

## Social TV: A contribution towards defining the concept

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## Abstract

The term 'Social TV' has been used to describe a broad range of phenomena generally involving, commentary on televised content through online social networks. It is necessary, however, to characterize and better define this concept due to the different modes of articulation that exist between TV and the Internet and the different manifestations of participatory culture in the environment of convergence. This article proposes to discuss Social TV as an interactional practice founded on conversation via the Internet, and an act based on televised content, through interactive platforms/technologies linked to strategies of the television and/or software development industries, which are able to provide the experience of watching something together from a mode of presence generated by the sharing of these pieces of content at the same time.

### Keywords

Social TV; Social networks; Interaction; Interactive technologies; Participatory culture; Presence.

## Introduction: Articulation between Television and the Internet

One of television's most significant transformations in the context of media convergence and in the scenario of participatory culture<sup>1</sup> is its articulation with the Internet. Today, all the major television channels offer the possibility of watching the programs we have missed, making many productions available on the Internet, on proprietary or associated platforms, free of charge via paid services. The World Wide Web has become yet another way to send and receive televised content, but its impact on TV has not been limited to this (Miller, 2009). Today there is a wide range of spaces on the Internet that can be considered real extensions of the programs, in which producers both develop and release complementary or associated content to the programs shown on TV, as Internet users share and give feedback of their interpretations while sending and/or receiving comments on what they are watching through digital social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.).

While television channels initially feared the competition from the Internet, they now strive to have their programs resonate on the Web, as they believe that social networks, unlike what they imagined, may increase their audience by engaging or attracting viewers. Social networks such as Facebook play a decisive role in this process, as they promote a kind of "word-of-mouth in the digital age" (Lacalle, 2010. p.91), which is able to influence television consumption more than traditional reviews. An increasingly common occurrence, for example, involves terms and/or hashtags<sup>2</sup> related to the content displayed during programs with mass appeal, such as sports games, reality shows or soap operas, which reach Twitter's Trending Topics section. Here, or in other social networks, these comments are made via both institutional/corporate and personal profiles, fostering a network<sup>3</sup> conversation among spectators, or between them and the television channels. In order to describe these new practices, which are generally associated with the network conversation about television, the use of the idea of 'Social TV' has been loosely disseminated in the field of Communication studies. Therefore, the challenge that we face here is to characterize and delimit in a more precise way the

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the postulations of Jenkins (2008), participatory culture has been defined as the scenario and the varied set of possibilities that are open to consumers to greater access, production and circulation of media contents, based on the digitization and convergence of media. Participatory culture defines, in this perspective, new practices for the use of associated media, in particular the sharing, publication, recommendation, message exchange, comments, remixing and reoperation of digital content (created and made available on digital media, particularly on the Internet). Cf. Fechine (2014) and Fechine et al. (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Hashtag: a word or phrase, preceded by the # symbol, used to identify and categorize content published on social networks.

<sup>3</sup> Later, we will provide a better characterization of this type of conversation.

type of interactive practice that may be referred to as Social TV among the different modes of articulation between television and the Internet and the different manifestations of the participatory culture in the convergence environment. Our approach is guided by monitoring trends in international television production (Miller, 2009; Jost, 2011; Pereira, 2014), but is based, above all, on the observation of Brazilian television. In this scenario, which we treat as *interaction*, is related to both the way in which individuals build their relationships with others based on the mediation of new communication technologies, and their own behavior towards interactive platforms and tools.

## Social TV: From Interactive Technologies to International Practices<sup>4</sup>

The term 'Social TV' initially appeared in discussions and publications mainly in the field of technology in the early 2000s. In this field, Social TV initially designated a segment of research and development of applications for interactive digital TV (iTV). It soon acquired a broader technical signification, naming a variety of systems whose purpose is to provide people with remote sharing experiences for the pieces of content broadcast on television, regardless of whether or not they are incorporated into the TV set (Harboe et al., 2008; Harboe, 2009). These technologies include audio and video systems that have allowed viewers in distant places to interact with one another using various means of interpersonal communication (voice channels, chat, instant messaging, etc.) or even to participate in a joint TV session<sup>5</sup>. The term gained even more strength after becoming associated with the search for technological solutions to integrate digital social networks into television, i.e., the development of interactive applications<sup>6</sup> that are capable of promoting the experience of watching television together even from different geographic locations.

As it disseminated into other areas, in particular in marketing, the term gained a broader meaning and became employed by authors such as Proulx and Shepatin (2012, p.13) to denote all forms of 'convergence between television and social media,' including both the behavior and forms of engagement of viewers on social networks and the development of applications for this purpose. This type of approach considers social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, on which there is

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<sup>4</sup> To advance in the conceptualization, this item recovers some ideas presented preliminarily in Fechine and Cavalcanti (2016). It also incorporates ideas that have emerged in discussions proposed by Fechine (2015a and b) and by Cavalcanti (2016).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pablo; David; Konstantinos (2009).

<sup>6</sup> Interactive application: a type of computer program, coupled with a graphic-visual interface, which performs tasks by means of a user action.

no segmentation of content, platforms developed specifically for fans of television, such as TvTag<sup>7</sup>, Beamy<sup>8</sup> or applications developed and integrated directly into the TV set, such as AmigoTV<sup>9</sup> and 2BeOn<sup>10</sup> (Abreu et al., 2001). More often, however, the term 'Social TV' is used to describe the interaction between two or more viewers who simultaneously watch a program and make real-time comments on social networks about what they have just seen (cf. Cesar and Greetz, 2011; Ling and Rickli, 2012; Cruz, 2013; Silva and Médola, 2015). In this sense, Social TV is considered as any exchange involving televised content between two interactors, when mediated by interactive technologies that are available on computers or mobile devices, on platforms that allow relationships and content sharing. Those who follow Twitter or Facebook, for example, find that, every day, their millions of users spontaneously share and comment on their profiles about various types of televised content, giving rise to new comments about what they posted and promoting a type of conversation shaped by the interactional logic of social networks.

To consider that any interaction carried out under these conditions could be referred to as 'Social TV' is an excessive broadening of the description of the phenomenon, to the point where it makes no sense to propose a specific denomination. It would thus not be justified to treat it as an individual and particular concept within the participatory culture, as its description would be confused with general interactional practices that are inherent to that environment (message exchange, positioning oneself and making comments on the content). It is thus necessary to define more specifically the concept without, however neglecting, two axes from which the use of the expression has been popularized: 1) Social TV as designation of a set of interactive technologies that focus on social networks developed for television and/or in articulation with its programming (technology-oriented approach); 2) Social TV as any conversation through digital social networks on (or from) television content (communication-oriented approach).

To distinguish the configuration of Social TV from the countless interactional practices brought about by the convergence of media, a basic assumption is that this conversation cannot be *any* conversation. It consists of a certain type of *network conversation* – as such, supported by interactive technologies – triggered by *production strategies* of communication (content producers) or technology

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<sup>7</sup> TvTag (formerly GetGlue) is a Social TV application that offers information on the main television releases, series and movie news, and a space for fan connection.

<sup>8</sup> Beamy is an application that allows communication among viewers of a given program, also serving as an informational channel.

<sup>9</sup> An application that enables real-time communication, through video and audio, of a particular television program on broadcast TV.

<sup>10</sup> A technology system that provides viewers with an online connection through the communication tools embedded in TV sets.

(application developers) companies, usually for commercial purposes and in articulation with television programming. These strategies generally seek to produce among viewers in different locations the effect of 'watching' television content remotely, based on the monitoring of certain programs and the exchange of messages in real time in a kind of "extended, virtual couch" which encourages its engagement with the content (Summa, 2011). To ensure involvement, the strategies also allow the exchange of messages with agents involved in the production of content (authors, transmedia producers, contracted or associated commentators, etc.). If we consider that the characterization of 'Social TV' depends necessarily on these conditions, its definition gains more specific contours, yet it demands a greater problematization of the types of strategy and conversation that configure the phenomenon. The continuous observation of the reconfigurations of television allows us to assume as a hypothesis that Social TV can be considered as one of the recurring manifestations of transmedia strategies in Brazilian television<sup>11</sup>.

In these discussions, we consider *transmediation* as a production model of the television industry that is oriented by the distribution across different media and technology platforms of associated content, whose articulation depends on the viewer's participation. Viewers are responsible for searching for the connections and associations between complementary pieces of content and a reference (in the case of the TV, series, soap operas, reality shows, etc.), made available on a chosen medium in relation to which transmediation strategies are conceived. These can serve for propagation or expansion.<sup>12</sup> The latter consists of the "overflowing" or unfolding of the narrative universe based on the supply of elements that have, on the one hand, a playful function and, on the other hand, a narrative function. In more complex actions, transmedia complements correspond to auxiliary or secondary narrative programs, contributing, based on its articulation with the main narrative program (or the reference program), to the construction of *transmedia storytelling*, as described by Henry Jenkins (2003; 2008). Investment is made in the complementarity between narrative programs that are interdependent, but are endowed with meaning in themselves (webisodes, extra scenes, etc.) and are capable of proposing an in-depth approach based on this articulated distribution of content. When the expansions have a playful function, they stimulate viewers to confabulate, experience and enter a game of 'make believe' from their involvement

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<sup>11</sup> This observation has been made since my participation, since 2011, in collective research projects carried out in the scope of the Ibero-American Observatory of Television Fiction (OBITEL), whose results can be verified, for example, in Fechine et al. (2013) and Fechine et al. (2015).

<sup>12</sup> A more in-depth presentation of these transmedia strategies can be found in Fechine et al. (2013).

with the plot and the characters, such as through games and plays (memes, humorous montages of scenes, etc.).

The transmedia strategy referred to as propagation, in turn, invests in the resonance and feedback on the content. One piece of content reflects or reverberates with the other, thus contributing towards maintaining the interest, involvement and creative intervention of media consumers in the proposed universe, scheduling it among other recipients or in other instances, and building communities of interest. This is often a strategy aimed at inserting a narrative universe into social networks on or off the Web, triggering consumers' taste for learning more about what they consume the media by sharing and for exchanging ideas about the content. A synergistic cycle is thus formed in which one piece of content draws attention to the other, triggering a production of sense that is essentially supported in this propagation by different means of a certain narrative universe. In propagation strategies, the stimulus to *network conversation* plays a key role and is often associated with configurations that we may refer to as 'Social TV'.

Understood as a form of computer-mediated communication that is dependent on interactivity<sup>13</sup>, network conversation is the exchange of messages on certain thematic topics, between subjects that are connected in interactive spaces, established by interactive digital platforms and technologies. Evidently, it should not be thought of as the dialogical exchange of speech that characterizes everyday conversation between two or more subjects.<sup>14</sup> This network conversation is composed, according to Recuero (2014, p.217), of 'collective dialogues whose participants constitute individuals of an invisible audience, forged by connections and visibility in social networks.' It is therefore capable of involving many interactors and various interconnecting groups, being thus able to spread and amplify participation on digital social networks (Recuero, 2014, p.124-126), even when there is no symmetry of roles. Defined in these terms, network conversation can be thought of as a type of message exchange that involves a well-regulated practice of interaction, both by the preconditions given by the technological applications and platforms employed, and by the manipulative regime of a specific sender (broadcasters, software developers, etc.).<sup>15</sup> It should not be confused,

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<sup>13</sup> Although it is the basis of the most diverse forms of *interaction* in digital and participatory culture, the term *interactivity* cannot be taken as synonymous with the practices to which it gives rise. The term here designates merely the form of updating contents in the digital media, necessarily based on an action of the recipients: clicking, replying, commenting, posting something, etc.

<sup>14</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the distinctions between networking and interpersonal conversation, check Recuero (2014).

<sup>15</sup> The manipulation referred to herein designates one of the schemes described by Eric Landowski (2014) in an interactional model, proposed based on a socio-demographic approach. In this model, the regime of manipulation refers to all kinds of relationships based on persuasive procedures by means of which one subject (recipient) acts on the other (recipient), leading them to *wish* and/or *be compelled* to

therefore, with conversation in the strict sense, in which the various participants 'supposedly have the same right to choose the word and subject to be address, and to make decisions about their time' (Marcuschi, 2003, P.16).

Even in the event that it is not possible to address, in the case of Social TV, the dialogue that characterizes the *stricto sensu* conversational encounter, the use of the term *network conversation* allows us to specify a particular type of interaction among many others provided by interactive digital technologies and platforms. Therefore, adopting the same path as Recuero (2014), the term *conversation* will be used here to designate a particular modality of interlocution. As any interactive practice that involves the exchange of messages among participants, it also depends on the construction of an environment that is provided by some type of organization to enable interlocution. In the case of 'Social TV', the organization required for the conversation is already part of the production strategy itself, as can be seen, for example, in the creation of profiles of television channels on social networks, through which they propose themes and hashtags to users. In addition to the provision of the same space (social networks) and same thematic topic (e.g. indicated by a hashtag), a given temporality is necessary to configure the environment of interaction in which this network conversation can take place.

The construction of a temporality that gives rise to network conversation depends on the permanence of the information, which allows the recovery of what was said in previous interactions and the continuous participation of new people. As the messages and their sequences are recorded and can be seen later, individuals who access this environment can thus join or continue the conversation at different times (Recuero, 2014, 54, 114). Thus, the possibility of *synchronous* interaction is established, in which individuals are on the network and are using the tools at the same time, or *asynchronous*, when there is no temporal concomitance. If participation can take place simultaneously or otherwise, what ensures the establishment of the network conversation is precisely this permanence of the environment for interaction. That is to say, the persistence of tools ensure the extension of the time of the interaction and allow the conversation to continue existing even when there are offline participants (Recuero, 2014, 84).

The construction of a shared temporality is, however, a crucial aspect for the establishment of the 'watching with' effect that is being pointed out as a defining feature of 'Social TV'. For that reason, the network conversation established in Social TV should necessarily be synchronous. In order to produce the 'watching

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do something. It requires, however, a "willing subject" that is capable of evaluating the values at stake, to which the manipulator calls for them to make their choices. The regime of manipulation is therefore based on the principle of intentionality in which the motivations and reasons of subjects are imposed in the process of interaction.



with' effect, participants in this conversation need to watch the content at the same time. Therefore, temporality should also be considered in relation to the concomitance or non-concomitance of this synchronous network conversation with the moment of broadcasting the television contents around which the interaction occurs. In the most successful experiences of 'Social TV', this shared temporality is built by the television flow<sup>16</sup> established by the programming schedule, but can also be implemented by procedures that allow viewers to articulate themselves to watch something at the same time, such as check-in applications or others that allow viewers who are watching previously broadcast programs to invite others to watch them together at a certain time (Fechine, and Cavalcanti, 2016).

We can thus have Social TV strategies that are oriented by the temporality inherent in TV programming, or by a temporality resulting from the interaction provided by applications that are articulated with social networks (i.e., a common duration created by the applications themselves). When the strategy is based on television flow, the network conversation – synchronous, by definition – is still subject to two conditions: it may occur while the program is on air or it may occur before or after broadcast. In the first case, it is common, for example, for producers to propose different hashtags during the broadcast, in accordance with the progress of the narrative, intensifying the viewer's involvement both with what is broadcast and with others. When there is no concomitance between the moments of conversation and the TV broadcast, the interactional process should occur, in any case, in articulation with the duration of the programming, i.e., anticipating or reverberating what will be or what has been presented in the daily television schedule, as the possibility of immediately commenting on what is going to be watched or what has already been seen on television is a *sine qua non* condition for the configuration of the interactional process we refer to as 'Social TV'. In this case, the temporality characterizing Social TV is that which establishes the context and the interaction environment itself, being strategically thought of as part of the insertion of the program into the schedule and taking into account the daily duration of the programming itself, at the end of which the conditions that trigger the network conversation around its contents disappear. This is the case, for example, when a TV channel makes Social TV applications available one hour or a half-hour before or after a program is broadcast, encouraging the public to interact around conversational topics that it proposes in a temporality under its control, as it manages the resources that promote the network conversation.<sup>17</sup>

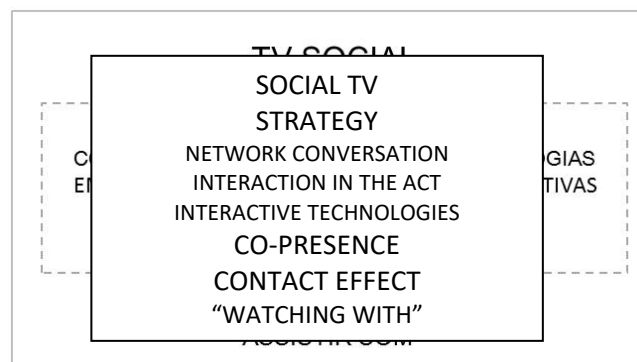
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<sup>16</sup> The term *flow* describes the way in which TV programs are offered as a sequence or a set of sequences organized in a schedule that is articulated with a daily temporality (WILLIAMS, 1975). It refers both to this mode of organization of sequences (instance of television production) and to the viewer's experience with TV (indistinct formats, overlapping of images and sounds).

<sup>17</sup> For another approach to temporality in Social TV, see also Cavalcanti (2016).

As we characterize Social TV here, the meaning is therefore anchored in the construction of a *now* that corresponds to the duration of the network conversation around which the interactive practice takes place. It does not matter if this duration is articulated with the temporality of the programming or with another one forged by applications that aim precisely to institute an environment that is common to its users. In one condition or another, it is crucial that this type of interaction/participation be constructed *in the act*: in the immediacy of an act that promotes a mode of encounter that is subjected to the imperative of the *here* and *now* of enunciation.<sup>18</sup> This type of encounter is associated with the establishment of a *place* of interaction that is built *in* and *by* the moment in which subjects establish contact through social networks. Thus, a mode of co-presence or a contact effect on which meaning Social TV is based – the sense of ‘being with’ or ‘watching with’ is manifested when subjects are willing to comment on the televised content being shared. These configurational conditions of ‘Social TV’ are summarized in Figure 01:

FIGURE 01 – Conditions configuring Social TV



To overcome a very restrictive understanding of Social TV (as a designation of only certain interactive television applications) or a much broader one (as a designation of any network conversation whose subject is television), it is necessary to consider all conditions discussed so far and, above all, to characterize the phenomenon as a mode of interaction predetermined by a production strategy. Based on the descriptive framework presented, we can finally define Social TV as a type of network conversation performed *in the act* regarding television content, carried out through interactive platforms (digital social networks) and technologies (applications) linked to strategies of the television and/or software development industries, and which is capable of providing the effect of watching something

<sup>18</sup> *Enunciation* refers to the act of producing utterances through any of the semiotic systems (verbal, audiovisual, etc.). In this case, the statements to which we refer correspond to the contents produced through the interaction process (comments, miscellaneous posts, etc.).

remotely (contact effect), based on a mode of co-presence produced by the sharing of content in the same temporality established by the programming and/or by applications.

The strategic construction of this contact effect is a crucial element in the characterization of Social TV, which, as is the case with many other practices brought about by digital platforms, involves a complex regime of manipulative interaction supported by an appeal to participation. There are many types of challenges posed by Social TV for communication scholars. They range from the discussion of the consequences of this mode of production on the general and open business model of television broadcasting to its impacts on the forms of sociability built around TV. The path for a better understanding of all these implications requires the identification and analysis of the strategies that configure 'Social TV' in the different fields of television production (entertainment, journalism, advertising), as, given their specificities, each of them can give rise to different manifestations. In any of these fields, however, the observation and systematization of strategies requires a preliminary stage of delimitation of the phenomenon to be observed. At this stage, we aim to cooperate, proposing the problematization of the concept of Social TV.

## Final Remark: Social TV as a Reinforcement for Programming Logic

As we have seen, Social TV stands out among the various interactional practices that characterize participatory culture by combining at least three factors in operation, to establish a presence effect: 1) it is a type of *network conversation*, in the terms herein described; 2) it involves *interactive digital platforms/technologies*; and 3) it is a type of *production strategy* that explores the articulation between TV and the Internet for marketing purposes. The latter is also one of the most important factors not only to circumscribe the phenomenon, but also to understand the most significant transformations of television, based on its digitization and convergence with other media. In view of the fact that the Internet, far from being a threat to television, has become one of its major allies, it seems relevant in future works to observe more closely, in light of the characterization herein proposed, the role of 'Social TV' as part of the transmedia actions/strategies

of television. In Brazilian television, this appears to be a clear trend in the actions of major broadcast TV channels, such as Rede Globo.<sup>19</sup>

The exploration of the experiences involving Social TV, particularly through the broadcast and generalist channels, ends up contributing to the reevaluation of a business model<sup>20</sup> and an organizational logic around which broadcast television consolidated itself as a sociocultural format: all watching the same thing, at the same time, and thus being part of an 'imagined community,' albeit in a latent or unconscious manner, which is dispersed and ephemeral (Buonanno, 2015, p.77). At a time when television is experiencing a crisis in its programming (Fechine, and Carlón, 2014), mainly due to the consumption of on-demand content, the integration of social networks into the experience of 'watching TV' contributes, according to Jost (2011, p.102), to the reconstruction of these 'imagined communities' to which television, during the golden era of broadcasting, 'had accustomed us and which were about to disappear.' From this perspective, the idea of 'Social TV' helps us now to describe another virtual modality of 'encounters,' interaction and sociability, which are still in tune with the flow-based programming schedule.

Another aspect to consider is that television programming is direct (live). As with many television formats, as well as their programming, they are made at the same time as they are broadcast. Social TV allows us, according to Summa (2011, p.29), to explore this process inherent in the medium, as it incorporates, as part of its own strategies, the most immediate feedback from viewers through social networks. The expectation to interfere in what is being broadcast through one's comments, or even the possibility that one's comments may gain visibility on the screen, often also becomes an added attraction for most connected viewers. Nothing, however, is more powerful in the experience of television than the pleasure of watching one's favorite programs while establishing some kind of exchange with family members, friends and acquaintances regarding them. The difference is that now, with Social TV, this 'conversation' is strategically amplified by television channels themselves with the use of social networks in the quest to engage more and more connected viewers in their programming schedules.

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<sup>19</sup> The observation of Globo's entertainment portal, Gshow, and its official Facebook profile clearly demonstrates that the appeal of Social TV has been increasingly frequent in the associated transmedia production, particularly its serial fiction and reality shows. Papers such as the ones by Cavalcanti (2016), Moreira (2015) and Sousa (2015) show this. See also Fechine and Cavalcanti (2016).

<sup>20</sup> What sustains broadcast television is the marketing of the advertising space, supported by the "selling of attention" of large audiences.

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