A Companion to Television
Second Edition
A Companion to Television
Wiley Blackwell Companions in Cultural Studies
Advisory editor: David Theo Goldberg, University of California, Irvine

This series provides theoretically ambitious but accessible volumes devoted to the major fields and subfields within cultural studies, whether as single disciplines (film studies) inspired and reconfigured by interventionist cultural studies approaches, or from broad interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives (gender studies, race and ethnic studies, postcolonial studies). Each volume sets out to ground and orientate the student through a broad range of specially commissioned articles and also to provide the more experienced scholar and teacher with a convenient and comprehensive overview of the latest trends and critical directions. An overarching Companion to Cultural Studies will map the territory as a whole.

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Part I

Introduction
Introduction
Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan

Television (tel•e•vi•sion.)
Pronunciation /tɛlˈɪvɪʒ(ə)n/ ˈtɛlɪvɪʒ(ə)n/
Origin Early 20th century: from tele- ‘at a distance’ + vision.

1. [mass noun] A system for converting visual images (with sound) into electrical signals, transmitting them by radio or other means, and displaying them electronically on a screen.
   a. The activity, profession, or medium of broadcasting on television.
   b. Television programmes.
2. A device with a screen for receiving television signals.

What is television, how can we understand it, and why should we bother? Ultimately, these questions lie at the heart of this volume, which features chapters by an international collection of media scholars who have studied various aspects of television. But even these experts do not offer easy or conclusive answers to these key questions, for television presents a complex phenomenon that has become a ubiquitous feature of our world.

In this second edition of A Companion for Television, additional questions must be asked: How has television changed with the introduction of digital technologies since the beginning of the twenty-first century? And, in light of these
changes, is television dead or has it become so pervasive and delivered by so many technologies that it is almost inescapable?

What is Television?

Television is a multifaceted apparatus. Most simply, it is a technological process, an electronic device, a system of distributing images and sounds. Although television as a form of mass communication did not emerge until the late 1940s and early 1950s, much of the technology for television was developed during the 1920s. As with many forms of media technology, the promises and expectations for the medium were optimistic and propitious. For instance, one of the often-overlooked inventors in the United States, Philo Farnsworth, was clearly hopeful about television’s future. One of his biographers explains:

Philo began laying out his vision for what television could become. Above all the … television would become the world’s greatest teaching tool. Illiteracy would be wiped out. The immediacy of television was the key. As news happened viewers would watch it unfold live; no longer would we have to rely on people interpreting and distorting the news for us. We would be watching sporting events and symphony orchestras. Instead of going to the movies, the movies would come to us. Television would also bring about world peace. If we were able to see people in other countries and learn about our differences, why would there be any misunderstandings? War would be a thing of the past (Schwartz 2002, p. 113).

Obviously, Farnsworth’s full vision has not yet been realized, even though some parts of his dream have been more than fulfilled. Television has become a common household appliance that serves as a source of news, information, politics, entertainment, education, religion, art, culture, sports, weather, and music. Television is an industrial system that produces and distributes products, as well as (often) promoting other commodities and commerce. Hence, television is not only a technical device, but also a social, political, economic, and cultural force.

Of course, the way television is produced and received has changed over the years with changing political and economic climates, as well as the introduction of newer technologies – videocassette recorders, cable systems, pay TV, satellite systems, digital, and high definition. In addition, other communication systems (such as computers and the internet) have challenged traditional television’s dominance as the primary mass medium, while often serving as a means for viewers to access television programming. Indeed, these variations and changes make television an enigmatic “moving target,” its future uncertain and contested. Nevertheless, we must still attempt to define its character and its influence. And because of these technological changes and the context in which they are emerging, we may need a new definition of television.
Introduction

Why Should We Still Bother to Understand Television?

Television – in all its forms – continues to be a centrally important factor and an inescapable part of modern culture. Many would still call it the most important of all the mass media. As the television program *Modern Marvels* concluded:

From its public marketing in the 1940s to the present day, television can be listed as one of the most profound, if not the most profound, influences on human history. Television has affected every aspect of our lives including history, science, politics, culture and social mores. It is impossible to imagine a world without television, and most of us take for granted the way television has shaped and defined our society, and our lives (The History Channel 1996).

The pervasiveness of television is hard to ignore. For instance, in the United States and Canada, television ownership reaches 99% of households, with an average number of nearly three sets per household. Despite the proliferation of individual digital screens, television is still a central presence in homes, with a high percentage of Americans still watching television while eating dinner.

In addition, television sets are also prominent in other locations. We find them in bars, restaurants, shopping malls, waiting rooms, schools, hospitals, prisons … indeed, television sets still seem to be nearly everywhere and often difficult to avoid. Certainly, television ownership and viewing may vary around the world – but the prevalence of television is a global, albeit varied, phenomenon.

We know that television in its various forms is a fundamental part of everyday life for many people, although accessing television data is complicated by inevitable methodological problems. Only a few years ago, it was claimed that the average American watches more than four hours of TV each day. With the growth of TV-connected devices (DVD/Blu-ray devices, game consoles, and internet-connected devices), it seems there may be even more overall television viewing. It is important, however, to note, the different viewing behavior between age groups. Nielson has reported that traditional TV time is much greater among older audiences, while connected TV time is much higher (and growing) among younger groups, but still trails traditional TV (see Table I.1.).

Television is also still able to gather very large audiences at one time, evidenced by the 114 million viewers of the Super Bowl in February 2015. And some regularly scheduled programs also draw significant audiences, with *Roseanne* attracting nearly 20 million viewers in 2018 (Nielsen 2018).

Although the internet may be increasingly providing citizens with news and information, traditional television remains a primary source of news for many people. Often, television covers an event while it is unfolding, while much of the news and information on the internet comes from television operations. In many countries, television is a key component in elections and political campaigns, thus becoming part of democratic and anti-democratic processes.
Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan

In addition to news and public affairs, television provides endless varieties of entertainment and diversion. Though the form and content may differ across time and space, the capacity of television to transmit sounds and images is potentially inexhaustible and seemingly unlimited. Thus, many have called television a storyteller, if not the storyteller for society. As Signorelli and Bacue (Signorelli and Bacue 1999, p. 527) explain:

Television’s role in society is one of common storyteller – it is the mainstream of our popular culture. Its world shows and tells us about life – people, places, striving power and fate. It lets us know who is good and who is bad, who wins and who loses, what works and what doesn’t, and what it means to be a man or a woman. As such, television has joined the ranks of socialization agents in our society and in the world at large.

Importantly, television systems and content exist within social contexts and are shaped by a variety of forces. Through its distribution of information, entertainment, education, and culture, television inevitably is a fund of values, ideals, morals, and ethical standards. In other words, television is an ideological source that cannot be overlooked in modern societies.

Nevertheless, opinions differ about television’s fundamental value. (Note the sampling of opinions in the quotes about television by public figures included at the end of this introduction.) Television has been praised as a wondrous looking-glass on the world, a valuable source of information, education, and entertainment. TV allows people to share cultural experiences, as well as allowing family members of all ages an opportunity to spend time together. Despite the disparaging comments about television’s impact on print culture, some would point out that TV may serve as a catalyst for reading, as viewers may follow up on TV programs by finding books on the same subjects or reading authors whose work was adapted for programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Traditional TV (hours : minutes)</th>
<th>Connected TV (hours : minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12–17</td>
<td>10:12</td>
<td>7:55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–34</td>
<td>14:02</td>
<td>8:11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–49</td>
<td>25:48</td>
<td>5:45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–64</td>
<td>39:26</td>
<td>3:25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>48:26</td>
<td>2:11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I.1 Time spent per week with traditional TV and TV-connected devices in the US, 2018.

Traditional TV: all live, DVR/time-shifted TV viewing.
Connected TV: DVD/Blu-ray devices, game consoles, and internet-connected devices, including streaming media players and smart TVs).

As envisioned by Farnsworth, television does indeed provide news, current events, and historical programming that can help make people more aware of other cultures and people. It is argued that “good television” can present the arts, science, and culture. Furthermore, good television can teach important values and life lessons, explore controversial or sensitive issues, and provide socialization and learning skills. Good television can help develop critical thinking about society and the world. More simply, many point out that television provides people with pleasure, as well as being a welcome companion for lonely or isolated individuals.

The economic impact of television might also be noted. Manufacturers often depend on commercial television to spread the word and encourage consumption of their products and services. But even the costuming, props, and setting of noncommercial programs often feature familiar products that add a dimension of “realness” to televised fictions. In 2019, TV ad revenue in the US was still expected to be over $41 billion. Revenues are also generated from programming production and distribution, subscriptions to pay television services, and hardware sales. It follows that television also provides employment – not huge numbers, but certainly a significant workforce that obviously plays an important role in economic systems.

On the other hand, many commentators have also disparaged television as being valueless, vulgar, and vacuous. Indeed, the discussions of television as a negative force in society are so widespread and varied that they are difficult to summarize. Television is blamed for everything from passivity and obesity to stimulating aggressive and violent behavior. It has been singled out as leading an attack on literate culture, as well as shriveling public discourse (see Postman 1986).

An early and often-cited assessment of television acknowledged its potential value, but was damning of its current state. In 1961, Newton Minow, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission in the US, proclaimed: “When television is good, nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite you to sit down in front of your TV set and keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland.” Today that wasteland may seem more massive given the proliferation of television channels featuring inexpensive genres, like game shows and reality programs, or rerunning movies, TV shows, or cartoons.

If television has become “a teaching tool,” as envisioned by Farnsworth, this is not a positive development for many observers. For instance, in 1995, John Silber, president of Boston University, declared “Television is the most important educational institution in the United States today.” Silber went on to decry the

… degenerative effects of television and its indiscriminate advocacy of pleasure… As television has ravenously consumed our attention, it has weakened the formative institutions of church, family, and schools, thoroughly eroding the sense of individual obedience to the unenforceable on which manners and morals and ultimately the laws depend (Silber 1995, p. 2).

The role of television in promoting consumption has been widely attacked, because commercial systems are fundamentally ruled by advertising and advertisements
often imply that buying the product will make the purchaser sexier, more popular, and happier (Downs and Harrison 1985; Andersen 1995). Given the brevity of the message, ads often feature actors who fit within contemporary sexual and racial stereotypes, as Novotny Lawrence demonstrates in Chapter 15.

But even without advertising, some have argued that television cannot be transformed or altered and that it is inherently destructive and detrimental. Former advertising executive Jerry Mander (1977) presented this viewpoint in Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television (1977), when he argued that television is not a neutral technology and its very existence is destructive to human nature.

There are different values and importance associated with television in different cultures. Nevertheless, television’s key role in many societies – as well as its global prevalence and importance – is undeniable. That makes television a significant issue for research and reflection.

**How Can We Understand Television Today?**

Since its inception, television has attracted a good deal of reflection and analysis. Within academia, television has been part of the ongoing study of mass media in general, which has been influenced by many disciplines, including (but not limited to) political science, sociology, economics, psychology, and literary studies.

Scholarly research has concentrated specifically on television, insisting that the medium itself is a worthy focal point for academic research. While general approaches to television research might be characterized as social scientific or humanistic, areas of research specialization have also evolved. Several chapters in this volume offer general overviews of television research detailing different perspectives and approaches, while other contributors summarize specific areas of scholarly inquiry.

Much early television research adhered to a media effects orientation, searching for quantitative measures of television’s impact on audiences, especially consumer behavior and the impact of violent content on behavior. For instance, according to one estimate, approximately 4,000 studies have examined TV’s effect on children. Still, no conclusive results have emerged.

Meanwhile, other scholars have focused attention on television content from the purview of literary or dramatic criticism. The growth of television studies emerged mostly from cinema/film studies in the 1970s and 1980s and mostly drew on this orientation. This work has focused mostly on television texts and audiences, often integrating cultural studies and feminist analysis, while drawing on a range of qualitative methodologies.

More recently, historical studies of television have blossomed, as well as work examining television’s structure, organizations, and ownership, its connections to the state and to other media, and its role in influencing public opinion and the public sphere.

Indeed, debates continue to rage about what should be studied and what methods should be used to study television, as many (if not, most) studies of television still represent single perspectives or specific agendas. However, numerous authors argue
that interdisciplinary, multiperspective approaches are needed. In the first edition of this collection, Horace Newcomb called for “blended, melded research strategies,” while Doug Kellner described “multidimensional” or “multiperspectival” approaches to understand television from a critical perspective. As Newcomb argued: “We can best understand television not as an entity – economic, technological, social, psychological, or cultural – but as a site, the point at which numerous questions and approaches intersect and inflect one another.”

**Chapter Overviews**

The contributors to this volume contribute to such a multiperspectival approach, offering a wide range of expertise on the study of television. They present overviews of the extensive research, as well as original insights, on television's development and significance in various regions of the world. Importantly, they also examine how and why television has changed.

We begin with a theoretical overview for many of the discussions in this volume. In the first chapter, Douglas Kellner points to the Frankfurt School as an inaugurator of critical approaches to television studies. His overview considers the politics of representation and argues for a multidimensional critical approach to television that embraces the production and the political economy of television, textual analysis, and the study of audience reception.

We then turn to several historical issues pertaining to television that have been studied by media scholars. Lynn Spigel speaks to television history by considering discursive factors and institutional relations involved in television preservation and asking important questions about why and how programs are saved. Meanwhile, Caren Deming and Deborah V. Tudor explore the variable constituents of the concept of “televisuality” by looking closely at a program from the “Golden Age” of television in the United States, *The Goldbergs* (1949–1956). And, Gary R. Edgerton considers the representation of history in his chapter on made-for-TV history, identifying a wide range of general assumptions about the nature of this type of programming and pointing to implications for popular and professional history.

The industrial nature of television is fundamental to its understanding and has been analyzed by scholars since its inception. In this volume, Sylvia Harvey examines the changes in traditional broadcasting in relation to new online providers. She especially focuses on the historical evolution of legislation and regulation in the US and UK and explores the implications for new television services. Giuseppe Richeri echoes many of Harvey’s points in his review of changing relationships and the involvement of the state in the European audiovisual industry, as well as discussing the behavior of consumers. Meanwhile, Jane Shattuc provides even more details about “the new Netflix order” by digging into the development of new streaming technologies. She concludes that the television industry may not be changing so dramatically, but has been experiencing a shift in technology, not companies.
No discussion of old or new television can ignore the significance of advertising. Matthew P. McAllister and Lars Stoltzfus-Brown present an overview of the critical literature on television advertising, focusing especially on the US system, which has been the model for commercial television systems around the world. On the other hand, public broadcasting has also had a rich history, but is facing challenges from new digital technologies and its goal of building “culture in common.” Graham Murdock offers a brief history of public broadcasting and outlines the challenges and possibilities for the future.

The next section includes examples of the work that has been done on television genres and programming types. Annette Hill suggests that genre identification can be tricky, as she explores reality TV, which she points out is “a container for a range of diverse programs, series, formats, and events in which elements of documentary, talent shows, game shows, talk shows, soap operas, melodramas, and sport, mix together to produce subgenres.” She ultimately concludes that reality TV represents an “intergeneric space” between other genres and platforms.

Andrew Calabrese and Christopher C. Barnes further complicate the concept of genre in their discussion of television news, which has experienced structural and technological influences that have affected its production, distribution, and consumption. Further changes have affected the cable news genre, as Deborah L. Jaramillo explains in her analysis of “breaking news,” drawing on examples from Trump’s Twitter flow.

Meanwhile, another genre that has grown and changed with television is sports programming. As Michael R. Real and William M. Kunz point out, “the combination seems a marriage made in heaven.” However, they also note the “mutually parasitic” relationship that has led to heavy commercialization of most televised sports.

Individual programs also have been a major focus in the academic study of television, as scholars have used various methods of analyzing popular (and unpopular) shows. Lauren Bratslavsky combines textual and political economic analyses to explore how the NBC series 30 Rock both criticizes and corroborates industrial media practices. The result is a critical portrayal of the status quo that mirrors the events surrounding one conglomerate purchasing another and satirizes some of the consequences and conditions of television’s industrial processes.

A wide range of themes have been analyzed in studies of television programming, especially those pertaining to the representation of gender, race, class, etc. In his chapter, Novotny Lawrence traces the history of African American-themed sitcoms from the 1950s to the 1980s and the various strategies that the networks implemented in creating black-themed series. Lawrence focuses on the more recent program, This is Us, observing how the series echoes previous sitcoms, repackaging specific tropes and perpetuating problematic themes.