

Interactive Television Production - Review of educational text

Author

Penn-Edwards, Sorrel

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Review of *Interactive Television Production* by Mark Gawlinski (2003) Focal Press, 273 pages.
by Dr Sorrel Penn-Edwards

Unlike a reviewer's relationship with conventional literature (fiction, biography, travel, and the like) often influenced by a desire or need to expose the shortcomings of plot, style, genre etc, a critique of a work of reference, manual or guidebook requires a disciplined and objective judgment informed by much experience in the field presented.

As a tertiary teacher I am impressed first by the physical attributes of the book which render it an excellent comprehensive learning resource embracing fundamental facets of interactive television. Secondly as a sometime practitioner and researcher into aspects of visual media I find it effectively communicates not only technicalities but essays into problems likely to be encountered in the industry and by all concerned.

This book is promoted on the back cover for use by 'all broadcasting and new media professionals whether in production, marketing, technology, business or management' as well as 'media students and anyone wanting to get an insight into the future of television production'. Focal Press has for decades published precise and detailed technical manuals on all areas of the media. This book certainly upholds their reputation, casting its topics in universal, uncomplicated terminology producing a text accessible to students as well as practicing technicians and professionals.

As the preface says, 'the book takes a practical, production-based approach' which is based on the author's professional 'hands-on experience of building interactive television services – and based on the knowledge and experience of a number of the United Kingdom's leading interactive television producers.'

The front cover is clearly intended to appeal to youthful readers as it shows a *cool* silhouetted female figure in flares and high heels casually reclined, fingertip to the television screen; an image which reflects the status of visual media amongst the student demographic and is in the ambience of the text. The final paragraph sums up the author's aims succinctly, thus:

This book in 30 seconds ... It was the philosopher Eric Hoffer who said that the best way to predict the future is to have the power to shape it. With interactive television, this power is with the viewers and with the people who will produce interactive television services for them. If you are already involved with interactive television production, I hope this book has given you some food for thought. If you are looking at the industry, I hope this book has tempted you to get further involved. Either way, start shaping that future. (p.248)

In the list of *Contents* the chapter headings are directly as titled; *What is interactive television?*, *The technology*, *Making money*, *Production*, *Usability and design*, and *The future*. The organization of the book is also straightforward, each chapter beginning with an overview in three to five points (or as it is headed in the book, this *Chapter in 30 seconds*), and ending with *Actions*, a brief section suggesting from four to seven extension activities. Whilst these are heavily web based links they include video examples, design guidelines, news sections and predictions and papers related to interactive television. The text is supplemented by an online site (<http://www.InteractiveTelevisionProduction.com>) that presents summaries of the book chapters and additional links. It also features an electronic quiz so that users can test their knowledge of the key concepts of each chapter.

Interactive television is a debatable term in the industry; this text defines it as ‘anything that lets the television viewer or viewers and the people making the television channel, programme or service engage in a dialogue’ (p.5) and encompasses ‘electronic programme guides, teletext-style services, walled gardens, internet on television, enhanced television, video-on-demand and near-video-on demand, and personal video recorders’ (p.7). Each of these areas is explained and explored featuring examples of programs such as *MTV Europe Music Awards*, *Walking with Beasts*, and *Big Brother*, as well as a range of advertisements and sporting events.

Interactive Television Production has an easy to use textbook format with colour coded blocks for chapter sections and key concepts, case studies, tables, and in-depth explanations. There are lots of simple graphics and eye catching photographic of examples of real world interactive screens to illustrate the comprehensive explanations. In the preface the author invites you to ‘pick and choose sections that interest you or throw yourself into the book from beginning to end’ and the arrangement of chapters and sections allow either use.

The fact that the examples are overwhelmingly British and costs are given in sterling is somewhat of a drawback particularly for use by students who are generally more comfortable and infinitely more interested in familiar images of television programs and advertising in their own domain. However the unfamiliar does have a certain novelty appeal and there are enough products and programs that although frameworked by United Kingdom broadcasters and platform operators, have been transposed to Australia, such as *Big Brother*, to give some personal connection and interest. Much of the survey data given is worldwide and the case studies include *The development and production of Sky NZ’s weather channel*.

The author, Mark Gawlinski, has a wealth of professional experience in this area having been ‘in charge of innovation and production development for BBC Resources ... former executive producer in charge of new media production at news broadcaster ITN ... [and] production manager of enhanced television at Cable and Wireless Communications’. He

has been 'responsible for the launch of the interactive ITN News Channel and for the ITV Election 2001 interactive television services ...[and] helped create the UK's first digital interactive cable television platform' (back cover). He also has a faculty for presenting this material in an easy to read and comprehensible manner. Although it ostensibly provides 'a practical, step-by-step guide to the processes and issues involved in taking an interactive television idea through to launch and operation' (back cover) various chapters would make valuable readings for students not just in technical education but in a wide range of academic courses dealing with contemporary society where many issues of debate are underpinned by the technological advances in everyday life particularly the role of a non-passive interactive means of learning.

Sorrel Penn-Edwards, previously an educational video and film producer, scriptwriter and camera operator, now teaches Media Studies and English Education at Griffith University, Queensland.

School of Education and Professional Studies (Brisbane, Logan)

Faculty of Education

Griffith University, Nathan, Qld 4111