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14 | December 8, 2008 | Current

Findability: Helping viewers catch what they'd like on PBS

It's top priority on Web, but not in public TV

Commentary by Chris Schiavone

Last night, I downloaded to my iPhone the latest mobile application from Google. It features a voice-activated search engine. No longer do I manually enter search terms using my phone's tiny touch-screen keyboard. Now, I just tell Google what I'm looking for and, voila!, up it comes. Whether I'm waiting, walking or—perish the thought—driving, I can find what I'm seeking almost as quickly as I can think it. It seems that the Holy Grail of "ambient findability" has finally been achieved.

What is ambient findability? And what in the world does it have to do with television? It is, to paraphrase the information architect and futurist Peter Morville, the *quality or characteristic of being capable of being found anywhere, anytime*.

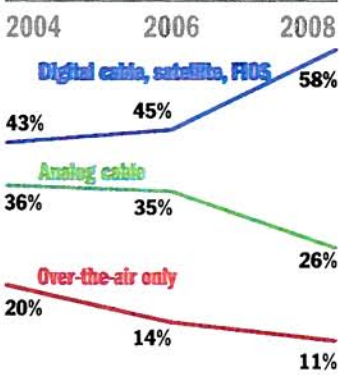
In short, it is what public television programming needs desperately, if further shrinkage in its primetime audience is to be prevented.

More channels, less consideration

The numbers from audience research conducted for public television in January and February of this year tell a compelling story.

The proportion of adult primetime viewers in households that receive television only over the air has fallen to about 11 percent, nearly half what it was just four years ago. The percentage of viewers with analog cable also has declined dramatically, from 36 percent to 26 percent since 2004.

PERCENT OF PRIMETIME-VIEWING ADULTS BY TYPE OF TV RECEPTION



Source: CPB Awareness, Attitudes and Usage Study (2008) based on a national probability sample of 1,509 primetime viewers 18+. Data: Knowledge Networks/Statistical Research Inc. Adapted from a chart by City Square Associates Inc.

The net gain is in the percentage of viewers with digital television reception—by means of cable, satellite or FiOS—now in the vicinity of 58 percent, up from 43 percent only two years ago. The impact cannot be overstated.

In just two years, about 15 percent of adult primetime viewers saw the number of channels on their TVs increase from a handful (for OTA households) or less than 100 (for analog cable households) to 300 or more

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channels, many of these delivered in high definition.

With all those options to choose from, it is no wonder that viewers are about half as likely now as in 2004 to name PBS among the channels they turn to first when looking for something to watch.

This finding from the opening months of 2008 turns out to have been a leading indicator for what we now know about the primetime audience average for PBS during the whole of 2008, which is down 12 percent over last year and 36 percent over the past five years.

While the channel proliferation experienced by a large group of adult viewers may not be the only explanation for the contraction of the PBS audience this year, one needn't resort to more exotic explanations to account for the troubling trend. Given the large number of viewers who recently acquired a triple-digit selection of channels, and their past standing among the most avid PBS primetime viewers, even a modest decline in their PTV usage would suffice to account for the recent drop in average audience.

Something old, something new

Happily, if technological change is the source of the problem, it is also a promising place to look for a solution. The clues are in the ways that viewers find what they watch.

Public television began measuring access to interactive program guides (IPGs) in the 2006 edition of the CPB-commissioned *Awareness, Attitudes and Usage Study* after hearing viewers increasingly mention IPGs in focus groups and interviews. Since then, the proportion of adult primetime viewers with access to the guides has grown 30 percent. As this year began, nearly two out of three adult primetime viewers had access to an IPG.

These viewers who have access to IPGs are also taking full advantage of them: 27 percent of adult viewers selected "viewing an on-screen listing in an IPG" as the method they use "most often" for locating primetime programs. An additional 37 percent named this as the method they use "next most often." Hence, two out of three viewers not only have IPGs but rely on them as a primary means of navigating their newly expanded program options.

The second most-used method for finding something to watch is decidedly lower-tech. Americans have been flipping channels since they laid their hands on the first remote controls in 1956, and today they use them to find programs nearly as often as they browse IPGs. Printed program grids in newspapers, *TV Guide* and public TV station member guides are not yet a thing of the past, but relatively small and fairly homogeneous segments of the primetime audience currently rely on them—segments already closely aligned with public television.

The findability challenge

Given the popularity of IPGs and channel surfing for finding programs, just how easy is it for viewers to find PBS's primetime offerings? Could public television be unwittingly

doing things that actually *diminish* findability? Research suggests that the answer is "yes."

Consider findability as it relates to IPG usage. Ethnographic research commissioned by the CPB-appointed Content Accessibility Working Group last fall made it clear that, of all the information in a program listing, nothing influences the viewer's response more than the program's title. An effective title motivates the viewer to get more information or to check out the show immediately. While program funders or producers may favor the most comprehensive or artistic title for their shows, there's only one question for viewers: "Does this sound like something I might want to watch?"

Answering the question effectively with an IPG listing is especially challenging, because the software for managing and transmitting the listings offers very little space for each title. That space is sufficient, however, if it's well used, as WGBH discovered in research for *American Experience* this year. In that study, viewers confirmed the power of provocative titling by the frequency with which they gravitated toward the story of an obscure physician, Dr. Walter Freeman, drawn by the sheer magnetic force of the title "The Lobotomist." But in real life (as opposed to research), more probably would have watched if their IPGs hadn't trimmed the title to a decidedly less compelling "American Experience: The Lob . . ." And so, the filmmaker must not only invent an attractive title but also do it in no more than 25 characters.

Flipping and surfing also pose challenges for findability.

First, of course, the program needs basic stickiness: When viewers stumble upon a show in progress, does it persuade them that the rest of the show is *not* to be missed? This is a vitally important job for the producer, and an entire essay could be devoted to it. But even without going into changes that could be made in the content itself, a brief and effective title remains a key factor in getting channel surfers to consider a program.

Second, the broadcaster can make the most of crawls, bugs, pop-ups and other visual reminders that viewers should stay tuned, or tune in later. Though they annoy some viewers, these fixtures of the TV screen's lower third have become necessities in a 300-channel universe. Back in the day when I had a choice of only five or six channels in Boston, no one had to hold up a sign to tell me what I was watching or remind me to keep my appointment with *The Cosby Show* on Channel 4. Today, however, if I am a viewer who finds things to watch more often by chance than by choice—as many primetime nonfiction viewers do—I will actually appreciate the occasional on-screen reminder of what I'm watching and where I've found it.

Third, programmers must come to terms with the coping mechanisms that channel surfers have developed, such as confining their tuning to "digital neighborhoods" and "favorites" sets. With so many channels to sort through—and still lacking the ease of anything like a voice-activated Google search for TV—viewers make their searching more efficient by limiting the number of channels

they check out. Having listened for hundreds of hours to viewers describing their habits, I am convinced that this limiting procedure is rarely conscious or explicit. And so, if these behavior patterns develop naturally over time, the question looms large: What is public television doing to cultivate desirable and durable habits in viewers?

It doesn't help that many public television stations have a split personality during primetime.

When most stations are in their regular schedule, it's "Save your Nights" for *Nature* and *Masterpiece*, *Antiques Roadshow* and *American Experience*, *Nova* and *Frontline*. But for eight or nine weeks of the year—more at many stations—it's "Pledge \$395, and as a thank-you gift we'll send you the four-DVD set." On top of that, there are periods when the regular schedule is blown out to accommodate a promising limited series.

From an economic perspective, it's understandable that programmers choose to disrupt their schedules with pledge. And from a cume-building perspective, the occasional scheduling stunt has its place. But the laws of unintended consequences and diminishing returns also prevail. If viewers have a one in five chance of surfing through PBS when the station is airing something *other* than its regular schedule, viewer habits are bound to be altered. What compelling reason would I have as a documentary fan, for example, to keep PBS in my consideration set when I've learned that I can find similar content elsewhere? The History Channel and Discovery are now *ahead* of PBS in viewer consideration for the first time since public television's primetime research project began.

If more stations left the primetime core intact during pledge, could PBS stabilize its consideration rank? It's an idea that's at least worth considering.

Lessons from the Web

Some have suggested that the best way to get more high-quality PBS content into the hands of more viewers is to do a better job of making it available on the Web. A multiplatform strategy will be critical to the future of public media.

However, American adults still devote a disproportionate share of their leisure time to television. According to Nielsen data, household tuning during the 2006-07 broadcast season averaged 57 hours and 37 minutes a week—down only 2 minutes from the previous season. Television dwarfs competing platforms for the foreseeable future.

In light of this, perhaps the main effect of the Internet on the work of PBS is not that it demands we move more of our content to the Web, but rather that it counsels us to learn from the Web how to make it more findable.

As Peter Morville puts it with respect to Web development: "Information that's hard to find will remain information that's hardly found." The same holds true for the content distributed by PBS for television.

By giving findability the high priority that it has among web developers and dedicating all functions—from branding and promotion to programming and engineering—to the cause of raising the visibility and appeal of PBS content, public television can halt and maybe even reverse the disturbing trend of the past five years.

The fundamental strategic principle is to

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Program findability

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begin with the user experience and not to substitute anecdotes we've heard or personal preferences for solid intelligence about how viewers think, feel, and behave.

In the viewer's experience, the content produced for public television is immensely desirable but not always easy to find in the vast digital landscape.

Until the user interfaces of digital cable and satellite boxes become as intuitive as the Google app on my iPhone, viewers will rely on less sexy but equally important devices to map their route: concise, compelling titles; embedded promotions and the artful use of the broadcast screen's lower third; and a fresh approach to on-air fundraising and program scheduling that makes their PBS station consistently worthy of consideration.

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