



**HAL**  
open science

## Television is happening

Helen Wood

► **To cite this version:**

Helen Wood. Television is happening. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2007, 10 (4), pp.485-506.  
10.1177/1367549407081956 . hal-00571559

**HAL Id: hal-00571559**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00571559>**

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Television is happening

## *Methodological considerations for capturing digital television reception*

**Helen Wood**

*De Montfort University*

**ABSTRACT** The more fragmented that engagements with the media become, the more important it is to understand changing audience practices for theories of social shaping. However, capturing the ways in which audiences respond to television is challenging when current technology makes new demands on the viewer: digital television packages offer ‘interactive’ choices coterminous with computer interfaces. This article proposes a new methodology and demonstrates the kind of data that it makes available for studying digital television audiences. It suggests adapting the traditional metaphor of ‘flow’ and combining an understanding of television-as-text with television-as-technology to explore the social contexts of new textual possibilities against the backdrop of claims made about ‘new media’. This is achieved by allowing the phenomenological aspects of television to inform an empirical study of television in sociocommunicative contexts. Locating mediated communication within everyday social interaction invites questions about what is new about the social shaping of the digital TV interface.

**KEYWORDS** *digital television, interactivity, methodology, old/new media, social interaction, textual navigation, user flows*

### **Introduction: going digital**

In the UK, according to the government’s digital television website ([www.digitaltelevision.gov.uk](http://www.digitaltelevision.gov.uk)), three out of four households now have digital television. This indeed bodes well for the UK government’s intention to be one of the first countries to complete analogue switch-off by 2012.<sup>1</sup> The precession of digital television take-up parallels the growing social trend towards the embracing of digital technology, whereby Britons are spending more time using internet broadband, digital video disc (DVD) players, gadgets and mobiles phones, as well as digital TV and radio (BBC News, 2005). According to Ofcom, the UK’s regulatory body for media and communications, the embracing of a ‘digital lifestyle’ means that people



are spending more time engaging in new communicative activities: for example communicating on-line, texting, downloading and 'surfing' 24-hour news (BBC News, 2005). In this context older (broadcast) technologies such as television and radio are transforming technologically, which potentially means that modes of everyday engagement are also evolving. While television as we know it is currently embracing 'interactive' services, the internet offers an alternative site where television programmes can be downloaded at one's own convenience. However, a recent report in the UK suggests at present that fewer than 15 percent of internet users have actually ever downloaded a full-length TV programme (Allen, 2007). These future prospects have been caught up within arguments about 'new media' and increased democratization. Graham Murdock (1993) has maintained that television has traditionally served as a means of cultural regulation which has controlled and coordinated production, distribution and consumption. However, potential such as 'interactivity' promises to have an impact upon traditional media processes: for example, the case of 'surfing news' rather reconfigures a set of industrial and academic assumptions about the distribution, scheduling and viewing patterns of news in the terrestrial era (see Allen, 2006). Therefore, it is important to capture what the changes brought to television through the digital revolution mean to its consumption as a medium. As Peacock announces: 'There is no doubt that the growth of digital and convergence between platforms is changing audience behaviour and posing new challenges for broadcasting' (2004: 63).

This article will outline some of the developments brought through digital television and draw out the main challenges that these pose to the normative assumptions which have framed television consumption research. In doing so, it will also briefly consider television's digital reforms within the broader debate about 'new media' against the backdrop of more recent arguments which locate the 'new' within the trajectory of the 'old'. It argues that TV audience research in the digital environment can be achieved through reconceptualizing broadcast flows into user flows, which necessitates addressing the dominant paradigms in audience reception studies. It will then set out the methodological framework underway for a small research project on the consumption of digital television, and present the kind of data available through its methodology.

### **Changes to the viewer experience: the multi-channel landscape and alternative platforms**

Changes in the organization, production and distribution of television services in the digital era are numerous and there is not space to account fully for them all here. One of the largest advantages gained in the transition to digital television has been increased functionality of services. In 2001 the UK government introduced its Digital Television Action Plan



to promote the take-up of digital television and ensure the switch-over. The benefits of digital television outlined within it were characterized as an increased range of broadcast channels, enhanced picture and sound quality<sup>2</sup> and interactivity (Sourbati, 2004). It is the first and the last of these which will briefly be taken into consideration here in order to address their potential impact upon viewing experiences.

Digital broadcasting overcomes the problem of scarcity in the analogue spectrum, which had previously necessitated tight controls over output and the restriction of channels in the UK. The resulting multi-channel landscape has been achieved through an increasingly deregulated television market coupled with technological capability offered through digital resources. The highly competitive marketplace has necessarily been accompanied by a rigorous drive to secure audience share and produced a shift towards the narrowcasting of specific channels and channel identities: giving people what they want, all of the time. For example the American cable company, Discovery Communications ([www.discovery.com](http://www.discovery.com)), which originally focused upon documentary and natural history, now has 15 channels, each entirely devoted to a specific type of factual programming, from *Animal Planet* to *Discovery Health and Home*. This obviously presents a rather different landscape in the UK to the terrestrial era, which was dominated by a public service broadcasting ethic of generalist channels with mixed programming (BBC and ITV), relying on innovative scheduling to capture audiences through the day, and aiming to provide a 'healthy' composite of entertainment, education and information. These changes led to concerns that in the 'era of plenty', the 'nation-binding' aspects of television may be eroded in favour of choice (Ellis, 2002). The rise of specialist channels, therefore, serves to fragment audience share and calls into question the future of television's potential as a mass broadcast medium.

If a dominance of specialist channels is conceded then this could alter the nature of programming altogether, as we see an increasing number of channels such as *Reality TV* produce fairly homogenous content throughout its airtime. The changes in the marketplace of television, and thus the pressure towards establishing lucrative exports, has meant that even the BBC has sought easily replicable 'formats' over individual programming. (Archer, 2003) Andrew Crissell goes as far as to suggest that in the digital era of broadcasting, we may well see a significant shift towards indeterminate programme sequences:

In any case the segment or 'bite' of which so much broadcasting content is composed – the interview, the rock video, commercial break, comic sketch, brief report, feature, or whatever – may well become the salient or significant feature. (Crissell, 2001: 281)

For audiences, this obviously means that they are potentially viewing across a larger range of channel options where they might be less easily



'fixed' as viewers by the scheduling conventions, which assume the daily routine of the nuclear family (and which still dominate the scheduling of terrestrial mixed programming). But despite the plethora of choices available on the surface, the programming output might mean that viewers are choosing to watch more of the same, and if Crissell is right, then viewers might be increasingly consuming from a smorgasbord of 'bites'<sup>3</sup> rather than viewing programme after programme from the broadcast television flow. Indeed, normative assumptions about television and 'flow' require considerable rethinking in the digital landscape, and will be addressed later in this article.

Another related set of initiatives which directly impact upon audiences refer to the added services brought to television, partly through the convergence of broadcast technology with telecommunications. These changes are related to commercial pressure and innovation in the digital marketplace, which has seen providers stretch the capacity of television's 'transmission' mode of communication, a process facilitated in the UK by the Communications Act 2003.<sup>4</sup> John Caldwell refers to these innovations as 'second-shift aesthetics':

Instead of cleanly replacing first shift aesthetics, that is, the new landscape of convergence has forced content providers to adapt and overhaul the means and goals of programming, in order to succeed in far more volatile media markets. (2003: 135)

This means that TV services allow us to shop, vote, bank and call up 'extra' information on our favourite programmes and news channels through extra text-based services, as well as shifting television services to the internet where one can download, catch up on favourite programmes, or become part of programme chatrooms. These are the 'interactive' services that drive much of the commercial hype around the future of television. The notion of interactivity is itself a dominant motif in the more radical claims made about the democratic potential of 'new' media over 'old' in the 'second media age' (Poster, 1995), transforming the 'one-to-many' communication principle of the mass media era to the 'many-to-many' model of the digital or internet era. Such a position is characterized by Kapur, who suggests that the crucial political question is: 'who controls the switches?':

There are two extreme choices. Users may have indirect or limited control over when, what, why and from whom they get information and to whom they send it. That's the broadcast model today, and seems to breed consumerism, passivity, crassness, and mediocrity. Or users may have decentralised, distributed, direct control over when, what, why and with whom they exchange information. That's the internet model today, and it seems to breed critical thinking, activism, democracy, and quality. We have an opportunity to choose now. (Kapur, 1993: 5)

488 These facilities in television do offer viewers some new levels of control over their textual environment through features which reflect the



hyper-mediated environment and immediacy of the computer interface. For example, viewers are offered multi-screens whereby they can replay segments of programming, and during live sports events they can use lateral movement to look up statistics and replays through their 'i-bar'. A viewer can open a number of windows, whereby one might have a channel stream accompanied by a number of text menus. In this sense, rather than descriptors such as 'zapping' to describe the viewer activity which accompanied the introduction of the remote control, these interfaces encourage the metaphors of 'navigating' or 'surfing', which belong to the internet era. Given these developments, the promise of 'interactivity' in television potentially fits the drive of 'new media' as one which theoretically re-orders the mass media era from a linear model of transmission to a more participatory model of network.

But despite these user abilities, Kim and Sawhney (2002) point out that the organizing ideology of television, as it has been historically, culturally and institutionally conceived as a broadcast medium, can never live up to the ideal characteristics of interactivity as present in face-to-face communication. They insist that it is more accurate to frame these advances as 'reactive TV', as they do not 'unleash the new liberties of action offered by new technologies' (2002: 229). Therefore, Kim and Sawhney warn against the uncomplicated adoption of theoretical frameworks used to describe 'new media' for responsive developments in 'old' media, without considering the technology's historical organizing principles. But in any case, it is problematic to directly compare media to face-to-face communication (Durham Peters, 2006), or to assume that face-to-face communication is itself a model for emancipatory participation (Wood, forthcoming). I have discussed elsewhere the possibility of audiences interacting with television conversationally as part of the way in which broadcasting enters the sociocommunicative frame of everyday life, implying that television has traditionally sought a voice through which it has considerable interactive potential within the home as a traditional broadcast medium (Wood, 2007). Curiously, the technology now available through new apparatus which claims actual interactivity, as it is inscribed in the technological features of digital television, only offers a text-based series of choices from numerous menus rather than any to-ing and fro-ing of communication.

Nevertheless, the so-called 'interactive' dimensions of digital television do offer some suggestive challenges to the perception of texts as broadcast. What is most interesting is that these hypermedia facilities potentially allow television texts to become navigable spaces, which can rupture the narrative drive of television's traditional linear mode of representation, potentially and perhaps sporadically, replacing it with an 'ergodic'<sup>3</sup> system requiring the user's dynamic engagement in the construction of textual aesthetics (Aarseth, 1997). Again, arguments made about hypertext are associated with digital literature and the computer game and have come



to define what's 'new' about new media. On this basis, radical speculations are made about 'new' practices of reading and writing, but they are rarely rooted in the empirical enquiry of user practices, or in a consideration of how they are embedded in lived social environments. The larger project from which this work is drawn attempts to ground these practices in relation to television's (old media) adoption of these (new media) processes.

This study is still mainly concerned with the technological apparatus around the traditional television set. The user facilities that accompany cable and satellite packages also contribute to the appearance of a 'hyper-text' environment, allowing other 'second-level' interfaces to streamed broadcasting. For example, in the UK, the standard Sky package offers various menus, TV guides, browsing facilities and parental control devices. More recently the digital video recorder (DVR), such as the Sky+ system, offers a hard drive memory which allows the live pausing and storage of programmes. Again, these services challenge received assumptions about scheduling and flow (Williams, 2003[1974]) as they allow the viewer the ability to interrupt and rearrange television time, beyond the recording facilities of the video cassette recorder (VCR). They also invoke speculation about the preservation of quality and public service broadcasting. In the UK, some of the fears have been associated with the disruption of 'flow'; that viewers may no longer view documentary after soap, consuming quality information because that is where the channel takes them. In the US – and this may be related to the vast differences in the institutional and commercial organization of television – speculation was conversely opposite. When TiVO was introduced in the US, commentators embraced the idea that viewers might become more selective in their viewing preferences: 'where you will become a gourmet, selecting just the stuff you really want [... reconfiguring] a reformed and empowered spectator to supplant the disparaged couch potato' (Boddy, 2004).<sup>6</sup> Again this presents a series of speculations about the new digital viewer which have rarely been tested outside of industry research, or in relation to contexts of consumption.

Therefore, developments in television's textual and technological apparatus, as well as its new distribution platforms, offer some challenges to the way in which the relationship between text and viewer has traditionally been configured, some of which are bound up in the grander claims of the 'new' media era. Recent thinking suggests that one must be cautious about what can be assumed about the replication of internet paradigms into broadcast media, such as hypermediacy and immediacy, and ground these within our historical knowledge of the specific medium. The uncertainty here about the 'new' fastened on to the 'old' brings social and cultural questions of use to the fore. As Sonia Livingstone argues:

[A]s audiences become less predictable, more fragmented or more variable in their engagement with media, understanding the audience is even more important for theories of social shaping, design markets and diffusion than perhaps was true of older media. (1999: 63)





Therefore, it seems imperative that in terms of reception research we need to empirically ground some of these most suggestive elements in the arguments about change: the viewing of ‘bites’; the ‘surfing of channels’; non-linear hyperviewing and so forth, and to do so we need to think through the theoretical and methodological precedents of audience research.

## Method and discussion

### User flows

‘Flow’ (Williams, 2003[1974]) has long been established as a primary concept for understanding the specificity of television as a medium. For Raymond Williams, the sequencing of television is characteristic of both the organization and experience of television. This theory of ‘flow’ announced the boundlessness of television texts, which infuse and expand, unlike other media such as cinema. Therefore, television output is thought of as segmentalized (Ellis, 1982) through advertisements, continuity announcing and the editing of sequences of programming which give the flow its momentum. According to Nick Browne (1984), because of this, television operates at the level of the supertext, locking viewers into time periods rather than programmes. The nature of programming as flow is therefore also related to ‘watching television’, a phrase which Williams suggests is revealing of the subordinate nature of the individual programme to the actual form.

Caldwell (1995) contests the notion of ‘flow’ for the way in which it contributed to ‘glance theory’ – the idea that television viewers are distracted and view less intensely, as they make less selective choices than in the case of film viewing.<sup>7</sup> He makes the point that the visually spectacular aspects of television are becoming increasingly salient, but he also points out how developments in television’s apparatus have served to fragment flow: from the VCR to the remote control, and now alternative platforms and multi-channel TV. Williams’ notion of ‘flow’ as experience relies upon the relationship of the viewer to the programming flow of the scheduler, but developments in television’s interfaces are allowing viewers to navigate texts within and without streamed programming on a number of levels or platforms. In this climate, networks and broadcasters must attempt to steer that navigation to secure audiences. Caldwell describes the ways in which some American networks have used the web as a resource to encourage viewers to explore the life of a programme beyond the television. For example, at the website for *Homicide: Life on the Street* ([www.homicide.com](http://www.homicide.com)), viewers can watch ‘The Second Shift’ on the web immediately after the broadcast show. Therefore, in the ‘second-shift media aesthetics’ of contemporary digital television, ‘programming strategies have shifted from notions of network programme “flows” to tactics of audience/user flows’ (Caldwell, 2003: 136).





While Caldwell is concerned with programming goals and the ways in which producers have become more savvy in adopting alternative platforms to maintain viewing figures, this article wants to explore whether the concept of 'user flows' might have some purchase in audience research as a way to ground empirically some of those speculative assumptions about 'new media' engagements in relation to television. Caldwell's description of 'user flows' describes how production practices in the 'second-shift' conceive consumers as 'viewers' in these new forms of textual dispersal. But in terms of reception research, employing 'user flows' as an empirical concept runs contrary to the main traditions in audience research that are germane to the field. This is because, embedded in Caldwell's phrase, 'user flows' are both the textual and functional aspects of television; in utilizing functions, 'viewers' are navigating textual space.

However, in the reception field, there has in general been a bifurcation of audience research along two axes: the text–reader or product–user routes of enquiry. In the former, a text–reader model for audience research was established by Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which relied on a structuralist principle about the location of meaning. This was then tested by Morley's (1980) study, in which viewers negotiated meaning based upon their social and cultural location, and which has been taken as the basis for research in terms of how particular viewers negotiate symbolic meaning in particular texts, offering the underpinning framework to much subsequent audience reception work. The second dominant paradigm in TV consumption research has a different type of project in which the location and politics of consumption of the media as technology became the priority. This type of research recognized that media consumption occurs in mostly domestic settings (although personalized media means that assumption is also increasingly being undermined), and that to understand fully its embedding into daily life requires engaging with what Bausinger refers to as 'the inconspicuous omnipresence of the technical' (1984: 346). A number of empirical studies in audience research took this challenge and were concerned with how technologies were located within the politics of the domestic environment, taking a more sociological rather than textual direction in analysing the impact of media forms upon daily life (for example, Gray, 1992; Moores, 1988; Morley, 1986; Silverstone et al., 1992).

Both of these approaches have indeed provided fruitful lines of inquiry about the negotiation of meaning and the role of technology in domestic politics, which have established the field. Livingstone (2004) states that the latter type of inquiry has come to dominate the study of media reception with a move towards ethnographic consumption studies, but argues that in the new media environment the time has come to right this imbalance. The present author agrees that new media forms such as the internet do compel us to make inquiries into the messages of media as texts, *as well as* into the appropriation of media as technological objects, but that this has long been the case for television, which is only exacerbated by these



developments in the technology's interface. However, here this article wants to go further: to suggest that we can develop a methodological approach to overcome considering these aspects as *parallel* modes of inquiry, by recognizing Caldwell's phrase of 'viewers'. It is possible to begin to research the relationship of viewers with television as *both* text and technology, as engagements which are not separated out in the lived realities of the social use of television. Just as Morley (1986) recognized that the focus groups organized within the university building did not necessarily reflect actual viewing experiences, so the time has come to acknowledge that the television text is not experienced as a separate entity to the television set.

### **Television is happening**

In the methodological approach used here, this article brings together both the textual and functional aspects of television in an attempt to explore the concept of 'user flows' in audience research. If one considers that the medium of television offers what Williams (2000[1974]) called 'mobile privatization' (the ability to be transported to other geographical spaces), or what Morley (2000) has more recently referred to as 'de-territorialization' (an experiential space where the global meets the local), then it is not too difficult to see that it is both the text and technology that mediates that experience. It is the viewer's intervention in the text that allows that experience to take place. To think of television as *happening* might be to locate the user's involvement in the sequencing of texts when questions about *how* the textual environment is navigated 'in time' are still largely overlooked in audience research. In part this relies on the development of a model that the present author has used in previous research, to capture television as it is 'happening' as a way to overcome the triumvirate of 'text, readers and contexts' (Moore, 1990) which has ordered the field.<sup>8</sup>

Television in time has been thought about phenomenologically in terms of the way in which broadcast texts embed themselves in real time. For example, Paddy Scannell (1996) discusses the communicative intention of broadcasting and its establishment of 'dailiness' as a departure from dominant modes of thinking in the field about the relationship of broadcasting with its audiences as a text-reader relationship.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Shaun Moore (2000, 2004) has argued that broadcasting can be understood as contributing to new spatio-temporal arrangements brought through conditions of modernity. Referencing Giddens (1991), he discusses the way in which broadcasting 'lifts out' social experiences and 're-embeds' them in local contexts. But such arguments are rooted either in analysis of textual strategies, or theoretical speculations about time-space relations, rather than in any analysis of the social experience of television *in* time. The philosophical focus of these theories relies on intuitively documenting the experience of broadcast phenomena, but it is possible to use these ideas to conduct a research method where we might envisage television



as taking place in locations of social action beyond the one-dimensional appropriation of 'text'.

The present author's previous research has envisaged programming as having a multidimensional impact on the social space in which it is experienced, through incorporating other forms of analysing communication from conversational analysis and sociolinguistics. In research of women audience members talking back to talk shows (Wood, 2005, 2007), television was captured as a dialogical encounter, illustrating how women engaged with the spoken text as it played out in their home. The methodology used there allowed a closer inspection of the interplay between text and subject in that particular genre of programming. This method was called 'text-in-action', because it brought the 'nowness' of the television text alive in the time and place of consumption as a mediated communicative exchange, rather than relying entirely on the retrospective accounts of viewers that are the staple of the interview or focus group in traditional text–reader research. This article wants to suggest that in terms of a project of examining 'user flows', a similar approach might offer the potential to consider both the viewing and user engagements involved in television consumption, allowing us to consider the viewers' social dimensions involved in the navigation of textual space.

### **Data collection**

In this small-scale research of 15 Midland homes with various digital packages,<sup>10</sup> three stages of data collection were used in order to pursue these ends. First, the participants were asked to record two evenings of viewing on either VCR or DVR, depending upon their own technology, on what they considered to be their 'main' set. The VCR or DVR could then reveal the navigation of the television texts across channels and even across platforms, as it is possible also to capture the playing of computer games, for example. Second, a further type of data came from recordings of sound in the home while the participants were viewing, recorded with a small digital voice recorder and a boundary microphone which can also capture the television sound. Finally, these were accompanied by straightforward semi-structured interviews about the participants' television use. This meant that through careful transcription, it was possible to locate the specific relationship between what was happening in the television text and what was happening in the home, attempting to stitch together both the textual and domestic dynamics to open out the relationship of 'user flows' to social life and action.

The method relies on recording the television technology alongside daily conversation. As Ian Hutchby points out, there is a multiplicity of ways in which conversational practices interface with technological devices:

[T]echnologies for communication can become implicated in our ordinary conversational practices while, at the same time, those very practices may



not only adapt to, but also shape, the cultural meanings and communicative purposes that such artefacts have. (2001: 2–3)

Hutchby offers a more orthodox conversational analytic approach to conversations through telephone and computer technologies – an approach which broadly informs this study of television. However, his larger study highlights the direct relations that particular forms of social interaction have with the social shaping of technology. This article will try to show, more modestly, how recording conversations around television can shed light on the reception of new forms of digital television technologies. It will explain the kind of data that can be gathered through such a methodology, using a case study of one couple in the study who have a relatively TV technology-intensive home.<sup>11</sup>

### **Navigation: the textual user flow**

Watching through the recordings of the couple's evening viewing makes visible the textual 'flows' that are established by viewers. This allows us to see how the multi-channel landscape is actually navigated; how alternative platforms are drawn upon around programmes, including interactivity and browsing devices, as well as the potential to record shifts to other inputs such as gaming. We can therefore reach beyond researching discrete texts and locate the use of user platforms within the experience of television viewing. This enables us to produce representations of viewing strips which allow us to see the textual dynamics as negotiated by audiences, rather than the textual flow as broadcast. This is an alternative way of conceiving the text and allows for other dimensions of textual forms to be explored: texts as navigated and texts as stitched together in time.

The viewing strip in Figure 1 is only the written representation of the visual text available for analysis. In it one can see the movement between broadcast and recorded segments from Sky+, the textual user platforms of the Sky and Sky+ packages being drawn upon, the use of live pausing and calling up recorded programming, as well as putting together short 'bites' of interest and fast-forwarding to larger 'whole' programmes of viewing. In a sense this provides one set of data for analysis which is the experienced text of consumption, rather than the flow of television schedules. As Williams pointed out, it is rare that whole texts are viewed in isolation, but here the complex navigation of texts offers a more intricate mapping of textual forms. Any understanding of 'meaning', as used in the text–reader mode of inquiry here, must surely be influenced by the user strategies of negotiation employed and by the relationship between texts within the overall 'mosaic'. The term mosaic offers a rather more accurate representation of the textual tapestry as it is experienced than the more linear implication embedded in 'flow'. It allows the speculative suggestions of 'navigation' and 'bites' to be visualized and to realize the

*Fifth Gear* from Sky+ planner (Channel 5, recorded)  
7.13 checks *Rides* (Discovery) from Sky+ planner  
Plays *Rides* (recorded)  
Fast Forwards through  
Watches 1 minute until ad break  
Fast forwards through ads  
Watches all of second half  
Flicks (grazes) choice of 'what's on' text preview at bottom of screen  
Chooses *The Simpsons* (Sky One, as broadcast)  
Watches until the end  
Looks through Sky TV guide  
Highlights *Coronation Street* and information  
7.30 watches *Coronation Street* (ITV, as broadcast)  
Watches end of *Watchdog* (BBC One, as broadcast)  
Watches *DIY SOS* (BBC One, as broadcast)  
[Uses live pause]  
Sky Guide  
Sky+ planner  
Choose *CSI* (Channel 5, recorded) and play [fast forwards through all ads]  
Watches *Cops, Robbers and Videotape* (BBC One, as broadcast, short segment while *CSI* paused)  
Back to *CSI* (Channel 5, recorded)  
Sky planner  
*Cops, Robbers and Videotape* (BBC One, recorded)  
[Flicks through choice of what's on through text preview on bottom of screen; chooses MTV]  
*The Osbournes* (MTV, as broadcast)  
*Viva La Bam* (MTV, as broadcast)  
Looks through Sky guide  
Then looks at Sky planner chooses recorded  
*Viva La Bam* (MTV, recorded)

Figure 1 Couple 1 viewing strip – evening, 6 April 2005, main set

sequencing of texts as structured in relation to each other in the life of the home. Gathering this type of data, we might in the future be able to make some insights into the relationship between the textual navigation of television as text and various social and cultural formations. While this type of data begins to reveal other dimensions of television texts as 'flow', by itself it still leaves us with only a textual representation of the decisions being made by viewers, and does not give us a wider picture in terms of how these are located with the dynamics of the home.



### Navigation: in action

The central concern of this project was to investigate some of the forms and practices that are 'new' in the digital environment, but are offered by television. The operation of practices that might be termed 'grazing' or 'navigating' has been adopted from convergent practices for 'new' media. These new practices, however radical they seem, need grounding in social inquiry. By looking at the interview that accompanies the couple's viewing strip above, the way this mosaic is put together makes sense within the relations of a heterosexual couple. From the interview it is clear that this couple have a relatively straightforward set of gendered viewing preferences and practices. He prefers programmes about vehicles, and satellite channels such as Discovery, while she prefers US drama and satellite channels such as E4. It is clear that gender plays a huge part in the negotiation or 'navigation' of viewing on the 'main set', making use of the various time-shift resources or alternative sets in their TV-dense home.

Interviewer: What do you do if *American Chopper* is on at the same time as *The OC*?

Male (M): Send [F] upstairs...

Female (F): ... or tape it.

M: You watch it in the day then?

F: Yeah, we tape it and I watch it in the day, I'll either do that or I'll watch *OC* next door or upstairs, or I'll watch it here and he'll moan about it a lot and then he'll go upstairs and come back down and moan about it some more [laughs].

Interviewer: What do you do when he's moaning at you?

F: Tell him to shut up! That's why it's easier sometimes to just go next door or upstairs.

Interviewer: So, you've worked out then how you negotiate who gets what on this television [main set]?

M: I get to choose.

F: Yeah, but I think we've got Sky+ now we can both get what we want to watch, even if it means doing it at different times when you're not in.

M: That's why we've got the other box, so you can go in there and watch it.

F: Yes, we've got another box.

Interviewer: So, you've got two televisions with Sky on that you can have on different channels and then have you got a television upstairs?

F: Yes, but the television upstairs is linked into this one [main set], so most Wednesdays I'll watch *Desperate Housewives* upstairs in bed because it's on quite late – it's on at 11pm, and so [M] will play Playstation while I'm watching it.

Interviewer: So he'll play Playstation on this screen [main set]?

F: Yes, because he can't watch another channel while I'm watching upstairs.



The interview suggests the important aspects of social dynamics in relation to digital TV use – the practical working out of viewing in the home – and it is also revealing that these technical considerations are negotiated around particular television programmes. We can obviously see the gendered relations involved in viewing preferences and issues of power, such as who is relegated to the second set. It is the kind of data which might usually be collected in research on media consumption, but this study is also interested in seeing how these social aspects necessarily impact upon the way that the textual environment is constructed, to envisage the interplay between textual and social forces. In the methodological approach here, recording action in the home alongside the textual flow, it becomes possible to put the textual and the social together when looking at the ‘text-in-action’ transcript. Here the text becomes multidimensional as it ‘happens’ within the experiential space of the home.

The use of the viewer platforms are negotiated within the domestic politics of the couple’s relationship and the informal agreements that they have made around the use of their technology. By highlighting *The OC* and *Desperate Housewives* (popular US dramas) in the text preview at the bottom of the screen, F is flouting their domestic arrangement whereby these texts are to be viewed upstairs while the main set is used by M to play on his Playstation. What this type of research can begin to reveal is that

Television	Home
<i>Coronation Street</i> ends; titles play	M: It’s yours [handing over remote]
Flicking through options in text at bottom of screen Looks up E4 from Sky guide	M: [?] F: What?
Highlights <i>OC Obsess Completely</i> at 9pm	M: Get rid of that!
Highlights <i>Desperate Housewives</i> at 11pm	F: I don’t think there’s anything else on is there? M: Well I don’t want to watch that, why didn’t I grab the remote control? I said I want to play Playstation tonight so we can record that.
BBC One <i>Watchdog</i> (live)	F: Have you watched that <i>Las Vegas</i> [Sky One recorded]. M: Yes. [During <i>Watchdog</i> they talk about filling in a form for a work contract with the council]

498 Figure 2 Text-in-action, segment 1





aspects such as ‘navigation’ are not just ‘new’ practices related to radical aesthetic strategies, but processes that become tied to the relatively traditionally configured social dynamics of daily life.

### **DVR and storage**

Similarly, the storage of textual material becomes an issue in this couple’s home, despite the fact that they have Sky+ DVR.

Male (M): But then [F] gets obsessed about the space it’s taking up and she deletes everything off all the time. She’s obsessed with, you got to get rid of everything off there straight away.

Interviewer: Why?

Female (F): In case there’s no room for anything.

F: Well, if you carry on I’m gonna put a password on it so you won’t be able to delete anything [laughs].

Interviewer: You want them deleted as soon as they’ve been watched?

F: *Yes*, what’s the point of them hanging around?

M: Because I might want to watch them again!

Of course, this extract demonstrates that the use of the DVR as technology is again located within the domestic politics of home. It is possible to interpret the extract in terms of relatively traditional gendered patterns of ‘tidying up’ as feminine, and ‘hoarding’ or ‘collecting’ as masculine. It is also interesting to note that M claims that he will put a password on the Sky+ planner to stop F cleaning it out, which actually is not possible within the current technology, but draws upon expectations from internet and PC use. Using the text-in-action method it is also possible to see the impact of this social organization of the technology on the navigation of the television as text:

Television	Home
<i>CSI</i> end credits	
Back to Sky+ planner <i>Rides</i> (Discovery) highlighted on screen	M: Leave that on! F: What’s that <i>Rides</i> thing? M: I’ve watched it. F: You’ve watched it?
<i>Rides</i> disappears from screen Back to BBC One <i>Cops</i> , <i>Robbers and Videotape</i> [stays on same channel but flicks through text options at the bottom of screen]	M: Yes, it’s about cars. You wouldn’t enjoy it. F: <i>Delete</i> it then! M : I <i>have</i> deleted it. F: What’s that <i>Amazon Abyss</i> thing?

Figure 3 Text-in-action, segment 2



When navigating user flows, the social impact of their domestic tensions over storage come to bear upon the configuration of the text. What can be highlighted and replayed depends very much upon the established gender politics in the social action played out in the living room. Of course, at present, this research cannot make any blanket claims about the gender politics of digital television viewing, but it does suggest tantalizing implications about the nature of textual and social interplay, which requires further investigation. These examples clearly show how textual choices are made, displaying how ‘navigation’ is very much part of social processes and interaction.

### ‘Bites’

Thus far the data has relied on the analysis of movement between one text and another in the overall mosaic, and considered how this is negotiated in terms of social context. But that tells us little of the content of the actual text or how viewers might make sense of particular messages. Previous research reveals how this method can be used to discuss the dimensions of television programme content (talk) as it takes place in the home (Wood, 2005). However, in terms of this research it can also be revealing of the symbolic significance of the viewing of ‘bites’. As discussed earlier, Crissell (2001) argued that viewing bites might become a salient feature of the viewing experience in the digital era, but the text–reader mode of audience enquiry traditionally considers the relationship that particular texts have with particular viewing communities. In the data presented here, it is possible to see how ‘bites’ of television, some of them unplanned, can become significant to the viewing experience:

Text	Home
End of <i>DIY SOS</i> credits	F: What are we going to watch now?
Goes to Sky TV guide Then to Sky+ planner Goes to <i>CSI</i> (presses I for info)	M: I dunno, I’m going to have a look now. F: What, we’ve got something to watch haven’t we? <i>CSI</i> ? M: Yes, stick that on.
Press play, part of <i>Five News Update</i> (Channel 5, recorded) Kirsty Young: ‘...the Royal Wedding organisers say that Saturday’s big race will now start at ten past four instead of the original time of 3.45...’	
‘That’s just about it from me for tonight. Five news returns tomorrow of course at noon.’ Plays some of trailer for <i>Greatest 80s TV Moments Ever</i> (C5)	M: For f*** sake, why have they changed <i>that</i> ? Nobody changed anything when I got b***** married! Telephone rings; M answers and wanders out of the room



In the extract in Figure 4, the unplanned news segment, which comes at the beginning of the recorded *CSI* programme, becomes of interest to M. In the same way in which audience studies have documented how programme content (particularly soap opera and talk shows) become relevant to viewers in relation to their own experience, so M is here extremely annoyed about the special treatment given to the royal family at the time of Charles and Camilla's wedding in relation to his own. This article does not intend to attach too much significance to this small extract, other than that it shows that viewers are engaged in even the smallest bites of programming within the larger mosaic of their viewing experiences, and that these moments of the 'in-between' have been largely lost in the research emphasis upon specific texts.

It is too early yet to make some overarching statement about different types of 'user flows' in social settings. My other data will reveal similar patterns related to other types of living units such as the nuclear family. This small project however, was set up to test the methodology and the proposition of bringing together textual and social dynamics to reveal the processes by which user flows come together. The empirical examination of 'user flows' *can* be achieved through a method which can visualize the interplay between the textual and social environments. So far the data is beginning to reveal the ways in which these new forms of communication, encouraged by the digital era, are firmly embedded in the routine and relatively mundane organizing principles of the home. In that sense, despite some of the more radical claims made by the industry and new media philosophers, in the case of television at least, we must be reminded of the repeated findings of sociological research on the social shaping of technology: 'All human experiences of technology have been codified in ways that reflect parallel systems of social organisation and culture' (Kirkpatrick, 2004: 3).

## Conclusion

This article began from the premise that changes in television use mooted through digital technological development require empirical research. Throughout it has kept in focus the premise that new media are constituted through their relationship to old media, as Bolter and Grusin point out:

No medium today, and certainly no single media event seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces. What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media. (2000: 15)

Bolter and Grusin (2000) have made the case already that in the digital era, television has refashioned itself to respond to the drives of immediacy



and hypermediacy through developing the capabilities that it already embodied throughout its history. But more broadly this work supports a general plea for media scholars to locate (new) media communication within the contexts and consistencies of everyday communication (Wood, forthcoming). The process of remediation refers to both the push and the pull of technological drives as they are variously contextualized, and here we should be reminded of Silverstone's point that:

The supposedly distinct characteristics of new media: digital convergence; many-to-many communication; interactivity; globalization; virtuality; are arguably, with the possible exception of the specifically technical, not new at all. Face-to-face communication is simultaneous and interactive and does not need a mouse ... *And any entry into electronic space has always presupposed and required a physical space as both its beginning and its end point.* Quantity, certainly, turns to quality in the matter of communication. This is not just true for the Internet but for all media networks. It is a simple law of any and every attempt to communicate. (1999: 10–11; emphasis added)

Here, then, by positioning digital television more firmly within the communicative space within which it *happens* and by documenting that process in time, a position not previously taken in reception research, we are able to capture the ways in which television's developed functions help to constitute the relationships between texts, textual navigation strategies and viewers' daily social interaction in a more complex picture of the social shaping of both text and technology. Our methodological reasoning needs to evolve, but at the same time we need to go back to what has been missing in audience research: that is, positioning the text within the communicative context of the home as neither the 'text–reader' nor 'product–user' models allow. While any findings part way through this research are only tentative, this article wants to suggest that 'newness' in television's apparatus requires methodological innovation, but what we find when we locate that newness within daily communicative action are 'new' relationships to established social and cultural practices. Thus far, we could say that this research seems to be uncovering 'plus ça change': the more things change, the more they stay the same.

### **Acknowledgement**

I am grateful to the Midland Television Research Group for initial comments on this data and for comments received when this article was first presented to the Centre for Research in Socio-Cultural Change Inaugural Conference, Manchester, UK, June 2005.

### **Notes**

1. A process currently underway in Wales but still meeting some resistance, see Mackay (2007).
2. For a good discussion of the impact of digital on television image quality, see Lury (2005).



3. The notion of 'bites' may seem similar to Ellis' (1982) concern with 'segments', but it is clear that for Ellis segments may be cumulative or repetitive, in some way associated with one another as part of television flow, while the notion of 'bites' conceives of sections of programming as entirely discrete.
4. In the UK the Communications Act 2003 allowed cross-media ownership across production and distribution platforms as well as facilitating the convergence between broadcast and telecommunications organizations.
5. Aarseth's (1997) analysis of interactive fiction (such as in computer games, digital literature and collaborative texts in multi-user domains) suggests that it can be located within traditions of 'ergodic' literature. This refers to texts which are open and dynamic, where the reader must perform specific actions to generate a sequence or narrative.
6. In the US, sales of TiVO and Replay TV as stand-alone digital video recorders were much more modest than expected and eventually withdrawn from manufacturing in favour of integrating the technology into television and service provider packages (Boddy, 2004). In the UK, Sky+ has adopted this model with the Sky viewing package. At the time of writing, figures for the take-up of Sky+ in the UK were not available.
7. Indeed, the enhanced visual quality of digital TV sets and larger screen wall-mounted features may contribute also to the need to rethink the visual aspects of TV viewing. For a discussion of the cinematic aspects of the BBC's *The Blue Planet*, see Wheatley (2004).
8. In part some of these concerns have been addressed in reception research, which employs ethnography as a method whereby the consideration of texts in the lives of participants is elaborated more fully. For example, see Gillespie (1995).
9. For Scannell:

Media and Cultural studies in the UK are still dominated by the encoding/decoding model of communications and a model of language based on Saussure. Mapped onto these is a text–reader theory derived from literary studies of written 'texts' to account for the relationships between the production of radio and television and their audiences. (1996: 10)

10. Funded by the University of Manchester Graduate Research Assistance Scheme.
11. This couple is lower-middle class; he is a self-employed electrician and she is a youth worker. They live in a three-bedroom semi-detached home in the Midlands, which is rich in terms of TV density: three TV sets, one in each lounge and one in bedroom. (Lounge 1: main set Techwood 42" plasma screen, tuner, Sky+, DVD player, PlayStation 2, two free-standing large speakers; lounge 2: 21" Sony TV, Sky box; Bedroom: portable Matsui 14" connected to main Sky.)

## References

- Aarseth, E.J. (1997) *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Allen, K. (2007) 'Coming Soon – But Not to a Video Store Near You', *Guardian* (10 May). [Accessed 11 May 2007: <http://www.guardian.co.uk>]



- Allen, S. (2006) *Online News: Journalism and the Internet*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Archer, T. (2003) 'Producer Briefing Day: Documentaries and Factual Programming', BBC website. [Accessed August 2003: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/strategy.doc\\_2003.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/strategy.doc_2003.pdf)]
- Bausinger, H. (1984) 'Media, Technology and Everyday Life', *Media, Culture and Society* 6(4): 343–51.
- BBC News (2005) 'Britons Embrace Digital Lifestyle', June. [Accessed 6 July 2007: <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3558266.stm>]
- Boddy, W. (2004) 'How God Watched Television: Early Responses to Digital Television', in *New Media and Popular Imagination: Launching Radio, Television and Digital Media in the US*, pp. 123–35. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bolter, J.D. and R. Grusin (2000) *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Browne, N. (1984) 'The Political Economy of the Television (Super) Text', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9(3): 174–82.
- Caldwell, J.T. (1995) *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Caldwell, J.T. (2003) 'Second-Shift Media Aesthetics: Programming, Interactivity and User Flows', in A. Everett and J.T. Caldwell (eds) *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*, pp. 127–44. London: Routledge.
- Crissell, A. (2001) *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting* (2nd edn). London: Routledge.
- Durham Peters, J. (2006) 'Media as Conversation, Conversation as Media', in J. Curran and D. Morley (eds) *Media and Cultural Theory*, pp. 115–28. London: Routledge.
- Ellis, J. (1982) *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*. London: Routledge.
- Ellis, J. (2002) *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Giddens, A. (1991) *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gillespie, M. (1995) *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change*. London: Routledge.
- Gray, A. (1992) *Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure Technology*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1980) 'Encoding/Decoding', in S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe and P. Willis (eds) *Culture, Media, Language*, pp. 128–38. London: Hutchinson.
- Hutchby, I. (2001) *Conversation and Technology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kapor, M. (1993) 'Where Is the Digital Superhighway Really Heading? The Case for a Jeffersonian Information Policy', *Wired* 1(3): 53–9.
- Kim, P. and H. Sawhney (2002) 'A Machine-Like New Medium – Theoretical Examination of Interactive TV', *Media, Culture and Society* 24(2): 217–35.
- Kirkpatrick, G. (2004) *Critical Technology: A Social Theory of Personal Computing*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Livingstone, S. (1999) 'New Media, New Audiences', *New Media & Society* 1(1): 59–66.
- Livingstone, S. (2004) 'The Challenge of Changing Audiences. Or, What Is the Audience Researcher to Do in the Age of the Internet?', *European Journal of Communication* 19(1): 75–86.



- Lury, K. (2005) *Interpreting Television*. London: Hodder Arnold.
- Mackay, H. (2007) 'Analogue Switch-Off: Multi-Channel Viewing by the "Reluctant 50%"', *European Journal of Cultural Policy* 13(1): 33–48.
- Moore, S. (1988) 'The Box on the Dresser: Memories of Early Radio and Everyday Life', *Media, Culture and Society* 10(1): 23–40.
- Moore, S. (1990) 'Texts, Readers and Contexts of Reading: Developments in the Study of Media Audiences', *Media, Culture and Society* 12(1): 9–29.
- Moore, S. (2000) *Media and Everyday Life in Modern Society*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Moore, S. (2004) 'The Doubling of Place: Electronic Media, Time–Space Arrangements and Social Relationships' in N. Couldry and A. McCarthy (eds) *Media Space: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age*, pp. 21–36. London: Routledge.
- Morley, D. (1980) *The Nationwide Audience*. London: British Film Institute.
- Morley, D. (1986) *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Consumption*. London: Routledge.
- Morley, D. (2000) *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Murdoch, G. (1993) 'Communications and the Constitution of Modernity', *Media, Culture and Society* 15(4): 521–31.
- Peacock, A. (2004) *Public Service Broadcasting without the BBC?* London: Institute of Economic Affairs.
- Poster, M. (1995) *The Second Media Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Scannell, P. (1996) *Radio, Television and Modern Public Life*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Silverstone, R. (1999) 'What's New about New Media?', *New Media & Society* 1(1): 110–12.
- Silverstone, R., E. Hirsch and D. Morley (1992) 'Information and Communication Technologies and the Moral Economy of the Household', in R. Silverstone and E. Hirsch (eds) *Consuming Technologies*, pp. 15–31. London: Routledge.
- Sourbati, M. (2004) 'Digital Television, Online Connectivity and Electronic Service Delivery: Implications for Communication Policy (and Research)', *Media, Culture and Society* 26(4): 585–90.
- Wheatley, H. (2004) 'The Limits of Television? Natural History Programming and the Transformation of Public Service Broadcasting', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 7(3): 325–39.
- Williams, R. (2003[1974]) *Television, Technology and Cultural Form*. London: Routledge.
- Wood, H. (2005) 'Texting the Subject: Women, Television and Modern Self-Reflexivity', *Communication Review* 8(2): 115–35.
- Wood, H. (2007) 'The Mediated Conversation Floor: An Interactive Approach to Audience Reception Analysis', *Media, Culture and Society* 29(1):75–103.
- Wood, H. (forthcoming) *Talking With Television*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.





**Biographical note**

Helen Wood is Principal Lecturer at De Montfort University. She has published articles and chapters on mediated communication, talk shows, reality television and cultural studies. Currently, her book *Talking With Television* is forthcoming (University of Illinois, 2008) and she has co-edited two forthcoming volumes of *The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies Working Papers* (with Ann Gray, Jan Campbell, Stuart Hanson and Mark Erikson, Routledge). ADDRESS: Department of Media and Cultural Production, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester LE1 9BH, UK. [email: hwood@dmu.ac.uk]