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## Twitter and #Television

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*Twitter and #Television*

The other week my grandmother asked me what those words were that always appeared in the right-hand corner of her television. Certainly it's nearly impossible to turn on a television these days and not spot a hashtag phrase there, but it's strange to consider because, really, this now common sight in the television medium embedded itself in that right-hand corner with very little fanfare. Seeming not to deem there to be much need for explanation about the arrival of these terms, networks simply trusted that the Tweeters they were reaching out to would know what to do, that a majority would be aware of the procedure of typing a hashtag (#) in front of a word, so Twitter will transform it into a link. This link would allow interested parties to browse all of the other recently posted tweets that included the same word or words. Essentially, it's a way of grouping messages about a topic together for easy access.

What this enables is for people on the site to find and jump into conversations about topics they feel like discussing by looking for a corresponding hashtag. Removing the connotations of watching shows being a solo activity, even if you don't have friends who tune in and share your fandom, you can now still have a place to get all your opinions out to an interested and like-minded audience. The hashtag is simply the phrase the group uses as a means to meet and culminate around. Responding to this trend, networks are attempting to take charge and encourage the use of a universal hashtag of their choosing to identify with their individual shows (the phrase that appears in the right hand corner of your television). It is their hope that enough *Tweets* including the same expression will be generated in the period that a show's playing to become one of Twitter's trending topics. Earning the designation of "trending" acts as a sign to Twitter users that this is a program they should be checking out because it offers something to chat about. It signifies popularity and acts as a way to garner public attention, but popularity and publicity is not always of the desired

“positive” variety. After all, trending topics do not differentiate between praise for a pilot and outrage, both of which can greatly influence viewers who are on the fence about giving a new show a try (affecting the amount of monetary profit). Twitter, the micro-blogging social network created by Jack Dorsey which started on March 21, 2006, may have forever changed how television networks communicate with the viewers of their shows, but networks are still working out how that change can best be used to their advantage and avoid instances where it could harm.

Indeed, there has always been this fear, and not completely unfounded, that the Internet and social media would be a threat to television. Every show that used to be available only on television, and afterwards DVD, can currently be found and purchased with services like Amazon and Netflix or legally (and illegally) streamed for free. This takes away the pressure to catch episodes live when they originally air because of these multiple sources to catch-up from later at a time more convenient. This then hurts advertisers, providers of a huge source of television’s revenue also used to cover production costs, who have less enticement to pay or sell their products on TV when their ads are being missed or ignored due to people skipping the initial airing. Even those that watch may never notice the commercials, as social networks provide viewers something to browse on during breaks instead of paying attention to what is being sold on screen.

As much as it has been easier for viewers to skip first airings, Twitter simultaneously provides a reason or motivation for people to keep tuning in at the scheduled time: Live-tweeting. This activity imparts a social opportunity for fans (and occasionally cast and crew members join in, too) to discuss what just happened, while their reactions are still fresh in their mind. Increasingly available Internet access on multiple electronic devices has made means of logging into the site always nearby and readily available for use at all times. What that means for television is that nothing stands in the way of viewers multitasking while

viewing. To participate is as easy as connecting to the site on your closest portable device (whether it be phone, computer, or iGadget app) and, instead of forgetting a detail you wanted to mention around the water cooler the next day, you can automatically get a response from others as you think of the comment or question in your head. It has made for a new, more interactive experience, as well as a dangerous one rampant with spoilers for anyone who missed an important scene (creating a cost to missing episodes in that there exists a greater chance of a surprise twist getting ruined). Basically, since the most active discussions will be taking place instantly after events occurred, you don't want to wait until later to watch.

From a data collecting standpoint, unlike previously, where most feedback from fans and critics would be direct but delayed, creators of shows have a way to receive direct, immediate feedback from a diverse and multiple demographic-filled resource about the scenes they recently wrote, edited, and/or directed. That meant if a plot development didn't go over well with followers of the show the writers could focus on improving that thread line immediately so it didn't continue to not mesh or throw people off in future episodes. Likewise, if a character made a very strong impression they might get more screen time in the future, because of the early receiving of praise. To what degree this input brings about change varies by show and the magnitude of the complaint but, no matter what, it is a previously unavailable well of information that, even if not used, is nice to have around for ulterior perspectives from target consumers.

For executives, who place so much value on keeping track of numbers and how many people tune in as a major factor in a show's success and continuation, here was a means to better grasp the volume and strength of fan support around a program. These numbers collected through Twitter could be used to entice the same advertisers who had been hesitant before since, "...Twitter-enhanced TV watching is incompatible with time-shifting, [so] Twitter television audiences are more likely to be exposed to commercials," (Harrington 16).

That suggests advertisers may be willing to pay more for time slots when there are more people around to see their commercials, signifying more money available to be spent creating better shows and towards other expenses of running a successful network.

Finally, another use of this new, more personal link to the outside world regards actors, who can start their own Twitter pages for communicating with fans and promoting what they are working on (instead of or in addition to the already utilized talk show circuit). Different networks have accounts which set-up contests where you have to participate within a timeframe that requires you watch the show while it's playing to know the answer soon enough. There are accounts set up from the perspective of fictional characters from shows as well that get a lot of attention despite being fake. It sounds a little out there but one of the Twitter accounts for *Big Bang Theory*'s Sheldon Cooper has a little over 205,000 followers, so clearly it works. "Psychologists have long known that people can engage in "parasocial" relationships with fictional characters, like those on TV shows or in books, or with remote celebrities we read about in magazines," (Thompson) and Twitter is able to monopolize on that feeling of connection.

Today, I still drop everything for a television show. The buffering of Internet video annoys me so unless conflicts come up that make it necessary to find a missed episode online, I avoid it. I don't have a Facebook and I would never dare miss a line of episode dialogue to send out a Tweet. My grandmother, who still can't grasp hashtags, is similarly unaffected. Nonetheless, we are a minority, and not the people television needs to be concerned about keeping around. The Internet and Twitter can be a distraction but they likewise breed the obsessive, passionate fans that will remain loyal to a network's show. They assemble interest, excitement, promotion, and provide a sense of viewer attitudes by way of both statistics and specific remarks. All of these openings can be positive fodder for television if the medium is willing to take on the challenge of allying itself with social networks, instead of allowing

them to be the enemy that takes away their reason for being kept around by consumers who have other choices.

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