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Television in theory

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Television has attracted much theoretical attention over the last two decades. Work from a number of different perspectives has attempted to locate different aspects of television within conceptual schemes which might help to explain its nature, operation and consequences. The sheer scale of its depictive 'flows' within modern society and its character as a representational matrix installed at the intersection of public and private life, have been an inviting challenge for such work. Some approaches to general social and cultural theory have located television in their broader schemes, often giving it a significance not found in earlier accounts. But there has also been a good deal of television-centred work undertaken, especially within the interdisciplinary framework of 'media studies'. Some of this work has been television-centred in its substantive interests while drawing on a wide range of theoretical and empirical settings in which to place the medium. Some of it has had a more exclusive character, developing its theoretical project tightly around television with little by way of cross-connection with existing social theory and research. Not surprisingly, work on television as an industry has shown less exclusivity than work on television texts, with recent work on audiences varying considerably in the kinds of conceptual linkage to the non-televisual which it attempts to make.

Compared to most areas of social science, most work on television has shown less by way of *theory building* and *theory development* in relation to research and analysis. And although there has been a degree of inter-perspectival debate, theoretical developments have often occurred in relative isolation from each other. Notwithstanding the continuing value of many ideas and concepts, an over-privileged and under-accountable role for theory and for the 'theorist' has become established.

Here, I want to attempt a brief critical audit of theoretical approaches to television, looking at some of the limitations which have shown themselves and at directions for the future. First of all, it would be useful to examine what is indicated by describing certain kinds of enquiry as 'theoretical', or by calling a particular set of ideas about television a 'theory', since the literature of international media research displays shifts and uncertainties of usage.

Theory as an academic practice

In his recent general account of cultural theory (Fornäs, 1995), Johan Fornäs reminds us that the Greek roots of 'theory' lie in the idea of seeing or beholding (a point not without some irony given the problems of obscurity from which media studies has suffered). More generally, 'theory' locates phenomena within a context of explicatory abstraction, seeking to understand them at a level above that of descriptive detail, a level where their interconnection with other phenomena and their generalized significance within the 'systems' constituted by perceived laws and conventions and bodies of previous knowledge can be gauged. Theories vary in their scale and internal complexity, ranging from a single speculative idea to linked series of propositions and conceptual systems claiming a degree of predictive precision. In the natural sciences, developed theoretical constructs are often produced partly from the empirical testing of hypotheses (although these are themselves variously derived from other bodies of theory and from guesswork). In that sense, the resulting constructs represent a moment of 'provisional closure' within knowledge, open to further confirmation but also to falsification. In the Arts and Humanities, however, theory is often not directly underpinned by enquiry — in that sense, it is more a moment of 'openness' than of 'closure'; a primarily *speculative* endeavour designed to lead to a debate maintained at the theoretical level rather than a systematic enquiry which is conventionally required to move 'down' to the level of evidence to secure itself as 'knowledge'. As the phenomena about which explanation is sought become less susceptible to any kind of controlled observation and measurement — such as is clearly the case in many areas of philosophy for example, but which is also true of areas of media and cultural inquiry — the idea of theory as a realm of *self-contained reflection* becomes more appropriate.

Many areas of media research have clearly had to confront the broadly 'scientific' and then more specifically 'social scientific' issues concerning the conditions of theoretical adequacy and the relationship (including the possible determinative effects) of theory upon methods and data. By media research, and particularly television studies, has been influenced by a strong 'philosophical' tradition too, coming through from critical social theory and, more recently, from the varieties of cultural theory. Some of this work has been pitched at the highest, most abstract of levels — it has

been 'grand theory' (often variously Marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic and postmodernist in derivation; see the account in Skinner, 1985). Moreover, the precise extent to which critical theory is interested in furthering an *understanding* of how things are as opposed to offering a generalized *critique* of how they are presumed to be has sometimes been difficult to gauge. Whatever might be judged of value by way of particular perceptions and insights, few academic endeavours can have worked with such sheer assertiveness, such an absence of conditionality on their discourse, than the varieties of critical theory. At least part of the allure for younger scholars, part of the 'glamour of theory', has lain precisely in the taking up of uncompromising 'positions' with such confidence and style.

During the 1980s, it was assumed by some that 'theory' was going to get to places which research could not reach (Thompson, 1978, remains a classic critique of the general tendency, despite its own specific intellectual moment and focus). 'Theory', refinable at the purely theoretical level, appeared simply to need careful *application* to instances. In this model, descent to the particular was more often 'illustrative' than it was 'investigative'. In part, such an emphasis was the product of resolute (and excessive) anti-empiricism, a rejection of the conceptual conservatism, and the accompanying political complicity, perceived in much social science.

Four types of theory about television

Theories about television are, of course, informed by media theory more generally. They also display varying degrees of applicability to other media. But the specificity and impact of television as a *cultural* form has given its theoretical literature a distinctive character. For one thing it is far more informed by Arts and Humanities thinking, particularly by versions of the literary/philosophical tradition, than the broader range of work on 'media and society' or the earlier literature of academic commentary which was generated around the press and around advertising. I think that the theories which have been developed about television can usefully be divided into four types — theories of representation, theories of medium, theories of institution and theories of process. There are clearly other useful ways of classifying theories, but this rather obvious typology helps in organizing the kind of preliminary 'audit' I want to present here. In some theoretical work, these types either combine or, indeed, merge. In practice, rather than providing exclusive, self-consciously delimited foci of interest, they have formed the 'core' for theoretical accounts which then frequently encompass other aspects of television, subsuming these as secondary to the main focus. This sometimes occurs as a process of 'totalization' from a quite narrow initial base.

A split which traverses all of them, though to different degrees, is one which I have commented on elsewhere (Corner, 1991) — that between a view of television as essentially an agency of public information and a view of it as essentially an agency of popular culture and popular entertainment. I want to look at each of my four types in turn before developing some points about their interconnection and the possibilities they offer for development.

Theories of representation

In general, studies of television developing out of the tradition of mass communication research had a tendency to ignore the symbolic, textual complexity of television programmes and to emphasize, instead, the 'output of content'. Such an approach inevitably resulted in a radically foreshortened view of television's character as a whole new system of socialized aesthetics, one in which quite unprecedented interconnections between 'the real' and 'the imaginary', between depiction and social subjectivity, were being established and in which the visual image was quickly becoming of momentous political and cultural importance.

In Britain, it was the influence of literary and film studies on the formation of interdisciplinary media studies in the early 1970s which provided a new emphasis on matters of representation, and then the structuralist/semiotic 'turn' within this which provided the primary framework for theory. The work of the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was of the most formative significance, particularly those working papers authored or co-authored by Stuart Hall (for instance, Hall, 1974) although Fiske and Hartley's *Reading Television* (1978), drawing on the Centre's work, made the 'cultural reading' of the television 'text' an accessible new critical practice in teaching. Within this strand of enquiry, theories of representation supported the more general, Marxist theory of ideology and ideological reproduction, particularly in the influential version provided by Althusser (1971) where, conceptualized in terms of a representational process involving both language and image, ideology becomes the key factor in the maintenance of Western political stability. A number of characteristics of television's dominant forms of social representation were seen to exemplify the features of ideological communication identified by Althusser — for instance, the 'interpellative' devices by which it engaged and addressed the attention of individuals-in-society and the kinds of 'misrecognition' of social relations which followed from the use of various means of displacement and mystification. Television's extensive use of the 'direct address' mode, its varieties of interrupted narrative, its range of 'realisms', dramatic and journalistic, often to provide 'illusory' effects, took on a directly political impact within this perspective (see Corner, 1992).

The theoretical developments which followed closely paralleled the rise of Althusserian 'ideological critique' in literary studies and film studies, where an existing tradition of theory as critical speculation was combined with newer ideas of theory as the main dynamic of a materialist 'science' of society (a combination seen at its most confident in Eagleton, 1976). However, whereas literature was regarded by many Marxist critics as a form which itself frequently exposed the contradictions of ideology, a function in large measure of the 'critical creativity' of authorial transformation and of a subtle and deep textual structure, in general no kinds of television output were accorded such redeeming epistemological and aesthetic qualities. Later writers have sometimes revised this judgement but theories about the distinctive 'realist' efficiency of television in circulating distortive social imagery (of class, gender and race as well as of specific issues and events) continue to be dominant. These have produced a marked sense of television (particularly US television) as, representationally, a 'bad object'. This object routinely encourages, if it does not actually instil, 'bad' forms of subjectivity in viewers by mechanisms frequently conceptualized in terms of the subconscious, psychodynamic 'positioning' which the viewing of dominant forms of television entails as well as in terms of content. Just how far this badness has been judged redeemable by better, more 'progressive' forms of representation and revised content has varied. Some theories have implied little scope for this, while others have turned on formal and thematic innovation and its possibilities. The question of 'redeemability' importantly figures in other types of account too, as I shall suggest below.

The notion of 'liveness' (an ontological feature often uselessly conflated with the stylistics of 'immediacy') has been a major component in theories of television representation. It has been either through real or pseudo liveness that many critics have seen the distinctive illusory or distortive potential of television to lie, engaging the spectator within the terms of an ontology which is extensively and successfully ideological in character (Feuer, 1983). The degree to which contemporary television even tries to project itself as 'live' is limited however, and a number of commentators (see Caldwell, 1995) have judged that an excessive concern with 'liveness' has been detrimental to theoretical development. It has led, in their view, to an ignoring both of the great variety of ways in which the recorded image is now used within dominant forms of television across all genres and of viewers' own understanding of the ontological status of what is seen on the screen.

The nature of television's specific forms of temporality, however, its organization of 'continuity' across interruption and widely diverse kinds of 'look' and 'sound' has been an important point of reference for those trying to address and theorize its particular representational system. Hall (1975) discussed both its distinctive mix of 'relay' and 'channel' functions (allowing both weak and strong kinds of mediation in relation to an

and to cause a major realignment of theoretical interest, towards audience interpretation. I shall pick this point up more fully later, but I have noted how many representational theories, though focused on form, were also concerned with questions of influence (whether conceptualized as 'ideology', 'myth', 'ritual' or whatever). Indeed, some of the more politicized theories of representation were interested in form *only insofar* as it was a device of influence. The opening-up of the poststructuralist debate about the contingency of televisual meaning, about the pragmatics of understanding and significance, together with the empirical precedent of Morley's classic *Nationwide* study (Morley, 1980), put 'limits' on this line of representational argument which still largely remain in place.

Theories of medium

Theoretical interest in television as a medium is often hard to differentiate from an interest in representation. However, whereas the latter places emphasis on television's aesthetic, discursive character across the generic range (though usually with some emphasis on either its journalistic or its entertainment functions), the former works, right from the start, at a more general level. It addresses television as a cultural technology, the social influence of which is more a matter of its general properties as a technology than anything to do with particular conventions of programming or types of output (Meyrowitz, 1994, outlines these factors usefully). Marshall McLuhan was undoubtedly the most influential pioneer theorist of television as a medium (notably in McLuhan, 1964) and it is not surprising that a revival of interest in his works on the spatial, temporal and sensory aspects of television, often seen to be that of a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, has occurred. McLuhan's own thinking on these matters was greatly prompted by the earlier studies of Harold Innis on the macro-cultural changes brought about by communication technologies. Innis's writings (for example, Innis, 1951) though less fashionable than McLuhan's, are still an important source of 'medium' theory. It is important to note, though, just how tightly McLuhan's agenda is drawn around the abstracted relationships posed between technological characteristics and sense experience. Political, economic, sociological or even aesthetic questions hardly figure on it all, and although the stimulating character of his pithy overstatements cannot be denied, his influence on later scholars has often included a degree of de-politicizing abstraction and the adoption of a 'techno-visionary' rhetoric.

A move away from representational theories of television towards 'medium' theories (not, however, as strong a shift as that towards processual ideas) has partly been the consequence of a gradual, selective movement in general theoretical activity from a (confidently) Marxist to a

anterior event) and Ellis (1982) influentially pointed to the 'segmental' character of studio-based construction, producing a temporality and a system of spatial and narrative development different from that of cinema, with its single camera shooting technique.

Productive for debate though such ideas have been, shifts both in technology and in aesthetics have radically undercut the capacity of such theories to speak to the full range of even mainstream broadcast output. A similar fate has befallen attempts at establishing theoretical work on genre (see Caughie, 1991 for an original and suggestive generic perspective). While some valuable analytic conceptualization has been done on the modalities of representation (particularly of scopic field, spoken address and narrativization) out of which television as a system of programmes is constructed (for instance, Wilson, 1993; Corner, 1995a) the rate and diversity of development (and, increasingly, the rate of inter-generic hybridization) has thwarted the emergence of anything like as relatively stable an ontological and aesthetic purchase on television as, for instance, has been provided for cinema. With such a varied, dispersed range of codings about which to be inclusive, theories have been forced so far 'up' from instances as to become virtually self-dissipating.

Over the last decade, television representation has been discussed extensively in terms of postmodernism (e.g. Fiske, 1991; Collins, 1992). When its centrality to modern popular culture is combined with its apparent capacity for generating 'simulacra' on a scale which blurs the distinction between reality and artifice and also with the high level of inter-textual referencing and stylistic eclecticism evident in some programming, this is not surprising. However, it has notably been specific kinds of television (e.g. the newer game shows, serial dramas, popular music programmes and channels) which have received most attention here (see Kaplan, 1987; Goodwin, 1993; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). A whole range of popular output remains difficult, if not impossible, to fit within postmodernist criteria, despite strenuous attempts at inclusiveness. Given their scope (discussed further below) it is difficult to decide whether most postmodernist attempts at theorizing television are usefully categorized as 'representational' in focus. However, changing aesthetic practices, and particularly changes in the nature and modes of circulation of imagery, have certainly been a key point of address in such theories, even if a connection with more general notions of 'medium' has been a significant feature too.

Representational theories have suffered from two kinds of limitation when they have been used to provide the core for comprehensive accounts of television. There has been the limitation described above — of achieving explanatory generalization across an increasingly wide and changing range of forms. Even more importantly, there has been the limitation on accounts of 'influence', a limitation so strongly recognized in the last few years as to bring about a radical drop-off in theoretical discussion of representation

unacceptability of such a generalization of viewing levels, indicating the huge variation across genres and time of day as well as in specific domestic/personal contexts (Caldwell, 1995, brings this out well).

With the exception of McLuhan's essays and the work of Meyrowitz, most of these theories about television as a medium have tended to regard it *pathologically*, reconfiguring culture in unprogressive ways. Even Meyrowitz's optimism about new 'at-a-distance' relationships is tempered by ambivalence and occasional anxiety. Unlike theories concerning representation, the generalizing drive of medium theories works against differentiation between channels, genres and programme formats, so that it is much harder within this framework even to begin to specify *where* change for the better might come from and *what* it might look like. At their worst, medium theorists can also slip into the technological determinism which always threatens an emphasis of this kind, 'bracketing out' from primary consideration both the specific communicative interface between programme and viewer and also specific institutional, economic and historical settings. However, medium theories, like theories of representation, vary considerably in the attention given to other factors, including to the political and economic elements of television as 'institution'. Silverstone (1994), for example, uses a 'medium' perspective in trying to connect with psychoanalytic accounts of self-development, with the nature of macro-cultural change in societies centred on consumption and with the literature of reception studies. The result, though provocatively eclectic, risks being too dispersed in its coordinates to develop much by way of explanatory leverage.

Theories of institution

Theories of institution are primarily concerned with the organizational structure of television and the embedding of this within specific political and economic systems. Although they inevitably have a concern for what appears and what does not appear on the screen — without this, the significance of television and the importance of researching it would be hard to claim — they see neither the symbolic/expressive dimension nor the cultural-technological profile as warranting primary attention. It is the linkage of organization (funding, production, distribution, regulation) with the activities of the state and/or with market structures which most requires conceptualization. Although traditional mass communications research paid attention to organizational factors, at the level of theory it is the political economy strand, drawing on Marxist accounts, which has been most active here (for recent exposition, see for instance Garnham, 1990; Murdock and Golding, 1991; Meehan et al., 1994).

British studies, focused on the tensions and growing contradictions of the 'Public Service' model of provision as it undergoes deregulation and

(nervously) postmodernist agenda. On this new agenda, the special capacities of television to transform spatial and temporal relations, to 'displace' many established forms of social experience, sometimes setting up parasocial substitutes (of a kind partly prefigured by Horton and Wohl, 1956) and to feed into that social and personal reflexivity and indeed anxiety which is often seen as a feature of late modern/postmodern society (as in Giddens, 1990) are important factors. The combination of centralized transmission with wide-ranging domestic reception provides the axis upon which this displacement effect can work, an effect which, in some accounts, is seen to be aided by the commodifying logics of the television industry. In the USA, the work of Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) on the effect exerted by television on traditional social and community life has received much attention, while a more self-consciously postmodern and politicized exploration of the culture of dislocation and displacement which television generates is given by Margaret Morse (1990). Morse's focus on the idea of 'everyday distraction' might be seen in part to indicate a concern with representation rather than medium, but it is to the general cultural and ontological consequences of the technology rather than to specific features of representational order that Morse is drawn. A parallel can be made here with the work of Raymond Williams and his widely-cited notion of 'flow' (Williams, 1974). 'Flow', as all good television students know, was the term used by Williams (writing after his experiences in the USA) to indicate the sequential, ongoing character of television programming, its impetus and continuity across the planned interruptions and insertions (e.g. commercials, embedded trailers) and across the repetitions and the shifts of item. Although 'flow' is not without its problems as an idea (see Dienst, 1994), Williams sees it as both a matter of organization (it is 'planned') and as a matter of viewer experience. Like Morse's 'distraction', it is also judged negatively; its presence is viewed as further evidence of the bad cultural consequences of an increasingly commercialized television system, consequences which have more to do with the organization of the medium itself than with specific representations. In fact, Morse's own account is centrally concerned with developing Williams's notion of 'mobile privatization', a condition whose paradoxicality, spatial character and tension between public and private realms are seen to be sustained in large measure by television's 'medium' functions.

John Ellis, in putting forward the claim that television attracted the 'glance' of viewers rather than, as in cinema, their 'gaze' (Ellis, 1982), offered another way of perceiving medium-effect relations. Here, what is seen as the essentially casual mode of viewing (partly a function of the technology itself and partly of the domestic contexts of attention, with their concurrent activities) is linked both to a reduced sense of TV's aesthetic value and, at the same time, a perception of its taken-for-granted (and therefore ideologically effective) permeation of the everyday. Many critics have since pointed to the

privatization, have differed in their concerns from North American work, which has had to engage with the reality of a much more intensively commercialized system right from the start.

It follows from the nature of institutional perspectives that they are likely to be much more alert to historical and national specificity than theories of 'representation' or of 'medium' since the institutionalization of television often shows variety within national boundaries let alone across them. This fact introduces limits on the level of generality which theories of television as an institution can reach, although the taking of the instance of US network television as internationally generalizable from has often been one way in which these limits have been escaped, sometimes with distorting consequences. However, the more clearly that television is seen as placeable within the structures and flows of global capitalist accumulation as it adjusts its strategies for the commodification of time and leisure to a new era of telecommunication development, the more transnational the conceptualization of it can become, despite the risks of abstraction beyond the levels of *explanatory* engagement.

A longstanding problem for political economic theories has been the predictability of given forms of television output (and thereby, if indirectly, of given 'effects') from the evidence of specific kinds of institutionalization. In particular, the relationship between the commodity form which television takes and its political and cultural character as knowledge and entertainment is posed as an issue. It is hard to imagine any researcher arguing that no links exist — it is the *degree* of causality (for Marxist theories, producing a version of the classic arguments about economic determinism) which is in question. New developments in the television systems of post-Communist Europe as well as the deregulation and expansion of Western systems (particularly through satellite and cable and through convergence with IT systems) will provide fresh evidence by which to assess television as institution. This assessment will be in terms of variations in funding profile, regulatory regime, the organization of production and distribution and then the impact of all these upon other factors (among the emerging assessments here, see Sparks, 1996). Such developments will also undoubtedly show a number of possible relationships, market-mediated or not, between the state, civil society and television systems (see the essays in Dahlgren and Sparks, 1991, and the discussion of television's 'public sphere' character in Dahlgren, 1995).

Although 'commodification' has been widely used as a term of sufficient critique, with the implication or sometimes the explicit suggestion that only 'decommodification' provides an acceptable alternative (see Keane, 1991), the number of *different* ways in which television programmes can have a commodity character and in which 'exchange value' can coexist with 'use value', require further attention. Practically, the real

possibilities for television systems working free of commodity value are extremely limited and likely to become more so.

Theories of process

'Process' is perhaps a more awkward category to use than the other three. Of course, all theorizing about television *assumes* process, but many theories of the kind I have discussed earlier see it as *entailed* by, and *predictable* from, something else (e.g. representational form, cultural-technological character, institutional setting) rather than requiring exploration in its own terms, as a matter of variable relationships and contingencies. By theories of process I want to indicate those conceptualizations which *directly* confront relational issues, issues of interaction and interdependency, rather than working with assumptions about them. It follows that processual ideas will often have a more complex sense of causality than theories extrapolating from one privileged focus.

In discussing theories of representation above, I noted how there was a division between ideas of television as primarily an agency of public information and knowledge and ideas of it as an agency of popular culture and entertainment. This is also true of processual theories, in the one case leading to a concern with social cognition and the relation of information to power (e.g. Dahlgren, 1995) and in the other leading to questions about pleasure and imagination, with a more recent emphasis on sexuality and identity (e.g. Heide, 1995).

Another important split within processual perspectives is between attempts to conceptualize process primarily in relation to questions of 'production' and attempts to conceptualize it in relation to 'consumption'. Over the last ten years, an emphasis on questions of consumption has become dominant in media research, producing argument not only about the neglect of production but also about how best to theorize and research consumption practices (see for instance, the critical reviews in Morley, 1992; Robins, 1994). This shift partly reflects a broader, steady move away from (and sometimes against) those Marxist models, once so influential in the structuring of the field, which focused on the 'productionist' factors of economic determination and ideological reproduction. More narrowly, it reflects the route from 'text' to 'reader' taken by much work on programme form and content, particularly following the example of Morley (1980). Here, reception has been regarded as a constitutive moment of communication process, in a way which not only opens out on to variability but which also places limits on the kinds of explanatory conceptualization that can be generated from consideration of pre-receptional moments alone, whether these be concerned with television as institution, medium or representational form. Using the cultural studies

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terms, this has been a move from 'encoding and 'message structure' to 'decoding'. Within the cultural studies tradition, it has been accompanied by a gradual weakening of 'ideology' as the main processual term.

There is no doubt that the conceptualization of 'power' within a notion of televisual process has now become a matter of the utmost importance and difficulty in view of the range of qualifying factors, and the uncertainties about established concepts, which have been introduced into research and debate. Just how to relate viewing behaviours and practices, variously conceived, to 'power' is the nub of the issue (for an illuminating dispute on this, one which also connects with fundamental divisions over methodological perspective, see Rosengren, 1996 and Jensen, 1996). In my view, a reengagement with 'production' — institutional structures, institutional settings and specific production relations — must be part of any development here. Studies of institutions and of production which themselves engaged more closely with representation and/or consumption could make a significant contribution. For instance, on television news, Schlesinger (1978), Ericson et al., (1987) and, most recently, Jacobs (1996), indicate a developing strand of workplace ethnographies which open up a broader theoretical agenda about the construction of public knowledge. For television fiction, Jostein Gripsrud's recent study of *Dynasty* (Gripsrud, 1995) attempts a major multi-aspectual analysis by keeping its substantive focus tight. What seems absolutely clear is that many studies of media consumption (including many reception studies), although their origins may lie in 'processual' thinking, have sometimes worked within a very non-processual conceptual framework. Closure around, and then totalization from, 'viewers' meanings' or a postmodern and rather miasmatic notion of the 'everyday', has simply replaced the older closures and totalizations around 'text', 'medium' or 'institution'. Exploration of the changing public and private spheres which television now sustains needs a far less exclusive agenda.

Theoretical development and television research

I remarked earlier how the extent to which theorization of television is seen as a matter of *ideas for debate* rather than as the *formulation of explanations in relation to prospective or collected evidence* varies. A 'theory' about television's role in providing temporal coherence within everyday life may be so general as to be incapable of direct empirical testing, it can only be subject to debate in terms of conceptual criteria and its 'fit' with other ideas, some of which may have an evidential basis. A 'theory' about image-text relations in a new kind of music programme will be subject to 'critical' argument — insofar as reference to the details of the programme may serve to question or, indeed, in the case of inaccuracies of observation, completely to refute such a theory (the extent to which textual

criticism is a touch of empirical enquiry, albeit one which is often procedurally loose, often goes overlooked). A 'theory' about the social class base of variations in audience response to a political broadcast is immediately open to direct empirical testing if it is a hypothesis and to empirical challenge if it is derived from a programme of study.

The search for explanatory accounts and relationships of the broadest possible kind is clearly a major part of academic investigation. In pursuit of this, work at the theoretical level must both lead substantive inquiry and also be informed by it; it must serve both as a moment of opening and speculation and of attempted consolidation and closure. It must, *inter alia*, work at a number of levels and orient itself both towards other, alternative and perhaps conflicting, conceptualizations (by modes of critique and of adaptive use) as well as towards phenomena.

However, I think that general recognition of differences between *kinds of theory* about television (in terms of level, scope, derivation and conditions of adequacy) needs to be much clearer and more explicit than it often has been. A stronger and more explicit sense of the *accountability of theory* should complement this and might act as a check against the tendency towards exclusive totalization and premature generality which the field still displays. The debates generated by the new anti-foundationalism may well indicate modified terms for prescribing such accountability but they do not displace the need for it (see the instructive comments on this and related themes in Seidman and Wagner, 1992).

My comments are not intended to suggest the desirability of bringing theoretical work on television within one, unifying discourse of endeavour. The different conceptual frameworks which researchers use will ensure the continuation of mismatches and conflicts between what 'television' is perceived to be as an object of research. The humanities and social sciences will continue to support distinctly different modes of engagement and analysis (often making usages like 'television studies' and, even more so, 'television theory', extremely awkward — see Corner, 1995b).

Despite its hectic recent history as a site for high theoretical adventure, it is unlikely that any new 'grand theories' will emerge which can be used to provide a totalizing framing for television study in the future. Middle-range, analytic concepts, developed 'downwards' from a broad range of political and social ideas and developed 'upwards' from substantive analysis are likely to prove the most productive route for development. A more thorough engagement with the spectrum of thinking about public life and cultural form taking place in the humanities and social sciences (e.g. in economics, anthropology, social psychology and political science) is crucial to progress here. Theory about television, though it will often, inevitably, use a specialist register for debate and critique, cannot be self-contained in its principal categories — it is a 'subset' of social and cultural theory and needs always to conceptualize television within these wider parameters

while retaining an interest in specificity. In a complementary way, it needs always to address television within the wider, substantive settings of economy, society and culture too (in different ways and to different degrees according to the specific theoretical project).

In the broad terms I have outlined, it will be increasingly difficult for any significant theoretical work on television *not* to have a strongly 'processual' character, although that does not mean that representational, medium and institutional foci cannot usefully be retained. By giving a certain emphasis to theories of process here I am not so much offering a category of 'solution' to the problems raised by other theories as indicating the category within which I think most new problems will arise. What aspect of television a given line of theoretical inquiry focuses on, what it chiefly tries to explain, what it finds most significant and what relationships it poses as important will continue to be matters of choice. What horizontal and vertical relationships it recognizes, the dependency and the status of its claims-making in relation to evidence and counter-evidence, the way in which it proposes itself for development by way of refinement, testing, application etc. are matters about which tighter conventions of practice might be encouraged. This is true both of perspectives from social studies and those of a more literary/philosophical origin.

In study of television, internationally, there is some indication of a move to ideas which more firmly engage with substantive factors, have a more precise perception of inter-relational complexity and carry a stronger sense of their own theoretical positioning and its possible limitations and foreshortenings.

If such a move can begin to encourage stronger linkage between the levels of conceptualization and of investigation and between the different sub-areas of study, then it will be good news indeed. Theoretical purchase on the condition and consequences of 'television' in society (and therefore our capacity to be cogently and effectively critical about its various dimensions) will develop rather than disperse or, as it has sometimes looked likely to recently, collapse.

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Note

Since this article was accepted for publication I have read with interest the essays

Studies following years of doctrinal rigidity. In line with my own arguments here, they emphasize a theoretical endeavour in which the connection with empirical work is strong and the development of 'middle-range' concepts an important goal.

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Globalization and policy choice: television and audiovisual services policies in India

Stephen D. McDowell

Policies shaping the production and distribution of electronic broadcasting or audiovisual services in India have undergone tremendous changes from the 1980s to the 1990s. The number of channels and programming carried by Doordarshan, the state broadcaster, has grown. Private companies both from within and outside India now produce television programming and distribute it through direct broadcast satellites or cable television systems. The dominant account of the liberalization of audiovisual services policies in India focuses almost solely on the role of global economic forces and technical change. While policy choices have been constrained, many of these limitations arose from Indian decisions made about the role of broadcasting in the 1970 and 1980s, and from social and economic developments within India in the 1990s.

A new kind of newspaper? Understanding a popularization process

Martin Eide

A social history of a popularization process of major importance for a national press structure forms the basis of this article. Today's largest circulation newspaper in Norway is the case in point. *Vadens Gang* (now known under the acronym VG) grew out of the resistance movement during the Second World War, and set out with the ambition of being 'a new kind of newspaper'. However, economic problems soon fuelled a popularization process, and gradually the ground was cleared for a sensational growth in circulation numbers. What happened to the original ideals, and to the new kind of newspaper? Answers are indicated by focusing on changes in the newspaper's modes of addressing its readers and their everyday roles, and by paying particular attention to a 'service and campaign journalism' and to a certain kind of 'newspaper schizophrenia'. On this basis, the author warns against a crude essentialism in the understanding of popular journalism.

Communication campaigns and the neo-liberal policy agenda

Jane Scott

This article summarizes my recent investigation of the political debate, conducted through the media, over a crucial and defining policy in New Zealand's neo-liberal