

1

The Backchannel

*Bringing the Social
Conversation to the
Forefront*

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On Sunday, February 9, 1964, The Beatles appeared for the first time on television sets across America.¹ Seventy-three million people tuned in to *The Ed Sullivan Show* at eight o'clock, Eastern Time, to experience the fresh sounds of the hugely anticipated British rock band broadcasting live from New York City on the CBS television network.

As the iconic curtain rose for the 779 time,² Ed Sullivan welcomed his viewers with news that The Beatles had just received a wire from Elvis Presley wishing them “tremendous success in our country.”³ The 728 audience members, watching the events unfold in person from CBS-TV Studio 50, erupted with loud applause and cheers.

Ed Sullivan took his spot on stage following a commercial break and exclaimed five simple words that would trigger a release of the pent-up excitement of over 23,000 US households: “Ladies and gentlemen, The Beatles!” Hysterical screams ensued and held for eight seconds before “All My Loving” (sung by Paul McCartney) kicked off the first of two sets.

It was during the second song, “Till There Was You,” when each of the “Fab Four” was introduced via an onscreen lower third overlay of their first name displayed in bold white block letters. “PAUL” was the first to be introduced and was quickly followed by “RINGO” and then “GEORGE.” As the camera panned over to John Lennon, his name came with a subtitle that read, “SORRY GIRLS, HE’S MARRIED.”⁴

This episode, which aired during *The Ed Sullivan Show*’s seventeenth season, ranks among the most watched primetime broadcasts in US television history.⁵ As Sullivan proclaimed, “Tonight the whole country is waiting to hear England’s Beatles.” While most of America indeed tuned in, the TV viewing experience was relegated to the living room in 1964. Coviewing was therefore defined

in terms of whatever family members or friends happened to be watching and sitting right next to each other.

Hundreds of thousands of simultaneous discussions occurred during that infamous Sunday night. Viewers reacted to the events on their TV screens as they unfolded in real-time over the course of the 60-minute show. Yet those conversations were contained within the households in which they took place, and in the hallways and around many watercoolers at offices throughout the country on Monday morning. What were the raw, in-the-moment reactions to unexpected turns like the witty John Lennon lower third or message from Elvis? We will never really know for sure beyond viewers' firsthand accounts and reminisced anecdotes.

Television and Social Media Have Blended

Of course, 1964 was over four decades ago—four decades before TV viewing audiences started tweeting on Twitter and posting status updates to Facebook. Fast-forward 47 years to today's modern television experience, and you'll find that social media has given birth to a real-time “backchannel” made up of the millions of living, organic social expressions that act as a participatory companion to our favorite TV broadcasts. It exposes the conversations taking place in our once-isolated living rooms and connects households around the world into a single, opt-in, covieing event.

Social media has become one of the highest cousing mediums with TV.⁶ The portability of today's laptops, coupled with the steady rise in smartphone and tablet adoption, has made cozying up on the couch and being connected to the Internet in front of the television not only in vogue, but also a very natural and comfortable part of the TV experience.

Forrester Research reports that a survey of close to 3,000 US online adults revealed that 48 percent claim to use a personal computer while watching TV to chat, browse, or research what they are

watching.⁷ As the number of people engaging within social media continues to increase, the amount of online conversations about television *while* shows are airing within those platforms also increases.

Meet the Backchannel

The next time you tune in to television during its original airtime (versus watching something you have recorded on your DVR), type the name of whatever TV show you are watching into Twitter's search box at <http://search.twitter.com>. You will see staring right back at you the raw, real-time, and unfiltered stream of consciousness of the most basic version of television's backchannel. Twitter has become an integral outlet for TV viewers who are looking to express themselves while watching broadcasts of their favorite television programs.

Online conversation happens about a given TV show before, during, and after one of its episodes airs. Television's backchannel, however, is defined as the real-time chat that is happening within social media channels *during* the time that episode is broadcast. Consider it the additive subtext that connects you into a giant virtual coviewing party.

For example, when the Britney Spears episode of hit television program *Glee* aired on Fox in September of 2010, the backchannel produced over 285,000 tweets about the show.⁸ That was back when Twitter averaged about 90 million tweets per day and was just shy of 5 percent of registered American users.

As of July 2011, the Twitter community is producing over 200 million tweets per day⁹ and in September of 2011, Twitter announced it reached 100 million active users.¹⁰ The 2011 Women's World Cup final broke a seven-month-old tweets per second record.¹¹ Seven thousand one hundred ninety-six tweets were created on the backchannel in just one second at the end of the soccer game, which was a live television broadcast.

This record was trumped 42 days later by Beyoncé's now-infamous baby bump reveal at the 2011 MTV Video Music Awards.¹² After her

performance of “Love On Top,” Beyoncé soaked in the audience’s applause, tossed her microphone onto the stage, unbuttoned her purple sequined blazer, and showed the world she was pregnant. Eight thousand eight hundred sixty-eight tweets burst into the Twitter backchannel over the course of a single second and spread like wildfire as people across the globe shared the news. In effect, the Twitter backchannel is like an electrocardiogram (EKG) of television’s heartbeat.

The Backchannel Is More Than Twitter

The average person has “liked” at least six television shows on Facebook. With over 800 million active monthly users worldwide—30 percent of whom are in the United States¹³—Facebook is as much a part of the real-time conversation around television as Twitter is. The big difference, however, is that the large majority of Facebook profiles are set as private and therefore bound by the interconnections of Facebook friends only. Yet there are a growing number of ways for communities of interest to publicly connect into the backchannel using this social network.

A defining moment for Facebook within the TV space happened when two engineers mashed up a newsfeed stream with a video viewer. This laid the groundwork for Facebook’s live stream box application piloted during the 2009 presidential inauguration on CNN.com. The result was close to 27 million unique live streams served.¹⁴ Those watching the video stream were able to post Facebook status updates directly from the streaming player and toggle between updates from everyone posting or those just from friends.

Among the Facebook and TV network partnerships that ensued includes a special edition of *Meet the Press*, which aired on January 8, 2012, just two days before the New Hampshire primary election. As host David Gregory moderated the debate amongst Republican presidential candidates, the show was simulcast on the

Meet the Press Facebook page. Viewers on Facebook were able to interact and share their questions while following the backchannel conversation as the debate was happening.

Twitter Gets More Attention

To do some of the most interesting, innovative stuff in television today, you actually don't need any new devices; you don't need any new apps or crazy fiber optic infrastructure. What you need is the will to produce TV in a new way.

—Robin Sloan, Content and Programming at Twitter, Inc.

Twitter's simplicity and easy access to its data tends to garner it more attention than any other platform within the social TV space. Its completely open and public nature makes any barriers to participation essentially nonexistent. One does not even need to have a Twitter account to view a given tweet stream. As (former) Twitter's Robin Sloan pointed out to us, "One of the things that's very important to any kind of interactive TV technology or platform is that people know the vocabulary and what they're supposed to do. If you have to give people the instruction manual before every experience, it's not going to work. With Twitter, you can put a hashtag on screen or an @ handle and people know what you're talking about. They know what that is. I think it's that simple recognition that makes it so incredible."

According to a *TV Guide* research study, 50 percent of Twitter users discuss the shows they are watching on television, versus 35 percent of Facebook users.¹⁵ When doing the math, it should be noted that the active worldwide Facebook community outnumbers the equivalent Twitter user-base by about eight times. While the behavioral propensity to share TV experiences might be greater on Twitter, the sheer number of people who share ends up being larger on Facebook.

However, the study neither addressed the volume of television content shared comparatively between the two social networks nor

weighed their relative amplification effect. Yet the point remains the same: The masses have taken to social networks to share their TV experiences as their favorite shows air ingraining a new and common behavior in TV viewers everywhere.

The Backchannel Is Reviving Live TV

The fact that you can interact on a different level with someone on Facebook or Twitter or get feedback from stars and experience information coming back to you on the second screen is driving a lot more people to return to watching television shows as they air.

—Christina Warren, Entertainment Editor at Mashable

There is no doubt that social media amplifies the feeling of being connected and part of something bigger when watching television. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*'s Kara Swisher,¹⁶ *Modern Family* creator Steve Levitan mentioned how he and his writers monitor the Twitter backchannel during new episode airings of his show. They are able to get a sense of which lines they wrote resonated the most by reading the real-time “Twitter laughter” that appears in 140-character tweets at a time.

While the experience of a highly engaged, lean-forward community is a compelling carrot to entice television viewers to return to the behavior of tuning in to television as it airs, the real motivating stick might be the fear of content spoilers. Twenty percent of TVGuide.com users reported that they are watching more live television broadcasts because they do not want the potential of people within their social networks to ruin the plots of their favorite shows.¹⁷

Viewers on the West Coast who fell victim to the time-zone tape delay of the 2011 *Grammy Awards* took to social media en masse to blame that same medium for spoiling the broadcast.¹⁸ Winners, inevitably, ended up trending on Twitter as East Coast friends and followers posted updates three hours before a good portion of America was able to tune in.

This poses a dilemma for television networks in the age of social media and the real-time Web. Content can no longer be contained within time zones. The backchannel has shattered geographical boundaries in a very open, public, and mass reach way. A single tweet containing a spoiler could amplify and spread to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people in a matter of hours, if not minutes.

In April 2011, the BBC broke new ground when they decided to air the latest season of *Doctor Who* in the United States on the same day that it premiered in Great Britain.¹⁹ In the past, the delay window between countries was a minimum of a couple of months, causing anxious Americans to seek out and watch copies of the show that were illegally uploaded online. So while social media was spoiling the content, the Web-at-large was actually distributing it.

Television Networks Have Embraced the Backchannel

It's so easy to forget that five years ago TV producers used to be scared about mentioning a URL on air that, somehow, it would be a distraction to the audience. Now there is a real feeling that social and digital is making what we're doing on television all the stronger.

—Ryan Osborn, Director of Social Media at NBC News

For the first time in 30 years, the 2010 *Emmy Awards* television broadcast had no West Coast time delay. Not only did host Jimmy Fallon integrate viewer tweets into the live broadcast; but NBC parallel broadcasted backstage video online using streaming service Ustream, which has a native Twitter and Facebook “social stream” backchannel integration. The embedded streaming player across various NBC online properties helped to amplify the backchannel conversation and increase their overall reach.

One of the first television networks to bring buzzworthy innovation to the backchannel was MTV, dating back to the 2009 Video Music Awards. In partnership with social media monitoring

company, Radian6 and Stamen Design, MTV created a real-time Twitter tracker that visually depicted the volume of tweets about each celebrity by the size of their respective headshot. As the VMAs TV broadcast progressed, the array of celebrity headshots each separately expanded and contracted as the conversation about them increased and decreased.

The climax of the visualization experience was when country music star Taylor Swift was awarded Best Female Video, and Kanye West hijacked her acceptance speech. Back on the visual Twitter tracker, the headshots of both Taylor and Kanye dominated the second screen as the backchannel exploded with tweets about the incident. A visual Ping-Pong match ensued for a brief moment as their respective headshots took turns jockeying for screen real estate until Kanye's headshot practically enveloped the entire screen.

There was a staggering amount of Twitter activity about the incident taking place on the real-time backchannel. In fact, there were close to two million tweets over the course of the two coastal VMAs broadcasts—which, at the time, ended up tripling Twitter's average tweet volume.²⁰ The day after the broadcast, MTV.com had its second highest record number of visitors ever.²¹

The Backchannel Gets Armed with Filters and Visuals

The success of MTV's pilot backchannel visualization during the 2009 Video Music Awards led them to enhance and expand the concept for the 2010 Movie Awards broadcast—which produced even greater engagement results. The network has since brought the backchannel to life visually for all of its televised award shows.

Toward the end of 2010, Bravo launched its version of a Twitter tracker, aptly called the “@Bravotv Tweet Tracker.” Users are able to easily segment the Twitter conversation by TV show and then drill down and engage with individual tweets about that show. The entire experience is embedded into Bravo's website and wrapped within

a compelling—and even somewhat addicting—user experience. The elegance of Bravo's solution is that it is *always on*, which provides round the clock backchannel engagement for the network's diehard fans.

TV Shows Realize the Power of the Hashtag

It is becoming commonplace and best practice for TV shows to display onscreen Twitter hashtags. This serves as both an acknowledgment that there is already a backchannel conversation taking place on Twitter, as well as an instructional prompt for viewers to join in by tweeting their own thoughts. It creates a backchannel amplification effect with a very simple execution.

Comedy Central displayed a persistent #comedyawards hashtag in the lower left corner of the TV screen throughout the duration of its two-hour Comedy Awards show. Many of the Fox network shows are now sporting individual hashtags including #Glee. And viewers tuning in to the summer 2011 HBO season premieres were met with show name hashtags appearing on new episode previews that effectively prompted them to tweet about the given program on the backchannel.

Twitter has found through their own analysis—after having conducted numerous television integrations—that there is an immediate 2 to 10 times increase in the number of backchannel tweets created about a given TV show when an onscreen hashtag is included in the broadcast.²¹

Our Tweets Are Becoming Television Content

Two pioneering TV shows that integrated backchannel Twitter content directly into their actual television broadcasts are *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* and *106 & Park*. One of the shows selects

content in between episode airings, while the other does it live from the real-time backchannel. Both employ the use of various hashtags to elicit near instant responses from TV viewers and Twitter followers.

Late Night has found its groove with social media by reaching out to fans in a way that generates hilarious content for the show using actual tweet responses to fill-in-the-blank hashtags. Host Jimmy Fallon will introduce a hashtag topic on the previous night's broadcast and tweet it out—for example, #slapyourself. Show producers will then monitor the resulting tweet stream and pull a short list of their favorites. Jimmy will select 8 to 10 tweets to be read on his next show. The result is pure hilarity.

106 & Park, which airs weeknights live on BET, is reminiscent of a modern day version of MTV's *Total Request Live*—yet it is designed entirely around Twitter. As the network's most popular music series, various hip-hop and R&B music videos are requested via Twitter, and live artist interviews are featured. When on-air talent is introduced, their lower third onscreen display simply has their name and Twitter handle.

Everything about *106 & Park* epitomizes audience interactivity—not only with its live studio audience but also the show's virtual viewers via Twitter. Each day, the show introduces a new hashtag and features resulting tweets on a large interactive in-studio “Twitter board.” For example, #NeverInAMillionYears produced thousands of tweets from loyal fans. *106 & Park*'s hashtags often end up trending worldwide on Twitter.

Television Talent Discovers Live Tweeting —

The day Oprah Winfrey joined Twitter was the day the microblogging platform suddenly seemed mainstream. On April 17, 2009, Oprah tweeted for the first time—of course, she did it on her show. It was fitting that she had Twitter cofounder and then-CEO Ev Williams guiding her along the way: “HI TWITTERS. THANK YOU

FOR A WARM WELCOME. FEELING REALLY 21st CENTURY.” Despite the spelling error and all caps faux pas, this was yet another milestone for Twitter—which was about to experience its share of more celebrities joining.

During the broadcast of his premiere episode on CNN, host Piers Morgan—who admitted to viewers that he had gone from hating to absolutely loving and embracing Twitter—decided to live tweet commentary while the taped show aired. “I’ll be live tweeting during my 1st show tonight at 9pm ET in America, and then again at 8pm UK time tomorrow night.” Watching the premiere while following Piers’s Twitter stream gave viewers a bit of a peek behind the curtain throughout his interview with—ironically—Oprah.

And a funny thing happened one Saturday afternoon in 2011 just two days before Valentine’s Day. During an HBO rebroadcast of the movie *Private Parts*, notorious radio personality (and star of the movie) Howard Stern unexpectedly took to Twitter and began tweeting from an insider’s perspective: “the monologue on the plane about carol alt was spontaneous. I just started talking into the camera and there was only one take.”

At first, a number of Howard Stern’s Twitter followers were confused as his tweets appeared almost rapid fire in their timelines without any context. But once they caught on to the fact that Stern was referencing his movie as a real-time commentary, they were singing his praises and tuning in to watch HBO. Many tweeted back saying they were glued to their seats as a result.

Apparently inspired by Howard Stern’s Twitter stunt, *Survivor* host Jeff Probst began live tweeting himself during airings of his CBS reality show. “Don’t forget—no DVRing *Survivor* tonight. Join me LIVE as I tweet while we all watch the show together. It’s a global conversation.”

Twitter analyzed the overall *Survivor* tweet volume from episode-to-episode during the fall 2010 season of *Survivor* (when there was no live-tweeting) and compared it with the spring 2011 season, when Probst became active on the Twitter backchannel. The results were astounding. Most of the shows during the fall season

produced under 5,000 tweets per episode, whereas in the spring season the volume per episode was, in most cases, between 5 to 7 times higher.²²

Social media creates the feeling of a more direct and intimate interaction between celebrities and their fans. This leads to a more engaged TV viewing audience who are increasingly abandoning their DVRs to tune in live. The lure of connecting within a community through a shared real-time experience is a compelling force.

But does the backchannel lead to ratings increases? In the case of *Survivor*, it did not. The show's spring 2011 season ratings were down across multiple demographic segments in comparison to the fall and the drop-off was most pronounced with younger viewers. Yet other shows—like MTV's VMAs and Movie Awards—continue to see ratings increases. (We take a much deeper dive on the correlation between social media and TV ratings in Chapter 5.)

Choosing Your Own Backchannel Adventure

The backchannel has evolved greatly from its fire hose roots. In June of 2011, Twitter rolled out a new version of its search feature—one that, by default, delivers the most algorithmically relevant information in the form of “top tweets.” As Twitter's Director of Content and Programming Chloe Sladden points out:

I am so excited that we're finally in a world where you can watch the Super Bowl and be on Twitter and have an algorithmically refined search without needing to do anything “extra.” You just click on the hashtag #superbowl in a Tweet—which provides a far more compelling set of search results now. However, that is still only an algorithmic and universal experience; so the question becomes, what can a network do on top of that to shape it? Just because it's getting resonance doesn't mean it's the best complement to the TV broadcast. There's an

opportunity for producers to shape and mold the best Twitter-plus-TV experiences.

Networks have taken formal strides with television's backchannel that, while still open and public, offer viewers choices in making their backchannel experience a bit more personalized. After a successful trial-run in April of 2011, CBS hosted its second "Tweet Week" five months later—this time in promotion of its new fall television season. Each night during the weeks of September 12 and September 19, 2011, CBS featured one or two primetime series where fans could chat with talent from the given show who were live tweeting during the broadcast. The 11 selected series included *Hawaii Five-0*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *The Good Wife*.²³

The network upped the ante again during the week of November 6, 2011. Stars and talent from 23 various CBS television shows and events (including *How I Met Your Mother* and *Mike & Molly*) took over their respective show's Facebook page and Twitter accounts in what CBS called "Social Sweep Week."²⁴

During the 2011 Primetime Emmy Awards on Fox, there was, of course, the official @PrimetimeEmmys Twitter account as the backchannel's emcee-of-sorts. But there was also *Glee*'s Lea Michele (@msleamichele) and *The Good Wife*'s Josh Charles (@MrJoshCharles), who live tweeted the event, sharing their bird's-eye view with everyone following them on Twitter. For those wanting a different backchannel experience, viewers could follow the likes of TV insiders James Poniewozik (@poniewozik), Jesse Fox (@JesseDavidFox), or number of others giving their flavor of #emmys commentary.

Putting All the Backchannel Components Together

NBC's *The Voice* premiered on April 26, 2011. The show's synopsis, at its ground level, was a reality-based singing competition. Following a series of on-air auditions, four celebrity musicians

(Adam Levine, Cee Lo Green, Christina Aguilera, and Blake Shelton) mentored contestants that performed live in front of a studio and TV viewing audience who cast votes for their favorite performances.

From a production perspective, *The Voice* was anything but ordinary; it broke new ground in the convergence of TV and social media. Show producers designed *The Voice*—adapted from a Dutch TV show—to have social media as its soul. On-air talent accessibility, openness, community, and connection were all tenets of the show's social media strategy. Their goal was to create a real-time coviewing experience that allowed spectators to become and feel as though they were part of the show. They succeeded by incorporating all of the best that the backchannel has to offer television.

#TheVoice hashtag was displayed on the broadcast screen—but unlike the Comedy Awards, it appeared only intermittently during strategic times when the Twitter backchannel conversation was most likely to amplify. Selectively displaying the hashtag made it behave in almost an alert-like fashion, which helped to mitigate the potential that viewers would tune out. As a result, 70 percent of the tweets about the show included its respective hashtag.²⁵

The show's celebrity judges and host Carson Daly live tweeted consistently during episodes and commercial breaks. The program also established guidelines in advance that prohibited the on-air talent from tweeting any spoilers. Select backchannel tweets from both celebrities and the viewing audience appeared as lower thirds onscreen. Not only were people able to watch the show through the lens of the on-air talent; they were also able to experience the backchannel as integrated TV content.

The Voice producers instituted the concept of a backstage social media command center. When the show would cut away to the “V-Room,” host Alison Haislip showcased trending topics and asked contestants questions selected from the backchannel on both Twitter and Facebook.

In addition to producing multiple worldwide Twitter trending topics as the show aired, the premiere episode of *The Voice* had

eight times more conversation on the backchannel than the following night's *American Idol* broadcast and was the most discussed episodic TV show at the time—even beating out *Glee*.²⁶

TV Shows Are Not the Only Backchannel Conversation Topic

During the Lost series finale, a lot of the online chatter was about the Target ads and how they were so good because they were contextual back to Lost.

—Geri Wang, President of Sales and Marketing at ABC

In June of 2006, Liberty Mutual launched a new marketing campaign to underscore the brand's core value of responsibility. The insurance company's TV commercials depicted a series of interconnected random acts of kindness set to the soundtrack of "Half Acre" by Hem. A toddler in a stroller drops her stuffed animal and a passerby stops to pick it up as the toddler's mother gives a glance of enormous, genuine gratitude. Later, as she buys something from the local bakery, she notices a patron's coffee mug is about to fall off the edge of the table at which he is seated—so she pushes it inward to avoid an accident. A man who happens to be standing at the coffee shop window notices the good deed and later helps a person up who has slipped and fallen on the wet sidewalk due to a downpour.

The pay-it-forward theme goes on for another six acts over the course of the 60-second TV spot. It resolves to a jogger who had earlier seen a man driving a pickup truck let a car pass through a gridlocked traffic jam. The jogger picks up a teddy bear that has fallen out of a baby carriage and places it back into the hands of the infant who dropped it. The camera pans up to the father pushing the carriage to reveal a familiar face. He is the person who performed the same good deed at the beginning of the commercial.

Thomas Okasinski, a retired engineer from Michigan, was so moved after seeing the Liberty Mutual commercial that he wrote

and mailed the following letter, along with a modest check, directly to Liberty Mutual's Chief Executive Officer Ted Kelly:

Dear Mr. Kelly:

Kudos on your recent television advertisement, which depicts one act of kindness leading to another. I really love it.

In this age of TV comedy put downs, gratuitous sex and violence, negative political campaign advertising, it's refreshing to see something uplifting to the spirit. It makes your company stand above the rest.

While I cannot utilize any Liberty Mutual products at this time, please accept the enclosed check for use in your company's marketing budget or community service program as a sign of my gratitude.

Very truly yours,

T. Thomas Okasinski

At this point in 2006, there was no real-time television backchannel. Twitter was one month from its launch to the public and, similarly, Facebook was three months from opening itself up to noncollege students. However, a lack of social media did not change the fact that people wanted to share their feelings about the Liberty Mutual commercial. The underlying desire to connect and share has always existed within the human race. Social media simply enables our inherent behaviors and gives us an instant means to express ourselves to a world of other people.

So in 2009—when the now-vintage anthemic Liberty Mutual TV spot was dusted off and rerun during an episode of *Dancing with the Stars*—hundreds of tweets were instantaneously posted in reaction to the commercial. The backchannel had, for a moment, turned into a conversation about a TV advertisement from an insurance company, and not about the TV show that was airing.

"I am in love with the Liberty Mutual commercial that I just saw! Beautiful!"

“Anyone seen the new Liberty Mutual commercial? I’m not a fan of insurance companies but their commercial is fantastic!”

When content strikes a chord—even when that content is a television commercial—the backchannel harnesses and amplifies that resonance in the form of our real-time reactional tweets. Despite what some people have come to think, there is indeed still lots of life *during* the 30-second spot.

TV Spots Are Learning from TV Shows

Recognizing the opportunities within the real-time social Web, brands are now mimicking many of the emerging backchannel best practices pioneered by television shows into their TV commercials.

Audi was the first brand to display a hashtag within a television spot.²⁷ The luxury car manufacturer’s 60-second ad aired during the 2011 Super Bowl sporting #ProgressIs toward the lower left corner of its ending art card. The on-air Twitter display, coupled with a paid 24-hour promoted Twitter trend using the same hashtag, significantly drove up the backchannel conversation about Audi and increased the brand’s Twitter followers.

It just so happened that Audi saw record first quarter 2011 sales along with a rising demand within the United States.²⁸ Obviously, the backchannel cannot entirely take credit for this, but it played an important role in creating brand buzz and generating top-of-mind awareness in concert with a larger business and marketing strategy.

Brands are not only becoming enamored with Twitter hashtags displayed on their broadcast TV ads; they are also taking another cue from television programs by embedding tweets into TV commercial content. In fact, some advertisers are even creating TV spots *around* Twitter.

The Wheat Thins “Crunch Is Calling” campaign began airing during the summer of 2010. A large series of TV spots were produced based on a simple premise: Wheat Thins monitors Twitter and finds interesting tweets about the much-craved and beloved

snack. Each TV spot features a single tweet where a camera crew and a spokesperson surprise the person who tweeted with some sort of stunt—in an almost *Candid Camera* style fashion.

In one of the Wheat Thins commercials from early 2011, the “Crunch is Calling” crew shows up to the house of Chris Macho—a man who had previously tweeted his excitement that Wheat Thins had begun to follow him on Twitter. They revealed to Chris a mobile billboard that would be driving around the rest of the day that read, “FOLLOW @CHRISMACHO. HE’S AWESOME!”

During the time period in which this version of the Crunch is Calling series aired, the Twitter backchannel conversation about Wheat Thins (and Chris Macho) more than tripled.²⁹ By using tweets as content within their TV spots, Wheat Thins was able to lift its brand conversation within Twitter itself.

The TV Spot Backchannel Conversation Gets Visual Too

It is no secret that for many people, the Super Bowl is as much—if not more—about the commercials as it is about football itself. This was precisely the impetus behind “Brand Bowl’s” first appearance during the big game in 2010. A partnership between ad agency Mullen, social media monitoring company Radian6, and local news portal Boston.com, Brand Bowl measures and visualizes the Twitter backchannel about the Super Bowl ads as the game airs live.

The returning Brand Bowl backchannel conversation for the 2011 Super Bowl was visualized as a scoreboard. Each of the TV spots was stack-ranked in the order in which they were trending on the backchannel. As Twitter conversation amplified around a given commercial, its place on the scoreboard moved upwards.

The innovative part in how the rankings were done is that they were not just based on the amount of conversation; the scores also accounted for the given TV commercial’s *sentiment*. The score was then calculated for each commercial by adding its number of

positive plus neutral tweets, subtracting its negative tweets, and dividing by the total number of tweets for all of the commercials.

Chrysler's "Detroit" commercial was declared the overall 2011 Brand Bowl winner, although VW's "The Force" spot garnered the most positive sentiment. For that reason, some might argue that VW's ad *resonated* the most with audiences. All of this starts to get into the concept of social TV ratings and measuring TV spot engagement (which we address in great detail in Chapter 5).

Not All Marketing Impressions Are the Same

Social TV is a stunning phenomenon that marries relatively scarce (but high impact) social impressions to the massive scale of standard impressions that television has always been known for.

—Baba Shetty, Chief Strategy Officer at Hill Holliday

The familiar model of paid, owned, and earned media was designed from the marketer's point of view; it is certainly not how a consumer experiences media. As far as consumers are concerned, media impressions are either choice or nonchoice-based.

Nonchoice-based impressions result from a person's exposure to advertising that he or she did *not* actively seek out. A traditional TV or radio spot, print or online display ad, and an outdoor ad such as a billboard are all examples of nonchoice-based impressions. These impressions are highest in number and the ads that drive them tend to cast a wide net to the most mass—yet target-appropriate—audience possible. And while we are exposed to these impressions, we may or may not notice them. But when they do grab and hold our attention, the outcome can be quite powerful.

Choice-based impressions result from advertising which we *choose* to seek out and engage. Deciding to watch a video, clicking a search ad, typing a URL or hashtag shown in a TV spot, or selecting

among a group of ads are each intended consumer actions. We are leaning forward when we engage with this kind of advertising and, therefore, our receptivity to a brand's message is at its peak. This makes the value of choice-based impressions worth a substantial amount to advertisers who can accomplish similar goals as using nonchoice-based impressions, but with a much lower volume and, arguably, higher impact.

A subset of choice-based impressions is *social impressions*. Every time we post, tweet, share, or "like," we generate impressions within our social networks. Social impressions are often received as an explicit endorsement from a friend, colleague, celebrity, or industry leader and are therefore the ones that influence us the most. Consider that the average account on Twitter has 349 followers, and the average number of Facebook friends is 130. Although not every one of your friends and followers will see every social impression you generate, many of them will. And then they may go on to multiply your social impression in turn by sharing it with others.

Now Is the Time for Marketers to Experiment with the Backchannel

Television's backchannel is filled with a constant stream of real-time social impressions. Some may live and die within the backchannel as quickly as they were created, while others will become amplified to reach more and more people. Many will be indexed by search engines and live forever to be discovered by hand-raisers' queries. Whichever the case, the backchannel is fertile ground for marketers. However, success only comes from having a posture of experimentation and integration.

For example, if your television commercial's content is one that has a naturally high propensity to generate positive conversation, showing a Twitter hashtag on-air will turbo-charge this conversation. Taking something that is a broad-reaching mass impression (the TV spot) and adding a simple, no cost prompt (the hashtag), will amplify your social impressions within the television

backchannel. This increases both the reach and awareness of your brand message. Make the hashtag persistent for a good part of the duration of your TV spot. Audi's use of #ProgressIs within its Super Bowl commercial was pioneering; however, it flashed on the screen so quickly that it did not give TV viewers a chance to fully absorb it.

Consider as well running a promoted trend on Twitter using the same hashtag that is on your TV spot. A promoted trend appears at the top of the trending topics list on Twitter.com and is clickable to a promoted tweet from your brand's Twitter account. Brands do a media buy with Twitter to have their chosen hashtag displayed exclusively for 24 hours. This works particularly well when you have something newsworthy to share that will appeal to a broad audience.

Be mindful, however, if your brand has a disproportionate amount of negative sentiment or if your TV spot has little content that would prompt an inherently positive backchannel conversation. You do not want to inadvertently create a lightning rod that generates a rash of brand-bashing, spreadable, social impressions. Use social media monitoring tools, such as Radian6, to first gain perspective as to the existing social sentiment of your brand and the message you are looking to communicate in your TV spot.

Creating the $1 + 1 = 3$ Cross-Media Effect

Look for ways to integrate your brand into the backchannel conversation during broadcast television tentpole events you sponsor. However, you must also be careful not to hijack the TV show's hashtag with advertising messages. Find ways for your brand's Twitter account to provide inherent value to the TV viewer by sharing content that relates to the show they chose to watch. Be part of the conversation on the backchannel—not an intruder who people might see as a spammer.

One brand that seamlessly integrated itself into television's backchannel is Verizon Wireless. During the opening of the 63rd Primetime Emmy Awards on September 18, 2011, host and *Glee*

actress Jane Lynch sang a musical number as she paraded through a single building where all of television's fictitious characters supposedly lived. Going from room to room—or, rather, show to show—she eventually made her way into a high school gymnasium amidst a pep rally celebrating television.

As Jane navigated the crowd she ran into the infamous “Can you hear me now?” guy from the Verizon Wireless commercials, stopped to take a picture with him, and said, “Consider it tweeted!” Those who were also following the Twitter backchannel using the #emmys hashtag saw a promoted tweet and, by its nature, it was pinned as the first of the real-time search results. But the tweet was not from Verizon Wireless's Twitter account (although they paid for it). It was from Jane Lynch herself, and said, “Can you hear me now? We're on the #Emmys <http://twitpic.com/6n32n7>.” The Twitpic was made to look like the picture that she took with the Verizon Wireless guy. What made the integration even more effective is that the official Verizon Wireless account retweeted Jane's tweet—thereby linking its own Twitter followers into a larger immersive cross-channel experience.

Television's Backchannel Is Fraught with Insights About Your Brand

Similar to the way in which *Modern Family* creator Steve Levitan and his writers learn about what lines resonate on the backchannel, so can you start to learn what people are saying about your TV commercials as they air. Social media is, after all, a giant unfiltered focus group—as a result, there are a lot of insights you can gain.

One way to start out is by setting up a Twitter search with your brand's name as the keyword on <http://search.twitter.com> while you are watching TV—especially if you have a prominent TV spot airing. Your brand's Twitter account could also engage in real-time with those who are tweeting about it. This is going to work best with highly resonant and high-impact television ad buys.

There is a goldmine of useful information that you can use to augment your traditional decision making inputs. Understanding what the lean-forward audience is saying about your content will only help as you fine tune your creative and messaging.

To help with this, there are a number of social media monitoring tools that can be used to conduct deeper insights and sentiment analysis on the backchannel conversation about your TV spots. This allows you to see results, after they air, in aggregate as well as drill down to individual TV spots for finer granularity. (Chapter 5 provides much more detail about this, using the concept of “social TV ratings.”)

TAKE ACTION: THE BACKCHANNEL

Here are three key takeaways to consider when thinking about how your brand can get the most out of television’s backchannel and increase your social impressions:

1. *Close the feedback loop.* Whether you are aware of them or not, TV viewers are having backchannel conversations about your commercials as they air. So at a minimum, actively monitor what people are saying about your brand; you will gain helpful insights as a result. When creatively appropriate, use your TV spot to direct people to the backchannel conversation as a means to amplify social impressions.
2. *Think content—not advertising.* The backchannel is no place for overt advertising messages. Rather, you want to build branded content experiences that naturally integrate with the backchannel’s tone, tenor, and timing. Consider the backchannel as a source for content that can feed your creative and concept on a canvas that lies across channels and screens.
3. *Try, learn, and optimize.* The very nature of the backchannel is that it is *real-time*. So use its instant feedback mechanism to learn how your brand’s unique qualities and social voice are best suited to participate. Maintain a “test and learn” attitude and collaborate with media partners to benefit from their lessons and emerging best practices.

It All Comes Back to Resonance

The backchannel responds the most to content that resonates—period. It is those moments of surprise and delight that we experience while watching TV that compel us to want to share our thoughts. As we end up generating lots of social impressions on the backchannel, it is possible that our engagement is helping marketers to produce better TV commercials. Just because a TV spot is an advertisement does not mean it cannot be great content.

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