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Interactive Television

– social use or individual control?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide new insights into TV as a medium, viewed in the light of the changing day-to-day practice of the media occasioned by PCs and the Internet. We have taken a user-oriented stance and have endeavoured to determine how interactive digital TV could be comprehended, marketed and developed in Denmark, where the market and offerings for interactive TV are relatively immature compared, for example, to UK. We have taken a constructive critical approach based on assessments made by a group of viewers/users of the communicative and aesthetic potential of interactive TV; I have made a special point of discussing the problems of gender and programme choice, including electronic programme guides, the position of TV in the cultural hegemony and social/individual use, choice and control viewed in relation to democratic debate and general information.

Keywords

Cultural hegemony, citizen and consumer roles, programme choice and gender, TV and computer usage, semiotics.

Introduction

Different technologies are currently used to provide the viewer with interactive access to TV programmes: the wireline/mobile telephone and the Internet are used for so-called *cross media* programme formats in which feedback on the programme from viewers is provided using a different technology than television. Set-top boxes connected to the TV are also used and they provide the option of integrated feedback by way of enhanced remote control - the Electronic Programme Guide (EPG). So far, few examples of actual integrated interactive programme formats have been developed for the Danish market but public service channel DR and commercial satellite channel *Viasat*

have, however, produced their first interactive programmes. Further, TV2Nord-digital, an independent channel operated by TV2, has started extensive trials of terrestrial digital interactive TV in Northern Jutland. This mainly comprises enhanced TV by way of teletext-style applications [Bjørner 2003]. The market for digital TV as such is limited in Denmark. Frands Mortensen suggests on the basis of Gallup's Annual Survey that there are 266,000 digital households out of a total TV market of 2.4 million households [Mortensen 2003] but the government's decision to digitalise transmissions by 2005 means that the Danish digital TV market will change and mature in the immediate future.

From consumer's point of view, the question that arises is what kind of TV use, services and programmes will be available, and at what cost. From a more general community perspective, the question is how can interactive options be developed so as to provide individual experience and stimulation, social contact, cultural competencies, opinion formation and democracy.

Social interpretation

TV was originally a social artefact in the sense that the TV set was placed right at the heart of the home and was used by the whole family together. Even though most modern families may have several TVs and one or more computers as well, the biggest, best equipped TV set is also to be found in the family's living room. Apart from being historically speaking a social artefact, TV may also be seen as a social medium since the flow of broadcast television is consumed in the domestic, informal context where the programme can be discussed between co-viewers. If we understand this process of simultaneous communication processes – the transmission of the television flow and the conversation between co-viewers – in semiotic terms, we may suggest that decoding the text represents potentially a mutual effort in meaning production.

In Stuart Hall's classical encoding/decoding model [Hall 1980], the television sign is described as complex because it comprises both visual and aural discourses. Moreover the visuality of television has iconic characteristics which means that the television sign is "easily" adapted. We tend to perceive such visual signs by means of some of the same cognitive processes that we use in perceiving objects in our immediate surroundings. The point made by Stuart Hall (following Roland Barthes) is that television's iconic signs "naturalize" and thereby conceal the cultural coding and ideological function of the television message.

But in relation to the encoding/decoding model and the social aspects of television communication, I find it interesting to focus on the fast and easy perception of iconic signs which allows for co-viewer's immediate common experience and conversation. From this point of view, conversation and verbal comments about the television programme may be understood as communal interpretations of the narrative while it is being transmitted

[Raudaskoski & Rasmussen 2003: 316]. This form of socio-situational reception by way of "interpretation-cum-interaction" is not restricted to the medium of TV. Cinema films use pictures and sound in the same way as TV but these are projected without the simulated "here and now" impact of the flow and the formal social context of the cinema prohibits conversation while the film is being shown.

In a multimedia context, the PC includes audiovisual and written sign systems. Some of the computer's narrative may be acquired communally in a socio-situational sense (interpretation-cum-interaction) in the same way as TV. Social use of the computer, however, is more likely to imply both talking and acting in accordance with the embedded affordances of interactivity in, for example, computer games. This means that "interpretation-cum-interactivity" will apply to any action-oriented mode of computer use where one user is performing the actual physical act on the keyboard (1).

In the case of ITV the two different modes of television and computer converge. Now it is important to stress that ITV is not and should not be conceptualized as a single uniform concept and the interpretation-cum-interaction and interpretation-cum-interactivity are only aspects of television reception and computer use which I have chosen to focus on because it provides a theoretical framework for understanding social aspects of decoding television and decoding + action as the interactivity of the computer. In line with reception theory and semiotics, we should also acknowledge the fact that television viewing in spite of its one-way communication (transmission) is also for the individual viewer an active act of decoding and meaning production.

As Silverstone remarks, this general notion of television and activity is somewhat banal and he goes on: "The key issue is not so much whether an audience is active but whether this activity is significant. We can grant that television viewing is active in the sense that it involves some form of more or less meaningful action (even in its most habitual or ritual mode). In this sense there is no such thing as passive viewing (an observation which simultaneously makes the simple descriptor 'active' redundant too)." [Silverstone 1994:153]. Apart from stressing the overall point that television viewing is not passive by nature, I find it relevant to discuss Silverstone's questions as to whether activity is

“significant” in relation to ITV – does interactivity really make a difference? “Does it offer the viewer a creative or critical engagement with the messages on the screen?”.

Along with social uses of media, we must also consider individual uses and the way the media are embedded in everyday activities as such. One clear problem associated with understanding, developing and marketing ITV is that historically-rooted social use of the TV combined with its function as a secondary (or even tertiary) activity taken in conjunction with domestic duties, doing homework, reading the papers and social intercourse in general, has not in general been made part of the agenda. James Lull’s original study of the social uses of television [Lull 1990] pointed very clearly to the importance of understanding the place and function of the media in relation to everyday routines of interpersonal communication: TV functions both structurally (regulates behaviour and time in the family) and relationally (as social learning, conflict mediator and facilitation of communication between family members). We know less about computers in families but Livingstone [2001] and Higgens [2000] report that parents tend to overestimate children’s computer literacy – and thereby contribute to a dominant discourse about computers in relation to “learning” and what is necessary for “the future” of children’s work and life.

ITV apparently gains its motivation from the interactive media (of which we know a lot about usability but little about everyday practice) and not from the possibilities and needs constituted in day-to-day TV practice (of which we know considerably more). At worst, this could mean ITV becoming conceptualised and marketed as the poor relation to the Internet or computer gaming. If one thinks of this as hype, a buzzword or a dominant discourse on the media, it is about emphasising **interactive** at the expense of traditional TV which becomes negational **non-interactive** – meaning **passive** (quite the contrary to the theoretical points I make above!). It is a hegemonic binary figure of passive versus active which was highly significant for the well-educated, computer-literate users in our focus groups and as we shall see, it is characterised by ambivalence and hence difficult to handle in relation to the market.

Everyday practice and cultural form

Accordingly my view is that a socio-cultural understanding of day-to-day media practice can

contribute to development and understanding of new TV formats that, from the user’s point of view, relate to the physical location and practical community in which TV is traditionally used and the virtual socio-cultural community to which interactive TV can provide access for singles as well as families. Our view of TV as a socially negotiated medium in everyday media practice and cultural hegemony is based on David Morley’s study from 1986 on the use of TV and TV programmes in traditional British working class families. In 2000 we undertook a large quantitative and qualitative study on media use in a local antenna association. In our qualitative interviews, we found two types of family that were either individually or socially oriented [Raudaskoski & Rasmussen 2003].

The individually oriented families had many traits in common with Morley’s patriarchal families by way of traditional gendered programme choices and preferences whilst the social families preferred such hybrid genres as quiz and reality shows that they liked watching and using together. In ITV production one could benefit from knowledge about different family types, genre preferences and typologies of interactivity (1) not only for targeting and segmenting the audience but for designing solutions for 1) fact-oriented individualistic male audiences who tend to leave TV and pursue their factual and practical interests on teletext or internet by means of consultation; 2) fiction and romance-oriented female audiences who are “left alone” with their favourite soaps and who might enjoy virtual conversation about their favourites; 3) hybrid-oriented social audiences who value co-viewing, talking about programmes and participating in quizzes and reality shows by means of registration.

The socially oriented families were modern in the sense that the role of gender had been evened out and the children formed the centre of the families’ sense of self-worth and in negotiating the “moral economy” [Silverstone & Hirsch 1992]. As a concept, the moral economy links families’ media practice in with societal market modes and socio-cultural hegemonies. The family is at one and the same time part of a transactional system of production and consumption of goods (economy) and a social unit which has to come to terms with – and negotiate – its own specific (moral) values and norms for use practices. In relation to the modern socially oriented families, child welfare is a core value and they adjust their purchase and interest in IT to the children’s needs – in

contradiction to the traditional individualistic families where the husband's needs for and interest in the latest IT sets the norm for the whole family.

In viewing TV as a cultural form, what is important is that the TV medium, understood as a mass media, mediates between the outside world and privacy in a way which in north-western Europe has been traditionally organised in public service systems which play (and still play) a significant role in the constitution of the public sphere and cultural communities. We feel that it is important that in developing interactive TV, the user perspective also includes questions about new conditions for the development of the public sphere, hence reinforcing the concept of the viewer/user as not just a consumer (target of TV advertising) and customer (direct sale on TV) but also as a citizen and participant in democratic discourse and even development of "deliberate democracy" [Thompson 1995:255].

Method

Our intention has been to study the construction of interactive media and TV in media practice and cultural hegemony. We opted for the focus group method even though it is not ideal for answering all the questions posed above. We have also investigated how interactive TV formats are assessed by focus group participants and asked them to make constructive proposals for developing TV (2).

We investigated the way ITV programmes work and their significance for viewers by way of a reception analysis which is the most widely acknowledged scientific method for gathering data on the use and significance of media texts. Reception research is primarily based on qualitative interviews with recipients of texts while media ethnography is more widely aimed at how narrative and various forms of media are anchored socially and culturally in the daily routines of specific groups of people [Drotner et al. 2003]. In relation to everyday media use, ethnographic research is of course highly relevant but, as we were interested in media use seen in relation to understanding and development of interactive television, it was – and is – not possible to conduct proper ethnographic research in a Danish context because of the current immature nature of the market for interactive programmes.

The focus group design which we used in this project was intended to address three aspects of

ITV: 1) Participants' day-to-day media practice with TV and computer; 2) Reception of interactive TV programmes and services; 3) Constructive testing of a news format. The interviews, lasting approximately three hours, took place in a laboratory designed to look like a living room with video monitoring facilities. There were three moderators in all, each responsible for one part of the session, and two technical supporter staff. We intentionally arranged some traffic in and out of the room, bringing coffee, cake and snacks, in order to create an informal atmosphere which according to the participants' evaluation succeeded very well.

There were different objectives for each part of the session and moderator interview guides differed accordingly. The present paper will discuss the first part of the sessions covering everyday media use. The moderator guide had four themes: 1) Television: most popular programmes/genres and how to choose programmes; 2) Television: intensive and extensive viewing, relational and structural use, use of remote control, the everyday meaning and importance of television in just a few words; 3) Computer: list of uses and genres (with probes), most popular websites and computer games, relational and structural use, the everyday meaning and importance of the computer in just a few words; 4) Cross media use: Internet, cellphone, telephone, letters (with probes in relation to specific programmes); projective: create a profile of a person who is active in relation to reality TV/local news/music-video programmes/song contests.

We worked with four groups of three to five participants. We wanted to simulate a living-room situation with participants placed in comfortable chairs and a sofa around a table and with the TV set comfortably in sight. This simulation was highly relevant to the overall themes of the sessions and we accordingly decided that we would work with relatively small groups with a high level of involvement and interest in the topic at hand [Morgan 1997:43]. Participants were in no way representative of TV viewers or computer users but were selected because they indicated that they were motivated and interested in talking about the possibilities and limitations in the development of new TV formats. Two of the groups were youngish parents in their thirties (not couples) and two groups were students in their twenties (not couples, no children). When recruiting interviewees, details of the relevant

demographic data and just a few lifestyle questions were registered for each of the selected participants. All the participants except one had taken their high school matriculation exams or some similar education and they all had one or more computers which they used actively.

The sessions were videotaped and verbal communication was transcribed for hermeneutical analysis [Kvale 1996:47]. In hermeneutical interpretation, the interview transcripts of each session are considered as one text with a global meaning which is produced in the specific interaction between the participants. The themes of the moderator/guide serve as a first step into the different layers or parts of meaning in the text and the interpreter produces different hypotheses about general themes in the text and re-confronts these hypotheses with the moderator/guide. An example of how to work the "hermeneutical circle" goes like this: What is said in focus group 1 about people who phone in to a reality programme is combined with the group's programme preferences and evaluation of television's meaning and importance in everyday life. An interpretative hypothesis is constructed about television as something for the "addicts" – people who are very different from focus group 1. In addressing other themes in focus group 1 about computer usage, participants stressed that individual choice of content was very important and confronting this theme with the hypothesis about "addiction" leads to a new interpretative hypothesis about the importance of "being in control". This interpretation holds for inspection of all of the themes discussed in focus group 1 and therefore the global theme of focus group 1 is about "individual control" (it is an easy example because group 1 was a very homogeneous group – and the participants actively supported each other's discourses).

Each session is treated in its own right with new interpretative hypothesis and testing in accordance with the moderator/guide and the group's interactional dynamics. Ultimately, the themes of each session are confronted and tested against each other. Performing hermeneutical analysis on interview texts may raise problems but given our purpose of understanding media use in relation to cultural hegemony, the interpretation method is well suited. An obvious disadvantage of the method is that it is difficult to validate the different steps of the analysis moving back and forth in the hermeneutical circle. In our case we experimented with inter-

subjective validation as five of us were involved in the research (conducting, videotaping and transcribing), analysis was put forward step by step for inspection by our co-researchers and assistants. In this process we made use of the video-observations and in the next step of research we will extend the use of video observations for use by ITV designers/producers.

In working with our youngish, well-educated and computer-literate users, we noted the strengths and weaknesses that can be associated with regarding new digital TV formats from the "point of view of the interactive computer". In this way, participants have made us aware of the problems in the dominant discursive construction of the phenomenon of "interactive TV" viewed in relation to research and everyday common sense. We were also made more aware that the way the youngish computer-literate people perceive interactive TV should be supplemented as quickly as possible by a study of the phenomenon with a group of elderly/old TV enthusiasts from the "point of view of television".

TV and the computer in daily life

The computer was the most important medium in the daily lives of most of the focus group participants, who kept it switched on all day while they were awake and used it for communications (e-mail, Web phone), entertainment (games, films and music), work, study and personal interests (e.g. children, saltwater aquarium, motor sport). The computer was used for "everything" and was indispensable for participants. For some of them, having their computer go down for a few hours meant they felt they had lost a lifeline. The TV was not switched on to the same extent as the computer and served in part as living wallpaper; some participants, for example, turned down the sound on the television while they were at their computer. TV was used for entertainment and information but several restricted their TV viewing because they were afraid of becoming "hooked" and that they would decline into passivity.

The significance and function of the TV in the home has changed significantly for large sections of the population over the past 15 years, with homes now having access to multiple channels and two or more TV sets. It may further be assumed that for children and young people, the computer is on its way to becoming

the primary medium. At the same time, the TV and control of TV viewing in modern families has become less important. Some of the male participants commented that choice of TV programme and ownership of the remote control had been allocated to the female part of the family whilst the male was often at the computer, enjoying being able to sit in peace doing his own thing while the rest for the family was gathered round the TV. There are two possible interpretations of this: one would assume that the male had downgraded the TV into the female/children's domain and that he was using the computer to establish space for himself, freeing him from practical tasks and emotional contact. The second interpretation would say that the modern family is materialistic, with the father being a marginalised figure. Compared to previous research on family TV viewing, it is in any event remarkable that only a single family reported fighting for possession of the remote control or disagreement about the programmes to be watched. In this family, the man was an ethnic Turk and he used a set-top box for access to Turkish programmes while the woman watched Danish programmes. In this family they avoided squabbling and conflict by having a TV each.

Participants expressed themselves in terms of TV as "relaxing", "passive" and "dependence" whilst referring to the computer as "indispensable", "essential" and "ultimate". The TV was an unconsidered natural part of daily routines. Some participants even "forgot" to mention that they watched the news every single day. It was also noted that participants expressed negative sentiments about TV. This is a classic assessment in the cultural hegemony, an assessment particularly shared by people with higher education which could indicate difficulties in marketing interactive TV to well educated, computer-literate users. The youngish people's view was that of users, meaning that they identified the possibilities of TV on the basis of the interactivity of the computer, with the computer appearing as the indispensable medium for contact with the outside world which is also a dominant discourse. At the same time, even the active component of interactive TV appears ambivalent because it conflicts with the primary function of participants' wishing to use television for "relaxation" and this could possibly indicate interactive TV being regarded as a form of "lazy interactivity".

Choice of programme/channel

Participants checked on TV offerings using teletext or station websites. They often switched channels and kept the TV switched on extensively, with the TV running at the same time as the computer or other activities. For families with small children, TV viewing in the early evening hours was very limited. One of the participants, who was especially interested in computers, normally kept the TV programme running as a "picture in a picture" on his laptop screen while working or researching saltwater aquariums on the Internet.

The most important (and for some the only) programme preferences of the male participants were the TV news and documentaries, while the female participants also preferred such genres as chat shows and reality TV. This pattern was completely in line with previous research, again indicating the importance of considering an overarching gender perspective in developing interactive TV formats. With respect to choice of channel and programme, it should be emphasised that teletext and the stations' websites worked perfectly well for participants but there was considerable interest in EPG functionality which could:

1. Provide a snapshot of current programmes on all channels, preferably with pictures;
2. Give brief summaries of a programme by scrolling over the picture or title of the programme;
3. Give an overview of programmes of special interest or within a genre;
4. Make the above just as fast and simple as programme guides on the Internet and teletext.

These functions are already available in some EPG versions but potential developments should reflect the gender aspect when it comes to personalising the EPG. During discussions in the focus groups, it was stated that women especially kept a check on the day/time of their favourite programmes, e.g. *Dr. Phil* or *Friends*. The literature describes this phenomenon as an "internal programme guide" [Jensen et al 1996]. One of the male participants commented that this kind of memory is comparable to how his wife kept a check on birthdays and other events. One of the other male participants commented that he only wanted to be reminded of birthdays when it was necessary, and not before, which could be regarded as an "externalised" instrumental viewpoint compared to the

women's "internalised" or relational diary which dealt with long-term planning and the pleasures of anticipation.

If further investigation demonstrates the validity of the supposition that there is a difference in male and female planning of events and socio-cultural anticipation and reminders by way of an internalised diary and other programme planning mechanisms, it will pave the way potentially for new aesthetic designs for a personalised "cyclical", social EPG for women wishing to get additional, different options from their programme guide than instrumental variation in the shape of overview and control.

One facet briefly touched upon by the groups was that problems can arise if only a single person can use the EPG at a time and participants found it hard to imagine how communal interactive TV viewing could work out if each of the members of the family wanted to use different functions of the same programme. Hugh Mackay (2002) used participatory observation to investigate Welsh digital TV families and he reported that the set top box and the EPG appear to become a social gathering point for families without too much potential for conflict. This therefore indicates a kind of revival for social TV viewing but in a situation in which there is only a single set-top box available in the home.

Debate and democracy ?

Participants were asked to consider the news and current affairs programme genres and to discuss the possibilities of getting involved in discussion of current topics. This kind of interactivity is only in its infant beginnings and it was difficult for participants to imagine themselves actively debating. Participation in known forms of debate such as readers' letters in the newspapers, in *19 Direct* (a call-in current affairs programme) and in various chat rooms were viewed very negatively, as were the kind of people who do so, who were clearly characterised as "odd" and querulants. People could perfectly well imagine putting questions to the politicians or experts involved but they did not want to contribute to the discussion. They found it difficult to see themselves as active participants in a public, democratic community and had great difficulty in seeing the possibilities of conversational interactivity or responsive dialogue (McMillan [2002]).

All in all, the various offerings of interactive TV were viewed positively by participants who expressed great interest in more opportunity for individual needs satisfaction, more control and greater freedom of choice, including a special desire to be able to watch what they wanted when they wanted. The Internet was repeatedly mentioned as ideal for user control in the consultative form of communication compared to the transmitted flow of television. Viewed in the light of the development of the public sphere, it was quite clear that when it came to TV, the traditionally strong Danish tradition for public service, understood as all-round multiplicity of services, was interpreted by participants as relating more to individual needs and service than mutual public interest. One of the participants (the only one without high school matriculation or other similar education) remarked that when it came to choice of channel, programmes and individual segments such as in the news, free choice could have consequences for the general level of information and awareness, that is for being able to play the part of a citizen. Another saw the proposition of "free choice" as an ideological and voluntaristic figure. But a common, dominant denominator in the group of well-educated, technically well informed participants could in the final count be seen as an expression of individualised and self-reflexive youngish people who feel most "at home" as customers and consumers rather than acting as citizens.

Concluding remarks

When recruiting participants for our research, we discovered that very little was known about interactive TV and set-top boxes, which must generally be ascribed to poor marketing and lack of awareness in the Danish market. Considering the highly computer literate users in our focus groups, some of the options in interactive TV programmes and services will be overshadowed by the computer and the Internet, which was the primary medium in the daily lives of most of our participants. They felt that gaming, e-mail, banking and e-commerce work perfectly well on the computer and they found it hard to see the point of the same opportunities being available on TV. This is a point also made by Theodoroupolou [2003] in her research on *Sky* audiences.

The participants were also negative about TV as a medium. Their attitudes were characterised by stereotypical classifications, self-justification and a tendency to take TV for granted. They were critically reflexive about the obvious/natural

aspects of TV and TV viewing and they were ambivalent in that on the one hand they regarded TV viewing as making for passivity while even so on the other hand not wishing to expect "too much" activity in the programmes. They watched TV extensively and did not wish to concentrate more on, and pay more attention to, TV programmes than they did because they used (and needed to use) TV for relaxation. This applied both to fact and fiction. TV's position in the cultural hegemony may have been (further) weakened by the interactivity of the computer. The fundamentally positively valued term "interactive TV" had contradictory and ambivalent overtones for participants and this could indicate weaknesses when it comes to marketing/sales to well-educated groups and problems of awareness of the market as such.

In our research, we gained a picture of gender differences for media use and programme choice/preferences. When some of the participating men referred to their TV viewing as being in the female domain, this is a reflection of new perceptions of the role of gender and the fact that media occupy new positions in the moral economies of these families. The development of interactive programme formats and EPG services could benefit from taking gender perspectives into consideration to match such new familial patterns. From a broader social and cultural point of view, media researchers could do well to investigate the role of TV in the social aspirations of various types of family, and what changing cultural significances users and viewers ascribe to television and the computer.

Notes:

- 1) In understanding such interactive modes of communication as transmission, consultation, registration and conversation, I have relied especially on Jens F. Jensen's review of Bordewijk & Kaam's information flows and Jensen's differentiation between the concept of sociological interaction and technologically mediated interaction as physical interactivity (Jensen 1999:25ff).
- 2) Christensen & Rasmussen (2003) give an overall description of the study. The focus group process lasted three hours, with sessions being split into three parts of equal length, with *Part I* investigating existing media habits and preferences for type of media, genre and TV format (lifestyle-oriented and media environment), and incorporating projective

techniques. The present paper addresses this part. *Part II* gave examples (UK, Norwegian, Danish) of interactive TV formats and programmes which were discussed so as to reveal how delegates reacted to the experience and viewed the examples. This part was dealt with by Lars Holmgaard Christensen (2003). *Part III* tested interviewees' use of an interactive DVD film and navigation with EPG using a set-top box (*Viasat*), with a constructive test of a specific news format (*24Nordjyske*) – this part was conducted by Tea Krogh and Jesper Hauerslev.

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