

The 'small screen' gets big
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Abstract:

The television is a mainstay of American culture, both reflecting and forming societal trends, conditions and values. Television has made it easy to televise wars, congressional hearings and address controversial issues.
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Full Text:

American television is not made for the Norwegian or Brazilian market but rather for America, whose culture is now decidedly worldwide. If you go to a shopping mall in Seoul, Berlin, or Buenos Aires and look at all the items and images on display, you can't tell whether you are in Asia, Europe, or South America. They have all adopted our culture. The malls are identical: McDonald's, Banana Republic, Garth Brooks' CDs, The Gap, Star Wars paraphernalia, Michael Jordan Nike ads-this is the material stuff of our global visual culture.

But there is a component of our visual culture that has had an even greater impact than the endless American product line in shaping attitudes and values, both nationally and internationally. It is television, a relentless stream of programming images that started in the United States in 1936 with the Radio Corporation of America (later RCA Corporation) installing

television receivers in 150 homes in the New York area. The parent company, NBC, then began experimental telecasts—a Felix the Cat cartoon was the first to these sites. (The BBC in Great Britain and CBS in America also did experimental broadcasts.)

The first regular TV broadcasts in the United States were established by NBC in 1939. However, when America entered World War II in 1941, television broadcasting had to be suspended until after the war ended in 1945. Fervently, the national networks—all based in New York City—resumed broadcasting shortly after the war. At first, their telecasts reached only the Eastern Seaboard between Boston and Washington, but by 1951, they extended coast to coast. The first such telecast showed a resolute President Harry Truman opening the Japanese Peace Treaty Conference in San Francisco.

Coverage of such special events did much to widen TV's appeal. In 1951, television caught the public's attention with a broadcast of the Kefauver hearings, in which Sen. Estes Kefauver and his Senate committee questioned alleged mobsters about organized crime. Even today, it is hard to find such drama on TV. In 1954, coverage of the Army-McCarthy hearings brought the dramatic congressional event into millions of homes. A mesmerized nation watched as Sen. Joseph McCarthy accused the Army of "coddling communists," and the Army charged McCarthy's staff with "improper conduct." America became hooked on "the box," and the line between live breaking news and sheer entertainment became forever blurred. No longer was America content to just read about the big stories—now it could watch them, and at home, for that matter!

During the television boom of the late 1940s and '50s, TV stations sprang up throughout the country. People who had no TV sets often visited friends who had one, while many stores placed sets in their windows to attract crowds. In 1953, for the lucky few, color telecasts began, but by 1960 television sets—some sixty million—were found in the homes of most Americans. (Today more than 90 percent of American households have a color set.)

Entertainment, news, special events, and sports contests replaced the simplistic, frequently experimental, prewar shows. The American people became enamored with the idea of having so wide a range of visual events available so conveniently. Even Hollywood felt threatened by the "small screen," and sought to recover profits lost to television by introducing seemingly glamorous 3D and Cinemascope projection formats.

There were giants in the early days of television programming. Milton Berle became the first television entertainer to attract an immense national audience. "Uncle Miltie's" Texaco Star Theater (1948-1956), filled with

offbeat comedy routines, often attracted 80 percent of the TV audience. (With today's plethora of network and cable selections, 20 percent of viewer share is considered good.) Lucille Ball's *I Love Lucy* (beginning in 1951), internationally exportable mid-1950s westerns such as *Gunsmoke* and *Have Gun Will Travel*, Ed Sullivan's variety show *The Toast of the Town*, professional wrestling matches, and big-prize quiz shows all proved popular fare in TV's formative years.

Such entertainment remained the major part of television's programming during the 1960s, but during that turbulent decade live coverage of President Kennedy's assassination, and two days later Jack Ruby's aired murder of Lee Harvey Oswald, stunned the nation. Events surrounding the Vietnam War, "the first war to be fought on television," alternated between grim battlefield footage and sometimes-violent street demonstrations back in the States. Civil-rights protests by blacks and other minorities became a standard part of TV coverage.

In the early years, broadcasters generally avoided controversial themes for fear of loss of viewership. However, things changed dramatically in the 1970s, with such big draws as the comedy show *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* (sex, political satire), *All in the Family* (prejudice), *M*A*S*H* (war satirization), and *Little House on the Prairie* and *The Waltons* (both dealing with moral and ethical problems). In the late 1970s, made-for-TV movies and serialized dramas called "miniseries," such as the highly popular *Roots* (1977), began to appear.

The success of these innovative shows encouraged the networks to cover a wide range of topics. However, today many people believe that television has gone too far in its presentation of controversial themes. Confrontation and "shock TV" programs such as *The Jerry Springer Show* and *The Howard Stern Show*-as well as a swarm of twenty-something shows strong on eye candy and innuendo but weak on values (*Bay Watch*, *Melrose Place*, *Roseanne*, *Just Shoot Me*, et al.)-have some parents thinking that parental censorship, through the installation of a V-chip, is the only solution. Contemporary urban life remains a chief theme, with shows such as *Seinfeld* (satire), *NYPD Blue* (gritty realism), and *ER* (life-and-death situations). At the same time, a profusion of educational programs, such as those found on cable-TV networks dedicated to learning-the History Channel, Discovery Channel, A&E-have been used to enhance both at-home and in-class study.

During the 1980s, technological advances promoted TV usage in a multitude of ways. Videocassette recorders skyrocketed in popularity, adding another dimension to the family TV. Meanwhile, many viewers began to enjoy renting

and watching pretaped movies at home. Satellites also gained importance in distributing television programs to cable systems, thus opening the door to truly international viewing of virtually all American programming. During the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein could watch CNN for updates on Operation Desert Storm. Later on, loyal Jay Leno fans around the globe could find out every sordid detail related to "Monicagate."

In 1994, a standard was agreed upon for high-definition television (HDTV) transmission, which produces sharp pictures and excellent sound. With the rapid advancement of electronics, however, it seems that the cost of upgrading to high-definition digital television (DTV)-\$5 million per station to switch from analog to digital-is the only remaining impasse. For all its implementation problems, digital TV should one day be as revolutionary as was the move years ago to digitize text, which led to the computerization of society and the new methods of communications provided by the Internet. The flexibility of the digital TV signal has opened up a range of possibilities that few of its inventors ever dreamed of. Meanwhile, America Online is offering consumers its own version of Internet television even though the future of Web TV currently appears unclear. Perhaps one day we will have virtually all our communications, entertainment, education, financial, shopping, and business needs met through the Internet.

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