

Communication for the Hell of It: The Triviality of U.S. Broadcasting History

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In this article I review the contours and trajectory of U.S. broadcasting historiography. I argue that a basic problem with some of what would be called serious U.S. broadcasting history is simply that it is politically timid and intellectually uninteresting and unimportant; it tends to be trivial. The recent surge in serious archival broadcasting history has produced some very good work, but there remains much work to be done. I argue that the infatuation with postmodernism has impeded the development of broadcasting history. I urge U.S. broadcasting historians to become more rigorous in their scholarship and to take issues of political economy more seriously. Taking political economy seriously means two things. First, it means broadcasting history needs to deal seriously with issues of ownership, subsidy, and control. I believe this is true even for broadcasting histories that are concerned primarily with programs and audiences. Second, it means locating broadcasting history in the context of the broader social relations of U.S. society. In particular, all broadcasting history must address the role and implications of the market for the nature of U.S. broadcasting, and for broadcasting's contribution to society at large. This is the central issue for the field.

This criticism might suggest that I approve only of scholarship with left-wing sensibilities, but that is not necessarily the case. I am asking that intellectuals fulfill the mandate set out in Philosophy of Science 101: The goal of scholars should be to make a difference, to understand the world so as to change it; to be committed to democratic values; to tell the truth and let the chips fall where they may, without fear of the consequences or conflict with the powers-that-be.

I am really making two basic criticisms in this essay. On one hand, I am calling for a degree of scholarly rigor that should be politically nonsecular. I do not believe that one need hold my political assumptions or values to write first-rate broadcasting history. And, as will become apparent, I do not believe that adherence to left-wing political views absolves the scholar of any need for evidence, logic, or integrity. At the same time, however, I do believe that first-rate broadcasting history must deal directly with issues of industry ownership, control, and subsidy as well as the relationship of broadcasting to various sectors of society. I also believe that any effort to locate broadcasting in a social context has to deal in one form or another with the profit-driven capitalist nature of U.S. society. Although these "political economic" issues need not be the province of the left, they tend to be that way. People content with the existing broadcast system and/or existing set of social relations are simply

less interested in examining them critically. And to the extent that is the case, in my view they are less likely to produce first-rate broadcasting history.

I base my analysis on both the published monographs in U.S. broadcasting history as well as my sense of the field's trajectory, developed through attending conferences, reviewing journal articles, and dealing with young scholars. I shall avoid "naming names" as I go about my criticism to the best I am able. Whatever benefits are generated by specifically criticizing authors are outweighed by the problem of reducing the discussion to an evaluation of a few specific titles. Most of my criticism deals with a few core problems that I think are generally identifiable and not the province of one or two authors. If they are not identifiable to the reader, then I gratefully can be dismissed as an alarmist. Let there be no mistake that, in my view, there is superb new material being produced in U.S. broadcasting history; regardless of the problems, I know that more is on the way. My goal in this article is to assist that process.

The historical legacy of U.S. broadcasting history is singularly unimpressive. I visited the office of a friend who is a film historian and I was struck by the immense quantity of books published on the subject, often by the finest university presses. In the case of U.S. broadcasting, the primary work of note prior to the 1980s was Erik Barnouw's broadcasting history trilogy published in the 1960s and early 1970s. As superb an introduction as Barnouw's work provided, it was just that, an introduction to the field, opening the door for further inquiry. It posed as many questions as it answered. And even Barnouw's work was not held in the same regard as Asa Briggs's historical series on British broadcasting. In the late 1970s to even broach broadcasting history at a history conference of this caliber was to invite derision. Radio and television were the toy department of life; serious scholars need not apply.

Indeed, then, one might ask why broadcasting does merit closer scrutiny. The answer to that question seems trite now, but that was far from the case two decades ago. Although intellectuals as well as citizens have long known that broadcasting played an enormous role in our lives, for a long time broadcasting could be dismissed as a dependent variable, the product of broader social and economic forces. These then were what serious scholars should study. This position has wilted over the years, as it has become more common to accept that broadcasting has some agency, or what Marxists would call relative autonomy. Radio and especially television have had a distinct effect upon our journalism, culture, politics, interpersonal relations, and economy. Once that is accepted the need for historical inquiry is established. (Parenthetically, I am not certain that historians are in a position to establish the exact effect of broadcasting upon society and its institutions. Perhaps our best hope is to provide an understanding of the terms and context in which the effects take place. In this way our work can complement that of our colleagues conducting other forms of research, especially quantitative social science.) The need to examine U.S. broadcasting no longer requires a defense before historians. The striking rise of the information age, patterned globally after structures developed in U.S. commercial broadcasting, make its importance self-evident.

The question, then, is why did it take U.S. historians so long to appreciate the importance of broadcasting? To some extent this is a function of the ideological entrenchment of network-dominated, advertising-supported radio and television as the "natural" American system. As long as that premise was accepted, the study of broadcasting revolved around mostly descriptive work on regulation and programming; it dealt with superficial issues and avoided the important ones. Hence the title of my paper — "Communication for the Hell of It."

Another factor of at least equal significance has been the unequivocal rejection of broadcasting history as a legitimate discipline by U.S. university departments of history. What is striking when one examines the rosters of U.S. history departments is the thorough absence of broadcasting and even communication historians. A cynic might contend that historians have a vested interest in not evaluating media critically, since they rely upon newspaper and media sources for so much historical evidence. This is akin to the theory that you never want to see the kitchen at a restaurant where you enjoy eating. I am surprised at how historians sometimes accept journalistic sources at face value as historical evidence for their arguments. At any rate, the lack of communication and broadcasting history in history departments is a glaring omission, in my opinion, yet one that has its own self-fulfilling logic. The types of questions that produce good broadcasting and communication history simply are not being asked in departments of history, which is why they continue to provide scarcely a trickle of research in these areas. This then justifies the pooh-bahs of the field that it is an area unworthy of faculty lines and resources.

Accordingly, the preponderance of faculty, graduate students, and output in broadcasting history has come from departments of journalism, communication, and film studies, with assistance from English and American Studies. The patriarch of the field, Barnouw, was in Columbia's theatre program, not its history department. These attachments with lowly professional programs further discredit the area's legitimacy with the mainstream history profession. This weak presence of broadcasting in history departments has been a contributing factor to the field's slipshod standards. I doubt that some of the published work in broadcasting history that has come through communication and film programs could survive in the history departments on the same campuses. At least I would hope not. It has been a constant struggle for the historians working in communication departments to elevate the standards for evidence, and the struggle is still being waged.

The boom in broadcasting history took place in the 1980s, represented first by Philip Rosen's (1980) fine work, and then by the trailblazing studies of James L. Baughman (1985) and Susan J. Douglas (1987). A key factor stimulating serious research on broadcasting was the dismissal of the assumption that U.S. broadcasting was innately commercial and that this was necessarily a good thing. In short, the study of broadcasting history became concerned with the relations of production and the struggles over who would control broadcasting and for what purpose. The determinants of government regulation became central issues. What became clear was that the entire history of U.S. broadcasting had been virtually unexamined by

archival historians and that most of the reigning assumptions collapsed under scrutiny; it was a virgin forest. Moreover, there was a sense that broadcasting history only made sense when immersed in broader social and political history. Even communication scholars concerned with issues of texts and audiences, like Susan Smulyan (1994), Michele Hilmes (1990), James Schwoch (1990), and William Boddy (1990), gravitated toward research on questions of institutional structure and policy. They grasped that issues of texts and audiences were incoherent or unimportant without a political economic grounding. Broadcasting history became a serious matter, taking up British film historian Edward Buscombe's (1984) point that the challenge for broadcasting history was to tackle whether the evolution of U.S. radio and television to its present status was an inevitable process.

In the past decade there have been nearly two dozen scholarly histories of U.S. broadcasting, including several works in press as this is written. Most have been published by university presses and many of the authors have been tenured at major universities, such as Brown, Wisconsin, Northwestern, Southern California, the University of California, and Indiana, to name a few. In short, the field is booming and with the growing institutional presence the future looks even brighter. When one applies elementary criteria for the evaluation of historical scholarship to broadcasting history, the recent spate of work is less impressive. These criteria include: Does the author have an argument? Does the author support the argument with quality evidence? Is the book well organized and coherent? Do the argument and evidence flow comfortably with the organization of the book? Is the argument important and is it situated within the literature of the field? Does the argument and work address the relationship of broadcasting to broader social and political phenomena? Are the author's assumptions defensible? To what extent does the author's argument rest upon untested assumptions? There are several first-rate broadcasting histories recently published or in press that meet these criteria and we should be delighted. At the same time, there is still too much work that can barely clear any of the above hurdles.

Why is that? The question becomes doubly interesting when one considers that the modern era of broadcasting history explicitly challenged the triviality of what had preceded it. I argue that the primary factor that accounts for the flimsiness of much broadcasting history is the rise of poststructural, postmodern, and related currents in the academy, and the influence they have had upon the young scholars. If the impulse to lay bare the social relations of production in broadcasting stimulated the first wave of research, this political sentiment has become decidedly less fashionable. This has affected the nature and quality of broadcasting history in several ways. In the balance of this paper I will review several of them.

To be more specific, the most striking influence over U.S. broadcasting history has come from cultural studies. Although it is important to distinguish cultural studies from postmodernism — Julie D'Acci (1994) and Michael Curtin (1995) have shown how cultural studies can contribute to first-rate broadcasting scholarship and history — in general the postmodernist influence has come to permeate so much of cultural studies that to the untrained eye they appear nearly synonymous. The newfangled

cultural studies that has come to dominate in the United States is quite different from the wave of new left cultural studies that had an explicit concern with democratic socialist politics (McChesney, 1996). Absent now is a concern for the production of culture and the institutions that determine production. In the treatment of broadcasting, this means that studies of shows and audiences are privileged, whereas struggles over policy and institutions are considered tangential.

Indeed, some go so far as to assert that questions of policy and institutions are by definition "mainstream," whereas studies of audiences are by definition "revisionist." The net result has tended to be that cultural studies in general tends to internalize capitalist relations of cultural production and dismiss organized efforts to confront and alter those relations. Consider, for example, the work of Dennis Mazzocco (1994), that examines in detail the organization of workers in the broadcasting industry, and the efforts of the labor movement to influence the nature of U.S. radio and television from inside the networks in the 1930s and 1940s. Twenty years ago such a study would have been central to cultural studies; today it has been banished to some netherworld called political economy. By narrowing the range of legitimate inquiry so, cultural studies has effectively neutered its capacity to make a class-based, structural criticism of both broadcasting and society at large.

In the place of materialist and institutional analysis, the new cultural studies' influence on broadcasting history still puts forth a politics of sorts. There is a romanticization of the audience and its power that belies its social, political, and economic powerlessness. At some times this is defended because of the "discovery" that audiences actually enjoy some commercial programming or that they do not necessarily swallow whatever the corporate masters feed them. So what? The terms of the engagement are still the terms of the marketplace and while the audience does indeed have some leverage, establishing that it has some leverage does not mean it therefore has complete or even dominant leverage. In fact, a scholar can only fathom the degree and significance of the audience's leverage by contextualizing the audience into a political economic framework.

At other times this romanticization of the audience is defended by pointing out that this is necessary because traditional scholarship and politics — both mainstream and critical — have generalized from the white male experience, and it is in the audience that one can deal with dispossessed sectors of society. This argument strikes me as disingenuous; there is nothing about materialist or institutional analysis per se that requires it to ignore issues of gender and race and sexual preference. Nor is there any need to believe that institutional or political economic analysis can answer *all* of the complex issues that arise in the study of broadcasting history and media. But unless studies of the audience are put in the context of the general power relations of society and in the organizing logic of the media system, these studies seem to have minimal explanatory value. Without a political economic grounding, this type of work can degenerate into an apologia for the market. This is especially true for the vital work that attempts to understand the seemingly immense popularity of some commercial broadcasting programming.

Let me be candid. I do believe that the producers are the dominant force — in general — for understanding the nature of the U.S. broadcasting experience. I believe the sociological evidence points dramatically in that direction. I believe that the ruling powers in all societies know this, and as long as they control the media output, they have no particular problem with audiences decoding in a resistant fashion. They only want the audiences to remain in their place in the social pecking order. I find it bizarre that some who claim to be on the political left can ignore this, or that any honest intellectual can gloss over it. If someone wants to assert that audiences have greater influence than producers over meaning, so much so that institutional factors can be ignored, and that scholar still wants to be regarded as critical of commercial broadcasting, he or she needs to provide significant evidence to make their case. I have not seen convincing evidence to date.

This devaluation of political economy reflects a general loss of faith in the possibility of changing basic social institutions. Having assumed the invincibility of capitalism, the progressive scholar is left to identify the “gaps” within the system that the dispossessed might exploit, though for what purpose is unclear. At its worst, there is a romanticization of individual cultural consumption as somehow constituting important political activity. There develops a categorical disregard for organized political movements, arguably the only known manner to exact progressive social change. This trivialization of politics leads to a depoliticized trajectory in the scholarship that is unmistakable. The commercial basis of U.S. broadcasting ceases to be subjected to hard analysis. We see, then, a return to the triviality that had marked broadcasting history prior to the 1980s, only now encased in the hepped up jargon of postmodernism and cultural studies. We get the posture of radicalism, combined with scholarship that avoids issues of ownership and control. In effect this is warmed over mainstream scholarship with a nose ring and a mohawk.

In particular, the Achilles heel for the cultural studies approach to broadcasting history has been its flimsy criticism of the market. For more than 60 years the National Association of Broadcasters has been telling us that commercial broadcasters “give the people what they want,” due to the competitive pressures of the marketplace. Following free market ideology, the NAB argues that any government interference with the market interferes with the dictates of popular taste and is therefore undemocratic. This contention is really at the heart of any examination of U.S. broadcasting history, be it for policy, programming, or audiences. It is also the starting point for understanding the history of U.S. nonprofit broadcasting. The need to evaluate the NAB position is true not only for those who are skeptical of the market, like myself, but also for those who regard the market as a superior regulatory mechanism for a democratic society. Interestingly, as broadcasting historians show ever less interest in critically analyzing the market, they increasingly accept it as a valid indicator of popular taste.

Why is the market *not* necessarily a democratic regulatory mechanism for broadcasting? There are several fundamental reasons. First, markets are based on one-dollar, one-vote rather than one-person, one-vote. The rich have many votes and the

poor have none. This is a transparently inegalitarian regulatory mechanism. Some overlook this problem because consumption of television and radio have been nearly universal for most of their histories. These are classical universal consumption communities. Yet to the advertisers who sponsor the programming, the differences in spending power are crucial to their determinations of what type of shows to support and what type of programming to avoid. Indeed, surprisingly little of broadcasting history shows the slightest interest in the role of advertising in U.S. broadcasting's history, or even remote interest in the causes and nature of commercial advertising as such a prominent institution in modern capitalism. Insofar as broadcasting can generally be regarded as part of the advertising industry, this disinclination seems destined to undermine the ability of scholars to fully grasp the subject.

Second, markets do not give the people what they want, so much as they give the people what they want within the range of what is profitable, and in the suppliers' interests. This is often a far narrower range than the citizenry as a whole may desire. For example, in the 1930s there is considerable evidence that a significant percentage of U.S. radio listeners would have preferred a broadcasting system without commercial advertising. This option, however, was never presented to the public in the marketplace because it was not in the interest of the commercial broadcasters to do so. Moreover, commercial broadcasters as capitalist enterprises have a distinct interest in the way society is organized; this may not appear in a direct censorship of programming to suit their interests, but it means some ideas are treated more charitably than others. The history of the treatment of left-wing and radical ideas in broadcasting, film, and the media writing all largely attest to this largely implicit and sometimes explicit process. The commercial broadcasters are not value-free arbiters of market commands.

Third, markets are very good at relaying certain types of desires but not so good at relaying other types of information. One look at the global ecology points to the limitations of the market in that regard. Likewise, the commercial advertising driven market in U.S. broadcasting has had real problems in terms of providing children's, educational, cultural, journalism, and public affairs programming. In view of cultural studies preoccupation with entertainment programming, this issue rarely arises.

Indeed, when these three factors are taken together, the oft invoked metaphor of the "marketplace of ideas" takes on a wholly different complexion. The commercial marketplace of ideas has a strong bias towards conventional views and an implicit marginalization of socially dissident views. Market regulated societies tend to reinforce social inequality economically, politically, and ideologically. When pressed, defenders of the status quo will acknowledge these criticisms of the market, but they will argue that despite its flaws the market remains the best possible regulatory mechanism for human society. Any alternative to the market would only make matters worse, much worse, than they are at present. This is conservatism's ultimate trump card, and conservatism prefers that it be accepted as an article of faith. As some of the best media scholarship has shown, the marketplace of ideas works in numerous ways to see therefore that criticism of the market and discussion of alternatives are

rarely even broached, let alone pursued. That is why the scholar must combine a relentless critique of the market with an unflinching commitment to finding an alternative, more democratic, system for both communication and society as a whole. It is on these two crucial points that some broadcasting historians have dropped the ball.

For example, too much of the new broadcasting history is uninterested in broadcast journalism, arguably one of the single most important contributions of U.S. radio and television to American politics and society. By concentrating upon entertainment, the commercial basis of the industry appears far more benign, even "natural." The "cultural studies" approach tends to hold journalism in relatively low regard, which seems quite incomprehensible for a school of thought committed to popular democracy. Indeed, without a clear sense of journalism and its relationship to both broadcast media and democracy, U.S. broadcasting history loses much of its significance. To some extent this dismissal of journalism is due to postmodernism's disinterest in "traditional" politics and modernist notions of democracy; that is, the idea that an informed citizenry can organize to change the world and rationally govern their own lives.

We have an impressive body of critical research into the contemporary nature of the U.S. broadcast news, but very little that approaches the topic historically. Although broadcasters may argue that they "give the people what they want" with their entertainment, they would be reluctant to make such a claim concerning their journalism. The idea of market-driven journalism violates every canon of professional journalism. Indeed, it is in the area of journalism and public affairs that the public service function of broadcasting becomes unavoidable, even to a crass free marketeer. The nature of network news division relationships with their bosses, advertisers, and their sources needs to be exhumed. At present our understanding of the history of broadcast news is mostly descriptive and based upon memoirs and biographies (Bliss, 1991; Persico, 1988; Smith, 1990; Sperber, 1986), with one or two notable exceptions (Culbert, 1976; Steele, 1985). Nancy Bernhard (in press) has written a detailed archival history of the relationship of broadcast news to the federal government in the postwar years. What is remarkable is that this will be the first such study ever published.

Broadcasting history has also given short shrift to the subject of nonprofit and public broadcasting. The cultural studies bias tends to support the commercial broadcasting contention that public broadcasting is a paternalistic intervention into the market, of minimal interest to the masses. Scholars who purport to have serious reservations about commercial broadcasting nonetheless show no interest in the historical record of those who have attempted to provide an alternative service. Ralph Engelman (1996) has done an admirable job of piecing together an overview of the history of U.S. public broadcasting, based entirely upon secondary sources. Engelman's accomplishment is magnified when one considers how weak the primary scholarship is. If we return to Buscombe's (1984) maxim that the focus of broadcasting history should be to determine if the existing system was inevitable, the need to

carefully examine the history of nonprofit broadcasting becomes paramount. If we add to Buscombe the critical sensibility that the purpose of our scholarship is to contribute to a more democratic media system as well as a more democratic society, this oversight by broadcasting history is indefensible. Nathan Godfried's (in press) new book on labor station WCFL is a terrific corrective in this regard as is some of the new research by Elizabeth Fones-Wolf (1994) and Andrew Feldman (1996).

This disinterest in nonprofit broadcasting reflects a broader retrenchment by broadcasting history away from Buscombe's directive. For 60 years the NAB has had two contradictory explanations for the commercial basis of U.S. broadcasting. On one hand, the NAB argued that commercial broadcasting was inherent to U.S. democracy, such that, as David Sarnoff (in McChesney, 1993, p. 243) explained, "no special laws had to be passed to bring these things about." On the other hand, commercial broadcasters have also claimed that the system is the result of an informed public debate in the 1920s, when the commercial system was selected in a democratic broadcast policy free-for-all. In general, commercial broadcasters have used either of these explanations opportunistically depending upon the situation at hand. Only recently have scholars examined these claims seriously. Perhaps the most dramatic strides in broadcasting history have come in the work of Rosen (1980), Czitrom (1982), Smulyan (1994), and McChesney (1993) that provide evidence of organized, principled opposition to U.S. commercial broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s. This work rejects the notion that commercial broadcasting is innately democratic and American, and it also rejects the notion that commercial broadcasting was selected in some sort of fair debate. To the contrary, although the odds were greatly to the advantage of commercial interests, the system was installed in a corrupt manner by forces that stood to profit by it. The implications of this work suggest that the assumptions of most broadcasting histories are somewhat inaccurate or wrong. To varying degrees this work lays the foundation for continued revisionist work in the field. Even for those studies that examine the range of possible outcomes within the commercial system, this work provides a necessary contextual basis for meaningful explanations of broadcasting history.

Yet this line of inquiry has an explicitly political and materialist bent that is at odds with the thrust of postmodernism, the newfangled cultural studies, and the general conservative mood of scholarship today. Explanation is not fashionable, safe, or encouraged in the academic social sciences and humanities. "In social thought, belief in the explanatory possibility of very general 'covering laws' capable of making 'if-then' predictive statements has plummeted," the intellectual historian Morton Horwitz (1992, p. vii) noted. "The result has been a dramatic turn toward 'thick description' in which narratives and stories purport to substitute for traditional general theories." So it is in media studies that the last attempt at a general theory for U.S. commercial news media behavior, Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model, has been oft criticized by liberals, conservatives, and postmodernists, but no suitable alternative has been provided. The attempts to counter Herman and Chom-

sky with partial models have been so weak they collapse under almost any scrutiny (Herman, 1996).

Broadcasting history is not immune from this anti-explanation spirit. The clear trajectory of too much broadcasting history is to turn and run full speed from the political implications of the research. In the place of serious political analysis we get equivocation. One all too common option in the new style of research is to eschew making hard analysis and simply point out that everything is too complex to make any definitive judgments. One is reminded of C. Wright Mills's (1956, chapter 14) classic observation that scholars only delude themselves if they believe they are providing subtle and sophisticated analysis when they state reality is complex. We know the world is extremely complex — a trained chimpanzee can probably tell us that — the task of scholars is to show how it is complex and to make sense of it. Otherwise get out of the way and let someone else have a crack at it. A second route is the recurrent refrain by historians that the broadcast media are not "all-powerful," as if some scholar, somewhere, at some time, ever made such an idiotic claim. (And if some such fool could be located, who cares?)

The most common course in this regard is to present some evidence and imply a critical stance but then to suggest that it is up to the reader to draw the conclusions. Many broadcasting historians find themselves in an awkward position. On the one hand, they recognize and their work reveals that the commercial basis of broadcasting is the central determinant of its nature and logic, and they recognize that this nature is highly flawed from a democratic perspective. On the other hand, to follow through on this reasoning goes against the defeatist and depoliticized spirit of the times, and the implicit pressures in the academy to avoid radical criticism of capitalism. As a result we see many studies that reveal flaws in commercial broadcasting, but then do nothing with that observation. Some quite solid recent archival studies of U.S. broadcasting conclude incongruously with vague calls for people to "think" more seriously about the effects of commercial broadcasting. This seems akin to concluding a detailed report on tobacco-induced lung cancer and heart disease by recommending that people think about the possible side effects of cigarette smoking.

Indeed, even this equivocation may seem like hard-core politics in comparison to the nonpolitics of postmodernism. The postmodern thrust in broadcasting history is most comfortable with the notion that commercial broadcasting is pretty much innately American, if not innate to human nature, much like the NAB has been telling us all these years. The argument goes that commercial values are so deep-seated as to be almost genetically encoded in Americans; while this may be regrettable, the actual possibility of ever changing it is virtually nonexistent. This then removes the unseemly discussion of earthly politics and capitalism, and permits the scholar to concentrate upon symbolism, all-encompassing ideologies, discourses, and other esoterica. This approach gives the green light to full blown theoretical discussions that have only a tenuous connection to the actual history of U.S. broadcasting. The value of this work seems quite limited.

The postmodern, cultural studies influenced work points to a continuing problem

for broadcasting history: its laziness. Too much of broadcasting history continues to have a bare-minimum-necessary standard for evidence. There are some wonderfully rigorous and important studies — and I have mentioned some of them already — but for each of those there are several others that simply fail to meet acceptable standards for argumentation. Most of these authors have seemingly done the bare minimum of archival research necessary to get published (and tenured), rather than having done everything possible to provide the most thorough account of the subject in question. Perhaps the level of scholarly commitment is revealed by the low percentage of broadcast historians who write more than one work in the area. Prior to the middle 1980s this may have been a consequence of broadcasting history emerging in journalism, film, and communication departments. Since then, I suspect it is due to intellectual traditions that downplay the importance of evidence. At any rate, as my colleague Jim Baughman has said, too few broadcasting historians are comfortable getting dirt under their fingernails. The fact remains that there is a dearth of good archival work in U.S. broadcasting history, and this undermines our ability to make reliable generalizations. We are still very much in the early stages of writing broadcasting's history.

But we do not have much time to spare. We are in the midst of a striking communication revolution that promises to thoroughly rearrange our society and our lives. Fundamental policy decisions are being made that may determine the course of the "information highway" — its institutions, content, context, and audiences — for generations. In these debates the history of U.S. electronic communication is often pointed to, especially the history of broadcasting. What is striking is how frequently the claims about our past are erroneous and self-serving to powerful interests. In particular, the market has been elevated to sacred status, and allegiance to its mystical democratic powers is now the ante for admission to communication policy debates. In February, 1996, President Clinton signed the new Telecommunications Act into law, a law written by and for big business with minimal public participation. In 1934 when Congress passed the last great communications act, it ratified an existing commercial system and removed fundamental policy debate from the agenda for 60 years. The 1996 Telecommunications Act, by contrast, is a preemptive strike by the corporate sector to dominate the emerging digital system. We are still a ways from the crystallization of the new communication regime, and we remain in a critical juncture, where the decisions we reach may have impact for generations. Broadcasting history must step forward and play a necessary role in providing the crucial context for the current debates. This is no time for pursuit of trivia.

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