

Chapter II

Broadening the Effects of Broadcasting: How ITV can Collapse Distance and Transform Communication

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ABSTRACT

Conventional broadcasting has the impressive power to create shared experiences over huge audiences or even entire populations. The sharing of such experiences deepens our sense of connectedness with others, which in turn arguably leads to positive effects in society as a whole. Interactive television and related technologies have the potential to further collapse distance and broaden these positive effects of broadcasting—enabling new modes of communication, providing an enhanced sense of community, offering opportunities to meet new people, and allowing us to build relationships in new ways. This chapter surveys a number of research projects undertaken in the Human Connectedness group at Media Lab Europe and at Distance Lab that address these themes, as a way to suggest new trends at the intersection of television, networking, and computing.

INTRODUCTION

Many areas of the world are undergoing a transition from conventional analog terrestrial broadcasting to a digital television infrastructure. In addition to expensive new production equipment, this

transition requires new television receivers or set-top boxes to be distributed throughout entire countries to ensure audiences can receive the new transmissions.

In building support for the transition to a digital television infrastructure within groups who will

be bearing some of the costs, ITV advocates often highlight various governmental or commercial benefits: Advertisers will be able to target messages to specific households and individuals with pinpoint accuracy. Government departments will be able to offer a range of services directly in our living rooms. Businesses will be able to sell us products at the touch of a button on our remote controls. But does the consumer really care enough about these conveniences to spend hard-earned cash upgrading their television equipment, even if picture quality will be slightly improved?

This chapter argues that the greatest potential for new ITV technologies lies in the communicative domain. Conventional broadcasting has a special power of creating shared experiences over large groups of people or even entire populations. The feeling of sharing an experience with so many others arguably deepens our sense of connection to those around us, and this translates to positive benefits within our personal circles as well as society at large. Digital television systems being introduced, together with the broadband “back-channels” they will be connected to, have the potential to further collapse distance and broaden these positive effects of broadcasting—enabling new modes of communication, cultivating an enhanced sense of community, offering opportunities to meet new people, and allowing us to build and maintain relationships in new ways. These new capabilities and ways of “staying in touch”, which are focused on the viewer/user, could serve a significant role in the swift acceptance and deployment of ITV technologies throughout the world.

The Human Connectedness research group at Media Lab Europe explored the theme of human relationships and how they are mediated by technology, with the mission of developing new technologies and experiences that allow people to build and maintain relationships in new ways. Several of the group’s projects addressed the areas of radio, television, and broadcasting either directly or indirectly. This group’s work is being

continued at Distance Lab, a research institute that is bringing together technology, design and the arts to overcome the disadvantages of distance in learning, health care, relationships, culture and other domains. This article gives an overview of relevant projects, with the hope that they can reveal interesting trends and inspire further research in this area. Links to longer publications with additional information are included, which in turn reference related efforts in other research centers.

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Human psychology is an enormously complex topic and our understanding of it is always changing, but a wide body of evidence and experimentation validates the basic claim that humans have a fundamental need for contact with other humans. Authors like Lewis, Amini & Landon (2000) detail the vital regulating effects that social contact and healthy relationships have on human mental and physical well-being. They also reveal the consequences that arise from a lack of these requirements, particularly during infancy and childhood.

The degree to which an individual is “self sufficient” or “independent”, able to live on their own and not needing anything from anyone else, is often used as a measure of success in our modern society. However, humans, and indeed all mammals, are not in fact “self-regulating” creatures. Recent theories assert that human physiology is largely regulated and stabilized by others who are nearby. This stabilization happens via many different channels including facial expression, physical touch, hormonal signals, and so on.

The term “limbic regulation” refers to this system of mutual exchange and adaptation between mammals. Disruptions in this regulation can have serious consequences, particularly in the early stages of life. Infants who have not received

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