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Uncertain Futures: Public Service Television and the Transition to Digital – a Comparative Analysis of the Digital Television Strategies of the BBC and Channel 4

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Abstract

Television remains the most powerful and ubiquitous medium for social communication. The advent of digital television (DTV) and the prospective convergence between television, computer and telecommunications technologies augur radical changes in the media ecology. In the context of the ensuing technological, economic, cultural and regulatory uncertainties, some analysts argue that public service broadcasting faces new threats, others that it bears new responsibilities. This report presents the results of an ESRC-funded study carried out in 2001 which examined the digital television strategies of Britain's two main public service broadcasters (PSBs), the BBC and Channel Four (C4), in this period of multiple uncertainties. The research also examined how the PSBs develop strategy in the face of such uncertainties. On this basis it sought to evaluate the strategic planning of the two PSBs, and to assess to what extent their respective policies demonstrate a revitalised role for PSB in the digital context and are likely to enhance the quality of British television. The research highlights the increasingly central role of strategy, market analysis and market research in the dynamics of the contemporary media industries.

The study has two further outcomes, outlined at the end of the report. It yields major insights for public policy in this area, highlighting the problematic nature of the regulatory controls operating on C4, the contradictory policy imperatives under which the BBC is labouring, and the critically important role in the roll-out of digital services being played by the publicly-funded BBC. In addition the research has implications for economic sociology. It offers a case study that exemplifies recent theories of the performative role of expert discourses, and particularly forms of economic expertise in contemporary business practice. Little attention has been paid by the new economic sociology and media political economy to the speculative processes by which new markets, such as those being formed around digital television, come into being. This study offers such an analysis, focusing on the way strategy and marketing are deployed to conceptualise, frame and constitute future media markets.

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