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What Does Twitter Really Offer TV Audiences, And At What Cost?

Abstract

Attention is one of the currencies with which television audiences purchase media—we pay, but the question of who profits is a question that must be considered, particularly in light of the billion dollar profits from the initial public offering of Twitter stock in the fall of 2013. This IPO put a value on audience interaction, as 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. Tweets become tangible evidence of audience attention, which serves as a commodity to be bought and sold, and as a new metric for counting audiences metrics. However, does all of the speculation merit the valuation? And how does this live-tweeting audience activation truly affect the audience experience? Is it really worth anything, and furthermore, what are the problematic aspects of this visible audience valuation?

The question of the television audience has bedeviled and beguiled television producers, critics, and academics as long as TV has existed. Often, the audience is visualized onscreen, most often in talk or sketch/variety shows, instructing home audiences in how to react to performers onscreen (see also: the laugh track), but the home audience has largely remained invisible, aside from that murky, yet necessary process known as the Nielsen ratings system. It wasn't until the advent of the internet in the 1990s that TV audiences have made themselves known, and the television landscape has not been the same since, orienting itself more and more toward those audiences working to make their opinions known, often directly to creators, beyond insular fan communities.

Whether it's through message boards, recaps, comments, and now, live-tweeting, audiences and TV fans have carved out a space for their opinions on the internet; their every comment left on a digital, largely public archive, a source of instant feedback for TV producers. Producers are able

to cater (or not) to the fan response that they receive on their shows, ensuring fan appreciation and loyalty, but almost more importantly, online audience visibility has seemed to solve the other issue of counting audiences. This is something that both TV producers and the proprietors of the online venues where audiences make themselves known have taken note of, and in which opportunity seems obvious.

Live-tweeting television (and recapping and commenting after an episode) is a way for fans to participate in the show itself: to insert themselves into the game of television via technology and social networks in order to possibly demonstrate their dominance or superior knowledge over the text; to manifest their ironic or negotiated readings of the show. Audience interactions with televisual narratives, and their possible influence on how these texts are made is an interesting question, but ultimately, television exists not necessarily to tell stories but also to sell advertising. Producers of film and television rely on audiences to make their

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productions real, as receptors of their productions, but more importantly, they rely on audiences to make their work profitable.

When studying media, its industry, and its consumers, issues of labor, product, profit, and economics are absolutely necessary and crucial to take into account. This was thrown into crystal-clear relief this fall, as Twitter geared up for its initial public offering of stock on the New York Stock Exchange, and much speculation was bandied about on the value of users, television audiences, and their attention to their screens. As advertising and television trade magazines and newspaper business pages speculated on share prices and valuations of Twitter, it became abundantly clear that live-tweeting was so much more than just a way for audiences to interact with televisual texts: it was also the number one way that a billion dollar company was going to prove its value.

Scholars of connected viewing now have to be conversant in Wall Street lingo and economic parlance, as the products of fan labor, the tweets that viewers generate as part of their interaction or play with a show, leave the traces of their attention on social networks, which is tangible evidence of their attention—a commodity that is bought and sold between media and technology corporations and conglomerates. While Twitter has been a world-changing service and impacted the way that we communicate with each other, it hasn't been incredibly profitable, so it has to discover ways to turn its most valuable resource, users, into money. Like so many other tech/media services, an advertising based model makes the most sense. 250 million sets of eyeballs on Twitter means 250 million possible consumers to put ads in front of.

To read the many articles about Twitter and TV this fall, one would think that the strategy of pushing promoted tweets into the timelines of users is going to be a cash cow for networks and advertisers. But is this only based on rampant speculation and specific narratives pushed by the media? The October cover of *Forbes Magazine* declared, "How Twitter Will Save TV (And TV Will Save Twitter)."¹ Twitter is often referred to as a "force multiplier," (by Twitter CEO Dick Costolo on the cover of *Forbes*²). It's true that a tweet from a single user about a TV show has the ability to reverberate throughout their networks, reaching the

eyes of their followers and possibly more through retweets and @ mentions. However, these stories are written *about* audiences *for* investors, and can often seem like an echo chamber of businessmen shouting at each other, while audiences remain blissfully oblivious, creating their own viewership practices and enduring the glut of ads that creep into Facebook newsfeeds and Twitter timelines. There is a specific strategy at play in the pages of business trades and publications: to prove that Twitter has value and that investors need to buy shares to get in on this moneymaking opportunity. This keeps the value of audience attention at an all time high—but who is buying this story? Investors? Audiences?

The practice of live-tweeting shows and events has been a boon for TV, which has struggled to adapt advertising strategies to technologically empowered viewers who are increasingly consuming their TV time shifted on DVRs (which allows for fast forwarding through commercial breaks), on streaming services such as Netflix (no ads, subscription based model), and Hulu (ads, premium subscription available), or On Demand. Live-tweeting inserts the "live" back into TV, which means in order to "properly" participate, live-tweeters have to be watching on both their TV screens and Twitter screens (computer or mobile), and thus, watching the ads as they happen. This process effectively activates both screens as possible locations for advertising, as audiences will be paying attention to both.

It is an imperative for television networks to put the live back in TV. Much in the way that a live event like the Super Bowl has created a lucrative space for advertising, with millions watching, live events hold a certain amount of sway over TV viewers who are bound by the spell of an uncertain outcome (see also: awards shows, and sporting events in general). NBC's recent *The Sound of Music: Live* was a strategy to animate the live space, and many tweeted along (some with an ironic or humorous viewpoint too). During the Season 3 Premiere of *Scandal*, official ABC and production Twitter accounts promoted live-tweeting and hashtags on screen, encouraging audience members to follow along. At the same time that this was happening, many Twitter users (including myself, as I was participating and using

official hashtags) received ads in their timeline for the film *The Best Man Holiday*, which promoted the trailer for the film that was going to run during the show. An ad for an ad! And in both televisual and online spaces.

For Twitter and other social networks, there is a scramble to be the place for television conversation, the virtual water cooler that is seen as an untapped market for advertising. A recent *New York Times* article titled “Swarm Seeking Share of Social Media Pie,” states that, “for investors the question is which services will attract the most users and the most advertisers.”³ Another article, “Social Networks In A Battle for The Second Screen,” reports that:

Facebook and Twitter both see the social conversation around television as a way to increase use of their sites and win a bigger piece of advertisers’ spending, which eMarketer estimates will be \$171 billion across all types of media this year in the United States.⁴

These social networking sites and new media services may be groundbreaking, but they are still turning to legacy media such as television as a way to monetize their services. While TV might be grasping onto Twitter in order to engage audiences, Twitter is just as dependent on TV for a business model.

Counting audiences is a primary concern for the TV industry (for determining advertising rates, etc.), and always has been, and the Nielsen system, though widely accepted, has often been criticized for its inaccuracies and inability to keep up with the evolutions in television viewership. Nielsen and Twitter recently unveiled a partnership, in order to measure the number of tweets about a show, as a way to improve metrics on both the ratings side and social media side (this would appear to be mostly a benefit to Twitter, to prove their status as the virtual water cooler). However, this partnership hasn’t been such an overwhelming success. *Variety* reports that, “one thing is immediately clear: There is practically no overlap between the most-tweeted shows on TV and the highest-rated shows.”⁵ The Twitter second screen audience is a fraction of the TV audience, and the real impact is difficult to

quantify, though there are delayed reverberations throughout the network. The *New York Times* reported that even though only a tiny fraction of the *Grey’s Anatomy* audience tweeted about the show, “the posts, 225,000 of them in total, were seen by millions of Twitter users, some of whom might have fired up their digital video recorders or laptops to watch the episode later.”⁶ The numbers aren’t quite there on the real impact of Twitter on TV (and TV on Twitter), but all of the speculation could be driving up the price of audience attention without real metrics. Twitter offers both the promise and convolution of audience metrics.

There is also the concern of how this affects the audience experience of watching TV, which is never addressed by these trades and business outlets. With over-activation, producers may be detracting from the televisual experience, as most shows these days come with suggested hashtags, official twitter accounts to follow, or interactive games at the bottom of the screen. During ABC’s *The Bachelorette* season of summer 2013, the network plastered fan tweets at the bottom of the screen, allowing tweets of all sentiment through: the good, the bad, and the snarky (the system by which tweets were filtered was not immediately clear). For fans tweeting along with the show, evidence of their labor within the text itself can be a profoundly satisfying example of their participation with the program.

This will not be true for all fans though, especially ones that do not expressly watch for the second screen experience. One tweet slipped through the filter, expressing not appreciation, humor, or snark but dissatisfaction and alienation with the format. It read, “I wish the tweets at the bottom of the screen would go away on the bachelorette. #noonecares.” Of course there is a certain amount of irony in the fact that the dissatisfied tweet slipped through into exactly what it was complaining about in a moment of meta-textual anarchy. In fact, during the January 2014 premiere of the newest season of *The Bachelor*, producer Robert Mills, tweeted “FYI for those wondering – the onscreen tweets have been retired #Bachelor.” Clearly, some experiments with audience activation haven’t been entirely successful, and networks are still learning how to best utilize the second screen experience in a way that is

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effective both for their ends and for the audience's.

This example leads us to beg the question of social media based audience activation: what is the real effect of these efforts on the audience? How does it affect their viewing experience, and what do they gain? Do audiences even care or is this hype generated on behalf of the industry itself and the press surrounding it? There is also a far more insidious and troubling effect on audience activation, particularly when it confronts capitalist intent, as it so did during the Twitter IPO. In the *Forbes* story, reporter Jeff Bercovici notes the valuation among different kinds of users based on nationality, noting that, "that domestic growth [of Twitter] has slowed to a crawl. About 14 million people signed up last quarter—13 million of them were from overseas, where each user proves only about one-seventh as lucrative." This may seem rather innocuous, but there is a dangerous implication as to how online data collection of users can create a hierarchy of valuation among users. Bercovici notes that international Twitter users are less "lucrative" in terms of a TV advertising business model, and designating which users are more valuable based on nationality seems troubling, as denoting which users are "valuable" based on specific identity markers such as nationality could lead to stereotyping or different treatment for different users.

Not only is there a possible issue with a hierarchical valuation of specific types of users, but there's also beginning to be an establishment of the "correct" way to live-tweet, and a policing of this behavior in popular media outlets. A *Flavorwire* article by Jason Bailey exemplifies this notion in discussing the live-tweeting of *Scandal*, titled "How Not to Live-Tweet Your Favorite Television Show." In the piece, he exhorts viewers to "think about upping our 'live-tweeting' game, just a little bit,"⁷ and compares the live tweeting of *Breaking Bad* to *Scandal*, *Glee*, and *The Vampire Diaries*. He states:

Every week, 'Scandal' watchers, you turn our timelines into this string of nonsense, and I get it; you're sharing the experience of watching a fun, provocative show in numbers. But every single thought that crosses your mind during your favorite

show is not necessarily a perfectly polished pearl that must be hashtagged and released.⁸

He states that proper live-tweeting should, "have something to contribute. Make a joke or craft an insight. Be droll or witty or sarcastic, but don't just state the obvious."⁹ While networks and advertisers won't care what live-tweeters are doing, just that they're doing it at all, this article showcases the trend of media commentators disciplining the "right" and "wrong" way to interact with media. It should also be noted that there is a large population of black women who live-tweet *Scandal*, and, the phenomenon of a white man (author Bailey) telling women of color how to "correctly" interact with media, as this article does in its subtext, is something I find enormously, hugely problematic, and is just as troubling as the valuation of users according to advertising purposes.

Of course there is something to be fascinated by, something to be celebrated in the success of Twitter as a place for television discussion. The *Scandal* live-tweeting audience mobilizes the conversation of a community (most notably the unofficial African-American Twitter community known as "Black Twitter"¹⁰) that is not usually considered as valuable in an advanced capitalist economy. The production done by fans creates an entirely new kind of media product, which is having an influence on the television and advertising industries. There is a heady and exciting prospect to the control that fans have over their media and their conversation with it. It also seems that the dream of interactive television has finally been achieved, something that has been discussed and tinkered with for decades. However, in using a lens of political economy, I have to question the notion of how audiences pay attention. Consider the phrasing as well: we "pay" our personal attention to something, and what do we get out of this product that we've just "purchased"? Entertainment? Advertising? Attention is the currency with which we purchase media—we pay, but who profits?

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Notes

- 1 Jeff Bercovici, "How Twitter Will Save TV (and TV Will Save Twitter)," *Forbes Magazine*, October 28th, 2013.
- 2 Interestingly, the title of the article online and inside the magazine is less sure than the cover, reading "Can Twitter Save TV? (And Can TV Save Twitter?)"
- 3 Jenna Wortham and Vindu Goel. "Swarm of Rivals Seeking Share of Social Media Pie." *New York Times*, October 16th, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/07/technology/awaiting-ipo-twitter-must-deal-with-horde-of-younger-rivals.html> (accessed February 12, 2014).
- 4 Vindu Goel and Brian Stelter, "Social Networks in a Battle for the Second Screen." *New York Times*, October 10th, 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/03/technology/social-networks-in-a-battle-for-the-second-screen.html> (accessed February 12, 2014).
- 5 Todd Spangler, "Nielsen and Twitter Unveil Social TV Metrics, Showing How Little Tweets Line Up with Ratings" *Variety*, October 7th, 2013 <http://variety.com/2013/digital/news/nielsen-and-twitter-unveil-social-tv-metrics-showing-how-little-tweets-line-up-with-ratings-1200702169/> (accessed February 12, 2014).
- 6 Brian Stelter, "Nielsen to Measure Twitter Chatter About TV Shows," *New York Times*, October 6th, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/07/business/media/nielsen-to-measure-twitter-chatter-about-tv.html?_r=2& (accessed February 12, 2014).
- 7 Jason Bailey, "Not To Live-tweet Your Favorite Television Show," *Flavorwire*, October 10th, 2013. <http://flavorwire.com/419423/how-not-to-live-tweet-your-favorite-television-show/> (accessed February 12, 2014).
- 8 Bailey, "How Not To Live-tweet Your Favorite Television Show"
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 John Drescher, "Black Twitter Emerges As a Force," *News Observer*, January 24th, 2014. <http://www.newsobserver.com/2014/01/24/3561280/drescher-black-twitter-emerges.html> (accessed February 12, 2014).