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Audience participation in ‘the post-broadcast era’

There is no doubt that the digital transformation and the entering into ‘the post-broadcast era’ (Turner and Tay, 2009), radically changes the conditions for televised communication. Now, when television is to be considered as ‘digital media’ (Bennet and Strange, 2011) and is provided on web-platforms, and then watched, not just on traditional TV-screens, but also on mobile devices such as pcs, tablets and mobile phones, television producers are in a phase of rethinking and re-inventing their programming, in search of new forms for audience participation.

Engaged in this enterprise, television producers have shifted programing to so called ‘multiplatform formats’ offering the audience extended possibilities to engage in the televised event (Ytreberg, 2009), creating platforms for live audience interaction (Lauersen and Sandvik, 2014). Producers have also experimented with new formats based on the idea of incorporating social media elements into the productions (van Dijck and Poell 2015). We have also seen experiments with live news interview shows produced exclusively for the web-platform with the ambition to be based on questions submitted by audience members (Author removed). This integration of social media interaction appears to be the key element in broadcasters’ multiplatform strategies (Sørensen, 2016). In this way television is becoming increasingly more associated with, and integrated in, the use of, social media such as Facebook and Twitter. As Moe, Poell and van Dijck (2016: 100) put it: ‘we are moving from the development of second screen applications to integrated systems of watching’. Both producers and scholars now talk about this marriage as ‘social television’, underlining the potential for producer/user-interaction as well as the possibility for users to be involved in discussions with both friends and unknown people via social media applications (Gigoletto and Selva, 2014; Selva, 2016; van Es, 2016). Some scholars even argue that these kinds of activities have become as important (if not more) as the main programs themselves (Selva 2016).

Although many scholars have engaged in discussing these changing forms for audience involvement, surprisingly little attention is paid to what Scannell (1996: 146) describes as ‘the care…that goes into making programmes’; i.e. how the programmes are organized, or designed, in order to come across to its viewers (cf. Hutchby, 2006), and thus ‘invite’ people to participate. From this perspective, television is characterized by its sociability; programmes are produced to be meaningful and ‘sociable occasion’ for viewers. For Scannell, who has theorized this matter over the last decades (Scannell 1989, 1991, 1996, 2000, 2014; see also
Scannell and Cardiff 1991), the concern departs from the very basic condition that taking part in radio or television is indeed a voluntary activity. Therefore, audiences must be, he argues, ‘thought into’ broadcast productions and be addressed ‘in ways that they would wish to be spoken to’ (Scannell, 1996: 24). The talk and interaction going on in programs must thus fit the contexts in which it is supposed to be experienced.

The key argument in this paper is that in order to better comprehend the ongoing re-invention of television, and thus the efforts made by media producers to engage audiences, we also need to consider ‘the care’ for audiences that goes into programmes in order to create ‘sociable occasions’. Programmes are increasingly created for a context of reception characterized by the potential for multiple media use and the possibilities for audience-user interaction, as well as peer-to-peer exchange. The overall question is: how is television’s sociability re-interpreted for a digital media environment? What does ‘the care’ for audiences look like when programmes are produced with the internet’s communicative affordances in mind?

In this paper we will discuss these questions based on an extensive research project conducted in Sweden on television produced exclusively for the web, what we henceforth term web TV. Our argument will lean on a series of analyses of such shows, produced by traditional broadcasters as well as other media producers, and appearing as re-invention strategies for media producers. These emerge as ways to develop TV-productions making use of the communicative affordances available on a web-platform and thus as strategies to appeal to online audiences. The observations made in these analyses are complemented with data gathered in interviews with leading media managers in Sweden in order to further understand how these companies currently conceptualize and think the audience into their productions. In these interviews, and in other kinds of documents, it becomes clear that this is certainly a hot issue at the moment.

Our discussion departs from the work of Scannell, but also from other scholars working within the strand of research often referred to as the broadcast talk approach (see e.g. Hutchby, 2006; Tolson, 2006; Marriott, 2007; Montgomery, 2007; Thornborrow, 2015). We especially address the changing conventions of liveness. Other scholars have shown that these conventions are changing when television is becoming a multiplatform event (Ytreberg, 2009; cf. Sörensen, 2016). We will continue this discussion and demonstrate how there is a trend towards an amplified experience of participation realized through an intensified performance of liveness, what we conceptualize as an orientation towards super-liveness (Author
removed). We will also discuss what happens with the understanding of place when producers and audiences can be present on the same platform and interact about the ongoing events. Developing the notion of ‘doubling of place’ as discussed by Scannell (1996), and others (see e.g. Moores, 2004, 2012; Kjeldsen, 2016), we argue that such web-platforms (containing the possibilities of social media interaction) can be “a place for an experiential accomplishment binding together people and environments.” (Moores 2012: 27). Here we will argue that what we see is a form of presence-making which is jointly accomplished by audience and producer and that we can talk about certain web TV programmes as ‘events of presencing’. Presencing is created by the participants in the studio making the audience feel present. It is also created by the performance of members of the audience who make themselves present through tweets with text and visual, and their joint (both producers’ and audiences’) experiences of sharing particular moments of the events.

Footnote

1Web TV sometimes refers to video-on-demand services (such as Netflix or HBO) and traditional broadcasters’ ordinary TV output made available online, but here we use the term to refer to live video productions that are freely available on the producers’ web-site. These are normally produced in a TV-like manner (e.g. interactions with reporters and/or presenters and guests/co-reporters in or outside of a studio), and they are also, importantly, presented under the header of TV. Web TV emerged in Sweden as a rather marginal phenomenon in the 00s, and then boosted radically in 2013 when the two leading tabloids – Aftonbladet and Expressen – started to stream extensive live programming accessible from their respective websites under the labelling of web TV. Both these media have made rather extensive investments in this area. Today (early 2018), most newspapers, national as well as local, produce live web TV material accessible online. It now has a rather extensive reach with 22% of Swedes watching web TV on a regular basis; over 40% in the 15-24 year old span (Facht, 2016), and numbers are consistently rising.

References


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