Getting Back to "So What?"

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Stop me if you've heard this one before….

The characterization of television as a collective, national, public experience – a characterization that is partly mythic, but partly justified – still hangs heavily over our field. Through a combination of regulatory, political, economic, technological, and cultural logics, network television (building from its roots in radio) constituted arguably the single most important massifying medium of the 20th century. That's a strong claim, and one that deserves considerable complication and qualification, but it nonetheless occupies a central place in our field's history, and in its preoccupations. At least two generations of scholars took television's public-ness as a given, and as a central problematic.

Whether exploring the possibility of television to act as a cultural forum writ large, or the relationship of network television to the civil rights movement, or charting the ideological tensions surrounding a single 1980s program's representations of women and feminism, some of our field's most important scholarly contributions rest upon an implicit (and often explicit) presumption about television's power to homogenize and nationalize disparate cultural and geographic groups. Television mattered, in part, because it represented the most prominent platform upon which we engaged vital struggles over who we are, and who we are not. A scholarly reading of a particular program mattered, not simply because that program existed, but because it was watched – often by many millions of people. Television's public-ness gave urgency to our interpretive work, and it particularly underlies the ethical commitments of those of us concerned with issues of cultural power, identities, and the struggles that emerge around them.

Our field has obviously moved on in many important directions, and we've recognized that sometimes the impulse to characterize television as a national medium can reinforce precisely the hegemonic system that we aim to critique. By taking a narrower view of our object(s) of study, we've developed a better appreciation for formal and cultural particularity, and the field is better for it.

And yet, the discourse of public-ness remains. Public-ness is central to our ethical and political claims about television; "the public" is that body to whom we make claims of harm, of consequence, and of reparation. But even though we've revised our definitions of television, it seems to me that we still haven't fully articulated the changing nature of the various publics to which we make rhetorical recourse in our discussion of our object of study.

I'm especially interested in this issue with regard to teaching, where we constantly have to model for our students why it is that television matters. We are constantly invoking questions of scale, relevance, and consequence

regarding the media we study, and the old foundations of our field are not well suited to the media environments in which our students live and work.

I'm not, however, interested in reconstructing a sense of television as purely central and national; to do so would be a deeply reactionary impulse. I'm thus not interested in national culture as a lost golden age, but as a crucial political discourse, a political rhetoric of transformation and possibility. Nationhood, whether explicitly invoked as a matter of governance or implicitly in our classroom, is the basis of a political claim.

It seems to me that we could do well to go back to some of the theoretical foundations of our field. Perhaps we should read a little more Gramsci, who insisted that cultures are always complex and contentious, dominant blocs always unstable, and hegemony tenuous. Perhaps by doing so we can reinvigorate our critical dialogues about television, and find new frameworks that can address its complexity, while still giving us rhetorical grounds for ethical intervention. It seems especially important as our cultural divides become increasingly fractious, we need to find new ways of theorizing television's role in what I'm inclined to characterize as a parliamentary media culture – one that cares little for the mannered consensus politics of the Cold War, or the broadcast medium on which postwar generations watched it play out.