Television: The Micro and Macro Effects of Creating a 'Window to the World'
by Kevin Kepple

When Microsoft CEO Bill Gates was once asked his thoughts about television as a medium, he stated "When we Americans share national experiences, it is usually because we're witnessing events all at the same time on television--whether it is the Challenger blowing up after liftoff, the Super Bowl, an inauguration, coverage of the Gulf War, or the 0. J. Simpson car chase. We are 'together' at those moments." (Boddy 194). In the history of the world, there are many great technological inventions prior to the birth of the internet that have created similar 'togetherness' such as the telegraph, the printing press, etc., but none have had a more profound and direct effect on the masses as the television. Although early motion pictures did provide a glimpse into the world of audio/visual technology, the television brought the pictures inside the home making the interaction both a private and mass experience. It served as a vessel for delivering the information and created an environment for people to reflect on these media experiences as individual, family, national, and world viewers. Therefore, television was the beginning of mass audio/visual convergence resulting in U.S. societal and cultural effects on both micro and macro levels. The two characteristics that are most important of television are its effects on domesticity and its utilization in mass-projecting social and cultural representations of American identity.

In her article Installing the *Televisions Set: The Social Construction of Television's Place in the American Home*, Lynn Spigel asserts Leo Marx's view that "…the dream of eradicating distances was a central trope of America's early discourse…. the telegraph, telephone, radio, and television promised to conquer space" (Spigel 7). Television as a medium had done just that.

Distance and time were no longer an issue of information transference because television was a 'medium as a vessel' (Meyrowitz 45). In comparison to the radio and telephone, television transferred audio and visuals immediately giving the viewer a 'window to the world'. Dant agrees stating that television provides multi-channel use "which may be 'live' and simultaneous or recorded and separate in time, but (unlike the telephone or radio) gives the receiver visual cues' ' (Dant 122). Spigel notes that early television served several other aspects of affordances other than entertainment such as: allowing for privacy, serving as part of the house décor, serving as a sign of financial status, and providing a way of 'going places without movement' (Spigel 4-6). By bringing nature into the home and creating a private space for women and a public space for men, this "space-merging" technology allowed a new way to share experiences with family, friends, and both local and national communities. (Spigel 8-9). Television was also adopted into parts of the public sphere in places such as bars, hospitals, airports, etc., creating this technological relationship of both familiarity and dependency. This could be considered part of Meyrowitz's 'medium as an environment metaphor' as television took center priority in many viewers' lives (Meyrowitz 48). Additional drawbacks to the domestic adoption of television consequently created a semi-dismantling of the nuclear family. It is/was a focal point in most household living rooms, disrupted family eating schedules, and 'family time' now revolved around what was on the TV. This included what Spigel refers to as women's 'spatial isolation' in that women felt trapped at home by the family's lure of the television (Spigel 14). Also, for both men and women, there was now a form of the "domestic gaze" meaning perspectives of the man and woman changed because the tv showed perfect versions of the ideal male/female counterpart. Men spent more time with the TV than wives and wives thought of the TV as a material eyesore and inner-domestic competition (Spigel 25). But the ideal outcome of placing a

television in homes across America was to give citizens a feeling of unity and belonging to a bigger ideology.

After the rapid increase in television purchases in the 1950s, the U.S. government quickly realized that television could not only be used to promote capitalism and revive the economy, but it could also be a source of increasing national identity among American citizens. Laura Grindstaff, a professor of sociology at UC Davis, references scholar Herbert Schiller who stated "… what differentiates the United States from other empires in history is its primary reliance on mass media rather than military to bring nations around the world into its fold" (Grindstaff; Turow 108). The affordances of television on a macro level involve not only a medium as an entertainment form, but also as an educational tool, promoter of nationalism, and moral compass for society. John Dewey and Robert Park (both of the University of Chicago) believed that "because the new technologies of communication reached so many so quickly, they could bring Americans together in ways that would encourage democratic thinking" (Dant 105). This has challenged the warm idea of 'togetherness' as political forces on both sides have taken advantage of television's reach and used it for positive efforts, but some would say the advertising tactics of campaign season tend to cancel much of that positivity out with a constant barrage of mud-slinging commercials.

Although corporations may assume that Americans function on more of a 'herd mentality' and that cultural and societal structures need government interaction. In 1954, CBS network president Frank Stanton said "We give America its daily consciousness of being a Nation. If it were not for us, private individuals all, and private businesses all, America would not know where it stood or what it felt" (Boddy 193). This may have stood as solid reasoning in the 1950s, but television viewers today are much more fragmented and diverse in their viewing habits. For

example, Grindstaff and Turow classify television "as a commercial institution that, in producing programming, also produces (and proscribes) social representations and ideas about the world, particularly as they relate to notions of power, place, and identity (race, class, gender, sexuality, and so forth)" (Grindstaff; Turow 115). For instance, a person who enjoys cooking shows may not enjoy motocross sports. There may be viewers who are shocked by learning the details of a murder while others may feel entertained or even unmoved. Although, this has allowed for a much broader capitalistic approach to modern television in that markets are being realized and invented that had previously not been known before. Dant refers to this realm as the 'public sphere' and states "the variety of materials available on television, intermixed in the mélange of the flow created by viewing choices, makes available to viewers a range of ideas and possibilities about how people might and should act" (Dant 133). While producing television for mass audiences may have been effective in the beginning, the growing population and demand for more variety and individuality are fragmenting television in several convergent directions.

Over the decades and generations, television has altered the way citizens think, live, and act. Dant shows his support of television moral education and creating a healthier national identity by stating:

> "The small screen achieves a form of sociation that is distinctive of later modernity and that brings people into a shared sense of society based on common interests that extends across nation-state boundaries – John Corner calls this 'parasociality'…television achieves a moral impact in that what is shown becomes available for people to take the ideas and values of their mediated experience into their own lives – or to reject as unacceptable, the behavior or norms they have been shown...." (Dant 119-120).

The specificities in which television technology has influenced U.S. culture in society are among the following: Television has evolved from its humble beginnings, which included only three major networks, and now consists of hundreds of channel options formulating new niches

and markets of viewing audiences. This, in turn, creates a more individualized approach to securing viewers of different economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. By fragmenting viewership into more defined and specific niches, both advertisers and governmental influencers can analyze and approach these segmented groups in alternate forms of media while still adhering to a national identity ideology. Gerbner's "cultivation analysis focuses on the ways in which the totality of media content creates a mythology… that subsequently shapes viewers' perceptions of and response to their real environments" (Meyrowitz 14). This can be a positive reinforcement to the morality of society but also have negative effects if interpreted incorrectly as Grindstaff mentions "Keane (1995), Crane (1995), and Cunningham (2004) all argue that we are experiencing a deterritorialization of public life through media and new communications technologies (Grindstaff; Turow 109). Governments and studios will need to focus their research on more specific areas of society and culture as technology changes and offer even more possibilities for change and shaping the domestic and national identity.

References

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