

Chapter VII

Social TV:

Building Virtual Communities to Enhance the Digital Interactive Television Viewing Experience

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ABSTRACT

Until recently, television viewing was perceived as a passive experience that aimed in satisfying a person's or a group's need for entertainment, information and, in some cases, education. However, the development of Interactive Digital Television (iDTV) and the significant change of society's expectations due to the appearance of the World Wide Web brought new dynamics on the medium. To that end, nowadays, iDTV adopts a more social role (Social TV) in order to satisfy the individuals' request for active participation, communication and (virtual) community formulation. This chapter aims at describing the characteristics of Social TV, while providing information about its systems and business applications. Similarly, the present study attempts to explain if and how Social TV can become a new setting for virtual communities and what are the potential implications for its viewers.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, television was basically regarded as a mass medium which the viewer used for entertainment, information and education, watching it solely or within a group of others (family or friends). Watching TV has almost always been described as a passive experience (Cunningham, 2003). Its impact was related to its content, to the time spent watching or to whether the viewer was watching attentively or while performing other tasks. Television has been considered as the most preferable mass medium, granting to its major players—like broadcasters, technology providers, content creators, TV personas—a great power of social influence.

The above situation changed radically with the introduction of the Internet in everyday lives, providing an alternative medium for entertainment, education, information gathering, shopping, but also communication without time or space limitations. Society started to become increasingly organized around interactive communication technologies (Mason and Hacker, 2003), as it was becoming more technologically literate, the cost of personal computers and Internet connections was decreasing, and the opportunities of a global community were becoming more evident. Thus, the challenge for television to include communicative features became more eminent (Rainie, 2006).

Nowadays, television is incorporating the necessary technology that enhances audio and video quality, enriches TV content, provides more data components and improves the broadcasting rates. Also, it focuses on becoming a medium that supports active viewing, intrigues the viewers' participation and engagement and, even, allows each one to communicate with others through its services. That brings us to the new reality of interactive digital television (iDTV).

iDTV has all the inherent qualities of the traditional mass medium, but it also possesses some capabilities of the Internet: specifically, the

level of iDTV's interactivity is limited—but not determined—by what the technology allows; its service offerings can be personalized independently of time and space limitations; and it can be used for electronically induced communication, consumption and even community formulation (Vorderer, 2000).

However, one should also keep in mind the conditions of television use, considering the distance of the viewer from the screen, the use of a simple remote control in most cases (instead of a keyboard), its massive, differentiated audience and, more importantly, the reasons why a person watches television (e.g., to relax, to be informed or entertained or even, to have a 'companion').

Overall, the critical change in Media was that the interest for innovation with the use of interactive services in TV shifted from the business producers to users (Pesce, 2005). This change has been slowly observed from early models of technology and content based around individual use of media to one that integrates the existing collective use of media and the social practices, which surround media products and technologies in everyday use (Stewart, 2004). This phenomenon is also due to the attraction of user-generated content, i.e. the ability of almost anyone to produce and distribute content (Spannerworks, 2006), while expressing preferences, opinions and needs. The current reality proves that people cherish the opportunity to communicate with others, expose aspects of their lives in public and even participate in virtual communities. Accordingly, each viewer becomes more demanding regarding the capabilities of his/her television set and expects to use TV as a platform similar to the Web. For that reason, Interactive Digital Television is gradually engaging a more active social role (Social TV) and evolves in such a way as to satisfy the modern consumer trends, while incorporating technological innovations and respecting the audience's behavioral characteristics.

Under this spectrum, the aim of this chapter is to review the current developments and future

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