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## What happens when I turn on the TV set?

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### **Abstract**

In a little known manuscript from 1998 Paddy Scannell asks some dumbfoundingly basic questions about the electronic media: ‘What happens when you turn on your television set? What is the meaning of television?’ The present article presents Scannell’s Heideggerian analysis of the act of turning on the TV set, and relates it to his other writings and lectures. The article doesn’t present Scannell’s work in its full breadth, but focuses on the technological dimension of mass communication. I also link up Scannell’s theory of television with the somewhat similar theories of Marshall McLuhan and the philosopher Albert Borgmann. These two writers stress the technological dimension of mass media in quite different ways from Scannell, but they share his concern with explaining how technologies can become so intensely meaningful for people.

Paddy Scannell asked two interesting questions at a doctoral seminar in Oslo in 1998. The first is reproduced as the title above. The second was ontological: *What is radio and television?* Both questions are daunting in their intellectual scope, and the listeners in the seminar in Oslo were at a loss. How could he frame such big issues in a coherent way in forty-five minutes? How much could he really explain by starting from the technological apparatus standing behind him on the floor?

It turned out that there is quite a lot that can be explained in this way. This article presents Scannell’s theoretical analysis of the act of turning on the TV set<sup>1</sup>, and relates it to some of his other writings and lectures about human engagement with mass media. I also connect Scannell’s theory of television with the somewhat similar theories of Marshall McLuhan and the philosopher Albert Borgmann. These two writers stress the technological dimension of mass media in quite different ways from Scannell, but they share his concern with explaining how technologies can become so intensely meaningful for people.

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The article doesn't present Scannell's work in its full breadth, but focuses on the technological dimension of mass communication. I consider Scannell's contribution to European media research to be substantial. Over several decades Scannell has helped to establish 'broadcasting' as an autonomous field of academic study. Scannell refuses to treat radio or television as ontologically different media. They are more similar in terms of being *live* and *personal* than they are different in other regards.

In 2004 Scannell made this point well at a seminar at Copenhagen University<sup>2</sup>. '*Liveness* is the most basic feature of television broadcasting'. He intended to explore what it meant with examples taken from international soccer, concentrating on two key questions: first, 'the management of *liveness*' as a fundamental problem for the broadcasters. Second, 'the effects of *liveness* for television viewers'.

'At the heart of my presentation', Scannell continued, 'is the problem of mediation. Most of the critical theories about television show a distrust of mediation. You can't believe what you see on television. It's not real/true. It is manipulated, selected and distorted. My presentation will argue against this "hermeneutics of suspicion" and show how and why we can trust what we see and hear'.

The day after his lecture most of Denmark watched the royal wedding between Crown Prince Frederik and Mary Donaldson from Tasmania. Scannell said that 'doubtless the vast majority of viewers will feel that they are really, truly, genuinely and authentically participating in this occasion as it unfolds, live-to-air and in real time on television'. This suggests that for Scannell radio and television are simply *real*.

### **A world of concern**

Scannell's speech in Oslo in 1998 was given during a period when he was studying the work of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) quite intensely. Even though Scannell had long studied ethnomethodology and conversational analysis, and written a social history of broadcasting that was phenomenological in its basic approach, this was a radical turn. Its fullest expression came in *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (1996). Many of Scannell's readers were confused by the turn, like his audience in Oslo that winter's day.

Heidegger's philosophy is difficult to get a grip on, and is rarely read by media researchers. Even his essay 'The Question of Technology' (1960) is not often quoted and worked with in anything resembling the way that Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) was received. While

Benjamin is pragmatic and relatively open to industrial mass communication, Heidegger has a deep skepticism of it all. There is a long way from his existential philosophy to the nitty-gritty practices of television journalism, genre adherence and audience preferences.

Scannell relates to the main sources; *Sein und Zeit* (1927) and *Was ist Metaphysik* (1929). Heidegger's knowledge interests and vocabulary help Scannell to focus on what is *always already there* when you push the button on the TV-set. Scannell started with a critical philosophical analysis of what is always already there. Humans are in 'the world' in a more fundamental sense than is commonly acknowledged. 'Modern thought locates being not in the world, but in the head', he said. Scannell was at this time not the least interested in semiotics or textual analysis of abstract qualities. Instead we should start by asking what the specifically *human* way of being in the world is. 'We, as human beings, confront the immense and overwhelming facticity of existence. Not just of our own human existence, but of other living species in the world, of inanimate things, of the world itself and, beyond our earthly home and dwelling place, the boundless immensity of the cosmos' (Scannell 1998, 3).

Scannell emphasizes that being human means 'being with others in a shared world of concern' (Ibid, 7). To explain what he means he sets up a contrast between objective space and humans engaged in space, where the latter is defined as the shared world of concern.

First he gives an example of objective space. 'I am in the seminar room', Scannell says, his words filling every nook and cranny of the room. 'You can notice that there are several other things in the seminar room as well; a blackboard, an overhead projector, a cassette player. What kind of being is that?' (Ibid, 8). This is quantifiable being, the measured, observed, objective properties that scientists and businessmen deal with. Although Scannell certainly doesn't refuse the existential importance of objective space, he shares Heidegger's concern that it attracts too much attention, and that it begets instrumentalism and colonizes the lifeworld.

Second he gives an example of the shared world of concern. 'I am taking part in the seminar' Scannell says, looking us all in the eyes. 'The only thing that can sensibly be said to be in the seminar with me are you, the other participants, and not the blackboard, the overhead projector or the cassette player' (Ibid, 8). By this contrast Scannell encircles the fundamentally communicative way of being that we humans have established among ourselves. The forces guiding the shared world of concern are emotional attractions like trust, interest, relevance or authenticity, while objective space is merely the arena in which they take place. 'I am interested in the seminar', Scannell continues. 'I am *not* interested in the seminar. I am bored by it, irritated by it. I am wondering how long it will last (will it ever end?)' (Ibid,

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8). The shared world of concern is what we're dealing with right now, and the ways it concerns me, concerns you and involves us equally. With this 'shared world of concern' Scannell sets the stage for careful considerations of the TV set.

### **Equipment for living**

The TV set belongs to the type of things that Scannell, along with Heidegger, calls *equipment*. It is a humanly created object, like a hammer or a motor car. That a thing is equipment means that it is 'designed for particular kinds of activity', and 'elicits some kind of action' (Ibid, 15). That things are equipment means that they are made to 'display what they are for, and how they are to be used and understood by beings that have such capacities and understandings' (Ibid, 21).

Equipment will always be found in a region, Scannell theorizes. 'A region is a dedicated space: a church, a football pitch, a road, a television studio, a kitchen – they are all in different ways regions that make possible certain kinds of activity. The equipment of a region appears as usefully usable things that are appropriate to what goes on in it' (Ibid, 12-13). Television only communicates in ways that everybody who is meant to use it already understands, and in this tautological way television is equipment for living the peculiar social life that goes on in it.

In the speech he gave in Oslo in 1998 Scannell was concerned with the *experience* of turning on the equipment. What does this involve? Your senses are trained on the TV as you turn it on. Scannell distinguishes two ways of perceiving: The objective mode, which is theoretical – and where you identify noises, tones, colours, patterns, complexes of sounds and images; and the immediate mode, which is pre-theoretical – and where you experience authenticity, trust, interest, relevance and similar human qualities.

It is only possible to see the TV in the objective mode when it is turned off, standing darkly on its stand. 'There it is, present-to-hand: an object alongside the other objects in the room' (Ibid, 20). It only becomes the thing it is intended to be when it is turned on. 'Now turn it on. Try to maintain the objective mode of perception. What do you see? The screen-thing lights up and miniaturized moving images appear and sounds come out of the TV-thing. And the image-things go on moving about and sound-things continue to emerge from the TV-thing and somehow I decode all this and "see" that it "is" news or whatever' (Ibid, 20). Scannell suggests that it is really only in the electrical shop that you can see the TV in this objective mode.

The ordinary way of watching is *Umsicht*: *concernful* seeing. 'When you get the thing home and set it up and turn it on you switch to *concernful* seeing. What you see *is* the news, or *Coronation Street*. That you see news as news and entertainment as

entertainment means that you have “seen” it as that which it manifestly is meant and intended to be seen as’ (Ibid, 21). Although this is certainly true, Scannell found no reason to actually turn on the TV set, at four in the afternoon with programmes that were all in Norwegian. The immediate *concernful* seeing requires a mother tongue and some form of shared (national) culture.

In an article from 2004 where he analyses the news coverage of the September 11 events on CNN and the BBC, Scannell describes how television is equipment for living: ‘Television coverage on the day established the truth of what was happening and of what was being done. It came up with explanations and anticipated future courses of action that remain unchallenged to this day. There would be no politics of the present without the presence and participation of broadcast media. In the responses of the day, on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, the whole world witnessed, through the mediations of television, the immediate, instinctive repair work to the torn and damaged fabric of everyday existence. In such rare moments the politics of the present achieve a transcendent character. And this is something that we get to see and understand through the power of live broadcasting, whose ordinary, worldly news routines shore up, on behalf of us all, the meaningful character of existence, even when it appears to be collapsing in ruins before our disbelieving eyes’ (2004, 582-583).

### **Hermeneutics of mood**

It is a defining feature of *Umsicht* that it relates to a mood which is social – indeed *public* when it comes to television. There is an hermeneutic insight in this idea that Scannell fruitfully adopts for the electronic mass media. ‘When I turn on the TV set I am “in the mood” for watching or listening’, Scannell says. ‘I am in the mood for a bit of entertainment, or relaxation or for finding out about what’s going on in the world, or even just for having the telly on as a bit of company. And even if what shows up is something that I instantly judge to be not for me, so that I switch off or switch to another channel, it is still the case that this negative response is indicative of my being in concern’ (1998, 22).

Due to the social forces of the shared world of concern and the activity of *Umsicht*, ‘the act of turning on the TV set presupposes, *every time* the totality of involvements that are the products of the care-structures of the whole regime of broadcasting (the institutions, the practices, the schedules, the programmes) (Ibid, 22). This includes such things as the time of day that different programmes are scheduled (dailiness), the factualness or emotionality of the performances, and the various techniques of editing and production.

Let me return to the equipment orientation, and compare the perception of television with that of a thermometer. The experience of TV is less instrumental

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and more communicative, it is more dependent on the cultural surroundings in order to be meaningful. While a thermometer would be thrown away if it showed the wrong temperature, there is no way that television will be discarded if it doesn't represent objective space accurately. Again, the emotional bonds of trust, interest, relevance and authenticity loom large.

In television it is the shared world of concern that decides the terms of engagement, not objective space. A social balance or equilibrium is a necessary condition of its hermeneutical relations 'What converges in the act of turning on the apparatus', Scannell says, 'is on the one hand the totality of practices that make up "broadcasting", and the totality of *expectations* invested in it by any and every viewer or listener anytime anywhere. That these two things meet and mesh, that the expectations are met not now and again but every time, that is the entirely unremarkable and yet astonishing fact of television' (Ibid, 22-23).

The Scannell speech in Oslo in 1998 can be interpreted as giving the theoretical rationale for his 2004 claim about the evidently real character of television. Referring to the royal wedding in Denmark in the spring of 2004, he said that 'the vast majority of viewers will feel that they are really, truly, genuinely and authentically participating in this occasion as it unfolds, live-to-air and in real time on television'.

Both musical and spoken presence in domestic settings can fruitfully be referred to as moods where self-oriented sociability is always the basic quality. I will specify that 'mood' should not just be taken to refer to some private emotion, but to a social contact where the public sphere is always involved. And furthermore, a mood should not be considered as a completely spontaneous relation, since there are of course typical moods accompanying typical public events and presentations. There are a host of conventions for how to realize distinct moods among people. What is unpredictable is rather the occurrence of a certain mood in the course of a person's day or week.

I agree with Scannell's point that the moods of the media are public in character, and disclose a climate of feelings, opinions and attitudes that should be considered the mood of the times. For example, you may feel really happy and therefore play really happy music or you may be really depressed and put on the same record to get into a better mood. In a likewise manner, you may turn on a news channel to get updated on what is happening in the world, or a talk show to have a social background to your lonesome household chores.

In all these cases the listener engages in a hermeneutical relationship where 'interpretation' takes the form of an ambient, bodily engagement with intentionally moody expressions. Both musical artists and radio stations make their products

with some kind of publicly recognizable mood in mind, and the inclination of the listener to actualize a presentation in a sympathetic or antagonistic manner obviously depends on cultural skills that go beyond the private, spurious moods of right now.

The Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) describes the specificity of television's expressiveness, and its dramatic difference from all other media (except radio). Although McLuhan is often considered a whimsy theorist, he was one of the first to describe the sensual experience of mass media, and his ideas exert a continuing influence on media scholars.

Regarding the interfaces and experiential character of television that Scannell described in terms of objective space and the world of concern, McLuhan makes no binary differentiation, although he clearly describes objective space, such as in this quote: 'It is not a photo in any sense, but a ceaselessly forming contour of things limned by the scanning-finger. The resulting plastic contour appears by light through, not light on, and the image so formed has the quality of sculpture and icon, rather than of picture' (1964, 313).

From this specific audio-visual materiality McLuhan points towards the social experience, or what Scannell calls '*concernful seeing*' or *Umsicht*. McLuhan stresses that the existential bias of television consists of *in-depth involvement*, relating to the 'all-inclusive nowness' that 'admits of no delay' (Ibid, 325 and 335).

McLuhan describes it in relation to radio: 'Radio affects most people intimately, person-to-person, offering a world of unspoken communication between the writer-speaker and the listener. This is the immediate aspect of radio. A private experience. The subliminal depths of radio are changed with the resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique drums. This is inherent in the very nature of this medium' (McLuhan 1964, 299). He continues the analysis for television: 'TV acting is so extremely intimate, because of the peculiar involvement of the viewer with the completion or "closing" of the TV image, that the actor must achieve a great degree of spontaneous casualness that would be irrelevant in a movie and lost on stage' (Ibid, 317). McLuhan quotes the film actress Johanne Woodward who had switched to TV acting: 'When I was in the movies I heard people say "There goes Joanne Woodward". Now they say, "There goes somebody I think I know"' (Ibid, 318).

From these quotes we get nearer an answer to the second big question Scannell asked in Oslo: What is radio and television? The same conception of personal or 'peopled' public space that McLuhan formulated can be said to be practiced by Scannell, especially in *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (1996). Addressing television and radio, Scannell stresses that the advancement of self-understanding and

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knowledge comes through ambient sociability. Listeners engage in other people's attitudes through all manner of personal attachments, emotional sympathies and antipathies. The hermeneutical baseline consists of taking pleasure in each other's company; that is, sharing verbal and visual communicative meaning. It resembles what James Carey referred to as the ritual view of communication (Carey 1988).

Scannell stresses this point quite strongly in relation to broadcasting: 'Sociability is the most fundamental characteristic of broadcasting's communicative ethos. The relationship between broadcasters and audiences is a *purely social* one, that lacks any specific content, aim or purpose' (1996, 23). Although Scannell acknowledges that there is strategic and purposive talk in broadcasting, he argues that the communicative ethos of the medium is not constituted by it. Scannell quotes Georg Simmel who says that in sociability 'talking is an end in itself; in purely sociable conversation the content is merely the indispensable carrier of the stimulation, which the lively exchange of talk as such unfolds' (Ibid, 23). In Scannell's perspective this is, for good and bad, the reality of radio and television.

### **Technology hides itself**

But there is always more. When you actually turn the TV on the hook-up occurs with a flash, changing the dark, silent box into a fluorescent and acoustic space. The live communication that Scannell praises is caused by a giant system of cables, transmission masts, receivers and auxiliaries. It's like a science fiction movie where messages race towards you from all directions, through the masts and screens and loudspeakers, throwing the complete reality of broadcasting in your face the instant you turn on the TV set, and never letting off.

It is a fact that television consists of industrial infrastructures on a global scale, and this can be interpreted as the technological core of what Scannell calls 'For anyone-as-someone structures' (2000). The structures are not just mental relationships, they are physical patterns of contact designed and built by scientists, entrepreneurs, bureaucrats and all manner of journalists, artists and intellectuals. This socio-material industry makes sure that hundreds of thousands of people can experience the same sensory events in more or less the same meaningful ways over and over again.

The German-American philosopher of technology Albert Borgmann has a quite precise analysis of the technological character of 'for anyone-as-someone structures', although he doesn't use that concept. Borgmann says that large-scale, 20th century electronic technologies basically consist of two elements: the concealed *machinery* and the fore-grounded *commodity* (see Borgmann 1984, 1999). In central heating systems the concealed machinery is the radiator, the pipes, the circulating water and the power source, while the fore-grounded commodity is



simply the warmth that is generated. He calls the combination of machinery and commodity a 'device'.

In the use of modern devices, where television most certainly fits in, there is a tendency for users to be ignorant of the machinery. Most users of central heating will be almost completely ignorant of how the machinery produces this attractive experience, not least because the machinery is designed to be inconspicuous. Computers are very complex on the electromechanical level, but the sensitive apparatuses are protected behind several layers of metal and plastic, reducing the risk of damage. The Graphical User Interface makes it easy to select and run files without thinking about how it comes about, and this is its 'commodity'.

The opportunity to understand how a device works is reduced with each new layer of complexity that is added. With television as a case in point, Borgmann argues devices are characterized by unfamiliarity with the means and reliance on their ends. What is fore-grounded in devices is perceptual ease, or in the critical language of Borgmann: comfort and light weight attention. Such ease 'is just the mark of how wide the gap has become between the function accessible to everyone and the machinery known by nearly no one' (1984, 47).

If the moralist undertone is ignored, Borgmann's analysis is actually a very precise description of the materiality of modern life. It is true that the work of the machinery is concealed by the rich experience of the commodity. '[T]echnology systematically withdraws devices or their machinery from our competence and care by making technological objects maintenance free, discardable, or forbiddingly intricate' (Ibid, 161), argues Borgmann. Modern mass media, with the gigantic television networks in the USA as a splendid example, can easily be explained in this perspective. Hundreds of stations create the 'commodity' consisting of soap operas, news programmes, reality shows, advertising and a hundred other genres, and audiences turn the TV on and off, change channels and regulate the loudness.

Borgmann's approach displays the historical nature of television (and other technological devices). First television was a strange new thing, with no impression of always already being there, but over the years it was established as a device with the machinery/commodity-structure that most other modern technologies also have. The historical development of television's technologies illustrate well what Bruno Latour (1999) calls '*blackboxing*'; the process where scientific and technical work is made invisible to the user because of the success of efficiency procedures and simple-to-use interfaces. When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become (Latour 1999, 304).

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This is relevant for the question of television because it is not just the mechanical functions that are blackboxed or ‘cocooned’, so are various social aspects of innovation and adaptation. Although its functions were initially socially negotiated the medium in use now has materially determined possibilities and constraints. Andrew Feenberg (1999) points out that *blackboxing* is a process of ‘closure’ that adapts a product to a socially recognized demand and causes it to be taken for granted. ‘But once the black box is closed, its social origins are quickly forgotten. Looking back from that later standpoint, the artifact appears purely technical, even inevitable’ (Ibid, 11). When turning on your TV set in the evening you never think about anything that has to do with the TV set as a technology, it is completely transparent in the peculiar way that makes ‘medium’ the best word to describe it by.

Regarding the richness of influence that people can have on television’s content and development the medium cultivates highly asymmetric relationship between experts and laypersons. The phenomenon of *blackboxing* makes evident a difference in skills between those maintaining the machinery and those consuming commodities. Very few people would know how to fix their television set if it broke down, nor would anyone outside the business know how to put an entire programme on air.

The differentiation in competence should not be taken to mean that ordinary people are dominated by technological functions beyond their control. Rather, the division of labor inherent in *blackboxing* should be considered a prerequisite for domestic engagements with complex electronic media. You couldn’t turn on your TV at all without this industrial structure. Enjoyment of an easily accessible function presumes dependence on absent means. Instead of feeling subordinated to them people actually feel stimulated by them – as Scannell and McLuhan both try to explain. *Blackboxing* facilitates widespread and relatively democratic access to a technological medium for ‘shared concerns’.

It is important to note that producers are not necessarily powerful just because they are experts. Their work may merely be to keep the device communicating without being allowed to make a difference. Their expertise is not a guarantee that they are in control of the device, on the contrary it may mean that they are even more dependent on it than the laypersons. It certainly means that when they get home in the evening they lie down on the sofa and turn on the TV-set just like anybody else.

### **Is it possible to turn the TV off?**

What happens when you turn on your TV set and it doesn’t work? A mild case of this activity would be that when you turn on the TV, you know in advance that the

signal will be very poor, and intermittently absent. Let's say that your antenna has been broken for a long time, and last night it fell apart completely, leaving you little hope of receiving a signal. A more severe case occurs if unexpectedly, the broadcast is interrupted. It may turn out that the transmission tower in your region has a malfunction, and hundreds and thousands of people are without a signal for the entire evening.

Social turmoil often erupts in such cases. I won't get to see my favourite programme! There is disappointment, frustration, indecision, anger, rage and hopelessness. The gamut of emotions should be considered abstinence; a reaction to the withholding of the commodity due to broken down machinery. Such experiences of non-access to TV are of course never planned by stations in any way; they always occur as accidents in some cases even tragedies. Not even McLuhan could foresee that television would have such socially well-anchored and utterly real implications in people's lives. The non-access to television discloses its existential character in people's lives.

There is another version of non-access to television, namely that of not wanting to turn the TV set on because you dislike it culturally. The TV-Turnoff Network in Washington DC helps children and adults to learn to watch less TV and concentrate on other and presumably more valuable activities. It organizes 'TV-Turnoff' drives combined with 'More Reading' drives (see [www.tvturnoff.org](http://www.tvturnoff.org)) to mobilize resistance to television.

Although such initiatives can have a limited pedagogic effect in for some social groups, there is no way that the TV can simply be turned off and not influence a person's life. You can't turn off a device like television except in a very local way, for yourself, for a while, until further notice. A social engagement is embedded in the design, and the design is embedded in the everyday life of society.

This leads to a conclusion that Scannell may agree with: The mass media are so central to our everyday lives that it would be irresponsible not to include them among the basic practices of society, on a level with the right to vote, the school system and electrical infrastructures. This existential importance is due to the fact that television's behavioural procedures are taught, conserved and translated within the technological device, and would only die out if the technologies were removed from society, or their everyday functions were taken over by different technical solutions. A medium can be thought of as an expressive arena where communication skills are created and kept active. There is an influential process of 'naturalization' and realism in this realm. To say that an interface is embodied means that the user's perceptual skills are cultivated in one direction that becomes natural at the cost of potential qualities in other directions. While these activities are deeply personal, they are facilitated by interfaces and electronic infrastructures

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shared by millions of people all over the world. They are fundamentally anonymous in their personal influence.

Since there was actually a TV-set in the seminar room in Oslo in 1998 Scannell could have turned it on, letting us have a fix of its social and perceptual allure. But he wasn't ready for it in 1998. He is probably more than ready for it now, and therefore I encourage him to turn it on and give us a comprehensive answer to what happens.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Scannell's lecture was called 'What happens when I (or anyone) turn on the TV set?' (1998). He handed out printed copies of his manuscript during the doctoral seminar, and I quote extensively from it, using Scannell's pagination.

<sup>2</sup> Scannell's lecture was called 'Television and the meaning of 'live'' at Copenhagen University, May 13, 2004.

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