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In Praise of the Original Social Media: Good Ol' Television

It's Striking How Often We Use New Media to Talk About Awesome Old Media

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I spend a lot of time living in the Twittersphere. Not because I'm a particularly prolific tweeter (I'm not), but because, in addition to writing this column, I do social-media trend analysis twice a week on AdAge.com: the [Trendrr Chart of the Week](#) on Wednesdays (which usually culls data from Twitter) and the [Top 10 Most Tweeted Brands Chart](#) on Fridays.

Here's what I've learned from soaking in all that data: For all the buzz and obsession about social media, old media still rules our lives. (It's amazing how often we use new media to talk about what old media is up to.) And of all the old media, TV maintains the tightest grip on our collective consciousness. Pay attention to what's *really* being talked about en masse on Twitter (and Facebook and elsewhere in the social-media sphere) and chances are pretty good it relates to what's on TV at the moment somewhere in the world, or what was on TV last night. Betty White was huge on Twitter last week, for instance, because of her star turn on "Saturday Night Live." News trends on Twitter because it's on CNN right now. Political controversies often flare up on Twitter because of something Glenn Beck or some other professional provocateur said on Fox News. Pop stars shine the brightest on Twitter when they're on TV (e.g., Justin Bieber on Oprah last Tuesday) and there's a snippet of video from that appearance that can be passed around online. Hell, TV *created* many of the pop stars tweeted about most ardently, from assorted "American Idol" alumni to the Disney Channel's Miley Cyrus and Jonas Brothers.

And as much as the media covers the supposed seismic shift away from broadcast to web video, the reality is that just 2% of TV viewing happens online. (Don't forget that Hulu -- a joint venture of three of the Big Four: ABC, Fox and NBC -- would be nothing without access to traditional TV programming.) TV consumption has actually risen as social media has exploded: Nielsen tracked an all-time high of 151-plus hours of monthly TV watching in the average American home in the fourth quarter of last year (vs. 27 hours of using the internet, including just under three hours of watching video online).

We may care more about social media than we did last year or the year before, but it's not denting our passion for TV in the least. And not just any TV -- I'm talking about the TV that's on *right*

now. Consider [The Economist's take](#) on some recently released research: "Nobody feels they need to be at home to catch the 9 p.m. drama any more. But a change in expectations is not quite the same as a change in behavior. Although it is easier than ever to watch programs at a time and on a device of one's choosing, and people expect to be able to do so, nearly all TV is nonetheless watched live on a television set. Even in British homes with a Sky+ box, which allows for easy recording of programs, almost 85% of television shows are viewed at the time the broadcasters see fit to air them."

Why? Because TV remains not only a passive medium, but one that people want to consume *socially*. Simply put, people want to watch TV *together* -- not only with their friends and families in their homes, but with the culture at large. We want to experience what lots of other people are experiencing -- and TV still delivers that mass, simultaneous experience better and more economically than anything else (until, that is, Major League Baseball and Lady Gaga start giving away game and concert tickets).

Which brings me full circle to Twitter. Immersed as I am in Twitter data every day, there's plenty about the Twittersphere that amuses me, informs me, baffles me, etc. But one thing about it consistently touches me: watching tweets pile up by the thousands because Betty White is killing it on "SNL" or "Modern Family" is extra brilliant tonight or Stewie just said something hilariously offensive to Brian on "Family Guy."

There's something deeply, beautifully human about people using newfangled social media to share their *awe* about great moments on good old-fashioned TV.

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