

Mobile Television: Technology and Cultural Form

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Abstract

The idea of video communication over telephony has been dreamt of and developed over several decades, since at least the invention of the Picturephone in the 1960s. With third generation cellular mobiles, video calling has become possible, though not yet widely used. What has generated a great deal of industry and public attention since 2005, however, is the 'third screen' — namely, mobile television. Accordingly in this paper I look at the emergence and shaping of this new media mode.

In the first part, I give an overview of mobile television technology, and how it is being positioned in relation to existing broadcasting and telecommunications technologies and also policy paradigms. In the second part, I provide a brief, international survey of what has been offered over mobile television in its brief time to date, and what sorts of audiences it has attracted. In the third and final part, I discuss the claims for mobile television's potential for empowerment, innovation, and the sorts of creativity it elicits and relies upon from its consumers. Not only do these themes suggest important values that are at the heart of debates regarding what Henry Jenkins has termed 'convergence culture', they also point to nascent relationships between technology and cultural form that mobile television represents.

Keywords: mobiles, television, technology, culture

[F]ar from leaving behind the golden age of television, we are still living through it. Broadcasting is about to discover democracy. Increasingly it will be the consumers who dictate what appears on screen ... this revolution will change far more than news ... the power of the consumer to choose what, when and where they watch could blow apart everything we are used to. (Hall, 2005)

The Dawn of Mobile Television

In 2005-2006, a new development in television has been announced — mobile television. Like many new technologies before it, the availability of television on mobile and wireless phone and portable devices is being heralded by at least some commentators and industry proponents as a 'revolution'.

In March 2006, visions of mobile television had appeared in the Australian government discussion paper *Meeting the Digital Challenge: Reforming Australian Media in the Digital Age*. By June that year, mentions of mobile television by the Federal Communications Minister, and other policymakers and legislators, were become more frequent (not least perhaps because the technology, like Internet television, raises a number of thorny policy dilemmas). Mobile television was becoming discussed more widely in middlebrow culture (for example, in a feature article in the *Sydney Morning Herald's* 'Icon' supplement; Tsang, 2006).

In the face of the numerous, concurrent developments in television, broadcasting, telecommunications, the Internet, media and entertainment industries, this sort of ritual presentation of mobile television is distinctly unconvincing, perhaps explaining why its backers themselves have latterly been referring to it as 'snack TV'. Accordingly, a central theme of this paper is

a critique of the airily utopian commercial and techno-optimist discourses, and a close attention to how this new technology is being socially shaped. Rather than just being dismissive of mobile television, however, I rather want to examine its emergence and shaping. I do so because I actually think it is *quite significant*, though I think its importance is not simply to be deciphered as arising from the interplay of defensive forces in telecommunications network and equipment industries ('mobile') and broadcasting and programming industries ('television'). In the terms of Raymond Williams' famous study (1974), I would like to approach mobile television mindful of both its incarnation as what he termed 'technology' and 'cultural form' (that, of course, after three further decades of the development and study of television we now have more elaborated histories and vocabularies to deploy).

The additional complexity in considering mobile television lies in the crowded field of convergent technologies and new media cultures in which it is taking shape. There are the developments associated with Internet technologies, for instance, such as the peer-to-peer, television program downloading communities. There are the various possibilities in personal video recording software and devices, such as the new Australian application IceTv, which allows recording of television programs onto a mobile devices as well as computer or digital video recorder (www.icetv.com.au). Then are other portable mobile and wireless devices such as wireless-equipped laptop computers or video iPods, that also offer new ways for consumers to construct their own distinctive mobile audiovisual, if not televisual, experience.

In the first part of the paper, I give an overview of mobile television technology, and how it is being positioned in relation to existing broadcasting and telecommunications technologies and also policy paradigms. In the second part, I provide a brief, international survey of what has been offered over mobile television in its brief time to date, and what sorts of audiences it has attracted. In the third and final part, I discuss the claims for mobile television's potential for empowerment, innovation, and the sorts of creativity it elicits and relies upon from its consumers. Not only do these themes suggest important values that are at the heart of debates regarding what Henry Jenkins has termed 'convergence culture', they also point to nascent relationships between technology and cultural form that mobile television represents.

The Scene of Mobile Television

There has been much debate about how to understand contemporary television and its transformations. One set of concerns relates to the fuzzy and contested concept of interactivity, which has been much talked about in television for at least a decade (see for instance Jensen & Toscan, 1999) but has proven very slow to materialize until the advent of the Internet, mobiles, and digital television. Another related discussion turns on changes in audiences, especially in understanding new media audiences (Ang, 1996; Balnaves, O'Regan & Sternberg, 2002; Ross & Nightingale, 2003; Seiter, 1999) A third debate relates to how we understand television as a cultural form in the wake of the changes from Internet and other new media (Owen, 1999; Noam, Groebel & Gerbarg, 2004; Wilson, 2003). Bound up with this, fourthly, there is the problematic of how the political economy of the television industry, its ownership, control structures, programming, and professional routines, are shifting as new media has provided impetus for corporate change. A fourth conversation concerns changes to viewing habits and audience expectations associated with the advent of video recorders, DVD players and recorders, and personal video recorders allowing recording and timeshifting of programs

(famously TiVo, the cultural implications of which were proposed by John Fiske (2000). Discussion of changes to cultural policy and regulation, especially public interest objectives such as support for certain types of desirable but not commercially viable content (children's programming, national content and so on) forms a fifth strand. Finally, but not exhaustively, a sixth debate concerns the challenges faced in public sector broadcasting (Sussman, 2003; Syvertsen, 2003; Tracey, 1998), and the possibilities for renewal and innovation new online and mobile technologies offer the project (Martin, 2003). I offer this thumbnail sketch because these themes attempt to describe the shifting scene in which mobile television is being constructed.

Video and television, of course, were something influenced the design of the third-generation cellular phone system (Goggin, 2006). However, what has emerged since the early, utopian visions of this technology is that the broadcasting of television over 3G is not so straightforward as it might be wished. A threshold technical difficulty is that 3G networks in their present incarnation will have problems dealing with the 'huge bandwidth that modern streaming Internet applications, such as TV, require' (Sieber & Weck, 2004). A more subtle yet profound hurdle lies in the very different provenances of broadcast and telecommunications, especially as these have been played out and shaped in decisive regulatory and policy decisions:

Mobile network operators ... do not wish to see broadcasters providing telecom services to telecom customers. Similarly, broadcasters fear the loss of existing spectrum allocations as the analogue shutdown approaches, with the completion of the transition to DVB [digital video broadcasting]. (Tuttlebee, et al., 2003)

Despite these deep-seated obstacles there are forces that have begun to change this, evident in at least two developments.

Firstly, with the integration of mobile messaging into international television program formats and new forms of audience interactivity and expectations, cell phones truly have begun to be involved in significant changes to television culture (Goggin & Spurgeon, 2005 & 2006). While well received by users, the industrial and cultural implications of these developments are not clear. One view is that such technologies and their use provide a way for a rapprochement between broadcasting and telecommunications, but not a merger:

SMS voting in live TV shows is creating new revenues for both the mobile operators and the broadcasters. This is an indicator of the potential for real mutual benefits, without the need for 'convergence', if ways can be found for the two industries not to *converge*, but rather to *interwork* — each protecting and safeguarding its own independence and assets. (Tuttlebee, et al., 2003)

Nonetheless from at least 2003 onwards, television broadcasters, producers, and program makers, joined with advertisers and cell phone companies to announce various packages of television content being made available for viewing on handsets (especially 3G handsets).

What had also emerged since with the design of 3G networks and the initial euphoria surrounding the sale of licences was the scope and impact of the increasingly intertwined production and consumption cycles of the Internet. There had been some early recognition that developments the Internet represented were changing broadcasting: 'Broadcasters are becoming increasingly 'agnostic' about the delivery mechanism and have to publish their content via whatever channels to whatever devices that are required to reach

their viewers and listeners' (Engström, 2000). The growing experience of users of broadband Internet, and the cultural possibilities this afforded, especially with peer-to-peer networks downloading and exchanging audio and music files (made famous by Napster, Grokster, Kazaa, and others) but also do-it-yourself construction of television schedules and programs made possible by programs such as BitTorrent. What also emerged from 2001 onwards was the growth of wireless, broadband Internet access through WiFi-enabled laptops. Actually the advantages of combining 3G with developments in digital television and radio broadcasting had been recognized from early on (Horn, Keller & Niebert, 1999).

In 2005, mobile television trials were held in a number of countries around the world. The technology being tested was a form of digital broadcasting direct to battery-powered cell phone or mobile device handset. One standard that enables this is called Digital Video Broadcasting — Handheld (DVB-H), one of the family of open digital television standards developed by an industry consortium that includes standards for digital terrestrial television (DVB-T).¹ A key feature of these DVB-H mobile television standards are features designed to cope with the low power capacities of these small, light and portable battery-operated cell phone devices as well as the particular environments in which they are used: '... DVB-H creates a bridge between the classical broadcast systems and the world of cellular radio networks' (Kornfeld & Reimers, 2005).

In 2002 four main requirements of the DVB-H system were agreed: broadcast services for portable and mobile usage with 'acceptable quality'; a typical user environment, and so geographic coverage, as mobile radio; access to service while moving in a vehicle at high speed (as well as imperceptible handover when moving from one cell to another); as much compatibility with existing digital terrestrial television (DVB-T), to allow sharing of network and transmission equipment (Kornfeld & Reimers, 2005). A further set of technical issues to be addressed involves the growing interdependence of telecommunications, broadcast and Internet networks. As of late 2005, a suite of standards were adopted for the transmission (in technical terms, datacast) of digital television using Internet protocol (so-called 'IP' or 'Internet television) but via handheld mobile devices.

There are other possible standards to deliver multimedia content. As well as the Japanese standard ISDB-T, there is also the possibility of adapting the digital radio (Digital Audio Broadcasting or DAB) standard for multimedia delivery (Sieber & Weck, 2004). Another perspective emphasises the different but potentially complementary roles of 3G compared to digital radio and television (Kozamernik, 2004).

The implications of such technical shifts are complicated and still not clear. What is key is that core telecommunications networks, including mobile cellular ones, are shifting worldwide from the traditional circuit switched paradigm to a packet-switched paradigm, based on the Internet protocol. How this fundamental change plays out in the interaction between telecommunications and broadcasting is being explored. Viewers are accustomed to a certain level of resolution, reliability and quality of service, cultural expectations that have their well-worked-out technical correlates in television broadcasting systems.²

One new set of social and cultural possibilities that is being constructed in tandem with these technical and industrial developments relates to personalization, something that has thus far been less salient in the cell phone

television debates. From a commercial perspective, there has been a slow-dawning realization that the sexiness of cell phone operators and their platforms is not so much the whizz-bangery and utopian flavour often predicated upon their services. Rather cell phone companies are extremely desirable because of something that has intense appeal to the actuarial imagination.

Cell phone companies typically have millions of customers and have very well developed and secure systems for billing them individually, and gathering data on their use of and preferences for services (Tuttlebee et al., 2003). A striking example of this pretty boring but extremely effective attribute of cell phone operators is found in how SMS has been used to authenticate personal identity of account holders in online banking transactions. Whereas the Internet was first designed for other purposes, certainly not commerce and trade for its first two decades, but then has become indispensable, telecommunications networks have long had very robust characteristics (due to their circuit-switched nature, but also as a result of the superior encryption and security capabilities flowing from second-generation digital cellular networks).

Desperately Seeking Audiences

Having established some of the features of the technical, industrial and political economy landscape of mobile television, I will turn to briefly discuss some of the offerings. One area in which the cell phone operators have not such experience is cultural content. From the early 1990s telcos have partnered with pay television operators but with the intensification of the commercial Internet, they also developed myriad arrangements with media and entertainment industries and the newer interactive multimedia and Internet industries. Such developments have become more commonplace since 2000 as cell phone operators seek to 'grow' their markets and find new forms of revenue. As cell phone users have slowly become audiences to entertainment, news, and information, so those who have specialized in shaping and servicing such viewers and readers have come to the fore, such as broadcasters.

There is little independent, publicly available, reliable research available to gauge how audiences and users are consuming mobile television. The only research I am aware of at this stage is that conducted by mobile and media companies themselves. Some of the findings of this research on the Nokia TV forum website, reporting on the various mobile television trials that have been held. The central message of these trials is that consumers do want mobile television, at the right price. Take, for instance, the findings from the three-month Finnish trial held in March-June 2005:

'Consumers also want to watch TV programs on their mobile'

Results announced today from one of the world's first commercial mobile TV pilots in Helsinki, Finland reveal the popularity and willingness to pay for mobile TV services, underlining the potential of this exciting new mobile application. (Nokia, 2005a)

There are obvious problems with interpreting this research, given its positioning to support mobile television. Other industry research conducted by consultancy organizations, the details of which are also not in the public domain, has directly contradicted the proposition that there is significant interest among consumers in mobile television, with one widely reported survey finding that 'most people have no desire to watch television on mobile phones' (Tryhorn, 2005), two other surveys suggesting that 'most of us are not

insatiable TV junkies' (Benady, 2005) and a good deal of sceptical media coverage recalling the industry previously 'championed mobile web-browsing, picture-messaging and video telephony as the answer [for new avenues for growth]' (*The Economist*, 2005a).

Notwithstanding the patent limitations of Nokia's Finnish trial, some of the reported findings certainly accent themes in the discourse on the new technology:

pilot participants not only wanted to watch familiar program offerings, but they would also welcome mobile TV content that is suitable for short and occasional viewing. Familiar programs available through national Finnish television channels proved to be the most popular followed by sports and news channels (CNN, BBC World, Euronews). The Ice Hockey World cup games, the San Marino and Monaco Formula One as well as the UEFA Champions League match between Liverpool and AC Milan were among the top 10 programs viewed during the pilot. In general, mobile TV users spent approximately 20 minutes a day watching mobile TV, although more active users watched between 30 to 40 minutes per session. Participants also watched mobile TV at different times than traditional TV peak hours. Mobile TV was most popular while travelling on public transport to relax or to keep up to date with the latest news although it also proved popular at home for entertainment and complementing participants' main TV watching. (Nokia, 2005a)

Such patterns of use and consumer really are unfolding at the present time. At the threshold of this social and cultural shaping of mobile television is scepticism about its prospects, not least given that with the screen quality available at present its appearance and texture is markedly different from the viewing experience expected by most (Timms, 2005b).

In the quest of establishing its legitimate claims to audiences, cell phone television takes as totemic the need to attract younger audiences:

Getting TV onto mobiles matters so much to broadcasters because it offers the tantalising prospect of beefing up their younger audiences, the 16-34-year-olds, who are turning off mainstream TV in their droves ... Sky's chief operating officer, Richard Freudenstein, told analysts this morning, it's the ability to consume what they want when they want that is the big attractor rather than whether picture quality and drop-out mars their interrupted viewing. (Timms, 2005a)

Nokia has been one of the handset manufacturers heavily promoting mobile television. Their dedicated website offers a mobile TV forum ('where you write the script for the future of mobile TV'). It also features a primer on the benefits for different parties (Nokia, 2005 a, b, & c). One of the first Western cell phone companies to launch a cell television service was US carrier Sprint's MobiTV service in late 2003. MobiTV streams television programming directly to phones with either a low-frame rate option or a high-frame rate option. Channels include well-known news and entertainment channels available on satellite or cable television around the world (such as CNN, Discovery Channel, the Weather Channel, C-Net, and others).

Television broadcasters have shown growing interest in the possibilities of mobile broadcasting. In September 2005, for instance, the established British commercial broadcaster ITV launched a mobile service so viewers might:

- enjoy highlights and made-for-mobile footage from your favourite shows
- get the latest on ITV's soaps and dramas and keep up to date showbiz news and gossip
- get up to date news, sport and weather
- have the opportunity to win fantastic prizes on exclusive competitions
- purchase the latest games, ringtones and wallpapers so you can customise your mobile
- find out what's on TV and plan your viewing with a complete TV guide on your mobile. (ITV, 2005)

The service took two forms. Firstly, there was a mobile website (using WAP) that users can access and download. Secondly, there was a subscription service called 'ITV Mobazines'. An application is downloaded to the phone, and two daily updates are then sent at 7.30am and 4pm daily, and the user can browse the Mobizine they choose at their leisure, whether news, entertainment, fun, what's on, or the TV guide. The TV guide offers SMS reminders for the user's favourite programs. Mobizine subscribers also remain able to browse the ITV mobile (WAP) site. Essentially here ITV mobile uses mobile messaging and mobile Internet technologies as part of an integrated 'portal' to offer customized, tariffed services drawing upon, modifying and repackaging its existing broadcast, print, and website content. So highlights of programs, gossip and extra information, weather and news are staples. When ITV Mobile launched however, it also offered special episodes of top-rating programs: 'These could include parallel storylines that link television episodes of the show. From next year, the broadcaster will also start to commission programmes specifically to be viewed on mobile devices' (Gibson, 2005).

The British public broadcasters, BBC and Channel 4, have also experimented with extending their broadcast to cell phone customers. Proud of its innovative offerings in interactive digital television, in November 2005 the BBC launched its first cell phone video game, based on the spy drama *Spooks*. Interestingly, though, the BBC positioned this in the context of the popularity of games, rather than cell phones per se, with the executive producer at BBCi speaking of the need for the public broadcaster to 'define a public service role for video games' (Observer, 2005).

Channel 4 has staked much on its digital strategy, including the 2005 launch of a new channel, More4 (Robinson, 2005a). Channel 4's positioning is deliberately aimed to contrast with its traditionalist, conservative confrère the BBC: 'It's a highbrow offering infused with a populist touch ... "It's a really important channel for us,' says [Andy] Duncan [Channel 4 CEO]. "In my mind it's a "little-sister" public service channel." ' (Robinson, 2005a). Adjacent to an image of Big Brother stars on a cell phone, Channel 4 mobile promises:

Wherever you are, keep up-to-date with Channel 4's mobile site, where you can access the latest video clips and exclusive mobi-soaps from Channel 4 shows, from Hollyoaks to Lost. You also have reviews and news from the world of music, film and entertainment at your fingertips. (Channel 4, 2005)

Again, the core of the service revolves around a WAP site. It is supplemented by various SMS services, including news alerts, 'TexTips4Lovers', cricket alerts, and, somewhat more creative, 'daily texts from the Hollyoaks characters with exclusive insight into what's really going on'. The use of cell phones as an integral part, or at least available channel or mode, for television is signalled

clearly in the website of channel 4 program 'Totally Frank', about the trials and tribulations of a girl-band. The website offers an introduction to the series, the option of catching up on 3-minute catch-up videos of past episodes and sneak previews of the next ones, extra information and photos on the band and cast, an 'episode blog' (written in the voice of the characters), a photo gallery, a forum, and a mobile episode:

Get extra mini-episodes of Totally Frank — never before seen on telly — direct to your mobile! There's a special 'mobi soap' for each episode on T4, so you can stay one step ahead of your mates by finding out how the girls came up with their name, get the dirt on make-ups and break-ups, and even witness a saucy snog! (Totally Frank, 2005)

Orange launched a TV-over-mobile service in May 2005, expanding its coverage to 18 channels later in the year. Sport featured heavily, as it has earlier with pay television, digital and interactive television, because of the particular characteristics that work well with 'live' events. So, for instance, in October 2005 Orange announced it was adding live coverage of the international cricket (Keegan, 2005; Timms, 2005c). With other sorts of programming, live streaming is not such a drawcard. Thus Orange also offers content in one of the early boom areas of mobile media innovation, namely music video television.³ It has funded a late-night music services on ITV1, Orange Playlist, 'which features musical guests interviewed about their music tastes, [and which will] will generate interactive content for mobile phone handsets and the Internet' (Timms, 2005c).

If the broadcasters have been relatively conservative in pitching for the eyeballs of the 'third screen' of cell phone (not to mention ears and thumbs), for their part the 3G networks operators are starting to recapture their post-auction enthusiasm and to seriously offer 'live' television. Hutchison, the company most associated with 3G around the world, has been reticent to publicly discuss what proportion of their business derives from consumers being prepared to pay for video downloads (as opposed to discounted voice services or text or relatively well-accepted services such as ringtones). Certainly Hutchinson is hoping mobile television will become a lucrative revenue stream. In 2005 the Italian 3 company launched a reality mobile TV channel, 'See Me TV', based on a peer-to-peer, micropayment model. 'See Me TV' (Wray, 2005). In October 2005 the British 3 venture announced it would sell airtime on its network to advertisers, apparently a world first (Wray, 2005).

Having approached mobile television from the broadcaster or telco angle, it is worth considering the perspective of content and cultural producers, including new intermediaries. One of the most powerful of these comes, in many ways, from the television production community. The Dutch-founded producer Endemol is famous for its *Big Brother* program format, with its successful adaptations worldwide. *Big Brother* is often seen as synonymous with 'reality TV', and there has been much public and academic debate regarding this. However what well may be more enduring about *Big Brother* is the way that it has generated new genres and modes of understanding television across different media and delivery platforms (television, magazine, newspaper, word-of-mouth, Internet, and cell phone). It is fitting that Endemol is now owned by the Spanish carrier Telefonica. Endemol produces specific programming for cell phones (such as comedy clips for 3 operators), and in late 2005, announced two TV channels specifically targeted to mobile

television: a comedy channel and an extreme reality channel featuring the ‘bizarrest and weirdest’ video clips’ (Timms, 2005a).

Before closing this section of the paper, I would like to briefly summarise and my discussion of how those actors promoting mobile television have constructed this technology in its early phase, and also signal a critique. There is intense interest among broadcasters, cell phone manufacturers, network operators, and the production community in mobile television. It is not all motivated by the desire to refresh and reform television, of course: fixed-line telcos as much as mobiles are also getting involved in mobile television to ensure they can offer the ‘quadruple play’ of TV, broadband Internet, telephony and mobile, and compete with their cable TV network competition (*The Economist*, 2005b). Such defensive, competitive strategies aside, there are two broadly but not mutually exclusive approaches I can see in all this. While some are experimenting with broadcasting television directly to cell phones and mobile devices (as part of developments in digital radio and television broadcasting), others are cleaving to the safer ground of modified or dedicated made-for-mobile content purchased and delivered through premium mobile services, via mobile Internet (whether WAP or i-Mode), or through 3G networks.

Thus far the bulk of available material, and indeed the discourse on, mobile television is celebratory and techno-optimistic, if not utopian. While success has been claimed for the early take-up of mobile television in trials, as shown in the quoted example of a Nokia trial, and there is some anecdotal evidence to support some consumer interest in the new forms and technologies, we lack any independent data, research, or criticism of mobile television. Furthermore, there are other developments in mobile audiovisual content that might also be termed ‘mobile television’ — kinds of unofficial television.

For example, as the mobile television balloon was rising in late 2005, serious competition was not far off — from a company with a proven track record in mobile media. The spectacular and icon digital successor to the Sony Walkman has not, of course, been any of Sony’s MP3 players (Belson, 2004), or other MP3 or other digital music technology, it has been Apple Mackintosh computer iPod device, first released in 2001. Not surprisingly there has been a considerable public discourse about the curious customs of iPod users with their distinctive ‘earbud’ headphones, listening to music in all sorts of public places (on the iPod, see Bull, 2005; also the detailed Wikipedia entry, 2005, and the growing popular literature such as Jones, 2005; Kahney, 2005; and, from a business perspective, Young & Simon, 2005). One of most intriguing things about the iPod, that distinguishes it from predecessors such as the Walkman, is its imbrication in online cultures and economy. As well as its ability to store and play audio from CDs or the Internet, the iPod has given rise to the phenomenon of ‘podcasting’, or the downloading of radio programs to the iPod (the iTunes programs allows the user to select a radio program for regular feeds and updates to be ‘podcast’). Once radio stations saw the potential of podcasting, many mainstream broadcasters quickly moved to leave substantial amounts of programming online (such as recent or notable programs), so users can download to play at their leisure. In October 2005, Apple chief executive officer Steve Jobs unveiled the new video iPod, allowing users to download video for playback, although he appeared to have doubts about the future of portable video — calling the video iPod the ‘best music

player we've ever made' (Timms, 2005d) and the video capability a 'bonus' (Johnson & Gibson, 2005).

Radical Consumption and 'The Great Cultural Unifier'

As is plain from my discussion so far, mobile television is at an early stage of formation, with various ideas of what it might be and who might be interested in watching or interacting with it, and producing cultural content and forms for it, being played out. In this sense mobile television truly is in the process of becoming, rather than having achieved or reached a much-or-less accepted identity — a 'black box', whose details do not concern most of its viewers or users. Although it is early days, I would like to conclude by noting what I think are two important ways in which the discourse on mobile television is contributing to overarching media and cultural meanings and debates. What I would point to here are the narratives of use and significance put into circulation by those shaping the technology, and seeking to persuade and enlist users.

The first of these ways in which mobile television is being discussed is a radical intensification and extension of new modes of consumption and the pivotal force and agency of the figure of the consumer. So, for instance, an important discursive moment in the construction of mobile television occurred in and around the September 2005 biennial Cambridge Convention of the Royal Television Society, grappling with the theme of 'TV is dead'. Mobiles were hailed as the 'small-screen future':

... John Pluthero ... who is executive director of Cable & Wireless UK, delivered a powerful piece of crystal ball-gazing on how television will be delivered in the future: forget the television set in the corner of the living room and think of broadband computers and 3G mobile phones. The 3G handsets ... are destined to become like mini-TVs, according to the TV futurologists. It is a development which Richard Freudenstein, Sky's chief operating officer, speaking at the convention, seized upon, saying the broadcaster would offer key news and sports channels 24 hours a day on mobile phones from next year. Teenagers, he said, wanted choice, accessibility, convenience and control over their viewing. (Culf, 2005)

Pluthero ferociously criticised television's lack of real innovation: 'What drives me to the depths of despair is that TV's ideas of interactivity is [asking viewers] to text in votes. I'm just a bit worried that the broadcasters will be a bit Marks & Spencer-ish about [industry changes], and keep making St Michael jumpers while their customers get old and drop dead ... It's 50 years since they created the soap opera ... They've been short of creative ideas every since.' (Robinson, 2005)

The Schumpeterian 'creative destruction' associated with digital technologies is palatable here. The second way in which mobile television is being discussed is keyed into larger debates about the relationship between media — specifically the privileged claims made for television as a forum for society-wide conversations that matter — and culture. If the viewer is once again pronounced dead to make way for, indeed give birth to, the consumer, what becomes of the cultural role of television?

A representative version of the new myth is nicely put in a British op-ed piece, authored by Tony Hall. Hall previously headed BBC news but at the time of writing was chief executive of an institution regarded as the epitome of traditional culture, the Royal Opera House. Hall opens with a sally on those

who decry contemporary television as a fallen medium, arguing to the contrary that the present developments stand to extend the golden age by radically changing it: 'Broadcasting is about to discover democracy. Increasingly it will be consumers who dictate what appears on screen. Far from narrowing the choice of programming, I believe this can broaden and enrich it' (Hall, 2005). For Hall this is portended by the cell phone-equipped citizen journalist in the aftermath of the July 2005 London tube bombings (Hall, 2005).

Drawing on these developments in news-gathering and circulation, Hall posits a thoroughgoing revolution of which the iPod is the emblem:

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 ... the power of the consumer to choose what, when and where they watch could blow apart everything we are used to. 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. (Hall, 2005)

One is tempted to dub this vision of the mobile television revolution an 'ideology of the cell phone' (Sarikakis & Thussu, 2005). Certainly similar themes and assumptions regularly crop up in discourse on mobile television, as they have in digital technologies discourses for at least 20 years. What presents itself more insistently, clearly, and at an earlier stage, however, is the problematic of what constitutes a culture. That is, a common culture. Take Hall, for instance, who ends his opinion piece with a note of caution:

As we all become more discriminating, more specialised in what we watch, choosing niche channels, the question becomes: what will bring us together? One thing that makes this country special is our diversity. But the more divided we become in the way we use media, the job of communicating the common ground between us becomes much, much harder ... The big journalistic or editorial question that broadcasters have to face in the next 5 to 10 years is how to reflect this variety of cultures. How do we avoid stereotypes, caricature or cultural ghettos? ... Back in that mythical golden age, television was the great cultural unifier in Britain. In some sense 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 often don't. Can television still somehow bring us together in the multi-channel future? This time the answer will have to come now from the broadcasters, but the consumers. (Hall, 2005)

This is a question also posed elsewhere by commentator Will Hutton, in reflecting on the vast potential of Xboxes, iPods, and other devices for consumers to choose what, when and where they consume entertainment and information. The plaintive question that Hutton raises is reminiscent of the early work of Raymond Williams (1958 & 1961): 'Britain's broadcast culture, and with it our wider culture, will change dramatically, weakening public values and experiences held in common — as it has already begun to do' (Hutton, 2005).

We are a long way from Raymond Williams now, though much of his work, especially his pioneering 1974 book on television still affords resources for making sense of these new developments. Certainly I am surprised that the current problematic of mobile television is still being framed in terms of the threat to common culture. Perhaps the persistence of such unifying rhetorics underlines that we are still in the process of understanding how we connect

through media, if not constitute through media, communities, audiences, and publics. What is at the centre of debates about convergent technologies and cultures are questions of how we make use of these new technologies and networks to fashion shared as well as individual spaces in our lives, relationships and ideas. Thus far, however, the developments surrounding, and discourses characterising, mobile television have tended to obscure these developments and struggles in social relations and cultural politics — something that I think merits considered and urgent attention.

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NOTES

¹ The Digital Video Broadcasting (DVB) project is 'an industry-led consortium of over 270 broadcasters, manufacturers, network operators, software developers, regulatory bodies and others in over 35 countries committed to designing global standards for the global delivery of digital television and data services'

(<http://www.dvb.org>). The family of DVB standards are handled by a Joint Technical Committee of the Centre for Electrotechnical Standards (CENELEC), the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), and the European Telecommunications Standards Institute (ETSI), the latter which publishes the standards.

² Writing in 2003, Tuttlebee et al. note that the 'case for IP in a broadcast network — with constant bit-rate streams requiring guaranteed QoS — is still under evaluation. Despite work on the role of IP within the DVB project, implementation in broadcast networks is unlikely to be universal and is probably some years off'. While technology development has been very rapid in mobile television, this assessment still holds much of its veracity in early 2006.

³ In November 2005, the music video for vocalist James Blunt's new single 'Goodbye My Lover' premiered on 3's mobile service, available for download to their customers, a trend apparently started by Robbie Williams' 'Misunderstood' in 2004 (Gibson 2005). Major label EMI's digital media director commented that she 'can't see a single campaign going forward that doesn't have a mobile element to it, from the lowliest act to the biggest global superstar' (Gibson 2005).