

Television and the new working class

Anthony Piepe and Arthur Box

The nature of social class in Britain today is changing. A new survey of television viewing habits helps to define these changes.

In the 1950s, social scientists who made studies of voting, and television audiences, argued that assimilation between manual and non-manual workers was under way and that, consequently, society was moving towards a predominantly middle class structure. Much evidence could be given to support this belief: three Tory governments were elected in succession; there was increased affluence in the form of home ownership and consumer durables among the working class; and there was a diminution in the subtle, invidious distinctions of class culture and opportunities.

Research into television audiences in Britain and the United States repeated this fashionable theory—the so-called “embourgeoisement” thesis. Manual and non-manual audiences liked the same kinds of programme: a 1959 analysis of 13,000 viewers of all the class levels by Mark Abrams found little difference between the tastes of the top 1 per cent and the rest; and a study by Denis McQuail of the audience for television plays showed that the inclination to watch plays, and the types of plays preferred, did not vary with social class. In America, it was found that tastes at odds with the majority were confined to small minority groups. In television, as in politics, the dominant theory was that “we are all middle class now.”

A sample of Luton workers investigated by John Goldthorpe, David Lockwood and their collaborators in the 1960s produced evidence that clashed with this picture of social change. Certainly the workers spent money on the home; were concerned with the state of furnishing and decor; were isolated from traditional networks of kin, neighbours, friends and workmates; shared with their wives a concern with the education and development of children and with the economic fate of the nuclear family: these might be said to be middle class characteristics. On the other hand, differences remained and were such as to question basically the idea of movement to a one-class society. The new working classes were predominantly Labour voters and strong trade union supporters: their social isolation contrasted strongly with the middle class tendency to entertain at home, belong to voluntary associations and spend time with friends and associates. They also continued to occupy subordinate positions in the industrial hierarchy. Although the Luton studies did much to disconfirm the “embourgeoisement” thesis in its complete form, they suggested the emergence of a new working class that was distinguished from the older, more traditional class by a closer concentration on family life as the focus of emotional satisfaction.

This distinction raises the possibility of asking questions about differences in viewing habits between what has been called the “home-centred”—the new emergent working class—and those who continue to conform to the older, traditional patterns.

Are home-centred families more, or less, susceptible to advertising? Have educational needs changed within these families and is this reflected in their

uses of media? What are the points of overlap and divergence between home-centred and traditional workers in their patterns of viewing? Can fresh light be thrown on the debate about the nature of social class in modern Britain through studying the uses of television?

We have now completed a survey of working class families with the help of a grant from the Social Science Research Council. Help was also received from the Southern Television Research Group. A total number of 272 families were interviewed and these were classified as home-centred or traditional, according to the criteria described below.

Our sample was drawn from families living in the Portsmouth area and we defined “working class” in occupational terms. The survey was confined to families in which the chief male member was in a manual occupation, was employed by somebody else, whose manner of payment was a weekly wage and whose job excluded any supervisory responsibilities. Non-European families were not included.

Portsmouth does lack an area of concentrated post-war working class private housing, and this, plus the social heterogeneity of the city, made us choose our survey area with care. The samples chosen from within the city were from Portsea, a traditional area with prewar and postwar council flats, and Fratton Bridge and North End—which contained prewar terraced houses, some rented and some owned. Many of these houses were being repainted and improved. We also interviewed in Leigh Park, an estate outside the city boundaries, with both Portsmouth county council tenants and owner occupiers in the more affluent parts. Finally, we interviewed in a socially mixed private estate in Waterlooville.

Interviews were by appointment with husband and wife, following preliminary contact, and with consent given after the purpose of the survey was explained. The response rate was 71 per cent of those contacted who fell into the relevant categories.

To distinguish the home-centred and traditional workers we used three measures—the expenditure patterns, social networks and the conjugal roles. Our measure of home-centred expenditure involved three factors: home-ownership (including buying on mortgage), as against tenancy; possession of at least four durable consumer goods; and a superior standard of interior decoration and furnishing. “Home-centred” was divided from “traditional” on the basis of families having at least two of these attributes.

We asked a number of questions to establish the external social networks of our families. They included the number and frequency of contact with friends, kin and neighbours (with two regular contacts or less, per family, being taken as the criteria for home-centredness); the husband's spare time activities, his relationship with his workmates; and the participation of husband and wife in voluntary associations. On the basis of this evidence we were able to judge the extent to which the family were involved

with kin, neighbours, workmates and friends.

To establish the degree to which marital roles were shared, rather than separate, husbands were asked how much of their leisure was spent in the home; whether husbands and wives should keep their work in the home separate, or whether it should be shared; and who should control family finances and make decisions. This evidence enabled us to assess how far the roles of husband and wife overlapped. Where families have a home-centred pattern of expenditure and little external contact, the “nuclear” family of parents and children becomes more important in meeting the needs of its members. Leisure will be spent in the home, there will be greater overlapping of conjugal roles and a shared concern by parents for the welfare and development of children. Classifying our 272 families according to these three criteria resulted in the following proportions: 83 home-centred and 189 traditional.

The response to questions we asked concerning television viewing habits showed marked differences between home-centred and traditional groups. Home-centred families watched proportionately more BBC, were more selective in their viewing, watched fewer programmes overall and had a preference for programmes of an educational and informational nature.

These results were what we expected when we started our survey. By definition, home-centred families are withdrawn from traditional working class social networks and they spend more leisure time in the home and more care on its upkeep. It might also be expected that they would show greater concern with the educational career of their children. Arguably, their style of life might be said to constitute a rationale for their different pattern of television viewing.

Using the question separately for weekdays and weekends, we asked, “Do you mainly watch Southern



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Television, BBC, or both about the same." Table 1 shows that home-centred families watch proportionately more BBC than do traditional families in the week, but that there is a shift to BBC by the traditional families at weekends. This result is in line with Jictar audience research findings—namely that STV has the

Table 1: Choice of channel

	STV		BBC		about same		total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
weekday							
traditional	76	40	31	16	82	44	189
home-centred	20	24	20	24	43	52	83
weekend							
traditional	54	28	54	28	81	44	189
home-centred	19	23	20	24	44	53	83

larger weekday audience (52 per cent) and slightly less than BBC at weekends.

Home-centred families spend less time watching television. People were asked to estimate the number of hours spent viewing on weekdays and weekends, and home-centred families watched an average of 3.4 hours weekdays and 5.7 hours weekends, compared with 3.8 and 6.3 hours for traditional families. This difference was also shown when people were given lists of all programmes screened during the period of the study and asked which they watched on a regular basis.

Table 2 shows both that, on average, home-centred families watched fewer programmes regularly and

Table 2: Number and type of programmes watched

type of programme	traditional		home-centred	
	No.	%	No.	%
comedy, light entertainment	4,834	43.0	1,584	41.0
information, educational	2,271	21.0	982	25.5
sport	935	8.4	379	9.8
children's	1,380	12.4	404	10.5
religious	124	1.1	37	0.0
films	1,265	11.4	357	9.3
plays	314	2.7	115	3.0
total	11,123	100.0	3,858	100.0
average per family		58.5		46.4

that they watched proportionately more educational and informational programmes. This preference was further illustrated when we asked people to name the six programmes that they enjoyed the most out of those they watched. Table 3 shows the differences between home-centred and traditional families in their preference for informational and educational programmes.

Table 3: Educational and informational programmes named out of six "most enjoyed"

No. of programmes	traditional		home-centred	
	No.	%	No.	%
0	82	43.4	13	15.7
1 or 2	95	50.2	51	61.4
3 to 6	12	6.4	19	22.9
total	189	100.0	83	100.0

We then asked a further set of questions concerning the effect of television advertising. The home-centred and the traditional groups differed in the purchase of advertised goods and in their attitudes to television advertising. Traditional families consistently purchased more advertised foodstuffs, detergents,

soft drinks, confectionery and toys. People were also questioned on their attitudes to advertising. We asked: "Do you buy goods after seeing them advertised on television?" Answers ranged from "very often" to "never." We also asked, "On the subject of television advertising, do you find that it draws your attention to new products, persuades you to try something for the first time, sets you against the product, just annoys you, or don't know?" On all of these questions, traditional families had a consistently more favourable approach to advertising, and were less disposed to see it negatively. Average incomes for both groups were the same, so that differences cannot be accounted for in terms of superior buying power.

These results in many ways confounded our expectations. We had expected that the greater concern exhibited by home-centred families with home affairs would be associated with a greater receptivity to television advertising. What we appear to have instead is an increased degree of "consumer awareness"—a more rationally calculative attitude to the purchase of goods—leading to a greater resistance to advertising. Also involved in this might be a greater tendency on the part of home-centred families to defer gratification: this tendency has been shown to be class-related, and such a proposition would, therefore, be compatible with a shift on the part of home-centred families towards more middle class attitudes to expenditure.

Our intention in this survey was to bring into conjunction the "uses of television" theme with the so-called "embourgeoisement" thesis. The more extreme version of this thesis suggests an extensive uniformity of viewing habits based on the current predominance of middle class attitudes and norms. Our survey was, of course, confined to manual workers but our results show a lack of uniformity within the confines of a single class.

Our evidence might, on the other hand, support the more modest contention that a section of manual workers are moving towards a more middle class style of existence: so far as television viewing is concerned we have argued along these lines. There is, however, counter-evidence. Potentially one of the most interesting areas in television viewing concerns the question of programme content, as this relates to the way in which people identify to it: serials such as *Coronation Street*, for instance, seem to provide identification and reinforce working class self-images, if these are held.

We did look at this in a minor way in our survey. People were asked to name any programme they watched which was about people like themselves. In fact, *Coronation Street* was the most popular selection for both groups alike: this was followed by *A Family at War* (mainly traditional families) and *For the Love of Ada* (mainly home-centred). People were then asked, in the light of their programme choice, what kind of person they saw themselves to be. The majority saw themselves in straightforward class terms—"just ordinary," "working class," "honest, struggling to make a living" and the like.

One interesting difference, however, was the choice of *Budgie* by eleven traditional families and no home-centred families. *Budgie* has a theme of the slightly masochistic loner, and respondents said things like, "He's always being conned, like me" or "He means well, but he's a loser, always frustrated, gives up easy."

Response to television is selective in terms of the needs and values that audiences bring to their viewing, and the overall picture may be one of growing heterogeneity rather than homogeneity.

In the market place: the old style flourishes

J. R. Medland

Last week, Mayer Hillman revived doubt on the advantages of hypermarkets. Now J. R. Medland discusses continuing demand for street markets and their like.

A Sunday retail market manages to attract about 80,000 people to a disused airfield near Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire. Tommyfield open market in Oldham is reputedly visited by 50,000 shoppers on a good Saturday. In the past four years more than 75 new markets operated by private enterprise have been opened, 25 of these in the last six months.

In a period when developments in retail distribution are changing rapidly and the burning issue surrounding the future pattern of shopping is whether or not the building of giant hypermarkets and complete out-of-town centres should be allowed, it is rather strange that so ancient a method of retailing as the retail market is enjoying the popularity that the evidence above would suggest. It is perhaps surprising that retail markets have even managed to survive, let alone be in a position of expansion.

The retail market is based on the traditional market known in this country for upwards of a thousand years. There are over 700 operating on at least one day each week in Britain, and almost 800 if the 80 or so London street markets are included, too. (Strictly speaking, these are groups of licensed street traders

but in all other respects they have the same function as any retail market.) Many of these markets open six days a week—particularly those covered markets so familiar in Cheshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire, which have for perhaps 100 years or more been a major focus of local shopping. The Kirkgate market in Leeds covers a total area of four and a half acres in the centre of the city, and Bradford has three large covered markets in the main shopping area. A third of all markets in Britain are held under cover and there is a trend by many local authorities to rebuild and generally modernise their markets. Since the last war, more than 10 per cent of the 275 covered markets in the country have been completely rebuilt. The character of many has changed from the decorative ironwork and glass of the post-industrial revolution period to the stainless steel, white formica and striplighting of today. But the recent investment in new covered markets—by local authorities in Liverpool, Bradford, Halifax, Huddersfield, Rotherham, Bury, Nottingham, Llanelli and many others—reflects the continuing interest in this method of distribution.

The more traditional style of market, the open mar-

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Old style trading in Bradford's new covered market

