

Sample essay on television and citizenship

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Communication

Compare and contrast Graham Murdock's framework for understanding citizenship as a complex ideal of modernity with Anna McCarthy's framework for understanding citizenship as a Cold War discourse for governing. Identify the central conceptual framework for each. Compare how each is concerned with neoliberalism. Identify one strength and one weakness in both frameworks.

Graham Murdock's purpose was to highlight how television fulfills the rights and representations of the citizens through his framework of modern citizenship (Murdock, 2010). Amongst the many rights that a citizen is entitled to, right to information, right to experience and right to participation should be fulfilled by any media. In the chapter rights and representations, Graham has stated that right to information incorporates the widest possible source of information that will structure the range of choices available to the person (Murdock, 2010). Television has been unable to capture the essence of experience that remains one of the important rights in the list of rights. Through television, an individual will be capable of attaining the information on news, current affairs but the essence of experience is revived only through fiction. Television has started doing justice to the citizen's right to participation by changing the landscape (Murdock, 2010). Whereas previously public broadcasting had constructed audience to become listeners rather than speakers, speculators rather than image-makers, these roles have now been reversed so that audience also seek a chance to voice up their opinion (Murdock, 2010).

It has been pointed out in the article that television addresses itself to

matters of public concern, debate and value is through programs put together in combination of pictures and speeches. As Goode, (1978) has pointed out that forms and genres play a crucial role in this process. These programs are devices for converting the fluid, abstract concepts and resonant imaginary into structured modes of knowing. These programs address discourses in remotely open or close way. The openness of the programs can be assessed by asking two important questions. First is how much space the program provides for the competing social discourses and how far is it arranged around the prevailing discourse (Schmid, 1984). Second is how is the content of discourses organized in these programs like is one perspective given more weight than the other one. Substantiating his basic purpose, Graham has derived that the best way to portray complex and modern citizenship is through open programs because open programs work through debates and discussions to the point of exhaustion rather than the point of conclusion (Schmid, 1984). The special feature of open programs is that they launch speculations, take imaginative courses and offer constructive ends. Examples of such open programs are not just documentaries or current affairs but some serial fictions that addressed the problems and contingencies of everyday life.

While Graham Murdock highlights the pivotal role of television in representing rights of citizens, Anna McCarthy undermines the role of television stating that programs on television are merely about sponsorships and not the content of the program (Magder, 2005). In the citizen machine, machine referring to television is depicted as a platform of exploiting the citizens. In this regard, McCarthy provides an example of a company DuPont

using its licenses over the television as a placeholder for advertisements (Magder, 2005). When focus groups realized that advertisements were not about good corporate citizenship but rather about the products that DuPont wanted to sell, then the company had to retrieve its advertisements completely from televisions. The underlying conclusion made by McCarthy is that advertisements, by means of focusing on what the ideal citizen should be like in postwar America, exploit the rights of citizens to try to influence them in buying certain products. McCarthy blames the U. S. broadcasting system for giving the powerful elites a platform of exploiting the masses. "Citizens are made, not born" she argues (Magder, 2005).

Both the models are inclined towards neo-liberalism in the sense that both the frameworks have highlighted that TV remains central to mainstream conceptions of citizen's needs. It no longer follows the top down process guided by the elite ideologies but it has adopted dominant conception of governing from bottom up, spreading the neoliberal ideology (Goode, 1978). Analysis of TV programming has led to the conclusion that the format is closely parallel to the neoliberal logic of Bush and Clinton's ideology who state that privatization, personal responsibility and consumer choice are promoted as the best way to govern liberal capital democracies (Goode, 1978). For example, lifestyle is one of the ways through which citizens are expected to look after themselves in the name of their own interests, making rational choices in matters of health, consumption, family and household. Under these circumstances, the content of the television program is focused upon how to conduct and empower ourselves as enterprising citizens. How did commercial television engage with, and seek to transform, ethnic

working class life in postwar American (as elaborated in the George Lipsitz article)? Include in your answer what constituted ethnic working class memories and what constituted the postwar consumer ideal. How did the The Honeymooners episode ("The Blond") negotiate working class ethnic identities (and their memories) and post consumerism?

Prior to the American War, when television had not become an integral part of the society, "Great Depression" of 1930's had brought extreme depravity in the life of majority Americans. The masses of people were without work, banks used to remain close and the rich lost their fortune. World War II ended depression and emergence of commercial television in the economy. Massive union strikes, demands for concessions to the working class and pressure for redistribution of wealth brought forth the emergence of this new working class. Television played an important part in the transition of economy through its programs and advertisements.

Lipsitz article focuses on how television has changed the working class in the post war period and how it has constituted the ethnic working class memories and postwar consumer ideal. The reading begins by focusing on a very popular show of the times "Mama" (Garofalo, 2008). Lipsitz argues that family comedy shows like this glorifies the consumption of commercial products and constitutes an ideal consumer in the minds of the people watching the show. He contends that insecurities and anxieties among consumers compel television to change the world in the present by emphasizing purchase of commodities (Garofalo, 2008). The great depression and the War instilled fear in the consumers but the entry of television into American home promoted consumerism in the economy and

this consumerism was constructed by individuals in power. He also identifies the role of government in shaping television as an advertising medium after World War II through policies and sanctioning networks.

Lipsitz contends that such situational comedies evoke historical emotions and memories of the ethnic working class while challenging dominant social trends in the era (Garofalo, 2008). He believes that memories of the past are a way of constructing a better future. To elaborate upon this point, he takes support from different television programs. For example the program *Life of Riley*, showcases the troubles of life that a domesticated woman has to go through. This includes the need to keep home clean, cook dishes, wash clothes and look after children. Amidst the daily chores, women are left with no time of their own to socialize. The most effective amongst all in terms of evoking memories of ethnic working class has been *The Honeymooners*, displaying hostility between husbands and wives.

The Honeymooners is a depiction of structural tensions within families, women betrayed by irresponsible and incompetent husbands and men enjoying the submissiveness of their wives. The entire portrayal of this family was far away from the ideal portrayal, much to the irony of the main title (Garofalo, 2008). These depictions demonstrated the crevices in a fundamentally new form of family, just recently bounded together in the embrace of marriage. One might expect commercial programs to ignore problems of nuclear families, but the desire to attract a large number of households to watch the program all the time, encouraged depiction of real problems facing the society (Garofalo, 2008). Though the use of censorship to rule out some aspects of the couple had been massive, the real family

problems found its way to be portrayed on the commercial television. Individuals experiencing these problems in their routine life but were marginalized because of previous definitions of self-identification, exhibited insatiable needs for finding a respite (Garofalo, 2008). These programs also offered individual and codified solutions to the problems drawing a large number of audiences towards itself. If the program were to remain true to the past, then it would have lost its relevance to the current tensions of the society. However, by choosing to express contemporary problems, they embodied the essence of the past while at the same time allowing the users to understand parochialism and paternal authority problems in recent traditional family systems (Garofalo, 2008).

3) Elaborate Pierre Bourdieu's framework for understanding taste hierarchies. What is the significance of these taste hierarchies in thinking about television and citizenship? Use an example from the Ouellette reading and one from the Newman/Levine reading to illustrate your points. Use an example of your choice (that is not from the reading or from class lecture) to illustrate your points.

The phenomenon of social class, as faced by society today, explicitly talks about how well the resources are allocated and how the means of production is channelized to make effective use of resources. However, the society divided into separate strata's and classes offers no explanation for how these classes came into existence (Rose, 1986). It also does not offer any explanation for how hierarchies within the societies are internalized by individuals. Mere possession of status or title due to ownership of means of production fails to explain the dynamics of society and existence of middle

class today. Acknowledging this gap in understanding, Pierre Bourdieu attempted to demonstrate at great length and detail how the use of cultural artifacts and the taste which people have developed for culture explains the dynamics of social class (Pierre, 1979). The taste reflects the taste in food, clothing and lifestyle which differentiates an individual from another and thus constitutes transformation of people into dominant or dominated class, moderating the numerous struggles between class and class fractions in modern capitalist society. It also attempts to teach individuals how to tailor their expectations and their view of themselves to fit a place in the hierarchy of society.

Pierre Bourdieu defines class fractions to be composed of three elements: social, economic and cultural capital (Pierre, 1979). His premise behind class distinction is that society uses symbolic goods, as weapons to shape interests by the dominating class. According to him, these symbolic goods are food, lifestyle and culture. The means by which dominant society distinguishes itself from the dominating society is represented in the different positions taken on by elites or dominants in these symbolic goods. Those positions are determined by their different tastes. The difference in taste also penetrates into the deeper depth of ordinary life. For example, a multitude of consumer interest based on different social positions necessitates that each individual has his own hairdresser, interior designer, tailor etc. Other examples classifying class distinction penetrating into ordinary choices of life is reflected in one own choices of clothing, cooking, furniture which are reflective of the long standing and deep rooted dispositions (Rose, 1986). Bourdieu contends that class distinction then

leaves an indelible mark on the upbringing of a child as well so that he also follows the same patterns as followed by his parents (Pierre, 1979). This way the likes and dislikes of the young child will reflect that of his class fractions. An evidence of this is that children from lower end of the social hierarchy have heavy, fattening foods which are also poor in dinner layouts. Their desire will be to opt for plentiful food than to prefer exotic food. This demonstration of distinction between tastes of luxury as favored by a rich child to tastes of necessary food as favored by poor child reflects distinction among social classes.

In his famous article *the Distinction*, Pierre's distinguished the high end of the society from low end of the society in capital attainment, educational attainment etc. *Distinction*, the most influential works on hierarchies of taste, describes taste differences between upper, middle and working class in France (Pierre, 1979). A very striking example of both high level of TV and low level of TV can be found in this article. It is probably the central idea of the article and has been delineated by taste, economic capital and cultural capital that movies, dramas, and newspapers occupy different positions in the life of people. For example, if one tier of the society may associate themselves with one movie or drama, there will be a completely different movie or drama to which the low tier class culture will attach it to (Pierre, 1979). Thus the author opines that owing to the incompatibility of universal popularity of television, programs on television follow hierarchical ranking. The author contends that high and lower social strata's, educational groups, status groups and income groups watch different channels, different programs, and different genres.

However, Ouellette and Newman enter into considerable debate and disagreement about the nature of these taste cultures in its efficacy of fragmenting the society (Rose, 1986). Their basic premise is that how is television fragmented when one program has the access to enter into everyone's drawing room?

Substantiating the debate raised by Ouellette and Newman, when this distinction is applied to television in reality, the boundary line between high end and low end of the society fades away (Pierre, 1979). Such hierarchical ranking of taste, drawing a clear boundary between sophisticated lifestyle against the ordinary living loses its validity when coupled up with eclectic mixture of information, entertainment and drama offered by television. For example, most of the television dramas consist of popular entertainment genres such as comedy, soap, popular drama and pop music which are appreciated by everyone no matter to which tier of the society they belong to. With television functioning in this manner, there lays common sense in warding off the entire concept of hierarchies in taste.

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