

The Future of the TV Experience

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Multitasking, once predicted as the last nail in the coffin of the TV industry, could now be the thing that reconnects TV with its most important player: the audience.

In January 2011, while speaking at the DLD Conference, Brian Sullivan, CEO of SKY Deutschland, suggested that social media could help TV reclaim its place as a social unifier and reconnect us with the original TV experience. TV once had the power to create social and societal events, but in modern society, the experience has been fragmented and turned into an individual and contained occurrence by the frantic pace of our lifestyles. TV has become something that happens between eight and eleven in the evening and is no longer the social glue that sparks conversations and enthusiasm far outside the TV channels peak hours. But in Sullivan's own words, "the internet is bringing TV back to the water cooler."

His opinion is based on the positive reactions to interactive platforms such as Google TV and social TV, collaborative content, parallel gameplay and simultaneous activities. As Kevin Slavin, Chief Creative Officer at Starling – a company that specialises in understanding the area between social TV and collaborative content (with a seminal amount of game mechanics to keep viewers and players enthusiastic and dedicated) – suggests: “If you were to turn on the TV and be given the opportunity to watch a random show or something your friends were watching, what would you choose?”

Making the TV experience kinetic

Slavin is the former chairman of the New York based gaming company Area/Code and is one of the thought leaders on the subject. Area/Code has vast experience in collaborative content and has worked on numerous programmes such as MTV Backchannel’s The Hills, which connected viewers through an online game/chatting application as the show aired.

The company also helped advertise reruns of The Sopranos, which challenged viewers to photograph Soprano posters and boards around the city and sort them into chronological order online, based on the order the characters first appeared in the show. Viewers could then check their scores live on their laptops during the show’s broadcast time.

These two examples provided innovative out-of-the-box thinking and set a high standard for other campaigns to follow. Whereas a lot of campaigns often fail to encourage viewer interaction, Area/Code’s work really succeeded in getting people to chat and share content. Slavin suggests that for a collaborative campaign to work, it needs to address the correct issues. The main challenge doesn’t come from getting people to meet and talk; they are already doing that. The main challenge is working how to make this activity kinetic.

Peter Hirshberg, a colleague of Slavin and CEO of RE:imagine Group, argues that a Twitter stream doesn’t really feel like media. It needs to be connected and weaved into content in order to become a part of a show’s storyline and offering. Starling is already doing this, and runs a collaborative component on MTV’s Skins programme.

If TV is the centre of gravity, it can provide a broader experience

But this is not just an area for explorative small start-ups. Ynon Kreiz, Chairman and CEO at the Endemol Group, the world's largest independent TV production company, is challenging all of his creatives to think outside the TV screen, to view TV as the centre of gravity that not only brings people to the screen, but offers them a much broader experience. This has already been trialled with a show called The Money Drop, which allows viewers to play the game online at the same time it is being broadcast on TV. It has been a marked success.

The future of the TV – which combines TV with the collaborative and connected technologies of the internet – is actually already here. TV viewers have been voting for years with their mobile phones and can easily switch focus between the television and the computer on their laps. The technology is already in place.

Start-ups and big production companies are now moving into the scene and can see the enthusiasm that is out there. But it is important to realise that free riding on the wave of engagement that is happening on Facebook and Twitter does not just create a larger experience, it creates an additional one. The challenge is figuring out how to tap into it. The merger of internet and TV has taken a quantum leap in the last year. Hirshber is standing right in the middle of it; and sees start-ups and ideas at an enormous speed. Kreiz offers a clear challenge:

Whoever figures out how people can be connected to their friends and family, and interact with them through the content on the TV – without having a four to five meter long arm stretching across the living room – will be the next Steve Jobs”.

Previously, storytellers and producers would steer clear of audience involvement as they thought that such input would negate the professionalism of a show's content, whose story and production values had been constructed by seasoned experts. However, it now seems that audience interaction does not affect the storyline directly, but can play out alongside it in order to enrich the overall experience.

Online is an activity

It all comes down to the wonders of multi-tasking. The solution is making laptop and mobile augmentations to the big screen and then merge stories across platforms and activities – at

the same time.

Even if some niche and big players are already well towards maturity in this segment, more or all content-producing companies will need to follow suit. They will need to put a stake through the popular and wrongful myths that connected technologies are merely distribution platforms – compared to Radio and TV that are storytelling mediums – and that the way to utilise online is to publish additional content to be enjoyed after or in between shows.

Online is not just a storage facility, it is an activity that allows viewers to interact with their favourite content and collaborate. And what we need to do is embrace multitasking and design stories that activate people, not just entertain them.

People multitasking is an opportunity, not a problem; the laptop is a multiplier, not a distraction; and TV with tightly directed and broadcasted events is the centre of gravity that provides centrifugal momentum for a whole host of experiences.

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