

Teaching Broadcast History

“The Place of Broadcast History in a Media Studies Curriculum”

Alisa Perren, *University of Texas at Austin*

It is unlikely that any of us on the panel – or for that matter, in attendance at this session – would question the importance and value of incorporating broadcast history within our media programs. Certainly worth addressing, as the prompt notes, are the challenges involved in making this history resonate with our students. I want to back us up one step further, shifting from a discussion of strategies, resources, and assignments that might be used in a *History of Broadcasting* course, to instead address how we might situate broadcast history within a media studies/production curriculum.

This issue is on my mind primarily because, in my position during the past year as Director of Media Studies, I have been responsible for supervising a complete overhaul of our undergraduate curriculum and major requirements. Previously, our students were provided with a menu of nine introductory level courses that they could take, of which they chose three (including *History of American Radio & Television* as well as *Development of the Motion Picture*, *Introduction to Global Media*, *Narrative Strategies for Film & TV*, *Introduction to Media Production*, etc.). None of these nine courses were required of students – so there was no guarantee when they reached the upper-division level that they had previously learned any particular subject. We recently transitioned to requiring four core introductory courses of **all majors**.

The process of making this transition to four core courses has been a challenging one, as in effect our media studies faculty have been asked to determine, as a collective, what core concepts are vital for all of our students to learn. With no courses currently required of all students at the upper-division level (they then move on to select from a menu of options, with most students focusing primarily on taking production and screenwriting courses), these four introductory courses become in effect the “pitch” for our entire upper-division curriculum. In other words, as part of this curriculum overhaul we have had to reconsider what, how, and why we are teaching media in the 21st century – and provide a “sampler” of sorts of our field and major for our students in the process.

Three of the core courses now required of our students are: *Media & Society* (a general survey of primarily social scientific approaches to the study of the media with a particular emphasis on global media as well as issues of identity and representation); *Narrative Strategies and Digital Design* (a survey of aesthetics and narrative structure across film, television, and games), and *Introduction to Media Production* (a hands-on introductory level production course). The fourth course, and the one most pertinent here, is called *Development of Film and Media* (being piloted by this panel’s moderator, Kathy Fuller-Seeley, who I am sure will have some valuable insights to share regarding the specifics of the course’s development). What this course aims to do – and try to keep your jaw from dropping as you read this – is provide an overview of the history of all media in the 20th century with a particular emphasis on industry, technology, and policy. We opted to focus on the histories of American film, radio, and television (broadcast and cable) although the internet, games, and podcasting all make guest appearances. Yes, all of this is covered in a semester. Students wishing to take a course on the *History of Broadcasting* (actually *History of TV & Radio*, which I continue to regularly teach) can opt to take the course at the upper-division level.

There are several issues I would love to discuss with our panelists and audience members pertaining to this shift in our core curriculum. These issues we have discussed and debated internally in my department, but it would be valuable to gain the perspective of others devoted to teaching broadcast history on a regular basis.

These issues include:

- What is gained – and what is lost – by folding broadcast history into a broader history of media?
- How much of broadcast history can/should “make the cut”? And how might this broadcast history be connected to film, cable, satellite, games, the internet, etc. in a way that respects the specific history of broadcasting but also indicates the long-extant intersections and interrelationships across media forms, technologies, industries, etc.?
- How do you make such a massive history (which, within more humanistically oriented programs, is usually compartmentalized as history of film, history of radio & television, etc.) legible to students who may never have taken any media history course before? What are the absolutely crucial topics, themes, and concepts that you students should take away from the course?
- How do you retain a focus on content and culture while also engaging with broader issues of industry, policy, and technology across media? (Or what do you screen and how do you frame it?)
- How might such a class be structured? In other words, do you take a chronological, narrative approach? Shift to a thematic orientation? Focus on different media forms at different historical moments?
- What do you assign students to read, given that there are not yet textbooks able to accommodate this type of course (at least from the perspective of those of us working on this curriculum overhaul)?
- Where, how, and when do you move beyond the U.S. context? It is obviously already challenging to cover the history of U.S. media in one semester – is it in any way to realistically incorporate other national or regional examples?
- How can concepts introduced in this introductory level course then be built on productively in an upper-division *History of American Radio & Television* course?

Obviously I am largely posing questions here, rather than providing answers. However, my hope is that this panel can provide a space for us to address these more macro-level issues. As broadcasting continues to become ever-more distant (and frequently inaccessible) to our students, it is important that we not only continue to assess how we teach history of broadcasting as a standalone course, but also how and why we might fold this history into larger curricular discussions and disciplinary conversations.

Should you be curious, here is a link to the syllabus for the second iteration of the course, as taught by Kathy Fuller-Seeley:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0BzBJwps6rlqpeW02UkpHNHhIRTg>

The current reading pack table of contents:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0BzBJwps6rlqpU0I4Um9RM0QzUTA>

And the link to the core concepts addressed (note this is already being tweaked for its second iteration): <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0BzBJwps6rlqpVzQwZnp3cndKZzA>