

TwitterTube

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Technology and the Social Uses of Television

The use of social media to talk about television creates a new space of interaction by enabling the viewer to remain physically alone while participating in a virtual social experience with an unprecedented variety of actors, including friends, strangers, celebrities, and producers. Television scholars face unique methodological challenges in studying this new mode of watching television. The addition of new technologies (e.g. computers, mobile phones) to the experience of television viewing problematizes existing conceptions of the audience and the act of viewing television. Before progress can be made toward understanding the implications of this behavior, we must first construct a detailed and comprehensive picture of this complex space of interaction. While scholars of media technologies generally strive to understand new technologies in terms of their predecessors, we are at a crucial juncture in which we must consider which aspects of previous literature on television are relevant in the context of social media, but also what is entirely unique about this new space for television talk. Finally, scholars must pay particular attention to the role of technology in facilitating and structuring communication, who uses technology and how, and the effects on both producers and consumers.

Market research shows that people spend increasing amounts of time viewing television in the presence of another “screen,” such as that of a mobile phone or laptop computer. Additionally, most television viewing is solitary and takes place at the time the program airs, a scenario that is particularly conducive to concurrent use of other technologies to discuss a television program. Researchers must account for the complexity of relationships between computer or mobile phone, television, producer, and consumer, as well as the context in which this web of interaction takes place. With so much potential for variation in such a scenario, specificity and thoroughness in research is essential. Precisely who is a part of the social media conversation and what portion of the entire audience do they represent? What is their experience like? What role does the producer or celebrity have in the interaction? How do available technologies, program content, or the viewing context alter the scenario?

Exploration of this space requires that scholars draw on the existing body of knowledge about the social uses of television and fan communities to identify analog behaviors online, but simultaneously remain open to aspects of these behaviors which have no precedents. Previous scholarship on the social uses of television emphasized the various functions of television in the home and among family members, but there has been a consistent lack of attention to the social uses of television outside of the home. The case of Twitter and television is unique in the way it bridges the gap between public and private space. Twitter users can connect and talk with friends who are watching the same show as it airs, share their feedback with producers, gain inside information about their favorite programs by following celebrity or producer feeds, and read commentary from other viewers. Literature on fan communities depicts a group of viewers deeply involved in consumption, production, and discussion surrounding a television program. Twitter facilitates a more casual fandom by making it easier to identify and engage with a community of people who share an interest in a particular program. Viewers can follow updates by producers, celebrities, and other fans of a program effortlessly, whether they choose to participate in the conversation or not. While the characteristics of these viewers do not entirely align with those typically attributed to a “fan,” per se, they are obviously fans to some degree. Social media allows people to be more active television viewers, and the introduction of new technologies necessitates the reexamination of previous literature on television.

The topic of Twitter and television is a phenomenon, but it is one avenue for exploring bigger questions about how technologies change the practice of television viewing, how technologies function in the context of television viewing, and how the social uses of television change in conjunction with new viewing technologies. As new technologies change the way people use television, researchers

must be attentive to precisely who uses technologies and how differences in accessibility impact the conversation that happens via social media. The focus of future research must not only be on the way people interact with new technologies, but also on the way technologies interact with one another. Television and the internet are increasingly inseparable as more televisions come equipped for internet access, more content is available online, and the “app culture” introduced by mobile technologies pervades other platforms. Researchers must reach across disciplinary boundaries and work toward a detailed understanding of the dynamics and effects of using social media to talk about television in order to understand the broader implications of this phenomenon.