Chapter XI  

ConncetTV:  
Share the Experience  

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ABSTRACT  

The combination of content and communication has proven to be a powerful and successful concept. Many online services not only allow for consumption of content, but also give their users the possibility to exchange views on the content among each other. YouTube for instance, not only allows its visitors to watch movie clips, but also to discuss them, to review them, and to send recommendations about them. Electronic Program Guides on the web more and more offer social functionality in addition to listing television programs; thus integrating content and communication. Users can discuss their favorite TV shows in forums that are organized around TV programs. ConnecTV is a social interactive TV service that combines communication with watching television. It makes watching TV a social activity, and aims to give its users the feeling of ‘watching together’. ConnecTV was developed in the B@Home research project (B@Home). Among the project’s goals was an investigation of the type of services that will become feasible when ‘fiber to the home’ is widely introduced, giving households broadband internet connections with significantly more capacity than today. Although the functional design of ConnecTV was carried out in close cooperation with experts from the media industry, the real test for end-user acceptance would be a field trial with the service. In addition, a trial would reveal the effects on the
users’ viewing behavior, and would give insight in how to make a positive business case around ConneCTV. In 2007 ConneCTV was implemented and a field trial was held in about 50 households in the town of Enschede, in The Netherlands. In literature, many systems have been proposed that combine social networks with consuming content in general, or with watching TV specifically. Examples are AmigoTV (Coppens, Trappeniers, & Godon, 2006), 2BeOn (Abreu, Almeida, & Branco, 2001), SocialTV (Harboe, Massey, & Metcalf, 2006), ChaT.V. (Fink, Covell, & Baluja, 2006) and CollaboraTV (Harrison & Amento, 2007). Although some of ConneCTV’s functionality can be found in these services as well, other functions (like following a buddy, or switching to the most popular channel) are new. The main contribution of the research described in this chapter though lays in the field trial of ConneCTV. With some of the above-mentioned social TV services field trials have been performed (e.g. (Harboe, Massey, & Metcalf, 2006)), but they were limited in size (typically two or three groups), and did not use extensive logging of user activities. To our knowledge, a field trial of a social TV service at the scale of the ConneCTV field trial with such extensive logging, surveys and experience sampling has not been performed before. This chapter starts with explaining the functionality of ConneCTV and its implementation. The main focus of this chapter is the field trial: the set-up, the research questions, the research methodology and the results of the field trial are discussed extensively. The chapter concludes with a description of the most viable approaches for a positive business case, and gives an outline for future work.

THE CONNECTV SERVICE

Developing ConneCTV was an iterative process. Early in the project, an interactive mock-up was realized and presented to experts from the media industry (cable operators, interactive TV application developers, etc.) and potential end-users. After several iterations, a prototype was built that functioned in a lab environment. The step towards a system that could be field tested was still significant. A field trial version to be used by ‘real’ people is fundamentally different from a prototype that is merely meant for demonstration purposes.

We put a lot of effort in redesigning the user interface and user interaction and tested it with a dozen people. While the prototype had many functions, we carefully selected those that we thought were essential for the concept behind ConneCTV and could be implemented within the available time constraints. We ended up with the functions described below.

The Buddy List

The buddy list lists each of the user’s buddies together with the TV program that they are currently watching (Figure 1). The list is divided in two categories: online (with buddies that are watching TV) and offline (with buddies that are not watching). In addition to the traditional human buddies, we introduced so-called ‘theme-buddies’. Each of them represent a certain genre, such as Comedy, Sports, etc. If a program in one of those genres is broadcasted, the corresponding theme buddy gets online, and indicates the program name.

Change to the Channel that a Buddy is Watching

This function is one of the four interactive functions that ConneCTV provides from the buddy list (Figure 2). When selecting a buddy, users can change their channel directly to the same channel as their buddy is watching.
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