International Journal of Communication 4 (2010), Book Review 810–815 1932–8036/2010BKR0810

Elihu Katz and Paddy Scannell (Eds.), **The End of Television?:Its Impact on the World (So Far)**, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 625, September 2009, SAGE Publications, 235 pp., $47 (hardcover), $34 (paperback).

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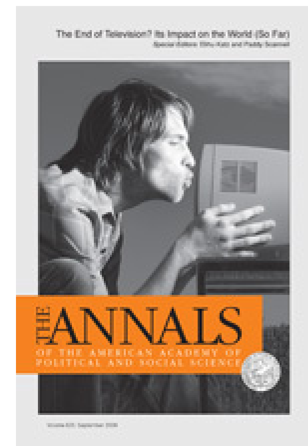

A "twice as outstanding" communications scholar, as Jay G. Blumler (2008) nicely emphasized when introducing Elihu Katz's recent guest lecture at the University of Leeds, and author of some of the most influential works in the field of television studies, the sociologist has been concerned since the mid-1990s with the possible demise of broadcast television. In fact, in the same journal whose special issue of September 2009 constitutes the volume reviewed here, Katz (1996) published an essay in which he stated that "television is dead, almost everywhere." The paraphrased title "And deliver us from segmentation" unequivocally identified the "evil" in the trends toward increasing customization of contents and fragmentation of channels and viewers that at the end of the century were reshaping television landscapes in the Western world. Taking issue with the thesis and the arguments in that article, James Curran (1998) challenged Katz's reading of the situation "with respect," and without excluding the possibility that it could prove a correct prediction of the future.

Katz was not the only scholar at that time to draw attention to the vanishing centrality of broadcast television and the impact of the apparently irresistible advance of a centrifugal multichannel environment on the democratic life and the civic culture of contemporary societies. One could mention, for instance, David Marc and Joseph Turow. In the final chapter added to the revised edition of *Demographic vistas* (1996), Marc discussed at length how the materialization of the 500-channels prophecy was likely to balkanize the once monolithic television public, and he drew from this the lapidary conclusion that "the Broadcast Era is kaput."

Turow investigated in *Breaking up America* (1997) the transmogrification of television from a society-making to a segment-making medium, a shift that was taking place in the broader framework of an emerging media system attuned to the advertising industry's self-interested vision of an increasingly splintered American society.

Whether taken for granted, predicted and evoked, denied, understated or deemed premature, the obsolescence of broadcast television after the proliferation of the narrowcast channels and the spread of new digital media could not fail, over the span of more than a decade, to become an issue for media scholars within and outside the United States (among these latter, I will limit myself to citing Jostein

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Gripsrud (2004) and Jean-Louis Missika (2006), largely in agreement with the concerns expressed by Katz, Marc, and Turow on the transition of broadcast television).

Against the background of rather diffused attention to the topic among other scholars, it can be acknowledged that Katz has followed his own distinctive route of study and research. He did not regard the end of television (with or without a question mark) as merely an issue,worth serious attention on only an episodic basis. Instead, with admirable perseverance, he made it a lasting, central feature of his scholarly agenda from the mid-1990s onward. Over these years, Katz has not ceased to elaborate on the fate of television in an age of media and social fragmentation; in fact, he made it the object of constant intellectual dissemination through his lectures and discussions with other scholars in many academic institutions and events around the world. In this connection I like to mention the Laurea Honoris Causa conferred on Katz in 2007 by the Faculty of Sciences of Communication at La Sapienza University of Rome. In both the Lectio Magistralis and the lectures delivered on that occasion, now included into a collection of essays in his honor (Ciofalo, 2009), the question of the passing of the broadcasting era was approached by Katz as a crucial one for contemporary media studies.

It is, in fact, so crucial as to be worthy of sustained investigation on the part of a large group of prominent scholars. On this proposition was grounded the international project "The end of TV?" headed by Katz and another outstanding thinker in the field, Paddy Scannell. The project was launched by a conference in Jerusalem in 2005, followed in 2007 by a colloquium hosted by the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. The special issue of the Annals published in 2009 is the first outcome of this academic endeavor, to be considered a work still in progress, as has been confirmed by Katz and demonstrated by the resumption of the discussion, a few months after the publication of the volume, in another Annenberg symposium (2010).

Co-edited by Katz and Scannell, who provide respectively the introductory and the concluding chapter, "The End of Television?" contains 15 contributions by 19 leading media scholars and researchers from the United States, Europe and Israel. Being unable to comment on each chapter, as a partial compensation I wish to acknowledge all the contributors: Menahem Blondheim, Jay G. Blumler, Steven Coleman, Daniel Dayan, John Ellis, Paul Frosh, Michael Gurevitch, Tamar Liebes, Sonia Livingstone, Amanda D. Lotz, Peter Lunt, Steve Martin, Joshua Meyrowitz, David E. Morrison, Andrea Press, Monroe E. Price, John Robinson, William Uricchio, and Garry Whannel.

It is not uncommon for reviewers faced with a collection of essays to point out an imbalance of interest or worthiness among them. It is a genuine pleasure to observe that such an imbalance does not occur in this case. I admit I have my favorites. I have found very helpful the notion of "monstration" advanced by Daniel Dayan to designate the activity by which television calls for public attention and the way he inflects this notion to apprehend the steps of the division of labor between old, centralized television and new de-centralized digital media. And I enjoyed my immersive reading of the subtly complex, fascinating analysis offered by Paul Frosh on the importance of the human face as the primary televisual image: what a humanistic redemption from the scornful criticism all too often leveled against the poor television aesthetics of the "talking heads." The considerations developed by David E. Morrison and Sonia Livingstone, in separate but rather consonant chapters aimed at contextualizing the place of

television in long-term social trends of secularization and individualization in British society, seemed to me exemplary instances of approaches as much uncontaminated by mediacentrism as wary of social determinism. Finally, I have been reading Scannell's thoughtful reflections on television and the duality of social time—the short-term of the present and the historical *longue durée* as conceptualized by the Annales school—with a sense of pure intellectual gratitude toward a deeply illuminating contribution.

Even a larger selection of examples would not do justice, however, to the fact that the scholarly equivalent of a *parterre de roi* brought together by Katz and Scannell guarantees the interest and worthiness of the volume from cover to cover.

In his introduction, Katz asks the double questions that participants in the project were invited to investigate. Is television really dying? What has been its major impact on society and culture so far?

In a sense, we could say that television has never been so healthy and triumphant as it is now: It has entered an age of "plenty" (Ellis, 2000) characterized by unceasing proliferation of channels; uncontainable spread of output across media, screens, platforms; and national and transnational phenomena of fully immersive, addictive fandom that was unthinkable in the days when audiences were known as "couch potatoes." Not by chance, discourses about the demise of television are likely to end up appropriating or paraphrasing the famous saying of Mark Twain: "Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated" (which is how Amanda Lotz concludes the story of television's evolution from network to post-network era in the United States). Why worry, then, apart from the fact that "the anxiety of obsolescence" (Fitzpatrick, 2006) has been a regular feature of the histories of almost all technologies and cultural forms of modernity from novel, to movie, radio, press, television?

In reality, the anxiety of obsolescence (or the opposite, its celebration, a point I will return to) is perhaps less significant in its capacity to identify the dying objects and forms—in this respect, I agree with Scannell that "five hundred years from now there will be television" (p. 233)—than in what it reveals about the way we conceive and evaluate those objects and the importance we ascribe to their role in relation to the aims, values and desires we prioritize. From this point of view, the question "is television dying?" can prove productive, regardless of the range of answers—yes or no, maybe, not yet—it is likely to provoke.

Thus, Katz's interrogation on the demise of the television he (not alone on this front) is mainly concerned with—"the television of sharedness, of nation-building and family togetherness" (p. 7)—is consonant with the commitment to an idea of participatory democracy of which broadcast TV has been for some decades a major instrument in the Western world, providing the citizens with a common meeting ground and a central forum where relevant matters of nation, state, culture, and civic life were made available to collective awareness and public discussion.

On this line of thought, Menahem Blondheim and Tamar Liebes elaborate in their chapter about the role of news, during the classic era of television, as conveyor of sense of trust and belonging by connecting entire populations to an imagined national center. This seems no longer to be true. Once constructed and addressed as members of the polity, viewers are being converted in the new media age

into private consumers of on-demand news fragments; "with the end of television, we may be experiencing the end of news" (p. 193), the authors conclude. If an exception occurs in the contemporary landscape of fragmentation and infinite individual choice of television content, it resides in the experience of live sports events; Garry Whannel argues that media events, quintessential rituals of social integration through large communal viewing on a national and even transnational basis, as theorized by Dayan and Katz, (1992) find their "last bastion" in the live broadcasting of sports.

Other contributors offer diverging readings of television's heyday. William Uricchio challenges the very idea of a broadcast TV germane to democratic life and public good and advances the critical notion of "constraint" to account for the intentionalities and the institutional and industrial practices of control behind the medium. The television of sharedness was created and maintained under conditions of spectrum and content scarcity to perform its cohesive role in the service of different hegemonic projects. From an opposite and symmetrical viewpoint, Peter Lunt acknowledges that there is still room for public interest in contemporary television, if one accepts that what is meant by public interest in the individualized society has shifted from "establishing common values . . . to supporting a normative ethics of the self" (p. 136).

I wish to note at this point that albeit different and sometimes diverging, the answers to the question "is television dying?"—all of which I have found engaging and thought-provoking regardless of the extent of my agreement or disagreement—seem to share the common assumption that the broadcast regime, an undisputed peculiarity of the history of television, has given way for better or for worse to the present post-broadcast, post-network era. This can certainly appear as a *fait accompli* from the geo-cultural perspective adopted by the authors, who mostly refer to the Euro-American media landscape. But, given that we are dealing with a work in progress, I would welcome in future steps the problematization of such premises based on evidences as strong as they are context-specific and hardly susceptible of being transferred to other contexts. There are (very large) countries in the world—think of Asia—where broadcast television bears no signs of obsolescence, the spreading of digital channels notwithstanding. We do not even need to leave the Western world to find, for instance in Italy, a television market in which the broadcast channels still gather three-quarters of the audience share. Whether these dissimilarities are symptomatic only of the existence of asynchronies among places—meaning that they correspond to different stages, more or less advanced and fast-moving, of the same evolutionary process—remains to be seen; but we should be wary of granting replicability or normativity to just one single model of television development, whether it results in the end of broadcasting or not.

Writing about literary fiction, Frank Kermode (1966) affirmed that as readers, "we hunger for ends and for crises." Hunger for ends involves in this context the significance of a sense-making desire, to which I shall return; but I shall first appropriate the expression in its plain meaning as wishing for the end of somebody or something to briefly point out what has always intrigued me about pronouncements about the passing of television. Predictions and statements of fact (real or presumed) that over the entire history of media have coalesced into discursive formations of the demise of a cultural form, say the book, the movie, the press, have usually entailed worries, anxieties, mourning, eulogies, sorrow at the loss. Only when it comes to television does an ambivalence emerge, because along with anxiety about obsolescence, a hunger for obsolescence also takes shape, engendering—partly in academia, mainly in journalism,

industry, public opinion—its own discursive formation, replete with celebratory statements of the soon-to-come or already-come-true collapse of broadcast TV and with vibrant expectancies of a better life after television.

As meant by Kermode, however, we hunger for the end because it offers a privileged perspective from which we can look to the past—the story that unfolded in the novel or in other narrative form—and make sense of it. To me, what renders "the end of television" project specially rewarding in terms of knowledge and understanding, as corroborated by the volume under analysis, is precisely the fruitful choice made by Katz and Scannell to turn a multivocal discourse on the demise of the medium into an opportunity to look to its history and to try to assess its major long-term effects on human experience, social institutions and cultural values.

Surprisingly enough, the dawn and growth of television throughout several decades has not been accompanied by "many *big* ideas" (Katz, 2009, p. 8), hypotheses, researches, studies, aimed at systematically investigating and evaluating the impact it might have on society and culture. In this regard Scannell brings into focus the temporal bias of media studies toward the present, reminding us that "academic engagement with media has always been concernend with the shock of the new" (p. 220). But the new has no history, no past, and long-term effects become discernible only when the passing of time reaches the historical breadth of the *longue durée.*

This is the case of television today, more than half a century from its inception. A wide-ranging mapping of the medium's impact on public and private life is very likely to engage dedicated scholars in the long run. As a start, Katz and Scannell have chosen to focus on the transformation of visibility: the way in which television has reshaped the configuration of and the relationship between public and private spheres, by the fundamental reason of its being a medium of showing (it puts faces, things, events on display). The theme is dealt with in various chapters by such influential authors as Daniel Dayan, John Ellis, Paul Frosh, and Joshua Meyrowitz.

I hope this valuable volume is the first stage of a lasting intellectual project. Not only the politics of the present, enhanced by the current climate of digital frenzy, but (according to Thomas's theorem) the consequences of defining as real the death of television, can undermine academic engagement with broadcast TV and its long-term effects.

Elihu Katz and Paddy Scannell have unconventionally and successfully challenged the *esprit du temps*. There is much to praise, and much to thank them for.

English revision by Jennifer Radice

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