

Future Perfect

Three things that will make an impact on Television News, on the road to 2010.

2010, is barely three years from now. A lot of the changes we see around us today will be more pronounced by then, and they would be growing in their impact. The industry would still be on its journey to a completely different paradigm - one that will perhaps be a reality 10 years from now.

10 years hence TV channels would've long been beaming LIVE news television on any screen that you might want. I can imagine offering LIVE streams on an (intelligent) shaving mirror, the headrest facing you in your cars and personal jets, on your mobile screens and new-age PDAs, all of them looking rather different from what they are today.

These gadgets would talk to each other, they'll be storing a lot more and their price tag will be just about what it is today. Why just mirrors and mobile screens or almost anything flat and shining (refrigerators anyone?), we could be giving LIVE news broadcasts on your sunglasses! All this with single-touch store and forward; and most important of them all, backed by truly intelligent, completely individualized menus.

In a word, I'm sure we, and some of our competitors in the news television business, would be customized to the "market size of 1". Minus the jargon, each viewer (or browser) would be served individually.

Would this mean an end to family viewing? Well, almost that - in many homes at the top of the ladder. These families will continue to have a giant family-viewing space, but the occasions for sitting around a single screen and watching news TV together would be limited to grand occasions akin to get-togethers at Christmas!

Who then will be the broadcasters of the future? Certainly those of us who will retain the best talent and offer the optimal mix of capital and technology. Size will matter. But there's little doubt in my mind that despite all the money and gizmos, the world will belong to Tireless Innovators. My favorites in this game will be those who shall evoke trust and credibility, those who'll listen to each viewer in their target universe, those who will give their subscribers a sense of hope and ideation, and, perhaps, above all those who will give their esteemed advertisers the most unobtrusive and smart vehicle to incubate an actual purchase decision.

Let me crystal gaze on the advertising piece. Perhaps the simplest transaction that I can see in the future will be "advertising that we can use". So, in 2017, while you zip past Delhi's Signature Bridge, watching your personalized service of Television News, the screen will be smart enough to know that you are still in time for good seats at next week's NY Philharmonic playing at the Yamuna Amphitheatre (yes, I think we'll have a world-class river front by then!). With a few taps on the touchscreen, the tickets would get stored in your e-wallet. Importantly, this message won't flash if Beethoven isn't your idea of a Saturday evening. The same "RFID kind of stuff" would work while we zip past a "hungry kya" Domino. But only if we haven't had lunch!

Besides digitization, compression and convenience, let me share the theoretical framework that prompts me to say all this.

As news media, we are (and shall remain) creatures of society, enabled by technology. The future of news television will therefore be shaped by social development and technology, as indeed it has until now. Society will get fragmented and the need to express / participate / assert will get more pronounced. User-generated content will gravitate towards channels that are led by a credible face and have rugged systems to separate wheat from the chaff. Internet culture will raise the bar on "mass personalization"; sharing; and on demand services. Technology will make it possible and society will make it imperative on TV too. Besides conquering global markets, innovation leaders from Reliance to Motorola, idea! to BSNL will power-pack what we know as our hand phone. Qatar Airways, Kingfisher and Jet will be offering every single news channel LIVE at 35,000 feet. Like the efficiency we observe in sending out sms, we'd want that no digital packet we receive should be a waste of our effort. We won't want television news to be handed down from "People Who Know." News television will have to demonstrate how it is actually a service to me, the viewer-who-is-paying, either by way of subscription or even by way of my time. The I--me--myself consumers will shut out what's irrelevant. Loyalty will be history. A dissatisfied viewer may never give "his" news channel a second chance.

In a word, every viewer (and advertiser) will constantly ask, "What's in it for me?"



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