

HARTLEY, J. *Television Truths*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
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Television Truths

In *Television Truths*, John Hartley rigorously analyses television culture and suggests that academic studies be overhauled to boost their prestige and address the changes the media is undergoing. According to the author, “television truths” are “persuasive, powerful and penetrating” (p. 7) and fulfil several functions in public and private life, which range from legitimating actions of war, businesses and the public administration to influencing private behaviour.

Hartley is a lecturer at the Queensland University of Technology and the Australian National University and, in 2001, was appointed to the Australian Academy of the Arts. Hartley previously taught and conducted research at a number of British universities. He is considered one of the greatest scholars in the epistemology of television, popular culture and cultural studies and has written distinguished works such as *Creative Industries* (2005), on the political, social and economic function of cities, companies and creative economies, *A Short History of Cultural Studies* (2003) and the now classic *Uses of Television* (1999).

The author argues that we have all become experts as well as critics, and not just of programmes, genres and the stars that fill the small screen but of the production system as well. However, the author claims that academic studies on television are undergoing an epistemological crisis and finding themselves sidelined from the prevailing discourse. Hartley points out that scholars who voice their views on television in the media often come from areas as diverse as psychology, marketing, political economics, paediatrics and criminology and devote themselves exclusively to denigrating content in most cases. However, Hartley believes that academic studies on television should shun an essentially negative approach, since the field generates media knowledge with profound cultural and political implications. In this sense, television studies understood as a “philosophy of popular reality” (p. 8) have a great deal to say not only about the medium, but also about education, politics (the relationship with the consumer-citi-

zen), creativity and the conception of society.

The book is divided into four parts. The first (*Is TV True?*) addresses the bases of knowledge and interpretation of the medium and shows how new paradigms associated with modernity are affecting contemporary thought, while it analyses television’s historical evolution in a global environment. Part two (*Is TV a Polity?*) considers the relationship between the audiovisual medium and the audience within the context of notions of mediatised citizenship and the consumer-citizen. Part three (*Is TV Beautiful?*) examines television content through examples of live TV, reality shows and sporting events coverage. Part four (*Metaphysics of TV*) offers a metaphysical point of view. Hartley contends that academic literature has neglected audiovisual historiography and he reformulates a method that allows us to investigate the broadcasting industry’s evolution, in this case, focusing on Australia. Lastly, the author puts forward a proposal for television studies in university education in the midst of the age of democratised media and “distributed truth”, in which user-generated content reconnects creative, critical and communicative aspects.

The burden of meaning in the chain of value in television production has now shifted from the creator/producer to the audience, who is the one that certifies a programme’s success through ratings, surveys, polls and messages in a kind of “democratainment” that satisfies consumers and voters (pp. 30-32). Hartley conceptualises the global dimensions of several phenomena that had previously only been experienced in the local or national arena. In this sense, he describes in detail how the coverage of floods in Asia during the December 2004 tsunami was an example of the globalisation of disaster, in which the global system of capturing and exchanging of images, broadcasting networks and the audience’s response was mobilised for the public good (pp. 70-73).

The book devotes two chapters to reality shows as a continuously mutating format capable of interpreting anything that may come up and pays special attention to programmes such as *Supermodel*, *The Eurovision Festival*, *American Idol* and *Celebrity Big Brother*, in which the audience’s plebiscite

becomes a response to the challenge of consumer activism and a way to reform democracy in the creative industry. Hartley contends that *Celebrity Big Brother* is a worthy successor to Shakespeare's dramas, although the interpretation of what goes on in the house ranges beyond the meaning of the events and obeys the viewers', bloggers' and voters' judgements, whereby privacy becomes public property in which anybody can traffic.

Most of the arguments in the book's final chapter advocate overhauling communication studies. With the internet's appearance, all users have become potential producers of multimedia contents. Thanks to the computer screen interface, television spaces are integrated into online services and the offer is becoming synergic and compulsive. Thus, television, which is increasingly personalised and interactive, appeals to one's own experience. The author emphasises four areas of research: a) technical: convergence, integration and interactivity; b) policy: the new economy, the Information Society and creative industries; c) employment: the massive change in kinds of jobs in small companies and service providers and d) consumers: the creation of content and innovation promoted by users and social communities. Although corporate stakeholders are still powerful players, the time is ripe for innovative companies supported by values such as research, interdisciplinarity, internationality and integration (pp. 256-260).

In short, Hartley's work commendably provides enough examples and proposals to accompany and clarify his theses in a sprightly, rigorous manner, making this book a must-read for those interested in studying the medium of television.