

Social TV: It's already here

Robin Sloan and Rod Naber, Current TV

TV is deeply social. People watch together. And we're not just talking about sitting on the same couch; we're talking about experiences that are shared across thousands of miles and millions of people. Even in an era of time-shifting, there are still big events -- big news, big games, big premieres -- on TV that many people watch at the same time.

Until now, that social activity has been like dark matter: *We assume* it's there, because we know big televised events get big ratings, but we can't see or hear it, except around the mythical water-coolers of the world the next morning.

But today, the web has kicked the social activity around TV into overdrive, and most importantly, it's made it *visible*. People blog in real-time; they post on services like Twitter and Facebook; they hang out in chat rooms. Do a Google search for your favorite show and you'll find a massive conversation.

Social TV is here already, and it's on the web. At Current, we know that a majority of our 18-34 audience watches TV with a laptop open. Yes, they're often multitasking, looking at something else entirely; but at least some of the time, they're talking about what they're watching, or searching for something they've just seen.

There's an opportunity there.

Rather than invent a new framework for social activity around TV (and somehow convince people to use it), we can harness everything that's already happening naturally. We can search and filter the web for social activity relevant to the TV show or events we're interested in. We can find new ways to present that activity back to viewers on-air.

And we can do more than package activity that is already happening -- we can build tools that actively solicit user feedback. **The next-generation set-top box is already in the room, and it's not on top of the set.** It's in your lap. It's the Thinkpad with a wi-fi connection. It's the next-generation 3G phones. We should design social, interactive applications for *these* devices; they're more powerful and ubiquitous than any set-top box will ever be.

Of course, there are limitations to relying entirely on the web. The linear TV feed is still one-size-fits-all; you're not putting personalized information on that screen. However, we can build for the web *now*. Without waiting for consumer adoption of any new equipment, we can move social TV from prototypes to broadcast today.

So the question isn't "how do we make TV social?"-- it's "how do we harness all the social activity that's *already happening* around TV?" That activity happens on the web, so the challenge is for producers of TV content and TV experiences to get smart about the web. Social TV is here already, and it's not waiting for us to catch up.

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