

Disruption 2.0: Broadcast versus Social Media

Dr Axel Bruns
Media & Communication
Creative Industries Faculty
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Australia

a.bruns@qut.edu.au
<http://snurb.info> – <http://produsage.org>

“FASTRACKED FROM THE US.” The words appear every day on our television screens. But apart from the embarrassing misspelling, what do they tell us?

In the first place, they point to the impact of alternative – both legitimate and illegitimate – distribution channels for TV content. Filesharing networks now routinely bring hot new US series to our screens well before the broadcast networks do; live streaming services offer sports, concerts, news, and other live content as it happens rather than as it fits the day’s programming schedule. Academic and TV celebrity Mark Pesce has described the case of the ‘reimagined’ *Battlestar Galactica*, broadcast in the UK and bittorrented world-wide some months before its premiere in the USA, as a sign of the impending death of TV as we know it; at the same time, he also pointed out the fact that widespread online distribution of *BSG*’s first series did not hurt (and possibly even boosted) ratings for the show when it eventually aired on the Sci-Fi Channel (see Pesce, 2005). It remains unclear whether such observations apply more widely, however – science fiction fans may be committed enough to re-watch a show’s ‘official’ screening in order to encourage producers, but the same may not be true for more mainstream audiences.

What is evident, though, is that TV viewers are becoming more sophisticated, and are increasingly aware of and willing to explore alternative channels for accessing their favourite programming. Indeed, mere fast-tracking of shows from the United States is no longer enough if scheduling is inconvenient or erratic – even state-of-the-art personal video recorders (PVRs) are now less convenient to use than on-demand download sites. Why bother about programming and re-programming the PVR to record that ‘hot new show’ skipping through various timeslots if you can simply Google for torrents of brand-new episodes?

Industry faith in the lure of high-definition TV over grainy online video is also likely to be misplaced. For one, *YouTube* has demonstrated that audiences frequently value salience and immediacy over production quality (cf. Pesce, 2006); committed fans, in particular, are more likely to download the latest episode of ‘their’ shows in whatever format is available than to wait until an HD, surround-sound version comes along. Additionally, too, such high-quality formats *are* increasingly being traded online; any cursory glance at Bittorrent sites will quickly find a wealth of HDTV-quality material. (This replicates a trend in audio filesharing, where many users have now moved from the lossy MP3 format to lossless audio compression formats such as FLAC or SHN.)

Such shifts are aligned with broader changes in media consumption patterns. While Australia’s comparatively expensive and sub-standard broadband networks serve to delay these trends to some extent, a recent Nielsen report has documented that in 2007, Australians for the first time spent more time using the Internet than watching television (Nielsen, 2008). Australians’ use of online alternatives to broadcast television, and their sophistication in identifying and using such alternatives, is only likely to grow further in future years, therefore.

Casual Collapse?

While it may be too early to predict a “casual collapse” of conventional television broadcasting, then, it is certainly likely that substantial transformations will occur, sooner rather than later. Streaming media and downloadable videos can no longer be considered as poor cousins of broadcast – indeed, it is possible to argue that television, even if enhanced through PVRs and home theatre systems, is failing to keep up with developments in online media. As noted, accessing broadcast content through streaming and download services is in

some cases already more convenient than waiting for it to be shown on terrestrial television; additionally, online formats are now often more flexible for users to handle than shows recorded to DVD or HD recorders. Finally, of course, access and distribution through online services also allows for easy integration with related content, including social media sites for fans. Streaming media used to be described as a second-rate, slightly gimmicky form of television; today, television has become a less convenient form of streaming media (see Bruns, 2008).

Virtually no staple of conventional television appears to be safe from such disruption. The continuing move towards the wholesale filesharing of TV series has already forced the hand of drama producers and broadcasters, who are increasingly offering their own, legitimate streaming and download options (witness for example CBS's roll-out of for-pay Bittorrent downloads and a dedicated *YouTube* channel, or the ABC's iView service). In the sports arena, international licencing arrangements continue to limit the development of comprehensive live and on-demand streaming services, but sports fans have increasingly taken matters into their own hands and are engaging in a form of 'guerrilla rebroadcasting' of sports events through Web-based services such as *Justin.tv* or p2p streaming media softwares like *Sopcast*.

In the field of news and politics, most major news broadcasters are already offering live and on-demand video news broadcasts on a continuous 24-hour news cycle, of course, and the field is growing more crowded also through the entry of new players such as the US news parody *Daily Show* (which streams full episodes on demand) and *Current.tv* (which provides a space for quality user-generated video content). *Current.tv* is especially interesting also for its recent experiment in broadcasting the US presidential debates with a live overlay of comments from the popular social messaging site *Twitter* – enhancing the official video pool broadcast with user-generated content. This innovative, interactive integration of television and online content (which is also evident in many other streaming and downloadable media services) clearly points to the advantage of online over broadcast media – no current mainstream 'interactive television' system is able to deliver a similar transmedia experience.

Ultimately, then, it is likely that television will both decline and flourish: television *content* is likely to remain as salient as it ever was, and will be further enhanced by new models of accessing and interacting with it. At the same time, television *broadcasting* seems no longer able to keep up with the shifting interests of users, and is likely to be vulnerable especially as better broadband options become available. We are likely to see a continuing increase in the number and diversity of 'television' channels available to us through online means – not least also including both legitimate and illegitimate channels providing user-generated and user-distributed (that is, rebroadcast) content.

Likely to reap the greatest benefits from such changes is the humble TV guide, however: especially given the growth in channels from around the world which are now becoming accessible to us, users are also increasingly in need of guides to and through the wealth of content available to them. Currently, even many committed Bittorrent users still find out about interesting news shows through promos on domestic TV; as the direct-to-download trend grows, they will need alternative sources for their entertainment news. Especially in the field of sports, some such guides (providing a list of global sporting events and links to where live streams may be accessed) are already emerging; on other areas, specific download sites, from Bittorrent directories to sanctioned services like *YouTube* and *iTunes*, are developing their own internal media guides. There remains a significant space here for new entrants, however.

References

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