

AFFECT, UPSET AND THE SELF: MEMORIES OF TELEVISION IN AUSTRALIA

Abstract

In a recent survey inviting people to outline some of their memories of television and its place in their lives, one of the questions asked was: 'Can you explain why these particular television memories have stayed with you?' While the responses to this question were complex and individual, some common themes emerged. These included questions of affect; experiences that were 'beyond the norm'; and moments of self-identification. While the younger age group (15–45 years) slightly favoured the 'self-identification' and 'affect' categories, for the 46+ combined groups, the major category was the 'beyond the norm'. The second-most cited factor, given by approximately 50 per cent of the respondents, was that a television memory is made when an event on television somehow becomes intertwined with the life of the individual. In many instances, the event was recalled as a formative or life-changing occurrence. While it is difficult to draw too many conclusions from the data in relation to gender, given that there were more female participants than male, when the data were recast to show percentages within each gender group, it was interesting to note that the male participants rated 'affect' most highly while females rated 'self-identification' as the most significant factor in the making of a television memory. This article explores these findings in more detail and examines the implications of these data for thinking about the relationship between the medium of television, television audiences and the formation of memories.

At a moment when the experience of watching television is rapidly changing as a result of digitisation and the availability of online content, it would appear timely to reflect on how the experience of broadcast television in Australia since the 1950s has been remembered, and how this has evolved over the intervening decades. This seems particularly important given the relative paucity of academic research that has been devoted to the memories of television audiences in Australia. Although over the years there have been some excellent analysis of Australian TV in terms of its institutional history and forms (e.g. Tulloch and Turner, 1989; O'Regan, 1992, Cunningham and Jacka, 1996; Cunningham and Turner, 2000), as Alan McKee notes in his book *Australian Television: Genealogy Great Moments*, the soap opera *Prisoner* – which screened from 1979 to 1985 – may still be the Australian television show to which the most audience research has been devoted (McKee, 2001: 184). This was possibly a result of the fact that the show provoked so much interest in, and anxiety about, the portrayal of women and female violence. Meanwhile, the definitive audience studies of such long-running and globally significant Australian TV shows such as *Neighbours*

and *Home and Away* are yet to be written. This is true even though, as in the case of *Neighbours*, their significance to audiences overseas has been noted, such as Marie Gillespie's (1995) study of Punjabi youth in London during the early 1990s, who were heavily invested in *Neighbours* at that time.

The project described here therefore began as an attempt to address this imbalance as a component of an ARC Discovery grant entitled 'Australian Television and Popular Memory: New Approaches to the Cultural History of the Media in the Project of Nation Building' (DP0879596). This ambitious research endeavour, led by Professor John Hartley, was designed to produce a series of collaborative histories illuminating the role of television in the formation of a national culture. The goal was not to explore the conventional academic sources and archives, but rather to generate a history of television that would explore TV memories, memorabilia and personal archives as well as the full range of popular and ephemeral publications that have supported engagement with the medium over time (McKee and Keating, 2012). Tasked with the responsibility of identifying how and why specific programs and genres might be remembered, what became apparent as this particular off-shoot of the inquiry advanced was just how intensely memories of television were to do with memories of place, home, family and the self.

Personal memories, however, may also borrow from the forms and themes of narratives constructed elsewhere, including those about television. Indeed, we were well aware when we began this project that television had always had a tendency to construct its own history, especially around major milestones such as the kinds of shows that celebrated 30, 40 or even 50 years of television in Australia (McKee, 2000: 6). In this way, 'false memories' of an imagined moment of origin may be perpetuated. For example, Cate Rayson's 1996 television documentary and book, *Glued to the Telly*, described and reconstructed a hypothetical moment in 1956 when Australians switched on and triggered 'a multitude of changes that would transform their lives forever' (Rayson, 1996: 21). The coming of television was, however, a much 'messier' affair. As Nick Herd (2012: 48) points out, although the Channel Nine version of this 'moment' features Bruce Gyngell, then program manager for TCN Sydney, appearing on Sunday, 16 September to announce 'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to television', in fact this event was re-created a year later. The moment had been 'lost', and no one can be quite sure what was said at the time. Furthermore, as research for this project revealed, for some of the participants in this study, television was experienced well before 1956, while for others a reliable broadcast signal was not available until 1976 in the remote south-west corner of New South Wales, pointing to the significance of 'location' to the experience of watching television (Turnbull, 2012; Hanson, 2012).

In the search for TV memories, the project as a whole made use of a website, TVLandAustralia.com, to which participants in the study were initially directed. However, after this site failed to attract sufficient numbers, it was decided that, for this branch of the study, a more 'personal' approach might be more effective in the memory-gathering endeavour. A flyer about the project was produced and delivered to a number of libraries and community centres in southern New South Wales that had agreed to participate. This inevitably led to a regional focus as well as a skewed and selective sample, given that not everyone visits their local library. In the end, 93 volunteers responded, of whom only 27 were male. Our sample was similarly skewed in terms of age. While we had 38 responses from young people under the age of 35, and 49 responses from those 46 and over, the 'missing' demographic lay in the 36-45 age range, where we had only six respondents, leading to the supposition that public libraries are largely the preserve of the young, the old and the female.

Table 1: Survey participants

Age	Male	Female	Total
15–25	6	19	25
26–35	8	5	13
36–45	2	4	6
46–55	2	16	18
56–69	4	11	15
70 +	5	9	14
Unknown	0	2	2
Total	27	66	93

This was a bias we attempted to address in our subsequent focus groups. These were conducted over a one-month period. The first group comprised two females and four males, all under the age of 30. The second group consisted of four males and three females, all over the age of 50. The final focus group attempted to draw in the ‘missing demographic’ from the survey: 30–50-year-olds. While six females attended this session, the two male participants unexpectedly had to withdraw but willingly filled in the questionnaire. Their responses were added to the pool of data collated in the survey analysis process. It might be noted that our research findings were therefore biased in favour of both somewhat older and younger participants.

Table 2: Focus groups

Age of group	Male	Female	Total
20–29	4	2	6
50+	4	3	7
30–49	(2)	6	6

The initial questionnaire was simple in format, posing two demographic questions and four open-ended questions designed to garner information about respondents’ memories of television and its place in their lives. These included the following two questions that were also posed in the focus group discussions:

- What television moments do you find particularly memorable?
- Can you explain why these particular memories have stayed with you?

The data were processed in the following way using NVivo software. Responses were initially entered into the database, and then coded using a thematic approach based on the general principles of grounded theory as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The software was then used to run a series of relevant queries. The openness of the questions, however, meant a single response could be complex, requiring coding under several categories. Some common themes began to emerge and seven main categories were identified:

- affect
- beyond the norm
- self-identification
- TV community
- perceived significance
- pervasiveness
- entertainment value.

Of these, the first three in particular stood out, given that the responses of all the participants across all the age cohorts most frequently fell into one or another of these categories, with some slight differences. While the 15–45-year-old cohort tended to favour the ‘self-identification’ and ‘affect’ categories in terms of significant TV memories, the 46+ combined groups tended to favour ‘beyond the norm’. Given the relative novelty of television in the lives of the older cohort, this finding was not particularly surprising. In general, it would appear that television was more memorable when an event, character or situation drew on the emotions, was out of the ordinary or was in some way integrated into the life story of the viewer. These findings are discussed in more detail below, as are the implications these data might have for thinking about the relationship between the medium of television, television audiences and the formation of memories within an Australian context.

Notions of affect

Nearly two-thirds of all the survey respondents expressed the opinion that television was at its most memorable when the content on the screen had a strong emotional impact. However, emotion meant different things to different people. For one young male, his notion of ‘emotional investment’ included being moved to laughter or to further reflection. In this latter case, it is interesting to note how emotional affect might be produced by dialogue rather than by the image on the screen:

I think it’s about the emotion that a show generates – the greater the emotional investment, the more likely I’m to remember the moment. Emotion can even mean particularly funny moments, or times when a piece of dialogue is poignant and I’ll reflect on it later. (Male, 26)

The suggestion that humour might make a TV moment memorable was mentioned by a number of participants in terms of how what they saw or heard might resonate with them at a later date:

For me I like to remember good and funny things so if a character is funny or makes me feel happy generally they are memorable for me. I guess the characters have to resonate with you on some level and touch your emotions. (Female, 22)

On the other hand, a memorable TV moment might well provoke a negative affect, and not necessarily in relation to programs where one would expect this affect to be produced:

Roger Ramjet – The whole cartoon really made me anxious, that’s how I remember it. *Dr Who* series stayed with me because I was mostly scared of the show and thought it was really bizarre. (Male, 25)

While it would be interesting to discover exactly what made the futuristic cartoon series *Roger Ramjet* anxiety-producing for this young man, the inclusion of *Dr Who* in the category of ‘scary’ television is not so surprising. Indeed, one of the female survey respondents described how watching *Dr Who* was a rite of passage for her, and one that she cherished because it was a mark of her perceived maturity in relation to her siblings, despite the fact that she was scared:

Personally memorable was that I was allowed to watch *Dr Who* before all my siblings as I was the eldest. I would sit in the lounge room alone with the doors shut because it might be too scary for the younger ones. It was too scary for me but I watched it anyway because my sister and brothers weren’t allowed to! (Female, 52)

For many of the participants, it was the emotional affect of ‘real’ events that rendered some TV experiences particularly memorable. The experience of watching catastrophes unfold on television was frequently mentioned in both the surveys and the focus group discussions in terms of the horror and the anxiety they provoked. As one male participant suggested:

The tsunami, 9/11 and the bushfires were all so horrific, terrible loss of life. They reminded me how vulnerable we are to disaster particularly the bushfires as they happened in our own backyard. (Male, 43)

Note that, in this instance, the emotional affect is intensified by the sense of proximity – even empathy – as the speaker registers how such disasters might be visited on all of ‘us’. Nor was this sense of threat limited to recent events. In the third focus group, one female participant stated that television coverage of issues pertaining to nuclear weaponry during the 1970s caused a great deal of discussion and trepidation in her household. She recalled her ongoing anxiety as a child about ‘who was going to press the button’ – an anxiety with which two other members of the group immediately identified.

While it was clear that some kinds of television might produce strong emotion, another participant in the third focus group suggested that television might also serve the opposite function, helping to reduce her anxiety. At the end of the day, exhausted after putting her young son to bed, she felt the need to be entertained and distracted. In this case, the content of what she watches is irrelevant, she just ‘just needs to stare at the box – whatever is on’ and ‘to not think about things’. This led to further discussion about television as a form of escapism and down-time, much valued by this group of women, most of whom were participating in the workforce while simultaneously caring for children and running a household. In this instance, television was used to avoid emotion.

Beyond the norm

While television might be cherished for its routine place in the family schedule, for many participants in this study, television was particularly memorable when it initiated an interruption to the ‘norm’. For many of the older participants, this might include the moment when everyday practices were put on hold in order to watch history ‘in the making’:

I was teaching in an outer Melbourne High School, which stopped its schedule to watch the B&W landing. It was mesmerizing. We all looked very carefully at the moon that night and marvelled man had arrived. We were aware of watching history. It was just a beginning. (Female, 73).

Another of the older female participants associated the witnessing of such memorable events with a perceived loss of innocence:

We seemed to live in such an innocent world and then suddenly we were exposed to these events [assassination of John F. Kennedy, murder of Harvey Oswald, moon-landing]. With the moon-landing it seemed beyond belief to watch that part of history, can remember standing outside the Commonwealth Bank in Goulburn St [Sydney] watching their television through the window – when I should have been upstairs working! (Female, 64)

Notice how both of these memories are immediately connected to a notion of the place where they were experienced – Melbourne High School and the Commonwealth Bank in Goulburn Street – revealing just how spatial these memories are.

Location was also an important aspect of the experience of television for the younger participants in the study, with the intensity of the memories being heightened when the drama unfolding on screen was experienced as a disruption to family life in the home. In this case, 9/11 figured vividly in their accounts. For the members of the first focus group, who would have been young children at the time, 9/11 was remembered as ‘the morning that *Cheez TV* (a popular morning show aimed at children) wasn’t on’. Indeed, it would appear that a number of the younger participants in the study were the first in the family to be aware of 9/11, simply because they were up and watching TV before school. According to two of the young male participants in the first focus group, even though they had to go to school and did not see or hear any more about the events as they unfolded during the day, the attack on the Twin Towers was nevertheless the focus of their schoolyard conversations. Furthermore, in the perverse but entirely predictable nature of such schoolyard exchanges, great status accrued to those who knew someone (cousins, aunts, best friends) who might have been in New York at the time.

One young woman in this first group described how the event was life-changing because this was the moment that she realised that the world ‘a bit shit’.

I remember waking up and feeling disappointed when my parents were watching, what appeared to me, as just ordinary news. Morning time was my time to watch kids’ shows! I asked them to change the channel and discovered that every channel was televising the same thing. This is when I realised that something huge had occurred. Seeing the footage of the planes going into the tower, and the tower collapsing was my initial awakening to the world. That the world extended beyond my own, and my immediate surroundings, and that the happenings in the world were not always nice. (Female, 20)

Other participants in the group agreed that, for them too, 9/11 was a moment when they became intensely aware of a world outside their immediate environment. For one young man, this realisation had arrived somewhat earlier in relation to the reporting of another horrific event overseas:

[It was] 1995/1996 or so (I think) – I remember hearing about some mass rape against Bosnian women in the Yugoslavian wars on SBS, I was really shocked and it had a huge effect on me. I didn’t understand why it was really hard to find out about. And because I was really young I was totally horrified. Although, I didn’t really understand explicitly what rape fully meant I just knew it was really bad. As horrified as I was – to this day I am still grateful I found out that it happened at that time, it’s kind of made me aware of implications of political events etc. It also introduced me to the idea of racism which also had a huge effect on me. (Male, 25)

The intensity of these memories, and their effects on the two young people discussed above, call into question Chris Healy’s suggestion that ‘television, as a form of media, lacks precisely the cathartic intimacy and emotional intensity’ for the production of ‘prosthetic memories’ (Healy, 2013: 266). Prosthetic memories – and here Healy is citing Landsberg (2004) – are considered to be an effect of the ‘commodification and technologies of mass culture’, in that the media enable people to feel an engaged

and experiential relationship to the past. In both cases noted above, not only are they evidence of ‘prosthetic memories’ of world events enabled by television, but they also demonstrate how these memories have been constructed from the vantage point of the present, when the participants are able to rationalise and account for the ways in which television impacted on them at the time, with life-changing consequences.

Self-identification

The second most cited rationale for the production of a TV memory, one given by 47 of the survey respondents (almost 50 per cent of the total), was that a television memory was made when a television event became intertwined with the life of the individual. For some of the older participants, this included a very personal connection with what they saw on the screen. One older woman described how:

In 1957 or 1958, my father appeared on Del Cartwright’s show demonstrating how to cut up a chicken for barbecuing. He was a pioneer in growing meat chickens in NSW and this was a promotion for ‘Chicken Week’, instigated by the newly formed Broiler Growers Association, of which he was secretary. (Female, 70)

Another of the older (56) male participants in the second focus group described how one of his first memories of television in 1960 involved watching his father taking an acting role in the television series *Consider Your Verdict*. This puzzled him because his father, along with other members of the family, was actually sitting beside him at the time and he struggled as a child to understand how this could be.

For another woman, the experience of watching television was remembered in the context of her personal development, including her relationship with both her mother and her father, and her life as a teenager. She recalled three specific memories:

Helping my mum do the laundry/ironing while watching TV in the middle of the day. I remember seeing *Beauty and the Beast* with John Laws. I also remember Mum being very hooked up into the *Days of Our Lives* story. I don’t remember much about the shows or whether I actually enjoyed them because I was very little but I loved having this special time with my Mum.

Being allowed to stay up until 8.30 on Friday night to watch Bobby Limb’s *Sound of Music* and *Bonanza* with the whole family. For an additional treat Dad would bring home chocolate-coated honeycomb to share.

Watching *Countdown* with friends for many years as a teenager. My hang-set all rolled our eyes up at the program, particularly the antics of Molly Meldrum, because we considered ourselves way to cool for *Countdown*. But we never missed a week and always watched eagerly, waiting to see who would be on next and what song would be number 1. We have since all admitted to secretly enjoying *Countdown* and being rather fond of Molly. (Female, 53)

In our third focus group, another female participant described the weekly ritual of viewing the variety show *Hey Hey It’s Saturday* in a vivid way, becoming very animated in the process. Because she lived with her grandparents during the school week and only went home to her parents on the weekend, and because the family was not ‘very well off’, watching *Hey Hey It’s Saturday* was a kind of special ‘night out’ with her parents at home, augmented with chocolate and chips.

In both of the above accounts, television memories are remembered in terms of the special food they occasioned as part of the break from the 'norm'. This was also true for one young male participant of the first focus group, who recalled that his father would make a special TV-watching breakfast of peanut butter and honey on toast at the weekends. Interestingly, for the other members of this focus group, eating dinner in front of television was apparently a rarity, saved for when there was something special on TV or the occasional Friday night treat.

Discussion in the first focus group about the kinds of television that might have had a particular impact on their lives quickly turned the American animated series *The Simpsons*, which the group as a whole agreed that they had grown up watching. One of the male participants stated that he quoted from *The Simpsons* every day of his life. The others laughed and agreed, collectively suggesting a list of 'things' they had learned from *The Simpsons*. This included ethics, critical thinking, and learning to accept different ideas such as vegetarianism or the wearing of mu-mus (the latter inspiring much hilarity). Rather more seriously, one young man (25), described in his survey responses how the 'guy' from the program *Art Attack* 'changed my life': 'I think I'm a graphic designer now at least partially because of him.'

Reflections

The findings outlined above tend to confirm historian Geoffrey Cubitt's suggestion that while memory may be viewed as essentially personal and individual, it is also be connected to social institutions and cultural forms (Cubitt, 2000: 4). This was clearly evident in this study in those moments when personal memories of television were connected to the social institution of the family in the home. As many eminent scholars (e.g. Bird, 2003; Couldry, 2004; de Certeau, 1984; Silverstone 1989) have persuasively argued, it is important to understand the role of television in the context of everyday practices more generally. This study has revealed that television memories should also be understood as being formulated within the wide arena of everyday practice. As revealed by participants, such practices might include the ordinary and everyday routines of Mum doing the ironing in front of *Beauty and the Beast*, as well as the moment when those normal routines were interrupted, as in the case of Dad making a TV breakfast on a Saturday. Furthermore, as the focus group discussions demonstrated, memories of television may in themselves constitute a form of social belonging, as in the case of the shared memories of *Countdown* or *The Simpsons*.

As Cubitt (2000: 4) also suggests, while memories may point to the survival of past experiences, they are inevitably a reconstruction of those experiences from the standpoint of the present. This was evident in the findings presented here, in those instances where a memory of television was used to account for the present formation of the self. This was particularly the case for the younger participants in the study, who described how the events that they had witnessed on television had affected them, including 9/11 and the reports from Bosnia. Although upset by these TV moments, these participants were able to rationalise these experiences from their perspective in the present as having played a significant role in their personal development and understanding of the world. In this way, a negative or scary experience might be reconceived as not necessarily a bad thing, but as a formative rite of passage.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this, admittedly limited, study is the ways in which the individual memories we encountered were so firmly located in a particular time and/or place. People's significant memories of television were inextricably bound up with when and where they were at the time, whether this was their particular life-

stage or exactly where they were, and with whom, when they were watching whatever it was that ‘moved’ them. The history of television in Australia that emerges from these accounts thus offers a rather different, and more nuanced, account of how television has mattered over the last 50-plus years to those who have watched it.

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