

# ***‘Outside the Box: Australian Television 2018’***

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This article reports on a research project entitled ‘Outside the Box: Australian Television 2018’ (‘Outside the Box’, 2007–9). University researchers and industry partners from media training, regulation, production and distribution organisations, used scenario planning methods to explore the core research question ‘What will Australian television and the society it serves look like in 2018?’. The project drew on a similar exercise conducted by Bournemouth University with the Independent Television Authority and the British Screen Council in 2001–02, published as Foster et al (2002). For background on scenario planning projects and methodologies, see Wack (1985a, 1985b), Schwartz (1991) and van der Heijden (1996). This research is of interest to MERJ because it represents a process of constructing interprofessional discourse through collaboration between media educators and media institutions.

Through a series of forums and one-on-one interviews, participants were invited to identify and discuss the critical issues, and to write two sets of stories, one entitled ‘A Day in 2018’ about their daily media use in April 2018, and the other a story drawn from one of the scenarios developed over the course of the project.

One of the innovations of the project was the combination of ‘morphological’ and ‘matrix-based’ approaches to scenario development. The first involves the identification of key issues and ‘drivers’ or sets of influences that may affect the future, and the determination of two ‘critical uncertainties’ – the most uncertain and important issues – which formed the two axes of a matrix. Scenarios were then devised for each of the quadrants of the matrix. Based on these scenarios, project participants wrote a series of subjective narratives. This ‘morphological’ approach involved filling the four quadrants or ‘worlds’, each of which constituted a particular, potential future, with as many stories as possible. Another innovation was the use of Web 2.0 applications to assist in scenario generation and story writing. A blog was created to capture and discuss television and media issues as they emerged during the research process, allowing rapid information sharing among the research team, participants, and indeed anyone surfing the internet, and enabled the story-writing and scenario-generating processes to be responsive to changing events and their potential future entailments. The research team also set up a wiki to collaboratively develop and annotate the matrices and quadrants, and to write up the scenarios.

After a series of interviews with senior figures in television and related industries and analysis of the available scenario planning literature, and following the staging of a forum with the interviewees, a set of initial assumptions and drivers that would impel change in the future were identified. The invitation to think ten years ahead was deliberately intended to take participants beyond their comfort zones, beyond the immediate present and short-term future that are often the limits of strategic planning. The ten-year time frame provided an opportunity for radical but contained thinking about the future.

In February 2007, 25 participants attended a forum focused on the 'consumer' of media. Following this forum, the core research team met monthly to discuss project progress, and regular meetings were held with the industry partners (the Australian Communications and Media Authority, Foxtel and the Australian Film, Television and Radio School). Arising from these meetings and discussions, the list of key influences was refined. A further set of one-on-one interviews was conducted with the original participants, and a further forum was held in October 2007. At the end of that session, the group determined five key influences or sets of drivers that would influence television in Australia over the coming decade. 'People' refers to individuals' use of media resources, and also covers demographic trends. 'Content as Audiovisual Experience' refers to the possible audio-visual experiences provided through the media, and to the formats, genres, sounds and images made meaningful via 'television'. 'Funding' covers how and who funds audio-visual content and distribution, and how producers and distributors are paid. 'Governance' refers to how the state effects regulation, control, classification, that is, its institutional constraints and enablers. 'Technology' refers to the global and domestic technological means that mediate audiovisual content, everything from infrastructure (eg. bandwidth), to the size of household screens.

It was apparent from the interviews and from analysis of secondary materials that there was no universally accepted term for audio-visual 'users', which the research team took to indicate a sliding scale of 'use' or 'engagement' with content, from Active at one end to Passive at the other. Importantly this refers to uses not users, as the same user will be engaged in different ways at different times.

A second forum, held in November 2007, was explicitly designed to encourage participants to brainstorm storylines about possible futures. A series of 'bombs' or 'story-starters' were thrown at participants, with discussion organised around the five key influences. In February 2008, the research team met with two 'holy fools', expert participants with specialist knowledge and divergent views on the issues of technological developments and media use to ensure full coverage of relevant issues. In April 2008, all participants were invited to write 'A Day in 2018' stories about one day's media use in 2018. Further interviews with selected participants were conducted.

Based on all the research materials – interviews, forums, storytelling and analysis – the research team added a sixth key driver, Environment, to cover the economic and ecological, global and national factors that form the changing macro-contexts for the realisation of television's possible futures. The group identified two critical uncertainties, which then became the two axes of the project's principal resource and tool, the matrix. The first axis is a continuum from Controlled to Uncontrolled *content*. This refers to the extent to which information and cultural content (programmes, news services, 'live' broadcasts of sport etc.) created by individuals, companies or organisations and distributed or distributable via 'television' is subject to, or free from, legislation, regulation, property rights, financial requirements or technological limitations. The second axis is a continuum from Open to Closed *access*. This refers to the potential and actual access of creators and users to the means to create, share, consume and store digitised content. This is not to suggest that any system could be completely open or restricted (except perhaps in totalitarian contexts) but to alert us to extreme alternatives.

A critical challenge for developing matrix axes is *orthogonality*, meaning the production of axes that enable sufficient exploration and development of issues to allow representation within an area that can reasonably be defined as a quadrant. If the uncertainties or issues that form the two axes are strongly intertwined, then clearly distinct and defined scenarios might not emerge.

Our matrix produced four distinct but alternate worldviews on the future. Each was given a name, labelled with a 'prevailing mood in the population', and populated with the most relevant drivers. In combination these elements produced a scenario and story points for narrative writing about the future. These could be seen as threats or opportunities, as provocations to, or as inhibitions on, change.

The first quadrant, representing 'closed access' and 'controlled content' was named 'Any Port in a Storm'. The prevailing mood in the population was summarised as: 'Everyone feels and believes the restrictions are very strong, and that change or 'loosening' is unlikely'. This, incidentally, is the quadrant that most participants considered Australian television currently to occupy. The second quadrant, 'Wrestling the Octopus', represents 'closed access' and 'uncontrolled content'. The mood in this quadrant was summarised as: 'There is a sense of great opportunity if one can get anointed by the regulators who can grant you access to the scarce portals and conduits'. The third quadrant, 'The Cork in the Bottle', represents 'open access' and 'controlled content'. The mood in the population is: 'It's a highly volatile culture where people rail against constriction and stagnation while sensing a nearby world of opportunity'. The final quadrant, 'Riding the Tiger', represents 'open access' and 'uncontrolled content'. The mood in the population is: 'There is a sense

of boundless opportunity and accessible experience. But there is also a great hunger for structures delivered through community-ratified protocols of good behaviour’.

Each cluster category or driver is considered likely to have a dominant influence in particular quadrants. Logically, a quadrant like ‘Any Port in a Storm’ (closed access/controlled content) is likely to be dominated by Governance. Logically, ‘Riding the Tiger’ (open access/uncontrolled content) is not. But it is important not to prejudge this, as unexpected scenarios and stories may emerge if the drivers are let loose in what may appear to be inhospitable territory. To write a story, the authors selected a quadrant, and examined the scenario produced by the key drivers in that quadrant. The authors considered how it would be possible to move from the quadrant their subject might currently be in to another.

The scenario-planning process is not designed to produce predictions, but rather to explore possibilities. Its purpose is to develop a set of resources to stimulate a public conversation about the future for television, based on a common language and shared tools. A website for the project ([tvfutures.com.au](http://tvfutures.com.au)) has been created, containing all of the background information on the project, the process undertaken by the research team, the matrix, scenarios and example stories. The real outcomes of the project will only be known in years to come as organisations and companies take up the challenge to produce their own scenarios and use them to shape and respond to the changing future of television.

Clearly the process of constructing interprofessional discourse through collaboration between media educators and media institutions is a transferable model that could be a key agent in facilitating more productive relations between media education and its ‘object of study’.

## References

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