

Dr. Richard I. Evans and the Innovation of Educational Television

By Emily Vinson



Dr. Richard I. Evans lectures on psychosomatic medicine as part of his telecourse, Psychology 231. June 8, 1953.

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Over the past two years, as the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered school buildings and university classrooms alike, remote learning has taken on new importance for a generation of learners. This phenomenon, in the age of laptops and Wi-Fi, is unprecedented in its global reach, however, the roots of distance education are firmly planted in the cables, wires, and towers of broadcast television.

The University of Houston (UH), and one of its professors, Dr. Richard I. Evans, played a key role in exploring the nascent opportunities provided by television-based instruction. A leader in social-psychology research and educational television, Evans dedicated much of his career to analyzing the potential of instructional television and evaluating its efficacy. UH Libraries' Special Collections holds the archives of KUHT, including examples of Dr. Evan's films, accessible via the UH Libraries' AV Repository. The Richard I. Evans Papers are held at the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron.

UH laid its foundation for distance learning in November 1950 with the launch of its radio station, KUHF-FM. With an impressive \$400,000 investment (equivalent to \$4.6 million in 2022), the fifth floor of the new Ezekiel Cullen Building was transformed into a state-of-the-art broadcast studio that served as a teaching space for the hands-on coursework required for radio communication majors.¹ Decades earlier the university's benefactor, Hugh Roy Cullen, clearly stated the objectives of his financial support: to ensure that the University of Houston would "always be a college for working men and women and their sons and

daughters."² KUHF represented another step towards bringing education to the broader Houston community.

Around this time, two key factors were shaping the development of television in the United States. First, by 1948, around three dozen television stations were broadcasting, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had approved licenses for a further seventy-one. However, the demand for hundreds of additional applications overwhelmed the FCC, and it announced a temporary stay on new licenses.³ Planned to last several months, the freeze remained in place for four years. Second, the demand for educational television was growing. Unlike many countries, the United States did not have a national public broadcasting network. The Joint Committee on Educational Television (JCET) was established to advocate for developing television "as an educational technology for cultivating knowledge and cultural excellence." From November 1950 through January 1951, the FCC, led by Commissioner Frieda Hennock, held hearings to consider setting aside dedicated frequencies for non-commercial educational stations.

In April 1951, UH president Dr. Walter W. Kemmerer attended a JCET meeting. Invigorated by the ideas presented, Kemmerer requested permission from the university Board of Regents to apply for a television license, noting that "television was expected to be the greatest educational media of all time."⁴ Initially denying the application, the FCC requested that UH partner with another educational institution to maximize the impact of the allocation. After the university reached out to area institutions, the Houston

Independent School District (HISD) agreed to partner with UH on a joint application.⁵

Finally, on April 11, 1952, the FCC lifted its freeze on new licenses. Under Commissioner Hennock's leadership, the FCC ordered that 242 licenses in communities across the country be reserved for non-commercial educational use.⁶ UH was among the first applicants issued a television license and assigned channel 8.

On April 16, 1953, KUHT-TV began testing its on-air signal.⁷ On June 8, the station broadcast its dedication ceremony featuring guest of honor Commissioner Hennock, who addressed attendees saying, "... here in Houston the practical realization of the tremendous benefit that television holds out to education. With TV, the walls of the classroom disappear, every set within viewing range of the signal is a potential classroom ... the sky of man's constructive imagination is literally the only limit on the good that can be derived from educational television."⁸

KUHT's staff set out to create television that educated and entertained. This fell into three general categories: telecourses, K-12, and general enrichment. Telecourses, which could be taken for university credit, were often utilized for subjects that drew large class sizes, such as introductory biology and philosophy.⁹ K-12 programming, created in partnership with HISD, was displayed in the classroom and included subjects like physical education. Television for general enrichment included series such as *Book Look*, *Doctors in Space*, and *Mexicania*. Many productions were distributed nationally in addition to local broadcast.

Among the notable individuals leading KUHT's early efforts was psychology professor Dr. Richard I. Evans who recognized the potential of instructional television from the earliest days of KUHT. Throughout his sixty-year career, Evans developed numerous educational television programs on a wide variety of topics. A tireless researcher, he published twenty books and over 300 articles, many focused on instructional television.¹⁰

Dr. Evans earned B.S. (1946) and M.S. (1947) degrees from the University of Pittsburgh and a Ph.D. in psychology from Michigan State University in 1950. That year, he joined the UH psychology faculty as an assistant professor.¹¹

In the summer of 1953, Evans taught the first KUHT telecourse, Psychology 231.¹² Over the next decade, he became a regular fixture on KUHT, with a wide variety of programs to introduce psychology concepts to viewers. Evans displayed boundless enthusiasm for pursuing opportunities to fund novel approaches to educational television and assess the impact of such programming.

Following the success of his telecourse, Evans embarked on television programming aimed at more general audiences. In the only surviving episode of his 1955 series *Propaganda and You*, Evans introduced the ways people develop prejudices through the lens of social psychology. With a charming, if somewhat nervous delivery, he presented academic research that explores the development of aggression and prejudice.

Perhaps Dr. Evans's best-known effort came in 1957 with *Approaches to the Psychology of*



UH raced to expand the KUHF radio facilities to accommodate a television broadcast studio. It also conducted nation-wide searches for staff with television broadcast expertise who could grow the radio communications program to include television.



Dr. Walter Kemmerer, FCC Commissioner Frieda Hennock, and Hugh Roy Cullen celebrate the station dedication.



Born August 29, 1922, in Chicago, Evans was raised in Grand Rapids, Michigan. During World War II, he paused his academic pursuits to join the U.S. Army, serving in General Patton's Third Army. After sustaining an injury during the Battle of Bulge, he was awarded a Purple Heart.

Photo, a still from Filmed Inserts of Dr. Evans (c. 1953-57), courtesy of KUHT Film and Video, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



Dr. Evans interviews psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm for the series *Notable Contributors to the Psychology of Personality* (1964-1965).

Personality. In his book, *Conversations with Carl Jung*, Evans described how the series was realized. In short, UH received a grant from the Fund for the Advancement of Education for \$18,700 (equivalent to \$184,000 in 2022) to “explore some new dimensions in university instruction.” In collaboration with UH’s Radio and Television Film Center director Dr. John Meaney, Evans wanted to counter what he saw as a tendency of psychology students to rely on secondary sources for analysis rather than studying the original texts. The ambitious plan was to interview Dr. Carl Gustav Jung, the only surviving member of what Evans called the “big three” of twentieth-century psychology (with Alfred Adler and Sigmund Freud).¹³

Rather than a lecture, which Evans feared could become boring to the student audience, Evans suggested an interview series, which would allow Dr. Jung to speak spontaneously about his work. On April 2, 1957, Evans wrote to Jung proposing this project, requesting several days of interviews. A few weeks later, to Evans’s delight, Jung agreed. With the support of the grant, Evans and a KUHT film crew traveled to Zurich, Switzerland, in August 1957

to interview Jung at his home. Evans and KUHT produced eight episodes from these interviews, each focused on a unique aspect of Jung’s work.

The success of this series led to another similar project. *Notable Contributors to the Psychology of Personality* (1963–1969) featured interviews with noteworthy experts in psychology, including B.F. Skinner, Jean Piaget, Konrad Lorenz, and Erik Erikson. In the 1970s, Evans examined broader themes such as creativity and humor through interviews with playwright Arthur Miller and comedians Joan Rivers and Buddy Hackett.

Amidst his work on these series, Evans explored how he could leverage instructional television to influence social behaviors. In 1961, UH proposed Houston as one of ten U.S. cities to receive federal funding through President John F. Kennedy’s Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act. This ground-breaking bipartisan legislation included a three-year, \$30 million grant program administered by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) to support pilot programs to combat juvenile delinquency.¹⁴

In Houston, the grant enabled the creation of the Greater Houston Action for Youth (GHAY) to bring together disparate social service agencies under the leadership of Dr. Evans. Convinced of television’s efficacy, GHAY departed significantly from a direct-intervention model favored in other pilot cities, instead dedicating resources to a television series meant to educate parents and youth about the risks of juvenile delinquency.¹⁵ The nine-episode series titled *Target: Delinquency* aired on Sunday afternoons in the spring of 1963 on KUHT and Houston’s three commercial stations.

In 1964, Evans was awarded another HEW grant to explore the “social, psychological and behavioral determinants and correlates of smoking.”¹⁶ Evan’s study came on the heels of the U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Luther L. Terry’s release of *Smoking*



One of Evans’s early studies explored how youth aged twelve to fifteen years in a school-based dental hygiene program responded to health messaging delivered via television in the classroom.

Photo courtesy of UH Photographs Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



Film still from *Resisting Pressures to Smoke*, which aimed to equip young people with real-world strategies to counter pressures to smoke.

Photo courtesy of KUHT Film and Video, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

and Health: Report of the Advisory Committee to the Surgeon General. This landmark report brought the risks of smoking into sharp focus for the public, linking cigarette smoking to chronic bronchitis and cancer and identifying smoking as a major factor of increased mortality rates among smokers.¹⁷ However, the 377-page report had only ten pages dedicated to youth and smoking. To better understand the influences and attitudes of youth smokers and non-smokers, Evans designed a project that filmed discussions between “spontaneous groupings of six to ten teenagers.” One example, *Smoke? Why Not?*, depicts students from Aldine High School discussing their perspectives on smoking.

Dr. Evans’s focus on youth behaviors continued and he began to study how tone in health messaging (positive-, fear-, and neutral-) influenced behaviors. In contrast to the fear-based approaches popular in many public health education programs, Evans’s research into tooth brushing behaviors indicated “the surprising effectiveness of a positive motivating appeal” coupled with “elaborated recommendations.”¹⁸

Study of positive-toned messaging continued in Evans’s work and laid the foundation for his National Institute of Health-funded work on social inoculation theory: the idea

that individuals can be insulated against risky behaviors through exposure and practice resisting negative influences. This concept is demonstrated in another juvenile cigarette smoking deterrent project led by Evans, resulting in two films, *Pressures to Smoke* and *Resisting Pressures to Smoke*. Social inoculation theory formed the basis of Evans’s future research, including work on gambling and AIDS prevention.

Dr. Richard I. Evans retired from the UH Department of Psychology as a professor emeritus in 2011. At that time, he was the longest-serving faculty member in the university’s history, having made an indelible mark on the institution. Among his noteworthy achievements, he founded and directed UH’s social psychology program, secured numerous research grants, and received the university’s highest honor, the Esther Farfel Award. His pioneering role in developing, analyzing, and advocating for educational television was particularly impactful. Even before KUHT went on the air as the nation’s first educational non-profit television station, Evans saw the immense potential to reach learners in a new way and challenged fellow faculty to explore new approaches to education. Richard Evans died in 2015 at the age of 92.¹⁹ □

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