
Although the most popular pastime of industrial society, television and its attendant issues of production, reception, and exhibition have been delegated to the backwaters of the academy, reluctantly added to the curricula of communication, sociology, and rare film departments, and once there all but universally treated as an aesthetic and moral wasteland, a compromise to the avocation of the university. Reality television seemed to provide a momentary resurgence for a field that had burned brightly in the 1970s and 1980s, but with television’s absorption into the digital realm of social networking and viral communication, it may have seemed like the days of television studies were numbered. Well, according to John Hartley, the opposite is true: television studies’ moment has finally arrived.

Hartley is well positioned to weigh in on the past and ever-shifting future of television and television studies alike. His 1978 book co-authored with John Fiske, Reading Television, was, after all, one of the foundational texts in the new area. Since then he has written extensively on television as well as more broadly on communication and media studies. His books have been translated into dozens of other languages, and his work can be found in all the important media studies anthologies. In addition, he is the founding editor of the International Journal of Cultural Studies. It would be no exaggeration to say that John Hartley has helped shape the field of television and media studies.

Television Truths is a compendium of some of Hartley’s prodigious output, repurposing eleven recently published articles. Its vision is ambitious, its tone at times prophetic. If Hartley’s influence on television studies will continue to exert itself as strongly as it has for the past thirty years, this book should be given close attention by teachers and students of communication studies.

With a cleverness we have grown to expect, Hartley divides the book according to traditional philosophical categories of epistemology (“Is TV True?”), ethics (“Is TV a Polity?”), and aesthetics (“Is TV Beautiful?”). These three parts are comprised of some wide-ranging discussions of the state of the field that veer between insightful and frustrating, but are always engaging. Hartley’s view is that the technological changes in television delivery and the democratization of video production and distribution via the Internet have irrevocably transformed the broadcast model of reception studies with its ideological underpinnings, into a participatory DIY model of media production.

As “technologies of the public” change and accelerate, so too does the public itself. Democracy, Hartley argues, may be “migrating” from older modernist technologies of the public, from which, if voter turn out is any indication, so many people have already disengaged, to a faster “mediasphere.” Far from destroying literacy and democracy, digitized television might be seen as the basis of new achievements of democratic literacy (defined as reading plus writing) and even a new republicanism.
Hartley’s argument may be summed up as follows: now that television has escaped the box and the national framework, it has become the paradigm of a new model of global, digital consumer-citizen engagement. This conception transforms the couch potato of classical mass communication theory into a digitally enhanced content navigator-creator engaged in what Hartley terms “a process of redaction” or recombinant editing. Concomitantly, it places television studies itself, as the discipline most suited to the study of this emergent phenomenon, at the centre of a new paradigm of citizen-state and consumer-entertainment industry relations. Feudal and paternalistic state models have been overcome and a new order based on participation and plebiscite needs to be recognized not as a shell of a functional polity, but precisely as its new form: something Hartley has termed “democratainment.”

The discussion found in parts 1-3 of *Television Truths* is entirely engaging, if slightly infuriating, and reading it feels at times like sitting down to dinner with a smart and opinionated companion who has had a drink or two and wants to hold forth (especially his Shakespearean reading of Celebrity Big Brother and his assertion that synchronized swimming is the new football). However, in part four of the book, “Metaphysics of TV,” Hartley shows his hand. His argument about the future of TV being intimately linked to the future of both university and social arrangement here takes on a concrete form, and it is one that may give pause. In 2000 Hartley was hired as Dean of Arts at the University of Queensland in Australia. There, he oversaw the dismantling of that faculty and its re-branding in 2001 as the Creative Industries Faculty. Since 2005, while still a professor in that faculty, he has also been the director of the Australian Research Council’s Centre of Excellence in Creative Industries and Innovation. And, the final section of the book reads like the promotional material for the role of media and media studies in the new economy.

As Hartley sees it, in the knowledge economy the arts and humanities need to be repurposed for use by people who will spend their lives working in the converged “creative industries.” “The arts, computers, entertainment media, and telecommunications were no longer separate industries but aspects of the same emergent phenomenon in a post-broadcast era” (p. 250). he says of his epiphany in the first year of the millennium.

“It was no longer viable to think of infrastructure (IT), connectivity (telecoms), and content (media) as separate disciplines, and to keep all of these away from ‘culture’ and the creative and performing arts. Furthermore, if the new economy was to be based on consumer action not behaviour, and on innovation in the services sector, there was a need to get beyond behaviourist models of the consumer and marketing models of society. Graduates needed capabilities that would enable them to act with confidence both as consumers and as citizens, and to create affluence both economic and symbolic out of their own talents and actions.” (p. 250)

In the knowledge economy, the key word according to Hartley is “innovation” and universities should, he proposes, be restructured to enable “project management,” “entrepreneurship,” and “life design.”
Characterizing the existing university as a dinosaur, barely post-medieval, Hartley asks how these institutions of higher education based on outmoded objectives of knowledge preservation and the granting of credentials are relevant to the digitally networked world. “As alternative sources, networks, and technologies of knowledge proliferate, what stories will universities need to tell in order to win acceptance from the general public and the public purse for what they do” (p. 254)? These are important questions for anyone working in, studying in or supporting universities. But not everyone may be as convinced by his answers, which include a system of “learning services” based on “academic entrepreneurship” that encourages “innovation rather than repetition in the classroom” (p. 257). In place of departments Hartley envisions “creative educational incubators” integrated into “consumer services, career development, and the ‘experience’ economy” (p. 257).

Television studies is poised at the forefront of these changes, says Hartley, and in fact becomes the core discipline of the faculty formerly known as Arts. As the broadcast model is superseded by the interactive age, television studies should, Hartley proposes, stop “lambasting its object of study” (p. 259) and start improving it. As they merge together, television and the university can both be improved by entrepreneurial academics who embrace their new precarity in the knowledge economy and are only as good as their last research and development grant.

Hartley, himself the product of a literary education, has had a long career of academic innovation in the field of media studies. His latest proposal should be looked at with seriousness by anyone working in the field for it seems likely that Hartley’s arguments for integration between what he calls the creative industries and the university may well come to pass and we may all be teaching at TVU.

Reference

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