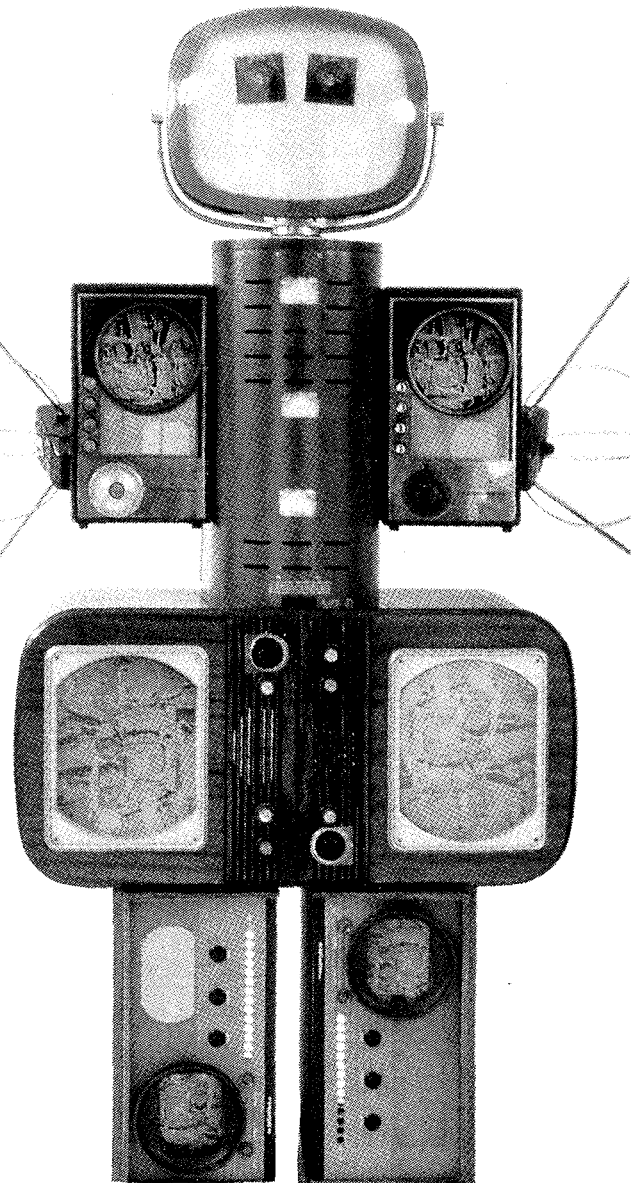

TV & AMERICAN CULTURE

"I hate television. I hate it as much as peanuts," Orson Welles once observed. "But I can't stop eating peanuts." Like it or not, most other Americans are just as hooked. As our three contributors demonstrate, no other single force since World War II has done more to reshape American society than the Tube. Television is so pervasive, Douglas Gomery shows, that defining its influence is as difficult as drawing a circle around the air we breathe. Todd Gitlin proposes that television is America's school for morals and manners, one that has reeducated our national character into something it never was before. Frank McConnell, in cautious defense of TV, suggests that its critics more often than not exaggerate the hazards of the medium in order to advance their own social agendas. Television meanwhile grows more and more like the late Orson Welles—every day a bit bigger than it was the day before.



*Nam June Paik's Family of
Robot: Mother (1986)*

AS THE DIAL TURNS

BY DOUGLAS GOMERY

It was a defining moment in American history, albeit one run over and over, like an episode of "Star Trek." Into the tidy living room of a young family's suburban home, usually just days before Christmas, came the electronic marvel. The old mahogany radio set, already seeming a bit antique, was shoved into a corner, and two hefty deliverymen struggled to position the bulky new console across from the couch, between the easy chairs. Everyone gathered around as the first test pattern came on. Then the fun began—perhaps with giggling children on "Howdy Doody" or the Top 40 beat of "Dick Clark's American Bandstand" or the stars on "Ed Sullivan's Toast of the Town" or the magnificent coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Thus was a new age born.

Pictures flowing through the air. That miracle had been much sought after and anticipated since movies and radio transformed American popular culture during the first quarter of the 20th century. And like those two earlier marvels of mass communication, and with many times more power, television has so refashioned and reshaped our lives that it is hard to imagine what life was like before it.

During the Great Depression and World War II, families gathered in crowded city apartments or in the parlors of distant farms to listen to the radio. But TV was instantly and unalterably linked with midcentury America's rising suburban ideal. Indeed, certain TV offerings, such as "Ozzie and Harriet," became synonymous with the ideal. Along with closely cropped lawns, two cars in the driveway, and a single earner so well paid that no one else needed to work, TV became a symbol of the "good life" in modern America.

The TV boom was delayed first by the war and then for several years after 1948 by what

might be called "technical difficulties." By 1948, the number of stations in the United States had reached 48, the cities served 23, and sales of TV sets had passed sales of radios. Coaxial cables also made possible fledgling networks, relaying live shows (there was no tape then) from the East to the Midwest. But as more and more stations went on the air it became clear that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had not allowed enough geographic separation between stations to prevent serious interference. The agency froze TV-station allotments and redrew the maps. It was only on April 14, 1952—with the FCC's Sixth Report and Order—that TV as we know it first began to flow to all sections of the United States.

So rapid and complete was TV's friendly takeover of the American imagination that when Lucille Ball gave birth to her second son the "same" night in January 1953 that her Lucy Ricardo character on "I Love Lucy" gave birth to "Little Ricky," it caused a national sensation, including an article in *Life* and a cover story in *TV Guide*, itself newly born.

Ubiquity may be the medium's leading characteristic. In 1950 far less than 10 percent of Americans owned sets. Those were folks lucky enough to have the \$500 that a black-and-white receiver cost at a time when \$3,000 was considered a good yearly salary and \$5,000 would buy a splendid Cape Cod in Levittown. But TV's allure was powerful. By 1955 about two-thirds of the nation's households had a set; by the end of the 1950s there was hardly a home in the nation without one. By 1961, when Newton Minow, the newly appointed chairman of the FCC, proclaimed television a "vast wasteland," there were more



Parents and children seated around a television set became, during the 1950s, an American icon for prosperity and wholesome family values.

homes in the United States with TV than with indoor plumbing. In less than a generation, the TV set had gone from being an expensive, somewhat experimental gadget to a home appliance considered more indispensable than the toaster or washing machine. With the possible exception of the videocassette recorder (VCR) in the 1980s, no other electronic gadget has been adapted so widely and with such alacrity.

Today, 99 percent of all households possess at least one TV, and most have two or more. There are nearly 200 million sets in use. More American homes have TVs than have telephones. (One study of the tiny minority of people who spurn TV found that the archetypal naysayer is a university professor of literature, wedded professionally to the printed word.) We take them to the beach, plug them into our automobiles, and even strap them on our wrists when

we go jogging. Now a company called Virtual Vision promises to make TV even more omnipresent. Its \$900 wraparound TV eyeglasses can be worn anywhere; they project an image that appears to float about 10 feet in front of the wearer.

In the space of only a few decades, watching TV seems to have become one of life's essential activities—along with eating, sleeping, and working. TV has become the Great American Companion. Two-thirds of Americans regularly watch television while eating dinner. The A. C. Nielsen Company, which monitors sets in a carefully selected nationwide sample of 4,000 households, regularly reports that the TV is on about seven

and a half hours a day—virtually all of the time remaining if one subtracts eight hours for sleep and eight hours for work. Collectively, the nation tunes in to a staggering 250 billion hours per year. If one assumes that the average hourly wage is \$10, that time is worth \$2.5 trillion. If we could collect just \$1 per hour we could wipe out the yearly federal budget deficit.

Figuring out who is actually watching the tube and when he or she is doing so is tricky. Nielsen's method shows when a set is on and what channel it is tuned to, but many studies have found that during much of the time the TV is on, no one is watching. Researchers have developed People Meters to try to determine who is watching, but these gadgets rely on viewers to "punch in" when they sit down in front of the set and "punch out" when they leave—hardly a foolproof method. As best as researchers can determine, the average person "watches" about four hours per day, varying

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by season (more in winter, less in summer), age (kids and senior citizens view the most), and race (African Americans and Hispanics watch more than whites).^{*} When are the most Americans watching? Prime time (8 to 11 P.M., Eastern Standard Time) on Sunday nights in the depths of winter.

TV is one of the things that bring us together as a nation. Thanks to television, the Super Bowl has become our greatest national spectacle, watched in at least 40 million homes. (By contrast, Ross Perot's first "town meeting," which was wildly successful compared to other political broadcasts, was watched in only 11 million homes.) Such peak moments generate mind-boggling revenues. Advertisements during the 1993 Super Bowl, which NBC sold out a month before kickoff, cost in the neighborhood of \$28,000 per second. Nevertheless, because virtually the entire nation assembles to watch this single game in January, advertisers such as Pepsi, Budweiser, and Gillette gladly ante up, and others have found it a perfect showcase for major new products. It was during Super Bowl XVIII in January 1984 that Apple introduced the world to the Macintosh personal computer. (The Los Angeles Raiders beat the Washington Redskins, 38 to 9.)

TV is a multibillion-dollar business. Sales of new sets alone come to about \$7 billion per year. Advertising revenues amount to more than \$30 billion, still collected in large part by the major broadcast networks—ABC, NBC, CBS, and, since 1986, Fox. Prime-time ads generate some \$4 billion, and billions more come from morning, soap opera, news, and late-night offerings. Cable TV in 1992 received ad revenues in excess of \$3 billion, and another \$2 billion came from subscribers who paid for the privilege of watching its millions of advertisements.

Buying and selling television shows was a \$25-billion business last year, principally

^{*}African Americans and Hispanics watch more TV than whites because they have lower incomes, on average. TV is, after all, just about the cheapest form of entertainment available. Only as one gets richer can one afford the luxury of fancy meals, nights at the theater, and other forms of diversion.

done by the major Hollywood studios. TV shows, from the latest episodes of "Roseanne" to 1960s-vintage series such as "Bewitched," are also one of the nation's biggest exports. If once it was said that the sun never set on the British Empire, now it never sets on "I Love Lucy." The U.S. trade in sitcoms and soap operas shaves some \$4 billion per year off America's chronic trade deficit, a contribution exceeded only by that of the aerospace industry.

The TV industry itself is split in two. As a result of antitrust policy decisions during the Nixon administration, the networks are barred from owning Hollywood studios, and the studios are barred from owning networks—with one famous exception. To promote the development of a fourth network, the FCC in 1986 allowed Fox to create a limited TV network while owning a major Hollywood studio, Twentieth Century-Fox. As a rule, the networks can only show (not own) TV's valuable series. These complex rules are now being phased out and should be gone by the end of the century. Then we are likely to see a spate of mergers joining Hollywood studios and the TV networks.

Despite all the hype and hoopla that attend its doings, TV is a mouse among industries, a relatively small collection of enterprises whose earnings, even if lumped together, are still smaller than those of either Exxon or General Motors alone. TV's cultural influence likewise tends to be exaggerated. The medium is so pervasive that whenever critics confront a vexing social problem, they blame TV. Crime on the rise? It must be TV's fault. Scholastic Aptitude Test scores dropping? Blame the boob tube. Now it is said that TV-induced passivity is literally killing us. A recent study in the *American Journal of Health Promotion* concluded that couch potatoes are twice as likely to develop high levels of serum cholesterol as those who rarely watch television.

Our anxiety about TV increases as the nation changes. More and more children in

TV in America

There are more TV sets in the United States than there are bathtubs or showers. There are more American homes with television than with indoor plumbing.

An average American living to age 65, at present levels of TV viewing, will have spent nine years of his life watching TV.

When children aged four to six were surveyed, "Which do you like better, TV or your daddy?" 54 percent said "TV."

Why is there no Channel 1 on your television set?

The FCC took the frequency away from TV broadcasters in May 1948 for use by the military.

Twenty-seven million people watched the first televised presidential inauguration of Dwight Eisenhower on January 20, 1953. It was upstaged, though, the night before, when 44 million people tuned in for the birth of "Little Ricky" Ricardo on "I Love Lucy."

A 1979 Roper Poll of 3,001 couples showed that the leading cause of marital disputes was disagreement about which TV shows to watch.

If you were guilty of every crime shown on American TV in just one week, you'd go to jail for 1,600 years. Unless you had Perry Mason for your attorney.

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this divorce-ridden society watch TV unsupervised. "Behold every parent's worst nightmare: the six-year-old TV addict," says *Time* magazine—who takes Bart Simpson as a role model, one might add.

Violence on television is probably the public's main concern. A recent Times-Mirror survey found that 80 percent of adults think that television violence is harmful to society. More than 1,000 studies have been carried out to search for links between TV viewing and violent behavior. Under pressure from Congress, the networks recently agreed to provide warnings before their most violent offerings. One mother declared in the *Washington Post* recently: "I find myself curiously unmoved by television producers covering themselves with a First

Amendment flag. As far as I'm concerned, they have abrogated their rights to freedom of speech by being so resolutely unconcerned about the impact of what they put on television. That includes the 100,000 acts of violence . . . that the average child will have watched by the end of elementary school."

In 1992 the American Psychological Association concluded that televised violence can sometimes stir aggressive behavior in certain kinds of disturbed viewers. Most researchers probably would concur. But this is a narrow case. Whether video violence has a significant impact on the general public is quite another matter, and the pile of studies published so far has not produced a consensus. It is clear that heavy viewers of televised violence are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior than are light viewers, all other things being equal. But it may be that people with a predisposition toward violence are

more likely to watch action/adventure programming to begin with, not that watching makes them become violent.

To regard some of the more extreme claims about the impact of TV skeptically is not to dismiss the challenge posed by the medium. By the time an average American child enters the first grade, she or he has seen at least 5,000 hours of TV and by all accounts has fallen in love with the medium. New video diversions soon appear, such as Nintendo (which has sold an astonishing 25 million machines in the United States). According to a 1991 National Assessment of Educational Progress study, nearly three of every four fourth graders admit to watching more than three hours of TV every day. By the end of

high school, teens have seen some 19,000 hours of TV—and an equal number of televised homicides. We do not need hundreds of studies to know that the time children spend spaced out in front of the tube is time they are not devoting to homework or baseball or daydreaming or any number of other more worthwhile activities.

There are legitimate fears about the effects of TV on young children. But once children learn how to use TV—how to pick acceptable shows to watch, for example, or to substitute videotapes when nothing good is on—only excess seems to prove harmful. Putting a positive spin on this, critics such as Ellen Wartella, dean of the College of Communication at the University of Texas, argue that the accumulated “effects research” suggests that classes in “visual literacy” for the young are a better bet than more radical measures to control what is aired.

Technology, meanwhile, is rapidly changing the very nature of the television challenge. In the very near future, for example, it even promises a partial solution—a technological fix—to the problem of children’s excessive TV watching. Soon consumers will be able to purchase digital TV sets that can be selectively “deprogrammed,” allowing adults to block certain programs from their children’s eyes and ears.

For 30 years after the FCC’s landmark Sixth Report and Order, TV changed very little. During the last 10 years, however, it has been transformed. Roughly two of three households are now connected to cable television, and that proportion is steadily growing. Cable households have access, on average, to 30 networks rather than the traditional three.

TV Around the World

The Japanese watch more TV than anyone (U.S. viewers are a close second). In Japan, the national TV craze is called ichioko-sohakuchi-ka or “the complete idiotization of 100 million people.”

Iceland, not generally considered a repressive country, has a TV-free day every Thursday “to reduce disruption to family life.”

Sesame Street is so popular in Pago Pago that the government once considered naming the island’s main street after it.

Bonanza is the most widely syndicated TV series. It has 250 million viewers in 85 countries.

A UNESCO Study found that TV-owners worldwide sleep an average of 13 minutes less per night than non-owners.

TV was banned in South Africa until 1975. The government was afraid it might threaten the precarious apartheid system there. Even as late as 1988, TV sets cost double what they would elsewhere to keep them out of the homes of black citizens.

A generation ago, five of six viewers tuned into one of the Big Three networks; today only three of six do. The medium, in other words, is now more diverse. And we have changed not only what we watch but the way we watch it. Armed with remote controls, another relatively new piece of technology, viewers now “graze” or “surf” across cable’s never-ending channels, from all-documentary formats (Discovery) to channels aimed at African Americans (Black Entertainment Network), from an alphabet soup of movie channels (AMC, TNT, TBS, and HBO) to all-weather and all-consumer news. We are promised all-crime, fashion, military, book, and (horror of horrors!) game-show channels in the near future. We can even shop by cable TV—and we do so to the tune of \$2.2 billion annually. Soon, in all likelihood, we will do our banking and pay our bills through TV as well.

It was not only cable that overthrew the Big Three and transformed the TV experience. During the 1980s, the VCR took America by storm, occupying only one of every five house-

holds in 1985 but four of five today. Last year Americans rented an amazing 3.5 billion videos, which works out to an average of one a week for each household. Videotape rentals are now a \$12-billion industry.

Impossible as it may seem, more technological change is coming. By the end of the century we will have digital high-definition television with movie-quality images, and in the next century, if not sooner, we will acquire the ability to summon (for a fee) an electronic newspaper on our screens and search through the biggest libraries in the world for information.

Already, these far-reaching changes have injected an undemocratic element into what was once in many ways a most democratic medium. Everybody could watch Neil Armstrong walk on the moon or Richard Nixon tender his resignation. That was because a TV set by the early 1970s cost only a third as much as the first '50s sets had. Cable TV offers no such bargains. The average monthly bill is \$30 and climbing, despite recent congressional attempts to roll back prices. As a result, poor Americans subscribe to cable at half the rate of their wealthier counterparts, going without a whole slew of information and entertainment, from C-SPAN to local-access TV to ESPN. Many also go without VCRs. Add in the cost of videotape rentals and new gadgets (such as VCR Plus) and watching TV can suddenly become a

\$1,000-per-year habit.

It is typical of the American attitude toward TV that, much as we may criticize the medium, we are also troubled by the fact that some Americans do not have equal access to it. Television has become the greatest entertainment and information machine of all time. Love it or leave it, we all—rich and poor, the powerful and the underclass—use it to educate ourselves in various ways and to define a common culture. Nielsen's Top 10 tells us what is "in." "Murphy Brown" elicits the wrath of former Vice President Dan Quayle. "Monday Night Football" defines the quintessential male-bonding night at the bar. "Jeopardy" teases Ph.D. candidates away from their dissertations to see if they are really smart. "Sixty Minutes," the single show virtually everyone agrees is entertaining and enlightening, has become as a consequence the most popular program in TV's history—and surely the one we all hope never to be caught on.

Television is like the fabled uncle who came to dinner and never left: It is difficult finally to decide how we feel about it. In one recent survey people were asked how much money it would take to convince them to give up TV for a year. Almost half refused for anything less than \$1 million! After a half-century-long love-hate relationship, we are just not sure if the story of TV in America will have a happy ending. But we do know that TV—probably in some advanced version we have yet to imagine, and surely not as all-consuming or as controlling as its current critics believe it to be—will be forever with us.

