

A Reappraisal of Instructional Television, by M. Cambre, Syracuse, NY
ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources, Syracuse University.

Reviewed by Jon Baggaley

The publication of this monograph is timely, for it reminds us that television is still the instructional medium with the widest distribution capability in the developed world. Of late we have been distracted from the benefits of instructional television by the exciting potential of the newer computer-based technologies. However, as the full applications of the computer in education become absorbed, the potential of computer-based TV methods becomes more fully appreciated. Television continues to evolve as the medium which, as McLuhan noted, carries all others.

The rapid evolution of ITV has been only too obvious to readers of recent CJEC issues. Television is seen as a prime carrier of broadcast education, of distance and interactive education, of individualized and group instruction in all their forms. Marjorie Cambre herself is a believer in television's overweening scope. Her previous investigations of interactive video have already anticipated the computer-based TV ways of the future. Her work in formative evaluation has generated immense interest in this key approach to the development of future ITV production methods.

In the current monograph, however, Cambre refrains from imaginative futuristic assessments of instructional television mainly, to avoid appearing "something like another new technology evangelist" (p. 49). Since the nominal purpose of the book is to reappraise instructional television, one is tempted to assume that this decision is deliberate. However, it becomes clear that an assessment of ITV's future scope is at least part of the book's purpose; and in this light the failure to discuss a medium as potent as videodisc before its last page is to say the least disappointing.

The book provides a digest of developments in the ITV field, with three emphases: historical (pp. 1-29); research /evaluation (pp. 30-37); and futuristic (pp. 38-50). (It is in fact a review of other reviews, and this book review thus becomes a 3rd-generation commentary on the topic!) The book's concentration upon ITV's past may in part be due to its sub-title: *An Information Analysis Project*; for there is obviously less information around to analyze concerning ITV's exciting future possibilities than there is about the mistakes of its past. Nonetheless, the range of information which the book analyzes is to say the least scanty.

The book's strength lies in its coverage of ITV's usage in high school education, and its chosen emphases may well have been motivated by a concern to speak to the school-teaching audience directly. However, this is no reason to exclude almost totally a) educational technology journals; and b) non-American literature. A reference to the CJEC journal breaks this pattern on both counts (though in the process the journal is renamed CJEM). The *Journal of Educational Television* is not quoted at all. Since the book is published by the

dozen of ITV literature search facilities -ERIC -these omissions are to say the least puzzling.

The book implies that many critics of instructional television (largely left nameless) have described it as "a failed medium" (p. 1); and it quotes perhaps a little too generously such people's views that those involved in ITV research and evaluation are primarily to blame for this. The results of 30 years of ITV research (p. 37) appear to have contributed little beyond a vague awareness that the medium can teach (sometimes), and that good ITV lessons will teach students better than bad TV lessons. There is clearly an immense research literature in Dr. Cambre's own field of instructional design which could have been mentioned at this point. Instead, the book turns to an inspection of ITV's future, mainly through the eyes of the ITV Futures Planning Group, an unpublished think-tank of TV broadcasters and bureaucrats at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, apparently still in session five years later.

Now, when groups such as this get together, they are almost certain to gloss over the achievements of TV researchers and instructional designers, for they are almost certainly ignorant of them. TV practitioners do not always like these approaches, believing that they threaten their creative license. Numerous such forums have taken place in the past, and Dr. Cambre alludes to "the grandiose goals and impossible promises" which they have traditionally set (p. 39). The conclusions of the ITV Futures Planning Group - setting priorities, encouraging good research, providing a creative atmosphere, etc. etc., - are clearly the same old lip-service and hardly worth reappraising. The fact that they are quoted at all, and in some detail, adds to the book's oddity.

The disappointments, scantiness, puzzlements, and general oddness of the book may conceivably be due to the interests of its sponsor, the U.S. Department of Education. Like the bureaucrats of broadcasting, government officials have little interest in radical evaluation methods or proactive fascination for new technologies. By tradition they favour the reactive approach; and the book's attempted justification of old ITV styles within the U.S. school system may certainly have been regarded by them as expedient. Caught between the bureaucrats of two industries, the author has possibly found herself bound to discuss ITV according to an old-style definition, and unable to emphasize any of the interesting perspectives which have previously occupied her.

This theory may be all wrong; but only such a theory could explain why an academic with an interesting prior bibliography should have produced such a restricted set of emphases. The book provides an interesting account of ITV's historical uses in the U.S., and in that respect it is a useful reappraisal. For the devotees of instructional television, however, it holds nothing which is new. At the same time, for cynical observers of the medium, it holds little which is likely to convert. It seems to "reappraise Caesar and to bury him" at the same time.

REVIEWER

Jon Baggaley is a professor in the Graduate Programs in Educational Technology at Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.