January 1992

Book Reviews Volume 2

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.dit.ie/icr

Part of the Communication Technology and New Media Commons

Recommended Citation


doi:10.21427/D77D9X

Available at: https://arrow.dit.ie/icr/vol2/iss1/12
This book opens with the image of the 'couch potato', an unflattering contribution to the language of television criticism which originated in the U.S. in the 1970s. In another discipline a political scientist at a Dublin University kept a framed photograph of a group of men leaning and chatting on a wall outside a rural polling station prominently displayed in his office. This expert on opinion polls and election results needed to remind himself that the data he analyzed were aggregates of the views and votes of large numbers of real flesh and blood people of all ages, sexes etc. all around the country not unlike the voters in his photo. The distance between the macro-scientific view of the world, which necessarily abstracts from the human dimensions of the phenomenon being studied, and the micro-view, which looks at the issue at the individual or small group level, is one of the core issues addressed in this essay on the audience. The real agenda, however, suggests that macro measurement of television viewing is a fairly meaningless exercise which is really oriented towards 'control' of the audience and that the primary need is to understand the diversity and problematic nature of the viewing experiences of people in their own social settings.

An American communications scholar, who spent time in Dublin on a sabbatical, likened American television to Disneyland and Irish (or European) television to a well organized museum. The contrast in tone and content was so great that it took him time to adjust to the European public service model of programming compared to the commercially driven tone and content of US television. Europeans experience a culture shock in reverse when visiting the US and are initially dismayed by American programming. The philosophy underlying the difference is usefully explicated in this book: in commercial television, the audience is seen as a 'market', to be exploited for commercial gain, while the European public service model sees the audience as the 'public' or 'citizens' to be served with a mix of programming of an entertaining, informative and educational nature.

Commercial television 'delivers an audience' to the advertiser who, seeing the audience as potential consumers, buys advertisement space in the schedule. The ratings, being the recognised currency of audience measurement, thus assume a crucial role in commercial television systems in determining the size of the audience and the rate or price to be charged for advertisements. The history of the American ratings system and the debates and arguments surrounding diaries, set-meters and the more recent 'people-meter' technology is discussed along with a discussion of some technical measurement problems posed by a more complex media environment such as a multiplicity of channels, VCR usage etc.

The argument is pushed further, however, to suggest that measuring television viewing is virtually an impossibility since the viewing situation is, perhaps, not the fictional model of people exclusively devoting all their attention to the images on the screen. It is well known, both informally and through research (some quoted by the author), that television viewing is frequently subordinated to a range of real life interactions and activities of household members. That knowledge, nonetheless, does not invalidate the efforts made by research companies to win the cooperation of household members to register their television viewing when they themselves consider that they are watching television. The viewing experience and situation will thus be different for people and will also be different for the same person at different times.

The people-meter measurement system and its predecessors merely attempt to measure the size and composition of the audience for programmes which household members are free to watch or not as they choose. The rating system does not measure
REVIEWS

the reactions of people to the programmes they view. However, the people-meter, has operated in Ireland (and in some other countries), does address the question of the degree of appreciation which viewers derive from names programmes. This is a useful qualitative gain from the new measurement technology.

The crisis in European broadcasting is discussed where the classical public service model of television programming is under threat from the new technologies (which brought the VCR and commercial satellite channels to many homes) and a shift in public policy which is opening up broadcasting to domestic commercial competition. The argument is advanced that there is a degree of convergence underway in European broadcasting where public broadcasters are addressing the new competitive environment and re-defining their role. The author argues that the very concept and process of audience measurement is one of the central arenas in which the process of convergence between the public service and commercial television is most obvious.

The book examines two European public service broadcasters – the BBC and VARA (the Dutch socialist network) – and argues that the original high ideals and 'paternalism' of both organizations in addressing their national groupings has given way to a more pragmatic view of their role as media studies have revealed the complexities of modern society. The author points to a decline in the philosophical certitude which characterised the early days of public service broadcasting and holds that institutional research has failed to address the true meaning of the viewing experiences of ordinary people. This jaundiced view of both broadcasting and academic research pervades the book. The alternative approach which is suggested – a focus on the viewer in his/her social situation – is too sketchily drawn to be helpful. Of course, good qualitative research can and does illuminate important aspects of the communications process and the viewing experience. Public broadcasters and the academic community continue to explore and support such research.

While the ratings are a major determinant of programming policy in the commercial television world, the results of audience research in public broadcasting in Europe have never fulfilled the same role in policy formation. Ratings are, of course, an important measure of relative performance but they are balanced with a number of other important considerations which derive from the public mandate in informing policymaking in public service television.

From the perspective of this reviewer, the main issue raised by this book is the discussion on the uncertainty which has affected European public broadcasting in the face of commercial competition and the new open market ethic. There is an urgent need to advance and intensify the debate on the national role of the public broadcasting in the final decade of the twentieth century in consultation with both governments and the public on whose behalf they were set up in the first place. The multi-faceted role of the research in European public broadcasting will emerge more clearly once the basic mandate of public broadcaster has been reviewed, renewed and agreed.

Thomas Richards The commodity culture of Victorian England: advertising and spectacle, 1851-1914
London: Verso, 1991. stg £11.95 (pbk)
ISBN 0 86091 570 0

Greta Jones

This book sets out to analyze the growth of commodity culture in the British Isles, in particular the depiction of the commodity through advertising. Whereas in the Great
Exhibition in 1851, advertising played a significant but relatively small role, by the turn of the century it was ubiquitous and the subject itself of a large and growing industry. The material basis for this was increased prosperity among a large section of the middle and working class. Mass production brought consumer goods within their reach and increasingly consumption and the satisfactions to be obtained thereby formed an important part of their lives.

Richards singles out the advertisements themselves for attention. He takes two approaches. One, influenced by Marxism, talks about the fetishism of commodities, that is, the importance commodities acquire as representations of the relations of production. The second is the work of Guy Debord who in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) argues that the advertisement has become the all embracing representation of the modern world, its most important cultural icon and a major reference point for the individual.

What picture emerges of the world through advertisements? Richards’ analysis, in particular of patent medicines which formed a large part of the Victorian markets for consumer goods, demonstrates the influence of historical circumstances on this world. In the nineteenth century, themes of tradition, empire and patriotism were linked to the commodity. But there were also more perennial ideas emerging. The depiction of the body — often the female body — and the ideal that one could recreate oneself in line with an aesthetic ideal played an important part in commodity representation, then as now.

Advertisements reinforced hierarchy by embracing the ‘royal’, ‘aristocratic’ and ‘exclusive’. They also promised that the commodity was the key to a world of plenty and satisfaction for everyone. Thus they were simultaneously ‘democratic’ offering access, availability and control, and ‘hierarchal’, emphasizing authority and exclusiveness.

Advertisements are the chief and most accessible pictorial, oral and literary representation of our culture. Richards’ book is an attempt to come to terms with what this means. He uses Victorian advertisements to show how capitalism transmits messages about itself, creating a world of apparent choices. He also argues that in contemporary society, the form and content of these messages may change. This may be because of the intervention of new means of communication, because of political changes within capitalism itself.

On the whole Richards’ arguments are convincing. The book nicely balances the theoretical content with exegesis of actual advertising practices. It should have appeal to historians and students of communications alike.

---

**Broadcast and electronic media in Western Europe**

London: Sage, 1992. 206pp stg£30.00, stg£11.95 (pbk)


Colum Kenny

This is a useful book for students of European audiovisual developments. For the dedicated professional it will also help to make sense of current trends in broadcasting. But it is not an easy read and like so many academic works appears to be addressed primarily to other academics. It has been written by no less than seventeen of them, being a collection of essays of varying degrees of clarity by social scientists from a number of Western European countries.
REVIEWS

One of the problems in describing what is happening to European television services at present is that, as soon as one begins to go beyond general assertions, there is a danger of being overwhelmed by national detail. It is important that any book's tour of particular aspects of media policy and practice is guided by an author who does not lose sight of the need to come to conclusions, even if the conclusion is sometimes that there are inconsistencies and no simplistic formulas.

It is clear to anyone who works in or who observes European broadcasting and cable services that certain trends are emerging. Public service broadcasters have lost their national monopolies, there is a degree of internationalism and cross media ownership, regulations are less rigid if not less numerous, American programming is increasing, European production is changing in nature and there is a lot of uncertainty and insecurity about the future.

Such is the terrain of this book. Chapters include 'The Building of Media Empires', 'The Technology Factor', 'Small States in the Shadow of the Giants', 'Regulation of Media at Local Level' and 'Television Content: Dallasiification of Culture?'. One of three co-authors of the latter contribution is Mary Kelly of University College Dublin.

This is a book written by an association of social scientists known as the Euromedia Research Group (ERG). The group, like the European Institute for the Media and other scholarly organizations, attempts to make sense of how European integration and co-operation is affecting what we watch and what we produce in Europe.

But in many cases the discourse of academics often seems to me to be quite closed, the audience being that of peers rather than public. The language and structures used can be indicative. The book under review here, for example, purports to set the scene with chapters entitled 'From Structure to Dynamics' and 'A Framework for Analysis of Media Change in Europe in the 1990s'. Anything more calculated to deter a general reader, even a professional in the field, I can hardly imagine.

Especially turgid and unsatisfactory is an attempt near the start of the book, by Denis McQuail and others, to construct 'models of policy change'. As an exercise in methodology in a thesis this would be fine. But given its tentative and inconclusive nature, it should have been kept for the coffee room or conference chamber by the authors of this work. In fact the last chapter of this book would have made a much more interesting opening, truly setting the scene and enticing readers to find out the reasoning behind the call to 'Wake up, Europe'.

Social scientists very often purport to wish to effect social, economic and political change. So why do they not use simpler language, especially when lecturing people on communications? This may have something to do with rites of academia, where certain types of publication are ranked higher than others when it comes to preferment. This is reflected in the way in which communications academia often appear indifferent to trade and professional publications. Titles such as Broadcast, TV World, The Hollywood Reporter and Television Business International are seldom cited and, when they are, authors' names are seldom given.

Yet such publications can be of more value to decision-makers than most of what one is likely to find in many academic publications. Not that academics do not rely on specialist journalism: often this is the principal source of their primary information, rather than broadcasters or public servants.

Judged on its own terms, however, as an academic publication, Dynamics of Media Politics is a contribution to continuing efforts to define and focus questions of relevance in communications. It is a companion volume to The Media in Western Europe and follows on from two 1986 books published by the ERG: New Media Politics and Electronic Media Policy in Western Europe. The editors, Slune and Truetschel, work at Aarhus, Denmark, and Rathmina, Dublin, respectively.
At various educational institutions throughout Ireland there is a growing interest in communications studies. It is to be hoped that the investment in staff and resources involved can be co-ordinated nationally in some way, so that the training and research needs of this small state may be served as efficiently as possible. But academic freedom must also be protected.

Like the publications of the European Institute for the Media, the books of the ERG, are welcome. Dynamics of Media Politics is recommended to anyone interested in the future of the audiovisual sector in Europe.

Ann Shearer Survivors and the media
80pp. stg £7.50
SBN 0 86196 332 6 (pbk)

Andrea Millwood Hargrave Taste and Decency in Broadcasting
64 pp. stg £7.50
ISBN 0 86196 331 8 (pbk)

Early last year during a period of intense fighting in one of the republics of the former Soviet Union, an enterprising photographer found himself in the home of a young soldier killed in combat. The dead boy's body was stretched out on his bed and his family were gathered around him. Some were weeping, some were comforting: some had their hands clasped to their breasts, others covered their eyes or turned their heads away.

The photographer recorded the scene, and the results were stunning. In composition, in the expressions of grief and pain it captured, the picture was more like a Rembrandt painting than the work of even a very gifted news photographer. The Irish Times cleared six columns to use it the next morning. Management at The Independent in London waited until Sunday and used it in colour across a double page spread. Some months later, the photographer won the top award in a major international photographic competition, to no one's surprise.

But no matter how beautiful the photograph, had the subject been an Irish family in mourning The Irish Times would never have used it. If the scene had taken place somewhere in Britain, the reputable British papers would similarly have refrained from publication. (The tabloids, as we all know, are a different matter.)

The first point of reference in any discussion about the ethics of news reporting of human tragedy is location. A new junior sub-editor on a foreign desk learns in the first few weeks how to tabulate deaths as news value — a rough equation cynically expressed as '500 drowning Indians equals the same space as one Irish Christian Brother'. What happens far away is as remote as fiction and can usually be handled bluntly without offence. What happens to us ourselves, our families, close friends is so private that in most circumstances any notice from the outside world is an offensive intrusion.

What happens next or near us has an impact that can almost be measured geographically. The disaster at the football match in Hillsborough, for instance, yielded the kind of news photography that war correspondents make their reputations on, visual evidence of catastrophe as it occurs. But many Irish readers and listeners found
REVIEWS

the sight of such near neighbours suffocating before the world’s cameras objectionably painful. In Britain of course, the protests were widespread and sustained.

The fact that attitudes change with distance in space, as in time, affects any discussion on the ethics of news reporting and human sensibilities, and it is a pity, I think, that the issue was not explored in either of the pamphlets produced by the Broadcasting Standards Council in Britain. They are, nonetheless, excellent publications, providing research rather than conjecture on how the public feels about what journalists do to them and about them.

Survivors and the Media is particularly useful, I think, for anyone involved in news journalism. It is based on two studies, one a demographically representative survey of 1,050 people, the other a report drawn from intensive interviews with fifty-four survivors of tragedies. As it happens, one-fifth of the first group, who were questioned on their attitudes to coverage of disasters, had themselves survived either violence or disaster that was nationally reported, while the second group included both survivors of disasters, or parents and relatives of victims, including rape, murder and accident victims.

Their responses make harrowing reading and for that reason, strongly recommended reading not only for media students but for media workers. Precisely because so much news is about violence and tragedy, journalists develop a second and tougher working skin as a necessary defence mechanism, just as police, fire brigade and medical workers do. We all need our sensitivities re-sharpened regularly, and nothing does this so effectively as the individual human voice of suffering.

But there are also some valuable lessons in the strong general endorsement of the positive role of the media, coming as it does from people who have been in bruising personal contact with publicity. Given a range of statements to rank on a five-point scale from ‘agree strongly’ to ‘disagree strongly’, for instance, most of the respondents agreed that people sometimes need to be shocked to make them aware of the severity of events, and that people should be kept informed of things even if they cannot do anything about them.

Most also agreed that television programmes did sometimes affect how they thought about an issue, and that freedom of expression should always be allowed. They strongly disagreed with the view that ‘there is so much violence on television nowadays that nothing affects me any more’. While some did avoid programmes which were related to their own painful experience, more found themselves particularly attracted and attentive to such programmes.

There was a general consensus in these areas regardless of what experiences the survivors had been through. Similarly, asked to rank ten hypothetical television items in terms of acceptability, there was a strong consensus on the most and least acceptable items. Those most acceptable were, understandably, the least emotive and most worthy approaches possible to news shots of the scene of an incident after the bodies had been removed, or pictures of the victims being visited in hospital by members of the government or the royal family.

The least acceptable news of the hypothetical broadcasts and most vehemently condemned by the respondents were those that showed the scene of a major incident in which dead or seriously injured people were recognizable; pictures of people who had been bereaved and were in an emotional state, or close-up shots of blood-streaked areas where victims fell.

There was broad consensus, too, in the second pamphlet, reporting on a survey by the British Standards Council on attitudes toward good taste and common decency in television and radio: but I imagine most readers will find the results a predictable reflection of age, background and station-in-life, i.e. parenthood. The pamphlet is still a provocative and lively read, covering such general issues as bad language, racist or
other discriminatory terminology, and the ever-perplexing problem of what children get
to hear and see of the outside world on television and radio, and what to do about it.

The answers raise more questions: is it a good or bad thing that surprisingly few
people these days seem to regard television as an 'extremely strong' influence on the
viewing public? (Only two to fourteen per cent depending on the subject covered.)

Should the Irish be pleased, annoyed or simply puzzled to know 'Paddy' is the most
widely tolerated ethnic appellation to respondents in Britain — seventy-four per cent of
respondents found it very acceptable, compared to a sixty-nine per cent approval for
'Taffy' and a thirty per cent for 'Paki' but that 'Mick', for some reason, is considered very
acceptable to only sixty-three per cent? As a woman, should I be disturbed that the
four-letter 'C' word is considered a strong swear word by slightly fewer people than the
four-letter 'F' word? (eighty-six to eighty-seven per cent, and I do not care if it is only one
point, I am a little disturbed.)

The survey on which the pamphlet is based is the first in a three-part cycle of
research. A subsequent study looked particularly at attitudes toward violence in
television fiction, and in 1992 attitudes toward sex and sexuality will be investigated.
The results will, I suspect, confirm what is evident throughout this pamphlet, that on
the whole people recognize that, as the Council says, 'times have changed and customs
change', and so do our attitudes about what is fit and proper.

Most of us, it seems, are trying our best to accept life as it is without sacrificing what
we hope for. Your heart would have to go out to the bewildered parent who said, of
children and telly, 'You want to give them a reasonably balanced picture of the world
outside because they've got to go out and live in that world, but you don't want them to
go about it too soon'.

Joan Mulholland *The language of negotiation*
- a handbook of practical strategies for
improving communication

ISBN 0 414 06040 0 ISBN 0 415 06041 (pbk)

Henry McClave

There is a flourishing industry in the production of handbooks on communication
skills aimed at business studies students and practising business men and women.
Most of these books follow a well-trodden path and there is little to choose between
them. Typically, they contain much useful advice of the 'do's and don't's' variety, but
rarely support it with research findings. The best are written in a plain no-nonsense
style; the worst with a kind of bar-stool informality that is an insult to the reader's
intelligence.

What distinguishes Joan Mulholland's book is that it is both practical and scholarly.
Its main objective is to help professional and business people improve their negotiating
skills by attaining a heightened awareness of written and spoken language. But,
because of its academic tenor, it should also be of value to students of linguistics,
particularly those interested in the practical application of language to professional life.
Readers will find many familiar negotiating terms examined and dissected with
academic thoroughness. They will also find that the author's advice is soundly based on
current research, although this is seldom made explicit in the text.
REVIEWS

In summary, *The Language of Negotiation* has three main areas of interest. First, it is concerned with the functions of language, how it relates to history and culture, and how it is used in discourse. Second, it considers particular forms of communication such as the conversation or written report and suggests various strategies of using language effectively in these contexts. And last, it analyzes and advises on a number of key negotiating acts such as accepting, arguing, discussing, etc. Tagged on to this is a final short chapter on how to remember and record information, but this looks like something of an afterthought.

A valuable emphasis in the book is on the need to attend to the interpersonal function of language as well as its function in creating meaning. There are very good sections on the way in which we use language to establish a social bond with the hearer, establish a role for ourselves in the interaction, and set the tone of the exchange. The notion of face is explained, and the virtue of using ‘politeness strategies’ to save one’s own or the hearer’s face is stressed at several points. These various interpersonal aspects of language are shown to be particularly problematic in the case of cross-cultural communication where ideas on what is socially appropriate will differ from one region or ethnic group to another.

If I had a question to ask, it would be about the author’s choice of communication activities when she comes to consider some of the specific forms in which negotiation takes place. According to her own definition, negotiation has as its main objective the settlement of differences between parties and their subsequent agreement on a common plan of action. Given this definition, it seems difficult to justify full chapters on the media interview and the use of the telephone, — and nothing on the meeting which is preeminently the medium of negotiation for most professional and business people. A media interview will certainly contain some elements of negotiation, but its primary purpose is to elicit information from the interviewee and entertain the public. In any case, it is a form that the ordinary professional person seldom confronts. Likewise, the telephone is not a commonly used medium for negotiating; it is more suited, instead, to the communication of simple enquiries, requests and confirmations.

I suspect that managers and trade unionists who are looking for a manual clearly focused on the negotiating process may find *The Language of Negotiation* too discursive for their liking. On the other hand, readers with a more general interest in language and its practical application should enjoy the book and learn much from it. Language skills that have become dull need to be sharpened every so often, and Joan Mulholland has provided an excellent whetstone.

W. Leiss, S.Kline and S. Jhally  *Social Communication in Advertising*
ISBN 0415 903548

Jim Nolan

In the main there are two kinds of books about advertising – critical works which seem at times to lay all the world’s ills at its door or ‘how to do it’ and ‘how it works’ books which may also include a spirited justification of the role and importance of advertising. But there is a third kind – books about advertising by academics which generally baffle or intimidate those who work in advertising. They either do not recognize the business they work at or they are overwhelmed by esoteric formulae which do not seem to have much connection with the job of making and placing advertisements. This book is different – it does not fit easily into any of the three kinds. Certainly it is written by academics, three of them in fact, but it is a very interesting and useful review of advertising and with a much broader perspective than one would expect from the title.
Social Communication in Advertising is a wide-ranging book which should have a particular appeal for people in advertising since it deals with a broad canvas, covering the main areas and tracking longer term trends which those who are too close to the day-to-day advertising activity could well miss. It also deserves a welcome for its even-handed treatment of all the principal areas which it covers. Better still, this is an attractive, very readable book, mercifully free of jargon – can you imagine what a combination of academic and advertising jargon would do for communications? The difficult issues facing the business are discussed in an admirably clear and complete manner.

None of the major social issues involving advertising are shirked including the hardy-annual debates about advertising – does it influence public attitudes or is it influenced by public attitudes? – does it shape opinion or is it shaped by public opinion? – the latter being the much more likely situation. Like most ‘chicken and egg’ discussions there is no clear-cut answer but this book places its verdict in the middle. Perhaps at times individual campaigns could be said to be subject to both influencing public opinion or attitudes and being influenced by them.

Advertising is seen as a ‘privileged form of discourse’ meaning that we accord it a place of special prominence. The authors argue that as the influence of other privileged forms of discourse – church sermons, political oratory and the advice of family elders - diminishes, the influence of advertising increases. They hold that the stage has now been reached where this influence has become ‘discourse through and about objects’. The book develops this idea against the backdrop of advertising which they describe as ‘the place at which media, industry and lifestyles converge’. In dealing with this big theme the book is much more comprehensive than its title would suggest and in fact, a most useful general book on advertising. It covers fairly and fully the various criticisms of advertising and the responses to them, it goes into the origins and development of advertising agencies, how they are structured and what they do. A major portion of the book deals with a very wide and detailed analysis of advertisements by means of a painstaking methodology which appears to practitioners to be a shade pedantic.

This book is unusual being the 2nd edition (1991) of a work which first appeared in 1939 and its three authors are all associated with North American Universities. This gives it a somewhat dated American feel which is reinforced by the illustrations which include little recent material. Social Communications in Advertising is a very useful work with a well presented case for the influence of advertising which may, however, give the business more weight than it deserves. These minor comments apart this is a fine book for anyone interested in the place of advertising in society.

---

**James Lull** **Inside family viewing**

London: Routledge, 1990. 208pp stg £35.00, stg £10.99 (pbk)

---

**Rejoinder to Martin McLoone’s review in ICR Vol 1**

**Brian Torode**

According to Martin McLoone, James Lull is the victim of doctrinal error: the belief that ‘audiences are active agents in the creation of reality’ as opposed to
the fact, central to all forms of Marxism, that audiences are already socialized in such a way that they have only limited and sanctioned access to discourses which allow for resisting preferred meanings.

McLoone advocates a theoretical debate in which Lull's 'humanist formulations will be used against him'.

I sincerely hope that this will not be the response to this publication. There always is ongoing theoretical debate. Now as ever, that debate is monopolized by the small educated elite who lecture in media studies, sociology, and other esoteric professions. Lull is not a theorist and the voices he publishes are not those of academics. They have not been heard before. If McLoone gets his way they will not be heard again.

Admittedly some of these voices are strange to our ears. There is the US army officer in Germany who blames the high divorce rate among his troops on the lack of English language television: 'that means a soldier and his wife have got to talk to each other in the evenings and they suddenly discover that they really don't like each other'; the working class family who are grateful for television because it keeps the grandparents (who live three doors down the street) occupied at night; and the husband who makes up to his wife (who abandoned a medical scholarship to marry him) by picking out medical programmes on television for her even when these conflict with his favourite shows. These examples are from chapter 2. 'The Social Uses of Television' (first published 1980).

Chapters 3, 'Family Communication Patterns' (1980) and 5, 'How Families Select Television Programmes' (1982), report Lull's revival of the 'Mass Observation' research technique developed in pre-war Britain. Unlike the individual ethnographic method pioneered by the US 'Chicago school' during the same period, this involves training more than ninety observers to code behaviour in 'the same' objective categories over a period of two or three half days spent with a family, followed by an interview.

The first paper distinguishes two family styles. Socio-oriented parents are found to be heavy television viewers themselves. They use television as background noise, for companionship, to punctuate time, to regulate talk and plan activities, to illustrate experience for conversational entrance and many other purposes. They agree that television is useful to them for interpersonal objectives ranging from structuring their activities and talk patterns to uses of the medium for more complex relational purposes. Though I frankly doubt whether these parents would understand what is here attributed to them, these are recognizable as homes in which television viewing is a central and shared family activity.

By contrast concept-oriented parents show 'extreme disregard for television as a significant contributor to family communications'. They value individual expression, debate and discussion of ideas, but do use television as a means to transmit values to and regulate their children, and to facilitate arguments. Relations within these families sound more distant and activities in the home more individualized.

The 'socio's', who presumably read tabloid newspapers and are less highly educated, are relatively dependent on television, whereas the 'conceptos' are relatively independent of it, having fuller access to printed media, including books. But because they attach more importance to television, members of 'socio' homes are more argumentative when television programmes are selected than are individuals from the 'concepto' homes. Hence television programme selection is the occasion for individual expression debate and discussion in the 'socio' homes. It is frustrating that Lull has failed to follow up on this finding, in the eight years since it was published, by the recording and analysis of these family arguments about television. However this is a well-signposted research priority indicated by his work.
Gender division in programme selection is a theme throughout the book. Answers to the question ‘who is responsible for control of the main television set at home’ (chapter 5) seem at first unambiguous:

Fathers were named most often as the person who controls the selection... Children and mothers were more likely to regard fathers this way than were the fathers themselves.

But is this not just the conventional response that any mother or child knows they are expected to provide? Lull finds several indications that this is so. In one household a loud charismatic prayer ritual was employed so that ‘God can tell us what shows to watch’ From this family’s standpoint, God was the responsible party, but the questionnaire would not have permitted this answer. Told that God controls the television selection, a humanist asks what man is articulating God’s choice? Similarly, told that Father controls the selection, a feminist asks, what woman or child is articulating his choice? As Lull puts it, ‘while men may have more formal say than women in program selection, women may exercise greater actual influence’.

Chapter 7 challenges theorizing by David Morley to the effect that the home is a ‘site of leisure’ for men, within which they plan viewing carefully and watch attentively, whereas it is a ‘site of work’ for women in which their television viewing is ‘distracted’ by domestic duties. Lull finds that:

When fathers arrive home ... there is a characteristic shifting of the attention of children ... away from their mother to their father. Fathers ... often assume greater emotional responsibility for the children at night, and this role ... continues into evening television viewing. ... My point is that men are also working while they watch television.

Cross-cultural research is cited throughout the book, and has clear conclusions concerning gender division, namely that ‘differences in programme preferences held by men and women all over the world follow a predictable pattern’, independent of political-economic system or broadcasting policy.

Men everywhere prefer sports, action-oriented programmes and information programming (especially news) while women prefer dramas (including serials, soap operas, and films) and music/dance/comedy-based programmes.

Accordingly gender-divided viewing patterns can be read off directly from the published television schedules. Most strikingly in Venezuela, where women manage family activity in the half of all homes in which they are single parents, and in many two-parent homes as well, television viewing has a feminine quality, dominated by telenovelas at prime-time. These programmes are not machismo, so men do not watch.

Chapter 6 is methodologically distinct from the rest of the book. It presents New Star a twelve-part 1986 political soap opera, the first product of a new local television station which was later networked throughout China. This shows the rise of a young reformer (Li) his challenge to the old bureaucrat (Gu), and his personal defeat: he is transferred, but his ideas live on. Li’s involvement with two women, one more traditional, the other more liberated is a feature of the story. So is collusion among the older generation (Gu gains support from Li’s father). Incompetence and a system of guanxi (you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours) are shown to be endemic.

The audience response (‘New Star fever’) was studied by a Chinese sociologist (Zhou Yong-ping) as well as by Lull. More than ninety per cent of viewers liked the show, but many found the conflict ‘exaggerated’. They denied that problems could be solved as rapidly as Li did, and denied that he would last even as long as two months in real life.
Many claimed that guanxi was unavoidable, as shown by the fact that Li gained his post then lost it again due to the influence of his own father.

Despite all this Li became ‘China’s first television hero’ symbolic of ‘absolute fairness’, and as such a re-living of the famous Judge Bao of several centuries before. Gu became a media villain, combining all the bad qualities both of Chinese tradition and of the Communist party. As such, Gu was more real than Li: ‘in the real world we seldom see a person like Li, but we see many people like Gu’. A critique of the drama is then that it personalizes social change.

This paper, part of a forthcoming book on Chinese television, now requires a postscript on the aftermath of the 1990 Tiananmen Square massacre, in which young reformers seem to have been decisively defeated by the old guard.

Lull’s collection of papers is incomplete and sketchy in some respects, over-ambitious in others. But it is always enquiring and lively, and it marks a clear trajectory over ten years of research, away from global generalizations and typologies and towards precise attention-to-detail in studies of the daily lives of viewers of television, which it treats as a resource put to practical use in their hands. Marx himself informed us that ‘social life is essential practical’. I hope that Lull’s work will inspire more work of this practical character, and less theorizing, in communication research.