



TELEVISION THROUGH TIME

When the first programmes began airing in the 1930s, broadcasters couldn't possibly have foreseen just how enormous the impact of television would be.

In the early 20th century, radio was the medium through which people could hear about current affairs and connect to the wider community. So when the first television sets were made commercially available in the late 1930s, they were largely regarded as technical novelties – as 'radios with pictures'. And even though a crowd might gather in front of a department store window to see one, their curiosity would seldom translate into sales. The low demand was only partly explained by the high price. With only relatively small budgets to draw on, television networks were unable to lure experienced writers away from radio, the stage or the film industry. Television programmes therefore consisted of educational lectures, religious sermons or classical music. It was only when networks began broadcasting sport at weekends that sales improved, with the head of the household suddenly acknowledging that a set might be essential after all. Since then, interest in watching live sport has never waned. Indeed, the last FIFA™ World Cup may well be the most watched sports event ever, with over 3.5 billion viewers.

In the early 1950s, the percentage of television-owning households in the West was still relatively low at around 40%. Family members would often decide that they might as well watch what the rest of the family was watching, even if they weren't particularly interested. 'Variety shows', for example, consisting of comedy sketches, singers, magicians and other entertainers, were aimed at the widest possible audience. But one of the first types of programme to air regularly was the sitcom. The formula was fairly standard: each episode featured a recurring cast, there would be comedic and dramatic moments and, by the time the credits rolled, any issue would be neatly

resolved. Over time, viewers became emotionally invested in the characters' lives and felt compelled to watch every weekly episode. In homes across the world, gathering around the set to watch and comment on a favourite sitcom became a ritual. The next morning, classmates and colleagues would go over the details together. It became apparent that the influence of television was just as, if not more, powerful than that of parents, schools and governments. Of course, the big networks were still telling screenwriters they couldn't introduce any storylines that were too controversial, for fear of offending conservative viewers.

It was in 1960 that the first ever televised presidential debate was seen in the US between Vice President Richard Nixon and a relatively unknown politician called John F Kennedy. Prior to the debate, approval ratings indicated that Nixon was ahead and might easily have won the election. But as viewers tuned in, they were charmed by the good looks and winning smile of his challenger. In contrast, Nixon appeared unhealthy and awkward in front of the camera. As a turning point in political campaigning, it cannot be underestimated. Although radio listeners believed that Nixon was the more articulate speaker, Kennedy was voted in as President. Since then, ambitious politicians have hired strategists and consultants, not so much to help them develop policy, but the image they should project.

Yet another shift was evident in the 1970s, this time away from light entertainment and towards programming that embraced controversy and the issues of the day. The US broadcaster CBS's long-running series *MASH* (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) centred on the personal relationships, stress and trauma experienced by a team of doctors and support staff. Despite moments of comic relief, the series did not shy away from the realities of war. Then there was the mini-series, *Roots*, a narrative that opened many people's eyes to the truth about America's 200-year participation in the transatlantic slave trade. Both series enthralled audiences and became important landmarks in American mass culture.

The video revolution came in the 1970s, too, giving rise to the phrase 'Can I have the remote, please?' For the first time, people were able to record programmes on video recorders and didn't have to fret about being home at a specific time. Television also became increasingly international. In 1985, 1.9 billion viewers are said to have seen a live broadcast of Live Aid, a benefit concert held simultaneously in London and

Philadelphia. And during the 1990s, the annual Eurovision Song Contest is estimated to have attracted up to 600 million viewers. Not only were viewers gaining more control, but there was also the sense they were part of a global community.

Towards the end of the 1990s, more TV shows started to become serialised, with multi-season stories, but there was still a seven-day wait to see what would happen next. Now, streaming has transformed the way we watch television. Should they wish, viewers can watch an entire series over a 24-hour period, for example, although some might view this as the TV equivalent to viewing a landscape from the window of a high-speed train: you get the general impression, but the subtleties and meaningful moments are simply a blur. And when networks decide to drop an entire season at once, it means that thousands can binge-watch simultaneously. Of course, not all new shows are top quality, but the best do what they have always done: generate discussion. And instead of this being limited to the living room, the schoolyard and workplace, viewers can despair about a plot line, identify with a tragic character, or predict the outcome of a whodunnit mystery via social-media platforms. TV may have changed in format but it seems it will always be a major presence in our lives. We can only guess at how it might develop in the future.