

section two

but what
will the
programmes
be like?

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Jimmy Mulville | Joint Managing Director,
 Hat Trick Productions

What will television be like in ten years’ time? A big question, an important question and, in a very real sense, a completely redundant one. Important if you work in the industry, especially if you have just started. Although most newcomers to the industry will be more concerned about where their next contract is coming from rather than with what they will be doing in ten years’ time, unless of course they are a budding Michael Jackson or Mark Thompson. But what renders the question almost not worth asking is that no one really knows. Let me repeat that. NO ONE REALLY KNOWS. I don’t mean not knowing like medical science not knowing the cause of the common cold, I’m talking about ignorance far more profound than that. I’m alluding to some sort of Platonic ideal of not knowing, and what makes it all the more confusing is that television is full of know-all: pumped-up, self-appointed prophets who are only too happy to spend hours banging on about the Next Big Challenge the industry has to face. Remember there was a time when you couldn’t go to an industry do without some bore in a bad suit banging on about The Opportunities of Dot Com, as if we would all need to mutate quickly and learn to breathe through newly developed gills or wither and perish like some old brontosaurus. The truth was, amusingly, that only the slow-blooded among us saved hundreds of thousands by not jumping on the frenzied bandwagon before it crashed and burned. I could have papered my house over the past few years with leaflets emblazoned with invitations to discover What The Digital Age Will Really Mean. I’d rather watch paint dry, which ironically is what a lot of digital channels can just about afford to show.

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Now I know this kind of attitude plays badly with the phalanxes of consultants, marketing gurus and corporate thinkers the industry employs every year to tell it what is going to happen and I don’t want to deprive these good people of their right to own a second home. But if there was a way one could predict what was going to happen in the television business - even roughly - do you think it would be in the state it is in at the moment?

Let’s be brutally honest. The producers and the people they serve - the broadcasters - find it difficult enough to predict how one piddling programme is going to perform next week, let alone a whole industry over a ten-year period. And it isn’t as if they’re not trying. These days

a pitch meeting can be attended by up to 20 - yes that's right, two zero - people, and most of them with degrees, not all of them in Meeja Studies either, all trying to second-guess the audience: controllers, commissioning editors, schedulers, demographic experts, their assistants, the marketing guys and several people just there to wear black suits and look very bored. And even then, you may have noticed, the programme they have sanctioned can be a turkey. Maybe in ten years the whole thing will be done over the Internet: we will send in the pitch, it will be processed through a piece of software, MicroPitch, which will decide if it is good enough, where it should play, who should be in it and how much it should cost. Of course that system would pretty much do away with most of the 20 people required to make these decisions now, so, unless turkeys suddenly start voting for Christmas, maybe the current system, which is at least a chance to meet people, is here to stay.

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By the way, I have promised the producers at Hat Trick that for the next big pitch we attend I will employ the services of a Druid and a dead pigeon, so that when I'm asked, 'And where do you think this will play best?' I can simply nod to Blodwyn who will produce said bird from his robe, eviscerate it and inspect the entrails. My betting is that this method would be as accurate as the over-manned nonsense we have now, in which programmes are in danger of being designed by committees primarily concerned with hearing themselves have opinions.

For me, the most interesting question to ponder is what will we all be watching - if we are watching at all - in 2014? If the current trend continues, predictions are that we will all be locked into our own specifically designed programming worlds, which will further separate us from our children, spouses and parents. Of course the great thing about telly - yes, there are great things about telly - is that it sometimes surprises, and in a good way. True, it more often disappoints and frequently depresses, but on the odd occasion it makes you glad you paid the licence fee. The surprises (the clue is in the name) cannot be predicted. They come out of the blue, they often defy logic or run contrary to prevailing tastes or are simply creative risks taken by clever producers and bold commissioners. For example, ten years ago, would you have predicted that a simple general knowledge quiz show would have swept the globe and dictated the share price of the Disney Corporation? Or that bunging a bunch of exhibitionists in a house and pointing cameras at them would keep Channel 4's audience share and several tabloids afloat summer after summer? Or that *Have I Got News*

For You would be thriving on a diet of changing hosts? Did you see *The Office* phenomenon coming? Very few at the BBC did.

If you ask those involved in the developing, making and scheduling of those shows, there will be stories of how it nearly didn't work, how the show looked like it was over before it started, and the predominant theme would be how the success of the project took them by surprise. The best television is and should be surprising. *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* was the result of one man's obsession and the bravest scheduling decision of the decade. People - by that I mean me - were expecting a cheesy disaster of *El Dorado* proportions. Instead, around the globe it glued whole families to their sofas for an hour a night every night for a fortnight. It was must-see television, until, of course, the networks got greedy, forgot about the maxim 'less is more' and ground the thing into the ground. *Big Brother* got away first in Holland as an act of will on the part of John de Mol - wouldn't you have loved to have been in the pitch meeting? - a huge creative risk that has spawned a whole new genre of television. *The Office* has passed into folklore as the idea Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant found difficult to sell at the BBC, not to mention Channel 4, where they spent their formative years on television.

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In short, no one, not even the creators of these shows, could have predicted their subsequent success, and that is what makes this predicting lark a bit of a non-starter.

The hand of the individual is evident in most great television. Of course, success has many fathers: you only have to look at the CVs of some senior executives who claim responsibility for shows they have never seen let alone helped to make. But this has always been the case and, to be honest, the programme-maker doesn't usually mind as it often means they get your name right the next time you meet.

Of course, as a maker of comedy, drama and entertainment, I am ever hopeful that our current fascination with the lifestyle porn that is spread across the schedules like a lovely hand-woven kilim will somewhat abate over the next ten years, but I see no sign of it. Now I know the BBC have said they will be good from now on and not slavishly go after ratings and they will start stacking their top shelves with pre-Charter

wholesome fare, but as soon the Government coughs up, mark my words, they'll be back seducing us with mouth-watering pine flooring and a little *gîte* in the Dordogne - or is that Channel 4? I forget now. And talking of the importance of channel branding... oh, let's not.

The truth is that the channels with the best brands in ten years' time will be the channels with the best programmes. Not very difficult to understand really, but can you imagine a meeting somewhere in the bowels of a broadcaster - I'm talking metaphorically now, work with me - in which a cohort of smart brand consultants and marketing high priests open their flip charts which simply say, Make Great Programmes. They then close their flip charts and end the meeting. They would rather choke on their Blackberries. Why? Well, they would be doing themselves out of a nice little earner and, more to the point, as I suggested earlier, NO ONE KNOWS how to make a great programme, inasmuch as no one knows whether the show they are currently working on will be great or not. Of course, it is a truism that some great stand-out shows could have turned out all wrong. The greater the risk, the greater the return, but the greater the risk. This is why audiences complain that so much of television is imitative. One channel creates a genuine original hit and then everyone else wants one, missing the point that the audience can spot a copy a mile off. They might even watch your copy but don't be under any illusions that they don't know it's a copy; and no one wants the brand, The Best Channel at Copying Others' Ideas, although, looking around today there would be quite a few nominations.

I happen to think that what we will be watching is the crucial question. We need to ask ourselves: what sort of television do you want? It always makes me laugh out loud when I read surveys telling us that people think that telly is by and large crap. And yet at big industry pow-wows, very little time is given to debating what we should be watching: whether television still has a role in enriching our cultural life or whether we should give in over the next ten years and give the audience cheap mediocrity, reflecting only the worst characteristics of ourselves, and kiss the viewers a slow goodbye.

Generally, when the industry gets together, as it will this year in Edinburgh, you can be sure of two things: one, I will be as far away as possible with my family enjoying the last Bank Holiday weekend of the year, and two, very little time is spent talking about programmes, or content as it is now known. Oh I'm sure John Humphreys will put the boot in for quality and editorial freedom in the MacTaggart Lecture, but the senior executives who will be in attendance will nod and clap and disregard it as the ranting of someone who doesn't have to deal with the Harsh Realities of Living in a Multi-Channel World (another dead cert for an RTS session).

No, when the big swinging dicks of telly and their female counterparts, which good taste prevents me from giving an equivalent nomenclature, gather together, they like to talk about big issues: ownership, Ofcom, the future of the BBC, the growing power of the Murdochs and, of course, whither ITV? The reason they do this is because (a) it sounds important and these, in case you hadn't noticed, are Important People, and (b) what they know about programmes - the actual stuff this business makes and is its lifeblood - could be tattooed on a gnat's penis.

I'm sure elsewhere more qualified people than I will tell you, supported by impressive statistics, that the Murdochs, maybe even Daddy Murdoch if the monkey glands are still kicking in, will continue to frighten the bejesus out of everyone; that ITV will limp along with its slowly degrading business until it is gobbled up by a General Electric or a Viacom or maybe even Roman Abramovich when he gets fed up with Chelsea (sometime next year then). They will tell you that the BBC will be broken up and all that will be left will be two blokes in pullovers making wildlife programmes, Channel 4 will join up with Five proving that 4 plus 5 equals 3, and that the independent sector is going to struggle.

I'll be honest, most of these burning issues do not take up much of my thinking time save perhaps the last one on the list: the question of the indies. Even the name, indies, implies we are some sort of simple South American tribe in danger of extinction. You can almost hear Attenborough: 'And here in Soho we see the last few survivors of the Indies, a simple but proud people, who could once be seen roaming these watering holes scratching for a living. Sadly but all too predictably these poor deluded folk increasingly found the going too tough and despite many warnings they paid the ultimate price and died off. Some of them can still be seen preserved in alcohol in BBC Television Centre.'

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Now for more years than I care to remember people, usually people within the broadcasters, have sucked their lips, shaken their heads like weary car mechanics and bemoaned the state of the independent sector. First, at the beginning of the eighties, we had to listen to the gurus

predicting first the stillbirth, then the early demise, then the cosmic contraction of the independent production business. It is absolutely certain that if someone had posed the question, 'What will TV be like in ten years' time?' in 1994 it is a sure bet that those apologists in the employ of the broadcasters would have predicted the end of the indies.

What they wouldn't have been able to predict, because to do so would have been too painful, was the steady flow of creative talent out of the monolithic broadcasters and into the more nimble, albeit tougher, environment of the independent sector where the possibility of getting your ideas on a variety of networks, working with people you choose to work with, and, let's be honest, extracting real value from your ideas by sharing in the revenues flowing from rights exploitation, proved very appealing to the best creative people over these past ten years. From where I am sitting this flow does not appear to be slowing down. The unvarnished truth is that, with a few notable exceptions, you know you are any good if you are working at a good independent. Of course, the broadcasters have been forced, through gritted teeth, to give little bits of the back-end to their creative staff but they simply cannot compete with a well-run indie. The truth is institutions find it hard to value the people who work there: junior staff feel remote from the people who make decisions, and the people at the top of the heap are constantly stepping on quicksand and disappearing from sight. Greg Dyke tried to humanise the BBC and, being all too human himself, look what happened to him. Witness the dreadful and unnecessary public humiliation of Alan Yentob, one the Corporation's most talented and loyal executives of his generation.

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Over the next ten years the real market for talent will be behind the camera. I have a quietly confident feeling that because the independent sector has had to work hard at building healthy relationships with this talent it will be well positioned to continue to give that talent real ownership in its ideas and roles within those companies that reflect ability rather than time served.

As the industry becomes even more freelance, and the big corporations cannot even offer security of tenure and a guaranteed career path - the very things that might have kept the more nervous types within their embrace - then the best people will look for the best deals and yet again the well-established independent companies will be there to enable this talent to flourish and express itself either from within their own businesses on advantageous deals or through joint venture enterprises that would currently be anathema to the large corporates.

Well, I would say that, wouldn't I? And that brings me to what I really want to say about predicting the future: it's not so much predicting as wishing, special pleading, pushing a party line. For example, no one from ITV in their right mind or even Charles Allen is going to come clean and admit it would make more financial sense at some time in the next ten years for ITV to be a venue on Sky's EPG rather than have a terrestrial licence and fork out hundreds of millions to the Treasury. Nor would anyone from the BBC tell you that this Charter renewal stuff is a pain in the arse and the sooner they can get back to ratings-grabbing and forget all this audience reach stuff the better.

Consciously or not, no one can dispassionately describe a future in which the canoe one is paddling is going to spring a bad leak, or indeed admit to already being up the proverbial in search of a paddle. So beware of predictions. They tell you more about the predictor than about the future.