


Social TV and the Participation Dilemma in NBC's *The Voice*

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Karin van Es¹

Abstract

In this article, I explore the perks and perils of social TV as a strategy for networks to drive tune-in to episodes as they air and to strengthen audience engagement. I do so by examining reality singing competitions in the United States, and specifically the NBC show *The Voice*. In analyzing the development of social media use in the program over the course of its first seven seasons, I identify a participation dilemma. This dilemma results from the fact that in giving viewers influence over aspects of the production to create an emotional investment, producers relinquish control over the contents of the show, which needs to appeal to large audiences. In addition, I classify the applications of social media: promotional, affective, functional, and phatic. In discussing these examples, I show how the “new” strategies of social TV hark back to “old” strategies that predate their use.

Keywords

reality singing competitions, social TV, audience engagement, interactivity

In the 1990s, reality TV exploded onto the scene in the United States. Not dependent on professional actors and writers, reality TV programs were cheap to produce and sell, and offered the television industry a way to deal with increased competition in broadcasting as well as with the networks' prevalent labor conflicts and financial troubles (Ouellette and Murray 2009, 9–10). Recently, the genre has proved particularly suited to what is called “social TV”: the combination of television with the real-time experience of social media (Ducheneaut et al. 2008). This pairing, it could be argued,

¹Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:

Karin van Es, Utrecht University, Muntstraat 2a, 3512 EV Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Email: k.f.vanes@uu.nl

is driven by reality TV programs being governed by structures of conflict, hierarchy, judgment, separation, and exclusion (Bratich 2011). Social media can intervene in these structures by fueling backchannel discussion, as viewers reflect on the show and especially the competitions they dramatize, and by inviting viewers to participate in the program in real time.

Social TV is the industry's latest response to the challenges of the digital era, as channel proliferation and audience control over television consumption have eroded the viewership of network broadcasts. It encourages viewers to tune in to episodes as they air—rather than later when they can choose to skip the advertisements—and to strengthen audience engagement through participation. Since around 2009, networks have sought the best ways to integrate social media—and through it, audiences—in and around programming. They have explored social media's various opportunities, and have learned from at least some of their mishaps along the way.

In this article, I reflect on the perks and perils of social TV as a strategy for television networks, and as an occasion for the interactivity and connectivity presumably desired by viewers. I seek to clarify the television industry's ambivalence toward audience participation, foregrounding its need to keep distinct the roles of producers and audiences, and to consider how the networks' attitudes and needs affect the scope of audience intervention.¹ Specifically, I examine the phenomenon of the reality singing competition through a discussion of the U.S. version of *The Voice* (NBC, 2011–), a show introduced to its American audience as the pinnacle of social TV. From April 2011 through the fall of 2015, NBC has aired nine seasons of the show. I will focus on the first seven, which I see as exemplary for the experimental phase of social TV. I analyze how NBC fine-tuned its social media strategy over the course of these seasons, disclosing and subsequently reflecting on what I call the “participation dilemma”: the clash between the promise of interactivity characteristic of reality singing competitions and some of the basic interests of television producers. To generate high ratings, producers must offer compelling television in the form of tightly structured narratives, but certain types of audience participation threaten their control over the program. As a result, viewers are invariably offered relatively superficial types of interaction that claim ostensibly to blur the line between producers and viewers—and by extension, to shift power to the audience—but in fact keep their roles distinct. Effectively, social media's potential is curbed: its use is molded to serve the interests of the television industry.

In what follows, I begin by discussing social TV as the latest iteration of an older rhetoric that promises genuine interactivity in television. I then develop a claim I have made elsewhere: over time, the opportunities for participation in *The Voice* were recalibrated, through social media use, to favor editorial control over the program's unfolding narrative by its producers, at the expense of certain forms of audience participation (van Es 2014). For a brief moment at the show's outset, NBC's social TV strategy for *The Voice* reconfigured the producer-audience relationship so that the producers had ceded control over certain parts of the program's narrative to the audience. This threatened their ability to make compelling television for viewing. They learned that audience interactivity has to be carefully balanced against their own interests. In what

follows, I discuss the four main applications of social media found in reality singing competitions today, as social TV has begun to mature. I consider how these applications, although seemingly new, hark back to established industry practices for engaging audiences—practices that have balanced the producer-audience relationship and have served the industry's interests well in the past. In conclusion, I briefly consider what this all likely means for participatory television in the future.

Social TV: The Latest Promise of Interactivity

In the discourse about new media, interactivity is considered to be a significant characteristic carrying a strong ideological charge (Lister et al. 2009). Against the background of supposedly passive media consumption of “old” media, “new” media's interactivity promises to restructure the hierarchical relationship between senders and receivers, taking power away from the mass media and giving users greater control over mediated communication (Müller 2008b). Decision-makers in the television industry assume that audiences desire interactive and social experiences. To promote television programs, producers draw on this rhetoric of increased media democratization and inclusion by promising audience participation.

Participatory media, of course, are anything but new. Bridget Griffen-Foley (2004, 545) claims that for more than a century, media producers have been “blurring the notion of the passive media consumer.” The transition from analog to digital return channels, however, made it possible to process large quantities of real-time user feedback quickly and simultaneously, allowing media to enter into continuous dialogue with its audience (Gripsrud 2010). Social TV is the latest articulation of television's promise of interactivity: viewers are led to expect that they will be an integral, active part of the live television experience through real-time interactions facilitated by social media.

Although the average American watched 141 hours of live television during the third quarter of 2014, this figure signifies a 4 percent decrease in linear viewing compared with the previous year (Ramachandran 2014). For the television industry, dependent economically on advertising revenue linked to viewership numbers, such a decline is worrying (Smythe 2006). Nielsen ratings calculate the ratings of programs based on the number of people exposed to linear television. This method has become strained by two trends in the television market (Ang 1996; Lotz 2014; Napoli 2011). The first concerns the fragmentation of audiences over multiple channels/platforms, which began first with the introduction of cable in the 1980s, and then the rise of the Internet (and, particularly, streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu, as well as the dissemination of shows through piracy) in the following decades. The second trend involves viewers having greater control over their television consumption (and, specifically, its timing) because of technologies such as the remote control and, later, DVR. These interrelated trends cast doubts on the reliability of traditional ratings as a currency to work with in the industry, because the measurement of audience exposure to particular television programs is now more difficult than it had been before these developments.

For networks in search of higher ratings, social TV promises to keep audiences watching live television (providing reliably measurable viewership numbers), and to lure back those viewers who tend increasingly to watch programs on their own schedules. Social TV stimulates viewers to watch programs while they air, as only then can they participate in on-air events, and this is the peak time for socializing with other viewers about the show (a Facebook post or a tweet the following day can seem like a reference to ancient history). At the same time, the rise of new information systems, including social media, introduces novel possibilities for the collection of audience data—and even for the collection of new kinds of information. More specifically, they allow the measurement of audience *engagement*: how people feel and respond to programming, rather than just what they are exposed to.

Although television has frequently offered viewers return channels in the past, rarely have the power relations between producers and audiences been fundamentally altered. Therefore, some argue that for audiences, interactivity, as a democratizing force, remains an unfulfilled promise (Müller 2008a). I have noted that incorporating social media into programming has been a difficult process of trial and error for television producers. For example, the “tweet-peat” experiments Fox conducted in 2009, where tweets were brought into a television broadcast for the first time, were not well received, as overlays with tweets obscured important on-screen action (Gillan 2011, 234–36). In what follows, I consider the first seven seasons of *The Voice*, to show how producers “figured out” social TV, and to explore how social TV affected both audience tune-in and the quality of its engagement.

The Participation Dilemma in *The Voice*

When *The Voice* first aired in 2011, it distinguished itself from other talent shows such as *American Idol* (Fox, 2002–2016) and *The X Factor* (Fox, 2011–2013), not only on account of its emphasis on voice rather than looks (key here were the “blind auditions,” in which the coaches selecting the teams could not see the people auditioning) but also because of its self-proclaimed “revolutionary” integration of social media. NBC, indeed, was eager to “push the boundaries” of working with social media (Yaron in Edelsburg 2011). Over the course of the seasons, the producers fine-tuned their social media strategy, not only bringing back “successful elements” in new seasons but also introducing fresh innovations (Robinson in Edelsburg 2012).

From the beginning, Carson Daly has hosted *The Voice*, alongside four celebrity coaches. In seasons 1 to 4, the show also had a “social media correspondent,” whose primary role was to bridge the program’s on-air and online experiences. This correspondent highlighted the central role allocated to social media in the show. The program initially comprised three phases: the “blind auditions,” the “battle rounds,” and the “live shows.”²² It was during the live shows that “power sharing” became an explicit promise. In the live play-offs of season 7, for instance, Daly claimed, “This is the night we have been waiting for, because for the first time this season the power shifts to you.” From this phase in the program onward, the show started to incorporate social

media more actively. As such, my consideration of *The Voice* primarily concerns the live-show episodes.

In what follows, I identify two interconnected developments pertaining to the role of social media in *The Voice*. Reflecting on social TV, van Es and Müller (2012) have identified four main relations between television and social media: “extension,” the use of social media to create a multiplatform experience across time; “enveloping,” the facilitation of conversation around a program; “overlay,” the display of social media comments in the bottom third of the screen; and finally, “integration,” the direct influence of social media on what happens in the broadcast. Analyzing these relations in *The Voice* will support my claim that although early on, the show’s producers placed social media at the center of its concept of the program, over the course of its run, the social media component was banished to its margins—a shift motivated by the need to broadcast a show that would be attractive to a sufficiently large group of viewers.

Furthermore, the types of audience participation elicited by the program also changed over time. These differences can be identified with the help of Gunn Sara Enli’s (2012) degrees of user influence on media production. She proposes the terms *reactive*, *active*, and *interactive* to identify common ways of classifying the degree of user influence on production output. Respectively, these can be defined as low influence on the production process (as in quizzes and polls), accumulative influence on production (as in voting), and high influence on (parts of) the production (Enli 2012, 123–27). By identifying the central changes in social media use in *The Voice* over its first seven seasons, looking specifically at the role of social media and the types of relation being forged with it, I bring to the fore what I call the “participation dilemma.” This dilemma centers on the economic need of producers to attract audiences by offering tightly structured narratives—narratives that viewers can possibly disrupt when they are allowed to influence on-air action.

Social Media from the Center to the Margins

I have noted that social media was pushed from the center to the margins of the show, but I should clarify that the social media segment was not introduced until the kickoff of the live shows during season 1, when a special stage area, “the V-Room,” was unveiled. The segment that took place there functioned as a bridge between the online and offline worlds. It was given this status both through the show’s press release and in the program itself. In the V-Room, the contestants were seen using their Samsung tablets with the suggestion that they were at that moment on social networks, engaging with audience members. Online activity was made visually concrete through the décor, with multiple large screens displaying tweets and Facebook posts; tweets also scrolled along the bottom third of the screen. In the social media scenes, Alison Haislip, the show’s social media correspondent, would read online comments or questions (often directed at the contestants), thus mediating between the on-air and online worlds. In these live shows, an interest in power relations became explicit, as viewers were told that they could vote contestants through to the next round and were encouraged to

share their thoughts and comments, getting a direct line to the show and its representatives. This aspect of the show set viewers up for Daly's seventh-season claim mentioned earlier.

In season 2, the V-Room gave way to the "Sprint Lounge." In this new social media center, the décor featured considerably fewer screens—a first shift in social media presence compared with the first season. The room continued to be a hangout area, with sofas and multiple seating setups for groups of contestants armed with tablets. A more radical transformation took place when the "Sprint Skybox" replaced the Sprint Lounge in season 3. What remained of the social media center was a small circular platform raised amid the studio audience. The Skybox was significantly smaller than the Lounge and its single screen functioned primarily as a billboard for the Sprint logo; only intermittently did it display a hashtag or the NBC website address. By season 5, the social media correspondent had disappeared from the show, with Daly taking over some of her tasks. I argue that these successive steps represent an effort to progressively restrict audience influence on the show. I read it as the producers' attempt to reclaim some control over the program's narrative, much of which had been ceded to viewers.

Even the size of the devices used by contestants and hosts to interact online was reduced. Both groups went from carrying Sprint tablets to Samsung cellphones. Moreover, from season 3 onward, they were no longer seen using mobile devices on camera, although they still carried them. The exception here was Daly, who occasionally read comments from his screen. This shift might be related to viewer complaints, reported by the press, about feeling disconnected from the hosts and contestants, if the latter were directing their attention toward those devices rather than the camera. Concurrently, the show increasingly led viewers to social media platforms where they could find supplementary materials (e.g., photos, videos, and other "extras") to engage with the show.

As for Twitter, viewer tweets were featured only during the live shows. During the blind auditions and battle rounds, only tweets exchanged between the coaches and the host—often in the vein of silly quarrels—were shown, in the bottom third of the screen. Gillan (2011, 234) has referred to this type of social media use, a form of overlay, where comments from the show's representatives but not the viewers are included on screen, as "promotion disguised as viewer interaction."

The Voice also experimented with the use of multiple hashtags. At first, a single hashtag was promoted (#TheVoice); later, various phrases were pitched as hashtags (e.g., #teamadam, #VoiceFacts, and #VoiceTailgate) that were increasingly connected to specific kinds of unfolding on-screen action. By season 3, the show also displayed contestants' Twitter usernames. In doing so, it fueled "social chatter" among audience members and between audience and contestants, thus stimulating a sense of interaction without necessarily having to incorporate comments into the show. The objective seems to have been to direct viewers to connect online with the show's representatives and/or to discuss the show with other audience members, rather than to forge these relations through the Sprint Lounge. That is to say, increasingly, *The Voice's* producers offered viewers opportunities to interact and participate around the show, even as they limited and controlled viewer influence over its actual text (the content of the episodes).

The overview sketched above points to a “decentralization” of social media in the program. Whereas *The Voice* first prided itself on the social elements in the show, these aspects were given a far less prominent role as time went by—evident, as I will now discuss, in how the program sought different types of audience engagement.

Different Types of Participation

As its social media components were relegated to the margins, the show also changed the terms of its online audience’s participation. In season 2, Christina Milian, who was said to have greater affinity with music, replaced social media correspondent Haislip. Although the job title remained the same, the role of social media correspondent, and that of social media in the program more broadly, were transformed. Milian did comment on online activity relating to the show (e.g., highlighting which *Voice*-related topics were trending on Twitter), but the visualization of this activity was drastically reduced. In other words, social media came to be used more as overlay than as integration into the show. Also, rather than mediating between online and on-air worlds, the social media segment now centered on backstage-type questioning of the contestants (not related to online social activity). As a result, viewers active on social media found their role increasingly to be reactive rather than interactive: unsurprisingly, since there was now much less chance that the contestants or the social media correspondent would respond to a viewer’s social media comments on air.

As noted, the social media correspondent was eliminated altogether in season 5, with host Daly being tasked with addressing online activity in addition to his hosting duties. From the Sprint Skybox, he would discuss a question or two read from his cellphone, usually prompted by a specific hashtag (e.g., #AskCarson). In this way, he restored something of the lost interactivity of the show. However, the questions selected were usually directed at him or the coaches, rather than at the contestants. In addition, he had brief talks with guests, primarily to promote other shows, as tweets scrolled by in the bottom third of the screen. So, although interactivity returned with the practice of responding on air to comments from the audience, these comments seem to have been carefully selected and anticipated by those responding to them. Moreover, the replies tended to be short and to the point, making the show’s interactive dimension seem more “controlled” and less spontaneous and chaotic than before. Such a subtle shift, I should point out, does not neatly fit the typology of degrees of user influence proposed by Enli—which is useful primarily in making more general observations. *The Voice* shows that the shaping of user participation in television is highly complex.

As of season 3, Twitter came to be used as a means of voting. Using the platform in this way, user influence was active. A count of viewer retweets of separate @NBCTheVoice posts and tweets from the hashtag battle (#VoiceBestShot vs. #VoiceWantMe) determined which song would be performed at the end of a show. From season 5 onward, the “instant save” was introduced, which allowed viewers to save one of the bottom three contestants by tweeting “#VoiceSave” along with the chosen contestant’s first name within a five-minute time frame. The results were

directly fed back into the live broadcast. Viewers thus assumed an instrumental role, as part of an integrative use of social media, rather than a more rhetorical role, as in the case of the envelopes (viewers answering invitations to tweet or using other forms of social media to discuss the show among themselves) and overlays, both of which had been used frequently.

The show took these measures as an occasion to once again adopt the rhetoric of participation. Introducing the instant save, Daly declared,

We hope you at home can appreciate the fact that this live show is giving you complete control with less than two minutes left in a live broadcast. You at home let us know that you love the show and want more control of it. And tonight as we do this for the first time on TV, this is really for you at home to feel like you have a part of the show. This show was produced and developed for you and so here we go. (Episode 17, season 5)

In season 7, *The Voice* app was used to reveal, in the final minutes of the episode, the outcome of the audience vote, allowing Daly to encourage those unhappy with the provisional results to vote for their favorites. Here, we see social media reduced to yet another means of voting, but with the exciting twist of being able to influence the results in real time in new ways.

For the industry, the real time of social media is both an opportunity and a threat to established scheduling practice: it helps to strengthen audience engagement but causes problems involving tape delays and distribution windows. Syndication delays strain the relationship between audiences from different countries, or regions within a larger country with more than one time zone (such as the United States, of course), as spoilers circulate online. Now that the use of social media places a premium on the timing of fans' response as they engage around the program, this problem has intensified. In *The Voice*, for example, the introduction of the instant save caused widespread disgruntlement among West Coast viewers, who were excluded from voting since the show aired locally three hours later than its East Coast broadcast. This problem and similar difficulties have been met with different responses. HBO, for instance, opted to have season 5 of its *Game of Thrones* (2011–) simultaneously broadcast in 170 countries (Battersby 2015). *Rising Star* (ABC, 2014), which is tape-delayed for West Coast viewers, chose to add live elements to the West Coast broadcast, and allowed viewers there to vote in real time as well. It used live cut-ins to show reactions of contestants who did not manage to collect 70 percent of the votes on the East Coast, but did so on the West Coast.³ Similarly, many apps developed for television filter social content based on geo-data to create separate audience groups.

Recalibrating Social Media Use

Throughout its first seven seasons, *The Voice* modified the place and function of social media in the show, recalibrating the producer-audience relationship. The audience was pushed out of the center of the show and its participation was increasingly sought online rather than on air. Active and reactive user participation through social media

seemed, in the end, to be preferred over interactive user influence. Presumably, both types of participation were taken to serve a purpose of inclusion—much like interaction—and to allow audiences to feel they were part of the program. Yet they could feel this way without producers relinquishing any significant control over the text. My interpretation is that producers responded here to a participation dilemma: they realized that giving viewers too much influence over the production made for television that was not sufficiently compelling. Certain types of participation conflicted with their economic need to draw large audiences for their advertising sponsors.

That *The Voice* is not a one-off example was apparent from ABC's highly anticipated singing competition *Rising Star*, which debuted in June 2014. This program, based on an Israeli format, promised to put the power of finding the new superstar in the hands of the audience right from the start. Rather than a panel of celebrity judges, viewers at home voted their favorite contestants through to the next round in real time, through the free *Rising Star* ABC app. In commenting on the show's app, executive producer Nicolle Yaron (who had previously worked for *The Voice*) stated,

It's not just part of the show . . . It *is* the show. There's no way to do the show without the app. It is not a second-screen experience. It is the experience. (Quoted in Kessler 2014)

In Tindr-like fashion, the app, which required registration with Facebook or Twitter, allowed viewers to swipe either green ("yes") or red ("no") for each performance. Contestants with at least a 70 percent "yes" vote moved on to the next phase, signified by the floor-to-ceiling light emitting diode (LED) screen separating the contestants from the live studio audience being lifted. But here, too, a panel of experts had some sway, as its votes counted for 7 percent of the total (in the first few rounds).

Rising Star claimed to transform reality singing competitions not only by shifting the power of selection from the judges to the viewers but also by providing instant results of the audience vote. Nonetheless, rather than allowing the audience vote alone to determine who moved forward in the competition, the show's three experts were given considerable voting power—and for a specific reason. As Mark Andrejevic (2001) has noted, in taking power sharing "too literally," viewers of *Big Brother* voted contestants home who had made the program more interesting (because they were phony and manipulative), so their decision was not in the best interests of the show. This relates directly to the participation dilemma: the need for producers to control their shows' content, making sure that what is broadcast will be attractive to a large audience.

As mentioned, by season 7 of *The Voice*, viewers were mainly offered opportunities for participation that could be carefully channeled into the program. The ability of viewers to influence the narrative were increasingly found in reactive forms of user influence such as voting. More broadly, as I will clarify below, the applications of social media that seem to be stabilizing in reality singing competitions indicate a *continuation* of, rather than a radical *change* in, existing forms of audience participation.

Applications of Social Media in Television

As we have seen, *The Voice*'s producers, hoping to encourage live viewing and increase audience loyalty through engagement, fine-tuned their social media strategy over the years but balanced their interests with the desires of their audiences. Television producers today, it seems, are beginning to realize which types of relations between television and social media “work” for them, and which do not. Looking across the reality singing competition spectrum in 2015, it is possible to discern four main, *nonexclusive* applications of social media in reality TV competitions, which I designate here as “promotional,” “affective,” “functional,” and “phatic.” I use these terms to consider how the “new” strategies of social TV in fact hark back to “old” strategies that predate their use.

Promotional

Social media use helps television shows increase brand awareness. I call this brand-oriented activity the “promotional” application of social media. A show can easily spread its brand name among its viewers’ social networks by encouraging them to (re) tweet, share, or like content. In this manner, audiences are turned into marketers, in that social media are “vehicles for promoting viewership by encouraging potential viewers to tune in to what their friends are watching” (Lee and Andrejevic 2014, 44). In reality TV singing competitions, the contestants’ and the show’s representatives are supposed to frequently tweet along with the broadcast. In addition, accounts on the major social networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, and so forth), stimulate viewers to engage with the show by prompting responses to discussions and questions and by offering additional content.

Reality singing competitions use social media to promote activities related to the show. Inviting viewers to (re)tweet, share, or like content, the shows’ official social media accounts play a key role in this process: they are an acknowledgment that audiences shape the flow of media (Jenkins et al. 2013), and the shows’ efforts in this regard are an attempt to trigger the old-fashioned “word-of-mouth” effect, common in traditional broadcasting. Social media have the added advantage of enabling easy “sharing” across one’s social network in one screen-click (e.g., clicking on “retweet” on Twitter or “share” on Facebook). However, the ever-greater range of platforms that can be incorporated by television also poses a challenge to social TV, as it requires continued experimentation with how to integrate them.

In June 2014, for instance, *America’s Got Talent* (NBC, 2006–) experimented with using Google Search. After the airing of the show’s results, viewers could type in “Snapple Save”⁴ on Google Search, which returned a Google voting box. In this way, viewers could save contestants from elimination by voting. Another example is *The X Factor*, which, as part of its Pepsi Challenge with sponsors Pepsi (carbonated soft drinks) and Verizon (telecommunications), developed The Xtra Factor dual-screen app. This app allowed viewers to influence aspects of the show such as song choice, wardrobe, and choreography—once again a reactive form of user influence. *The Voice*

for its part is sponsored by Sprint, a telecommunications company. In the show's earlier seasons, it provided the V-Room, and later the Sprint Skybox. Samsung, furthermore, supplied the devices for contestants to stay online and engage with the audience. The official app for season 7 of *The Voice* was "powered by Nissan" as part of the automaker's continuing sponsorship, and included a button to download music from the show on iTunes. In these last few examples, the sponsors financed the infrastructure for participation. Strategies for digital extensions here are akin to the single-sponsorship deals from the heyday of the big-three network dominance of television.

Affective

Of course, social media are also being used to nurture and deepen the emotional investment of viewers. Such use relates to how, in light of increasing audience fragmentation and autonomy, the industry has been revaluing fan loyalty and participation (Jenkins 2006). Television networks, as mentioned, are increasingly interested in measuring audience engagement rather than their exposure to programming (Napoli 2011). In social TV, as opposed to transmedia storytelling, the emphasis is on audience participation in real time. The preferred form of user influence for an affective application of social media is active engagement, which tends to result in relations of extension (e.g., in the Twittersphere) and overlay (on screen).

To prompt activity on Twitter, *The Voice* strategically placed hashtags throughout the show, displayed coaches' tweets in the bottom third of the screen during the blind auditions and the battles, and had Daly explicitly request that viewers at home tweet about certain topics. These practices closely align with something long recognized in television studies, which Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) described as the establishment of "para-social interaction." In mass media such as television and radio, the authors claim, the shows' representatives are encouraged to have direct contact with the audience, so as to make it feel as if the performers belonged to a circle of peers. By giving the audience a "direct line" to the performers, coaches, and host through Twitter, the frame separating it from the show is made to seem permeable, implying something of the intimacy of a face-to-face relationship.

Aside from allowing social media to give audiences the (theoretical) opportunity to intervene in the program, producers also use these means to connect audiences to one another and facilitate online "water-cooler conversations"—the familiar phrase derived from the notion that television creates chatter around the office water cooler the day after a broadcast. Bruns and Stieglitz (2012), in looking at the tweets featuring the hashtags #eurovision and #royalwedding, note the relative *absence* of interaction among television viewers on Twitter (e.g., by replying to tweets or retweeting them), identifying a significant discrepancy between the online virtual water cooler and its real-world analogue. This lack, however, does not mean that tweeting does not perform an important social function. As Nick Couldry (2003, 109) points out, interactivity around content is a way of "showing, in performance, the otherwise merely assumed connection between medium and representative social group." Social media enhances this performance for television, by enabling real-time interactivity around live content.

Even though the audience members are not tweeting at one another, their tweets still reveal something akin to chatter around the show.

Another example of an affective application of social media was evident in the thirteenth season of *American Idol*. Here, the profile pictures of some of the viewers who had voted for one of the contestants via Facebook appeared during the broadcast, alongside their names and who they cast their votes for. Although there is clearly a functional reason to do this—as these profiles allude, very simply, to viewers voting—the display of pictures can be interpreted as an attempt to deepen viewers' emotional bond with the show. In *Rising Star*, there was a similar use of social media. Here, the profile pictures of the contestants' supporters were displayed on the LED-screen-covered wall in the audition rounds as they were voting in real time.

Functional

In addition to the above uses, social media are also employed for practical purposes. I propose to call this type of use “functional.” For season 14 of *American Idol*, social media auditions were introduced. Users could upload video auditions of themselves to Facebook, Instagram, Vine, or link to it on YouTube via Twitter, Facebook, or Google+, always using the hashtag “#thenextidol.” In this instance, auditions were made easy in that people could post their tryout videos on social media from the comfort of their homes (rather than by making an appearance in person). This application allowed for active user influence, in that they have an accumulative influence on the production through their votes.

Many talent shows, including *The Voice*, *America's Got Talent*, and *American Idol*, offer the opportunity for viewers to cast votes through social media channels. Essentially, this is a fairly functional use of social media. As I mentioned before, audiences before the rise of social media had cast votes by telephones, SMS, and iTunes downloads. Social media, however, simplify the practice, and offer the possibility of on-air, real-time integration of large-scale voting (e.g., instant Twitter voting to “save” one of two contestants, that is, prevent them from being sent home). For the industry, this type of voting possesses the advantage of having a built-in promotional dimension. In tweeting about the show, viewers expose their followers to the fact that the program is currently on, and this may encourage additional tuning in. If the hashtag starts trending, even more people are made aware of the program.

Phatic

The final application of social media in television identified here can be called “phatic.” Here, the primary function of social media is to keep communication channels open. This occurs in situations when viewers are asked to respond to questions simply to keep them involved, but without having them influence the narrative. These scenarios usually involve reactive forms of participation. Such use differs from the affective application of social media, in that interaction is concerned more with triggering expressions of viewer opinion and testing simple knowledge than with engaging

audiences emotionally. A good example can be found in the *American Idol* auditions. Here, a few seconds before the commercial break, a snippet of an audition is shown. In voiceover, Ryan Seacrest, the show's host, asks the viewers if they, too, can spot talent, and encourages them to vote (by using one of two hashtags) on whether the contestant is heading to Hollywood (the next round of the competition) or going home. After the commercial break, the outcome of the audience poll and the judging panel are disclosed. This is similar to the cliffhanger in television series, and soap operas in particular: a plot device intended to ensure that viewers will return after commercial breaks or a gap between episodes.

Another example is The 5th Coach app on Facebook developed for *The Voice*, which allows viewers to guess which contestant will move forward and to share their guesses with their Facebook friends. Here, the show stimulates participation by "gami-fying" the experience. The element of competition entails that users are pitted against one another with scores shown on scoreboards, and that winners are awarded prizes. For *The Voice*, it is a simple way to engage audiences and deepen their emotional investment in the outcome of the competition.

The Future of Television

This article has explored the example of *The Voice* to establish how television producers, and those behind reality singing competitions in particular, experiment with the integration of social media into their programs. Examining a social media use that is characterized by the show itself as innovative, I have demonstrated how, over the course of several seasons, the program modified the relation between audience and "text." This reconfiguration favored the control of the producers over content, to the detriment of the viewers and their ability to intervene in the program. In exploring social media's possibilities, *The Voice*'s producers, it seems, concluded that their interactive and real-time qualities became a threat to the tightly structured narratives needed to attract eyeballs and keep them watching the show. They, therefore, sought to change the forms of audience participation, making it less often interactive, and more often *reactive*. The taxonomy I have provided of the main applications of social media in 2015 demonstrates how producers are "remediating" (Bolter and Grusin 2000) established practices to engage audiences, rather than to revolutionize audience participation in television.

In making these claims, I am not trying to deny that social media present new opportunities for audience participation in television. However, as discussed previously, some of the affordances of social media are gradually marginalized (e.g., the possibility of a real-time Q&A spanning the online and on-air worlds), while those that can be leveraged to the industry's benefit (e.g., real-time voting, which boosts social conversation and participation) gain prominence. My point, then, is that economic imperatives work to maintain established power relations between producer and audience. Television producers want to control audience participation, for their business model relies on their ability to offer compelling television that can reliably (which is to say conventionally) hold an audience.

Apart from the challenges discussed above, there are other difficulties that networks face with social TV. The social media landscape changes fairly rapidly. Viewers, especially younger people, migrate from one popular platform/app to the next. The industry thus risks investing time and money in a particular platform or app that might be out of fashion by the following season. Moreover, although social media represent an easy and low-cost way for networks to engage audiences, getting full access to their data is expensive. This explains why networks sometimes choose to develop their own second-screen apps (Lee and Andrejevic 2014).

The question for today's networks is not *whether* social media have value for television but *how best to integrate* social media into programming to strengthen audience engagement. As mentioned, social media allows for the collection of new forms of data about audience behavior. This, alongside increasing dissatisfaction with the current exposure metrics, is gradually moving the television industry to a "post-exposure" marketplace where, for executives and advertisers, audience engagement becomes a more significant consideration in assessing programs' success (Napoli 2011). Such a shift suggests that interactivity will continue to play an important role in television strategies to come.

In the future, television producers will probably continue to revive the promise of interactivity, and find new ways of incorporating viewers into their programs. However, I have suggested that although the industry usually relinquishes some control over the program narrative in the process, it simultaneously tends toward *managing* user participation to maintain its business model. It is to be expected that new technologies for participation will continue to be used in similar ways, and serve the industry by remediating successful practices from the past. In this case, also, actual opportunities for audiences to influence program content will remain an empty promise. We can thus only expect shifts in power between producers and viewers with the adoption of other business models: those not reliant on the selling of audiences to advertisers.

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Notes

1. In this article, I use the following distinction between interactivity and participation, offered by Henry Jenkins (2006, 133): "whereas the former [interactivity] emerges from

- the properties of technology, the later [participation] emerges from protocols and social practices around media content.”
2. In season 3, the “knockout rounds,” which also allowed coaches to steal two contestants from other teams, were added between the battles and live shows. By season 6, the knockouts were renamed “Battles, Round Two.”
 3. The show’s finale excluded West Coast voting.
 4. Snapple is the iced tea and juice brand that is a sponsor of the show.

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Author Biography

Karin van Es is an Assistant Professor in Television and New Media at Utrecht University. Her research concerns topics at the intersection of television and new media studies, reflecting on instances of change and continuity.