**Video Script**

**Lecture 18 – Television Comes Home**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

You may recognize this woman from our last lecture. This is Gertrude Berg, creator, writer, producer, and star of the hit radio program *The Goldbergs*. Today we’re going to look at the cultural, technological, and industrial conditions that encouraged her to leave radio behind and embrace the device that characterized domestic entertainment for more than half a century: the television.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today.

**V-E Day**

Let’s begin here, at the end of WWII. The Nazis surrender on May 18, 1945. The United States uses nuclear weapons against Japan in August; Japan surrenders on August 15, 1945.

Within the context of the United States, the end of the war prompted a number of pretty seismic social and cultural shifts. Soldiers like the ones you see here return home en masse to the United States. The GI Bill sends thousands of these returning men to college, creating a thriving middle class and record prosperity in the post-war years—though it’s important to put an asterisk after all of that prosperity.

*Black* soldiers returned home to a country still under Jim Crow laws, which limited how many of these roaring post-war opportunities they could seize.

**Rosie/woman**

**[ANIMATION]** Women had been encouraged to seek jobs outside the home to support the war effort. With thousands upon thousands of young men returning from the war front to civilian culture, **[ANIMATION]** women were then encouraged to cede those jobs and return to full-time mothering and homemaking.

**Baby boom**

Queue up “Reunited” by Peaches & Herb, folks, because another social change in post-war America was the enormous uptick in the birth rate. Many people’s plans to marry, to buy homes, and to start families had been derailed by the war. As the country got back to the business of living, it also got back the *business* of living if you know what I mean.

Post-war, the average marriage age drops to just 17 for a few years. The resultant wave of babies born between 1946 and about 1964 are known as the Baby Boomers, the meme-famous generation who will never retire and paid $400 for college and believes if my generation stopped buying oatmilk lattes we would all own homes.

Kidding! Just kidding. Mostly. I’m pointing out this generation mostly just to note their numbers. So many births all at once meant a nationwide increase in the number of families looking for space to raise all these kids.

**Suburbs**

Thus, we invented the suburbs. Earlier in this course, we talked about how the success of the motion picture industry was tied to urbanization, or the movement of people from around the country into cities in search of jobs. **[ANIMATION]** Surburbanization flows the other way; it’s the mass move away from urban centers to single family homes in neighborhoods that were being constructed in the 1940s and 1950s.

**[ANIMATION]** Suburbs across America were shaped by redlining. Redlining was an unethical but legal—all the way up until 1968—practice that kept financial services like mortgages out of reach for residents of certain areas based on race or ethnicity. The name comes from surveyors who would code neighborhoods on a city map: people from white neighborhoods were safe investments and coded blue, while people from Black, Latinx, or predominantly immigrant neighborhoods were coded as red and deemed a financial risk. A person’s ability to get a house loan was based on the racial makeup of their current neighborhood rather than their individual creditworthiness.

The community you see in the background of this picture illustrates both of these concepts. What you see here is Levittown, on Long Island in New York, not too far outside of New York City. It was a planned community for returning veterans that was mass-produced after the war. It had what was called a “restrictive covenant” which said the house “could not be used or occupied by any person other than members of the Caucasian race,” even if they were veterans.

**Suburbs (Edward Scissorhands)**

So, the suburbs were built for a specific kind of family that lived a specific kind of life. **[ANIMATION]** They were designed for home ownership, not renting. The booming post-war economy produced a large middle class and put single-family suburban home ownership within reach for many people. There were (and still are) very few places to *rent* in the suburbs.

We know based on redlining that they were mostly designed for the *white* middle class, because white families were the most likely to be able to get a mortgage to purchase one of these new houses.

They’re designed for the nuclear family—just parents and kids. People who moved to brand new suburbs were moving away from cities where they might have extended family into homes built for just a few people. With no local grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, or other relations to help watch all those infant baby boomers, the structure of the suburbs encourages a family to have one full-time caregiver and one full-time wage earner. These jobs were almost always assigned according to gender.

Those wage-earners most likely commuted by car to and from jobs in nearby cities. The growth of the middle class made car ownership more feasible for more people, so these new neighborhoods were designed for drivers, not walkers.

And finally, the suburbs were designed for privacy. Detached homes, fences, shrubs, and yards for small, nuclear families facilitated much greater privacy than one of the tenement apartments photographed by Jacob Riis that we saw in our early lectures.

None of this is to say that *only* middle-class white people in nuclear families lived in the suburbs. It’s just that their architecture and planning created functional obstacles for people who wanted or needed to live in other ways. Child care becomes a problem for single moms. Getting groceries becomes a problem for people who can’t drive. Privacy becomes a problem for elderly people whose health might depend on their neighbors keeping an eye on them. And so on.

**Easier on the eyes**

**[ANIMATION]** So, the suburbs produce a whole bunch of families who need to entertain themselves at home, in new neighborhoods with no movie theaters, with content that’s pleasing to adults and children alike.

**[ANIMATION]** Television and the suburbs are a perfect fit. Part of the reason television takes off is because it scratches so many itches for all of these suburban homes.

**Phase one**

It helps me to think about the development and rollout of television as happening in four phases. Unlike when we talked about film and radio, I’m not going to dwell super long on who invented the various components of a television, because—straight up—the TV is a complicated effing machine.

**Wonkavision**

**[ANIMATION]** I’ve found the more that I try to explain it, the more that I sound like the Wonkavision scene from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, but you don’t even get a fun cautionary song at the end. So, if you’re really interested in the science of this…

**Cartoons**

..I’ve linked in the module an old-school educational video on how television works that, while dry AF, is the most aesthetically pleasing piece of mid-century illustration I’ve…ever seen? I want every image from this video on a t-shirt. It’ll explain what you want to know and it’s truly gorgeous to look at.

**Phase One (again)**

So, I’m going to abbreviate the chain of inventions that lead to television’s early days and just highlight one dude with a great name…

**Philo Farnsworth**

…and that’s Philo Farnsworth. He invented a bunch of components that are key to how an old television operates, and successfully demonstrated the first all-electronic television system for investors in 1928. Aptly, he transmitted the image of a dollar sign across the room. Ol’ Philo—he’s got jokes!

**Farnsworth & camera**

So, Farnsworth patents all of these components. This poses a problem for RCA, the Radio Corporation of America, who had also been developing an all-electronic TV system and who had begun to pin big hopes on television as a business.

Farnsworth and RCA end up locked in patent litigation. Their dispute comes to a head in 1934, when RCA brings a patent interference suit against Farnsworth. My favorite part of this story is that Farnsworth *wins* because he called his high school chemistry teacher as a witness and this guy, Justin Tolman, was able to produce a sketch Farnsworth made in *1922* that laid out many of the key ideas behind television.

All I’m saying here is that if you have any billion dollar tech ideas you can email them to me as insurance. I will put them in a folder and print them with glee when Lord Zuckerberg comes a-suing.

**Empire State Building**

RCA loses the lawsuit, but they see so much possible profit potential in television they license Farnsworth’s technology to the tune of a million bucks. This clears the way for them to ramp up development. They erect an antenna on the top of the Empire State building and, as this press release from 1937 says, they begin “the greatest program of experiment in the history of American television.”

**Phase Two**

What I’m calling the second phase of TV development began in 1939, when RCA performed their spectacular rollout of television at the New York World’s Fair.

If you’ve never heard of a World’s Fair, they were huge, multi-month events meant to showcase the best different nations had to offer. Think of a state fair, but longer and for lots of countries. The theme of the World’s Fair in ’39 was *Building the World of Tomorrow.* RCA literally built the world of tomorrow by designing their pavilion in the shape of a vacuum tube (a key piece of television technology).

**RCA Postcard**

Here’s another view of the RCA building. So remember, RCA are titans of radio at the time. They own NBC and they manufacture radio sets, too. Imagine it’s 1939, you’re at the World’s Fair and you’re sampling the dazzling wares from around the globe and you see RCA advertising television: a tiny motion picture for your home. You step into the pavilion. What wonders await you?

**Televising certificate**

Well, if you guessed “the same thing we use at any CVS to make sure teens don’t pilfer nail polish,” you’d be right. In addition to just *seeing* televisions for the first time, visitors had the distinct honor of being recorded by a television camera and displayed on a screen in the exhibit. You even got to take home this certificate to show off to your friends and neighbors that said you had “been televised at the RCA Exhibit Building.” This was basically just closed-circuit television—same principle as in-store surveillance cameras. Something we see every day was so technologically marvelous in 1939 it was a flagship attraction at a World’s Fair.

**Ads**

So, television makes its splashy debut as a consumer technology in 1939, and RCA begins the limited manufacture of television sets. Here, you see one of those extremely early—extremely beautiful, no?—sets that cost about $11,000 in today’s dollars.

There’s a catch, though. The FCC hadn’t actually approved television broadcasting yet. RCA continues experimenting and developing the technology, and they produce a PR campaign called “Television Now.” It was effective. The FCC approved the broadcast of television in 1941 and handful of stations went live.

Here, you see a weekly NBC television schedule for a week in June and July of 1941. There are just a few hours of broadcasting each day, focused mostly on sports, live events, and a couple of films.

When this lineup aired, there were only about 3,000 working televisions in the New York City area. That’s such a small audience that the New York station, WNBT, was able to mail these cards to everyone with a television in their broadcast area *and*  asked them to provide written feedback on the programs!

**Ads**

WWII all but suspended the rollout of television. But after the war, people rekindled their excited about TV, and TV was seen as a potential stimulus for the post-war economy, too. It was a new industry that might provide jobs.

When TV started to take off, in 1946 or so, it was dominated by established radio interests and networks. Existing radio networks like NBC and CBS dominated programming (although there were other broadcasters too, like DuMont) and the existing radio manufacturer RCA produced about 80% of televisions during the 1940s and early 1950s. Where there were technical questions about how television should be broadcast, the FCC ruled in favor of RCA’s choices. The airwaves remained firmly commercials and firmly in the hands of existing broadcast corporations.

What you see on this slide are two early ads for television sets, both of which focus on children—though the terrifying clowns on the left are certainly an interesting way to go about that. On the right, this little buddy is sending a letter to Santa that “Daddy wants a G-E television,” emphasizing the relationship between television and that post-war nuclear family arrangement we were talking about a few minutes ago.

**Ads (NBC & Dumont)**

Here, you see an ad touting the radio show Fibber McGee & Molly will be migrating to television—and this was common. Since television licenses were granted mostly to radio networks, they frequently shifting their most popular shows to the new medium. The format of commercial sponsorship gets ported over from the radio, too. Shows were provided by sponsors and there were lots and lots of ads.

The one the right I included just because this ad gets weirder the longer you look at it. The text is urging people to get on board with television *now*, even if they don’t have a station broadcasting yet in their area. The picture shows this family happily watching their television, illuminated by the light….of the earth? Are these Martians watching television? Are they dead? Are they watching TV from the great beyond? The world will never know.

**Phase three**

So, by 1948, there are about 108 stations operating in the country, and they carry programs from four networks: NBC, CBS, ABC and DuMont.

The FCC is totally overwhelmed. The 108 stations are unevenly dispersed throughout the country—there are some whole states with zero television stations, but there are cities along the coasts with several. Some people buy televisions…but there’s no one to broadcast to them. Some people by televisions but there’s so much interference between stations, they can’t get a clear picture. Let me demonstrate what I mean.

**Montana**

Let’s say you live in Montana in 1948. Here’s you, in your little house. You ask Santa for a G.E. television for Christmas, and you get one! But you turn it on and **[ANIMATION]** you get CRICKETS. Nothing! Because Montana didn’t have a television station yet. The applications are sitting in the FCC office under a pile of similar paperwork from all around the country. **[ANIMATION]** This is a bummer, and you are sad.

**New York City**

Now let’s say you live certain parts of New York City in 1948. **[ANIMATION]** Here’s your little house. You got the name of the architect from your cousin in Montana. You also get a television for Christmas. **[ANIMATION]** You turn it on and by golly, it’s a miracle! You get programming on three different stations and it’s awesome. You’re watching your Yankees games and you are loving life.

But then, **[ANIMATION]** they build stations in Long Island. And they’re broadcasting on the same frequencies as your stations! Suddenly you’re getting static and your TV can’t get a clear picture. The signals are interfering with each other.

**[ANIMATION]** This is also a bummer, and you are sad.

**FCC Freeze**

The FCC realizes that they need to figure things out, and they take dramatic action to do to so. **[ANIMATION]** What happens from 1948 to 1952 is called the FCC Freeze, where they do not license a single new station. During this pause, they work out a whole system of where to place stations, what kind of frequency they should broadcast on, and even big picture issues like a plan for color TV.

During this time, the existing 108 stations keep broadcasting, and the people without stations keep waiting. New Yorkers keep watching, and people in Austin, or Denver, or Little Rock keep staring at the wall and listening to the radio.

**Fog over Portland**

I’m including in this module as a recommended (but not mandatory) clip a very dramatic film produced by the Zenith television corporation in 1953. The film *Fog Over Portland* is basically just one big melodramatic commercial…

**Man in front of board**

But it does contain this helpful segment where this 1950s gentleman explains a key piece of the FCC’s plan. They license channels to broadcast on two different frequency ranges.

**VHF**

VHF (or very high frequency) television stations are high powered, but there can only be a few in a given area. So, these are mostly in cities.

**UHF**

UHF (or ultra high frequency) television stations are lower power, but you can have more of them without experiencing interference. So, these help bring television to smaller towns. The catch was, not all televisions could tune in both UHF and VHF signals, and maybe you were trying to buy a TV before you knew which kind of station was being built in your town. Zenith produced this commercial specifically to say hey, our TVs do both! We’ve got you covered! Buy Zenith!

**Phase 4**

This brings us into Phase 4, from the end of the license freeze onward. Television stations spread across the country as they are licensed, and television set sales go through the roof. As radio corporations increasingly invest television, they kill their radio businesses. Music becomes the dominant radio format. And sponsors retain that radio-like, strict control over TV programming…for now. We’ll talk about why that changes in our next lecture.

**Growth of television**

So, just to give you an idea of how quickly television spreads:

**[ANIMATION]** In 1948, less than 1% of US households have a television.

**[ANIMATION]** By 1952, the end of the license freeze, that’s increased to 35%

**[ANIMATION]** By just two years later, in 1955, 75% of households have a TV.

**[ANIMATION]** And by 1960, it’s 90%. Almost everyone has a television.

So, that’s the story from an industrial and regulatory perspective. What’s it like to be an average person at the dawn of television?

**Reading/Iowa**

Your reading for this lecture aims to answer exactly that question. “Learning to Live with TV” by Dr. Kathy Fuller-Seeley analyzes historical documents and discourse from the beginning years of television to understand how everyday folks incorporated TV into their lives.

In the following slides, on the left side, I’ve pulled a few key points from the reading.

One the right side, I’ve matched them up with some real-life stories collected by the Iowa Historical Society to illustrate each point. A few years back, older Iowans wrote in with their first memories of television, and I found that what they said matched Dr. Fuller-Seeley’s article almost exactly. Let’s take a look.

**Watch at home with the family**

Your reading observes that television watching was framed from the beginning as an activity for the nuclear family.

**[ANIMATION]** Iowan John A. Harnagel agrees, saying  *“[We] normally watched television as a family. Sometimes the dog was in the act, but he would usually stand and stare, thus cutting out our view of the screen. We also watched with friends and relatives, but most of them had televisions too.”*

**Young kids loved it**

And even while it was for the whole family, it was kids who were truly gaga over this new technology.

**[ANIMATION]** Iowan Margaret Hedges remembers that her family got their first television during a particularly wet and terrible harvest season. Their two-row picker had knocked over more stalks of corn than it had picked. She continues:

“*So my husband, who was inventive when it came to chores for the children, told them that if they hand-picked the corn lying on the ground that they could have the money it brought in for a TV set. That’s all it took—the magic words TV sent them out every day after school for nearly two weeks and, sure enough, there was enough money for a Sears TV set and a revolving stand to put it on.”*

**Who controls it?**

Most families only bought one television, and the question of who would choose the programs could be a contentious one. After Margaret Hedges’s kids earned their TV with their corn-picking money, they devised a particularly elaborate system. She says:

*“There were seven of us and seven days in the week, so one night a week each person could be what they called privileged character (PC) and choose the programs from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. They assigned Saturday night to Mom, who didn’t much care what she watched, and Sunday night to Dad, who was busy most other nights. Also the children made elaborate arrangements for trading nights with each other, and a lot of bargaining went on among them, but whoever was PC made the final decision on his night…”*

**Was it appropriate for housewives?**

Men were concerned about the appropriateness of television for housewives. Women could work all day in the home with the radio on, but television required you to be stationary with your eyes glued to the screen. Would America’s homemakers be able to resist its siren call?

Well, Iowan Kenneth McFate found his wife could reject a TV with no problem at all. He explains that by 1955 he was the only person he knew without a TV, so he decided to bring one home one day as a surprise. He continues:

*“I proudly uncrated my newly purchased TV and ‘presented’ it to my wife. Having just had a full, hard day of washing clothes, hanging on and removing from the line, folding, ironing, etc., when she saw the new TV set, her first and immediate comment was ‘I wish you had bought me something that would save my time instead of something that expends it.’”*

Kenneth: not a great gift-giver, maybe.

**Where do we put it?**

The television required the reorganization of the home. Which room did it belong in? How did you arrange the furniture around it?

**[ANIMATION]** Betty and Harry Ankeny recall placing it in their living room, but it was on casters so they could swivel it around into the dining room to watch while they ate.

**[ANIMATION]** John Harnagel remembers having to move the television away from the thermostat in the winter. The backs of these old TVs got so warm, the heat would never go on if it was too near the controls!

**What’s it going to do to us?**

And finally, as with all media forms we’ve discussed this semester, the introduction of television was another occasion for a rousing round of panic. What might television *do* to us?

**[ANIMATION]** Mildred Steele recalls figuring out her kiddo was perhaps watching too much when he ended his prayer one night with “Amen. This has been a recording.”

**[ANIMATION]** James Otto remembers his parents “advising us not to sit too close to the TV because it would hurt our eyes. Also, we had to have a light on in the room for the same reason.”

That last bit, the pseudo-medical belief that you needed an extra light on when you were watching TV…

**TV lamps**

…led to the manufacture of one of my all-time favorite kitschy objects, the TV lamp! These came in a multitude of demonic-looking shapes and sizes, and the purpose was to provide a dim light that would somehow protect your eyes. Many were actually manufactured here in Texas, at a ceramic works in a little town called Bangs, that was opened to give farmers work during a drought in 1950. I’ll link you to some more info about that in the module.

**Lamp**

Here’s another great one. Look at this monstrous wonder. I love it.

**Fears**

Because the TV was such a looming and omnipresent force in the home, many fears focused on how it might disrupt or undermine the post-war nuclear family formation.

**[ANIMATION]** Would TV ruin families? Would it produce pale, bug-eyed anemic little children with atrophied muscles and brains made of mush?

On the other hand, would watching a bunch of westerns and cartoons make them aggressive and violent? Would having newscasters speaking authoritatively in the home all the time undermine Dad’s authority? Would mom just sit around all day watching soaps? Would it hurt our eyes? Would it fry us with radiation?

**What were people watching?**

At the end of the day, though, the fears people had about television always came second to their fascination with it. Americans in the 1950s bought televisions by the millions and tuned into a variety of programming—virtually all of which went out live in TV’s early days--including sports, children’s programs, and situation comedies, often about families who reflected the white, suburban, middle-class ideals of the era. They also watched anthology dramas, shows like CBS’s Studio One, which produced high quality weekly movies like *Twelve Angry Men*, which you’ll watch this week. They also watched quiz shows, which we’ll talk about next week.

**Goldbergs**

And they watched the shows they’d come to love on the radio. The question I posed at the beginning of this lecture was how Gertrude Berg ended up in front of the camera, and now we know. Let’s let Molly Goldberg say hello from 1949, tell you a little bit about her trip to the Catskills…nd sell you a little Sanka, too.

**[PLAY CLIP.]**

This lecture was also brought to you by Sanka, the drink of undercaffeinated instructors nationwide.