

The expansion of the fictional universe of The X-Files on social TV

La expansión del universo ficticio de The X-Files en la social TV

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Abstract

The social TV marks the convergence of television experience with social media. The phenomenon refers to content sharing through social networks and second screen apps simultaneously to television broadcasting. In this context, this article aims to discuss the features explored by Fox during *The X-Files* 10th season to engage the interacting viewers with social TV. We analysed the dialogue between the fictional universe of the series and the backchannel through a monitoring of @thexfiles profile postings on Twitter during the exhibition of series episodes. We conclude that the network's engagement strategies reinforce the social bond, stimulate the participation of the interacting viewers, and amplify the narrative arcs of *The X-Files*.

Keywords: Social TV; Television; Twitter; The X-Files.

Resumen

La *social TV* marca la convergencia de la experiencia televisiva con los nuevos medios. El fenómeno se refiere al intercambio de contenidos hecho a través de las redes sociales y de las aplicaciones de segunda pantalla de manera síncrona al flujo televisivo. A partir de ese contexto, este artículo tiene el objetivo de reflexionar sobre las acciones de *social TV* adoptadas por Fox durante la décima temporada de *The X-Files*. Hemos analizado las publicaciones de la página (@thexfiles) gestionada por el canal en Twitter con el fin de entender cómo contribuyen al desarrollo y la comprensión del universo de ficción de la serie. Hemos concluido que las estrategias de compromiso de la emisora refuerzan el lazo social, estimulan la participación de los telespectadores interactivos y amplían los arcos narrativos de *The X-Files*.

Palabras Clave: Social TV; Televisión; Twitter; The X-Files.

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1. Introduction

Despite being a recent phenomenon, discussions about social TV began in the early 2000s. As Fechine (2016) points out, the reflections were initially linked to the scope of interactive digital television, known as iTV. Subsequently, with the popularization of multimodal networks and the mobile devices, social TV was designated to describe the convergence of television with social media (Proulx and Shepatin, 2012). In this context, the phenomenon refers to the sharing of content (comments, memes, videos, montages, photos, etc.) through social networks (Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, etc.) and second screen³ applications (TV Showtime, TV Tag, Viggie, etc.) synchronously to television broadcasting (Proulx and Shepatin, 2012; Borges and Sigiliano, 2016).

Even configured in the context of convergence itself, the social TV is guided by aspects that have always integrated television experience. According to Wolton (1996), TV is an object of conversation, independently of its temporality, as it rules the subjects and stimulates the dialogue between the viewers. The author states that "The television is a formidable instrument of communication between individuals. The most important is not what you see, but the fact of talking about it" (1996: 16-17). The ability to instigate a debate goes beyond the constitution of a public sphere. According to Summa (2011: 8-9), "television is not only a major influence on society, but also a driving force for social interaction". The process of reception of the medium itself facilitates the interlocution of the viewers,

the TV, unlike the movie theaters, allows you to chat while the programming is displayed. If a viewer speaks loudly in the movies, he will probably be warned by a sitting neighbor. On the other hand, with the television, it is common to make comments during the exhibition (Cannito, 2010: 59).

However, on social TV, the comments, once restricted to the living room, a circle of friends or colleagues, are transposed into social networks and second-screen apps, enabling watercooler⁴ further appropriations, subversions and amplifications. Therefore, the intermediation of the conversation by digital platforms re-signifies viewers' dialogue.

Another aspect of television ambiance that gains new developments in the social TV is the shared experience. According to Wolton (1996: 15-16), the television is capable of "bringing together individuals and audiences that tend to be separated and offers them the possibility to participate individually in a collective activity". Television's aggregating aspect and the connection with plurality that permeates the medium itself is related to what Benedict Anderson (2008) conceptualizes as an imagined community. The author's discussions help us to reflect on how the collective consumption of the same cultural product enables the construction of a community and an identity bond. The imagined community formed by the display of a television show evokes, albeit fancifully, the notion of belonging to a nation, connecting the individual to a planetarium. In this sense, the shared experience materializes a symbolic collectivity by bringing together different viewers around the same television content (Silverstone, 1994).

Watching TV means 'watching with': with all the other distant and unfamiliar viewers that someone supposes or imagines that 'they are simply there' in front

³ It refers to the parallel and synchronized interaction with the television experience through mobile devices (Proulx and Shepatin, 2012).

⁴ Socialize with friends, family and colleagues through informal discussion about television.

of their screens at the same time that we are in front of ours, watching the same program we are watching as well” (Buonanno,2015: 77-78).

As it is configured in the temporality of the television broadcasting, social TV reinforces television experience. However, instead of watching the content with friends, family and colleagues, the audience gathers virtually on the digital platforms. Consequently, the viewer can even watch the program by himself, but when accessing these spaces, he/she will be connected to several viewers who, like him/her, are also accompanying the same attraction at that moment.

2. Twitter: the digital watercooler

According to Nielsen (2016), Twitter is the social network most used by the interacting viewers in posting content related to television programming. By 2015, 68% of the 310 million active microblogging users tweeted about what they were currently watching (Nielsen 2016). Wolk (2015: 67-68) points out that the strong adhesion of the social network in the context of social TV is not by chance, “Twitter has always been the obvious platform for social TV. It's public, it's short and it's easy to organize tweets around a topic using hashtags”.

The aspects highlighted by the author can be observed in the central features of the informational architecture of Twitter. The microblogging social interaction is based on the temporality “always on”, “[...] in which the past matters little, the future arrives fast and the present is omnipresent” (Santaella and Lemos, 2010: 61-62). In this sense, the social network provides the instantaneous sharing of information, in a way that only “now” interests. According to Santaella and Lemos (2010) this instantaneous temporality is an exclusive feature of the social network and causes the postings to propagate rapidly across the network. “The conversation and the discussion of ideas in real time are the main differentials in the use of this media” (Santaella and Lemos, 2010:79).

In the social TV, this fast-moving Twitter dynamic meets the unilateral and regular flow of television. Cannito (2010: 49-50) states that the language used on TV is characterized by the uninterrupted reproduction of content and does not depend on the viewer. Thus, the ecosystem of social TV brings together two characteristics: the “always on” temporality of Twitter and the form of television distribution. The user can even report old events in the microblogging or record a program to watch at the time that is most convenient to him, but this does not de-characterize the specific language of these media. As the social TV refers to the sharing of content in a synchronous way to the display of the programming schedule, Twitter is the platform that best corresponds to this factor.

Another aspect that meets the phenomenon is the focus of Twitter social interaction. The connections “[...] on Twitter are not based on pre-existing links, but rather on the individual penetration in the flow of ideas, that is, open collective flows of shared ideas in real time, which are in continuous movement” (Santaella and Lemos, 2010: 91). According to Recuero (2014: 132), this aspect allows the microblogging to assembly asymmetric connections, those that do not depend essentially on reciprocity to create interactions. Thus it is possible to 'follow' a user, without the need of being followed back.

These characteristics of Twitter informational architecture contribute to diversify the debates about programs that are being aired. In this sense, the instantaneous temporality and the focus of Twitter social interaction expands the “buzz” around an attraction and amplifies the backchannel⁵.

3. The social TV in the context of American serial narratives

The American channels began to use Twitter massively in 2008; initially the social network promoted the attractions of TV programming and sites feedback (Proulx and Shepatin, 2012; Wohn, 2011). Already in 2009, MTV and CNN started to stimulate the backchannel during the exhibition of their programs. However, the social TV only became popular in 2011. Considered by Proulx and Shepatin (2012: 11-12) as the ground zero phenomenon, the edition of the *Video Music Awards* fostered the synergy between Twitter and the appointment television. As a result of a major marketing action, which involved a partnership with Get Glue⁶ and an exclusive content for the social network, the award generated 5.482,861 million tweets during its exhibition on August 28, 2011 (Warren, 2011; Nielsen, 2011). Only during the performance of Beyoncé was recorded a flux of 8.868 thousand comments per second, reaching, till then, a unique mark (Nielsen, 2011). The entire buzz generated during the event made the American channels to notice the relevance of the phenomenon to engage the public.

In the scope of the American fictional narratives, the social TV actions go beyond the simple stimulus to the appointment television. The strategies allow the expansion and deepening of fictional universes and also the presence of interacting viewers (Observatório da Qualidade do Audiovisual, 2015-2016).

Series such as *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-current ABC), *Mr. Robot* (2015-current, USA) and *Halt and Catch Fire* (2014-current, AMC) promote live chats with writers to detail the informational gaps that permeate narrative reports. The attractions also offer complementary content, such as videos, photos and unreleased emojis of the episodes that are being exhibited. In addition to explore new perspectives of the stories, the social TV strategies stimulate the public participation and collaboration. As the series are displayed, Twitter profiles managed by the channels ask to interactive viewers to send comments, memes, and mounts.

From this context, this article aims to reflect on the social TV actions adopted by Fox during *The X-Files* 10th season. For that matter, we will discuss how the page posts managed by the channel on Twitter contribute to the deepening and understanding of the fictional universe of the series. We will analyze the tweets published, in a synchronous way to the exhibition of the episodes, by the profile (@thexfiles) of the plot in the social network.

4. The return of *The X-Files*

⁵ Secondary channel of content sharing (text, image, video, etc.) formed specifically during the display of a program (Proulx and Shepatin, 2012). From this perspective, the backchannel connects the viewer's individual experience to countless interactors on digital platforms, optimizing the shared experience.

⁶ Second screen app.

In the mid-1990s, Johnson (2005: 61) notes, Fox was trying to establish itself in the American television industry. While NBC, CBS and ABC channels were concerned about audience fragmentation caused by the popularization of cable TV, the broadcaster invested in broadening its programming grid.

After reaching significant audience ratings with *The Simpsons* (1989), *Married ... with Children* (1987) and *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990), Fox sought a dramatic series to attract audiences aged 18 to 49 (Caldweel, 1995; Lavery; Hague and Cartwright, 1996). After a long process of pilot seasons, Fox decided to produce two attractions, *The X-Files* (1993), by Chris Carter, and *The Adventures of Brisco County* (1993) by Jeffrey Boam and Carlton Cuse. The programs debuted on Fridays, in 1993.

As a result of low ratings, *The Adventures of Brisco County* (1993) was canceled shortly after the show's first season (Porter and Porter, 2010: 15-21). But *The X-Files* quickly caught public attention as the season premiere was watched by 12 million viewers. Johnson (2005: 63) states that the plot differs from the other programs that were on air: "The implication is that *The X-Files* appealed to Fox because it offered something different from the other network (horror), in a new way (without 'lots of blood'), allowing Fox to fill the void left open by its competitors".

The series was shown until 2002. In addition to nine seasons (201 episodes), the fictional universe still features the movies *The X-Files: Fight the Future* (1998) and *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* (2008), the spin-off *The Lone Gunmen* (2001), books and comics.

In July 2013, Comic Con invited the protagonists of *The X-Files* and its writers Vince Gilligan, Howard Gordon, Darin Morgan, John Shiban, James Wong, David Amann, Glen Morgan and Chris Carter to participate in a commemorative panel of 20 Years of the series' debut (Foutch, 2013; Ausiello, 2016). The event held in San Diego, California, put the show back in evidence and eventually caught the attention of Fox. "I got a call from channel the CEOs, Dana Walden and Gary Newman saying they were thinking of producing the series again," said Chris Carter (Carter, 2016).

The broadcaster's proposal was to follow the production and distribution patterns adopted by *24: Live Another Day*. Displayed by Fox in 2014, Jack Bauer's (Kiefer Sutherland) plot had a pay-TV development logic, that is, instead of having a season composed by 24 episodes, it only produced 12 episodes. This format allowed the return of *The X-Files* to become viable and attractive to the cast and crew.

During an annual programming convention, in March 2015, after 13 years of the series finale show, Fox announced the return of *The X-Files*. The tenth season of the series, exhibited between January 24th and February 22nd, 2016, was composed of six episodes ('*My Struggle*'⁷, '*Founder's Mutation*'⁸, '*Mulder and Scully Meet the Were-*

⁷ Original air date January 24, 2016.

⁸ Original air date January 25, 2016.

*Monster*⁹, *Home Again*¹⁰, *Babylon*¹¹ e *My Struggle II*¹²) and continues the fictional universe of Mulder (David Duchovny) and Scully (Gillian Anderson).

5. Methodological approach to monitoring and collecting tweets

The methodological approach used in this article consists in a combination of observation and data mining procedures generated on Twitter synchronously to the programming grid (Zuell and Preradović, 2013; Sigiliano and Borges, 2016). The gathering of tweets from @thexfiles¹³ profile was made during the exhibition of *The X-Files* 10th season episodes.

At first, we focused on filtering the 463 tweets generated by Fox in order to separate them into categories to select the corpus of analysis. The mining indicated that of the 463 publications of the series profile on Twitter, 372 were mentions to other pages in the social network, and 91 were postings without mention. Subsequently, from the corpus, we analyzed individually each of the 463 tweets and correlated with the narrative reports displayed in the episodes with the fictional universe of the program.

The reflection is based on the fictional universe of the series and the backchannel, that is, in one hand we analyse the content that is being broadcast on television and, on the other hand, the publications shared by @thexfiles on Twitter while the program is being exhibited. In this sense, it is the junction of these two points that are pertinent to us, the narrative reports that guided the tweets and the actions adopted by Fox in the microblogging during the exhibition of *The X-Files*.

6. Analysis: *The X-Files* backchannel

While the 10th season was on, *The X-Files* profile on Twitter developed a number of social TV actions, such as the publication of tweets that emphasized shared experience and encouraged the propagation and production of content; the exchange of messages with interacting viewers and the holding of chats with series' cast. Fox's strategies also included posting tweets that further emphasized and re-signified the fictional universe, and boosted public engagement.

The content posted by @thexfiles during the episodes reinforced the collective experience and stimulated the backchannel. Driven by phrases such as *'let's watch together'*, *'we're all watching The X-Files together'*, *'watching with us'* and *'all together'* the profile publications drew attention to the social bond, highlighting the sense of presence of the medium. Wolton (1996) argues that the notion of social bond was formulated by Durkheim and the French school of sociology. According to the author, discussions about the concept had a perspective on institutionalized social practices (work, education,

⁹ Original air date february 1, 2016.

¹⁰ Original air date february 8, 2016.

¹¹ Original air date february 15, 2016.

¹² Original air date february 22, 2016.

¹³ The X-Files profile on Twitter. Available at: <https://twitter.com/thexfiles>. Accessin: Jan 14th, 2017.

family, etc.). Subsequently, the notion of social bond was used and amplified by cultural anthropology and, in this context, television is one of the main examples.

Wolton (1996) points out that generalist TV constitute a two-way social link. The first refers to the fact that "[...]the spectator, when watching television, joins this potentially immense and anonymous audience that watches it simultaneously, thus establishing, like him, a sort of invisible bond" (Wolton, 1996: 124). This silent bond creates a common knowledge among viewers and the different communities that make up a society. The second sense, however, points out that TV is the 'mirror of society'. In this context, "[...]television creates not only an image and a representation, but it offers a bond to all those who watch it simultaneously" (Wolton, 1996:124).

Nonetheless, despite appearing in the context of convergence, social TV also enhance television silent and invisible bond. In other words, if Wolton (1996) points to the understanding of the social bond as a shared experience that brings viewers and different communities together to establish a common knowledge, the phenomenon reinforces this aspect of television, so weakened by individual consumption and audience fragmentation.

To help propagate the content, the page asked the interacting viewers to retweet (RT) the tweet with the words: *'this person is watching The X-File'*. Thus, the audience not only advertised on their timeline that the show was on air but also it could, even indirectly, influence their followers to turn on the TV. The stimulus to the backchannel permeated the Twitter engaging actions of all 10th season episodes. As the scenes were shown, the @thexfiles profile encouraged interacting viewers to share memes, photos, videos, and especially comments while watching.



Figure 1: The official profile of *The X-Files* series highlights the collective experience of television and encourages viewers to share their impressions during the show.

Source: Research Data

However, one of the most relevant aspects of @thexfiles social TV strategy was the profile dialogue with the audience. Instead of just encouraging conversation around the show, the profile exchanged messages with the interacting viewers on different subjects. In addition to reporting the replay times and synopsis details, @thexfiles answered the questions related to narrative reports and the future events in the story. The

publications were made in real time and in a personalized way, that is, each mention contained a different text distancing itself from mechanical and scheduled posts.

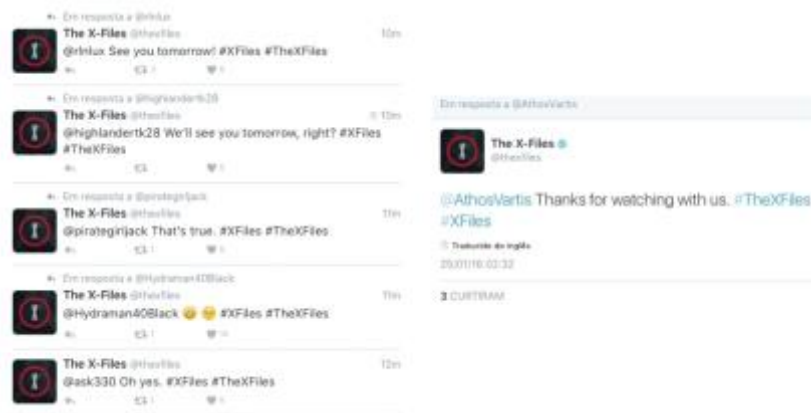


Figure 2: The official profile of *The X-Files* series exchanges tweets with the interacting viewers during *TheX-Files* tenth season episodes.

Source: Research Data

The actors Gillian Anderson, David Duchovny and Mitch Pileggi also contributed to *The X-Files* watercooler's plurality. Through their personal accounts in the microblogging the cast talked to the followers about the new season. In this sense, Fox's action not only established a dialogue with the interacting viewers, but also stimulated the appointment television. That is to say, the public could even choose to watch the show at a convenient time, but would miss the opportunity to exchange tweets with the cast and clarify their doubts about the show.

In addition to distancing itself from one-sided communication, the profile of the plot on Twitter valued the posts of the public. During the exhibition of the six new episodes some tweets of the interacting viewers were retweeted. The publications ranged from praise for attraction to memes involving the themes of the story.

Driven by a complex narrative, *The X-Files* had its fictional universe detailed on the second screen. The content that integrated the program's social TV actions helped to understand the plots of 'My Struggle', 'Founder's Mutation', 'Mulder and Scully Meet the Were-Monster', 'Home Again', 'Babylon' e 'My Struggle II'. During the exhibition of the episodes, the series' profile on Twitter highlighted the main reports of the frames through photos, GIFs and polls.

The photos were always accompanied by lines and/or dialogues of the scenes. In this context, the phrase highlighted by @thexfiles reproduced an important moment in the story that would directly influence the unfolding of the narrative. GIFs, however, drew attention to season's central plots, such as the reunion of Mulder (David Duchovny) and Scully (Gillian Anderson), William's whereabouts, the details of the investigations, and even the characteristic elements of the fictional universe of *The X-Files*, as for instance recurring points of the attraction that always permeated the episodes, such as the opening theme, the flashlights, the phrases 'Mulder it's me', 'But Scully, aliens' and the pencils embedded in the office ceiling. The posts worked as a kind of guide for the interacting viewer, indicating the most representative events of the show.



Figure 3: The official profile postings for *The X-Files* series highlight Scully's (Gillian Anderson) and Tad O'Malley (Joel McHale) dialogue, which is featured in the episode *My Struggle* and directly influences the series season finale, and the emblematic lanterns of the FBI agents, respectively.
Source: Research Data

Another strategy adopted by the Twitter profile of the attraction was the introducing of 10th season new characters. Each appearance of Tad O'Malley (Joel McHale) and Sveta (Sheila Larken) in '*My Struggle*' and '*My Struggle II*' was highlighted by @thexfiles. The tweets contained the picture along with the character's name on the scene helped the audience familiarize themselves with the new reports of the plot. There were also created polls that debated the nature of Tad (Joel McHale) and Sveta (Sheila Larken), the options drew attention to the motives that led the characters to make certain decisions and facilitated interacting viewers understanding.

However, the social TV actions created by Fox were not limited to the fictional universe of the plot. Some scenes were renamed by @thexfiles as the profile highlighted an image that was on air, but put it in another context. As for example the tweet published during the display of *Founder's Mutation*. The post showed Sanjay (Chris Logan) having a psychotic outbreak, however if in the episode the character is the victim of a genetic experiment, in the meme the profile made an allusion to the excess of caffeine. With the words "*Us after too much coffee*" the page satirized the behavior of Sanjay (Chris Logan) in relating his agitation to the effects caused by the consumption of the chemical compound in large quantities.



Figure 4: *The X-Files* profile re-signifies the scene from the ‘*Founder’s Mutation*’ episode.
Source: Research Data

The use of memes helped propagate tweets in the plot profile by exploring everyday situations such as the grueling work routine, the traffic jam of large cities, and the surplus of coffee. The publications drew the attention of users who were not following the series.

Finally, *The X-Files* page on Twitter encouraged the careful reading of the interacting viewers. As we discussed earlier, the narrative reports of the series are permeated by references to the fictional universe and intertextualities. In this context the profile of the attraction asked the public to share the Easter eggs present in the episodes. The Fox channel's strategy of engagement enabled, even indirectly, the formation of informational frameworks around these elements of the story. By clicking on the profile tweet of the program one could see all the responses sent from the @thexfiles post. In this way, the interacting viewers had access to new perspectives of the season. Although not essential for understanding the episodes, the Easter eggs amplified the meaning of the scenes. As an example, we could point out the episode Mulder and Scully Meet the Were-Monster, when Mulder (David Duchovny) approaches a tomb with the identification “Kim Manners”. Within the plot, the name does not change the course of any event, but the intertextuality is a tribute to one of the directors of *The X-Files* who passed away in 2009. The same can be observed in the closing plan of ‘*Babylon*’ that makes an allusion to the last scene of the feature film ‘*I Want to Believe*’, released in 2008.



Figure 5: *The X-Files* profile asks viewers to share the Easter eggs in the episode. By clicking on the tweet it is possible to access the audience's responses.

Source: Research Data

In short, the social TV actions developed by the plot's profile, @thexfiles, during the 10th season go beyond the simple stimulus to the appointment television. The publications reinforce the collective experience and the sharing of content on Twitter in a synchronous way to the episodes exhibition, contributing to the plurality of the backchannel. Another important point in the strategies adopted by the American broadcaster is the dialogue with the interacting viewers, that is, each mention of the profile was promptly answered.

Tweets also helped understanding the fictional universe of the series. As the episodes 'My Struggle', 'Founder's Mutation', 'Mulder and Scully Meet the Were-Monster', 'Home Again', 'Babylon' and 'My Struggle II' were on air, @thexfiles highlighted important scenes and quotes in the unfolding narrative reports. Some moments of the episodes were resigned, leading the creation of memes that irony day-by-day situations. Finally, the attraction's profile on the microblogging encourages a close reading of the public, highlighting the Easter eggs that permeated the plot. In this way, the actions of the channel in the scope of social TV enhance the collective experience, drawing attention to the imagined community formed from the television broadcasting. In addition, it contributes to deepen and expand the fictional universe of *The X-Files*.

7. Conclusion

The social TV actions performed by Fox during the *The X-Files* 10th season emphasized the social bond. In that sense, by accompanying the tweets the interacting viewers felt part of a collective, planetary activity. Another important point in the

broadcaster's strategy is the way the @thexfiles profile stimulated and aggregated the publicly produced content. This cooperative position of the page not only propelled the backchannel but also enabled the fictional universe to be approached from various perspectives.

To encourage the appointment television the cast of the plot promoted live chats on Twitter. The actors Gillian Anderson, David Duchovny and Mitch Pileggi exchanged messages with the interacting viewers and commented on the attraction. The dialogue also extended to @thexfiles. During the episodes the profile of the series responded to public doubts about the narrative arcs, replay schedules, special participations, etc. However, each tweet sent by the page was different, that is, the responses did not consist of preprogrammed texts, on the contrary, the interaction varied according to the interlocutor.

Fox's social TV actions for the tenth season of *The X-Files* contributed directly to the understanding of the plot's episodes. As the scenes were displayed the profile highlighted specific points in the story with photos, GIFs and texts and also featured the new characters in the series. In this sense, the contents functioned as a kind of guide to the complex and overlapping narrative arcs of the program. The page of the attraction in Twitter also resignified the events of the episodes, creating memes that ironized some habits of the day to day. Finally, the plot's profile stimulated the careful reading of the interacting viewers, asking the public to send the easter eggs present in the sequences of the attraction.

From the analysis of the social TV strategies developed for *The X-Files* 10th season it is concluded that the Fox channel went beyond the simple incentive to the appointment television. That is, each tweet had a backchannel function, either in the understanding of the complex fictional universe, in the loyalty of the audience through live chats or in the deepening of the plot. The position of the station not only meets the environment of media convergence and participatory culture, but emphasizes the importance of the second screen in the scope of serial fictional narratives.

In this context, social TV comes to act as a support for the dense fictional universes of Post-Network Television by establishing this synergy with the narrative arcs of *The X-Files* 10th season. That is, the second screen acts as an extension of the series that is in the air, contributing to the deepening and detailing of the plot. However, it is critical that tweets that reinforce and detail the fictional universe do not distance the interacting viewers from the cognitive exercise of dismembering these stories. After all, the depth of the narrative arcs and the way they require careful reading of the audience are central aspects of the contemporary series.

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