

T.V. Topics

by Michele Hiczewski



As I sat in front of my television set a few nights ago, surfing through a seemingly endless cavalcade of stations, I was amazed that I could not find even one show to watch that piqued my interest. So, against my better judgment, I decided to sit back and watch what was being touted as the “blockbuster hit of the season.” Once the first commercial break came along, I decided that, I not only despised the show, but had an unsettled feeling that the producers were insulting my intelligence by presuming I would enjoy watching it.

Well, since it is in vogue these days to blame our parents for any of our adult neuroses, I am going to put the weight of my dissatisfaction with the broadcast industry on Mom and Dad. Why not? After all, they are the ones who set my expectation bar so high for the rest of my life. They chose only quality programs for me to watch, even when the shows were of a comedic nature. Now remember, our choices back in the Fifties and Sixties were much leaner than they are today. The selection of stations consisted of the three major network channels on your UHF dial, and one or two public broadcasting stations on your VHF, guided into your home with the assistance of a set of antennae affectionately called rabbit ears. And that was it. Yet, there was a plethora of excellent programming, tastefully produced, and suitable for family viewing. So, doesn't it make sense that, with today's access to an endless supply of channels from around the globe, the excellent program choices would be endless as well? Well, guess again.

Today, the airwaves are permeated with programming that is nothing short of mindless, repetitive drivel. Sure, there are some good shows that can be found where the story line and the talent are both good. But these shows are deeply buried under the weight of prime time nonsense. In television's infancy, comedy was defined by the likes of Lucille Ball, Burns and Allen, and Andy Griffith. Today, we are expected to find the same quality of humor from an endless array of comedies about family dysfunction, sexual innuendo, and pubescent scatological references. Parental role models have gone through some changes as well. The Father who “Knows Best”, once regarded as the undisputed head of the family, is now portrayed as a bumbling idiot who can barely tie his shoes, let alone run a family.

Quality musical entertainment used to mean live performances on network television, free of charge, by such names as Garland, Streisand, Sinatra and the Beatles. Today we have an endless choice of channels that are dedicated to music. Most, however, are repetitive music videos—a recorded song accompanied by outrageous footage having nothing to do with the lyrics.

Should you want to enjoy one of your favorite artists in a live performance, you will need to call your cable provider and request it as a special order. It will then be broadcast to your home via Pay Per View, which seems a bit redundant for me since I already pay the cable company every month for the pleasure of viewing my television.

Classic television shows such as *All in the Family*, *MASH*, and *Seinfeld* are history. Today, we have the networks' newest brainchild, reality television. The concept behind it is very simple. For a full thirty minutes, or heaven forbid, sixty, we watch ordinary people argue with each other about utter nonsense, perform nauseating physical acts, or try to live with someone else's family, as if their own household is not challenging enough. Why are there so many of these so-called reality shows? Because screenwriters have nowhere else to go, no other ground to cover, and nothing new to bring to the T.V. table. So, why not just have people watch each other? After all, we are quite an amusing species, and most scripts these days are no funnier than what occurs in every day life, so why stress out over creative screenwriting? Just go into someone's house, let the cameras roll, and you're good to go. The show will be a hit! Viewers will watch anything. Need proof? After three years on the air, there is still an audience willing to watch two brain-dead heiresses display just how ignorant of the real world a person can be, and still be considered a television

celebrity.

Network news has had its share of changes as well. Various news networks that offer up-to-the-minute breaking news twenty-four hours a day have replaced broadcasts that featured noted announcers such as Huntley & Brinkley and Walter Cronkite. Initially, this sounds like an upgrade in the quality of news broadcasting, especially for those of us who are talented enough to simultaneously process the verbal broadcast and the ticker that runs across the bottom of the screen. However, there is only so much news that can be reported in a given day, so networks are now competing to be the first to broadcast pictures of Brad and Angelina's new baby. Talk about a news flash!

I get nostalgic when I think of watching television as I was growing up. I guess that is because I was among the first generation able to witness history as it was happening. Television was slowly morphing into something more than a way to pass some leisure time. News correspondence was becoming a part of our daily lives, to the point where viewers now recall exactly where they were when they first saw historical news announcements or events. I saw Neil Armstrong take his first steps on the moon as I sat in a picnic shelter in Delaware Park, Buffalo, and I can recall vividly how my family gathered around our black and white television, to grieve together on that tragic November weekend in 1963.

Network television seems to have changed their perspective on how they can grab the lion's share of the viewing audience. Classic television shows of the Fifties and Sixties were, for the most part, an icon of family values, and that is what made them attractive to viewers. Today, the emphasis seems to be more about how those traditional values can be ridiculed and mocked, with an arrogant assumption that this is what today's audience really wants to see.

In my continuing effort to find the positive side of any situation, I am going to step back for a moment and thank today's network television producers. They did what few have been able to do for me since May 20, 1955.

They got me away from the front of the set.