

# Digital television: A personal view

I was using the telephone, communicating by speaking and listening before I started school. Much later, in employment, I was watching when the computer met the world telephone network, and extended online communication to reading, writing and numbering. Using it gave me powerful support when I needed it, and I've been an enthusiastic online user ever since. I retired a couple of years ago, but retiring no more stopped me going online than it stopped me using the telephone, and when I wrote this text I'd been simulating interactive digital television in order to clarify my ideas about what I wanted from it. I already knew I wanted it to support me in using everything I've learned about communication since starting school, reading and writing, speaking and listening, multimedia and images. As well, I wanted it to get my news, and keep me well informed, educationally up-to-date and entertained. So there I was using ADSL broadband to discern what would happen when digital television met the world wide web. Being 'downunder' simulating advanced online technology in the year 2003 enabled me to get an unusually comprehensive view through my technologically advanced window of advanced technology war in Iraq.

Interactive (digital) television seemed to have the potential to enable the viewer to get a timely handle on fast-changing fields in the television news like military science, as well as making close-ups of football worth watching for me. I was particularly looking forward to using interactive digital television to learn. It might turn out to be the learning machine I've always thought television could be, and I started simulating using digital television to learn in order to articulate what I would be wanting when I decided to buy it, and I was already thinking about how I was going to start using it.

In Adelaide, South Australia, news items from the US, UK, and Europe, as well as places like Iraq and Afghanistan were all there to be seen in my television window. From Australia's location near Asia, any global trends showed up clearly, and standards for interactive digital television were shaking down around the world, as global development proceeded stage by stage with time constants and emphases heavily dependent on local thinking about job prospects and pension plans. Among conflict and competition, the standout news topic in 2003, was Iraq, but the military technology making the news was a generation ahead of the media technology getting the news to me! I was simulating digital TV while I was watching analogue TV, and I

started writing this article when I found that, unlike many of my fellow viewers, I had been able to make sense of news from Iraq as the Coalition forces established a new 'mark' for fast military advances. Access to PBS online newshour archives and familiarity with them had enabled me to support fast breaking war news on Australian Broadcasting Corporation television with Washington 'know-how'.

I was using both a personal off-air television receiver (P-TV) and a personal online computer (PC) in the same room to simulate what I want interactive digital television to do. The 'personal television' receiver was connected to a video-cassette recorder, and a television aerial. The personal computer was connected to the internet's World Wide Web by ADSL broadband through the phone line. I appreciated the P-TV for its' ability to shift the timeslot of any television program into my 'early to bed, and early to rise' day, and I appreciated ADSL technology for high speed broadband access, especially to streaming video. Ever enthusiastic about learning, I was expecting that as interactive digital television got developed, different programs and learning options would be developed for a range of platforms from mobile phones to consoles, not forgetting laptops and standalones.

In early 2003, Iraq was in the news, and I had been getting ready for whatever was going to happen there by using what PBS (the Public Broadcasting Service of the USA) had been providing 'on air' and 'online'. PBS had presentations about military matters from expert commentators, who I thought of as their "retired colonels corps". Ultimately, they would enable me to keep up with television coverage of the Gulf War II advance - one of the fastest advances in the history of war! Access to archived presentations of the television coverage of this "retired colonels corps" military expertise facilitated learning about Gulf War II and enabled me to make sense of it! Analogue television puts the onus on the presenter to prepare, but interactive television, driven by the viewer, rewards

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viewer preparation. An unprepared viewer can no more expect to be able to get the most out of an 'interactive' presentation, than a board member can expect to get the most out of a board meeting without consulting the minutes. As a former couch potato, I'll have to lift my game! I'll be wanting to interact online and offline with my digital television.

I was getting the news I wanted on my television by tuning to two nightly television news services, the PBS 'Newshour with Jim Lehrer' on weekdays, and the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) national television news every evening. On my online PC screen, I could display text content in large print, so I could read anything on either broadcaster's website. The 'Newshour with Jim Lehrer' television program was my preferred source of global news and current affairs from the Washington perspective. In Adelaide, on weekdays, its' delayed broadcast on SBS-TV happened at my dinner time, and I set my VCR to videotape it, so I could watch it after dinner each evening ahead of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's national news. The two services complemented each other over an extended news day. The ABC was excellent for breaking news, the Newshour was thoughtful as well as authoritative, and access to its' archives enabled me to support fast breaking war news on the ABC with Washington know-how, so I learned it was important to be able to work online (off-television), to browse website content and use access to text and streaming video archives.

It had been widely announced that the technology of precision guided munitions had developed greatly between Gulf Wars 1 and 2, so I had been doing my basic homework on technological change and military thinking in early 2003. The military use of advanced technology was expert, and that meant that when things started to happen, they happened fast, and my 'homework' paid off! Everything had changed when news items had started coming from that very fast advance. Local broadcasters had tried to cope with it by substituting global television for their usual local television, but that not only ignored the issues that had been arising, it ignored how much military technology and techniques had been changing, and I was only able to make sense of the television news by going back online to the archives that I had been working on for months. Preparation paid off, where simply substituting global television for local television failed. Going online got me ahead, buying time at the time, or making time already spent studying presentations of the PBS "retired colonels corps" count as

preparation for ABC-TV 'breaking news' items. So I learned that I'll be wanting to use my digital television keyboard and screen, only sometimes as a receiver, and at other times as a browser. As a source of issues, I don't think that 'Iraq' will go away, any more than 'Vietnam' has, and there'll be a continuing need for access to archives to support using interactive digital television for learning!

Getting to feel well-informed about events leading to Australia's eventual involvement in conflict in Iraq in 2003 was a continuing challenge - any event in the news had happened on the other side of the world hours earlier, and unless I wanted the nightly television news to tell me what to think about it, I needed to get ahead of the news so I could consider each issue as it arose. I used access to the World Wide Web to achieve that, and I don't think I could have managed with just radio and (non-interactive) television. Interactivity counts if you make it count, and you can make it count if you have access to archives! Digital television intersects the internet using the language of the World Wide Web. It uses text and numbers, sound and graphics, multimedia and anything else the way I use them when I am using a computer to communicate, so using it enables me to communicate 'in writing' in a learning environment of worksheets, written tests, and exams.

For months one could see something about Iraq was coming, when Gulf War II started in earnest. My local television broadcasters had made their preparations for it. Every Adelaide television channel started feeding one or other of the global networks like CNN, MS-NBC or BBC-World, and I started watching them, trying to take in the news from Iraq and put it in the context of the issues that had already been brought up about Australian involvement. However, I realised that while local television broadcasters were responding to breaking news, there wouldn't be any consideration of questions from the past on local television - substituting global television for local television hadn't made enough difference. Each event in the fighting war had been preceded by months of controversy, and only knowing my way around months of thoughtful PBS current affairs broadcasting archives enabled me to keep up. Those months of preparation paid off for me when dramatic events started happening swiftly. Familiarity with the archives of the Online Newshour website enabled me to find considered responses to the flood of questions that arose as television commentators and presenters scrambled to keep up with one of the fastest advances in the history of war, followed by something still more unexpected - the sudden fall of Baghdad. Building on work already done, I started going online again, to support my television watching. It paid off handsomely, and the lesson I learned about interactive digital television is I shall want the receiver

to enable me to browse archives on the web. I expect to be using Interactive Digital Television to learn lessons about Iraq for years, and that will involve both watching television and browsing archives (including streaming video). In the Iraq window of my online PC, making sense was challenging, but quite possible, whereas using only the window of my off-air television receiver left me confused. My extended news day started when I logged on, and the 'Newshour with Jim Lehrer previews' arrived among my email. That gave me a list of items that were planned for the 'Newshour with Jim Lehrer' that would be broadcast on SBS-TV at five o'clock that day in Adelaide for my waiting VCR to video-record. It also gave me an introduction to each item. By late afternoon, I would, perhaps, be able to preview the item on the Online Newshour website by listening to it in streaming audio. Revision of items was supported, after a day or two, by a text transcript, initially with a link to a streaming audio archive, and later with a link to a streaming video archive.

### **Conclusion**

Where television intersected the internet, I was expecting to get a learning machine for the learner-viewer. Interactive digital television seemed to have great potential for education and training in the twenty first century, enabling each individual learner to get support for learning a personalised and individualised curriculum. Using it seemed to open the possibility of enabling a child to learn to use keyboard and screen to 'read and write' on the World Wide Web before starting formal schooling! I was expecting to see it make things change. The impact on viewing for consumers might turn out to be like the impact of steam on sailing ships for travellers, and the impact on publishers might turn out to be like the impact of diesels on steam locomotives for the railways, and the impact on communicators 'getting the message through' might turn out to be like the impact of the electric telegraph on the pony express. I was expecting the road to interactive digital television to be challenging! Interacting with digital television augmented reference books on my library shelves, and even replaced some of them. I got interactive access to the vast learning resources of the online World, and that left me expecting to see developments in 'specialty' television programming like individual cooking for the kitchen laptop, with food e-shopping sponsorship.

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