

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

Presenting Television Studies with TV's Past

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The presentist emphasis of contemporary television studies is paradoxically both overstated and under-examined. In many ways, historical inquiry remains a key component of television studies as a discipline. Nevertheless, the relative profile of history within the field at least feels like it has changed. In this paper I will explore briefly some of the reasons for this change and contemplate its consequences before offering some suggestions about how we might better television studies with renewed attention to the past.

Presentist work has gathered greater significance in the field for a number of reasons, many of them salutary. In particular, work on contemporary television programs, industry, and policy comes with a sense of urgency that used to be frustrated by the pace of scholarly publication. Social media, blogging, and the various forms of online publication have shifted the venues for critical conversation, and allowed for the dispersal of both finished work and “trailers” for forthcoming pieces to address shows and issues as they arise. This is a good thing, and I do not think contemporary criticism's gain is by definition history's loss.

At the same time, historically focused work has been affected by factors both external and internal to the field. The televisual past invoked in the call for this panel was in large part bound up with the corpus of programs from the 1950s through the 1980s that were the lifeblood of the syndication economy and rerun culture.¹ If not exactly a canon, these programs served as shared reference points in teaching television's past, and their ubiquity provided a justification of television history as a scholarly pursuit (television studies of that era certainly felt the need to justify itself through appeals to influence or effect since the medium's status as art was still held suspect). Additionally, in the three network era – and even with the rise of FOX – both the scholarly and common understanding of television's institutions relied on a dynamic of continuity and change. In that era, the conception of television's present was appreciably historically minded.

However, as both a culture and a field, our relationship to television's past has changed with the proliferation of channels, distribution platforms, and niche programming. With those changes, there is a temptation to turn to explanations of the present that crop history out of the picture. For example, whether critical, neutral, or celebratory, an understanding of the present framed in terms of markets and viewer demand is in many ways cleaner and for many students and readers more persuasive than a historically grounded explanation of the institutional cultivation of markets and tastes. But reintegrating history allows us to tell our students and readers something they are less

¹See Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television*, (Routledge, 2004).

likely to have thought of or known themselves. Moreover, trenchant examples from the past can provide the scholar of contemporary television with a large measure of critical punch through the more starkly drawn causes and effects of history. And, perhaps most significantly, grounding our contemporary work in history can help keep us honest with ourselves, acting as a check on our rages and enthusiasms and engaging us in long-standing scholarly conversations.

I've laid out a set of historical prescriptions for the contemporary critic, but what is the avowed historian to do? One course of action is to engage with the present. History holds the promise of reanimating salient areas of inquiry, calling contemporary suppositions about the nature of television into question and volatilizing notions of novelty and the presumed congruence among aesthetic, political, and industrial progress. Work like Michael Z. Newman's recent *Video Revolutions* productively contextualizes and critically interrogates the tendency to understand new media in terms of historical rupture, and such scholarship historicizing television and/as new media does much to remedy an often technologically or industrially determinist emphasis on transformation over continuity in the conceptualization of contemporary media culture.²

Another tack for the historian to take is to embrace the areas of concern so ably tackled by much presentist work: production and distribution practices, style, and narration. For a number of reasons including differing schemes for academic legitimation and quite often different departmental homes, television studies (even in the apogee of historical focus described by this panel's call) has often asked different types of historical questions than our colleagues in (or ourselves when practicing) film studies, and this has created significant lacunae. There is still much to be learned about the ways that networks worked and the interplay of sponsors, agents, producers, and stars. Similarly, I strongly suspect that the notion of television as "the producer's medium,"³ combined with labor and legal relations that differ significantly from film, has led to a misunderstanding of the role of the director in making television. Finally, if the recent celebration of a narrow slice of television as art has finally made it acceptable to write about television style and narration as subjects that matter at least somewhat independent of sociological impact, then – as problematic as I might find its elitism and potential for contextually unmoored triumphalism – this turn should at least open up opportunities for the television historian to critically reappraise our received wisdom about the grand structures of the Classic Network Era and take another look at the texts to find the innovations and anomalies that existed alongside the exemplars. Here again, we are likely to have opportunities to talk back to the present, and as I have found in my teaching, digital access (both commercial and extra-legal) to old television has productively lowered the barriers to scrutinizing many past shows and relating them to the medium's present. As much as I would encourage the scholar of contemporary

²Another good example is Luke Stadel's work on the continued interpretive flexibility of television throughout the 20th century in such pieces as "Cable, Pornography, and the Reinvention of Television, 1982–1989," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 3 (2014): 52-75.

³Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley, *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, no. 786 (Oxford University Press, USA, 1983).

television to be historically minded, I think it is clear that we as historians can productively harness the concerns and methods that have given presentist work so much salience and energy.