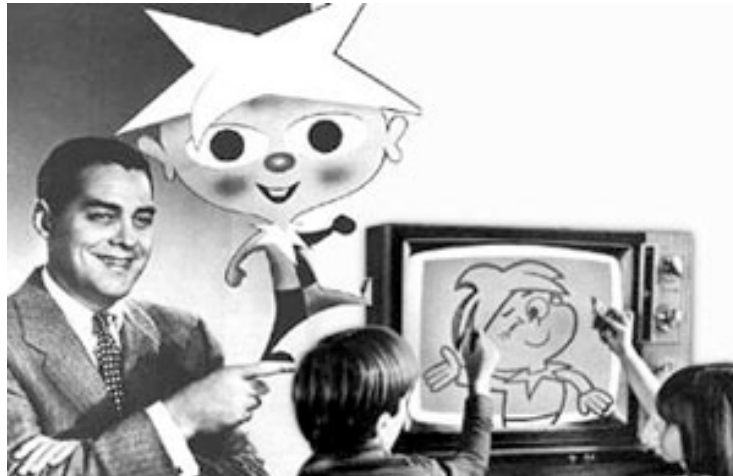


**Television and Interactivity: Patterns and Categories in the United States**

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T585: Interactivity & New Media  
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Research Paper 1  
10/17/07



## **Television and Interactivity: Patterns and Categories in the United States**

Interactive television started in 1953 with a show called “Winky Dink” which encouraged children to become involved in a cartoon story by completing connect-the-dot puzzles which were displayed on screen. Children could send away for a “Winky Dink” kit which included a sheet of transparent plastic and wipe-away markers. As the main character (Winky Dink) got into trouble, he would ask viewers to help rescue him from difficult situations. The children would place their plastic sheet against the television screen and draw a bridge, for example, to help Winky Dink cross a river before an ensuing predator would reach him (Swedlow: 2000). Considering the ways in which communication technology has progressed since 1953, one could argue that very little has changed in the way that Americans interact with television content. The internet has grown to present users with a vast expanse of interactive video viewing and communication opportunities, but as we sit in our living rooms with our televisions, only a relatively small amount of interactivity is possible.

In the following pages, I will look closely at a variety of interactive experiences which currently exist in American television, discuss their unique qualities as they relate to interactivity and standard broadcast television and group programs with similar characteristics into categories. Examining the particular characteristics of interactive experiences in television will allow us to see exactly how and in what ways interactivity is present in American television. In fact, I will show that interactive experiences in television broadcast, while still relatively limited in number, come in six basic forms. The most well known of these is the “American Idol,” or text-to-vote, model where viewers call, SMS or cast a vote online in order to determine the outcome of the show itself. Home shopping, do-it-yourself, prerecorded playback, alternate reality games and viewer produced content are other types of interactivity which currently exist in broadcast television. The six-prong typology presented in this paper will enable future comparisons between modes of interactive television in the United States and other countries. While identifying these categories alone will not fully indicate why American television remains so passive, it will provide one important piece of the larger puzzle pertaining to

why the U.S. lags behind other countries in the presence of interactive experiences in television.

### **Interactivity**

While interactivity has become a buzzword in the technology and advertising industries, the exact definition of interactivity can vary based on which scholar's definition one is reading. In this discussion of interactivity and television, I employ the definition proposed by Erik Bucy in *Interactivity in Society: Locating an Elusive Concept*. Bucy determines that "Interactivity is best (though not exclusively) understood as a perceptual variable that involves communications mediated by technology" (Bucy 2004b: 377). Because this definition includes user perception as a variable, it will allow us to include patterns in broadcast television which might be excluded if we were to employ other definitions which tend to focus on a specific technology or person-to-person interaction. For example, in the children's show "Winky Dink," there is no actual impact of the viewer's participation on the content of the show. However, the viewer gains information in the form of educational knowledge and specific skills by *interacting* with the show. Thus, Bucy's definition which includes user perception as a variable in the interactivity equation is used in this case because it takes into account the rather passive interactions we currently have with television in the United States.

Before exploring the predominant patterns of interactivity in American television, it is perhaps useful to discuss why interactivity as a property of media in general is considered beneficial and why, specifically in television, interactive experiences have been seen as favorable. Rafaeli (1988) notes that interactive processes have generally been thought to lead to increased motivation, acceptance, satisfaction and learning as well as more thoughtful engagement with the task at hand. While others argue that interactivity is value-neutral (Bucy 2004a) or even deters engagement with technologies for people who have low levels of technological literacy (Bucy 2004a), many advertisers are capitalizing on what they feel is a new way to connect with potential consumers. Peter Birch, head of Interactive Sales at iTV, a British broadcast station employing a variety of interactive advertising strategies, notes, "Advertisers benefit from bespoke content areas and a return path to achieve ROI (Return On Investment), and a direct dialogue with the

viewer. And as viewers control the information flow, they're also particularly receptive to the advertising message" (Birch 2005: 17). Besides this increased ability to sell things, interactivity can allow users to feel a greater sense of social and civic involvement, an increased (in some cases) ability to learn and a more immersive, enjoyable sense of entertainment. In the following paragraphs each of these benefits will be more closely examined as the predominant interactive patterns in American television are more thoroughly described.

**Categories of Interactivity**

While creating a taxonomy of interactive styles of television may not single-handedly illuminate why interactive television is incorporated less into American television than in European or Asian television, it will provide a standard which will allow future work to be done in comparing similarities or differences between American television and European and Asian television. This comparison to international instances of interactivity in television along with an analysis of policy making, technological advances and corporate management trends will help paint a more complete picture of why American television remains passive as the web and many other forms of media continue to become more and more interactive. The task of *this* paper is to group like instances of interactivity into categories. While these categories cannot include every instance of interactivity which exists or has existed in American television, they signify predominant themes existing today in mass broadcast television. The six categories of television interactivity described in this paper are the following: text-to-vote, home shopping, do-it-yourself, prerecorded playback, alternate reality games and viewer produced content.

**Table 1: Categories of Interactive Television in the US, 2007**

Type	Interactivity Characteristics	Examples
Text-To-Vote	Viewers determine the content and/or outcome of a show by sending text messages, faxing, emailing, calling or going online	American Idol, Larry King Live, Rock Star Supernova, The Next Food Network Star
Home Shopping	Viewers purchase goods shown on TV	HSN, QVC, Infomercials

Do-It-Yourself	Viewers replicate a task as shown on TV	This Old House, DIY/Food Networks, The Joy of Painting, Trading Spaces
Prerecorded Playback	Viewers control the programs they view by recording them and playing them back when they want to view them	Digital Video Recorders, TiVo, Video on Demand, Internet Protocol Television
Alternative Reality Games	Viewers participate in fictional narratives which refer to televised programs	Heroes, A World Without Oil
Viewer Produced Content	Viewers become producers of video content which airs on broadcast television networks.	Community Access TV, Current TV, 2006 Doritos Superbowl Advertisement

In developing this typology of interactivity in current American television, I gathered and analyzed a number of press releases from content providers, service providers, and product advertisers. I felt that the information provided in these sources would give a realistic assessment of how industry players are implementing interactive experiences into their business models. The appearance of being cutting-edge, is positive for these companies because their success depends largely on their ability to differentiate themselves from their competitors. It is therefore, in the interest of advertisers, broadcast networks and cable/satellite/IPTV (Internet Protocol Television) service providers to alert the public when they employ a new technology or service especially if these technologies or services will impact consumers/viewers in a positive way.

### **Text-To-Vote**

The first and perhaps most prevalent type of interactivity in American television is what I deem the text-to-vote category. This model has been made nearly ubiquitous in reality television shows due to the popularity of shows like “American Idol.” The defining characteristic of the text-to-vote model is a content producer’s appeal for audience participation in the outcome of a televised competition in the form of SMS text messages and/or phone calls. As viewers watch “American Idol,” a live show where aspiring musicians compete for a chance to win a recording contract, they vote for their favorite contestants thereby eliminating those with the fewest number of votes. Other forms of participatory television, which fall under the text-to-vote category, include news

presenters requesting the public voice to be heard. While viewers aren't necessarily voting, they are augmenting the content of the show (if their message is read or listened to on air) and becoming more engaged due to their participation. Viewers are asked to text/fax/email/call in with their opinions, questions, and comments. Thus, in the typology I outline in this paper, "Larry King Live" on CNN, for example, also falls into this text-to-vote category.

The text-to-vote model provides a win-win situation for content producers because viewers return to the show again and again because they feel they have a voice in the content of the show. Obviously, the more people who are invested in the show and become repeat viewers, the higher the show's ratings climb. This, in turn, makes advertisers happy because viewers (read: consumers) are more likely to know about their products. In the case of "American Idol," for example, Fox and advertisers such as AT&T, a wireless service provider, depend on viewers taking ownership of the show by voting for their favorite singer. Because viewers are likely to come back to the show to find out if their vote made a difference (e.g., whether or not their favorite contestant survived elimination), they are not only contributing to the network's ratings, but also generating money for the wireless service provider (AT&T) who sponsors the show. Viewer participation in text-to-vote programs provides a unique arena in which content producers and advertisers can partner with each other as well as with viewers to create a popular, dynamic, and interactive show. (Kapko 2007)

### **Home Shopping**

Another important type of interactive television which exists today is the phenomena of home shopping. Home shopping exists in multiple forms in modern television; entire networks are dedicated to selling various consumer goods. QVC and HSN are good examples of stations which fall into this category. On such networks, there are two levels in interactivity. The first consists of the actual transaction; an exchange of money and goods. A viewer can sit at home while perky on-air personalities describe and fawn over products which are available for the viewer to buy. To purchase the item, the viewer simply calls in and pays for the item by credit card. The item then appears, delivered to his or her home, in just a few days.

The second form of interactivity involved in home shopping is the perceived interaction between the viewer and the on-air personality. Along with stations such as QVC and HSN, infomercials—longer format shows in which a product is demonstrated and offered for sale—provide insight into this type of interactivity. For example, celebrity infomercial personality Suzanne Somers, pitched and sold thousands of thigh masters to American TV viewers. Although viewers may feel that they have developed a connection with the on-air personality, no real interaction with the personality is taking place. Perhaps a viewer would perceive a greater investment in the show by relating an object present (or soon to be) in their physical environment to one which occurs on television. In this way, home shopping channels and infomercials are replacing door-to-door salespeople from previous generations with TV-to-door salespeople, thereby simulating previous forms of interactivity.

### **Do-It-Yourself**

The phrase “do it yourself” became commonly used in the 1950’s referring to jobs that people could do in and around their homes without the use of a professional. Do-it-yourself (DIY) programming is perhaps best described as programming which inspires a viewer to replicate or apply a particular action which appears as part of a television show, in their own lives. Many of the actions present in DIY programming include tasks such as gardening, cooking, painting, home maintenance/decor, automobile repair, jewelry-making, quilting, scrap-booking, video production, etc. Similar to home shopping there is no actual interaction between the user and the on-air personality or host of the show, though a bond between them can certainly develop. For example, viewers can potentially paint “happy little trees,” along with Bob Ross (“The Joy of Painting,” PBS, 1983-1995), in their living rooms as Bob is painting them on TV. Unlike home shopping however, there is no exchange of goods; the transaction is a one way flow of information which inspires a later action on the part of the viewer.

A distinguishing feature of the DIY type of TV interaction is that as the need for a particular task presents itself to the viewer, he or she is then able to recall and apply the knowledge acquired while watching the performance of a similar task on television. Perhaps the viewer is tuning into a particular show, like “The Joy of Painting,” due to a

preexisting interest in painting or a desire to learn how to paint. With the relatively recent addition of the networks which dedicate nearly all of their programming to this type of television (e.g, the DIY network, the Food Network, and HGTV) it is apparent that this type of interactive television is quite popular. Such popularity during the past couple of years promises that this type of programming will have staying power.

### **Prerecorded Playback**

Many American television service providers are now offering products which allow users to make decisions about what they want to watch *when* they want to watch it. Examples of this are DVR (Digital Video Recording) technology, VOD (Video On Demand) and IPTV (Internet Protocol Television). These technologies allow viewers to record content and view programs at their own convenience. When viewers watch prerecorded shows, they are also able to fast-forward through commercials. Although previous technologies like the VCR allowed viewers to do this as well, DVRing is more convenient; there is no need to mess with tapes and multiple shows can be recorded at once. Beyond the basic functions that prerecorded playback provides, however, there is still very little a consumer can do to interact with video content.

TiVo, a DVR service, does provide its users with additional interactivity functions. TiVo owners can connect their televisions to their home broadband network and interact with content like family photos, music and games via an internet connection. This application makes DVRs similar to IPTV systems, though it is likely that these functions are not utilized very frequently by users because the same content is easily accessible via a regular computer with an internet connection. In sum, very little interactivity is possible beyond recording predetermined shows and pausing, fast-forwarding and rewinding them during playback. (Strom 2007)

Despite the lack of realized potential for interactivity in prerecorded playback systems, certain advertisers are beginning to make the most of this technology. For example, Nike has partnered with Dish Network in promoting their new Zoom training-shoe product line via an interactive TV campaign. Dish Network's DVR users (about 30% of the network's 13 million subscribers) click into thirty- and sixty-second TV advertisements starring Sand Diego Chargers running back LaDanian Tomlinson and

other Nike-clad athletes. Interactivity comes in to play as Nike gives users the option to view an interview of Tomlinson where he discusses his training, footage of Tomlinson's football moves (in varying speeds), a three-dimensional demo of the shoe and a Nike-branded game which tests users' remote-control reflexes (Cueno & Mullman 2007). Used in this way, I believe prerecorded playback systems of the future may not only shape advertising itself, but also provide the most potential for creating immersive interactive environments on TV due to quick system response to user input.

### **Alternate Reality Games**

An Alternate Reality Game (ARG) can be described as an interactive narrative which unfolds in the real world. ARGs differ from other forms of interactive TV in that they are prompted by television, but the interactivity itself mainly takes place outside of television in other media arenas. In this way, although ARGs are extremely immersive environments, they are actually augmentations of television programming. Because of this, players of ARGs are highly motivated and interested in the narrative of the game which is really an extension of the narrative of the TV show.

Many times these games are used to get viewers to become more invested in a particular TV show. A couple of noteworthy examples of this include the NBC "Heroes" ARG which brings people deeper into the narrative of the story by presenting them with the opportunity to visit a website mentioned on the show and "A World Without Oil" which is a PBS (Public Broadcasting Services) funded ARG that aims to help inform people of the social hazards of consuming too much oil. Interestingly, when it comes to ARGs, oftentimes players of an ARG do not actually realize that they are playing a game. Clues or entrance points to the game appear randomly. In the TV show "Heroes," for example, a website was mentioned in the show as the site of a fictional company, Primatech Paper. If viewers went to this website and submitted a fictional employment application, they were granted access to secret files containing information about the show's characters. This information is only made available to those who seek it out. The satisfaction that users get from this is largely based on a desire on the part of viewers for more of the show's content and narrative, while the network and its advertisers benefit by creating a loyal core group of the show's viewers.

While the PBS ARG “A World Without Oil” takes place outside the realm of television, the ARG is funded by, and thus, an extension of a television broadcast network. Users of this ARG are invited to show how they live now that the world’s oil supply is depleted (the fictional premise of the game). “A World Without Oil” is unique in the fact that it solicits videos produced by viewers which help mold the content of the game and employs tools such as LiveJournal, Vox, YouTube, podcasts, and the phone (anyone can call in and leave a message for other players to hear) to facilitate user interaction with the story and with other players. Thus, users are also creators and moderators of the game since they are encouraged to alter its narrative and challenges. I believe “A World Without Oil” is important because it incorporates interactivity from the real world to potentially generate content for broadcast television, thereby making television programming potentially more participatory.

### **Viewer-Produced Content**

The final model of interactivity found in American television is programming in which the traditionally passive viewer becomes the active producer of content. While the concept of broadcasting viewer-produced content is not new, it has become en vogue lately with the popularity of websites like YouTube. Community Access Channels have enabled users to voice their concerns or broadcast their artistic expressions since the early seventies. The recent popularity of video websites along with relative price drops in consumer camcorders and editing systems have catapulted the establishment of a population of people who regularly capture, edit and post videos online. Several newspapers have already taken advantage of the low cost opportunities consumer-producer content affords them. It certainly seems probable that television will follow suit.

In fact, one can occasionally see consumer-produced content on television today. A memorable example of this was the 2006 Dorito’s Superbowl Commercial Contest where a group of amateur videographers submitted a Dorito ad to Frito Lay with the hopes that their ad would be chosen to air during the Superbowl (and they would win the \$10,000 cash prize). Additionally, a refreshing and innovative hybrid of YouTube and Community Access is Al Gore’s new media startup, Current TV. Current TV allows young people (18-34) to submit videos to its website. Website visitors then vote on their

favorite videos. The most popular videos are then aired on Current's actual broadcast television station. Joel Hyatt, Current TV's CEO, says, "Current TV is an effort to build a new kind of media company to democratize television first and the media industry generally." It is an effort to combat an "utter lack of innovation in the media industry" (McGirt 2007:72). Current TV is making about a ten percent margin on cash flow after less than two years, according to analyst estimates (McGirt 2007). This is largely due to the low production costs associated with viewer produced programming. Derek Baine, a senior analyst with Kagan Research, notes, "I think their model has made other networks sit up and pay attention" (McGirt 2007: 74). Current TV is turning heads with its high-profits, repeat viewership and fresh content which suggests viewer produced programs are the wave of the future when it comes to television and interactivity.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have identified and described six categories of interactive television currently present in the United States: text-to-vote, home shopping, do-it-yourself, prerecorded playback, alternate reality games and viewer produced content. (These categories along with their particular interactive characteristics and common examples can be quickly referenced in Table 1 on pages 3 and 4). While it is important to understand that these categories are not perfectly exhaustive, they do denote the significant patterns which exist in American television today.

As readers may observe, some categories are capable of overlapping depending on their specific application. For example, prerecorded playback and do-it-yourself programming could be used at the same time; with DVR technology, it is possible to simulate DIY program content in real-time given the ability to pause, rewind and fast-forward televised programs. However, DVRs can also mean sacrificing interactive television content. If a viewer watches a program on a one or more day delay, for example, he or she is unable to fully participate in text-to-vote model programming. Thus, although I have discussed these categories of interactive television separately, they are not necessarily distinct entities.

Although the categories described here shed light on the different forms of interactivity which currently exist in American television today, there is still much to be

examined in order to determine not only the reasons *why* American television consists of these particular forms and not others but also *how much* interactivity we can expect in the future. Based on international evidence, it seems that as content and access providers form stronger relationships (or become one and the same), interactive experiences in broadcast television in the US will increase in number. Therefore, future investigations should focus on the impacts that communications policy, technological innovation, and management of communications/broadcast corporations have on the interactivity of television programming. Only after conducting a broader query of these factors, then, will we fully understand why television in the United States consists of the categories of interactivity outlined here and what we can expect to see in the future. Hopefully, such future research will also help us understand why interactivity on television has advanced so little in the United States since the inception of “Winky Dink” in 1953.

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