commercial ventures, that followed directly in the footsteps of the early interactive trials of the nineties. The motivation here was simple – to continue exploring the profitability of new technology systems and finding ways to better integrate (or commercialize) Internet services with television. Although motivated by different concerns, the unifying theme of both experimental and commercial explorations into social television coalesced around the idea of transforming the television living room experience of the network era into virtual lounge spaces where viewers could congregate and watch shows in communion with others and engage in conversation.

Experimental Approaches to Social Television

One early development in this area can be traced back to the concept of Inhabited TV (1998), a joint project combining researchers from the University of Nottingham, British Telecom (BT) Labs, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and Sony. The purpose statement outlining the goals of the project defined Inhabited TV as geared towards creating a “new medium for entertainment and social communication which combines collaborative virtual environments (CVEs) with broadcast TV. The fundamental idea of this medium is that on-line audience (sic) can participate in TV program within shared virtual worlds.”

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The researchers involved with the Inhabited TV project envisioned two main uses for the collaborative virtual environment; as a companion lounge for viewers, or more ambitiously, as a site for extending the live broadcast interactively, with some elements of the show taking place within the virtual environment. The assumptions fueling the project were as follows: The Inhabited TV environment was to be a highly participative network with varying degrees of participation available. The innermost level of the Inhabited TV environment included the performers of the show with the flexibility and ability to participate at the highest degree with the show. Beyond this innermost level, the next layer was to be made up of the inhabitants of the virtual environment. This second group could participate with the show to varying degrees, from simply socially watching and engaging with other participants at this level, or by contributing some form of content for the show. The third layer with the greatest distance from the show were the traditional home viewers, whose participation was limited to watching at home, or at best, taking part in shows requiring audience votes. At the periphery of the Inhabited TV environment was the production team – directors, producers, and technical staff – involved in the creation of the show. As a whole, the Inhabited TV largely considered this group mainly invisible in the process.

The actual experiments took place over four phases involving a number of different settings that included both stage productions and television shows with more emphasis on the latter. However, each of the experiments employed similar set-ups that mirrored the participation levels described above. In each phase, the actors performed in front of a live audience – either on a theatrical stage, or in a television studio. The performances were also transmitted to viewers watching at home, and to viewers who were watching virtually through computer workstations.
Participants in the virtual environment largely interacted with each other using avatars. Although the researchers were interested in fostering social interaction within a virtual environment, many of the earlier experiments fall far outside the realm of contemporary understandings of social television. For example in the second phase, the researchers created a virtual environment, *The Mirror*, consisting of six theme worlds all based on the British TV show, *The Net (1998-1999)*. Regular viewers were invited to move into this virtual world where they could engage in a number of activities and play interactive games with each other. Reports of these inhabitants’ activities were integrated back into the main show, as news items.

The experiment most closely resembling contemporary social television took place with another show, *Heaven and Hell – Live*, a game show. The core show involved a host, and two contestants (both local celebrities), along with “three reporters.” As standard, there was a studio audience, and viewers within the inhabited environment as well as in the home environment. Home viewers could double up as inhabited viewers by logging on to the Inhabited TV world for the show. The reporters acted as the key link between the virtual world and the TV world. Their role on the show was to report on the activities of the “lost souls,” the participants in the Inhabited TV environment. It is worth noting that the TV show performers also appeared as avatars in the virtual world. The participants in the virtual world could communicate with each other via text chats, and could ostensibly communicate with the show performers via chat. The performers in turn could respond to the chats they received from the virtual participants, although most of the conversation between the performers took place within the confines of the show.
The preliminary work done here hardly proved to be a feasible option for future television engagement. The overriding conclusion emerging from the Inhabited TV research suggested the participatory form of engaging with television it imagined had a high appeal, but technological limitations made its implementation impractical. The researchers noted the quality of the broadcast within the Inhabited TV world was inadequate compared to traditional viewing on a TV set. They also documented technical limitations and issues with audio transmission and camera work within the virtual environment, and the constraints in communication imposed by the avatars hampered by limited forms of expression. Communication between the performers and the virtual participants suffered in this setup and it often lagged with the performers mostly

Fig. 1.4: A schematic showing the Heaven and Hell-Live Inhabited TV World
interacting with one another, ignoring the on-line chat participants. Ultimately, the prevailing consensus from this experiment keyed in on this specific point – the Inhabited TV project although promising, and with the potential for future viability, could not be fully integrated because the technologies in place at the time of the research had very distinct characteristics and practices, at odds with each other. Despite this setback, the optimistic takeaway from this research assumed this problem was temporary and that the eventual convergence of data networks with broadcast technology would eliminate the deficiencies embedded in the system.62

Nonetheless, the research highlighted a key facet in the assumptions guiding social television development, namely a belief that it could herald the convergence of the text and social interactions technologically. The approach favored by the Inhabited TV producers refused to see the television text as a static object independent of the activities of the audience. Influenced no doubt by the hypertextuality of online spaces, these researchers were intent on exploring different modes of engagement not just between participants, i.e. the audience, but also with the television broadcast itself. Social television was constituted thus as inhabiting a dual framework bringing together the best of the Internet and television and creating a potentially more advanced mode of interaction and engagement.

This shared belief of an upcoming future driven by the integration of television with Internet technologies persisted in research labs across Europe and in the United States. Throughout most of the early 2000s, a number of research trials emerged with a focus on exploring how best to incorporate online social interaction practices with television. Some of the more notable research experiments in this period include: Microsoft Research Lab’s Media Center Buddies Project (2004), Alcatel’s Amigo TV (2005), Xerox PARC’s Social TV (2005),
TNO’s ConnecTV (2007), Motorola’s Social TV (2008) and CollaboraTV (2008), a joint collaboration between AT&T Research Labs and researchers from Carnegie Mellon, University of Minnesota and Georgia Tech. While the various technologies differed in implementation, there were significant similarities in the affordances of the various prototypes with an emphasis on creating shared viewing experiences, even across distance. Common features included chat services so participants could talk and sometimes share content with each other and the addition of an electronic program guide (and viewing history) to allow for discovery of new content. For example, the Media Center Buddies Project sought to find ways to integrate instant messaging into its Media Center interface without compromising on viewers’ ability to enjoy the show free from distractions. Alcatel’s Amigo TV featured the use of avatars overlaid on the screen to represent the participants, who could communicate with each other using headphones. Users’ could also employ emoticons that would appear on the screen as a form of expression. 

![Fig. 1.5: The instant message feature as implemented in the Media Centers Buddy Project](image)

Fig. 1.5: The instant message feature as implemented in the Media Centers Buddy Project
Most of these projects did not make it past the research stage, but they are important to consider in terms of conceptual imaginations of television, but also in terms of how some of the ideas developed here carried over to contemporary apps designed to facilitate socializing around television. As a case in point, although the Xerox PARC effort never made it past the conceptual stage, it did involve a number of experiments with actual users to understand how and when viewers engage in chatter around television, and which genres incite the most amount of social
interaction. Based on these experiments, the Xerox PARC researchers outlined a number of key characteristics they determined were essential in the development of any future social TV system. Given the current state of technology development in social television, the PARC team was at once both prescient and off the mark in how they envisioned the actual technical composition of the device. In their estimation, a social television prototype needed to incorporate existing devices such as Digital Video Recorders and TV sets, rather than existing as stand-alone devices. They also intended this social television prototype to sync with the broadcast show, pausing on occasion to allow users to comment or chat with fellow participants. Additionally, the team expected ad content would adjust accordingly under this scenario, with some ad breaks taking longer as viewers engaged in extended interactions outside the primary show. While they did not account for any enhanced features such as clips, polls and bonus information, they proposed having a feature that would allow users to catch-up on the show, and tried to account for the need to engage in widespread as well as more private conversations.

These early experiments are significant in terms of what they reveal about social television, both historically and in the present tense. First, the use of the term “Social TV” appeared in research circles long before its more widespread adoption circa 2010. This revelation serves a crucial purpose, situating social television firmly as a function of television, as opposed to imagining it simply as a modern day practice emerging in response to the rise of social media. Additionally, many of the concepts of social media interactions now taken for granted emerged during this experimental phase. ConnecTV for example relied heavily on the use of its “buddy list.” Users of the service “followed” other buddies (in the social media sense), and had the ability to see what these buddies were watching and could set up their television system to automatically switch to the channel thus initiating both this “live viewing” experience critical for
social television interactions, but also the sense of presence needed to usher in interaction between the buddies, who could share messages and other content with each other. Features such as sharing content, following users, and taking part in synchronous conversations were thus a key aspect of early interventions in social television revealing a fundamental belief in television’s intrinsic connections to sociality, but also to the importance of live viewing.

On some level, the research agenda undergirding these projects aimed at gaining insight into the hidden potentials of internet-TV technologies is an important consideration for sure. However, the researchers explicitly state a core belief in television as a medium around which people generally watch together, talking and sharing feelings about the content, or use it as a basis for future conversations with friends and family. What is also important to take away from these early interventions is the idea of liveness being displaced from the moment of transmission to that of reception. In foregrounding live viewing, the researchers were at the same time inculcating the practice of synchronous viewing as one that is very much grounded in social encounters, seeking to evoke or capitalize on a “sense of liveness” as endemic to live viewing. In writing about liveness through the lens of media rituals, Nick Couldry suggests it is a social construction, that nonetheless

naturalizes the idea that, through the media, we achieve a shared attention to the realities that matter for us as a society. This is the idea of the media as a social frame, the myth of the mediated centre. It is because of this underlying idea (suggesting society as a common space focused around a ‘shared’ ritual center) that watching ‘live’ makes the difference it does: otherwise why should we care that others are watching the same image as us, and (more or less) when we are.66

That is certainly one way to look at liveness, but it is probably more useful to consider the ways in which liveness functions perceptually – how it evokes feelings in the viewer that privileges togetherness and closeness with others. Liveness in this sense functions on a spectrum, with
viewers capable of negotiating the degree to which this closeness occurs. Thus, even in the spirit
where we imagine liveness to be tied to being co-present either spatially or temporally,
intentionality is built in, as alluded to in earlier framing of social television as “being present”. In
the same way that two people could be present in the same room but not have any interaction
with one another, liveness reflects the desire and degree to which social actors choose to
encounter and engage each other. This quality of liveness and intimacy reflects the basis upon
which telesociality – socializing around television – is founded. It is meaningful and directed
interaction that is grounded not only in reaching out to other viewers but suggests an amenability
or “impulse to sociability”67 that derives pleasure and satisfaction in transforming day-to-day
experiences into opportunities for convivial encounters. Live viewing may be ritualistic in nature
but the ritualized aspect is tied less to this lofty idea of attending to the issues that matter most to
society, but rather is rooted in this need for socialization. Entertainment television finds
resonance for its audience both in the sense that it is a pleasurable activity, but also because it
carves out a space for talking about content that matters to us, reflecting the reality that the text
can have an emotional effect on the viewer that often needs to be expressed externally.

The inability of these research projects to make the transition into commercially viable
technologies did not stem from a misunderstanding of this core assumption around television.
Indeed, many of the research projects achieved high rates of satisfaction amongst the research
subjects who tested out these implementations. The degree of satisfaction with the shows used in
these experiments enjoyed a positive correlation with the rate of participation. Respondents
noted for example, “The more people and friends there are, the better the experience.”68 This
notion of volume increasing the engagement experience appears in the findings of research
projects going as far back as Inhabited TV, with similar findings emerging in the Media Center
Buddies Project, the Amigo TV project, and the most recent experiment, CollaboraTV.\textsuperscript{69} CollaboraTV, which also integrated avatars and an instant messaging service into its interface reported satisfaction rates of over 80 percent, but did note activity levels dropped for participants who experienced the service with few other participants. What is particularly interesting to note with the CollaboraTV experiment is the connection the researchers make with social media. The lower rate of adoption by non-social test participants prompted the researchers to conclude the service would be better served if it incorporated a mechanism to invite others to join, or was integrated into social media technologies such as Facebook, or MySpace.\textsuperscript{70}

Thus, an interesting conclusion from these early experiments is not a lack of vision, or a fundamental misunderstanding of the affordances and functionality most prized by audiences. Rather, what is evident here is simply an example of research moving ahead of its time. The inclination to see television as heading towards a social television future was right. The issue however, was a failure in first establishing a solid infrastructure to help support the social television interface, and an audience ready to adopt the new technology. This critical flaw provides additional insight into the commercial initiatives that emerged in this period, and as the next section shows, several companies also attempted to integrate social chatter features into television well before 2010 with varying degrees of success.

\textit{Commercial Interpretations of Social Television}

The separation between the experimental explorations into social television and the commercial counterpart is not simply the lack of a primary profit motivation in the experimental projects. Indeed, the collaboration between industry and the academy made this research more functional than theoretical. However, the chief distinction was that the experiments privileged
understanding the motivations behind people’s needs for social interaction around television, and more importantly how to develop technologies, or facilitate these forms of social interactions using existing technology as the underlying goal. In contrast, the commercial initiatives primarily emerged as a response to existing market conditions – the increasing fracturing of the audience, fear that the internet would cannibalize the viewing audience, and a general perception within the industry that it needed to stay ahead of technology to avoid some of the problems that had emerged in the music industry due to piracy. Consequently, this period was marked by a number of trial projects that reflect little forethought, often simply a matter of chasing the audience or trying out new initiatives to see what developed.

Microsoft’s WebTV and AOLTV deserve consideration as early social television technologies, although both companies developed these functions as a side benefit towards the broader goal of integrating internet services with television and are direct off-shoots of the Internet imaginaire belief in virtual communities. Both of these services focused therefore on offering consumers e-mail options, instant chat, as well as rudimentary forms of website channels that could be accessed alongside the regular television broadcast. At the time of the AOLTV launch, Barry Schuler, president of AOL Interactive Services noted, “Our members tell us they are online and watching TV together more and more. AOLTV will make it easier to combine these two important activities into one.” News of the AOLTV launch however produced mixed reactions in the broader media landscape. Some analysts expressed a high degree of skepticism on the viability of the product given its high costs (the service involved purchase of an additional set-top box as well as increased subscription fees to AOL). This perspective received a boost from the slow rate of adoption for Microsoft’s WebTV service, which launched nearly four years earlier.
The high profile failures of the interactive television trials no doubt influenced much of the pessimism that emerged around these two ventures. Nonetheless, a huge strain of optimism continued to abound amongst some industry insiders. This latter group held on to a strong belief in the inherent value of interactive television and continued to imagine television’s future as intricately linked to Internet services. Product launches such as AOLTV, Microsoft’s WebTV, and Excite @Home symbolized a new trajectory for interactive television, imagined as a corrective of the previous mishaps. Reports suggesting interactive television would grow into a nine billion dollar industry by 2004 helped foster this roseate future for such technological undertakings.72

The primary goal with the product launches above continued to revolve around building a sustainable interactive television ecosystem, but a corollary to this obvious fixation was a desire to capitalize on what was by now a recognized facet of audience behavior. Television viewers were increasingly turning to these sites to chat with friends while watching television on the burgeoning message boards and chat rooms of the Internet. AOLTV executives repeatedly referred to this observed habit among its users, especially teens, who “already are racing between their TVs to zap messages about one another about the score of a ball game or the latest video on MTV.”73 Towards that end, the AOLTV box integrated a picture-in-picture feature that allowed users to either instant message with friends or enter existing chat rooms dedicated to the show currently playing on the screen.

Indeed, this emphasis on chat services (and TV rooms) served as a precursor to second screen apps, as did web services such as ABC’s Enhanced TV website. Launched in 1999, the Enhanced TV website offered a “LIVE Interactive Television experience on the Internet, that
allows you, the TV viewer, to interact with the broadcast.” Offered on a selective basis, the Enhanced TV service was available with sports shows - *Monday Night Football*, game shows such as *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and later on some fictionalized dramas such as *Alias* (2001-2006) and *Lost* (2004-2010). A snapshot of the services available for sports fans included instant polls, chat rooms, live interactive games, stats, trivia, quotes, and other information that could enrich the broadcast. Participants could build “fantasy teams” and during games could predict the upcoming play – building on an idea first seen with the Qube cable service. The Enhanced TV website was synchronized to the broadcast allowing smooth integration between the television set and the computer. As such, it seems fitting to suggest that the computer screen was an early second screen app.

Significantly, ABC emerged as a pioneering visionary in this area. Under the guidance of Rick Mandler, then Vice President of New Media for ABC, the company was a firm believer in the potential of interactive television. In fact, well before the Enhanced TV site launch in 1999, the network had begun offering in October 1994, a version of enhanced content with its *Monday Night Football* program through a partnership with AOL Online Service. Taking advantage of AOL’s TV Rooms (called Auditoriums), the interactive content available to viewers included stats, trivia, and live commentary from guests, along with the ability for fans to chat with one another. ABC also managed to produce the only successful attempt to launch social television services. For example, the interactive website for *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* recorded over one million unique visitors in its first six weeks and by 2005, over 9 million visitors accessed the site on a regular basis. This was hardly surprising given that quiz shows and game shows lend themselves well to this form of interactivity.
Amongst the broadcast networks, ABC may have pioneered social television initiatives but by the mid 2000s, there was definitely a stronger sense of social television’s importance to contemporary television practices. During this era, websites had increasingly emerged as potential distribution sites for television episodes, transforming these sites from simple portals used to host bonus material and content. ABC once again took the lead in this area announcing in April 2006 that episodes of two of its most popular shows at the time, Lost and Desperate Housewives would be made available on its website a day after the broadcast. NBC and CBS followed shortly after. Experimenting with strategies to make network websites more compelling to users’ followed, and inevitably, this produced a number of trials exclusively focused on
creating social spaces for viewers to watch episodes online. CBS’ venture, referred to as a Social Viewing Room, integrated a streaming service for users along with a chat room allowing fans to interact with each other as they watched a narrow selection from the CBS current line-up. In the press release announcing the new venture, then senior vice-president, and general manager of CBS Interactive, Anthony Soohoo emphasized the social interactive affordances of the service. He writes,

This takes people 3,000 miles away and makes them feel like they’re sitting next to each other. The social viewing room is a next-generation social media platform that lets users engage with each other and the content they are watching in a fun way.81

There were severe limitations however in the design of the service prompting its quick cancellation after a few months. CBS took a contrarian approach that was nonetheless logical given its business approach by attempting to force a synchronous mode of viewing on viewers. The episodes available through the Social Viewing Room screened on a defined schedule, and so users were restricted from setting up new streaming sessions. The options were to join a show already in progress, or to wait for the next scheduled start time. The set schedule also prevented users from self-selecting an episode to watch. Unwilling to cede control, CBS did attempt through the service to impose broadcast norms of operations in a web environment. Furthermore, CBS failed to promote the service, and the few people who used the service had negative feedback based on the above limitations, and crucially as well, the failure to integrate Twitter.82

In context, CBS’ approach was typical and reflective of the general mood across the industry. None of the broadcast networks were willing to offer too many concessions to alternative viewing models that took audiences away from the primary television screen. Given the realities of the television marketplace, this mode of thinking was entirely rational. Broadcast
television networks primarily earn revenue from advertising dollars, which is measured in terms of audience ratings. The thought of providing viewers with alternative modes of watching the show was counterproductive to the networks’ goals, as it would cannibalize audiences away from the television set and could usher in a higher rate of audience time-shifting. The industry was already heavily opposed to time-shifting and did not want to be seen offering any services that indirectly endorsed such models of viewing. Nevertheless, the influence of the web could hardly be ignored, and by instituting some form of web viewing, albeit bounded by broadcast norms, the networks were trying to stay ahead of and take control of the changing reality. Furthermore, by tying this mode of viewing into a social experience, the network was making a case for the inherent sociality of television viewing, offering up the lure of social viewing as a tool for offsetting the attractions of choice and convenience.

NBC also attempted in 2008 to launch its own social viewing room, dubbed The Viewing Party. This service emerged even with less fanfare than CBS’ venture without an accompanying press release. Unlike the CBS venture, which encouraged social strangers to come together to watch the show, the NBC experiment spotlighted the ability to initiate viewing parties among friends. Users who logged on to the site could only enjoy a communal viewing experience by sending out invites to contacts via e-mail. This was a huge limitation of the service, especially as it perpetuated some of the limitations that social television tried to address, such as the ability to create an affinity space for viewers with similar interests albeit not proximate to one another. Additionally, NBC did not make it easy to access the viewing rooms on its website. In contrast to CBS’ Social Viewing Room, which was promoted on the main CBS website, access to The Viewing Party was only available through links from each individual show’s page. NBC’s social television project suffered both from poor promotion and from its ineffectiveness in handling its
audience’s needs, but more broadly, its failure and that of CBS is tied to the ill-conceived approaches taken up by both networks that gave scant attention to the ways in which people engage with others online.

Fig. 1.9: The CBS Social Viewing Room (Courtesy of TechCrunch.com).

**Building Audience Engagement: The Case for Social Television**

The haphazard approach seen here in these early efforts reflect some of the ambivalence common within the networks who were troubled by the lack of monetization opportunities available through these internet ventures, but at the same time felt compelled to act given the sense of impending doom resulting from a failure to act that was a common part of the discourse at the time. As stated above, these early efforts to integrate social television into television viewing practices can be subsumed under the much broader socioeconomic changes taking place.
within the television industry. Continuing in the spirit that emerged with the rise of the “internet imaginaire,” websites, and the Internet in general represented a new frontier for commercialization, although specifics on how best to achieve this remained vague. The threat of digital was a concern to the industry, but conversely it also offered an opportunity for television as an institution to enhance and fortify its stronghold in capturing and engaging the audience’s attention. The web came to occupy a necessary role, unwelcome perhaps at times for its disruptive power, but crucial nonetheless in fostering the move towards multi-platforming modes of operation. Undoubtedly, the idea of multi-platform building had emerged as the more lucrative alternative to the synergy efforts that had fueled widespread consolidation across media enterprises following deregulation prompted by the 1996 Telecommunications Act.

Both the synergy efforts of the nineties, and the push toward exploring the multiplatform potential of the web can be rationalized in purely economic terms, providing the opportunity for media institutions to leverage their holdings and maximize revenue opportunities. The economic concerns notwithstanding, the far-reaching effect of these moves reflects a perceptible shift and reliance on promoting audience engagement. Targeted marketing to specific and niche audiences contributed to, and was a side effect of the breakdown of mass audiences following the demise of the network era of television, as Joseph Turow outlines in his book, *Breaking Up America*. Intense focus on audience engagement emerged as a corollary to these targeted marketing efforts. With audiences already exhibiting migratory patterns following the increased choice and control available in the multi-channel transition era, keeping audiences tuned in became a vital strategy in the pursuit of the increasingly elusive audience.
Audience engagement as a concept enjoys significant attention from a storytelling perspective. The focus here centers on the immersive properties of a story necessary to induce audience engagement. Thus, Jeffrey Sconce suggests television’s narrative strategy beginning in the late 1970s prioritized elaborate and more complex plot elements, emphasizing a “cumulative narrative” structure, a hybrid form of seriality that requires increased investment with the text. Cumulative narration, Sconce writes was a particularly effective narrative strategy because it catered both to the casual viewer through its episodic format, but in incorporating longer story plots, concurrently allowed for a limited form of world-building as a means to secure the loyalty and attention of repeat viewers.

The elaborate cumulative structure which Sconce outlines here is merely a forerunner to contemporary practices involving complex world-building and the crafting of intricate mythologies embodied in concepts of transmedia storytelling. These practices place greater reliance on using paratexts – supplementary material used to support the main text – to pull in the viewer and increase the audience’s involvement and engagement with the text. Transmedia storytelling, although not uniformly practiced across all television texts, nevertheless reveals the significance of audience engagement conceptually in the imaginations of television producers, networks and studios. There is an evolutionary imperative at stake here, whereby new technologies help facilitate audience engagement and usher in new methods for activating and capturing the audiences’ attention.

Janet Murray’s theorizations on hyperseriality perhaps offers more clarity on the relationship between social television and audience engagement. Writing in 1996-97, Murray introduced hyperseriality as the inevitable response to the new modes of participation well
underway as fans of television migrated over to online spaces to discuss and chat about television shows. Murray accurately pinpointed the bleeding of television narratives into websites, which she argued would become digital repositories for various artifacts from the show. She writes

"Probably the first steps towards a new hyperserial format will be the close integration of a digital archive, such as a Web site, with a broadcast television program. Unlike the Web sites currently associated with conventional television programs, which are merely fancy publicity releases, an integrated digital archive would present virtual artifacts from the fictional world of the series … The compelling spatial reality of the computer will also lead to virtual environments that are extensions of the fictional world. For instance, the admitting station seen in every episode of ER could be presented as a virtual space, allowing viewers to explore it and discover phone messages, patient files and medical test results, all of which could be used to extend the current storyline or provide hints for future development."

Significantly, Murray predicted hyperseriality as gaining traction mostly amongst audiences already engaging in two-screen viewing activities, referred to here as mobile viewers. These mobile viewers she goes on to suggest could potentially benefit from opportunities to “converse with one another in chat rooms that are configured as sites within the universe of the program.” The early forms of social television exemplify the practices accounted for here, suggesting seepages between academic theorization of television in relation to digital technologies, and the visions and imaginations of the industry. Certainly by 2008, a good number of Murray’s predictions had been realized in one form or another. The connections between her theory of hyperseriality and transmedia storytelling in practice are undeniable. Similarly, her suggestions on how television shows could utilize websites as enhanced narrative locales for the main text is reflected in the many examples of shows that created intricate websites for expanding the mythology of the show, highlighting digital artifacts from the show, or providing alternative
points of views narratives. It follows then that social television spaces on television network websites, were a logical and in some ways obvious next step in the broader multiprogramming strategy that had come to consume the television industry.

The push toward social television therefore seemed inevitable. Culturally and socially it fit the aims of the industry, which was seeking new ways to enhance audience engagement. Despite the failures of these early social television initiatives, ample evidence suggested fans of television shows enjoyed talking about television in online forums. Websites such as Television Without Pity (TWOP) had emerged as leading sites for in-depth analysis and recaps of a wide range of television programs to satisfy a diverse range of interests. From an obscure fan site launched in the mid-nineties, TWOP transitioned into a mainstream cultural forum, receiving significant notice from the media industry itself, as Mark Andrejevic outlines in a 2007 article.89

Thus, in order to understand the evolution of social television two things become clear. First, as already highlighted the idea that television viewers are inclined to want to talk about television was fundamentally sound, but what was lacking was the right infrastructure to make this a viable technology. In other words, social television was already happening on the ground, in chatrooms, on websites such as TWOP, and in countless other spaces both online and off-line, but transforming these cultural practices into a viable commercial and technological initiative was more challenging than simply building technological solutions. The progression toward technological innovation often outpaces the habituated daily experiences of those for whom it is intended.

What is needed therefore is a broader cultural shift, whereby the technology co-evolves with the culture, both in the sense of how it is imagined, and what it comes to mean to audiences
who construct particular meanings around the technology. In that regard therefore, what emerges in the 2010s and the ways in which social television has been practiced and experienced since then is reflective of this broader co-evolution. This idea is taken up in the next chapter, which continues tracing out the technologizing of social television highlighting how it was both a reflection of new technology products such as Twitter, but also broader societal shifts that emerged with the rise of both a mobile and social sharing culture.
NOTES


2 Get Glue’s check-in service offered up stickers to fans after checking into shows. One of its early network partnerships was with HBO in 2010, which designed exclusive stickers for fans who checked into the networks shows. Fans could opt to have those stickers mailed to them after acquiring a sizable number of stickers (at least 20 stickers). By 2012, the sticker system was in place with most networks and film companies. Although it had its own messaging platform so users could socialize with other users, the app also allowed fans to integrate Twitter and Facebook so they could follow along with the wider conversation going on around a show or film. With the exclusive partnership with DirecTV, DirecTV subscribers could connect the app to the DirecTV cable box and could use the Get Glue app as a remote control. The integration between DirecTV and Get Glue also offered users the opportunity to share what they were watching with other friend through the TV screen. Friends could then opt in to watching the same show with the other user.


4 Another second screen app to change business operations is Zeebox, which began as a second screen app in 2011 in the UK. The app formed early partnerships with NBC Universal, Viacom and HBO. The distinctive features of the app include the use of TV rooms where fans could have live chats around a show. Shows had official TV rooms, which sometimes featured members of the production team, but users could also create TV rooms open to everyone or restricted to friends. The app also offered additional show-related content produced in conjunction with its media partners as an additional inducement for users. In 2014, the company decided to change its name to Beamly, because the original name, Zeebox, was seen as too “geeky” and male centric (See Dredge, Stuart. "Social TV App Zeebox Relaunches as Beamly to Lose ‘male Geeky’ Image." The Guardian. April 14, 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/apr/14/zebox-beamly-social-tv-app). By 2015, the company had moved away from the second-screen, and began making “social content” for marketers and brand agencies. It was later acquired by one of its clients, the beauty products company, Coty to become its in-house marketing agency.

5 It is worth noting that at the time of the Viggle purchase, the company had a reported 10 million registered users. In the broader context of TV, this is hardly a mass audience, but it does suggest the service was not a complete failure. It continues to be a fully functioning second screen app. ("Viggle (VGGL) Agrees to Be Acquired by Perk." Street Insider. December 14, 2015. http://www.streetinsider.com/Corporate+News/Viggle+(VGGL)+Agrees+to+Be+Acquired+by+Perk/11149826.htm).


8 Ibid., p. 101.


11 Ibid., p. 21.

12 The discourse of web versions (1.0 the read-only web and the newer more participatory Web 2.0) was popularized by Tim O’Reilly in 2004 during a conference aptly titled Web 2.0. The nature of and/or the reality of a true disjuncture between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 have been debated extensively. See Allen, M. "What Was Web 2.0? Versions as the Dominant Mode of Internet History." New Media & Society 15, no. 2 (2012): 260-75. doi:10.1177/1461444812451567, Cammaerts, Bart. "Critiques on the Participatory Potentials of Web


In a 2006 MacArthur Foundation article “Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century,” Henry Jenkins, Ravi Puroshotma, Margaret Weigel, Katie Clinton and Alice J Robison, define participatory cultures as those characterized by “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship where experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices (p. xi). Furthermore, they note that “members [within a participatory culture] believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connections with one another (at least they care what other people think about what they have created)” (p. xi). Beyond giving a voice and a name to the practices emerging in digital spaces, the concept of participatory cultures has received significant attention in part due to the potential “revolutionary” components embedded in the practices of its members. Activists and some within the academy have imagined participatory cultures as powerful forces and agents capable of inciting social change, while business interests more specifically the media industries have experimented with the ways in which these participatory cultures can be leveraged to enhance, expand and reconfigure traditional media content.


I use the term passive and active here more in the colloquial sense favored by the industry to distinguish between lean-back and lean-forward modes of viewing rather than theoretically as it relates to active audience theories.

The idea of intensity as correlated with affect comes from Brian Massumi’s work on affect first laid out in the article, “The Autonomy of Affect.” Massumi argues affect results from this intensity – thus it is both reflects what affect means and how it is manifested. In Massumi’s terms, affect is not simply “emotions” but rather the continuation of emotions. Affect he argues is more about capacity, “the passing of a threshold” that provides more maneuverability and the ability to affect and be affected by others. (See: “Navigating Moments: An Interview with Brian Massumi by Mary Zournazi)


28 Ibid.


30 Ibid, p. 3.


32 Ibid, p. 85


34 Quote on page 86 of Marshall, New Media as Transformed Media Industry. For more on transactional space, see White, P. B. "Online Services: The Emerging Battle for Transactional Space." *Media International Australia* 79 (1996): 4-11.


36 Ibid, p. 129.

37 Ibid, p. 130.


42 The Winky Dink kit consisted of a plastic screen that used static to attach to the television screen, and a set of crayons. The entire set could be purchased by mail for 50 cents. On the show, the clear screen was referred to as a “magic window” Children were instructed to wipe the magic window down and then stick it on the screen. For more info see Ingram, Billy. "Winky-Dink and You." Winky-Dink and You. Accessed October 14, 2014. http://www.tvparty.com/requested2.html.

43 The show was revived briefly in syndication in 1965


The centerpiece of the Clinton-Gore deregulation policy was the Telecommunications Act of 1996. This Act relaxed rules around cross-ownership within the media industry, deregulated cable rates, and eradicated restrictions on the types of services an entity could offer. Ostensibly, this was supposed to usher in a new era of competition and lower barriers to entry which made it appealing to the communications and media industries. For more about the effect of these policies see Holt, Jennifer. Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011 and Crawford, Susan P. Captive Audience: The Telecom Industry and Monopoly Power in the New Gilded Age. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013

The six themed worlds were as follows: Space – an alien world focused on navigation, Power – a debating chamber where audiences could vote, Play – a gaming environment, Identity – where participants could engage with identity construction, Memory – filled with historic events, and Creation – a world where participants could create and view the works of others.


The Media Center Buddies project noted that enjoyment with its application jumped from a mean of 74% to 83% when others were involved. Collabora TV also reported satisfaction rates of 81% amongst its participants when co-viewing.

Ibid, p. 93.


Ibid.


In a broader sense, this bonus material was important in its own right. It served as paratext for the show, which as Jonathan Gray describes is the extra material that resides in the space between the text, the audience and the industry. Paratexts serve to provide enhance the range of meanings that can develop around a text, but they also perform a useful service for the industry, serving to promote and hype the show. For more on paratexts and the industry, see Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.
Murray’s conception of mobile viewers differs from contemporary understandings of the term, which refers to those viewers who use mobile devices to watch content. She characterizes mobile viewers in terms of access and choice, referring to the idea that the upcoming convergence of television and Internet would provide viewers with many access points to content with each path offering some variation in the content available, hence the hyperseriality. This would free viewers from a fixed mode of access where everyone gets access to the same content. Viewers would instead get the flexibility (and hence the mobility) to decide how and to what degree they choose to engage with the available content.

Ibid, p. 261

CHAPTER II

Artful Alliances: Building a Social Television Infrastructure

In the introduction to her book, *Always Already New*, Lisa Gitelman reminds us that “one of the burdens of modernity seems to be the tendency to essentialize or grant agency to technology.”1 To some degree this chapter might serve as an exemplification of this maxim. On one level it continues the historical work which began in the previous chapter offering up a chronological rendering of the evolution of social television. On the other hand, it directly speaks to the myths about technology and how these myths direct or influence the ways in which technologies are expected to develop and the forms which they come to occupy. If the narrative of the previous chapter can be summarized as follows: Social television as a technological construct existed in the imagination of industry insiders long before it could be realized practically, which reflects the idea that technological innovation often moves at faster speeds than the culture in which these technologies are expected to inhabit, then the narrative of this chapter highlights the opposite – the idea that a confluence of factors is crucial in explaining the progression of new technology products.

The latter perspective also reflects Gitelman’s observation that technologies are “socially realized structures of communication … a ritualized collocation of different people on the same
mental map, sharing or engaging with popular ontologies of representation.” Gitelman’s perspective here is useful in examining the emergence of social television in the 2010s, but suggesting that the social construction model is enough to explain the growth of the social television phenomenon only tells part of the story. It rejects the determined agency of principal actors to impose a particular vision or representation of the technology into broader circulation. This is not to suggest that these visions exist outside ideological frames or that the resultant technology can simply be attributed to the actions of one or several key figures as the “great man narratives” are wont to do. Rather the objective is to emphasize both the socio-cultural impetus responsible for the development of the technology alongside the autonomy and executory actions taken up by certain powers motivated by a host of factors, but who are also subject to particular modes of thinking about technologies.

This chapter therefore is concerned with highlighting both perspectives in explaining the rise of social television. The key focus of the chapter emerges as a corollary to the previous chapter in that it asks, “why now” in relation to social television. In other words, given the long-term obsession with implementing social television technologies, what specific technological and social conditions needed to be in place to prompt the shift of social television from experiment into a viable infrastructure? What forms did social business practices take? And finally, following the institutionalization of social television, what does the way it has materialized reveal about broader projections about the role of technology in society broadly as well as in the contemporary television landscape?

By necessity, Twitter figures prominently in this narrative but the intent here is not to reduce social television to an inevitable outgrowth emerging from Twitter’s development, but
more importantly to highlight the confluence of factors – technological and sociocultural – that converged during this specific moment in time when Twitter began to emerge as a viable form of social communication. This emphasis necessitates a targeted focus on the socioeconomic conditions in play during the nascent stage of Twitter’s development, a look at Twitter’s specific strategies to drive growth by focusing on its media business, and of course the changing understanding and perception of the audience’s role in contemporary media practices.

Taking a medium-specific focus with respect to Twitter allows examination of its “ontological distinctiveness,” which grounds the analysis of its technological infrastructure into broader claims about its role in repurposing cultural and societal understanding of social television, and facilitates current-day practices. This focus appropriates Jonathan Sterne’s format theory, which requires “us to ask after the changing formations of media, the contexts of their reception, the conjunctures that shaped their sensual characteristics, and the institutional politics in which they were enmeshed.” Building from that, I make a two-fold argument. It starts with the premise that Twitter emerged at a fortuitous moment in time, that was marked by a series of social transformations that produced new ways for interacting with each other. The shape in which its infrastructure developed and its corresponding mode of operation initially can thus be attributed to these socio-cultural factors external to the company. At the same time, the company did capitalize on the practices that were becoming common-place to engineer a vision of social television that offered up a model, which positioned Twitter at the nucleus of social television. In this latter objective, the company was assisted by strategic partners who pushed forward a narrative that cast social television as a prescriptive for outdated audience measurement technologies. Given the concerns of the industry, and again reflecting the sustaining myths about
technology’s ability to provide solutions to age-old problems, social television became the rallying symbol for broader anxieties about the current state of the television industry.

**Fumbling towards Social Television: Twitter’s Early Years**

The narrative placing Twitter into a pivotal role at ground zero in the development of social television stands in stark contrast to the motivations driving its launch in 2006. Indeed, the company’s founders did not explicitly set out to align with television or to become the key platform for social television initiatives. The service, which emerged as a side-venture from failed start-up, Odeo, was originally tagged as a “social network around text messaging.” Co-founder Biz Stone reinforced this perspective of Twitter as a Short Message Service (SMS) – based social network in a YouTube video designed to explain the service to new users. In the instructional video, Stone emphasizes that Twitter functions as a social texting service that allows users to share memories – of the most mundane activities like riding a bike – with friends, family and employers. The character-length limitations of text messaging was therefore embedded in the technology from the start, but more crucially, the instantaneous and rapid form of communication emblematic of text messaging also become an integral feature of the service that enabled its transformation into a real-time communication technology.

Paradoxically though, the lack of a clear vision for the Twitter service in its early days played a role in its eventual evolution. Beyond the initial articulation of Twitter as a service intended for users to share status updates with others, Twitter’s founders at least outwardly were very vague about the potential of the service. The ethos of experimentation was hardwired into the service from the onset, and the principles that emerged in early interviews with the founders’ stress two key things: keeping the service simple and unencumbered with too many features and
adapting according to users’ needs. Jack Dorsey, another of the co-founders and current CEO, articulated this vision of the company during a profile interview in 2007.

There’s [sic] so many models we’ve looked at, and the most compelling one will expose itself when the time is right. Our main focus right now is growing the service and having as many entry points as we can. There are some very obvious ones around the network, but I think we can come up with more creative ones and do something native to this application and usage pattern.7

During the same interview, Biz Stone reinforced this perspective, sharing

We’ve been following user behavior and we’ve been watching what they do and adding features. That philosophy will work well with the revenue model. Just like there are so many cool features we could do there will also be cool ways of making revenues. But we want to follow behavior and add something that users are excited about.8

The emphasis on following user behavior helped propel some of the distinctive conventions of the service instrumental in establishing the protocols of social television. Notably, the @reply feature, the hashtag (#_), and the retweet (RT) option can be credited either to user practices that became standardized or to actual suggestions from individual users. The @reply attribute developed as a norm almost immediately after the service began in 2006. Users found this was a simple identifier, which when placed in front of another user’s handle helped to indicate a response to that user. As the service grew in popularity, users determined they also needed a formal way for copying someone else’s tweet, and soon adopted an informal workaround “RT” at the start of a message to indicate the tweet was reblogged from another user. In 2009, Twitter formally incorporated the feature into its web interface and into its application program interface (API) for third-party developers.

Possibly the most significant feature attributed to the Twitter user community is the hashtag (#), the feature most responsible for introducing a way to categorize and filter Twitter
messages, in turn making them searchable. In 2007, Chris Messina, an avid Twitter user, posted a status update suggesting Twitter should consider adding hashtags to group messages. Interestingly enough, when Messina first proposed the hashtag, the company initially declined to adopt the service fearing that it would only appeal to a subset of techno-geek followers. They were convinced later on of the merits of having easily identifiable ways to categorize messages, when the hashtag “spontaneously” erupted during the San Diego fires of 2007. The most illuminating discovery for Twitter during this period was the realization that the hashtag could facilitate the use of Twitter as a rapid news-disseminating platform, that transformed the service into a “real-time information network.” During the fire, both unofficial and official sources used Twitter’s service to spread information pertinent to local residents such as the progress of the fire, evacuation areas and meeting points. Adopting the hashtag also significantly changed the nature of Twitter, creating the opportunity for strangers with no apparent connections – just a mutual interest in a particular subject – to commune together and share in a worldwide conversation about those interests. The hashtag in essence became a necessary affordance for facilitating social television conversations on the platform. By September 2008, Twitter would codify the use of hashtags, by introducing the trending topics list, which functions as a ranking system to easily identify the topics that are generating the most buzz on the platform based on hashtag use.

The hashtag furthermore allowed Twitter to benefit from a hitherto unheralded attribute of the service: the publicness of its users’ streams. In contrast to its predecessors in the social media environment and its contemporary, Facebook, the service from the start eschewed the idea of creating a walled garden infrastructure. The embedded visibility gave voice in spirit to every user on the platform, even though in practice this was hard to achieve. However, by coupling the public nature of users’ activity with the introduction of the trending topic, Twitter mobilized the
service into a distinct platform that legitimized the participatory mode of engagement essential for social television. It activated Twitter as an affinity space, whereby particular constraints – age, class, race, gender, and location – could potentially be collapsed and energy focused on communicating across specific interests. Conversations on Twitter could expand well beyond a user’s followers to the broader community at large. Indeed as Dhiraj Murthy notes regarding Twitter, it is structured towards “the accumulation of more and more followers who are aware of a user’s published content.”

Murthy’s larger point speaks to the structuring norms embedded within Twitter from the start. As he points out, while other social media platforms defer to the user in terms of who can see the user’s posts or activities on the site, Twitter opted for default consent. Put simply, anyone can choose to follow another user without that user’s consent, unless the person initiates additional privacy restrictions. The publicness of users’ tweets in combination with hashtags created a perfect recipe that would prove attractive to the television industry complex. It established Twitter as a site for effective promotion with considerably less effort, and with the ability to seem natural.

The hashtag also served an important purpose related to the use of trending topics. When the trending topic was introduced, the company used a simple volume algorithm to determine which topics could be deemed trend worthy. In other words, having more people converge around a hashtag would effectively push that hashtag into the top-trending list. However, by 2010, Twitter would revisit its top-trending topic algorithm and make changes that would invariably benefit TV shows. With the new policy, the trending topics rated more highly the rate at which interest in a topic grew over overall volume. This change in policy privileged two things - novelty and distinctiveness. It was as Twitter spokesperson, Matt Graves noted, “a reflection of what people are talking about right now in this moment, than they were a minute
ago, an hour ago or a day ago.” The focus on what is hot right now prioritized topics and issues that had previously not been heavily discussed on Twitter, which in turn favored television shows. With concentrated conversations happening around a show within a limited time frame spanning an hour or so before its airtime to shortly after the broadcast, television shows had an in-built advantage propelling these shows to the top trending list frequently.

The new algorithm policy had the added benefit of drawing in new participants to top trending shows by inferring a degree of importance to these shows. By its very nature, trending topics serve as a call to join in, to participate, and congregate around the topics enjoying the liveliest and richest debate in the moment. It imbues these topics with a sense of timeliness and urgency, a cool factor, that serves as a form of affirmation for everyone invited to the party. Similar to how fashion trends work – where the average consumer adopts the trend to invoke a sense of belonging – the top trend list reinforces the illusion of popularity around the specific topics on the list, which in turn induces participants to join in and be a part of the in-group. These new rules thus in helped to enhance the perceived value of social television conversations taking place on the site.

In discussing the implications of the new trending algorithm, Tarleton Gillespie suggests that for Twitter users the top trending topic not only proffers up a “measure of what’s most important, but also serves as a “means of visibility… Trends (sic) offers to propel a topic toward greater attention, and offers proof of the attention already been paid. Or seems to.” In other words, it steers conversations towards these topics. The attention economy that fueled up in the latter part of the 2000s and continues to date, placed heavy emphasis on brevity – placing intense focus on an issue for a short time – and then moving on to the next hot topic accompanied by a
brief dose of amnesia related to the previous topic.\textsuperscript{16} Trends seemed to encourage that sort of behavior.

Furthermore, the nature of tweets by themselves, bite-sized commentaries with very little room for expanded analysis, feeds into this tendency for users to quickly jump in and participate in the conversation. What is privileged here is the ability to make witty commentary that is imminently shareable over insightful analysis. It is symbolic of a rise of a “spreadable culture” which, as Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green note in the book \textit{Spreadable Media}, reflects a movement toward circulation that is propelled by “people who are shaping, sharing, reframing and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined… doing so… within larger communities and networks.”\textsuperscript{17} Jenkins et al describe this cultural shift as emerging with the rise of a “networked culture,” in which previously analog modes of media circulation that occur on a much smaller and intimate scale have been amplified and extended geographically through widespread adoption of social media technologies.\textsuperscript{18}

This explanation of a rising networked culture taps into the reality surrounding social television and Twitter, whereby Twitter should be acknowledged not so much as the instigating force in the rising popularity of social television, but more accurately reflects the fortuitousness of a company emerging during a moment of huge cultural transformations. Twitter’s early growth was facilitated by this shifting perception related to the circulation of media content, and also by the growing reliance on mobile technologies as communication devices. In 2006, when Twitter launched its services, mobile phones had achieved widespread penetration rates domestically with a reported 233,000,000 subscribers nationwide.\textsuperscript{19} Smartphones were already in existence, although a niche product, popular only amongst Palm Personal Digital Assistant
(PDA) users and Blackberry subscribers. By 2007, Apple would launch the first iPhone, which was credited with ushering in a new reliance on mobile phone usage and developing the mobile app economy that is critical in current understandings of social television. The introduction of Google-powered Android phones a year later would further propel the rise of mobile devices, and entrench within contemporary society the possibility of ubiquitous connectivity.

Ubiquitous connectivity is an important cultural transformation that plays into why Twitter later became important in the move towards technologizing social television. In their book, *Mobile Communication*, Rich Ling and Jonathan Donner present a commonly-held perspective that focuses on how mobile telecommunication helped to change both the affective experiences of communication, but also the material form in which the communication takes place. Mobile communication they suggest, “is a phenomenon that changes the dynamics of social interaction.” Part of this changing dynamic has given rise to the concept of “connected presence,” which, simply put, is the perception that our friends and family are ever-present and available to us. The net effect of this connected presence or ubiquitous connectivity has fundamentally altered how we communicate with one another. The mobile phone, they argue, became a device through which everyday rituals could be performed, but in terms of connection, it became “part of the lore associated with relationship… when in contact, we engender a common mood and we coin a common sense of our shared experience.”

That Twitter emerged conterminously with mobile technologies was a pivotal act of timing, and played a crucial role in formulating the company’s identity and its later identification with social television. From the start, Twitter tied its fortunes to mobile communication protocols through its reliance on SMS technology. The service began as a form of short-
message-servicing (SMS), and this functionality remains embedded within the fabric of the technology. The ability to engage with Twitter through simple text messages using the code 40404 reinforces the connection to liveness and to immediacy that is so crucial to social television practices. It also infects Twitter with the aura of ubiquitous connectivity. Twitter became a space where these everyday rituals could be performed, and users could share common experiences albeit on a much larger scale than that afforded simply by one-to-one mobile technologies. Whereas mobile phones allowed users to reach out to close friends and family, Twitter emerged as a channel for funneling those interactions to a much broader audience – a sort of group text if you will, but more efficient in the sense that it provides potentially more opportunities for exchange with the group but also with others outside the group. Twitter’s communication model carefully captures the concept of “masspersonal” modes of communicating, that is communication practices that embody both interpersonal and mass communication modes of address.24

Furthermore, the ease of incorporating multimedia material into tweets intensified the richness of the communication available through Twitter. In outlining the factors that helped Twitter emerge as an effective news outlet and resource for rapid breaking news, Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess highlight the multi-media affordance and its ease of use. They note,

A key driver here is the ease with which additional materials (links, photos, video, audio) can also be shared. This aids both the dissemination of first-hand, user-generated material documenting unfolding events as directly experienced by the user, and the sharing of secondary material in the form of links, screen captures, or even photos of TV screens. These additions extend Twitter’s affordances far beyond the 140 character limit, adding a rich multimedia layer to the tweets themselves - and these multimedia materials often also make their way into mainstream media coverage.25
The ability to link multimedia content would be exploited by television shows and would emerge as a key promotional aspect for Twitter in its quest to position itself as an indispensable component in the selling and marketing of television. Beyond the explicit experiments discussed in the previous chapters, television shows and marketers had long turned a focus toward fan websites and to forums dedicated to discussing and analyzing television shows.

The increasing popularity of Twitter in the period between 2008 and 2010 transformed the site into a promising venture for experimenting on how best to use Twitter to promote shows, and the entertainment sector also found value in using Twitter during this period. Although the practice of live tweeting was in the stages of being fleshed out, several shows elected to form Twitter accounts for its main characters. In a sense, these early Twitter accounts replicated the ways in which shows used websites in the late nineties and early years of the 2000s. These Twitter accounts generally served as a repository for show artifacts, similar to the ways in which Janet Murray imagined the websites to function. Alternatively, they functioned as promotional vehicles for the show referring followers back to the main website or reminding viewers of airdates and times. This would soon change as both Twitter and the television industry began to envision the service as a site of significant economic value.

Nonetheless, the influence of the audience in shaping Twitter’s early development is important to note because it demystifies any narrative that places Twitter at the epicenter of social television’s development. On some level it reaffirms the idea that technology by itself is not sufficient to change cultural and social practices and gives credence to Gitelman’s idea of technology as being co-constituted by a wide range of actors. Indeed, in this case the lack of a defined objective in the early stages of Twitter’s development allowed the service to progress
almost organically – adopting the communication norms and styles of its users’ – which is critical both in thinking about the affordances of the technology and its uses. More specifically in relation to social television, it reflects the underlying premise that social television is simply what audiences do. Twitter became one more artifact through which telesociality could be enacted. If talking about television is a natural everyday ritual, then Twitter emerged as a site for social television activity simply because its affordances – along with Facebook and other web/social media platforms – were designed to facilitate both banal and serious conversations. It naturally followed that conversations about television would migrate to the platform, which is exactly what happened.

Thinking about the development of Twitter simply in relation to socio-cultural shifts only tells part of the story, and elides the concentrated and strategic actions by Twitter to create a viable economic model that would allow it to profit from social television. Adopting features such as the hashtag and the retweet were initial first steps, as both of these features created the basic toolkit used in valuing social television chatter on the platform. The company also backed into other features that proved to be important. For example, the ephemerality of its streaming tweet platform was essential in associating the practice of tweeting with liveness. That sense of rapidly “disappearing tweets” ensures that to be part of the conversation, users have to be taking part in it now as it is happening, not later on. Although the tweets do not actually disappear it becomes much harder to find older tweets both on the platform or on personal users’ timelines making it almost impossible to even get a sense of what was going on when the user was not on Twitter. Thus, being present is very much a prerequisite for using the service as the tweets move somewhere into the ether and the collective users’ attention is redirected towards the next trending topic. In that regard, this ephemerality helps privilege the importance of live tweeting,
providing a basis whereby tweeting can find some relevance for television advertising and networks concerned with ratings. On the other hand, it is also very important to acknowledge how the company took advantage of these inadvertent advantages, but also deliberately sought) to make itself crucial to the experience of social television and situate itself firmly at the nexus of the social television ecosystem by the late 2000s and into the 2010s.

**Targeting Television: Twitter as Strategic Partner**

Twitter may have started with a vague sense of its identity and its primary mission, but by 2009, the company had a clearer idea of its core strengths: serving as a site for the rapid deployment of news and sitting at the epicenter of timely chatter about television shows and events. A number of key factors helped to steer the company in this direction. First, the company enjoyed significant growth between March 2008 and March 2009. Subscriber numbers multiplied greatly during this period, from 475,000 subscribers to just over seven million, and the company passed the one billion threshold for the number of tweets delivered through its platform. Politicians began to find value in using its services, and the Obama campaign utilized the service extensively to communicate and interact with supporters. From a news perspective, the company helped to break a number of news stories, and CNN began to incorporate Twitter commentary into its broadcast, the first network to do so. Most relevant to this project, many television-related media events broke the record for tweets per minute during this period, which drew the attention of the industry.

As previously documented, the first organized live-tweeting event occurred in 2008 during the presidential debates. The success of this event led Twitter to form its own media development team. Television networks also took notice of this emerging phenomenon, and by
2009, select shows experimented with the concept. A notable example is the case of *Glee*, a Fox show that premiered in May 2009. *Glee* was unusual in that it aired its pilot episode in May to take advantage of the popularity of *American Idol* but the actual show itself did not debut until the fall. The show therefore used its hiatus as an opportunity to heavily promote the show and relied significantly on Twitter to do so. In keeping with the norms of the time, it created Twitter accounts for its main characters and utilized the summer hiatus period to keep in contact with the show’s fans – commonly referred to as Gleeks. The characters’ Twitter accounts became a vehicle for sharing behind-the-scenes footage and images showing interactions with fans as the cast undertook a shopping mall tour during the summer to promote the show. Fans of the show were also encouraged to tweet about the show in order to gain points and ascend the leaderboard of its summer contest, *The Biggest Gleek*. However, the most significant event related to social television occurred in the fall when the show returned to the air. To properly reintroduce viewers to the show, the network rebroadcast the pilot episode on several occasions. During some of the rebroadcasts, the show implemented live tweeting and used another episode to superimpose tweets from fans and cast members on the screen as the episode aired. Efforts such as the above caught the attention of the trade press, which began to talk up these promotional efforts using the verbiage of social television.

From Twitter’s perspective, the media attention placed on social television was a huge advantage, and pursuing a strategy focused on building media partnerships with television networks and shows was a no-brainer. Following the formation of its media development team, Twitter began an intense lobbying campaign to become the platform of choice for the social television economy. The company not only promoted itself as the venue for real-time conversations around television, but also stressed its part in bringing declining audiences back to
live television. This strategy was bolstered in part by an interesting trend, which occurred in the early part of 2010. First, the 2010 Super Bowl became the most watched show in U.S. television history, beating the record set by the series finale of M*A*S*H from 1983. Additionally, all the award shows that aired in early 2010 – The Golden Globes, Emmys, Grammys and Oscars saw increased audience numbers, as did the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, with most of these shows including the Olympics registering the greatest audience increase in a decade. Although the specific connections between Twitter and the increased ratings had not been directly measured, some in the mainstream press and trade press, began to make connections between the increased Twitter volume and the ratings rise, fueling the narrative that Twitter was playing a crucial role in television programming’s success.

Unsurprisingly then, 2010 proved to be a pivotal moment in the development of social television from Twitter’s perspective. It was during this period that the company began a concentrated effort to build up its television business and simultaneously established its monetization strategy. In April 2010, the company launched its promoted tweets feature, whereby brands and companies could pay to have promotional tweets inserted into users’ timelines irrespective of whether these users actively followed the brand or company. Later in the same year, the company began the first of many stages of integrating complex, multimedia functionality into tweets. In the initial first stage, the company introduced embedded photos and videos into the Twitter stream, creating the opportunity for users to watch video directly within the Twitter interface. Other developments in this area came about with Twitter Cards introduced in 2012, and the flagship product Twitter Amplify, which premiered in 2013.
Setting aside for a moment the multimedia innovations at the center of Twitter’s social television strategy, in 2010 the company also began to actively promote itself as a vital partner to the television industry, particularly the entertainment sector. At the 2010 New Tee Vee Conference, Robin Sloan, a recent hire to the Media Partnership team, introduced the basics of Twitter’s marketing approach to the television industry. The consistent refrain emerging from Twitter beginning with Sloan’s presentation focused on the following key points. First, Twitter sought to position itself as the ultimate second screen companion for television. Critical to this messaging was the idea of Twitter as the new “electronic hearth” where conversations around television congregate. Twitter facilitated content producers’ ability to develop emotional bonds with the audience, and more importantly for the content producers, it gave them the ability to structure and control the conversation happening around the content through initiatives such as synchronous live tweeting.

Liveness was another key aspect in Twitter’s framing of its importance to television. As Sloan noted in 2010, Twitter argued it had been integral in bringing audiences back to live viewing. The specific discursive framing adopted by Twitter hinged on the idea that the default mode for most people watching television is in companionship with others, and thus Twitter played a crucial role in facilitating this form of social connectivity in an era of technological fragmentation. Thus, the claim advanced by Twitter suggested the service has been instrumental in containing the shift towards time-shifted viewing.

Building on this idea of Twitter’s importance to television, the company employed a third framing mechanism that placed itself at the forefront of television’s future. Here the focus rested on the ability of Twitter to drive new forms of content and storytelling mechanisms, but more
importantly suggested the company was in a unique position to foster engagement and refine audience measurement techniques. Accordingly, the company began in 2011 to offer up a Producers’ Guide to Tweeting that provided networks and shows with detailed guidelines and tips designed to help content producers increase live Twitter activity around shows. The Producer’s Guide was an important early marketing tool that once again drew on Twitter’s ability to coopt the best practices of its users, in this case – the television networks and shows. By highlighting what had previously worked, the company taught others how to use its service and concurrently developed a viable marketing strategy that would be an essential part of the company’s business objectives going forward.

By 2014, Twitter had refined its messaging to its television and advertising partners, and emphasized not only its influence and role in facilitating live conversations around television content, but more importantly, its status as a cultural bellwether that was capable of far-reaching influence and impact in broader society. At the 2014 MIPCOM trade show conference, current head of Twitter’s TV media team, Fred Graver, heavily promoted Twitter as a site for capturing the cultural zeitgeist. As he put it, conversations that take place on Twitter more often than not receive broader coverage in the news, blogs, and other social media sites, which created the opportunity for hyper-engagement with audiences that extended well-beyond the “broadcast window.”

At the same time, Graver, conveyed yet another constant component of Twitter’s messaging focused on aligning Twitter’s goals with the goals of television networks, shows, and advertisers. Graver noted 70 percent of Twitter activity around television took place during the broadcast window, so the company was strongly motivated to ensure that television shows were
equipped to capitalize on the social television trend. The coupling of the television industry’s objectives with those of Twitter was an aspirational move in keeping with more widespread practices employed by digital services firms to establish their utility and importance in the contemporary era. Notably, Tarleton Gillespie, in drawing attention to the ways in which digital service intermediaries have deployed the term platform, has pointed out the discursive and political staging required by these firms to serve the needs of various constituencies. Gillespie thus proposes these firms promote themselves as “platforms of opportunity” to advertisers and media content producers in a bid to highlight their services as meaningful locales for reaching consumers directly.33

Twitter’s push to become a viable “platform of opportunity” emerged in the concentrated effort towards multimedia advertising embodied in its Twitter Cards and Twitter Amplify products, along with several technological improvements meant to stimulate interactions between high profile users, known as Very Important Tweeters (VITs),34 and the public. Twitter Cards, the first of the multimedia enhancements addressed the limitations of the 140-character limit by offering clients (mostly advertisers) the opportunity to drive traffic to content on other websites or mobile apps. The Cards, which offered an array of features from simple summary cards, photo and gallery cards, to player cards with embedded audio and video functionality were a useful addition for marketers in that they could be customized to fit the client’s needs, and also because the introduction of multimedia features such as photos, embedded videos and audio allowed for more creative uses of Twitter. For example, brands could create cards that allowed users to download a mobile app directly from Twitter, or could use video to provide “teaser content” that directed users to web links or shopping sites for transactional purposes.
With the launch of its Cards features, Twitter effectively served notice of its intent to serve as an advertising platform for brands and marketers. The versatility of the Cards became a key selling point for Twitter, and in its pitch to advertisers, the company emphasized the idea that the Cards could be used to extend television advertising through the Twitter platform. The idea was simple – advertisers could partner with Twitter to create a parallel ad campaign on Twitter targeting the audience engaged in live tweeting a show. Twitter used success stories to underscore this point in its advertising. For example, in 2013, Adidas ran television ads during NBA playoff games to promote its “Crazyquick” basketball shoes. During the on-air broadcast, the ads featured the hashtag, #quickaintfair. Adidas also created extended video that highlighted the moves of each NBA player featured in the TV broadcast. During games featuring the TV ads, Adidas ran the extended video on Twitter targeting those viewers tweeting the games. The Twitter promotion asked these viewers to name each player’s move and tweet a response to Adidas using the above hashtag. Adidas and the NBA players retweeted these viewers, which in turn increased the visibility of the campaign. The hashtag became a trending topic, and Adidas reported higher levels of engagement and awareness around the television ad campaign. The company also increased its number of followers on Twitter.35

Twitter’s proposition to these advertisers highlighted a number of advantages for the advertisers. First, the Twitter Cards offered better enhancements than those available through regular tweets. Furthermore, the Cards offered these advertisers a second opportunity to reach the television audience, because Twitter intended for the Cards to be used alongside the broadcast ad. Twitter also touted research that showed viewers who saw extended advertising on Twitter were 40 percent more likely to recall the television ad.36 Finally, and most importantly, as
Twitter implied, the Cards offered up directly measurable metrics that could be used for tracking actual sales and engagement.37

The ability to extend TV ads on Twitter’s platform, a campaign that Twitter proudly referred to in terms of “TV x Twitter”, brought to the forefront the significance of social television from the industry’s perspective. Advertising has long served – and retains considerable utility – as the primary currency for much of the television industry. The relative effectiveness of advertising has thus been a key concern for both the television industry and advertisers. Joseph Turow has offered evidence showing how media executives have banked on a “claim of efficient separation” to justify advertising dollars in light of market segmentation.38 This claim of efficient separation rests on the idea that media products – particularly niche offerings – can effectively separate out desired audiences for targeted advertising. And yet this claim frequently flares up as a bone of contention between advertisers and television networks, with advertisers troubled by the notion that these claims may be exaggerated, or that the prevailing measurement techniques do not allow for sufficient evaluation of the merits of the claim. Twitter’s positioning therefore centered on its ability to effectively assuage the concerns of advertisers by offering enhanced advertising products that combined superior analytic capabilities and directly measurable outcomes.
At the same time, the company also directed its efforts toward television networks, and claimed that it could also offer the networks new revenue streams and the ability to enhance the experience of its audience. With the launch of Twitter Amplify, the companion marketing tool to the Cards product, the company explicitly signaled to broadcasters and other publishers of media content its ability to help these content producers monetize social television content. Twitter Amplify was similar to Cards in that it was also a multimedia product, but Amplify was specifically marketed to content producers, and the marketing rhetoric Twitter used for promoting the product made strong reference to Amplify’s strengths as a tool for engaging these
content producers’ fan base. As part of the promotional spiel during the launch of the product, Glenn Brown, then director of promoted content and sponsorship for Twitter, suggested the Amplify product would help producers create “spectacular, timely content that rounds out their [the fans that is] TV experience and reminds them to tune in.”

According to Twitter therefore, the advantages for broadcasters were manifold. The Amplify product by design was set up to allow broadcasters and other publishers to create in-stream video content, either promotional or paratextual in nature, that could be offered to its Twitter followers as special content – a boon for following the network or publisher on Twitter. Building from Twitter’s promoted tweets feature where companies could pay for tweets to appear on users’ timelines, the Amplify content was also a paid feature. However, the difference here was Twitter set up the service so advertisers could partner with content producers to sponsor the Amplify video. The way it worked was content producers would choose what content to feature – common examples included sports replays, or big dramatic moments from non-sporting events. These Amplify tweets would be inserted into targeted users’ timelines and viewers who clicked on this content would see a brief ad from the content sponsor before they could view the content.

One of the earliest publishers to take advantage of the Amplify product was the NFL in partnership with Verizon. The deal, employing the widespread revenue-sharing practice implemented by Twitter, was set up so pre-roll Verizon ads would appear at the start of all NFL Amplify videos, purportedly creating a win-win situation for everyone involved – Verizon, the NFL and Twitter. Like in traditional advertising, Verizon would have access to its desired audience and more so perhaps in this case, the NFL would create new opportunities for reaching
its fans, and in turn it would also receive additional advertising revenue through Verizon. Twitter, as the facilitator of this new business partnership was further solidifying its importance to the television/advertising relationship, and increasing its revenue. The NFL-Twitter Amplify deal proved to be one of the most lucrative for both companies, but Twitter did set up other partnerships with networks such as BBC America, A&E, Discovery and most of the broadcast networks.

**Theorizing Innovation as Practice: TV x Twitter**

In its push to meaningfully establish a role for itself within the television/advertising substructure, Twitter strategically laid out a discursive framework by placing the company at the nexus of this infrastructure and establishing itself as a critical missing piece essential to the future viability of this ecosystem. Its various initiatives subsumed under the marketing slogan *TV x Twitter* implicitly served as the centerpiece of this discursive logic. By adopting this slogan, Twitter in a sense set out not only to closely align itself with television but also suggested the two were equal but separate halves of the whole. Television without Twitter was incomplete, and Twitter had emerged at just the right time to rectify some of the challenges besetting the industry such as declining audiences assailed by increasing choices in media options and competing tensions around efficiency in measuring these audiences. Taken literally, the slogan further implied Twitter exponentially improved the television experience *culturally* but also *economically*.

In analyzing the dynamics at play that often emerged in the partnerships between new media technology firms and television (more specifically the BBC in the United Kingdom), James Bennett has argued a logic of “not getting it” heavily permeates the cultural imaginaries of
these new media technology firms.41 Critical to this understanding is the positioning of these firms as representing the new wave of technological progress reflected both in the affordances made possible through these new technologies, but also in the business systems and practices enacted by these firms. As such, Bennett argues these new media firms often laid charges of stodginess, resistance to change, and economic inflexibility at traditional broadcasters, heavily implying these companies were welded to old-fashioned approaches to understanding the modern television audience and the contemporary economy more broadly. The sentiments expressed here were hardly novel. Futurists and other advocates of new media technologies have consistently set out to mark out these technological forms as harbingers of progress that are equipped with the potential to usher in “a more participatory, democratic, creative and interactive world,”42 capable of redressing the limitations of the staid older technologies deemed as relics of the past.

Notably, Alvin Toffler distinguished the progressive narrative of technologies into three waves. The third wave, he argued, populated by the rise of communication technologies would help solve emergent crises in advanced industrial societies. Toffler also implicated mass media technologies as agents of oppression in the second wave that forestalled growth and progress by promoting homogeneity and conformity in all facets of society. Third Wave technologies therefore could be seen as a rejection of the ideals and impetus driving mass media technologies, and offered a way out of the oppressive bonds endemic to these technologies. According to Toffler, these technologies would encourage flexibility, adaptation and a better and more advanced social order. Thus he argues, “This Third Wave of historical change represents not a straight-line extension of industrial society but a radical shift of direction, often a negation, of
what went before. It adds up to nothing less than a complete transformation at least as revolutionary in our day as industrial civilization was 300 years ago.”

Toffler’s perspective can be rightfully described as technologically deterministic in nature, but criticism of technological determinism aside, his perspective and others similar in tone, express an important facet of the underlying ideology embodied by many innovators in the tech world, and is certainly characteristic of the start-up culture from which Twitter emerged. The rise of a distinct mode of thinking within the Silicon Valley entrepreneurs defined by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron as the California Ideology, accompanies this persistent optimism in the potential of technology to usher in positive change. Barbrook and Cameron trace the rise of this California Ideology to the influences of both the New Left movement of the 1960s and libertarian individualism centered on free market principles emerging out of the New Right. The idealism of the New Left prompted a belief in the ability of emerging technologies to promote new democratic practices and principles free from the control of the established hierarchies such as the government, universities, corporations and even left-wing parties. Thus Barbrook and Cameron argue, these “technophiliacs” predicted that the “convergence of media, computing and telecommunication would inevitably create the electronic agora – a virtual place where everyone would be able to express their opinions without fear of censorship.”

At the same time, a strong faith in the efficiency of the free-market economy guided the distinct culture that emerged among Silicon Valley techno-enthusiasts and innovators and resulted in a complicated and often contradictory mix of ideologies. However, technology remains at the nexus of this ideology, and produced a knowledge structure that imagined technology as providing relief for much broader societal problems and challenges.
These contradictory principles were very evident in Twitter’s marketing discourse, that simultaneously privileged the ability of the service to usher in democratic forms of participations among its users, while also touting the advertising and commercialization potential of the service. Tellingly, the company adopted the use of “agora” in defining the ways in which its service was changing public discourse. Former Twitter CEO, Dick Costolo speaking at the University of Michigan in 2012, highlighted the increased connections between Twitter and television, heralding the service as a “modern form of the Greek agora” that allows everyday participants to engage in multi-directional conversations that are unfiltered in ways that other media is not. Elaborating further on the role of Twitter in fostering conversations around television he noted, “it is increasingly the case that Twitter is the shared experience, the addition of the multiple perspectives, and the inside-out view and the dialogue and the conversation about broadcasting that is happening on television right now.”45 The conflation of Twitter as the modern embodiment of the agora would be a repeated theme expressed on a number of occasions by Costolo and other Twitter representatives in the media.46 As a strategic device this particular framing allowed for meaningful work to be done in crafting Twitter’s role as a vital cog in facilitating public sphere discourse. As such it allowed Twitter to offer up self-congratulatory pats on the back for its role in “making the world a better place.”

Yet the economic imperatives embedded in this framing drew purchase from the deep-seated belief in the efficiencies of technology-driven applications as a solution to ongoing problems. However, unlike the technologists in Bennett’s study that sought to cast divisions between old and new, Twitter instead reasserted the primary structures of the existing process, while at the same time establishing itself as a necessary and needed improvement to that process. The goal therefore was not to disrupt this process, but to “creatively destruct” it from the inside.47
By offering new modes of engagement for both content producers and advertisers, Twitter attempted to redefine social television not just as a cultural process but also as an economic process funneled through the Twitter platform with the necessary infrastructure to redress the limitations of the existing system. To that end, social television analytics became the primary offshoot of Twitter’s attempt to redraw the boundaries of television. *TV x Twitter* reflected not only a partnership with television and advertising, but suggested television with Twitter was more intelligent, market-driven, and capable of engaging the audience in new and exciting ways, while simultaneously offering up new tools for audience measurement and the potential for greater insight into the minds of the audience and the impact of advertising. *TV x Twitter* was a rhetoric and strategic move on Twitter’s part to build an alliance with the television industry – one which it framed as both natural and essential to the continued fortunes of television. The company’s efforts received a boost from the surrounding ecosystem that emerged concurrently with Twitter’s rise. The accompanying ecosystem is just as significant in that it created a space for imagining social television not simply as an abstract or experimental project, but as one with serious potential for commercial exploitation. More than anything else, the emergence of this ecosystem pushed forward by Twitter and by other third parties explains why social television in the 2010s became a feasible interactive television technological solution and drew the attention of the broader television industry.
The Value of Social Television Analytics

“Half the money I spend on advertising is a waste. The problem is I don’t know which half”

Despite its murky origins the above aphorism has long been a fixture in the advertising world. Often attributed to retail entrepreneur John Wanamaker at the turn of the 20th Century, the essential truism in the phrase reflects the pervading anxiety in advertising circles about how to truly measure the effectiveness of advertising. Brands and marketers often feel caught up in a bind. They are beholden to the idea that advertising is essential for commercial growth and success, but at the same time are aware of the inefficiencies of most forms of advertising where true metrics are hard to come by. In the mass media era, television was often seen as a reliable venue for advertising. With its massive audiences, advertisers were confident that a good portion of the intended audience would be exposed to the TV commercials and expected to convert a significant portion of this mass audience into consumers. With the emergence of new technologies and the trend towards niche audiences, the shortcomings of traditional advertising became more prominent. This sentiment was captured in the writings of marketers Lars Luck, Björn Bloching, and Thomas Ramge who argue, “the decreasing efficiency of advertising reveals a further weakness of traditional advertising: the Return on Marketing Investment (ROMI) is measured only indirectly or not at all. The typical figures … measure the activities, but not the effect.”

The sense that advertising could be enhanced through advanced metrics was not limited to television, and a general shift in the importance of big data analysis in advertising spread throughout the industry. Naturally, this trend also found resonance within the television ecosystem as both Nielsen – the longtime leader in television metrics analysis – and Twitter
emerged as significant players in this arena. Crucially though, social television became the site of
despite activity where much of the discourse on the value of data converged. Social television activity
offered up tangible evidence of what some in the audience found interesting, and potentially
offered more direct ways to measure these audiences. Much of the early work on social
television analytics emerged in the start-up space as companies such as Trendrr, SocialGuide,
Networked Insights and Bluefin Labs became pioneers in analyzing social television
conversations. By 2013, all but one of these independent companies had been absorbed by
Nielsen and Twitter. The first of these buy-outs occurred at the end of 2012, when Nielsen
purchased Social Guide, in part because of its strengths in tracking linear programming
conversations. Twitter soon followed the Nielsen acquisition with two of its own. In February
2013, the company purchased Bluefin Labs for a reported $90 million dollars, and subsequently
purchased Trendrr in August of the same year. Bluefin Labs was an integral purchase in that it
allowed Twitter to refine its TV ad-targeting program, while Trendrr was instrumental in
offering programs the ability to integrate tweets on the screen. The significance of these deals,
however, rests not in the fact that these companies were deemed valuable enough by Nielsen and
Twitter, but more importantly in how these companies marketed themselves and consequently
what the purchases signaled about the true objectives of social television at least as imagined by
the industry.

As part of my research into social television, I interviewed representatives from both
Social Guide and Trendrr to talk about the services on offer and to take part in a product demo.51
Talking to these representatives revealed a number of commonalities in the ways both companies
imagined their services and how they envisioned these products changing the television
landscape. Moving beyond the hype and sales spin present in these imaginings, the broader
assumptions guiding these firms revolved around an unwavering belief that social television analytics could provide an enriched dynamic between television networks, advertisers and the audience, whereby communicative practices acquired more predictive value and enhanced the structures of knowledge available to these networks and advertisers.

Social television analytics was presented as a vessel through which hidden layers of information could be unmasked. It suggested, that these analytics could be used to render additional visibility to information previously obscured through the lack of efficient technological resources. This particular positioning was present in the marketing material, and in the ways the sales agents at these companies talked about the services they provide. Sociality then within the context of the television business acquired different registers than its simple dictionary meaning would imply. It moved beyond privileging ideas of what it means to be social – extending relationships, sharing information, participation – to understanding social television as a phenomenon with “scientific registers,” a measurable object that allowed for more categorization and quantification. As such, it served as a realm where the norms and assumptions about television viewing and the audience itself were constantly revisited and reimagined. Consequently, three main themes emerged from the contact with Social Guide and Trendrr that reflects more broadly on why social television as a concept matters to the industry, and more importantly how it is conceived.

The first of these three themes centers on how social television technologies could be used to enhance audience engagement around live-television viewing. Both companies touted the potential reach embedded in their offerings, where reach encompassed both audience volume – as in number of active participants interacting with a show – but also the ability to reach
individual participants. Trendrr focused on “real-time” audience engagement described its in-house product *Curatorr* as the essential control-center and portal through which brands could manage and control real-time Twitter activity.\textsuperscript{52} Using *Curatorr*, clients could not only follow the conversations taking place around a show or a brand, but could easily interject themselves into the conversation, retweeting highly favorable or well-received tweets, or could respond directly to audience members through the *Curatorr* product. According to Alex Nagler, the Trendrr representative, *Curatorr* was also beneficial to the show and to brands because it was integrated with the actual broadcast. Tweets could be readily embedded into the live broadcast for display on the air, to produce what he referred to as a true “360 degree interaction” between the audience and the show.\textsuperscript{53} He argued this 360 degree interaction was essential in driving social television traffic on Twitter and other social media sites,\textsuperscript{54} but also helped to amplify the experience of watching the show live, created additional exposure for the show, and increased the emotional connection between the show and its audience.\textsuperscript{55}

Social Guide also touted its ability to foster real-time engagement through its social intelligence tool. The service worked by capturing all Twitter activity during the “broadcast hour,” defined as 3 hours prior to airtime and extending to 3 hours after.\textsuperscript{56} Although Social Guide did not offer its own version of Curatorr, the service nonetheless offered real-time tracking to its clients, with the ability to view all tweets related to a show on the dashboard.\textsuperscript{57} This Twitter data was presented to clients both as a stream based on criteria selected by the end-user, and visualized graphically. Users could use either option to reply directly to individual users, thus “driving engagement.”\textsuperscript{58}
In thinking about audience engagement, both Social Guide and Trendrr privileged activity beyond all other measures. Both companies placed heavy emphasis on celebrity “opinion leaders,” as well as others deemed to be highly influential on the service. As such, the number of followers is considered an all-important metric in the valuation of audiences. To some extent both companies were mirroring Twitter’s policy, which is designed to facilitate media institutions access to what it calls its “VITs,” – a term adopted by Twitter to identify its “very important tweeters.” In 2013, Twitter restructured its platform to account for the increased volume of tweets occurring daily that often led to a lag in the posting of original tweets from
users with a high number of followers. Prior to the infrastructure change, some users were receiving replies before the original tweet. In response, Twitter implemented changes meant to ensure that all tweets are delivered within five seconds, prioritizing tweets sent out from VITS, as well as from active users. Users who have not logged in once in the last thirty days receive the lowest priority.

Fig. 2.3: Social Guide’s Intelligence Guide Tool. Demo shows how it could be used by Sports Center to respond to audience tweets
Although both companies declined to specifically talk about the algorithms used to determine how information is displayed to clients, a similar process seemed to be at play. Trendrr highlighted top Twitter influencers in its reporting using a ‘K-Score,’ based on a combination of the following metrics – number of followers, number following and number of retweets. Social Guide also reported on the most “social audience” ranked by the number of followers. Both representatives did talk about audience engagement and reach through a frame that privileged these high volume users. They suggested these high volume users were optimal targets for their clients – the networks and brands – to extend reach and engagement on the platform. It identified potential contacts for these clients that could optimally serve as a reward mechanism for the user. In essence, users who managed to attract a high number of followers would attract the attention of the network or show, and sending tweets to these users directly was an acknowledgement on the show’s part that these users were important. Additionally, by engaging with these users, the client could also benefit from the extra exposure since these tweets had the potential to garner the most impressions. The broad lesson emerging here highlights the ways in which audience engagement exists on an uneven plane, where Twitter users with the “most reach” are afforded the ability to experience the full range of benefits of audience engagement on the part of the networks and the programs. It illustrates how audience measurement shifts from simple metrics such as “how many people are watching” or even “how many people are tweeting” to categorizing the audience in terms of potential value and utility. As such the overriding idea endorsed by social television analytic companies has to do with offering tools that can help networks maximize limited resources in the social television arena by focusing on audience engagement strategies that would derive the highest return.
Audience engagement as articulated here served a critical role in the functional services that these social television analytic firms offered, but it also highlighted another key theme that emerged in my research – the role of these companies in offering “keen insights” about audiences and the business of television to their clients. Both Social Guide and Trendrr emphasized the expanse of data they could provide clients and how this could make these companies work more efficiently in the day-to-day running of the business. For Trendrr, its primary data focus was sentiment analysis, ranking tweets according to three broad categories – positive, negative or neutral. Other data points made available to the company’s clients include
gender breakdown, conversation topic (largely categorized by hashtag), device used, volume of activity, ranking of designated market areas (DMA), and the aforementioned top influencers, ranked by the k-score.

To a large degree, the potential utility of these data points for clients was primarily framed in terms of future possibilities. When I pressed Alex Nagler for more specifics on how these services offered value to clients and how it compared to other audience tracking data already available such as Nielsen ratings, he focused on two things. First, he argued that Trendrr did not see itself in competition with Nielsen, but more like a complementary product that
expanded the range of information available to the industry. He noted that while Nielsen provided very conclusive data on the number of people watching a given show, it did not have insight on how this audience was watching the show or what they responded to most in the programming (referring here to the sentiment analysis and the conversation content breakdown). Nielsen data he conceded, might currently be more valuable on the macro-level in terms of what the network needs but he felt that the data they provided was especially beneficial to individual shows seeking to improve or maintain audience interest, as well as to advertisers who could more readily adjust social media advertising campaigns based on this data. This influence he predicted was sure to grow as more people migrated to using these online sources. Secondly, he argued the process was still in flux, and both Trendrr the company, and its clients were working out new ways of using the available data – in particular the sentiment analysis and conversation content analysis.

Social Guide, which was more firmly integrated with Nielsen by the time of our conversation, also believed strongly that traditional ratings and social television analytics were complementary products. Nonetheless, the data provided by Social Guide mirrored Nielsen’s methodology in a number of ways. There was more emphasis on ranking shows based on Twitter activity, such as privileging the number of unique users participating in the conversation over total number of tweets, although in most cases I observed there was a linear positive correlation between unique tweeters and number of tweets. Impressions was also a key metric for Social Guide, with the company determining impressions by extrapolating data using the number of active followers logged on during the broadcast hour to draw assumptions about how many people potentially saw each individual tweet. Comparison between networks and between shows was also a key component in the data provided to clients. Social Guide prided itself on having
access to the widest range of network data available as it covered 239 networks including much more niche networks such as “Hallmark, Hub, Outdoor, Ovation and Sprout.”

In contrast to Trendrr’s focus on sentiment analysis, Social Guide instead focused on what it referred to as affinity metrics. The Social Guide Intelligence product offered the ability to track users throughout the Twitter universe. Clients could dive down to the user level to see all of the user’s tweets, and which brands or subjects they interacted with on Twitter beyond the actual conversation revolving around a particular show. This “full spectrum of use” reflected the significant utility of the product to both networks ad brands. For brands, Danny Landau, the Social Guide representative, touted the ability for both ad sales teams and marketing teams to benefit from the product: Ad Sales could benefit by knowing which programs really resonate for their products, and which audiences would respond most favorably to advertising from the company, while marketers on the other hand could obtain information useful for speaking to the audience in a manner that seemed “natural.” Similarly, he argued the information Social Guide provided was beneficial in allowing networks and shows to take part in the pop culture conversations in which they were a central figure, without appearing inauthentic. From a programming perspective, the information Social Guide provided could help evaluate a show’s performance and also help in development. For instance, Landau cited an example where a minor character in a show was getting more attention and sympathy from the audience. The network was able to capitalize on the insights gained here by changing promotional material to highlight this character more and featured the character much more prominently in its social television activities, even offering the character the opportunity to take over the network’s Twitter feed and live tweet a number of episodes.
Just like Nagler, Landau also talked about the utility in its services as evolving. He noted “people were still figuring out how to use the data,” which reflects more broadly on the third theme present at both companies: the idea that social television represented the future, which revolved around techniques of collaboration. As noted already, given their line of business both companies had a vested interest in framing the progression narrative as inevitable, but beyond that, there was a sense of optimism tied not only to the advantages of social television analytics but to the futures of Twitter as an entity. Both representatives imagined Twitter as becoming ubiquitous and commonplace in everyday interactions, and the prevailing sense implied that new infrastructures of collaboration were needed to be competitive in the contemporary and future landscape. Twitter was highly regarded for already embodying this new collaborative mode of engagement, which was evident in the heavy investment the company already had in making its data available to these analytic firms. Landau explained how accessible Twitter was in terms of providing data for analysis by providing data directly into Nielsen’s Measurement Science tool. Landau saw this collaboration as critical to the success of social television, but also determined that it was in Twitter’s best interest to accommodate clients such as Nielsen to ensure its continued growth. To that end, he suggested that social media, in general, was built on a model of collaboration between companies offering complementary services with each bringing something to the table. Asked to elaborate on his idea of what social television meant he talked about collaboration, but also integration. New players to the industry were essential, but what made them successful was the ability to align effectively with the existing infrastructure. In that regard, he was critical of companies who simply attempted to enter the industry without giving much forethought toward existing alongside the traditional television business.
This theme of collaboration emerged also in Nagler’s conception of social television describing it as an “overlay of services working in partnership to revitalize the dynamics of television and advertising.” The television content was the primary driver in this system, but services like Trendrr were part of an overall chainlink system that provided added value and support critical for success within the existing landscape. The core media companies were good at the services they offered, but he argued social television analytic firms offered a new dimension that worked because both these core companies – the media and tertiary companies such as Trendrr, and other social media technologies – included here were the four main companies (Twitter, Facebook, Getglue and Viggle) Trendrr partnered with– all played a crucial role in developing an ecosystem that took television beyond the primary screen into a fully actionable and measurable entity.

Critically, to the extent that the audience mattered in defining social television, both Landau and Nagler regarded them merely as data points to be analyzed, or echoing broader industry speak, as “ambassadors” for shows instrumental in creating or expanding nodes of attention around specific shows. Audiences helped with visibility, an important characteristic of social television, but in thinking more generally about how and when visibility reigned in social television, the larger emphasis rested in the ways in which social television and its concomitant analytics made visible practices that had previously been untapped. The recognition that audiences had always gathered around television was a given, but in this framing, these unexplored practices were finally receiving due consideration due to the technological affordances of social television analytics that enabled listening, participation and analysis. Consequently, as the argument went, social television was a crucial intervention for the television industry because the full potential of television could finally be realized. It represented
the future with two diverging paths – get on board and reap the full potential of social television or be left behind.

**Making Social Television Count**

The impact of social television analytics to the industrialization of social television is undeniable. Analytics provided a way forward for monetizing the practice of talking about and socializing around television. Television networks, shows, and advertisers could take advantage of these practices and develop strategies to grow the business, and to integrate the audience in a manner that appeared at least superficially to be less contrived than previous engagement efforts. Social television analytics gained relevancy for the industry through a number of factors both self-driven and external to its growth. The self-driven efforts can be linked to the marketing strategy employed by the analytic firms. These firms marketed their platforms separately to television networks, shows, and advertisers. For advertisers, the selling point was social television could make the television text accessible to advertisers in ways previously unimaginable. In conjunction with Twitter, advertisers could build upon traditional ads, which aired on television. Twitter ads could facilitate direct engagement with the audience, and the analytics available through these companies would provide further insights into consumers and measurable outcomes for determining the effectiveness of the advertising campaign.

Television shows and the networks also had an incentive to reach out directly to the audience and engage in social television activities. At the very least, these efforts could assist in bringing live audiences back to the network, which was crucial for the ratings system. Ratings were used to set advertising rates, and thus the benefit for television networks and shows could be intricately linked to a positive economic outcome for both the network and individual shows.
Additionally, the data obtained from the social television analytics could also prove beneficial in these broader negotiations with advertisers. Networks could point to a highly engaged audience as one additional metric to be employed for indicating the value of their product. Research showing that social television audiences boasted higher recall of television ads bolstered this idea that audiences who engaged in live tweeting and other social television practices offered value to advertisers beyond the traditional ratings measure.63

On the other hand, Twitter and the burgeoning social television analytics industry also benefitted from the broader transformation in society that saw data becoming a highly valuable currency. The emergent network society had given rise to an influx of technologies – mobile communication technologies, cloud computing, social media and others – that produced significant amount of data that revealed much about human behavioral patterns. Tracking human practices through the traces left by these new technologies had become an accepted and welcoming state of affairs across a wide variety of industries. van Djick and Poell have talked about this shift in terms of datafication, which they frame as a key principle underwriting the emerging social media logic. Datafication reflects the reality that the primary business model of social media platforms rests on an “ability to harvest and repurpose data rather than from monetizing user activity proper.”64 It also bears a strong resonance to Carolin Gerlitz and Anne Helmond’s work on Facebook social plugins, and the resultant “like economy” it helped usher in. Gerlitz and Helmond note “A click on the Like button transforms users’ affective, positive, spontaneous responses to web content into connections between users and web objects and quanta of numbers on the Like counter.”65 Twitter’s retweets and like buttons performed a similar function, and furthermore was also heralded because of the perceived connections between its
“real-timeness” and the liveness of traditional television media. The possibility of receiving instantaneous feedback proved extremely alluring to media buyers and to television networks.

Data had become the new ‘imaginaire.’ It fueled optimism across a broad spectra and convinced networks and advertisers of the value to be found in tracking social chatter on Twitter. The myths around technology had found new momentum in the credo, “In data we trust” that served as a breeding ground for a sensibility premised upon the idea that all human behavior could be mapped out, measured and predicted. Companies such as SocialGuide and Trendrr along with other data analytic firms could therefore rely on a widely-shared perspective that was emboldened and encouraged by the value of data.

Evidence of this emerges in the ways in which the trade press and these companies talked about their services. As a quick example, in 2011, business magazine Fast Company ran a profile on Bluefin Labs, the start-up social analytics firm purchased by Twitter in 2012. Bluefin Labs labeled its work as “mapping the TV genome.” The idea behind this was that its machine-based algorithms were sophisticated enough “to capture millions of social-media (sic) comments posted daily about TV programs and commercials on Twitter. It analyzes what content drove the most conversation, the sentiment behind and topics of those responses, and the characteristics of the commenters.”

Setting aside the practical realities of accomplishing this with a high degree of efficiency, the relevance of this claim rests more with the perceptible shift in the approach to data, and how data-mining companies offered to alleviate the anxieties of the industry. Deb Roy the co-founder of Bluefin Labs, makes explicit reference to this in a TED talk he delivered in May 2012 where he states
With the combination of science and large-scale computing, we are solving a problem that has eluded TV for more than 60 years: how to measure actual audience engagement and not just simple media consumption … Marketers and TV networks are looking to us to understand how their audiences are responding to ads and shows on TV, and we are able to provide them with data in near real time.”

This particular framing of the strength of social television analytics echoes those of Danny Landau and Alex Nagler of Social Guide and Trendrr respectively. What each of these perspectives reveal is the idea that the company’s technology can recast social television as not just an activity hard-coded into the everyday practices of ordinary television viewers, but one that is much more powerful and determining with the ability to engineer everyday routines such that it renders “people’s activities formal, manageable, and manipulable.” The emergence of a market-based solution for deploying social television paved the way forward for its development, a critical difference helpful in explaining why social television became more visible in the 2010s compared to the earlier experimental phase. By framing subjective behavior patterns and practices into a quantifiable logic, a new order could be achieved that redrew the boundaries of what was possible in terms of directing audiences’ attention and behavior. Thus social television as imagined here derived its importance not simply in relation to what users’ were talking about in regards to a particular show, but it also represented an ideal whereby a connective matrix of interests and ideas could be developed that could be used to script shows and mold future behavior by the audience.

This sort of algorithmic prediction had become commonplace in the media industries. The long-held idea that “nobody knows” was being turned on its head, and with it the vision of television production as something that often carried a high degree of uncertainty. Beneath the hype that accompanied social television was this promise of clinical precision and measurability.
Social television became the beacon of hope for the television industry, an opportunity to reinstitute control over unruly audience behavior and practices. Getting audiences to talk about your content was important, but the longer-term value rested in the ability to gather data about these audiences that could later be tapped for greater audience engagement. This emerged as the sustaining legacy of social television, which became even more evident in analysis of social television implementation across various media networks.
NOTES


8 Ibid.


11 Facebook to some degree has now incorporated some elements of visibility into its platform. In 2014, it introduced a trending topics feature.


13 The change took place reportedly to avoid having the same topics appear daily on the list. It is often invoked in relation to Justin Bieber who at the time enjoyed significant and sustained discussion on Twitter by his fans. With the change, Twitter sought to more accurately capture breaking news. See Parr, Ben. "Twitter Improves Trending Topic Algorithm: Bye Bye, Bieber!" Mashable. May 14, 2010. http://mashable.com/2010/05/14/twitter-improves-trending-topic-algorithm-bye-bye-bieber/.


16 Scholar Michael H. Goldhaber first proposed the idea of an attention economy in a 1997 conference titled, Economics of Digital Information. He suggested that the attention economy was the new natural economy that emerged with the Internet, whereby people and institutions were increasingly consumed with the need to capture the attention of others. In his estimation, the production of material goods was subordinate to this greater call toward attention, and it was the defining means of economic activity in the digital age. He wrote, “Money flows along with attention,” so those who can capture the others of attention become the stars of the economy and the recipients of capital. See Goldhaber, Michael H. "The Attention Economy and the Net." First Monday 2, no. 4 (April 7, 1997). doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v2i4.519.


28 Steinberg, Brian. "First Network, Then Cable, Now There's 'social TV'; Networks Try to Hold, Build Audiences with Facebook and Twitter.

29 The trend that began with the 2010 Super Bowl has continued yearly with each successive Super Bowl overtaking the record for most watched program. The 2015 Super Bowl holds the current record with 114.4 million US viewers. The last six Super Bowls (2010 – 2015) currently sit at the top of the list in descending order for highest viewership numbers (See http://variety.com/2015/tv/ratings/super-bowl-ratings-hit-all-time-high-with-patriots-win-on-nbc-1201421267/)


34 The term was used by the former Twitter VP of Engineering, Raffi Krikorian in a number of presentations going as far back as October 2012, and has spilled into more common usage within the trade press. Fred Graver, Creative Lead at Twitter also used it in his MIPcom presentation.


40 The NFL did not enter into an Amplify partnership with Twitter immediately when the product was launched in May 2013, but joined the program a few months later in September 2013. The announcement received significant press both because it was a huge get for Twitter, and because both Verizon and McDonalds signed up immediately to be the ad sponsors, with Verizon getting the bulk of the sponsorship spots. (see Heine, Christopher. "McDonald's Will Join Verizon as NFL-Twitter Amplify Partner." AdWeek. September 26, 2013. http://www.adweek.com/news/technology/mcdonalds-will-join-verizon-nfl-twitter-amplify-partner-152727.)


46 Costolo also referred to Twitter as a modern Greek agora in a speech in 2013 to the Brookings Institute (see http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/08/twitter-global-social-media/402415/)

47 I am drawing here on Joseph Schumpeter’s theory of creative destruction, which refers to the ways in which capitalist structures engender growth by changing processes from within, while at the same time destroying some of the embedded structures in place. For more on creative destruction, see Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper, 1950.


51 By the time I made contact in July 2013, Bluefin Labs was well integrated within Twitter and the company had a policy of not talking to researchers. The sale of Trendrr was announced about a month after my initial contact with the company. My contact at Social Guide was Danny Landau, then an Account Manager of Analytics at Nielsen, and the Trendrr contact was Alex Nagler, a Business Development executive.

52 The landing page for the Curatorr product highlighted this focus on real-time engagement. The tagline (no longer available but see Appendix) read, “Create rich real-time Twitter experiences. Anywhere.”

It should be noted at this point that at the time, Trendrr collected data from four sources – Twitter, Facebook, Viggle and Getglue. The majority of the data came from Twitter though (~90%), thus I refer mainly to Twitter here in terms of what we talked about.


Social Guide also focused on providing historical data reporting to end-users, which Landau likened more to the traditional ratings measurement tool. The historical data could be used to analyze trends across all networks, filtered across cable/broadcasts and offered three views – network (which was the broadest), the show itself, down to the most granular – an individual episode. Data could also be filtered across East and West Coast broadcasts.

Danny Landau espoused the idea that this would drive engagement.

The term was used by the former Twitter VP of Engineering, Raffi Krikorian in a number of presentations going as far back as October 2012, and has spilled into more common usage within the trade press. Fred Graver, Creative Lead at Twitter also used it in his MIPcom presentation

I specifically asked Landau about demographic information when we talked but at the time Social Guide wasn’t collecting demographic information. He noted this was being mapped out for a new Fall Twitter rating system, which turned out to be the Twitter TV ratings partnership jointly announced by Twitter and Nielsen in October 2013.


Borrowed from Bloching, Ramge and Tobler’s book titled, In Data We Trust: How Customer Data is Revolutionising Our Economy


This idea of “nobody knows” emerges from the work of Richard Caves outlining the characteristics of the creative industries. Caves suggests these industries operate on the principle of ‘nobody knows’ whereby it is impossible to predict which products will be successful, or after the fact provide a with scientific clarity why certain products ended up being successful. The principle of nobody knows is thus antithetical to the approach taken here whereby algorithms are depicted as capable of analyzing audience behavior to a high degree that it is possible to predict what type of content they would like. Netflix and Amazon have based their business models on this idea of using algorithms to produce content. For more on ‘nobody knows’ see Caves, Richard E. Creative Industries: Contracts between Art and Commerce. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
CHAPTER III
Crafting the Perfect Playbook: NFL TV and the Value of Mediated Sociality

By all accounts, televised sports programming has developed into the undisputed leader and prime beneficiary of the social television phenomenon. A cursory review of Twitter’s ratings metric reveals the dominance of sports-related content on the platform. Empirical evidence from Nielsen’s 2013 Year in Sports report clarifies the relationship and reveals that although sports content made up only 1.2 percent of television programming, sports chatter on Twitter comprised nearly half of all conversations on the platform, which represented an increase of 7 percent from the prior year.

Sports dominance in social television rankings is rather unsurprising given its prominence in contemporary television ratings and in live-viewing practices. While much of the discourse surrounding ratings in the contemporary fragmented media environment focused on the rise of time-shifting practices and lower ratings thresholds and expectations, sports programming has – for the most part – remained impervious to the changing media environment and enjoyed characteristics more emblematic of the mass media era. Unlike entertainment programming, televised sports programing continues to adhere closely to the linear, live-viewing experience and posts higher audience viewing rates than most other forms of programming.
Furthermore, sports spectatorship calls up a subject-position with deeply affective and cultural resonances, that is tied into the notion of identification with a team and the broader community of like-minded participants. In that regard therefore, it is embedded within social television practices built around the notion of communing and interacting around a shared common television experience.

Sports spectatorship has traditionally been characterized as a ritualized social activity that engenders feelings of enjoyment, togetherness, modes of identification, and status, and can often give rise to obsessive states of being – either in the moment or more long-term. Psychologists studying sports fandom have deliberated over the intense emotional states that sports fans often exhibit, and noted the increased activities in pleasure centers of the brain manifested through higher dopamine and testosterone levels as fans participate as spectators. The intense emotional state that fans experience is often accompanied by feelings of identification with the athletes on the team. In some cases, researchers have observed similar emotional registers between the fans and the athletes. In other words, the fans can often feel just as involved, present, and committed to the outcome displaying the same heightened sense of engagement and focus that athletes embody. This depth of emotional affect plays neatly into the attributes that prove most compelling to social television, such as the urge to connect, share, and enhance the feelings of enjoyment that come from being a part of a collective social experience.

The highly socialized and engaged nature of sports is quite evident in the National Football League (NFL), which was voted the most popular sport in the United States in 2014 for the thirtieth year in a row. According to Harris’ 2015 Interactive poll, 32 percent of sports fans declared football to be their favorite sport, followed not so closely by Major League Baseball
(MLB) at 16 percent. Accordingly, the NFL dominates both traditional television ratings and the newly formed Twitter TV ratings discussed in the previous chapter. As a case in point, the top sporting event on Twitter for 2014 was the Super Bowl game between the Denver Broncos and the Seattle Seahawks. Nielsen reports over fifteen million users were actively participating on Twitter during the Super Bowl game, and these users sent more than twenty-five million tweets. To put that into perspective, the Soccer World Cup also took place in 2014, and despite the fairly substantial global reach of Twitter with 211 of 271 million subscribers reportedly located outside the US, the Super Bowl beat out the World Cup despite the fact that soccer is the most popular sport in the world. The World Cup did dominate the top ten ranking for the year capturing six of the top ten spots, but significantly, the NFL’s top three games – the Super Bowl, and both divisional championship games also made the top ten list.

In drawing attention to these numbers, I aim to establish the crucial objective at stake here – investigating and analyzing the widespread and transformative media developments taking place within the sports television industry in relation to social television, with a specific focus on professional football. A number of key developments make the focus on the NFL timely and worthy of consideration. As the most popular sports league in the nation, the NFL has carefully staked out a position that allows significant influence in the media environment, well beyond the power it exerts as the producer of highly desirable content. The league has become a very powerful media institution in its own right, with about 60 percent of its annual revenue attributed to its media offerings. With the launch of the NFL Network in 2003, the league transitioned into television distribution, which complicated its relationship with its traditional partners and allies – the broadcast networks and ESPN, the leading cable sports channel.
Crucially, this transition of the NFL into television distribution comes at a moment of tumultuous change in the industry, not only in terms of shifting audience practices and new technological advances, but also when the fundamental economics of television are facing new uncertainties and challenges. In the years since the launch of the NFL Network, mobile sports consumption has become an increasingly important mode of fan and audience engagement with sports content. Between October 2012 and October 2014, the number of people consuming sports content on mobile devices increased significantly and the average time spent consuming mobile sports content also saw a corresponding rise. Furthermore, despite the proliferation of mobile sports apps, Nielsen reports the average number of sports apps per user stands at 1.86 making for a very tight and competitive marketplace as television networks, sports leagues, and other mobile app creators fight to become the go-to-app for fans. The particular exigencies of sports, that require immediacy and real-time connectivity to live sporting events no doubt explain in part the rise of mobile sports consumption. This state of affairs further complicated the struggles faced by media institutions in the present era, and reveals some of the pressures involved in gaining a foothold or advantage in the emerging mobile/second screen app market. To a large degree, the mobile app economy within television is shaped by the ever-present quest to maintain and refine brand identity, but beyond that this mobile app economy also speaks to transformations taking place within media cultures and the attendant impact on economic and technological contexts of television production as well as on the ways in which contemporary audiences are understood to have meaning.

Consequently, the main objective of this chapter centers on the following questions: How has the NFL responded to the challenges and opportunities created by social television? What is the impact of the burgeoning social television ecosystem on the NFL, and how does that play
into the NFL’s relationship with its television partners? How does the investment in social television provoke or reinforce the complex social interactions between the league and its fan base, and more broadly how can we begin to make sense of the contemporary media landscape vis-à-vis social television? Taken together, these questions return the focus of inquiry towards the broader concerns of this dissertation project focused on understanding the transitions taking place in the television industry in the wake of social television and what these transitions suggests in terms of understanding the range of experiences and shifting dynamics that structure the current television ecosystem.

The chapter offers a narrative of the revolutionary shift in the NFL’s media strategy, that takes into account the interplay of cultural and economic forces that have worked to produce the longstanding ideas and structures guiding the NFL’s role as a pivotal player in shaping the direction of sports broadcasting. It tracks the rise of the NFL into a legitimate, culturally relevant, and powerful agent in the business of television, and analyzes the league’s rationalizations that hinge upon the attractiveness and economic viability of its intellectual property. Although the league retains considerable dominance in the contemporary era, it has had to acknowledge and readjust to the challenges imposed by social television. The appeal of its media content had traditionally afforded the league significant negotiating and leveraging power within the television industry. Social television has introduced some new challenges for the league and the ways in which the NFL has been forced to contend with social television is of crucial concern here especially as it seeks to maintain its position at the top of the televised “sports/media complex.”
What emerges then is a distinctive configuration of mediated sociality that reflects the complicated structures of interaction taking place between the industry and its fan base. Mediated sociality, which draws from Jose Van Dijck’s *The Culture of Connectivity*, reflects an “engineered form of sociality,” where every day human social activity is carefully scripted by the television industry into narrowly defined rituals, norms and practices. In this specific context, it accounts for the strategic interventions by the NFL to dictate the terms by which audiences may partake in social television activities related to football content, but it is also constitutive of the shifting economic realities that have beset the league. The league traditionally has been able to maintain a solid grasp of the audience’s attention, but the changing socio-cultural norms engendered by social television impels the league to rescript practices focused on audience engagement. As such, the league’s foray into social television is more than a simplistic capitalist impulse towards growth. It more accurately reflects a cautious accommodation to its audience’s everyday habits and activities, and at the same time a growing recognition of the impact of social television, that was made visible by some of the league’s competitors. The evolution of the league into a viable media content provider has impressed on the league some of the more pressing concerns facing the television industry at large, despite the generally strong position it holds within the contemporary television landscape. Nonetheless, understanding the ideological foundations that have grounded the NFL’s meteoric rise as a media entertainment powerhouse is critical to understanding how social television has been imagined and implemented by the league.

Events that helped shape the early development of the league function as a pivotal structuring principle determining its present-day course of operations and explain the logic employed by the NFL in establishing and maintaining supremacy in the televised sports market.
From its early days, the approach favored by the league has maintained strict control of its intellectual property and maximized the opportunities to capitalize on this content through lucrative deals with television networks and other media entities. This fundamental logic continues to guide the narrative in relation to social television, and produces a “complex, ambivalent and contested” negotiation with social television on the part of the league. The league is beset by contradictory needs where on the one hand it sees great value in restricting access to and exerting control over its media library, and on the other the audience’s desire for social interactivity requires some flexibility on the part of the NFL to meet this growing demand. Although the league has now made concessions in this area, change was slow to come as the league was reluctant to face this new reality. This reluctance is rooted in the league’s past, and so a thorough exploration of the historical conditions that gave rise to the NFL as a dominant media institution is a crucial first step in analyzing the cultural and economic drives guiding the league’s adoption of social television.

The Birth of NFL and TV

The NFL has enjoyed a profitable and lucrative relationship with television since the 1960s as television became a household staple and sports became a worthwhile option for networks seeking to fill out the programming lineup. Pete Rozelle, who served as long-term NFL commissioner from 1960 – 1989, is widely acknowledged as the chief architect in growing the NFL and turning it into a leviathan operation. Rozelle foresaw the viability of television early on and was instrumental in establishing a number of initiatives that helped cement the bond between both industries. He helped transform the league into a leading media institution and powerful brand with significant leveraging power.
Sports scholar Michael Oriard and others have documented Rozelle’s contributions in orchestrating the transition of the league into a powerhouse. Among the many contributions attributed to Rozelle, was the pivotal act of getting a unified television deal for the league as a whole that overturned the previous patchwork system that relied on local deals amongst the various teams. The national television deal was bolstered by Rozelle’s push to institute what has been termed “League Think,” that is the idea of team parity and equal revenue sharing across the league. As a former public relations professional, Rozelle imagined the NFL as a powerful media institution in its own right. He established the first public relations department for the league and most of his executive group consisted of men with a background in public relations or in the newspaper business. Rozelle’s actions here proved to be quite fortuitous, and, it is worth noting as these two decisions – pushing for a single uniform television deal and convincing the owners to act as a unified group – afforded the league significant negotiating power with television that continues to this day. In contrast, major league baseball, the second most popular sports league, places less importance on having an equitable structure in place for all its teams. Although the league does have a national television deal for many of its games, this deal is not inclusive of all games and individual teams are free to negotiate separate deals with local stations, which enables a state of affairs where the big-city teams enjoy considerable monetary advantages over smaller-market teams and at the expense of the league itself.

Perhaps the most significant intervention by Rozelle in terms of building a media empire was the move to develop an in-house production operation, NFL Films. Named after the purchase of Blair Motion Pictures from father and son team, Ed and Steve Sabol, NFL Films has served as the main promotional vehicle for the NFL, and the father and son pair remained the principal filmmakers long after the privately owned studio transitioned into a league-owned
entity.\textsuperscript{19} NFL Films played an instrumental role in helping the league build both its brand identity and its media library, which has become the cornerstone of its operational logic and strategy. From the start, the Sabols approached the filmmaking process with an eye towards narrative structure. Steve Sabol, especially, adopted several Hollywood filmmaking techniques in his shooting style, that emphasized drama within the game and among the coaches and players.\textsuperscript{20} Beginning in 1965, the company took on the task of developing documentary series’ meant to humanize the sport and imbue it with quintessential American traits, facilitating the NFL’s ability to position itself as embodying a “unique reflection of America.”\textsuperscript{21} Reflecting back on his career in 2006, Steve Sabol talked about the principles that guided the filming process noting:

\begin{quote}
We’ve always tried to stir your emotions more than your mind. Comebacks, underdogs, and a group of guys thrown together on a dream to overcome the odds are the story lines that occur every season and never go out of style. That’s our bread and butter.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

The work undertaken by NFL Films helped to popularize the league, but its more enduring legacy rests in the vast amount of footage it has produced and acquired, a critical element in shaping the NFL’s media strategy historically and persisting today with its approach to mobile and social television content. The league’s strategic move to maintain exclusive rights over its content, coupled with the increasing popularity of the game, proved to be a decisive advantage for the league giving it immense negotiating power with television networks and limiting the desire to experiment with untested and untried ventures. Notably, although NFL Films televises every single game, its broadcast partners are responsible for filming the footage they air on the networks. Once the broadcast is over, all game footage produced in connection with the NFL, whether in-house or externally through the networks is governed by the NFL, which retains the
rights and can dictate when and how it is used. The licensing agreement, to which all entities are
bound, spells out the NFL’s exclusive right to all game footage

regardless of the source of such footage (this includes, but is not limited to, television coverage of games/events, footage shot on NFL sidelines with proper credentials, and NFL Films’ coverage). NFL copyrighted footage includes: (1) all footage of NFL game action, including footage of ancillary activities inside the stadium (e.g., cheerleaders, pre-game activities, crowd, sidelines, etc.) from the period three hours prior to kickoff of an NFL game to one hour after the NFL game has ended, and (2) NFL controlled events (i.e. Combine, NFL Draft, etc.).

NFL Film’s erstwhile contribution resides mainly in its role in building a huge media library for the league. Through its stranglehold on content, the NFL was able to derive tremendous value over its intellectual property, and much of the revenue earned by NFL Films came from the licensing of game footage after the fact, but also through the sale of programs such as Inside the NFL to cable networks.

The highly stylized form of filmmaking popularized by the Sabols helped to transform the league into the most popular sport in America, and in turn, this increased the NFL’s negotiating power with television networks. Signing exclusive deals with multiple partners and parsing out access to NFL media content on a piecemeal basis has been the key strategy for the league based on the belief that its holds the power to dictate the terms under which it chooses to operate. Crucially, this approach is not unique to the NFL but is more reflective of the underlying logic of media industry operations. As Janet Wasko notes, “The enforcement of intellectual property rights has become a vital issue for media and entertainment companies, especially in light of the proliferation of branded products as well as the increased global marketing of products.”
Nonetheless, in tightly managing and controlling its intellectual property, the NFL has by and large affirmed a “particular ordering” in the cultural and economic relationship between the league and its television partners. This particular ordering rests on maintaining an asymmetrical power relationship between the NFL and its television partners that reflects Bourdieu’s understanding of the logic guiding the market for symbolic goods. In Bourdieu’s estimation, these markets are punctuated by the exercise of “symbolic violence,” whereby powerful entities exercise dominion over less powerful actors without the explicit use of force or coercion. While Bourdieu’s theorization did not specifically address the negotiations that take place between powerful institutions, his perspective nonetheless serves as an appropriate tool for analyzing the relationship between the NFL and television networks.

Sports historically have been central to the growth of television. Notably the broadcast networks used sports programming to fill the schedule line-up, but also as a tool for selling television sets and introducing television to the nation as a whole. According to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, the first documented instance of football appearing on television occurred as early as 1939 during New York’s World Fair, which was also simultaneously an introduction to television. This initial pairing set the stage for a symbiotic and mutually beneficial arrangement, as both parties more or less equal partners originally found great gains from this relationship. Writing in 1974, scholar Donald Parente argued networks reportedly used “sports programming as a kind of “loss leader” to attract and maintain a network of affiliates,” which speaks to the fact that early on sports was an attractive programming option to get affiliates on board, but it was not a profitable venture and did not enjoy the influence and reach typical of the contemporary era. With the rise of the post-network era however, sports in general have proven increasingly central to the fortunes of the broadcast networks as the only content capable of
reliably generating audience ratings comparable to the mass-media era. The predictability of sports in commanding higher ratings, and attracting a mostly live-audience contributed in shifting the balance of power away from the television industry as a whole towards the sports leagues. In addition, the increased competition amongst networks seeking to acquire sports programming is a key factor in this shift. As new cable networks emerged to compete with the broadcast networks for valuable sports programming, the various sports leagues began to command significantly higher prices for the “privilege” of earning broadcast rights. Networks have been increasingly loath to turn down league demands, caught in a bind between the higher fees and gaining access to sports content mostly guaranteed to draw in huge audiences.

This shifting dynamic is one the NFL was perfectly primed to benefit from, and the NFL, more than any other, has been well-placed to take advantage of this bargaining chip. By all measures, the NFL has proven itself adept at not only drawing in significantly more revenue than all the other major sports leagues combined, but also at offering less for more. The control it exerts over its property allows the league to offer its content to buyers on a piecemeal basis, breaking up licensing rights such that the same content can be resold to other networks, or broadcast on its own network. Nonetheless, although the rights to the content is limited, networks – both cable and broadcast – continue to fight for access to NFL games. As a case in point, in 2011, when the league announced its latest television deal set to go in effect in 2013, it was able to command an estimated three billion dollars on average annually from its broadcast partners, an increase of 60 percent over the previous deal. In addition, deals with cable network ESPN, signed in the same year brings in close to two billion dollars per year, while the Sunday Network Ticket with DirecTV contributes a billion dollars annually. By all estimates, the NFL is
poised to take in about seven billion dollars in revenue from its media deals, well above the revenues commanded by all of the other sports leagues (see Fig 3.1 below).  

Similarly, the content deals increasingly have been structured in favor of the league. When the NFL Network launched in 2003, it initially served as an outlet for airing content – past games and other documentary footage – from NFL Film’s vast archive. By 2006, the network also began broadcasting games, leading to the launch of Thursday Night Football. At the same time, it began to offer live coverage of the NFL Draft, placing the league in direct competition with ESPN, which already had the rights to air the draft. Currently both ESPN and the NFL Network live simulcast the draft over a 3-day period where both networks compete not only for the television audience, but also over control of audience interaction in the second screen and mobile app space. The NFL employed a similar strategy for the 2014 season when it offered a simulcast deal for its Thursday night football games. After receiving several bids from a number of television networks, including ABC, NBC, Fox and Turner Sports, CBS won the deal to air eight Thursday night games for about 300 million dollars. The striking details of the deal included the fact that it was only offered on a one-year basis, but additionally CBS had zero dictating power in determining which games would be scheduled for Thursday nights. As reported by ESPN, the deal offered tremendous benefits to the league, since ultimately its objective was to test out the market to see if there were larger financial benefits to be gained by going through a broadcast partner over its own network. Tellingly, even though some of CBS’s audience was siphoned over to the NFL Network, CBS renewed its deal for the Thursday games highlighting once more the perceived value of sports content, particular football, to the television networks.
The power enjoyed by the NFL extends to its digital partnerships where the league similarly favors a somewhat “take-it or leave-it” approach. Until 2015, the league stood as the only exception in forging a deal with YouTube to have its own branded channel on the site. Instead, it focused its efforts on stringently pursuing all copyright violations in a bid to force fans to access NFL content on its own digital portal. In the recently signed deal, the NFL secured from Google a multi-year annual fee in addition to a better than standard ad-revenue sharing deal. In other words, Google is set to pay the NFL a fee to host NFL-provided content as well as a share in the revenue generated through advertising.

The significance of the You-Tube deal is two-fold. On the one hand it reflects the entrenched power of the NFL in regard to its content, but of consequence to this project, it also reflects the changing realities facing the league as it increasingly must acknowledge the growing

Fig. 3.1: Annual TV Revenue – Major Sports Leagues (2014 Data)
importance of mobile and social television. The NFL’s initial approach to social television was emblematic of its overall approach to structuring deals with television networks. In the few deals that emerged early on the league persisted with the heavy-handed approach consistent with its television network deals. There was very little effort to accommodate the growing demand for social television content or to pilot initiatives where a reasonable expectation of profit could not be met. From the league’s perspective, the balance of power rested comfortably in its sphere of influence, and so its initial strategy revolved around maintaining this strict hierarchy. Nevertheless, the persistent expectations of the audience centered around social interactivity. The movement towards social television adoption by the league’s network partners and the demands and affordances provided by the technology put pressure on the league to conform, and led the impetus towards social television, albeit reluctantly.

Social Television and the NFL

The league’s early approach to social television can be categorized as ambivalent at best. This ambivalence was due in no small part to the lack of differentiation between mobile content and social television on the part of the league, but also stemmed from concerns about the economic value of social television at least in the early days. The gripping reality of contemporary audience practices and competition from ESPN would, however, create a shift in strategy as the league grudgingly had to come to terms with the growing importance of social television practices amongst its fan base.

In contrast to social television, the NFL was quick to embrace mobile, signing its first exclusive deal with Sprint in 2005. The five-year deal worth $600 million gave Sprint subscribers exclusive access to NFL content airing on the NFL Network. Given the
technological capabilities of cell phones at the time, most of the information available to Sprint
subscribers early on consisted merely of game highlights and player stats. By 2008, the mobile
offering was upgraded to NFL Mobile Live, allowing Sprint data subscribers the opportunity to
watch live football games broadcast from the NFL Network’s Thursday Night Football schedule
and other tailored content based on the subscriber’s self-selected preferred team(s).33

Tellingly, the Sprint deal reflected the league’s overarching principles already firmly
entrenched in its traditional television deals. It was prefaced on the idea that it could boost
revenue by carving up content into smaller packages, which could then be auctioned off to the
highest bidder. From its position of strength as exclusive rights holder, the league approached
mobile with the presumption that the most important draw for fans centered on access to the vast
array of content in its film library. Offering the promise of exclusivity thus appeared to be the
appropriate strategy to pursue. The league promised Sprint customers’ access to content that
could not be obtained elsewhere (at least through mobile devices). The idea of creating a space
for social television interactions did not factor into these negotiations.

Even as social television emerged as a buzz word around 2010 and television networks
and other sports leagues set about to capitalize on this new trend, the NFL put little effort into
creating second-screen apps that embodied the best practices of social television. Any focus
devoted towards mobile app development derived from the desire to draw fans back to what it
considered the mothership, the website NFL.com, which was imagined as a portal that would act
as a 24/7 site of connection for fans.34 Mobile apps were also deemed attractive because they
allowed the league to continue the trend of squeezing additional dollars from fans through
exclusive mobile content available through its sponsorship deals with wireless companies.35
Continuing the practice that began with the Sprint deal in 2005, the NFL signed a new four-year deal in 2010 with Verizon Wireless for $720 million. The 2010 deal with Verizon is noteworthy for two important reasons. First, reflecting the already established policy of the league to carve up its content, the Verizon deal codified a separation between tablets and smartphones. The league offered up its tablet deal to its broadcast partners and struck a separate deal with Verizon for smartphone access only. Television partners that highly desired the NFL content were without leverage and in no position to argue, which allowed the NFL to spread the same content amongst its various partners so that games were available to Verizon mobile subscribers, and simultaneously available on the broadcast and cable networks with which the league partnered.\(^{36}\)

Secondly, these new deals revealed the growing importance of mobile but once again the league short-changed its social television offerings. The rationale for the discounting of social television early on is best captured in the words of Manish Jha, then head of NFL Mobile, who noted in early 2013 at the Sports Social TV Summit, “[I’m] not convinced how good it is for us who’ve had a more traditional relationship with fans to strengthen these platforms by doing a whole lot of stuff to them.”\(^{37}\) The perspective proffered here by Jha is aptly illustrated in the early second-screen platforms offered by the league. In 2011, the NFL launched its first second-screen app called *NFL ’11*, seen as an alternative for non-Verizon subscribers. The exclusive deal with Verizon limited the functionality of this app, as most content was only available to Verizon-paying subscribers. Users could pay an additional fee to receive some video content, but the primary functionality of the app focused on live play-by-play summaries, team news, and an updated player/game statistics board.
By placing a key amount of its energy and efforts on its Verizon-powered app, the league hindered its efforts in building a solid user-base for NFL '11, but further actions on the part of the league also contributed to the poor showing of the app. Instead of concentrating all of its features into NFL '11, the league created a second companion app for users called TNF Xtra. The TNF Xtra app was designed to be synced with Thursday Night Football games and came with features that allowed fans to predict plays or answer trivia questions in addition to the scoring recaps offered by the NFL app. Furthermore, the league’s overall social media policy also played a huge role, hinging as it did on the idea that each individual team assume considerable responsibility for its social media interactions with its fans. This policy stemmed from the belief that the teams already had very close relationships with fans and could cement these relationships by creating targeted campaigns for their fan base. The hands-off approach favored here symbolizes (to some degree) apathy towards social television, especially given the highly centralized approach to media generally undertaken by the league. Consequently, the experience for fans differed from team to team. Although some teams worked to provide social connectivity, the main NFL portal placed little emphasis on the social chatter and bonding that characterizes much of social television practices.
Fig. 3.2: NFL ’11 app for non-Verizon users. The app only offered game play-by-play summaries.

Fig. 3.3: TNF Xtra app with some of the available game features.
To a large degree, the TNF Xtra app more accurately represented the ideals of social television as a second screen interactive technology by offering more interactivity for fans and the opportunity to actively engage with the app while watching television. However, in failing to develop a consistent and universal app for fans, the league uncharacteristically failed to emerge as the market leader in mobile app usage and social followers, and it lagged behind the other leagues and ESPN. As a case in point, the Dallas Cowboys the most popular NFL team on Facebook, actually ranked fifth behind teams from the NBA and MLB in terms of Facebook followers, while the Jets, the NFL team with the highest number of Twitter followers ranked sixth – again behind teams from the NBA and MLB respectively. The net result was that even as the NFL’s own research showed that in 2012 about 56 percent of its television viewers engaged with second screen apps during games, the league’s self-branded app saw less traffic than third party offerings from ESPN and Yahoo Sports. The league also trailed behind other apps including Major League Baseball’s branded app, MLB At Bat, and Bleacher Report’s Team Stream according to Nielsen data. It was clear to the league that some changes were needed, and 2013 emerged as the tipping point when the league changed its overall approach to social television and emphatically worked on improving its social television offering for fans. Aside from the reality of having to play catch up in the mobile app market, the NFL was also prompted to act based on other factors threatening its market position - what I have termed the ESPN effect and the Back to the Bleachers imperative.
The ESPN Effect

The roots of ESPN’s approach to social television are tied into its internal mission statement, “To serve sports fans wherever sports are watched, listened to, discussed, debated, read about or played,” an ethos that overshadows most of its decision making. To that end, the company’s philosophy has been more explicitly linked to innovating and testing out new ventures, all under the guise of reaching out and meeting fans where they are. The heavy emphasis placed on chasing the fan helped to lay the groundwork for its dominance on all social television audience charts. Accordingly, the company had a head start on social television going back to the nineties. ESPN first introduced interactive services in the mid-nineties period, which foreshadowed many of the features that would become prominent on second-screen apps. In 1995, when it launched its first website, the channel also integrated a live chat service with John
Wooden for basketball fans and later introduced interactive games and an extensive statistics tracker for sports fans in general.

The earlier trend established here would continue in the mid-2000s, well before social television emerged as the new buzzword for the industry. In 2006 – in the pre-smartphone era – ESPN launched a short-lived mobile network that came to be known as Mobile ESPN. The service, which came with a customized mobile phone from Sanyo, was fitted with a Java applet that provided users with live up-to-date scores from a variety of sporting events. Users could also set up the phones to receive SMS alerts when a favorite team scores. The phone promised access to tons of other ESPN-related content such as news analysis, video, and even trivia. Aside from the technological limitations inherent in creating a device that presaged the smartphone era, the Mobile ESPN service incorporated many of the features that have become ubiquitous in second-screen mobile apps.
Mobile ESPN

Just press the “E” key and the SANYO MVP takes you into the world of ESPN, offering a sports experience unlike any other.

Your teams. Your players. Your ESPN columnists. Mobile ESPN delivers rich and personalized content including news, scores, sports alerts, Gamecast, video, trivia and more. All at your fingertips.

SIDELINE

Easy and quick access to the teams, players, scores, stats and information you care about most.

SCOREBOARDS

Up-to-the-minute scoreboards keep you patched into games around the country.

ALERTS INBOX

Managing your alerts is easy, so you’ll never have a problem tracking your favorite teams and players.

FANTASY BOX SCORES

Access your players’ status, study match-ups and watch up-to-the-minute fantasy box scores.

YOUR FAVORITE TEAMS

The names you love get their own screens complete with the latest headlines, game info and stats.

STATS

Stay connected with all the latest data in an easy-to-read format.

VIDEO PLAYER

Our state-of-the-art video player not only takes advantage of our spectacular LCD displays, it gives you the option to pause and rewind any of the clips you are watching.

GAMECAST

Get game previews, up-to-the-minute highlights, box scores and summaries.

ESPN SHOWS

From hits like Pardon the Interruption and 30 for 30 to newer offerings like One Center and ESPN Hollywood, you’ll get select moments from top analysts from ESPN programs. And with clips changing daily, you’ll always have fresh video content to choose from.

Fig. 3.5: Image from the Sanyo Manual listing all the features available on ESPN Mobile
Despite the early failure of the Mobile ESPN cellular service, ESPN continued to exhibit signs of innovation in social television. In June 2009, it launched its first mobile app, ScoreCenter. The app proved extremely popular with fans, and it was downloaded more than 2.7 million times by September of the same year. A crucial difference in operating strategy emerged between the NFL and ESPN, with the launch of ESPN’s mobile app. While the NFL was focused on holding tightly to its intellectual property and restricting access to mobile content, ESPN took a different tack and set out to create content for its mobile platforms with little regard to monetization. An in-depth 2012 article about ESPN notes the early content was delivered devoid of any form of advertising, and the only instance of promotion came in the form of the ESPN logo, which was displayed during commercial breaks for live content. From a business perspective, ESPN forewent advertising waiting instead to negotiate deals it perceived would be far more lucrative with sponsors at a later date. The channel’s long-range plan was to build a platform that would become the site of choice for mobile sports fans. The strategy appeared to pay off as ESPN was able to command over 70 percent of all mobile sports consumption by 2012.

Beyond the obvious domination of mobile sports consumption, ESPN’s overall strategy was also vindicated by the length of time consumers spent accessing ESPN content across its media portals. In a 2011 conference focused on “Building the Second Screen,” Patrick Stiegman, Vice-President and Editor-in-Chief of ESPN.com, highlighted the “stickiness” of mobile sports consumers. These fans spent significantly more time on ESPN portals than those fans that just interacted with ESPN through a single platform. In recognition of this reality, ESPN employed a strategy that was targeted towards reaching these avid fans and providing exactly what they required in terms of social television interactivity.
According to research conducted by Google and others, sports fans view second screen apps as fulfilling a number of functions. First, is the desire to connect with others, gauge how others perceive the actions taking place on the screen, and share in the rush of victory or agony of defeat. Others find value in being the first to share breaking news or in displaying bouts of creativity by enhancing news stories with amusing memes or biting commentary, while the third motivation stems from a desire to get access to more extensive information on the team. This latter group places huge emphasis on trivia, statistics, and other team/sports minutiae that can help expand the individual’s breadth of knowledge about the team, its players, or the sport. Research also indicates there are some social aspects to this quest for knowledge, as it allows fans to show-off to others both in-person and on social network sites and apps.

Consequently, ESPN set out early on to incorporate extensive and immediate statistics data through its second screen, along with social feeds where fans could interact with others. Called Gamecast, this service relied on a number of features that would prove attractive to sports fans. It was integrated across the entire ESPN digital platform, providing a measure of flexibility and choice for fans, creating the opportunity to interact with others without technological or space constraints. The service was also integrated through most of ESPN’s sports coverage, including sports like tennis, MLB, and of course the NFL. The service also prided itself on its responsiveness, integrating the ability to create highlight clips on the fly and providing these to fans for immediate analysis. Furthermore, social chatter was an integral component of the service, and the social feed included commentary not only from ESPN’s reporting team, but also the Twitter feeds of a wide range of sports professionals from athletes to local sports reporters. Additionally, ESPN relied heavily on live chats – a critical component of its social television portfolio. As Stiegman notes in 2011, the network was heavily engaged in live chats and hosted
over 2,000 in the previous year. These events were an invitation to fans to “watch the game with ESPN” so to speak. The deliberate effort by ESPN to integrate social television into its overall strategy paid dividends as the network was able to extend its status as the leading sports network from television to digital. Unlike scripted television where upstarts such as Netflix emerged to destabilize the traditional nets, the sports industry remained tethered to broadcast and cable, and ESPN’s proactive stance helped the company enjoy and maintain a commanding lead over the other sports leagues in Facebook and Twitter followers.

The relevance of ESPN’s strategy to the NFL however emerged as both companies entered into direct competition for television audiences. While the league could reasonably expect to ignore other networks, or sports app providers, ESPN’s status as the leading sports network in the country accorded it considerable attention from the league. For the NFL, the broader implications tied into its ongoing battles with cable and satellite operators to have the NFL Network exist on a more competitive and equal footing with other sports-themed networks. Between 2005 and 2012, the NFL engaged in a series of carriage disputes and legal battles with a number of multi-channel video programming distributors (MVPD) including Comcast, Time Warner, DirecTV and Dish. The crux of the battles centered on two main issues – carriage fees the league could reasonably expect to levy on the MVPD that carried the NFL Network and the tier of service in which the network should be included. The league sought to maximize its carriage fees and demanded to be included in the basic tiers available on each MVPD. Being available on the most widely available tier rather than on the added-on sports programming tiers would allow access to a much wider subscriber base and would allow the league to earn more dollars. The resolution of these disputes by 2012 ensured the network had access to about 72 million viewers nationwide, which placed it in a good position to challenge ESPN’s dominance.
The competing tensions between the NFL and ESPN began to manifest during the 2012 NFL draft. The draft served as a lightning rod in large part due to its emergence as a significant media event within the NFL’s off-season. Though it had enjoyed considerable popularity among NFL aficionados, the performative aspects that had begun to dominate the coverage, and the extensive behind-the-scenes footage available on mobile apps, helped turn the event into a must-see event for a wider audience group. The imperative for this turn emerged from the NFL itself as it sought to keep itself relevant throughout the year. As popular as the league has been historically, it also faced the increasing challenge of trying to stay relevant throughout the year because of its relatively short season. Although the other professional leagues have regular seasons that last on average about seven to eight months, the NFL observes a much shorter schedule barely stretching to five months. To combat this long hiatus, the league sought to create an off-season cycle that kept the NFL fresh in the mind of its fans, and the draft played a significant role in this promotional push. Thus as soon as the Super Bowl is over, the league turns its attention to the draft, first through the “combine” where college athletes showcase their talents for NFL scouting organizations and team coaches. Prior to 2004, the combine largely existed as a non-media event, prohibited even to sports journalists. The league found value, however, in televising the combine after launching its own network, which created an opportunity for the league to differentiate itself from other competitive sports networks. To date the combine remains an exclusive event on the NFL Network producing about 30 hours of coverage for the network.

By 2012 the strategy of transforming the draft into a major event for the league was fully realized, and that year it drew a record 25 million viewers. Reflecting the current agreement in place, both ESPN and the NFL Network jointly simulcast the entire draft, but at the same time,
ESPN enjoyed a significant lead over the NFL Network in terms of viewers with an average of 8.1 million viewers compared to NFL Network’s 1.4 million viewers. Also of significance here was the huge increase in activity amongst the NFL’s digital and mobile platforms as the NFL saw a 53 percent increase in unique visitors across these sites. With a few years of data in hand, the notion that fans of sports programming were avid users of second-screen apps could no longer be seen as an anomaly.

Success on the traditional screen also required significant investment in the second screen. ESPN was its most considerable rival but the league was also facing serious competition from other third-party app providers as well as from its broadcast partners, CBS, FOX and NBC. The initial apathy toward second screen and social television employed by the NFL created a gap in the market which several app providers rushed to fill. Despite the crowded nature of the field, several apps emerged out of the chaos to provide a considerable challenge to the league. Some notable examples include TeamStream from the website Bleacher Report, Yahoo Sports, CBS and Sports Illustrated’s SI app. Although framed as a two-way battle, the reality was the league had to emerge from the back of the pack, where it trailed a number of already successful apps. As a case in point, during the 2012 NFL Draft, ESPN, the NFL, and other sites collaborated with live-event publishing platform CoverItLive to offer opportunities for fans to live chat during the draft. Over 2 million viewers participated on one of these sites, with ESPN accumulating over half of the traffic – about 1.18 million viewers. The NFL found itself in fifth place behind Yahoo and Sports Illustrated, and a growing awareness emerged in league circles that more attention needed to be devoted to social television initiatives.
This detailed review of ESPNs social television strategy is important in that it reveals the outdated principles underlying the NFL’s digital content policy. ESPN’s approach proceeded from the assumption – and growing realization – that the contemporary sports media market required a shift in priorities and closer attention to the relationship and movements taking place across and between screens. In that sense, ESPN more rightfully adopted the strategies common to media organizations that centered on how best to meet the needs of the audience, and deliver appropriate content that would draw in the right audience, which was essential for earning advertising dollars. This consuming logic accords greater consideration to audience practices and behaviors. The NFL, on the other hand came in with long-established norms, which translated towards more favorable opportunities for meeting its profit and revenue maximizing objectives. This was an institution accustomed to getting its way, and the assumptions that circulated about its audience - in the sense that it enjoyed a very loyal audience – was a driving factor that made the league slower to react to changing conditions.

The differing approaches here highlight a crucial struggle emerging in this arena, revolving around control of, and how best to navigate the changing landscape. It was a matter of determining how best to adjust to the new norms emerging in the marketplace, and what strategies needed to be implemented to capture the hearts and minds of audiences. From the perspective of ESPN, there was the growing realization that providing increased access to media content on mobile devices and encouraging user interaction was a rational economic decision that hinged on the belief that these practices served as a useful complement to traditional television programming and was also more reflective of the current media environment. Without a clear monetization policy in hand, the NFL was suitably unimpressed with these emerging platforms and chose instead to sustain its more traditional revenue-generating platforms and
content. Until circumstances dictated otherwise, the league did not feel an imperative to act as these new strategies were counterproductive to its goals.

However, there was a larger and more complex cultural transformation taking place with serious implications for the sports media market and television industry at large. ESPN’s overall strategy in relation to the second screen and social television speaks to these broader cultural changes. The NFL may control the rights to and act as a gatekeeper carefully managing access to the most popular sports programming nationally, but social television led the audience to demand and expect more in terms of how it experiences and enjoys the programming. In particular, what is most salient here is the increasing importance of mobile media communication and how it factors into the total time spent with media. Audiences conditioned through the near ubiquity of mobile devices and the growing app market, which enhances the functionality of mobile devices, now expect instantaneous access to media content and assume the ability to interact with others using these mobile technologies will be standard.

The growing recognition of the power of mobile apps and the second screen thus prompted the league into action. To that end, it began to rework its mobile strategy and made a concerted effort to draw more users into its own offerings. The turning point came through the renegotiation of its contract with Verizon, its exclusive wireless provider. The original contract, which both parties signed in 2010 covered a ten-year period and was valued at 720 million dollars. However, in 2013, the two parties reworked the contract with Verizon maintaining exclusive access to live streaming, but the NFL app became universally available to all smartphone users with Verizon serving as the exclusive sponsor of the app. As exclusive sponsor, Verizon received prominent branding on the app, and could offer its customers features
not available to non-subscribers. Non-Verizon users received access to videos, news, game highlights and some of the features previously available on apps such as TNF Xtra, while Verizon subscribers could also watch live games through the app.\textsuperscript{41} The reworked deal worth one billion dollars over four years signaled the NFL’s new commitment to second screen technologies and to social television more generally. Furthermore, it served to redress another growing problem the NFL faced related to declining audiences at the actual physical game. Social television was proving to be a double-edged sword in a number of ways. On the one hand, it drew in a more participatory engaged fan base to the game, but the enhanced experience available to home viewers left in-stadium fans deprived. Paradoxically, this state of affairs prompted more investment in social television initiatives designed to appeal to home viewers, but also intended to make the game experience more interactive.

\textbf{Back to the Bleachers Initiative}

Despite its increasing success on television and with its media holdings more generally, a budding problem emerged within the league following the 2011 season. The sustained popularity of football had translated into a period of growth in revenue, ratings, and in paid attendance at the games. In some respects the league had been spoiled, enjoying six consecutive years of record high attendance following its expansion in 2002.\textsuperscript{42} By 2008, the record growth era was supplanted by a period of declining attendance over the successive years, and 2011 marked a low for the league as attendance dropped even below the 2002 figures. From the league’s perspective, the negative trend deserved significant attention.

The cost of attending a game was in part responsible for the declining attendance figures, as ticket prices continued to increase in the corresponding years. In 2008, the average price of an
NFL ticket was $72.20, and by 2014, it had risen to $84.43. Additionally, the average Fan Cost Index (FCI) for a family of four was up to $479.11 by 2014, which made attendance at an NFL game a very costly proposition. The state of the economy also contributed to audience decline at the games. The financial crisis of 2008 produced concrete and material repercussions on a global scale and has been perceived on some level to be analogous to the Great Depression era. The overall cutbacks in consumer spending that emerged as an outgrowth of the financial crisis was inextricably bound up with the drop in attendance for the games and should not be discounted.

At the same time, in-game attendance faced additional hurdles that ultimately necessitated a response by the league. The in-stadium experience had traditionally enjoyed a slight edge over in-home viewing by fans over the years, but in a 2011 ESPN poll, only 29 percent of fans opted for the experience of watching a game at the stadium over watching at home. This statistic compared unfavorably to a previous ESPN poll conducted in 2008, in which 54 percent of fans chose the in-stadium experience. The popularity of watching at home stemmed from the perception that the in-home experience allowed for significantly more conveniences that overshadowed any benefits obtained from the adrenaline rush and conviviality of watching in person.

In talking about the attributes of the post-network era, Amanda Lotz hones in on the attribute of theatricality, which draws upon the aesthetic experience that has traditionally been linked to the superior images produced at the cinema when compared to home video. Lotz notes that technological advances in the audiovisual components of home entertainment systems flatten the divide between the screen experience of the theatre and that of the home.
theatricality of the home theatre experience maps on to the televisual norms that have become embedded within sports broadcasting. The superior audio and visual fidelity of the television images is supplemented by the multiple camera angles and repetitive replays, which allows for a sophisticated and comprehensive game experience in keeping with the increased needs and desires of audiences to acquire as much information as possible. Home audiences have also been armed with a range of tools that expand the scale of knowledge by creating the opportunity to keep up with multiple games simultaneously through services such as DirecTV’s Sunday NFL ticket, mobile companion apps, or the NFL Redzone channel. Finally, and of critical note, the actual game is itself bound to the dictates of television with numerous imposed stoppages to allow for commercial breaks on television.

The structures of control that constitute the basis of the NFL’s overall approach to media power bump against the need to fill the bleachers at the games. To a large extent, the perceived advantages of the home experience emerged out of the NFL’s push to command and secure a firm hold of the television audiences’ attention. The dramatization of the televised game, the increased access to game day content and material, and the institutionalizing of content such as red zone coverage all converged together to improve the quality of the home experience, but also to provide more choice and convenience for fans. As Michael Real notes, “television personalizes the sport experience better even than can live attendance at a sporting event, because it can intensify and personalize the way the viewer feels connected to the competition.”

The truth embedded in that perspective became even more evident with the rise of social television. While traditionally the stadium experience could tout the benefits of joining in a communal ritual of spectacle, the last bastion of the stadium experience - the camaraderie,
connectedness, and sense of community - often imagined as characteristic of live sports has been troubled by the sociality embedded within technological interfaces. Facebook and Twitter have eagerly sought out these audiences and have emerged as significant drivers of social activity around sporting events. Additionally, the marketplace for social television activity has mushroomed, fueled by a growing number of apps and websites all offering to carefully script the social experience of watching NFL games.

For example, many newspaper websites offer live blogs where fans can gather during the games and make comments in real-time as the action progresses on the screen. In the Detroit-Ann Arbor area for example, the Detroit FreePress.com website and MLive.com both offer live blogs for fans. These live blogs emerge as productive sites for community building, and offer more intimate experiences than those that emerge on the larger-scale platforms. Specifically, the sports journalists who cover the Detroit Lions for the respective newspapers moderate the live blogs and interact with participants, offering their own commentary as the game progresses. A majority of the participants on the blogs also engage daily with one other and with the reporting staff, to imbue the blog with a sense of familiarity and ribaldry that separates the insiders from the outsiders.

Fans often share personal information, and although participation is anonymous, participants have to register and log on to take part in the conversation. As such, homosocial bonds develop between the participants and the spirited debates that emerge often spill over from week to week. The rhythms of the game are shared collectively, with fans celebrating highs or commiserating over the lows as the game progresses. In short, the live blog sites have emerged as community hubs promising an alternative recreational mode for enjoying football.
unencumbered by the inconveniences of having to leave the comfort of home. Crucially, it can be argued these sites facilitate an enhanced experience for fans who eschew the live game experience, and find greater resonance in communing with others across space.

Read historically, the attractions of these homosocial sites and the anxieties that emerge about the effect on in-stadium attendance parallel the debates that centered on tavern spaces in the forties, and later on, in the sports bars of the seventies, as Anna McCarthy notes in her work, *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*. McCarthy argues tavern spectatorship gave expression to rising tensions centered on the perceived threat to the economic viability of organized sports. The social impetus for tavern spectatorship revolved around its centrality as a site for the manifestation of masculine domesticity, but conversely the “rhythms and patterns of everyday life” that materialized in the tavern placed it at odds with the sports leagues. In the forties, the threat of the tavern was framed through the lens of unfair competition, but McCarthy notes that with the introduction of satellite technologies in the eighties, sports bar spectatorship was deemed to be theft and the NFL successfully sued several sports bars for illegally broadcasting satellite feeds, consistent with the NFL’s policy of strict control.

In contrast to the heavy-handed approach undertaken by the league against sports bars, the threat posed by social television proved to be an opportunity for redirection. Although the league publicly downplayed the declining trend in audiences at games, it strategically turned the focus towards repurposing the game experience for fans. The emphasis shifted towards offering features to in-stadium fans that were enjoyed by the home fans. Providing second screen experiences to in-stadium fans was seen as an essential tactic in the repurposing plan. In 2012, the league hired its first Chief Information Officer, who immediately set as an objective, the
improvement of Wi-Fi service in all stadiums with a goal to have every stadium updated by 2016. Teams were encouraged to develop in-stadium mobile apps that offered fans the ability to get game-day stats, replays, and order concessions from their seats. Fans were also encouraged to be more socially active participants, with incentives geared towards those who took selfies or posted updates on Twitter. The Redzone Channel, which had been sold to fans as a way to see all red zone action for all games, also became a staple of the stadium experience in 2012. These actions on the part of the league attest to the growing importance of social television, and speaks to how it was beginning to entrench upon long-standing media practices and experiences. The league could no longer remain immune to its influences, and so had to develop its own social television playbook, that also allowed for significant control on its part.

**Mediated Sociality in Action: The Social Television Playbook**

The ramped up competition that emerged in 2013 spurred more investment in the social interactive features of second-screen applications, and moved the technology away from purely information-based platforms to more collaborative, companion apps for users. In preparation for the 2013 NFL Draft, ESPN and the NFL both announced the release of additional mobile features intended to enhance the draft experience for fans. ESPN encouraged its social media team to serve as active participants in promoting a social draft experience. Members of the team were tasked with creating custom hashtags for on-screen display, generating custom images of behind-the-scenes action, and with curating a live blog where fans could interact with a number of ESPN analysts during the three-day event. Additionally, the network launched an interactive game, *Draft Bingo*, that was integrated both into the tablet and smartphone versions of the ESPN SportsCenter app, and on the ESPN website.
Not to be outdone, the league also launched its own draft experience app, called Draft Xtra. The companion app, offered as an integrated feature of NFL ’13 and as a separate downloadable app, focused on social interactive features in addition to providing users with behind-the-scenes information and video. Accordingly, the app offered fans the ability to chat with others and play some basic games such as “Predict the Pick,” trivia, and polls.\(^5\) Having the draft serve as the setting for the increased competition between both media institutions was perfectly understandable given the draft’s status as a huge television ratings bonanza, but also because both ESPN and the NFL Network were in direct competition for that television audience.

The draft experience app also served as an opening salvo in the NFL’s renewed commitment to providing a more comprehensive social television experience for its fans. In late August 2013, the league announced the creation of several new apps meant to capitalize on the varied and sometimes disparate needs of its fan-base.\(^6\) This announcement came on the heels of the launch of its revamped universal NFL mobile app; it cemented the shift in policy and underscored the increased emphasis on social television. One of the first releases following the announcement was an app geared towards social interactivity called NFL Rush. The NFL Rush app served as an alternative to the flagship NFL Mobile app by emphasizing chat features, social polls, the ability to follow individual players, and the option to tweet and receive tweets from the NFL and its athletes.\(^7\) By 2014, the NFL had expanded its offerings to include apps such as NFL Homegating (a tailgating app), a Super Bowl stadium app, NFL Now (a video streaming app), and had revamped its NFL GameRewind app (a subscription, on-demand app offering access to previously played games going back to 2009).\(^8\) In essence by the end of 2013, the NFL
seemingly had developed a comprehensive ecosystem offering its fans the opportunity to personalize the social and mobile NFL experience.

At first glance, social television from the perspective of the league promised to usher in a new era of consumer choice and a celebration of ubiquity whereby NFL content of all kinds was available at the touch of a button. The abundance of apps offered up by the league delivered a subtle contradiction between the articulation of choice that was seemingly so readily apparent and control – the more subversive exercise of power by the league. First, the promise of choice is chimeric in reality, an illusion at best. The league’s promotional efforts to date have focused primarily on its flagship app, NFL Mobile and on the NFL Now app. However, both of these apps provide limited social interaction functionality. NFL Now in particular can be understood more clearly as a broadcast mobile app that replicates the broadcast model of television interaction. Consequently, the content offered through the app consists primarily of video feeds such as game highlights, news reports, interviews with players and coaches, and behind-the-scenes footage. A considerable percentage of the content available on the app is drawn from the NFL Network’s programming, with feature reports broadcast from a studio setting as is common in news programming.

The continued emphasis for the league rested on promoting its vast library of media content, while ostensibly accommodating the fans’ desire for mobility and for interaction with others. In essence, the league focused on delivering snack-size content that was easily portable, but did not erode its traditional roots built on the premise of offering exclusive access to content within a controlled environment. Social television as practiced by the NFL foregrounded the institutionalization of differentiation that has served as its structuring principle. In contrast
therefore to ESPN, Yahoo, and the myriad other second-screen sports app providers that devoted significant effort on blending the information-gathering tendencies of sports fans with the desire for social interaction, the NFL insisted on offering content that was markedly different from the offerings of its competitors.

This specific approximation of social television facilitates the extension of the league’s brand identity, and as such, it is indistinguishable from the broader marketing and promotional strategies employed in maintaining the league’s competitive might. More importantly, however, it highlights the conflation between the league’s understanding of itself as a broadcast media organization and the imperatives that drive media industry operations within a highly digitized and technologically interactive space. Thus, in relation to the NFL, social television is hardly distinguishable from mobile content more generally. Even with its renewed focus on social television, the league continued to privilege mobile content for the very fact that it presented the best opportunity for maintaining an air of exclusivity with regard to its content.

The more sweeping aims of multi-platform storytelling, whereby content is designed to flow across multiple platforms and formats take precedence here. The brief nod to social interaction extends the entry-point for multi-platform storytelling seen as the more lucrative financial option for the league. Notably as part of its broader adoption of social television, the league embraced a partnership with Twitter in September 2013 using Twitter’s recently launched Amplify service to offer highlight clips and other content on Twitter. The NFL-Twitter Amplify deal served two legitimate purposes. First, it immediately legitimized the Amplify service as a monetization tool for the league when both companies announced that pre-sale ads had exceeded the $10 million dollar mark. Furthermore, the Amplify deal allowed the league to further
differentiate itself from competitor, ESPN. ESPN had been one of the first media networks to sign up for Twitter Amplify when the service launched in May 2013. However, the NFL declined to give ESPN the rights to show clips from *Monday Night Football* games on the service, even though the games are broadcast on ESPN. By signing its own deal with Twitter directly, the NFL was able to redirect traffic to its own Twitter feed from fans interested in watching highlights of *Monday Night Football* games, as well as those interested in watching the vast expanse of NFL content it now made available on the Twitter platform. Immediately, the league began to showcase game highlights on Amplify, but also other content such as behind-the-scenes footage from the NFL draft and other NFL-sponsored events. Reminiscent of the ways in which the NFL approached its media strategies on its other portals, Twitter Amplify helped to foreground the NFL as the site to receive content not available elsewhere. Having fans retweet the content, or provide feedback was a side-benefit of the overarching objective of extending the platform reach of its content.

In a similar vein, the league also entered into a separate partnership with Microsoft, which expanded the league’s presence on gaming platforms. The five-year deal gave fans the opportunity to watch live games on Xbox game consoles, but it also provided access to game stats and highlights on the same screen. Social television functionality was integrated here as fans could initiate chat services through Skype and could opt to view the enhanced content on second-screen tablets and smartphones using Microsoft’s in-house second-screen infrastructure, *SmartGlass.*
Both the Microsoft and Twitter Amplify deals articulate clearly the objectives of the league in relation to social television. Beyond the immediate concerns of gesturing to fan practices, social television has been integrated into the long-standing goals of the NFL in relation to its media holdings. The seeming disruption of social television to the firmly entrenched practices of the league proved to be a minor aberration. The league has focused instead on carefully orchestrating a social television playbook that reinforces the value of holding tight control over its intellectual property and forging deals with as many separate organizations as possible. From the perspective of the league, social television enabled the organization to expand its reach to fans. For example, following the Twitter Amplify deal, the NFL saw traffic on Twitter rise to about 30 million unique users by June 2014, and the videos it shared through the
Amplify service had 4.5 times the rate of engagement compared to other Amplify users. This early success of the partnership prompted the league to extend the agreement beyond the original test-run deal, and the league moved to expand the type of content it distributed through the Amplify program. The Amplify deal might be considered a watershed moment for the NFL’s relationship to social television, debunking the idea that social television does not serve the interests of the league.

**Conclusion**

The key takeaway here in reviewing the NFL’s implementation of social television reinforces the ways in which the league has adopted social television in furtherance of its long-standing media goals. Although the league initially dismissed the importance of social television, it was ultimately forced by competitors and the audience to contend with social television, which in turn created new avenues for revenue generation for the league. What is revealed here are the ways in which the league has carefully managed social television; social television has been conscripted by the league as a new tool that allows it to continue to exercise its intellectual property rights, and as an aid for distributing access to its content across a wide range of platforms beyond the television screen. Mediated sociality therefore from the perspective of the league serves as a strategic manipulation of audience’s tendencies to congregate and interact around media content. The league therefore aims to build out an infrastructure in which its audience remains tethered to the organization through fairly consistent means, but with the added bonus of developing an exchange economy where it functions as the central hub guiding the interactions and activities of its more social audience. This functionality allows the league to retain control over key facets of the exchange economy – the data available from the viewers, the
traffic around its media content, and most importantly, the connections between the league and
its fan base.

More importantly, it suggests social television and traditional business practices common
with the industry are not at cross purposes with one another. The tendency is to imagine social
television is causing huge media entities to rethink long-standing beliefs and adopt new and
unfamiliar practices to keep up with the changing environment. To a degree this is true, evident
here in the ways in which the NFL had to reimagine routine business practices to accommodate
social television. Crucially, however, the necessary accommodation to social television presented
an opportunity for the league to rearticulate its market practices and reinforce structures of
commodification and control. The larger revelation here highlights the self-modulating nature of
its business logics, emblematic of the nature of control societies as articulated by Deleuze. As
Deleuze describes, control mechanisms are deeply entrenched within advanced or late capitalist
structures, evident here in the ways in which the NFL seeks to dictate the terms under which
social television should be imagined within its framework. 65

Yet while the league has successfully integrated social television into its marketing
strategy, further clarification is needed to fully account for its effect in contemporary society and
within the traditional entertainment media institutions. As previous noted, sports programming
enjoys a much more traditional relationship with television, and the audience continues to exhibit
– demographically and in its viewing habits – strong parallels to the mass media era of television
embodied in the network era. This question of effect becomes more heavily loaded when the
operations of cable and broadcast channels are brought into the equation. A parting shot here
revolves around this idea of a tension between audience consumption practices in relationship to

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the managed approaches to social television favored by the industry. The distinctions between social television as practiced and imagined by audiences and social television as imagined by media institutions, raises crucial questions surrounding these inherent contradictions. On some level, the NFL in its privileged position as the provisioner of highly desirable content, cannot fully account for nor explain how these tensions are experienced and enacted upon on a daily basis. The next chapter takes up these crucial concerns, and expands the analysis begun in this chapter by turning the focus to the cable channels, AMC and Bravo, examining social television here alongside the practices of the networks’ audiences.
NOTES


5 In 2013, 34 out of 35 of the most watched programs on television were NFL games, a feat duplicated in 2014


9 It is worth noting the increased chatter about the breakdown of the MVPD market. Although we are far removed from that, it is troubling enough to the industry and recent news suggests that US Consumers are more likely to stream content through the Internet than watch Live TV (See https://www.natpe.com/page/research2015)


13 The pivotal moment that helped establish the NFL as a potentially lucrative property for television has been largely determined to be the 1958 game between the Baltimore Colts and the New York Giants at Yankee stadium. According to most reports, 30 million people tuned in to watch Johnny Unitas score the winning touchdown after a mostly tied game.

The patchwork system meant that in some cities, there were multiple broadcasts of the same game going on at the same time. Mark Yost details the complicated arrangements at play here in his book, Tailgating, Sacks and Salary Caps: How the NFL Became the Most Successful Sports League in History. Yost notes there were various television contracts at play. CBS had contracts with 9 of the 12 teams in the league, NBC had a contract with the Baltimore Colts, and the Cleveland Browns had a sponsorship deal with Carling Beer (p. 73).

Journalist and NFL historian David Harris popularized the term League Think, according to Oriard. See p. 12 of Brand NFL: Making and Selling America's Favorite Sport.

Oriard, Michael. Brand NFL: Making and Selling America's Favorite Sport. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007, p. 11. Rozelle also moved the NFL headquarters from Philadelphia to New York in keeping with his notion of creating a media empire, and furthermore spearheaded the merger of the NFL league of which he was commissioner, with the rival American Football League (AFL) leading to the creation of the Super Bowl.


Sabol also adopted the “up close and personal” style popularized by ABC Sports cameraman Roone Arledge. See Vogan, Travis. Keepers of the Flame, p. 30.


33 National Football League. "NFL, Sprint Launch 'NFL Mobile Live'" News release, August 18, 2008. NFL.com. http://www.nfl.com/news/story/09000d5d80a17a0f/article/nfl-sprint-launch-nfl-mobile-live. Subscribers could also listen to live radio broadcasts, and had a repository of video highlights available to them, along with breaking news, injury reports and player stats and bios. By 2009, the service also deployed some early sharing capabilities, as Sprint subscribers could also send “Cant Miss Plays” or other highlights to other Sprint customers (See the Sprint Press release for full details of the features available - http://newsroom.sprint.com/news-releases/sprint-to-carry-live-nfl-network-game-telecasts.htm)


35 It is worth noting that the mobile deals were a subscriber-paid option on the part of the mobile users. So in other words, the NFL got revenue from the wireless company for exclusivity, but also split the fees mobile users paid to the wireless company for access to this exclusive content.

36 In contrast to the previous Sprint deal, the Verizon deal included all NFL games including the Sunday games broadcast on the Big Three networks - CBS, NBC and Fox, as well as the popular NFL Redzone Channel, previously a web-only offering. The NFL Redzone Channel offers fans the opportunity to watch all red-zone action for all games played, a fitting way to catch up on action taking place around the league. See Ankenny, Jason. "Verizon Wireless Strips NFL Sponsorship from Sprint." FierceMobileIT. March 9, 2010. http://www.fiercemobileit.com/story/verizon-wireless-strips-nfl-sponsorship-sprint/2010-03-09.


42 With the exception of the 2001 season, which was affected by the World Trade Center bombings, attendance at games had been on an upward trend since 1998. Following the slight dip in 2001, the trend continued from 2002 to 2007 when the league enjoyed an all-time record for paid attendance coming in at 17,345,205. Although the 2012 and 2013 numbers increased over the 2011 figures, the numbers were still significantly lower than the 2007 high (Source: NFL Record and Fact Book)

43 The FCI includes the cost of four tickets at the average price, two beers, four soft drinks, four hot dogs, a parking pass, two programs and two adult hats. Data collected from https://www.teammarketing.com/tmr/66_See Greenberg,
Within financial circles there is some debate centered on the idea of comparing the Great Recession (as the 2008 crisis is commonly called) to the Great Depression. Former Fed Chairman, Ben Bernanke asserted in testimony to Congress and in interviews that the Great Recession was more severe than the Depression, in part due to the more complicated and interwoven financial networks affected by the recession on a global level. Certainly, the effects of the Depression were more severe on a national level, but his argument suggests the sheer scale of the Recession contributed to a more insidious crisis with long-reaching ramifications.

Sites like ESPN, and team NFL websites also offer live blogs for fans to participate in during the games.


NFL Mobile offers limited social TV options, emphasizing mostly the NFL’s status as a multimedia and news provider source. Thus the app is heavily geared towards highlights, clips, news and stats, and some Fantasy Football functionality. The second screen experience is limited to offerings geared towards particular NFL Network shows such as the Draft, Thursday Night Football, and A Football Life.

Currently, the NFL offers 14 apps on the iTunes store most with very targeted functionality. Besides the aforementioned apps, other offerings include gaming apps including an augmented reality game featuring Deion Sanders, three fantasy football apps, and a ProBowl Stadium app.


ESPN had signed up to beta-test the service in 2012 when it initially debuted as Instant Replay and continued its partnership when Amplify was officially launched in 2013.
62 Associated Press. "NFL, Microsoft Strike Deal to Enhance Fans' TV Viewing of Games." NFL.com. May 21, 2013. http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap1000000205083/article/nfl-microsoft-strike-deal-to-enhance-fans-tv-viewing-of-games. SmartGlass allows users to transform tablets and smartphones into second-screen devices for the Xbox. The technology which is platform agnostic creates the opportunity for these mobile devices to interact with the Xbox console, whereby the devices can serve as remote controls for the Xbox or can receive enhanced second-screen content. (See http://www.xbox.com/en-US/smartglass)


64 Ibid.

65 Deleuze, Gilles. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." October 59 (January 01, 1992): 3-7. JSTOR.
CHAPTER IV

Play Rituals: Conventions of Social Television Practices

“Conversation is King, content is just something to talk about”

Cory Doctorow, Editor BoingBoing.net¹

One of the biggest storylines during the sixth season of The Walking Dead involved the fate of Glenn, a well-beloved character and one of the original cast members of the show. During the third episode of the season, Thank You which aired on October 25th 2016, the show introduced a cliffhanger by showing Glenn and another character, Nicholas falling into a horde of zombies, “walkers” in the show’s parlance. The camera cuts to Glenn’s face, which depicts horror and perhaps agony. The walkers hover above him and are tearing apart and eating fresh guts – presumably Glenn’s – although the show never made it clear in this episode if the walkers were tearing him apart or the more despised Nicholas. The episode ends with Glenn’s fate in suspense, but as the character appeared to be facing impossible odds, the clear intent was to suggest he had been eaten alive. Predictably, Twitter and other social media sites exploded. Facebook and Twitter feeds were swamped with stories about Glenn and the show more than doubled the number of tweets recorded for that episode alone.² This episode seemed crafted to
mine the best of social television by creating a moment of suspense and uncertainty designed to
get people talking. Glenn’s fate would remain in limbo for the next three episodes as the show
opted not to return to this scene until the penultimate episode of the half-season during episode
seven. In that time, the credits were altered eliminating Steven Yeun, the actor who plays Glenn
from the cast, and the actor also went silent on all forms of media – both social and traditional
refusing to do any interviews.

These sort of machinations, although not new, speak to what matters for entertainment
television in the social television environment. Generating widespread discussions about the
show becomes a valuable promotional strategy that brings additional visibility for the show, and
can spark renewed interest amongst the most casual fans. As a network, AMC has led the charge
in constructing this sort of social conversation around its shows. During the waning years of its
critically-acclaimed show, Breaking Bad, the network launched a promotional campaign called
“Watch and Chat” on Twitter, Facebook, and its website amc.com. The “Watch and Chat”
feature was billed as an opportunity for fans to “discuss the latest episode in real time as it airs”.3
In keeping with the general motivations that have driven the push toward social television, the
emphasis on liveness was a key part of the campaign, and the appeal the network made to fans
was the promise of “LIVE” moderated conversations between fans of the show and occasionally
insider experts. The idea of “Watch and Chat” was extended to The Walking Dead during the
second season premiere of the show in October 2011. Notably at the same time, the network also
launched a companion show to The Walking Dead aptly named Talking Dead, which was
followed by the mid-season launch of its second screen engagement app, StorySync.4 The
Talking Dead show can best be understood as a means of bridging the worlds of online
conversations with that of the television screen itself. Airing immediately following the premier
episode of each new *Walking Dead* episode, *Talking Dead* is promoted as a means of extending the conversations that began during the live broadcast of the zombie show. Hosted by stand-up comedian and self-described nerd, Chris Hardwick, the show also features a changing guest cast of insider experts and other celebrity “fans” of the show. *Talking Dead* has emerged as a prototypical social television show, in that the way it is produced reflects an understanding of current social television strengths and thus it features a number of elements that gestures heavily towards the audience, but is also designed to spark broader engagement on social media sites and Twitter.

This brief snapshot into the social television strategies of AMC builds up to the focus of this chapter which is largely concerned with mapping out how contemporary social television is produced and experienced within the day-to-day routine of watching television. The emphasis here is on the following: In what ways have television networks sought to capitalize on the social television industry? How do these strategies collide with or complement the audiences’ pursuit of telesociality? And emerging from that, how does the audience understand its role vis-à-vis the industry? Taken together, the aim here is to explore and uncover the cultural norms that have developed around social television practices. These questions are explored through two case studies focused on cable networks AMC and Bravo.

There are compelling reasons for focusing on these networks. Bravo emerged as a rich venue for social television activity in 2010. Data from NBCU’s Cable Viewer Voice Research Panel ranked Bravo as the top network for providing viewers with opportunities for interacting with its shows, and close to 50 percent of those surveyed found additional value and enjoyment in the “social editions” of its programming. The company under the auspices of its Executive Vice-President for Digital Media, Lisa Hsia has eagerly embraced social television and
interactive services for the fans, presenting an opportunity for significant exploration of network social television initiatives. Bravo also specializes in reality television programming, a genre which is well-suited to the social television interactivity favored by the networks.

AMC also serves as a promising site of analysis because of its heavy investment in social television engagement as noted above, but also because The Walking Dead has succeeded in breaking through a number of milestones by becoming the first cable show to top the Nielsen ratings chart amongst adults aged 18 – 49. Full of “wow” moments, the show enjoys significant relevance in online spaces and has also proven to be a huge success in the social TV arena where it also tops the Twitter TV ratings. The combination of these two factors – a highly socially engaged audience coupled with spirited attention by the networks – present the opportunity in both cases for rich engagement with and critical unpacking of the affordances of social television and the practices that have proven to be most meaningful to the audience.

At the same time, these two case studies expand the scope for understanding social television, in part because differences in the programming slates of these networks, and potentially in the audience itself produces different concerns for the networks and the need to develop different strategies. These network dissimilarities speak to the ways in which differential logics and norms punctuate how social television is implemented, echoing the observations that emerged in the previous chapter when comparing the NFL to ESPN, but also leads to different practices by the audience. The overarching goal of this chapter, however, is to draw broader conclusions about the naturalization of social television routines within everyday consumption of television, and as such the project is attentive to Horace Newcomb’s admonishment concerning institutional case studies. Newcomb points out, “Beginning inductively, with specific individuals, examples, policies, historical circumstances, and so on, the emphasis will likely
already be, on distinction rather than similarity.’” However, he also adds, “the analysis must remain open to precisely those similarities, those general theories, defined above as deductive beginning points to see that the specific ‘case’ may relate to others in definable ways, that it may indeed be an ‘example’ of larger patterns, tendencies or modes of standardization.”

What becomes clear thus in the analysis of these two case studies, are the ways in which certain play rituals come to stand-in for social television activity within these settings. These play rituals include activities commonly associated with social television – processing and talking about the show’s narrative and characters – but also involves some degree of “playing along.” Playing along is a critical part of these play rituals. It invokes both the literal sense of the idea of playing along, as in engaging in synchronous activities during the show such as playing games on second screen apps, or live tweeting, and also includes the idea of buying in the show’s ideas of what constitutes social television activity. Playing along serves as an apt metaphor because it also captures the knowingness of the audience in understanding how certain activities are deemed to be more valuable than others, and yet takes into account the reciprocity inhered in these activities. The audience plays along because these practices reflect their innate desires to be social in this context, and as such they accrue emotional and affective rewards out of participating in these play rituals. Critical therefore to the formation of these play rituals is the idea of blending together voices of the cast and crew, celebrity fan guests, and the audience itself. At the same time these play rituals are carefully scripted by the shows, and what gets scripted is audience play, so that some of these modes of play are denaturalized, while others are channeled into a managed and routinized practice. The play rituals therefore serve as the mechanism the show uses to invite itself to be part of audience play, and through these play rituals it suggests a natural order for the norms of social television.
Scripting Audience Play: AMC and The Talking Dead

In 2012, when social television hysteria seemed to be at an all-time high, consensus in the industry suggested the content most likely to benefit from “live” social television activity included sports, reality television, breaking news (or political debates), and one-off events such as the Oscars or Emmys. AMC’s success with The Walking Dead broke this mold of thinking, and the success of its after-show program, The Talking Dead spawned several imitations in the 2016 television season. Popular shows including The Bachelor, Orphan Black and most recently Game of Thrones, all launched a version of their own after shows. Like the Talking Dead, most of these shows feature a host and celebrity guests processing the episode, discussing character motivations and speculating on future events.

At a minimum, AMC’s success with The Talking Dead can be linked to its connection to a hit show, The Walking Dead, but assuming the success of the show simply hinges on this connection fails to account for the significant effort put forth by the network to take advantage of what was naturally occurring around its shows. Furthermore, by carefully attending to how the audience was already behaving, and capturing elements of this behavior – even if at the same time they reformatted these behaviors to benefit the network – AMC offered up a model for social television activity that could be taken up by other networks. The roots of AMC’s successful recipe for social television, however, emerges long before the launch of The Talking Dead. It goes back as far as the launch of the AMC blog on the Amc.com site in 2006. The network initially started with a general blog, but by 2009 each individual show had its own blog filled with news items, behind-the-scenes information, and interviews from cast and crew. When the blogs launched – and in line with what other networks were doing – AMC was simply concerned with providing extra-textual content on its website that would drive traffic to its
portal. This was a period of experimentation by the networks and AMC was hardly unique in taking up these endeavors. As previously discussed in chapter one, this was a moment of hyperseriality that created an opportunity for networks to develop digital artifacts around their content and offer up light transmedia storytelling opportunities. The networks were actively seeking out new and profitable means to exploit their content digitally, and yet were reluctant and wary of giving up control too easily. Indeed, this desire for control was a guiding force in AMC’s efforts, driven by the belief that the network was best placed to offer up content that would prove most compelling to fans of its shows. In talking about the influence of the AMC blogs on its future social television offerings, Mac McKean, Senior Vice President of Digital Media and Content for AMC notes,

we built up a network of writers, what content performs and what people are interested in. We wanted to be the best source of information of our shows, because we are closest, serving our fans. We started with that philosophy, it might be different than some of the other players.12

These blogs were instrumental in getting the “Watch and Chat” feature off the ground as one of the many features that eventually came to be included on the blog. Again, AMC was not the only network to experiment with some form of synchronous viewing for its fans. CBS’s Social Room and NBC’s Viewing Rooms were attempts to usher in this sort of synchronous viewing with chat services. Additionally, these networks and others also offered up message forums on their sites were fans could discuss shows. There are some elements to AMC’s strategy that proved to be the difference maker. The “Watch and Chat” service was one among many spaces where fans of AMC’s content could gather together to chat and socialize around a show. Watch and Chat however offered up some benefits starting with the live nature of these chats. Of course, there were other spaces for live chats led by Twitter, but Watch and Chat was moderated by AMC insiders and often included exclusive content for participants. At the same time, AMC did not
ignore Twitter or Facebook, and social television activity on each of these sites was also actively promoted. The network, which was in the midst of building a slate of “quality” dramas with complex narratives and complex characters became a magnet for viewers who were not only eager to watch the shows, but also spent time engaged in extended analysis of these shows. AMC’s strategy therefore was to cater to its audience’s desire to find a comfortable space for this type of discussion, and it focused instead on embracing the various spaces where these conversations were taking place.

The “Watch and Chat” feature along with the other gestures towards social television were useful from a branding strategy in establishing AMC’s brand as the site for engaging content designed to make viewers think, but from a long-term perspective its purpose was to frame out a social television strategy for the network. During its run, the network was able to capture meaningful data around audience practices, data that would prove useful in its decision to launch the Talking Dead show, and also in the ways in which the show developed and catered to its social television audience. The Talking Dead format, can therefore be seen as the culmination of social television experiments by a network intent on refining the ways in which its audience engages with its content.
Beyond this, however, the show has evolved over the last five seasons into the perfect mechanism for scripting together the play-rituals crucial for developing the social audience. Each episode features a number of elements geared towards fostering collaboration amongst various constituencies that importantly signal to the audience that they inhabit an important role in the playful configurations that the show has developed as part of its social television routine. Despite the liveness of each episode – and liveness in this sense refers to the fact that each episode is not pre-recorded but filmed in real-time – there is a rigid structure to each episode that draws attention to the border-crossing that is central to managing social television activity by networks and television shows.

There is a recognizable pattern to each episode of *Talking Dead* that serves as a call to the audience to “play along” with the show and be a part of the “social audience”. These patterns of play structures are manifested through segments that directly gesture to the audience.
Hardwicke routinely reads tweets from the live broadcast of the actual Walking Dead show, and often uses these tweets as a set-up for a broader discussion with his celebrity guests. Midway through the show, the “Play Dead” segment appears, whereby Chris enjoins the audience – and in some cases the celebrity guest(s) – to answer poll questions displayed on the television screen using the Play Dead website. Responses to these poll questions are instantly relayed on the screen with the results also occasionally serving as another discussion point for the guests. The show also incorporates less direct integration with the viewing audience through a segment called “Tweets we like from real fans like you.” During this segment, the show displays audience tweets on the screen, and these tweets are presented absent any further reflection. This segment – just like the recent decision to display fan art on the screen – seems designed to reward fans who take part in these rituals. The show also rewards fans’ participation through the inclusion of an audience question segment. During each episode, the show broadcasts a call-in question from a member of the viewing audience, and towards the end of the episode, Chris calls forth a member of the studio audience to come forward and ask a question of his guests.
The second order of social television norms embedded in the *Talking Dead* show emerges out of the show’s call back to the idea of talking about television shows. Indeed, the show’s very existence is an acknowledgment of the imperative among fans to process the show. *Talking Dead* can be seen as the quintessential watercooler show, a show designed to facilitate the process of deliberating over the narrative of the main show. Analyzing the episode that just aired is a very central component of the show. Filmed live in front of a studio audience, this audience along with the celebrity guests and Chris Hardwick watch *The Walking Dead* episode together making it the ultimate viewing party. Following up the episode with the *Talking Dead* show thus becomes an opportunity for everyone to take part in a cathartic experience together.
Talk is clearly central to the aims of the show seen through the intentional selection of celebrity guests, and the customary process used for scheduling both the cast’s and the crew’s appearance on the show. The celebrity guests invited on the show have a publicly avowed identity as fans of the show, more clearly articulated in the latter episodes of the show once it began to find its identity. Thus they are positioned as fan representatives taking on the mantle of speaking for the fans and echoing some of the common themes that might be part of the broader conversation around the show. This positioning as fan representatives is critical in the ways in which the discussion on the show flows. The celebrity status of the guests confers no special status upon them. Part of the narrative during the analysis revolves around the idea that the guests have no extra knowledge of the plot beyond what’s been aired publicly. Chris Hardwick also claims to be unaware of advanced plot details or extraneous information, which is an important framing context that sets up *Talking Dead* as the sort of discussion that could take

![Fig. 4.4: Studio audience reaction to the Glenn scene as they watch the live show.](image)
place between any truly dedicated fans of the show. In the episode discussed above, Thank You, this lack of foreknowledge is a central part of the conversation surrounding the fate of Glenn, but is also quite evident in hindsight when evaluating the trajectory of the conversation and the speculation offered up by the celebrity guests. One of the celebrity guests on this episode included TV producer and writer, Damon Lindelof, showrunner for Lost and Leftovers. Despite his professional role as an insider within television industry production, his status on the show revolved around his “nerd status” as a fan of the show and comic book reader. And thus even though he was able to reflect on his own experiences as a showrunner in discussing Glenn’s story, he made it quite clear that he was unaware of the true fate of Glenn. Tellingly, Lindelof seemed to speak from the position that Glenn was dead, and even went as far as to suggest that it would be a cheap trick if the show pulled back the curtain later on and revealed Glenn had somehow survived being trapped under the surge of zombies surrounding him. His observation and potential criticism of the show would be echoed by others – fans and critics – when the show eventually revealed that Glenn did somehow manage to survive. For this group, this seemed like poor storytelling and the suspense a cheap trick to hook viewers to the show.

As the Lindelof example highlights, dedication to the fandom is definitely an important consideration in how the celebrity guests represent themselves on the show. A number of the celebrity guests have made repeated appearances on Talking Dead and in general identify as both fans of the television show, but often as comic book readers also. Thus the positioning of the show in relation to its celebrity guests further enhances the idea of playing along, in this case it sets up a sense of solidarity with the celebrity guests, suggesting playing-along is something the audience can do alongside celebrities. For this reason, having an in-depth knowledge of the show and the ability to recall even the most trivial events is highly prized and those guests who can
demonstrate this dedication to the show are invited back often. Take for example, Yvette Nicole Brown, an actress who formerly starred on the sitcom *Community*, and currently stars on CBS’ *The Odd Couple*. She bills herself as the ultimate fan and has made at least six appearances on the *Talking Dead*, the most of any celebrity guest, where she has distinguished herself by displaying a vast understanding and recall of every season of the show. Consequently, when she appears on the *Talking Dead*, the analysis is usually highly nuanced rivaling some of the fan discussions that take place on website forums where long-form discussion takes place.

Fig. 4.5: Sample of tweets reflecting on Yvette Nicole Brown’s comments on *Talking Dead*
Having the option for sophisticated analysis of the episode is one of the clearly prized features of the *Talking Dead*, and the use of the cast and crew is a strategy employed by the show to capitalize on this analysis. In general, the crew are frequent guests for episodes where direction or other narrative elements are key. Robert Kirkman, the creator of the comic and an executive producer of the TV show has been a frequent guest, while former and current showrunners Glenn Mazzara and Scott M. Gimple appeared at least once or twice each season. Another frequent guest is Greg Nicotero, executive producer, director, and special effects creator who has been on the show at least nine times. The cast, on the other hand, are featured guests typically following episodes where they are heavily featured. For example, in the third season of *Talking Dead*, and the fourth season of *The Walking Dead*, Danai Gurira who plays Michonne on *The Walking Dead* made her second appearance on the couch. Although the character was introduced in the final episode of season two, her character’s backstory is not explored until the ninth episode of season four. Her appearance on the show prompted a thorough examination of her character’s motivations, which was well-received by fans of the show based on Twitter’s feed.

Characters typically also appear on the show when they are killed off. It becomes an opportunity to say goodbye and also in keeping with the character analysis to explore and understand why they acted in the ways in which they did or what events led to their demise. To some degree this strategy may cause some consternation amongst fans as the simple announcement that a cast member is going to be a guest on *Talking Dead* is often seen as an indication that the character is going to be killed off. This set of expectations was definitely a key part of the talk surrounding Glenn following the *Thank You* episode. The actor was conspicuously absent from that episode of Talking Dead, nor was he featured in the *In
"Memoriam" section of the show, whereby all characters killed (including zombies) are given a tribute similar to those done by the award shows. His absence on both the show and the memorial tribute thus offered hope to fans who were unwilling to accept the character was dead.

“Playing along” is thus a crucial element in the overall strategy employed here in Talking Dead but its importance is further highlighted by drawing parallels between this after show and the second screen app, Story Sync that the network first developed for the show in February 2012. Story Sync, as the name implies is synced to the live broadcast of each episode’s first-run. At various moments during the broadcast, fans are prompted to respond to trivia or poll questions, predict the cast member with the highest number of kills, evaluate moral dilemmas, or be reminded of previous relevant storylines through flashbacks. There are two contexts to playing along embedded within the Story Sync app. First, there is the direct reference to playing along on the app’s website where a message invites viewers to “Play along with the show during the premiere broadcast on AMC and see if you survive the week’s episode.” The app is designed as a literal call to play along as the questions and other features of the app move on to the next thing as the primary show progresses. Unlike the main show, fans do not have the option of pausing the action on the app. It is very much a real-time experience. The second aspect of playing along embedded within the app is this notion of playing along with others. It serves as a recognition of play as something you do with others – a social activity. Like the Talking Dead polls, the collective responses of all participants are displayed on the screen. Additionally, users of the app can opt to “watch together” with a celebrity guest. What this means is the celebrity’s answers are displayed on the screen alongside the broader audience. Both the “watch together” feature or the non-celebrity version of Story Sync encourage viewers to conceive of themselves as part of a broader collective, a community of others all similarly
invested in the show. Through this framing, playing along is presented as a collaborative and participatory mode of interacting with the show, and as the appropriate mechanism for interacting with that broader community. The play rituals constituted within the network’s social television strategy extend the experience of watching a show beyond simply watching events on a screen, redefining the viewing experience as one that is more interactive not only in relation to the text, but also in relation to other members of the viewing audience. Playing along is constructed as an embedded viewing ritual that sublimates boundaries – between the audience and the text, but also between audience members physically located in disparate geographical locales. The overriding conceit that emerges within this context is one of togetherness; an opportunity to effectively cater to the inherent impulse towards sociality in and around television. Playing along further ties in to the long-desired goal for greater interactivity in television, which becomes even more apparent in the case of Bravo.

**Trying it All: The Case of Bravo**

From the start, Bravo’s approach to social television has centered around the conceit of playing along. The network has long sought to integrate various playing rituals into the social television experience. The key, however, to understanding how these have played out lies first in understanding how social television is imagined by the network and the particular motivations that have guided its development. Unlike other networks reluctant to commit to or experiment with social television initiatives, Bravo embraced social television from the very early days. Its reality television-loaded slate of programming provided an early opportunity for venturing in this arena. Before shows like *Scandal, Game of Thrones* or *The Walking Dead* proved that scripted dramas could also top the social television charts, general consensus assumed reality and sports programming were natural vehicles for this sort of activity. Bravo was particularly placed to take
advantage of this perceived advantage. Its niche programming, focused on creating an aspirational lifestyle brand, made it compelling to audiences but also to advertisers who could find readymade tie-ins for their products in a somewhat “organic” setting. As Nicole B. Cox notes writing on the ideological impact of The Real Housewives franchise,

The good life on screen is largely based on conspicuous consumption. The capitalist class is marked by never-ending shopping sprees, exotic vacations and fine dining events…Class is conveyed via material goods and brandname(sic) items that immediately connote expensive taste …[and] one’s taste in material goods is indicative of belonging to – or aspiring to achieve – a certain class, perpetuating the hierarchical social relations in the United States…. Audiences are encouraged to view consumption as exciting, fun, empowering, and a solution to all of life’s problems.14

This critique could realistically be extended to most of the programs on the Bravo slate with shows such as Shahs of Sunset, Thicker than Water, Million Dollar Listing, Southern Charm, Vanderpump Rules, and the multiple iterations of The Real Housewives that present a cast populated by people who mostly live an affluent lifestyle filled with partying and the consumption of expensive goods and services. The network has long realized its appeal to what it considers “affluencers,”15 a mostly female upper middle class demographic, and this is reflected in its programming, which seeks to capitalize on that audience by finding ways to monetize every single interaction with the audience, and create new ways to forge partnerships with advertisers. This is not to suggest that other networks do not carry the same concerns or motivations. However, Bravo has been uniquely placed to be able to capitalize in this manner, and thus its social television strategy emerges out of this logic.

Its approach to social television has more in common with attempts to integrate interactive television models than it does with contemporary approaches to social television. This strategy centers around privileging interactive engagements with the audience in a bid to keep
the audience tuned in not only to the program, but through extended opportunities for marketing products to these consumers. This idea of social television as the bedrock for extended audience engagement is a repeated theme in public interviews and talks by Lisa Hsia, head of digital initiatives for Bravo. Indeed, the company more rightfully considers social television as falling under the umbrella of what it calls, “Participant TV.”\textsuperscript{16}

Interestingly enough, although the shows differ somewhat in format, the Bravo show, \textit{Watch What Happens Live (WWHL)} might be considered a precursor to \textit{Talking Dead} and the various other editions of that show which currently exist. The show, which premiered in January 2009 was designed as an opportunity for “bravolebrities”\textsuperscript{17} to not only talk about their shows but to also discuss popular culture more generally.\textsuperscript{18} The talk show format also presented a great opportunity for the bravolebrities to market the products and brands to which they were linked. In previewing the concept a few months before its premiere, prior to the announcement about its launch, Laura Zalaznick, the executive in charge of Bravo, credited with spearheading this lifestyle branding, talked about the potential of creating such a show in an interview with \textit{The New York Times}. In response to a question about the effect of the economic crisis on the network’s programs given the focus on affluence, she talked about launching a show that would center around a host interviewing the cast and characters from the other shows on Bravo’s lineup and as part of the interview the discussion could provide some context around showing a cast member buying $1500 shoes. Specifically, she had this to say:

\begin{quote}
Here’s what’s important about that, or here’s what’s funny about that, here’s this person sitting on my couch to talk about that, given what’s going on in the world. It’s providing a little context, less inference — it’s not a time for subtlety.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

This appeal to what’s funny, or to concerns tangentially related to the show has structured \textit{WWHL}’s direction. Although ostensibly the show is set up as an opportunity for cast members to
explicitly discuss episodes, this sort of conversation rarely appears on the show. The first episode featured Real Housewives of New Jersey cast member, Danielle Staub but the episode was less concerned with her character and the events of the just ended season and focused instead on fashion and general pop culture news. Discussions about Bravo’s shows do feature occasionally on WWHL episodes, most commonly in the reunion shows at the end of a show’s season, but in general WWHL is an interesting hybrid bearing some similarities with general talk-shows where the host interacts with a wide-range of celebrity guests about general pop culture news and events.

From its very first episode, however, WWHL has focused on integrating play rituals into its programming. Fan interaction is built into the show and the interactions between the host and the guests often occur in the form of games in which guests are required to take part, sometimes via audience suggestions. Twitter use was limited in the first season, although the show did display a Twitter hashtag on the screen during the broadcast. The show also relies on phone calls from the audience, but has now incorporated Twitter into the audience participation model, and tried a few other social television initiatives.

One of the most prominent social television efforts was the introduction of the Play Live feature, which was launched in 2012 on WWHL and later expanded to other shows. The premise of Play Live was simple – audience members were directed through a message on the screen to visit the Play Live website where they could take part in polls, contests, and play other interactive games during the broadcast. The results were to be instantly displayed on the screen, and the ultimate goal with the Play Live feature was to use it as a platform for interactive advertising. At the time of the launch, Play Live was generally well-received by the press and seen to be an indicator of the approach to innovation that marked Bravo’s social television
However, although the service initially seemed to be promising, and was extended to other shows on the network including *Top Chef*, *Best New Restaurant* and *The Singles Project*, the feature was eventually abandoned.

Experimenting with features such as Play Live is typical of Bravo’s approach to social television over the last few years. The network is constantly exploring new initiatives but has yet to commit fully to a long-term idea. Some of the efforts undertaken by the network include its Bravoholic contest in 2013, where prolific Twitter users would have the opportunity to be nominated Bravoholic of the week. The winner was then given an opportunity to take over the @Bravoholic Twitter account for the network for an entire week. In 2012, the network introduced a “social edition” episode for the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* show and subsequently on other series’ in the franchise. The social edition episode was simply a rebroadcast of an episode of the show that incorporated audience tweets. Fans were therefore encouraged to live tweet the original episode with the goal of having these tweets incorporated into the social edition broadcast. The network also forged a partnership with second screen app, Zeebox for its *Real Housewives of Orange County*’s 100th episode. Several current and former cast members of the show took part in a live chat with fans of the show using one of the app’s dedicated TV rooms. In 2014, the network launched the select-a-scene feature in conjunction with the rebroadcast of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*’s sixth season. Select-a-scene offered fans the opportunity through Play Live to select a scene to be included in the rebroadcast. In promoting the feature, the chief selling feature for fans was the opportunity to revisit events from the episode from a particular character’s perspective. For example fans would be asked a question like the following: “Do you want to hear NeNe’s side on the pajama party gone wrong or
Fans responded through the Play Live website and the winning scene was included in the rebroadcast.

Other short-lived attempts by Bravo to integrate social television features as accompaniments to its programming slate include Talk Bubble, its first attempt at interjecting a live social viewing experience for its shows, and the special case of the show, *The Singles Project*. Talk Bubble, serves to highlight Bravo’s early commitment to social television, which can be traced as far back to early 2009 when the network first launched virtual viewing parties for its *Real Housewives* franchise shows and later on *Top Chef*. The first virtual viewing party, began with the second season finale of the *Real Housewives of New York City*. These virtual viewing parties featured invitations to fans to take part in live conversations with one another, but also with some of the Bravolebrities through the network’s website but also through Twitter. In March 2010, the virtual viewing parties transitioned over into Talk Bubble, which served as a portal where all social television activity around Bravo shows was curated. Like the virtual viewing parties that preceded Talk Bubble, fans were invited to be part of the community through invitations on the website that asked fans to RSVP to be part of the online party.

Framing the Talk Bubble moments as events that required an RSVP formalized the occasion and allowed Bravo to tap into this class consciousness that permeated most of its programming. It conferred upon the participants a degree of belonging that implied these fans were part of the inner circle, worthy of socializing and mingling with the inner circle – the “VIPs” that populated Bravo’s shows. The Talk Bubble thus became a venue for communicating directly with these VIPs, but also provided ample opportunities for marketing directly to these participants while ostensibly creating the perception that fans were getting access to insider information. Beyond the obvious curation of all conversation around the show – on Facebook
and Twitter – the Talk Bubble provided fans with show trivia, behind-the-scenes video, and poll questions reflecting the common threads that have developed across most networks’ social television initiatives. At the same time, Talk Bubble also included a “Tweet Heat” graphic, an insider version of a Twitter trending topic list. Fans could use this as a guide to which topics were getting the most play across the social media universe, with the graphic in effect serving as a subtle guide directing viewers’ towards certain topics, regulating the flow of the conversations to avoid lulls and spiking up the activity on the site. But on the other hand, the “Tweet Heat” graphic also provided the network with data that could be used for direct merchandising. This scenario was spelled out in an interview with Ellen Stone, the Senior Vice President of Marketing for Bravo Media, who spoke of the ways in which the network kept track of which fashion options were getting significant attention online. The system, she noted, was responsive enough where if the network noticed people were talking about a particular item, the network would quickly move to offer that item for sale in its online shop. Talk Bubble proved to be popular with the network and was the featured option when Bravo launched Bravo Now, its second screen app in August 2010. Notably, the network also served as a pioneer here, reportedly becoming the first network to launch a companion app for the iPad.
This commitment toward experimentation and being the “first” also emerges when you consider the launch of the show, *The Singles Project* in 2014. The show, billed as the “first real-time dating docuseries” by the network, was designed with audience participation in mind. Fans were provided every opportunity to significantly interact with and participate in the show. The show with a cast of six singles in Manhattan and was filmed a week ahead of its broadcast. During the filming process fans were given access to timely updates (photos and other behind-the-scenes footage) through the network’s social media outlets – Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Tumblr - in near real-time as the dates occurred. Fans were encouraged through these updates to offer up advice to the dating contestants, advice that included anything from what activities the contestants should engage in, which potential dating partners were worth pursuing.

Fig. 4.6: Screenshot showing Bravo’s invitation to join the Talk Bubble Party
or dumping, and could also through a segment called “15 second flirt” submit a video nominating themselves or others as potential date mates for the cast. Fans could also take part in a live Twitter Q&A with the cast the day after each episode aired, where once again the objective was to offer fans the opportunity to sound off on the dates, and to also receive “insider information” from the cast. During the actual broadcast, Play Live was featured heavily offering fans the opportunity to vote on a wide range of details such as the attractiveness of the dating mates, chemistry of the couples, behavior and the outfits won by the contestants and their dating partners. By any measure, the show can be read as the ultimate invitation for fans to play along, evident not only in its tagline, which suggested that every week was an opportunity for you the fan to “engage, influence and impact their search,” but also in the words of Lisa Hsia who described the show as a way for “fans to feel more like friends and confidants of the cast members.” She went on to add,

With “The Singles Project,” we’re particularly proud of how we transformed everything about how we do business – staffing, production schedules, casting… everything – to create a truly unique connection between audience and cast, making our viewers a part of the story. The complexity of that work and the user-facing simplicity with which we presented it engaged Bravo fans on a whole new level, allowing us to raise the bar.

The language used here by Hsia confirms this ethos of experimentation present in Bravo’s social television practices, but at the same time it brings to focus the curious dichotomy whereby the network on the one hand appears to be heavily invested in and committed to exploring social television, but on the other has failed to establish a lasting imprint in this arena. The prima facie evidence might suggest Bravo and AMC’s approach to social television is highly divergent. Bravo’s approach is more clearly tied to marketing and advertising. In repeated interviews, Lisa Hsia, and other members of Bravo’s media and digital teams make reference to this goal. For Hsia in particular, social television is simply part of a broader multi-platform storytelling vision
that creates new opportunities for monetizing the network’s content through partnerships the network forges with advertisers. This explicit link to advertising is less clearly addressed by AMC. What appears to be the focus with AMC is the primacy of content. Josh Sappan, the President and CEO of AMC has talked about the importance of creating what he calls iconic content, which in turn produces “superviewers.” According to Sappan, iconic content defines a certain type of show that is so durable, enduring and satisfying that when somebody really likes it and they go without it, they miss it. They actually care – it’s not just sort of indifferent TV.

Iconic content, Sappan notes, is distinguished by the quality of its writing and storytelling, and viewers develop personal connections to the content primarily through identification with the characters in the show. Consequently, these viewers become more likely to want to extend the connections to the show, by connecting with other “superviewers” through digital means. He further adds, the Talking Dead concept emerged in response to this need for connection.

In outlining what he believes is most important about “iconic content,” Sappan taps into the fundamental attributes of telesociality revealing how these implicit motivations become externalized through social television activity and experiences. Sappan calls our awareness towards the fact that the content serves as the bridge through which people communicate with and form bonds with one another. The urge toward social television activity springs out of the emotional registers that are stirred up through content that inspires some affective feeling within the viewer, which is then manifested outwardly by participating in a discursive space populated by others with similar affective responses to the content. This rightfully places the text at the center of social television activity, a revelation that is not entirely novel. In their widely cited study on Dallas, scholars Tamar Liebe and Elihu Katz partly attribute its success worldwide to “the universality, or primordality, of some of its themes and formulae, which makes programmes
psychologically accessible.” However, although the text remains central to telesociality, its essence lies in the social interactions and attachments that emerge amongst the viewers. It involves the bleeding together of de Certeau’s “reading as poaching,” referring to the ways in which the reader, or in this case the audience, imposes its own meanings and interpretations on the text, with practices of sociality. Reading as poaching, in de Certeau’s terms, describes the process of reading as one where the reader

insinuates into another person’s text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he (sic) poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes himself in it like the internal rumblings of one’s body… The readable transforms itself into the memorable.

Telesociality is thus about transforming the enjoyment of reading the text into a social ritual that draws on innate desires toward sociability, expressed through the pleasurable acts of finding common ground with others, finding humor in others’ proclamations, reveling in shared understandings, or conversely engaging in debates when fissures do occur in these shared understandings. Telesociality allows for extending that moment when the viewer is transported into the narrative, beyond the text into the physical world. It continues the emotional high that began when the viewer encounters the text.

This core understanding of social television as emerging out of the connections viewers form with the text and with one another, distinguishes AMC’s approach to social television, from Bravo’s. The point here is not to suggest that AMC does things right when compared to Bravo, nor is it meant to imply that the overriding motivations both networks have for pursuing social television is radically different. Rather, the goal is to account for the different outcomes by exploring the core assumptions that guide each network. The evidence suggests Bravo’s framing of social television does not accord the same level of importance to the sociality that develops between the viewers. Rather, it imagines social television to be rooted primarily within the
connections between the viewer and the show. On some level, both implicitly and explicitly, Bravo conflates social television as simply a vehicle for ushering in multiplatform storytelling. Lisa Hsia has likened social television to transmedia storytelling, noting in 2012 that it allows for the evolution of transmedia storytelling and adding that the network uses “social to drive integration of digital content – all content no matter what platform you’re on.” In an earlier written piece for Mashable, and in a 2012 interview with Interactive TV today, she drew the same conclusions noting that social could be used to pull fans along the way as they move content across platforms. More recently, she has focused on the ways in which social television can be used to “find new viewers and bring them back to the mothership” and how to use “social and social influencers to make [their] audience bigger than the scale [they] have already.”

Given this rationale, Bravo’s short-term exploration of various social television initiatives, and continual abandonment of some of its ideas can be better understood. The evolution of social television, such as it is, for the network relies more heavily on immediate outcomes and takes on a frenetic approach in the quest to achieve dominance over audience social activity.

Nonetheless, despite the disparity in approaches favored by AMC and Bravo, both networks are oriented toward managing audience behavior in social television spaces producing some commonalities that manifests as this invitation to play along. The invitation to play along can be understood as part of an underlying logic that subscribes to, or sees value in playfulness as a meaningful strategy for bringing audiences in line. The belief that games and game design elements can be used to exploit and shape user behavior has emerged as a prevailing logic across a wide range of industries – in the business world, education and in the mobile app ecosystem to name a few. Within the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) field, research has focused on studying how games can be designed to “support or promote different types of sociality.”
Gaming features have been introduced in a number of non-game settings to introduce pleasurable experiences for users that could be used to increase user engagement, as a persuasion tool, and games have been used to reward or motivate certain types of behavior. Game scholar and designer, Ian Bogost who has written about the persuasive power of games, argues games introduce a “procedural rhetoric” that strongly orders processes, implying there is a specific logic to the process that users must adhere to. Within the specific context here of social television, this persuasive rhetoric works to suggest that viewers need to play along with the television show. Playing along introduces a modality to the viewing experience that is useful in designing the proper order for social television from the networks’ perspective. It induces a state of playfulness into the viewing experience, which serves as an affective hook used to inveigle a set of actions from the viewer that serve the network’s interests.

Playing along works to return the focus toward the ephemerality of television, a relic of the broadcast era that acquires new resonance in this age of time-shifted viewing. By its very nature, playing along is something that is done live. The design of the playing along features, both on the television screen or on second screen devices, all center around the live television show. The implication that emerges is that despite the ability viewers have to watch television on their own schedule, watching live presents a much more rewarding and playful experience for the viewer. Playing along also invokes a call to responsiveness on the part of the viewer. This responsiveness is brought out in a number of ways. First, is the encouragement towards commenting about the show in public spaces. The display of public tweets on the screen rewards those viewers who buy-in to this call to be vocal and public about the show. Similarly, the potential to receive a response from the show itself, or from celebrities attached to the show produces the same effect. Finally, the call to be responsive also emerges through the directed
prompts to viewers to respond to poll questions, and to take part in online contests and games. All together, these actions are presented as a promise for greater engagement with the show for viewers who play along in the ways the show demands.

Playing along further serves an ideological purpose in framing the audience. It is metamorphic in that it functions as a tool for transforming ordinary viewers into a social audience. It consciously builds up certain traits in the audience to reaffirm and reproduce the audience as commodity. The social audience therefore has less to do with people who may be fans of the show, but eschew these public conversations. In a sense it is a misnomer because it does not encompass all the modes of sociality that might take place around a television show. Thus viewers who watch together and discuss the show, or take part in message board discussions on less public web spaces are excluded. The raw material that is extracted here is the audience’s time, capacity for engagement and willingness to be actively present in public social spaces. Thus, the social audience is one that is visible and thus measurable, oriented towards action, and complicit in serving as a promotional mechanism for the show. This social audience is one that becomes a tool for the network, not simply engaged in socializing around television, but one that directly buys into and works to reproduce the aims of the network as it relates to its social television goals and objectives.

**Understanding the Social Audience**

The characteristics of the social audience are best introduced through a quick detour exploring the actions undertaken by fans of the cult show, Fringe, who mounted a spirited campaign to save the show by directly gesturing to the Fox network’s economic concerns and goals. In 2011, when Fox announced the show would move to Friday, a night long considered to be the death knell for television shows, dedicated fans of the show organized and began to use
social television in a manner that specifically referenced the values most esteemed by advertisers and the network. The campaign, which called itself Fringenuity, recognized that advertisers are a key factor in the continued success of a show, and so organizers rallied fans to engage with the show’s advertisers on Facebook and Twitter. Participants advertisers by liking the Facebook pages of all the brands that advertised during the live broadcast of each show. They also expressed direct gratitude to these advertisers through Twitter messages that referenced the products advertised through the show. As a sign of the overzealousness of the entire campaign, a member of the fan group actually took time to compile a weekly video featuring all the ads so participants could have a handy reference to locate the show’s sponsors. Accompanying the video were suggested Twitter posts that users could send to the shows sponsors, as the example below demonstrates

Hey @McDonalds, I just observed your 20-piece McNuggets commercial during #Fringe. Thanks for supporting the show.46

However, the ingenuity of the fans is best explored through further exploration of the Twitter campaign that began with the move to Fridays during Fringe’s third season, and was improved upon and expanded during the fourth season. When Fox announced the move to Fridays, the key organizers of the Fringenuity campaign began by setting up what they called a Twitter Force. The Twitter Force was charged with recruiting five strangers to actively participate on Twitter during the live broadcasts. The efforts consisted simply of scanning Twitter feeds to identify potential fans of the show indicated by the fact that these people had previously tweeted something about Fringe. Members of the Twitter Force would then send direct messages to these “fans” mentioning the show’s tenuous status beyond the current season, and imploring these fans to tweet about the show if they cared about its future. The Twitter Force was discouraged from “spamming” Twitter accounts, in other words they could only tweet each individual user once

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(unless the other person initiated a further conversation), a strategy which meant they reached a broader base of users than would have been possible if they continued to target the same people repeatedly.

During the fourth season of the show, the Twitter campaign took on a more sophisticated tenor when the campaigners sought to manipulate Twitter’s algorithm to catapult Fringe to the top of the trending topic list on the platform. The Fringenuity fans eschewed the use of the hashtag #Fringe during the broadcasts, relying instead on different weekly catchphrases such as #Crosstheline or #loveistheanswer that directly referenced themes from each week’s episode.

The use of unique and somewhat cryptic hashtags served a dual purpose. First it met Twitter’s algorithmic requirement that relied on novelty and distinctiveness as important criteria in determining what people are talking about right now. At the same time, the hashtags chosen were designed to pique the interest of the broader Twitter populace, not limited to fans of Fringe in hopes that they would check out the hashtag to see what was going on and retweet or join in the conversation thus helping to push or keep the hashtag as a top trending topic. Reaching this broader audience was made possible by the Twitter interface, which displays a list of the top ten trending topics on each users’ page, as a resourceful avenue for spurring further activity on the site. By the midway point of Season 4, Fox integrated the Fringenuity campaign into its weekly broadcast by displaying the weekly hashtag on the screen during the broadcast, and ultimately rewarding fans with a fifth and final, albeit truncated season of the show. Despite its eventual cancellation the show managed to exit if not fully on its own terms, at least in a manner that allowed for plot resolution due in some small part to the activity and the labor of its highly vocal and engaged fandom.
It might easy to dismiss the Fringenuity campaign as the actions of fans all to wiling to submit to the marketing and corporate designs of the network and advertisers, but there is a knowingness to their actions that belie this simple conclusion, and this knowingness also reveals itself in the social television practices of Bravo and AMC audiences. It adds another dimension to playing along, this time on the part of the audience who willingly indulge in some of the strategies pushed by the networks to further their own enjoyment and pleasures. Some of the discussions that emerged on the Fringe Television site reveal a superior knowledge of the workings of the industry, and the organizers were quick to share news, updates and other relevant articles explaining why the strategy was worth pursuing.

Social television adherents of both AMC and Bravo shows evince a similar awareness in their activities, recognizing that much of what they do in the social television realm fits in with the network’s objectives, but these actions are very rarely carried out solely to support the show. Rather, the primary motivation is to enhance the enjoyment of the shows they follow. Furthermore, it suggests playing along is something that fans do because these rituals of play satisfy some fundamental need within these participants, and is an important vector to understanding telesociality amongst the audience. In other words, it shifts the center away from discussing playing along as something driven solely by the industry, to a recognition of how it serves the needs of the audience directly.

The proof of this lies in the range of activities that have come to define social television for the audience. Talk obviously remains central in the formation of audience social television practices, but beyond that, these fans take part in a set of practices that are self-seeking reflecting the desire to maximize these social television spaces and the interactions that develop therein.
These fans treasure the immense experiences possible through social television interactions and consequently work hard to develop and maintain these practices.

The most obvious examples of these directed forms of social television rituals can be seen in the cynical appeal to celebrity, and in the self-promotional quality of some of these interactions. Fans engaged in live tweeting shows often make sure to mention the name of the show’s stars in their tweet. For these participants, tweeting directly to the celebrity is a calculated gesture meant to fulfill two main goals. The fans acknowledged the sense of pleasure that came from receiving a reply from the celebrity in question, but there was also a second motive in that it could be used to raise the profile of the fan on Twitter. Often expressed was the idea that other live tweeting participants would react with envy, once a fan received a reply from a celebrity but additionally, having a celebrity reply to a tweet would make the tweet more relevant and it would receive more attention such as garnering more likes or retweets on the platform. On Bravo, this calculated appeal to celebrity status was realized through a deliberate strategy undertaken by some of the participants. Fans noted how they would take the side of a Real Housewife under attack by the other cast members to get the notice of the attacked housewife.

I’m often contrary. I think the show is entirely fake so I don’t really care who’s right or wrong. So when there’s a fight, I send a tweet to the one’s who’s getting picked on. (Alexis, Bravo Fan)

You want to get them to notice you, so you crack jokes, like what they like. If they promote something, I usually retweet (Camilla, Bravo Fan)

One upshot of having a celebrity retweet or reply to a message, was the effect on the participant’s follower network. Many social television participants are actively engaged in chasing followers. Having a celebrity retweet was one aspect of this chase, but savvy participants also concentrate on building a peer network in this space. Within *The Walking Dead* family,
there is a huge reciprocal exchange network in place. As part of their bio, many fans include a line that indicates they follow back, meaning they respond to all follow requests with a mutual follow in return. Building up followers is an attractive prospect because of the possibility it offers for garnering the attention of celebrities. One of the key motivations for this audience was to get a celebrity as a follower. Fans noted that celebrities were more likely to follow members who had a huge network, but at the same time a celebrity follower could be a selling point for attracting new followers, which made the conversations on Twitter more responsive.

I know I can get more people to respond to my tweets if I have many followers because more people see it. Then it’s not like I’m just talking to myself. (Sam, TWD Fan)

Fans who succeed in getting celebrity followers use it as a mark of status. This status is highly prized, especially amongst Walking Dead fans who brag about the number of celebrity followers they have managed to accumulate. Thus, it is not uncommon to see within profile bios a list of all the celebrities who follow a particular user. Respondent, LP, a fan of The Walking Dead has leveraged his ability to acquire celebrity followers by developing a thriving business through his now extensive network of followers. He talked about the strategies he used to get the celebrities’ attention, echoing the themes expressed above by Alexis and Camilla. As a graphic artist, he employed his creative skills toward making fan art that celebrated the cast member’s role on the show, or tied in some way to interests beyond the show.

My fan art helped. I’d make stuff that appealed to their ego right? But I was lucky. Daryl [Norman Reedus] loves fan art and photography so we had that in common. I’d send him some of my stuff and he responded. With the rest, I think having Daryl on board was helpful, but I also sent them stuff too. And if they were doing some charity stuff or whatever, I’d piggyback and make something they could use to promote it.
Nonetheless, despite the allure of gathering large number of followers, or attracting the notice of celebrities, social television activity is primarily motivated by the desire to experience more fun with the show in question. Across the board, fans noted the desire to take part in live tweeting was to express some emotional response to the actions on the screen. Indeed, part of the appeal of building the social television network was rooted in a desire to find amusing and everyday people to follow. Many of the participants talked about following along on Twitter just
to laugh when reading the comments. This was especially true of Bravo since its material offered up more opportunities to ridicule the contestants, but also amongst *Walking Dead* especially when the participants found the actions of the actors to be stupid. Even those fans who were more actively engaged in live tweeting the show talked about how it often was an opportunity to “snark” on the show, although it could also be used to simply vent, or express some positive feelings. It became an opportunity to express solidarity with one another. For example, the Glenn incident that started off this chapter emerged as a lightning rod for some fans to marvel at the ridiculousness of the plot, but it also served as a unifying moment earlier in the season, where fans could gather together to find solace in one another, and to experience the shared sense of grief that emerged when they thought he had been killed off. Thus, the most common experience of live tweeting was the immediacy to the action on the screen. Responses were lightning-fast, and occurred in sync with the show, in a sense echoing the call to play along live that accompanied the Story Sync app. The rationale here was that the tweets were only relevant while the action was taking place on the screen.\(^{48}\)

> I only tweet live. What’s the point otherwise? You miss half the fun, half the conversation. It’s like when you’re talking to friends and the conversation moves on to something else, and then you decide to bring up an old topic. (Maxie, TWD Fan)

Significantly though, and in contrast to the perception that social television activity is broad in scope, and characterized by a medley of all voices coming together in a giant space, much of the conversation gets bracketed off into smaller clusters of individuals with similar interests and opinions.\(^{49}\) Often, even amongst the fans with huge swaths of followers, participants would seek out a smaller network with whom they would carry out conversations. These smaller networks of exchange made the interactions more manageable and intimate and the conversation and the train of thoughts easier to follow along. Some fans would make appointments with others to tweet
together, and in cases where there was no specific appointment, others opted not to tweet if their “friends” were not available on a specific night.50

Sometimes everyone is just so concerned with being funny, or making biting comments. I like to talk about what’s going on in the show. I watch for the drama so it’s more fun to talk to a smaller group where we can discuss the things we want to (Joslyn, Bravo fan)

The desire for smaller networks of exchange exposes some of the contradictions within the audience’s embrace of social television activity. The chase for a large number of followers seems to be at cross-purposes with the desire for a closer and smaller network to serve as the nucleus of social television practices. The former highlights some of the audience’s complicity in pushing forth the network’s goals. The network can point to these fans as proof of the extensive engagement with its show in its selling pitch to advertisers. As chapter two points out, social television analysis also pays special attention to these viewers with high follower count, providing both the networks and advertisers easy access to data from these viewers. This state of affairs was well-understood by the social audience, who simply considered it “part of the cost of doing business.” Ashley, one of my participants noted, “it does not bother me,” in response to a question about the potential use of her data as an advertising and marketing tool for the show. This sentiment was common across the board, as fans eagerly embraced the opportunity to be ambassadors for the show. What respondents focused on instead, were the myriad benefits they accrued from this sort of activity. Having a high follow count was described as an ego-boost on the one hand, but additionally it could provide additional visibility not just for the show, but also for the individual. Participants were well aware that a huge follower count increased the likelihood of greater interaction with the show, and it also fulfilled the purpose of making sure that the show remained popular and would stay on the air.
Conversely, the shrinking of social television networks can be seen as a remediating act on the part of viewers,\textsuperscript{51} that restructures social television spaces into an approximation of past models of social viewing – embracing the modality of viewing together in living rooms, or in public spaces such as bars. This mode of engagement further solidifies the sociality embedded in these social television spaces, where interacting with others is not just about talking about content – although that is an important criterial – but also builds towards the maintenance and grooming of social relationships that is typical when people congregate together.

The complex business of negotiating the social television environment acquires some clarity when one begins to consider what matters for the viewer and how. The pleasures embedded in the convivial relationships that form between viewers is a key motivating factor, as is the enjoyment derived from the show. Within the interactions that develop specifically between the viewers, some vestiges of the industry’s play rituals are readily apparent. During the downtime, as in between seasons or between episodes, fans engage others by creating their own trivia questions, or asking poll questions that ask participants to anticipate future events. Playing together was seen as a pleasurable pastime, and it also fostered a degree of closeness between participants. Overwhelmingly, my respondents described these efforts to increase engagement between viewers as critical in building a sense of community around the show and the fans. This perspective explains the lack of anxiety around the industry’s efforts to script social television spaces. For these fans, the richness of these social experiences mattered most, and efforts by the networks to institute social television interactivity was just as valued as those that emerged from other viewers.
I like knowing that there are tons of people out there who like what I like. Makes me feel good, a part of something. I don’t mind promoting the show. In fact, I do it a lot, because more people would come online to talk about the show. (Sam, TWD Fan)

What these perspectives offer therefore is a need to reconfigure the significance of social television. The technological meanings that are impressed upon it, have less resonance than the sociocultural and economic implications that it produces. Social television draws attention in crucial ways to the nature of the industry-audience relationship, and suggests more harmony exists between the two. Furthermore, it speaks explicitly to the sociality embedded in television, bringing new focus to bear on how this sociality shapes our relationship to television, and how instrumental it is in determining how we watch, when we watch and even what we watch on the screen.

**The Aftermath to Play Rituals**

During the season finale of AMC’s, *The Walking Dead*, the show continued the practice it had instituted earlier with Glenn, of leaving viewers in suspense. During the episode, the core group of survivors became the captive of a villain, Negan, making his first appearance on the show. This was hardly surprising to most viewers. Negan’s presence had been highly anticipated all season, as he is a critical character from the comics. The show actively encouraged such anticipation, through direct references to the character within the show, but also online on social media, and in interviews. Indeed, when Jeffrey Dean Morgan was cast to play the character, this was widely announced. Additionally, most viewers, even those who avidly stay away from spoilers knew his presence was tied to the death of one of the core characters. Narratively, the show tends to end each season with the cast facing mortal peril, or with the loss of someone significant. In this case, the cast and crew also talked about the upcoming death of a beloved
character during the season finale, so fans expected the worst. However, instead of showing the
death, the show opted to go with a point-of-view shot from the character who is killed. We see
Negan swing his signature bat covered in barbed wire at his victim, someone screams in the
background and then the screen fades to black and the credits roll.

It would hardly be the first time that the show had left viewers in suspense, but this time
it seemed particularly egregious and a cynical attempt to manipulate the audience to not only
watch live, but also to spark conversation in social television spaces. Unlike previous seasons,
the show had promised the death of someone in the finale but failed to deliver. The decision took
away the option of fans to process and deal with any potential feelings of loss. Many fans railed
against what they considered to be cheap tricks to increase ratings, and to capitalize on the fact
that fans of the show, tend to be highly active social television users. For these fans, it felt like a
contract had been violated.\textsuperscript{52} The expectation of fans that the show would provide entertaining
and compelling stories, and in return fans would tune in and drive attention to the show had been
violated. These fans loudly vocalized their displeasure with the show on the same social
television spaces where it reigned, mounting criticisms focused on the idea that show had begun
to compromise on storytelling. It reignited debates about the quality of the storytelling over the
last season. The Glenn storyline had first stirred up this criticism, but the continued use of
suspense as a narrative device increased the perception amongst fans that the show was losing its
creativity.\textsuperscript{53} Fans also felt the cliffhanger was a setup to ensure people would tune in to the show
in the fall for resolution, and in the meantime they would continue talking about the show during
its hiatus. Scott Gimple, the executive producer of the show, and Robert Kirkman, the creator of
the comic quickly gave interviews to counter this criticism. They argued that these decisions
were entirely creative decisions, made from a storytelling perspective and asked for the fans’
patience as the next season would offer more clarity on why this was an appropriate storytelling decision.  

Creative decisions aside, the expectation that this cliffhanger would inspire significant interest during the hiatus has been justified. Much of the chatter online, and on social media revolves around fans carefully picking apart the final scene, reviewing screenshots and camera angles, and carefully tracked casting news and the movement of the cast in an attempt to determine the victim. From AMC’s perspective, this is more than likely welcome news. The recently released Nielsen Social Television report serves as affirmation, at least from a business perspective, that the network has succeeded in engaging audiences around this show. For the third year in a row, *The Walking Dead* is the top social TV series.

Viewed from a larger perspective, however, the controversy around the final episode offers some revelations about the contemporary television environment. AMC would hardly be the first network to employ the use of cliffhangers as a season finale. The epochal “Who Shot Jr?” moment from Dallas’ third season finale is now firmly entrenched in television history lore as a successful use of suspense to emotionally manipulate audiences. According to published reports, as viewers waited to find out who shot him, the episode was more hotly debated that summer than the presidential conventions, and the oil shortage crisis. The reveal episode, *Who Done It* became the highest-rated television episode of all time, until it was overtaken by the M*A*S*H. series finale. It remains to be seen if *The Walking Dead* would inspire a similar ratings increase when it returns in the fall. During the height of the fans’ emotional response to the finale, a chorus of voices loudly declared the intent to boycott the show, and some even took up petitions to have Gimple replaced as showrunner. The sentiments behind the idea of a boycott is captured by the comment below from a fan on a web article discussing the furor over
the finale episode. While some advocated for a boycott of the first four episodes, commenter Dragonetta said the following:

Nah. That would be overkill. We just want to teach him a lesson. We don’t want to kill the show lol. Sponsors will have to pay a lot of money to run ads during a TWD premiere because they always expect a high number of viewers. We should bring that number down significantly, just to let them know that we have power, too. Don’t play with us. Stop with the gimmicks and just write good stuff. I have no fault with the actors. They all do a great job portraying their characters and they have little to no control over the script. It’s the people BEHIND the show that are starting to get on my nerves. These guys are power mad and they’re getting greedy. It’s time to remind them that without us, they wouldn’t even have a job. Don’t fricking play with us.\textsuperscript{58}

Despite all this, what is important to take away is the following – the idea that social television has increasingly become the site where television is debated, and where crucial ideas about television shows and the networks’ responsibility to its audience, and the reciprocal audience obligations are negotiated. The audience is increasingly knowledgeable about industry practices, and often willing to accommodate the needs of the industry. At the same time, this same audience is more likely to hold the networks’ accountable, if the audience senses some deception on the part of the industry. In exchange for the right to be entertained and to experience sociality, audiences are willing to appease the industry to some degree. However, audiences are not dupes who readily fall in line and submit to every whim and caprice of the industry. Bravo’s inability to fully institute its version of social television, and the backlash over \textit{The Walking Dead} finale attest to this current reality.
NOTES


2 I draw these conclusions using Sysomos data


4 The Talking Dead show premiered on October 16, 2011 and StorySync launched when the show returned in February for the second half of the season. It accompanied the mid-season premier Nebraska which aired on February 12, 2012.


9 Ibid.

10 It is too early to say if these shows will become permanent fixtures on the network’s slates. Each of these aftershows are in the first season. Also, the Bachelor Live show ran for six episodes, and the sister franchise show, The Bachelorette currently airing does not have its own aftershow.

11 Game of Thrones’ version of its after show departs from The Talking Dead format in a number of ways. This after show, aptly named After the Thrones does not air live. The show billed as a weekly recap show is currently only available as a digitally on the HBO Go and HBO Now platforms, one day after the broadcast on Mondays. The show also eschews the use of celebrity guests, and should more appropriately be termed a podcast. In fact, the hosts, Andy Greenwald and Chris Ryan had been running a popular podcast for the show in previous seasons on Grantland. This format seems to have been transferred over to the After the Thrones show, as the majority of the 30-min show featured both hosts recapping the episode. Audience involvement is also lacking in this after-show. Although the Twitter handles for both hosts appear on the screen, audience tweets do not appear on the screen, nor is there any attempt to include the perspective of the audience. The asynchronous mode of viewing privileged here further leads to the show eschewing the norms of social television rituals as popularized by the Talking Dead. Nonetheless, HBO has said the success of the show might determine how the show proceeds in the future. If the show proves to be a success, the network plans to transition to having an actual live broadcast show in the vein of The Talking Dead and After the Black.


13 AMC plays each episode of The Walking Dead twice in each market. The first episode airs at 9pm ET and 9pm PT, followed by Talking Dead, and then each episode runs again following the Talking Dead show.


Bravolebrities is a term used by Bravo to describe the stars of its show. The term is fairly ubiquitous currently. It appears on the networks’ website and promotional materials and is often used by executives in interviews.

WWHL began as an web after-show for Top Chef, hosted by current host Andy Cohen following a request by Laura Zalaznick who envisioned Cohen as a likely host for such a show, and helped fulfill his desire to achieve a camera-facing role. It later transitioned to being a reunion host show for Real Housewives and has now evolved to simply being a general talk-show, that still serves as a watercooler venue for Bravo’s lineup. (See http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/02/magazine/02zalaznick.html).


The app was nominated for the 6th Annual Shorty Awards in the category Tech Innovation, although it did not win.


This factoid has been widely reported in discussing Bravo’s innovation and Lisa Hsia’s influence in Bravo Digital although I haven’t been able to independently confirm or disprove this claim. In reviewing press releases from major networks I haven’t found any announcements that came before August 2010. In terms of the claim, see Jeffrey, Bob. "Worldmakers at CES 2012: Bravo’s Lisa Hsia Speaks with JWT’s Bob Jeffrey." J Walter Thompson Worldwide. January 13, 2012. https://youtu.be/25g7kWwERB0 and Talk Forum NYC. "/// Lisa Hsia, Executive

232


33 Ibid.


36 Ibid.


39 Ibid., p. xxi.

40 JWT Interview (Cite later)


44 The commonly-used term to describe the interjection of game features in non-game settings is “gamification” although the term remains problematic. It has been defined colloquially as “the use of game thinking and mechanics to engage users and solve problems,” and more formally by academicians, Sebastian Deterding et al as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts.” See Deterding, Sebastian, Dan Dixon, Rilla Khaled, and Lennart Nacke. "From Game Design Elements to Gamefulness." Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference on Envisioning Future Media Environments - MindTrek '11, 2011, 9-15. doi:10.1145/2181037.2181040.


This strategy appeared to be successful as reported on the Fringetelevision site. Several of the show’s hashtags, for example #TheDayIDied became worldwide trending topics during the broadcast period.

Jamie noted she only tweets, “While it’s happening, because that’s when it’s most relevant.”

This is especially evident in race-based clusters that form on the Twitter site. For example, Black Twitter, a culturally defined segment of Twitter users with distinctive modes of using the service, according to scholars and other activists, have carved out a separate space of their own for carrying out social television conversations. This group eschews the use of #TWD for The Walking Dead and #GoT for Game of Thrones choosing instead to live-tweet respectively with the hashtags #DemDeads and #DemThronez.

The use of quotes around friends is to indicate that these were friends only in the online sense. The participants did not have any relationship to one another beyond a mutual appreciation or disdain for the show in question.

I am drawing here on Jay David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin’s theory of remediation. Remediation, as advocated for by these scholars is the idea that new media objects appropriate and “refashion” conventions and characteristics from media forms that preceded the new media object. For more on remediation, see Bolter, J. David, and Richard A. Grusin. Remediation: Understanding New Media. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.


I counted at least 3 petitions on Change.org. Although these petitions did not get significant traction, they reflect some of the outcry against the finale episode.

CONCLUSION

Imagining a Future for Social Television

In what seems like a fitting backend to this project, the initial hype and hyperbole that accompanied the rise of social television at the start of the 2010s had begun to taper off by 2014. Articles from the tech trade press were sounding its death knell, a sure sign the industry was coming face-to-face with the reality that social television would not be the revolutionary game changer as previously imagined. To be fair, these articles and the ensuing discourse around social television and its potential centered around mobile apps, particularly those second screen apps that had at one point proliferated at a rapidly increasing pace. Part of the discourse that emerged during this period acknowledged Twitter’s dominance in the field, and the growing impact of Facebook. The ensuing debate centered around a number of reality checks facing the industry. First was the recognition that the second screen app space had grown to a point that was not sustainable by current conditions. During the height of the second screen boom, there were reportedly at least one hundred companies competing against each other with very little differentiation in service besides the use of check-in or rewards program. The suggestion that these apps would help consumers discover new programming proved to be illusory at best. Moreover, these apps were for the most part duplicating what was already most popular on sites
such as Twitter and Facebook. As the press articles acknowledged, the single most important activity in the social television ecosystem was the actual conversations taking place around television shows, and Twitter (as well as Facebook) had conquered this sector.¹

The turn away from social television is typical of the postmortem phase that accompanies the fall-cycle of any technological hype. Think pieces and op-eds designed to explain the failures of the technology become common-place, and echo the original rush to justify the optimism and hype that was projected on to the rising technology. At the same time, the rhetoric that accompanies both the positive spin of new technologies’ impact or the subsequent criticism of its success projects a singular vision onto the technology. This rhetoric screens out alternative meanings that reside alongside the dominant narrative. Although discussions of these competing rhetoric are useful from the standpoint of considering what the myths that surround technology have to say about society or the influence these myths have on the development of a technology, it serves little utility in considering the actual ways in which people make sense of the technology or how it is used.

In the case here of social television, this becomes quite evident in considering how it has been integrated into the fabric of everyday rituals. The above perspective preoccupied with innovation and tracking the large-scale impact of social television to a large degree misses or discounts the cultural significance of social television. What it does reveal, however, is the reality that the desires and visions of the technologists were so divorced from the experiences of the actual users of the technology. This technological perspective was driven by a framing ideology centered around growth and economic success. Built upon a capitalist framework, the ethos that emerged was grounded in the belief that creating new technologies could initiate
infinite opportunity for commercial success. An outward manifestation of this is reflected in the search for the next “killer app,” defined by Merriam-Webster as “a computer application of such great value or popularity that it assures the success of the technology with which it is associated; broadly: a feature or component that in itself makes something worth having or using.” This quest for the next killer app was an overriding concern for the industry and helps explain the rush toward second screen apps assumed to be the next killer app. From that perspective, the failure of second screen technologies consigns social television into a scrap heap pile, of minor importance to the tech industry.

At the same time, what is also revealed is an articulation of sociality that revolves around television, and defines an intrinsic mode for interacting with television texts and with other members of the audience. The long history of fans getting together to watch television shows and discuss plot events bears this out. These practices may have originally emerged in off-line spaces, but Internet and web connectivity have expanded the range of opportunities for like-minded fans to get together. Let us briefly consider two non-current examples – *Battlestar Galactica* and *Melrose Place*. From 2004-2009 when the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* aired original episodes, a practice emerged across the country of fans gathering together and organizing frak parties, either at people’s homes or in bars to watch the show live as it aired. A list of frak parties appeared on the show’s websites and fan pages, and Ron Moore, the executive producer for the show would occasionally attend these parties and blog about the party and the show in his podcast – an early manifestation of what would later emerge as live-tweeting. Although these parties were popular, the opportunity for wider interaction was of course limited, and eventually the concept of frak parties moved to online settings. The fan website Galactic Watercooler also began to organize online frak parties where online gatherings of fans could
watch new episodes of the show and comment on the episode with other like-minded viewers. Later on, this concept of online frak parties was expanded to include scheduled events to rewatch the show, again in a communal setting.

A somewhat similar trajectory can be seen with the case of *Melrose Place*. The show originally aired from 1992 – 1999, and an attempt was made to reboot the series in 2009, although the new version of the show lasted for one season only. During its original run, a weekly ritual developed among some fans of the show who would gather at bars across the country to watch the show and socialize with one another. This weekly ritual earned the moniker Melrose Mondays, a name that entered the popular culture lore and is synonymous with the show. In a nod to online social television, the idea of Melrose Mondays was carried over to Twitter in 2015 when some fans of the show spearheaded by a twitter account with the handle Melrose Mondays gathered together weekly to rewatch episodes of the show on Mondays live-tweeting each episode.

The significance of these two examples and countless others reflect the sociocultural relevance of telesociality and its links to live presence and community that finds great affective resonance from the opportunity to traverse space and time constraints. It affords the opportunity for fans to take part in immediate conversations around television that extend the bonds of intimacy that are forged both with the text and with one another. This nod to liveness and immediacy is an important one to make in relation to current expectations about social television that define its meaning. In 2014, the long-running television forum site, *Television Without Pity* (*TWOP*) was shuttered; an act that actually becomes more significant in retrospect. Throughout the 2000s, *TWOP* had been the site of engaging and often intricate discussion around television
shows. In many respects, it was the true precursor to the 2010 social television phenomenon. Television show executives and the networks increasingly paid attention to the conversations taking place on the site, and in some cases, executive producers and writers actively participated in the forum discussions to the delight of many fans. The weight of TWOP’s cultural relevance resulted in its sale to Bravo in 2007, with the site subsumed under the broader NBC Universal umbrella.

The changing circumstances on the ground offered up every indication, at least to NBC, that the site had lost its purpose, and was being overshadowed by new forms of social television interactivity. Thus in 2014, the company made the decision to shut down the service, and used declining traffic on the site as the primary reason for the closure. In an ode piece reflecting on its importance as a cultural touchstone, Buzzfeed editor Doree Shafrir reminisced over her use of the site in its heyday, writing

*Television Without Pity*’s recaps and forums were at one time a regular stop for me in my internet routine. I wanted to know what their writers — people who’ve gone on to places like the *New York Times Magazine*, *Go Fug Yourself*, and NPR — thought about the most recent episode of *Six Feet Under*. I wanted to commiserate about *Friday Night Light*’s terrible second season. I wanted to spend hours getting lost in the *Lost* forums. But slowly — as every other site started doing recaps, and then as the discussion around TV began happening in real time, on Twitter — I stopped reading.4

She would go on to add

And certainly, social media has usurped the utility of sites like *Daily Candy* and *Television Without Pity*. In a world where I can go on Twitter while *Scandal* is on and not only see what the audience is tweeting, but also what the cast and showrunner are saying as the show unfolds, I don’t want to wait two or three days for the *TWOP* recap, or scroll through hundreds of comments in a forum.5
For the die-hard *TWOP* users, the NBC decision was heart-breaking, but the perception that Twitter had usurped web-based discussion sites was shared almost universally, with popular opinions suggesting audiences were no longer interested in the more elaborate discussions that took place on these sites. That may be the case, but it is also important to consider how these sites were originally managed and what recent changes suggest about telesociality. About two years before *TWOP* went out of business, the original founders of the site Tara Ariano and Sarah Bunting launched another discussion site *Previously.TV*. The site mostly remained under the radar until NBC announced the closure of *TWOP*, when many of the long-term users of *TWOP* migrated over to this new site. The presence of healthy online discussions on this new site belies the notion that audiences are no longer interested in long-form discussions.

What is particularly more noteworthy is comparing how discussions take place on *Previously.TV* compared to its predecessor, *TWOP*. Throughout its run, *TWOP* had a strict rule preventing live discussions from taking place as the show was airing and forum threads were locked until the episode was over. The expectation was fans would watch the show and immediately after could take part in extended discussions that could last for days. The ability for extended discussions still occurs on *Previously.TV*, but the most significant difference in the two sites has to do with the presence of live discussions. Originally, *Previously.TV* tried to maintain this strict boundary, but that rule was quickly relaxed as fans were clamoring to talk about show events as they occur. The site now mostly allows live commentary to take place for the majority of shows.⁶

There are perhaps two reflections that might be relevant here. First it illustrates the bleeding through of Twitter social television conventions into mainstream cultural patterns. The
influence of Twitter is rather ancillary though, in that what matters more are the affordances embedded in the platform, that mirror impulses in the audience. In other words, social television is not derived through Twitter, but rather, it has found a somewhat stable configuration there because Twitter creates a setting for live and immediate connections to others, and users can share express themselves emotionally and receive feedback in the moment. The creation of spaces for these sort of affective expressions is crucial for understanding the overall place of social television in the contemporary environment.

Secondly, it highlights the importance of telesociality as a fundamental relationship that emerges out of television. In 1974, when Horace Newcomb outlined the aesthetics of the television medium, he focused on three key aspects – history, intimacy and continuity. Newcomb talked about intimacy simply in relation to the bonds forged between the viewer and the text of the show – the plot and the characters. This intimacy finds expression also in the conversations that develop around the show in subsequent chat sessions. As many fans have noted, the talking through that takes place during or after a show airs presents an opportunity for processing the events of the show, but also for socializing and bonding with others who share similar interests. The emotional registers that derive from the intimacy between the text and the fan, gets resolved and worked through in the conversations and connections these fans make with other viewers. The continued presence of web-based sites for show discussions, and the migrations of these practices to platforms such as Instagram that were not exactly developed for such conversations, provide evidence for the immanence of telesociality within television.

In what is perhaps a fitting postscript underlying the importance of social television not only to the audience, but also to the industry, Tribune Media Group purchased the TWOP
domain in April 2016. Although the site remains non-operational, the home page prominently displays the following message: “Welcome Back, You Devil.” Josh Cogswell, the chief product officer for the Tribune group responded to inquiries about the company’s plans for the site by stating:

“Television Without Pity was once one of the best destinations for TV commentary. An overwhelming number of fans — including us — were saddened that it shut down. So we bought it and are now working with some of the industry's favorite talent, influencers and strategic partners on a relaunch. We can’t share anything more at this time, but to all fans past and present: Stay tuned.”

It remains to be seen how Tribune plans to use the TWOP website. Cogswell’s comments offer some glimpses into the potential use of the site, but the greater significance lies in the continued attention directed towards social television by the industry. Social television seems at once so promising, and yet unfulfilling. In recent months, Twitter, once the darling of social television, has come under scrutiny in part because growth on the platform has stalled. So what does it say that despite the inability of the industry to realize its ambitions, social television still manages to fascinate the industry. This is a question that will continue to have resonance for scholars and the industry alike.

One possibility lies in the articulation of social television as a technological tool. There is a certain correspondence between telesociality and social television, but the latter exists through the prism of technology. It serves thus to preserve the viewer’s relationship to the text and to one another, through technological constructs that present larger implications for imagining television as a social practice. Casting television’s sociality as a purely technological practice reproduces questions and concerns that revolve around how and why television matters in the present-day environment. Social television, from an industrial perspective is about the
management of movement across screens, and the shepherding and control of audience behavior and practices. Like much of the cultural studies scholarship that came before, these questions are rooted in an examination of power structures and require sustained attention on production structures, textual outcomes and ways in which audiences are conceived and imagined. The failure of many of the early social television initiatives to take root, suggest the diffusion of power is not one-directional, but questions remain about the lasting impact of social television. What lies ahead though from a research perspective is to further examine how social television initiatives are shifting the dynamics at play in the production-textual space, but also in the relationships between production and the audience. It presents the need to rethink these social television spaces as undifferentiated and instead bring to bear questions of race, class and gender and how these structure and intersect with the broader economic and cultural logics that emerge out of social television practices.
NOTES


5 Ibid.

6 *Game of Thrones* remains an exception, in part because the site has to do significant policing in maintaining some sections of the forum spoiler-free for those fans who have not read the books.

7 The purchase may have actually taken place in 2015, as the copyright date presently shows 2015. However, the site remained dormant until April 2016 when the home page and copyright information was updated.


APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: List of Interview Participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Show</th>
<th>Follower Count</th>
<th>Has Celebrity Followers?</th>
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<td>Abigail</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AMC</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>Yes - 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bravo</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AMC</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camilla</td>
<td>Late 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bravo</td>
<td>1.6K</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joslyn</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bravo</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith</td>
<td>Late 50s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AMC</td>
<td>&gt;10K</td>
<td>Yes prominently displayed on Twitter Bio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LP</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>AMC</td>
<td>&gt;12.5K</td>
<td>Yes prominently displayed on Twitter Bio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxie</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AMC</td>
<td>2K</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>AMC</td>
<td>11.7K</td>
<td>Yes prominently displayed on Twitter Bio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Names are all pseudonyms selected by participant
APPENDIX B: Extended Profile of Participants

Abigail joined Twitter in 2013 to specifically take part in TWD conversations. She follows the entire cast of the show and primarily tweets about show-related content. She met Norman Reedus, one of the stars of the show at a regional con and he now follows her on Twitter.

Alexis considers herself a fashionista and is an aspiring model. She is a relative novice to Twitter joining in early 2015. Her tweets are generally related to television especially Bravo shows. She is very much interested in getting noticed by the cast of these shows and tweets them constantly.

Ashley has been on Twitter since 2012 and she uses the service primarily for following the shows she enjoys. Her Twitter activity is mostly limited to her immediate circle of friends although she sometimes monitors the broader live tweeting community. She is married with one daughter and is a stay-at-home wife and mother.

Camilla has been on Twitter since 2009 and enjoys the experience of interacting with other fans and also with the celebrities. She is an avid tweeter and uses the service to find people with like interests – movies, television, books and culture generally. She loves that Twitter is breaking down the silos between celebrities and the general audience and thus constantly reaches out to celebrities on the site. She is married, and has two adult children.
Joslyn recently joined Twitter but has been an active participant of web forums for years. She is a huge reality television fan and loves to tweet with fellow fans. She also enjoys the experience of tweeting with “friends” and rarely takes part in the larger conversations.

Judith has been on Twitter for about a year and a half and in her own words, “she took to it like a duck to water.” She is a huge Walking Dead fan as well as other horror-themed television shows. She tweets constantly to fans and celebrities alike, and is constantly plugging and retweeting any projects the celebrities might be involved in. Judith loves the high of interacting with a great number of people on the platform and is always on it, and very active in the live tweeting scene. In the 18 months or so that she has been on the platform she has sent over 100,000 tweets.

LP has been on Twitter since 2013 and is a devoted fan of The Walking Dead. He enjoys the interactions that come from participating in live tweeting and is constantly tweeting about the show even during the break. LP strongly believes in using the platform to socialize and constantly sends messages of greetings to all his followers. He follows everyone who follows him, and creates quizzes and other games related to the show to keep enthusiasm high for fans.

Maxie joined Twitter in 2014 and although she tweets about the show, she tweets about a wide range of interests. She enjoys the process of live tweeting and carries on smaller conversations while also taking part in the larger live tweeting practice. Although for the purposes of this study, she identified primarily as a Walking Dead fan, she has on occasion also tweeted about Bravo shows but rarely does so since she does not watch the shows – Real Housewives of New York primarily – regularly and often fails to watch it live.
Sam is a self-described *Walking Dead* addict and a prolific tweeter. He has been on the platform since 2010 but most of his activity is based on the show. He enthusiastically supports the cast in all their endeavors and tweets about the show constantly even during the hiatus. Sam actively tries to grow his Twitter network and follows everyone who adds him.
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