

News
reception

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'Is anyone else out there sick of the news?!': TV viewers' responses to non-routine news coverage

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Who decides what 'counts' as 'news'? Rather than being simply the validation of objective events, labeling something newsworthy is the outcome of a complex effort by various claimsmakers (Spector and Kitzuse, 1977). Most scholars debate whether it is editors and journalists or corporate owners and sponsors who have the power to decide questions of newsworthiness (Bagdikian, 1990; Schiller, 1989). Rarely taken into consideration are consumers' own opinions. This article explores United States' television viewers' beliefs about what ought to count as news by examining their responses to unscheduled news bulletins (pre-emptions). Focusing on viewers of daytime soap operas, analysis reveals the content of viewer complaints and shows how recent changes in the viewer/tan subculture have altered the way complaints are handled by the networks. Viewers' responses to pre-emptions might be considered a form of political action rather than the uninformed whining they are usually perceived to be.

Introduction

Television, viewers and political action

Most of the literature on the links between television, viewers and political action focuses on several key issues. The area of political life where the impact of television has been most successfully established is public opinion, where TV news has been shown to set the political agenda and shape viewers' opinions (Iyengar, 1991: 2; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987;

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Lippmann, 1991). A second body of research debates whether television or print media is more successful in educating people about world events (Clarke and Fredin, 1978), and a third focus is the media's function in narrativizing political events for the public (Bird and Dardenne, 1988; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Gans, 1979).

Research comes to bleak conclusions about the impact of the news media on viewers' political action. Despite increasing access to various media forms, consumers retain very little information about world events, regardless of the source. In fact, Entman (1989) argues that the 'poor state of citizenship' today raises serious questions about the function of the news media. In his view, the media thwart rather than encourage the possibility of having well-informed citizens participating in democracy by overwhelming them into a state of passivity. Even when the press succeeds in educating the public, there is a big discrepancy between the potential and the actual relevance of news for individual political action. While the news might promote awareness of political issues and shape public opinion, there is little evidence that consumers act on the knowledge they gain (Jensen, 1990).

Most of this literature takes a traditional approach to what is considered a 'political' response by focusing on actions occurring in formal, public spheres of life: do people vote, what candidates or issues do they support, how does that correspond to the presentation of said candidates or issues in the news, and so on. But 'one of the most important recent trends in the field has been expanding the categories of messages that are considered to be "political"' (Nimmo and Swanson, 1990: 16) to include not only *arenas* in which activity occurs but *types* of activity. With this inclusion, politics' embeddedness in everyday life is revealed, and the concept of political action expanded to encompass a wide variety of activities people engage in as they position themselves relative to systems of power (Abrahams, 1992: 329-30).

Scholars are increasingly legitimizing everyday forms of political action. For example, cultural studies theorists argue that media consumers are their own producers of meaning (Hall, 1980; Iser, 1978; Neuman et al., 1992; Radway, 1984). Rather than having a completely passive relationship to the media where preferred readings (Hall, 1980) are simply absorbed, consumers actively engage with texts and use them to assess the validity of their knowledge about the world. Does this imply that media consumption in itself is a political act? I agree with Jensen that the 'wider ramifications of opposition at the textual level depend on the social and political uses to which the opposition may be put in contexts beyond the relative privacy of media reception' (1990: 58). In terms of news scholarship, there is growing acceptance of the political nature of the 'uses' of negotiated and oppositional news readings. For example, more attention is being paid to people who write letters to newspaper editors (Sigelman and Walkosz, 1992) or

phone in to radio and television talk shows (Munson, 1993). Rather than being dismissed as unrepresentative fringe elements, these groups are for the first time being taken seriously as political actors.

Crisis news coverage and viewer-newsworker relations

This article explores a different 'fringe element': people who complain about non-routine news, or the kind of special events that require pre-emption of regularly scheduled television programming. Such coverage in the USA usually consists of presidential addresses, economic, industrial or weather-related disasters, or non-emergency coverage of parades, telethons or national sporting events. As Mellenkamp points out, it is difficult to imagine 'a mid-program break to the zoo, the classroom, or an art event' (1990: 244). While there has been very little investigation of the way the US media report crises compared to the volume of studies of routine news coverage, we do know that non-routine news is characterized by newsworkers' own surprise at the news, diversion of time, attention and resources towards the breaking news, and open-ended reporting with relatively shoddy production values (Berkowitz, 1992; Nimmo and Combs, 1985).

If we know little about the production of crisis coverage, we know even less about how viewers respond to its newsworthiness. This is not surprising, given that viewers' perceptions of the newsworthiness of even routine news is under-researched. The few studies that exist find a clear 'disjuncture between what the mass media emphasize and what the media audience tells us is important and relevant to their lives' (Neuman et al., 1992: 11; see also Gilbert, 1988). It perhaps makes sense that viewers' opinions of routine news are overlooked, given that viewers generally accept it as natural. That is, no one complains that the evening news ought to be organized or structured differently (Jensen, 1990). But scholars' lack of interest in viewers' perceptions of non-routine news is more curious, given that people respond readily, emotionally and publicly to unscheduled news bulletins: they write letters, they make phone calls. Viewers complain, scholars know they complain, but no one has investigated why or to what end.

Newsworkers have also sidestepped the 'why' question, but for different reasons. Journalists have little knowledge of or interest in how particular news stories are received by the public because they do not believe that the audience is 'capable of determining what news it needs' (Gans, 1979: 230). Despite the fact that networks spend huge amounts of money doing audience research, newsworkers themselves pay little attention to it precisely *because* it raises the question of their power to construct the news for the public. Journalists 'are reluctant to accept any procedure which

casts doubt on their news judgment and their professional autonomy' (Gans, 1979: 232).

But if newswriters in general don't care to know much about their audience, there are some consumers who want very much to know about the news media and are frustrated by their seeming inability to interact with it (Dennis, 1989). While some suggest that audience members have considerable power to influence the media, viewers themselves are often unaware of the channels open to them (Jamieson and Campbell, 1983: 204-9), and those who do exercise their options get little satisfaction. For example, efforts by citizens' groups to critique the press have had little success (Dennis, 1989: 53), and viewers' direct complaints to television stations about pre-emptions are routinely ignored (see later). Again, viewers complain, we know they complain, but the motives behind — and substance of — their complaints remain unexamined.

Soap opera viewers and pre-emptions

I decided to focus on soap opera viewers' responses to pre-emptions for reasons having to do with values, economics and the changing nature of the soap fan subculture. (I refer to each only briefly here.) The common stereotype of the pre-emption complainer is the bon-bon eating housewife who is 'angry that Chernobyl replaced thirty minutes of "One Life to Live"' (Meltencamp, 1990: 245). This stereotype reflects broader cultural perceptions of soap watchers as losers preferring to dwell in fictional fantasylands rather than spend time in the 'real' world supposedly reflected in the nightly news (Harrington and Bielby, 1995a; Seiler et al., 1989). There is a clear moral hierarchy of television choices; the most highly valued is the news, whereas soap operas receive the most denigration because they are regarded as the least realistic type of programming (Alasuntari, 1992). As we shall see, the question of *when* to pre-empt is also a question of *what* to pre-empt, which can also be read as a question of *who* to pre-empt. There is considerable tension between newswriters, viewers and others over the worth of soap operas versus other programming choices, which surfaces during disputes about pre-emptions. But the decision to pre-empt is about more than values; economics plays a key role as well. Pre-emptions cost money and because soaps are relatively inexpensive to produce, the genre is routinely targeted for non-routine news. Admittedly, the very 'non-routineness' of non-routine news means that newswriters cannot plan when it occurs; they cannot schedule hijackings, bombings or natural disasters to fit scheduled news hours. Most of these events occur during the day simply because that is when most activity occurs, both governmental and the sorts of everyday activities that can contribute to catastrophe (I thank a reviewer for this insight). But

clearly, all kinds of dramatic and non-dramatic events occur which newswriters manage to save until the regular news hour or squeeze into newscasts that do not pre-empt regular programming. The question is not so much about *when* activities occur that might constitute 'news', but about the decisions made about what kind of news it is and what kind of coverage it warrants.

The most important reason for focusing on soap opera viewers' complaints about pre-emptions is that two trends within the soap viewer/fan subculture have publicized those complaints in a new way. Daytime fan magazines have gradually begun allocating increasing space to fans' perspectives in letters-to-the-editor columns, public opinion polls, and fans' accounts of meeting celebrities (Harrington and Bielby, 1995a). Fans who want to complain about pre-emptions are now able to have those complaints published in a national forum. Similarly, the emergence and popularity of electronic bulletin boards (BBSs) give public voice to viewer complaints in an unprecedented way, attracting more than 30 million subscribers in the USA alone (see Civile, 1995: 179). Through either a subscription fee or on-line charges, members may correspond with other subscribers of the service both day and night, seven days a week. Depending on the service, there are any number of file topics or locations on the boards where soap opera viewers can gossip about the day's episode, speculate about upcoming events or complain about pre-emptions (Bielby and Harrington, 1994). Examining these two forums allows for unique access to the public's construction of the news, for while families and co-workers certainly hold discussions about newsworthiness, bulletin boards and fan magazines (like radio and TV talk shows) provide a space where previously unacquainted people come together purposefully to debate the appropriateness of news interruptions. Fans' opinions are publicized not just to one another, but to other industry members as well; as such, they are being heard and responded to in new ways.

In this article I examine US soap opera viewers' complaints about pre-emptions as a potential form of political action, as moments where (to oversimplify) newswriters' implicit assertion, 'This is big enough news to warrant a pre-emption' is rejected by viewers, 'No, it's not.' I describe the substance of viewer complaints and examine how they are handled by media participants. Analysis reveals that the power of viewer complaints to engender change depends largely on the channels through which they are made. Implications are discussed in the conclusion.

Data

I draw on several sources of data. The primary data are transcripts of BBS dialogues. I monitored one commercial BBS (Prodigy

[http://www.Prodigy.com]) for six months in 1993 (1 January–30 June) and downloaded transcripts of viewers' discussions about pre-emptions. The approach was non-interventionist; the data were collected by monitoring viewers' naturally occurring dialogues. During this six-month period there were five national pre-emptions covering three presidential press conferences, the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City and the burning of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. For comparison, I also include viewers' responses to annual (scheduled) network pre-emptions of daytime programming for basketball coverage in February and March of 1993.

For purposes of analysis I utilize only those postings that clearly reveal viewers' perceptions of newsworthiness. BBSs are always flooded with messages following a pre-emption but they often focus on viewers' comparative experiences (e.g. length of interruption) or queries about missed portions of TV shows. I concentrate only on those postings that include an evaluation of newsworthiness. The BBS data thus include: 51 comments on the presidential conferences (44 different users), 37 comments on the Branch Davidian incident (33 different users), 10 on basketball coverage (6 different users), 2 on the World Trade Center bombing, and several others used for purposes of comparison. The quotes have been edited to correct spelling and minor grammatical errors.

As a secondary source I draw on survey data collected in 1991 for a separate study on celebrity-fan relationships in the soap opera community (see Harrington and Bielby, 1995a). These data are used to illustrate viewers' opinions about pre-emptions in general rather than to the specific instances noted above. Additionally, I draw on soap fan letters and industry discussions about pre-emptions as published in national magazines, newspapers and trade journals. These discussions refer both to the pre-emptions occurring during the six-month data collection period as well as others. Finally, I spoke informally with news programmers in two mid-size Midwestern (US) cities about decisions to pre-empt.

Discussion

Viewers have several options for influencing the media, although they might be unaware of them: they can complain individually, they can exert group pressure and they can exert pressure through established organizations or legislative power (Jamieson and Campbell, 1983: 204–9). Most viewers seem to complain individually about pre-emptions (if at all). Their complaints can be direct, such as calling or writing to a television station or network, or indirect, such as complaining to a friend, on a BBS or in the pages of a national fan magazine. It is difficult to estimate how many viewers make direct complaints because television stations and networks

do not keep careful records of their calls and letters. They are aware when a pre-emption prompts a high volume of complaints but do not retain systematic records of their number or content. However, a recent study of soap opera fans found that approximately 27 percent have written or phoned a TV station at least once to complain about a pre-emption (Harrington and Bielby, 1995a). The number of indirect complainants is impossible to determine.

While the direct route might seem the most productive for viewers, it is not. As noted above, records of calls and letters are not routinely kept, let alone analyzed or responded to by newswriters. In addition, what might seem like a 'direct' route is not always direct. For example, while national pre-emptions are decided at the network rather than the local level, most complaining calls and letters go to local TV stations who not only do not keep track of them, but do not necessarily relay them to the network. What about other routes? In the next section I summarize the content of viewers' indirect complaints about pre-emptions. I then analyze how perceptions of value, economics and the nature of soap production influence decisions about (and determine the impact of) pre-emptions. Finally, I discuss how emergent forums of complaint are giving viewers more power to help decide what counts as news.

What do viewers complain about?

Interestingly, viewers rarely take issue with whether or not what is covered in non-routine news is in fact 'news'. Rather, they struggle with the *kind* of news it is and how it ought to be televised. Specifically, viewers debate whether the news needs to be aired live, and whether the coverage is appropriate in terms of length of time and production values. Viewers' debates over live coverage are central to their response to unscheduled pre-emptions. This issue arose most noticeably in response to the three daytime interruptions by President Clinton, to which viewers responded that live coverage was unnecessary and that the news was more appropriate for the regular news hour or for an all-news cable channel such as CNN:

I don't know why they don't have the press conferences during prime-time. . . . When it's something really important (yeah, like once every century) and everyone needs to see it, prime-time would be better. (Prodigy posting, 23 March 1993)

Today President Bill had a press conference that informed viewers of absolutely nothing. . . . The questions asked were tedious at best. I'm sure the ratings are higher for *All My Children* than for a useless, uninformative news conference. (Prodigy posting, 23 April 1993)

Not all viewers complain, however; note the following defense of live coverage by one viewer and a subsequent rebuttal:

I can't stand it anymore — I have to comment. [It would be a waste of time to complain] to the President of the US about an issue so TRIVIAL as press conferences interrupting the soaps. The continued outcry on this issue is an embarrassment. . . . *All My Children* will be on next week and the week after that and the week after that. . . . (Prodigy posting, 23 April 1993)

For those who think press conferences are more important than soaps, I think you are missing the point. General press conferences such as today's . . . are not immediately important . . . if a person has his or her TV on at that time, they want to see [the soaps], not updates, not re-hashes of questionable 'news' things. (Prodigy posting, 24 April 1993)

Although the White House strategized to reach as many viewers as possible during the day for Clinton's addresses, consider that just one of them elicited more than 1300 complaining phone calls to the ABC network alone (*Soap Opera Weekly*, 1993a). This contradicts newsworkers' belief that 'whatever the President says or does is by definition national news' (NBC editor quoted in Epstein, 1973: 144). Newsworkers may think so, but these viewers do not.

Some viewers believe that television industry changes may work in their favor. They predict that increasing channel capacity and more all-news channels will lessen dominance of live news on the networks. Others point to CNN as the channel responsible for 24-hour news and feel that NBC, CBS and ABC should not continue to utilize pre-emptive coverage:

I guess [the networks] figure there are still people out there who can't get their news any other way but from one of the Big Three . . . [they] are living in the dark ages. . . . I think eventually CNN will take care of the news for everyone (at least I hope so) and we can watch our shows in peace. (Prodigy posting, 27 June 1993)

In fact, CNN's style of reporting has contributed to an *increase* in live coverage by the networks, which some feel has affected the quality of news reporting in that there is now 'too little distinction between what is "live" and what is significant' (Rosenstiel, 1994: 28).

Viewers also complain about the acceptability of pre-emptive coverage in terms of amount of airtime allocated and production values. When discussing the coverage of the Branch Davidian fire, viewers protested most vehemently about its repetitive and uninformative content:

Yes, I agree that the conflagration at the Branch Davidian complex was interesting . . . FOR ABOUT FIVE MINUTES TOPS!!! I really resent the news folks rehashing this for 45 minutes when it seems obvious the place is going up in flames. . . . (Prodigy posting, 19 April 1993)

If the guy in the studio asked a question he asked it about forty times — I finally blanked out the sound but for Pete's sake it was like something from an old *Saturday Night Live Show*. . . . Here's the story . . . here it is for the hearing

impaired, here it is for the seeing impaired, etc. etc. Drove me nuts! (Prodigy posting, 19 April 1993)

Viewers point out that while certain events might be newsworthy, they often aren't given any real information:

I do get irritated when . . . [pre-emptions] take up a great portion of a show with what might be going to happen about something, or guessing and going on about all possibilities. . . . Let us know when the facts are in, not all these possible outcomes on something. (Harrington and Biclby, 1995a)

Viewers feel that if an event needs to be covered live, they want to *see* something happening. But while they complain about pre-emptions that are short on action, viewers can get caught up in the wait-and-see attitude of live reporting, which was readily apparent the night O.J. Simpson meandered down the Los Angeles freeway and 'an estimated 95 million people were sufficiently hypnotized to stay glued to their sets' (CBS executive quoted in Bart, 1994: 5).

Also subject to viewer complaint is the production quality of pre-emptive coverage. The constraints entailed by non-routine coverage often lend themselves to amateurish production values: unsteady cameras, disjointed narratives and obviously confused news anchors (Berkowitz, 1992). Responses to visual images are important because viewers get their ideas about news primarily due to the organization of images, not oral narration (Altheide, 1991). Viewers watching the Branch Davidian incident complained about the shoddy camera work (exacerbated by high winds in Texas) and the moral appropriateness of the footage:

The camera bobbed up and down — who was shooting this? Some intern who didn't know better????? Where are the news execs who make decisions on these things? Why is ABC so goofed up? (Prodigy posting, 19 April 1993)

[T]hey showed the building burning to the ground . . . so I have all of that [on videotape instead of my soap]. I actually sat and watched a lot of the tape, but I felt like I was watching suicide, or murder, or both. I really couldn't take it. (Prodigy posting, 20 April 1993)

So what, in viewers' minds, is worthy of a pre-emption? To them, the concepts of national emergency and national safety are central, though they do not always agree on what constitutes those conditions:

Is anyone else out there sick of ABC news and what they choose to cover during the day? . . . I do not think that this story [Branch Davidian burning] warranted national interest. Who cares about this? The shuttle blowing up, the [San Francisco] earthquake, yeah, they are important but the burning of a compound? No way!! (Prodigy posting, 19 April 1993)

The only one of the six pre-emptions that fits viewers' criteria was the announcement of the bombing of the World Trade Center. There was little

discussion of this pre-emption on BBSs or in the daytime press and the few comments that were made imply that viewers felt the event was worthy of pre-emptive coverage and that the coverage was appropriate. As *Soap Opera Weekly* reported, 'All 10 soaps were pre-empted. . . . Viewers seemed to understand the need for the pre-emptions; ABC received only 72 calls from disgruntled fans; about 1,000 calls are average' (1993b).

Values, money and the decision to pre-empt

As noted, decisions about *when* to pre-empt are also decisions about *what* to pre-empt, which by implication are also about *who* to pre-empt. Many viewers feel that the low status of daytime TV (and its fans) is responsible for the frequency of daytime interruptions. They believe that the networks would not 'dare' pre-empt prime-time TV because of viewer protest (one woman said 'I'd like to see them interrupt "Roseanne" with a press conference'; Prodigy posting, 24 April 1993), but care little about the opinions and reactions of daytime viewers:

It is so frustrating being treated like a nonentity. . . . Every time there is a pre-emption during the soaps we can be sure that NBC won't give the viewers a second thought. (*Soap Opera Weekly*, 1993c)

I am sick and tired of everyone dumping on daytime programming. On the 6:00 news here in Toledo, the newscasters sneekered and chortled over how many people had called in to the local station complaining about [a pre-emption]. I sat down and wrote to the President of Entertainment at CBS. . . . but then I deleted it, as I realize that the network could care less [sic] about its daytime viewers. (Prodigy posting, 26 March 1993)

Soap watchers complain vehemently about unscheduled pre-emptions because they feel that the nature of the genre, compared to other genres, makes it less amenable to interruptions:

I hate it when I've waited for something for 6 months and crucial scenes are cut and never re-run for insignificant news I could catch with everybody else on the 5:00 p.m. news! . . . Soaps tend to lead up to resolution — build, build, build and then *one day* . . . resolve. Miss that one day and everything is shot. Resent that (Harrington and Bielby, 1995a)

This concerns not only soap watchers, but those involved in the production of soaps as well. Following a pre-emption announcing Ruth Bader Ginsberg's nomination to the US Supreme Court, 'As the World Turns' actor Terry Lester stated:

[Pre-emptions seem] like a blatant disregard for the audience. We had a peak in the storyline and a plot point that we've been building up to for almost a year

. . . and no one in the Eastern third of the country will ever see [the scenes]. I think for anything short of an alien attack or a natural disaster where people need information, there's no reason to break in. It undermines our legitimacy as a form of entertainment. . . . Nobody else in TV has to wonder if their stuff will air, except us. (*Soap Opera Weekly*, 1993d)

A CBS executive responded:

We don't want to offend viewers who are emotionally involved in an ongoing drama, and on the other hand we have an obligation . . . to put on the air events we think warrant coverage. The announcement of a Supreme Court justice I thought — and think — is an important event. (*Soap Opera Weekly*, 1993d)

The disagreement was followed closely by *Soap Opera Weekly*'s readers, who responded to the appropriateness of pre-emptions in letters published in subsequent issues of the magazine. Lester's comments received both praise and condemnation:

Lester should be commended for changing the networks with anti-soap bias. . . . I waited a long time to see how [a storyline would turn out]. CBS cheated us out of those scenes. (*Soap Opera Weekly*, 1993e: 42)

Lester feels that interrupting the soaps shows a lack of respect for the audience. Well, I feel it is Lester who is showing a lack of respect. He seems to feel that the audience thinks what happens to fictional characters is more important than what's going on in the real world. (*Soap Opera Weekly*, 1993e: 41–2)

Most soap watchers are worried that due to the local (rather than national) status of many pre-emptions, some regions of the country will see storylines that the rest of the country will miss. While their consternation might seem puzzling to non-watchers, the nature of the genre engenders a very devoted audience (Allen, 1985). In viewers' eyes, if a pre-emption is absolutely necessary, it ideally impacts everybody in the same way (all viewers in all markets are interrupted at exactly the same point in the story), and once the pre-emption is over the story resumes exactly where it left off. This, however, is rare. Pre-emptions' impact shows differently depending on time zone, order of daytime line-up, affiliates' decision-making, and the fact that many pre-emptions are local rather than national. Given the probability that a pre-emption will be less-than-ideal, what constitutes a 'better' or 'worse' pre-emption? If an interruption is fairly short, BBS users are grateful to have access to other watchers on-line who can provide them with missing information, a benefit unavailable to non-users:

I almost screamed when I fast forwarded [my tape and found that 'news' (and I use the term loosely) crap had wiped out the last 40 minutes of [my soap]. I'm glad, however, that I could turn on [my computer] and get an update, also find others to vent with. . . . (Prodigy posting, 19 April 1993)

Most BBS dialogue following a pre-emption consists of queries to viewers in other time zones on whether or not a show (or certain scenes) aired, and if so, requests follow for plot synopses or videotaped copies of the show. But the lengthier the pre-emption, the more anxious viewers become about whether they will have access to missing storyline. At ABC, if pre-emptions are under 40 minutes long for an hour-long show, the show is picked up in progress with a brief re-cap, which means the missed story is never aired in the markets pre-empted. If more than 40 minutes is pre-empted, ABC executives must decide what should fill the remaining time and whether to air the missed episode the next day (*Soap Opera Weekly*, 1993d). If a show is pre-empted in just one area of the country it is nearly impossible to get it re-broadcast since most regions of the country will have seen it. Viewers are frustrated that others are privy to scenes that they might never get to see:

Back before I [subscribed to Prodigy] I always assumed that what I missed, everybody else missed too. Boy was I wrong!! Little did I know that if only part of an episode was missed, other time zones saw the whole thing. That makes me mad! (Prodigy posting, 23 April 1993)

Note the following viewer's confusion as she tries to figure out what will happen to NBC's daytime line-up following the Branch Davidian pre-emptions:

I called NBC... and asked when we would get today's show. ... [The receptionist] said that because so many cities across the country missed yesterday's show because of the Waco thing ... [all stations] would show yesterday's show today ... as I see it, all of us are going to be a day behind forever. [The receptionist] said no ... NBC would not be sending a show out today so we would all be at the same day ... [but] what about the [people with satellite dishes]? Will they get the same show two days in a row? ... The same as yesterday or a new show? (Prodigy posting, 20 April 1993)

The fear of missing aired story also explains the absence of complaints surrounding scheduled network pre-emptions. For example, the networks regularly interrupt programming in February and March to air basketball playoffs. While soap fans would rather be watching their show(s), most accept the pre-emptions because they know that soaps are being pre-empted in all markets and that daytime executives anticipate the interruption in terms of story design. This is an 'ideal' pre-emption because no viewer is being deprived of story or character development. As one fan said, 'I'm glad it's nationwide so nobody will miss anything' (Prodigy posting, 14 March 1993).

Clearly, a decision to air unscheduled news brings newswriters into conflict with other network concerns (Epstein, 1973: 113), but research points more to economics than to perceptions of a genre's moral worth as

the basis of those concerns. Money plays a key role in decisions to pre-empt because the news can be expanded only at the expense of something else (Epstein, 1973: 114). Pre-emptions are costly both because ratings might be adversely affected and because fewer commercials are shown during pre-emptions than during regularly scheduled broadcasts (Jamicson and Campbell, 1983). The decision on what program to pre-empt is thus based on the relative economic value of different time slots (Epstein, 1973: 124), which is measured mainly by audience size. If the news pre-empt a program with a small audience, the network loses less money than if a more popular program is interrupted. The viewer quoted earlier is accurate in saying that an episode of *Roseanne* is unlikely to be pre-empted, but from the network perspective, it has less to do with the low social value of daytime television than with its comparatively low economic value. For example, *Soap Opera Weekly* (1993d) reported that 'the White House contacted all three networks to find out the best time to reach the most viewers during the day for Clinton's pre-emptions'. While the article did not report what was decided to be the best time, most presidential pre-emptions occur at 1:00 p.m. EST, to the consternation of viewers of *All My Children* (ABC), *Days of Our Lives* (NBC) and *The Bold and the Beautiful* (CBS), whose shows air at 1:00 p.m. in most East Coast markets. During the 1992-3 prime-time television season, the combined Nielsen ratings for these three soaps did not surpass the ratings for a single episode of *Roseanne* (Momush, 1994: 23A-24A), which indicates that choosing to pre-empt soap operas rather than prime-time is indeed a money-saver for the networks.

In addition, two factors make soaps as a genre potentially less costly to pre-empt than a prime-time program. First, since soaps air five days a week, 52 weeks per year and an episode is generally aired only one or two weeks after it is shot (Allen, 1985: 55), they have at least some flexibility to absorb pre-emptions through careful editing or last-minute rewrites. Prime-time programs, which are usually shot weeks if not months ahead of airtime, have much less flexibility and thus risk permanent loss of story material if pre-empted. Second, the soap audience is remarkably loyal and might be more willing to tolerate interrupted programming than more fickle prime-time viewers.

But the decision is not that simple. There is a point of diminishing returns beyond which even the most dedicated daytime viewers will abandon their shows. The wall-to-wall coverage of the O.J. Simpson preliminary hearings eclipsed all but two soap operas for more than a week in the summer of 1994. While they cost the networks up to \$1 million a day in lost advertising revenue, they garnered huge Nielsen ratings (Cerone and Hall, 1994). When soaps finally returned to the air, their ratings had declined dramatically, and still have not fully recovered. Since early 1995 and the beginning of ongoing trial coverage, the three top soap operas have

each lost 10 percent of their viewership (Bellalante, 1995: 73; see also Cochran, 1994). Many fear the damage could have a long-term impact not just on soap operas but on network television as a whole, given soaps' status as the networks' 'cash cow' (*Soap Opera Now!*, 1994a). Some viewers are aware of the role daytime plays in the economic success of network television and threaten boycotts during periods of extensive pre-emptions:

I love the way they promised us gavel-to-gavel coverage of O.J. every day as if they were doing soap fans a favor by obliterating the entire daytime TV schedule. We should boycott the prime-time shows on all three networks until they stop holding us hostage in our own living rooms. Maybe then these arrogant people will get the message! (*Soap Opera Weekly*, 1994: 41-2)

Why would the networks risk loss of daytime revenue by covering the O.J. trial? We come back to the question of values but in a slightly different way. Entertainment insiders speculate that the networks continued trial coverage because it would 'look bad' to abandon the real-life drama in the courtroom for the fictional drama of soap opera, not in the eyes of viewers but in the eyes of the press (Cerone and Hall, 1994). Competitive pressures often decide what counts as non-routine news. When one station decides that crisis coverage is warranted, other stations quickly follow suit (Berkowitz, 1992).

The tension between the relative value and economics of pre-emptions came to a head during the controversy surrounding ABC news anchor Ted Koppel's public dismissal of soap viewers' concerns about the extensive O.J. coverage. At a press conference Koppel said, 'the American people, what were they deprived of [by the pre-emptions]? The soaps? Is that what we're in this sort of righteous suit about?' (quoted in Kape, 1994). The daytime press went wild. Koppel's comments inspired impassioned editorials in numerous daytime magazines, including the following by Michael Kape, Managing Editor of *Soap Opera Now!*:

I guess we'll have to spell it out for Ted Koppel. Your program does not pay your huge, million dollar plus salary. *Loving*, *All My Children*, *One Life to Live* and *General Hospital* really pay your salary. The news division of ABC consistently *loses* money for the network. Soap operas make money ... and we aren't happy with you at this moment. (Kape, 1994)

In fact, Kape's claim that soap operas pay Koppel's salary is borne out by the ratings. From 14 September 1992 to 18 April 1993, *World News Tonight* (ABC's nightly news show anchored by Koppel) averaged an 11.3 rating while ABC's four daytime soap operas collectively earned a 20.4 rating (Monush, 1994: 23A-24A). Koppel's attitude, however, is typical of newsmakers, who believe that the point of pre-emptions is 'to fill time that isn't worth anything anyhow' (Epstein, 1973: 124). Soap viewers' and

daytime insiders' perceptions of stigmatization are thus based in fact, and reflect the ongoing marginalization of the soap genre (and by extension its fans) within the media production industry (Harrington and Bielby, 1995a).

What happens to indirect complaints?

If viewers' direct complaints get them nowhere in terms of shaping decisions about newsworthiness, what happens to their indirect complaints? Even though the forums for most indirect complaints (BBSs and fan magazines) are more 'public' than letters or phone calls to television stations, it might seem that disgruntled viewers are misusing their potential political power by complaining to the wrong source: each other. Ideally, citizens with complaints 'construct notions about the causes of the conditions they find onerous, assign blame, and locate officials responsible for rectifying the conditions ... [but if] ... groups complain to the wrong party, they may get no results' (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977: 83, 145). If I am angry at a pre-emption and complain on a BBS, I have other people to complain *with* but am not directly engaging the very people/institution with whom I am angry. If I write a complaining letter to a fan magazine, my only guaranteed satisfaction seems to be including other viewers and the daytime press in my frustration. How can indirect complaints engender change?

There are at least two possibilities. First, actions of viewer advocates within the daytime industry are beginning to get results. While viewers' complaints about pre-emptions address their newsworthiness, it is not in fact newsmakers who respond to them but other industry participants, who essentially act as interveners between viewers and newsmakers (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977: 143). For example, consider again the pre-emption to announce Ruth Grimsberg's US Supreme Court nomination, which pre-empted CBS viewers from seeing a long-awaited wedding on *As the World Turns*. After thousands of viewers complained in fan publications, on BBSs and in direct calls and letters to CBS stations, network executives arranged for the wedding to be re-broadcast in flashbacks. Writers quickly penned a scene where the bride described the wedding to characters who were not at the ceremony; viewers were able to see the pre-empted material, now positioned as a 'memory' (*Soap Opera Weekly*, 1993f). Industry participants also intervene on viewers' behalf by working to keep all markets at the same place in the story; in other words, they aim for the 'ideal' pre-emption. During the O.J. hearings, NBC specifically asked its affiliates for a national pre-emption so that 'everyone will be in the same place at the same time so then they can continue on with the story' (*Soap Opera Now!*, 1994b: 1). In the case of local pre-emptions, CBS tries to get local affiliates to air soaps in early morning hours so that dedicated watchers can

videotape the episode (Champagne, 1994a: 48). In a rare move, the Executive Producer of *As the World Turns* asked a CBS executive to repeat an episode that was interrupted by the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan ice-skating scandal during a crucial moment in the storyline: East Coast viewers lost the first half of the program and West Coast viewers the second half. Says the producer:

Within a half hour, she called me back and gave me the great news that CBS had made the decision to rerun the show. . . . The next day when we repeated the show, we got almost double the amount of phone calls thanking us for the decision. (*Soap Opera Digest*, 1994: 11; see also *Soap Opera Now!*, 1994c: 1)

The daytime press also functions as a viewer advocate (Harrington and Bielby, 1995a). During the O.J. hearings they published network addresses and phone numbers and encouraged viewers to write and call. More importantly, discussions in the press about how the networks *should* handle coverage of the O.J. criminal trial seem instrumental in how the networks *did* handle it:

Several weeks ago *SONow!* floated a novel and revolutionary idea about how the networks could deal with airing the OJTV trial. . . . We suggested in these pages the networks trim ten minutes per hour from the soaps and give them over to trial coverage. . . . this is exactly what's going to happen. . . . Remember, folks, it was our idea. (*Soap Opera Now!*, 1994d)

In the past, 'whatever the news departments wanted they got. This time, daytime — and the network accountants — rebelled' (*Soap Opera Now!*, 1995). Each of the networks formed a different strategy for dealing with pre-emptions during the ongoing O.J. trial. Daytime insiders were happiest with ABC's creation 'Soapline', a mini-show which updated viewers hourly on pre-emptions and gave recaps of missed or partial episodes (*Soap Opera Digest*, 1995: 74). They believe the show's creation reflected widespread viewer and critic protests over the networks' extensive pre-emptions during the preliminary hearings. Viewers are grateful for these intercessions on their behalf. In May 1993, ABC made a decision to not air live a statement by President Clinton that was covered by CBS and NBC, and delighted viewers flooded the bulletin boards with thank-yous:

. . . we owe ABC a big thank you for their decision. They showed independence, integrity and maybe even some support for loyal viewers! We complain a lot when ABC makes us mad. . . . I just want to say THANK YOU ABC. (Prodigy posting, 16 May 1993)

In addition to the actions of daytime advocates, a second way that viewers might be able to indirectly shape decisions about newsworthiness is through BBS participation by television executives. The recent explosion in BBS user rates has finally caught the networks' attention, each of whom

now has on-line services that provide users with storyline updates, inside information, opportunities for live chats and more (Bellafante, 1995; Champagne, 1994b). Viewers perceive these services as a more direct link to TV's head honchos (whom they call PTB or the 'powers that be') than is provided through letter-writing, telephone-calling or via the daytime press. Word of President Clinton's appearance on-line inspired the following suggestion:

I read today that President Clinton is going to be on [the boards. It] might help connect us all a bit more with the PTB in DC. Hmmm. . . . Maybe the [All My Children] PTB can tell the White House not to hold news conferences between 1 and 2 p.m.! (Prodigy posting, 22 March 1993)

Another intriguing possibility is the existence of industry-located BBS 'lurkers', or those members who join a BBS and read ongoing dialogue without posting messages themselves. 'One of the mysteries of being on-line is that you never really know who reads your messages, or who you're communicating with' (Cerone, 1994: 82). Summary reports of Usenet, a network of electronic newsgroups, show that lurking is not an isolated activity but is instead the principal mode of participation, with the ratio of readers to posters very high (McLaughlin et al., 1995: 91, 92). Film executive Ira Deutchman claims 'there is a lot of Hollywood talent lurking on the board at this moment' (Cerone, 1994: 82). Indeed, there is growing evidence that various entertainment industry participants — from producers to directors to actors — routinely lurk on BBSs, gaining immediate viewer feedback without participating themselves or revealing their identities (Cerone, 1994; Grimes, 1992; Harrington and Bielby, 1995a; Strauss, 1994).

Why might industry insiders choose to lurk? What are the benefits? There are several possibilities. First, on entertainment-oriented boards, the identity of someone claiming 'insider' status is immediately suspect. Although celebrity-identity claims are difficult if not impossible to verify, if 'celebrity' is the board's focus, the verification of those claims proves crucial to the group's ability to sustain meaningful interaction (Harrington and Bielby, 1995b: 617). For example, when someone logged on to a soap opera board claiming to be a popular daytime actress, some users were welcoming, but others mocked or questioned her claim:

Just what the hell are [you] trying to prove? That's like saying I'm Kareem Abdul Jabbar!

And I'm Princess Di.

Hi, I'm Elvis and this [bulletin board] is so great I came back from the dead.

. . . (all quotes from Harrington and Bielby, 1995b: 617)

This claimant proved, in fact, to be an imposter. After a heated debate on the boards as to whether she was in fact the actress she claimed to be, she posted this message:

Hi. I am writing to tell you that [the identity claim] wasn't real. . . . I started this whole big mess. You see, I wanted to see how people would react. . . . I realize that this was wrong, because I had gotten people's hopes up, and now it is just a big letdown. . . . I am very sorry. (quoted in Harrington and Bielby, 1995b: 618)

As identity on BBs is so manipulable — on-line, you can be anybody you want to be — users who claim to actually be celebrities must prove their identity to others. This prospect might discourage 'genuine' daytime insiders from full participation.

Second, celebrities might choose to lurk because if they reveal their identity (and it is believed by others), they are often overwhelmed with the number of messages they receive. When popular musician Michael Stipe first logged on to America Online, he warned his many fans, 'Don't send me E-mail. I don't want to get flooded' (Strauss, 1994: 45). Similarly, a soap fan magazine editor warned BBS users in a posting:

Thanks so much to all of you for making this board work. I have a simple request to keep it so. Please do not e-mail me questions; I will not answer them. . . . Since we don't answer letters to the magazine personally, I am extending that policy to the BB and will not answer e-mail personally. It's not fair so here's fair warning: Letters posted by e-mail will neither be acknowledged nor answered. (quoted in Harrington and Bielby, 1995b: 620)

This quote also speaks to a third reason: by lurking rather than fully participating, industry insiders can gain all the benefits of fan reaction without having to respond to them personally, credit their assistance, or be accountable to them in any way, shape or form. BBs provide a forum for gauging audience reaction and preferences from a totally anonymous position (Harrington and Bielby, 1995a, 1995b; Strauss, 1994).

Regular posters, aware of the possibility of lurkers, disagree on whether to grant them full membership status on the boards. Some refuse to legitimize lurkers, but others clearly take them into consideration when constructing their posts (McLaughlin et al., 1995: 102). For example, during the aforementioned incident in which an 'actress's' identity-claim was debunked by board members, one user cautioned:

I think we should give everyone who writes on the board the benefit of the doubt that they are who they say they are until they prove otherwise. Who knows, there might be more cast members reading our notes but are afraid to make their presence known because they think we might attack them. (quoted in Harrington and Bielby, 1995b: 618)

Similarly, a BBS user complaining about one of President Clinton's news conference pre-emptions posted the following:

I really wish that someone, like the network, could have come out of their stupor, and at least put the [soap] storyline on at the bottom of the screen . . . per chance someone at the network will read this note. (Prodigy posting, 26 March 1993)

For disgruntled victims of pre-emptions, the existence of lurkers allows for what seem to be misdirected claims to be 'heard' and perhaps responded to in future decisions to pre-empt. BBs thus facilitate and potentially enhance the impact of TV viewers' opinions about newsworthiness.

Interestingly, the most indirect form of complaint might also be the most powerful. Recall viewers' threats to boycott stations during pre-emptions. If changing channels or turning off the TV is viewed as a form of complaint, it might be the one that works best. Soap opera research finds that television executives care little about the nuances of viewer preferences as long as they keep watching (Harrington and Bielby, 1995a). Presumably, the same is true with the news. We know that while newswriters care little about viewer reaction to news content, network executives want good ratings. It is only when viewers abandon programming altogether that their likes and dislikes become relevant. As such, the 'quietest' complaint might actually be the 'loudest'.

Viewers' indirect claims do give them limited power to influence the news. While they are seemingly unable to alter newswriters' claim, 'This is important news!' as reflected in decisions to pre-empt, viewers can influence how those pre-emptions are handled through the strength of their counter-claim: 'It may be important news but it's not *that* important!' They may not have the power to co-construct what counts as news, but they do have the power to co-construct the meaning or relevance of pre-emptive news vis-a-vis other programming choices.

Conclusion

This study supports other research (Neuman et al., 1992) in finding that on some occasions the media and the public are in agreement about what type of news is worth following closely but on other occasions they are not. In this study, the only pre-emption viewers accepted as appropriate was the announcement of the World Trade Center bombing. This acceptance is important because if soap opera fans were to reject *all* emergency news bulletins, their unenviable reputation as being lost in fantasyland might seem warranted. But they don't reject all intrusions of the 'real world' into their fictional narratives, only those they deem unworthy. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of viewers' comments is that they address *not* the question of whether or not something is 'news', but rather what *kind* of news it is: is it worthy of a pre-emption or should it be part of a regularly scheduled news program? Were production values acceptable or not? Was

the news informative or repetitive? Viewers accept that it is someone else's prerogative to decide what is or is not televised as news, and their debates focus instead on the kind of coverage a given event warrants. Rather than co-constructing what counts as news, viewers instead negotiate the meaning of that news.

Given these findings, we return to the question of the status of complainers as political actors. While analysis might show that viewers struggle and negotiate with the construction of the news, what power do they really have? A fruitful starting point might be a closer examination of the impact of the 'publicness' of the complaints made in fan magazines and on BBSs. As noted, these complaints might seem misdirected because they do not directly engage those who make decisions about pre-emptions. Earlier discussion focused on the viewer advocacy role played by the daytime press, and the possibility of entertainment industry lurkers on the boards. Here, let us consider more closely the question of how fans' publicized complaints to *one another*, even if no one else were 'listening in', might engender political action.

The most important thing viewer-to-viewer complaints accomplish is fostering a sense of community among television viewers and fans. We typically think of TV viewing as an isolated, private activity, and reactions to programming content as shared only among friends, family members or others in the same immediate physical setting. When viewers write letters or make phone calls to complain about pre-emptions, they have virtually no way of knowing whether others are doing the same thing. But when complaints are publicized in fan magazines and on BBSs, each viewer's perception of the unfairness of pre-emptions gets advertised to others. Recall the BBS user who said that before she had subscribed to the service, she had no idea that pre-emptions had different effects in different time zones. 'Little did I know that if only *part* of an episode was missed, other time zones usually saw the whole thing' (Prodigy posting, 23 April 1993). Or note the following user who is trying to figure out how 'alone' she is in her experience:

... does this news stuff happen across the country? ... if [Clinton] holds a 1 p.m. news conference (my time) it blocks out AMC, but if he's live in say CA, it's only 11 a.m., so what I'm getting at is DO WE ALL SUFFER??? (Prodigy posting, 23 April 1993)

Fan magazines function in a similar way. By publicizing fans' encounters with soap opera celebrities, allotting increasing space to fan opinion columns, and printing fans' letters about pre-emptions, the magazines foster a sense of community among fans (Harrington and Bielby, 1995a).

By putting like-minded individuals in touch with one another, as radio and television talk shows have effectively done (Munson, 1993), BBSs and fan magazines create the conditions under which widespread political

action is possible. As Jones has noted, 'One of the measures of genuine community ought to be its relationship to action (political or otherwise)' (1995: 25). But are the communities created on-line and through readership of fan magazines 'genuine'? Scholars have not examined the political implications of the community created through soap opera fan magazines and soap-opera oriented bulletin boards and only recently have begun discussions about the nature and political potential of on-line communities, most notably with Steven G. Jones' edited volume *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (1995). As Jones admits, 'it is difficult to determine just what would constitute on-line political and personal action. The connections between computer-mediated community and the social and political worlds that users are part of offline are unclear' (1995: 25). Presumably, the potential of those linkages will gain clarity as user rates escalate and the boards become more democratic, widening to include demographic categories of users not yet widely represented.

The forums for communication discussed in this article are rarely thought of as hotbeds of political action, in either the formal or 'everyday' sense of the term. Yet, they provide unique opportunities to observe how people translate private feelings about the news (negotiated and oppositional readings) into public displays of opinion (complaints). It is not just that television viewers feel pre-emptive news isn't newsworthy; they *do* something with their feelings (Jensen, 1990) and they are now able to do it in forums that allow others to 'see' and 'hear' what they are doing and perhaps inspire them to do the same. Disgruntled viewers' recognition of their own sheer numbers — and network executives' recognition of that recognition — has inspired advocacy on behalf of soap viewers. Knowledge is indeed power, though it is rarely thought to apply in cases such as this. Eliasoph has asked 'What context could elicit the public voices of people who never engage in public debate? What is "public" in that sense?' (1990: 488). Examining non-traditional forums could help answer those questions.

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Cultural production and the corporation: musical genres and the strategic management of creativity in the US recording industry

Keith Negus

This article focuses on how the major US recording companies attempt to strategically manage their different genres of music. It then considers the consequences of this for creative and commercial practices through illustrative case studies of the corporate management of rap and salsa. In broad terms, the article is intended as a contribution to debates about the 'culture industry' and the interrelations between 'culture' and 'economics'. Two themes are used as a way of highlighting this relationship and the role of the music companies in cultural production: that an industry produces culture and that culture produces an industry. These themes are developed through an interrogation of detailed empirical material brought together from research conducted in the USA during 1996.

Needs and wants: the case of broadcasting policy

Stephen Pratten

In this article I identify two broad perspectives on broadcasting policy, each deploying very different assumptions regarding the role of policy in facilitating human well-being. I argue that an increasingly influential wants-based position draws upon an impoverished social ontology which is unable to sustain the distinction between wants and underlying needs. I also argue that the previously dominant beyond-wants perspective failed to elaborate its own contrasting pre-suppositions sufficiently. Drawing upon a perspective developed within economics under the heading of *critical realism*, I emphasize that needs can be formulated as goals only under definite historical conditions. As such, they may be poorly and even misleadingly formulated. Specifically, real needs can be manifest in a variety of historically contingent wants, which may then be met by any of a multitude of potential satisfiers. The point insisted upon here is that the two, real needs and expressed wants, should not be conflated. By maintaining this distinction it is possible to evaluate broadcasting systems not simply in terms of their ability to match outputs to wants but in terms of criteria beyond wants.

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