



## Citizens on the Couch: The ‘Us People’- Potential of the Television Experience

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*From the end of the 1990s the notion of cultural citizenship has been loaded with several meanings and definitions in Western-European media studies. From a perspective which is highly influenced by cultural studies, cultural citizenship has been described as a bottom up fulfilment or accomplishment of citizenship through popular culture. In particular the idea of feeling connected with the other(s), with a wider community, with other ‘ordinary’ people has been prominently linked up with the idea of cultural citizenship (cf. Barnhurst 1998; Meijer 1998; Hermes 1998; Hermes & Stello 2000; van Zoonen 1999). Many scholars agree that the mass media are playing a central role, and hence are contributing to the construction of a stretched fellowship, association and connectivity with humankind. In this context it has been pointed out that in a late modern world which is both more heterogeneous and global, humanity has become the major connection among people (Turner 1994).*

*This paper discusses the im/possibility of television to enhance such feelings of community, solidarity and connectivity among ‘ordinary’ people. The paper is based on a critical review of theoretical thinking and empirical evidence on how TV enables and constrains the sense of belonging to ‘a’ humankind, from a public’s perspective. The paper draws on our own research on the reception of documentary soap among Northern Belgian (Flemish) television viewers.*


*We focus on television for two reasons. First, we believe that television remains the most popular and cross-demographic and cross-cultural medium, intersecting and interconnecting people all over the world (Hartley 1999). Television is what we share with other people also taking part of the television experience. Second, more than other media, television represents ‘a peopled world’, a world lived and made by people. In particular through the expansion of reality television, such as real-life soaps featuring ‘ordinary’ people, what we see on television are by foremost other people.*

## Introduction

In the cultural studies' literature, which we find as an audience researcher a useful starting point for studying the concrete, common and lived practices of cultural citizenship, there seems to exist an unorganised consensus about the definition of cultural citizenship. When used for discussing the part popular culture plays in the creation of 'civic capital' (Meijer 1998), citizen-identities (Dahlgren 1998; Heater 1990) or the feeling of citizenship (Heater 1990), the following rather 'thoughtful' or 'reflective' practices are seen as constitutive for cultural citizenship: self-reflexivity and identity construction, the capability or power to act and think differently and, last but not least, membership of wider communities. That is, popular cultural experiences (cf. Meijer 1998) are believed to generate 'civic capital' whenever they involve one of these 'thoughtful' practices (e.g. Hermes & Stello 2000). It is somehow controversial to use the notion of thoughtfulness in relation to citizenship, because of its connotation with rationality. As feminist social and cultural theorists have pointed out, the equation between citizenship and rational thinking had led to the exclusion of personal feelings and emotions from the public sphere and, as a consequence, has resulted in the exclusion of women as full citizens and the rejection of popular culture as a forum where people can exercise their citizenship (Fraser 1992; MacDonald 1998; Dahlgren 1995). Still, authors seem to agree that there can be no cultural citizenship without some kind of reflection on the part of the people involved (cf. Hermes & Dahlgren 2006: 260). This, one might say, is a kind of 'evaluation criterion' audience researchers can use to study the qualities, but also the limitations of popular culture experiences as an instance of citizenship. It is this double-sided perspective, which is the point of departure of Joke Hermes' book *Re-reading Popular Culture* (2005) that is also our angle from which we have been reading television audience practices as citizenship practices. Does television pass the citizenship test? What are its qualities, but also what are its limitations as a tool for citizenship? (cf. Hermes 2005: vii)

Today, in the cultural citizenship debate and research one of the key/core questions is how popular culture can contribute to a concrete sense of community (Barnhurst 1998; Meijer 1998; Hermes 1998; Hermes & Stello 2000; Hermes 2005). Many have pointed out that feeling connected with differing others has become a major challenge for the culturally heterogeneous post-modern society (Stevenson 1997; Hartley 1999; van Zoonen 1999). As Bryan S. Turner (1994: 166) argues, the traditional concept of citizenship, as relevant to a period in history in which modern states promoted a homogeneous nationhood, should be replaced by a new form of citizenship based on the convergence between the idea of global human rights and post-modern cultural complexity.

This paper presents an empirical elaboration on the 'bonding potential' of popular culture. The theoretical ideas that underpin our audience study are only rudimentarily discussed. Our focus is definitely on the experiential nature




of cultural citizenship. Second, we concentrate on one peculiar popular medium experience, namely the television experience, in which a sense of community might be produced. Third, our perspective is double-sided, meaning that we will try to describe conditions that enable and disable community feelings when watching other people on television. Although our study started from a bottom-up approach which distances itself from prescriptive and normative definitions of media and citizenship, we believe the double-sided perspective cannot escape a set of values against which the so-called lived citizenship is tested. On this point we share Peter Dahlgren's (1995: 3) idea that the importance of a vision or, as he calls it, a horizon should not be undervalued. Understanding the emptiness (cf. Hermes 2005) or Sisyphus-like character (cf. Dahlgren 1995) of our condition and still not giving up on a moral vision is without any doubt the major challenge of the double-sided perspective.

### The 'bonding potential' of television

If television has been blamed for the retreat from the public sphere, for the inwardness of modern citizens and the erosion of social capital and solidarity (Baudrillard 1979 [1972]; Putnam 2000; Postman 2000; Hart 1999), others have theorised television's bonding potential with convincing historical, sociological and phenomenological arguments. It is these constructive arguments about the part played by television in forging a sense of community, we have taken as our starting point.

One of the main arguments on which many authors have collaborated in the discussion about television and togetherness is precisely the popularity of the medium. This popularity has to be understood in Hermes' (2005: 4) definition 'of and for the people'. People 'own' television, not in the political economical sense of the word, of course, but in a more ethnographical understanding. People have quickly 'appropriated' the medium, have made it their own. It is there for them. They can love it, despise it, hate it, long for it, forget it, but it remains their medium, insofar that so-called expert television criticism (by acknowledged journalists or commentators) is severely dismissed by 'ordinary' viewers (see the letters sent to television magazines) and viewers themselves discuss the television output in the same letters or, today, more and more on the internet.

But there is more to television's popularity. The medium is also 'about the people'. It is Scannell (1992) who has demonstrated that broadcasting, both radio and television, gave voices to the voiceless and faces to the faceless, creating new communicative entitlements for excluded social groups. This is also one of the key ideas in John Hartley's (1999) theorising work on television and citizenship. He describes television as the medium par excellence that teaches different groups in society how '*others look, live, speak, behave, relate, dispute, dance, sing, vote, decide, tolerate, complain. Television is a*




*major source of “people-watching” for comparison and possible emulation’,* so he argues (Hartley 1999: 155). This means that if television contributes to citizenship, and according to Hartley this is most definitely the case, it does this by teaching people about other people and by promoting difference understood as ‘neighbourliness’ (Hartley 1999: 159). As such, to feel affinity with socially and culturally distinct others might be one of the major unexpected consequences of television.

A last argument for understanding the ‘bonding potential’ of television is grounded in a more phenomenological oriented approach of the medium. Many authors, reacting against the Enlightenment definition of the rational citizen identity, have argued that if television viewership is discussed as a potential moment of citizenship, researchers should focus on television’s capability to touch and engage the feelings and thoughts of its audiences. So the strength of television is not to be found in its being an informational source, but rather an emotional source which fosters feelings of sympathy, solidarity and empathy with other human beings (Dahlgren 1995; Thompson 1995; MacDonald 1998). John Corner (1995) has described the emotionality of the television experience as one of the driving forces of community building among modern citizens.

So television ‘seeing’ can have resonance which elicits from its viewers certain kinds of investments of self which other media cannot so easily generate, if at all. This capacity is an important aspect of its ‘public’ character - to call viewers into empathy and understanding; to create a ‘virtual community’ of the commonly concerned, of vicarious witness; to cut through accommodating abstraction with the force and surprise of ‘things themselves’. (Corner 1995: 31)

In his phenomenological analysis of the characteristics of the television experience, John Ellis (2000) elaborates on this theme. He argues that a particular form of witnessing was developed which was distinct from the forms of witnessing that the other media and cultural experiences had enabled. First, so he argues, television gave people the possibility, opportunity or chance to come extremely close to, what Ellis calls, ‘outpourings of emotion, or the visible marks of emotional repression’ (Ellis 2000: 32). Ellis has attributed this so-called extreme proximity with other unknown human beings to early television drama, but today it seems that the wide variety of factual and reality television formats in which people are shown in a naturalistic way (‘life as it is’ is the title of docusoap-series broadcast by the Flemish public service television) has taken over this role. Second, Ellis (2000: 33) stresses that television turned the act of witnessing into a domestic act, happening in the home rather than in a public space of entertainment, or so we could add, in a public space of citizenship. Third, Ellis attributes great potential to, what he calls, television’s process of working through. It is the constant process of making, remaking and exploring definitions, explanations, narratives and speculations about social life. Ellis insists that this never-ending process is non-totalizing and comes to no conclusions (Ellis 2000: 78-81). Nevertheless he



argues that television's process of working through produces something which, for the purpose of our research, is an interesting claim with regard to the bonding potential of television. So, he argues, in a post-modern world where differing beliefs and lifestyles are connecting and disconnecting, 'sympathy' is needed and sympathy is the product of television's process of working through.


By placing explanations, rearranging the facts, looking from all possible angles, using the different emotional registers of its different genres, television is able to produce sympathy across the process of differentiation that is modern consumer society. This process never comes to a definitive conclusion because none are available. It pushes the multiplicity of explanation as far as it will go, making the strange seem understandable, or at least acceptable. To that extent only, television in the era of availability can be seen as a post-modern form. (Ellis 2000: 85)

Although Ellis' work does not explicitly link up with the discussion on the role of television in the citizenship experience, he addresses key issues regarding the bonding potential of television. Television is a medium that makes us witnesses of human behaviour, provides us '*with far more knowledge than we need to have in order to function as citizens*' (Ellis 2000: 80) and helps us to work through the uncertainty of social life and as such produces sympathy for other beliefs and lifestyles. But how exactly is this 'civic potential of television' experienced by television viewers? What does it mean to be a witness through television, to be near to other people's experiences from the outer world entering our inner world? If citizenship is to be found on the couch, we must turn our attention to the act of witnessing and ask ourselves how people are dealing with this domestic experience of emotional proximity and which forms of sympathy the process of working through is producing.

### **Connectedness with others**

Let us now turn to the experiences of television viewers themselves. As many audience researchers, we have chosen to talk with television viewers and let them tell in their own words how they relate to television. If we are looking for instances of citizenship, we believe we must analyse the talk of people, in which they express their thoughtful feelings.

The interviews, on which this paper is based, date from a few years ago and inevitably refer to programmes which no longer exist. At the same, our re-reading of the interviews surprised us because a lot of programmes and television tendencies still exist. In total 75 television viewers were interviewed by myself and a group of students. We talked with 31 men and 44 women, between twenty and seventy-seven years of age. Although we aimed for a large diversity with respect to the social, cultural and economic position of the informants, we used three criteria for the selection of our informants. First, no students were interviewed because of their frequent appearance in qualitative



audience studies. Second, we decided to exclude people with a university degree, because of their rather snobbish attitude towards TV and their tendency to manage and manipulate the impression the interviewer gets of them. Third, we aimed for viewers who engage on a daily basis with television and tune in for several hours. This makes them rather 'ordinary' since 68,1% of the Flemish population watches television on a daily basis and approximately 50% of the Flemish population watches at least two hours a day.

We could call the people we talked to 'couch citizens', because they make use of television rather intensively. In Roger Silverstone's words, it is people for whom television plays a central role in providing symbolic resources for creating and sustaining order in their daily lives and for finding and positioning themselves within that order (Silverstone 1999: 114). We are not claiming that they only use television to get connected with social matters and other, unknown people and co-citizens. At the time of the interview, all informants also used other media and also led an 'outwards' life, meaning: they met people in more formal and organised settings (at work, in hobby clubs, in associations) and informal social gatherings (with friends and family). The reason we focused on these people, is they have not been 'treated kindly by certain academics' (cf. Hermes & Dahlgren 2006: 262). In Flanders, only a few years ago, television viewers were still being stigmatised as asocial, distrustful and antidemocratic citizens - especially the so-called commercial television viewers were the target (Hooghe 2002).

It is also a group that remains rather invisible, with no one performing a job with high status or playing a social role with high public rewards. Loyal to cultural studies' concern, our search for those ordinary people has been motivated by, what Nick Stevenson (1999: 10) has called 'a normative desire to uncover the voices and perspectives of ordinary people' and a 'concern with the deep inequalities that structure how individuals emerge as speaking subjects at all' (Couldry 2006: 326). In their voices and perspectives, 'rarely heard in the everyday outpourings of centralised media messages' (Stevenson 1999: 10), we have been looking for 'the (hidden) resources for citizenship' (Hermes & Dahlgren 2006: 262).

One question has guided the re-reading of our interviews. How does television contribute to a sense of community with other people? How do viewers express a sense of connectedness and disconnectedness with others? The notion of connectedness with other people is used in the sense that Hartley has put forward: people-watching. Being witness to other people on television, what does this entail?

## Television and the connectedness with others: watching other ordinary people

Although our audience study didn't start as a case-study (we talked with the informants about their television experiences in general), in the interviews we focused on the performance of 'ordinary people' on TV (we will not be using the quotation marks anymore, although we feel a bit uncomfortable with this expression, but then again, it is an expression used by people themselves). The reflections of our informants have to be understood in the overall context of the northern-Belgian television landscape since the late 1980s. When in 1989 commercial television arrived,<sup>1</sup> a new era of television programming was marked. In particular VTM, the oldest and biggest commercial television channel in northern Belgium, made it its adagio to broadcast programmes which not only responded to the needs and wants of ordinary people, but also mirrored the social life of common people in Flanders. This manoeuvre to win over the viewers who had strongly resisted the paternalistic, elitist approach of public service television in those years and who had been watching the Dutch television for years,<sup>2</sup> was immediately successful.


One television programme that became exemplary and even iconic for the new style of television was 'Jammers', a human interest magazine made by the former public service television reporter Paul Jammers. Each edition of this programme, every week on Thursday evening for more than fifteen years, reported on three unusual people, all united in a peculiar lifestyle, habit or behaviour. After then, the performance of ordinary people became a firm/established ingredient of the Flemish television offer. After the internal reform of the public service, public service television also joined this human interest-movement with a boom of docusoaps. All these programmes, very different in approach, came up in the interviews, but it is clear that 'Jammers', once a big ratings shot but today not broadcasted anymore on the Flemish television, elicited the most vivid reflections. 'Jammers' is an interesting programme, because of its aim: showing beliefs and lifestyles that are very different from ours. If television has the capacity to make the strange understandable, acceptable and sympathetic (cf. Ellis 2000) and to show difference as neighbourliness (cf. Hartley 1999) then 'Jammers' is an interesting test case because of its radical approach towards ordinary Flemish people. The answers of our informants often crystallized around this specific television programme.

All informants, with no exception, were firmly convinced that 'the ordinary people shown in this reportage magazine, are extremities, who are not representative for the 'man in the street', for the average citizen'. 'It is

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<sup>1</sup> On February 1<sup>st</sup> 1989 the first Flemish commercial television (VTM, Vlaamse Televisie Maatschappij) started.

<sup>2</sup> Between 1972 and 1989 20 to 25% of the Dutch speaking viewers in Belgium watched on a regular basis the Dutch television.



people who are obviously from another kind than we are'. 'We are definitely not them'. This distinctive mode of talk ('we are not them') framed/structured all the answers with regard to 'Jambers'. Nobody recognised nor identified himself/herself in or with the people that 'Jambers' presented. In that sense, the men and women who made a performance in this programme were considered as 'socially and culturally distant others' although most of the 'cases' in 'Jambers' were Flemish, predominantly white Flemish. This sentiment is not always explicitly expressed, but it becomes clear in the words and expressions that are used by the informants for describing the people they saw.


One time there was this couple. The man had lost forty kilos and his wife was really a fat person. And then, of course, they split up. And then you really saw mean reactions of this couple (laughs). (forty-years old working woman)

May I say it? But I think that most of the time those people are people who have ended up in the gutter [...]. (man in his seventies, former train guard)

Of course, the answers of the informants must be understood in relation to the broader social-cultural meaning of this programme, heavily charged by the public attention, criticism and controversy that this monument in the history of Flemish television broadcasting met in the press and among viewers. But, at the same time, all our informants saw the programme more than once, albeit not necessarily every week, and their reflections were also based on their own concrete experiences with the programme.

Apart from the underlying structure of feeling towards the people in 'Jambers' ('we are not them'), the informants produced very different attitudes towards the people who participated or, more pejoratively, who were staged in this programme. We would like to make some generalising claims about the way particular attitudes are linked with the social, cultural and economic position of the informants, but we believe the methodological approach of our audience research does not allow us to do this. The rather skinny insight into the lifestyle and beliefs of our informants (only 2 hours-interviews were realised; this was definitely not an ethnographic study) is a risky ground for claiming that 'certain' kinds of people produce 'certain' kinds of responses, attitudes and reflections. Therefore, our findings should be read not as indices of how certain people feel dis/connected with other people through television, but how multifaceted the phenomenon of feeling dis/connected with other people through television can be.

First, the act of witnessing other people with extremely unusual lifestyles, beliefs and habits, provoked feelings of sympathy, but it was a sympathy of viewers who feel sorry for these other people. What was expressed is a kind of moral compassion. It is not a sympathy as the sympathy that undergirds acceptance, it is the sympathy for those poor devils who let themselves be exploited by this immoral reporter.



A housewife in her forties, married with four children, is one of our informants who expressed this feeling of compassionate sympathy aptly.


Yes, I've seen this programme ['Jammers'], but not every episode, sometimes I saw it by accident... you know, when the subject interested me. But, actually, I find it sad. In fact, what it is, is a kind of exploitation of these people, because they don't know better. Programme makers shouldn't do that, I think. So, these people who already are in the dumps, tell their life story, but they don't know better and they keep on telling all these things. And I think that there must be a lot of them who regret that afterwards. I'm not sure, of course, but I think that those people should be protected from themselves... Yes, some people really must be protected from themselves, I believe.

Second, watching other people with extraordinary/unfamiliar/uncommon lifestyles, beliefs and habits, produced a sense of normality which was strongly connected with a sense of superiority. Here there was no sympathy. There was only the acceptance of one's own behaviour as normal and as right.

Third, being a witness to other people living on the fringes of society, brought about a rather hostile response towards these people. Here the act of witnessing coincided with the act of simply not understanding why such people behave, live and act the way they are represented in the programme. The people represented in 'Jammers' could also elicit a rather violent response. The excerpt from an interview with a 45-years old housewife illustrates this.

Sometimes I wonder how they will face the baker, when they have been telling all these things on TV and have been 'squalling like that...

What is interesting is that this kind of argument entailed not only a disapproval of these people's behaviour, lifestyle and beliefs, but also a condemnation of these people's lack of television literacy. How can they be so naïve to let themselves be used by immoral television program makers? And why do they show off on television, since others will mock and laugh not only at them, but also at their children, partners and families? This last argument is intriguing, because it shows how not only programme makers are blamed for the unacceptable mode of representation of human emotions, but also the participants themselves, who testify to their own life experiences. In this context, we also met a kind of mistrust or cynicism vis-à-vis the people who appeared on the programme. Again the proximity between viewers, who regard themselves as normal people, and the televisualised others, who are chosen for their special qualities, was countered by a fundamental distrust, not only towards the integrity of the programme makers but also towards the authenticity of the people narrating their life experiences in the TV programme. Again, the gap between the viewers' ordinariness and the televisualised people's otherness was rationalised by an argument which didn't



help to understand why such people are the way they are, only why such people would fake those things.

It is clear that the sympathy for these socially and culturally distant others is disabled by the lack of understanding of their being both outside and inside their television performance.

An older woman in her seventies, who has worked all her life as a secretary, expressed this reflection as follows:

[...] I believe that this man Jambers is paying those people for revealing everything in his programme. But those people don't know how much they are damaging themselves by exposing themselves so much. No, I think that those people are very naïve and he just talks them into this. They don't realise how many people are watching! No, there is nothing to this (programme) really. Those people, I feel pity for them, for letting themselves be fooled.

This excerpt illustrates the last point we would like to make before coming to our concluding remarks. Clearly, the three attitudes we found are not isolated from each other, but flow over into each other. That is: viewers produced very mixed discourses on ordinary people in 'Jambers', navigating from disapproval to fascination, from compassion to contempt.

### **Concluding remarks**

Our audience study on people watching other people on television didn't result in a celebration of popular culture. It was the viewers themselves, although all self-declared occasional viewers of 'Jambers' - who made the magazine one of the most popular late-evening programmes on Flemish television - who made clear that not every television experience can be recast as a moment of solidarity with socially and culturally distant others. In order to gain a more detailed and rich understanding of how certain popular texts can connect and other programmes only disconnect, reception research in its original sense (audience-cum-text analysis) remains a valuable methodological option.

We think it is important to stress that television viewers were not on trial here, although we analysed their discourses and described their thoughtful feelings. If the voices we heard were sometimes cynical and standoffish, this only means that there exist also popular television programmes which are perhaps, as Hartley (1992: 7) has put it, not worth defending.

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