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# MORE THAN A BACKCHANNEL: *TWITTER* AND TELEVISION

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*Twitter* is a social media service that has managed very successfully to embed itself deeply in the everyday lives of its users. Its short message length (140 characters), and one-way connections ('following' rather than 'friending') lend themselves effectively to random and regular updates on almost any form of personal or professional activity – and it has found uses from the interpersonal (e.g. boyd *et al.*, 2010) through crisis communication (e.g. Bruns *et al.*, 2012) to political debate (e.g. Burgess & Bruns, 2012). In such uses, *Twitter* does not necessarily *replace* existing media channels, such as the broadcast or online offerings of the mainstream media, but often *complements* them, providing its users with alternative opportunities to contribute more actively to the wider mediasphere. This is true especially where *Twitter* is used alongside television, as a simple backchannel to live programming or for more sophisticated uses. In this article, we outline four aspects – dimensions – of the way that the 'old' medium of television intersects and, in some cases, *interacts*, with the 'new' medium of *Twitter*.

## 1. TWEETING ABOUT TV

Television has always been a highly social media form; it has consistently provided key 'talking points' for western societies. And, ever since notions of the 'active' audience became firmly entrenched in media studies several decades ago, it has been recognised as a medium that readily catalyses audience discussion, interaction, fandom and other social activity. *Twitter* has become an important backchannel through which such social activity is sustained and made more widely visible: Deller (2011: 225) notes that television shows, or topics related to them, frequently appear in *Twitter's* 'trending topics', for example, and recent market research suggests that viewers now use social media with considerable enthusiasm to engage with television programs, particularly where there are explicit on-screen prompts, such as dedicated hashtags (*Broadcast Engineering*, 2012).

Used this way, *Twitter* – and similar services – become a kind of virtual lounge room, connecting the active audiences of specific TV shows at an unprecedented scale and thereby amplifying audience activities even further. This is the case especially for live television (from first-run drama and reality TV screenings to politics and sports), where the shared sense of watching a show together is especially heightened; here, *Twitter* becomes a metaphorical 'watercooler' in the cloud, but one where the watercooler conversations take place instantly, rather than at work the following morning. For audiences with access to social media on a second screen, the experience of watching television thus becomes an even more communal one.

## 2. TWEETS AS TV AUDIENCE RESEARCH

This instant audience feedback, intended in the first place for other viewers, but also available to broadcasters and researchers, in turn provides a potentially very rich stream of data – representing "empirical evidence ... of how other people make sense of the world" (McKee, 2003: 1) –, growing at an exponential rate. This data stream presents a significant opportunity for researchers seeking to understand the processes of television "audiencing" (Fiske, 1992), in addition to more conventional approaches to audience measurement. The in-depth, minute-by-minute, quantitative and qualitative data which now surround television in the form of tweets is ripe for analysis, and provides the basis for a more sophisticated, immediate measurement and understanding of audience activity.

A number of obvious opportunities emerge in this context: first, it becomes possible simply to track the total *Twitter* activity surrounding a show (and its associated hashtag) over the course of the screening; this provides insight into the audience reaction to key moments of the show at a temporal resolution which cannot

be matched by most other audience measurement approaches. (Bruns, 2011a, shows user activity around the #royalwedding hashtag during the global telecast of the British royal wedding, for example). Such measurements may also be used to explore audience reactions to candidates during televised political debates, for example. Second, the major contributors to the *Twitter* debate may be identified, and these key enthusiasts may be harnessed for the further promotion of future episodes. Finally, qualitative analysis of key themes and topics of discussion over the course of the show provides important feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of a program, well beyond what may be identified through the inherently artificial device of audience interviews and focus groups (see e.g. Bruns, 2011b, for an indication of audience reactions to the contestants on Australian reality TV show *Go Back to Where You Came From*). Such analysis may also be usefully combined with conventional audience ratings and feedback tools, and in combination, these techniques enable researchers to understand audiences in an increasingly converged media environment (Simons, 2011): they constitute audience research tools fit for multi-platform, transmedia content (Jenkins, 2006).

### 3. TWEETING FOR TV

Not only do audiences tweet about what they see, but television programs themselves can be structured in part or in full around the input provided by viewers via social media. In such cases, producers leverage the audience conversations that occur on *Twitter*, and to some extent incorporate those tweets back into the show itself. *Twitter* becomes not only a backchannel to the show proper, in other words, but becomes part of the show itself.

This has become increasingly common practice, and is facilitated largely through the promotion of dedicated hashtags relating to a show, and/or through the show's dedicated *Twitter* account. Australian breakfast television shows such as *Sunrise*, for example, which has a history of incorporating viewer voices and feedback that predates social media (Harrington, 2010), now regularly ask people to provide their thoughts about daily news topics through *Twitter* mentions of their official account. Similarly, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's live talkshow *Q&A*, which focusses mainly on political themes, asks its audience to use the #qanda hashtag, and promotes the 'best' tweets (often the most clever, incisive, or funny) by displaying them at the bottom of the screen. Such activities raise the potential of making television a more interactive, dialogical experience (beyond the traditional broadcast model). The extent to which such interactivity might be incorporated into live television formats has yet to be explored in full; indeed, entirely new television formats may arise to leverage such interactivity more effectively.

### 4. NEW, *TWITTER*-ENHANCED WAYS OF WATCHING TV

Clearly, then, increased uses of *Twitter* alongside television – as a simple backchannel, or in more sophisticated, transmedia contexts – may add a new dimension (and new pleasures) to the experience of being 'an audience' for television. At the very least, *Twitter* provides a new 'channel' for the conversations that have always occurred around television – but in doing so, how might the platform affect and change television itself, and the audiences who watch it? To begin with, it is interesting to note that the importance of synchronous co-presence in *Twitter*-based social media discussions could well re-entrench synchronicity in television viewing, and make viewers less likely to use time-shifting technologies (PVRs etc.): *Twitter*-enhanced television viewing privileges the live event because it requires the gathering of a social media community on the same platform, at the same time. The impact here is similar to that of the unauthorised distribution of shows: television networks may be increasingly less inclined to delay broadcasts and series, as this would serve to dissipate the social media 'buzz'. Conversely, a strong *Twitter* resonance may also be a boon to advertisers: as *Twitter*-enhanced TV watching is incompatible with time-shifting, *Twitter* television audiences are more likely to be exposed to commercials.

But beyond this enhancement of shared, live television experiences, *Twitter* may find its uses in a much greater range of television contexts which have yet to be fully explored. Transmedia content does not need to be live to make use of a wide range of media channels and platforms, and *Twitter* can play a role also in the

anticipation and follow-on discussion of television shows; it may be used to maintain a show's momentum in between weekly screenings or between the seasons, for example. Here, *Twitter* would be used more to sustain a community of enthusiasts and to facilitate their interactions with the program-makers, rather than for (or in addition to) live interaction during the broadcast itself.

## CONCLUSION

The relationship between television and social media is very complex one, but the point of this article is to sketch out the possible forms of that relationship, and its implications for the engagement between audiences and television content. A wide range of additional questions emerge from this, including:

- What social media strategies can and should television networks employ to facilitate and manage audience interactions?
- If networks make overt attempts to catalyse *Twitter* discussions, what resistance tactics against such takeovers might some audience members engage in?
- What programs are not conducive to this form of engagement, and therefore limit the potential applications of social media as television enhancements?
- How does research into television audiences' social media activities compare and connect with more conventional television ratings and market research approaches?

Such questions are necessarily well beyond the scope of this brief introduction. They are, however, questions that television and social media researchers are beginning to confront in their work, as *Twitter* and other social networks become more popular and normalised as platforms for our everyday interactions, and as networks and producers begin to further embed social media initiatives into their content and programming strategies.

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