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Two Dimensions of Teaching Television Literacy: Analyzing Television Content and Analyzing Television Viewing

Barbra S. Morris

Abstract: Students engage in basic content research they design and complete for themselves and learn not to make unsubstantiated generalizations about text, or to employ totalization in criticism. Students formulate a precise research question about television text, hypothesize about what they will find, log and categorize findings, and interpret and report results in light of the original hypothesis, using exact evidence from the text. Similarly, students must conduct viewer analysis in a systematic fashion: responding to and designing questionnaires for focus groups and engaging in analytical discussions. Sample student writings, originating from college-level research into sports programming, indicate development of television literacy.

Résumé: Les étudiants conçoivent et complètent par eux-mêmes des projets de recherche élémentaire. Ils apprennent à éviter les généralisations sans fondement au sujet des textes étudiés et à ne pas être absolus dans leurs critiques. Ils posent d'abord des questions précises au sujet de textes de télévision. Ils formulent ensuite des hypothèses au sujet de leurs constatations, notent et catégorisent les résultats, les interprètent et font ensuite rapport des résultats en se référant à l'hypothèse originale et en se basant sur des preuves qu'ils auront puisées dans le texte. Les étudiants doivent aussi procéder à une analyse systématique des spectateurs en répondant à un questionnaire qu'ils auront eux-mêmes conçu pour des groupes cibles, et en procédant à son analyse par des discussions. Des textes, préparés par des étudiants de niveau collégial dans l'étude de la programmation des sports montrent un développement certain de la connaissance du média de la télévision.

Interest in teaching critical thinking about television has increased in our schools. As yet, however, too little is known about how classroom teachers use this subject matter to promote students' intellectual engagement and academic development. Perhaps one way teachers might inform each other about their teaching strategies would be to explain their own teaching approaches and reasoning behind them, describe typical classroom scenarios and, finally, illustrate students' development of television literacy with samples of their work.

In my own experience as a college teacher of television analysis, I have learned to combine close classroom study of content with requiring students to

reflect on their own and others' viewing responses. These two dimensions of teaching appear to work well together in motivating and promoting students' television literacy.

In *Reading Television*, Fiske and Hartley (1978) stress that the first step in television content research is ascertaining precisely what is in the text. They insist that "The starting point of any study of television must be with what is actually there on the screen" (p. 21). Their straightforward position, advocating careful collection of evidence upon which to base television criticism, argues against impressionistic, superficial assertions about what is bad or good in programming. Similarly, Brummet and Duncan (1990) labelled the practice of making general claims about all of television content as the problem of totalization or generalization about television content as if all experiences of television-watching can be reduced to one category. They say that totalizing masks critical distinctions, meaning that "important differences among members of any category are overlooked" (p. 225).

Moreover, lack of differentiation among television-watching experiences often leads to an assumption that all viewers respond similarly. The notion that large numbers of viewers passively accept television content, regardless of its quality, and without discriminations, is summarily dismissed by Liebes and Katz (1990):

"Domestic audiences are not homogeneous entities. The ethnic and cultural communities that make up most societies, not to speak of the aggregates of age, education, gender and class, are all different enough to raise the possibility that decodings and effects vary widely within any given society" (p. 8).

In contrast to generalisations about television-watching experiences and effects of the medium, then, teaching television literacy begins with careful investigations into the actual complexity of texts. Equally important, literate television viewers demonstrate willingness to reconsider their own responses to any text. Analytic viewers understand that they read from their own unique perspectives, and individual readings necessarily differ from one another in levels of insight into textual meaning.

In fact, it is the variety and vitality of content/viewer relationships that emerge as intriguing aspects of classroom teaching about television. Therefore, as important as it is in research into television content to be accurate about what actually appears on the screen, it is equally important to understand and respect the enormous number of factors that determine any viewer's reactions to any received television text.

Although one frequently hears the assertion that viewers are harmed by what they watch on the screen, assuming all television-watching is negative overlooks the multiple roles viewers themselves say television serves in their lives. For example, in response to a questionnaire distributed in winter 1992 to students who were beginning my television analysis course, a student observed that television had helped her adjust to adolescence by establishing her sense of being connected to society, despite feelings of isolation from her immediate family:

"While I was growing up, my best friend and teacher of what few social skills I possess was TV. I wouldn't listen to my parents, but I paid attention to TV. When I didn't like what it was telling me, I merely switched channels until I found a voice with which I could emotionally and/or intellectually unite."

Here is a not uncommon instance of a viewer reflecting upon positive interactions with television. This student recalled journeys through the text, again and again, finding compatible voices there that filled a gap in her life. Those who condemn television for its negative impacts on society, even though many of these concerns are justified, need to be equally willing to examine ways in which television provides positive empathic connections or social links for members of the TV audience who experience alienation from their own lived circumstances.

As we develop television literacy in school, then, we need to be aware of a meaningful social community television has provided for many members of its audience. The classroom where television analysis takes place can be a place where students freely speculate about problems and benefits of their viewing histories. In this sort of academic climate, students can avoid the limiting aspects of totalization about either television content or viewer responses to it. Television literacy, in other words, can combine close analysis and criticism of televised text with close analysis and discussion of how and why viewers interpret texts in the ways they do.

Television Content Analysis

Because of the daunting amount of television content available to study, teaching television literacy is more manageable when students begin with very precise examination of actual details of text. Furthermore, academic study of television ought to depend on accurate documentation. Toward that end, then, I ask students to begin their television criticism by developing well-focused content research questions. Once a precise research question is formulated, students become basic researchers; in logging and coding content outside of class, they determine the presence or absence of whatever features they have elected to study. Once they have actual data to analyze in hand, interpretations of possible effects of the text begin.

During the fourteen weeks of a typical college semester, my students have time to study four genres of content: sports, news, commercials, and dramas. In the first section of this paper, I will refer only to the first genre that we study, the production and presentation of sports on television, to illustrate students' close textual analysis. We have no trouble locating sports texts for our discussions. American television has embraced live televised sports-casting; in fact, all the mass media contribute daily to promoting general awareness of various kinds of sports matches, or athletes, or persons connected to sporting events. Even students who claim that they rarely watch television since they entered college nevertheless report that they keep abreast of favourite teams or athletes, either through newspapers or magazines or occasional broadcasts of the premier continuous sports-broadcasting network on American television: ESPN. Very

few students say that they have never followed any sport whatsoever, and they are all, regardless of their attitudes toward sports-casting in general, aware of many major figures in the sports world. After more than a decade of teaching content analysis, I find that sports, because it is a universally familiar topic to students, offers a good place for them to begin serious television study together.

Despite their familiarity with sports programming, most sports fans relate uncritically to the representations of sporting events on television. It is almost as though viewers think they are watching unmediated direct transmissions of athletic contests. Therefore, sports content is a particularly eye-opening genre for exploring constructions of stories about athletes, or matches between teams, as well as investigating how our perspectives on, and pleasures in, entire sporting events are created. Research into televised sports emphasizes study of the creation of stories about people and events and ultimately works toward preparing students for their studies of stories about individuals and issues in newscasts, the genre immediately following sports.

While it is fairly obvious to regular sports watchers that recounting of athletes' past exploits occurs in sportscasts, the ways these stories are dramatically constructed and presented within a program may not be quite so evident. Indeed, just analyzing the powers of commentators as story-tellers introduces students to considering input into viewers' attitudes toward content. Ordinarily, most interpretations by commentators of visual text throughout a sportscast are well-accepted ingredients of the whole experience. To develop academic television literacy, however, I encourage students to research narrative positions of commentators during a typical sportscast. In doing so, I know students will also learn how illusions of authority are developed in telecasts.

One method of encouraging television literacy, then, is to turn students' attention to observing a very few elements in a telecast that help shape the whole broadcast. For instance, one student (Mary) decided to focus on developing a better understanding of how commentators' narration related to visuals in a broadcast of the United State Figure Skating Championships (ABC, 11 January 1992, 9-11 p.m.). She posed three research questions: What are the physical relationships between commentators and on-camera visuals? Which relationship is most frequently employed? What effects might the relationships of commentator to imagery have on a viewer's reading of the content?

All students log and then categorize or code whatever features they elected to study in actual broadcast programs. In their papers, they display their findings in charts before analyzing the possible effects of those features on audiences; specific research always serves as the basis for their interpretations. During their research, however, new discoveries about television content invariably take place.

Mary, for example, hypothesized that she would find three predominant categories of commentator-to-visual relationships; (1) voice-overs, during which a viewer hears only the commentator and sees something else; (2) face-to-face camera editorializing, during which the commentator, when looking directly into the camera, appears to look directly at viewers; (3) face-to-face interviewing,

during which a commentator speaks with someone else on-camera, occasionally looking at viewers, but ordinarily speaking with the other on-camera person.

In a short research proposal prior to beginning her logging of the figure skating contest, Mary said she believed that voice-overs during the actual athletic performance, or category one, would predominate during the broadcast. Her hypothesis proved to be correct. What Mary did not anticipate finding was a need to subdivide this first category of voice-over into three sub-categories; (1) voice-overs heard during a skating routine, (2) voice-overs employed during a montage of text replays or during an in-depth report of athletes, and (3) voice-overs used as segues into and out of commercial breaks or program announcements. As Mary conducted her research, close analysis of television content heightened her awareness of and appreciation for the text's overall complexity. In highly focused research, a student's development of television literacy begins with close examination of an aspect of content, yet it leads student researchers to discover and distinguish among other, unexpected features in the text. Mary's depiction of her precise findings about frequency and use of voice-over commentary in a one hour figure-skating sportscast revealed the following:

Types of Camera/Commentator Relationships	Number of Occurrences
Voice-overs within a routine	Total: 75 (Average= 12.5 per routine)
Voice-overs within a montage/ report	Total: 02 ongoing voice-over throughout)
Voice-overs as segue or stall	Total: 18
Face-to-camera editorial	Total: 13
Face-to-face interview	Total: 03

In addition, for her research paper, Mary needed to log exact examples of voice-over commentary, and this led to her undertaking some preliminary rhetorical analysis of the language of commentary. To quote from her conclusions about her findings:

"As you can see, the findings partially support my hypothesis. The category 'Voice-overs within a routine' greatly outnumbers the other kinds of commentary. My hypothesis, however, did not distinguish between types of voice-overs, so I needed to look at three sub-divisions. I logged and noted each separate voice-over as a single instance of verbal narrative; when voice-over stopped for two seconds or more, I considered a two second break sufficient to indicate a new voice-over had started. I found that the majority of commentary was dedicated

to educating the viewer about the sport and the quality of performance. The appearance and tone of commentators made me feel as though I was getting an authoritative inside story. For example, when I first saw Al Michaels and Dick Button, they were wearing matching tuxedos. Peggy Fleming wore an elegant evening gown and jewelry. The visuals suggested high quality competition to me, while the excitement of their voices apparently was meant to persuade the audience that the competition was worth their attention. Because of commentators' dignified appearances, viewers are not likely to question their expertise and judgements. ...Voice-overs often contained personal insights into the health, well-being, and preparation of the skaters. I found the commentators were trying to ease any disappointments in performances with consoling remarks; Button called Harding a 'dedicated, gusty, true-blue competitor'. Fleming, however, provided insight into the extra effort of Kerrigan: "That wasn't even scheduled into the program," she remarked about a triple-toe, double-toe combination.

Now that I have completed this preliminary study, I wonder if similar types of commentary are made in other sports, and how commentary might change from sport to sport. I am beginning to be aware of what isn't in ice-skating voice-overs: tough analysis and very complex evaluations are absent. The commentators apparently assume that we want to hear only supportive and positive voices. Now, I am interested in why the evaluations are so limited and who they think we are."

Mary's careful content analysis led her to ask new, more probing, questions about the text, far beyond her initial inquiry. Her emerging interest in the effects of television commentary and reasons behind the tone being established by both visuals and voice-overs, and her questioning of assumptions about audience interest bring her toward increasingly sophisticated questioning of content, while her broadening perceptive insight displays a developing television literacy.

Analyzing Television Viewing

Students ordinarily begin the study of television believing that they already know the content well enough, and they won't have to work very hard analyzing it. Once they begin close content research, however, they realize their understandings have been fairly casual. Moreover, students rarely have thought about whether viewers read television differently from one another. In order to introduce the value of critical dialogue about television content and to encourage expression of various points-of-view about it, I often bring to class brief questionnaires for students to complete. In these questionnaires, students frequently say how important television is to them. At the same time, as Luker and Johnson's *"Television in Adolescent Social Development"* (1989) indicates, students seldom have opportunities to discuss what television means to them. In class discussion, however, students speculate about the presence of meaningful messages in the text about behaviour, attitudes, and values, and they realize that these received ideas need to be questioned much more profoundly. With even the briefest questionnaire answered before group discussion, participation by everyone in

class discussions improves tremendously.

In the past, when I did not ask for written responses to samples of text screened in class, relying totally on students' spontaneous oral observations to them, some students simply would not be interested in examining their own attitudes in comparison to those of others. Perhaps they would listen silently or did not believe their own responses were valuable. But when everyone views a segment of television text in class followed by a brief questionnaire to be completed about the screening, and I illustrate numbers of YES/NO responses on the blackboard, we are beginning class discussion from a point of full representation and participation. Indeed, I feel the collective energy of the class, as a whole, increases as we consider reasons behind differing responses to the same text.

The questionnaires generate both quantitative and qualitative information. Some questions simply ask for either a YES/ NO response. Some questions ask for one word descriptions of individuals who have appeared in the televised segment. Other questions may require identifying or ranking features in the text, in their perceived order of importance. For example, in a segment from a sitcom or soap opera, students might rank the general attractiveness or the power of individual characters in the scene. In the last case, ranking is followed by considering issues of acceptance or rejection of characters and the practice of stereotyping people because of visual appearance or level of language in televised dramas.

Sometimes students are asked to form focus groups outside of class to investigate responses to programs by people that they regularly watch television with. For example, many of my undergraduates have programs they watch in their dorms with others. Students regularly report years of devotion to watching certain programs, and they speak of some characters as though they were members of their own families.

This year, one of my students (Tory) elected to develop a questionnaire to distribute to her dorm-watching buddies, all of whom met weekly together to see the program, "A Different World". She developed the following list of questions for them to answer:

- Approximately how long have you been watching this program?
- How often do you watch this program?
- What is it about this program that keeps your interest?
- What was the main theme of this week's episode?
- Did you enjoy this episode? Why or why not?
- Who do you feel is the best actress on the program and why?
- Think back to when you first began watching "A Different World."
- How has the program changed?
- Was this change positive or negative? Explain.
- Please give a brief description (1 or 2 words) about the following characters:

Please give a brief description (1 or 2 words) about the following characters:

Dwayne Wayne
 Ron Johnson
 Jalesa Taylor
 Terrence

Whitley Gilbert
 Kim Waite
 Freddy
 Mr. Gaines

All of her respondents indicated that they had been watching this program for six or seven years. Tory analyzed their responses to her questionnaires and also asked questions directly to all respondents after they completed the forms. She learned that her viewers preferred this program because it dealt with issues that they were concerned about: sexual harassment, racism, tuition costs, political trust, values and motives among friends. In her paper analyzing viewer responses, Tory quoted from several questionnaires, illustrating her viewers' concerns. One response that represents extended historical perspective read: "The program now deals with more universal issues than when it began. The characters have grown up and the stories have more depth. It is no longer just a comedy."

After focus group projects, each student presents her or his findings to the rest of the class for general discussion. For this kind of presentation, students prepare a one-page abstract of exactly what text was studied, and by whom, followed by a summary of findings (with relevant illustrative quotes) and an interpretation of findings. These summary presentations serve a number of functions: (1) We all learn more about viewers' responses together, (2) Students' own viewing experiences and peer groups are valued, (3) Discussion after each presentation helps create and solidify us as a community of researchers in our classroom.

In the discussion that followed Tory's research into attitudes of her friends toward "A Different World", we discussed ways in which characters in this program solved their problems. Luker and Johnson (1989) suggest the following useful stages of such program discussions: "Establish the facts of the conflict, establish the perspectives of the central characters, classify the coping style used by the main character, explore alternatives which the main character could take, and consider the consequences of each alternative both for the main character and the foil" (p. 51).

The research that Tory completed outside of class set the stage for an in-depth examination of a sample program of "A Different World" in class. She led the discussion, with members of our class involved in interpreting program content as well. Establishing the importance of this program among regular viewers in their own age group before analyzing it in class created a greater sense of urgency about understanding what the program's messages actually were. As Luker and Johnson (1989) point out: "It is important to be systematic in the use of television shows with adolescents. The lessons they offer may be obvious to adults, but they are likely to be hidden from adolescents - especially if the problem portrayed on television is the very issue with which they are having difficulty" (p. 51).

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content in developing students' academic and analytic abilities are ease with text and the depth of information they bring to their research. Beyond those benefits, however, is another advantage: television content analysis legitimizes students' own experiences and insights both outside and inside school. Too many students do not think their life experiences count in their own education. The lessons and samples of students' work in this brief paper are, I hope, examples of how television literacy, as a classroom objective, can promote both serious textual criticism and thoughtful reconsideration of the importance of one's own role in interpretation of content.

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