

Television Is Finally Tuned In

By Jeff Greenfield

Americans have invented a new indoor sport, which is sweeping the nation, threatening to displace baseball, Sunday driving and gossip as our most prominent national pastime. This sport has no name yet, but the rules are simple: Pick up a club and beat television over the head with it.

The Nixon administration perfected the game, of course, before being ordered off the field for unsportsmanlike conduct, but assaulting television knows no political or cultural bounds. Virtually every ethnic minority in the country has found cause for protest: from Italians complaining about the Italian-as-Mafioso cliché of "The Untouchables," to blacks complaining about their invisibility from the medium in the late 1960s, to Poles seeking court action against Polish jokes on talk shows.

This year the national PTA has made violence on television its No. 1

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In the 30 years since the first commercial television season, the medium, like the United States itself, has achieved a new maturity in the treatment of sexual and ethnic themes.

priority. And church groups around the country sought to pressure ABC television into removing the controversial new comedy "Soap," though few protesters had even seen it.

Even a federal government agency, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, found time to complain about the way women are portrayed on television. It protested that Edith Bunker always rushed to bring husband Archie a beer when he came home from work, and that Mary Tyler Moore always called her boss "Mr. Grant," while the male employees called him Lou.

Aesthetics, of course, is not the strong point of government commissions—look at official architecture for irrefutable proof—and it is perhaps too much to expect a federal agency to understand that these character traits are part of what good writing is

all about. (Edith Bunker, is a person of her time and place, raised according to rules of the game which have changed. She is in her own way a character of extraordinary power and moral conviction. And Mary Tyler Moore's Mary Richards is the small-town girl come to the big city, years younger than any of her colleagues. Throughout the life of that show, the character grew in assertiveness, responsibility and power, and the "Mr. Grant" habit was a touching example of the original character.)

And no interest group—political, ethnic, sexual—organizing around the cause of self-pride is likely to be happy with the way in which it is portrayed in the mass media. Without that dissatisfaction, there wouldn't be all that much to organize for. Finally, television throughout its history has provided more than enough examples

of insensitive, distorted and downright stupid stereotypes to warrant a heady dose of skepticism.

To look at television today, however, 50 years after the first inter-city transmission of a television picture and 30 years after the beginning of network television, is to see a medium that has moved with the sea changes in American life during that time.

The debut of network television was not unpromising. The 1947-48 season pitted CBS newscaster Douglas Edwards against NBC's John Cameron Swayze. Arthur Godfrey was joke-master for CBS while NBC gave us Milton Berle. But CBS also offered the incomparable Ed Sullivan and then late in the season its rival network introduced Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca.

But as the offerings of the networks increased so did the mediocrity of scripts and plot lines. Still, for all the exploitation of anxiety and fear (both in programming and commercials), the fact is that today commercial television has broken the limits of who—and what—it might portray wide open. And it has done so, I think, because of what has happened in the United States itself. To say

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that television, as a rule, reinforces old stereotypes is to ignore much of what is happening on the tube today.

To understand the change, consider television in the middle of the 1950s—a time when what Warren Harding previously had called “normalcy” was very much a part of our lives. The America portrayed on network television in such shows as “I Love Lucy,” “Father Knows Best,” “Ozzie and Harriet,” “My Little Margie,” “Make Room for Daddy” was a totally white, middle-class enclave where (in the words of a TV executive of the time), the story lines concerned “happy people with happy problems.” Would Rick Nelson tell Dave that he borrowed his cardigan? Would Lucy tell Ricky she burned the roast just before a big dinner? Blacks did not exist; they just lived in a separate world of happy domestic servitude (“Beulah”), or happy ghetto misadventures (“Amos and Andy”).

The women on television were strictly role-defined: an occasional teacher or secretary, otherwise a wife and mother. Frequently they were played as adult children. “I Love Lucy,” “My Little Margie,” “I Married Joan,” and countless other shows featured zany scatterbrains whose misadventures were either rewarded by paternal chuckles or punished by paternal scoldings or spankings. The concept of a man staying at home while a woman worked was, to be sure, frequently seen on television—as a sure-fire slapstick joke. And matters such as sex, politics, religion, serious domestic disputes and death were treated in a consistent fashion—they did not exist.

Television today is different, not always better—the anthology drama of “Studio One” and “Playhouse 90” was in fact more diverse and often more challenging than the regular weekly dramatic series of today—but different. Put simply, the explosion of deep divisions in our politics, our cultural and sexual preferences, our willingness to talk about matters in public that were kept secret 20 years ago has finally reached television. Indeed, it has done more than that. Television is sufficiently comfortable with these changes that it no longer has to clear its throat when touching on a once-taboo subject. It has finally reached the point where dissident characters and behavior can be accepted simply as part of life.

Consider the portrayal of blacks on television. When the first black faces began appearing as leads in television series, it was treated with consummate caution. NBC’s “Julia” of a decade ago was a comedy-drama about a widowed nurse raising a young son. So concerned was the network about not portraying blacks as somehow slovenly or unkempt that they put a woman making \$10,000 a year in an apartment with about \$100,000 worth of interior decorating, and with \$50,000 in dresses. It was the Stanley Kramer, guess-who’s-coming-to-dinner treatment of making the black figure so noble, so heroic, that racial prejudice would be wiped out.

Now look at blacks on television today: They are all over the screen, in series, as lead characters, as friends, as co-workers. On “Barney Miller,” Detective Harris, as played by Ron Glass, is the classic upwardly mobile city-dweller. He is well-spoken; he is flawlessly dressed, and this trait is treated as a pretension for comic relief. On

premise, and reality was precisely what television feared to deliver a generation ago.

Women have similarly broken totally out of the housewife-mother-naughty little girl mold of an earlier generation. In drama, and in comedies, they are in every profession in the work force. On “Family,” Sada Thompson has left the kitchen to go back to college now that her children have grown, and Kristy McNichol, as Buddy, the daughter entering adolescence, is a marvelous combination of brains, wit and vulnerability. In “On Our Own,” a new CBS comedy, the two lead characters are ad agency women who have been recently promoted to a creative copywriting team.

While feminists have made much of the sex-object aspect of shows such as “Charlie’s Angels,” “Police Woman” and others, the fact is that these women are not only beautiful but also in charge of their own destinies. They solve crimes; they catch criminals; they rescue men in trouble; they thwart evil. As the father of a 4-year-old daughter, I am delighted that there are super heroines of the Bionic Woman-Wonder Woman variety, so that her fantasies of super strength and power need not be channeled through male figures. Of course these shows distort reality and provide escape; that is what popular culture always does. At least now the culture is providing entry to blacks, women and virtually every other group to see themselves as part of the escapist fantasy.

Finally, it ought to be noted that there simply is no taboo subject on television anymore, except perhaps for the outer fringes of sexual conduct. Only five years ago Hal Holbrook starred in “That Certain Summer,” about a man coming to grips with his homosexuality and his fatherhood; it was considered a movie of remarkable courage. Now gays are an almost casual part of sit-com and dramatic life. And while gay activists may not always approve the portrayal—one group took out an ad in Variety demanding that a gay character not desire to go “straight” on “Soap”—gays as a class are out of closet on TV for good.

Sexuality is also a fact of life: Love affairs are as frequent on network series as they are in real life, and the now-defunct “All’s Fair” featured Bernadette Peters and Richard Crenna living together without benefit of clergy. Characters on Lear shows have been debating politics for years, and “Washington: Behind Closed Doors” was at its best not in the soap-opera portrayal of love and lust in the capital, but in its specific political views of intelligence agencies and a power-hungry White House.

It is hard, I know, to recognize any change in television for the better because the quality of TV comedy and drama, the execution, the faithfulness to characters, the respect for the intelligence of the audience is so often missing that the premises are often drowned in nonsense. But if we take a step back from the onslaught of bad jokes, silly plots, and half-baked characters, and look at television as it was and is, the difference is remarkable.

It’s the difference between war as Movietone news propaganda newsreel and war as an ugly, wretched, inhuman horror as portrayed on M*A*S*H.

It’s the difference between home as a fantasy land of well-scrubbed kids and parents, and home as a sometimes battleground

played by Ron Glass, is the classic upwardly mobile city-dweller. He is well-spoken; he is flawlessly dressed, and this trait is treated as a pretension, for comic relief. On "The Jeffersons," George's I-made-it-big-why-can't-they intolerance is a comic version of pride usually directed *against* blacks. Norman Lear didn't need to clothe this black main character with nobility or selflessness, and the result is laughter with very little racial overtone. On "What's Happening"—a third-rate comic show, to be sure—the situation is a woman, abandoned by a ne'er-do-well husband, struggling to raise two kids as a domestic. And, as with many poor people living on a high-starch diet, the mother is very overweight.

The point is not that these shows represent great television, but that they are willing to take comic reference points from the broadest spectrum of black life in America. These shows neither confine blacks to one kind of occupation, nor render them into super-folk. Reality is the

trayed on M*A*S*H.

It's the difference between home as a fantasy land of well-scrubbed kids and parents, and home as a sometime battleground where angry, bitter wills clash, as on "Family."

It's the difference between cops as simon-pure forces of good and cops as sometimes weak, sometimes vulnerable, sometimes venal human beings, as on "Kojak" and "Police Story" and "Barney Miller."

Nothing ought to stop people from complaining about the all-too-frequent failures and outrages of the medium of television. It is so pervasive, powerful, so totally defining of our culture and society that it must be watched with care and with skepticism.

But it also must be said that in many ways, the medium has gone through the same growing pains we all have lived through these last 30 years. And to say that television has not grown up with us is to ignore the evidence before our eyes. □