

Interactive Television

TV of the Future or the Future of TV?

Media & Cultural Studies 1

Edited by Jens F. Jensen & Cathy Toscan

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Associate professor Jens F. Jensen, Series editor
InterMedia-Aalborg and the Department of Communication,
Aalborg University.

Media & Cultural Studies 1:
Interactive Television. TV of the Future or the Future of TV?
(Edited by Jens F. Jensen & Cathy Toscan)

Media & Cultural Studies 2
The Aesthetics of Television
(Edited by Gunhild Agger & Jens F. Jensen)

Contents

<i>Jens F. Jensen & Cathy Toscan</i> Introduction	11
<i>Jens F. Jensen</i> The Concept of 'Interactivity' in 'Interactive Television' and 'Interactive Media'	25
<i>David Tafler</i> Interactive Television and Virtual Culture Ruptures, Disruptions, and Transitions	67
<i>Gerhard Fuchs</i> Interactive Television - A Shattered Dream?	91
<i>Rolf Brandrud</i> Digital TV and Public Service in the Nordic Countries Reflections on the Mass Market Introduction of Digital TV, the Struggle Between Proprietary and Open Standards and New Opportunities for Public Service	119
<i>Terje Rasmussen</i> New Media Change Sociological Approaches to the Study of the New Media	149

<i>Borko Furht, Raymond Westwater & Jeffrey Ice</i> A New Approach to Radio and Television Broadcasting over the Internet	169
<i>Derek Nicoll</i> As Viewers Become Consumer-Users: Anticipations and Actualizations	191
<i>James Stewart</i> Interactive Television at Home: Television Meets the Internet	231
<i>Cathy Toscan</i> A New Generation of Audiences for the 21st Century	261

About the Authors

Rolf Brandrud is senior advisor on interactive services and convergence at the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). Commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers he wrote the report *The position of the Nordic public service broadcasters in the digital future*, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1997 (<http://www.nrk.no/norden/ps-framtid/summary.htm>). He led NRK's Internet development during 1996-98, and was an editor for the departments for arts and cultural affairs at NRK Radio during 1987-88 and 1990-93.

Dr. *Gerhard Fuchs* is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center of Technology Assessment in Stuttgart, Germany. Fuchs has previously worked at the University of Munich in Germany and Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA, the Max-Planck Institute for the Study of Societies. Recent publications include: G. Fuchs & H.-J. Braczyk (eds.) *Informations-technische Vernetzung*, Nomos: Baden Baden 1998; G. Fuchs, H.-J. Braczyk & H.-G. Wolf (eds.) *Multimedia and Regional Economic Restructuring*, Routledge: London 1999.

Borko Furht is a Professor of Computer Science and Engineering at Florida Atlantic University (FAU) in Boca Raton, Florida, USA. He is the founder and director of the Multimedia Laboratory at FAU, funded by the National Science Foundation. Before joining FAU, he was a vice president of research and a senior director of development at Modcomp, a computer company of Daimler Benz, Germany, and a professor at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida, USA. His current research is in multimedia systems, video compression, video-on-demand, and Internet computing. He is an editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Multimedia Tools and Applications* (Kluwer Academic Publishers), and an associate editor of *Real-Time Imaging Journal*. He has received several technical and publishing awards, and has consulted for IBM, Hewlett-

Packard, Xerox, General Electric, JPL, NASA, Honeywell, and RCA. His recent publications include: B. Furht, R. Westwater, & J. Ice, "Multimedia Broadcasting Over the Internet – Video Compression", *IEEE Multimedia*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1999; B. Furht (Editor-in-Chief): *Handbook of Internet and Multimedia Systems and Applications*, CRC Press and IEEE Press, Boca Raton, Florida, 1999; B. Furht (Editor-in-Chief): *Handbook of Multimedia Computing*, CRC Press, Boca Raton, Florida, 1999; and B. Furht: "Where Are Information Superhighways Headed?", *ACM Computing Surveys*, invited paper, Vol. 27, No. 4, December 1995.

Jeffrey Ice serves as the head of research and development for the SimulSays products at Pipe Dream, Inc. based in Boca Raton, Florida, USA. Before founding Pipe Dream, Ice was involved in developing speech recognition software products for IBM (VoiceType, Simply Speaking, Simply Speaking Gold, and ViaVoice). In his earlier career at StreeWise Systems, Inc. and International Computer Systems, Ice has successfully developed and deployed several software solutions, such as premium finance software for loan institutions, a GPS system for videoconferencing systems, and many others.

Jens F. Jensen is Associate Professor in Multimedia and Computer-Mediated Communication at InterMedia-Aalborg and The Department of Communication, Aalborg University, Denmark. His current research interests include network-based multimedia, interactive television, Internet and WWW, interaction and interactivity, the aesthetics of multimedia, and inhabited 3D virtual worlds. Jensen is on the editorial board of the Danish scientific journal *K&K*, and is the general editor of the series *Media & Cultural Studies* as well as the *FISK-series* from Aalborg University Press. He is the editor of several anthologies, including *The Computer as Medium* (co-edited with P.B. Andersen and B. Holmqvist), Cambridge University Press 1993; and *The Aesthetics of Television* (co-edited with G. Agger), Aalborg University Press, 1999. He has published several articles and papers on new media and the social and cultural implications of information and computing technology. Recently, Jensen participated in the national research

program on: "The Aesthetics of Television" in a subproject on "Media and interactivity" (1993-1998). He is currently participating in a national research program on "Staging of Virtual Inhabited 3D Spaces" funded by the Danish Research Councils as well as a research project on "Multimedia in the Home".

Derek Nicoll is Research Fellow at The University of Edinburgh Management School in Scotland. With a background in psychology, he is currently working on a collaborative project with the Design Council of the UK – 'Increasing information intensity: Towards intelligent products' – where he is researching particular issues arising from the design and use of 'smart' or 'intelligent' products. His main interests lie in the design-use/production-consumption interface, and how firms make sense of and implement models of the user within design processes. He is a member of the Technology Management and Policy Programme (TechMaPP) – an integrated programme of research, consultancy and education. He has publications in the area of new media and human and social factors and is editor of *Interactive Television News* – an online newsletter devoted to advances in the area of advanced media.

Terje Rasmussen is a sociologist and Professor of Media Studies at the Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Norway, where he is also Head of Department. He co-manages the project 'The social Transformation of the Internet', funded by the Norwegian Research Council (see <http://www.media.uio.no/internetiendring/>). Among his publications in English is *Communication Technologies and the Mediation of Social Life*, Report no. 16, Dept. of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Norway.

David Tafler is Head of the Communication Department at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, USA. He has written extensively on interactive media and new media technologies and co-edited a book with Peter d'Agostino titled *Transmission: Toward A Post-Television Culture*.

Cathy Toscan is a ph.d.-student at InterMedia-Aalborg, Aalborg University and the Department of Communication, as well as an independent American media consultant. She lives in Copenhagen, Denmark. She has fifteen years of broadcast production experience (radio and TV) and has worked for NBC and ABC-TV affiliates in San Francisco, California, USA and the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (Danmarks Radio) in Copenhagen, Denmark, among others. More recently she has been a consultant for a number of research and development projects involving multimedia, hypermedia and interactive media. Toscan holds a Danish cand.phil. degree in humanistic computing from Aalborg University and an American B.A. in visual journalism from Antioch University. Her primary research interests include: interactivity, convergence, usability and interface design. She has written a number of articles in the popular press as well as in Scandinavian academic journals and anthologies.

Raymond Westwater is one of the key system designers at Pipe Dream Inc. based in Boca Raton, Florida, USA. He is a recognized specialist in the area of video compression with 25 years of consulting and project management experience with industry giants including IBM, Intel, and Microsoft. In his earlier career at IBM and Intel, Westwater has developed a real-time delivery system and managed application implementation on real-time video capture and playback systems. He holds a Ph.D. degree in Computer Science from Florida Atlantic University, a master degree in Applied Mathematics from Long Island University, and B.S. degree in Computer and Information Science from State University of New York. His recent publications include: R. Westwater and B. Furht: "A XYZ Algorithm for Real-Time Compression of Full-Motion Video", *Real-Time Imaging Journal*, Special Issue on Image and Video Processing in Multimedia Systems, Vol. 2, No. 1, February 1996, R. Westwater and B. Furht, *Real-Time Video Compression: Techniques and Algorithms*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Norwell, MA, 1996; B. Furht, J. Greenberg, and R. Westwater: *Motion Estimation Techniques for Video Compression*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Norwell, MA, 1996.

Introduction

**Cathy Toscan
&
Jens F. Jensen
InterMedia–Aalborg
& Department of Communication,
Aalborg University, Denmark**

Television is one of the most successful technological consumer products ever produced. It has spread to virtually every household in Western society. TV sets are located in a central part of the main living room in most homes, TV viewing is a dominant part of most people's leisure activities and daily lives and, for many, TV has become their most important source of information and entertainment. At the same time, television – on the heels of newspapers and radio – plays a major role in setting the agenda for public discussion and in defining social reality. Finally, TV as a mass medium has created a huge industry, which has thoroughly, changed the conditions surrounding the production, distribution and use of information and entertainment. To say that TV has a central place in our culture, or that TV over the past decades has thoroughly changed our daily lives, leisure, patterns of consumption – and thereby our society – is, therefore, a statement that barely begins to describe reality.

TV, however, is not a static medium – neither as a technology nor as a service. Game consoles, VCRs, cable, and satellite systems have already begun to change the image of what TV is and what it can be as a medium. In the years ahead, television faces even more radical developments and changes. Terms like interactivity, digitization, convergence, broadband

networks and services, networked multimedia, the information superhighway, integrated full service networks, content-on-demand, two-way cables, direct broadcast satellites, data-casting, multi-channel services, the mixture of TVs and computers, of broadcast and Internet, etc. point out some of the aspects involved in this process of change. Briefly, what is at stake here is the delivery of interactive, digital, multimedia services to the home.

Many observers have pointed to the radical – even revolutionary – character of these current transitions.

In an article entitled *Mediasaurus*, Michael Crichton, author of *Jurassic Park*, compares contemporary mass media with the dinosaurs (Crichton, 1993). The mass media, he writes, have become gigantic clumsy creatures, ill suited and unable to adapt to the demands of the new environment of information with its flexible mini-media and computer networks. Consequently, they are obsolete, on their way toward extinction. Crichton's conclusion: "Today's mass media is tomorrow's fossil fuel".

George Gilder, another commentator with a gift for the drastic, speaks of "life after television" (Gilder, 1994). Gilder's scenario resembles Crichton's in many respects. He claims, for example, that television, in technical terms, is dead, that just as the 'centralistic mainframe computer' and IBM collapsed in the 1980s, superseded by the PC, the centralistic television structure will now collapse, so that "in coming years, the very words 'telephone' and 'television' will ring as quaintly as the words 'horseless carriage', 'icebox', 'talking telegraph' or 'picture radio' ring today" (1994: 12). Is there a life after television? is Gilder's question. His own answer is: Yes, it's the PC and 'telecomputer'.

The editors of the trend-setting computer and lifestyle journal, *Wired*, do not predict the out-and-out demise of television as we know it today, but they expect broadcast television will be but one of many different alternatives in a new network of converging media: "As everything gets wired, media of all kinds are moving to the decentralized matrix known as the Net. While the traditional forms – broadcast, print – show few signs of vanishing, the Net is being invaded by new media species" (Kelly et al., 1997: 12). The prime characteristic of

this new medium is that it is not a broadcast, but a point-to-point medium: “a new medium is arising, surging across the Web in the preferred, many-to-many way: anything flows from anyone to anyone – from anywhere to anywhere – any-time. In other words, a true network like the telephone system, rather than a radiating system like radio or TV ... It means, in short, a more full-bodied experience that combines many of the traits of networks with those of broadcast” (Kelly et al., 1997: 14).

A significant feature of this new fauna of network-based species of media is their diversity, ranging from media mastodon to micro-media. “The most revolutionary advance”, *Wired* continues, “may be the creation of a whole universe of small-scale (and not-so-small-scale) broadcast networks ... Networked media ... can create broadcasting networks of any size and shape, especially the intermediate size between TV and say, personal mailing lists. You can push-pull broadcast to llama keepers or home scholars ... [The Net will be] a Net of push-laden networks, a world of nichecasting – thousands of mini-networks, ranging from micro-TV stations to totally customized personal programming...” (1997: 21-22).

Finally, digital guru Nicholas Negroponte speaks of the changing media landscape in a similar vein. He points out that the economic models of media today are based almost exclusively on ‘pushing’ the information and entertainment out to the public. The media of the future will have much more to do with ‘pulling’, where the consumers or users reach into the network and check out something the same way one does in a library or video-rental store today. Negroponte expects the media to be “redefined by systems for transmitting and receiving personalized information and entertainment” (: 6). The critical factors in Negroponte’s scenario are digitization and the ‘great information superhighway’: “Being digital will change the nature of mass media from a process of pushing bits at people to one of allowing people (or their computers) to pull at them. This is a radical change, because our entire concept of media is one of successive layers of filtering, which reduce information and entertainment to a collection of ‘top stories’ or ‘best-sellers’ to be thrown at different ‘audiences’. As media companies go more and more toward narrow-

casting, like the magazine business, they are still pushing bits at a special-interest group, like car fanatics, alpine skiers, or wine enthusiasts ... The information industry will become more of a boutique business. Its marketplace is the global information highway" (1995: 84-85).

Each in his own way – Crichton, Gilder, the editors of *Wired* and Negroponte – are all pointing out radical changes, a sort of evolutionary quantum leap, in the current media-landscape.

The significance of these events has been the subject of some controversy. People like Crichton and Gilder have perhaps overestimated the radicality of the change and, as we say in Scandinavia, ‘sold the pelt before the animal (in this case a mediasaurus) was caught shot’. More cool-headed ‘mediasaurologists’ have, in the midst of all the technological turbulence, not seen anything really new at hand, and have cautioned us to ‘hold our horses’ – or paleohippuses, as the case may be.

However, no matter which reactions are most suitable, there does seem to be good reason to devote some attention to these processes of change right now, as they are taking off. No matter how you evaluate the effects and consequences, interactivity, digitization, convergence, networked media etc. have been the main media themes of the final decade of the old millennium and they will be the main themes of the first decade of the new.

The intention of this anthology is to describe and discuss various aspects of this ongoing process of transition and convergence in terms of interactive television. Trying to capture the essence of the daily fluctuations regarding interactive television, using the relatively ponderous processes required by book publishing, has proven to be a challenge similar to grasping at quicksilver. The anthology is best read as a snapshot of the situation at the time of publication. Like Gilder’s question: ‘Is there a life after television?’, the subtitle we have chosen – *TV of the Future or the Future of TV?* – is also intended as an open-ended question. What will TV of the future look like? Or, more radically, has TV as we know it a future as a medium at all?

Interactive television - an attempt at a working definition

What is interactive television, anyway? And what does it mean to interact with a TV?

Media researchers, especially those from reception research, media ethnography, and media and cultural studies, have in recent years denied the perception of television as a passive medium and have instead pointed out that the viewer's reading of TV-texts is always active and interactive. Practically and technically, however, traditional TV claims very little activity or attention from its viewers, as reflected by the parody of the 'couch potato'. Naturally, the viewers decide what to watch, just as they must cognitively and socially deal with, interpret, and make sense of what they see on the screen. But apart from this, strictly speaking, the only physical requirements involve turning on the set, (perhaps) changing the channel, and turning it off again and on the odd occasion, making small adjustments to the sound and picture.

In a negatively defined demarcation, interactive television (ITV) can be understood as TV, which requires more of the user than the traditional turn-on-zap-and-turn-off interaction and the conventional cognitive (and social) interaction between the presented text and the viewer's ability to make sense of what is seen – i.e., the purely interpretive interaction. In a more positive version interactive TV can be considered a new form of television that also relies upon actual, physical interaction in the form of choices, decisions and communicative input to the system. Thus making it possible for the viewer to interact with the medium in such a way that he or she gains control over what to watch, when to watch, and how to watch, as well as having the opportunity to actively and directly participate in a program or its creation.

Understood in this way, interactive television can be considered a fairly broadly defined concept. At the world conference dedicated to interactive television "i-TV '96. The Superhighway through the home. Configuring and consolidating the vision" in Edinburgh, Sept. 1996, the term interactive television was used