Chapter XV

Watching in Public: Understanding Audience Interaction with Big Screen TV in Urban Spaces

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors present a field study of BBC Big Screens Public Space Broadcasting initiative. Under this initiative, large screens have been installed in several urban locations across the United Kingdom and used to screen a range of television content and interactive applications. The chapter discusses a number of different findings and themes. These include different types of screen use such as viewing of standard television content, event-based use of the screens and interactive use of the screen. The chapter then goes on to discuss the content in relationship to its placement in a particular local context. Following this, the chapter looks at how architectural features shape the way the screens are used and impact on audience behaviour. Finally the authors explore issues of health and safety that impact on content choice and pragmatics of scheduling.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade we have seen a proliferation of digital displays within our urban environments. Such urban displays, using a variety of form factors, are being used for a wide range of commercial and cultural purposes, from advertising and branding through to entertainment, art and community support (Fatah gen. Schieck, 2005). The potential of these screens to transform the urban environment and people’s experiences of the public spaces within which they are located...
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is enormous. Understanding this potential, its impact on public spaces and on the people who inhabit those spaces is an important consideration for us if we are to successfully design valuable urban screen deployments and content.

In recent years, we have begun to see a concerted effort to develop such an understanding through both public experimentation in the arts (e.g. Lozano-Hemmer, 2002; 59th Minute -www.creativet ime.org) and through the commentaries of cultural, architectural and new media theorists (e.g. Virilio, 1997; Manovich, 2006; Taylor, 2006). Much of this work though has focused on grand themes and issues, and while the insights provided are important, we often lose sight of the detailed material practice of people’s engagement and behaviour with these technologies and content.

With this in mind, we conducted a study of the BBC Big Screens Public Space Broadcasting project. Within this project, large screens of approximately 25 metres squared have been placed in major city centres in the UK such as Manchester Liverpool, Leeds, Birmingham, Hull, Bradford, and Derby. The screens broadcast continuously around the clock and show a wide variety of content including nationally sourced BBC television programs and more locally sourced content. The content includes news bulletins, soap operas, sports events, live music, short films and interactive experiences. Having been running now for several years in several different locations, these public interactive television installations provide us with a unique opportunity for understanding how such technology fits within people’s lives and the new behaviours afforded by the technology relative to traditional interactive television delivery into people’s homes.

Our interests are with different use modes of the screens. These include everyday TV broadcast (e.g. soap operas, news), event-based usage (e.g. the Live Earth Concert,) and more interactive applications (Red-Nose game, Penalty Shootout, or sending pictures from mobile phones to the screen). We are interested in how people use and engage with the display in these different modes and what social, psychological, technical and spatial factors shape this use. Our exploration is also concerned with the practical aspects of content curation and how this is managed across key stakeholders such as the screen manager and the city councils. An important example here is the impact of particular content decisions on health and safety in public spaces and, vice versa, how health and safety management issues shape content choices.

STUDY

The study comprised a series of observations and interviews conducted across different cities where a BBC Big Screen was located. The interviews and observations took place over a period of several weeks during the summer of 2007. The sites studied were Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Bradford and Birmingham (see Figure 1).

Observations at the different sites were conducted at various different times of the day, on different days of the week. The observations primarily focused around people’s behaviour within the immediate vicinity of the screens but some more general observations were also conducted to get a sense of the surrounding area within which the screens were immersed. In conducting our observations, the aim was to get a sense of what people were doing in and around the space where the screens were located and any ways the screen and content played a role in shaping these behaviours.

Interviews were conducted on the same days as the observations with people in the vicinity of the screen deemed by the interviewers to be or have been engaged with the screen in some way. The interviews focused initially on the particular visit to the screen that day but broadened out to more general experiences with the screen where applicable. A broad range of participants was interviewed and covered a wide age range from