

‘Media Multitasking’ is not always Multitasking

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INTRODUCTION

Over time, studies have shown a steady increase in the consumption of electronic media. In a 2005 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation on media usage among 8 to 18 year-old Americans, the amount of time consuming media actually started to show signs of plateauing at 6.5 hours a day [6]. Surprisingly, that didn’t stop the growth of media consumption, which rose to 8.5 hours worth of media, exceeding the total time spent consuming media. American youth were able squeeze more media into the same amount of time through ‘media multitasking’.

Many studies have demonstrated the negative effects of multitasking; the quality of one’s output and depth of thought deteriorate as the number of parallel tasks increase. This leads some to make predictions on how this emerging ‘media multitasking’ trend will impact the lives of these youth as they transition to adulthood. “Kids that are instant messaging while doing homework, playing games online and watching TV, I predict, aren’t going to do well in the long run,” says Jordan Grafman, chief of the cognitive neuroscience section at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS). [7]

Implicit in this line of reasoning is the idea that each media channel is a separate task, but this is often not the case. For many tasks, adding another media channel isn’t about switching attention back and forth, it’s about directing attention in a new way. These additional channels facilitate co-interpretation, collaboration, perspective reorientation, and collective sense-making of media content.

These multichannel tasks are many times the result of people finding ways to accomplish traditional face-to-face tasks over a distance. The emergence of ‘media multitasking’ presents an opportunity for designing technologies that leverage multiple media channels and screens to facilitate shared experiences at a distance. The following set of examples should illustrate how multichannel media can be combined towards a single task.

EXAMPLES OF MULTICHANNEL TASKS

Family Communication

Improving the quality of family communication across generations and distances is a current research topic in



Figure 1. Example of an emerging trend of parents reading to children over video conference.

our team at Nokia Research Center. Through our field research, it is clear that video conferencing has become a popular way for distant family members to keep in touch with children [1]. One emergent activity in this context involves reading books to children over video conference [2] (see fig. 1). Parents can encourage dialogue around the book by asking open-ended questions and allowing children to verbalize their thoughts with appropriate scaffolding (sometimes referred to as dialogic reading [9]). In this scenario, the book (with a copy of the book on each side of the video conference) serves as the primary media channel, and the video conference serves as the supporting channel that facilitates co-interpretation of the book. How can we leverage ‘media multitasking’ trends to improve this shared experience with future digital book and videoconferencing technologies?

Social TV

In recent years, much attention has been given toward using communication technology to create remotely shared experiences around TV content. These systems layer a combination of communication channels (such as presence information, text chat, voice chat, or video chat) on top of shared TV programming [3, 4, 5, 8]. Advocates of this idea see watching television as a social activity capable of reinforcing bonds in established relationships.

Combining Television and Games

We are also beginning to see games that leverage multichannel media consumption. Sopranos A&E Connec-

tion¹ mixes the game mechanics of a scavenger hunt, and bingo. Players use their cellphones to collect pieces that can then be composed on an online gameboard. Pieces are strategically positioned in anticipation of what might happen in the upcoming episode. During the show airtime, the gameboard comes to life and animates synchronously to activate tiles that are relevant to the progress of the episode. Points are scored based on the frequency and position of the tiles. This multichannel task redirects the perspective of the viewer by fostering anticipation the upcoming episode and bringing excitement to otherwise mundane scenes.

CONCLUSION

These examples scratch the surface of the broad range of possibilities for multichannel tasks. Instead of viewing ‘media multitasking’ as continuous distraction, we should be considering how to embrace this trend and design media to be used across multiple media channels and multiple screens. Several open questions remain:

- How should ‘media multitasking’ impact the way content is produced and delivered?
- How do we design multichannel media and related technologies in ways that do not deteriorate but enrich face-to-face interactions?
- Should we be rethinking our techniques for education to actively foster multichannel collaboration (even for traditionally individual homework)?

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¹<http://playareacode.com/work/sopranos/>