

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

Synopsis

Lotz argued that television has changed significantly over time and that it can be useful to track these changes using five categories: technologies, industrial formations, governmental policies, practices of looking, and textual formations. She identified three specific eras of television, which include the network era, the multi-channel transition, and the post-network era.

During the network era of television, most families had a single television with three channels in a central area of their home that the family would watch together. Lotz explained how this viewing style encouraged networks to create shows with universal appeal for the whole family. In the post-network era, technology had evolved so that homes contained multiple televisions and programs could be viewed on a variety of devices at a variety of different times with the help of technologies like RCDs, VCRs, and DVRs. Lotz described how the digitalization of television signals allowed for many more channels to be broadcast. That, coupled with the diversity of viewing experiences in this era, allowed programming to expand to include shows that catered to a wide range of topics and interests. The government had been minimally involved in the television industry throughout the network era into the post-network era until it required a complete shift to digital television signals in the mid-1990s. Lotz believed that television will not die out but continue to evolve with the shifting technology and society.

Key Concepts

- **Network Era:** (1950s-1980s) “the formative period in which the industrial norms of the then-new medium were put in place” (p. 50) when television was a “domestic, nonportable medium used to bring the outside world into the home” (p. 51).
- **Multi-Channel Transition:** (1980s-1990s) the period of time between the network era and the post-network era when the industry gradually “incorporated emergent changes into its extant standard operating procedures” (p. 50).
- **Digitalization:** “the digital transmission of television signals...the adoption of digital production technologies and audience devices” (p. 53).

Key Quotes

- “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 (p. 57).
- “Such 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” (p. 50).
- “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” (p. 53).

Essential Question

- How have the changes in television industrial practices affected television’s cultural influence?