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Speaking to Each Other at Last? The Ghost of TV Past, Present and To Come...

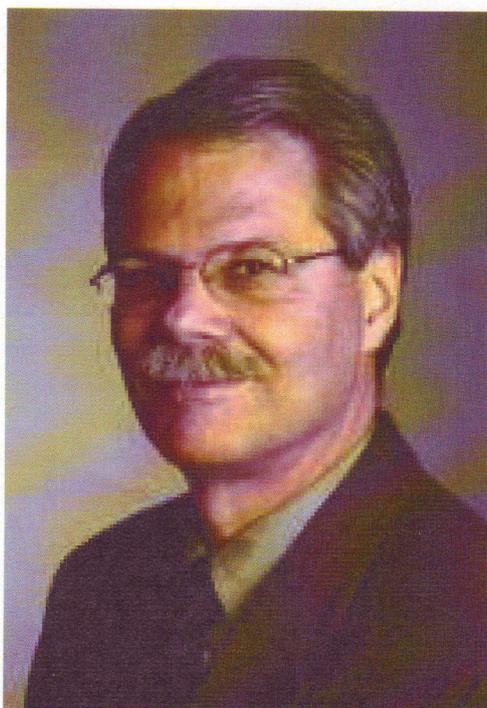
Speaking to Each Other at Last? The Ghost of TV Past, Present and To Come...

Posted by [John Hartley / Queensland University of Technology, Australia](#) on January 13th, 2006 [2 Comments](#) [Printer-Friendly](#)

This is my fifth and last *Flow* column, all of which I have enjoyed writing – I hope you have caught one or two of them. If by some oversight you've missed them, they are archived here:

1. [Disappointment and Disgust, or Teaching?](#)
2. [Flowers Powers: Mars or Venus?](#)
3. [To Have and Have Not \(You Don't Know What You've Got Till It's Gone\)](#)
4. [Laughs and Legends, or the Furniture that Glows? Television as History](#)

There's not that much space for pleasurable discourse among peers these days. So it was instantly appealing when co-founder Avi Santo (along with Christopher Lucas) offered me a chance not only to write about my own specialist field again, but to engage with the comments of others. The *Flow* journal wanted us to 'engage with television at the pace of the medium,' he said.



Horace Newcomb

It was then that I began to hear the rustle of the Ghost of TV Past. Actually it wasn't a ghost, it was the Spirit of Horace Newcomb. Here he was, large-as-life, not exactly rustling in those Texan boots, taking me back to 1984 or thereabouts.

I see a big drill-hall of a conference venue somewhere in Michigan, or is it Illinois, where it seems Horace has invited me and another British guy to join with himself and plenty of others –

American media academics and a sprinkling of media professionals – to talk about TV.

They're calling me Fiskan; Fiskan Hartley I was in those days.¹ There was a deep chime. I looked at the clock on the wall. It was the very 'moment' of High Theory. A shudder went through me, as if from a Ferment in the Field. Everyone began speaking in tongues: I spoke Althusserian, Fiske was babbling away in Certeauvian, young Docrock² was there too I think, talking in a Birmingham accent. Two giant but shadowy figures – Charlie and Percy – lurked in the background as they Measured our Meanings, muttering:

*O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum,
Du kannst mir sehr gefallen!*³

Then the Genial Spirit politely rounded us up, I think there was some embarrassed hanging back and a general feeling that we were stepping out of our comfort zones. He wants us to do *what?* To sit up on the podium; to watch a pilot episode of an as-yet-unseen TV sitcom called 227; and he wants us to *review* it? There and then, in public, no rehearsals ... oh and 227's proud producers are sitting there too in the drill hall, waiting with the usual grad-student crowd to hear what Media Academics had to say.

Hell, this vision is turning into a nightmare, surely? But no – it was Horace Newcomb, quietly trying to do what he has never stopped attempting, which is to get the worlds of professional media production and criticism to talk to each other. It has proved to be an uphill struggle.

We got through our ordeal-by-criticism on that night, but I wasn't very impressed with us. There was just not enough common understanding of what TV criticism in an academic context might be *for*. So as each of us took our turn on the podium, what came out of our mouths told the audience much more about us than it did about the hapless 227 – which however survived our critique and went on to five successful seasons.

227 was an ordinary product of the network dream factory, with no particular critical, *avant garde* or oppositional merits to recommend it to the assembled Young (well, mostly older) Turks. Its merits were that it was funny in a sitcommy way, and it proposed to put a predominantly African-American cast, playing working-class characters, in front of Americans each Saturday night. Everyone could think about neighbourliness while they laughed at the vicissitudes of apartment-block life. **Check it out.**

But someone on the podium thought it was too much like the *Cosby Show*; someone else thought it had its class analysis all wrong; a third (it might've been me) thought it reeked of network values rather than those of the culture it purported to portray.

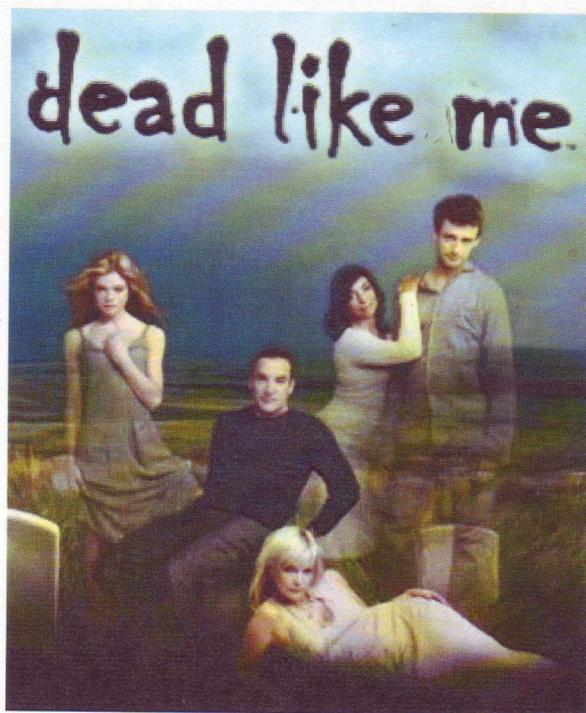
This was the last time I ever heard media academics doing 'live' TV criticism, in sync with the rhythm of TV itself. In fact criticism itself became a nearly forgotten art after that painful night in the wilds of East Lansing (or Urbana-Champaign).

During the long slog through Ideological Critique and the posts- (structuralism, modernism, colonialism etc.), it was hard to get a judgement in edgeways. It seemed that criticism had had its day. It was either an oppressive discourse imposing DWEM [dead white European male] values, or it was self-deluding infantile wish-fulfilment universalising the self of the critic, or both. Just then the Bennett & Miller gang, the tough guys of Cultural Policy Studies, rode into town, shot the place up with their Foucault-45s and declared the unattached universal intellectual dead.

Criticism became the love that dare not speak its name. Those of us trained (as unattached universal intellectuals) to make skilled judgements, both aesthetic and moral, about texts, in order to provide expert guidance in matters of culture and value to the public at large, with due understanding of the context of class, you know, like Richard Hoggart, learnt to keep our big mouths shut.

Until *Flow*. And suddenly all the memories came flooding back, because *Flow* has Horace Newcomb written all over it. It is tolerant, open, polite, passionately interested in connecting the industry with the academy and both with the audience, and of course it comes from Austin-Texas.

TV Present



Dead Like Me

And all of a sudden I hear an eerie clanking again. This time it's none other than Toby Miller ... oh and I can make out other figures in the modernist gloom ... Anna McCarthy, Michael Curtin, Mimi White, Tom Streeter, Sharon Ross, Henry Jenkins ... no wonder there's a big noise.

These are collectively the Ghost of TV Present, and there's a hell of a lot more of them crowded around. Their ghostly words surround you now, as you read this. Go on, check the archive (it's one of *Flow's* attractions); read their stuff, it's terrific.

Indeed this is the other thing that appeals to me about *Flow*. I like the idea of an interactive but asynchronous and global medium – a useful conversational tool for those of us living and working in Australia.

I especially like the idea of the comments that can be pasted under each column. This had been my own introduction to the site – I'd posted an irreverent comment on a piece by **Michael Curtin**.

Flow's comments are by an interesting mix of senior figures and grad-students, and they often bring some entirely new insight to the column in question, or else they race off at a tangent on some new line of thought entirely, forgetting the poor columnist altogether.

According to Avi Santo, each issue gets about 8000 hits, although as yet there's no way to tell which columns they're reading.

But as time has gone on on, it has been interesting to observe how many comments a given column attracted – a sort of beauty contest or instant poll that might tell us who or what topic was hot. Eventually **Henry Jenkins won**, with a column on the humour of Sarah Silverman that at last count had attracted 58 comments.

The fact that Henry is one of the best and most thought-provoking writers in our field has a lot to do with that. But so, it seems, do extra credits. Someone had had the bright idea of getting a class to post comments as part of a class assignment. Not a bad idea: it made the students think, write, and communicate in public about sexism and racism on TV; a good outcome for everyone and an absorbing read for any educator.

But there is a whiff of 'insider trading' about this particular manifestation of conversational democracy. Was it true, as Horace Newcomb had claimed in his own column, that the audience for *Flow* is 'predetermined'? Perhaps. Despite the global reach of the Internet we still live in tight little demographic villages, and judging by the traffic on *Flow*, one *type* of community simply doesn't interact with another.

So I thought I'd try to write a column that would speak directly to TV audience-members, about the experience of watching a show that I really liked, which was *Dead Like Me*. Imagine my delight when comments starting appearing from actual fans. They do read *Flow*! Posts are still trickling in, five months later. To date there are 22 of them. Not a patch on Henry's score and of course nothing like what you can find on the comments pages of IMDb, Amazon.com, petitiononline.com and myriad fansites. But here they are – and every one of them shares my feelings about *DLM*. Welcome, TV fans!

The only fly in the ointment, or clank in the chain, is that there was not a single post from a 'Flower' (regular contributor to *Flow*), or even from another media academic (apart from the obligatory editor's comment). There were posts from Australia, the USA, Croatia and four from Canada. But from my peers, silence.

So it remained true – we don't really interact across the demographic boundaries. Academics and audiences can appear on the same site, but academics talk about one thing; audiences another. Professionals are nowhere to be seen (and students are seen but not heard).

Now I see again the lowering bulk of the Ghost of TV Present. I hear the doom-laden voice ... of **Toby Miller**:

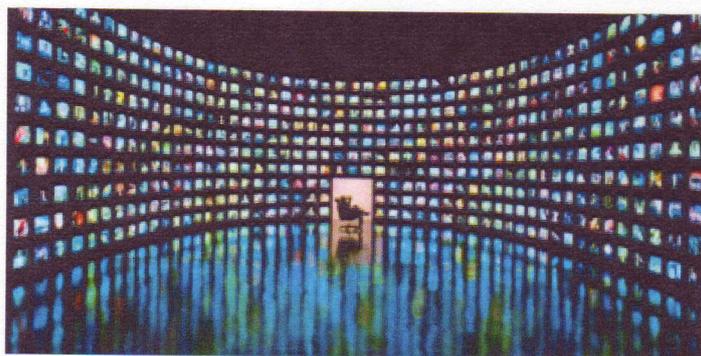
Sometimes it appears as though critical public intellectuals in the US are, in the words of the Economist, 'a tiny, struggling species, whose habitat is confined to a few uptown apartments in New York and the faculties of certain universities' ...

Things are even worse on TV itself, he intones:

There is minimal room for intellection on network television, as the still-extant mass audience is the target, and is assumed to despise universities.

Hell's bells! What are we going to do about that?

TV To Come



Is the promise of *Flow* – for technologically and critically enabled steps towards an interactive consumer co-created 'conversational democracy' – a mere illusion?

Well maybe; certainly the symptoms diagnosed by Miller suggest that the 'imagined community' of modernity is in a pretty sick condition, if broadcast news in the USA is the thermometer.

And maybe that's true – maybe we are nearing the end of the modernist paradigm when public intellectuals, whether critical or universal, could aspire to speak to entire nations. Maybe nations themselves, or big ones like the USA, are evolving past the point where even network broadcasters can hope to address them as a unified whole – the 'unum' has gone out of the 'pluribus.'

And so perhaps we're reaching the end of the paradigm in which anyone thinks television itself is targeted at 'the still-extant mass audience,' whether they despise universities or not.

There's a whispering breeze at the window; a trail of indeterminate smokey haze slides into the room, across the computer terminal ... it's the Ghost of TV to Come.

I can't tell you what it looks like, since I have never met Jason Mittell, who in any case keeps morphing into Jonathan Gray ... now it's John McMurria, now Avi Santo ... these guys, oh dear, are they really all early-adopter boy-toy guys? ... no, here's Tara McPherson ... these guys seem to have got this thing licked.

They reckon TV will evolve from universal broadcasting to customised consumption. **Jason Mittell** writes:

A sizable, motivated, and demographically desirable audience ... awaits the advertisers and distributors who are willing to buck the centrality of ratings as determinant of television's hits and misses. ... By only investing in the traditional currency of ratings, networks ignore the multitude of ways that viewers are already actively engaging with their programs, and forego the option for people to actually participate in the selection of television programming that they want to see.

If they're right, we no longer have to assume that all television needs to be directed towards something as wide (and anti-critical) as 'Americans.' It just won't matter whether or not 'most people' despise intellectuals or foolishly refuse to recognise the things that we like. Good TV shows – such as *Dead Like Me*, *Veronica Mars*, *Arrested Development* – won't have to be cancelled if they 'fail' in the Nielsen lottery.

This new generation of scholars is putting together the case for a television ecology that can exploit the Internet ('Web2' McMurria calls it), BitTorrent, TiVo, video-iPods and DVD. It is becoming possible for passionate fans to support their favourite shows directly, without relying on network providers.

Not only that, but fans can use digital equipment and software to make their own TV. In fact I've done it myself with 'digital storytelling.' Out there now are tribute versions of sci-fi shows, local documentaries, digital storytelling, or even full-length feature films. Some of these will attract their own audiences, driving new distribution options.

And so, alongside, underneath and (at least as far as IP goes) in defiance of the *closed expert system* of broadcast television, will develop a new *open innovation network*. You can already inhabit it. Actually *Flow* already does.

This brave new world does have a couple of dystopian elements. One is that no-one knows how to fund non-universal TV production. Another is that any future 'imagined community' will have to get used to the fact that most people aren't inside it. There will no longer be one technology of communication that combines broadcast television's universal access, affordability and appeal with content that – at least in principle – addresses *everyone* from time to time; from the top of society to the bottom.

Instead, different groups can just ignore each other. Television will become more like publishing,

and as is already the case in that medium, no-one will be able to claim any longer that their particular audience equates with a universal subject or with 'the nation.'

Mind you, it does seem – if Miller is right about the fate of the critical intellectual on American TV news – that the broadcast era hasn't got much to shout about in this regard anyway. Entire demographics co-exist but ignore or bad-mouth each other.

TV claims a universal subject but viewers increasingly resent that. *Flow* columnists like Mittell and Jonathan Gray are rebelling against the Nielsen ratings, the 'representative' apparatus that levels out national taste.

Back to the Future?

Conversational democracy still seems a long way off. But in fact we do need to recognise that the apparently simple act of 'speaking to each other' is quite hard work – it's not a natural outcome of any technology or ideology.

Luckily, the future-facing folks at *Flow* are onto this simple truth, and they're doing something about it. Avi Santo tells me they're planning a *Flow* conference later this year (2006).

But it won't be the usual academic thing. There'll be no papers, panels or plenaries. Instead, there'll be conversation. Why?

- *There are too few television and media conferences.*
- *Traditional conferences provide too little time for discussion.*
- *Wider conversation and the circulation of ideas can promote collegiality, a less polarized discipline, and the promise of engaging real publics with our ideas.*
- *Critical media studies will be more effective if it grapples openly with the immediacy and breadth of its object of study.*

Says Santo:

The roundtable would be open to the public. ... In this manner, we hope to ensure a lively conversation ... Our goal is to spark a conversation that is both immediate and consequential.

Presumably it'll be at Austin-Texas, a place whose drill halls I've never had the happiness to visit. But I would love to go – if only to search for the spirit of Horace, for clearly he stalks the corridors still.

It is to their credit that 'the Flowers' are looking for more effective means by which we can continue 'speaking to each other.' But it is right to recall that this is exactly where cultural studies first came in. 'Speaking to each other' is the title of two books by 'our founder,' **Richard Hoggart**.

Notes

¹ Fiskan Hartley is a reference to *Reading Television* (1978) by John Fiske and John Hartley, which enjoyed a moment of academic celebrity in the 1980s.

² Docrock is Larry Grossberg. Docrock is his email alias.

³ Charlie and Percy are (were) Charles Osgood, inventor of the semantic differential, and Percy Tannenbaum (who co-authored a book called, from memory, *The Measurement of Meaning*, with Osgood, in about 1967). Both were still around when cultural studies hit America, and neither of them approved!

Image Credits:

1. **Horace Newcomb**

2. **Dead Like Me**