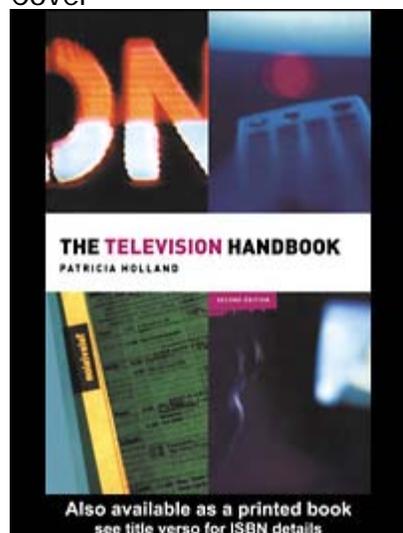


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Page i

The Television Handbook

2nd edition

'This lively guide blends media theory with hard advice from practitioners... An admirably comprehensive and tough-minded book.' *Sight and Sound*

'An exemplary publication. No self-respecting media course ignores television and, unless you've worked in the industry and are happy with media theory, this book is a must.' *Nick Lacey, in the picture*

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**Patricia Holland** is a writer, lecturer and programme maker. She is researching television history at Bournemouth University.

Page ii

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**The Television Handbook**

2nd edition

Patricia Holland



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**Part I**  
**Introduction**

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1

**On television practice and television studies****Television in a changing world**

Television is many things. Raymond Williams called it a combination of technology and cultural form (Williams 1990). It is a transnational business and also a national institution. It is our most celebrated form of entertainment and our most important source of information. It is an outlet for creativity and a medium through which social concern or political views may be expressed. It is a substantial employer of accountants and office workers as well as skilled engineers, technicians, programme makers and performers. And now, at the beginning of a new millennium, it is a central part of a convergent network of digital technologies that is revolutionising the communications media. This book looks at the practicalities of television production from the point of view of someone new to this complex industry.

Television has been a central and much loved part of British culture. As a comfortable, home-based medium, a warm glow in the corner of the living room, it has provided a companionate voice and a circle of friends old and new—Dot Cotton of *EastEnders*, reliable figures like Desmond Lynam with the sport and Trevor McDonald with the news, through to the anarchic disruptions of a Chris Evans or a Jennifer Saunders. The glamour of television is daily celebrated in the popular press. In its aim to offer a 'window on the world' (*Panorama's* first description of itself), it has provided the major source from which most of us get to know and interpret domestic politics and world affairs. Those who work or aspire to work in the medium may aim to contribute to one of its many diverse areas.

Although those who produce television programmes tend to inhabit what Jeremy Tunstall described as a genre-specific world (Tunstall 1993:2), each absorbed in their own very different fields, the special characteristic of television in the UK is that it has prevented those diverse areas from drifting apart, arguing that audiences do not always know in advance what it is they want to see, so they should be given something of everything. The very proliferation of our television system, allowing disparate expectations to rub against each other, gives it a richness that remains unique and valuable. Variety, diversity and unexpected juxtapositions are at the core of a television service that takes seriously the privilege of entry into people's homes. UK television has maintained a unique balance between its commitments to both entertainment and politics, both information and relaxation, by containing the drive to satisfy a substantial audience within a regulated public service system.

Television is not all about cosiness, however. The glow in the corner of the living room has also been seen as a dangerous opening, a wound, a gash through which alien

Page 4

and possibly unwanted material pours in. Like the much-reviled children's favourite *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*, it may transform its friendly local faces into terrifying fighting monsters. Television has come under biting attack from parts of the popular press, as a corrupter of childhood, a purveyor of sex and violence and a debaser of moral standards. As veteran politician and commentator Conor Cruise O'Brien wrote:

The minds of most citizens may have been so boggled by televised varieties of instant gratification, including pornography, as to turn into mere sentient sponges, compulsively feeding on flickering images. And if so, how long is democracy likely to last?  
(O'Brien 1995)

The final years of the twentieth century were a challenging time in the history of broadcasting in the United Kingdom. The television landscape began to change possibly beyond recognition as the very ground on which it was built heaved and resettled. The secure foundations of public service broadcasting, based on well-established and familiar channels, gave way to an unfamiliar moonscape of multiple channels fuelled by unpredictable technologies and powered by multinational business interests. Weaker regulation made access to the broadcast media a rich prize for the moguls and an outlet for entrepreneurs, advertisers, sponsors, celebrity agents, public relations companies and marketing people. In this fiercely competitive world, boardroom battles have intensified as major companies vie for control of digital systems. The massive computer company Microsoft is buying shares in cable companies, while television companies like Carlton and Granada have moved from being local and regional to become international ventures. The BBC itself has global enterprises and it shares satellites with commercial companies. From the global point of view, British television is a small part of a web of supra-national business enterprises. Debates about the social value and function of television have become more intense under pressure from these economic changes which give more power to profit-making interests. We now hear talk of 'product' where we once spoke of programmes, and of 'the market' where we once meant the audience.

At the same time, the notion of what a 'programme' is, is itself changing as the digital era brings an unprecedented number of new channels. The television set is no longer the centre around which the united family gathers, but a personalised accessory. With many sets now dispersed around the house, each is likely to be tuned to a different channel. The targeting of niche audiences is a regular pattern, and whole channels are given over to a particular type of programming—say cartoons or sport. The convergence between computer-based technologies and those of broadcasting is bringing even greater changes to patterns of consumption. There is now less distinction between the computer screen and the television screen, as experiments such as Microsoft's WebTV stream moving pictures over the Internet, and cable and digital technologies bring interactive services on to the television screens (see Chapter 18, Changing technologies). We live in a new cultural world of media plenty in which the key words are 'on demand' and interactivity.

The changes and their apparent speed and uncontrollability have brought public reactions that range from euphoria about the coming digitopia to deep concerns about the commercialisation and 'dumbing down' of conventional television. The accusations have been that a fear of shrinking audiences—inevitable when many more channels are available—has led either to a move to the middle ground, eschewing any risk taking or deeper commitment, or, perhaps worse, to a cynical populism. The changes have been ideological as well as technological. Television is undoubtedly a more commercial

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and troubled environment. Old principles have been shaken and new ones are unsure. The future of the BBC as the publicly funded cornerstone of British television has come under attack, and the BBC's own response has been on the one hand a highly contentious restructuring, but on the other a commitment to be at the forefront of the digital, multi-channel future.

Yet, while new technologies and new forms are emerging, different individuals, even within television itself, inhabit different bits of the future, and many of those at the cutting edge of contemporary innovation have their roots in the long tradition of quality British television (see the interviews with Tony Garnett and John Wyver on pp. 127 and 154). Thus, while twenty-first-century technology creeps up behind our backs, emergent forms continue to co-exist with older ones. We must be careful not to fall into the trap of technological determinism, but should pay careful attention to all those social, cultural and political forces that are shaping the way in which the new technologies are used.

Nevertheless, as the landscape of television changes, it will be the people now entering the media professions who will be instrumental in developing these new structures. New skills are needed and old skills are being revised. The need for a dialogue between those who think about television and those who make it has never been more acute.

### **Television training and tele-literacy**

This is a handbook for the tele-literate and those who aim to be tele-literate. I use the term to combine a knowledge of the skills of television practice with a critical appraisal of the content of television and an enthusiasm for the medium in all its responsible and irresponsible proliferations—from *Eurotrash* to *Panorama*, from *Changing Rooms* to major events like Princess Diana's funeral. The book puts practical advice on 'how to do it' within the context of academic theory, current debates between television professionals, and issues that concern the public at large.

Television professionals and those who study the medium have brought different perspectives that at times have seemed totally at odds with each other. Many who work in the industry argue that media studies are irrelevant, since television theory has nothing to do with the real world of television production. Students, they say, spend their time deconstructing *Neighbours*, rather than learning practical skills (Petre 1996). In their view, media theory is abstract and sceptical, attacking rather than helping practitioners. Although there is some justice in these criticisms, in many ways they miss the point. To make useful critical judgements, television studies can never simply take the perspective of the broadcasters. As two researchers into television talk shows wrote:

Whatever the intentions of broadcasters in making these programmes, these do not determine the nature of the product. This must be revealed through textual analysis, and the programmes have many unintended consequences which only audience research can discover.

(Livingstone and Lunt 1994:2)

Television studies have their own history which is explored in the next chapter, where I argue that practitioners have made an important contribution—sometimes to the most abstract realms of theory. However, for many years, education and practical training had little to do with each other. Training had been largely on the job, oriented to technical expertise and with the prospect of a secure career ahead. But the structures of employment are changing. Television has become a casualised industry with less than

Page 6

half of its workers on contracts of a year or more (BFI 1996). A long period of apprenticeship is no longer appropriate. In response to student demand, the universities and colleges have stepped in to offer practical training alongside their more critical teaching. It is a development that has been greeted with alarm in the industry. The new-style courses are turning out unprecedented numbers of graduates at the very time when employment is in crisis and many experienced technicians are seeing their prospects disappear. What is more, this college-based 'training' is ambitiously close to a critical liberal tradition and produces students unwilling to confine themselves to the specific skills that employers need. The mutual suspicion between those concerned with theory and those concerned with practical work has been exacerbated by this state of affairs (see *Who needs media studies?*, p. 197).

Yet, as television itself is changing, the relationship between education and programme making is changing too. Links have been built between colleges and television companies. Phil Redmond, who originated *Brookside* and *Grange Hill*, writes of the initiatives between his company, Mersey Television, and John Moore's University, Liverpool (p. 205). Granada Television is amongst the companies with regular links to local colleges. The cynicism and anti-intellectualism within the television industry, which was part of a backlash against the high theory days of the 1980s, is giving way to a new reflexivity and media interest in its own practices and ways of doing things. The National Training Organisation Skillset is evolving a more structured understanding of the skills that are needed in a rapidly changing medium (p. 200). At the same time, a more diverse group of people is gaining access to television skills, often for uses other than employment in the television industry. Knowledge about television and access to television is much more widely dispersed in the population, while academics and others concerned with media education are beginning to grapple with the implications of an interplay between theory and practice.

Thinking about television, creating tele-literacy, is an activity that is carried on in many forums, from the pub to the starchiest of academic journals, between tele-people and viewers, students, academics and journalists. People new to the industry and all who seek to be tele-literate are now able to follow and take part in a television debate that is more than just 'did you see?' The daily and weekly broadsheet press carries extensive comment on policy and personalities, on technology and legislation, on the deliberations of channel controllers, on scheduling, commissioning, and other matters that have aroused public concern. Unlike the celebrity pages of the popular press, which speak to their readers exclusively as non-participant viewers, the broadsheet media pages have in mind a readership of informed media practitioners as well as viewers who take the media seriously. The many forums in which television is debated are increasingly accessible to the general public. They include public meetings and seminars organised by educational institutions, informal groups, pressure groups and bodies like the British Film Institute; they include trade magazines, such as *Broadcast* and *Televisual*; they include the courses run by educational institutions from schools to evening institutes and universities; and on television itself there are programmes such as Channel Four's *Right to Reply* and BBC2's *The Viewing Room*, in which a cross-section of television viewers are given the chance to study various programmes and to discuss such important issues of television policy as the function of the watershed and the growth in light-weight chat shows. Susan Williams (p. 201) writes of how she has been able to keep up with the television world in the gaps between working and training.

The distinction between education and training is still there, and the gap between studying television in a spirit of disinterested and critical enquiry and making television programmes remains an important distance which needs to be preserved. Independent intellectual values should not be abandoned in the face of an onslaught

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from those who feel that, in the new competitive atmosphere, only the most pragmatic of approaches will do. This book will suggest that theory and practice should not collapse into each other, but that they should inform each other. It will look at examples of good practice (see James Curran, p. 181) as well as showing how some theoretical perspectives have illuminated day-to-day production norms within some television genres. In this book, references to the sort of theoretical ideas that inform television studies are threaded through the chapters on practical approaches. For example, in considering the capacities of modern cameras, Dziga Vertov's writings on the 'camera-eye' are startlingly relevant (Chapter 6); when looking at advice about narrative structure, the formal explorations of writers including David Bordwell and Roland Barthes are as useful as the down to earth advice offered by Syd Field and Robert McKee (Chapter 10); when we come to new media and the world of digital communications, postmodern theory offers some provocative insights (Chapter 18).

The practitioners who have contributed to the book, some as written contributions, some in the form of extended interviews with Patricia Holland given between 1995 and 1999, are all aware of the contribution that their education has made to their careers. They range from trainees on the industry-sponsored technical courses to experienced producers and educators. They include policy makers and commissioning editors as well those who are making their way through the television jungle. All of the television programmes mentioned in the text are listed in the Programme References section at the end of the book, where further details (e.g. year of screening, channel, etc.) are given.

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2

**Studying television****Studying television?**

Despite the central role that television has played in the culture, politics and economics of the second half of the twentieth century, a coherent discipline called television studies hardly exists. Studying television is still treated with suspicion by the public at large and with a certain amount of amused condescension, if not contempt, by much of the academic community. As a result, television studies either lurk unnoticed within other, more 'respectable', disciplines—such as social psychology or literature—or else brashly assert themselves as critical and oppositional voices within media studies or contemporary cultural studies. But recently, just at the moment when television is disappearing as a separate phenomenon, there have been a number of works that have set out to take a fresh look at the medium (Fiske 1987; Silverstone 1994; Scannell 1996; Ellis 1999), and several attempts to pull together the many different ways in which it has been studied (Allen 1993; Corner and Harvey 1996; Geraghty and Lusted 1998). It seems very clear that, to get an overview of the place and influence of television in contemporary society, we have to draw from many different sources, some of which are totally unaware of each other's existence, while others are most definitely not on speaking terms.

The fact that the study of television rarely stands alone partly reflects the hybrid character of the medium. In *Television Times*, John Corner and Sylvia Harvey make a conscious effort to build relationships between its many different facets. They comment:

There is no doubt that much study has been undertaken with a high degree of ignorance about work lying outside the specific field of interest receiving attention. As the bright spotlight of enquiry has been placed on one 'part' of television, so other 'parts' have been plunged into darkness...for instance we have had studies of production which show little interest in the form of programmes themselves, critical analyses of certain programmes which show no interest in other kinds of programme, and frequently no concern whatsoever for the interpretations made by the viewers who make up the intended audience, and studies of audiences which show not the slightest awareness of the economic and institutional contexts within which specific viewing opportunities are made possible.

(Corner and Harvey 1996:xv)

Their conclusion is that this has led to a situation whereby 'pronouncements about the state of television per se have been made on the basis of very limited analyses'.