

Grant, A. E. (Ed.). (1994). *Communication technology update* (3rd Ed). Boston: Focal Press. 389 pages.

Jankowski, G. F., & Fuchs, D. C. (1995). *Television today and tomorrow: It won't be what you think*. New York: Oxford University Press. 237 pages.

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These two books offer contrasting views of the future. Although one cannot deny the importance of the ongoing technological evolution/revolution, *Television Today and Tomorrow* certainly argues that the old system is firmly in place. Both books are well conceived, but the book by Jankowski and Fuchs provokes more thought and controversy in my mind. It is a book that should be noted by all readers of this journal.

The media scholar would be well advised to use *Communication Technology Update* as a guide to understanding the various technologies. It is a comprehensive and well written work. The regularly revised book is divided into five sections: electronic mass media, computers, consumer electronics, satellites, and telephony. I found it comprehensive and well written.

Dr. Grant presents an "umbrella perspective" to illustrate five factors that influence communication technologies: enabling factors, limiting factors, motivating factors, inhibiting factors and organizational factors. Enabling and limiting factors are opposites based on the physical nature of the hardware, what it can or cannot accomplish. Motivating and inhibiting factors are opposites based on social, behavioral, economic, and political influences, none of which is less unyielding than physical characteristics.

The strength of *Communication Technology Update* lies in the synthesis of each chapter. A reader could probably find more current information by going directly to trade journals, but the information would be too specific to a particular event to achieve a sense of the larger issues. As with any compendium, some chapters have outstanding quality and others are average. The overall quality of the entire work, though, is high.

I recommend the Jankowski and Fuchs book *Television Today and Tomorrow* because the central ideas of the book are very sound, albeit subject to some controversy. First, the authors argue that the network/affiliate arrangement (the so-called spinal cord of the industry) is presently the sole means of reaching nearly every television home at negligible cost to the viewer. As such, it will have

no real competition for some time to come, with the implication that network hegemony is firmly in place. This "nothing-will-change" view is a popular prediction with some authors. W. Russell Neuman and Clifford Stoll also predict a long, happy life for the *status quo* in their recent books on the future of the media.

Second, the authors argue convincingly against technological determinism by framing technology issues against three requirements: distribution, programming, and funding. The latter two, the authors contend, are ignored in visions of the future. Designing a new means of distribution does not answer the thorny questions of who will pay, given finite consumer resources of money and time, and what mechanism will fill the additional hours of required programming.

Third, this book characterizes the machinations of the cable industry and the telephone companies as protective of their own overpenetrated markets. The authors submit that both industries have run out of ways to make money from their core businesses and are looking to expand into other domains. The recent retreat from video dialtone testing by some regional telcos may mean that wired competition is not nearly as imminent as once predicted.

Finally, the new communication technologies are cast in the role of serving small-scale interests, nibbling at the margins of the network audience by presenting old reruns of programs produced by the networks or an ever-dwindling supply of theatrical releases from Hollywood. The authors characterize the predicted 500-channel menu as 490 niche services fighting each other over "ever smaller fragments." This is a compelling idea for which they muster considerable evidence.

Together, these ideas pose a much different view of the future, perhaps leading to the subtitle for the book: "It won't be what you think." Although the major tenets are largely true, there is an element of wishful thinking throughout this book that things will always remain that way. Perhaps the reports of the networks' deaths are premature, but how many years premature remains to be argued.

It is too simplistic to pit networks against cable at a time when industries are converging. To Jankowski, who spent many years at a network that eschewed involvement with cable channels, it must seem all black and white. The future, however, seems to be evolving toward more partnerships among the various technologies and the major studios that supply the software. Ted Turner, for example, looks for partnerships with Bill Gates.

The tone of the book is often high-and-mighty, pandering to the "risk takers, entrepreneurs, creative geniuses, and financial wizards" on one page and attributing success to "trial and error" on another. This "great men" pro-industry bias, complete with name-dropping, is sometimes annoying and often cloying, especially in the case of describing the creative functions of fictional media workers.

The book also devotes too much attention to domestic broadcasting and not enough to the globalization of telecommunication. If the U.S. system has really

amassed like a coral reef, the authors do not address the role of central planning in other countries. They seem a little too proud of the economic Darwinism that underpins the U.S. system of broadcasting. The constant badgering about the "Dictatorship of Numbers" represents an economic determinism that may be as overly simplistic as the technological determinism against which the authors rail.

The reader is subjected to the usual pro-broadcast litany against the cable industry as scripted for years by the Big Three networks. The most notable premise is that cable has somehow stolen the networks' programs, even though the advertiser-supported system requires that the supplier give away the product to one customer (viewers) in order to maximize the market for the other customer (advertisers).

To obfuscate matters, the authors claim the 1992 network audience is almost the same size as the 1980 audience and larger than the 1970 audience. Such a disingenuous declaration ignores the declining share of audience, focusing only on the absolute size of the base that expands with population growth.

The book is littered with other inane ideas that have been repeated so often that apparently the corporate bosses actually believe them. Space does not permit a full discussion of all of them, but here is a partial list: (a) that audience circulation somehow connotes quality, (b) that the world really cares if there is only 30 minutes for nightly network news, (c) that there is a hard line separating information from entertainment (or that the audience does not know the difference), and (d) that the displacement effect of television on reading has not influenced students' writing ability.

Some of the errors are in defiance of simple logic. For example, the authors use a print media analogy to downplay the negative impact of advertising clutter. Is there not a fundamental difference between the sequential accessing of print and electronic media? Can the eye "skip over" what it chooses not to "read" while watching television? No VCR has come along that zips faster than my flipping past a flurry of full-page print ads.

Similarly, the authors discount the VCR because the largest "use" is the recording of network programs. This makes the assumption that VCRs are used only as recorders, when in fact most owners never learn to record anything, preferring to play back rented material and ignore Saturday night programs on the networks.

As a researcher, I am continually amazed at the misuse of ratings data by network management. The authors contend that the ratings drop of PBS from 2.7 in 1987 to 2.1 in 1991 is somehow momentous. Have they not heard of standard error of measurement?

The most disappointing feature with many of the authors' arguments is the absence of much solid evidence. The reader is frequently implored to believe that something is true because the authors are insiders who have superior knowledge. Anecdotal evidence is frequent but is often self-serving and one-sided. An example would be the casting of CBS as the last network to cave in to

the cable companies in 1993 during the retransmission consent wars, in which the networks blinked first. Does it matter who lost the game?

In fairness, the book is also filled with some very good ideas. For example, Jankowski and Fuchs recommend the elimination of the four "sweeps" ratings periods, a system that had led to distorted audience measurement. In addition, they plead for accuracy in representing the total network audience: The share is 74% in markets where the four (not three) networks have affiliates, which is less than the 90% share before cable but much more than the 57% figure touted in classrooms.

Probably the most controversial opinion held by the authors is that the academics and social critics have it all wrong about television ever being the cultural force that it could have become. According to Jankowski and Fuchs, given a choice, "the audience will opt for relaxation." It is too bad that the authors are on target, and it is too bad they do not seem to care.

Both books are very interesting to read. *Communication Technology Update* certainly pays attention to the economic factors of mass entertainment and information in assessing the future of communication technologies, though perhaps not to the extent done in *Television Today and Tomorrow*. When considered side-by-side, the material in the Grant book makes me wonder if the networks can survive unless they adapt. My prediction is that they will adapt. The difference may lie in whether the new owners are movie studios or equipment manufacturers.

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