

Narrowcasting and Clip Culture

Do Technological Innovations Change Our TV Experience?

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To:

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Introduction

In his 1974 monograph "Television: Technology and Cultural Form", Raymond Williams emphasizes the ambivalence of television as technology on the one hand and cultural practice on the other. Research on the topic, Williams proposes, should take into account the interdependence between these two dimensions of television. "We really don't know, in any particular case, whether, for example, we are talking about a technology or about the uses of a technology; about necessary institutions or particular and changeable institutions; about content or about a form" (Williams, 1974, 10).

Williams asks further if one of the two dimensions determines the other; if the technological innovations determine cultural and social practices or if the technological and scientific developments are indeed determined by social and cultural conditions in society. The "fundamental form of the statement: 'television has altered our world'" (Williams, 1974, 13) and any further myth about cause and effect of technological change shall be critically questioned.

The television environment that surrounded Williams and the changes occurring in it were of course much different of those today. In the United States, new regulations and the ending of the communication satellite corporation monopoly helped the big commercial TV networks to emerge (cf. Urrichio, 2004, 167). The television market got off and television as a cultural practice was about to conquer the living rooms on a mass scale. As technological innovations, cable TV, VCRs and soon the remote control changed the viewing experience of the audience that had already domesticated the medium as a family institution.

More than thirty years later, there are new technological developments that seem to have the power to change the viewer experience dramatically. The process of digitalisation within the last 15 years provides a large range of possibilities for the 'medium formerly known as broadcasting'. Instead of wondering if television has altered our world, we must ask ourselves if our digitalised world is about to alter television in the (technological and cultural) form that we know. But how influential are these innovations in reality?

Milly Buonanno (2007) argues in her monograph "The Age of Television: Experiences and Theories" against a technological determinism in the TV market. According to

Buonanno (2007, 63f), the technological innovations go along with a cultural optimism that sometimes lacks the connection to the present reality. Further, she states two differing time-spans for technological and social change. “These time-span categories are first, technological innovation and its potential and actual applications in tools and services available in the market; and second, cultural and social innovation, correlated with but not automatically dependent on the first category.” (Buonanno, 2007, 65). The margin between the “potential of technologies and their social consequences” is often neglected (ebd).

This paper aims at emphasising the distinction between these two dimensions of television while at the same time showing dependencies and relations. The occurring and ongoing changes in the TV market shall be discussed in technological and cultural ways. It asks in particular for a technological determinism and aims at answering the question: Does TV as a cultural practice change in the presence of a technologically enhanced TV environment.

At first, technological trends and possibilities shall be introduced that widen the technological definition of television. The second part examines if there is indeed a shift in the viewer experience and how television changes as a cultural practice. This part builds on relevant studies and a focus group that was conducted in March 2010 in Stockholm containing three participants in the age of 19, 26 and 81 (all female, all Swedish)¹. As a conclusion, the technological and cultural changes shall be brought together asking for interdependencies and determinism, while at the same time pointing at future trends.

Technological Innovations in Broadcasting Media

One of the main technological key drivers of television within the last 15 years has been the digitalisation² putting television up to a new stage. John Ellis (2000, cited in Buonanno, 2007, 20) states three different phases of television. The initial phase was that of ‘scarcity’ characterised by a limited number of channels and a limited number of hours of transmission a day. With the arrival of commercial channels, television entered

¹ The focus group was conducted in cooperation with my colleague Henrik Bonnichsen.

² I use the term in its very basic technological meaning as the producing, storing and transmitting of information in the form of digits, which is originally associated with computers (cf. Gripsrud, 2004, 213).

the phase of 'growth', which is characterised by an increasing choice of channels. Finally, television came into the phase of 'abundance'. Cable, satellite and digital technologies allowed a multiplication of channels "by a factor of ten or even a hundred" (Buonanno, 2007, 21). This development towards the availability of a large amount of different channels is often described as 'narrowcasting' contradicting the mass accumulating quality of broadcasting TV.

But this multi-channel environment is only one part of the consequences that reached television due to digitalisation. While the availability of channels exploded, TV content also multiplied its ways of distribution making television not only a multi-channel, but at the same time a multi-platform technology. "Technologically, TV includes non-broadcast technologies (DVDs, TiVo, BitTorrent files), and it can be viewed on computers (YouTube) and mobile devices (phones, iPods) as well as via traditional TV sets, which have evolved to flat-screen technologies" (Hartley, 2009, 20). Especially the mobile reception of television is to underline, since it symbolises the spatial independence of TV usage.

Further, the variety of ways to watch television leads to an increasing independence of the TV content from TV channels or a scheduled TV programme (time-independence). Beginning with the introduction of the VCR, the personalisation of television has made a huge step due to technological innovations. Digital, internet-based distribution permits subscription services, Video on Demand, Near-Video on Demand or Catch Up TV that enables the viewer to easily become her/his own programming director.

Finally, digital distribution and the technological convergence of television and computer technologies provide a high possibility of interaction with the program. It is not only possible to edit the textual form of a program for instance by choosing different camera angles, subtitle languages or by the 'timeshift' function, but also to manipulate the TV content for instance by adding comments and references or by in-screen interactions as innovative players such as *Microsoft Silverlight* or the *Adobe Flash Player* supply them. "The medium has transformed from mass to DIY, from 'read only' to 'read and write', and from network TV to social networks – in short, from a regime of representation to one of productivity" (Hartley, 2009, 26).

But do these five consequences of the digitalisation of television (multi-channel, multi-platform, mobile, personalisation and interactivity) thus lead to a dramatic shift in the viewer experience?

A changing viewer experience?

The social equivalent to the technological term 'narrowcasting' is 'fragmentation'. It describes the dissolving of the TV audience as an (imagined) community into fragments of "individualised forms of asynchronous consumption" (Buonanno, 2007, 70). John Hartley (2009, 23) proposes the thesis that "it is unlikely that any single fictional TV show will ever again achieve the audience numbers of I Love Lucy's top-rating episode (1953)" due to multi-channel opportunities and the 'long-tail' principle – a term that has originally been introduced by Chris Anderson (2004) and that is frequently used to describe the archival character and economy of Web 2.0 services.

As for the Swedish TV audience, a fragmentation can be retraced. While in 2005, 81,4 % of the TV consumption was spread over the five biggest channels (SVT-1, TV 4, TV 3, SVT-2, Kanal 5), until 2009, the number decreased to only 63 % (2006: 76,7 %; 2007: 70 %; 2008: 66 %) (MMS, 2010). Even if not that dramatic, a similar development can be recognised in the German TV market. 2005, the five biggest channels (The third channels (ARD), ARD, ZDF, SAT.1, RTL) bundled together 64,7% of the whole TV consumption. In 2009, it was only 61,6 % (2006: 63,9 %; 2007: 61,8%; 2008: 61,7%) (KEK, 2010). Even if this development cannot solely be described as a direct consequence of technological innovations, it underlines an increasing embracement of niche channels and juxtaposes the democratic community-building character of television.

However, Jostein Gripsrud (2004, 213) argues for an ongoing community-building character of television: "broadcasting's provision of a more or less shared cultural menu is still a highly important element in people's construction of their social identities, their sense of selfhood and their experience of community." In a personalised, multi-platform TV environment, audiences might not be gathered through scheduled broadcasting, but through a combination of multi-platform distribution such as DVD sales, Video on Demand, Catch-Up TV and promotional Clips.

Michael Curtin (2009) and Stuart Cunningham (2009) give examples of how major networks such as the US-American *NBC* or the Australian *ABC* agitate in such an environment that Curtin titles 'Matrix media'. "These 'brand extension' strategies aim to deepen the viewer experience by delivering content in a variety of formats so it is available to audiences wherever they wish to engage with it" (Curtin, 2009, 14). The viewers that 'engage' with other platforms than the traditional TV sets are not included

in the numbers of TV viewing time even if they might take part in mainstream TV consumption. The US-American video website *Hulu* (owned by NBC Universal, News Corp., The Walt Disney Company and other stake-holders) makes this obvious. According to ComScore (2009), more than 1 billion video streams of TV programs were watched on *Hulu* in December 2009.

An example for that provided also the focus group, where a woman (female, 26) and her grandmother (female, 81) found out that they watched the same program, only that the grandchild used to watch the program with the Catch-Up service of the Swedish public service broadcaster 'SVT play', while the grandmother followed the scheduled TV program. For the 26-year-old woman, the possibility to watch the program time-independent ranked higher in value than the live-experience. This goes along with P. David Marshall's (2009, 47) statement that fictional TV content is increasingly watched independent of the scheduled programme. According to Marshall, TV shows on DVD made 10 % of the overall industry income in 2005 (ibid.) and file-sharing communities have a huge member base that reveals an even higher commitment and "fan-ish behaviour" (ibid., 42) towards their favourite TV programs. It is therefore not useful to take only into account the audiences that gather in front of the TV screen in order to speak of an imagined community. There are much more dimensions that have to be considered in order to grasp the whole size of the 'dispersed' audience.

The focus group showed that it is completely natural for the two younger participants (female, 19 and female, 26) to watch television online. Both participants stated that they regularly watch popular shows or movies either via Catch-Up TV directly on the channels' websites, via video-aggregation websites such as *YouTube* or in downloaded form. The "ARD/ZDF-Onlinestudie 2009" supports this result for the German 'Onliners'³. In the study, 11 % of the Onliners between 20 and 29 years old stated that they watch TV shows online time-independent at least once a week; in the age group of 14 to 19 the number is even 16 % (van Eimeren & Frees, 2009, 341). The number of people watching all kinds of videos online (Catch-Up TV as well as for instance user-generated content) at least occasionally is overall 62 % (2008: 55 %; 2007: 45 %; 2006: 28%) (cf. van Eimeren & Frees, 2009, 343). This shows that especially young people change the platform of consumption, while – as the focus group showed – they may stick to the same channels.

³ Internet users in Germany up the age of 14. The study contains a sample of 1804 Interviews (cf. Van Eimeren & Frees, 2009, 334).

The focus group showed further that the two younger participants use the computer screen just the way they use the TV screen. The process of searching and preparing the television content might be pro-active, but the TV experience is perceived in the same “laid-back” mode than in front of the TV set. This confirms Marshalls (2009, 41) when stating that “far more individualized than the traditional mode of television consumption, the computer screen for this ‘audience’ replaces the television screen and it has enabled them to search for content in an internet-delivered format” (Marshall, 2009, 41). While the content might be ordered and structured in a highly personalised way, the consumption of the content units is still linear. “I turn my computer into a TV”, told the 26-year-old woman in the focus group. A higher degree of interactivity with the program that would exceed a usual interaction with the remote control such as adding comments or sharing content could at least in the focus group not be detected.

However, both younger participants told that they occasionally watch online video material that has been recommended by friends through links on social networks such as *Facebook*. It seems that this ‘social programming’ plays an increasingly important role. Additionally, the “recommended to you”-section on video websites is relevant for the participants in the focus group. William Uricchio (2004, 176) interprets this possibility of metadata-filters as a new kind of ‘flow’. Referring to Raymond Williams and his notion of flow as a programming strategy, Uricchio points at a new flow that is neither controlled by the viewer nor by programmers anymore. “Instead, a new factor enters the equation: the combination of applied metadata protocols (which code the program within certain limited parameters) and filters (search engines or adaptive agent systems that selectively respond to the metadata)” (Uricchio, 2004, 176f). The programming is thus algorithm-based dependent on a very personalised set of behavioural data in combination with collaborative filters. And in fact, one of the focus group participants stated to be “captured” in this ‘*YouTube*-flow’ from time to time browsing from one recommended video to another.

Speaking of *YouTube*, it is necessary to take into consideration the kind of video content that is available online. Video platforms such as *YouTube* gained their success by offering user-generated content. It is only within the last year that *YouTube* underwent a period of professionalization by offering TV shows and whole movies. The original slogan “broadcast yourself”, however, is still the main driver of *YouTube*’s success and gives a perspective in a changing video content production. “*YouTube* would not be a

destination for the viewer seeking standard television fare or formats. But for the trans-brand or trans-network fan, the synoptic viewer and the growing cohort of young cellphone viewers, it is fast providing an array of alternatives from new textual forms to annotation systems, to community-building strategies, all consistent with its user-driven profile” (Uricchio, 2010, 28).

User-generated content, ‘mash-ups’⁴ between professional and amateur material, remixes or information in clip form in a social network environment juxtaposes the industrially produced television content that is aired on the major channels and raises the question if video platforms can be defined as television after all. All participants in the focus group negated that stating that watching for instance an embedded clip on *Facebook* is “something else” than TV. But considering that some videos on *YouTube* gained more than 30 million clicks (for instance the “Leave Britney Alone” clip by Chris Crocker) catapulting their authors to national celebrities shows that “*YouTube*, however, has launched a number of initiatives that seek to restore notions of collectivity” (Uricchio, 2010, 34) and eventually restore the character of ‘broadcasting’ in its very original sense.

Conclusion

Raymond Williams (1974) argues that technological innovations do not automatically lead to social and cultural change. To have the technological opportunity does not mean that the audience automatically seizes it. The opportunity to interact intensely with the TV program for instance does not seem to transform television from a ‘layed-back’ to a ‘lean-forward’ medium. However, this small research shows that some of the technological innovations that entered the television industry due to digitalisation might have an impact on television as a cultural form.

The presented numbers of the viewing time per channel might be a sign for an ongoing fragmentation of the TV audience. Even though this cannot really be interpreted as TV’s loss of ability to accumulate great audiences, it is quite obvious that audiences are increasingly dispersed over multiple platforms. Programmers thus must expand their efforts with inter-media strategies taking into consideration the “second audience”

⁴ A video mash-up is the combination of existing video material in order to create a new piece of work.

(Marshall, 2009, 41) that chooses to watch a program time-independent be it on DVD, Video on Demand, video platforms or illegally downloaded. The focus group showed that a personalised TV experience is already absolutely common among young viewers. To choose from a menu of TV shows when or wherever you want seems to be a natural TV behaviour. Also social and/or algorithm-based recommendations enjoy increasing popularity among young viewers.

So what will the TV experience look like in the future? Considering that television from its start “has been a transient and unstable medium, as much as for the speed of its technological change as for the process of its cultural transformation” (Uricchio, 2004, 165), it is unlikely that television will lose its overall qualities. The general way of experience in a laid-back, consumption-oriented mode, this paper proposes, is not going to change despite facing a digital environment with huge interactive opportunities. Also the interest in TV events and industrially produced quality content is unlikely to fall apart even though this content might be watched in a rather personalised way neglecting TV schedules and programming strategies. The “Accenture Global Content Study 2008”, supports this mentioning that multi-platform distribution, mobile rich media⁵ content as well as user-generated content are the three biggest future trends for decision-makers in the media and entertainment industry (Mann & Sonnabend, 2008).

In such an enhanced television environment, a new definition of television is needed. Even though *YouTube* carries the word “broadcast” in its slogan, it is negotiable if video platforms can really be defined as television and if they cannot, what else are they? The abolition of linear programming questions one of the main definers of television and this should be taken into account by media and television researchers. Moreover, changing production modes including user-generated content seem to be an interesting field for further research elaborating the question if *YouTube* & Co. contribute to a more democratic media system or, quite the reverse, undermine TV’s character of community and common sense. In any case, Williams shows that television has always had the dynamic to reinvent itself – at the beginning of the 70s as well as in 2010.

⁵ „Rich media content“ means content that is enhanced by audio, video or animated data.

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