Departmental Papers (ASC)   Annenberg School for Communication

Review of *Inside Prime Time,* by Todd Gitlin

Elihu Katz
University of Pennsylvania, ekatz@asc.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers

Review of *Inside Prime Time,* by Todd Gitlin

Abstract

Book Review: Inside Prime Time. By Todd Gitlin. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983. Pp. viii +372. $16. 95.

in a fresh way, and illuminating on the gender issue in emotions. The second book is a construction that does not fly.

Inside Prime Time. By Todd Gitlin. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983. Pp. viii + 372. $16.95.

Elihu Katz
Hebrew University of Jerusalem and *University of Southern California*

In his sharp critique of the Lazarsfeldian tradition of communications research ("Media Sociology: The Dominant Paradigm," *Theory and Society* 6 [1978]: 205–53), Todd Gitlin argues that placing emphasis on the short-run effects of media messages diverts attention from the institutional order. A counterparadigm, says Gitlin, "could scrutinize the 'culture industry' as both social control and failed, muddled, privatized revolt against the exploitative conditions of work and family in the world of organized capitalism. . . . It could note the multiplication of means for the engineering of consent, especially for Cold War policies. It could study the decision-making processes of soap manufacturers and soap-ad propagators and soap-opera producers as well as that of soap consumers" (p. 107).

Inside Prime Time is Gitlin's turn at bat. It is an institutional study of that well-lit corner of the culture industry called television or, in faded radical chic, "the television-industrial complex." It sets out to explain to a general audience but also to colleagues how and why television programs get on, and stay on, the air. It seems fair—if not quite affectively neutral—to ask how the counterparadigm stands up, theoretically and methodologically.

1. The study is based on over 200 informal, colorful, gossipy interviews with television executives, writers, and agents. The book quotes elaborately from this galaxy, whom Gitlin pronounces more interesting than their products. The quotations are all attributed by name, approvingly. Indeed, the book is an almost phenomenological anthropology in which the principals are invited to offer their perceptions of the workings of their world, its relationship to the world outside, and the ethnologic of their actions. Gitlin's voice is only dimly heard, as if to tell us that most of the critical theory he might have spoken is said just as well from "inside." The prophetic code of the 1978 essay has given way to the code of the talk show. Gitlin is a sociologist who can write well and entertainingly; the result is like a Universal Studios Tour of decision making.

2. Altogether absent is any trace of comparison with other broadcasting systems. In 1978, Gitlin complained that American communications research "is not interested in the structural and cultural consequences of different models of communication ownership" (p. 105). Neither is Gitlin in 1983. If the fault of American television derives from an oligopolistic institutional structure in which competition is oriented to delivering very

large numbers of viewers to advertisers by means of fine tuning to public mood and a variety of watchdogs, how about Britain? Or Sweden? Or Holland? Their systems are different, even if less so than before, and comparison is the only available test for institutional hypotheses. Instead, we get an announcement on the last page of the book that the "mass marketing mentality pervades much of non-commercial European television to almost the same degree as in America, *though without the compulsion of the profit motive*" (p. 335; italics mine). This means that profit is not the main culprit. Is Gitlin trying to tell us that something more profound than that capitalism is poisoning the media of the Western world? He had given us good reason to think otherwise and should not have left us guessing.

Are the other television systems really all the same? Even without original field work, good research on other broadcasting institutions could have been brought to bear. But Allen Burns makes the index, not Tom Burns.

3. Gitlin's study has two strengths. One is his portrait of the assembly line. We are escorted through the phases of writing scripts, packaging programs, negotiating with company censors, pretesting pilots, making schedules, collecting ratings, and agonizing over which programs to drop. We are given insight into the insurance scheme of musical chairs that makes certain that the inevitable leavers—due to failure or success—will be well provided for and not stray very far. We observe the interaction between the networks and the major production companies that do the work and among the networks, the stars, and the agents who package the programs. We note the decline of the power of the advertisers. One is struck by the tinkering that goes on at every phase in order to mesh the product with the prevailing norms and the current folklore of what will succeed. It is nice that one of the most cited philosophers of the trade is actually named Tinker.

4. The other strength of the book is its case studies. Bringing his interviews to bear, Gitlin masterfully pieces together the histories of several programs that failed, apparently because they attempted to grapple too closely with the Angel of Relevance. He points to the occasional deviant case such as "Hill Street Blues," as well as to the socially relevant programs of the 1970s, when it was legitimate to address social schisms ("M*A*S*H," "All in the Family," "Roots," etc.).

5. But where is the systematic analysis of what gets on and what stays on? We are introduced to the folklore of what works, the proverbial influence of wives and hairdressers, the high power of ratings and the low power of pretesting, the various forms of recombining elements from earlier successes, the standing rules about simple characters and clear-cut resolutions, the euphemisms that are employed to depict social problems (not a black but a cripple), and the avoidance of familiar social or family conflict. The case studies and the several stations of the assembly line illustrate the working of these rules. But it is all rather anecdotal. Admittedly a big job, a lot of good analysis might still be done on the 3,000 ideas

that are floated each year, of which 100 are scripted, 25 piloted, 20 broadcast, and one or two renewed for a second season (p. 21). Moreover, the average age of death for a new series is dropping each year. William McPhee tried to model this process of the survival rate in culture. But the index cites "McCloud," not McPhee.

6. Gitlin does cite the high rate of success of network researchers in predicting popularity. CBS data show 85% accuracy in predicting from preview theater reactions to Nielsen ratings, and it seems that this can even be bettered by improved sampling of respondents. Gitlin plays down these figures, because the executives do and because pretesting of this kind comes too late in the process. Once the pilot has been made it is apparently too expensive not to give the series a try, whatever the pretesters say. Indeed, it is only because the failures previewed are also aired that predictions of success and failure can be tested.

That is why schemes that claim to be able to predict from content analysis of scripts or survey reactions to program synopses are so much more attractive economically. Moreover, systems such as the excommunicated TAPE that are based on analysis of scripts in terms of the presence or absence of a list of ingredients constitute a "theory"—probably more predictive than the intuitive "theory" of the executives. Both kinds of theories, of course, perpetuate sameness and repeatedly fall behind actual changes in public opinions and tastes. Gitlin is fascinated by the strength of the occasional hunch that challenges the inertia of the system and the heroics of writer-producers who are strong enough or crazy enough to fight for ideas they believe in, even if most of them lose. Formulae—numerical or intuitive—not only homogenize culture and dehumanize the system, they threaten executive jobs and status. But the research fraternity is offered consolation in the number of researchers who are said to have landed top executive posts (from which they are expected to intuit, not research).

7. The only semblance of a theory of sifting is an implicit one that explains success and failure as a function of the compatibility between the values of programs and the "zeitgeist" as personified by presidential incumbents. Thus the Carter years, for example, were tolerant, even encouraging, of frontal discussion of social problems. The Reagan years show a trend toward externalization of enemies and presumed reunification of the ranks. It is also thought that the public mood favors a return to law and order and to symbols of family, honesty, authority, and teamwork. But this is a bad guess, says Gitlin, or at best an oversimple one. Implicitly, there is a theory here, to which Gitlin also subscribes.

Gitlin applies it to "Hill Street Blues." There *is* a certain change in the attitude toward authority, say Gitlin and the program's writers. It is based on a fatalistic view that nothing can be fundamentally improved and that the role of authority is to hold back chaos. It is "a new image of benign male authority cultivated in the middle class, especially those in their 30s and 40s, especially in California, but now diffused via management training seminars and therapeutic encounters. . . . [It is] an image of

sensitive male authority . . . alternative to Al Pacino's predatory, pow-erhungry, paranoid godfather." The job of authority is to negotiate truce: "Only his [the program's police chief–hero's] soft-pedalled embodiment of old-fashioned professional duty, combining self-discipline, service and care, can stave off the utter, catastrophic dissolution of the societal con-tract" (p. 313).

Gitlin's voice is strongest here in the high quality of his sociological criticism. He proposes an analogy between the fictional police station and the television station "with its collectivity, its squabbles, its array of off-center personalities, its moods and morale problems and delicate balances of ego and personality."

8. So what happened to capitalism? What about hegemony? In a thoughtful disquisition in the final pages, Gitlin agrees that businessmen often look bad on television but capitalism looks good. Competition needs losers, he says, and little guys have to win against bigness—in business, government, even labor. Gitlin's own heroes—the writers of "Hill Street Blues"—do nothing less than that in their own big milieu. Writers and producers, says Gitlin, glorify the rules of fair business prac-tice in their programs so that little guys will be seen to have a chance. But there is no mention of the hegemonic potential of such messages.

9. The main conclusion of the book is that television, as medium and as message, fits the American preoccupation with private rather than public happiness. The cost of this pasteurized culture is in the impover-ishment of the public domain, in the illusion of participation that Lazars-feld and Merton, in their famous essay, called the "narcotizing dysfunc-tion" of the media.

The Regulatory Executives. By Robert H. Miles and Arvind Bhambri. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1983. Pp. 213.

Mayer N. Zald
University of Michigan

Social control of industries is a pervasive aspect of modern life. Although we live in an era that has made deregulation an important and, to a large extent, bipartisan target of public policy, many industries remain heavily regulated. Moreover, much control of industry in the United States is conducted under state and local jurisdictions.

As part of a larger study of the strategies and directions of the insur-ance industry, Robert H. Miles and Arvind Bhambri became interested in the regulation of the industry and in particular the role perception, behavior, and impact of insurance commissioners. They rightly recog-nized that much of the literature on regulation deals with federal, not state, regulations; with the political environment of agencies ("capture theory"); and with the output of agencies (the price-product effects and the development of industry stability and attitudes). The literature does