

Domestic Disturbances and Economic Crisis: Modern Families on the Air in the 1930s and Today.

Jason Loviglio, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, USA.

Almost from the inception of the daytime serial format, it has been axiomatic for critics to focus on its uniformly and intensely domestic character. For more than 70 years, corporate sponsors like Procter and Gamble were self-conscious and overt in their pursuit of an atmosphere of woman-centered domesticity in which to sell their wares and just as importantly, the domestic ideal that would require an almost endless need for such wares. And critics have been quick to point to the social and political ills of such an atmosphere. The plush, almost claustrophobic interiors, the nearly exclusive focus on the goings-on of a handful of families, the emphasis on dialogue, close-ups, and emotional crises—it is impossible to imagine the soap opera in terms other than those most evocative of the domestic sphere. As Rudolph Arnheim has put it, “the world of serials is quite clearly a ‘private’ world in which the interests of the community fade into insignificance.”

So what are we to make of soap opera plots in which the most severe crises of the intimate sphere—illnesses, problematic pregnancies, marital discord, and unruly children—are inextricably linked to the machinations of corrupt businessmen and politicians and for which the only resolution is community-wide collective action?

My research—and that of other scholars---suggests that the exclusive emphasis on soap operas’ domesticity obscures as much as it reveals. Radio soap operas, like the other radio genres and performances we have considered, are intensely focused not on domesticity per se, but rather on the public/private dichotomy in American social life. In particular, the radio soap operas that I have examined from the 1930s through World War II call attention to the limits of this dichotomy as a way to understand local community, relations between the sexes, and most surprising of all, the political economy of the United States. Soap operas sound, at first hearing, like a world of hypertrophied domesticity—virtuous, stalwart women rescuing feckless, inconstant men, and leading families through a never-ending series of trials. Under close examination of hundreds of scripts, recordings, and correspondence, the soap operas of the late 1930s and early 1940s depict a world preoccupied with but highly ambivalent about the real-life consequences of sharply separated spheres.

While rhapsodic paeans to the pleasures of domesticity were *de rigueur* in the serial dramas of the period, the solution to most domestic crises required the messy and unorthodox blending of the home, the marketplace, city hall and some broadly ineffable sense of national community. The plots moved inexorably towards linking—often in highly stylized ways—the personal happiness of the “typical Americans” depicted in the soaps to the economic fortunes of the community in which they lived, and often, of the nation itself. In particular, the resolutions of intimate crises were almost always linked to a collective solution to a public dilemma. The discourse of home became the code

through which factories were built, mill workers were represented, and community health care needs of the under- and unemployed were guaranteed.

Hilmes has demonstrated how auteur Jane Cruisinberry was tightly constrained by network and sponsor executive who demanded storylines for Mary Marlin be neither too public nor too private. “Yet these strictures,” Hilmes tells us, “were constantly challenged and violated.” Women’s strength and heroism derived not simply from their mastery of domestic affairs but rather from their ability to take advantage of the porous boundary between the home and the larger social and economic community of which it is a part.

This presentation revisits my research and the scholarship of others on radio soap operas in the US in light of the recent economic crisis and the cultural responses that have emerged in the electronic media. Thanks to feminist scholarship, we have come to see the domestic as a crucial site in political and economic life of a society. But the popularity of depictions of domestic crisis---in reality shows as diverse as *Extreme Makeover*, *The Marriage Ref*, and *The Jersey Shore*; on dramas and comedies like *Big Love* and *Modern Family*; and countless “viral” homemade Youtube videos---continue to draw critical incomprehension, if not scorn.

This presentation compares the trope of unconventional family formations in 1930s soap operas to those in contemporary radio and television programs in the era of the Great Recession. Listening afresh to the representations of crisis that formed the bedrock of 1930s serial storylines in light of more recent versions, can help to elucidate both the historiographic assumptions we make about 1930s radio and the persistence of tropes of domestic troubles in times of economic crisis.

Jason Loviglio is Director of Media & Communication Studies and Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He is coeditor, with Michele Hilmes, of *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* (Routledge, 2002) and author of *Radio’s Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass Mediated Democracy* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005).