THE USE AND ABUSE OF TELEVISION

A Social Psychological Analysis of the Changing Screen

J. Mallory Wober

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J. MALLORY WOBER

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers
365 Broadway
Hillsdale, New Jersey 07642

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Wober, J. M. (J. Mallory)
The use and abuse of television.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Television—Psychological aspects. 2. Television broadcasting—Social aspects. I. Title. II. Title: Social psychological analysis of the changing screen.
PN1992.6.W65 1988 302.2'345 88-3819
ISBN 0-89859-662-9

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
TELEVISION

Volume 17

THE USE AND ABUSE OF TELEVISION

First published in 1988

This edition first published in 2013
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-82199-5 (Set)
eISBN: 978-0-203-51517-4 (Set)
ISBN: 978-0-415-83953-2 (Volume 17)
eISBN: 978-0-203-76997-3 (Volume 17)

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CHAPTER 1

The One Hand Clap? Or a Sounder Way of Understanding Television

INTRODUCTION: EXPLORING THE NATURE OF THE SCREEN AT HOME

Capping his illustrious career, Hugh Malcolm Beville (1985)—whom we shall encounter again—wrote a stirring and definitive defense of some of the ways in which American television is assessed. After long service with NBC and a full academic professorship, Beville served as Executive Director of the Broadcast Rating Council (which later evolved into the Electronic Media Research Council). Referred to as "the dean of broadcast research," Beville has a clear and probably uniquely well-informed view of the scene. In a telling anecdote, which he draws from a Carnegie Commission report on the Future of Public Broadcasting, (Beville, 1985, p. 234) he recounts:

> At the end of a concert at Carnegie Hall, Walter Damrosch asked Rachmaninoff what sublime thoughts had passed through his head as he stared out into the audience during the playing of his concerto. "I was counting the house," said Rachmaninoff. The principal test of public broadcasting's accountability to the community is whether anybody is listening or watching.

To take Rachmaninoff's remark at face value tells us only that Damrosch had had his leg pulled; to draw the conclusion that is contained in the final sentence, the passer-on of this tale Gary Steiner (1965) shows that he may have as shallow an understanding of creative musicians as he has a command of logical inference.

In this book we hope to maintain an appreciation of humor but also to be careful about conclusions and the processes by which they are attained. To illustrate this claim, let us ask some questions about the anecdote. Can Rachmaninoff have been right in implying that his assessment of events stopped short at a count of listeners? This may be partly true but is unlikely to be the whole or even the most important part of the truth, for musicians pay great attention to the applause at the end of a performance. This not only reflects their own concern about their product, but it also gives them a good idea about what the size of the house may be *next* time and whether they will have to face their peers, their managers, and their own creative selves with confidence or with contrition.

If one accepts that public broadcasting is best assessed by the "size of the house" then one might develop either of two approaches at PBS in the United States or at the BBC and IBA in Great Britain, neither of which is actually in practice. One would be to close down the PBS under the assumption that the public is better served by existing commercial and cable services. A second approach would program, as other networks do, soap operas, talk and game shows to maximize "public broadcasting's" share. Of course, these are not the aims of public broadcasting, nor is the best test of public broadcasting's accountability the achievement of some arbitrarily set quorum of audience size.

Before we leave this anecdote, it is important to pay attention to what Walter Damrosch had done. Damrosch did not find out the size of the ticket paying audience and start a conversation with Rachmaninoff on this basis; he treated the musician *as* audience, as a viewer, and to assess his (Rachmaninoff's) experience, he asked him what was in his mind. This fact should be the first lesson drawn from the anecdote. That a highly selective interpretation has been placed on the outcome—that skill and caution have to be used in dealing with subjective responses and expressions—should be the second lesson. In fact, this applies as well to objective data, which can be equally misleading if treated carelessly.

Thus far, we have encountered two ways of assessing an audience. One is simply by noting its size. Of course, this is more easily done in the concert hall or theater, though even there one has to be careful with mere numbers. Often tickets are given away to fill the house and thereby generate enthusiasm. Also, package or season sales of tickets can produce larger audiences than might have been achieved for certain shows if they had had to compete on their own account. A more accurate way of appraising a show is by asking the audience how they liked it or, as in the theater where a routine occasion has been established for this purpose,

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by noting the nature of the applause (or catcalls). We are not concerned in this book, however, only with assessing an audience; we wish to gain an understanding of the "Screen At Home"—a much broader problem. To do this, we will look more deeply into the phenomenon most widely called "television" (literally, meaning far-seeing, just as, in German it is called "fernsehen," although the viewer does not see anything far away—screens are all too often positioned unhealthily close—and the term does not logically exclude video-cassette viewing, or teletext). For practical purposes, television can be understood as the home screen that is used for viewing picture programs. These may have been broadcast, brought by cable, carried on cassette, or rarely, even made by oneself with a videocamera (hardly "tele", or "fern"). In English speaking countries, television services were inaugurated in 1936 (BBC in London) and in 1939 (RCA/NBC at the New York World's Fair); however, the war and the heyday of radio briefly stood in television's way.

When television began in earnest in Great Britain soon after the end of World War II, the broadcaster filled in with film of a potter's wheel because there were gaps between programs. For some time this image was more the butt of jokes than an object of interest for critics or interpreters of the new screen phenomenon. Yet with hindsight there may be more to be said about the image, and it may be better remembered than many of the programs that surrounded it. Although it may have been chosen simply as a pleasant image of creativity many interpreters saw its message as something more somber. The clay stands for consumers who were now there to be molded by the potter of the program provider; the result could be a simple but serviceable product, rarely a work of high art, but more often broken into a sharp-edged and dangerous object. The phenomenon of television (which will not be called a medium in this book, for reasons explained later) has evoked a substantial body of analysis of its production process; it has perhaps prompted an even larger literature about its viewers, and although a huge body of ephemera has been written and spoken about current programs and their participants, comparatively little of the screened product itself survives that is accessible for enjoyment or scholarship.

The phenomenon of print gave rise to the two meanings of literature, that is, the act of making written works to be shared as a widespread experience and the product itself. Less widely shared ways of creating meaningful objects have also generated bodies of work known by cognate terms; thus, portraiture and sculpture are the acts of production as well as the harvest of each particular field of work. The scripts of plays for the theater are securely part of literature, and this may be the reason why in the United States theater is known as "legitimate." Cinema and subsequently television are by implication "illegitimate." Although a few movies and television programs have scripts in print and others receive "novelization," it has so far only been print that has given screen products a widespread availability and permanence.

What does the word literature itself teach us about television? The first section, "litera," refers of course to letters; the suffix "ure" originates in the Latin past participle "us," designating the completed product rather than the act of production. This may be why furniture and caricature refer to the results of an activity rather than to a particular kind of creative activity itself. So, although the word "cinemature" has been devised and used in its own field, there is no cognate term as yet in obvious use for television. What would be needed is a word specifying the kind of signs involved, and the suffix "ture": televisture; or more fully, televisauditure; or visauditure (for the prefix "tele" is misleading, since it tells us nothing about the process which is of direct relevance to the user), or audivisiture. However, such neologisms are not only ungainly, they are also unnecessary.

The absence of the term because of the absence of the product it might refer to has been noticed by several writers, though they may in different ways have somewhat exaggerated the position. Wright (1975, pp. 6–7) argued that the products of mass communication are "not to be entered into permanent records" and are "regarded as expendable." Levy and Fink (1984, p. 57) declared that "if one criterion of artistic merit is longevity of appeal, then television's fleeting fare can not meet the test of time." Such a remark may perhaps be made more readily in the United States than in Great Britain, where there are frequent programs of great artistic merit, which certainly do have long-term appeal. However, it is also true that the absence until the 1980s of videorecorders has denied observers the means to compile a widely shared televisture. This will now change. In Great Britain by the end of 1986, several estimates agree that well over 40% of homes possess videorecorders, while in the United States the figure simultaneously passed 15%. Beville (1985, p. 275) estimated that by 1990 in the United States, 55 million homes, or 59%, would be equipped with VCR, thus surpassing cable, which he estimated would reach 52% of U.S. homes by the end of the decade. These devices, as well as videodiscs, enable screen programs to reach a mass public as retrievable products, allowing them to attain a status not won by the cinema alone—that is, to become "legitimate."

When television programs lose their present evanescent status, they will be open to more permanent and sustained criticism and evaluation. In turn, some screen products will gain a significance and value beyond that of the fleeting impressions they registered during the first television age. The public will become critics themselves and will back up their evaluations, as they do now with works of literature, music, and theatre, by buying recordings and being willing to pay to attend repeat performances where the product is experienced communally rather than privately. When programs survive in this way in public esteem and a written and oral lore is generated about them, this will exemplify one kind of evaluation and assessment of an artistic or cultural product (i.e., one which expresses ideas and feelings). Currently, the modes of systematic

assessment of television are barely skeletal in public, even if they have attained some better depth in esoteric academic and even industry circles.

THE GRASS ROOT RESPONSE

What are the common modes of assessment of television in its first age, before the arrival of visual recording and the simultaneous invasion of the screen by games and other more sophisticated applications which change its character? There have been at least five such modes. First, people discuss what they see and thereby influence each other's opinions about what they have seen. This kind of assessment is like rain disappearing into the sands of the desert. It is largely unavailable to the producers, nor in aggregate to the critical community or public at large. In the live theater, direct feedback from the audience affects the players and can enhance or inhibit their performance. At one American opera performance in which the words were being displayed in supertitles the display mechanism broke down; the players did not know exactly what had happened, but they sensed a very different (and less informed) response from the audience. Even in the cinema the assembled audience can be observed as they laugh or cry, consume more snacks, or go for walks in the auditorium; their responses affect each other and eventually, albeit at second hand, reach those who made the films.

This is much less possible with television. Nevertheless, despite its currency in but small circles of shared reflections, direct behavioral reaction and comment is thus the first mode of television assessment, and there have been enlightening studies in this field. Lull (1982) observed families' viewing and worked toward a typology of their different ways of relating to the screen; Liebes (1984) used focus group discussions to shed light on the ways in which Israeli viewers of different cultural backgrounds understood *Dallas*. In Italy Capocasa, Denon, and Lucchi (1985) reported an in-home observational study of several hundred families, concentrating on their experience watching advertisements, and in England, Hobson (1982) contributed a substantial book about women's feelings about the soap opera *Crossroads*. Similarly Morley (1980, 1986) wrote about the early evening local magazine program *Nationwide* and on families' different styles of viewing. Taylor and Mullan (1986) produced a popular work on various aspects of viewers' relationships with life as represented on "the box." All of these studies have a social anthropological flavor and face a difficult problem, for if they set out to reflect the grass root response it seems consistent to do so in terms which are accessible to a wide popular readership. This may tend to obscure the discipline with which such studies may be assembled or even, in some opinions, to dilute it somewhat, but it is worthwhile to

discern a particular strand of work in which a great deal of variety of popular experience can be represented.

SCALES BEFORE THE EYES OF INDUSTRY: AUDIENCE WEIGHED AS A COMMODITY

Much more prevalent and powerful is the measurement of audience size. Such a measurement, however, can actually reduce understanding of the nature of the experience the screen has engendered, or at least destructively narrow it down, if it is used as is all too common with little or no reference to other modes of assessment. Measurement of audience size produces an index unfortunately termed "the ratings." Why should we see this term as a misnomer? A simple answer begins with another question: Who does the rating, that is, rates an object to produce or contribute to a figure called the program's "rating"? Did the viewer actually "rate" the program by the mere act of looking at it? No. In no publicly known system of "ratings" assessment have viewers actually rated what they saw; they merely saw it. To interpret the act of viewing as equivalent to evaluating a program and to take the number of people who turn out to see an item as a measure of its subjective value is to make two assumptions: first, that people are capable only of a bimodal scale of response: watch or not watch—watch means good, not watch means bad; second, that the population is homogeneous with regard to taste, so that if many people watch a program, this indexes the extent to which a program has appeal or experiential merit over and above its value to a smaller audience. Both assumptions are false.

Before we assign the ratings to their proper place, we should reflect on how the term became entrenched. There may have been conscious intent to mislead at the outset. Or, the term may be a result of sloppy thinking. In one sense the term does relate to quality, albeit not as far as the viewers themselves need be concerned. It is well known in the social sciences that the word rating connotes subjective value. We rate people for kindness or diligence because we can not easily measure directly such attributes objectively, as can be done for example for height or weight. Therefore, any social scientist who participated in this use of ratings (or more correctly, misuse) has been negligent. In mitigation, the common sense notion that, given some alternatives, what people choose to do is both qualitatively and morally right, has some plausibility. Thus, the programs with the largest audiences are termed the most popular, and this term shades into the designation of intrinsic merit.

The third gloss on the term "ratings" is that it does refer to quality, but, as several writers have pointed out (Gandy, 1982), it is the seller of advertising space rather than the individual program viewer who is pleased in exact proportion to audience size. This application of the term cannot be denied, but it is not the meaning implied when the word is so

often displayed in the press. Beville (1985, pp. 308–309) reports that in 1977 the largest audiences received for episodes of a regular mini-series, *Roots*, ranged from 45% to 50% of adults nationwide; these audiences were nearly twice as large as the peaks in 1984 which occurred for *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, and *60 Minutes*. Does this mean that "Roots" was liked twice as much as *Dallas*? Or, by the same token that *Mork and Mindy* (1979, 34%) was liked nearly one-fourth more than *Dallas* in 1984? Such notions are absurd, even though in several places Beville (1985, p. 134) argues that "quantitative ratings" do a qualitative job, or in *Time* magazine's terms (p. 240) that ratings are "an expression of democracy in action." However, perceptive observers soon realized that the audience size figures were determined not only by a program's merit but also by such things as season, time of day, lead in, and oppositional circumstances. The British television executive Howard Thomas (1962) acknowledged these facts and referred also to our third mode of assessment, appreciation indices, sometimes pleonastically called "qualitative ratings" (pleonastic, because rating means an index of quality and one should not need to double the term), as useful in complementing the estimates of audience size.

In spite of the drawbacks, audience size constitutes the "one hand clap" of the chapter title, by which the press and the public generally continue to appraise television. In the United States, Hurwitz (1984, p. 205) explained that "ratings . . . constitute the language of competition between broadcasters and between broadcasting and other media." The main city newspapers and the broadcasting press ranging from the *TV Guide* to more technical publications most commonly refer to "ratings" as indicating popularity (which is correct) and, therefore, merit (a more complex and much more dubious assumption). As an added ambiguity the HUT (Homes Using Television) definition is sometimes used as an alternative to audience size expressed in individual terms, and the two rarely agree. Thus if 50% of homes have sets switched on, it is not unlikely that at least some of the individuals in these homes are not watching, so the individual percentage or rating will be less than 50%. Although in both Great Britain and the United States, audience size estimates are not the only available measures of assessment, they are the published ones. The weekly *Listener* magazine published by the BBC carries a section labeled "Research," which consists substantially of lists of top tens (defined by audience size) for each of the four networks, backed by a short commentary. The *Times* lists the same figures, usually without comment, but the tabloid papers carry the meaning of ratings further, to indicate high audience size; "in the ratings" is accordingly the touchstone of stardom and is thus not a scientific but a quasimagical term or incantation.

Since both in the United States and Great Britain the commercial measurement contractors define individual viewing extremely generously in terms simply of being in the room with the set switched on, the individual ratings or homeviewing figures are extremely likely to be over-

estimates of the number of people actually watching the screen, which depends on program appeal and a variety of personal factors and social circumstances. For example, a survey (Wober, 1974) included the question "if you do sometimes watch programs you really do not want to see, why does this happen?" Among a representative sample of over 500 adults in the London region, four out of ten endorsed "I am in the room when others insist on watching" and one fourth specified not switching off when the program comes next to something they do want to see. Beville (1985, p. 148) reports a Canadian study in which 45% of respondents indicated they were casual "viewers" (in the room, aware, or noticing rather than paying attention); likewise the defunct Boston firm Television Audience Assessment (1984) found that between 40% and 50% of the audience are eating, washing up, reading, or doing something else while the TV is on.

In spite of the problems of definition just cited, firm (and therefore misleading) figures are not only commonly bandied about, but they are justified by spokespeople with high visibility and status. In the United States, Jay Eliasberg, a vice president of CBS concerned with research in the early 1980s declared "I don't give a damn what people say. I care what they do . . . If they watch it, they are satisfied" (quoted in Menneer, 1981, p. 4). Similarly, a well-known analyst in Britain (Henry, 1978, p. 280) wrote that the minute-by-minute metered diary audience size estimates available permitted "a behaviourist approach to the measurement of appreciation which I for one judge a far more valid research technique than asking people questions about what they like." Note, here, that a distinction may unwittingly have been glossed over between what people say they like in general, believe they are going to like, or, having experienced, did like. We do not need to imply negligence on the part of Eliasberg, Henry, and others, for they may be aware of these analytic distinctions. If so, however, they did nothing to make these distinctions and to cope with any consequences that would arise because of them.

In addition to the "democratic" assumptions of Eliasberg, *Time* magazine, and many others—that action is an honest token of intention and resolve—the behaviorist justification offered by Henry indicates one theoretic standpoint within psychology and one that corresponds with the sociological procedure of dealing with aggregates of behavior, which are either taken as sufficiently important in themselves, or which are used for making inferences about individual experience or intentions. In short, the ratings information on audience size (and flow) resonates with democratic ideology and with sociological and behaviorist psychological methodology.

THE CONSUMERIST VIEW: SUBJECTIVITY

In contrast, a more cognitive and social psychological approach to assessing television is to measure audience appreciation of programs.Appreciation is measured only among those who have seen programs and only

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