

Fausto Colombo (ed.)

Tv and Interactivity in Europe

Mythologies, Theoretical Perspectives,
Real Experiences

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Interactivity and Analogue Commercial Television in Spain

1. *Introduction*

The purpose of this paper is to explain the current status of interactivity in commercial television in Spain. Commercial television is understood here as conventional analogue television, as opposite to digital television, despite of the commercial character of digital channels. The main reason for this distinction is that digital television (satellite, terrestrial or cable) has an inherent potential for interactivity that conventional television does not have, and this difference made more interesting the efforts of analogue television for reaching part of the value associated to interactivity.

The second objective of this paper is to question if the interactive initiatives of analogue commercial television are generating value for both the channels and the audience. The hypothesis is that while television channels are making money with these initiatives, audience as a whole is not really taking advantage of all the potential that interactivity offers to the public. And the main reason is that channels are promoting these services between a very specific target, the youth, and young people use the interactive possibilities just as a game. This is related to the devices used by analogue commercial television as return path: the mobile phone and the internet, both media very popular between young people.

2. *Illusion of interactivity?*

Could we really talk about interactivity on analogue commercial television? If we hear to Gilder (1994: 200), of course not, because it would be incompatible with the nature of television.

But if interactivity is understood as a continuum (Jensen 1998:191), and as a quality of technology-mediated communication (Neuman 1991:104), it would be possible to establish a rank of media depending on every medium's capability for allowing interactivity. In that rank

analogue television would be in the lowest place, because the main technological point of interactive media is that the return path must be the same that the signals use to reach the users. The internet would be a good example of high potential interactivity. For example, not all the digital television has the same level of interactivity: while satellite and terrestrial digital television need the phone line to enable interactive services, cable television allows the return path directly by the same cable line, making it more suitable for real interactivity.

The departure point is that analogue television is not the perfect platform for interactivity. But attending to some of the elements of interactive systems, it could be inferred that it is possible to determine some level of interactivity from the relation between viewers and television, mainly through the internet and the use of the short message system (SMS) of the mobile phones.

Most of contributions to the interactivity concept have identified user control over content as one of the characteristics of interactive communication systems, and the capacity, to some extent, to elaborate new content that would affect the content of the following communication process (Lelu - Marcovici 1986; Durlak 1987; Bettini 1995; Croteau - Hoynas 1997).

Some examples from Spanish experience could help to clarify the different interactivity levels that analogue commercial television could offer.

2.1. Less than bidirectional communication

The most common call for action nowadays on Spanish television is the SMS. Moderators ask the audience for their comments and opinions about the program's content. Those messages appear on the screen, modifying the program's final appearance, but not really the content. It is a kind of "make up" interactivity, less than the bidirectional communication, the lowest level of interactivity according to Hanssen, Jankowski and Etienne (1996), because in this case the receiver, the television channel, does not take into account the answers.

Most of prime-time live shows are using short messages to foster audience participation and of course their loyalty: "Así es la vida" (Antena 3), "A tu lado" (Tele5), "Crónicas Marcianas" (Tele5), "Cada Tarde" (La Primera),... are some of those programs.

There are two cases in which the use of SMS turns into real two-way communication:

Sometimes, one message is occasion for a change on the content line of the program, when some of the participants take notice of it and introduce some new question. This could be considered as a higher level of interactivity than simply be shown on the screen. The problem is that this is not a systematic approach, and most of the times, messages do not have an impact at all on the program.

In other cases, users send messages addressed to other people on the audience's side. In this case, television is a technological platform to conduct interpersonal communication. Once again, this is not part of any systematic approach.

2.2. Responding a specific demand: reactivity

One of the revolutions of the "Big Brother" format was allowing the audience to determine the evolution of the program: voting for a specific character would modify the following events of the contest.

This "yes" or "no" option is a very popular formula and one of the key elements of the famous reality-shows: "Pop Stars", "Operación Triunfo", "La Isla de los Famosos", all of them are looking for the audience decisions.

In these cases, the contribution asked is needed but really simple, and in fact when a program has tried to do something more sophisticated the audience's response has not been so good.

During the fourth edition of "Big Brother", the organization announced a real implication of viewers on the "house life", not just deciding who would be out of the contest. The first weeks questions like "do you want rain or sun for the house?", "must the participants be awarded with a Chinese or a Mexican party?" were set up to the audience. But after the first attempts, viewer's participation was again restricted to the traditional vote to the nominees.

Other relevant experiment is the one held by Antena 3 Television for Saturdays nights: Viewers' Day. During the whole week two movies are offered to the public, and everyone is invited to vote for their favorite option through SMS.

The main difference with the first experience is that in this case the viewers' opinion is acknowledged by the receiver (television channel): his or her opinion has a significant importance on the subsequent program content.

Despite of its simplicity, this second option clearly offers more interactivity than the previous one. Hanssen et al. (1996) referred to this type as *reactiveness*: react to a stimulus, that seems an appropriate term

to designate this kind of actions. The stimulus is a question or an option given to the public.

2.3. A higher level of interactivity: responsiveness

Richer forms of interactivity on analogue commercial television come mainly from the use of the internet as the return channel. Users experiment interactivity on television channels' websites, where they review programs, send video clips to friends, participate in forums or chats with celebrities or other users, etc.

Most of the times, the internet offers a real interactive experience with occasion of a television program, but not directly influencing its content. This is the case of Operación Triunfo website, www.portalmix.com, one of the most popular forum websites of the internet where fans interact with others, interchanging information about their pop idols. The website for Telecinco, www.telecinco.es, the most visited television website in Spain, is another good example, with information about programs, video-clips to send to friends, polls, forums, etc. Interactive communication occurs in those sites but it does not have a real influence on the television program at all.

In other cases users can send elaborated content through the Internet to be shown on television programs. Viewers are entitled to produce their own pieces of video, or computer animations. "Pecado Original" (Telecinco) or "+ te Vale" (Canal +) offer this option to the viewers. Telecinco "News Report", on prime time, offers a special section called "Viewers' News" where information or disclaims sent by Internet users are presented as news inside the regular program.

The internet also affects the programs' content in other ways: during the second "Big Brother" season, the daily summary opened a specific section where Internet users' opinions were exposed to general audience.

Higher levels of interactivity could be found in those examples. As an interactive medium, the Internet offers interactivity, but it does not always have a real impact on the television content.

The other experience, the one where viewers are asked to send their own video creations or news, is much more interesting. In this case, using the same languages than television (video, audio, multimedia), users really influence, creating the program's content. Hanssen et al. (1996) called the third level of interactivity *responsiveness*, that matches with this option where user really react to suggestions, of influences. The term definition also includes "use of responses", that is a perfect definition of an interactive communication process, where all the interventions could modify the following content.

3. Are these interactive experiences generating value?

Before answering this question lets make an interesting remark: recent research works in Spain have found that digital television users are not really interested on interactive services (Garrigaonandia, Fernández and Oleaga, 2001). In the other way, as it has been exposed in these pages, analogue television channels are working hard on the implementation of tools and services that are able to attract the viewers' interest. And the result is that the audience is using these opportunities to participate.

Of course not only the audience is interested in this low-profile kind of interactivity. Channels have also discovered a new business, easy and profitable. The profits are mainly two: the development of interactivity maintains the interest and loyalty of the audience, and economic results are good enough for television companies, that have identified a new money source. In fact, Telecinco and Antena 3 are owners of the companies offering mobile phone interactive services.¹

So if value is just understood as economic profit, the answer to the question would be *yes*: these initiatives are generating money. Every day more than 20 million SMS are sent between mobile phone users in Spain. During 2002, the premium messages services reached 438 million euro.² Antena 3 received more than 121.000 messages the first day that its premium messages service CONTXTA was operating. "Big Brother" viewers sent 1,3 million messages during the last day of the contest.

But of course value is not just money. And in many cases the one that television channels are doing come from a narrow target: youth. According to last data, young people in Spain, as well as their European counterparts, are heavy users of the mobile phones, and of SMS. Internet forums, chats and websites are also part of their daily routines. In all these instances and interactive claims from television programs cover specific needs and gratifications of this target: need of control over the environment, relationship building, fan movement to feel part of a group.

A recent research developed for Navarra's Youth and Sports Institute (Naval, C. - Sádaba, C. - Bringué, X. 2003) questioned how the use of the information technologies influenced the social relationships of youth: the main conclusions of this study were that young people use these technologies to reinforce their social networks and to play with content

¹ Telecinco is associated with GSMBox and Antena 3 with Conxta.

² This supposed an increment of 628% respect to the previous year.

or with others; besides that, they are not really conscious about the cost of using these tools, because parents financed their expenses.

But price is not a small issue: participating through SMS on television programs is not cheap: every message costs approximately one euro. In December 2003, The Science and Technology Minister expressed his concern about the price of these services, because there were mostly addressed to young people.

The youth (13-20 years old) has found on the mobile phone a funnier substitute for the remote control and channels are using it to maintain the public in front of television sets. But this is also an inconsistent audience, because young people are not independent from the economic point of view, and most importantly, they tend to look for new experiences, so this one -the SMS- could be just a new *goodie*.

Interactivity is generating money for television channels, but not a real value for audiences.

4. Which one is the experience from these experiences?

The main conclusions from these experiences are:

During the last months in Spain there has been an evident effort from the analogue commercial television channels to implement interactive tools as a secure way of attracting and maintaining the audience. Despite of previous experiences with digital television users, where viewers were not interested on interacting with television sets, now it is possible to discover some successful experiences where viewers were involved. Interaction happens at very different levels, from the simple SMS that appears on screen to the much more sophisticated one allowing the users to create the content of some programs.

But most of interactivity is about irrelevant questions, leisure and entertainment issues, and most of the time gossip and fan related information. This is explained by the main target of all these actions: young people, specially attracted by these subjects.

Of course that, at least right now, is an interesting business for commercial televisions, always worried about the decreasing advertising expenditures and the increasing competence.

Participation is a marketing tool, used by the channels as a resource to attract viewers. And of course it is an interested action of the channels, looking for advertisers' money.