

## The shape of things to come

Simon Woodroffe



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**Simon Woodroffe** | Founder,  
Yo! Sushi

There is a delicious irony in me writing an essay on the future of television, since for twelve years, I refused to have television in my home. In fact, I frequently tell people that the best way to get successful in this life is to get rid of your TV. The crunch for me came late one night, when I tuned in to one of the cable channels and found myself watching topless darts long past the time I should sensibly have been tucked up in bed. *What am I doing?* I thought to myself. *This is madness. The telly has to go.* Frankly, I think giving the set the boot is one of the reasons I became who I am today.

Nonetheless, I firmly believe the future will be shaped by television, even if I am proud that I have not allowed it to shape me in the past. Why? Because the television of tomorrow will be nothing like the television we grew up with, or even the television of today. TV is about to come of age. Here, at the start of the 21st century, we are just reaching the point where television bursts its shackles and sets us all free. No longer will we sit passively on the sofa, with nothing better to do than watch topless darts. We will snatch television from the grasp of the broadcasters and make it our own.

#### **Everybody's a star**

A number of factors are coming together to make this radical vision possible. Back in the 1960s, when television was still a toddler, Ray Davies of The Kinks wrote: 'Everybody's in showbiz, everybody's a star - it doesn't matter who you are.' Most of us in Britain have grown up with the notion that television comes in four or five flavours - the main terrestrial channels - and that what is dished up on those channels is largely *table d'hôte*: chosen for us. But the television of the future will be an endless conveyor belt of infinitely varied, creatively crafted fare. We will be able to choose exactly what we want to watch, when we want it. Already, we are able to tap into hundreds of channels. In less than a couple of years, we will have a choice of five thousand or more. If what we want isn't out there, we can make it ourselves, to our own recipes and tastes. Ray Davies was spot-on. Tomorrow, everyone can be in television, and on it.

The problem then becomes how to persuade people to watch your channel in particular, out of all the thousands of others they could conceivably choose. But then who would have thought the English would watch opera or for that matter eat raw fish off conveyor belts? The one lesson I have learned, from the retail businesses I have been involved in, is that the best way to attract customers is to offer them products that are very, very good. If you want to make an impression on the television of the future, my advice would be to give the marketing team the push, and instead spend your time and effort doing something so substantially different that word of mouth sweeps it to success.

### The new bottom line

Creativity, in business or in television, isn't about sitting down and planning according to tried and tested formulas. It isn't about copying what you know has worked before. It is about following your heart and doing what you believe in.

My firm belief is that in the business world of today, no longer can we create brands in advertising agencies. Brands should reflect the life and soul of the people who are building them. We have never had a set marketing brand strategy for YO! Sushi, and all the other YO! enterprises. Instead they have been a reflection of our enthusiasm and what we wanted to do. It is what you might call the new bottom line: one that is ultimately not only about making money. Naturally, we *do* want to make money and have more people buy our products. But new entrepreneurs, people like Richard Reed, the man behind Innocent smoothies, and many of the younger people starting businesses today, do what they do because they want to work with a group of like-minded people and create a product they believe in. That enthusiasm communicates itself to the customer, and for that matter the viewer, because in the end, the consumer is actually on our side - they want us to build brands they can be loyal to, and start clubs that we all can join.

The business buzzwords of the 80s and 90s were *vision* and *passion*: for me, today's equivalent is *outrageous*. I use outrageous in the sense that you should aim to do something that is *outrageously* different, *outrageously* good: not attention-grabbing in a superficial way, but something that is truly, *outrageously* substantial, something that you care about *outrageously*. Then word goes out and people will hear about it. When YO! Sushi began, I did no advertising whatsoever, and very little PR. I simply opened the doors on a concept that struck people as very, very different; word went round in no time at all.

The moral to be drawn from this, whether it is for a restaurant, a hotel, or a television channel, is that although advertising and marketing can be helpful, the real key to success is a genuinely different product that you personally believe in, and have done your damndest to make the best possible. People used to ask us to define our target market when we began, and we would joke that we just wanted to reach out to the young at heart - by which we meant ourselves. If the product is right, the market follows. If you make a television channel absolutely fabulous, to steal a phrase, people will want to watch it. Of course if you have money to burn you can advertise it on billboards, but often the biggest trees grow from the smallest acorns. *The Osbornes*, for instance - who would have thought when the series first appeared on MTV that it would become such a monster hit, and not only relaunch Ozzy's career but build careers for Sharon and Kelly too? And how did that happen? Because the series was outrageous, and different, and got talked about.

So from those thousands of channels, one or two will emerge that stand out because they are both original and created by people who are truly passionate about their idea - the TV equivalents of Friends Reunited or Lastminute.com. They say in publishing that you can't sit down to write a best seller. Instead you must sit down to write the book that is inside you: the one you want to read. If you do it right, and enough people want to read it too, it will become a best seller, but you can't start from the other end and write what you imagine people want to read. The same holds true for making television.

### Beyond the ad break

Since I do now occasionally give myself a night off to watch TV, I am also fascinated by how the kind of television programmes we watch might change, once we become more empowered as viewers. Amongst the factors that have shaped the kind of television we are used to watching is the traditional advertising break. A whole style of television narrative has developed in my lifetime - both in drama and in documentary - based on a series of cliffhangers designed to bring the audience back after they wander off to boil the kettle while the ads are on.

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But how will things change when viewers no longer have to let ad breaks run through, because they can skip them with PVR and similar technologies? I am looking forward to a more relaxed attitude to programme sponsorship and product placement. Advertising will be integrated into the fabric of television itself. And why not? What we buy and what we eat and what we drink are all part of our everyday lives. Today's audiences are, as we are well aware, sophisticated. They are perfectly capable of understanding when they are being advertised to. Moreover, *they don't mind*. At some level, we are all begging to be advertised to, because we enjoy finding the products that define us, goods and services that make us part of our particular club, be it Nike shoes or Volkswagen cars or Scottish Widows pension plans or Motorola phones. The brands we are drawn to can become part of the programmes we are attracted to, not in a cynical way but so that integration carries with it a sense of integrity. When Car Phone

Warehouse is involved in a new reality TV strand, we want to feel that they played a part in shaping the series: the programme becomes a reflection of their product ethos, and vice versa.

### Big vision

So products will be part of programmes, and we will be too, empowered by the red button. I believe we can go much, much further with interactivity. Not only will we decide which cameras angles we view from, we will even be able to affect the outcome of the dramas we watch. I am currently involved in an Internet project called *The Never Ending Book*. Anyone can join in online and write the next chapter to the book, though it does have an editor. Similarly, programme-makers will tap the creativity of their audiences.

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Freed from the tyranny of ad-break cliffhangers, people will be far more inclined sit down for an evening and experience an event, in the same way that we came together to watch *Live 8*, or a massive sporting event like the Ashes. In drama, or in entertainment, we love being part of big things. They draw us together and there is a real sense in which we come alive when we know everybody else is watching too. So I look forward to blockbusting dramas that are the equivalent of big fat airport novels, and epic documentary filmed over a period of years. We underestimate viewers’ concentration spans. The other night I sat down to view Michael Palin’s *Around the World in 80 Days* series. I watched eight in a row, completely hooked. When he arrived at the South Pole, the cable channel took us back to the beginning again to see how he started.

And why shouldn’t programmes be epic, not just in terms of the time we spend watching them, but the periods over which they are made? It is not easy, in the current climate, to make programmes about business, because a business takes at least two or three years to develop. I was very struck to hear the other day about a company that

has a hundred-year business plan: a touch long, perhaps, for a television series, but why not follow a family for ten years? A company as it establishes itself over decades? An oil-rig from construction through production to decommission? Perhaps ultimately we could make television in the way cathedrals were built in the middle ages: one generation begins filming the series, but it might not be completed for two or three generations more. Anything is possible: a bigger vision, a longer vision, an altogether grander vision. *Big Brother* sixty years from now could be a small city, and you will be able to choose which street or home you zoom in on.

### The even bigger picture

Let me press the red button for the really long term view. Sixty years after man’s first flight, Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. Now that the pace of change is really hotting up, imagine what will happen to television in the next 60 years.

We are probably right to be cynical about large amounts of television today being watched on our handheld PDAs. But give it a generation or two of technology, and we could all be carrying around miniaturised TV devices as comfortably as we slip a paperback in our pocket before getting on a train or plane at present. Just as someone made the quantum leap from computers to the Internet, so a new genius will come up with a way of putting every information and entertainment source we could possibly desire on a single piece of equipment. Perhaps one day we will watch TV via electronic spectacles or even a digital implant in our brains - our ‘mind’s eye’. The device will know us and understand us and learn as we use it what we want, what turns us on and what helps us.

There is so much choice coming that none of us will be capable of filtering it by ourselves, so we will depend on these devices being capable of doing it for us. Instead of receiving news and current affairs by watching *Panorama* or by reading the *Daily Telegraph*, I will have the *Daily Simon Woodroffe Channel* beamed to me, assembled automatically from a list of those journalists and commentators and creators I trust. I will be broadcasting it too, so anyone can join in and share my world view; just as we have started to use the Internet today to communicate our interests and passions and beliefs via personal websites and blogs. Television will reflect the world in that it will be ‘out of control’ - that is, out of the control of programmers and in the control of ordinary people.

No one will need to ask the question, *what do you think of television?* or *what do you think of the Internet?* just as today no-one would dream of asking *what do you think of the telephone?* *Are you a telephone user?* It will be simply a part of the way we lead our lives. We

will use it to communicate, to vote, to participate, to create, and in short influence and be part of the society we live in, on a minute-by-minute basis. TV is, after all, no more than a delivery mechanism for our wishes and hopes, and a means of unlocking our own creativity.

### **Inform and educate**

Television will become our leading source of information, even of education. Why does education have to take place in an institution, or even follow any sort of traditional academic model, which fails so many kids?

I would like to see young people in the future leaving school with a real sense of the world outside: what it is like to work, and what it takes to run a business. Currently, I go into schools to give them an insight into what I do; I love it, and both children and teachers really seem to engage with this way of learning. Television could play a part in something similar. Educators, gurus, visionaries of all kinds could inspire kids by being beamed via big screen TVs to schools all over the world. Education could become truly global.

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Another model might be to use television to educate children away from traditional places of learning. My sister-in-law is one of the few people who currently educates their children at home. She doesn't do any of the teaching herself, but hires in teachers for a group of ten children, at a fraction of the cost of educating them at a private school - and to a standard way above any state school because the classes are small and the education tailored to the children's individual needs. If one of them wants to learn stone masonry, they can. Just as today more and more people are teleworking, so we could soon be teleteaching and telelearning.

These are science fiction visions, but they may be closer to reality than we think. I believe there is a purpose to speculating about the long term, because even if I am wildly out in my predictions, it is a way of beginning to do something positive towards shaping the future in the short term.

There need be nothing scary about this future. We will not be swamped by a morass of mind-numbing TV for the lowest common denominator, because what is truly rubbish will be weeded out by a process of natural selection. As Darwin would say, the weak will pass away and the good will come through, because we at last have the power to choose rather than meekly accepting what we are given. I won't have to watch topless darts because I am going to find I have a choice of far more palatable fare. (There may well be a small niche somewhere in the ether for people who do like topless darts, but there will also be a niche for those who like opera, or Japanese food, or whole evenings watching Michael Palin circumnavigate the globe.) And we will find that a lot of little, self-selecting individual markets like these can be just as profitable to advertisers and programme-makers as larger, more diverse ones.

So I, for one, am immensely optimistic. Tomorrow's television need not be a time-waster - it can be a world-changer. Essentially, the future of television is no more and no less than what we choose to make it.