

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

*Jennifer Porst, University of California, Los Angeles*

Rather than causing a turn away from history, the rise of digital culture provides an impetus to “reunderstand” the history of television. With the introduction of digital technologies, issues of disruption and convergence became important concepts, but they are historical, as well as contemporary phenomena. For example, in the wake of the many seemingly dominant media companies who struggled or failed in the face of the digital media, why did they not successfully defend their market dominance in the face of these new innovations? What prevented them from adapting and taking advantage of these new technologies? Historical inquiry can provide some possible answers to those questions, especially since an earlier struggle between old and new media bore an uncanny resemblance to one that followed half a century later. In looking back at that earlier period of technological change when television emerged as a viable, commercial media form, it is clear that many of the same questions and issues of convergence were at play. Analyzing the moments throughout history when a disruptive technology was introduced and the media industries either adapted or failed to innovate, can help us not only understand those important moments in history, but also illuminate the issue of disruptive technologies and the media for the present and the future.

My current research project attempts to reunderstand the history of media and media culture through an analysis of the earlier moment of media in transition and the relation between the film and television industries at the significant historical juncture when television first developed as a commercial medium. It examines the causes and effects of disruption and convergence in the media industries through a case study of the struggle over Hollywood’s feature films on television before 1955. If television began broadcasting in earnest in 1948, two years after Hollywood saw its box-office revenues decline precipitously from their all-time high in 1946, why did it take seven years for Hollywood’s features to make their way to television? Through an investigation of the efforts made by the film and television industries in the 1940s and 1950s to work towards feature films appearing on television, I concluded that Hollywood’s feature films did not appear on television until 1956, not because of the long held assumptions that the film industry was either apathetic or hostile to the nascent television industry, but rather as a result of a complex combination of industrial, social, legal, and governmental forces. Those issues that prevented Hollywood’s feature films from appearing on television before 1955 may well be common to all periods of media industry disruption and convergence, particularly, the contemporary film and television industries and their relationship to digital media.

Both in the 1950s as now, the media industries faced struggles over the legal rights to the films, the geography of windows and deals, fiduciary duties to shareholders, the power of the interests of and contracts with successful retailers and exhibitors, the high risks inherent in producing costly films, contractual obligations with labor organizations,

and more. For example, just as advertisers in the early days of television waited for concrete ratings information to show them where they could spend their money for assured successes, so too have advertisers today been hesitant about taking risks without better data analytics and media measurement tools to point them in the right direction. I'm not suggesting that historical study will allow scholars and media practitioners to perfectly understand and manage their media landscape, but a clearer understanding of the history of the media industries, their successes, and perhaps more importantly, their struggles and failures, would allow everyone to better navigate the present and anticipate the future. Just as we can reunderstand historical periods through a contemporary analysis, so too can historical parallels help us to reunderstand the contemporary.

Digital technologies have also opened new pathways for historical inquiry. Anyone who had attempted archival research on early television can tell you that the maintenance of records on early television was spotty at best and presents a serious challenge to historians. The internet has made research, at least preliminary research, much more accessible, and provides scholars the opportunity to more efficiently locate useful archives. My recent project has shown that using files related to law suits provides a whole new archive from which we might finally be able to piece together a more comprehensive television history. Those files often include information about and testimony from persons or agents who were important to early television history but who have been overlooked because no other archival materials exist to document their stories. In theory and in practice, contemporary media provides a window to the past, just as historical inquiry allows us a better understanding of the contemporary.