

TVseries and Social Network marketing: The Audiovisual Text as a Wider Experience

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Introduction

Many TV series are constructed as high concept products, generating an expanded narrative universe that creates a strong engagement with the audience. Besides television AV texts we can also find Web series (*Seattle Grace: On Call*, *Dexter: Early Cuts*, *Dexter: Early Cuts: Dark Echo*), minisodes (*True Blood*), mobisodes (*24: Conspiracy*, *Lost: Missing Pieces*), comics (*Heroes*, *True Blood*), ARGs (“Lost Experience”), Web experiences (“Lost University”).

In our present epoch, social networks are fast becoming the main field of promotion and user engagement for audiovisual products. Hence this kind of campaign suggests to us the necessity of reconsidering the idea of text as part of a wider user experience, rather than as a finished, completed product.

This approach leads us to reconsider also the concept of “engagement”: social network marketing campaigns, in fact, are often built to provide an “experience”, which aims not just to generate awareness in users but also to bring TV series into the life of its viewers.

This chapter aims to present some case histories in order to demonstrate how we now need to reconsider the classical ideas of text and engagement.

After a short description of the new media landscape and the user relationship with audiovisual texts, we will consider which kind of interactions can be established between social network marketing and user experience of the text itself and precise elements of it (characters, narratives and casting), right up to the idea of “user generated marketing”. Then we will go on to analyze the importance of sharing and the role of social TV and new entertainment levels.

In conclusion, we shall seek to describe the idea of text as a broader form of experience.

The Relationship with the Text

The new media landscape is governed and defined by dynamics of technological and cultural convergence (Jenkins 2006). In a participative culture era the relationship with serial text is often governed by “affective economics”. As stated by Jenkins (2006: 43), it is a “new configuration of market theory which seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions,” that values different viewers according to their commitment to the program. Consumers’ tastes are being commodified and accepted or rejected in accordance with the emergent goal of a ‘brand community’. Audiences – now turned into prosumers (Boccia Artieri, 2004) – take decisions led by a strong

relationship with audiovisual products, considered as “lovemarks” (Roberts, 2003), that is to say as brands to which customers feel “loyalty *beyond reason*”.

As Jenkins further notes (1992: 24) “media fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate”. This definition, previously applied to fans, can now be extended to a wider audience – the so-called “extended audience” (Cauldry, 1995) - that interacts with social media and create its own media products. We cannot just create our own media, we are our media (Lasica, 2005) and marketing strategies aim to promote the production of user generated content connected to audiovisual products.

In this media landscape characterized by a huge number of entertainment offerings, in fact, time and attention are precious resources. The so called “attention economy” (Davenport and Beck, 2001) takes it into account and finds in engagement a solution to involve users and recognize the active role that the audience has acquired in relation to the older paradigm of the TV consumer as “couch-potato”; audience is now defined as “juggler”: entertaining themselves and building entertainment for others (Jenkins, 1992). Everyone can now decide *where* to watch and *how* and *when* to watch serial products. The multiplatform distribution of serialized audiovisual contents facilitates the relationship between medium and viewer by freeing consumers from the temporal and spatial regimes of consumption previously imposed upon them.

Fandom goes mainstream (Jenkins, 2006) and the buried “shadow economy” of user generated contents (Fiske, 1987) is now becoming a primary focus of interest for marketing people. In a context in which users are more connected than previously, and the sharing of experiences and interaction online forms a basis for our daily life in social networks, we can look at social media marketing as a form of tribal marketing (Cova, 2003), in which the relationship is more important than the product (Cova, 1997); as defined by Maffesoli in 1988, we can refer to these communities as “affective tribes”. This is the reason why some researchers prefer to talk about “societing”, rather than “marketing” (Badot, Bucci, Cova, 1993).

These days, media users and consumers are not only the main target of cultural industries, they are also a part of them, acquiring an active role now recognized by producers, who actively incorporate user activities into their business models. Sharing, collaborating, networking and co-creating are the keywords on which participatory culture is based, while various forms of “collective intelligence,” (Lévy, 1998) resolves problems by the “wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki, 2004). All those aspects become part of a new economics model.

We believe social networks are now the best field for observing and analyzing this power shift, and new forms of user interaction with audiovisual texts. Media consumers actively interact with producers and with other consumers outside of traditional forms of organization (Shirkey, 2008), and they can in fact be defined as networked publics (Ito, 2008). At several different levels we can seek to determine how influential this double relationship is: between users and texts and between users and other users.

Against the classical division between bottom-up production and top-down production we can

group social network marketing strategies and products as a sort of “middle area” in which interactions can go deeper and deeper, and predefined roles can begin to switch and change.

Social Network Marketing and Use Engagement

Social network marketing campaigns determine different levels of interaction with the text. Users can interact: with the text itself, with text elements, with text promotional strategies.

In particular we can identify these relationships through a few significant case histories.

User and text itself

At this level we can group all types of user presence within the text.

Here, we are able to distinguish two subcategories of interaction: text “re-adaption/re-enactment” and the relationship with users personal knowledge of the text. In the first case, users become part of the text and personally involved in the story, often also becoming part of its adaptation.

This is what happens with “FlashForward Experience”, an application using Facebook Connect technology to construct a “personal” flash forward: photos, friends lists and images from the series are used to build a “vision” that every user can then share with friends. This means that the application offers the user the possibility of recreating one of the core elements of the ABC product: flash forwards. These are narrative elements that link characters to stories within the series. In the Facebook application these have a double purpose: (a) they make the user part of the narrative experience and (b) they give him the possibility to involve his friends and share this “personal (partly) user generated movie”. Users can then share their flash forwards by joining the “The Mosaic Collective” website, a platform reproducing a similar one presented in the show: an interactive map that locates and shows all inserted witnesses, tagged and keyword searchable; this leads to the fictional website reproducing the aim of the series itself: connecting people through shared experiences and discovery of coincidences and unknown relationships. All posted flash forwards were also sharable on social networks.

The sharing dimension is, in fact, the main focus of social network marketing campaigns, in order to “viralize” and promote the product. This explains why most promotional strategies are social network based, as demonstrated by the “Dexter: Follow the Code” campaign, both for the product launch, and during the fourth season of the Showtime TV series. In this case, users could discover clues on the Facebook and Twitter official accounts in order to unblock part of a mosaic image on the Follow the Code website, or other content (such as clip previews of the episode). Social network status updates, for example, presented questions related to episodes: correct answers to these were the key to the participative game on the website.

The idea of going deeper into the text, or part of it, is also the basis for other campaigns such as Lost University, a sort of online University, based on an ABC TV series. Users can enroll as students by answering questions about the TV series; before the launch of the sixth season users

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could also participate in a contest to win a bottle with an USB pen containing a sneak preview of the first episode: all they had to do was correctly answer a few questions about the show. For the mid-season premiere of *Glee*, on April 2010, an interactive “hypertrailer”, plugged into Facebook, YouTube and other networks was launched. This allowed participants to find more information about characters, actors and stories related to the series; these “discoveries” were also shareable on social networks.

Also the *Mad Men* hyper-episodes, *The Hills* enhanced, and *Glee* superfan applications are thought to offer users more intense forms of experience.

As we said, users can also become part of the story in a more personal sense, by for example (re)living some parts or contexts of the narration. This is the case with the Dharma Initiative Recruiting Project, an ARG produced for the launch of the fifth season of *Lost*. In this case users could volunteer as candidates for Dharma projects by signing on at the DharmaWantsYou.com website; after some tests, Dharma elaborated a personal profile and gave special access to reserved contents. In other words, the ARG recreated exactly the same selection process used by Dharma in the TV series, giving users the possibility to participate in a personal way to the story, re-enacting it as a first person experience.

The concept of re-enactment is also the base for the “True Blood Ultimate Fan Experience”. On the occasion of the third season launch, fans could volunteer to participate in local events in 50 cities all over the USA. It was a “one-night-only event” on June 1st 2010 that was broadcast on Simulcast (with a live question and answer session with Alan Ball, creator of the series) and consisted in a collective viewing of the second season finale followed by a sneak peek preview of the third season. To participate it was necessary to access the “Sweeps” area of the Facebook Fan Page, that is to say that user actions (expressions of preference or interactions) were automatically shared with each user’s friends. But the most interesting aspect is that in the real event fans were organized in a hierarchy that reproduced that of the vampires: via Twitter local sheriffs were nominated. and these were responsible for the *truebies* of their zone (who had to follow their sheriffs in order to be informed about event news), exactly as is the case with vampire sheriffs in the TV series. The real world was organized in the same way as the fictional one. Sheriffs were selected via Twitter: candidates had to declare via a tweet - using the official hashtag #UltimateTrubie - why they were ultimate *truebies*, and what their zone was. In this way HBO created a lot of buzz around the initiative and gained publicity for the event. Sheriffs were acclaimed by other users, according to the content of candidate tweets. All Twitter followers of the event also had the possibility, at the end of the night, to obtain the link for the last minisode (“Jason”) before other Web users. Social network activity was thus awarded through gaining access to special content.

For the first season of *Glee* a mobile application for iPhone and iPad – realized by Smule - was launched. This allowed *gleeks* to recreate the *Glee* experience by founding new clubs, joining existing ones and singing (alone or together with others thanks to a special tool (pitch correction and three-part harmonies). and sharing one’s own performance on Twitter and Facebook: sharing

of performances, singing songs and completing missions, let users gain gleeks (a sort of points) that unblocked new songs.

The Glee club experience could thus be in the hands of users and at the same time reproduce, or re-enact, the TV series context.

For the show *How to Make it in America* HBO a Foursquare profile was created that allowed users to check-in to New York locations of the TV series, promoting the idea that is actually possible to transfer TV life into the real life (and, of course, multiple check-ins help users to gain badges).

In all the analyzed cases we can observe a constant: users want to go deeper into the text and want to own it, recreating it in a personal way. News acquisition, sometimes, is not only a collective or individual intelligence activity (such as in traditional fandom), rather, it is provided by producers, not only in the form of blogs or other content online, but also in the form of real-time news, empowered by use of other devices.

For example, for the ABC *My Generation* TV series an iPad app called “My Generation Sync” it was launched, that, using voice recognition during the episode and Media-Sync Technology, identified what episode users were watching, as well as “where” they were within the show, in order to deliver additional content and interaction with the series on your TV (also outside of the original broadcast time slot, while also recognizing pause, flash forwards or rewind actions).

Providing news, sharing it and participating in online discussions are all forms of motivation to encourage users to join conversations during the airing of TV series. This theme deserves wider coverage that we are going to be able to give it in this particular article.

User and text elements: characters, situations, narration and casting

At this level users can interact with precise elements of the text. In particular we are first going to analyze the interaction with character case histories.

We can include in this category all cases of Twitter interaction with TV series characters. This is often is a powerful interaction form that affects the television narrative by opening it up.

At this moment the best example is probably the Twitter accounts of *True Blood* characters. Every character tweets about the story and narrative events witnessed on the screen, and users can retweet, mention and write back regarding the series universe: this means, effectively, that we can find a wider form of narrative text, stemming from user activities and character actions. Also the characters live outside the screen, communicate using social media and interact with users, exactly like a real person. One of the characters – the young vampire Jessica Hamby – opened her personal blog on June 2010 and used it to share video logs and personal stories connected to the *True Blood* plot. The blog attracted a lot of comments and Facebook sharing and interactions (in the form of “like” preferences).

Another example of effective practice connected to use of Twitter is the creation of the account

@upraiser7 for *The Good Wife* TV series. This is the personal account of Becca, girlfriend of Alicia Florrick's— the main character – son Zach. It is possible to follow the account and interact with it, and actually – exactly as in the case of *True Blood* – there are two kinds of interaction: a first referring to the story itself, and another referring to the promotional strategy. In both cases users demonstrated a positive reception.

Sometimes users can be called to become part of the show through social media campaigns. This is what happened with the casting for the second season of *Glee*. On March 2010, *gleeks* were asked to participate in the casting by uploading their own video-performances on a dedicated MySpace page. The most voted users – also according to judgements by Fox– would become part of the *Glee* cast for the second season of the show. The contest was to have been closed on April 26th, but was delayed till April 29th. In any case, on April 26th, 28.000 audition videos had been uploaded and 85.090.415 votes registered.

An interesting category of analysis regarding user relationships with the text is represented by Alternate Reality Games, in which users are called to interact with elements of the narration: this is what happened in the case of the “Lost” promotional alternate reality games The Lost Experience and Find 815, which involved, respectively, The Hanso Foundation and Oceanic Airlines. In these cases, interaction has the function of going deeper into something connected to the narration. We can also take into account here a number of hoax sites and blogs related to TV series plots: to give just a few examples, think of the Red Panda Resources, the Oscar Obregan blog and the Twitter account connected to *FlashForward*, the American Vampire League, Fellowship of the Sun and Love Bitten websites connected to the *True Blood* first season viral campaign (it is also possible to find several promotional videos on YouTube for these associations and for True Blood beverages), the *Lost* i-related websites of the Hanso Foundation, the Oceanic Airlines and the Ajira Airways page.

Users and promotional strategies: co-creation and bottom-up promotional initiatives

All the analyzed cases so far are part of social media campaigns that actively engage users, but these represent merely some kind of promotional strategy: while we can refer to all these as “text centered strategies”, we can also identify a number of “user centered strategies”. The difference between these two types is signaled by creative interventions by users. We are referring here to co-creation processes related to promotional campaigns.

Some weeks before the end of *Lost*, ABC sent out an email – the intriguing object of which was “Lost celebrates the fans” – inviting all *losties* to create a promo for the big finale with the “Ultimate Lost fan promo contest”. ABC was recognizing user’s knowledge and competence regarding the TV series and video creation tools, celebrating their role and “delegating” to them various forms of creative action. The chosen video, based on the number of views online and votes on the website, was to have been aired on TV and winners have been invited to participate in the final party in Los Angeles.

The co-creation strategy formed a basis for the fan art wall dedicated by ABC to all fans who wanted to send and post their *Lost*-related creations. In this way, the company could promote the show through the image *losties* have of it, without creating – in other words – a lot of original materials themselves. This initiative had also a teaser function regarding the launch of the promo contest.

HBO called to action Twitter *truebies* with the contest “Reasons why waiting sucks”. On Spring 2010 – more than two months before the launch of the third season – fans were asked to tweet (using the hashtag #WaitingSucks, with clear reference to the vampire world) their personal points of view about why waiting for the last *True Blood* season was so terrible. The thirteen best tweets were published, on April 1st, on the official *True Blood* website. In this way, HBO: (a) delegated to fans the elaboration of concepts related to waiting for the new season, (b) filled the gap – in addition to the presentation of comics and minisodes – between seasons and (c) stimulated user generated buzz.

There also some cases in which a promotional idea derives directly from users, stemming from their “love” for audiovisual serial products.

In 2009, before the San Diego Comic Con, ABC launched a contest. Fans were asked to create a video that answered a precise question: what you think a *Lost* title song *would be* (if the show had one)? The winner prize – given to the Random Gibberish group - consisted in a screening of the “new title song” before the *Lost* panel at Comic Con. This ABC initiative, though, was not the first related to the *Lost* entry title. From 2005 the Video Island website launched monthly contests asking users to recreate the *Lost* entry sequence in different styles. The most famous was the contest – launched in March 2009 (the same year of the Comic Con contest) for the *Lost* TV series styled entry: we can find the *Lost Veronica Mars* styled entry, *Lost Baywatch* styled entry, *Lost Smallville* styled entry, *Lost Buffy* styled entry and so on. ABC discovered the initiative and didn’t oppose it, but we can reasonably imagine it served as inspiration for the 2009 Comic Con contest.

Another interesting case is represented by *Glee* and *gleeks*. After the pilot of the Fox series aired in the USA on May 2009, fans – who began referring to themselves as *gleeks* (*Glee* + geeks, in assonance with the narrative concept of the show) – started to upload onto YouTube video copycats of the performances seen in episodes. This user-generated content immediately turned into a viral success, and Fox drew advantage from the situation by launching a contest to find the “Biggest gleek”. The winner was selected by monitoring social network activities – especially on Facebook and MySpace. The result was a total success: *Glee* also became the most tweeted show, while ABC made a deal with iTunes to sell online not only the song performed by the *Glee* characters, but also a karaoke version “ready” to be used in user generated videos.

We use the term “user generated marketing” to refer to all those cases in which marketing strategies stem from user activity. These are cases where users demonstrate their competencies regarding marketing strategies and their relationship with the product: collective intelligence can

(sometimes) achieve more than marketing people can; fans know and “own” the text better than its creators, and, above all, they have the power to spread it in a peer-to-peer environment, gaining the attention of other fans. And producers know this. For the launch of the third season of *True Blood*, a video was published on the Facebook Fan Page of the series, with the following description: “the HBO marketing department would like to apologize for getting a little over-exuberant in its enthusiasm for the return of *True Blood*”. In the video we see a member of the marketing team apologizing for all the (weird) products HBO has realized, due to their enthusiasm for the season premiere. What is meaningful here, is that this marketing man is acting exactly like a fan: his happiness, his desire to show it to other people and share his love for the HBO series is the same as a fan. As happened in the case of the videos “The fans have spoken at HBO True Blood”, HBO here demonstrates knowing very well the basic engagement dynamics. Users are definitively becoming advertisers.

The establishment of a peer-to-peer relationship with users sometimes passes by way of calls to action such as choice of the character for the Facebook Fan Page avatar (on *True Blood*, fan page polls of this kind are very frequent) or through celebration of the number of users that are fans of the show (eg. the claim of the *Dexter* Facebook Fan Page on October 2010: “You’re mine now. Dexter 5 millions”). These kinds of initiatives take into account the fans’ contributions to the buzz and sense of success around a TV show, and actively celebrate it.

The network of exchanges, discussions and conversations going on around an audiovisual product has clearly been empowered by social network development.

The Importance of Sharing: Conversations, Social TV and New Entertainment Levels

Interacting with other users, sharing ideas and videos are frequent actions on social networks: comment spaces on Facebook, or use of hashtags on Twitter, are ways to generate buzz and dialogue around audiovisual products. Sharing is primarily a necessity for those users who are most moved by their intense love and interest for a favorite TV series.

That is why most engagement online revolves around forums, discussion boards and tweets. In general, users can share their activities on social networks, and their actions on those platforms can then be rewarded with special discounts or access to exclusive content. NBC, for example, launched the “fan it” campaign in order to reward fans who use MySpace, Twitter, Facebook, Foursquare or MyNBC accounts to share content and promote discussions about NBC network series. In exchange, fans collect points they can use to obtain merchandise, discounts or virtual goods.

But it is first with social TV tools that all the previously analyzed characteristics arrive at their most perfected developmental level.

First of all, we need to look at the discussion sharing potential of social TV applications: Google promoted a Twitter integration tool that allows users to write about their favorite show during broadcast time and, as announced by Nielsen on March 2010, a lot of American

users go online while watching TV. Stemming from experiences such as FoxPop and the social plugins used for social network webcasting, applications like Miso, Tunerfish, GetGlue and Philo, all aim to offer what we could refer to as a double entertainment experience. These applications, in fact, give users the possibility of ‘flagging’ and ‘liking’ programs and, especially, of checking in to audiovisual programs and following/friending other users. That is to say that anyone can create and share a flow of a personal “vision archive”, a timeline shareable on Facebook and Twitter, that functions as a marketing opportunity for investors and a recommendation search engine for other consumers.

In the last months we have seen the emergence of several alliances: *True Blood* made a deal with GetGlue to offer discounts at the HBO ecommerce shop (10% discount for users, 20% for fans and superfans) and exclusive badges (*Dexter*, *Hung*, *Entourage* and GetGlue), or viewing parties (*Chuck*, *Gossip Girl* and others with Philo).

Badge conquering represents a second form of entertainment, beyond audiovisual consumption. So the act of viewing is now a result of a double form of entertainment: watching the show itself and obtaining badges and prizes; and above all, all these actions are shareable. We can generate a personal timeline and a stream of check ins to our favorite shows and we can share it all with friends.

Engagement is more than simple involvement: it is construction of a participatory experience.

Conclusion: The AV as a Wider Experience

As previously mentioned, users are becoming marketers, and they share the same vivid enthusiasm, creativity and relationships with the AV text. Hence, AV media fans are similar to brand communities: collective intelligence and *lovemark* experience are central keywords for understanding the way in which such contemporary tribes function.

User engagement strategies seek to empower consumers as prosumers for marketing purposes, establishing, in doing so, a new kind of relationship between the semiotic notion of text and the marketing concept of consumers and consumption.

User generated content such as personal video-clips, movies, Facebook comments or tweets can be considered part of a wider conception of the text, defined not only by the primary text itself, but also by all the other texts created around it in order to promote this audiovisual product. This new, extended notion of text is a semiotic, marketing-related concept: within this definition of text we can find all elements (trailers, promotional kits, videos, but also ARGs or viral campaign materials etc.) that are part of the whole promotion process, but which have also their own independent “persistence” spaces; that is to say: they are more than mere “paratext” (Genette, 1997): they are also fully independent media productions.

Social Media Marketing strategies lead to a necessary renegotiation of the distinction between primary text (the media product properly understood as such) and secondary text (derivates of its promotion process), which both can be considered entertainment products in their own

right. TV series are not merely audiovisual products, they are also part of a wider world of user experience.

In a context in which “everyone becomes an audience all the time” (Cauldry, 1995: 190) we need to re-elaborate the first principle of the Cluetrain Manifesto: audiovisuals – not markets – are conversations

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