



Key Issues in the Arts and Entertainment Industry

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The Future of Broadcasting

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Introduction

At the end of the last century, a dictionary could confidently define broadcasting as the transmission of a signal for television or radio. Within a decade, every element of that definition had changed. Transmission had branched out from the cumbersome business of placing masts bearing receivers and transmitters at the highest vantage points across the countryside.

A signal was no longer confined to the band waves that the air could carry – invisible streams snaking their way across the landscape: Ultra High Frequency (UHF) carrying television, as long as the hills weren't in the way; Very High Frequency (VHF or FM) carrying wonderful quality sound, as long as the same hills were not joined by chimneys, bodies, the wrong sort of cloud or stonework; Long Wave, unstoppable by anything except distance, it seemed, carrying cricket and the shipping forecast across Europe and far out to sea; Medium Wave (AM), the carrier of choice for hosts of daytime local music stations and great for listening in the car, but hopeless when night fell and the waves went bouncing around the ionosphere bringing martial music from Albania where the football commentary should have been; and Short Wave – the touchiest of the wave bands, that made catching the words as hard as catching fish, but finally gave national broadcasters a global reach.

Instead, the old analogue signals and the copper wires of telephone lines were replaced by fibre optic cable and digital bytes. The slow, romantic waves were now just pulses of light with the possibility of being either on or off. But what freedom that simplification gave. Freedom came in many forms: there was suddenly room for dozens of new radio stations between the television signals,

equally digital – though ironically needing more, if smaller, transmission masts than the old system. The quality achieved is such that picture definition is as close to perfect as is possible in two dimensions. Sound definition is ahead of television in being able to transmit not just in stereo (which has been available for radio since the 1960s) but in surround sound. With the potential for 3D, the introduction of a sense of depth into TV images, watching at home will increase markedly in its sense of realism in the course of the next two decades.

The variations now are more due to the slight differences in the way microphones and ears, and cameras and eyes, hear and see, than to the inadequacies of transmission. And the receivers have developed in parallel: a television used to be a huge box, distended at the back, with a radioactive tube firing particles at a relatively small curved screen. A decade into the 21st century, the technological fashion moved to huge flat screens that could dominate a room, showing liquid crystal pictures in high definition only previously possible for the poster size still photograph.

Signals now come through the air (whether from satellites, dedicated transmitters or mobile phone masts) through cables and telephone lines. The effect on broadcasters themselves, however, has been caused as much by the diversification of the ability to receive, as by the means of delivery. The opportunity to use broadband digital telephone lines and wireless (wi-fi) extensions of them in domestic and public spaces to offer an almost unlimited range of content by computer is revolutionising not just the industry itself, but the expectations of audiences. The Netherlands became the first country in the EU to switch off completely from analogue transmission in 2006. The EU aims to complete the process in 2012, but is unlikely to meet such a stiff target. The Netherlands was also one of the first countries to embrace TV and radio via the Internet. In 2005, 26 per cent of audiences there used it. That figure doubled in three years.

The Internet is becoming as important in delivery as the old infrastructure, and it is global, not local. Broadcasting has been joined by narrowcasting, netcasting and podcasting. Perhaps one should just forget the prefixes and call it all 'casting'; for it does indeed live up to the original metaphorical image of machines casting the seeds of ideas to the winds without knowing where they will fall or what will grow from them. But let's stick to broadcasting. It still has resonance and to call oneself a broadcaster confers a professional cachet that the new terms can't quite invoke.

This chapter suggests ways in which the whole sector may change in the next quarter of a century. It explores the changing expectations of the public and the implications for producers, manufacturers, creative contributors (and their copyright) and, not least, governments. It will largely focus on Europe, and

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