

# The Implementation of Social Interactive Television

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, some insight is provided on the main issues regarding the adoption of Social Interactive Television and the conditions that will allow it to foster and grow to become part of people's everyday lives. It is supported that, besides the importance of the development of adequate systems and applications and the difficulties related to the convergence of different technologies, the most critical ingredient for success is the consumer and the ways that one's needs, hopes and preferences are addressed. Finally, some ideas are presented on what might be the results of Social TV's wide range adoption.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of Social TV has come forward over the last years as the next phase of Interactive Digital TV (IDTV) in its evolution from a medium that promotes the viewers' active participation to one that aims to their engagement and self-expression. This transformation of scope is gradually gaining importance, since nowadays, due to the explosion of the World Wide Web, people are more aware of the possibilities that electronic systems have to offer and of the ways they can exploit them to their interest and satisfaction.

Of course, this evolution became possible because of the parallel growth in IDTV research and the increasing complexity that relevant applications managed to address. Also, the focus towards designing platforms that would take advantage of the media convergence brought new dynamics to the medium and interesting business potentials to the market.

However, following Bell's (2006) suggestion that "whilst platforms converge, people don't", it now seems necessary to focus on the consumers, and not only to the business structure nor the technology dynamics. Current research [4] shows more and more that is the consumers' preferences and activities that set the standards for the development of Interactive Television, and not the other way around.

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## 2. WATCHING SOCIAL TV

### 2.1 Social TV Viewing Patterns

Social TV incorporates all the inherent qualities of the traditional mass medium, as well as some capabilities of the Internet: specifically, the level of interactivity is limited by what the technology allows -but is not determined by it-, its service offerings can be personalized and independent of time and space limitations, and it can be used for electronically induced communication, consumption and even community formulation [13].

Firstly, viewers are enabled to actively engage with the TV by selecting information from teletext-style services, by enjoying enhanced TV shows, and/or by participating in live interactive TV games [2]. This experience reasonably shifts the way TV is perceived and experienced, while increases the viewers' awareness that they act in a new electronic environment, which is similar to the one reached by their computers.

Then, as viewers slowly become more familiar with the new setting, they are increasing their level of expertise and they explore its dynamics. It is logical to assume that people progress accordingly, so as to extend their "electronic habits" through their TV. So, viewing scenarios that suggest of people participating in virtual communities or posting in blogs seem feasible. So, television viewers can have the possibility to publish their personal material -like personal diaries, photos and music, home videos-, express their preferences and make suggestions. The only assumption is that viewers can also have access to others' material from many sources, like the World Wide Web, Peer-to-Peer (P2P) networks and broadcasted content.

Based on this development, viewers-users are given the choice not only to decide when and how they want to watch a TV program distributed by a mediator, but also to access content generated by other independent viewers and even to interact by introducing their own material. Those interactive features that allow user-to-user communication may have a positive effect on how users perceive the "sincerity" of television [12], while they encourage individuals to express their preferences both implicitly and explicitly and socialize both on real and post-time.

In the case of virtual communities in Social TV, their formulation is usually based upon the viewers' interest in a TV program (a show, a game or a TV series) or related to the notion that those watching the same TV content also share some common characteristics. Then, viewers expect to find like-mindedness among other members and connect to them in order to reach better information (e.g. find out details of a TV hero), receive more credible suggestions [5,10] and express themselves in public.

This opportunity to connect with others and reach an abundance of information, while participating in a community with higher or lower involvement, refers to a core value of socialization that is the increase of technical (the skills and knowledge needed in order to execute tasks competently) or social (knowledge of the expectations and norms of the group members) knowledge acquired from other group members through some exchange activity – active or passive [3]. So, the engaged viewer will be able to gain additional knowledge according to his needs and preferences, while maintaining some sense of familiarity with the information providers -individuals or communities he/she has voluntarily selected- and the technological setting -the “good, old” television.

## 2.2 Concepts and Applications

The overall TV concept is gradually shifting, since business and academic research leads to systems and applications that incorporate services for the extensive communication, collaboration and socialization among viewers. So, the concept of Social TV is now being promoted as the medium that supports communication and social interactions – remote or co-located – in a TV-watching content, or related to a TV experience, and technology that supports these communications and interactions [4]. The development of Social TV’s systems and applications follows the recent interest for innovative interactive features that are based on the abilities and the initiatives of users, and not primarily of the business providers [9]. This phenomenon is due to the attraction of user-generated content, i.e. the ability of almost anyone to produce and distribute content [11], while expressing preferences, opinions and needs. The Web paradigm made evident that people cherish the opportunity to communicate with others, expose aspects of their lives in public and even participate in virtual communities. Accordingly, viewers gradually become more demanding regarding the capabilities of their television set and expect to use TV as a similar platform to the Web.

Of course, this demand is also identified by the designers and researchers, which try to satisfy it by introducing additional features and services to their social television systems, most of which are still on a conceptual stage, or exist as lab prototypes, beta or pilot versions. Overall, the aims of Social TV Systems are: (a) to enable viewers at different locations to communicate with one another, (b) to allow direct (and indirect) sociability, (c) to support the emotional sphere of sociability, (d) to train viewers on generating their own content and distributing it to similar others, and (e) to support the formulation of virtual communities [6].

Thus, Social TV designs are primarily based on the ways users wish to incorporate them into everyday life [8] and on the fact that personalization allows users to browse programs more efficiently according to their taste, while socializing with others and, even, building social networks. For instance, these systems allow viewers to integrate voice communication, text chat, presence and context awareness, TV recommendations, ratings or video-conferencing with the TV set.

However, in order for these systems to overcome the prototype stage and become actual part of the viewers’ routines, several conditions should be met. Firstly, the business environment should be clarified so that each “player” in the media market recognizes its role, and, more importantly, understands

and accepts his collaboration with other technology, content or service providers - and the ends users. Also, the fact that Social TV must satisfy different markets - in terms of geographical areas, size, technological standards and cultural criteria - while enabling some common structure to all viewers sets additional obstacles to its smooth introduction to the world. Thus, it is preferable that the adoption process of Social TV will respect these differentiating variables, conform to each market accordingly and apply separate strategies.

Secondly, it is critical that viewers grasp all the benefits of Social TV and have the interest and the ability to explore it. So, these systems should be launched in combination with all the adequate training tools and the necessary technology, which supports the individuals’ expectations and needs. Perhaps, these systems could be offered for a short while as demos launched in parallel to the broadcasted content, so that the users become intrigued without having to invest in a technology they do not know or completely understand, and seems similar -if not less valuable - to the existing computer offering. Moreover, it seems important that all these new systems should “feel” as relax and common as the traditional TV setting, while offering interesting new services to catch the viewers attention - and their will to spend time, effort and money.

Finally, if the potential of blogs and virtual communities is taken under consideration, all of the market players have reasons to support the adoption of Social TV and profit. Specifically, the business and marketing models for television will resemble more to the electronic ones, where value is derived by their direct effects to engaged individuals.

## 2.3 Users

Since Television has gained a primary place in every household, it is difficult to define specifically the segment of potential users in its evolved stage. Also, research on IDTV first and Social TV next has focused a lot on considering the needs of every possible viewer. Specifically, one can find applications design for especially qualified for complex tasks adults or inexperienced children, for members of the Net Generation or seniors, for expert users or people with mental or physical disabilities.

Thus, the question is not “who the potential users of Social TV are”, but rather how Social TV can attract and satisfy different kind of users. Since specific applications are already designed to address different kind of expectations, it seems better to spend some effort in order to approach the appropriate segment, rather than to try to make one “recipe” for all.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that younger individuals with prior Internet experience, interest for the benefits of e-services and need for self-expression might seem as a more adequate segment of potential Social TV users. However, this suggestion can be different according to the criteria applied, i.e. necessity to communicate, to feel part of a group, to express oneself, to be entertained, to learn, to keep up with modern times. Then, perhaps the need for Social TV may seem stronger for a senior that has never used nor possess a personal computer, than for a teenager that can satisfy its goals through its mobile phone, its personal computer or face-to-face interactions.

### 3. CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL TV IMPLEMENTATION

While participating in this new compelling setting, viewers still face the limitations of television use, which has not yet managed or chosen to distance from the traditional patterns. So, the scenarios of viewing Social TV are still determined to a major degree by the use and the design of the medium, as well as the business models. Any attempt of simply trying to transfer the Internet paradigm to TV is doomed, if the media differences are not thoroughly examined.

With respect to the conditions of use, it is always necessary to consider the distance of the viewer from the screen - or the screen's size and technical abilities -, the use of a simple remote control in most cases (or perhaps a keyboard), its massive, differentiated audience and, more importantly, the reasons why a person watches television (e.g. to relax, to be informed or entertained or even, to have a "companion" while doing something else simultaneously), where (e.g. in the living room, a bedroom, a public space) and with whom (e.g. alone, with family members or friends).

On the other hand, the media environment includes a complex set of broadcasters, content providers, public authorities and telecommunication companies. It differentiates substantially according to the economic and technological standards of a country, the business practices and investment margins, as well as the size, the level of technological literacy, the cultural and behavioral characteristics of the public.

### 4. THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL TV

Social TV should not be examined only as a "mechanical combination of technical components" that allows communication, but as a technology designed to satisfy the social impetus [7]. Under this spectrum, it is logical to assume that more sophisticated systems and applications will appear which will promote the social status of the medium and will attract those who wish to maximize their choices without "ever parting from their couch".

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### 6. BIO

Evangelia Mantzari is a doctorate student at Athens University of Economics and Business, in the Department of Management Science and Technology (AUEB, DMST). She is part of ELTRUN, the e-Business Research Center, and she is actively engaged in projects relating to Interactive Digital Television, Consumer Behavior, e-Business and e-Government. Also, she is currently member of the coordinating committee for the Greek forum for Interactive Digital TV, which aims in evaluating the conditions for the media market's transition. Evangelia holds an International MBA degree (AUEB, DMST) and a first degree in Economics from the University of Piraeus. Besides her research activity, she is employed as a financial consultant for the National Bank of Greece and as a trainer in the field of electronic business and marketing for the national program of lifelong learning of the Greek Ministry of Education.