**Interactive Television? A retrospective analysis of why red button content failed.**

**Abstract**

Interactive television was intended to provide the viewer with an enhanced experience of television. In the late 1990's and early 2000's both public service and subscription based television broadcasters provided the audience with a variety of 'interactive' applications. By 2012 most of the interactive applications had been either reduced in scale and ambition or withdrawn completely. This article is an overview of why the interactive television experiment failed. The methodological framework is a content analysis undertaken in the summer of 2012 which found a small amount of red button content supporting traditional broadcasts. The little found was either pre-existing content or entailed the button’s use as, effectively, the portal to a supplementary television channel. Moving forward the article provides a discussion on why the optimism that television could be an interactive experience in the early 2000's dissolved in a relatively short period of time. The conclusion is that interactive television did not fit the political economy of the media landscape.

**Keywords**

Audience Participation, Communication, Content Analysis, Digital, Journalism, Media Studies, Multimedia, News, Popular Culture, Sport

**1.0 Introduction**

This article is historical in nature as it explores why attempts to move television towards a more interactive experience have failed. Towards the end of the 1990’s and beginning of this century broadcasters were experimenting with new forms of televisual content. Red button content was being produced by the BBC to support factual and non-fiction programmes, dramas and major sporting events. At ITV, while not developing red button services, much stock was being invested in a web based platform called ITV Local, which would allow viewers in the regions to interact with local issues more easily by the audience providing user generated content. Channel 4 were providing red button coverage for reality television shows and Sky were harnessing accessible video streams to back up their coverage of sporting events such as Premier League football matches in the UK.

The main theoretical underpinning for this article will be to place the red button/interactive television experiment within the context of political economy; more specifically Christian Fuch’s work on Critical Internet Theory (2009). While Critical Internet Theory looks at the social use the internet, the main argument in the study is that interactive television was an attempt to make televisual content move from a passive viewing experience to a more democratic, open and internet-like experience. This was because the user clicked through the content by using the red button on the remote control.

The data used to establish if the material known to exist for programmes such as *Walking with Beasts* (BBC, 2001) was still being produced, and had spread and evolved, was generated by a content analysis carried out in the summer of 2012, which formed the core of a PhD thesis (Fox, 2014). The content analysis’ aims were to establish just how much red button content there really was and how much of that content supported the programme that was being shown. Summer 2012 was a particularly pertinent time as the content analysis coincided with the Euro 2012 football tournament, the London Olympic Games and Queen Elizabeth the Second’s Diamond Jubilee celebrations. There was, therefore, much potential to yield some very positive results as to how terrestrial and satellite television broadcasters used the red button as a method of enhancing the television experience for their viewers. In addition field interviews were conducted at the BBC and ITV during the spring and summer of 2007. The outcome of the interviews provided an optimistic outlook on the future of interactive television, with interactive content being encouraged to be developed alongside traditional content.

The results of the analysis were, given what were on face-value relatively promising conditions, surprising, with very few red button applications supporting scheduled broadcasts. This article will use data gathered from two specific genres, sport and news, to discuss why the optimistic political economy of 2007 gave way to a pessimistic political economy by the autumn of 2014.

**2.0 Literature Review**

2.1 Interactivity and digitalisation

In the final chapter of his history of British broadcasting, Crisell (2002) speculates about the future:

Certain kinds of content, such as sport, will allow us to choose our own camera angles and action replays and we will be able to play alongside the contestants in quiz shows like *Mastermind* and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* In a far more intimate way than previously (p. 285).

The presupposition for interactive television, that it was at least around the corner if not already available, was not a new idea. Williams (1974), in his seminal work on television included a section on interactivity. In the 1990’s and early 2000’s Gilder (1990) and Swann (2000) published work that suggested television was changing beyond being a passive medium. For both the far reaching implications for the evolution of the technology would not only lead to an enhanced experience, but would also impact sociologically by allowing television to be more democratic, through more audience choice of how to use the medium.

Moving away from speculation, supposition and hyperbole, the impact digitalisation would have on television inspired volumes by Bennett and Strange (2011), Gillan (2011), Gripsrud (2010), Mann (2014) and Turner and Tay (2009). Likewise the work of Kolodzy (2006) looks at the impact digitalisation would have on news gathering, in terms of the implications for journalists. Fox and Mitu (2016) also explore the impact digitalisation has had on news broadcasting, this time from the editorial angle and how editorial decisions differ on a platform by platform basis. Wardle and Williams (2010), on the other hand, explore a further recent development: user generated content, whereby members of the public can participate with journalists by providing pictures, audio and video to provide a different slant on a news story. However, while all agree that television would have to adapt to change in the broader media landscape and imply that digitalisation potentially registers a significant impact across platforms, interactive television is never fully defined. The field interviews suggested interactive television services included video on demand and changes in how content could be delivered, for example catch up services, enhanced red button services in addition to cross platform content and more opportunity for audience participation.

For a more detailed analysis of interactive television we turn to Bennett’s (2006, 2008 (a), 2008 (b)) work on the perceived rise of interactive television in the UK. Bennett’s three articles provide evidence of how a converged scheduling strategy can work, a technique called 360 degree programming. Additionally Bennett looks at how interactive applications could be used to push forward the public service broadcasting remit at the BBC and how Sky used their red button services as a marketing device. The conclusion is overwhelmingly positive in terms of how red button services add an additional dimension to the televisual experience.

2.2 Political Economy

The media’s relationship with political economy has been explored in depth by Murdock and Golding’s (1973) work in tying together media forms with economic expediency. However, and as might be expected, the analysis within their work focusses on then dominant modes of television, radio and newspapers and, rather obviously, times have moved on. The emergence of digital technologies has led to a much changed media landscape; this for Mansell means ‘there is a very substantial tendency in studies of new media to emphasise the abundance and variety of new media products and services and to concentrate on promoting access with little regard for the associated structures and processes of power that are embedded within them’ (2003, p.3).

The above is true of interactive television which was an attempt to move television away from its traditional use. That the optimism about the evolution of television down this path has now largely dissipated suggests a power struggle between the medium and its place in society, primarily between producers and the audience. To further my argument I turn to Fuchs’ (2009) examination of the state of political economy at around the time when interactive television was being widely touted. Fuchs’ approach here sees ‘media like the Internet not as primary objects of interest, but as a concretization of the analysis of the development dynamics of capitalist society, for which a social theory is needed’ (p. 73). Therefore what we need to address is not the content which appeared through the red button on the remote control but why the opportunity for interactivity was not taken up by the public. While Fuchs’ (2009) hypothesis is concerned with the internet, as interactive television was seen as providing a more internet like experience for the viewer so we can therefore use Critical Internet Theory to inform the discussion which follows. However, what is required before the discussion is a brief explanation of the methodological approach to this article.

**3.0 Theoretical Framework**

The literature examined above combines the two areas of interactivity and political economy. It is clear that there was a significant amount of academic discussion around the potential digitalisation would offer television both as a medium and as a technology. What is also clear is the industry were thinking the same as;

‘in the last two years especially with Mark Thompson coming on board digital has spread to the centre of the BBC’s agenda and one of the key changes he’s made is that as of the next fiscal year the commissioning of the interactivity will happen at the same place as the commissioning of the programme’ (personal interview, November 2006)**.**

That the industry availed itself of the interactive style that was being put forward needs to be explored in greater detail, which is where the political economy element of the literature review comes to the fore.

Combining the suggestive and sometimes hyperbolic language surrounding interactive television and digitalisation with the more pragmatic and realistic political economy model helps us make sense of why television did not take on more characteristics of interactivity. By using Critical Internet Theory (Fuchs 2009) as the main theoretical underpinning for this article we have a model of political economy that is allied to an interactive medium albeit one that is carried on a computer rather than through a television screen. However, an argument that will develop is that interactivity was an attempt to answer the challenge presented to television with the advent of digitalisation, media convergence and the rise of the Internet.

**4.0 Methodology**

While this article is discursive in nature, the discussion has been informed by data extrapolated from a larger sample collected between June and September of 2012 (Fox, 2014). A content analysis was the most reliable method in assessing how much material existed and its nature. The methodological approach took the form of a probability based content analysis, as not all channels available through Freeview and the Sky set top boxes were included. A non-probability sample would have meant collecting data from all existing channels, which was not possible as not all channels appeared on both platforms. By using a probability based sample, as suggested by Riffe et. al. (2005), key platforms and channels were identified which still provided the data with authority without collecting information from every available channel.

Collection occurred for a week each month for a total of an hour a day. Each daily hour was different to capture as much programming as possible. A combination of terrestrial and satellite channels were included in the sample but the data for this article is made up of measurements from BBC1, BBC News, Sky News and Sky Sports 1. The initial sample was larger and consisted of two more channels, CBBC and Boomerang as well as a wider selection of genres of programming. However, for the purposes of this article only the news and sport genres were used as they yielded the most interesting results. There is a mixture of terrestrial and specialist digital channels as BBC 1 scheduled major sporting events during the data collection period and has daily news output.

The first measurement taken established if any content was signposted through an on screen icon. Once that measurement had been taken then the red button content was pressed, the menus were accessed and what was found measured accordingly. Once the data collection had taken place the information was fed into SPSS and analysed. A brief summary of what was found is presented below.

**5.0 Results and Findings**

The results from the content analysis found that while there was a substantive amount of red button content, very little of it related to the programme being shown. None of the content was found to be interactive in the manner that was envisaged in the late 1990’s and 2000’s; for example additional meta-content relating to the programme being shown behind the red button or the widespread use of video multi-screens.

Table 1.1 How red button content relates to scheduled television programmes by genre

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Genre | Programme specific | Non-programme specific | Direct to content | No content | Totals |
| News/Current Affairs | 1 (3%) | 21 (60%) | 1 (3%) | 0 (0%) | 23 (66%) |
| Sport | 3 (8%) | 9 (26%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 12 (34%) |
| Totals | 4 (11%) | 30 (85%) | 1 (3%) | 0 (0%) | 35 (100%) |

Data from Fox, 2014

As evidence of the lack of interactive style content table 1.2 examines the data in more detail by providing an analysis of the specific options which were found.

Table 1.2 What the specific red button content consists of and whether the application relates directly to scheduled programmes

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Value | Programme related | Partially programme related | Non-programme related | Totals |
| Audio Options | 1 (0.7%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (0.7%) |
| Popular Sport | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (1%) | 2 (1%) |
| News Teletext | 0 (0%) | 16 (11%) | 47 (33%) | 63 (44%) |
| Weather Teletext | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 22 (15%) | 22 (15%) |
| Sports Teletext | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 43 (30%) | 43 (30%) |
| Sports Multiscreen | 2 (1%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (1%) | 4 (2%) |
| News Multiscreen | 0 (0%) | 5 (3%) | 3 (2%) | 8 (5%) |
| Non-scheduled programming | 1 (0.7%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (0.7%) | 2 (0.6%) |
| Totals | 4 (3%) | 21 (14%) | 120 (83%) | 145 (100%) |

Data from Fox, 2014

The four examples of programme related content were pre-dominantly based around sports based programming. Multiscreen optionality was provided for coverage of the 2012 Olympics by the BBC. Likewise the audio option was also provided by the BBC as optional commentary for a match in the 2012 Euro’s football tournament. The option was a direct feed of the radio commentary provided by BBC Radio 5live.

The partially related programme material, which appeared through the news teletext and news multiscreen applications was because the headlines presented correlated with the stories discussed on the parent channels. However, what was found for both programme and partially related content is offset by the key finding that 83% of red button material is non programme related. What the results and findings do show is that the optimism, found in 2007, had given way to a much diluted service by 2012. The main hypothesis, which frames this article, is that the politically economic conditions underpinning interactive television were not right.

**6.0 Research Questions**

6.1 Introduction

This article provides a historical perspective as to why interactive television was not a success. In this respect the main research question is clear. However, in order for the research presented here to progress we need to break down the main question further. This is because we are not concerned here with the reasons as to how television did not become an interactive medium in the way originally envisaged but why? There are three research questions;

6.1 Research Question 1 – What are the similarities between interactive television and Critical Internet Theory?

As the primary purpose of this article is to explore why interactive television did not benefit the medium in the manner expected there needs to be a thorough examination of the correlation between interactivity and the main theoretical underpinning being proposed here.

6.2 Research Question 2 – From the broadcasters perspective why was interactive television not further developed between 2012 and 2014?

It is clear that there was a period of time when UK broadcasters were actively embracing the idea that television could be an interactive medium. This research question explores why this did not continue and the reasons why.

6.3 Research Question 3 – Was there ever an audience for interactive television?

Leading on from RQ 2. this research question examines whether the audience embraced interactive television and as to this was the real reason why the broadcasters stopped developing the applications.

To provide satisfactory answers to the research questions each RQ will be discussed further below before the article concludes.

**7.0 Discussion**

**7.1 RQ. 1 – Similarities between interactive television and Critical Internet Theory**

While Fuch’s central premise for Critical Internet Theory, that it is based on the ‘*categoric imperative to overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned,despicable essence’ (Marx, 1844: 385, cited in Fuchs, 2009, pg. 70) appears rather grand, there is currency in the sense that interactive television was rejected by the audience. Fuchs’ (2009) approach is Marxist because he sees that current media consumption is an attempt to debunk societal norms. The same can be said of the assertion from McGrane and Gunderson (2010) that the audience now solely exists for the consumption of media content and products.

On the surface the whole concept of a public service broadcaster like the BBC looks Marxist; an organisation funded by the people for an annual license fee which answers to a Board of Governor’s rather than a board of directors. In turn to justify the license fee the corporation has to capture a certain percentage of audience share per annum. Therefore the whole ethos behind the BBC is about taking from the people in order to give to the people and justify this by proving that the content it provides is popular through audience rating figures.

However, the BBC still exists within a capitalist free market economy and has to distribute its funds amongst a wide variety of media outlets, specifically online and radio as well as television. Within these media subsets exist departments which all have to compete for funds, one such department being the interactive television area. We can apply Critical Internet Theory to this model as:

it shows how the Internet is shaped and shapes the colliding forces of competition and cooperation; it is oriented towards showing how domination and exploitation are structured and structuring the Internet and on how class formation and potential class struggles are technologically mediated (Fuchs, 2009, pg. 75).

If we juxtapose the BBC model onto this definition of Critical Internet Theory and, more specifically, apply interactive television as the primary focus, a political economy emerges. Certainly as Lewis et. al. (2005) contend, there is now a blurred distinction between whether the audience are empowered members of society, citizens, or merely consumers.Interactive television was something that was seen as a technological advance in the development of television and therefore invested in by the broadcasters who in turn attempted to impress it on the audience. Drawing on a Marxist critique here is useful because interactive television was pre-supposed as something that was beneficial and shared by all, particularly in a public service broadcasting environment such as in the UK. However, while we can observe elements of this practice from the BBC, subscription based broadcasting is also now prevalent in the UK. The next section will examine interactive television focussing on the attitudes of a public service broadcaster (the BBC) and commercial (Sky) broadcasting.

**7.2 RQ. 2 Broadcasters Perspective**

For the broadcasters the red button and its use as a way of re-invigorating the televisual experience was attempted for two very different reasons; public service and commercial. The BBC, as a public service broadcaster, was duty bound to explore new ways of delivering content. Wherever possible the BBC employed its 360 degree strategy to content, primarily through its television channels. Bennett’s (2008 (b)) examination of the D-Day commemorations was one such example but content that was labelled as interactive appeared through a multitude of television programmes; for example, Walking With Beasts (2001), Rome (2005 – 2007) and Test the Nation (2002 – 2007).

The BBC’s attitude towards interactive television and red button content can be seen as an attempt to push television as a medium towards alternative methods of use. Television was seen as being old and tired and was under threat in the early part of the 2000’s as scholars such as Jenkins (2006) and Andrejevic (2008)identified when discussing how the audience was interacting with programme producers through the use of chat rooms and fan fiction. Others such as Gilder (1990) and Swann (2000) suggested that television could be used differently as a medium. Katz (2008)went as far as to claim that television was a dead medium as digitalisation had brought specialist niche channels, which rather than offering more choice actually prevented the audience from seeing a variety of programmes of differing genres. Therefore for a public service broadcaster like the BBC, which was heavily invested in television as a medium, new avenues needed to be explored to justify continuing to provide programmes.

For the BBC interactive television was supposed to act as a bridge between broadcasting and the internet. The corporation already had a strong on-line presence through its various websites which also housed video content that was and still is, in the main, snippets of content produced for television. Interactivity was supposed to allow television to be the BBC website in reverse, a space which was pre-dominantly governed by schedules and linear content but could sometimes take on characteristics of the internet, all of which was produced to follow the corporation’s key core themes; to educate, inform and entertain.

The political economy for Sky is very different to the BBC as it is a subscription and advertising based purely commercial operation. Sky television is less concerned with audience ratings and more determined by the amount of subscription packages that are sold. In this respect the political economy of Sky is the opposite of the BBC. As Sky television does not have the same inform, educate and entertain remit as the BBC, it can be less considered with both its traditional content and attempts at invigorating the medium. While the purpose of this article is not to engage in a discussion about the conflict between high and popular culture (Adorno, 2005), or Bordieu’s (1984) seminal works on taste and class distinction, there is a clear difference in approach to red button content between the two broadcasters because of the nature of their political economies.

Sky clearly decided, like the BBC, that the political economy of interactive television did not fit the organisations business model by the time the data on which this article is based was collected. However, the paradox is that the best red button content found during the data collection period was through a Sky channel in Sky News, with its combined text and video service which allowed for a breakdown of the days main headlines. Further to this Sky currently runs an application which is in the spirit that red button content was first launched in the Sky Race Control which is used throughout coverage of Formula One Grand Prix’s through the Sky Sports F1 channel.

For Sky the opportunities red button interactivity offered could be used for commercial purposes. As Sky Television in the UK is not bound by a public service remit and is a profit led commercial orientated business any new innovation is used as a marketing device, see for example the current marketing of the Sky VR app ([www.sky.com](http://www.sky.com), 2017). Sky’s red button services were heavily promoted through television advertising using the gimmicky marketing of the services and its attendant content using a character called ‘Little Red’ (Bennett, 2006).

The services on offer consisted of such examples as PlayerCam where, if the viewer wished, the audience could view one player during a football match, and FanZone, whereby it was possible to hear commentary from fans of the two teams playing. Red button services were also used extensively on Sky News as a way of offering the viewer an alternative away from the main news broadcast as was found in the content analysis. However, this service has subsequently stopped and there are currently no red button services attached to the channel.

The idea behind all this additional content was to attract subscribers, so the content was arguably more low-brow than the BBC’s attempts at adding more educational material to back up the science of their programmes and encouragement of the viewers to test themselves. What these above examples, for both broadcasters, demonstrate is that there was a shift in the political economy of television towards 360 degree programming structures, for which interactive content was developed alongside traditional programming output, and has since stopped.

We can therefore conclude that the spirit of red button interactivity, while not thriving, has not been discarded completely. However, for the most part broadcasters in the UK find the idea of additional content acting as a meta-channel underneath the main broadcast as, at best, an uneasy fit.

**7.3 RQ. 3 Audience**

The failure of the interactive television experiment would not have happened had the audience it was aimed at accepted the opportunity to navigate away from the main broadcast. Audience research has long since argued for and against the passive and active over a pronounced period of time (see, Barwise and Ehrenberg (1988), Ang (1991) and Livingstone (1998). However, that the interactive audience never manifested itself in regards to accessing supporting material suggests not only a rejection of the content but also that television is not seen as a clickable medium.

Media consumers are used to an abundance of conduits by which content is received. Therefore, Jenkins’ (2008) hypothesis that media convergence will not be a single box which sits in the house and is used to access all content has been proven. There are still radios and television sets but sitting alongside them is the computer. Additionally the use of smartphones has become more pronounced in the past decade and, as Schirra et. al. (2014) point out, increasingly the audience member uses their device to comment about television programmes through social media applications.

What the audience wants and what the broadcasters were trying to produce were therefore very different. The broadcasters wanted to provide an enhanced viewing experience but the audience were still content to watch a narrative unfold without any need for further choice or explanation. In this respect interactive television attempted to move the medium of television towards an era of technological, media and economic convergence but did not take into account the audience reaction, which was unaccepting.

Mansell’s (2007) fear that an abundance of content would overwhelm media production does not seem to have been realised as services have been cut rather than added. The problem with producing any kind of content is that it costs money. Therefore if a programme is produced for transmission through the normal schedules and additional content is provided to support the broadcast then that is an additional financial burden. Both broadcasters in the sample invested large amounts of financial resources providing red button content in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. In 2007 the amount of production, considered interactive, pointed to red button content being seen as a viable method of substantially enhancing the viewing experience. However, post data collection analysis suggested that the expense of producing such material was resource sapping without actually reaping much reward in terms of viewing figures. During the 2012 London Olympics, while the red button services were used 24 million times (personal interview, 2012), this pales a little when considering that **‘**51.9m (90% of the UK population)’ (bbc.co.uk) watched the Olympics on terrestrial television at some point over the duration of the two weeks.

The BBC still produced quizzes and live feeds to back up the *Antiques Roadshow* and *Autumnwatch* programmes respectively. It is also worth pointing out that the comprehensive red button coverage of Formula 1 coverage was available, suggesting that Sky still sees the value of enhanced content. However, for the most part it was found that of the services available through Sky in the early 2000’s had disappeared, most notably the multi-cam, additional commentary and playercam facility for their coverage of Premier League football. Likewise the BBC’s innovative red button applications which supported specific programmes had disappeared by 2012 (Fox, 2014).

The audience is a key player in the disappearance of these services as clearly if the applications had been recording a significant number of click throughs then they would have continued broadcasting.

**8.0 Conclusion**

This article has attempted to explain why the interactive television experiment of the late 1990’s and early part of this century did not prove successful. What becomes clear is that the broadcasters stopped supporting interactive like applications after 2007, and before the data collection period in 2012. Evidence of this can be seen through the lack of supporting material, even for large scale events such as the Olympics and Queen Elizabeth II’s Diamond Jubilee celebrations. The reason lies in political economy and the limitations of television as a medium not as a technology.

Technologically television is capable of bearing the load of having multiple streams of text, audio and video running in parallel to the programmes that are appearing through the conventional broadcast channel. Nor is the problem that the material could not be resourced, witness such ambitious BBC red button productions like Walking with Beasts (2001) and the periodic use of the red button to back up the Test the Nation series of quizzes. Instead the problem lies with audience acceptance. While much was made of the potential to considerably enhance the audience experience conventional television viewing runs against interactivity.

What the television viewer wishes to do is watch and not navigate. Therefore the conventional scheduled content and red button material designed to support a broadcast were uncomfortable bed-fellows. By offering the audience more choice between supporting and conventional material there is the potential for the audience to reject both as if the supporting material proves to be more popular there is little point in having the conventional programme in the first instance. The broadcasters in the early 2000’s therefore found themselves in a difficult position, as by trying to provide an all- encompassing experience the main programme, which cost a substantial amount of money to produce, could be compromised. In the end we can conclude that the audience rejected the more comprehensive use of interactive television as it detracted from the primary function of the medium and as a result the broadcasters cut the services.

The red button experiment was a worthwhile exercise that did not yield the promise of television as an interactive experience as was first thought. However, what the red button experiment did was to open new methods of offering content. As a result it was the pre-cursor for the catch up services that all broadcasters now offer, which are now an expected part of the televisual experience. Therefore television as a medium is still being used to watch scheduled programming, but instead of offering enhanced content through the red button the audience instead is offered the chance to use the channel to view programme content away from the schedules. To fit the political economy of television broadcasting catch up services make more sense to the past red button interactive services. Rather than providing another layer of content, catch up services allow audiences the chance to view programmes off schedule and are included in audience rating figures. Offering catch up content has achieved what was sought through interactive applications by offering the audience more choice of how to view programmes.

Catch up services also fit Critical Internet Theory (Fuchs, 2009) by offering a more democratic experience. Catch up services provide an option for the viewer which fits Critical Internet Theory’s Marxist angle of everyone being able to view everything at a time of their choosing. We can therefore close with the view that while the interactive television experience was a relative failure, in terms of audience take up, catch up services provide a compromise on the promise of early red button applications. As a result interactive television was a necessary experiment to conduct in order for television to become a more democratic experience by offering the viewer more choices in how content is accessed.

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