

EDITORIAL: THE INDUSTRY LEARNS A LESSON: THE DEATH OF 3D VS. INDUSTRY PREDICTIONS. WILL THIS CHANGE THEIR PLANS FOR INTRODUCING 4K TO THE PUBLIC?

JOHN E. JOHNSON, JR. × JULY 22, 2013 × EDITORIAL



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EDITORIAL FROM THE TOP

The recent announcement that ESPN is eliminating its 3D channel on cable and satellite by the end of 2013 tells a sad story of overestimating the impact of selling HDTVs that have 3D capability. Although 3D movies continue to be released – for the time being – it appears that consumers are not interested in watching 3D at home. The “glasses” are claimed to be the reason, but I think there is more to it than that.

Our exuberance over dumping the cell phones we have now for the latest and greatest every year makes it seem that we might also treat TVs the same way.

Manufacturers have made a grave mistake in equating the commodity nature of cell phones to HDTVs, thinking that consumers will toss that \$1,800 55” 1080p HDTV they finally purchased last year at Costco because it was now affordable, for a new 55” model that has 3D capability, and will then get rid of that one for the 4K resolution TVs, called UltraHD (or UHD), in a year or so when they are hitting the shelves at Costco for \$2,195 (4K UltraHD TVs are already available, with a Sony 55” model coming in at \$5,000).

It ain’t gonna happen.

Before HDTV, when it was just TV, we kept our sets for 10 or 20 years before replacing them. That was because the old one stopped working and could not be fixed. It was not because of new features, because there were no new features, unless you had a black & white TV and wanted color.

When HDTV was announced, and we saw it demonstrated, it *did* look terrific and everyone could see the improvement in picture sharpness. The problem was, and still is, that many, if not most, consumers don't give a damn about the image sharpness. Friends have told me many stories of seeing their parents watching the standard definition version of the local news on an HDTV rather than the HD version on another satellite channel. When asked why, the answer is always, "We don't care about that. We are interested in the news, not the picture quality."

I went to Blockbuster a while back (I currently use Netflix movie streaming) to pick up a Blu-ray copy of a recent release, and the person in front of me in line put a Blu-ray movie on the counter and handed the clerk her Blockbuster card. The clerk asked, "Do you have a Blu-ray player?" "No," she said, so the clerk got her the DVD version. Only about half of US consumers have a Blu-ray player and that statistic may even be a stretch. The only reason they have an HDTV is that HDTVs are the only TV you can purchase now.

I am no artist, but are you beginning to see the painting taking shape yet?

3D is still warm in its grave, and now 4K is already being considered by the industry as the savior of their stock price. Yet, Sony is considering off-loading its consumer electronics division and concentrating on selling *insurance*. Are you asking, "Did I read that sentence correctly?" Yes, you did. Sony makes more money selling insurance than it does selling consumer electronics, yet they are the first to announce 4K titles that will be available while also releasing an UltraHD player, priced at \$700, to play and watch on one of their new UltraHD sets.

Somebody out there – and I mean that in a very, very plural sense – is living in the fantasy world that comes with just about every new movie these days. You never know if even the door behind the actor is real or CG.

Are they listening? 3D didn't revolutionize the TV industry. HDTV revolutionized the industry, but where I come from, only one revolution every century or so is allowed. 4K isn't going to revolutionize the industry – except for use at commercial theaters – nor will any other high definition add-on. High definition TV is here. 1080p is here. It's done. It's over. Broadcast studios haven't even completed the transition to having all of their cameras as 1920 x 1080. I still see some shots at pro football games that are from standard def cameras with their images up-converted to 1080. They have spent hundreds of millions in the conversion. They aren't done yet. Do you think they are going to sell their \$100,000 studio high def cameras and get 4K cameras to show even more of the makeup defects and perspiration on the news anchors' faces? Not !!!

And that is not even the end of it. The SMPTE 2013 Annual Technical Conference & Exhibition in Hollywood, California, October 22-24, has a pre-meeting symposium on the 21st, entitled, "Next-Gen Image Formats: More, Better, or Faster Pixels?" In this symposium, they will discuss not only 4K (UHD-1), but 8K (UHD-2), "Offering a clear picture of the current technology landscape, the Symposium will be valuable to anyone responsible for delivering high-quality imaging in broadcast,

Internet, cinema, and broadband applications.” So, 4K has just barely emerged, and they are already talking about 8K.

Think back to CDs (whether or not CD’s revolutionized the music industry is debatable, especially now that vinyl is making a huge comeback), when SACD and DVD-A were introduced as “higher resolution than CD” audio formats, exactly the way that 4K is being touted as “higher resolution than 1920 x 1080 video”. So, *um . . .* how well did they do in the marketplace? *Massive* failure. Now, fortunately for us handful of audiophiles, SACDs are at least a niche market, but definitely not mainstream. And if you look in the music catalogs that we get in the mail, LPs now dominate the pages, whereas just two years ago SACD was a much larger part of the offerings. High resolution PCM stereo (24/96, 24/192) music is available as downloads, and I suspect that all high rez music will eventually be available only as downloads, including SACD, just in the same way that movies are becoming more and more a downloadable product rather than a disc that you rent or purchase. But SACD and DVD-A as big moneymakers and replacements for CDs – as higher resolution audio formats – *just didn’t happen*.

More news. Over the past year or so, local libraries have seen a huge up-swing in books being checked out, and budgets for libraries are being increased to meet the demand. This, after cutbacks over the years due to declining use of public libraries. What does this mean? It could mean that people are watching *less* TV and reading books instead. I imagine the preceding sentence caused a few anal sphincters to tighten up in the television manufacturing boards of directors.

The bottom line: 4K – and even 8K or 16K – is great for when we are at the theater with our popcorn and watching a movie on a 50 foot screen. The picture is amazing. But forget about trying to shove it down consumer’s throats for our TVs at home. 1920 x 1080 is fine for our living rooms and home theater. Anything higher resolution is just not noticeable at our couches 8 feet away unless you have an 84” UltraHD., and that particular model is available for \$25,000.

Concentrate on improving the current 1080p image in broadcasts by developing more efficient video compression. Add more color depth, i.e., make the color 14 bit. Market this to the 50% of consumers who don’t have Blu-ray players and the homes that don’t have a high def TV yet. Maintaining focus on 1080p HDTVs as a consumer product will also keep current HDTV owners happy, and they will buy a new one when the time comes. Notice that we still have OLED screens being developed, which have fantastic black levels, and that translates to beautifully saturated color.

But, will the industry listen to advice? Within 5 years, only 4K UltraHD HDTV sets will be available, so we will buy them whether we want them or not . . . *unless . . .* the format fails in the mainstream marketplace as did SACD and DVD-A. And I don’t call *that* a revolution.

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Editor