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### Television and history.

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## Television and history

I start with the *worldliness* of contemporary television. On the one hand it is routinely experienced everywhere as part of the ordinary life-world of members of modern societies (watching TV is just one of those things that most of us do in the course of an ordinary day).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, and just as routinely, in daily news services the world over audiences experience, as a commonplace thing, their situated connectedness with what's going on elsewhere in the world. In exceptional moments people the whole world over are glued to their television sets as witnesses of celebratory or catastrophic events. In all this broadcasting has accomplished something quite unprecedented; the routinisation of history on a world wide basis. Television today makes the historical process visible. Through it we see the manifest truth of the claim that human beings do indeed make history; their own histories, the history of the country in which they live, the history of the world. But what is much harder to see is how to account for and understand these interlocking historical processes which are all embedded in each other. I have argued that the history of the world (world history) is an impossible narrative.<sup>2</sup> There is no point of view, no point of rest, from which it could be written by human beings. And the same is true, I think, for television. As a world-historical phenomenon it paradoxically appears as an impossible historical narrative. So in order to broach the world-historical character of broadcast television<sup>3</sup> I begin with the perplexities of historiographies of broadcasting, communication and media technologies.

### Broadcasting histories

What is broadcasting history's natural subject matter? In the mid 1950s the British historian, Asa Briggs, embarked on the history of broadcasting in the United Kingdom which turned out to be the history of the British Broadcasting Corporation who commissioned him (Briggs 1961-1994). Fifty years and five volumes later this is a still continuing history with Jean Seaton taking over from Lord Briggs to produce Volume 6 (1974-1986). This, the earliest scholarly history of broadcasting, was immensely influential and set the benchmark standard for subsequent histories of broadcasting in other countries. Briggs produced a meticulously researched history, based primarily on the BBC's huge written archive, that offered a rolling narrative of the development of the BBC as its activities grew and expanded in time. It was largely concerned with the internal history of the institution; its administrative structure, its hierarchy of policy and decision making, program production and delivery. At the same time it looked outwards to the external pressures that constantly impinged on the operational activities of the broadcasters from its two masters; the state on one hand, the audiences on the other. These pressures bore down on different aspects of the work of broadcasting but together they helped to shape and define its universe of discourse, the limits of permissibility, of what could and could not be said or shown on radio or television, at any time. Radio broadcasting began everywhere on a local basis and sooner or later a process of consolidation and centralisation took place that set in dominance a national system of broadcasting that remains intact today. This convergence took place very quickly in the UK,

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<sup>1</sup> On the ordinariness of television see Bonner 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Scannell 2004b. This history was, in the West, originally the Judeo-Christian narrative of humanity's fall and ultimate redemption. It was revised in the Enlightenment as the historical struggle for the kingdom of heaven on earth in the form of the perfectly free and just society. Postmodernism has proclaimed its incredulity towards such 'grand narratives' (Lyotard 1986).

<sup>3</sup> 'Given the overall mapping of the globe that today is taken for granted, the unitary past is one which is worldwide; time and space are recombined to form a genuinely *world-historical* framework of action and experience. (Giddens 1990:21, my emphasis). I follow Giddens in thinking of 'globalisation' as the-world-as-a-whole experienced by each and all of us 'embedded' in our own time and place.

partly because of its small size, partly because of the rapid domestic uptake of radio by the population and partly because so much of British economic, political and cultural power was already concentrated in the metropolitan capital, London. In other parts of the world, with much larger territories, with different socio-political geographies and a slower rate of uptake, the centralisation of broadcasting took place more gradually and the central broadcasting authorities had less power over regional and local broadcasters.<sup>4</sup>

Briggs established a 'first generation' history that put in place a narrative of the institutions of broadcasting. It served to generate further 'social' and 'cultural' histories. These focused on the output of broadcasting and its impact and so were moved to consider their reception. Susan Douglas's engagingly readable history of 'listening-in' to the radio in America is exemplary (Douglas 1999).<sup>5</sup> Such histories however do not run in parallel with histories of the broadcasters. They are separate narratives whose concerns are with daily existence, the place of the radio or tv set in the spaces of domestic, family life, and their role (along with the movies and other elements of popular culture) in the lives of, say, girls growing up in America in the 1960s (Douglas 1994). These histories have no necessary connection with the histories of the broadcasters because, as mass communication sociologists gradually learnt and as Stuart Hall (1980) argued, there is no direct correspondence between the outputs of broadcasting and their impact and effect on audiences.<sup>6</sup>

All these histories are embedded in national histories, for the nation-state remains the containing frame within which historiography operates, the world over, today. The possibility of comparative, international or global histories has exercised historians for centuries.<sup>7</sup> It is an increasingly pressing issue today since all of us know that we are living in a single, common world. Broadcasting history, in response to this pressure, has tried to transcend its national boundaries. A comparative study of Nordic television brought together condensed histories of developments in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, each drawing on its own, more comprehensive national history of broadcasting (Bono and Bondebjerg 1994). Kate Lacey has made comparative studies of broadcasting in Germany, Britain and the USA (Lacey 2002). Michelle Hilmes has argued the need for larger comparative broadcasting histories (Hilmes and Loviglio 2002: 1-19) and has brought together British and American broadcasting in *The Television History Book* (Hilmes 2004). All these works proceed by setting national accounts alongside each other and noting their points of convergence and divergence. But what do we learn from them beyond the structural similarities of broadcasting's organisation, mode of production and program service which are subject, inevitably, to national variations and differences determined by the size of available native audiences, and indigenous economic, political and cultural factors? The comparative study of national broadcasting certainly illuminates their idiosyncratic character—the Japaneseness of Japanese broadcasting, the Americanness of American broadcasting etc—in a supranational historical context. But it does not bring us closer to the global character or impact of the spread of broadcasting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

What of the history of *world* broadcasting? The case of the BBC is exemplary. In the 1930s the BBC began overseas broadcasting first to white settler audiences in Britain's imperial outposts and then, in the late 1930s with a European war imminent, to countries that the British government wished to influence. In the course of World War 2 the BBC developed a truly global broadcasting service that transmitted British versions of events, suitably inflected for reception in different parts of the world depending on their part in the global convulsion. Coming out of the war the BBC's now established World Service, funded by a grant-in-aid from the Foreign Office, played an important part in the cold war, backed up by the government-funded Monitoring Service which eavesdropped on broadcasting transmissions from within the Soviet bloc and from many other parts of the world. It might be thought that this service, born out of *raison d'état*, should have begun to disintegrate as Britain gave up its

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<sup>4</sup> Australia, France and the USA may serve as exemplary case studies. See, respectively, Johnson 1988, Meadel 1994, Smulyan 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas has that rare ability to write as an academic (observing academic norms of scholarship, research etc) for a non-academic readership and her books are widely reviewed and read outside academia. It is partly a matter of style but it is, more exactly, the narrative point of view that she assumes. She writes of radio in the way that it matters for listeners as part of their own lives and experience.

<sup>6</sup> Except on very rare occasions. The Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* scare in 1938 is an early and classic case of a single program with an immediate, dramatic effect on audience behaviour.

<sup>7</sup> Breisach 1983. See especially his discussion of 'The enigma of world history': 319-322, 395-411.

Empire in the decade after the war and to have disappeared completely with the fall of the Berlin wall at the end of the 1980s. It is remarkable then that, at present, the World Service's audiences continues to grow each year and not only for its English language services. The audiences for the Brazilian service, in Portuguese, have grown since September 11 2001 and the number of those working in it has doubled since then.<sup>8</sup>

The continuing existence and growth of the World Service indicates, I think, not only the overlooked global importance of radio as the parent broadcasting medium, but the existence of a growing felt need around the world for reliable, authoritative news of the world that comes from one of its centres, from where the action is.<sup>9</sup> But what would the history of this service consist of? It is, inevitably, a history *of* the centre; of the growth of the scale of its operations and of key historical moments such as Suez and Hungary in 1956 (Mansell 1982). What it cannot be is a history of its reception the world over, for that is historically irretrievable beyond the most fragmentary indications to be found in newspapers, magazines and other sources in particular countries throughout the world. Thus broadcasting historiography's natural limits are set by the situational geographies in which, and for which, broadcasting institutions exist—the territorial boundaries of nation states. Moreover, it seems to be a one-sided history. Either you write about the institutional side, or you write about the reception side but between them there is a wall over which it is hard to see the other side. The narratives of institutions and their activities and the narratives of the social uptake of those activities are invisible to each other for good reasons, as we shall see.

### Technological histories

Broadcasting histories belong within the more encompassing history of the extraordinary growth in mediated forms of communication that underpin the modern, electronically wired-up and wireless world. Radio broadcasting is after all a by-product of an earlier technology (wireless telegraphy) conceived for different purposes and use. The same is true of the Internet and world wide web. Both were later applications of technologies that had, at first, a restricted military use as outcomes of earlier histories of scientific exploration and discovery. Communication technologies reach beyond national borders and their histories are not constrained within them. Brian Winston has produced a sophisticated model of the complex transition from 'pure' scientific experimentation, through the recognition of possible practical applications and the development of prototypes, to the invention of a new technology with a strong potential for use and profit (Winston 1998). His magisterial narrative of developments from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century telegraph to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Internet is, throughout, a *technical* history of scientific discovery and commercial application. The same is true of Pawley's important history of the BBC's engineering division (Pawley 1976). In both books the concern is only with the scientific, technical process and its richly complex historical unfolding. The boundaries of technological histories are set by the moment of transition when the technology in question moves out of the laboratory, so to speak, and achieves social recognition and uptake. At that point different histories take over; the histories of their social application and use as discussed above, in the case of broadcasting.

It is important to note how this transition comes about. A technical thing comes out of the R&D laboratory and enters into the world. It ceases to be a technical thing and becomes a worldly thing. For this to happen it *must* present itself—if it is to be an ordinary, worldly thing—not as a complicated technological object but as a simple piece of equipment such that anyone can use. The development of the radio set illustrates the point. In the aftermath of World War 1 radio had become a popular 'scientific' hobby even before the British Broadcasting Company began to transmit a program service in November 1922. In garden sheds up and down the land men and boys (it was very much a male thing) were building two-way radio transmitter-receivers or one-way receiving sets to scour the ether for sound signals. In either case the results were a naked display of valves, knobs, wires and amplifiers.

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<sup>8</sup> In the early 1990s the Brazilian service was on the point of closure. It now has 40 staff, and is the one of the largest sectors in the BBC's foreign language transmissions. See [bbc.co.uk/brazil](http://bbc.co.uk/brazil). I am grateful to Lorena Barbier of CBN (Central Brasilieras de Noticias) Recife, for this information.

<sup>9</sup> The hegemony of English as the world's language is crucially important to the position of the World Service as the dominant global broadcaster today. In many countries people listen to improve their understanding of the English language.

The scientific innards had yet to be encased and its operation required endless fiddling and twiddling. It was not yet a domestic object fit for family living rooms.<sup>10</sup> Adrian Forty describes three stages in the evolution of the first truly modern, mass-produced radio set in Britain; the Ekco AD65 receiver designed and manufactured by the E.K.Cole company and in the shops by 1934 (Forty 1986: 200-206. Scannell and Cardiff 1991: 356-62). The mediating stage in the transition from technology to domestic equipment is *design*. It is a basic mistake to think of design as style and aesthetics applied to mass produced goods, as if it were some kind of value-added. Design is essential to the transformation of user-unfriendly technologies that only trained experts can use into simple user-friendly things that anyone can use. The famous Ekco set was designed by a leading architect of the time. Its scientific innards were concealed in a circular moulded plastic case made of bakelite, with a chromium plated grille and just three knobs for volume, wavelength and tuning. It was not a piece of furniture, but a thoroughly new and modern piece of equipment suitable for any household with electricity, and any child could use it.

The point is perhaps obvious enough; you do not need to know how a thing is made in order to understand how to use it. Nor do you need to know how programs are made in order to like or dislike or be bored by them. The labyrinthine complexities of the scientific-technical development of radio and television broadcasting and the production processes that lie behind their transmitted output are equally invisible in the design of the receiving equipment and in the design of programs. We are not aware of the manufactured character of either except when they break down. And yet it must be the case that the design of television sets and of television programs are, in different ways, disclosive of how they are to be understood and used. How else would we know what to do with them? To study the hidden labor processes of technological innovation and application and of broadcasting institutions and their program making, is to begin to uncover the care-structures that are concealed and yet immanent in humanly made things.<sup>11</sup> More particularly to attend to the design of receiving equipment and to the communicative design (or intentionality) of the programs they disclose is to begin to find answers to the question as to how something such as 'television' appears in the world as a worldly thing; as an ordinary, available thing for use by each and all, anyplace, anytime.

## Media histories

A third approach to the historical study of communication was pioneered by the Canadian economic historian, Harold Innis, whose ideas were taken up and popularised by Marshall McLuhan.<sup>12</sup> McLuhan's fame has overshadowed and distorted the significance of Innis's late work which today needs some contextualising in order to rescue it from the condescension of contemporary media historians (eg Curran 2002:51-4). Outside Canada Innis is known for two books written at the end of his life: *Empire and Communication* and *The Bias of Communication*. In them Innis developed what was then a startlingly original thesis about the *media* of communication; the material forms (and their technologies) through or upon which human communication is registered and moved. Today, via their diffusion in McLuhan's writings, these ideas have become commonplace. They include the periodisation of historical epochs according to their dominant form of communication (oral, manuscript and print cultures); the distinction between speech and writing (emphasising the role of the latter in the management and maintenance of religious and political power); the communicative bias of different media of communication towards either time or space. Throughout the emphasis is on the material forms of communication and not their particular content.

Innis's late work is hard to read today. It is written in an assertive, oracular style with a vast historical sweep and a high degree of abstraction: 'Minerva's owl', the first chapter of *The Bias of Communication*, gets from ancient Babylon and Mesopotamia to the industrial revolution and the Communist Manifesto in just over twenty pages. This kind of writing was more acceptable fifty years ago and in fact represented probably the last and certainly the most original attempt to write 'world

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<sup>10</sup> For an account of this history in the United States see Douglas 1999: 55-82. See plate 1, opposite p.192, for a photograph that vividly captures this moment.

<sup>11</sup> Scannell 2003 for a discussion of the broadcasting production process as a care-structure.

<sup>12</sup> Notably in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* which McLuhan describes, in the preface as 'a footnote to the observations of Innis on the subject of the psychic and social consequences, first of writing and then of printing' (McLuhan 1964: ix).

history', a genre which, even as Innis wrote, was in decline and has fallen out of favour ever since for reasons hinted at above. World history took its inspiration from Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (The Phenomenology of the Spirit) in which the enlightenment narrative of progress found its ultimate expression as the story of the Spirit of Humanity's long journey to self-understanding and reconciliation. The challenge to translate this from a philosophy of history into an actual historical narrative was taken up by historians in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most influential of these, in Innis's day, was Arnold Toynbee's multi-volume *Study of History* which started by tracing the history of the world first in terms of the rise and fall of civilisations and, later, of world-religions.

Innis's *Empire and Communication* took the same broad canvas as earlier world histories but painted a very different picture. The transcendental narrative of the movement of *Geist* in history via the rise and fall of civilisations was replaced by the movement and circulation of people, goods and information. To see how Innis got to this we must return to his early historical work on the Canadian economy. In his detailed, empirical studies of Canada's export staples (fur, timber and fish) Innis came to see them as key components of a front tier (frontier) economy heavily dependent on the 'back tier' economies of Europe and its dominant American neighbour. More exactly he found that his work was, in a fundamental way, a study of the movement and circulation of people and goods underpinned by available forms of transport and communication and all of which came up against the material exigencies of time and space. If his later work seems to operate at a high altitude it is grounded in the earthy, practical realities of his early empirical work. As part of his definitive study of the fur trade Innis bought himself a canoe and paddled down the remote McKenzie River to the Hudson Bay (the route taken by 19<sup>th</sup> century trappers) in order to understand how the pelts started on their long journey to the shops of London and Paris where they were sold as fashionable beaver hats.

It is customary to read 'medium theory'<sup>13</sup> as flawed by technological determinism; the view that technological innovation causes social change. The difficulties lie, to a considerable extent in the way that the question is posed in terms of technology and its social effect. That formulation presupposes a dichotomy between the hidden processes of technical discovery, invention, application, manufacture and distribution all on one side with 'society' on the other side of the wall. It is as if human inventions are discovered outside society and then are suddenly parachuted into it. Furthermore the question is posed in terms of a cause-effect relationship as if one could isolate and specify the particular change(s) that could be attributed to the technology itself and nothing else. Moreover what is almost completely overlooked is that what begins, at the point of social uptake of modern technologies of communication, is the process of working out what can be done with them, the discovery of what in fact they are (good) for. Technologies do not arrive in the world with what Ian Hutchby calls their 'communicative affordances' known and understood. Hutchby places this concept at the heart of his penetrating review of current approaches, in the sociology of science, to the question of technologies and their impact (Hutchby 2001: 13-33). The traditional deterministic interpretations of technology were largely negative. Technologies were the product of instrumental reason that exploited the natural environment and were instruments of social exploitation and domination. Recent sociology has challenged that view but, Hutchby argues, ends up by rejecting determinism completely. His own more nuanced position allows that technologies do indeed have constraining effects but these should be thought of as enabling rather than disabling. The question now becomes, what affordances do new communicative technologies open up. What are they good for? What difference, for instance, does television make to our lives? What does it do with us and what can we do with it?

### **The historicity of television**

The historiographies of communication and media, with which I have thus far been concerned all point to the difficulty of grasping the historicity of media and particularly the world-historical character of television. Histories of broadcasting, in which television's history is situated, turn out to have a one-sided institutional and national character which it is difficult to transcend. Social and cultural histories are written on the other side of the wall. Narratives of the development of technologies of communication are similarly one-sided and stop at the point of social uptake. Finally, efforts to write the history of the world in terms of communication media appear today as discredited by our incredulity towards grand narratives. The wider question of the historical impact of communication technologies presents major hermeneutic difficulties. At the heart of these problems is an issue that

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<sup>13</sup> The label attached to the approach of Innis and McLuhan by Joshua Meyrowitz (1994)

medium theory highlights. Historiography is about history but points in a different temporal direction. Historiography operates on the temporal axis of present and past while history operates on the axis of present and future. History's subject matter is the history making process. Both are situated in the present, the phenomenal 'now'. Historiography looks back to the past as a clue to the present situation. Meanwhile however, the history-making process, in the very same phenomenal now, is moving forward into the future, is giving the world its future through its actions in the present. The writing of history and the making of history inevitably diverge. Broadcast television is part of the history-making process. That is what its *historicality* (its being historical) indicates. That is why historiography can never catch up with, can never quite grasp, its object of enquiry. As historiography looks back history itself is moving forwards and away from it.

Historiography is about the *writing* of history. A much debated crux in a number of disciplines is the status, in historiography, of the *event*. The influential Annales School (Burke 1994) was deeply dismissive of *histoire événementielle* whose time was that daily life and whose concern was with the kinds of event that show up in newspapers (Braudel 1980:27-29). A preoccupation with historical actors (monarchs, statesmen and military leaders) and with great events (politics and war) produced surface narratives, it was argued, which overlooked the underlying structural factors that produced both the events and their agents. The rejection of surface history however produced peculiarly motionless and abstract histories and there was a swing back to narrative in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, accompanied by vigorous debates about its reliability in relation to the 'truth' of the event-as-narrated.<sup>14</sup> The event, for all the difficult issues it poses, is the bedrock of history. If nothing happens, there is nothing to tell. One elegant definition of daily life is precisely that there is nothing to say about it. It is uneventful *because* it has no storyable, tellable characteristics (Sacks 1995, volume 2: 215-221).

History however is not simply the event. Events remain unhistorical unless or until they are narrated. History is the act of narrating the event. To narrate is not to chronicle. It is to find and tell the story of the event. The investigate process of finding and telling the story is the task of the historian and the journalist:

Yes (.) This just in (.)  
 You are looking at obviously a very disturbing **live** shot there  
 That is the World Trade Center and we have unconfirmed reports this morning  
 that a plane has crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center  
 CNN center right now is just beginning to **work** on this **story**  
 obviously our sources and trying to figure out exactly what happened  
 But clearly something relatively devastating **happening** this morning  
 there at the south end of the island of Manhattan. [emphases added]

This is the moment that the event breaks, live to air, into CNN news at 8.50 am on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. It is the moment of first sight, for viewers *and* the news-desk, of a pall of smoke billowing from one of the towers of the World Trade Center, and these are the first words from the newsroom about what, coming out of the ad break, is now on screen with the strapline, BREAKING NEWS. It is immediately and naturally assumed, by the newscaster, that this—whatever it is—is a story. There is 'something.[...] happening' as viewers can see. What exactly, is unclear beyond 'unconfirmed reports' of a plane crashing into the building. Though the situation presents itself as incomprehensible and inexplicable, it is spontaneously treated as self-evidently potentially meaningful and significant. The *work* of finding the story is the task of the CNN news center and it is now, off screen and invisibly, working flat out on it. In the interface between its backstage finding and its front-stage telling, the meaning and significance of the event-as-story will be uncovered. It was to be a long and terrible journey of discovery on that day (Scannell 2004b).

Journalists are the historians of the present. To find and tell the story is to give structure, coherence and meaning to events-in-the-world and thereby historicise them. The world-historical character of life today shows up, like a bolt from the blue, in the world-historical event. Both are, in significant ways, an effect of television. To reiterate: it is not the event-in-itself that is historical. It becomes so only through the story-telling narratives of its historian(s). History is the sum of the relationship between event, story and narrative. The attack on the World Trade centre in New York instantly became a

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<sup>14</sup> A useful review of history and narrative as discussed by historians, philosophers and literary theorists is provided by Roberts 2001.

world-historical event through its immediate uptake on television news-programs round the world. Most news comes after the event. But on September 11<sup>th</sup> event and narrative were both in the same forward-moving history-making real-time now. The significance of television—its essential meaning, power and impact—is encrypted in its most fundamental communicative affordance as *live broadcasting*.

### **Live television broadcasting**

‘You are looking at obviously a very disturbing *live* shot there.’ To find and tell the story in the live, phenomenal now of television is to articulate a prospective, forward-looking narrative. This in contrast with written histories (including film and newspaper histories) which are backward-looking retrospective narratives. Innis and McLuhan drew attention to the fundamental communicative affordances of writing (inscribed in all its mediating technologies) and speech. But the force of this distinction was considerably vitiated by the terms in which it was made: the distinction between ‘oral’ and ‘print’ cultures has a curiously flattening and distancing effect (it is an academic distinction). We will have a more vivid grasp of its force if we think it in terms of the *living* and the *dead*. Historiography’s subject matter (history) is in, as we say, the dead past. But history itself (the history-making process; the *a priori* of historiography) is in, as we also say, the living present. The past is dead because it is over and done with. ‘It’s history’ (it’s finished). The perishability of news (‘yesterday’s news is dead news’) reminds us of this each day. The present is alive because it is the now-becoming-future of the lives of the living. The liveness of television is not its technological effect but its existential basis, the condition of its existence in a double sense: its possibility and its manifest, expressed effect. It is because, and only because, television is live that it is inextricably implicated in the history-making process which today has long since been routinised by modern media (starting with the daily press) as news. Today’s news is tomorrow’s history.

The meaning of *live* has been much misunderstood in the academic literature on television. In most discussions it is pointed out that television was broadcast live to begin with but was, from the 1960s onward, replaced for the most part by recorded programs. But ‘recorded’ is not the negation of ‘live’. Jane Feuer’s influential and much cited essay on ‘The concept of live television’ conflates liveness with immediacy. Of course in live broadcasting the moments of production, transmission and reception are all in the same real time now, but what Feuer neglects to consider is the temporal ontology of the immediate now and, crucially, what gives its possibility. As human beings we exist, at one and the same time, in many different and incommensurate orders of time. The immediate now, for instance, is radically different in digital and analogue time. In digital time reckoning we say: ‘Now it is 8.50. Now it is 8.51 etc. Time is manifest as an ever-present punctual moment that cannot ever be anything other than ‘now’. In analogue time reckoning we say: ‘Now it is ten *to* eight. Now it is ten *past* eight’. Analogue time’s immediate now is expressed (both on the clock-face and in the way we say it) as being in a relationship with its before and after, neither of which exists in digital time. The now of analogue time is the phenomenal now of our concern. It is the matter to hand in the now that matters. It is an immediate present that exists only by virtue of the *historic* and *future* present which are the conditions of its possibility, of its coming-into-being. The possibility of live-to-air program transmissions, in which we experience liveness-as-immediacy, is given by the structure of the daily programme schedule which, in broadcasting, is attuned to the existential arc of days.

The two ontologies of time expressed in analogue and digital time pieces are implicated in two temporal orders of the day. The day, in 24/7 news-time, exists in a continuous, never-ending succession of punctual moments that are always in the ever-present now. This strictly abstract, numbered and sequential time overrides the natural temporality of the day with its immanent structure, rhythm and tempo around which human life, even today, remains adjusted.<sup>15</sup> Light and darkness;

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<sup>15</sup> The time-of-day, like the lunar month and solar year, is a natural (non-human) order of time and is both linear and cyclical in its movement. Digital time is motionless and is a perfect example of Zeno’s paradox of the arrow in flight. In any indivisible instant of its flight is a flying arrow moving or at rest? If the former, how can it move in an instant; if the latter, it is never moving, and therefore is at rest (Honderich 1995: 922). The punctual moment of digital time, with no ‘before’ or ‘after’, appears trapped in the eternity of the ever-same now. *Groundhog Day* is a wonderful exploration of the paradoxes of digital and daily time.



waking and sleeping—the days of our lives have a natural arc of morning, noon and night which is the storyable arc of our own existence too. Life and days are inextricably folded into each other and show up in the schedules of the broadcast day in which the historic, immediate and future present show up in relation to each other. *Good Morning America*, which Feuer briefly discusses, is a start-of-day program whose live-to-air unfolding format performs the task of orienting its audience to the day ahead and all its upcoming business. It is not just *at* that time of day, but *for* that time. For Feuer liveness and immediacy are essentially ideological. She never sees either as matters of time or as time-that-matters.

*Live broadcasting.* The two terms must be thought together. We owe it to John Durham Peters for a corrective reminder of the communicative affordances of broadcasting, in his seminal discussion of Christ's parable of The Sower (Peters 1999: 51-62). To broadcast, before radio and television, meant to sow; to scatter seed abroad. In the parable the broadcaster is careless of where the seed falls. Some lands on stony ground and is pecked up by the birds of the air. Some falls among thorns and is choked as soon as it springs up. Some falls on shallow soil, springs up quickly and soon withers. And some falls on fertile soil and yields a good harvest; a hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold. This is inefficient communication that is indifferent to its success. It is inefficient because it is indiscriminate. It makes no effort to disseminate only to chosen, selected and responsive audiences. It allows for rejection and indifference. It has no measure of its own success. It is a strictly one-way, or non-reciprocal form of communication. But whereas this has usually been regarded as its deficiency, Peters sees it is a blessing. To give (to broadcast) without any expectation of return is an unconditional communicative act that comes with no strings attached. Any recipient can make of it what they will, and that is allowed for. It is unforced, non-coercive communication that offers involvement without commitment. In all these ways broadcasting is deeply democratic. It is intrinsically non-exclusive and non-binding. Anyone can watch or listen and anyone can, if they so choose, disagree with what they see and hear. The generosity of broadcasting is strictly impersonal, but allows for persons and their personal opinions.

### **Television, history and the world**

The broadcast character of television indicates its spatiality. Its liveness is its particular temporality. Together they yield an unprecedented historical here-and-now. History is no longer 'then'. It is 'now'. The event is no longer 'there', but 'here'. The now-and-then, the here-and-there come together in the live immediacy of broadcast news and events which are structured in expectancy of what is to come. These real-time, real-world moments produce a spanned and gathered now in which, daily and routinely, countless individual lives and the historical life of societies intersect with each other the world over. In such moments each of us experiences the news-event as if it spoke to me-and-others now.<sup>16</sup> The world-event, through television, impinges directly and immediately, in each individual case, upon me and my life. Individuals the world over in live transmissions are not so much spectators as witnesses of events.<sup>17</sup> As witnesses we become implicated in the events themselves. Witnesses have communicative entitlements and obligations by virtue of having been present at the event. As such we are not just entitled to our views and opinions but we may be called upon to bear witness, to testify to what we saw and how we saw it (Peters 2001).

#### **BBC News, 11.09.01: 10.04 pm Eyewitness, New York:**

I wuz just standing here watching the World Trade Centre after the first after the first plane hit (. ) I just saw a second plane come in from the south and hit the whuh south (. ) tower half way between the bottom and the top of the tower its gotta be a terrorist attack I can't tellya anything

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<sup>16</sup> For a fuller discussion of the complexities of how 'we' are addressed by radio and television, see Scannell 2000.

<sup>17</sup> There is a very basic issue at stake here. The witness has experienced something by virtue of having been there. Can the viewer lay claim to an experience having watched something on television? The various communicative entitlements of a witness derive from the assumed *authenticity* of their witnessing. That is presumed to be validated by the fact of their presence and their immediate, first-hand experience. If television offers mediated, second-hand experience it is inauthentic. I have argued it is possible to have an authentic experience watching television and thus to be a witness (Scannell 1996: 93-116), a claim which underpins the whole of this chapter. See Ellis 2002: 31-36 on television as 'live witness realized'.

more th'n that (.) I saw the plane hit the building

To re-live a moment such as this testifies to the *pain* of witnessing. The anguish in the face and voice, in the whole body of this anonymous 'man in the street' as he tells what he just saw is all caught in the recording. But what is our position, as viewers, in relation to what we witness on television?

Luc Boltanski has eloquently argued that, as 'moral spectators of distant suffering' via television, we are unavoidably implicated in what he calls the *politics of pity*. In France, if you are an immediate witness of suffering, you have a legal obligation to come to the aid of the sufferer (Boltanski 1999: 7-17). What, then, is our obligation (if any) as television viewers in relation to what we witness? As *moral* spectators we cannot assume the indifference of an objective stance ('that's how it is') and turn away. We *feel* for what we see. The politics of pity requires that we take a stand and confront the choice between detachment or commitment, a choice made reflexively visible by broadcasting. We may be roused (politicised) to act; to protest, to demonstrate or at least to make a donation to an aid agency. At the very least we may be roused to speak; to express our indignation, pity, or even our malicious pleasure, to discuss with others, to form an opinion on the matter of the suffering of others. Through the communicative affordances of today's television, their suffering achieves a visibility and publicness which 'presupposes an international public space' of discussion (Boltanski 1999: 184), a global public sphere. This is how we, as viewers anywhere, encounter the world-historical character of life today. This is how we are implicated in what Boltanski calls 'the politics of the present' which responds immediately to immediate events.

Critics of the politics of the present accuse it of a naïve humanitarianism which merely responds to the victims of suffering without addressing its causes. Boltanski replies that 'to be concerned with the present is no small matter. For over the past, ever gone by, and over the future, still non-existent, the present has an overwhelming privilege: that of being real' (Boltanski 1999: 192). It is the reality of suffering brought to presence by television everywhere, that stirs us to present thought and action. Present actions have no guarantees of success. We cannot be wise before the event, though all of us can be wise in its aftermath. The CNN newsdesk and other broadcasters on the day had no such available wisdom as they wrestled with the unbelievable events unfolding live and in real time on their screens; yet, by the end of that day, news-rooms the world over, had digested, framed and interpreted their momentous significance. They had named Osama bin Laden as the likeliest perpetrator of the attacks on the United States and correctly anticipated an American-led attack on Afghanistan as its likeliest political consequence. Journalists, as historians of the present, face and anticipate the future that present events will bring about. They do this on behalf of their publics everywhere today.

Boltanski's meditation on the television news-viewer as moral spectator has a premise that this chapter shares—it is through television that we are implicated, day by day on a world-wide basis, in the history and politics of the present. The beginnings of that historical development was the theme of Jurgen Habermas's hugely influential account of the emergence of public opinion as the foundation of modern mass, democratic politics (Habermas 1989). Habermas pinpointed the moment that the opinions of ordinary citizens became *historically* relevant as the moment that they became *politically* relevant. When the opinions of ordinary people began to impinge on the decisions and actions of those who exercised political power, the people themselves became, for the first time, involved in the process of making history. The role of media in making public the political-historical process was and remains crucial to the formation of critical public opinion as part of that process. In the last century the live and broadcast affordances of radio and television have drawn us all into the history-making politics of the present which all of us experience normally, and normatively, as members of the societies in which we live. Our *own* situation and its attendant circumstances are understood by each of us as embedded in the world-historical framework of life today as disclosed, daily and routinely, in television news and events wherever and whoever we may be.

[7831 words, including footnotes and end references]

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