

Bodroghkozy, Aniko, University of Virginia. “The “Black Weekend” and Television Viewers: What the Archive Reveals about Public Response to the Kennedy Assassination”

The assassination of John F. Kennedy may be one of the most studied and talked about events of the 20th century generating a library full of research, both sober and hysterical. Historians and commentators who typically ignore or marginalize the importance of television as an active agent in post WWII American history tend to recognize the profound impact of the medium in this instance. (See, for instance Manchester 1967, Bugliosi 2004, Knight 2007). A number of Media Studies scholars have also examined television and the assassination in depth (Zelizer, 1992 and Watson 1990). There would seem to be little more to add to this voluminous research record.

There is, however, a significant lacuna in this record acknowledging television’s tremendous impact during the “Black Weekend.” Massive and unprecedented numbers of Americans spent much of Friday November 22 through Monday the 25th, 1963 in front of their television sets. How were they making sense of this national crisis and trauma that came to them primarily as a television event? There is only one scholarly study of television audiences of the Kennedy assassination (Greenberg and Parker, 1965). Using Lazarsfeldian survey methods and analytical frameworks, this volume of instant studies done in the days after the assassination came to the predictable “limited media effects model” conclusions: Americans and their institutions bounced back quickly from the trauma and television assisted in the rapid healing process. The optimistic conclusions appear, in historical hindsight, shallow, one dimensional, and inadequate.

How might one reconstruct in a more historically nuanced, analytically rich way how television audiences responded to coverage of this monumental national trauma whose impact still reverberates through the American psyche and body politic?

The David Brinkley Papers at the Wisconsin State Historical Society provide a treasure trove of letters from viewers writing to Brinkley and NBC during and immediately after the “Black Weekend.” These letters provide important clues about how Americans were processing not only the tragedy but also the role played by network television in covering the tragedy. My presentation will examine the historical value of viewer mail (of which the Madison archives has many examples) and why both media researchers and historians in general need to engage these documents. My presentation will also provide some preliminary findings of recurring themes a I am associate professor and undergraduate director at the above named institution.

Aniko Bodroghkozy is the author of *Groove Tube: Sixties Television and the Youth Rebellion* published in 2001 by Duke University Press. She just completed a new book, *Equal Time: Television and its Audiences in the Civil Rights Era* and is currently working on a new book project tentatively titled *Assassination Television: JFK, MLK, RFK*. As a graduate of the Dept. of Communication Arts at Madison, she used the State Historical archives extensively in all my scholarly works.