

Television is dead. Long live television!

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Mark Twain once said, “reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” Can the same be said about television? In the age of personal video recorders (PVRs, e.g. TiVo) and BitTorrent movie downloads, the stereotypical model of a television set broadcasting content at a relatively passive audience looks more dead than alive. And yet, television viewing remains strong: Nielsen reports that, in 2007, North American households spent a record number of hours (8 hours and 14 minutes per day, to be precise¹) with a set tuned in to their favorite channels. What, then, can the future of television possibly be? In view of current trends, we can venture a few educated guesses.

The Web is widely mentioned as the main threat to television as we know it. While online content is often seen as competing directly with television for the audience’s attention, current practices show that the two media are in fact quite symbiotic. Witness for instance the dynamic and resourceful communities built around popular shows like ABC’s *Lost*. Consulting (and potentially contributing to) *Lostpedia*² online is as much a part of watching the show as viewing the actual episodes. By enabling a community of like-minded viewers to interact asynchronously prior to and after each viewing, online social networks sustain and expand the reach of televised content. The obvious next step would therefore be to make this marriage more explicit and, unsurprisingly, several startups have begun offering services in this area³. One could say that the future of television is therefore interactive, but not in the sense this term is usually understood: the point here is not to interact with the television but rather with its viewers and with additional content that enrich the experience of watching a show.

In fact, the involvement of the audience might not limit itself to discussions about a given show and can even extend to creating entirely new visual content, which brings us to our second trend. The ever-increasing popularity of video sharing sites like YouTube provides an outlet for viewers to re-enact, parody, or continue a show along lines that might not have been envisioned by its producers. With the widespread availability of “mass market” video editing (such as the iMovie software on Apple machines, for instance), it is quite possible that a wider share of content will be produced by and for the audience, instead of the current, more centralized model (which of course has potentially dramatic effects on the broadcasters’ advertising revenue and explains their fear at this paradigm shift). This kind of “remix” has happened in other media before (the manga industry in Japan is a good example⁴), where the audience became part and parcel of the content creation cycle and, in the end, contributed to the survival and growth of the medium.

Finally, the advent of PVRs and peer-to-peer video sharing have both proven that audiences want more control over the way they experience televised content: control over time (deferred viewing), control over place (viewing content on different platforms, e.g. both traditional TV and on a mobile phone), and control over storage (keeping shows on recorded DVDs or large hard disks, either for future viewing or simply for collecting episodes of a series they are particularly fond of). PVRs now offer the first form of control, but the latter two are more experimental and require technical expertise (e.g. re-encoding a video stream) that most viewers do not have. We can expect this to change as technology is designed to address this latent demand.

So, in the end, the future of television looks brighter than it may seem at first, although we might wonder if the transformed medium that is emerging can still be called television. While television should become a more social and interactive medium, giving its viewers more flexibility about when and what to consume (the latter possibly

¹ Holmes, Gary (2007). Nielsen reports television tuning remains at record levels. <http://tinyurl.com/34qwb3>

² <http://www.lostpedia.com>

³ See for instance Joost: <http://www.joost.com>

⁴ Pink, Daniel (2007). Japan, Ink: Inside the Manga industrial complex. *Wired*, 15.11, <http://tinyurl.com/yo7twk>

including viewer-generated content), audiences will most probably still need “big ticket”, high-quality shows to federate their interest and seed interactions and content creation. The popularity of hit series, some of which have become real cultural phenomena, shows no signs of abating: *Lost*, *The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City*, *Battlestar Galactica*... each season, large communities of viewers impatiently await the next development in their fictional universe of choice. This capacity to enable the emergence of a “fan culture” around televised content (which Henry Jenkins describes in his book, “Convergence culture⁵”) seems to be a defining feature of television as we know it. This can be preserved, provided broadcasters leverage their strength in creating such compelling content and simultaneously find ways to recoup their investment that do not require viewers to seat in front of the screen at a pre-determined time and place.

There are signs that television networks understand this need to redefine television as a broader ecology of content and technologies that support and enhance their shows: many networks now generate revenue through the sale of “collector’s edition” DVDs, advertising revenue from Web site tied to a particular series, downloads of specially-formatted videos for viewing on cell phones, etc. Our challenge as technology designers is to embrace this broader notion of what television really is, in order to let viewers easily consume, store, edit, share and interact around the televised content they enjoy as easily as possible.

⁵ Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: where old and new media collide*. NYU Press.