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FROM A CRITICAL POINT OF VIEW:
NEWS AS SOAP OPERA

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Abstract:
Traditionally reasoning skills have been taught through written examples, often anachronistic or artificial. However, students use television as their major source of information about the world and as the source of basic understanding of the world. Yet we rarely provide students with the skills directly to criticize and analyze television's world view. This paper reports on a project designed to teach reasoning through the critical analysis of real television products. News presentation is shown to be influenced by the stereotypes and oversimplification of the genre of soap opera, to the detriment of balance.

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I begin with a Washington story, one which resounded around the world as Washington stories tend to, but with a peculiar flavour. It is the tale of the State of the Union address vs OJ: a tale that had global coverage. The State of the Union was to begin 9 pm in Washington on Tuesday 4th February, 1997. It had already once been moved to avoid conflicting with the finals of Miss America. It was a tense moment for the networks when they discovered, on Tuesday afternoon, that the State of the Union was now scheduled at exactly the same time as the 6 pm Los Angeles announcement of the verdict of the OJ Simpson case. The Guardian correspondent in Washington, Martin Walker, claims that the White House press office called in the news chiefs and said 'Of course we don't and won't tell you what to do. But the President is fulfilling his constitutional obligation to tell the people of the State of the Union'1. As it was, the networks hedged their bets. NBC ran the State of the Union, but their corresponding cable company, CNBC, did OJ. CNN Headline news had OJ, CNN itself stuck with the President. ABC and CBC took the subtitle route—the OJ verdict was run on a title line all through the last ten minutes of the Clinton's declamation.

Did media hype win out over genuine citizenship? Has television's polarising and sensationalising of issues undermined the ability of viewers to play a part in the democratic process? Or have the American people become cynical about politics, while growing sensitive to the fundamental issues of justice and race in the OJ case? I argue that, while each of these views may be true, part of the explanation lies in the increasing tendency of news to adopt the generic conventions of soap opera. Soap opera's repertoire of plots, from romance to violence, are domestic in focus and designed so that the story goes on for ever. The characters are also from a limited repertoire, with good looks and sporting prowess pitted against evil and the terrors of female sexual aggression. OJ fits the mould, whereas the State of the Union, dealing with the 'large public issues' of the economy, education and health cannot compete. And competition it is—as the commentators the next day made clear. Networks and cable channels are out for consumers' blood. Television sells consumers to advertisers, not news to citizens. And consumers prefer OJ.2 In the event, there was a twist to the final score. An unprecedented numbers of viewers saw the State of the Union, already tuned in as they were, waiting for the OJ result. Happily,
the result was delayed and the President was nearly finished when he lost the limelight.

The most common reaction to a scenario of this type is outrage. William Shirer, in the final volume of his autobiography, charts the decline of news:

For news I have to turn to my local paper, and since I live in the north east, to the New York Times. ... I gather there is not much general reading, at least of books, in our country anymore. Gazing at the tube has replaced it as it has replaced social conversation. Are the consequences not predictable: a country of illiterate boobs sitting dumbly around the TV set, like ancient cavemen around a fire, unable to communicate or articulate, stupefied by inanities? (1990: 288)

Klite et al talk of 'the empty calories of tabloid journalism [which] have become the standard fare on newscasts' and go on 'the very idea of news has been perverted into a steady diet of titillating, terrifying, and manipulative entertainment' (1997: 102)

In some ways, Shirer and Klite underrate the danger. It is not just the US, 'our country', that is under threat, but the global viewing public. The global news presentation style is heavily influenced by that in the US and the actual content is overpoweringly dominated by US stories. Both in format and content, the soap opera style of the news has spread throughout the world. In some senses the consequences are worse outside the United States. Australian students, for instance, with a diet of LA Law and OJ, are confused to find that Australian legal system is not like that in the United States. The information about the world which the global television distributes is skewed in ways that young Australians have not learnt to recognize. Given that such a high proportion of people find out about the world from television, the sheer impact of the messages is immense.

At another level, the pessimism of Shirer and Klite is unwarranted. They make the assumption, common to critics of the media of all flavours, that viewers simply absorb uncritically. To use Shirer's words, viewers are 'illiterate boobs sitting dumbly around the TV set, like ancient cavemen around a fire'. He conceptualises viewers as passive receivers, uncritically soaking up what is thrown at them. The view of audience as passive receivers has been under attack for over ten years now, from a number of perspectives. The concept of the 'active audience' has been used to challenge traditional models. According to theorists, viewers actively interpret the content of television, in many cases producing from their interpretations messages far removed from those intended by broadcasters. In recent years, the concept of the active audience has been expanded to emphasize the fact that interpretation always occurs in a social context. We do not understand television in isolation, but as part of the social and cultural context in which we act. In general, models used in research about the impact of television have come to emphasize the role of the viewer, rather than the producer of content.

Kids watch and make sense of television in complex and generally uncharted ways which have only just begun to be explored. They use television, as we all do, as a way of making sense of the world, as well as a mode of relaxing and of creating bonds. When a young child snuggles up on a bean bag by the set, or an older child surfs apparently randomly across the channels, only highly sophisticated viewers—and researchers—are able to interpret how they engage with television. In order to understand the impact of the emerging modes of television on children, it is necessary to examine not just the content of television, but also how television is being watched.

Here, I look at both changes in content and changes in modes of understanding the media. On the one hand, I chart the increasingly tabloid style of the news and current affairs commentary, and its effects. The leaching between two separate categories of news and entertainment has brought in its wake a worrying unreality to news and realism to fiction. Yet, on the other hand, viewers are not entirely unable to deal with the tendency. The
solution I suggest is that we develop what is already part of our repertoire, namely our ability to be critical about the process of television itself. People do debate what happens on television; they dispute the facts, they engage with notions of right and wrong in the courts, if only to a limited degree. There is critical reflection about television but it needs encouraging. We find out about the world from television. Yet too often we are uncritical about news, commercials, sit coms—even presidential debates. For a democracy, it is not sufficient that others are able to analyse issues critically—everyone must learn how to.

1. Soap and News

Soap opera was originally a label for the series and serials designed to sandwich soap powder ads. Indeed, soaps were and still are produced by the soap powder firms—Proctor and Gamble produce three leading soap operas now, including Another World (Canedy, 1997). They came into currency in the early days of commercial radio. The format was driven by the advertising needs: to keep the attention of the audience through the ads and bring them back for another ad-filled episode. Since the ads were for household goods, the focus of the stories was of the sort to appeal to those engaged in domestic settings. Long running family dramas proved most successful. Early radio soap operas developed a repertoire of techniques to personalise and domesticate drama. The genre relied on domestic settings and romantic themes. Stereotypes reflected the norms of the 1950's. So, for example, good women were faithful wives and mothers, while only evil women had a sexual existence outside the bounds of marriage. Those stereotypes have developed over time, but soap operas have maintained a simplicity of moral view well behind the norms of society. They are domesticated, personalised, extended narrative formats which invite viewers to 'enter the home' of characters. These features which have been taken over into the news format.

There is an extensive literature on the soap opera format, describing how it is structured, how new proposals are tested, how ratings determined and how sensitively—or insensitively—they are viewed. Perhaps the most tantalizing feature of soap opera lies in its difference from the corresponding genre in print. Mills and Boone novels, like the Sweet Valley High series and countless other similar tales require resolution in a fulfilled romance. Soaps, by their nature, lack such closure. The interweaving plot lines cannot be designed to unravel and resolve themselves—they must continue to wind up.

In this sense news and soap opera do have common ground. News stories do not tie themselves off neatly, but continue just as soap operas do. The similarities between the genres of news and soap opera cut even deeper than the fact that both news and soap opera are narratives without a dénouement. Both news and soap opera provide a template for understanding the society in which we move. Both do so primarily in narrative format: they are both stories. And both attempt in a variety of ways to give the impression of realism. The reporter at the scene gives an impression of immediacy and close involvement to the viewer, just as the close-ups of the weeping heroine in a soap opera are intended to involve the spectator.

Yet news and soap opera were traditionally seen as disjoint. On the one hand, news is information about real, public events. Soaps are entertainment about imagined, private events. The news room is engaged in finding out what has happened that day—and verifying stories. The soap production team is creating myths which are purposely timeless. The move to the hybrid genre often called 'infotainment' offends practitioners and viewers precisely because they conceive a gulf between the two types. In fact, the ethos of the television news room was a relatively recent arrival.
In the early days of commercial television in the United States, there were brief newscasts scattered among quiz shows, sit coms and soaps. However, by the early 1960’s, networks were attempting to produce a broadsheet journalistic style, possibly in reaction to the quiz show scandal of 1959\textsuperscript{7}. News and entertainment divisions became entirely separate. The networks made the news the flagship of their channels, taking pride of place as 'responsible television', television which performed a vital social role. Unlike the entertainment programs, newsrooms were not held to ratings. Indeed, Carl Stern, professor of Journalism at the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University and former law correspondent for NBC news, reports that news rooms at NBC were never even told their ratings until the mid eighties.\textsuperscript{8} The news borrowed its generic style from the print media. Broadsheet print based values provided the basis of the style of television news. In particular the print based discursive analytic style was taken over in the highly formalised tones of anchor men. The values of the print media dominated the model of the television news.

The television and news culture of the time participated in, and was critical of, the public domain. The evening news saw itself as a player in the 'ideal public sphere' in Habermas' (1991) sense: part of the Fourth estate with a responsibility to engage private citizens in the public domain of the government and of wider social issues. The public domain was conceptualised as the domain of government, of objective, rational talk, of public morality. The private world, the world of the domestic life of citizens and politicians, was protected. It was a space on which public comment was inappropriate. News thus positioned itself on television as a 'public' service, within a public space. The private world of romance, domestic issues and 'personal' life belonged on television only in fictional forms, such as soap opera. Such fictional forms had an immense moral and social impact. The myth of the all American (white, middle class) family, of individualism and the West, of gender were powerfully reproduced through the television. But those myths were concentrated on models of the private sphere, not on government or political process.

The dichotomy between what is public and what private is problematic,\textsuperscript{9} and was further problematised by the immediacy and visual force of television as medium. Television news, particularly morning programs, had a tendency to emphasise personalities and images over content; but this could be regarded as a failing of the medium, firmly resisted by the evening network news, which maintained its broadsheet tones. By the end of the 1960’s however, the divide between news and entertainment was under pressure. \textit{60 minutes}, which premiered on CBS in 1968, showed that news and current affairs could do well on the ratings. Once the role of news and current affairs in determining what channel was watched for an entire evening became clear, the race to win the infotainment war was on. The growth of cable and regional networks accelerated the process. By 1990, there were four commercial networks and more than one hundred regional and cable networks. When Rupert Murdoch launched the fifth broadcast network in 1987, he entered a saturated market. He won by programming Fox according to a familiar formula-tabloid journalism. \textit{A Current Affair} came first, taking the human interest angle on news, then \textit{America's Most Wanted} and \textit{Cops}—the first reality show, using real police shown chasing real suspects. The blurring of fact and fiction, soap and news had set in.

In straight news reporting, \textit{A Current Affair} was followed by \textit{Inside Edition} in 1988 and \textit{Hard Copy} in 1989. All three aligned themselves with the voice of traditional current affairs—introduced by anchors, each has three to four stories with a narrative and a team of correspondents who punctuate voice overs with editorial pieces to camera. The shows consist of discussions with experts, personal witnesses and commentary in the fashion of current affairs programs. The anchors sit behind a desk: a figure with the expertise and authority of a school master or magistrate. Yet tabloid anchors purposely undermine their authority, turning themselves into domestic and personal figures, rather than distant impartial judges.
Even more noticeable is the shift in content. The broadsheets defined a sphere of appropriate comment. They privileged an objective tone, and the large 'public' issues: the economy, the political process. The tabloid news shows, like the tabloid press and soap operas, have a different focus. The private domestic sphere of personalities, sexual peccadillo, romance, addiction take over from the public issues. The emphasis is on personal identification of the viewer with the characters in the story; on footage which invades private spaces. It is no surprise that hidden cameras and illicit amateur videos become so important in such programs. The viewer is no longer positioned as the impassive and judgmental observer, but as a family member, intimately involved in the issues, and able to identify with the plight—or good fortune—of all those portrayed. The stories are highly personalised and emphasise subjective reactions. Close-ups of interviewees addressed by their first names show their emotional reactions. Viewers are located so as to identify with the anchor, in whatever moral pose she takes. In special reports, reporters, while using traditional models of voice overs, make highly subjective comments.10

It would be simplistic to accuse the tabloid news alone of such characteristics. Traditional news presentations increasingly use many of the techniques and formats of soap opera and share the tendency to personalise and simplify issues. The lead-in gives the range of the news, to tie in viewers. The anchors use teasers to guarantee the audience will stay on for the commercial break, as in 'After this break...'. Reporters are put 'on the scene'; and report their reactions; even in the most 'objective' of reports, voice-overs give the impression of 'really being there'.

Yet all too often, the impression of the network having privileged access and the ability to make first hand 'objective' comment is manufactured. A striking example was given by Bill McLaughlin of a report about gun control in Britain on ABC, NBC and CBS on the 16 October 1996.11 Although all three networks have offices in London, they not only used the footage supplied by the British reports, but also used the footage in the same order, with virtually identical commentary, reflecting the British edit, although with their own voice overs.12 The networks implicitly laid claim to a veracity they simply do not have.

Carl Stern notes that in the mid eighties, the heads of newsrooms in the networks most of whom had been reporters were replaced by managers. The change came in the wake of a recognition by the networks that news could rate, and hence make—instead of lose—money. At the same time, network ownership moved from family hands into those of corporations, who insisted on profits. When Turner's CNN showed massive profits, in part because they used non-union labour, the networks followed. NBC cut one hundred and five correspondents worldwide to thirty three. At the same time, they stopped hiring union labour. The structure of the news was popularised and streamlined, so that news slots were determined well in advance of the stories coming in. By the late eighties, according to Stern, not a single producer in the NBC newsroom came from a background of journalism; all were managers. News was seen purely as a profit centre. He argues that this is a major factor in the changing of attitudes to news.13 News is no longer a product of a culture trained in determining and presenting the truth, but of a culture aimed at producing high ratings. The subsequent shift in news values is to entertainment driven news, rather than news driven by public concerns and an interest in the truth, even for the most reputable of newsrooms. While the public broadcasting networks and C-Span have resisted the soap opera style to some degree, they have done so at the risk of their own survival.

Does the loss of credibility of television news matter? Recent surveys by the Newseum/Roper Centre14 suggest that more than half, 54 percent, of Americans report that they watch the local news every day; that local TV
anchors were seen as reliable and that the news is trusted. On the other hand, a recent quantitative study of local TV news concludes that

A constellation of excess—mayhem, fluff, filler, ads, and racial and gender stereotyping—characterises local TV newscasts across the United States' (Klite et al, 1997: 108).

How can we the viewers not see the world 'as through a glass darkly', with such biased coverage as a window on the world?

Some argue that new technology will remedy the problem. Cable, and now the internet, they argue, have so altered viewing habits that consumption of the news will soon be only a minor factor in how the world is perceived. Thirty years ago, most people in the US (over 60 percent) watched the networks. A major report, such as that by CBS in the sixties on hunger, was seen by huge numbers and had a political impact. That is no longer so in the United States. The television audience has fragmented, with cable networks and the web coming into direct competition. This means that the networks now only share 50 percent of the audience—over the summer of 1996, only 37 percent. The New York Times of 3/10/97 notes that Nielsen's ratings show that viewers of television are down by one million in February 1997, a 'precipitous drop' (Carter, 1997, D1) which the networks, fearing for their advertising dollar, are blaming on the research tools.

The internet has also invaded the domain of the television news. A report released by Nielsen in January shows that homes attached to America Online do less television viewing than before (Carter, 1997, D10). Even the soap operas are losing their audience (Candely, 1997). Jon Katz, of Wired claimed that the young no longer acquire their news from the network evening news or the newspapers—rather they download from wire agencies, surf radio, pick and choose. The web offers tailored news, and the user groups and email sites have reclaimed interactivity for the media. Many are scornful of the abusive and often unscholarly dialect of the web. Others defend it. Jon Katz points out that the press, in the times of Thomas Paine, was originally partisan, abusive and highly interactive. Katz is broadly optimistic about the prospects of a highly literate and informed readership emerging from the web. His view is that Shirer's 'illiterate boobs' will become a highly argumentative public as it learns the highways of cyberspace. Others are more sceptical, for the web lacks gatekeepers and is already turning into as much a global information tip as a resource.

Lacking the gatekeepers and traditions of journalism, the net is even less reliable than the media. There is no guarantee of verisimilitude on the web: to the contrary. And the web too has moved to soap opera formats. Here Australia is in the forefront. I quote a report from an August 31, 1996.

Australia, which gave the world Neighbours, Home And Away and Prisoners, has brought home grown soap to the Internet with the launch of Friday's Beach. The teenage soap opera, created specifically for the internet, made its debut Tuesday.... It is the world's first professionally produced Internet drama... it exploits the Internet's interactive capabilities, ...

Viewers of the Web site can read written dialogue, view pictures and video segments transmitted digitally to their computers and hear audio segments... (Wilson, 1996).

The report goes on to explain that the soap is interactive—in so far as it allows the viewer the choice of which character to follow. One can 'listen in on' character's phone calls or email them. The director claims that the soap deals with 'serious' issues, such as 'steroid abuse and sex'. The question is, what is being done with the possibilities—to what extent is interactivity critical? Too often, being interactive amounts to sounding off. Like
radio talk back shows, interactive soaps are likely to have little real argumentation or regard for truth.

The internet as it supplies news is not yet truly revolutionary. It simply cobbles together news sources and interest groups in a novel fashion. The anecdote of the rise of the internet soap is a cautionary tale. The pattern of net use is likely to reflect the model of information found in more familiar media, at least in the short term. Moreover, net users, like television viewers, are in desperate need of skills for sorting out the information thrown at them. The internet, unlike television, allows a space where critical interactions could flourish; but as yet that space is underused.

In short, the decay of news values will not be quickly remedied by the new technology. When satellites beam five hundred channels into the house, there may, it is true, be a niche for broadsheet news, but that is little consolation to those concerned about the news as it is now viewed. And many features of television are shared by the web.

The world wide web, like television culture, is global; both share the features of a culture, the US media culture, which produces and funds a high proportion of the product. There are cultural variations in television product, and the large corporations have learnt to their cost, for instance in India, that a diet of straight US product is not what everyone wants. Regional patterns of television news and soap opera are not so much either global or national as communal. For instance, the Chinese diaspora across south east and east Asia create a global Chinese culture with components produced in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Mainland and also viewed in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. Even so, there is a recognisable continuity between news formats, and between the soap genre and news.

The spread of the soap genre is one of the most remarkable features of modern global cultures. In some cases, soaps themselves travel. The success of Mexican 'telenovelas' in Russia and China or of Australian soap operas such as Neighbours in Europe is a remarkable feature of modern culture. In other cases, the genre is adapted to local customs, as in Japan, India and Taiwan, so that the format and story lines are taken over and adapted to local circumstance. An interesting recent version of the development of soap operas in Eastern Europe is reported by Eugene Secunda of the US based Central European Media Enterprises Group. This group set out to buy private channels in the emerging markets of the Czech republic and Slovakia. Secunda explained the strategy: 'start a local soap and get in the audience, then bring the newsroom staff to New York and give them a crash course in exciting news at NY1'.

The link between soaps and NY1 style news bulletins is not a coincidence. There is a seamless web of television content which merges soap, commercials and news into a nightly diet based on the US model. It is a diet with a great deal of verve and excitement, with high, or at least costly, production values and immense subtlety of approach by the advertisers. It has produced a highly televisually literate generation, whose skills include the ability to deconstruct the medium itself. As the media guru Rushkoff puts it: 'Most kids are doing media deconstruction while watching television' (Gabriel, 1996). He goes on 'Their favourite shows come "pre-deconstructed" that is with built in distancing devices ...such shows earn the ultimate youthful phrase 'cool'. By cool, I mean seeing things from a distance'. (Gabriel, 1996). Rushkoff goes on to talk of the sort of deconstruction that kids seek in watching television:

What screenagers seek from television, multi media and other entertainment is the "aha" experience of making connections across their storehouse of media images' (Gabriel, 1996).

The sophistication of the audience has been part of the complex situation in which news and soap opera
interpenetrate. News is deconstructed by kids, but it is also interpreted through the understandings of the media gained through soap opera. A form of highly sophisticated intertextuality has served to superimpose genres across the converging technologies, so that the soap format has bled into the news.

This is a process which is most unlikely to be reversed, whatever the hopes of media critics. But it has heartening elements, among them the fact that audiences do not take television or internet content at face value. Instead, there is a process of largely inchoate evaluation and criticism already in place. It is significant, given the thesis that news is soap, that there is evidence that soap operas are discussed with passion. Recent studies (e.g. Steele & Brown, 1995) fill out the anecdotal evidence of the role of soap opera in adolescent lives. One 15 year old, Chelsea, says of the soap Growing Pains, 

it has a teenager in it and there are typical problems that you would have every day. It kinda helps you look at it and say, 'oh yeah, that's a different way to solve that problem' (Steele & Brown, 1995: 566).

Fiction and myth have always had a moral role of this type. George Eliot's Mill on the Floss, like Wolfe's Bonfire of the Vanities, not only produced social commentary, but also allowed us to see our lives differently. We debate over who was right or wrong, for instance, as a way of discovering our own moral attitudes. Television fiction plays the role of the great novel of the nineteenth century in this sense. It is no easy matter to judge guilt, for instance, or the worth of a presidential candidate. The fictional soap operas and sitcoms give us an impersonal way to begin debate about moral issues.

But while we talk about television and soap opera, we rarely do so with a high level of reflective and critical attention. We lack the skills to interrogate the content, whether of television or of the net. The skills needed for informed and critical debate about major public issues are not those which come automatically with the ability to deconstruct and say 'aha'. They are skills which have had a major role in Western culture for many years, and have been developed over centuries of debate, and of debate about how debate should proceed—of philosophical and political questioning. It is that skill to debate which is missing in the sophisticated young.

For the crux of the issue is the need for there to be a habit of critical scepticism, in particular with respect to news. Viewers of television and those who surf the net are not just consumers, but also citizens, voters and members of a society. Habermas in his classic, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, puts the point thus

In comparison with printed communication the programs sent by the new media curtail the reactions of the recipients in a peculiar way. They draw the eyes and the ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under "tutelage", which is to say they deprive of it the opportunity to say something and to disagree. The critical discussion of a reading public tends to give way to "exchanges about tastes and preferences" between consumers... . (Habermas, 1991, 171-2).

This was written in 1962, and in the eyes of many critics, the three decades of television viewing since his remarks have not engendered a skilled critical audience. Even David Buckingham, a noted defender of models of child based audience research and of research which valorises the understanding viewers bring to the media, talks of the danger of 'sentimentalising' children's grasp of television and the need for critical views. His talk was subtitled 'Cultural literacy in the electronic age' precisely because 'literacy is a kind of guarantee of citizenship' and 'modern societies are based on the electronic media'.
One approach to the issue is to call for a change in the ways television presents news—and indeed drama—by regulation and controls. Media action groups advocate public pressure to alter what can be seen on television. There are lobbies to reduce violence on television, others to promote religion, in the hope that by altering what is seen on television, society might improve. But this is a vain hope. In the global world of the new media, anything which is legally prevented from entering the home by broadcast or cable will come in down the phone lines and modem. Regulation has been playing a hopeless game of tag with the media since the beginning and, with the massive financial clout of the media now, is unlikely ever to catch up. Another approach is to engage citizens in producing of media, so that they will no longer be baffled and confused by the sleights of hand producers use. Calabrese and Burke, for instance, 'plea for a state which sees as its duty not only to sustain the best available means of democratic representation, but also to promote greater democratic participation at all level of society' (1992:61). They go on to consider the possibility of community television. This strategy is more hopeful, especially now production can be done on a PC. But I do not think it is the solution.

Television product is part of the common culture. We can develop the resources within the culture: the critical debate that already exists about television within the medium itself. Rather than seeing television as injecting a view of the world onto participants, we should see it as part and parcel of the culture. What is needed is not new television as much as new strategies for dealing with it: the ability to reason and be critical about television.

2. Reasoning and Television

Traditionally reasoning skills have been taught through written examples, some of which are highly anachronistic or artificial. However critical reasoning skills are required in order to filter and interpret the rapidly changing circumstances of the world around us—and those skills need to be relevant. Many students use television as their major source of information about the world and as the source of basic understanding of the world. Yet we rarely provide students with the skills directly to criticise and analyse television's world view. It is an obvious step to use the medium of television itself as a means of analysing television product critically and thereby of teaching viewers to reason.

'Reasoning' as it is used here has a broad application, to skills which range from analysis through inference to evaluation. Reasoning thus conceived is far broader than the set of logical skills often caricatured by non-logicians: it is rather, logical skills as conceived by many logicians and most informal logicians, as skills of interpreting and evaluating arguments, with all due contextual sensitivity. They are skills used by all from the youngest toddler when guessing at causal connections to the most theoretical of physicists or post modernists, drawing out implications of statements.

'Reasoning and television—an oxymoron' is a common reaction to the notion that reasoning can be taught through television. Television does not model rational behaviour. We see kids behaving bravely, adults behaving with sympathy, or dispassionately, but we almost never see people interacting as rational agents. This is as true of current affairs as it is of situation comedies and drama. Political debate has been reduced to a competition to discover who is more adroit with the one liners. I scanned the debates on US television before the last presidential election, hoping to find examples of "arguments" in the technical sense—sustained sets of premises on which a conclusion is based. I could find none. The debates consisted of bland assertions. One reason is clear. The Harvard survey of the average length of the soundbite—the segment of uninterrupted speech—for presidential candidates lasted 42 seconds on the evening news bulletins in 1968. By 1988 it was 9.8 seconds (Adatto 1990: 23); by 1992, 7.3 (Taylor, 1992: 41). There is simply no room for debate on television.
Yet reasoning skills as conceived above do appear on television; and can be refined using debate about television. If we hope to set standards of critical evaluation of the media for students, we need to model the behaviour required. This involves a two part process—criticising content and argument strategies as they appear on the television or the internet, and training students to identify rational and irrational moves themselves. There are (at least) two major ways of training students to be rational. One method involves the use of logic exercises in a classical framework, which would in this case need to be applied specifically to television product. The model here is, for instance, to ask students to look for fallacies in advertisements, or to identify the argument strategies in a debate; or the moral position in a current affairs talk.

Another method is Socratic, involving a process of debate and inquiry in a group, in such a way that students become able to question what they and others say, according to criteria of rationality. My model is derived from Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children, although it has many other antecedents, including Dewey and Habermas. The aim is to encourage a particular sort of debate, based on television product—not the familiar style of prurient speculation or questions of "who won", but a debate about the philosophical and logical moves made in television product. The ethical issues have received attention, but the sheer logical incongruity of many presentations offers a starting point for discussion.

It has been argued that print differs from other media in being uniquely well suited to logical thought. If that were so, the teaching of reasoning through television would be misguided. Postman (1993) suggests that the linear patterns of thinking may be undermined by the immediacy and impact of television, and that hot links on the internet also fail to encourage the development of logical thinking skills. Eisenstein's (1983) finely worked analyses of the impact of print have been developed by some to suggest that television, with its plethora of clues, limits the imagination, and the demands made on the viewer. Print, on the other hand is both 'linear' and demanding—the imagination is working double time to think through images given in language, while at the same time interpreting the logical links explicit in written language.

One example suffices to illustrate and question Postman's point. In the New York Times late last year Rupert Murdoch, placed a full page ad. It reads:

"I'm about to dust some cops off.
Die pig, die pig, die."

Time Warner used the First Amendment's protection of free speech in its unwavering support for these lyrics, from "Cop Killer", by Time Warner Recording Artist Ice-T.

After all, profits were at stake.
Now, Time Warner believe the FOX news Channel poses a threat to the Profits of its CNN.
And this time, Time Warner cites the First Amendment to deny New Yorkers the right to see the Fox News Channel.

The First Amendment protects free speech, not Time Warner profits.

Support, don't distort the First Amendment
Don't block the FOX News Channel
The advertisement is very effective, not surprisingly. One can only wonder at what the cost might have been. As George Steiner put it, advertising is the poetry of the modern age—and the hours of highly paid agonising over the right phrase by teams of highly intelligent ad executives do pay off. The sheer effrontery of using others’ controversial lyrics to grab attention is remarkable. But the ad also has a highly complex logical structure. It accuses Time Warner of inconsistency. It is an instance of the form of argument which finds a contradiction or inconsistency, and takes this inconsistency as grounds for rejecting the view. The form of argument is widely accepted as valid.

Can we conceive of such a complex form of argument on television? Not in as dry and 'logical' a format as in the press, perhaps, but in other forms. The familiar television strategy of accusations of 'hypocrisy' while highly personalised, has the same fundamental logical form.

It is an error to identify print alone as suitable for reasoning skills. Being reasonable is fundamentally a feature of discourse and action, not of written linear texts. It is only a contingent feature of our culture that extended patterns of reasoning do normally appear in print. Still, there is one feature of television which leads to the thought that it is less logical than print, namely the fact that visual media evoke immediate and emotional reactions and hence are not as cognitively complex as print. Evidently, reactions to television differ from those to print, and may be more emotional. But it does not follow that emotional reactions are unreasonable or different in kind from reasoning. It is still beholden on us to develop the reasoning abilities of those who watch television, especially when television is not just entertainment but a route to finding out about the world.

From the perspective of the project of teaching reasoning skills through television in order to better equip viewers for life in a democracy, the increasing juxtaposition of the fictional soap opera format and the news bulletin has serious consequences. It is not a trivial matter if the viewer of the evening news bulletin is geared to expect soap opera themes. Soaps, intended though they may be to help us understand the world, are not intended to be about the 'public' world of the news, nor are they intended to be true. In Western thought, the virtues of the public and private domains have been characterised independently. 'Statesmanship', rationality, judgment, the balancing of alternatives, the evaluation of consequences: such have been the characteristic public virtues. These are clearly virtues which, from the philosopher kings of Plato's Republic, through Mill to present day theorists such as Rawls, place value on ratiocination, on the divorce of the good from the personal, and on a generalised application of principle. The domestic private virtues were quite different—sympathy, the recognition of special duties and rights (of the parent to the child, for instance) and a recognition of particular cases.

As the evening news assimilates the conventions of soap opera, the two moral universes collide. We are no longer asked to judge what is the appropriate behaviour for a President or a Secretary of State in the public domain as opposed to their private lives. Instead, the private virtues dominate—sympathy, warmth, intelligence, special relationships. In such a model of the statesman, private life is a guide to public virtue: and indeed the only measure of public virtue is the private. Campaign fund scandals and Madeleine Allbright's unacknowledged Jewish parentage take on more force than renegotiation of welfare or the NATO pact.

W. H. Auden's lines:

Private faces in public places
Are wiser and nicer
Than public faces in private places
bring out the distaste many feel at the parading of the private affairs of public figures. Yet television specialises in putting public faces into the home, the most private of places. The *New York Times* (Bruni, 1997) cites a number of cases in which the private affairs of public figures are publicised, with their agreement. Messinger, who revealed that her daughter was gay and a mother, said 'I think people like to know that their elected officials are not plastic figures but real people' (Bruni, 1997, B2). The personalisation of public figures is a process so entrenched that it becomes the focus of public figures themselves.

Habermas saw this as a major danger.

The public sphere becomes the sphere for the publicising of private biographies, so that the accidental fate of the so-called man in the street or that of the systematically managed stars attain publicity, while publicly relevant developments and decisions are garbed in private dress and through personalisation distorted to the point of unrecognisability. The sentimentality towards persons and the corresponding cynicism towards institutions ... curtail the subjective capacity for rational criticism of public authority ... (Habermas, 1991: 171-2)

However the tendency to emphasise the private has positive aspects. Our traditional Western notion of the public sphere has emphasised the masculine at the expense of the domestic 'feminine' virtues (Benhabib 1992; Fraser, 1993; Young, 1990) and has played down the fact that major political public decisions are made by private individuals generally well aware of their private interests and special relationships. The 'higher truth' of the broadsheet and the traditional news bulletin had inherent bias towards established interests, towards those who were in command of the public forms of rhetoric, thereby reducing those on the margins, whether for reasons of race, gender or educational difference, to near invisibility. The television talk shows empower the private individuals in a society to take a voice, to participate in the public sphere, if now a public sphere very different from the Habermasian ideal. Oprah's talk shows provide another, more personal, narrative route to an understanding of the world: a route which, in some sense is preferable, since it includes those minorities, such as women and African Americans, who are implicitly excluded by the WASP tones of the older style evening news bulletin.

There is a further problem, however. The role of television news is not merely to empower, or to entertain, but also to inform, to convey truths. Information and truth are difficult concepts, but, to put it pragmatically, knowledge about the world is itself a critical element in the ability to survive. If indeed we find out about the world via television, and the soap opera style of the news is an element in distorting the boundaries between fact and fiction, then there is no reliable basis for action. Again Habermas puts the issues well

The integration of the once separate domains of journalism and literature, that is to say of information and rational-critical argument on the one side and *belles lettres* on the other, brings about a peculiar shifting of reality—even a conflation of different levels of reality. Under the common denominator of so-called human interest emerges the *mixtum compositum* of a pleasant and at the same time convenient subject for entertainment that, instead of doing justice to reality, has a tendency to present a substitute more palatable for consumption and more likely to give rise to an impersonal indulgence in stimulating relaxation than to the public use of reason (1991:170).
News now blurs the divide between fiction and fact, so that OJ Simpson or Mr Clinton are only marginally real characters, playing on the edge of the fictional divide. How can we keep the role of debate and critical thought alive? Can we expect to save a notion of truth in the post modern uncertainty of what truth could be? I suggest that there is a role for old fashioned critical thinking skills even here, at the borders of the divide between fact and fiction.

It has become fashionable to decry the appeal to truth as some Platonic ideal which exists independently of human apprehension, in a God's eye view of the world. In reaction to the pomposity of those who thought that the truth and the whole truth could be captured on a television news broadcast with a BBC style, it is natural to object that truth is far more various and difficult to get right than a simple formula would allow. Consider, for instance, the truth about Bosnia—is there one, or are there many truths? Could we not get best access to the truths about Bosnia through the personal stories of victims from different sides, or from such documentary films as *The Bridge* which portray the truth in narrative mode? In reaction to this line of thought, many reject the very natural and inviting correspondence theory of truth. Yet the theory that the truth is what corresponds in some as yet unspecified way to how things are in the world is particularly seductive when it comes to television news. This is in part because television news has a relatively uncomplicated relationship to fact. The evening news, it is natural to claim, just reflects a subset of the infinite number of events of the day, according to some criteria such as salience. This impression is reinforced by the use of images which, being photographic, seem to reflect the world as it is. A version of the picture theory of meaning, such as that proposed by the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, seems tailor made for television news.

Wittgenstein himself grew sceptical of the approach of the *Tractatus*, in particular of the search for a relation of correspondence and of assumptions about the way language is constructed and related to the world. Others, such as Davidson (1967), have been more sanguine about the possibility of using a Tarski style truth definition, in a suitably relativised way, to spell out the way the structure of the language is related to the truth predicate. Yet, in general, concerns about language have undermined a belief in truth. Critics of the media at the same time have pointed out how the framing of media stories can influence their impact, the intense biases in what is shown and how it is presented, even to the fact that only stories with 'vision' make it to air.

I advocate a middle way. The notion of truth is difficult, but that need not lead to a slide into relativism. It is quite coherent to be sceptical of particular accounts of truth, yet allow that certain methods characterise a central mode of establishing truth. It is possible to distinguish 'strict and literal' truths, associated with canonical means of establishing veracity, from truths in fiction, whose veracity does not depend in the same way on the world. Without such a distinction, we would be at a loss to describe behaviour. When we accuse a politician of lying, we appeal to those modes of determining truth in the broadest sense. The practices of establishing truth are deeply established in the culture. We can still accept that fiction is a route to understanding the world: but the assertions made in fiction are not strictly and literally true.

Post modern arguments can be adduced against this position, suggesting that fiction and non fiction are far more deeply intertwined than this simplistic division suggests. The very possibilities of what can be said truly or falsely, it might be argued, are themselves set by the fictional discourse. This is a persuasive and pervasive view. Miller's (1993) example shows that the influence is mutual: from fiction to non fiction and back again.
meaning is fixed at the level of the structures of the text, but compromised by shifting relations between particular discourses of the human sciences and the representational text—for instance, the state of popular medical knowledge and its intersection with an account of science fiction medicine in a short story...

It is in tracing the deployment of these protocols of mapping, the actual cartography of superimposing nonfictive knowledge onto fictive that we may find the meaning, the referentiality, the political effect/affect of texts. (Miller, 1993, 65)

The argument here is that there is a symbiotic relationship between soap opera and news, with each influencing the other, in just the fashion Miller describes. But a relationship is quite consistent with the need to draw a distinction, at some level, between the fictional and non-fictional, as indeed Miller does. As Miller argues, the fictional sets the parameters of citizenship, so that actual political action is circumscribed by the possibilities of action in fiction. Soap opera, by emphasising the personal, has reduced the space of political action, thus narrowing what can count as news.

This is not to recommend a return to the broadsheet tones of the network news. The public modes of talk of the traditional news were and are gendered and ethnically marked tones of the public sphere, tones which, as Miller explains, delimit the identities of citizenship of a community. It is possible to incorporate other voices and argument styles and the language of a range of classes into the public voice, without abandoning truth. The syntactic ploys of the 'serious' newsreader, the use of the passive, the assumptions of objectivity, are neither necessary or sufficient for truth. Truth consists, I have suggested, in ways of establishing truth, not just in ways of expressing truth. A news report which uses narrative styles and vague language may serve the purpose of conveying truths just as well as the public voice. Indeed an elliptical or vague statement, or a personal one can be as strictly true-or false-as any impersonal precise statement.

Accepting that the aim of news is truth does not simplify the debate about how we assess or deal with the truth claims made on news. It does allow us to account for the fact that truth claims are made: whatever the evening or tabloid news programs assert, they do not lay claim to being soap opera. The methods for establishing truth are multiple and various. One subset of methods for establishing truth is the group of 'reasoning skills'. Reasoning skills are skills we use constantly in assessing the world. Among the features of the world we now live in television product looms large. I advocate honing those skills on television itself.

There is indirect evidence that truth has become a focus of attention in the media. Television commercials characteristically aim to be unsettling, to cut at the margins of issues which are exercising a community. Toby Miller notes the following statistic: while in 1993, six hundred ads in the US mentioned truth, by 1994 two thousand did (Fitzgerald, 1994). The mention of "truth" here calls out for investigation. Understanding what is going on in appeals to 'truth' requires hard philosophical leg work. It is truth, as it is used in the ads, that we need to begin to address when we talk of television. Kids and adults have been told that television is a capitalist plot. They don't want to talk about that. What they want to do is talk about what interests them—what the Nike ad, 'Just do it' means, or even what 'true' means in an ad. Kids are not interested in the meta-level debate about whose interests are served by television; but they are interested in issues like fairness, truth, reality. Try asking yourself about the Cannon ad, for a laser printer-'Its only competition is reality'. What is real and what is unreal about a photocopy, colour or not? Surely photocopies are real photocopies.... It is an easy step to asking what is real or not about the evening news, whether crime and mayhem are more real than a quiet day at home; whether Clinton's private life is more real than his political life. The philosophical debate is a natural place for
refining reasoning skills and, at the same time, a natural place to raise the issues of truth and the personalisation of news I have been concerned with.

It is a moot point whether training in reasoning skills will quantifiably improve the way viewers of television act in the world, or indeed their understanding of the world. This is in part because of the difficulty of obtaining definite proof that viewing television news—or any type of televised product—actually alters behaviour, fundamental though that assumption is to both ad agencies and political campaigns. I do not require such definite proof, for I advocate merely that we use television as a site for the inculcation of reasoning skills.

I finish with another New York gleaning, this time from a department store called Barney's. I was wandering in the store when I saw a huge sign Philosophy. It was a trade mark for a range of cosmetic products—and I quote the booklet.

logic
what is reasonable and what is unreasonable
when it comes to skin care?
(philosophy sales booklet, Barneys, 1996, p.8)

Not just truth, but reasoning itself has become an issue which advertisers have latched on to: evidence that there is a need for reason and logic, not only in television, it seems, but also in cosmetics.

Notes

1. Walker was talking at the Brookings Institute in Washington, to Harkness scholars, 2/7/97.

2. Ralph Begleiter of CNN claimed at a Media Studies Forum, NY, 02/20/97, that CNN's ratings quintupled as a result of their choice to run the first OJ trial. The taste for the trial has proved utterly insatiable.

3. For instance, in 1989 the ABC correspondent Jeff Greenfield talked of the concerns about tabloid television when he addressed the Radio-Television News Directors Association, identifying a trend towards 'tabloid TV, trash TV the new nonfiction television programs that feature murders, celebrity break-ups and sex scandals'. (Weiss, 1989:38). For Greenfield, the degradation of news 'seemed to threaten the American way of life, even the American family' (Weiss, 1989, p. 38).

4. This is summarised in a number of standard histories of Mass Communication research, such as McQuail, 1987.


7. Hallin significantly comments that the news gave the networks 'a claim to be something more than a high tech way of selling detergent'(1994:97).

9. I here gloss a number of issues, which I return to later in the paper: but I refer to Robbins 1989 and Poole, 1989, as good sources for the underlying tensions in the notion of the public sphere.

10. To consider one example, *Hard Copy* ran a story on 02/10/97 concerning the murder in Boulder Colorado of the 5 year old Jo Benet Ramsey, a quintessential soap opera theme. She was an attractive if overexposed child of a church going blended family, with murder, possibly incest, divorce and an arrest in the offing. Like any good soap, the story just keeps on going. It seems impossible that more should be milked from it, and indeed, the item was rather thin. A former baby sitter came forward, and said the family was 'cold'. She was unattractive; and there was no other new footage. But the demands of the soap are paramount. The story ran. With almost no evidence, there was room for a suggestion that the move towards the triumph of the good was on track.

11. Media Studies Centre seminar 02/20/97.

12. The global correlate of this process of reusing footage and the accompanying voice overs has been traced by Peter Putnis, in Australia—all too often the very same comments survive transpositions from US, British, Australian and even Singaporean commentaries.

13. Carl Stern in a meeting at George Washington University, 3/4/97 and later phone conversation 4/17/97. He claimed that until the mid 80's news at NBC was losing money yet the news room never even saw ratings. This has evidently changed massively.

14. Reported in the Freedom Forum seminar, 'If it Leads, it Bleeds' 05/01/97, New York.

15. According to Brian Lamb of C-Span 11/19/96, Centre for Communication Inc, meeting.

16. At the same meeting, 11/19/96, Centre for Communication Inc.

17. It is important to note that much of the web is not interactive: the so called 'Dole' sites which are full of whizzbang graphics and answers to questions about his policy are not interactive in any real sense. Interactivity would require the possibility of a response to a question—which Dole, and many sites do not genuinely offer.

18. 11/19/96, Centre for Communication Inc, meeting.

19. Eugene Secunda, Central European Media Enterprises Group, NYU 02/26/97 went on to explain that the CME group stations have an astonishingly high viewership—80 percent ratings in several markets. The claim could not be independently confirmed.

20. I am grateful to Fisher Keller for this reference.

21. Talk at NYU 02/25/97.
22. The talk was titled 'Teaching the Media', NYU 02/25/97, and is quoted with permission.

23. There are those who might take this as a case of the absurdity of deriving anything from a contradiction, formally p& - p therefore q—in other words, CNN is inconsistent so Fox must be right...

24. This was noted by one respondent, at a presentation of the paper in Hawaii, 04/15/97, to whom I owe thanks.

25. This view was put to me forcefully by Jo Ellen Fisher Keller in discussion.

26. While the logic of television has been much discussed, there is little access to the critical debate except for those who are reading media criticism in print. The World Wide Web will give us further space for a debate which may be accessible to those actually caught in its skeins. Patricia Aufderheide, long a critic of the private interests in television, called for a new public space—a space of debate—on the web itself. Patricia Aufderheide was speaking last year (12/11/96, NYU) about the impact of new technologies. Even Jon Katz, arch priest of the web, says 'it has to be translated into the civic process that is rational'. Center for Communication Inc (11/19/96).

27. This is culturally specific: and does not apply to e.g. Chinese thought—see the discussion of public and private virtue in Chinese thought in Hui, et al 1993. In Chinese traditional thought, the domestic and state virtues are identical, and depend on the preservation of the hierarchies of respect, together with a tolerance for inconspicuous deviance.

28. I am grateful to Todd Gitlin for this reference.

29. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, for instance.

30. Miller, 1993 gives a range of examples. Kress (1986) discusses the print media and the details of the contrast between the public objective tone of the broadsheet and the personalised tone of the tabloid press report of the same story, about a court decision on the actions of the Builder's Labourer's Federation, an Australian union. He links the manner in which news sources constructs the readers or viewers as public or private personae to implicit class categorisations. When the quality press headline reads 'Full Bench announces decision on BLF today' and uses the passive and impersonal forms of verbs, it places the reader as middle class, participating in a public world. The tabloid reads: 'Too busy for court, says Norm'. It concentrates on personalities, quoting the leader of the BLF and structuring the story around his direct—in both senses—speech. The reader is metaphorically invited to the pub with Norm, as a private, not a public figure, with particular class associations.

31. Try, as it happens, "I am not bald" uttered by me, now.

32. In conversation.

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