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Mary Kelly

University college dublin

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The television audience: A research review

Mary Kelly

Television researchers, like television producers, regulators and other commentators, have used a variety of perspectives in their attempt to understand different facets of that apparently simple but in effect rather illusory category 'the television audience'. In this article I will look at three of these: those which have emphasized the audience as consumers, those which have defined the audience as public citizens, and those which have focused on the audience as cultural actors. While noting previous research within each of these perspectives and drawing on Irish research when available, I will particularly concentrate on more recent developments. These developments have tended to break down some of the earlier boundaries between perspectives, between their different definitions of the audience and between their different methodologies.

In recent years there has been renewed interest in the television audience, due to two major stimuli. One is interest in examining changing audience behaviour in the light of the introduction into the home of new media technologies - especially cable, satellite and video, and the related internationalization and commercialization of television programming.

The second is the increasing theoretical interest among media researchers in culture, in everyday social practices, and in understanding the relationship between everyday socio-cultural practices and power. This latter theoretical interest has opened up a space for new theoretical and empirical work on the television audience.

Research on the Audience as Consumers

Research into the audience as media consumers has taken three forms. The first identified the audience as a mass of individual consumers, and investigated the psychological effects of media content on these individual consumers. This is often entitled a 'stimulus - response' model of media consumption. The second model saw each audience member as having socio-psychological motivations which s/he sought to gratify through media consumption decisions - and was hence entitled a 'uses and gratifications' model of media consumption. A third model sees these socio-psychologically motivated consumption decisions as being taken within, and centrally influenced by, broader socio-cultural contexts and taste cultures.

Since the 1920s media researchers have been interested in systematically investigating the influence of the media on the attitudes and behaviour of audience members. In the early days researchers were interested in the influence of films, later moving on to radio and subsequently to television. Simplistic models of audience 'effects' drawing on a stimulus-response model were soon abandoned by some, as research highlighted how the existing cognitive and emotional dispositions of the audience member influenced what was viewed and how the viewer responded. Research also began to note the influence of the viewer's social environment on these predispositions.

The movement from the first to the second model may be exemplified in the extensive research on the influence of violent TV on children which has been undertaken in the USA. A general conclusion of this research is that some children may be encouraged in their aggressive behaviour by viewing some types of violent TV programmes. This tends to occur, however, only under certain conditions. One such important condition is an existing predisposition in the child to be aggressive. A second concerns the attitudes towards aggression of those in the child's immediate social environment. In general, these attitudes must be accepting of aggressive behaviour - or even encourage aggression - if the child is to act aggressively. A third condition is the particular form of violence seen by the child. This latter condition includes such factors as the perceived authoritative nature of the programme seen and the reality of the violence to the child (see Brown, 1976; Comstock et al, 1975, Howitt, 1982; Lowery et al, 1983).

These three findings - firstly, that TV does not generally create attitudes or behavioural responses in the viewer but may confirm existing predispositions; secondly, that the message is mediated by significant others in the viewer's environment, and thirdly that the programme form is important - are typical of a wide range of research findings on media effects. These findings hold true whether the research has examined the influence of media violence on children or the influence of election television on voters.
The importance of understanding attitudinal and behavioural predispositions led researchers, as noted above, to develop the 'uses and gratifications' approach to the television audience. This approach focuses on how individuals actively use media content to obtain gratification, and to fulfill their own pre-existing needs and interests.

While some research in this tradition has fruitfully - if routinely - identified a typical set of motivations for media use (e.g. the desire for information, for diversion, for social contact or to reinforce one's personal identity), other researchers have pushed this 'uses and gratifications' framework further by examining what kinds of personalities choose what kinds of programmes and why. This was the social psychological approach taken by Grant Noble in Children in Front of the Small Screen. He undertook research into viewing patterns among 13-15 year olds in a boarding school for 'somewhat privileged boys' in Dublin in the early 1970s. He concluded by identifying three categories of boys: Conformist, Rebel and Problem boys. Each category, he argued, had their own programme preferences, motivation to view and televiewing style. He examined how these preferences and televiewing styles were influenced by their social environment, in particular their relationship with their family and peer group. I summarise his conclusions below.

Conformist boys had a strong sense of their own identity, an identity which they perceived as supported by the views of peers, parents and teachers about them. They were also strongly embedded in peer group relationships. This group enjoyed news and comedy programmes in particular, and talked about the content of these programmes with family and friends. Rebel boys tended to be identified by other boys as leaders, but not as close friends. They had a relatively clear sense of their own identity, but rejected what they perceived as parental and teacher conceptions of them. These boys sought out programmes which featured the lone urban man, the lone and aggressive hero, in, for example, detective and western stories, and identified with such heroes. They tended not to discuss programmes with parents, but did use TV viewing to start up conversations with friends. They interacted within 'straight' TV presenters (e.g. newscasters) by, for example, making rude comment at them while on the television screen. The last category, problem boys, had little sense of their own identity, often coming from 'problem' family settings and were isolated from peer groups. Again these social factors had consequences for the type of programmes viewed and preferred and the emotional gratifications sought from these programmes. These boys were fond to enjoy serials, especially family based serials. They liked programmes in which there was a regularly appearing group of people. They identified with TV characters more than either of the other categories. Noble argues that they used TV in order to practice interaction within a highly predictable and routinised setting. They did this in order to try to learn how to interact successfully, and to establish a more stable identity. They sought companionship and reassurance from television viewing.

The more interesting research in this tradition has thus, I would argue, moved from simply identifying lists of motivations to an examination of the social-psychological predisposition to view certain programme types, and further, to examine the socio-cultural contexts within which both psychological predispositions and certain preferences and 'taste' cultures develop. This represents a movement away from an individualistic conception of the viewer, to the viewer as social and cultural actor.

The most recent research on viewers as consumers thus concentrates on, not so much the individual consumer, but on the social and cultural contexts in which consumption decisions regarding TV are taken, in particular the social context of the household and the cultural context of socially structured taste cultures.

The recent priority given to investigating the domestic context of the home, and the placing of the TV consumer within this context is, in part, due to increasing interest in new consumer technologies and in understanding how domestic decisions are reached regarding incorporating such new services as cable and satellite TV, teletext, VCRs and computers within the home.

Increasingly this research has relied on detailed ethnographic and intensive interviewing methods to investigate media consumption within the context of family and household interaction, values and lifestyle. It also recognizes that family interaction is embedded in the broader social and cultural contexts of, among others, class, gender, generational, educational, ethnic and national taste cultures. Thus, '...the analysis of broadcasting must be reformulated to take into account its inscription within the routines of everyday life and the interweaving of public and domestic discourses' (Morley et al, 1990:33).

Within the domestic sphere, the question is: what are the family and household dynamics which influence consumption decisions - regarding, for example, buying a video, subscribing to cable or satellite services, deciding which programmes to watch, or who may use the remote control and when. How are these decisions taken or negotiated within the 'microsocial environments of family and household interaction'
(ibid). Research findings from Britain, the U.S. and Germany indicate that these consumption decisions regarding new communication technologies - their buying and usage - tend to be predominantly in the hands of husband/father, and thus the consumption of the new media is tending to constitute a 'masculine domain' within the household. Sonia Livingstone elaborates:

Through technology, specifically through his preferred programme genres - sports or documentaries rather than soaps or dramas, through his use of the programme listings in the paper to anticipate demand, of the video recorder to time-shift woman's programme interests, with his zap stick to monitor other channels, and his 'shhh' to maintain viewing in his concentrated, not fragmentary, style, the man controls the major, shared living space. Technologies are used, then, to further establish male power in the home, extending public gender relations into the privacy of the family, expressing the subordination of non-earning or low paid women and legitimating the undervaluing of their domestic concerns' (Livingstone, 1991). (See also Rogge et al., 1988; Lindhof, 1987.)

Also within the context of the domestic sphere, there is increasing interest in exploring further different televiewing styles between men and women. Why, across a wide variety of different societies, do we find a consistent preference by men for news and sports, and a preference for soaps and drama by women? Why is the televiewing style of women more fragmentary than that for men, with women frequently doing other things (ironing, knitting, chatting) as well as viewing? Explanations have been offered in terms of the differential meaning of 'the home' for women as a site for work, while for men it is much more frequently seen as a site for leisure. Yet women may also, given the opportunity, take 'time out' to watch a favourite soap or 'weepie' film, in, for example, the afternoon, or read a romantic novel, and thus create a private and personal space. She may also tend to use an older communication technology - the telephone - in a different way to men, to maintain family and friendship networks, and as a source of emotional involvement. Technologies are used, then, to further establish male power in the home, extending public gender relations into the privacy of the family, expressing the subordination of non-earning or low paid women and legitimating the undervaluing of their domestic concerns' (Livingstone, 1991). (See also Rogge et al., 1988; Lindhof, 1987.)

Thus patterns of consumption - of both old and new communication technologies - are being investigated in terms of family patterns of negotiation, decision making and power, in terms of how the family and household is embedded in the wider world of kinship, friendship, neighbourhood and work, and indeed how this embedding may be differentially experienced by men and women, depending on, for example, whether or not they work outside the home, and their differential responsibilities within the home.

A further mode of investigating consumption decisions examines how they are influenced by 'taste cultures', and in particular by class based cultures. This perspective would suggest that consumption decisions regarding new communication technologies and their display and usage in the home are influenced by the desire of consumers to strategically appropriate and publicly use these technologies as 'markers of differentiation', marking the consuming family as members of a particular taste culture. Such markers operate as claims to identity, to membership of a particular group, and to status.

A theory of the relationship between 'taste cultures' and social class has been elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu in his attempt to explain the very different tastes of the upper, middle and working class in France. He argues that the differential material and social conditions of existence experienced by those in different social classes gives rise to very different dispositions and desires (labelled 'habitus' by Bourdieu) which are expressed in different taste and consumption styles. These taste cultures, he suggests, are further influenced by education. Thus the upper middle classes who have achieved status through education, attempt to copperfasten their claim to 'superiority' through particular consumption styles - styles frequently based on claims to superior or esoteric knowledge - such as knowledge of contemporary 'art' films and contemporary music; of health foods; or new technologies. This consumption style may be contrasted with what the educated middle class might characterize as the conspicuous (and somewhat vulgar) consumption of those whose status is based not on cultural or educational capital but on economic capital. The latter may prefer fast cars and large homes with a TV and video in every bedroom. Technology competes to establish, maintain and reproduce their status through elaborating taste and consumption cultures, hence claiming symbolic superiority over others (Bourdieu, 1984; Millar, 1987; Dibaggio, 1982).

The above discussion on the audience as consumers has traced the movement by researchers from a passive to an active conception of audience behaviour, and from a
more individualistic and psychological perspective to one which emphasizes the socio-cultural, domestic, class and gendered contexts in which consumption decisions are made regarding the use of new communication technologies in the home, and regarding what programmes to watch and how they are watched. At this point the emphasis on the audience as consumers begins to articulate closely with perspectives on the audience as cultural actors, and thus will be taken up again in the third section below.

Research on The Audience as Public Citizens.

The audience may be defined not only as consumers but as citizens. Through this lens television viewers are frequently seen as citizens of a particular nation state, involved in a public democratic discourse and hence with the right to be informed, to question elites and to make informed decisions. Research of relevance in this context includes investigations of the extent to which viewers can be directly informed and influenced by the media on matters of public concern, as well as the indirect influence of the media on citizens and on the quality of public and democratic life generally, by the way in which the media may contribute to the modification of political, religious, economic and other major institutions.

Most of the research on both direct and indirect media influences has examined the relationship between the media and politics, in particular examining the media's 'agenda setting' powers - its power, through consistently highlighting particular issues and presenting them within a particular ideological frame to 'define reality' for viewers and to ensure that these issues are placed on the public agenda. While it is difficult to gain conclusive evidence of the media's agenda setting powers, it does appear that when individuals are heavily dependent on the media for knowledge about particular issues, have few alternative sources of information or little reinforcement for existing contrary views, the media may indeed have the power to both focus attention on this issue and to define the terms in which it will be discussed. Again, media influence will depend on certain complex filter conditions: for example, on the class, gender and political subcultures to which viewers belong and hence the predispositions and attitudes which influence what is viewed and how it is received; the extent to which the media is believed as a credible source of information; the way the message is presented and how frequently it is repeated (see Morley, 1980; Kosicki et al., 1990; McLeod et al., 1985; McQuail, 1987; Philo, 1980).

Given the potential agenda setting power of the media, it is important to ask: whose definition of reality is being reproduced and amplified by the media? What particular power groups within a society may influence the media's agenda? What is the relationship between political, economic, professional, religious and other elite groups and the media? Answers to these questions may help to explain why some issues are taken up and others excluded; some ideological themes continuously elaborated while others are marginalized or ignored (see Kelly, 1984 a and b).

The most overt form of control over the media is of course political censorship. The direct political censorship of broadcasting coverage of the conflict in Northern Ireland at present, proscribing the broadcasting of interviews with members of illegal organizations or reports of such interviews, requires that the self legitimating political statements of members of illegal organizations be ignored. This leads to violent incidents being reported as a series of unmotivated and irrational actions. Thus the 'news story' of Northern Ireland is frequently dominated by images of irrational violence. Given what is known about media power, the likely consequence for many in the Republic who rely on television and radio as the most credible source of news (75%), and who have few alternative sources of information on what is happening in Northern Ireland, is to be extremely ill-informed regarding one crucial aspect shaping the conflict in the Northern Ireland. Their rights as citizens to be so informed, and thus to enable them make informed decisions, has been fundamentally undermined (Kelly, 1986).

Not only may the media influence the audience, media coverage may also influence the actions of political actors. Thus, the media, by consistently putting a particular issue (e.g. crime, health-cuts) on the public agenda, may influence politicians to do something about this issue. In such instances politicians may use the media as a 'bystander public', assuming media concerns are also the public's concern. Likewise, a lack of media coverage can lead to political action.

Because of the close interaction and indeed interdependence of political and media institutions, it is frequently argued that the media, especially television, have fundamentally influenced the contemporary development of political institutions in democratic societies. Denis McQuail (1987) has summarized:

'Recurring ideas about the effects of media change on political institutions include the following: that personalities (leaders) have
become relatively more important; that attention has been diverted from the local and regional to the national stage; that face-to-face political campaigning has declined; that partisanship and ideology are less important than finding pragmatic solutions to agreed problems; that opinion polls have gained influence; that electorates have become more volatile (more inclined to change allegiance); that general news values have influenced the attention-gaining activities of political parties; that internal party channels of communication have been attenuated; that media and more specifically the press becomes more important than party logic in selection and presentation. As always, it is hard to separate out the effects of media change from broad changes in society working both on the media and on political institutions and there is much room for dispute about what is the real cause of a given effect.'

In this very complex area of the relationship between media, political institutions and audiences, an attempt was made to investigate some aspects of these interrelationships in a case study of media coverage of the 1979 European elections in all EEC countries including Ireland (see Kelly, 1983 and 1984c; Blumler, 1983).

From one perspective, the media in Ireland appeared powerful and autonomous - particularly relative to the government of the day. The press predefined the Euro-elections, some six months before election day, as a domestic and mid-term test for the government. Broadcasters followed suit. The government of the day (Fianna Fail), however loath to campaign on such a difficult terrain, felt obliged to do so, and indeed lost the election.

Yet the media operates, not simply in relation to the immediate government of the day, but within a given and broader political system, where relevant political factors in European elections include the timing of the elections in the national election cycle, and, given the fact that the same parties stand for European as well as national elections, Euro-election results are very likely to be taken as a test of domestic party strengths and weaknesses. Broadcasters in all European countries were found to be similarly influenced by the broad political context within which the election was held. The comparative research concluded that the definition of an election and the status it is given, is not simply within the gift of the media. Rather, it is distilled out within the context of the often conflictual relationships between politicians, broadcasters and audiences within a particular national media-political system. These relationships and the balance of power and alliances at any one time vary.

It might also be noted at this point that broadcasting coverage of the European elections in Ireland, as in other EEC countries, operated as a politically mobilizing force. Those who watched the election coverage on TV were more likely to come out to vote than those who did not view. Furthermore, TV viewing was found to be particularly influential among those who were otherwise not interested in the elections. A follow-up study of the 1984 European elections replicated and confirmed these findings.

Previous research in Western Europe on the broadcasting audience as a 'public' has tended to see each national broadcasting organization as located within a particular nation state, and as being required by broadcasting legislation, as well as by the interests of broadcasters themselves, to be responsive to the democratic, cultural and political interests of that particular nation state. However, as the number of privately owned and commercial stations rapidly increases throughout Western Europe, and as ownership of these stations is increasingly internationalized and concentrated in a few hands, and as the number of imported entertainment programmes, especially from the US, offered by these new commercial stations rapidly outstrips those offered on the older public service stations, concern has been expressed regarding the consequences for audiences - especially the audience as citizens of a particular nation state. The concern is that ultimately there may be fewer home produced programmes, especially drama, current affairs and documentary productions (see Kelly, 1988), and that commercial broadcasting may be much less responsive to the democratic, public and cultural interests of the nation state, given that its primary interest is in making a profit, and that it tends to be owned by a few international media moguls. In this context we need, as Nicholas Garnham (1990:18) has noted, 'to rethink the concept of citizenship in the modern world', and to rethink the meaning of freedom of expression and information in a world of increased concentration of economic and communicative power and the consequences of these for the citizen, for informed political decision making and for representative democracy.

Furthermore, with the rapid increase in the amount of general entertainment programmes and sport on offer, viewers may increasingly switch to these programmes. This will reduce the importance of the national television service as a public
informational service and undermine its importance as a site for investigating the activities of political and other elite groups. Garnham (1990:124) has argued that such an undermining of television's present public service functions would contribute to reinforcing the increasing division between the information rich and information poor within society. He notes that the commercialization of the new communication technologies has led to the creation of a two-tier information market divided between rich and poor. The former can afford to subscribe to high cost specialized information, cultural and communication services characterized by range and diversity, while the latter are increasingly reduced to relying on homogenized entertainment services, which in many instances may be imported (see also Golding, 1990).

Concern has also been expressed regarding the increasing Americanization - or Dallasiucation as it is sometimes called - of West European television. As noted above, the new commercial stations have been found to import a much higher percentage of US general entertainment programmes than the older public service stations. From its inception, of course, RTE has had to face more foreign competition than almost any other national television channel in Europe. At the present time this includes overspill signals from British stations which, along with the third of the population who have cable, means that two thirds of the population receive the four British terrestrial channels, with cabled homes also receiving satellite channels. Furthermore, of the programmes RTE transmits, over 50% are imported. Nevertheless, Irish produced programmes are consistently the most popular programmes on RTE - The Late Late Show, Glenroe, Today Tonight and The News. However, recent legislation limiting advertising revenue on RTE, as well as the possible emergence of the commercial TV station TV3, is bound to limit the amount of finance available for home productions in the future.

Research on the choices and responses of audiences in the circumstances of more foreign competition and programming is just beginning in Europe. One such piece of research - in which Ireland is included - notes that while U.S. dramas such as Dallas are highly popular with European audiences, home produced serials tend to be even more popular. National audiences have been found to derive considerable pleasure from home produced series - especially in Britain and Ireland, with such series as Coronation Street and Glenroe - in comparison with popular U.S. series (Silj. 1988:45). The question is, will existing stations, given increased competition, be able to afford to continue making such home produced drama?

Media researchers also argue that as the number of television stations increase, and cross border and imported programmes flow in, the audience will inevitably fragment. This will considerably weaken the previous contribution of television to 'the construction of a national culture' (see Scannell. 1988; Schlesinger, 1987). As audiences fragment, the argument runs, the previous ability of one, or just a few, national stations to mobilize and involve the population as a whole in the calendar of national life (e.g. major national, sporting and festive events), and its ability to offer a shared dramatic construction and questioning of national identity in its news, current affairs and drama productions, will be considerably undermined both through financial constraints and because of audience fragmentation. They thus argue that the commercialization and internationalization of television will contribute fundamentally to the deconstruction of national cultures as well as to undermining television's central role in the public sphere. Television will thus become an internationalized and commercialized entertainment service rather than a public national service. These concerns are also expressed and investigated in research on audiences as cultural actors.

Research on Audiences as Cultural Actors

Some of the best research on the audience as cultural actors draws on a 'cultural studies' approach to the media. Within this approach, the media is assumed to be but one part of a much broader cultural scene, a scene which includes many diverse cultures. These cultures include, for example, different class, regional, generational, gender and linguistic cultures. The media tend to articulate and amplify some of these cultures while ignoring others. Thus the news tends to focus on the activities and views of political and economic elites, who also tend to be male, while ignoring to a large degree the lives of women and the working class. News also tends to focus on the other extreme of the social spectrum - on those who are seen as a social problem or as a threat to society. Thus, such groups as travellers, drug addicts, criminals, members of the working class when on strike, and in the political sphere, terrorists, tend to receive heavy news and current affairs coverage. Furthermore, these 'problem' groups frequently tend to be presented in a negative light.

Research within the cultural studies approach also investigates how different audiences respond to and interpret media content. It emphasises how groups in different social positions and with different cultural values - such as middle-class as
opposed to working-class groups, or men as opposed to women, or different generations - tend to select very different media forms and content to which to attend. Furthermore, when groups with different cultural values are exposed to the same media content, for example shown the same TV programme, they have been found to interpret its content in very different ways. Each group draws on its own cultural knowledge and values when responding to, enjoying and evaluating the programme. The audience is hence no longer seen as an undifferentiated 'mass' audience. On the contrary, the audience is seen as highly differentiated, each group with its own culture, values and interest, which materially influence how members actively construct meaning around the TV programmes they view (see Morley, 1980).

Some researchers have laid particular emphasis on the potential openness of the TV text to a very wide variety of meanings, depending on the subcultural context and values of the viewer (see Fiske, 1987). Others are much more critical of this broad 'polysemic' approach, arguing that texts are constructed around and have embedded in their form, thematic and narrative structures, particular 'preferred' or ideological readings. Greg Philo (1990), for example, having undertaken research on the TV news coverage of the miners' strike in Britain, has shown that the overwhelming majority (98%) of his respondents perceived and remembered the TV news coverage of miners on the picket line as consistently highlighting violence. Just over half agreed with this definition of the event, believing that most picketing was violent. Of those who rejected this definition (43%), believing that the picketing was in fact mostly peaceful, only some did so by drawing on subcultural values which offered alternative definitions. This was the case, for example, for a group of Scottish trade unionists, for a group of print workers and a group of miners themselves. Others, however, rejected the TV definition on other grounds: on the basis that it was contradicted by alternative sources of information (e.g. other media coverage, personal experience of the strike or of miners); or on the basis of a general critique of how TV news is constructed or in terms of logic (e.g. not all miners could have been violent, otherwise there would have been a revolution). As noted above, however, over half of the respondents accepted the television version - this included some who were sympathetic to the miners, but accepted the media view due to the lack of alternative definitions of the situation.

It would thus appear that subcultural values need to be particularly salient and strong to offer alternative definitions which will overwhelm the preferred reading embedded in the text. Other sources of alternative readings may come from the information supplied by other media, through personal knowledge, from a knowledgeable critique of how news is constructed and from subjecting the TV version to some inquiries in logic. However, in the instance of the miners' strike, the TV news' 'preferred' definition of miners' behaviour on the picket line as violent was accepted by a slender majority.

Media researchers in the past decade have also become interested in how subcultural values influence the decoding of television drama. One of the most interesting pieces of research in this area has been undertaken by Barbara O'Connor (1987) on the meaning and pleasure of television viewing for Irish women audiences. She examines, in a small scale but in-depth study, the role of TV in the lives of various groups of women differentiated by class, age and urban/rural background. She argues that women's position in the social structure gave rise to differential cultural experiences, competences and orientations which, in turn, influence the ways in which they use and respond to the media. Her findings show that preferences for different kinds of programmes, the pleasures received from these programmes, and the construction of meaning around a particular TV drama (in this instance, The Ballroom of Romance) varies very significantly in terms of class, gender, generation and urban/rural location of the Irish woman viewer.

In a further piece of research on Irish audiences' response to Dallas, O'Connor has again found differences in terms of class and gender subcultures (see Silj, 1988; O'Connor; 1990). Given the potential influence of subcultural values on the pleasures and meanings constructed by viewers around a television drama, it is not surprising that major differences have also been found in how audiences drawn from very different national cultures also vary widely in their interpretation - again much of the research here has focused on Dallas (Ang, 1985; Liebes and Katz, 1986).

It might be argued that, given the importance of indigenous cultures and subcultures in interpreting television texts, one need not be overly concerned regarding, for example, the extensive importation of programmes. I would argue that 'preferred readings' are embedded in all texts (although fiction tends to be more open in this regard than, for example, news), and, as we have noted from Philo's research on the TV presentation of the miners' strike, the rejection of this preferred reading cannot be assumed even for those who were sympathetic to the miners. Thus it cannot be assumed that sufficiently strong and salient indigenous cultures and subcultures exist to enable viewers to reject the preferred reading and to actively construct their own
meaning by drawing on their subcultural or national value systems.

Media imperialism operates most effectively in a culturally impoverished society, where the alternative definitions of reality are too weak to counter those from outside. The way society members maintain, reproduce and enrich their own culture and subcultures is through, inter alia, constantly addressing and responding to others in terms of shared cultural values and languages; through building, maintaining and interacting within institutional structures reflecting these cultural values; and through representing themselves to themselves and to others in the many diverse media, cultural and artistic forms available within that culture. Through these forms a culture is shared and celebrated, made self-aware and thus open to critique and to development, and available as a resource for critiquing and assessing other cultures. Within this way of looking at culture, television programmes should articulate, celebrate, develop and critique a range of cultural frames of reference from within a particular society. This means sufficient money to finance home produced programmes, and to ensure that they are of sufficient range and quality to compete with international productions.

Conclusion.

Research on television audiences evidences a convergence of different perspectives at the present time (see also Curran, 1990). Contributing to this has been an increased emphasis on culture, on a cultural studies approach to the audience and on ethnographic and qualitative modes of investigation. These are evident in the research on the audience as consumers which is examining the use of new communications technologies in the home, and how this articulates with cultural tastes based on class and gender; in the investigation of the influence of television on audiences as citizens of democratic nations; and in the studies of the construction of meaning around television texts by a range of subcultural groups - in particular those differentiated by class, gender and age.

These theoretical and empirical interests also evidence a concern to further explore television’s cultural power, especially in the context of the rapid development of new media technologies and the related internationalization and commercialization of television in terms of both ownership and programming. Thus the question of the ideological power of an internationalized television system within particular national contexts has been raised, as well as the possible demise of the public and national services previously offered to citizens by national television organizations. Within this scenario of expanding commercial television, of new and expensive media technologies, and of internationalized TV owned by multinational and multi-media corporations (such as Murdoch’s News Corporation), the past contribution of public television to the construction of national cultures will undoubtedly be fundamentally undermined, as will the range and quality of information offered to citizens - especially the ‘information poor’.

If one accepts that existing national cultures, and the subcultures within them, have something valuable and unique to offer and are thus worthy of support even if only to further critique and development, the implication of the research reviewed above is that national television organizations need to be supported. This means they need to be sufficiently well financed to enable them to make a wide range of high quality home produced programmes that articulate with existing national and subcultural value systems and thus allow these to be shared, celebrated and indeed challenged by the audience. Such productions culturally empower their audience either by allowing the sharing and recognition of existing values and ways of seeing, or by offering new ways. Thus at least one televisual agenda would be set from within the nation state, offering the possibility of choice to viewers in an otherwise internationalized programme market. Furthermore, by thus empowering its audience, the latter are in a better position to recognize and negotiate the preferred reading or ideological power of imported media. Of course it is acknowledged that this may include recognizing that the imported definition of reality is superior to that offered by one’s own culture. But this recognition should come from a position of cultural strength - knowing what one’s own values are, rather than a position of cultural weakness where even this recognition and awareness has been undermined.

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Regan Paul.


