Interactive Television.
TV of the future or the Future of TV
Eds. Jens F. Jensen & Cathy Toscan

reviewed by Bohdan Jung, Warsaw School of Economics, Poland

This book is co-authored by distinguished academics and professionals:

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**Overview**

This book’s nine chapters are authored and co-authored by European and North American academics and practitioners specialized in the field of interactive media and communication. They present the reader with a multitude of disciplinary approaches including sociology, communication and media studies, computer science, cultural studies, technology management brought together in one coherent volume devoted to the interactive future of what the authors’ describe as ‘one of the most successful technological consumer products ever produced’ – the television.

The attempt is made to probe the shortcomings of the existing definitions and dimensions of ‘interactivity’, as can be applied to ‘interactive television’ and ‘interactive media’. The interactive television is analyzed in the context of cultural confusion which accompanies the transition from receptive to selective, menu-driven consumer choices. The possession and use of cultural capital, as well as the form and structure of production and reception of interactive media may lead to a very different set of real options available to media audiences. In extreme cases “new communication technology jeopardizes traditional forms of information management ... crucial to the preservation of different cultures”.

Some of the key issues in interactivity are user involvement and institutional networks. This problem is presented in
a practical manner using the example of Interactive Video Services Stuttgart pilot project in Germany, where a complicated system of contractual relationships had to be established between research partners, consortium of technology providers, network and content providers, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the participating households. Relations between digital TV and public service broadcasting are studied from the Nordic countries’ perspective. The main effect of the introduction of DTV (digital TV) “will be to bring the first real convergence medium and the global information super highway right into private homes all over the world”. This has enormous technological potential, but also creates huge economic opportunities (electronic marketing, commerce) through Internet-enhanced broadband services.

As there is not enough free TV content available for DTV, this form of television “will not take off before the national free-to-air broadcasters become actively involved”, but given the purely commercial character of developments in digital TV, at the time of writing it was not clear whether Nordic public broadcasters would be able to enter into partnerships with private consortiums. War of standards was likely to slow down the development of DTV.

The authors argue that “communication and understanding between media analysis and the social sciences is more important than ever”. Digitalization and deregulation not only produce new interactive media, but lead to improved handling of the existing information. This suggests a close relationship between new and old media, pointing to continuity, rather than to a radical shift in their complementary co-existence. It is argued that “sociology of new media should not accept the post-modern argument of a radical shift of identities and multiple selves in cyberspace. Rather ... virtual communities ... are constructed through, and filled with existing real life experiences ...”.

In the chapter devoted to radio and television broadcasting over the Internet (or ‘webcasting’), this form of broadcasting is viewed as “coming of age”. Several techniques for multimedia broadcasting over the Internet are presented (IP Unicast, Multicast and Simulcast) in the context of their potential applications (such as distance learning, electronic software distribution and updating, real-time broadcasting of critical data (like stock prices), database replication, video conferencing etc.

The Cambridge Interactive Television Trail (1994-97) serves as the ground for reflections on the transformation of viewers into consumer-users where interactivity is built into media consumption. The author documents the tensions which emerged during the Cambridge Trail “between anticipation and actualization, imagination and realization”, between the design and use. The argument presents the first user and consumer as the inventor, who has a privileged position as a communicator – an idea often obscured by technical determinism of the infrastructure put in place.

The fusion of television and the Internet, or interactive television in the home, is a perspective which receives much attention from the technology companies and broadcasters. Users with access to the Internet are already using some elements of these technologies at home. Interactive television (ITV) changes from “a device used to watch television shows or films into a home terminal for access to and interaction with networked interactive technology, programs and services”. To the author, this gives rise to three issues:

1. Instead of being controlled by a small number of corporations, like in the traditional media, the Internet is in the public domain, which makes innovation more complex and gives the market a much stronger voice;
2. There are major doubts about the applicability of Web-style interactivity to television viewing;
3. PC or multiple terminals may be more flexible and competitive platforms of interactivity in the home which, in the words of the author, make “the Web and television an uncertain marriage”. On the other hand, television is a mass market and cross-society phenomenon that may never be imitated by the Internet.

The book ends with a chapter devoted to the interactive media world in which today’s children and ‘screenies’ (i.e. the “video-drenched generation”) live, pointing to the ease with which young people engage in interactive media and surround themselves with virtual pets, taking newest interactive technologies for granted while no longer capable of enjoying ‘traditional’ TV. Their interactive skills can then be used for ‘hyper-learning’ which “combines pedagogy with access to computer based non-linear communication”. The general conclusion that “audiences of the future are likely to actively watch, listen to, and use multimedia media networks rather than the one-way media common in the 20th century” carries the message that in terms of media usage, it is the older generations which will learn from their children how to use interactive media, reversing the traditional order of learning.

Conclusions

This book gives a comprehensive and multidisciplinary perspective on the issues involved in media interactivity, offering insights into theoretical and practical facets of this interactivity. It covers a wide range of topics ranging from conceptualization of interactivity, through information technology to cultural and societal implications. In
all of its diverse chapters authored by specialists coming from very different fields, it manages to keep in sharp focus its main topic – interactivity. Some of its more theoretical considerations may initially discourage the book’s less academic readers, whose attention is likely to be recaptured by other chapters. Technological issues are clearly presented in non-technical language. On the whole, while this book’s target audience seems to be academics and students, is likely to be read and enjoyed by a broader spectrum of people interested in the future of TV and electronic media. To both audiences, it is highly recommended reading.

Rating

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Rating Points: excellent: +++++ poor: +

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Media & Cultural Studies 1

Aalborg University Press,
Aalborg, Denmark, 1999

ISBN 87-7307-625-2 / ISSN 1399-1752

http://www.forlag.auc.dk/en/