Putting the TV Back in Television Studies
Daniel Chamberlain

As important as engaging the specificities of the physical delivery device of television (old tube, flat screen, mobile device, digital decoder, 3-D), we should also consider how the apparatus of television extends to a set of infrastructures that distribute the signals, data, and code that end up on our screens. This is not to deny the importance of the display device itself, but, in keeping with the framing question of this roundtable, is a reminder that there is value in interrogating the full scope of televisual materiality. From orbiting satellites to cable head-ends to massive data centers hosting streamable video, all the way down to the aerials, dishes, and cables that adorn our homes, our televisions are material in a way that goes far beyond the screens and processors for sale at Best Buy and the Apple Store. We would be advised to keep such facts in mind as we debate the perceived dematerialization of television programming that increasingly meets us on our schedules, wherever we may be. Framing these infrastructural networks as material culture - as part of the apparatus of television - moves them from purely functional systems to technological artifacts that also signify in cultural and political terms.

So how do we make sense of the scale and scope of television infrastructures? Because they are often the most visible, the careful arrangement of domestic information architectures is a useful place to start. Homes tend to have multiple infrastructures that allow for the flow of information streams, and those elements visible in the home are caught up in complex associations of utility and signification. The provision of network infrastructure can be an expressive gesture - akin to locating the furniture and selecting wall treatments - and often puts the gendered politics of domestic design and media management in creative tension. This can be as simple as a cable tacked along the molding or as expressive as a carefully arranged treatment of lights and cables. A dominant trend in contemporary home construction is toward structured wiring solutions that offer a clutter-free information architecture, signifying both the means and the taste to hide such matters in specially constructed domestic data closets. Taken to the limit, nothing but an impossibly thin wall-mounted high definition screen is left in plain view. Such choices are, of course, bound up with question of class and gender as much as they are with connection speeds and tiered pricing models.

And yet more than these local information architectures are hidden by focusing solely on the screening device itself, as they are merely the endpoints of vast systems. We know canonically that signals are broadcast from radio towers, downlinked from distant satellites, carried by buried cables, passed along by microwave relays, and, increasingly, stored on physical formats. In this current moment, we must also consider how these infrastructures might directly structure our experience of television, related media, and space. While the big infrastructural issue last year was the transition to digital broadcasting (and the introduction of new aspects of the televisual apparatus), today's related fight centers on expanding broadband access and ensuring net neutrality. Not only will the outcome of this regulatory issue impact the types of devices that end up in our homes, but also the forms of media that traverse our broader infrastructures and the particular companies that make up the television industry. Witness Google's rise as a

serious player in the establishment of communications (or "information service," depending on the mood of the FCC) policy, as it has recently bid on open spectrum and embraced a differentially provisioned data environment. Google - along with Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and others - is also anchoring the infrastructure of much contemporary television viewing by running the massive data centers that underpin notions of streaming or subscription television. These server farms are themselves exquisitely material, taking forms such as co-located urban server farms, Google's monster facility at The Dalles in Oregon, and Apple's new investment in western North Carolina. These projects represent an unseen centralization of the televisual apparatus, a radical mixing of media streams, an introduction of new ecological challenges, and an infrastructural inversion in which rural regions are supplying the foundation that undergirds our celebrated urban and suburban digital lifestyles. And whereas the net neutrality debate is making (some) headlines, these often massively tax-subsidized data centers are rarely notes or discussed.

In short, we should start with the set, but we stand to learn a lot if we take to time to also see where the cords go.