

Interactive Television Format Development – Could Participatory Design Bridge the Gap?

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study, part of my Ph.D., focusing on ‘viewer empowerment’ in the audiovisual industry due to digitization and the emerging ‘architecture of participation’ [1] of Web2.0. In the ‘traditional’ broadcasting industry there are boundaries between the media professional and the non-professional (the audience) [2]. Web2.0 offers citizens/consumers the opportunity to create, distribute, share and publish all sorts of content (text, images, video, audio) via the internet. These changes in media consumption practices have consequences for the broadcasting industry and poses the question whether the traditional broadcasting industry is willing to adjust to this changing role of the viewer and open up to (inter)active non-professionals. The conclusion described, results from two preliminary studies that were meant to gain insight in a) ideas amongst internet and broadcasting specialists regarding viewer empowerment in interactive television formats and development and b) the current internet and interactive television usage in the greater Noord-Holland region. The studies indicate that internet and broadcasting professionals differ in the way they value end-user participation. However they have rather traditional ideas about making television. The different generations of end-users (e.g. ‘digital natives’, the younger people) have different needs; the audience changes. The use of participatory design could be an instrument for the broadcasting industry to bridge the gap.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.m [Information Interfaces and Presentation (e.g. HCI)]: Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Design, Economics, Human Factors

Keywords

Participatory design, Web2.0, interactive television format development, end-user participation, broadcasting industry

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1. INTRODUCTION

Participatory design pioneered in a political context, as a part of the workplace democracy movement in Scandinavia [3]. It represents an approach towards computer systems design in which strategies and techniques were used that gave workers influence on the design and use of computer applications at the workplace. It is a set of theories, practices, and studies related to end-users who are invited as full participants to play a critical role in the design process. This is done in order to help ensure that the product or system meets their needs because they are the ones that will have to use it. Participatory design is now used in a variety of fields including architecture, graphic design and software engineering. It can be seen as a move of end-users into the world of developers and researchers.

In the media industry something similar is happening now, however the invitation to participate in the development of media content is not specifically initiated by industry professionals. It stems from the activities of the end-users themselves. The distinction between end-users and producers of media content is decreasing due to the availability of semi professional equipment like digital photo and video camera's, easy to use software for editing sound, images and video and the creation of web pages combined with Web2.0 possibilities. The power of so called Web2.0 applications lies in aggregating the intelligence, the time, the efforts, the distribution and publishing facilities of users and maximizing the network effect [1]. It gives citizens/consumers the opportunity to create, distribute, share and publish all sorts of content (text, images, video, audio) via the internet.

Due to this opportunity media participation is happening on a large scale. In the music industry the website My Space is filled with songs and lyrics of both professionals and amateurs. YouTube offers everyone the possibility to publish all sorts of audiovisual material. There is hardly an entrance barrier. This shift in opportunities has resulted in the so called *prosumer*, - that is the consumer in the role of producer - [4, 5]. More and more companies are aware of this shift in behavior from consumer to producer and are open to co-design. In this respect Leadbeater talks about the *with economy* instead of the *to- economy* [6]. In the *with economy* so-called *pro-ams* (professional amateurs) can work together with manufacturers and be creative and productive and have influence on the design of product and services. This in contrast to the *to- economy* where the manufacturer is creating products and services *for* the market instead of *with* the market.

Despite these changes in the media industry, the broadcasting industry seems a bit reluctant to invite their audiences to participate. In the broadcasting industry format development is considered to be the work of media professionals with expert skills. Nick Couldry describes the symbolic power of broadcast institutions that is based on the boundaries between professional media people and non-professional, ordinary, people [2]. To find out if this barrier still exists, in a preliminary study differences and resemblances between internet and broadcasting specialists in valuing interactivity and end-user participation were examined. In the other preliminary study the usage and appreciation of interactivity via internet and interactive television by end-users was subject of research. The results of both studies led to this paper in which the combination of usage of participatory design within interactive audiovisual format development is considered. Empirical research on this topic is still scarce.

2. MEDIA PARTICIPATION

Although on the internet *prosumers* [4] are finding their way, the traditional broadcasting industry seems somehow reluctant to work with audience contribution. The television industry is a traditionally closed and regulated domain [7, 8]. The possibilities for the public to get access to the television screen are influenced by issues like gate keeping, programming and genre and the regulation of audience contributions is seen as a professional competence in media production [9, 10]. This means the television program maker decides what input of the public he or she uses in the program or show. Gunn Sara Enli studied these strategies used for the participatory turn in broadcast television since the early years of the 21st century [11]. The involvement of the public is often *scripted* participation [12]. However now that young people increasingly prefer interaction and participation and spend an increasing amount of time online [4, 13], the traditional broadcasters are challenged how to respond to the possibilities provided by digital platforms or how to use them themselves. This shift in media behavior of the viewer causes broadcasters and advertisers to rethink their relationship with the public. Circumstances show that viewers zap the commercials or skip the commercials via the personal video recorder. Spending on Advertiser Funded Programming¹ (in The Netherlands known as Non-Spot or branded TV-content) has increased, especially amongst commercial broadcasters. It breaks away from the traditional model of television funding where ‘eyeballs’ are sold by selling advertising around the actual television program. Advertisers are looking for ways to enhance the relationship with their target groups and realize that the former eyeballs show different media behavior.

2.1 The concept of interactive television

This study is not about the definition of interactive television. The term *interactive television* is not exclusive for interactive content viewed on a television set with the remote control as return path.

¹ SPOT (Dutch knowledge center for television advertising) has defined the activities that belong to the non-spot market in order to clarify the discussion about what is seen as non-spot. Expenditures belonging to the non-spot market: all program branding activities, all in program price marketing activities, billboarding, promo’s (commercial announcement of programs) and all production costs.

The convergence of broadcasting and digital media leads to cross media formats and other types of hybrid output. Syvertsen uses the term *multi-platform media hybrids* [14, 15]. Hybrid media can combine features from broadcasting with features from digital, personal and mobile media. The viewer can choose from different platforms and devices to interact with content; all fit within the scope of this study.

3. METHODOLOGY

In The Netherlands interactive television has been a promise for many years. Still, the offer of interactive television formats is limited. I have been looking for explanations taking into account the position of the media professionals as well as the end-user’s point of view. Two preliminary studies provided me with an exploration of issues related to the development of interactive television formats and what the limiting barriers are.

Study 1: For finding out how professionals in the field of internet and broadcasting value end-user participation, 14 in-depth interviews were conducted. These professionals were selected based upon their position in the industry. The selected professionals work for television production companies, a broadcaster, advertisers, marketing and communication agencies and internet agencies. They fulfill positions like owner, director, producer, project leader, consultant, and marketing manager. I conducted one and a half hour-long, semi-structured interviews in the participant’s working environment. As for the media professionals, findings concentrate on the professional ideology, working routines, business models, the valuation of user participation, the changing role of the consumer and the way it influences the industry.

Study 2: In order to explore the development in internet and interactive television usage and appreciation, I conducted three surveys at different points in time amongst television viewers and internet users in the greater Noord-Holland region. The data come from three quota samples of respectively 1408 respondents (spring 2006), 792 respondents (spring 2008) and 752 respondents (winter 2008). Respondents were contacted by first year students of Media- and Entertainment Management of INHolland University in Haarlem. The respondents questioned were internet users and television viewers 16 – 50 years old with different educational levels and from various household backgrounds. Findings of the survey are briefly presented in terms of the penetration of digital receivers in households, internet and interactive television usage of interactive television applications.

The goal is to provide the broadcasting industry with better insights into changes in users’ media consumption and to address the gap between the broadcasting industry and the ‘empowered viewers’.

4. RESULTS

The findings of the in-depth interviews show that the gap as described by Couldry still exists. In response to the question whether the professionals saw a threat or an opportunity in the straightforward way channels with audiovisual (user generated) content arise on the internet, most of the professionals stressed the fact that ‘traditional’ lean back television will not disappear. They hold on to conventions that the social function and the leisure function of viewing ‘traditional’ television via a broadcast

schedule remains important. People like to lean back after working hours and the reach of a channel on the internet would not be sufficient for a viable business model. Furthermore they pointed out that making television is a profession that can not be done by amateurs; the quality of user generated video content is often very poor. The media professionals - both from the internet as well as from the broadcasting field - see limited value in actual participation of end-users when it comes to format development. They do not rate the ideas of ordinary people high. However they do see the value of end-user interactivity when used as fore-mentioned *scripted* participation. They underline that interactivity can enhance the bonding with the audience. This is of interest from a marketing perspective. Especially the internet specialists stress the fact that the dialogue with the end-user is very important; this may originate from the difference between mass media and personalized media. Another aspect mentioned is the economical value of end-user participation. The interactivity via text messages via mobile phones provides an interesting revenue stream for the industry.

The results from the surveys show that the number of digital television receivers in households is growing rapidly. At the end of 2008 over 50 percent of the respondents report they have a digital receiver at home. The digitization of households is continuing and has stretched from internet connections to digital television subscriptions. However when it comes to usage and appreciation of internet and interactive television activities, there is a difference between generations. Digital natives or the 'net generation' are young people that grew up with new media [16] and they perform other media behavior than the older generations. They use new media as a communication, social and entertaining service whereas for older people the information service is more important. The digital natives could serve as predictors of future media behavior of the broader population.

5. CONCLUSION

Only very recently the traditional broadcasting industry seemed to notice this behavioral change in their audience. However despite multi-platform media formats of Dutch public broadcasters like 'Landroef' (VPRO), 'Wij zijn de geschiedenis' (KRO) and 'Blikvoer' (VARA) where audience contributions are welcomed, based on the findings from the preliminary studies it seems unlikely that the barriers between media professionals and non-professionals will level automatically. On a more general level we see the same conservative reaction as within other entertainment industries confronted with digitization and user generated content, just think of the music industry. To bridge the gap between the traditional broadcasting industry and the internet domain where Web2.0 is showing new horizons, it is important to look for methods that can be of help. Based on the findings I concluded that using participatory design within the broadcasting industry may be that method. The method fits within 'der Zeitgeist' where collective intelligence is used for the development of products and services. The aim is to try a different approach in a (still) rather traditional industry.

5.1 Why participatory design?

Participatory design is less characterized by a single theory or technique, than by a rich and diverse set of perspectives and experiences that despite their differences share a distinctive spirit and direction. That spirit and direction is characterized by a more

human, creative and affective relationship between those involved in technology design and its use [17]. Practitioners in PD are sharing the idea that people who are affected by a decision should have an opportunity to influence it. It is a key element in democracy. The other idea is that quality can improve with strong and effective participation of people involved. The combination of diverse knowledge's makes better services and products [17, 18]. The dominant ideas of quality and productivity are broadened by adding participation, another point of view. The representation is difficult in a discussion dominated by managerial and expert perspectives. Participatory design means that professionals and non-professionals become familiar with each other and their concerns or needs and wishes.

Andrew Keen, author of 'the Cult of the Amateur', is against the implications of web2.0 possibilities where amateurs (non-professionals) are creating and publishing all sorts of content [19]. He sees the media professional as an endangered species due to the facilities that ordinary men have today thanks to affordable semi professional equipment and the internet. In his view this is undesirable. As the traditional media gatekeepers lose their power, the quality of the cultural production is threatened by amateurs and the digital revolution undermines the economic exchange value of a copy resulting in a shrinking cultural economy [20]. Back in 1993, Schuler and Namioka stated that participation stands in contrast to 'the cult of the specialist'. They describe that in the specialist model an expert is consulted to answer a certain question. With this approach, the ones most affected by the conclusion must sit idly by, waiting patiently for the answer [21].

It is important to note that participatory design is *not against* expertise. In the participation model the specialist expertise becomes yet another resource to draw on. As a matter of fact participatory design underlines the importance of expertise, but this time expertise is not dictated by profession. In participatory design the end-users are viewed as experts on the process and the result. To find out whether participatory design could be used as an instrument to bridge the gap between the internet and broadcasting domain and between media professionals and non-professionals, I will use the design described below. By taking a close look at techniques and practices of participatory design the set up of the design will be clarified. The important issue is the attitude of the media professional and the will to collaborate.

5.2 The design

In order to study the impact of involving professional amateurs in the development of interactive audiovisual formats, the first step is to find a professional media partner who is willing to cooperate. The research item is a *special interest format* that could be developed for broadcast television or a WebTV channel. For the participatory design committed participants are needed. The non-professionals can bring valuable experiences or knowledge because they are practitioners of a certain hobby or have specific interests. Traditional techniques will be used. The first step involves story-collecting and story-telling by means of end-user photography. Photography can be easily incorporated in daily routines. Discussion around photographs and the combination of photo-narratives can lead to mutual learning and new ideas [22]. These effects will be stronger if combined with the voices of the photographers, the viewers and the people depicted in the photographs [23]. The result will be used for agenda setting and prioritizing of topics. In step two, professionals and non-professionals enter into each others world in order to participate.

The site of the work is of interest for the collaboration. Non-professionals will be brought to the studio and the production company so they get a feel of the routines, but also to de-mystify the work of the media professional. Then the media people will have to accompany the non-professionals in their habitat and join their activities for the same reason. When collaborating, professionals and non-professionals tend to feel more at ease on their home ground - the others are then the visitors [18]. In step three both the professionals and the non-professionals meet each other in an 'in-between' region, a so-called 'third space' to equal the power balance. According to Michael Muller, recent work in cultural theory claims that inviting professionals and non-professionals in another environment could be fruitful. Important attributes of third space experiences that could exist are amongst others the combination of knowledge's into new insights, mutual learning and the creation of new ideas through negotiation, understandings and relationships [18]. This step is the brainstorm session where the gathered information is discussed and transformed into new concepts. The heuristic evaluation of the format in step four is conducted via a peer review by media professionals as well as future end-users. This evaluation could be seen as grounded co-creation. The evaluation could result in the advice to make some changes that will be followed. Since the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the format will be shown (preferably as a finished product) to end-users. Besides an interview, these end-users are asked to create a review in the form of a commercial (photo's/text/video) for this format assuming that they will emphasize the aspects they like and leave out the aspects less interesting or entertaining to them.

It might turn out that collaboration with end-users is beneficial for the broadcasting industry as it is for other industries. Additional research is needed to explore future opportunities.

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