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THE FAILED TV A-Z by Toby Miller

Thursday 12 April 2012 Last updated at 18:02

Ten years ago, I published a Television A-Z (Miller, 2002). A cute conceit, I thought, and one likely to attract attention.

It didn't.

Complete failure. Hopeless joke, Toby.

I tried revised versions a couple of times (Miller, 2004 and 2010), with identical results.

Here it is:

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| Advertising: Texts that interrupt television, or are the best television, or enable television |
| Broadcasting: When television went through the air and was aimed at everyone |
| Culture: What television was not |
| Drama: Once characterized television, and has <i>always</i> characterized its internal workings and debates about it |
| Effects: Measuring the impact of worrying about television on politicians, family power dynamics, god-botherers, and the careers of psychology and communications professors |
| Flow: The movement of Raymond Williams backwards, forwards, and sideways on a trans-Atlantic liner |
| Government: The space between television as a vast wasteland and a toaster with pictures |
| High Definition: A faster way of making television sets obsolete |
| Ideology: What people who live outside plutocracies and militarized states no longer believe in |
| Journalism: Endangered species, formerly common in the United States |
| Knowledge: Used to disagree with people who refer to an information society |
| Liveness: Plausible, in the case of sports coverage |
| Media: Subject for corralling undergraduates and teaching them that what they enjoy is also good for them |
| News: RIP September 11, 2001 |

| |
|--|
| Ownership: A topic that used to matter but is no longer important, because people interpret television programs freely and fearlessly |
| Production: Invisible other than as what media-studies undergraduates must do rather than research their essays |
| Quality: It's not quality, it's television |
| Race: A Grand Prix |
| Sex: Only on satellite and cable |
| Technology: Sold to the public by offering sport exclusively on latest innovation |
| Uses and Gratifications: Jeremy Bentham watching <i>Survivor</i> |
| Violence: To be derided, other than when done by the state to foreigners |
| Women: A market segment |
| X-cess: Television studies academics writing about wrestling or their children |
| Youth: Spectators becoming responsible consumers |
| Zworykin: Fabled television inventor from RCA who "liberated" an already-patented invention |

I thought about the A-Z recently as I was revising an Introduction to Television Studies course. The class has around two hundred people in it. Our major, Media & Cultural Studies, has doubled in size in two years and is headed for 500 students despite the fact we only came into being in 2008.

I asked the students to fill out a form explaining their reasons for taking the course. Most indicated that it was required for their degrees. A few said the topic interested them. Some drew pictures of cyborgs—mixtures of human beings, TV sets, and computers. Others referred to matters of the heart: my girlfriend is enrolled; a **really really** cute boy is in the class; my friend is shy in large groups so I'm accompanying her.

As I rewrote the syllabus, had my thinking moved on from a decade ago, and that rather sardonic A-Z? You can find the revised outline at <http://tobymiller.org/courses.html>. It's my attempt to offer a balanced and capacious account of key discourses while remaining reasonably true to my own idiosyncratic language and perspective.

So I give room to the psy-function that attaches electrodes to penises while screening porn; space for narcissographers who undertake fan research by watching *Teletubbies*; and time to cybertarians' credulous faith in the capacity of technology to heal the wounds of the division of labor and other travails.

My vain hope is that US students transcend the obsession with brains and representations that fixes our population when it discusses television.

I want them to expand their view to examine such topics as:

- workers making TV sets in Tijuana, where buying a television would cost them more than it does in San Diego
- employees creating TV content outside union protection and without horizontal solidarity, as members of the precariat
- boxing fans of Showtime and HBO. Those companies "own" the "sport" and charge pay-per-view rates that fleece the working class and subsidize the *bourgeois* dramas you enjoy
- the ecological impact of television sets, arguably the most difficult of all manufactures to recycle; and
- the unequal televisual flow of knowledge and entertainment around the globe

You might call it a wager or a deal. If the students consider my concerns, I'll tell them about everybody else's. I hope the outcome will see them looking at television through two core prisms—pleasure and justice.

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