Editorial

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The ahistorical nature of academic enquiry into the media has been widely commented upon in recent years. More than a quarter of a century ago Paddy Scannell first pointed out the propensity of media and communication scholars to 'conduct debates on media institutions (their political, economic and ideological functions), and on the sphere of culture/ideology...at a theoretical pitch not solidly underpinned by detailed, empirical historical knowledge in either field' (1980, 1) A decade later James Curran could still claim that history was 'the neglected grandparent of media studies' (1991, 27), yet from the vantage point of 2007 nurtured rather than neglected appears to be a more suitable point of view.

Though questions still remain about the marginalization of media history as a distinctive field, both within history and media studies (Hampton 2005), the sheer increase in output by academics from a variety of intellectual traditions testifies towards this idea. Not only are there now a number of firmly established journals focusing on the historical study of the media, but the emergence of 'centres of media history' in Europe, America and beyond can be viewed as part of an ongoing process of academic realignment. Indeed such has been the expansion of research into this field that in 2002 Scannell could point to what he called 'second generation histories' that moved beyond analysis of the historical organisation of a particular media institution. Thus it has no longer become the norm for broadcasting history to simply be viewed through institutional prisms or the narrative of technological change, but rather as the history of a cultural form. Similarly press histories are increasingly not just about individual newspapers but the social construction of news itself.

This change of approach is in part a consequence of the changing backgrounds of those engaged in its study. Once confined to subaltern scholars in the fields of history and literary studies, a generation of media historians has now emerged, schooled in the theoretical insights offered by media and cultural studies. This is not to say, however, that the move away from traditional institutional approaches

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is always easy or indeed desirable. As John Corner notes, increased interest in the history of television has tended towards its cultural characteristics, 'the development of its generic forms, its diverse connections with the changing terms of popular reality' (2003, 273). Nonetheless, many problematics remain not least difficulties in the historical study of television aesthetics, due to the inaccessibility, in Britain at least, of a comprehensive audio-visual archive (Ibid, 276).

However, perhaps one of the most fundamental aspects of the development of media history in the last decade has been the move towards comparative accounts that attempt to cross both national boundaries and/or media forms. A recently published textbook entitled *Comparative Media History,* for example, explores the rise of seven media industries, in five countries, over a two hundred year period from the French Revolution to the present day (Chapman 2005). James Curran, in a seminal article published in 2002, outlined no less than seven different approaches, or 'competing narratives' of media history in which 'the histories of each individual medium have been linked or merged to offer general accounts of media development'(1-2). In Scandinavia similar methodological approaches can be traced back to at least 1997 when the publication of *Writing Media Histories: A Nordic View* was the result of collaboration between scholars from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden who examined whether data from their respective national media histories could be used in a more integrated manner. One of the most significant developments was the articulation by Lennart Weibull of two types of comparative approach. The first which he labelled as 'comparative descriptions' was based on simply applying the same questions to media in different countries, while the second, 'explanatory comparisons', gave 'insight into the more general patterns of historical development of media, focusing on the social forces underlying this development' (Salokangas 2002, 101). Though such an overview is beyond the parameters of this collection, this issue of *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* presents a range of articles on media history and the representation of history in the media which when taken together provide comparative perspectives across time, space and place.

The first article by Allison Cavanagh investigates the 'relationship between history and theory in the establishment of media history as a subject area.' Cavanagh argues that the historical study of the media has developed predominantly along teleological lines culminating in a 'story of the present' in which contemporary academic perspectives, especially in the study of new media, are reflected back into the study of the past in a methodologically unsound way. What emerges she argues is a 'Whigist' history in which categorisations are applied statically and uncritically across time in a profoundly problematic manner. As a corollary of this, Cavanagh offers her own perspective on how 'a more inclusive history could be developed', by retelling one of the most high profile and sensationalist cases in Victorian Journalism, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.*

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The following two pieces analyze the relationship between history, media and collective memory but in very different settings. Carolyn Kitch's article examines the growing commercialization of history through the range of historical products sold by *The New York Times*. As an 'active repackager of history' Kitch explores in detail the way in which the *Times* markets (mostly) photographs, that present a unique visual narrative of the American past, in a manner that appeals to present-day sensibilities often in a highly personalised form. What emerges is a complex interplay between history, nostalgia, journalism and advertising in which boundaries become blurred, but the stories for sale are almost always affirmations of American greatness.

In contrast Epp Lauk and Tiiu Kreegipuu's article uses historical discourse analysis to highlight the role played by the Estonian Communist press in attempting to legitimise the Soviet annexation of Estonia in June 1940. Foregrounding their work with an overview of Soviet historiography, the authors highlight the argumentation strategies employed in *Rahva Hääl /The People's Voice* - Estonia's 'local Pravda' - in the construction of what became known as the 'June Myth.' In analyzing twenty five texts that appeared in the paper between 1945 and 1960, the authors show how through manipulation, exaggeration and falsification the texts under examination portrayed the coup d'état as part of Estonia's national destiny and were a key element in the public dissemination of a new Soviet Estonian history.

The next article by Susan Bye challenges common perceptions of the 'developmental' nature of television viewing history. In a close reading of the 'key TV centred narratives' in the Sydney daily press and the magazine *The Australian Women's Weekly* during the early years of Australian television, Bye shows how in popular representations the new medium was rapidly incorporated into the everyday. In doing so she highlights the convergence of commercial interests and focuses on the role played by the TV Column in stitching 'readers into the daily business of television.'

Our final two pieces are linked by their examination of Western influences on aspects of indigenous television industries. Mirta Varela presents an overview of the first two decades of television in Argentina. Using the notion of 'peripheric modernity', she discusses whether it is possible to write a national television history in an era marked by the dominance of global and local programming. In doing so she considers the different development of mass media history in Latin America when compared with the West, and discusses how the 'late' arrival of television in Argentina resulted in the break between technology, culture and the nation.

Sharon Shahaf concludes the issue with a study of the production processes and public reception of *Krovim Krovim*, Israel's first sitcom. Drawing on archival sources

and oral history interviews Shahaf examines the programme as an 'early case of format production' stressing the tensions between the 'dissemination of a dominant Western TV cultural form, and the seemingly contradictory processes of Israeli nation-building.' In doing so she highlights the benefits of adopting a globalized outlook for both the contemporary and historical study of television and the importance of format adaption in marginal media systems.

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