

DINNER/DISCUSSION SUMMARY

How is technology changing the nature of broadcasting?

Held at The Royal Society on 21st June, 2006

We are grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for supporting this meeting

- Chair:** **The Earl of Selborne KBE FRS**
Chairman, The Foundation for Science and Technology
- Speakers:** **John Dickie**
Head of Public Affairs, BBC
- Anthony Lilley**
Chief Executive, Magic Lantern Productions
- Professor Philip Esler**
Chief Executive, Arts and Humanities Research Council
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MR DICKIE said that the BBC was committed to providing distinctive high quality public service broadcasting. The BBC's central purpose was to deliver excellent content, creative, innovative and enriching, using the licence fee to support creative risk-taking, in a way not possible in the private sector. Technological change reduced the costs of equipment and raised expectations of quality. So far, the impact had been broadly incremental: broadcasters were delivering existing content through increasing numbers of channels, mainly text-based websites, and making tentative moves towards new distribution channels such as mobile phones. The next wave of change would be radical and dislocative; content would be deliverable through all media, and would be searchable, moveable and shareable, with users able to generate their own content. After a slow start, take up of digital free view and broadband technology was now increasing rapidly. Children and young people already expected to be able to control their access to broadcast media. The Creative Future initiative was designed to enable the BBC to take the opportunity to deliver more and better public service content, free from the constraints imposed by schedules, and available to the audience in whatever medium and on whatever device they chose, wherever they were. The corporation was developing software which would allow downloading of programmes and sharing between PCs, with a timed auto-destruct function to protect copyright; an open archive to make content available after commercial exploitation; and a creative archive to allow manipulation of content under a non-commercial licence. New search tools would enable users to find the material they knew they wanted, while broadcasters would need to use links and knowledge of viewing preferences to encourage take-up of new and different content, as they had previously done through scheduling. While there was some nervousness at political level that an over-dominant BBC could have an adverse impact on the private sector, BBC governance would be more transparent and robust. Trustees would apply a rigorous public value test to new developments, with Ofcom assessing market impact. There was every reason to see a strong BBC as good for UK media, and comparison with US broadcasting in particular highlighted the positive impact on UK democracy and cultural life underpinned by the strength and independence of the BBC.

MR LILLEY's experience at the leading edge of media technology led him to believe that social issues persisted, while all technology was destined to be replaced or renewed. Publicity for a new technology always suggested, for commercial reasons, that it would kill demand for existing media, but in real-

ity, new developments revealed the essential value of what had gone before. Cinema had taken some 25 years to recover from the advent of television, but was now a strong, high quality, socially focused entertainment medium, stripped of more routine features such as weekly newsreels, better delivered through TV. Similarly, the new media would improve broadcasting, by allowing choice, of channel, medium and viewing environment. A range of different experiences could flow from a single piece of content, because of the different media and different contexts in which it could be accessed. The most exciting feature of the new landscape was the shift to interactivity, with forms designed to be controlled by the user. Computer games were offering more and more sophisticated outlets for creativity, through collaborative social narrative experiences. 'User generated content' was a negative description for a flowering of creative expression, exemplified by the Channel 4 'docs' project, which had so far given rise to over 100 films, properly made in the documentary tradition, and by the response to the BBC's opening of the Planet Earth archive. While some blogs were unreadable, some were excellent. Mobile phones had created new opportunities for digital photography. The new media were facilitating new communities of interest, such as Friends Reunited, and self expression and social interaction for teenagers through shared webspaces: these responded to deep human needs. New commercial opportunities were also emerging as the new technologies make it cost-effective to meet the needs of very small, even individualised, niche markets: the 'long tail' phenomenon. Public feedback, such as Amazon bookstore reviews, had led to mass marketing successes. The BBC and Channel 4 were making excellent use of the new technologies for public service purposes, though impact measurement was increasingly challenging, as established indicators such as audience numbers became irrelevant. The challenge for content providers now was to empower citizens and help them personalise their experience.

PROFESSOR ESLER explained the role of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in supporting research that produced people and ideas vital for the health of the creative industries in the UK, a sector occupying 8% of the economy and growing at more than twice the national trend. BBC broadcasting, which plays a central role in the creative industries, exists in the current convergence between digital media and the human dimension, in terms of the creative impulse and creative content. He suggested that to imagine that the future of broadcasting was about technology and not about the integration of technology and the human dimension was to

make a serious error that would rebound against the health of the UK economy. He proposed that the BBC and the AHRC formed a natural alliance in ensuring that the creative resource represented by the 12,000 arts and humanities researchers in UK universities was deployed to maximum effect in the process of this convergence. He explained the richness of issues in this area in relation to broadcasting that had emerged in the course of recent AHRC/BBC summits. Particularly important was the movement toward interactivity and mobility, so that the old notion of fixed scheduling to distribute programming was disappearing and the meaning of the BBC brand in relation to content was undergoing a radical change. Yet even in this changing world the original Reithian commitment to providing public value and augmenting social capital maintained its appeal. The challenge was how to stick to the ideals underlying public service broadcasting in the revolution in broadcasting we are now experiencing. Here too the AHRC saw a coincidence of values with the BBC.

The discussion opened with an observation that, increasingly, people understood that internet technology could be fashioned to do what they wanted, rather than thinking only in terms of what they could do with the latest technology. This was particularly true of software, and put a premium on the ability to write software which reflected understanding of the user's needs. As network convergence meant that more data could be carried on more generic networks, software became even more important: 'suddenly everything is software'. It was argued that the BBC should do more to drive technology to meet its own needs, but also that the BBC's role was to use technology to create opportunities to meet the needs of audiences, not to be itself in the vanguard of technical change. It was suggested that there was no essential difference between current interaction between creative artists and the new technologies, and that of 17th century artists with their tools: it was the human creative spirit which found new ways of using available media.

There was a dark side to the new interactivity; if anyone could upload, and alter content, everything had apparently equal value, making it more difficult to find the truth. Citizen journalists would not be bound by the professional codes of checking, scrutinising, assuring quality which underpinned expectations that published material would be factually based. There was a call for an independent warrant of the truth of material posted on the internet. But this was not a new issue, as the impact of the challenge to scientific consensus on the safety of the MMR vaccine had demonstrated. It has never been safe to believe everything you read in the papers; and there is no such thing as 'neutral news'. There was an urgent need for improved levels of critical literacy. It was regrettable that citizenship courses did not include media literacy, but media studies courses, though often derided, did provide the necessary skills. It was important that the scientific community should become even more proactive in getting its messages across. The BBC's trusted brand was a valuable asset, offering assurance that the ethos was to strive to make material as accurate as possible.

There was a difference between the contribution of citizens as witnesses, using mobile phone technology to contribute to emerging news, as had happened during the London bombings, and the role of journalists, who comment on and help shape the news. Genuine examples of citizen journalism included the Channel 4 'docs', some blogs, and Guardian web forums, facilitating comment and debate.

There were calls for the BBC to do more to stimulate participation in civil society. It was argued that the BBC's role is to facilitate participation, not to force people to participate. The Action Network, which enabled individuals and groups to exchange experience of community action, was an excellent example. The Make Poverty History campaign had made good use of mobiles and other new technology to deliver its message. Marginalised groups, such as Islamic terrorists, also used

the internet as a communication tool for their own purposes, though not necessarily to the benefit of wider civil society.

Public private partnerships to disseminate museum contents through the media had caused controversy in the US, as the national patrimony, at least virtually, became subject to commercial exploitation; the UK national museums faced similar issues. On a lighter note, it was recognised that commercial rights were often breached by those using mobile phones to take photographs at sporting events.

Sport put a premium on contemporaneity, highlighting the continuing need for skilled professionals such as camera operators to deliver excellent material to large audiences. There was a drive to make the 2012 London Olympics the most open and shareable event ever using the internet to deliver multiple material worldwide.

There were risks that the new technologies would remove opportunities to introduce socially useful material between popular scheduled programmes, and that more choice would remove the critical audience mass required to justify investment in new and different material. However, through Radio 1, the BBC was already demonstrating its ability to deliver a distinctive public service offering in a highly competitive environment. And new technology could be used proactively to offer personalised choice, based on shared information about preferences.

Looking ahead ten years, it was impossible to say what changes would have come from these technologies. Ten years ago, the BBC's future vision statement had made no reference to the role of the internet. However, it had seemed likely that a screen, as a gateway to personalised content from a structured network, would have replaced TVs in their current form, and unlikely that there would be a single device meeting all needs. It was certain that there would always be a need for people to meet face to face to debate, enjoy good food and wine, and turn off their mobile phones!

Jo Durning

The presentations are on the Foundation website at www.foundation.org.uk.

Useful Web Links:

Arts and Humanities Research Council:
www.ahrc.ac.uk

BBC:
www.bbc.co.uk

Creative Commons:
creativecommons.org

Magic Lantern Productions:
www.magiclantern.co.uk

Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television:
www.pact.co.uk

Research Councils UK:
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