IN FOCUS: Teaching Television in a Postnetwork Era

Introduction

by SERRA TINIC, editor

Since the late 1990s I have begun my television criticism seminar with a quick poll of students’ viewing repertoires, from casual surfing to favorite “must-see” programs. Despite the number of available narrowcasting cable options offered, even ten years ago the majority of students described themselves as avid viewers of the same five or six network series. However, in the past two or three years I have noticed a substantial change in the results of my poll: it is now remarkable to find even three students who watch the same programs. Still more striking is the increasing number of students who say they do not watch television at all and then proceed to describe the characters and story arcs of a vast array of dramas, comedies, crime procedurals, and reality shows. What they mean, of course, is that they do not regularly watch television on television. Their televisual world is one where content streams across multiple screens rather than across a broadcast program schedule. Whether they are torrenting or streaming on laptops and smartphones or bingeing on DVD box sets (sometimes even on the “old-fashioned” television set), our students’ temporal and spatial experiences of media compel us to consider contemporary challenges to teaching television as both a cultural object and a practice.

If conference workshops and hallway conversations with colleagues provide any indication, I think it is safe to say that both my polling practice and classroom experiences are widely shared among Television Studies faculty. It was not that long ago that we could presume that most Television Studies syllabi shared common foundational texts and conceptual frameworks, with the expectation that examples of single episodes or even mere clips of programming would suffice for exercises in classroom discussion and critical analysis. Despite the interdisciplinary engagement that shaped the development of the field of Television Studies, a glance in the rearview mirror indicates that, whether we like the term or not, a working canon had emerged in the
discipline, and we sought to convey it to both our undergraduate and graduate students. Questions of television’s role as a “cultural forum,” or site of ideological struggle over representation, power, and reception, were central to our efforts to encourage students’ understanding of the medium’s material and cultural impact on social formations. The politics of the popular and quotidian dimensions of television remain as (or perhaps even more) acute today as new media platforms destabilize the notion of a common forum of meaning making that has long defined our pedagogy.

This In Focus is a provocation for a long overdue conversation about both the shifting terrain of television as a medium and the implications of this shifting terrain for Television Studies as an institutional configuration. The essays that follow share a number of intersecting concerns ranging from the practicalities of teaching television in an age of multiplatform delivery systems to the emergent challenges facing Television Studies as a disciplinary area in a time of economic crisis and amid overall threats to the humanities in the twenty-first-century university. Derek Kompare explicitly addresses this issue in his reminder to us that television has always been “multiple” in its aggregation of technology, industrial practices, and aesthetics. His emphasis on continuity within dialogues that describe a tidal wave of industrial change encourages us to contemplate how Television Studies is uniquely positioned to frame its centrality, even within the broader designation of “Media Studies,” as a vital component of a liberal arts education. Jon Kraszewski provides a critical connection here in his depiction of the assumed “hybridity” of the Television Studies scholar in most media and communications programs in North America. As he notes, it is increasingly rare to see job postings that specifically identify a position in Television Studies. This is not to say that departments have abandoned this area of study, but it is assumed that those hired as new media or digital media specialists will, of course, also be prepared to teach television. As Kraszewski emphasizes, such forms of hybrid scholarly identity are not expected within Film Studies, which has generally been able to maintain its distinction as a field of study.

The assumption of hybridity in teaching Television Studies may actually speak to Kompare’s depiction of the medium’s multiplicities. Indeed, to adequately understand the sociocultural role of television, we have always had to situate it in relation to the continuity and disjunctures of old and new technologies—from radio broadcasting to the Internet. In this respect, television, or televisuality, is remarkably persistent and integral to any analyses of digital culture and new media delivery platforms. We might see this as an opportunity to reassert the value of Television Studies pedagogy within the present environment of academic discourse that unproblematically subsumes television under the broad umbrella of an expanding mediascape. As Kraszewski underlines, the notion of the hybrid scholar is often predicated on the assumption that “anyone can teach television.” This is partially attributable to the ubiquity and “everydayness” of television that has long contributed to its depiction as a lesser art. And it is precisely resistance to this framing of the medium—one which elides the politics of domination and resistance in quotidian culture—that is at the foundation of Television Studies and its engagement with Cultural Studies.

Concerns about the assumed hybridity of the media-TV scholar have important implications for both television pedagogy and the perpetuation of the field. Despite fifty years of scholarship, there are only a handful of Media and Communications Studies departments in North America that have a critical mass of TV scholars teaching across the numerous specialized areas within the discipline: production studies, textuality, reception and fandom, and globalization, to name but a few. Rather, it is more common to find one or two TV faculty members teaching in relative isolation within larger communications programs. Timothy Havens explores the problems that the “lone Television Studies scholar” experiences in conveying the history and future of the medium’s cultural role at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. As his own experience indicates, the small number of TV faculty teaching in any given department is particularly troubling in graduate education when a new generation of scholars must learn the breadth and depth of Television Studies in a single seminar. In this scenario, it is difficult to envision a seminar structure beyond that of a survey course for graduate students; it would certainly be impossible to fully examine emergent questions of the postnetwork era and media convergence without an explication of the history of broadcasting contextualized within the theoretical framework of critical Television Studies. In envisioning his ideal graduate seminar, Havens proposes exploring the options available for graduate students to earn course credits from partner institutions and departments. He also proposes actually using the new communications technologies we analyze to virtually guest lecture in one another’s classes.

Elana Levine’s essay brings together many of the aforementioned themes and further challenges us to question how our own invocation of “post” theorizing implicates us in the contemporary quandaries of Television Studies pedagogy. Similar to “postfeminism” and “postrace,” the depiction of a “postnetwork” era tacitly assumes that the problems and crises of a previous time are now resolved and evacuates the politics from reconfigurations of prevailing inequities. Indeed, Levine provides a clarion call to TV scholars in her statement that “[i]nstead of assuming that we cannot talk about contemporary television as a central site of cultural negotiation, and as a site where power is at stake, perhaps it would be wise to ask whose interests are served by denying that television may still play a role as a site of cultural negotiation.” This is a particularly timely intervention. It has been ten years since John Fiske, one of the most influential individuals in the development of Television Studies, retired from the academy. The recognition of his canonical (yes, that word again!) contributions has been marked by the publication of new editions of his books as well as the organization of the Fiske Matters conference in Madison, Wisconsin, in 2010. Levine’s observations of that gathering remind us of Fiske’s enduring legacy not only as a scholar but as a teacher whose ideas and pedagogy remain as salient as ever in an evolving media landscape.

Continuity amid change also informs Jonathan Nichols-Pethick’s contribution. Nichols-Pethick encourages us to retain our central concepts of television culture while meeting students where they are in their own mediated worlds. Turning away from the structured nature of “flow” that characterized the practices of the high-network era, he aptly illustrates how to adapt the term in the classroom to refer to “randomness and flexibility” across media platforms. Nichols-Pethick’s experiences in the classroom illustrate the ways that the basic tenets and theories of Television Studies are uniquely
suited to an understanding of the new media environment. Perhaps more significantly, he underlines how we have overdetermined the differences between our students’ television and media practices and our own. We, too, are immersed in the world of media fragmentation, time shifting, and apparent individualization. More important, this has enabled us to experiment with innovative scholarly dialogue in forums such as *In Media Res*, *Flow TV*, and *Antenna*, which Nichols-Pethick effectively identifies as models for new forms of student engagement with television pedagogy in a digital media sphere.

Indeed, too rarely do we recognize how our own media practices affect our research and the subsequent impact that this has on how we teach television. Levine references, for example, the ways that many TV scholars have embraced the postnetwork branding of premium cable programming as a new form of quality television that replicates the high-low division that customarily separated television from film. Premium cable programs are important to study, but we should consider how such research also shapes the ways that we teach the ever-expanding field of Television Studies, particularly given the fact that many, if not most, of our students continue to engage with network programming, albeit across a range of platforms that confound the rationalization practices of broadcasting executives. Moreover, despite our own concern with the rapidity of change, it is worth noting the persistence of the risk-averse strategies that continue to define the conventional wisdom of TV production and programming. Despite their acknowledgment of audience fragmentation across new media platforms, network executives continue to rely on ratings metrics while they simultaneously strive for the affective investment that smaller audiences display for the narratively complex offerings on premium cable. FOX’s cancellation of the critically acclaimed *Lone Star* after only two low-rated episodes is but one eminent example. So, to translate from the French, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.”

This In Focus should be read as a companion piece to predecessors that have examined the role of television scholarship as a contributing factor to the contested discourses of the future of both the medium and the field of inquiry. As Charlotte Brunsdon asserted only three years ago, “Maybe it will be neither ‘new media studies’ or ‘visual culture,’ but some version of ‘screen studies’ that will be the most interesting home for the study of television in the future, but only if it retains a memory of the history of broadcasting.” The following essays all invoke Brunsdon’s sentiment, whether taking a broad institutional perspective or centering on the grounded issues involved in teaching our students about television’s role in society. (Perhaps, for example, more of us should borrow from Film Studies and argue for institutional restructuring to allow timetables for screenings of TV series.) As all the contributors note, Television Studies is uniquely poised to engage our students’ understanding of a multimediated world. Our tool kit of theories of representation and power as they intersect with industrial practices in the production of culture remain relevant and pressing across the actual screens in which they are made manifest.

Television is not a stable object. It has never been one, nor will it ever be one. As the most provocative work in Television Studies makes manifest, television functions less as a stable object than as an empty box into which we put our hopes and anxieties about modern life. While the content of that box certainly engages us, it’s the box itself that matters most: a discursive structure with permeable borders yet with material presence. Although always contentiously defined and regarded, it has also been the cultural nexus of much of the world for the past six decades. As the twenty-first century rolls on, however, it is also increasingly apparent that television is a box designed for a prior age of centralized, regimented, and unidirectional media distribution, and its concomitant subjectivities. Nonetheless, like the governments we elect, the roads we drive on, and the mass-produced foods we eat, TV is still very much part of the larger inherited environment in which we live. Regardless of how we define it, television, or more specifically concepts of television—as a technology, an industrial system, a set of aesthetic practices, an ideological apparatus, or even a “plug-in drug”—will continue to matter for the foreseeable future. Given that television will be there, in many forms, we must continue to pursue why and how it matters.

Throughout television’s history, and outside the medium itself, this task has largely been fulfilled in another prominent modern “box”; the university. There, despite continual doubts, fears, and dismissals of the medium, television has at least been regarded, quite broadly, and often only at a “safe” distance, as a phenomenon worthy of academic concern. Although it took until the 1970s, following the work of Horace Newcomb and others, for cultural and textual analysis of television to be accepted as a legitimate academic approach to the medium, and even longer for Television Studies, as a distinct field, to gain a modest footing in the humanities, TV has certainly always been “studied” in academia. Broadly speaking, Television Studies’ place in the academy, and particularly in the humanities, has now seemingly been won, if not in every college or university. But this position is far from secure. First, television’s perpetual cultural and industrial instability has extended in recent years into more radical reconfigurations, as the medium has migrated from domestic set to networked node, and as many long-standing practices such as broadcast schedules and broad national address have been challenged. Second, and more critically, higher education is itself undergoing its most significant transformations in centuries. Like television, Television Studies may be a box ill equipped for the emerging environment.
Given these challenges, we need to consider TV’s place in higher education, and especially in the humanities, at three levels: the overarching philosophical question of education about television per se, the functions of television in the Media Studies curriculum, and the roles of television in the classroom and syllabus. While the fundamental question “What is television?” is of course critical in how we conceive of our scholarship, it is equally critical to consider how we teach this question. In other words, what does an “education in television” mean in the twenty-first-century context of potentially radical shifts in the expectations and functions of both television and higher education?

By now we all are, or should be, familiar with the current narrative of academic crisis. Many (perhaps most) of us have faced this issue directly, particularly in the past few years, in the form of curricular turf wars, resource allocation struggles, tenure battles, and shifting status, wage, and benefit policies. While it is tempting to treat this as the standard background noise of academia, it is critical to realize that the current wave of crisis, inflamed largely by the devastating 2008–2009 financial crash, may radically alter what we do and how we do it. The roots of this crisis lie precisely in long-standing structural issues, not only in higher education but also in the political economy more broadly, and their convulsions over the past few years have sent ripples of significant changes throughout the system. Obviously, colleges and universities are no less at the mercy of capital than any other social institutions. While much of the recent impact has been most prominent in public institutions (as seen in the University of California system), private schools, including mine, have also been affected as endowments suddenly shrink and donors pull back. Despite some reassurances of restoring “normalcy” after these events, the effects of these fiscal crises are hardly temporary. As Naomi Klein argues in The Shock Doctrine, governments and private capital exploit crisis, and even the perception of crisis, as a way to implement new, ostensibly free-market (but functionally financial-capital-favoring) economic and organizational schemes that can profoundly affect how they, and societies more broadly, function.¹ The changes may be subtle, such as a temporarily frozen job search, or more profound, such as the gutting of entire academic programs or colleges. Perhaps the most extreme example of impending structural change is from the United Kingdom, where the recently elected Conservative government proposed to rescind the entirety of state support for the arts and humanities.

Such a fluid environment challenges long-standing assumptions about institutional and even epistemological stability. The applied sciences and professional schools have generally been able to make easily understood arguments for their viability, and it is they who have benefited most thus far from the radical structural changes in higher education. By contrast, the humanities, long diminishing in relative status and resources, have borne the brunt of the existential crisis.² In his assessment of the situation in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Frank Donoghue even ponders whether the university is

still an appropriate home for the humanities: “[W]e need at least to entertain the possibility that the humanities don’t need academic institutions to survive, but actually do quite well on their own.”³ While this point is certainly worth pondering in this era of redefinition, I agree more with Richard A. Greenwald, who points out that the onus falls on academics to better make the case for our own relevance: “Our challenge in the coming years is to reconnect the arts, humanities, and social sciences to the world, to make them matter again. We need to break down the barriers that isolate us, some of which we erected ourselves.”⁴

Where does this leave Television Studies? To “reconnect” with society, the humanities in general need to better articulate their methods and objects of study at the broadest institutional levels. This is as it should be; our practices and institutions should be neither static nor only reactive. That said, the situation for Film and Media Studies, as a subset of the humanities, is complex in this regard. Technologically and culturally, we would seem to be situated relatively well in the current environment. Our tools and texts are inescapable in an increasingly screen- and network-based culture, and our research and pedagogy have helped bridge conceptual gaps between traditional methods and emergent digital humanities, while bridging also gaps in professional practices, despite the long-standing chasm between production and critical studies in most media departments. Benefiting from the explosion of text-based analysis in the humanities since the 1960s, the study and production of film have long been ensconced in most colleges and universities in North America and Europe.⁵ More recently, “new media” or “digital media” courses, faculty lines, and entire programs have made similar strides, riding the rapid and inescapable diffusion of digital media and the Internet.

For Television Studies, however, the situation is more complex. There’s no doubt that the field has expanded tremendously over the past twenty years, to the point that television-centered scholars, conference papers, articles, and books are nearly as plentiful as those centered on film; the membership of SCMS certainly reflects this expansion. Unfortunately, as we all well know, the concept of the box itself has never been more unstable, hence the many “state of television” panels, papers, and books offered by both the academy and the industry over the past fifteen years.⁶ While this very instability undeniably provides significant conceptual and practical opportunities, in a threatened academic environment, with resources scarce and lines redrawn, it also presents a considerable challenge. What does “television” mean for humanities education in the 2010s? Is TV any more or less vital than any other medium or “box”? With the understandable fervor to stake out new media practices and subjects on one side, and the stalwart defense of “old” media (like film) on the other, television falls in the middle: neither new enough to be hip nor old enough to be venerable. Thus, while some of our colleagues pursue


⁵ Even in universities with dedicated Film Studies programs, courses in “X and Film” are routinely offered through other departments.

⁶ Every academic and industry conference I have attended since 2000 has featured multiple panels on variations of the question “What is the state of TV?”
grants for developing iPad apps and others (albeit more rarely) for protecting on-campus film exhibition, we’re left wondering what to do with shelves full of off-air VHS tapes.

We must recognize and better articulate where television fits in these new configurations. Some of these changes may seem cosmetic, but they have a wider strategic function. In 2010, the faculty of my department at Southern Methodist University, which offers courses in both production and critical studies, made the unanimous decision to change our name from “Cinema-Television” to “Film and Media Arts.” The “television” in our old name was no longer reflective of much of our identity—while I and others have continuously taught TV courses, we hadn’t offered the traditional multicamera TV studio production course in many years. Moreover, it was regarded as a term with increasing baggage in a changing media environment, particularly in the eyes of potential students and university administrators. As John T. Caldwell points out, most people in the “film” industry are actually making “television,” but the former term still holds greater cultural sway, even in Hollywood. Indeed, most of our students, and I suspect most of yours, choose to identify their major as “film” or even “cinema,” rather than “television.” “Film” still means something tangible to them in a way that “television” does not. As the only person in my department primarily identifying with TV Studies, although not the only one teaching television content, I support both this assessment and the new department name. Retaining “film,” as opposed to the more austere “cinema,” is a pragmatic connection to a justifiably “venerable” (and still discursively valid) tradition of production, history, and criticism, while substituting the increasingly ubiquitous construction “media arts” for “television” is a nod to the growing diffusion of media forms, as well as a more concrete link to the rest of our college (the Meadows School of the Arts).

While a younger me debating a new name for our department would have shot down “film” and demanded the retention of “television,” I now see that we must choose our battles carefully and that there’s nothing to be gained, and much to be lost, by holding on to “television” in a department name. As was the case with the similar rebranding of SCMS in 2003 (rather than SCTS, as it could have been in the 1990s), the formal naming and institutionalization of “television” should not be the point of Television Studies. Indeed, we should resist that conception and be wary of how such subdivision actually weakens the potential for Media Studies as a whole. Again, television is less a distinct medium, form, or identity, and more that empty box I spoke of earlier: an unrivaled conduit for contemplating the humanities as it has actually related to human cultures for the past several decades. Strategic ex-nomination, at the level of the department, opens up that box even further to greater exploration across the humanities.

Thankfully, we’re already skilled at that, with three generations of faculty teaching television in the humanities in many different fields and departments. Television Studies shares television’s polysemy. Accordingly, given the sheer variety of departments teaching television within the humanities, and of teaching situations more broadly, it is impossible to describe a definitive approach to the television curriculum. Nevertheless, there are particular strategic considerations that could apply broadly. The simplest of these is to assess what’s offered in light of the instability of both television and the

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humanities. What is the “television” of these courses? Is it a television expressly of the past, which no longer exists? Is it a television of ideological texts, of creative practices, of capital transactions? Consider whether this conception of TV is not only relevant but actively vital. That is, does it add something significant to a twenty-first-century university education? If not, it should be reconceptualized.

Some of this may result directly from practical pressures. Many departments are shuttering their in-house television production studios in favor of increasingly inexpensive field production equipment, a move that not only saves immensely on equipment overhead but also focuses on nimbler practices of content creation. While an entire mode of television production—live-switched multicamera studio—is cast away or (more likely) ceded to journalism programs (which, of course, have their own considerable crises of validity to contend with), the gain in flexibility is not insignificant. In programs not offering such production courses, the reconceptualizing may take a form that would be considered heretical in some quarters: combining the analysis of television with film and other media forms in the same course—in other words, reworking the usual segregation of medium specificity into a more productive relationship.

While there are certainly courses that deserve a focus on television, there are other courses that could benefit from some comparison and cross-pollination. For example, my Science Fiction course covers both film and television; this way, I can present a wider range of material (from A Trip to the Moon [Le voyage dans la lune; Georges Méliès, 1902] to Fringe [FOX, 2008–]) and prompt debate about the aesthetic, industrial, and cultural differences and similarities of both media forms.

The rationales that shape our broader concepts of television in the university and in the curriculum should also help situate its coverage and treatment in our courses. This includes better explaining to our students (and most important, acknowledging to ourselves, as we prepare the same courses over and over) that television is, and always has been, multiple: a box of possibilities described and filled by competing, contingent interests. In fact, our students’ experiences of TV are already rife with these definitions. In many ways, television is not the same medium it was ten, twenty, or fifty years ago. Most of our students came of age with the Internet; many of them certainly take for granted industrial and cultural practices—like file sharing via BitTorrent, licensed online streaming of TV content, and YouTube—that were “experimental” only a few years ago. Yet television is also stubbornly continuous. It largely maintains a cultural centrality it acquired a half century ago, and most of its major program forms have been around for that long as well. In addition, it remains, as it was then, a site of controversy, and of potential excess, critique, and art. These are all key aspects of the humanities and absolutely relevant terrain to be explored in a university education.

In my experience, in a Film and Media Arts program that teaches both production and largely “textual object-focused” critical studies, this persistent indeterminacy is easiest to convey in history courses, where comparative opportunities abound.8 I like

8 By “textual object-focused,” I mean courses that study film, television, and other media forms in large part via analyses of individual texts and their industrial histories. In other words, categories like aesthetics, history, genre, identity, and nationality are likeliest to be the jumping-off points for course descriptions. While I think it’s safe to assume that most SCMS members conceptualize their own pedagogy and scholarship this way, these certainly aren’t the only viable approaches.
to present a set of problems (or more generously, “concerns”) at the outset that have factored into how television has functioned aesthetically, culturally, and industrially. These typically include issues (like representation, economics, technology, and aesthetics) that are broad enough to cover wide ground, but which can easily be narrowed and combined into more specific concerns. Students are encouraged to regard television history not as a parade of disconnected programs, policies, and people but instead as a web of perpetual debates. Every new program has been a formal argument about television’s ontology. Similarly, every television moment is loaded with such significance. Instead of locating past television as a collection of quaint or “cheesy” concepts and characters, I highlight both continuities and contradictions in particular moments and across time. While this is certainly a lot of fun when covering The Burns and Allen Show (CBS, 1950–1958) and Curb Your Enthusiasm (HBO, 2000–), it is equally important in handling the decidedly drier terrain of policy and industrial practices. Past debates, like the one over the Prime Time Access Rule in the 1970s, can (in this case) be presented as an example of the continuous regulatory tension between local and national conceptions of television, and the constituencies and vested interests associated with each.

In sum, television’s perpetual instability may help us weather the new instability of the university. Both boxes largely mean what their users and observers want to see. Knowing this, our best strategy to insure that television remains a vital part of a vital humanities education is to get ahead of its perception and make sure that we fill the box in ways that best serve our students’ needs, and our own.

Hybridity, History, and the Identity of the Television Studies Teacher

by Jon Kraszewski

My teaching and research investigate the intersections of production cultures and identity studies. I am interested in the way workers construct and contest their own identities while they produce culture in institutions and the way these battles over identities shape sociopolitical issues and formal elements in texts. When asked to contribute to this In Focus on teaching contemporary Television Studies, I thought it would be a unique opportunity to use some of my research concerns to make sense of the work and identities of television scholars in contemporary universities. An appropriate starting point is to note that in the first half of the previous decade, when I went on the job market, many Media Studies departments placed job advertisements exclusively for “Television Studies scholars.” At that time, an established institutional logic prevailed that those who taught TV Studies were TV...
Studies scholars. In the second half of the decade, television-centered jobs largely disappeared, with a job dedicated exclusively to that field appearing every two years or so. Now jobs that mention the teaching of television often ask the candidate to have a hybrid identity and to teach television with a combination of other media—usually film or new media. One might blame this on the way university cuts and consolidations force workers to take on more tasks. Or one might positively conclude that areas such as production studies investigate the creation of contemporary film and television simultaneously, a sign that the study of TV is being brought together with the study of other media. Likewise, the focus on convergence, coupled with the increasing tendency to call our field “Screen Studies,” suggests we are more comfortable with merging media in our teaching and scholarship.

One could claim that all media scholars should have a hybrid identity and teach numerous media. Yet a quick glance through the Chronicle of Higher Education or the SCMS job postings today reveals that many departments advertise for film positions or for new media positions and do not require the hire to teach other components of our field such as Television Studies. Hybridity—a term that I use to describe the need to combine various media or areas of Media Studies (Film Studies, Television Studies, New Media Studies) in our teaching and scholarship—is unequally affecting the practice of hiring and the future of different fields within Media Studies. Contemporary universities usually construct the identity of a TV instructor as that of a hybrid scholar-teacher who should not focus solely on television, whereas film or new media teachers often have the option just to teach their medium of specialty. Still, we should not conclude that hybridity is simply bad for the teaching of Television Studies.

Rather, the hybrid identity of the TV teacher can serve either as a benefit to Television Studies or as a denigration of the field, depending on who constructs this hybridity. Self-identified hybrid scholars usefully illustrate how identities are constructed and contested across media or how industry personnel work in more than one medium. Diane Negra’s and Yvonne Tasker’s work on postfeminism in film and television is a superb classroom tool that asks students to think about problematic notions on television that suggest that we have somehow moved past the need for feminism. Likewise, Mary Beltrán’s writings on Latina/Latino and mixed-race identities in film and TV have helped me teach my own interests in multiracialism and postracialism. Film scholar Amanda Ann Klein has written provocative work on reality television that I have used to teach multiplatforming and class-based prejudice in the genre. Television Studies is still indebted to 1990s industry studies that prioritize the mining of trade magazines and archives; I have used these writings from hybrid scholars in my own courses to

speak more explicitly about the social, political, cultural, and economic constructions of identity on television. I place a priority on archival and trade research in my own teaching and writing, but the identity issues investigated by hybrid scholars offer my students an important and equally valuable way to understand struggles over meaning in TV programs. Moreover, the booming field of production studies is populated with scholars dedicated to understanding the culture of production and the production of culture in both the film and television industries. As John Thornton Caldwell notes, “The production sector in Los Angeles . . . involves the interaction of personnel from both film and television.” Production studies teaches us that many people with careers in contemporary media move between television and film.

At the same time, the prominence of calls for the hybrid television scholar in job ads can play into the common belief that TV is a lower form of culture than other media; this belief helps support the idea that anyone can teach television—even those with no background in the field. This all harkens back to notions from the 1960s that film is a form of art, one that requires teachers with aesthetic and theoretical training. In its founding years—let’s say from the late 1970s through the early 1990s—Television Studies distanced itself from Film Studies by turning toward Cultural Studies and the study of the collaborative production process (as opposed to the examination of the individual auteur that helped elevate film to the level of art in many universities).

While the move away from auteurism is one of the things that drew me to Television Studies, TV Studies’ distance from Film Studies’ methods can be abused by departments to put forward the idea that anyone can teach television since it requires no aesthetic or intellectual training to appreciate. Departments can also use the notion of the hybrid TV Studies teacher to pawn off television courses to Film Studies or New Media Studies hires who have little interest in TV Studies, making television classes a mere side project for them. Media Studies curricula often play into this notion. Many media departments have three or fewer courses on television. Although these courses differ across institutions, they often break down to a history, analysis, and special topics sequence. Meanwhile, Film Studies often has at least four times the number of courses on the books. The three-course sequence in TV favors the notion that anyone can teach television, as departments—especially in this economy—cannot justify a hire for someone to teach those few classes. I’ve witnessed this firsthand as friends from graduate school with no training or interest in television have asked me for advice once their departments scheduled them to teach TV courses.

There is another layer to the notion of hybridity and teaching Television Studies: any fight to assert that television should be taught by television scholars or self-identified hybrid scholars will be riddled with disciplinary contradictions, as some of the

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5 Film Studies also turned to industrial studies at this moment in writings that favored a complete study of the production process. See Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon, 1989); and David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristen Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). This undeniably influenced research on the creative process in Television Studies, but I think TV Studies still positioned itself as against Film Studies, or at least against the auteurism of previous decades.
most interesting work on television relies on terms from the nascent field of New Media Studies and from the established field of Film Studies. I think there are two keys to advancing Television Studies as a field to be researched and taught by TV scholars or self-identified hybrid scholars. First, we must subject television to a rigorous historiography to convince people that teaching TV is more than just examining contemporary television; television will be left available for co-opting by other fields if administrators cling to the false notion that the twenty-first century is the only age of convergence. Second, we should remain open to hybridity with other areas of Media Studies, yet at the same time mark the boundaries of our own work as television specific. In what follows, I offer two brief examples of new directions in Television Studies indebted to other fields—one stems from New Media Studies and the other from Film Studies. I point out how we have harnessed, or should harness, this disciplinary hybridity for the purposes of television historiography.

The idea of convergence is central to the teaching of television, but it is also an idea that administrators might abuse to delegate television courses to new media hires, based on the assumption that the topic simply deals with television’s relationship with the Internet and digital cultures. If treated in this way, convergence, a dominant issue in Television Studies, can handcuff us to teaching only contemporary television, whereas I’ve always found TV Studies to be at its best when it both historicizes the medium and responds to the most pressing issues of the day. While we absolutely need to teach television’s contemporary convergence with the Internet, we also should redeem convergence as a central theme in television history. Convergence is nothing new. If we go back to the origins of American television in the post–World War II era, we see various moments of convergence: members of the art world going to work in the television industry; museums constructing exhibits about television; writers for 1950s television anthology series adapting their scripts for the book publishing, theater, and motion-picture industries; stars from vaudeville and film using their background to create a televisual acting style; producers of radio shows finding ways to adapt their series to television; and film studios entering television production. We can also think about the emergence of new technologies such as home video as representing moments of convergence.

At stake in such a historical project is the recognition that television’s convergence is not just about participatory cultures and the Internet, a topic that dominates many current discussions. Rather, convergence deals with other themes such as the ways throughout history that workers in the television industry managed their careers and creativity across media, the ways that aesthetics of other media have historically influenced television and vice versa, and the ways that cultural forms such as acting styles have traveled across media at different points in history. Here, television historiography

6 Lynn Spigel makes this point about convergence histories in writing the history of television’s convergence with modern art in *TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

should recognize that television has never functioned in isolation from other media; TV Studies must chart out the specific historical convergences that television has experienced, just as Media Studies in general is starting to come to terms with the histories of convergence. I find it critical that we teach the historical specificity of this topic for television. I should also point out that television scholars have been conducting such work on television’s relationship to other media since the 1990s and that perhaps Television Studies understood that the medium was about convergence even before Media Studies officially started to use that term. Thus, works from the 1990s such as Christopher Anderson’s *Hollywood TV* can be used to teach issues of media convergence.

Television Studies is also actively borrowing terminology from Film Studies that it had previously avoided. This is an important way to write about ignored histories of television that informed TV culture of the past, as long as it is done for rigorously historiographic purposes, not as a way to promote the notion that any film scholar can teach television. Attempts in the 1970s and 1980s within Television Studies to address authorship were largely frustrating, no doubt because auteurism—debates both for and against it—still lingered in discussions of authorship in Film Studies. Early efforts in TV Studies to address authorship became saddled with a problematic notion that authorship related to the dominant creative vision of one person on the set who rose above the collaborative nature of production to imprint a signature on a series. Although Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley made a significant contribution to understanding authorship’s place within the larger creative process of the television industry in the 1980s, efforts by other scholars to discern who exactly was the televisual author never allowed this subject to gain momentum. Unlike Film Studies, whose discussions of auteurism often heralded the director as an artist, Television Studies could never agree on just who the auteur was. Moreover, from its inception, TV Studies disavowed the artistic discourses found in some camps of Film Studies in an effort to create a theory and history for a medium seemingly caught up in everyday life and culture. Authorship appeared to be out of line with the rest of the field back then and seemed like it could not be transferred from Film Studies to Television Studies because the industries functioned so differently.

The turn to the study of reception in 1990s Film Studies set the foundation for compelling discussions about authorship in Television Studies in the 2000s. These debates about film authorship in the 1990s moved past mystical notions of auteurism to examine the various institutional reasons why the film industry promoted certain directors as individual authors, even though they worked in a collaborative environment. Discussions about artistry and authorship in film reception studies of the

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8 See Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake, eds., *Convergence Media History* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
9 See, for example, Christopher Wicking and Tise Vahimagi, *The American Vein: Directors and Directions in Television* (New York: Dutton, 1979); and Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, eds., *MTM Quality Television* (London: British Film Institute, 1985).
1990s veered away from essentializing film as an art in an effort to understand the institutional articulations that brought together film with the art world. More recently, Television Studies has examined the discursive construction of authorship in a variety of historical settings, most notably the early twenty-first century and the 1950s. Scholars have realized that authorship has been an important part of television culture, but that we needed to write a history of it that explained how it operated within the institutional setting of the television industry. This work explains the collaborative production process of an era and examines why the television industry invests efforts to promote certain people—ranging from contemporary showrunners to 1950s anthology writers—as television authors.12 These discussions are invested in analyzing taste cultures, as many researchers seek to understand how authorship functions in highbrow programs, but we should not overlook how authorship operates in middlebrow and lowbrow television. For example, I found that 1950s television anthology writers spoke of their own authorship in middlebrow terms, viewing themselves as ordinary people committed to the improvement of mass culture.

Authorship has been a prominent discourse of American TV culture since its beginnings, but we are only now beginning to create a historical and theoretical understanding of it. As the teaching and research of television authorship moves forward, I hope the field pays more attention to social agency and to style. My own work explores the political positions and narrative styles of television anthology writers identified as authors. I look forward to future work that acknowledges the collaborative nature of television production but also realizes that authorship enables certain individuals and not others to function politically within the industry. We also need articles, books, and courses that focus exclusively on the careers and works of major television authors. As Michele Hilmes recently stated, “It is a sign of a field [television authorship] still in development that some of our most productive and innovative writer-producers have not yet been the subjects of full-length critical studies.”13 Thus, the teaching and research of television authorship needs to address both macro issues of authorial discourses and micro issues of individual authorship.

The identity of Television Studies teachers within academic institutions has changed dramatically over the past ten years. The key for the future of teaching television will be for those with an investment in the field—whether they define themselves as television scholars, television-film scholars, or television–new media scholars—to shape their own hybridity in ways that emphasize the importance of television in a Media Studies department. As we wrestle with various issues of disciplinary hybridity in TV Studies, I encourage readers to consider a broad restructuring of television in the curriculum and to design new courses in an effort to further assert the value of our field and the identity of those who teach television. Designing courses is always hard, especially in the current climate of cuts and mergers, but I hope that some of us


will try to add more television courses to the books in an effort to build up the field so that it warrants teaching, whether from a television, television-film, or television–new media perspective. If television continues to be a marginal presence in many Media Studies curricula, it will become increasingly vulnerable, especially when Television Studies scholars retire and departments consider whether they want to make another TV Studies hire or use the line for something else. If more of us don’t build up Television Studies within our curricula, then I foresee a day when there will be no job ads for Television Studies scholars and TV Studies courses will either be removed from the books or continually assigned to media scholars with little interest in the field.

Teaching the Lone Television Studies Graduate Seminar

by TIMOTHY HAVENS

A friend of mine, the only Television Studies scholar in her department, tells this troubling anecdote: A graduate student from English has been sent to her because he wants to be eligible for jobs in Media Studies. Can she, the student inquires, recommend thirty-odd articles that will provide the “basics” of Television Studies?

While Television Studies may still be “aspirationally disciplinary,” as Charlotte Brunsdon put it more than a decade ago, as a field of inquiry it has developed over its brief four-decade history a coherent set of theoretical assumptions, canonical readings, and prevalent methodological approaches. Much as a doctoral student in English cannot hope to master the field of Television Studies in a single semester, even graduate students with training in fields that may seem closer—Film, Communication, Media Studies—can only begin to scratch the surface of Television Studies in a single graduate seminar.

As someone who considers himself first and foremost a television scholar, I have a deep commitment to preserving, explaining, and promoting my understanding of the field to the next generation of scholars. This includes methods of analyzing television texts; theories about active audiences, networks, and the televisual apparatus; an interdisciplinary commitment to studying the intersections among texts, institutions, and audiences; and a belief in the contingency of meaning, social power, and popular resistance. It also includes an emphasis on the continuities among

new media and older media; such an emphasis enables us to see television broadcast- 
ing as an antidote to the industry’s claims about the revolutionary power of new me-
dia. However, much like my friend (and numerous other colleagues), I am the lone TV 
scholar in my department. So what aspects of the field should I privilege or exclude in 
my graduate seminar? How do I decide what will most assist graduate students pursu-
ing Television Studies, as well as those pursuing different traditions in Media Studies? 
And, just as important, how do I accomplish my pedagogical goals without taking on 
an excessive teaching burden?

The circumstances that influence the answers to my questions about graduate-level 
Television Studies depend primarily on what departments faculty are employed in, 
rather than the massive changes that are taking place in the current television indus-
tries and how to deal with them curricularly. I teach in a communication department 
with a substantial presence of Media Studies scholars, but I am the only faculty mem-
ber with a strong background in what I would call Television Studies, or an intellectual 
undertaking that uses a range of theoretical perspectives and methodological tools to 
ask and answer questions specific to television. While other graduate seminars across 
my department and college include topics and readings related to television, they are 
framed as ways to understand broader theoretical questions, rather than television 
itself. Certainly, these are worthy endeavors, but they are no more Television Studies 
courses than are courses in, say, interpersonal communication that use clips from tele-
vision programs to demonstrate perspectives on human communication. At the same 
time that I need to educate students on the particularities of Television Studies, I also 
struggle to give students with strong backgrounds in the study of television sufficient 
training for their future careers.

I see three possible approaches to teaching the lone Television Studies graduate 
seminar. I have tried the first two of these approaches, and would love one day to de-
velop a course around the third approach. In fact, I spend a good deal of my precious 
free time fantasizing about it.

First, we might structure a course around distinctive theoretical perspectives in 
Television Studies, emphasizing such things as flow, the glance versus the gaze, televis-
ion as an oral medium, the concept of the apparatus, the programming supertext, 
domesticity and reception, gender and popular pleasures, models of cultural circula-
tion, and the cultural forum concept. When I have taught such a course, we’ve focused 
on reading some of the “classics” of Television Studies, including Raymond Williams’s 
Television: Technology and Cultural Form, Horace Newcomb’s TV: The Most Popular Art, John 
Fiske and John Hartley’s Reading Television, and Ien Ang’s Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and 
the Melodramatic Imagination. In a department where our graduate-level theory course 
traces the Frankfurt, Toronto, and Chicago schools of society and mass communica-
tion, and where few students are introduced to British Cultural Studies, my course 
was a rather transparent effort to trace a different intellectual history of television as 
a mass medium than most students had previously encountered. At the same time, I

2 Raymond Williams, Television: Technology and Cultural Form (1974; repr., New York: Routledge, 2003); Horace 
Newcomb, TV: The Most Popular Art (New York: Anchor, 1974); John Fiske and John Hartley, Reading Television 
sincerely believed that engaging these theories would enrich students’ perspectives on, and appreciation of, television when they wrote seminar papers, conference papers, and dissertations. However, throughout the course it was clear that students were just as interested (perhaps even more) in the practice of television criticism, and most of the students wrote textual analyses of television series for their seminar papers. The authors of many of these papers, as with many of the authors on whose dissertation committees I’ve served, would have benefited from formal training in textual analysis. With hindsight, I think that, in my particular circumstances, teaching television criticism is probably more purposeful than teaching theory, because I continue to believe that textual analysis is a fundamental skill in Television Studies.

Again, given my departmental location, I doubt I would teach a basic readings course in television theory again. However, I do believe such a design has merit, particularly in Film Studies departments or American Studies departments with a substantial presence of film scholars, where students already get good training in analyzing audiovisual texts, but perhaps not in the distinctiveness of television theory. In addition, I think this approach has particular merit when analyzed in the context of contemporary television ecology.

In addition to the requests I received from graduate students for courses in television criticism, the main reason I ditched my theory course had to do with the generally poor quality of TV criticism I encountered in graduate students’ dissertations. While I have long been irked by what I consider simplistic or dismissive treatments of television as an object of study, I eventually came to the conclusion that the lack of textual analysis skills that many dissertations exhibited was a far more serious problem from the perspective of a graduate student’s future career. Many dissertations had difficulty rising above the level of descriptions of TV series, while those that did venture into interpretation generally demonstrated a lack of attention to the visual dimensions of televisual storytelling.

As I began to see more dissertations with chapters devoted to television, I decided to develop a graduate section of my undergraduate television criticism course. This course meets once a week for two hours, and students also attend my undergraduate lecture or conduct other course-related projects for an hour a week. I teach this as an overload so that I can teach other graduate seminars in globalization and in race theory (and even sneak in another television theory course on occasion). In other words, this is a labor of love, and one I’m fortunate to be able to perform because I’m tenured. At the same time, the fact that I need to teach graduate TV criticism as an overload speaks to the kinds of excess labor in which the lone television scholar often feels compelled to engage. We focus heavily on skills and methods of critical analysis in the course, including narrative criticism, genre criticism, semiotics, reception studies, and industry studies, but we inevitably get into more complicated theoretical discussions as well about such topics as quality television, aca-fandom, and the erosion of the networks. In addition, we address particular “problems” in television criticism, including transmedia storytelling and reality television, that seem to require reading skills beyond those we conventionally teach in Television Studies. Still, the primary purpose of the course is the acquisition of critical analytical and writing skills.

One of the biggest challenges I face teaching undergraduate television criticism—finding good articles on current television programs that teach the skills I want students
to learn—disappears at the graduate level because I can expect students either to fa-
iliarize themselves with the programs on their own time or to engage with the read-
ings without knowing the programs. Consequently, I never hesitate to assign *Channels of Discourse* to graduate students, while I stopped assigning it to undergrads ten years ago because of complaints that they had never seen any of the shows discussed in the anthology. The same holds true for older articles and monographs, such as Julie D’Acci’s *Defining Women*, which offer excellent examples of particular forms of criticism even though they address programs that few students have watched. In addition, I integrate my graduate and undergraduate courses to help overcome the fact that my department does not hold screenings in conjunction with classes: I have graduate students host blogs related to particular television programs and require undergradu-
ate students to join and participate in one of those blogs to get practice writing short descriptive and analytical pieces. Again, this arrangement adds to the amount of time I devote to the class because it requires me to keep current with all of the blogs in order to use them as examples in my lectures.

I have to admit that I have yet to see my labors bear fruit in the dissertations I’ve read, but so far none of the students I’ve taught has proceeded to that stage. Comparing seminar papers with those submitted in previous semesters, I have no doubt that students are writing better analytic papers about television series, genres, and programming trends. This kind of approach to teaching television seems most appropriate for those of us who work in generalized communication or mass communication departments where students may get a good deal of theoretical training but little training in critical reading skills. In addition, Television Studies scholars teaching in English or American Studies departments, where students do have backgrounds in critical reading, but little familiarity with the specifics of televisual narrative storytell-
ing, might also find that such an approach works well.

At the same time, I miss the kind of theoretical engagement with television that I see with other topics in my other graduate seminars. I want to close, then, by discussing the ideal Television Studies course that I would like to teach, as well as by offering a proposal for how I, and others, might be able to create the institutional conditions for teaching this and other graduate-level TV Studies seminars.

When I was preparing my first graduate seminar on television, I spoke with a col-
league of mine in a similar situation, and she suggested that I focus the class on new technologies and subsequent industrial and cultural changes related to the new television era. I designed a syllabus along these lines, but ultimately rejected the idea because I had the impression that our graduate students had sufficient opportunities to study new media in other courses. I also had a serious concern, which Michele Hilmes raised in an In Focus essay in 2005, about the tendency to leapfrog Television Stud-
ies into New Media Studies. What was the point, I wondered, of teaching about the

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changing landscape of American and global television when students had little theoretical understanding of the broadcast era, and therefore little capacity to evaluate the significance of those changes and the applicability of earlier theoretical considerations to this new era?

The syllabus I have designed for my ideal graduate seminar tries to identify important theoretical and conceptual questions in broadcast-era Television Studies—many of which I mentioned above—and traces their applicability in an era of all-digital, high-definition home theaters and the digital circulation of telesvisual clips. In essence, this approach kills two birds with one stone: it allows us to read the classics of television theory and to study the contemporary television landscape. The challenge has been finding current readings that engage these theoretical assumptions directly. Frequently, a fascination with new media, globalization, and industrial and technological change seems to have replaced engagement with questions of social power and popular pleasure that once sat at the heart of Television Studies. Still, a number of publications about these considerations do exist, and I would hope to supplement conventional publications with blogs and other online publications such as FlowTV, Antenna, and In Media Res. In addition, I have discovered that many graduate students are quite active in online discussions of television theory and serve as excellent resources for finding such discussions in these new intellectual forums.

Which leads me to my final point about how to create an institutional arrangement that would allow me to teach such a course. In fact, for me and others, such an arrangement already exists: as many readers may know, the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), which spans the Big Ten schools, plus the University of Chicago, offers a program it calls CourseShare, which allows students, including graduate students, at any member institution to enroll in courses at other institutions for home-university credit. Significantly, in some instances, these member institutions seem to include all campuses in a university system. Every one of the campuses has a local representative to help with administrative and technological difficulties, and administrators have already agreed to accept these courses for credit. While I’m not familiar with them, I wouldn’t be surprised if other university consortia offer similar programs.

In other instances, it might be possible to convince administrators (at the department level and higher up) to allow students to access graduate courses elsewhere via Skype. I can envision an arrangement whereby those of us who teach stand-alone graduate Television Studies courses could share our course offerings at a central website, and students pursuing Television Studies at one institution could sign up for courses offered elsewhere. In my wildest fantasies, I envision us coordinating those courses to build a tiered, cross-institutional graduate curriculum in Television Studies that could allow each of us to teach courses in the basics of TV criticism, theory, and ecologies, as well as more specific areas of specialization, including global television, network and post-network television industries, television production cultures, television and new media, and television history. Such a curriculum would not only end our own isolation but also give TV Studies graduate students at our institutions the opportunity to pursue a coherent program in graduate-level Television Studies.

Of course, this kind of arrangement also risks amplifying the excess labor that the lone television scholar already faces, as university administrators could use such a
curriculum as an excuse for reducing faculty lines and eliminating programs in favor of cheap, distance education courses. These are serious concerns that threaten to speed up the deprofessionalization of academic life. At the moment, however, from where I sit, the opportunities of graduate-level distance education in TV Studies outweigh the dangers. Perhaps I am the only television scholar who finds disciplinary isolation at my home institution difficult to deal with, and who sees graduate seminars as an antidote. But the one thing I do know is that the fantasy of such a graduate curriculum cheers me up on days when that intellectual loneliness sets in as I face yet another proseminar presentation, seminar paper, or dissertation on the evils of commercial television.

Teaching the Politics of Television Culture in a “Post-television” Era

by ELANA LEVINE

Television has changed dramatically in recent years. As the very existence of this In Focus makes clear, the shifts in television economics and technology, as well as in the medium’s social and cultural roles, have made it increasingly difficult to study or teach television as a unified object, even within a single national context. As many have noted, in the United States the disappearance of the classic network system and the program scarcity that came with it seems to have diminished television’s historical capacity to operate as the central cultural forum—or site of hegemonic negotiation—that it once was. Whereas it may be possible to talk about the television of earlier eras as speaking to or struggling over such concerns as changing conceptions of gender and race, or the role of the United States in a world fraught with Cold War tensions, or the authority of the law amidst increasing crime, the vastness of contemporary TV and the fragmented experiences of its viewers can make any exploration of the medium’s social place seem unwarranted. Given this context, how might we think about television’s cultural or political role today? What is there to say about television as a cultural force, as a site for negotiations over power, when there is no one “thing” we can call television? Is it even reasonable to assume that television has a coherent social, cultural, and political influence? And if we do make such an assumption, where might we look to analyze this influence?

Such questions plague not only TV scholarship but also the ways in which we teach students to think about television. Scholars produce the works we ask our students to read, thereby setting the agenda for our classroom discussions; they shape our pedagogy in the undergraduate and graduate study of television and other media. At the graduate level in particular, trends in scholarship influence the emergent members of the field, shaping their sense of what is intellectually provocative (and marketable). The research we produce today thus augurs the future of the field, as well as the future of the media practitioners, consumers, and citizens we educate. Do questions of the cultural, the social, and the political have a place in the contemporary Television and Media Studies classroom? What might that place be, and how might we study and explore it with our students?

For television scholars such as myself, who came to the field in the 1980s and 1990s, it is nearly incomprehensible even to ask such questions. Matters of the cultural, social, and political directed the very origins of Television Studies, at least as it developed as a field of humanistic inquiry in the United States (as in the work of Horace Newcomb) and in relation to British Cultural Studies and its American manifestations (as in the work of John Fiske). In this earlier phase of the field, the study of television from a humanistic, critical, and reader-oriented perspective was an explicit intervention, an attempt to wrest television away from the world of mass communication and the more positivist, social-scientific perspective it fostered. This first generation of US television scholars made television texts central to their analyses, but they were also concerned with “how the textuality of television is made meaningful and pleasurable by its variously situated viewers,” as well as with “television’s status as a commodity in a capitalist economy.” Influenced by Marxism, as well as by semiotics and ethnography, this study of television was inherently political, in that it was invested in questions of power. In the United States, television has always functioned as a vehicle for delivering audiences to advertisers, thereby serving the interests of capital, a fact that has implicated the medium in the social inequalities of capitalism more broadly. But the influence of Cultural Studies on the development of Television Studies also meant that the circulation of meanings and pleasures by those who “read” or engaged with television was also paramount. Thus the relevance of questions of power for television was not simply a matter of a determining capitalist force reigning over the public. Rather, the Cultural Studies foundation of Television Studies sees the TV-viewing public as engaged in negotiations with the dominant ideology of the capitalist system, making meanings and pleasures of television in ways that sometimes accept and sometimes resist dominant interests.

For many, this way of thinking about television becomes less persuasive—or less pertinent—in our contemporary culture, given the multiplication, convergence, and fragmentation of television and other media. With the diversification of viewing outlets through cable, online, and DVD distribution, and the concurrent dispersal of viewers across these sites and practices, television is now so many different things at once that it is difficult to see it as perpetuating any particular interests as “dominant.” For example,

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2 See Robert C. Allen, Speaking of Soap Operas (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), as an example of this sort of intervention.

a person who identifies as queer and seeks out representations to which he or she can relate might find the depiction of gay men on the popular ABC sitcom *Modern Family* (2009–) to reflect a heteronormative conception of gayness. Instead of making this resistant reading, however, she or he might reject the series altogether, instead turning to the range of programs on Logo, the LGBT-targeted cable channel, or to the stories of the openly gay designers on *Project Runway* (Bravo, 2004–2008; Lifetime, 2009–), or to the music videos of pop star Lady Gaga. This viewer might also turn to a range of amateur or alternative productions available on cable channels or via video streaming sites like YouTube. Thus, the meanings this viewer might make of the network sitcom recede in significance, given the range of options available. It is likely that many of us have heard such responses from students when we ask them to engage with the politics of representation in any one such case. They rightly point out that viewers can turn elsewhere and find representations more suited to their own worldviews and self-definitions.

Does the diversity of available perspectives, then, eliminate the usefulness of approaches to television that seek to understand its cultural, social, or political influence? At times, the answer seems to be yes. All of us live in a world in which activist claims of social injustice can sometimes seem passé. In the United States, with an African American president and multicultural casts populating many entertainment programs, claims of racial inequality can seem moot to some people. With women headlining prestigious cable dramas, serving as show runners on network hits, and attaining positions of authority in the worlds of medicine, law, higher education, politics, and business, it is hard to claim that gender-based discrimination is consistently and universally in operation.

As a result, it can be challenging to engage students in questions of representational politics. The very mention of social inequality can trigger a defensive response, one that takes offense at suggestions of women’s subordination under patriarchy, for example. I have experienced this response many times. When my students read John Fiske’s chapter on ideology in his lucid *Introduction to Communication Studies*, they always—always—bristle at his example of women wearing high heels as an ideological concession to patriarchal ideals of feminine appearance, objectification, and passivity. Women students invariably proclaim their pleasure in high heels for how it makes them feel and look, rather than as a means of attracting or pleasing men. For them, the very fact that they may choose to wear high heels (or not) and that their choice can bring them pleasure disqualifies the act from questions of domination and subordination, and from questions of power as a whole—unless a woman wants to claim empowerment as a result of her choice. I am sympathetic to students resisting Fiske’s example in these ways; our culture has made their perspective logical and commonsensical, and various feminisms have helped us to resignify elements of fashion and style, even those most closely associated with a patriarchal conception of the feminine. And yet my students’ quick resistance to the very possibility that something pleasurable and freely chosen may also be imbricated with unequal distributions of power exemplifies the way in which the contemporary cultural and political context makes it seem as if raising any questions of social inequality (perhaps especially when they have to do with gender) is old-fashioned, irrelevant, and even insulting to those groups characterized as

subordinate. Add to this the multiplicity of television options now available, and raising any questions of TV as a participant in perpetuating unequal relations of power becomes even more challenging.

Today, numerous changes in the social climate have been linked to the successful efforts of a number of different progressive social movements. From this perspective, everything seems to be “post”: postfeminist, postrace, post–gay rights, postclass. Of course, many scholars do not celebrate being “beyond” progressive social movements. Instead, they point out—and challenge—the “post” perspective as the new, hegemonic common sense of our time, disputing the idea that because various social movements have indeed accomplished some of their goals their work is done, inequalities no longer exist, and any mention of purported inequities takes us backward, doing more harm than good. The “posting” of these activist social movements and progressive causes can thereby serve as an exercise of power in and of itself, in that it silences the very naming and challenging of ongoing differences in power.

But what does the broader climate of “posts” have to do with the study and teaching of television, and particularly the question of television as a social, cultural, and political force in an era of audience and program fragmentation? I would suggest that the challenge and consequent hesitancy in thinking about contemporary television as having a bounded, coherent impact in negotiations of power may function similarly to the “posting” of so many challenges to dominant culture. Perhaps the designation of today’s television as “postnetwork” functions quite similarly to designations such as postfeminist and postracial. In this respect, postnetwork logic would argue that now that the dominance of the Big Three broadcast networks is behind us, there is no longer a need to think about television as a site of cultural struggle. Television might once have required that kind of activist intervention, but television today has moved beyond that state. Because we can choose from so many different options, because our experiences of television are now so varied and so self-directed, it is old-fashioned and irrelevant to ask questions about television’s place in the workings of power. Such a perspective is visible in scholarship and teaching that replicates the logics and discourses of the television industry, for example, or that participates in the cultural legitimation of certain kinds of television, thereby reproducing social and cultural hierarchies. Whether by denying the questions of access that result in different degrees of participation in the convergent media culture, by adopting a liberal-pluralist “something for everyone” perspective that suits the interests of the TV industry, or by generalizing what is meant by “television” when one is really speaking of premium cable fare, not the broader-based series that do not fit the habitus of the media scholar, postnetwork thinking is an increasingly prominent part of Television Studies.

Just as many have challenged the “post” thinking on matters of gender, race, or sexuality, there is scholarly and pedagogical value in challenging the kind of postnetwork, post-television thinking I have outlined. While American television has certainly diversified the number of options it offers to us, how much has it diversified the stories, the myths, the ideologies it presents? The assumption that postnetwork television offers something truly

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new and unbounded by conventional relations of power might actually parallel the logic of the television industries—a new, hegemonic common sense of television, as presented by those that serve to gain economic and cultural capital by the ongoing, even magnified embrace of TV in American (and global) culture. Instead of assuming that we cannot talk about contemporary television as a central site of cultural negotiation, and as a site where power is at stake, perhaps it would be wise to ask whose interests are served by denying that television may still play a role as a site of cultural negotiation.

Despite the challenges that postnetwork-era television may provide to our ability to analyze its role as a central site of social and political struggle, the “posting” of so many sites of cultural contention can serve as a wake-up call, bringing us back to some of the questions about television’s role that generated the humanistic and critical turn that initially shaped Television Studies as a field. Such imperatives have reinvigorated a range of politically engaged scholarship and inspired the June 2010 conference Fiske Matters: A Conference on John Fiske’s Legacy for Cultural Studies. As a major figure in the intellectual history of Television Studies, Fiske arguably positioned television as the central medium of popular culture and sought to understand culture through the lens of British Cultural Studies—that is, to understand culture as a site of struggle over power. While Fiske’s work was at times criticized for being overly optimistic about the resistant potential in audience readings of popular culture, there is no question that his work was always engaged with questions of power, both the top-down assertion of it and the bottom-up resistance to it. That such a politicized take on media culture could seem forgotten, even anachronistic, in 2010 testifies to the impact that the “posting” of so many realms of social contention has had.

Fiske Matters reminded those in attendance not only of the importance of a politicized take on the media culture that surrounds us, but also of the excitement that attention to such matters can bring to the study and teaching of television and other media. In many respects, the conference focused on the legacy of John Fiske for teaching Cultural Studies. “I am John Fiske,” Steven Classen expressed in his remarks, a Fiske-like provocation meant to demonstrate how central Fiske’s work is to the way many of us teach. Fiske’s legacy as a teacher was made clear in many presenters’ references to experiencing him as such, but it was also visible in demonstrations of what the fields of Television, Media, and Cultural Studies can still learn from Fiske’s ideas. For example, Michael Mario Albrecht spoke of turning to Fiske’s work to better understand conceptualizations of cultural and political populism, and he demonstrated how a Fiskean analysis of the contemporary Tea Party movement would need to connect the culture and the politics of its white, working-class constituency. Not only did Albrecht himself model the kind of intellectual discovery that analyzing the present through a Fiskean lens can bring, he also offered an example that any of us might use in teaching our students about the intersections of popular culture and politics. Bill Kirkpatrick pointed toward a Fiskean approach to media policy, urging that we follow Fiske’s lead in defining policy in ways beyond the “official” policy most often associated with the term. As Kirkpatrick

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stated, “The digital transition is media policy, but so is a parent’s rule of ‘No TV until your homework is done.’” Fiske’s teachings illustrate the many layers of vernacular, popular, and localizing policy making around television and other media that would serve us well as we try to demonstrate the pertinence of policy to students. Similarly, a panel on “Agency in the Age of Obama” foregrounded examples of Fiskean insights applied to the contemporary culture of “postblackness,” whether in attempts to fix the national and racial identity of Obama himself, or in the programming of cable’s BET network and the designation of mediated bodies as raced. The politicized nature of all of Fiske’s works and their continued relevance to a variety of contemporary media and cultural sites affirmed the crucial work still to be done in considering the social, cultural, and political impact of television and other media.

The recent changes in the television industry and in viewer experiences of the medium are clearly significant, but they do not eliminate the need for attention to the ways that television continues to play a part in struggles for power. The medium need not speak in a single voice to be a factor in the exercise of dominant interests, nor do its audiences need to engage in a single experience of television to make their negotiations with it central to current social, cultural, and political debates. As the ongoing relevance of Fiske’s works reminds us, “Television-as-culture is a crucial part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself.” The plethora of new channels, and the fragmentation of viewers across them, may generate new research questions, but it does little to alter these fundamental workings of television culture, even in a postnetwork age.

Going with the Flow: On the Value of Randomness, Flexibility, and Getting Students In on the Conversation, or What I Learned from Antoine Dodson

by Jonathan Nichols-Pethick

Let me start with an obvious fact: we exist in an era of media production, distribution, and consumption vastly different from the one in which most of us came of age as viewers and learned our trade as students and teachers. Perhaps because of this fact, we often teach

9 Darrell Newton, Christopher Smith, Jennifer Fuller, and John Fiske, “Agency in the Age of Obama” (conference panel, Fiske Matters, June 11, 2010, Madison, WI).
10 Fiske, Television Culture, 1.
at a distance from our students’ own media experiences. Of course, there are good reasons for this distance: primarily, we challenge our students by confronting them with texts and ideas they haven’t encountered before. But new conditions should also force us to rethink our core ideas and to reconsider the texts we use in our teaching. For example, we once again need to reconsider the concept of “flow” as a foundational principle of the television experience. Raymond Williams’s seminal idea has, of course, been thoroughly reworked by any number of prominent media scholars in order to account for the variety of everyday viewing practices as well as changing modes of distribution and reception.¹ And yet the basic idea of some sort of organizing principle of media flow persists, even if it is characterized today more by DVR menus or the scattershot, hyperlink-driven availability of the short clip via YouTube or Facebook than by the neater contours of the channel or the viewing strip. In what follows, I want to explore the tension between random and planned access that defines contemporary media distribution and consumption practices as a model for how we might structure our own pedagogical practices in a multiplatform media environment.

My approach responds to several interconnected trends in the era of convergence and neo-network structures, an era defined at least in part by two trends that point in opposite directions. On the one hand, it is characterized by more flexible technologies that allow for new modes of production and distribution, increased abundance of products across platforms and over time, and extended access to products from a variety of often interconnected outlets. On the other hand, it is also characterized (as part and parcel of these same institutional and technological factors) by tighter corporate control of products in terms of intellectual property rights and by the drive to safeguard the interests of vertically and horizontally integrated conglomerates. As Henry Jenkins has argued, ours is a “convergence culture” in which “old and new media collide, grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.”²

What Jenkins points to is the need to attend to new and emerging forms of media production, distribution, and consumption without losing sight of media history or the theoretical and critical ideas about power that have animated studies of media for at least the past four decades. With this in mind, I want to highlight the value of randomness, flexibility, and nonofficial voices, as a way of understanding both Media Studies itself and Media Studies as a pedagogical process—a process that is also necessarily grounded in specific historical, theoretical, and critical contexts.

In a class I taught during the fall of 2010, a student asked, “Have you seen this video on YouTube? You have to see it! Oh my God, it’s so hilarious! Can we watch it now?”


She was referring to a YouTube posting of a news story out of Huntsville, Alabama, about an attempted rape. The news report detailed the information about the attempted rape, and then featured the victim’s brother, Antoine Dodson, addressing the perpetrator and the viewing public by looking directly into the camera and venting his frustrations. The news video went viral in a matter of days, spawning a song by the Gregory Brothers (now available on iTunes) and an accompanying music video (which also went viral). The viral nature of these videos points to the fact that, while the production of these videos, and our access to them, has an arbitrary quality, the viewing of them (via Internet buzz and word of mouth) crystallizes rather quickly into somewhat stable patterns.

In terms of the class in question, while the student’s request seemed like a random, maybe even unwelcome intrusion into the careful structure of the day, it allowed for a vibrant discussion (after the laughter at Dodson’s over-the-top diatribe died down) about a number of related subjects, and I eventually scrapped the day’s planned “les-

son” in favor of this extended discussion. The improvised topics that day ranged from the quality and ethics of the journalism to stereotypes of blackness and the near invisibility of violent crime against black women, perpetuated by media representations and enacted by the newscast itself. Importantly, the students largely drove this discussion through their immediate reactions, since most of them hadn’t seen the video until then. There was even danger in the discussion, as some students simply wanted to dismiss it as innocent fun—or even as a publicity prank by a media-savvy Dodson—while others insisted on pushing the critical issues of race and gender representation. Mostly, though, the flow of the discussion mimicked the way that many of us access a good portion of our media content: randomly and accidentally. Certainly, my own viewing has come to have a more haphazard quality to it. While I still have “ap-

pointment viewing” (although today those appointments can be rescheduled as the need arises), I also find myself attending to things I never planned on watching as new digital recording and distribution technologies make it easier to share video and to get suggestions about what one might enjoy. In this way, television viewing is beginning to take on a very different quality from that of surfing the cable and broadcast schedule at any given moment. Channel “surfing” is a metaphor that hints at a certain kind of relaxed, noncommittal style of viewing, the idea being that, like a surfer, you roll with the waves until you find the one you want, and then you (hopefully) ride it to the end. And even if the advent of digital tiers that offer us hundreds of channels makes this older form of surfing nearly impossible, we can still surf the electronic programming guides.

But there is nothing really all that random about channel surfing; it’s still predicated on a schedule of available programming (waves) to choose from at any given time. The multiplatform situation, by contrast, is more akin to Buster Keaton’s hapless, sleeping movie projectionist in Sherlock Jr. (Keaton, 1924), who finds himself plunked down in a range of random environments that have only the loosest connection beyond his presence. While our viewing strategies are characterized by far more agency than poor Buster’s, the point is that the viewing possibilities available at any given moment are determined not by a schedule, but by a vast and growing archive that can be accessed at almost any time and in random order on a range of different devices. Of course, we need to be careful not be lulled into linking this randomness to pure agency. Sites
like YouTube, Netflix, Google Video, and Hulu rely heavily on algorithms that select “like” items and also work through your own preferences to select videos for you in a not-so-arbitrary order. Increasingly, their offerings are predicated on the “value” of the videos, based of course on popularity. What we need to remind our students is that randomness is as much a strategy for maximizing dollars as it is a rebellious outgrowth of new technologies.

And if sites like these are now part of what we call television, we need to address what counts as television content. Is it based on a certain level of production value? Is it a specific kind of textual organization based on episodes, seasons, or series? Is it based on the historically dominant (network) institutional structures that have defined our object of study for so long? Is it just the fact of being available on a certain range of devices? For example, independent local production and “alternative” television have been marginal objects of study for quite a while, perhaps because the content is so specifically situated and the forms are experimental. And amateur video (such as home movies and first-person video diaries) has also only recently begun to receive serious critical attention. But these kinds of productions now circulate widely—and in direct contact with high-end commercial productions—on sites like YouTube, Google Video, blip.tv, and Vimeo. These new distribution structures and viewing habits require us to consider even more carefully the role of local independent, alternative, and DIY content as part of Television Studies, not only as responses to more “official” content but also as a growing part of the television landscape. To take television seriously is to look to the margins as well the center for productions worthy of study.  

Perhaps in reaction to the flexibility of new and emerging institutional structures, our general approach to television viewing is more flexible than ever, given the availability of programming across new and expanding outlets. For instance, during one typical week in 2010, while writing this essay, I watched cartoons with my kids in real time on Boomerang, but also watched YouTube videos of their favorite characters and DVDs of some of mine (Bugs Bunny being my hero). I watched Wednesday’s *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–) online on Thursday morning, and I also got caught up on extra web-only *Modern Family* material. I watched Thursday’s *Project Runway* (Bravo, 2004–2008; Lifetime 2009–) late at night on Friday, having recorded it on my DVR. I watched snippets of *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central, 1996–), which are available in segments mostly via links that friends have highlighted on Facebook. I also watched a hard-to-find clip of Jackie Gleason’s second episode of *You’re in the Picture* (CBS, 1961), thanks to a blogger who had embedded the scene from YouTube. Meanwhile, I continued catching up on programs I had missed during their initial runs, thanks to Netflix’s “Watch Instantly” function, and I downloaded an episode of *The Shield* (FX, 2002–2008) from iTunes for a chapter I’m writing on post-1990s police dramas. These are just a few of the ways in which my own viewing habits—and I imagine many

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others’ viewing habits as well—have come to be defined by a certain kind of flexibility. And in reaction to the Antoine Dodson example cited above, my own teaching is now informed by these practices in terms of how I access materials for class, the range of materials I show in class, and the way I talk about “television” with my students. As most of us know, the object of television is a moving target, brought to us through an increasingly flexible series of distribution outlets. That needs to be part of what we talk about in the classroom.

We can get our students in on the conversation in two ways. First, we can get them talking more about their own media practices, because they may be quite different from our own. What constitutes television for them? How has that changed over time? Can they take a critical look at these practices and come to some conclusions about them? How does what they consider television relate to what constitutes television for us? Where can we see important overlaps? What are the patterns? Second, thanks to a growing number of academics reaching out to a wider public, we can include our students in the scholarly conversation in a much more meaningful way. Sites like FlowTV, Antenna, and In Media Res serve as locations where students can not only expand their experience of television as well as their understanding, but also chime in. Just as the official networks of television production and consumption are becoming more flexible, so too is the world of television scholarship showing signs of opening up to new methods of engaging readers. By using FlowTV in the classroom, for example, it is possible to have students read pieces that are, hopefully, designed for a broader audience than most scholarship. It’s a far more flexible (and timely) form of academic discourse than the standard journal article or book. At the same time, undergraduate students are not necessarily ready, willing, or able to engage in the flow of direct response and scholarly conversation that these sites encourage. One response to this problem might be to create smaller, more directed “flow sites” within the course that mimic the critical engagement of the more official sites, but within the context of, and at the comfort level of, the students.4

I don’t believe that students come to us fully media literate; the tools to help them gain a greater literacy are expanding and becoming more flexible—and increasingly coming from them instead of us. And so, in the classroom, we might benefit from incorporating our own versions of randomness and flexibility in order to meet students where they live, and to reflect the reality of what the neo-network era offers and demands from viewers. Necessarily, we need to keep our focus on larger questions about ideology, framing, hegemony, and power, and we also need to contextualize these questions within the context of the current technologies of delivery and students’ own experiences as media practitioners of one sort or another. Just as scholars have hung on to and continually revised the concept of flow to fit new cultural contexts, I find that foundational theories of ideology and hegemony, critical approaches to representation, and the tensions between political economy and reception studies animate my teaching with even more force in the era of convergence. At a time when the flow of programming has become a torrent, and when the institutions that control

4 I would like to thank Ethan Thompson for this suggestion during a workshop at the 2010 SCMS Conference in Los Angeles. His suggestion was in response to my own concerns about the nervousness of my students when asked to engage with contributors to FlowTV.
and distribute most of these images are expanding and consolidating, it is vital that we equip students with the tools they need to make sense of the present moment in historical and critical terms.

What we might try to teach our students above all is the intellectual flexibility they need to have in order to deal with the tension between the seeming randomness of their experiences, the vastness of what’s available to them in the media landscape, and the ongoing efforts of institutions to shape, control, and profit from those objects and ideas. Television Studies in the neo-network and convergence eras strikes me as being a particularly useful template for just such an endeavor.

Contributors

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