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Advertising Television: Television Discourses and Post-War British Communities, 1945-1955

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Introduction

This study will use advertisements by television manufacturers to examine the discourses between consumers and producers of the new medium during the first decade after World War II. In particular, it will emphasize how television-centred debates and discussions reflected larger concerns stemming from the new social and cultural landscape of post-war Britain. Post-war British consumers encountered television in a variety of ways, including through the discourses surrounding the new medium in media coverage and advertisements. At the same time, the accelerated growth of home- and car-ownership, combined with the rise of domestic appliances, fundamentally altered the population's relationship to public and private spaces, as well as with each other. The relocation of both leisure and domestic tasks within the home severed traditional social networks for many consumers and reconfigured social relationships for others. The new emphasis on the home as the focal point of British society and culture represented the changing relationship between people and their communities.

Television's central role in these changes makes it a valuable tool for historians. Television was unique in that it offered to bring public experiences into the home. It could replace the experience of going to a movie or play by altering the venue of reception from the cinema or theatre to the living room. It accomplished the same

thing with parades, royal ceremonies, and sporting events. Thus, while actually reinforcing the physical separation encouraged by demographic shifts in British society, television allowed those within the home to participate vicariously in many public events that in reality, they could not attend. It also became part of a shared experience for those watching the same program as a single audience; even in this early period, virtual communities of viewers could number into the millions. In this sense, television was a paradox, both reinforcing the individuality and isolation that worried many suburban critics, while offering to bring disparate families together through the introduction of shared public experiences into the private spaces of the home. An examination of how consumers and television manufacturers incorporated debates over social and cultural changes into television discourses reveals the importance of the new medium as both a reflection of, and an influence on, larger issues in post-war British communities.

Historiography – A Note on Sources and Chronology

Historians have often used television as a reflection of British society. However, a narrow focus on programming presents a particular perspective on television's usefulness as a historical tool, especially in terms of consumer perspectives. Scholars have used television as a lens through which to view the cultural and social changes occurring within Great Britain in the post-war era, producing many fascinating studies that provide insight into television's relationship to shifting cultural attitudes. Historians have examined how television programmes both reflected and challenged gender roles, the position of minority populations in society, and discussions of juvenile delinquency, among a host of other topics. However, these studies are almost exclusively focused on television broadcasting and the

decisions, debates, and reactions to programming. The history of British television is thus a history of institutions like the BBC and ITV, as well as of the government agencies and committees that regulated them. It is a history of genres, including comedy and news, and it is a history of events like coronations and royal weddings. It is, in essence, a history of what was shown *on* television, but not a history of television itself. Since the programmes themselves were carefully selected by the cultural elites in control of broadcasts, they have limited value in assessing the attitudes of audiences. Rather, the reliance on programming sources has resulted in an almost exclusive focus on the producers of television culture, leaving the voice of the consumer largely unheard.

Historians have also shown a hesitation to discuss the very earliest post-war television culture, namely because television saw relatively slow and localized growth during the late 1940s. Yet the first few years following the end of World War II were crucial to the ways in which British consumers conceived of, discussed, and debated how televisions would be incorporated into society. Even though saturation levels remained fairly low and localized in the late 1940s, television's impact was anything but small. The idea of television as a new and exciting medium for information, education, and entertainment was popular even before the war ended, and consumers as well as industry executives discussed and debated television's undecided and changing role in British society and culture. These discourses both shaped and reflected the hopes and fears of British consumers, who saw television as a symbol of the country's ingenuity and industrial future.

Alternative, non-programming sources offer valuable opportunities to explore the consumer perspective in television history. From media coverage of the expanding television service to

advice columns in women's weeklies discussing how to incorporate the new technology into the home, British consumers encountered television long before they purchased one. The ways in which potential buyers conceived of, discussed, and debated television not only offers valuable information about the consumer perspective in the earliest stages of television's ascendancy, it also demonstrates television's ability to reflect larger changes occurring within British communities.

One valuable source of insight into the relationship between consumers and producers of television can be found in the advertisements for the new technology. Television manufacturers had to sell the product as a medium before programme directors could sell the content that would be aired over it. The ways in which advertisers made appeals to the public are important, because they often reflected the attitudes of potential buyers. American television historian Lynn Spigel argues that 'advertising adopts the voice of an imaginary consumer—it must speak from his or her point of view—even if that point of view is at odds with the immediate goals of the sales effort' This type of research offers a fundamentally different approach than the study of programming, since advertisers were forced to more clearly recognize and reflect the hopes and concerns of their customers. These advertisements, which appeared daily in newspapers and magazines with wide readership throughout Great Britain, represent some of the earliest negotiations between producers and consumers of television sets. The debates over how the new medium would be incorporated into the home, including its influences on community and neighbourhood relationships, shaped these advertisements and often directly confronted critical assessments of television while capitalizing on the hopes for the medium's ability to enrich the lives of its owners.

This paper will utilize a selection of these advertisements to demonstrate both the value of non-programming sources to television histories as well as television's role in the changing nature of post-war British communities. It will show that both consumers and producers were aware of the technology's impact on old and new social networks, helping to reinforce the separation between home and public life while simultaneously helping viewers forge new, and sometimes virtual, links between themselves and their real and imagined communities.

Television, Suburban Culture, and Changing British Communities

Television's rise both influenced and reflected the general reorientation of leisure, and culture in general, toward the home. Although many of these changes had begun in the interwar period, World War II accelerated the processes that resulted in significant social and cultural changes. Suburbanization, encouraged by automobiles, domestic appliances, and indeed television, meant that traditional social networks and urban leisure activities were increasingly separated from the privacy of the home. The growth of television was both a cause and result of declines in other, more public, forms of entertainment. Both manufacturers and consumers were aware of these trends and incorporated discourses about television into existing debates about the changing nature of British community life.

The new emphasis on the home in British culture resulted in advertising focused on television's effects on families. The themes of family togetherness and parental authority, which were subjects that caused a great deal of debate in the post-war world, became central to advertising strategies. As manufacturers recognized the anxieties

over television's impact on family life, they highlighted the medium's ability to foster family relationships into their ads. For example, an English Electric ad noted that 'perhaps mother's old-fashioned...she's glad to see the family stay at home more nowadays' (*Punch* 29 August, 1951, p. xi). Similarly, in a different ad from the same series that focuses on daughter 'Pamela,' the social interactions of families are important once again. The ad claims that 'she likes going out to see her friends' television' and 'she likes having her friends "look in" even more' (*Punch* 25 July, 1951, p. ix). The emphasis here on the relatively safe type of recreation offered by television and its ability to keep families together, an important selling point during this more home-centred period. Television also caused fundamental shifts in consumer relationships with more established forms of entertainment. Television's relationship to the cinema is particularly interesting, since the new medium directly, and negatively, affected cinema profits and attendance. 1946 was the all-time statistical high point for British cinema attendance and was a popular form of leisure, especially younger audiences. However, the growing popularity of television resulted in a sharp decline in ticket sales that continued over the next few decades. Although cinema remained popular during the 1950s, the rapid rise of televisions resulted in a reorientation of leisure activity from public to private spaces, which was mirrored in similar, though not as drastic, declines in attendance at other public places like football league matches.

Some of the earliest advertisements for television sought to link the new technology to the experience of theatre-going and motion pictures, reflecting the shifting attitudes about home- versus public-based leisure activities. A 1944 ad for Ecko Television, for example, showed a simple caption reading 'A peep into the future—Ecko Television' which was framed by parted theatre curtains (*Times*

10 November, 1944, p. 2). Later advertisements explicitly linked the new technology to more familiar forms of entertainment. A 1952 advertisement for Philips Projection Television claimed that the set provided the ‘sort of picture you have been used to all your life on the cinema screen’ (*Reader’s Digest* February, 1952, p. 79). Many of these ads also lauded television’s ability to provide the familiar entertainment qualities of the cinema while allowing viewers to remain in the comfort and privacy of their own homes. Murphy Television and Radio ran a 1952 advertisement that claimed their televisions gave consumers access to the ‘front row of the dress circle every night, comfortable armchairs for seats; and no bus to catch home’ (*Punch* 21 May, 1952, p. xv).

Although comparisons with the theatre helped familiarize consumers with an otherwise alien product, advertisements such as these also reflected the changing nature of entertainment in the post-war era. Especially for families in suburban areas, a trip to the cinema or theatre was increasingly rare, as these types of entertainment were located in urban environments. Rather than lamenting the fact that attendance at these places was impractical for suburban couples and families, advertisements for television showed that traditional forms of entertainment could be enjoyed through television, and without many of the hassles involved. In this case, manufacturers and retailers brought television to the centre of the debate over shifting social relationships due to the move out of urban areas by many British families. These advertisements indicated that television would allow these families to continue to live, albeit vicariously, urban lives while enjoying the privacy and security of a suburban home.

In some cases, the set was even anthropomorphized to be an extension of the viewer’s own senses. A series of ads from GEC

Television and Radio from the early 1950s showed a television silhouetted by a human head, and both male and female profiles were used in separate ads. In these cases, the set became part of the viewer's senses, as the television screen was depicted just behind the eye of the silhouette and the speakers along the side were just behind the ear of the illustrated head. The accompanying caption noted that the television provides 'a picture that is clear and crisp and lifelike' and 'sound so natural you could swear you were actually there' (*Reader's Digest* October, 1952, p, 103; *Punch* 27 August, 1952, p. xxii). In both pictures and words, these ads hoped to show how television could serve as an extension to the viewers' eyes and ears, providing lifelike reproductions of the public world within the private spaces of the home and enabling viewers to participate in their communities in new ways.

Television ownership also directly affected how suburban families interacted with and viewed their neighbours. Historians have pointed out the inherent focus on privacy that resulted from the increase in owner-occupation during the post-war era, which differed significantly from the urban, communal lifestyles that characterized many in Britain before the move to suburban areas. In this type of reshaped demographic environment television offered new opportunities to establish and maintain social contacts. Especially in this early period, when the technology was only available to a limited number of consumers, television helped break through the privacy-oriented structure of post-war suburban lifestyles by encouraging television-themed parties and increased interaction with neighbours.

Queen Elizabeth's Coronation in 1953 clearly demonstrates the importance of communal viewing to early British television culture. BBC audience research concluded that 1.5 million people

watched the ceremony on a public set, situated in places like cinemas and shops . Communal viewing was important to suburban homes, as well. The BBC noted that of the twenty million people who watched the Coronation, more than half did so at the home of a friend or neighbour, and that ‘the average number of people around each domestic television set was about seven, excluding children’ . Thus, even while encouraging the physical separation of people and their traditional urban communities, television actually fostered new suburban community interactions through communal viewing and television-themed parties.

Interestingly, the same technology that helped bring suburban strangers together would eventually change the ways in which neighbours viewed each other. As Britain’s economy was transitioned out of austerity and toward consumption, television became an important signifier of success for both the economy at large and individual households. A television aerial became as significant a sign of conspicuous consumption as the automobile, and people became more aware of how their spending habits would be viewed by others. As with many other trends, this change in cultural attitudes was reflected in the advertisements. A 1952 ad noted that after the purchase of a set, ‘you begin to look at your screen a bit more critically and compare it with your neighbour’s’ (*Punch* 21 May, 1952, p. xv). Some companies solved this problem for consumers by actually providing a service to replace a television set on a regular basis. For example, DER Limited offered to solve the problem of aging sets through the ‘introduction of the *Premium Viewing Service*,’ which was ‘specifically designed to provide the more discerning person with a new television set every year.’ The company promised that their plan was the easiest method ‘of keeping right up to date with the latest developments’ (*Reader’s Digest* July,

1957, p. 174). This advertisement's solution to the problem of competing with neighbours is only one example of the growing importance of conspicuous consumption and the ways in which manufacturers and retailers used such community relationships to sell their products.

The Development of a Virtual Community of Viewers

Aside from the physical closeness encouraged by communal viewing, television helped create a virtual community of viewers among disparate groups of people, sometimes from around the globe. Televised events including the 1946 Victory Procession, the 1947 Royal Wedding, and the funeral of King George VI in 1952 helped to legitimize the new medium in the eyes of British consumers while building a mass audience of viewers. This imagined community, made up of different audiences brought together by a shared viewing experience, would become an important influence on early television culture, as well as a powerful advertising tool for manufacturers.

The 1953 Coronation of Elizabeth II indicates the extent to which television created mass audiences among many different populations. The sheer size and scope of the Coronation broadcast generated a sense of British national unity among a diverse and otherwise disconnected group of people. Over half of the adult British population watched the procession and Coronation Service, and the viewing audience outnumbered the listening audience in almost every area of the country. The audience was not limited to viewers in Great Britain, however. Commonwealth viewers eagerly awaited recordings of the broadcast. The Royal Canadian Air Force escorted the films on their flight across the Atlantic, and the BBC identified the Coronation as the longest sustained audience in South

Africa among adult Europeans . The Coronation was broadcast live to many locations in Europe. Over a million viewers watched the event in France, and NWDR in Hamburg relayed the entire telecast on the day of the Coronation. The United States also watched eagerly and commented on the technological achievements of the BBC, helping to cement television's role in international cultural transmission .

Again, advertisements reveal some of the consumer perspective about television's role in the Coronation, as well as the technology's impact on larger themes like national culture and virtual communities. As more consumers used television to stay connected to an increasingly distant public world, manufacturers used the idea of a virtual community to encourage sales. The Coronation broadcast dramatically reinforced both the legitimacy of the medium and the demand for new sets , and manufacturers like Murphy capitalized on this demand by encouraging consumers to buy early to avoid missing out. As early as January, an advertisement with the words 'you have been warned' caught the attention of readers. The ad noted that 'a lot of people (you?) are thinking about a T/V set for the Coronation. (*Times* 26 January, 1953, p. 4). Ads like this not only grouped consumers into a single audience with similar hopes for television, it also warned them about the dangers of missing out on such important events like the Coronation. The advertisement continued:

Now comes the sad bit. A great many of these people (you?) are going to be disappointed. There will be a great rush in April and May and there won't be either enough sets or enough time to install them all. The usual clever dicks will cry out that this is just an advertising sales stunt. But to all sensible people we say

see your Murphy dealer soon (*Times* 26 January, 1953, p. 4).

Less than a month later, a similar Murphy advert warned:

If you want a television set in time for the Coronation now's the time to get one. What! In February? Why the hurry? Because more and more people will be buying sets as June 2nd draws near, and there will be neither enough sets to go round nor enough time to install the ones that are available...if you want to be one of the lucky ones who "saw the Coronation", go and see your Murphy Dealer now' (*Times* 12 February, 1953, p. 6).

These sales strategies, combined with the growing excitement over a chance to watch the Coronation, resulted in a rapid increase in television purchases in the months leading up to the ceremony . Again, the emphasis within these ads was on the disappointment consumers risked by not ensuring their access to the privileged group of television owners that would be able to participate in the national enjoyment of the Coronation that summer through the early purchase of a set. The development of a virtual community of viewers gave manufacturers a new opportunity to sell sets by emphasizing the pressures consumers felt about participation in the new viewing community.

Conclusion

These advertisements reveal television's central role in the social and cultural changes underway in Britain following the Second World War. In one sense, television encouraged the separation of public and private spaces by helping to reorient leisure activities toward the home, replacing traditional forms of entertainment like the cinema and public sporting events. On the other hand, television helped

newly relocated and isolated suburban families forge and maintain social networks in their suburban communities. Communal viewing habits, especially important to the late 1940s and early 1950s, meant that television actually encouraged physical closeness among viewers sharing a television set at parties and during popular broadcasts. Additionally, the development of a virtual community of viewers, which at times extended across the globe, created new connections among diverse audiences. Viewers often felt the need to be connected to the outside world through television, and manufacturers used advertisements to capitalize on consumer relationships to this imagined community.

The advertisements also point to the importance of non-programming sources to television history. The historical focus on the broadcasting industry has resulted in a producer-oriented literature, and only by utilizing alternative sources can historians more fully explore the experience of considering, buying, and watching a television set. The inclusion of consumer-oriented studies using alternative sources will give historians a more comprehensive understanding of television's early development. The technology had to be accepted and domesticated by consumers, and manufacturers were forced to incorporate consumer hopes and fears into their marketing strategies. Thus, sources like advertisements offer a unique glimpse at some of the debates and discursive language used in producer-consumer negotiations about television. More importantly, discourses about television can offer interesting insight into larger changes in British society and culture. The technology's significance to suburbanization, leisure, gender, juvenile delinquency, and a host of other topics make it a valuable historical tool that has yet to be fully explored.

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