



未名社科·媒介与社会丛书（影印版）

Channels of Discourse, Reassembled
Television and Contemporary Criticism (second edition)

重组话语频道

电视与当代批评理论

第 2 版

〔美〕罗伯特·艾伦 (Robert C. Allen) 编



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总 序

媒介是神奇的,社会也是神奇的,媒介与社会的耦合生产出无限的神奇。从涂尔干《宗教生活的基本形式》关于“社会”与唤起社会意识的符号与仪式共生的理论来看,媒介使社会显得神奇的过程也造就了自身的神奇。

人类在现代大众传播成为现实之前对于“神奇”的感知是经由巫师及其巫术的转化来实现的。澳洲土著在图腾舞蹈的狂热中感受到超个人的社会力量的存在。满身披挂的萨满用舞蹈和神歌请灵降神,让已经消逝的显露原形,让凡人通常不可见的显现真身,让千山万水之遥的即刻大驾光临。借助巫术,时间和空间的障碍可以暂时克服,过去的、未来的都可以在现实中出现,墓室中的、仙山上的都可以召唤到面前。

这些神奇经验在现当代越来越彻底地被大众媒介所造就,电视、网络等图像传输技术在其中发挥着关键作用。大人物像变戏法一样总跑到百姓居室内高谈阔论,历史的亡灵在荧屏上招之即来,挥之即去。媒介使常人具有千里眼、顺风耳,看见那原本遥不可见的,听清那从前根本就听不到的。媒介是神奇的,它在社会中的运行有如巫术。几百年的现代化对世界“祛魅”,结果我们看到人类社会所集聚的全部的“魅”都汇聚于媒介,并被媒介无限放大。

长期耳濡目染,媒介的神奇人们已经习以为常了,就像前现代的人对巫术习以为常一样。但是,这个过程一直都是知识界探讨的课题。现代大众媒介的各种新形式从一开始出现的时候就会被知识界作为新事物加以关注。从较早的照相、无线电广播到电影、电视,再到近年的新媒介传播,关于大众传媒研究、文化研究、虚拟社会研究的知识生产就一直紧随媒介发展的步伐。媒介研究在发达国家已经形成庞大的群体和细密的分工,这个群体既能够追逐传播领域的新事物,也能够通过专业的眼光让人们习以为常的许多方面显出怪异来,从而引发众人的注意和分析的兴趣。我们国内的媒介研究在这两个方向上都需要培育自己的能力。

依靠现代大众媒介运行的社会是一种机制极其不同的社会,中国社会正在越来越深地涉入其中。

高科技媒介的威力以不断增强的方式发挥出来,世界虽然还成为不了地球村,但是人与人之间的联系方式、人与各种层次的共同体的联结机制都发生着变化。

社会因媒介成为可能,因新媒介而成为新的可能。社会是个人之间相互挂念、相互意识到而成为可能的。在短暂的一天和有限的一生里,个人在多大范围里意识到多少他人的存在、记挂多大范围的他人,这是靠媒介运作的结果。基于集体意识和共同想象而形成内在联系的社会,是存在于媒介(运作)中的。在中国境外的许多城市,华人移民在本地新闻中看到唐人街的春节表演而确证自己与华人群体的认同,全世界的中国人因为春节文化的展演而想象自己属于一个十多亿人口的共同体。网络新媒介创造了新的人际联系方式,虚拟社区借助新媒介产生出来,人们之间隔空互动,与传统真实意义上的面对面交流的主要差别只是不能“臭味相投”而已。

媒介见证社会实体的存在。人类共同体因为联合国的新闻、国际救灾行动的画面而被呈现;国家共同体因为制造媒介事件的奇观(spectacle)而被世人记住;地方共同体因为地方风物、特产或节庆被传播而知名;行业罢工、同性恋群体因为游行的极端表演而受注意。优势的存在是在媒介中具有正面形象的实体。

媒介见证社会力量的博弈。各种社会力量要竞争,最好的方式是围绕媒介、借助媒介展开能见度高的竞争,展开正面形象的竞争。国际政治的软实力、国内政治的亲民形象、商业竞争的名牌效应、文体明星的商业价值……都是靠媒介的舞台定位的。社会力量竞争的王牌是通过媒介制造“奇观”,造成举世瞩目的效果。制造“9·11”事件的组织选择纽约世贸大厦为目标,是因为他们不仅要使行动成为媒介事件,而且还要使媒介事件具有奇观效应(spectacularity);美国占领伊拉克,对媒介画面进行筛选,突出精确打击的画面,限制伊拉克平民死伤的画面,既在避免负面效果,也在凸现战争奇观。强势的社会力量是媒介中的主动力量。

媒介毕竟是社会的媒介。媒介为社会中的人所运用。人具有神性和魔性。社会既是温情的港湾,也是邪恶的渊薮;社会既以公正相标榜,也以不平等为现实。运行于社会中的媒介也兼具人性和社会的两副面孔。媒介制造人间奇迹:新闻报道能够让尼克松总统下台,能够让孙志刚事件改变弊端连连的城市收容制度,能够让绝望中的重症患者借助社会力量得到救治……媒介也产生遗憾和问题,媒介暴力、媒介色情、媒介

偏见一直层出不穷。

媒介是社会的舞台、社会的缩影,媒介本身就是社会。媒介被政党看作一个特殊的战线,一个意识形态斗争的领域。主导的力量会设法控制公共舆论的导向和社会议题的设置,其他的社会力量或附和、追随,或批评、抵制。弱者有弱者的媒介武器和媒介阐释策略。沉默或参与,是一次选择。参与而主动解码,借题发挥,进而用反讽来消遣权势,则潜藏着无数持续的选择。大众媒介在社会的运行中产生着层出不穷的问题。

媒介不仅是信息、思想、政治,也是经济。从事媒介行业的人也是经济动物,媒介也是经济利益的集散地。媒介造就百万富翁、亿万富翁,造就中产阶级,造就报童、报摊,当然也造就自己的消费者群体。这是一个不断膨胀的产业。新媒介成为新的产业,往往使原有的一切产业具备新的形式和运作机制。媒介产业是其他产业发展的助推器。世界是人的天地,也是产品的库房。产品世界的秩序是由媒介按照品牌进行编码和排列的,从而形成“物的体系”,以此支撑着人的世界成为一个多样而有序的“消费社会”。

媒介是一种信息产业,是一个经济领域的范畴。媒介又是现代文化,因此媒介作为经济就应该更加准确地被称为文化经济(文化工业)。媒介卷入的是共同体集体利益和共同体内部的利益、地位、声望的分配问题,因此媒介涉及的问题是政治经济学的问题。这些问题在社会博弈过程中消长,媒介成为社会进步的助力,有时也为社会制造解决问题的障碍。媒介与社会,纠结着人类伟大的成就和太多的问题。凡此种种,我们就让有心人、术业有专攻的人去一一论说其中的究竟吧。

是为序。

高丙中、杨伯渝
2007年8月,北京大学

Preface to the
Chinese Edition of
Channels of Discourse: Reassembled

Robert C. Allen

Channels of Discourse: Reassembled was published in the U. S. in 1992 as a revision of the first edition of this anthology, which was published in 1987. The essays prepared for the first edition were written in 1985-6, and the revisions were prepared for the current edition in 1990-91. As editor of both volumes, my motive for organizing the revision was to encourage the contributors to address the transformative changes in the television landscape that unfolded in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

When essays were written for the first edition, the experience of television in the U. S. was still largely organized around a limited set of viewing options at any given time carried "over the air" by a small number of national broadcasting networks and their local affiliates. In Britain and on the European continent, television also meant limited viewing choice—choices made principally between one or two state-funded "public service" channels and (in some but certainly not all countries) one or two commercial channels. Watching television meant watching whatever programs were offered by broadcasters at a particular time of *their* choice. If you weren't available to watch a given program at the time of its broadcast or watched another program broadcast at the same time, you had to assume that you would not have the opportunity to see it again.

By the same token, because of limited viewing options, broadcasters and academics could assume that the viewing audience at any given time was divided into a small number of large sub-audiences;

in the U. S. where three national networks controlled more than 90 percent of broadcasting output every evening, most viewers were tuned to one of three programming choices at any given time, and a particularly popular show might attract a majority of all viewers. Because television meant "free to air" broadcast television and most television sets had the capacity to receive whatever channels were being broadcast in a given area, most people who had access to a television set had access to the same programs that everyone else did. Also, although it would have seemed silly and unnecessary at the time to note this, today we should remind ourselves that in the 1980s watching television meant watching a television set.

By the time **Channels of Discourse: Reassembled** was published in 1992, this description of "television" and "television viewing" was outdated in most respects in many places in the world. In the U. S. over-the-air broadcasting was being challenged by the linking of two new delivery technologies: beaming television channels around the world or parts of it by satellite and circulating them in a local area via coaxial cable. For viewers who could afford the monthly fees, cable television offered a dozen or more broadcast channels and others that were only available to cable subscribers.

As the first edition of **Channels** was going to press, yet another technology was changing the way millions of people experienced television. The video cassette recorder was introduced in the U. S. in the late 1970s, and by 1987 was to be found in a majority of American households. The VCR freed viewers from the programming schedules imposed by broadcaster: if you were at work when your favorite soap opera was aired, you could simply record it on videotape and watch it later in the evening. Many households began to assemble collections of videotaped programs that could be watched whenever and however family members chose and for as long as someone wanted to keep them. After initially resisting this new technology, the Hollywood film studios eventually embraced the idea of renting and selling feature films on videotape. By the time **Channels of Discourse: Reassembled** hit bookstores and classrooms in 1992, Hollywood studios were making

more money from selling videotape copies of their films than from people buying tickets to see these same films in movie theaters.

In Europe, the television landscape was also being transformed by new technologies and by politics. Telecommunication policies in many countries were changed to allow for the proliferation of new channels—many of them advertiser-driven—and the old public service monopolies had to share the audience with multiple broadcasters in a “mixed” public service/commercial system. New channel capacity created new demand for programming, and increasingly programming created in other countries for different national audiences found its way onto German, Italian, and Polish television screens.

As you will see, the essays in **Channels of Discourse: Reassembled** were written as one paradigm of television—as institution, technology, cultural form, and viewing experience—was being supplanted by another. The essays reflect this shift, even if the outlines of the emerging “new” paradigm of television are still unclear. Jim Collins, for example, chooses to analyze a television series called **Twin Peaks**, whose popularity in the early 1990s lay in its appeal not to the “old” homogeneous audience of broadcast television but in its ability to put together “a series of interlocking appeals to a number of discrete but potentially interconnected audiences” (p. 342). Ann Kaplan and John Fiske focus on music videos and MTV, the cable/satellite channel most associated with their circulation in the 1980s, and both authors suggest that this “new” form of television text and its role in the “new” experience of television offered by cable television require television scholars to rethink fundamental premises about the medium and its programming forms.

In his “Afterword,” James Hay points toward the future of television in the 1990s as a changing set of “practices, techniques, and technologies,” which interact to produce a changing experience of television for the viewer. He notes that television is to be found not only in the home but in public spaces; that television “programs” are being produced not only by large organizations and corporations but also by millions of families (as “home videos”); that television sets are

getting bigger (for use in bars and theaters) and smaller; that television sets are being combined with other technologies (the VCR, the video game, the computer) to produce new uses for and new users of "television." As a result of these changes, he argues, the experience of television will become more "interactive" in the decade to come. In the early 1990s when Hay was writing, the primary technological instrument of this interactivity and the primary means of connecting the experience of watching television with the "outside world" was still the telephone, and the "wired" telephone at that; the ubiquity of the cell phone was still over the historical horizon. In the final paragraphs of this the concluding chapter of the book, Hay mentions as an example of new "networking" technologies something that readers of this translation in the latter half of the first decade of the 21st century might find puzzling: "'computer-link' networks like Prodigy." Prodigy was a *pre-internet* commercial online bulletin board and email service that was launched in 1984!

You, of course, are reading these essays from a historical vantage point on the other side of the VCR/VCD boom and from a different cultural and social perspective from that of the contributors. The particular television programs they discuss are not likely to be familiar to you; they certainly aren't to my own students, most of whom were not even born when these shows were being broadcast in the U. S. But fifteen (or more) years after these essays were written, they remain useful to students of television, media, and cultural studies because they introduce ways of thinking about television and the experience of television that are still relevant. We still look to television to tell us stories, and we need a language to describe the ways television narratives have been and might be organized. We continue to organize our experience of television in terms of categories or genres of programming: soap operas, sports, game shows, documentaries. Questions of gender representation, class, race, and social identity remain important to an understanding of the ways television works as a cultural form. Our experience of television continues to be shaped by the ways television addresses the viewer and how viewing is socially

situated.

It is, I think, worthwhile to pause before reading these essays to consider the magnitude and direction of those changes—as least as I am in a position to do so on the basis of my own experience of television here in the U. S. A number of the most significant changes in the American and European television landscape were anticipated in the essays that follow. There has been a significant increase in the number of television channels available via over-the-air broadcasting, cable systems and satellite services in a number of countries since the early 1990s. In 1990, for example, the “average” American household could receive 33 television channels. By 2002 the number of available channels had topped 100. At the time **Channels of Discourse: Reassembled** was published Indian viewers had a single viewing choice: India’s state-controlled Dordarshan. A decade later there were more than 100 television channels.

There has also been a shift away from reliance upon broadcasting (receiving television signals in the home via an over-the-air antenna) to supply television channels in the home to cable and satellite dishes as preferred television distribution modes. Two out of every three American households now receive television via cable; and one in four homes has a satellite dish. The expansion of channel capacity in India was related to the growth of the cable and satellite market there. In the 1990s, the number of cable/satellite-serviced homes increased more than thirty fold: from 1.2 million to nearly 40 million.^① As of the spring of 2007 there were more than 320 million households with television in China (94% of all households), nearly 100 million of which receive cable television channels.^②

There continue to be individual programs and series that resonate

① Daya Kishu Thussu, “The Transnationalization of Television: The Indian Experience,” in Jean K. Chalaby, ed., **Transnational Television Worldwide** (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), pp. 159–172.

② Worldscreen.com, April 7, 2007 (<http://www.worldscreen.com/asiapacific.php>).

strongly within a given national or trans-national television culture and attract a significant viewership. The most popular television series in the U. S. in 2006, **American Idol**, was viewed in nearly one in five households. The 2006 World Cup had a cumulative audience of some 5.6 billion viewers across more than fifty countries. However, the trend over the past fifteen years in most television cultures around the world has been in the direction of a fragmentation of the television audience, to the point that today it is problematic to speak of the television audience. Rather, it is more accurate to speak of complex viewing patterns formed as millions of viewers simultaneously negotiate choices among dozens or hundreds of channel and programming options and as they re-negotiate these choices continually with the aid of the remote control. Although national broadcasters might still seek a "mass" audience, cable and satellite channels target much smaller but more clearly defined sub-audiences with particular demographic profiles (women, teenagers, children), interests (home improvement, travel, cooking, politics), and/or tastes (sports, music, comedy). The rise to prominence of subscription-based cable and satellite services has also created socio-economic fractures in the national television "audience" in many countries, between those who can afford the monthly subscription fees (as much as \$100 per month in the U. S.) and those who cannot and are thus restricted in their viewing options by the much more limited menu of "free-to-air" public service and advertiser-driven broadcast programming options.

What the contributors to this volume could not have anticipated, I think, were the implications of simultaneous and unpredictable change in all aspects of what they understood "television" to be: institution, technology, cultural form, and "viewing" experience. Today (summer 2007), it is increasingly difficult to define "television" as an object of study and to distinguish it from other cultural forms, technologies, and "viewing" experiences. For example, producers of programming for broadcast and cable television delivery are also making some of them (or parts of them) available for viewing online, on MP3 players, and on cell phones. With video cameras built into cell phones and webcams

a feature of many laptop computers, the number of "television" producers is quite literally uncountable, as are the "user-generated" programs they so effortlessly and casually produce. The internet provides an inexpensive and technically accessible avenue for immediate global distribution of video diaries, documentaries, and comedy sketches. Within eighteen months of its founding in February 2005, the video sharing website YouTube was adding 65,000 new videos every day, which were being viewed by more than twenty million "viewers" each month. In November 2006, YouTube was sold to Google for \$1.65 billion.

It is my hope and, I am sure, those of the authors of these essays, that you will be able to use the approaches they discuss to think about your own experience of television. The differences between what they take for granted as the state of television in the early 1990s and your own experience of television today should help you measure the changes that have occurred in television as a technology, social force, cultural form, and aspect of everyday life in the intervening period.

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