

The Form of Content Delivery

Grant Wythoff

It's an interesting fact of television's place among the ever-growing number of screens in our daily life that—even with the transition from analog broadcast to digital distribution, from serial formats to multiple-season story arcs—there has never ceased to be an entity that is culturally identifiable as “television.” We don't even have to touch a television set in order to “watch TV,” a practice that now encompasses a multiplicity of devices, receptive postures, temporalities, and spaces. To watch television, elegantly captured by the German verb *fernsehen* (literally “see far”), a verb for which there is no English counterpart, is today a cultural technique unmoored from the specificity of any one tool, experience, or aesthetic form.

What I would like to suggest briefly here is that, now that the medium of television has become virtualized and distributed among many different devices and systems, specific narrative formats allow television to hold together as an identifiable cultural form. In the shift from analog broadcast to digital distribution, from sets to apps, the rhetoric of “content” plays an important role in maintaining the identity of “television after TV,” to invoke

the title of Jan Olsson and Lynn Spiegel's edited collection on the topic.¹ And that means that more than ever before, theories of television must take narrative into account when asking questions of medium specificity.

Assessing these changes is difficult partly because the question of television's identity has been an unsettled one from the start. Settling on a critical framework for television remains one of the most famously slippery endeavors in media studies. Ever since the debate between Marshall McLuhan and Raymond Williams on the politics of televisual aesthetics, there has been a great divide in how the topic is approached. For McLuhan, the significance of television had to do not with its broadcast content but with the nature of its sensory effects: "the instant flow of TV imagery tends to immobilize the motor muscles of the eyes, creating sleepiness and also impeding the eye movements necessary for reading print, where the young are concerned."² For Williams, McLuhan's intensive focus on media aesthetics blinded him to the politics of broadcast content. In this way, "All media operations are in effect desocialised; they are simply physical events in an abstracted sensorium, and are distinguishable only by their variable sense-ratios."³ Williams argued that the scholar must remain attentive the politics of content.



Today, as television transitions from analog broadcast to digital distribution, it presents an especially slippery object for which these established analytical terms are constantly shifting, and in a way that neither McLuhan nor Williams could have anticipated. Take for instance an acolyte of the McLuhanite sensory experience camp, Samuel Weber. In his book *Mass Mediauras*, Weber cites the curious lack of an article preceding the word “television” in the English language. Unlike the telescope, the radio, or the computer, “television” is never qualified with “the” or “a.” One listens to the radio or works on the computer, but never watches the television. To Weber, this suggests that “while our relation to the telescope [that other tool of far-seeing] is above all to a particular kind of instrument, our relation to television confounds both apparatus and the medium in general.” That is to say, we don't primarily use the television to look at images. Rather, when one watches television, that person “looks at a certain kind of vision.”⁴

Understanding the medium as exactly what its name implies—television as “a certain kind of vision”—is a useful starting point for the multi-screen situation we find ourselves in today. But pinning down the nature of this visuality becomes very difficult in practice. Unlike cinema studies or more recent approaches to electronic literature and the digital culture, no clear paradigms or critical consensus ever emerged to tackle the distinctive specificity of television. The bibliography of television studies contains a record of evocative gestures and unresolved debates. For all its ubiquity, television remains largely unexamined in many fields, a neglect that Stanley Cavell once called a “more complete, or studied absence of interest than can be accounted for by the accidents of taste.”⁵

From postwar movie reviewers to twenty-first century media theorists, the impossibility of isolating the scope of the televisual “text” to a single unit of analysis has posed a great challenge. In coming to terms with the fact of television, a great amount of time is spent on the effort of wrapping some sort of intelligible model around the sheer pervasiveness of the medium. One intuition serves as a common ground for some of television's most canonical formulations—the paradoxical couple of closeness and ubiquity. Cavell, in the same essay, writes, “this existence is at once one of the most obvious and the most mysterious facts of contemporary life.” Weber, in a similar vein, calls it “a phenomenon that is so close to us, so ubiquitous and so powerful, that it has proved particularly resistant to thought.”

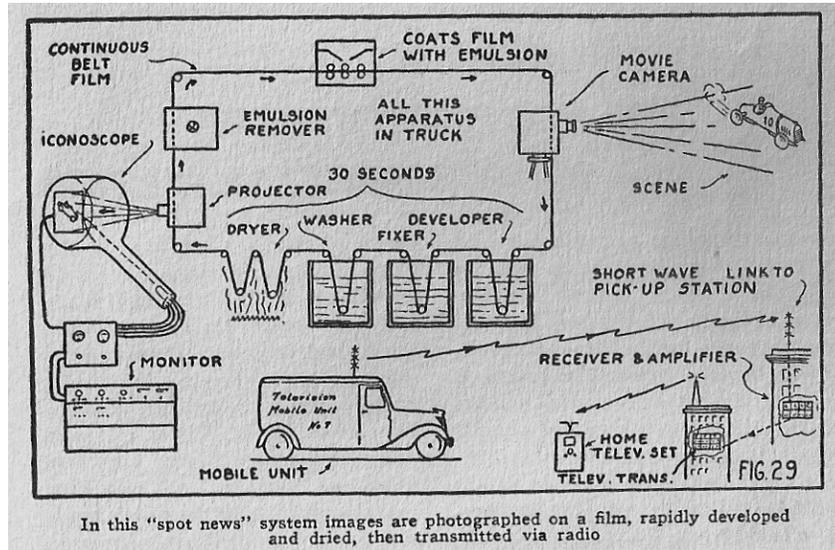


Figure 1. Image from Hugo Gernsback's instructional book *Television* (1938)

As a response to this problem, a common fallback position is to simply state that television has no attributes of its own. It is not a medium—let alone an art form—with any distinctive features. Jane Feuer, in an essay on television's liveness, writes, "Not much has been written on the aesthetics of television. One of the reasons for this becomes obvious as one sets out to correct this lack: no one is entirely sure exactly what the entity 'television' is. [...] Is television a thing-in-itself (i.e., a specific signifying practice) or is it merely a means of transmission for other processes of signification (cinema, news, 'live' events)?"⁶ If television is simply a distribution infrastructure into which we dump a variety of other social forms, we're now obviously very far from Weber's suggestion that "television" connotes a marriage of medium and apparatus into a "certain kind of vision."

Changes in the medium over the past decade haven't made it any easier to approach the experience of "televsuality" today. Television now occupies a range of practices (passively surfing live broadcasts, binge-watching DVR'd, streaming, or DVD content, collecting entire seasons via peer-to-peer networks, etc.) and technologies (the computer, flat panel displays, mobile devices, etc.). Recent announcements by traditional broadcast, premium, and cable networks that they would begin streaming their broadcast online

through subscription services independent of cable companies seems to represent the final nail in the coffin of what was being called as early as 2004 the “death of television.”⁷ Amanda Lotz even argues that television's current technological and cultural metamorphosis is “on the scale of the transition from one medium to another, as in the case of the shift from radio to television.”⁸

With the ubiquity of digital networks, the question of television's differential specificity has shifted on several fronts. To sketch the briefest of schematics: First, “broadcast,” once named for some the characteristic that distinguished television as a medium in its own right, has become “content delivery.” These distributed networks that deliver digital information at minimum bandwidth cost erase most of the contours that enabled an intelligible image of television's “constitutive heterogeneity” in the first place (a phrase used by Weber). Content delivery replaces broadcast with a model of transmission that specifies no narrative form or genre whatsoever. It reveals nothing of the temporal structure of television, the view of the world as a series of disconnected events, or what Mary Anne Doane calls “the generalized fantasy of live broadcasting.”⁹ At its smallest constituent level, content delivery exists as a neutral delivery system that can ferry any form of content whatsoever, a state that Georg Tholen calls “indifferent transmissibility as such.”¹⁰

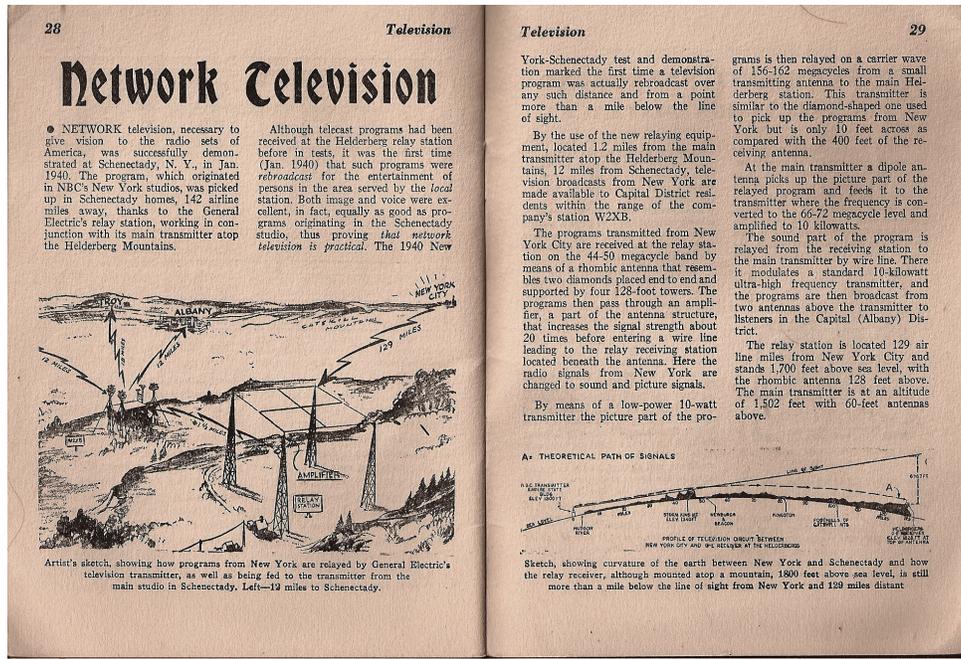


Figure 2. Image from Hugo Gernsback's instructional book *Television* (1938)

For the television industry, the problem can be encapsulated in a slippage within the word “network.” While broadcast was based on a hierarchical model of distribution—from a certain corporate network’s tower directly to the individual sets of a receiving or subscribing audience—digital content delivery networks not only redirect users to innumerable replica servers, but in some versions of multicast distribution, those users’ computers act as proxy servers themselves. Viewers become distributors, points of origin within the network, and the hierarchical structure of broadcast distribution is itself distributed. In 2008, for instance, NBC/Universal experimented with a managed peer-to-peer model of distribution that was in essence a modified version of the very BitTorrent protocols the company hoped to combat.¹¹

Second, within this ubiquitous network of content delivery, television must now be differentiated through a set of viewing practices and aesthetic criteria aligned more fully with the narrative specificity of individual formats. Increasingly, individual TV series extracted out of the broadcast flow receive more emphasis as the constitutive element of television, as opposed to the

“liveness” of the broadcast in earlier models. You may be more willing to say that you’re “watching TV” if you have the Hulu app open on your phone than you would if you’re watching a video on YouTube. If televisual content was before considered to be little more than a smorgasbord of preexisting social forms delivered in order to serve the expansion of national broadcast networks, how then might we define content today when it alone seems to bear the burden of differentiating televisuality in the context of digital networks?

“Content” used to evoke something like raw story material or fabula, that heterogenous abstraction that only becomes visible against the presence of its individual manifestations in narrative form, plot, or syuzhet. Extracting “content” from “form” allowed one to place the circulation of culture in a conceptual freeze-frame at the very moment in which a story, a proverb, or a human life “assumes transmissible form.”¹² For Walter Benjamin, to talk of a story was merely to ground the presence of “that slow piling up, one on top of the other, of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate image of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of various retellings.”¹³ Because content provided “no explanations” and was “utterly dry,” it remained the imaginary kernel that offered itself up out of individual form to be inexhaustibly crafted and transmitted anew.

It is now almost impossible to hear these echoes in the word “content.” Instead, we speak of “content owners,” “content vendors,” and the “content industry.” Under the slogan “content is king,” content has become a vital utility delivered to every home as if through a series of tubes. Content gains currency in a network environment where information begins to proliferate in an uncontrollable way. The importance of evoking the “content” of networks has nothing to do with the creation, circulation, and modification of narratives. Rather, the investment in the term lies in the control it enables over a certain structure of transmission, reception, and use.

The question is then, what has narrative form become under the regime of “content”? For Benjamin, abstract, “utterly dry” content required time to locate and explain, and in this very repetition, content was rendered no longer content but form. Content “explained” nothing for the individual

narrative, but remained the condition of its transmissibility. For content owners, on the other hand, “content” serves as an absolute boundary that is able to determine the conditions for the transmission of a proprietary material. What once named an abstract point of origin for the diffuse circulation of culture can now be localized in a single, homogenized unit.

Today, as television transitions from a hierarchical broadcast model to one of digital distribution, content stands at the center of a much wider power struggle between two diametrically opposed network discourses on the information economy: the centralized model of media conglomerates and the decentralized, distributed networks of peer-to-peer protocols and pirate communities. The transition of television into a digital environment provides a litmus test for the ability of a medium to resist disintegration under a discursive set of material conditions. And in this distribution of distributive modes, we can see the rhetoric of content flare up as both the lifeblood of an industry attempting to reinvent itself and the sign under which a whole new series of narrative forms are organized and experienced. As Michael John Starks shows, new legal frameworks for televisual content are now even serving as a regulatory model for other industries like web journalism.¹⁴

Going forward, if we are to update the notion of television as “a certain kind of vision,” I think that we should take very seriously the contemporary discourse on content as a new paradigm, and not just dismiss it as an oxymoronic misuse of narratological terms. Now that “content” contains within itself connotations of television's narrative forms as well as an attention to the mercurial nature of its material support, it opens up a space in which media studies can attend to both.

Notes

- 1 ¶ Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, eds., *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
- 2 ¶ Marshall McLuhan, "Review: Television: Technology and Cultural Form by Raymond Williams," *Technology and Culture* 19, no. 2 (January 1978): 259–61.
- 3 ¶ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Routledge, 1974), 130.
- 4 ¶ Samuel Weber, "Television: Set and Screen," in *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 115, 118.
- 5 ¶ Stanley Cavell, "The Fact of Television," *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John Hanhardt (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986), 192.
- 6 ¶ Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1983).
- 7 ¶ Early expressions of this idea include Spigel and Olsson, *Television After TV*; "The Death of Television," *Slate*, 17 Oct 2005, www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2005/10/the_death_of_television.html; "The TV is Dead. Long Live the TV," *Wired*, 6 April 2007, archive.wired.com/entertainment/hollywood/news/2007/04/tvhistory_0406; and Alexander B. Magoun, "The Digital Generation and the End of Television," in *Television: the Life Story of a Technology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007). For more on new live streaming agreements, see Steve Shannon, "Sling TV, a Live, Over-the-Top Television Service," Roku Stream Blog, 5 January 2015, blog.roku.com/blog/2015/01/05/sling-tv-a-live-over-the-top-television-service/; The Editorial Board, "Unraveling the Cable Bundle: HBO and CBS Move Toward Selling Content Directly to Consumers," *New York Times*, 21 October 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/10/22/opinion/hbo-and-cbs-move-toward-selling-content-directly-to-consumers.html.
- 8 ¶ Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 6.

- 9 [¶]Mary Anne Doane, "Information, Crisis Catastrophe," *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 227.
- 10 [¶]"The potential validity of media studies as an independent inquiry therefore depends on coming to terms with the permissiveness of digital technology regarding its use for text, image, or sound, a fact that necessitates theoretical reflections on indifferent transmissibility as such (Übertragbarkeit)." Georg Christoph Tholen, "Media Metaphorology: Irritations in the Epistemic Field of Media Studies," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 3 (June 2002): 659–72.
- 11 [¶]Paul Glazowski, "NBC Direct To Get a Reboot With Help From Pando," *Mashable* 27 February 2008, mashable.com/2008/02/27/nbc-direct-pando/.
- 12 [¶]Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, ed. and trans. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006).
- 13 [¶]Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 151.
- 14 [¶]Michael John Starks, "Digital Convergence and Content Regulation," *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 3, no. 6 (2014): 125–35, viewjournal.eu/index.php/view/article/view/103.

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