Introduction: Early Television Historiographies

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This issue of *Journal of E-Media Studies* features a set of new works on the history of early television. Rather than defining "early television" strictly chronologically, the issue takes a page from the book of early cinema studies and considers "early" as the period in television history that preceded the establishment, codification, and standardization of what became the dominant media practices of broadcast television. Hence, what this issue seeks to explore are the initial forms and historical transformations of a range of television technologies, industrial formations, programming strategies, and relationships to television audiences and to other cultural institutions.

Traditionally, historiography of early television occupied a fairly marginal place in television studies. Since the establishment of television studies as an academic field, television scholars have been prominently concerned with the notion of television as a form of mass media and with methodologies of social sciences and cultural studies. Consequently, they focused on questions regarding televisual texts and their interpretation, programming flow, audiences, and media effects. As a result, most literature on the history of television takes as its starting point the beginning of the network era, and rarely engages in cogent discussions about the origins of the medium or practices and procedures that predated the inauguration of regular television services. That is not to say, of course, that there have not been any important exceptions to this tendency. Suffice it to mention scholars such as William Boddy, Lynn Spigel, Anna McCarthy, Mark Williams, and William Uricchio, who had written extensively on television's earliest days.[1] Yet, a great deal of the history of early television is documented not in works of television studies per se, but rather in studies of the technological history of television and on the history of related individuals and institutions.[2] Such

studies offer a wealth of invaluable information, but are often written outside the critical and cultural discourses that guide television studies, and are still too infrequently tapped into by academic television scholarship.

The recent years, happily, saw an increase in scholarly activity dedicated to early television history. This is not the place for a conclusive list, but it is worth mentioning, for example, Philip Sewell's 2014 book *Television in the Age of Radio*, which offers an in-depth consideration of the cultural formation of the understanding and aspirations for television before the network era; a recent volume of *View: Journal of European Television History and Culture*, edited by Andreas Fickers and Anne-Katrin Weber and dedicated to media-archaeological perspectives on the multiple pasts of television; Alfonso Puyal's highly original Spanish book *Arte y radiovisión*, which traces the artistic avant-garde's engagement with early televisual media; and the French anthology *La télévision du téléphonoscope à Youtube*, edited by Mireille Berton and Anne-Katrin Weber, which presents historical engagements with television that encompass over a century of televisual formulation and experimentations.[3] In addition, two volumes on the subject are forthcoming: Mark Williams's *Remote Possibilities: A History of Early Television in Los Angeles* and a collection of papers from the 2015 conference at the Cinémathèque québécoise on art and television in the black-and-white era.

Overall, the current moment proves to be a particularly stimulating one for the study of early television history, in more than one way. The present thorough transformation—or even revolution, as Amanda Lotz suggests—in almost every aspect of television, from technology and aesthetics to programming and business models, opens up opportunities for fresh revisionist interrogations of previously dominant media practices and their place in the ongoing history of transformations of the televisual.[4] In addition, novel methodological challenges posed by media-archaeological approaches, which focus on materiality, intermedial junctures, imaginary media, and the complex relations between "new" and "old" media, provide new opportunities to excavate early moments in the history of television. Likewise, the recent boom in writings in the field of sound studies has further contributed to the expansion and sharpening of the tools available for examining television history.

The contributions to this volume take different perspectives as they offer new examinations of televisual

industrial and technological standards and of television's place among other media cultural institutions. In the article that opens this volume, Luke Stadel examines radio's influence on the development of sound norms for television, making a compelling case against the simplified conception of television as "radio with images." Stadel demonstrates how the study of human sense perception informed the technological design of television, particularly though an examination of early 1940s NTSC hearings that codified noise as part of the standardized aesthetics of American television. In this light, Stadel argues that it is the notion of noise, and not of flow, that marks radio's most prominent influence on television.

Drawing on extensive research of archival documents, Deborah Jaramillo's article about the history of the Television Broadcasters Association (TBA) narrates the collision of old and new media through the lens of the trade associations. As Jaramillo shows, during that period of planning and debates in the 1940s and early 1950s, the TBA advocated the launch of commercial television, whereas the National Association of Broadcasters—the body most often considered in television history as the inevitable home of the American industry—was rather invested in radio. Ultimately, the history of the TBA also brings to light the centrality of broadcasting stations and the associations that represented their interests in the development of the American television industry.

In his study of an early ambitious experiment with the use of television for bringing modern art to the public, David Rynell Åhlén traces the history of *Multikonst* (Multi Art), a project that consisted of 100 identical exhibitions that opened simultaneously across Sweden in 1967 and was accompanied by televised components. Åhlén's article discusses the specific cultural and historical conceptions of the possibilities of television that allowed for this intersection of modern art and mass media, and argues that *Multikonst* may best understood as an artistic "media event," following Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan's notion of the unifying and transformative potential of live television.

The articles section is followed by a special feature, an international annotated database of cinematic representations of television before 1939, compiled by Richard Koszarski and myself. In 1998, Koszarski published his pioneering article "Coming Next Week: Images of Television in Pre-War Motion Pictures ," where he surveyed cinematic representations of television before the broadcast

era.[5] The database in the present volume updates and extends the survey. It contains filmographic information about over 100 films made between 1908 and 1939, as well as illustrations, links to online versions of the films (where those exist), and primary source materials that are made available by the Media History Digital Library. The early fictional depictions of television offer yet a new historiographic resource, as they provide evidence of the technological imaginary of television and of the ways in which it was anticipated before the public experienced it firsthand. As Koszarski notes in his introduction to the database, the films listed in it "were produced in response to changes in the popular discourse, not only in terms of how many such films were being produced, but in what aspect of television they chose to focus on." We invite readers to contribute more information to this work-in-progress through the comments function on the database's webpage.

The conversations section of this volume includes two interviews. In the first, prominent communications scholar Elihu Katz discusses his work both as an academic in the field of television studies and as founding director of Israeli television, and reviews the current state of public broadcasting and media events. The second interview in this issue is with Steve McVoy, founder and president of the Early Television Museum, an extraordinary institution dedicated to the collection and exhibition of early television technologies.

Rather than closing my introduction of this special issue by delineating the common denominator of the various contributions, let me instead stress the diversity of perspectives and methodologies that inform the issue. It is through a varied range of lines of historical inquiry—which involve questions of aesthetics, taste, and mass culture, technological design, economic and industrial formation, fictional depictions of possible future media, conceptions of public service, and the preservation of television's material culture—that this issue of *Journal of E-Media Studies* demonstrates that early television is not merely a prehistory of the so-called perfected mass medium. It is, conversely, a fascinatingly complex period of the medium's social, cultural, and material history, one that saw not only the formation of the dominant traits of 20th-century television but also numerous other alternatives and unrealized possibilities.

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Endnotes

[1] William Boddy, *Fifties Television* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1992); Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for Television* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992); Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001); Mark Williams, "On sauve un enfant: la télévision au seuil du réel" ("A Child Is Being Rescued: Television at the Threshold of the Real") in *Télévision: le moment expérimental*, edited by Gilles Delevaud and Denis Maréchal (Paris: INA Éditions Apogée, 2011), 202–13; and William Uricchio, "Television, Film, and the Struggle for Media Identity," *Film History* 10.2 (1998): 118–27. See also these two special issues: "U.S. Regional and Non-Network Television History," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 16:3/4 (1999), edited by Mark Williams; and "The History Of German Television 1935–1944," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 10.2 (1990), edited by William Uricchio.

[2] Albert Abramson, *The History of Television, 1880 to 1941* (London: McFarlend, 1987); George Shiers, *Early Television: A Bibliographic Guide to 1940* (New York: Garland, 1997); R. W. Burns, *Television: An International History of the Formative Years* (London: Institution of Electrical Engineers, 1998); Russell W. Burns, *John Logie Baird: Television Pioneer* (London: Institution of Engineering and Technology, 2000); and Jeff Kisseloff, *The Box: An Oral History of Television, 1929–1961* (New York: Viking, 1995).

[3] Philip W. Sewell, *Television in the Age of Radio: Modernity, Imagination, and the Making of a Medium* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2014); *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 4.7 (Sept. 2015); Alfonso Puyal, *Arte y radiovisión: Experiencias de los movimientos históricos de vanguardia con la televisión* (Madrid: Editorial Complutense, 2009); Mireille Berton and Anne-Katrin Weber, eds., *La télévision du téléphonoscope à Youtube: Pour une archéologie de l'audiovision* (Lausanne: Antipodes, 2009). http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jacc.12396.

[4] Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*

(New York: New York UP, 2007).

[5] Richard Koszarski, "Coming Next Week: Images of Television in Pre-War Motion Pictures," *Film History* 10.2 (1998): 128–40.