

## The new golden age of television

Tony Hall



# The new golden age of television

## We are right on the cusp of a fundamental change...

**Tony Hall** | Chief Executive,  
Royal Opera House

There's a myth that older television people - particularly television people who have now stepped out of the business - like to promote. Television isn't what it was, they say. We have just passed through a Golden Age, and now we are heading for cultural darkness.

Since leaving the BBC I have been able to watch television in a completely different light. Indeed, as a viewer I think I now see it more clearly than I ever did. It is much easier to appreciate its strengths, and understand its weaknesses too. What I like about British television is, quite simply, its quality and range. Of course not everything I see is good; not everything excites me. But there is plenty to be optimistic about, especially in terms of arts coverage. The BBC's series *A Picture of Britain* this summer showed it is possible to put a thoughtful, thought-provoking, well-researched programme about the arts right in the middle of primetime viewing on Sunday evenings. It was popular, intelligent and engaging, it linked to a book and an exhibition at the Tate, and it was exactly what public service broadcasters such as the BBC and Channel 4 should be doing, and are doing, to reflect the arts in Britain. When you watch programmes like those, you feel broadened by television.

---

**'We are right on the cusp of a fundamental change... that I find immensely exciting. Increasingly it will be the consumers who dictate what appears on the screen. But far from narrowing the choice of programming, I believe this can broaden and enrich it.'**

---

So it seems to me that far from leaving behind the Golden Age of Television, we are still living through it. But in one respect, those old pessimists do have a point. We have reached a stage where very soon, television will never be the same again.

We are right on the cusp of a fundamental change. Something is about to happen to British television that I, unlike the pessimists, find immensely exciting. Broadcasting is about to discover democracy. Increasingly it will be the consumers who dictate what appears on the screen. But far from narrowing the choice of programming, I believe this can broaden and enrich it.

Think back to the bomb attacks in early July 2005 in London. What made the coverage so compelling were the informal ways of gathering information: e-mails, texts, pictures and snips of video from mobile phones. The half-lit images looking down the smoke-filled tube tunnels

were unforgettable; the background noise, the off-camera conversations haunting. The story unfolded not through the polished phrases of traditional broadcasters, but through the eyes of ordinary people caught up in the horror, bringing their fear and stoicism home to us as we watched what they experienced.

But this revolution will change far more than news. It has repercussions right across the board in television. The balance of power between the broadcasters and the audience is shifting, brought about by the new ways we can both record and receive information. You can see it reflected in those jerky images on the news, but you can also sense it when you look at the iPod your son or daughter has strung around their neck - or the one you've already bought for yourself.

Right now that iPod is for listening, but before long something very similar will also be a means of viewing. When that day comes, the power of the consumer to choose what, when and where they watch could blow apart everything we are used to. We have already seen the beginnings of this new age of viewer power with Sky Plus. PVR puts real choice at the fingertips of the consumer: whether it is *Lost* or *Newsnight*, I can decide *when* to view, now or later. Further down the line, when we all own television iPods, we will also be able to dictate *where* we watch, and demand the ability to download both current and archived material to suit the mood of the moment.

---

**'Right now, an iPod is for listening, but before long it will also be a means of viewing.'**

---

For me this vision of the future centres on the train I take every day into work. I have a long commute, and I can't wait to be able to sit on the train with my iPod and watch the programmes I missed last night. Look at what is already happening in radio. I listen to a great deal of radio as it is broadcast. But I also cherry-pick programmes to hear on the BBC radio player, via the website. As the BBC applies the same logic to television it will be truly extraordinary. For people like me who don't have a huge amount of time and who really want to watch television, but have so far been limited in our ability to do so because we are rarely able to catch the programmes we like, it means a complete change in our viewing habits. We might even begin to watch a great deal more.

This does not imply a complete breakdown of all formality. There will still be news bulletins presented by newscasters and specialist reporters, there will still be schedules. But at the same time a breeze will blow into dusty corners. It will be interesting to see how television

channels and broadcasters exploit these opportunities, but this is also a chance for organisations outside broadcasting to start thinking in new ways, including promoters of the arts such as the Royal Opera House.

### Television and the arts

No one would deny that arts coverage on television has improved in recent years. There are some excellent critical forums and documentaries. But nothing really beats the excitement of watching a live performance in a theatre, opera house or concert hall, in real time as it happens. Every arts lover knows the ideal is to be there, but only relatively few people will ever be able to do that. There are, for instance, many people in Britain who are devoted opera fans, but rarely get the chance to come to a live performance at the Opera House. The Next Best Thing then, surely, is to have that performance available to them on the screen, *wherever and whenever they choose to watch it*. Through broadband - particularly high definition broadband - we now have a chance over the next few years to give people access live to what happens on stage at the Opera House, or to offer them the secondary experience of downloading a performance after the event.

We are not setting out to launch The Opera House Channel, but I do believe there is a real opportunity here for arts organisations. We have to find new ways to give ourselves a presence in this new television world. Broadcasting will become like a vast bookshop into which the viewer wanders, saying to him or herself - *right now, this is what I feel I want to watch*. Arts organisations should make sure their material is there on the shelves along with everything else, so that the viewer who is a music lover can flip through an Opera House archive of performances, or pull out the hot new production that has all the critics talking in this morning's papers.

It could be the same model for sport. You may not want to watch the live broadcast of the Brazilian Grand Prix, a prize fight in Kinshasa, or England v New Zealand because in your time zone it is midnight or three a.m. Instead you download and watch it the next day.

This makes for an enormous expansion of cultural richness. We can become part of what is happening anywhere around the globe, in sport, in the arts, or in news. In five years' time, perhaps, my fellow commuters on the morning train into London will be watching last night's performance at Covent Garden on their TV iPod. There could also be Japanese commuters on the subway into Tokyo downloading the same thing; New Yorkers, Brazilians, people in Cape Town, Beijing, Delhi or Teheran. It works both ways: in Britain, we could have the chance to see opera from La Scala or ballet from Moscow.

Arts organisations will have to consider if they can afford to make an investment in the technology to make this possible. But my instinct is that this is the way of the future. So we have cut a deal with Sony and installed high definition cameras at the Opera House. There are rights issues to be sorted, and copyright, none of which will be easy. But against all the negatives, we can balance the overwhelming benefit of expanding our audience for the arts in Britain to global dimensions.

In the end it always comes down not to the technology, but to content. In Britain we are exceptionally well placed: not only is the quality of our programming exceptional, so is the quality of our arts organisations. Apart from New York, there is virtually nowhere in the world that can match the range of our theatres, galleries, museums and concert halls.

My worry is whether broadcasters are still prepared to put in the money and the time to exploit this richness. But I am cheered by the fact that television has shown itself prepared to make big statements, and big commitments, like the superb Live 8 concerts, or Channel 4's commitment to looking at torture and human rights. Creatively, I believe British television remains in a good place.

### Targeting television and the arts

It is not enough to make it possible for an audience to watch in this way. You have to make sure the right people are part of the conversation that tells them what is happening, so they know when to watch or what is available to download. Marketing is essential, and one reason for working with broadcasters, rather than going it alone and setting up our own channel, is to have access to the broadcaster's marketing machinery. Being seen or heard on big audience channels leads people to you. But even there the balance may change. Consumers of the arts are much the same as shoppers. You can use a boutique or you can use a department store - it is essentially the *brands* that bring people to the product.

New ways of using media have already begun to open up unexpected possibilities and untapped audiences. We sell ourselves over the Web, and I was amazed by how many more potential customers we can identify in this way: roughly 70 per cent of the people who visit our website are new to the Opera House. Moreover, the relationship that can be opened up with an audience through e-mail is an unusually personal and proactive one. We have been asking students about how they use the Opera House, and they tell us they want e-mails, to be reminded that something is happening or to hear about special deals for them.

Developments like these suggest that marketing the arts - and by extension marketing the broadcasting of the arts - will become much more finely targeted. We will be able to know what our individual

consumers like or dislike. Instead of people using the press or handouts to identify the particular opera or ballet they want to see, then contacting us to book, e-mail can turn the process on its head. Once we discover that they are particular fans of Rossini, for example, we can tell from our database whether or not they have booked for the Rossini opera to be staged in a few months' time. Then we e-mail them directly to remind them about it. It is the same model that Amazon made so successful: *If you liked this, you may also enjoy...* Text messaging via mobiles is just as powerful. You can send a text message alerting those on your database to a performance coming up which you think they will like, or promoting one where ticket sales have been slow, or telling them a performance can be downloaded to their TV iPod.

---

**'In the end it always comes down not to the technology, but to content. In Britain we are exceptionally well placed: not only is the quality of our programming exceptional, so is the quality of our arts organisations.'**

---

So we are moving into a world where we build audiences by knowing their exact preferences. It is easy to be dismissive of some of the programming that the new forms of television distribution offer us. There are moments when I am tempted to assume a lofty position and sneer that topless darts or non-stop poker channels are not what I went into television for. But the fact that niche channels are able to survive also suggests the new multi-channel environment can offer broadcasting of real cultural worth. Look at some of the big ideas Channel 4 is proposing for More4 - the kind of programmes many people believed Channel 4 was there to do in the first place. Of course we should not be complacent, but we can be confident about the future.

### Taking risks

Targeting your audiences means that sometimes you may be targeted back: niche audiences are often extraordinarily free with their criticism or praise. They will write telling you what they like or dislike about what you do, and when they have an interactive red button to hand, you may find that they are even quicker off the mark with feedback.

We all like praise, and when most of the feedback is telling you how much your humble efforts are appreciated, it will be very tempting indeed to go on doing what you clearly do so well to please the audience. The danger is that broadcasters will stick to what they know the audience respond positively to. But we have to dare to be innovative, even at the risk of failure. It is vital to hold onto that sense

of risk; risk is essential to creativity. In today's climate, when wasting programme budgets or public funds is one of the seven deadly sins, it is not always easy. People may be quick to agree you should take risks, but as soon as something goes wrong they descend on you like a pile of bricks.

You have to address the idea that you will, at some point, fail, and see that as something which is positive. If you are an artist or a television producer or the director of an opera house or theatre, there are moments when you must be brave and say, *I have no idea whether one person or millions are going to like this, but I have to do it.* Creatively we all must take risks in order to survive.

### Reaching out

However, in spite of all the optimism I feel for the future of television, perhaps it is only right to end by sounding a note of caution.

As we all become more discriminating, more specialised in what we watch, viewing in our separate little boxes, choosing niche channels that appeal personally to us, then the question becomes *what will actually bring us together?* What unifies us as a nation?

One of the things that make this country special is that as a people we are so diverse. But the more divided we become in the way we use media, then the job of communicating the common ground between us becomes much, much harder. One of the terrifying things to come out of the London bombings, and the debate about Iraq, is the level of misunderstanding and indeed downright incomprehension about and between the different communities that make up Britain.

---

**'Risk is essential to creativity. In today's climate, when wasting programme budgets or public funds is one of the seven deadly sins, it is not always easy. People may be quick to agree you should take risks, but as soon as something goes wrong they descend on you like a pile of bricks.'**

---

The big journalistic or editorial question that broadcasters have to face in the next five to ten years is how to reflect this variety of cultures that constitutes the new Britain. How do we avoid stereotypes? How do we escape caricature or cultural ghettos? What is the balance between free speech and divisive polemic? What restrictions will broadcasters, and artists, have to suffer to maintain proper relationships between those communities? In Birmingham, a play was taken off because of protest

from one section of the community that found it offensive. Personally I believe that self-expression in the arts should have no limits, but I suspect the issue will be increasingly tested over the coming years.

Back in that mythical Golden Age, television was the great cultural unifier in Britain. In some senses it still is: I find it fascinating that *Big Brother* draws strong nationwide audiences by showing us a group of people who sometimes get along, but more fundamentally, often don't. It makes compelling viewing out of exploring how people relate and work together. Can television still somehow bring us together in the multi-channel future? This time the answer will have to come not from the broadcasters, but the consumers who are increasingly driving the New Golden Age of Television.