

## **TELEVISION STUDIES – OCW UC3M**

### **Topic III. Technology and the History of Television**

#### **Outline:**

This topic addresses the development of television technology in the area of technological change. In the first part, we will cover the birth and development of communication technologies throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, such as the popular press, the telegraph, the radio, the telephone, and eventually the cinema and television, and their importance to the emergence of capitalism and consumer society. The way in which the international presentation of television technology took place in World's Fairs will be relevant to understand this process in its final phase. A second part will address the importance of linking the origins of television to the concept of State and the role that governments exercised in interwar and postwar periods. We will discuss how this was crucial to the development of a public monopoly model in Europe and a commercial system with a limited number of operators in the United States. Raymond Williams' theoretical work will be particularly relevant for this topic, including his study of the cultural analysis of technology and its seminal concept of "television flow." The compulsory reading deals with the introduction of the technology of television in the context of the World's Fairs during the interwar period.

#### **Specific objectives of the topic:**

- Knowledge of the social function played by television and its relevance to understanding contemporary cultural change.
- Knowledge of the historical, technological and cultural conditions necessary for understanding the development of television.
- Knowledge of key television texts in the development of international television, from the origins of the medium to the present.
- Knowledge of the institutional factors that determine the creation and reception of television texts.

**Detailed content:**

- Technology and society: technological determinism and symptomatic technology.
- The communication technologies.
- The arrival of television and the development of international TV systems.

**Introductory notes:**

The author who made more definitive contributions to the development of Television Studies relating to technology was Raymond Williams, distinguished professor of British Literature and Political Science and sometimes television reviewer. A research stay at Stanford University gave him a continued access to U.S. television that was critical to develop a more complex approach to the medium. In his book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974), one of the foundational texts of Television Studies, Williams argues that the technology of television emerges as a response to new economic, social and political needs, and that these are based in order, power and communication. The concept of "mobile privatization", the chance to approach the outside world from the comfort of home, presents broadcasting as a social product. Williams also uses the concept of "flow" as one of the defining characteristics of the television, a medium based on continuity, repetition and juxtaposition. At the end of the book, Williams, who died in 1988, proposes the development of alternative technologies and their potential impact on institutions, policies and uses of television.

In the introductory chapter, Williams discusses the relationship between television technology and society (p. 3-6):

(i) Television was invented as a result of scientific and technical research. Its power as a medium of social communication was then so great that it altered many of our institutions and forms of social relationships.

(v) Television, discovered as a possibility by scientific and technical research, was selected for investment and development to meet the needs of a new kind

of society, especially in the provision of centralised entertainment and in the centralised formation of opinions and styles of behaviour.

The first class of opinion, described above, is that usually known, at least to its opponents, as technological determinism. It is an immensely powerful and now largely orthodox view of the nature of social change. New technologies are discovered, by an essentially internal process of research and development, which then sets the conditions for social change and progress.

The second class of opinion appears less determinist. Television, like any other technology, becomes available as an element or a medium in a process of change that is in any case occurring or about to occur. By contrast with pure technological determinism, this view emphasises other causal factors in social change. It then considers particular technologies, or a complex of technologies, as symptoms of change of some other kind.

In technological determinism, research and development have been assumed as self-generating. The new technologies are invented as it were in an independent sphere, and then create new societies or new human conditions. The view of symptomatic technology, similarly, assumes that research and development are self-generating, but in a more marginal way. What is discovered in the margin is then taken up and used.”

This process of change has also been studied from a more contemporary perspective. Robert C. Allen (in Robert C. Allen, *The Television Studies Reader*, Routledge, New York, 2004, p. 12) defines the characteristics that came to define the medium of television at an early stage:

- Production and distribution of television programming was in the hands of entities other than the viewer (production companies, broadcasting stations, networks, government agencies).
- The relative scarcity of channels and programming, and hence of viewing options, was limited to and determined by the simultaneous over-air

transmission of programming from a originating site to geographically dispersed individual TV sets.

- In some countries (the U.S. in particular) television assumed the dominance of advertiser-driven, commercial entertainment broadcasting. Each network sought the largest possible fraction of the viewing audience at any given time. Unavoidable commercial messages structured the viewing experience.
- In other countries, television meant either a national, public service broadcasting system or a competing and limited public service and regulated commercial broadcast services. Each one was expected to provide a wide array of programming of appeal to a relatively wide spectrum of tastes and interests.
- Experientially, television was understood to be a private (as opposed to public) and hence a domestic medium.
- Television's normative viewing situation was assumed to be a single television set in the household watched by all members of the family.

However, after the introduction of new technologies such as cable, satellite, VCR, DVD and Internet, television and its relationship with the audience has changed radically, offering new features. These are defined by Allen as follows (p. 16):

- Multiple channels in increasing number.
- Multiple transmission systems (radio waves, cable, satellite).
- Multiple simultaneous viewing options, negotiated through the remote control.
- Recording of broadcast programs for later use.
- Viewing of prerecorded material through the TV.
- Programming oriented to niche and specific audiences.
- Increased availability of imported programming.

- Multiple business models: advertising, subscription, pay per view, sale or rental of prerecorded material, public funding, paid programming (shopping channels).
- Multiple TV sets at home.
- Use of the TV set to play video games.
- Production home-made videos with video cameras.
- Streaming of videos via broadband Internet connections.
- Watching TV regularly outside the home (bars, dorms...).
- Use of public surveillance video.
- Constant, rapid, and unpredictable technological, institutional, and economic change.