Foreword

Unconstrained interactivity of all kinds—with people, technology, environments—has reshaped life in the modern world. Concomitantly, the social imagination has expanded to incredible proportions with tremendous cultural and political consequences. Television looms at the center of all this activity.

Television has performed brilliantly as a socially-interactive medium from the time it first appeared in the mid 20th Century. No other communications medium has ever influenced the structural and relational properties and processes of everyday life the way television does. Anyone who has lived through any stage of television’s short history intuitively understands the intrinsically social nature of the visual medium just by reflecting for a moment on his or her own viewing experiences.

Even more than newspapers, magazines, film, and radio before it, television’s endless stream of images and ideas inevitably prompts discussions about content. From simple conversations to complicated discourses about politics and culture, television gives everyone plenty to talk about. Because television uniquely sends images and ideas directly into the most intimate venues for media consumption—domestic living spaces of all sorts—the medium immediately became more than a technology that conveniently delivers news and entertainment. The television set, programs, and viewing situations (form, content, and context) all became focal points of family life that changed the way people live. Withstanding and sometimes absorbing the challenge posed by other information and communications technologies, including the ubiquitous Internet, television has yet to be replaced as the most useful and dynamic medium of social exchange ever invented.

Although television viewing in the developed world has often become a decentralized, even isolated activity; watching TV will never be primarily a private experience. Even when individuals watch alone, the viewing experience doesn’t end when the set is turned off. Its social significance often only begins then. Viewers routinely process program content—drama, news, sports, documentaries, specials, and countless niche genres—with other people inside and outside the home during and following consumption of content. Television sets off incessant waves of social interaction by the very nature of its constant and provocative content (of widely varying quality, of course, but that’s another matter) in contexts that range from private chats and commentaries to global discussions and debates.

The vectors of television’s social interactivity rotate and expand in ways that reflect prevailing trends of technological and cultural development. New forms of human expression and communication are created in the process. Social interactive television—the subject of this book—represents just such a change. Social interactive TV turns “viewers” and “audience members” into “interactants,” “users,” “participants,” even dialogical “partners.” Social communication about television and para-social interaction with television today are being joined, not replaced, by communication through television via interactive content and novel forms of mediated social connectivity. Moreover, television’s convergence with other communications media—especially the Internet and mobile phone—are proving to be inherently social phenomena, not just technological adaptations.
Even within the boundaries of their quasi-social relationship with television, audiences have always been emotionally involved with the visual medium. But so far the TV-viewer communication system has operated largely out of balance; programming flows from the TV set to viewers who cannot directly respond. The digitalization of video and audio has further enhanced the emotional impact of television signals on their viewers. Still, the primordial impulse to interact with television—to express oneself back to the message source and to help influence the course of events—has always been there. Simply talking back to the box—even hurling insults and other abusive comments—has long been noted by ethnographic researchers and casual observers.

Now the “box” is listening and rushing to accommodate users’ wants and needs.

Given the surge in the new varieties of mediated social interactivity, the very term “television” is becoming out of date. The idea of television as the transmission of video signals to receivers across distance doesn’t capture the dynamic nature of what’s happening at the frontier of the medium’s development. The more comprehensive idea of “telecommunications,” which used to seem too abstract, technical, or theoretically inappropriate to describe television transmission and reception now seems to be a more accurate and relevant descriptor. The “natural capabilities of television” that the editors of this book promote have begun to correspond in practice with the principles of any healthy form of human communication—real two-way or multi-way interaction.

Viewer ratings don’t come close to revealing the kinds of social experiences TV routinely facilitates. The intricacies and subtleties of the connection between television and its viewers inherently resist measurement, especially quantitative assessments. Ethnographic research and the other forms of qualitative investigation that first emerged in academic circles in the 1970s were proving to be better at penetrating the deeper levels of television’s social significance. Those more naturalistic techniques were later appropriated by commercial researchers and advertisers when market differentiation and the need for a greater understanding of how viewers actually experience (and relate to) television promised increased revenues. The advent of social interactive television poses complex opportunities and challenges for academic media researchers and others today. The theoretical and methodological approaches represented in the following pages will certainly help propel the next generation of television research in exciting—indeed necessary—new directions that are fitting for the times.

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