## Social Tv between Audience and Political Engagement

**Defining social tv**

Despite the fact that a shared definition of social tv is still lacking, we can easily interpret it as a social practice of commenting tv shows through various devices. The history of those practices is rooted in the very beginning of broadcasting but it is only in recent times that we are facing an increasing development of technological devices specifically deputed to allow distant people interact each other while watching tv. At the end of the Twentieth century many scholars and practitioners started to reflect about interactive television as a way to combine interpersonal communications and broadcasting contents (Van Dijk, De Vos 2001; Van Dijk, Heuvelman, Peters 2003).

Today a substantive branch of social tv scholars still rely upon those seminal studies, emphasizing technological aspects of social tv. We can in fact distinguish between hard definitions and soft definitions of social tv: the first ones refer to the technological development linked to media innovations and observe various solutions along the continuum between convergence (Jenkins 2006) and second screen (Chorianopoulos and Lekakos 2008; Gross, Fetter, Paul-Stueve 2008; Harboe 2009; Lochrie, Coulton 2012). Soft definitions of social tv highlight instead the social practices of sharing, commenting and networking with little or no concern about the technological devices adopted.

In this work we use the latter perspective in order to focus on audience activities. In particular, social tv is interpreted an enhanced experience of audiencehood (Livingstone 2005) in which on line contents and interactions are as much as important as (if not more than) shows being broadcasted.

A relevant aspect of social tv is commenting political talk-shows: even though social media have been often depicted as alternative to traditional media outlets (De Blasio 2014), accounts of political use of social media highlight the preeminence of social tv dynamics (author 2014a, 2014b;

Bentivegna 2014), as the frequent presence of official tv shows hashtags among trending topics testifies (this is partly due to the still huge importance of television in news consumption: in Italy for example television still is the primary source of information for the 98% of population; Censis 2013). In effect Italian political talk-shows have been defined as a "third chamber" of the parliament because of the great popularity of the genre, the so-called pop-politics that blends together information, entertainment and popular culture (Mazzoleni, Sfardini 2009). Similar trends have been observed in other countries, such as United Kingdom (Deller 2011) and Australia (Harrington, Highfield, Bruns 2012).

**Television and social media: a quest for participation**

With the advent of digital media, traditional media like television and radio faced an increasing competition: in the context of technological convergence and digitalization (Jenkins 2008; Colombo 2007), traditional media have been forced to re-position themselves. Television in particular faced this challenge by progressively extending "the repertoire of audience participation options" and outsourcing many participation channels to Internet and social media, starting an internetisation process (Nightingale 2007).

Audience participation has always been a contested concept: in political and social sciences, a minimalist conception rooted in liberal democracy delimits participation in decision-making processes (i.e. legislative arena, independent and civic media), whereas a maximalist conception, linked to participatory and deliberative democracies, extends the ways in which citizens can participate up to everyday life (i.e. consumption choices and volunteerism, but also informal political talks with peers; Carpentier et al. 2013; Sorice 2014). Simultaneously, scholars use to distinguish between participation to the media and participation through the media. Participation to the media sees audience contributing to production and distribution of contents, whereas participation through the media is referred to public engagement allowed and sustained through the mediated public space (Carpentier et al. 2013).

Those opposite positions suggest to evaluate participation opportunities through the media as a continuum of cases (Carpentier 2007; De Blasio 2008; De Blasio, Hibberd, Higgins, Sorice 2012):

- access 1.0 is guaranteed by the universal public service;

- with access 1.1 media get closer to publics, as in community media;

- access 2.0 is peculiar to social media, since user generated contents fall into this category: here audience can obtain its own expressive space within the media;

- interaction describes a dialogue between audience and media in which the former percept to contribute but the latter still maintain their asymmetrical position of power;

- participation is only referred to the possibility for the public to take co-decisions about the technology, the contents or the production.

When talking about social tv, it is necessary to keep this classification in mind in order not to exaggerate the role of audience: very few shows actually offer real-time participation through social media and those few still limit audience intervention to specific segments of the show (such as questions from the web, e-voting on particular issues, and so on). Since a full participation through social tv is excluded, then audience's role can only vary from access to interaction.

First experiments of social television can be dated back to access programs such as BBC's *Any Questions?* and *Question Time*, in which audience could interact with the show through phone calls (Hibberd, McNair, Schlesinger 2003). With Internet increasingly substituting phone and letters, some scholars have spoken about an emerging viewertariat to describe the expanding opportunities for the audience to intervene in shows through various media, particularly in political talk-shows (Ansted, O'Loughlin 2011).

Since the private experience of audiencehood is publicized through social network sites, it re-introduces aspects of sociality essential to the construction of publics (Livingstone 2005). Publics are in effect defined as collective formations or communities of self-reflective subjects sharing common values, aims and identities, also developed thanks to shared audiencehood experiences (Dayan 2005). Media and mediatised political communication can thus be understood as "frames of

reference" in so far as they provide to subjects repertoires, representations and cultural meanings for interpreting social reality and building their own identity (Hall, du Gay 1996; Sorice 2009). If political talk-shows are meant to recreate a public debate involving citizens at least on a symbolical level (Livingstone, Lunt 1994; Dahlgren 1995; Couldry et al. 2007), the possibility of real-time interaction offered by social media enhances this involvement and pushes it to an effective engagement, which in turn refers to the sentimental connection and immersive attention upon an object or issue that is an essential prerequisite for practical activities of participation (Dahlgren 2009).

Social network sites, and Twitter in particular, enrich the perception of liveness as a social connection with a group of peers and with a universal potential audience (Couldry 2004). Real-time sharing of this social connection introduces a ritual aspect that bonds social tv dynamics to the process of building a collective discourse around the issues represented by tele-politics. The novelty of social tv thus relies in a brand new blending of broadcasting and networking logics, in which citizens can access public (mediatized) discourse and contribute to the social and political communication flows crosscutting the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013).

In this framework, social tv can constitute a crucial practice that influences those processes in multiple ways. Most social tv empirical studies have focused on a quantitative approach mainly applied to entertainment shows and fiction series (either a pure counting of users behaviour patterns and quasi-qualitative content analysis; Doughty et al. 2012; Highfield et al. 2013; Wohn, Na 2011; author 2014a); those works fail to adequately describe which are the social dynamics and the shared meaning of social tv practices in the public space. In order to render this complexity, this work is going to describe the multiple implications of social tv by directly asking to users.

**Methodology**

We chose to focus our attention on social tv practices through Twitter because it was the most used platform for social tv purposes, compared both with more specific social tv services (such as Miso)

and with the other mainstream social networking platform, Facebook.[1] We adopted a mixed methods perspective, which results in (1) a quantitative phase, useful to provide a description of the phenomenon in terms of reach and popularity, and to sample users for (2) qualitative in-depth interviews.

The first part derives from a broader project in which we monitored eleven political talk-shows aired in free-to-air Italian tv outlets from August 30th 2012 to June 30th 2013. We acquired Tweets through DiscoverText via Gnip access using the official hashtags of each show and limiting the acquisition to the airing time.[2] For the purpose of the present work the corpus of Tweets has been further limited to the period from August 30th to December 23rd 2012 in order to proceed with the qualitative analysis.[3]

[table 1 here]

Interviewees have been selected according to two criteria: the activity and the assiduity of social tv practices. Each episode has been analysed by executing Gawk scripts in order to obtain the distribution of users in terms of activity: the software divided users in three clusters according to their contribution (number of Tweets) and every time calculating thresholds specific to the overall activity of the episode.[4] Thus three lists of users per episode have been created and then matched each other using the TM package of R, in order to extrapolate those users who twitted continuously episode after episode (assiduity).

This procedure allowed to identify four levels of activity and assiduity.

[figure 1 here]

All users in those categories have been contacted via Twitter direct messaging service. This kind of service required the users to follow back the author in order to receive private messages and that provoked a high rate of non-responses.

[table 2 here]

In the end, thirty-one users accepted to be interviewed via Skype, with a semi-structured outline which investigated: information habits; digital skills; political participation; social tv practices and meanings. The transcriptions have been finally analysed with Dedoose.

**Four uses of social tv**

Most interviews spontaneously introduced the argument of social tv while talking about Twitter, stating that it is one of the principal use of the microblogging platform. As regards to devices, users answered in different ways but second screen practices (television and computer, smartphone or tablet) prevail over web-casting. Finally, there is a homogeneity regarding favourite shows: those are preferred among others because of the fact that they provide some windows of dialogue with Twitter (reading Tweets, asking questions suggested by Twitter users, rolling Tweets on the bottom of the screen).

Users affirm to Twittering during the shows in order to participate, in a double perspective: on one side, they want to "contribute" to the discussion about an issue (for example asking questions to the politicians or suggesting them to the host), and on the other side, they want to "protest" against a politician or more broadly against the politics and ruling class, also including journalists and shows' newsroom. However the desire of participation is anchored to a broadcasting logic: the activity of Twittering at the tv seems to acquire a meaning only when referred to the frame, times and spaces that television concede. Thus social tv is not a fully antagonistic practice but rather a manifestation of audience resistance which needs television counterpart to be legitimated and shared.

As already stated, Twitter contribution to the show narrative is still irrelevant. Many political shows have opened up sections or little spaces deputed to read a selection of Tweets or Facebook posts; although encouraging, those experiments remain delimited as regards to the whole narration of tele-politics. In other words, the editorial control over the contents of the show completely resides in production's hands. For this reason, we cannot talk about a real participation but just interaction (Carpentier 2007; De Blasio 2008, 2012). Anyway in social tv we find that the reasons

for the use of Twitter are linked to the full expression of citizenship, acting as informed publics and producer/distributor of information.

Analysis showed that users describe social tv in multiple ways, which can be represented in a model of four uses of social tv.

[figure 2 here]

The horizontal axis goes from access to interaction: you can access Twitter to read what other people say without necessarily intervene in the flow (identity building/social awareness and game use), or you can use it to participate in the discussion (civic/informative and emotional use). Of course the distinction between access and interaction is empirically fuzzy, but nevertheless present in users' accounts.

The vertical axis distinguishes between practical and symbolic meaning of the experience: on one side we can find social practices specifically linked to the strict context of what is happening on tv, such as emotional outburst or recreational, often satirical, uses, defined by interviewees as moments in which Twitter adds to television something more (the opportunity to pour out frustrations and some kind of collective entertainment). On the other side, the symbolic meaning appears when users described the show as the frame (that is to say, the chance) to enhance or change their mind and their self-perception (civic/informative use and identity building/social awareness).

Civic/informative use of social tv (interaction practices with a symbolic meaning) implies the use of Twitter to comment on what is happening in tv and, in a wider sense, in the whole political context: "We are very interested in politics, but we realized that participation does not lead to change... so we take up position from home" (f, 50); "I Tweet to let people remember what it has been said, promises, ideas. Sometimes I directly speak to politicians" (m, 45). Users tweets to participate the debate, to make their own contribution, to help spreading news and ideas, and to recall other users' attention (i.e. Tweets announcing the presence of some politicians hosting in the show): "When my favourites politicians are in tv I Tweet. It's like a live commentary, I do it to

make information circulate, to attract more viewers" (m, 19). Other kinds of uses falling into this category are Tweets directly addressing the show or the host (using @ and mentions) to suggest questions to ask: "I often Tweet about tv, because it is a way to catch up or to try trigger up a concrete conversation, for example questions they do no task. That annoys me a lot" (m, 45). When interacting with the show or the host, civic/informative use can also be very close to pure attention-seeking (Wohn, Na 2011; author 2014).[5] Another variant of the civic/informative use is the real-time fact checking: "I try to correct mistakes in what they say when talking about HR management and fiscality. Because it's my job and they say a lot of lies. We always need to verify" (f, 50).

Identity building and social awareness (access practices with a symbolic meaning) are deeply blended together: "it's like a parallel world where you can confront with other people. You have the chance to verify if you have a common point of view" (m, 48). Here users revealed to access Twitter as a way to monitor what other users think and compare it with their own thinking, in order to verify if they are "the only one to see it that way": "you try to find other people who think it the same way as you do, count how many we are, find out if you're wrong and why" (m, 41). This dynamic has been confirmed also in tv-series publics although with a more emotional nuance ("to feel not to be alone"; see Schirra et al. 2014) and seems to be very specific to social tv. Also, such a monitoring activity can imply a subsequent interaction but it is not the primary goal: social tv is often a way to compensate for the absence of other people in the physical realm of the living room and have the chance to control others' reaction: "once you watched tv, got angry and asked am I the only one to think it that way? With Twitter you verify you are not alone. Some evenings I don't want to Tweet but then I listen to such lies in tv and I desperately need to switch on the pc and Tweet" (m, 41). In other words, Twitter functions as awareness system (Hermida 2010), since the control of what others share on Twitter is part of the identity building process: how I distinguish myself from others (individuation) and how I join others (identification; Hall, du Gay 1996) are essential for the construction of one's self-perception with regards to public discourse, both tele-political and grassroots.

The emotional use (interaction practices with a practical meaning) describes social tv as a way to satisfy expressive needs, such as outburst, frustration and indignation: "Talk shows and live Tweeting is a way to express frustration against those in charge" (f, 45); "I use to comment what politicians and journalists say because sometimes I need to speak out, even if it doesn't change anything" (m, 38). As many interviewees said, Twitter perfectly represents vices and virtues of Italian society, highlighting in particular relation and communication habits among political opponents: most of them describe this characteristic by using metaphors such as "cheering", that is to say the reaction of a spectator to a show, no matter the genre, and the profound irremovable gap between rival teams. Twitter is often described as the bar: it is seen as a third place between private and public realm (Oldenburg 1991; Chadwick 2009), a protected environment where one can meet other people to freely share reactions and emotions with no need to discuss reasonable opinions: "it is as watching a soccer match at the bar, Twitter becomes the bar, a place where collecting comments: someone shouts, someone calm down the others. It's a way to confront with people who are watching the same thing as you and are angry exactly how much as you are" (m, 58). This kind of use confirms the need to include emotional publics the political and social research agenda, shifting away from normative ideals of public sphere (Livingstone 2005; Higgins 2008).

Game use of social tv (access practices with a practical meaning) occurs when users access Twitter to find out "how is going". Although similar to identity building and awareness use, in this case there is a specific orientation to entertainment: irony, sarcasm and satire are added to television and to political talk-shows as grassroots frames that subvert the original meaning. This is a particular form of how politics and culture are mixed together (Street 1997; Van Zoonen 2004, 2005) resulting in multiple expressions that vary in critical awareness and efficacy. Amusement is even enhanced when users are embedded in a group or circle: in effect some described the presence of a core group of users meeting each other on Twitter episode after episode, so that they expected that someone would make the first joke or create the satirical frame (in a similar way, "let's find out what s/he says"): "there is a closer circle of people. We know each other and often comment

together. Two or three of them have become friends of mine and we have a lot of fun" (m, 41). Another kind of entertainment is linked to disputes and flames occurring among users and famous subjects, mainly Twitter inexpert politicians: "it's my favourite entertainment, mainly if there are big disputes or people teasing politicians" (m, 63).

[table 3 here]


**Concluding remarks**

Although restricted by methodological limitations, this work provides a first attempt to describe how discursive practices in a hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013) relate to the public sphere and to political engagement (Dahlgren 2009). Results show that social tv practices play a major role in everyday consumption of politics: the combination of television and social media enhance the whole experience of audiencehood and constitute an innovative pathway to the constitution of publics, to political engagement and to collective shared identity, but despite many accounts of uses of social media as participation and contestation tools, a broadcasting logic is still dominant in social tv.

Uses of social tv can vary very much, depending on the activity in which audience engage (access and/or interaction) and the meaning (practical/symbolic). This variety reflects at the same time the variety of the (platform-mediated) relationships among individuals and between them and the actors of the wider contemporary mediated public space: civic/informative uses appears nearby emotional outburst, hybridizing the definition of public itself and suggesting once again the need to overcome normative ideals of public sphere and recognize the increasing importance of emotional publics in mediated political communication (Higgins 2008; De Blasio, Hibberd, Higgins, Sorice 2012).

This work also confirms that Twitter, and for extension social media function as awareness system (Hermida 2010) and have a great importance for identity building and self-representation. Another evidence emerged during this work is the presence of diffused practices of grassroots ironic

and subversive frames: audience use to comment current affairs and political characters by embedding them to irony, sarcasm and popular culture in a subversive manner (Lievrouw 2011). Signs of those frames are visible for example in the creation of hashtags (unofficial hashtags for the show or hashtag involving political character) and fake or collective accounts on social media. Further research ought to combine users' accounts with textual analysis of social tv expressions in order to analyse the multiple forms of irony on social media.

In conclusion, television and social media appear to be deeply connected each other: television, and tele-politics in particular, are (slowly) reinvigorating languages and formats in order to include social media practices and conversations in their narration, although it still remains fundamentally centralized. At the same time, social media contribute to legitimate television as a central front-stage (more than a source of information) where politics actually happens.

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Table 1. Schedule of shows under monitoring.

| Hour | Rai1 | Rai2 | Rai3 | La7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Morning (7am – 1pm) | | | Agorà | Omnibus |
| Afternoon (1pm – 8pm) | | | In 1/2 Ora | |
| Access prime time (8pm – 9pm) | | | | In Onda, Ottoemezzo |
| Prime time (9pm – 11pm) | | | Ballarò | In Onda, L'Infedele, Piazzapulita, Servizio Pubblico |
| Late night (after 11pm) | Porta a Porta | L'ultima parola | | |

Table 2. Users responses to interviews.

| | Followed users | Users who followed back | Follower/following rate | Interviews | Interview/following rate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Assiduous | 10 | 2 | 0.20 | 2 | 0.20 |
| Frequent | 40 | 20 | 0.50 | 9 | 0.22 |
| Active | 51 | 15 | 0.30 | 8 | 0.16 |
| Standard | 97 | 16 | 0.16 | 12 | 0.12 |
| Total | 198 | 53 | 0.26 | 31 | 0.15 |

Table 3. Uses of social tv.

| Uses | Examples |
|---|---|
| Civic/informative | - Participate the debate expressing opinions<br><br>- Spread news and ideas<br><br>- Address the show to suggest questions to ask<br><br>- Address politicians<br><br>- Fact checking |
| Identity building/<br><br>social awareness | - Social monitoring<br><br>- Shared positioning |
| Emotional | - Emotional outburst<br><br>- Expressive needs<br><br>- Cheering and bar metaphors |
| Game | - Entertainment<br><br>- Ironic grassroots frames<br><br>- Group dynamics<br><br>- Flames and disputes (also with politicians) |

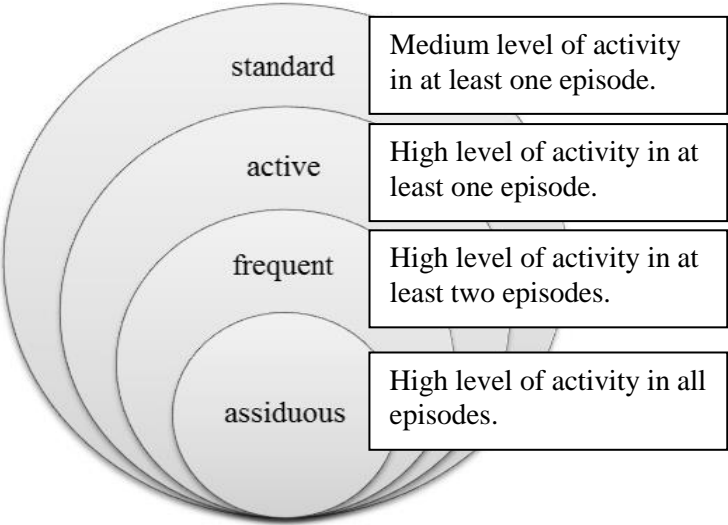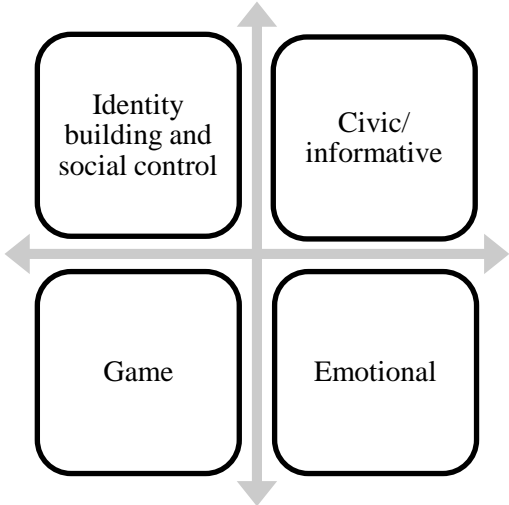Figure 1. Levels of activity and assiduity of social tv users.



| | |
|---|---|
| standard | Medium level of activity in at least one episode. |
| active | High level of activity in at least one episode. |
| frequent | High level of activity in at least two episodes. |
| assiduous | High level of activity in all episodes. |

Figure 2. Four uses of social tv.

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[1] In 2013 Twitter users were 9.6% of the entire Italian population, compared with 44.3% of Facebook users (Censis 2013). Nonetheless, the relevance and impact of Twitter in Italian political communication flows has been acknowledged (Bentivegna 2014), as the niche of Twitter users include pundits, journalists, politicians, opinion leaders who still have a substantive role in agenda building processes. As for social tv, it is a common evidence that Twitter more than Facebook is likely to be used to comment real-time shows because of its affordances and its forced synthesis (author 2014b). As a confirm, Twitter's director for Media partnerships Fred Graver revealed that 95% of Tweets is related to television and Nielsen launched a specific service of Twitter ratings about television audience in 2012 (author 2014a).

[2] The aim of the original research project, directed by [omissis], was exploring patterns of use of social tv in Twitter and developing a regression model in order to predict audience rates. See Giglietto 2013; author 2014a.

[3] One of the most important reason for this choice was the sudden change of political scenario that year: first, the electoral campaign which started in late December 2012 and ended in late March 2013, followed by a month of political deadlock and the elections of the President of Republic (head of State) in June 2013. Those events determined a substantive revolution in all outlets' schedules, the emergence of new talk-shows and ultimately the increasing of public's attention to political issues which could constitute a relevant bias.

[4] Gawk automatically calculates percentiles describing a right-skewed distribution (so-called long tail), as to recognize the niche of users who produced most of contents, the average values and the majority of users who published the residuals. Further information can be found at http://www.gnu.org/software/gawk/manual/gawk.html (last access 11/26/2014).

[5] The difference between civic/informative use and attention-seeking are both substantial and methodological. On a substantial level, attention-seeking is just a specific variant of a broader civic/informative use, which in turns consists of many empirical manifestations. On a

methodological level, the attention-seeking category results from the textual analysis of the single

Tweet (the presence of mentions or direct questions are indicators of attention-seeking), whereas

civic/informative use refers to users' accounts of their own user experience and could be actualized

in more variegate textual forms.