

Taylor Nygaard

Television Connectivity

Editors' Introduction

During the winter holiday season of 2013, Apple aired a sentimental Christmas-themed commercial called “Misunderstood” that comments on some of the contemporary assumptions about the way media technologies are impacting our lives and particularly our interpersonal relationships.¹ Set to a pared-down version of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” performed with melancholic pathos by Cat Powers, the narrative follows a young teen boy experiencing a bustling white Christmas with his extended family, the whole time his head buried in his iPhone. Although physically present while building snowmen, tree trimming, sledding with his cousins, and receiving warm greetings from his grandparents, he appears distracted and disconnected from them as his eyes are glued to the glowing screen of his phone. That is until he has the family gathered around the living room television set, like an electronic hearth² on Christmas morning, and he mirrors a family video he has produced from his phone to the apple TV for them all to watch. Raptured by the skillfully produced video, which captures emotional point-of-view hugs, playful cookie decorating, and beautiful snow covered landscapes, along with stolen kisses and unabashed happiness from both young and old, several family members are moved to appreciative tears. It concludes with the boy’s mom thanking the young teen in an apologetic embrace after realizing she was wrong in assuming he was disconnected from the family.

Reflective of Apple’s well-established and careful affective branding, the ad plays on

common tropes and discourses circulating about how technology is impacting our lives, particularly in describing the way media technologies have become fully integrated into our everyday social interactions. It taps into anxieties about the technologization of the American home described by Henry Jenkins, where “technologies have become a wedge between family members” and “young people often deploy media to cut themselves off from the people around them.”³ Although, as Jenkins notes, these new technologies have also “enabled greater connection to more dispersed family members, helping to combat some of the forces that are breaking down extended families.” The ad, nevertheless, banks on viewer familiarity with the common narrative that technology may lead to more personalization, diversity, and niche-oriented interactivity, but it also leads to familial dispersal and isolation: we may be “connected” via technology, but isolated and disconnected from those around us.

The ad is one of many representations in a long tradition that visualizes the threats of technology to our everyday lives. The film industry’s anxiety about competition with television, in particular, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, cemented fear of technology’s impact on familial and interpersonal relationships in the cultural zeitgeist through a succession of negative representations of television. Yet, technology’s tendency to drive a wedge between family members was perhaps never better visualized than in Barry Levinson’s film *Avalon* (1990) about a

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Jewish family's assimilation in post-World War II America. For the Krichinsky family, prior to television's arrival, grandfathers dominated bustling family dinners telling stories about life in the old country, bringing the family together under a common identification with these patriarchs. But, as the film progresses, big family dinners are slowly replaced by a small group of uncommunicative family members sitting in front of a tiny television. This is punctuated in a concluding scene where, as the grandfathers tell stories at a family dinner, the kids are distractedly looking at the television.

Similar critiques of television as a pale replacement for familial relationships have proliferated throughout popular culture representations. Yet, Apple's "Misunderstood," like several contemporary ads for mediated devices and platforms, asserts that technology can, in fact, bring us together and it visualizes this by having a family come together around a television set, albeit a new "smart television" connected to both the internet and the boy's mobile device. The tension made visible in "Misunderstood" about the connectivity enabled or threatened by mediated technologies is the framing theme of this special issue. In particular, this issue questions in what ways television—often experienced across multiple platforms and integrated with digital technologies and socially networked communication—enables new forms, theories, and practices of connectivity.

There are many ways in which television has been theorized as facilitating connectivity. Television has been thought to bring people together, whether it is members of a family coming together to watch their favorite show in the living room, a nation coming together to watch the moon landing, or viewers around the globe coming together to watch the Olympic games. During the time of three channel dominance in the Broadcast Era, limited choices meant that on Monday mornings viewers could bank on knowing their friends, community members, and colleagues had sat down to watch *Bonanza* or *The Ed Sullivan Show* the night before, contributing to what Benedict Anderson calls the "imagined community" of the nation that shares in similar stories and ideologies.⁴ Viewers have also been theorized to uniquely connect to or identify with television characters and programs because of

television's intimate placement in the home and the longevity of certain television forms, like soap operas that were designed to integrate seamlessly into the rhythms of a housewife's day.⁵ Diverse fan communities have also formed and developed lasting relationships over the shared appreciation of and connection to certain television series, like *Star Trek*, long after the show went of the air.

On a structural level, Raymond Williams theorized a form of connectivity in his foundational concept of *flow*, when he saw television as comprising strategies that transformed diverse programming elements or units into a seamless whole.⁶ And, in her essay "Crossing Wavelengths: The Diegetic and Referential Imaginary of American Commercial Television," Mimi White talks about television in terms of "dispersed mechanisms of continuity," drawing attention to the importance of self-promotion as a regular function of the medium, particularly through cross-over specials and diegetic mixing of different television series, among other strategies.⁷ Moreover, despite the affordances of new technologies to allow viewers to time and place-shift their television viewing based on personal and individual needs, television producers and programmers are devising a variety of strategies meant to encourage both old and new forms of television connectivity. Whether it is Twitter live-streaming, second screen story synch options, or interactive communities around a web series on YouTube, which are all explored in this issue, forms of what Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson call "connected viewing" now bring multiple screens into alignment, offering audiences a way to enjoy the interactive capabilities of mobile devices and laptops while simultaneously engaging with traditional television texts.⁸

In fact, this issue is in dialogue with Holt, Sanson, and the contributors of *Connected Viewing* who initiated an important exploration into the way the contemporary media industries are adapting to technological change and how screen media of all forms is created, circulated, and consumed. This issue hopes to add to the conversations begun by these scholars. But, while *Connected Viewing* purposefully "eschews medium and platform specificity" in order to map connectivity across the film, television, and gaming industries in what Michael Curtin describes as the "matrix era"—a

transition from the one-to-many distribution strategies of an earlier time in media history to a moment “characterized by interactive exchanges, multiple sites of productivity, and diverse modes of interpretation and use” — this issue focuses on television’s unique position and legacy within this matrix of connectivity.⁹ Conversant with many collections and scholarly inquiries into the changing nature of television in what Amanda Lotz calls the Post-Broadcast Era¹⁰, and others have called a time “after TV,”¹¹ the articles in this issue attempt to address the ongoing technological redefinition of television and specifically our changing interactions with and understandings of the medium, which this issue conceptualizes as still being a central cultural institution in our everyday lives.

As Holt, Sanson, and many scholars of contemporary television studies have noted, television has arguably been affected the most by competition with new digital media platforms and modes of distribution, which have increasingly attracted both large audiences and the advertisers seeking to court those audiences, thereby threatening television’s longstanding business models. Although borrowing programming and business strategies from television as well as its general ethos, the digital distribution platforms Hulu, Youtube, Netflix and iTunes along with DVRs and on-demand services disrupt the television industry’s traditionally lucrative windowing opportunities, but also most importantly the necessity for live viewing. These platforms, along with the general increase of more diverse content available across them, have allowed for portable, personalized, and individualized viewing that fragments mass audiences and lowers advertising rates on television. As a result, it’s no mystery that the television industry is scrambling to reassert liveness as a defining characteristic of the television experience with the hopes of rebuilding and even expanding television’s communal aspects in order to drive viewers back to traditional television viewing.

One of the most visible strategies in achieving this reassertion is the TV industry’s collusion with the social media microblogging website Twitter. In a short provocation in this issue, Katie Walsh explores the mutually beneficial relationship

between the television industry and Twitter. She writes that during the lead up to the Twitter IPO in September 2013, “Twitter relied on the conversations users were having around legacy media such as television to prove their worth as a location for attention-based advertising models,” while television relied on Twitter and its partnership with Nielsen to enhance their metrics for counting audiences in order to re-prove their importance to advertisers. Walsh contemplates the veracity behind the celebratory rhetoric common in the trades driving up Twitter’s worth before its IPO, questioning what Twitter really offers television audiences.

Considering a similar question about the relationship between Twitter, audiences, and the live broadcast of televised sports, Andrew Harrington’s article “Searching for “Tweethenticity”: Television, Tweets, and the Impression of Reality at the 2012 Daytona 500” theorizes why Twitter is so popular among both fans and producers. Engaging with foundational film theories of realism, he explores the way athlete tweets—by connecting the viewer/follower to the perspective of the athlete—add to the “authenticity” or “realism” of experiencing live televised sports, an authenticity he argues is missing from the highly mediated feeds of traditional sports broadcasts. Harrington and Walsh’s articles illustrate why television’s relationship with Twitter has logically dominated conversations around television connectivity. The platform brings back the crucial aspects of liveness and community around television that have been lost in the post-broadcast era. But, as Walsh notes in her essay, audience attention can be also be increasingly distracted when focusing on the chaotic live-feed around their favorite shows, and the connected viewing enabled through the Twitter platform may be detracting from the televisual experience more than enhancing it.

In fact, according to Hye Jin Lee and Mark Andrejevic, many second screen experiences have been seen as failures, distracting viewers from the original television text and disrupting audience connectivity during the viewing experience.¹² Yet, Kyra Hunting’s article in this issue suggests that some second screen experiences can be more immersive than others. In particular, she explores how the new iPad app *Disney Jr. Appisodes*

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undermines clear distinctions between traditional “viewing” activity and interactivity or play, defining it instead as a “merged screen” experience, which combines the metaphorical interactivity of the television viewing experience common in children’s television with the literal interactivity of a touchscreen app.

Apps on tablets like those that Hunting explores are but one of many ways viewers can consume and interact simultaneously with television through connected viewing devices. Taking on another form of connected viewing, Karen Petruska and John Vanderhoef explore how televisions are increasingly connected via over-the-top video players or gaming consoles. Specifically they interrogate the debate surrounding Microsoft’s planned release of the Xbox One gaming console and the Kinect One camera peripheral to explore viewer negotiations with media companies over the enhanced mechanisms of data collection powered by digital technologies. Their analysis reveals how consumers were able to voice a “powerful but reactive activism” throughout the time leading up to the console’s release, showing potential for consumers to have a say in creating new understandings of privacy and surveillance, particularly around access to their own information and the company’s purposes for collecting it.

Petruska and Vanderhoef’s article draws attention to how data-mining and the information collected through connected viewing devices and other digital media platforms are increasingly being used by media companies to not only understand, but also shape audiences and their media practices. Nevertheless, illustrating Henry Jenkins’ now oft-quoted description of convergence culture where our media environment is getting defined by both top-down corporate decisions and bottom-up grassroots viewer practices,¹³ Stephanie M. Yeung offers a different perspective as she examines the curatorial practices of lesbian fan communities on YouTube. Seeing YouTube as an “indispensable yet vulnerable platform” for archiving and distributing global lesbian televisual representations, she explores how viewers utilize the platform to connect audiences with television content to which they would likely never have access through other more traditional distribution outlets.

Approaching YouTube from a different angle,

Allegra Tepper outlines the innovative transmedia strategies of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a fictional bi-weekly YouTube vlog, which reimagines Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and capitalizes on (and often veritably invents) the narrative power of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, 8Tracks, LinkedIn and others. She argues that in doing so the creators of the property extend and maximize the potential of television connectivity to create an original immersive world that feels as though it plays out in real time while sustaining the audience’s critical engagement with both narrative content and the people behind it. Tepper’s analysis shows how certain YouTube creators have extended television’s textual practices to expand the productive possibilities of interactivity and immersion that scholars such as Jennifer Gillan predicted were likely if media producers took advantage of this moment of media instability to reimagine industrial practices and audience habits.¹⁴

YouTube, however, is not the only platform to develop unique and imaginative original content that taps into the affordances of digital distribution and connected viewing platforms. Like HBO discovered in the late 1990s and early 2000s, one of the ways in which most media platforms are getting a leg up in this increasingly competitive marketplace is by throwing money behind quality original content. Even though YouTube shocked many when it invested \$300 million in its initial original content initiative, Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and Yahoo Screen are all making similar investments to try and edge out the competition. Netflix plans to raise \$400 million in order to double its investment in original content after the success of its original series helped them add 1.29 million domestic subscribers during the third quarter and 1.44 million in international subscribers, bringing its total to more than 40 million members, up from 30 million a year ago.¹⁵

Netflix’s original series offer a useful example of how digital platforms have changed our understandings, expectations, and interactions with narrative strategies of television, even provoking debates about the very definition of television.¹⁶ *House of Cards*, Netflix’s first original series, was created and distributed outside of the traditional network structure; each of its two

seasons were released in their entirety, altering viewer relationships with the creators, text, and fellow viewers. The series also reflects narrative innovation built for streaming; it was created with the knowledge of viewers' preferences for binge watching. But, according to creator Beau Willimon, because the show could possibly still be consumed in international markets in more traditional serial installments, they couldn't revolutionize the structure too much, choosing instead to focus on an overall story that could unfold similarly to Dicken's novels, proven successful on series like *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*.¹⁷ Yet, he adds that Netflix's revival of *Arrested Development* was more experimental with episodes that could be viewed out of order, thus allowing the viewer to draw her own connections across the series in whichever way she chose. He concludes by saying this distribution model has the potential to revolutionize our understanding of seasons, episodes, individual series, and television in general.¹⁸

Building on these ideas of televisual narrative innovation, in his article exploring the concept of preemptive narratives, Toni Pape outlines how narrative strategies on broadcast and cable television have evolved as a result of the affordances and technological conditions of digital distribution, particularly those of streamability and bingeability. Focusing on the preemptive endings of the TV shows *Flashforward* and *Damages*, he explores the various ways in which the preemptive strategy connects innovative standards in writing, production, distribution and consumption around an aesthetic experience of time. He provocatively draws out the implications of these ideas by theorizing the relation between this narrative technique and contemporary trends towards premediation and a politics of preemption, which lead, for example, to the United States' war with Iraq.

Connectivity provides a theoretical lens for Alison Fornell, whose essay explores television through the concept of the body in order to make sense of some of the changing contemporary modes of television spectatorship and narrative production practices traced above. With the transnational series *The Bridge* as her focal point, she theorizes a body-linked concept, *connective tissue*, to examine the ways contemporary television relates to the body,

convincingly arguing through rich textual analysis of a complex and layered series how television might very well be made of the same stuff of the body. Also approaching television connectivity from a theoretical perspective, Hunter Hargraves provides a short meditation that considers examining televisual affect from the perspective of entanglement. As a concept drawn from quantum physics, science and technology studies, and performance studies, he argues that entanglement is useful for understanding television's role in structuring affective, intersubjective relations between individuals and audiences alike.

The collection concludes with reviews of two recent books that explore television's place in contemporary media studies. Britta Hanson reviews the collection *How to Watch Television*, edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell that comprises forty short articles written by some of the top television scholars in the field, each using individual television series to cover key modes of analysis in television studies. Joshua Richardson reviews Derek Johnson's book *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, which interrogates the idea that franchises are simply commercial texts with little cultural value, arguing instead that media franchising, rather than being a merely commercial operation, actually contains a variety of social relations and hegemonic claims to authority.

These reviews complete a collection that seeks to interrogate the concept of television connectivity as it relates to the integration of mediated technologies and culture more broadly. What ties these diverse articles together is an understanding articulated by Hargraves that despite the major changes and evolution of television's industrial practices, narrative strategies, modes of viewing, and audience relationships enabled by the medium's various connections to digital technologies, most viewers have not found themselves alienated by such changes. Rather, as Hargraves suggests, television and its unique place in the matrix of connectivity, still occupies a commanding position in the media industries and culture more generally. Exploring several rich and varied examples of television's connected viewing, together these articles expose how the changes confronting

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contemporary television are enabling new forms and practices of institutional, technological, and interpersonal connectivity, but they also posit how theories of television connectivity can help us better imagine the ways the medium could evolve along with our relationships to it and each other.

Taylor Nygaard is a Postdoctoral Scholar in the Bryan Singer Division of Critical Studies in the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, where she received her PhD. Her scholarly interests focus on the social and industrial impact of digital media, particularly in relation to the television industry, gender identities, consumerism, and convergence culture. She is currently turning her dissertation, "The Virtual Big Sister: Television and Technology in Girls' Media Culture" into a book manuscript. The project examines the transmedia strategies of three dominant television brands for girls—Alloy, Nickelodeon, and The CW—to explore the early 21st century convergent media industries in the contexts of postfeminist girlhood, television, and digital media. She has published previously in *Spectator* on the intersection of race, sexuality, and television. Her work can also be found in *Feminist Media Studies* and an edited collection for Palgrave, *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*.

Notes

- 1 "Apple - Holiday - TV Ad - Misunderstood." Uploaded by Matthew Miller to *Youtube* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhwhnEe7CjE> (accessed February 12, 2014).
- 2 Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- 3 Henry Jenkins, "Eight Traits of New Media" *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Web-log of Henry Jenkins*. November 6, 2006. http://henryjenkins.org/2006/11/eight_traits_of_the_new_media.html (accessed February 12, 2014).
- 4 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Revised Edition* (London: Verso, 2006).
- 5 Tania Modleski, "Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work" in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches*, ed. Ann E. Kaplan. (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1983), 67-75.
- 6 Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London and New York: Routledge, 1974)
- 7 Mimi White, "Crossing Wavelengths: The Diegetic and Referential Imaginary of American Commercial Television" *Cinema Journal* 25 no. 2 (Winter, 1986), 51-64.
- 8 Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson, eds. *Connected Viewing: Selling, Streaming, and Sharing Media in the Digital Era* (New York: Routledge 2014).
- 9 Michael Curtin, "Matrix Media," in *Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, eds. Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 13. Cited in Holt and Sanson 2014.
- 10 Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will be Revolutionized* (New York: NYU Press, 2007).
- 11 Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, eds. *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
- 12 Hye Jin Lee and Mark Andrejevic, "Windows into the Digital World: Distributor Strategies and Consumer Choice in an Era of Connected Viewing," in *Connected Viewing: Selling, Streaming & Sharing Media in the Digital Era*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson. (New York and London: Routledge, 2014).
- 13 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, (New York: NYU Press, 2008).
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- 15 CNBC with Reuters, "Netflix: Subscribers up, Original Content Investment to Double" *NBC News*, October 1, 2013 <http://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/netflix-subscribers-original-content-investment-double-f8C11434084> (accessed February 18, 2013).
- 16 Spencer Kornhaber, "Is House of Cards TV?" *The Atlantic*, February 13, 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/02/is-em-house-of-cards-em-tv/283805/> (accessed February 18, 2014).
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.