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THE ROLE OF NEWS IN TELEVISION CULTURE: CURRENT DEBATES AND PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY JOURNALISM

Television and the public sphere: journalism in a multi-channel environment

In making sense of television journalism, it is important to look beyond a particular headline or breaking news story in order to situate whatever purpose it serves more generally in society. Since television is where most people turn to understand what is happening in the world, what is – and what is not – routinely included in an increasingly crowded and multi-channel environment matters. It constitutes, like other media, a space that is commonly identified as the public sphere, a normative theory used widely in journalism studies to understand the role the media could (or should) play in society.

This theory was developed by a German scholar, Jürgen Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which was originally published in 1962 and translated into English in 1989. It has, over the years, received comprehensive treatment (Calhoun 1992; Dahlgren 1995) and been related to far grander political, economic and philosophical arguments than the scope of this book can include. This is not the place to rehash or flesh out those debates. The public sphere is briefly summarised here as a means of characterising what television journalism can democratically make possible rather than something it can tangibly achieve. What the public sphere represents, in other words, is a normative rather than an empirical aspiration.

Put simply, Habermas (1989) charted an historical journey of how citizens, in post-feudal times between the seventeenth and mid-twentieth century,

reached an understanding of the world that was independent of state forces. At the beginning of this period, when the early symbols of democracy (parliaments, newspapers) began to take shape, citizens met and exchanged ideas by drawing on sources that were largely reliable and free from any commercial agenda or political corruption. These meetings were not pre-scheduled events but organic moments in social spaces such as salons and coffee bars. Engaging in a form of deliberative democracy citizens had a range of factual information at their disposal. In Habermas's view, this constituted an idealised site – a public sphere – where citizens could participate, at length, to form (and reach) a rational consensus on the prevailing issues of the day.

As societies became more modern and industrial, mass production opened up the opportunities for media (at this point primarily newspapers) to reach a far wider audience and, importantly, to generate healthy profits for the rich and corporate minded. This triggered, in Habermas's thesis, the decline of the public sphere. When society reached a more advanced stage of industrialisation in the mid-twentieth century, capitalism was in full flow and a corporate culture had taken control. The mass media (at this point newspapers, magazines, radio and the early years of television) had become more factually dubious and politically motivated. A wider communication crisis had also engulfed societies with the rise of the public relations and advertising industries. For Habermas, these pernicious industries wielded considerable influence over the kind of mass media that would be produced and fostered a more trivial and commercially motivated public sphere. No longer publicly meeting to deliberate at length on the burning issues of the day, citizens instead were fast becoming private consumers: passively watching, reading and listening to information in their own homes, much of it entertainment-based, on television, radio and print media. The mass media, in short, had become the public sphere but one that fell considerably short of the idealised site Habermas had envisaged happening centuries ago.

Before we start to untangle the complicated economic, social and political forces that shape television journalism today we must recognise that Habermas's public sphere captures what is democratically possible (and for some even desirable) from mass media. As a normative theory the public sphere reflects a mythical time and idealised space, a benchmark for assessing whether the conditions for sustaining a healthy democratic culture and vibrant citizenship are being met. Television, of course, was still in its early days when Habermas's book was first published in 1962. As Hallin (1994: 2) has noted, Habermas's 'account of the later history of the public sphere is extremely thin. He jumps abruptly from the salons of the eighteenth century to the mass culture of the 1950s'. Since then television has grown into a complex and fragmented beast, the most significant and consumed medium in many countries, representing 'the major institution of the public sphere in modern society'

(Dahlgren 1995: x). Across many regions of the world, it has 'been essential to the experience and practices of citizenship for five decades or more' (Gripsrud 2010: 73).

While news and current affairs is not the only genre to experience and practise citizenship on television (Stevenson 2003; Wahl-Jorgensen 2007), it is what best captures the kind of public sphere Habermas imagined centuries before. The genre of television journalism today, of course, stretches well beyond conventional evening bulletins or serious current affairs programming. From afternoon chat shows like *Loose Women* in the UK to *View* in the USA (which featured the first ever daytime television interview with an American President, Barack Obama, in July 2010), Michael Moore documentaries such as *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* to comedy news like *The Daily Show* in the US or the *10 O'Clock Live* in the UK, television journalism has become an increasingly hybrid genre. In what some might call a postmodern development, conventions from a range of genres have been spliced together to form new ways of informing, engaging and entertaining viewers about politics and public affairs (Jones 2005, 2009). Chapter 4 weighs up the relative merits of new television journalism formats and asks how much of a contribution they have made to rejuvenating the television news genre.

When compared to other forms of journalism, television news and current affairs operate on a medium where their consumption is deeply ingrained in everyday life and culture (Hart 1994; Silverstone 1994). While newspapers may conveniently fall through the letterbox, magazines can be religiously purchased each week or news delivered at the touch of a button online, none of these media are utilised with the same degree of routine as watching television. Ethnographies of media use have shown how the television set is strategically placed at the centre of people's social living space (McKay and Ivey 2004). And in more recent years, television sets have moved beyond the living room. As a result, multiple televisions shape not only the layout of a living room, but also increasingly the bedroom, kitchen, garage and, for those lavish enough (to afford it), the bathroom. Television, in this sense, is more than part of the furniture: it is part of the family home, invited into every room and engaged with at any given opportunity. In pubs and clubs, gyms and health spas, libraries and waiting rooms, trains and planes, a television screen – often showing a rolling news channel – will never be far from people's view. Indeed, apart from sleeping and working, surveys show watching television is what occupies most people's time and energy. As Briggs has put it, television viewing is 'utterly ubiquitous in Western societies, part of the fabric of our everyday lives, a common resource for storytelling, scandal, scrutiny, gossip, debate and information: always there, taken for granted ... Television, both as a communicator of meanings, and as a daily activity, is *ordinary*' (2009: 1; original emphasis). Television, then, is a one-stop-shop for information, education and entertainment programming.

While the rise of dedicated 24-hour news channels over the last decade or so (see Chapter 3) has made information and education services more widely available, most of the time it is entertainment channels that are most desired. Soap operas, football games, reality game shows, films and other popular programming are what dominate television schedules. Towards the end of the last millennium this was exacerbated by the arrival of multi-channel television that was able to broadcast a plethora of new programming around the clock.

As Chapter 7 illustrates, this diversity in television schedules can often be related to how public service and private broadcasting models are balanced within nation states. While many countries have increasingly moved towards the highly commercialised US model of broadcasting (Gripsrud 2010) there is resistance still being shown in some nations who remain proud of their public service traditions and are unwilling to let an unfettered market power dominate and state control diminish. In Europe, where an infrastructure of public service remains relatively strong, this has been difficult to withstand (Cushion 2012). As a result of the commercial media market being liberalised in the late 1980s and 1990s it is today possible to access hundreds of channels via cable and digital platforms (Chalaby 2009). Rather than fuelling a more diverse television culture, however, systematic studies of television schedules have found these tend to rely on cheap, populist programming – imported shows (usually US in origin), Hollywood films, light entertainment, low-budget shopping channels – to make up the vast majority of what appears on screen. While there are some highly valued cultural and arts channels it has been observed that, in a European context over the last two decades, ‘unashamedly commercial television was on the offensive and conquered large parts of the viewing audiences’ (Gripsrud 2010: 81).

In this increasingly populist and crowded multi-channel television culture, then, how much priority is given to television journalism?

Scheduling wars: locating television news in an increasingly entertainment-based medium

Most striking, for news and current affairs journalism in the multi-channel era, is the abundance of dedicated 24-hour news channels that have sprung up over the last decade or so (Cushion and Lewis 2010). For many viewers rolling news channels have become a familiar and accessible part of cable and digital television packages. Different packages make it possible to access a range of international, national and local stations, not just from their own countries but also from different regions of the world (Rai and Cottle 2010). In the UK, it is not uncommon – with even a basic cable Freeview package – to tune into English-language versions of BBC World News, Russia Today, Fox News, Sky News, CCTV and Euronews, amongst many more, without paying

any subscription charge. Audience figures for these channels are relatively low and, for the most part, these are primarily viewed by media, business and political elites (Garcia-Blanco and Cushion 2010; Lewis et al. 2005). Rolling news, nevertheless, has extended the menu of journalism on television and – as argued in Chapter 3 – has had a broader impact on the conventions and practices of television journalism.

Notwithstanding the contribution made by 24-hour news channels, television journalism is most regularly consumed on terrestrial or free-to-air channels. But these channels, such as BBC1 and ITV in the UK, are not genre specific: they offer up a range of programming throughout the day. Within the United Kingdom, the free-to air channels are required by law to run a quota of public service programming in their schedules. In this respect news and current affairs are seen as being synonymous with public service commitments (a point returned to in a moment). At the same time, the quota of programming legally imposed on channels operating within a public service framework includes balancing out the genres beyond news such as children's programming, the arts and religious affairs. The rest of the time they are free to run more preferred (since they are more popular and advertiser friendly) entertainment and sports programming. In balancing these genres, the priority placed on news and current affairs can be assessed by examining *where* they appear in television schedules.

Television schedules, for the most part, tend to be ignored by scholars (Ellis 2000). Instead it is the advertisers and programme makers who pay most attention to them since these are used to generate revenue or capture the largest slice of the audience. In our multi-channel era, however, scheduling has perhaps become even more important. With so many channels to choose from, now more than ever a routine relationship with viewers needs to be forged in order to cultivate consumer loyalty. For John Ellis, television schedules are 'the locus of power in television' (2000: 134), revealing much about how programming is prioritised across different channels. If we examine television journalism in this context it can be observed that news and current affairs plays an important role in the schedule but one that, in more recent years, appears to be second best to other television genres. Apart from breaking news stories (such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 which, in the UK, were broadcast live on terrestrial channels), news and current affairs programming seems to be scheduled *outside* of prime time. The peak viewing hours – broadly 7pm–10pm in most countries – tend instead to be reserved for more popular, light-hearted entertainment.

A quick glance at the UK's, Australian and US's evening television news (see Tables 1.1–1.3) time slots indicates that the free-to-air bulletins avoid, for the most part, prime-time scheduling. While it would be misleading to suggest these bulletins represent a complete picture of news and current affairs on television in each country, they nonetheless usefully demonstrate where television journalism routinely features in the prime-time schedule.

Table 1.1 Time slots for the evening news bulletins on UK terrestrial television channels

<i>Television channel</i>	<i>Time slots for UK national news and in the nations and regions opt outs (for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and regions across England)</i>
BBC1	6–6.30pm (national) and 6.30p–7pm (nations and regional opt-outs) 10–10.30pm (national) and 10.30–35pm (nation and regional opt-outs)
ITV	6–6.30pm (regional) and 6.30–7pm (national)
Channel Four	7–7.50pm (national)
Channel Five	5–530pm (national)

Table 1.2 Time slots for the evening news bulletins on Australian terrestrial television channels

<i>Television channel</i>	<i>Schedule for national</i>
Seven Network	6–6.30pm (Seven News) and 6.30–7pm (Today Tonight)
Nine Network	6–6.30pm (Nine News) and 6.30–7pm (A Current Affair)
Network Ten	5–6pm (Ten News at 5pm)
ABC1	7–7.30pm (ABC News), 7.30–8pm (The 7.30pm Report) and 10.30–11.05pm (Lateline)

Table 1.3 Time slots for the evening news bulletins on Australian terrestrial television channels

<i>Television channel</i>	<i>Schedule for national</i>
CBS	6.30–7pm CBS Evening News with Katie Couric
NBC	6.30–7pm NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams
ABC	6.30–7pm ABC World News with Diane Sawyer 11.35pm – 12.00am (Nightline)

Apart from ABC1 in Australia, television news across the three countries is scheduled either before 7pm or after 10pm. While there is some variation in Australia and the UK, it is noteworthy that many rival television channels routinely schedule their bulletins against each other. This is most obvious in the United States where the three big networks all provide news *at the same time* – namely 6.30–7pm – with each emphasising the role of the anchor to brand its own identity. In one sense, this may reflect when television news is most likely to be consumed. It can however also be viewed as a highly strategic move on the part of the broadcasters concerned: if each one runs news and current affairs at the same time, no one station will suffer a dip in ratings (and thus ‘take a hit’ from lost advertising revenue). Either way, it reduces pluralism in television news since viewers are not able to routinely watch the day’s events from a variety of perspectives. There is, however, more

pluralism in the Australian and UK schedules – where a stronger public service culture exists – compared to the US networks which remain entirely commercially orientated (Cushion 2012).

If scheduling is sometimes overlooked in academic circles this is not the case within the industry. In the United Kingdom the rescheduling of the BBC1 and ITV evening news bulletins that took place at the end of the last millennium was to generate considerable publicity. Since both channels were legally required to air television news as part of their routine schedules, ITV requested permission to move its late night bulletin from 10pm to 11pm in 1999 on the basis that it wanted to run more entertainment programming and screen films uninterrupted (having previously had to break for the *Ten O'Clock News*). While this was accepted by the then regulator, the Independent Television Commission (ITC), audiences rapidly declined within a year and ITV was asked to schedule its nightly bulletin at an earlier time. Returning to its 10pm slot, ITV was then faced with competition from the BBC who had also requested whether it could move the nightly bulletin from 9pm to 10pm. This decision, in the words of BBC1's controller, was to allow 'us to open up our schedule to show more quality programmes at 9pm, including new drama such as *Crime Doubles* and *Clocking Off* and strong documentaries like *Blue Planet*' (cited in BBC News 2001). Having enjoyed a thirty-year stint at 9pm, television news had ceded its prime-time slot for more entertainment genres.

A scheduling war soon broke out between ITV and the BBC. The latter believed, in a multi-media and online age with rolling news channels, that it would not impact on news audiences overall. ITV, meanwhile, argued the BBC's move to 10pm reflected 'a major abdication of the corporation's public service responsibilities' (cited in BBC News 2001). In the years following the BBC has attracted a greater share of the audience than ITV and the news slot has remained on the schedule at 10pm. ITV, however, never settled on a regular slot and has struggled to sustain consistent viewing figures. While it agreed initially to a 10pm slot with the ITC for three days of the week, this was subsequently renegotiated to a more permanent time of 10.20pm during the week and then moved again to 10.30pm a year later. In 2008 it returned to 10pm, but has struggled to compete with BBC 1's 10pm news. A McKinsey review into the future of ITV news for the Chief Executive, Adam Crozier, in November 2010, reportedly recommended ITV's national news (and its regional 6pm service) should be reduced from 30 minutes to 15 and replaced by a quiz show (Brown 2011). At the time of writing no decision had been made about ITV news's scheduling future, but McKinsey's proposal alone suggests commercial television news is under threat from more populist programming.

More importantly, the squabbling over scheduling reveals much about the politics behind news provision in an increasingly entertainment-based

multi-channel age. For while ITV and the BBC can be (and were at the time) criticised for prioritising populist genres above news, compared to other countries (see Table 1.1–1.3) both currently maintain early evening *as well as* evening news bulletins. This is not something that can be entirely credited with either organisations however. Enshrined in UK law, television programming remains subject to a larger broadcasting ecology that values news and current affairs as a key public service requirement (Cushion 2012). Since broadcast models of television news impact not only on scheduling but also on its journalism's news values and conventions more generally, public and commercial television systems need to be introduced.

(Re)shaping television journalism: Public and commercial models of broadcasting

Television's culture operates under broadcasting models that differ from one country to the next and relate to wider social, cultural economic traditions. While the history of television journalism will be explored in more depth in the subsequent chapter, for now it is vital to recognise that the political economy of broadcasting is an important aspect of understanding how news and current affairs are made and shaped (Cushion 2012). What must be taken into account, in other words, is a range of external factors that may impact on why television journalism is produced and how this happens.

In one sense, explaining broadcast models is a question of economics. For commercial broadcasters the primary goal is to generate revenue. Since this is most productively achieved by advertising, delivering large, or better still, affluent audiences is what sustains commercial broadcasting systems. Answerable to shareholders, commercial broadcasting is largely scheduled though financial decision making: which market will it appeal to and how many viewers will watch it? Public service broadcasting, by contrast, is funded either directly or indirectly via public subsidy. In theory, this means public service broadcasting is immune from market forces, making programming that appeals beyond the largest possible demographic or those groups with the most disposable incomes. While its purpose is to remain universally accessible, a key aspect of public service broadcasting is making programmes for minority tastes and cultures (Tracey 1998). This means embracing those genres which are typically marginalised by commercial broadcasters, such as children's programming, science, religion, the arts, and, importantly for this book, current affairs and news journalism, and are invested in by public service broadcasters without (again, in theory) the pressure of attracting large audiences.

The reality of how broadcasting systems operate, however, is somewhat more complicated (Cushion 2012). While the United States represents a fully fledged commercial system with a minimal public service television

infrastructure (McChesney 2004, 2008), across many regions of the world broadcasting ecologies have been pushed in different directions into developing hybrid broadcast models and systems of regulation (Hallin and Mancini 2004). As a result in some countries public and commercial operations now overlap, creating what might be termed duopolistic broadcasting environments (Corner 2010). In the UK, for example, while the BBC has always remained an entirely public service system, ITV, a commercial broadcaster, was launched in the 1950s under the proviso that it would shoulder some public service responsibilities including scheduling news and current affairs programming. From the 1980s onwards a new multi-channel broadcasting environment challenged – or, some might say eroded (Tracey 1998) – the traditional model and concept of public service broadcasting. This has prompted debates into how public service communication should be ‘re-inventing’ (Iosifidis 2010) itself for the digital age and greater commercial competition. Since the rise of multi-channel television, a new tripartite broadcasting system has evolved in countries where channels have either no, some, or fully blown public service broadcasting responsibilities. As broadcasting ecologies have shifted and overlapped somewhat, how then has television news and current affairs been reshaped?

Despite the commercial competition faced by publically-funded broadcasters in recent years, many have defied free market critics and risen to the challenge of remaining relevant in a digital and interactive environment (Debrett 2010). As Chapter 6 shows, many public service broadcasters have maintained a brand identity as a trusted and valued source of information in many countries because of their commitment to impartial and accurate news and current affairs provision. Those values associated with well resourced and high quality journalism lie at the heart of public service values, informing not only public but also some commercial broadcasters in this new millennium. So for example, in the United Kingdom, even the relatively ‘light touch’ regulator (meaning it will not impose heavy regulations on broadcasters), the Office of Communication (Ofcom) – which monitors, amongst other media, commercial television provision – places great value in ensuring news and current affairs remains central to broadcasters’ schedules. In an introduction to a report into the state of the UK’s broadcast journalism, *New News, Future News*, Ofcom stated:

For the last 50 years the UK’s public service broadcasting tradition has ensured high quality news provision on the BBC and independent television channels. It has been a clear policy objective of both government and broadcasting regulators to maintain and support plurality in the supply of high quality PBS news. (2007: 1)

The report raised many questions and concerns about the future of news that are also explored throughout this book, such as the challenges presented

by the Internet, the consequences of relaxing the regulation of broadcast journalism, and the demise of regional and local news content. But what is important to emphasise here is how necessary a healthy provision of television journalism is to the regulators of *commercial* television.

It would be wrong, of course, to suggest news and current affairs on commercial channels shares the same level of importance across many other regions around the world. Indeed in later chapters the key differences between countries with varying degrees of public service and commercial media are explored and compared to the kind of journalism produced and the wider audience knowledge of public affairs (Aalberg et al. 2010; Curran et al. 2009, 2010). But neither would it be right to suggest that public service journalism – in the UK and beyond – has not been influenced by the increasingly competitive commercial environment within which it now operates (Cushion 2012). It would be difficult, for example, to interpret the decision by the BBC to move its flagship 9pm news bulletin to 10pm as anything other than attempting to capture a larger share of the audience with drama and entertainment genres in a prime-time slot, since both bulletins have been described as ‘seemingly immovable journalistic objects, fixed forever in their slots as symbols of British public broadcasting’s commitment to the provision of quality news for a mass audience’ (McNair 2003: 42).

Far from public service broadcasters being immune to market forces, at times it is possible to detect commercial factors exerting their influence on editorial agendas. This paradox confronts many such broadcasters: how can their programming remain relevant and popular at the same time as being distinctive and able to cater to those areas neglected by the market? After all, if viewers are not regularly tuning in and out of a channel it could be treated like one amongst many specialist stations, with tiny audiences hidden away in a multi-channel environment. By ghettoising public service channels the concern is that they will no longer reach a critical mass, and by extension, also no longer justify the licence fee or other means of public subsidy. Thus in an age of multi-channel choice news and current affairs on public service channels have to pull off no mean task: remaining distinctive from what the market already supplies while also continuing to be relevant and popular with the masses.

It is perhaps inevitable, in this context, that some publicly-funded broadcasters have been accused of encroaching on commercial television’s territory by adopting populist news values and going ‘down-market’ in order to remain competitive news outlets. This criticism tends to be most frequently voiced by the BBC’s competitors and most notably by certain right-wing newspapers such as *The Times*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sun*. But while such carping from the BBC’s competitors can be viewed as somewhat predictable there has also been criticism from within the organisation itself. One example of this came from Kate Adie, a BBC correspondent, who suggested in 2002 that BBC news had become

'increasingly tabloid. Health scares, education crises ... it's far more tabloid than it used to be' (cited in Jury 2002). And more recently, in 2010, a current affairs journalist for BBC1's *Panorama*, John Ware, provided another instance of this by stating that the BBC1 Controller, Jay Hunt, was 'as shallow as a paddling pool' when commissioning programming. BBC1's schedule, he claimed, should have 'more depth and boldness' (cited in Revoir 2010).

It is not usual, of course, for the BBC or any other public service broadcaster to be taken to task about their news values and journalism. As far back as the reporting of the miners' strike in 1922, the history of the BBC has been marked by arguments with the government of the day or its commercial competitors from print, television and, increasingly, online sources (Curran and Seaton 2010). But beyond such industry rivalry and quarrels what is more significant here is why journalism is currently being critiqued in the way it is. While terms such as 'soft news', 'dumbing down', 'tabloidisation' or commercialisation are often pejoratively invoked to describe an approach or style of journalism, it is less clear what these values actually encapsulate or tell us about the changing nature of television journalism.

Changing times, changing values: Television news's shifting values and conventions

Accusations of 'dumbing down' are not reserved for television news or journalism more generally. Even some lifestyle programming, such as the BBC's *Gardener's World*, has not escaped unscathed, with the term being applied in this instance after the show was accused of 'patronising' viewers over its approach to gardening. A spokeswoman for the Chelsea Flower Show, for which the BBC holds a contract for exclusive coverage, said 'I will certainly ... see if we can get a bit more quality. I think they're making a mistake in dumbing down' (cited in Jamieson 2010). This notion of 'quality' is important since it often appears to drive debates about the nature of television journalism. So, for example, the UK's Media, Culture and Sport Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, has argued the BBC should 'concentrate on producing great TV programmes at the quality end of the spectrum. One of the things I think we get from having a BBC is that there is competition in British broadcasting at the quality end and not just at the mass end of the market' (cited in Watt 2010). While the 'quality end' of television is often reflected in Shakespearean dramas or arts programming, for television journalism its conventions and values are not as clearly defined and have historically been subject to much pejorative speculation about how the form and style of news have changed.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold, a famous literary figure, suggested that a decline in 'quality' journalism was increasingly becoming apparent in British print media. Arnold is credited with coining

the phrase ‘The New Journalism’, which Hampton (2008) describes as representing ‘controversial changes, some influenced by American practice, including formatting innovations, such as headlines, and new types of content, such as interviews, human interest stories, celebrity features, and a shifting emphasis from opinion to news ... Lengthier columns were replaced by paragraphs, often derisively called “snippets”, and the tone grew more personal’. On the face it, it is difficult to distinguish much of this critique of downmarket print journalism from contemporary interpretations of ‘dumbed down’ news television and current affairs. In response US journalist Danny Schechter (2007) has observed that

TV News comes alive when celebrities or former presidents die. That’s the time when news ghouls come out to play ... Programmers look for “hooks” – and try to generate interest for lowest common denominator stories, stories that will keep viewers coming back ... Increasingly, the avalanche of dumbed-down news and reality shows shapes the media environment with more celebrity chatter and viewers encouraged to participate on shows they often have no influence in organizing ... The effect of all of this, of course, is to further limit and reduce our attention spans, to distract and divert us from what matters, and to give us a distorted view of the world ... Clearly, if you want news these days, ‘THE NEWS’ on TV is the last place to find it.

If we rewind time to several years before similar concerns were voiced in an editorial for *The British Journalism Review*:

Do we hear a distant voice whispering, once again: ‘Beware the Ides of Dumbing Down’? ... There is little doubt in the minds of many serious journalists that there has been a growing superficiality in television news reporting; that the ‘quick-fire’, in-and-out tendency is in command; that this leads to a vulgarisation of the message because background material is so thin or often completely absent. (Goodman 2000)

In each of these accounts there appears to be an arbitrary yardstick by which to measure journalism from a previous era, a time where news was more serious in its tone and content. Brian McNair (2009: 69) has labelled this the ‘narrative of decline’ whereby a romanticised, ‘golden age’ of journalism is unfavourably compared to the contemporary news culture. McNair (2009: 69) suggests this ‘cultural pessimism’ is espoused by ‘journalists and politicians as often as academic observers in newspaper columns, television and radio talk shows, and debates in Parliament’.

While the ‘dumbed-down’ tag is certainly well-used journalistic shorthand for characterising trends in modern life – from lowering educational standards to (re)interpreting Shakespearian plays, and even for patronising viewers on gardening shows – academic observers, in more recent years, have arguably been more critical of the term and the values it represents. Shirley Harrison (2006: 20) for one has put forward that ‘at times the charge of dumbing down is too

often wistful or nostalgic and in both cases wrong ... the history of news does not support the charge'. Likewise, Hugo de Burgh (2005: 39) has observed that 'many current anxieties about "dumbing down", commercialisation and the like can be found in discussions of journalistic evaluation going back centuries'. For Elizabeth Bird (2010: 13), the all-encompassing 'notion that "tabloidization" was a negative process that was "dumbing down" journalism and discouraging rational discourse' must be understood in the cultural context it was produced. In 'Mexico and the former Eastern Bloc', she has observed (2010: 13), 'apparently similar trends in journalism – a loosening of controls, snappier, more accessible writing, concerns about engaging the reader – were acting as positive forces for social change and democratic participation'. In a similar vein, Mick Temple (2006) has argued that 'dumbing down is good' and suggests scholars should look beyond a Habermasian model of constructing audiences as rational and critical actors since many people engage with news that is trivial or emotionally driven. The 'dumbing-down' thesis, in this context, is caught up in intellectual snobbery, informed by an elitist and highbrow sense of what news and current affairs should be as opposed to an accessible form of journalism that audiences can understand or participate in.

Within journalism studies, then, the 'dumbing-down' slogan has arguably generated more heat than light about the changing nature of television news agendas and values. It represents, in itself, a lazy means of approaching media and journalism scholarship, since it provides a somewhat vague and impressionistic narrative of how news has evolved over time (McNair 2009). After all, while the notion of 'dumbing-down' can be contested (since it remains, at best, an imprecise category – see Sparks and Tulloch 2000), what the term broadly encapsulates – a shifting of news conventions and practices, or news agendas and values – can, from a variety of perspectives, be explored by empirical means. Thus, scholars invoking the 'dumbing-down' charge to characterise news and current affairs will arguably undercut what journalism research has achieved in recent decades. Since journalism studies has grown up and internationalised the discipline (Loffelholz and Weaver 2008), there is an increasing range of global sources that demonstrate how television journalism has changed. The chapters in this book engage with this material to explore evidence-based changes and more broadly evaluate what it is that contemporary news values and conventions can tell us about the present and future of television journalism.

Towards a post-broadcasting culture? Television news and media convergence

In order to understand contemporary television journalism the wider culture of news delivery and consumption cannot be ignored, for no news media

text can exist in isolation nor can it operate in a vacuum shielded from the larger world of competing journalisms. The history of television news makes this clear since its development has been closely intertwined with the broadcast culture it inherited. Struggling in its early years to be distinctive from radio's many decades of dominance and adapt to the visual demands of the medium (see Chapter 2), television news also evolved with one eye on newspapers breaking news which broadcasters found hard to resist reporting. In a twenty-first century media landscape, television news competes beyond the familiar world of broadcasting and newspapers. The emergence of the Internet and mobile phone technology has brought new pressures and challenges since these can constantly update news audiences who now no longer have to wait for an evening bulletin to catch up on the day's events.

In making sense of an increasingly crowded marketplace for news, scholars have suggested we live in a 'Post-broadcast democracy' (Prior 2007; c.f. Cohen 2010). Whereas broadcasters once monopolised what was seen and heard in family homes and by mass audiences, today our mediated experiences have become fragmented and highly individualised. In Turner and Tay's (2009) edited book, *Television Studies After TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, many of the chapters expose how television – or the TV – has redefined itself in the face of more intense competition. Turner and Tay (2009: 2) have stated that television's 'content has migrated onto the web through the conventional media's branded websites, but more significantly through video aggregators like YouTube; the circulation of television increasingly occurs through viral, rather than broadcast, networks such as those available through blogs or the social networking sites Myspace or Facebook'. Which television content is watched and when this happens, it is argued, are no longer entirely under the control of major broadcasters. For audiences, this is interpreted as empowerment since they can tune in and out, pick and choose, email-on or delete in a flash the 'vast swampland' of programming that Newton Minow once defined as being typical of American television in the 1960s. Since the arrival of our multi-channel culture television has moved away from a time of 'scarcity' to enjoy an 'era of plenty' (Ellis 2000), ostensibly making far more choices available to viewers. In an American context this has been described as the 'Post-Network' era, where the political economy of television has pluralised the schedules as new cable operators challenge the monopoly that was once firmly in the grasp of just three major networks (this is explored further in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4).

It would, in this context, be hard to empirically contest a Post-Network era. After all, US network audiences have fragmented and increasingly turned to new cable channels for news, films, sports and entertainment (even if these offer more of the same as opposed to radically extending the kinds of

programming available). By contrast, prefixing post *before* broadcast more generally appears somewhat premature since it implies something has ended – the end of television? – and something entirely new has begun. Of course, as with the arrival of any new media, the digital era has impacted on how ‘old’ media operate. Television – and television news – is an increasingly interactive medium, and its journalism has spent much time and energy on integrating the salient features of the Internet to harness ‘user generated content’ (UGC). Whether texting or tweeting, building interactive web sites or Facebook pages, many television news formats have attempted to enter into a real-time dialogue with their viewers.

While this has encouraged audiences to interact with each other and programme-makers, it remains open to question if anything meaningful has changed in a post-broadcasting context. In Wardle and Williams’s (2010: 792) observatory study of the BBC’s use of UGC, they argued that there was ‘no radical upheaval in the way they work, and no great change in the structural roles played by traditional producers and consumers of news’. Rather than citizen journalism leading to an audience revolution in newsrooms, Williams et al. (2011: 85) suggest it is ‘business as usual at the BBC’ in that audience contributions have been dealt with by using ‘long-standing routines of traditional journalism practice’. Nonetheless, audiences themselves have more power since remote controls now allow them to record simultaneous programmes, live pause, or go active at the press of a button. But while the potential for enhanced interactivity is open-ended, most of the time television viewers will continue to watch in ‘real time’ (OFCOM 2009). Television viewing, in other words, still remains largely within the ‘flow’ that was once conceived by Raymond Williams (1974) as characterising how programming could seamlessly shift from one programme to the next.

Of course this is not to deny that one day the Internet will reign supreme. In the United Kingdom a free to-air, web-connected television service – YouView – is due to be launched in 2012 and this will enable viewers to access programming via the WWW. Television is thus becoming a more integrated online service, with higher definition enhanced and on-demand facilities also becoming more sophisticated. Scholars are right, in this sense, to interpret how television is evolving and reshaping its technology, format and style to meet the demands of the interactive era (Turner and Tay 2009). However the ‘post-broadcast era’ has in turn been caught up in debates about Media Studies 2.0, where the enthusiasm and potential for new, multi-media, online technology have not matched what it is empirically delivering. Chapter 7 explores Media Studies 2.0 in the context of television news studies and suggests, within journalism studies, that ‘old’ broadcasting questions about media power, ownership and deregulation should not be marginalised even if the transformative potential of the Internet can potentially challenge and resist previously omnipotent gatekeepers.

From another perspective, the post-broadcast era has also been part of wider debates into media convergence. As Tay and Turner (2008: 71) have observed, it is in the 'post-broadcast era where the convergence of media platforms has challenged conventional understandings of how the mass media work'. Since new and old media have collided, convergence culture has been explored from a wide range of perspectives (Jenkins 2006). Media convergence is seen to represent how new technologies have become 'accommodated by existing media and communication industries and cultures' (Dwyer 2010: 2). But it must also critically examine the impact converged industries have had on the autonomy of media workers to operate the creative pathways that may have evolved.

For journalists this has meant increasingly sharing job descriptions, technical equipment and media platforms. In order to fill the many hours of television news journalism, new cable and digital channels have created more employment prospects. The number of freelance journalists – without permanent contracts or security behind them – has risen in recent years and, according to Ryan (2009: 648), 'can be found in a variety of markets and television operations' in a US context. A survey of freelance US journalists found that some had become accustomed to being casual workers in a convergent culture, adapting to new technologies and revelling in the autonomy that otherwise would have been imposed on them by tighter contractual agreements (Ryan 2009). In *Media Work*, Deuze (2007) has argued many journalists have forged new professional identities in converged newsrooms. In the 'daily interaction of creativity, commerce, content and connectivity', he writes (2007: 83), new meanings and values have been shaped by journalists in fast-changing multi-media environments.

At the same time, media convergence has had many implications for the role and status of television journalists, making it a more a precarious profession to enter. As working environments have evolved into multi-media newsrooms, staff time and resources have been stretched and the required demands of multi-skilling have not corresponded with substantially improved pay or contractual conditions. An IFJ report – *The Changing Nature of Work* (2006) – surveyed 38 countries and found journalists' pay and conditions across the world were diminishing. The report suggested as more state-owned media were privatized, employers were looking to cut costs by recruiting younger staff at lower rates of pay. In a global marketplace, where the budgets for news have become tighter in the face of increased competition, cost-cutting exercises now include employing more casual and freelance journalists at the expense of more experienced journalists in long-term positions. The report labels these positions as 'atypical workers' – journalists on short-term rolling contracts, subcontracted work, casual work, temporary work, and freelance work. And while journalists may have creatively adapted to these new working conditions and converged newsrooms, many

remain dissatisfied with diminishing employment rights and the demands imposed on them by news organisations (IFJ 2006; Ursell 2003).

Ornebring (2009) has identified four trends in the working environment that potentially threaten not just the editorial content but also the professional values of journalism. These overlapping areas include: the deregulation of labour markets as union power diminishes; new forms of employment, such as the use of temporary or freelance staff; the changing use and purpose of technologies; and finally, possible de-skilling, where technical skills are valued above the creative impulses of journalists. All of which, Ornebring (2009) concluded, should not be assumed but empirically assessed within the context of shifting working routines and practices because new technologies are not to blame for 'dumbing' journalism 'up' or 'down' but for how wider employment conditions impact on the autonomy of journalists (Ursell 2001, 2003). Chapter 6 takes a close look at the status of television journalists, exploring their employment conditions, rates of pay and what kind of training journalists receive to cope with the demands of converged and integrated newsrooms.

For within multi-media newsrooms, the role of television journalist does not start and end on the small screen; it may involve radio broadcasts, online blogs and mobile tweets. Tanner and Smith's (2007) study of 51 television markets in the United States found close to 70 per cent of journalists surveyed carried out a range of convergent tasks. They argued new training was urgently required for new journalists to cope with the fast-changing profession. Multi-skilling has become part of the professional jargon to encapsulate the range of demands contemporary journalists are now facing. In the midst of this there has, according to Palvik (2004: 21), been a 'sea-change in journalism' since the relationship journalists have with sources, audiences and producers has been compromised by the demands of 24/7 that are always on multi-platform journalism. Ryan et al. (2008) compared the US network's use of its talented journalists from 1987 and 2007 and found, by drawing on comparative content analyses studies, that reporters were used in many more newcasts per day than twenty years ago and that the same content was oft-repeated.

While the empirical value of a 'post-broadcast' era was questioned in this section, the convergence of 'old' and 'new' media nevertheless holds many challenging prospects for television journalists: on the one hand, converged newsrooms appear to breed healthy creativity and new professional spirit and resolution, while on the other, integrated staff and technology pile the pressure on already strained time limits and resources and have also pushed many journalists into the realms of freelance work, thereby weakening their job security and employment conditions. In the chapters that follow the stresses and strains journalists routinely face in converged newsrooms should not be divorced from how contemporary trends in television news are identified and understood.

However, before we attempt to understand the present we must turn to the past to interpret the wider context in which television developed and how its journalism has evolved within different broadcasting structures, cultures and regulatory arrangements. The next chapter shows how the political economy of television in many countries was shaped by the national broadcasting cultures it inherited. In doing so, this demonstrates why contemporary television journalism can differ from one country to the next and, in more recent years, how various trends in media ownership and deregulation are pushing television journalism in a new direction.