An Exploration of Television Viewing Decisions in an Era of Many Options

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Master’s Final Project 2011
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<th>Movie: “Ice Age: The Meltdown”</th>
<th>Movie: “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year” (’08)</th>
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<td>Movie: “Ann Rule’s Too Late to Say Goodbye”</td>
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Americans watch more TV than ever.

- More channels
- More shows
- More flexibility
- More screens
- More technologies
- More decisions

How do viewers experience “primetime”? 
Television, conversation, connection

- Television was our “electronic hearth” (Tichi, 1992) and what we talked about around the watercooler
  - A physical place for families and friends to gather
  - A supplier of small-talk subjects
  - A marker of American cultural change

- Primetime shows have always mattered most
  - Audiences are believed to be the largest during those hours

- The TV schedule was once so routine, some thought it “programmed” viewers’ lives
  - Debate about whether viewers were active or passive
  - Questions about whether the actual shows even mattered
So, what happens now?
I took that question to TV viewers.

- Interview participants: 16 viewers around the country
  - Recruited via online survey and snowball sample

- Age range: early 20s to mid-40s
  - Television’s key commercial demographic

- Geographic diversity
  - Eastern, Central, Pacific time zones

- Great variety in ways of watching television
  - Basic cable, no cable, premium cable
  - Watching everything live, nothing live, occasionally live
  - Watching alone, watching with friends, chatting online
Viewers also kept journals of a week’s TV.
Several common themes emerged.
The TV broadcast schedule does still matter.
The TV broadcast schedule does still matter. Sort of.
Three Major Influences on Personal TV Scheduling
Influence #1: Content Rights

“We notice that you are trying to access Hulu from your Google TV. It’s not available ...”
Influence #2: Social Sphere

- True “watercooler” shows were few and far between
  - A few that deserve mention: *Lost, Mad Men, Glee*

- But there were plenty of other ways that talking about television influenced personal TV schedules
  - Co-location: What can you watch (physically) together?
  - Talking with friends, in person or using technologies
  - Discussions online after a show — and even during

- Wanting to talk about a show = watching it sooner
  - This affects some types of shows more than others:
    “You can avoid [results] for an hour or two, but not for days.”
Influence #3: The Desired Experience

- Programs serve specific purposes
  - “Multitasking shows” or “background shows”
  - Shows that get full attention
  - The most beloved shows don’t always get watched first

- Sitting in front of the TV is still a desired experience
  - “The computer is for work and the TV is for relaxing.”
  - “I just feel happy when I get to sit in front of the TV.”

- Shows have to prove their worth one-by-one
  - Each show has to earn its spot on a personal schedule
Where Does TV Go From Here?
Television could be designed for …

- **Conversation**
  - Lots of work currently happening in this field
  - More could be done to customize views, optimize search, be sensitive to viewers’ privacy concerns

- **Control**
  - Stricter network/broadcaster oversight over show availability; clearer communication to viewers
  - Risky: Could alienate viewers used to flexible scheduling

- **Personalization**
  - Release all programs at the same time each week; let viewers build their own schedules, with any show on any platform
  - Would require rethinking television’s revenue model
Thank you!

To read the paper, please visit: http://www.personalprimetime.com