



# New Media Cultures

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## chapter seven

## Rejuvenation: television

Over the last 50 years television has been very successful, developing massive audiences for its content whether under the structure of national public broadcasting or commercial imperatives. The success of this model of cultural production is easy to underestimate, but to appreciate television's consistent impact it may be useful to compare audience size with that of film. One of the most successful films of all time – *Titanic* – had a US box office of \$600 million. If the average ticket price were \$8 that would translate to an audience of 75 million viewers over its extended run of nine months in 1997 and 1998. *M.A.S.H.*, one of the most popular television programmes of the 1970s and 1980s, achieved American television history when its final episode in 1983 was watched by more than 125 million households, which could be as many as 200 million people. The Football World Cup of 1994 achieved a worldwide audience of over 33 billion through its 52 televised games or approximately 600 million on average for each game (History of Film and Television, 2003; Internet Movie Database, 2003). It is easy to see how television can dwarf the size of audiences achieved in other media industries. There is little doubt that television has had the greatest cultural impact of any media form for the last half of the twentieth century.

Despite these overwhelming statistics about the audiences produced by television, as an industry it has been transformed and continues to be altered by technological changes. One of the principal changes has been the expansion in the number of channels delivered and available to households. Up until the 1980s, in most countries there may have been only a handful of television channels available. There were a limited number of frequencies for stations to broadcast on without some interference from another channel. This scarcity model organized television stations and severely limited the number of licences granted to companies to operate television stations. In the United States, the scarcity along with the development of affiliated networks to national broadcasters led to the emergence of the 'big three' television networks. In the United Kingdom, with even more state regulation, there were generally two or three available channels in the 1970s in most markets (the BBC and ITV). The transformation of this highly organized and centralized structure of a small number of networked stations occurred with the expansion of cable television in some parts of the world and the development of satellite-delivered television in others. Cable, in its most basic form, broke the geographical limitations of broadcasting by offering subscribers channels from more

individual households. This cable system was expanded further with the development in the 1970s and 1980s of satellite-delivered stations that could be distributed via satellite receivers once again to these same cable subscriber homes. Progressively, the effect of these technologies of distribution on television was the fragmentation of the audience and a challenge to the need for centralized powerful national networks.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, one can see the progressive dispersion of the national audience in several directions. First of all, in countries such as the United States and Canada broadcasting no longer represented the primary means through which people received their television signals. As a result, regulations built on a broadcasting model of delivery were ceasing to serve national or even local needs and interests. Superstations or satellite-delivered channels could operate quite easily transnationally with their large footprints of coverage.

Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB channel in Europe represented this shift from the national to the transnational. CanalPlus, the French-based but trans-European-distributed satellite premium channel replicated this form of delivery. In Asia, Star Channel, with its several layers of subtitles is available across Asia and South Asia. In the United States, the development of satellite stations that are also distributed by cable emerged in the 1970s with HBO and Ted Turner's WTBS superstation. This form of delivery became highly regularized by the 1980s with such mainstays of American cable television as ESPN, MTV, CNN and the Home Shopping Channel. These channels represent a second kind of dispersion: individual channels no longer needed to be an omnibus of content but could specialize in particular genres of programming. All news channels would be side-by-side with all sports channels; all movie channels would rub shoulders with all music video channels; a children's station might be next to a nature documentary channel. No individual channel would have a mission that related to the particular community or locale; rather their mission was comprehensive programming in a particular recognized genre. The range of stations would cover the array of needs of an audience – or at least that is how it was to work in theory where a true marketplace of ideas-as-programs was to flourish.

This plenitude of television has expanded further through digitalization. For the free-to-air channels, their frequencies can now be divided into a number of individual channels or converted into a few high-definition channels. In other words, they have the potential to be multi-channel platforms of content. Digitalization of cable has allowed for the expansion of possibilities for pay-per-view channels, which can now number as many as 20 or 25 distinct channels. On-demand television, where the viewer can choose what specific programs are selected and recorded for viewing from an array of premium and non-premium channels is a feature that is now being offered by American cable companies. Their advertising slogan emphasizes the sense of control that on-demand digital cable television tries to provide: 'you are the tv guide'. Through this service digital cable heralds the end of the bestselling magazine in the world – *TV Guide*. Other services have developed very successfully in European countries. The videotext information services as a television channel is relatively ubiquitous. Still other channels can serve as community access and electronically updated noticeboards of local events.

Although linking all of these trends in the development of television into one theory of

migration of television as very much linked to the principal directions that have led to the proliferation of newer media forms. Television is both a precursor of new media culture and an older medium that is transforming into an interesting hybrid. As we have already detailed, new media is very much connected to the development of something beyond the active audience into various forms of cultural production. Television traditionally has represented in popular culture the most passive of pastimes and embodying this inactivity is the derogatory description of the television viewer as the couch potato. Although cultural studies approaches to television have disputed the characterization of the television audience as passive, as a cultural form it has rarely been linked to interactivity. Yet the 60-year history of television as encapsulated here is one of expansion of choices to provide different forms of engagement and investment. To many, the expansion of choice has allowed for the same kinds of content to prevail and that the presentation of channel choice actually is a myth of diversity. After all, in American television ABC is owned by Disney which in turn owns five ESPN channels, SoapNet, the Family Channel and Toon Disney, and co-owns E! Entertainment Channel, the History Channel, Arts and Entertainment Channel and Lifetime Channel. Likewise, General Electric owns or co-owns: NBC, the news channel MSNBC, the financial channel CNBC and the Bravo network. When ownership is factored into the conceptualization of choice the diversity disappears into the various media conglomerates.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of televisual monoculture, the industry has had an interesting relationship with the activity of the audience. The development of the remote control since the 1970s has to be seen as a precursor of the computer mouse and the point-and-click computer and internet world that is so celebrated for the engagement of its audience (Burnett and Marshall, 2003: 88–9). The remote control, despite the discourse of pseudo-control has periodically stood as a challenge to the economics of television. Watching television with the remote control is closer to surfing the channels than resting on an individual programme. The old economy of television depended on the viewer's resistance to changing channels – the viewer's stickiness. Programmers designed an evening of television viewing around this inertia with lead-in programmes such as the news and strong situation comedies that could support weaker comedies and dramas for the evening. Television watchers now often follow more than one programme in their active avoidance of commercial downtime. Channel surfing, as its name suggests, is closer to the activity of web surfing described in chapter four and expresses a different viewer than has been theorized when film theory has been adapted to television.

It should also be indicated that the television industry has developed the most sophisticated technology for monitoring its audience. Through Nielsen ratings, the advertisers and the networks closely gauge the predisposition of the television audience. With people meters in select households Nielsen more closely tabulates the uses of television and then extrapolates the survey into a representation of the particular national television market. With its broadcast model, it is difficult for television to fully embrace the individualizing tendencies that seem to be an essential part of digital culture. Television historically has produced audience aggregates to sell to advertisers. By this definition it is working under a

television is clearly post-Fordist in its quality of providing slight differentiations in content. Post-Fordist implies an economy that does not simply mass produce, but rather provides the possibility for variations in design for products. The car market is classically post-Fordist. The rough model of the car remains the same, but we are allowed to choose from an array of options to individualize our mass-produced choice. In cultural forms, Darley identifies the post-Fordist tendency in the development of serialization and links this to digital culture's serializing of content into many different forms and manifestations – something identified in chapter six as the new intertextual commodity (Darley, 2000: 26–9). Television has embraced this notion of differentiation within a structure of similarity in its production of serials in every genre imaginable. From a more universal perspective, the sameness of television, where channels are just variations of other channels, also presents a post-Fordist model of cultural production. Television, therefore, is a cultural industry that is transitional in its connection to the interactive audience and its new desire and will to differentiation. Through its history, television has demonstrated its capacity for developing an elaborated version of cultural production that connects to its audiences in sustained ways and that has provided a type of variety and variation in its content.

## Reactionary television: responding to the increasing digital world of interaction

With new media forms invading the space and privileged position of television in the home, it is interesting to see the way that television as a very large industrial apparatus has reacted. This reaction of television can be seen in its content and in its technology. To unpack this reaction, it is important to begin with the similarities and differences between television and the computer.

### Technological movements

Television, like the computer, is composed of a screen – originally a cathode-ray tube, but increasingly we are seeing versions of plasma televisions just as we are seeing flat-screen computer monitors. This connection may seem superficial, but its significance is in the electronic basis of each of these systems of display. With the electronic structure, it is possible to manipulate screen content. Both computers and televisions can divide the screen into pixels and reorientate the information that is contained in each of these pixels. What this has meant is that the production of television can divide the screen into image and graphics as we often see in newscasts or in sports programming. The television screen is highly manipulable and, increasingly, computers have been utilized to manipulate the production of the screen image. This quality of television has made it the screen precursor of the graphic interface of the personal computer. And in reaction to the graphic quality and the enormous

become increasingly graphics orientated. Watching any of the newscasts from Fox News to CNN, one becomes aware of the divided screen. The news ticker scrolls across the bottom as the newscaster continues on other stories at the top left. Other graphics are provided on the right third of the screen as well. On Bloomberg, other information, such as international weather, stock reports and sporting results, occupies the left third of the screen as the newscaster is positioned to the upper right in about a fifth of the entire screen. Television has worked to enrich its content to rival the flow of information that is produced via the World Wide Web. This expanded graphic quality of television is not limited to the news, but extends to placing the individual television station's logo in the corner of the screen during actual programmes. Similarly at the end of programmes, it is now normal to divide the screen with credits and a small window that advertises future programmes for the night. Digital cable and satellite services also provide a location for the expansion of information overlay on to the screen: the viewer can get background information on the programmes that they are watching. Because of television's similar technology of display, it has reacted by providing similar graphic environments to the web in its programmes.

It is important to identify one other similarity between television and the computer before we demarcate the significant differences. Like the computer, television is a transmitting technology – its content is determined by what is fed into it. Once again, this may seem straightforward, but it is easy to overlook in the celebration of new media forms. Historically television has been very successful at incorporating new uses. As we have seen with electronic games, the first versions of those games were on the television screen. Arcade games were dependent on television technology for their display. Similarly, the video cassette recorder was added on to the basic television set in the home from the late 1970s onwards. The implication of the VCR was to some degree time-switching but to a much greater degree it transformed television into an exhibition technology for films and not solely a broadcast technology. This control over exhibition was a major transformation of television use which spawned the massive video rental industry, but also allowed the relatively smooth integration of the DVD into home entertainment appliances in the late 1990s and the early twenty-first century. Augmenting the use of television even further was the development of the portable home video camera. Exhibition of home videos became a middle-class pastime from the 1980s onwards. What we can see with these developments is that television has been a technology that has adapted to provision for other technologies. These other technologies have been expressions of cultural production that are very much connected to the cultural production thesis. Television can no longer be seen simply as a technology of reception, but has integrated these elements of productive activity into its social and technological apparatus.

Where television differs from computers is in the arena of software. Television for all its add-ons of programmability, VCRs, PlayStations, and video camera display is fundamentally linear. Although the television screen can now take a computer input for display, which makes the technology simply a monitor, it is important to distinguish that the software of the computer is much more malleable in its design for use than the software for television. The origin of the software for television is generally television stations that, once again,

transmission partly because the transmission is instantaneous. In contrast, the content of computers is actually contained on one of the drive spaces that operates as a 'memory' source. The memory quality of computers fundamentally differentiates its technology from that of television. Stored word-processing software such as Microsoft Word provides open-ended possibilities for the user to produce content. Similarly, other software programs, such as Adobe Photoshop, allow for the manipulation of images. In contrast, the television set for decades contained little or no memory. More recent versions of television sets may have contained some microchip technology that allowed storage of favourite channels, but not much else. The VCR could be thought of as a form of memory extension of the technology, but very few people have had video-editing capabilities that could manipulate content in any way that resembled computer software. Television as an apparatus – which has social, economic and technological dimensions – primarily divided its production capabilities (the television studio) from its reception capabilities (the home). Computers, on the other hand, blended these production and reception possibilities so that the personal computer in 1980 was seen as a technology of work as much as a technology of home and leisure. Television's physical location may have migrated to public spaces in airports, pubs and bars, supermarkets or waiting rooms, or occupied more rooms of the contemporary household from kitchen to bedroom, but it was rarely a technology that was embraced in the normal work environment. As an apparatus, even with its capacity to have add-on capabilities, it has remained fundamentally a technology of entertainment and connected to non-work time.

The changes in television technology can be seen as two types: techniques that have improved the quality of the image or techniques that have offered the viewer a greater sense of control. Large-screen and high-definition television are examples of television's improvement of the experience of reception through the quality of the image. In many countries, television signals are already sent out digitally and in high-definition format. The transformation of the picture quality will be instituted over the next decade both at the level of production and in the technology of the television set itself. With that improvement in picture quality, the television as a technology of transmission will rival the quality of the computer screen image.

The technology that has improved the sense of personal control of television has a long lineage, which has been outlined above. The most recent addition to the technologies of the remote control and the VCR is the personal or digital video recorder. Operating under the brand name of TiVo or ReplayTV in the United States since 1999 and 2001 in the UK, the digital video recorder is connecting the technology of the computer with the technology of the television. The actual digital video recorder (DVR) is a large hard drive that digitally records and saves the requests of the viewer for future viewing. By 2003, digital video recorders had a hard drive that could store up to 80 hours of television programming. Because of this 'memory' capacity, what I have described as the distinction between the television and the computer is partially dissolved with the DVR. The DVR as an intermediate software technology does not provide the wide functionality of computers and software, but operates in a manner that resembles the way computer technology has become an integrated element in other appliances with very specific functions and not open-ended

to programming choices offered by cable or satellite television. With the DVR's communication via telephone for daily updates of television schedules for the specific local area, the new technology further resembles the converged structure of the contemporary personal computer and its internet connection. In its focused functionality, the DVR provides the viewer/user with the capacity to record and collect an entire programme's series. The DVR also has the capability of having what are called 'wishlist', where the recorder searches for a particular desired movie, director or actor and, when it finds a match, records and stores it. It has an added function of anticipating and recording programmes that the viewer, given previous programming choices, would in all likelihood want to watch – a kind of Orwellian smart technology.

As Jason Mittell describes, the DVR's 'interface' – that is, the way in which the technology 'shapes our experiences with its content, setting the parameters for the user's relationship to the media as a whole' – is significant both in its relative simplicity and its transformation of how viewers use television (Mittell, 2003: 3). Mittell further explains that we have to now think of the myriad repercussions that this new interface, which is beyond the remote control and the earlier era of the channel dial, has for the institution and apparatus of television. The technology of the DVR has sold moderately in the United States. The largest DVR producer at the end of 2003 had approximately 1.3 million subscribers (TiVo, 2003). What is perhaps more significant about this technology is its progressive integration into other hardware associated with television viewing. Cable operators are developing and launching DVR/digital cable combined boxes. Computer manufacturers such as Dell and Apple have expanded the storage capacity of personal computers and provided a software connection to programme the digital recording of television. On-demand cable is operating under the same premise of the viewer/user controlling (and paying for) individual programme series and specific movies. It is also important to be aware that technologies such as TiVo have specifically been supported by the corporations who are most concerned about the control of intellectual property. While TiVo has proclaimed itself a revolution in the use of television in its promotional campaigns, with its structure of corporate control and subsidization by the major entertainment corporations it is evidently a revolution supported by the media establishment. Sony, NBC, CBS, the cable giant Comcast, America Online and Liberty Media, among a host of other corporations, are equity investors in the enterprise. The product is also twinned with major equipment manufacturers such as Toshiba, Pioneer and Sony. The DVR is very much connected to how the television industry is constituting its digital future.

The digital video recorder is placed ambiguously in its role in the television industry. On the one hand, the leading DVR, TiVo, entices viewers to eliminate commercials through pausing live television in order to accelerate through their content; while on the other hand it is encouraging advertisers to invest in commercials that are housed on the playlist of TiVo itself. With advertising the economic driving force of the industry, TiVo is developing a different model for television. TiVo calls its advertising 'embedded commerce' (Boddy, 2002: 250) and encourages a new relationship between advertisers and their potential audiences.

experimented with TiVo's means of connecting to an audience. Films and music are given 'profile' advertising support around their release dates. Car companies, such as BMW, can explain in great detail the advantages of their luxury cars.

## Content transformations

In the digital transformation of television, the DVR does represent one very possible future. The pattern of a short series of commercials interspersed with programme content may in fact be in decline as the business model for television. Connected to this development is the remarkable success in the United States of premium subscriber channels such as HBO and to a lesser degree Showtime. Several HBO series, including *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under* and *Sex and the City*, rival audience figures achieved on the major commercial networks despite having a potential audience base of less than a fifth of the major networks. Indeed, the finale of *The Sopranos* in December 2002 had 12.5 million viewers (Kellert, 2002) while its season premiere in September 2002 had an audience of 13.5 million. *Six Feet Under* has audiences around 5 and 6 million. *Sex and the City* also has a large and loyal audience, which has encouraged networks to bid on its syndication rights.

The traditional free-to-air networks are also in decline and causing the advertising world of television to change. In the United States, although the number of recognized networks that have stations that operate beyond cable and satellite has increased to six, the total percentage of the audience watching network television is now about 48 per cent, a steady fall over the last 15 years. In the week 7–13 April 2003, no network had an audience greater than 13 per cent or an 11.5 share of the audience (CBS). In the 1970s a top programme would have a 30 per cent share of the available audience. This pattern was maintained for most of the 2002–03 season. With the dispersion of the audience across the cable and satellite universe, along with the expansion in the use of DVR technology, there is a bifurcation in television. Audiences are moving closer to direct allegiance with particular programmes and not watching an evening of television. What has been labelled the 'hammock' programme, a weaker series that is placed between two stronger programmes, is just not as workable as it once was. Although skewed to a richer demographic, the premium channels are forming an audience cluster that actively avoids commercials in its following of discrete programmes. On the other side of the divide is commercial television, frantically reorientating its content into some new way to attract its dwindling and less-demographically appealing-to-advertisers audience.

With the whole nature of programme flow under threat from the audience and with audiences seeking different sources for information, television in the era of new media is serving a shifted function. Network news is in steep decline – it no longer fulfils its role as the beginning of an evening's viewing. The industry has responded by producing programmes that reconstruct in serial form event television. Event television identifies the moments when television moves to a primacy of place in how people interpret world events. Large sporting events such as the Olympics and the Football World Cup operate as event television. Likewise, a national crisis such as the 2003 Iraq War or even the weeks following

interpret and process the images of a particularly traumatic international news story. For the television networks, events can rarely maintain audiences and by their very nature they are relative unique occurrences. The international television industry has recently developed new generic types of programmes that try to capture this feeling of event television. And as Albert Moran has developed, these trends in television are replicated quite rapidly in multiple international markets: copypast television, where program types are syndicated for different national audiences, has become the industrial norm (Moran, 1998). Television networks in Australia, in Britain and in the United States are serializing and 'stripping' these manufactured event television structures in order to attract loyal and returning audiences. Copypast syndicated television at one time operated at the level of the lower end of television production – game shows and soap operas were the models that were exported from one market to another. The difference in a much more dispersed audience era is that these genres of games have been hyped for network prime time to become events. They have replaced the 1980s favoured strategy of the major mini-series as a genre that is designed to invade the everyday lives of a national audience to engage with a particular television programme.

The response of the television industry has even been more sophisticated than simply manufacturing regular events. In a much wider linked phenomenon, television has also developed programming types that celebrate audience involvement and investment. The traditional game show has always iconically embodied the audience in its format – contestants for game shows are chosen from loyal viewers who understand the game and play it at home before they appear on the programme. Television's attempt to intersect with new media culture and its transformed audience of 'users' and 'producers', has led to the pervasive incorporation of the audience into television formats. Reality television is one of these genres and along with lifestyle programmes expresses television's response to new media culture both in its attendant level of interaction and its tendency to be dispersed across new and more traditional media for various uses.

The origins of this trend can be seen emerging from newer cable television channels. The all-music channel MTV since the early 1990s had diversified into representing an array of youth cultural activities (Williams, 2002). Instead of simply music videos, the channel began developing programmes that involved showing their audience in different settings. The series *Real World* began in 1992 and was the simple idea of placing seven twentysomethings together in a shared house. Their exploits were then edited into half-hour episodes. Contemporaneous with *Real World* were the various game shows that engaged the audience in gender-style battles and the spring break specials. *Road Rules*, which began in 1994, took the concept into a travelling motorhome and a game quality as college-aged students toured specific countries with specific missions.

Child-orientated channels developed parallel strategies of building loyalties to their audiences. By the late 1990s, Nickelodeon was broadcasting programmes that matched more closely the rhythm of life of school-age children. Live programming, beyond animation, with live audiences, such as *Super-slime Live*, built a closer connection to their core demographic. 'Nick invades your school' was another successful formula for making the audience part of

With Nickelodeon, club-like television with antecedents back to *The Mickey Mouse Club*, resurfaced in the 1990s.

The emergence of this trend in television in the mid-1990s was very much linked to the expansion of the World Wide Web and a different new media audience-sensibility. It is also significant that the trend towards engaging with the audience more directly was initiated with youth television where reading of that new sensibility was first registered in the television industry. MTV and Nickelodeon quickly developed very elaborate websites that further connected to their audiences, providing powerful feedback loops for their own future programming strategies. Nickelodeon now divides its website between pre-school and school-age sites. Simple games are provided on the site that provide ways for children to further engage with their animated favourites. MTV has one of the most sophisticated television websites: with music news and a coordinated message board, background details about current programmes, and other related videos and information, MTV.com establishes a strong internet presence that acknowledges how much the web is a source of news in and around youth-related activities.

The web-television nexus has strengthened over the last decade. In dramatic programming the greatest experimentation has once again been in programmes aimed at younger demographics. *Dawson's Creek* developed a standalone website for the WB Network programme that allowed fans to see the lead character's computer desktop. Fans were encouraged to register and receive email updates on the programme's content. The designer of the site, Christopher Pike of Sony Pictures Digital, saw its principal objective as providing a fan's bridge for the seven-day gap between episodes. This was expanded further to keep fans engaged with the exploits of the characters over the summer hiatus when only reruns were programmed on American television (Burnett and Marshall, 2003: 92). Soap operas have also been a point for internet expansion and proliferation of related fan websites (Baym, 2000). What emerges is the building of audience loyalty by providing greater details and behind-the-scenes information for the more committed viewer. Television has used the web to build a form of brand loyalty for its programmes and there is little doubt that some of the greatest traffic on the web is to television-related sites.

From the late 1990s, the 'cannibalization' of the audience by television – where the audience is the subject of television programmes – has continued and intensified. Reality and lifestyle programmes are as much part of smaller cable channels as they are now elemental to major networks. Although not reality television, but expanded game shows that became event television, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* and *The Weakest Link* created an international phenomenon for major networks in drawing the viewer back to network television for as many as four nights in succession. The size of the potential prize, a million dollars, provided the allure for the game show that transformed these trivia programmes into events. Competitions such as *American Idol* or *Popstars* or other international variations also franchised successfully in national markets. The audience involvement was further expanded: audiences voted on which performers advanced to next week's programme until one was left standing. In the 2003 *American Idol* series, the votes for the finalists rivalled national elections: 24 million votes were cast on websites, by phone or through text messaging with



By 2003 reality game shows had become the industry standard for programming.

Following the success of the original *Survivor* (2000) and its incarnations before and after in various formats, the blending of ordinary people placed in extraordinary circumstances with multiple cameras recording their every movement became industrially produced by television internationally. The list of reality-based game shows is extensive: *Big Brother* (a game show version of *Real World* that has been enormously popular in the UK and Australia), *Joe Millionaire*, *Temptation Island*, *Fear Factor*, *Meet the Parents*, *Bachelor*, *Bachelorette*, *Race around the World*, *Lone or Money*, and so on. With only a few exceptions, the contestants are generally in their twenties. What becomes evident is that the television industry is working on an elaborate strategy to recapture the interest of youth.

Another range of programmes can be classified as lifestyle programmes that have also been linked with the game show genre and thereby lay claim to a similar status of reconnecting and representing their own audiences. Emerging from gardening, home repair, beauty advertorials and cooking shows, this new generation of programmes deals specifically with personal and property transformation. *Trading Places*, the Australian *Auction*, the British and Australian *Changing Rooms* and *Ground Force*, the American *Dream Home* shift the demographic to the propertied middle class. Viewers are invited to watch couples with expert help transform their homes or rooms. *Auction* deals with the various parties interested in buying a house before its public auction and through its camerawork and voice-over quickly moves towards the melodramatic. Other programmes such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* or the British and American versions of *Trading Places* work at personal transformations that are very much connected to the exigencies of contemporary consumer culture. More dramatic in their transformation are programmes such as *Extreme Makeover* (US, ABC Network), which have documented cosmetic surgery operations for individuals; participants receive free plastic surgery in exchange for allowing cameras to cover their every move and thought leading up to the surgery, the surgery itself and the final unveiling in front of friends and family.

A final cluster of programmes that are connected to the reality television genre are the celebrity programmes. MTV's *Critics* is a series that tries to reveal the everyday and somewhat mundane lives of pop stars. Drawing on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, *Critics* updates the style by making the celebrity's lives resemble that of the great number of reality television programmes that surround their exploits. *The Osbournes* (MTV, 2002, 2003) has attempted to present the bizarre 'family' life of heavy rocker Ozzy Osbourne. In synergy with the genre, the programme is presented in classic fly-on-the-wall quality and stripped down to show the almost incomprehensible Ozzy, his wife, and his teenage son and daughter dealing with living in their mansion in Los Angeles. In a similar vein, *The Anna Nicole Show* (E!, 2002–03) presents the former porn star and widow of an octogenarian Texan millionaire transform her life to fit into the scene in Los Angeles. *The*

*Anna Nicole Show's* claim to fame is the banality of her life, which is presented with some irony by the editing of the basic documentary-style camera work and with some subtitles. By late 2003, Fox had launched a reality quasi-celebrity programme called *The Simple Life*, which chronicled the life of hotel heiress Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie, the daughter of Lionel Richie, living with a family in rural Arkansas. Designed to be both

humorous and kitsch, Fox's *The Simple Life* mixed the fabrication of wealth with poverty for effect.

The sheer number of reality television programmes that have been produced in the last five years is truly astounding and has gone well beyond the number that have been listed in this chapter. The genre has rocked the Hollywood television writing communities as networks have developed fewer comedies and dramas in favour of trialling the comparatively inexpensive reality television programmes. Although there are many insights that can be drawn about the phenomenon of reality television and there have now been a number of good critical investigations of the form (see, for example, Dovey, 2000; Andrejevic, 2003; Brennon and Cohen, 2003; Murray and Ouellette, 2004) one element can loosely group the initiative. Television is trying to rejuvenate itself. Reality television is the current path towards positioning television in the new constellations of entertainment in the digital era. We can isolate here some of the features of reality television that intersect with the new exigencies of interactive forms of entertainment.

1. **Reinvigorating the role of the audience: a televisal form of interactivity**  
Reality television reinvigorates the role of the audience. From recruiting its 'actors' from its audience and allowing the audience to determine who is voted off a programme to the documentary style of celebrating the everydayness with the extraordinary, reality television gives television the gloss of connecting to its audience more strongly than through dramatic programming. In conjunction with websites and internet chatrooms, the television industry has used reality television to become an interactive form.
2. **The immersive quality in production and reception**  
Reality television has an immersive quality. In terms of the production technique of cameras everywhere, reality television tries to construct a narrative but maintain a sensation that what is presented is unedited. In their use of documentary effects, with mini-cameras and handheld shots interspersed with 'hidden' webcam voyeuristic shots, reality programmes work to reconstruct the feel and experience of the given setting. With their website homes, the audience can invest more fully in the various directions of a particular programme's players. The game quality also attaches the programme to, however obliquely, an aesthetic of electronic games. What is cultivated is a sensation of audience commitment through a more complete sensorium of the programme. With their often stereotypical participants, reality programmes' closest new media relative is the electronic god-game *The Sims*, where the gameplayer controls the actions of various individuals and families. Reality television games are the televisal versions of these god-games, where both the audience and the game-master become part of the controlling elements of the interactive game.
3. **The flattening of participation and value**  
One of the fundamental features of the internet and the web is the lack of gatekeeping around who can participate. Thus, as discussed in chapter four, websites may arise from institutions as much as individuals. Homepages may be those officially developed by a particular celebrity or they may be shrines developed by the most avid fan. With the

quality of websites, it is difficult to distinguish the home-produced site from those derived from more official and costly origins. Reality television is the television industry's response to this levelling of participation. If we think of television as the apparatus that has bestowed significance on events and people for the last 50 years, this particular moment describes how television is actively manufacturing its 'celebrities' – its significant people – from its audience. Even within the reality television genre, there is the intersection of the celebrity reality shows with the 'contestant' shows. The distinctions and differentiations cannot be so clearly seen. Winners of game shows – except those from the 1950s – have rarely been celebrated, discussed and gossiped about in the way that reality show winners and losers move from their own programmes into specials, news programmes and talk shows, as well as on to newspaper and magazine covers. This circulation of reality programme participants into the ratified world of entertainment celebrities is indicative of how television has made a mythic representation through reality television of its audience.

#### 4. Exhibiting in representational form the cultural production thesis

For the television industry, reality television programming is still all about constructing audiences. Most of these programmes, with very few exceptions, are designed for commercial advertising-supported networks. Yet the nature of these programs highlights a central dimension of new media culture: the will-to-produce. The various reality programmes that deal with lifestyle changes and home improvement are exemplary of this desire to produce and they represent television's technique of conveying this new wider subjectivity. Other reality television programmes, by virtue of the game quality celebrated and the use of audience as participants in the game, are also providing an exhibition of cultural production.

## Conclusion

Television, as a cultural institution and as an industry, carries a great deal of baggage as it transforms into a new media form. It has been a broadcasting technology and has developed expectations around what and how it re-presents our world. Those patterns of representation are currently in flux. What we are witnessing through television is a rejuvenated form that is still very reliant on its principal objective of manufacturing audiences, but realizing and working to produce programmes and content that lead to greater investments and engagements by audiences. Purely as a technology, television has expanded outwards beyond its historical role as a broadcaster through its related new media extensions such as videogames, VCRs, DVRs and DVDs. Each of these technologies has highlighted a sense of control by the user. Similarly, with the dispersion of audiences not only to many more television channels but also to different new media forms and technologies, television has invested in genres like reality television, which enliven the institution of television with a sense of greater audience participation and investment. At this particular cultural moment, it is unclear whether television will consolidate as a technology that provides distinctive narratively driven fictions and non-fictions and maintains an appliance-like functionality in

production. The technology of television is not a neutral force, but a technology that is actively producing a new form of knowledge of the computer and the network, and attempting to produce much more than it is. What is clear is that the economy of television is transforming, specifically because of new media culture and the different user sensibility that has become normalized in contemporary culture.