TELEVISION JOURNALISM AS CATALYST*

This presentation consists of two parts. First I wish to address some general themes relating to the concept of the public sphere and to introduce the notion of micro public spheres as concrete empirical settings which can be made available for analysis. Then I will briefly summarize a study which I and a colleague conducted. This study centers on a micro public sphere and seems to represent an interesting methodological variant of reception analysis. Instead of just focusing specifically on the viewing situation or the domestic setting of TV reception, reception studies can also examine the role that TV journalism can play in stimulating group discussions in the context of more public settings, i.e., in micro public spheres.

The public sphere as an active process

We can today readily talk of the public sphere (and such talk can at times border on incantation!) as those fora or arena where information and viewpoints about societal matters can circulate and where citizens can participate in the shaping and expression of political will. There is of course disagreement on how free the information is, or how wide the spectrum of available viewpoints, but the idea of the public sphere as such has gained currency in the English-speaking world, largely as a result of the increasing introduction of Habermas’ ideas. (See Dahlgren, 1991 for a more detailed discussion of this).
But what is meant by the more basic and traditional concept of “the public”? The answer of course depends on within which intellectual tradition (or “discourse”) we find ourselves. In the horizons established by some strands of professional journalism “the public” figures only as an abstract referent, a myopic body to whom deferent lip-service is paid (“the founding of our democratic system”, etc.) but about whom there is little genuine knowledge or even interest. Many journalists seemingly write for their professional peers (or superiors) and have only cliché notions — and not infrequently considerable cynicism — about social circles outside of their own. Journalistic responsibility extends at best to considerations of the news article or item, but usually not to the actual nature of the communication which takes place between themselves and readers/viewers/listeners. I hasten to add that this is not to be explained by some collective moral failure on the part of journalists as a professional group, but rather must be understood as a consequence of the overall institutional arrangements of journalism. (For an overview, see for example Schudson, 1989).

Alternatively, the public can be constructed as statistical aggregates of essentially atomized individuals, collated within particular contexts and for specific instrumental purposes, such as polling, advertising, election campaigns, audience measurement, and so forth. Whatever the benefits or compelling necessities behind such procedures, the implicit, reductionist understanding at work here is that the public consists of separate individuals who somehow make up their minds to do/not do, or think/not think, certain things. Obviously we know better, and have known better for decades, but in the contexts to which I refer, such knowledge has little bearing. The “pay-off” or “bottom line” is not sociological understanding but rather instrumental knowledge about individual behavior or attitudes, guided by technocratic interests.

I will cut short this somewhat dismal inventory and move on to what I view as rather more uplifting perspectives. To name but two of many possible prominent names on either side of the Atlantic, John Dewey (1927) and Jürgen Habermas (1989), each in their own way conceptualize the public not as individuals or even as structured collectivities, but rather as social processes of communication. For them, the “public” is constituted by people talking freely and meaningfully about contemporary political and cultural affairs. Journalism, for example, has to do not just with the transfer of information, but also with the stimulation of discussion, evoking and fostering lateral or horizontal communication within society. That it often fails to do this — that the discourses of journalism itself often serve as an obstacle to political self-reflection — is not to be ignored. Neither does this notion of the public seek to dismiss all the historical hindrances to public discussions between citizens, such as the ubiquity of ideology in the media, the privatization and commodification of everyday life, alienation, powerlessness, and the general crisis of legitimation and self-confidence of the Enlightenment’s project of rationality.

These and many other features which we could catalogue present severe problems which threaten the whole viability of this understanding of the public, and of democracy. Yet if we seriously — at some profound level — actually, do give up on this idea of the public then, we also give up on democracy. We seem not to have taken this step yet; perhaps the fact that we are
here addressing these issues is a sign of the “optimism of the spirit” prevailing over the pessimism of the analytic mind. In any case, I have elsewhere (Dahlgren, 1991) discussed the need for a renewed vision of the public sphere, one which retains a democratic impulse and is anchored in an understanding of the historical present, (not looking back romantically to the 18th or 19th century). A contemporary and empowering notion of the public sphere needs to be grounded in today’s political and medial circumstances and must strive to maximize the (admittedly limited) forces for democratic renewal.

But let me backtrack and return now to this understanding of the public as social processes of communication. Seen in this light, the growing research on audience reception which has emerged over the past decade is of great significance. (This literature is by now quite extensive). This “rehabilitation” of audiences as active sense-makers, the view of media “consumption” as creative production of meaning, is an important theoretical and empirical turn. I will not review this already extensive literature here, but I do wish to suggest that the emphasis on meaning as an interface between viewers and television output is highly relevant for our understanding of the concrete dynamics of the public sphere. Much of the focus of reception research has been on the sense-making that audience members are involved in during and immediately after viewing and in the context of interviews with the researchers. More ambitiously, some researchers (e.g., Morley, 1986, Lull, 1990) have expanded their ethnographic field of vision to examine how TV operates within the larger frame of domestic relations. Such studies have illuminated a great deal about how meaning production proceeds. However, more recently there have appeared calls to better situate the significance of TV in a broader framework which elucidates how it is interwoven in the overall multiple textures and fabrics of everyday life (Silverstone, 1990). This is quite sound, for clearly it is the case that people talk about TV and use TV in their social interactions in a wide variety of settings, not just in the home and in front of the screen.

In my own rather modest effort to look at how talk about TV journalism takes place in circumstances beyond the actual viewing situation (Dahlgren, 1988), I found that people tend to use different discourses in different situations. However, the rudimentary typology of modes of talk about TV news which emerged from this work points more to the plurality (or prismatic quality) of subjectivity — itself rather than to the specifics of the contexts and the dynamics of talk in those contexts. What still remains to be investigated (among so many things!) is how people in their everyday lives utilize or create the social and discursive space in which discussions about current affairs take place; how people, in other words, actually become publics and generate, in interactive situations, what I call “micro public spheres” (MPS).

**Micro public spheres : two variants**

It would seem, at least in this initial stage of conceptualization, that we can specify two logical categories or ideal types of MPS, (which no doubt, as often is the case when typologizing, actually represent poles on a continuum rather than fully discrete phenomena). Let us simply
call them *spontaneous* and *structured*. Spontaneous MPS arise whenever and wherever people gather together and talk about current issues outside the context of purely domestic settings. The label “spontaneous” does not imply that such occasions lack sociological patterns. The classic research by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) on the two Step Flow of opinion formation as well as other traditions suggest that there are indeed at least somewhat stable configurations behind such group discussions.

The point here is that these spontaneous MPS’s emerge out of people’s own practices and, from the perspective of research, can only be studied in their natural settings. Moreover, from the research perspective, one has little control over media variables, e.g., to what extent a particular news story or ongoing coverage or style of journalistic discourse plays a role in initiating and shaping the nature of the discussions. One can only chart the ethnographic features and perhaps, via interviews, attempt to reconstruct the specific role the media played. Yet spontaneous MPS’s strike me as an important next step within the growing tradition of ethnographic studies in media reception.

Structured MPS’s, by contrast, are embedded in a more formalized or institutionalized contexts. The setting may or may not have discussion of current affairs as its focus, but it could be that the people (who in some way constitute a defined membership) use it for such purposes. Or, alternatively, such discussion can be strategically generated by some one in the settings with the legitimate status to do so. Structured MPS allow for a certain degree of experimental design and variable manipulation, yet it is important that their “social naturalness” not be damaged by excessive researcher intrusion. Carried to the extreme, we end up with, for example, experimental studio audiences. Such settings have their purposes for certain research strategies, but I would argue that one has then left the realm where people can still be said to construct MPS out of their own practices.

Among the settings which readily come to mind are of course self-conscious political groups or meetings of various social movements. But there are other, less explicitly political contexts which can also provide the framework for MPS. Associations, clubs, unions, etc. are all possibilities. In Sweden, adult education is very extensive, and while much of this activity is organized and/or sponsored by political parties and the traditional popular movements, the courses themselves vary enormously. Such courses are not just pedagogic settings, but also mini-fora where small groups of adults, pensioners as well working people, meet. Some are explicitly organized as discussion groups, other implicitly so, while others retain their traditional character of “dispensers of learning”. A suitable center for adult education (not surprisingly!) provided the setting for the study to which I will turn shortly.

It might be argued that there are in fact few genuine settings in contemporary society which offer the opportunity to generate structured MPS and/or that most of the possibilities which do exist would end up being too contrived or manipulated. I would respond by saying that these are indeed risks, but that we should bear in mind two things: first, that the establishment, maintenance, and expansion of the public sphere in general must be seen as political
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accomplishments, as appropriations from a system which actively strives to delimit or control people’s political talk. MPS can be viewed as the results of everyday “tactics” which people use to counter the system’s “strategies” (de Certeau, 1986, Silverstone, 1988). Secondly, part of the aim of research here should be precisely to see how MPS can be fostered and supported.

Media variables loom large here: for example instead of researching questions about how well people understand the news or how much they remember, we could look at the way various kinds of journalistic output manage to catalyze (or hinder) conversation within groups. We would examine such things as the dynamics of group talk, how it succeeds or not in terms of meaningfulness to the participants and how it relates to other cultural practices in everyday life. Questions of journalistic formats and theories of the popular become central. Research could also beneficially take a pedagogic slant (assuming a pedagogy which is anchored in democratic instincts, e.g. Paolo Freire). For instance, within the contexts of structured MPS, how can people be helped to develop their roles as self-conscious political subjects?

TV journalism as catalyst

In our own investigation we were less concerned with examining how and to what extent an existing social setting could be actively transformed into MPS. Rather our focus was more simply on how certain features of TV journalism serve as a catalyst for discussion. This strategy derived largely from the fact that the study began as commissioned research from the Educational Broadcastign Division of Swedish TV. The study necessitated a rather stable institutional context where the use of TV journalism as a resource for a collective experience — as opposed to a private and individual experience in the home — could be seen as natural and legitimate.

We had no ambitions at the level of “critical media awareness” — evoking reflection on the media practices — though this could and should be placed on the research agenda. In this initial investigation our aim was merely to see if TV journalism could make a difference in the discussions generated and if we would be able to chart the ensuing discussions in a productive manner. This latter concern was explicitly methodological; we felt we were groping in the dark and needed to clarify if this line of inquiry was at all productive.

We chose to center our study around TV, but not because TV journalism is especially informative. In fact, it has been established via research in many countries that TV as a medium is a poor vehicle for successfully transmitting complex factual information (see the recent issue of JoC for the latest update on this research). However, if there is any medium which can stimulate discussion and elicit commentary, it is certainly television. Just about everybody has opinions of some sort on what they have seen. To what extent it is TV news’ polysemic quality which is behind this as Fiske argues (1987) and to what extent it has to do with how the medium
generally is experienced I cannot say at this point, but that question does not have to be answered with finality at this point.

As a journalistic medium, TV has a number of established genres and formats. Aside from the news programs, there are also current affairs programs, with discussions and interviews, as well as magazine style programs with longer and more detailed segments on contemporary issues. Common to virtually all journalistic programming on television is what we call the program leader (PL). This person, or persons, since at times there might be more than one, serves as the central pivot of the program. On the news programs s/he is usually called the “anchorperson”, while in other formats we have “moderators” and “program hosts.”

The PL is the focal figure who not only begins and ends the program but also introduces each new segment or news story and steers the interviews which take place in the studio. As viewers, we are usually returned to the PL for the start of the next item. The PL is thus obviously the crucial “human factor” in defining much of the experiential involvement with TV journalism. Our project derived from an interest at Educational Broadcasting to see what might be the effects of varying the persona of the PL. Our focus here, however, is less with the specific manipulations of that variable and more with demonstrating that the variations in the discussions within this MPS could be attributed to variations in the format and to show how the group discussions were mapped. I will, however, briefly recount how the study was structured.

**Research design: four program versions**

The setting in which we worked was defined by the particular imperatives of the commissioned study. It was an adult education center for day care workers. Their participation in the study was motivated by a request from Educational Broadcasting to have them draw upon their experiences to comment on a program segment dealing with the important theme of the potential dangers of excessive TV watching among children. This particular setting we felt fulfilled the formal requirements for our study, yet also could serve as one of endless examples of structured MPS: small, non-mass media discussion situations in which public issues could be aired.

Programs produced by the Educational Broadcasting Division are often made available on video cassettes so that interested individuals and institutions can have access to them. This was a practical advantage in the project, since the availability of the video was perceived as perfectly normal. (In other MPS TV journalism can be introduced in other ways...). We began by scripting a short — about 14 minutes — program typical of the magazine style segments seen on TV. Then, with the help of actors, we produced four different versions of the program, where the PL had a distinct persona. That is, his overall gestalt and relationship to his material and to the audience would vary in the different versions. This we accomplished by modifying details in
the script, his attitude, his clothing, his style of language use and intonation, his body behavior, as well as the scenography. However, the formal content was identical in all the versions and the camerawork was fully conventional. The persona of the PL in each version was as follows:

1. cold, elitist, professional
2. friendly, patriarchal, professional
3. engaged, intense, younger, “unprofessional”
4. friendly, professional, younger (variant of 2)

The four versions in essence constitute four different discursive modes and, by extension, four different modes of address. At the theoretical level it could be argued that each version constructs a different implied viewer within its audio-visual text. However, our concern was with the impact that the different versions would have or real viewers in a real social setting. The programs were thus shown at the municipal center for day care instruction. The invitation to participate in the discussions was formulated as a request to do some “brainstorming” over the theme of children’s TV viewing and participants were told in advance that a short program would be shown in conjunction with the discussions.

After each viewing, the participants were randomly placed in one of three groups, each with a discussion convenor who was well-known as an instructor at the center. The groups consisted for the most part of four participants plus a convenor. Each program version was thus discussed by three different groups, for a total of 12 discussions. They lasted about 30 minutes each. They were recorded and transcribed as a text. The tapes and the texts constituted the data for our analysis of the discussions.

There are at present a variety of strategies and methodologies which can be used to analyze spoken interaction, ranging from versions of formal linguistics to intuitive hermeneutic traditions. Within media reception research the dominant approach has been some variant of discourse analysis, often with a semiotic foundation. In Sweden, at least, there is also reception analysis being done which takes cognitive psychology as its point of departure (see Höijer, 1990). We found useful certain influences from applied pragmatics (Stubbs, 1983, Schroder, 1990), which synthesizes the textual-critical tradition with empirical sociolinguistics. However, we felt there was no simple formulas which really suited our purposes, and consequently we had to improvise our analytic strategy to a considerable extent.

We treat the spoken interaction of conversation and discussion as collective enterprises which manifest unique, non-repeatable histories. Our interest is in the discussion as a group product, an objective and observable accomplishment. The focus here was less on the elucidation of specific meanings generated or the particular views expressed and more on the overall form or nature of the discussions — on whether the discussions seemed meaningful to the participants.

Instead of asking the participants what they feel about the program, we decided on a more indirect approach where the participants are invited to address themselves to the topic of the program and talk about it in relation to their own experiences. This way we hoped to ascertain
some insight into the catalytic quality of the different program versions. We are not concerned
with the psychology of the speakers, nor is the social psychology of the situation per se part of
our research topic. The basic hypothesis is that variations in the programs will be manifested in
the ensuing discussions. Each discussion represents a collective encounter with a program, and
the tapes and transcripts are the historical record of that encounter. Also, we anticipate that the
small size of the groups will foster easy participation for the group members.

The level of complexity and abstraction of the actual analysis was also of concern to us in
this pilot venture. It is all too easy to drown in all the details and subtleties which an analysis of
spoken interaction can illuminate. Moreover, the exposition can be turgid and cumbersome for
the reader. Hence it was important to maintain an optimal analytic horizon.

The discussion convenors were instructed to facilitate a discussion on the theme of
childrens’ television viewing and to invite the participants to talk about this theme in relation to
their own lives and professional experiences. We advised the convenors to keep the discussions
going by introducing topics or asking questions where this might be helpful, but otherwise to
minimize their own roles. They were not to dominate the discussions in any way, nor to try to
keep the discussions alive in any manner which seemed forced or unnatural. They were to aim
for about 30 minutes of conversation, adjusting this to where the discussion seemed to be going
as the half hour mark neared.

We were very aware that such an undertaking was filled with potential problems. Much
depended on how the convenors played their roles. Afterwards, we concluded that they were
eminently successful. Still, the very nature of the research design raised problems of both
reliability and validity: variations in the group discussions could be caused by a number of
factors, not least the social-psychological dynamics at work (which we chose not to investigate)
when four people who do not know each other sit down to talk.

While our findings still leave some questions unanswered, there are a number of points
which argue in favor of the study. First, we take the position that “pure” spontaneous
conversation or discussion does not really exist and that the distinction between natural/
unnatural is somewhat misleading. By this I mean that no speech occurs context-free; all
conversation is influenced by the situation in which it occurs. All spoken utterances can be
treated as performances in concrete settings.

Secondly, the setting was highly consistent for all groups, given their common vocational
and educational background, the randomized group placement, and the fine, stable perfor­
mancess of the three convenors. If the social psychology of the situation was in some way
inhibiting, it was at least so uniformly in the group, discounting the impact of any particularly
dominant personalities (of which in fact we found no real evidence).

Thirdly, our preliminary analyses of the tapes and transcripts matched very closely the
convenors’ own accounts of what took place during the discussions.

And finally, since the discussions were both audio-taped and transcribed, we had two
forms of data for our analysis, which could complement each other. The transcript lends itself
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more readily to systematic study, while, with the tapes, we could check the accuracy of the transcription as well as capture certain dimensions and qualities which are not directly visible in the text, e.g., laughter, voice inflection, tone, tempo, and intensity.

For those who have never seen an accurate transcription of a discussion or conversation, the first encounter may prove startling. One is used to seeing edited written texts, which have structure and coherence. A transcription, with all the false starts, dangling sentences, stammers, illogical statements, etc., looks chaotic and incoherent. But, paradoxically, it usually is experienced as coherent and structured by the speakers. To analyze such a text, we must not impose the standards of written language that we normally use. Rather, we must respect the authenticity of the collective product and try to flush out the sense of order which lurks beneath the apparent entropy of its surface.

Charting the group discussions

For the analysis of transcribed spoken interaction, there are no fool-proof recipes, only different strategies which can yield better or worse interpretations. As in all social research, the findings are in part dependent upon the manner in which one interrogates the data. We had a total of 12 discussions, averaging about 17 pages of text each. With that much material, we were forced to capture potential variations in the discussions with rather broad strokes. At the same time we needed a level of analysis which could at least identify the major elements and dynamics at work. The final version of our methodology, and the analysis that it provided, was a result of a shuttling back and forth between the data and various theoretical constructs.

The fundamental unit of analysis is the spoken passage of a speaker. Talk proceeds by turn-taking of spoken passages; when there are two or more speakers, as in our case, the order of turn-taking cannot be predetermined. A passage can be relatively long — a few were over 10 lines of text — or extremely short: one word or phrase. Most passages consisted of 2-3 lines of text. In principle, each passage can be identified as to the practical dynamics it accomplishes within the flow of the discussion — its “function”, as Roman Jacobson and Del Hymes would term it. In simple terms, some of the more common primary functions are: referring to some external object or phenomenon, expressing an inner emotion or evaluation, maintaining communication and contact, and reflections on what has previously been said. Mapping such functions proved helpful at certain junctures, but was not undertaken systematically for all passages.

We studied the nature of the transition between passages to illuminate the mode of sequencing (turn-taking) within the discussion and sought to identify production cycles of larger chains of passages. Finally, we indicated the major phases of each discussion in its entirety.

Sequencing is a term we use to depict the nature of turn-taking, and we make a simple
distinction between monologic and dialogic sequencing. Monologic sequencing is characterized by series of passages which, while they may be related by references to common topics, do not actually engage each other. The discussion at that point consists of little speeches: the participants are not really talking to each other and answering each other. Dialogic sequencing, by extension, displays an interconnection between speakers and manifests an intersubjectivity.

Production cycles refer to chains of passages which constitute identifiable segments of collective production within a discussion. We all have had the intuitive reaction of “This conversation is going nowhere”: Here, the collective engagement and overall intensity falters. Alternatively, the conversation may “take off”, commanding and expressing the speakers’ involvement.

In the first case, passages tend to build up a “discursive mass”, an accumulation of “semiotic capital”. At some point, a sense of overaccumulation is reached, (“We’re just going around in circles...”) which leads to sluggishness and inertia. Eventually decay sets in if the development is not interrupted. We can note that such production cycles are often accompanied by monologic sequencing.

A discussion can seem to take off via one or more passages which take the talk off into new directions. This provides a “discursive energy” which revitalizes the discussion and leads it into new production cycles. Thus, we can metaphorically depict successful production cycles as proceeding via a dynamic interplay of accumulation (of discursive mass) and initiation (of discursive energy). Failed cycles gather inertia and may lead to decomposition of the entire discussion.

Production cycles are useful in mapping the progress of a discussion. It should be emphasized that such cycles are not in any way indicators of the level of agreement between the speakers, but rather of the extent of their success in creating a collective intensity. A heated argument most likely would consist of very successful production cycles.

The major phases of a discussion only become apparent at the holistic level — the discussion in its entirety. In a sense, the phases are the net outcome of passages, sequencing and production cycles. We identified three major phases present in the discussions. The transition from one to another could occur over several passages, but seen holistically, the distinctions between the phases were rather clear in most discussions. The phases are:

1. Contact and sociability; in the early stages of the discussions, the passages are mostly geared towards adjustment to the situation and to opening and establishing non-committal contact between the participants.

2. Emergence of commonality; the participants, in descriptive and often socially pleasant passages, begin to define the basic boundaries of a shared foundation for the topic of discussion. Expressive and evaluative passages are frequent, largely of a “safe” and non-controversial nature. This establishes the general contours of a collective orientation.

3. Resolution; this phase can come early or late in the discussion, but once reached, there tends to be no turning back. The discussion has taken on a definitive character. Resolution takes one of three forms:
— a. Stagnation; the easy sociability and commonality of the first two phases simply continue, resulting in a climate of consensus, but of a banal, non-intense quality. The production cycles lack sufficient initiatives to halt an over-accumulation (of unanimity) and inertia ultimately sets in.

— b. Entropy; here the discussion becomes unraveled and disassociated, either because the inertia is too great and culminates in decay or because the commonality of phase 2 was insufficient.

— c. Coalescence; this is in essence the outcome of a series of successful production cycles. The speakers, through their involvement and interaction, have made the discussion their own, creating a collective product and, in a sense, themselves within the setting.

If this is the framework for analyzing discussions, how would successful catalyzation manifest itself? We assume that there is no one single model, but in simple terms, we posit that discussions which resolve themselves in coalescence display a relative success over discussions which do not. Consequently we would conclude that the program versions which prompted discussions which coalesced should be deemed more catalytic. Moreover, we do not merely dichotomize. We can, again in relative terms, look for a variety of indicators which point to successful catalyzation. Thus, dialogic sequencing would be an indicator of a degree of success. If the discussion consists largely of a series of monologues, clearly the communicative prerequisites for fostering involvement with others or for overcoming the obstacles to such involvement, are insufficient. Likewise, one would expect that successful catalyzation would manifest production cycles characterized by initiatives which “lead somewhere”.

Resolution of the discussions

As indicated above, the key to each discussion lay in its third phase, where resolution is achieved. The resolution for each of the 12 discussions is as follows (keeping in mind that each program version was discussed by three different groups):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program version 1</th>
<th>Convenor A</th>
<th>Convenor B</th>
<th>Convenor C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(cold, elitist, professional)</td>
<td>coalescence</td>
<td>stagnation</td>
<td>stagnation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program version 2</td>
<td>coalescence</td>
<td>stagnation</td>
<td>coalescence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(friendly, patriarchal, professional)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Taking version 2 and 4 together, five of the six discussions were successful. For version 1, two of three ended in stagnation, while one was successful. And for version 3, we find no coalescence at all: one ended in stagnation and two in entropy. In short, the relaxed, professional style of the PL’s persona in versions 2 and 4 unambiguously served to foster meaningful discussion, while the aloof and elitist persona in version 1 worked very poorly. The emotionally intense and unprofessional style of 3 was a total disaster for discussion.

Recalling that for purposes of this study we equate coalescence with successful catalyzation, the results speak with little ambiguity. The ensemble of variables which define the PL’s persona and the overall mode of address resulted in quite clear differences in the discussions, which indicates to us that we at least are on the right track.

**For a pedagogy of critical collective reception**

Now, I would certainly not claim that these findings in and of themselves have great import, and I would be very suspicious of anyone arguing vehemently for or against any particular style of PL based on these results. In all probability the best explanation of the results are that the deviations from the normal mode of address and the culturally defined definitions of professional journalism generated confusion and insecurity, which in turn impeded discussion. The significance of the study lies rather, I would suggest, in three areas. First, at some level, differences in production styles within TV journalism are not irrelevant for the kind of discussions that they foster. This is something which can be developed much further. For example, a research program could be developed around precisely the question of how the discourses of TV journalism could be formulated to better stimulate discussion.

Secondly, the contours of a methodology to chart variations in group discussion — collective reception in MPS — seem to be on the horizon. In the next effort of this type, the methodology will hopefully lose some of its “home-made” quality and become more systematic.

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, the methodological strategy of mapping group discussions, coupled with the notion of MPS, invites an activist, interventionist alternative to the traditional approach to reception. This appropriation of the reception tradition shifts the research focus and perhaps the research interest as well. Normally, reception studies have emphasized the ethnographic ideal of natural setting. MPS, as I suggested earlier, can be of the spontaneous or structured variety. Within the latter category, it seems even possible to actively generate them. This may compromise their “naturalness” somewhat, but may also open the door of a new research approach.
Television journalism as catalyst

In this presentation I have discussed how different program versions have different impact on their audiences. One could also reformulate the issue: if TV journalism is treated as given, could group discussions be generated and pedagogically structured so that they foster both self-reflection of the speakers and their discussion as well as reflection on TV journalism? One of the themes which crops up in some versions of reception research and Cultural Studies generally is that the sense which people make of TV programming can or should be seen as expressions of ideological resistance (the extent to which this point is emphasized varies). Fiske (1987, 1989) is no doubt one of the foremost representatives of this position. This has, not surprisingly, given rise to considerable debate, with critics claiming, among other things, that the political relevance of the interpretations people make in the privacy of their homes is at best minimal.

The development of a critical pedagogy for collective viewing — i.e. within structured MPS — could contribute to enhancing resistance by fostering reflection. While this could be seen as an element in “media education” and certainly utilized in the context of instruction, I think that it could play an even more important role within the contexts of MPS. With a general theoretic horizon on the public sphere, an empirical focus on accessible structured MPS, and a suitable methodology for mapping group discussions, it should be possible to do politically relevant research whose goal is the generation of knowledge which could have practical bearing on people’s future reception, and by implication, their political and social praxis.

The experiences of participating in structured MPS, with suitably trained convenors, where group discussions take up TV journalism, the links between the participants’ own everyday lives and politics, and not least, reflexive attention to their own media-inspired discussions, could offer new angles of vision. Such experiences could offer insight to both people’s own ways of thinking and talking about current affairs, the media, as well as about themselves. While the ideological premises of structured MPS will no doubt vary with the specific institutional contexts, it seems that such settings and the applied research which would be carried out there have more chance of fostering resistance than the social ecology of the typical home viewing situation.

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NOTES

* Ole Breitenstein, of the Dept. of Cinema Studies, Stockholm University, was my research partner and I wish to gratefully acknowledge his collaboration.

RÉFÉRENCES BIBLIOGRAPHIQUES


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