

Television: Histories from Scarcity to Abundance

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Introduction

As did television as “technology and cultural form” (Williams 1975), television historiography too changed significantly over the last decades. This chapter aims at reconstructing 5 phases of television historiography, based on three main criteria of comparison: a) the actors and motivations of those doing television history; b) the sources they did or could use; c) the questions and concepts that framed their interpretations. The combination of a chronological perspective (phase model) with the tripartite analytical framework presented above is deliberately based on the thought to historicize both the medium of television (its changing dispositifs) and to contextualize television historiography (the changing popular or scholarly interpretations of what television was or meant). This radical historization of both the means and meanings of television has the double aim of introducing the readers of this book to the long and complex history of television and to the institutional and disciplinary contexts in which television has been studied. On the one hand, historical changes in the legal, economic, political or cultural environments within which television emerged and developed shaped new questions and debates about televisions past and future, and on the other hand, new methodological approaches to and theories of television have highlighted and – simultaneously – neglected specific dimensions of the televisual dispositif, depending of the different waves of intellectual fashions within academia. As the history of television is characterized by a pre-history (1870s-1940s) that is more or less exactly as long – and certainly not less fascinating – as the history of television as a mass medium (1950s-now), the phase model I propose wants to bridge the “longue durée” of the phenomenon of television along the following phases:

		Phases of television historiography	
	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Sources</i>	<i>Questions</i>
1. phase	Identify the many origins of television	Science-fiction literature and ego-documents of television pioneers	Who invented television?
2. phase	Writing the history of television institutions	Written archives and oral traditions	Who / what shaped our television institutions?
3. phase	Understanding television culture	Participant observation & own viewing practices	What is television and why studying it?
4. phase	Recognizing and preserving television as cultural heritage	Audiovisual sources of archives and private VHS collections	How to conserve our audiovisual cultural heritage?
5. phase	Creating access to digitized television material	Online databases and DVD's	How to study television history in the age of abundance?

While this model roughly suggests a chronological structure, it asks for a certain “interpretative flexibility” (Bijker 1995) as the different phases may overlap and / or occur at different times at different places.

Before starting with the historiographical retrospective sketched above, one additional remark of a more general character has to be made. This remark concerns the surprising and somehow astonishing neglect of television as an object of historical research within the large field of contemporary history. While no handbook on the history of the twentieth century misses a strong statement on the importance of mass media for the formation and stabilization of nation states and modern societies, hardly any of those studies offers even a rough description or analysis of mass media as agents of ideological, political, cultural and social change. Although this “typical underexposure of the mass media” (Wilke 1999, 21) has been repeatedly decried (Schildt 2001), contemporary history remains characterized by the marginal treatment of television. Or, to put it bluntly: the historical importance of television is inversely proportional to the historiographical attention it has gathered so far. Except from a small community of media historians, television – despite being the leading mass medium of the second half of the twentieth century – remains shockingly absent from the agenda of contemporary history (Fickers 2012a; Hodenberg 2012). As I will argue later, this ignorance of contemporary history towards audio and audiovisual sources is certainly a result of the vocational education of historians that is still based on developing the necessary skills for the so-called source criticism based on our *written tradition*. “History beyond the text”, to quote a recent student guide to approaching “alternative sources” (Barber & Oeniston-Bird 2009), seems to pose a major challenge for general historians both in terms of analytical skills and access.

This long-lasting ignorance or at least critical distance towards television as an object of scholarly attention in history has a curious parallel within the field of what is now generally coined with the term media studies. As Michele Hilmes once put it in a nutshell, television was – and sometimes still is – the “bad object” within academia (Hilmes 2005). As the “low other” compared to the “art” of film, the mass-produced commodity of television suffered from being classified as popular culture instead of “high culture” by the established film studies community in literary departments all around the world. Somewhat ironically, Hilmes sharp attack on the elitist academic behavior of some “Ivory League” American universities towards television was published in the *Cinema Journal*. It seems as if the “low” symbolic capital of television as a topic of serious scholarly research is negatively reproduced in the lack of a highly recognized international platform for publication. While the field of cinema studies and history knows a number of journals in various international languages, television research – both historical and contemporary studies – still misses a highly acknowledged journal and is mainly published in cross-media journals, or journals of cultural studies. But this lack of a classical platform of scholarly representation for ongoing research in the field is recently been challenged by the emergence of a number of new online electronic journals.¹ According to a growing number of leading television scholars, the future of television studies and television history is a digital one – both in terms of sources and in terms of the organization of academic discourse and research (de Leeuw 2012) – and a promising one too.

But before discussing the challenges of doing television history in the “age of abundance” (Fickers 2012 b), I want to briefly sketch the different phases of television historiography. This overview doesn’t claim to be comprehensive. In fact, it mirrors the author’s limitations in terms of linguistic and competences and cultural background. This means that the geographic coverage is clearly biased with a strong focus on the European and American tradition of television historiography. Although driven by the ambition to plea for a much needed transnational perspective in media history, works on the history of television in Asia, Africa or South America could only be taken into account when they were published in English, French or Spanish. The – most likely – rich literature on television history in the many native Asian or Arab languages remains unfortunately beyond the scope of this study.

Phase 1: Visions of tele-vision and myths and legends of television inventors

The beginning of television historiography correlates with a growing interest in the possibility of transmitting (moving) pictures by telegraph in the late 19th century. The old dream of mankind to be able to „see at a distance“ received an enormous boost in the second half of the 19th century, fuelled by a popular science fiction literature such as Albert Robida’s “Le vingtième siècle” (1883). In this remarkably accurate novel, Robida sketches the technological, scientific and even social advances of the 20th century. Among the more important of his predictions were: giant-screen television sets, with multiple programmes to select from, radio, twenty-four-hours worldwide news coverage in “real time”, video telephones, and college courses given on television, shopping by telephone, rapid air transportation, fast food outlets and even genetic engineering. In a paragraph dedicated to television Robida wrote: “*Among the exceptional inventions about which the 20th century boasts, the telephonoscope can be called one of the most surprising. With the telephonoscope, one sees and hears. Dialogue and music are transmitted in the manner of a common telephone, but at the same time the scene itself appears with its lighting, its decorations, and its actors, on a crystal disc with the clarity of direct visibility. One really attends the performance with eyes and ears. The illusion is perfect and complete! [...] Thus we could – what a wonder (!) – become a witness in Paris of an event that took place a thousand miles away from Europe*”. (Robida 1883, 53-57).

In this period of expectant technological foresight and concrete literary utopias, “seeing by electricity” – the term of was first used by the American electrician W.E. Sawyer in an article published in the *Scientific American* in June 1880 – seemed no longer an exclusive object of utopian visions, but a concrete possibility.² At the end of the 19th century, a whole host of scientific experiments and technical discoveries dealt with the problem of long distance transmission of pictures. Constantin Senlecq’s “téléctroscope” (1878), George Carey’s „Telectroscope“ (1878), Alexander Graham Bell’s „Photophone“ (1880) and James Bidwell’s „Phototelegraph“ (1881) all propose technical solutions for the electrical transmission of pictures on the basis of the facsimile telegraph principle. Although we have several detailed studies on the early history of television (Abramson 1987; Burns 1998) with a strong interest in the technology, the “pre-history” of television as a mass medium offers a real treasure of largely unexplored sources, characterized by the then fluid or hybrid nature of television as a scientific, technological, and imaginary object in the making. As the bibliographical overviews by Kohntopp and Zielinski (1990), Kraeuter (1993) and Shiers (1997) show, television was part of a vivid popular and scientific discussion on the future of modern society, an object of both literary speculation and techno-scientific experimentation. This hybrid discourse of early television is a fine example of the co-construction of television as a new medium, a process characterized by the mutual interference between the symbolic imaginary inscribed into technology and the material, social and political realities framing the development and institutionalization of that same technology (Sturken et al. 2004; Morley 2007; Flichy 2007).

The early or pre-history of television does in fact offer a promising excavation site for the emerging field of media archaeology (Zielinski 2006; Berton / Weber 2009) and could serve as a historical reference point for the digital turn in (new) media studies (Turner 2012). But while media archaeologists – at least those associated with the German “Kittler-school” (Kittler 1999) – are mainly interested in an a-historical, constructivist analysis of past media practices and discourses (Parikka 2011), television historians might be more attracted by studying and contextualising another interesting genre of historical sources: the many ego-documents produced by the early “pioneers” of television technology in the late 19th and early 20th century. As outlined in the scheme provided above, the first phase of television historiography

was characterized by the search for the origins of television, often combined with a certain eagerness to identify or proclaim *the* inventor of television. Many of the international players in the field of early television technology have written autobiographical accounts or have been the object of either popular or scholarly biographies.³ What makes these works interesting for contemporary media history is that they allow for a critical reconstruction and study of the many myths and legends that ornament the popular narratives of early television. As the American broadcast historian Erik Barnouw once put it, “the process of inventing television [...] became a long-running serial drama full of twist and turns that often seemed to reach its climax only to confront us with the message ‘to be continued’” (Barnouw 1995, 1).

When looking at the international saga of the invention of film and television, one can identify several recurring episodes, topoi or patterns in the accounts given by the inventors themselves (Fickers & Kessler 2009). Referring to Hayden White, one can identify specific rhetorical styles or narrative genres, such as romantic, tragic or (melo)-dramatic stories of lonely inventors, powerful industrial players and the unrecognized genius (White 1987). In historicizing these narratives of “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawn / Ranger 1983), one discovers several recurrent patterns of narration, evidencing similar rhetorical styles and genres, but referring to unexpected geographical or national characteristics:

- first, a certain mystical transfiguration of the creative act of invention using metaphors as preferred rhetorical device to describe these moments of sudden enlightenment;
- second, a pair of two other narrative patterns either presenting the story of the clever inventor as entrepreneur who managed – mostly with the help of powerful allies – to make his invention a successful innovation, or – the other side of the coin – stories emphasizing the tragedy of the isolated genius-tinker as a modern Don Quichote, fighting against the bureaucratic mills of patent offices and the power of giant corporations and trusts;
- third, a reframing of these narratives within specific techno-political regimes, creating the discursive frame for techno-nationalist instrumentalization of the “genius” for political or ideological purposes.

Following Bryan Pfaffenberger and relating to the idea of symbolic co-construction of technology outlined above, I argue that these narrative patterns do not only characterize historical storytelling about acts of inventions and processes of innovation, but that the technological artefacts themselves implicitly have the momentum of co-shaping specific paths of technological development. The discourse of television invention is an active part of the serial drama of television as emerging medium:

“To emphasize the metaphor of drama, too, is to employ a richer metaphor than text. It is to emphasize the performative nature of technological ‘statements’ and ‘counterstatements’, which involve the creation of scenes (contexts), in which actors (designers, artefacts, and users) play out their fabricated roles with regard to a set of envisioned purposes (and before an audience), and it is also to emphasize that the discourse involved is not the argumentative and academic discourse of a text but the symbolic media of myth (in which scepticism is suspended) and ritual (in which human actions are mythically patterned in controlled social spaces.” (Pfaffenberger 1992, 286).

The three recurring narrative patterns discovered in analyzing the history of invention and innovation of television – the metaphorical description of the of the act of invention, the (melo)dramatic accounts of glory and failure in the process of innovation, and the mythical

charging of technology in techno-political regimes – perfectly demonstrate the “rhetoric of the technological sublime” (Nye 1994; Morley 2007) and underline the performative nature of technological artefacts and infrastructures (Badenoch & Fickers 2010). Instead of blaming early historical or historiographical accounts of the emergence of television for their techno-deterministic bias or their propagandistic aims, television historians could and probably should use this rich corpus of sources to study the complex process of narrative co-construction of media technologies (Sturken & Thomas 2004). In doing so, they could make a welcome contribution to a historicisation and contextualization of the rather a-historical “emerging media” discourse as propagated and practised by some media archaeologists.

Phase 2: the institutional approach to television history

While the first phase of television historiography was dominated by an interest in the technological development and pioneering actors in this field, the second phase was characterized by an interest in the structural settings in which television grew as a broadcasting institution. After television had made its entry into the mass media ensemble in the 1940s (U.S.A., GB) and became really settled in 1950s, broadcast historians started to be interested in the process of institutionalization of a new medium. Between 1966 and 1970 Eric Barnouw published his trilogy on the *History of Broadcasting in the United States*, dedicating the last volume “The image empire” to television. In a similar vein, the British historian Asa Briggs started his career as official chronicler of the BBC in 1961. Between 1961 and 1990, Briggs published a voluminous history of the BBC in five volumes, but only the last two (“Sound and Vision” (1979) and “Competition” (1990)) deal with the history of television. In Germany, Hans Bausch edited a five volume history of broadcasting in Germany from the Weimar Republic to the present in 1980. These early works mainly focused on the political, economic and legal contexts in which broadcasting – both radio and television – developed and how these context shaped specific organizational structures and influenced programme policies.

What characterizes these monumental projects is their common methodological approach towards the sources. All studies are based on extensive archival research in the various holdings of private and/or public service broadcasting institutions. As these archives were all but public service institutions at that time and not equipped to host professional historians at all, these works could only be written thanks to the help by or – as in the case of the BBC – on behalf of broadcast institutions. Without the structural alliance between the broadcasting institutions and their chroniclers, these huge projects would not have been feasible at the time. Some, like Hans Bausch, pushed the project from within a public broadcasting institution (he was director general of the SWR, the South-West Broadcasting Organisation in the Federal Republic of Germany), others, like Eric Barnouw, profited from their professional background (he was the first chief of the newly formed “Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recording Sound Division” at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.) to realize the lengthy research activities. Thanks to the “special relationships” between researchers and broadcasting institutions, these works were based on archival evidence from the otherwise hardly accessible *written sources*.

But this strategic alliance had its price too: On the one side, all books have – despite their rich documentary and contextual information – a certain institutional bias and inward-looking perspective; on the other side, they are prototypes of a history of broadcasting based on written sources, “contributing to the long and dishonorable tradition of writing about television without watching it” (Brunsdon 2008, 130). The reconstruction of the history of television (and radio) on the basis of written sources has dominated the historiography until the 1990s and still continues to be a common approach, especially with historians. While students coming from film, media or cultural studies tend to have a much more visual approach towards

television, focusing on the aesthetic, narrative or symbolic dimension of television as an audiovisual medium, historians – still today – show a certain uneasiness or reluctance when it comes to the (audio)visual analysis of television programs. The academic training of historians is still dominated by a tradition of source criticism based on written rather than audio or audiovisual sources. But while a whole bunch of auxiliary sciences of history have been successfully established to complement the critical reading of written historical sources (including paintings, blazons or other pictorial representations), a thorough analysis of the visual aesthetics, narrative structure or semiotic meaning of audiovisual sources has largely been absent from historical skill trainings in academia. Despite the existence of excellent handbooks and tutorials in this field, mainly written by and dedicated to students in film studies (Jost 1999; Steinmetz a.o. 2005; Hicketier 2007), historians reveal a certain methodological conservatism in the selection, analysis and interpretation of sources. This conservatism or traditionalism may have been founded in the scarcity of audiovisual sources at hand – magnetic tape recording for television productions only became available in the late fifties and was so costly that the tapes were often reused and dubbed – but even the television historiography beyond the “age of scarcity” (Ellis 2000; Jacobs 2000) sometimes shows a surprising distance to the audiovisual heritage of television.

Beyond such heuristic reflections, the institutional approach towards television continues to be a strong tradition within television historiography. While single-authored monographs or collective volumes on specific broadcasting institutions or television stations continue to offer valuable insights into the economic, juridical or political contexts and structural environments in which these institutional actors operate and function, there is a clear lack of information and historical studies on transnational or international institutions of television regulation, program exchange or production (formats and programs). As works by Slotten (2000) or Henrich-Franke (2006) have demonstrated, the regulation of frequencies on an international and national level has a huge impact on the technical, economic and structural potential of development of television, yet we know relatively little about the strategic negotiations in these international arenas of techno-political diplomacy. Other institutions, such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and its broadcasting branch the Comité Consultatif International de Radiocommunications (CCIR) or the eight networks of the World Broadcasting Unions (WBU)⁴ have eventually made the object of political science studies (Tomlinson 1938; Codding 1952) or juridical works (Zeller 1992) but remain largely unexplored territories of transnational media historiography so far (as exceptions see Moses 1978; Degenhardt 2002). Any future global history of television will have to deal with the complex institutional settings regulating the transnational flow of television formats and programs, framing the market of international television productions and structuring the negotiations of technical standards and infrastructural means of distribution. But this research agenda is quite alienated from mainstream television studies business which central questions and methods were introduced in the 1970s and 1980s.

Phase 3: the emergence of television studies and its impact on television historiography

The emergence of television studies as an academic field in the 1970s and 1980s had without doubt a decisive impact on the writing of television history in those decades too. As with all emerging disciplines, the beginning of television studies was characterized by a hybridity of approaches and methods originating from various other disciplines such as film studies, sociology, and literature and communication studies. As Charlotte Brunsdon has stated, this “emergent period” of television studies had ontological concerns (“what is television?”), epistemological debates on the appropriate tools and methods to study and analyze television, and a generalized conviction in the argument to legitimize the study of television within academia

(Brunsdon 2008, 129). This ambition to legitimize or promote the scholarly attention for television as “popular culture” was at the heart of another emerging discipline too: cultural studies. It is no surprise then to see that some of the main protagonists of the so-called Birmingham school of British cultural studies became prominent figures in the new field of television studies as well. In *Television. Technology and Cultural Form* (1974) Raymond Williams introduced the notion of “flow” as one of the “key-concept” of television studies (Gripsrud 1998), and the textbook *Reading Television* (1978) by John Fiske and John Hartley analyzing the signs, codes, functions, modes and audiences of television became the bible of a whole generation of television scholars in the 1980s and 1990s – at least in the Anglophone academia.

Both Williams, Fiske and Hartley were primarily interested in understanding television as a social medium, or, in other words, to understand what television does or means to those who watch it. This attention for the television viewer as an active co-producer of cultural meaning and social identity provoked a real flood of studies in the 1990s analyzing the representation of class and gender in television programs and the effect of such representations on individual or collective identity constructions. As most of these scholars were engaged in semiotic and theoretical debates on how to “decode” the meaning of television as a “text”, few of these works show a deeper interest for the historical dimension of the medium. Although Fiske and Hartley emphasized the “bardic” function of television as a mediator between cultural codes and conventions at large and their individual and creative appropriation, the historical dimension of the medium remained marginalized and seemingly without importance for a cultural understanding of the medium as an agent of individual or collective identity building.

This focus on the textual analysis of the medium within television studies has sometimes led to readings or interpretations of television somehow hard to grasp for “hard core” historians, whose main ambition is to produce historical relevance by *contextualizing* their sources and objects of study. Despite the fact that philosophers of history have – at least since the pioneering works of Wilhelm Dilthey and Johan Gustav Droysen in the late 19th century – developed an heuristic model of historical interpretation that essentially links the internal (textual) with the external (context) source critique, television historiography has suffered from a fission between those interested in the close reading of television programs as alleged essence of the medium and the chroniclers of the institutional development and broader political or economic dimension of television (Fickers 2012a). The “literary-ization” (Newcomb 2005, 110) of television as text in the 1990s has certainly helped to establish television studies as an academic field or even discipline within academia. But the focus on the contemporary meanings and effects of television – which certainly helped to legitimate the importance of television studies in a highly competitive disciplinary environment at universities and colleges – produced a certain blindness towards longer historical processes in which television as a mass medium is embedded and rooted. On the other side, the “linguistic turn” in cultural studies has produced a lot of interesting and important questions that remain to be studied from an historical perspective.

It is only in the last decade that television studies have witnessed a growing interest in the historical nature of the medium and that media historians have moved from a reconstruction of the past based on written archives to a more integral historiography of television, translated in a serious attention for the audiovisual tradition of the medium. To a certain degree, the volume *Re-Viewing Television Histories* edited by Helen Wheatley (2007) is a demonstration of this recent rapprochement between the textual and the contextual tradition in television historiography. In her introduction, Wheatley reconstructs the key approaches to television history and pleads for “a multi-methodological approach to television historiography in order to pro-

duce a more rounded, holistic version of television history” (Wheatley 2007: 8). And indeed, most of the chapters reflect the constant tension between a close reading of a specific television program as main source for the production of an historical argument and a broader embedding of this example into contexts and traditions of television production cultures, broadcasting institutions and viewing habits. This need for a combination of textual and contextual approaches in television studies and history becomes evident when looking at the research on television audiences.

The question of how to study television audiences has been – and remains – a continuous challenge for historians as they can’t use ethnographic methods such as participant observation to study their object (Lull 1990). While John Hartley or David Morley have denied the existence of “the audience” and analyzed the discursive construction of many different publics (Hartley 1999; Morley 1980 and 1992), media sociologists (Butsch 2000) or historians (Méadel 2010) have tried to use the rich empirical evidence of viewer statistics and audience reports for a critical reconstruction of “real” viewers, thereby emphasizing the need for a critical yet fruitful use of statistical evidence for historical audience research. Others, like Lu Seegers (2003), have analyzed the rich source of television magazines as mediators between public and broadcasters, or tried to make oral history interviews to catch the blurred memories of television viewers (Bourdon 2011, Sullivan 2007). While all these methods or approaches can be valid and useful depending on the specific historical questions one asks, the difficult task of reconstructing past audiences in fact requires the skilful combination of a variety of sources and perspectives. As Susan Douglas has convincingly argued: “We cannot forget the importance of triangulation, of putting together in productive, historically accurate ways all these factors: historical context, remnants of audience responses, changes in media forms and technologies, repetition and contradictions in the texts themselves, and intertextuality among texts” (Douglas 2008, 75-76).

Together with Jonathan Bignell I have tried to demonstrate the fruitfulness of a critical dialogue between textual and contextual approaches to television history based on a critical discussion of the most important key-concepts in television studies (Bignell & Fickers 2008). Whether dealing with television spheres (between private and public), television spaces (national or transnational; local or global), television institutions (commercial or public service), television audiences (active or passive), television technologies (for production, transmission or reception), television discourses (between hopes and fears), television norms (about high or low quality), television rituals (ordinary or exceptional), television politics (democratic or totalitarian), television history (old and new) or television ontologies (‘us’ versus ‘the others’), the critical dialogue between theoretical positions from various schools and traditions (from Frankfurt school to cultural studies) and historical contextualization has opened a variety of promising paths for future television research in a critical *and* historical perspective.

Phase 4: From “bad object” to national cultural heritage

The emergence of the third phase of television historiography coincided to a certain degree with the advent of what I would like to call ‘audiovisual consciousnesses’ in the 1970s and 1980s. The most important consequences of this discovery of cultural heritage as a political issue were to be found in the changed roles and responsibilities of television archives (O’Dwyer 2008; Compton 2007). The sixties and seventies witness the emergence of large national institutions for the conservation of television and other audiovisual material, such as the *National Film and Television Archive* in Great Britain (1960), the *Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv* (DRA) in Frankfurt (1962), the *Institut National de l’Audiovisuel* (INA) in Paris (1975), the *Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division* at the Library of Congress

(1978). The foundation of the *International Federation of Television Archives* (IFTA) in 1977 marks the emergence of an international network of television archives, discussing standards and best practices for the conservation and – recently – digitization of television material all over the world. In addition to that, their “Television Studies Commission”, one of the four permanent commissions of IFTA, aims at building an active link to the academic community of television historians.

The emergence of professional infrastructures for the collection and preservation of audiovisual sources (mainly radio and television productions) was a prerequisite for doing historical research in the field of television beyond the study of written archives. This combination of new research infrastructures, the emergence of television studies as an academic discipline and a public awareness of the historical value of radio and television programs as national cultural heritage also pushed the establishment of new platforms of academic networking and publication (Corner 2003). Journals like the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* and national and international associations for the ‘advancement’ of broadcast history were founded in this phase. The most active of these associations included the *International Association for Media and History* (IAMHIST), the *Vereniging Geschiedenis Beeld en Geluid* in the Netherlands, the *Comité d’Histoire de la Télévision* in France, and the *Vereinigung Rundfunk und Geschichte* in Germany, all publishing their own journals, organizing conferences and workshops and acting as pressure groups in public debates about the importance and future of our audiovisual heritage.

This change of the symbolic status of television from being the “bad object” within academia to respectable product of national cultural heritage is mirrored in the many national histories of television appearing in the 1990s and 2000s. Literally over the world – in Asia (Propper Mickiewicz 1988; Goto 1991; Kitley 2000; Chun 2007; Wen 2009), South America (Orozo Gómez 2002; Luz Hurtado 1989; Castellot de Ballin 1993; Ulanovsky, 1999), Africa (Oluyinka 2009; Dioh 2009) as well as in North America and Europe (see Fickers 2005) – national histories of television were published either as collective efforts or individual monographs, some addressing a larger public and written by journalists or former television professionals, others authored by television scholars and targeting an academic audience. As the nation has been a primary frame of historical investigation in the nineteenth and twentieth century, it is not surprising that television historians have approached their topic in a similar vein. The strong tie of media historiography with the national project has, as Jean K. Chalaby has formulated, its origins in the fact that no other media institution was more central to the modernist intent of engineering a national identity (Chalaby 2005). This intrinsic quality of television as a national institution has tempted most historians of television to analyze the medium using a more or less strict national perspective. The search for the nation in television formats, programmes, institutions, or legislation has produced a variety of excellent historical scholarship, reinforcing Benedict Anderson’s thesis of the constitutive role of the media in the creation of “imagined communities”. But, as I will argue in the last paragraph of this chapter, the national perspective needs a critical re-assessment in the light of recent transnational and comparative approaches.

The synchronous emergence of an “audiovisual consciousness” and the institutionalization of television studies and history as an academic field and discipline during the 1980s and 1990s has also given birth to a number of seminal works in television historiography who continue to exert a certain influence until today. Two sets of questions and topics have dominated these works: one cluster of studies interested in the social history of television circled around the question of how television acquired its status as the new “electronic hearth” of the home; and the second group of works was mainly interested in the question of how television developed

into the new leading medium within the existing mass media ensemble. Gabriel Thoveron's monumental dissertation *Radio et Télévision dans la vie quotidienne* (1971), Lynn Spigel's *Make Room for Television* (1992) or Thomas Steinmaurer's *Tele-Visionen* (1999) are just three examples out of many that witness of the centrality of the question of domestication within television history. On the other side, Knut Hickethier's *Das Fernsehspiel in der Bundesrepublik* (1980), Jérôme Bourdon's *La télévision sous de Gaulle* (1990), Michele Hilmes' *Hollywood and Broadcasting* (1990) or William Boddy's *Fifties Television* (1993) have studied the complex processes of the political, economic and aesthetic negotiations about the medial identity of television as a new medium. From a chronological point of view, both perspectives share an interest in what has recently been coined as the "experimental phase" (Delavaud & Maréchal 2011) of television: a phase in which the strong intermedial ties of television with cinema, radio, theatre, and the press are most visible (Fickers 2012c). As these studies in fact all deal with the emergence of television as a "new medium", they would certainly merit a renewed attention in the light of the ongoing and by trend a-historical contemporary discussions in the field of new media studies.

Phase 5: Writing television history in the age of abundance

With the digitization of large collections of audiovisual sources starting in the last decade, the field of television studies and television history has witnessed a drastic change. In playful allusion to John Ellis' categorization of the history of television into the three "ages" of scarcity, availability, and plenty (Ellis 2000), this change can be characterized by a jump from the age of scarcity into the age of abundance. While a number of legal or practical barriers made access to national audiovisual archives (if existent) an adventurous endeavour, innovations in digital and web-based technologies as well as developments in asset management and semantic coding allow for new forms of storage and retrieval and make increased access to historic television material possible for a wide range of users (Turnock 2012). Craig Robertson (2011) recently predicted an "archival turn" in television studies characterized by the opening of hitherto closed or hard to access collections of television material to a broad range of users, eventually leading to the deconstruction of master narratives written by professional television historians or scholars. Others sketch a more nuanced picture of the impact of digital technologies and infrastructures on the way television history will be done in the future (de Leeuw 2012). But it seems clear that we are facing a phase of radical change in terms of accessibility to historic audiovisual material.

For many television scholars, the advent of video tapes and receivers had opened the possibility of creating private collections of taped programs to be used for research and teaching, and with the success of DVD technology, many old television series were appearing in boxes sets, "cashing in for generational nostalgia" (Compton 2007, 131). Yet with the digital turn in archives and cultural heritage collections and the trend towards online availability, the community of television scholars is facing a new and unknown challenge: the challenge of abundance. But while the digitization of sources and their public dissemination is being praised as a democratization of access and historical knowledge production, the products of this process – digital documents or files – disrupt long evolved systems of trust and authenticity, ownership and preservation. As Roy Rosenzweig (2011) has rightly stated, re-adopting those systems to the digital environment, or inventing new ones, is more difficult than coming up with a long-lived storage mechanism. But while archivists have discussed the many technical, practical and heuristic implications of the digital turn quite extensively over the last decade, the community of professional historians remains astonishingly quite when it comes to the consequences that this shift in access and availability of sources may evoke – both in terms of practices and epistemology (Patel 2011).

The biggest challenge for the writing of television history in an age of abundance seems to be the problem of contextualization of digitized sources. Indeed, being able to consult sources online sounds like heaven for those who have experienced the fate of getting caught in the wheels of ‘real’ archives. The internet with its many video portals seems like a perfect solution to this problem: once the sources have been digitised, their online consultation is a cost-effective operation both for archives and users. Alas, the brave new world of online access is threatened by both legal restrictions and economic factors. At least in the field of audiovisual sources, copyright problems seriously hamper the enthusiasm of those trying to make their collections available. Despite some promising developments on a European level (de Leeuw 2012), national legislation still prevents the global dissemination of audiovisual content. So where does the talk about ‘abundance’ take its evidence from? Mainly from the fact that portals like *YouTube* and social media like *My Space*, *Facebook* or *Twitter* have developed into platforms for the sharing of millions of ‘private sources’, largely ignoring questions of copyright and intellectual property right. These portals offer an overwhelming number of clips of old television series, news programmes, documentaries and advertisements. Enthusiasts of ‘disintermediation’ interpret these portals as the realization of a democratic, direct, and unmediated access to the past and sociologist Mike Featherstone (2000) speculates about the emergence of a ‘new culture of memory’ in which the hierarchical control over access to cultural heritage would disappear.

Without denying the fact that the internet offers the fantastic possibility of sharing hitherto inaccessible or private sources with a potentially unlimited number of ‘users’, the question is what kind of history this unlimited access would produce? Or, in the words of Roy Rosenzweig: “Will abundance bring better or more thoughtful history?” (Rosenzweig 2011, 7). I doubt so. From the millions of sources available on the net, only a few are accompanied by the contextual information (the so-called meta-data) necessary to give a satisfactory answer to the five basic *W*’s of historical source criticism: *Who* created/produced the source (author)? *What* kind of document is it (genre and specific use of language)? *Where* was it made and distributed (dissemination and audience)? *When* was it made (date and period)? *Why* was it made (intention)? When looking at the mass of audiovisual content dealing with the history of television on *YouTube* (including complete episodes of television series, shorter fragments of all kind of genres, screenshots and montages), very few will be offering meta-data that are essential for a critical reading and interpretation of the source. While watching a rediscovered programme on *YouTube* might produce a feeling of nostalgia and bring back some cheerful memories and therefore constitute an interesting form of autobiographical remembrance, the source remains with no history beyond that personal experience. The pure availability of the source tells nothing about its historical meaning or importance. Without the contextual information of the meta-data, any source on the internet will of limited historical value to the historian. If “content is king” as Pelle Snickars formulated so aptly, “context is its crown” (Snickars 2012).

Going regional, transnational or global? Towards a “spatial turn” in television history

The five phases of television historiography as sketched in the “tour de force” above aimed at demonstrating that the historiography of television has been influenced by three interconnected contexts: first, the availability and accessibility of sources; second, the institutional and disciplinary contexts in which television research and teaching was embedded; third, the broader theoretical or conceptual frameworks dominating the intellectual debates and discussions about the ontological status of television. To historicize the complex relationship and mutual influence of these three interrelated domains is a challenging task in itself and the brief

overview presented here by no means claims to be exhaustive or comprehensive. Instead it aimed at highlighting a few dominant trends and patterns in international television historiography, such as the predominance of the nation as main geographical and cultural frame of analysis, a strong interest in the family and the domestic space in historical studies on audiences and domestication of technology, and finally an ongoing tradition of institutional approaches towards television stations, networks or organizations.

Such schematic sketches always happen at the expense of the diversity of approaches that existed and will continue to exist. The past years have seen a growing interest in and research on the transnational or global dimension of television, albeit less in a historical than contemporary perspective (Barker 1997; Collins 1998; Parks 2003 & 2005; Straubhaar 2007; Chalaby 2009). This research asks us to re-evaluate the function of television as a medium of nation-building as well in its formative as later years. Looking from a longer historical perspective one sees that the nature of television as a medium was constantly challenged by new modes of production, transmission, and reception, affecting the capacity of the medium to function as a national and/or transnational, global and/or local, private and/or public, popular and/or elite mediator of norms and values, beliefs and visions. In addition to this attention for the spatial dimension of communication (Falkheimer & Jansson 2006), television as technology and cultural form needs to be understood as part of the larger mass media landscape in order to recognize television as just one vector in the complex spectrum of daily life. As the works by Butcher (2003) and Metha (2008) on India, Rinnawi (2006) or Kraidy (2010) on Arab countries or Hong (1998) and Zhong (2010) on China demonstrate, television – especially in the age of satellite transmission (M. LeSueur 1991) – can catalyze or inhibit processes of political or cultural change; yet, at the same time, it can function as the social cement of a nation and foster collective individuation and participant isolation (Amos 2005; Keane et al. 2007).

When looking at the flows of television – for example at television formats or programs – television can at the same time stimulate cultural diversity and standardize narrative or aesthetic conventions; it can both – by the way of subtitling or dubbing – promote the other and make it feel familiar (Bielby et al. 2008). Yet at the same time, television has the power to generate and promote popular myths and metaphors that can mask the inherent contradictions of the medium. Early adverts for television as a “window on the world” pointed to the medium’s transnational possibilities while concealing the attempts to bend television to the will of the nation state. The invention of transnational programs under the label of “Eurovision” brought the nations of Europe together, but to fight musical (*Song Contest*) or physical (*Jeux Sans Frontières*) battles. Both examples demonstrate the deeply ambivalent nature of television as a cultural agent of modernization (Thompson 1995). Television history needs to take account of these phenomena if it is to understand the transnational nature of television as a medium.

In order to study the interaction and multiple interferences between actors and actants (non-human actors such as infrastructures or technologies of transmission and reception) of transnational media flows, the television historian has to identify specific arenas of their simultaneous appearance in order to be able to analyze the spatial and temporal evidence of transnational television flows in the everyday life of media users (Fickers 2011). The spatial scope of such arenas can be downscaled to very specific *places* of media production or consumption such as the studio or the home, but more hybrid and blurred *spaces* such as metropolises, border regions, or coverage zones of television satellites can also be studied as specific arenas of transnational media flows. While media theorists such as Manuel Castells (2009) or Arjun Appadurai (1996) deal with the flexible and dynamic nature between places and spaces of the

transnational mediascape in a rather associative and abstract manner, television historians will have to think about where to *locate* (transnational) actors, actants, and arenas in a physical or geographical and topological sense.

In a topological sense, flows of transnational information and communication can best be analysed using the network metaphor. In this logic, locating the flows means basically identifying the important nodes and analysing the relationship between them (Adams 2009, 85). But the historical perspective once again should question the causal relationship between a high degree of connectivity and social, economic or political relevance. This is especially visible when it comes to such hybrid spaces such as overlapping layers of coverage zones. The many attempts to either foster (by means of high power transmitter stations along the Iron Curtain) or hamper (by means of jamming) the transnational flow of broadcasting signals from West to East or East to West during the Cold War emphasize the fact that these flows cannot only or adequately be analysed by looking at nodes and links, but that one has to study the many strategies of circumvention of circulation and the many practices of subversive reception in order to pay duty to the historical complexity and spatial fragmentation of information and communication flows across ideological, geographical and physical borders (Badenoch / Fickers / Henrich-Franke 2012). In fact, the spatial approach to television history forces us to question the huge body of political sciences literature dealing with the concept of the public sphere(s). Instead of such a normative approach, transnational television history should be thinking of “accessibility” in terms of a duality of (virtual) spaces and (physical) places. In analysing the complicated nature of such dynamic “zones of convergence” (Reid 2010) where political power structures, physical reception and transmission zones, and cultural norms and values overlap and intermingle, the television historian could successfully challenge the normative and highly politicized reflection about the “public sphere” and offer a more sophisticated view on the ambiguous nature of local, regional, national, transnational and global processes of circulation and appropriation of media technologies and contents.

This leads me to a final reflection on the importance of the nation as a cultural more than political frame for a future television history. The transnational perspective should not be misinterpreted as an abandoning of the nation as important concept for the study of television history, but instead pave the way for a critical re-assessing of the nation as an analytical framework of doing media history. One can only understand processes of transnational circulation and resistance of media flows by *contextualizing* the cultures of production, the mechanisms of circulation, and the discourses of adaptation, assimilation, and appropriation (Müller 2012). In this sense, the nation and national television cultures will necessarily remain crucial parameters for our understanding of transnational media phenomena. At the same time, the transnational perspective should function as an intellectual challenge to see the familiar strange and to question some of the meta-narratives of national media historiography we have become fond of.

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¹ In contrast to cinema or film studies the field of television studies knows a number of successful online journals, such as FlowTV(<http://flowtv.org/>), Critical Studies in Television (<http://www.criticalstudiesintelevision.com/>) and the Journal of European Television History and Culture (<http://journal.euscreen.eu>).

² The Belgian historian André Lange has reassembled a rich documentation on the early scientific experiments and literary fantasies about television on his website. See <http://histv2.free.fr/> and Lange 2001.

³ In German there exist auto/biographies on August Karolus (1948), Fritz Schröter (1937), Walter Bruch (1969) and Manfred von Ardenne (1996), in France on Henri de France (1986) and René Barthélemy (Amoudry, 1997); in the U.S. we have studies on Philo T. Farnsworth (Everson 1949; Godfrey 2001) and Peter C. Goldmark (1973) and the Russian émigré Wladimir Zworykin (1954; and Abramson 1995). The Scottish television pioneer John Logie Baird made the object of no less than 12 biographies so far. For a description of this literature see Fickers (2005).

⁴ The World Broadcasting Unions (WBU) is the coordinating body for broadcasting unions who represent broadcaster networks across the globe. It was established in 1992 as a coordinating body at the international broadcasting level. It reunites the following eight institutions: the ABU (Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union), the ASBU (Arab States Broadcasting Union), the AUB (African Union of Broadcasting), the CBU (Caribbean Broadcasting Union), the EBU (European Broadcasting Union), the IAB (International Association of Broadcasting), the NABA (North American Broadcasters Association) and the OTI (Organizacion de Telecomunicaciones Iberoamericanas).