

AN INTRODUCTION TO TELEVISION STUDIES **3RD EDITION**

JONATHAN BIGNELL

An Introduction to Television Studies

In this comprehensive textbook, now updated for its third edition, Jonathan Bignell provides students with a framework for understanding the key concepts and main approaches to Television Studies, including audience research, television history and broadcasting policy, and the analytical study of individual programmes.

Features include:

- a glossary of key terms
- key terms defined in margins
- suggestions for further reading
- activities for use in class or as assignments.

New and updated case studies include:

- 'Every Home Needs a Harvey' ad
- approaches to news reporting
- television scheduling
- *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*
- animated cartoon series.

Individual chapters address: studying television, television histories, television cultures, television texts and narratives, television genres and formats, television production, television and quality, television realities, television you can't see, television audiences, beyond television.

This book is accompanied by a companion website featuring activities and case studies, flashcards, a glossary of key terms and links to useful websites, available at www.routledge.com/bignell.

Jonathan Bignell is Professor of Television and Film at the University of Reading, UK. He is the author of *Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays*, *Media Semiotics: An Introduction*, *Big Brother: Reality TV in the Twenty-first Century* and *Postmodern Media Culture*, and co-author of *The Television Handbook, 2nd edition*. He is the editor of *Writing and Cinema*, and joint editor of *Popular Television Drama* and *British Television Drama: Past, Present and Future*.

‘At a time when the question of what constitutes “television” is being ever more keenly debated and as the medium continues to be reimagined, I can think of no other book to so adroitly meet the needs of students new to Television Studies. Engaging, accessible, and with a diverse series of activities and case studies that capture both the history and dynamism of this subject, Bignell’s invaluable new edition provides a comprehensive entry into the most significant debates in the field.’
Dr Deborah Jermyn, *Reader in Film and Television, Roehampton University*

‘In covering key areas of Television Studies, ranging across history, aesthetics, genre, production and reception, this book remains a key touchstone for students entering and studying the field. Accessibly written and well-illustrated with the addition of up-to-date examples, Bignell manages to span the core concepts and concerns of the discipline in an engaging and stimulating manner. At a time when the very idea of ‘television’ as an object of study is undergoing significant shifts, *An Introduction to Television Studies* succeeds in taking us on a journey which maps out longstanding aspects of television (and Television Studies), whilst embracing the “new” context of television’s dispersed screens and digital culture.’
Su Holmes, *Reader in Television Studies, University of East Anglia*

An Introduction to Television Studies

Third edition

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Introduction



Using this book

This book is an introduction to Television Studies, aimed especially at those who are new to the study of the medium at college and university level. It describes some of the critical approaches to television that have become widely accepted in the subject. It also explains and makes use of key concepts in Television Studies that every student needs to know about. The book re-evaluates the terms and ideas that have been significant in studying television, and tests out their limits, drawing attention to the strengths and weaknesses in the ways that television has been studied up to now. So the book draws together a collection of concepts and critical languages that are sometimes quite diverse, or even contradictory, and suggests how there are some ways of thinking about television that are more fruitful than others. Television Studies is a recent, dynamic and rapidly changing field of work, as the next section explains. This makes the task of the student of television an open-ended and exciting one, and the book also aims to convey some of this energy and diversity in its organisation and layout.

This book outlines significant strands of critical work in the field, and provides worked-through case study examples of how critical approaches can be applied to actual problems, programmes and issues. It encourages active learning by including many activities that can form the basis of classroom discussion or written assignments.

The book is organised into chapters that are suitable for use as preparatory reading for class study, or as follow-up reading to support classroom debate. Significant terms are highlighted in **bold** in the text when they are doing important work in the discussion. A definition of the highlighted term appears in the margin next to its first appearance in a chapter, and these definitions can also be found in alphabetical order in the glossary of key terms at the end of the book. The terms I have highlighted in this way are those that seem to require a specific definition. Some of them are part of the critical terminology of the academic discipline of Television Studies or one of the areas of research that has fed into the field. Some of them are terms used in the television industry in Britain or the USA to describe an aspect of how television technology works, or how programme-making and broadcasting are carried out. Some terms are more widely known and are part of non-professional language, but seem to me to need a precise definition so that they can be understood and used accurately by readers and students of television. Readers of this book will already know some terms, will have heard but not understood others, and will be introduced to some completely new vocabulary that I hope will enrich their capacity to talk and write about television.

Each chapter ends with a short list of suggested further reading. The books, essays and articles chosen are often those I have quoted from, but there are also some other books listed that deal with the topics covered in the chapter. Some of the sources

2 INTRODUCTION

are available only online, and in those cases the URL (the internet address) of the source is provided. I have created my own online materials to support this book, where extra material can be read, some of it from earlier editions of this book. There is great insight to be gained from noting how other voices have expressed ideas that I have written about here, and especially so if another writer has an alternative or even opposed attitude to a subject. Like any academic subject, Television Studies is diverse and evolving, and there are strongly held and articulately presented points of view within it that differ greatly in aims, assumptions, emphases and conclusions. Approaches to Television Studies are not a set of tools, but more like a group of different languages. They do not translate neatly one into another, and each defines its world in rather different ways. This book is concerned with the most commonly studied theoretical issues in television courses. The major differences between courses of study are in their focus on one or two of the following areas:

- analytical study of television programmes as texts
- the television industry as an institution and its production practices and organisation
- television in contemporary culture and the sociological study of audiences
- television history and developments in broadcasting policy.

This book provides introductory explanation, evaluation and routes for further study in each of these areas. I aim to show why these approaches have a significant role in Television Studies, to encourage students to participate in debates within and between these approaches, and to gain an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of particular theoretical models for studying television.

In each chapter the reader will discover references to work by others who have contributed to Television Studies, and these references can be followed up in the Select Bibliography at the end of the book. Indeed, the Select Bibliography can itself be a useful tool for looking at the range of the subject, and exploring sources for independent work. In a single volume it is impossible for me to note all of the significant ideas in the sources I have used, and readers have many opportunities to build on the brief discussions of existing research that I have included here by reading the source texts that I have cited. Indeed, the many directions that such further work can take indicate the comparative newness and potential of Television Studies, and I hope that readers of this book will be encouraged to make their own contributions to the subject by identifying the gaps, new directions and even contradictions opened up in these pages.

Television Studies

Television Studies has tried to define how the medium communicates, and this has involved distinguishing between television communication and the media of cinema or radio, for example. But it has used methodologies for describing and analysing television texts that come from disciplines including Film Studies, methods of discussing audiences and television institutions that come from sociology, and ways of describing the development of television that amount to different histories of the medium. Charlotte Brunsdon (1998b: 96) has summarised this by explaining that:

much of the literature of television studies could be characterised as attempting to formulate accounts of the specificity of television, often using comparison with, on the one hand, radio (broadcast, liveness, civic address), and on the other, cinema (moving pictures, fantasy), with particular attention . . . to debate about the nature of the television text and the television audience.

Because television includes so many different programmes, channels and ways of addressing its audiences even at one point in time in a single geographical region, it has proved very difficult for critics and commentators to produce useful general insights into the medium. This is even more the case once the history of the medium and its regional variations across countries and regions of the world are considered.

Early predictions (in the 1930s, for instance) of what television would be emphasised its liveness, its ability to present to a mass audience images of what was happening in the real world. Commentators remarked on television's inability to compete with cinema as entertainment and therefore expected the medium to focus on information and actuality. These early thoughts conditioned the ways in which realism, connection to the contemporary and uneasiness about bringing controversial visions into the home were played out. The connection of television technology to immediacy (television as a means of relaying something that would have happened anyway) predisposes it to linear real-time progress, and the claim to report the real world. Film has been theorised in terms of space (what can be seen on the space of the screen), and this has led to theories about how individual film spectators identify with the usually fictional characters and points of view offered for spectators to see. Some of these ways of thinking from studying film have been deployed in Television Studies to explain how viewers make sense of the television medium. On the other hand, television has also been theorised in terms of time. Television consists of a flow of audio-visual material that, although divided up into programmes, runs on across a period of time without empty gaps in between. Brunsdon has noted that:

Television is, for the most part, made as programmes or runs of programmes: series, serials and mini-series. However this is not necessarily how television is watched . . . It is precisely this possible 'drifting' through an evening's viewing that has come to seem . . . one of the unique features of television watching.

(1998b: 105–6)

Rather than anticipating and wishing for the end of an individual film narrative, the television viewer is usually drawn into and out of a flow of material that does not come to a decisive end.

The experience of watching television occurs in a dimension of time where little end-points (like the ends of programmes) keep occurring, but where viewers are always aware that something new is about to take the place of what they have just been watching. Television Studies has tried to address this situation by looking not only at individual programmes but also at the ways they link together. These links might be in terms of the similarities of one programme with another, where shared features of a genre tell us something about the persistence of some kinds of storytelling, sets of issues or ideas being explored or the conventions to which the makers of programmes adhere. The links might also be in the planning and

organisation of a period of viewing, for example an evening's television schedule on a certain channel. Planning a schedule to include variety, yet also a continuity of interest that can keep a viewer tuned to a single channel, can tell us a lot about how an idea of the viewing audience and its interests drives the organisation of television and assumptions about how television is used and enjoyed. The links between programmes in a schedule are the responsibility of the institutions that broadcast them, and looking at how television institutions work has been important to Television Studies' understanding of the medium's role as an industrial product, made and organised in different ways in different parts of the world.

Even though television programmes and formats are distributed globally, its local forms are different. This can be seen immediately in the difference between commercial television in the USA and the British tradition, which has a strong civic, 'public service' character. In Britain there has always been a tension between taking television's responsibility to society seriously and regarding television as entertainment for a consumer. So although television has been regarded as the medium most appropriate to the way we live now in Western societies, it is not the same everywhere across the world; nor does it lack a history that has shaped its present form in each society. The contexts that the organisation of television in particular places offers to Television Studies are important because they draw attention to the fact that television does not have to take the form that it does in the places with which we might be familiar. There is no necessity about the fact that in Britain, for example, there are television channels funded by advertising and sponsorship, and others funded by a licence fee that is in effect a tax on the ownership of television sets.

The ways in which television connects with the character of the society where it is watched raise the issue of the social significance of what television represents. The questions of what is represented, in what ways and with what possible effects have been considered in Television Studies with particular attention to the representation of groups who are relatively lacking in social power. This kind of study can illuminate the active contribution of television to the ways that viewers understand and experience their social environments, as well as how television reflects that environment to them. As well as looking at what can be seen and heard in the medium of television, how it is organised in different parts of the world and its relationship with the ways of thinking and experiencing the world in social contexts, Television Studies pays attention to the audiences of television and how they interact with the medium. This involves noting which programmes and kinds of programme are watched the most, using information that television institutions themselves collect in statistical form. But it also involves undertaking independent studies where groups of viewers are asked by Television Studies researchers about their attitudes to what they watch, and how their television viewing fits into their life experience and their sense of who they are. Research on audiences attempts to engage with how viewers make sense of television, and how it is important (or perhaps unimportant) to them. In this way Television Studies aims to break down the boundaries between the academic agendas that it has developed for specialised work on the medium and the place of watching television in the lives of non-specialist viewers for whom television can function in a range of ways among other routines and everyday experiences.

The first edition of this book was published in 2004 and the second edition in 2008. The new relationships between television and other electronic media are the

most significant change that has occurred in British television in the interval preceding the completion of this new third edition of the book in 2012. All television broadcasting to home viewers is now done by means of digital signals received by a **set-top box**. Many viewers watch television programmes on computer screens as well as on home television sets, accessing programmes to watch them live at the time of their first broadcast or accessing previously broadcast programmes on catch-up services like the BBC's iPlayer. Programmes and television channels have accompanying websites, and some of them also offer social networking and other internet-based services. Television can be watched on mobile phones and portable computers. So the relationship of television to other media technologies is now much closer than ever before, and television is increasingly part of a convergence culture. Television can be accessed over the internet in a wide range of places (on a train, or in a café, as well as inside the home), and programmes are available for a longer period (for a week after broadcast in the case of iPlayer) rather than being broadcast at a set time. These changes to the production, distribution and reception of television are the reason for many of the changes to the content of the new edition of this book.

set-top box the electronic decoding equipment connected to home television sets that allows access to digital television signals.

The organisation of chapters

Studying Television

The first chapter sketches out the topics of study and critical approaches which can be found in academic Television Studies, noting its significant emphases and exclusions. Television Studies in Britain and the USA, for example, is dominated by work on television in the English-speaking world. One dominant strand is the detailed textual analysis of programmes, with a preference for popular programmes in serial and series form, concentrating on drama, documentary and news programmes. This derives from the tradition in academic work of studying content and form in detail. It also reflects the dominance of English-language programmes in the world television market. There are other kinds of television to mention, however, which stimulate thinking about what television can include: trailers, commercials and channel idents, for instance. As mentioned, television can now be viewed on computer screens, and is viewed in a different position and often in a different room from the traditional household television set. This chapter considers different understandings of what television is, and how Television Studies approaches are based on assumptions about the television text, the form of its transmission and who is watching where and when. The chapter includes a case study comparing and contrasting representations of television viewing in the 1950s and the 2000s, showing how the medium has been thought about in different ways at different times.

Television Histories

Chapter 2 describes and analyses the different approaches to the evolution of television from the 1930s to the 1990s in Britain, comparing and contrasting these with historical approaches to television in other countries, especially the USA. This

involves discussion of state regulation of television, the increasing proliferation of channels and the introduction of cable and satellite broadcasting systems, competition and commerce. Part of the different historical shape of television around the world comes from distinct and different understandings of the television audience, perceived as a market of consumers or as a public whose needs television should serve. The chapter aims to introduce the subject of television history, with regard to the changing social place of television in society, changes in television institutions and changing conceptions of the television audience and the nature of television viewing. The range of approaches to television history in the chapter provides different selections of landmark developments and landmark programmes, for example according to whether the focus is on technology, institutions or audience issues. The chapter explains a range of historical approaches, in order to show how television history can be written in many different ways. The case study at the end of the chapter explores one aspect of television's likely future, as new technologies allow viewers to compose their own viewing schedules and selections of programmes from huge databases from which viewers can download their choices, or have their personal video recorders make choices for them.

Television Cultures

Chapter 3 looks at the competing ways of analysing television institutions, and the significance of national and international cultures of television broadcasting. It explains and discusses patterns of commercial and public service broadcasting, and debates about whether television contributes to media imperialism. This leads to a discussion of television globalisation, comparing and contrasting ways of thinking about television as a market and an industry with political implications. Television in the developed world is still largely organised on national lines, but the increasing significance of international flows from West to East and North to South has been hotly debated. The chapter refers to inequalities in production funding and the role of imported programming in national television cultures. The focus of the chapter is on theories arguing that television institutions both embody and transmit ideologies because of their ownership, and their relationships with national broadcasting cultures. The chapter finishes with a case study on the ways in which talent shows and reality TV formats have been adopted outside the UK, and how they can be understood in the context of debates about the politics of global television.

Television Texts and Narratives

Chapter 4 evaluates the theoretical approaches that have considered television programmes as 'texts' that can be studied in close detail to reveal how their meanings are made. The techniques for undertaking this kind of close analysis, deriving from the methodologies of semiotics, are explained. This includes methodologies for analysing narrative, the relationships between programmes across a period of television viewing, and ways of thinking about the relations between image and sound. While this way of working can be very powerful, the chapter also considers

what it leaves out, such as television's institutional context and history, and the relationships between actual viewers and programmes. The question of who or what is the maker of television's meanings, in other words the question of authorship, is also considered in the chapter, and it explores different genres of television and how they can be studied. The case study in this chapter takes a single television commercial and conducts a close analysis of its images and sounds, showing how textual and narrative approaches to television can be used in practice.

Television Genres and Formats

Chapter 5 focuses on the significance of genre in television, showing how genres are relatively stable, but also how genres mix and change over time. It addresses the distinctions made by academics and broadcasting companies between, for example, fact and fiction, drama and documentary, series and serial. The chapter explains theories of genre, and tests them out in relation to a range of programmes, some of which have mixed or uncertain genre. The effects of the flow of television viewing for audiences, and channel hopping, are introduced since understandings of genre depend not only on how programmes themselves work but also on how they are watched. The chapter explains the concept of a television programme format, suggesting that formats display much less variability than genres. The case study at the end of the chapter looks at American animated series, analysing how they draw from a range of television genres and combine them in interesting ways to address different audiences.

Television Production

Chapter 6 discusses the production practices and technologies that are used in bringing programmes to the screen, including the pitching, production planning, production scheduling, shooting and post-production of programmes. It gives an account of the professional culture of television production in different kinds of broadcasting environments and in different genres and forms of programme. The chapter aims to provide a critical understanding of the television industry as a profession. This includes such issues as the conventions of lighting, camerawork and editing, and the significance of sound, music and graphics. Attention is paid to developments in technology such as digital editing by means of computer software programmes, and the different kinds of equipment used in programme-making. The chapter discusses the institutional organisation and technology of television, and encourages readers to gain an understanding of the production process. The chapter includes a case study of the Avid editing system, noting how the design and operation of the system carries assumptions about the role of the programme-maker, and discussing the opportunities and constraints which the system allows or imposes.

Television and Quality

Chapter 7 discusses the social and cultural frameworks that enable some kinds of television to carry value, and for some programmes or kinds of television to be labelled as ‘quality TV’. Deciding on what counts as quality TV has a relationship with genre, since it works as a way of separating ‘good’ television from everything else. Attaching the label ‘quality’ involves assigning cultural importance to programmes or kinds of television that have acquired a valued position in culture, rather like theatre’s distinctions between serious theatre and musicals or pantomime. The debates about what constitutes quality TV are also ways of engaging with the common criticism in the press, and sometimes in the television industry itself, that some television is unimportant and lacking in artistic value. The chapter explains how understandings of quality may be different in the different contexts of the television industry, in academic studies, or in the reactions of audiences. Quality can mean different things, depending on what is being discussed and by whom. The majority of programmes discussed in the chapter are American drama programmes, since recent discussions of quality have claimed that US television has overtaken British programmes in achieving quality. The chapter’s case study addresses *The Wire*, an American series that exemplifies this argument.

Television Realities

Chapter 8 focuses on the ways that questions of realism can be addressed in Television Studies. This includes looking at what realism might mean in different programme genres, and the conventions used in various kinds of documentary and factual programmes. Television has a strong tradition of showing its viewers images of reality, using live footage and actuality in such diverse forms as news, documentary, docusoap and reality TV. The chapter debates the different understandings of reality and realism in television, and how kinds of realism are achieved. This chapter also looks at how television criticism has dealt with the representation of certain groups in society. The chapter outlines the different methods adopted in Television Studies for approaching these issues, including content analysis, and debates over fair and accurate representations of different groups of people. In this context television has participated in setting up and also changing the cultural norms that underlie how members of society think about themselves and about people who seem different to them. As well as dealing with television forms that are centred on representations of reality, the chapter considers the realist conventions in fictional programmes, and the crossovers between documentary modes and other television forms. The chapter ends with a case study on dramatisations of real events in drama-documentary, also known as docudrama.

Television You Can’t See

Chapter 9 is about television regulation, with particular attention paid to broadcasters’ assumptions about the audience and what viewers should not see or would like not to see on television. This includes an account of the main principles of

broadcasting regulation in Britain and the role of Ofcom, the official body that deals with this. The chapter discusses the assumptions about the protection of vulnerable groups (such as children) that are embedded in broadcasting regulations. A significant aspect of the issue of what can and cannot be shown is the way that television institutions and programme-makers censor themselves, and why and how they do this. The chapter also explains the regulation of programme content at moments of political and military tension, and the effect of a perception by broadcasters of public concern. The chapter ends with a case study on television coverage of war and conflict in the Middle East, where, as this edition was completed in 2012, coverage included showing video shot by unofficial observers and participants in political protests. When television institutions were unable to get access to events themselves, they made use of amateur footage of events that otherwise viewers would be unable to see.

Television Audiences

Chapter 10 analyses the methods of understanding audiences, and of seeking to control their television viewing behaviour, which are used by television institutions. The methods used by British and US broadcasters to gather information about television viewers are explained in the context of a discussion of the underlying assumptions about viewers and the television medium that accompany them. The chapter introduces the different industry and academic approaches to audiences, and their implications. The identification of niche audiences in today's multichannel environment, and the ever-increasing drive for reliable information in order to predict audience behaviour, have led to a greater interest by broadcasters in fragmented, specific viewing groups and viewing practices. This mirrors the emphasis in academic audience research on highly specific studies of audience behaviour and people's responses to television. The chapter addresses issues connected with the activity or 'agency' of viewers, the role of academic television audience researchers and the ways that audiences make and resist the meanings of television programmes. The discussion of understandings of audience is placed in the context of how broadcasters try to attract and hold audiences, especially through the ways they schedule programmes. The chapter concludes with a case study on television scheduling which develops these issues in more specific detail.

Beyond Television

Chapter 11 discusses the ways that television has recently changed and is likely to change in the future, because of the medium's convergence with related audio-visual media like the World Wide Web and social networking. Some commentators have claimed that in the first decades of the twenty-first century, television in its previous forms is ceasing to exist, and is being absorbed into a digital media culture that takes distinctively new forms. The delivery of audio-visual content to viewers changes when programmes are available on computers or mobile phones, as well as on television sets, and when viewers can choose where and when to watch. Viewers can also interact with programmes in new ways, by accessing web resources or

engaging with programme makers and other viewers over the internet. The chapter explores how these changes came about, and what their implications are for how television can be defined and understood. It analyses the continuities and ruptures in the evolution of television, and argues that the critical approaches and vocabularies of Television Studies are still useful.

Further reading

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