

Thinking Outside the National Box: Three Key Moments

US media historians and analysts are particularly apt to consider the US situation in isolation, assuming either that television operates the same in all settings, or that where the US leads, others will follow. Or, worse, US historians fail to nominate the nation as a frame at all, implying that US television is “the” television, or that US developments are the “essential” ones. In particular, influences from outside US borders are often simply not acknowledged but appropriated and naturalized without credit. I would like to bring this tendency to the attention of current scholars and practitioners and argue for a perspective that acknowledges the role that national agendas have played in broadcasting history, and what transnational aspects they have silenced or omitted.

I want to reconsider three key moments in the history of US broadcasting, pointing to developments that shaped the industry in important ways but where a crucial transnational influence has been overlooked, in fact “written out” of accepted history. The first occurs in 1926, as the Radio Act that will shape US broadcasting’s structure over the next 80 years emerges from the freeform “chaos” of the early 20s. I argue that, in order to understand how the US system of local stations, national commercial networks, and federal regulation emerged, it is necessary to take into account the example of European public service broadcasters, themselves shaped by the runaway popular success of the Hollywood film.

The second moment occurred in the late 1950s. Television as a technology had made its debut a decade earlier, but its industry structures and program practices remained closely tied to the system developed in radio. The quiz show scandal of 1959 provided the excuse for shifting the economic system of broadcasting into its televisual form, placing the network in the key position that it would hold for the rest of broadcast television’s life. It was the advent of ITV in Britain five years earlier, however, that gave the networks the rhetorical response they needed to make this change occur.

Finally, the advent of prime time reality programs at the very end of the twentieth century paved the way for the current televisual economy that devalues writers and producers, encourages format transfer and localized performances, and has accelerated the blurring of lines between fiction and factuality that mark our current period. This too had transnational roots, having more to do with the pressures facing public service broadcasters in Europe than with any seamless evolution of US programming practices.