

TV.com: Participatory Viewing on the Web

JUNE DEERY

TODAY WE ARE ON THE BRINK OF THE WIDESPREAD ADOPTION OF SOME form of hybrid Web-TV technology, a convergence that will bring about fundamental changes in how we think about television and its audience. The resultant device will represent more than a refashioning, or what Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin refer to as a “remediation,” of previous media.¹ It will involve more than the partial borrowing of the conventions and structures of an older and still extant medium, as when television developed after and then alongside radio. Instead, the next development will entail a complete technological enfolding of one medium into another, resulting in what can best be described as an intermedium, the term coined by artist Dick Higgins in the mid-1960s to indicate a merging of two or more media into something new. Whether this future black box will ultimately be perceived as a TV set with computer capabilities or a computer that narrowcasts television is up for debate—and will be bitterly fought over by commercial enterprises.² Given that it is still difficult to send broadcast-quality video over the Internet and that television is the more familiar and accessible technology, what will likely become standard in America in the near future is a TV device with Web content, such as Microsoft’s WebTV, now MSN TV.³

Whatever the final configuration, the convergence will result in an alteration of televisual content, in large measure because the new technology will alter the way television communicates with its audience. This article looks for signs of things to come by examining the current use of the World Wide Web by television viewers and

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producers. What we find to date is not a complete merging of media, but a dual use of two separate media that are becoming increasingly interlocked.

Already the computer has engendered a new TV audience whose members communicate in a public, many-to-many, online environment that enables them to be more active and participatory than audiences of the past. Under pressure of this online activity, producers have begun to recast television programming. Though tentative, these trials go beyond a largely stylistic imitation of the Web, as when the TV screen displays split screens and multiple banners—the so-called CNN effect. What is new is that Web communication is now being built into programming to render television, in Marshall McLuhan's terms, an even cooler medium.⁴

It has been a long time coming. For decades, there has been talk of “interactive” television of one sort or another, and although there has been a slow evolution toward this end, nothing is as radical as forecasters predicted.⁵ The VCR, the remote control, pay-per-view, early teletext services like the British Ceefax, and now digital TV and PVRs (e.g., TiVo)—each has contributed to making television more interactive.⁶ For years, the low-tech telephone also has enabled viewers to respond in a limited fashion to television programming, usually to make purchases. But with the explosion of the World Wide Web, unprecedented forms of interactivity have emerged, some of which are dialogic, viewer-generated, and outside industry control.

This viewer engagement is perhaps reflective of a broad cultural trend, evidenced, for example, in Pierre Bourdieu's investigation of “the popular aesthetic,” a move away from the elite/Modernist values of distance and disinterestedness (“the pure gaze”) toward the desire to participate, empathize, and “enter into the game” (32–33). As audiences push to cross the broadcast threshold, TV companies are beginning to take note because it is in their economic interest to do so. Not long ago, the choice was largely between broadcast or participatory media—for example, the television or the telephone. Today, dual media use enables both, and broadcasters are beginning to seize on Web use, clumsily at times, in order to keep or win back viewers with attractive demographics who have been spending more time away from their TV screens. They now invite TV audiences to participate online as players, commentators, and voters, while still hoping for the impact—and dollars—of mass broadcasting.

Although commercial interest in Web-TV linkages is currently high among advertisers and producers, their perspective is not the primary focus of this discussion. What follows is a survey of dual TV and Web use as it affects viewership. My focus is on American media in the period 2000–2002, when the idea of using these two media in tandem was first popularized. My analysis begins by delineating general features of their conjoined use, before moving on to examine sample Web sites.

Television on the Web

Before categorizing sites that currently refer to television, the first thing to note is the sheer volume. The topic of television has spawned tens of millions of sites.⁷ Its programming has proved to be an ideal subject because it was designed to appeal to a heterogeneous population. Viewers require comparatively little contextualization or background knowledge before they can weigh in on this subject and form passionate opinions. Hence, millions do—and this number will only grow as TV screens offer Web access.

There are currently several categories of online reference to television. One is essentially journalistic and a carryover from print media. This includes reviews and essays reproduced from print publications (e.g., *TV Guide*, *Entertainment Weekly*) or similar material written exclusively for online magazines (e.g., Salon.com). Some search engines offer an ensemble of pages devoted to television coverage (e.g., Yahoo! TV Coverage),⁸ while other sites have been established to provide information of a practical sort, such as current TV listings. Less-visited academic articles and other kinds of formal television research are also available online.

A major category is what is usually termed the official site for a show mounted by a TV company, material that originated as a form of marketing. Every TV company now has an official portal that links to sites aimed at viewers of specific shows. The commercial advantages are clear; although it is unlikely that a Web site will generate more business by converting casual Web visitors into new viewers of a show, visiting the official site may keep a TV audience engaged and increase its loyalty to a show or brand. Moreover, for the comparatively little extra expense of running a Web site, TV companies can sell advertising

space online as well as on air, and can cross-promote other shows on their network.

However, so far the majority of sites devoted to television are viewer-generated. These unofficial or “nonsanctioned” sites (as *Survivor* producer Mark Burnett [26] terms them) are often more significant than their official counterparts in terms of popularity and diversity of content. Indeed, the Web’s deconstruction of traditional one-way, hierarchical communication is perhaps its most significant contribution to the notion of interactive television. Amateur sites can float in cyberspace as prominently as corporate sites, decentralizing the flow of information and providing a space for speculation, rumor, and even subversion of network control. They expand fandom and make it mainstream, building sometimes powerful online communities whose energetic cultural production has begun to exert some influence, as we shall see. As viewers become writers, these sites also turn our attention to viewing as a process and to the audience as text.

As yet, there is generally no overt tension or competition between official and viewer-generated sites, although TV companies can and do shut down sites if they use unauthorized material or infringe on copyright. Unofficial sites that allude to particular TV programs are undoubtedly benefiting from the branding created by TV companies, usually at some considerable expense, but at this point these corporations presumably regard online interest as mostly beneficial to their products.

A viewer site, official or unofficial, typically performs three functions: it allows viewers to discuss a program in a many-to-many mode such as a message board; it provides information about the show; and, to a lesser but increasing extent, it allows visitors to buy associated merchandise. On unofficial sites, the latter feature is not necessarily commercially driven but is regarded as a peer service.

Visitors may simply view the screen and navigate the site with only a little more exertion than channel surfing with a remote. But the opportunity is there to experience more participatory forms of viewing. As well as writing text, visitors may participate in polls, games, and sweepstakes, or even play along in some fashion with the program. Indeed, some fans are cashing in on this activity by selling their own templates for participatory viewing.⁹ In an electronic update of print fanzines, some sites provide forums for fanfictioners. Others, such as official sites for reality TV shows, furnish application forms for future

series, thus facilitating TV production and affecting future content by enabling viewers to become cast members. This continues the process that Web communication expedites—that of transforming the private into the public.

A Brief Typology

Site Form and Content

Official and unofficial sites can be distinguished according to whether they are evolving or fixed, critical or uncritical, and open or closed. The distinction between evolving and fixed refers to how much and how frequently site content changes due to new input, whereas openness refers to accessibility to online visitor participation. Usually it is a matter of degree. Broadly speaking, viewer-generated sites tend to be open and evolving, while official sites are more closed and fixed, producing, in Roland Barthes's terms, more readerly (*lisible*) than writerly (*scriptible*) texts.¹⁰ This is not always the case; some fan sites are entirely closed and fixed while, from early on, some official sites have been quite evolutionary. However, viewer-generated sites have tended to exploit the Web's interactivity more comprehensively than official sites. As for content, company sites obviously do not criticize the programs they are designed to promote, whereas viewer sites may take any stance. Some even offer the opportunity to rewrite the televisual text in the form of fan fiction. Yet, intentionally or not, program promotion is one function online fans perform and presumably one reason why TV companies do not view these sites as unwelcome competition.

Having noted some understandable differences, a recent trend has been for official sites to imitate the unofficial. Despite fundamental divergences in viewpoint and function, many company sites are attempting to incorporate the informal and open camaraderie of viewer sites. Hence, ABC's homepage has a "Community Page" link that attempts to build the kind of informal and enthusiastic exchange that unofficial sites offer, with chat, gossip, polls, and FAQs. Other commercial Web pages are following suit. These construct consumers as "fans" who are encouraged to chat online about their enthusiasm for the product being sold. They also invite users to contact the manufacturer: "We'd love to hear from you" is the friendly solicitation

from Palm, Inc. on its Community page (<http://www.palm.com/community/>). Whether a collectivity of consumers can be said to constitute a community is, of course, highly debatable.¹¹ In any case, it will be interesting to see how far television companies can go in allowing their viewers/consumers to produce critical content on open but official sites, thereby relinquishing control over Web, and eventually TV, content.

Dual Media Use

Leaving aside whether sites are official or unofficial, when it comes to the overarching relationship between television and the Web, there are further broad categories to consider. First, there is what we might call a *depth* relationship: TV viewers go to a Web site to find out more about a show, news item, or advertised product. So far, this is an optional rather than a necessary use of a secondary medium to supplement the primary medium. In this instance, TV producers and viewers are making use of the Web's practically infinite spatiotemporal and hypertextual nature—its ability to store and retrieve a greater amount of efficiently organized information than other media. Some channels have begun to display their address permanently as a constant dual identity, e.g., “Discovery.com.” Others periodically display banners with URLs when they want to offer viewers specific information. News programming and public stations have been among the first to exploit this dual media use. But the real pioneers were the advertisers. Today, almost every television ad cites a URL, which makes immediate sense because a Web site can deliver more and more tightly targeted information than thirty seconds of television, can do so at far less expense, and can even process an online sale.

Of course, this is not to say that depth guarantees profundity. To date, much Web information is only laterally extensive; users simply surf from one shallow source to another, a riding of the wave emblematic of postmodern surface dwelling. Moreover, the easy access to online information that TV programs promise is not always delivered, as when data is buried, stale, or absent. But the potential to add supplementary information has been recognized and is a growing trend. This, logically, will alter TV content by allowing a different distribution of information than is possible in a single medium presentation. TV broadcasts can condense or eliminate information that

instead is provided online; the broadcaster, in other words, can also narrowcast to more targeted audiences. This in turn alters what is meant by viewing because it encourages viewers to make decisions and choices, in an expansion of some features of older print media. Like print media and unlike television's generally fixed temporal sequencing, time online is spatialized to some extent. Information is displayed before the viewer who selects which data to view at which time, equivalent to choosing which page of a newspaper to read. Television is already straining toward this spatialization as much as the medium can bear, as when its screen adopts the multiple frames we are used to seeing on a Web page. But it awaits a full convergence for a richer and less busy display of information through hyperlinks.

A second relationship that has been established between the two media is one of *extension*, as when a Web site extends a television program in some fashion by releasing extra footage. For example, although the television series *Big Brother* generally is broadcast several hours a week, it is also narrowcast live online 24/7, while on *The Real World*, a webcam has been used to allow viewers to see one hour of extra uncut footage per week. Clearly, by destabilizing television's temporal and spatial parameters, such dual media use eventually will force a new definition of "the show." However, online extension is still technically difficult to mount and remains comparatively rare.

Interactive Modes

Given that the Web enables participatory viewing, a distinction can be made between *shallow* and *deep* interactivity. The interactivity is shallow when audience members participate in a parallel fashion and, for example, try to guess the outcome of a show without affecting the broadcast. The interactivity is what I refer to as deep when the audience's Web input actually affects or determines the show. Examples of this are as yet rare, but they include fan sites that influence program content or, more indirectly, the scheduling and continuance of shows. In some instances, fans have made themselves heard by successfully organizing online "save our show" campaigns to affect programming decisions. For instance, online fan pressure is thought to have convinced WB to extend the run of the teen show *Roswell*. When it was rumored that the show was not going to be renewed after its first

season, *Roswell* fans mobilized online and sent WB thousands of bottles of Tabasco sauce in support of this “hot” new show. Although it is difficult to prove what made WB eventually extend the run, the show’s producers have posted letters of thanks to the online community for saving the series. Other “save our show” Web campaigns have included those for ABC’s *Once and Again* and *Cupid*, the Sci-Fi channel’s *Sliders*, and WB’s *Gilmore Girls*. Some official sites have begun to allow viewers to select material. For example, viewers are asked to vote for which video will appear on air (MTV), which program will be broadcast later that evening (Nickelodeon), or which game will be showcased (ESPN). But so far, direct audience influence on TV programming has been fairly restricted and largely under producer control.

Online communication can, however, take a turn unintended by TV companies and set up a conflict between viewer and producer. A good example was the attempt by gay organizations to use the Web site StopDrLaura.com to garner support for getting Dr. Laura Schlessinger’s TV show off the air. By pressuring advertisers to withdraw, they succeeded in doing this in many markets. Thanks to the Web’s particular capabilities, among them its ability to coordinate previously inaccessible and unlegitimized voices, we will undoubtedly see more of this kind of viewer leverage in the future. A less politically motivated or even accidental deconstruction can occur when privileged information leaks out prematurely from an official source. This interaction can affect a TV show’s basic selling point, as when suspense was broken once the identity of a *Survivor 1* evictee was accidentally revealed on the official CBS site hours before the TV broadcast.¹² Up to this point, there has been only a limited publicizing of viewer opinion, predominantly by those in the public tradition who occasionally broadcast their own viewers’ feedback (e.g., PBS, NPR, or the BBC). Elsewhere, beyond market and scholarly surveys or the raw statistics of ratings, viewer reactions generally have been publicly mute and politically impotent. What is new is that, without professional prompting, the Web enables private reactions to become public and acquire currency and weight.

A further distinction can be drawn between *synchronous* and *asynchronous* interactivity. An example of the asynchronous is when viewers vote online, in advance, for which show they would like to see. The interactivity is synchronous when they play along during the

broadcast. A pioneer in the more complex synchronous interactivity was ABC's "enhanced TV," the first concerted effort to highlight the Web link for entertainment programming. As defined by ABC, enhanced TV "is a LIVE Interactive Television experience on the Internet that allows you, the TV viewer, to interact with the telecast" (more later).¹³ For Net-savvy younger viewers, Nickelodeon devised a "BubbleCast" game that prompts the audience to answer online questions about a show as they watch it on TV.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, when synchronous, the interactivity tends to be shallow, since anything else would be difficult and costly to produce.

Interestingly, the usual time lag between TV broadcast and online response can be reversed if a show is broadcast at different times in different markets, thanks to the live nature of much Web communication, as opposed to television's generally recorded fare. This reversal can conspicuously affect reception. For instance, the crucial revelation of the mole's identity was being discussed online before those on the West coast saw *The Mole's* final episode, much to the annoyance of some West coast fans; one complained bitterly that her Final Episode party was ruined.¹⁵

Even when offered the same programming, today's TV viewers are increasingly difficult to pin down as they surf and select in a manner resembling behavior online. This minimal but popular form of interactivity is something producers fear and resist. The broadcaster's aim, after all, is still to attract a mass of viewers to the same material at the same moment, including, of course, to the all-important commercial messages without which the program would not exist. (This refers primarily to commercial television and not its underfunded and anemic cousin, PBS, whose corporate "underwriting" is, these days, hardly distinguishable from commercial messages.) Already, technologies like VCRs and PVRs permit viewers to time shift, but a future digital Web-TV will make it even easier for viewers to bypass commercial breaks and so force advertisers to seek embedded forms such as product placement, thereby again altering program content.

More to the producers' liking is the interactivity implemented by a managed *content migration* across media, whether it be of persons or props. Most commonly, this takes the form of TV personalities making a guest appearance on a Web site and entering into a dialogue with fans. Prior to the Web, fan access to celebrities was limited and most commonly asynchronous (e.g., letters), whereas online interactions can

be live, synchronous, and dialogic without being face-to-face (as at a convention). The celebrity's appearance online primarily serves to advertise the TV product and presumably increase viewer commitment, though it may also temporarily boost the Web site he or she visits. This visit causes no absence or lack on the TV show. However, there may be some intentional displacement after a TV series has ended. For example, producers of *The Real World* and *Survivor* have used the Web to auction off material props, thus reifying screen images for the lucky fans who acquire material goods imbued with a televisual aura¹⁶ Another version of product placement, this practice will be made much easier and more profitable when, with interactive television, viewers are able to purchase what they see by clicking on a TV icon.¹⁷

So far, the most novel features of the Web-TV relationship are synchronicity and extension, both of which capitalize on the speed of Web transmission which, for many users, is the core (even fetishistic) attraction of the new medium. The potential depth of interactivity and its attendant decentralization also have increased. Much else was possible in pre-electronic media such as the magazine, but at a slower rate and with less access.

Sample Sites

An examination of a variety of official and unofficial sites will help elaborate facets of the Web-TV linkage discussed above. I will focus on four TV genres: first and foremost, reality TV, and then, to a lesser extent, science fiction, the quiz show, and daytime talk.

I begin with reality TV because, more than any other genre, to date it has embraced viewer Web use both as a supplementary feature and as a program component. Reality TV is where much dual media experimentation has been taking place because it is a genre designed to attract a Web-savvy audience, which includes the affluent, young, male audience so eagerly sought by advertisers. One way that it does this is by imitating features of Web culture. Reality shows attempt to recreate the interactivity, direct participation, and validation of so-called ordinary people and their experiences that users find online. For some years now, Internet inhabitants have been able to interact with ordinary, "real" people in uncensored environments, such as chat

rooms, Usenet newsgroups, and message boards. They have seen amateurism rival professionalism. They have become producers and writers. They have nurtured an ethos that encourages spontaneous, frank, and intimate communication and that accommodates rumor, speculation, and various forms of identity experimentation. These are also elements of reality TV formats that depict the intimate and largely uncensored goings-on of ordinary people as they cohabit a panoptical space. Reality TV encourages supposedly ordinary people to write their own scripts, experiment with their identities, and reveal intimate details to invisible audiences. Another reason for reality TV's popularity also reflects Web culture. These are the elements of voyeurism and exhibitionism, both of which are striking features of Web content, especially its most visited category of pornography. But more specifically, the webcam, with its continuous and ubiquitous depiction of the mundane and the taboo, is a significant forerunner of today's reality television.

A prime example of a strong and deliberate Web-TV linkage is the official CBS *Big Brother 1* site. This launched for the first time before a mass audience a new symbiotic relationship between television and the Web. The chief novelty was a live video feed, 24/7 (both in the United States and in Europe), a clear example of the extension referred to above. The webcast was, in effect, a purer, unedited version of the show. It was also intended as a dual media primer. For many viewers, it was the first time they combined TV watching and Web communication, and the first time they watched any video, never mind live video, online. Site visitors were offered several video streams to view at any one time, and in making their choices, each became his or her own editor to some limited extent. The online activity was not a by-product of the show, but was designed to be present from day one. The producer's intention was to broadcast to as large a TV audience as possible, while also narrowcasting to a smaller but demographically significant group.

Even though viewers voted by telephone—and this is still generally the case with such programming—*Big Brother 1* showcased the Web link and cannibalized its texts. Producers not only plugged the associated Web site during the show, but also featured a regular report on online activity from an America Online (AOL) representative who came bearing sample texts. This meant that Web material was part of the TV experience, even for those who never went online, and that

audience reaction was, in this way, being sold back to viewers as broadcast material. CBS went into a formal partnership with AOL in order to cross-promote their products, and AOL customers were given access to exclusive videos available only through its server—an example of divergent extension supplied to discrete Web audiences. This exclusive license was strictly enforced when Paul Sims, creator of the unofficial site *BigBrotherBlows.com*, was legally ordered to stop showing these extra feeds of the show on his Web site.

The TV contestants were also fully cognizant of the significance of Web activity, and of the fact that the “show” existed in two media. Whenever they were voted out, the first thing most did was go online and check what was being said about them and the show. For several participants, this online reaction seemed to be a major preoccupation, and the success of their TV appearance was measured not only by the show’s Nielsen ratings, but also by how much or how well they figured on the Web.

Another prominent reality TV show has not been webcast yet has done much to increase traffic to TV-related sites and to cross-promote media products. I refer to the hottest American “dramality” of them all, *Survivor*.¹⁸ Here again, the associated Web sites are not strictly necessary to the program but are increasingly popular. By the time *Survivor II* was launched, CBS committed to making its official portal as engaging as viewer-generated sites. The official *Survivor II* site presented itself not just as a place for obtaining information on the company and its programs, but also as a place of entertainment. Hence, it introduced a selection of games based on the TV show. The new medium was also used to enhance on-air promotions. For example, local affiliates invited viewers to vote online while they watched a *Survivor* episode, promising results by the local late news broadcast. *Survivor*’s popularity also inadvertently produced an accidental Web-TV link. Before the show ever went on the air, one company site already bore the name *Survivor.com*. Once the show caught on, the site was overwhelmed with unwelcome traffic to the point where TV was adversely affecting regular e-business. Gradually, the site owner decided to turn the liability into an asset by welcoming the show’s fans, providing *Survivor* links and related news, and in the process generating some income through advertising.¹⁹

But what is most fascinating is the abundance of unofficial sites that have grown up around this television phenomenon and their attempts

to achieve a deep interactivity, sometimes against company wishes. In fact, the sometimes accurate speculation of viewer sites has prompted editors to proactively shape content and plant red herrings in the televisual text and elsewhere to try to maintain the crucial element of surprise. Meanwhile, within the Web, amateur sites vie for attention and compete for scoops. Particularly popular (even notorious) *Survivor* sites are *Survivorsucks.com* and *Yowieman.com*. The former is one of a family of (noncommercial) TV sites mounted by Paul Sims; others include *BigBrotherBlows.com* and *RealWorldBlows.com*. Billed as a site for those who love to hate the show, *Survivorsucks.com* has even generated its own reaction site, *Survivorsuckssucks.com*, which seeks to defend the show against the mockery of Sims and his friends who, as well as providing witty commentary, have been quite successful at predicting the evictees of the show. The second site, *Yowieman.com*, is the home of one Tim the Yowie man (named after the Yowie, an Australian Big Foot), a sort of Matt Drudge figure whose mission was to uncover secrets of *Survivor II* and relay them to a Web audience. Having discovered the Australian contest site, he claimed that he flew a helicopter overhead and dropped chocolates (apparently donated by Ghirardelli) to the hungry contestants below, much to the annoyance of production staff. If this premature interactivity did in fact happen (a modern version of Manna from heaven), the show's producers did not broadcast or even acknowledge it—hardly surprising, since this would constitute a very unofficial pre-audience participation which, if repeated, could alter the dynamics of the show. This intervention and other attempts to reveal secrets in turn earned Tim the Yowie man some media coverage.²⁰ Like Drudge, his is an early example of Web celebrity translating into TV face time.

Although Web discussion is still customarily a reaction to a prior TV broadcast, such is the interest in online activity that a Web site may be chronologically prior: thus, Sevaan Franks got a start on the others by setting up a fan page for Elisabeth Filarski of *Survivor II* a month before the first episode aired. Another example of a keen Web user would be Nigel Barham, a nineteen-year-old who took a semester off college in anticipation of the second *Survivor* series to operate his own site, *SurvivorFire.com*. On it he featured daily comics about the show and generated income from ads and merchandise. In a succinct example of Web-TV symbiosis, Barham got TV attention for having made this life change, which in turn boosted his Web site business.

Another reality TV show cited earlier will serve as an example of how Web communication can change TV viewership both during and after the broadcast, due largely to an enhanced horizontal and synchronous communication among fans. This is the case regardless of whether TV producers formally build in a synchronous action. In this instance, viewers of *The Mole* spent weeks speculating online about who “the mole” was; solving this mystery was the whole point of the show. Within minutes of the revelation and while the final episode was still on the air, dozens of people were typing away on the official site and sharing their reactions—generally nothing more profound than “Wow!”²¹ Evidently, these viewers felt part of a virtual community; they had been through the series “together,” they had competed and collaborated in their speculations, and at the show’s climax, they were using the computer not to transfer information but to share an experience. Lacking physical proximity, they were forced to resort to some form of verbalization, however banal, in a medium that still interjects pockets of textuality into the largely visual culture that television helped produce. However, this return of the written word may be fairly short-lived, since a future Web-TV device will likely support visual communication among viewers and finally make visible the invisible audience that is always peripherally felt in TV viewing.²²

Although television is a medium that one can experience in the physical company of others (and for the first half of its history, viewing patterns reflected this), in most Western cultures, the days of the whole family gathering around one set are largely gone. As the number of channels grows, the chances of finding someone offline who shares your interest in a particular program has become even slimmer. TV sites allow individual viewers to find these others and alleviate—albeit at a distance—the increasing solitude of what Baudrillard refer to as our “closed-off cell” in which more and more experience is regulated by remote control.²³ It is, of course, a somewhat ironic attempt to use a prosthetic technology to lessen the social alienation it helped intensify. Although the individuals who participate in these online conversations may actually be no more than limited personae, the effect on TV viewing can be real. Knowing that one is watching a show with identifiable others and will discuss its details with them will undoubtedly affect the viewing experience, both in an anticipatory manner while watching the show, and subsequently if one is influenced by the online discussion. Viewers may now join a community of critical

readers whose attention to the show's production and to the program as artifact may in fact alter the ontological status of the show-as-perceived-by-viewers, producing a postmodern self-reflexivity—what Umberto Eco has termed “neo-television”—even when this self-consciousness was not embedded in the show by its producers.

The British show *Public Property* was a notable attempt at convergent programming that deliberately embedded Web interactivity as deeply as possible into the show's content.²⁴ The result was a high degree of indeterminacy and openness. The basic premise (since purchased by ABC) is that seven ordinary people are plucked from obscurity and followed by camera crews for three months. This material is then edited into thirty-minute TV shows five nights a week, with participants having some say in what gets shown. When broadcast in Britain, the show's official Web site featured daily diaries, video clips, and message boards that allowed the audience to communicate directly with the contestants. But the big novelty was that, via the Web and the telephone, viewers got to determine these people's lives in what was in effect a *real* simulation game. Producers devised questions and viewers responded by telephone for a big decision such as whether to change jobs, or online for smaller decisions such as what to eat for breakfast. The creators cautioned voters regarding the players: “Remember, they're your property, so take good care of them.” Participants, who volunteered in the thousands, agreed to abide by a majority vote in each instance or get kicked off the show and miss winning some unspecified life-changing prize. Viewers also could vote people off the show by telephone. However, the formula was not as big a success as anticipated and was taken off the air after five weeks, apparently because it could not compete with the quiz show *The Weakest Link*.

In this instance, we have online input affecting people's real lives. Less controversially, an American venture wanted viewer input to determine fictional characters' lives. *Nathan's Choice*, a sitcom developed by veteran Chuck Lorre for Fox, was to allow audience members to regularly determine the plot, not just the occasional turning point as has been offered on *Just Shoot Me* (NBC), the *Drew Carey Show* (ABC), *Two Guys and a Girl* (ABC), and *Dawson's Creek* (WB).²⁵ Each week, *Nathan's Choice* viewers were to vote halfway through the show, via computer or telephone, for one of two predetermined (and already recorded) options. Thus, the interactivity would be deep and synchronous but still largely directed by the

producers. However, at this point, the experiment has been shelved, the producers claiming that it is too difficult to mount. Certainly, unless TV production costs dramatically decrease, this kind of interactivity will always remain fairly limited. It is unlikely that individual TV viewers will ever have the opportunity to pick their path through scores of narrative branches such as readers of hypertext fiction are invited to do—should this degree of openness even be desirable.

Another television genre that has generated dense Web activity is science fiction. This is not surprising given that there is a good chance that viewers of sci-fi are going to be habitual Internet users. It also helps that sci-fi and other fantasy texts tend to be open and polysemious, leaving room for intensive audience interpretation. Fox's *X-Files* inspired typical but particularly elaborate fan sites; in fact, some online "X-Phile" communities quickly acquired a cult status. The show exists now only in syndication, but many Web sites remain active, even devoted. Certainly, the television scripts encouraged an almost religious devotion, and Web users were not slow to pick up on this. Hence, some sites present themselves as religious places of worship, although much of this is fairly tongue-in-cheek. The Order of the Blessed Saint Scully has a Web site that claims to be an Abbey.²⁶ Another page functions as The Altar of Saint Scully,²⁷ while the Hall of Martyrs boasts flickering devotion candles.²⁸

In other ways, too, the hundreds of sites associated with the program quickly began to evolve their own architecture. Some function as meta-sites to provide links to other sites and to help navigate users through an extensive Web infrastructure—for instance, in the form of annotated bibliographies. What is striking here is the depth of the Web-TV relationship and the extent and detail of the contextual knowledge that these sites provide. Perhaps in recognition of this, *X-Files* producers did allow an occasional and unanticipated deep interactivity between Web and televisual texts.²⁹

Together, *X-Files* sites encompass the whole gamut of online forms of communication: general discussion forums (some mailing lists are moderated, others not); live chats, especially immediately after the TV broadcast; role-playing simulations; even a MUSH (a Multi User Shared Hallucination—a type of MUD where players can themselves construct rooms, objects, or puzzles for each other). Impressive online communities quickly formed, and not just among young males whom one might expect to constitute the majority of sci-fi fans. For example,

the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade is an email list (now private) begun by female fans. It sees itself as “an extended family” that discusses all manner of things, mostly online but occasionally beyond the Web and face-to-face. Begun in January 1994, its current members are enthusiastic about their experience. “We strongly encourage other groups to form similar lists, using whatever common bond you can come up with. It’s one of the best things that’s ever happened to any of us,” they attest. They ask others not to use their group name because, they say, “It’s part of our identity.”³⁰ Their example highlights the significance of the horizontal interaction between viewers—stimulated by television in this case but enabled by computers—in addition to the interaction between the TV show and the individual at the computer. It also illustrates the centrifugal push toward private enclaves, as well as the much-vaunted public space of the Internet, perhaps attributable here to the longevity of *X-Files* sites and the traditional strength of sci-fi subcultures. Most TV sites have shorter life spans and remain utterly—even desperately—open.

Several *X-Files* sites have been built by those whose fascination with textual minutia rivals medieval scholasticism. “X-Philes” have compiled and correlated tremendous amounts of facts or factoids about each episode, demonstrating a great reverence for the televisual text. They archive quotes from the chief characters (“Scully-isms” and “Mulder-isms”). They provide deep background information on characters, actors, producers, production notes, ratings, awards, and so on. They also look for textual errors, slippages, and contradictions. These are the deep analysts.

Then there are displays of creative fanfiction where audience members become writers, though not broadcasters. During the series’s run, longtime fans regularly warned newbies that the show’s producers were not interested in unsolicited scripts, so such texts existed only for other fans to read in a closed electronic loop. Yet this is not the whole story about this show’s Web links, for it is also known that *X-Files* staff did read fan sites and did take on some suggestions occasionally. Writers used online fan names for bit parts and even dedicated one episode to a prominent online fan who had recently died. Viewer feedback also determined the prominence of character roles. The character of Skinner, for instance, was apparently expanded due to positive viewer reactions. This kind of interactivity is still relatively rare. It is also limited in that it is asynchronous and not fully dialogic.

Fans cannot directly write comments to the production staff and expect a reply; they can only float ideas online and hope something comes of it.

A third significant genre for Web interaction is the quiz show. As mentioned earlier, ABC's "enhanced TV" was one of the first concerted efforts to encourage Web use among TV audiences, and it originally centered on the hit show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. Certainly, the quiz format is suited to synchronous but not deep interactivity. On the ABC *Millionaire* site, viewers are invited to play online as they watch the live broadcast. Designers verify that the online player is in fact watching the show by asking additional questions about, e.g., the color of the host's tie.³¹ Players are offered minor prizes and the glory of outplaying others across the country. The incentive for the TV company is presumably to attract Web users and maintain TV viewership. Only in this way can shallow interactivity conceivably affect a program, not by influencing content but by affecting ratings and potentially determining the extent of the series's run.

ABC's *Millionaire* site also attempts to merge the two media in a limited fashion by placing the Web user in a simulated TV environment. It does so by displaying a 360-degree rotating view of the TV set as though one were sitting opposite the host. In a compensatory and democratizing use of the new medium to cover the limitations of the old, Web technology thus offers a simulated experience to all of something ordinarily enjoyed by a few. More pragmatically, it may be intended as a recruitment device to entice more of us to try to cross over into the TV realm and sit on the hot seat ourselves.

A second ABC "enhanced TV" site—now deactivated—was presented in conjunction with the daytime talk show *The View*.³² Evidently, ABC regarded this as another testing ground for future commercial development and availed itself of the opportunity to conduct audience questionnaires; this may have been the site's main purpose, in fact. The question/answer, stimulus/response mode, identified by Baudrillard as the fundamental schema of a consumerist mass-mediated culture, is common in Web-TV linkages (*Revenge of the Crystal* 69). Certainly, in this case, the underlying commercial interest was not very well buried.

Presumably, online participation was meant to enhance the sense of belonging to a TV family or community that shows of this type foster. It may be that this is meant to appeal particularly to a female audience,

the obvious target of *The View*. Similarly, Oxygen, a cable channel specifically designed to appeal to women, invites audiences to go online during broadcasts to “chat” about the program being aired. For instance, a banner regularly invites viewers of *Kate & Allie* reruns to chat about the show or even specific segments of the show online. Visitors to *The View* site were invited to answer live polls on topics as they came up on the broadcast. They could share trivia as it came up on their computer screens in synch with the telecast, and they could participate in a contest. The latter, significantly, included questions about commercials currently being broadcast on air. A survey question in fact wondered: “did you get up more or less during commercial breaks while using ABC’s enhanced TV for *The View*?” Clearly, corporations are still trying to work out the commercial benefits of this kind of Web linkage. It could be that synchronous chat during a broadcast risks losing the TV audience. Given that the “enhanced” interactivity of the *View* page has since been discontinued, ABC presumably decided that this talk show experiment was not a huge success. The network subsequently switched its focus to linking interactive Web sites to its sports programming, and later to event programming such as the Oscars.

Conclusion: The Way Ahead

There is little doubt that a closer link between television and the computer is coming. What also seems certain is that the convergence of our era’s two most significant media will require a more complex understanding of what is meant by “the viewer” and “the televisual text.” We have witnessed the first steps in this process. We have observed how online activity foregrounds the process of viewing and the status of being a viewer; how it facilitates vertical communication between viewer and producer/corporation/performer and lends amplitude and force to the horizontal communication among viewers. Both modes result in potentially more dynamic and open texts, thus approaching the Kristevian notion of productivity when, instead of being finished products, both TV text and audience remain in a state of production.³³

As yet, Web use is optional and supplementary. But it is easy to predict that as producers increasingly rely on viewers being able to go

online, they will modify what is broadcast and what is expected of the viewer. They will experiment further with deep interactivity, although they will come up against financial limits. There are likely to be more campaigns by viewers to alter or erase programming without official sanction, as was the fate of Dr. Laura. More viewers will give Web communication precedence over broadcasts. We may even see TV broadcasts that supplement Web sites.

Already, Web use has introduced some interesting, more dialogic possibilities that have begun to alter media consumption and may lead to some real shifts in control. However, there has not been, nor will there likely be, any major shake-up in institutional practices. Those who produce and transmit programming will still seek to control the process and make it serve commercial interests. One likely consequence is an increase in viewer surveillance. Thus far, corporations have failed to make much use of the viewer feedback that is already available online, but future applications will gather information more systematically about viewers and encourage them to consume not only programs, but other products as they watch. Unless legislation intervenes, the television set will indeed be a monitor used to gather ever more extensive information about what used to be considered an individual's private life and transform it into a marketable commodity. In this sense too, viewers will become part of the program.

NOTES

1. "Remediation" is the term used by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin to signify the refashioning of an established medium by a new medium. The pattern they observe is that the new medium promises to reform the old by offering greater immediacy, but the result is usually a greater sense of hypermediacy.
2. For more information on the technical and socioeconomic prospects for a merged technology, see Owen. For a breezier account of the delights in store for the consumer, see Swann.
3. Microsoft's WebTV allows viewers to link to Web sites using their TV remote control and hence purchase products from their TV screen without logging on or lifting the phone. In Britain, Rupert Murdoch's Sky satellite TV (BSkyB) offers a similar service named Open. Not surprisingly, it is the opportunity to use the Web-TV link to sell products that is of particular interest to the corporations. Business mergers and partnerships also anticipate future Web-TV linkages. For example, Microsoft hooked up with a traditional TV broadcaster, NBC, to produce a twenty-four-hour cable channel and online news service, MSNBC, while Time-Warner merged with AOL.
4. "Hot media are . . . low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience" (McLuhan 23).
5. Pyungho Kim provides a historical account of the failure to construct a truly two-way interactive television system despite the industry rhetoric.

6. Ceefax is a teletext service that has been available in Britain since the mid-1970s. By punching in page numbers, viewers can call up news, weather, recipes, flights, and subtitles on their TV screens.
7. My focus is on the Web, so I will not be discussing the various forums for discussion on the larger Internet.
8. <<http://tv.yahoo.com>>.
9. One site offers to sell a downloadable game sheet that a group of office mates developed. See <<http://www.Survivor2OfficePool.com>>.
10. Web-TV interactions more usually produce "writerly" texts that blur the distinction between reader and writer.
11. Joseph Lockard pours scorn on the idea of the Internet building any kind of community in a lively essay, "Progressive Politics, Electronic Individualism, and the Myth of Virtual Community." He remarks that communication-only "cybercommunities" are designed to promote consumerism, including consumption of the technology itself: "in hyper-consumption societies characterized by individual alienation and loneliness, there is an enormous appeal to buying some fine new equipment and joining the online world in search of community" (225–26).
12. This network gaffe occurred on July 19, 2000. The evictee was accidentally revealed on the official CBS site at 2:00 p.m., six hours before the 8:00 p.m. broadcast.
13. <<http://heavy.etv.go.com/etvHome/about.shtml>>.
14. BubbleCast TV debuted on February 5, 2001 during *Rugrats*, broadcast weekdays at 4:00 p.m.
15. <http://abc.go.com/primetime/themole/mole_home.html> Accessed on 28 Feb. 2001.
16. <<http://www.mtv.com/onair/auction/2003/realworld>>. The *Survivor* props were sold on eBay, with proceeds going to an AIDS charity.
17. Another activity that is sometimes commercial (and, if so, illegal) is the circulation of tapes of previous broadcasts from one fan to another via online message boards.
18. "Dramality" is Mark Burnett's favorite term for the genre he helped popularize with *Survivor* (25).
19. The Survivor.com site was mounted back in 1995 by Conrad Walton for his client, Survivor Software. Walton has expressed considerable acrimony over the high-handed and uncooperative approach of CBS and their unwillingness to place advertising on his site. See <<http://www.survivor.com/origstory.html>>, Accessed on 14 Jan. 2001.
20. The Yowie man has been interviewed by, e.g., *Access Hollywood* and *Inside Edition*.
21. See the message board at <http://abc.go.com/primetime/themole/mole_home.html> Accessed on 28 Feb. 2001.
22. Daniel Dayan describes the sense that we have when watching television that others are watching also. "Watching television means being part of a 'reverse-angle shot' consisting of everyone watching the same image at the same time or, more exactly, of all those believed to be watching" (743).
23. "We know that the simple presence of television transforms our habitat into a kind of archaic, closed-off cell, into a vestige of human relations whose survival is highly questionable" (*Ecstasy of Communication* 17–18).
24. *Public Property* began on ITV on February 1, 2001.
25. *Dawson's Creek* also has a site called Dawson's Desktop, which continues storylines between episodes. See <<http://www.dawsondesktop.com>>.
26. <<http://www.obsse.com>>.
27. <<http://www.smartania.com/churchofx/gaaltar.html>>.
28. <<http://atysko.home.mindspring.com/martyr.html>>.
29. As Ellen Seiter observes, the official Web site may have saved *X-Files* from being cancelled early on, and its producers are aware that it remains a significant element in the show (232).

30. <<http://www.ddeb.com/faq.html>>.
31. <http://abc.go.com/primetime/millionaire/millionaire_home.html>, Accessed on 8 Feb. 2001.
32. <<http://abc.go.com/theview>>.
33. Drawing on Freud to modify what she regards as Marx's limited description, Julia Kristeva suggested this more dynamic and interactive understanding of "production" in "Semiotics: A Critical Science and/or a Critique of Science" (74–88).

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