

## Introduction

With the possible exception of the popularisation of the motor car, it is impossible to name a modern day invention that has had a greater impact on the everyday lives of the general public than television. It is hard to conceive of any contemporary Westerner that has not come into contact with it on a regular basis. Not only did the twentieth century see television establish itself as the dominant cultural medium, but the whole concept of peering into a screen, whether for entertainment or practical purposes, has become so cemented in our collective consciousness and daily experience, that anyone that claimed not to engage in this behaviour, would not only be viewed as eccentric beyond belief, but also would be highly unlikely to be believed by the majority of people. (And, yes, I do recognise the irony of using a laptop to type this in order to point it out. And, yes, I do realise that *The Simpsons* has already made this joke...).

The television set has become the centrepiece of living-rooms all over the world, and more recently the high-definition telescreen – whether coming in the form of the traditional television set, a personal computer, mobile phone technology, or increasingly in urban landscapes beaming commercial advertisements into the ether twenty-four hours a day – has become a permanent fixture in all of our lives. Ironically, the rise of the latter, spawned as it was by the former, has led to television's predominance, not being completely overcome, but being challenged by similar mediums that offer a flexibility and interactivity that has not been associated with television – much as the convenience of television led directly to a decline in cinema attendance.

It is surely for this reason that we have recently witnessed the introduction of new phenomena such as “+1” TV channels, that theoretically allow the viewer to watch “live” TV shows that they would otherwise have missed, all the mainstream broadcasters launching Internet television applications such as the BBC's iPlayer service, which allow viewers to access a back catalogue of centrally stored programmes, and a raft of television programmes that are specifically centred around the public voting, thus supposedly “interacting” with the programme. Not to mention the fact that live programmes that don't revolve around voting almost inevitably attempt to incorporate some dubious opportunity for the viewer to vote, phone in, otherwise offer their opinion, or participate in a competition at some point. Of course, this last phenomenon serves the rather transparent ulterior motive of allowing the poor, impoverished broadcasters to claw a few quid back from the general public. Well, Davina McCall doesn't come cheap, you know...

In accordance with this it is frequently suggested that the early years of the twenty-first century are witnessing the *fin-de-siècle* of television as we experienced it in the twentieth century, where viewers will no longer tolerate the concept of scheduled programming that has to be consumed at the convenience of broadcasters, rather people will consume their media as and when it suits them. IBM recently produced a document entitled “The end of television as we know it”, which begins by acknowledging this very issue.

“Today, audiences are becoming increasingly fragmented, splicing their time among myriad media choices, channels and platforms. For the last few decades, consumers have migrated to more specialized, niche content via cable and multichannel offerings. Now, with the growing availability of on demand, self-programming and search features, some experiencers are moving beyond niche to individualized viewing. With increasing competition from convergence players in TV, telecommunications and the Internet, the industry is confronting unparalleled levels of complexity, dynamic change and pressure to innovate”.<sup>1</sup>

While IBM clearly have a vested interest in this, the document is also acknowledging a cultural

paradigm shift that is already affecting the lives of people who could by no means be described as technophiles. However, it also seems reasonable to assert that IBM are over-stating the case somewhat, and that conventional television still has a huge cultural grip that shows no sign of being immediately relinquished. While viewing figures have declined somewhat from the peak figures of the 1970s and 80s, the two flagship soap operas of the BBC and ITV, *Eastenders* and *Coronation Street*, still attract in the region of ten-million viewers per episode,<sup>2</sup> which represents over 15% of the British population. By the law of averages, you would only need to stop six people in the street before you found someone that had watched the last episode of *Eastenders*, and probably far less before you found someone that had watched an episode in the past week. It would be nigh on impossible to think of any other cultural activity that does not sustain life itself for which such vast numbers of willing participants can be identified.

Thus, to sound the death knell of television would be hugely premature. One need only traverse the average street of terraced housing in Britain and observe the number of houses with satellite dishes to witness the market penetration that satellite television has achieved. A far cry from its humble beginnings in the UK, with British Satellite Broadcasting launching, collapsing and merging with Sky Television to form the British Sky Broadcasting Group that exists today, all within a six-month period in 1990.<sup>3</sup> It is hard to imagine today that a significant football match could be played in England without someone filming it and broadcasting it live, and equally difficult to envisage the consumption of this broadcast not involving viewing a conventional television receiver. Live, scheduled television may be in decline, but the threat of it dying out completely would seem to your humble author to have been somewhat exaggerated.

Nevertheless, with the very real threat of audience share declining, broadcasters have had to embrace the concept of “TV on demand”, with a centrepiece of Sky’s subscription package being the ability to write television programmes to a hard drive for consumption at a more convenient time (some might say that this is little more than a glorified video recorder!).

Furthermore, there has been a fundamental need for broadcasters to provide something not offered by Internet or other downloadable services, to attempt to draw a clear distinction between the two. Sky launched a high-definition television service, Sky HD, that began as a companion to the existing analogue service, but which has grown in prominence as more people desire the shiny new bauble that they’ve seen at their friends’ houses. In June, 2011, Sky announced that 3.8 million homes now have Sky HD installed.<sup>4</sup> All of the terrestrial broadcasters apart from Channel 5 have launched similar services, with the BBC providing two HD channels through the “free-to-air” Freeview service (Freeview isn’t free-to-air, but more on that later). Even more significant – now that high-definition television has become less of an exciting, obscure concept, and more a routine part of people’s everyday lives – is the launch of 3-D TV. With ‘three-dimensional’ films already achieving great success in the cinema, most notably James Cameron’s *Avatar*, Sky launched their Sky 3D service, which provides a modicum of ‘three-dimensional’ programming in April, 2010, with the first ever broadcast being a football match between Chelsea and Manchester United.<sup>5</sup> Sky, unsurprisingly, describes its 3D service as a revolution in TV.<sup>6</sup>

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## References

<sup>1</sup> IBM: The end of television as we know it: <http://www-935.ibm.com/services/us/imc/pdf/ge510-6248-end-of-tv-full.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Broadcasters' Audience Research Board: Weekly Top 30 Programmes: <http://www.barb.co.uk/report/weekly-top-programmes-overview?>

<sup>3</sup> *The Guardian*: Sky TV's launch: 'a wing and a prayer': <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/organgrinder/2009/feb/04/sky-tv-early-years>

<sup>4</sup> Sky: BRITISH SKY BROADCASTING GROUP PLC:  
[http://corporate.sky.com/documents/pdf/latest\\_results/fy\\_press\\_release\\_1011](http://corporate.sky.com/documents/pdf/latest_results/fy_press_release_1011)

<sup>5</sup> *The Drum*: Sky Television claim first 3D broadcast as a success: <http://www.thedrum.co.uk/news/2010/04/03/sky-television-claim-first-3d-broadcast-success>

<sup>6</sup> Sky: Sky 3D is here: <http://www.sky.com/shop/tv/3d/>