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Television as Popular Culture

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"Television" means "seeing from afar." It describes several things: a physical device, a cultural system, and a labor process that brings the two together and embeds them in the daily experience of half the world's population (→ Television). "Popular" signifies of, by, and for the people, offering transcendence through pleasure, but doing so by referring to the everyday (→ Popular Communication). "Culture" derives from agriculture (→ Culture: Definitions and Concepts). With the emergence of capitalism, it simultaneously embodied instrumentalism and abjured it, via the industrialization of farming and the cultivation of taste.

These terms have generally been understood through the social sciences and the humanities – truth versus beauty. In the humanities, popular television texts are evaluated by criteria of quality and politics, understood through criticism and history. The social sciences focus on

television viewers, investigated ethnographically, experimentally, or statistically. So whereas the humanities articulate differences through symbolic norms (for example, which class has the cultural capital to appreciate high culture) the social sciences articulate differences through social norms (for example, which people play militaristic electronic games). "Popular culture" relates to markets, as does most television. Neo-classical economics assumes that expressions of the desire and capacity to pay for services animate entertainment and hence determine what is "popular."

Early Concerns about Television

This background explains why television is the focus of so much theory and research. People have long fantasized about transmitting images and sounds. Richard Whittaker Hubbell published *4000 Years of television* in 1942, and the device has its own patron saint, Clare of Assisi, a teen runaway from the thirteenth century who was canonized in 1958 for imagining a midnight mass broadcast on her wall. In 1935, Rudolf Arnheim predicted TV would bring global peace. But he also warned that "television is a new, hard test of our wisdom." The emergent medium's easy access to knowledge would either enrich or impoverish its viewers, manufacturing an informed public, vibrant and active – or an indolent audience, domesticated and passive (Arnheim 1969, 160–163).

Such concerns about TV have never receded. When famous news anchor Edward R. Murrow addressed the US Radio-Television News Directors Association in 1958, he used the description/metaphor that television needed to "illuminate" and "inspire," or it would be "merely wires and light in a box." In a famous speech to the National Association of Broadcasters three years later, Newton Minow called US TV a "vast wasteland" (1971). He was urging broadcasters to show that the US was not the mindless consumer world that the Soviets claimed. The networks would thereby live up to their legislative responsibilities to act in the public interest by informing and entertaining. For his part, Alfred Hitchcock said: "Television is like the American toaster, you push the button and the same thing pops up every time" (quoted in Wasko 2005, 10; → Television: Social History).

These concerns come from a longstanding class concern. Ever since the

Industrial Revolution, anxieties have existed about urbanized populations vulnerable to *manipulation by images* and demagogues through the popular. This is spectacularly the case with television. The notion of the suddenly enfranchised being bamboozled by the unscrupulously fluent has recurred throughout the modern period. It leads to an emphasis on the number and conduct of television audiences: where they came from, how many there were, and what they did after being there. These audiences are conceived as empirically knowable, via research instruments derived from sociology, demography, psychology, communications, and marketing (→ Research Methods). Such concerns are coupled with a concentration on content. Texts are also conceived as empirically knowable, via research instruments derived from communications, sociology, psychology, and literary criticism.

Key Topics in Research

Television analysts "speak different languages, use different methods," and pursue "different questions" (Hartley 1999, 18). But broadly speaking, TV has given rise to *three key topics*: ownership and control, texts, and audiences, with the question of the audience, and the knowledge that it has or that it lacks, as the governing discourse. Within these categories lie several other divisions. Approaches to *ownership and control* vary between neo-liberal endorsements of limited regulation by the state, in the interests of guaranteeing market entry for new competitors, and Marxist critiques of the "bourgeois" media's control of the agenda for discussing society. Approaches to *textuality* vary between hermeneutic endeavors, which unearth the meaning of individual programs and link them to broader social formations and problems, and content-analytic endeavors, which establish patterns across significant numbers of similar texts, rather than close readings of individual ones (→ Text and Intertextuality). And approaches to *audiences* vary between social-psychological attempts to validate correlations between watching TV and social conduct, and culturalist critiques of imported television threatening national culture (→ Audience Research → Exposure to Television).

Just as US communication studies doggedly clings to a binary opposition between qualitative and quantitative approaches, between impression

and science, between commitment and truth, so its dominant formation has hewed closely, with an almost febrile desire, to methodological individualism in seeking to explain why people and television interact as they do, looking for links between TV and violence, misogyny, and educational attainment. By contrast, most study of TV elsewhere is more exercised by imported programs' impact on their countries' cultural expression, using terminology and methods that address TV as a collective issue, rather than an individual one; a matter of interpretation and politics, more than psychological impact. But there is in fact a link between the two anxieties.

Models of the Impact of Television on Popular Culture

Each of these anxieties assumes that audience members risk abjuring either interpersonal responsibility (in the US) or national culture (in the rest of the world). Both models assume that the audience is a "cultural dope … acting in compliance with the common culture." Caricaturing people in this way clouds the actual "common sense rationalities … of here and now situations" (Garfinkel 1992, 68). The dope first appears in a *domestic effects model* (DEM). Dominant in the US, and increasingly exported around the world, it is typically applied without consideration of place and is psychological (for the apotheosis, see Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior 1971). Entering young minds hypodermically, TV can both enable and imperil learning and drive viewers to violence. The DEM is found in laboratories, clinics, prisons, schools, newspapers, psychology journals, television stations' research and publicity departments, everyday talk, program-classification regulations, conference papers, parliamentary debates, and state-of-our-youth or state-of-our-civil-society moral panics (→ Violence as Media Content, Effects of).

The second means of constituting "dopes" is a *global effects model* (GEM), primarily utilized in non-US discourse. Whereas the DEM focuses on the → cognition and → emotion of individual human subjects, via observation and experimentation, the GEM looks to customs and patriotism. Cultural belonging, not psychic wholeness, is the touchstone of the GEM (→ Globalization Theories). Instead of measuring audience responses to TV electronically or behaviorally (→ People-Meter), as its

domestic counterpart does, the GEM interrogates the geopolitical origin of televisual texts and the themes and styles they embody, with particular attention to the putatively nation-building genres of drama, news, sport, and current affairs. GEM adherents hold that local citizens should control TV, because their loyalty can be counted on in the event of war, while in the case of drama, only locally sensitized producers will make narratives that are true to tradition and custom. The model is found in media-imperialism critique, everyday talk, broadcast and telecommunications policy, unions, international organizations, newspapers, heritage, cultural diplomacy, and postindustrial service-sector planning. In its manifestation as textual analysis, it interprets programs in ideological terms.

In contradistinction to the DEM/GEM, a third tendency in communication studies is stimulated by the *cultural-dope critique*. Endorsing the audience as active rather than passive, it constructs two other model audiences: all-powerful consumers (invented and loved by neo-liberal policy-makers; desired and feared by corporations) who use TV like an appliance, choosing what they want from its programming; and all-powerful interpreters (invented and loved by utopic communications and cultural critics; investigated and led by corporations) who use TV to bring pleasure and sense to their lives. Each claims that the television audience makes its own meanings, outwitting institutions of the state, academia, and capital that seek to measure and control it. Ownership patterns do not matter, because the industry is "wildly volatile," animated entirely by "the unpredictable choice of the audience" (De Vany 2004, 1, 140). The first approach demonstrates a mechanistic application of neo-classical economics. The second varies between social-psychological tests of viewers' gratifications and a critical ethnography that engages cultural and social questions.

But the DEM and the GEM continue unabated as the major players. From one side, effects researchers Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer comment on "the impact on children of their exposure through television and films or, more recently, to computer games and arcade video games that involve vast amounts of violent actions" (2001, xv). From the other side, cultural researcher Néstor García Canclini notes that: "We Latin Americans presumably learned to be citizens through our relationship to

Europe; our relationship to the United States will, however, reduce us to consumers" (2001, 1).

Regardless of their political or epistemological quixotries, all such researchers begin with popular culture and television as problems in need of address, whether through critique or adulation. Perhaps future scholars will break away from this rather elderly dance, and consider issues of textual diversity, cultural democracy, TV labor, and the high-technology trashing of electronic waste.

SEE ALSO: → Americanization of the Media → Audience Research → Cognition → Culture: Definitions and Concepts → Emotion → Exposure to Television → Globalization Theories → Media Economics → Media Effects → Media History → People-Meter → Popular Communication → Research Methods → Television → Television: Social History → Text and Intertextuality → Violence as Media Content, Effects of

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