Television

In 1964, when British cultural studies was getting underway, a new medium – television – was showing signs of its extraordinary capacity to shape culture. At that time and place, TV was still relatively tame: the pictures were black and white, the public broadcaster, the BBC, was just opening its second ‘quality’ channel which gave the British public all of three channels to watch, and posh announcers introduced an evening’s entertainment as if they were presenting a variety show in the living room. Nonetheless, the new media was already fanning the flames for a new kind of cultural event – Beatlemania – which not only put Britain into the rock ‘n’ roll age, transnationalising its pop culture for the first time, but opened the way for a revolutionary decade – the sixties – defined by a new kind of youth power. In the USA, TV had made Elvis a national sensation almost a decade earlier, and a 1961 Disney broadcast had persuaded consumers that colour sets were worth buying. In 1964 in the States, CBS turned to videotape, marking the end of an era when most television was broadcast live. This was when Lyndon Johnson used the first ‘negative’ political TV ad against his Republican rival. Two devices designed to transform the medium were introduced – the instant replay, which gave TV an edge in sports broadcasting (and led to US pro football realising that the real money was in television), and the wireless remote control which dissolved the formality of TV viewing. Television as it would exist in its greatest moment was being born. (Check http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/index.html, an online source for television history.)

Closer to home, television, as the dominant medium of the period, has a unique relation to cultural studies which, it’s clear, has been formed around its encounter with TV. The discipline’s turn to popularism and devaluation of high culture; its
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emphasis on cultural reception as a life practice rather than on interpretation or production; its sense of cultural consumers as segmented, all owe much to its contiguity to television and to a TV-centred understanding of the 'media' (a word that, revelatory, only came into common usage at the end of the sixties). Of course, in being shaped by TV, cultural studies is by no means unique: it is just about impossible to imagine contemporary party politics, sport, music, film, and indeed consumer culture generally outside of their complex interactions with the box.

But an important qualification is necessary at once. Different nations have different television industries and, once again, transnational generalisation is just about impossible. Once again, the USA stands out in this regard. Because the medium first took off there (although it was a British invention), because technological and, usually, programming innovations tend to happen there first and because its products dominate world export markets, its influence is easy to believe that the medium exists there in its purest form, and that it is where the future happens first for other nations too. This is a misconception, and yet it is impossible to treat other national television systems except in comparison with the USA and, for better or for worse, much of what I have to say below has a US focus.

What kind of medium is it that has achieved such power? It is useful to see it as containing four different elements: the broadcast content; the set on which the content is consumed; the means of distribution of that content; and the industry which produces the content. And the medium's development since the sixties can be summed up like this: sets in both private and public spaces have proliferated; after the popularisation of satellite and cable, channels have proliferated also, and programming has become routine 24-hour. As part of this process, TV has become less and less dominated by scripted shows and especially by fiction. In many countries, the industry has been deregulated and has been more and more closely integrated with other leisure and media forms, notably sport and newspapers. As this can be summed up more abstractly: during its relatively short history television's interactions with everyday life have been radically intensified.

The set

Among the rich (globally speaking), the TV set exists primarily in domestic space and for that reason television's content and regulations have always had to address family values and lifestyle patterns (see Morley 1995). The marketing of the new media in the sixties placed a great deal of emphasis on positioning the set in the main family room (Spigel 1992) and the question of where the television set should be placed still has lifestyle and self-presentation consequences. One TV set in a family household tends to mean disputes about programme selection; several sets tend to isolate family members from one another. The set, like everything else about television, has evolved and since the mid-nineties has metamorphosed into the 'home entertainment systems' which further appropriates public forms (the movie theatre, the concert) for domestic space, subtly eroding public culture as the process. It has also increasingly been used as a visual display unit for computer games and video and DVD viewing. Instead of cultural studies has come to concern itself with the 'sociality of television use' (Lembo 2000, 29), the materiality of the TV set becomes of primary concern. And by concentrating on the set is easier to understand the precise social frameworks in which television is figured, in the West, primarily as a domestic medium. It is easy to forget that in many parts of the world television is watched mainly in public, in cafes or bars, and that alters its impact considerably. And its relations with which domestic space has a different function and significance than that it does the West, as for instance in many Hindu and Muslim regions where the domestic realm is sanctified, is dedicated to purity, and is under the control of women; then the positioning of a TV set here can cause tensions with Western-style programming where it tends to the erotic, the counter-cultural or the profane.

The Industry: Funding and Regulation

When it comes to the industry, one question dominates: how to fund it. After all, TV, like any broadcast medium, does not offer commodities in the traditional sense, able to be presented in a marketplace, priced via the play of supply and demand. At least when broadcast by radio waves, broadcast media can be picked up for free by anyone who owns a receiver (which is why, during the early days of radio, programming was provided by receiver manufacturers, which is what the pathbreaking broadcasting company RCA was in its first incarnation). Furthermore television is an expensive medium in relation to print or even film, partly because of what is sometimes called 'content exhaustion': the way in which content has constantly been rephrased. This commits the medium to novelty and, as technology and deregulation have increased the numbers of channels, increasingly to competitive novelty (Corner 2001). One of the reasons that fiction and scripted shows are under pressure in the industry today is that novelty comes easier in live shows which are also considerably cheaper to produce.

Funding models differ widely across different nations: television may be funded either by advertising, by advertising or (in the case of cable and satellite) by periodic fees, or by a mix of these. Governments tend to pay for television programming either through the tax system (as in Australia), by selling off the right to use frequencies or by charging licences for set ownership (as in the UK). The USA is unusual in having almost no wholly government-funded television: there, public television generally means television broadcast on frequencies reserved for non-profit stations who typically receive less than half their funds from public sources, yet who may broadcast commercials only if they are disguised as non-commercial adjucats.
Funding through advertising turns the medium into a system whose primary economic function is to sell potential consumers to advertisers, via the buyers of advertising time, set at prices determined by ratings whose measurement worldwide is dominated by A.C. Nielsen and, increasingly, its controversial Peoplemeters. In the USA, audiences are now sold to advertisers every six or seven minutes by the major networks. Yet, as competition in the industry has grown and as the technology has permitted increased numbers of channels largely by lowering the costs of studio production, the television audience has been divided into various taste-cultures or niches of very different economic power. Advertisers chase young adult audiences for the rather counter-intuitive reason that the young spend less time in front of the TV set than do either children or their elders. As its audience segments, television mustes in form. Families no longer watch a night's programme obediently, and so programmes grab national attention. Rather the medium offers up a kind of background chatter against which attention drifts in and out. New taste-cultures proliferate: some based on ethnicity (blackTV in the USA); some on age; some on level of education; some on gender; some on rhythms of a working week (i.e. the time of day TV is watched); some on personal, local or national differences; and so on.

Nowadays the mass media's audience is a highly fragmented one, with people consuming a wide variety of media. The media now operate in a highly competitive environment, with each medium trying to capture a share of the audience. The fragmentation of the audience has led to the development of niche markets, where advertisers can target specific groups of people.

But the question of how restricted media ownership should be in any particular market remains a vital one. It's a question that is all the more acute since many of the biggest transnational media companies—Time Warner and News Corp in particular—own newspapers, publishing houses, sports teams, film studios, tourist attractions, financial institutions, and so on, globally. Recently the emergence of the Internet has been used to downplay concerns about the narrowness of media ownership and to justify further relaxation of regulations (see Streeter 1996 for an excellent contribution to cultural policy studies of television in this regard). In general we can say that arguments about ownership break down to industry issues on the one side (concentrated ownership threatens free markets, not least because the barriers to entry into television broadcasting remain high) and into public service issues on the other (limited ownership puts at risk the principles of balance, diversity and quality). These two are probably not debates to which cultural studies intellectuals as such can contribute a great deal, even if cultural populists in particular need to recognise the constraints that ownership regimes place on content.

When it is state-funded television that is in question, however, the situation changes. Then the most important policy topic becomes the degree to which programmatic diversity should be enforced through the state's funding policies. The state, in this role, is responsible for ensuring that a wide range of programmes is made available to the public, and for ensuring that these programmes are of high quality. The state can also use its funding to support the production of programmes that reflect the diversity of the population, and to promote the development of new talent and innovative formats.

Perhaps surprisingly, cultural studies has been less interested in industry regulation than in its actual organisation. Why is regulation important to television in a way that it isn't, for instance, to print publishing? Partly because the most common mode of delivery — through radio frequencies — enabled the state to take responsibility for the allocation of the spectrum. Furthermore, regulations are constantly open to re-negotiation since media technological changes so quickly that a particular technological regime cannot be assumed to maintain its place for more than about five years. But, most of all, television is a policy issue because of its social power.

The principle issue at stake in industry regulation is often that of how the public interest is to be funded and in general they concern the balance of market and non-market funding of programming and the safeguards, first, to maintain diversity (through limiting the market share of any one broadcasting company); second, to ensure the right of the media to 'free speech' without which, it may be argued, democracy withers and, third, for civic decentum, through censorship. In the West neo-liberal regimes have consistently been one to one of the market solutions to issues of balance, quality and diversity — that is deregulation. Cultural studies has a stake in this through cultural policy studies, but its response has been muted, because to speak very generally its liberalism and populism provide few strong, critical arguments for maintaining a strong regulatory environment.
While Stuart Cunningham has reminded us that cultural studies academics risk irrelevance in avoiding these debates (which are of genuine concern to parents as well as to media companies), it is probably as important to think about what is at stake in the debates themselves as it is to engage in the kind of research which contributes to them (Cunningham 1992b). In line with Cunningham's terms, Lauren Berlant has persuasively taken up the argument that putting the protection of children at the centre of social policy normally serves the interests of authoritarian and retrograde political groupings by reducing the richness and freedom of adult product (Berlant 1997). The fuss over children's television viewing, with its polarising for formal or informal censorship, is just another instance of this. Yet, as debates over children and their relation to television, what also seems to be at stake is a struggle between two centres which are simultaneously ethically and social, one based in the family, the other in the media, and beyond the media, in the consumer marketplace.

As we know, television, and not least children's television, belongs to the consumer marketplace. It delivers the attention of children (and their parents) to toy manufacturers, confectioners and drink marketers, fast-food outlets, the recorded music and film industries and so on. Whatever its other effects on children, it seems clear that it socializes them towards consumption, and thus towards the social apparatus upon which the market is built (Kline 1993, 349–350). It takes them away from more physical play, including, it needs to be said, bullying and violence. At this level, it stands at some distance from the more ascetic, generationally interactive, socially and educationally aspiring values and clusters of family memories and styles which are habitually clumped together as family values. And yet, however discriminating they may be, children love television as they love little else. Let us recall that in the USA at least there is a television set in over half of all children's bedrooms, providing parents with a welcome (possibly necessary) space and time by monopolizing their children's attention for hours (the equivalent figure for Italy is 90% per cent) [Kazemipour and Hill 1999, 35]. Furthermore, television provides children with an imaginative world and its own form of far from negligible ethical and affective instruction. And in children grow up their memories of a childhood watching TV are often invested with a deep nostalgia that nurtures intergenerational bonding - each generation, after all, has its own TV memories. In this light it may seem as if television is a site for intergenerational struggles over style and autonomy, but, I'd suggest that in the last instance the debate over children's television can be regarded as an expression of anxieties concerning the usefulness of television as a substitute for parenting.

The audience

Traditionally at least, most cultural studies work on television has concentrated on audience reception - which is a sign of the medium's lack of cultural value. It is as if the programmes themselves aren't worth taking as seriously as their impact on viewers. So it has been impossible to concentrate on close readings of TV texts or to construct a TV canon. And partly for that reason, the study of reception has undergone almost constant transformation as it has tried to figure out exactly the value and impact of television. Various stages in this history can be isolated.

The 'users and gratifications' approach was pioneered by Paul Lazarsfeld during the forties and used statistical analysis of data retrieved through quantitative ethnographic studies to show that, in the USA at least, television viewing integrated viewers into capitalist society by reinforcing its norms and marginalising deliberative analysis. For this approach, television was supposed primarily to satisfy specific needs that exist outside the viewing situation. Lazarsfeld's work defined an avalanche of 'mass communications' research that linked patterns of television viewing to gender, education, age and economics and tried to view the impact of such viewing on 'behaviours' in terms of these variables (see Schramm 1961 for a classic book in this tradition).

The 'critical theory' school's most famous representative was Theodor Adorno who, like Lazarsfeld and at around the same time, argued that television reduced its audience's capacities to reflect on and critique society and culture. For Adorno it did so by providing powerful forms of 'distraction' which transformed 'modern mass culture into a medium of undreamed of psychological control' (Adorno 1991, 138). TV deindividualises people; it offers them a profoundly standardised image world; it reinforces the false domination of private life over the public sphere; it creates fantasies and false satisfactions that allow capitalism to maintain itself. Television possesses such a great a power of seduction that the distinction between its 'dream world' and reality becomes contorted. Adorno is often (and rightly in my view) accused of not understanding TV's manifold pleasures, and at the same time of taking it too seriously. Yet for the first time he brought to the field a complex theory of subjectivity, based in part on Freudian notions of the unconscious, as well as a clear idea of the limits of capitalism and the deliberative value of high culture. And he was one of the first social theorists willing to think about television genres in some specificity (see Adorno 1991).

The "encoding/decoding" model was the first influential intervention in the field from within cultural studies proper. In an important essay of that name, Stuart Hall suggested a four-stage theory of communication: production, circulation, use and reproduction. For him each stage is 'relatively autonomous' from the others (see Hall in During 1999). This means that the coding of a message does control its reception but not transparently — each stage has its own determining limits and possibilities. The concept of relative autonomy allows Hall to argue that polysemia is not the same as pluralism: messages are not open to any interpretation or use whatsoever simply because each stage in the circuit limits possibilities in the next. In actual social existence, Hall goes on to argue, messages have a 'complex structure of dominance' because at each stage they are 'imprinted' by institutional power relations. Furthermore, a message can only be received at a particular stage
if it is recognizable or appropriate — although there is space for a message to be used or understood at least somewhat against the grain. This means that power relations at the point of production, for example, will loosely fit those at the point of consumption. In this way the communication circuit is also a circuit that reproduces a pattern of domination, and it thus belongs to ‘ideology’ thought of as the system of meanings through which social structures are regarded as natural or commonsensical rather than a means by which capitalism (and its class hierarchies) reproduces itself (Hall in During 1999).

Hall softened the tie between the text’s meaning and its reception. For him, dominant meaning was only received under certain circumstances. And in the late seventies and early eighties cultural studies expanded the gap between meaning and reception by accepting that audiences could actually resist a programme’s values (Morley 1980), and then by showing that television flows did not have a single, dominant meaning but rather contained a number of meanings or that it primarily communicated not meaning at all but emotion or pleasure (Fiske 1987). From this perspective popular television could embody forms of critique or transgression too. It could undo as well as embody ideology.

The emphasis on the polysemic of television and the variety of moods and moods in which it was viewed led cultural studies in the late seventies to pay increasing attention to television viewers not as members of a massified audience but as (socio-culturally formed) individuals, not as ‘cultural dupes’ with limited powers to accept or reject television’s meanings but as people living more or less attentively around the television set.

This notion, which was so important to the discipline’s sense of itself, was also inspired by Roland Barthes’ concept of the ‘pleasure of the text’; by feminist work on women watching television in which researchers and viewers were allied in a new kind of solidarity; by Michel Foucault’s critique of ideology as too totalising and coherent a concept; and by the emergence of a generation who could actually confess to liking television and who were familiar with its history.

It’s no accident I think that this shift occurred at the same time as, first, in the USA programmers began to pay attention to viewer demographics and ‘quality’ shows began to be produced for particular audiences, and, second, cable television, with its promise (not kept) to usher in an epoch of commercial-free choice and variety, took off. The consequence of all this was that cultural studies work on television became committed to a particular kind of empirical research on media audiences: qualitative research, often involving participatory observation (i.e. the researcher joining with his or her subjects in their activities), aimed not at studying how shows were understood but at understanding the role of television in everyday life, and most of all among fans of particular genres or shows. Such work has often pictured TV fans in nostalgic, sixty-six idealist terms: for instance, they are conceived of as being engaged in upsetting received norms of good taste and aesthetic culture by ‘poaching’ particular elements from shows and using them as a basis for their own creative expression (see Jenkins 1992). As cultural studies researchers examined viewers more and more closely they also began to analyze the criteria that viewers use to judge programmes (with ‘realistic’ turning out to be key). And they paid attention to how television was infused into ‘practices of self’ (the techniques that people use to construct their character and life) — for instance by inserting memories of watching old shows into life stories.

Once television viewers became the object of research too did TV sociability — the way TV draws people together or isolates them, the way it reinforces family authority structures or undermines them, and so on. It is in this context too that one branch of cultural studies has become increasingly interested in the impact of TV (and the media generally) on the ‘public sphere’. The ‘public sphere’ as a concept remains tied to Jürgen Habermas’ analysis of the civic institutions which underpinned European Enlightenment. For Habermas, famously, a ‘bourgeois public sphere’ emerged in the salons and coffee houses of late eighteenth century Europe (especially in England), marked out from commercial and domestic life on the one side and the apparatuses of state on the other. It was not dominated by the army, and was dedicated to discussion and the circulation of ideas through which rational reflection and reform could gradually be applied to social institutions. For Habermas, this public sphere (which exists more as a theoretical construct than as a historical reality) was under threat by the nineteenth century. High capitalism ‘re-feudalised’ it; and, or so the argument goes, the modern public sphere is under the sway of commercial interests, mass entertainment and technologies (Habermas 1989).

This argument has been reconceptualised by John Hartley, who has put forward an alternative notion of the ‘mediaspHERE’. For him the media connect together different ‘cultural domains’ for audiences (the media is a bridge rather than a field), as well as creating a sense of the audience itself as community. This is in opposition to Habermas’ notion of a public sphere shared by a politically delimited national community (Hartley 1996, 28). For Hartley, the media become the primary means through which a community not only knows itself to be a community but also makes the internal connections required to become a community. This is an important notion because it helps us see the productive role of television, which lies outside both the model of representation (since television connects social and cultural fields rather than represents society) and the Habermasian model of discursive rationality in which television was seen as failing to provide for rational and civic public debate.

However Hartley’s concept risks overestimating the degree to which the media and television in particular has subsumed older conceptions of society. If you are immersed in the media, either as a cultural studies academic or as a viewer, then the media seems to be the stage on which social reality presents itself. But to whatever degree society has absorbed television into itself most everyday lives are lived at a certain distance from television, even in the West. It is important not to forget that most information and
orientation about the world comes from elsewhere: from friends, from schools or workplaces, churches, etc. or indeed from books. What is the public sphere for young urban blacks in the USA for instance? It exists in the basketball courts, swap meets, local stores, schools, clubs, street hangouts and parties as much as if not more than in the media (which, of course, almost uniformly represents them negatively). What is the public sphere for the educated upper middle class? For the born-again Christian? For the recent Ethiopian migrant? To repeat: especially for those who do not recognize their lives in TV representations, the media forms a kind of background hum to the rhythms of ordinary existence, the occasional distraction or amusement rather than the framework of life itself. What we need to acknowledge is that while TV and the media do systematically structure society and culture and have had an especially profound impact on certain of their audiences, nonetheless, in everyday life they remain at the sidelines for many, probably most, people (see Hernes 1993).

Content

It is, of course, impossible to do any justice to TV content in the context of an introduction to cultural studies, and my aim in this section is simply to sketch some parameters for a cultural studies account. This aim would be even more laughably reductive than it is, if it were not the case that cultural studies, especially in its early days, rarely concentrated on individual programmes or 'texts' as they are often called. Rather it dealt with media content at a more abstract level - in terms both of scheduling and of genre - and I will follow it in this.

The cultural studies approach to the medium generally began when Raymond Williams developed the concept of 'flow'. On his first visit to the USA in 1974 he turned on a TV in his hotel room only to discover that what he was looking at had a completely different feel than he was used to back home. An evening's viewing consisted of an uninterrupted, unpunctuated stream of programmes, advertisements, announcements and logos. Unlike in Britain, no presenter announced the evening's entertainment (Williams 1975, 91-92). For him this was a eureka moment and, in essence, he realised, television was 'flow'. Williams was certainly on to something since, from the perspective of the programmer, what is at stake in an evening's line-up is not the individual show but the 'architecture' of the schedule, which as relations between ratings and programming have become more and more finely tuned, have been more and more carefully considered (Ellis 1992).

Shows deliver particular sectors of the audience ('demographics') to advertisers, and prime time is scheduled in 'strips' in which a sequence of shows is designed to keep particular demographics viewing one programme after another, with careful consideration given to audience changes determined by real-life events - domestic, local and world news (in the USA, for much of TV history special regulations have ordered 'prime-time' TV towards family viewing). Within the strips it is important that commercials retain viewers' attention so they merge more and more seamlessly into programming in order to prevent the channel skipping and muting enabled by the remote. In a sense, TV is a battleground between the 'strips' designed by the programmers and the 'skid' enabled by the remote.

Cultural studies has also paid sustained attention to genres. There are, of course, various approaches to the generic television text, and three in particular need pointing out. First, we can analyse the constitutive features (textual and/or institutional) of a particular genre, e.g. news programmes, soap operas, nature documentaries. Then, for instance, a large generic distinction, unique to broadcast media, has been made between 'series' (in which each episode, while sharing characters, has a distinct narrative) and 'serials' (in which the narrative unfolds from episode to episode). And serials themselves come in different genres, of which, in the seventies and eighties, by far the most analysed was the soap opera. Feminist theorists recuperated soaps, showing that their focus on dialogue (gossip) and the personal, along with their melodrama and endlessness, enabled female viewers to find value in their own everyday lives. Such theories provided a way of positively acknowledging lives lived around relationships and emotional responses rather than work and the public sphere. Or, in another formulation, soaps can present an imaginary world in which the male-dominated public side of life is judged by feminised and more private values (Rappaport 2002). And soap opera was especially meaningful since it valued survival above all things (Ang 1985, 51-85; Brandon 2000).

The concept of the TV genre has its limits however. For instance, the 1990 ABC hit 'America's Funniest Home Videos' is sometimes regarded as inventing a global genre. But should it rather be regarded as a version of earlier voyeuristic, comic reality shows such as 'Unsolved Camera' and 'Life's Most Embarrassing Moments'? Or, more particularly, of the hit Japanese show 'Fun with Ken and Kato', produced by the Tokyo Broadcasting Company, in which viewers were invited to send in their amusing videos, if in a rather different spirit and with a different kind of presenter than the ABC's Island Bob Saget (geeks of presenter-style exist too). And leaving this kind of ambiguity aside, what seems most interesting about 'America's Funniest Home Videos' is the way in which it draws material from the real world, leaving behind all dramatic and fictional framing. In this it gave a signal of what was to come - reality TV.

Reality TV has its own genres, of which maybe the most popular has been the 'competitive reality show' (whose first big hit was 'Big Brother', an idea imported into the USA from Europe). These shows often use viewer feedback via the phone and Internet and elements of the game show as well as of soap opera. It's a technically and formally sophisticated - and gripping - generic hybrid but, again, what seems fascinating about it is not its generic make-up as such, but its innovative use of the possibilities of the medium's interactivity with both viewers and participants. And in
texts are received by viewers. For that reason, in cultural studies, it tends to survive only in introductory courses.

Individual programmes can also be read closely and subtly in a way habitual to literary, art or film criticism, even though, as I have said, it is a sign of television's degraded place in academic culture that there is remarkably little of this kind of criticism. The lack of easy access to many old shows is also a problem here, and the question of television preservation is an urgent one: it's a materially ephemeral medium, which also puts its long-term cultural value at risk. Nonetheless, television has been praised because it has a positive political and sociological function, as when feminism recuperated soap operas, but only rarely in terms that relate specifically to the creativities demanded by the medium itself. There is a rich future for this kind of criticism since it allows cultural studies to transmute TV fandom into established academic modes. And it promises opportunities for changing those modes too: what kind of criticism might a serious and detailed appreciation of the competitive reality show create for instance?

Finally, television can also be understood in terms of its relations to other cultural and social institutions. In particular, television is in competition with a wide variety of other institutions that fulfil similar functions or offer similar pleasures. One of contemporary TV's most remarkable features, I have suggested, is how keyd in it is to other media, especially the Web. Not just in terms of industry synergies (either — information, gossip about plot lines, stars, and so on often circulate on the Web before productions are aired, giving producers headaches).

But TV competes with certain other institutions in a deeper level too. TV is in competition, for instance, with the education system as a purveyor of information, knowledge and comment about the world; it is in competition with live sports events as a leisure choice; it is in competition with literature again as a leisure choice but also (sometimes) in a struggle over lifestyles and cultural values; it is in competition with the Internet, not just at the level of information about shows but as a technology of communication, and one which will probably swallow TV. Of course it is not just in competition with other social or cultural institutions; it enables and shapes them too, mainly for advertisements because, although (or because) they're short, they can be so complex and dense at this level. One might analyse, for example, the way in which an instant coffee commercial uses erotic and sexual images to link drinking coffee to sensual mystery. The classic work in this area is Judith Williamson's Decoding Advertisements (1978), which identifies a 'coded text' in the teaching of what is called the 'semiotic' approach to media texts, i.e. an approach that breaks texts down into constitutive signs. The problem with semiotics in this mode is that it tends to neglect 'polysemry' (that is, it tends to claim that signs have one meaning rather than various meanings, especially across different communities). Semiotics, by its very nature, also tends to pay relatively little attention to the actual way that
between the public and the private, between masculinity and femininity, childhood and adulthood, politicians and their electors.

Conclusion

The sense that television is creating a culture without shape or order is, in the end, untenable because it fails to appreciate the actual ways that TV is used and enjoyed. That kind of complaint is a version of the reactive cultural criticism on the rejection of which Raymond Williams founded British cultural studies. Nonetheless it does point to something important: television, and the media generally, is not a site of authority, standards and hierarchy. Ultimately this is because it is so interwoven with everyday life itself. To take just one further example: TV poaches reality as well as representing it. One way it does so is by generating celebrities who are often now famous not for any accomplishment but just (as they say) for being famous (see Rojek 2001). These celebrities exist in a weird cultural zone; they have real existences in a world we share with them but they are also imaginary creatures – imaged on the screen, in print and on the Web in all kinds of complex collisions and synergies. It is their ambiguous condition of being that makes them so fascinating. Finally, their lives can be understood as real-time, live experiments on the power of the media to shape a life as spectacle; think most of all of Michael Jackson (although of course he did bring serious talent to his fame). Or think of the Olsen twins: media figures since they were nine months old (when they began appearing in the prime time sitcom ‘Full House’); stars of computer games and animated TV series; media moguls (executive producers at the age of seven of a video series that has grossed over US$50 million); brand names for a ‘tween’ orientated line of clothes, cosmetics, home furnishings, books and CDs; and web site and movie stars as well. The countdown to their eighteenth birthday was a minor-league major media event in the USA. In living in and through the media network (which remains centred around TV) celebrities of this kind acquire a symbiotic function: they become metaphors of the way in which sections of the community also live in interaction with the TV/media imaginary, not as celebrities themselves but as consumers, obsessions, dreamers, lovers, gossip, who are in the end the masters of the celebrities whom they adorn.

The old understanding of the media – that it represents or comments on the world and that it exists on a different plane than life itself – has been completely undone by the broadcast media over the past century. And, as we shall see, it has been further undone by the Web. In that sense Hartley’s mediansphere does not really exist. Rather the media folds into everyday life; it nationalises it; it fuses into it and determinatises it; it forms kinds of emotions in the real world or grounds social activities there which appear and disappear in their own opaque rhythms. The italicised words in this sentence are borrowed from the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, whose theoretical concepts work exceptionally well when deployed to describe relations between contemporary life and the media (see Rajchman 2000 for an excellent introduction to Deleuze). It says something about how complex and vital that relation is that it helps to have a reconceptualised philosophical vocabulary to describe it.
Popular music

Television is a 'top-down' institution in that TV broadcasts are comparatively expensive and require considerable technical expertise and its channels of dissemination are relatively finite and highly regulated. Nor has the move from analogue to digital technologies (as yet) empowered TV viewers or radically changed the industry's business model. All this is less true of popular music, which remains, at least to some degree, a spontaneous product of individuals (both musicians and fans) who come to it outside the highly capitalised recording industry itself, and have poached new technologies to make and listen to topics on their own terms. Music isn't just records and marketing. That's why, for instance, although it rarely makes much sense to ask of television or even specific television genres how authentic they are, that question remains powerful when it comes to music. Likewise, it rarely makes much sense to ask of TV shows how oppositional they are. But cultural studies has consistently posed that question of popular music, partly because rock 'n' roll has conned rebellion from its very beginnings. In fact cultural studies' claim to a politics of resistance has been deeply influenced by rock's rebellion.

Although popular music is genuinely popular, it is also divisive, segmenting communities by generation, class, race, ethnicity, taste and, if less so, gender. Music quickly generates something larger than itself — micro-communities and lived styles, each tied to a genre or sub-genre or set of genres. The big multinational corporations that dominate the music industry themselves organise their music divisions into units each concentrating on a different genre and audience. Black audiences are marked out from white, and certain genres (notably so-called 'modern rock') are given more attention because of their history of profitability (Negrus 1999, 496). It's because of music's capacity to segment and germinate that, for instance, the concept of the 'sub-

culture', appropriated from sociology, has been developed in cultural studies terms largely via work on popular music. And it's because of that capacity that cultural studies' work on African diaspora cultures and drug cultures also tends to be mediated through music — even if this emphasis exposes the study of music to certain distortions.

Of course rock music in particular has also become hegemonic. Even 'authentic' rock stars can belong to the establishment, if, in general to the liberal establishment. Over the years they have acquired significant political clout, of which there are few better instances than Bobo of U2's role in increasing US aid to the world's poorest nations. At the UN Conference on Development in Monterrey, Mexico in March 2002, the USA increased its aid budget for the first time in twenty years by $5 billion. The White House confirmed that lobbying from the rock star was significant in the USA's unexpected change of direction (which led to the European Union increasing its aid budget also). In the light of this clout and respectability, rock's history of, and carefully maintained image of, rebelliousness begins to fall apart, as we shall soon see in more detail. What, for instance, happened to 'alternative rock' which can now be used to hook youngish viewers into a truly mainstream product such as Fox's Dallas revamp The O.C.? That the mainstreaming of rock generates new internal divisions, as musicians invest modes to counter in influence.

Punk and reggae

The first popular music genres to come under the examination of British cultural studies were reggae and punk, the street music of the disaffected young in the late seventies when the discipline was young. British punk was a reaction against its various predecessors, namely: (1) the highly industrialised and show biz music that heavy metal and other rock genres had by this time become; (2) the faded utopianisms of the hippie movement with their middle-class overtones; and (3) the hoppiness and perceived pretentiousness of 'glam rock' whose biggest stars were David Bowie and Roxy Music. Punk was urban, working-class, young and aggressively anti-establishment. Some of its elements (including the name and its revisionist 'back to real rock'n'roll' music credo) had been imported from avant-garde New York art-school scenes (and in particular ripped off the New York Dolls) by Malcolm McLaren, the Sex Pistols' manager. Nonetheless, British punk was a whole new thing.

As to reggae: this was the time that reggae was exploring studio-based techniques such as dub and perfecting the technique of 'toasting' which had developed in the early fifties in Kingston's sound systems. (A sound system is a portable record deck, amplifiers and speakers used for street and other parties and was mainly popular in the poorer neighbourhoods.) Toasting DJ's, working for and individualising the sound systems, improvised slang lyrics and interjections on top of records, a tradition which began to fade among the Jamaican systems in the late eighties at a point when hip hop,
which can partly be regarded as an offshoot of toasting, was already a major genre in the USA. (In Jamaica it transformed into ‘dancehall’ or ‘ragga’, one of the most innova-
tive, technological music genres of the nineties.)

In the seventies too, ‘roots reggae’, as produced by stars such as Bob Marley, Island
Spear and Culture, had incorporated Rastafarianism, a Jamaican religious cult much
influenced by Marcus Garvey who preached a ‘back to Africa’ doctrine in the first
decades of the twentieth century. Rastas reject the white man’s materialist world and
believe Haile Selassie, the last Ethiopian monarch, to be divine. Their religion is also a
style: dreadlocks, ganja-smoking, patois-speaking. During the seventies Rastafarianism
began to spread beyond the working-class Jamaican men who had formed its base since
the thirties. Simultaneously in London, reggae began to enter into complex interactions
with punk, most obviously in the music of groups such as the Clash and the Slits as well as
in the lyrics of tracks such as Marley’s 1977 ‘Punky Reggae Party’. (Marley’s sense of
where popular music could go was influenced by hearing the Clash.)

In his book Subculture: The Meaning of Style (1979), which did much to popularise
cultural studies in the Anglophone world, Dick Hebdige theorised punk as a transgressive
‘signifying practice’. According to him, punk ‘cut up’ and recombined various working-
class styles, past and present, in a ‘phantoms history’ motivated by parody. Its safety pins,
 bondage trousers, S&M paraphernalia, ripped clothing – a radicalised ‘ragamuffin’ look –
are interpreted as instances of impoverished British working-class styles, worn brazenly
and out of context to express the emptiness and meaninglessness of the social situation
in which British working-class youth found themselves under Thatcherism, i.e. under first-
wave neo-liberalism. Punk’s appropriation of nationalistic signifiers, especially the Union
Jack, war, likewise, in your face ironic. But, for Hebdige, the most important function
of the punk style was to form the punk community: punk identity and collectivity was
articulated in and through its signifying practices.

Hebdige’s account of reggae in Subculture was somewhat more straightforward:
dub, toasting, roots reggae and the culture of the sound system provided an alterna-
tive to white hegemony for its fans. In the music they found an alternative Africanist
identity, ‘a black heart beating back to Africa on a steadily pulse of dub’ (Hebdige 1979,
38). Rastafarianism deepened a long-standing ethos of rebellion and disaffection
among Jamaican youth, providing it with an everyday life ethic (that like punk style
were its difference and refusing the obsolete, but it also, in the case of roots reggae,
offered it a spiritual and historicised self-understanding. Aspects of the rasta style were
disseminated globally: after Marley’s trip to New Zealand in the eighties (during which
he was welcomed as a hero by Maori youth) dreadlocks, rasta colours, dope-smoking
and so on became common marks of resistance for young Maori, and successful Maori
reggae bands appeared. These days, sound clashes (competitions between sound
systems) have gone global: the World Club, normally held in Queens, New York
involves sounds from as far afield (and far from Africa) as Japan and Italy.

For punt the attractions of reggae were clear enough. Punks could identify with
reggae’s refusal and otherness, especially as these took musical form. And yet,
Hebdige argues, punk music was formed as much in opposition as in alliance with reggae.
Musically punk favoured the treble not the bass, and it preferred a rhetoric of
abuse rather than of alusion. Punk drew some of its energy to resist white rock from
reggae, but reggae’s turn to ethnicity from punk out of Hebdige contends, at the
heart of the punk sub-culture, forever arrested, lies this frozen dialectic between black
and white cultures – a dialectic which beyond a certain point (i.e. ethnicity) is inca-
picable of removal, trapped, as it is, within its own history, imprisoned within its own
antinomies (Hebdige 1979, 69–70). Here Hebdige’s own notion of punk as a signi-
ifying practice in process – capable of constant mutations and negotiation with external
cultural forces – reaches its limits.

It is possible to cavil with some of Hebdige’s findings: his analysis is too London-based
and it romanticises punk culture by over-emphasising its working-class nature. Important
figures such as the Clash’s Joe Strummer were in fact upper-middle class, and, as we’ve
seen, punk had art-school and commercial genealogies too – let’s not forget that its style
began in a King’s Road boutique and, as Geoff Marcus has pointed out, had links to Guy
Delaire’s 1960s French avant garde art world / cultural theory movement known as ‘situ-
ationism’ (Marcus 1989). Like all theorists determined to find socio-political significance
in cultural formations, Hebdige neglects the role that entertainment, pleasure and sheer
blankness play among fans. As far as reggae goes, he doesn’t fully articulate the associa-
tions between modernity and technology that constituted some of dub’s appeal to its
Jamaican fans. Black music of various kinds has a long association with modernity in
resistance x’s soul – think George Clinton; think Sun Ra; think hip hop musicians
and DJs such as OutKast or DJ Spooky; think the eighties Jamaican dub maestro Scientist.
Aid yet Hebdige’s account of relations between two subcultures formed around music is
instructive because it suggests how effectively music can form identities that have polit-
ical and even spiritual dimensions, and how these identities may be articulated in
complex interaction with one another. And how music can form a bridge, a basis for
sociality, between groups of fans with no ‘organic’ association with one another –
including indeed academic and non-academic fans.

Modern folk music or commercial product?

Hebdige’s understanding of music is so richly nuanced because he was clearly so
sensitive by the styles and music he wrote about. But it has to be said that much cultural
studies writing has been more detached and has circled around a small number of
tensions and debates which confront the discipline in relation to popular music. The
first, which I have already mentioned, is the tension between music as an authentic,
self-driven collective expression (as if it were a kind of folk music) against music as
reggae groups, and rap is fast hybridizing with other styles—as for instance [at the time of writing] in The New York dance craze 'reggaeton', a fusion of Latin, reggae and rap from Puerto Rico, popular with 'perreo' underground Latino/a youth.)

Hip hop—which included fashion styles, graffiti art, break-dancing, scratching or turn-tabbing and (later) free-style (the improvisation of rhymes on top of rhythm tracks, sometimes collectively in 'cyphers') and sometimes competitively in 'battles')—first appeared with a strong intellectual and political charge (Wimsatt 2001). After all, rap is poetic and verbal in ways that most other popular music forms (except drinking and ragga) are not. Certainly in many cases it has been produced differently to rock music. Its beats or rhythms are produced separately from the lyrics and vocals in what is effectively a different section of the industry, although dividing responsibility for the production of different elements of a track has become increasingly common in mainstream commercial music too, where producers of a track's total sound have become industry kings. Nonetheless at rap's core are loosely affiliated groups of performers and producers pulled together for particular projects. The most organic of such groups is the 'crew', mutually supportive performers often with long-term roots in the same neighbourhood, often in the same schools—the 'schoolyard being a nursery for free-styling, and free-styling being a nursery for recorded hip hop.' The Wu Tang Clan, many of whom come from Staten Island, have been probably the most successful, artistically if not commercially, of these crews. And to stay with the Wu for a moment, it is also the case that their record label, Loud Records, half-owned by the multinational BMG, was a pioneer in so-called street marketing. This was a form of retailing that replaced or supplemented radio and video promotion by swapping select sites in the young, urban, black public sphere—basketball games, local stores, schoolyards, clubs—with sales material. Marketing and community merge here and street credibility becomes both a marketing tool and a commitment to a social sector and to 'being real'. These sophisticated marketing techniques have been key to the gangsta rap which emerged in Los Angeles in the late eighties, also operating in a complicated zone where the commercial image and the lived meet. But it was the Wu who were pioneers in what has become a big industry as US black markets, fashion franchises branded and 'designed' by music stars. In sum, hip hop reminds us that anti-commercialisation is in itself more characteristically a white bourgeois attitude than an African American one, despite a vibrant African American counter-culture based on spirituality and poetry.

With the question of audience is especially debated. It is more usually produced by independent labels than by majors, although majors often distribute and market music produced independently. Some argue that this is because the independents are closer to the street, others that a great deal of independent rap is produced for middle-class and educated audiences (black and white) by producers and artists who have the capacity to maintain their autonomy. There is evidence that the majors have understated the
genre because of (racial?) fears that it has less ‘catalogue value’ (potential for future sales) and international appeal than rock, and thus they have allowed production to remain in independent hands (Nagas 1999, 498-500). As Tricia Rose has pointed out, breakdowns of sales figures may not be especially helpful in sorting out this debate, since so much music is now disseminated outside of quantifiable and official channels, especially among black youth (Rose 1994). And of course, since the late nineties the downloading and swapping of MP3 tracks over the Internet also means CD sales are decreasingly a good indication of listenerships.

Over the last decade rap has itself split into numerous genres and audiences, from mass market figures such as Jay-Z or Eminem whose relation to their labels is conventional, to entrepreneurial collectives such as Wu Tang, to regionally situated independent crossovers into the big time such as the platinum OmKast, to an increasing number of avant-garde and out-there artists whose appeal is indeed largely middle class, to those producing versions of canonical genres such as Prince Paul of the rap-operators, King of Thieves, and, lastly, to fusions with ragas and other genres. (As I write the number one single in the UK is by Sean Paul, a Jamaican raggas artist who has crossed over into both soul and rap.) Yet despite this segmentation, critics can still regard hip hop as primarily oppositional in its force, a case made most cogently by George Lipsitz (1994) and Tricia Rose (1994). Rose argues that hip hop is at the very least ambivalent about commodity culture and is to be understood as ‘urban renewal’ — a regrouping of devasted communities. For Lipsitz, on the other hand, in a reprise of Holderian on punk, hip hop’s fascination with commodities (gold chains, fast cars, etc.) is a playful and hyperbolic mimicry of dominant culture, an expression of adolescent fantasy which contains within it a subversive sense of its own extravagance.

Such analyses do need to be qualified, especially in relation to the macho chauvinism of bitches and hos which constitutes one dominant commercial rap convention. Of course, that convention works precisely because it sentimentalizes women, liberals, family values and so on: it performs rehearsallessness. But it possesses other functions too: it provides the constraints within which it is possible for a rapper to assert his mastery of a specific rhetoric. And, more problematically, it may express a certain version of masculinity of middle-class urban African Americans too: a kind of salmagundi from a social position that combines systematic subordination with widely recognized glamour and street cred as well as the capacity to create fear among middle-class whites. Where in all this does the commerce/real distinction come into play? Or the subordinate/dominant opposition?

Another genre that brings the tension between commerce and underground expressiveness into the open is dance music. Dance music, like punk and rap, begins with a marginal youth cultural formation, this time the ‘rave scene’. The rave scene emerged, more or less simultaneously in Bia, the Spanish holiday resort, and in Manchester around 1987 when house music first met the drug ecstasy. House, which had been developed out of disco in Detroit and Chicago, was a music style which synthesized and sampled all kinds of sounds including Eurodisco, Kraftwerk and Anglo synthpop, linking them through club effects and percussive breaks. It quickly spread to London and Germany, and by the early 1990s was established in California and New York. And, at least at first, it had a specific market: it was played on 12-inches distributed to DJs, becoming a favourite in clubs such as Chicago’s Warehouse and New York’s Paradise Garage whose clientele included blacks, whites and Hispanics, straight and gay.

Raves, on the other hand, were large parties, news of which were spread by word of mouth or on pirate radio stations, generally organized without official sanction, dedicated, not to put too fine a point on it, to dancing to techno music while stoned on ecstasy or sometimes (mainly in the States) on acid. The drugs were as much a key to the scene as the music, if not more so: they helped confer its subterranean and illegal status. And the dancing was key to the culture too: a new style without partners, trance like and radically expressive. But the music soon evolved into different genres in the UK and Europe, breaking with its early dependence on US beats partly as computers and music software became cheaper and cheaper. House and acid house jostled with Detroit techno, hardcore techno, breakbeat, jungle, drum and bass, trance.... And in the early days this combination of mega parties, techno music and drugs was connected to a discourse of paganism, nomadism and spirituality which clearly remembered the sixties hippie movement and which, for many, was (like punk before it) a conscious repudiation of Thatcher/Reaganite neo-liberal individualism.

In the summer of 1992, at the movement’s height, a rave party in Castlehorn Common in England’s West Country drew about 40,000 people across six days of illegal partying. But the rave movement as such was not very commercializable: its tracks were too meandering and sacem and it was too drug-orientated for that. Nonetheless popularised versions of music styles formed within it entered the hit parade and club music of the nineties, and in particular the corporatised club world of the late nineties with its star DJs producing endless CDs and special nights (let Ministry of Sound stand as the exemplar) were a mutation of the rave scene. The movement’s decline was more due to the logic of exhaustion familiar from the sixties hippie culture: repetition, continual and escalating drug usage, increased invigilation by authorities and the widening of the movement from an avant-garde into a wider, more pragmatic and commodified leisure culture, all degraded it. This is to return to the question of authenticity since dance music’s history was one of what Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin have called ‘progress by attrition’ — where (as the story goes, sometimes more persuasively than at other times) what starts out real ends sold out (Frith and Goodwin 1990, ix).

More specifically: what was important about the rave scene and its music was that, unlike ‘yigger’, punk and hip hop, it had absolutely no organic base, no community defined in terms outside of itself which it could claim to articulate and express. It was drawn together by the music and the drugs — and only by the music and drugs. This meant that its politics
Indeed a certain aestheticism is integral to the popular music markets insofar as they are dependent on reviews and criticism. Reviewers make value judgements to guide consumer choices, and they do so by virtue of what are, finally, aesthetic criteria. Let's take a (shortened but still long) instance of a review, written by an employee of the independent San Francisco record store Aquarius Records and pulled off the Web. Here rock's aestheticism is made quite clear, as in the unseem between it and popism (as well as the speed with which genres are formed).

LOVELESCRUSHING 'Glasscree' (Sonycopic) cr.9.98

Shoegazing – originally the derogatory term applied to bands such as Ride, Slowdive, and My Bloody Valentine for their lackluster stage presence – had developed into an impressive aesthetic during the early ‘90s whereby the jangle of ‘60s psych-pop had been married with Brian Eno's notions of ambient music as an oceanic/pretentious return to the womb. After its glided crescendo from a couple of records (most notably MBV's 'Loveless'), shoegazing as an artform faded away, with many of the original proponents shedding the layers of distortion to concentrate upon their songwriting. Loveleescrushing – the post-shoegazing US duo of Scott Cortez and Melissa Arpin-Henry – disagreed with this trajectory away from otherworldism and towards songsmithry, thus centering their music around only the finest residues of melody and ghostly remnants of what might be a song somewhere within all of their bleary-eyed guitar washes. Their first two exceptional albums ("Bloweyelashwth" and "Xywebiry") found their way onto Projekt, the stakwarp proprietors of America's darkwave/gothic scene, although they didn't readily fall with Projekt's aesthetic for black lace and blood red roses. The only connection with Projekt may have been in the mutual affinity for the Cocteau Twins, whose glassicidal scree songs certainly resonate within the incomprehensible shame-like vocalizations of Arpin-Henry. Yet Loveleescrushing has little use for arify/thm section, presenting that soft female voice floating way off in the distance amid auratic crescendo layers of guitar reverberation. In all probability, this will stand as one of my favorite 'pop' albums of the year, even though there's nothing 'pop' about it.

(http://aquariusrecords.org)
"Glossolalic", "radiohuminecesent," 'ghostly reminders of what might be a song" — all this is aestheticism of considerable refinement, and yet, almost ironically, pop too. Any traces of a liberal arts education are surely apparent here. But the discourse of appreciation, which is also a marketing pitch, gels with the music itself. This is aestheticized experimental music that carefully negotiates a balance between pop pleasures, avant-garde hermeticism and distillation of dull normativity. This may be the most aestheticized sector of the rock spectrum but, as Bernard Gendron points out in his insightful book Between Montmartre and the World Clubs: Popular Music and the Bourgeois, the founding move of rock culture — the rejection of bland singers such as Pat Boone in favour of effulgent weirdos like Little Richard — itself implies aesthetic distinctions, an aesthetic, of course, of energy, authenticity and disent (Gendron 2002, 214).

The difficulties of accepting the art values buried in popular music are apparent in a great deal of cultural studies work on the field. For instance, an excellent essay by Angela McRobbie on British drum 'n bass regards the genre as a black British aestheticization of popular music styles (McRobbie 1999, 14-16). Much drum 'n bass, she notes, is anonymous and not aimed at a market, but rather is performed and created for its own sake. It's a genre that is also marked by the inability of outsiders to assess or otherwise come to terms with it, precisely because of its inward turn.

The music functions as a record of the lives of its producers. It is extraordinarily self reflexive, continually redressing itself, telling and re-telling its own story. It combines elements of improvisation, uplift and utopia inscribed within its practice and performance and described by Gilroy as a part of a black Atlantic musical aesthetics and also something newer, darker and different. A shot of fear, even terror, runs through the core of drum 'n bass music. Virtually without voice or lyrics, except for the commands and commentary from the MC, there is also the underside of racial memory where there is no community, not protection and security — only paranoia.

(McRobbie 1999, 19).

McRobbie believes that drum 'n bass is a neglected form, which does not get the attention it deserves because it has few links with mainstream public culture or the academic, in comparison to Brit Art for instance, which she regards as a superficial and cynical drift outward from the art world into popular culture (McRobbie 1999, 18). The assumption here is that sub-cultures such as drum 'n bass need official imprimatur, media attention: it is unjust if they don't have any. Which is certainly not the view of many practitioners. Indeed the excitement, experimentalism and 'integrity' of drum 'n bass in the late eighties was predicated precisely on the absence of attention which McRobbie understandably deplores.
The Internet and technoculture

In 1999 India Sinha (known online as ‘the Beat’) published The Cyborgacy: A Frank Account of Love, Life and Travels on the Electronic Frontier. It is a semi-fictional memoir of nights spent playing and messaging on the Net between about 1987 and 1991. This was before Winners and the World Wide Web turned cyberspace into a mass media. In the late eighties, the Net feels gothic - hyper-gothic. Its characters - Jean Shiftucker, Lilith, Hagstor and Methal - prove virtual space like it’s a dangerous, mysterious underworld. Some are virus writers who meet in places such as naKE, plotting to burn and destroy, some are role-playing S&M-ers clustering at sites such as Madame Pompea’s on the Vortex; some become addicted to Shades, a MUD site, sometimes spending days at a time sleepless at the keyboard. Obsessive hackers go after nerd nets such as FidoNet (which started in the USA in 1984 and marks the beginning of this community) as well as the university system, the JANET. More risky, they try to track the daddies of the Internet, both managed by the US Department of Defense, MILNET (the military network) and ARPNET (the research network which was the first Internet system of these all).

Yet access is through modems that take minutes, sometimes hours, to make any connection at all. Phone bills bill up some players. Bear owns a computer called an Apricot (Britain’s answer to Apple) with 128k of memory and a 16-bit microcomputer, cutting-edge at the time but mind-numbingly slow and perpetually suffering cardiac arrests. All this to enter a world made up primarily of bulletin boards that don’t have any capacity for images or sounds at all (Sinha 1999).

At one level what is remarkable about Sinha’s vivid evocation of the old Internet is how dated it all seems. For instance: no hard-core porn, and it’s porn that will kick

start the Internet boom once images are available. Nothing becomes obsolescent quicker than cybertecture. But at another level it is strangely familiar. Who, among those who lived through it, can forget the apocalyptic rhetoric of doom, estrangement and revolution that accompanied the emergence of technoculture? And the opposing rhetoric of renewal, magic and technological bliss which combined sci-fi-futurist motifs with the Californian new-age libertarianism most notoriously promoted by the magazines Mondo 2000 and Wired in the eighties. All this reached a climax with the hollow utopia of the dotcom boom and pundits for a new stage of capitalism, which in turn was mirrored negatively in crazy predictions of the millennial crash on 1 January 2000.

The difficulty with technoculture is that no one knows exactly where it is heading or indeed exactly what it is. Just after Sinha’s time, or, more specifically from 1990 onwards, the Web as such meant something very specific within the larger Internet. It meant the World Wide Web, which at first was just one service on the Net, the user-friendly one with pictures and (later) sounds that many old-time Net people then despised. (Technically the WWW was a global hypertext system based on HTML; see www.w3.org/history.html for a good Web-history timeline.) Today the Web can signal the whole thing: it’s interchangeable with, and is taking over from, terms such as ‘Internet’ or ‘Net’. And the Web does not just belong to culture: it is as much a business, an administrative and a military tool as a personal, leisure one. It is not just a service either. It absorbs and transforms most of the old communication technologies – telephony, broadcasting, mail, publishing – and adds some new ones – audio downloading, listing (which used to be called hypertext, the topic of a plethora of optimistic futurist writings in the early nineties), info-tracking (to give a name to its capacity to record and publish usage immediately). To use the old Hegelian lingio: it sublates the old media, preserving them and lifting them up to a higher power. But in doing so it also hybridises and mutates them. E-mail, for instance, is a form of post text in its speed, its de-individuating capacity to reach many addresses at once, it can become something like a broadcast, albeit an ‘interactive’ broadcast.

Because the Web is still developing and because no one knows exactly what it will turn out to do or what its social effects will be, its critique and theory routinely lapse into speculation and prophecy. All the more so because the digitisation of information and communication, although separate from the Internet, is itself closely connected to the Net’s extension, since everything that can be digitised can, in principle, be put on the Web. At the moment, however, digitisation has its own effects independently of the Web, including important implications for copyright, as in the case of MP3 sharing. To cite a case that Steven Feld has discussed: a song ‘Woroewera’ sung by Amonakwe, a Solomon Islands singer, had originally been recorded by an ethnomusicologist employed by UNESCO and then sampled in a CD by Deep Sound (Feld 2001). It then took on a life of its own: a highly produced version became a world music hit, a video
for which was made. The music was licensed for use in television commercials by a number of transnational corporations including Sony and Coca-Cola. The jazz saxophonist, Jan Garbarek, sampled it in a record of his own, under the impression that he was appropriating "pagan music". At this point a controversy about royalties flared up. Aftanakwa had no economic rights to the song, since it (like a great deal of third-world indigenous music) was regarded as 'oral tradition'. And Garbarek had obviously paid no royalty to her or to the Solomon Islands, although it turns out he had paid 50 per cent of the total royalty 'due to the Norwegian collection agency required. But the real questions were: what recognition was given to the original singer in this drift of digital sound from CD to CD and from web site to web site? And what control did they have over the song's subversion into a soft, commercial "one worldism"? Here is a case in which a work's original context of production is forgotten and ignored as it is digitised and more or less immaterially disseminated. Nonetheless, although the situation is new, the issues of responsibility and control that it raises are not unique to the digitalised era and the ethical categories that we have come to cope with them, although, admittedly, this is less certain for legal structures (see McLeod 2001 for an extended discussion of the challenges that new technologies pose for issues of intellectual property). Here digitisation and the transmission of sounds across cultural and national borders test cultural rights and the law. The Web accelerates such tests and uncertainties. Yet, at the moment, attempts to chart the impact of the Web also are constrained by the Web's being a technology-in-process. How it is used now and how it impacts on lives now is not necessarily a good indicator of what is to come: the Sinha example is evidence of that. Or, to give another example, in 1997 Louise Woodward, a British nanny living in the USA, was accused of murdering a baby in her care. The case attracted a great deal of international activity on her behalf. She became an early web celebrity and, as such, the object of considerable cultural studies analysis (see Seefeld 2000). In particular the case has been seen as a harbinger of web activism's nascent power to work for justice. Leaving aside questions of the relations between the Woodward campaign and the more general "Court TV", it seems as if her case will never be repeated. Today, six years later, the Internet is simply too big for that; there are too many such cases. It has no more relation to social justice (if that was what was in question at all) than it does to the Christian right, political advertising and fund-raising, gambling, or to libertarianism, say.

Then too, Internet sites that were once unknown have now become orthodox. Take another instance from 1997 - the case of Harry Knowles and his web site, http://www.saint-icot-cool-news.com, which became famous after an early review of the Hollywood film Rambo and Rohin. A kid from Texas, Knowles became an important player in Hollywood via the Internet, the first to make that move. At that time his rela-
tive imperviousness to the big studios' spin; his fervent love of movies, past and present; his use of leaked insider e-mails about scripts, productions and test screen-
gings; his intimate knowledge of Hollywood marketing techniques, all made the site important as a space outside Hollywood's own presentation of itself, and therefore a threat to the big studios. All the more so because informed and unbiased information about movies before the all-important 'first weekend' is especially damaging. That weekend is crucial to the US films industry because it is a measure not of reviews and word of mouth (over which the studios have little control) but of marketing strategies and star power (which they can control) and can become the basis for further marketing campaigns. But today Knowles' site is commercialised, containing some of the most sophisticated studio advertising of the moment. It marks itself off from Hollywood in any way, you'd have to be closer to Hollywood than your average movie-
goer to notice. The web independent has been brought into line with established media interests.

So, accounts of the Web have moved on from early upturn or future-shock discourses. Academic surveys have followed them. A recent summary of social-scientific research on the Web's social and cultural impacts presents its findings in the field under five headings: (1) the uptake and use of the new technologies depend crucially on local context and don't 'undermine socially normative behaviour'; (2) the fears and risks associated with new technologies are unevenly distributed in social terms; (3) virtual technologies supplement rather than substitute for real activities; (4) the more virtual the more real, which means that the new technologies actually encourage more traditional activities (as in the publishing industry, where the digitisation of book production has made the process cheaper, quicker and more flexible, increasing the number of books published per year); and (5) the more global the more local, which means that technologies which seem able to transcend location can actually produce its re-insertion. A good example would be the community web sites that provide an effective means of communicating images and attractions of, and activities in, particular localities. There is evidence that connecting neighbours to the Web can increase local pride through the very sense of being globally wired (Woodgar 2002, 14-20). Indeed Net usage can seem to confirm long-standing cultural practices. Daniel Miller and Don Slater's study of Net use in Trinidad, for instance, shows that there the Web was experienced not as a break with tradition but as 'naturally Trinidadian', confirming both to local cosmopolitanism and to local chatty sociabilities (Miller and Slater 2000).

Nonetheless, it won't be the case that the Web marks no break with the past, any more than electricity or cars or telephones (which are equally important, now more or-
less settled, technologies) did not result in a shift in the patterns of society and culture. And yet to the degree that these technologies become part of the armature of life, they evade study. There is simply no point of view that can analytically transcend them or, pretty much, which is interested in doing so. (Television is an exception because, as we have seen, it remains poised between being a structuring force and being one media
Among many. Social scientists examining the impact of new technologies on the community at large are likely to miss important features of that impact, since it is a small number of relatively privileged 'early adopters' who first live out the transfor-
mations involved in usage of technologies. But early adopters' experiences will not necessarily be those of later generations.

I do not claim to be an expert and avant-garde web user, but I am more wired than most in the community at a moment when the Web represents approximately 11 per cent of total media consumer time in the USA and obviously much less than that globally. The United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) 1999 Human Development Report noted that by the late nineties, OECD countries constituted 19 per cent of the world's popula-
tion but 91 per cent of Internet users: this is the figure that measures the global digital
divide, i.e., the massive inequality of Net access across regions. My personal figure for the percentage of media consumer time spent online is closer to 50 per cent, which may
be where we are heading - and this means that my personal web usage may have some merit as a predictive case. So let me offer a little auto-ethnography of my web usage on a particular and specific day (yesterday, 28 May 2003). I checked my e-mail first thing after breakfast and then once every couple of hours or so. I ordered some books and while doing that fiddled with my wrist band on Amazon and ABE. I opened up the bbc.com news site a couple of times during the day to make sure no big disaster had hit the world while I was doing something else, and read through the headlines at Slate.com. As I'm writing this book I find myself googling sometimes to check out information about topics and importing bibliographical details, usually from the Library of Congress via Endnote. I logged on to Linewire and tried, mainly unsuccessfully, to download some Son Volt tracks because I came across a reference to them which seemed intriguing. I thought about an old colleague and wondered what he was up to, scouring the Web to find out, encountering frustrating dead-ends, out-of-date sites and then some more recent ones. I randomly browsed through some books, bookmarking those I might want to look at again. I published some stuff on my own blog and then spent time on Apple Music listening to thirty-second samples of tracks, following the trail of people who bought this also bought this' into albums I didn't know.

Not every day is like this of course. And I know I am not typical in that for instance my access to the Internet is at home rather than through work or e-gateways (cyber cafes, universities, etc.) which remain important for accessing the Net among those who can't afford computer access from home. Nor am I an online gamer, involved in so-called 'massively multi-player' online games that deliver role-playing scenarios which take the Beat's old-style virtual fictions onto a whole other plane. More techni-
cally, I have a broadband service with a wireless router at home feeding an up-to-date and fast computer, which is still uncommon. But the spread of wireless links to the Internet is increasing and is likely further to popularise web access.
Something like the null temporality of the library (as in my search for traces of an ex-colleague). Websites rarely mark their time of origin clearly, and they are there as long as their server remains connected.

Certainly the ongoing triumph of the Web does not seem to mean a victory of dematerialisation or virtuality, those catchphrases of early technoculture theory. The fact that the Web has the particular relation to space that it does, while essential to its operation, seems not to be of primary importance to its users. It does not de-spatialise them, it merely changes the kind of spaces they typically inhabit. The whole "virtual" thing was something of a red herring (although it retains more point as a category of digital gaming). Likewise affirmations of a wired community and wired democracy, and claims that the Web would increase our power to communicate with one another in such a way as to strengthen the public sphere, seem to have been massively overplayed.

Indeed, against such arguments, Jodi Dean has recently argued that the increased capacity to communicate that comes with the Web actually functions to degrade democracy because it submerges the individual voice in a mass of information and communication without order. Digital network boosterism, according to Dean, helps disable the kind of deliberations that might actually make a democracy out of technoculture (Dean 2002). This argument acknowledges that the Web does not constitute a public sphere of the kind that much enlightened political and social theory assumed: a finite number of individuals capable of sharing communications, and who either constitute the population of that community or who represent it according to an agreed form of representation. Yet as we have seen, the Web is probably not the most important force in degrading formal politics based on that myth: the older broadcast media, especially TV, played key roles in that.

In sum then, the discourses that have surrounded the Web have tended to exaggerate the danger of cult classes, its threats towards normative ways of understanding and institutions that are central to our lives. The consequences of Web use may be complex, and we need to think about the power of digital technologies in ways that allow us to ask the right questions, not just the usual questions about the Web as a new medium.

Further reading