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Abstract

For reasons unclear, sociology abandoned its proprietary rights in the study of mass communications and relegated it to the fringes of collective behavior on the one hand and critical studies on the other. Relatively recently, however, as interest in hegemonic processes becomes more popular and critical theory gains new prominence, there is a corresponding rise in attention to the integrative, if hegemonic, role the media of mass communication. This paper explores that role, reflecting on television and its influence in the construction of holidays.

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Broadcasting Holidays

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For reasons unclear, sociology abandoned its proprietary rights in the study of mass communications and relegated it to the fringes of collective behavior on the one hand and critical studies on the other. Relatively recently, however, as interest in hegemonic processes becomes more popular and critical theory gains new prominence, there is a corresponding rise in attention to the integrative, if hegemonic, role the media of mass communication. This paper explores that role, reflecting on television and its influence in the construction of holidays.

For reasons unclear, sociology abandoned its proprietary rights in the study of mass communications and relegated it to the fringes of collective behavior on the one hand and critical studies on the other. As a result, the most obvious of the sociological effects of the media- their integrative role--has been largely neglected by recent generations of this fraternity, although others--historians, political scientists, students of the social effects of technology, and some members of the now burgeoning field of communications study--have taken up where sociological pioneers left off.¹ Relatively recently, as interest in hegemonic processes became more popular and critical theory gained new prominence, there is a corresponding rise in attention to the integrative, if hegemonic, role of the media of mass communication. Neo-Durkhemianism has also joined in.

The newspaper had a prominent place in the social history of Western nationalism and was followed successively by radio, then television. Each offered the shared experience of a national culture and polity, by defining who belongs, by making the imagined community more tangible, and the center

more visible. In Habermasian terms, the independent press set the agenda for the public sphere, although Habermas was by no means the first to make this point. The prerequisite for political and social integration, of course, is that the reach of the media and the boundaries of the polity coincide, or in other words, that the same content, more or less, is received by all members, in shared language at the same time. Thus, the national newspaper smoothed over regional differences and dialects in nineteenth-century Europe, and the electronic media then added the dimension of simultaneity (Morley 1992). Parenthetically one wonders whether a new medium of national integration is waiting in the wings as television goes the way of radio toward segmentation on the one hand and globalization on the other.

There is one genre of television that has served the integrative function dramatically well, although even this genre is in jeopardy. The corpus of the genre can be dated to the coronation of Elizabeth and includes the first presidential debates, the funerals of John Kennedy and Itzhak Rabin, the moon landing, the royal wedding, the Olympics, the pilgrimages of the Pope (especially his first visit to Poland), the Mideast peace ceremonies (beginning with Sadat's surprise visit to Jerusalem), Watergate, the Hill-Thomas affair, the O.J. Simpson trial, and so on. These events share the following characteristics: They are simultaneous transmissions of ceremonies planned in advance by a government or some central agency of one or more nations. They originate from a sacred spot, or from a place that is especially designated for the occasion.

They are enacted by organizers and broadcasters with reverence. They usually feature a heroic figure and highlight the values which the hero represents. They interrupt the routines of society and of broadcasting, calling attention-even demanding attention-to the special character of the occasion. When successful, they enlist such attention-sometime from hundreds of millions of people-who dress up expectantly, seat themselves with family and friends in front of the television set, serve refreshments, and participate emotionally and cognitively through witnessing, applauding, cheering, or crying as prescribed. Dayan and Katz (1992) call them “media events” and suggest that there are three subsets of such events: contests (of sports and politics), conquests (giant steps for mankind), and coronations (rites of passage of the great).

In effect, these are secular holidays, proposed by establishments and broadcasters, and celebrated by vast audiences. Like religious holidays, they constitute “liminal” moments (Turner 1979)-“times out” from mundane affairs--during which societies concentrate on one or more of their central values. Indeed, if we attempt a formal definition of holiday, it will be seen how readily media events fit the definition. A holiday, I suggest, is (1) a consensual *interruption* of the everyday round-of-life in which people divest themselves of everyday roles and assume a festive stance, (2) a way to *commune* with some value or concern which is central to the society or culture, (3) a means of *ritual* and symbolic activity, and (4) an occasion when participants are aware that *everybody else* is doing the same thing at the same time. Thanksgiving and

Christmas or Passover are easy to recognize in this definition, but so is the Kennedy funeral or the moon landing or the Olympics. Consider the royal wedding for example--if you still can. Government, Church, and Palace proposed a "time out" from concerns over racial tensions, the fighting in Northern Ireland, and the economy, in order to mark the marriage of the prince, that is, to recall the glorious heritage of the British people. Almost without exception, Britons suspended all other affairs and repledged their allegiance to the Crown and to tradition, while the television networks--not only in England, but in the whole of the former British Empire, and, indeed, in the world--invited actual participation in the occasion. The holiday evoked a sense of belonging, just as the coronation of Elizabeth had done at the beginning of the television era (Shils and Young 1953). One could witness the wedding vows, one could cry with the Queen Mother, one could eat the wedding breakfast and copy the wedding dress. One could say amen.

Many of these events have a one-time character, although some of them recur irregularly, such as state weddings and funerals; others--such as the Olympic Games--recur with regularity, like real holidays. Exaggerating only slightly, one can say that television has the power to declare holidays and to invite ritual participation in them. Usually acting in collusion with establishments, television has the extraordinary power to command a moratorium, reshuffle roles, and focus every eye and ear for hours, sometimes

days and weeks, on the progress of a ceremonial event.

Media and Holidays

As a byproduct of the study of media events, I became interested in the role of the media in relation to holidays in general, in other words, not only to these media-declared events, but to the part played by the media, especially television, in the celebration of the familiar calendar of secular and religious holidays.

Colleagues and students joined me in a seminar in which we recorded the television transmissions of all the holidays on the Israeli calendar, religious and civic (Offenbacher 1988). One of our students also studied the several ways in which the holiday of Passover finds its place in the daily press (Shnidor 1987). Adding this work to a series of surveys on the uses of leisure (Katz, Haas, et al. forthcoming) and to the media events research, I should like to offer some thoughts on the role of the media in the celebration of holidays drawing on examples that are mostly Israeli, some American, and some British.

I will describe four such roles. I shall call the first *phatic* (Jakobson 1972) --when television transports viewers directly to the major ceremonial center from which the holiday radiates. A second type of role may be discerned in which television *complements* the holiday ritual; it offers something to enjoy or think about *after* church, so to speak. One can think also of situations where television *substitutes* for ritual performance, recalling the original but offering

something else instead, either for the nondevout or for a society which has allowed the prescribed rituals to wane. In each of these relationships, television makes conscious reference to a holiday that is defined in the tradition or by the establishment- sacred or secular- and marks the places and times indicated by the tradition. But there is one further step that might be taken. I will call this *innovative*, in that television, in the extreme case, invents holidays that do not refer to any authority or place outside itself.

Phatic Television

In its phatic role television takes us to a center where something special is happening. It is evident that this is the case for media events when we are taken to the cathedral, to the cemetery, to the Senate committee room, to the moon, to the sports stadium, or to Wenceslas Square. But it is equally the case when we are taken to St. Peter's for the Pope's Easter Mass, or to the ceremonies on the eve of Memorial Day and Independence Day which are viewed by some 80 percent of Israelis (Handelman and Katz 1990), or to the Republican National Convention.

The term *phatic* seems appropriate in Jakobson's (1972) sense of keeping a channel open. But we are too sophisticated to believe that the mediation--even the most disinterested kind--has no effect on the message. Moreover, both the organizers of the event and the television producers become self--conscious

about their performance. Both see an opportunity to missionize to an audience that could not make it to the church (or to Cape Canaveral, or the moon), or may never have been inside one. The effect of television is evident if one compares the Lonesome Train which carried Lincoln's body from town to town over a period of days, with the Kennedy funeral. It is evident in Zefferelli's production of the Pope's Easter Mass. It is equally evident in the nominating conventions which have all but excluded the original elements of contest-over candidates or over issues-in favor of coronation. (It is by no means self-evident, by the way, that coronation is a better show than contest.)

No less than the organizers, television does more than merely open a channel. It tries to enhance the participation of the viewing audience by augmenting the transmission with visual embroidery and festive camera work, by filling dead time with background material and documentaries, by offering commentary on the symbolism of the ritual, by going behind the scenes (but not irreverently) to show the viewing audience what the in-house audience cannot see, just as the organizers are trying to do the opposite.

Indeed, the phatic role is not often attractive to television producers.² Even when they say with pride, "we take you directly to the Church or the Sports Arena," they mean something more. Willy nilly, they too must missionize for the event and give it their endorsement. Willy-nilly, they seek to enlist the interest of those who are only marginally involved in the holiday. When they are successful, they reawaken traditional and transcendental sentiments among

the otherwise unreligious, and national or local loyalties among less devout sports fans. For example, they want women to celebrate the World Cup and men to view the Easter Mass (Breitrose 1980).

Thus, television's phatic role is delicately balanced. It tries to offer the committed the experience of being there, and to offer others a more mediated experience but one that is equivalent emotionally and aesthetically. The expansive role of television is not always appreciated by the devout. When Pope John Paul II celebrated Mass in Warsaw, for example, the very Catholic Polish people--who are intimately familiar with the ritual--are said to have resented television's effort to explain the symbolism they knew so well, suspecting that this was an attempt by the Polish regime to "distance" the event. Sports fans who really know the game also resent television's chatter and artistry; they prefer the illusion of being there to television's intrusive editing of the event. Moreover, the television producer must concern himself with the question of whether transplanting the holiday from church or arena to home--offering vicarious for direct participation--is acceptable to the organizers of the event. Television evangelists wish for such participation, but that is virtually tautological. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, does not, except for the sick and the shut-in, and even minimizes the live broadcasting of religious events on all but very major holidays.

Note that this kind of television aims to *reduce* direct participation in the local church or even the family ritual in favor of participation in a remote and

centrally organized celebration.³ By transporting us to the national capital, or the main cathedral, or the Olympic stadium, television is demonstrating its ability to overcome space while paradoxically enhancing the aura of Place. It is as if to prefer the Temple Rebuilt to the decentralized worship in local synagogues. It favors centrality over dispersion, even if one may argue that it resembles diasporic holidays such as Passover when myriad small groups assemble to focus, separately but simultaneously, on a symbolic center.

Television as Supplement

Television may also play a complementary role on holidays. Rather than offer participation in the ritual itself, it presumes that the viewer will go to the local church or partake of the Christmas dinner in person, not via television. Instead, television will attempt to augment not the ritual but the occasion, by offering special holiday features, films, and entertainments as supplements. Some of these elements may become institutionalized as part of the holiday itself and may come to be expected year after year. The Christmas message of the British monarch is a classic example of such complementarity. Since 1932, when the BBC's Lord Reith persuaded King George V to broadcast to "all the members of our world-wide family" (Cardiff and Scannell 1987), the royal Christmas greeting has conveyed the image of family and integration year after year. People stood at attention in front of their radio sets, and some say that they

continue to do so even today. From the earliest days of BBC radio, holiday programming marking Christmas, New Year's Day, Empire Day, and the days of regional saints has featured live hookups from remote and representative people and places to contribute to "the experience of tribal unity" (Cardiff and Scannell 1987).

An American example is the annual broadcast of a traditional parade on the Thanksgiving holiday. This broadcast from New York has become an integral part of the morning of the holiday, after church and prior to the traditional family dinner. The symbols of national unity, and of the shared folk culture--especially the Disney version of children's stories--are displayed in the parade and diffused nationally to all homes.

The Sabbath eve in Israel provides an interesting case study of supplementation. Most families--almost two thirds--get together for dinner and perform one or another of the Sabbath rituals--particularly candle lighting and the blessing over the wine. They say that they still value "a quiet, home-centered evening"; younger people say so as often as their elders (Katz, Haas, et al. forthcoming). But the fact is that the ritual aspects of the evening are emaciated, and one can infer a need, or a wish, for some enhancement of its character (Levy, Levinsohn, and Katz 1993; Liebman and Katz 1997).

Complementary television rallies attention to the traditional spirit of the holiday, without attempting to duplicate or simulate its ritual. Since its inception, Israeli television has sought a formula for Sabbath eve (Friday night)

programming that would offer all strata of the society (except, of course, the orthodox, who do not view on holidays) some other avenue to the home-centered spirituality associated with the occasion. Its attempts at highbrow programs of drama and music failed because these were too pretentious, but good-quality films seem to work. Repeated debates question whether a review of the weekly news is or is not appropriate for the “peace of the Sabbath.” The best solution so far has been a program of informal interviews intertwining indigenous music, humor, and human interest as if there were family on both sides of the set.⁴ Certain traditional symbols of the Sabbath are also included, but the main effort is to augment tradition with appropriate entertainment.

Television as Substitute

As ritual performance erodes, television often serves as substitute. A third form of holiday broadcasting is based on the assumption that the vast majority of the audience will not participate in the holiday, not for lack of opportunity either direct or mediated--but by choice. While the minority of the devout may observe the holiday, the rest may be left to experience just another “day off.” This is particularly characteristic of secularizing societies that still pay honor to religious holidays, even if the memory of their meaning is waning. While major Jewish holidays are widely celebrated in Israel, either in their original form or in

modified secular versions (Katz and Gurevitch 1978; Katz, Haas, et al. forthcoming), the symbols of certain holidays are fading. Indeed, ritual celebration of the Sabbath itself has become far less pervasive, even if most Israelis see it as more than just a secular weekend.

For such people, on such occasions, television may offer alternative forms of participation, not just as supplement but as alternative. For many people, Friday night television--as just discussed--may be used in this way.

Thus, the holiday of Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, is on the endangered species list, from a ritual point of view. It is a major festival, normatively speaking, marking Moses' delivery of the Law at Sinai, and a national day off. Early Zionism tried to refocus it as an agricultural holiday, highlighting ceremonies of the bringing of first fruits, with which it is also associated. But the fact is that the holiday is losing adherents, coming as it does at the end of June after a succession of springtime holidays, religious and secular. Because the Book of Ruth is read in synagogues on Shavuot as a Harvest story, the holiday also alludes to Ruth's conversion to Judaism and to the Jewish people.

Of these three themes--the Law, the first fruits, and conversion--broadcasting has chosen to emphasize the last, annually assembling the best academic and religious minds, and the most interesting converts, to discuss the process and, not incidentally, the nature of Judaism. In the years during which Israel television broadcast on a single channel, a very large audience chose to view, and it is likely that the new commercial channel will also find its own way

of joining the discussion, rather than running away from it.

The same sort of substitution characterizes the summertime fast day of the Ninth of Ab, commemorating the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Israel radio may present one or another reading of Jeremiah's lament, live from a synagogue, but television substitutes an engaged philosophical discussion--with pathos--of the event, and may add an archaeological exploration of the excavations at the Temple Mount.

Israel Independence Day provides another example. While there is still a marked ceremonial center--the tomb of Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement--to which we are transported to open the 24-hour celebration, additional broadcasts are gradually commanding the attention of more and more people, often at the expense of other personal, familial, and communal forms of participation that have become institutionalized. The Bible Quiz, the Israel Prize, the classic newsreels, the satirical skits have all become closely associated with the Day of Independence. Indeed, it is difficult to define the focus of the holiday without reference to the television screen. The holiday has moved inside, onto the television screen. The same thing is true for the Remembrance of the Holocaust. There is a central memorial service at the national Yad Vashem monument which is broadcast live on television, but it is the evening of documentary films that constitutes the content through which most Israelis express their grief.

Mutatis mutandis, the EBU's New Year broadcast of waltzes from the

Vienna Philharmonic is another good example. Light classics are substituted for lost or forgotten ritual forms and become part of the identity of the holiday. In some countries, certain classic films have come to be associated with particular holidays.

Innovative Television

A fourth form of holiday television departs even further from the referentiality of time and place that characterizes television's response to traditional or national holidays. On these occasions, television itself declares a holiday and invents its own ritual forms without having to displace traditional forms.

Consider, the all-night vigil on election eve celebrated on television in many countries of the Western world. While there is an obvious referent to recession, this holiday is a pure product of electronic technology. Prior to broadcasting, there was only an expectant and unformulated period of waiting, albeit in a mood of liminality. Television has made the counting of the vote into a major national contest, embellished by political interpretation and commentary on the likely shape of the coming government. Hypothetical coalitions are made and broken in front of the television cameras, where politicians and broadcasters speculate subjunctively on the outcome of the race and on the future. Home participation takes the form of refreshments, political discussion, betting on the

outcome, and the like.

Another political holiday, more or less invented by television, is the presidential debate. Although it, too, is associated with an ongoing process outside, the event originated in a studio in 1960. Since that time, legal problems having to do with third parties caused it to be transposed into a live ceremony under civic auspices to which television is invited, but this is true only of the United States. In other countries--even totalitarian states where elections are a sham--the televised presidential debate is celebrated as a holiday of democracy, as if it came inscribed on a hard disk when television first arrived in each country.

Another case of television-invented holidays is the Superbowl. No such event existed prior to television, and television is responsible not only for its institutionalization and financing, but also for supplementing it with breakfast recipes and other adhesions.

An even purer case is the Eurovision Song Contest. This is a holiday evening in many countries, "time out" from routine to celebrate the community of Europe through networking of all member countries and their shared acceptance of the common rules. People gather in each other's homes to view together and to support the home song. There is no reference to time; no agency other than television has fixed the date. There is only a faint reference to place--to the country hosting the contest, but its locus is clearly the studio, not

elsewhere.

Electronic Media and Modernity

This typology of media roles in the design and celebration of holidays provides some insight into the nature of modernity as affected by the electronic media. Let us review a few of these implications.

First of all, television--in its phatic role--paradoxically enhances the importance of place in spite of electronic reproduction. While overcoming distance, the fact is that remote places as represented on television have become more accessible and are perhaps displacing local places. The Cathedral is open to the television viewer who may choose to snub the local parish. However, the television of the future--in its innovative role--may yet demote place by proposing itself as the ceremonial locus. Both of these tendencies are in view. The next years will see us transported to far-away ceremonial centers, while also coming close to the realization that reality may be in the air rather than on the ground. Although reference to place and the abolition of place represent opposite tendencies, both are done at the expense of local and concrete testings of reality, and as always, raise the spectre of the mass society.

A second point worth noting has to do with the sacralization of entertainment. In its role as a substitute for holiday ritual, as well as in its innovative role, television has ritualized certain forms of popular entertainment

and transposed them into liturgy. This is not necessarily negative- certain products of popular culture are quite worthy, of course--but it is important. Indeed, it might be of some interest to review the history of holiday entertainments prior to the advent of broadcasting.

The one-time holiday is also a product of the television era. If television has made a place for entertainment in holiday liturgy, it has also found a place for the sacralization of the news. Indeed, what we call media events are holidays of the news. They are civic occasions of such import--the funeral of Kennedy, the voyage to the moon, the visit of the Pope to Poland--that a one-time holiday is organized in collaboration with television to celebrate them. The live broadcast is both news and ceremony, and the public is offered participatory roles.

The technology of simultaneity makes such worldwide participation possible. The setting of dates for holidays, the shaping of heroes and legends, the negotiation of ritual forms, often took thousands of years to fix. The idea that Christmas or Passover is celebrated the world over in shared ways and at the same time used to be considered remarkable. Today, television can mobilize the world to bury a president or prime minister, and provide the necessary instructions for mass participation in the ritual, within a few hours.

Holidays give power to television. The nature of this power is revealed far more accurately in television's ability to induce the world to stand (or sit) at attention than in its ability to direct changes in opinions and attitudes. Holidays give television the opportunity to take itself seriously--rather than frivolously by

associating itself with symbols of the sacred centers of society. On holidays, television can meet the expectations of people who look to its ministry for integration in tradition, culture, and nation. On holidays, television associates itself unashamedly with hegemony and reassures the conservative elements in society that it is not just an agent of troublemaking.

At the same time, there is a worrisome echo here of the days of political spectacle. Recall how early radio was used to divert attention from parliaments to the national leader, and how they came to be associated with fascism. The civic ceremonies of television are subject to such danger, unless free and independent broadcasters are courageous intermediaries in selecting and interpreting establishment holidays.

Antiestablishment holidays--perhaps the ultimate proof of media independence--are very rare indeed, and in certain cases are coopted by establishments (Lukes 1975; Hobsbawm, 1983; Lane, 1981). The live broadcasting of revolution--the Czech Revolution, for example--poses an interesting question, but is perhaps better conceived as the conquest-cum-coronation of a new establishment.

A more recent phenomenon has come into view that also smacks of antiestablishmentarianism: the live broadcasts of conflicts and disasters which reflect establishment failures. Heretofore, these were themes in the daily news and--on more drastic occasions--were broadcast live as unplanned interruptions, the very opposite of the planned interruptions of media events. Liebes (1998)

has noticed that the broadcast of such accidents and disasters shows a new tendency to linger on and recycle details of accidents and disasters far beyond their newsworthiness, that is, quasi-ceremonially. Liebes, for example, refers to the repetitive, almost obsessive, reports on the recent terrorist attacks on civilian buses in Israeli cities, but alludes also to American coverage of the Challenger disaster, the San Francisco earthquake, and so on.

Television's role as an agent of integration is also being undermined by the new media technology: video, cable, satellite. The message of these media is (1) segmentation--that choice is so great that no two people need view the same thing at the same time, and (2) globalization. Both tendencies, it will be seen, ignore the national polity (Katz 1996). The segmenting or individuating role relates directly to the classic debate over the definition of leisure. Some, like Dumazedier (1967) argue that leisure is the quintessence of individual expression--that only "doing one's own thing" differently from all others--is true leisure. The other conception sees leisure as communal, defined and prescribed by traditions such as the Sabbath and holidays. The paradox that emerges from modernity is the increasing availability of free time and the question of whether individuals will use it individualistically or collectively. The mass media surely contribute to collective use of leisure, the new media to more individualistic and differentiated use. It will be interesting to see what balance will emerge from their interaction.

ENDNOTES

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¹Kurt Lang (1996) reviews the European roots of sociological interest in communications and the media.

²Levy (1981) argues more strongly, and rightly, that journalists feel that such events compromise their objective and investigative commitments.

³In fact, at least so far, the audience for the evangelists is ardent churchgoers as well.

⁴Horace Newcomb (1974) has long since noted the familial character of television genres and their audiences.

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