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How TV has changed over 40 years

It's a vastly different medium, so let debate rage

By Ed Robertson

Two-thousand-four certainly ranks as one of the more controversial years in television.

Let us count the ways. Janet Jackson boobed us on Super Bowl Sunday, "American Idol" was afflicted with rumors of racism and voter fraud, a CNN producer uttered a no-no word during the Democratic National Convention, Bill O'Reilly was accused of having unwanted phone sex with an assistant, a slew of stations refused to air "Saving Private Ryan" for fear of indecency fines, and ABC's gotten in Dutch for a raunchy primetime ad for its racy "Desperate Housewives."

What has all this brought about? Certainly some good. America in this one year has entered into an important dialogue, one long overdue, about the very nature of television and its role in American society. How should television serve this society?

But these often virulent debates also bring to light just how much television has changed in 40 years. We may think of television as the same medium grown up. It is not. It is in many ways an entirely different medium, one in a very different America.

Back in 1964 television was deemed so inconsequential that it was barely worthy of discussion, beyond its widespread dismissal as, in the words of one critic, chewing gum for the eyes.

Forget Janet Jackson flashing her boob or Nicolette Sheridan dropping her towel. The most eye-opening story on television that year, after the Beatles' appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show," was a married sitcom couple, Darrin and Samantha on "Bewitched," sleeping in the same bed.

Until then most married TV couples were shown in the bedroom, and sometimes in bed. But they were always in single beds, snuggled in but a good five feet apart and separated by a nightstand and a distance of carpet.

Network programming was still very proper. There was no sex, nudity or profanity. Even the word “pregnant” was a no-no.

Lucy and Ricky had separate beds on “I Love Lucy,” as did Rob and Laura on “The Dick Van Dyke Show.”

Network censors let “Bewitched” slide simply because Samantha was a witch, as opposed to a real live flesh-and-blood woman, according to author Herbie J Pilato. “Because ‘Bewitched’ dealt with witches and warlocks—in other words, ‘non-humans’—specific moralities showcased in other programs did not necessarily apply,” observes Pilato, whose book “Bewitched Forever” was recently republished.

“Therefore, it was more acceptable for Samantha, a witch, to sleep in the same bed with her husband Darrin, as opposed to Laura Petrie with her husband Rob (on the ‘Dick Van Dyke Show’).”

Then there was Jeannie the genie (Barbara Eden) of “I Dream of Jeannie,” which premiered in 1965. Jeannie was no more real than Samantha, yet in the eyes of TV executives, she was different.

Jeannie exposed her navel, or more accurately the area of her body where the navel is most commonly located. As a genie she wore a diaphanous, midriff-baring costume.

But network executives were loath to have audiences getting a gander of Eden's belly button. It would not be seen on camera. Eden was fitted with specially-cut high-waisted harem pants to conceal her navel.

TV has changed in other ways.

According to Nielsen Media Research, television’s potential audience—households with TV sets—was estimated at 52.6 million entering 1965. Today the number of TV homes in this country alone is more than twice that amount: 109.6 million.

In the fall of 1964 the average TV home viewed 5 hours and 38 minutes of television per day. This past fall that figure was up to 7 hours and 39 minutes.

Many TV sets in 1964 were still black and

white. There were just three networks. Cable didn't exist.

Our opinion of television has also changed. As much as we may deride television, we hold it in higher regard in many ways, and we are also more cognizant of its influence of society. Television worries us as it did not 40 years ago.

Four decades ago there weren't many serious discussions about television because there was little serious television to discuss.

Newspapers were still the dominant information medium. TV News, though in cases excellent, modeled itself to some degree after radio, where its roots were, but it followed the leading papers for guidance in its coverage of national events.

It was the dawn of what TV historian Tim Brooks has dubbed the idiot sitcom era.

The prestigious anthology shows of the '50s ("G.E. Theater," "The U.S. Steel Hour," "Playhouse 90," "The Twilight Zone") had fallen out of favor. So-called socially relevant dramas such as "The Defenders," "East Side, West Side" and "Naked City" were also on the wane.

In their place were comparatively simplistic shows ranging from the bucolic ("The Beverly Hillbillies," "The Andy Griffith Show") to the fantastic ("Bewitched," "Jeannie," "My Favorite Martian") to the bizarre ("The Addams Family," "The Munsters") to the absurd ("Green Acres," "Gilligan's Island," "My Mother, the Car"). These were the sorts of shows then-FCC chairman Newton Minow had railed against so famously in 1962 when he denounced television as a "vast wasteland." TV was mostly viewed as a vehicle for entertainment, a temporary escape from the worries of the everyday world. It was not the world.

Now TV is the world, or at least the primary medium through which we see the world. Instead of three broadcast networks, we now have six, along with slews of cable networks.

TV has shot to the center of popular culture, with thousands of books now out about the medium and about its impact on society.

So in 2005 bring on the debate about TV and its proper, or not so proper, role in American society. But be aware that in some ways that, as old as the issue may seem, it is really still a fresh one, certainly for these times.

Should we deregulate media? Should the
FCC be in charge of censoring television?
Should TV even be censored?

We should address all these questions as if
they were being asked for the first time.

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