

dividual instantiation of a genre – a ‘novel’ or a ‘tragedy’ – tends to appear as the always *singular* displacement or translation of other media. The “epic theater” of Brecht, for instance, is interpreted by Benjamin as the staging of what he calls – or rather, cites as – “the citability of gesture.” Citability, usually associated with language and in particular with written texts, *parts* with this medium in order to enter into relation *with* ‘gesture,’ involving a bodily movement that points away from where it is situated. Whether or not this movement is *consummated* depends not on itself but on others: audience, readers, or interpreters. Benjamin’s -abilities always involve such an appeal to transformative reinscription on the part of those others who are its destined addressees.

It is no accident that old and new media converge in Benjamin’s discussion of Brecht’s theater. Theater spans the gap between old and new media, between “cult” and “exhibition value,” as Benjamin calls it in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility.” For the great resource of theater, old as well as new, is, according to Benjamin, that of “exposing the present” (*Exponierung des Anwesenden*). And it is such exposure, in which all enclosure becomes unhinged, that marks Benjamin’s theory of media no less than the mediality of his writing, which is always exposing the established sense of the words it uses by turning them inside-out.

This is obviously a very different conception of ‘medium’ and of ‘mediality’ than those that are familiar to many today. But to the extent that they provide an alternative scheme for approaching the instability of representations in the audiovisual media, they will hopefully prove useful for a reconsideration of those media, including the uses to which they are generally put.

William F. Baker

*on the state of
American television*

It elects presidents. It wins wars. It is both a mirror and an engine of our culture. Television is, undeniably, an extremely influential force in our country. And television viewing has never been more a part of our lives. Last year, Nielsen Media Research reported that during the 2004 – 2005 season, the average U.S. household tuned in for eight hours and eleven minutes per day. This is 2.7 percent higher than the previous season, 12.5 percent higher than ten years ago, and the highest levels since Nielsen Media Research began measuring television viewing in the 1950s.

However, instability, invention, and revision are now at work in every aspect of the medium – from content to viewer-

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ship to legislation to, of course, the driver behind it all, technology. In short, television is in a state of revolution.

If you are of a certain age, you remember when American television was defined by three networks (plus public television and a few scratchy channels that, with luck, you could pick up on the UHF band). Those three networks – CBS, NBC, and ABC – were television. They showed us the first moon landing, the Vietnam War, the Kennedy assassination, the Beatles, the Watergate hearings – the events that defined modern America. They offered something unprecedented: a mesmerizing glimpse of history in the making. We watched them together, free of charge, and they gave us a common media ground to stand on; we were a nation united by a glowing box in the corner of the living room.

The monolithic nature of television in those years was part of its power and its value. But it was also a liability. The networks were run by big corporations beholden to shareholders who expected a return on their investments. So they sold commercials, and they appealed to the largest common denominator. By their very nature, they represented the mainstream, the salable, the profitable.

Public television was created precisely as a reaction to the entrenched, corporate media establishment. Commercial-free, subsidized with government funds, and dedicated to the arts, education, and intellectual exploration, public television was the lone alternative to the Big Three – and the only television provider with a public-service mission.

Of course, because they used the public airwaves, the networks made *some* concession to public service, as required under the Communications Act of 1934. But because programming like news and public affairs was not profitable, they offered it reluctantly, and it was only un-

der the watchful eye of the FCC that they remained in compliance.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, that was largely the story of American television. Three big commercial networks used the public airwaves mostly as a source of revenue, but offered a unifying national experience and some nominal public-service programming. Public television, with its independent, community-based stations, offered the only real alternative.

In the final years of the 1960s, though, moves were being made in Washington to begin a cycle of deregulation that would eventually reform nearly every aspect of American industry – including television. This became perfectly clear in 1984, when FCC Chairman Mark Fowler famously declared, “It’s time to move away from thinking of broadcasters as trustees and time to treat them the way that everyone else in this society does, that is, as a business. Television is just another appliance. It’s a toaster with pictures.”

Notably, the deregulatory attitude of Reaganomics coincided with a technological breakthrough. The introduction of the personal computer – and its underlying digital technology – would transform the media in ways that few could imagine.

The effects of these economic and technological forces wouldn’t become completely clear for another decade or so, but the appearance of cable in the 1980s was the first sign of what was to come. Because cable emerged under a separate regulatory regime, cable operators were not – and are not – bound by the same strict rules that governed broadcasters. Cable operators are not obliged to devote part of their schedules to public service; they do not have to observe FCC regulations regarding indecency; and they are not limited by the

ownership caps designed to keep broadcasters from dominating particular markets. Consequently, cable channels were free to expand rapidly and introduce a range of programming not generally available to broadcasters.

As cable proliferated, new channels sprang up seemingly overnight. Faced with an ever-growing menu of choices, American audiences began to splinter. Channels were targeted to ever-smaller groups defined by demographics or specific interests: MTV for teenagers, A&E for arts lovers, CNN for newshounds. The dominance of the Big Three networks slowly began to erode. With the arrival of cable, television would no longer unite Americans under a big tent. Rather, it would set up scores of smaller tents catering to narrower sets of tastes.

The collateral trends of deregulation and the emergence of digital technology intersected in the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The first major telecom act in over sixty years, it sought to open American media to free-market competition – a move that many saw as necessary to enable Americans to take full advantage of what was becoming known as ‘the information superhighway.’

For some years, significant barriers had separated the lanes on this information superhighway. Television, the Internet, and voice and data communications all traveled along their own routes. But by the end of the millennium, the lanes began to merge. The Internet increasingly became a part of our daily lives. Streaming audio and video clips began to appear on web sites. In media circles, the word on everyone’s lips was ‘convergence.’ We started to think less about television programs and computer programs – and more in terms of content and access to that content.

The ice really cracked with the introduction of the digital video recorder

(DVR), which overturned the traditional television-scheduling model. No longer did viewers have to make appointments at specified hours to watch their favorite shows. Armed with a DVR, they became the programmers. And on the heels of the DVR, the entire world of media seemed to have broken open.

Over the past year, we have seen major Internet companies like Google and Yahoo set themselves up as television distributors, taking advantage of the web, the video iPod, and the omnipresent cell phone to deliver traditional television content. Following their lead, the ‘old’ media networks, as well as PBS, have been moving their content to these new distribution channels, in what amounts to a digital land rush for the new millennium.

Meanwhile, technology is revolutionizing not only viewing and distribution but production as well. Where it used to require dozens of technicians to make a television program, now one person can do it all. With an inexpensive camera, you can capture beautiful digital images and sound – even fabulous high-definition images. With a notebook computer and consumer software, you can edit footage. And when you’re done, you can upload your program to the web, where a potentially unlimited number of viewers can watch it. This has led to the explosion of so-called social network sites – such as YouTube – which build communities around shared amateur videos.

But it’s not all just for fun and socializing. Commercial news organizations across the country are adopting this technology to bring new immediacy to their programming as well. They are even enlisting citizen correspondents to submit footage – often captured with the video cameras built into cell phones. So the difference between amateur and professional is becoming increasingly

blurred – yet another wall that the digital revolution is tearing down.

New developments and innovations are emerging on an almost daily basis, and the traditional notion of television is quickly taking its place in media history alongside vinyl LPs and videotapes. It's an exciting time but a problematic, and even dangerous, time as well.

It's clear that the digital revolution is introducing a democratic potential into American media. More programs are available, and more people can participate in the creation and sharing of television. That's positive. But the effects of deregulation, if anything, are stronger than ever before. The toaster has become portable and interactive and downloadable, but it's still a toaster. And corporate America is hungry for toast.

So, even as we experience this democratization of the media, we are also witnessing massive consolidation. Newspapers, television groups, movie studios, and web sites are merging with telephone and wireless companies, Internet service providers, and cable companies. Thus, while the public has access to thousands of channels, the reality is that a few giant companies control the vast majority of information Americans consume. The prime objective of big media continues to be increasing shareholder value, and the public-service obligation of the commercial media is all but nonexistent. Cost cutting at the corporate level has led to staff reductions and closings of local newsrooms. Fewer reporters and editors mean lower-quality news, as does the cutthroat race to air with 'breaking stories' in a society where information travels at the speed of light.

A whole web of related pressures is at work as American media transforms. Indecency and political bias have caused firestorms in the halls of Congress. Internet, cable, and phone companies

are locked in pitched battles over who should control the distribution channels. And the commercial model is threatening to collapse in the face of ad-skipping and time-shifting technologies. In short, there are titanic struggles taking place in the media today. Profits versus First Amendment responsibilities. Viewer expectations versus economic realities. Political forces versus technological innovation.

As this chaotic revolution unfolds, we need to exercise caution. Even with all its exciting innovations and democratic promise, American media may be heading in the wrong direction. What began by adding new sounds to the chorus of American media may soon leave us with little more than unmodulated noise. Given the power and impact of television in our lives, it may be time to step back and carefully consider, with an eye on the future, the pros and cons of current developments.

At this critical moment in the history of American television, we should revisit the regulatory framework that governs providers of television programming in all its forms. Clearly, the various regulatory regimes that pertain to broadcast, cable, and telephone services no longer make sense in this era of integrated digital communications. The legal structure needs to be reconsidered and revised to reflect the realities of technology and the marketplace. At the same time, we need to explore the national vision of our media and promote its potential as a positive force in our culture and society. Right now, as we spin in the whirlwind of change, a full review and revamping of the duties of media providers would be a healthy exercise, and would do much to ensure that the digital revolution does not relegate public-service media to the dustbin of media history.