

And the Emmy Goes to.... A Mobisode?

The potential impact of such non-traditional viewing devices as computers, mobile phones, iPods, PDAs and portable media players.

By John Carey and Lawrence Greenberg

In November, 2005, the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences announced that it is establishing a new Emmy category for original programming created specifically for non-traditional viewing devices such as computers, mobile phones, iPods, PDAs and portable media players. It cannot be repurposed programming such as an episode of *Lost* that is distributed to iPods as well as carried on regular television. It must be original made-for-broadband or made-for-mobile programming. The Emmy announcement challenges many of our assumptions about the economic models for television, how to produce appealing content, and who controls the television industry. In simple terms, it has expanded our perspective about what we mean by “television.”

Emmys have been awarded for advances in technology but this is

the first time the National Television Academy has designated an Emmy for content that is distributed through non-traditional viewing technologies — devices other than television sets. The new Emmy category covers a broad range of video content and will require that we all learn the terminology for these new forms of programming, such as vlogs (video Web logs), mobisodes (video episodes for mobile devices), and IPTV (internet protocol television).

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The Emmys have a long association with new technologies. Indeed, the Emmys were created to recognize creative expression in a new technology: television. The term Emmy is actually a feminized version of “Immy,” a nickname for the image-orthicon camera tube that was used in early

TV cameras. In the 1950s, Emmys were awarded for live programs and programs on kinescope, the latter a means of recording TV before the advent of videotape. Later, many Emmys were awarded for advances in technology and engineering. However, there were no awards for content that appeared on videocassettes or cable television when they entered the scene. There was very little content created specifically for videocassettes. Cable at first had little original programming. When new content began to appear on cable, it became eligible for Emmys as part of the mix of broadcast and cable content.

The latest Emmy signals that we are entering a new ballgame for video content with many characteristics of viewing and production that are very different from traditional television. As NATAS president Peter Price observed, “The new video environment is boundary-less. There is no local, no national, no daytime, no prime time.” It is largely without a schedule and can be viewed almost anywhere since many of these devices are portable. Another important characteristic of the new viewing environment is that most of the mobile devices have very small screens. What do these characteristics mean for the content that will be created and how people view it?

Small TV Screens Make A Comeback

Television historians will point out that the new small-screen TV environment is a throwback to the earliest days of television Television



Teenager and video iPod.

was introduced to the world about 80 years ago as a small screen medium. In one of the first public demonstrations of television – a mechanical system using spinning discs – on April 7, 1927, Herbert Hoover, then U.S. Secretary of Commerce, was televised giving a speech over a 2” x 3” screen. Most televisions before World War II consisted of very small screens encased in large, ornate, radio-like cabinets. For the privileged few who watched the new medium, television screens were synonymous with tiny pictures.

Mobile television was also envisaged in the early days. In 1941, *Radio Craft* magazine proclaimed “Car Television Is Here!” offering circuitry details and featuring a photograph of a man attempting to tune a tiny television embedded in the middle of the dashboard. There is no evidence that a working version was ever built. In fact, it was almost two decades later, in 1959, that Philco introduced the first practical consumer mobile television to the market – a battery-powered model known as the Safari. Accessorized with a leather carrying case, it had a two-

inch projection screen that offered a narrow viewing range.

Over the decades, the popular press periodically reported on advances toward what was considered the holy grail of portable electronics – the Dick Tracy television watch, modeled on the fictional comic strip. In 1982, Seiko introduced such a watch with a 1 1/4-inch black-and-white screen and attachable ear piece (it was not, however, the two-way TV transmitter depicted in the Dick Tracy comics.) Around the same time, looking to create a video companion to its highly successful audiocassette Walkman, Sony introduced its Watchman, with a 1.5-inch screen.

None of these devices caught on with the public. One possible reason is that the TVs were designed to play only local stations. This would have meant sporadic, fuzzy reception as users moved from one place to the next. An even greater challenge – and one still faced by the latest generation of portable video devices – was limited battery life.

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Today's small-screen mobile televisions aren't televisions at all – they're cell phones, iPods, laptops and a host of other devices that were originally designed to do something else — make a phone call, answer emails or listen to music. As storage capacity and processing power increased, along with improved battery life, they became multifunction devices, including in some cases, the ability to store and display television content. In this sense,

mobile TV is a stealth application, arriving inside the Trojan Horse of other platforms.

While it is still very early in the development of video content for these services and usage patterns by consumers, there are some clues in the characteristics of the devices and feedback from early users about where things may be headed. Aside from small screens, these devices generally have lower frame rates than regular TV sets, typically 10 to 15 frames per second versus 30 frames per second on regular TVs. This means that some details can get lost, wide-angle shots may not work so well and fast action such as sports can be blurry. Over time, as broadband gets even faster and a next generation of cell-phone networks is deployed, frame rates and resolution will improve. A second key feature of these devices, related to small screen size and the shape of the devices, is that people must *hold* them at a close distance. This compensates for small screen size but it places a burden on the viewer to hold the device steady and

at close range. It may affect the length of time people are willing to watch video content without taking a break and putting the device down or in a pocket. Some people we have interviewed say that if they are watching a 30-minute show on an iPod or cell phone, they break up the viewing time into 5- or 10-minute segments, opting to multitask — that is, receive a phone call, check email or listen to music between video sessions. This viewing pattern may impose program lengths for handheld video devices that are much shorter than the typical 30- or 60-minute programs on regular

television. In fact, much of the current content for these devices is only a few minutes long.

Current wisdom is that mobile video is not conducive to group viewing and this appears to be generally true. It is not just the case that the screen is small, but people often listen to the video with earbuds or earphones that can only be used by one person at a time. However, we've observed some video "segment sharing" behavior with these devices, much like the way teenagers share a photo they've just taken on a cellphone, or received via email, with others. With video, it is often a funny segment or a clip about something a person thinks a friend would like to see.

One of the key selling points of these new devices is that in most cases they free a viewer from schedules. Content is available anytime through streaming or it can be downloaded, stored and viewed whenever and wherever a person wants. This means that television programming can fit into a person's schedule, rather than having to arrange one's schedule in order to catch a favorite show. It also means that content can be viewed anywhere: on a train, during a lunch break at work, while waiting at a doctor's office and even in the bathroom (new competition for newspapers and magazines). On the downside, what will this mean for "water cooler TV" — the often-reported phenomenon of people who like to chat around a water cooler at work or over the phone about a show that everyone watched *last night*? Depending on how business models, technology and the law evolves, some forms of water-cooler TV may be replaced by "shared TV" in which a person shares favorite content

with others and then chats about it with them later.

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In reviewing the content on the new devices, some critics have offered comments about what works and doesn't work visually — for example, how bright objects in a scene can wash out and obscure darker objects. It will take time for the program producers — both professional and amateur — to develop the technical and artistic skills to create visually appealing content for these new media.

Some of the content available for streaming or download to a laptop, iPod, cellphones or other non-traditional video players is repurposed content from entertainment conglomerates such as NBC Universal, Time Warner and Viacom. Episodes of *Lost* or edited clips from *Survivor* will not be eligible for the new Emmy. Original content comes from many sources, including some of the media giants, independent production groups, and amateurs. For example, The News Corporation, parent of Fox Television, has created an original, spin-off series of its popular show *24* (the new series is called *24: Conspiracy*), that contains 60-second mobisodes designed to be downloaded and viewed on cell phones. Apple has announced that Pixar Animation Studios will create six short animated films that will debut on the video iPod. Independent production company JibJab Media has created a series of animated films available for download. Their popular animated spoof of the last presidential campaign received

80 million downloads. In addition, the Knight Foundation is funding public television to create video for the Web and other non-traditional TV environments. In terms of sheer numbers, the bulk of available content comes from amateurs. One aggregator of video blogs, MeFeedia.com, has over 100,000 videos created primarily by more than 3,000 amateurs. Ithaca College has even created a video festival for 30 second programs that must be shot on and distributed to cell phones (see www.cellflixfestival.org).

Amateur videos vary considerably in quality, from boring monologues to creative and unique stories that are well designed for the new media. Anyone creating original content for the new video technologies is eligible to submit their content for Emmy consideration. This opens a door for content producers who would find it difficult to break into the established media. It is an opportunity to be discovered and to introduce change, which the major media groups should welcome.

In a sign that this is a serious endeavor, the major U.S. cell phones carriers have adopted a content rating system, modeled on the TV and film rating systems, for all content that they sell to subscribers. This doesn't affect content that is downloaded from the Web to cell phones.

In the 1960s, Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan shook up the media world with a series of bold theories and claims. It was McLuhan who coined the phrase, "the medium is the message," to indicate that media are not just conveyers of content but shapers of the content they transmit. He argued that television strongly influences how we perceive the world through our



habitual use of this medium over time and that this had a major impact on attitudes about the Vietnam War, race relations and others issues of the day. McLuhan categorized media by degrees of *hot* or *cool*. Hot media include radio and print because little physical interpretation is required by the ear or eye. He described television as a cool medium, since the viewer must become involved in creating an image in the mind from flickering, low-resolution pictures on the screen. In McLuhan's terms, high-definition television would be hotter than regular TV and low-frame-rate video on a cell phone would be cooler than regular TV.

McLuhan believed certain personality types, which he also called *cool*, were suited for the TV screen and others were not. His most famous examples of *cool* versus *hot* personality were John Kennedy and Richard Nixon in their presidential debates. Kennedy had a cool, ambiguous personality that suited him well for television; Nixon was hard-edged and hot, which, according to McLuhan suited him for radio. People who watched the first debate on TV thought that Kennedy came across better; those who heard it on radio

thought that Nixon won. McLuhan also argued that television *selected* entertainers who would become popular because they had cool personalities, for example Jack Paar.

What would McLuhan have made of this new era of high- and low-definition images, wide-ranging screen sizes, and seating distances from TV that vary from several feet to a few inches? In McLuhan terms, large-screen HDTVs provide more realism, create excitement and should favor content with a big impact; small screen TV, watched at a close distance, is more intimate and should support low intensity content. Small-screen TVs may also rely more on the audio track to convey meaning and fill in details that are not clear in the video.

Non-traditional video devices such as laptops, iPods and cell phones are an emerging category and producers are just beginning to carve out a unique marketplace niche. We don't know yet if it will be a substitute for regular television programs when the traditional TV set is not available or a unique medium with unique content. The new Emmy represents a bet that creative and unique content will emerge.

From a business perspective, it is unclear whether the emerging small-screen and often mobile TV environment will be paid for by consumers, advertisers or a combination of both. It is a new market in which the television industry will try to capture a larger share of disposable time, either time outside the home or time within the home that has been lost to Web surfing. Media giants will compete with independent producers and amateurs. Large

budgets and expensive production equipment may not matter as much in the small-screen environment as in large-screen television. Distribution will also be different. Broadcasters, cable companies and satellite operators will not be the powerful gatekeepers for content as they are in traditional television. In their place, we will have cellphone companies, hardware manufacturers such as Apple and open-distribution networks on the Web. In the Web environment, we also have video aggregators and search engines.

From a creative perspective, will the new video environment lead to new types of communication and story telling? Will filmed entertainment for tiny screens consist primarily of talking heads and very simple images, animation or something else? Who will be the stars in the new video environment? Will mobile television be a portable radio with pictures, in which dialogue must carry the weight of the narrative? Given the likely time restrictions for content, will dialogue be constrained or will time become a source of artistic creativity as it has with television commercials, which also have time restrictions?

The outcome is uncertain but it will be an exciting time ahead. By 2010, the world of television – big and small – could be a very different place for content producers and viewers.

John Carey is Professor of Communications and Media Management at Fordham Business School. His research focuses on consumer adoption of new media and the impact of technology on media behavior. Lawrence Greenberg is a New York-based writer and communications consultant.

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