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DOI

[10.1177/1367549420927724](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420927724)

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

European Journal of Cultural Studies

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Citation for published version (APA):

Hermes, J., & Hill, A. (2020). Television's undoing of social distancing. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 665-661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420927724>

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Television's undoing of social distancing

European Journal of Cultural Studies

2020, Vol. 23(4) 655–661

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DOI: 10.1177/1367549420927724

journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Joke Hermes**

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Keywords

Coronavirus, COVID-19, social distancing, television, togetherness

At this critical moment in time, April 2020, when we are living with the cataclysmic event of Covid-19, television – a medium declared almost dead at the beginning of this millennium – has become a vital resource for solace, daydreaming, social ritual, knowledge and storytelling. In conditions of lockdown, we turn towards television, not away from it (Ellis, 2020; Negra, 2020). We are checking news on national channels, and tuning to live broadcasting for campaigns to help the health services and communities in need, such as with the globally broadcast *One World: Together At Home* special. We are curling up on the sofa to engage with gripping drama, like *Ozark* streaming on Netflix, re-watching favourite series from the beginning, such as *Buffy* or *Breaking Bad*, and taking part in television quiz shows like *Pointless*, even watching repeats, to recreate a pub quiz atmosphere in the living room. On a darker note, we are also overloaded with corona news; the ritual evening news bulletin can be a source of anxiety and a cause of sleeplessness. Television infrastructure can break down, from broken satellite dishes to lost remote controls, which are tricky to fix when technicians are not so readily available to help; and television can be an economic burden. The cost of streaming

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Breaking Bad can push the limits of monthly contracts and data packages. Television both lightens and darkens the mood of domestic spaces and social relations in lockdown culture.

Of course, television is not the only medium we turn to at this moment in time. Mobile phones are a lifeline for relationships, work, paying bills or making charity donations; radio and podcasts offer a soundscape for the domestic space, something to listen to while at last getting around to cleaning the cooker; meme-making and video-sharing apps such as TikTok provide a creative outlet; meanwhile, books are carefully exchanged across garden fences, travelling from one home to another at a time when libraries, bookshops and online deliveries are not so readily available. For television, we turn towards it because of its particular affordances: its affective, material and ontological elements which become central in lockdown culture. Back in the 1990s, media scholar Roger Silverstone noted television's offer of ontological security in everyday life: his work addressed national television broadcasting and the values and practices of people living with television (Silverstone, 1994). This sense of ontological security is relevant to lockdown television and how it feels, for making sense of the atmosphere and mood setting of television at a time when people are restricted in their movements, fearful of the health of themselves, family and friends, and facing uncertain futures.

Perhaps even more relevant is the idea of 'throwtogetherness' by Doreen Massey (2005), where the confrontation of different elements, such as affects, objects, bodies, histories or stories, make and re-make a setting or situation. In this case, the throwtogetherness of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic enables us to see afresh the affect, materiality and affordances of television. The example of Mabel and Olive, new canine stars in the time of coronavirus, allows us to see the 'throwtogetherness' of television and other kinds of social media in everyday life particularly well. This is not at first glance television in its traditional form. It is a short video, using mixed-genre audio-visual storytelling from sports, video diaries and comedy, and yet the voice and affective structure establish live sports television as a mood setting. Mabel and Olive belong to BBC sports presenter Andrew Cotter, who, no longer able to do his television job, posted a short video on Twitter with his two Labradors entitled 'I was bored'. Mabel and Olive are eating their breakfast and Cotter provides a sports commentary on their activities. In 'The Dogs' Breakfast Grand Final', we see the dogs scoffing their food and Cotter narrating: 'Olive in her customary black, five times the star', Mabel with her 'heavy tail use, happy to be alive'. As the competition heats up, Cotter's voice raises its tempo: 'Olive focused, relentless, tasting absolutely nothing', and Mabel gracious in her defeat, offering the ritual 'swapping of the bowls' at the end.¹

The video quickly spread to other social media, shared in WhatsApp groups with and without context, title or author, within hours reaching over 6 million views. Further videos posted on Twitter have cemented Mabel and Olive as stars in a 'micro-universe' of hashtag digital boredom (Ehn and Löfgren, 2010). In a news interview about Mabel and Olive's worldwide success, Cotter noted how the video captured the public imagination and showed how this small story of boredom in

lockdown illustrated the value of human-animal mood work in a time of crisis. He also pointed out the value of sports: 'it shows how much we are missing sport ... we absolutely take it for granted and we are at last realising that' (*The Guardian* 9 April 2020). As Cotter is currently unemployed, he is referring to the cancellation of sporting events worldwide, and his own precarious employment in sports television. The sports industry and live television of sporting events, like football or tennis, face an uncertain future, gradually opening up again for business after other key sectors like construction, transportation, shops, restaurants and pubs. The sports industry, and television industry in general, has been dealt a major blow from corona, alongside theatre, music and the arts.

When we see television, what becomes visible is that the medium is not only about technology, screens or business models. While television has modes of storytelling that it does better than any other medium (which we will return to), it is most of all the amazing affordance of television as a medium, in the ways it can provide a feeling of togetherness whether one is alone or with others (an argument made about interpretative communities more broadly in the 1980s (Fish, 1980; Lindlof, 1988; Radway, 1984)). In addition, television eases the physical being together of small groups, whether this is friends or families, or (in ordinary times) strangers in a bar, in that it offers the choice of standing in for social talk, making being silent together less awkward. Alternatively, it can be talked about, offering itself as subject for any and all kinds of conversations. In lockdown, television uniquely provides ways to bring material reality into its world and dramatic spaces and gives us access to the personal experiences of others we did not know before.

This is television in a new heyday after a time when critics consigned it to the history books, calling it 'legacy' media, and when viewers found it difficult to apply the label of television to the Netflix or YouTube viewing that felt very similar but perhaps, according to experts, was something else. Television scholars have used terms such as 'platform television', 'internet-distributed television' or 'online television' to mark that something is clearly different (Johnson, 2019; Lotz, 2017, 2018). Those working in the online content industry, in subscription video and on demand services have used a rhetoric of ageing and dying: television as an old medium which will be mothballed to make way for 'social TV' and algorithmically led streaming shows.

The early 2000s prophesising that the end of television was nigh, by critics and academics alike, boiled down to how new distribution methods would compromise television's business model. If no one was forced to watch commercials any longer, and the requisite eyeballs could not be delivered as proof of advertising having been watched, broadcast television would come to its end and the entire system would crash. Where licence fees are still paid, they make up only a small part of the budgets involved in making television. Whether in the context of primarily commercial or in mixed commercial and public service broadcast systems (the story in the United States, for example, is a different one from Europe or Asia), digital video libraries were thought to be taking over. Encouraged by the experience of

lockdown, we are now thinking about television beyond broadcast and narrow-cast, and understand that it comes to us via a multitude of source platforms, all of which invite the feeling of togetherness and throwtogetherness that is television's signature achievement. Television is more than about being offered a window on the world, it is the offer of a set of ongoing stories about who we are.

Looking back, Keilbach and Stauff (2013) argue that television seems to have always been in a process of transformation. A state of indeterminacy, they show, is closer to the norm for television than a clear and fixed sense of what television is. Perhaps it is the medium's particular strength to exude a sense of becoming, keeping audiences in a state of expectancy and the industry on its toes. As much as we do not know where television will go, we know where it has been. While television has changed in the over seven decades of its history, it has been able to retain a number of core qualities. In an early television studies book, John Fiske and John Hartley (1978) describe television as the bard of our times. John Ellis (2000; Ellis, 2002) has noted that television is more than a storyteller, it helps us work through the anxieties of our time.

Under conditions of corona, television, across platforms, screens and genres have been our master storyteller with its easy mix of reliable news and entertainment. A distinct advantage that has allowed the medium to re-establish itself has been its use as means for the nation to communicate with itself, or for political and cultural elites to invite us to fall in line and practice social distancing. Scheduling has been interrupted for heads of state, prime ministers, queens, kings and presidents to address the people; the best-rated talk shows have been reprogrammed to allow for endless corona talk.

Television has been able to do this because its storytelling is open-ended and seeks syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic complexity. These terms come from early work on television by Newcomb (1976) and Allen (1987). Both refer to soap opera, originally a radio genre, as the type of programme that would distinguish television from other media. Soap opera's logic of storytelling has permeated any number of genres. A famous example is the cop show (or police series). From linear narratives about bringing perpetrators to justice (that follow a 'paradigmatic' logic), they have become multi-storyline tales with large casts of characters that we follow across their personal and professional lives (Johnson, 2006). *Hill Street Blues* (NBC 1981–1988) is the way-back-when landmark series where this first changed. Like the extended family of the 19th and early 20th century, the 'work families' of 'soapified' drama series promised to never completely fall apart. We follow storylines through the experiences and dialogue of the characters; rather than move forward (in paradigmatic logic), this syntagmatic storytelling circles and repeats, building a unique type of suspense while allowing for a viewer to miss large chunks of a program and still be able to make sense of the narrative. What happened will be repeated when the focus shifts to another character. The large casts of soaps offer the possibility of multiple perspectives on any given event that we witness through concurrent narratives (Brunsdon, 1997: 15). Rather than

(only) follow the storyline, or paradigmatic narrative logic, we learn to enjoy syntagmatic complexity and the comparing of viewpoints.

This following of multiple perspectives is also tied to the ways that the private lives of others are opened up for us to take (imaginary) part in. A crisis such as corona needs exactly the televisual mix of governmental authority that produces a sense of things being taken care of, and entry into other people's intimate stories. Arguably, this exchange of personal stories could occur solely through social media. Television, however, in addition to offering the authority of national broadcasting and the solace of comparing one's own life to that of others, whether actually living or fictional, has extended its broadcast aura into becoming a platform for cultural citizenship (Hartley, 1999; Hermes, 2005). That is to say that before and beyond the cultural economy of the filter bubble (Pariser, 2011) that characterizes our use of social media, television established itself as supplier of material to talk about (within and outside of your immediate circle of family, friends and acquaintances) and to have authoritative feelings about: a space in which to think about, reflect on and (re)form identities that are embedded in communities of different kinds, both existing in real life and virtually. Implied in our use of television are processes of distinction and rule-making: ethical norms as much as aesthetic evaluation and assessments of truth and sincerity of others (Skeggs and Wood, 2012). It is a process of bonding and community building and reflection on that bonding, implied through watching, celebrating and criticizing what is offered in a televisual form – defined as open-ended, syntagmatic storytelling across news and entertainment that always allows for opening up to the personal (while less so the other way around: television tends to make the personal political more sparingly and does so mostly implicitly).

Corona has re-consolidated television as master storyteller and as platform for cultural citizenship. Television could not have done this if the medium had not been domesticated as 'family' maker and teller of never-ending stories that offer ontological security and allow us to cope.² In lockdown, even more than ordinarily, this provides the necessary link from the intimate to the public; transforming the domestic into a space for endless meetings, viewpoints, considerations as well as allegiances. Television undoes social distance.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPhpJuraz14> (Andrew Cotter's The Dogs' Breakfast Grand Final).
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mprDNI2kXMs> (Lynne Joyrich on TV news and entertainment in a pandemic).

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