From telescreen to society

The fear that television might take over society and dominate individuals was articulated in George Orwell’s classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, first published in 1949:

The telescreen had changed over to strident military music. It was curious that he seemed not merely to have lost the power of expressing himself, but even to have forgotten what it was that he had originally intended to say. (Orwell, 2004, p. 9)

Modern flat LED, LCD and plasma screens that can be mounted on a wall fit quite closely Orwell’s (2004, p. 3) description of the ‘telescreen’ as ‘an oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror which formed part of the surface of the...wall’, but unlike the telescreen, televisions only receive sound and images, they do not gather and transmit them. This means that they do not afford dialogic communication, which, as we will see, restricts their social role; the domestic small screen cannot watch over us as in Orwell’s dystopia so, useless for surveillance, the only social effect they have is through the sounds and images they channel into the domestic space. Nonetheless, as Baudrillard puts it, commenting on a 1971 American TV-verité programme on the Loud family, television shows us the minutiae of lives at work and in families through its documentary and reality programmes: ‘You no longer watch TV, TV watches you (live)’ (1983, p. 53). He argues that television inverts panoptical surveillance by showing us the ‘truth’ of our lives through exemplary instances – the BBC’s *The Family* (1974) and Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s *Sylvana Waters* (1982) are other landmark examples.
Michael Apted's *Seven-Up* for Granada Television, which began in 1964 with a series about the lives of fourteen British children who were seven at the time and have been revisited every seven years since, is another model of how the small screen simulates ordinary lives in a reflective mode. Along with soap operas filmed in the studio, the naturalistic family documentary has inspired the 'reality' programming that focuses on families, small groups and individuals' lives. Documentaries have also inspired much television drama that depicts lives, or at least aspects of them, that are similar to those of the viewers who watch them. Rather than our telescreens interfering with our powers of expression, they provide a mimetic means through which viewers can experience and express their own lives.

In this chapter, I want to explore the idea that television both reflects society and extends it. It tries to show us who we are and who we might be, how we are changing and how we should be. Television achieves a moral impact in that what is shown becomes available for people to take the ideas and values of their mediated experience into their own lives – or to reject as unacceptable, the behaviour or norms they have been shown. Although there is also an ideological impact in that these ideas and values may serve the interests of particular groups in society (for example, the commercial interests behind advertisements), where there are different channels and different production companies with different interests, there are opportunities for a variety of voices with different ideas. The overarching interest of all the different voices of television is, first and foremost, to attract an audience, which is how the medium of television conjoins us in the same way that a shared language, a common school curriculum, a legal system and a political structure bring us into being as a society.

I will work towards the idea that the small screen is a very powerful agent of socialisation that keeps the members of society up to date with changes in its moral order. As modernity continues to develop, the rapidity of change increases through technology, economic and environmental crises, political transformations and the violence of war and terrorism, with ever greater demands on the members of society to change their moral outlook. The traditional means of face-to-face socialisation through the education system, the church and the organs of the state are unable to cope with assimilating and disseminating the rapidity of moral change. The media, especially the televisual media that are not limited to textual discourse, are able to respond more rapidly to this process of cultural change. The small screen achieves a form of sociation\(^1\) that is distinctive of later modernity and that brings