

FAUSTO COLOMBO
NICOLETTA VITTADINI (eds.)

Digitising TV

Theoretical Issues and Comparative
Studies across Europe

MEDIA SPETTACOLO
PROCESSI CULTURALI
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III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

MIHÁLY GÁLIK

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Digital Tv in Uk and Italy: Two National Cases

TANIA STORSUL - VILDE SCHANKE SUNDET

Digital Terrestrial Television in Scandinavia

CHARO SÁDABA*

Digital Interactive Television: New Audiences for an Old Medium?

During the last years interactive television industry has been fighting to be accepted by the audience. Despite the first unsuccessful efforts (QUBE) made by Warner Cable Corporation in Columbus, Ohio, in the last 70's to implement interactive services through television, the industry has claimed the enormous potential it offers, and the market has answered with an also enormous indifference.

With the arrival of the internet and its popularization, interactive television seemed to be forgotten. But internet was a perfect tool to show the users how to interact easily with content, enjoy doing it, and wish to exercise this new power in the rest of media. It also made clear that interactive television had to compete with a huge number of screens as computers, PDAs or mobile phones. In fact, for some researchers, interactive television could not be on television but on personal computers¹, or in other devices as mobiles phones, or iPods.

The impact of the internet on the interactive television has been really relevant. According to Stewart², "three issues arise as companies are attracted to the Internet and the web as a solution to interactive television": the control is not on a few corporate hands but in a public domain, with a strong concurrence of the users; the web has a more defined design style, based on the interactivity, while interactive television has not already found one; and television and the PC confront a strong competition from "low profile terminals for interactive services"³.

Despite of the of the internet, the arrival of Personal Video Recorders have proved that users are able to adopt those technologies that make possible a more comfortable television experience: storage of favourite programs, skip advertising, watch whatever they want when they want or

*Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain.

¹Todayoni 2004, p. 77.

²Stewart 1999, p. 232.

³Stewart 1999, p. 233.

can, are really key points for adopting this technology. A research published in July 2005 confirmed the acceptance of PVR among the US population: in one year users have doubled, reaching the 8% of the total population.⁴

But what seems the big challenge is to get involved the users behind the classic viewership experience. This article try to present some reflections about how the role that interactive television demands from audience could create a new kind of audience.

Audience has welcomed digital television because it supposes great advantages for doing what they are used to do: turn on the television and be entertained by the content they choose. But digital television could be also interactive television and this condition demands a new attitude from the audience. Digital interactive television is not only a bigger screen, a better sound, or a much better colour definition: it supposes also an active participation from the viewer to be enjoyed.

1. *Old or New Medium?*

Television has been around for almost eighty years. In all this time some significant improvements have taken place: from one to hundred channels; from black and white to color images; from receiving the television signals through the air, to do that through cable or satellite; the remote control; and so on. If changes have been always present in television history, why the introduction of the digital element is so important?

Among all the possible answers to this question, there are two remarkable things:

– this change supposes that television gets out of the box: television set is not needed to access the content. This implies also that television consumption could not be related to a physical place, as the home, as viewers could watch their favorites contacts through mobile devices from other places.

– As the pull strategy to access the content is gaining over the traditional pushing of contents to viewers, digital television also could end with the unique television viewership experience: every viewer could have a really different content, adjusted to his personal needs or wishes.

It could be said that digital television supposes a revolution because it

⁴ LRG's study, *On-Demand TV 2005: A Nationwide Study on VOD and DVRs*. Accessed at: <http://www.leichtmanresearch.com/press/072105release.html>, November 1st, 2005.

implies that audience will change. In fact, if we attend the television definition, it is already valid for the current, and the future, scenario:

tel' e' vi' sion n'.

1. The transmission of visual images of moving and stationary objects, generally with accompanying sound, as electromagnetic waves and the reversion of received waves into visual images.

2. a. An electronic apparatus that receives electromagnetic waves and displays the reconverted images on a screen.

b. The integrated audible and visible content of the electromagnetic waves received and converted by such an apparatus.

3. The industry of producing and broadcasting television programs.

Nowhere in this definition television is related to a physical place or device: the phrase "electronic apparatus" is broader enough to be already useful.

Of course television is changing a lot: new channels, new ways to deliver content, new business opportunities. But the real challenge is that a new audience is required to take advantage of all this improvements. And viewers are able to adopt that new role as it supposes new control, and new power, the empowerment of the audience, for them.

2. *Prosumers or Viewers?*

Audience is a complex term⁵ but traditionally has been the collective way to refer to the last link of the mass communication process: source, channel, message and receiver, who suffers the effects. From this perspective audience role is reduced to wait to be impacted by media content. This traditional model was good enough for unidirectional communication scenarios were feedback was not expected or taken into consideration. In fact, for some researchers as Berlo⁷ it was a great mistake of the model that he considered useless for practical purposes.

But this has of course changed: not only the technology allows the user/viewer interact with content and media, the answer from the audience is encouraged and more and more is a measure for the success of a communication process.

⁵ As defined by *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company.

⁶ Mc Quail 1997.

⁷ Berlo 1960.

After the first attempts to implement video on demand services, the term *prosumer* was coined⁸, from the fusion of *producer* and *consumer*. It recognized a new relation between consumer and content, as consumer could decide what and when to watch a specific program. Consumer was not really producing the content: he just was programming it according to his needs⁹.

In the last years a new term was coined: *viewers*, a mix of the traditional television *viewers* with the personal computers *users*. It is difficult to identify who fixed the term that now is used by interactive television professionals, but 1999 appears to be the moment it started to be popular. Osso¹⁰ appointed Gary Arlen, of Arlen Communications, as the creator, but in an article from 2002, David Goldie and Sohail Dahdal, producers of interactive television materials said they had coined the term "viewers" to explain that "the audience that we hoped to attract were not just simply viewers but users as well. It could never be a passive experience"¹¹. In December 2001, *Thunderbird*, the online magazine of the School of Journalism of the University of the British Columbia, published an article titled "Viewers, the audience of the future?"¹²

Viewers not only decide about timing issues, as the prosumers, but also about content. They can play with content, participate in contests, or personalise the kind of information they want to receive. According to Jagodzinski¹³ viewer is the same that *televewber* and both terms describe to those "who multitask, simultaneously e-mailing, instant messaging, surfing the Web, talking on cell phone, watching TV while doing their homework".

The use of viewer makes clear that the new television audience translates to the television watching experience the attitudes from the computer usage that always has demanded an active user, able not only to turn on the machine, but also to open/close application, select between millions of web pages, IRC channels, to use the keyboard to chat or communicate with others. An experience more related to work than to a pleasure or relaxing activity. In fact the internet has been defined as a cold medium, as it was first conceived as a computer activity, that requires a

⁸ Toffler, 1980.

⁹ Grasso, 2004.

¹⁰ Osso 1999, p. 305.

¹¹ Accessed at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/09/06/1031115930136.html>, November 10th 2005.

¹² Liu, 2001, see also Van Tassel, 2001.

¹³ Jagodzinski 2004, p.169.

professional attitude to be used: sitted on a desktop, facing a screen, and concentrated in the usage. Hoffman and Novak¹⁴ postulated that despite the internet and the computers were considered a cold media, user could experiment the flow: "a holistic sensation where one acts with total involvement, with a narrowing of focus of attention". The flow concept, fixed by Csikszentmihalyi¹⁵ and applied to internet scenarios by these researchers, describes a situation of total involvement, when all senses are focused on what is happening on or through the screen in such a way that user could forget his phisycal environment.

That idea is important because it recognizes that users, as viewers, could enjoy with the interactive experience, and this is very important for television, as audience usually expect to get entertainment and some relax from it. The difference would be that they could be entertained or get entertained by themselves.

Interactive television will grow in the next years through all over the world, as digitisation processes are general in most markets. Media companies must keep in mind that in the interactive scenario audience participation is essential: without them, interactive television will not really exist. Prosumers, viewers, telewebbers, are useful tools to understand the new role that this everyday more fragmented audience is claiming in front of the television.

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¹⁴ Hoffman - Novak 1996.

¹⁵ Csikszentmihalyi 1990.

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