

A (premature) eulogy of broadcasting: the sense of the ending of television*

Uma eulogia (prematura) do *broadcast*: o sentido do fim da televisão

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ABSTRACT

The vanishing centrality of broadcast television has turned into a key issue within contemporary media studies, thus making *the end of television* a familiar trope in scholarly discourses and opening the way to a redefinition of the present-day phase in terms of post-broadcast era. Besides recognizing that there are plenty of places in the world where the broadcast era is still alive, this article makes the claim that the discursive formation of *the passing of television as we knew it* may offer media scholarship the opportunity to assume the viewpoint of the end as the privileged perspective from which the broadcast era can be looked at anew, eventually acknowledging the reasons why it is liable to be praised rather than buried.

Keywords: Broadcasting, narrowcasting, microcasting, digital, convergence

RESUMO

O declínio da centralidade da televisão aberta (*broadcast*) tem se transformado num ponto chave nos estudos contemporâneos de mídia, tornando, por isso, o *fim da televisão* um tópico familiar nos discursos acadêmicos e abrindo caminho para uma redefinição do atual momento em termos de uma era pós-*broadcast*. Além de reconhecer que existem diversos lugares no mundo em que a era do *broadcast* continua viva, este artigo ressalta que a formação discursiva do *fim da televisão como a conhecemos* pode dar aos pesquisadores de mídia a oportunidade de assumir o ponto de vista do fim como uma perspectiva privilegiada para que o *broadcast* possa ser visto de novo, eventualmente, reconhecendo as razões pelas quais é suscetível de ser elogiado em vez de sepultado.

Palavras-chave: *Broadcasting*, segmentação, *microcasting*, digital, convergência

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1. Available at <<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/eulogy?q=eulogy>>, accessed March 24, 2013.

ACCORDING TO THE Oxford English Dictionary, Eulogy is “a speech or piece of writing that praises someone or something highly, especially a tribute to someone who has just died”¹. Therefore, a eulogy would seem appropriate to pay tribute to broadcast television, if we have to trust those who within and outside the academia support the belief that television is dying or has already died.

Is television really dying? In a sense, we could say that television has never been so healthy and triumphant as nowadays: it has entered an age of “plenty” (Ellis, 2000), characterized by unceasing proliferation of channels, uncontrollable spread of output across media, screens, platforms, and national and transnational phenomena of fully-immersive, addictive fandom that was unthinkable in the old days when audiences were known as *couch potatoes*. But on the other hand it may be said that owing precisely to the transformation undergone by the medium in the digital age, television as we know it is definitely coming to an end.

This article will be concerned with the narrative of *the end of television as we know it*. I wish to start by saying that I’m not aligned with neither of the two perspectives from which *the passing of the broadcast era* is usually approached, arousing opposing feelings of anxiety or satisfaction. The leading cultural studies scholar Graeme Turner has recently coined the definitions of “broadcast pessimism” and “digital optimism” (Turner and Tay, 2010: 32), to encapsulate the two different positions. The proponents of *broadcast pessimism* argue that we are witnessing the inexorable obsolescence of traditional television – the television of sharedness, of family togetherness – under the disrupting, disuniting impact of media digitization; the *digital optimists*, on the contrary, welcome the rise of the post-broadcast era which – by disclosing an unprecedented range of contents, and allowing unrestrained time, space and modes of access to an array of platforms, screens, outputs – is deemed to democratically satisfy individual needs and demands of free choice and control in relation to the television experience.

The two antithetical perspectives converge to provide the same diagnosis that *television is over*. Consistently with this verdict, the present stage of television history has been conceptualized and is typically defined in contemporary television studies as *post-broadcast, post-network era*: a label clearly informed by a uni-linear vision of media development (in spite of the clarification provided by Amanda Lotz in her influential history of the American television, that post-network era “is not meant to suggest the end or irrelevance of networks”) (Lotz, 2007: 15).

Accounts of the end of television have turned into “a strong tendency within media and cultural studies” (Turner and Pertierra, 2013: 15), and something of an *orthodoxy* has emerged especially within the reach of the *digital optimism*, also

favoured by the “exceptionally warm reception accorded to new technologies” (Turner and Tay, 2009: 57).

But there are also instances of resistance to this orthodoxy, by those in the academia (e.g. Graeme Turner, Toby Miller, John Ellis, Paddy Scannell) who – without obviously denying processes and phenomena of substantial change brought about by the conjuncture of spreading digital technologies and other influent societal factors – challenge nonetheless the *universalizing claim* that broadcast television is over; and draw attention to the multiple signs and evidences *that broadcasting is still alive and well*, despite declining share, in most countries around the world, and even holds central or dominant position in many hugely populated locations (like China, India, Brazil, Mexico ...). In early nineties Herbert Schiller wrote an article titled *Not yet the post-imperialist era* (1991). I will rephrase here Schiller’s title to declare that I fully concur with the argument made by this strand of television scholarship not aligned with the master narrative of the end of television: i.e., *Not yet the post-broadcast era*.

Even though the term *eulogy* does not express my stance on the state and fate of broadcasting², as for declarations or predictions of its collapse, it performs a useful evocative function: as *eulogy* is meant to recall and bring to the fore a narrative of television demise that has gained currency and momentum to a large extent within media studies over the last two decades or so. Although questionable under many respects – for instance, the narrow range of reference countries, the speculative and predictive rather than evidence-based argument – the discursive formation on *the end of television* is something that we cannot avoid coming to terms with, when we reflect on what is television today.

It is not surprise that serious concerns about the collapse of broadcast television were first expressed by one of the founding fathers of the communication studies, Elihu Katz. Katz published an essay in 1996 where he stated that “...television is dead, almost everywhere” (Katz, 1996: 22-23). The religious paraphrase of the title *And deliver us from segmentation* unequivocally identified the *culprit* in the trends towards increasing customization of contents and fragmentation of both channels and viewers, which at the end of the 20th century were emerging in certain markets in the Western world. Over the subsequent years Elihu Katz has never ceased to work and elaborate on the fate of television in an age of media and social fragmentation, as is testified by the international project *The end of TV?*, carried out in the first decade of 2000s; a large group of prominent media scholars and researchers, from the United States, Europe and Israel, contributed to the project, thus making “the end of television” something of a top issue in the academic agenda of early 2000s (Katz and Scannell, 2009).

2. ³My intent would be better encapsulated in a sentence reminiscent of Mark-Antony’s speech: *I come not to bury television but to praise it.*

Elihu Katz however was not the only scholar at that time to focus on, and draw attention to the vanishing centrality of broadcast television and the impact made by 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 of the revised edition of *Demographic vistas*, which likewise appeared in 1996, Marc discussed at length how the materialization of *the 500-channels prophecy* was likely to balkanize the once massive television public, and drew from this the lapidary conclusion that “The Broadcast Era is kaput” (Marc, 1996: 189). One year later, Joseph Turow investigated in *Breaking up America* the transformation 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 vision – prompted by the advertising industry – of an increasingly fractioned and heterogeneous American society (Turow, 1997).

In 2000s the obsolescence of broadcast television, following the proliferation of the narrowcast channels and the spread of the new digital media, has not ceased to be a major issue for media scholars within and outside the United States. Among the Europeans, I will limit myself to quoting Jostein Gripsrud (2004) and Jean-Louis Missika (2006), both largely in accord with the concerns expressed by the aforementioned scholars. I shall conclude this rapid and certainly incomplete overview by quoting Daniel Dayan’s statement: “television-as-we-knew-it continues to disappear” (2010: 25).

Worries about the disappearance of television as we knew it, manifested by the *broadcast pessimists*, are hardly an unprecedented cultural phenomenon. As the wonderful book by Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2006) compellingly demonstrates, “the anxiety of obsolescence” has been a regular feature of the history of almost all the technologies and cultural forms of modernity, and has concerned from time to time novel, movie, radio, press, painting, photography etc. (all of which are still with us, albeit reshaped). In reality, the anxiety of obsolescence (or the opposite, the celebration: a point I will return to later) is perhaps less interesting for its alleged capacity to identify endangered technologies and cultural forms than for what it discloses about the way we conceive of those forms and envisage their possible evolution. It may be the case, for instance, that worries about the death of television help to unveil underlying essentialist conceptions of the medium, tending to solidify its nature into a set of given and unchanging characteristics: essentialist visions that resist coming to terms with processes of becoming. Even more interesting and consequential: talks on the demise of TV function according to Thomas’s theorem that is they end up by conferring on their subject a status of reality³.

3. According to Thomas “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (1928: 571).

In fact – whether they emanate from broadcast pessimism or digital optimism – those discourses achieve to bring into existence the *cultural phenomenon* of the end of television, and to validate the largely taken-for-granted assumption that the broadcast regime, an undisputable peculiarity of past history of television, has given way for better (the optimists) or for worse (the pessimists) to the present post-broadcast, post-network era.

This can appear as a *fait accompli* from a situated geo-cultural perspective that encompasses the Euro-American media landscape, having the United States at the centre of the picture. But this alleged *fait accompli* is hardly susceptible of being transferred to different contexts and to be generalized. Again, there are (very large) countries around the world – think of Far-East 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 broadcasting channels still gather almost two-thirds of the audience share. The Italian market today finds itself in the phase of moderate audience segmentation which, according to Denis McQuail, corresponds to the “central-peripheral model” (McQuail, 1997: 137). At this moment, although the multiplication of channels makes it possible to enjoy a wide range of TV programs both outside and on the edge of the mainstream, the generalist networks continue to occupy centre-stage on the TV scene and to attract a majority share of audiences.

The master narrative on the inexorable march of television towards the post-broadcast age would suggest to mobilize the notion of *asynchrony* to account for dissimilarities between locations: as if those dissimilarities reflected different stages of a single evolutionary process, which sooner or later is intended to drive every mature television market to the same *end*. Precisely, the end of broadcasting.

In reality what television will become tomorrow in myriad countries around the globe cannot be predicted, and what television is today responds to a large extent to structural and contingent factors specific to each location – notwithstanding the undeniable impact of transnational and globalizing trends. Thinking of Italy again, the demographic structure of the population that comprises a high rate of ageing citizens, joined to the (declining but still considerable) resilience of the Mediterranean model of the *strong family*, plays an important role in securing the broadcast television a still dominant position.

Hence, we should be wary of granting replicability or normativity to just one single model of television development, whether or not it results in the end of broadcasting.

Writing about literary fiction Frank Kermode affirmed that as readers “we hunger for ends and for crises” (1996: 5). In the context of Kermode’s discourse hunger for ends refers to a sense-making process, to which I shall return; but I shall first appropriate the expression in its plain meaning as *longing for the end/demise* of somebody or something, to briefly indicate what I find intriguing and worth pointing out as regards pronouncements and discourses concerning the passing of television. Predictions and statements of facts (real or presumed) that over the entire history of the media have coalesced into the discursive formations of the demise of the book, the movie, the press, have usually entailed worries, anxieties, mourning, eulogies, in short sorrow on the loss. Only when it comes to television does an ambivalence emerges, since alongside of the *anxiety of obsolescence* a *hunger for obsolescence* also takes shape and place, engendering – partly in academia, mainly in journalism, industry, public opinion: wherever the *digital optimism* has successfully taken hold – its own discursive formation, replete with celebratory statements of the soon-to-come or already-come-true collapse of broadcast TV, and with vibrant hopes of a better life after television, as predicted by George Gilder since mid-Eighties (1985). What we are dealing here is probably the effect of two mutually reinforcing cultural stances: the “modernist obsession for innovation and novelty” (Mulgan, 1990:18), which fuels the highest expectations towards the new digital environment with its cornucopia of (alleged) “technologies of agency and liberation”; and the “rejection and denigration” (Newman and Levine, 2012:2) that cultural élites have long expressed towards broadcast TV, as a low-quality medium suited to passive mass-audiences. It is not coincidence that discourses of television legitimation began to emerge alongside the technologies of convergence, and that only programs produced in the narrowcast environment of the American television have achieved to be labelled “quality tv” (Buonanno, 2013).

Back to Kermode. He says that we hunger for end because this offers a privileged perspective from which we can look back to the past – the story that unfolded in the novel or in other narrative form – and make sense of it. Thus it may be possible to turn the narrative of the end of television into an opportunity for retracing the story of the medium, in a way that helps to make sense of its present.

It is now common practice within media scholarship to distinguish three consecutive phases of the evolution of television; Amanda Lotz (2007) for instance identifies a network-era, a multi-channel transition, and a post-network era. Broadly influential has proved in this respect the triple periodization proposed more than a decade ago by John Ellis (2000). This is based on what might be defined as a *principle of expansion*; in other words, the progressive pluralisation

and proliferation of the channels and contents made available to the viewing public. I intend to summarise Ellis's thesis rapidly in order to provide a starting point for additional observations, and in particular to introduce an opposing viewpoint, consistent with my argument.

Ellis defines the first phase of the age of television as a one of *scarcity*: it is characterised by a limited number of channels, and by temporal restrictions of the daily programming schedule. In Italy, like in other European countries, at the beginning there was only one national terrestrial channel, under the public service regime; many years were to pass before it was joined by a second and, much later, by a third network.

After a few decades scarcity gave way to a phase of *larger availability*, when a relatively wide and varied choice of channels and programmes became available in the majority of countries. As a consequence, the first phenomena of erosion of mass audiences began to occur, as the viewing public spread out in different shares among the multi-channel offering (in Italy, where the phase of growing availability coincided with the birth and the rise of commercial channels, the national networks doubled from three to six).

And then came the time of *abundance*. Thanks to cable, satellite and digital technologies often blended or synergetic, this phase has witnessed and continues to experience the multiplication of channels by a factor of ten or even a hundred; the dissemination of contents across multiple platforms; the diversification of the patterns of consumption of, and modes of engagement with, television programmes.

Ellis has given a useful and influential contribution to systematize and categorize key evolutionary steps of television over the half-century and more of the medium's history. However the dynamics of *magnificent and progressive* expansion highlighted by this account risk overshadowing other aspects of the story that do not travel along the same linear route from scarcity to plenty.

In this connection I will limit myself to pointing out that the apparently unlimited territories of televisual abundance offered by the phase of plenty are hardly freely and unconditionally accessible: quite the opposite. The cable and satellite networks that crowd our multi-channel digital environment indicate a transition in the way television contents are made available to viewers, compared to the past. This is the transition from free-to air television platforms to subscription and PPV platforms. Although only commercial television has traditionally been free of charge, the form of payment demanded by nearly all the public networks – an annual fee – has never constituted, in the strict sense, an unavoidable key to accessing television programming, nor is it so perceived, as one can evade paying the fee and still keep watching TV.

Access by subscription or purchase (DVD, VOD) has significantly altered the traditional conception of TV as public good “with no price” (Newmann, 2012: 467). Television has been historically characterized by its low threshold of accessibility, largely predicated upon the prerogative of being free of charge. Watching television requires no preliminary acquisition of competencies – you have to be literate to read books and newspapers, and the online platforms that allow mostly young technology-savvy consumers a (legal or illegal) free access to any kind of television outside the box, demand further digital literacy and devices, and high-speed internet connection; nor watching television is predicated upon any act of purchase to be repeated from time to time, like buying a newspaper or a movie ticket. Easily accessible and user-friendly, television has proved without doubt the most democratically inclusive among the mass media, as Joshua Meyrowitz has compellingly argued (1985). Therefore the advent and rise of subscription platforms has represented a clear break, practical and symbolic, with the previously unfettered open-door profile of the medium.

Hardly anyone lives any more in a regime of televisual scarcity today; yet even in the most televisually developed countries only a part of the citizens – in varying shares depending on different contexts – really enjoys a regime of full abundance; and it is reasonable to believe that a sizeable proportion of the population around the world, whether from preference or necessity, will continue to access television the good old way – being content with enjoying at most the low to moderate abundance of free digital television, wherever available. In actual fact the landscape of plenty is unevenly attainable.

My clarifications are not intended to cast doubt on the legitimacy and relevance of Ellis’s choice of criteria, nor of the usefulness of the reconstruction that these criteria allow us to make. I identify rather in this reconstruction a valuable canvas providing the background on which I can sketch out what from my own perspective emerges as the most significant and crucial pattern of evolution to be observed in television’s history to date. I am referring to the transition from broadcasting to narrowcasting, i.e. from generalist to special-interest channels (or thematic television, as the latter is also called), and furthermore to *person/microcasting* (the most individualized modes of television delivery and consumption we are witnessing nowadays).

I wish to clarify that taking this viewpoint is not merely a rhetorical stratagem for saying in different words what can equally be said in terms of the shift from scarcity to abundance. On the contrary, it is a complete reversal of perspective, since the *dynamic of expansion* that drives the path to abundance turns out to be exactly overturned: that is to say, it becomes a *dynamic of contraction* made crystal clear in the terminology itself, which marks the

difference between *broad* televisual diffusion (to the widest possible audience), *narrow* diffusion (to smaller sections of the public) and finally *micro* (to single individuals). I make here a quick note, to be resumed later, that both the pessimist and optimist proponents of the end of television make an issue just of dynamics of contraction.

We can say *diffusion*, *distribution* or perhaps better *dissemination*, when referring to broadcasting. At first glance it seems somewhat strange to have recourse to a word taken from a traditional agricultural vocabulary to describe a medium of communication which (if nothing else at its inception) had strong connotations of modern urbanity. The word *broadcasting* originally indicated the act of scattering seeds in large handfuls by a sower over a wide area of tilled earth. Yet this is how the dissemination of broadcast television functions, as John Durham Peters (1999) has indicated in one of the most thoughtful books about communication ever written. Peter's main concern is to rescue broadcasting from the widespread and persistent criticism that, in setting it against an idealised and almost sacrosanct model of interactive dialogue, blames it for the bad influences of a form of communication that is supposedly undemocratic because it is a one-way, top-down monologue. Instead Peters, without attempting to set one theory against another or establish that either is superior, compares the communicative models of dialogue and dissemination and traces them back respectively to the great moral figures of Socrates and Jesus. His purpose is to demonstrate that "dialogue can be tyrannical and dissemination can be just" (1999: 34). In particular Peters draws inspiration from the Gospel parable of the sower to put forward a persuasive argument for the non-selective, one might say ecumenical, nature of broadcasting. As the parable teaches us, the sower has no control over the harvest; or, in the terms of a media studies jargon, no control over the reception context. Like the seeds, which can fall on stony ground, or be eaten by birds, or blown far away by the wind, so that only some of them fall on good ground, televisual dissemination goes out indiscriminately in all directions and is *democratically indifferent* to the uncontrolled randomness of its effects and consequences. "The parable of the sower," says Peters, "celebrates broadcasting as an equitable mode of communication" (1999: 52).

Broadcast television has demonstrated a unique capacity for reaching huge audiences, on national and also – in the occurrence of special ceremonial events – international and even global scale (Dayan and Katz, 1992). Obviously this capacity to attract mass audiences was never as great as (it had been) in the phase of scarcity, when the smaller number of available channels was in itself a powerful factor in gathering viewers. But broadcasting has proved to

be effective in retaining substantial audiences even in the later phases of the system's growth, and to this day.

Bringing people together is in fact the purpose and prerogative of broadcasting; and since – contrary to conventional wisdom – large aggregates of individuals (inappropriately defined as masses) are endowed with a high degree of internal heterogeneity rather than homogeneity, it is with the challenge of communicating to a differentiated audience that broadcast/generalist television is faced. This entails work primarily on what is shared or can be shared between individuals who are heterogeneous in every respect: gender, age, education, lifestyle and other attributes. In order to attract audiences numbering millions, broadcast television has to appeal to an assorted aggregate of diverse segments of the population. As Dominique Wolton puts it, the idea of programming inherent in broadcasting “indicates in fact an acceptance of the heterogeneity of tastes and aspirations and thus constitutes a sort of recognition of their equality” (Wolton, 1990: 115).⁴

4. Translated from French: “Elle traduit de ce fait une acceptation de l'hétérogénéité de goûts et des aspirations et constitue donc une sorte de reconnaissance de leur égalité.”

The propensity of broadcast television to bring together the widest range of viewers – understood by many to be no more than a simple quest for the lowest common denominator – has performed and continues to perform important functions of culture and identity binding within the national collectivity. Television itself has helped to construct this collectivity symbolically, offering it a non-physical meeting place where participants may experience mutual visibility and recognition. Broadcast television has served to forge a shared *imagination* of the national community, with considerably more impact and to a far greater extent compared to the press (Anderson, 1991); in Italy television has been among other things a primary force in linguistic unification, anticipating the process of universal schooling (Bechelloni, 1984, 1995).

Evoking notions of collectivity and community leads directly to acknowledge that watching television is typically an experience of sharedness and connection with a (broader or narrower) plurality of others. In this regard Daniel Dayan wrote: “Watching television is always a collective exercise, even when one is alone in front of the set” (2001:743). Watching television means *watching with*: with all the other distant and unknown viewers whom one supposes or guesses *are simply there* in front of their screens *at the same time* as we are in front of ours, viewing the same programme that we are viewing ourselves. *The same programme at the same time*: the *invisible meeting* convened by broadcast television is predicated upon the simultaneousness of an identical viewing experience.

It is important to distinguish between different types of simultaneousness. The one that is embraced by the experience of *watching with* is not necessarily

the synchronisation with the real time of a live event, but the synchronisation between individuals who are far apart and unknown to each other but who are doing, and know that they are doing, the same thing at the same time. It is a form of “de-spatialised simultaneity” (Thompson, 1995: 32), entirely analogous with the simultaneous or nearly simultaneous reading of the daily newspaper. As Benedict Anderson describes, “Each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (Anderson, 1991: 35).

The concept of community must be approached with great caution when it comes to mediated, vicarious experiences. However it may be affirmed, simply referring to sense of togetherness inherent in the word, that watching television means entering into a connection, and being aware of it even in a latent and unnoticed way, with the imagined community – intangible, scattered and ephemeral though it may be – of all those who are watching it at the same moment.

The imagined communities, or the invisible meetings of simultaneous viewers of the same programme, make up aggregates that are variable in terms of scale and internal composition; and this variance depends, among other things, on the forms and directions taken by television development. In the most triumphal phase of broadcasting, watching television was similar to participating in a viewers’ community that was not only widely expanded but, still more important as far as social bonds are concerned, was characterised by the *internal pluralism* created by the heterogeneous presence of different components of national collectivity, brought together by the *ecumenical communicative model of dissemination*.

Over time, watching television has progressively become an experience shared within more restricted social circles, which are at the same time more homogeneous in their internal structure. Rather than within a large aggregate of disparate people, viewers meet up in smaller groups of equals, convened by the peculiarly selective communication model of the *narrowcast television*.

Narrowcasting – in concrete terms, the proliferating system of niche cable and satellite channels, both basic and premium, mostly available on subscription, catered to specialized interest of typically affluent viewers – certainly reflects the distributive abundance that comes with technological evolution. But it might be conceding too much to technological determinism not to acknowledge that the advent of *narrowcasting* has also been prompted by the emergence of zones of social demand – more or less extended, depending on different geographical locations and socio-demographic factors – for tailor-made TV programmes likely to meet the requirements, preferences and tastes of specific

segments of the viewing public: although never completely disregarded by the broadcast channels – which have introduced increasing schedule diversification with the passage of time – such a demand can only to a very limited extent be accommodated in the broadcasting system.

Broadcast and narrowcast television are driven by seemingly antithetical logics and purposes, as the latter entails selection and separation, just as the former entails inclusion and togetherness. Broadcast television – with its diverse range of programmes aimed at an equally diverse range of audiences – is committed to keeping together and thus to *re-composing* heterogeneous groupings of viewers into some sort of commonality (of interests, pleasures, viewing choices etc). Narrowcast television – mushrooming into dozens to hundreds of thematic, special-interest channels – is rather committed to *de-composing* the heterogeneous into the homogeneous, carving out the mass audience into restricted and tendential uniform fractions, and keeping them within a regime of mutual *separateness*. Each network has its own speciality, its tribe of viewers, its niche topics. Myriad channels in the narrowcast environment are aimed at giving (or so it is promised) everyone what they need, without any limit: cartoons to children, movies to film-lovers, soccer to sport enthusiasts, series to fiction fans, and so on.

As soon as narrowcasting has started to emerge and develop, taking audience away from broadcast networks (at an unequal extent and pace in different national television systems), the enduring *substitution approach* so often prevailing in discussions about the media and their evolutionary steps has expressed itself all too easily in declarations, predictions and expectations concerning the imminent demise of broadcasting. By *substitution approach* I refer to the intellectual penchant – to be found well beyond media studies – of conceiving processes of change and development in terms of displacement of the *old* by the *new*. U. Beck has defined this *either-or* stance as “the mode of exclusive distinction”, as opposed to “the mode of inclusive distinction” that accommodates co-existence and overlapping of different phases, forms and directions of becoming (Beck, 2003:12-15), rather than postulating an inevitable sequence of obsolescence and replacement. The inescapability of such sequence is never so taken for granted as when the drivers of the change are believed to be the new technologies – whether this suggests pessimistic or optimistic predictions. Then, whereas broadcast pessimists mourn the loss of the television’s ability to address the national community, putting the blame on the fragmentation instigated by channels proliferation, the optimists – who have on their side the digital orthodoxy enthusiastically embraced by conventional wisdom – celebrate the much awaited decline of a top-down centralized medium, superseded by a

more progressive delivery system attuned to viewers' specific tastes and interests. Narrowcasting widely benefits from the positive prejudice that makes it "a superior form of television, compared to broadcasting"⁵ (Wolton, 1990: 119) and is sometimes acknowledged with the supreme redeeming compliment of not even being television (after all, the bold claim "it is not tv...it's HBO" has emerged from the narrowcast environment).

It is worth pointing out that, regardless of being inclined towards pessimism or optimism, predictions of the end of broadcasting following the advent of narrowcast television present two weak points. The first is that they speculate on the alleged narrowcasting's potential to segment the audiences to almost unlimited extent: which is simply not proving true, even in a highly fragmented market as the United States, where – quoting Jennifer Gillan – "broadcast television still carries significant weight" (Gillan, 2011: 244), typically although not exclusively when special events of different nature (from politics to sport to entertainment to disasters...) occur. In actual fact, what is possible in principle is not necessarily realized in practice, due to number of structural or contingent intervening factors. The second flaw relates to the still limited time-frame of the evolutionary phenomena being observed; media and television studies have traditionally been characterized by the temporal bias towards the present, alongside a certain tendency to envision the future; but processes of change and their permanent effects only become discernible when the passing of time reaches the historical breadth of the *longue durée*.

This is not to deny that broadcast television – besides being *in full swing* in several locations around the world – has been challenged and weakened to varying degrees by the rise of multichannel platforms in a number of western countries. However there seem to be no signs anywhere that the so-called *old television* has been (or is in the process of being) dislodged altogether by the growing array of niche channels. If we resist the temptation to conceive of the television becoming as a clash of old and new, where the old is sooner or later destined to surrender to the overwhelming advance of the new, we can find evidence that in contemporary television landscapes long established technologies and cultural forms co-exist with their emerging counterparts, putting at audience disposal opposite and yet complementary resources able to satisfy equally opposite and complementary desires and demands: to be integrated into the larger community of the viewing public, if need be (which is broadcasting's duty), and to be enabled to retreat into preferential enclaves of television consumption (which is narrowcasting's business).

We should be careful not to regard this kind of *division of labor* as the functional differentiation between an old-fashioned embodiment of television,

5. Translated from French: "L'idée qui fait de la télévision fragmentée une forme de télévision supérieure par rapport à la télévision généraliste."

premised on a conservative vision of community cohesion, and a modern, progressive form of the medium, more attuned to supporting expectations and claims of distinction and separateness. As a matter of fact, broadcasting is no more conservative than narrowcasting is progressive and, taking again inspiration from John Durham Peters, we might say that if the first can be unbiased, the second can be discriminatory.

In this connection, there is no need to embrace the broadcast pessimist vision, with its lack of confidence in the present and the future of television, in order to agree about the crucial importance of the broadcasting survival in time. Narrowcast platforms have introduced an expanded variety of contents and choices that is not without merit (even though it comes at a variable economic and social cost). But there is no doubt that the broadcasting system has the unique prerogative to provide free universal access to television programming, in conditions that enable large and disparate audiences to come together and share viewing experiences.

It is worth pointing out that what makes such experiences peculiarly distinctive and socio-culturally relevant is not in itself the feature of coming together and sharing; it is rather the fact that broadcast television foster togetherness and sharedness *across* – not within – “the plurality of groups and interests that make up the society” (Katz, 2000:130), thus providing an arena, a forum (Newcomb and Hirsh, 1984) in which people meet and confront. Let us suppose, as a purely conjectural hypothesis, that at some point in time broadcasting were to be scaled down to a mere residual presence: in that case we should be seriously concerned at the disappearance of a symbolic space that has made it possible for public encounters to take place between the diverse components of the same collectivity.

Although besieged and undermined, this space still exists and holds up in a media environment where new powerful trends of potentially extreme segmentation are rapidly emerging and spreading, in the context and under the impact of what has come to be known (embraced in fact) as the “age of convergence” (Caldwell, 2004; Kackman and Binfield, 2010; Barbosa and Castro, 2014).

In this age, owing especially to the advent and growth of online platforms and the increasing number of available digital devices and services, the conditions of possibility have been created not only of unheard plenty of choice – which has not gone without its own rhetoric of liberation and control – but, even more important, of diversified practices of television access and viewing. Since these new practices take advantage of both time-shifting and place-shifting options enabled by digital technologies, they easily escape from the so-called *tyranny of the schedule* and from the monopoly of the television

screen, thus allowing for (much celebrated) *anytime-anywhere* customized patterns of media use.

It is interesting to observe how deeply predicated on disjunctures and disconnections may be patterns and trends that are deemed to epitomize the convergent era. *Television anytime-anywhere* is premised on the disengagement or in the words of Anthony Giddens (1991) *the disembedding* of television output from the temporal frame of the schedule and the spatial setting of the TV screen. Moreover, by making the television usable as a provider and repository of contents, to be accessed and watched at will *outside the box* on multiple platforms and screens at whatever time in whatever place, digital technologies pave the way for further temporal disjuncture on the reception side: as the act of viewing is no longer synchronized with that of other people who are watching the same programme at the same time, thereby losing the traditional characteristic of a collective appointment. To the *de-spatialised simultaneity* of traditional modes of television consumption we can now add the *de-spatialised asynchrony* of the emerging modes. Thus the conditions are created of an elective encounter, potentially unique at the moment it happens, between a programme *disembedded* from its proper context, and a viewer (who is) *isolated* while performing his or her own act of viewing. Not by chance, this trend towards an extremely individualized and customized mode of accessing and watching television, supported by a resonant, consumerist rhetoric of *choice*, has suggested definitions like as microcasting (Gillan, 2011) or even personcasting (Lotz, 2007); and has not surprisingly strengthened pessimistic and optimistic ideas that broadcast television is definitely coming to an end.

But again we should be wary of confusing condition of possibilities with determinants, trends with shifts, additions with substitutions. For conditions of possibility to be actualized, many societal, cultural, economic factors must come into play, well beyond the *technological magic*. And it remains to be seen whether emerging trends, embraced by enthusiastic early adopters, will pave the way to a new mainstream/long-term shifts or will remain a minority phenomenon, or a *situational* one: id est – as also Gillan suggests – a phenomenon mostly pertaining to the youth and young adulthood phases of the life-course. As for substitutions, “The new televisions ... – Paddy Scannel argues – do not displace the functions of the older television of the mid-twentieth century, but complement them” (Katz and Scannell, 2009: 229).

Furthermore, we should be looking for continuities, not just for breaks, between the old and the new. According to Toby Miller, for instance, “Time-shifting and platform choice are versions of what has long been the dominant norm – watching material produced and bought by television networks”⁶.

6. Posted on cstonline. tv, November 2011.

By the same token: the dystopian vision of an atomized audience made up of *monadic and nomadic viewers* (or viewers, if you prefer) is tempered with – if not contradicted by – diffused evidence that the desire and the practice of sharing media experiences remain crucial even in digital environment. Graeme Turner observes in this connection that “television seems designed, no matter what its platform of delivery, to generate new ways of being-together-while-apart” (Turner and Pertierra, 2013: 66). Nor the appeal of *appointment television* has vanished altogether, as it continues to have an impact – for instance – on fans’ practices, to the extent that watching television simultaneously gives viewers the chance and the pleasure to participate in on-line first-conversations on the show *as-it-airs*. As declared on Twitter website, “On-demand and online viewing are important options, but *the vast majority of the conversation around the show happens during the initial airing, in real-time*”⁷.

7. Available at <<https://dev.twitter.com/media/twitter-tv>> (accessed March 10, 2013).

Admittedly, shared and synchronous television experiences in the micro-cast environment have much restricted reach, as compared to the audience size for both broadcasting and narrowcasting. And size certainly matters, as Daniel Dayan reminds us making explicit that all the power of broadcasting “lies with the size of audiences invited to share” what is on offer (Dayan, 2009: 22). It is undeniable that the evolution of television towards systems of delivery and patterns of consumption increasingly fractioned and individualized has worked – in some locations more than others – to challenge and undermine this power.

However, the history of the medium has not unfolded along a disrupting *revolutionary road*; there have been breaks and continuities, gains and losses, adjustments and resistances, that have left broadcasting – again in some locations more than others – certainly not unscathed and unchanged, but not even defeated. Ultimately it is still with us, part and parcel of a heterogeneous media landscape, in which different old and new television formations that testify to the dynamic, transformative nature of the medium are simultaneously, although not universally, available. It’s a picture somewhat more complicate than the narrative of the end of television is able to render.

It seems to me that besides broadcast pessimism and digital optimism there may be space for a, moderate at least, *broadcast optimism*: an optimism predicated on the awareness that broadcasting remains unique and precious in its capacity to fulfill the promise of unconditional, universal access to television as a public good.

Which suggest me to conclude this article by rephrasing the famous quip of Mark Twain: “reports of the death of television have been greatly exaggerated”. ■

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