Commentary

Put on Your Bunny Ears, Take Your TV around the Block: Old and New Discourses of Gender and Nation in Mobile, Digital, and HDTV

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Abstract: In this article I examine discourses of national progress and technological change surrounding digital and high definition (HD) television. Via an examination of various texts—television and web content as well as advertising on and offline—I argue that these contemporary narratives echo older discourses from the early years of television and the Internet. Similarly, I suggest that while it’s necessary for television and communications theories to address new questions of spatiality, and of global movements of information and technologies, classical theories of television are still highly pertinent. As such, I identify a multidirectional flow between technologies of digital television, cellphone, and the body which both supports and subverts a global meaning economy of consumption and intertextuality amid rapidly converging technologies.

Keywords: Television; Television theory; Digital communications; Digital television; HDTV; Convergence

Résumé : Dans cet article, j’examine les discours sur le progrès national et le changement technologique entourant la télévision digitale et celle à haute définition. Par l’examen de divers textes—y compris le contenu de la télévision et du Web ainsi que la publicité tant en ligne que non—je soutiens que ces narrations contemporaines font écho à des discours plus anciens provenant des débuts de la télévision et d’Internet. À cet égard, je propose que, bien que les théories sur la télévision et la communication doivent nécessairement porter sur de nouvelles questions de spatialité et de mouvements mondiaux d’information et de technologies, les théories classiques de la télévision demeurent très pertinentes. Ainsi, j’identifie, entre les technologies que sont la télévision digitale, le téléphone cellulaire et le corps, un flux multidirectionnel qui tour à tour appuie et conteste une économie mondiale du sens, de la consommation et de l’intertextualité parmi des technologies en convergence rapide.

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At a panel at the 2008 meeting of the Canadian Communication Association/Association canadienne de communication at Congress 2008, I asked for a show of hands to indicate how many folks in the audience owned an outmoded television. Almost every single media scholar in the room raised their hand. I, too, was ashamed to confess—for I am a television scholar!—that my TV is over 15 years old. As I scour intimidating, scientifically worded ads from Best Buy to Sears, I feel I am entering a completely new era of television, one which seems premised on utopian promises of visuality, seamless convergence, or unfettered mobility. Needless to say, this has affected my scholarly work as well, raising a host of new and fascinating questions. But like the DIY enthusiasts who insist on using bunny ears instead of cable to get their HD connection, the palimpsest-like recurrence of archaic discourses and enduring ritual uses of TV also demands the use of classic strategies.

In this commentary I examine discourses of progress and technological change surrounding digital and high-definition (HD) television and the convergence of these new technologies with mobile devices. Because broadcast television, as a time-based medium, has always been particularly suited to the creation of national time (Anderson, 1983), I also ask if and how national and gendered narratives of progress are at least partially dissembled in the movement between and across technologies.

An examination of television and Web content as well as advertising on and offline reveals that contemporary narratives on digital technology echo older discourses on progress and the extinction of old technologies from the early years of television and radio. It is also interesting to note that throughout the history of television advertising, anxieties about technological change have frequently been accompanied by gendered anxieties and embodied representations.

Consider, for example, a 1958 ad for a combined Olympia television/radio/phonograph unit that depicts a maniacal, can-can-dancing young man and woman in front of the unit, another woman clapping and grinning at their feet. “3Way Fun!” promises the ad. “All In One!” David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (2004) have identified discourses on radical technological change as “stress points” (p. 2) based on class difference, but I think that gender difference may be at issue as well. The overarching desire that seems discursively present in both old and new propaganda regarding televisual technology is the desire for greater intimacy that increases exponentially according to the distancing that these technologies also offer.

**Seeing at a distance**

Television means distant sight. As early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, writers like Jules Verne, Mark Twain, and H. G. Wells were coming up with the idea of “seeing at a distance.” Thus, we could say that television—and
perhaps even digital TV—were imagined before they even existed (Christensen, 2002). William Uricchio describes the initial concept of television as being about what he calls “the extension of vision in real time” (2004, p. 164), a kind of camera obscura that takes in the entire universe and shrinks it down to living-room size. To wit, a 1944 ad for Dumont Television depicts a beam of light pouring from a globe of the world suspended in the air, illuminating a family gathered around a television console far below. “Television,” the ad claims grandly, “will carry new thoughts, new hopes, new products into millions of homes.”

Carolyn Marvin (1988) writes that the invention of television echoes the spectacle of the electric light shows of the late nineteenth century. She describes these spectacles and the fantasies they built upon as constituting a desire for intimate contact at a distance, represented by beams of light connecting earth and sky. The invention of the telephone only increased this desire. These early communication devices, claims Marvin, served as phantasmatic projections, meant to reunite one spiritually with the distant loved one. The yearning to bridge intimacy was perhaps one of the most prevalent themes in predictions of future communications. Then, as now, this desire was often written, metaphorically, or fantastically, on the body. For example, a 1965 ad (Genova, Tom, 2001) for the new lightweight five-inch-screen Sony TV has the slogan “Tummy Television” and depicts a rather large man enjoying a tiny TV perched on his stomach while his wife sleeps beside him. (“So that your wife can sleep we also include a personal earplug.”)

Television theory, then, has always analyzed the ways in which television brings stories and news from far away and brings them close to us, into domestic space. Jostein Gripsrud reminds us that the word “broadcasting” emerges from agriculture: the taking of seeds from a bucket and casting them afield, from proximity to distance. It is a hopeful image that implies sowing, growth, wide distribution, perhaps even nurturance, or as he puts it, “a rich harvest sometime in the future when universally distributed information, education and entertainment . . . results in an enlightened, socially and culturally empowered, and presumably quite happy population” (2004, p. 211).

Within the framework of broadcast television, this has meant that public and private space are brought together (Morley, 2000). Historically, television has been theorized as being different from going to the movies because of its intimacy—it bridges or perhaps even blurs the worlds of home, work, and play. Internet and ambient television, no longer tied to the home, could be seen as placing these theories in question. In this sense, then, television now speaks of itself as having progressed from being a place where the near and the far merge and come to you, the passive audience, to being a mobile device—perhaps a cellphone with both Internet access and digital TV—that moves with you between the poles of private and public space.

As aesthetic and social questions to do with television are placed in new and unsettling contexts, including mobility, the field of television studies is placed into a crisis of meaning. Pundits of standard media ask, archly: will there even be TV in five, ten, or fifteen years? These are in fact the same questions that were asked of the novel when radio emerged, and of radio when TV emerged, and so on. Foundational theories of television to do with flow, genre, and site of recep-
tion are, indeed, radically repositioned by greater use of the digital video recorder (DVR), the rise of reality TV, and the increasing presence of television in waiting rooms, airports, airplanes, and on cellphones—what Anna McCarthy has dubbed “ambient television” (2001). And it is certainly true that we’re watching television differently, and increasingly on the computer screen, whether we’re viewing an archival television clip on YouTube for research or in the classroom or watching an entire season of *Weeds* in one evening, on a DVD inserted into a laptop. The increasingly segmented computer screen that digital TV viewers experience definitely takes notions of distracted viewing or “the glance” to a whole new level, while doing away with simultaneity. Yet many argue that such convergence enables a higher degree of audience participation, multidirectional flow of information, and collective knowledge building.

Quite apart from the interactive properties of postmodern television’s persistent intertextualities, television cannot, any longer, be analyzed as a single text. A television program used for relaxation might prompt an information search later in the evening; the complementary Web pages from TV programs might be accessed from the computer, at home, school, or work; the use of the cellphone as an adjunct to television fandom is now ubiquitous. Indeed, certain post-DVR practices of TV, such as the insertion of commercial products into the *mise en scène* and diegesis of a TV program (Spigel, 2004), or, say, Panasonic’s promise that HDTV will reunite a fractured family, begin to look a lot like advertising from the early days of television. A recent Panasonic ad for high-definition television depicts a family whose members must be formally introduced to one another by Mom, so distanced are they from each other. But as they sit together on the couch in front of their big screen, they are remade into a happy family. “It’s time to bring back family time,” intones a warm female voice-over. “And with Panasonic’s family of HD products you can do just that.” Bernadette Flynn (2003) has similarly noted the ways in which early advertising for gaming consoles extolled the family values of a home video arcade, a trope she has identified as being part of the early stage of domesticating new technologies.

Sometimes, as we’ve seen in those Mac ads that pit a young, tall Mac guy against a middle-aged, vaguely pathetic PC guy, advances in technology are depicted as markers of masculinity. It is interesting to see that user-generated ads for the digital TV channel Network2 take up and then hyperbolize these same gendered tropes. In 2007, Network2 initiated a contest aimed at what they called “inspired producers” to make a clip with the title “How to Watch Internet TV.” The ads would function both as commentary on a new medium and as free advertising for a nascent network. Lacking the corporate gloss of, say, a Mac or Panasonic ad, these infomercials reveal some interesting social anxieties to do with digital television.

In an ad created by Casey Mackinnon and Rudy Jahchan, the interactive capabilities of Internet TV are pitted against television’s lack of mobility and supposed hypodermic flow. The producers of the ad riff off of Apple’s ads, with a big-shouldered digital TV guy presenting a cohesive argument for Internet TV’s interactivity, while a frumpy, somewhat effeminate, and ethnically marked TV guy responds in a defensive, childlike manner. Digital TV guy argues, good-
naturedly, “People can watch us on their Macs or PCs, desktop or laptop . . . their cellphones, or their iPods, or TiVO, or Akimbo.” TV guy responds lamely, with a rhyming couplet: “You can watch me on your sofa, or you can watch me with your loofah” (Galacticast, 2007).

In another Network2 user-generated ad created by Josh Leo, the owner of a television, frustrated with its lack of mobility, duct-tapes the TV’s bunny ears to his head, picks up his huge set, and walks around his neighbourhood, hyperbolizing television’s lack of mobility (Leo, 2007). But the ad also indicates the ways in which the search for intimacy becomes an intimacy with the technology itself: a kind of convergence between body and mobile device that echoes those nineteenth-century fantasies about communications.

**The national public**

If we think back to that image of the farmer spreading seeds, there is a paradox to television’s increasing mobility. We might say that that mobility impedes the sowing of national and regional identities—the ways in which public television broadcasters like CBC become a marker of an affective Canadian national space, one that promises an idea of “home.” As Morley writes, broadcast television links “the national public into the private lives of its citizens, through the creation of both sacred and quotidian moments of national communion” (2000, p. 106). We might be glad that this is happening, for as many scholars have reminded us, publicly funded national narratives are frequently used to mask internal dissent (Shaw, 1995) or to compensate for the failures of individual or subaltern memories of the nation (Ahmed, 2000). Still, whether it is the masculinized nationalist practices of sports fandom or the ritualized gathering of lesbians on Thursday night to watch *The L Word*, we need to interrogate these losses. While the loss of disciplinary representations may not be much to cry about, we might also wish to think through the ways in which television operates as a node of community formation. Gripsrud (2004) argues that broadcasting has worked to provide a “shared cultural menu” (p. 213) crucial to social identities, although those who have not necessarily seen their cultures on the menu might disagree. Still, with all of its shortcomings, is this work that only broadcast television can do?

All technologies have had to reinvent themselves as newer technologies threatened to eradicate them (Thorburn & Jenkins, 2004). Broadcast television is seeking new ritual formations via such shows as HBO’s *In Treatment*, which airs every weekday evening, capturing a different client’s therapy session each night before concluding each Friday in the office of the therapist’s therapist. At least one DVR-owning psychotherapist I know is throwing digital technology to the winds in order to be physically present for this show every night that it airs.

Much popular discourse has the computer and the cellphone completely displacing television. “Cellphone TV a reality within five years, analyst says,” reads a 2005 *CanWest News* headline (Gignac, p. 1). Coincidentally or not, the “analyst” in question works for a wireless consulting firm. In yet another viewer-produced ad for Network2, by Ian Savage, Internet TV even displaces the computer. Ted, a nerdy guy in a suit, loves his Internet TV—so much so that he has it fed to him intravenously; so much so that he internalizes both TV and computer, no longer needing to be attached in any way to a machine—he is machine (Savage,
Here, Internet TV is shown, in an ironic tongue-in-cheek manner, to be many things: emasculating in a fashionable, metrosexual, nerdy kind of way; but even more interestingly, as a medium that will erase the boundaries of body and machine, skin and screen. It is not only TV that is eradicated, but the computer too—Ted’s body is now an entertainment unit. Cultural anxieties about fragmented identities and a constant movement between homes or between home, work, and play are here resolved in an imaginary, cyborgian, and highly ironic notion of technology that is cannibalistic and preys on itself.

However, the discourse of advertising for television’s new technologies, with its national narrative of progress and dizzying change, belies the ways in which consumers and audiences still make their own decisions about how they will use and create meaning out of these changes. Television is still central to domestic life. For example, when I assigned my students the task of staring at a blank television screen for half an hour, many of them noted how everything in the room they were in—whether it was their parents’ living room or their own residence dorm—was centred around the television. Some theorists are even arguing that digital television is actually bringing about a redomestication of TV. Lars Holmgaard Christensen defines this domestication as the active process in which users attempt to find a place for the technology in the household and make it useful and meaningful in their everyday life (2002). The domestication of technology therefore becomes a process of taking control of a technology in the home. And television, still delivering audiences to advertisers, is central to this process.

Marshall McLuhan wrote, “The content of any medium is always another medium” (1964). He would perhaps insist that the content of the Internet is television. A Sony ad (Sony Style, 2007) for example, talks about its Bravia Internet link as having computer use “blended into the TV experience.” Most studies suggest that computer use enhances television use. Thorburn and Jenkins (2004) coin the term “transmedia storytelling” (p. 8), by which they mean content designed to appear across various media platforms. Transmedia storytelling, then, can also be seen as creating a new kind of cultural competence and set of reading strategies. Meaning-making becomes not only intertextual but also inter-technology, in ways that both ironize and update older technologies. In Deleuzian terms, such storytelling suggests a multidirectional flow between technologies of digital television, cellphone, and the body that both supports and subverts a global meaning economy of consumption and intertextuality amid rapidly converging technologies.

Hybridity—the bringing together of different identities, and the creation, out of that, of new identities—is posited within postcolonial theory as a liberatory space. Thorburn and Jenkins point out that focusing on the competition between technologies erases the interesting ways in which technologies hybridize. Convergence, they argue, “can be understood as a way to bridge or join old and new technologies, formats and audiences” (2004, p. 3).

So we can say, productively and hopefully, that digital TV and HDTV have the potential to offer not just a visual aesthetics of precision, sharpness, and depth, but also an intellectual aesthetic of critical thinking, evaluation, and intertextuality. I may not have a state-of-the-art TV, but then I do not, any more, use
it just for itself. My laptop and cellphone distract me and give me other points of view to consider, critical voices to destabilize, or at least enhance, my staunch fandom of *Dancing with the Stars*. Television, so rooted in national time, can then be seen as being in dialogue with digital media’s non-synchronous time, creating what Appadurai has called a “post-national imaginary” (1996, p. 2). Perhaps, like those nineteenth-century visionaries of electricity, I am projecting my own desires for the public intimacies of community onto new, privatized technologies. I am staying tuned to the uneasy possibilities they hold.

**Ad Citations**


**References**


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