

Putting the TV Back in Television Studies

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In proposing this roundtable, my aim was to call attention to and interrogate the custom of asserting that “the ‘television’ of television studies” is “more than just a technology,” or “not just a machine.” Television studies scholars regularly pose and confront questions about the identity of our object of study, and while the answers we provide to these questions are diverse, many betray an apprehensiveness about how to come to grips with television’s status as a technology. Certainly, television is irreducible to its apparatuses of reception. But then again, who would claim otherwise? What do we gain by our ritualistic reiteration of the mantra that television is “not just a machine”? What do we forfeit in order to maintain this position?

As my contribution to our discussion, I want to highlight some of the reasons why television studies scholars historically have downplayed television’s status as a technology, and also some of the consequences of doing so.

Disciplinarity: “The ‘television’ of television studies” was at least initially a negative construction: it was *not* the television studied in departments of Mass Communication or Political Science in the 1970s, and it was most certainly not the television studied by Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan’s television was reducible to its working parts: it was the television of “scanning-fingers” and cathode ray tubes that tattooed images upon the skins of viewers, and of satellites that knit the world together into a “global village.” Contrast this to the television studied by Williams, Newcomb, Ellis, Feuer, Allen, Brunson, and the others whose work shaped television studies’ research agenda during this formative period. This was a deliberately *textualized* television of “flows,” “viewing strips,” “segments,” and “supertexts”; of daytime serials, morning chat shows, and of course *Dallas*. By refuting McLuhan’s subordination of television’s content to the status of epiphenomenon, these scholars made important arguments about the ontology and ideology of television, but also for the formation of a new discipline that would approach television from a humanities-based perspective.

More than thirty years later, we are still dealing with the reverberations of these disciplinary turf wars. Only now, the repudiation of the television of McLuhanism is no longer an urgent matter of disciplinary identity and survival, but rather of tradition. Television studies’ theorization of the medium’s technologies stalled shortly after the discipline’s formative period; rote denunciations of technological determinism and obligatory citations of a few key authors (e.g., Williams, Morley, Spigel) too often stand in for fresh considerations of the constantly-changing nature of the relationships between television’s technologies, forms, institutions, and audiences. As a result, our scholarship has not kept up with the astounding pace at which technological change currently takes place. This is not to suggest that foundational work about television’s technologies is no longer valid, but rather that this work deserves to be refreshed to reflect the very different technological contexts within which television now exists.

Politics: In the 1980s, neoliberal policymakers invoked television’s status as a technology to rationalize the dismantling of regulations governing broadcast media

content and ownership. It was in this period, of course, that FCC Chairman Mark Fowler famously argued that “television is just another appliance” or “a toaster with pictures” Though in general American television studies scholars have shied away from active involvement in policy debates, at the time many vigorously contested Fowler’s metaphor.

When today we reassert that television is “more than just a machine,” we acknowledge the degree to which television studies’ history as a discipline has been shaped by its critique of the television of neoliberalism. Unfortunately, we also recuse ourselves from current debates about a television that is decisively technologized. At present, stakeholders in debates over deregulation, public service broadcasting, spectrum allocation, e-waste disposal, access, and copyright law identify television in terms of the capacities and limits of its technologies of transmission and reception, and frequently mobilize vernacular theories of technological change in support of their positions. These strategies are prevalent not simply because regulators or lobbyists or reporters rhetorically reduce television to a “toaster with pictures,” but because television is in fact always and inescapably a technology.

How might television studies scholars go about inserting ourselves into these debates? Traditional avenues of political participation remain open: we can write open letters, sign petitions, consult with community advocacy groups, or speak out in the press. But these interventions will remain hollow if we first do not address the consequences of television studies’ longstanding tradition of deemphasizing television’s status as a technology. Television studies’ capacity to matter outside of our discipline hinges upon our willingness to breach the boundaries we draw around our object of study.