The Television The Television Mega-Text: Using Digitized Text to Study Television History

**Table of Contents**

**List of Participants**

**Narrative**

We seek a Level II Digital Humanities Advancement Grant for our project, The Television Mega-Text: Using Digitized Text to Study Television History”. In the Television Mega-Text we use digital methods to give a more complete, and, we hope, contrary account of 1950s television than the one that has been established from much of the scholarship to date. Indeed, we find that 1950s television was weird, heterogeneous, ethnically and racially diverse, full of working class characters and themes, and ideologically diverse as well. We find as allies in this argument the scholars who edited and wrote *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Mid Century Icons*, and, especially, Horace Newcomb’s chapter, “Meaningful Difference in 50s Television.”

There are three obstacles to telling the real story of 1950s television.

1) 1950s television told a very particular story about itself. Critics, writers and producers told the world that television could be a serious and even politically engaging medium, but by the middle of the decade they also claimed that because of corporate advertising pressure and a “mindless” audience, that the Golden Age of television was over. A surprising amount of television scholarship aligns itself to this narrative.

2) Much of 1950s television has been lost forever; only a fraction of television comedy or dramatic serials, let alone variety shows, cooking shows, news programs, etc., were preserved on kinescope (the practice of using a film camera to record the face of the television as a live show was being broadcast) or were recorded and stored on film from the outset.

3) Even what remains of 1950s television is enormous in terms of watching hours. To watch everything that has been preserved, from beginning to end, could consume an entire career.

Our project, “The Television Mega-Text” intends to overcome these obstacles by using digital tools to conduct a distant reading of fifties television as what Nick Browne has called a “Mega-Text”—as a representation of televisual discourse that accounts for not only the range of diversity across programming content, but also the programming schedule’s relationship to wider social processes such as the standardized work week (citation needed).So far our Mega-Text consists of data such as program descriptions, names of actors/writers/producers, etc., air dates, length of run dates, and network data, all obtained from sites similar to Wikipedia and IMDB. These sources will include “TV guide” sections of relevant periodicals and period newspapers found in digitized databases, encyclopedia sourcebooks on early television programming featuring detailed program descriptions and personnel information, and supplementary information regarding sponsorship and advertising contracts gleaned from both academic and corporate archives such as The Museum of Television and Radio in New York City.

Once compiled, this data set will be coded in order to make it machine readable for analysis. Such operations will entail: coding scheduling slots to time of day and place in the workweek (i.e. “daytime-weekday”, “primetime weekday”, “primetime weekend”), coding genres of programming that reliably occasioned displays of meaningful difference through the broad working-class and ethnic humor of “variety shows,” and other fixedly multi-cultural content formats like “musical song and dance”, and lastly by identifying key industry actors in the form of producers, creators, and on-screen stars whose class and ethnic backgrounds, as well as political and civil associations, might be argued to have had a significant impact upon the display of “meaningful difference” across television media at this time.

Our initial research question is this: how can we use what has survived from 1950s television—the copious amounts of text produced daily describing what was going to be on television that night, and/or reviews of what had been broadcast the day before—to create and then analyze the television Mega-Text, in order to produce a more accurate, and, we hope, more varied account of what Americans watched in the 1950s?

The specificity of the televisual form is uniquely suited to digital methods of “distant reading”. Some of the most innovative formal features of television, such as the structuring effect of it’s distribution across the network schedule, and the viewer’s “characteristic experience of sequence or flow” (Williams 1975), are often deemphasized or ignored by more conventional textual analysis based on “close readings” of individual programs, episodes, or even genres. To this end, our project is also driven by a desire to discern the extent to which digital methods might enable new and revolutionary ways of engaging with televisual media as cultural text.

In order to decide how best to answer these questions, we will continue to explore options for conducting variable data analysis, and strategize how best to implement the available methods in order to produce effective and reliable results that will provide us with a sound evidentiary basis for offering meaningful and accurate generalizations about television culture during the 1950s.

This project seeks to enhance the humanities in a number of ways.

First, we hope to construct an alternative, testable narrative of 1950s television that will challenge and revise the field of early television studies by showing that 1950s television was more diverse than we remember, in terms of race, ethnicity, gender and class.

Secondly, we hope to show how relatively easy it is to construct searchable databases for texts that are unwieldy for humanities scholars to work with. Similar methods could be used for studying film, radio, music, and other hard-to-access/hard-to-engage-with texts.

Finally, we hope to contribute to the larger project of distant reading championed by Franko Moretti and others. As Kathryn Schulz quipped, writing about Moretti’s campaign of distant reading in 2011, “Art is long, life is short.” How can digital humanities help the humanities more generally to distantly read the massive number of stories produced by the entertainment industry over the last century? (Citation needed)

Ironically, perhaps, in the Television Mega-Text we still retain the tool of close reading; our method is to perform close readings of small bits of text referring to large numbers of television programs. For this stage of the project we seek to include textual material related to all television programs made in the entirety of the 1950s.

**Environmental Scan**

The methods of digital humanities are slowly making their way into television. For the most part there is no project that is seeking to do the exact same thing as we are. However, there is one digital humanities project at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ that has been working to turn issues of *TV Guide* into a readable digital text.

The obstacle that Televisual Time is having is that they are working from original copies of *TV Guide*, and they are facing numerous obstacles turning TV Guide into machine readable text, called Optical Character Recognition (OCR).

The advantage we have over Televisual Time is that we are using already digitized data that we have scraped from sites like Wikipedia and IMDB. Much of the data is very similar to that found in TV Guide, but it’s already readable. The data does have to be cleaned up, but it’s much easier to translate this kind of data than it is to turn printed documents into OCR format.

Other than Televisual Time there is no similar project to The Television Mega-Text. There are many scholars interested in the problems and promises of the television archive, such as Lauren Bratslavsky, who writes about when, how and why certain US archives began to collect materials related to television.

Another group of scholars working on distant reading is associated with the Media Ecology project. There scholars are working on devising machine readable codes and commands for visual interpretation. In these projects the scholars focus on teaching machines how to read visual information---the television text itself.

THIS SECTION NEEDS TO BE EXPANDED

**History of the Project**

This project began in 2011 when I was working on a book called *How the Fifties Worked: Mass Culture and the Decade the Unions Made.* I asked my then Masters level research assistant, Steven Gotzler, to create a television database based on an encyclopedia of early television. In 2016, when Gotzler was a PhD student and one of my dissertation advisees, I had the idea to turn Gotzler’s excel data base into an application for some Mellon Digital Humanities funding at CMU (I need to understand better what this is).

In 2017 I became the PI of a DH Mellon project Mapping the Television Mega-Text. Over the last year, with DH team at CMU, we have

**Work Plan**

**Final Product and Dissemination**

**Biographies**

**Budget**