Active audience theory: pointless populism

William R. Seaman

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN AT MADISON

Active audience theory is a recent development in cultural studies, one which is now quite popular in the field of mass communications analysis. The trend emerged from the application of ethnographic research methods to the study of television audience viewing practices.[1] In broad terms, active audience theorists hold that traditional conceptions of media effects are debunked by the alternative interpretations of viewer behavior proposed in 'reception' studies. The active audience theorists argue, among other things, that a radical reassessment of viewer practices is warranted by their 'findings' and that would-be critics of the media industries need to recognize that television audiences hold far greater power over the medium than is generally acknowledged.

This article is a critique of the active audience trend in cultural studies. It first focuses on several types of arguments used by the active-audience theorists and examines in particular their characterization of certain cultural practices as 'resistant' or 'oppositional'. In my view it is not always clear what makes a cultural practice 'resistant' towards a particular ideological construction, say, for example, towards a sexist stereotype; still more difficult is the judgment of whether or not the practice contributes to transforming the oppressive relationship that the particular ideology functions to maintain.

The conclusion of this critique turns to a dimension of the topic that is, in my view, rather more disturbing than the difficulty of judging the relative 'subversion' of television audience viewing habits. This is the problem of 'mediated effects'. Whether or not members of a 'target' subgroup interpret apparently disparaging or degrading representations of that subgroup in ways that subvert the 'intended' message (the 'dominant reading'), these representations may indirectly reimpose their destructive meanings through the concrete actions of other viewers. Members of other subgroups, or members of the same subgroup who are additionally affiliated with other subgroups of divergent interests, can interpret the text as an affirmation of their prejudices and so may come to feel authorized in oppressive, often violent conduct directed towards the represented subgroup. Whether or not, for example, particular women interpret a particular text in a 'subversive' manner tells us nothing of how particular men interpret that text.

Dubious inferences

Certain patterns of reasoning found in active audience studies and in the secondary literature reveal more the disposition of the investigator than any compelling argument or evidence. A common rhetorical strategy of active audience theorists is familiar from the law courts. One constructs an interpretation, a narrative or scenario that is consistent with the 'facts' presented from the 'field investigations' and the scenario's plausibility is allowed to rest solely on its coherence with those 'facts'.

In Morley (1986) the author cites Thomas Lindlof and Paul Traudt's observation that 'television [is used] to create personal space in a restricted physical environment'. Lindlof and Traudt write that 'in higher density families . . . TV viewing may function as a way of avoiding conflicts or lessening tensions in lieu of spatial privacy' (quoted in Morley, 1986: 21). Uncomfortable with the 'dominant image' that 'television (or the media in general) . . . [has] a primarily disruptive effect on household routines and family relationships', Morley suggests that 'it is perfectly possible to pose this issue the other way round' (Morley, 1986: 22). He suggests that

> 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. (Morley, 1986: 22)

Citing James Lull, Morley asks us to consider the option of seeing television as playing 'a central role in the methods which family members and other social units employ purposefully to interact normatively within their own special everyday realities' (quoted in Morley, 1986: 22). 'Far from simply disrupting family interaction', Morley writes that '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' (Morley, 1986: 22). Television, he concludes, 'is being used to provide the reference points, the ground, the material, the stuff of conversation' (Morley, 1986: 22).

The first thing one ought to notice about this description is that, within the space of two paragraphs, Morley has gone from 'it is perfectly possible to pose the issue the other way round' to the conclusion that the issue '*is*' the other way round; from 'television "*can*" be seen' as being used in this way to 'television' "*is*" being used', and is best understood as being used, in this way. Certainly this interpretation does not contradict any of the observations cited by the researchers, but coherence alone is not enough to recommend this characterization of the viewing practices. An example, I hope, will illustrate the problem with this sort of reasoning.

Reading the passages from Morley (1986) reminded me of something called the 'amelioration hypothesis', an attempt — interesting, though ultimately unsuccessful in my view — to address certain questions regarding voluntary and nonvoluntary acts. The hypothesis is illustrated by the case of a small-scale shopkeeper confronted with a bothersome business environment. One can 'understand' and 'explain' the situation as that of a defenseless shopkeeper paying protection money to mafia thugs (the 'dominant image'), or 'it is perfectly possible to pose this issue the other way round'. We can see the shopkeeper as taking rational precautions to secure a favorable investment climate. The payments, and perhaps other duties 'owed' to the local bosses, are simply 'methods . . . employ[ed] purposefully' by the shopkeeper 'to interact normatively within [her] own special everyday realities'.

Such a scenario is not implausible. Demoralized by the lack of police protection, shopkeepers might think of organized crime as a kind of natural threat, like a tornado or an earthquake. One ought to take precautions against such threats, but *it is* unimaginable that one might organize to oppose and eliminate them.

I believe we face a similar problem in our choice of descriptions of the behavior of television viewers. Several questions must be asked, and answered, before we come to a judgment. Does the subject consider the environment inevitable or does the subject realize there are alternative choices — alternative practices — and consciously affirm her 'choice' to operate within that environment (as contrasted with choosing to oppose and transform that environment)? What alternative practices are possible and how would the consequences of the alternatives compare to those of watching television? Merely describing an interpretation that is coherent with the observations is not adequate to establish the interpretation as true, reasonable, complete or even plausible. Certainly we 'can' see viewers in the manner preferred by Morley, but only in the very weak sense that we are not faced with a glaring contradiction if we try. The dangers of this approach become clearer when we consider Morley's amplification of viewer 'uses' of television.

'Television content,' Morley writes, 'is used [by viewers] in order to facilitate conversation, . . . for the purposes of furthering interaction, . . . to establish and maintain their interpersonal relationships . . . to stimulate conversations . . . to provide the context in which reminiscences can be exchanged' or for 'validating each other's sense of themselves as critical viewers' (Morley, 1986: 31); 'Television examples are used . . . to explain things', to 'illustrate the point that someone is trying to make' or 'as a way of gaining entry to a conversation', to lessen 'the uneasiness of prolonged eye contact between people' (Morley, 1986: 32). All of these descriptions are 'true', in a sense, but they beg the important questions when it comes to judgments regarding the character of these practices. Television may be 'used' in this manner, but we are left to speculate on the implications or consequences of such uses — specifically we have no basis to judge whether or not these uses are detrimental either to the user or to others in the user's community. On the other hand, the theorist's choice of terms suggests that such a judgment has been made.

The word 'use' implies a power relationship between the agent who 'uses' and the agent (or object) being 'used'. Morley's characterization suggests that the viewer is 'controlling' or 'exploiting' the text to his/her own ends. Such an interpretation betrays a disposition towards the practice, a disposition that requires some justification beyond the choice of verbs. One could give an account of such an activity in less viewer-dominant terms. A viewer may be described as 'relying upon' his or her experience of soap operas to 'make sense' of 'real-life' situations. Or the viewer may be described as 'dependent upon' these experiences. Or one might suggest that these experiences 'determine' how the viewer makes sense of the world. Conversely, one could describe the viewer as 'using' her experience of 'real-life' relationships to 'make sense' of the television programs. The point, again, is not whether one 'can' see things 'the other way round', but rather whether that alternative interpretation explains, rather than mystifies, the viewing practices and their consequences.

What is absent from the implicit, positive appraisal present in Morley's descriptions is any basis of comparison and judgment. The assessment might be persuasive if the uses described could not (1) be replaced by other activities which *would satisfy* the needs or desires cited, or (2) involve television programing of a significantly different character. Both (1) and (2) might lead to profoundly

different consequences. Without such comparisons, the implicit judgment involved in describing the activities as 'uses' is baseless and deeply misleading.

Pandering or deference: empty solidarity

Intimately related to the problem of interpreting the behaviors of television viewers is the pretence of conducting anthropological field work; many of the articles published by active audience theorists are said to rely on 'ethnographic techniques'. Thus the researchers often (always?) warrant or give credence to their assertions by citing particular views of particular members of the study's subject population or 'subgroup'.[2] This results in a variation on the 'can be seen as' – 'is' inference gap cited above (this version might be called the 'has been seen as' – 'is' inference), and is especially evident in the following passage:

> Women have told me how much they enjoyed *Charlie's Angels* when it appeared on their screens in the 1970's, and that their pleasure in seeing women taking active, controlling roles was so great that it overrode the incorporating devices that worked to recuperate the feminist elements in its content back into patriarchy. (Fiske, 1987: 39)

In this passage Fiske is discussing 'the ability and freedom of the viewer to bring extra-textual experience and attitudes to bear upon the reading of the program' (Fiske, 1987: 39). Just as coherence is not an adequate basis for judging the character of these practices, the self-assessments of viewers, while certainly relevant, cannot stand alone as the basis for judging the success in 'overr[iding] the incorporating devices' of a television program.

A related inference that I find equally troubling is that if particular members of a relevant class take pleasure in viewing certain programs that involve 'apparently' degrading representations of that class, then the 'incorporating devices' of such representations have been 'overrode'. (Indeed, the suggestion here is that the more one takes pleasure, the greater the override.) Before coming to a judgment regarding the character and consequences of viewer 'enjoyment', surely it would be prudent to take a closer look at the '*quality*' of such roles and, perhaps more to the point, at the wildly skewed expectations that are likely to provide a better explanation of the 'pleasure' felt by women viewers at the appearance of such roles. Of course, there remains the question of whether the views cited by active audience theorists are representative of the relevant subgroups (and not only of those subgroup members who happen to watch the programs in question). But the crucial point is that even if they were representative, even if they reflected an overwhelming majority view, these questions about the character and consequences of the images and of the viewing pleasures would still have to be answered.

Evidence and argument are required for the assessment of viewer practices and of the impact of particular television programs. Interpretations that rest on mere coherence or viewer pleasure can obscure a cynical, self-serving variety of populist pandering. Such pandering is familiar and easy to spot when the spokespersons involved are representatives of the major networks or of the advertising industry. It is puzzling when precisely the same sorts of 'arguments' are made by academics. At best they reflect a misguided or twisted form of 'deference' to 'ordinary people'. At worst, they only masquerade as deferential respect for the desires of the 'masses'; frequently they constitute a deceitful reliance upon the symptoms of a system of

indoctrination as a warrant for dubious claims about 'resistence' and 'opposition' (the sort of 'deference' that US auto manufacturers profess towards the American citizenry when lobbying against gas mileage standards).

Before continuing, I must address an objection that active audience theorists routinely use in response to this sort of criticism.

Media critics who argue as I have in this article, are often accused of having an elitist and patronizing attitude towards television viewers. Dorothy Hobson, for example, complains that 'it is false and elitist criticism to ignore what any member of the audience thinks or feels about a programme' (Hobson, 1982: 136). Of course, nobody has urged that the thoughts and feelings of audiences be *ignored*. The question is how to characterize those thoughts and feelings. And celebrations of an alleged resistance and assertiveness among television audiences, when such 'valorizing' judgments are offered without evidence or argument, reflects a far more pernicious form of patronage. They reflect an opportunistic brand of populism, in the style of a Huey Long or a David Duke, a demagogy that cynically panders to the prejudices and superficial desires of the television audiences (served up as representative of 'the masses') and then presents that pandering as an expression of solidarity. Arguments are required for judgments regarding the character of audience practices. Appeals to pleasure or mere coherence are not enough. But there is a more obvious point to make in response to the charges of elitism.

Criticisms aimed at the content of mass media programing, or critical assessments of viewing practices, do not entail any necessary judgments regarding the intelligence, sophistication or moral goodness of the related audiences. To criticize an argument does not entail a judgment that those persuaded by the argument are stupid or immoral. Reciprocally, however, judging audiences as intelligent, sophisticated and generally decent does not entail that all the programs they take pleasure in watching are thus rendered harmless in their possible or even probable effects, either upon the viewers themselves or on other individuals within or outside of the viewer's community.

Perhaps the best way of illustrating my concerns with the 'uses' of television described by active audience theorists is to turn to news and news analysis programming. Certainly viewers 'use' the 'information' they pick up from news programing to 'make sense' of the world; they draw upon examples and images that they see and hear 'to interact normatively within their own special everyday realities'. But are we tempted to throw this 'interaction' into the sort of 'empowering' descriptions favored by Morley, Fiske and other proponents of the active audience turn in media scholarship?

To the degree that elite interests dominate our news media and so constrain the field of options for 'reference points', 'examples' and analyses, to that same degree we must question the value and desirability of these sorts of 'uses' of television. If, as Morley would have it, television 'is being used to provide the reference points, the ground, the material, [and] the stuff of conversation' (Morley, 1986: 22), then in light of the sorts of information and views that we know are systematically excluded from the medium, we ought to find such 'uses' quite alarming, viewer pleasure notwithstanding.

Television and its effects

Active audience theorists are particularly resistant to the idea that television, or more precisely the practice of watching television, has effects upon viewers. John

Fiske's discussion of this issue provides another example of the choice of terms playing a more rhetorical than analytic or descriptive role in theory construction:

> Television and its programs do not have an 'effect' on people. Viewers and television interact. . . . Television does not 'cause' identifiable effects in individuals; it does, however, work ideologically to promote and prefer certain meanings of the world, to circulate some meanings rather than others, and to serve some social interests better than others. This ideological work may be more or less effective, according to many social factors, but it is always there, and we need to think of it in terms of its effectivity in society at large, not of its effects upon specific individuals or groups. (Fiske, 1987: 19–20)

It is quite true (one might have thought it too obvious to merit comment) that viewers 'actively' interpret what they see and hear; human beings are not computers open to televisual 'programing'.[3] However, this writer's decision to characterize the activity as 'interacting' with television suggests that the viewer has some 'effect' on television, on the television program she or he is interpreting. Clearly this sort of 'interaction' is not taking place. Choosing the term 'interaction' simply obscures the ultimate effects which the viewing practices eventually have upon the viewer and, no less important, on other individuals or groups in the viewer's community.

  The viewer may, perhaps, be said to 'interact' with the television when he or she switches it on, adjusts the reception, switches channels or — a 'strong' interaction — smashes it with something heavy, hard and handy. (A truly concrete 'interaction' took place when on 22 January 1991 the organization ACT-UP broke into the studios of CBS Evening News to disrupt the live broadcast, chanting 'Fight AIDS, Not Arabs!') On the other hand, it is simply false to suggest that the viewer's individual interpretation constitutes 'interaction' with the televisual text. The text, in its concrete manifestation as an audiovisual signal, is not altered by the viewer.

Causes and constraints

The reluctance felt by many theorists to assign television programming a causal role arises, in part, from the sense that to-do so reduces viewers to deterministic mechanisms. It is important in this respect to recognize the complexity of the concept of *causation*, even when considered in its most deterministic and philosophically realist sense. One distinction particularly helpful in the discussion of media effects on audiences, and on our society more generally, is that between *token* or *particular causal processes* and *systems or networks of causal constraints*. This distinction is best understood, appropriately enough, in terms of another difficult notion: *free agency*.

  We can deprive a person of their freedom in (at least) two distinct ways relevant to the debate about media effects. On the one hand, supposing we had some science-fiction horror technology at our disposal, we could control viewers' minds in the same way we control a VCR. We might push a button, say, and thereby cause our victim to start a rousing chant of 'Support our troops!'; in such a scenario we could be controlling both their beliefs and their desires. This seems to be the strawman view of television causation that active audience theorists argue against. It illustrates a token or particular causal process: the television presents certain images of, say, Jews or Italians and the Jewish and Italian audiences come to believe in and accept these images of themselves and their communities. It is not a

completely ludicrous understanding of the possible influences of television images in our society, particularly if we consider audiences of very young children. But it does not exhaust the many and various ways that television programing and audience viewing practices can have effects on viewers and on the society at large.

We can also control a person by controlling their environment, by controlling the information that is available to them and on which they must base their decisions to act. Very roughly conceived, decisions flow from our beliefs and desires. To the degree that we can control the beliefs of a person, we can control their decisions. We do not need to control their desires, or any other aspect of their mental life. It is in this second sense that we can, perhaps more reasonably, discuss the effects of television; television as the embodiment of a system of *causal constraints*, of a network of boundaries restricting the range of available information, views and images, and *not* as an evil demon manipulating the viewers as if they were programable robots or marionettes.

People may freely choose to watch television and may freely choose to take pleasure from the selection of programs available. However, unless they are genuinely aware of the highly constrained character and content of that programing, unless they are genuinely aware of the sorts of information, perspectives, analyses, beliefs and images that are systematically filtered out of the mainstream media, it is simply wrong to suggest that such viewers are truly free in their decisions to act, and it is a profound mystification to suggest that any amount of 'inflected' readings can remedy such a circumstance. Even if we set aside the more diabolical conceptions of mass media mind control, we can still reasonably discuss the effects of television, both upon individual viewers and in the society at large.

Opiate as opposition, misdirected defiance

All of the features of active audience research which I have taken such strong exception to are directed, in my view, towards 'privileging' or rehabilitating the activity of watching television. The 'valorization' takes its strongest form in the characterization of this activity as a 'struggle', as viewer resistance and assertiveness (see especially Fiske, 1987: 75–7, 97 and Hobson, 1982: 111, 143). Several very troubling examples of this sort of interpretation are found in Dorothy Hobson's *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*. They are, I believe, quite typical of the variety of 'ethnography' practised by active audience researchers.

One viewer interviewed by Hobson explained how visitors are politely put on hold when her favorite soap operas come on. This subject's 'attitude to visitors', according to Hobson, demonstrated 'her independent mind' (Hobson, 1982: 111). 'Yes,' Hobson's subject explained, 'I watch everything, I never switch off.' And, Hobson continues, if 'she wanted specially to watch a programme, she was not averse to telling a "white lie" and saying she was going out' so as to avoid being disturbed by someone wanting to visit (Hobson, 1982: 112). Certainly this behavior might reasonably be considered defiant, but against whom? Recall that the subject's expression of 'independence' is directed against '*visitors*', very likely friends or relatives.

In a related, though no less troubling example of 'defending' viewer practices, Hobson cites 'the importance of a television serial [as something] to "look forward to", even when it is less than perfect'. During an interview, one of Hobson's subjects 'often looked out of the window of her ninth-storey flat and counted cars as they travelled along the main road below'. Hobson concluded that the 'isolation' that caused one to 'resort to counting cars' very likely explained the sense of

anticipation felt by the viewer towards the television program. And it was likely the 'lack of contact with neighbours or friends of [her] own' that accounted for curiosity, 'being nosey' as the subject put it, 'about fictional characters' (Hobson, 1982: 117). Hobson may well be right about this. However, one wonders why this explanation is offered as a 'defense' of the viewing practices, or as a criticism of 'elitist' media critics. (Recall Morley's similar discussion of television's cure for the 'restricted physical environment'.)

It is easy to imagine a 'defense', precisely parallel to that provided by Hobson for the behavior of her viewer/subjects, of a retreat into religious fanaticism or of valium addiction. Certainly we should try to understand why, for example, selling crack-cocaine is a 'rational' choice by inner-city youth, but that understanding does not address the ultimately self-destructive nature of the practice; such an 'understanding' does not take into account the brutally restricted *range* of options within which this particular choice is seen as rational and 'free' (and, indeed, defiant). Similarly, an appreciation of the 'benefits' of television does nothing to confront the grim reality that many of Hobson's subjects face. One can, I hope, imagine *other* responses to these examples of the ills of our present society; defending the mollifying influences of television is a very odd expression of 'solidarity'.

Plurality of interpretations and the problem of 'mediated' effects

Aside from the problems already discussed, 'active audience' theorists seem to ignore crucial divisions within oppressed 'subgroups' and the often destructive ways that a plurality of interpretations can lead to certain very unpleasant 'mediated effects'. To return to the earlier example of 'how much [women] enjoyed *Charlie's Angels*', we should note that 'their pleasure in seeing women taking active, controlling roles' tells us nothing about the men who may have failed to override 'the incorporating devices that worked to recuperate the feminist elements . . . back into patriarchy'. Men's pleasure in 'seeing women taking active, controlling roles', or in other aspects of the program may have entirely different implications for the effectiveness of 'incorporating devices'. While there may be a plurality of readings which 'subvert' the sexist elements of a television program, there is certainly an equally expansive plurality of readings which may engender, affirm or possibly encourage and amplify sexist attitudes within the general viewing community. And the abusive and even violent behaviors which may result from that affirmation are not mitigated by the naively hopeful 'inflected' readings of a few comfortable, middle-class college students.

Reading the concert or video performances of the mega-opportunistic pop star, Madonna, as 'empowering' for young women does nothing to decrease the staggering risk of date rape and other all-too-common forms of sexual assault and harassment.[4] The fact that such 'inflected' readings are possible or even probable for young women has exactly zero implications for the odds that profoundly sexist interpretations will be made by young men.

In all of these cases, the problem does not lie with those viewers who enjoy an 'inflected' reading of a sexist, racist or otherwise ideologically packed televisual text, but rather with the behaviors of viewers who partake of more conventional, or of equally plausible and yet deeply ideological, interpretations. This is not a matter of judging the intelligence or sophistication of the viewing public. The problem does not lie with audiences, but rather with a system of mass communication that systematically excludes certain forms of programing and imagery in favor of a profoundly restricted and highly interest-driven selection. The problem is not with audience interpreting practices, but with what is available for interpretation.

Outside the text

There are victims beyond the television viewing public. As citizens of the greatest purveyor of violence on the planet, Americans must address the plight of those victims struggling in the violent, non-metaphorical battlefields that are created and managed by our government and effectively hidden from the television audience by the mainstream media.

The one form of racism that remains socially acceptable, indeed respectable, in the US is anti-Arab racism. There is no shortage of racism of all sorts, but anti-Arab racism occurs openly in the most disgraceful ways throughout so-called 'popular culture'. Whether in soap operas, situation comedies, political cartoons, romance novels or Halloween costumes, the 'crazed Arab terrorist', the 'Middle East madman', and the 'oil-rich sheik' have become ideological icons of truly mythic proportions; and racial epithets like 'camel-jockey', 'rag-head' and 'sand-nigger' have a special place in the American cultural lexicon. Shall we follow the active audience prescription and interview the domestic Arab-American subgroup to see how they 'inflect' their readings of such texts in heroic 'struggle' to 'override' the 'incorporating devices' of the dominant ideology? Or will we realize that the threat posed by these racist messages is not the demoralization of the subgroup represented, but rather the likely encouragement of racist feeling *'against'* that subgroup.

Many people in the US accepted, and some even celebrated, the deaths of upwards of 200,000 Iraqi soldiers and civilians in the Gulf War and its aftermath.[5] The tradition of anti-Arab racism and the viciously racist representations of the 'enemy' presented to television audiences in the US contributed to this acceptance. Television images can function to mobilize opinion within one subgroup against another. In terms of US policy in the Middle East, the process has involved directing domestic public opinion against a community outside of the country. But of course we do not need to look outside the US to illustrate the problem that inter-subgroup conflicts pose for the active audience program.

Fiske has made much of the diversity of the domestic viewing audience. He complains of 'the fallacious belief that we live in a homogeneous society', urging that we recognize that 'late capitalist societies are composed of a huge variety of social groups and subcultures' (Fiske, 1987: 309). Yet he seems to have missed the implication that this 'huge variety' has for the assessment of cultural practices and for complications arising from mediated effects.

The intersections of race, class and gender interests, and their collisions, have been overlooked by the active audience approach. The pleasures made possible by inflected television readings simply will not address, let alone confront, the parochial bigotries, racist and sexist hiring practices, or the conservative voting trends that threaten even the most basic social programs, affirmative action and abortion rights here in the US (and that have already rendered such rights meaningless for the growing numbers of poor and uninsured). Nor will such 'defiant' interpretations address the violence that disrupts or extinguishes the lives of thousands of women and people of color each year. In the light of these facts, we must ask whether the active audience innovation has provided insight, rather than obfuscation, to research in communication and media theory. I believe that the problems I have identified in this article suggest that the active audience approach has tended more to mystify than to clarify, to rationalize a set of practices rather than explain them. It is imperative that communication scholars resist the pernicious features of this new trend in cultural studies. The very real and destructive effects that are denied or dismissed by the 'revisionist celebrants of

semiotic democracy' must be reintroduced into the debate and re-established as a central topic of study and research.

Notes

1. That this trend does not represent a genuine innovation has been noted by at least two scholars. Herbert Schiller relates the active audience trend to the 'limited-effects' theorists, recalling an earlier version of this 'paradigm' most clearly presented in Ithiel de Sola Pool's book *The Technologies of Freedom* (Schiller, 1989: 145–56). James Curran has observed that active audience theorists, who he refers to as 'revisionist celebrants of semiotic democracy', have 'mov[ed] towards a position that pluralists are abandoning' and 'are engaged not so much in revisionism as . . . revivalism; they are reverting to the discredited received wisdom of the past' (Curran, 1990: 135–64).

2. For an excellent treatment of some of the problems involved in this approach, see Said (1989).

3. Schiller answers this strawman argument by asking 'Who would have made such a claim in the first place?' He notes that

> the transfer of cultural values is a complex matter. It is not a one-shot hypodermic innoculation of individual plots and character representations. It involves the much more difficult to measure acceptance of deep-structured meanings that may not even be explicitly stated. Can the transfer, for example, of acquisitive or consumerist perspectives be simply quantified? (Schiller, 1989: 149–50)

Schiller acknowledges that 'audiences do, in fact, interpret messages variously' and 'may [also] transform them to correspond to their individual experiences and tastes' (Schiller, 1989: 156). Perceptively, however, Schiller points out that 'when . . . confronted with a message incessantly repeated in all cultural conduits, issuing from the commanders of the social order', the intellectual 'capacities [of audiences] are overwhelmed' (Schiller, 1989: 156). He cites as an example the message of anticommunism in the US, that 'enormous fabrication of fear that has supported the edifice of the national security state for at least fifty years' (Schiller, 1989: 155).

4. On this topic a provocative, though clearly quite preliminary, speculation on the probable influences of music videos was recently offered in the form of a video produced by the researcher Sut Jhally. The video is called *Dreamworlds: Desire/Sex/Power in Rock Videos* and explores 'the negative and dangerous representations of women contained in music videos'.

5. Of course, there was significant opposition to the war in the US and good reason to believe that the opposition would have been more widespread had the mainstream media been less willing to accept the Bush administration's reasons for not pursuing a negotiated, non-military settlement.

References

Curran, J. (1990) 'The New Revisionism in Mass Communication Research: A Reappraisal', *European Journal of Communication*, 5: 135–64.

Fiske, J. (1987) *Television Culture*. London: Methuen.

Hobson, D. (1982) *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*. London: Methuen.

Morley, D. (1986) *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*. London: Comedia.

Said, E.W. (1989) 'Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors', *Critical Inquiry*, 15: 205–25.

Schiller, H.I. (1989) *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression*. New York: Oxford University Press.