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CMS.603 / CMS.995 American Soap Operas
Spring 2008

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19 May 2008

As The World Turns in the Digital Age: A Study of Soaps and Streaming Media

As broadband connections have become ubiquitous and mobile devices developed increased Internet capabilities a demand has arisen for on demand digital video outside of the television and cable box. The field of online video is rapidly developing – six years ago the concept of downloading whole programs simply didn't exist, and disputes over online copyright issues were firmly in the domain of the music industry. Today, prime-time shows can be downloaded (illegally) with ease immediately after transmission in high definition, and an increasing number of networks are placing official content online.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, soap operas have been left behind in the race towards digital distribution. There has been a strong tradition of resistance on the part of networks and producers to introduce new technology to daytime TV, and online video is no exception. A large number of soaps remain in a non-widescreen aspect ratio, let alone being shot in high definition. Still, several networks have made moves to place their soap opera content online, if only to supplement their other offerings. Thus, the responsibility to produce and upload content has fallen to the fans, many of whom do so with considerable relish. This paper will examine the methods employed by both fans and the networks to place regular and relevant content from soaps online. The main focus will be upon *As The World Turns* (ATWT), a well received and reasonably performing show that regularly places third in the ratings.

There are several methods through which one can watch *ATWT* online, some official, but most not. The first port of call for many fans will be the CBS website, where can watch full streaming episodes of the show. During the writing of this paper, CBS updated the platform upon which their streaming video was based, and the quality of hosted videos is surprisingly high. Shows are supported by commercial breaks as per broadcast, although interruptions are shorter and feature one sole product – generally a sponsor will support each episode, and buy all advertising space. The website, whilst improved in comparison to prior CBS efforts, is still unwieldy and difficult to use.

Out of all the problems with CBS's site, the most glaring is the lack of community or social networking integration. This is in contrast to other official channels such as *Hulu*, a joint NBC/Fox project to centralize their shows onto one unified site (devoid of network branding) - *Hulu* offers a commenting system similar to *YouTube*, whereas CBS does not. CBS does mirror its online video content via Microsoft's *MSN TV* website, although again only allowing the most recent five episodes to be screened. The underlying video platform appears to be much the same, again with little in way of community features (despite *MSN*'s tight integration with Microsoft's social networking features).

Further compounding the problems with the official streaming, only the most recent five episodes are offered for viewing. For a prime-time series, this is not so problematic – five episodes are equivalent to five weeks of content. However, for a soap opera viewer this represents a large stumbling block. Online streaming sites are frequently targeted at the 'catch-up' viewer, but a fan of *ATWT* is unable to watch episodes he or she may have missed from two or three weeks ago. The precise reasons for CBS choosing to limit content in this way are unknown. There is no technical problem with hosting a back catalogue on content

– indeed, official sites such as *Hulu* offer entire seasons of shows such as *The Office* or *Arrested Development*. Networks can on occasion refuse to stream entire seasons online out of a fear of DVD sales cannibalization, but given the lack of after-market capitalization on the part of soap operas, one must assume the decision to limit episode availability is based on contracts and residuals.

Therefore, a viewer looking for content outside of the previous week's episodes must turn to unofficial channels for content. The same goes for fans from countries outside of the United States, as the CBS website is strictly limited to US residents. Illegal content can be broadly split into two - web based streaming (eg, YouTube) and downloading (peer to peer software). For many television shows, the latter is the most popular option, typically via BitTorrent – however, this is not the case for soap operas.

Bit Torrent is the favored method for downloading of film and television shows, which can be quite large in size. Episodes of *ATWT* do appear on BitTorrent 'trackers' (search engines) - whilst content does extend past the five day period offered by the official channels, the nature of BitTorrent means that anything older than a couple of weeks is extremely difficult to download and obtain (the more popular the content, the easier and faster it is to obtain). Only one or two users may be 'seeding' an episode from the previous month, which can make download speeds very slow. The main advantage of BitTorrent over a hosted video site such as *YouTube* is the quality of the final product, which is normally quite high (for soaps, DVD resolution, but many HD shows can be downloaded in their native format). However, one can anticipate that developments in storage and technology will result in hosting sites providing similar quality videos, and that this advantage is strictly a short-term one.

Even recently aired episodes are not particularly popular on BitTorrent. The May 16th 2008 episode of *ATWT* had twenty three seeders and 11 'leeches' 36 hours following transmission. For comparison, the same day's episode of *The Young and the Restless* had eighty-eight seeders, and prime-time show *30 Rock* (with about three times the audience of *ATWT*) had 738 seeders. The discrepancy between prime-time shows and soap operas (based on audience size, *30 Rock* should theoretically only have 69 seeders if we take *As The World Turns* as a baseline) can be assumed to be a result of worldwide popularity of a show. *30 Rock* is broadcast in numerous countries, nearly always with months long delays. Keen audience members may wish to keep up to date with their American cousins. The same argument proves true for *The Young and the Restless*, which should only really have around 40 seeders based on audience size. *The Young and the Restless* is broadcast in considerably more countries (22) than *ATWT* (3).

There are several potential reasons for the comparative lack of soap opera content via BitTorrent – primarily, a lack of interest by networks to prevent content being placed online for streaming. Many networks will spend a considerable amount of time and money tracking down and removing illegal hosted and streamed content (for example, searching *YouTube* for Comedy Central's popular *Colbert Report* will turn up no clips or episodes – not because users don't want to post them, but because Viacom, parent of Comedy Central, is embroiled in a lawsuit against *YouTube*). This forces users to more distributed and undetectable protocols such as BitTorrent. However, neither Proctor & Gamble nor CBS seem particularly interested or concerned by the proliferation of technically illegal soap opera content online. There is little known history of genuine claims against copyrighted *As The World Turns* material hosted by sites such as *YouTube*.

YouTube is the most popular medium for distribution of *ATWT* content, despite the fact the vast majority of it is technically illegal (CBS maintain a small profile on the site, which will be discussed later). YouTube is the number one video streaming site across the Internet and offers a variety of amateur and professionally generated clips. Whilst there are many other video streaming sites, they tend to be used as refuge for illegal content rejected by YouTube - something that doesn't happen in the case of *As The World Turns*. Because individual users are responsible for uploading videos, rather than a faceless corporation, different personalities can become associated with different content. Some of the better known users and their 'channels' will be examined in more detail here.

First and foremost, there are the users who upload recently aired full episodes, which are split into 10 minute segments¹. There are several 'competing' users on YouTube who do so for *As The World Turns*, each catering to a slightly different audience. Beautreal is one such user of YouTube, who uploads entire episodes usually the day after broadcast. Whilst each segment typically has fairly low viewing figures (hovering between 800-1000), Beautreal's channel is still one of the top hundred viewed in the United Kingdom. Beautreal his/herself is in fact British, and places episodes online for people unable to watch the show on regular television (episodes for his/her channel are obtained by capturing the official online stream).

Beautreal as a user and potential audience member is particularly interesting – in a brief message to this researcher, Beautreal stated s/he was a high school student in Britain taking media-studies A-levels. This is an audience that *As The World Turns* does not

¹ When YouTube was created, videos could be any length. The 10 minute limit was added to prevent entire episodes being uploaded, although in reality rarely acts as a barrier.

inherently target in the US (mainly down to its airing time), but one that is potentially worth more to advertisers than the typical demographic. Whilst it would be sad for the community built up around Beautreal's efforts to be lost, one cannot help but wonder if CBS or Proctor & Gamble could significantly increase their online revenue stream by opening up daily episodes to foreign viewers. Indeed, perhaps CBS could take this even further and produce a teenage/early adult portal featuring soap content, packaged in such a way as to appeal.

In addition to Beautreal, user ATWT1980 also caters for an audience abroad, although in this case one who's primary language may not be English. *ATWT* is screened in only a few foreign countries, unlike other CBS soaps – outside the US, it is broadcast in Canada and the Netherland. ATWT1980 captures broadcast episodes from the latter country for upload. Whilst the episode dialogue remains in English, it is subtitled in Dutch, and it seems likely that the audience is mainly composed of Dutch speakers – the delay of several months between American and Dutch showings means English speakers will have already seen the episodes. This smaller audience is reflected by the low view count, typically around 300-600.

User-generated/edited content makes up the majority of popular (in terms of view count) *ATWT* material. One user, LukeVanFan, has created a popular unofficial 'spin-off' of *ATWT* entitled *Luke and Noah's Story*. His videos consist of episodes of *ATWT* cut to only include scenes featuring or concerning gay couple Luke and Noah (known to fans as 'Nuke'). At the time of writing, the saga had reached Part 166, with each part ranging from one to ten minutes in length. *The Luke and Noah Story* maintains a dedicated audience of between 10-30,000, depending on content and length. LukeVanFan also uploads news

broadcasts and other media pertinent to Luke and Noah, which garner similar viewing figures. The audience is fairly vocal, and each episode will generally feature upwards of a hundred comments. Many commentators will offer their views on the storyline, although the free-form nature of the YouTube discussion system means semi-anarchy can occasionally develop (which will be examined later).

ATWT also has a number of 'stand out' clips on *YouTube*, footage that has garnered far more views than one might expect – the majority of this comes from *The Luke and Noah Story*. There are dozens of archive clips – generally from the past few years – that have 50,000+ views (typically climaxes of romance plots), but at the top of the list is a Luke & Noah clip featuring their first kiss (currently with 1.3 million views). It would make an interesting study (one that is sadly beyond the means of this paper) to determine how many people viewing this clip and the *ATWT* universe for the first time went on to subsequently watch either whole episodes or the *Luke & Noah Story*.

In addition to current media, some YouTube users upload archive clips and episodes from the show. There are two in particular – OakdaleHistorian and Oakdalian. Both users mix plots of the past couple of years with older footage dating back to the 70s (although primarily 1980s material). The majority of this video is obtained from digitized VHS copy, and new videos representing various periods are uploaded on a regular basis. Again, CBS and/or Proctor & Gamble have shown little interest in preventing this from happening.

Finally, CBS maintains an official presence on YouTube, although *ATWT* content is marginal and limited to short clips (with the exception of *InTurn*, the *ATWT* reality spin-off, which features full episodes). Clips are always from recent episodes, as opposed to archive material, and other unofficial users usually also upload identical copies (for comparison:

CBS's official clip of Luke & Noah's first kiss has 60,000 views, whereas LukeVanFan's has over 1.6 million). It is interesting that given this YouTube presence CBS have not worked more to eliminate unofficial content. One has to assume that they are aware of it.

One of the defining features of YouTube over other channels is the community building and networking options on offer. Uploaders have the ability to enable an unthreaded discussion on a per video basis, discussions which frequently descend into an anarchic free-for-all. Because the *YouTube* community is so large and pervasive, discussions can also turn political quickly (*LukeVanFan*, for example, sometimes disables comments on particularly contentious videos, such as Luke and Noah's first kiss to avoid this).

Whilst the discussion over current storylines and episodes tends to be fairly loose, archive footage is considerably more sedate. Users may navigate to the content out of a desire to learn more about storylines mentioned in the show (for example, one user, a 13 year old watcher of the show, posted a comment in response to the Margo Hughes rape storyline thanking the uploader for allowing him/her to fully understand the reemergence of that particular plot several years later). Because traffic to archive footage tends to be lower than that of current episodes, discussions also tend to be more controlled and on-topic.

The YouTube discussion format proves problematic for existing conceptions of fan interactions online. Because the audience base for YouTube is so large, people navigating to *ATWT* content may not be the same demographic as those who deliberately choose to visit a soap opera discussion board. The lack of official moderation and topic threads means conversations can quickly become somewhat chaotic, with little individual reply going on.

For example, one episode of *The Luke & Noah Story* had a hundred post long discussion over Luke's latest hairstyle, dominating any other discussion and prompting one poster to bemoan "People, please – ITS HAIR!!" (sic)²

For example, Figure 1 shows an excerpt from a discussion for an episode of *The Luke & Noah Story*. The first six comments, whilst related, are isolated and more akin to thinking aloud than a threaded discussion. We then briefly move into a short political discussion of the death penalty, which presents difficulties for soap opera researchers who maintain little political discussion takes place. Indeed, it is possible to provide examples for most episodes of *The Luke & Noah Story* as well as recent full editions of *ATWT* where discussion veers to the political (and not always, as seen below, in the homophobic ways one might expect for a gay storyline).

There are several good reasons for this. First and foremost, YouTube registration is not typically self-selecting – unlike an established soap opera discussion forum, one does not commit an interest in soap opera by the act of registration. It seems unlikely that a user may choose to register for a website such as *soapcentral.com* if they are uninterested in soap operas. The very act of navigating to such a site implies at least a passing interest, and registering indicates a desire to participate in a community discussion. One could register for YouTube for many different reasons, and the global YouTube community is so large that one would suspect many commentators on soap opera videos did not register with that specific intention in mind.

²http://www.youtube.com/comment_servlet?all_comments&v=4H5RODQg1ZI&fromurl=/watch%3Fv%3D4H5RODQg1ZI%26feature%3Drelated

Furthermore, commenting on YouTube is extremely simple and quick. The site is designed so that comments may be posted during video playback, and only the 10 most recent posts are displayed. Perhaps the most important point is the perpetuity of the commenting system. Unlike a threaded discussion board such as *soapcentral.com*, videos never 'drop off' the radar. Videos that were uploaded years ago still receive comment postings from users, unlike forum threads. People may post comments to older videos that have seen little traffic with little concern for judgment or moderation as on forums.

One might wonder why CBS seems so indifferent to this user content. There are several potential possibilities. CBS did, several years ago, sign a deal with Google (owners of YouTube) to permit users to upload CBS content (whilst the terms of the deal was confidential, presumably it involved CBS gaining a cut of the advertising earned). That deal eventually fell apart, but the fact they were even willing to consider it places them above other networks in their attitude towards copyright infringement.

CBS has also publically stated that clips of shows on YouTube result in higher ratings. Whilst there is no data available for *ATWT*, ratings for CBS late night shows increased by an average of 6% following clips being posted on YouTube. Of course, there is a world of difference between simple clips and entire episodes. There is one other potential reasons, which is that CBS simply doesn't particularly care about protecting its daytime properties. This is in part due to scheduling – if one is watching a mid-day broadcast live, it seems fairly safe to assume there is little to distract them (in sharp comparison to a prime-time show). The people watching *ATWT* episodes on YouTube may simply not be eating into the daytime audience, and so pose no threat to decreased ratings for advertisers. One

therefore has to wonder whether if CBS would pursue illegal online content more aggressively if they had their own online content portal of comparable quality.

There are signs that this is happening, and perhaps CBS has something larger planned. During the writing of this paper, the network announced it would be buying online content provider *CNET* for \$1.8 billion (ironically, CBS stated in November 2006 that it was not “going to spend \$1.6 billion on YouTube”³). CBS is extremely bullish over its online revenue generation capabilities – predicting raising over \$1 billion by 2010. If CBS is serious about its online video portfolio, it has yet to show it. Its official efforts to produce online soap opera content have been overshadowed by the vast fan community. It will be extremely difficult for the network to provide attractive alternatives. Even if it did, it will be even more of a challenge to do so without alienating the many fans who have dedicated large portions of their lives to editing, uploading, and sharing their favorite moments from soaps.

It is extremely likely that the next couple of years will see online video content become even more prevalent. Whilst the medium is not particularly lucrative at the moment, it would be naïve to believe there was no potential for increased revenue from video streaming. As *As The World Turns* fans become increasingly involved in the creation of content themselves, the more permanent their efforts will become. With *The Luke & Noah Story* gathering tens of thousands of views, and an episode count to rival many TV shows, CBS would be in a difficult position should it decide to prevent further uploads from taking place. On the other hand, there’s no doubt that unlike other fan forms of expression,

³ <http://dealbook.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/15/cbs-to-pay-18-billion-for-cnet-networks/?ref=business>

direct capture and upload of videos (even with editing) is somewhat illegitimate. How CBS manages to both devise methods of capitalizing upon the demand for soap material whilst balancing fan needs for community and content creation remains to be seen.

- JOINYOUBE** (1 week ago) [Reply](#) | [Spam](#) +1  
there are always bigger bombs ticking than we allow ourselves to imagine
-
- fadedsmilebrokenhear** (1 week ago) [Reply](#) | [Spam](#) +2  
anyone feel like there is something going on between ameera & her 'father in law'
-
- cuteiwhatiaimfor** (1 week ago) [Reply](#) | [Spam](#) +6  
This is getting exciting again I love the scenes with Noah and his dad. "His name is Luke!" and jumping across the table loved it!
Oooh what is the Col. up to now?!
-
- qaffan4299** (1 week ago) [Reply](#) | [Spam](#) +2  
well now what? When Col. Mayor and Ameera talked what was the "Can I count on my girl"?? What is up with that. Luke is right something is not right.
-
- peooni** (1 week ago) [Reply](#) | [Spam](#) +4  
Cut your hair Luke!
-
- bdmjintx** (1 week ago) [Reply](#) | [Spam](#) +3  
If you think about it, shouldn't the colonel be dead by now? He murdered one person and attempted to murder two others. I believe in most states that will definitely get you the death penalty .
-
- jaybird62** (1 week ago) [Reply](#) | [Spam](#) +1  
please, they don't give death penalty anymore, just life sentence so they can continue justifying ridiculous tax increases
-
- BikingWithColdWater** (1 week ago) [Reply](#) | [Spam](#) 0  
jaybird62 - Life is much, much less expensive than the death penalty, monetarily speaking.
-
- jaybird62** (1 week ago) [Reply](#) | [Spam](#) 0  
yes monetarily speaking, but at the same time (especially in cases such as mr. mayer)'d feel comfortable with a little more money spent in offing his ass than him sitting in a cell getting three squares a day and personal phone calls from conniving trick bitches like Ameera

Figure 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rNSfIU52y4>