issues are reported and in what form or shape they are reported? Perhaps even more important are questions concerning the ultimate targets of all these efforts: the media consumers. To what extent are they aware of this battle for the public image, and its dangers? Does success in acquiring access to the media equal success in affecting public opinion, much less behavior? Although the focus of the book is on production factors, some hints as to the answers of these questions would have been welcome; now they are left to the imagination and it leaves the reader wondering if all the trouble everybody goes through is actually worth the effort.

In sum, News, Public Relations and Power sketches a domain of mass communication in which boundaries between ‘serious’ journalism and interest-driven propaganda are sometimes fuzzy, where a growing number of groups compete for access and meaning in an environment of continually changing power hierarchies in which the large institutions normally have the upper hand, but in which the little ones are not powerless. What the volume lacks in empirical material, it makes up for in terms of concise presentation and nuance in the various issues and viewpoints, and thus provides an excellent introduction into the field for communication students.

Department of Communication
University of Nijmegen

Gabi Schaap


Ordinary Television offers a comprehensive view of what seems to be one of the most neglected areas of cultural analysis of non-fiction television, namely everyday television. It focuses not on news or current affairs, but on the ‘ordinary’, meaning generally disregarded programs such as game shows, lifestyle and reality programs, chat shows, breakfast, morning and late-night shows and advice programs. Besides these seemingly ‘unimportant’ programs, the book also considers more serious magazine programs looking at science or economics and ‘crime-stopper’ programs such as Crimewatch UK. The overall purpose of the book is to investigate what these programs contribute to the television mix, and to challenge their apparent dismissal. Although talk TV recently did receive much attention, the author wonders why so much of the television schedule is ignored by academics, critics and reviewers, when ratings show that audiences do watch. She suspects that the lightweight, ephemeral
character of the forms themselves is the problem; “examining them does nothing to counteract the impressions from the academy that television is too trivial to be worth studying” (2). It is not only the low status of these genres, working as a social stigma when giving a public presentation of one’s research field; There is also a more analytical problem in trying to find a way to approach the material. Bonner regards these diverse programs as a whole, comparing Great Britain and Australia from 1986 until 2001, and attempts to discover their shared characteristics and the dominant discourses that pervades them.

The main contention is that what holds the diversity together is, in the first place, their non-fictional character, their direct address of the audience, the incorporation of ordinary people, the mundane nature of its concerns (i.e., their concentration on the domestic) and their direct relationship with ‘real life’.

The book tries to overcome the limitations of existing fragmented approaches of genres, by discussing in the first chapter the development of sometimes outdated terms and genres such as ‘light entertainment’, ‘infotainment’, ‘reality TV’ as ways of conceiving ordinary television. The second chapter presents the key term ‘ordinary television’ as a concept that enables the conceptualization of very diverse programs as being linked, and that complements prevailing fragmented ways of conceiving changes in the world of television. ‘Ordinary television’ constitutes the ordinary, the regularity, as opposed to special TV, that disrupts regular scheduling. Ordinary television centers on the home and family, holidays and relationships and mediated entertainment.

Because ‘ordinary television’ is restricted to non-fiction television, the people who appear in the programs are appearing as themselves rather than as fictional characters. Chapter three considers the people who appear as presenters, ancillary on-screen staff (such as reporters, tradesman for makeover shows, musicians etc.), celebrities, experts, contestants and other kinds of non-professional participants, such as the studio audience. Bonner uses the widespread term ‘active viewers’ in a different way, namely as referring to viewers who become actively involved in the operation of a program, people who phone, write, fax or email messages for use on air. This chapter contains a combination of literature with more or less anecdotal observations.

Chapter four examines the discourses that operate across the range of programs that constitute ‘ordinary television’. Considering the range of programs, a relatively small number of discourses recur. Those labeled ‘pervasive’ are discourses like consumption, family, health, leisure and sexuality. The chapter ends with conclusions about the television’s power to transform, illustrated by the case of the makeover.
Chapter five looks at discourses which are absent or disguised, such as work, race, class, ethics, law and order and education. These discourses are absent because they are opposed to the organizing principle of entertainment. Other discourses like race, class, value pose difficulties for sociability, the dominant mode by which ordinary television conducts itself.

The next chapter, chapter six, is concerned with the place of ‘ordinary television’ in a global television market, concluding how much more common it is for such programs, especially gameshows, to be formatted rather than exported, like drama, in their original form.

Nevertheless there are some programs which seem to speak very strongly of the nation. For instance the British Antiques Roadshow and the Australian Burke's Backyard. These are discussed at length.

The final conclusion looks at the overall pattern. Entertainment, ‘tabloidization’, the reduction of the gap between viewer and viewed come together in a ‘consumption technology’ (214), showing both the commodities and the ways they can be incorporated into fulfilling, even ethical lives. As an expression of self-identity, ‘lifestyle’ is an important term, and television provides guidance in what tastes, practices and possessions mean.

Some final remarks; the book is well written and a pleasure to read, convincing as an essay on a neglected area. Less fortunately, the book is harder to review as an academic study. Although the analytic perspective is well grounded, referring to longstanding classics of cultural studies as well as many contemporary theories and research, the actual research of Bonner remains methodologically invisible, which makes the scientific quality hard to judge. Maybe the book is not intended for an academic public, as the cover text mentions “invaluable reading for anyone interested in television and media in general”, but none the less, the author speaks very often of her comparative study that examined the content and overall cultural meaning of a very broad range of programs. Because of this diversity of programs the reader might wonder just how exactly this comparison took place (were records made, or were programs merely looked at?), how many cases were compared (it must rather be many, covering 15 years of television in two countries) and in what way discourses were distinguished. Looking for regularities and recurrent features (5) can be done in many ways, which always yields some results. These would gain credibility when readers could reconstruct the way in which these results were produced. What could be a handicap in truly understanding the results, is the lack of cultural knowledge concerning the content of the programs of a non-British and non-Australian readership. I was familiar with only some of the titles mentioned, and although the author describes almost every title, my imagination was probably
much less triggered than one belonging to an English or Australian viewer.

Finally, some pages were technically ill produced, with missing lines leaving the reader puzzled.

Department of Communication
University of Nijmegen

Ellen Hijmans