TV watchers look to Web for instant analysis, laughs

March 3 2011, By Mark W. Smith

When Elena Wollborg sits down to watch television after a long day, she does so with all of her girlfriends.

They share quips and laughs during shows like ABC's "The Bachelor" and Bravo's several "Real Housewives" reboots - but from different couches in different cities, using Twitter and Facebook.

"It just kind of lets you bring your girlfriends into the room with you and watch the shows as if they were sitting right next to you," said Wollborg, 33.

They're part of a growing trend among TV watchers who are plugged in to the Web at the same time.

It's a phenomenon industry watchers call the "second screen" - the act of using a smartphone, laptop or tablet computer to pair real-time Internet discussion with traditional television viewing.

A Nielsen and Yahoo! joint study found late last year that 86 percent of mobile Internet users use a mobile device while watching TV - social-networking, texting, browsing for related or unrelated content.

"The most accessible device while you watch TV is actually not the remote. It's probably your iPhone," said Somrat Niyogi, the CEO of Miso, one app for TV watchers.

The gang is gathered in the glow of separate Twitter screens, bonding over the tube

Many of us would never publicly reveal the movie we settled on during a quiet, cold winter night in.

But Graves De Armond, 45, is more vocal with his viewing habits.

He used his Android-based smartphone and the media check-in app GetGlue on a recent Saturday evening to tell his online connections he channel-surfed to "The Twilight Saga: New Moon."

"Guilty pleasure," read the comment that accompanied the check-in to the vampire drama.

De Armond began using GetGlue - one of a slew of new media check-in services - to stay connected with what his friends are watching on television.

Apps like GetGlue thrive on a user behavior that began with the advent of mobile Web technology: Going online to converse or look up information while watching TV.

Leading viewership tracking firm Nielsen last year looked at television viewers as a whole and found that 60 percent of them use a Web-enabled device such as a smartphone, laptop or tablet to text, use a social network or browse while watching.

Wollborg uses a laptop and Twitter to track live discussion during some of her less-admirable television choices, which is usually more entertaining than the shows themselves, she says.

"With 'The Bachelor' - it's not good programming. It's kind of

ridiculous," Wollborg says with a laugh. "I follow a lot of people that are really snarky and funny and it makes things a lot more fun to watch, because you're reading these things that are making you laugh at what you're doing."

The growth of the Web as a whole has trained us to consume media in a more interactive way, says Scott Campbell, a University of Michigan assistant professor of telecommunications who has studied the impact of new technologies, including mobile devices.

Web users have grown accustomed to multitasking and taking brief detours to seek another layer of information, Campbell says, and that behavior has taught us to want more from television.

"With reading, they're becoming increasingly used to clicking on a link and stopping where they are with this article and looking something up and jumping back into the article," Campbell says of Web multitaskers.

"In other types of settings, they're becoming more adept to processing more than one thing at a time."

NATIONAL BRANDS TAKE NOTE

This second-screen behavior has caught the eye of the entertainment industry as it competes for viewers' wandering attention.

Alex Iskold, the founder and CEO of GetGlue, which has signed up more than 900,000 users since its quiet November 2009 launch, says the firm has reached partnerships with more than 40 major networks and movie studios, including Showtime, Fox, NBC, Universal Pictures and Sony Pictures.

"We enable a new form of marketing," Iskold says. "If you check in and

say you're watching 'Mad Men,' obviously you don't think of it as an advertisement and neither do your friends.

"But the fact is, that's an ad."

The new free mobile apps that facilitate that discussion hope to cash in, too, with their hold on the second screen, which could also display paid ads.

"If you can build something that you can use while you watch TV, in the same way TV advertisers buy ads on TV, they will buy ads on a second screen," says Niyogi, of Miso.

The trend toward real-time engagement during live shows may even help slow the decline in ratings as viewers shift to online video and time-shifted DVR viewing.

This year's Super Bowl - the most watched television event in history with 162.9 million viewers - was also the most tweeted sporting event ever.

Twitter users sent more than 4,000 tweets per second the moment the game ended, breaking a record set during last year's World Cup, the social network said.

Those who don't watch appointment television events like the Super Bowl or this Sunday's Academy Awards live also miss out on the often entertaining real-time discussion happening alongside online.

GetGlue hopes to stoke this live-viewing behavior and set itself apart from dozens of new check-in apps by giving out tangible and time-sensitive rewards, Iskold says. When checking in to certain shows, users unlock stickers - digital rewards that can be redeemed for real stickers

through the mail. Many stickers are available only to those who check in to a show's live broadcast.

"What we're finding is, this scarcity starts to drive behavior," Iskold says. "People know that they have to check in to get this reward."

IS IT ANTISOCIAL OR HYPERSOCIAL?

It may seem that those who spend TV-watching time plugged in to online conversations are the epitome of antisocial.

But others say they're being overtly social, just using a different tool.

"I've made other friends from liking things and tweeting about shows," De Armond says.

And using these new tools may actually be making us more socially savvy, Campbell says, as we adapt and evolve to participate in conversations across platforms.

"These folks are developing new communication skills - an added layer of communication confidence on top of the skills they already have in dealing with people face-to-face," he says.

MEDIA CHECK-IN SERVICES

GetGlue

Price: Free

System: Web-based and apps for iOS and Android

What it does: Allows media consumers to check in to and share online what television show or movie they're watching, what music they're listening to or what book they're reading. Users also can enter in their favorite artists, authors, actors, movies and TV shows and the service becomes a recommendation service based on what has been entered. Frequent watchers earn stickers - digital badges - that can be redeemed for real through the mail.

Quote: Founder and CEO Alex Iskold: "You can connect to people and communities that are reflective of your tastes in a way that your Facebook friends wouldn't be."

www.getglue.com

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Miso

Price: Free

System: Web-based and apps for iOS and Android

What it does: This service is still fairly basic, just allowing users to check in to what they're watching and earn digital badges. Users can also see what's trending on TV - the shows that the most people on the service are watching now. The company plans to add functions this year that will pair second-screen content with live television.

Quote: CEO Somrat Niyogi: "We want to build something where you have your iPhone out the entire time you watch TV because it makes the TV-watching experience better."

www.gomiso.com

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IntoNow

Price: Free

System: iPhone

What it does: This is another social network built around check-ins to television programs, but it has one buzzworthy feature that others don't: It automatically listens to the show you're watching and checks you in based on what it hears.

www.intonow.com

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