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Since its beginning in the 1970s, the field of Television Studies has often struggled to distinguish itself amongst older and more prestigious fields of humanistic research. Leading research universities have provided it with little institutional support or scholarly attention, and too often it has been relegated to the back offices of English or Cinema Studies departments. To some degree the poor regard given Television Studies is the field’s own fault: its textual objects have tended either to be obscure or crassly popular, its approach to audiences condescending or overly celebratory, and its methodology a contradictory mix of MBA–style industrial research and progressive, leftwing politics. Indeed, it is often difficult to *place* the project of television studies, which is absent the kind of claims for formal distinction (as with “the literary” or “the cinematic”) that serve as the foundation for English or Cinema Studies,
If Victoria Johnson's *Heartland TV* is any indication, however, this lack of a stable institutional locus can occasionally give rise to work that is in breadth interdisciplinary and in methodology trailblazing. Winner of the 2009 SCMS Katherine Singer Kovacs Book Award, *Heartland TV* argues for new approaches to United States network television history, the politics of representation (and its relation to marketing), and the study of regional identity in America. Its thesis is that the development of television, both as an industry and as an aesthetic medium, was shaped by and in turn came to shape the myth of the Midwest as the symbolic Heartland of the United States. To prove this, Johnson narrates a history of the United States that begins in the 1920s with debates over the allocation of broadcast frequencies in the country's center and ends in 2000 with *USA Today's* red-state/blue-state election map.

To tell this history, Johnson relies upon a vast variety of texts and approaches to analyzing them. Indeed, much of the pleasure to be had in reading *Heartland TV* comes from watching Johnson take what appears to be trivial texts, such as a newspaper review of *The Lawrence Welk Show* or mid-90s ads for the Subaru Forrester, and through close reading and production history demonstrate some of the key forces shaping the development of political identity in postwar America. Each of the book's six chapters advances the argument about regionalism and the development of television by focusing on a different historical period and industrial issue. Chapter 1 traces how perceived differences in regional demographics intertwined with debates about television's duties as a "public good" to shape FRC and FCC policy. Chapter 2 maps out the difficulties television faced in its attempt to establish *national* broadcast culture in the 1950s. In Chapter