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Mobile Television Roundtable
Position Paper

Imagine a picturesque nuclear family in the 1950s: dad, mom, and approximately 2.4 children, all gathered around a television in the common room. Dad is smoking a pipe in a recliner chair, mom is sewing or knitting on the couch, and the children are sitting on the floor, fascinated at the television. Fast forward to another family, fifty years in the future: the children are watching television, but now they are in their separate bedrooms, with their own televisions. Meanwhile, mom and dad remain in the family room to watch television, until they too retire to their bedroom to continue their television viewing.

What separates the two families is not just the television viewing within the home, but also the potential for mobile viewing practices. The rapidly changing and improving technologies of both cell phones and portable MP3/video players are providing the potential for television viewing practices to be dislocated from the home, out of the private and into the public. While television viewing has some history of public viewing, such as in bars and taverns (McCarthy 2001), the domestic sphere has typically been the center of television viewing. The individual family members may not watch television exclusively in the various rooms of the hours anymore- they may watch television on their iPod while at the gym, or on their cell phone while waiting in line at the bank.

While these new technologies have a great potential to change television viewing, there are issues of viewing within the home that must also be addressed. Television viewing in the home has historically been structured according to specified gender roles, particularly regarding television viewing as a "work" or a "leisure" activity. Dating back to the Revolutionary War era in the United States, the hearth the center of the home and a symbol of masculinity, patriotism, militarism, and nationalism for men, compared to stability and domesticity for women. When the medium of radio became integrated into homes, these values were transferred from the hearth to the radio, and later to television (Tichi 1999). As print advertising for television sets often reflected this ideology, so too did the structure of daytime television programming. Shows like soap operas utilized techniques of minimal action and repetitious plot content so that housework and television viewing could be conducted simultaneously, even with interruptions; in contrast, print advertisements often depicted men relaxing and reclining while viewing television (Spigel 1992).

From both the structure of broadcasting and consumer marketing of the medium, gender divided television viewing as a form of work for women and leisure for men. In the post-World War I society in industrialized nations, a contradiction was evident between increased mobility outside of the home via transportation and an increased self-sufficiency within the home through purchasing of consumer goods (Williams 2003). For men, this increased mobility outside of the home created further divisions between work and home, while for women the increased self-sufficiency within the home shaped the home as a site of work (and thus little leisure). Television became a medium for reinforcing these standards of gendered work and leisure in the domestic sphere.

What happens, then, if television and television viewing practices are no longer anchored in the home? While mobile viewing devices may have the potential to reconstruct television viewing without the gendered constraints and ideologies of the home, television viewing is not simply either in the living room or outside the home. Mobile television may provide alternative opportunities for television viewing that work against the dominant ideologies that follow gendered constructions, but the technology is unlike to "liberate" unless other social aspects, such as the gendered differences between work and leisure in the public and private spheres, are altered on a significant scale of societal change.

References:

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