

Philip Sewell=s Response

The conversion to DTV provides media scholars a chance to articulate television's past to its present and future. Ours is not the first moment when televisions sold to the public will be rendered obsolete by decisions in which the citizenry had little voice, but it will be on a scale that in earlier eras was used to justify delays in standardization. By looking to U.S. television's experimental era we can see earlier iterations of discourses, particularly the tropes of requiring television to reproduce the cinema and/or reality and the commercial and cultural imperatives for stability, that bear directly upon the current moment and the rationales offered for the digital conversion.

Prior to the sales and programming spike of the late 1940s that ushered in the FCC's licensing freeze and several key decisions on technical standards, most notably on color and VHF-UHF intermixture, there were two earlier peaks (1928-32 and 1938-41) in sales of and popular enthusiasm for television and corresponding articulations of regulatory values. During the earlier boom, fostered by mechanically scanned systems, inventors and entrepreneurs sought to replicate the experience of sound broadcasting from the early 1920s, where a confluence of amateur practices, innovative business models, and some key advances might bring a new industry/art to life. Thousands and possibly hundreds of thousands of plans were sold for DIY televisions. However, the FRC refused to allow commercial television programming, specifically arguing that if the general public were to prematurely purchase low resolution experimental sets, the prospects for television of true technical quality would be harmed as consumers would not accept such rapid obsolescence, particularly during a time of on-going economic upheaval. Underlying this definition of quality were image standards modeled on 16mm motion pictures, including the ability to reproduce the definition of newsreels for live transmission, and a technical consensus within the Commission that mechanical processes could not achieve that resolution. Good television was not imagined to be radio with pictures but rather cinema in the home.

By the next boom and particularly with RCA's push for de facto standardization and commercialization with sales and marketing of receivers organized around the 1939 World's Fair, a general technical, regulatory, and industrial consensus had been built on the grave of popular mechanical television, but the ghost of obsolescence haunted RCA, as the standards ultimately set by the NTSC were incompatible with sets already sold. These early sets were reconfigured by the manufacturers and their dealers, and from this point on backwards compatibility would become a key concern in future standardization decisions such as color, where the RCA system trumped CBS with simple compatibility, and UHF-VHF intermixture, where a set-top adaptor would enable reception of the added UHF channels. Here relative technical stability was directly articulated to television's commercial and cultural imperatives. No viewer would be left behind. Until this February.

The conversion to DTV marks the latest triumph of the notion that television is best when it most closely replicates the movies. Promotional materials issued by manufacturers, the FCC, and even PBS emphasize the cinematic quality of television with a new aspect ratio and the possibility for higher definition. Part of the pitch is that better texts will look better with the conversion to digital. The persistent cultural hierarchy that has placed cinema as always-already over TV

distracts us from questions of how and why television as an everyday institution warrants technical, economic, and cultural transformation. Put another way, contemporary broadcast television devotes large portions of its schedule to economically and culturally significant genres that in many instances and iterations are likely to be little improved by higher definition, multicasting, or data streaming. I think we might all agree that, regardless of our assessment of the program, *Wife Swap* does not really need DTV and, we might imagine, may be imperiled by it.

Some DTV boosters might say that the potential for broadcast gentrification is one of the chief virtues of the transition, but as several of the participants in the “Watching Television Off-Television” roundtable at the 2006 Flow Conference suggested, there are powerful articulations among the cultural understandings and practices of what television is, how it is delivered, and who it is for. As with all forced migrations, some will be left behind, government coupon programs notwithstanding, and this overturning of the medium’s legacy structures offers both an opportunity to reflect on the regulatory and legislative processes that brought us to the current moment with minimal public debate and a means to assess the choices and values of the past. It is a good time for scholars and citizens to ask questions: Have we over- or undervalued stability? How and to what ends have we defined quality? And, why do we, as owners of most of broadcast television’s infrastructure, both the airwaves and the sets, and as its principal product, not have or demand more of a say?