

What Is U.S. Television Now?

By
AMANDA D. LOTZ

This article explores the institutional adjustments that have altered the operation of the U.S. television industry over the past twenty years. The author first chronicles those industrial norms that characterized television during its “network era” (1952 to mid-1980s) and upon which most ideas about the role of television in society are based. She then explores the ways in which adjustments in technologies, industrial formations, governmental policies, practices of looking, and textual formations have redefined the norms of television in the United States since the mid-1980s. Analysis of the shifts in the institutional and cultural functions of television reveals the articulations between the dominant industrial practices and the forms, texts, and cultural role of the medium. Such a conception of shifts of the medium allows us to understand recent changes as an evolution of this central cultural medium rather than its demise.

Keywords: post-network era; multi-channel transition; television industry

The two symposiums in Jerusalem and Philadelphia that inspired this special issue of *The Annals* were both concerned with the changing nature and future viability of the entity known as “television.” By the late twentieth century, it was clear that this long-taken-for-granted medium was in the midst of profound adjustment. Certainly, the central concerns related to television’s changes varied considerably dependent on one’s vantage point. Those working in television and its adjacent industries worried about their future employment and devised plans to adjust their businesses to emerging developments. Journalists attempted to represent the concerns of the public and offered

Amanda D. Lotz is an associate professor of communication studies at the University of Michigan. She is the author of The Television Will Be Revolutionized (New York University Press 2007) and Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era (University of Illinois Press 2006) and editor of Beyond Prime Time: Television Programming in the Post-network Era (Routledge 2009).

DOI: 10.1177/0002716209338366

“trend” pieces outlining the various technological shifts and how they might affect the ordinary viewer. Scholars of media, communication, and culture, such as the authors in this volume, tried to assess the broader cultural implications of television’s evolution, particularly its fading role as a mass medium that addressed whole populations.

Regardless of the varied concerns of workers, the public, and scholars, and despite daily announcements of new revolutionary developments for the future of the medium, all might agree that the key components of “television” were changing and that new versions of television were emerging that differed in crucial ways from its original industrial organization and social role. Lynn Spigel, introducing her coedited anthology *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, writes that “if TV refers to the technologies, industrial formations, governmental policies, and practices of looking that were associated with the medium in its classical public service and three-network age, it appears that we are now entering a new phase of television—the phase that comes after TV” (Spigel 2004, 2). Shifts in these four aspects of the medium, to which I would also add “textual formations,” locate broad yet meaningful attributes through which we can trace precisely how television has changed, discover why these changes matter, and establish guideposts for organizing some of the ways current and coming forms of television differ from those of its past.

In what follows, I offer a story of change that is particular to the American experience of television, although in many cases the experience parallels that of other industrialized countries with a similar timeline for the uptake of television.¹ I use the term “post-network era” (from the beginning of the present century) to describe what Spigel (2004) calls the “phase that comes after TV” and contrast it with the “network era” of television (from the early 1950s to the 1980s), the formative period in which the industrial norms of the then-new medium were put in place. I also propose an intervening period of “multi-channel transition” (from the mid-1980s through the nineties) to catch the gradual manner in which the industry incorporated emergent changes into its extant standard operating procedures.

Such a periodization of the industrial history of television is necessary because shifts in norms of operation lead to changes in the textual production of the medium and its role in culture. The attributes of television that Spigel (2004) lays out have shifted so that new technologies enable wholly new uses of television; industrial practices—such as production norms, distribution routes, and financing structures—have become highly varied and consequently enable a greater range of textual possibilities; and governmental policies have lagged behind the rapidly evolving medium and cannot be credited with its evolution (although this may be a particularly American experience). It remains uncertain whether there will ever again be common practices of looking that define television use. Emerging practices are increasingly varied based on factors such as level of technological adoption and generation of the viewer and indicate a substantial array of viewing behaviors. Finally, an expansion in the range of commercially viable television content has occurred, with a decline in content that provides a common cultural experience. The contributors to this volume have not gathered to

pronounce the obsequies of television. By evolving into something different than we believed it to be, the medium has revealed the arbitrariness of what we previously thought were characteristics of its essence. Current changes in the institutional and cultural functions of television do not indicate its demise but enable us to see more clearly the dominant industrial practices of the network era and the forms, texts, and cultural role of the medium in that formative period.

What Was Television?

In the network era, we primarily experienced television as a domestic, nonportable medium used to bring the outside world into the home (McCarthy 2001; Spigel 2001). Program options for viewers were limited to the offerings of the three national networks that delivered content on a linear through-the-day schedule—shows were available only at appointed times in a routinized daily sequence of programming. This technological configuration left the viewer with little to do. Minimal choice and control characterized our viewing experience compared with subsequent technological innovations and the modes of engagement they allowed.

The practices of looking that Spigel (2004) acknowledges are shaped both by the technology available at the time and by the industrial norms through which manufacturers, regulators, networks, and stations structure what we get to watch. Conventional practices of looking might be considered to encompass all of the day-to-day behaviors and norms of use that have come to organize our interactions with television. Of course, we rarely think in these formal terms; nor do we often reflect much upon our ritualized behavior with the medium. The dominant practices of looking of the network era were largely defined by the organization of television content in a linear schedule. Viewer activity required little more than turning on and tuning into the “flow” of programs and promotional messages. The three networks regularized the schedule with predictable patterns throughout the day (the same shows on at the same time Monday through Friday) with greater variation in programming on the weekend and in the evening—the most-watched, “prime time” viewing hours. The competing networks also regularized the schedule among themselves—so that all networks began new programs on the hour or half-hour and aired commercial messages at the same regular and predictable intervals.

Another key component of network era practices of looking involved the nature of the set within the household. Introduced as a sizable piece of furniture, network era television was an object around which family life came to be organized as the architecture and organization of domestic space quickly adapted to incorporate this new addition, as Spigel (1992) adeptly recounts. Network-era practices of looking relied upon the construct of family viewing and the family audience. Most homes possessed just one set, and families watched together, which meant negotiations about what to watch—television viewing in the network era was largely a home-based, shared experience. The networks’ perception of their target as a family audience led to reliance on content featuring broad and

universal themes, and competition pushed them toward homogeneous content likely to be accepted by a heterogeneous audience. Challenging, unconventional, or contentious “edgy” content were planed from programming to avoid alienating family audiences. All three networks generally pursued the same strategy, so despite the appearance of competition, little differentiated the programs airing at any particular time. Throughout this period, the networks could assume that audiences would view programs at the times they transmitted them. In the network era, viewing was, perforce, a shared cultural experience. Television’s status as a topic of “water cooler conversation” was based on the reasonable assumption that others had viewed the same programming as oneself the night before. New technologies in the 1980s—the remote control device (RCD), video cassette recorder (VCR), and the beginnings of cable services—all undermined the networks’ power to define the viewing situation by giving viewers control over when they would watch and increasing choice in what they might view.

Industrial practices—such as the highly regularized arrangements between studios and networks for procuring and funding shows; the deliberate patterns of selling content through various domestic and international markets; and the division of labor and payment among advertisers, advertising agencies, and networks, to name just a few of the most significant practices—led to standardized production norms and standardized products. The production practices developed in the network era became the norms of the industry and in time assumed hegemonic status. Later innovations, such as the development and adoption of cable distribution, shifts in rules about program and media outlet ownership, and changes in viewer behavior gradually challenged dominant network-era procedures for producing, distributing, and financing shows. Such developments steadily increased the available range and style of program content as the television industry adjusted to change taking place in the 1970s and 1980s.

The medium’s regulatory framework was a key factor, and it is perhaps here that the peculiarity of U.S. television is most apparent. The regulatory framework in place as the television industry adapted to new technologies and distribution possibilities in the late twentieth century had been established nearly eighty years earlier for television’s precursor, radio. This regulatory framework provided for an industry organized by a commercial mandate with a light regulatory requirement of serving the public interest, convenience, and necessity in exchange for the free use of radio and later television spectrum for signal transmission. Once the television business got going in the 1950s, however, government involvement in its operation became minimal. Occasional incursions—such as the implementation of the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules in the 1970s and the prohibition of cigarette advertising—required some shifts in industrial practices, but for the most part, the logic of commerce provided the regulatory mechanism. The existing, but minimal, governmental expectations obliged the networks to maintain expensive news operations that required costs they would never recoup. The buyouts of the networks in the mid-1980s, however, led to decreased institutional commitment to the democratic, informational role of television as commercial goals increasingly trumped the remaining vestiges of public service.

Post-network-Era Developments

Although the sense of “crisis” that led to frequent headlines regarding the “end” or “death” of television did not become pervasive until the early 2000s, the roots of this crisis began to take hold two decades earlier. The development and deployment of devices that allowed audiences control over viewing were crucial to adjusting the experience of television. The RCD, VCR, and finally digital video recorder (DVR) combined to break the experience of watching television as a continuous flow of program content determined by the networks over which individuals had no control. The new control devices transformed television from a “flow” of content that was available only at a particular moment to individual programs that could be reordered, saved, and re-viewed at will. The nature of the relationship between supply and demand was changing.

It is difficult to assess the comparative significance of the technologies that ultimately have reshaped the cultural experience of television, but of them all, perhaps the most encompassing was digitalization, by which I primarily mean the digital transmission of television signals, but also the adoption of digital production technologies and audience devices. Digitalization introduced many varied changes. It enabled significant efficiencies in transmission that allowed more content to be transmitted and better signals. The efficiency of digital transmission facilitated a vast proliferation of content—endless by some estimates—for a medium long bound first by the scarcity of spectrum availability and later by the bandwidth capacity of cable. Digitalization allowed interoperability between television and the other technologies that came to define the contemporary media world. Convergence between television and computers was a key outcome of interoperability. New ways to digitally distribute television content permitted by convergence were not subject to the same regulations as broadcast and cable, with enormous consequences for production, distribution, and use. Moreover, digital recording facilitated new editing practices and increased portability of production that surpassed the limitations of analog recording. Although digital video files initially proved too large to transmit efficiently over the Internet, advances in compression technologies eventually divorced the transmission of television from broadcast signals, cable wires, and satellite feeds. Digitalization was the key that unlocked new portable, extradomestic uses of television in the post-network era. It also improved the visual and auditory quality of television. The most significant advances in the aesthetic qualities of television in the post-network era, however, came with the adoption of high-definition (HD) standards. The more efficient signal transmission of digital is necessary for HD, but HD should be understood as a technological advance that is broader than digitalization. Those choosing to use HD television in its more traditional “living room” screen application now enjoy an appreciably improved aesthetic experience that has produced ramifications throughout the production process.

Despite the steady stream of innovations—the VCR, remote control, and cable—throughout the multi-channel transition, modifications in the dominant practices for making, financing, and distributing television shows were incremental

and subtle. In recent years, however, the extent of changes introduced by new technologies and viewers' response to them has made it increasingly difficult for long-established industrial practices to maintain their grip on the processes of production and the norms of textual output. Recently, a new set of conventions has begun to replace the monolithic norms that dominated industrial operations for much of television history. The coexistence of multiple strategies of advertiser support of content provides one site for considering the increasing variation of practices. Once the dominant norms of television production, distribution, and financing were established in the late 1950s, the industry soon settled into a reliance on "magazine-format" advertising—or the inclusion of fifteen- and thirty-second commercials from a range of advertisers as the dominant means of advertiser financing. This strategy had consequences for the program content the industry produced, just as the shift from single sponsorship had minimized the company voice appeal of the pre-network era. Advertisers began greater experimentation with other advertising strategies as the media field began changing at the close of the twentieth century—particularly spurred on by the various social, financial, and technological possibilities introduced by the Internet and advertisers' growing concern about viewer adoption of devices such as DVRs. In some cases—such as the use of single sponsorship and various forms of product placement and integration—these "new" advertising strategies returned the industry to practices common in a bygone era. The industry also made traditionally peripheral strategies—such as the "infomercial"—more central through the growing use of "branded entertainment" in which the content and advertising message were inextricably linked. Finally, beyond the purview of advertisers, the industry also experimented with various forms of subscription and transaction financing that eliminated advertisers and allowed viewers to pay directly for their desired content. Such means of financing allowed for program content deemed too risky or unacceptable for mainstream audiences in the era of spot advertising and channel scarcity.

Another example of changes in industrial norms can be found in the fracturing of dominant distribution practices. For decades, a bottleneck in the distribution of television limited the supply of program offerings and led to a restricted set of norms regarding how shows were produced, what could be produced, and how and when they might be viewed. The creation and distribution of channels via cable systems began to loosen this bottleneck. Early cable systems offered subscribers a handful of additional channel options that steadily grew into the hundreds by the end of the century. The development of cable channels as additional pipelines for content also refigured the business of content creation, as these more narrowly targeted outlets required cheaper production techniques for original content while also adding to the profitable life of other content by creating a venue through which previously produced programming could be made available again. Today, television operates without any sense of a technological bottleneck—although legal limits protecting copyright and content owners' uncertainty regarding how to profit from their holdings via emergent distribution techniques prevent the free flow of content that is now technologically feasible.

It is in the context of these sizable adjustments in nearly all aspects of the operation and experience of television that the role of regulation, or, rather, the lack thereof, is so stunning. The truly profound adjustments that have already taken place in the United States and that continue to redefine the television industry occurred with minimal governmental intervention or involvement. In fact, if one were to argue for a particular shift in regulatory policies in the recent term, it would have to be in relation to the “regulatory” consequences of deregulatory policies. In the past few decades, the already light touch of government involvement in the television industry has become even lighter, particularly in relation to past policies that limited the consolidation and allowable conglomeration of media industry ownership.

The television networks were nationwide corporations; however, television’s early years featured station ownership that was often the provenance of local, independent entrepreneurs. The so-called “mom-and-pop” owners were based in the community in which they owned their station and were limited by government regulations from owning many additional stations (although it must be noted that the networks owned the stations in the largest and most lucrative markets from the beginning of television). Deregulatory policy since the beginning of the 1980s lifted long-standing rules and allowed station ownership groups to steadily amass greater holdings. This led to the consolidation of stations into fewer, less locally based hands, while other policy changes created an environment of significant conglomeration among media industries at the global level. Perhaps the most consequential ownership change resulted from the purchase of each of the three broadcast networks in the mid-1980s, which then became part of global corporate entities involved in many media enterprises. By the 1990s, it was impossible to extricate the companies of the “television” industry (those involved in production or distribution of television shows) from the conglomerated media industry. The deregulatory approach of the government enabled this change in the organization of the television industry and its absorption into a broader media industry realm.

Government intervention was also responsible for the mandated shift to digital signal transmission that began at the end of the twentieth century and remains in process at the time of writing. This particular development illustrates the ineffective and haphazard character of government intervention in the operation of broadcasting. Although Congress mandated the digital transition in the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the process of this change can be described as awkward at best, and the intended outcome of this massive adjustment remains unclear. Members of the broadcasting industry, for whom this change has entailed considerable expense, largely complied with the ordered timetable—albeit with some stragglers. The key failure in the transition process, however, involves viewers whose enforced participation in this technological conversion was scheduled to render useless TV sets in millions of homes in February 2009 (extended to June 2009), thirteen years after Congress legislated the transition. The deregulatory sensibility that has governed U.S. telecommunication policy since the 1980s led this undertaking to be the most modest imaginable. Although

this functional reinvention of television broadcasting—complete with the reallocation of spectrum—presented a prime opportunity to restate or clarify the responsibilities of broadcasters in exchange for their spectrum use, no new policy mandates were included. The digital transition was originally sold to citizens as necessary in order to upgrade to better-quality HD television standards and as a means for providing more broadcast services through the gains digital signal transmission afforded. As the decade of transition wore on, broadcasters instead focused on ways to “monetize” the spectrum through ventures such as home shopping networks or leasing the spectrum to others instead of engaging in endeavors that might offer greater public service. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 and subsequent related policy decisions mandated the technological change to digital transmission but avoided any other engagement with how the industry might differently provide its service of the public interest, convenience, and necessity with these new technological tools. Indeed, it remains remarkable that the television industry could experience such considerable change in its norms of industrial practice without more substantive input and involvement of regulators.

Changes in the Viewing Experience

These technological and industrial changes had many consequences for the experience of watching television. Crucial developments in the post-network era involved the new practices of looking that emerged as a result of the breakdown of the linear daily schedule as a dominant organizing feature of television. The VCR released content from the network schedules to allow viewing at self-appointed times while making it more interactive: it was now possible to stop, rewind, and re-view what one was watching. Such self-determined viewing practices increased as subsequent technologies enabled a greater array of choices in how and when to view. The “on demand” technologies of the 1990s that allow viewers to save a range of selected content and create their own schedule represent the most fundamental break from the schedules of the network era and the constraints on viewing that they imposed.

Once content broke free of the schedule—either because it was available in a folder of choices for viewers to watch on-demand or because viewers has recorded it on a DVR—nearly all established ideas about how people watch were called into question. Much of the institutional purpose for a sequenced flow of programming was to keep viewers watching the same network. It encouraged viewers to turn on the set and stay watching in a way that differed from the selective practice of viewing that later recording technologies facilitated. Another crucial shift in the dominant practices of viewing that developed in the post-network era resulted from possible extradomestic viewing of television available once programming was freed from the TV set in the living room. Certainly the use of television outside of the home is not new—in many ways, group viewing in locations such as taverns defined one of the earliest viewing experiences common to the medium. The combination of new technologies and new distribution

routes has pushed television outside of its common consumption location in living rooms and bedrooms and into bars, hotel lobbies, airports, and other public spaces.

It is not necessarily “television” in its strictest technological sense that is breaking out of the home; video content long perceived as “television” programming is now being accessed by viewers on computer screens and on portable devices such as iPods. Such devices—and the corresponding economic and distribution practices being negotiated to help content reach these screens—frees television from its fixed point in the home and allows easier attention to it in other locations (such as on office computers) and increasingly wherever the portability of laptops and mobility of cell phones permit. Another practice of looking that corresponds with television’s extradomestic circulation involves the increasingly individualized organization of the medium’s use. The family viewing experience began to crumble as the cost of TV sets fell, enabling households to own multiple sets. The shrinking screen size of portable television devices allows solo viewing for a reasonable aesthetic experience. The erosion of the family audience reinforced the rise of programming directed to increasingly niche tastes that cable made available. Programming strategies shifted considerably once executives began designing content that would be most valued by individual members of specific demographics instead of programming that would be least objectionable to the aggregate family audience. Again, a combination of developments in technology, economic structures, and distribution possibilities facilitated the creation of new applications and use of the medium.

New programming strategies and new audience expectations became decreasingly salient throughout the multi-channel transition. The rapidly expanding number of cable channels targeted increasingly precise niche audiences and tastes—whether channels aiming at women, children, or African Americans or viewers seeking twenty-four-hour news, music programming, weather, or history. Throughout the 1990s, niche targeting grew ever more specific as channels targeting women multiplied and diversified, as did those offering news. This expansion in viewer choice led to a massive dispersal of the viewing audience across the increasing range of channels, while control devices diminished the mandated immediacy of viewing characteristic of the network era.

The practices of looking related to the extradomestic and individualized use of television have not neatly replaced those common in the previous era. Rather, these new modes of viewing now coexist with those previously dominant, with preferences for one or the other largely determined by age. Older viewers who have spent much of their lifetimes watching network television at home continue to do so, while those who are younger experiment with new ways of viewing that threaten to disrupt the still largely dominant network-era practices should they continue with them as they get older. Yet, more ways of viewing will emerge as the post-network era continues to take shape, and it is likely that the near future will be characterized by a wide array of television viewing behaviors.

The viewing environment today has become so different that the networks are increasingly challenged to abandon their advertising-only economic model tied to

programming with broad-based appeal. To try to retain some of their steadily fleeing audience base, network programming has become markedly more edgy—although still avoiding the excesses to be found on many cable networks. The networks have also diversified their programming base to feature some high-budget scripted programming that matches the aesthetic and narrative quality of feature film as well as more affordable unscripted “reality” programming. Likewise, many temporal rhythms that had long governed television production—conventions such as the late-September-through-May television season, seasons composed of twenty-two original episodes, and the integration of new and rerun episodes—eroded as the networks lost their oligopolistic advantage and year-round programming by cable stations undermined their long-established business routines. And just as the shift from single sponsorship to magazine format advertising had altered the guiding imperatives of content at the start of the network era, so an assortment of new (and very old) advertising and viewer payment strategies expanded the range of viable content in the increasingly competitive post-network era.

Consequently, television content now represents a broader array of ideas, forms, and peoples than ever before. This should not be taken simply as wholesale advance, however, because the simultaneous fragmentation of the audience makes it difficult to assess the cultural consequence of this new diversity. It used to be that simply being “on television” conferred importance because of the medium’s broad reach in the network era. This is not the case today, as much of the vast multiplicity of post-network content slips by unnoticed. A newsmagazine may feature a thoughtful profile of a radical thinker, but it may pass into the ether seconds later, unremarked upon and leaving little trace. On the other hand, a politician may make an off-the-cuff comment to a news reporter that is captured and reaired millions of times on twenty-four-hour news networks and on a video distribution outlet such as YouTube. An annual event such as the Super Bowl may bring together that mass audience of the network era, and the country may stand in unison transfixed by breaking news coverage, as we did on the morning of September 11, 2001. Like-minded audiences numbering only a few million—if that—may gather weekly for a comparatively obscure favorite television show, while other shows collect tens of millions of viewers. This variety of circumstance is now common for U.S. television, and—as these scenarios suggest—the cultural role of this single medium consequently can vary profoundly. It is getting harder to assess the role of television today in all its many and varied forms.

While this concise account has been able to offer only the briefest overview of much more complicated practices and norms of television, the developments highlighted here begin to reveal the breadth and scale of change that has begun. Many—in the academy and the industry, as well as popular pundits—have declared that these changes provide evidence of the end of television. Although it should be clear that the medium is experiencing extraordinary adjustments, pronouncements on the passing of the medium are, in my view, exaggerated and overstated. Older media such as radio and magazines have experienced sizable adjustments to their original, dominant norms of practice; their role in daily life;

and their characteristic content in the course of their longer histories. And television is now undergoing just such adjustment. It may evolve into a medium very different from the one we have long thought it to be, but it will indeed continue to exist.

Note

1. I have given a much fuller, detailed account of the transformation of American television in *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (Lotz 2007), whose basic argument I summarize here.

References

- Boddy, W. 1993. *Fifties television: The industry and its critics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- . 2007. *The television will be revolutionized*. New York: New York University Press.
- McCarthy, A. 2001. *Ambient television: Visual culture and public space*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Spigel, L. 1992. *Make room for TV: Television and the family ideal in post-war America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2001. Portable TV: Studies in domestic space travel. In *Welcome to the dreamhouse: Popular media and postwar suburbs*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- . 2004. "Introduction," in *Television after TV: Essays on a medium in transition*, 1-40. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.