

Resisting Presentism, Reviving the Past: Feminist TV History

“We Can Be Historians: Challenging Presentism in Feminist TV Studies”

Mary Celeste Kearney, *University of Notre Dame*

The coalescing of critical television studies into a legitimate academic field in the early 1990s was facilitated in part by the work of such feminist historians as Lynn Spigel, Denise Mann, Mary Beth Haralovich, Lauren Rabinovitz, Nina Leibman, Jane Feuer, and Julie D’Acci. Indeed, television scholars of the 1980s and ‘90s took a historical approach so far granted that neither version of Bobby Allen’s methodology-oriented *Channels of Discourse* (1987, 1992) included a chapter on historical research. Yet, as the twentieth century came to a close, so did historical feminist television criticism. At the 2016 Console-ing Passions conference, which focuses on gender in television culture, only 14 of 212 papers were historical, which amounts to .7 or *less than one percent*.

As noted in the call for this roundtable, many questions come to mind when we reflect on presentism in contemporary feminist TV studies. My response explores the main reasons this perspective looms so large, with the hope that focusing on them will motivate us to find new ways to reinvigorate historical feminist television research.

As I have argued elsewhere*, the reasons for a presentist perspective in contemporary media studies are many. Enumerating those reasons, and thinking about them from a feminist television scholar’s perspective, can help shed light on why presentism dominates in our particular section of that larger field while also suggesting ways we might combat it. The first reason has to do with *disciplinary approaches*: While early feminist TV scholars mostly came from film studies, a good part of today’s field is composed by scholars trained in communication studies, a social science that privileges analyses of contemporary society. One result of this—and the second reason the presentist perspective dominates—is that television is most often understood as contemporary television and historical iterations are ignored. Such *ahistoricism* is exacerbated when scholars do not approach the present moment as historical. A third reason for feminist TV studies’ presentist focus involves the privileging and definition of academic *innovation*. Scholars are required to pursue original research. Yet “original” seems to be defined today primarily in relation to the present moment. While historical research can certainly be innovative, novelty and presentness have become equated to such a degree that historical work is undervalued, if not seen as irrelevant. This problem is perpetuated by *academic publishers*, who collectively contribute to the fourth reason for feminist TV studies’ presentism: What’s new is now, what’s now is hot, and what’s hot is what sells.

The fifth reason for presentism dominating feminist TV criticism has to do with the relatively the relatively *young age* of many scholars in our field. Arguably, as a result of their limited personal history, young people tend to focus far more on the present than on the past. Thus, their TV culture—current TV culture—is more attractive to them. A sixth and related reason has to do with the medium at the heart of our field: Television has long been linked with *liveness*, which in turn has motivated many people to be most interested in “live” TV, or that which they can access via a click of their remote or mouse. The final, and most obvious, reason for the dominance of presentism is that contemporary television culture is *more accessible*, and this is related both to TV’s “liveness” and to the young age of many television scholars. Although an increasing amount of archival material is accessible online, most historical TV

research still requires additional time, effort, and money. With limited funds for their scholarship, younger scholars tend to steer toward current TV culture.

This roundtable is part of my on-going effort to keep historical feminist TV studies both alive and relevant. Of all the reasons I've enumerated, I most want to stress the importance of *historical contextualization* for all television research. To reference, and badly butcher, David Bowie's lyrics: *We can be historians, but not just for one day*. Just as the ahistoricism of so much contemporary TV research limits our understanding of today's popular culture, so does the avoidance of historical television research prevent our full understanding of the past. Much of television history has yet to be written, particularly outside Anglophone countries, and many of TV's earliest professionals and viewers are near the end of their lives, if they haven't reached it already. So there is a wealth of great opportunities for those TV scholars willing to put in the extra effort. For those of us who have the means to do so, we should collaborate on historical research with younger and less-well-off scholars, not only to inspire their engagement with the past but to affectively and financially support it. Finally, we must develop new ways to make historical research not only accessible but attractive, by sharing tips on archives and older texts, and promoting our scholarship beyond the usual academic circles. Next year, let's push the number of historical papers at Console-ing Passions well past the ten-percent mark!

* "Historicize This! Contextualism in Youth Media Research." *Youth Cultures in the Age of Global Media*. Eds. David Buckingham, Sara Bragg, and Mary Jane Kehily. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 53-68.