

Lotz, A. D. (2009). What is U.S. television now?. *The Annals of the American Academy*, 625, 49-59.

Synopsis

Lotz outlines five key features that transformed the nature of television: technologies, industrial formations, governmental policies, practices of looking, and textual formations. She analyzes how these features impacted the television industry through three key eras: the network era (early 1950s – 1980s), the multi-channel transition (mid 1980s – 1990s), and the post-network era (2000-present). In studying the network era, Lotz identifies that watching television started as a formal activity characterized by three networks, similar content, and a stationary piece of furniture that established norms and catered towards family viewing. However, as technology developed in the 1980s (i.e remote controls and VCRs), the dynamic of television began to change. The digitalization of TV signals also improved the quality of the content. Further, decreased government regulation allowed for the expansion of TV and the “conglomeration of media industry ownership” (p. 55). Lotz writes that the “breakdown of the linear daily schedule,” (p. 56) created an individualized experience as viewers were able to watch TV programs on their own time, on different devices, and choose from a variety of programs that fit their interests. Comprehensively, Lotz says that the developments of the two latter eras have shifted the industry away from established norms and revolutionized the way television is created and consumed.

Key Concepts

- **Network era:** taking place from the early 1950s to the 1980s, this was the “formative period in which the industrial norms of the then-new medium were put in place” (p. 50).
- **Digitalization:** “the digital transmission of television signals...the adoption of digital production technologies and audience devices,” (p. 53) characterized by an increased efficiency in transmission and higher quality audio and visuals.
- **Industry norms:** practices developed in the network era that became the standard for production companies such as “highly regularized arrangements between studios and networks for procuring and funding shows; the deliberate patterns of selling content through various domestic and international markets...” (p. 52).

Key Quotes

- “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” (p. 51).
- “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” (p. 57).
- “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” (p. 57).

Essential Question

- How might future advances in technology alter the way audiences engage with television?