

## **Teaching Broadcast History**

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I have been teaching an upper level U.S. broadcasting history course for many years structured around Michele Hilmes' wonderful *Only Connect*. I am also in the midst of finishing up a big anthology project for Wiley Blackwell: *A Companion to the History of American Broadcasting*: a 500+ page volume featuring new essays by 24 major scholars in the field. So, I've been thinking a lot about broadcast history of late – the writing of it and the teaching of it.

I want to first take up the question from this roundtable's prompt: do we abandon linear approaches to teaching this material? Textbooks like Hilmes obviously take this approach. But last year when I taught the course, I didn't want my students to have to pay the exorbitant price of latest edition. I liked what she was doing in some of the sections of the new, final chapter, however. So I made the relevant sections of that chapter available to the students (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year Media Studies majors in a 30 person class) and had us start the course with "Television today" and draw out continuities and discontinuities from the past. So: we discussed the issue of "liveness" and its centrality in many forms of reality TV – and also the resurgence of the live "event TV" phenomenon, particularly NBC's live musicals. Why is this becoming a thing in network TV? This provides a platform for discussing how "liveness" has been a recurring feature of both network TV and radio in constituting bulk audiences – and gets us talking about what commercial broadcast networks are for. So we started in the present and with something familiar to the students and then work backwards. My impulse in teaching broadcast history – as well as media history more generally – is to get students questioning just how new and unprecedented their contemporary media environment actually is. Often, history shows that we've been here before, at least to some extent.

My anthology also builds in linearity. The first section of the volume includes seven overview essays by scholars each tackling an era in US broadcasting history: Susan Douglas on the period before broadcasting; Michele Hilmes on the radio era; Michael Kackman on TV before the 1950s; Vicky Johnson on the classical network era; Bambi Haggins and Julia Himberg on the multi-channel transition period, Alex Russo on radio in the TV era, and finally, Amanda Lotz on the post-network era. One thing I want to highlight here is what we do with radio once we are in the broadcast TV era. So it was important for me to have Alex Russo's piece discussing the history of radio after the network era. Typically, of course, radio disappears in our teaching and in our historical overviews. Because I'm seeing radio studies – especially historical work – to be a particularly vital and exciting area right now (alas more so than television history!) I wanted to think through in structuring my anthology, and now with my teaching, how to better incorporate the history of radio into my course. The recent Radio Preservation Task Force conference in Washington D.C. really energized radio scholarship and I think we as teachers of broadcast history need to emphasize radio more in our teaching. As a television historian, I admit to feeling a bit inadequate to the task, but think it's important to get away from presenting radio as merely the enabling medium for television. So, for instance, in my anthology in the second section with essays on "Industry/Production,"

“Programming/Genre,” and “Audiences/Reception” I asked my contributors to consider not focusing solely on radio or on television but rather bring together both in tracing the history of their topic: such as the history of broadcast fandom, the history of activism, the rise and fall of the soap opera, the role of the military in radio and television, the development of Latino broadcasting in the US. This also provides a way of examining the history of broadcasting that isn’t quite linear, but starts with a theme or specific topic.

Finally: here’s just a random successful teaching exercise that connects recent TV history that our students (for the moment at least) will still remember and a more distant TV event: the coverage of 9/11 compared to the coverage of the Kennedy assassination. I have students watch the first two hours of coverage of both (assigning groups of students to watch different networks: coverage of both events is readily available online). I have them compare and contrast what has changed and what hasn’t over the 40 years of TV news coverage of a breaking, crisis event. Students invariably find it eye-opening and we have very useful discussions about the development of TV news conventions.