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The future of television - social TV

By Tanya Goldhaber & Jeff Patmore



A new digital revolution is gaining momentum which could ultimately change the way we watch TV. It's called social TV, and has been identified by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as one of the top 10 technologies that will change life as we know it today.

Social TV is at the forefront of a change in the way we consume television. Instead of passively sitting and watching television, people are starting to use their smartphones, laptops and tablets to proclaim and swap views on their programme choice via Twitter, Facebook and other social networking channels. As a result events as diverse as the Winter Olympics, Grammys and the UK election debates are drawing more viewers and creating more buzz than ever before.

In one sense, it's nothing new. If we think back to when TV was a new technology, the few families that were lucky enough to have TVs all gathered around for the few programmes that were broadcast each week. The showing of a programme was a highly social event, eagerly anticipated by members of the family, and perhaps the guests that had been invited over to watch as well. Everyone watched together, and talked both during the show and after. TV was social

Pick and choose

But as time evolved, so did TV and it became much more common-place for households to have several TV sets, with multiple channel choices and personal recording devices – enabling people to pick and choose what they want to watch at a time that's convenient to them.

The result was that more and more people were watching TV on their own rather than in a group. By the time the 21st century rolled around, TV was seen to be more of a family divider than a family unifier, with parents often complaining about how often their children disappeared off to watch TV in their rooms.

And yet, the idea of social TV did not completely perish. When it comes to major sporting events, for instance, people tend to gather in pubs – or at dedicated fan zone areas with giant screens – to watch the game together.

This would seem to indicate that the rapid decline of TV as a social medium is not caused by a lack of interest or desire on the part of the viewers, but simply that technology has made it too easy for people to watch TV in isolation.

Generally people do like to share their experiences and to feel part of a community, it is just that with so many TV channels and the ability to time shift them with recorders we rarely have the chance to enjoy this form of entertainment together.

And that is exactly what is happening. When it comes to TV, the rise of social networking and internet communication tools is bringing people back together. Studies of how people use the internet show that often friends use chat services such as Instant Messenger or Skype while watching the same programme at the same time.

Online chats

It's a sort of virtual social experience. Technological improvements have increased the ability to have a Skype video call open at the same time as watching a programme online, allowing friends to chat casually and watch TV together, even if separated by vast distances.

Why not enable this behaviour with a truly intuitive and easy-to-use interface that seamlessly merges TV and all the communications devices we have at our fingertips? Why not recreate the social thrill of watching a game at a pub by facilitating and enhancing social interaction while people watch TV?

Why not make all possible without someone needing to have their PC and mobile phone with them while the watch a programme, and moreover make the experience *better* than if they were doing that? There is no longer any technological barrier to making all of these things happen. The question is not if sociable TV experiences will re-emerge, it is how and when.

The truth is that nothing will replace a group of your friends or family sitting in front of a TV enjoying a programme together, nor should there be such a replacement. But the pace of our 21st century world, however, makes such a scenario increasingly difficult.

One to watch

Which means that social TV's place on MIT's list of 'technologies to watch' is a good pick. Indeed, BT and MIT are leading the research into social TV and the impact it will have on our lives.

In particular, we're looking to identify new ways to seamlessly connect the traditional television viewing experience with the new social world. Concepts include intelligent remote controls, participation TV and viewer- created narrative. It's exciting and could completely change the way we view TV.

Of course, it's still early days. But this one is definitely worth watching.



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