

# Defining Vision

Joel Brinkley, *Defining Vision: The Battle for the Future of Television*, Harcourt Brace and Company, New York, 1997

**N**ew York Times and Pulitzer prize winning journalist Joel Brinkley has written a fascinating account of one of the most important industrial issues of the last decade: the invention and implementation of the next generation of "television" sets and services.

Much of it is a thorough journalistic account of the activities of a committee established by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission to examine the possible introduction of high definition television into the U.S. There is amazing detail about the work of the consortia which put proposals to Richard Wiley's committee, the assessment process and the remarkably un-American decision to draw together the rival systems, none of which were entirely satisfactory, into a single "Grand Alliance". This Alliance produced the digital high definition television system which has been adopted as the U.S. standard.

If all this tech-talk sounds a little dull, it's worth remembering the advice of Stewart Brand in *The Media Lab*: "If journalists discover standards debates, they'll find there's a whole world of them. It's true that nobody votes for technology: things like birth control pills, jet airplanes, and computers just arrive. But standards are agreements. They are a political process that, so far, has taken place far from the political arena of the public the standards will affect."

What Brinkley does so effectively is to show how the political, economic and social choices associated with the next generation of

television in the U.S. were shaped by decisions about the kind of technology that would be invented in the first place. The broadcasters, the FCC and the Grand Alliance had very specific political and commercial agendas when they sent the engineers to work.

The US television broadcasters, according to Brinkley, used the prospect of high definition TV, which would require lots of spectrum, to fight off a mid-1980s proposal for unused UHF spectrum to be re-allocated for "Land Mobile" purposes. They had to convince Congress and the FCC that high definition TV was a good idea and they had to work out a technical way of doing it.

The early high definition TV systems were analogue and the switch to digital reflected a growing belief that all new communications systems would have to be digital. But the technical challenge of inventing digital terrestrial high definition television was enormous. In 1989, CBS' senior vice president for technology, Joe Flaherty, told an industry conference: "We'll have digital television the same day we have an anti-gravity machine".

Nine years later, viewers in the top ten markets in the U.S. will be able to watch digital TV services by the end of this year. Although "the origins of this remarkable new technology could hardly have been more cynical, the triumphs more serendipitous", digital TV is happening.

It is providing a crucial site for public and private decisions about the kinds of communications systems we will have in the future. Because digital television transmission systems provide the capacity to deliver both "television" and other kinds of communications services, decisions about them are of interest to telecommunications companies, Internet service

providers, newspapers and others, in addition to traditional "television" companies.

Brinkley's account thrives on the clashes of culture associated with this convergence: the glamorous East Coast solidity of network television and the fast-moving "candor" optimism of Silicon Valley's computer companies; superficial politicians and real world business people; America and Japan. They all feel a little stereotyped, although they make for a good story.

The book is relentlessly American in its focus, from its history of early television technology and services, which seems unaware of John Logie Baird or the BBC, to its limited coverage of European digital TV standards. That would not be a problem if it was acknowledged as an American, rather than a world, account. Brinkley says: "The creation of digital, high-definition television is an American triumph, no question". But Australian broadcasters have recently proposed the adoption of the European Digital Video Broadcasting standards (as it did with the adoption of PAL rather than NTSC for colour transmissions), not the triumphal U.S. offering.

This is a story about the politics of technology, about how powerful institutions sold an idea and then went away to make it happen. U.S. broadcasters said they needed spectrum and they warned vulnerable members of Congress that: "You can't afford to take the risk that we might be right".

They got what they wanted. They have not necessarily won the battle for the future of television, or whatever the media of the future will be called, but they have ensured they will have the technical means to put up a serious fight.

**Jock Gliven**