

Unboxing TV  
Avi Santo

Let me begin by saying that what is to follow will be a bit pie in the sky, and intentionally so.

When belatedly invited to be a part of this panel on the future of television studies, my first inclination was to try and channel the spirit of John Hartley, whom I was asked to replace. What would the “discipline’s” premiere provocateur say about where we ought to be headed? Well, as it turns out, I’m no telepath (I did once meet Marina Sirtis though, but she’s an empath), but I’d imagine that Hartley would likely encourage media scholars to pay more attention to what television already does well, rather than constantly berating its shortcomings or bemoaning its unachieved possibilities (many of which Sir John – if only we could Knight our own – suggests scholars simply have failed to notice that television already accomplishes). In short, Hartley cautions that in our zeal to cleanse, we too often insist on throwing the baby out with the bath water.

And, indeed, television does many things quite well. It offers, as Hartley would say, many opportunities for the negotiation of cultural citizenship central to struggles over identity politics and reformulations of political and consumer identities. But, as Hartley leaves the page, I have to say that even as I agree with many of his ideas, I am also often perplexed about where this leaves the television scholar. Should we become TV rally boys and girls? Should we retire? If the dream machine ain’t broken, what are we trying to fix? And, so the question for me -- and this echoes Lynn Spigel’s argument for this panel in some ways, but diverges from it in others -- isn’t “what is the future of television studies”, but “what is the future role of the television studies scholar”? But where Spigel seems to suggest we ought to be concerned about obsolescence, I think we ought to be doing our jobs better.

I have at other times gone on my rant about the need for media scholars to be the public intellectuals of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and was rightly taken to task for this assertion by John Hartley, who reminded me that it is the public that decides who its intellectuals ought to be, not the academy (John is only partly right; public relations intermediaries often make those decisions). In order to be granted the public’s goodwill, TV scholars need to be out in the public eye. Blogs and webzines are important spaces that allow for less formal discussions of media literacy, history, policy, technology, and practice. And I am purposely using the word “discussion,” because too often, those of us out there in cyberspace -- including myself -- use these sites as soapboxes and branding tools rather than cybercoffee house chat rooms. Of course, the digital divide is a growing, not a shrinking problem, but we are more likely to reach a larger community through Flow, MediaCommons, or any of our blogs, than through our prestige pieces published in Cinema Journal.

Beyond this, what I’d like to propose as the future for the television studies scholar is the development of an important third space. Though TV does many wonderful (and horrid) things, and we do need to be better attuned to how television already operates, we should

be doing so in order to suggest how TV might do the things it already does well, even better. Where academics have often worked alongside industry professionals in other countries, crafting and critiquing cultural policy, US media scholars have usually been on the sidelines, passing judgment. Recently, folks like Henry Jenkins and Robert McChesney, two names not often (or is it too often?) uttered in the same sentence, have taken more interventionist approaches. The former has worked to form strategic alliances with media creators in the hopes of working from within the system to offer up more progressive and communal fare; the latter has become a champion for the media reform movement as a scholar/activist (more the latter these days) seeking to raise awareness about unfair competition, hyper consumerism, and the erosion of the public in media policy. Both positions are valuable and needed. I'd like to consider a third space: Television scholars must practice what they preach.

If television could be doing a better job, we ought to be providing them with alternative models. In an era of simulation and DIY authoring options, scholars need to start experimenting with the creation of alternative television forms, content, regulations, and communities. Praxis scholarship, which simultaneously critiques and challenges the existing structure by offering alternatives, is not only a possibility, but a necessity. As educators, we have devoted our lives to the notion that media matters and critical literacy skills are important tools to teach society to wield. Well, TV literacy has taken on increased writerly dimensions, and we need to be able to show both industry and society that writing skills don't only have to be about mimicry, but also about the invention of new vocabularies. We often praise and critique alternative media forms and practices, whether they be Paper Tiger TV, Current TV, Deep Dish TV, or fan mash-ups and fan fiction. Some of us have even tried our hands at the latter, though often as a separate practices from our scholarly identities. Much as the college radio station once stood as a space that both offered job training and ideological critique, perhaps TV studies 2.0 can model new ways of imagining television that inspires and educates would-be producers and consumers (and con-ducers/pro-sumers) alike. Without being naïve as to the constraints still explicitly and implicitly in place, my question is, who better to create/model/test new television practices than the community trained to be critical of the very institutions and media forms we study?

This perhaps raises more questions than it answers, but I'm already over my word limit and at risk of having Hartley show up just to point out my mischaracterization of his work and my own fallacious assumptions. So, I'll leave it there and hope to continue this conversation in person.