

Looking Forward by Looking Back: The Role of Historical Inquiry in Current TV Studies

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As anyone who has gone digging through the archive can tell you, there is so much in TV history that has yet to be discovered and analyzed. Just about every document has the potential to lead a researcher down a new path of inquiry, and these documents are everywhere. However, my experience in the classroom has taught me that many students consider television to be strictly of the moment and without history. Now that the dominant academic and popular discourse emphasizes TV's current state of flux, I worry that the history we have worked so hard to reconstruct, interpret, and teach is now considered to be even more irrelevant.

While TV Studies boasts solid historical scholarship, any implication that the project of excavating TV's past is finished would be detrimental to the field. A plethora of contemporary issues have deep roots, so a presentist framework must be in constant conversation with rigorous archival research and analysis. Broadcast history in general provides the context for decisions that are being made currently about everything from Aereo to net neutrality.

I came to my current project on the Television Code precisely because I wanted to uncover some roots. I wanted to understand fully why cable television was so damn special. Sure, we can look to the 1990s to track the shifts in programming decisions, but we can also examine what has been positioned as cable's opposite—broadcast television. If a large part of cable's allure is what it has the freedom show and tell, then what has confined broadcast television historically? The FCC is the obvious answer, but the story becomes much more complicated and nuanced once we include the inner workings and self-regulatory efforts of broadcasting's dominant trade association. Trade associations need to enter the narrative of broadcast history in a more pronounced way because their actions—as regulators, researchers, lobbyists, lawyers, and provocateurs—have influenced the direction and output of a culture industry and its creative professionals. Bringing a trade association like the NAB into television history also re-inserts the prerogatives of local broadcasters into a body of work dominated by national imperatives. Finally, the connections between the trade association, the government, networks, stations, and the public are vast and reveal layered negotiations of power.

While I am venturing into archival documents and legal scholarship to understand the implications of trade associations, there are obviously so many other historical questions that remain unanswered. The biggest one occupying my mind is: Where are all the women? Specifically, I have found exactly one document citing a broadcast trade association composed of and serving women exclusively, but when I pursued that lead I instantly reached a dead end. Being able to connect the role of women in broadcasting to the intricacies of the trade association would be ideal.

I have already mentioned the challenge of teaching broadcast history to millennials. A related concern is the viability of a historical focus for PhDs on the job market. Television history is simply not as marketable as presentist topics. It also lacks the prestige of film history. Where will these PhDs find jobs as departments increasingly covet “new media” scholars, and will they be able to present themselves as historians, or will they need to shift their focus to answer the demand for more contemporary topics? Additionally, who will fund historical research on TV when the popular impression is that TV doesn’t even exist anymore?

Perhaps the digital age offers opportunities to raise the profile of our historical work and our Ph.D. students. We’re dealing with two major types of material here: the moving image archive and the textual archive. Both can be shared. Digital reproductions of both types of material enable a wider audience. But at least with textual materials, some archives (that are dependent upon money from visiting researchers) ask researchers not to distribute photos of materials. All the same, we must find a way to, as Ethan Thompson says, make the past visible outside of the standard journal article.