

A long time ago Darwin demonstrated that changes in the physical environment favored certain attributes and species over others. In a somewhat similar fashion, though in a different dimension, changes in the technological environment convey favor to certain specific skills, knowledge, ideas, and even institutions. In that sense, the time may well have returned when it is again important for television broadcasters to have access to an insightful, trustworthy, and technically adept staff to help navigate the new potential minefield of digital television.

### Digital Television Will Strengthen the Role of Technical People

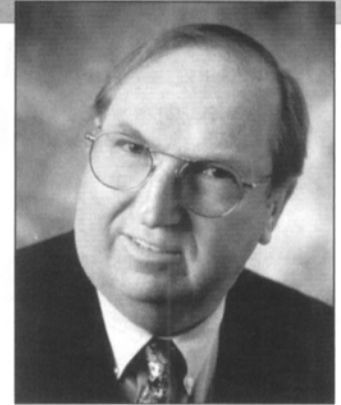
Skilled technocrats are valued in today's business environment and gifted technical people are once again considered an important part of enlightened management teams. This resurgence of executive interest in technical matters is due to a discontinuity in the technological development of television that may possibly transform it into quite a different medium over time. Like any change, it can be capitalized on only by those who recognize the opportunity.

This is a continuous phenomenon, not a new one. It is not limited to television or electronic media, though the digital revolution provides a basis for much of the current cycle. The mature film medium, for instance, is currently going through a similar phase in which current production is characterized by the size, complexity, and quality of the special effects employed in the storytelling, with each new release attempting to extend and improve on those that preceded it. Differentiation of a range of products by special effects production values has become the norm.

### Differentiation is Key

There are two successful generic business strategies. The first differentiates a product from all those around it to provide the perception of added value. Strategy two involves becoming the low-cost producer of an undifferentiated product and competing on price alone. When television was introduced, competing services could be easily differentiated by how effectively a particular licensee chose and deployed technology. It was critical that television businesses had easy access to a large and competent technical staff who were entrusted, for the most part, with the technical aspects of the business. For many years some visible differentiation could be provided by technology in areas like better pictures, better coverage, added production innovation and diversity, and smoother and more consistent operations.

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However, it can be argued that television, in a technological sense, matured over the last decade just as film did decades before. Better, smaller, cheaper, and more reliable devices were readily and widely available. The more hardware matured, however, and the more uniform the

subjective performance of various devices became, the less the opportunity presented itself for technical people to significantly influence business outcomes through providing technical opportunities for differentiation, and the more marginalized such people became. Also, the cost of technology, when compared to other operating costs, particularly programming, was small and getting smaller. Technical issues had limited business impact, provided little room for technological creativity, especially at the broadcaster level, and lessened the value of those whose talents were mostly technical.

This is not to say that technological development was standing still throughout this period. What was new and innovative, especially in television, was the emergence of a new form of technical democracy in which the tools of the profession could be placed in the hands of many, not just the technical and economic elite. In overly simplistic terms, this, in turn, contributed to the widespread proliferation of new and innovative television services, the end of the dominance of the medium by its traditional leaders, and a reordering of the economic structure of the industry that is still under way.

But the interest in digital television has put technological concerns and technical people back on the front burner. Is it just a digital discontinuity? Will it be a digital decade or a digital disaster? As in Darwin's theories, different characteristics will find favor and different elements will eventually prevail. We should recognize that we increase the odds of being favored if we become digitally literate and competent in the deployment of this new technology. This is where SMPTE comes in. If you participate, we can help.