

# TV-home entertainment for home-centered era

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Television inherited the mantle of the movies as the most prominent and pervasive medium in American popular culture, and we are in the midst of a heated debate about its possible effects.

It is sometimes hard to remember that similar debates were carried on with the introduction of other technological innovations—the railroad, the telephone, the automobile, the movies.

Of course, television's impact on society may be so much greater than that of any other device as to make comparisons irrelevant. The statistics of television use are staggering. The television set in the average American home is now turned on more than six hours a day. Children spend more time watching television than in any other activity except sleeping. Many Americans use television as their sole source of news.

TELEVISION IS blamed for causing children to become more aggressive. Television is blamed for leading viewers to perceive society as violent. Television is blamed for lowering college admission test scores.

Television is blamed for a decline in reading, for making children passive. Television is accused of turning America into a nation of sheep.

Anything that has happened in the past quarter-century that people do not like has been blamed on television. They have been less inclined to give the television credit for good things—an increase in cosmopolitanism, for example, or a decline in racial pre-



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judice, for which television, as a rich source of information about other peoples and places, may have played a part.

How you judge television may depend on what you think about the direction of American society in the past 25 years. But no matter what your verdict, the odds are very great that you watch it daily and would not like to live without it even for a very short time.

TELEVISION BECAME the primary medium of American popular culture during a suburban era.

Although TV had been developed technologically in the late 1920s and 1930s, it was not until after World War II, in the late 1940s, that receiving sets were made commercially available to the public.

This was a period of vast suburban expansion. Returning servicemen, aided by federal loans, and many other Americans were able to own homes for the first time. Television became the home entertainment for a home-centered age.

Television became an anthology of all previous forms of American popular entertainment.

From radio, the earlier home medium, it took soap operas, dramatic series, sports events, talk shows and even, to some extent, the news, leaving radio primarily to broadcast music.

From movies it took principally old movies from the studio vaults, and eventually took over the making of what used to be called program pictures—the low budget adventure, mystery, Western and detective movies. It took elements from vaudeville and

variety shows, night club acts, Broadway musicals.

TELEVISION became a cornucopia of entertainment.

People did not have to go out, pay for babysitters, pay for parking, pay for tickets, to be entertained. After the initial cost of the set, television was free.

It was paid for by commercial advertisers, whose messages comprised (and still do) a considerable share of television programming—a minimum of six minutes every hour. Many viewers, moreover, find commercials more entertaining than the programs they interrupt.

There are two opposing perspectives today on the development of television entertainment.

One view is that the Golden Age of television was in the 1950s. In those days, when sets were relatively expensive and the audience was still a minority of Americans, composed mainly of middle-class and well-to-do viewers, serious dramatic programs made up almost half the top-rated shows.

Week after week, on such programs as "Studio One" and "Television Playhouse," viewers could see live dramas written by Reginald Rose, Rod Serling, Paddy Chayefsky and other television playwrights.



Characters such as Edith and Archie Bunker may be part of a Golden Age of television—characters who seem to be real human beings.

## TV's moral ambiguity worse than its violence

By JESSE PITTS  
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Nobody doubts that television has had a powerful impact on our lives, although we are not quite sure how it has impacted. It has probably altered profoundly the political process, but today we are going to concentrate on its social impact.

Certainly families with children have gained in TV a cheap babysitter. Some people say it has made our children grow up more violent adolescents and adults, and for that reason, they are demanding less violence on TV.

On the other hand, it is not uncommon to find that the same people who are so worried about violence on TV, because it promotes violence in the spectator, are convinced that porno is all right because it is a harmless outlet for sexual fantasies. They believe, for instance, that the movie "Pretty Baby" prevents paedophilia while "The Untouchables" promoted assault and murder.

THE DATA, as usual, is slim and contradictory. You can predict the conclusions by knowing who paid for the research.

Personally, I doubt whether the depiction of violence per se promotes violence. What seems more dangerous is the glamorization of murderers and robbers, as in "Bonnie and Clyde," or the glamorization of paedophiles, as in "Pretty Baby." It is the moral ambiguity of the definition that is pernicious rather than the depiction of the act of violence or sex.

As long as porno movies are kept in porno theaters, the damage to our values is minimized, because the porno circuit has no "organizational weight." In fact, it has a negative organizational weight. When people go there, they know it is not their better selves that are being "entertained."

The message is much more insidious when the porno is covered by a great director—Louis

Malle—and gets good review from critics who are afraid of putting down a major personality whose product is shown at the Oakland Mall.

IF ANYBODY wants to see violence on TV, go to Spain. Their TV makes American TV look tame.

Yet one can walk the streets of Barcelona at night in a way one cannot walk the streets of Detroit, even though half the Spanish working class families do not have as much purchasing power as a welfare family of three with food stamps and Medicare.

The fact that a murderer in Detroit has three chances out of four of avoiding prison, plus the near immunity of teenage hoodlums, is a much more influential factor in promoting street violence than is TV.

MEANWHILE, two-thirds of my male students, raised on "The Untouchables," "Mod Squad" and other "violent" shows, deny having had a fist fight since the age of 14.

On the other hand, shoplifting and larceny—as teenage, middle-class phenomena—are epidemic, and this without benefit of TV advertising.

But perhaps we should consider anti-establishmentarianism and the promotion of the "victim" mentality as a form of covert advertising. When the TV message is "enjoy, enjoy" and the bosses are shown to be mean, greedy racists, what is a hip kid to do, nowadays, when he does not have the cash for the latest disco record?

Following this line of thought, TV has probably had a "liberalizing" influence on our mores. Norman Lear, the old lefty of the 1930s and '40s, has been able to propagandize the American public through shows like "All in the Family," "Maude" and "The Jeffersons." Yet the liberalizing impact is not that certain.

Some research shows that Mike and his McGo-

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For comedy, there were performers like Ernie Kovacs, Lucille Ball, Sid Caesar, Milton Berle, Groucho Marx, Jackie Gleason, Bob Hope and Ed Sullivan offered variety hours. Edward R. Murrow pioneered with news documentaries.

As television became increasingly a mass medium reaching all elements of society, according to this view, it tended to value quantity over quality. Programs were tailored for the highest possible ratings, in order to attract advertisers and increase revenue.

Networks became copycats. If Westerns proved popular, they flooded the screen with cowboys; if crime and mystery caught on, there was a glut of cops and detectives.

THE GOLDEN AGE, as others see it, is with us now.

It began in the early 1970s when several situation comedies broke through the old stereotypes and restrictions that previously limited television only to trivial subjects, like mistaken identities or faulty toasters.

The new situation comedy dealt with how people really feel—and with attitudes toward race, sexuality, aging, loneliness.

Producers Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin pioneered by adapting a controversial BBC series, "Till Death Do Us Part," and after some difficulty aired it on CBS as "All in the Family."

Even earlier, Grant Tinker of MTM Enterprises had launched "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," the saga of a career woman coping with life in the big city.

Out of these producers and shows have come much of the significant comedy programming of the 1970s—"Sanford and Son," "Maude," "The



### Mirror of American Life

Jeffersons," "The Bob Newhart Show," "Rhoda," "Phyllis" and many more.

Almost any regular television viewer can name a dozen or more characters from these programs. They seem as familiar as neighbors; indeed, we may spend more time with them than we do with our neighbors.

THIS IS A point not to be taken lightly.

Archie and Edith Bunker, Lou Grant, Ted Baxter, Mary Richards, Maude and Walter and others have been coming into our homes regularly for years. They represent something new in American entertainment.

Movie stars like Garbo and Bogart were distant, magical figures. Earlier television comics like Jackie Gleason in "The Honeymooners" and Lucille Ball in "I Love Lucy" were comedy stars first, fictional characters second.

In the case of contemporary situation comedies, we relate more to the characters than to the actors. They seem real human beings, whose struggles and problems recapitulate and illuminate our own.

THE SUCCESS of situation comedy characters in entering our lives is seen by critics of television as one further example of the medium's dangers. It

is as if television's fictions seem more real to us than reality itself.

There is also continuing concern that the steady diet of situation comedies, soap operas, game shows, movies and action-adventure series that the commercial networks offer—popular as they may be with the mass audience—barely scratches the surface of television's potential.

In an attempt to develop this potential, the federal government in 1967 established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and organized existing educational and non-commercial stations into a national network, the Public Broadcasting Service.

The public television schedule offers British series like "Upstairs, Downstairs," foreign movies and documentaries. In recent years, more federal funding has been available for American dramatic productions for television, resulting in such significant programs as the "Visions" series of dramas, "The American Short Story" series and "The Adams Chronicles."

Perhaps the most important—and certainly the most popular—public television offerings have been the educational and non-commercial programs produced by Children's Television Workshop, "Sesame Street" and "The Electric Company."

Television's legacy to American society remains in dispute. If you have read this far, it may indicate at least that television has not eroded your desire to read—when the subject is television.

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