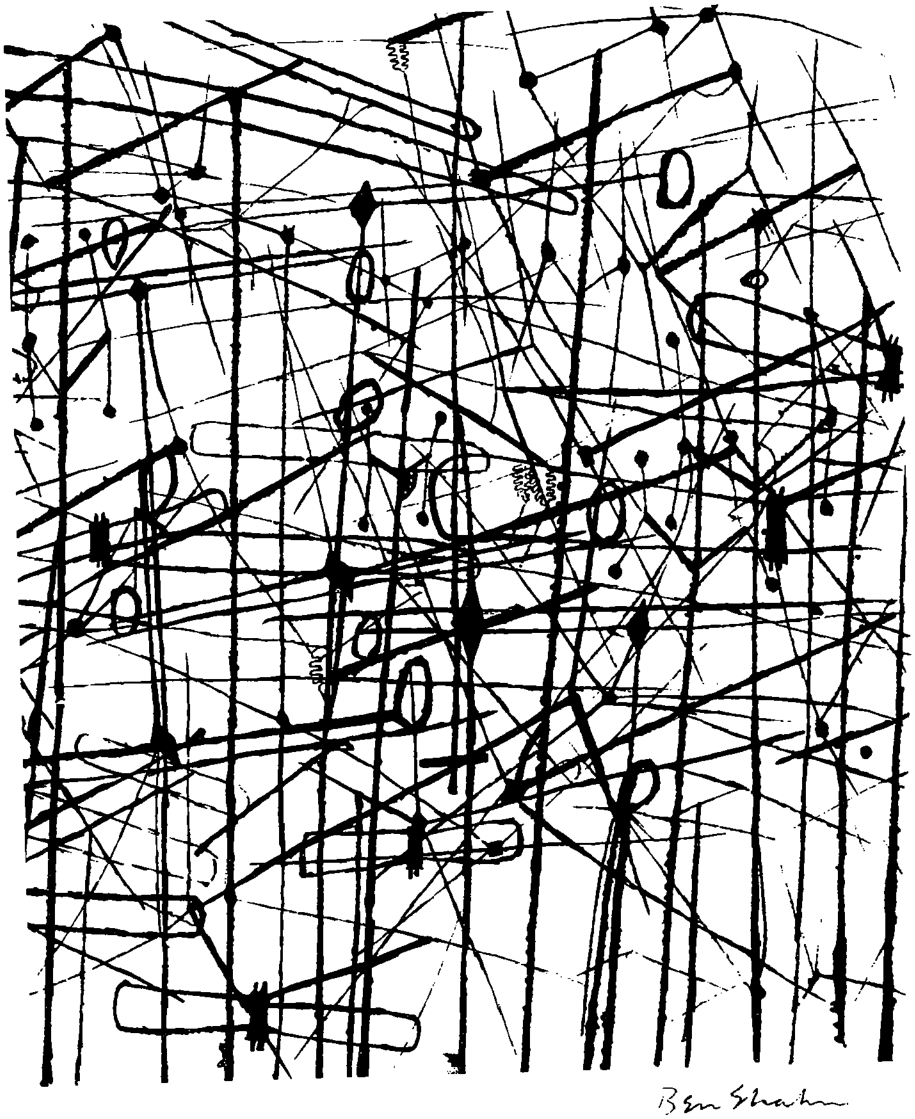

By 1953, when America's spreading roof-cover of TV aerials caught the imagination of artist Ben Shahn (detail above), 20 million U.S. households had television sets, and Walter Annenberg had launched his new TV Guide, *now America's best-selling magazine. Today, 98 percent of all American families own at least one TV set, more than own refrigerators.*

Television in America

"There has never been anything like the intimate relationship . . . between the American people and its television broadcasters," observed critic Michael Arlen. Watching television is the one thing almost all Americans do, and if the experts are right, they will be doing more of it every year for some time to come. Inevitably, TV has become a focus of much scholarly inquiry. Does television shape U.S. voting patterns or sway public opinion? Has it fostered a decline in literacy among the young? Is it a spur to violence, to sexism, to promiscuity? Here, Lawrence Lichty explains how TV acquired its present character; Stuart Shorenstein looks at public television's uncertain future; Stuart Brotman weighs the probable impact of cable TV, videodiscs, and other new technologies; and Joel Swerdlow surveys the research on television's effects on the way we view the world and live our lives.

SUCCESS STORY

by Lawrence W. Lichty

In many households in the United States during the early 1950s, Father came home one night, often just before Christmas, and placed a television set in the living room where the radio had stood. It came sooner to families in big cities and suburbs, sooner to people with higher incomes, and sooner to those living in the Northeast, where most of the new TV stations were. Because postwar America was the most affluent place on Earth, television, like the automobile, eventually came to everybody.

In one sense, television seems to be the world's first dispensable major technology. Theoretically, the complex industrial societies of the United States, Western Europe, and Japan could function quite well without it. This is not true of the printing press, the telephone, the radio, the digital computer. Were any of these to disappear, our economy, our public administration, and our defense system would be thrown into chaos.

Radio Days

Yet I would argue that television has also become essential, by the very fact that it has been around for 30 years, and we have adjusted to it, allowed it to alter our perceptions and choreograph the rhythms of daily life. Television, if only by default, is one of the tools modern societies now must use to sustain themselves. In many countries, as in our own, television and the central government are the only *national* institutions. Television is a baby sitter, an initiator of conversations, a transmitter of culture, a custodian of traditions. It is the creator—and showcase—of heroes. Psychologically, TV performs other, ineffable functions. If it were suddenly to disappear, what would happen to the 20 percent of Americans who watch 12 hours of television a day? One need not concede that TV is "good" to recognize that getting rid of it, like keeping it, entails a certain cost.

Television's roots go deep. It is the inheritor of functions once performed by serialized novels, by newspapers and photographs, by movies and the phonograph. But its content, like a froth, exists on the surface of things. The "substance" of TV is a derivative amalgam flavored by Madison Avenue and Hollywood, endlessly percolating the grounds of popular culture: the fiction of women's magazines, the clichés of newspaper headlines, the plotlines of best sellers, the fleeting tyrannies of political fads, the shifting banalities of the conventional wisdom. All of this television ingests, then throws back, reshaped and reinforced and trivialized. It happens over and over again, day after day. In relation to American society, television is always in the same place. It possesses a peculiar, implacable kind of stability.

For 30 years, television has been a flickering constant in American life. The TV industry and its structure; the nature and quality of television programs; the ratings system; the raised

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From A Pictorial History of Television *by Irving Settel and William Laas. Copyright © 1969 by Irving Settel and William Laas. Used by permission of Grosset & Dunlap, Inc.*

In 1882, illustrator Albert Robida tantalized the French public with visions of a sight-and-sound device much like television. Above: his version of what, during the Vietnam era, came to be called the "living room war."

eyebrow of federal regulation—remarkably, none of these has changed, in its essential lineaments, since commercial TV emerged after World War II. Television thrives within a constellation of forces on which it depends but over which it has only limited influence. Its character, in effect, has been locked into place. Television might be a different medium if broadcasters did not have to rely for their revenues on advertising, but they do. Television would certainly be different if the audience were different (imagine the result if only people with mortgages or Ph.D.s in physics owned TV sets) or if it had been the offspring of the federal government, or even the Ford Foundation, instead of network radio.

Nothing was so important to the development of television as radio. Radio-as-progenitor gave television a voice, a code of conduct, and a way to make a living, just as radio itself had drawn its form and content from vaudeville, the concert hall, and the newspaper.

In 1923, when émigré engineer Vladimir Zworykin, late of the Russian Army Signal Corps, sought his patent for the first electronic TV tube (the iconoscope), the radio broadcasting business was growing rapidly. In 1922, the number of U.S. radio stations rose from fewer than 30 to 570.* The Radio Corporation of America (RCA), founded in 1919 as a U.S. government-promoted holding company for radio patents, grossed $50 million in 1924 from sales of radios.

Uncle Sam Steps In

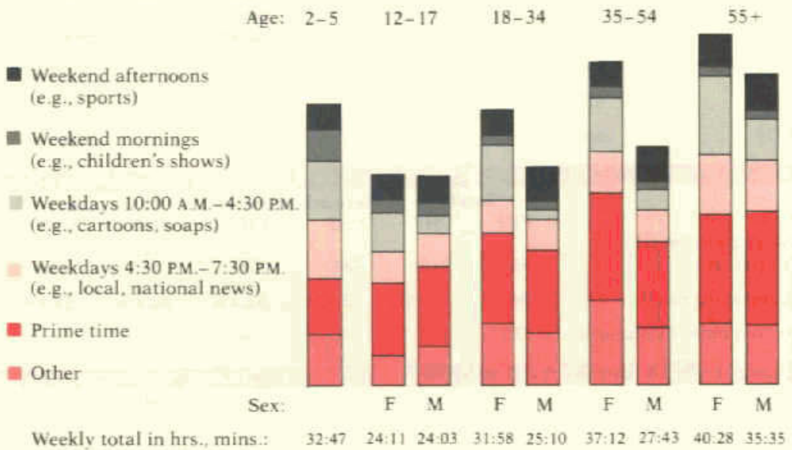
By the time of the Great Crash, a network structure was in place. Building on several years of experiments, RCA, through its subsidiary, the National Broadcasting Company, inaugurated a "Red" Network in 1926 by providing music and various talk shows to 21 affiliate stations. A second NBC "Blue" network was started a few months later. (NBC was ordered to divest itself of one network in 1943, and the Blue network became what is now ABC.) In 1929, cigar-fortune heir William S. Paley, then 28, took control of a floundering network, the Columbia Phonograph Broadcasting System—now CBS and still controlled by Paley. Together, the networks provided about 130 hours of programming a week in 1931. For a quarter century, the networks would dominate radio programming.

As the radio audience grew, advertisers turned increasingly to the airwaves, although many found the notion of "ether advertising" distasteful. "The very thought of such a thing," wrote the author of a 1922 *Radio Broadcasting* article, "is sufficient to give any true radio enthusiast the cold shakes." Yet, barring government subsidies, or a rush of Andrew Carnegies to endow stations, advertising was the only long-term way to pay for radio. In time, advertisers became the chief source not only of radio revenues but also of radio programming (e.g., the *Eveready Hour*, the *Cliquot Club Eskimos*, the *General Motors Party*), cementing forever the link between broadcasting and commerce.

Throughout radio's golden age, Washington stepped in occasionally from the sidelines, mainly to prune a tree that was otherwise doing nicely. With the blessing of most broadcasters, Congress in 1927 created the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) to straighten out a chaotic technical situation and assume responsibility for station licensing. The FRC eliminated some channels and consolidated others, then allowed radio's development to proceed—with the proviso that use of a channel was

*Much of radio remained "amateur" throughout the 1920s, with programming sometimes patched together minutes before broadcast time. Most stations with any real "staff" were owned by department stores and other retail outfits that sold radios, or by radio manufacturers themselves (e.g., Westinghouse, General Electric).

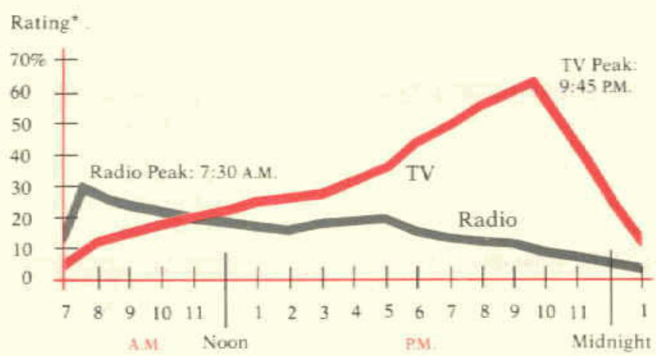
HOW TV VIEWING BREAKS DOWN, BY AGE, SEX, AND TIME



Source: A.C. Nielsen Company.

TV viewing activity is distributed disproportionately (above). Women, for example, watch more than men, older people more than younger (except children). Television has pushed radio's prime time from the evening to the early morning hours (below).

RADIO LISTENERS VS. TELEVISION WATCHERS



*The radio rating in this chart reflects the percent of all persons with radios who are listening at any given time; the television rating is based on the number of households watching television as a percentage of all TV households.

Sources: Arbitron; A.C. Nielsen Company.

THE TELEVISION INDUSTRY

TV Sets and TV Households

	TV sets sold to retailers (millions)	TV households (millions)	As % of all households	% with color TV
1950	7.4	3.9	9.0%	0.0%
1960	5.8	45.8	87.1	.7
1979	16.6	76.3	98.0	81.0

Television Stations in 1978

	Total		Network-affiliated		Independent	
	VHF	UHF	VHF	UHF	VHF	UHF
No. of commercial TV stations	515	210	484	128	31	82
% reporting profits	94.4%	73.1%	93.1%	82.1%	82.1%	57.1%
No. of public TV stations	112	168	—	—	—	—

Commercial TV Employment in 1978

	No. of employees	Total payroll (billions)
Total	70,805	$1.4
ABC, CBS, NBC	14,542	.4
Local station total	56,263	1.0

Television and Advertising

	Total U.S. adv. expenditures (billions)	Total TV adv. (billions)	TV adv. as % of all adv.	Magazine adv. as % of all adv.	Newspaper adv. as % of all adv.
1950	$ 5.7	$ .2	3.0%	8.4%	36.3%
1960	12.0	1.6	13.6	7.6	30.8
1979	49.7	10.2	20.5	5.9	29.4

Top Five TV Advertisers in 1979

1	Procter and Gamble	$289,600,000
2	General Foods	203,200,000
3	American Home Products	122,600,000
4	General Motors	117,300,000
5	Bristol-Myers	117,000,000

Cable TV Penetration

	No. of households with cable (millions)	As % of all TV households
1969	3.6	6.3%
1974	8.7	13.1
1979	16.8	22.0

Sources: *FCC TV Broadcast Financial Data; Television Factbook; Advertising Age,* April 30, 1980; *Cable Television Developments,* Oct. 1980; A. C. Nielsen Company; Cobett Steinberg, *TV Facts,* Facts on File, Inc., 1980; Public Broadcasting Service.

being conferred "but not the ownership thereof." The regulators were not reformers. In any event, the FRC found, as its successor, the Federal Communications Commission (1934) would find, that life and death power over individual stations did not bring much leverage over the system as a whole.

By the time of the Depression, as radio became a vehicle of popular entertainment, the broadcasting industry had acquired the shape it now generally maintains. Stations were organized into networks, AT&T "longlines" linked them up, and advertisers paid for programming. Broadcasters were experimenting with program formats that have since become familiar: news, drama, comedy, music, and variety shows. Politicians began using radio to publicize their conventions, FDR to broadcast his "fireside chats." Radio, with its capacity for virtually instantaneous nationwide communication, had become America's first *universal* mass medium.

The TV Age Begins

Slowly, working from the inside out, television displaced radio. It took radio's programming, its networks, its audience, its advertisers, its talent, its executives, its benign relationship with the FCC, and its way of doing business. Over time, the TV moguls made some changes, but the basic formula remained.

Television was radio's child. While the idea was not new—*Scientific American* had used the word *television* in 1907—it was not until the early 1920s that such pioneers as Charles F. Jenkins and Philo T. Farnsworth in the United States and John L. Baird in Britain reported the first successful video transmissions. The radio networks built on this foundation. NBC televised images as early as 1927 and in 1931 began broadcasting from an experimental station, W2XB5, on the 53rd floor of the Empire State Building. Atop the Chrysler Building, CBS soon had its own experimental TV station.

After World War II, the electronics industry finally got television out of the infant stage. Television sets reappeared on the market in 1946, costing an average of $280. Within two years, four networks—ABC, CBS, NBC, and the short-lived Dumont network—were in operation. By 1952, 108 stations were on the air.* Of these, more than half were owned by a company that

*From 1948 to 1952, the FCC imposed a "freeze" on new TV station applications while it studied certain technical problems—allocation of stations to various market areas, use of the ultra-high frequency (UHF) band, color television, and other matters. Following the precedent set by the Federal Radio Commission 25 years earlier, the FCC then allowed the development of television to proceed. Within one year after the end of the freeze, the FCC authorized creation of more than 400 new TV stations.

operated an AM radio station before 1925, half were owned by a company that owned another TV station, and four out of five were owned by a company that owned a radio station in the same market as its TV station. Ninety percent of the stations were showing a profit. TV's advance was abetted by skillful promotion. "How can a little girl describe a bruise deep inside?" asked one television manufacturer's advertisement. "No, your daughter won't ever tell you the humiliation she's felt in begging those precious hours of television from a neighbor."

A Tyranny of Fads

Radio was the obvious source of much television programming. Most of the radio stars of 1950—Martin and Lewis, Lucille Ball, Roy Rogers, Groucho Marx, and scores of others—became TV stars a few years later. To this ready-made menu, the networks added movies and a bigger dollop of sports than radio, lacking pictures, had ever been able to sustain. Puppet shows and, later, cartoons drew young children into the broadcast audience, just as action/adventure serials had done for radio. While television news combined the traditions, good and bad, of radio and newsreel reporting, TV made journalism a more prominent feature of broadcasting than it had ever been.

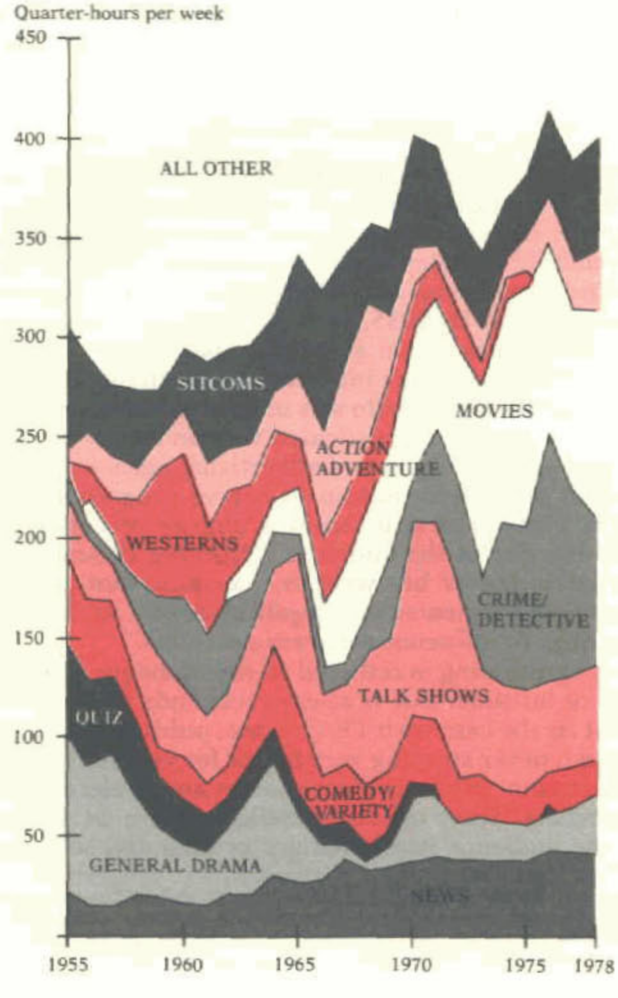
Television programming, like that of radio, consists of a finite number of trends mutating within a closed system. Most of them have radio precedents: the courtroom dramas (beginning with *They Stand Accused,* 1949), the "adult" westerns (*Gunsmoke* and *Wyatt Earp,* 1956), the medical dramas (*Ben Casey* and *Dr. Kildare,* 1962), and so on.* "Spinoffs" were not unknown on network radio—the Green Hornet, for instance, was the Lone Ranger's nephew—but television raised parthenogenesis to a science.

If something works, imitate it; if one show soars in popularity, put on others like it; if the ratings fall, take them off. One can study an electrocardiogram of this phenomenon, reflecting the variable vitality of "action" shows, in the incidence of TV violence, which rises and falls but oscillates from a nearly constant level. Few trends, or programs, last very long. In the delayed 1981 season, only 18 out of 80 prime-time network programs had been on for five years or more.

Contrary to the claims of the high-minded, television is not free to break this cycle. Broadcasters are in business not to produce bold, innovative programs but to attract audiences to

*Throughout this essay, the date given for programs is that of the TV "season." Thus, *Dr. Kildare* appeared during the 1962 season, which began in the autumn of 1961.

NETWORK PRIME-TIME PROGRAM TRENDS



Source: Computed by Lawrence W. Lichty, Christopher Sterling, and Susan Leakey. For more details see Christopher Sterling and Timothy Haight, *The Mass Media*, New York: Praeger, 1978.

Not shown on the graph are daytime soap operas (40 hours per week) and weekend sports (17 hours). Both have grown steadily since 1955.

view commercials. Audience taste—what the largest possible audience will stand for—sets television's immutable boundaries. Fred Smith, then director of radio station WLW, identified the fundamental principle in 1923. "The nature of radio programs," he wrote, "eventually will follow demands of economic conditions, which in other words, is but the demand of the public."

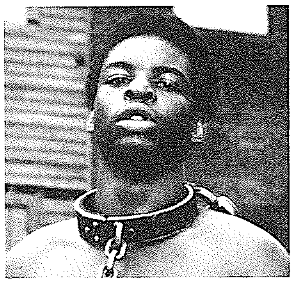
Nielsen's "Black Box"

Most early radio stations kept track of audience response, usually by monitoring the mail and phone. But as advertising increased, so did the accuracy—and importance—of polling. In 1930, Archibald Crossley and his Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting Company began publishing once-a-year ratings based on telephone surveys. By 1935, the C. E. Hooper Company was providing "Hooperatings" on a monthly basis. Seven years later, the A. C. Nielsen Company introduced a mechanical "black box" that could be affixed to radio sets in selected homes to record listening habits. A more sophisticated version is now used to measure TV ratings.* Sponsors and advertising agencies rely heavily on this and other information to cancel programs or develop new ones. Networks and stations charge prices-per-minute based on the size of the audience. "Nothing in American life," author Martin Mayer has written, "certainly not politics, is so democratic, so permeated with egalitarianism, as the use of television ratings to influence program decisions."

TV programming is tethered to the audience. Like a kite, it has a bit of latitude. But it always responds to a tug from the viewers. As is the case with TV violence, public opinion rises and falls, though never straying very far, or for very long, from a glacial mainstream. When audience tastes and preferences change in a superficial way, television reflects them in a superficial way. If the audience itself changes profoundly, so does televi-

*The two largest ratings companies today are the A. C. Nielsen Company and Arbitron, though the latter is concerned exclusively with local ratings. Nielsen produces a weekly National Television Index based on 3,600 homes nationwide. For instant ratings, known as "overnights," Nielsen relies on a sample of 1,800 households in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco. In addition, Nielsen analyzes the data from TV diaries logged by 100,000 viewers across the country to compile its quarterly Nielsen Station Index, which provides local station ratings. Not all members of the TV audience are equal. During prime time, advertisers have their eyes particularly on the middle-income women who still do most of America's shopping. Makers of products for the elderly—denture cream, Geritol, headache remedies—aim for the network news programs, 41 percent of whose audience consists of people aged 55 or older. Toy makers and candy companies dominate the weekend morning children's shows. Commercials tucked into soap operas are for housewives aged 25 to 49. While popular shows attract older men, teens, and children, prime-time programming must hold the 25-to-54 female audience or it will not survive.

THE TOP-RATED SHOWS IN HISTORY



UPI.

*All eight *Roots* episodes scored in the top 50 programs. In order to list other highly rated shows, only the top-ranking segment is included here.

	Scheduled Programs	% of all homes reached
1	Nov. 1980 *Dallas* (Who Shot J.R.?)	53.3
2	Jan. 1977 *Roots* (episode 8)*	51.1
3	Nov. 1976 *Gone With the Wind*—1	47.7
4	Nov. 1976 *Gone With the Wind*—2	47.4
5	Jan. 1978 *Super Bowl XII*	47.2
6	Jan. 1979 *Super Bowl XIII*	47.1
7	Jan. 1970 *Bob Hope Christmas Show*	46.6
8	Jan. 1980 *Super Bowl XIV*	46.3
9	Aug. 1967 *The Fugitive* (last show)	45.9
10	Jan. 1971 *Bob Hope Christmas Show*	45.0

	Special Events	% of all homes reached
1	Nov. 1963 JFK Funeral	96
2	July 1969 Apollo II Moon Landing	94
3	Nov. 1960 Election Night	92
4	July 1965 Gemini IV Space Walk	92
5	Nov. 1964 Election Night	91
6	Aug. 1968 Democratic Convention	90
7	July 1976 Democratic Convention	89
8	Nov. 1956 Election Night	89
9	Aug. 1976 Republican Convention	88
10	Feb. 1962 John Glenn Space Flight	81

Source: A. C. Nielsen Company.

ABC.

All but one of the top 10 scheduled TV programs were broadcast during winter months, when TV-watching is at its peak. Six of the 10 were shown on Sunday, when evening viewing is heaviest.

sion. There are many reasons for the end, in the mid-1950s, of the "Golden Age" of live, often inspired, TV drama. Not the least of these is that television's early core of affluent, urban viewers by then constituted a minority of TV households.

Television did induce, though it did not initiate, one major change in the relationship of advertiser to broadcaster. Throughout most of the radio era, advertisers paid for *and pro-*

duced their own programs. Then, in 1946, CBS radio regularly began producing shows of its own—notably *My Friend Irma* and *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts*—and selling the time to advertisers. The notion was transplanted to television. By 1959, only one-quarter of all prime-time TV shows were produced by advertisers. (Today, the practice survives mainly in soap operas.)

The chief catalyst here was the rising cost of production. A typical hour-long variety show cost only about $6,000 in 1949, but more than $100,000 a decade later. The cost of a 30-minute drama grew from $15,000 in 1952 to more than $100,000 in 1970. Bearing production costs plus network fees represented a big commitment—and an act of faith—by even the wealthiest sponsors. At first advertisers reacted by sharing the costs of a program with one or more other companies. Eventually, they moved out of the business altogether, content to spread their bets and buy time on programs created by the big Hollywood production companies: Paramount, Universal, 20th Century-Fox, Warner Brothers, and Columbia.*

Fish Can't Fly

The decline of advertiser-produced TV coincided with the quiz show scandals—an episode that constitutes a parable of government attempts to regulate the TV industry.

Introduced in 1955, within six months Revlon's *$64,000 Question* was being seen in almost half of all TV households. True to the cycle of imitation described above, prime time was suddenly blinking with sponsor-produced quiz shows, all of them hungrily competing for viewers. By 1957, reports of "rigging" were being investigated. The climax came during congressional hearings in November 1959 when Charles Van Doren, a teacher at Columbia University and an NBC *Today* show celebrity, confessed that he had been briefed on questions and answers while competing on the quiz show, *Twenty One*. "I would give almost anything I have," Van Doren testified, "to reverse the course of my life during the past three years."

Amid a brief public uproar, the FCC in 1960 raised an eyebrow and enjoined the networks to clean house. Then—as atonement, it was implied—FCC Chairman John C. Doerfer proposed that each of the three networks begin providing an hour of public affairs programming each week. The networks agreed. Dur-

*The cost squeeze hit the networks, too. Because an hour-long show was considerably less expensive to produce than two half-hour shows, the networks prudently began to expand their action or dramatic programs into an hour. Four out of five prime-time television shows in 1956 were 30 minutes in length; fewer than half are today.

ing the 1962 season, there were more hours of documentary programming on television than any season before or since—253 hours. Yet, as the memory of the quiz show scandals receded, so, quickly, did the number of documentaries.

The FCC's "prime-time access rule," which went into effect in 1971, has suffered a similar fate. In essence, the rule requires TV stations in the 50 largest markets to carry no more than three hours of network-supplied programming during the prime-time hours of 7:00 to 11:00 P.M. The goal was to promote *local* programming, especially news and public affairs. To a certain extent, the rule was effective: Many stations now broadcast informational programs such as *PM Magazine*. Yet its primary—and unanticipated—effect has been to stimulate the growth of first-run, nationally syndicated quiz shows, created by independent producers. In 1975, two-thirds of the programs on all TV stations in the 7:30–8:00 P.M. time slot consisted of game or quiz shows; all five of the TV stations owned by the NBC network, for example, are currently airing the highly profitable *Family Feud*. Broadcasters have neatly finessed the intent of the access rule while following it to the letter.

One still reads, from time to time, laments in the press or in academic journals about what television "could have been," as if it could have been any different than what it actually became. Its future, as a mass marketing tool, was determined well before its birth, in a very Darwinian sense. A fish cannot fly; it swims.

Some dreamers now hail cable TV and videodiscs as technologies that may finally pull television into an era of "quality" and "innovation." They won't. They may supplant commercial TV just as TV in some ways brushed radio aside. But radio adjusted by becoming more "specialized," and so will network television. The new video media, for their part, will be subject to the very same market forces that shaped radio and television broadcasting. While the audience may have more choices, the proportion of "quality" programming appearing on the home screen will not be much different than it is now. The prospect is not a noble one, but it has, at least, the virtue of familiarity.