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Is Archiving a Feminist Issue? Historical Research and the Past, Present, and Future of Television Studies



by Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley

Historical television studies are flourishing in the UK and elsewhere.¹ Such historical research has become increasingly possible as archival material has become available to researchers.² (This is an increasingly fragile project as contemporary archives have recently been forced to reduce the amount of television they record and preserve.)³

The study of television's past, therefore, has ramifications for the present and future of television archiving, television scholarship, and, arguably, television itself. It both shapes our understanding of the historical development of the medium and also redefines the methodological approaches of television studies.

In order to make convincing arguments about contemporary women's programming, such as the British talk/magazine programs *This Morning* (Granada, 1988–) and *Loose Women* (Granada, 1999–), or popular "postfeminist dramadies" like *Sex and the City* (Darren Star Productions/HBO, 1998–2004), television scholars need to be able to see where the address, format, representations, and concerns of "the new" originate and how they have developed. We need, in other words, to pay attention to "the old" of television, as well as to "the new." As the television historian John Corner has argued, this "utilitarian defence" suggests that understanding television's history offers us a clearer sense of the medium's present and future: "An enriched sense of 'then' produces, in its differences and commonalities combined, a stronger, imaginative and analytically energized sense of now."⁴ It is essential, then, that scholars and archivists continue to argue for access to television's past in order to properly contextualize television's present and futures.

In her contribution to the *Cinema Journal* In Focus on the 21st Century Archive, Margaret A. Compton has also proposed that "for those studying television's women on screen and behind the scenes, no matter how convenient it is to download *Desperate Housewives* to an iPod, if they also want to study *Hi Mom*, a show Shari Lewis created and starred in for 1957's housewives and children, at this point, it will have to be seen in an archive."⁵

Here, as we look ahead to our project to uncover some of the unexplored history of television for women in Britain,⁶ we need to acknowledge the important work that has been done in this area.⁷ Some of this work, in its address to the conditions of production of women's television, has shown the value and significance of historical television studies that draw upon archival research as part of their

methodological approach. Our own project aims to develop existing feminist histories of women's programming, female program makers,⁸ and women's viewing practices,⁹ and calls for a renewed attention to historical work on programming that has guided and/or reflected upon women's tastes and cultural competences, and that draws attention to women's labor and creativity. In line with other recent writing about television historiography, we argue that what is needed is a multi-methodological approach to television historiography, an approach in which television historians might draw together strands of the production/text/viewer triumvirate to produce a more holistic picture of the history of television for women.¹⁰ Our broad research questions are, then:

- What are the gendered gaps in preexisting histories of television?
- What has constituted television for women, and how has it conceptualized the female viewer?
- What have been the relationships between women and their television?
- How has gender been an issue in television production, and how has that changed historically?
- What have been the shifts in production practices, and what has produced these shifts?
- What kind of methodological framework do we need to reconstruct a history of women's television?

Such a project raises numerous methodological challenges and questions; for instance, how can one access the historical audience for television? What can we know about the historical conditions of viewing? These are critical questions that are explored at greater length in the work of others,¹¹ but for our purposes here, chief among these is the issue of access to the production and texts of the past of television for women. Arising from our broader research agenda and preliminary research, then, the question "Is archiving a feminist issue?" has loomed large both as an initial finding and as a methodological and theoretical problematic. We want to argue here that archiving is a feminist issue; and in asking what the impact of archiving policies will be on the future of television studies and on feminist historical scholarship in particular, that it is indeed perhaps more pressing a question now than ever before.

Access and the Archives. The question and problem of access to the historical texts of British television (both production documentation and programming), and particularly women's television, brings into focus the question of the relative attractions of the ordinary and the exceptional, the everyday and the newsworthy, to the television archivist. In particular, our question "Is archiving a feminist issue?" draws attention to the ways in which archiving practices affect and produce the kinds of histories that can be written. Access to research materials is a major

shaping factor in the kinds of television histories that are undertaken; there are institutional gaps in the audiovisual archive, and therefore in national histories of television (in the sense that access to all early television is limited, and access to early commercial programming is practically nonexistent to researchers in the UK). We propose that there are also gendered gaps in the archives and histories of British television.¹²

In the UK, the BBC's Written Archive Centre at Caversham, Reading, is a wonderful resource for the television historian; it offers incomparable access to production and personnel files that provide real insight into the decisions and processes involved in all aspects of television production and planning. The researcher can look, for instance, at studio plans, shooting scripts, correspondence between personnel, and planning and production documentation from the earliest days of BBC radio and television broadcasting. The BBC archive can therefore be an invaluable resource for the feminist historian looking, for instance, into women's creative work in the industry near the beginning of its life. Helen Malinowska, Doreen Stephens, and the male producer S. E. Reynolds in the 1940s and 1950s, were all significant in the early history of women's television. Both program and personnel files relating to these figures that are held at Caversham need to be explored as a matter of priority in reconsidering a history of television for women. However, researching these files will provide only a partial history of this period of program making for women in Britain, as no comparable archive for independent, commercial television (ITV) exists.¹³ At the start of this research project, we have a (largely untested) intuition that ITV programs and program makers played a pivotal role in the establishment and redefinition of television programming for women, particularly given the assumption that, given its need to supply viewers to advertisers, ITV was the more populist program provider, with a keener eye on audience demographics. However, the gaps in the paper and audiovisual archives make testing this "hunch" a great challenge.

Archiving issues became increasingly visible during the preliminary research for our project to explore the production, text, and reception history of television for women in Britain, as we discovered how little of ITV's programming in the 1940s and 1950s has survived. While listings guides appear to be full of what program makers and schedulers defined as "programming for women," frequently occupying a repeated midafternoon slot across the entire schedule, the archives tell a different story. It is the case, as Steve Bryant has shown in his monograph *The Television Heritage: Television Archiving Now and in an Uncertain Future*, that little early television has been preserved and remains available to view.¹⁴ Most early television was produced live, and only those television events of international or national importance were recorded and archived (for example, the first night of broadcast in 1936, and the Coronation in 1953). "Everyday" television addressed to a female audience was not high on the preservation agenda.

Programming addressed to women, particularly those daytime magazine shows that have constituted such a significant part of the address to a female audience,

has been seen as lacking in cultural value, and was therefore even less likely to have been recorded and preserved than other forms or genres, such as drama and “serious” current affairs. Part of our broader project then, as television historians, is to encourage the gatekeepers of television history to value women’s programming more highly on preservation and access agendas. As the television historian Jason Jacobs has argued, “the danger is that television history gets reconstructed around what survives for viewing rather than what was actually shown.”¹⁵ Opening up access to what little programming still exists is therefore of great importance in allowing scholars to reconstruct more complete histories of British television.

In beginning to research the history of British women’s television, it is immediately apparent that very few entire programs appear to have survived, with only those segments deemed socially or politically significant, or those shot on film (particularly outside broadcasts), having been preserved. Consequently, looking at these fragments alone may produce an equally skewed or uncharacteristic picture of programming for women in that period. From our initial investigations into what early programming for women survives, we were able to view a few short extracts from early British afternoon magazine programming for women, such as *For the Housewife* (1947–50), the umbrella magazine program *Mainly for Women* (1955–59) and *Leisure and Pleasure* (1951–55). One of the few segments still available to view from the BBC’s *Leisure and Pleasure*, from July 13, 1954, shows Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, an Indian diplomat and politician, sister of Indian Prime Minister Nehru, and the first female president of the United Nations General Assembly, being interviewed on *Leisure and Pleasure* alongside features on murals, the silver jubilee of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and a Women’s Voluntary Service prisoners’ aid service. The title *Leisure and Pleasure* is initially suggestive of dominant contemporary discourses of 1950s femininity in which the domestic and consumption are central. However, what the surviving extracts of this program suggest is, rather, a much wider interest in politics, international affairs, and women’s role in public life alongside the more expected program segments on domestic affairs; for example, other editions of this program were far more strongly focused on more recognizable “domestic” feminine concerns, such as “Make the best of yourself: Muriel Pemberton and Morys Wenger advise on choosing a new outfit and hair style” (May 25, 1954), or “Summer Hobby: Rex Graham and Max Walters on collecting wild flowers” (May 11, 1954). The kind of material that does still exist to view may challenge the ways in which we imagine 1950s women’s television, or, indeed, how we critically reconstruct femininity in the 1950s, focusing as it does on questions of women’s roles in public life, and addressing the viewer as citizen rather than consumer. While techniques have been developed in some areas of television studies to reconstruct “lost” programming using the written archive (in the field of historical drama studies and particularly in the work of Jason Jacobs),¹⁶ it is only through being allowed access to the programming that does survive and analyzing this alongside archival documentation such as production files, publicity materials, correspondence, listings guides,

broadcast logs, and so on, that we can begin to understand the programs as they appeared within their contemporary televisual landscape. This combination of approaches to women's programming also provides a counterbalance to those institutional accounts of British television history from the top down, which tend to produce a "great man" approach to history.

Conclusion: Archiving the Ordinary. Throughout the history of television, it seems, there has been a lack of concern with preserving television's "ordinary" programming culture, which tends to coincide with those programs produced for and watched by female audiences; daytime factual entertainment programming such as that discussed above is a key instance. Missing are the many segments on cooking, fashion, shopping, and child care, which may have constituted a significant part of the way in which television has operated as a "technology of gender."¹⁷ Looking at archival material to reconstruct lost texts, and where possible, speaking to people about their experiences working in and watching television, it is possible to unearth a very rich seam of creative work by women that attended to women's interests and aimed to address, educate, and entertain them in very particular, historically specific ways (for instance by providing a source of domestic reeducation after World War II, and by offering a direct address to the women working outside the home in the postwar period).¹⁸ It is possible, through shooting scripts, floor plans, and properties lists, to critically reconstruct some of the women's programming that has not been preserved, and to bring back to life the sets, representations, textuality, and address of early women's television. In this way, television historiography can reveal the relationships between these shows and contemporary women's programming.

In the UK context, the British Film Institute's recent decision to downscale the recording and preservation of television threatens to put women's television culture at risk once again. If an emphasis is placed, within archival policy, on preserving the out-of-the-ordinary, the critically acclaimed, and the internationally significant, then those everyday moments (particularly from the daytime schedules) that lie at the heart of programming explicitly produced for a female viewership will be lost to future historians. Alongside the television historian Michele Hilmes,¹⁹ we contend that archiving is a feminist issue, given the relative absence of texts traditionally coded as feminine from publicly accessible archives, and that this is an absence that needs to be addressed by and for future archivists and historians.

Notes

1. See John Corner, "Finding Data, Reading Patterns, Telling Stories: Issues in the Historiography of Television," *Media, Culture & Society* 25, no. 2 (2003): 273–80; Jason Jacobs, "Television and History: Investigating the Past," in *Tele-Visions: An Introduction to Studying Television*, ed. Glen Creeber (London: BFI Publishing, 2006), 107–15; Stephen Lacey, "Some Thoughts on Television History and Historiography: A British Perspective," *Critical Studies in Television* 1, no. 1 (2006): 3–12; Helen Wheatley,

- Re-viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007) for accounts of this rise in British historical research.
2. Particularly through the development of electronic and remotely accessible archives and databases.
 3. At the time of this writing, the National Film and Television Archive in the UK is currently undergoing a radical change in recording and preservation policy in order to reduce its number of new acquisitions per year.
 4. Corner, "Finding Data, Reading Patterns, Telling Stories," 275; see also Gill Branston, "Histories of British Television," in *The Television Studies Book*, ed. Christine Geraghty and David Lusted (London: Arnold, 1998), 51–62, and Wheatley, *Re-viewing Television History*.
 5. M. A. Compton, "The Archivist, the Scholar, and Access to Historic Television Materials," *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 3 (2007): 131.
 6. With Helen Wood, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK.
 7. See, for example, Joy Leman, "Programmes for Women in 1950s British Television," in *Boxed In: Women and Television*, ed. Helen Baehr and Gillian Dyer (London: Pandora, 1987), 73–95; Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, eds., *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Mary-Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinowitz, eds., *Television, History, and American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Janet Thumim, *Inventing Television Culture: Men, Women and the Box* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Michele Hilmes, "Front Line Family: 'Women's Culture' Comes to the BBC," *Media, Culture and Society* 29, no. 5 (2007): 5–29; Rachel Moseley, "Reconstructing Early Television for Women in Britain: Marguerite Patten, Television Cookery and Post-War British Femininity," in *Home Fires: Domesticity, Feminism and Popular Culture*, ed. Joanne Hollows and Stacey Gillis (London: Routledge, 2008).
 8. See, for example, C. O'Dell, *Women Pioneers in Television: Biographies of 15 Industry Leaders* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1997); Julia Hallam, *Lynda LaPlante* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Julia Hallam, "Independent Women: Creating TV Drama in the UK in the 1990s," *Critical Studies in Television* 2, no. 1 (2006): 18–34.
 9. For example, Andrea Press, *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class and Generation in the American Television Experience* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), and Julia Hallam, "Remembering *Butterflies*: The Comic Art of Household," in *Popular Television Drama: Critical Perspectives*, ed. J. Bignell and S. Lacey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 34–50.
 10. Corner, "Finding Data, Reading Patterns, Telling Stories," 273–80; Jacobs, "Television and History: Investigating the Past," 107–15; Wheatley, *Re-viewing Television History*.
 11. Tim O'Sullivan, "Television Memories and Cultures of Viewing, 1950–1965," in *Popular Television in Britain: Studies in Cultural History*, ed. John Corner (London: BFI Publishing, 1991), 159–81, and "Researching the Viewing Culture: Television and the Home, 1945–1960," in Wheatley, *Re-viewing Television History*, 159–69; Hallam, "Remembering *Butterflies*"; Henrik Örnebring, "Writing the History of Television Audiences: The Coronation in the Mass-Observation Archive," in Wheatley, *Re-viewing Television History*, 170–83.
 12. Janet Thumim's research, presented in *Inventing Television Culture: Men, Women and the Box* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), has been significant in addressing this gap, and was achieved despite the lack of archived programming, using institutional documentation and the *Radio Times* and *TV Times* listings magazines.

13. With the exception of Granada, none of the commercial companies producing television in this period are still in existence. Their paper archives have been either destroyed or subsumed into larger archives that are not accessible to researchers. See Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock, *ITV Cultures: Independent Television over Fifty Years* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), for a discussion of this problem.
14. Steve Bryant, *The Television Heritage: Television Archiving Now and in an Uncertain Future* (London: BFI, 1989).
15. Jacobs, "Television and History: Investigating the Past," 112.
16. Jason Jacobs, *The Intimate Screen: Early British Television Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
17. Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1987).
18. Moseley, "Reconstructing Early Television for Women in Britain."
19. Michele Hilmes, ed., *The Television History Book* (London: BFI, 2003), vii.

Television Studies Goes Digital



by James Bennett

Lynn Spigel's essay in the 2005 *In Focus* on the Place of Television Studies in *Cinema Journal* asks, "What is to be gained from studying TV under the rubric of new media?"¹ This paper takes this question as its central concern, by thinking about changing ontologies of television: from the ideological "liveness" of flow to the emergence of "real-time" in database structures of digital television. Studies of television as new media are increasingly prevalent in U.S. scholarship, as nine panels or workshops addressing this theme took place at the SCMS annual conference in 2007; but the issue remains underexplored in the UK. This is particularly problematic given, as Charlotte Brunson argues here, the peculiar heritage of UK television studies with its entwined interest in the texts of television and the role of public service broadcasting. Where there has been engagement with the future of television, scholars have tended to privilege one site or the other, with entries such as Matt Hills and Cathy Johnson's in *New Review of Film & Television Studies* exemplifying an interest in textualities, while work by scholars such as Richard Collins and Patrick Barwise have used the switch to digitalization to launch renewed attacks on the BBC (advocating free-market approaches to television regulation).² Insofar as these two distinct areas of scholarship do converge, there is an interest in the way the experience of television is increasingly removed from the linear flow of broadcasting, privileging viewer choice to more or less degrees. In treating television as new media, I suggest that the twin concerns Brunson outlines can ground an approach to the study of digital television that draws on new media studies and also pays attention to the specificities of television as a cultural form.

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