

Resisting Presentism, Reviving the Past

“Resisting Presentism, Reviving the Past: Feminist TV History”

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There are indeed plenty of “doom and gloom” stories about the decline of students’ interest in all historical subjects (let alone in television history) – the number of university undergrad history majors (and liberal arts majors) is down by 50% at many institutions. I, however, will always be an advocate for the study of media history, and particularly feminist media histories. Our enthusiasm for the topic, demonstrated in our research, publishing and teaching, hopefully will have some impact to increase student interest in historical subjects.

We will all be arguing for the vital importance of studying the past as ways to better understand the present and future. We will also be acknowledging the particular challenges of researching and writing feminist-inspired histories of television – lack of archives and documentation, lack of original program sources, as well as student focus on “presentism.”

But I would like to highlight, in my eternally optimistic vein, new sources for historical research, new publication outlets, and wonderful historical research being done across media forms – such as:

Newer digital sources like the Media History Digital Library and digitized newspaper archives, provide greatly expanded and enhanced opportunities to search for feminist-inflected historical research material in fan magazines and industry trade papers.

If we expand outward from the area of US network television history to broader connecting aspects of media history (including radio studies, film history and performance studies), we will find that many exciting initiatives are out there to promote historical study. I will mention such sources as –

Feminist Media Histories, a new journal published through the University of California Press. It co-sponsors (with the women’s caucus) an SCMS writing prize for best feminist graduate student publication.

The Television Milestone series of publications published through Wayne State University Press, which has been a source of terrific recent studies of such important television historical programs as *Bewitched* and *Father Knows Best*.

New opportunities for support of scholarship such as the Public Programs NEH fellowships initiative in funding projects for wide dissemination of popular historical topics.

There’s great work being done these days in the allied areas of historical radio studies, film studies, fan studies and performance studies, and I look forward to learning what publications, research archives and sources our colleagues are finding most useful for our work.