

Putting the TV Back in Television Studies

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One of the ways in which television studies has limited its inquiry into important issues bound up with the device itself is by sometimes too readily accepting a distinction between technical form and programming. This distinction is worthy of critique and strategic rearticulation not only because it is culturally produced and historically contingent but also because it produces senses of stability for text and technology that obscure the processes that make them and make them mean. I argue this distinction can be productively disrupted with an inquiry into the interpenetration of technical and textual notions of quality at salient moments in television history, as in the mechanical television era or the articulation of “the box” to the VCR when the set and its presumed uses and content have been debated and rendered into norms. The lessons from these earlier moments bear upon the present and suggest opportunities for an expansion of television studies’ interests and import, and humanities-based criticism is perhaps singularly poised to intervene into issues of policy and question the cultural presumptions that undergird seemingly unassailable technical authority.

One of the first steps we can take is to remind students, colleagues, and the public of Raymond Williams’s corrective on the relationship between television technology and culture. He persuasively argued for the role of cultural and political intention in the articulation of gadgets into what would be called television. Here, we can point to the ways in which the processes of invention and standardization in early television history expressly relied on notions of content such as movies, opera, sporting events, and commercials in setting thresholds for acceptable brightness, resolution, and image size. These expectations guided engineers and regulators and shaped the public imagination of what would constitute acceptable quality for both the apparatus and the program, and they not incidentally worked to delegitimize other uses and practices. We can see this process replicated in the marketing of high definition television and the digital conversion to the public in the past decade, where conforming television to a home theater ideal was central in the pitches made by both the FCC and electronics firms. The cultural and political consequences of technical standards that are driven by relatively narrow notions of quality content – in both the distant and recent past – remain underexamined. Those standards stack the economic and ideological decks in a manner that demands greater critical scrutiny and the raising of public awareness as to the hidden stakes in seemingly neutral technical questions.

Related to this is an opportunity for our pedagogy and critical and historical practice. The recent conversion to DTV was a sufficiently drastic change that it can serve as a signature example of a broader set of interlocked technical and cultural distinctions over the arc of television history. Here the issues of expense and obsolescence render concrete the larger systems of exclusion that have been at work in television since the 1930s. From the change to NTSC to the addition of UHF to color to cable-ready tuners, there has been a series of transitions that created tiers of users/viewers that may have broadly mapped onto class but also have been shaped by the relative power of individuals within the home and the presumed value added by the new feature. All of these factors are bound up with television’s programming and the institutional conceptions of which audiences count, as illustrated by NBC’s decision to forgive, albeit temporarily, *Star Trek*’s borderline ratings in the interest of promoting color television(s)

to younger viewers. Likewise, hand-me-down televisions intriguingly provided a material corollary to the cultural recycling of re-runs just as they signaled the steady differentiation of viewing spaces. In all of these cases, the devices have been collaborators with programming in television's project of producing identity and difference.

Finally, when we turn our attention to television's apparatuses and both its past and present uses, we should critically consider the term "TV set," remembering that the "set" refers to a grouping of gadgets. Televisions may be consumer goods purchased in a single cardboard box, but there is a verbal residue of electronic enthusiast practice that echoes forward into uses of the television beyond the reception of broadcasting and cable. The understated component nature of the set anticipated the more robust articulation of technologies we see in gaming, home theater, piracy, and creative re-editing. It also suggests that television's iterative nature has not been limited to its texts but rather is a consequence of its on-going renegotiation as a shared system of cultural and economic exchange. As television's apparatuses have been recently reconfigured for HD and digital transmission, there have been affiliated moves to discipline the new TV and its technical articulations that testify to the shift from television being something that is owned and shared to something that is rented. While we wonder at the shifts in textual production and distribution that allow for the better targeting of our tastes, a look at what is happening with the set should prompt us to question our status as tenants.