Introductory Remarks

The new media of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries present particular challenges to historians. To what extent have historians taken these challenges on board, and what remains to be done? Where are the gaps in current scholarship, and what are the most promising avenues for future research? In order to stimulate discussion, the Journal of Modern European History invited four experts to respond to these questions: Michael Meyen (Munich), Jérôme Bourdon (Tel Aviv/Paris), Frank Bösch (Potsdam) and Lynn Spigel (Chicago). As this journal issue attempts to build bridges and facilitate dialogue between the fields of history, mass communication and media and television studies, to a certain extent, these distinguished scholars represent their academic fields. Lynn Spigel’s works are well known in the world of television Studies. Michael Meyen’s research is part of the historically focused strand of German communication studies, while historians Frank Bösch and Jérôme Bourdon have contributed to our understanding of how mass media shape long-term societal and political developments. The four statements offer intriguingly different perspectives on the future of media history, introducing us to the key concepts and writings in each field along the way.

It is high time that historians debated the current standards in teaching and researching media history. As all four experts mention, historians are still held back by the dismal state of mass media archives in most countries. The output of audio-visual and digital media is still widely regarded as private commodity, and national or international authorities rarely feel responsible for collecting and organising media heritage. This situation cries out for a remedy – precisely because today, scholars in the field of contemporary history have come to reject the Rankean tradition of the primacy of research in state archives. In an attempt to supplement official documentation with sources generated by society rather than state, and by local, regional or global agencies instead of national ones, many historians increasingly turn to mass media sources.
But there are other deficiencies for which the historical profession itself is responsible. Meyen turns our attention to the training of future historians, which lacks engagement with sociological data and the body of knowledge in the social sciences and media studies. Bourdon points to underemployed strategies of researching media reception: oral history and media memories, as well as the pre-formatting of experiences by digital media, and the recent methods of sentiment analysis and opinion mining. Bösch, too, asks for more research into the ways in which media (in their broadest sense) change daily habits and strategies of communication. It is telling that the experts from the field of history are all interested in questions of mass media effect and societal reception, but are split over the value of ratings and opinion polls. By contrast, for the television studies scholar, ratings and reception take a back seat. Spigel advises to understand television as an everyday cultural form that frames social reality in specific ways through its genres and narrative strategies. The culture under investigation consists of a body of (mass media) texts; the constructivist concept of «society» (much relied on by historians) lies outside the remit of this approach.

Predictably, the issues debated in this forum will grow in significance during the next few decades. The Internet and digital media will become primary sources no contemporary historian can work without. Historians are well advised to get ready for this challenge sooner rather than later. They have to begin to train students to deal with audio-visual, digital and research-generated sources. And they have to lobby for better access to, and systematic archival storage of, audio-visual and digital media output. Since these mass media have become more international and transnational in nature, media historians will also need to communicate across national boundaries to a greater extent than before. Future media archives should be international in scope. Similarly, future research into mass media and society needs to overcome the divisions that have been created by nationally specific academic landscapes. Too often, German Kommunikationswissenschaftler, Anglo-American television studies scholars, media scholars and historians everywhere still speak different languages and take little notice of works considered canonical in other fields.

Michael Meyen

Historical Research on Media in a Social Science Framework

Historical research on modern media is confronted with, firstly, a body of literature that was developed in a social science framework and, secondly, sources that stem from the same research background. The differing ideas of science expressed in these sources necessitate a change in the training of historians, and an increase in the number of historians interested in bridging the two different perspectives. How we define «science» and «the scientific» leads us to apply different criteria to
the assessment of scholarly work.\textsuperscript{1} Whereas most researchers in the social sciences, just like natural scientists, want to discover objective relationships and general laws and aim at knowledge that is of practical use, historical research is concerned with individual cases that are not repeatable. It thus merely supplies orientation knowledge that encourages reflection upon one’s own existence, for example, or upon the basic values of a society. Since historiography’s interpretations are always subjective in nature, they are unable to meet the social sciences’ ideal of objectivity. This explains why, in communication studies, the situation is anything but comfortable for historical research.

Over the past five decades, the academic field of communication has taken shape and undergone explosive growth. While research on communication was scattered across virtually all disciplines of the social sciences and humanities during the first half of the twentieth century,\textsuperscript{2} after the Second World War entrepreneurs like Wilbur Schramm in the United States and Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in West Germany founded departments where communication became the central focus of study.\textsuperscript{3} The new academic discipline quickly gained an enormous following of undergraduates. As a result, new institutions mushroomed, as well as new faculty positions in already established ones. At the International Communication Association conference held in May 2011 in Boston, there were more than 2,600 attendees – double the amount that visited the association’s conference in 2000.

Although the field of communication is highly diverse in methods, theories and objects of study,\textsuperscript{4} there is a social scientific core, as well as a strong orientation towards theories and methods coming out of psychology. This is not the place to criticise or even to discuss the current state of the art in media and communication research, but it is certainly true that effects studies are located at an individual rather than cultural level, and that media contents are connected to short-term societal changes rather than to long-term developments.\textsuperscript{5} Additionally, there is an emphasis on experiments, statistics and quantification. Sometimes, communication researchers seem to put method over question or theory.

However, future historical research on radio and television, on the Internet or on connections between media and social change should be informed by both the


existing body of literature on media and the institutional context that produced that body. There is an abundance of studies on media and journalists, on audiences and effects that helped shape public expectations of media research. The research agenda is often framed by psychological theories, as well as «biased toward considerations of public opinion, propaganda, public affairs, and voting». There are two ways to cope with that challenge. First, media historians need awareness of the field of communication studies, of its institutional structures and its existing body of knowledge. They also need to learn about theories and methods used in this discipline. Second, historians need to critically reassess the professional standards in their own field. Unlike social scientists, most authors of papers in historical journals fail to disclose their approach and submit it to scrutiny. To compensate, they add (usually implicit) references to the historical method and an appropriate list of works consulted (this list being as extensive as possible). But because the model of the natural sciences has proven so successful, history as a discipline now has to adapt. It needs to acknowledge that no object exists without being the subject matter of research, and that the theoretical prerequisites and methodical steps underpinning historical interpretation have to be disclosed. Moreover, historiography is unthinkable without historians – the questions and the selection and interpretation of sources are influenced by present-day interests, by the intentions of the author, and by his or her social position. As historiography does not simply reflect upon a given past, the subjectivity of the authors should be discussed: their socialisation, their conception of man and society, their relationship with the subject matter under investigation, and the interests that may guide them. The historical method can easily be adapted to this approach. The already well-developed criteria for dealing with sources can be applied to theoretical elements, to methodical approaches, and to the subjectivity of authors.

There is another methodological challenge. The rise of social scientific methods has produced a new type of source: opinion polls. The results of such empirical sociological surveys are available in most parts of the world and for almost all research into audiences and journalism – beginning with the United States in the 1930s and followed by Western Europe after the Second World War. The earliest research reports from the pre-computer age are often archived in written form. But from the 1970s onwards, there are also numerous data sets available that require certain analytical skills. So, it is not only the discussion about critical and administrative research that prevents historians from using those reports and data sets, but also a lack of skills. The rules of the historical method and, as a result, the academic training of historians date back to the nineteenth century. It is no

---

7. Wartella / Reeves, «Historical Trends», 118.
coincidence that both of these refer first to written documents, particularly official records. Opinion polls do not fit this pattern but in many ways are extremely valuable sources. Unlike records, diaries and other documents, representative survey results provide information about behavioural patterns, opinions and values across entire populations, as well as about differences between existing social groups and milieus.

To exploit this goldmine, I propose two solutions: First, future historians have to be trained in methods of the social sciences, including data analysis. Second, we should historicise empirical sources such as opinion polls. Criticism of sources is the historian’s most important tool. The credibility of sources always needs to be questioned by scrutinising the relationship between the wording and the facts presented. In order to do so, we have to assess the origins of a given source, its purpose, the organisation that produced the document, and the intentions of its author(s). To interpret data sets in the context of historical analysis, we need to know the following. Who commissioned the polling? What was the position taken by the opinion research institute? What was the aim of the survey? Who were the recipients of the reports? And which parallel and preceding studies exist? Additionally, the historian should critically re-evaluate the polling methods used at the time. The validity of the findings depends on the instruments used, the quality of the random sample, the way the survey is conducted, the indicators being implemented, and the quality of data analysis. Other methodological aspects to be considered are the design of the questionnaire and the wording of the questions, as well as the interviewers’ motivations and the behaviour of respondents. The historian needs to contextualise and compare the data with, for instance, the results of opinion polls from other fields or other periods of time, or with documents (such as official statistics, diaries or reports on public opinion) that might provide insights key to the research question.

Jérôme Bourdon
Too Much Text, Not Enough Institution, and an Elusive Public: How (Not) to Write Media History

For historians, the object «media» poses relatively new problems, most of which are related to a growing source: media «texts», as communication researchers call the variety of media products including newspaper articles and pictures, television and radio programmes, websites, sounds and images. This focus on media texts is something of a novelty for European researchers of my generation, who started researching media in the eighties. Limited accessibility of such texts was a major problem then. Accessing newspapers in archives was a cumbersome process, with large gaps in holdings, especially for (not so early) periods and for (still) neglected regional and local newspapers. For broadcasting, the situation was much worse.
Few programmes had been kept, and what had been kept was only accessible if one was willing to pay a very high price.

Media history did not start with the now wide-spread approach of careful, lengthy analysis of media texts. The typical output concerning the printed press were monographs about newspapers (or sometimes national histories of the press), based on archival documents, testimonies of professionals and personal reflections on the industry. The single newspaper or journal (Le Monde, The Times) was taken as the unit of analysis, without further reflection (as is still done to some extent). This disregards the problems in constructing a long-term identity of a given newspaper. Concerning broadcasting, historians began with a focus on political and legal history: the succession of media laws and reforms, and the debates surrounding them, dominated broadcasting histories. This legal fetishism made us overestimate the power of national policies. Subsequently, this legally and politically oriented historiography was supplemented by studies of broadcasting institutions, administrations, professionals, practices, technologies and, to a certain extent, programmes. But the content of programmes had to be inferred from other sources, such as written archives, the printed press and interviews. The national synthesis was seen as the crowning achievement of this approach: the history of British, French or Italian television, for example – as if television were a self-contained national institution with a stable, long-term identity. Again, to choose this unit of analysis is highly questionable, although trying to write more international histories is certainly a huge challenge. Some historians, more modestly, have written about the history of television in the United Kingdom or Spain while stressing national diversity to a greater extent.

Most studies in media history have by now moved away from this focus on institutions and organisations, and look at texts instead. This is a growing trend. The increased accessibility of media sources in archives, first on physical sites (starting in France with the 1992 law on the legal deposit of broadcasting archives), then online, is radically changing the work of the media historian. It is hard not to get dizzy when considering the sheer amount of material available. Georges Duby, the French medieval historian, used to say that he was happy to write the history of the Battle of Bouvines without interviewing each knight about his particular view of the battle. What would he say today if he had to deal with filmed and sound reports, oral testimonies collected by local associations, and web postings?

Changes in quantity, however, are not the only changes we are facing today. Media materials are now increasingly organised and structured. This «pre-processing» concerns verbal material, of course, but holds true for images and the connection between different kinds of material (transmedia) as well. In addition, researchers
can now build processing tools that allow them to reprocess material over time and generate indexes. A good example is provided by a new trend in computational linguistics, misleadingly named «sentiment analysis». Especially for the Internet (which means, ultimately, for all media), researchers can retrieve indicators, one period after the other. After an initial investment, the text effortlessly generates more texts. There is no need to insist on the danger of this for future historians.¹⁰

The recent opening up of television archives has already given us examples of the promises and perils of this focus on texts. Many scholars began to investigate what, for television, could be called «the image inside». Standard projects would look at «The image / representation of the army / teacher / sex / foreigners on French / Greek / US. television, from year X to year Y». Although the methods vary – from quantitative analysis of articles, themes and characters to the qualitative analysis of exemplary cases – this approach exemplifies the way television archives (and, to a lesser extent, media archives) are conceptualised as giving privileged access to social representations. Though some interpretations are needed, the object is there, if one knows how to process the text that gives access to it.

This method has been fruitful and has resulted in fascinating monographs of interest to both media historians and cultural historians. For France, no historian of philosophy or of television programming can ignore Chaplin's recent work.¹¹ Still, this type of approach remains problematic. Assuming that the reduction of tens of thousands of hours of programming to a few statements is grounded in sound methodology, we still have to deal with the leap from «the image inside the text» to the image inside … how shall we put it? The image in French society? In the French public? In collective memory? The inference from the media text to something else is tricky. It is much more logical, or at least more modest, to claim that the text leads the scholar «upwards», towards the intentions of a smaller, more easily circumscribed entity: the organisation(s) and professional(s) who produced the text. More often than not, however, scholars go «downwards» and judge the whole of a society from a selection of its media products. This problem, commonplace in the debates on collective memory research,¹² should be taken on board by (media) historians as well.

Both media historians and their colleagues need rules in order to interpret media texts. I will suggest one, which I call the institutional detour. The interpreter of texts should always consider the way media content is influenced by profes-


sional categories, the political regime, and the type of institutions (monopolistic or competing, private or public, rich or poor), within which this content is produced. The radical change in television content that took place in Europe after the deregulation of the 1980s and 1990s and the rise of powerful private television stations cannot be understood properly without acknowledging that, even before, the rise of competition within public service television had changed the content of programming. A scholar ignoring this context is bound to write about, say, «French television culture» as something leading straight to a national culture, mentality or collective memory, or, to use the trickiest term of them all, identity.

Of course, the fact that French governments (governments, not society) chose to pass laws that radically modified the content of television is meaningful. But it does not necessarily say anything about the French «public» and its taste. As one producer said to me, reflecting on the rise of crime reality TV during the 1990s in Europe: «If we had produced that kind of programme in the 1970s, it would have been successful, of course. But this was not what public service television was supposed to be about.» Thus, the rise (and fall) of a certain genre or topic can only be understood if backed by a sound knowledge of institutional and political media history.

But the interpreter of media texts will always be tempted to move in the other direction, and think of audiences before institutions. How does one write a history of audiences, a history of the public? I have met quite a number of students wanting to tackle this challenge. The first question they ask is this: Do we have old ratings? Early ratings? Paraphrasing Raymond Williams, my answer is that there is no public and no audience, only ways of writing about media users as a public or an audience (and «ratings» are just one way of doing this, among many others). Even if one is not a constructivist and believes in the reality of certain categories across history, «public» and «audience» are highly elusive, highly political concepts, and moreover dependent on the way modern societies organise themselves and evolve. However dominant television ratings and opinion polls may seem, our modern «trust in numbers» is socially and historically constructed, dependent on technologies of measurement – including statistics – and on the social credit of those technologies. Furthermore, the fluid boundaries between «audience» and «public» in different languages illustrate how unstable these concepts are.

Even in our times of ratings and polls, there are other ways for historians to write audience history. Collecting «media memories» or «life stories» of media


users offers a fascinating perspective on media texts and on the relation of audiences to texts.\textsuperscript{17} For television, it shows that the flow of images is reorganised in memories. This happens less according to specific historical moments (with the exception of major media events or media crises\textsuperscript{18}) than according to major media figures and celebrities («media friends», as Joshua Meyrowitz put it). Such media memories become intertwined with everyday life and show how texts are remembered mostly as a function of the availability of viewers at given points of their daily schedule and life cycle (e.g., a given soap opera is associated with «getting back from school and finding the whole family glued to the set»). Beyond ratings, certain programmes and figures leave an imprint on audiences. In between elevating ratings to a fetish and questioning the very possibility of any generalisation, this is just one among many methods available to audience historians.

When we move from old media and television to «new media», will everything change? Does the Internet text «represent» society? Considering the freedom users have on the web and the so-called involvement of audiences in production (sometimes condensed into the word «prosumers»), it is tempting to suggest that the Internet can indeed «represent society» to a greater extent than the elitist older media. And yet, our «institutional detour» remains valid, even if rephrased slightly as the «formatting detour». Major web institutions do not always directly select content (as newspaper editors still do), but they format our searches, our cognitive habits, and our presentation of ourselves in social networks in specific ways. Historians cannot ignore the way practices and expressions are formatted or mediatised, and how each period will be, in the long run, characterised by certain kinds of social formatting. Moreover, historians cannot ignore that successful texts (the prime time of the web, so to speak) are still produced for the most part by powerful institutions, with at best a modest contribution by audiences (the rankings of top websites usually see major newspapers or broadcasters on top). The majority of the «audiences» remain mostly passive consumers of the web.

Let us use our methodological imagination. You have to write a history of the web, but most of the web content has disappeared. You work the way early European television historians used to work, without access to archives. You will have to interview site editors, webmasters and, of course, web users, readers, listeners and viewers. The kind of history you will produce will be less diverse than a content-based history and more focused on the architecture of media production while also anchored in the interpretations of contents by audiences. To put it briefly:

\textsuperscript{17} J. Bourdon, «Media Remembering: The Contribution of Life Story Methodology to Media / Memory Research», in: M. Neiger et al. (eds.), On Media Memory. Collective Memory in a New Media Age, Basingstoke 2011, 62–76.

remember institutional constraints. Do not focus only on texts. I believe these pieces of advice apply equally to old and new media, and both media historians and historians interested in the media will benefit from them.

Frank Bösch
A Case for Considering the Media and their Effects in the Study of History

At first glance, research on the media may seem like just another special field of historical studies, and this may often be the case when researching how the media function. But for those who investigate the history of the twentieth century (and in the future also the twenty-first), the mass media assume a special role. The media have permeated virtually all areas of society since the beginning of modernity. Not only do we use the media several hours every day, making them the most important aspect of our everyday reality next to work, but the media play a prominent role in the countless fields historians normally research – politics, economics, science, consumerism, sports and culture, as well as perceptions, norms and social interactions. For this reason, taking the media into account no longer means researching how something is portrayed in the media, or how the media are organised, but rather investigating the question of how historical phenomena were shaped and determined by the media culture at the time. The media should therefore be considered as an integral part of such research into contemporary history. A key goal would thus be to analyse the techniques, uses and content of the media in relation to people’s perceptions and actions. In doing so, contemporary historians have to be aware of the media’s impact on their own research. Their knowledge production, social networks and circulation of findings are always decisively influenced by the current mass media.

This change in perspective offers benefits but is also fraught with problems. It opens new doors in terms of methods and generates fresh historical insights. Even classical and seemingly well-researched topics of twentieth-century history can be re-analysed from a perspective that is sensitive to the media and its effects. Very little historical research has been done so far, for instance, on the extent of the influence of different media on economic relations and crises or on religious cultures or family and gender roles. Transnational relations – the interrelations between countries and cultures – are also dependent on the media to a high degree.
although this is rarely taken into account. Even areas such as foreign policy, which have been researched until now mainly on the basis of formerly secret diplomatic records, should be re-examined for the ways they are shaped by the media. Diplomats in foreign countries primarily got their information and sent their reports through different media, which in turn shaped the content of these reports (i.e. letters, cables, faxes or phone calls); they also worked with these media when decisions needed to be made and implemented. Thus, according to a «new history of politics», these communicative foundations should be researched.\textsuperscript{21} Compared to traditional studies, the research of the media in such cases highlights new actors, content, institutions and cultural techniques. We also have to take into account the fact that people living in a certain time were aware of the effects of the media and that they altered their actions accordingly, which in itself is often an important effect of media.

There is one problem with this kind of historiography informed by the media, however. Unlike media and communication scholars, historians are particularly fixated on the effects of the media, which are difficult to analyse with any precision. While a media science scholar would be content with an analysis of the content of a film, for example, historians usually investigate its effects on the perceptions of contemporaries, on social roles or the culture of memory. But because humans use the media rather unconsciously and do not reflect on this process very often, sources which clearly and causally document these effects are rare. Yet, in the United States especially, but also in Germany, the empirically oriented scholarship on the effects of media has become highly advanced. This research works with empirical studies and uses numerous models to differentiate between different media effects that are related to socialisation, behavioural patterns or direct communication.\textsuperscript{22} However, relevant data exist only since the 1970s, and even so, they are rarely applicable to the fields of research that historians want to investigate. But this should not be discouraging. After all, historiography often works with assumptions of plausibility in order to analyse the past. A political decision, a thought from the history of ideas or a certain behaviour in everyday life can rarely be causally retraced to a certain actor, author or norm; it has to be seen in relation to the respective environment. The same is true for the media, which are also not like a black box. Recent historical works also show that if we investigate media in a creative way, we will find many reactions that document effects. These can be pointed out in typical sources, such as letters, surveys or texts used in debates, but also accounts

\textsuperscript{21} This understanding of the political as a communicative space is connected to the Collaborative Research Centre at the University of Bielefeld of the same name; U. Frevert / H.-G. Haupt (eds.), \textit{Neue Politikgeschichte. Perspektiven einer historischen Politikforschung}, Frankfurt a. M. 2005. See also the «Cultural History of Politics» special edition of the \textit{European Review of History} 15 (2008) 6.

by contemporary witnesses. The effects of the media need not always be related to individuals, but should also be seen in relation to the functional logic of the media that is inscribed into institutions and processes. The changes an institution undergoes after the introduction of photocopier, telephones, information technology or the Internet, for example, can be analysed in the work flows, which are often a subject of reflection in sources.

Consider the media in historiography means to go along with an overall paradigm change in historiography. There is a stronger focus on publicly accessible sources while archives, secret files and the archival blocking periods lose significance. While historians generally strive to review all sources for a research topic (if possible), the problem in this case is choosing from a seemingly ubiquitous number of sources. The concept of accessibility is turned around: whereas classical archival records were inaccessible to the people who lived during the time in question but easily accessible to historians, media sources (like television or radio features) were freely accessible to people living during the time in question, but they are often difficult for today's historians to access.

The fact that only a small number of early films and radio and television programmes has survived and that access to them involves much money and effort is well known. Materials documenting the creation of media content, for example editorial notes, which are especially interesting for historians and for history, have been kept only in rare cases. The preservation of audio-visual heritage is more or less well developed in different countries. In France, for example, the INA national archive, which preserves altogether four million hours of radio and television programmes, requires the submission of a copy of all broadcasts. In Sweden, copies must also be submitted to a public institution which collects roughly 45,000 contributions a year. In other countries, like the United States and Canada, no mandatory copies are required, although the Library and Archives Canada has the right to independently record programmes and the Library of Congress in the United States recently opened its National Audiovisual Conservation Center with a stock of 300,000 programmes. In Germany, the conservation, backup and access to television and radio programmes is the responsibility of the regional broadcasting institution. This means that broadcasting companies have to maintain archives, but the conservation of and access to materials functions according to the logic of pro-

25 For more on the conservation of audio-visual heritage, see L. Kramp, Gedächtnismaschine Fernsehen, Vol. 2: Probleme und Potenziale der Fernseherbe-
duction, not the logic of research criteria. Still, new opportunities abound. Research benefits more and more from privately organised media sources: digitalised commercial newspapers, private films and photographs available online. This offers an alternative to the collecting mechanisms and the restrictions of archives.

Because the media are defined differently in each scholarly discipline, it is often unclear which media should be taken into account. The culturally oriented media studies in particular rely on a very broad and all-encompassing concept of the media following Marshall McLuhan, which includes all kinds of communicative signs and techniques such as fire and glasses, and occupational groups such as priests, and thus loses its specificity. Historians have chosen a different path and nowadays concentrate mainly on classical mass media (the press, television, film, radio and the computer). A greater inclusion of different «new media» of the twentieth century is therefore necessary in the future. The significance of the fax in the 1970s for the history of economics, the copier for social movements, the telephone for social relations, or the tape recorder for youth culture, for example, cannot be overestimated, but so far these phenomena have received little attention from historians. And while the analysis of visual sources is now established, the investigation of acoustic sources has only just begun. History can learn from media studies that books, paper, and type writers are not only neutral storage facilities; they are also parts of different systems of inscription that have a shaping effect.

The objection that historians are too fixated on texts and are therefore not qualified to integrate non-written media is a weak one at best. Although different techniques of description may be required when interpreting moving images or sound, we will still rely on the familiar method of critically analysing a source and its historical context. If historians stopped regarding the media as a foreshortened representation of something real and instead began to see them more as an independent, central part of twentieth- and twenty-first-century reality, then we could soon look forward to new results in very different fields of historical research.

Translated from German by Michelle Miles.

Lynn Spigel
Television as Document

In a recent interview on CNN, Caroline Kennedy discussed her childhood memories of the Kennedy White House. The interview footage was interspersed with the now iconic images of John and Jacqueline Kennedy – from the joyous inauguration footage to the eerie motorcade images of Jackie in her stylish pink suit to the news and culture of sound in the twentieth century («Politik und Kultur des Klangs im 20. Jahrhundert») of Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History 8 (2011) 2.


See, for example, the special edition on the politics
coverage of national mourning. These images are now a kind of historical shorthand for the national narrative of the Kennedy era. But what struck me about the CNN interview was not just television’s significance to national memory, but also Caroline’s disclosure of her own childhood memories of watching TV. Discussing her life in the White House, Caroline recalled sitting around the TV set watching Mr. Ed, a gimmicky sitcom about a talking horse who lived in a ranch-style home somewhere in suburbia USA. Suddenly, the picture of Caroline’s life switched registers in a dramatic way. No longer just a series of spectacular triumphs and tragedies staged for and captured by television, her life now seemed utterly ordinary – a life filled with everyday childhood pleasures organised around the (seemingly) trivial programmes broadcast on network television.

Television is a particularly intriguing kind of historical document. As a recording medium, television stages, frames and documents the spectacular events of the day (funerals, revolutions, disasters, wars and so forth). But as an everyday form of culture, it also tells us something about the routine quotidian practices that make any society «social». These dual functions of television – its role in staging and documenting historical events, and its role in organising people’s (mostly undocumented) everyday lives – have been key issues for television scholars. But the question of how to find historic footage is often trickier than it first appears, and the question of what television means (i.e., how to interpret it) is even more challenging.

The first major anglophone broadcast histories – Eric Barnouw’s three-volume history of US broadcasting (condensed as Tube of Plenty in 1975) and Asa Briggs’ five-volume History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom (1961–1995) – drew mostly upon paper sources, documenting the rise of radio and television as technological inventions and industrial forms, while also considering broadcasting’s relation to the nation.28 When programmes were discussed in these histories, they functioned mostly as colourful anecdotes or as markers of major national events. But in the 1970s, this top-down political/economic model gave way to a more sustained interest in television as a cultural form and form of cultural history (a development that had to do with the broader rise of cultural studies, film studies, and social/cultural history in the academy). This cultural turn put more emphasis on television’s textuality, its modes of narration, enunciation, visual rhetoric, and reception by audiences and critics.

Raymond Williams’ ground-breaking Television: Technology and Cultural Form (1975) marked a turn away from notions of technological determination (particularly McLuhanism), to a contextual/conjunctural account of broadcast history that

---

demanded that we think about the mutual relations between technology, society and television’s material forms – especially its programmes.\textsuperscript{29} Williams’ chapter on «flow» was important for theorising the television text in relation to its reception context. Rather than a single text (such as a play or a novel), television, Williams argued, is arranged by programmers and consumed by viewers according to a scheduling flow that interacts with the flows of everyday life in the home. Williams called attention to the fact that television is not made up of just programmes, but rather consists of the entire pattern of programming, including commercials, news bulletins, interstitial promotional materials and the like. Given this, historians find themselves in the difficult dilemma of figuring out what actually counts as the object of analysis in the first place. Is \textit{I Love Lucy} still \textit{I Love Lucy} without the original commercials or animated title art (which were ripped out for syndication re-run markets, and subsequently from home videos, DVDs and many archival prints)? Can news footage of Princess Diana’s death really mean the same thing to a researcher who sees it as a clip in an archive as it did to a viewer (like myself) who was watching a TV game show when a newscaster interrupted with the tragic news?

By the end of the 1980s, television historians began to ask questions like this as they focused more on television programmes and their reception by audiences. Scholars began to trace the history of television in relation to the history of family life, and especially to gender dynamics in the home.\textsuperscript{30} And rather than writing multi-volume sweeping histories of the broadcast industry, historians began to offer thick descriptions of particular moments, with equally thick descriptions of the programmes themselves. Exemplary work in this vein includes histories of television’s relationship to social change and social movements;\textsuperscript{31} television’s relationship to nationalism, citizenship and the public sphere;\textsuperscript{32} and television’s development as an industrial and aesthetic form and its relationship to the broader history of the arts, taste and cultural institutions.\textsuperscript{33}

Anyone using television as a source is immediately confronted with the problem of its status as evidence. Like other objects of industrialised/bureaucratic cul-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} R. Williams, \textit{Television, Technology and Cultural Form}, Hanover 1992 [1974].
\end{itemize}
ture, with television, one wonders about its commercial and/or state-run objectives. As with all documents (whether court trials, diaries or TV shows), historians need to understand the terms of their enunciation, their modes of narration, and the processes by which they were produced, regulated and/or censored. Insofar as television is a highly risk-averse industry, producers developed genres, formats and production protocols that helped to standardise programme forms. So, for example, anyone interested in using CNN’s televised coverage of Egypt’s revolution to understand those events would need to consider the history of news programmes – their formatting, set design, acting styles and modes of address that frame reality in specific ways.

Beyond such concerns, television is a particularly challenging kind of document because of its own claims to authenticity. In the 1940s and 1950s, television marketers promoted TV as an improvement on cinema, boasting that as opposed to film, television was a «window on the world» or a «magic mirror» that would make viewers feel as if they were there, on the scene of presentation, witnessing performances and events as they happened. Critics insisted that television was best when it exploited its qualities of «liveness, immediacy, simultaneity, and presence», qualities that gave indexical proof to the source of transmission.

Nevertheless, as many scholars have argued, liveness is not an essential property of the medium, but rather the effect of narrative strategies aimed at securing faith in the TV image. These strategies include: (1) direct address (when, for example, a news presenter speaks into the camera directly at the viewer); (2) continuity editing (which provides a realist sense of time and space); (3) the use of studio audiences or canned laughter (which encourage viewers to feel that they are participating in a real-time social event, laughing along with the crowd); (4) self-reflexivity (as when news programmes display TV cameras, making viewers feel that as if they are privy to back-stage production and insider knowledge in the TV studio); (5) the use of eye-witnesses on news and documentaries; and (6) performance conventions that create a sense of sincerity and ordinariness, which make television seem more real. Historians have considered television’s aesthetics of liveness and related narrative strategies in the context of larger historical questions. For instance, Paddy Scannell examines how broadcasting’s aesthetics of liveness and authenticity produced new ways of addressing citizens in the privacy of their homes, and in the process changed the nature of public life in Britain. Margaret Morse and Lynn Spigel each consider how liveness and the simulation of ordinary

---

life on television were related to the rise of suburbs and transformations in social space. As these and other scholars demonstrate, television is not a «window on the world» or a social «mirror»; it is a complex industrial, aesthetic and cultural form that processes and frames social reality in specific ways.

In more practical but no less complex terms, television poses questions in relation to the archive. Given the fact that much of early television was recorded live, and given the sheer amount of TV broadcast, a great deal of the daily schedule is simply not saved. But the problems of preservation are not just caused by technical limitations. The television archive is also based on taste biases against TV, and assumptions about its cultural worth. For example, in television's first decades, there was no national storing house for television in the United States. As the Library of Congress admits, before the mid-1960s it did not actively seek to collect television because «The Library simply underestimated the social and historical significance of the full range of television programming.» It was not until the passing of the Copyright Act of 1976 that a national centre was created to house a permanent record of television and radio programmes. In the meantime, television preservation was largely done by private industry, and often for commercial and public relations purposes. In the late 1950s, the Emmy Award granting Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (the major public relations wing of the US television industry) was one of the first organisations to imagine a television library. Its collections, now housed at the UCLA Film and Television Archive, are based on the commercial goals and tastes of the Academy members and TV networks that decided which shows were worthy of award nominations. In this sense, television archives do not so much reveal a total record of the TV past as much as they belie the tastes, goals and collection strategies of the people who saved them.

Today, the sheer abundance of «old» television circulating in online archives and on websites makes television a particularly seductive object for anyone interested in the recent past. As opposed to the old brick-and-mortar archives, these online archives promise instant access to history. The advent of share sites like YouTube and digital collections launched by the BBC or by private corporations (such as the NBC/Turner/Disney joint venture known as Hulu) are an indisputable boon for research and teaching. Yet, many of the old, stubborn problems regarding evidence, textuality and context remain central, if not exasperated by the fact that so much of contemporary audio-visual culture comes to us through invisible

---


37 In the 1950s the live programmes that were preserved were stored as «kinescopes» (or programmes shot on film directly from the screen).

38 The website is lcweb.loc.gov.

sources and trade-routes on the Net. This new traffic in visual culture often makes it hard to know why these materials are online in the first place, who put them there, and what exactly they say about the past. In other words, the abundance of text online often turns out to be, at another level, a scarcity of context. Media historians have begun to reflect more deeply on the question of the archive. Journals have devoted special forums to television archives, and collectives such as EUscreen (and its predecessor Video Active) and the Internet Archive (a US non-profit website/library) provide online access to film and television materials not necessarily available elsewhere, and often with accompanying contextualisation. Everything from practical problems (such as copyright or financing for digital preservation) to more historiographical concerns (such as those discussed here) is now up for debate.

Despite all the academic reflection, the creation of the television archive is also a deeply popular pursuit. Even while sites like YouTube may at times confound scholars with their cut-up content and decontextualised texts, they nevertheless demonstrate the deep interconnections between historical scholarship and the more popular practices of television memory. Indeed, so much of what survives from television is there because some thought to save it—whether on a VCR, a DVR or a mobile phone image sent to a friend. Today, as in the past, television is embedded in all sorts of popular history-making as people cut up clips of old TV shows, remix them, post them, and chat nostalgically about TV history online. Once again, the history of television is never just the history of spectacular events; instead, even at the level of the archive, television history is bound up in the everyday practices of media use. In this sense, historians dealing with television always need to think about the intersecting (if at times contentious) relationship between scholarly and popular uses of the TV past.

41 I discuss this online activity in «Housing Television: Architectures of the Archive», in: The Communication Review 13 (January-March 2010) 1, 52–74.