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Nele Simons

# TV drama as a social experience: An empirical investigation of the social dimensions of watching TV drama in the age of non-linear television

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nele.simons@uantwerpen.be

**Abstract:** As time-shifting technologies and digital convergence are facilitating and encouraging increasingly individualized and personalized television viewing practices, the social role and function of traditional linear television might be changing as well. Through empirical audience research, using TV diaries and interviews, this article investigates the social dimensions of engaged viewers' reception of TV drama and explores how audiences themselves experience contemporary television as a social medium. The qualitative analysis reveals three social dimensions in viewers' engagement with TV drama and indicates that television is generally still perceived as a social medium. Time-shifting technologies do not only fracture audiences, they also create new opportunities for social connections with peer viewers.

**Keywords:** television, TV drama, social, qualitative research, audience research

## 1 Introduction

Although there are various opinions on what the future of television will be, many do agree that some of the key components of television are changing and that new versions of television are emerging that differ in crucial ways from its original industrial organization and social role (see, for example, Gripsrud, 2010; Katz, 2009; Lotz, 2009; Spigel and Olsson, 2006; Turner and Tay, 2009b). Technological evolutions have introduced new opportunities to consume TV content, which undoubtedly also have influenced the social uses of the medium, although it is not sure to which extent and how. First, it becomes increasingly clear that audiences do not necessarily follow or use every new techno-

logical innovation offered by the television industry and, second, if audiences do adopt new television viewing practices, it needs to be considered how audiences themselves explain and experience the television's new social function. This article will explore how audiences actually perceive the impact of the changes in TV drama viewing practices (such as the use of time-shifting technologies) on TV drama as a social experience. It will empirically investigate which social dimensions can be distinguished in TV drama viewing practices and how contemporary TV drama viewers describe TV as a social medium. This paper starts with a brief overview of the social uses of traditional linear television and how these uses have changed due to the technological developments the medium has undergone. This paper does not aim to review or discuss the extensive literature on television as a medium, but to deliberately sketch out only the main thoughts on this topic and its evolution. Although this study hopefully can contribute to the theoretical debate, the focus is first and foremost on empirical evidence.

## 1.1 Traditional linear television as a social medium

In the first phases of the development of television, from its beginning up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the medium was usually conceived as a mass, domesticated and social medium. As soon as television entered the home, it acquired a central place in the architecture of the home and in the organization of daily life (Lotz, 2009). The dominance of the medium was linked with the linear structured broadcasting schedule which gave rhythm to daily life (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Gripsrud, 2006). Programs were broadcast to a mass audience behind a fixed TV set. Typically, families were seated together on the couch, gathered around the centrally placed TV set in the living room (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999). Although soon many households had more than one television set, the television in the living room was often still the best equipped one (Bauwens, 2002) and served as a gathering point for the family members (Ang, 1996). Families often watched together and this co-viewing took place within the context of the family as a set of social relations and within the patterns of everyday family life (Lull, 1990). Television could both function as an escape from family conflict (as the collective activity strengthened family ties) or as a cause of it (as there could be disagreement about what program to watch), but either way it had a social function.

In addition to watching together, TV viewing was often accompanied by comment, debate and discussion, according to Morley (1986). In its initial phase of scarcity (up until 1980), and even in the next phase of availability (up until

the late 1990s) (Ellis, 2000), television stayed relatively limited in the number of channels and programs that were accessible. People thus usually watched the same TV content and discussed the hit show that was on television last night around the water cooler the next day (Lotz, 2009). These “water cooler” talks played a crucial role in the social dynamics of meaning-making of TV content (Fiske, 1987, p. 79). Ann Gray (1992) even argues that a very important part of the pleasure of watching television serials stemmed from the gossip about them the following day. Sharing the television experience enabled viewers to go beyond their individual perception. The experience was often not only discussed and shared with family members within the home, but also with others outside the home. The everyday television of the limited channel era provided a shared culture of stories and opinions.

The combination of watching together and talking about shared TV content brought people together and this could evoke a feeling of belonging to a larger audience, argued various authors. Traditional linear television could function as a “lingua franca”, according to Seiter (1999, p. 116), even if people watched individually. One of the key characteristics of linear broadcasting is that millions of viewers were watching the same content at the same time. This synchronicity played a vital role in creating a sense of being part of a particular audience: Although people watched individually, they often were aware of the fact that they were partaking in the same activity as millions of others. Fiske (1987, p. 80) wrote that, in this way, solitary viewing could be experienced as group viewing, because the viewer knew that other members were viewing at the same time and that the program could be discussed the next day. Watching traditional linear television was “watching with”, according to Buonanno (2008, p. 24), meaning “watching with all the other distant and unknown viewers whom one supposes or guesses are simply there in front of their screens at the same time as we are in front of ours, watching the same program or part of a program that we are watching ourselves”. The synchronization between individuals who were far apart and unknown to each other but who were doing the same thing at the same time, and also knew this, led to the formation of “imagined communities” (Buonanno, 2008, pp. 24–25). Morley (2000, p. 107) also argued that television was capable of creating a sense of unity by sending the same images to every TV set in family’s homes at the same time, especially within national borders. Broadcasting television pulled together individuals, families and groups into a national whole, which made it a powerful tool in the construction of the nation state.

Up until this point, television viewing was thus perceived as a social and collective activity, rather than an isolated and individual activity (Morley, 1986). But when television at the start of the new millennium moved into the next

phase – referred to as the era of plenty (Ellis, 2000) or the era of post-broadcast TV (Turner and Tay, 2009b) – characterized by the digitization of television, an increase in the number of television sets and other screen technologies to watch TV content on and a growing convergence between television and the computer (typically considered as a more individual medium), the “sociability” of the medium TV seemed to be questioned (Lemish, 2007).

## 1.2 Post-linear television as an individual experience?

Different evolutions in different areas might have an impact on the social uses of television. The first change that might affect TV’s social capabilities is the rapid increase of TV screens inside and outside the home. Families often own multiple TV sets and other screen devices to watch TV content on. Family members no longer watch together but have spread out into separate rooms, which Katz (2009) describes as “a move from a collectivist phase to an individualist phase”. Shrinking screen sizes and portable screen devices encourage solo viewing and an increasingly individualized organization of the medium’s use (Lotz, 2009). Smaller, portable devices make television become mobile. This means that the television’s family audience has now dispersed, into different rooms within the home, but also outside of the home. Watching TV content does not necessarily have to take place in the domestic space, together with family members; it can happen everywhere. TV has escaped from the domestic space: Screens appear everywhere, becoming an everyday component of public space (Turner and Tay, 2009a, pp. 1–2).

Furthermore, discussions about TV content seem to become more difficult due to the rise of time-shifting possibilities, a process whereby broadcasts are taped for replay at later time and date (Levy, 1981). Watching TV content can even happen at any time, thereby breaking with the key characteristic of linear broadcasting television. The first time-shifting technology, the VCR, was feared to be interfering with the here-and-nowness of TV (Cubitt, 1991). Examining the impact of the VCR, Gray (1992, p. 199) argued that the technology would cut off the possibility of gossip on TV content: It becomes impossible to conduct a conversation with someone about a TV show if you have not seen the same episode of the same program. With the digitization of television, time-shifting possibilities have even increased and become more user-friendly, facilitating highly individualized and personalized TV viewing practices (Lotz, 2007). Viewers can now easily access TV shows at any moment in time, they may even have access to programs that have not (yet) been broadcast in their home country. Downloading allows viewers to transcend their local broadcaster’s schedule, so

that, for example, European viewers can watch American series months before the local broadcast (Gray, 2008, p. 90). These time-shifting technologies allow personalized viewing behavior, but disrupt the possibility for television stories to function as the source of water cooler discussions the next day at work. Lee and Lee (1995) argue that television as “social grease”, meaning the role of television to facilitate interpersonal communication, conflicts with the highly individualized programming possible with interactive television. Similarly, Lotz (2007, p. 61) argues that this temporal fragmentation has important implications for the circulation of ideas within culture and for the social aspect of watching television.

It is argued that along with the water cooler conversations, also the coherence of the TV audience and the idea of belonging to an audience will disappear (e.g., Gray, 1992; Lotz, 2007). While linear broadcasting television joined people, kept them together and unified nations (Buonanno, 2008), post-linear television isolates and separates. The enormous amount of available TV content in combination with time-shifting technologies decrease the likelihood that everyone is watching the same content at the same time. In accessing a TV program via time-shifting technologies, out of sync with the moment of its broadcast, the viewers can be convinced that they are the only ones watching it (Evans, 2011). The idea of people belonging to an imagined community and viewers having a sense of belonging to an audience, which was a typical characteristic of linear TV as a social technology, is being threatened. The proliferation of private choices for the individual consumer pushes the public and shared dimension of television aside (Turner, 2009) and shatters the social binding function of television (Kackman, Binfield, Payne, Perlman, and Sebok, 2011). Or, as Katz (2009, p. 8) puts it, “as television moves content-wise from same to differentiated, it moves contact-wise from together to alone”.

However, this does not necessarily need to be the case. Some, often technological utopianists, think that digitization and the shift of control from the industry towards the audience has the possibility to empower audiences and to erode previous existing social barriers (Kackman et al., 2011). Others prove with empirical research that time-shifting technologies can also be seen as means to enhance and strengthen the audience, as, for example, Evans’ (2007, 2011) research shows, by offering additional opportunities for being part of a viewing community. Although these new technologies expand the possibilities for asynchronous viewing and thereby might influence the social aspect of watching television at the same time, they also offer additional possibilities to keep up to date with TV drama episodes, and can in that way function as a facilitator of inter-personal relationships between TV viewers.

Especially for engaged TV viewers or fans of particular shows, time-shifting technologies and the convergence of television and the internet can offer new possibilities for social interaction around programs. It is typical for fans to have a strong sense of belonging (Baym, 2000). They often search for other fans to talk and share the passion for a particular television text. This is of course nothing new, but changes as media technologies have created new opportunities. For example, time-shifting technologies, and downloading in particular, can be useful for overcoming national transmission borders: Viewers can watch TV shows that are not yet available in their own country and can interact with fellow viewers around the world (Evans, 2011). In addition, the internet provides immediacy: Viewers can go online immediately after watching an episode to interact with fellow fans, erasing the frontiers of time and space (Bourdaa and Hong-Mercier, 2012). According to Jenkins (2006), digital media facilitate relationships with the TV text. He sums up three social practices of television fandom that have become more easy and more visible since digitization and convergence: re-circulation (the transmission of texts to a larger audience), virtual communities (internet-mediated places where texts can circulate) and participation (through these virtual communities, viewers cannot only interact with each other, but also with the TV text and its producers).

This article explores how engaged TV viewers, engaged viewers of TV drama more specifically, deal with television's changing social functions. It examines the different social dimensions that can be distinguished in their TV drama viewing behavior and explores how the viewers themselves understand and explain TV drama viewing as a social experience.

## 2 Method

In this study, engaged TV drama viewers are defined as viewers who do more than just watching TV drama episodes through live television. They are actively involved with TV drama by personalizing their viewing practices (when, where and through which technology), by communicating about it, by consuming cross- and transmedia elements of TV drama (i.e., all the additional extensions to the television episodes), or by producing TV drama related content. They are heavy consumers or intense users of TV drama and early adopters of new TV and media technologies. In other words, they are "information-rich cases" (Creswell, 1998, p. 119) with regard to the object of this study. This form of "intensity sampling" (Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam, 2003) is very useful to research audiences in a constantly changing media landscape. If there were any changes

in the opinions about the social aspect of watching TV drama in times of digitization and media convergence, it should be noticed within the sample selected for this study.

The sample selection and data collection took place in 2010 in Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. In order to select the sample, a preliminary online survey was set up. The definition of engaged TV drama viewers was operationalized with seven closed questions, of which three are relevant for this study: 'Which Flemish TV drama do you watch regularly?' (list of 25 response options), 'Which other TV drama do you watch regularly?' (list of 25 response options), and 'Do you often talk with others about these programs, their characters or actors?' (list of 8 response options). Respondents could tick multiple response options. The higher the respondents scored on the preliminary online survey (i.e., the more boxes they had ticked), the more engaged they are according to the definition. The link to the online survey was posted on websites of drama series and soaps, Flemish TV broadcasters, DVD and gaming review sites, new technology and electronic gadget websites, etc. Respondents with high scores were approached to participate in the actual research. A total of 1169 participants filled in the preliminary online survey. 157 people met the needs of the research and were interested in further participation. In the end, 61 people (39 men and 22 women) completed the whole research process. The sample ranges in age from 17 to 55. It was made sure that the sample was selected through nine different websites on which the link to the online survey could be found. Through this selection procedure, it was ensured that the sample was diverse in terms of gender, age, educational level and family situation, rather than relying only on, for example, easily accessible, young, high-educated respondents.

For the data collection, online TV diaries in combination with in-depth interviews were used, in order to be able to examine which social dimensions were apparent throughout the different activities of engaging with TV drama, but also to explore their own opinion on the social aspect of watching TV drama. Each day for a whole month, the respondents reported all their actions (viewing, downloading, gaming, talking, shopping, reading, etc.) related to TV drama in their online TV diaries. For each TV drama related activity, they created a new entry in the TV diary. The online TV diary consisted of six pages, each page containing three to five open questions related to one theme. The analysis focused on the theme 'communication' (including the questions: Did you interact with fellow viewers?; Did you interact with the program's characters?; Did you interact with the program's actors?; Did you interact with the program's producers?). In order to retrieve the best data possible from the TV diary, the respondents were contacted by telephone to guide them through their

first entry in the TV diary. Afterwards, the respondents were closely followed up through online communication. After the TV diary month, the research process was concluded with an in-depth interview, which took place at the respondent's home. During the interview, a copy of the completed TV diary was used to recall all the respondent's actions. In addition, it was decided to conduct six focus groups with five to eight fans of specific drama series (*Lost*, *Stargate Universe*, *True Blood*, *Gossip Girl*, and two focus groups with fans of the Flemish daily soap *Thuis*) in order to collect more specific information about how fans perceive TV drama as a social experience. Most of the participants for these focus groups were selected out of the database from the preliminary online survey, while others were contacted via previously selected participants. All in-depth interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using QSR International's NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2010).

### 3 Three dimensions of TV drama as a social experience

First, all the online TV diary entries were analyzed to search for the social dimensions of TV drama engagement. The social aspects that could be discovered in all the activities related to TV drama consumption were then discussed with the respondents in the in-depth interviews. Three recurring elements could be distinguished: watching TV drama together, talking about TV drama with fellow viewers, and parasocial interaction with TV drama characters.

#### 3.1 Watching TV drama

The first aspect of the social dimensions of television is watching and experiencing TV drama episodes together with others. All of our respondents sometimes watch together with others, sometimes alone, and they name a variety of reasons for this. While Flemish TV drama is often watched together with other family members or friends, usually through live broadcasting on the main television screen in the living room, American fiction series are more often watched individually, delayed through DVR or downloaded and on DVD on a computer or laptop screen. The reasons for watching together with others can be divided into three groups: practical reasons (because we only have one TV set, someone else has the remote control and decides on what to watch), reasons related to

perception (we can discuss the episode while watching and this leads to a better perception, a shared TV experience is a richer experience, it is more fun, it is quality time with my partner), and reasons related to the fact that watching together, usually with their partner or families, is a habit or daily routine:

On Sunday evening we watch *CSI* together with the whole family. This is a tradition of ours. On Sundays we eat junk food on the sofa in front of the TV, watching *CSI* together. [laughs] I really like that, it's more fun than watching on your own. (Severina, female, 22 years old)<sup>1</sup>

Two of these kinds of reasons are also mentioned when respondents explain why they watch individually: practical reasons (no one else is interested in the series, others are watching different episodes or seasons), and reasons related to the perception (I do not want to be disturbed while watching, I want to be concentrated while watching, I want to fully immerse myself in the series). For example, Iris (female, 22 years old) says: "I prefer to watch on my computer. I usually watch on my own because it's easier to concentrate then." Ellen explains it like this:

It's much easier to fully immerse myself in a series when I watch alone. When we watch together, I'm always aware of the other person next to me. When I watch on my own, I really let go and I really lose myself in the story. (Ellen, female, 29 years old)

In addition, reasons related to being in control are also mentioned for watching individually: "It's just easier to control what you watch and when" (Sven, male, 20 years old), "[I watch alone] because I don't want to compromise and we only had fights about what to watch" (Martha, female, 35 years old), "I like watching everything all at once, without stopping or pausing, but my mum can't do that. So I watch alone" (Johnny, male, 22 years old).

### 3.2 Discussing TV drama (offline and online)

I don't think watching TV drama together makes it social. It's talking about it afterwards and discussing what happened with others that makes it social for me. (Kevin, male, 23 years old)

Besides watching together with others, consuming TV drama becomes social when talking about it. While people might watch the episodes individually, the

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<sup>1</sup> All the respondents' quotes in this article are literal translations by the author. The names of the respondents are nicknames to ensure anonymity. All the quotations come from the in-depth interviews, unless it is indicated that they come from a focus group.

experience is shared afterwards by discussing the episodes, online or offline. Stan (male, 20 years old) argues: “That’s why I watch the episodes weekly, to be able to discuss them in the meantime. I really like to talk about what happened, think about it, that really makes a difference for me.” Almost all of our respondents talk about the fiction series they watch, although there are differences in how, when, with whom and why. Almost all respondents talk offline, face-to-face that is, with others about TV drama. This mainly happens with friends, family and colleagues, and the discussion usually remains rather short and superficial, for example, about what happened in the latest episode. Both Flemish and international (American) TV drama is discussed in face-to-face conversations, although the respondents in this study mention that it is easier to talk about Flemish drama, which is usually watched live so people have seen the same episode, than about international drama. In this case the conversation usually starts with asking which episode the other person has seen, in order to avoid spoilers. When comparing with talking about TV programs before there were endless possibilities to time-shift, most of our respondents say that nowadays, it is more difficult to talk about episodes afterwards, because people are watching at their own rhythm. “[Face-to-face discussions about TV drama] don’t happen so often. Because everyone can choose when they want to see the episodes”, says Jentel (female, 20 years old). Therefore, television content, and international TV drama in particular, is less of a subject of conversations than it used to be. However, some respondents also say that discussing TV drama episodes is not more difficult than before, because, first, friends and family usually have the same viewing rhythm (“All my friends download TV drama, that’s why I also started downloading, so I would be able to join their conversations”, says Jef, male, 25 years old), and second, because there are so many time-shifting possibilities that no one ever has to miss an episode (the chances that someone else has seen the episode are actually higher). The respondents name various reasons for why they like discussing TV drama afterwards. First of all, most respondents like to go over the storyline again, and reminisce about what has happened in the episode. Second, they also talk about the acting skills and side projects of actors. Third, quite a lot of respondents mention the need to share the individual experience of watching TV fiction: Being able to talk about an episode afterwards makes it more fun to watch, and it is a stimulus to continue watching. “If I’m touched by it, I want to share it with others. I want to go over the episode with others who also have seen it, to relive it”, says Kevin (male, 23 years old).

Watching TV drama is an individual experience, but you interpret the story in a specific manner, while others might have different interpretations. So I want to know whether I

understood it right, what others thought of it ... In that sense, I really like the collective aspect. It becomes a shared experience, and that makes it stronger. You watched something, you have an opinion about it, and that leads to interesting discussions that go beyond the program. (Tuur, male, 30 years old)

Next to talking face to face about TV drama, almost half of our sample also regularly discusses TV drama online, generally right after watching an episode of an international fiction series. They talk online with friends (through MSN, on Facebook), but also with strangers, who are usually fellow fans of the series (through official or unofficial online discussion boards or Twitter). These online discussions with fellow viewers and fans often have a lot more depth than offline conversations about TV drama, because people deliberately go to these online spaces to share their views and opinions:

Yes, I talk online with other fans of the series. We talk about the technical aspects and such, the plot, the camera angles ... These are all people who really know the series inside out, so with them you talk about it differently than with people who only watch the weekly episodes. (Steve, male, 25 years old)

Online discussion boards also often have threads for specific episodes, so viewers can immediately interact with others who have seen the same episode (contrary to face-to-face conversations with other viewers): “Online, viewers have watched the same as you have, so you can talk and discuss without worrying about spoilers” (Michiel, male, 20 years old). Reasons to make the effort to go online to discuss TV drama include: to share thoughts, opinions and comments on specific plotlines or characters (more in-depth), to read other interpretations and reflect on the storyline, to learn more about cross- and transmedia extensions to the series (“When you chat online, you can immediately include the link to videos and stuff like that, that’s easy”, says Jef, male, 25 years old), or to find fellow fans of a particular fiction series or genre (e.g., sci-fi) and thereby experiencing the feeling of belonging to an audience. Especially this last reason seems to be of great importance for viewers of lesser known TV drama: When there are no possibilities for face-to-face conversations, they feel the need to go online to share their viewing experience.

Online, it’s really a group of people who are fans of the same series and who are watching the same. There is always something to tell about the series, or read what others have written about it. I think that’s kind of cool, a community of people with the same interest, who can talk to each other about it. (Charlene, female, 20 years old)

### 3.3 Interacting with TV drama

Only very few people in this study are involved in the third dimension of TV drama as a social experience. Although digitization and the rise of interactive social media have increased and facilitated the possibilities for connecting with fictional characters, not many of the respondents are interested in such interaction. About ten respondents interact with fictional TV drama characters through Twitter, Facebook or official blogs. They like following the characters in other media, to get to know them better and to get additional information about the storylines. According to these viewers, this interaction really contributes to a better engagement with the show:

Almost all characters of *Misfits* have Twitter accounts. You can read how he thinks. It's something extra because you get to know more about the character and its personality. (Severina, female, 22 years old)

The large majority has no need or interest to interact with TV drama characters. They argue that it is strange talking to fictional people (the account or profile is probably managed by someone of the production crew); they would rather talk to the actors who play the characters.

Yes, you can talk with the characters on Twitter, but who says that is real? You can bet on it it's someone else talking to you. Someone who really doesn't know the character. (Jasper, male, 18 years old)

Some of them also mention that TV drama should stay fiction: Being able to chat with the characters would blur the line between fiction and reality and would, according to them, hamper their emotional engagement with the show.

Why would I read a blog of a *True Blood* character? [...] It's probably a producer or someone else typing it, not the actor. That wouldn't contribute to my immersion in the storyline, on the contrary, I would get irritated. (Ellen, female, 29 years old)

## 4 TV drama as a social experience and belonging to a TV drama audience

After exploring which social dimensions could be discovered in the respondents' engagement with TV drama, the respondents' own opinions on the sociability of TV in general and TV drama more specifically were analyzed. On the question whether television can still be considered as a social medium, the

majority of the respondents answers affirmatively. Although people often watch TV drama episodes individually, some respondents think that there are now even more possibilities to be social with TV drama than there used to be and that television will even become more and more social in the future:

The slogan of our website [www.followmy.tv] is 'TV made social', because new media can make TV a lot more social. In the future, I expect every TV set to have an internet connection so people can comment while watching and give real-time ratings. [...] Viewers come together on our website to discuss and rate TV drama. This is really an added value to the perception of TV drama. (Jef, male, 25 years old)<sup>2</sup>

In the past, you would only have your parents or friends to discuss the episodes. But now you have so many interesting discussions on the internet, of other viewers around the world. With *Lost*, for example, you had thousands of different opinions and theories. That was really interesting to follow. (Jelle, male, 23 years old)

Although most of the respondents think that television still needs to be considered as a social medium, some of them argue that the medium can only be considered as social for other genres than drama, such as reality programs, entertainment shows and sports programs, because these kinds of programs are watched live by many people and talked about the next day. Then, there are also a dozen respondents who think of television as an individual medium. Some of them say that television used to be social, but that it is not anymore today ("People used to talk about TV drama episodes a lot more before there was DTV", says Gerrit, male, 21 years old), others say that television never was a social medium in the first place.

In addition, the respondents were also asked to explain what 'following TV drama' meant to them, in order to explore whether they would mention something about the social aspect. They explain that really following a show involves more than just watching the TV episodes, it also means: engaging with the show through different media platforms (informing yourself about plotlines, characters, background information, etc.) and talking about it (online or offline, sharing the experience with others).

[Following means] definitely talking with friends about it and also go online to discuss it. Not just experiencing it individually, but really spreading it to the outside world. (Jelle, male, 23 years old)

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<sup>2</sup> Jef is one of the webmasters of www.followmy.tv, a social media website dedicated to TV drama. TV drama viewers can indicate which shows they follow, interact with other viewers, get additional information about shows, etc.

J: [Following means] talking about [*Stargate Universe*], convincing others that it is a good series.

L: Yes, you'll notice when there's an interaction between viewers of the same series, you'll have a connection then. Being part of it, the group of viewers, being able to join the discussions, that means that you follow [*Stargate Universe*]. (Jean, male, 35 years old, and Lea, female, 55 years old, focus group *Stargate Universe*)

These results show that sharing the TV drama experience with others, during or after watching, is a very important part of engaging with TV drama. These answers of the respondents remind us of the concept of imagined communities which was discussed earlier (see, for example, Buonanno, 2008; Ellis, 2000; Morley, 2000; Seiter, 1999).

In order to further explore this idea of TV drama as a shared social experience, the respondents were asked about their sense of belonging to a specific TV audience. Although most respondents find it important to be able to share their TV drama perception with others, only half of the sample says to experience a feeling of belonging to an audience of a show. Typically, they experience this feeling when they know that others (friends, family) are watching, too (for example with Flemish hit series), when talking afterwards about it on online discussion boards with other fans (especially with more underground TV fiction), or when talking on Twitter during watching ("You have the illusion of not watching alone, thanks to the hashtags, not only you and your wife", says Tuur, male, 30 years old). They describe this feeling as a sense of belonging to a select group of viewers (feeling special), a feeling of belonging to a bigger family (relatedness), having something in common with other viewers (same taste), or as something that definitely contributes to the joy of watching TV fiction.

It's not during watching that I feel [like belonging to an audience], but afterwards when I visit the Tumblr pages of the series. If you go to that website and you see that everyone is discussing the episode, then I get this feeling of solidarity. (Severina, female, 22 years old)

This is exactly why we set up our website [[www.followmy.tv](http://www.followmy.tv)], because people expressed the need of sharing their viewing experience, of finding fellow viewers and having this viewing community. (Jef, male, 25 years old)

The other half of the sample reports not to experience any sort of feeling of community or co-presence while watching TV fiction: Either they do not immerse themselves enough into the story or they only experience this feeling during large sports events:

[with TV drama], it's not like watching a soccer game. Then you know everyone is watching at the same time, you can hear it in the streets when there's a goal ... No, [watching] TV drama is something else. (Steffie, female, 30 years old)

## 5 Conclusion and discussion

According to Katz (2009, p. 7), the “television of sharedness” is no longer with us, having made room for a television of hundreds of channels, of niche broadcasting, of portability, one that is part of a system that integrates with the internet and other new media. To exaggerate, due to time-shifting and on-demand viewing technologies, no two people are watching the same program at the same time, says Katz (2009), and this affects the social aspect of television. However, the convergence of the social communication capabilities of the internet with the role of television in social relations might also suggest a potential for endless social interactions through television-related websites and message boards (Evans, 2011). The purpose of this article was, first, to explore the social dimensions of engaging with TV drama and, second, to examine how the viewers themselves explain and define TV in general and TV drama more specifically as a social experience.

The qualitative audience research shows that three social dimensions in the respondents' engagement with TV drama can be distinguished: watching together, talking about it and interacting with fictional TV drama characters. The respondents stress that it is pre-eminently the (offline and online) discussions about TV drama that make it into a social experience. The large majority of the sample of engaged viewers still considers TV drama as a social experience. In addition, they think that discussing TV drama is an essential part of following a show. It is the social dimension that makes the difference between 'watching' or 'following' TV drama. About half of the respondents claim to experience a sense of belonging to an audience when engaging with TV drama, especially when engaging in a more active manner.

Although previous technological innovations such as cable, VCR, satellite, etc. have not led to a radical erosion of collective, shared viewing experiences (Dhoest and Simons, 2013), one could have thought that digitization and convergence might have led to more substantial changes in the reception of TV drama as a social experience. However, empirical audience research into TV drama viewing practices in times of time-shifting technologies has shown that viewers do not necessarily immediately adopt every new media technology and the new modes of viewing that it offers (Simons, 2013). Such results might also indicate that the social dimensions of watching TV drama will not dramatically

change with every new technological innovation. Similar to what Evans (2011) concluded, this study shows that time-shifting technologies can, on the one hand, be seen as divisive for the television audience, but can, on the other hand, also be seen as a way for audience groups to come together, in particular across previously restrictive boundaries. Downloaders can keep up to date with international TV drama and can go online to discuss the episodes with fellow viewers from all over the world. This seems to confirm that digital convergence has facilitated the formation of virtual fan communities in which (TV and fan) texts can re-circulate (Jenkins, 2006). However, the engaged viewers in this study are not that keen on participation with the TV text through interaction with the TV drama characters, despite the various and easy-to-access possibilities. With regard to the idea of TV's capacity to create imagined communities and to evoke the sense of belonging to a particular audience, this study shows that especially the viewers who engage with TV drama in a more active manner, for example, by going online to discuss TV drama episodes, experience this feeling of belonging to an audience. Although these results seem to indicate that this social dimension of TV is now more restricted than before – as literature on traditional broadcasting television suggests that the feeling of belonging to a large, imagined audience was central and typical for the medium –, it is very difficult to compare these results with previous literature. The fact that in this study only a minority experiences a sense of an audience feeling might just be the consequence of a different approach, in terms of sample, method, etc., in researching this social aspect.

To conclude, a couple of limitations need to be considered with regard to this study. First, this research has only focused on the genre of TV drama. The results of this study might have shed some light on TV drama as a social experience, but might not say anything about the social dimensions that are perceived while consuming other genres of TV content. Second, this study only examined a very specific group of engaged TV viewers. As mentioned earlier, these engaged viewers might have a stronger sense of social belonging to a particular TV drama audience than more casual viewers (Baym, 2000). Lastly, as television technologies are still constantly evolving, the results of this study only give an insight in the social experience of TV drama at this particular moment in time. At the same time, this is exactly what makes this research valuable. As television technologies and their social uses will keep on changing, these results will be a reference point in the future, a snapshot of how engaged audiences perceived TV drama as a social experience at this particular moment in time.

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## Bionote

### Nele Simons

Nele Simons is a member of the research group Media, Policy and Culture at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Antwerp.