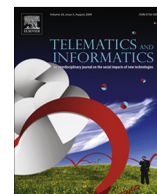Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Telematics and Informatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tele

Emergence of the viewing public: Does social television viewing transform individual viewers into a viewing public?

Yun Jung Choi

School of Communication & Media, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, South Korea

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study wanted to find out whether social viewing, the act of exchanging ideas through online media while watching television programs, can turn an audience member into a viewing public. This study proposed nine variables that represent attributes of viewing pubic and content analyzed social viewing discussions based on those variables. The results showed that more than half of the discussions reflected negotiated reading and independent reading of the television texts. A factor analysis of the nine indicators of social viewing resulted in three factors – issue viewing, network viewing and critical viewing. The comparison of three factors across four programs showed that social viewing is sensitive to genres of programs. As expected, the documentary, a non-fiction genre, caused viewers to be engaged in issue related discussions with critical perspectives. The drama genre, on the other hand, was less successful in transforming an audience into public. The study also found that the quality of program did not influence the social viewers' discussions.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Recent developments in telecommunication technology have expanded the way television is being watched. In the past, television viewing was a social experience (Lull, 1980) around which social interactions occurred. Families gathered in front of the television, usually situated in the middle of a living room, to watch a show together and discuss the program afterwards. The social experience of watching television has diminished due to the expansion of channels through cable networks, online media and satellite channels, and the expansion of individual media devices such as PCs, iPads and smart phones. In many households, people have begun to watch television in their own rooms causing television viewing to become an individual experience. This individualized viewing has given viewers freedom to watch television contents whenever they want in diverse contexts, but, at the same time, isolated viewers. The television viewing audience has become fragmented, individualized, and dispersed (Ang, 1996).

Recently, television viewers have started using second screens, such as tablet computers or smart phones, to connect to web-based media and SNSs (Social Networking Service) to connect to others who are watching the same program, to be able to share their viewing experiences. People are posting comments online, reading what others post, or engaging in live-chatting about television shows in real time (Smith and Boyles, 2012). In this study, these connected viewing experiences through online networks will be conceptualized as 'social viewing.'

Social viewing is a viewing context, where people with diverse backgrounds are watching visual content together in a mediated environment and exchanging diverse ideas related to the program, which can lead to more analytical and critical viewing. Most social viewings are happening through SNSs such as Twitter and Facebook. Many applications and sites devoted to social viewing, called social TV apps, such as GetGlue and MISO TV, were developed, but most social viewers are still connected through SNSs.

This study will try to answer a question that has been posed by many scholars that examines the relationship between social viewing audiences and the public (Dahlgren, 1995; Dayan, 2005; Livingstone, 2005; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). The question is whether individuals who watch television together, through technological means, can turn into a viewing public. Isolated viewing can hinder people, who are concerned about social issues, from making their concerns public and discussing them with others. This research suggests that social viewing is a facilitator that can turn a once isolated, passive viewing audience into a new form of public called the 'viewing public.' Social viewing can give isolated viewers the chance to connect to other viewers who watch the same television programs and have discussions about the messages presented.

This study will content analyze discussions that social viewers participated in during and after television air time, and find out whether those discussions can be considered to be deliberative discussions held by the public. Additionally, this study will also find out whether discussions social viewers hold are influenced by television program genre and quality. This study will examine whether social viewing alone encourages individual audience members to become part of the viewing public regardless of the genre or quality of the program, or if social viewers are influenced by the discussion contexts that television programs provide.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social viewing

A new form of television viewing has emerged as SNSs such as Twitter and Facebook are used while watching television so that individual viewers can share their television experiences with other viewers who are viewing the same show. Many people are beginning to watch television with a second screen such as tablet PC or smartphone so that they can post comments during the show and discuss their opinions with others. Isolated television viewers are now connected through online networks. Real-time discussion has also become possible, allowing viewers to be able to engage in interpreting television messages in real-time as they are watching television shows. Diverse social TV applications and devices such as Miso TV, Get Glue, and Amigo TV, which facilitate co-viewing, have also been introduced (Weisz et al., 2007). Many of these social TV devices have a function that allows friends to be invited to view a show, make audio and video comments, and post CG(Computer Graphic)s on the screen. Theses social devices converges television and social networks, which allows viewers to share television contents with their friends, and add values to the watching experiences.

One distinct feature of this form of television viewing is that individuals form a networked community by sharing their thoughts on the internet. Some scholars call these individuals who have formed a community online a networked audience (Marwick and Boyd, 2010). Networked audiences consist of viewers who are not only connected to producers, but each other, creating active, communicative networks (Boase et al., 2006; Haythornthwaite, 2002). Networked audiences monitor other people's comments and activities and give feedback.

Individuals who have formed a networked audience are decoding television messages at the social level, interpreting messages in a collective way. Networked audiences constantly exchange comments about shows, have discussions, and come to conclusions and consensuses about shows. Members monitor other people's opinions on shows, make adjustments in their opinions or try to persuade fellow viewers to change theirs, and make decisions about television contents in groups. In summary, networked audiences engage in creating collective evaluations of shows. This is a great development for individuals who, in the past, interpreted television messages by themselves, based on their own prior knowledge and experiences (Morley, 1992). Unlike the television social experience of the past, where people who share a similar background or geographic location watch together, this new form of viewing allows for the creation of heterogeneous networks, where individuals with diverse perspectives gather together and watch a show. This heterogeneous network allows people to experience opinions that differ from their own and make more deliberative decisions about television content by exchanging oppositional perspectives.

In this light, this study will refer to this new form of viewing as "social viewing." A simple definition of social viewing is "chatting while watching television." It refers to both synchronous and asynchronous online mediated communication between people who are watching television in different locations. Social viewing is a mechanism that allows audience members to interpret television messages at the social level, which can lead to more diverse discussions about the contents featured in television shows, potentially leading to discussions about public issues. Therefore, social viewing refers to collective viewing mediated by online discussions, transforming isolated individual viewers into connected viewers who interpret television messages at a social level, potentially becoming the viewing public.