

SECOND EDITION

The Televiewing Audience

The Art and Science of Watching TV



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Introduction

This book is a user's guide for the only household appliance that does not come with one. It is written for the millions of us who simply watch television, and it informs us that nothing is simple about watching television.

Sure, there appears to be a naturalness with which we sit in front of our TV sets, observe the sights and sounds that technology places before us, and enjoy a few moments of entertainment or information. The watching of television seems relatively effortless. Therein lies its appeal as a leisure time activity and a principal reason why it has been one of our nation's most preferred activities for the past five decades.

Nonetheless, televiewing is complicated. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, watching television is a learned activity that is in a constant state of revision and upgrading and, now more than ever, requires the generation and application of critical thinking to guide program selection, inform appreciation, generate greater pleasure, and inspire dialogue after consumption. Televiewing is an art and a science.

Televiewing as a Learned Activity

Watching television is a learned, rather than innate, behavior. Staring at a piece of household furniture for entertainment has not always been a natural or accepted practice among homo sapiens. The invention and eventual institutionalization of several other domestic devices—the phonograph and radio in particular—at which previous generations stared, paved the way for the watching of a television set to be perceived as appropriate and the pleasure we derived from it to become normative.

Similarly, we had to learn how to comprehend the artistry of its content. We still do. Place an infant in front of a television set and . . . nothing. Without experience with and knowledge

of the real world, television will appear to be nothing but noise and nonsense. Place an adult with no electronic media experience whatsoever (if you could ever find such a person) in front of television set and . . . little will be understood that is not presented as if it were experienced in the real world with our own senses. Introduce television content involving storytelling methods foreign to real world experience and unique to electronic media—such as editing, unusual perspectives due to camera placement, action facilitated by camera movement, and voice-over narrative and background music—and that individual would be lost. These techniques and conventions are woven into a program by professionals and appear, to the experienced televiewer, as seamless and invisible. They are, nonetheless, unnatural and foreign to the naïve viewer, and they must be comprehended before their contribution to the program can be understood. They must be mastered before a program can be fully appreciated.

Indeed, watching a television program requires:

- **Exposure** to these techniques through media experience, which generates an initial awareness that these techniques exist and the realization that they must somehow contribute to the storytelling.
- **Repeated exposure** to these techniques, which eventually facilitates understanding and establishes shared meaning between the viewer and the program's creator as to what these techniques contribute to the storytelling.
- **Assimilation** of these techniques, which creates a general, holistic understanding of television as a form of storytelling and what television stories consist of. This includes the realization that different types of stories incorporate different techniques for storytelling.
- **Suspension of disbelief** that the staged activity in a television program is staged and artificial. At this stage, the viewer buys into the televiewing experience, which allows the viewer to get into the action, relate to the characters, and enjoy the story being told.
- **Cognitive complacency**, which allows these storytelling techniques to become seamless and invisible parts of the program's narrative. They no longer capture attention or require conscientious effort to comprehend.

Only after we go through this process of learning—which we have all done upon our first exposures to television at a very young age—does televiewing become seemingly effortless and appear as if it is a natural extension of our communication repertoire. Just like learning our native language, we have had to learn the language of television.

Televiewing as an Evolving Activity

Learning to watch television is an on-going process. The creative community within the television industry continues to push the envelope in terms of production techniques, programming formats, and the inventive presentation of controversial subject matter. Many of today's popular dramas, such as the *Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS) franchise, look and sound nothing like their 1950's counterparts, such as *Dragnet* (NBC). Much of the pushing of the creative envelope is done by the innovations of other storytelling media that are competing for the same audience. For example, motion pictures were the first to incorporate computer-generated special effects into

its storytelling, mostly in its action films. This is now commonplace in television's action adventure programming. In fact, many of film's high-tech production innovators, such as director Jerry Bruckheimer (e.g., the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films [2003, 2006, 2007]; *Armageddon* [1998]; *Black Hawk Down* [2001]; the *National Treasure* films [2004, 2007]), are now producing television programming (e.g., *Cold Case* [CBS]; the *CSI* programs [CBS]) that look and sound like their big screen counterparts.

The more we watch and the more thoughtfully we watch, the more we are capable of appreciating the artistry of a program. We learn to admire the creative parameters that make a situation comedy a comedy and not a soap opera, the marks of quality that distinguish a great program from a lesser product, the blending of factors that give a program its appeal, social relevance and entertainment value, and the aesthetic components that make a program age-worthy and capable of surviving its competition. The more we watch and the more thoughtfully we watch, the more we come to understand why television is the dominant storyteller of our time. As such, television's conventions, its pace and patterns of presentation, and its stories weave together the fabric of our society that constitutes our contemporary culture.

Of course, getting us to watch more television is the primary goal of the industry that provides these programs. Television is a highly collaborative industry, where producers, programmers, promoters, sponsors, distributors, and exhibitors all work to attract and retain the largest possible audience for its product. The problem for the industry is to keep accumulating these audiences, particularly at a time when technological developments have increased the audience's range of leisure time choices—from the number of broadcast and narrowcast (cable) channels, to the selection of publications we can read, to when and where to see a film or a television program,¹ to the range of personal media (i.e., laptops, iPods, CDs, DVDs) at our disposal. To keep this highly segmented and easily distracted group coming back week after week, the television industry employs a range of strategies within and between programming and advertising. This is intended to make us not think about program selection, not consider viable alternatives, not evaluate program quality, and not determine for ourselves how and how well we will spend our leisure time.

“I do not think about things I don't think about.”

WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN, THREE-TIME FAILED PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE²

However, the more thoughtfully and critically we watch television, the more aware we are of the science behind these audience-building strategies and the less susceptible we are to them.

The more thoughtfully and critically we watch television, the more we become discerning consumers seeking entertainment and information that meet our expectations.

The more thoughtfully and critically we watch television, the more we come to understand and appreciate the art of its storytelling, and the more likely we are to engage in conversation about it.

This book is all about becoming a more thoughtful and informed consumer. It is designed to shatter the anonymity of the viewer for the television industry, which typically sees us as ratings and demographics rather than individuals. It is also designed to create a sense of com-

munity, for we rarely think of ourselves as instrumental in the televiewing experience or think of the experience as a shared event. The chapters to follow can help *us* better understand the ways in which television influences the way we think about ourselves and our culture. This book places us center-stage in the extremely complicated, competitive, creative and costly endeavor that is television.

More specifically, each of the following chapters does the following:

Chapter 1 starts us on our way to becoming more thoughtful television consumers by examining the thought process. It distinguishes between average, everyday thinking and the type of critical thinking in which modern day media consumers need to engage.

Chapter 2 explores the nature of being a television viewer. It examines the differences in being a member of the televiewing audience compared to being a member of any other type of audience. This chapter explores why the televiewing audience has been taken less seriously by social critics, the television industry, and viewers themselves, and explains why this is a gross injustice.

Chapter 3 focuses on the primary explanation for why the televiewing audience should be taken seriously—that televiewing is a cognitively active and learned activity, rather than the passive and mindless enterprise it is falsely perceived to be. It explores what needs to be learned to watch TV and how that learning takes place.

Chapter 4 specifically examines the assorted skills that are required to watch television. It suggests that, as television programming has becoming increasingly complex in its stories and its storytelling, more sophisticated skills are required.

Chapter 5 examines the history of the television industry—that is, the stations, production houses, syndicators, networks, and advertisers. The current structure and stature of the television industry are the result of a multiphase evolution in the relations among these partners, which is still in a state of flux due to increased and intensive competition for the televiewing audience.

With an ever-diminishing, increasingly fragmented commercial network audience, today's airwaves are laden with sophisticated and competing attempts at audience-making. Chapter 6 suggests that, from program selection, scheduling and promotion to network branding and within- and between-program manipulation, television is a competitive sport and everything is fair game.

Chapter 7 explores how increased competition among the networks has also increased, intensified and modified the networks' measurement of their audiences. Problems with these measuring devices are identified as are the ramifications.

Chapter 8 examines the regulations that guide the television industry. It suggests that the increased competition from new media players that has been eroding network audiences has regulatory roots.

Chapter 9 identifies the technologies that represent the greatest threat to commercial network broadcasting. It also evaluates whether and how the networks' programming strategies have been influenced by heightened internal and external competition in recent years. It will be important for the networks to preserve their mass audience niche if they are to survive the disciplining force of new competition. Their penetration—that is, their claim to us—is their greatest asset.

Notes

1. See, for example, Ronald Grover, Tom Lowry & Cliff Edwards, "Revenge of the Cable Guys." *Bloomberg Businessweek*, March 22 & 29, 2010, pp. 38–41.
2. See <http://edgeofthewest.wordpress.com/2008/07/21/i-do-not-think-about-things-i-dont-think-about>, retrieved February 11, 2010.

Questions to Be Answered in the First Chapter

1. What is critical thinking?
 2. How does critical thinking apply to watching TV?
 3. What are obstacles to critically thinking about TV?
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