TWO SCREEN VIEWING AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Exploring the invisible backchannel of TV viewing

MARK D. JOHNS
Associate Professor of Communication Studies
Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, USA

Abstract. Use of social networks to create a real-time backchannel of communication among viewers of television programs has been documented, and has been termed “two-screen viewing,” with one screen devoted to the program being watched, and a second screen (usually a laptop, tablet, or cell/mobile phone) devoted to maintaining the backchannel. Prior research has examined two-screen viewing through content analysis of social media posts. However, little has been done to explore the way in which two screen viewing qualitatively changes the viewing experience, or to understand how this behavior contributes to the construction or maintenance of social relationships. Couch (1992) noted that social interaction require a shared focus, a social objective, and congruent functional identities. The first screen program provides the shared focus. Using online interviews, this small pilot project seeks to discover whether social objectives and congruent functional identities are established through two-screen viewing. That is, the study explores how one might go about determining whether this communication actually contributes to social relationships or serves some other, asocial purpose. The present study is a small pilot project only. Preliminary data suggest that there are two types of two-screen viewing defined by different degrees of visible and invisible online practice.

1. Introduction

The formation of fan communities online has been long established (Baym, 2000; Jenkins 1992, 2006). Members of these communities engage one another in conversation about various media programs, sharing observations, opinions, rumors, and fantasies about plots and characters. Fan cultures frequently engage in promoting variant readings of media texts, enabling and empowering individuals to make meanings from the program that were not intended by the producers (Fiske 1982, Jenkins 1992). Fiske (1982) suggested that these contested readings often remained invisible, while Jenkins (1992, 2006) suggests that the internet generally, and social networks in particular, allow these readings to circulate visibly.

More recently, use of social networks to create a real-time backchannel of communication among viewers of television programs has been documented (Boyd 2010; Doughty, Rowland, & Lawson 2011; Ferguson 2012). This has sometimes been
termed the “two screen viewing” experience (BBC Click 2011; Skates 2011) -- with one screen devoted to the program being watched and a second screen (usually a laptop, tablet, or cell/mobile phone) devoted to maintaining the backchannel.

Dedicated social media applications are being marketed to facilitate two screen viewing. The recommendations of social network “friends” can be a powerful promotional tool. Also, the content of the backchannel can provide valuable insights into the type of viewers watching a given program and their immediate responses to it. Thus, producers and broadcasters of media entertainment, and the advertisers who support them, have utilized the two-screen phenomenon both to learn about fan trends and to feed them (Cooper, 2012). GetGlue, miso, movie IQ, Disney SecondScreen, Zeebox, and StarPlayer are some of the applications, launched within the last two to three years, expressly for this purpose.

Real-time two-screen viewing has only recently been recognized as a phenomenon distinct from other forms of online fandom. Thus, the literature on this topic is not abundant. Much of the existing research has been administrative in nature, and remains proprietary. Previous academic studies (i.e. Ferguson 2012) have examined two-screen viewing through content analysis of tweets, status updates, or other public social media posts. However, little has been done to explore the way in which two screen viewing qualitatively changes the actual viewing experience, to understand how this behavior contributes to the construction or maintenance of social relationships, or to examine users’ motivations for engaging in these interactions. It is unclear to what extent the use of social networks in this way allows fan relationships, or alternative fan readings of texts, to become more openly visible. To better understand this relatively new and rapidly growing phenomenon, it is necessary to go beyond the instrumental questions about what is taking place, and to delve into the reasons why participants are engaging in these interactions and how such engagements contribute to users’ social matrixes.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Carl Couch theorized that “a shared focus is established when interactants achieve mutual understanding that they are simultaneously attentive to some third object” (Couch 1992, p. 120), but Couch also noted that social interaction requires “a social objective, and ...congruent functional identities” (p. 119). In the context of media fandom, Couch might say that members of the audience for a particular media program or other content constitute an audience because of their shared focus on the program itself. However, as Walter Ong (1982) has noted, the concept of the media “audience” is an abstraction in that the members are not copresent and have no interaction with one another. Individuals attending to a television screen by themselves, or even in groups of two or three, are isolated from others who may attend to the same content at the same time. Thus, while the ratings tabulators may measure the “audience” for a particular program in the millions, in fact, there are millions of audiences comprising one or few persons.

Online social networks may have the potential to link these individuals into a true audience, but in order to do so, in accord with Couch’s (1992) theoretical assumptions, such networks must create congruent functional identities. Further, they must develop a
shared social objective. That is, members of the social network must recognize one another as persons sharing the common focus on the particular media content who have some past history and common understanding of this content, as well as some developing expectation of planned future action. As Couch details, this past and future need not be elaborate. The shared past may be as little as a common knowledge of other episodes of the same series or of other programs in the same genre. The planned future action may be no little more than continued exchanges beyond the next commercial break, or the next scene in the program. But social relationships take place within time. Simply watching a program, or even commenting upon a program, does not necessarily create a social relationship among audience members unless this temporal link is established and the social other is recognized.

In order to gain insight into the depth and quality of social relationships formed and maintained through two-screen viewing activities it is necessary to go beyond the mere content of the backchannel. One must understand how the act of engaging in this activity impacts both the viewing experience and the social experience of the viewers involved.

Prior research (e.g. Doughty, Rowland, & Lawson 2011; Ferguson 2012) has established that the two-screen experience involves a shared focus, but has failed to uncover clues to the meaning this activity has for the viewer, either in enhancing enjoyment of the program, and/or in enhancing the social relationships with other participants. Absent from these analyses has been information about the prior relationships existing among participants in two screen viewing, the level of shared purpose among participants, or the extent to which two-screen interactions lead to building ongoing relationships in the future. The present research investigates the level to which participants engage in establishing congruent identities and social objectives necessary to develop interactive relationships as they view, or whether other types of asocial motivations are in play. In other words, is the two screen experience only about the moment of viewing, or does this communication contribute to ongoing social relationships, deepening across time, among participants? And if relationships are not being established or maintained, then what other social or personal motivations lie behind this behavior? The purpose of this small pilot study is to determine if the theoretical perspective will be useful in analyzing this behavior, and to test whether the method will be adequate.

3. Method

Through online interviews using a snowball sample, the way in which two-screen viewing qualitatively changes the actual viewing experience, and users’ motivations for engaging in these interactions, are explored. The sample begins with persons known to me who have been observed posting second screen comments on social networks, and expands outward to their two-screen viewing partners. An interview protocol was developed including questions such as:

- How frequently do you engage in two-screen viewing?
During what sorts of media programs are you most likely to engage in two-screen viewing?
Are there specific persons to whom you address your comments during two-screen viewing? If so, who are these persons and what is their relationship to you?
In what ways does two-screen viewing enhance or deepen relationships with these persons?
As you view media programs, do you watch a stream of comments posted by others, or do you only post comments of your own?
Are there particular types of programs during which you intentionally refrain from participating in two-screen viewing? If so, what are these?
On what type of device do you generally engage in two-screen viewing (phone, tablet, laptop, etc.)?
Do you post comments during the program itself, or do you wait for commercial breaks to engage with the social network?
Do you ever use a Tivo or other digital video device to stop the action in order to post comments or read the comments of others?
In what ways does two-screen viewing enhances your enjoyment of media programs?
Are there any ways in which two screen viewing detracts or distracts from the media program itself?

Follow-up questions were added as seemed appropriate or necessary in each interview.

4. Findings

IRB approval for this project was been secured for a period beginning March 1, 2012. A very small number of interviews were conducted (N=6) in order to test the interview protocol and explore whether the theory is appropriate. Results are, of course, preliminary with such a small number of interviews.

4.1. FREQUENCY

For some respondents, engaging in two-screen viewing was dependent upon the schedule of certain television programs, and was carried out only during those specific broadcasts. For example, one responded, “The frequency is really dependent on programming schedules. I’d say several times throughout the year, maybe 10-15?” Another wrote, “A few times a week. It depends on what’s on – the sport or the show, and if I know others are watching the same program.” Yet another responded, “I usually do it during Chicago Bears (football), College football or Chicago White Sox (baseball) games. I’ll be watching the game, but browsing online during the frequent commercials and breaks.”

Others, however, indicated an ongoing, almost continuous interaction with others in a viewing audience. One wrote, “Almost at a constant. Work demands simultaneous use of my computer and smartphone, and occasionally the TV. On weekends, the TV, computer and smartphone may all be on simultaneously.” Another indicated that she
keeps up a running dialog with friends who share her interest in particular programs or actors; “Daily on a very low level (either my husband or myself looking up a quick fact on Wikipedia— someone’s name, what they’ve been in, facts about the story etc.).” It appears that while the two-screen viewing behavior is triggered by certain programming for some, others see the behavior as an extension of fan behavior in which they converse with other fans, through social networks, about a program or series through the week, after the conclusion of one episode and in anticipation of the next.

4.2. PROGRAM CONTENT

Indications in this pilot study point to participants selecting the programs in which they will engage in two-screen viewing according to the perceived preferences of their two-screen viewing partners. Sports broadcasts were also more likely to be those in which two-screen viewing was engaged. One wrote, “Mostly live events like award shows or sporting events, plus highly popular premieres I think my peers will be watching at the same time.” Another responded, 

I do it with two things: major sporting events and television shows that my friends also watch. That frequency is determined by how important an event is, either to the popular consciousness or to my close group of friends that I know will also be engaged in it at the same time. Although a football game, for example, may have some importance to me (but not to my friends), I don’t often participate in two screen viewing if I am simply going to be shouting at myself, so to speak.

Political programs or news events also seem to play a role in two-screen viewing, at least for some. These might also be in the category of “live events,” but seemed to occupy a special place in this presidential primary season. One wrote, “Awards shows, presidential debates or speeches, shows that a majority of our friends also watch.” Yet another suggested that personal two-screen viewing was sports related, while two-screen viewing during work hours tended to involve politics: “My ‘free-time’ two-screen viewing is primarily dominated by sporting events. I share my opinions via social networking sites with other sports fans. At work, CSPAN is typically on the TV so I can keep tabs on current Hill happenings while going about daily computer business, emails.”

However, others sought to avoid the political realm. One wrote, “I probably tend to avoid two-screen viewing related politics.” Another elaborated,

In general, but not always, I will not -personally- post about divisive topics or developing political events such as presidential debates (although I do re-post others’ posts from time to time). Posting about divisive topics only prompts flame-wars and attracts online trolls. I also learned in a college course that employers do judge employees based on their social media posts, so I stick to sporting events -- lighthearted disagreement is fun. Politics is never lighthearted. Or fun.

While some appeared to look forward to sharing favorite dramatic programs with two-screen partners, others seem to want to refrain from dividing their attention and to concentrate fully on certain programs. One wrote, “In our house I think it goes without saying that a 2nd screen will be out during something like the Super Bowl or Oscars, but that phone/computer use should be kept to a minimum during a Monday night
viewing of *Mad Men.*” Another was sensitive to this desire among friends, noting, “Many of my friends watch serial dramas, such as *Mad Men* and *Justified.* However, with real-life getting in the way of viewing, we are often forced to watch these at different times, and I do my friends the courtesy of not commenting on them when I’m watching them.”

4.3. TWO-SCREEN VIEWING PARTNERS

Participants in two-screen viewing appear to fall into two camps; the most prevalent seem to be those who share comments only with a select group of known individuals, but there are also those who seek to play to crowds of strangers with their comments.

Among the former camp, one respondent wrote, “Yes: [name of specific individual]; we fundamentally disagree about the NFC North, but shoot barbs at each other through Twitter and Facebook. All in good fun.” Another wrote, “I direct my comments to people on my Twitter stream who I either know or assume are watching the same sporting event as me. They are a mix of personal friends and people I’ve met online.” Yet another wrote, “I interact with people I’m already ‘following’ on Twitter, and mostly those who I’m friends with in ‘real life’. I’ve never participated in two-screen viewing conversations with anyone I wasn’t already following.”

Among those who seek a wider audience, one wrote, “The persons I share comments with during my personal two-screen viewing time includes a large swath of both strangers and acquaintances. Whoever happens to be using the same social media platforms as me during the event will see my posts. Some are strangers who have subscribed to my posts, others are friends.” Another described her partners very generally; “Most of my two-screen interaction is aimed towards Twitter and I would say that the majority of my followers are 23-30 y.o females.”

4.4. SHARED FOCUS

Participants in this study were asked, “As you view media programs, do you watch a stream of comments posted by others, or do you only post comments of your own?” The purpose of this question was to assess the degree to which participants in two-screen viewing seek to engage in actual social interaction. That is, in Couch’s (1992) terms, do they seek to create both a shared focus, as well as some developing expectation of planned future action? Overwhelmingly, respondents indicated involvement with others by reading, as well as by contributing. However, there is some effort to attend only to certain comments, and not those of the entire audience. Participants are selective in their engagement.

One responded, “I filter the stream of comments using my own lists of friends and through hashtags. I post comments of my own and also comment on other viewer’s posts.” Another wrote, “I do read and comment on posts by others, if they are relevant to the posts I am sharing. I even share others’ posts with my own group of followers, if I deem them to be sufficiently witty or insightful. My ego enjoys being the absolute arbiter of useful information.” Yet another wrote, “During larger events I keep tabs on what others are saying.” But one respondent appeared to be more inclined to strictly broadcast his own thoughts rather than engage with others, writing, “I’ll read them if available...they literally need to be in front of my face, I don’t seek them. The frequent
comments and illegible posts from NFL.com has taught me to keep my expectations low.”

4.5. USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Respondents seemed to have no preference for the second screen device of choice for use while viewing television broadcasts. Many switch among several devices as may be convenient. Surprisingly, however, there seems to be a slight preference for full-keyboard laptops over the phones or tablets typically envisioned as the second screen. One wrote, “Typically iPhone or iPad but if I’m live Tweeting something I prefer my Ultrabook as I prefer to have multiple tabs open. I really like the apps that are being developed for second screen viewing—-I think they have a lot of potential.” Another wrote, “Generally a laptop but sometimes a phone.” Another wrote,

It used to be my phone, but since I bought an iPad, I find myself using that more. There are apps to monitor multiple feeds at once (Twitter, Facebook, etc.), so if I do feel like participating in a Facebook topic, along with Twitter which is my primary outlet, I can do both. On the iPhone, you have to flip back and forth between apps. I don’t own a laptop anymore, and my desktop is in another room and used purely for work.

Similarly, respondents tended to eschew the use of Digital Video Recorders (DVRs, one brand of which is Tivo) or other recording and time-shifting devices. One explained, “I pride myself in my real-time posts. I’ve been re-posted by much more widely-viewed “sports aggregators.” Not keeping up with the live action would lose any chance at having my posts re-posted. The goal is to be part of the discussion, not mopping up afterward.” Another stated, “I would never stop a show to simply read what others think about it - I do that in real time. If I delay it, I may read ahead of the feed (in real time) while the program lags and unintentionally spoil something for myself.” Yet another simply wrote, “I own a Tivo but do not use it for that purpose.”

4.6. TIMING

Respondents appeared to be more or less equally divided between those who wait for commercial breaks to write comments, and those who post comments during the program itself. One wrote, “I try to post in real time.” Another explained in detail,

Primarily during the program. I base a lot of my comments on snarky humor and observation, and those observations mean nothing if they occur 15 minutes after the event happened on-screen. The nature of an instant social network like Twitter is talking about something while it’s happening. I see this as no different than watching a movie with my friends -- if I were to comment on something funny 15 minutes after it happened and the movie has long since moved past it, that would be an annoyance to my friends. But if there’s an overarching theme I’d like to point out in the episode, or an aside that may have something to do with what I think will happen next..., I post those anytime they come to my mind, whether it’s during the program, or in commercial.

Two others, however, did not wish to chance missing something in the program as they posted. One responded, “I usually wait until commercials. The commentary on the
sporting event is secondary to the action.” Another, “I prefer to wait for breaks or commercials, but if something exciting enough happened, I really can’t help myself.”

4.7. ENHANCED VIEWING

Respondents were asked, “In what way would you say that two-screen viewing enhances your enjoyment of media programs?” Most responded at some length to this interview question, or to follow-up questions posed in the interviews. Most pointed to the creation of a virtual community surrounding the broadcast. One wrote, “It tends to make me feel like I’m actually watching the program with other people, even though we aren’t physically in the same room together. I enjoy the interactive element and the conversation with my peers.” Another responded, “Humans are social creatures, and I think that we find natural enjoyment in sharing our opinions. The fact that one can converse with more people than whoever happens to be sitting nearby at the bar just multiplies the effect and enriches the viewing experience. It’s fun!” Yet another wrote, “It allows me to participate in a collective consciousness with friends who are like-minded, despite us being in different places. It creates a friend experience with anyone online.”

Similarly, respondents mentioned the ability to express emotions with others who may be reacting in a similar way. One wrote, “It’s also a good way to vent when watching a frustrating game.” Another, “I get to know what others think or are thinking during the show/game, if that particular penalty or call was as bullshit as I thought it was, and to brag/lament about my team’s fortunes.”

Another theme in these responses had to do with the sharing of information. Some appreciated receiving background information on the backchannel, such as the one who wrote, “I enjoy seeing the thoughts of other people who are watching the same game as me. Sometimes there are angles that I haven’t considered. As a college basketball blogger, it’s interesting to get perspectives from people who are also engaged in viewing the game.” Another indicated a combination of information and socialization, writing,

[The] ability to quickly look up a fact to answer a question you have can enhance your understanding of the program, story-line etc. But when engaging in second-screen viewing for the purpose of social media interaction I think the benefit is enhanced interaction with others---it can make you feel like you are interacting with others socially even though you haven’t left your house (which is probably good and bad), it can also enhance your knowledge of the topic since you are viewing other’s opinions/thoughts and also perhaps thinking about things on a deeper level than you would be if you were simply watching the program.

4.7. DISTRACTIONS

Respondents were asked, “Are there any ways in which two screen viewing detracts or distracts from the media program itself?” Universally, they answered that the distractions are minor compared to the benefits they perceive. One wrote, “I think there’s always the risk that you’re going to miss something while you’re typing----but in most aspects I think it enhances your experience.” Another responded, “When commenting, especially during sports, you run the risk of missing an important or
exciting play. However, with things like TiVo it’s easier to go back and review events you may have missed.” And yet another, “Occasionally I’ll miss something, but modern TV loves to reiterate itself, so there’s always repeats.”

5. Discussion

In light of Carl Couch’s (1992) requirements that social interaction requires a shared focus, a social objective, congruent functional identities, and planned future action, the present study is inconclusive as to whether or not true social interaction takes place in all instances of two-screen viewing. Clearly, those who engage in this behavior with previously identified, known individuals at set times (during particular or pre-arranged television programs or sporting events) have fulfilled all of Couch’s requirements for complete social interaction. This is the majority of respondents in this small pilot study. An additional feature is that these networks of individuals become visible not only to one another, but to others who have access to the Twitter stream or Facebook status posts. Depending on the privacy features employed, this may be true whether or not the individuals involved desire to make their association visible.

However, others have suggested in their responses that they post comments with little or no reference to the comments of others. Other respondents have indicated that they post comments to widely read forums read by large numbers of essentially unknown or even anonymous audience members. In these instances, it is less than clear that Couch’s conditions for social interaction are being met, and the present study does not supply sufficient data to make a determination.

Further, if some are participating in two-screen viewing only in the mode of “broadcasting” comments to unknown others, without social interaction, if relationships are not being established or maintained, the present study provides little or no indication of what other social or personal motivations lie behind this behavior. Some of the responses hint that having a post picked up and repeated by others with a larger following makes visible the expertise of the one originating the post, and enhances that person’s prestige among other fans. This points in the direction of a uses and gratifications type of study, which was not the direction of these interviews.

At least one respondent mentioned the use of “snarky humor” on the backchannel, suggesting the possibility of mocking or questioning the producers in the way they have presented their storylines or the way a team is playing its game. This points to the possibility of alternative readings of the media text being suggested or developed through the two-screen viewing process. If this is the case, the social network may make these alternative readings visible in ways not generally done in real time heretofore. However, the questions posed did not explore this sufficiently.

In the present study, at least four the respondents are male, one is female, and one unknown. Responses did not betray noticeable gender differences in behavior or levels of social interaction, but with such a small number of interview subjects, it is difficult to know with any certainty if gender plays a role in how two-screen viewing is used. Similarly, there were no questions regarding race or ethnicity, and all respondents had email addresses pointing to U.S. locations. As the research continues, a greater effort will be necessary to explore this phenomenon in more diverse populations.
6. Conclusion

As a pilot study, this small investigation verifies that two-screen viewing is an important behavior for study. However, there is reason to suspect that some of the interview questions will need to be adjusted going forward. Issues of technology used appear to be irrelevant, as respondents do not consistently use any one platform, nor does the selection of platform (laptop, tablet, or smartphone) appear to affect the basic behavior in any meaningful way. Similarly, while some report using digital video recorders, such as Tivo, to rewind the live broadcast when something is missed, no one indicated time-shifting as a factor. In order to enjoy the experience of interacting with other viewers, it is necessary to watch the broadcast live or real time, and not delayed. At least one respondent mentioned the dedicated applications becoming available for two-screen viewing (such as GetGlue, miso, Zeebox, and others), and the employment (or not) of these applications would certainly be more important to understanding how two-screen viewing is being carried out than information about the hardware. Because these applications are less popular than social networks such as Twitter or Facebook, using them would make the interaction less visible and places the conversation in venues under the powerful control of producers and advertisers, who are the builders and promoters of the applications.

Conversely, in view of Couch’s (1992) theoretical framework for examining this phenomenon, the questions posed to interview subjects in the pilot study do not focus sufficiently on the social relationships created or sustained by two-screen viewing. Going forward in this research it will be necessary to develop interview questions that address the nature of the relationships between the interview subjects and those with whom they interact in two-screen viewing. There are hints, in this preliminary data, that while most tend to share their comments with a relatively invisible few persons with whom they are already well-acquainted, others are striving for highly visible, widespread recognition of their fan knowledge and perceptive observations. The distinctions between these two types of two-screen viewing need to be better understood, and interview questions need to be formulated that will enable this information to be gained.

By design, this small pilot study is extremely limited and few conclusions can be drawn from such a small number of respondents. While two-screen viewing warrants further investigation, the primary benefit of the present study is to guide and refocus the ongoing research.

References


