

Clearing the Distortion: TV History & Local Archives

“Notes Toward a New TV Historiography: Local Television and Its Archive”

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Recent years have seen two critical shifts in television historiography: a reassessment of the nature of “television” as an object of study, and a corresponding reconsideration of the objects and institutions included in the category of the television “archive.” This session on TV History and Local Archives engages with these twin shifts in television historiography by exploring a two-part proposition: 1) recognizing an important gap in existing histories that has produced a “distorted” picture of television’s early years, historians have shifted focus from national to local broadcasting, and 2) local archives are needed to help fill this gap and support these new research agendas. Simply put, new archives are needed to build new histories. In what follows, I would like to validate the project of a new television historiography that attends to the neglected domain of “local” broadcasting but also question our session’s founding proposition. Does this redefinition of our object of study go far enough in challenging previously dominant conceptions of this thing called “television,” and does the production of local television histories indeed demand a focus on “local archives”? To unpack these twin doubts of mine, I will tease out four key biases in our session’s structuring framework. My goal here is not to dismiss or refute, but in the interest of advancing our goal of a new television historiography, to critically deconstruct our discourse on local television and its archive, asking what forms of thinking it enables and encourages, and what it excludes or denies.

Bias 1: Television as broadcasting. In framing our shift in emphasis as one from national to local broadcasting, we should take care not to identify an entire medium (“television”) with a particular distribution system (“broadcasting”). Even for broadcasters (whether local or national), early distribution technologies were multiple and varied, including kinescopes, wire lines, and microwave relays – local variations in which could dramatically impact forms and experiences of television, even for network fare. Alternative distribution systems such as theater television and early cable (from standard coax to proprietary technologies such as Zenith’s Phonevision) were also an important part of the medium’s history and by regulatory mandate targeted primarily regional/local markets. Media archaeology has encouraged us, as well, to consider not just successfully realized technologies but also imaginary and failed ones – what local inflections might we find for these unrealized forms of “television”? What, in addition, of television’s employment as a “useful” medium in local classrooms and workplaces, or local implementations of radar, medical imaging, and related forms of “television” that the field still struggles to recognize? Let us use the present opportunity not simply to continue the old, broadcasting-oriented mode of television historiography in a new form but rather engage in deeper and more critical reflection on our objects and field of study.

Bias 2: The archive as research site. Archival research has been the bedrock of traditional television historiography, and archives will remain vital to the new television historiography. However, we should take care not to instrumentalize the archive by casting it as merely a support institution serving researchers in our endless quest for knowledge-production. Archives serve many other functions and masters, and researchers need not limit themselves strictly to the role

of “patrons.” It may be instructive here for television historiography to engage with work in archival studies on community or DIY archiving, which highlights archives’ importance not just as repositories of dead objects and static traces of the past but as living institutions that a) help to produce, maintain, and transform local identities, and b) encourage more bottom-up modes of praxis that engage users as active participants in the archival process. In pursuing a critical interrogation of local television and its archive, let’s ask not just what our archives can do for historians, but also what historians can do for their archives, considering how we might better collaborate with one another in pursuit of common goals.

Bias 3: National-local binarism. Counterposing the “local” to the “national” when classifying broadcasters and archives may prove a necessary strategic move, but there is a danger if we fail to see it as a strategy and mistake it for simple fact. As Mark Williams reminds us, all broadcasters are at some level local broadcasters, and even network stations must remain responsive to local needs and demands. The task in locating “local” archives may likewise not just be finding new archives to support our research but also looking for new things in familiar places. What information on “local” stations exists in archives that have been used to support traditional histories of network broadcasting? Buried in the NBC Records at the Wisconsin Historical Society, for instance, are the papers of Frank Young, publicist for independent TV news station WPIX who saved promotional write-ups he created for each of WPIX’s programs, including their widely syndicated TV newsreel service. At the University of Maryland, another staple archive for histories of network television, lie the unprocessed papers of broadcast educator Rudy Bretz, who before starting his teaching career served as WPIX’s station coordinator and preserved an almost complete run of daily production reports for the station’s first two years of operation. What other treasures have archivists in larger, more familiar institutions faithfully maintained for decades, waiting for us to notice? Let us guard against any de facto exclusions and ensure that the new television historiography does not simply perpetuate the same errors of its predecessor in reverse.

Bias 4: Distortion-free history. As a final note, I’d encourage us to resist the language of anti-obfuscationism through gap-filling, or justifying new projects with the goal of achieving a more complete and thereby less distorted picture. All history is partial: what we find depends on who is looking, where, for what, and why. Accuracy is important (no ethical history intentionally distorts), but we should also ask what conditions of knowledge production make it possible for histories to appear right or wrong, complete or lacking, clear or distorted. What are the unseen limitations or biases of our own historical truth-telling, and who or what forces authorize those accounts? Better histories are not just histories that fill gaps – they are histories informed by critical reflection on the ways their own objects, methods, and very language can structure the types of questions they ask and answers they get before they’ve even begun. Let us make our new television historiography appropriately self-critical in orientation, aiming not simply at creating new knowledge but asking ourselves why that knowledge matters and what exigencies or constraints govern its production.