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S. Hornig Priest *Doing Media Research*

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In moving from the stage of 'I think I would like to do research on...' to actually undertaking a piece of useful and rewarding research work, many students – graduate and undergraduate – recoil from taking sufficient stock of their proposed methodological framework. It is sometimes because of a lack of basic methodological know-how and sometimes because of fear. Oftentimes it is a combination of both. Nevertheless it results in poor research and often poorer results!

It is in this context that I welcome Hornig Priest's text. It is both comprehensive and comprehensible and should prove an invaluable aid to the undergraduate researcher. Hornig Priest manages with great skill to explain the quantitative and qualitative research tools available to the media student. She spells out the importance of a novice researcher considering a wide range of methodological options at the early stage of her research and the implications which they might have for her overall research findings.

In five parts, the book begins by contextualizing methodological issues through an exploration of the theoretical roots of social science. This is an essential exercise given that media and communications studies has straddled a range of social science disciplines in search of both theory and method. The book then demonstrates how social scientists ask questions and engage in data gathering. Parts three and four explain how both quantitative and qualitative data is analyzed and she attempts finally to get the research student to think in terms of their contribution – no matter how modest – to the wider research world.

This book succeeds in demystifying the research process. It is written in a user-friendly style and even draws upon a series of illustrations to reinforce for example the differences between quantitative and qualitative paradigms. Hornig Priest's text should be on the compulsory reading list of any undergraduate student of media and communications who is proposing to do even a short research project. Her text is a welcome antidote in an area which is largely populated by texts which are turgidly written and which fail miserably to inspire confidence in a person beginning research.

Groombridge and J. Hay (eds.) *The Price of Choice – Public service broadcasting in a competitive European market place*

London: John Libbey. 1995. stg£16.00
ISBN 0-86196-486-1

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This book consists of the papers presented to a conference on the future of public service broadcasting (PSB). The conference was organized by a group called the 'Voice of the Listener and Viewer', a consumer rights group for media audiences. In essence, the conference concluded that PSB has a vital function to perform in the cultural and democratic life of society and that there is a need for a pan-European association to represent the 'citizen/consumer' interest in broadcasting. The usual issues and arguments concerning broadcasting in Europe were addressed.

The initial chapter dealt with regulation and choice, specifically focusing on current legislation as it pertains to the UK market. The main points addressed were the future of Channel 5, financial arrangements for commercial television, the future of the BBC Charter, cable and satellite broadcasting, the regulatory framework for the development of telecommunications services and the extent of future restrictions on cross-media ownership. The latter issue was treated as particularly important by the speaker, Lord Hollick who is Chairman of MAI Ltd., an ITV company. The development of the information superhighway in the USA is also discussed; it has the potential to offer video-on-demand, interactive shopping, access to video games and most importantly, information. The commodification of information marginalizes and discriminates against the less well-off. In the USA, public service television has sought to redress this by developing on-line services and information networks. The current struggle is to ensure that the thirty per cent of cable systems channels reserved for PBS remains intact in the face of market pressure.

The impact of technology on the European broadcasting market specifically was addressed in the next chapter. Two broadcasting concepts, that were essentially antagonistic to each other, share the same space raising questions such as 'Do we need PSB?', 'How can public service television compete against media giants?', and 'How can we regulate programmes transmitted from abroad?'. The reality of the inherent disparities embodied by the information economy are acknowledged while the speaker asserted that the salvation of PSB is in remaining true to itself. The media is not just an industry but a cultural phenomenon. This view was counter-balanced by the argument that competition is not in and of itself negative. PSB currently faces a crisis of finance and identity. Viewer choice has increased because of the proliferation of channels. The European Commission sees PSB and commercial broadcasting as complimentary; there is value in diversity.

Who will pay for the new broadcasting order, particularly since the new technology will involve heavy investment? In Germany, the special function of the public side of the dual system has been identified at a very high level in the Courts. There, it is felt that using advertising to supplement the license fee weakens the position of the broadcaster; instead, the license fee should be the dominant method of funding. PSB has the right to be sufficiently funded according to the German Constitutional Court. However, the rationale of a license fee by providing a high quality, universal service is most important in ensuring the vital political support. It is a reality that ascertaining political support for raising the license fee is problematic as it would not be a popular move. Nowhere is this more apparent than Ireland. The more commercially-minded advocate the selling of programmes, launching new channels or offering interactive services. Ultimately, the consumer will pay for the new technology. There is some feeling that more sponsorship and advertisements, which can supplement the license fee and has become the norm, is not the best way forward. The fear is that viewers will pay more for programming previously universally available by having to subscribe to generalist channels.

Another issue raised at the conference was that of citizen's rights within European broadcasting. The point was made that in a competitive environment not best suited to high quality television, however, there could still be good programmes without PSB. It is an obligation of the state to provide a framework for secure funding. The viewer's need for information, education and entertainment is the raison d'ētre of broadcasters. Commercial broadcasters often want PSB to provide the programming they would prefer not to make. Without maintaining standards, public service stations will not get audiences or political support; political will is of utmost importance. Public service broadcasting has the objective of providing the information and the depth of debate and perspective that allows citizens to make the decisions necessary to facilitate democracy and pluralism. Public broadcasting must be a guarantee of programme quality, offer news and current affairs at peak times, demonstrate the range of common experience; it is accountable only to the public interest.

Chapter six concerns itself with the responsiveness of television to viewers. It deals with issues of accountability, practical responses to the needs, interests and tastes of viewers. The assertion is that interests of viewers should be at the heart of broadcast policy. The author of this paper provides an overview of the different methods of evaluation of accountability available to broadcasters, commercial or public service. These include administrative accountability (through regulatory bodies), consultative committees, audience research departments (is this biased towards quantitative issues or quality aspects of broadcasting?). Other points raised ranged from: how much account is taken of advertisers and sponsors?, what account is taken of direct feedback from the audience through calls and letters?, and, in the case of subscription channels, does the direct financial relationship between broadcaster and audience ensure a higher degree of accountability? In conclusion, it was argued that the Broadcasting Complaints Commission, in the UK provided an adequate forum for the expression of viewer concern although there is a necessity for some right to reply mechanism universally.

The book concludes by looking at the major themes emerging from the submissions of the participant groups: increased commercialism, the fate of the public service ethos and the citizens right to receive information. The need for legal and financial support from public authorities to ensure the pluralism of information was highlighted, as were the dangers of increasingly personalized patterns of viewing from a societal point of view. The debate essentially can be said to be not so much about communication as about society. The onus is placed back on the politicians since it is they who are directly responsible for the current state of broadcasting. The final section deals with the citizen's right of access to information and ideas from a plurality of sources. New technologies offer new opportunities but at a cost borne by the audience. The points raised by previous speakers are reiterated, and the necessity for a more effective and fuller representation of the interests of viewers and listeners emphasized again. Ultimately a resolution was drafted based on the main arguments emerging from the conference for submission to the European Union and the Council of Europe.

I found a number of difficulties with this text. The focus of each section was very much determined by the agenda of the speaker, which did not serve the cause of a balanced and provocative debate. The book is suffused with a self-congratulatory air that grates increasingly through the chapters. There is a great deal of repetition of points; it seems to this reviewer that a greater plurality of view-points would have made for a more interesting and stimulating read. The persistence of the organizers in seeing the audience as consumers rather than citizens only serves to add to the dominance of market ideology so disturbing to most of the speakers. To be fair, *The Price of Choice* contains some very valid and interesting arguments from a range of speakers from across Europe who each provide considerable insight into the state of public service broadcasting generally. Finally, the text suffers from the malaise of all books published directly from a conference, you had to be there.

I. Ang *Living Room Wars – Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*

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In this supposedly postmodern world, a novel yet potentially defining lawsuit looks set to reach the courts. The litigant in this action is John Grisham, lawyer-turned bestselling author. In the dock will be Oliver Stone, film producer and director. The

source of contention is *Natural Born Killers*, Stone's controversial portrayal of the relationship between a young couple of serial-killers and the American mass media. *Natural Born Killers*, suggests Grisham, is directly responsible for a number of copycat killings in the US, where young people have murdered after watching (often repeatedly) Stone's film. Stone, as director of the film, stands accused of negligence. All film directors, so Grisham's suggestion runs, owe a duty of care to their audience to 'manufacture' products which are not 'defective'.

The key to this bizarre case is the question of media consumption and in particular the nature of the relationship between media texts and media audiences. It is precisely this dialectic which also lies at the heart of *Living Room Wars*, Ien Ang's ten-year historical anthology of her research into media audiences and the consumption process. The central tenets of Ang's work are two-fold:

(i) it is not epistemologically tenable to speak of 'the audience' as an empirically abstract and ultimately quantifiable entity;

(ii) media consumption is an inherently social process, where 'active' audiences employ interpretative strategies to negotiate meaning.

The meanings which we as readers derive from media texts, suggests Ang, are formulated by the complex and increasingly fragmented experiences of everyday life. Abstract empiricism, she argues, represents audiences as passive aggregates, disempowered, obliging, and faceless. Such methodologies, it follows, fail to recognise that how we, as individuals, engage with media texts and negotiate meaning is shaped by the intersubjective linking of our own media and non-media experiences to the public arena. Meaning is not given, as if a matter of strict linearity between text and reader, or as in Grisham's case, author-text-audience. It is rather the product of the everyday experiences we bring to our interactions with media texts. Postmodernism's continual proliferation and diversification of media forms ensures that such interactions, and the meanings they spawn, are increasingly entangled, self-reflexive exercises.

Ang's starting point in this debate is with, what she terms, 'institutional' audience research, namely those syndicated ratings (focus is only given to television) which predominantly form the basis of 'audience research' within large broadcasting organizations. These ratings, with their predetermined social categorizations of 'gender', 'class', and 'religion', Ang describes as symptomatic of modernity's attempts to 'map' the social world. It is of course, she adds, in capitalism's best interests to identify and if possible control viewing habits, consumption processes and purchasing patterns. The perennial need of broadcasters to attract advertisers (in the case of public service broadcasters to justify their licence fee revenue) who will buy access to an audience means that it is always in the broadcasters' best interests to present their research as objective truth, albeit continually favourable 'objective truths'. This commercial and methodological tension between broadcasters and advertisers, suggests Ang, negates any possible understanding of the consumption process(es), as little or no qualitative emphasis is given to how texts are contextualised by audiences.

Ang's own brand of ethnographic inquiry ('radical contextualism'), which she advocates as a necessary replacement to positivist empiricism, is firmly grounded in both ethnomethodology and general theories of reception. Drawing on the work of Garfinkel and Morley, she seeks to uncover, not so much which meanings audience arrive at but rather the interpretative strategies they employ to make sense of, what she sees as, increasingly dislocated arrays of texts. Her exposition of a small sample of *Dallas* viewers (*Watching Dallas*) in Holland amply demonstrates a multiplicity of meanings that audiences negotiate from a chosen text. For Ang, the key word here is 'negotiate'. The primary implication of Ang's 'active' audience is that theories relating to either text or reader need to be re-examined ethnographically, taking full account of the contextual and historical positioning of the reader. Certainly the sheer plurality of meaning and the very existence of popular subcultures shows that the micro can survive

the macro, with audiences 'resisting' hegemonic flows to some degree. *Living Room Wars* adequately proves, for example, why the commercial success of romance novels and the endless supply of American movies cannot alone confirm the death of feminism or our enslavement by Hollywood. Equally important, however, argues Ang, is the recognition that 'resistance' has semiotic limits, falling some way short of Fiske's 'semiotic democracy'. We do, it seems, in the last instance, operate within capitalism's systematic control of media production.

But it is exactly at this point that Ang's argument loses cogency and most of its convincing qualities. It is quite clear that complete contextualization (as Ang herself mockingly disclaims) is a logistical impossibility – we cannot take into account every reader's previous experiences! Yet for 'radical contextualism' to become a workable mode of inquiry we need some grasp of where the contextualization process is to stop. Ang shys away from prescribing such parameters arguing simply that to do so would be tantamount to universalizing the social world by the back door. Instead she leaves us somewhere between the two extremes of Grisham's strict linearity of meaning and Fiske's empowering model of the reader-as-sovereign.

In the meantime it is not altogether clear how media researchers should proceed. Any attempt to undertake comparative ethnographies will tend to appear as positivistic aggregations to the 'radical contextualist'. Yet, in fact (if not in theory) these strategies are not mutually exclusive. Odd as it may seem, the similarities between Ang's ideal and the methods of commercially motivated audience researchers are really quite striking. Perhaps it is a sign of postmodern times that as audiences fragment and media forms proliferate, broadcasters, among others, find themselves having to sell niche markets. 'Audience appreciation' is currently the advertising industry's Holy Grail. Thus, broadcasters and market researchers have, as Ang overlooks to acknowledge, increasingly been giving greater resources and credence to qualitative focus groups as a legitimate, indeed preferred, means of audience research. Both random and non-random focus group samples are used to expose volunteer audiences to chosen texts. Audiences are usually small and feedback is 'freely' garnered. Comments are viewed by these professional researchers, not as objective truths but rather as snapshots of key strands of opinion (most often the precious ABC1s), at best being viewed as representative of wider trend(s) within the viewing community as a whole.

The implications of Ang's researches are analytically immobilising. If she's right, there can be no point in endeavouring to read (to decode) the ideological meanings of texts; in which case, much of what currently passes for film and television studies is critically redundant. On the other hand, clearly market researchers do know the power and the value of the commodity they are studying and, presumably, unlike Ang and her affiliates, believe there is purpose served in seeking to encode texts in particular ways (in the interests of their clients).

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S. Aronowitz, B. Martinsons and M. Menser (eds.) *TechnoScience and Cyber Culture*

New York and London: Routledge, 1996. 323pp. stg£40.00, stg£12.99 (pbk)
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This book has two aims: 1) to develop a new technology-centred method of cultural analysis, and 2) to open up a new field, the cultural study of science. Under the first heading, the book focuses on technology, science and culture, concluding that the three are 'now so intertwined, that to critique one is already to implicate the others'. Under the second, the book addresses many topics including 'unemployment in the global market' and 'violence in American culture'. This well-written and attractive book, illustrated with images which are discussed in detail in the text, advocates a new 'fast track' approach to the study of science by non-scientists which may be very timely. The sociology of science, slow to start when Robert Merton launched it in the 1940s, has been in full flow for three decades since it was relaunched by Thomas Kuhn (1962). Arguably, it is now bogged down. After a decade of navel-gazing around the tedious question of reflexivity, also around the more interesting question of 'symmetry' between humans and objects in the explanation of scientific and technological development, a recent writer (Lynch 1993) concludes that the road ahead is arduous and uncertain. In-depth ethnography of laboratory life (Lynch's preferred method) is 'difficult, time-consuming, epistemologically suspect' and may in practice be incompatible with pursuing a career in the social sciences. Hence, many sociologists seek a short cut.

This book offers several short cuts. Several essays directly address the above concerns. Firstly, the introductory essay by Aronowitz and Menser addresses the old issue of 'technological determinism'. The authors' answer to the chicken-and-egg relation between technology and society is 'co-implication', also referred to as 'complexity' and 'situatedness', the guiding principles of the heterogeneous studies which make up this collection. Secondly, Dorothy Nelkin briefly traces the evolution of science studies. She notes with dismay the way in which natural scientists view research which 'treats science as a social and cultural product, and the scientific community as a labour force'. They fear a 'flight from science and reason' for which both fundamentalists and social constructionists are responsible. But Nelkin fears that cultural models of science often ignore the wider context within which science operates, and defer to the autonomy which it claims for itself. Thirdly, Barbara Martinsons' 'The Possibility of Agency for Photographic Subjects' discusses photographs of veiled women. The one she most admires 'is not... part of the ethnographic discourse or the discourse of sociology' but partakes of aesthetics, ontology and archaeology. Through the technologies of the camera, and of the veil, two women show their curiosity about each other. 'Each empowers the other in small ways'. Hence, 'technology is not, necessarily, the enemy'.

Fourthly, in the longest essay in the book, Betina Zolkower provides an ethnography of 'Math Fictions' in the classroom. She tries to determine the practical impact of one specific cultural product taught in a Latino school in East Harlem, NYC. 'Everyone Counts!' is a curriculum intended to place the US 'first in the world in math and sciences' so individual citizens can escape poverty, marginality, exclusion. New maths is part of the move traced by Basil Bernstein from a 'visible' curriculum comprising abstract but meaningless standard tasks with public praise or humiliation for 'success' or 'failure', to an 'invisible' curriculum which is child-centred, relevant to the specific family, cultural, gender or other circumstances of the individual or small group of children working together. Specimen assignment: The Incas never discovered the wheel, instead they transported things on the backs of llamas. Suppose the Inca emperor had 117 gold bricks, and each llama could carry 9. How many llamas would be needed to carry the load? Children got stuck on 'wheel' (*rueda*), 'llamas', 'emperor' (*imperador*), and

'load' (*carga*). Zolkower's judgement: all this cultural stuff is irrelevant to the maths. If you want to get the maths right, 'Forget about the Incas!' Dystopian effects result when 'culture' is introduced into maths classrooms and tests. More positively, we should 'examine the symptomatic nature of lying-games, tricks, and errors. As we are reminded... maths is a very tricky thing.' Still more detailed ethnographic studies of children's coping strategies in class, and outside it, are required.

The book contains a notable short essay by Arthur Kroker, 'Virtual Capitalism', on technological liberalism, the free movement of labour, and the techno super highway, doing for the world what the railroad did for Canada a century ago. The techno virtual class must eliminate the real working class. They themselves are missionaries, high on their own hype, riding the crest of the wave but due to be subsumed, digitized, made redundant. In global terms, Asia, Africa and Latin America are slave economies: the bodies of its women and children, the body parts of its adult members (blood, kidneys, eyes) are objects of a 'vampire-istic' world trade. Kroker proceeds by taking marketing metaphors literally: the Marlboro economy; Disneyland. There is an absence of real sociological description.

In all, this is a mixed bag of essays, amounting to a lively but lightweight work. Nonetheless, powerful points are made which stay with the reader after the book is put down. Most chapters can be read in a few minutes. They work by the sometimes ingenious coining of new metaphors which enable us to generalize a universal insight out of a known but unassimilated observation. Others work by collecting and retelling anecdotal narratives, both verbal and visual. These stories are intriguing. But they amount to a form of modern myth-making. We never know enough of the context to test their validity. (We cannot really know whether the woman in the veil collaborated with the photographer, though it is nice to imagine she did.)

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