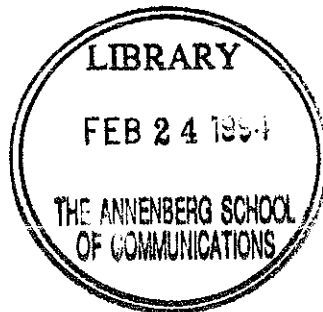


# CULTURAL

# STUDIES

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Special Section on Cultural Studies and the Environment  
Guest edited by Jennifer Daryl Slack and Jody Berland

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MICHAEL X. DELLI CARPINI

AND BRUCE A. WILLIAMS

'FICTIONAL' AND  
'NON-FICTIONAL' TELEVISION  
CELEBRATES EARTH DAY: OR,  
POLITICS IS COMEDY PLUS  
PRETENSE

Introduction

**W**hile there is much new work in the field of communications that challenges such distinctions, many scholars who study the medium still assume a clear and natural separation between fictional and non-fictional television. Falling into the former category are most prime-time shows, specials, movies and other broadcasts serving, it is assumed, primarily as entertainment. Further, many scholars assume that such shows have little impact on the way people think about the 'real world', in general, and politics, in particular.<sup>1</sup> In the latter category are shows like the news, documentaries and other public-affairs programming. Such shows are assumed to deal with events or conditions in the 'real world'. With few exceptions, for example, political scientists examine only 'non-fiction' television when they search for the effect of the medium on political attitudes and beliefs. In this paper we critically examine the distinction between 'fiction' and non-fiction' television, arguing that it does not hold up under close scrutiny. Indeed, its unexamined persistence tends to blind scholars to the full political implications of television for democratic politics in the United States.

To make our argument, we proceed in two steps. First, we develop a notion of both politics and politically relevant television that does not depend on this distinction and that better captures the current contours of the medium. Second, we apply our theoretical arguments in a close examination of three seemingly different types of programs dealing with the same political issue: environmental pollution. Through this analysis we

demonstrate both the difficulty and the inappropriateness of maintaining the distinction between 'non-fiction' and 'fiction' television.

### **Fiction versus non-fiction television**

Among most mainstream social scientists who study the mass media, mass politics is assumed to consist of two elements: opinions about the people, institutions, and policies of national politics; and voting in national campaigns. However, messages about campaigns, elections, institutions such as congress and the presidency, policies of the day, etc., are only part of the substance of political communication. Uncritical acceptance of this limited definition constrains the study of media and politics since the media's most important forms and profound effects are in the very areas which lie outside it. As we argue elsewhere, an adequate definition of politics must encompass three different, but related, levels.<sup>2</sup>

First is what we call the *institutions and processes of politics*. By these we mean the formal channels of politics and government – elections, the presidency, etc. Second is the *substance of politics*, or issues, policies, etc., that are on the political agenda or that are becoming part of that agenda (social security, AIDS, drug testing, criminal rights, etc.). Most work in political science addressing the impact of television investigates politics at only these two levels. Third, and most neglected by students of the media's political impact, is the *foundations of politics*, or the processes and concepts upon which the very idea of politics and government is based – authority, power, equality, freedom, justice, community, etc.

Our definition of politics raises questions ignored by scholars adopting a narrower definition. First, does the media affect attitudes about 'the foundations of politics'? Second, does the way in which the media affects attitudes and behaviors vary across levels of politics? Third, how does the media influence the relationship between fundamental political values and more proximate behaviors and attitudes? In our analysis of shows dealing with environmental pollution presented below, we find that the political values espoused by these shows are quite different at each of the levels we have defined.

Answering such questions requires a rethinking of what constitutes politically relevant television. The rest of this paper is devoted to a consideration of this issue.

The 'commonsensical' assumption of a clear distinction between 'fictional' and 'non-fictional' television derives from and is reinforced by several lines of reasoning that are seldom explicitly examined. First, the very distinction is assumed to be 'natural' as evidenced by its use in a wide variety of fields. So, for example, there is assumed to be a clear distinction between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' writing. Novels, poetry and other works of 'imagination' fall into the first category. History and biography fall into the second. Likewise, it is assumed that television programming can be sorted into the same categories. However, this distinction is now being questioned in the very fields from which it is borrowed. In literature, for example,

certain genres like the historical novel challenge this distinction. In history and biography there is growing awareness that the use of certain narrative devices (borrowed from literature) shape the way we tell any 'story' and so inevitably involves the creation of a 'fiction'.

While this distinction is being questioned in many other fields, it nevertheless continues to be used in unselfconscious ways in the study of television's political impact. This is so not because the distinction is less problematic in the study of television (in fact, we argue that it is more difficult to sustain in classifying television programs), but because of the beliefs of both those who produce television and the social scientists who study it.

Programs categorized as 'non-fiction' are produced by journalists. The 'doctrine of objectivity,' widely accepted by American print and electronic journalists, and not coincidentally by most social scientists, reinforces the categorization by assuming that the purpose of such programs is to provide viewers with a neutral mirror on 'real world' events. Moreover, political scientists who study the media share with television journalists a definition of politics that is confined to the institutions and substance level. Thus, when political scientists look for politically relevant television they are drawn to this type of programming because it is explicitly labeled 'political'. From this perspective, it makes little sense to see the products of journalists as reflecting (or being indistinct from) the narrative conventions or devices borrowed from 'fictional' forms of writing or broadcasting. Yet, the unexamined, universally used terminology that news events are communicated as 'stories', once we call attention to this choice of words, seems to indicate much less distinction between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' than journalists often assume.<sup>3</sup>

The distinction between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' is also reinforced by the self-definition of social scientists as 'serious' scholars who ought not be concerned with the mundane and non-serious aspects of popular culture. Since television itself is commonly assumed to be part of 'low culture' (how many academics will even admit that they watch television?), social scientists are reluctant to confront its full political significance. Thus, it has been attractive to draw a boundary between the small portion of 'serious', 'non-fiction' programming, produced by other respectable professionals (i.e., journalists, campaign managers, etc.) that is worthy of serious study and the vast majority of television that is not relevant to the concerns of political scientists.

To the extent that this reasoning remains unexamined, it produces a 'common sense' understanding of television. That is, it seems logical or natural that 'non-fiction' television addresses public concerns and therefore has 'serious' political implications while 'fictional' television is simply a form of entertainment with few 'serious' and or political implications.

In our view, the very distinction between 'non-fiction' and 'fiction' is especially misleading when applied to television. Its unexamined maintenance leads to some fundamental misconceptions about the nature of the medium and its political significance. First, there is a growing tendency for

'entertainment' television to reflect real world issues and events (e.g., docudramas that portray actual events or series that deal with current political or social issues). The recent flap over Dan Quayle's attack on Murphy Brown and that character's response (or was it Candice Bergen's response, it's so hard to tell), is one recent example. Since these shows are consistently watched by large audiences it seems reasonable that they will influence the ways viewers understand such issues. We examine two examples of such shows in this paper: a docudrama on toxic waste pollution and *The Time-Warner Earth Day Special*.

Second, there is a more subtle tendency for 'non-fiction' television to use the form and substance of 'fiction' – staging events, using graphics and movie clips to dramatize issues, employing the narrative conventions of fiction story-telling, the celebrity status of newscasters, and so forth (see Fiske, 1987: ch.15). One reason 'non-fiction' programming borrows conventions from 'entertainment' programming is that the latter type of programming dominates. Thus most people's expectations about what will be on television and how it will be presented requires that public issues be dealt with in an 'entertaining' fashion. This has clear implications for the ways public issues can be raised on even 'non-fiction' programs. We examine below an example of a 'non-fictional' program that employs many of the devices of 'entertainment' television: an episode of the show *48 Hours*.

Third, television blurs the line between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' by presenting fictional accounts of issues or events while they are still topical, and by tying these 'entertainment' broadcasts into the news itself, often using each to promote the viewership of the other.<sup>4</sup> In the past few months, for example, many entertainment shows had plots that revolved around the LA riots. With respect to the shows we examine below, ABC ran several stories about Earth Day on their nightly news broadcasts that explicitly referenced the prime time *Time-Warner Earth Day Special*.

And finally, because of the edited, scripted and contrived nature of its production (including 'live' television), in a very real sense *all* television is 'fictional' (see e.g., Seiter, 1987: esp. p.23). Yet, because it is a visual medium and there is a very strong conviction among viewers that 'seeing is believing', television has a great power to render invisible the conventions it uses to construct its treatment of public events. This power to naturalize its coverage makes it difficult to critically analyze the effect these conventions have on the portrayal of public issues.

These characteristics of television are fundamental to the ways in which it influences politics, and are missed because of the ways political television is normally defined. In short, much of what appears on television deals, at least tangentially, with the political (especially if we expand our definition of politics, as we did above). Thus, far from being natural or neutral, the distinction between types of television programs obscures television's impact. Along with theorists like Michel Foucault, we believe that distinctions accepted as natural or 'commonsensical' are not subject to critical scrutiny, and thus operate ideologically in the deepest, unexamined

manner. Such ideological significance can only be revealed by foregrounding these distinctions and subjecting them to critical scrutiny.<sup>5</sup>

Unexamined maintenance of the distinction privileges programs categorized as 'non-fiction' by implying that they can or should present politically neutral, objective pictures of the world. This view fails to consider that narrative devices drawn from other forms of 'entertainment' and popular culture are an inevitable component of any television show. For example, we show in our analysis of *48 Hours* that different segments draw upon the conventions of the Western, the family melodrama, and the police show to tell their stories. The limited number of 'genres' available to journalists shape the kinds of 'stories' that they can and cannot tell on the news. This is especially the case on commercial television where the expectations of viewers are heavily influenced by the devices used on 'entertainment' broadcasts. In our view, such devices have ideological significance, especially at the foundations level of politics (e.g., individualism, democracy, fairness, etc.).

Focusing attention on the 'fictional' devices inevitably employed on 'non-fiction' broadcasts, raises many other issues obscured by the unquestioned use of this distinction. For example, in what sense are network anchors actually journalists? Most do not write what they read. Their careers depend not on the skills traditionally valued by print journalists but rather upon the images they have established as celebrities.<sup>6</sup> As with all television celebrities, their jobs and salaries depend upon the ratings their shows achieve. We might see such people much less as neutral, professional journalists (their carefully cultivated self-definition), and much more as highly paid celebrities employed by large, private corporations that depend both upon governmental regulatory largess and selling time to advertisers interested in particular kinds of audiences. Seeing network personnel this way might affect how we analyze the ways news programs frame such terms as 'capitalism', 'socialism', 'freedom', 'equality', etc. For example, this sort of analysis might be especially revealing in analyzing the ways the networks have used such 'essentially contested concepts' in their coverage of 'The Collapse of Communism' in Eastern Europe (Connolly, 1983).

We would also suggest that prime-time 'entertainment' programming has become increasingly important as a place for the structuring of public discourse. First, all television deals with issues that have relevance for the foundations of politics. That is, it is a medium of communication, constantly watched by mass audiences, that always deals with issues like individualism, authority, community, participation, etc. Second, prime-time shows increasingly deal with the substance and institutions of politics by explicitly addressing the social and political issues of the day (both in docudramas and regularly scheduled series).

Simply listing the unasked questions raised by considering the political implications of 'entertainment' programming indicates the extent to which they have been ignored by social scientists. First, how often does (and has) prime-time programming address(ed) politically significant questions (at all three levels of politics)?<sup>7</sup> Second, what are the conventions, conscious and

unconscious, used by the actors, writers, producers and directors of such shows when they address political issues? How do they define their own role in shaping the public agenda? They clearly do not see themselves as journalists, but how do they see themselves? There are as yet no standards or doctrine (comparable to the doctrine of objectivity or fairness) for critiquing the ways in which such issues are portrayed. Just as authoritative sources define what is news, so too celebrities become 'sources' on entertainment programming by signaling the importance of events or coverage. What are the effects on public debate of celebrities participating (both in and out of their established characters) in shows that deal with political issues? More generally, how do viewers receive and use the political messages of 'entertainment' programming as they form their own political beliefs and positions? Do they distinguish between news and entertainment programs as credible sources of information?

For example, consider the impact of the popular show *L.A. Law* on the practice of law in America and the way this impact challenges the distinction between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction'. According to two articles in *The New York Times* (Margolick, 1990; Weber, 1990), lawyers increasingly must consider the effect on juries of cases 'tried' on the show. Law school professors use episodes of the show as a teaching tool. Clients increasingly want lawyers who behave like those they see on the show, and dismiss those who do not. Clearly, a prime-time show is having an impact on the way viewers understand the law, the way lawyers practice the law, and the way students are taught the law. Is *L.A. Law* a 'fictional' or 'non-fictional' show? Does it have a political influence and importance that makes it a serious object of study? Even the very placement of these articles in the *Times* highlights the difficulty of categorizing such shows and their effects. While the articles were placed in the entertainment section of the newspaper, they could just as easily have appeared on the front page of the news section, or in the section of the paper that deals with legal developments. Clearly, there is nothing natural or inevitable about the placement of the story, nor is it clear how to categorize the story's subject. Answering such questions mean abandoning as 'common sense' the distinctions that guide social scientists when they examine the medium.

### **The representation of environmental issues**

To explore the issues raised thus far we examine three very different types of shows all dealing with the same general issue: environmental pollution. Celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the first Earth Day in May 1990 pushed environmental issues on to the evening news and, as important to us, on to prime-time television as well. This resurgence of concern over the environment is interesting in and of itself. Environmental pollution is a difficult issue for the mass media, both print and electronic, to cover well.<sup>8</sup> It is an ongoing, slowly changing story that only rarely provides the dramatic events that render an issue newsworthy. It is difficult for journalists to cover the issue on a day-to-day basis and provide readers and viewers with the sort of in-depth information needed to appreciate the complex issues involved.



This is especially so on television, where compelling visuals are needed to push any ongoing story on to the news on any given day. Moreover, when dramatic events do occur (e.g., Exxon Valdez Oil Spill, Love Canal, etc.) they are covered for a brief period of time and in ways that often over-dramatize and simplify the issues involved. For these reasons, the extended attention to Earth Day and environmental issues was quite unusual. While it wasn't any specific change in the condition of the environment, but simply the twentieth anniversary of the first Earth Day that pushed the issue on to television, the opportunity is there to analyze the ways various types of programming (usually thought of as 'fictional' and 'non-fictional') deal with a serious and difficult public issue.<sup>9</sup>

Before beginning our analysis, it is important to emphasize how complicated, politically, economically and technically, the issue of environmental pollution is. In any specific area of environmental concern (hazardous wastes, global warming, air pollution, water pollution, etc.) there is great uncertainty and disagreement among scientific and technical experts over the level of pollution, whether the situation is improving or deteriorating, the overall threat posed by that pollution to the health of the overall ecosystem, and the adequacy and cost of proposed solutions. Appreciating the dilemmas of environmental protection requires some familiarity with this sort of technical complexity and uncertainty.<sup>10</sup>

Politically and economically, environmental pollution poses even more difficult issues. Since most forms of pollution in America are the by-products of private economic activity, dealing with them raises significant questions at all three levels of politics we defined above. At the substance level, specific public policies designed to protect the environment must address questions about the appropriate trade-offs between economic growth and the health and safety of citizens and the environment. At the institutions level, environmental protection raises questions about the role (both in terms of what it is and what it might be) of political institutions as regulators of the activities of private corporations. At the foundations level, environmental concerns address the overall meaning of and relationships among terms like capitalism, democracy, the public good, fairness and so forth. Thus, this issue is particularly appropriate for applying our definition of politics to various types of television programming.

#### DOCUMENTARY TELEVISION CELEBRATES EARTH DAY

The first program we examine is an episode of *48 Hours* entitled 'Not on My Planet'. This show provides us with an example of what would ordinarily be classified as 'non-fiction' programming: it is a regularly scheduled, prime-time, documentary program produced by the news division of CBS. As is often the case with documentary programming, *48 Hours* does poorly in the ratings and remains on the air as an example of CBS's commitment to public-affairs programming. This particular episode finished at no. 67 (out of 90 shows) for the week with a rating of 8.1 and a share of 14.<sup>11</sup>

A close analysis of the program — its structure, audio and visual

techniques, narrative conventions, etc. – challenges the ‘common sense’ distinction between ‘fiction’ and ‘non-fiction’ television. The show consists of seven brief (4–7 minute) stories dealing with different types of environmental problems: controversy over a landfill in Los Angeles, pesticide use in the San Joaquin Valley, suspected leaks from a petro-chemical factory in Texas, a group that organizes Hollywood stars to participate in environmental issues, concern over a hazardous waste-disposal facility in Alabama, efforts by the Los Angeles Police Department to arrest polluters, and the return of wildlife to the lands around the Rocky Mountain Arsenal. Thus, rather than providing an hour-long, in-depth treatment of a single issue, or a unified overview of environmental problems, the show is broken down into smaller separate stories.

However, while the stories address different environmental issues, they are all similarly structured. Each story has ‘heros’ – in all but one episode the hero is an ‘average’ citizen combating pollution in his/her own neighborhood. Six of the seven stories have villains – usually the spokesperson for either government or business. Each story, while posing a difficult problem with which the citizen-hero grapples, also offers a cause for hope or optimism, usually in the form of some solution that, while not yet perfected, looms on the horizon. Each story emphasizes the emotional and personal reaction of individuals to the problems they face, rather than attempting to address scientific, political or economic difficulties. Thus while the show might be categorized as ‘non-fiction’ because it purports to describe actual events, it frames and tells these stories within a single overarching narrative structure drawing heavily from other forms of television programming, especially ‘fictional’ dramas (but also other ‘non-fictional’ programs like *60 Minutes*). The stories use conventions drawn, for example, from other genres of television programming like the Western, the cop show, the family melodrama, and the celebrity-news *Entertainment Tonight* format.

The similarity in the narrative structure used to tell all seven stories takes precedence over any attempt to deal with the differences and complexities of the seven, in many ways quite distinct, issues. The strength of the narrative devices, the short-story format, the reliance on graphics and rapid cutting between shots all indicate the degree to which the conventions of television and television viewing (e.g., switching between shows in search of arresting images, the need to engage viewers on an emotional level with dramatic visuals and touching personal stories) tend to break down the distinction between ‘fictional’ and ‘non-fictional’ programming. While these narrative conventions are needed to make the specific stories entertaining and easily accessible to viewers, they are far from being politically neutral.

The show itself opens with a computer-animated logo and a series of rapid cuts among scenes, drawn from the various stories that will follow. Dan Rather, the ‘host’(?), ‘star’(?), ‘anchorperson’(?) narrates opening and closing segments that define the overall narrative into which each of the following stories will be fit. Rather’s segments are remarkable for the way

they implicitly establish the specific political discourse within which all the stories will operate:

**Rather:** For most people Earth Day used to conjure up images of long-haired activists in tie-dyed shirts . . . no longer . . . Most Americans say the air they breath and water they drink is worse than ever . . . Americans say clean-up help isn't coming from government or business, so they're taking up the fight on their own.

This is a message rich with significance for understanding the way television deals with the foundations of politics. It signals that, while it used to be associated with 'radicals' outside the mainstream of American politics and hence not worth serious consideration, now environmental concerns are acceptable because 'average' Americans realize that their air and water is polluted. However, large institutions are not the solution, rather those same 'average' Americans operating as individuals and certainly not as radicals, will solve the problem on their own (as opposed to seeking to reform those large institutions). This opening also specifies the way in which the show will deal with scientific uncertainty: the ultimate criterion is not what experts say, but what Americans believe. Rather does not even raise the issue of whether the air and water are *actually* worse than ever (since one must first specify which water and what air we are talking about and even then there is much disagreement about how to answer this question); instead, if public opinion concludes that pollution is getting worse, then it is. This reinforces the emphasis on individual action and the wisdom of 'average' Americans as opposed to the confusing findings of experts located within those suspicious and ineffectual government institutions.

The way these foundational issues are defined provides the framework within which the specific stories, overtly dealing with the substance and institutions of politics, operate. At the level of the substance of politics, these stories deal with a diverse group of issues. Yet, there is never any on-camera discussion of what makes these stories similar or dissimilar. Instead, it is the narrative structure and its definition of the foundational issues involved, rather than any overt discussion that makes them seem so similar. We discuss two segments to emphasize the degree to which seemingly 'non-fiction' television employs narratives and formulas that owe much to the conventions of 'fictional' television and other forms of popular culture.

The segment on pesticide pollution in the San Joaquin valley, entitled 'Growing Concern', follows the overall narrative structure. Lasting eight minutes, it opens with the strongest possible emotional appeal: a group of parents discussing their dead children. These parents are convinced that pesticides used by nearby farmers caused the death of their children. Experts are not so sure. The story quickly focuses on the family of Kevin who died in 1986 at the age of eleven. While the show deals overtly with pesticides, it avoids considering the public policy implications of the issue by using the conventions of the family melodrama to focus on the private struggles of the family to deal with Kevin's death. Kevin's doctor, representing expert opinion, states that medical researchers, in fact, don't know what caused

Kevin's illness. However, cutting rapidly from the doctor, in a white coat acting unemotional and removed from the tragedy, to the family itself blunts the impact of expert information and reinforces the idea that it is the parents who truly 'know' what caused their child's death. While the strong emotional message of these scenes cuts off any serious debate over whether pesticides killed the children, it does create powerful, gripping television. In one scene Kevin's brother, while thumbing through photographs of Kevin, talks about what his brother's death means. He explains that the family launches balloons with messages for Kevin to read in heaven ('Hi Kevin. Everything is fine here. What's it like up in heaven?' reads one). The episode later closes with the actual balloon launching at Kevin's grave: Kevin's brother stands alone watching the balloons rise, presumably to heaven, while his crying parents hug each other. Indeed, as with much television, the entire episode engages our emotions more than it engages us in any sort of public debate over appropriate policies.<sup>12</sup> We do not believe that emotions can be, or should be, sharply separated from 'factual' understanding of public issues. Indeed, the sharp distinction between affective and cognitive understanding processing is one of those ideologically significant distinctions – like 'fiction' versus 'non-fiction' – assumed to be clear, but not adequately examined by mainstream social scientists. Nevertheless, it is interesting that much of the emotional tug of this episode flows from its borrowing from other television genres (e.g., family melodramas; medical shows, etc.); rather than any overt discussion.

All of this is pretty grim, but part of the formula is the need for some optimism. Here that is provided by a farmer (the individual as hero) who, after his son developed leukemia, turned to organic farming. The episode presents this as an individual, personal decision arising from his own tragedy. This hero is contrasted with a scene of other farmers sitting around in a restaurant drinking coffee (the hero farmer is never seen at rest, he is always out working on the land) who are reluctant to abandon pesticide usage. Unlike the hero farmer or the families of the dead children, who base their decisions on personal experience, these farmers coldly debate the economic costs and benefits of using pesticides. Nevertheless, one is left with the feeling that organic farming is the wave of the future.

The issue of government regulation – laws that would prevent the use of pesticides – or any sort of government or business action or responsibility is never raised. Instead, we are all implicated as individuals: it is American consumers' demand for good-looking produce that the farmers say keeps them spraying. Further, collective or coercive action that will solve the problem (by fighting for such laws, for instance) is never considered; instead, it is the hero farmer and the convictions of the grieving parent that hold out hope. Amazingly, this episode was followed by a commercial for Scott's Turf Builder Fertilizer.<sup>13</sup>

A second episode, 'Next Door Neighbor', also follows the narrative structure closely. It employs the conventions of the Western (especially *High Noon*) with a lone individual facing down the dangerous invaders of a small Texas town. The story chronicles the struggles of Diane Wilson, a heroic

fisherperson turned activist who is trying to monitor suspected leaks from a chemical plant near her home in Sea Drift, Texas. Lest we miss the Western flavor, the narrator calls Wilson 'an environmental Lone Ranger'. The six-minute story follows her as she tries to cope with the demands of family and job at the same time as she tries to arouse the community to the threat posed by the company. Here, the conflict necessary to drive the narrative is provided by a villain: a foreign-owned company with a long record of pollution and spills. The image of the company clearly plays upon anxieties about the vulnerability of the American economy and workers to foreign investment (the plant, 'Formosa Chemicals', is owned by a Taiwanese company). The issue of whether the factory actually is polluting is never addressed: it is enough that the hero – Diane Wilson – thinks they are. She is shown at a town meeting trying to arouse the citizens of the town but, as in *High Noon*, most of them are fearful for their jobs and the end result is that Wilson is left to carry on by herself.

Again, the story emphasizes the idea that the solution to these issues will not come from government or other institutions. In one scene an 'environmentalist' (Tonto?) helping Wilson take water samples is asked why the state or EPA isn't doing this (we never find out whether the samples reveal pollution from the plant). He responds, 'They don't have the resources or the political will. All across this state and country, you're going to find citizens out doing the job state and local agencies ought to be doing. That's just the reality of it.' Thus, while institutions are deeply flawed and not to be trusted, that is just how they are ('the reality of it'). Echoing the mythology of the Western, the solution lies not in institutional reform or political organizing, but in individual action.

After all seven episodes, Dan Rather returns to sum up with a rather remarkable closing statement:

Americans tell us pollution is hitting very close to home. Twenty per cent say they know someone personally whose health was damaged by pollution. Seven per cent say they know someone who has died [presumably from pollution]. But are Americans committed to doing something? Yes, say those who responded to our poll. Three out of four say the environment must be cleaned up, no matter what it costs. In fact, they'd even pay higher taxes to do the job. I'm Dan Rather.

This statement succinctly repeats the message of the narratives employed in the seven stories. First the use of public opinion, because it registers the views of average Americans, is the final arbiter of reality: the issue of whether people can really know whether the health problems or deaths of specific individuals actually resulted from pollution is ignored. Experts may disagree, but it is the common-sense perceptions of average Americans that really count. As with the specific episodes, despite the grim statistics the show ends on an upbeat note. There is hope because Americans are 'committed to doing something'; exactly what is never stated. However, that slight omission is unimportant because all that matters, within the confines of the discourse that the show establishes, is that Americans want something

to happen (clean up the environment 'no matter what the cost') for it to happen. This is a theme to which we shall return, since in all the shows we examined (through a variety of devices) television has come to celebrate itself as a place where a form of populist or direct democracy can take place. This vision of a perfected, direct democracy wherein citizens can rule for themselves without the corrupting influence of 'big' government at a distance from 'the people' is a deeply rooted yearning in American political thought: political scientist James Morone (1990) calls it the 'democratic wish'.

Our point in this analysis is that a supposedly serious 'non-fiction' show employs many of the devices of 'fictional' television and is no more serious, neutral, or accurate than 'entertainment' shows. The result of the infiltration of the conventions of 'entertainment' television into the province of 'non-fiction' programming is a show that operates at a variety of political levels, but ultimately treats a public issue in a way that mocks serious debate. The failure of the show to deal any more seriously with this issue than supposedly 'fictional' television is illustrated when we turn to a docudrama that deals with toxic-waste pollution.

#### TED TURNER TACKLES TOXICS

*Incident at Dark River*, a two-hour drama about toxic-waste pollution, was produced by and appeared on Turner Network Television several times in the months before Earth Day. While it would be categorized as a 'fictional' program, *Incident at Dark River* deals with many of the same public policy issues as *48 Hours* and in strikingly similar ways. At the center of the story is an heroic 'average' small-town American who is convinced, while experts are not, that his child has been struck down by industrial pollution. He is helped not by government or industry (both of which are revealed as corrupt and inept), but by a sidekick (here, an ecologically aware college student). As with *High Noon* and the 'Next Door Neighbor' episode on *48 Hours*, in the end the hero cannot count on his neighbors (frightened as they are for their jobs), but must act alone to deal with the threat to his community posed by an evil corporation. As with the 'Growing Concern' episode on *48 Hours*, a central dramatic element of the story, drawn from melodrama, is the struggle of his family to come to grips with a child's death. Despite these similarities, because of its two-hour length and its focus on a single type of pollution, *Incident at Dark River* in many ways provides a more sophisticated, in-depth and balanced story than does the 'non-fictional' *48 Hours*.

*Incident* stars (and was written by) Mike Farrell as Tim McFall, a maintenance worker at a college in a small town at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. McFall's daughter Kathleen is rushed to the hospital with a mysterious brain ailment after playing by the river that runs past her house. McFall gets no answers from rather surly and condescending doctors (the medical profession does not fare well on either *48 Hours* or *Incident*). Later, he finds his daughter's doll, reeking of chemicals, lying by the river near a pipe running out of a local chemical plant. Starbrite Chemicals, the villain of

the piece, is the largest company in the town and most townspeople, including those at the college, are dependent upon the company. We learn at the very outset that the company is illegally dumping untreated wastes into the river and that the company's chief executive, despite the pleas of concerned engineers, is unwilling to stop production long enough to remedy the situation (thus, as with the other shows, scientific uncertainty is never an issue – cause and effect relationships are always clear and unambiguous).

McFall has the doll analyzed by his friend, a professor at the college, and finds that it is contaminated. He goes with his friend to Starbrite and they meet the slick, public-relations director of the company. They receive a tour of the plant (on which the viewer learns more about the technology of waste treatment than he/she does on *48 Hours*) and bland reassurances that the company is not to blame. Unconvinced, McFall uses the college library to do his own research into hazardous waste. There is a club of students concerned about the environment and he turns to them for help. He finds in the club, Dan Rather would be happy to note, a 'long-haired activist'. It turns out that McFall knows more about hazardous wastes than the students (since as 'long-haired activists', they admit to being more concerned with 'saving the whales and things like that' than the concerns of average, sensible Americans like McFall) and the show uses this as an excuse to have him educate them (us). In fact, here we get the same sort of 'factual' information as we do on *48 Hours*:

**McFall:** [Starbrite] uses heavy metals – lead, mercury, cadmium. You know about heavy metals? You dig that stuff out of the ground, sooner or later every bit of it – hazardous waste. The petrochemical industry in this country alone – 2½ million metric tons of toxic waste chemicals every year.

The students suggest that McFall go to the EPA for help and a female student volunteers to go with him. As you would expect, consistent with the conventions of the melodrama, she and McFall will have a brief flirtation. The rest of the show is a picaresque tale of McFall and his female companion finding out about the flaws and limitations of all the institutions to which they turn for help. They first find out how spineless academics are as allies (no surprises here) when the President of the college, pressured by Starbrite, warns McFall's friend to stop helping. The professor slinks away (once again, experts come off as an unreliable source of support or information). McFall and his companion find that the EPA, in the person of an obnoxious, officious and vaguely corrupt woman, will be no help:

**Student:** So, the company says 'not guilty' and you say 'Oh thank you'.

**EPA Official:** You don't understand the way the EPA works.

**McFall:** I think I'm starting to.

**EPA Official:** Basically, industry is supposed to be self-policing.

**McFall:** And your're here to help 'em out. Isn't that funny, I thought it was the public you were supposed to protect.

Soon thereafter, Kathleen dies and there is a touching scene at the graveside (quite similar to the balloon launching scenes in 'Growing Concern') between McFall and his son Pat who blames himself for his sister's death.

McFall and the student resume their quest by confronting the President of Starbrite. Here, unlike on any of the other shows, an element of the class basis of environmental politics is introduced.

**President:** If I thought there was a grain of truth in what you're saying, I'd get out of the business. I live in this community too. We share the same space on this planet.

**McFall:** My guess is that your family and friends share the same space in the swimming pool at the country club, not at the river.

McFall then turns to a local reporter who finds an employee of Starbrite who confesses that the company has, indeed, been dumping in the river. Here again, though, the actions of heroic and well-meaning individuals are foiled by corrupt institutions. The local newspaper, pressured by Starbrite, won't run the story. This prompts this critical and cynical outburst from the reporter to McFall:

**Reporter:** The guy who said the press is free only if you own one was wrong. It's still not, it's who pays the piper calls the tune and in this town that's Starbrite. All that First Amendment crapola they feed you, 'Congress will make no law . . .' Congress doesn't have to make a law. The fix is in man . . . Ever wonder what would happen if everybody figured out the way this country really works?

However, the reporter manages to get the story published in a nearby paper. The resultant publicity turns many of his friends against McFall, who is seen as trying to drive Starbrite out of town and cost them their jobs. McFall's wife, who has been critical of his efforts to uncover the truth about Kathleen's death, leaves him (thus setting up his flirtation with the college student).

Still nothing happens. The company denies responsibility and McFall is disillusioned. Here, the show confronts the problematic relationship between knowledge and action. In contrast, *48 Hours* avoided this thorny political problem by simply assuming that public opinion translates into policy solutions. The student lectures McFall that, if he wants anything to happen, he must do more:

**Student:** People need to be directed. You have to give them some direction. You can't just sort of let them know all this stuff is going on and expect them to straighten it out. It's like you're saying, 'Here's this problem, I've identified it, you go fix it'. It won't happen. It doesn't work that way.

McFall calls a town meeting and a scene results that is remarkably similar to the scenes of the town meeting called by Diane Wilson in 'Next Door



Neighbor' (both nostalgically evoke the New England Town Meeting). A debate occurs that, while brief and superficial, provides the show with a sort of balance sorely lacking in the other two shows we examined. Townspeople speaking at the meeting are used as a device to articulate the various perspectives that exist on pollution, risk, economic blackmail, and so forth (i.e., some claim Starbrite isn't dangerous, others say they need their jobs, others say that they owe it to their children to find out more, others argue that EPA will protect them, others that the government's risk standards are too lenient, etc.). Nevertheless, as with Diane Wilson's meeting, the town meeting in *Incident* ends inconclusively.

While political efforts in the real world may end inconclusively, the conventions of television drama (observed in both 'fictional' and 'non-fictional' television) require a more satisfying conclusion. One difference between *48 Hours* and *Incident* is that the former provides the 'happy ending' by assuming that public arousal will lead to a solution. The 'fictional' program gets to show the happy ending. Consistent with the conventions of the Western, the satisfying resolution comes through violence. Immediately following the town meeting a professor from Johns Hopkins (called by McFall's professor friend before he was scared off) appears at McFall's house and assures him that his daughter was indeed killed by pollution from Starbrite (thus, any lingering questions of causality are eliminated). McFall drives his pickup through the gate at Starbrite, takes out a sledge-hammer and tries to smash the valve that dumps waste into the river. He is restrained by employees, but his wife (who just happens to be there), in an act of reconciliation, picks up the hammer and finishes smashing the valve forcing the factory to close down and, presumably, remedy its disreputable practices.

#### THE SOLUTION IS IN THE STARS: THE TIME-WARNER EARTH DAY SPECIAL

While the two shows we just discussed represent infiltration of the conventions of 'fictional' programming into 'non-fictional' programming and vice versa, they are still recognizable as examples, albeit changed examples, of the documentary and the docudrama. However, one of the characteristics of television is that it constantly changes in ways that challenge the typologies we have for describing it. The final show we examine, the *Time-Warner Earth Day Special* demonstrates how the infiltration of conventions produces new sorts of shows that defy easy categorization. As Candice Bergen-Murphy Brown says on the show, 'I'm not quite sure what's happening here, it's difficult to describe.' We couldn't agree more.

The special was aired on ABC from 9:00 to 11:00 on Sunday night, the most popular evening, in prime time. The entire show was sponsored by Time-Warner and hence all commercials, with the exception of promos for other network shows, were for the communications giant. Unlike the other

shows we have examined, *The Earth Day Special* did quite well in the ratings: it was the 16th most watched show that week, the same week that our episode of *48 Hours* finished 67th, with a rating of 14.6 and a share of 24. This means that millions of television sets were tuned in for the consideration of an important issue high on the public agenda.

Walter Lippmann once defined news as the 'signalizing of important events'. By this definition, *The Earth Day Special* is a news program: it signalizes the importance of environmental issues. However, the signalizing works not through reporting on events or by consulting authoritative sources, but through the celebrity power of those who appear (act?) on the show. Thus, while it deals overtly with environmental issues and hence might be categorized as 'non-fiction', the show and its significance cannot be understood by anyone not immersed in the world of 'fictional' television and popular culture. The high ratings are evidence of how successful, especially when compared with news programming, celebrities from the world of entertainment are at signalizing events. Promotion of the show focused on the stars who would appear, indicating to those familiar with popular culture an important event indeed: they ranged from television stars (Bill Cosby, Rhea Perlman, Candice Bergen), to movie stars (Kevin Costner, Meryl Streep), to musicians (Quincy Jones, Barbra Streisand), to celebrity experts (Carl Sagan). Further indicating the importance of the show was the crossing of media (i.e., from film to television) and the networks (i.e., NBC and CBS stars appearing on an ABC show) by these personalities.

Before the credits appear, the show opens with Danny DeVito and Rhea Perlman sitting in a living room preparing to watch *The Earth Day Special*. Throughout the show, they reappear as the audience and signal to us the changing emotions we are supposed to experience at each stage of the show (sort of an environmental version of Kubler-Ross's stages of grief): denial of environmental problems; shock at recognition of the severity of the problems; hopelessness and depression; finally hope and optimism at what each of us can do as individuals to solve the problem. But how are we to take these two characters? On the show they are 'Vic' and 'Paula', rather than Rhea and Danny. Yet, there is no character development and we learn nothing about Vic and Paula. Instead, our understanding depends on us knowing that in 'real life' Perlman and DeVito are married. Thus, in a blurring of 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' that will be repeated again and again throughout the show, our understanding of these characters depends on our knowing their 'real-life' relationship (or what we assume to be their real-life relationship, itself a carefully crafted 'fiction') and the roles they have played on television and in the movies. If this discussion makes you slightly disoriented, hold on, it gets worse.

After our brief interlude with Vic and Paula, the actual show begins. We see computer graphics of the planet Earth over which are superimposed the lengthy list of the celebrities who will appear on the show. The list includes actors, musicians, Hollywood directors, cartoon characters (e.g., Bugs Bunny), puppets (e.g., The Muppets) and space aliens (e.g., E.T.).

The show takes place in a small town (as does *Incident at Dark River* and

virtually all the stories on *48 Hours*). Here again, the viewer immersed in popular culture knows that the townspeople are played by the casts of various daytime soap operas. The first celebrity to appear is Robin Williams, dressed in loud polyester clothing, who, in his well-established comic persona, preaches to the 'townspeople' about the virtues of mindless progress and the transition of humans from 'hunter-gatherers to shopper-borrowers'. Suddenly, the sky darkens, hi-tech lightening flashes and we find out that Mother Nature-Bette Midler is dying from the abuse caused by the excesses of progress. She descends from the sky, collapses and is rushed to the hospital where she is attended to by various actors who play doctors on television shows. Throughout the rest of the show, Candice Bergen-Murphy Brown stands outside the hospital and reports to us on Mother Nature-Bette Midler's condition (no, we are not making this up). The whole first segment, then, situated as it is in small-town America, serves as a nostalgic critique of progress and the Time-Warner commercials in this segment continue this theme: there is one for Henry Luce's founding of *Time Magazine*; one for the creation of Batman (D.C. Comics is owned by Time-Warner); and one for Woodstock (Warner Brothers Records).

After the commercials comes an extended segment designed to inform us of the 'facts' about the ills afflicting Mother Nature. Perhaps more than anywhere else on the show, this portion illustrates the futility of trying to distinguish between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' television. As with 'non-fictional' television, experts are relied upon to provide us with information (however, such experts are only to be trusted when they present information that unambiguously agrees with the dominant perspective of the show). The first expert is Carl Sagan who explains the Green House Effect and Ozone Depletion to an audience of Soap Opera Cast-Townspeople. He gets one minute on the former and 35 seconds on the latter. We then switch to a short episode of the quiz show *Jeopardy* for more information about environmental issues. The next 'expert' to provide us with information is Harold Ramis in his character from the movie *Ghostbusters*, who tracks down Martin Short playing (in a character he has developed on *Saturday Night Live* that, in turn, is a take-off on *60 Minute* interviewee-victims) the sleazy, evasive spokesperson of a polluting firm. The next expert is Christopher Lloyd in his role as Dr Emmette Brown from the *Back to the Future* movies. The doctor arrives in his time-traveling automobile (replete with special effects by Steven Spielberg) and rushes to the hospital with news from the future. This news actually consists of a series of unconnected clips of current environmental degradation (hunting elephants, giant garbage dumps, polluted water, polluted air, etc.). What is the viewer to make of this? Does it matter that information is provided by 'fictional' characters as opposed to celebrity-experts like Carl Sagan? We fear that even posing such questions indicates how inadequate our categories are for capturing what is going on in this show.

At this point, the tone of the show changes from one of pessimism to optimism. The change is signaled in several ways. First, the type of commercials shift from nostalgia to celebrations of technological progress:

one is for sound movies, several others tout cable television. In short, technological progress, at least when managed by Time-Warner and not Robin Williams, has actually improved our lives.

Second, Carl Sagan returns to announce to the Soap Opera-Townpeople that there are solutions to environmental problems. Here, he sets the stage for the types of solutions that will be considered. As with the other shows we examined, whatever the problem, the only solutions are individual, not collective or political. Sagan says, 'Acid rain problems can be dealt with. Industrial pollution can be limited.' How, one might ask? 'Every one of us must do our part.' How will every one of us know what to? That's easy, the solutions will be provided by space aliens! Yes, lurking behind a garbage can is E.T. (the ultimate expert) who, saddened by environmental problems, produces a glowing book containing everything we can do (as individuals of course) to save the environment. He hands this over to the children of the town. This book is used throughout the rest of the show as a guide for solving environmental problems.

The rest of the show consists primarily of a series of celebrities (Jack Lemmon, Morgan Freeman, Michael Keaton, Meryl Streep, Kevin Costner, etc.) playing townspeople who talk about what they will do as individuals to save Mother Earth. We return to Paula and Vic, who discuss how they will begin to recycle their aluminum cans and put a plastic bottle in their toilet. The Cosby Family appears, in their television characters, discussing how they will do their part by not lifting pot lids while cooking, turning down the thermostat, and not keeping the refrigerator door open while searching for food. Emphasizing the importance of individualism, it is pointed out that all of this will save Bill-Cliff money.

Limiting discussion to individual solutions obviously restricts the range of options—basically all the advice boils down to turning down the thermostat, tuning up the car and other household appliances, and recycling, recycling and more recycling. Again blurring the line between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction', in addition to celebrities playing various characters, this segment also contains brief stories of 'real people' who run recycling programs in their communities and schools.

The closest this segment gets to an explicit consideration of government's role in environmental regulation is a vague injunction to 'check out Senators and Congressmen on the environment'.<sup>14</sup> The responsibilities of elected officials are addressed by a small child who says, 'I think that anyone who holds public office should care about the Earth'. No doubt this leaves quaking all those politicians who run for office on a platform of hating the Earth.

The show ends with a final blurring of the line between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' programming. Feeling better, no doubt due to the commitment of humans to keep their cars tuned up, etc., Mother Earth-Bette Midler emerges from the hospital to address the Soap Opera Cast-Townpeople. She asks if it is OK to 'drop the mask for a moment' and address the audience as 'just Bette Midler'. Robin Williams also drops out of character. They face the camera and tell us:

**Midler:** I'm Bette Midler. I live on this planet. I share it with you. I belong to a movement that is a grass-roots movement, it's a movement to save our planet. This movement is not a hype and being part of it is not a trend. We sincerely believe that our earth is at risk. Since our earth is at risk, we the people of the planet are at risk as well. It's going to take a whole lot more, though, than just one television show and all our good intentions to save Mother Earth.

**Williams:** And I'm Robin Williams and these are Wayne Newton's clothes. And I'm here tonight to say we gave you the information, now it's up to you to get active. You can do it, it makes a difference. Go out there, recycle, you can do that. Vote with your hearts, vote with your hands, vote with your dollars, and vote with your votes. Don't wait for the politicians. Come on, they're going to read an opinion poll one day and say, 'Maybe now I'll do something.'

**Midler:** So what do we know? We know that the earth does not belong to us, we only inherit it for a very brief moment in time and then we pass it along to our children.

**Williams:** We're a kinder, gentler nation. Come on, let's act like one. We know that all things in nature are connected, that all things are interdependent.

**Midler:** We know that whatever happens to the earth will surely happen to us. We didn't weave this incredible tapestry of life, we are only part of it . . . And so, we're counting on you. Yeah, we're counting on you to get off your cans and recycle. Recycle! Reuse! Reduce! Replace!

**Williams:** And most of all rejoice! You have an incredible gift here. Don't blow it. Wise up.

As with the framing remarks of Dan Rather in *48 Hours*, there is much going on in this concluding segment. There are the confused politics: Can a political movement involve everyone on the planet? How can we join? Isn't there a difference between organizing for a collective, political purpose and simply acting, as the show advises us to, as individuals? Yet, given the underlying foundational politics of the show, the only solution is individual action. Hence, when all is said and done, the only advice the stars can offer is recycling (said in a variety of different ways – reusing, reducing, etc.)

More relevant to our discussion of the blurring of 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' is the question of how we are to understand this dropping of 'the mask'. Midler and Williams did not write what they read here any more than they have written their other lines (or any more than Dan Rather, for example, writes the lines he delivers<sup>15</sup>). They have dropped one mask (playing characters in the show), but they still appear to us as their celebrity selves and we cannot know the difference between this mask and the other 'selves' they might have (e.g., parents, husbands/wives, friends, etc.). The show creates the 'fiction' that we are now seeing the 'real' Robin and Bette, but can we ever really know celebrities in this sense? Are celebrities who earn millions of dollars a year just simply citizens of the planet like us? In short, as when Dan Rather tells us on the nightly news that he will see us tomorrow,

we are confronted here with the irreducibly 'fictional' quality of television (see Seiter, 1987).

### **The politics of television's treatment of environmental pollution**

Just as these three shows all use similar conventions that blur the line between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction', so too they adopt a remarkably similar political perspective that further challenges our common-sense distinctions between various types of programming. Interestingly, the political slant shared by the shows changes as we move between the three levels of politics we defined above.

At the substance level of politics, all three shows adopt a liberal perspective in defining the issues posed by environmental politics. First, they all employ a catastrophic perspective on environmental problems and the risks posed by pollution. They assume that environmental pollution of all types is worse than ever, that each form of pollution poses a grave and immediate threat to humans and to nature, and that we must do something now. This may or may not be accurate, but it is certainly not the only perspective. As we have noted, there is much disagreement about the actual severity of the problems and the risks they pose. Yet, no serious attention is paid on any of these shows to scientific uncertainty, or the relative risks posed by various forms of pollution.

Second, none of the shows seriously address the trade-offs between regulation and economic activity. The notion that reducing pollution may require reduced economic growth is either not addressed, ridiculed as a ploy by unscrupulous businesspeople or the shows suggest that reducing pollution will be good for the economy. In short, when dealing with environmental regulation these shows present a comfortable liberal perspective that ignores or ridicules the questions raised by conservatives or more radical environmentalists.

At the institutions level of politics, all three shows are critical of the problem-solving capabilities of political and economic institutions. Government (in the form of politicians, the EPA, or state environmental agencies) is seen as corrupt, incompetent and completely inadequate to the task of dealing with the problems posed by environmental pollution. Thus, all three shows make it quite clear that we cannot count on government to help solve this problem. Nor can we count upon business to act responsibly. In all three shows, the business sector is represented by either evasive corporate spokespersons or shady and disreputable owners. In either case, they cannot be trusted to either obey the law or act responsibly.

While the politics of these shows at the institutions and substance levels supports the view that television has a liberal bias, or that it can be used for oppositional purposes, a very different perspective emerges when we move to the foundations level of politics. Here these shows all adopt a 'nostalgic individualism' that is extremely conservative and serves to blunt, in terms of political action, the more critical messages of these shows. First, all three shows are set in small-town America. *Incident at Dark River* is set in an

unnamed small town in Colorado. Most of *The Earth Day Special* takes place on a set designed to evoke nostalgia for small-town life. Four of the seven episodes on *48 Hours* are set in small towns (a fifth, although dealing with garbage in Los Angeles, is shot almost entirely in sparsely populated hills outside the city). While such settings are quite common on television, they have political significance for the way we understand environmental problems. By evoking an image of small-town life, where people know each other and can have a real impact as individuals, many of the problems of collective political action are slighted. The small-town setting allows all three shows to use the image of the New England Town Meeting as a forum for discussing public issues.

Indeed, television itself emerges in these shows as the place where this 'electronic town hall' can occur. This self-promotion of television as a substitute for the failed politics of existing political institutions is reinforced by the implicit assumption that television, through a variety of mechanisms, can more effectively represent citizens' opinions and interests than traditional political institutions or traditional forms of political action which are scorned, ignored, parodied, or need to be carefully monitored by television journalists.<sup>16</sup> In many ways, here at the foundations level, television plays on the deep-seated suspicion in American politics that any large institutions – be they public or private – are threats to democracy, and thus inherently corrupt. As we noted above, the American solution to this dilemma is 'the democratic wish' for a truly perfected citizenry that might rule on its own behalf without the corrupting interference of institutions that distort the relationship between the 'people' and political power (Morone, 1990). Because television's status as a large and powerful institution remains invisible in these shows, the medium seems to offer the possibility for such direct democracy. Certainly that is the implicit claim made in the use of infomercials by Ross Perot and national town meetings by President Clinton, where the illusion of an unmediated relationship between political leaders and the public is created.

We call such devices and the settings of the shows we discuss here illusions because they presuppose the existence of a self-conscious community and an active public sphere, things that do not exist for most Americans who live in urban or suburban settings. Further, the small-town setting diverts attention from the urban and suburban lifestyle of most Americans which may be an environmental problem in and of itself (i.e., the reliance on automobiles for transportation, pesticide usage on suburban lawns, the general emphasis on consumption). Ironically, it was this consumption-based life that was the target of many of the 'long-haired activists in tie-dyed shirts' who organized the first Earth Day.

Second, while institutions are portrayed as flawed and inadequate, the solution is never political organization aimed at institutional reform or change. Rather, individuals, acting on their own as individuals, are seen as the solution to the problem. Thus, in *Incident at Dark River* and several episodes of *48 Hours*, it is the heroic individual (straight out of the Western) who recognizes the problem and seeks to solve it by taking matters into

his/her own hands (see, e.g., Cawelti, 1970). When Diane Wilson or Tim McFall want to find out about pollution in their towns, they must act without government or expert help. Further, they do not appeal to government to change, rather, they see the inevitable flaws of 'big government' and 'big business' and work instead as two of the 'thousand points of light' we now rely upon to solve our social problems.

This emphasis on individualism as the only possible solution obviously limits the sorts of solutions that can be considered. Since cleaning up the environment has all the characteristics of a 'public good' and any solution is likely to involve a significant 'free rider' problem, individuals acting on their own are unlikely to ever solve the problem (Olson, 1965). Yet, the only solution offered on these shows that is designed to call forth any sort of action by viewers is recycling. Since consumption, in general, cannot be called into question, and we cannot count on political or economic institutions to regulate systematically the by-products of productive activity, the only solution is for individuals to consume, not less, but more wisely. Thus, on *The Earth Day Special*, after two hours of horror stories about the illness of Mother Earth, the only thing the stars can ask us to do is to recycle our cans and bottles, actions unlikely to significantly affect the destruction of the rain forests, the extinction of many plant and animal species, global warming, or the choking air pollution in many Third World cities (all problems briefly alluded to on the show). Indeed, it is interesting that where these shows deal with issues not easily solved by recycling, or other sorts of individual action (e.g., *Incident at Dark River*, or the Diane Wilson episode of *48 Hours*), they end without any real message or calls for action.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

We have argued that understanding the political impact of television requires both expanding our definition of politics and abandoning preconceived distinctions between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' programming. Our analysis of programs dealing with environmental pollution indicates that this distinction is not helpful for categorizing shows in terms of their political relevance (especially when we expand our definition of politics). For us, television is best seen as a dynamic and changing medium (indeed these changes are often enormously entertaining and horrifying at the same time, as in *The Earth Day Special*) that routinely deals with politics in most types of programming.

However, while television deals with politics on a wide variety of shows, it does not deal with politics in a wide variety of ways.<sup>18</sup> While it may be possible to find specific instances of counter-hegemonic messages in television shows, it is important to not lose sight of the overall impact of the medium as an important mechanism for reinforcing the *status quo*. That is, taken as a whole,<sup>19</sup> the medium is firmly situated within and supportive of a consumer culture hostile to any but the most modest forms of oppositional political action.

Thus, all three shows we analyzed were liberal at the substance level of



politics and quite critical of government and business at the institutions level of politics. However, the overall impact of any critical messages are blunted at the foundations level where all three shows adopt a 'nostalgic individualism' which excludes any responses to environmental problems that might call into question consumer culture, the political status quo, or present economic-industrial strategies.

A final issue we raise involves the status of our 'reading' of these three shows. While we hope we have convinced the reader that the messages we discern are 'really' in these shows, we have not addressed the issue of whether audiences actually use such programs in constructing their understanding of environmental issues. To answer this question we have conducted a series of focus-group experiments that involve showing these programs to small groups and then comparing the discussions about environmental issues that result (we also run groups where no television is watched). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to report systematically our findings, one thing is clear: viewers use and rely upon 'fiction' programs in their discussions at least as much as they use 'non-fiction' programs (see Delli Carpini and Williams, forthcoming). It seems clear, then, that viewers do not share the assumption upon which most social scientific research into television's political impact is based. That is, viewers do not assume clear distinctions between politically relevant 'non-fiction' television and politically irrelevant 'fiction' television.

## Notes

- 1 One of the major purposes of this paper is to show the degree to which 'common sense', and therefore unexamined, usage of certain key terms has limited our understanding of the impact of television on politics. We bracket many terms with quotation marks not to be irritating or inexact, but rather to draw the reader's attention to the problematic nature of their usage.
- 2 For a more complete discussion of these issues and our own perspective see Delli Carpini and Williams (1989).
- 3 For scholars who have made similar critiques of the privileged status accorded the news, see Edelman (1988), Fiske (1987: ch. 15), Postman (1984) and Tuchman (1987).
- 4 For example, a CBS docudrama on Oliver North was rushed on to the air so that its broadcast would coincide with the actual trial of Colonel North: the trial, the docudrama, and people's responses to both become subjects of stories on the nightly news.
- 5 For theorists who make similar sorts of arguments, see Connolly (1987) and Edelman (1988).
- 6 For an entertaining account of how these sets of values clash in high-profile anchor persons, see Joyce (1988).
- 7 For an interesting, but rare, systematic attempt to answer this question, see Lichter, Lichter and Rothman (1991).
- 8 On this, see Hertsgaard (1990).
- 9 On the idea that anniversaries constitute news events, see Romano (1986).
- 10 For a more detailed discussion of the issues raised in this paragraph and the next, see Williams and Matheny, forthcoming.

- 11 The rating indicates that 8.1 per cent of all television sets in the United States were tuned to the show. The share indicates that of all sets turned on at the time of the broadcast, 14 per cent were tuned to the show.
- 12 On the limitations of television as an effective medium for the treatment of serious public issues, see Postman (1984).
- 13 One measure of the political message and significance of programming is the willingness of advertisers, whose products might be adversely portrayed, to buy space on the show. In contrast to the furore over docudramas or prime-time shows that deal with issues like abortion (*Roe v. Wade*, episodes of *Cagney and Lacey*) or nuclear war (*The Day After*), the willingness to advertise a chemical product designed to keep your lawn green indicates that advertisers expect little connection between the show's content and viewers' actions. Similarly, the show carried several commercials for automobiles and other consumer products that have been implicated by many environmentalists, although certainly not by this show, as causes of environmental problems.
- 14 In a two-hour show, we could have actually been informed of the records of our Senators and Congressmen, or at least how to find out about such things.
- 15 On Dan Rather's role, or lack thereof, in writing his own copy, see Joyce (1988).
- 16 This point was brought to our attention by the insightful comments of Jody Berland.
- 17 It is especially interesting that this aversion to calling upon the coercive powers of the state to solve problems is not characteristic of television's treatment of all social problems. When the 'problem' is poor blacks using crack (and not wealthy whites buying and using expensive automobiles or polluting fertilizers, etc.), there is no reluctance to see the 'solution' as a declaration of war and the calling forth of the police powers of the state. See Campbell and Reeves (1990).
- 18 Elsewhere, we argue that the political perspectives presented on television are neither strictly determined, nor are they entirely free or open. Instead, borrowing from recent Marxist theories of the state, the political meanings of television are 'relatively autonomous'. Just as some Marxist theorists have highlighted the existence of deeply held value systems (e.g., democracy, participation) which limit the subordination of the state to the interests of capital, so too theorists of television's political impact must take into account the diversity of value systems which producers and viewers bring with them to the medium (e.g., a free and open press, public control of the airwaves, etc.). See Delli Carpini and Williams, 1990.
- 19 We do not use the phrase, 'taken as a whole', lightly. As we have argued, understanding the full impact of the medium on politics requires an examination of all types of programming.

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