



# Television Studies

## *The Key Concepts*

ROUTLEDGE



KEY GUIDES

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Liam French and Justin Lewis

# TELEVISION STUDIES

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# INTRODUCTION

Even though a generation has grown up with it, television is still a comparatively new technology. Even in the context of the authors' own lives we have a lucid sense of its novelty. Some of us dimly remember a single channel of British television. Most of us recollect just two channels. Virtually all of us can recall black and white television. And every one of us can remember the advent of the video-cassette recorder, even if we have not yet mastered the knack of setting it for when we will be out. In the last few years the terrain has been altering dramatically, with a mushrooming of channels, interactive viewing, compact discs, internet links and other innovations that tax our imaginations.

Television is also enormously significant. In more developed societies virtually every household possesses at least one television, with ownership of a set per member becoming increasingly commonplace. Television viewing has become the dominant leisure activity for the majority of the population, with statistics suggesting that each individual in the UK watches television, on average, for nearly three hours a day, while in the US research has suggested that sets may be on for an average of seven hours (Macionis and Plummer, 1998). Although ownership in Asia and Latin America lags behind comparatively, these continents and that of Africa have already been targeted as the major areas of growth for the global television industry during the twenty-first century. Beyond these bare statistics, though, television plays a central role in most people's everyday lives. In the public sphere it has become the venue for political debate, religious evangelism and the exchange of 'news', as well as the major medium for entertainment (Macionis and Plummer, 1998). In the private realm, television has been seen both as a quasi-altar around which the family gathers and the harbinger of domestic fragmentation as everybody slopes off to different rooms to watch their own favoured

programme. In addition, television is perceived as having an impact beyond the experience of viewing. It is blamed for encouraging violence and sexual promiscuity and for lowering educational standards. At the same time it has been lauded for raising political consciousness on issues as diverse as sexual health and global poverty. Academics of various hues have argued that it has helped people to become aware of their membership of nationalities, genders and even the human race – or, conversely, that it can dull the sensibilities of nearly every human who comes within its orbit. What is clear is that television as a bombardment of images and programmes, as a technology and as a world-wide industry, touches social life in profound ways. It has done nothing less than change the cultural landscape.

It seems appropriate and unarguable, then, that television as the major, global, contemporary mass medium should be subject to academic investigation. In some ways the emergence of television studies as an area of intellectual inquiry, to mirror the likes of literary, theatre and film studies, has been hesitant and, in certain quarters, resisted as a sign of the encroachment of popular culture on academe and the arts. Nevertheless, the last twenty years have seen the genesis of a recognisable, legitimate body of research on television as a cultural phenomenon. Academics and cultural critics had been interested in television since its inception and particularly so once sets were more widely available from the 1950s on. But the analysis of television tended to be subsumed under the study of mass communications and then, after that, media studies. For some the study of ‘the box in the corner’ should have been straightforward but, as Brunsdon (1998) notes, there is very little which is obvious about the television of television studies. Much early work, drawn from a broadly social scientific perspective, was stimulated by diverse anxieties about the effects and influences of television, be they cultural, behavioural, political or ideological. From the 1970s, analytical terms and models first developed in literary, film and cultural studies began to make an impact, while in the 1980s concepts have been drawn from psychoanalysis, philosophy and social psychology as well as, perhaps more predictably, sociology, history and economics. These other disciplines have also opened up new avenues of inquiry, so that Hartley (1999) points to the emergence of four separable but related areas. These he labels: television as mass society, television as text, television as audience and television as pedagogy. This book is intended to reflect the multidisciplinary origins of, and the breadth of diverse enquiry already managed by, television studies as a relatively new field of

academic investigation. As such it says something about our own professional biographies, which have seen us coming from diverse subject and research backgrounds to end up teaching and writing about television. We hope, then, that this book can contribute to the development and maturation of television studies.

### *Using the book*

In keeping with the genre we need to emphasise that this book is not a dictionary, nor a definitive guide to the precise content and boundaries of television studies. Rather, it is intended as a map of the territory, an indication of what has been covered, how and by whom. Each concept or topic is written to reflect what we consider to be essential information, to note central debates and to offer, where appropriate, examples relevant to television. As such the book seeks to debunk some of the more technical language which accompanies any field of study, helping visitors to television studies to gain a sense of the rationale and accomplishments of the field. But importantly, the book assumes that the reader will only begin here and will go on to use other relevant sources.

We should also offer some swift caveats. First, we have chosen seventy-odd concepts. We might have chosen more or less. Some are longer than others. Our choice in one sense, then, is idiosyncratic and points to our views on what is more and less significant in television studies, to our disciplinary heritages in sociology, cultural studies, history and media studies, to our employment in the United Kingdom and the United States, and to the historical moment. It is possible that a canny reader may be able to tell something about our various ages and our *tastes* from the examples we have used. Nevertheless, while we have been selective we hope that by writing more developed essays on a smaller number of topics we have covered the broad sweep of contemporary television studies. Second, with five authors we have sought not to impose a party line, and it should be possible to identify points of healthy divergence between entries in terms of theoretical and conceptual stance. Third, as those of you who have espied genres and theories among the entries will realise, we are defining 'concept' in a broad way to include any generally conceived notion. Fourth, as several entries starkly reveal, television dates quickly with programmes and technologies coming and going. Concepts are not immortal, but they are rather more durable than *Cop Rock* and *Eldorado* and you should be able to find your own examples to fill in the gaps.

The book should be simple to use. Each alphabetically organised entry has cross-references to other key concepts in the book (although the word may not be exactly the same, as in *postmodernity* referring to *postmodernism*) and an index to enable you to make more links. Every concept finishes with some suggestions for further reading and links to other relevant topics in the book.

Finally, despite our protestations of both idiosyncrasy and comprehensiveness, we would welcome any feedback (via the publishers) on suggestions for extra concepts, gaping omissions and alternative interpretations. Any weaknesses will be blamed on each other.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The book's genesis lies in our discussions in the last century about what students really want from academic texts. We would not for one moment pretend that we have an answer to this, but we would like to thank all our students who have contributed to our thinking. We would also like to thank Adrian Emerson, for his encouragement during the project's development, and Anne Murphy and Martha Casey, for their help in producing the finished manuscript. Finally we would like to thank editorial staff at Routledge and various children and partners for their impressive patience.



# LIST OF CONCEPTS

Access	Hegemony
Advertising	Ideology
Agenda-setting	Institutions
Americanisation	Intertextuality
Audiences	Marxism
Children and television	Mass culture
Class	Mediation
Code	Music video
Comedy	Narrative
Commercial television	News
Community television	Objectivity
Content analysis	Ownership
Convention	Pleasure
Crime series	Pluralism
Cultivation analysis	Policy
Cultural imperialism	Political economy
Cultural studies	Polysemy
Culture	Postmodernism
Discourse/discourse analysis	Power
Documentary	Production
Drama	Psychoanalysis
Educational television	Public service broadcasting
Effects	Race
Encoding and decoding	Realism
Family/domestic viewing	Reality television
Fans	Representation
Feminism	Rhetoric
Game shows	Scheduling
Gender	Science fiction
Genre	Semiology/semiotics
Globalisation	Sex/sexuality

## LIST OF CONCEPTS

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Sign

Soap opera

Sport

Stereotypes

Structuralism and post-  
structuralism

Synergy

Taste

Technology

Text

Uses and gratifications

Video

Violence

Women in television

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## ACCESS

Access television refers to those forms of programming that allocate televisual space to members of the public (non-media professionals) in order to ensure that all sections of society have an opportunity to be represented and to express their points of view. The basic philosophy underpinning access production is that there should be equality of access to television wherein anybody (and indeed, everybody) should have the chance to express their views. Advocates of access programming see it as a way of correcting imbalances (Corner, 1996) in mainstream television's output, especially where minority groups (ethnic or gay and lesbian, for example) are concerned. Quite often, it is the case that marginalised groups are either under-represented (e.g. the elderly and the disabled) or misrepresented (see *Stereotyping*) in mainstream programming.

Access television is more than just a generic term for certain types of programming – it implies a campaigning polemic (Corner, 1996). Within this context, access is not simply a 'right of reply' or reactive response. Ideally, access television should be proactive and involve a high degree of participation on behalf of the 'accessor(s)'. This involves not only access to the means of production such as cameras, sound and editing equipment but also to editorial and authorial control. On this basis, *game shows*, *vox pop documentaries*, *docusoaps*, talk shows, home shopping channels and other *audience-oriented* forms of programming do not strictly meet the criteria.

In the UK there is no guaranteed right of access (although there is right of reply) which means that access television in Britain is very much on broadcasters' terms, and there is no legal obligation for the provision of public access programming. Access programmes can be either institutionally produced (such as the BBC's *Video Diaries* produced by the Community Programmes Unit, and Meridian's *Freescreen*) or independently produced by small-scale producers. The US model for access production has possibly come the closest to realising the potential of public access television. During the 1970s, the Federal Communications Commission declared that with the introduction of cable television services there should be some provision for public access programming. Cable franchise owners had to provide admission to facilities and channel space for non-commercial public access and community programming. With the expansion of cable and satellite services the provision of resources also grew – by the mid 1990s there were over a thousand public access centres participating in regular access programming. One of the most

successful public access projects was the *Paper Tiger/Deep Dish Gulf Crisis TV Project*, which transmitted counter views and alternative messages concerning the Gulf War.

During the 1990s, access production flourished in both the UK and the USA, partly aided by the availability of relatively inexpensive video camcorders and editing equipment on domestic markets. However, while this development was seen as a significant step towards more democratic and participatory forms of media production, the use of camcorders has had some unforeseen consequences. To begin with, the availability of camcorder technology on domestic markets has reduced the emphasis on broadcasters making their facilities available to the public. Many programmes now consist of video footage shot and sent in by viewers using their own equipment. Furthermore, there has been an increasing trend towards individualism within access production. The use of camcorder technology has given rise to the production of what are known as 'first-person narration' texts (e.g. *Video Nation Shorts*) wherein individuals talk openly (and intimately) about themselves, their lifestyle or some emotive or personal issue. In conjunction with this, there has been an increasing trend towards professionalism within access production. This partly arises from broadcasters needing to maintain some degree of professional and institutional control over the quality and content of the programme, but also through participants having access to better equipment. Thus, it is not uncommon for broadcasters to receive relatively good-quality, edited tapes from viewers who strive to emulate professionals' techniques. Where this is not the case, broadcasters will generally re-edit videotapes sent in by viewers.

The need for television producers to maintain control over the final product goes beyond post-production practices. Through processes of gatekeeping and selection (who is allowed access and who is not) along with *agenda-setting* (what the context of access will be), broadcasters define the parameters of, and are able to manage, access production. Furthermore, as O'Sullivan *et al.* (1994) point out, broadcasters will not let simply anyone go on television and have their say – what is said and shown will always be, to some extent, mediated. *Representation* (including self-representation) is always in relation to, and mediated through, professional *codes* and *conventions* for producing entertaining, dramatic and interesting television. The recent trend towards reality programming, for example, has seen an increase in more dramatised, voyeuristic and visually appealing camcorder footage being produced by viewers (see *Reality television*). Critics have argued with some justification that these developments have contributed to the

depoliticisation of access television wherein the personal, the sensational and the bizarre take precedence over the political and the progressive.

Access production is undertaken within the context of fundamentally conflicting sets of interests and is perhaps best understood as the site of a struggle – over representation, over meaning and, in the final analysis, over who has the power to define social reality (McQuail, 1994). Despite the well-meaning intentions of access producers and programme participants, it is often the case that, in practice, access television fails to accomplish much of what it sets out to achieve. While it seemed to hold possibilities for new forms of democratic intervention (Kellner, 1990), recent developments have somewhat undermined this potential. Access production (particularly in the UK) has struggled to realise the vision of a ‘teledemocracy’, the notion of television as a kind of electronic soapbox for the airing of diverse, critical and alternative viewpoints. Ultimately, as Garnham (1992) suggests, access to the means of production does not yield the same degree of *power* and control that *ownership* does.

*See also:* **Community television, Documentary, Reality television, Video**

*Further reading:* Corner (1996); Dowmunt (1994); Hood (1987); Kellner (1990)

## ADVERTISING

Advertising is, in many ways, the most ubiquitous cultural industry. Many forms of media, such as *commercial television*, commercial radio, internet web-sites, magazines and newspapers, generate all or part of their revenue from advertising, and there are now few spaces free from advertising messages. In the United States – one of the world’s most advertising-saturated societies – over 40 per cent of mail deliveries and over 25 per cent of television time consists of advertisements. From the advertiser’s point of view, the sheer volume of advertisements creates what is often called ‘clutter’, with so many messages competing for attention that their impact is inevitably reduced. Current trends suggest, however, that the strategy for dealing with clutter is to search for new, additional advertising venues rather than reducing marketing budgets.

The purpose of advertising is fairly straightforward: to persuade people to buy goods and services in a market economy. From an economic perspective, advertising is seen as creating demand for

consumer goods, allowing for the widespread proliferation of product names and brands – without advertising it would be difficult for consumers to negotiate supermarket shelves containing dozens or even hundreds of varieties of the same product. While many scholars see advertising as playing a key role in the development of a capitalist consumer economy, the evidence suggests that the degree to which advertising raises aggregate market consumption – particularly in an environment already saturated with advertising, and where consumer spending levels are already high – is inconclusive at best. Advertising is as likely to be about maintaining or protecting market share (or ‘brand loyalty’) as increasing it. As a consequence, the costs of advertising a product are generally not recuperated through economies of scale in increased production. Accordingly, the costs of advertising are generally passed on to the consumer. Thus it is that ‘brand names’ are generally more expensive. The consumer is, in effect, paying for the advertising campaign used to influence their purchase.

For this reason, the idea that commercial television is ‘free’ is a misconception. Consumers pay for commercial television indirectly, since the advertising costs will be passed on to the consumer in the store. Commercial television *appears* to be cheaper (than, say, if it comes from the government, licence fee or through direct viewer subscription) because the system of payment is indirect. In fact, commercial television may end up being more expensive than more direct forms of television payment, since the costs of commercial television involve paying not only for the programmes but also for the commercials that punctuate them. The popularity of commercial television, as an economic system, relies partly on the fact that its costs are hidden.

For some products – particularly in sectors where high levels of advertising expenditure have become the norm – the cost of producing the product may be less than the cost of advertising it. This means that what we are buying is not so much a physical object as the ‘image’ advertisers attempt to associate with that product. This is particularly apparent when people are faced with a choice between two equivalent products – whether sports apparel or shampoo – and they choose the more *expensive* brand name. It could be argued, in this sense, that unless people are aware they are paying for an image rather than the physical quality of the product, advertising leads to irrational consumer behaviour.

Proponents of advertising argue that advertising plays a vital and necessary role in a market economy because it provides consumers with information. However, critics of advertising point out that the

quality of this information is suspect for various reasons: first because advertisers will necessarily skew information to suit their interests (and hence it is more like a propaganda system); second, because those larger companies with greater access to advertising budgets will dominate the message system regardless of product quality; and third, because the informational content of advertisements is increasingly low. The last point alerts us to the way in which advertising works as a *discourse*.

The proliferation of similar products in the marketplace in a cluttered advertising environment has led many advertisers to abandon informational advertising (which many consumers now find boring) in favour of what Roland Barthes referred to as a 'mythic' system, in which the product is juxtaposed with other images in the hope that the consumer will associate the product with the image. So, for example, often regardless of its attributes, the product will appear amid images designed to evoke such attributes as attractiveness, sexiness, popularity, healthiness, sophistication, style or success. The beauty of this strategy, from the advertiser's perspective, is that it avoids making any *overt* informational claims, so the advertiser is not constrained by the limitations of the goods or services being sold. Thus, for example, campaigns for fast food or soft drinks can use images of health and vigour to construct positive associations without making any direct (and false) claims about the healthiness of their product.

Advertising's mythic structure has influenced the political arena, as politicians and parties have become more adept at marketing themselves. Many commentators argue that political campaigns are therefore less attempts to explain and promote *policy* positions than attempts to associate a party or politician with positive images. So, for example, a politician promoting tax cuts whose main beneficiary will be the more affluent may attempt to construct a more populist image by surrounding herself with ordinary working people (or signifiers thereof). Modern political campaigns are, in this respect, run like any other marketing campaign, with the same underlying discursive logic.

Much of the academic research on advertising has focused less on its ability to sell products than on its broader cultural role. At its most basic level, advertising stresses consumption while ignoring various aspects of production (which may be dependent upon a poorly paid or poorly treated workforce). Raymond Williams (1980) described advertising as a 'magic system' that promoted capitalism and deflected attention away from social class differences, a critique that has been made more poignant as *globalisation* has highlighted differences



between first-world consumers and third-world sweatshop production. Environmental degradation has also highlighted the way in which advertising ignores the *consequences* of consumption. The pressure put on environmental and ecological systems by the production and disposal of goods is, for obvious reasons, entirely absent from the discourse of advertising. In advertising, consumption is always good, while solutions to problems will always be through consumption rather than social action. Within the discourse of advertising, the only response to environmental problems is to buy more goods (such as high-factor sun protection cream).

Advertising can therefore be understood as an ideological system that not only speaks about the world of commodities but also paints pictures of the world. This means promoting other forms of meaning and identity as well as an *ideology* of consumerism. Viewed from a *semiotic* or anthropological perspective, advertising can be seen as a cultural industry that not only reflects certain social values but also promotes specific values over others. Scholars like Erving Goffman, for example, argue that the stereotypical representations of women in advertising (as sex-objects or housewives) may reflect patriarchal values within the society as a whole, but they solidify and reinforce those values (Goffman, 1979).

While TV advertising is often regarded as creative and entertaining, the widespread use of advertising in television has led to various criticisms about its effect on other programming. In essence, the function of TV programmes on commercial television is to attract audiences to the advertisements that interrupt them (during commercial breaks) or permeate them (through product placement or sponsorship backdrops or logos). This means that programmes will often be written, edited or produced *around* the commercial messages, thereby delivering audiences to advertisers in a receptive mood. This is not only a formal constraint, but one that can affect content. So, for example, negative information about the car industry or about the corporate world in general – whether in *drama* or *news* and current affairs – may be regarded by advertisers as creating an unsympathetic environment for the promotion of their wares.

**See also: Commercial television, Discourse, Political economy, Semiology/semiotics**

*Further reading:* Ewen (1976); Goffman (1979); Leiss *et al.* (1990); R. Williams (1980)