

Think sideways

— because the audience is up to something

Jonathan Marks

Critical Distance

This is a written summary of a presentation given by Jonathan Marks at the recent *Multimedia Meets Radio* conference hosted by the EBU in Geneva. The author has held several production and management posts within Dutch, UK and Austrian public broadcasting organizations over the last 25 years. Now in private practice as a trainer, independent producer and strategic “insultant”, he provides these personal thoughts on areas that broadcasters should be concerned with.

It is so easy to sit, moaning and reminiscing. But that’s no way to face the future. My advice is to think *sideways* – in the same way you look sideways before crossing the road ahead.

So here is a summary of what I am seeing ahead by looking sideways at the broadcast industry – and comparing it with emerging technology companies and the telecom industry.

“New Media”

Firstly, I hope we’re going to stop using the term “new media” one day very soon. How about next Thursday? After a decade of experimentation and billions of Euros shelled out by marketing departments, the promises made at the turn of the century are finally turning into software we can use. Nothing has replaced traditional broadcasting, of course. Instead, there are different ways of producing and distributing ideas that are becoming an integral part of future strategies. It is not new ... it is happening now.

And that is why I’m concerned.

I wandered through the exhibition halls at IBC in September 2005, and more recently at NAB in April 2006. It was clear where the major-league vendors wanted to be. They spent millions putting teams of people on their stands in the two “multimedia” halls. There wasn’t the same buzz in the hardware halls where vendors were selling bits for traditional radio and TV. It was exactly the same at Broadcast Asia in June this year. All the “fun” was happening in the communications halls. They were selling *experiences*. The broadcast guys were, for the most part, just selling *boxes*.

Embrace the podcasting and videocasting hype soon

The radio and TV set have traditionally been the dumbest devices in the house. On the inside, they haven’t changed much in 50 years. There is no internal memory to store great stuff it might have picked out of the ether and which, through the licence fee, you have already paid to watch. With hindsight, broadcasting is a very inefficient way of sharing an idea – knowledge transfer is only

possible within a short period of time determined by the sender. It reminds me of the messages Jim Phelps used to get on that tape recorder in *Mission Impossible*.¹ No chance of putting that tape in the archives to review later.

Recording radio programmes for listening to later

Radio, in particular, has been slow to improve its relationship with the user. Around 16% of the population in Western Europe mastered the Video Cassette Recorder in its heyday. But only a handful of twisted souls got into the routine of recording radio shows and jingles with a view to listening to them again a decade later. I confess to being one of them. The radio has not been very forthcoming about the treasures it is able to pluck from the airwaves. Can anyone remember the frequency of their favourite channel? No. So most listeners leave the dial fixed in one position. Radio is living with the legacy of the radio dial. True, recent digital radios tune by station name – but they are still essentially dumb devices that can find channels but not specific content.

The car is a great place to consume audio material. Yet, traditionally, the cassette player in the car never had a record function to keep shows for listening to later. The Radio Data System (RDS) has put labels on the dials in many countries. But curiously, programmers themselves have prevented users sorting their listening by subject rather than the vague genres invented by broadcasters (like "news" or "popular music"). There has been a continual fear that audiences might tune away. Commercial networks have simply used RDS for banner ads – to the point where they irritate rather than inform.

A simple interface ... with a search engine

In 1996 and 1998, the web got Yahoo! and Google to tell us what was inside the Internet. Google, especially, understood the power of the *simple interface*, to a point where the standard Google opening page has hardly changed in 8 years, resisting the temptation to clutter and confuse.

Back in the days when there was a spinning globe in the browser, I routinely sent people to Google rather than Yahoo!. I knew that the page on Google was so simple that people never came back again to ask me how the web worked. Wouldn't it be great if radio and TV had their own *search engines* that were that simple? I would argue that TiVo and Windows Media Centre are the public beta versions of what's going to come for digital television. As mass storage become really cheap and the bandwidth into many homes becomes greater, so at least some of the intelligence is shifting from the transmitter to the receiver.

It is not moving fast enough for radio though. It is true that some countries are experimenting with electronic programme guides, where song titles and programme names appear in awkward windows. But they still seem to be in the physics lab compared with the de-facto interface that's appeared for audio – namely *iTunes*. It is this program, on both the player and the home computer platform, that has unlocked the key to hundreds of thousands of hours of fascinating programmes. For the first time you can do what newspapers and magazines have always done – you can subscribe to stuff you like and end up consuming more. It is popular – Apple quotes it is selling iPods at the rate of 100 a minute at the moment. 1 million people signed up to podcasts within two days when it was offered with the release of iTunes version 4.9.

Podcasting ... and "Podfading"

I believe the public currently confuses "podcasting" with "downloading". I hear trailers on the radio which use the terms as though they're the same. There is a difference. You can buy a newspaper at the kiosk. That's the equivalent of downloading a single programme. But you can also subscribe and have the magazine or journal delivered to your door. That's what podcasting is all about. It is not really about the device, since podcasting is not limited to a particular brand of mp3 player, the

1. "This tape will self-destruct in five seconds."

iPod. It is not really about "casting" either, since the producers are still lumbered with the bandwidth costs. One of the most successful (and interesting) podcasts – *This week in Tech* – claims it regularly hits 233,000 downloads per show – and gets bandwidth bills for one Gigabit !

I expect the current phase in podcasting has passed its peak of 10,000 shows. It's a good thing that there is now "podfading" taking place, where some producers realize there is more to making an audio magazine than a web page. The boring ones stop after around 10 podcasts, realizing there are more people in the studio than in the audience.

The good news is that there are excellent, cheap podcasting software packages coming on the market to assist the non-technical storytellers to create soundscapes very easily. There are specialized groups using podcasting as a way of sharing content of important internal meetings as well as narrowcasting programmes to insiders on the outside. Look at how Skype Beta 2.5 is not only offering Skypecasting to no more than 100 simultaneous users, but is also starting to give people things to talk about (such as their campaign: *Win a conversation with the pop group Coldplay!*).

Podcasting can do a lot. But it can't do breaking news. It also isn't easy at the moment to send a clip of something you like so that a friend can enjoy it, in the same way you might forward a section of a web article you found interesting. It is still easier to scan a blog than a podcast, even if the latter has incorporated "show-notes" alongside the audio.

Going wireless

For me, the next breakthrough will come when the iPod goes wireless, combining the existing on-demand capabilities with *streaming audio*.

We're already seeing companies like www.reciva.com and www.octoshape.com doing pioneering work in the field of streaming audio, the former building chipsets for stand-alone Wi-Fi receivers, the latter being one of several companies making solutions for peer-to-peer live streaming where the producer doesn't pay the bandwidth bills, but shares the burden with the consumers. The bits of the jigsaw are out there – the question is how soon these people will find each other.

In any event, I applaud broadcasters who have been quick to realize they have excellent on-demand content at their fingertips – and have set up the infrastructure in record time to be part of the publicity bandwagon. Let the newly-rich technology companies pay for the expensive ads to launch the technology – it is all useless without relevant content. That means a great future for speech – as well as music.

Tagging of content

I see a role in the near future for the EBU in coordinating programme metadata from Members, making sure that the search engines like Google, Blinkx and Technorati are able to find great content from enlightened public broadcasters. Some of these programmes may start using the web as a form of on-demand distribution.

We may also see this programme metadata bought up by special devices such as "Slingbox"² whose products allow you to programme your media centre while away from home – and stream your favourite programmes to a box you can carry anywhere in the world.



If 1999/2000 were the years of "search" and 2004/5 were the years of "podcasting" and "video-casting" hype, then look to 2006/7 as the years of "tagging" – great content needs to be found again, especially when we're adding web pages at the rate of millions a day.

2. Sling Media: <http://www.slingmedia.com/slingbox/>

Be transparent

There is so much hype in Internet-land (why don't we call it fibbing?) that statistics are hard to put in the right context. It would be great if the public broadcasters could agree on a standard way of measuring, i.e. downloads per edition, where a download is only counted if it was complete or a streaming session is only recorded if more than a minute was streamed to the user. It will be great when the podcast system can tell us how many times the file was played – programmes can be downloaded but never listened to.

I congratulate organizations such as the Dutch PSB site www.radiocast.nl which publishes the number of downloads. The best of the Giel Beelen's morning show seems to score consistently in the Top 5, with around 29,320 downloads per edition. Colleagues in Denmark and Sweden have done likewise, and the BBC has monthly stats on-line at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/onlinestatistics.shtml#downloads>. Monthly figures for April 2006 showed the soap opera *The Archers* topping the list at 650,782 downloads. But does this mean that, on average, 21,693 people listen to it daily in this way? Or are there weekend peaks when the omnibus edition is broadcast?

I think we've only begun to scratch the surface in making on-demand a real mainstream activity – and hopefully some of the easy-of-use features in the on-line players will end up on the front of digital radios before too long.

Smarter outsourcing

Just as no-one would dream of building their own word processor from scratch, so it makes no sense at all for broadcasters to try and develop their own search engines. Yet, I see on some of the larger broadcast sites that their content is easier to find in Google and Yahoo!, than using the local search engine on their own website.

On the broadcast engineering side, there seems to be a trend towards outsourcing transmitter capacity. That business, especially in national and international broadcasting, is moving from frequency and transmission management into agreements being made for coverage provision.

But stations would be wise to keep their strategy for content production and execution firmly in-house. If you have no idea how you want to produce content to a deadline and on which platforms to distribute it – there are plenty of IT companies and consultants that are willing to advise you. However, they have rarely made a programme to a deadline. Time spent analyzing what you do in the analogue world and reducing the bottlenecks in a logical workflow could save millions, as well as avoid journalists from becoming slaves to a system that resembles filling in forms at a bank. Each station I have visited has a different requirement somewhere along the production process, which is why a lot of money is spent on interfacing with legacy systems rather than going back to basics. Editors are becoming technically savvy enough to understand what their new system has to do – both now and three years from now.

If everything is built by the IT department in splendid isolation, there is definitely trouble ahead.

Innovation is a culture

If you have a department for new media, or even an innovation department, make sure that you plan to get rid of it within the next two years.

Innovation is often thought of as a product. In modern media companies, there should be innovation at all levels of the company, with especially high incentives for producers to be innovative in programme making. Those working in the "innovation" departments are often treated with derision by their colleagues involved in day-to-day production. The challenge is not about integrating new ideas. It is all about getting people to accept changes to the old ways of working.

From where I am standing, the more successful public broadcasters seems to be moving away from the pure pipeline model, where invited guests perform in sound-proofed studios before a passive audience. Increasingly, public broadcasters are seen as stimulating conversations in society, with producers being given the challenge to make these sustainable.

The use of blogs, wikis, flickr (a photo-sharing website) and other social media tools are some of the new ways to start conversations with audiences in the research phase of a programme, rather than waiting until everything is ready to air. Those members of the public involved at an early stage are the best publicists for the programme – and much cheaper than an advertising campaign. The best part is that these social media tools are relatively inexpensive – and the measurement of the impact is much easier than with traditional audience research. They do not replace traditional, quality storytelling by journalists and broadcasters – but they bring a useful reality check to those professionals who get trapped by their own routine. And with public financing of broadcasters under continual scrutiny, public broadcasters cannot afford to become distanced from their stake-holders. I am still amazed at how few public broadcasters spend time explaining what they do in the form of an accessible annual report or public discussion.

Demand better tools from the industry

In January of this year I asked some EBU Members to help me with a survey on what equipment radio reporters are using in the field. Over 600 questionnaires came back within the space of a week. Reporters, especially the freelance community, are worried by the trends in the consumer electronics industry. The simple, cheap and reliable end of the audio recorder market seems to be in trouble. Although not confirmed, the fact that

many of the new Sony Walkman Phones do not support the Minidisc ATRAC audio recording format is a sign that Minidisc's days are numbered. Cassette and DAT have long since expired.



Hard-disk recorders are becoming the norm for news reporters, with codecs that send stuff back to the studio via Wi-Fi scheduled for later this year. But freelance feature reporters are furious that whereas cameras (both video and stills) have plummeted in price, yet improved in quality, the mp3 flash recorders are over-priced bearing in mind their functionality. With 1 GB flash drives being advertised for less than 30 Euros as this article goes to press, it seems strange that some companies are charging more than 1000 Euros for a microphone and a piece of software to capture the sound to that flash-drive.

Again, the complaints from the survey were that the designers have clearly never had to make a programme to a deadline – menus are illogical or battery life is too short. Those who have tried using newer mp3 recorders explain they need an external microphone not just because it captures better sound, but that politicians don't take the reporter seriously if they are not wielding a "serious" microphone. At present, no-one seems to have cracked the code in producing a simple, rugged, light-weight recorder at a reasonable price that makes sense for freelancers. I have even encountered people who were using Mini-DV cameras for recording audio (and a few statements in video for the web) on the grounds that these devices were doing more for less than their audio-only equivalents.



This, again, seems to be an area where the EBU and its sister organizations can make recommendations to the market as a whole. I draw a parallel with the excellent work the EBU has been doing in the area of streaming technology and the examination of open-source solutions for broadcasters.

People don't want to interact with a corporation

They want to interact with other people. They want to download content from the web, either on a computer or a mobile device for themselves or to interact with their friends.

Just look at the popularity of a site like www.myspace.com, a start-up which within 2 years has gained 65 million users and has become one of the top-5 visited websites in the USA. Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation now owns it, having paid US\$580 million for the privilege. It is currently growing at 250,000 new users a day and adverts on the home page are reputedly being charged at the rate of US\$750,000 a day. Mr Murdoch is, so far, keeping it cool by organizing secret shows and events. Friends tell friends – and viral marketing takes over. It's also the way to get around the strict regulations the FCC imposes on over-the-air broadcasters.

Expect similar interfaces to emerge as rival broadcasters look for different ways to reach younger audiences – as well as trying to get maximum value out of their archives.

Multimedia exchange needed

We need to find ways to keep all our new multimedia projects – and keep track of our assets even if they are sitting on computer servers separated by hundreds of kilometres. Fortunately, systems are emerging to do this. Public broadcasters have a mission to preserve the national heritage, which is increasingly a cross-media expression of arts and science rather than text printed on dead trees. Just as Eurovision and Euroradio are doing good work at the EBU, I look forward to ways of exchanging cross-media productions in the future. In fact, I would argue that the recent EBU Health project involving radio, TV and web talent was a firm step in the right direction.

Kids 2020

I have been fortunate to have interviewed several dozen kids between 10 and 18 in cities all over the world on how they hope the future will look in less than 15 years from now.

They are vocal on what they don't want. They don't plan to pay for more of the same at the same time. They are not attracted by services that don't make themselves clear. They are allergic to any company that tries to lock them in to services they believe will expire. They seem to favour paying 5 - 6 Euros a month for access to a giant catalogue of music that streams on demand – rather than paying for downloads at 99 cents a song. CDs have lost their material value to this generation.

When it comes to what they expect from the media, it is clear that they already speak in terms of audio, video and text on *relevant* devices rather than speaking in terms of what they watch on TV, radio and the web.

I have been surprised by the answers given to the question "*which device (radio, TV, web or mobile) would you surrender first?*" I expected a lot more people to say radio. But in the UK, Norway and the UAE, the kids were quick to surrender the TV.

Why? Radio was their signpost to new music to download. The mobile was more than just a phone – SMS chat was important to them. But whereas their parents allowed them to have a computer in their room (for educational purposes), they weren't allowed a TV. So they just watched video via broadband or their own DVDs. With new display devices like e-paper just around the corner – as well as Wi-Fi phones/video cameras, the kids see all kinds of different ways of telling stories – most of which will reach us within the next 5 years.



Who to watch?

Google and Yahoo! have all the headlines. But I am visiting and watching [YouTube](#), [Blinkx](#), [Skype](#), [heavy.com](#), [myspace.com](#) as well as a whole host of start-ups who will be the heroes of Broadcasting 2.0.

In fact, in terms of growing and harvesting great ideas, there has never been a better time to be in broadcasting! Here's an open invitation for you to participate.

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