the journal of media innovations

User Empowerment and Audience Commodification in a Commercial Television Context

Iris Jennes, Jo Pierson and Wendy Van den Broeck
IMinds/SMIT – Vrije University of Brussel.
Corresponding author: jo.pierson@vub.ac.be

Abstract

This paper aims to provide insights into the concept of 'user empowerment' in current –digital and connected- media industries. We start by defining empowerment as a concept rooted in certain research traditions that focus on user behaviour and capabilities in dealing with digital and connected technologies and the production, aggregation, distribution and consumption of content. We then oppose 'user empowerment' to 'audience commodification', a concept that highlights how the audience and its members are exploited by the media industry through their usage of digital and connected technologies. This research tradition typically looks at the meso-level of media usage and how it is embedded in the media industries. In light of this paper on media innovations, we then argue that the concepts of 'empowerment' and 'commodification' are strongly embedded in the underlying social imaginaries. This helps us to redefine 'user empowerment' and 'audience commodification' as interactive processes underlying innovation within the (commercial) media industry. We use the case of commercial television in Flanders (Belgium) to demonstrate this hypothesis.

Introduction

Audience behaviour, audience measurement and power struggles in media industries have always been important research topics within media studies.

The Journal of Media Innovations 1.1 (2014): 71-87

http://www.journals.uio.no/index.php/TJMI

Traditionally, audiences were approached as either a commodity within the (commercial) media industry, or the audience was provided a more active role as it negotiates and produces its own meanings in media content. More recently with the advent of digitisation, the idea of an 'empowered' media user was introduced, referring to the increased control media users can exert over media usage, content and even production (see also Jenkins, 2006; Castells, 2009; Slot, 2007). In this paper, we aim to combine the seemingly contradictory concepts of user empowerment and audience commodification by contextualising media usage in innovation processes within the media industry. To start, we will discuss the concepts of user empowerment and audience commodification and link them to the Internet paradox as described by Mansell (2012).

In the second part of this paper, we use the case of commercial television in Flanders (Belgium) to demonstrate that user empowerment and audience commodification can be redefined as interactive processes underlying innovation. Commercial television provides a useful case, as its business model is based on audience commodification through aggregated audience measurement (Napoli, 2003; Napoli, 2011), based on a passive methodology and referring to viewers as 'eyeballs' and 'mass audiences'. New digital technologies provide a challenge for the traditional broadcasting sector as viewers' interactivity and control over their video consumption becomes more traceable (Seles, 2010), with individual personal data gaining importance in the advertising industry (Jennes & Pierson, 2012; Jennes & Pierson, 2013). We first provide data on how Flemish viewers watch TV content and how and why they use (new) digital devices such as tablets. These data provide a context for the power struggles and initiatives taken by traditional players within the Flemish commercial television industry in Belgium. Our expert interviews (see section 2) enable us to outline different strategies used by players within the Flemish commercial television sector to demonstrate the importance of audience commodification and user empowerment in both their resistance as well as their motivation to innovate.

The empowered user and the audience as commodity

Empowerment is a widely used concept charged with meaning and it has been the topic of many academic discussions. The notion has a long tradition in civil society and social welfare literature, but also in business, science, and policy fields. The definition of empowerment varies depending on the different perspectives on the subject. In a general sense empowerment is defined as 'a process, a mechanism by which people, organisations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs' (Rappaport, 1987: 122). In this way it refers to the capability of individuals, communities and groups to access and use their personal/collective power, authority and influence, and to employ that strength when engaging with other people, institutions or society (Punie, 2011). In the following sections, we describe empowerment (1.1) and audience

commodification (1.2), linking it to Mansell's (2012:176-179) paradox of complexity in the Internet age and underlying social imaginaries (1.3).

The empowered user

Perhaps one of the most well known approaches to user empowerment can be found in Castells' (2009) notion of 'mass-self communication' which underlines his focus on the increased autonomy of the media audience or user which enables them to gain power vis à vis global multimedia networks. Castells (2009) links empowerment to the audiences' struggle for autonomy to make decisions and to communicate to an audience (see also Pierson, 2012). Jenkins (2006) focuses on the interaction of users, viewers or fans with media content and the increased possibilities users have to voice their opinions, be creative with media content and to create an audience themselves.

This approach on user empowerment starts from the evidence that media users and audiences can gain more control or power (empowerment) over their media experiences, as they can determine themselves which content they access anytime, anywhere and on any device. In addition, audience members can now acquire different roles, such as production and aggregation of content - which used to be the exclusive domain of production firms and media companies (Jenkins, 2006; Slot, 2007). Within this framework, both the Internet and digital television are seen as networked digital technologies that allow users to increase control through personalisation and interconnectivity (Jennes & Pierson, 2012). TV becomes a medium of 'mass-self-communication' (Castells, 2009: 70), transforming from a one-way mass media model to a two-way interactive model (Carlson, 2006: 97-98). From this perspective, the focus lies on the active roles of media and television users and on how they can produce social difference (Bolin, 2012) by taking on roles due to 'affordances' of digitization and digital technologies. 'Affordances' were defined by Norman (1988:9) as "perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used". We apply the notion of affordances to indicate the different possible uses of a technology or a tool or service. We also differentiate between those 'affordances' that relate to expected uses (as scripted in the design process) and affordances that are innovative user practices in the sense that they are not foreseen in the design or marketing of a technology or a tool/service. (As an example: one of the expected affordances of digital television has been interactive advertising via new advertising formats like a Dedicated Advertising Location (DAL) within a commercial (Cauberghe, 2008). An affordance that relates to innovative user practices is the social interaction regarding television programmes on social media enabled by tablet use (as second screen). These (personal and content) data were then – later – picked up by advertising as commercially valuable information.)

Various authors (e.g. Castells, 2009; Slot, 2007; Pyungho & Harmeet, 2002) argue that there are restrictions to audience empowerment due to limitations of digital technologies on the one hand and restraints imposed by the media industries on the other hand. However, it is clear that these authors focus on the increased individual control and audience autonomy from a perspective that aims to explain how users relate to media, ICTs and media content and which capabilities users need to interact and engage with media content (e.g. Sen, 1999; Mansell, 2002). With regards to digital television, Slot (2007) indeed points out that users are still foremost approached as consumers of television content and only play a role at the receiving end of the value network of television, but she stresses the possibility for users in the digital era to expand their roles beyond consumption to the creation, production, packaging and distribution of TV content, which is expected to influence the business model of commercial television.

The audience as commodity

Audience autonomy has also been discussed from an economic perspective (e.g. Napoli, 2003; Napoli, 2011) and from a more critical political economy perspective (e.g. Smythe, 1977; Fuchs, 2012). This framework defines audiences as well as users primarily as products (Napoli, 2003) or commodities (Fuchs, 2012; Smythe, 1977). Smythe (1977:3) defined the audience as working for broadcasters and as a product sold to advertisers. In other words, the business model behind television relies on the commodification of audiences.

The commodification of audiences within commercial media industries is closely related to audience measurement systems. Audience measurement allows commercial content providers such as broadcasters to sell the 'watching labour' of the audience to advertisers (Bermejo 2009: 136–37). This means that the results coming from audience measurement must be comparable and compatible across different TV channels and programs because the aim of audience measurement is to picture the audience as accurately as possible and to provide a currency of exchange for advertisers and commercial content providers (such as broadcasters) (Miller 1994: 57). In traditional commercial television, what is sold is not necessarily the audience itself but the attention or time of the audience spent on TV content. But even attention is often replaced by 'exposure' because exposure can be quantified more easily (Bermejo, 2009: 136). Audience measurement is also essential in the business model of commercial media and television because it registers audience behaviour (exposure) and the changes that might occur in this behaviour (exposure) due to technological or socio-economic changes (Barnes and Thomson,1994: 78).

Fuchs (2012) applies Smythes' notion of audience commodification to social media and proposes that although social media provide users with a platform for 'mass-self-communication' and the aggregation and distribution of (user

generated) content, the aim of the platform is not to empower users but to commodify their personal data. This signifies a move from the commodification of aggregated (compatible and comparable) audience data towards individual and personal user data, which – according to Fuchs (2012) – signifies an increase in user exploitation by media industries and advertisers. With regards to digital television, Napoli (2003 & 2011) also underlines the shift in focus on aggregated and standardised audience measurement towards more individual user data that should enhance the industries' insights into audiences and their behaviour. For Napoli (2003 & 2011) this is a logical shift since the commercial television broadcasters operate in a dual market that revolves around the selling and buying of audiences between television broadcasters and advertisers. Andrejevic (2002) decribes this as the digital television industry watching the audience work and links it to processes of rationalisation, (productive) surveillance and enclosure.

Although this perspective leaves little room for user agency and audience input within the development and design of ICTs and media content –apart from via the existing audience measurement techniques- the approach is useful in that it aims to expose the economic motives of media companies and how they function within a two-sided market. As this research focuses on the commodification of audiences or users and their data, it provides us with insights into the link between micro- (user behaviour) and meso-level (media industry) through the descriptions of challenges and opportunities in audience measurement and data mining in a digital and connected environment.

The 'empowered user' and the 'audience as commodity' as social imaginaries

In light of our focus on media innovations, it is interesting to link the different perspectives on user empowerment to what Mansell (2012: 176-179) describes as 'the Paradox of Complexity in the Internet Age', stemming from conflicting social imaginaries. According to Mansell, the paradox manifests in perspectives that highlight: "… intrinsic benefits from the emergent complexity in the technological system behind the screen, which are leading to a loss of control…" versus perspectives that focus on "…intrinsic benefits from the emergent complexity in the technological system behind the screen, which are leading to greater control achieved through programming within a decentralized system…" (Mansell, 2012: 179). These seemingly contradictory statements can be explained by examining the underlying, conflicting social imaginaries of the different stakeholders involved. As Bolin (2012: 797) puts it, media usage can be understood "…both as an activity that users engage in, benefit from and value the use of and as an activity that is then used by others for other, mainly economic ends." (Bolin, 2012: 979). These perspectives help to explain the discrepancies between changes in the power relationships from an empowered user perspective (the users or audiences gain control and become increasingly autonomous in producing social differences within a converging culture) and from a political

economy perspective (the users or audiences are mainly of economic value within the framework of media industries).

Although there are valuable claims stating that the production of meaning by audiences and the use of audience measurement by the media industry should be studied separately (Bolin, 2012), we aim to put forward an inclusive perspective that tries to incorporate both human agency and economic growth as important processes in innovation within media industries. In line with Pierson (2012), it seems more useful to start from a definition that integrates the different levels of empowerment by describing it as Delahaij (2004) suggest, as the interaction between (a) individuals who get more influence or control over their consumption and even distribution of media content and engagement with media content and (b) institutions whose main interest is to prevent individuals from acquiring an equal position in society.

In the next section, we use the example of Flemish commercial television to build a framework for empowerment that takes into account audience or user autonomy within the economic context of commercial television. First, we will describe the ways in which the audience becomes more autonomous or empowered and the challenges it provides for the current commercial television industry. Then, we take a look at how the concept of empowerment is used and dealt with within the television industry and how the industry tries to commodify user interactions in order to maintain their power position and organize their dual market. This framework is then used to support our thesis that both the audiences' increasing autonomy and the commodification of audiences and users by developing measurement techniques and data mining, are interacting processes that support innovation within the commercial television industry.

Digitisation and complexity in a Flemish commercial television context

In the second part of this paper, we apply the concepts of user empowerment and audience commodification to the case of the Flemish commercial television industry and its audience in a digital era. These insights are the result of a series of 9 expert interviews with professionals active in the television industry in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium. The research is focused on the Flemish rather than the Belgian TV sector as from a regulatory perspective, the broadcasting market in Belgium has been divided into separate, independent markets: a Walloon and a Flemish broadcasting market.

As experts are not neutral (Harvey, 2011), variation in background and professional environment of the stakeholders was important to provide a broad and complete picture of the challenges and strategies that prevail in the Flemish commercial television industry as it enters a digital and connected era. The stakeholders were selected based on their affiliation within media organisations and their knowledge on digital television and the Flemish television market. We aimed to incorporate experts from different actors in the television value network

such as commercial broadcasters, network providers, media agencies and umbrella organisations that focus on digital marketing opportunities. This would allow us to gain insights into both the possibilities of digital television and other technologies (digital marketing opportunities) as well as the dynamics between actors (network providers, broadcasters, media agencies) and how digital commercial television as an advertising medium relates to other media (umbrella organisations, media agencies). We applied snowball sampling in order to get to the right people within each organisation. Additionally, media experts were selected based on their background as experts within the field. (All experts agreed to be mentioned with their full names and affiliations.)

The interviews were conducted face to face with representatives of the Belgian Direct Marketing Association[1], technology developer Paratel[2], media agency Havas Media Belgium[3], Flemish commercial broadcasters SBS Belgium[4] and VMMa[5], incumbent network provider Telenet[6] and Dr. Katrien Berte[7]. Media expert Jo Caudron[8] was interviewed over the telephone due to a busy schedule. The topic list was designed to include both the current status of the commercial television industry dynamics and views on future disruptions or shifts in these dynamics due to digitisation and digital technologies. We focused on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in a changing television market, from the perspective of each expert (Vermeylen, 2004). The analysis took place in different stages, first focussing on retrieving an overview of challenges within the industry based on the experts' viewpoints (Jennes, Van den Broeck & Pierson, 2013). Further analysis aimed to expose underlying motivations and strategies of different actors within the Flemish commercial television industry concerning innovation or resistance to innovation.

The Flemish television market is less fragmented than the TV market in other EU countries. Based on audience measurement, the three largest broadcasting companies are VRT (public service broadcaster), VMMA (commercial

1 Greet Dekocker (Director) and Viviane Eeckman (Strategic Manager), interviewed on 2012.02.20.

2 Yannic Beckers (General Manager), interviewed on 2013.03.29

3 Hugues Rey (CEO Havas Media Belgium), interviewed on 2013.07.25.

4 Bart Decoster (Commercial Director), interviewed on 2012.02.28.

5 Ben Jansen (Commercial Director), interviewed on 2012.02.22.

6 Benny Salaets (Vice President Content Management), interviewed on 2012.02.21.

7 Author of the PhD : 'Advertising in a digital media landscape: Challenges, opportunities and constraints for advertising on digital television' (2010), associate member of research group Media and ICT and senior project manager TV and Internet studies at Centre for Information on the Media (CIM). Interviewed on 2013.04.10.

8 Founding partner of Dear Media, President of IAB Belgium, author of 'Social media, the essentials'; 'Fixing the media, the dramatic impact of new media'. Interviewed on 2012.03.07.

broadcaster) and SBS Belgium (commercial broadcaster) account for 81 per cent of the market share (VRM 2011:156). This provides us with a unique situation in the television market. Also, previous research has shown that, from a user perspective, Flemish television viewers are not that revolutionary in their usage of digital television (Van den Broeck, 2010) and, from an industry perspective, that innovation uptake within the traditional Flemish television industry is only picking up slowly (Jennes & Pierson, 2013). This means the Flemish commercial broadcasting sector and audience provide a useful case when investigating user empowerment and audience commodification, as it allows us to look at both user behaviour and industry dynamics within the innovation process. As a case, it provides insights into both the innovative practices and resistance to innovation from an industry point of view and allows us to link those to the power struggles within the television industry and to audience or user behaviour. The following sections will first provide an overview of the Flemish television audience (2.1). We then look at the different innovation strategies that are in place in the television industry (2.2) and link them to audience behaviour and costumer ownership (2.3).

The Flemish audience

Since the introduction of analogue television in the 1950s, the main characteristic of this medium was that it was a linear broadcasting medium, a typical one-to-many medium. TV viewers in Flanders had access to about 30 linear TV channels. The digitisation of the signal and the addition of a return or feedback channel from 2005 onwards, created new affordances for this medium in transition. With interactive digital television, the number of TV channels viewers can access has increased enormously, and interactive services became possible such as on-demand consumption, play-along and voting, as well as using television as a platform for e-mail, information and online shopping. Via iDTV, viewers can time-shift linear television, view programs on demand and interact with the offered content as well as skip advertising. This way they can gain control over their TV consumption.

Research on the domestication of interactive digital television in Flanders (Van den Broeck, 2010) has indicated that despite the expectations that iDTV would lead to a drastic shift in viewing practices, viewing practices only change gradually: old habits die hard. This is reflected in the fact that although 86% of Flemish viewers have switched to interactive digital television, still 96.7% watch TV in a linear way at some point and 55.8% still watch linear TV daily. (iMinds iLab.o, 2013). This indicates that the options to take control over TV consumption and to break loose from traditional linear broadcasting are not used to their full extent. Nonetheless, we do see that there is a gradual shift in viewing practices and viewers do use their set-topbox (STB) to timeshift. Digimeter data (iMinds iLab.o, 2013) indicates 49.9% of ad skipping on a daily basis. This

implies that although the viewers only use the affordances in a limited way – most time shifting occurs within 24 hours as viewers for example do tend to shift the starting hour of broadcasted programs (e.g. start watching half an hour later when children are in bed) but do not use this option to personalize their broadcast stream in a drastic way – even this limited usage might have consequences for the TV industry.

Also, online video platforms and services and the expansion of devices on which audio-visual content can be consumed have recently led to even more opportunities for viewers to control their video consumption. There is a significant increase in 2nd screen devices, which has led to new viewing practices. Smartphone penetration in Flanders increased from 23.10% in 2010, over 38.5% in 2012 to 47.6% in 2013. Tablets evolved from 2% in 2010 to 27.7% in 2012 and 41.4% in 2013 (IMinds-Ilab.o, 2013).

These connected devices such as smartphones and tablets but also laptops are used to multitask while watching TV. A study of IAB in 2012[9] indicated that 54% of Belgian viewers are online while watching television, but only in 21% of the cases their online activity is related to the TV content. Compared to interaction on the television screen, second screen interactions are perceived as user friendlier, since interaction via a personal device is more natural compared to interaction via the television screen or STB (Dekocker & Eeckman, expert interview, February 2012; Jansen, expert interview, Februari 2012).

Another trend is the usage of alternative platforms to consume video content, e.g via Internet. While television is still the most popular device to watch TV content amongst the Flemish population (88%), 50.5% also watches TV content on a laptop or desktop, 26.6% on a tablet and 18.4% on a smartphone (iMinds iLab.o, 2013). Besides television and interactive TV platforms, Flemish viewers can also make use of over-the-top TV services (e.g. YouTube, Stievie) and other online video services that allow TV viewing via streaming or downloading (both legal and illegal). Examples of Flemish legal services are ‘Yelo TV’, ‘TV overal’ and ‘Bhaalu’.

The commercial television industry

Napoli (2003; 2010) argues that as digital technologies provide users and audiences with additional possibilities to aggregate, access and consume television content, the gap between the predicted, measured and actual audience for TV content increases. For advertisers and broadcasters, this inaccuracy of audience data is a problem since it provides reasons to question the return on investment of advertisements on commercial television. In Flanders, the television audience still watches linear television and the three main broadcasting

9 http://www.iab-community.be/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/IAB-Europe-Mediascope-Belgium-Launch-Presentation_membersfriends.pdf

companies own 81% of the market share. This explains why advertisers also still see television as the most important advertising medium, with 40.8% of advertising spending dedicated to television (UBA, 2010). Also, the traditional commercial television broadcasters and advertisers are slow in innovating their services and advertisements because there is a lack of knowledge on new ways of advertising that incorporate the affordances of digital technologies (Cauberghe & De Pelsemacker, 2006). From our expert interviews, we identified several challenges and opportunities for the television value network in a digital environment. We will discuss how network operators, traditional commercial television broadcasters, media agencies and advertisers try to gain costumer ownership across platforms. We link these innovations to how they perceive the increased audience autonomy related to new platforms for television content and ad skipping practices.

This argument mainly revolves around costumer ownership -network providers having access to user data through STB, broadcasters lacking individual data- (Caudron, expert interview, March 2012) and accuracy of audience ratings and ROI, which decreases when advertising can be skipped (Napoli, 2003; Napoli, 2011; Caudron, expert interview, March 2012; Dekocker & Eeckman, expert interview, February 2012). As Beckers (expert interview, March 2013) says: "Everyone is fighting for the same thing: the money to be made from interactivity. And everyone is trying to pull it to his or her side. Up until now it was mainly the network operator doing this". In response, the commercial broadcasters try to exert power over technological developments that enable TV audiences or users to determine their own broadcasting schedule. As Rey (expert interview, July 2013) puts it: "The single thing is monetisation. Who will make money with that?" Negotiations between the commercial broadcasters and network providers have included the need for the Flemish government to mediate and the suggestion that users should either be unable to skip advertising or pay an additional fee to be able to skip advertising (Jansen, expert interview, February 2012; Decoster, expert interview, February 2012; Berte, expert interview, April 2013). The reaction of the traditional commercial broadcasters can thus be viewed as a strategy that revolves around holding back innovations by other industry actors (network providers) that would harm their current business model and in the process, reverse or get direct revenue from the gained user control[10].

Network providers (Salaets, expert interview, February 2012), commercial broadcasters (Jansen, expert interview, February 2012; Decoster, expert interview, February 2012) and other interviewees (Caudron, expert interview, March 2012; Dekocker & Eeckman, expert interview, February 2012; Berte, expert interview, April 2013; Rey, expert interview, July 2013) stress the co-

10 Even though these discussions involve technological affordances that might be very important to television viewers, it is remarkable that –in the interviews conducted- little thought was given to the reaction of viewers. It was assumed that viewers would either agree not to be able to skip advertising anymore or to pay for content without advertising.

dependency of commercial broadcasters and network providers – especially with the high rates of linear television viewing. However, the aforementioned discussions also influence the development of other innovations (e.g. the development of second screen applications) by broadcasters and network providers (Caudron, expert interview, March 2012; Rey, expert interview, July 2013).

The combination of co-dependency and competition hinders the development of other innovative services. For example, Flemish incumbent network provider Telenet has launched a second screen application 'Yelo TV', that allows Telenet customers to view television content on their tablets or laptops. However, these 'eyeballs' are not (yet) integrated in the standardised audience ratings by the Centre for Information on Media (CIM). The same problem occurs for the data gathered through the STB, as selling it between network operators and broadcasters would violate the viewers or subscribers privacy (Salaets, expert interview, February 2012; Berte, expert interview, April 2013; Jansen, expert interview, February 2012). The commercial television broadcasters and advertisers are interested in incorporating these data in the standardised audience ratings (Berte, expert interview, April 2013) but there are legal (e.g. privacy), methodological (e.g. tablet adoption rates) and technological (e.g. building codes into applications) challenges. And, as Napoli (2003; 2011) and several of our interviewees (Caudron, expert interview, March 2012; Rey, expert interview, July 2013; Berte, expert interview, April 2012) stressed, there is an important level of path dependency when it comes to aggregated, standardised audience measurement. This makes it difficult for traditional commercial broadcasters to innovate and expand their business model to individual data. Supposedly, that is the main reason why the main commercial broadcasters (VMMa, SBS) decided not to provide their content for the second screen application YeloTV developed by the network operator (Telenet) (Jansen, expert interview, February 2012; Decoster, expert interview, February 2012; Salaets, expert interview, February 2012). Beckers (expert interview, March 2013) pointed out that the difficult relationship between these two players was also at the heart of the decision, as was the decision from the main Flemish broadcasters to start their own second screen application called 'Stievie'[11].

As different players are looking for solutions, Second screen devices such as tablets and smarthones provide the opportunity to connect to viewers directly. Second screen applications could make commercial broadcasters less dependent on network providers to gain costumer ownership, but could also make advertisers less dependent on commercial broadcasters for the same reason. Commercial broadcasters, advertisers and media agencies are trying to incorporate interaction or engagement based data into their campaigns by using and launching second screen applications themselves (Rey, expert interview, July 2013; Dekocker & Eeckman, expert interview, February 2012; Jansen, expert

11 http://www.stievie.be/

interview, February 2012; Decoster, expert interview, February 2012). It is also described as less complicated and easier to start up since the number of industry participants involved is smaller and privacy-issues are clearer (Rey, expert interview, July 2013; Beckers, expert interview, March 2013). The data collected through these devices is seen as an addition to the aggregated audience ratings (Rey, expert interview, July 2013; Caudron, expert interview, March 2012).

Flemish commercial broadcasters have experimented with second screen applications in order to keep the viewers' attention during the commercial breaks (e.g. play along with quizzes such as 'The million pound drop') and, to engage users with their content (e.g. vote along with the judges in 'The Voice Of Flanders'). The strategy here is to use the increased control viewers have in order to attract them to the platforms and services offered by the commercial broadcasters themselves (Jansen, expert interview, February 2012), rather than other services or websites that could reduce the audiences' attention for the television content –and by extension the commercial breaks: "… the combination of the screens. You could say this is my TV, my laptop and my tablet and it is more, more, more. But it could also be less less less." (Berte, expert interview, April 2013). These developments are important as they show that audience commodification does not necessarily involve restricting users but may instead entail pushing them to certain platforms, sometimes explicitly using increased audience control ('you decide') as a unique selling point for the programme or application (Andrejevic, 2002). The incentive for TV viewers to use these apps is that they can engage and interact with television content (e.g. play along in quiz shows such as 'the million pound drop') and even influence the outcome.

From the point of view of the advertisers and media agencies, Beckers (expert interview, March 2013) and Rey (expert interview, July 2013) state that they are looking for ways to incorporate user data into their campaigns but might not necessarily be interested in the data traditional commercial broadcasters offer. Advertisers and media agencies can gather additional data through the analysis of television-related user content on social media, called 'Social TV'[12] (Rey, expert interview, July 2013).

Also, it is in the advertiser's best interest to attract users to their own platform, rather than that of the commercial broadcaster or network provider. Second screen applications such as 'Shazam' or 'Layer' can be added to a traditional 30 second spot, without even the knowledge of the broadcasters (Beckers, expert interview, March 2013). This also allows advertisers to process the data on a bigger scale or worldwide, without being restricted to data only concerning a Flemish audience.

Up to this point in the paper, we have been restricting the results of our interviews to the traditional actors within the television industry. However, when it comes to the collection of personal data it is also important to take note of other

12 See also : http://huguesrey.wordpress.com/2013/10/01/havas-media-septembre-2013-une-rentree-tv-tres-sociale/

initiatives that go beyond the traditional broadcasting sector. On the one hand, downloading content can be done illegally or through peer-to-peer sharing networks, allowing users to skip advertising or to infringe copyright (both important revenues for traditional commercial content providers). On the other hand new actors enter the content market, increasing competition for the traditional players in the television industry. These include over-the-top players (e.g. Netflix, Google, Apple) as well as consumer goods producers who now offer connected television devices which allow them to target consumers with content and advertising apps (e.g. Samsung, Apple). These could also provide very useful partnerships for advertisers.

Empowerment, commodification and innovation in the Flemish television industry

Previous sections allow us to identify the different strategies used by commercial broadcasters and advertisers in order to deal with affordances that technology offers users. It takes into account changes in power relations between new and incumbent players in the Flemish commercial television industry, depending on who gains from changes in audience behaviour. The centrality of audience behaviour, its measurement and commodification within the business model of traditional commercial broadcasters and advertisers, causes uncertainty in the ROI which is based on these standardised audience ratings (Napoli, 2003). The results of our interviews allow us to describe dynamics within the Flemish television industry that cause resistance to innovation (power struggles, see also Napoli, 2003; Napoli, 2011; Jennes & Pierson, 2013). However, the results also indicate that increased audience autonomy can motivate innovation in second screen applications. From the perspective of traditional broadcasters we note, on the one hand, strategies to hold back the usage of technologies that allow users to control their TV consumption such as the STB, which allows ad skipping without an alternative revenue model for the commercial broadcasters. On the other hand, commercial broadcasters in Flanders try to attract their (loyal) audiences to their own platforms and services. Our findings are in line with Carlson's (2006) findings concerning the launch of TiVo in the United States: "Existing television companies have responded to the above disadvantages and advantages created by DVRs through a combination of litigation and pressure as well as investment" (Carlson, 2006: 106).

This allows us to conclude that commodification does not necessarily involve the restriction of user choice or autonomy since the traditional players within the commercial television industry do not have the means to control all new initiatives and sometimes benefit from using the audiences' autonomy to add valuable personal data to their aggregated measurements. This requires (creative) innovation from traditional players within the television sector in order to engage and bind viewers or users to their own platforms. This way, the traditional players aim to increase advertising revenues through different channels.

Empowerment and commodification as interactive processes

We used Mansell's (2012) perspective on the paradox of complexity in the Internet era to provide a framework that allows us to overcome the boundaries of the concept of 'user empowerment' by defining it as stemming from a social imaginary that focuses on technology and human agency. We then opposed it to 'audience commodification', a concept used within political economy that stems from a social imaginary that focuses on technology and economic growth. The case of the Flemish commercial television industry provides insights that support what Delahaij (2004) describes as the industry trying to maintain their power, thus counterbalancing user empowerment by individuals.

As our interviews show, the idea of user empowerment can also be used by the industry to facilitate innovation in commodification practices. This does not necessarily result in less autonomy or availability of choice for media users but does contribute to our conclusion that empowerment and commodification can be seen as interactive processes within media innovation. As commercial television is organised as a two-sided market, audience behaviour and industry dynamics influence each other. The planning of media content, advertising campaigns and their Return On Investment (ROI) depends on accurate audience measurement, currently provided in an aggregated and standardised way. Changes in audience behaviour could lead to a decrease in accuracy of these measurements and –as we stated earlier- an increased need for more individual, personalized data that again would trigger innovations in TV content and advertising. This analysis thus concludes that 'user empowerment' and 'audience commodification' can both be seen as non-static concepts that refer to interactive processes that restrict or support innovation within media industries.

References

Andrejevic, M. (2002) 'The Work of Being Watched: Interactive Media and the Exploitation of Self-Disclosure', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19:2, 230-248.

Barnes, B. & Thomson, L. (1994) 'Power to the people(meter): Audience measurement technology and media specialization', in: Ettema J., Whitney D., (eds.) *Audiencemaking: How the media create the audience.* California: Sage.

Bermejo, F. (2009) 'Audience manufacture in historical perspective: from broadcasting to Google', *New Media Society*, 11:133-154.

Bolin, G. (2012) 'The Labour of Media Use: The Two Active Audiences', *Information, Communication & Society*, 15:6, 796-814.

Carlson, M. (2006) 'Tapping into TiVo: digital video recorders and the transition from schedules to surveillance television', *New Media Society*, 8:97-115.

Castells, M. (2009) '*Communication power'*, Oxford: Oxford University.

Cauberghe, Veroline (2008). *Determinants of the Impact of New Advertising Formats on Interactive Digital Television*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Universiteit Antwerpen, 12-13.

Cauberghe, V. & De Pelsemacker, P. (2006) 'Opportunities and thresholds for advertising on interactive digital TV: a view from advertising professionals', *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 7(1):12-23.

Chester, J. (2001) '*TV that Watches You: The Prying Eyes of Interactive Television.'* Center for Digital Democracy.

Delahaij, R. (2004) *'Dossier empowerment: empowerment methoden bij allochtone jongeren'*, Utrecht: FORUM.

Donders, K. and Evens, T. (2010) '*Broadcasting and its distribution in Flanders, Denmark and the United States: an explorative and future-oriented analyses – A research report for SBS Belgium.',* (working paper), Brussels: Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

Fuchs, C. (2012) 'Dallas Smythe Today - The Audience Commodity, the Digital Labour Debate, Marxist Political Economy and Critical Theory. Prolegomena to a Digital Labour Theory of Value.', *TripleC*, 10(2):692-740

Harvey, W. S. (2011) 'Strategies for conducting elite interviews', *Qualitative Research*, 11(4): 431-441.

iMinds-iLab.o (2012) '*Digimeter Report 5. Adoption and usage of Media & ICT in Flanders'*, Ghent: iMinds-iLab.o.

Jenkins, H. (2006) *'Convergence Culture. Where old and new media collide'*, New York: New York University Press.

Jennes, I. and Pierson, J. (2012) 'Audience measurement and digitalization: Integrating TV and Internet?', *International Journal of Digital Television*, 3(2): 239-252.

Jennes, I. and Pierson, J. (2013) 'Innovation in TV advertising in Flanders' in: Storsul T., Krumsvik A.H., (eds.) *Media Innovations. A multidisciplinary study of change,* Gothenburg: Nordicom.

Mansell, R. (2002): 'From digital divides to digital entitlements in knowledge societies', *Current sociology*, 50 (3), 407-426.

Mansell, R. (2012) *'Imagining the Internet: Communication, Innovation and Governance'*, Oxford: Oxford University press.

Miller, P. (1994) Made-to-order and Standardized audiences: Forms of reality in audience measurement, in: Ettema J., Whitney D., (eds.) *Audiencemaking: How the media create the audience*, California: Sage.

Napoli, Ph. M. (2003) *'Audience economics: Media Institutions and the Audience Marketplace.',* New York: Columbia University Press.

Napoli, Ph. M. (2011) '*Audience evolution: New Technologies and the transformation of Media Audiences.*' New York: Columbia University Press.

Norman, D. A. (1988) '*The Design of Everyday Things*. London: The MIT Pres

Pierson, J. (2012) 'Online privacy in social media: a conceptual exploration of empowerment and vulnerability', *Communications & Strategies (Digiworld Economic Journal)*, 4(88): 99-120.

Punie, Y. (2011) 'Introduction: New Media Technologies and User Empowerment. Is there a Happy Ending?', in J. Pierson & E. Loos & E. Mante-Meijer (Eds.) *New media technologies and user empowerment*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Pyungho, K. Harmeet, S. (2002) 'A machine-like new medium: theoretical examination of interactive TV', *Media, Culture & Society*, 24: 217-233.

Rappaport, J. (1987) 'Terms of Empowerment/Exemplars of Prevention', in *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 15 (2): 121-148.

Seles, S. (2010) '*Turn on tune in cash out: maximizing the value of television audiences*', Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

SEN, A. (1999): *Development as freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Slot, M. (2007) 'Changing user roles in ICT developments; the case of digital television' *Telematics and Informatics,* 24 (4), November 2007:303-314.

Smythe, D. (1977) 'Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism', *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 1(3): 1-28.

UBA (2010) '*Media-investeringen in België in 2010'*, Belgium: UBA.

Van den Broeck, W., Bauwens, J. & Pierson, J. (2010) 'The promises of iDTV: between push marketing and consumer needs.', *Telematics and Informatics*, 28(4):230 – 238.

Van den Broeck, W. (2011) '*From analogue to digital: the silent (r)evolution?*', Doctoral Thesis, Brussels: Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

Vermeylen, S. (2004) *'Werken met de SWOT-analyse: een handreiking voor een betere beleidsplanning.*' Brussel: Politeia.

VRM (2011) '*Mediaconcentratie in Vlaanderen'*. Rapport 2011, Belgium: VRM.