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Reconstruction of the Television Industry's Role in the Social Media Era: A Breakthrough Path Based on Audience Needs

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Abstract. Traditional television once cultivated collective culture and public opinion through the shared ritual of simultaneous broadcasts, fostering a unified national consciousness. In contrast, the meteoric ascent of social media and short-video platforms like TikTok and Douyin has profoundly fragmented viewership, accelerating a shift toward content tailored to individual niches, driven by algorithms, and offering instant gratification through interactivity. This study critically examines the stark evolution of television's societal sway, juxtaposing iconic case studies from China (CCTV's Spring Festival Gala) and the United States (the Super Bowl). The analysis compellingly reveals that television's historical dominance as a cultural gatekeeper has significantly eroded, primarily stemming from social media's unparalleled immediacy, algorithmic curation, and content diversity. To sustain its relevance and cultural impact in this fragmented mediascape, traditional television must strategically embrace and seamlessly integrate genuinely interactive features and personalized storytelling approaches that resonate authentically with the evolving, bite-sized viewing habits cultivated on ubiquitous social media platforms.

Keywords: Traditional Television, Social Media, Audience Behavior, Media Convergence

1. Introduction

In the 20th century, television became the main way people got entertainment and information. It shaped culture and what people remembered as a group. Families often sat together in the evening to watch television. They shared these times, and this helped bring people together and guide what they talked about in society.

But when social media grew fast, this pattern changed. People moved from watching television with others to looking at content by themselves and taking part online. Platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Weibo, and TikTok show this change. People could now make, share, and watch content at any time. This changed what people wanted from media and how they spent their time on it.

People moved from watching shows together to scrolling through social media alone. They wanted short and active ways to get content. This paper looks at how television's role changed when

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social media became popular. It looks at the history, how people changed the way they watch, and how the television industry tried to adjust.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section 2 looks at how traditional television grew and how social media started, showing how both shaped what people shared as a culture. Section 3 looks at how people changed the way they watch in the digital age and how the television industry reacted. Section 4 gives ideas for how television can keep its place by using active forms and focusing on what viewers want in the time of social media.

2. Historical context: television and the emergence of social media

These days, people sit alone and scroll their phones, more so than watch television together with their families as before. Social media is fast, intimate, and interactive. But is it superior to traditional TV? Back in the days, television would bring people together and was part of family time. Television also had an effect on what people thought, as everyone watched the same show and news. These days, however, audience habits are different. People want more immediate and personalized content. That is why the television industry also needs to evolve.

This part examines how traditional television started and how social media grew. It also explores how these changes shaped the way people watch and use media. It then reviews how people now make and share content, and what trends are leading this change. It also discusses how media may develop in the future. The focus is on how audience needs now guide what content is made and how platforms change to meet these needs.

In the 20th century, television became the main way people got culture and ideas. Under fixed-time broadcasting, people watched shows together with family and neighbors. In the United States, events like the 1969 moon landing were watched by almost all households with a TV, with over 600 million people around the world [1]. The 1960 debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon also had about 70 million viewers, close to the number of voters then [2]. These events brought large groups together at the same time, making television important in shaping shared culture and public views [3].

In China, people also watched shows together, like the CCTV New Year's Gala, which became a national event that helped people feel united. This model helped TV control what people talked about and made it a key way to build national memory and identity [4]. The Gala had its highest numbers in the early 2010s, with 1.17 billion viewers in 2013. But things started to change. Reports show that short-video platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou grew fast during the Spring Festival from 2019 to 2023, with Douyin reaching over 600 million daily users in 2023. This growth shows how social media has become a strong competitor for people's attention, while Gala viewership stayed high but did not grow much. TV was once able to decide what stories and views were shown, which shaped how people thought and acted. TV was also strong in advertising, bringing consumer culture into daily life and shaping what people liked to buy [5].

In the early 21st century, mobile social media grew fast and changed how people watched content. It moved them away from watching TV together. Mobile internet made it easy for people to watch short videos on apps like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. This led to less interest in traditional TV. Short videos made it easy to catch people's attention, and people started to watch in more personal ways. In China, traditional media once had strong control over what people thought. For example, in the first Spring Festival Gala in 1983, the dress worn by Liu Xiaoqing became a quick fashion trend. In 2015, Jia Ling's comedy sketch became popular through the Gala, adding new words and symbols to culture. But as apps like Douyin and Weibo grew, the Gala moved from leading trends to following them. Now, many stars are invited to the Gala because they are already

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popular on social media, not the other way around. This shows how short videos and diverse content have changed how people see things. It also shows that people now share their own voices more, instead of only following collective trends. This change in China shows a move from focusing on fast economic growth and central power to letting more people share different ideas.

In the United States, similar changes happened. Big events like the Super Bowl still have many viewers. For example, the 2015 Super Bowl had 114.4 million viewers, and recent games have over 95 million viewers [6]. But these events now face competition from trending topics on social media. More young people like to watch highlights on short videos and social apps instead of full live shows. A report in 2023 showed that 54% of U.S. adults now get news mainly from social media, showing a big change in how people watch content [7]. This shows that people's attention is now split, and they want more personal, user-made, and interactive content.

So, traditional TV networks have started to use social media in their shows and marketing. They use live polls and cross-platform teasers to try to keep people's interest and match the ways people now watch content on apps like TikTok and Instagram.

At first, TV and social media had a tense relationship because they were competing for people's attention and ad money. TV networks saw less ad income as companies moved to social media for better targeting [8]. So, TV started to try using social media in their shows. They added hashtags, live posts, and audience polls to get people to join in and to keep their interest after the show ended [4]. For example, reality TV in China and the US let audiences take part through social media, mixing the strengths of TV with the interactive nature of digital platforms [5]. However, early integrations often highlighted the limitations inherent in traditional broadcasting, such as its rigidity in response to immediate audience feedback compared to the agile interactivity of social media. Nonetheless, these initial efforts laid the groundwork for a convergence of media forms, encouraging traditional broadcasters to adapt by embracing hybrid models that could leverage both traditional mass reach and the participatory nature of social media.

3. Audience behavior and market response

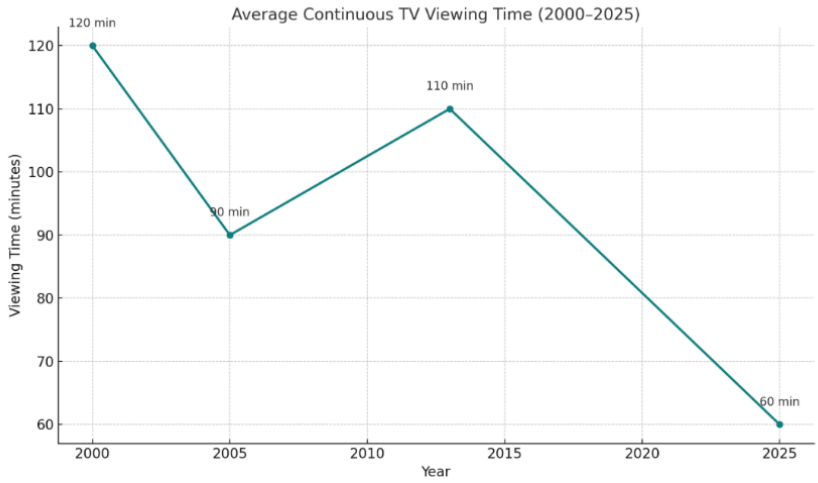

Figure 1. Average continuous TV viewing time from 2000 to 2025(in minutes)

In today's media environment, audiences are no longer satisfied with passively consuming television content. Instead, they want control over what, when, and how they watch. This change reflects a deeper shift in how people interact with media. For example, according to Statista (2023),

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over 76% of Netflix users actively use the "Skip Intro" feature [8]. This small action shows how much viewers care about efficiency and control. [Statista, 2023] They don't want to waste time; they want to start the story immediately. This isn't just about impatience—it's about having a personalized experience. The audience is no longer sitting back quietly; they are selecting what fits their schedule and mood. Watching TV has become part of a larger, active process of discovering and shaping content.

This chart shows a clear downward trend in how long people focus on television without switching tasks [9]. In 2000, viewers could often sit through an entire program without distraction. By 2025, the average continuous viewing time has dropped to about 60 minutes. This decline supports the idea that modern viewers don't want passive viewing. They prefer faster, more manageable content that fits into their day. These numbers help explain why so many people now start watching shows through clips they find on social media. Personally, I often see short videos from shows like Loki or Reset before I even know the full series exists. If the vibe feels right, I search for the complete version—but only if I'm really interested. Many of my classmates do the same. It's not that we dislike long stories—it's that we want to be sure our time is worth it.

In response, the television industry is adapting by making content more social media-friendly. For instance, Marvel's Loki earned over 4 billion views on TikTok by releasing short clips that grabbed viewers' attention [10]. However, some fans felt the actual episodes had lost their natural storytelling flow. They said the scenes felt too chopped up, making it harder to connect emotionally. This points to a bigger issue: copying social media tactics might bring clicks, but it can weaken the story. Viewers still want emotional arcs and character development. They want to feel something—not just scroll past. When shows are edited only to fit algorithms, they risk losing what makes storytelling powerful. We need to remember that even young audiences still value feeling something real, not just being entertained for a second. As more and more content decisions are made by data, it is true that platforms can perform better. Along the way, though, it may also take away from stories the creativity and surprise that made them stick in the first place. From other perspectives, this shift towards "data control" is already transforming audiences' engagements with programs. From an emotional and fan point of view, most individuals are starting to feel like they are no longer connected to the TV programmers that they watch. Netflix's cancellation of 1899 is a case in point [11]. Although the show was groundbreaking and did have a loyal fan base, it got canceled because the audience numbers were not high enough. Most fans were left let down and began to wonder if their time and participation even meant anything. In China, Reset and other TV shows also use big data to decide where the plot must shift to get people to watch through to the end [12]. While doing so can keep people attentive, others have their say that the stories become predictable and there is no real sentiment involved. Data can tell creators what works, but it cannot fully understand how viewers feel. If a piece of writing doesn't make people feel something, it's difficult to say it did its job. From a data and business standpoint, too much dependence on numbers can be problematic as well. They tend to look at things like "how many people bailed on the intro" or "how long someone watched" to determine whether a show is worth keeping. Those numbers don't tell the full story, however. They can't measure whether an individual was emotionally impacted, or if a show picked up after a sluggish beginning. Sites may start making only the kind of shows that are simplest to make popular, and not care about those that take longer or are more serious. This could end up having shown all have the same flavor, and nothing standing out.

If platforms enable data to make all the choices, then real surprise would slowly disappear. The content will seem faster and more engaging, but increasingly it won't really stick with the audience.

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4. How to regain TV's market influence in the social media age: a demand-side strategy

In the social media age, the TV industry should rebuild its market influence, which is audience-centered and responds to changes. Therefore, TV should make corresponding strategies in the following three aspects: interactivity, content access and cultural communication. In today's social media era, the audience is not only satisfied with watching TV shows; they are more likely to hope to engage with the shows. As Bob McKay notes in *Forbes*, it points out that shows like Wednesday and Secrets of Sister Wives are becoming more and more popular, not only because of their attractive narratives but also because of the fan interactions. Platform - based communities, such as those on TikTok and Twitter [13], promoting fan interaction. Fans get involved in creating challenge videos and editing clips. Also, the memes, which spread widely across the internet, transform the original individual viewing experience into a collective one.

Such interaction demand has also changed people's opinions about the way they watch shows and the platforms on which they can watch them. Nowadays, online platforms offer features like real - time bullet screens and live comments, which can provide people with real - time comments and allow them to send their own. By showing video feedback more directly on the screen, these features are much more attractive than traditional TV shows. For example, the 2023 CCTV Spring Festival Gala integrated AR effects and live comment systems, generating over 120 million interactions [14]. These functions and features make the audience feel their own existence and that they are being heard, thus enhancing their emotional engagement with the content. Furthermore, the new interactive form of narrative and storytelling experiences also further expands the engagement of the audience. Netflix's *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* allowed viewers to make decisions that led to 12 different outcomes, while Tencent Video's *Tower of Babel* used branching narratives to give audiences a sense of control. Apps like HBO's *Westworld* and BBC's *Sherlock* provided additional layers of content and engagement on mobile devices. These tools extend the viewing time and enhance audience retention, indicating that fragmented attention and more vivid, advanced lifestyles are transforming television into a more multi - functional platform, offering an engaging experience.

With the rise of fragmented attention spans and a mobile-first lifestyle, traditional television is being forced to adjust its pace, format, and content strategy. Traditional television is adopting shorter formats, with mini - dramas featuring 10 - 15 - minute episodes, as seen in platforms such as iQiyi. Fueled by advertising sales and viewer spending, revenue in the mini - drama sector soared 35% to reach 50.44 billion yuan ($6.91 billion) in 2024, surpassing China's box office. Pacing strategies emphasize "strong openings, frequent highlights, and suspenseful endings," while 4K/8K visuals enhance appeal. With average attention spans declining to 8 seconds, and 90% of 18 - 24 - year - olds favoring streaming over broadcast television, the industry must prioritize mobile - optimized, concise content [15]. In response, many shows have shortened episode lengths to 10–15 minutes, mimicking the structure of web dramas. Visuals are also being upgraded to 4K and even 8K to enhance user experience across different devices in order to accommodate mobile users, content producers are increasingly adopting formats, such as vertical video formats, that can better fit mobile phone screens. For example, many foods show nowadays commonly use vertical shots to enhance the interactive experiences on mobile platforms. Furthermore, interactive visuals and gamified programs are also taking advantage of the features of smartphones, such as touch - screens and social - media sharing, to further increase audience engagement. These innovations are not isolated; the trend is expanding more and more and has actually become a part of the market. The mini - drama sector in China alone is projected to generate over 50 million yuan by the end of 2024, 35%

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of this revenue is expected to come from short-video series, indicating the commercial potential of such content.

Moreover, television shows aim not only to broadcast content at a fixed time but also to make it more accessible at any time and any place. Companion apps and cross - platform, cross - device integration allow users to interact after the broadcast of the shows. For instance, HBO's *Westworld* app had a 99.2% synchronization rate with the broadcast and extended average viewing time by 12 minutes [16]. Such an increase in viewing time shows that second - screen tools have effectively increased the reach, influence, and content coverage of television shows. Overall, such strategies reflect the changes in mobilized interaction and shorter video - filming styles within the industry, in order to meet the evolving habits of the younger audience.

To stay relevant in a fast-changing digital landscape, television must overcome its traditional limitations in time, space, and delivery format. Fixed broadcast schedules are being replaced by short vertical episodes under 15 minutes, which better suit fragmented attention spans and mobile usage. TV content is also extending beyond screens through audio versions and text adaptations, while social media algorithms help promote remixing and reposting. As Bob McKay explains in *Forbes*, this shift allows viewers to engage with content in more personalized and interactive ways [13]. A smarter release strategy is also a key point, which helps the television keep pace with younger audience habits nowadays. Many platforms broadcast different contents during different daytimes. For instance, they deliver short clips in the morning because young audiences may not have much time to watch the whole episodes then. At night, on the other hand, they broadcast the whole episodes. They also post audio summaries at night, which allow audiences to listen to the audio while sleeping. These strategies are supported by many services and cross - device integrations, such as smart watches. Car displays and smart home screens push timely content into daily routines. As Mackey points out, such strategies make television content much more accessible, immersive, and responsive to modern lifestyles.

What's more, emotional and cultural resonance are both crucial points. Today's Gen Z and Gen Alpha audiences want authenticity and content that can reflect their social values. They are not only consumers of the content but also immerse themselves in the roles of creators, sharing and responding. As emotional responders, to meet their needs, television producers are collaborating with online platforms. They try to turn the scenes into social videos or video mimics. For example, clips from a documentary can become viral posts on the internet, which can motivate a second wave of emotional connection. Such changes turn TV from a passive bystander to an active participant in youth culture.

5. Conclusion

This is not about turning back to so-called "golden age" TV, where families gathered at the same time to view the same show. That is over—and it need not be back. We need now a new era, an era that sensibly blends the strengths of old-fashioned television and social media. Television can still powerfully bring true, emotionally resonant stories. Social media, on the other hand, provides immediacy, interactivity, and high-density creative participation. When combined—through, say, storying augmented with short-form fan cutting, live commentary streams, or back-stage material—it creates a more interactive and personal media experience. Some series are already ahead of the curve by providing timely episodes with bonus material on platforms such as TikTok or Instagram. The media future is not meant to be a competition for attention, but a collaboration respecting how today's audiences think, feel, and choose. Platforms and content creators must be concerned not only

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with what succeeds in the algorithms, but with what resonates with their audience's hearts, and the industry can move toward something else—not necessarily faster, but more human.

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