

## Analyzing quality television...and why it is redundant

### 1. Media 2.0 and the cultural studies perspective on television

Before arguing what is entailed in respecting the *autonomy* of how television is understood in everyday life and how this is a different challenge for critical theory than actual technological or political developments, it should be clear that what, here, is called the paradigm of mass communication is part of a 'dispositif' or apparatus (Agamben 2009: 14) that has been severely criticized in cultural studies. A caricature of the mass communication paradigm would point to the strong focus on media effects, the reification of quantitative methods and its administrative orientation. From a critical perspective, there is little to be gained by a paradigm that favours a top-down view of audiences as 'masses' and that sharply distinguishes between proper and improper (e.g. dangerous) behaviour. Cultural studies, on the contrary, has argued that a bottom-up perspective of culture as the ways in which we make meaning, is more conducive to understanding how television functions and may effectuate different types of meanings (Morley 1980, 1986).

From a cultural studies perspective, issues of power and regulation are of paramount importance. Therefore, at the current conjuncture, we may need to reassess how broadcast television is still intimately connected with nation-building and the containment of diversity within the nation. Despite ongoing (economic) globalization, we are witnessing a new age of cultural protectionism and a strong decline in enthusiasm for new cultural forms and hybrid that appear to threaten national identity. 'New' voices are carefully screened. Conservative populism joins hands with a strong sense of cynicism and distrust. Such historical circumstance will cast its shadow over how television is understood. It is not unlikely that the nation-building quality of the medium will be more strongly revered as a result. As this is part of how audiences historically came to television, it may well pay to closely examine how, from an audience perspective, 'broadcast' television had and has its uses and pleasures. How and why audience came to love television as a medium, and negotiated its power remains an important and relevant question today that needs to include the type of knowledges that were deployed in this process. Here, I am referring again to the mass communication paradigm. It is not unlikely that exactly this way of thinking about the medium may help television survive the broadcast era. Beyond technologies of dissemination and production and beyond the family set in the living room, the paradigm of mass communication still offers 'programming' (the set menu that as a viewer one does not need to think about), 'liveness' (intimately connected with maintaining a sense of the national, e.g. in sports matches) and even particular types of narrative in national news programmes and in indigenous television fiction. Instead of focusing on new media forms and cultures, critical cultural studies ironically needs to pay more attention than ever to mainstream thinking about TV.

Coming from the tradition of cultural studies and qualitative audience research, I sincerely hope that 2.0 convergence culture will come into being and materialize into new, more open cultural practices. The 2.0 argument posits that if and when individuals truly start using the new options open to us under the rubric of ‘convergence culture’, a significant counter force may emerge against the media industry. Henry Jenkins foresees that media corporations will cease to wield an absolute form of control (Jenkins 2006: 18-19). Likewise, Jeff Jarvis, recently argued that brand integrity for instance is crucial to enduring commercial or public success and it is in the hands of consumer communities (Jarvis 2009; Jenkins 2006: 86). Integrity here can be taken to mean organizational reflexivity and responsiveness to users who are seen as partners, rather than as an anonymous entity from which money can be made.

This is romantic idealism. In practice, there have not been significant shifts. Despite the increase of media literacy and the availability of cheap video editing software, audience members have not moved in on television production (Janssen 2011). Young adults still watch significant amounts of hours of television.<sup>1</sup> Television producers interviewed by Janssen (Ibid.) in the Netherlands feel little need to open up production practice to audience members. Children’s programming offers some examples of changing roles for television producers and more (controlled and supervised) initiative from viewers. In a first sketch, Berriman (2009) concludes as much for the BBC programme *Bamzooki*, which has firmly been repositioned as a ‘multimedia’ production, rather than a television programme. Peters looked at a Dutch public broadcasting programme based on uploads made by children themselves and sees only a very small number of really interesting short movies (Peters 2011). While Jenkins offers (inspiring) examples of viewer and user initiatives, they appear to come from exceptional individuals, rather than from ‘the general audience’.

It could, of course, be the case that television has a stronger bulwark of professionals than other media and that it is just a matter of time before production relations are rewritten. Experiences in the world of game development (Nieborg and Van der Graaf 2008; Humphreys 2008) suggest otherwise. Even in the game industry, characterized by its tight bonds between gamers and the publishers and developers, new relations of power and dependence have not emerged. While, in many ways, the game industry is open to initiatives and the skills of gifted individuals, these individuals cannot really hope for more than to have their idea for a game or software improvement taken into (commercial) production. It is highly unlikely that they will reap much profit from this. While, evidently, within the gaming world this type of recognition is felt to be worthwhile, it can hardly be understood as a form of empowerment, such as claimed by media optimists.

To believe in empowerment is a good thing. To see possibilities and openings for other social, cultural and economic arrangements is surely of immense importance. This revolutionary idealism, however, is not shared broadly. 2.0 media optimism overlooks that it is exactly the ‘mass’-ness of the mass media which make them exciting and of interest. The two case studies below will show that they are seen as a platform for and a place to check stardom and success, and, more mundanely, as a representational space where group identities and reputations may be either empowered or undermined.

## 2. The mass communication paradigm in its protoprofessionalized version

### *West Side*

Two Dutch case studies may offer a more concrete sense of what is meant here by 'the mass communication paradigm'. The first case is of local reality soap. In 2006 and 2007, the city of Amsterdam co-financed a television series, produced by the regional Amsterdam television broadcaster AT5 and televised both on regional and on national television (AT5 and NPS in 2006 and 2007). The series, called *West Side*, was intended to defuse interethnic antagonist feelings in the city, which it was feared would come to a head after the murder of film maker Theo van Gogh by a fundamentalist Muslim in 2004 (Buruma 2006). *West Side* was one of the many initiatives that make up the city's 'We Amsterdammers' social cohesion programme to improve multicultural contact between citizens. In fact, *West Side* fulfils this function in a rather provocative way. The series portrays four families, as befits a soap, all four with a different background: one family is Moroccan, one Turkish, one Dutch, and one Surinamese. They move into the same block of houses because of urban renewal. Tensions regularly rise high, interethnic prejudice is thematized head on. The style of filming and the use of amateur actors and improvised dialogue give the series a strong and, for some, an initially confusing 'reality' feel. The content is sheer soap opera: tears, arguments, sorrow, and happiness all have their place in a world centred on the four families.

During the two seasons (2006/7 and 2007) of *West Side* that were televised,<sup>2</sup> a multi-ethnic team of student-interviewers spoke to more than 200 Amsterdam citizens in the street, half of whom were non-white.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 100 individuals took part in focus group and in-depth interviews. Of these people, a little less than half was non-white. The 20 forums on the *West Side* website (over 800 postings) were also examined. Overall, the various ethnic backgrounds were amply represented. We interviewed roughly the same number of men and women. (See Müller and Hermes 2010).

Evaluation of audience reactions to the show provided an unexpected number of unsolicited comments about 'the media' as a whole. In fact, 'the media' were a subject that respondents felt much more comfortable talking about than the series or citizenship in general. Clearly, as a topic, 'the media' allowed them to take up the position of lay experts. Moreover, the link between non-fiction media and citizenship, which appears endangered by the decline in newspaper usage and by the hybridization of fiction and non-fiction genres, is often made by our Amsterdam informants. Not only is it the case that the media and certainly the content of popular media are everybody's domain, there is a strong sense that the media have an obligation to represent ethnic and cultural groups in a fair and correct manner.

The understanding that the media are a strong socializing force in society was broadly shared, as was the notion that this should be used to positive ends. Somewhat naïvely, it was widely believed that good media examples would be followed. In such cases cynicism does not come into play. When speakers suggest that negative representation and stereotyping will have serious social consequences, they do two things. They suggest that they understand the power of the media to shape social reality (and socialize us) but also that, because they are aware that this could happen, it will not happen to them but only to less-informed and more naïve others.

Issues of media influence and effects make up an important part of the mass communication paradigm. What happens, however, when media content is seen in a more favourable light than *West Side* was (or media representation of non-white Dutch in general)? If the paradigm of mass communication is on the way out, and a media 2.0 paradigm is taking its place, surely we would, at the very least, find a heavily nuanced version of the conclusion offered by Perloff; namely, that informants in cases of positively evaluated content would also understand themselves as being influenced. Such a conclusion offers further proof of the wish to recognize not just the power but also the *authority* of (mass) media. If, on the other hand, you see yourself as an active participant in practices of media use and of media production, would that not entail understanding media texts as voices in dialogue, rather than as an authoritative source of truth and enlightenment?

### **3. Conclusion**

The two case studies presented here are meant to illustrate an unexpected state of affairs. While television is changing, technologically and culturally, and critical scholars point to a whole new way of using and thinking media (Media 2.0 or convergence culture), in everyday life relatively old-fashioned notions of the media rule. I have used ‘mass media paradigm’ as a catch-all phrase to denote the entire complex of knowledges, practices and rules that came into being in the twentieth century and converged on television. The mass media paradigm has been, and still is, highly effective; so much so, in fact, that rethinking television or thinking beyond television (the broadcast, centrally produced and disseminated medium) might well be compromised from the start.

When the proponents of the media studies 2.0 discussion advocate that we find suitable terms to understand current changes in media technology and media culture, they appear to argue from a completely different understanding of today's everyday media use. Neither our amateur television producers, nor the viewers that were interviewed would agree. They did not feel in need of new terms or notions to give meaning or legitimacy to what they are doing. There is no urgency in everyday life to find new terms or ways of talking about television.

It would be difficult to find standards by which the paradigm of mass communication hands anyone a convivial tool. Fear and distinction appear to be its main mechanisms: fear of the possible effects of viewing (too much) television, and the means to project that fear onto others (the third person effect). Even when it comes to issues of representation, it is a discursive system that encourages a system to hold distant others responsible, rather than take responsibility themselves. Of course, that is also what makes it a highly comfortable mode of thought: beyond fairly easy forms of criticism there is not much required of a viewer to establish herself as a discerning individual.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2009. *What is an apparatus? And other essays*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Berriman, Liam. 2009. 'Re-aligning media and actors: The impact of 'cross-platform broadcasting', in *The children's media industry*. Paper given at 'Ends of Television' conference, Amsterdam, June 2009.
- Bolter, Jay D., and Richard Grusin. 2000. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Buruma, Ian. 2006. *Murder in Amsterdam: The death of Theo Van Gogh and the limits of tolerance*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Carey, James W. 1989. *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- Crone, Vincent. 2007. *De kwetsbare kijker: Een culturele geschiedenis van televisie in Nederland*. Amsterdam: Vossiuspers.
- Davison, W. Phillips. 1983. 'The third-person effect in communication'. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47(1): 1-15.
- Dean, Mitchell. 1999. *Governmentality. Power and Rule in Modern Society*. London: Sage
- Dovey, Jonathan and Martin Lister. 2009. 'Straw men or cyborgs?'. *Interactions: Studies in Communication and Culture* 1 (1): 129-145.
- Dyer, Richard. 2001. *White*. London: Routledge
- Gauntlett, David. 2009. 'Media studies 2.0: A response'. *Interactions: Studies in Communication and Culture* 1(1): 147-157.
- Gauntlett, David. 2007. *Media studies 2.0*. Online, cited August 2008. Available at [www.theory.org.uk/mediastudies2.htm](http://www.theory.org.uk/mediastudies2.htm).
- Gripsrud, Jostein. 1998. 'Television, broadcasting, flow: Key metaphors in TV theory', in *The Television Studies Book*, C. Geraghty and D. Lusted (eds.). London: Arnold.
- Hagen, Ingunn. 1994. 'The ambivalences of TV news viewing: Between ideals and everyday practices'. *European Journal of Communication* 9 (2): 193-220.
- Hermes, Joke. 2006. 'Hidden debates: Rethinking the relationship between popular culture and the public sphere'. *Javnost/the Public* 13 (4): 27-44.
- Humphreys, Sal. 2008. 'Ruling the virtual world. Governance in massively multiplayer online games'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11(2): 147-169.
- Janssen, Skylla. 2011. Next-gen television. Phd dissertation, Leiden University, unpublished.
- Jarvis, Jeff. 2009. *What Would Google Do?* New York: Collins.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jensen, Joli. 1990. *Redeeming modernity: Contradictions in media criticism*. Newbury Park: Sage.

- Keen, Andrew. 2007. *The cult of the amateur. How today's internet is killing our culture*. New York: Doubleday.
- Lundby, Knut (ed.). 2008. *Digital storytelling, mediatized stories. Self-representations in new media*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Merrin, William. 2009. 'Media studies 2.0: Upgrading and open-sourcing the discipline'. *Interactions: Studies in Communication and Culture* 1(1): 17-34.
- Morley, David. 2006. *Family television: Cultural power and domestic leisure*. London: Comedia.
- Morley, David. 1980. *The nationwide audience*. London: Bfi publishing.
- Müller, Floris and Joke Hermes. 2010. 'The performance of cultural citizenship: Audiences and the politics of multicultural television drama'. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 27 (2): 193-208.
- Nieborg, David B. and Shenja van der Graaf. 2008. 'The mod industries? The industrial logic of non-market game production'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 11(2): 177-195.
- Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. 1993. *The spiral of silence: Public opinion – our social skin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. 1974. 'The spiral of silence: A theory of public opinion'. *Journal of Communication*, 24: 43-51.
- Pajnik, Mojca. 2005. 'Citizenship and mediated society'. *Citizenship Studies* 9(4): 349-367.
- Perloff, Richard M. 1999. 'The third person effect: A critical review and synthesis'. *Media Psychology* 1(4): 353-378.
- Peters, Cindy. 2011. *TV flat: Over de mediageletterdheid van kinderen*. (TV Tower. On the media literacy of children) MA thesis, Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam.
- Spigel, Lynn. 1992. *Make room for TV: Television and the family ideal in post-war America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.