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Quicklook at **Television**



About Quicklook at Television

TELEVISION was one of the most influential creations of the 20th Century and is still developing rapidly. It has helped to shape and spread cultures. News broadcasts bring graphic images into homes. Entertainment stars depend on the exposure that TV provides. It is one of the world's biggest advertising platforms.

Grainy images have given way to High Definition, small black and white screens to huge colour ones and infrequent single channel offerings to the ability to watch hundreds of broadcasts from around the world.



Quicklook at Television provides an astonishingly wide insight into TV and the people and industry that creates and supports it. We move from early pioneers to the explosion of activity after the Second World War. A whole new art form was created and then transformed, in step with, and sometimes leading, changes in society as a whole. We look at the programmes and the stars that came – and often went, with bewildering speed. Fortunes were made as huge new businesses emerged.

TV is a world wide phenomenon. It can be a cultural battlefield. Countries like the USA have been accused of being too dominant. TV's influence is undeniable and can be hard to control. We follow the ebb and flow of the many trends that have fired the imagination of millions and sometimes alarmed governments.

In the 21st Century TV is having to adapt yet again, in the face of the challenges and opportunities offered by the growth of the internet.

Quicklook at

Television

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Quicklook
books

Published by Quicklook Books Limited

Weighbridge House, Grittleton SN14 6AP

First published 2012

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Cover photo from www.istockphoto.com. Photograph by jonya

Books in the Quicklook series are available in hard copy and as e-books from
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ISBN 978-908926-66-1

Contents

One	Television has changed the World	7
Two	The development of television	9
Three	Pre-war TV programmes	20
Four	The first golden age (1945-1965)	24
Five	The screen age (1965-1985)	44
Six	The digital age (1985 – the future)	62
Seven	Into the modern era	69
Eight	Television careers	80
	Where to find out more	82
	About the author	83
	More titles in the Quicklook series	84

Television has changed the World



THERE was no television for most of human history, but it is now hard to imagine the world without it. Almost everyone in the world watches it and everyone is greatly affected by it.

Writing, drama, radio, photography, journalism and much else already existed when television arrived. It has absorbed and transformed them. In its turn, it has spawned and interacted with new media, delivered via the internet to ever more capable devices. In the process, distinctions between types of media are breaking down and new patterns, such as interactivity, are developing.

The ability of TV to deliver information and mis-information, graphically and increasingly instantly, affects people and what they think in very significant ways. Would public opinion have tolerated the carnage endured in First World War, if it had been shown to millions on TV?

No one in the public eye can ignore television. We now live in the era of the sound bite and spin doctor. Behaviour is controlled in an effort to produce favourable coverage on TV.

TV influences us in a great many ways. It can educate us or create tastes, aspirations and prejudices. It can make us change the way we cook, eat, and drink, what we think, what we wear and even what we do in the bedroom. (Watch TV, perhaps).

Television worldwide has come a long way from John Logie Baird's first practical demonstration of the medium in January 1926. With huge changes in programming and technology, it has evolved from a one-to-many broadcasting form to a individual-viewer-on-demand choice, thanks to time-shifting, portable devices and video-on-demand. The old analogue transmission of images has been replaced by a wide range of digital services, often aimed at niche audiences.

Several “golden ages” of television programming have come and gone. We may be at the start of another one, with new US shows such as *Mad Men*, *Boardwalk Empire* and *The Walking Dead* drawing much acclaim, alongside UK hits like *Downton Abbey* and *Doctor Who*.

Major news events, such as the 9/11 assault on New York, were covered live. The images of the collapsing towers are now as much a part of history as grainy footage of the moon landings. They have changed the way the world works.

Television’s impact on culture, including the trivial (such as the widely popular *The X-Factor*) is immense.

TV has been the defining communications medium of the 20th century. It promises to make a major contribution to mankind throughout the 21st century.

The development of television



LIKE the movies before it, the invention of television was the work of a variety of lone inventors, all of whom contributed parts of the whole. It is a story of innovative thinkers, persistence, competition, allegations of sabotage, successes and heroic failures.

Early Practitioners

The late-19th and early-20th century was a time when the onrush of technology was driven by maverick lone inventors.

Television was long discussed before it was practical. Ideas about the long-distance transmission of images accompanied the invention of the movies and the telephone in the previous century. One of the first television concepts – the telephonoscope – was outlined as far back as 1878. Between the first ideas of television (which literally means “far sight” or “viewing at a distance”) and the first practical demonstrations, almost half a century would pass.

The discovery of the photoconductive element selenium in 1873, by English electrical engineer Willoughby Smith, led to the development of fairly insensitive photoelectric cells that would later become vital in the earliest mechanical television systems.

The invention of a scanning disk by Paul Gottlieb Nipkow, a German student, in 1884, theoretically allowed for the breaking down of an image into component parts, ready for transmission. The idea was that by scanning the image, it could be turned into a signal that could be transmitted electrically. Nipkow lacked the element needed to convert varying amounts of light into matching amounts of electricity for the signal. There is no evidence that he built such a disc, but he patented it. The patent lapsed after 15 years, as it was never practically applied.

“Television”

Amazing Stories publisher, and maverick inventor, Hugo Gernsback, first expressed his interest in “seeing by wireless” in the December 1909 issue of his magazine *Modern Electrics*. He may have invented the word “television” in the article “Television and the Telephot” (sic). Other claims to the term dated back to the turn of the century. Constantin Perskyi apparently used the word “television” in a paper delivered to the International World Fair in Paris in August 1900. This was a review of the existing technologies related to the transmission of moving images, although no one had made one work. By 1907, progress in amplification tube technology, by American inventor Lee DeForest and German-born physicist Arthur Korn, led to the first practical demonstration of the transmission of non-moving silhouette images by Georges Rignoux and A. Fournier in Paris in 1909. This simple system used a rotating mirror drum that scanned an image that was then transmitted to a matrix of 64 selenium cells, where the image was recreated.

In 1908, A. A. Campbell Swinton wrote to the journal *Nature*, proposing a completely electronic system for television, using the discovery of the cathode ray tube by Karl Ferdinand Braun in 1897. This “CRT” was later used in most television sets up to the end of the 20th century. Russian scientist Boris Rosing and his student Vladimir Zworykin claimed to have transmitted “very crude images” over wires in 1911, using a mechanical mirror-drum scanner and a “Braun tube” (an early form of the CRT). The system was not sophisticated enough to transmit clear or even moving images, but the use of a CRT was another step towards electronic television.

John Logie Baird

By 1925, electro-mechanical television was being enthusiastically developed, with the first practical demonstration anywhere in the world conducted by Scotsman John Logie Baird.

Baird combined a Nipkow disc for scanning images with a selenium light-sensitive sensor that produced transmittable electric pulses, through a photoelectric cell. His first Nipkow disc was made from an old hat box lid, while other elements included a biscuit tin and a knitting needle. Equipped with this, Baird laid claim to the first public demonstration of transmitted moving images. These were in crude 30-50 lines of resolution – just about

The first golden age (1945-1965)



IT was only after the war that television became a mass medium, with the BBC back in action from 1945 and UK independent television (ITV) beginning in 1955. Regular broadcasts began in the US from 1948, giving rise to many TV genres, from popular soaps to quiz shows, news programmes and live events.

The licensing and regulation of the new television services that developed around the world following the Second World War were varied. From July 1941 the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) allowed television stations to broadcast supported by advertising, but also imposed some public service requirements before issuing licences. In the UK, a television licence fee was introduced (modelled after the already existing radio licence) paid by everyone who owned a television, in order to fund the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) which was committed to offering public service programming as part of its Royal Charter.

The fall out from the war meant that television resumed late in European countries like France and Germany, although this meant that they could benefit from the experience of those countries that had adopted television earlier. The 1950s saw a rapid expansion worldwide, from Mexico (1950), Brazil (1950) and Canada (1952) to Italy (1954), Australia (1956) and the People's Republic of China (1958).

The first television set designed and manufactured after the war was in America. The 630-TS was made by RCA and sold over 10,000 units by the end of 1946 (rising to around 43,000 by 1949) with each set costing \$352. By 1947 there were around 44,000 television sets across the United States, compared with over 40 million radios. Despite this, the new medium was well on its way to becoming the dominant form of popular entertainment of the 20th century.

US Commercial Television (1945-55)

In 1943, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) was forced to act on a FCC ruling from 1941 that it must sell one of its two radio networks. The sold network became The American Broadcasting Company (ABC) and soon became a major competitor to NBC when television broadcasting resumed in the US in 1947.

As with radio before it, television in the US developed as a hybrid commercial/public service system, closely monitored by the FCC. Although advertising was allowed as the economic underpinning of the services offered by NBC, ABC and the third major player, Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and programming was under the stations' control, commercial television was not a free-for-all. Despite First Amendment constitutional freedom of speech, providers of television services were Federally-regulated and expected to provide a degree of "public service" content. The television broadcasting system that emerged in the post-war period in the US closely resembled the radio system that came before it. Based around centrally-produced (mostly live in the early days) content – drama, news, comedy, variety – television rapidly took off.

By 1949 most large American cities had their own television stations affiliated to one of the network broadcasters: NBC, ABC or CBS. Those who lived within receiving range of these broadcasters could watch a growing variety of television programmes, including *The Texaco Star Theatre* (1948, starring Milton Berle), and children's puppet show *Howdy Doody* (1947).

Competing news programmes offered differing views on the world, with CBS's TV News with Douglas Edwards competing with NBC's Camel News Caravan, featuring John Cameron Swayze (required to smoke throughout the bulletin by the show's tobacco sponsor). Many programmes came directly from radio, such as *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951) and *The Jack Benny Show* (1950) with NBC and CBS funding their early explorations of television with profits drawn from their already well-established radio operations.

Initially, NBC and CBS dominated US television, but by the end of the 1950s ABC would become the leading network. Live broadcasting – mainly drama and variety shows – originated in studios in New York including such series as *The Philco Television Playhouse* (1948-55), *Kraft Television Theatre* (1947-58), and *Playhouse 90* (1956-60).

The “big three” of NBC, ABC and CBS were not the only television networks available in America in the 1940s and 1950s, although they were the only ones to prosper. Before the arrival of television, the largest radio network had been the Mutual Broadcasting System (MBS). This co-operatively organised venture saw affiliated stations share their programming, rather than having a network centre dictate the programming available. This laudable organising principle, however, held back MBS when it came to television, as the lack of a single decision-making body meant that it was unable to exploit the possibilities of television quickly enough to establish a successful network. AT&T (which controlled the coaxial cabling linking television markets) was slow to connect up the smaller markets that were the backbone of MBS. As a result, the so-called Mutual Television Network was doomed.

Hollywood movie studio Paramount attempted to establish a television network itself, following a short-live alliance with CBS in radio. In the late-1940s, Paramount had its own television stations in Chicago and Los Angeles, but never expanded beyond these territories, due to its core focus on the movie business. Others, such as set manufacturers Philco and DuMont, attempted to break into the broadcasting business but were defeated by the might of the big three.

DuMont (partially funded by Paramount) was the most successful, duelling with ABC for third place in the ratings until 1955. Named after industrialist Allen DuMont, the station was the only one to make a serious attempt to take on the dominance of NBC, CBS and ABC. With the FCC resisting calls to licence additional stations, competitors like DuMont had to battle with the big three to secure airtime on affiliates, but the local stations more often than not chose to go with the three majors to supply their programming blocks. When ABC merged with United Paramount Theatres in 1953, DuMont admitted defeat, as ABC was now better funded to secure its place alongside NBC and CBS as a major national broadcaster.

The number of television sets in the US increased dramatically from just 10,000 in 1946 to over 12 million by 1951. No new invention penetrated a new market place quicker than black and white television, resulting in half of all American homes owning a TV set by 1955.

About the author

BRIAN J. ROBB is a journalist and editor and the author of over 20 books on films and TV. A life long love of movies has fuelled his writing career.

He has written biographies of Johnny Depp, Keanu Reeves, Heath Ledger, Ewan McGregor, Leonardo DiCaprio—a *New York Times* and *Sunday Times* best seller—and Will Smith. He is the author of books on directors James Cameron and Ridley Scott. *Counterfeit Worlds* was a major study of the movies based on the works of acclaimed author Philip K. Dick, while *Screams & Nightmares* celebrated the work of horror director Wes Craven.

Brian edited the *Official Star Wars Magazine* (UK) and *Star Wars Insider* (US) for over a decade, as well as doubling up as Managing Editor supervising a host of officially licensed magazines for various science fiction films and TV shows. He also edited general consumer entertainment magazine *Dreamwatch* for six years. He created and supervised the web site Total Sci-Fi and is a founding editor of current web site Science Fiction Bulletin.

Brian worked on publications for the London Film Festival, the British Film Festival in Washington DC and the Edinburgh Film Festival. He was the film and video critic for the *The Daily Record* and *Edinburgh Evening News* for many years, as well as contributing to Scot-FM Radio and BBC Radio Scotland. He has appeared as an expert/biographer in a number of television documentaries.

Brian started his career as a sub-editor at the BBC's *Radio Times* magazine, and on *TV Guide* magazine. He also edited Edinburgh local newspaper *Central Times* for many years and was the Founding Editor of *Scottish Arts Monthly*, a listings title.

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