Chapter XI

Screening in High Standard: Innovating Film and Television in a Digital Age through High Definition

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the innovation of television by looking at the development of high definition television (HDTV). It argues that the way that the interaction of technological, industrial, and political actors has been crucial in several stages of the development of this innovation. Central question is how industry, broadcasters, and consumers have debated and defined a medium and consequently redefine a medium through innovations. The complexity and the way actors have played a part within the changing media environment is analyzed by looking at the necessity for technological change of the television standard, by relating the media film and television in transition from analogue to digital and by studying case studies of political debates and policy in Europe and the United States.
Introduction

As a domestic medium, television has basically not changed since the 1950’s. The programming, the way of viewing and the technological quality of the image all suggest that the medium’s history is a stable one. The major changes have been the introduction of colour in the 60’s and cable and satellite in the 80’s, offering more channels. The VCR influenced the viewers’ possibilities for time shifting. Despite these changes William Uricchio (2002) argues that the applications, cultural status and our assumptions regarding the medium have hardly changed over the past half-century. Digitalisation has offered new possibilities for the medium, but so far consumers have hardly adopted digital television. One of the developments associated with Digital Television (DTV) has been the innovation of the television screen in High Definition Television. This chapter explores aspects that have affected the so far unsuccessful implementation of HDTV.

The way in which innovation of a medium is promoted often resembles the discourse that was used with the introduction of a previous medium; in the case of Digital TV it’s for instance radio and television. William Boddy (2004) argues that the digital moving image has been celebrated within “compelling imaginary scenarios of work and leisure, identity and community” (p. 1). Obviously the cultural and economic stakes in the transition from analogue to digital should be considered by looking at the way the media have been anticipated, debated and taken up by the industry, politics, and audiences.

Technology has to be considered as a cultural construct, so it is essential to look at the way that medium has developed. In terms of television this means how industry, broadcasters and consumers have debated and defined a medium and consequently redefine a medium through innovations.

Within this context the introduction of High Definition Television offers a compelling case study for the pattern in such a technological innovation. The changing media environment is studied by looking at the necessity for technological change of the television standard, by relating the media film and television in transition from analogue to digital and by studying case studies of political debates and policy in Europe and the United States.

Developing the High Standard

The process of defining a standard for the television image at the beginning of the medium shows the complex interaction of different actors involved in television technology.
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