

Teaching Broadcast History

“The Dust Binns of History”

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This question asks how we make television’s core concepts and earlier technological, industrial, regulatory, and discursive forms legible to students. The brief suggestions posed revolve around the possibility of “make[ing] broadcast history come to life”—through game-like strategies like playing detective and impersonating scholars. I have used several of these strategies.

To explain the rise of the commercial system, I developed a simulation of the radio conferences. Students take on the role of a wide range of stakeholders debating their qualifications to operate radio broadcasting in the public interest. Over the course of the simulation, students see the impact of a series of regulations that slowly forces most of them off of the debate floor and out of the process of determining the future of broadcasting.

I’ve used the Media History Digital Library to teach students about historical methods. In one instance, I put them in pairs and assigned each a different pre-selected issue of a trade magazine. We discuss a bit of basic historiographical theory with regards to how different historical traces can be used as evidence for different types of arguments. Then students spend time with their partners paging through the magazines thinking about how they can be transformed into evidence for arguments relating to the historical broadcasting industry (advertising practices, understandings of audience behavior, relationships between networks and affiliates, etc.).

I’ve also arranged for my students to work with archival materials. When possible, I’ve coordinated with my local special collections to curate field trips. These are designed to introduce students to archives, give them an idea of what it is, exactly, that historians are doing when they’re writing histories, and showcase how institutions like archives help shape the record and support historical research. And these trips are fun. Whatever feelings students may hold for the discipline of history as an academic subject, they will almost universally be excited about the dusty aura of primary documents. When I haven’t been able to coordinate an official trip, I’ve played mock-archives scavenger hunt with paper copies of an archival collection I’ve used in the past for my own research. In both cases, students get to see materials that challenge their expectations with regards to broadcast history and they experiment with transforming traces into evidence for historical arguments.

This semester, my students are indeed adopting the methods of an established scholar—Anna McCarthy. One of their assignments asks them to undertake fieldwork to study ambient television in a public or semi-public place of their choice. While the project has not yet concluded, I am optimistic that asking students to think about the material reality of television in the spaces of their daily lives will help them consider historical transformations in mediated space and discursive understandings of the function and affordances of television.

So, in short, I use the very same playful, hands-on activities gestured to in the question prompt and I think they can be useful. However, the question’s anxiety—if I can call it that—over what to do in a history class to engage students reveals a larger problem. Students have a hard time seeing the relevance of “History” to their lives. And no wonder.

When reflecting on the popular status of academic history, I think often of Cuthbert Binns, Professor of History of Magic in *Harry Potter*. The most boring professor is the most popular contemporary book series about school is a man so out-of-touch with everyday life that he dies without noticing, continuing to teach as a ghost whose only power is soporific speech. (And whose enrollments drop as soon as his course is no longer required). In my experience, Binns personifies many of my students' feelings towards media history—at least at the beginning of a course. Working against cultural expectations of history as expired, irrelevant, and boring is thus perhaps the larger question to ponder here. While class activities might inject “fun” into a day's lesson, they tend to be extraordinary outliers – a symptomatic treatment of a larger problem.

While I'd like to talk over the course of this roundtable about possible remedies for this problem, I'll propose one solution here: embedding and recognizing historical work in media courses across the curriculum. Many classes students take incorporate history to some degree. A class on Latin@ representation or media regulation, for example, must make considerable use of historical context to explain contemporary practice. How can faculty teaching such courses signal to their students that any time they are trying to understand cause and effect, transformation, failure, and, indeed, identity formation, they are thinking historically? In contemporary television courses, how can we encourage students to think of research strategies and epistemological positions adopted for understanding the recent past (e.g., rise of streaming TV) in relation to research strategies for exploring 1950s television? Our students use the past (if not necessarily critically) often in different facets of their lives. The challenge is to ensure they recognize—and value—when they are doing it and learn how to do it well.