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VARIOUS FACES OF INTERACTIVITY: REMARKS ON TELEVISION

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Resumen

Se da un cierto consenso acerca de lo que la interactividad es en contacto con los medios: no los percibimos de forma pasiva (lo que es comúnmente, aunque erróneamente, creído) sino que reaccionamos a su contenido (inmediatamente o con algún retraso). Sin embargo, si profundizamos en esta afirmación, incluso este primer aspecto de nuestra actitud ante los medios es susceptible de reformularse, ya que la recepción nunca ha sido pasiva. El simple hecho de "trabajar" (también en el sentido sicoanalítico del término) con convenciones, reclamando contextos interpretativos de características de género no puede llamarse nunca propiamente comportamiento pasivo. El presente artículo desarrolla esta idea y la ejemplifica con el escenario más privilegiado: el medio rey de la televisión.

Abstract

More or less everybody knows what interactivity is in contact with the media; we not only watch them passively (as it is commonly, yet mistakenly, believed), but we also react to their content (immediately or with some delay). Even this very first trait of our attitude towards media facts seems to raise doubts; because watching has never been determined by passivity. "Work" (also in the psychoanalytical sense of this word) with conventions, recalling interpretative contexts or recognition of genre characteristics cannot be called passive behavior. Present article deals with this idea and focuses on the king media: television.

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Introduction

Watching has never been determined by passivity. The reception with conventions, recalling interpretative contexts or recognition of genre characteristics cannot be called passive behavior. The receiver undoubtedly reacts to media content – without delving at this time into how they affect him. The media "teach" receivers in may ways: they show how to behave and how not to; they make us realize consequences of various choices. The question is by what principle do we assign one code name "interactivity" to all these relations? Perhaps it is a methodological error or, which would be even worse, we create such a broad category that it in fact has no practical meaning.

Besides, we may ask if interactivity means that the media adjust to people, or these are people who adjust to the media. Those who believe that human's supremacy in these contacts is indisputable should remember that antropomorphization of computers or adding ornaments to TV sets are not rare things and give sufficient grounds to support the latter part of the above alternative.

My discussion focuses on the questions concerning the nature of interactivity of television. This choice will make me deal with a more problematic object of examination; interactivity between computers and their users (and between the users themselves) seems to be by all means "obvious". I am interested in television of the recent years, in particular its programming and the method of using Polish channels in the context of the notion of interactivity. First, I will describe the issue from a technological and humanistic point of view. In the following parts I will give examples of interactivity from the last ten-odd years, whereas in the last part I will focus on the remote control device, one of the most common gadgets for some, and an institution, or a gizmo-to-think-with, for others. Finally, I will try to address the questions concerning the possible methods of (necessary or enforced) development of interactive reactions in the Polish media society in the forthcoming years. These questions have mainly been prompted by the research conducted in 2006 at the request of UPC, comparing the habits of Polish television viewers to those of other nations.

1. When technology imposes interactivity or when man cannot live without it

We are compelled to a great extent by modern technology to interact with devices (or other men using the same device or a class of similar devices). It would be a mistake to believe that clicking buttons or moving a mouse are but a play of no importance or influence on the process of communication. On the contrary, the knowledge of behavior of the media receiver is priceless for the advertising industry, programming editors in broadcasting stations and for media market regulators. What is more, all the communication theories which preferred the communication from the sender to the receiver crumbled to dust. It is more and more evident that it is the receiver who dominates in the contemporary audio-visual communication. It is perhaps most obvious on the Internet, where the receiver of information had long forgotten of being passive and became a "prosumer" – a productive consumer.

Meanwhile, the issue is not that obvious with respect to the older media. Naturally, there is evidence of feedback: readers write to editors, call live shows, send text messages indicating their choices. However, the phenomenon seem "natural" and raise no excitation. Anyway, we know that it had existed before the dawn of the digital media era.

Several interesting standpoints crystallized in discussions regarding interactivity. The Polish researcher Ryszard Kluszczyński [1992: 96] states that this notion is the key characteristic of the new media art. He also claims that the traits of interactivity should not be attributed to the relationship between the sender and the receiver, as commonly believed, but to the message itself. Thereby the work-message carries the trait of interactivity and this feature is its structural characteristic. In this sense, we understand interactivity as special qualities of the work which „invites the receiver to join the conversation" or, in an extreme case, may "seduce" him. The potency of such contact is embedded in the work – it can be discovered and followed up, ignored or simply go unnoticed.

It raises the vexed question of interactivity meant as the common access and availability of contacts, in other words whether the fact that the contacts are reciprocal is the most important in the process. The answer is no – the acting force which initiates the need of contact between all elements of the communication structure is social by nature, rather than technological or merely contextual. What is more, it possesses traits of a special need and authority because, as Mark Andrejevic puts it, "At the extreme, interactivity ties a particular act

of production to a guaranteed act of consumption. In exchange, consumers are promised a degree of control over the production process: that power over the means of production will, in effect, be shared" [Andrejevic, 2001].

Indeed, in addition to often quoted ludic functions, the strength of interactivity is based on giving the receiver-producer, in other words prosumer, control (or an illusion of control) over the other elements of the communication structure. Thus, he may change the text and create it anew along his own rules. He has the capacity to change the terms and channels of the transmission, or even transfer the existing "content" to the new media (at this point interactivity strongly correlates with intertextuality, convergence and the much older principle of dialog – this coincidence of relationships has been well described by Henry Jenkins [1992]).

Some researchers [Jensen, 2002] perceive interactivity as a complex broadcast-receive game with three main participants: the medium, structure and agency. As a result of three relations (represented by three sides of a triangle) between these elements (represented by three vertices of the triangle), three kinds of interactivity are created. The interactivity of the first kind is the relationship between the user and the medium: „this type of interactivity may be defined as selectivity - selections by the user are required for the interaction to proceed at all" [Jensen, 2002: 184-185].

The interactivity of the second kind reflects the relationship between the media and the other parts of the social structure. According to the Danish researcher: „The research questions are familiar to the media field - media have been said to function as a watchdog, a Fourth Estate, a public sphere, or an institution-to-think-with." The third kind of interactivity concerns the relationship between the entity and its social sources. Jensen emphasizes the role of computer users, stating that „users perform a range of actions - the (re)production of physical objects, of personal relationships, organizations, communities, and of entire societies" [185].

The broad scope of understanding of this notion leads to an inevitable conclusion that in a communication by means of the television medium the second and third type of interactivity seem pre-eminent. In other words (seemingly) trivial clicking on a remote control button, when associated with television, inherently leads towards strongly social interpretations concerning both the general nature of social relationships and the role of the media in a given group.

This point of view is emphasized by another Polish researcher: "Still, the interactivity of this medium (television – WG) is strongly restricted, chiefly by the specific nature of the stream of visual messages in which a quarter of a century ago Raymond Williams saw the capacity to place the television world in the circle of our per-

sonal, even intimate experience, and at the same time to take us "out there". Therefore, this interactivity would be similar to that of a book and literature with its worlds which draw us in, as if we belonged to them. This interactivity cannot be reduced to mental processes of completing the "indefinable spaces" and "specification" of the message. It demands experience of alienation, a distance between us and the world we communicate with, and "immersion" in this world of transcendence and immanence at the same time" [Bauer, in press].

Therefore, it may be said that the interactivity of television must be limited, to a significant extent, in view of television strategy to seize privacy. Television more often simulates reality than delivers it. This also applies to the sphere of interactivity; television makes us convinced that we do something whereas in fact we do very little, if anything.

2. Can a remote control become the essence of interactivity?

Roaming the cultural landscapes, being the opposite of stillness and awaiting – the traits of a true rover - take us closer to the contemporary concepts of cultural navigation. Paul Levinson has conceived an anthropotropic concept which describes the man-driven evolution of the media in which the media start to function in a manner similar to human senses. In his opinion, there is a three-stage scheme of relations between the media and the human world. The equilibrium of the initial stage was soon distorted by the media. Yet, the emergence of the new media was to restore the previously lost balance.

I think that starting from the "democracy of media meanings" proposed by the British school of cultural sciences, we should notice an important disagreement between a digital medium with its message and the human perception abilities. Let us try to look at the moment into this relationship, where the receiver of digital transmission starts to notice that what he faces is a new quality. The question is, shouldn't we, instead of focusing on technology, speak of a radical revolution from the moment when the change has been noticed by the receiver/user and accepted by him as "normal"? I am thinking of an attempt to look at new technologies from an anthropological point of view, rather than merely technological one. It is possible to use new technologies against their "spirit", and viceversa: "old" technologies can be used in such a way as if they were "brand new". This gives raise to a number of questions: about our individual capabilities to perceive

digital television, then about social skills in this respect. These questions concern the technical culture already existing in a given community, but also the methods of learning it, or the very consciousness that these things should be taught. A story of one of the first VCRs at a Polish university, back in the beginning of the eighties, is a good example here. There was an employee appointed to watch over the machine as it recorded programs, even late at night. Nobody believed instruction manuals at that time, there was even no custom to read them. On the one hand, this process is continuing: my new printer, purchased online and paid for with a credit card, has no written manual at all, other than a few pictograms. "Instead" it lets me know in a beautiful female alto that it has just started or finished printing. On the other hand, we have begun to place considerable trust in machines, otherwise, we would never entrust them our money.

Let us take these remarks into consideration in the context of the remote control. The media work in a similar way as human senses, and the remote control is the border checkpoint opening an avenue to the world of simulacra and prostheses. Media users antropomorphize their appliances, they often adopt friendly attitude and treat them as family members. The question is, does this extend to the devices which only initiate contact with the "proper" appliances, hence facilitating or even enabling further contacts.

In Polish television interactivity commenced in the nineties with Polsat offering "movies at request", and hit parades based on viewers calling in. Viewers also played the role of jury, e.g. in the kids talent program *Od przedszkola do Opola*. Audiotele (ironically referred to as "Idiotele" because of trivial questions) was used as a basis for programming plans concerning soap operas production. More mature forms of interactivity in Polish television were related to a computer-themed program for adolescents called *Tenbit* (TVN) which, for proper perception, required a participant (who was no longer a mere viewer) to be concurrently online on an appropriate web page and to send responses via mobile phone. One could risk claiming that *Wielki Brat* (*Big Brother)* and *Idol* effected a transition to a more mature form of television interactivity. The viewer intensely staring at a TV screen, scanning a computer screen in search of instructions related to a program and sending text messages at the same time to fully participate in the program – it is not a vision of the future but a contemporary picture of the desired Polish viewer. This picture is so very different from the other ones discussed until recently that it requires an immediate description and consideration, unless it is already too late.

Mark Andrejevic proposed a category of "interpassivity" which would better describe the existing situation (the name is a redefined original concept of Slavoj Žižek).

Andrejevic states that the media today convince people that "they do more, whereas in fact they do even less". The Oxygen project pursued at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology brought about one more consequence. The intention behind the project was to create an interface which would be as invisible and as indispensable as air. That is why it is better to use the term "interpassivity", says the researcher from Iowa; the intervention of the interface is so minimal that its use becomes practically automatic.

It is said that Americans handed the interactive television relay baton to the British. Indeed, a lot has been done - roughly a million users experiments with hybrid Internet-TV services AOLTV and MSN TV which have been created (albeit this number fails to satisfy both broadcasters and advertisers). The early American experiments were ambitious but led to disappointments. They included the Qube system (Warner Amex Cable Communications) in Columbus, Ohio, in the seventies, and the Full Service Network (Time Warner in Orlando, Florida) in the mid-nineties. The former system let viewers vote during talk-shows.

In short the issue can be put this way: the time of living in the culture dominated by image went by; the things moved forward, and we have become a pure image. We may speak of a triumph of a culture based on total visual virtuality and absence of past images full of coded and decoded meanings. To follow this line of thinking: it all boils down to the fact that these complicated actions (although perceived as quite natural) can be performed with a palm-top gadget. The question is, whether in the context of the interaction between the television viewer and his television interface we should still call it a gadget?

What is all this about? A device nearly as old as a TV set (for US viewers), albeit it is much younger for Poles. It is an American device rooted in American symbols related, among other things, to an innocent word "choice". The remote control has been an incarnation of the television freedom - the right to choose freely a program and conditions of its presentation. But this word means much more in the American culture: AT&T uses the slogan „the right choice" in its advertisements, power suppliers are often referred to as "the power of choice". A hungry American is in a dilemma over a bun with the slogan "there is no better choice" offered by Wendy and McDonald's burger which is "the America's choice". Naturally, if you are thirsty you know that Coke is "the real choice", whereas „in copiers, the choice is Canon". Thus, the choice is not just a decision but an almost metaphysical experience of something "right" and solely correct. Additionally, the choice has the "power"; it is not only a common and natural thing to do but also necessity as it evidences the user's cultural competence.

The history of the device which gives us the choice in our television sets must take into account the fact that in 1992 98% of all color TVs were remote-controlled [Benjamin, 1993]. The first remote controls in the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century were used with radio receivers. They were placed in the rooms which family members visited most often. They let them turn on the speaker and adjust volume or tune to the favorite radio station. In the mid-thirties the remote control was equipped with two simple buttons which switched back to the previous station. Thus, one of the first controlling functions of the radio remote control (other than switching on and off) enabled an escape from commercials.

What can the remote control do today? It is hard to say because it has been merged with a home managing computer. Therefore, it has become an intelligent "friend" designated to control most of home electronics. All it takes is to place the remote in an infrared beam and, it will remember its signature. With data residing in memory, we can freely, even remotely program, register and execute operating schemes of electronic devices (the simplest example being "turn off the stereo when I turn on the TV").

What are the capabilities of TiVo − the prototype of intelligent television with hard-drive recording? According to an advertisement of this device:

- *it will pause viewed programs and offer simple recording*;

- it will provide sophisticated channel search (up to two weeks into the future) for thematic choice;

- recorded materials can be conveniently cataloged with instant access;

- TiVo connected to the Internet permits recording from any location; connected to a home computer creates an enhanced audio-visual mega-center.

Moreover, the remote control has become a cultural icon: dozens of American movies show games involving the device. One of the most favorite tricks of adolescents was to switch channels on a neighbors' TV set across the street, which required a sufficiently powerful device. In *Stay Tuned* kids rescued their father, a TV maniac who was sucked into the TV world. In this predicament losing or damaging the remote control became a matter of life and death (fortunately − only in the world of illusion, although US police records have seen cases of domestic violence and even murders caused by remote control deprivation). Without the remote control we would not have seen a number of very valuable new media films (e.g. Atom Egoyan, Peter Weir or Darren Aronofsky). Eventually, let us notice that owners of a great majority of contemporary receivers are completely helpless without the remote control; in the main, it is impossible to even tune to a station or to program the recorder.

Undoubtedly, the remote control is a pop-culture favorite gadget. Still, it is a subject matter of various scientific research which, generally, do not focus on the gadget itself but on its use, the desires it invokes and the needs it satisfies. It turns out that this small electronic device has been honored by a number of scientific conferences, at least two monographic papers and dozens of serious scientific publications. The following questions have been tackled:

- how do we learn to use the remote control and how does this device affect our social behavior?

- what kind of pleasures are achieved by adult viewers while watching programs with active use of the remote control?

- is it a toy or a serious tool (of control and active viewing behavior)?,

- how does the remote control affect the ways children watch TV?

- to what extent does the awareness of the use of the remote control by viewers influence the strategies of TV business and broadcasters?

- is the use of certain remote functions correlated with the user's sex?

- what are the forms of TV program control in the family in regard of sex and social roles? (Bellamy, R., Jr., Walker, J., 1996).

I imagine that these subjects may go on: what about domestic violence as a function of remote control use or the remote con-

trol as a tool to create a "TV story" from fragments of the TV stream?

I believe that we can easily speak of the "second generation of television viewers" which evolved with a nexus to the development of this device. The popularization of the remote control created a new method of watching TV. There are the viewers who take pleasure not only from the content and form of the programs, but also from the way they watch this medium. Thanks to the remote control the viewers find pleasure in avoiding the unwanted TV broadcasts (the separate question is, whether the remote control has triggered such needs or it is only an instrument to satisfy them). Flipping, zipping, zapping are the common references to various subtleties connected with actions aimed at commercial evasion (in the main) by switching to different channels. Viewers are satisfied because they believe they get from television more than they would get should they watch one channel only. Additionally, they may control the access of other family members to a program.

Other scientists pondered how the TV viewer interacted with the device. They decided that:

- the viewer most often presses the button representing a particular channel, or an up-arrow or down-arrow to visit other channels;

- then the viewer zaps using the "previous channel" button or uses the picture-in-picture function;

- the viewer may also scan the programming offer by slowly moving up or down the channels, or turn off the voice (see: Benjamin, 1993).

EPG has become a key function, one which requires the remote control like no other. It is an interesting subject of research for culture scientists. The point is to find ethnic particulars (if any) of navigating the Electronic Program Guide. The Finnish media scientist Jääskeläinen [2001] conducted a number of focused polls which concerned, as he defined it, six different genres of interactive television: commercials, computer games, "on demand" news magazines, Electronic Program Guide, remote learning and program information. With respect to the Electronic Program Guide he concluded that the situation in Finland is not typical: the Fins implemented a uniform interface for the TV viewer's contact with the TV customer service center. Therefore, any new operator would need to adjust to the principles defining such details of the interface as its template, size, scope of information and orders. This research raises intriguing questions whether the layout of buttons on the device has already been globalized or it can still accommodate national invariants? The latter case is against the belief concerning the global nature of the functionality of

the template and orientation of the remote control panel.

As I hear this kind of information I am less reluctant to believe that it will soon be gone; the "intelligent remote" enters the scene. A device which will recognize speech, thus saying "VOD on, dim lights" will be sufficient.

I do not know what such a remote control will look like. The only thing I know is that few of us will control anything with it because we are still unaware that it takes learning and that the situation needs a creative and positive attitude. While others will enjoy being in control we (Poles with anti-technological attitudes and many other groups) will stick to our good old homely choices: an up-arrow, a down-arrow. The sophisticated pop culture which created the television remote control craves for it in a particularly twisted way and cannot get on without it. What is more, everything seems to indicate that the remote control will not only become the primary icon of man's medial contact with the world, but also a source of such a contact.

The remote control has a good chance to become the most important device facilitating (enabling?) access to the media in the era of convergence. The reasons seem quite obvious:

- media users will interact with the content to such an extent that we will be able to talk about complete culture of participation;

- the receiver will be in control of the received content to a greater and greater degree, the more so as it will comprise materials recorded on various carriers, which will only "pretend" to be presented "live";

- the remote control will help the viewer evade commercials - this is a stereotype view because the device may as well draw the viewer's attention to the commercials of particular interest.

All this leads to popularization of the view that in the era of "lifestyle media" – characterized by domination of video content, active contact with other receivers and the ability to receive broadcast at any time and place – the remote control will become a less exciting, yet indispensable, tool. It will become, if it is not already, a prosthesis, an extension of not only our hands but also eyes, brains and the whole "self".

I remember a serious discussion with one of the Polish Television presidents in which he declared his conviction that the "TVP 1" brand of his station was indestructible. He claimed that TVP1 would always have the greatest audience because on most of the Polish remote controls this program was coded under number one. I wished the presidents had other arguments in support of the quality offered by their stations, but this statement is intriguing in itself. Is this a fact indeed? And first of all, does it have any serious implications? Let us look at an online discussion on a similar topic.

It started with a comment by mikospa on October 21, 2004 on a www.gazeta.pl forum, under an intriguing title "Bare your remotes":

"I propose to write in this thread the settings of your remote controls. For example the first fifteen channels. I wonder who has what and where?

Then we can summarize it (a task for the GW editors) and create a "map" of Polish remote controls, while also analyzing favorite stations without looking at viewing polls. The more persons post their settings, the more credible will the result be, in statistical terms. :-)

Here is my list:

1. TVP1, 2. TVP2, 3. POLSAT, 4. TV4, 5. MTV, 6. MTV CLASSIC, 7. TVP3, 8. TVN, 9. TVP POLONIA, 10. TVN24, 11. TVN7, 12. ALE KINO, 13. EUROSPORT, 14. EUROSPORT NEWS, 15. CNN.

Does this list say something about me? :-)".

And there it started. The net surfers submitted the configurations of channels programmed into their remotes, and the following prevalent pattern emerged: the two state television programs went first (TVP1 and TVP2), usually followed by Polsat and TVN. Note that for years this sequence reflected the share of these stations in the advertising market: the first program had the greatest share, followed up by the second program, etc.

This led to funny and very common situations, as probably each of us has this one

favorite and one notorious button on the remote. The discussion was interesting because it raised serious questions about the use of the remote. Although we can only consider this a merely initial study of the issue, rather than a justified opinion, it was worth starting. Especially as there is hard data regarding Poles' attitude towards the media, and indirectly the remote control. The data was produced, among other things, by the European comparative studies conducted at the request of UPC (published in the www.wirtualnemedia.pl portal, access January 20, 2007).

It transpires that the image of customs of Polish television viewers is very shady. For example, the results relating to program recording are dismal: 65% of the viewers in Poland do not do it, in Europe this percentage is even lower: 48% of the television viewers. Even the younger generation does not help the unfavorable statistics - still 55% of them do not record anything on any available carriers.

Almost half of the Europeans do not record the programs which they cannot watch. It is probably bad. However, a glance at the television-related behavior of the young brings about some optimism – almost 60% of them do use recorders (including 21% who use DVD and 19% who search the Internet for the missed programs).

The fact that the penetration of the Internet in search of the missed TV programs is higher in Poland than in Europe (25% in Poland, 21% in Europe) seems to be the only consolation. This provokes the question about how we treat television: isn't it something too volatile, insignificant, something that we are careless about? Do the programs leave us indifferent since we accept their loss so easily?

As much as 40% of European television viewers (and even more, 50%, while considering those before the age of 30) have no TV watching plans and decide on any result of flicking through the channels with use (or abuse) of the remote control. The good news is that, globally, the majority of people analyze programming and watch a particular audition rather than whatever is on.

Traditionally we learn what to watch from printed television magazines or the press in general (total of 75% in Europe). But the Internet and EPG lurk round the corner: as much as 65% of the viewers before they are 30 years old obtain programming information from these sources (this percentage can be overstated because it pertained to an Internet panel). Moreover, programming directors sweat, whereas advertising experts rejoice to see that television viewers more and more often decide to watch a chosen TV program under the influence of the television stream. It means that a good trailer accompanying a show, internal advertising and program content as such make the viewer stay with the channel.

Having read the above pages the reader no longer needs to take for granted that we

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indeed face a new branch of interdisciplinary human sciences research (references to the mythical function of the remote control are made several times, besides, there is a serious discourse regarding the contribution of the research on the remote control to the phenomenology of perception). Yet, seriously speaking, we should prepare for the forthcoming "third generation" viewer, with the remote control accommodating new methods of use.

We should not forget that the remote may play a key role in the new reality: no longer as a primitive gadget but as an intelligent key to a sphere of unknown stimuli.

Conclusions: Coda: what kind of interactivity do we need?

I am convinced that these results contribute profoundly to our knowledge of the structure of television audience. They corroborate what is obvious, e.g. gender-driven reception and division into "male" and "female" genres. But they also uncover new tendencies, such as the fact that the Polish viewers under 30 years of age almost do not depart in their receiving behavior from the European average. However, we also have a fairly large and quickly growing group of elder viewers who are reluctant to surf the Internet, dislike interactive text message contacts with the screen and hardly ever record their favorite programs (perhaps they do not even have such).

It is high time to start thinking about two models of television reception and accordingly adjusted two kinds of broadcast. The latter group particularly needs public television: more relaxed, mission-driven (whatever this would mean) and first of all

"syntagmatic" – containing a little bit of everything and sorted in a comprehensible and acceptable order. This is what television used to be – a "stream of images from our lives". The former of the two groups, the one conforming to European customs, will probably visit so-defined valuable programs of public stations. But for them television will amount to games and fun with flicking channels, connecting to the Internet, recording and creating programs according to their own competence and whims.

The research illustrates that the Polish model of television and the use of it do not adhere to the European templates. It does not mean that we must immediately adjust to this relatively uniform standard. However, it certainly means that we should very seriously discuss the model of the public television of tomorrow, teaching good practices at school, calming down the

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race in which public stations try to chase the commercial ones. The interactivity in both models will be obligatory, yet homely. The ability to control and the opportunity to make ceaseless choices will become the day-to-day life of the television viewer.

Therefore, it will be necessary to seriously think over what is normal and ordinary.

We have hard times ahead; watching TV out of boredom by older and older audiences may solidify hardly creative habits. And for sure it would mean the end of the television culture as we know it.

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