

TECHNOLOGY AND HISTORY: Television History

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Historical documentaries in the form of television and film have a substantial impact on the interpretation of history delivered to and received by the general public. The information presented in historical audiovisual programs reaches more individuals than other sources such as museums and academic texts.¹ Without historians' participation in the creation of historical television and film, the production of historical knowledge is left to filmmakers and producers who do not always have a professional or sufficient depth of academic history when they present their own interpretations of events, especially in historical documentaries. This article explores the history of history on television, uses results from a survey conducted by the author to demonstrate that audiovisual history reaches the widest audiences, explains the inherent limitations as to what and how history can be presented on television and film, lists incentives for historians working on a historical program, and using interviews with historians and a producer conducted by the author provides examples of production processes and collaborations between filmmakers and historians. Because audiovisual history reaches the majority of the general public, the field needs more historians to participate in televised and filmed history productions to ensure the accuracy of the historical content presented.

The history of historical television

The history of history on television reveals how the conventions of the field were developed and how documentaries became revered by viewers. History on television became a respected discipline in the 1930s when John Grierson championed the ability of factual historical programs to educate

¹ Shelley Bookspan, "History, Historians, and Visual Entertainment Media: Towards a Rapprochement," *The Public Historian* 25 (2003): 10.

society. He marketed the phrase “documentary.”² One of the first esteemed factual historical television programs was a series of lectures delivered by A. J. P. Taylor that aired on national British television from the late 1950s until the 1980s.³ The first historical documentary series to make a sizeable impact on the field and set the standard for historical documentaries was *The Great War*. This series was created in 1964 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of World War I.⁴ It utilized footage from the Imperial War Museum, eyewitness accounts, and dramatic readings of contemporary historical documents.⁵ Tony Essex produced the film for BBC. The script was written mostly by historians under lead historical advisor Basil Liddell Hart. Hart resigned, however, because he disagreed with the interpretation of a few key episodes. Although historians had important roles in the final production, the series was negatively critiqued by historians, such as Taylor, and also by the director of the Imperial War Museum, Noble Frankland, for lack of integrity and misuse of footage by Essex.⁶

The 1970s brought changes to the standards and formats of historical documentaries. The 1972 documentary series *The British Empire*, produced by and for BBC One, was praised for its academic integrity but criticized for

² Wilma de Jong, “Developing and Producing a Feature Documentary: The Case of Deep Water,” in *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices*, edited by Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong (New York: Open University Press, 2008), 143.

³ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 155.

⁴ Taylor Downing, “Bringing the Past to the Small Screen,” in *History and the Media*, edited by David Cannadine (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 8-9.

⁵ James Chapman, “Television and History: The World at War,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 31 (2011): 248-9; Max Hastings, “Hacks and Scholars: Allies of a Kind,” in *History and the Media*, edited by David Cannadine, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 106.

⁶ Chapman, “Television and History,” 248-9; Jeremy Isaacs, “All Our Yesterdays,” in *History and the Media*, edited by David Cannadine (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 38. Essex portrayed staged propaganda footage from the war as authentic wartime footage.

having an unclear structure that did not follow typical television conventions.⁷ The next great series of note was *The World at War*, which aired on ITV from 1973 to 1974, produced by Thames Television. Like *The Great War*, this series also used eyewitness accounts and footage from the Imperial War Museum. Producer Jeremy Isaacs included Frankland of the Imperial War Museum on the production team as historical advisor. The series also had researchers on staff to further ensure the legitimacy of the historical interpretation as well as the accuracy of the footage shown. Although more television professionals than historical advisors worked on this production, Frankland had an important role in developing the structure and focus of the series. Additionally, whenever reconstructed footage was used in the series, the audience was made aware.⁸ For these reasons, *The World at War* was a landmark series that set new standards and helped to bring integrity to historical documentaries. However, not all documentaries upheld these standards over the following decades, and authenticity of footage and interpretation is still a concern to this day.

While in today's society the History Channel does not have a good reputation for airing meaningful documentaries, it was introduced in 1995 as a branch of A&E for the purpose of airing historical television shows. The Discovery Channel, introduced in 1985, was also created to broadcast documentaries and informational programs. Many of the documentaries aired on these channels were previously produced in Europe or for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), which was created in 1970.⁹ American documentaries did not have an international reputation until Ken Burns started producing them. Burns reached tens of millions of viewers all over the world with his documentaries such as *The Civil War*. He appealed to non-

⁷ N. C. Fleming, "Echoes of Britannia: Television History, Empire, and the Critical Public Sphere," *Contemporary British History* 24 (2010): 4-5.

⁸ Isaacs, "All Our Yesterdays," 41-4; Chapman, "Television and History," 250-253.

⁹ Brian Taves, "The History Channel and the Challenge of Historical Programming," *Film and History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 30 (2000): 7-14.

scholarly audiences by touching their emotions, using language that the audience was able to understand, and engaging the audience with recognized cinematic conventions. Documentaries became much more prominent on American television after his productions aired.¹⁰ The substantial amount of viewers tuning into his documentaries proved to American broadcasting companies that documentaries were worth producing and audiences enjoyed them.

Current public interest in the genre: Academy standings and survey results

Currently, the general public is very receptive to engaging with history by watching historical documentaries and film. Historical films have also been critically acclaimed.¹¹ Since 1990, when *The Civil War* aired, 16 out of 27 Academy Award winners for Best Picture were historical films. From 1992 until 2002, only one winner, *American Beauty*, was not a historical film. There was another streak from 2010-2013 when *The King's Speech*, *The Artist*, *Argo*, and *12 Years a Slave* won sequentially. Although a historical film has not won Best Picture in the past three years, multiple historical films were nominated in that category each year. Critically acclaimed films receive abundant attention from the general public, and historical films winning awards increase the population's interest in history.

In a survey of 250 individuals conducted by the author, television and film history reached a majority of the respondents. 81% said that they had seen a historical film in the past year, 78% had watched a documentary, and 58% had watched a historical drama series. 72% of respondents said that they were most likely to engage in history via audiovisual means, either by watching a historical documentary (30%), drama series (25%), or film (17%). Women, however, said they were most likely to watch a historical drama series. With higher levels of education, the percentage of people who said that

¹⁰ Gary R. Edgerton, "Chalk, Talk, and Videotape: Utilizing Ken Burns's Television Histories in the Classroom," *OAH Magazine of History* 16 (2002): 17-19.

¹¹ Robert Brent Toplin, "Cinematic History: Where Do We Go From Here?" *The Public Historian* 25 (2003): 81.

they were most likely to watch a documentary decreased while the likeliness of watching a historic film, reading an academic text or historical fiction increased.¹² The following data suggest that most of society gets their historical information from these sources like historical television and film format. Surely, more historians need to participate in the production of historical programming to ensure that the history the public receives is as accurate and complete as possible.

¹² These results were collected using surveymonkey.com and in person at an engineering office, a ship repair company, and a restaurant. The author asked respondents their age, gender, level of education, if they were interested in history, and specifically if they had watched a historical documentary, historical film, historical drama series, read historical fiction or an academic text, or visited a history museum in the past year and which they were most likely to do. The author believes that some of the responses are skewed because she did not define what an academic text was, or included reading historic nonfiction in the categories. Additionally, the author believes that some respondents ignored the “history” museum denotation. The age ranges of the demographic questions were 18-24, 25-34, 35-49, 50-64, and 65 or older. The results in each age category were well balanced, but 25-34 had the largest responses (33%) while only 2% of the respondents were 65 or older. 91% of the respondents had at least attended some college and the largest percentage of respondents (36%) had bachelor’s degrees. 68% of the respondents were female and 31% were male. 61% said they were interested in history and 31% said they were somewhat interested in history. 72% of respondents said that they were most likely to engage in history via audiovisual means. Although more people said that they had seen a historical film, when asked what they were most likely to do, a plurality of people (30%) said they would watch a documentary. 17% said they were most likely to visit a history museum, 8% said they were most likely to read historic fiction and 2% said they were most likely to read a historic academic text. Additional findings include: women were more likely to read historical fiction or visit a history museum while men were more likely to read an academic text. The percentage of people who said they were most likely to visit a history museum increased dramatically with a college degree. Respondents over 35 were less likely to visit a history museum and respondents over 50 were less likely to watch a historical drama series. The percentage of respondents who were most likely to read historical fiction increased with age.

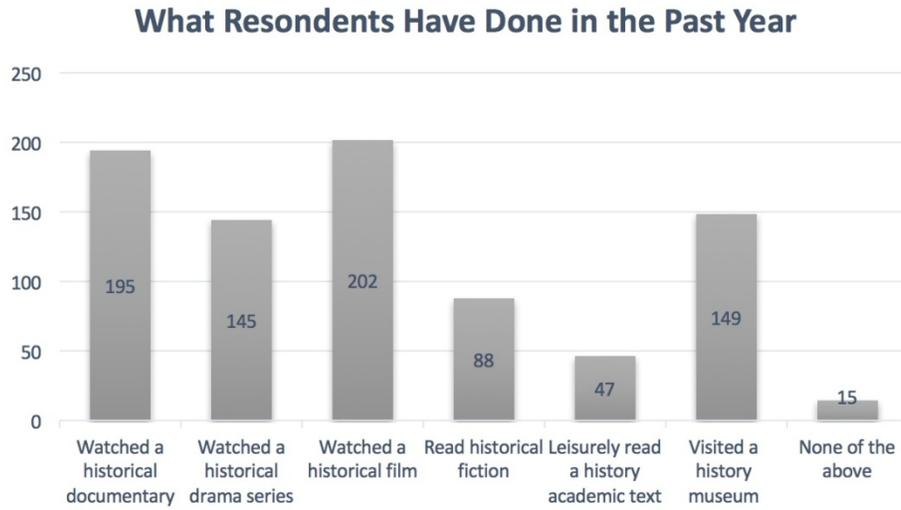


Chart 1: Survey Results: What respondents said they had done in the past year

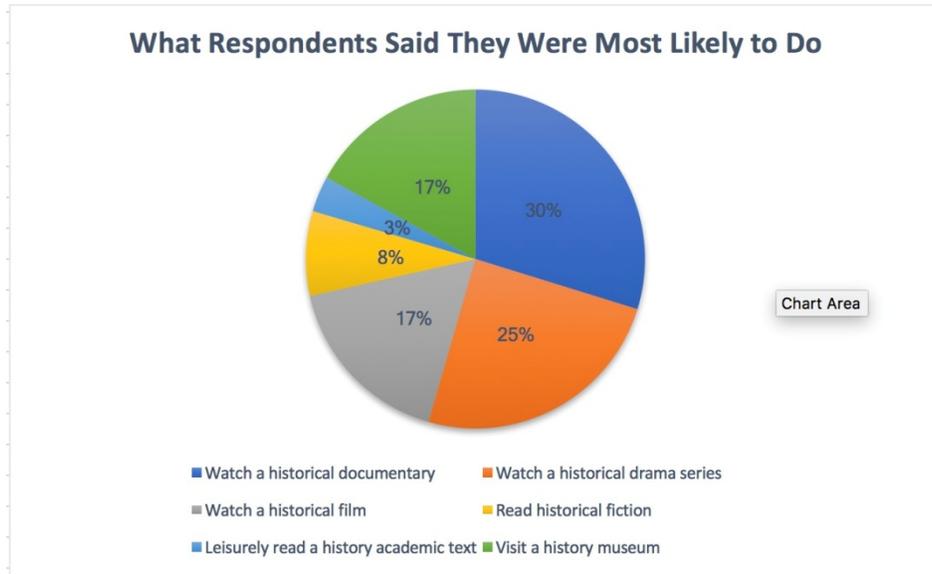


Chart 2: Survey Results: What respondents said they were most likely to do

Incentives for historians to work on historical television or film productions

Even though the early history of historical documentaries may have created a perception that historians' contributions are not valued by filmmakers, there are many incentives for historians to work on a historical television or film production. First, this form of history reaches far more people than a book or article written for academic circles. Engaging the public with history and making people excited about and interested in the past should be a priority for historians. The field of academic history generally does not penetrate the broader public; nevertheless, audiences still want to learn about the past. Given the success of the genre that includes Ken Burns' documentaries, it seems that individuals enjoy audiovisual history that targets their emotions while conveying material culture and life experiences. It is more accessible than written words in academic journals or texts.¹³ Films will never be able to share the same amount of elaboration on or debates about a topic that takes place in academic journals or texts, but films do increase the general public's interest in history. This should not be undervalued and it may be good for the academy of history.

Another benefit of participating in historical television or film productions is increased book sales. It has been proven that successful documentaries are followed by significant increases in sales of factual books about the topic. For instance, after Ken Burns' *The Civil War* was released over \$10,000,000 worth of Civil War history books were sold. Ken Burns said in an interview that Shelby Foote told him that Burns made Foote a millionaire.¹⁴ For many historical consultants who write a book corresponding to the

¹³ Michael Sturma, "Teaching American History with Feature Film," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 20 (2001): 68; Barbara Abrash and Daniel Walkowitz, "Sub/versions of History: A Meditation on Film and Historical Narrative," *History Workshop* 38 (1994): 204; Libby Haight O'Connell, "Viewing History: The Pros and Cons of Presenting History on Television and in Films," *History News* 49 (1994): 15.

¹⁴ David Thelan, "The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns," *The Journal of American History*, 81 (1994): 1049-1050.

production they worked on, name recognition from being associated with the production or being seen on camera also helped their book sales.

Ensuring the accuracy of the facts presented is an additional benefit for historians working on historical programs. According to historical television consultant Libby Haight O’Connell, historians’ knowledge is needed in the production of these series, films, and documentaries to “eliminate inaccuracies, contribute to story-telling, and flesh out chronology.”¹⁵ Historians can also help filmmakers determine what historical footage is authentic and what is propaganda or stock footage.¹⁶ This is important because propaganda footage does not necessarily provide verification of the event being represented. However, it can provide information on the government’s or agency’s aims at the time. Additionally, historians need to inform audiences that histories presented on television and film are not undebatable and that they are purposefully constructed to tell one easily comprehensible story. This information could be conveyed by including caveats at the beginning of a production to encourage viewers to do more research on the topic after seeing the program. Audiences should be able to trust the information they receive from historical documentaries, therefore historians need to be part of the production process in order to ensure the information presented is correct and not misleading. By working on audiovisual history programs, academic historians are able to share their research with a much larger audience, therefore increasing the historical knowledge of the population.

Limitations of the genre

Since the formation of the genre, there have been issues around the legitimacy and extensiveness of the evidence presented in documentaries.¹⁷ However, there are limitations inherent to the genre that affect the history that can be presented on television or in cinematic form. These limitations

¹⁵ O’Connell, “Viewing History,” 17.

¹⁶ “Film and History: Questions to Filmmakers and Historians,” *Cinéaste* 29 (2004): 58.

¹⁷ De Jong, “Developing and Producing a Feature Documentary,” 143.

lead some historians to be concerned about the perceived inadequacy of historical documentaries even though filmmakers have no choice but to work within the restrictions of the genre. For example, stories narrated audio-visually need images. If archival footage or photographic evidence is not available, recreations must be used or the story cannot be told. Budgets greatly influence all programs, especially when recreations are needed, because computer generated images (CGI) and actors are costly. Another limitation to what can be presented is the length of the script. A script for a fifty-minute documentary will only be twenty to thirty pages long, which is about twenty-five thousand words. Limited word count results in summarization without much elaboration. Furthermore, complicated themes are most easily communicated to and understood by audiences by using personal stories, producing a biographical focus. Limiting the story to a narrative eliminates traditional historical debates and arguments about interpretation.¹⁸ However, personal narratives allow audiences to identify with the history being presented by being able to mentally put themselves in the shoes of a historic individual.¹⁹

Many viewers want to be entertained and they may not want to think about conflicting theories that leave them confused about what really happened.²⁰ Entertaining the audience is a priority because if the viewer gets bored, they can easily change the channel. Targeting the audience's emotions is a key way to keep them engaged with the show.²¹ Historical television and films must usually abide by the conventions of the audiovisual genre such as a

¹⁸ Ian Kershaw, "The Past on the Box: Strengths and Weaknesses," in *History and the Media*, edited by David Cannadine (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 121; Hastings, "Hacks and Scholars," 107.

¹⁹ Tristram Hunt, "Reality, Identity and Empathy: The Changing Face of Social History Television," *The Journal of Social History* 39 (2006): 848.

²⁰ Toplin, "Cinematic History," 83.

²¹ "Film and History," 57 and 59.

linear story line, narrative focus, good versus evil, conflict, and a resolution.²² Many academic historians have concerns about the simplification of history presented on television, but as historian Max Hastings argues, “If you want to sell history to the media, it must be crafted to fit its requirements.”²³ If historians do not understand the limitations and requirements of cinematic history, they will not be able to appreciate its educational value to society. Including film studies classes in the requirements for a degree in history could help to prepare future historians for potential participation in the genre. A better understanding of these attributes and the filmmaking process in general will result in historians being more accepting of history on television and film, and also give historians more realistic expectations when working on a historical program.²⁴

Interviews with collaborators on historical documentaries

The remainder of this paper provides examples of the production process of creating documentaries including collaborations between filmmakers and historians. Although many historians’ published accounts of their experiences working on historical films or documentaries were negative because they did not have a lot of control over the final product, this author’s findings contradict such published reports. The author had the privilege of interviewing two historians and one producer who participated in creating historical documentaries. These examples demonstrate that historians can have positive experiences working with filmmakers.

Historian Micheál Ó Siochrú revealed that he experienced a substantial amount of control over the creation of his two-part documentary

²² Toplin, “Cinematic History,” 89; Robert A. Rosenstone, “History in Images/History in Words: Reflections of the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film,” *The American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1174, 1179.

²³ Hastings, “Hacks and Scholars,” 107.

²⁴ Desmond Bell and Fergal McGarry, “Truth at 24 Frames a Second? A Working Dialogue between a Film-Maker and a Historical Consultant about the Making of *the Enigma of Frank Ryan*,” *Rethinking History* 19 (2015): 636.

Cromwell in Ireland: God's Executioner, produced by Tile Productions for RTÉ that aired in September 2008, coinciding with the 350th anniversary of Cromwell's death. Ó Siochrú was first approached by Tile Productions to create the documentary after they had discovered that he was commissioned to write a book on the topic. After watching various documentaries produced by Tile, he trusted that the producers and directors would make an upstanding documentary. Ó Siochrú emphasized the trust between himself and the director and the necessity of teamwork when creating a historical documentary throughout the interview:

I'm a historian there to authenticate what we're talking about and to present, but how it looks is not my responsibility, it's [the director's]... It's not *my* documentary, I'm simply part of a team. Of course there's going to be compromise."²⁵

Ó Siochrú had many roles in the creation of the documentary. He revealed that his collaboration on the film was more so with the director than with the producer. He researched, presented and co-wrote the script. A cowriter provided by the production company worked as "a sounding board for what might work and what won't work" as a television script due to the conventions of the genre. However, he authored each piece that he spoke into the camera and did not use phrases or words the filmmakers wanted him to use if he did not feel comfortable using them. In these aspects, he had rather definitive control over the script; neither the director or production company asked him to change the content. Additionally, Ó Siochrú was the one who identified the historical expert 'talking heads' who contributed to the documentary. He was dissatisfied with the first edit of the program, but after elaborate talks with the director and reviewing the film almost scene by scene to explain what he thought worked and did not work in the program, he was able to procure "a very extensive second edit" of the program, which he felt was "a fair reflection of what we were trying to do." The second edit changed

²⁵ Micheál Ó Siochrú, interview by Ashley Curry, March 9, 2016.

some of the content, chronology, and the flow of the program, “reestablishing a balance” between the visual aspects of the series and the text.²⁶

Military historian and archaeologist Gavin Hughes also had largely positive experiences working with historical television. He worked on many programs for various branches of BBC and RTÉ with both Tile Productions and 360 Productions. He appeared on screen in addition to researching and consulting on programs. He contributed to working scripts by adding depth and research to topics the producer and script developer wanted to expand. From this experience working on scripts, he revealed:

There hasn't been any kind of conflict with how I would academically tackle a subject and the way I would like to present it to a general audience. In fact, quite the opposite, as I've been actively en-couraged and supported to do so.²⁷

Both Hughes and Ó Siochrú did not experience filmmakers attempting to influence the way they interpreted the history they were hired to present.

Hughes has also been responsible for fact-checking the many series he worked on as well as reviewing documentary trailers produced for broadcasters. He believes that one can remain dedicated to academic history while also creating an entertaining program. Additionally, Hughes disclosed, “Any concerns I have had about a project have always been taken on board [by the producers] and openly discussed, whether this is regarding awkward historical complications, or indeed, simply the tone of a piece.” Therefore, Hughes’ opinions about the final production were respected and heeded by the filmmakers he worked with. Hughes also emphasized the necessary collaboration with filmmakers:

You end up with a very close working project relationship with the producers, directors and crew; they all put so much effort

²⁶ Micheál Ó Siochrú, interview by Ashley Curry, March 9, 2016.

²⁷ Gavin Hughes, email message to author, April 4, 2016.

and skill into the final product that my input as a historian/archaeologist is made so much easier.²⁸

To have a positive experience working on a historical production, historians must be aware of the possibilities and limitations of what television can portray, their own responsibilities when making documentaries, and also be able to make compromises and work as part of a production team.

Producers' roles in creating historical television and film vary from country to country but generally revolve around budget, funding, and responsibility to broadcasters. Edward Hart, series producer-director for 360 Productions and former BBC producer, explained to the author the roles of a producer of historical television. According to Hart, series are produced based on funding, available footage, and if there is evidence that the audience will watch the program. Broadcasters commission and fund most documentary series that are produced, usually co-producing the series with foreign broadcasters. Series normally need to be remade for each broadcaster to appeal to its specific audience, which often includes changing the language and presenter, as well as cutting or adding scenes.²⁹

Hart also described his collaboration with historians. According to him, the role of filmmakers is to make the historian's academic contributions to the program more "accessible" and "exciting," and also to weed out stories in which only academics would be interested. He reveals that there will always be debates between historians and filmmakers, and, like Hughes and Ó Siochrú, he emphasized the need for compromise and mutual respect. Other responsibilities he had as a producer-director include directing the research; identifying experts and locations; hiring the crew; directing presenters, cameras, and computers on location; writing and managing the rewrites of the scripts; and maintaining the budget. He further explains that only producers with the dual responsibility of directing and producing encompass all these roles.³⁰ According to Hart, producers' responsibilities can be determined by

²⁸ Gavin Hughes, email message to author, April 4, 2016.

²⁹ Edward Hart, phone interview by Ashley Curry, March 8, 2016.

³⁰ Edward Hart, phone interview by Ashley Curry, March 16, 2016.

the location of the production company. For example, he suggests that Irish and American companies work in similar ways that differ from his U.K. experiences. Irish and American companies tend to bring in a director whose sole purpose is to direct the cameras and what appears onscreen once most of the decisions have been made about the story to be presented. Companies in the U.K. typically use producer-directors.³¹ While historical television productions are limited by funding, available footage and the length of scripts, having trust, respect, and collaboration on a production team enables producers and historians to create meaningful and accessible history programs.

In conclusion, as evidenced by the popularity of audiovisual history, historical television programs and films have been and continue to be a significant way in which the public receives historical information. Standards of factual programming have changed over time and are now in a more progressive stage with historians having more control over the final product. Incentives for historians to work on these programs, such as having their research reach more people, increasing book sales, and ensuring the accuracy of the history presented, exist. As producers and historians work together and make compromises to create historical television and film, historians become more aware of the limitations of historical programming as well as audience's expectations. With increased participation of historians on audiovisual production teams, the history received by the public via these means is more accurate and comprehensive.

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³¹ Edward Hart, phone interview by Ashley Curry, March 16, 2016.

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