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THE NEW FACE OF THE TV VIEWER.
FROM EVOLUTION TO REVOLUTION?
A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

For a long time, TV viewers were said to be passive, sitting on their couch with the rest of the family, watching the programs that were broadcasted.

Now, society has changed, people are more demanding and willing to participate in the creation process. Television has also changed with the multiplication of the channels, the technologies involved (the VCR, TIVO, even the remote control) and TV viewers have new tools to interact with television programs and to choose from a wider range of opportunities in order to create their own timetable and their own programmation.

This article deals with the evolution of the TV viewer, with his technological skills and with the relationship between new technologies (and especially the Internet and interactivity) and the more and more active part played by the TV viewer in the co-creation of messages.

Keywords: interactivity, cultural studies, users, television.

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1. Introduction

Studying the reception of television broadcasts has always been the main interest of media researchers, from the critics of the industries of culture of the Frankfort School to the TV viewers' negotiated position of the Cultural Studies. More precisely, the effects of the television media on the TV viewers were deeply analysed, revealing each time a new face for the TV viewer with each new theory and paradigm. Today, with the apparition of new media and technologies, the TV viewer is referred to as an "interactor," someone who is thinking, interacting and deciding. This aspect of audience research and the novelties in technologies and media is quite a new path taken by sociologists and communication researchers to explain the "new TV viewer." In fact, audience research has shown too little inclination to seek historical explanations. Yes television is quite new in our society. But since the 1990's, television experiences an important phase of transformation with the expansion of channels, especially global and narrow-cast ones, and with the advent of new technologies such as the VRC and new digital television. The only element that stays is the audience, the people who make a medium live because they watch it, or listen to it or read it. Central to recent work on media audiences is an analysis of the ways in which people can be said to be active in shaping their media culture, contributing to the process of shaping or co-constructing their material and symbolic environments. Actually, the spectator is at the core centre of every media. It is even more true concerning the TV viewer. Organisms make "representative groups" and calculate the audience rates, researchers study the reception by different audiences of different TV genres, and producers create broadcasts "to send a message" to some identified audience. Actually, we can distinguish two TV viewers: an ideal TV viewer constructed by sociologists, wanted and dreamed by producers and a TV viewer in flesh and blood, the real TV viewer, the one who watches his TV set in his living-room, the one who likes or dislikes the programs he is proposed. The first one is formatted by media and advertisements. This is what is called "the implied audience," an audience that is presumed, imagined or mythologized. "For example, audiences may be implicitly construed as participants in and beneficiaries of a new democracy or as victims of a new and highly manipulable panopticon"

(Livingstone 1999: 4). The TV viewer in "flesh and blood" is defined by his numerous experiences, by his expectations, by his contradictions and by his cultural, political, economical and social background.

This paper will focus on the characteristics of the TV viewer, and on how the uses of new technologies allow him to interact and participate in the co-construction of the text, the message. How was the TV viewer defined when television broadcasts first appear? How did the TV viewer become active? How is he defined today with the multiplication of technologies and the meeting point of the Internet, cell phones and television? How new technologies evolve and make the TV viewer evolve? The purpose of this article is to show, through the analysis of the litterature and the confrontation of different paradigms, that the TV viewer is not the same anymore, that he was changed by the implement and use of new technologies. He now wants to be part of the creation of media content and has evolved as well as the society.

2. From the Spectator to the TV Viewer

The first and basic definition of a spectator makes him a witness of any action, "the one who is watching an event of which he is the visual witness." Montaigne in his *Essais* is more Manichean when he writes that "the spectator is the one who is watching an action versus the one who is making the action" (Montaigne, new edition 2007: 35). Today, there are two ways to define the TV viewer considering the technical and social aspects. On one hand we have the passive one, the TV viewer, which is mentioned in every advertisements which promote the power of interactivity and the active viewer who is already and actually using interactivity and new technologies. But it has not always been like that.

When television was launched in the 1940's, it was said to be, by optimistic people and producers, a fantastic innovation, a new mirror reflecting society. But for European researchers, this new technology was something to fear, a social object to be afraid of. The first theorists, who were not so optimistic about the apparition of this new media, were part of the School of Frankfurt. Adorno and Horkeimer criticized the industrialization of the culture and the alienating power of the media and particularly of television. Actually, according to this Critical Theory, media

were in the hand of the men in charge, and thanks to these media and their influence over society, politics could alienate audiences and make them believe anything. We can conclude, as Guillaume Lochard wrote, that "media and specifically television has some effects of social inertia over a victimized audience" (Lochard 1998: 14). What does that mean? The political power by that time controlled everything, even the cultural products and their reflections on society. People were only passive objects reading, listening and watching what they were told. The School of Frankfurt had a Marxist point of view and despised capitalism and its power and effect over people, economy and society. Max Horkheimer's and Theodor W. Adorno's "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" chapter in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was explicit on their view of society and passivity of the audience. The corrosive sharpness of their analysis targeted the impact of capitalist modes of production upon all spheres of life, even the ostensibly autonomous realms of high art and social critique. For them, audience was totally passive, unable to make a decision because they faced a stronger power that did not allow them to think freely and to question and object to the media and their content. Spectators watched passively even sometimes dispassionately their screen. Here, the notion of mass can be introduced. Adorno and Horkeimer had a poor image of the spectator as a passive and amorphous mass. "The masses are not the principal factor, but only a secondary element. The consumer is not the king, as the culture industries would like, he is his object" (Adorno 1964: 23). Adorno, specifically wrote about music. Including music in society, he diagnosed a global raise of the weakening and elimination of an autonomous and reflexive subject, under the weigh of capitalism. This European's thoughts conclude to the passivity of human beings concerning their link with cultural products and more generally with the cultural industry and capitalism.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the Functionalists' theory was created by Paul Lazarsfeld. His main issue was to underline the capacity of decision of the TV viewer. The thesis of a fascinated and alienated audience manipulated by the power of the mass media (School of Frankfort) was displaced by the theory that the audience has a right of negotiation while dealing with a mass medium: or they accept it, or they reject it, or they negotiate (the Functionalists). For them, the audience was not

this object almost empty of judgement and consciousness depicted by the researchers of the Frankfurt theory. They believed that the message followed two steps: first, it is received and read by the opinion leaders who then gave the information to other people. The negotiation aspect came from the opinion leaders because, before putting the message in the hand of other people, they could choose to accept the information they were given, reject it or negotiate. At this time, "there was not much more than this Columbia Theory, which gave an alternative portrayal of the audience, postulating a freedom of choice for the consumer facing the offer of programs and based on a broadcast by level" (Proulx 1998: 121). This is what the functionalists called the "two step-flow of communication." It was clear then that our own appropriations of the audiovisual media were more and more impressed by the interpersonal network to which we belong. Moving from the paradigm of the Marxist theory to the sociologist's, we can notice that the definition of the "television consumer" has changed. He was first described as a passive spectator, subjected to the capitalist power in charge, unable to make any decision (School of Frankfurt, Europe). Then, the "media consumer" was able to exercise a power of decision (rejection, acceptation or negotiation) on the media and more particularly on the television programs. He became a real TV viewer, involved in what he saw on his TV set because he had choice. "The functionalist theory concludes that the audience is active in its use of media and of television in particular, and that this use is linked to some expectations and needs from the TV viewers" (Vilches 1995: 39).

3. From the TV Viewer to the Interactor

A new face of the TV viewer appeared, analysed by the theorists of Columbia. Following the Functionalist paradigm, the Cultural Studies were created in Birmingham, in the United Kingdom. They wanted to continue and then go further into the functionalist tradition, which advocated a new decisional power to the TV viewer. "British Cultural Studies has very specific historical roots in postwar Britain, where the revival of capitalist industrial production, the establishment of the Welfare State and the Western powers' unity were all inflected into a representation of the 'new' Britain" (Turner 1990: 33). The main subject of the theory

was first working classes: their conditions and values had become indistinguishable from the middle-class' ones. In 1957, Richard Hogart wrote *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life with Special References to Publication and Entertainment.* This book became the foundation of the theory. The author analysed the influence of the culture in the working classes broadcasted by modern ways of communication. Inspired by this reference research, Stuart Hall studied the impact on television programs in *Encoding/Decoding in the Television Discourse.* For him, the culture is a relation of power between the production and the reception. "The notion of decoding helps taking seriously the fact that receptors have social statues and cultures and that watching or listening to a broadcast does not imply to have a same memory of it" (Mattelart 2003:35). Hall suggested that the TV viewer could consider three hypothetical positions in order to decode a television program and its message: first, audience could totally agree with the message ("hegemony" position). The TV viewer decodes the message with the reference that helps to encode it. Or the audience could partially agree ("negotiation"). This requires elements of adaptation and opposition to decode the message. Finally they could not agree with the broadcaster ("opposition"). A TV viewer could totally understand the connotations of a discourse, but could decode the message in an opposite way. Contrary to the Frankfurt theory which thought that television and all cultural products were unilateral, the Cultural Studies explained that there must be two elements in an audiovisual message: the broadcaster and the audience, that is to say the TV viewer who will consume and use the messages. In their paradigm, the Cultural Studies researchers added one important element concerning the audience: the cultural, economical, social and political background.

> An argument, encapsulated by Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding paper, began by rejecting the linearity of the mainstream, social psychological model of mass communication in order to stress the intersections but also the disjunctions between processes of encoding and decoding, contextualising both within a complex cultural framework. (Livingstone 2003:8)

In fact, every TV viewer is defined socially and culturally, and whenever he receives an audiovisual message, he uses this inner background to create

his own meaning of the message. "For the Birmingham School, television is obviously a fusion between pre-existing cultural and institutional forms. So, the messages from television can only be understood through cultural forms and skills from the TV viewers" (Vilches 1995: 92). Audience interpretations or decodings have been found to diverge depending on viewers' socio-economic position, gender, ethnicity, and so forth, while the possibilities for critical or oppositional readings are anticipated, enabled or restricted by the degree of closure semiotically encoded into the text and by audiences' variable access to public resources. The point is not that the audiences are "wrong" but that they construct their interpretations according to diverse discursive contexts which are themselves socially determined. The TV viewer takes another dimension with the theory of the Cultural Studies. He is active as the Functionalists found out with their researches, but he is active because he uses his own social construction.

In the 1980's, the whole television environment changed in what Umberto Eco called "neo-television" (Eco 1983). New channels were launched, programs were broadcasted all day and even all night long, homes have more than one TV set. With these changes and the apparition of new technologies, the TV viewer evolved, becoming an interactor able to choose what he likes and dislikes in television.

4. The New TV Viewer: The Interactor

In the 1980's, television was symbolized by three linked evolutions: a big growth of the available channels, a growth of the volume of the audience, and finally a diversification of the reception equipment. Now, the TV viewer can use his background but also the techniques to interact with his television and the programs he is offered and create a new audiovisual media and way of using it.

4.1. The VCR

The primary tool that TV viewers use as an alternative is the VCR. When they record a program they like or they don't want to miss, they begin to experience options. Actually, choosing to watch this program and not

another one, choosing to record one program and not another one is a first step into optional choices. Of course, in this case, the alternative option is quite weak because it is only a single program choice. TV viewers have only one possibility of choice, they can only record one program and watch another one simultaneously. But still, it is an example of how TV viewers can play with television and make their own programs, the programs they want to watch and not the ones that they are told to watch. The VRC was a great invention helping to make the TV viewers impose their opinions and voice their choices. Today, TV viewers have new digitalised VCR to create a new media temporality and be able to choose among a wide range of programms they have recorded. In fact, TIVO in the United States or Pilotime in Europe allow the TV viwer to interrupt the live broacast and record it on a hard drive, store recorded programms on the hard drive to watch them at a suitable time, to built an ideal variety of broacasts.

4.2. Channel Hopping

Then, with the great number of brand new channels, a new phenomenon appeared that changed the way people use television and that radically changed the way TV viewers grasped this everyday medium. This fresh "technique" was made possible with the creation of the remote control and was called "zapping," which literally means "deleting." What is zapping? It is the action of compulsively going through channels thanks to the remote control. The TV viewer deletes one channel and replaces it with the next one by clicking on the remote control. Zapping seems to be an overwhelming phenomenon that affects any kind of TV audience. When we compare available television with watched television (in reality), we can understand better the evolution of the audience's tastes underlying their love for entertainments and fictions. Faced with a large offering of programs, TV viewers would form their opinion by skimming through channels thanks to their remote control before reaching their final choice. For Dominique Wolton, a famous French sociologist, channel-hopping is first of all a way to avoid tediousness. Then, it can be an opportunity for TV viewers to watch, to spot randomly cultural programs integrated in general-interest channels. Actually, watching TV can be just a pallia-

tive for boredom, and going through channels compulsively is even more attractive because it avoids monotony. According to a study published in *Le Monde,* it appears that zapping is a lonely practice. It seems that TV viewers use channel-hopping more often when they are alone than when they are watching television with someone else. For example, young TV viewers (between 6 and 14) are qualified as "great users of zapping" when they are watching TV alone. But beyond the love for one or another channel and the attractiveness of a program, the free movement of TV audience into the general TV programs underlines an evolution in the relationship between the medium (television) and its audience: instability in watching a specific program in its full length and a growing autonomy of the audience towards the programs. TV viewers thanks to channel hopping were able to break the continuity of the broacasts, and discover new programms. Now, they are not faithfull to one specific programm but they can wander among channels.

The TV viewer again gained a new dimension thanks to new technologies and new ways of appropriating the audiovisual media. They not only refer to their society and culture to choose their favorite programs and interpret them, but they can also choose the moment where they will watch them and how they will watch them with new materials and techniques possible with a remote control.

With the overwhelming raise of new technologies and the meeting point of these technologies, the TV viewer can become more than a simple sociological actor, he can become an interactor (Proulx 1999), using interactivity.

5. What Did Interactivity Really Change for the TV Viewer

Real interactivity is quite a new phenomenon in television programs. I oppose real interactivity to a simulated one that allowed one TV viewer to come on set to represent all the others in front of their TV set. It was a common practice in France in the 1980's debates on political issues. There was a will and an effort from the producers to give the right to speak to their TV viewers. But this is not true interactivity. So what is interactivity in television programming today? According to Kiousis, a key concept in conceptualizing interactivity is "feedback": "the ability for

message receivers to respond to message senders" (Holmes 2004: 150). Tincknell and Raghuram explained in their analysis of *Big Brother:* "the idea of interactive media texts makes the idea of the active audience newly interesting because it suggests that such audiences may go beyond simply responding to a text. They may also help to change it." (Tincknell 2002: 206). For Holmes, "it is perhaps not so much increased levels of audience intervention that characterize the new interactivity as the increased level of self-reflexivity through which the audience is invoked, beckoned and address." (Holmes 2004: 152) Finally, the industry definition of ITV (Interactive television) is "a mechanism for allowing viewers to influence and controls programs or content in a natural or intuitive way making them feel they are part of the TV experience." (Jones 2002: 213). Here, we are more in a marketing definition giving the good part to both the users and the producers. The actual interactivity must include in its definition a link, an interaction between the user and the machine.

When we talk about interactivity in television, the user is the TV viewer and the technology can be multiple: a cell phone, a computer with Internet, or even a remote control. Before, when interactivity was first launched in television programs, the TV viewers had few options to interact with the producers and change the content of a broadcast. They could write a letter which might be read the next week during the broadcast or they could phone live during the program to answer questions or make the program evolve. More precisely, today, when we talk about Interactivity in TV programs, we are dealing with a real-time interaction between the TV program and the TV viewer, who is using technologies he knows: his phone, his computer, his remote control. There is an evolution compared to the possibilities offered by the use of the VCR and the use of channel hopping. What is important and obvious today is this convergence between all the media we traditionally know. Users and more specifically TV viewers accommodate to these new techniques in order to be a part of the changes in society. As Sonia Livingstone argues:

> [...] users are, necessarily, clicking on hypertext links in order to create a sequential flow of images on the world wide web, typing in order to co-construct the messages of the chat room, externalizing their conception of interface design and genre when producing their website, and manipu-

lating their game character in order to keep the game going. They are also accumulating audible references to their content preferences through "favorite" folders, inboxes, history files, software downloads, and so on. (Livingstone 1999: 63)

When it comes to interactivity in real-TV for example, the knowledge of techniques helps the users to reconfigure a form of active citizenship. "This is best understood by looking at the role of the Internet. Those logging on to the Internet were able to observe and construct a different dramatic arc, one in which they could play a role via message boards and the thousands of sites devoted to the series." (Hill & Palmer 2002: 252). Nowadays, to be part of the "active audience" and try to create his own broadcasts, the TV viewer has to be aware of the launching of new techniques and technologies and has to learn to use them. Interactivity is one of them, maybe the most important for the TV user and for the television producers. Thanks to the implement of Interactivity, the TV viewer has now a new definition: he is seen as a thinker, decision-maker, and an innovator. But Interactivity is also a lot about marketing: Interactivity becomes the growing acceleration or facilitation of retroactions (the feedbacks) from the TV viewers. The TV viewer is an interactor. What does that underline? For Bardini and Proulx, the interactor is "a cultural construct, the object of discourses, a potential client and consumer. But the interactor is also a concrete actor in flesh and blood who uses interactivity" (Proulx 1999). Interactivity is mainly seen as a system that generates opinions about the TV product and thereby allows the producers to know better and better please their audience. Here, I underline the paradox of our society driven by what producers and innovators offer to the users and what users need in their everyday life. The TV viewer is an interactor, decides on what he wants to watch on television, but he has to take the techniques and technologies into account and to face the production. Using this idea as a point of origin, André Vitalis developed the concept of socio-politics of uses. For him, "the society is above all a users' society. Because of the merchandizing of the needs to communicate, the communication between people is more and more linked to the objects and the technologies" (Vitalis 1994: 7). He goes on by saying that more and more new producers of new technologies (and there we can include the interactive television programs producers) analyze the consumers' needs,

that is to say those of the users, even if the gap between the two parts is still distinct. Actually, in this book, Vitalis softens the power of the users. "It deals with admitting the power of the user, but a power strongly limited by the dominating power of the production" (ibid.). Compared to Serge Proulx and his "interactor" who decides, acts and interacts with the programs, Vitalis has a restraint view of the skills of the users and of the TV viewers. Michel de Certeau had already analyzed this notion, this gap between the users and the producers. But for him, the users, and the TV viewers are "some unknown inventors," and that he can use "artifices and poaching" to voice his choices (De Certeau 1980).

In this context of interactivity and interrelation between the users and the producers, Dominique Boullier describes the TV viewer as a "person," especially when he is asked to write or phone the producers to express a choice or tell his feelings about the broadcast. (Boullier 1994: 67).

Interactivity is a new tool used by TV viewers in order to create their own programs and try to make the producers follow and answer their needs and wishes by doing profits with the overtaxed phone calls.

6. Going Further than the Interactor?

Television has changed in many ways giving a new feature to the TV viewer. Lochard explains that "from a simple spectator, the TV viewer is becoming an active protagonist immerged in the promises of the new convergence of technologies" (Lochard 1998: 219). Today, we can witness new forms of interactivity in the ways fans are dealing with their favourite programms (usually american TV shows) and are trying to have an active part in the co-construction of a text, to recreate new messages (fanfictions, fanvids, for example) thanks to the polysemy of the text. Actually, fans are more and more willing to participate in the constructions of their cult TV shows, seeking informations, talking to other fans in forum community, creating materials from the TV show, giving producers their fellings on the programms. All of these became possible thanks to the implement of the Internet, its use by the TV viewer (the fan) and the producers, and by the cultural need to participate in the creation of media metarials.

Are we going to have a more powerful TV viewer emancipated from the production? Will new technologies appear and help the TV viewer voice

his choice clearly and make things change? Maybe, with the growing interest for real-TV programs by programs' producers, the TV viewer will create a new media, dictated and constructed by his choice, needs, and wills.

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