

THE Ideological Octopus

AN EXPLORATION OF TELEVISION & ITS AUDIENCE



Justin Lewis

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An Exploration of Television
and Its Audience

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Preface

This is a book about television audiences. While writing it, I was conscious of another audience, every bit as important to me as the one under discussion: the audience of which you, dear reader, are a member. I was keenly aware of how unfortunate it would be if a book that purports to know something about the television audience should be written in a way that ignores the needs and interests of its readers.

I have tried, as best I could, to keep two people in mind throughout. The first knows very little about TV audience research, or the theoretical work (such as semiology and cultural studies) behind the more recent developments thereof. The second knows a great deal about both. This book is an attempt to go as far as possible while assuming as little as possible.

The book is divided into two parts: Part 1 is a journey through developments in audience research, focusing on some of the more recent theoretical advances and the ideas that have informed them; Part 2 is the presentation of two empirical qualitative audience studies, based upon television news and television fiction.

My main concern throughout is with one of the most mysterious and elusive aspects of watching television: how, in the most precise and intricate sense, does television actually influence us? What ideological role does it play in contemporary culture? I shall investigate what television means by examining *how* it means what it means, by exploring the complex relation between the message and the viewer.

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to television audience research and takes a critical look at some of the research traditions that dominated the field from the 1940s to the 1970s. In so doing, the chapter confronts some of the basic questions to be resolved about the television audience.

Chapter 2 provides the reader with a short interlude, placing the inquiry into the TV audience in its contemporary theoretical context. The study of the audience is briefly considered in relation to modern media studies, semiology and cultural studies.

Preface

Chapter 3 takes up the story where Chapter 1 left it, examining what I have called the “new audience research,” much of which has evolved from the theoretical traditions touched on in the previous chapter. It considers the relation between media criticism (or “textual analysis”) and audience research, and proceeds to a discussion of the most recent work in the field.

Chapter 4 analyzes some of the practical and methodological questions that confront the audience researcher, concentrating on the qualitative approach to the subject.

Chapter 5 opens Part 2; it introduces the reader to two empirical studies, one carried out in Britain, the other in the United States. The chapter uses the studies to tackle the methodological problems that surround the analysis of interview transcripts.

Chapter 6 is an analysis of television news based upon the findings of an audience study. In the light of these findings, the ideological role of TV news is radically reconsidered.

Chapter 7 is an analysis of *The Cosby Show* based, like Chapter 6, on the findings of an audience study. The findings are used to shed some light on recent debates about the show’s meaning and significance.

The title of this book is, I admit, a little enigmatic. By the end of Chapter 7 its meaning will, I hope, become clear. Happy reading.

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PART 1

1

An Introduction to the TV Audience

INTRODUCING TELEVISION

Imagine, for a moment, that you have been magically transported back in time to the 1930s, anywhere in the industrialized world. Imagine also, if you will, that you have been transported for a particular reason: you are a journalist who has been asked to write a feature article on changes in everyday life between now and then. Your editor has wished you luck, leaving you by yourself to settle back into the comfortable padded seating of the time capsule.

What are your feelings as you slither backwards through recent history? Do you have any sense of danger or foreboding? Not really—your destination is, after all, vaguely familiar. It is the world your grandparents grew up in, a world you have seen pictures of, a world you have been told about by people who were there, a civilized, sophisticated, twentieth-century world. It is not as if you are being transported back to somewhere unpredictable and strange, before enlightenment, reason or the steam engine. No, you feel secure and just a little curious.

You are looking forward to seeing men dressed in baggy suits, women wearing hats and art deco furniture that isn't sitting in an overpriced antique shop. Maybe you will be able to pick something up to take back? You think nostalgically about an age before microwave ovens, shopping malls and T-shirts boasting unwitty slogans.

When you arrive, your first impression is one of absences. There are no ugly post-war high-rise buildings, no three-lane highways and no travel agents. There are fewer shops, fewer cars and a much smaller selection of vegetables in the market stalls. There is no multitude of brand names offering to cure your headache, clean your hair or wash your socks, and nothing appears to be "additive free" or "low in cholesterol".

As you begin to probe deeper into the 1930s world, however, this impression begins to change, to be gradually replaced by a sense of historical continuity. The basic social structures you observe (through the many telescopic windows of the time capsule) do not

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really appear to be that different. There is less money and less technology certainly, but people's daily lives don't seem to have altered that much. They work a little longer, but only a little, they eat a little less and they sleep at roughly the same times. There are hospitals, schools, movies, daily newspapers, buses and postage stamps. People go to bars, theaters and restaurants, they hang out on street corners and play the same kind of games.

As you return back to the 1990s, you reflect upon what you have seen. The gap between then and now, you muse, is, perhaps, more style than substance. And yet, people's behavior *does* seem to have changed. There is a presence now that was not there then. It is something ubiquitous, something that dominates what we now call leisure time. There used to be two activities we could name that dominated huge chunks of most of our lives. Now there are three: sleeping, working and watching television. In the average home in the United States, the TV is on for more than seven hours a day, and by the time many children finish high school, they will have spent more hours watching TV than in school. Similarly in Britain, the lengths of the average working week and of the average "viewing" week creep closer and closer.

It is not unusual for technological developments to occur more rapidly than our ability to understand their social consequences. In the last century, industrial societies pursued technological advance with scant regard for the social disruption it unleashed upon the working class. Our societies may have become a little less brutal, but, even in the twentieth century, there are few instances of social considerations determining the shape of technological development. It is possible that we have, as individuals, become more self-analytical. As societies, we have scarcely bothered to pause, even for a brief moment, for reflection.

The development of television is no exception. Television began life, not so long ago, as a gimmick, an amusing diversion from the radio. Its prodigious growth in the 1950s and 1960s turned it into a monster, a creature whose tentacles squirmed into almost every avenue of our cultural life. Now, in the 1990s, it would be difficult for us to find many more hours in the day to watch TV than we do already. Our energy has been channeled into the technologies of production, distribution and reception. We have laid cable, launched satellites, equipped viewers with video recorders and sought to improve the quality of production, sound and vision. And yet, what do we know about the practice of watching television itself? The answer is, unfortunately, very little.

The breadth of our ignorance is remarkable. We do not really know what role television plays in the formation of attitudes and beliefs about ourselves and our world. We are aware that it does play a role—as advertisers or political campaign consultants will testify—but we are uncertain about how or why. The story of TV viewing is a tale of mystery and imagination.

I do not promise, in the pages that follow, to get to the bottom of this mystery. I shall nevertheless attempt a few tentative steps into some of the more enigmatic aspects of television watching. I shall argue, moreover, that we have, as social scientists, reached a point of theoretical sophistication that allows us to understand more about the practice of watching television than ever before.

Before setting off on such an uncertain journey, we need to establish two things: first, what do we already know, and second, what remains unknown?

MASS CULTURE, POPULAR CULTURE

One assertion frequently made, by a surprising variety of people, is that media researchers invest television with too much power. The truth is, on the whole, quite the opposite. The history of TV audience research is characterized more by understatement than by bold and sweeping claims. Here we have a machine that sits in the corner and pumps out messages to people hour after hour, year in, year out—and yet media researchers, like circumspect lawyers, are prone to muffle statements about its influence with caveat upon caveat. Some, such as Conrad Lodziak (1986), have argued that television's main effect is not on our consciousness at all, but on its tendency to monopolize our leisure time.

The explanation for this rampaging caution has more to do with the nature of academic inquiry than with any social realities. The bold are necessarily taking more risks than the cautious. The more aware we have become of those risks, the more tentative we have become. It is, after all, much more difficult to build a positive case than it is to knock it down.

We are also, it must be emphasized, dealing with a complex semiotic phenomenon when we take on the study of television. There are no straightforward solutions to its mysteries. Unlike other forms of scientific investigation, there are, as we shall see, no agreed measures for evaluating the practice of TV watching.

Perhaps the most radical claims about television come from a body of work that preceded and anticipated the age of mass TV

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viewing. This was the work of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse from the Frankfurt School. Capitalism, empowered by technology that could reach whole populations, was, they argued, in a position to restrict and control cultural life as never before. Mass cultural forms (like television) would create a "mass culture" that was uniform and banal, reducing cultural life to the lowest common denominator available in the marketplace. Anything dynamic, innovative or creative would be deemed unsuitable for the mass market, to be replaced by a mundane repetition of bland superficiality.

The Frankfurt School has, since then, been criticized from a number of quarters. The beauty of its generality concealed a number of flaws. The "mass culture" thesis was seen, first of all, as an expression of aesthetic values that were traditional and elitist. It appeared to contain the implicit assumption that popularity necessarily degraded and impoverished culture—a view that seemed to say more about the authors than about the culture they condemned. Indeed, the more the theory was applied to contemporary society, the more shaky it appeared. Were "the masses" really that passive? And weren't the new cultural industries, at least on occasion, producing things as innovative and creative as anything hitherto?

My own feeling is that, by and large, the critics are right: television—or, for that matter, any other popular cultural form—is *not* that simple. I am, however, wary of being too dismissive. For all its simplicity, there are elements of the Frankfurt School's grand cultural theory that strike a disturbing chord of truth. The deregulation of television and radio that has characterized government policy in the U.S. and many parts of Europe in recent years, does seem to suggest that free market capitalism will, ultimately, suppress cultural innovation and diversity (see Richeri, 1985; and Lewis, 1990). There is also no doubt that the age of television, like the age of religion, provides us with a common cultural currency, a set of ideas and images that most of us share. This gives television the power to create a degree of ideological uniformity, whether about a soft drink, a politician or a social issue, with greater speed and force than ever before.

At the heart of this debate is a tension between the viewer and the viewed. Where does power—the power to create and solidify meanings—*really* lie? Does it rest in the hands of the TV producer or the TV consumer? Do we create our own meanings, or are they passed on to us, prewrapped in an attractive, well-designed package? As we examine the fruits of over forty years of inquiry into TV watching, it will become clear that this tension underpins the whole

history of audience research. The quest to resolve this tension could not be more serious. The meaning of television, no less, is at stake.

OF MICE, MEN AND WOMEN

The history of television audience research is almost as old as the history of television viewing itself. Whereas the study of television today encompasses textual and content analysis, political economy and rhetorical theory, television research from the 1940s to the 1970s was dominated by audience studies.

The first question to be asked about television—and asked repeatedly—was refreshingly simple: what was the effect of television upon people who watched it? Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, this question revolved around two recurring themes: could violence on television induce violent behavior in viewers, and what effect did TV have on people's political attitudes? While both these questions are of enduring fascination, they had the advantage of allowing researchers to enter "television" as a key variable into social statistics that were readily available. Was this the variable that lay behind shifts in political support at elections? Was it the missing link in attempts to explain the increasing crime rate?

Thus began what became known as the "effects" school of research. Studies were commissioned, surveys carried out and findings analyzed. Anyone who has ever been involved in experimental research of this kind will understand the sense of excitement and anticipation that surrounds the gathering of data whose results are unknown, data with the power to prove or disprove a theory. Discovery, as the saying goes, is no accident: it is the culmination of empirical research. So, what did they find? What mysteries did they uncover?

Without wishing to belittle a number of interesting individual studies, two words can sum up the experience of reading through the many published studies of the period as a whole: inconclusive or confusing. It is a little like reading *Hamlet*; a number of questions are thrown into the air, the reader follows the hero's quest to try and resolve them until, finally, when all the action is over, the questions are . . . left hanging there. For every "proof" of TV causing attitudes to change, there is another study disproving it. Perhaps, you wonder, these questions can never be answered?

The disappointment felt by those in the discipline was so profound that, by the 1960s, the "effects" approach to the TV audience

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was, to all intents and purposes, abandoned. What went wrong? How do we interpret the failure to find conclusive results?

The problem does not lie with the basic question of “effects,” but with the particular formulations of that question and the means used to try and answer it. The effect of watching TV is bound up with complex social processes. It is not like giving mice small electric shocks to modify their behavior—even if it sometimes feels like it.

The difference between the TV viewer and the mouse is not simply (Douglas Adams notwithstanding) that we’d put our money on most human beings to outwit the average mouse, but in the whole nature of the experiment. Suppose an over-zealous animal behaviorist wanted to measure the effect of mild electric shocks on a mouse’s preference for gorgonzola over cheddar. The methodology required to pursue such an inquiry is fairly straightforward: our cruel but thorough researcher would probably take the following steps.

First, inscribed within the study are a limited range of possible responses. These responses are behavioral and measurable: the mice will or will not change their cheese preferences, and the nature of these changes can be observed and enumerated by the researcher.

Second, it is possible for the researcher to eliminate other variables (such as a mouse’s possible tendency, over time, to develop and shift preference from one type of cheese to another) by setting up a “control,” involving mice free to choose their cheese as they please, without any painful deterrents. The two sets of mice can be compared and conclusions drawn.

The final problem the researcher needs to overcome concerns possible differences in response between different kinds of mice. It may be, for example, that Italian mice will stick with gorgonzola rather more tenaciously than British or Belgian mice. The researcher will simply test this variable by repeating the experiment with different kinds of mice.

The TV audience researcher, on the other hand, faces a whole range of complications, complications that many of the “effects” researchers either failed to overcome or fully appreciate. We can, with the benefit of hindsight, identify six principal difficulties.

1. Unlike the unfortunate mice, the “effect” of watching television will not necessarily be manifested in our behavior. Political coverage may not change the way we actually vote, but it may influence the way we *think* politically. Such changes, because they go on inside people’s heads, will be difficult for us to observe. Similarly, the fact that TV violence does not appear to generate