

Large, Visible and Loud: recalling some basic circumstances for ‘social television’

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‘Social’ is a cover word for a large range of behaviors, practices, and potential usages and products solutions among researchers, designers and developers working in the field of interactive television. While it is not my intention here to delve into the full range of these definitions, their assumptions and the usages they inspire, I will address a basic assumption of this workshop in hopes of generating discussion about the particular type of ‘social TV’ experience advocated in the call for papers. Specifically, I am interested in the assumption that the type of social networking experiences that have proven wildly popular globally on PC platforms (sites and applications such as Orkut*, Cyworld*, MySpace*, Mixi*, QQ* and Facebook* to name a few) will prove popular on a television platform.

While the increasing prevalence of connected CE devices and strong worldwide growth in high-speed Internet connections to homes suggest exciting possibilities for the convergence of broadcast and broadband experiences, is it presumptuous to assume that being ‘social’ through an IP connection to a television set can be imported from PC-based applications? Does importing social networking usages from the PC to the TV reveal more about our own perspectives and biases as professionals generally steeped in the field of *human-computer interaction* than about the social nature of the television experience? In particular, when we borrow the term *social* from the world of social networking on the PC or mobile devices, our perspective focuses on the *individual* using a device to interact with other non co-located individuals. What would happen if we instead took the perspective of researchers, designers and product developers in *human-television interaction*? Both historically and in current practices, television has a very different set of social practices surrounding its use than the PC, and supports a different set of social experiences. Drawing on ethnographic research on television use in homes around the world, I draw attention to some basic circumstances of the most common physical attributes of television sets, their placement in homes and their status as shared technologies among household members. These admittedly very basic and simple observations point to some challenges for adopting social networking technologies to the television set.

Television Screens are Large

Television sets are designed for viewing from a much greater distance than a PC or mobile devices. While TVs have always been large, marketers are pushing even larger screens, particularly as the cost of flat panel screens

continues to decrease and HDTV allows for larger screens in smaller spaces (recommended viewing distances for HD being nearly half those for SD images.) While the screens are large, they are generally not considered by most viewers as suitable for reading and writing large amounts of text – currently a primary means of communication in social networking applications. And while many users lament the number of remote controls associated with their TVs, for the vast majority a keyboard is even less appealing. Setting aside keyboards and text, what shape could social networking take on the television?

TVS are Visible

Because their screens are large, TVs are highly visible. While the continuing shift to flat, thin panel televisions from CRT models have reduced attempts to minimize their presence by hiding them in large cabinets, they still tend to dominate rooms in which they are placed. Furthermore, they are generally placed so that as many potential viewers as possible can see the screen, usually from what is considered the most comfortable (and least upright) vantage points in the room – soft chairs, sofas, futons, beds, tatami mats, etc. Television supports co-located social behaviors such as spending time together and chatting about the content on the screen, and discourages social interactions that draw an individual’s attention away from the co-located shared experience. Time and time again, we’ve heard in interviews that the TV screen is a shared screen, and that behaviors that favor the individual’s needs over those of other current or potential users violate this code of the TV as a social technology, prompting the individual to shift to another screen in the home (texting on a mobile phone, multitasking watching videos and IM on a computer screen). Is the highly visible TV screen the most appropriate screen for communication at a distance? What other connected devices can we use for social networking on or through the TV?

TVs are Loud

Televisions take up not only physical space, but also aural space. They are not technologies commonly used with headphones and indeed are valued not only for the video they show, but the sound they emit, which allows for use of the device even when multitasking other activities that require visual attention or indeed when the user is not even in the same room! Their aural output dominates people’s attention, with co-located social activity often bent to accommodate it. (see, for example: Ducheneaut et al 2008)

What does it mean to design social networking applications for a platform that is valued as much for the immediacy of its aural as well as visual messages?

Bio: Alex Zafiroglu is a researcher in the User Experience Group of Intel Corporation's Digital Home Group where she has researched television use in 10 countries in the past 3 years . She holds a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Brown University.

Works cited:

Ducheneaut, N., R Moore, L. Oehlberg, J. Thornton and E. Nickell "Social TV: Designing for Distributed, Sociable Television Viewing" *International Journal of Human-computer Interaction*, 24 (2), 136-154, 2008.

*Other names and brands may be claimed as the property of others.