In Focus: The Place of Television Studies
edited by William Boddy

This In Focus, on the current state of television and new media studies, was inspired by two recent landmarks in the history of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS). The first was the second anniversary of the decision by the membership to change the organization’s name to affirm its support for scholarship in radio, television, and digital media. The change marked the culmination of a long campaign among television scholars and others within SCMS to recognize its members’ expanded intellectual terrain. Despite the name change, however, the organization’s official publication, Cinema Journal, still receives relatively few manuscript submissions devoted to nonfilm topics. While there are probably many reasons for the low proportion of television—and new media-related submissions (some beyond the journal’s control), the editors hoped that devoting an In Focus to television and new media would underscore the journal’s commitment to providing a venue for the best emerging scholarship in the field.

The second occasion for this In Focus section was the success of the 2005 SCMS conference, held at the University of London’s Institute of Education. In addition to being the first SCMS conference convened outside North America, a record number of panels and papers addressed nonfilm topics. Furthermore, the London venue, which helped attract an unprecedented number of European scholars to the conference, also reinforced the international nature of television studies, old and new.

As television studies emerged out of the 1980s cross-Atlantic confluence of film studies, political economy, feminism, and cultural studies, among the important venues for new scholarship were the four international television studies conferences organized between 1984 and 1991 by the British Film Institute and the University of London’s Institute of Education. As Lynn Spigel notes in her essay here, that those conferences and the 2005 SCMS conference were held at the same venue prompted reflection on the past two decades of television studies and on the future of the field.

It was in this context of introspection that Cinema Journal invited six senior scholars in the field of television studies to consider the current state of and prospects for television and new media studies. A handful of key questions framed their reflections: What are the proper aims and methods of television studies? What are its debts to film studies and to other humanities and social science disciplines? How should television studies relate to the emerging fields of visual studies and new media studies? How might current academic and scholarly institutions be reconfigured to support TV studies? Finally, how might the work of television scholars be brought to wider public debates over media policy, and how might such debates inform the research of media scholars? As more than one of our contributors note,
these questions are unusually urgent as television itself undergoes fundamental technological and institutional changes around the world.

As both Toby Miller and Lynn Spigel posit, speculation about the future of television has been a perennial theme. Such speculation reveals more about the anxieties and hopes of those offering predictions than of the imagined media future conjured up. Inviting television scholars to speculate about the future of television studies also provides a collective snapshot of a young discipline at a moment when, despite its record of substantial scholarly accomplishments, it faces fundamental questions about its proper objects and methods, and about its place in the academic institutions of education, research, and publishing.

The perennial challenges of defining the texts and methods of television studies are made more urgent in the current context of industry consolidation and technological convergence. At the same time, the current (and ubiquitous) calls for scholarly interdisciplinarity beg fundamental questions about the nature of television studies research and whether interdisciplinarity should be pursued on the level of individual articles or monographs, academic departments, scholarly organizations, or journals. As scholars continue to sort out the implications of the current forces of globalization, corporate consolidation, and textual hybridity, the tools and level of analysis appropriate to these new objects of study remain highly contested.

As the essays in In Focus testify, the past and prospective fortunes of television studies are enmeshed in larger histories of academic policy and cultural taste, underscoring significant national differences between the United States and the United Kingdom. The earlier and more thorough institutionalization of film studies in U.S. universities, for example, provided an important intellectual and institutional base for the development of American television studies, inflecting the new discipline with a strong humanities orientation, often in explicit opposition to earlier social science approaches to the medium. Furthermore, the contrasting industrial and cultural traditions of commercial network oligarchy versus public-service broadcasting in the United States and the United Kingdom created different settings for policy reform, technological innovation, and academic study in the 1980s and beyond. Finally, the continued importance in British television of one-off and limited-run TV dramas, arts programs, and serious documentaries as well as the infusion of university-trained producers at Channel Four and the BBC over the past two decades have created different relations between the TV industries and academia in the two nations. The inevitable challenges for media educators—negotiating theory and practice, the desire for scholarly critique and students’ appetite for professional training, and the demands for intellectual autonomy and internal resources and external funding—have heightened the stakes of television studies in colleges and universities around the world.

In addition to the continuing importance of the national context in television studies, the following essays point to the important role played by the largely implicit politics of class and institutional legitimation in constructing the discipline in both the United States and the United Kingdom. The traditionally disparaged status of television as an aesthetic enterprise and a leisure activity not only has affected the cultural prestige of the medium’s creative workers but has also provided
a determining context for the growth and direction of television as an academic discipline. The historically uneven incorporation of television studies in elite versus nonelite academic institutions in the United States, in broad distinction to the institutionalization of film studies, is thrown into relief by current efforts to incorporate the study of digital media at a range of public and private universities.

Securing a supportive venue for television scholars amid ongoing institutional realignments, as some of our contributors suggest, may not be as obvious as merely adding the word television to the title of a department or program. Indeed, the propinquity of television studies to the higher-prestige if loosely defined field of new media studies may have served to elevate the TV medium’s own status; in this context, it may be worth recalling that in the 1990s the membership of SCS decisively rejected efforts to accommodate television scholars. In any event, contemporary television scholars should not underestimate the accumulated accomplishments and influence of the scholarship in their field, and, as Michele Hilmes suggests, should join in the inevitable institutional battles over resources and support without inhibition or apology.

For many in my own generation of cinema studies–trained television researchers who began teaching and publishing in the early 1980s, the shift in scholarly attention to the new medium seemed impelled by the historical situation of film studies as it emerged from the 1970s. Indeed, the diverse mix of methods and topics in cinema studies at the time—textual analysis, feminism, psychoanalysis and spectatorship, ideology, apparatus theory, avant-garde and political filmmaking—all seemed to extend into the chaotic and liberating universe of television and independent video. Film studies promised—and provided—insights into issues of TV textuality (illuminating the medium-specific issues of sound-image relations, direct address, melodrama and serial form, and genre and authorship, for example), as well as issues of spectatorship and ideological agency. At the same time, the revitalization of the study of film history in the 1980s, especially by scholars of early cinema who encompassed issues of formal style, institutional change, and social context, was a powerful model for the new generation of historians of radio and television. The impact of this emerging work in television studies in many ways challenged and advanced several central debates within film studies at the time, including those around reflexivity, spectatorship, the apparatus, and serial form.

While contemporary television studies struggles to come to grips with new academic contexts and a shifting object of study, much recent scholarship continues to build on earlier links to film studies, including new work on genre and broadcast stardom. Simultaneously, recent edited anthologies have investigated the new genre of reality TV and have fruitfully interrogated the wider relationship between new digital media and the “old” medium of television. Meanwhile, established discipline-wide gatherings, such as those organized by SCMS and more narrowly focused series such as the Console-ing Passions, Visible Evidence, and MIT Media in Transition conferences, are increasingly supplemented by interdisciplinary meetings receptive to television studies work. Likewise, the established scholarly journals that have provided a home for television studies scholarship are being joined by new online venues. These new electronic forums encourage a wide range of writing styles,
including topical, conversational, and informal modes; they also offer scholars the opportunity to reach, and interact with, new groups of readers. As such, they suggest a response to the question posed by the editors of *Global Hollywood*: “What would it take for screen studies to matter more?”

Meanwhile, as the sustained slump in Hollywood’s 2005 domestic box office underscores, the continuing migration of film viewers from public cinemas to the home, and the domestication of cinematic reception (fueled by the growth of cable movie channels, pay per view, and DVD home theaters), promises to rewrite the affective and scholarly economies of cinephilia, with implications for how academics and others construct both television and cinema. Television scholars today enjoy the sometimes perplexing privilege of addressing an object of study that is undergoing fundamental revisions in its technological platforms, textual forms, viewing protocols, industrial structures, and cultural meanings. Many of the traditional tools of television studies, formulated in an earlier era of nationally defined broadcast practices and institutions, will have to be rethought for a moving-image culture with less fixed notions of medium, text, spectatorship, schedule, and nation. For scholars, it is an exciting prospect.

Notes


5. For example, the May 2005 issue of *Flow*, an online journal on television and media culture, from the Department of Radio, TV, and Film at the University of Texas, Austin, contains a reflective take on the condition of television studies by Aniko Bodroghkozy, “Media Studies for the Hell of It?: Second Thoughts on McChesney and Fiske,” as well as essays by Dana Polan, Daniel Marcus, and Jason Mitell. Horace Newcomb and Henry Jenkins respond to the Bodroghkozy article in the June 2005 issue. Available online at http://idg.communication.utexas.edu/flow/?jot=view&id=789.
