TELEVISION STUDIES – OCW UC3M

Topic I. Television, Culture and Society

Outline:

The first topic traces the origins and development of the first theories and representations of television. This topic's main idea is that the negative perceptions about television are responsible for the limited development of academic research about the medium, and have, until recently, determined the result of a significant part of the theoretical thinking. To do this, in the first part we will discuss how the historical, intellectual, ideological and commercial contexts in the post-Second World War II era contributed to the development of these negative perceptions. In the second part, we will use the works of the Frankfurt School and its critique of mass society, and the first relevant communication theories, which focused on effects. In the third part, we will link television to contemporary social history, and discuss how many negative representations of television can only be understood within a broader distrust and fear of the developing communication technologies.

In the fourth and final part we will talk about how during the 60s we could find the first legitimizing approaches to television as part of a new appreciation of public service, and the possible use of television for social reform. The theoretical elements of this topic will be supported with screenings of negative portrayals of television by newspaper cartoons, cinema and television itself from the 40s to the present. The theoretical elements of the topic are supported by the screening of film and television clips depicting television in a negative light. In this topic there are three compulsory readings from different periods that cover the origin and extent of these negative visions about television.

Specific objetives of the topic:

- Knowledge of the historical, technological and cultural conditions necessary for understanding the development of television.

- Understanding of the function of social institutions, such as popular press and academia, in shaping contemporary critical analysis.

- Knowledge of the social function played by television and its relevance to understanding contemporary cultural change.

- Ability to conduct assessments of own and others' ideas in relation to television experiences.

Detailed content:

- Historical, intellectual, academic and ideological contexts of influence on television.

- Economic background on the emergence of television.

- The contemporary echoes of the Frankfurt School: Pierre Bourdieu.

- The concept of public interest: Newton Minow.

Introductory notes:

Television was introduced during the interwar period and was publicized through a variety of experimental broadcasts throughout the 30s, with the purpose of making the medium known to the public in the early 40s, as demonstrated by the important role played by television in the New York World's Fair of 1939. However, the outbreak of World War II in 1939 and the participation of the United States after the bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1940, relented the commercial development of the medium. Nevertheless, technological advances did not stop, since the research continued under the umbrella of military programs, to great results. However, when Western societies began to return to normalcy after the end of the conflict, much of Europe was destroyed. In the continent, this significantly delayed the development of what would become a key issue for the birth of consumer society. Meanwhile, utopias about a bright future of peace and prosperity made possible by communication technologies were displaced by fear and mistrust, resulting from the use of propaganda in the years before the outbreak of the War in Nazi Germany and other totalitarian regimes. The same happened, albeit with different intentions, in countries with democratic governments. This is the context in which the theories of the Frankfurt School gained importance. They were a group of German philosophers and sociologists who developed

their first works at the Institute for Social Research before they went into exile to the US after the rise of Nazism. There, they continued their work at prestigious universities and research centers. Critical Theory, a term coined by Max Horkheimer, was based on critical-dialectical and historical analysis of social and cultural conditions of contemporary society and the changes that had occurred since the development of classical Marxist theory. Theorists such as Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno were marked by the use of Nazi propaganda and the omnipresence of popular culture in their adopted country and, consequently, they identified the mass media (print, film, popular literature, comics and radio) as a damaging entertainment used by large corporations and the political elite to reproduce the structure of power and the supremacy of the capital.

The end of the Second World War brought deep social and cultural changes in the U.S. The middle classes began to leave the city centers to live in the suburbs. The nuclear family displaced the extended family, and terms such as isolation and dehumanization began to be used to define daily life. Industrialization and urbanization gave rise to increasing tensions of class struggle and, in a second phase, ethnic tensions. Some theorists started to appreciate how individuals with isolated lives were helpless against the influence of mass communication and were susceptible to the manipulation and mechanisms of control of a centralized power. In this context, Harold Lasswell published in 1948 his seminal work "Who (says) What (to) Whom (in) What Channel (with) What Effect". Lasswell's paradigm is an example of how early communication theories were based on the so-called strong effects and defined the communication process as an act of influence. Other theories from this period, such as the "hypodermic needle theory" (a term coined by Lasswell) or "the magic bullet", suggested that mass media can directly and uniformly influence broader groups of people by "injecting" or "shooting" appropriate messages which are designed to obtain a desired response. Both images suggest that this was an aggressive act in which the receiver was powerless. The remarkable influence achieved by the behaviorist theories invites us to establish a direct link between the two positions.

There are two main reasons why, although they were questioned from the beginning, these theories had a strong impact. Firstly, we can remark the fast popularization of radio and television, which provoked defensive reactions to the possibility of their becoming an alternative system to the traditional procedures of social control. In this regard, the potential danger of the mass media was exemplified by the scandal produced after the radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Welles, by Orson Welles' theater company. The radio play was presented as a news bulletin and this caused confusion in some listeners, and a subsequent panic. Secondly, we can look at the emergence of the so-called persuasion industries, such as political propaganda and advertising. Research on public opinion began to be essential to sell products in the consumer society, and politicians and their ideas to voters. It was within the framework of an investigation that sought to demonstrate with empirical data the direct influence of electoral propaganda on voters, when Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet found that informal personal contact was cited by respondents as an item which was more decisive in shaping voting behavior. The publication of *The People's Choice* in 1944 was fundamental to the first reconfiguration of the communication model. Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz developed in *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications* (1955) the two-step flow of the communication model, which presents a first phase in which different individuals configured as opinion leaders receive information from mass media, and a second phase in which these opinion leaders, through direct contact, define the attitudes of other group members.

This was a first challenge to the hegemony of the issuer in the communication process, but also the first look at the receiver. This was the path that Elihu Katz followed to analyze the use of media by audiences, based on their interests and social and psychological characteristics. In the seminal article "On the Use of the Mass Media for Important Things", published in 1973 in the journal *American Sociological Review*, Elihu Katz, Michael Gurevitch and Hadassah Haas developed the basic elements of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. They suggested that the media should be considered as an instrument for the gratification of the social and psychological needs of the audience. Thus, the mass media are tools through which individuals connect or disconnect from

others, so that receivers adapt them to their interest rather than being dominated by them. The viewing public acts proactively when choosing and selecting content which meets his/her needs. These needs were defined as follows:

- Cognitive Needs: Acquiring information, knowledge and understanding.
- Affective Needs: Emotion, pleasure, feelings.
- Personal Integrative Needs: Credibility, stability, status.
- Social Integrative Needs: Family and friends.
- Tension Release Needs: Escape and diversion.

In 1974 Elihu Katz and his collaborator Jay G. Blumler edited "The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research", the third volume of the outstanding "SAGE Series in Communication Research" and the first to focus on a specific methodological approach. This volume compiled contributions from international researchers in the Uses and Gratifications field, and several of the fourteen papers had television as their object of study. The topics were diverse and included the television coverage of the assassination of President Kennedy, British children's programming, the 1972 American presidential campaign and the use of the television content by male audience.

Criticism towards television went as far as to advocate for its complete elimination. This is the central thesis of one of the most famous books on television, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1978) by Jerry Mander. The author, a former advertising executive turned-essayist, articulates the book around these four arguments:

- While television may seem useful, interesting, and worthwhile, at the same time it further boxes people into a physical and mental condition appropriate for the emergence of autocratic control.

- It is inevitable that the present powers-that-be (or controllers) use and favor the expansion of television so that no other controllers are permitted.

- Television affects individual human bodies and minds in a manner which fits the purposes of the people who control the medium.

- Television has no democratic potential. The technology itself places absolute limits on what may pass through it. The medium, in effect, chooses its own content from a very narrow field of possibilities. The effect is to drastically confine all human understanding within a rigid channel.

Against this negative view (also present in publications such as *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* [1985] by Neil Postman), other authors have established that television is only a technological evolution of the concept of cultural forum, and that television has a prominent social and cultural function. In their text "TV as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research" (1983), Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch established this idea: "In contributing to this process, particularly in American society, where its role is central, television fulfills what Fiske and Hartley refer to as the "bardic function" of contemporary societies. In its role as central cultural medium it presents a multiplicity of meanings rather than a monolithic dominant point of view. It often focuses on our most prevalent concerns, our deepest dilemmas. Our most traditional views, those that are the most repressive and reactionary, as well as those which are subversive and emancipatory, are upheld, examined, maintained and transformed. The emphasis is on process rather than product, on discussion rather than indoctrination, on contradiction and confusion rather than coherence. It is with this view that we turn to an analysis of the texts of television that demonstrates and supports the conception of television as a cultural forum". Contrary to Jerry Mander's notions of control and unity, Newcomb and Hirsch argue that television is a heterogeneous medium where many visions, representations and values, sometimes contradictory, are possible, and that the essence of television is no other than being a mirror of society.