GLUED TO THE TUBE

Few would doubt that America has an addiction to watching television. Whether simply out of boredom or being exhausted after a hard day's work, most folks habitually park themselves on the living room couch after dinner and flip on their dependable TV. The average citizen spends five hours a day in front of this mockingly-referred-to device, the 'Boob Tube.' In fact, the average American sees over two million commercials during their lifetime, and consumes twenty-two YEARS of television by age sixty-five! And a notable thirty percent of commercial network programming is devoted exclusively to a variety of advertisements selling products.

When I was younger, I watched much more television than I do today. Other than long-time regular PBS shows such as American Experience and Nova, or various documentaries by Ken Burns, I have not watched commercial television for perhaps twenty years -- back when our daughter was a toddler. Nowadays, my wife and I watch a movie (either borrowed from our local public library, or from our own vast collection of DVDs and VHS tapes) each evening on our television, so a total on the couch of about two hours a day.

As a boy, my earliest memories regarding TV was that the shows were all in black and white. The actual viewing screen was small, but the consol furniture 'box' surrounding it was large and bulky. Television repair men were a common sight, and they came to your house to replace burned out or faulty vacuum tubes or bad wires inside the back of your television -- all of which made your set operate. Back then, once you turned it on, your television had to 'warm-up' for a few minutes before a picture appeared. There were only three channels: ABC, CBS, and NBC. (PBS -- public broadcasting, with no commercials -- came into being later in 1970.)

To receive TV signals, you either needed a large outdoor roof antenna, or a set of 'rabbit ears' -- a small, V-shaped antenna device hooked up to your TV while it rested atop the set. Often, one had to manually move the rabbit ears around a bit to get a clearer picture or better sound -- both of which depended in part on the weather, which could interfere with the signal transmission. Sometimes, even hitting the side of the television with one's hand, or jiggling the entire consol box around a little, could actually improve the reception too!

Television sets had no wireless remote controls until Zenith invented its Space Command in 1956, but I never saw one in anyone's home in our South Side of Chicago neighborhood until the 1960s. You had to physically get up and manually change channels and/or the sound level -- usually with the parents ordering their children to do the annoying but necessary job.

All television stations stopped broadcasting at midnight, after playing the Star-Spangled Banner and showing our national flag waving proudly. A fixed 'test pattern' --consisting of an American Indian in profile, surrounded by several number and letter motifs in circles, along with an odd, fixed humming sound -- was then transmitted over the airwaves until the Farm Report appeared at sunrise as the first new broadcast program.

In September, 1959, the first widely seen color television program, a western series called Bonanza, was shown on NBC. This network picked a bright, colorful, animated peacock as its logo, and boasted that its programs were now "...brought to you in Living Color..." Of course, nobody we knew could afford a color television yet, so we were stuck with still viewing all of our shows in ordinary black and white. However, a few years later, I finally did get to see my first color TV shows -- two cartoon series: The Flintstones and The Jetsons -- and it was truly amazing! Later, also in color, was the Wonderful World of Disney, on Sunday evenings.

The first shows I remember watching as a boy was Captain Kangaroo, Ding Dong School, Romper Room, Howdy Doody, Kukla-Fran and Ollie, and the locally-produced Bozo's Circus, which I watched while eating at home during my daily hour lunch break from elementary school. After school, it was the hilarious slapstick of the Three Stooges, then the Mickey Mouse Club (with Spin & Marty, the Hardy Boys, and my secret crush -- the dreamy Mouseketeer girl, Annette!), then Garfield Goose and Friends (with Frasier Thomas showing Clutch Cargo), before getting down to homework after dinner around 6 p.m.

On Saturdays, it was Flash Gordon (starring Buster Crabbe, whom I later saw while in college, when he came to give a lecture on the serial), followed by an all-morning cartoon fest until lunchtime: The Bugs Bunny Show (with Elmer Fudd, Yosemite Sam, Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner, Daffy Duck, etc.), Quick Draw McGraw, Huckleberry Hound, Top Cat, Yogi Bear, Rocky and Bullwinkle, Jonny Quest, and more. The commercials all pushed sugary cereals and toys on their eager, captive audience. As I grew out of the exclusive age for cartoons, I watched instead The Adventures of Superman, The Lone Ranger, Sergeant Preston of the Yukon, Fury, The Roy Rogers Show, The Adventures of Rin-Tin-Tin, The Soupy Sales Show, Sea Hunt, Lassie, and Sky King on Saturday mornings. There was also a really interesting kid's science experiment show called Watch Mr. Wizard, with Don Herbert. His chemical and other demonstrations were truly like magic!

The only program I can recall my whole family regularly watching was the Ed Sullivan Show on Sunday nights on CBS. It was a variety show, with singers, dancers, comedians, acrobats, musicians, Broadway stars, magicians, puppeteers, and more. Fast-paced and quite entertaining. On February 9, 1964, the Beatles performed live in America for the first time on the show. We couldn't wait to watch it. And yes, it was a sensation, especially with the screaming young females in the audience! Viewers marveled at the quartet's long (for the time) 'mop top' hairdos. The young teenagers were thrilled, but the adults were generally baffled at both the music and its sudden popularity. I still remember my father dismissively saying: "...Yeah, Yeah, Yeah...what kind of lyrics is that?" after the group performed their new hit song, She Loves You.

Television cleverly made the best of the holidays. Thanksgiving Day featured the big annual Macy's Day Parade from New York City. Soon after, the Christmas holidays traditionally brought several Christmas Specials on television, hosted by Perry Como, Andy Williams, Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, and others. And New Year's Day brought the Rose Bowl Parade from sunny Pasadena, California into our living room. It was always amazing to see people enjoying warm weather and flowers while we in the Midwest were still freezing through a miserable, gray winter!

As a boy, the only sports on TV that I watched was Chicago Blackhawk hockey (with the exciting sportscaster Lloyd Pettit), and so-called Pro Wrestling. Kids my age were later shocked to learn that the wrestling matches were merely acted-out, carefully choreographed movements, and not actual fights! Still, we regularly tuned in to see such greats as The Crusher, Dick the Bruiser, and Gorgeous George.

Another secret thrill was sneaking out of bed when the rest of my family was asleep to watch Shock Theatre in our darkened living room, with the TV sound turned way down. This fright-fest featured scary classic movies like Dracula, Frankenstein, The Wolfman, and The Creature From the Black Lagoon. Shock Theatre aired from 10:30 p.m. to midnight on Saturday nights. It was sometimes hard to stay awake, but -- before the technology to record shows in advance to watch later at one's convenience -- you had to endure the late time slot if you really wanted to watch it, which I did.

Religion was also featured on television. Bishop Fulton Sheen -- in full, imposing priestly vestments -- terrified young Catholics like myself with his hypnotic, dark eyes and dramatic delivery (strangely, almost like Dracula's actor, Bela Lugosi!), warning every week of various sinful temptations and the dangers of going to hell. Protestant evangelist Billy Graham had a more well-rounded approach to salvation, however, with engaging and emotional real-life stories, Bible verse readings, and sincere, persistent urgings to ultimately "Come to Christ..."

Game shows were extremely popular in the late mornings and early afternoons: Queen for a Day (hosted by Jack Bailey), I've Got a Secret (Bill Cullen), What's My Line? (John Charles Daly), Password (Allen Ludden), Concentration (Hugh Downs), Jeopardy! (Alex Trebek), To Tell the Truth (Garry Moore), Let's Make a Deal (Monte Hall), and The Price is Right (Bob Barker). Later, some of these programs would go into early evening broadcasts. Other afternoon programs were the so-called "soap operas" -- dramatic inter-relationship serials, exclusively crafted as a daily, thirty-minute break for the hard-working housewives of America: The Edge of Night, The Guiding Light, The Secret Storm, and Search for Tomorrow. Various laundry detergents and cleaning products were the primary ad sponsors for these shows.

The most common evening, or 'prime time' TV commercials that I recall seeing as a boy were for headache & pain remedies, beer, cigarettes, soft drinks, cooking & baking, and cars. Cigarette ads, however, were finally banned from television on January 1, 1971 -- when tobacco use was earlier proven to cause cancer.

Meanwhile, idealized family life was very popular with shows like Father Knows Best, The Andy Griffith Show, and Leave It to Beaver. I always watched them -- in fact, I wished I could be part of those interesting families! Later came Little House on the Prairie and The Waltons. These were all good, wholesome shows of inter-personal human interest, and each episode ultimately emphasized a meaningful lesson in positive moral values.

For crime programming, there was The Untouchables, starring Robert Stack as Elliott Ness -- busting up bootlegging syndicates with his team in Chicago during the Prohibition era of Al Capone. I still remember the show's dramatic, pounding theme music by Nelson Riddle!

Ralph Edwards had a memorable program called This is Your Life, whereby a famous person was feted with verbal flashbacks of their accomplishments, with surprise guests from their past -- many of whom had not been seen for decades by the award recipient. These childhood friends, former teachers, and others were brought out, often evoking real tears of remembered recognition.

For Westerns -- dozens of which flooded the TV airwaves in the 1950s -- the most popular were probably Gunsmoke and Rawhide. Along with the previously mentioned first color program series Bonanza, I especially liked Daniel Boone, starring Fess Parker and Ed Ames. Parker also played the character of Davy Crockett in other shows hosted by Walt Disney.

As for war, my favorite program was Combat! on ABC, starring Vic Morrow and Rick Jason. It was very gritty and realistic -- done in black & white -- and it focused on the minds and hearts of the several main characters as they tried to cope with fighting and surviving different battle assignments.

Each of the three networks began to show movies -- at least one night a week, beginning in the late 1960s --in their evening programming. Frasier Thomas (of Garfield Goose and Friends fame) also hosted a Saturday afternoon children's series called Family Classics, which showed good, literature-based movies like Treasure Island, Swiss Family Robinson, Heidi, and Journey to the Center of the Earth.

As for comedy, beginning back with the live TV antics of "Mr. Television," Milton Berle, I enjoyed I Love Lucy, The Honeymooners, Green Acres, Hogan's Heroes, and The Tonight Show programs hosted first by Steve Allen and later by Johnny Carson. In addition to late-night interviews, Carson did hilarious bits (with his sidekick Ed McMahon) as the dubious psychic Carnac the Magnificent, and as Art Fern -- the wacky, fast-talking huckster host of the Tea Time Movie. My favorite comedy show, however, was probably The Dick Van Dyke Show, with Mary Tyler Moore (my second secret crush after Mouseketeer Annette!), Morey Amsterdam, and Rose Marie. There was also a Canadian TV show spoof series called SCTV which was really excellent, starring John Candy, Joe Flaherty, Andrea Martin, Eugene Levy, Rick Moranis, Dave Thomas, and Catherine O'Hara.

Talk shows were also an important part of my television habit, whether in the afternoon (Mike Douglas, Merv Griffin) or late evenings (Jack Paar, Dick Cavett). These brought famous celebrities, movie stars, politicians, authors, musical artists, sports figures, and more in for meaningful interviews and discussions. These were virtually always interesting and enlightening. Thankfully, many of these historic programs are now preserved for viewing as DVD collections or on YouTube.

There was an entertaining animal program that I recall named Wild Kingdom, which was hosted by zoo expert Marlin Perkins (and sponsored by an insurance company -- Mutual of Omaha). It showed film footages with commentary of various animals in the wild, and Perkins usually had some small live animals to show his audience too.

My all-time favorite TV category, however, was science fiction. Science Fiction Theatre, One Step Beyond (hosted by John Newland), The Outer Limits, Star Trek (starring William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy), The Time Tunnel -- and the best of them all -- The Twilight Zone (with originator Rod Serling, who I saw in the early 1970s at a college lecture he gave about his show). The program Unsolved Mysteries similarly had episodes on the paranormal, the strange and the unexplained, purported miracles, and the like.

Television shows about spies and secret agents were very popular in the 1960s, all with high-tech gadgetry and daring action adventures: Mission Impossible, The Man from U.N.C.L.E. (starring Robert Vaughn and David McCallum), I Spy (Robert Culp and Bill Cosby) and T.H.E. Cat (Robert Loggia). There was also a program called The Wild, Wild West (starring Robert Conrad and Ross Martin), which was basically two secret agents -- with amazing gadgets too, for that era -- working for the U.S. government and President Ulysses S. Grant in the 1870s.

There was an American history program called The Great Adventure which lasted only one season, but was very good -- dramatizing important events from our nation's past. Similarly, another program called You Are There (hosted by the previously mentioned, well-known newsman Walter Cronkite) took the viewer back in time throughout world history, and recreated famous, dramatic scenes and speeches which helped shape Western Civilization.

A guilty pleasure that my wife and I succumbed to in the 1980s was watching the CBS family saga series Dallas (starring Larry Hagman as the villainous oil tycoon J.R. Ewing, and Patrick Duffy as his virtuous brother, Bobby), which ran for an astounding fourteen seasons (357 episodes!), from 1978-1991. Its competitor on ABC was called Dynasty, but Dallas was the juggernaut 'ratings king.' Many people actually re-arranged their schedules on Friday night so as not to miss even a minute of Dallas. It was crazy, looking back nowadays! The most famous episode -- on November 21, 1980 -- was the reveal of "Who Shot J.R." Who pulled the trigger? And did the dastardly villain survive? America wanted to know. 90 million viewers (76% of the total American viewing audience) tuned in that night, and 360 million viewers in 57 countries did too. Amazing!

Next, we must mention the big-budget, all-star, blockbuster TV mini-series' that are rarely made anymore. ABC had the massive WW2 saga Winds of War, and its sequel, War and Remembrance. That network also had Roots (a multi-generational tracing of black slavery from Africa to America), Rich Man Poor Man, North and South (the American Civil War), and The Thorn Birds. NBC had Centennial, Shogun, Marco Polo, The Captains and the Kings, and Peter the Great. CBS had the Western masterpiece Lonesome Dove, as well as its prequel and sequel.

In the early days of television, the evening news only aired for fifteen minutes a day, after which families typically gathered to sit down and enjoy their dinner. John Cameron Swayze's Camel News Caravan on NBC was the first television newscast, begun in 1949. It was sponsored by Camel cigarettes. (Swayze also became the top spokesman for Timex wristwatches.) NBC later expanded its evening news program to thirty minutes, co-hosted by Chet Huntley and David Brinkley. But the king of the network newsmen was Walter Cronkite on CBS -- who soon came to be regarded as "the most trusted man in America." His steady, avuncular manner soothed many an anxious citizen through the assorted mayhems of modern life, whether at home or abroad. Cronkite's two most dramatic broadcasts were the reporting of the shocking assassination and later death of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, and the joyous Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969. Both of those historic events are still vividly etched in my memory, as I am sure they are for most Americans who experienced them.

Meanwhile, the local TV network news was also important, and was a half-hour tradition for many devoted Chicagoans at 5 o'clock, 6 o'clock, and/or 10 o'clock. News, weather and sports were served up every day in a homey, familiar manner. Weathermen like P.J. Hoff and Harry Volkman, and anchors like Fahey Flynn (with his trademark bowtie) and co-hosts Bill Kurtis and Walter Jacobson, were all beloved 'local institutions' airing on CBS affiliate Channel Two.

Nowadays, modern televisions have become flat-screen behemoths, some up to 72" in screen diameter, and some even with stereophonic sound speakers to give a 'home theater' experience -- almost like being in a private movie theater. 'Smart' TVs can now be hooked directly up to the internet, for viewing digital streaming programming (no rooftop analog TV antennas anymore for most people) in crisp, high-definition picture, and for hours-long 'binge-watching.' Cable and satellite television companies, likewise, can offer over 200 different channels of programming for a hefty monthly service fee. Although we don't use either cable or satellite television subscriptions, some more recent series my wife and I have enjoyed have been Downton Abbey (a British production on PBS), The Man in the High Castle (Amazon Prime), and My Brilliant Friend (HBO).

With all of this new competition for the attentive eyes (and spending dollars, for advertised products) of the American public, it is no wonder that traditional network viewership on the Big Three -- ABC, CBS, and NBC -- is in serious declining revenue jeopardy. What the future holds for them is anyone's guess, as more and more young people are watching programs on their computers or even their tiny cell phone screens rather than planting their tired tushies on the couch in front of the old Boob Tube. Movie theaters across the nation are likewise trying to hold on to their regular customers in these changing times.

Who could have foreseen years ago that such rapid changes in the world of television would occur today? And what is in store for us in the field of visual entertainment in the years ahead? Is the Golden Age of TV gone forever, or are we in a new, growing phase of even greater broadcast excellence?

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

August 30, 2020