

Western Television in the Broadcast Era, 1945-1990

Television as a wide-spread mass medium began after World War II. There was some experimental broadcasting before, but it was halted by the war. Industrialized nations led development: the US, Britain, France and the Soviet Union, while Germany and Japan were close behind. Post-war economic prosperity provided conditions for its development in the US, while vast projects of rebuilding and adjustments to peace occasioned its development in European nations and Japan. Television spread rapidly to audiences of tens of millions.¹ In this era, television programming was dominated by national broadcast networks, who determined what these truly mass audiences would see. These networks required a constant supply of programs to fill on-air hours every day, far greater than the demand of movie theatres in Hollywood's classical era.

The spread of television in most of the rest of the world occurred a decade or more later. As late as 1972, three fourths of television audiences and four fifths of television receiver sets resided in North America and Europe (Table 5.1). Moreover, a large portion of programming seen on television in Asia and Africa involved Western-made exports, while native television production was scarce, more unevenly developed and distributed, more available to urban, higher classes, and less to rural and lower-income communities.

This chapter and the next will examine television broadcasting, texts, and audiences from the post-war beginnings through the 1980s, before digital media and the internet. We will begin with the US as the culturally hegemonic nation of this era, and move from there to the UK and Europe, then to Latin America, Asia, and Africa. This

Table 5.1. World Television Count 1972

Area	No. of TVs (millions)	Aud Size (millions)
N. America	96	
USA	89	205
W. Europe	82	246
E. Europe	45	221
Latin America	17	78
Arabic	3	12
Sub-Sahara Africa	0.2	2
Asia	30	120
Japan	23	
Total	273	884

Source: Nordenstreng and Varis, 1974²

chapter will include the US, Britain, and Europe; the next chapter will concentrate on Latin America, Asia, and Africa, in many cases, nations recently independent from colonial rule.

Governments generally shared an assumption, beginning with radio, that broadcasting should serve the public or national interest, even while that varied in how it was implemented.³ In the 1920s US law and policy established that broadcasting would be an independent commercial business enterprise, with some government regulation. Most South American countries followed a similar path, although often with a closer collaborative relationship between television broadcasters and governments. In Britain and Western Europe the typical premise was that broadcasting would be a government-subsidized public service but, to varying degrees, independent of government. In Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe and in many post-colonial nations in Asia and Africa, radio and television broadcasting were overt instruments of nation-building controlled directly by the government.⁴

Across this spectrum, industries and agencies developed policies and practices in relation to issues of nationhood. Television was used to promote nationalism and a uniform national identity. Even in the US commercial system, corporate advertisers used television to promote ideas of the civic corporation and the consumer-citizen.⁵ This was more notable than with many other industries because television distributed not things, but ideas. By virtue of their immense audiences and the time to repeat the same themes over and over in show after show, broadcast television texts could create a quality of 'unquestionable' truth, shaped by and in turn shaping and anchoring mainstream

values and beliefs. Television texts, often implicitly and sometimes explicitly, became imbued with matters of nationhood and watching television became defined as a civic practice. The concepts of nation and national identity however, elide class, race, gender, and other strata of inequality, by universalizing one group as the national identity.

In order to assay how much television texts repeat similar themes over time after time, we will examine a wide-spread, popular genre – domestic drama serials – known colloquially as soap operas or telenovelas. Domestic drama serials provide an ideal genre on which to base comparisons of both texts and audience reception across nations, as they have been popular in almost every nation around the world. They are notable for how audiences have used these texts and how cultural elites have reacted to both texts and audiences. Whether for radio soaps in the US in the 1940s, television soaps in the US or Britain in the 1960s, telenovelas in Brazil and Argentina or India and China in the 1990s, audiences responded to these shows enthusiastically, using them to address issues of class, gender, race, and generation, and conflicts between traditional and modern values.

Drama serial audiences demonstrate that, while television has distributed texts of nationhood to many millions, delivering a message does not ensure that the same message was absorbed. For this we will look at the domestic contexts of the texts, the lived cultures of audiences. During the broadcast era, television, as with radio before it, was a domestic appliance and a stay-at-home domestic activity, in contrast to going out to a cinema. Once it became commonplace, like a cup or a comb, it could be casually picked up, set down, used for a variety of purposes or ignored, as a moment called for, a prop on the stage set of living. Sometimes it was the center of the scene, other moments it was background, but always there.

The use and meaning of television and its texts in the home grew from and shaped family interactions, relations, and culture. People singly or as couples or household groups developed television routines, using tv at scheduled times to mark particular junctures of the day or week and establishing habits of who uses the remote or chooses shows. Television can be used by people to project messages to others. Husband and wife watching together or separately expressed something about their relationship. Conversation about a show may be indirect statements to partners, children or room-mates too delicate to address directly. Viewers comment on a show's particular statements, appearances, gestures, actions, or events for purposes outside the television narrative itself, but very much in the household narrative to make a point to self or others. Television can also be another reality, created through text, into which people voluntarily and imaginatively

transport themselves, but is subject to regular interruptions from its domestic context. This distinguishes television from the cinema, where a darkened theater reduced sensory and social context, so that one could be more easily transported into the film text for an extended, uninterrupted experience. It is more like nickelodeon in the living room, with people's focus moving back and forth between the screen and each other.

These parameters of the television landscape began to change dramatically in the 1980s, with the arrival of the new technologies of satellite, cable television, and vcr. Broadcast had to compete for audiences with other sources of programming, and audiences gained a greater range of choices and circumstances of viewing. At the turn of the millennium, a digital phase began, as dvds displaced vcrs, the internet became a new means of program delivery, and television screens competed with computer screens and smartphones for viewers. These latter changes will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Living in Fifties America

Television in 1950s America was by far the cheapest entertainment of its time, and available in the comfort and convenience of home. For the price of a television set, which was affordable to most families by the mid 1950s, one could watch star performers who would be costly to see at a theater or night club. Hours of entertainment everyday were available free.

Three commercial networks, NBC, ABC, and CBS, ran the industry. They supplied polished programming with national stars about eight hours every day to over 80 percent of the nation's broadcast stations. The few stations not affiliated with one of the networks, about a seventh of all stations, could not match such programming – the same problem of small markets for recouping sunk costs as occurred with film – and frequently re-broadcast old filmed network series. The attractive shows and limited alternatives enabled the networks to attract 90 percent of the viewing audience. For this audience, affiliated stations were willing to sign restrictive contracts, giving much program control to the networks. American television was an advertising business: audiences were a commodity for sale to advertisers. The networks sold these large audiences at high prices to advertisers seeking a national market, while local stations sold the audiences in their markets to regional advertisers at similarly lucrative prices. In turn, the advertising income enabled the networks to pay for the preferred programming to continue the cycle.⁶

An important consequence was that, every night, vast audiences of tens of millions, across the whole nation, watched the same shows on the same night. More than half of the population was watching television, and overwhelmingly, one of the networks. This was an oligopoly not only of an industry market, but also of the marketplace of ideas. It is little wonder that cultural elites and social reformers began to worry about mass culture manipulating the masses.

On the positive side, the nightly ritual of watching television strengthened a national culture. To the degree that there was a common culture among all Americans, it was presented on network television. At times this rose to the level of solemn civic rituals. For example, presidential addresses were aired live on all three networks, preempting even the most popular and lucrative television series.⁷ Moreover, US domestic screen culture in this era was produced almost entirely in New York and Hollywood. Foreign film and television were practically invisible in the everyday lives of Americans, with the exception of a small, niche market of 'art theaters' and a few British television programs on the anemic public broadcasting network PBS.⁸ In addition, very few Americans were even aware that US film and television producers had a thriving export business.

When people watched was determined by the three networks. Network programs were available only when the network broadcast them. They were not syndicated to other stations for re-broadcast for five years. To see a particular show, people had to make themselves available on the day and time when the network chose to broadcast it. People therefore scheduled their days around the television schedule, in contrast to the time-flexible convenience of going to the movies.

What they watched also was determined by the three networks. Their contracts with affiliated stations gave the networks full control of program content, and a great deal of clout to require all affiliates to broadcast shows when the network stipulated. Adopting the weekly schedule developed for radio networks, each show appeared at the same time on the same night every week, so audiences could predict and plan. Shows ran year-round: 39 new episodes and thirteen of these re-run during the summer.

The content of these shows arose from a variety of factors pushing toward uniformity. For networks, the weekly schedule of series programs meant that during prime time, when the largest audiences gathered most profits for the networks, there were fewer than forty program decisions planned annually per network for fall debut – six half-hour slots for seven nights, mixing half-hour sitcoms with hour-long dramas. Network profits rose or fell dramatically based on those

decisions. Yet the success of each show was unpredictable. Each decision then carried a large risk and networks did whatever they could to mitigate that risk. Series programming reduced some risk by providing some stability week by week. But this did not help in decisions to edit an episode or choose a new series. Consequently, network executives were wary of controversial programs or even a word or sentence of a script that would increase risk to profits. Thus 'least objectionable programming' became the norm. The vast majority of the audience would watch one of the networks; to increase its market share a network only need provide programming less objectionable than that of the other two networks in the same time slot. This pushed network decision-makers to adhere to programming similar to their competitors rather than risk offering anything substantially new and different. These pressures produced repetition of a narrow range of mainstream ideas and stereotypes year after year.⁹

The series format produced familiarity with television genres, characters and story lines through the scheduled regularity and repetition, with successful series lasting years. Television characters and popular series were a pervasive presence in almost everyone's daily life, even if they did not watch any particular show. Popular shows and characters were mentioned frequently in newspapers, magazines, and other television shows. It was nearly impossible in the 1950s for Americans not to know who Lucy, Ralph, and Sargeant Friday were. This nationwide uniformity of leisure experience meant that popular television shows and characters constituted topics for conversations with just about anyone anywhere. The same applied to the networks' national nightly news programs about dinner time. They too featured the same characters every night, 'anchors' as they were called, cast as trustworthy authorities on the state of the nation and the world.

Network executives scheduled genres fitting time of day to gender or age. Daytime serials (soap operas) were scheduled for housewives in the afternoons, while husbands were at work and children at school. Evening prime-time programs were planned for family viewing; Saturday mornings were for children; Saturday afternoons were sports for men. Since nearly 90 percent of the audience was white, shows rarely addressed or even mentioned other races. Also, few shows specifically targeted working-class Americans, despite being a majority of the population. Class was submerged in programs, but rarely explicitly thematized.

Nevertheless, despite all the forces pushing toward uniformity and consensus, each night half the population was not watching network television, but doing something else. Moreover, the half that was

watching did not react in the same way to these programs. A middle-class woman's reading of a show was likely different from that of her husband while watching together. All the more between people of different classes, races, and regions. Those identifying with a particular status regularly watched through their own lens and shared their own readings.

Yet the simultaneity of watching constituted an unprecedented textual omnipresence, further enhanced by publicity and compounded by congruent texts of other shows, so that the sheer pervasiveness of the texts' preferred reading created an appearance of consensus and 'naturalized' these ideas, as not only a cultural glue, but also a type of public pressure to accept the preferred reading and to conceal disagreement. To do otherwise would be at least unpleasant and at worst deviant. A message of such omnipresence could take on a powerful quality of fact and truth.

The experience of film was not as powerfully omnipresent. Far fewer people saw the same movie and they did not do so simultaneously on the same night; rather, their numbers accumulated only over weeks, as the movie trickled from first-run to fifth-run theaters, from center city to neighborhoods, suburbs, and small rural towns. To see a movie one had to go to a theater during its brief run there; it would be months or years before it was broadcast on television. Only a handful of the most successful movies were re-released to theaters a second time or more and accumulated larger audiences spread over years. Even these did not gain audience size on the scale of television shows. Perhaps the most notable example was MGM's *Gone With the Wind*, reputedly the all-time domestic box-office record-holder, with 200 million tickets sold domestically over decades. It demonstrated remarkable durability. It premiered in theaters in 1939 in the US, then was re-released in first-run theaters about every five to seven years thereafter to 1974. Between times, it was simply not available to the public, building pent-up demand until the next re-release. Each time it attracted packed houses and substantial profits. It did not appear on television until 1976.¹⁰

Compare that to perhaps the overall highest-rated television series, *I Love Lucy*, whose average audience for each episode when originally aired in 1951-57, was approximately 50 million viewers each week, roughly a third of the nation's entire population. *Lucy* gained as many viewers in four nights spread over four weeks as *Gone With the Wind* did in four decades. The latter endured and persisted, but the former was immediately pervasive as well as durably persistent over decades. American college students in the 2010s were still reliably familiar with *Lucy*.¹¹

Suburban Television

While television quickly became a domestic appliance for the home, at first it was located in bars and other public places, as an attraction to draw in customers, a period called the 'tavern phase,' a kind of community television.¹² Its domestication in the US was made possible by greatly reduced prices for tv sets, and boosted by post-war suburbanization: massive new housing development and migration of about 12 percent of the population from older urban neighborhoods. This was a shift in the physical, social, and cultural landscape that promoted the privatization of the American family. Urban populations had lived within walking distance of schools, churches, shopping, and mass transit to work. Suburban sprawl required a vehicle for all these activities. Government policies enabled the change. During the Depression, the federal government created 'savings and loan' banks to provide home-mortgages to the average working man. Low interest rates sustained by federal policy and even lower rates for World War II veterans made these mortgages affordable for middle-income families, including the skilled industrial working class. Local governments offered incentives to developers to build inexpensive housing on cheap, open land outside cities. The federal government planned an enormous expansion of roads, the interstate highway system that freed freight transport from the existing rail system tied to city centers, and eased commuting from suburban homes to city work. Lastly, the federal government initiated urban renewal that declared many older urban, working-class neighborhoods 'blighted,' and provided the funds and authority to level them, displacing and dispersing their inhabitants, some to the suburbs.¹³

These initiatives coincided with a widespread desire among people to settle down. During the Depression and World War II, young people had delayed marriage. With the war ended, many married and had children, producing a baby boom. They needed places to live and new housing in the suburbs at low prices were plentiful. Advertising and popular culture made it all seem to be the modern way to live. However, since stores and theaters were no longer within easy walking distance, the homes needed larger supplies of food and home entertainment. Refrigerators increased in size; televisions provided home supply of entertainment every day for years. Also, time and place were fortuitous. There was full employment, a high rate of unionization, and the middle-income population was very large.¹⁴

The growth in the proportion of the population with middle incomes enabled the growth of suburbs, television, and the mainstream culture.

However, since television broadcasting was privately financed, more remote and smaller cities and rural areas, often poorer, were neglected in television development, sometimes having only one television station. By contrast, suburban America was well served and influential in the national culture.

Movie theaters were less compatible with suburbanization. The movie industry was heavily invested in the real estate of *urban* theaters, from metropolitan downtowns to neighborhood shopping streets. Suburbanization left these behind. Movie ticket sales plummeted from four billion in 1948 to one billion in 1960. To accommodate the suburban trend, exhibitors built inexpensive suburban drive-in theaters by the thousands for teens and families on summer nights. Drive-ins filled up, while urban, third to fifth-run neighborhood theaters began to empty.¹⁵

Critics complained about the uniformity and tastelessness of new suburbs. Best-selling books and even a popular song condemned the mindless sameness that their authors imagined must be suburban living. Most of this criticism was aimed at the college-educated, corporate middle class who had settled in the suburbs. John Keats' *Crack in the Picture Window* caricatured young upwardly mobile professionals who commuted to New York City. Malvina Reynolds's song, *Little Boxes*, also pilloried that class, who lived in the repetitive little houses that began to march across the hillsides outside San Francisco, who went to university and now, "play golf [and] drink their martinis dry ... And the children go to school ... And they all come out the same."

Academic sociologists became public intellectuals and wrote books for public consumption on the topics of suburbia and television. C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* and William H. Whyte's *Organization Man* pointed to the workplace parallel, large corporations, that demanded conformity at home as well as at work. These confirmed some of what trade books argued, such as Sloan Wilson's *Mann in the Gray Flannel Suit* and Clare Barnes *White Collar Zoo*. Bernard Rosenberg and David White's *Mass Culture* and Norman Jacobs' *Culture for the Millions* presented a range of public intellectuals highly critical of mass media and especially television. According to these critics, mass society, including massive corporations, mass-produced housing, and mass media were producing conformists and undermining democracy.

All that said, it is important to distinguish between claims about suburban life and the reality. While to some degree the claims were valid, at the same time, studies of suburban communities, particularly of working-class ones, indicated a good deal of community

was constructed by the inhabitants, *despite* the limitations of suburban living. Herbert Gans was among the first to demonstrate this in his study of the new Levittown in Willingboro, New Jersey, built in the late 1950s. Bennett Berger, likewise found community in the alleged suburban desert. The contradictory claims of these two literatures contrast white-collar middle-class and working-class suburbs. Critics of conformity tended to focus on the white-collar middle class.¹⁶

It would seem that the conformity also would imply some sort of associated commitment to community and civic duty. Yet suburbs, cars, and television physically separated and insulated families from their neighbors. Before the 1950s, people living in urban working-class neighborhoods walked or took a trolley to work, schools, and stores. In contrast, post-war suburban design required driving to work, stores, and theaters, and riding buses to school. The home designs turned inward, eliminating the front porch and withdrawing from the street to a private rear patio. In more privileged neighborhoods, central air-conditioning sealed doors and windows from interaction with the world outside, and automatic garage-door openers made it unnecessary to exit one's car until sealed inside the attached garage — giving such neighborhoods a deserted feel, with no people in front yards or walking on sidewalks, and no sounds coming from open windows. Cultural values were changing at the same time as the shift to suburbs. People were leaving an era of intense, unified national effort, when working together for the whole was expected as civic duty, to an era that emphasized the nuclear family over neighborhood, and consumption over community service.¹⁷

Television complemented this turn inward, situating entertainment as a private, daily domestic activity, rather than an occasion for going out. At the same time, class cultures constructed television differently within the domestic setting. For the upper-middle class and their education and health advisors, the ideal was to separate the tv rather than embed it in household activity, so its use would be selective and limited in time and content. But most families could not afford a separate room for tv. Working-class families kept the tv in the living room and were more likely to intersperse talking and watching, giving priority to the socializing.¹⁸

This world of conformity began to come apart in the mid 1960s. The civil rights movement was displaced in the news by black power and black riots, a turn that alienated many whites sympathetic to civil rights advancements. The urban riots of the 1960s hastened the flight of whites to suburbs. At the same time, other groups, including Latinos, women, and the elderly, began to voice their own oppression.

In addition, revelations about the Vietnam War shattered trust in authority that was the foundation of 1950s conformity. It culminated in President Lyndon Johnson declining to seek a second term in 1968 and Richard Nixon resigning in 1974 as a result of the Watergate scandal. More people were reading against the grain of the dominant culture.

These challenges to authority may have been enabled by full employment and prosperity, a revolution of rising expectations. In the 1970s however the economy too fell apart. Stagflation, i.e. high unemployment combined with high inflation, signaled the beginning of de-industrialization in the US that would last for decades until the manufacturing economy was hollowed out, devastating unskilled and semi-skilled manual workers with little education. Noticeably absent was any working-class movement; instead unions declined too as de-industrialization progressed.

Multiple forces changed the early television landscape and aided audiences reading against the grain. Among these were the spread of cable television and video cassette recorders (vcrs). By the early 1980s prosperous suburbs were wired for cable television, which provided audiences more choices and more flexibility in watching television and began to erode broadcast network dominance. Twenty or more cable networks increased the range of choices, including premium networks like HBO that offered movies well before they appeared on broadcast television.

About the same time, vcrs increased audiences' autonomy and independence and transformed people's experience of television. They no longer needed to make plans to be home for their favorite show. Now they could program the vcr to record it and watch when it suited them. Moreover, once recorded, they could skip the commercials. In addition, the vcr gave people an alternative to going to a movie theater or waiting for a movie to appear on television. By 1980, they could rent movies on pre-recorded cassettes and watch them in the comfort of their home at times convenient to them, pausing for a break whenever they chose.¹⁹

During the network era, critics and researchers had imagined that audiences were passive viewers consuming whole what was fed to them by television. When vcrs became widespread, it became undeniable that audiences were actively controlling what, when, where, and how they watched television. The audience defined the circumstances in which they watched, the context of television texts. As we will see in Chapter 6, the arrival of these new technologies and changes were not confined to the US, but also changed television and viewing in many nations.

Discourses about Audiences

American public discourses also shaped television screen culture. These included public worries and news reports about the effects of television, the spectator implied in the texts of shows, assumptions about audiences implied in government policies and regulations, or made by television and advertising executives and in academic research, and audiences' discourses about themselves.

The early years of television, while an era of prosperity, was also an era of anxiety about a variety of new things, such as the atomic bomb and the cold war, or teenagers and rock 'n' roll. In an era of conformity, deviance and change were cause for panics. An artificial consensus was sustained by denying the existence of deviance within one's own group, and making deviance a sin of outsiders. To sustain this belief required strict conformity within groups. Large American corporations expected loyalty and conformity from their male office employees, including such trivial matters as the color of their suits and shirts. At the same time, change and difference needed to be condemned.²⁰ A plethora of fears were expressed about television pouring the ills of the world into the everyone's living room, with parents unable to control it and keep the home a safe haven.

In the early 1950s, articles proliferated in homemaking magazines about the health of young children who watched in darkened rooms, instead of playing outside in sunlight and getting exercise. Critics worried that even adults were unduly influenced by television. John Frankheimer, director of the 1962 film *Manchurian Candidate*, explained his motives in making the movie, "I think our society is brainwashed by television commercials, advertising, politicians, a censored press ... " *Saturday Review* editor Norman Cousins railed at television's tasteless menu. Public intellectuals, left and right, saw mass media, particularly television, as threats to democracy and tools of domination.²¹

Part of the foundation of any text is the implied audience, those addressed by the authors of the text. Television audiences may be implied in a variety of ways, by the time of a broadcast, type of advertising or genre and subject matter of a program. Any producer of text must begin by choosing through whose eyes they will tell the story, the subject position. The use of pronouns, 'you,' 'we' or 'they,' reveals the presumptive audience. Producers of television shows tended to be members of dominant groups (white, upper or middle-class men). Their presumptions became institutionalized, telling the story through their eyes and assumptions, as if that world view were the universal experience of every group.

For example, critics often cite award-winning television shows that "we all remember and love." A book blurb claimed: "... beloved and still-remembered family stories - *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *I Remember Mama*, *Gentleman's Agreement*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Marty*, and *A Raisin in the Sun*..." The phrasing presumes that everyone in America shared the same experience of these shows. It elides the question of whose 'beloved,' 'remembered,' and 'collective dreams': rich or poor, black or white, men or women, old or young, coastal, midwesterners or Southerners? This single blurb alone is of no consequence. However, innumerable texts that regularly imply the same audience may have had a substantial impact. The implied audience becomes an insistent demand upon others to assimilate and jettison their own point of view. It also excludes those who didn't or couldn't assimilate.

Despite uniformity of representations and subject positions, contemporary studies of actual working-class audiences indicated quite different reactions than the unanimity imagined by the book blurb. First of all, people often did not give tv their full attention. Women often watched while doing homework; husbands multitasked with newspapers; children did their homework. In addition, people selected and interpreted shows from the point of view of their own circumstance and experience.²²

Watching tv with urban working-class men in the 1950s, sociologist Herbert Gans found that they challenged shows' definitions of who was hero and who villain. The men preferred positive portrayals of working-class men, as in *Meet McGraw*, and disliked those that were negative, such as *Dragnet*, in which they detected hostility toward working-class characters, and *The Honeymooners* and *Life of Riley* in which the husbands were characterized as buffoons. Overall, he found a skeptical attitude toward television programs and personalities, distinguishing 'them' from 'us.' He found a similar attitude in the post-war suburb, Levittown. Working-class men in a California suburb also disliked shows like *Perry Como*, *Ed Sullivan*, and *I Love Lucy*, which featured middle-class personalities and characters, and preferred *The Phil Silvers Show* and *Meet McGraw*, which featured working-class characters. In the early 1970s, racially prejudiced viewers of *All in the Family* tended to side with loading-dock worker Archie against his college-educated son in law. Given the correlation between class and admissions of prejudice on psychological tests, these viewers were more likely to be working class than college-educated professionals and managers. Decades later, Ellen Seiter and her colleagues observed the same reaction among working-class women watching soap operas, and Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis found both white and black working-class viewers of *The Cosby Show* were critical of this middle-class, African-American tv family.²³ These studies indicate that

American working-class viewers were guarded in their attitude towards television programs and filtered the shows through a standard that distinguished what was friendly or unfriendly to working-class people like themselves. They used television texts as raw material, re-constructing it within the framework of their everyday circumstances and lives.

Soap Opera: Daytime Serial Melodrama

To paraphrase Marx, audiences make their own screen culture, but they do so with texts presented to them by media purveyors.²⁴ Screen texts play a part in shaping culture, both in the explicit message presented and the subject position implied, even though they do not determine audience culture. Rarely is a single text or a specific message consequential in shaping people's views and their culture. Rather, culture is influenced only by ideas that recur in many texts and persist across time. Repetition is what persuades, simply because pervasiveness and persistence make an idea seem natural - "if everyone says it, it must be true."²⁵ Pervasive and persistent ideas also reach many more people and thus become generally held assumptions recycled through and reinforced by screen culture texts. And screen culture texts tend to conserve existing conventional wisdoms and the status quo.

One way this happens is by truncating reality, excluding things contrary to conventional wisdoms. For example, texts that focus on personal relationships, romances and families may sidestep issues concerning class and erase race. Television, with its small screen and close-up shots, is technically suited to genres that emphasize personal relationships. Genres focusing on such relationships can avoid thematizing class and race. Even a show depicting a working-class or black family may look less at their relation to and interaction with other classes and races. Instead, tensions are confined to gender and age strains within families that are resolved through bonds of affection. Domestic drama serials, which focus on such relationships, are notable for their popularity and success worldwide, and provide an opportunity to compare texts and audiences across a wide array of cultures and over time. The two key traits of the genre have been the serial format, with characters and events continuing from episode to episode, and the topical focus primarily on family and romantic relationships. Continuing characters establish audience familiarity and loyalty, while the serial format draws people to the next episode to learn how the story continues. Soap opera originated as daytime serials on US network radio in the late 1920s.²⁶ As radio networks formed and expanded their broadcast hours they sought programs appropriate to daytime and its alleged housewife market. Other genres were developed in the 1920s and 1930s for this target audience, but

the soap opera was the one that proliferated and persisted. At their peak in 1941, almost every quarter-hour segment of network daytime broadcasting from 10am to 6pm was filled with soap operas. These daytime serials neglected blue-collar workers. None of the forty-odd soaps of 1942 centered on blue-collar families, even though most Americans were working class at the time. Most serials featured the upper middle class.²⁷

American discourses persistently ridiculed daytime soaps and the housewives who watched them. In the 1940s, social and cultural elites criticized network radio advertisers for feeding women soap operas that were, "ridiculous, sentimental bunk which has no relations to any of the realities of our lives." Humorist James Thurber caricatured soaps as "a kind of sandwich: between thick slices of advertising spread twelve minutes of dialog, add predicament, villainy, and female suffering in equal measure, throw in a dash of nobility, sprinkle with tears, season with organ music, cover with rich announcer sauce, and serve five times a week." Some claimed that listening to soap operas was psychologically unhealthy. These criticisms endured throughout the broadcast television era. Thematically, discourses about American soaps and audiences have framed the shows as women's entertainment and women listeners as mental lightweighters. This perception of female audiences underlay much of television program decision-making and scheduling in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁸

Contrary to criticism however, in those same decades, soap opera fans interviewed by researchers or writing fan-mail objected to this characterization and constructed an alternative positive discourse among themselves, explaining the shows' benefits to them. From the earliest studies in the 1940s, radio listeners stated that the stories provided helpful ideas about how to sort out their own relationships. Rural women in the 1930s and 1940s also described radio as a companion to ward off loneliness. The same pattern recurred with the appearance of television soaps. Much research since then has confirmed the importance of conversation among friends and fellow viewers about the shows, constructing collective representations of the shows, self-descriptions of themselves as active audiences, and asserting the benefits of their activity.²⁹

British Television

In most of the world, governments took leading roles in subsidizing the cost of new television infrastructure, as well as in producing and broadcasting. There were a range of mixes of state control and

commercialization across European nations, but also a general similarity in the assumption that television should serve the public interest foremost and that government should have a central role. The consequence was to favor a distinct national consciousness in television texts.³⁰ Even Britain, sharing a common language and much else with the US, felt compelled to defend its culture. Consequently, we will examine television in Europe by concentrating most on Britain.

The BBC, from its beginning in radio broadcasting, has been identified as the polar opposite to America's commercial broadcast model. It was publicly funded, dominated broadcast radio and television,³¹ and its mission was the public good. Its founding premise and operating policies presumed a cultural hierarchy: a disdain for commercial culture and for working-class and regional cultures, and a belief in cultural uplift. John Reith, the first director of the BBC, in 1922 formulated this mission, "... our responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is the best in every department of human knowledge, endeavor, and achievement and to avoid the things which are or may be hurtful." In 1926 a government commission endorsed Reith's mission and transformed the BBC into a public monopoly supported by the state. Given this mission, the BBC established sufficient transmission and retransmission equipment for its broadcast to reach most of the population, rural or urban.³²

Acceptance of the BBC's monopoly control was probably helped by the fact that American films accounted for 80 percent of the British box office at the time and threatened the existence of British filmmaking companies. It was hoped that BBC's monopoly power could prevent American incursion into broadcasting and could assure that a British voice and culture was broadcast to the whole population. The BBC consciously contrasted its approach to that of the US, which the BBC program director, Cecil Lewis characterized as chaotic and something to be avoided in Britain.³³

The 1951 Beveridge Report, a post-war review of the BBC charter, reaffirmed the public service model for television, again contrasting it to the American commercial model of broadcasting. However, a new government soon introduced commercial television. Independent Television (ITV) was formed as a federation of private producers and franchised regional broadcasters. Although ITV was created as a commercial enterprise, legislation and regulation defined it as a public service "in the image of the BBC." Yet, its commercial status led it to be labeled low-brow to such a degree that its acclaimed series *Upstairs, Downstairs* was sometimes mistakenly remembered as a BBC program.³⁴

Diffusion and Settling-in

The spread of television in post-war Britain and the cultural changes it engendered were similar to that in the US. Post-war television broadcasting in Britain began in 1946. There was a brief phase of community viewing before most homes had a tv, as in the US. By 1958, half of homes in England and Wales had a television; by 1961 three fourths, and by 1968, 90 percent had a tv, a diffusion rate only about four years behind the US, despite the damage of the war.³⁵

Television arrived in many British homes before they had a refrigerator or a car. With limited budgets, people chose to enhance the quality of their leisure time with television, rather than increase their amount of leisure by reducing housework time. It may also have been that the housewife's work-time was considered less important than the husband's and family's leisure time. There were other reasons as well for renting or purchasing a television. Perhaps the refrigerator and automobile were less necessary for Britons in that era due to less and denser suburbanization and the continuing presence of local shops within walking distance of homes. The expense of a tv set was justified as educational or 'horizon expanding.' It also represented modernity, progress, and status. Income played a part too: In 1955 only a quarter of British working-class households had a tv set; radio remained the predominant medium. The working class afforded televisions by renting or hire-purchase schemes. Despite an improving economy, wages were low, and only three percent of the population had some post-secondary education. Nevertheless, television had settled into the domestic life of most homes and television habits were set. The daily and weekly schedules of households were fitted to the broadcast schedule.³⁶

Television in the home clearly wrought adjustments in people's everyday lives. By 1955 the average viewer watched television about 1.5 hours per evening. Most affected was radio listening, as in the US. Radio listening in tv homes was one fifth of that in radio-only homes. Television viewing also displaced other activities in the home, such as cards and games, hobbies and music making. Once-a-week cinema-going reduced from 29 to 17 percent of people and never-going rose from 19 to 34 percent. Club attendance shrank by one third. Pub attendance dropped from 79 to 68 percent, but was still a robust participation. Televisions installed in pubs tended to reduce conversation in pubs, and to some degree, disrupt the settled patterns of association and behavior. But effects on conversation depended on the arrangement of the room and the makeup of the clientele. The only activity unaffected by tv ownership was sports participation and spectatorship.

Some claimed that television brought families together to watch after Sunday dinner. Yet, others claimed that television reduced conversation among family members, even when watching together. Michael Pertwee, an actor in the popular BBC soap *The Grove Family*, claimed that television "does little to create a family atmosphere and turns any parlor into a miniature cinema where conversation is frowned upon and relations and friends will sit for hours without exchanging a single word."³⁷

However, tv practices and tastes varied by class, gender, and age. Teens reported that they stayed at home more and went to bed later since they had television. Women preferred serials and drama, men sports, and both liked sitcoms. Housewives reported using tv as a companion while doing housework when husbands were at work and children at school. They expressed guilt about watching, even in early evenings after chores and even while husbands used tv to relax when returning home from work.³⁸

A 1958 *Sunday Times* series of articles about television changing British life reported that 59 percent of upper-middle-class respondents said that they never had tv on while eating and 66 percent considered that tv was not important in their conversations. Their furniture and family schedules were re-arranged to prevent tv from interfering with or overriding conversation, schoolwork or sleep. On the other hand, 22 percent of working-class respondents reported always having tv on during meals. A 1961 survey reported that preference for ITV over BBC was inversely related to the work-skill level of the respondent. Some respondents saw BBC announcers' 'plummy' upper-class accents as snobby. ITV in the 1950s introduced more relaxed and spontaneous modes of address that produced a more informal relation to audience. Others disliked the vulgarity they associated with ITV.³⁹

Television was implicated in suburbanization as well. Britain experienced post-war suburbanization as well as the US, but on a smaller scale, spurred by the destruction of a great deal of urban housing during the war, planned and financed as public policy, and directed at the working class. Instead of rebuilding old, urban working-class neighborhoods, post-war policies favored new, publicly built and operated 'council housing estates' on the peripheries of cities.

In 1953, sociologist Michael Young observed urban working-class transplants to one of these suburbs, Debdon, where "instead of going out to the cinema or the pub, the family sits night by night around the magic screen [of television]..." Young interpreted this as a response to the destruction of the lively community culture of East London street life, pubs and clubs, and closely knit, extended-family networks, when individual families were uprooted and transplanted to a new

suburb. Young wrote, "Television is something which complements and reinforces the isolation of the immediate family and the lack of opportunities for community life."⁴⁰

The social interaction and sociability described by Young and the surveys discussed above are considered social capital, an asset of individuals and communities that enables people to work together. Reducing such assets by up-rooting a neighborhood also reduces those people's abilities to act collectively to help each other, or to advance their collective interests. It thus reduces their democratic participation. American political scientist Robert Putnam blamed television in the US for a decline in social capital, as indicated by reduced association memberships about the same time as the spread of tv in the 1950s.⁴¹ In Young's analysis, television is an effect, not a cause of decline in social capital: in the absence of the sociability in their old urban neighborhoods, working classes in new suburban neighborhoods with little street life, bought a tv and stayed at home to watch. A related argument was that cosmopolitan 'broadened horizons,' due to the war rather than to the spread of television, loosened ties to local communities and reduced local social capital. The Lynds concluded differently, that radio in 1920s US brought cosmopolitanism that reduced social capital.⁴²

Researchers have focused on the impact of social capital on collective political action. But more relevant is that social capital enhances the formation and sustenance of ground-level cultures of the people, rather than cultures *for* the people. That is, social interaction is the ground on which local cultures are made and sustained and where mass or global cultures are interpreted and modified to local conditions.

Serving Consumer Wants

Reactions to television were founded on two bourgeois fears: the 'enemy of culture' within, the masses, their numbers, their 'inferior' tastes and values; and the enemy without, the invasion by American commercial culture. Notable among favorite shows were imported American drama series. These two concerns were compounded by the fact that the lower classes particularly *liked* the invading American culture.⁴³

Although at first a positive status symbol when it was new and expensive, television quickly became defined in published discourse as negative cultural capital. The negativity was directed less at the alleged social and psychological effects on children and more at the low-brow aesthetics of *commercial* television eroding the national culture. BBC was represented as the standard of culture and education

for the nation. Perhaps more than any other organization, with the exception of public education, the BBC institutionalized a 'preferred' British culture and language for this purpose. With the advent of ITV, there arose an intense political debate about the popular and commercial. The ITV debate reiterated an old alleged contrast between high-brow BBC and low-brow American entertainment attributed to commercialism.⁴⁴

Television had arrived as the sun set on the British empire and its world importance. Perhaps this compounded the concern about Britishness and another American cultural invasion. Labour MP Christopher Mayhew argued that the US was a danger "not only to our tv standards, but to our whole national culture and way of life ... it would be an excellent thing if we British asserted ourselves a bit against the colossal cultural impact of America." In 1956, writer John Fowles railed against ITV and its American style, "Watched commercial television for the first time ... such rubbish ... Desecration of most sacred themes - death, birth; American voices and manners."⁴⁵

American programs were a substantial presence, especially on the fledgling ITV but also on BBC, precisely because they increased ratings. In 1956, four of the twenty top-rated series on British television were American series; in 1958 the second-highest rated show was an American western series, *Wagon Train*. In addition, British tv broadcasters bought the formats of several American game shows and adapted them to British audiences. The problem was that the British working class chose to watch the American programs.⁴⁶

In elite British discourse, popularity and commercialism were long associated with lower classes and America. As we saw with film, there was a British upper-class aversion to both for the same reasons, to such a degree that an argument against one translated easily into an argument against the other. The nationalist rejection of American fodder and the classist rejection of working-class 'tripe' fitted together well. Much published discourse disapproved of working-class tv habits and criticized imported American shows and ITV for promoting a lack of taste and sophistication. Even anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, who in some respects was sympathetic to the working class, excoriated working-class television taste in his *Sunday Times* column and described them as television 'addicts.' John Fowles, claiming it had a narcotizing effect, in 1956 stated "drinkers in the pub sat in silence, watching, not drinking ... Transfixed by the shimmering screen like the first cavemen to make fire."⁴⁷

Beside American programs and working-class tastes, a third fear concerned the effects of television on children, often linked to these first two. Hilda Himmelweit, in the preface to her influential early

study in the UK, *Television and the Child*, summarized the public discourse at the time before her research:

A good deal of concern was felt about the effect of this new medium ... that young children were intent on the screen when they should be out at play, that older children spent time on it that should have gone to their homework, and that adolescents were diverted from their youth clubs and their games. Some stressed the dangers arising from the passive character of television viewing, fearing it would make young people mentally lazy.⁴⁸

Himmelweit's research concluded that these fears were overblown, but the fears remained part of public discourse nevertheless. These fears were part and parcel of policies of paternalism toward audiences and television's duty to serve citizens' and the nation's needs.

Children's programming well illustrates the public versus commercial difference in television policy between the US and Britain. In the US during the 1950s, early daytime programming for children on commercial networks was largely reruns of Hollywood's Saturday matinee films a decade or more old, especially western serials and animated cartoons. The guiding sentiment was what would attract a child audience, with little concern for its educational value. By contrast, BBC produced much of its own children's programming, and the guiding principle was socialization and education to prepare them for "an active form of citizenship and public participation."⁴⁹ This was hoped to counteract effects of both American television shows and working-class taste on British politics and culture.

These fears subsided as television became commonplace. By the 1980s during the Thatcher years, industry discourses changed, as an increasingly commercialized industry addressed audiences as consumers rather than citizens. One producer expressed the changed landscape's influence on children's programming: "they assumed in the 1950s [that] you'd put on children's television at teatime and they would sit down and that would be it, and they wouldn't watch beyond whatever. You can't schedule in that paternalistic way any longer. You've got cable and satellite and video and all the rest," new sources of television programming that spread rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s.⁵⁰

Industry decision-makers, including advertisers, network executives, creative personnel and regulators, downplayed paternalism and serving citizen needs and emphasized serving consumers' wants. The new attitude reflected a broader neo-liberal faith in the market and consumer choice fostered by Margaret Thatcher and Tory party policies of the time.⁵¹ Advertisers reconceived children as influencing household purchases, so that if they could be trained appropriately, they might

become 'ideal consumers,' a very different goal from preparing them for "an active form of citizenship."⁵² Television was re-purposed from an institution akin to government-subsidized education and cultural production to an advertising industry using programming to trawl a large audience for sale to advertisers.

British Drama Serials and Audiences

Television programming constitutes another sort of discourse about audiences, framed as the assumed audience and subject position in the text. British drama serials reveal aspects that are distinctly British in the text as well as in the discourse about their audiences.

British serial dramas were broadcast during hours that enabled the whole family to watch, in contrast to the American daytime serials that targeted housewives alone. There were two British serial sub-genres, both with roots in radio: domestic serials depicting ordinary people, several of which focused on working-class families and communities; and classic or heritage serials re-creating literary classics for television which typically featured upper-class families. The former were quite popular, sustaining high ratings for decades and in the 1980s, accounting for most of the twenty top-rated shows. The latter, not usually grouped with domestic serials, received generally critical acclaim and success as exports. The first were inexpensive dramas produced for steady income, the latter expensively produced for prestige.⁵³

Two famously long-lived working-class soap operas, *Coronation Street* (ITV 1960) and *EastEnders* (BBC 1985) illustrate the first. Twice weekly *Coronation Street* was a sentimental portrait of a working-class neighborhood, probably influenced by Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (1957). Raymond Williams described it as a "distanced and simplified evocation and prolongation of a disappearing culture: the Northern urban back-streets of the Depression and its immediate aftermath." *EastEnders* quickly became Britain's most popular tv show. Set in contemporary London's working-class East End, it was less sentimental, including storylines about thieving and some violence, yet still focused on family and community sentiments.⁵⁴

Within this class setting, there was also a gender dimension. It is no surprise that shows built upon relationships and emotional realism were designed to attract, and indeed did attract, women more than men. As one woman viewer remarked, men "don't like [*Crossroads*] cos it's sometimes sentimental ... men are not supposed to show their emotions ... they think it's just stupid and unrealistic." The gendering also is indicated by the fact that several working-class serials were built around strong female characters, with men as secondary characters.⁵⁵

Classic or heritage television serials began in the early 1950s, but by the 1960s more ambitious productions were made to rebroadcast and syndicate. BBC produced an adaptation of Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*, followed by a regular stream of lavish productions during the 1970s. ITV too produced classic serials, most famously *Upstairs, Downstairs*, which mimics a proper bourgeois Edwardian home, dress and manners.⁵⁶ These shows positioned viewers to identify with the happiness and heartbreaks of characters in financially successful families and even to enjoy vicariously the plush living and surroundings, all without class resentment.

Promotions of these serials as literary adaptations made clear their intended audience. They were the English national heritage concept applied to television, framing audiences as patriotic citizenship expressing pride of heritage, a stark contrast to the American stereotype of teary housewives watching soaps in the afternoon. Even when based on French and Russian classics, they still were presented as a product of traditional British dramatic quality, not unlike the French promotion of the auteur film.⁵⁷

Both upper-class families of classic serials and working-class communities of soaps represented the 'emotional realism' of relationships and a common Britishness. By depicting these different classes in separate, self-contained life-worlds, the serials could present class without thematizing class conflict. Instead, they sympathetically elided class difference by emphasizing family and relationships as concerns shared by all classes. Playing up the Britishness also provided common ground to both classes.⁵⁸ In contrast, class was submerged in American shows, as we have seen, while class tension was central to Latin American telenovelas, as we will see in Chapter 6.

In one way, soap operas in Britain suffered some of the same bad reputation among elites and highbrows as in the US. The term was used to indicate any behavior or incident exhibiting melodramatic quality, in phrases such as "high politics as soap opera." *The Times* sarcastically described *Lost Empires* as a "bad case of repetition-compulsion" and *EastEnders* as "an East London Mylra of no real problems; while its residents planned a harmonious carnival, real-life Inner London was erupting in riots." At the same time, however, some soaps were treated with a certain fondness, such as the long-running *Coronation Street* and *Crossroads*. In a 1987 debate in the House of Lords on alcohol abuse, the Under Secretary for Health said that *EastEnders* set a good example in that characters were frequently shown with non-alcoholic drinks.⁵⁹ In the US, such distinctions between soaps were rare, except among their fans; they were more commonly dismissed *en masse*.

It appears too that there was less venom directed to their audiences than in the US, and to the degree that was, it seems composed of a smaller dose of misogyny and a larger dose of class, partly wrapped in the conception that the 'ignorant masses' need uplifting.⁶⁰ This seems to go hand in hand with the fact that soaps in Britain were not so ghettoized in daytime slots and identified so exclusively with women viewers, as in the US. Moreover, British soaps' domination of prime-time ratings in the 1980s made it more difficult to publicly and regrettably ridicule such a large audience. Consider for example, the relative acceptance in the US of the profitable prime-time serial *Dallas*, while daytime soaps continued to be disparaged. It is not that disparagement of soaps and their audiences was absent in Britain, but rather that it was less virulent, and to a degree balanced by some public fondness as well.

In sum, two closely related cultures, sharing a language and a long-shared history, yet had distinct differences in their television cultures, first in production, with differing mix of public and commercial systems, and then in consumption, differing practices in watching the same genre. Culturally sedimented discourses about television and audiences reveal yet further differences, most notably the differing treatment of class and the ridicule arising from gender-segregated soap opera.

European Television and Nationalism

Post-war television broadcasting in Europe began earlier in larger nations – France, Germany, and Italy – followed later by smaller nations – Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Ireland. European television was predominantly non-commercial. Until the late 1980s, its development and operation was typically government sponsored and funded. The relationship between television ownership and operational control ranged from Britain, with the BBC alongside ITV overseeing commercial networks, to the Soviet Union, with complete government ownership and operational control. The French and German governments' control of television lay somewhere between, but closer to the British.⁶¹ Many nations relied on American exports to fill their television broadcast hours, as they had filled the theater screens with Hollywood films.⁶² This fact fed a sense of urgency in these nations to limit American programs and fund native production.

In France, the government's purpose was to use television to strengthen and unify national identity and advance nationalist agendas. The de Gaulle era in France was most notable. The Fifth Republic,

new in 1958, needed to establish its legitimacy among the French people. Its first president, Charles de Gaulle used his charismatic and heroic appeal to French citizens to speak directly to the nation rather than through Parliament or political parties. His press conferences were national events broadcast by all the radio and tv stations. The de Gaulle government used television so much and so effectively that it was described as a 'telectracy'.⁶³

Smaller European nations faced a greater problem of market size in supporting a national television system and supplying sufficient native programming. This was the same problem that had plagued national film industries, the cost of producing a sufficient supply for a small population, compared to larger nations where networks spread costs over much larger markets. Smaller nations were necessarily more dependent on imported programming, and less able to restrict imports, especially inexpensive American programs.⁶⁴

For example, Sweden had a population of less than eight million and only 20 percent of households had a television as late as 1963. Sveriges, the national broadcaster that was modeled on BBC and began television broadcasting in 1956, recognized that their audiences could not generate sufficient funds to fill even a short broadcast schedule of four hours per day. Funds from exports were not a solution, since Swedish-language programs had no outside market. Therefore they planned to import a third of their programming. So, although its public service mission was explicitly to provide information and education, it actually sought American programs, which were quite cheap, about \$400-800 per episode.

Sweden appeared less fearful of American cultural invasions. They upheld what they considered a higher cultural standard in rejecting some American programs and episodes as too 'sentimental and mawkish' or considered inappropriate to Swedish taste. The broadcaster carefully selected specific episodes of shows and rejected others. Sveriges was cautious about television programming, particularly violence. However, having filtered the shows, the American western genre proved popular with Swedish tv audiences. Swedes had been familiar with the genre from its predecessors in American films and dime novels even before film. A survey indicated 75 percent were 'very satisfied' with *Gunsnake* episodes televised in 1959.⁶⁵

One attempt to make production more affordable and to combat American imports was Eurovision, a cross-national cooperation to facilitate exchanges of programming established in 1950. At the same time, however, each nation provided its own commentaries and context of these shows to re-nationalize them for their domestic use.⁶⁶

European Audiences

For brief periods, in pre-war Germany and Britain and post-war rural France and Italy, government policies conceived tv reception as a collective experience in theaters and public television rooms, rather than as a private domestic experience. These were experimental systems reaching only a select few people in a handful of cities. However, the small screen restricted the audience to a small number of viewers at one time, and the price of television sets dropped dramatically by the mid 1950s, making widespread private ownership of a set feasible.⁶⁷

With a television in the home, family viewing became common in many cultures. French viewers recalled with nostalgia their nightly family rituals in front of the television in the 1950s, indicating the intimacy of that viewing experience. Italian families expressed similar experiences. It was important enough that families rearranged their everyday schedules for meals and other events in order to watch together. In this manner, television seems to have contributed to a cross-national practice in domestic life.⁶⁸

At the same time, family and domestic settings of television often have been cited as reducing sociability and community ties, or what has been defined as a community's social capital. One concern was that it would engender fear of the outside world that increased withdrawal. However, the causal connection is unclear and the relationship bounded by social and cultural contexts.⁶⁹

What was neglected in these claims was a continuing communal aspect found in many nations in the form not only of viewing together, but more important, of conversation *about* television programs that extended beyond the viewing context, thus constructing meanings together regardless of any preferred reading.⁷⁰ This has been most documented in the case of soap opera, when women viewers, in addition to watching with friends and neighbors, often kept each other informed and shared and compared their reactions to characters and incidents. Widely recognized but less documented by research are similar circles of men who converse about televised sports events. This latter example occurs on two levels: first, locally among family and friends as a form of bonding, and second, broadly, as a form of bridging among men used as an ice-breaker for conversation at work or in public spaces. Programs targeting men and women with different gender-identified programming have supported gender-segregated and gendered cultures that bridge racial, class and other differences among men or among women. An important implication of these observations is that television viewing as a shared culture is not reducible to

a product of a preferred reading, but is based on widespread, pre and post conversations among viewers, ranging from family and friends to strangers, about television texts. At the broader level, the bridging phenomenon is linked to national identity, fostering a national culture. In these conversations, people often express feelings of national pride and identity as well, especially in relation to national news programs, televised national celebrations, and national participation in international events such as the Olympics or World Cup soccer matches.

By the 1980s, the Western television landscape was changing, with the introduction of cable television, direct broadcast satellite and the video cassette recorder (vcr) that gave viewers more program sources from which to choose and more flexibility in viewing. One impact was increased time using the television set. Another was to dis-assemble and individualize the mass audience, dispersed over dozens and more of cable or satellite networks, or dispersed across time, by watching the same show but time-shifted, and across space by watching the same movie, but at home rather than at the cinema.

Still, there were cultural differences in television use. In the 1980s the French used television a bit over two hours per day. In 1991 it remained one of the least cabled countries in Europe and only 0.2 percent subscribed to satellite service. The French were also among the slowest adopters of vcr, at 20 percent of households in 1987. Of those households with a vcr, most used it to record from television; only 19 percent reported using it mostly for pre-recorded cassettes.⁷¹

Similar to the French, in the 1980s the average Swedish viewer watched about two hours per day. As late as 1987 only one third of Swedish homes had a vcr and only five percent had cable tv. Vcr use occurred mostly on weekends, mostly watching programs recorded off air, not pre-recorded cassettes. Women more than men viewed recorded programs; men more than women viewed cassettes. The vcr allowed adolescents greater opportunity to watch with peers separate from parents. By 1984 movie cassette rentals exceeded movie ticket sales, and tickets declined 28 percent from 1980 to 1984.⁷²

Before the mid 1980s, Germans could choose from only three to four public tv channels. In 1986 the government allowed cable television and commercial broadcast. By 1987 about a third of households had a vcr. Vcr owners spent less time watching news, political discussions, current affairs, and high culture, the very programming that government-funding was supposed to encourage. But, cable and vcr did not substantially increase tv use, nor take much time away from other media or leisure.⁷³

Compare these numbers to the strikingly higher consumption in the US, where in 1980 average daily use was six and half hours, and

in 1987 half of all households had a vcr and half had cable service and daily use had increased to seven hours.⁷⁴

Comparisons

American television in the network era was probably more uniform, if only because European television programs were not on American screens, while American programs were on European screens a good deal. Yet there is no evident Americanization of Europeans, other than their becoming more familiar with American accents and culture. The Beatles sang something akin to American English, but spoke Liverpoolian English. Little boys in Britain and America both watched American westerns and played with cap pistols, but British boys also played with their British soldiers. The British working class watched their fill of American television programs, but also continued to harbor a great deal of pride in their nation. Europeans watched less television than Americans, even after the arrival of cable and vcrs, but there is no clear consequence, even though it may be profound. Things changed in Europe, but their causes are speculative, not confirmed. As always with culture, it is difficult to demonstrate cause and effect. We are left with the specifics and no sweeping answers about television and cultural change.

Among Western nations, television spread fairly quickly, more so than radio, reaching a very high percentage of households by the early 1970s. Television was highly entertaining, very convenient, and very affordable, in Europe and the US. Even more than film, it was recognized as an important tool for government communication to its citizenry. This was the incentive for governments to classify broadcasting from the beginning as a public service. In Europe, governments initiated the funding and building of the physical and organizational infrastructures necessary for television broadcasts, and in some cases established schemes to subsidize household purchases of television receiver sets. Such a commitment came with expectations that this would enhance citizen identification with the nation; in effect, to convince citizens, regardless of class, race, gender, region, or other status, that their interests were congruent with each other and with those advanced by the state.

Such expectations were challenged in Europe by imported American television series that were popular among the working classes. Whatever national identity and preferred readings of native broadcasts were intended, these had to compete with other messages in an American voice. The working classes were an especial challenge. Within

Western Europe, race, gender, and regional differences had been less championed by mass movements or critical discourses and mostly overcome in the nineteenth-century by nationalist and imperialist rhetoric. On the other hand, there had arisen strong mass movements and discourses questioning and critiquing the claim that the government adequately represented working-class interests. Consequently, American appeal to European working classes was particularly threatening to governments and the class interests they represented, especially since, in the first decade or so, many government-funded television agencies needed American programs to fill their schedules.

In any case, minority viewers, whether class or otherwise, did not simply swallow preferred readings, native or imported, but constructed their own out of the television texts and the context of their own lives. For all the impressions made by America and incorporations from American imports or native productions, audience research has demonstrated thoroughly that there was no singular national reading, but rather varied readings, collective ones shared by those mobilizing the same identities, as women or children or students, in similar circumstances, for all varieties of purposes including political critique, personal venting, or simple amusement.

6

Post-Colonial Television, 1960s-1990s

Like film, television development in nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America were shaped by their colonial past. Most of these nations had had a subaltern status in relation to Western nations for a century or more, whether as directly ruled colonies of Western empires, such as India, or through hegemonic influence, as in China and Latin America. In the post-war era, many directly ruled colonies gained independence, and were confronting the difficulties of transition to post-colonial nationhood. Some, particularly in Latin America, continued their subaltern status under American hegemony. Many of these nations were also poor, economically 'under-developed' and dependent on foreign aid. Most did not have the resources to build nation-wide infrastructure for television broadcasting immediately. Yet, their post-colonial circumstance made television more important than in the West.

While the first broadcasts in these nations may have come shortly after those in the US and Europe, these were limited to very few major urban areas and a small portion of the population. Substantial infrastructure to reach the bulk of the population and outlying areas did not arrive until the 1980s. But when television was developed, it was frequently done so with government funding and planning and its programming often used to promote national identity and cultural changes. A confluence of economic resources and political choices brought this about.

Western colonizers had used radio and film to justify and glorify colonial rule to colonized peoples and to tie their allegiance to the ruling nation. Post-colonial governments used television broadcasting