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THE DESIGN AND ORGANIZATION OF A SHARED ‘LIVE’ MULTI-SCREEN SPORTS EVENT ON WEB TELEVISION

Introduction

The overarching research question guiding this study is how webcasting and the use of social media technologies contribute to a transformation of communicative relationships between ‘producers’ and ‘audiences/users’ (in relation to ordinary broadcasting); what new forms of forms of ‘sociability’ emerge in web-exclusive formats supported by multi-screens? Sociability refers to how a sense of familiarity and inclusiveness is conveyed to the viewer in the talk that is produced, mainly referring to broadcasting (e.g. Scannell 1996). I expand the concept to include how both producers (here webcasters) and users work at achieving sociability, and I am also interested in examining not only talk but the visual/technological context of talk and interaction as well as non-discursive contributions such as photographs.

More specifically, I will explore a Swedish tabloid’s design and organization of a webcast (called Expressen TV) covering football games which was streamed live during the World Cup in 2014. Additional material that has been analyzed includes posts in the related hashtag expressenvm on twitter. In particular, I am interested in the organization of a multi-screen media experience both on part of the producers of the webcast and their audiences, and how a mutual communicative bond is constructed and sustained using technologies that enable multimodal interactional contributions on both sides. I will basically argue that the interactional situation enabled by the use of multi-screens potentially offers a richer producer/audience relationship – that is, a more intense co-present experience – than what is conventionally thought to be linear televisions’ core characteristic and attraction – the ability to transmit ‘the live event’ in the here and now (Ellis 2000). The function of one particular interactional contribution has been singled out for closer analysis: the so-called ‘home picture’ where users post photographs of how they arrange their engagement with Expressen TV’s live web airings, including how they organize their screens (laptops, television, tablets etc).

Background

Two brief points regarding the characteristics of ordinary television will serve as a point of departure for an argumentative comparison between different kinds of mediated television experiences. First, talk is central to all broadcasting, and the primary focus of such talk is to build ‘communicative relationships’ (Scannell 1989) with audiences who by and large are absent (Heritage 1985). Broadcasting’s greeting phrases (“good evening”) is an example of when the broadcaster constructs a place for potential interaction (Tolson 2006). However, it is a relationship where audiences cannot really enter into any real interaction but are placed in what Thompson (1995) has referred to as a ‘quasi-interactive situation’. For example, the commentator to a football game on television cannot really see or hear whatever you do and say as you watch the game at home. It is a kind of mediated encounter that can be understood as basically constructing or offering an asymmetrical communicative relationship.

Second, a lot of TV’s attraction lies in the fact that it permits us to gain access to events otherwise outside our reach, and moreover television brings events to us live. Whether actually broadcasting ‘live’ or not, the feeling of experiencing something here and now is re-enacted in
talk and interaction in order to hold the audience’s attention and continued interest. As viewers, we are positioned as witnesses to live performances whereby a sense of a shared co-present reality is accomplished (Ellis, 2000: 32–3; cf. Scannell, 1996). Although it is said that truly live broadcasts are getting fewer and fewer on television (Bourdon 2000), certain events and certain genres, among them the international sports matches, still seem to demand true liveness (Marriott 2007).

However, Expressen TV’s set-up of their live web-exclusive airings from the World Cup deviates from the basic characteristics of ordinary television on several accounts, enabling and a more symmetric relationship between webcaster and audiences/users with the use of multi-screen technologies and multi-platform interactions. The analysis will show that the users ‘respond’ to Expressen TV’s interactional set-up by organizing their own user experience so as to enhance a jointly shared and co-constructed sociability which seem to by and large replace ‘the original’ live event’s attraction (i.e. the live football game). A few examples of this will be given below.

Expressen TV

The set-up of Expressen TV’s live World Cup coverage on the web is quite different from an ordinary live football game on television (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Expressen TV’s live web television streaming set-up during football games.
Throughout the entire game of ninety minutes plus eventual overtime (and often another game after that), the viewer is (at least at first glance) situated as an on-looker or witness to people watching and talking about the game and related activities on their respective laptops which are placed in front of them. Not only can the actual game not be seen by the audience in Expressen TV’s airing due to the tabloid not having the rights to show live video, the commentators are watching the game from the television broadcaster’s web streaming services on their computers. This causes them to lag behind by up to 25-30 seconds in relation to live events and the closest they can come to events in the ‘now’ is 5-6 seconds. ‘The live event’ that they can offer is thus not the football game per se, but their talk and interaction in relation to it. Their inability to air the game in true live mode is however not treated as an interactional flaw that needs to be concealed. The webcasters still treat their talk as if orienting to the events in the very recent ‘now’ (see Extract 1).

Extract 1

Host: Opa!
Host: There Miroslav Klose scores TWO nil and is up in the sole lead of the tournament’s goal scorers
Expert: ALRIIGHT! KLOSE!
Host: I mean in World Cup history- he misses the first return ball and then he SLAMS in two nothing and GERMANY has after twenty-two minutes TWO nothing against Brazil Thomas Wilbacher what’s happening here?!!
Expert: Yes but again the defence play is very poor by Brazil while the Germans are doing a great job

Their carefree attitude to their ‘non-live’ mode in relation to the game most likely stem from the knowledge that a) their audiences access the game elsewhere (another screen/platform) should they want to see it, and b) that they interpret their mission as more than commenting but rather as creating a community in which audiences are genuinely included (see below). Why they still perform ‘live talk’ in a very animated manner although users have already seen the score is likely based on an assumption that their enacting of it is part of why users are attracted to the format (something which is confirmed in tweets, see below).

Because the ‘other’ main interactional component that they offer audiences other than being watched talking about game events is the hashtag expressenvm on twitter. What goes on in the hashtag gradually becomes more and more important in interactions over the course of the championship, and they monitor it sometimes more closely than the games themselves. Both audience members and the webcasters begin to post tweets continuously during games. The one overarching orientation in these tweets can be said to be one of inclusion in a joint, symmetrical and multimodally articulated ‘we’. Sub-strategies that are used in which both producers and audiences participate in order to accomplish this shared experience of talking live together in relation to games are the invention of, and partaking in, side-games such as betting on results of games (real and mock bettings for a laugh), cross-word puzzles and quizzes based on what goes on in the studio, the invention of code discourse that requires that you have followed prior airings to know what they refer to, in-group and individual appreciative commentary on both sides, positive joint reinforcement and acknowledging the community as a community where
members participate together. Audiences are also used as equal co-commentators and evaluators of what has happened, or will potentially happen:

Host: One of our active members here under the hashtag expressenvm is Johan Bristic. He reminds us that this is the World Cup of dramatic turns. And that Italy will solve this in the second half.

By ways of responding to e.g. being integrated in talk, audience members take screen shots of the Expressen TV team and post them back on twitter with comments of their own which create new sub-stories and sub-plots in the on-going interaction (see Figure 2):

Figure 2: Example of recontextualization of studio interactions with added meta-comments by twitter user.

A while into the championship, users start posting ‘home pictures’ of their own organization of their viewing/user experience where the Expressen TV interaction is integrated. This becomes a recurring feature on twitter (see Figure 3 for four examples).

Figure 3. Examples of ‘home pictures’ of user/screen arrangements posted on the hashtag expressenvm.
As the airings progress, more and more of the regulars using the hashtag put up pictures of their at-home screen arrangements adding extra ingredients such as showing food and beverages and not least, exposing (and sometimes commenting on) how they organize their screens, e.g. ‘This is how The World Cup should be followed’, or ‘Hard to prioritize: the game or Wilbacher on a bigger screen. But I think I made the right choice’ (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. The Expressen TV expert to the left on the big screen – twitter posting.

I suggest that the photographs play a number of functions in the overall Expressen TV interaction which all orient to the construction of a collective and inclusive ‘we’ (who experience this together). Examples of such functions are:

1) A creation and expansion of a joint ‘here’ where – in contrast to ordinary broadcasting – the webcasters’ are invited into the home sphere of the audience as a response to being invited into their studio (e.g. tweet comment to one photo: ‘nice and clean when one has distinguished guests in the livingroom’ – ‘guests’ referring to the webcasters who can be seen on one of the screens in the picture)

2) A gesture of intimacy, bridging the social and spatial gap between webcaster and audience (linked to the above)

3) An enforcer of one’s role in the community that is expressenvm, to show that one is ready to partake in the activities to come and that one wants to manifest one’s inclusion

4) As an identity constructor in the sense that it makes explicit the kind of technologies you have/can afford to use as resources to take part in the interaction. The ways in which you prioritize and create hierarchies between screens also sends a message as to who you are and wants to be in this public domain. Also the chosen food and beverage conveys identity signals to others

5) When Expressen TV is shown to be prioritized before the live football game on the biggest screen, it is also a token of appreciation oriented to the webcasters’ efforts of making you feel included in the community, implicitly saying: ‘what you guys do is worth me re-organizing my space for’

6) An invitation to the webcasters to comment on what is displayed in the picture (e.g. Expert: ‘Marika Westerberg is with us. Great! She’s winging it from the balcony this evening. She’s done a classic eh, placed herself on the balcony, pulled out the television set a little bit and then the tablet on us then’). In addition, it could also be read as an invitation and encouragement to other users to do the same (one home picture is often followed by more shortly thereafter), thus strengthening the community of those enjoying Expressen TV

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Preliminary conclusions

Against the backdrop of how we understand ordinary or linear television’s core characteristics and attraction – that of being able to connect remote audiences with broadcasters and events in a co-present live moment using discursive and non-discursive means – I have attempted to explore what on the surface looks like a somewhat barren mediated encounter set up on the web by Expressen TV during the World Cup.

Upon closer inspection, however, with their coordination of both game commentary off of laptops and constant monitoring of, and engagement with, the twitter hashtag(s) they have set up on other screens, Expressen TV enables a multitude of communicative circuits to be created which allows users to actively participate in talk and interaction in a joint mediated encounter. By ways of responding to the multiscreen and multi-activity set-up by Expressen, audiences in turn respond with a technological organization of their own that enables them to take on the role of true member of the community. This includes monitoring the game on TV in order to be able to make comments about it, watch how the webcasters talk about the game and related activities including what the audience contributes with on twitter on other screens, as well as allowing oneself to post tweets on yet other (or split) screens. Thus many have at least three screens going where they prioritize which ‘event’ is positioned in the foreground and which is positioned in the background. Photos reveal a screen hierarchy which serves as a multi-functional and multi-oriented comment back in the on-going twitter flow, something which in turn is integrated into the webcasters’ talk – intensifying a sense of inclusiveness and familiarity, i.e. sociability.

Multi-screen arrangements using social media that allows for a constant flow of joint commentary around a broadcast without actually showing it create opportunities for non-broadcasters to attract audiences without broadcasting’s resources. Expressen TV here enables audiences to be real ‘buddies’ in a joint ‘we’ who are doing this together and having very fun while doing it. What previously has constituted the main event has become a springboard for live and playful conversation in an unfolding and common ‘co-present here’ enabled by multi-screen technologies.

That this is indeed a very attractive communicative relationship is proven by the fact that the hashtag expressenvm has been resurrected a few times due to popular demand, and nostalgic tweets are still posted of how much people miss the community created during the championship – both on the side of the webcasters and audience members who took part in it. The question remains to what extent the communicative bonds that can be created in this way will pose a real threat to the attractiveness of ordinary TV. Undoubtedly, looks-to-camera and a ‘good-evening’ to which one cannot respond seem rather reductionist as ways to be sociable with future TV audiences.

References


