

Rethinking Television in the Self-Media Age

Filomena Antunes Sobral

Abstract— Informed by theoretical reflections the article presents a review of the literature that focuses on television in the self-media age. The main objective of the research outlined in the paper is to rethink the role currently played by television from multiple perspectives and question the position of the medium in contemporary digital societies. Research shows that the main strength of television is the attractiveness of its content, its flexibility, and the experience it offers to its viewers. The numerous studies reviewed provided us with enough information to conclude that television has been able to adapt and has discovered new forms of storytelling without ever losing sight of the way television consumption has evolved on multiple platforms.

Keywords—Television, self-media, streaming, content, digital culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

The existence of television has been marked by a multitude of transformations and by successive attempts to establish its true self and assert its position. Over the years, this medium has been analyzed according to multiple dimensions and, in turn, that examination gave rise to theoretical conceptions about aesthetics, technological potential, broadcast programming policies, audiences, contents, social effects, among many other aspects all related to television studies. Oddly enough, at a time when the specificity of the medium seemed to have finally been established, the emergence of digitalization and of the internet made critics take a fresh look at a medium that, according to some theorists, was on the verge of death.

For a long time, television, regarded as a technological device, a social practice and as a cultural representation, has been the dominant medium. That way, television became famous not only for allowing audiovisual transmission but also for making it possible for a vast audience to watch all sorts of TV shows. Emphasis was placed on the concept of TV program flow and remote viewing both live and deferred.

In today's media landscape, watching television can be a different experience that implies individualization, mobility, and the possibility of accessing different platforms. Television viewing is also shared with other consumption routines such as online products, video on-demand or streaming services. And so, in the midst of the age of self-media, television faces challenges that will involve flexibility of use, individual

access, mobility or the urge to diversify the range of programs it provides. While some highlight the crisis it faces, others emphasize the window of opportunity that not only encourages reflection, but also leads to creation, promotes innovation and encourages adaptability.

Television as once we knew it is changing and adjusting to new challenges. This transformation urges societies to reflect critically on the medium. This is a moment of transition that can act as a powerful strategy to draw attention to other potentialities of television while the medium is going through a process of redefinition. In this context, this essay offers a reflection on the role and the essence of television as part of a world dominated by the digital revolution. That way, it presents a review of the state of the art and seeks to clarify the position held by television among all the contemporary digital societies. The essay is organized into three parts that will help trace a sequential path from linear television to the digital revolution and to the new consumer behaviours, and will focus, to conclude, on the coming trends that will form part of a digitalisation and convergence conjuncture.

II. TV IN THE INTERNET AGE

The past was paved with high moments of creativity. The western canon was nourished by a notion of culture synonymous with intellectual activity driven by an elite of creators or by an "ideal of erudite, cultivated and superior culture" [1] that opposed the concept of popular and mass culture. 'Great art' was birthed by notorious names from painting, sculpture, theatre, literature, music, or classical antiquity opera and later a restricted group of cinema talents elevated the mechanical reproduction of reality to an art form and the cinema came to be known as the seventh art.

When television appeared and became part of mass culture, it was shrouded in an aura of negativity for it was perceived as the poor cousin among all the other arts [2]. That image will persist and the medium will find it hard to dissociate itself from it. However, it is undeniable that television, "the most important phenomenon of the post-World War 2 era" [3], has achieved a relevant place in society, albeit not always consensually. As reference [4] explains, television has become "a privileged means of communication, often associated with the cultural changes shaping societies and the rhythms of daily life".

In 1974 reference [5] refers to television as the most popular type of art and conducts an analysis to understand how television tells stories, how those stories focus on cultural concerns and whether television can be aesthetically appreciated. More than thirty years after the publication of this essay, reference [5] firmly believes that television viewing is

Filomena Antunes Sobral
Polytechnic Institute of Viseu - Centre for Studies in Education and Innovation (CI&DEI)
Portugal

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still "a cultural practice", because "television presents repertoires - some as despicable as others are noble - and the elements we select from those offerings of meaning, belief, behavior, emotion, and performance fit variously into our experience". In reference [6] opinion's, television is clearly a cause of debate because "it is simultaneously a symbolic universe meant for mass consumption, a tremendous business opportunity, an advertising vehicle, a cutting-edge technological sector, a stage for political debate, a powerful social aggregator tool, an individual and/or daily family experience, a pleasure, an escape and a company". The controversy about the socio-cultural status of the magic box is far from being overcome and suddenly contemporaneity, which materializes the global village of the 1960s, is witnessing a new stage in which television embraces the challenge of sharing audiovisual consumption with other devices as it enters a new phase of its history.

Reference [7] indicates three different stages when it refers to the transformations that have occurred during the evolution of television: TV I or the creator of consensus narratives, TV II defined by a competitive broadcast programming and TV III that focuses on the satisfaction of consumer demands for personalized content aiming to please segmented audiences. In fact, if at an early stage (1950-1980s) the television offer was not very diversified and the context of viewing was mainly familiar, over the following years, with the emergence of satellite TV and cable TV and with the increasing competitiveness between the different channels and media, the offer grew significantly and the increase in the number of television sets per home helped families move from the living room to the other rooms of the house.

With the consolidation of the internet and of the different video streaming platforms, new consumer habits and interests arose and television content started to be consumed on new platforms. As reference [8] emphasizes, the television screen has spread to other televisibility places, such as smartphones, iPads, or laptops. Television audiences have come to include internauts and their wide-ranging interests and the *Age of Emerec* predicted in the 1970s seems to be at its peak [9].

As a matter of fact, any Millennial, or any other individual belonging to a later generation, is nowadays both a producer and a receiver of information in a self-media saturated environment where the audiovisual content choices and the access possibilities are steadily growing. The individuation paradigm is more developed than ever, but at the same time new possibilities of interaction and participation are discovered every day. Society faces new consumption habits in which individuals keep on watching linear television but complement their choices with online experiences and services. This new paradigm is used to share content or to comment on what has been posted or shared, or to engage in binge-watching experiences. On the other hand, this new dynamic implies that there should be a greater and more diversified television offering and involves multiple choice and mobility decisions. Viewing alternatives flourish and the television that once could only be watched from a distance can now be viewed anywhere. And so, while some sectors of society predict its impending end and some others anticipate

the advent of a new era, television is constantly forced to reinvent itself to find its rightful place in the digital society. This is yet another choice that will contribute to grant cybnauts the freedom, control and dominance they crave. As reference [10] explains "It is not difficult to perceive or predict that the new generations are watching less and less generalist television on their television sets. Not so much because of the quality of the programming, but because staring at a television set in the living room or in the bedroom is certainly less comfortable than walking around carrying a different sort of visual display device (computer, tablet, mobile phone)".

The fact is that the way we watch TV is changing, not only for the younger generations of Millennials and for those who came after them, but also for the previous lineages who also had to adapt and embrace new realities and practices.

Therefore, television sets are naturally becoming screens that provide a ground for multiple uses, as reference [11] argues, television sets "are no longer mere television receivers but are currently multimedia viewing devices". Reference [12] adds that "the *one-to-many* principle that used to guide the traditional mass media has evolved into a *self-mass communication* premise (...) that simply and utterly follows a logic in which one seeks interpersonal multimedia communication and the ever-growing absence of a mediator".

For that matter, linear TV consumption is heading towards a type of selective and personalized consumption where flashback, binge-watching and on-demand services are increasingly important. Evidence shows that on-demand TV content is growing worldwide. According to reference [13] the number of worldwide on-demand video users will increase drastically between 2019 and 2022 (21.3 million users will be added each year) and will grow from 483.3 to 568.4 million. Moreover, the fifth-generation networks offers higher data speed with zero interference, this allows a greater number of users to be connected at the same time and lower latency for a faster response time.

The self-media age has therefore led to "a hyper-segmentation of audiences, to an increase in the viewers' power of choice and to a mismatch between the conveniences of the programmer and the receiver" [14]. We have entered a new communication paradigm that reference [15] defines as the individualization and *cyber-society* (or cyber tribes) paradigm, where "the systems of self-editing, which are extensions of the new media, rule and have created the user. The receiver can now participate directly in the communication flow and possess technical possibilities never imagined".

A global, continuous, immediate and mobile communication emerges.

We realized that the television viewing habits of generation Y (Millennials) are quite different from those adopted by previous generations. Reference [16] stresses that, not only is television content available on mobile devices and on different platforms, but it is also very easy to access. The same reference claims that the older generations are those for whom television is still the main entertainment medium and the living room remains the best place to watch television, while the younger generations "in spite of their strong connection with

television" [16] tend to diversify the places where they access their favorite content and the devices they use to consume audiovisual content. In reference [17] opinion's television is a system of networked screens. Reference [17] also points out that younger age groups value above all the price of the monthly charge they must pay for a certain audiovisual service and whether or not one can use several devices simultaneously and in multiple places. Another important factor to keep in mind is the possibility viewers have to access and watch the streaming content on any kind of screen and for as long as they want. Streaming video and binge-watching possibilities are therefore of particular importance. In other words, "binge-watching or marathoning have become well known, if not common habits" [17]. The possibility of watching all the episodes of a certain show for as long as one wants, without any programming restriction is increasingly common. The other advantage of such services is that the video contents are always available. That way, "the ability to view entire seasons of TV series immediately, rather than having to wait for single episodes to be released, is essential for consumers" [18].

This marathoning practice is also associated with a need to exchange comments and opinions on social networks. This new habit makes the pleasure of watching a certain show go way beyond the sheer moment of binge-watching. Reference [19] warns that "it is not only about the consumption of episodes for several hours in a row, but also the amount of time the users devote to looking for information in all sorts of online discussion groups or spend chatting with their friends or on social networks where they share references".

III. TELEVISION AND CONTENT

So, how can we explain television after twenty years of the 21st century? According to reference [20] television has been explained by many theorists based on its *before* and *after*, in other words, explanation is based on what it used to mean to people and on what it has become. Because of these studies, concepts like network and multichannel environment [21], broadcasting and narrowcasting [22], shortage and abundance [23], mass medium and individualistic medium [24], analog and digital [25], nationalistic orientation versus globalizing orientation [26], programmer offer and on-demand option [27] or immersion mutation [28] have become familiar and recurrent. For reference [29] "television is still ordinary in many ways, it still gives meaning to the casual viewer of the TV I age, it still provides material for the imagination of the avid fan of the TV II age, and even the most mature quality television series of the TV III age should be read as an object embedded in television culture and its viewer should be regarded as being part of an audience".

According to reference [30] television is a medium that favors gender diversity, that broadcasts programs based on reality, on sports context and that allows fictional creation as well. It invests in segmentation and seriality, materializes concrete images, favors contact through narratives, stories and dialogues, puts an emphasis on personalization, values emotions and affections, simulates a sense of interactivity with its viewers, calls for co-presence, has its own style and

engages in dialogue with various artistic languages. As far as television language is concerned, reference [30] recalls the enormous variety of television content and that the "medium has created his own language". However, for some time there was this accepted notion that television was all about "live programming" and that when it comes to fiction production the "poverty of its visual grammar" was more than evident [31]. Everything that involved the word 'television' – television theatre, television film, etc. – would stimulate critical discussion, especially when compared to cinema. We can also refer to the close-up shots, the lack of character's depth, the superficiality of the productions, the insignificance of photography and the fragility of the scripts that focused mainly on social stereotypes and shallow characters. The fast and mechanical production used in television was in stark contrast to the time and excellence of filmmaking productions. According to reference [32] television has always been accused of "a lack of quality, not only in the narratives and dramatic quality of its fiction, but also in its visuality, its aesthetics".

However, the technical and aesthetic development that the course of time has provided was important to transform prejudice and preconceived ideas. In reference [32] opinion's "criticism does not make any sense when the quality of some television content, some its series, documentaries or records of musical and worldly events for instance, is much higher than the quality offered by many of the films currently made to the cinema". Reference [33] agrees that "with the growing segmentation brought about by cable TV, we have witnessed the emergence of a wide range of TV channels that are ready to produce a type of content that goes beyond mainstream productions. Those documentaries and shows have often paved the way to produce good cinema and excellent documentaries". Reference [33] adds that "TV is experiencing a moment of true rebirth thanks to the series it has produced over the last fifteen years". Audiovisual quality became evident and famous film directors like David Lynch (*Twin Peaks*), Steven Spielberg (*Brothers in Arms*) or Martin Scorsese (*Vinyl*) proved that producing for television could be equally creative. Therefore, reference [34] states that "it has become commonplace to proclaim that we live in a new Golden Age of television drama. Since the late 1990s, we have experienced a veritable deluge of serializes television narrative that is routinely compared (and often favorably) to the literary masterworks".

What makes these productions different from the rest is not only the complexity of the scenarios, but also the depth of the characters and the sophistication of the plots, as well as the contemporaneity of the topics they address. For reference [33] these audiovisual serial productions are "cultural phenomena of the utmost importance". For reference [35] "television series are both relevant and complex and address and unite a wide audience". When reference [36] refers to the style and content found in high quality series, what is emphasized is "a decidedly cinematic visual style, hybridity of structure, a rich and complex character-based narrative, a generally liberalist humanist outlook, the engagement of controversial and/or social issues, and a degree of textual self-reflexivity".

Interestingly, this television twist occurs ironically "during the exact period in which television itself has in many ways experienced its demise: the medium's third era, in which its boundaries are challenged and reframed by the rise of digital culture and media convergence" [37]. So, despite strong competition from services like Apple TV, ChromeCast, Popcorn Time, YouTube or Netflix, television has been able to resist largely because of its fiction productions.

A study conducted by the American company Viacom International Media Networks, owner of television channels specialized in music, humor and youth entertainment such as MTV, Comedy Central or Nickelodeon, showed that the idea that television is dying because of online competition is incorrect. In TV RE[DEFINED] we realized that digitalization and convergence paved the way for the empowerment of television, but differently than one would have expected. In fact, over a short period of time, television content has become available anytime and anywhere and hence has made it possible for viewers to experience numerous viewing possibilities. According to reference [38] we are in the presence of a redefined television and thus "TV RE[DEFINED] shows that more television is being consumed now than ever before. What is needed is a redefinition of our understanding of television". A comprehensive study that included more than 10,500 participants aged 6-34 and that covered 14 countries (Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia, Philippines, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Russia, Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, Poland, Netherlands and Sweden) confirmed that "in an ever-more digitally connected world, television and great stories (content) still connect people to each other now more than ever - 63% agree that television has never been this good" [38]. The research suggests that what really defines the user's relationship with TV is the quality and the attractiveness of the content. In other words, the audience will come back for more if they are given the possibility of accessing more content of excellence. In addition, the user's involvement is greater because he can access the products through different channels. The research concludes that the existence of a collection of audiovisual works - "library of great content" - strengthens the connection with the viewers and that the devices - television, computer, smartphone - are just mere vehicles used to deliver the content [38]. Therefore, it is not a question of knowing whether the internet is more interesting than television, what really matters is to understand the kind of content they offer and how they are able to provide it. In essence, television and the internet can even be allies since evidence clearly shows that talking about a certain audiovisual product is a key element to encourage viewers to tune into that content: "72% are talking about TV shows they love more often than a few years ago" [38]. Reference [39] argues that "content today is a cultural zeitgeist that unfolds in real-time, and people want to watch shows as they happen so they can participate in the global water cooler conversation". Chat rooms, social networks and *the like* contribute to keep conversations going.

As for linear television, the study reveals that it still plays a relevant role in content discovery. Research shows that most viewers find new products while they are zapping ("69% of

adults and 76% of kids start their viewing journey via linear TV"), interpersonal conversations or TV promotions. Research also shows that linear television, because of its nature that allows viewers to adopt active and passive viewing behaviors, works as a direct and indirect source of content discovery and is still quite capable of attracting people's interest to the products it provides. This medium allows for a viewing experience that has not yet been matched by any other medium. Hence, "online is very useful as a means of reinforcing interest, but it is linear TV that «seals the deal» and commits them as viewers" [40]. There are indeed several non-linear content services, but what really determines their interest is the type of audiovisual proposals they offer. Meanwhile, "the television provider's VOD services can be very competitive if they continue to provide viewers with access to great content in easy and innovative ways" [40].

Truth is that today's society uses different viewing tools to meet different kind of needs. Some of those tools are useful to find and explore content that might be interesting; some others are used to watch something for the first time or to watch a certain content for the second or third time but always according to the viewer's own individual choice and schedule and some others give the viewers the chance to subscribe to viewing marathons. Some users spend their time scrolling through websites to look for information on audiovisual products that will play an important role in their future consumer decisions. On the other hand, to watch a certain product, users might need to have access to different sources and they will have to spend some time looking for a program they will enjoy. Consequently, we witness the birth of the so-called engaged viewer: whenever they decide to watch a certain program, that concrete choice is a result of an informed selection and "this has increased their engagement with TV and they are now watching more TV content in general. In fact, they are even watching more linear TV than they were a year ago" [40].

IV. FUTURE SCENARIO

Global viewers are redefining television. For them, the most important factors are the provision of quality content and the viewer's experience. Television is being consumed differently and for its consumers/ audience it represents "content on their own terms" [40] based on a strong peer connection, on the exchange of personal experiences and on the viewers' personal convenience. At the same time, something called "must watch television" emerges. According to reference [41] this new concept "is designed to appeal to affluent, highly educated consumers who value the literary qualities of these programs, and they are used by the networks to hook this valuable cohort of viewers into their schedules".

Reference [42] stresses that "streaming services have revolutionized how we watch TV and consume content. Netflix alone has more than 139 million subscribers". The success of this type of service relies on the respect they show to their users' convenience. Besides, consumers are constantly bombarded by digital recommendations that suggest other programs they might want to watch. On the other hand, according to reference [42], "on-demand viewing also makes

niche content more accessible and provides something for everyone. Instead of waiting a week between episodes and sitting through commercials, we now watch shows more like how we read books: by bingeing them and enjoying delicious, uninterrupted experiences".

As seen before, many streaming services are creating their own productions and this increase in original content also allows the representation of topics, stories and characters that had been neglected in the past.

In the near future, competition will continue to be fierce and the viewer will be regarded as a full-fledged consumer. He will become someone who should be provided with a high-quality entertainment experience, someone who should be offered original products, personalized recommendations and a viewing offer that will suit him the best. For reference [42] "in the next five to ten years, even more content will be created by looking at data. Highly personalized niche content will be delivered straight to the people who really want to watch it. Netflix is already experimenting with interactive content that allows viewers to choose their own adventures". According to reference [42] the future of television will be customer-oriented and will offer interactive content experiences. Therefore, reference [43] believes that the current situation in which television finds itself can be seen either as a crisis or as a moment of change that is precisely the opposite - a chance for television to reinvent itself.

V. CONCLUSION

In the digital age, one of the issues that keeps on inspiring researchers and scholars' work is the importance of understanding how television will be able to adapt to the changes in viewing and consumption habits implemented by online competition. In fact, the digital age has transformed not only societies themselves, but also the way people communicate, learn, or share and even the way in which we relate with our fellow humans' beings. Opinions about television are far from being consensual: for some people the term has negative connotations, for some others it has a positive impact, some look at it as if it is on the verge of disappearing and for some others the situation facing television is nothing more than an opportunity for rebirth. Nevertheless, television has gone through several stages and has always figured out how to take advantage of the technological transformations to adapt to change. As it reaches the third millennium and enters the fourth episode of the history of communication, the so-called individual communication episode or the age of self-media, television is currently facing a new evolutionary stage and some are already arguing that it will soon have to adjust to the fifth episode - the Post-Organic phase. The truth is that, despite the emergence of new media, the television universe has kept an active attitude and has always done its best to be part of a world in which the viewer is increasingly becoming a consumer.

During this period of renewal in which mobility and multiple platforms have become part of the viewing process, television has been able to use the passion human beings have for stories [44] and could capture the *cybernauts'* interest with highly acclaimed television content that will turn into the main

topic of endless online conversations and get countless comments all over social networks. We watch television differently, but we talk about it a lot and we share a lot of comments online about it and about its content. The way we watch television may be different, but everyone is pleased with the offer of differentiated television products, whether they are consumed via linear TV, streaming or through binge watching.

In modern societies, where image has achieved a prominent position, television exists not only in its traditional and linear format, but its influence is already felt in the digital and online universe. It constantly redefines its existence, and, just like the history of communication, it is evolutionary and cumulative. That way, it is willing to join forces with the other media to develop new communication possibilities. The world is in constant evolution and this progression happens through different cycles. The same happens to television. The situation it is currently going through is just another stage in which the medium must face several challenges it will have to overcome to continue its journey cautiously, but affirmatively.

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About Author (s):



“It is not a question of knowing whether the internet is more interesting than television, what really matters is to understand the kind of content they offer and how they are able to provide it. In essence, television and the internet can even be allies [...]”