

Television in the family

Despite frequent moral panics about “television and the family” we still know very little about how families as distinct from individuals (who, after all, mostly live in families or households of some kind) interact with and use television in their everyday lives. The perspective employed in this project has been one which attempts to redress this imbalance and to consider television viewing as a social activity, one which is conducted within the context of the family as a set of social relations, rather than as a merely individual activity, or as the activities of a collection of individuals who merely happen to live in the same household. The need for this approach is surely now beyond argument. As the introduction to *Communication Research Trends*’ issue on “TV and Family Communication” put it:

“As long ago as 1972 the US Surgeon General’s Advisory Committee Report on TV and Social Behaviour requested that TV be studied in the home environment. Ten years later, the update of the Surgeon General’s report ‘Television and Behaviour’ called once again for more studies on family interaction with TV and for a research approach which uses the family or peer group as the unit of analysis.”¹

This perspective has a number of implications. First, let us return to the comments above on the disjuncture between my findings in this project and the generally accepted thesis that people are just as likely to view types of programme which they claim not to like as they are to view their claimed programme preference. James Webster and Jacob Wakshlag go some considerable way towards explaining why stated preferences fail to match up with observed viewing behaviour by the simple expedient of taking into account the influence of “others” (other members of the family or household) on programme choice – that is, “the role that group viewing plays in mediating the free exercise of individual preference”.² As they explain, many theorists have assumed that television programme choice is a direct result of individual programme preference, and that, as a consequence, patterns of stated programme preference should be manifest in viewing behaviour. As they note, Goodhart *et al.* concluded that in terms of recorded viewing

behaviour “there is no special tendency across the population for people who watch one programme of a given type also to watch others of the same type”.³ This conclusion has led many to believe that statements of programme type preference, given that they are poor predictors of viewing behaviour, are of little interest or significance.

In fact, as Webster and Wakshlag show, when respondents view alone, their programme choice is more consistent with reference to programme type (as indeed it is when they view consistently with the same group of other people). A large part of the “gap” between individuals’ stated programme preferences and their actual viewing behaviour is to be accounted for by the effects of others, and the need to accommodate and negotiate with their preferences as to what is to be viewed. In short, a lot of people’s viewing is not of their own choosing. As they put it, contrary to their original hypothesis that an increased incidence of group viewing would result in a reduction of programme type loyalty:

“Group viewing *per se* did not reduce programme type loyalty. Rather, it appeared that when a composition of the viewing unit varied across time [for example, when a respondent viewed with varying combinations of family members], programme type loyalty declined. When the viewing unit was constant, as was the case with a solitary viewer or an unchanging group, programme type loyalty was heightened.”⁴

We are, in short, discussing television viewing in the context of domestic life, which as we all know is a somewhat complex matter. To expect that we could treat the individual viewer making programme choices as if he or she were the rational consumer in a free and perfect market is surely the height of absurdity when we are talking of people who live in families (unless my own experience of families is, for some reason, unrepresentative). After all, for most people, viewing takes place within the context of what Sean Cubitt has called “the politics of the living room” where, as he puts it, “if the camera pulls us in, the family pulls us out”, and where the people you live with are likely to disrupt, if not shatter, your communication with the “box in the corner”.⁵

Let us consider the problem from another angle. Herman Bausinger’s research provides the following account of what “switching on the television” can mean – and it clearly doesn’t necessarily mean that one wants to watch the television: “Early in the evening we watch very little TV. Only when my husband is in a real rage. He comes home, hardly says anything and switches on the

TV.”⁶ As Bausinger notes, in this case “pushing the button doesn’t signify ‘I would like to watch this’, but rather ‘I would like to see and hear nothing’ or ‘I don’t want to talk to anybody’.” Conversely, he notes, later the opposite case where “the father goes to his room, while the mother sits down next to her eldest son and watches the sports review with him. It does not interest her, but it is an attempt at making contact.”⁷

By way of a protocol, Bausinger also helpfully provides us with a number of points to bear in mind in relation to domestic media consumption:

- “1) To make a meaningful study of the use of the media, it is necessary to take different media into consideration, the media ensemble which everyone deals with today . . . The recipient integrates the content of different media . . .
- 2) As a rule the media are not used completely, nor with full concentration . . . the degree of attention depends on the time of the day, or moods, the media message competes with other messages . . .
- 3) The media are an integral part of the way the everyday is conducted [for example, the newspaper as a necessary constituent part of ‘breakfast’] and [media] decisions are constantly crossed through and influenced by non-media conditions and decisions.
- 4) It is not a question of an isolated, individual process, but of a collective process. Even when reading a newspaper one is not truly alone, it takes place in the context of the family, friends, colleagues . . .
- 5) Media communication cannot be separated from direct personal communication. Media contacts are materials for conversation.”⁸

This last point is also germane to the hoary old question as to whether television is killing (or indeed, has already killed) the “art of conversation”. Simon Hoggart, writing in *New Society*, put the point well:

“What TV does furnish is a shared experience which actually increases the amount of conversation. In factories and offices across the land people earnestly debate what they saw on the screen last night [compare this with my own family interviews] where once they might have discussed the sales manager’s love life, the weather, or the shortcomings of the head of faculty.”⁹

In fact, the whole basis of the predominant cultural snobbery which sees almost any activity as superior to “watching television” (and which confers prestige on “not watching television” almost as an activity in itself) lies in the assumption that television is capable, somehow, of obliterating the processes of domestic communication that would otherwise occur in the home. As my findings indicate, this is far too simple a picture of a process in which (as Bausinger shows) media and domestic communications exist in all manner of symbiotic intertwinings.

Even those who would argue that television has somehow “harmd” domestic conversations are sometimes forced to admit that television itself has also made significant contributions to the “art of conversation”. Here is Nancy Banks-Smith, writing in the *Guardian* about the contribution of situation comedies to the development of the art:

“Television has not exactly killed conversation; it has eaten it alive, woofing it down wholesale as a cat might a canary. ‘Where has it gone?’ thinks the bereaved owner, looking wildly round the living-room. ‘It was here a moment ago, chirruping away.’ And then the television set starts to sing.

The best conversation heard around most homes in the last twenty years has been in situation comedies. People with nothing better to do talk best. Hancock alone on a Saturday night, Dud and Pete in a wardrobe discussing the womb, Foggy, Clegg and Compo in their second childhood, Fletcher in prison. Conversation actually seems to improve in captivity.”¹⁰

As Thomas Lindlof and Paul Traudt argue,¹¹ many media scholars have tended to view television viewing as somehow “supplanting family functions”, rather than investigating how media resources are adapted to families’ economic and cultural (or psychological) needs. This can involve quite elementary considerations – such as, for instance, the use of television to create personal space in a restricted physical environment. As Lindlof and Traudt note,¹² “in higher, density families . . . TV viewing may function as a way of avoiding conflicts or lessening tensions in lieu of spatial privacy.” These authors also make most convincingly a very basic point about the problems with a lot of media research to date. They note that much research has concentrated on “questions of *why*, to the exclusion of *what* and *how*. [Scholars] have attempted to describe causes and consequences of televiewing without an adequate understanding of what it is and how it gets done”. They rightly argue that in order for

“many of the central theoretical and policy questions to be satisfactorily framed, let alone answered, a number of prerequisite questions concerning *what the act of TV viewing entails* [my emphasis – D.M.] for all family members, need to be posed and investigated”.¹³

The dominant image of the relationship between the family and television (or the media in general) is one in which the media are seen as having a primarily disruptive effect on household routines and family relationships. In this picture the media’s influence is seen as primarily negative and disruptive. However, it is perfectly possible to pose this issue the other way round. Rather than simply thinking of television having a disruptive effect on the household, one can examine the ways in which television provides family members with different schedules for gathering, the ways in which television provides acceptable zones for private pursuits, the ways in which television programming does not so much intrude on existing family activities as provide organising centres or focuses for new types of communicative contexts. As Lindlof and Traudt put it, “Family members eat and drink with their television viewing, engage in content-related and content-unrelated talk, iron clothes, study, dress, undress, daydream and so on.” James Lull has also provided us with a more useful way of thinking about the relationship between television and the family. He provides a model of this relationship in which television can be seen “to play a central role in the methods which family members and other social units employ purposefully to interact normatively within their own special everyday realities”.¹⁴

The point here is that, considered in this way, television can be seen to provide in one sense an alibi, in another sense a context, for encounters between family members, where the content of the television programme they are watching together may often simply serve as a common experiential ground for conversation. In this kind of instance, television is being used for something which is more than entertainment. It is being used as a focus, as a method for engaging in social interaction with others. So, far from simply disrupting family interaction, television is being used purposefully by family members to construct the occasions of their interactions, and to construct the context within which they can interact. It is being used to provide the reference points, the ground, the material, the stuff of conversation.

Family studies

In this connection it is especially interesting that some of the best recent work on television and the family has been generated not within the orbit of media studies but within the orbit of psychology

and family studies. Thus, Irene Goodman writing in the *Journal of Family Issues*¹⁵ provides a very interesting perspective. As she puts it, the primary focus of much work in the past has been on the effects of television viewing on behaviour. By contrast, she argues that what is important in examining the role of television in family life is not simply the matter of studying effects on family members. It also involves looking at television as a phenomenon that serves a whole range of social purposes, the study of which can shed light on general family functioning. As she puts it:

“The working assumption [of] traditional research dealing with the effects of television is that television is a medium of information, entertainment, education, and/or an indirect informative agent in the area of values and behaviour. However, if it is assumed that television not only is used by family members for these traditional reasons but also has other functions (for example, as a companion, scapegoat, mediator, boundary marker between family members, to schedule their other activities, as a reward or punishment, as a bartering agent, and so on) then a new set of research opportunities present themselves. By studying the role that TV plays in the realisation of these other purposes, we are in effect looking at television use as a tool for understanding family interaction.”¹⁶

The fundamental point which Goodman makes is that previous researchers have tended to concentrate on individual members of the family, rather than studying the family unit as a whole. In the past the research model was often a linear one, in which television was seen to have direct effects on viewers. Things got a little better when people thought in terms of mediation – where, rather than television having direct effects on people, television’s effects were seen to be mediated by the family – so that, in effect, the family structure was taken to be a complex of intervening variables, which acted as a filter between the individual and the screen. Where Goodman’s work is particularly important is in encouraging us to think about the family’s use of television: that is to say, the way in which the family constructs the meaning of television within the home, the ways in which the family members construct their uses of the television set. This is not to deny that television programmes have their own structure, and indeed that television generates a whole set of meanings, rules, values and so on when it enters the home. However, as Goodman notes, “Each family... interprets the set in its own terms, viewing television through its own screen of family rules. It is a kind of family assimilation/accommodation process...”¹⁷

In many houses the television is kept on continuously, as a kind of "filler" going on continuously behind conversations and domestic events. It will be watched for quick snatches, listened to in moments of quiet and then ignored. Turning off usually signifies a major family tragedy or confrontation.

As Peter Collett of Oxford University puts it: "Television is *what* people talk about, while it is on, as well as at work the next day. It buttresses social relationships in the sense that it gives people something to discuss. Often, it provides a kind of focus for people to talk about other things." Janet Brown, a member of one of the Oxford families filmed by Peter Collett, says:

"When me and Marie want to have a mother and daughter discussion we will just turn down the television and sit and chat for a couple of hours. I still know what is happening on television, but when I'm having a heart to heart with Marie my sole attention is on her. Actually, a lot of times the programme will actually spark off the discussion. We turn it down so we are watching it *and* having a discussion at the same time."¹⁸

Goodman's fundamental point is that the family is not just a collection of individuals – it is greater than and different from the sum of its members. Furthermore, she urges us to think about the family in the context of its social *milieu* and in the context of its own life-cycle – that is to say, the "stage of life" of the family, the age of the children and so on. Her fundamental interest is in family processes and her main point is that we should use the family as the unit of analysis and be concerned to understand family processes as they relate to viewing behaviour. Goodman notes that among psychologists studying the family the dining-room table has often served as the focal point for an understanding of family functioning. However, she suggests that given television's acknowledged pervasiveness in the lives of so many families, the family's use of television may well provide us with a better starting-point than their dining-room table behaviour as a key to a better understanding of the way in which the family functions. Her interest is in understanding the ways in which families develop and negotiate rules or principles governing areas of behaviour, and she suggests that this occurs in the field of television viewing as much as anywhere else in the domain of family life. If we looked at the family's eating habits, one might be interested in the way in which the family sits round the table, the rules it has regarding manners, the question of who serves the food, who cooks or prepares it, who carves the meat, what topics of conversation are allowed round the table – all these questions will give us valuable insight into family life. Her

suggestion is that if we think about television watching, one can produce equally interesting questions which will likewise allow insights into the way in which the family functions, and into the way in which the family uses television. Her point is that family processes tend to be consistent across different domains of activity. Thus the decision-making processes the family uses in respect of television will probably be similar to those which it uses in relation to other areas of family life. Her point is that given television's central position in the home, rule making, decision making, conflict and dominance in relation to television are naturally major aspects of family process.

Goodman suggests that we look at this situation as one in which we can expect the family to be a rule-governed system whose members behave among themselves in an organised and repetitive manner, and that this patterning of behaviour can be analysed so as to discover the governing principles of family life. This is in respect of family rules of two kinds, both explicit or overt rules, and implicit or covert rules. As she notes, research on the family's uses of television has focused on rules for television viewing, particularly the explicit rules parents may have for the content and quantity of programming that their children are allowed to watch. But, as she notes, these studies are focused on the outcome for the child, rather than the process of rule making. They have not been sensitive to important implicit rules that govern family processes. To understand this, one would have to ask how the rules about television are made in the family, who formulates and who enforces the rules, and whether these rules are simply followed and/or negotiated. As she points out, some rules may be spelled out and well understood by all. Others may be unclear and understood by no one, or only some family members. The prohibition of the specific television programme is a clear rule, but the prohibition of a general category of "unsuitable content" may be difficult to define and enforce. She goes on to note that some implicit rules may revolve around the permissible social interaction of family members when the television set is on. For instance, in some families, watching television is the "OK" time for husband and wife to be in close physical contact, or for other family members to express affection if they have difficulty in doing so at other times. In a family where the members say "We don't have rules about television," she suggests that this simply means that one has to look a little further in order to understand the ways in which implicit rules are operated because, from her perspective, the notion of a family operating without rules of some kind (whether explicit or implicit) is in fact a nonsense. As she points out, television can be used as a controlling mechanism. It can regulate the environment by providing background noise, punctuating time, or scheduling other activities. It can

also be used by family members to control one another, or as a means of bartering, as in "I won't watch such and such a programme today if you'll help me do something else." It is hardly uncommon, she suggests, for viewing choices to take the rather displaced form in which someone chooses to watch a certain programme not because they particularly wish to watch that programme, but because they wish to make contact with another member of the family who does want to watch that programme, and watching it together provides a way of having a conversation, having a common talking point.

It is commonly believed that adults use television as a reward or punishment in relation to their children, allowing children to watch television if they are good, or saying to the child, "You can't watch this programme because you didn't eat your greens/clear up your room", or whatever. However, it is also true that adults do this with each other. A husband can use television to get even with his wife in the course of a family dispute simply by watching all the sports events on the television, because he is angry with his wife and knows that watching all this sport will annoy her. Likewise, people can use television in the home to cope with the stresses and strains of the external world. If someone is experiencing dissatisfaction with their job, when they get home they may well not want to interact with other family members. One simple way of achieving this is simply to turn on the television set and "tune out" of the family context.

Goodman also contends that the family is transformed over time – it moves through a number of stages as the children grow up, each of which require restructuring of the family. Thus one can expect television to be used in a variety of ways, depending on the phase of family development, given that television rules and decision-making procedures will need to be constantly revised and updated according to the level of understanding of the children and the needs of the family unit. Clearly, one can't use the same rules for a nine-year-old as one can do when the child is five; or rather, if one does, it is likely to cause conflict within the family!

Of course, it is not simply a question of relationships within the family; one has to think also of the way in which people feel the need to watch certain programmes in order not to be left out at work the next day – if they haven't watched the programme which everyone else is talking about. With children, if all their friends at school habitually watch a certain programme they may well feel that they have to view it if they are not to feel left out by their peer group. Conversely, if the peer-group pressure playing upon adults and children leads them to feel they need to watch different types of programmes, there is then the problem of the parents and children having less common subjects about which to talk. All of this has

rather major implications, for instance if we return to the old chestnut concerning the "effects" of violent television programmes on children. If a family uses television to suppress conflict and aggression between family members (that is, retreating into television viewing so as to avoid interaction, which is a fairly common use of television within the home), then this use of television will itself interact with the effects of the programming on the child's behaviour. Thus, to take this one question of the effects of "violent" programming on children's behaviour, one immediately sees that replacing the question within the context of the family as a system, as a process governing and providing a context in which viewing is performed, allows us to approach the question in ways which are much more likely to provide us with adequate answers – or at least to provide us with sensible questions for research.

Television and family interaction

In the same vein Jean Brodie and Lynda Stoneman have developed what they call a "contextualist" framework for studying the influence of television viewing on family interactions.¹⁹ Their interests lie in understanding the ways in which roles within the family interrelate with programme choices and with varieties of response to programme material. Their basic interests lie in the understanding of the contextual variables that determine the salience of television programmes to different members of the family. They are further concerned with the effect of this salience (and therefore the level of interest which different members of the family display towards particular types of television programmes) on the nature of family interactions during different types of programmes. The variables they are concerned with are contextual, such as the question of competing activities in the home, the physical arrangement of the domestic situation; which family members are present; and the specifics of the televisual material which is being viewed at a given time. All these contextual variables, in their view, operate in combination with what they describe as "person variables" (by which they mean the "information processing" skills of the different family members), their roles, their emotional state at a particular time, and so on. Their thesis is that the salience of a television programme is determined by a combination of person and contextual variables and that the salience of a television programme for a family member will determine how much he or she will interact with other family members while that particular programme is being viewed.

As Brodie and Stoneman put it:

“Family members select programmes to view and these programmes in turn serve to organise family interaction. In some cases a television programme will decrease interaction between some family members: in other cases a different programme will increase or maintain family interactions. Thus, the television viewing context actually consists of many contexts, each of which may create different family interaction patterns.”²⁰

Returning to the question of research that has been done in relation to the effects of television on children, they note that one of the major limitations of much research up to the present has been the focus on the individual child. They note that “little attention has been paid to the possibility that television viewing influences family relations and the socialisation process in the family”.²¹ In short, they are trying to develop a model of television viewing which is sensitive to the different levels of attentiveness which are paid to the set by different family members in different roles, in relation to different types of programming. They are trying to get away from any notion of the television set simply dominating family life, for all its members in an equal way, whenever it is switched on. They are also trying to get away from the notion that people are either living in their social relations or watching television – as if these two activities were mutually exclusive. Rather, what they are interested in is the way in which the familial roles influence television viewing.

In another piece of research by the same authors, they produce very interesting results about the way in which family interaction varies in relation to different types of programmes. This research established that children were less responsive to other family members during programmes such as cartoon shows. This was not surprising, given that this material addressed them most directly, and most effectively captured their interests. At the same time, they noted that fathers were less responsive to other members of the family during the news. Of considerable interest in relation to my own research was their finding that mothers retained a responsive parenting role across programme types (for details of my own findings in relation to gender-specific type viewing styles, see later). The authors’ premise here is that “to the extent that a family member becomes engrossed in a television programme, we would expect that person to initiate fewer interactions with other family members and, in addition, to be less contingently responsive to initiations by others”.²²

Continuing with the theme of gender-specific viewing behaviour, the authors note that family members tend to assume roles that to

some extent determine their behaviour in the television viewing context. These authors’ findings seem to support the thesis that in family interactions mothers will often assume a “managerial” or “overseer” role, while fathers will assume the “playmate” role in relation to their children – that is, fathers will tend to join their children in activities while mothers sit and monitor the situation. This also applies to the television viewing context. Thus we see again the pattern in which men become engrossed in viewing in a very direct way, which obliterates their concerns with the presence of other members of the family (or rather, that it is much more common for fathers to do this) and that, conversely, it is very uncommon for mothers to assume this position and much more common for them to maintain their managing, supervisory role in the family in relation to all programming. Here these authors are attempting to explain how a perspective can be developed that understands the ways in which family communication in role patterns can explain television use, and can explain the varieties of response to televisual material which are displayed by different family members – precisely in relation to their familial roles. Thus, the authors, quoting research by Brodie, note that “Fathers, while viewing television with their wives and children, tend to become engrossed in the television programme, relying on mothers to enact the parenting role with the children.”²³

What is of further interest here is these authors’ understanding of the varied uses to which television can be put. They bring to their analysis an understanding of the very different functions that watching television can perform within the family. Among these functions they note the use of television by parents as a babysitter for fatigued or irritable children, thus providing a way of avoiding the kind of conflict that often arises between parent and child when the child is tired. They also note the not surprising tendency for tired family members to position themselves in front of the television set for long periods of time, only minimally processing the television content, and basically using “watching television” as a way of tuning out input from other family members. This is clearly similar to the incident recounted by Bausinger in the article quoted earlier.

Television can also function as a cause of family conflict. This may arise due to disagreement among family members about what programme to watch, or whether even or not the television set should be on at all. Equally, television viewing may function as a means of escape from family conflict. Brodie and Stoneman quote research that claims to have found a strong relationship between “the amount of time that television sets were reported to be on in a household and self reports of tension and conflict within the family. Thus, it is plausible that television programming can take on increased salience

for one or more family members as a mechanism for withdrawing from negative family interaction."²⁴

What these authors also point to as a discriminating device is the recognition that most television programming does not demand complete attention. They note that many programmes are designed so that the viewer can engage in other activities, such as conversing with another family member, without missing programme content. However, they note that other programmes require careful attention in order to understand the information being presented. So we have here the recognition that not all television programmes demand the same level of attention, and indeed not all are designed in such a way as to need the same kind of attention from the viewer. As we all know from our own experience, it is perfectly possible to understand the content of many kinds of programmes by means of intermittent listening, or scanty visual attention. One often sees children playing in a room with the television set on and can note that the children monitor the soundtrack of the programme, looking round towards the screen when the soundtrack gives them a clue that something of particular visual interest is about to occur in the programme. Brodie and Stoneman suggest that even by the age of five children have developed "sophisticated strategies for television viewing that allow them effectively to divide their visual attention between television and other competing activities".²⁵

So these authors' basic thesis is that the greater the family members' interest in the television programme being viewed, the less they will attend to competing activities and, conversely, the greater their interest in the competing activity, the less they will visually attempt to watch television. Their point, however, is also that this will work in different ways for different family members. As they put it, "the presence or absence of certain perceptual features in the television programme may be accompanied by attention directed toward or away from a programme by various family members. These programme features thereby influence family interaction patterns by commanding the attention of certain family subgroups, diverting attention from interactions with other family members."²⁶

Returning to the theme of how people use television in various ways for their own purposes, it is interesting to consider the research of Michelle Wolf, Timothy Mayer and Christopher White.²⁷ They present a qualitative study of how one particular couple make use of the content of television as a way of constructing conversations between themselves, and with their friends who come round to visit them while they are watching television. As these authors note, this couple, like many others, frequently use television material in order to create topics for talk or to create a common ground with co-

viewers. In cases such as these, television content is used in order to facilitate conversation, in order to provide themes around which interaction can take place. As they note, this may take the form of conversation running parallel with the programme, commenting directly on television material as it is presented or, indeed, it may be that the television content brings to mind stories, possible anecdotes or jokes which can be "saved up" to be exchanged during the next commercial break, or at the end of the programme. In either case, although these processes may be unconscious, we can reasonably speak of an intentional use of television for the purposes of furthering interaction, rather than once more falling back into the notion of television viewing as an alternative way to social life. These authors are precisely concerned with the ways in which the viewing of television is itself conducted as a social activity. Their concerns are with understanding how television content is used by people to establish and maintain their interpersonal relationships – most often by the way in which television is used to stimulate conversation about past experiences and important day-to-day activities. This may, for instance, take the form of someone being motivated when watching the television to say, "Oh, that reminds me of when . . .". Here the viewer is using the occasion of television viewing to provide the context in which reminiscences can be exchanged. Or, more argumentatively, it may take the form of the viewers commenting adversely on programme material being viewed – at its simplest, validating each other's sense of themselves as critical viewers, people who will not easily allow the wool to be pulled over their eyes, or people who are aware when they are watching bad acting.

All this is simply to say that one has to understand television watching as something rather more than the individual search either for information or entertainment. That perspective leaves us considering the viewer as an individual consumer, outside of social relations. The perspective being advanced here is one which is precisely interested in the viewers' activities in viewing as part of (and indeed as a constitutive part of) the social and primarily familial or domestic relations through which they construct their lives.

The social uses of television

Another researcher who has investigated the nature of the social uses which audience members make of television is James Lull of the University of California. In his article "The Social Uses of Television",²⁸ Lull refers back to some previous research conducted by Bechtol in 1972. Bechtol argues that "television viewing does not

occur in a vacuum, it is always to some degree background to a complex behaviour pattern in the home . . . no doubt an aim of future research is determining the relationship among viewing time, viewing styles, and the larger framework of a family's life-styles".²⁹ Lull is concerned with the social uses of television, as the title of his article suggests. In particular, he is interested in the ways in which television is used as what he describes as an "environmental resource" – in order to create a flow of constant background noise which moves to the foreground when individuals or groups so desire. As Lull says:

"TV is a companion for accomplishing household chores and routines. It contributes to the overall social environment by rendering a constant and predictable assortment of sounds and pictures which instantly creates an apparently busy atmosphere. The activated television set guarantees its users a non-stop backdrop of verbal communication against which they can construct their interpersonal exchanges."³⁰

What Lull is concerned to investigate is the way in which television viewing contributes to the structuring of the day, punctuating time and family activity – such as meal times, bed times, homework times and so on. His point is that we need to understand the differential times which different members of a family construct for their viewing in relation to their domestic roles and obligations. In particular Lull is concerned with the ways in which television can be used to facilitate communication. He notes that television's characters, stories and themes are employed by viewers as ways of illustrating experience – common references which other people can be expected to understand. As he points out, people often use television programmes and characters as references known in common, in order to clarify issues that they discuss. Television examples are used both by children and adults to explain things to each other – to give the examples and instances which will illustrate the point that someone is trying to make. Within the home, children often use television in order to enter an adult conversation. A child being ignored by several adults talking to each other can gain access to the conversation if he or she can think up an example which illustrates a point being made by one of the people involved in the conversation – very often that example will be drawn from the world of television. In this case the child is using the reference to televisual material as a way of gaining entry to a conversation from which he or she otherwise would have been excluded. More fundamentally, Lull points to the way in which the uneasiness of prolonged eye contact between people can be lessened by the use of the television set, which so ably attracts attention during lulls which occur in conversation. Moreover, the

programme being watched at any given point of course creates an immediate agenda for talk where there may otherwise have been none. Thus the medium can be used as a convenient resource for entertaining outside guests in the home. As Lull puts it, "To turn on the set when guests arrive is to introduce instant common ground. Strangers in the home may then indulge in television talk."³¹ Thus hosts and guests, in their common role as viewers, can become better acquainted but invest minimal personal risk.

Television viewing is of course something which in many families is precisely done together. In this case the medium can be used to provide opportunities for family members or friends communally to experience entertainment or informational programmes. To quote Lull again: "A feeling of family solidarity is thus achieved through television – induced laughter, sorrow, anger, or intellectual stimulation."³² And these forms of interaction may not necessarily be expressed through talk. Other researchers have noted that during the viewing of certain types of programmes, while one *could* come to the conclusion that family interaction is decreased – in the sense that the flow of talk may have dried up (for instance, during the viewing of complex informational programming) – it may well be that while the talking has decreased, the level of touching and other forms of personal intimacy may have increased. That indeed is a fairly common "family rule", that touching or cuddling up together is indeed more common when watching the television with other members of the family than on any other occasion. Indeed, the suggestion that "we should watch the television" may well be one in which the content which we are about to watch could well be the secondary consideration, where the primary consideration may be precisely the opportunity which doing this will provide the family members to sit close together (clearly this does not only apply to family members).

Lull tries to systematise his observations by suggesting that the social uses of television can be understood along two dimensions: the structural dimension and the relational dimension. Along the structural dimension he distinguishes two particular uses: the environmental use (provision of background noise, companionship, and entertainment) and regulative (punctuation of time and activity, talk patterns). On the relational dimension he distinguishes four different social uses. The first of these is what he calls communication facilitation (experience illustration, provision of common ground and agenda for talk, etc.). The second function he refers to is that of affiliation/avoidance (physical, verbal contact, family solidarity). The third is what he calls social learning (which is the use of television for provision of role models, value transmission, all the dissemina-

tion of information). The fourth relational use medium which Lull identifies is that of the demonstration of competence or dominance (role enactment, role re-enforcement, gate-keeping). Indeed he goes further, and ends his article by suggesting that it may be possible to construct indices based on these major divisions (especially of the relational uses of television) so as to develop user types and family types. He is suggesting that it may be possible to determine if a particular family predominantly uses television for one or another of the relational functions which he has identified. As he argues, if we could distinguish family types along this dimension (in terms of the predominant use to which they put the television set), one would have gone a long way toward systematising what would otherwise be a complex web of otherwise unaccountable findings.

However, it may be that this typology should itself be used in a different way, which would allow us to see that different families may well engage in various different uses of the television; and far from there being a direct linkage from one family type (which predominantly uses the television set for one or other of the structural or relational uses which Lull has identified), it may rather be the case that any given family uses the television for different purposes at different times, and indeed that different members of the same family may well wish to use the television set for quite different functions.

Lull's own main attempt to extend his work, in terms of this type of systematisation of the social uses of television, is explored in "Family, Communication Patterns and the Social Use of Television".³³ The starting-point of this article is his observation that one factor which influences the way families process television is the nature of the interpersonal communication which takes place in the home.

In this article Lull distinguishes between two types of families. The first of these types is the socio-orientated family, in which parents strongly encourage their children to get along well with other family members and friends, and the child is advised to give in on arguments rather than cause conflict (in my own view, this may have more to do with gender than any other factor). The other family type is the concept-orientated family, where a communicative environment is created in which parents stimulate their children to express ideas and to challenge other beliefs. In general the difference between the family types is the preoccupation in the socio-orientated family with others' feelings, compared with an emphasis in the concept-orientated family with presenting and discussing ideas. Clearly this distinction is not a million miles away from some of Bernstein's formulations of the different socialisation styles of working-class and middle-class families respectively, as laying a basis for the different forms of

cultural competence or communicative code (namely, restricted and elaborated code) which Bernstein identifies as characterising these different types of families from these different class backgrounds. Lull's other point is that family members from socio-orientated as opposed to concept-orientated families differ radically in their uses of the mass media. Parents and children in socio-orientated families will tend to have high levels of total television viewing but low levels of news viewing. (Compare this with some of my own findings later.) Conversely, parents and children in concept-orientated families will tend to use the mass media primarily for news and comparatively little for "escape" or entertainment. Concept-orientated family members are also held to have relatively low overall television viewing habits; that is, quite simply, a low level of television consumption. In effect, concept-orientated families are those that value the presentation of personal points of view of the issues under description and do not discourage disagreement or argumentation about these issues. Socio-orientated families, on the other hand, are characterised by an environment where social harmony is prized, and children are told to repress expression of ideas if it would cause interpersonal friction.

However, Lull's attempt to develop this family typology seems to have run into some difficulty. In a later article³⁴ Lull claims that, not surprisingly, concept-orientated family members view less television, do so more selectively, and are less satisfied with television as a form of family entertainment. However, as he notes:

"Concept-orientated individuals are also more likely than those with a socio-orientation to report their sensitivity to the needs of others who exist in their interpersonal interaction about programme selection. Further, socio-orientated family members said that arguments about programmes prevailed more often in their homes than did people from concept-orientated households. The conclusion then is that members of socio-orientated families are less sensitive to the needs of others, and more argumentative when television programmes are selected than are individuals from the less harmonious concept-orientated homes."³⁵

While the contradictory nature of some of Lull's findings may give us pause when considering the usefulness of the concept-orientated versus socio-orientated family typology, none the less a number of his other findings reported in this particular article are of considerable interest. What Lull investigates here is "Who is responsible for the selection of television programmes at home, how programme selection processes occur, and how the roles of family position and

fundamental point at issue here concerns the fact that viewing is often non-selective. That is to say that viewers often watch programmes that are selected by someone else in the family. This is often referred to as "enforced viewing", hardly an uncommon situation in any context in which there is more than one person involved in the viewing group! The point is that programme selection decisions often are complicated interpersonal communication activities involving inter-family status relations, temporal context, the number of sets available and rule-based communications conventions.

Here we approach the central question of power. And within any patriarchal society the power at issue will necessarily be that of the father. This perspective involves us in considering the ways in which familial relations, like any other social relations, are also and inevitably power relations. Lull's central finding, in his survey of control of the television set, was that fathers were named most often as the person (or one of the persons) who controlled the selection of television programmes. Children and mothers were more likely to regard fathers this way than were the fathers themselves. Lull found that fathers controlled more programme decisions than any other single family member (or combination of family viewers) and that they were more than twice as likely as their wives to control such decisions. Indeed, fathers were found to act alone on their programme decisions in more than ninety per cent of the cases observed. One of the children was the next most likely to turn the set on (or off) or change the channels. Mothers were observed to be far less involved in the actual manipulation of the set (compare this with my own findings later) than were either their husbands or children. Indeed, mothers were initiators of programme decisions or actions of this type in a very small percentage of cases, and they were less likely than either fathers or children to undertake such actions or decisions alone. In essence, as Lull puts it, "The locus of control in programme selection process can be explained primarily by family position."³⁷ Thus, to consider the ways in which viewing is performed within the social relations of the family is also, inevitably, to consider the ways in which viewing is performed within the context of power relations and the differential power afforded to members of the family in different roles – whether in terms of gender or in terms of age.

The question of power and gender relations is of particular interest. Lull's work provides us with a picture of male power within the family, in relation to television viewing, which is very much borne out by my own research. His remarks on the extent to which women are disempowered within the relations of television viewing are also strikingly pertinent. Moreover this issue relates to the whole field of family relations and indeed raises the further problem of how difficult

it is for most women to construct any leisure time space for themselves within the home – any space, that is, in which they can feel free of the ongoing demands of family life. In this connection the work of Janice Radway on women's reading of romance fiction provides us with a number of helpful parallels. Essentially Radway's research discovered that many of the women she interviewed connected their reading of romance fiction with their rare moments of privacy from the endless demands of family and work life. In effect, her respondents seemed to feel that romance reading was almost a "declaration of independence", in the sense that in picking up a book the woman was effectively erecting a barrier between herself and the arena of the regular family ministrations. As Radway puts it, "Because husband and children are told 'this is my time, my space, now leave me alone' they are expected to respect the signal of the book and to avoid interrupting. Book reading allows the woman to free herself from her duties and responsibilities and provides a 'space' or 'time' within which she can attend to her own interests and needs."³⁸ Radway concludes that "Romance reading functions for the woman as a kind of tacit, minimal protest against the patriarchal constitution of women – it enables them to mark off a space where they can temporarily deny the selflessness usually demanded of them."³⁹

Radway develops this theme further in a second article "Women Read the Romance – the Interaction of Text and Context". In this article she argues that we need to know not "What the romantic text objectively means . . . but rather how the event of reading the text is interpreted by the women who engage in it."⁴⁰ Radway helpfully reformulates the question of "escapism". This derogatory term has often been applied to the consumption of romance fiction. Clearly "escapism" in this sense is almost inevitably held to be a bad thing – the very term is pejorative. However, once we pose the question of "escapism" in relation to power relations, and specifically in relation to the position of women within heterosexual power relations, this activity begins to acquire a whole different meaning. Indeed in the situation in which many women find themselves, escape would seem to be a rather rational strategy. Radway says:

"When asked why they read romances, the women interviewed overwhelmingly cite escape or relaxation as their goal. They use the word 'escape' however, both literally and figuratively. On the one hand, they valued their romances highly because the act of reading them literally draws the women away from their present surroundings. Because they must produce the meaning of the story by attending closely to the words on the page, they find that

their attention is withdrawn from the concerns that plague them in reality. One woman remarked, with a note of triumph in her voice, 'My body may be in that room, but I'm not.' These women see their romance reading as a legitimate way of denying a present reality that occasionally becomes too hard to bear."⁴¹

The women I interviewed often displayed guilt when talking about their pleasures in watching romance or soap opera material on television. Radway's research, because it was concerned with the reading of books rather than the viewing of television, brought to light another dimension of the problem. This is to do with the ways in which, because the reading of books has a generally higher cultural status than the viewing of television, there is a way in which for women in this position reading romance fiction in book form is a more acceptable and legitimate activity than viewing the same kind of material on television. As Radway puts it, "This particular means of escape is better than television viewing for these women, because the cultural value attached to books permits them to overcome the guilt they feel about avoiding their responsibilities. They believe that reading of any kind is, by nature, educational. They insist accordingly that they also read to learn."⁴² The learning to which they refer is rather similar to the kind of "social learning" which James Lull identified as one of the functions of television viewing. In Radway's previous article she provides this formulation: "Although the books are works of fiction, the women use them as primers about the world. The romance for them is a kind of encyclopaedia and reading a process of education."⁴³

Again, clear parallels can be drawn here between the comments which Radway's respondents make on what they feel they learn about human relations from reading romance fiction and the way in which my own respondents talk about watching soap operas as an activity which is very closely related to their concerns in their own lives with family problems, the progress and difficulty of certain relationships and so on. This perspective dates back originally to the work of Lazarsfeld and Hertzog in the 1940s, who researched the response to soap operas on the part of different women. Lull notes that Lazarsfeld and Hertzog's early studies of soap operas demonstrated that "these melodramas provide practical suggestions for social interaction which are widely imitated by audience members... these imitations may be useful in solving family problems which bear resemblance to difficulties resolved in television dramas. At the very least, television provides an abundance of role models which audience members find socially useful."⁴⁴

These two ways of looking at women's viewing or reading of low status soap opera or romance material are particularly instructive. At its crudest, the woman viewer of *Crossroads* is a familiar object of scorn in contemporary humour. This scornful attitude is also displayed by several of the husbands I interviewed, who denigrate their wives' activities in watching this kind of material precisely as escapism – an indulgence in fantasy which is an improper activity for an adult and, indeed, perhaps even an irresponsible activity. Certainly it is an activity which is held to have very low status. However, if we understand the functions of romance or soap opera viewing as part of a strategy of escapism, which can be seen to be very rational given the position in which many women find themselves and, further, if we understand the ways in which many women use the viewing of these types of material in order to learn more about the problems of social life and relationships, one can see that this activity is itself worthy of something more than scorn.

Radway's work clearly has parallels with that of other commentators on women's viewing habits, such as Tania Modleski,⁴⁵ Dorothy Hobson⁴⁶ and Charlotte Brunson,⁴⁷ all of whom have attempted to understand more fully what it is that women are doing when they watch fictional programmes, and why it is that they watch them in the way that they do, and with the degree of attentiveness which they give to them. I can only hope that my own work will go some little way in advancing these arguments further.