

CULTURAL IMAGES OF THE MEDIA

Pertti Alasuutari

The tragic death of Princess Diana in a car crash after being followed by photographers in Paris, on 30 August 1997, invoked questions about the way in which we habitually conceive of the media in everyday life. Throughout the world, people were furious at the photographers, who, by hunting pictures of Diana with her boyfriend Dodi Al Fayed, were commonly thought to be partly responsible for the fatal accident. We read or heard about that anger from the media, often also expressed by representatives of the media themselves. The media were self-reflective of their own role and position. Soon two camps were constructed: self-identified quality papers put the blame on the 'yellow press'. In many commentaries it was noted that the guilt could also be extended to the general international public, whose great interest in the private life of the beloved princess made the pictures of Diana so expensive that the photographers were ready to do whatever it took to get them. All in all, the accident probably made many people throughout the world conscious of the complicated role of the media.

Thus, when we are talking about the media we are in fact dealing with much more than press agencies, journalists, radio, television or newspapers; we are talking about a whole organization of social reality. We could not properly conceive of contemporary society and the world system without the role of the high-technology networks of mass and personal communication that bind people and places together, and are an essential part of business, politics, emotional and public life. In other words, the media are a tough object of knowledge to conceptualize. Yet in everyday life, most of the time the media are taken as massively given, without invoking them as an object of reflection. The media are only brought to discourse in the face of particular problems related to their role or functioning.

We could talk about a basic rule in the 'phenomenology of everyday life' according to which there has to be sufficient controversy over an issue or object of knowledge for it to become 'visible', to be constructed as a known

and named object. Second, it follows from that rule that the different ways in which the object is then discussed are relevant to the typical problems or controversies associated with the object in question; that is self-evident, because without those problems and controversies the object would never have been constructed in the first place.

Third, objects of knowledge in social reality – such as ‘the media’ – are typically constructed by making use of metaphors, that is, by paralleling them to well-known, easily understandable images borrowed from other spheres of life. Consequently, often an object of common knowledge can be understood by identifying the key metaphors invoked in making sense of it, and the discourses related to it.

The images we habitually use in discussing a topic such as the media are in many ways powerful, because the parallel drawn between an image and the present object of attention highlights aspects that could otherwise be missed, but such metaphors also guide perception. The imagery normally used may reflect old sensibilities, and might not speak to present experiences and problematics. Yet, in their clearness and concreteness key metaphors are often so powerful that they tend to lead new discussions in such a direction that they fit the old images.

In this chapter I will discuss the most common images of the media, and how they have been applied to especially radio and television. These images can be grouped into three sets. The first set of images employs the metaphor of a channel or a window, and evokes discussions about how transparent the media are, or how they distort the picture they convey of outer reality. The other set of old images utilizes the metaphor of a square. Within these images, the media can be seen either as a marketplace or as a forum. Finally the third, and most heterogeneous, set of images deals with individuals’ personal relationships with the media. Within it, the media may be compared, for instance, to a friend or to addictive drugs or stimulants. After first discussing the role of cultural imagery in general, I will discuss these images of the media. Then, I will discuss how these images have been applied to radio and television. Finally, I will round up the discussion by trying to explain the differences between the cultural images of radio and television.

Cultural images and routinized practices

As said, most of the time we take the media for granted. Daily life and social order are based on routinized, taken-for-granted lines of thought and action, and the media are part of this self-evident, unquestioned environment of modern life. As Paddy Scannell puts it, ‘people everywhere listen to radio and watch TV as part of the utterly familiar, normal things that they do on any normal day’ (1995: 4). In other words, most of the time we do not waste a single thought on the media as an object of knowledge in its

own right. We do not normally interact with, say, TV by first invoking this or that cultural image or frame within which to observe it, in order then to watch it. Instead, we proceed directly to the frames and images needed to make sense of and perhaps to comment on the particular programme – or the events taking place ‘out there’ that the programme tells us about.

However, although the particular cultural images of the media are only invoked in contexts where there is some kind of ‘metadiscussion’ about the media or media use, it would be a mistake and a simplification to assume that they do not have any role or importance outside the very instances where they are specifically addressed. The media are an essential part of our everyday life and social reality, and that is why they have a place in the overall ‘map’ people use in navigating in this more or less shared reality. Individual maps may more or less differ from each other, and when they do, people work out a shared understanding of what is going on, as especially ethnomethodological conversation analysis has pointed out. Working out such a common understanding does not mean that everything we assume about social reality is spelled out; that would be an all too philosophical and complicated (actually impossible) undertaking for all practical purposes of everyday life. We must bear in mind that the key cultural images of the media are also mostly taken for granted, and unproblematically provide us with the common ground on which basis we can talk about ‘the media’ as an object of knowledge.

Am I saying that people perceive the media through a shared mental map, which is most of the time taken for granted and therefore not made explicit? I suggest that the situation is more complicated than that. There are several repertoires or discourses people invoke when discussing the media at a meta level. Practically only social scientists theorize the media just for the sake of theorizing. Cultural images of the media circle around different problems attached to people’s media use, and in that sense we could say that none of them represents a shared map used in dealing with the media. Such maps are nowhere explicated, and the whole image of a complete ‘master map’ must be rejected. Instead, we could say that there are certain ‘landmarks’ to which people repeatedly refer when moving about in the terrain of modern life, with the media as an integral part of it.

Several of these landmarks of mediascape entail a moral aspect. For instance, how to ‘responsibly’ or ‘rationally’ behave as audience members, or what media contents are appropriate to different audience groups, such as children. In other words, images of the media are constructed in relation to individuals’ subject positions as citizens or audience members. Individuals may reject such implicit prescriptions or proscriptions, and when needed justify why they do so, or they may constitute themselves as moral subjects who follow certain normative rules in their media behaviour. To take an extreme example, the American Amish reject mass media altogether, and totally refrain from watching television (Kraybill and Olshan, 1994). To make the picture even more complicated, let me point out that such embedded moralities related to the images of the media may

have long ago been taken into account in individuals' media practices and become routinized and therefore not normally invoked, but again this doesn't mean that the cultural frame which accounts for such media routines has no importance.

Transparent and distorting media

During the presidential elections in Finland in 1994 one of the television channels asked people in the street what they thought about the public images of the presidential candidates. 'Have the media influenced your image of the candidates?', the interviewer asked them. Some individuals thought that they had, others said no. None of the interviewees nor the journalists pointed out how absurd the question actually was. Hardly any ordinary citizen would have any means to form an image of the candidates *outside* or irrespective of the media. Still the interviewees were able to regard it as a basically sensible question.

I suggest that the people interviewed could regard it as a sensible question by automatically separating two types of media coverage, or rather two perspectives of the media, from each other. These are two key images of the media.

The first image of the media is a 'weak' one. Within it, the media are equated with 'the world' or 'the news' itself. Over the years we had followed daily political events with the candidates involved: read about them in the newspapers or seen them on TV delivering speeches, negotiating or giving statements as politicians. Seen from this angle, we simply witness what is going on in politics and in the world generally; the media themselves are a self-evident, transparent 'extension of ourselves' (McLuhan, 1964), the technology that enables us to witness events which happen in far-away places. We could call it the link metaphor.

The second image of the media concentrates on the impact of the institution and technology of the media: how they may in various forms distort the picture we get from reality. It may be that not everything is told, or that the image we get is not truthful. To return to our example: during past years we had also seen or heard in the media things that have an image-building aspect. Even the way a candidate puts his or her views into words can be seen from that perspective, but especially personal interviews, knowledge or gossip about the candidate's private life are cases in point. There certainly was more of this kind of media coverage during the candidates' campaigns, although TV advertisements were not (yet) allowed in 1994. The people in the street who were asked about the effects of the media were supposed to make a difference between the 'hard facts' and the media-influenced 'image' of the candidates, although all information about the candidates came from the media. Let us call this the representation metaphor.

In practice these two images of the media blur into each other in many ways, because they both perceive the media as some kind of a channel to the world out there. Especially the image of the media as a representation, as a distorting channel, may at any moment be evoked to overrun the weaker image of the media as a link to the world at large. This is especially true when we consider the different subject positions with which the images provide the audience. Within the image of the media as a link, audience members are typically seen as more or less informed citizens, whose duty should be to keep themselves informed of what is going on, at least as regards politics and other hard news. On the other hand, following 'less important' events, such as sports or popular culture, may be considered as a waste of time, which could have been spent keeping oneself informed. This designation of certain events as 'less important', is often achieved by arguing that they in some ways distort audience members' world view. In other words, argumentation is borrowed from the representation metaphor.

Within the image of the media as a (potentially distorting) representation, typically audience members are assessed or criticized from the viewpoint of their abilities to be critical and doubtful of what they see or hear. As to the news, critical audience members should not rely on a single source, and in any case should assess the way in which an event is represented. As to fiction, critical audience members are supposed to assess how 'realistic' the events and characters are.

Within these two images, the subject position of the audience is more or less equated with that of a nation state's citizens. That is why there is a particular 'media policy' perspective to these images. Within it, citizens assess how appropriately the media function in a given nation state, and such assessments are used as justifications for demanding changes in the ownership, control and legislation of the media. In the case of fact reporting, news and documentary, the media are assessed as to how well they are able to educate the people, keep them informed, and help them form a good and many-sided picture of the world. As to fiction, the media are also seen to have a more or less successful role in not only entertaining people but giving them good models and values.

The media as a forum or a marketplace

The second set of images of the media can be traced back to two metaphoric usages of a square. Within these two images, the media can be seen either as a forum, *agora*, or as a marketplace.

When evoking these metaphors, discussants often appeal to the principle of 'freedom of speech', and to a 'free press' as its guarantee. In the case of newspapers, the image of the media as a forum typically refers to different political parties with their own newspapers or other forms of

communication, expressing their views and trying to win citizens as voters on their side. In this instance, newspapers may also be conceived as marketplaces of ideas and other interesting material; it can be thought that citizens buy or subscribe to those papers they find interesting and useful. The principle of freedom of speech is also extended to the realm of art and literature. For instance, Western countries have defended Salman Rushdie's 'artistic' right to write what he wants to in the name of the freedom of speech, whereas Iran seems to have approached it within the channel or window metaphor, arguing that Rushdie conveyed a false and insulting picture of Islam.

Within the electronic media and especially television this set of images has typically been seen in relation to opposing media policy views. Television has been seen either as a public forum or as a marketplace, each metaphor invoking different notions of the audience (cf. Ang, 1991: 26–32).

With the rise of electronic media, the ancient idea of the media as an open forum, as the 'public sphere' where people can express their own views on anything, became problematic. It is of course already true of printed media that not everyone can afford to establish their own newspaper to get their voice heard, but in the case of electronic media it has also been technically impossible. At the dawn of electronic media there were, in a single nation state, a limited number of available wavelength areas for broadcasting. Partly for that reason, partly for other reasons, as soon as radio transmission was invented, in most countries the state controlled radio and television, often in the form of a state monopoly. It has typically been argued that in this way freedom of speech is actually best secured. Thus the metaphor of the media as a forum or *agora* has been used to serve the ideology of public service broadcasting. It was reasoned that a democratically elected organ has to decide about the contents of public broadcasting, the ideal being that the audience-as-public get what they need as citizens: high-quality programming and important information. Public service programming ideology adopted a public educational function. A prime task of state-owned broadcasting was to ensure that news is impartial and the national audience are, or become, educated citizens and informed voters.

The discourse justifying commercial television, on the other hand, sees the media as a marketplace and the audience as market. Within this metaphor, the different channels and programmes are presented as products that the viewers or listeners are free to choose from as 'customers'. In that sense, 'freedom of choice' comes to the fore instead of 'freedom of speech', but it is typically argued that in the system of commercial broadcasting the audience eventually get what they want by 'voting' with their remote controls.

Yet, these two opposing images of the media share certain premises. Whether it is audience-as-public or audience-as-market, whether viewers or listeners are conceived as members in a democratic meeting or as

customers choosing between different programmes, in both cases it is considered their business to view or listen to what they like or to draw their own conclusions from it: the voter or the customer is king.

Entertaining and addictive media

There is also a third set of media images, which deals with the media in individuals' lives. They are thought to affect people's lives and personalities by informing, entertaining, and by being a factor in interpersonal relationships within domestic settings. For instance, they can be thought to reflect power relations within the family (Morley, 1986), or be likened to other electric appliances and communication and information technologies in the home (Gray, 1992; Silverstone, 1991, 1994; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992; Silverstone et al., 1991; Spigel, 1992).

This set of images is quite heterogeneous. As will be seen in the following sections, where I discuss the images of radio and television in the light of qualitative interview studies, people may resort to a plethora of metaphors. The imagery we use to make sense of our experience is very much dependent on a context, and in that sense there is hardly any limit to the images we may employ.

However, many of the images used in this instance address the effects of the media on individuals. It may, for instance, be feared that individuals lose their sense of reality, that is, their ability to see the difference between real life and the imaginary world of TV programmes (Alasuutari, 1992). Thus, the metaphor of the media as a distorting representation is invoked to discuss their psychological effects. In this context, the media may also be likened to addictive drugs to discuss individuals' autonomy as media users (Demers, 1989; Spigel, 1992: 51–3).

The invisible radio

When considering the imagery of the media outlined above, it seems that radio is most often perceived within the image of the media as a link, an extra sense or an extension of ourselves through which we are in immediate contact with the world at large. Of course radio is not nearly the only, hardly even the most important, medium through which we get our daily information about the news of the world, but it is the prime example of our ever-present, self-evident contact with the rest of the world. When listening to or hearing a radio broadcast we seldom conceive of ourselves as doing anything else than 'staying tuned' to events in other places. We do not think that we are being 'exposed' to influences, although we may not like some of the music 'they' play out there.

Because of this image of hearing rather than being addressed 'eye to eye' as an audience member, people do not often notice that they are indeed listening to the radio. This observation of the invisible role of radio, made repeatedly in the history of scarce radio research (Lewis and Booth 1989; McIlwraith and Schallow, 1983; Mendelsohn, 1964), also emerged very strongly in a study of radio listening I made some years ago (Alasuutari, 1997).¹ When people were asked how much they listen to the radio, many of them said that they listen to it reasonably little.

Q: How much do you usually listen to radio?

A: Well every now and then, it depends. When I'm for instance driving my car I listen to it. And, erm, sometimes, when I happen to be at home then I also listen. But not very much anyway.

Q: How much do you usually listen to radio?

A: Well, in the morning [...] as I'm coming to school and [...] That's about it, and always when I'm driving a car.

Q: How many radios do you have at home?

A: [...] Four.

Q: Is there a [...] do you have a room of your own?

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Is there a radio?

A: Yes.

In many interviews people at first said that they hardly ever listen to the radio, but when the subject was discussed in more detail it turned out that there are several daily occasions in their everyday life when the radio is to be heard. To use Paul Willis's (1978) term, it really seems that radio does not belong to the 'cultural field' of ordinary people; it is not one of the objects or artefacts that have particular symbolic meaning and significance for them. Listening to the radio mostly goes routinely unnoticed.

Why is that so? Why is it that especially radio has that invisible character? Is it because it is perceived within the image of a link, a transparent channel that simply transmits information to us about the world at large, without in any way distorting the picture we get? The study results suggest interesting features about the way radio is typically used as a medium, and the underlying image of radio.

In the study, the particular role of radio was approached by answering why those doing manual work listen to the radio more than others – a finding that has been reported several times in Finnish radio listening statistics (Ruohomaa, 1991; Sarkkinen, 1992). The same finding could be made from my 'mini-sample' of 48 interviewees. In my data, farmers and factory workers held first places. Of the farmers, 85 per cent, and of factory workers, 64 per cent are 'heavy' or 'fairly heavy' radio listeners. As to the proportions of heavy users, the factory workers were the leading occupation.

This finding could be explained by the fact that among these 'heavy

radio user' occupations, people typically had a lot of long uninterrupted listening sessions. That, in turn, depends on the listening context. When going to work by car, say, radio listening does not last very long. On the other hand, at work and at home listening may last several hours. The individuals for whom it is possible and who are in the habit of listening to the radio in the morning and at work are the ones whose total listening time will be substantial, because those are often long listening occasions.

To be able to listen to the radio all the time at work requires a particular kind of occupation. It can be said that mechanical tasks enable simultaneous radio listening, whereas tasks that require an individual's full attention prevent it. That is why individuals' total amount of radio listening is correlated with their occupation and, more precisely, with the nature of their work. Manual work is usually more suited to simultaneous radio listening than mental work.

As a side activity we do not pay too much attention to the radio. In that sense it is conceived as a transparent channel: we may pay attention to what we hear on the radio (news), not to the medium itself.

But there are also other explanations as to why the radio is left unnoticed. One is that radio listening as a side activity is socially acceptable, even desirable, because the time spent listening to the radio while doing something else at the same time does not prevent oneself from being active. On the contrary, we could say that it is used to compensate for insufficient mental activity, to provide use for the mental capacities left unemployed by the task at hand. It may support the self-image of an active citizen who, even when being 'held up' by performing a routine task, is also mentally active by keeping up with what is going on out there or by simply listening to what kind of music 'they' are playing.

On a more general level it can be said that by the use of radio we manipulate our mental activity, both the activity level and the content and direction of our attention. We may 'open up' a channel for one of our senses, hearing, in a situation where hearing is not needed to accomplish the task we are engaged in. We may also 'shut down' voices we find uninteresting, disturbing or irritating. By choosing to concentrate on a programme, we may be highly active, while at the same time performing a dull task, such as washing the dishes. The channel and programme may be selected very carefully to adjust one's activity to the preferred level. When performing a task that requires much concentration, we may choose an easy-listening music channel or turn off the radio altogether. In the interviews it turned out that the proportion of music listening is biggest among the descriptions of car listening. On the other hand, less demanding tasks or situations enable and favour speech programmes. At the other end of the continuum we have programmes such as radio drama which require full attention. In the interviews people typically report of listening to such programmes during holidays or weekends.

Adjusting one's activity to the preferred level may also mean that radio is a surrogate friend, a companion during one's lonely moments. By selecting

the right kind of channel or record we may also manipulate our emotions (see also Tortzen, 1992a, 1992b). We may tune our radio set to a channel that corresponds to our frame of mind, thus enforcing or stabilizing it, but we may also get attuned to a different emotional state by selecting a suitable channel or record. A woman, age 24, working as an interviewer for a market research company, put it this way:

- Q: What are the situations in which you play a record instead of listening to radio?
 A: Usually if I have guests or if I get a certain frame of mind – that is, if I'm sad or very happy or something. Or you want to get the feeling more intense, so you know what to do it with when you have records. On the radio you do not necessarily get just what you want.

Another woman, a 28-year-old high school music teacher, uses radio in a similar fashion:

- Q: Do you ever listen to the music during the weekends or more than on weekdays?
 A: Yes, more actually. During Saturday evenings and if I'm going out to have fun I may turn on the radio, you know! *[laughter]*
 Q: When was the last time you went and turned on the radio?
 A: It must have been two months ago *[laughter]*.
 Q: You said you didn't have the channels in that [preset] [. . .]
 A: No [. . .]
 Q: How have you found them then?
 A: Well I just search for a kind of groovy music that would tune me up to the beat of the city already at home.
 Q: So you just keep searching for a suitable channel?
 A: Yeah.
 Q: How long do you listen to it before going out?
 A: Well, let's say I might do my make up for an hour or so and have some white wine *[laughter]*.

Within this discourse of radio use, radio is seen as a sort of product or substance. It is used as a *mind-altering device* that could be compared to drugs as mind-altering substances. However, the way it is spoken of as a device does not suggest that the users would be concerned about becoming addicted to it. It parallels drugs only in that people use it for particular purposes; the fear of addiction, the image of the subject being carried away by the drug, is missing. The subject is in full control of its use.

When radio is seen as a product in that way, it fits the image of a product or products being selected by consumers. In that sense, radio is invisible or unproblematic because radio channels are seen as the market from which consumers may choose the kind of products that fit their frame of mind at any particular time; or they may choose not to listen to it at all.

The morally loaded imagery of television

If we compare the cultural image of television to that of radio, the difference is striking in many respects. Certainly, television – as part of contemporary ‘mediascape’ – may also be taken for granted in many instances of everyday life, but it is much more of a topic. That is why TV is researched so much more than radio or newspapers. TV can be and is repeatedly articulated within many contradictions characterizing our modern cultures, and in that sense the cultural image of TV is morally loaded.

Let me take an example. When, some years ago, I conducted a study in which people were asked about their TV viewing habits and programme choices (Alasuutari, 1992), it immediately struck me how moral the topic was. There were very few programmes that people freely and plainly said they like to watch. With the exception of the evening news and other current affairs programmes, people seemed to feel a compelling need to explain, defend and justify their viewing habits. Ingunn Hagen (1992, 1994a, 1994b) came across the same phenomenon from the opposite direction. When she studied *Dagsrevyen*, the main TV news programme of the Norwegian public broadcasting corporation, she found that people tended to give an explanation if they for some reason hadn’t watched it.

Although the moral aspect of giving an account of one’s viewing habits found in those two studies could be made less outstanding by noting that justifications are a routine aspect of ordinary conversations (Heritage, 1984; Nofsinger, 1991), it is still true that television has raised, and continues to raise, strong emotions and heated disputes in many instances and several cultures. For instance, when television came to Finland, the Laestadians, one of the Finnish Protestant revivalist movements, banned it, and maintained the total ban until the 1980s (Melkas, 1985). Similarly, as mentioned above, the American Amish, who are famous for their critical attitude toward modernization, reject mass media, especially television (Kraybill and Olshan, 1994).

Although the Laestadians and Amish are extreme examples, in certain respects they reflect the attitudes of the general public, especially of the upper middle class, who especially in previous decades were critical of mass culture and generally scorned television series. In previous decades critical discussion of television revolved around commercial television and mass entertainment, but now also public television is under fire for its elitist paternalism (Ang, 1991).

In these discussions, there are several images which frame television as a problem. Interestingly, especially in the case of such religious groups as the Laestadians and the Amish, even the ‘weak image’ of television as a link or as an extra sense that connects us to the rest of the world may be framed as a problem. These groups are not critical of television in the name of truth, by arguing that it would somehow distort the picture we get

of the world. They are simply critical of all these 'worldly' things that television brings to our homes, and want to protect themselves from them. As Kraybill (1994) puts it, the Amish community want to restrict their members', especially their children's, consciousness, and the ban on television, as well as on higher education, stems from that attempt.

Amish children do not study science or critical thinking, nor are they exposed to the relativity and diversity so pervasive in higher education today. The Amish rejection of mass media, especially television, severely limits their exposure to the smorgasbord of modern values. The tight plausibility structure in the Amish community thus helps to hold the forces of plurality at bay. (Kraybill, 1994: 27)

This may again appear as an exceptional case, but in fact a great deal of discussion about television deals with the ways in which and the degrees to which children or other audience groups should be protected from seeing and hearing things that may harm or upset them. It is, for instance, argued that in homes there should be some kind of 'parental mediation' of television viewing, and at the higher level there are laws that censor what can be shown to the general public. The truthfulness of possibly improper programme contents is not the point in this discourse; it is just the contention that showing certain things on TV may shock, offend or harm people.

On the other hand, a great deal of moral concern surrounding television viewing is also articulated with the cultural image of TV as a distorting representation, albeit the underlying image of the 'true truth' is a very fussy one. Often, the (distorting) representation image is invoked when people criticize or justify TV programmes for their (lack of) realism.

For instance, in a study I made (Alasuutari, 1992), when interviewees gave accounts for their viewing habits they often referred to realism. Let me take direct quotations as an example:

Q: Are any of these programmes that you no longer watch?

A: There's plenty, what were they called these [. . .] well, you know, *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest* and what have you [. . .] that sort of thing I just can't watch them any more.

Q: What's wrong with them, why these?

A: Well somehow they're just, they're so far removed from the ordinary world even more than these violence things, I mean really [*laughter*] [. . .] even the wife no longer watches them.

Q: Erm, what would you say are the bad sides about the serial.

A: Er, it's [. . .] what would I say, well I mean it's all so unbelievable everything, isn't it? It can't really be true, can it? I mean if you look out there in the real world.

Analysis of realism was a central form in which especially watching fictitious programmes was discussed, but people depicted realism in many

ways. Ang (1985) proposes a distinction between two ways of understanding the realism of the programme: an empiricist and an emotional concept of realism. In the empiricist conception of realism the focus is on whether the representation corresponds to external reality. In the emotional conception the fictional setting of the denotative level of the story is disregarded, and the focus is on whether the characters, models of action, and conflict situations appearing in the story are 'identifiable', that is, whether they are believable within the context of one's own life-experiences.

In my qualitative interview data there were examples of quotations that could fit both of these types. For instance, some of the people who watched action serials explained this by reference to their empirical realism. They pointed out that in spite of all the violence the world that is depicted in action serials or action films is rather realistic: the real world *is* violent. There were also examples of justifying TV viewing on the basis of an emotional conception of realism. In these cases it was pointed out that there is a clear logic of action in TV serials and that the underlying motives of action are recognizable.

In addition to those two ways of talking about realism, there were cases that should perhaps more appropriately be described as references to 'technical realism'. While the content of a programme was not considered to give a truthful representation of reality, the interviewees assessed whether the stunts performed in it could be technically possible.

However, the main reason the interviewees in this study passed a negative judgement on especially soap operas stemmed from still another notion of realism. Within this frame the criticism of 'unrealistic' programmes – and the respondents' willingness to excuse themselves for watching them – is due to their failure to give a true representation of what life is really like for ordinary people. This involves a certain presupposition of what is regarded as the chief function of fictional stories: they should provide ethically sound models of life. This requirement of realism could be described as *ethical realism*.

Well yes of course I think that very often the value system in these programmes is not necessarily suitable for children, for a growing child, it's not a model you'd like them to follow. No[. . .] I mean I've seen enough of *Dallas*, I've earlier seen the odd episode and these other series, and I think the model they provide is just not good enough.

Within this frame, a programme like *Dallas* is not criticized because the critic would argue that the portrait it gives of the lives of rich people in America is not truthful. From the critic's viewpoint, that may or may not be true, but he or she is concerned about the models of life that are conveyed through TV programmes. By saying that a programme – or a movie or a novel – is 'realistic' in this sense, the speaker in fact says that it portrays a milieu that is familiar to ordinary people (a form of 'everyday life realism'), and tells a story which has an acceptable morale.

On the basis of the Finnish interviewees' attitudes, it seemed that, to be 'ethically realistic', programmes should not give an overly romantic picture of life. Second, fictional stories should not lead us into believing that life is too easy. In real life we must be prepared for unhappy endings. Fictional programmes that are considered realistic are such that describe modest, simple life. In this emphasis on the hardness and harshness of everyday life there are certain traces of Protestant religion and its puritanism. The world that provides an acceptable model for life is often found in films that portray old country life. It is also an ethical principle of the Finnish mode of life to stress that life is hard, because that is the best way to avoid disappointments. Life is hard, and if it's not, it's not good for your character seems to be the guiding line.

In its details my study, of course, reflects Finnish sensibilities and structures of feeling, but I suggest that the various ways in which people invoke the image of television as a channel – a link or representation – are not peculiar only to the Finnish case. When talking about 'realistic' or 'unrealistic' programmes, people imply a 'reality' somewhere else, but often that implied reality is infused with ideals: how reality should be or how people should lead their lives rather than how things are.²

In that sense it could be argued that the channel image is mixed with the image of the media as a forum. Fictitious programmes, in particular, are assessed from the viewpoint of their 'message': what opinions the directors or producers express or what lessons they give to the public. Because the 'air time' is limited and because TV is thought to be a politically influential medium and a powerful forum of public education, governments and pressure groups often attempt to influence programme contents. For instance, in American television there are many regulations about the representation of minorities as characters in television serials.

It might even be argued that to refer to realism as a criterion of assessment in fiction is a way of legitimating a moral judgement about a programme. In our contemporary 'emotivist culture' (MacIntyre, 1985; Wilson, 1993) it is commonly agreed that moral arguments are rationally interminable. However, since modern people want to build their views on solid facts, or at least present them in that way, they 'borrow' the distorting channel frame to argue that a programme they dislike is not 'realistic'.

The time people spend (or waste) by watching television is another ground for deeming it problematic and thus treating TV viewing as a topic. This is again intertwined with programme contents and thus with other cultural images of the media, but in this case the main image is TV as a device or substance. When reflecting on TV viewing from this viewpoint, people parallel television to other domestic appliances or utensils. Watching television is simply something that can be done instead of or simultaneously with other activities or chores.

For instance, in my qualitative interview study on TV viewing discussed above, several interviewees accounted for watching 'lowbrow' programmes, in particular, by explaining or self-diagnosing the reason why

they watch something they themselves deem silly or a waste of time. Modern culture and cultural citizenship of modern nation states values individuals being active and spending their time usefully, such as doing household chores, keeping up with the news or educating themselves. However, relaxation as a counterbalance to work stress as a way to take care of oneself is a 'respectable' justification for doing something that does not seem to be functional at the outset, and that is how many people explained watching 'silly' series. After a hard week's work, a Friday series, perhaps enjoyed with some wine, is perfect because when watching it 'you don't have to think about anything'.

In these instances, the act of watching television is paralleled with alternative or complementary substances such as alcohol. In that sense, it differs from the way in which radio is paralleled with stimulants. People often talk about radio listening as a way to stay awake and active, or to raise their activity level, but television watching is, at least in these instances, talked about as a relaxant. Of course watching television may be and is used to stay awake, but television is more effective as a relaxant because it prevents oneself from doing much else. Indeed, it is often used to sit back and relax, to cool off and to get one's thoughts away from something they were working on. In that sense, radio could be compared to coffee and television to an alcoholic drink. Modern culture approves of coffee and prizes action, but we have an uneasy relation to alcoholic drinks and idleness or laziness. The discussion and fears of television addiction also stem from using the metaphor of psychoactive drugs to conceive of the media.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the way in which key cultural images of the media organize and guide public discussions and personal conceptions of the role of electronically mediated communication in contemporary society and the global system. The notion of 'media' itself can be seen as a construction 'put together' from those metaphoric images and the discourses around them.

One of the problems with these cultural images is that the sheer apparent concreteness of the metaphors employed guides reflective consciousness and leads public discussion easily back to old positions. For instance, in the Diana car crash discussion, the guilt hanging on the photographers and partly on the general public was soon levelled at the driver, who turned out to have been drunk. Already by the following week the British yellow press was able to launch a moral crusade against the Queen and the Royal Family for not mourning enough – or in fact not showing their grief publicly in media appearances. Once again, mediated communication was conceived as an object paralleled to objects in the physical

world. That is typical of what Pollner (1987) calls 'mundane reason': we always conceive of a world as a 'thing' which is independent of the mode and manner in which it is explicated. For that reason alone the idea of us all being involved in, say, what happens to public figures, and even in the whole construction of them as public figures, does not so easily become part of public discourse.

Yet, cultural images are not eternal. Along with social changes, we come up with new metaphors and images by which to conceive of social reality. In fact social changes are always also, and can be triggered by, changes in key cultural images and discourses. I suggest that the comparison between the cultural images of radio and television illuminates that point.

One of the problems with those who would have been interested in radio research during recent decades has been that – although radio has preserved a role as one of the media in people's lives – academic media research has mainly been interested in television. The reasons for that tell us a lot about mass communication and media research in recent decades, and may give us some hints about future changes.

As in recent years several communication studies journals have published special issues on radio research, the editors have tried to address their public and the main concerns of media research by assuring their readers that – contrary to the common conception about radio as the 'forgotten medium' – radio is important. As the preface to the special 'forgotten medium' issue of *Media Studies Journal* (Summer 1993) puts it, 'a close look at radio demonstrates its vitality, its economic, political and social importance, as well as its staying power in the communication field' (Anonymous, 1993: xi).

As sympathetic and justified as such assurances are, by justifying radio research within the standard media studies political reality, they poorly capture the cultural place of radio in individuals' everyday life.³ Radio is commonly perceived – or rather taken for granted – within the image of the media as a link to the world. That is why it has rarely been seen as a problem, and worthy of social research that has circled around the images of the forum or marketplace or a potentially distorting representation.

However, I argue that radio shows the future of television, and that all media are becoming radio-like. Just consider breakfast television, MTV or CNN. An ever-greater share of television viewing has become radio-like, a side activity amidst other activities going on in the household, at work or other places. A growing number of television or multimedia sets per household also means that watching television is less often a joint family activity. As a consequence, individual family members less often need to justify their programme choices to others. Using – or rather being linked to – the media will become less often a topic.

Moreover, the future mediascape will be so full of potential channels through which people can find news, information and entertainment that nation states can ever less plan and control programme output. Thus public discourse will be less centred on the discourse of distorting

representation or that of audience-as-citizens, and that will also dampen the use of its counterpart configuration of audience-as-market as a critique against commercial broadcasting. More often, as media users, people will be seen simply as consumers, choosing from products and services often also sponsored by advertisers.

The present developments of our mediascape also are reflected in media studies. A turn is evident from media politics to identity politics and to more psychological problem-settings. No matter what the form in which fiction – serials, films or theatre – is consumed or how the programme output is decided, narratives always address morals and personhood (MacIntyre, 1985), and that is one of the reasons why qualitative media studies has turned largely away from fact to fiction. Besides, fiction requires more attention from the audience, and that is why it may be addressed as a time-using problem, for instance, within the addiction framework. Using computers, especially playing computer games, also may be approached from this viewpoint. And who knows, maybe a turn away from ‘the media’ to ‘the audiences’ (whose nature as a construction has already been problematized, e.g. Allor, 1988; Ang, 1989; Bird, 1992; Radway, 1988) may lead to new images of mediated communication.

Notes

1. It was based on 48 qualitative interviews, which were then transcribed. The main idea was to ‘collect’ detailed descriptions of individuals’ radio listening situations. The interviewees were asked to describe what time it was; where it was; what else were they doing; whether there were others present; whether anyone commented on anything on the radio; whether their other activities disturbed their concentration on what was on; whether they remembered what the programme was and what was said or what records they were playing; what channel it was, and so on.

2. This infusion of realism with morality has a long history. Aristotle and the Greeks were already concerned with the ‘double difficulty’ of drama and poetry. On the one hand, it was emphasized that the poet is a moral teacher whose work must fulfil a moral purpose. Others, on the other hand, took the position that art’s function is the revelation of reality (Carlson, 1986: 15–16).

3. Scannell puts it this way:

The only reality that media studies knows is a political reality, set in a field of discourse that – as it would say – mobilizes concepts of power, struggle, conflict, ideology. It has great difficulty with any idea of ordinary *unpolitical* daily life, and its everyday concerns and enjoyments. Since for the politically minded all things are political – and what is not is either marginal or incorrectly understood – it follows that the only *interesting* questions about the media are political. (1996: 4)

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