Jephther Ukachukwu
European Journal of Communication 2008; 23; 508
DOI: 10.1177/02673231080230040604

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There is a similar combination of strength and shortcoming in terms of how the systemic perspective is adopted in the book. Far too often the literature on the field focuses on only one of the actors of the political communication systems, as if they could ever be understood in isolation. So, Stanyer’s systemic emphases on interdependence and reflexivity, on the mutual influence among politicians, journalists and citizen-audiences are certainly to be welcomed. But, in part because of how the book is organized, addressing each of the actors in turn, these linkages are not always given as much airing as one could have hoped for.

Finally, there are some issues regarding the argument of the communication and engagement inequalities. The fact that the dynamics of modern political communication, with its selective emphasis on ‘key’ voters, politically self-motivated elites and commercially attractive audiences serves some citizens better than others, exacerbating existing inequalities and divisions, is an important and forceful argument. It is, moreover, one that is often overlooked in the literature as a result of either the sweeping negativity of media malaise, or because of the counter-emphasis on those who benefit from the virtuous circle (Norris, 2000). But precisely because of the importance of this argument, the book would have benefited from a more thorough engagement with the political economy of culture and communication literature (PECC), which has been drawing attention to some of these issues for years. Such an engagement, and a more explicit acknowledgement that in the past communication entitlements and political participation have had anything but a perfectly equal distribution, might have made the book’s main argument stronger. Namely, that although these inequalities are not new, the changes in the dynamics of modern political communication can greatly exacerbate them.

Overall, Modern Political Communication is a useful and interesting book; a good starting point for undergraduate students and of appeal to anyone with a non-academic interest in political communication and in its impact on democratic politics. For those with more advanced knowledge of these issues, it might feel at times a bit too broad and descriptive. Yet, the dual focus on the US and the UK and the plentiful data are likely to make it attractive to advanced students and academics alike, both as a teaching aid and as reference source.

Reference

Ana Inés Langer
University of Glasgow


Television is ubiquitous, complex and elusive. To conceptualize and apply a theoretical framework on television – a commonplace item in most people’s living
rooms and kitchens as well as in bars, pubs, restaurants and other public and private places – seems a daunting task. Not only is television flexible and open; it also resists any imposition of fixed, innate and monotonous qualities of empirical experience and ideation. This is, according to Milly Buonanno, because it ‘allows us to switch between looking and listening, between involvement and detachment, and it offers us both demanding and relaxing forms of cultural entertainment and social participation’ (p. 41). Any attempt to explore television as a sociocultural construct, an art form and a technological continuum of prior media, can therefore be provocative and exciting.

This is exactly what this book does. Through well-thought-out arguments and fluid exposé, Buonanno gracefully takes the reader on a journey, the destination of which the reader does not anticipate, but will enthusiastically reach. At first she takes the reader through familiar television terrain. Then she begins to bring out little ‘gems’ by exploring different perspectives and gradually gravitating towards new angles that hitherto may not be common knowledge. Suddenly the reader starts seeing television from a broader perspective and is in a position to engage critically with well-established views and assumptions in television studies.

Broadly speaking, the book can be divided into two main aspects. The first aspect deals with various television theories, highlighting new dimensions to our understanding of these theories and exploring the importance of transition theory as a basis for a spatial and temporal understanding of television. The second aspect deals with the experiential elements in television studies. The ideas from these two aspects of the book are intricately intertwined as well as illuminating and refreshing in their own right.

The book starts by exploring the ‘Age of Television: Seeing Far, Going Far’. This title is anchored on the importance of communication in human history and development. The author argues that just as human development is classified in accordance with time periods (Iron Age, Bronze Age, classical era and modern era), communication should be an important factor in defining epochs and in distinguishing one from another. Hence, tracking developments in human communication as transitions from the age of sign and signal, through the ages of spoken and written words to the age of the press and mass communication, and then right up to the emerging age of computing and Internet is a possible alternative. The transitory nature of various communication ages underscores the importance of transition theory as the bedrock of understanding the ‘age of television’. Buonanno posits that transition theory adopts a connective approach that is a cognitive style that prefers to take coexistence and combination into consideration (the form ‘both . . . and’ or an inclusive distinction) in preference to substitutions or dichotomies (the form ‘either . . . or’, the exclusive distinction). That is why modern communication coexists with traditional communication in modern society and is not substitutive, although a new medium may tend to edge its predecessors out and install itself centre-stage. This cumulative quality of communication is fundamental to understanding the age of television. However, although the book goes on to develop the idea of the television age through a fantastic blend of television’s past and present with comparison between the domestication of television and ‘ambient television’, it does not cogently establish the argument that human history can be defined by various stages of human communication development. This leaves the reader free either to accept or reject the
hypothesis at face value. Further elaboration of the argument is a critical omission given that the title ‘Age of Television’ is the book’s unique selling point.

Exploring further the growing interconnection in media studies between media and ‘spaces’ (both domestic and social), the book highlights the relationship between television and mobility (the idea that television allows you to go out and see new places in your home without physically moving from your home: the world in your home). Buonanno adds new insight into the concept of ‘sense of space’ fostered by television viewing. Meyrowitz (1985) posits that television creates a weakening or loss of the sense of place, the delocalization of social life, so that when ‘we are everywhere, we are also in no place in particular’. Buonanno challenges this concept of no place and the nowhere of a televisual dystopia by arguing that the diverse places and spaces television allows its audience to not cancel each other out, but interact within the new coexistence between nearness and distance, a sense of here and elsewhere, home and the world. Furthermore, she argues that recognizing the domestic nature of television as an elaborate historical and cultural construct allows us to underline the public and collective dimension of television in its guises that change according to context – just as sense of place in television is affected by simultaneousness in the specifically bi-local experience of television (p. 20). Once again we see Buonanno adopting the principles of transition theory. The domestication of television did not replace ambient television (omnipresence and contextualized TV in various social spaces); rather they are complementary.

The succeeding chapter delves into television theories. Buonanno adopts Meyrowitz’s (1993, 1998) postulations about the metaphorical constructs of the nature of television, namely: metaphor of the channel; metaphor of language; and metaphor of the environment. She argues that understanding these constructs and their interrelatedness helps provide reliable media research. She critically analyses the theories of ‘flow, glance, and gaze’. She points out that such theories slant towards the perspective of medium theory to the neglect of theoretical perspectives focusing on representations, institutions and process. Instead of debunking the theory of flow (the idea of sequential flow of television from one programme to another, which forces the viewer to become immersed and submerged in the torrent of televisual flow), Buonanno accepts the occurrence of flow but emphasizes the active nature of the viewer, the individuality of particular television programmes and the reality of zapping. She states: ‘by analogy, where absolute beginners or outsiders to television, or in a likelihood those who shun television because they despise it, will watch indiscriminately, competent viewers – that is to say, most viewers – will grasp the differences in the sequence of programmes and even of fragments as happens when one is zapping’ (p. 34).

Similarly, she contextualizes the concepts of glance (the absent-minded, casual and nonchalant watching of television) and gaze (immersed, undivided attention, a ‘couch potatoes’ attitude to watching television) by arguing that they are often not mutually exclusive but complementary. She takes the view that our personal experience of watching television includes both the glance and the gaze depending on our circumstances and inclinations. In addition, different types of programme educe different styles of watching for different people at different times. A television at home or work may be switched on to produce counterpoint or background to what we are doing, or serve as a form of quasi-social company
when we are alone and need to hear human voices. This requires little more than occasional glances, whereas sometimes, for a range of different reasons, we may relax with the television and give it our whole and undivided attention.

Theories of flow, glance and gaze were postulated in the latter part of the 20th century when television and other communication technologies were not as advanced as they are now. Given the novelty of the medium and the circumstances and context of the period when these theories were formulated, it may be that the phenomena they describe were commonplace. In the early stages of development of a medium, its technological functions and artistic features may be different to those of a succeeding period. Also, audience relationships and interactions with the medium may vary from those of later times. Therefore, criticism of these theories should recognize and take into account their historical and social context. Besides, Buonanno's criticism of these theories may benefit from the advantage of hindsight. Definitely, there have been both spatial and temporal changes that, although minor, may have altered both the medium (television) and its audience. Television in terms of technology, programming, content and timing has come a long way in its journey to the early 21st century. For instance, at times, modern television programmes can and do rival the cinema both in technical quality and innovation, unlike in the past. The Citroen advert of a car that transforms into a man-like walking car was on air months before the film *Transformers*, which used the same idea as the basis of cinematic entertainment.

The concept of 'media event' (otherwise called the televisual ceremony) is the next focus of the book. Buonanno uses the case study of the television drama, *Mother Teresa of Calcutta*, as an opportunity to introduce, discuss and supplement this concept. Media events are programmes by virtue of their unique nature; they receive huge attention and involvement from large national and international audiences. Often these events have an existence of their own, separate from television – because they would have happened irrespective of television involvement or not. The events become even more important because television shoots them and broadcasts them nationally and internationally. Television thus becomes a means not just of the creation of a temporal co-presence that breaks the chain of spatial distance, thereby giving people access to shared experience via simultaneous televisual exposure both in size of audience and geography covered, it also becomes a repository of history. Media events, Buonanno points out, bring about a celebration of common values, which are consensual and reconciliatory, at least for the period of the televisual event. She argues that public events that become media events do not suffer any degradation of their ceremonial and public dimension because of being linked with the domestic space of televisual viewing. She posits that one of the aims of media events theory is to ‘lend transparency and value to the retexualization of the ceremonial, and to the redrawing of the symbolic boundaries between public and private space which – quite unlike a simple privatization of what is public – takes place in the home viewing of the collective event’ (p. 65). She does not rule out a situation where the audience will reconfigure the domesticity of television viewing into a public space in order to participate in a media event. However, in view of recent developments in the televisual environment in developed countries, one wonders whether most public events are inseparable from television, and so may not exist without it. Given its commercialized basis, most public events are now adapted to fit the requirements of
television. These events are global because of television and will never mean much without it. Good examples are global sporting events like the Olympics and Football World Cup.

Furthermore, Buonanno agrees with Dayan and Katz (1992) that some media events are not rigidly regulated by the ‘liveness’ of events and as such are not extraneous from broadcasting but rather are compatible. She argues that although in principle media events are classified as informative, they can be transformed into fiction or at least blur the line between fiction and fact. This is often achieved by the narrative course adopted by television coverage, the appeal to emotions and the recourse to utopian archetypes and fairytales. Hence, this new type of hybrid televisial event is not antithetical to the theory of media event; rather, it is compatible given the openness, flexibility and fluidity of television.

Buonanno is critical of theories of technological development and social change with regard to television. She challenges the notion that the digitalization of television, with its concomitant emergence of new media and new communications technologies, radically changes society and human consciousness. She points out that such claims subscribe to the ideals of technological determinism, a theoretical tendency that is reductionist at best. She argues that ‘while technological development tends to proceed quickly and relentlessly, social change — in so far as it concerns the introduction of new technology in the context of everyday lives of people — goes at its own pace, which is normally slower and more prolonged, at any rate on a large scale’. She suggests that we should adopt a ‘time will tell’ attitude towards the impact of technology on society, especially since the impact can only be accessed with hindsight. We should therefore curb any enthusiasm we may have in talking about a television revolution brought about by digitalization.

Furthermore, she points out that if the new digital scenario is to be seen from the point of view of a multiplicity of channels (a multi-channel environment), this may be flawed given that some countries in Europe (like Germany, Spain and Greece) and most parts of the US already enjoy a good level of multi-channel penetration with cable, analogue and satellite technology (even though they may be inferior in magnitude and efficiency). Judging from this, digital television in terms of television penetration and multi-channel efficiency is not a ‘revolution’, but rather an extension or improvement of existing developments. Other aspects of digital television, TV on-demand and a personal video recorder (PVR), are not revolutionary since applications such as the VHS and DVD have given viewers the same ability either to record or buy recorded television programmes of their choice. However, it has to be pointed out that although these technologies are rivalling these aspects of digital television, the ease and convenience of accessing desired programmes is better with digital television than setting up VHS/DVD recordings or buying already recorded VHS/DVDs. The viewing of television programmes at one’s convenience brought about by digital television has created a desynchronization of the television experience we have known in the past. The simultaneity of television viewing that is a characteristic of television broadcasting and helped build social integration and community cohesion has been considerably diminished by the individualized asynchronous viewing of television. Therefore, the despatialized simultaneity of broadcasting now coexists (in the spirit of transition theory) with the despatialized asynchrony of the individualized consumption of television in this era of broadcasting and narrowcasting.
The concept of interactivity (shopping, banking, emailing, betting, among others) is the last aspect of digital television considered by Buonanno. She argues that a small percentage of digital television users (the early adopters, innovators) use this service each week and as such it is not yet a revolution. She emphasizes that only time will tell whether it is revolutionary. Meanwhile, in the multi-channel environment orchestrated by the digitalization of television, there is a problem of ‘choice fatigue’ (Ellis, 2000) brought about by a cornucopia of programmes.

The individualized, despatialized asynchrony of the modern televisual experience has redefined television viewing from a ‘forum to a library’. Television programmes are now tangible (like a book) in the form of DVDs, VHS tapes or TV on-demand, which people individually view at different places and times. This does not completely destroy the ‘community’ feel of programme viewing since there are still fans who share a feeling of commonality for such programmes irrespective of the time and place they view their favourite programmes. In sum, it is obvious that digital technology allows individuals to view television in different ways and instead of being revolutionary, some of the elements of digitalization take us back to old and familiar modes of artistic consumption and storage (like books and libraries). This is especially true with DVDs, which are exactly like books (physical objects that can be collected, bought and stored).

Building on the theme of the ‘de-localization of social life’ created by televisual mediated experience, Buonanno argues that television offers the viewers ‘a seat in the front row’ of what is happening in places where they are not present, and perhaps will never go, despite the notable mobility of people today. This it does through various narrative discourses: referential and non-referential; factual and fictional; historical and imaginative. She posits that narrative systems are very important because they provide ‘the stage for social reality and organise and display dramaturgy through which society represents itself to itself’ (p. 77). Fulfilling this mediated experience are various informative, factual and fictional television genres. She argues that there may be a tendency to neglect the importance of television drama (fiction) in fulfilling this role. She uses examples of programmes such as Coronation Street, The Bold and Beautiful and A Place in the Sun, which highlight specific geographical locations and social environments, human and professional types, intimate and public situations and relationships, which add to viewers’ experience of these places that they may not have been to or experienced in reality.

The mediating function of television is also discussed in relation to issues of illness, crime, religion and death. Various popular television dramas based on crime and detectives, illness and hospital romance, violence and families are permeated with experiences that are sequestered from the reality of everyday life (p. 82). However, as strong as these dramatic representations of social realities are in television, one needs to be careful not to overemphasize their impact or effect on the audience. If television is seen as all-powerful in influencing individual and social realities, viewers may be seen as passive and gullible members of a homogeneous mass society, so raising the ghosts of hypodermic theory. Mediated realities do sometimes differ greatly from social realities.

The last theory Buonanno critically reviews is the theory of media imperialism. She aptly argues that the paradigm of media imperialism (which she says stems from the transmission model and adopts the ‘magic bullet’ theoretical principle) has lost its central position in the field of explicit theories, but still
maintains its hold at the level of implicit theories that underlie public discourse and ordinary conversation (p. 87). She maintains that ‘Americanization’ (a facet of cultural and media imperialism) is not inevitable and permanent, and that the effects are exaggerated. Besides, she suggests that local cultures retain a strong influence on television consumption and production within globalized phenomena. Furthermore, she claims that in television, contacts and relationships with foreign programmes and products give rise in most cases to new forms and programmes that are at the same time hybrid, original and sometimes home-grown (p. 88). Hence, she adopts the ‘indigenization paradigm’ as an alternative paradigm.

She argues eloquently against media imperialism in the uses of television by adopting: the ritual model of communication (this emphasizes the interactive and dialogic nature of communication through which meanings are exchanged, interpreted, negotiated, transformed and shared); the supply of television argument (this emphasizes that it is mostly television drama that is American, which is in any case subject to variation in time and space); the demand of television argument (the view that television gives the public what they want and the public enjoys it, hence it does not matter where the programme originates); the television consumption argument associated with cultural proximity and cultural discount (the idea that television consumption takes into account cultural resonance and the audience is not a gullible consumer); and the audience choice, adoption and adaptation argument associated with cultural identity (this is the idea of cultural affinity to programmes, which often creates hybridization, indigenization or outright originality).

As eloquent as these arguments are, they do not explain some fundamental issues in media flow disparity. Buonanno uses examples from the Western European television environment as evidence to challenge the idea of Americanization without considering if examples drawn from ‘third world’ countries would not support the same line of argument. An important issue that must be considered is not just who is transmitting cultural products or what these cultural products are, or how the audience consume these cultural products. Rather, answers should be proffered to the all-important question of the non-democratization of televisual flow between the West and the rest of the world. Although there has been great improvement with the rise of stations like Al-Jazera (accepting that some critics consider it western because of its location in London) and other satellite stations in Asia and Africa, the flow of television programmes has remained, at best, unidirectional and vertical. Besides, while it is evident that indigenization and hybridization of foreign television programmes occur (for instance, in Africa we have Big Brother Africa, Who Wants to be a Millionaire Africa and various talent shows fashioned after X Factor and Pop Idol), it would be a fallacy of overgeneralization to claim that it happens in all circumstances and with all television programmes; just as it would be an error of judgement to advocate an absolute Americanization of television programmes in third world countries. I argue that elements of both Americanization and indigenization are simultaneously in place in the televisual experience of most third world countries, and are complementary and not substitutive – in the spirit of transition theory. The creative and recombinant process of indigenization (in the form of local adoption and adaptation of television programmes) and its concomitant consequences are complex and diverse, and are not easily reducible to a monolithic view of either media imperialism or cultural indigenization.
Adopting theories of travel and mobility, Buonanno attempts to turn the ‘cultural threat’ of international television flow into a potential resource. She argues that although television is an object that does not require the audience to move from wherever they are watching it, it is fundamentally a medium of mobility. The two dimensions of mobility in travel and television flow are interconnected and intersect with each other: the physical mobility of the individual in real geographical space and time; and the transfer of cultural material in forms of symbolic meanings that are amalgamated into a narrative through international and intercontinental television flow. An audience watching a television programme that is not indigenous becomes deterritorialized. In a sense, when one watches an American programme in Africa, one feels as if one has ‘travelled’ to America. This feeling of motion links with one’s imagination. The workings of the imagination, brought to life by television, can become a driving force of individual and collective geographical mobility. A good example is the mass movement of young people in some ‘third world’ countries to western nations because of the televisual representation of the glamorous and affluent lifestyles of western people. This example underscores the power of mediated experience. Buonanno further argues that this mediated experience, which fuels imagination, needs to be considered on the same level as a dimension of reality (phenomenologically diverse but not inauthentic or artificial compared with the reality of direct experiences). She cites Giddens’s (1991: 23–4) argument that ‘virtually all human experience is mediated’ to buttress her point. She advocates a new theoretical framework for understanding international television flow as ‘flows of symbolic mobile and mobilising resources that have the potential to widen the range of our imaginary geography, multiply our symbolic life-worlds, familiarise ourselves with “the other” and “the distant” and construct a sense of imagined places’ (p. 109).

However, these arguments and examples emphasize the importance of a reconceptualization of the paradigm of television flow. If our imaginations are stimulated and fuelled by our televisual experiences, the problem of international television flow may be neither the direction of the flow, nor the cultural content of the flow, but the cultural and symbolic representations of people or cultural formations in a particular negative or positive way, which may define or redefine the imagination and experiences of the various audiences exposed to them.

In discussing television series andserials, Buonanno links the experience of ‘liveness’ to televisual experience. She describes the elemental structures of seriality and time, the inextricable connection between seriality and ending, life and death. At the centre of her hypothesis is the possibility of tracking down and establishing a nexus between the cultural attitudes of modern western society towards death and narrative seriality. Using the frame of the Arabian Nights; she aptly shows the relationship between serialized stories and life and death. She argues that television serials and series touch the nerves in our human psyche and yearning to achieve the great flight from death. In her view the ‘televisual medium – thanks to the unprecedented volume of serial narrative, structurally predisposed to the exercise of a twofold faculty for dominating time – multiplies the experiences of eternity’ (p. 132).

In summary, this book is a must-read for students of television studies, media studies and the social sciences in general. The fluidity and clarity of the writing are exceptional. Occasionally, Buonanno’s use of ‘I’ and ‘we’ forces the
reader to look more critically into the arguments that she presents. She nevertheless outlines various television theories and uses empirical evidence (televisual experiences) to test these theories, in most cases bringing new light to our understanding of them. As a reader, even when you have the tendency to disagree with her arguments, it becomes difficult to do so sensibly because they are rooted in empirical evidence. Furthermore, two of the main threads that run through the book are the rich potential of the multiplying of experiences of television and the transitional (rather than substitutive) nature of the development of human communication. These two threads seem to be the compass the reader needs in navigating this complex, but highly articulate and interesting book.

References


Jephther Ukachukwu

*University of Loughborough*


I read most of this book on two long train journeys, plus some stop-over time at the newly renovated St Pancras Station in London, which gave me the opportunity to observe and experience some of the complex interplays of media and space that Scott McQuire so eloquently discusses in *The Media City*. All around me, commuters worked and played away on laptops, PDAs, iPods, mobiles, Blackberries – sometimes all at once. Mobile and pervasive media have truly reshaped the practices of travel. At the same time, that older mediation of space by the train, the cinematic experience of watching the landscape speed by through the train windows and the way that experience connects to images of train travel, from *Strangers on a Train* to *Brief Encounter*, served as a reminder of the complex enfolding and interacting of media and space. The railway station too, figured as a space of longing, opportunity, goodbyes and, yes, brief encounters, is a media-saturated environment in all kinds of ways.

This kind of intertextual flickering seemed to me emblematic of the connections and storylines that McQuire traces. His is a book that contains sometimes audacious segues, that crams into a single chapter more insights and illustrations than seems feasible, yet which ties all threads together through a consistent, theoretically rich analysis of the interplay of media and city. Thinking the