Chapter 4.20
From 'Flow' to 'Database': A Comparative Study of the Uses of Traditional and Internet Television in Estonia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter compares several basic statistical indicators of broadcast (traditional) television viewing and Internet protocol television (IPTV) use in Estonia and show how the structural difference between the two types of television results in different consumption models. The main conclusion is that the structure of the content to a large extent determines the uses of media. Flow-type media (broadcast television) appears to support routine and unconscious media use, while the use of database-like media (Internet television) could be characterised as being more purposeful and conscious. The study opens new perspectives on audience research and might be inspiring for further research and analyses focussing in detail on the use of IPTV.

INTRODUCTION

Although most of us watch television every day, it is hard to define it unequivocally. For TV professionals, television is usually a text that is constructed of moving pictures and sound, and that should somehow attract the viewers. For viewers, television is above all a moving picture on a TV set, situated in the living room; it entertains, passes the time, or provides interesting and useful information. Communication and cultural scientists usually sum up these two understandings and interpret television as a form of culture that constantly picks up some pieces of culture, processes them in its own way, and gives them back to the culture in a slightly different form (see Morley, 1992; Williams, 1992).

Despite the fact that different groups have interpreted television differently, the general understanding of TV was quite homogenous in society up to the 1980s. The consumption context was quite similar for most individuals—television was usually watched at home (in the living room), after school or work, often together with other family members (see Ang, 1991, 1995; Lull, 1991). The choice was limited to one or two TV channels.

All this determined much of the content that TV producers offered—mostly the programmes were of general interest to a general audience, news was aired at the best prime-time slots, while adult programming was aired late at night when children had been put to bed.

Such a homogenous understanding of television began to disappear in the mid-1980s, when the TV industry entered an age of uncertainty (Ellis, 2000). The liberalisation of media markets and the development of new communication technologies pushed media companies to exploit new audiences.

The targeting of new television audiences achieved a new level in the era of Internet and mobile phones. Television dematerialised from the *apparatus televisio* and appeared everywhere—on Internet-connected PCs, on laptops situated in a wireless Internet area, or on a mobile phone.

It is hard to identify the first Internet TV experimentation, as the software development took place simultaneously in different parts of the world. In 1995, a U.S. computer magazine *Computer Chronicles* was accessible over the Internet (Greenberg & Johnson, 2004). In October of the same year, when the Pope visited the U.S., Xing Technology Corporation and Catholic Internet made an experimental live broadcast of this event over the Internet.[2] In February 1996 British radio station Talk 101 made music videos available over the Internet.[3] In 1997, CNN, Fox News, BBC, and many other TV stations had news videos uploaded onto the Internet.[4]

Estonia was among the pioneers of IPTV. As early as 1998 it was possible to watch some public service Estonian television programmes live on the Web (for a detailed history of IPTV in Estonia see Suni, 2005).

Today there are two IPTV providers in Estonia, itv.ee and tv.ee. The first of them offers mainly Estonian television programmes, the other programmes from the private commercial television channels Kanal 2 and TV3. The penetration rate of IPTV is relatively high—22% of the Estonian population have used the Internet to watch television programmes.[5]

USE DETERMINED BY STRUCTURE

The development of new media has primarily forced us to reconsider the cultural meaning of television. The starting point here could be the paradigmatic changes in the television communication model.

To understand these changes it is useful to take a look at the matrix of communication patterns provided by Bordewijk and Van Kaam in 1986 (see Figure 1). Their typology is based on two central aspects of all information traffic: (1) the question of who owns and provides the information, and (2) who controls its distribution in terms of timing and subject matter (see also Jensen, 1999; McQuail, 2000).

According to Bordewijk and Van Kaam (1986) broadcast television is based on the transmission model, that is, one-way communication, where the significant consumer activity is pure reception. The key concept of the distribution of content in broadcast television is a "flow"—a continuous succession of programmes (Williams, 1992).

However, IPTV is based on the consultation model of communication. It is a type of on-demand service, where the content is produced and owned by a television company, but the consumer determines the context of reception (i.e., what, when,