

# Cross Media and (Inter)Active Media Use A Situated Perspective

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When future broadcasting is discussed and planned, it is vital to understand what the current media consumption looks like in order for the policy makers to undertake more informed decisions within the field of convergent digital media. In theory and already to some extent in practice, these new media are a hybrid between the TV and computer. Instead of regarding the present use of these two media as unquestionable or even uninteresting in the face of the convergent media, we find that it is important to understand how these commonplace media are used within families at the present time.

In this chapter we concentrate on two aspects of contemporary practices of TV viewing and computer usage in Danish homes, and introduce two methods of researching those issues: 1) How do Danes (in Northern Jutland) organise their everyday life around TV and computer media (interactivity as a daily pattern)? This question will be answered through interview research; and 2) How could the interactivity of the TV and computer be theorised from the perspective of use (interactivity as an emergent property)? Video analysis will suit this approach because interactivity is regarded as a social and observable matter (1). Although our data come from Danish families, we contend these data have more general relevance and suggest our treatment should be understood as a demonstration of broader theoretical and methodological arguments.

Another reason for our research is that consumers/citizens seem to be marginalised in the present broadcast and convergence discussion, and therefore we want to bring them more forcefully into the picture through studies that are inspired by ethnography. What we have embraced, however, is not just a repetition of what has been done before. We do not only want to investigate stories about how recent technologies have been adopted and applied. We also want to study traditional media use, such as TV watching, with new theoretical understandings and methodologies. We discuss the fundamental theoretical and methodological challenges in the convergent media landscape by introducing a common framework for understanding any media/technology use (Raudaskoski, 2001).

When we discuss interactivity we do not start from media systems and patterns in the information traffic, even if these topics are of importance to the overall project from which we derive our data (see note 1). Instead, we start with the social situation in which interactivity is an issue. In an interview, people give accounts ('make sense') of what they regard as interactive, whereas in their (observed) everyday actions, people constitute interactivity in the situation through their everyday social processes of watching TV or using a computer (Raudaskoski, 2002). In the latter case, the participants show to each other through their talk and other action how they make sense of the situation. This sense-making is part of any human action that unfolds in time and space – it is done through moment-by-moment participation in the world and is therefore sequential.

In this chapter we delve into the concept of interactivity as understood from the perspective of the actions that the users undertake at or with the media. Thus we take a closer look at the reception side of broadcasting and convergence, suggesting a situated user/viewer –oriented approach to gain a better understanding of what happens in Danish homes and about future possibilities that could grow from that knowledge.

### Interactivity: What enables this interaction now?

We wish to take the discussion about interactivity away from it being either a feature of the technology or of the user/viewer and instead regard interactivity as something that is constituted *in situ*, similarly to how Suchman (2001), with reference to such theorists as Haraway and Latour, discusses the topic. Suchman wants to keep the difference between the two categories of technology and human, while acknowledging that agency – and therefore interactivity – “reside(s) neither in us nor in our artefacts, but in our intra-actions” (Suchman, 2001: 7). When we act, the action has to do with intelligibility, our understanding of the world, and, unlike machines, we are responsible for the consequences of our actions.

Be it a human or technologised entity that acts – the traditional way of understanding agency argues there has to be an individual that is interacting. This assumption can also be found in some of the early concepts within media studies, namely parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1986 [1956]), which refers to cases where the TV host “interacts with” the viewers at home, who consequently regard him or her as their “friend”.

When interactivity is defined from the point of view of “intra-action”, i.e. from the perspective of the people’s contingent interpretations of the technology in question, it can be tangled with wanting to define people’s interactions with each other as the ideal realisation of interactivity. People’s interactions are assumed to be the yardstick by which we should evaluate what counts as interaction between people and technology. In this view, peoples’

mutual interactions would decide which machines deserve to be labelled 'interactive'. Of course we recognise that people may interact 'with' the machine in ways that resemble interacting with a human being, but that is not all that's at stake (cf. parasocial interaction). Through engaging in an activity that resembles interaction with another human being, the viewer/reader/user is constructing the agency of the technology, and thereby constituting the artefact as interactive.

We could compare this situation to an adult talking to a baby: the baby's reactions are taken as an intelligible part of the interaction even if the baby would only be gesturing and making sounds haphazardly. What matters is that from the adult's perspective, a meaningful encounter took place. With adult-adult interaction the mutuality of sense making is essential, however, and we cannot 'switch off' from an interaction without consequences. With TV and computers, there might be specific attempts at "virtual mutuality" (e.g. questions being asked directly to home audiences). Also, in genres such as talk shows (Bruun, 2001) and reality TV (Rasmussen, 2001a) the viewer is very often constructed as a sociable participant, as a judge or co-player in games or quizzes (Syvertsen, 2002). However, there are no consequences – so far – if the home audience does not choose engage in that interaction.

When people encounter the Internet through their computer screens and keyboards, mice or pointing pens, the screens offer different resources for action and intelligibility than the TV screen. The multimodal nature of the interface means that not only are texts read or typed in, but also icons, pictures, and videos can be seen on the interface, some of them appearing in an interactive fashion because of the design of the program. In this situation, the possibilities for action vary not only between different modes but also within one genre. In most chat rooms, for example, not only does the screen allow discussion with other people in real time, but past chat is also readable on the screen or with a click on the scroll bar. So, the same screen offers possibilities for observable physical interaction and also passive monitoring or reading. By 'active' and 'passive' we refer to the observable actions and activities of the user-viewers, not to mental activity or emotional 'inner' responses. Because TV also allows for observable action, this means any categorisation of TV viewing as something inherently passive and Internet/computer use as always active must be suspended and a closer look taken at what is actually happening in those activities.

To be able to discuss more precisely how different environments influence and become part of the ongoing interaction, and thus sense-making, a short introduction to the basic conception of interaction and interpretation from an interactionist perspective is useful.

## Interaction cum interpretation, with or without media/technology

Interpretation and interaction are sometimes regarded as different, distinct practices that should be studied by separate fields: Interpretation 'belongs' to media and cultural studies while interaction 'belongs' to communication studies. However, it is possible to combine these in interaction analysis because the interactional sequence is ultimately one in which interpretations are expressed and checked. If this is accepted as a definition for interaction, then we could posit that: *The interactivity of technology instigates, helps, or mediates the interpretative process.*

As shown by conversation analysis, when two or more people are involved, sequential interpretation concerns mainly the others' interpretations of one's own contributions that are checked in and through the ongoing interaction (2). If these contributions are mediated, then the technology (audio, visual; synchronous, asynchronous) affects the way the interpretative work happens because the resources for sense-making are different.

Alasuutari (1999) discusses three phases of audience studies, all of which use interviews as an important research tool. The first is reception research, which started with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model; the second was audience ethnography; and the third is a constructionist view. In the third approach the focus has been, among other things, on how TV viewers construct themselves as an audience. According to Alasuutari, the approach to audience studies in the second phase became more sociological, and the interest in the (cognitive event) of interpretation (or reception) faded away. Instead of regarding interpretation as either a strictly cognitive phenomenon or a broader cultural issue, in our research into interaction and interactivity we want to address, through detailed data analysis, how both culture and interpretation can emerge in action. We also want to investigate how the audience members in their interactions with each other and with the programme construct the viewing/using activity as intelligible. Therefore, not only is the achieved order and sense of interaction of interest, but also the very 'technique' of interaction.

The sequential interpretation through which all interactions take place has certain characteristics, as shown by conversation analysis. In conversations, people constitute and check intelligibility through turn taking – every turn takes the situation forward but at the same time provides an interpretation of the previous turn. Some turns are special in that they require another for a two-pair sequence to be completed. These are called 'adjacency pairs' (for example, greeting-greeting, question-answer). If sequential interpretation is the basic means of sense-making, then it is important to be aware of these features when mapping the resources for media users' interpretation work. In this way interaction analysis provides a framework for studying both traditional media and computer media. Instead of regarding the 'reception' of television and the 'use' of the computer as different practices that should be

researched with different methods (reception and human-computer interaction studies), one approach can be employed.

Also, interaction analysis provides a framework for researching interactions at and with media. Intelligibility, the sense-making work, can be studied from a fairly mechanistic perspective, but it also is possible to look at more culture-related issues, both within the media texts and in their reception. We also find it useful to situate our interviews and video observations in a more overall framework, for instance that of mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001) within which the link between situated practices and society/culture is made theoretically and methodologically clear. Scollon wants to understand human action from a holistic perspective. Actions are always realized through mediation and therefore with mediational means (e.g. language, TV, computer screen and the material setting of the room) in a community of practice (e.g. family) or in a nexus of practice (e.g. watching football in a pub). Various situations provide different possibilities for action, depending on the communicative resources (mediational means): A TV or a computer enables different actions around them, but those actions cannot be completely defined beforehand. Instead, real-world situations have to be studied.

### Relation to (mass media) communication

Since Shannon and Weaver, in mass (media) communication research the message, its sender, and its receiver have been theorised as focal points. Bordewijk and Kaam's typology of telematic services was also based on the variables of sender and receiver: transmission (one-directional from the sender), consultation (the receiver can choose what to view), registration (the sender's initiative is completed by the receiver), and conversation (the sender and the receiver exchange information on an equal basis).

Jens F. Jensen (1999) has suggested a typology of interactivity in media that is based on Bordewijk and Kaam, but which places their dimensions (and the counterparts) in a 3-D structure. Jensen concludes that interactivity can be measured as "media's potential ability to let the user exert an influence on the content and/or form of the mediated communication" (p.59), which then makes it possible for him to position various technologies in an 'interactivity cube' model. Thus interactivity is a feature of the technology: it affords user manipulation. However, Jensen wants to keep the concepts of "interaction" and "interactivity" separate – the former being defined sociologically as "actions of two or more individuals observed to be mutually interdependent" (Duncan, 1989: 325). But, as indicated above, we want to claim that if we substitute "individuals" with "entities" in Duncan's definition of interaction, the humanness is not the issue. What happens in an encounter is the issue. Thus, the interesting question becomes: How does

the user-viewer actually make use of the media's potential for interaction, and therefore how does the user constitute the interactivity of the media?

Van Dijk (1999) also refers to Bordewijk and Kaam's definition as a basic division. He lists levels or quality of interactivity according to the following criteria: 1) two-sided communication (space), 2) synchronicity (time), 3) control (of interactional behaviour), and 4) content (understanding). According to him, 1 is the lowest possible level of interactivity, whereas all the four together indicate the highest level, something that only humans can really achieve. As Bordewijk and Kaam have the sender and the receiver as important variables, their model – and its follow-ups – can be reworded from a more interaction-based point of view, even if the terms 'sender' and 'receiver' are regarded as "participants". So, from an "interpretation cum interaction" viewpoint, the Bordewijk and Kaam taxonomy could be reformulated:

**Table 1.**

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Transmission | The flow of the text from the centre, and therefore the local interpreter has to adjust actions to the flow.               |
| Consultation | The local interpreter has control over what to read and in which sequential order.   |
| Registration | The initiative for the action comes from the centre; the action is completed by the local interpreter (an adjacency pair). |
| Conversation | A sequential, minimum two party interaction in which interpretations are performed and checked through turn-taking.        |

In this reformulation it is clear that the emphasis is on the local interpreter: the person watching TV or using the Internet has different resources for action in each of the four scenarios. If we then compare van Dijk's levels of interactivity with the sequential conception of social interaction, we can see that his list covers various aspects of the interaction process. But those aspects are hard to separate in practice (both that of the participant and that of the analyst). For example, interaction takes place in physical surroundings by embodied people (van Dijk's Space); the interaction is sequential, and can take place synchronously or asynchronously (van Dijk's Time); and the interpretative work (van Dijk's Understanding) is done through turn taking (van Dijk's Control).

So, in all types of interaction and media use, interpretation takes place. The task is to find out precisely how those turn-takings are shaped when they take place at the TV or computer, be it via talking to other user/viewers or interacting 'with' somebody on a screen. The level of interactivity or amount of interaction is not so much the issue, but instead whether and how interaction is possible in the first place. So there is no need to differentiate *a priori* between, for instance, consuming (TV) and searching for (Internet) information because empirical studies must show whether and how those interpretative modes differ from each other for the participants involved. In

the video observation, we are after the viewer-user's local, situated, and public interpretations, whereas interviews can give us access to their reflections over the issues.

Thus an interactionist re-reading of Bordewijk and Kaam, and also of van Dijk, reveals the importance of understanding the general possibilities that people have in different situations of media use. In the human-computer interaction literature, these resources are often referred to as affordances (what can be done) and constraints (what is not possible). However, media scholars that draw on Bordewijk and Kaam tend to be stuck with what, in Norman's (1988) terms, could be called "*real affordances*" – namely, what are the built-in possibilities for action or manipulation? In contrast, what matters in our understanding of interactivity is the "*perceived affordances*". For example, the viewer-user can still 'interact with' a traditional broadcast transmission, even if this interactivity is not a 'real affordance'. From the interactionist view, one important difference between consultation and conversation is that it is only in the latter case that both of the participants take responsibility for the meanings that are being shaped in the situated interaction. So, even if, in the traditional TV broadcast situation, people are often interacting with each other in the studio or parasocially with the viewer, they can escape the local consequentiality or responsibility of their actions in relation to the viewers' interpretations as the two settings are separate from each other.

### Consuming media/technology at home

In the following we discuss briefly the main methodological points and results of the two types of empirical inquiry: interview and video research. As mentioned in the introduction, the studies were undertaken to gain a better understanding of the everyday practices of present media use in Danish homes. The first study used interviews as a way to find out more about the everyday media consumption of the interviewees, and the second concentrates – through video observation and detailed action analysis – on what types of emergent interactivity can be found in TV viewing and Internet use.

The qualitative interview research was undertaken to obtain a deeper insight into specific forms of media consumption, viewed in the light of the families' moral economy (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). Six families were selected on the basis of responses to the project's questionnaires. This sub-survey was made as an extension of qualitative media sociology (Lull, 1990/1980) and media ethnographic studies of familial TV use (Morley, 1986). We thereby had the possibility of benefiting from relatively well-established methods, and also of contributing to further development of this area of research with respect to old and new media consumption.

The different moral economies of the families, combined with their media consumption, may be summarised as follows: There were individualistic-oriented and then social usages. The individualistic families generally functioned in the same way as David Morely's (1986) patriarchal families. We use the term 'masculine' to characterise the families in which the men were in charge of the remote control and did not like to talk during programmes, and also considered factual programmes and realistic fiction as their favourites. The women fitted in with the TV's flow and structured their house-work according to an internal timetable (K. B. Jensen et al., 1993) which followed the scheduling of their favourite fiction and drama programmes. The men had specific objectives when they used the Internet. They routinely sought information within well-defined areas of interest, whether related to work or pleasure: motor racing, stamps, and football were typical examples. Women in the masculine families did not take any interest in the Internet.

The socially oriented families liked genres such as quizzes and reality TV with which the families could actively get together when viewing and talking about the TV. We use the term 'feminine' to characterise these families. Both men and women in the feminine families used the Internet to search for information, but especially for specifically limited tasks – travel or grant applications were typical topics. The adults and children used e-mail to communicate with their friends, but the children also visited various chat rooms and in general exploited the entertainment opportunities and possibilities of the Internet to a far greater extent. Adults were uncertain about the possibilities of the Internet, whilst the children showed mastery and enthusiasm. They were constructed as experts by their parents.

With respect to adults' use of computers, the most important purpose was to accumulate knowledge and skills at work, a factor which overcame any potential gender differences, although it should be noted that skilled women were more liable to express uncertainty than skilled men. The masculine families had strongly gendered TV programme preferences (fact or fiction). The men often left the TV for the Internet in order to pursue their factual and practical interests, while the women stayed tuned to the TV flow. The feminine families used TV in a more social way and they actively participated in quizzes and reality programmes because they liked the social aspects of playing, and also of discussing the participants. Table 2 summarises how the categorised families differed in their television consumption.

**Table 2.**

| TV use                        | TV use                           |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Feminine families             | Masculine families               |
| Social                        | Individual                       |
| Hybrid genre (quiz & reality) | Specific genre (fact or fiction) |
| Hedonistic 3)                 | Pragmatic                        |

The contrast between the social and individual aspects of the families' TV use is the focus here in order to emphasise that social reasons are still important for television consumption and the development of interactive TV formats. This in no way changes the overall picture of familial media use that was characterised by individualisation. For the families, TV was thus no longer the dominant shared medium. It was only in specific genres (if at all) that the whole family got together. (See Rasmussen, 2001b for a more comprehensive report of the interview study).

### Interactions with and at TV and PC: The video study

The interaction analysis of video data was done in order to achieve a better understanding of the situated activity of TV reception or Internet usage. An older couple and a young man with his friends agreed to be video observed while watching "Robinson Ekspeditionen 2000" (the Danish version of "Survivor", or, rather, of the original Swedish "Expedition Robinson" – see Hujanen, 2000) and while browsing the Robinson-related sites on the Internet. Both of the households were observed when the last episode of Robinson 2000 was broadcast, thus providing us with interesting data for comparison. As mentioned earlier, it became clear that TV viewing was not just passive, nor was Internet usage – even chatting – only active. Both media allow for active interaction (understood as observable action) and passive viewing. In the data analysis the starting point was that the participants had to make their action and talk intelligible to the other(s). They were constituting the situation as a TV viewing/PC using one. It is thus in this mundane work that both the cultural values of the participants and the interactivity of the artifact emerged as empirically researchable actions.

The intelligibility or sense-making of a situation is achieved through talk, gestures, and other actions that reflectively show the speaker-doer's understanding of what has been going on so far. Also, the trajectory for ensuing action and talk is based on the interpretation at hand. Conversation analytic and ethnomethodological findings such as turn-taking, adjacency pair, recipient design and the membership categorisation device, offer analytical tools to reliably analyse the participants' action from the participants' perspective. What was it that the participants were achieving through moment-to-moment interaction? A detailed enough approach was also needed to avoid making overly hasty conclusions.

This became clear when an identical audience response was observed in the two widely different audiences (an old couple and a group of youngsters). There was a similar reaction word-for-word in each group to what happened on the screen. In both cases the audience members were amusedly repeating what was said by the programme host when he called one of the guests "old Ole" (which is also the brand name for a well-known Danish

cheese). “However, a closer look showed that the older co-viewer showed recognition/remembering and therefore agreed with the formulation, whereas the younger one commented on it. These two public interpretations could also be seen orienting to the ambiguity of the direct gaze of the TV host in a situation where he was talking to some guests that were connected via a video link to the studio: He could be seen as ‘looking at the people at home’ and/or ‘talking to his guest’. The former interpretation means that he is engaging the viewer in a virtual face-to-face interaction (and the older viewer picks up this aspect and agrees with his formulation, becoming a ‘conversationalist’); the latter interpretation makes him and his guests observable (and the young man orients to this possibility, becoming a ‘commentator’ of a public event). This was a concrete example of “how meanings and identities are formed in the interactive and interpretive practices around combinations of digital communication media and traditional media types and cultural genres” (Fornäs, 1998: 36).”

The flow of the particular TV programme would thus be a source for action (cf. parasocial interaction) that sometimes continued as a separate track from the programme, resulting in viewers switching their gaze from the TV to each other. Though the Internet allows even more possibilities for a ‘time out’ from the program (even when chatting you can check past interaction from the screen), the gaze of the participants is fixed on the screen even during the discussions between them. This could be a consequence of the physical configuration of the participants around the screen and the attentiveness to the screen as a possible site of an about-to-happen participation.

The data analysis also showed how the contestants were constructed as familiar in the talk of the viewers/users. It was interesting that the programme host was not a central character in the participants’ talk – his presence was thus also unnecessary on the programme’s web page, where he was replaced by the text, images, and videos that concern the Robinson participants.

## Conclusion

The applied methodology proved useful as we obtained new, sometimes unpredicted, knowledge about the families’ use of TV and computers. The interviews gave an understanding of the family life patterns that future interactive services would be introduced into. The video study contributed to further developing the real affordances of systems that better match the present perceived affordances. We conclude with reflections about the present quest of interactivity in media research and technologies.

The interviews were conducted on the presumption that TV is a more ‘extensive’ and collective medium than computers/Internet, which are more ‘intensive’ and individual. We managed to bring aspects of the classical family studies up to date with the new media surroundings. The collective, so-

cial TV-viewing in the family was not the same as Morley and Lull argued in their media ethnographies from the 1980s. Families today have many TV-sets in the home and to a large degree are accustomed to using them individually, whereas the computers and the Internet may in fact be used collectively for entertainment and play.

Both the structural and relational aspects of social television use are changing. The exercise of power by means of the remote control (choice of programmes), regulations and censorship and the common ground of reference for family interaction and socialisation are less important than in the 1980s. The co-present and situated reception context with its possibilities for "interaction cum interpretation" is supplemented by the viewers' access to virtual settings where it is possible to expand the experience of the television programme by chatting to participants or debating with other distant viewers.

The video study shed light on the actual practices of being on-line: It was clear that user/viewers' sense-making practices use both active participation and passive monitoring, every bit comparable with watching a broadcast transmission. But the exact nature of active participation and passive monitoring differs according to the medium in question. In this regard, the observation from the video study that people tend to gaze at the PC screen even if they are talking to each other is interesting: The material design of the computer gadget and the demand for physical activity does not in fact support focused face-to-face interaction, but, rather 'ear-to-ear' commenting, while the television design allows for face-to-face interaction and 'screen-to-ear' listening.

In sum, our empirical studies have been able to shed light on how TV and computer media are used in Danish homes. We emphasise the need for more ethnographic and empirical research to make sure that the viewer/user/consumer's everyday practices are not forgotten in the new developments within broadcasting and convergent media. There is no doubt that TV and computers are important 'texts' in households today. There is not, however, enough understanding of (in the terminology of Mediated Discourse Analysis) how these *mediational means* are used in the actions that embody TV-viewing or computer using in the *community of practice* of, for instance, watching Robinson with friends or in a *nexus of practice* when chatting about it afterwards.

What is common to various types of engagement with media and technology at present is that these forms of participation are *optional*. Unlike in face-to-face discussion, there are no consequences when we do not answer the TV host who is looking at us intensively, selecting us as the next speaker. Should this freedom from active participation be cherished when defining the remit? With digital media, the consumer might have to talk back; otherwise there would be (undesirable) consequences. If the initiative comes from the programme and not its viewer, it could be hard to resist or challenge.

Therefore the hype about interactivity and convergence as direct involvement should be critically reflected upon. Better game players, abler citizens,

or increased democracy for that matter do not automatically follow from (forced) engagement with the media. However, this seems to be a direction that today's (male?) game media culture is heading. What we should fight for, therefore, are possibilities for the viewers to make initiatives ('first turns') through, for instance, discussions in chat rooms or other public spaces in which *they can choose* what the topic is. In this way the demands of the increasingly individualised, even if socially oriented, new media users would be met, and the agency of the citizens would be given more possibilities (i.e. "real affordances" would be increased) through public service and other media structures. We acknowledge that interactivity is never purely about sequential interpretation, but it is always a social process that has implications for citizenship, equality and even democracy.

## Notes

1. Our data comes from a project launched in Autumn 2000 at Aalborg University, Department of Communication and VR MediaLab called Interactive TV and Cross-Media Consumption. See the project's homepage: <<http://www.vrmedialab.dk/projects/mmih>>.
2. The conversation analytic idea of sequential interpretation has been adopted by various other fields of research, for example, discursive psychology within the field of social psychology.
3. The Danish research project *Når danskerne ser tv* (When Danes watch TV) identifies three types of TV viewers: hedonists, pragmatists and moralists. A hedonist has a very positive attitude towards TV which is seen as a source of pleasure and play. TV viewing is not planned or regulated. Opposed to the hedonist is the moralist who sees TV as a dangerous 'temptation', as a waste of time. This is why TV viewing as to be planned very carefully. In between there is the pragmatic attitude: TV is considered as a mainly positive source for information and pleasure, and TV viewing is structured in accordance with other activities in the family (Jensen *et al.*, 1993: 74-75).

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