Three questions, almost always interrelated, seem to motivate the academic study of television, even when one or the other seems more forcefully to drive the work. My framing of these questions may be idiosyncratic, but I find them embedded in almost everything I read.

First, how does television tell stories? I include almost all television “content” in this category, almost all questions of form and narrative strategy, as well as production studies, genre studies, auteur studies, industrial organization, technology as applied in production. I include news, documentary, “reality programs,” and so on in this category, as well as “fiction.”

Second, how do the stories found on television relate to (express, control, limit, expand, shape, etc.) the societies and cultures in which they appear (including, of course, all those in which they appear, not merely those in which they are made)? Here I include all studies of audience, viewer, reception, effects, and so on, up to and including space, governance, culture, and ideology.

Third, and finally, why television? I will get to this one later.

Over time, responses to and applications of these questions, both practically (evidence, analytical technique, and critical methodology) and conceptually (what do the terms “story,” “society,” “culture,” “industry,” “franchise,” “audience,” “viewer,” “express,” “space,” “shape,” etc., mean?), change with individual instances and within the larger body of work that has come to be known as the field of television studies. A further result of our focus on the academic study of television appears in the organization of settings where this field is located, as in departments, colleges, courses offered, projects funded, journals published, editorial angles chosen to drive those journals, book series from publishing houses, and so on.

Clearly, all these matters are and have always been interrelated. Moreover, they are not limited to the academic study of television. Versions of the questions emerge as concerns of interest groups, public-school teachers, religious leaders and practitioners, politicians, media industry executives, and the writers, producers, performers, editors, development executives, agents, and others who produce/create/schedule/perform (choose your term) television. Indeed, some of the most sophisticated and complex notions related to the large categories of questions I pose above have emerged in the settings and social arenas frequented by these professionals.

As addressed by intellectual enterprise and inquiry, whether professional or academic, all of these questions, problems, approaches, large questions, and subquestions are informed by historical conditions. From this point, I will focus primarily on the academic side of our concerns, although the professional overlap I describe above is always shadowing what we do and emerges at times into full prominence.
For the academic study of television, the shifting historical conditions comprise a huge range of institutional arrangements. Who studies television? How and where in the academy do they study it? Where do they publish? What courses do they teach? How do professional organizations “name” themselves (better put as what does “naming” mean)? To some extent, some of these questions have been answered in academic settings. No longer, for example, is it obligatory to make a full “defense” for the study of television (which still leaves the “why TV?” issue begging outside the frame).

The difficulties and, more significantly, the opportunities we face, however, are powerfully affected by historical developments outside the academy. I refer mainly to the changes in technology, policy, and economics, including political economy, and the consequent alterations surrounding what television means industrially and creatively and, perhaps most important, culturally and socially as experienced in homes, hotels, shopping malls, and other settings.

The significance of these changes is visible in strains of analysis purporting to address, and sometimes to explain, television. As suggested above, the intersecting, interrelated, interacting aspects of television have always been present. However, it certainly was easier to segment them in earlier times. It was easier to suggest that some aspect of television studies was insignificant, as was often the case when actual program content was dismissed or ignored because of assumptions regarding quality, or value. It may have been strategically important to explore one facet or another for purposes of precision and to “fill gaps” left by other questioners. Or it may merely have been easier to do what one wanted by ignoring what one might have realized would have complicated matters more than one wished.

When I began to write about television, around 1969, my efforts fell somewhere between these last two options, depending on whether I was addressing a publisher that needed to be persuaded or simply getting a book written. In Gary Edgerton and Brian Rose’s forthcoming Thinking outside the Box: New Directions in Television Genre, I comment at some length on the thinking and writing that went into TV: The Most Popular Art.1 Basically, mine is a very primitive book, but I respect it for raising as many, if not more, questions than it answers (because I am always interested in questions first) and for whatever value it offers as history. It certainly was not planned as history, or even as theory, although I suppose it steps lightly in that direction. In the Edgerton and Rose collection, I discuss terms that should be changed and other revisions I would make today. If, in the end, my book offers something of a snapshot of television programming up to 1974, it must be seen as a photo focused through a severely restricted lens, somewhat eccentrically developed and now rapidly fading. In some real sense, however, television was simpler then, and if the questions asked and answered seem equally simple, it is also the case that they had not been asked in that way before.

I have a similar response to “Television as a Cultural Forum,” which was subtitled “Implications for Research” when it was first published.2 The “implied” aspect of the argument should perhaps have been more prominently displayed. It certainly seems so in retrospect. But I still believe that what Paul Hirsch and I described and offered as an approach to understanding television was more applicable to the media as then
institutionally and culturally arranged than strict, top-down, dominant-ideology, hegemonic-control descriptions suggested.

The point, however, is that these efforts and others utterly ignored the historical conditions on which the arguments were based. If the foundation appeared sound at the time, it certainly should not have taken a great deal of insight to see it shaking. Surely this was the case with the forum essay, given that it was published in 1983 and the entire thing we knew as television was already morphing into something else (that is not clear, even today). Indeed, we may come to realize that all that is happening is morphing. If this is the case, or even if it is merely one fruitful way to approach the problems, where does it leave or lead us?

First, perhaps, we must recognize that television has a real history. Beginning in the mid-1980s, an increasing number of articles and books have addressed details of television programming, industrial organization, personalities, responses to the medium, its place in culture both material and symbolic, and so on. Many of these studies have relied on limited but growing archival resources consisting of both programs and papers.

I am far more aware of the significance of archival resources not only because of what I have learned from them, which is a great deal, but because my current position keeps me closely involved with one of the major media resources in the world. A brief plug: the Peabody Archive at the University of Georgia Library is not a collection of Peabody Award winners. There are fewer than 1,500 of these, despite the sixty-four-year history of the award. Rather, it is a collection of entries submitted for consideration for the award. As a result of the wisdom of early administrators in the awards offices and in the library, the collection now holds more than forty-five thousand titles, of which the earliest materials are some of the 1940 radio entries. Some of the submissions are individual programs; some are entire series. The award is given across all fields: news, documentary, entertainment, and so on, and without regard to categories. It is given to local as well as large-scale enterprises.

The University of Georgia Library contains the best collection of locally produced programming in the country, mostly news and special reports but also children's programs, teen shows, and documentaries. Additionally, all the paper records, artifacts, and supporting materials are kept in the library's Hargrett Rare Book Collection—even the rolls of Simpsons toilet paper. If morphing is the guiding metaphor in this brief commentary, it is TV historians who have given us glimpses of the process. Whether those glimpses can guide future questions remains to be seen.

Another continuing analytical strategy, of course, is the familiar one of isolating an area that requires close attention: programs, genres, series, schedules, production companies, individual producers. This is certainly made easier with the use of videotape and digital recording devices. As I have often remarked, TV: The Most Popular Art was written, for the most part, based on my memories about television programs. I have never tried to locate specific episodes, preferring instead, and tellingly, my own blurred recollections to substantiate blurred claims. Of course, it is possible to search for links among all the features and forces in the mix, showing how one program, or one genre, or one career careens through a process and demonstrates complexity, if not confusion.
All of this, however, results from and demonstrates that developments in technology, policy, economics, and strategy have made (and are making) television very different from what it was in the mid-twentieth century, and from what it will be five years from now. It is no longer the central social and cultural medium it was for a very brief period—a period I observed and participated in almost from its beginning and that I mistakenly, myopically, assumed would continue.

For the first time, so far as I have been able to discover, a central sociocultural medium (religion, drama, epic poetry, the novel, the movies, briefly radio, mass-circulation magazines, etc.) has been fractured by new media but not supplanted by a succeeding centralizing medium. Television is now more like a music store (bad analogy given that these, too, are fading for many of the same reasons) or a bookstore (same problem). Or perhaps television is more like a subscription library, the venerable eighteenth- and nineteenth-century institution in which, for a fee, we pick, choose, schedule, experience, return, copy, quote, almost (but not quite) at will. Recently, a colleague suggested another powerful metaphor for the “new” television—the warehouse. Given that we still pay for television one way or another (ads, subscriptions, license fees), I like the idea that TV is the Sam’s Club or the Costco of contemporary American culture.

There are great opportunities and needs in the field. There are more gaps to be filled. What happened to produce a certain set of phenomena? What can close studies of intersecting forces tell us about the emergence of a particular program, genre, or schedule? What do accounts of struggles within producing organizations, networks, and corporations tell us? How do strategies of competition explain cultural patterns of meaning-making and meaning use? The strongest new works will stand more as maps than as mines probed for specifically valuable gems. They will provide descriptions and explanations of connections and struggles, convenience and compromise, collaboration and contest.

But even here there are attendant liabilities. I have always shied away from the “literary-ization” of television studies. I do not follow academic film studies, but from scant observation it seems that this state of organization has long been the norm. I refer to the fragmentation of questions and concerns into smaller and smaller fields and subfields and journals, courses, and dissertations that have to dig for significance in the equivalent of efforts to revive neglected eighteenth-century poets. (My prejudices show here. I am much more comfortable reviving minor nineteenth-century novelists.) And I certainly do not intend to suggest that in those forgotten episodes of forgotten television programs, in the details of the always neglected careers of television writers and producers, in explorations of the latest “hot” genre, or in the implications of one more attempt by one more special interest group to affect one more policy outcome that we cannot find important material. Rather, my concern is always with “why TV?” which is sometimes lost in the swamp of description, analysis, method, and theory, obscured by what we, as individuals, find fascinating.

As I have frequently noted, I wrote, and occasionally write, about television because it changed my life. It opened visions otherwise unavailable in the 1940s and 1950s in the closed society of the American Deep South, a region (not alone in its problems) that without the coming of television would have maintained and
exercised even more venal power than it did. Movies and radio had done positive work, but there was something about sitting in the living room, knowing that something almost dangerous was taking place on the screen, that others sensed it too, and that they were reacting very differently. It was almost more important to feel that tension—while all present remained silent—for as long as possible.

Television still has this power. I watch several hours of TV almost every night, almost always dramas, and find myself moved and enlightened, annoyed and disgusted, angered and delighted. In early March 2005, I turned to Sara Newcomb, who watches with me and whose judgment I trust implicitly, and said of an episode of *Boston Legal*, “That’s the best episode of television I’ve seen in years and the best script by David E. Kelly I can remember in some time.” She agreed and we began a conversation. It wasn’t simply “an episode” we talked about, or even a program or a writer-producer. It was television.

I am unconcerned with whether one writes about episodes or series, genres or schedules, industry or policy, TiVos or cable, European public-service broadcasts, or economic shifts. I am concerned that we ask questions that help explain to others why television continues to be so important. That is what I look for when I read new work. That is just about all I care about, and if I do not find those critical questions, I stop reading.

I enjoy being able to help make choices that somehow address the larger social and cultural constructs that surround us. In today's richly shattered condition, it is very hard to conceive of a writing and teaching strategy that allows one to touch and tap all the intersecting forces that come into play in any given question related to television. It is harder still to pose the truly major questions. But that is certainly what we should do.

**Notes**


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**The Bad Object: Television in the American Academy**

*by Michele Hilmes*

Here is one of the main distinctions I can make about our field based on twenty-five years as an SCMS member and scholar of radio, television, film, and new media: virtually all television scholars have taken courses in film history, institutions, and aesthetics; very few film scholars have taken courses in broadcasting history, institutions, and aesthetics. Or, to put it in slightly less sweeping terms, there is an information and