

# Thinking through Television

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Ron Lembo



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## *Social Theory*

Years ago, in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Robert Merton (1968) distinguished between the “European” and “American” traditions in the study of mass media. The former theorized power in broad-based, social structural and historical terms and the latter focused on the systematic, empirical study of “the processes and effects of mass communication” (1968: 498). Writing in the 1960s, Merton believed that a substantial gap existed between the truth claims advanced by social theorists and those of social scientists.

Many years have passed since the time of Merton’s assessment of the literature. In the intervening years, much has changed in the analysis of the mass media, including, of course, the emergence of cultural studies and, along with it, a newfound prominence given to interdisciplinary work. Those developments will be the topic of my third chapter. In this chapter and the next, I want to focus attention on the paradigmatic work of social theorists and social scientists in media studies, work that, for a variety of reasons, has fallen outside the purview of cultural studies, but which has nevertheless remained influential in shaping what more mainstream analysts conceptualize as important and document as “real.”

The gap in truth claims that Merton spoke about still exists and continues to divide what is understood as “scientific” and what is not. But, beyond scientific concerns *per se*, what this gap really signified for Merton was the failure of media analysts to translate ideas about broad-based and deeply rooted forms of social power that were believed to be operative in the media into the terms of systematic empirical research, whether quantitative or qualitative. Writing in the 1990s (post cultural studies), when corporate control of media institutions and imagery has reached unprecedented proportions, when the circulation of such imagery can, via television, reach into the minds of virtually all Americans, I see this failure that Merton

spoke about as a failure, really, to account for *culture*: that is, to account for the sociality that emerges from media use, for the meaning sometimes made there, and for the forms of power that continually shape this cultural terrain.

This may seem to be an odd position to take, since it is clear that theorists (both past and present) have identified the economic, technological, political, social, and cultural transformations integral to the emergence of mass society, mass media, and hence, television. They have focused attention on the issue of power – be it social structural, institutional, ideological, or, more recently, discursive power. They have often conceptualized how the various structural and institutional requirements of corporate production and distribution take shape as patterns of media imagery. They have identified what they believe to be myriad ways that television works to order and organize the everyday lives of the people who watch it. They have done so, however, by positioning themselves outside the day-to-day world of television use. Absent in their accounts is any clear conceptualization or empirical documentation of how television imagery, or media imagery more generally, actually enters into the meaning-making activities of the people who use it on a daily basis. Absent, too, is any systematic understanding of how television or other media contribute to the formation of a distinctive sociality of use, or how media-based practices are situated over time in people's everyday lives. The *culture* of viewing is unrecognized in these accounts; or, alternatively, if it is recognized, it is understood only as a derivative of power. As a result, valuable insights regarding television's power come at the expense of more fully understanding the complex social dynamics that comprise the everyday worlds in which it is used.

Typically, theorists analyze the social, or societal – as opposed to only the persuasive – power of television. This power emerges, they say, from the political, economic, technological, and discursive transformations that have characterized the rise of advanced capitalism in the West. Television is understood by them to carry something of these changes forward, touching and transforming the social, cultural, and social-psychological domains of people's everyday life experience. So, for example, while Lazarsfeld and Merton wrote in the pre-television age, their analysis of the mass media was – and still is – applicable to television. In fact, many of the key ideas found in their classic essay, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action" (1977), have become staples of functional analysis regarding the mass media (Wright, 1975, DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1982).

For Lazarsfeld and Merton, the mass media works first and foremost as a "structure of social control," serving to integrate individuals into the

culture of industrial capitalism. How? By extending the corporate market economy, and, along with it, the interests of political and economic elites, directly into the social psychological experience of ordinary people (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1977). The mass media, they say, has taken on the job of rendering the mass public “conformative to the social and economic status quo” (1977: 558).

Lazarsfeld and Merton have much to say about the broader, normalizing powers of the media. They talk of the patterning of values and norms in the media as representative of elite interests. They talk as well about how these values and norms work as a kind of symbolic fabric in supplying people with what, today, would be called the “discourses” for making their social experience meaningful, including the all-important ways that people find their place in the larger culture. The media does this, they say, by conferring status on people, places, groups, and events; by enforcing mainstream social norms and marginalizing challenging, or “deviant” behavior; and by substituting the taking in of information for political action – its “narcotizing dysfunction” (1977: 565–566). While their functional perspective leads them to see all of these forms of social regulation as, ultimately, something consensual (save for the narcotizing dysfunction, which has a peculiar status in their analysis), it does not, however, prevent them from seeing how elites maintain hierarchical control over personnel recruitment and the organization of the work process within bureaucratic institutions, or how media discourses become standardized in satisfying the requirements of capitalist production and distribution.

Lazarsfeld and Merton identify important, unintended cultural consequences of the consolidation of elite power in the mass media, and it is not difficult to envision how these functional processes work in the case of television. Certainly, television sanctions and enforces social norms; it confers status on people, places, policies, and events, simply by giving them coverage; and it sometimes removes people from more active forms of involvement in their own lives.

In a second example of this kind of theorizing, Todd Gitlin (1978) focuses attention on something called the institutional power of the mass media. This includes, he says, the preference given by the media to particular ideologies, the shaping of public agendas, the mobilization of support networks for the policies of political parties and the state, and, in a more general sense, the conditioning of public support for these kinds of institutional arrangements.

According to Gitlin, the repetition of certain “ideational structures” is indicative of the media’s preference for ideas and values that harmonize with elite interests. Most importantly perhaps, Gitlin sees these structures

working to solidify ordinary people's opinions and attitudes into more enduring configurations of consciousness – what he calls ideology. Once in place, ideologies shape how people will respond to and interpret media messages in new situations. Dominant ideologies are the most fundamental of symbolic structures in the mass media because they represent most directly the interests and world view of elites.

But Gitlin does not see the media as some sort of static, or monolithic, ideological structure. Rather, he understands it as something processual, as so many sites of “ideological work.” What this means is that, while challenging ideas can and often do find their way into the media, they are usually framed in a way that blunts their critical, or oppositional qualities. They are tamed, co-opted, normalized, and ultimately they become, for Gitlin, compatible with elite interests. This is why he sees the institutional power of the mass media not so much as a social fact, but, on the contrary, as something continuously negotiated. This is understood, following Gramsci, as a hegemonic process. It is this perspective regarding the media's power that informs Gitlin's later analyses of the framing process in news and the mainstream coverage of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), the decision-making process in network television, and the ideological structuring of entertainment programming (1983, 1980, 1979).

The Frankfurt School can account for all of what is important in Gitlin's and Lazarsfeld and Merton's analyses, and much more, too. In the work of Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Lowenthal, and others, we find a thoroughgoing critique of the commodity form of the mass media. Sometimes using different constructs, and sometimes developing different emphases, over the years the Frankfurt School has demonstrated quite consistently and convincingly how the marketing logics that guide programming production and distribution decisions standardize the story-telling conventions of mass media and, as a consequence, extend corporate capital's influence that much further into the everyday life experience of people.

Of all the Frankfurt theorists, I find Adorno's work to be particularly interesting, since he carried out systematic empirical studies of the media, even working for a time with Lazarsfeld at the Bureau of Applied Social Research in New York. In such studies – for example, “The Stars Down to Earth” (1974), “A Social Critique of Radio Music” (1945), and, most notably for my purposes, “How to Look at Television” (1957) – Adorno identifies how the objective forms of the mass media work in structuring the meaningful experience of people who encounter them. Radio broadcasts of classical music, films, television shows, astrology columns, etc. – all of them exhibit, in one way or another, the standardizing influences of

commodity production. When people listen to the radio, go to the movies, watch television, or read newspapers and magazines, they encounter a world of standardized media imagery, are inevitably drawn into it, and, as a result, Adorno says, their mindful and emotional experiences become standardized, too. Under such conditions, real life becomes indistinguishable from commodified representations.

For Adorno, and others at the Frankfurt School, the historical emergence of mass culture carries consequences both numerous and profound. Not only does the ideology of elites become a social fact of everyday living for the vast majority of ordinary people, but so, too, they say, do the standardization of ideas and, imagery and, eventually, the commercialization of public discourse. Personal involvement in the image worlds of mass media inadvertently circumscribes whatever awareness people might otherwise have of more diverse and challenging ideas. Over time, Adorno says, that capability that people have for reflexive engagement with the social world – a cornerstone of modernity – is no doubt diminished and, furthermore, their ability to envision a world different from the one in which they presently live becomes increasingly problematic. In the end, the idea of a public sphere, of something separate and separable from commodity culture, is rendered obsolete.

When it comes to television, Adorno sees its power working at multiple levels simultaneously. At one level, what he terms “the multi-layered story structure,” television serves as a “technological means” for the culture industry to “handle” the audience, because, Adorno says, the way in which the story depicts people and their social actions becomes the way in which the viewer understands people and their social actions (1957: 222). At a second level of analysis, Adorno sees the formulaic structure of the television narrative as pre-establishing “the attitudinal pattern of the spectator before he is presented with any specific content” (1957: 226). Because of the repetitions of formula, the viewer, according to Adorno, can “feel on safe ground all the time,” and, as a result, he or she can always anticipate how the story will unfold (1957: 224). At both levels, Adorno conceives of television’s power as working through standardized and repetitive depictions of social life to constitute fully what he refers to as the psychodynamic responses of the people who watch. This is the power of ideology in action.

Adorno’s work is indispensable for the study of television because he demonstrates how its objective structure (namely, programming) is tied to the logic of producing and distributing commodities. The result is a series of transformations in story-telling conventions, and their repetition, as crucial determinants of television’s power. Whether one uses the term industrial, postindustrial, late, post-Fordist, or some other one to designate



the workings of capitalism, the fact remains that Adorno has theorized the relationship between television's institutional workings and its discursive power. By synthesizing Freud's idea of the unconscious with Marx's notion of the commodity form of social relations, Adorno moves beyond the abstractness of say, Lazarsfeld and Merton's, or Gitlin's conception of the media's institutional power, and articulates specific dimensions of internalization that characterize media use. Armed with psychodynamic constructs, he is able to theorize a complex interplay of conscious and unconscious processes that could conceivably make up people's social experience with television or other media. Interestingly enough, because Adorno's work remains theoretical in *the way* that it does, he is able, in comparison to others who analyze power, to deal more concretely with the sociality of television viewing. Adorno attempts to think through the social psychology of power relations. Yes, it is power that Adorno sees, and sees practically everywhere in mass culture. But his is a multi-layered conception of power, one that enables us to see the relationships that form between the outside world of media imagery and the internal world of thinking and feeling as something that is socially and culturally significant.

The language of these kinds of theoretical accounts is taken up with articulating the broader structure and functioning as well as the deeper workings of the media. The analysts mentioned have theorized quite nicely the *social*, or *societal*, power of television. The medium is linked with profoundly important, and, in some cases, irreversible economic, technological, and political changes. Television, in turn, is understood to carry something of these changes forward, touching and transforming social, cultural, and even social-psychological domains of people's everyday life experiences.

Many things are explainable using such an approach: the imperatives of industrial capitalism, the institutional structure of the mass media, marketing logics, ratings; the various facts of elite control, the commercial concerns that shape decision-making and, hence, programming; moving product; ideology; class; power; control; the idea of there being "preferred" ideologies, the idea, too, that these preferred ideologies reflect elite interests even, or especially, in their widespread popularity; the regularities and the changes in social life that become reflective of, and, at times, actually become the world outside of the media; the public sphere; the disappearance of the public sphere in the age of the image; and consumption patterns documented as on the rise.

But "top-down" approaches such as these must eventually touch bottom. So, much of the language of these accounts is also taken up with assumptions and assertions about how these broader structures and functions have

become interwoven with one or another aspect of the social experience of those who use the media. Woven into this language, then, are ways of seeing the people who watch television. These ways of seeing, imbedded in language, make sense of what it means to watch television; or, less directly, but no less importantly, what it means simply to live amidst its presence on a day-to-day basis. The theories of Lazarsfeld and Merton, Gitlin, the Frankfurt School, as well as many other analysts – Postman, Kellner, Meyerowitz, and Miller, among them – offer, then, a whole series of judgments and understandings of proscriptions and prescriptions regarding the meaning of television in people's lives. In and of itself, this is not a problem. Theorists theorize by abstracting social logics from the particularities of more concrete conditions. This is a good thing. As I see it, the problem lies not in theorizing or making statements about institutional or ideological processes, or even in their influence upon or incorporation within the everyday life experiences of people. The problem arises when such theorizing occurs in the absence of any attempt to account for the experiences of those who are understood to be effected.

Certainly, Lazarsfeld and Merton saw the merit of grounding their theoretical ideas in the empirical world. As social scientists, they recognized the need for data in advancing truth claims. But, as Merton (1968) himself pointed out, the logic of variable analysis (their chosen methodology) limits what can count as evidence. The research techniques that they relied on were of little help, it seems, when it came to conceptualizing and operationalizing such things as the consolidation of elite power or other aspects of the media's societal power which they theorized as important. Methodological and technical issues aside, their theory itself – a theory of structure, of function, and of power – fails to conceptualize the emergence of power in the very social experiences that people routinely have with the media. Lazarsfeld and Merton do not inquire as to what normative functions or societal power or elite influence or unintended consequences look like from the vantage-points of the people who read, listen, watch, or otherwise encounter the media on a daily basis. In fact, a depth understanding of reading, listening, or watching never really materializes in their otherwise insightful and intellectually compelling theoretical account. Despite their brilliance as sociologists, they fail to elaborate a construct of culture that would enable them to reconstruct the very practical ways that media power is made meaningful by people.

Similarly, Gitlin's theorizing – of such things as the media's institutional power, of ideology and ideological conflicts, or the workings of the hegemonic process – is no doubt illuminating. So, too, is his critique of early social science research. I find no fault, really, with these formulations of

power. The problem, however, lies with Gitlin's failure to explicitly account for how people who watch, listen, and read actually confront this power in the context of their own lives. For him, the meaning of media use unfolds out of institutional regularities or the ideological structuring of media imagery, among other things. Like many other theorists who position themselves outside the world of day-to-day media use, Gitlin understands the people who use media only as an audience, and, I might add, a somewhat passive one at that. This is not to say that ideological struggle and social change are unaccounted for. They are. But it is journalists, academics, and political activists who struggle and change things, and who therefore "count" as social actors, not people whose daily lives are lived in and through the media. Gitlin fails to adequately distinguish between the analysis of power as something institutional and ideological, and the ways that this power may actually work, concretely speaking, in people's everyday lives. "Ordinary" people who use the media are incapable of any kind of reflexive engagement with the ideas and imagery that they encounter. Gitlin is too quick to dismiss what they do with media imagery, and, as a result, he, like Lazarsfeld and Merton, is unable to properly theorize the sociality of use as an integral aspect of power. The idea that there is a culture of *use* never arises as a significant factor in his analysis.

In treating mass media as objects of social experience, Adorno, unlike Gitlin, fails to give any serious consideration to the ways in which challenging ideas may surface as representations of broader social conflicts and struggles. Furthermore, his conception of mass culture, dependent as it is on notions of repression and commodity fetishism, leaves little room, really, for the consideration of sociological realities that emerge in day-to-day media use. When it comes to actually investigating the lives of the ordinary people who occupy the role of audience members in his theory, Adorno appears to have had little patience for the subtleties of systematic, ethnographic research. Adorno never even attempts to accord the same status to reconstructions of people's actual experience with media as he does to ideas of commodity production, instrumental reason, reification, or the unconscious structuring of thought and action. In the case of television, Adorno was unable or unwilling to consider how the text and esthetics of programming might enable viewers to disengage themselves from dominant ideology, to question the supposed normalcy of story-telling conventions, and, in these ways, open up new possibilities for seeing the world. As brilliant and as far-reaching as Adorno's theory of mass culture is, his failure to develop a construct of sociality makes it impossible to theorize the meaningful complexities that come with actually watching television as something intrinsic to the workings of power.

Lazarsfeld and Merton, Gitlin, Adorno and the Frankfurt School, are three examples of sociological theorizing about the media, about power, about the culture that takes shape amidst the media, and, consequently, three theories about the meaning of media in people's lives. If my aim were comprehensiveness, then I would certainly want to account for the theorizing of other scholars, both past and present, who have made significant contributions in their own right when it comes to understanding the role television, mass media, and mass culture play in people's lives. For example, there is the work of Kellner (1990), Miller (1988), Postman (1985), and Meyerowitz (1985), to name some of the more noteworthy of contemporary media theorists who have yet to be identified with cultural studies. Further discussion of, say, Kellner's analysis of the political economy and regulatory environment of contemporary commercial television, or Miller's ideas regarding the (inherently) limited horizons of television programming, or even Meyerowitz's notion of the loss of a sense of place resulting from the more subtle and pervasive effects of media imagery in people's lives – all of this would add much to our understanding of the objective structural features of television as well as the sociological influence they may carry in day-to-day living. And, going back in time, the contributions of Seldes, Shils, Lippmann, and Macdonald, among others loom large in defining American media criticism. Ideas about the construction of distinctive "taste cultures" in the age of television, or about gaps between the world outside and the pictures in our heads, or even about the democratizing tendencies that accompany the introduction of media – all of this, too, would figure importantly in an expanded view of the object, television, and the ways it may work in structuring social experience.

My aim, however, was not comprehensiveness but clarity: clarity, that is, regarding where and how the people who use television fit within analytical frameworks that, while outside of cultural studies, have defined and continue to define the sociological significance attributed to television by successive generations of scholars. While many scholars have made significant contributions to what we know about the media, the theorizing of Lazarsfeld and Merton, Gitlin, and Adorno is, I believe, paradigmatic. Why? Because ideas about a capitalist political economy, norms and what becomes normatively appropriate, status conferral and legitimation functions, structures of elite control, institutional requirements, ideology, ideological power, the hegemonic process of fashioning consensus, commodification, story-telling conventions and their standardization, the growth of consumption, the passivity of the audience, and the disappearance of a viable public sphere, are all elemental in critical analyses of the mass media, and they receive elaborate and original treatment in the work

of these theorists. Other scholars certainly articulate the significance of, say, legitimation, or the hegemonic process, in distinctive ways, accounting for particular conditions or specific circumstances that are not addressed by Gitlin, Lazarsfeld and Merton, or Adorno. And yet, their frameworks of analysis, their ways of seeing the media and the people who use it, the logics they deploy, are derivative, really, of the elemental ideas that form the backbone of sociological theorizing for Gitlin, Lazarsfeld and Merton, as well as Adorno and the Frankfurt School. In aiming for clarity in my critique of theorizing (again, outside of cultural studies) about media, then, I have focused attention on seminal aspects of their work. I leave it up to the reader to decide the extent to which the theorizing of other media analysts is subject to the same critique.

While there are real differences between structural functionalism, critical theory, and Gramscian-inspired forms of ideology critique, nevertheless, as perspectives for media theory, they all share what I call a “top-down” mode of analysis. Lazarsfeld and Merton, Gitlin, Adorno: each of them *read out* of the media as objects in order to explain things social and cultural associated with their day-to-day use.

In their work and in the work of other “top-down” theorists, too, a rather complex and sophisticated *reading out* of the object occurs. In today’s parlance, theirs are *situated* readings; situated, that is, by an understanding of history, politics, and social logics, including the logics of capitalism, corporate institutions, dominant ideologies and political struggle, among other things. All of this is constituted in explanations, elaborations, and critiques of the objective structures, the functioning (or dysfunctioning), the power of mass media in social life. The phrase “in social life” is key here because, in using it, I want to underscore the fact that in such top-down theoretical accounts, what is read out of media as its objective forms, as its objectivity, is, at the very same time, unavoidably subjective. The media, after all, is believed to order and organize what things mean to people. That is, what people who use media on a routine basis take to be the meaning of their experience with it is understood by these theorists as something already structured, behind the backs of people, as it were. Their meaning-making activities take persistent social and cultural forms as a result of the objective workings of media – where it comes from, historically speaking, how it is structured economically and politically, the ways in which it functions, socially and culturally, and its power, ideologically, to shape thinking and acting.

The top-down mode of analysis enables theorists to deal with the meaning of the media in daily life. They account, sometimes very effectively and with great insight, for how the broader and deeper workings of the

media can become inscribed within the everyday, common-sense, and taken-for-granted experiences that people have with it. This is precisely how they theorize the social, or societal power of the media. It is, as I said, a power to direct actions, shape thinking, and channel desires. It is, really, a power of cultural formation that they describe.

I am certainly supportive of this kind of theorizing. After all, it is clear that television, for example, takes shape amidst broad-based political, economic, technological, and discursive transformations characteristic of the rise of mass society. It makes sense to speak about the day-to-day workings of television as an elite controlled institution, or to use terms such as legitimation, normative consensus, standardization, mainstreaming, ideological domination, and so on to account for television's sociological significance in people's lives. Television's power can be understood to cut across virtually all domains of social life – work, home life, public culture, and private thoughts – and to touch virtually every social location that analysts deem important, including class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and age, among others.

In the objectivist perspectives like those of Lazarsfeld and Merton, Gitlin, or Adorno, theorists are outsiders to the world of day-to-day media use. Analysis proceeds from what Bourdieu has called “an intellectualist standpoint of deciphering” (1977). Those who theorize in this way (and intellectuals in general) no doubt use the media, whether it is reading newspapers, attending movies, listening to the radio, or watching television. It is probably the case that their own media use, including their critical reflection upon it, becomes incorporated into the formation of their theories, especially when it comes to concerns about the meaning of day-to-day use.

But their pattern of use could hardly be considered typical of most Americans. When it comes to television, for example, few if any of those who do this kind of theorizing currently watch or have watched commercial programming for even several hours a day, let alone the seven hours that is average for American households. When they do watch, they probably focus attention on what they are watching and, as a result, are less likely to just have the television on for hours at a time while they do other things, a way of watching that has, in fact, become quite routine for many people. And, unlike many people who live and work outside intellectual circles, media analysts and scholars of culture are often hesitant to acknowledge the pleasure and purposelessness that comes with watching television. They are also less likely than others who watch to recognize that such pleasure and purposelessness is often integral to the meaning of viewing, quite apart from the information gained, the knowledge derived, or the understandings made while watching.

While media theorists do indeed watch television, their world of use differs in frequency and in kind from the worlds of day-to-day use that others who watch television typically inhabit. There are ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that occur when people watch television that remain unfamiliar to these theorists. Among people living outside more purely intellectual domains, there is often a sociality that emerges in the presence of television and becomes a persistent feature of their day-to-day use. I am speaking here of varieties of mindful and emotional relations between and among people, but also, and perhaps more importantly, between people and the television set, that can occur in routine use. Over time, the repetition and ritualization of these social relations may even come to constitute distinctive cultures of use. Yet, those who theorize in a top-down mode lack the practical experience that comes with continual involvement in such social relations. Consequently, they lack a certain knowledge and understanding – call it an “insider’s” knowledge – of the cultures that take shape in and through uses of television other than their own. As a result, there are worlds of television use that remain invisible in their theorizing, theorizing that purports, as Merton has said, to “capture the broad movement of ideas in relation to social structure” when it comes to media. These theorists see themselves primarily as thinking through various intellectual traditions pertaining to the study of media and culture, recasting the findings of previous empirical research into new theoretical abstractions, unmasking class power or ideological domination and mapping the formation of political interests in media, or, more simply, recognizing and critiquing the kinds of media use that go on in society at large. It is this kind of intellectual work that typifies the critical stance of top-down theorizing.

This is not a problem, really. Over the years, valuable ideas and keen insights regarding media have emerged from intellectuals positioned outside worlds of day-to-day use that are much more familiar to most Americans. Rather, the problem lies with the *unacknowledged nature* of their outsider status. For, as long as the position of the analyst as outsider remains unacknowledged, the gaps, the distance, indeed the differences that exist between their positioning and the positionings of those who use the media more regularly, and admit to enjoying it, can remain camouflaged, they can be abstracted away, or naturalized under the rubric of an intellectualist standpoint of deciphering.

### Conclusion

In theorizing about television and media more generally, analysts must deal directly with issues of power. Functionalists, critical theorists, and

Gramscian-inspired Marxists are quite correct to emphasize the importance of social structures and processes that give rise to mass media in the first place and shape the meaning it can have in people's lives. In the case of television, theorists should continue to focus attention on the medium's influences, since it is clear that broader social and historical forces are at work – through discourses and ideologies as well as the set itself – in constituting much of what people take for granted in using television.

But assertions about the power of television cannot only be *read out* of what theorists see as the structure of the object, no matter how complicated and nuanced their conception of that object, television, might be. This is true for the study of any other form of mass media as well. If the power of television, for example, is understood to work socially, then theorists must make the sociality of television use an explicit part of their conception of power. In addition to focusing analytical attention on the meaningful consequences of more broad-based social structures and processes, theorists who share something of the top-down perspectives that I have criticized must examine the actual experience that people have when they watch television regularly. This includes, of course, consideration of the ways in which those more broad-based structures and processes work via the television set and the symbolism of its programming in the meaning-making activities of people. This is not simply a matter of grasping the normative or ideological outcomes of viewing. When watching television, people participate in an oftentimes complex social world, one in which they routinely exhibit varying levels of mindful and emotional involvement with television and other people as well. These kinds of involvement stand on their own as cultural forms, quite apart from what many theorists take to be their normative or ideological consequences. Furthermore, their involvement with television and other people while watching is itself situated amidst a variety of ongoing social and personal relations that constitutes the wider, meaningful world that they inhabit. This cannot be read out of the object, television, either. For far too long, sociological theorists have failed to formulate clear conceptions of “viewing,” choosing instead to link constructs of “television” and “culture” in fashioning their critiques of the medium. What is needed in the approaches I have described is a commitment on the part of the theorist to reconstruct the standpoints of participants in a *viewing* culture. To speak about television viewing is to speak about power as something socially and culturally emergent. To speak about television viewing, then, is to speak about more than power in the very attempt to designate what power is and does in the rituals of daily use. Theorizing can, in Marx's terms, rise from abstract designations of television's power to concrete formulations of its sociological significance in



people's lives. In order for that to happen, media theorists must own up to their own outsider status regarding the worlds of day-to-day media use. In falling back on their own ideas about what it is that ordinary people actually do with the media – and consequently, what the media does to them – theorists must work harder, and differently, to enable the voices of the people who use the media, the people who they believe to be affected by it, to be heard.