

Connected Viewing Response

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Enthusiasm for disruptive “connected viewing” products and services is rooted in the belief that technology can give the television audience more control over the viewing experience. Technologically, “connected viewing” products have the potential to reimagine the audience ratings system, network programming strategies, and the relationship between audiences and advertisers. But this potential will only be realized if “connected viewing” services are made to support the creativity of the audience and not the business models of the existing media industries. The tension between the digital audience and the traditional media industries is particularly apparent in the creation of “second screen” apps.

Technology companies and television networks produced “second screen” apps in reaction to research that shows a majority of television viewers multitask on a mobile phone, tablet or laptop while watching TV. “Second screen” apps are designed to complement the audiences multitasking by offering information and social networking opportunities related to live programming. The apps shrink the contents of the Internet to the content most germane to watching the show, effectively tying the second screen to the flow of the first screen. For example, consider Zeebox, the most popular “second screen” app in the UK, which makes its US debut this month. The tech company behind the app has already signed partnerships with Comcast-NBCU and HBO to provide second screen content that enhances their linear programming. The app does not work for programming that is DVRRed and operates best when a person connects their cable box to their Internet. Tethering the Internet to the cable box is fitting requirement for the app given the way it connects digital technology to the established television industry. Instead of offering content on a second screen that helps the viewer to avoid commercials and perhaps find something better to watch, the Zeebox app attempts to keep the viewer engaged in the television flow by offering curated social network conversation and synchronous advertising.

Linking the second screen to the first screen may not be so frustrating if the opportunities to interact with the programming were more creative. The poll questions and trivia contests that these apps offer are not much different from fan contests one could find in the low-tech medium like the back of a cereal box. When user-generated content is featured on the shows it is typically sanitized and lacks the creativity one can find in less filtered interactions on Facebook or Twitter. In addition to sanitizing the conversation between producer and consumer, second screen apps ensure that all interactions use hashtags that will make a program a trending topic on Twitter which could increase “buzz” for a new show or increase ratings. Instead of designing content that would enhance a shows entertainment or social value, these interactive opportunities are designed to help the financial goals of the television networks. “Second screen” apps like Zeebox are not a disruption to the traditional television viewing experience but essential to maintaining “flow” in this era of multiple distractions.

Even on-demand options offered by Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and iTunes are being made to co-exist rather than replace the established entertainment industry. While these services offer content whenever and wherever an audience might like it, they have signed licensing deals with television networks and studios that preserve the distribution windowing structure. Certainly, there was a moment of experimentation when digital content was being made available the same day as DVD box sets or a day after the initial airing on broadcast networks but these practices disrupted traditional business models and cannibalizing revenues leading media conglomerates to adopt “delay windows” and start treating digital platforms as “catch-up” services (limited availability streaming content designed to help fans “catch-up” to new live content). Even the lofty titled “TV Everywhere” initiatives promoted by media conglomerates like Time Warner are only accessible to those who have cable subscriptions.

The secondary status of digital services is frustrating because connected viewing apps could truly change the way people use television in their daily lives. Indeed, this technology has the potential of enhancing the cultural and social aspects of watching television by making the conversation about TV more important than the shows themselves. But the television networks have a financial interest in making digital platforms supplemental to the living room screen. There remains, however, a real tension between official connected viewing apps and the unfiltered conversation occurring on the wider Internet. As Twitter and Facebook continue to search for a more profitable business model by partnering with television networks, marketing departments and studios, it is quite possible that they will begin to resemble the official connected viewing apps and redefine interactivity into something that is more palatable to the established media industries.