

Television

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Subject [Sociology](#) » [Sociology of Culture and Media](#)

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What is television? It is an object that is produced in a factory, then distributed physically (via transportation) and virtually (via advertising). At that point it transmogrifies into a fashion statement, a privileged (or damned) piece of furniture – a status symbol. Finally, it becomes outmoded junk, full of poisons and pollutants in search of a dumping ground. In short, television has a physical existence, a history as an object of material production and consumption in addition to its renown as a site for making meaning. That renown is the focus of most sociological theory and research into the media.

Prior to the emergence of TV appliances and services, people fantasized about the transmission of image and sound across space. Richard Whittaker Hubbell made the point by publishing a book in 1942 entitled *4000 Years of Television*. The device even has its own patron saint, Clare of Assisi, a teen runaway from the thirteenth century who became the first Franciscan nun. She was canonized in 1958 for her bedridden vision of images from a midnight mass cast upon the wall, which Pius XII decided centuries later was the first broadcast. As TV proper came close to realization, it attracted intense critical speculation. Rudolf Arnheim's 1935 "Forecast of Television" predicted it would offer viewers simultaneous global experiences, transmitting railway disasters, professorial addresses, town meetings, boxing title-fights, dance bands, carnivals, and aerial mountain views – a spectacular montage of Broadway and Vesuvius. A common vision would surpass the limitations of linguistic competence and interpretation. TV might even bring global peace with it, by showing spectators that "we are located as one among many." But this was no naïve welcome. Arnheim warned that "television is a new, hard test of our wisdom." The emergent medium's easy access to knowledge would either enrich or impoverish its viewers, manufacturing an informed public,

vibrant and active, or an indolent audience, domesticated and passive ([Arnheim 1969](#): 160–3). Two years after Arnheim, Barrett C. [Kiesling \(1937](#): 278) said “it is with fear and trembling that the author approaches the controversial subject of television.” Such concerns about TV have never receded. They are the very stuff of sociology's inquiries into this bewildering device.

Like most sociological domains, the study of television is characterized by severe contestation over meanings and approaches, not least because its analysts “speak different languages, use different methods,” and pursue “different questions” ([Hartley 1999](#): 18). Broadly speaking, TV has given rise to three key topics:

- 1 Ownership and control: television's political economy.
- 2 Texts: its content.
- 3 Audiences: its public.

Within these categories lie several other divisions:

- 1 Approaches to ownership and control vary between neoliberal endorsements of limited regulation by the state, in the interests of guaranteeing market entry for new competitors, and Marxist critiques of the bourgeois media's agenda for discussing society.
- 2 Approaches to textuality vary between hermeneutic endeavors, which unearth the meaning of individual programs and link them to broader social formations and problems, and content-analytic endeavors, which establish patterns across significant numbers of similar texts, rather than close readings of individual ones.
- 3 Approaches to audiences vary between social psychological attempts to validate correlations between watching TV and social conduct, and culturalist critiques of imported television threatening national culture.

There is an additional bifurcation between approaches favored by those working and/or trained in US social sciences versus the rest of the world. These relate to wider intellectual differences, but also to distinctive traditions of public policy. Like so many other areas of social life, TV is principally regarded as a means of profit through entertainment in the US and, historically at least, as a means of governance through information elsewhere. The first tradition focuses on audiences as consumers, the second as citizens. Pierre [Bourdieu \(1998](#): 48) refers to these rather graceless antinomies as “populist spontaneism and demagogic capitulation to popular tastes” versus “paternalistic–pedagogic television.” Neoliberal deregulation since the 1980s has privatized TV all over the globe under the sign of the US exemplar, but there continue to be theoretical, analytic, and political correlates to this difference between the US and the rest.

Just as US sociology determinedly clings to a binary opposition between qualitative and quantitative approaches, between impression and science, between commitment and truth, so it has hewed closely to methodological individualism in seeking to explain why people and television interact as they do, looking for links between TV and violence, misogyny, and educational attainment. Conversely, sociologists elsewhere worry less about such issues. They are more exercised by Hollywood's impact on their own countries' cultural expression. Global sociology is inclined to use critical terminology and methods that look at TV as a collective issue, rather than an individual one; a matter of interpretation and politics more than psychological impact. But there is in fact a link between the two anxieties.

In their different ways, each is an effects model, in that they assume television *does* things *to* people, that audience members are at risk of abjuring either interpersonal responsibility (in the US) or national culture (in the rest of the world). In Harold Garfinkel's (1992: 68) words, both models assume that the audience is a "cultural dope ... acting in compliance with the common culture." Caricaturing people in this way clouds the actual "common sense rationalities ... of here and now situations" they use. Most of the time that the television audience is invoked by sociologists, or by TV's critics and regulators, it is understood as just such a "dope"; for example, the assumption that "children are sitting victims; television bites them" (Schramm et al. 1961: 1).

The dope splits in two, in keeping with dominant audience models. The first appears in a *domestic* effects model, or DEM. Dominant in the US, and increasingly exported around the world, it is typically applied without consideration of place and is psychological. The DEM offers analysis and critique of education and civic order. It views television as a force that can either direct or pervert the audience. Entering young minds hypodermically, TV can both enable and imperil learning. It may also drive viewers to violence through aggressive and misogynistic images and narratives. The DEM is found at a variety of sites, including laboratories, clinics, prisons, schools, newspapers, psychology journals, television stations' research and publicity departments, everyday talk, program-classification regulations, conference papers, parliamentary debates, and state-of-our-youth or state-of-our-civil-society moral panics. The DEM is embodied in the US media theatrics that ensue after mass school shootings, questioning the role of violent images (not hyper-Protestantism, straight white masculinity, a risk society, or easy access to firearms) in creating violent people. The DEM also finds expression in content analysis, which has been put to a variety of sociological purposes. For example, a violence index has been created to compare the frequency and type of depictions of violence on US TV news and drama with actual crime statistics, and content analysis has also been applied to representations of gender and race.

The second means of constituting "dopes" is a *global* effects model, or GEM. The GEM, primarily utilized in non-US discourse, is spatially specific and social. Whereas the DEM focuses on the cognition and emotion of individual human subjects, via observation and experimentation, the GEM looks to the knowledge of custom and patriotic feeling exhibited by populations, the grout of national culture. In place of psychology, it is concerned with politics. Television does not make you a well-educated or an ill-educated person, a wild or a self-controlled one. Rather, it makes you a knowledgeable and loyal national subject, or a *naïf* who is ignorant of local tradition and history. Cultural belonging, not psychic wholeness, is the touchstone of the global effects model. Instead of measuring audience responses electronically or behaviorally, as its domestic counterpart does, the GEM interrogates the geopolitical origin of televisual texts and the themes and styles they embody, with particular attention to the putatively nation-building genres of drama, news, sport, and current affairs. GEM adherents hold that local citizens should control TV, because their loyalty can be counted on in the event of war, while in the case of fiction, only locally sensitized producers will make narratives that are true to tradition and custom. The model is found in the discourses of cultural imperialism, everyday talk, broadcast and telecommunications policy, unions, international organizations, newspapers, heritage, cultural diplomacy, and post-industrial service-sector planning. In its manifestation as textual analysis, it interprets programs in ideological terms.

Both models have fundamental flaws. The DEM betrays all the disadvantages of ideal-typical psychological reasoning. It relies on methodological individualism, thereby failing to account for cultural norms and politics, let alone the arcs of history and shifts in space that establish patterns of imagery and response inside TV coverage of politics, war, ideology, and discourse. Each massively costly test of media effects, based on, as the refrain goes, "a large university in the [US]

mid–West,” is countered by a similar experiment, with conflicting results. As politicians, grant–givers, and jeremiad–wielding pundits call for more and more research to prove that TV makes you stupid, violent, and apathetic (or the opposite), sociologists and others line up to indulge their contempt for popular culture and ordinary life and their rent–seeking urge for grant money. The DEM never interrogates its own conditions of existence; namely, that governments and the media use it to account for social problems, and that TV’s capacity for private viewing troubles those authorities who desire surveillance of popular culture. As for the GEM, its concentration on national culture denies the potentially liberatory and pleasurable nature of different forms of television, forgets the internal differentiation of publics, valorizes frequently oppressive and/or unrepresentative local bourgeoisies in the name of maintaining and developing national televisual culture, and ignores the demographic realities of its “own” terrain.

Nevertheless, the DEM and the GEM continue unabated. From one side, [Singer and Singer \(2001: xv\)](#) argue that “psychophysiological and behavioral empirical studies beginning in the 1960s have pointed ... to aggression as a learned response.” From the other side, [García–Canclíni \(2001: 1\)](#) notes that Latin Americans became “citizens through our relationship to Europe,” while warning that links to the US may “reduce us to consumers.”

In contradistinction to the DEM/GEM, a third tendency in sociology picks up on Garfinkel’s cultural–dope insight. Endorsing the audience as active rather than passive, it constructs two other model audiences:

- 1 All–powerful consumers (invented and loved by neoliberal policymakers, desired and feared by corporations) who use TV like an appliance, choosing what they want from its programming.
- 2 All–powerful interpreters (invented and loved by utopic sociologists and cultural critics, investigated and led by corporations) who use TV to bring pleasure and sense to their lives.

These models have a common origin. In lieu of citizen–building, their logic is the construction and control of consumers. Instead of issuing the jeremiads of rat–catching psy–doomsayers, they claim that the TV audience is so clever and able that it makes its own meanings from programs, outwitting institutions of the state, academia, and capital that seek to measure and control it. Ownership patterns do not matter, because the industry is “wildly volatile,” animated entirely by “the unpredictable choice of the audience” ([De Vany 2004: 1, 140](#)). The first approach demonstrates a mechanistic application of neoclassical economics. The second varies between social psychological tests of viewers’ gratifications and a critical ethnography that engages cultural and social questions.

A summary of sociological approaches to television up to the present might look like this:

<i>Origins</i>	<i>Topics</i>	<i>Objects</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Allied disciplines</i>
Global	Regulation, industry development	State, capital, labor	Political economy, neoliberalism	Economics, political science, law, communications
US	Genre	Text	Content analysis	Communications
Global	Genre	Text	Textual analysis	Literary/cultural studies

US	Uses	Audience	Uses and gratifications	Communications, psychology, marketing
Global	Uses	Audience	Ethnography	Anthropology, cultural studies, communications
US	Effects	Audience	Experimentation, questionnaire	Psychology, marketing, communications

And the future? What are we to make of digitally generated virtual actors (synthespians), desktop computers that produce and distribute expensive-looking images, the New International Division of Cultural Labor's simultaneous production work on TV programs across the world, and broadband home video access (Miller et al. 2005)? The rhetoric of the new media is inflected with the phenomenological awe of a precocious child who can be returned to Eden, healing the wounds of the modern as it magically reconciles public and private, labor and leisure, commerce and culture, citizenship and consumption. "Television is dead" (de Silva 2000) and the interactive web is the future. That may be. But it is worth remembering that television stations continue to multiply around the world, that TV is adapting to the use of Internet portals, and that the digital divide separating the poor from high technology is not changing. Two billion people in the world have never made a telephone call, let alone bought bookshelves on line.

In any event, the questions asked of television today illustrate its continued relevance. For example, leading bourgeois economist Jagdish Bhagwati (2002) is convinced that TV is partly to "blame" for global grassroots activism against globalization because television makes people identify with those suffering from capitalism, but has not led to rational action (i.e., support for the neoclassical economic policies he supports, which many would say caused the problem). Just a few pages further on in Bhagwati's essay, however, cable is suddenly a savior. There is no need to litigate against companies that pollute the environment, or impose sanctions on states that enslave children to become competitive in the global economy, because the rapid flow of information via the media ensures that "multinationals and their host governments cannot afford to alienate their constituencies" (pp. 4, 6). The tie between the medium as a heaven and hell is as powerful as it was in Arnheim's forecast seven decades earlier.

We are perhaps witnessing a *transformation* of TV, rather than its demise. Television started in most countries as a *broadcast, national* medium dominated by the state. It is being transformed into a *cable and satellite, international* medium dominated by commerce, but still called "television." A TV-like screen, located in domestic and public *spaces*, and transmitting signs from other *places*, will probably be the future.

In many ways, television has become an alembic for understanding society. There is intellectual and political value in utilizing the knowledge gained from sociology to assess this transformation and intervene in it, especially if we borrow from the right traditions. The three basic questions asked by students of the media – "Will this get me a job?" "Is television bad for you?" "How do we get that show back on?" – have direct links to the relationships between text and audience, as understood through ethnography and political economy. The respective answers are: "If you know who owns and regulates the media, you'll know how to apply"; "The answer depends on who is asking the question and why"; and "If you know how audiences are defined and counted and how genre functions, you'll be able to lobby for retention of your favorite programs."

In summary, analyzing television requires interrogating the manufacture and material history of TV sets; creation, commodification, governance, distribution, and interpretation of texts; global exchange of cultural and communications infrastructure and content; and economic rhetoric of

communications policies. This can be done by combining political economy, ethnography, and textual analysis into a new critical sociology of TV.

SEE ALSO: [Audiences](#); [Culture](#); [Genre](#); [Media](#); [Media and Consumer Culture](#); [Media and Globalization](#); [Media Literacy](#); [Mediated Interaction](#); [Popular Culture](#)

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