

PART SEVEN

TV Times



Television promoted itself to audiences by incorporating aspects of earlier media: highlighting the star system, publicizing scheduled programs in newspapers and magazines, and through television watching guides, such as *TV Times*, for viewers in the United Kingdom in the 1950s. *The Advertising Archive*.

The first television broadcasts in North America began in 1939. Radio, at the height of its golden age, had its pre-eminence challenged. However, just as World War I put the development of broadcast radio on hold, so World War II delayed for almost a decade the dream of television as the new mass medium. By the early 1950s television was in the throws of a remarkable growth. Sales of television receivers boomed. Radio would never be the same again. Given what we have already discussed regarding the relationship between new media and old, it should come as no surprise to learn that the early content of television drew from both the motion pictures and radio. Distinct directions soon followed, most notably the filming of comedy and adventure series. "I Love Lucy" was one of the first programs to follow this convention, and, with the help of "canned laughter," it broke the format of the live broadcast that was the staple of "radio days."

The mass audience that was enamored with radio in the 1930s adapted with enthusiasm to television. Following the war, production and consumption increased and along with it, as William Boddy shows in our first selection, a television culture emerged. As people became more mobile, a variety of new job opportunities opened up. Yet family life remained strongly "home centered," especially on evenings and week-ends, when, thanks to a shorter work week there was increased leisure time, and more money to spend on it. Television, with its affordability, mix of national and local programs, and panoramic view of the new consumer culture via advertising, became as Boddy demonstrates a technology central to social life.

Although television during the 1950s managed to draw people away from radio sets and movie theaters, it was not always technologically reliable. Snowy pictures, sound problems, and interrupted signals were often a problem, especially in areas at the periphery of major cities—the expanding suburbs. However, the next several decades saw improved signal delivery systems; the transistor replacing the older vacuum tube, followed by integrated circuits (during the 1950s set breakdowns resulting from tube failure were a regular occurrence and every neighborhood had its TV repair shop); the emergence of reliable affordable color sets; and the introduction of cable transmission and satellite links. As of this writing, we are witnessing yet another transformation, the wide-spread adoption of digital high-definition television. Digital cable dramatically increases screen resolution, potentially providing viewers with a visual experience comparable to 35mm and 70mm films. As television standardizes production around digital technology significant shifts in programming and patterns of viewing may result. We leave it to readers informed by the essays that follow to speculate on what this might entail.

The unique aspect of television is a concern of Edmund Carpenter, an anthropologist who during the 1950s collaborated with Marshall McLuhan on a major research project and on a journal dealing with human communication, entitled *Explorations*. Like McLuhan, Carpenter argues that a medium constructs its messages as much through its form as through specific content. ("The medium is the message" was McLuhan's provocative maxim for overstating this notion.) Media therefore are never neutral. They impart what Harold Innis—who also influenced Carpenter—called a "bias" to communication. In his essay, Carpenter likens media, especially television, to languages. Television is contrasted with radio, film, theater, and the book, particularly through a consideration of the way each medium gives a distinct shape to what appears to be the same story. His analysis of *The Caine Mutiny* in this respect is revealing. It should encourage readers to think of books they have read that were made into movies or television programs, and to think about how viewing films in the theater compares with viewing them on television.

The social impact of television during the 1950s is the subject of our next excerpt. Lynn Spigel explores the way television, suburban life, and the new post-war patterns of consumption developed in concert. As she notes, the resulting shift in domestic space and the aspirations of a newly emerging

middle-class were often mirrored in the programs. Since a number of the programs she mentions are available via syndicated reruns, video or DVD we urge readers to “have a look.” In what ways do they reflect a social world quite different from today? What themes are still relevant and consistent with a 1990s sensibility?

Our next selection deals with television news. In it, Mitchell Stephens shows us how radio, then television, imitated and eventually altered the news-gathering roles of other media. Radio news originally adopted the reporting style of newspapers. However, the sometimes complex sentences of newspaper reporting had to be reduced to make reading “on the air” effective. World War II was a major arena for this evolution. It created enormous audiences for broadcast news. Stephens argues that the Vietnam War played a similar role in giving television news its distinct format of almost instant televisual reporting and as a consequence pushed radio further into the background of local broadcasting and music formats.

Television news has led to certain expectations and dependencies for viewers. Stephens argues that this is not all to the good. He challenges McLuhan’s optimistic view that television extends our eyes and ears into a greater awareness of events in the “global village.” He warns of the dangers and limitations of linking news to newscaster celebrities and formulaic visual presentations.

Our next selection is rather unusual: a dinner conversation between two renowned and controversial commentators of media and popular culture: Neil Postman and Camille Paglia. Postman champions the book and the sense of culture he associates with it. Paglia argues that television—and the image culture it creates—dominates our era. However, they concur on the need for a critical literacy in both media. An interesting class project might be to continue their debate, adding examples from your own experience as well as from other essays in this book.

Television today is not what it once was, either in terms of program formats or the way we watch. Henry Jenkins’ essay uses the example of *American Idol* to highlight this shift. What do you think of his categories of viewership? Are you a “zapper,” a “casual,” or a “loyal”? Talent competitions have been on television before, but *American Idol*’s serialized format, following from other reality shows such as *Survivor* (a trend that began with soap operas, then entered the realm of television dramas in the latter years of the last century, and now is a staple of recent contemporary programs such as *Lost*), encourages a diverse viewership that is sustained and inter generational. The MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) study of *Idol* cited by Jenkins is worth understanding, not just for its results, but also for its inclusivity in assessing the intermediality and role the audience plays in a commercially successful aspect of the popular culture of our time.

In scale, television far surpasses what was possible during the newspaper and radio eras. Each medium, however, built on its precursors and tried to bypass their inherent limitations. Today, television still provides a compelling demonstration of “simultaneity” and “co-presence,” which began almost 150 years ago with the telegraph. The moon landing, the Olympics, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the events of 9/11 all provide instances of shared global experience, which should be continually reflected upon in light of the history and nature of a medium whose influence on our lives continues to deepen.