"It's TV's Fault I Am This Way": Learning From Love-Hating the Media Industries

Phil Oppenheim¹

Turner Broadcasting

p.e.oppenheim [AT] gmail.com

Abstract

It's okay to be conflicted about the media industries, argues a US cable television veteran in this insider perspective. Via an idiosyncratic, autoethnographic approach that focuses on one executive's formative internal conflicts as he worked his way into and through the industry, this article advocates embracing our personal love-hate conflicts—and perhaps channeling one's inner punk rocker in the process. This approach provides a way for critics of all kinds to look at the television industry with a perspective informed by passion and contrariness. Such conflict-forward critiques might encourage students to jab at an industry that they may later decide to lobby for employment and may encourage scholars to uncover issues and investigatory sites to explore that industry professionals would just as soon ignore. Ultimately, the author argues, such critical analyses might well work their way back to industrial practitioners, who remain open to listening to the tiny punks still screaming away in the back of their brains.

Keywords: Broadcasting, Cable, Television

This essay, which suggests potential directions for students and critics of media industry studies to consider, began not as a critical analysis but as a tirade.² Neil Genzlinger, the television critic for the *New York Times*, aimed for a bit of whimsy during the height of the 2013 summer cable original series season. Recognizing that we were experiencing many good television programs at once—*too* many, really, enough to create a "surplus"—Genzlinger suggested that the federal government might need to intervene.³ What we "need," he argued, is something comparable to the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, a way to control the creative spigot so that our troughs don't overflow with stuff we're unable to consume. TV has never produced more great series, "but we can't choke them down as fast as they're being produced. We need a Television Adjustment Act of 2013."⁴ I got the joke, of course. Still, I bristled at the snarky, but ultimately industry-cheerleading, message. Genzlinger's piece stirred pent-up suspicions that I had similarly felt after attending presentations at academic media conferences heralding our current "golden age" of television and the triumph of recent "quality television." Had academics as well as journalists unwittingly joined the PR departments of the networks?

More recently, Michael Wolff, professional gadfly and columnist for *USA Today*, restored my faith in skeptical journalism with a hilariously mean-spirited, probably unfair troll targeting a handful of

network executives. He attacked them as “empty suits” whose skill sets consisted not of creating or shepherding golden-age content but instead of “managing up, hogging credit, grabbing power, terrifying staff and relentlessly managing . . . [their] own press.”⁵ The executives Wolff named all wore “the emperor’s empty suits,” but Wolff’s article suggests that the aesthetic, intellectual, and business vacuum at their core was endemic to the industry as a whole. “That’s network television!” his screed concludes, “as it has always been, and as it remains, even with just about everyone saying how passionately they are focused on reinventing the business.”⁶ My amusement at whiffing Wolff’s stink-bomb editorial was short lived, however, for within five hours I happened upon *TV Week* managing director Chuck Ross’s apologist rejoinder.⁷ According to Ross, not only was Wolff (who is himself, in the words of an anonymously cited friend, “well, an ‘empty suit,’ and . . . a rather unpleasant person”) wrong in his assessment of executives (“I have rarely interviewed a top executive who I actually thought was an empty suit”): he was also wrong about the entire industry. “The jobs are real,” Ross opines, “and these executives—like most everyone involved in network TV, from those at the studios to those at the stations to those at the networks themselves—are working their asses off trying to figure out how to put on programming that most of us want to watch and will tune in to.”⁸

Ross’s rebuff of Wolff might have made me, by proxy, feel pretty good about myself, my career, and my industry. To confessionally out myself, *I* am a TV executive. In reality, it made me once again worry about the state of industrial criticism. Believe me, I love when all kinds of critics, journalists, and academics champion and praise our programming. I am both proud of and humbly grateful for the networks’ accolades, awards, and—most gratifyingly—the viewers. But, perhaps perversely, I also revel in bare-knuckled takedowns, aggressive criticisms, and scorchingly passionate attacks on the industry. I think it makes for a healthier cultural ecosystem. And, like the best TV, it’s also fun to watch.

My fondness for diatribes aimed at my cherished vocation isn’t a function of mere pathological perversity. Coming of age in the late 1970s and early ’80s, flirting with academia in the mid-eighties, and landing in cable TV in 1989, waves of antimedia discourses shaped my sense of the media industries.

As a teenager, I may have been blissfully ignorant of Jerry Mander (and his *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, 1978), but I was painfully, repeatedly made aware of Ronny Zamora.⁹ Zamora was the fifteen-year-old Floridian who killed his eighty-three-year-old neighbor after watching too many hours of TV and one too many episodes of *Kojak* (1973–1978)—or so went his defense. As my high school teachers lectured, it was TV’s fault that Ronny was this way. (The court, of course, found otherwise, and Zamora—not the defense’s witness Telly Savalas—was found guilty.) “If you and I can be influenced to buy products by a 30-second commercial, an hour commercial for murder is going to get through to his [and your] head thousands of times,” argued the defense.¹⁰ As one might expect, anti-television hectoring by adult authority figures had the opposite of the intended effect: television’s dangerousness made it more attractive, not less.

At the same time, I was lucky enough to be the right age (sixteen), in the right place (New York), at the right time (1977); the explosion of punk played a constitutional role in my identity formation. My sense of media culture was fundamentally rooted in punk. While there was never an agreed-upon consensus of what punk aesthetics were—being oppositional, reifying its sensibilities would serve to only to kill it—one could (safety) pin together a loosely formed punk critique of mass media.

On the one hand, punks argued that television and radio were stultifying cultural industry manufacturers that churned out a homogenized culture and slathered it onto a passive, narcotized, captive audience, defusing any of its potential to provoke thought or feeling. Radio “is in the hands of such a lot of fools trying to anesthetize the way that you feel,” Elvis Costello famously [spat](#); the medium is littered with generic acts that “all sound . . . the same to me.”¹¹ Television was as bad, if not

worse, peopled with gun-toting Starskys and Kojaks who were "always on the TV / 'cause killers in America / work seven days a week."¹² All in all, radio and TV were banal and boring, prompting punks to become their own creative producers, bashing out three-chord (or fewer) anthems and DIY distribution and marketing strategies. As the Desperate Bicycles proclaimed in the title of their 1977 self-produced classic 45, ["The Medium Was Tedium"](#): if you didn't make your own culture, you were doomed to consume somebody else's mass-produced junk, the last stop in an assembly line of "just another commercial venture."¹³

On the other hand, punk's position toward mass culture wasn't simply total rejection. Punks hated television and radio in many ways because of what it had become. Punky retrofuturism helped them embrace what they thought media once was and to imagine its future promise. Punk godfathers the Velvet Underground understood that "despite all the amputations / you could just dance to a radio station," and radio-blasted rock 'n' roll could still [save your life](#).¹⁴ AM radio still had a mystical power, and "help[ed] me from being lonely late at night," especially when it was infused with "the spirit of 1956."¹⁵ The Ramones articulated the sensibility well: they fervently felt that radio was important and reclaimable, which is why "we want the airwaves, baby / if rock is gonna stay alive."¹⁶

Similarly, when punks didn't hate television, they loved it.¹⁷ Again, they directed most of their love toward retro series—whether it was by "watchin' *Get Smart* on TV," covering theme songs from sixties cartoons, or mix-mastering old sci-fi and dance-party TV shows (e.g., anything from the B-52s' first album, in 1979).¹⁸ Even contemporary shows were lovable, given enough beer. While Black Flag's embrace of pop TV was ironic in its 1981 single ["TV Party"](#), a function of boredom and stupidity more than connoisseurship ("I don't bother to use my brain anymore / There's nothing left in it"), they still managed to reveal a funny fan's view of favorite shows: "*That's Incredible! / Hill Street Blues! / Dallas!...Saturday Night Live! Monday Night Football! Dynasty! Fridays!*" Punk's oppositional aesthetics valorized trash and embraced no-budget "junk," like the [Joe Franklin Show](#) (1950–1983) in one famous example. Meanwhile, punk viewed middlebrow culture with suspicion, loathed "quality," and spurned well-packaged products that critics, teachers, and parents acknowledged as high art. My punk-inspired hatred for media culture was concomitant with my punky love for it.

By the time I actually began my career in the industry—I joined TNT during its first year, in September 1989—punk had been dead for nearly a decade,¹⁹ but a new antimedia critique had entered my landscape. The students and faculty I'd left behind in graduate school (Emory PhD dropout, 1989) started affixing a strange new sticker to their bumpers: we, the loyal listeners of NPR and readers of the *New Yorker*, were all now commanded to "kill your television." TV was still mind-rotting garbage, but now we could do something more dramatic than "eliminate" it. We could *destroy* this home invader, make like Elvis and blast it to smithereens.²⁰ Bruce Springsteen's unavoidable 1992 hit "57 Channels (and Nothin' On)" provided the movement with an anthem. He borrowed from Ant Farm's famous 1975 stunt [Media Burn](#) for his music video, which crashed a Cadillac into a flaming wall of TVs as part of a vague, impressionistic critique. Giggling pyromaniacs Beavis and Butt-head added fuel to the fire—literally—a year later. In the Plasmatics' punk video that also appropriated *Media Burn*, they expressed their love for burning stuff, thus throwing their show into the middle of debates about imitative behavior and ultimately getting the episode "banned" from the air.²¹ In 1994—the same year in which my colleagues and I launched Turner Classic Movies—TV-Free America launched as a nonprofit dedicated to consciousness-raising about our national dependence on TV. They instituted TV Turnoff Week as a way to make us aware of how addicted we really were. In part, I understood and sympathized with the middlebrow assault on television; a lot of what was on the air was junk. Yet I still loved a lot of that junk. The 1990s and 2000s TNT institutions like *MonsterVision* (1993–2000), *100% Weird!* (1993–2000), *Lunchbox TV* (1995–1999), and *Bad Movies We Love* (1993–1994) were all testimonies (along with TBS reruns of Minow-baiting²² sitcom *Gilligan's Island*, 1964–1967, among many others) that proved I was not alone. And, of course, we at the network were proud of running

great shows, movies, cable original movies, and (soon) original series. Indeed, we reached the point of bragging that we were the home of “The Good Stuff” (one of TNT’s earliest slogans).

I’m belaboring this decades-old, perhaps solipsistic industrial autobiography not to gloat over the failed efforts to euthanize my industry or to try to bring back punk (as unrevivable as my seventies-era hair or waistline, alas) but to suggest some ways for media industry students and scholars to think about their work. I hope my example proves a simple truth: it’s okay and healthy to be conflicted about the media. I’ve met many students in media programs who seem all too willing to embrace roles as sort of adjuncts to the industry, squelching criticisms of the media as a pre-professional defense strategy so as not to jeopardize their first steps on their media career ladders. As my own experiences demonstrate, self-critical reflection is not an impediment to a TV gig or career. Other students seem to ascribe semi-supernatural abilities to media executives, believing their focus to be laser-like and their strategic executions flawless as they draw eyeballs to their products and money from everyone’s wallets. While I’d admit to thinking that we’re a pretty smart bunch of folks who have extraordinary batting averages, I’d also strongly suggest that students would learn much from investigating our failed product rollouts, botched mergers, dead-end technologies, missed opportunities, and outright flops. I have been glad to see that so many scholars at so many conference panels want to talk about a newly canonical set of TV series—I love those shows too. I would, however, also love to see more conversations about series entrepreneurs, phenomena, oddball performers, atypical viewers, weird trends, industrial misreadings of shifting market dynamics, and technological and corporate initiatives that never bore fruit, as well as analyses of artifacts of *unpopular* popular culture. With apologies to legendary DJ (and punk icon) [John Peel](#), I want to hear something I haven’t heard before. Who knows: perhaps we in the culture industries can learn something about ourselves from the kind of fractured reflection such critiques will reveal to us? Might we thereby achieve an oft-imagined and rarely realized reciprocity—at arm’s length—between academe and industry?

Finally, like Chuck Ross, I’ve never met an empty suit, and all of my industrial colleagues are proud of what they do and *do* work their asses off—but it’s fine with me if you think otherwise, and say so in print and conferences. Have fun at our expense. I look forward to reading and hearing what you’ve got to say.

¹ Phil Oppenheim is Senior Vice President of Programming and Scheduling for TNT and TBS. He is responsible for overseeing programming, scheduling, and acquisition selection strategies for the two linear networks and their digital extensions. Oppenheim previously served as Vice President of Programming for TNT and TBS; prior to that, he was Vice President of Programming for TNT, working his way up from the positions of program executive, program coordinator, and *TNT Program Guide* editor. He was also instrumental in helping launch TCM and the European versions of TNT. *The opinions expressed by the article author are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of his employer.*

² The quote in the title of this article is taken from the song: Ramones, “Carbana, Not Glue,” Sire, 1977, LP.

³ Neil Genzlinger, [“A Television Adjustment Act for Viewers Who Can’t Keep Up,”](#) *New York Times*, August 19, 2013.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Michael Wolff, [“How Empty Are Television’s Suits?”](#) *USA Today*, October 7, 2013.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Chuck Ross, [“You Know That Executive the Network Just Hired? What an A-Hole!”](#) *TVWeek* (blog), October 7, 2013.

⁸ Ibid.

- ⁹ Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Quill, 1978).
- ¹⁰ B. Drummond Ayres Jr., ["Influence of TV Fails as Defense Plea,"](#) *New York Times*, October 7, 1977.
- ¹¹ Ramones, "Do You Remember Rock and Roll Radio?" *End of the Century*, Sire, 1980, 33½ rpm.
- ¹² Clash, The. "I'm So Bored with the USA," *The Clash*, CBS, 1979, 33½ rpm (single originally released in 1977).
- ¹³ Desperate Bicycles, "The Medium Was Tedium," *The Medium Was Tedium / Don't Back the Front*, Refill Records, 1977, 45 rpm.
- ¹⁴ The Velvet Underground, "Rock and Roll," *Loaded*, Warner, 1990, compact disc (originally recorded 1970).
- ¹⁵ Modern Lovers, "Roadrunner," *Modern Lovers*, Rhino/Berserkley, 1989, compact disc.
- ¹⁶ Their love also contained a threat: "Keep rock 'n' roll music alive / Mr. Programmer / I got my hammer / And I'm gonna / Smash my / Smash my / Radio." Ramones, "We Want the Airwaves," *Pleasant Dreams*, Sire, 1981, 33½ rpm.
- ¹⁷ When mass media struck back and responded to punk, its reaction was less equivocal. Phil Donahue, for instance, staged a shouting match between "punkers" and their unfairly treated moms ("Parents of Punkers," *Phil Donahue Show*, 1984). The eponymous forensics pathologist Quincy, M. E. infamously offered punk music as a murder weapon in the infamous episode "Next Stop, Nowhere" (1982). Tom Snyder mocked punk with condescending fogeyism on *The Tomorrow Show* (1973–1981, see particularly his Johnny Rotten/John Lydon interview from 1980). Officer Poncherello upstaged a gang of punkers when he broke out a rendition of "Celebration" in the finale to the 1982 *CHiPs* episode "Battle of the Bands," and Vicki Lawrence's geriatric alter ego taught a trio of female punk rockers to dress like housewives and warble like the Andrews Sisters in 1989's *Mama's Family* episode "Bubba's House Band"—both of which ran ad nauseam on (unsurprisingly, perhaps) TNT and TBS, respectively.
- ¹⁸ Ramones, "Danny Says," *End of the Century*, Sire, 1980, 33½ rpm; The Dickies, "Gigantor," *The Incredible Shrinking Dickies*, A&M, 1979, 33½ rpm.
- ¹⁹ Punk's echo boom—fueled largely by MTV—began in the late 1980s with the rise of "grunge" and crested in 1991, *The Year Punk Broke* (the name of an influential 1993 documentary). I'll leave the debate over the importance of this movement to bar arguments and Twitter fights.
- ²⁰ The Elvis-shot-at-TV myth was itself a distortion, of course. As real fans know, Elvis shot at Robert Goulet while in his Vegas hotel room; he hated the singer, not the medium. Visitors to Graceland know that TV held a special place in Elvis's heart: three side-by-side sets line one wall of his "TV Room."
- ²¹ Kristofor Brown and Mike Judge, "Scared Straight," *Beavis and Butt-head*, MTV, September 27, 1993.
- ²² Newton Minow was US Federal Communications Chairman from 1961 to 1963. Fueled by his ire over the "dictatorial power" that Minow bequeathed to the networks in the wake of his "vast wasteland" jeremiad, *Gilligan's* creator, Sherwood Schwartz famously christened the ill-fated tiny ship the *S.S. Minnow*. For more details, see Robert M. Jarvis, "Legal Tales from *Gilligan's Island*," *Santa Clara Law Review* 39.1 (1998): 185-205. Quotation from page 202.

Bibliography

Ayres, B. Drummond, Jr. "Influence of TV Fails as Defense Plea." *New York Times*, October 7, 1977.

Genzlinger, Neil. "A Surplus of Good TV? Try Depression Economics." *New York Times*, August 19, 2013.

Jarvis, Robert M. "Legal Tales from *Gilligan's Island*." *Santa Clara Law Review* 39.1 (1998): 185-205.

Ross, Chuck. "You Know That Executive the Network Just Hired? What an A-Hole!" *TV Week*, October 7, 2013.

Wolff, Michael. "How Empty Are Television's Suits?" *USA Today*, October 7, 2013.

Copyright © 2014 (Phil Oppenheim). *Media Industries* is an open-access, peer-reviewed, online academic journal. As such, we aim to participate in the open exchange of information. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial No Derivatives \(by-nc-nd\) License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). Under this license, this work is available for sharing and noncommercial distribution provided the appropriate attribution is given.