

TV's double vision, when 1 screen isn't enough

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NEW YORK (AP) -- As a kid, I dreamed of having a telephone that was plugged into my family's TV and would let me ring up whoever I was watching. With this special phone, I could reach my favorite TV stars, introduce myself and talk to them about their shows.

It would've been so great. But I always knew it was an impossible dream.

Flash forward a few decades. On a Thursday night last month, Kerry Washington, the star of such films as "Ray" and "The Last King of Scotland," was live-tweeting answers to questions tweeted from viewers as they watched the premiere of her new ABC series, "Scandal."

Washington was at her mother's New York apartment, where family and friends were gathered for a viewing party in her honor.

"But I hate watching myself," she says. "So while the show was on, I was buried in my laptop tweeting. It was fun."

Then, too excited about her new show to sleep, she logged back on to Twitter a couple of hours later to chat with "Scandal" viewers tuning into the West Coast feed.

The act of watching TV has no doubt gone through epic transformations.

Remember when TV shows were locked in place by broadcasters, cemented on each station's grid in take-it-or-leave-it formation? Well, maybe you don't. It's been a generation since the first affordable home VCRs let viewers store and time-shift their favorite programs, putting made-to-order scheduling in each viewer's hands.

Here's another one: Remember when you needed a TV to watch TV? It was only in recent years that TV content escaped the physical constraints of what we call a TV. You now can opt for watching "television" on a PC screen or even newfangled devices such as an iPad, iPhone or Kindle Fire.

And that's not all. Now, in the latest quantum leap, those alternative outlets are converging with the TV for a multi-screen experience.

A new book, "Social TV," speaks of "a rediscovery of TV as a NEW medium." According to authors Mike Proulx and Stacey Shepatin, "We now live in a world where television has symbiotically become one with the Web, social media and mobile."

No more can TV-watching be contained by the TV or any other gadget. A companion

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screen - be it computer, tablet or smartphone - has been brought into the act. Never again need TV be experienced as TV alone.

Nor need any member of the audience experience TV while being alone.

TV was always a solitary pastime. Maybe a few family members convened to watch together, but for the most part, TV funneled the world to viewers individually, each of whom knew that millions of others were seeing the same shows, but in similar isolation. Truly sharing the experience was impossible, even unthinkable.

Now, thanks to "second screens" and the social media they convey, the TV audience can talk among themselves. As they engage in the new pastime of virtual co-viewing, they can express their likes and dislikes in a massive, global back-and-forth.

What's more, they are heard, and often heeded, by the presenters of those programs.

Maybe it's as simple as a cable-news show that, bannerizing its hashtag, invites Twitter users to weigh in on the story being reported, with their tweets unscrolling on the TV screen.

Maybe it's as complex as teams of data miners curating what the Twitterati are saying about a TV show, from moment to moment as the show unfolds, for sharp-eyed analysis by network bosses and ad buyers.

And the tweets add up. At 10:35 p.m. Eastern time on a Sunday night last August, MTV's "Video Music Awards" sparked a record-breaking 8,868 tweets-per-second as Beyonce finished singing and rubbed her belly, signaling she was pregnant.

Now what would Karen Scott have made of that?

I'm talking about the heroine of a short-lived 1960s NBC sitcom. "Karen" centered on a "modern teenage girl" who "by the light of television" (according to the theme song, performed by the Beach Boys) "can even write a book report."

Today, of course, that report would be composed on a laptop or a tablet that emits its own light, while the multitasking Karen keeps her eye on her TV and tweets on her phone.

Maybe circa-2012 Karen would be following her favorite show on Twitter or Facebook.

Maybe she would log onto a specialty app for a show she likes, such as TBS' "Conan," whose Team Coco tablet app presents its own Twitter feed interspersed with other content unfurling in synch with the show as it airs.

Maybe she goes to a website like TweetTV, where she can find a full array of TV shows, with their respective Twitter feeds, to choose from.

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Maybe she checks into sites for TV shows on Viggle or ACTV8.me, whose users can redeem the points they earn for items like movie tickets or gift cards.

And maybe she would make time for websites like Yap.tv, SocialGuide, GetGlue, Miso and BuddyTV.

In March, the Hollywood Reporter published results of a poll that found that nine out of 10 people view social networking sites as a new form of entertainment, while more than half of the respondents said social media sites are important tastemakers in determining not only what to watch, but also what to buy.

The poll, conducted by market research firm Penn Schoen Berland, surveyed 750 social network users ages 13 to 49. It found that half of the respondents post on social networking sites while watching TV to feel connected to others who might be watching.

Welcome to the era not of the bygone Must-See TV, but of Must-Tweet TV. The second screen has become its own media destination.

And its own TV-navigating tool. Peel is one of several sites that provide an on-screen customized remote control and a search mechanism for keeping track of favorite TV shows. Meanwhile, its social platform allows the user to find and follow friends to see what they are recommending.

As one special feature, Peel unveiled an "American Idol" app earlier this season, which, among other things, lets users post "Cheers" and "Boos" for each performer as a real-time interaction, which results in a leaderboard summarizing how the Peel community sizes up the performances.

"Most viewers want to have a rich engagement around a program," says Peel marketing vice president Scott Ellis. "They're looking for that intersection of the social TV platform and the second screen, which provides an enhancement of the programs they care about."

But there's more going on than that. Companies are tracking buzz from you outspoken viewers. Programmers and advertisers are interested in how you respond to their shows, stars, advertisements and brands. Social media exchanges are followed, quantified and analyzed.

With measurements like tweets per second, volume of show mentions, and conversation sentiment, social media have certified TV viewers as active participants, not just pairs of eyeballs. As a viewer who engages in social TV media, you are no longer held captive to the proxy voices of a few thousand households in a Nielsen audience sample. You are part of the world's largest focus group.

For instance, on a recent Wednesday night, you made "American Idol" the top broadcast show, by far, on social media, according to figures compiled by Trendrr.tv from Twitter, Facebook and several other sites. There were 227,858 messages all

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day and 162,700 messages while the show was on the air. "Revenge" was second, with all-day activity of 93,723 and on-air activity of 68,541.

This comports with overnight Nielsens, which placed "American Idol" first with 16.5 million viewers, and "Revenge" second with 6.8 million viewers.

But third-place in the Trendrr.tv survey was "Late Night," hosted by tech-savvy Jimmy Fallon, with daily activity of 51,924 - compared with its relatively modest average of 1.8 million viewers.

"By measuring people's engagement around TV shows, whether through Twitter or with second-screen applications, there is now a new level of interactivity around the media itself," says Trendrr.tv CEO Mark Ghuneim.

"TV has always stimulated conversation," says Tom Thai, vice president of marketing at Bluefin Labs, another social TV analytical firm. "Whether in people's living rooms, or as the proverbial water-cooler effect with people discussing shows at work, you watch TV and then you talk about it. But no one had been able to quantitatively measure those conversations, so they didn't factor into business decision-making.

"Now we can now measure conversations," he says. "But it's not at the water cooler. It's virtual."

According to Bluefin's analysis, "The Academy of Country Music Awards" on CBS last month inspired 676,000 social media comments, 28 percent of them identified as positive and 13 percent of them negative. A time line of the tweet rate during the broadcast finds a spike of 20,000 tweets at 10 p.m. Eastern time, when Toby Keith performed, and an evening-high jolt of 35,000 tweets shortly after 11 p.m., as Taylor Swift was crowned Entertainer of the Year.

CBS conducts lots of research of its own to harvest viewer feedback, notes David Poltrack, the network's chief research officer. But as a Bluefin client, CBS recognizes that what is unique about the feedback Bluefin crunches "is the volume of responses: It is ongoing, in a continuous stream," Poltrack says. "The question that is still to be resolved: How representative is that feedback? Only 10 or 15 percent of the population uses Twitter. Is the Twitter audience representative of the other 85 percent?"

CBS is busily assessing what this new social-media information means, and how it can best be applied in helping shape schedules, set ad rates and determine whether its shows live or die.

"We're still in the exploratory stage," Poltrack says. "We and Bluefin are learning together."

Meanwhile, social-media engagement is exploding: For instance, the volume of social media comments from last year's "CMA Awards" increased this year by 331 percent.

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Clearly, it's been a long time since the era of Karen Scott, that circa-1964 sitcom teen. Her version of interactive media was a fan letter. Her version of co-viewing would have been a phone call shared with a chum while the two of them watched a TV show, and talked about it, in the privacy of their respective living rooms.

These days, more and more, watching TV is a public act.

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