Introduction

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In media studies today, the development of American television, and of television worldwide, is generally seen as a succession of three major periods or eras, as stressed by the studies of both Roberta Pearson, who bases her “periodization” for the most part on the number of channels available and the quality of their programming, and John Ellis, whose three “TV Eras” are mainly based on broadcast availability. For both scholars, “TVI” or the “first TV era” would span from the late 1940s, when commercial TV was born, until the early 1980s: a time when initially four and then only three networks ruled the airwaves, allowing for a massive audience share for a single program, and when programming transitioned from radio and stage models to a wide range of formats in comedy, drama, talk shows and games shows that we still see today. This first period had its own sub-periods, as it were, nearly every decade, as the programs of the 1950s had little in common with those of the 1960s, which in turn were quite different from the 1970s, as this edition of TV/Series will demonstrate.

“TVII” or the “second TV period”, for both Pearson and Ellis, would then last about fifteen years, until the late 1990s, a period of huge channel expansion, notably on cable and satellite channels, with increased competition leading to greater investment in programming and the treatment of more controversial topics. Finally, “TVIII” or the “third TV era” began with the rise of the Prestige TV phenomenon of the late 1990s and early 2000s (The Sopranos, The Wire, etc.) and would lead to the current explosion of accessibility to content and streaming platforms, today’s “Peak TV” phenomenon that offers so much programming in so many formats that the viewing audience is now necessarily a niche audience (as no viewer could possibly watch all the programming on offer and no program on its own could garner the huge audience shares of the Network era), and an international niche audience at that. As we seem to currently be near the end of “TVIII” – literally at its “peak” – one can only wonder what the coming fourth TV era might look like...

However, there is one constant that has played a dominant role in all three TV eras, reaching back before television even existed and surely carrying on into whatever the fourth era of TV might be, and that is Network Television (also called “broadcast TV”)
or “linear TV”, as they have been broadcast free of charge over the air and have a strict daily schedule of airtimes for its broadcasts). When one refers to the “networks”, it is usually in reference to the “Big Three” – NBC (The National Broadcast Company), CBS (The Columbia Broadcast System) and ABC (The American Broadcast Company), who have been broadcasting since commercial television first began and are still going strong, though the term “Big Three” leaves out some other networks, including the short-lived Dumont Network (1947-1956) from the early days, the arrival of PBS, or the Public Broadcasting System, in 1969 (providing educational, cultural and international programming through public and private donations), and the newer fourth network, FOX, launched in 1986.

If these traditional channels are called “networks”, it is because of the technical dimension inherent to broadcasting their programming in the early days – first for radio and then for television. At the outset of American radio, there were only two major networks – NBC, founded in 1926 by RCA president David Sarnoff, and CBS, formerly known as United Independent Broadcasters but bought and renamed in 1928 by William Paley, the wealthy son of a cigar magnate. The technical problem radio broadcasters (and later television broadcasters) had to overcome was finding a way to relay and amplify its limited-distance broadcast signal beyond the New York City region it was initially emitted from to as much of the country as possible. The only way this could be done was to create a complex “network” of relay stations and of local affiliate radio stations around the country willing to broadcast NBC or CBS programming (often with delayed broadcasting or in a package deal that mixed big nationwide “network” programming, usually aired during prime listening hours, with local programming and news to fill out their schedule). Hence the “networks” were literally networks of affiliate stations and relay stations to get their programming into as many American homes as possible, and when the switch to television came along, NBC and CBS, with their network relay system already in place through radio, were ready to dominate the television airwaves as well.

Indeed, even before the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) allowed commercial television broadcasts in late 1947, the government tried to chip away at what seemed to be a looming monopoly of television by Sarnoff’s NBC, the leader in terms of profit, of technical know-how and patents, and of the number of big stars it already had on contract. It was even NBC that presented the first television sets at the 1939 World’s Fair. In the early forties, NBC was so big it had two national networks (NBC Red for popular entertainment and sports; NBC Blue for more cultural programming), which is why the FCC fought NBC on anti-trust legislation all the way to the Supreme Court and was able to force NBC to sell off one of its two networks in 1944. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Sarnoff chose to keep the popular money-maker NBC Red and sell off its poorer educational sister network, NBC Blue, which was bought by candy magnate Edward J. Noble and renamed ABC. And then there were three. Two years later, another rival to Sarnoff, Allen DuMont, a technical genius and the head of DuMont labs in New Jersey, joined the fray by launching the DuMont Network in 1946 and hiring Ted Bergman as its programming director.
At the dawn of commercial television in the late 1940s, there were thus four networks in intense competition, with two (NBC and CBS) that had the distinct advantage of having a national broadcast network already in place thanks to radio as well as a bevy of stars and popular radio programs ready to be adapted to the new medium. Despite the FCC’s best efforts, NBC would quickly take the initial lead in early TV ratings, notably thanks to its popular variety programming and the number of expensive Hollywood and radio stars it had on contract. Paley’s CBS would soon challenge and surpass NBC, in great part thanks to Paley’s business-savvy tricks that allowed him to steal many of NBC’s stars and to his creation of new and popular formats – including the primetime sitcom (then called “plot comedy”) that quickly rivalled and drew more regular audiences than NBC’s variety programs, as well as the first daytime soap operas – thereby allowing CBS to dominate both afternoon and evening ratings by the early 1950s. ABC, with no popular radio programs to adapt to television, took some time to find its niche, and though a consistent third-place finisher in ratings throughout the 1950s, it would find a strong audience when Leonard Goldenson bought out founder Noble and had the network focus on youth programming [including American Bandstand (1952-89), Disneyland (1954-61) and The Mickey Mouse Club (1955-59; 1977-96), along with scores of other programs popular with children and teenagers]. Goldenson also was the first to bring major film studios to television programming, by having Disney produce and showcase its content from 1954, a trend that the other networks would follow with other studios in years to come. As for the ill-fated DuMont Network, in spite of its technical savvy that often surpassed that of NBC (for example, DuMont was the first to reach the West Coast via coaxial cable in 1951, greatly simplifying national broadcasting), the programming niche it chose, with very few exceptions, was cultural and educational programming, certainly a noble choice but in no way a ratings bonanza, leading to the network’s demise in 1956 and the consolidation of the “Big Three” networks for decades to come.

As mentioned above, TVI, or the first era of American television, spans nearly 35 years and itself contains its own periods and movements. The first ten years of commercial television are generally referred to as TV’s “First Golden Age”, a time when TV audiences slowly grew from a few privileged viewers in cities in the Northeast to over 90% percent of U.S. households, and when the four networks adapted radio shows to television or developed new program formats in both comedy (variety and late night, plot comedy or sitcom, hybrid variations, comic game shows, etc.) and drama (teleplays and literary adaptations, crime dramas, afternoon soaps, etc.). However, there was a drastic change that occurred circa 1957, and that is the focus of the first essay in this collection: “The ‘First Great Purge’ of American Television Programming: Understanding How and Why Popular Television Changed So Dramatically from the 1950s to the 1960s,” by Dennis Tredy. His study first focuses on the key features of “Golden Age” programs (adapting popular radio shows, the dominance of popular comedy programs over drama, the use of live audiences and showrunners, the creation of myriad TV formats that are still used today, and the surprising use of urban settings and themes of ethnic diversity and female independence – surprising because such progressive themes and ethnic visibility are not seen in our collective consciousnesses as being a feature of the notoriously conservative 1950s). Then Tredy explains how...
drastically things changed after 1957 and throughout the early 1960s (with a shift to suburban and rural settings, to harmless escapism especially in comedy and to a sudden and sustained absence of people of color and independent women on the small screen), and just as importantly, why they changed (a confluence of factors involving changes in audience demographics, source materials for programs, writing and filming techniques and locations, etc.).

8 If the 1950s seemed to represent a contradiction in terms of it being a conservative decade that featured controversial, diverse and progressive TV fare, the 1960s was in many ways an inversion of that same contradiction, particularly in terms of TV comedies, as the most popular TV programs were harmless and seemingly apolitical escapism, whereas violent civil rights and anti-war confrontations were waging in the streets and were only conveyed to American households through the evening news. Drama programs of the late 1950s and the 1960s, however, did manage to broach more controversial – though somewhat sugarcoated – topics, and that is the focus of the second essay in this collection. Julie Richard’s essay, “Les minorités raciales, la justice et la peine de mort dans les séries télévisées américaines de networks, 1950-1977”, deals with the representation of race and scenes of capital punishment in drama series (notably westerns and sci-fi series) of the TVI period, with a particular focus on programs of the late 1950s and the 1960s. Richards shows, through numerous examples, how drama series of the period consistently presented a whitewashed view of capital punishment to audiences, stressing a colorblind justice system that did not really exist, one with people of color on both sides of the judicial process and one where an individual’s racism might be depicted but where racism was by no means systemic to the United States or to its judicial system. Like so many themes of the 1960s, there was a stark contrast between the way race was represented on screen and the racial injustice that was being called out and fought against in the streets.

9 The third decade of the first era of American television, the 1970s, would see another sea-change in programming, ushered in by CBS and its famous “Rural Purge of 1971”, in which the network swiftly canceled all of its escapist sitcoms and variety shows set in rural America [e.g., The Beverly Hillbillies (1962-71), Hee-Haw (1969-71), Mayberry R.F.D. (1968-71), etc.] – even though they were among its top-rated shows – in a decided shift towards “Relevancy Programming”. Settings were now urban, as were their target audience, and the themes and topics of the shows, especially sitcoms, were topical, liberal-minded and controversial. This was a time when CBS continued dominating the ratings with feminist fare like The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-77) and its spin-offs [Rhoda (1974-78), Phyllis (1975-77)], anti-war dramedy like M*A*S*H (1972-83), and arguments over about every other controversial topic (including racism, antisemitism, homosexuality, rape, menopause, draft-dodging, gun control and abortion – just to name a few) that were showcased weekly on All in the Family (1971-79) and the numerous spin-offs and lookalikes also produced by Norman Lear [Maude (1972-78), The Jeffersons (1975-85) Good Times (1974-79), One Day at a Time (1975-84), etc.]. The success of CBS in making television unabashedly relevant and hard-hitting was helped in part by new viewing habits, with primetime seen as more for adults rather than for the entire family, including small children, a staple of 1950s and 1960s TV. This change was helped along by the networks moving the bulk of their children’s programs to Saturday mornings in the late sixties and by the 1969 launch of PBS, a public service network whose hallmark was educational programming, such as Sesame Street (1969-present) or
Mister Roger’s Neighborhood (1971-2001), allowing primetime to deal with more adult themes.

Networks and TVII (early 1980s to late 1990s)

The end of the 1970s would nevertheless see something of a backlash against this strongly liberal TV fare, notably with the popularity of more nostalgia-based sitcoms on ABC that looked back longingly to the simpler days of the 1950s [Happy Days (1974-84) and its spin-offs Laverne & Shirley (1976-83) and Joni Loves Chachi (1982-83)], shows that allowed ABC to finally be the number-one network. Some award-winning sitcoms, however, continued to tout more progressive issues with ensemble casts in both working-class [in the case of Taxi (1978-83)] and middle-class environments [in Cheers (1982-93), for example] – the latter of which is the focus of the first of three essays in this edition focusing on trends of the mid-eighties. Virginie Iché, in her essay “Cheerfully Misunderstanding Deixis on the Screen: Coach is his (Nick)name and Misunderstanding Deixis is his Game (Cheers, NBC, 1982-1993)”, focuses on the linguistic devices behind the comic lines delivered through the character “Coach” Ernie Pantusso during first three seasons of Cheers (that is, until the death of Nicholas Colasanto, the actor portraying him). At a crossroad between media studies and in-depth linguistic analysis, Iché dives deep into the linguistic theory of misdirection and misunderstanding, a blend of deixis, anaphora and cataphora, to demonstrate the genius behind Coach’s seemingly dopey humor and how his own peculiar line of reasoning made him stand out in the show’s collection of lovable misfits and once-greats.

In terms of 80s drama, however, the launch of TV’s second era would truly reflect the rightward swing of the Reagan years. Popular nighttime soap operas like Dallas (1978-81) or Dynasty (1981-89) touted the world of the ultra-rich and ultra-successful, a sharp change from the 1970s’ focus on working- and middle-class families. Tough-guy action series also ruled the TV airwaves, in most cases with a sexy female sidekick who for some reason quite often needed to wear a skimpy bikini – as was the case with Catherine Bach in The Dukes of Hazzard (1979-85) or Heather Thomas in The Fall Guy (1981-86). This trend even seeped over to some seemingly more progressive sitcoms, such as Three’s Company (1977-84), which balanced anti-homophobic humor with sexy shots of every-man’s-dream-roommate Suzanne Somers. This trend, often nicknamed “Jiggle TV”, was a far cry from the more feminist trends of the 1970s and is the starting point for Benjamin Campion’s essay “Les networks et la tentation persistante de la ‘jiggle television’ dans les années 1980”. Campion cleverly shows how this shift in the representation of sexuality and nudity since the 1970s affected the representation of not only female but also male protagonists in dramas like Magnum, P.I. (CBS, 1980-88), The Fall Guy (ABC, 1981-86), Miami Vice (NBC, 1984-90) and Hunter (NBC, 1984-91), a trend in which the rise of “triumphant” masculinity also led to the representation of male action heroes as sex objects themselves. In a separate essay, Jean Du Verger takes a closer look at the one series discussed in Campion’s study that came to define popular late-80s television and was one of the first series to bring Hollywood directors to the small screen, Michael Mann’s Miami Vice. Entitled “Diurnal and Nocturnal Cityscapes in Miami Vice”, Du Verger’s article explains the post-modern vision of the city of Miami during the Reagan years and how Mann made Miami and its changing reputation...
regarding immigration and crime a main character rather than a mere backdrop. Du Verger notably stresses the differences between the daytime and nighttime representations of Miami in the hip late-eighties drama, a dichotomy that reflects both the blend of film noir and neo-noir influences behind the *mise-en-scène* and the blurred distinction between criminal and hero that characterizes the main protagonists.

The transition to the second half of the TVII era, the 1990s, would again signal a sharp shift from the previous decade in many ways. For example, the “Big Three” networks would grow to become the “Big Four”, as the new FOX network grew from its initial launch in 1986 to a ratings leader by 1994, along with a growing number of new basic cable channels that would slowly gain popularity and eventually start to create quality original content (e.g., A&E and AMC since 1984, the WB since 1995, etc.). In certain network drama series, the above-mentioned “dominant masculinity” theme seemed to start to shift, and this is the focus of the essay by Jules Sandeau, who analyzes more ambivalent notions of masculinity and gender-bending in the series *Quantum Leap* (NBC, 1989-93). Entitled “Les instabilités quantiques de la masculinité blanche dans *Code Quantum*”, the essay showcases the numerous episodes and opening-credit clips in which Sam “leaps” into the body of a woman and/or a minority. Sandeau explores the possible ambivalence of such shapeshifting. Is it a white male’s appropriation of a woman or a minority’s point of view or an honest shift in perspective? Could Sam’s incarnation of women and minorities be seen as erasing their presence? Or is it a sign of the times, of white masculinity in crisis at the end of the Reagan era? A transition from 80s network television was clearly under way.

In terms of comedy, however, there is an even more clean-cut break with sitcoms of the 1980s, particularly in terms of a notable shift to the left on social issues, even on the traditional networks, with NBC giving audiences *Seinfeld* (1989-98), where brash political incorrectness and observational humor allowed Americans to laugh at themselves, while CBS broke barriers with feminist sitcoms like *Murphy Brown* (1988-98) and *Designing Women* (1986-93), and ABC came to openly discuss homosexuality when in April of 1997 Ellen DeGeneres came out as a lesbian to Oprah Winfrey (and the world) both as a character on her sitcom *Ellen* (1994-98; Winfrey played the character’s psychiatrist) and as herself in an appearance on the talk show *Oprah* (syndicated, 1986-2011). FOX, the new network on the block, also focused on politically incorrect and breakthrough programming, including popular series such as *The Simpsons* (since 1989) and *Married... with Children* (1987-97), which was in sharp contrast to 80s TV fare, as demonstrated by the essay in this collection by David Roche. In his essay “A Working-class Hero is Something to Be . . . Except in a Sitcom: Interrogating the Ideological Structures in the US-American Sitcom *Married... with Children*”, Roche points out a sharp return to the working-class sitcom approach of the 1970s, after an 80s foray into successful upper-middle class families [e.g., *Diff’rent Strokes* (NBC, 1978-86), *Silver Spoons* (NBC, 1982-87), *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982-89), *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-92) and *Growing Pains* (ABC, 1985-92)], showing how *Married...with Children*’s reworked features of 70s’ working class sitcoms like *All in the Family* to stage Al Bundy as a would-be working-class hero who cynically lampoons both the Reaganite narcissism of the 80s and the family sitcom tradition hitherto established. The similar success of FOX’s *The Simpsons* and of ABC’s *Roseanne* (1988-97) would seem to confirm Roche’s observations regarding a working-class shift.
In terms of network TV drama, the 1990s featured many landmark series that heralded the arrival of Prestige TV characterizing the end of the decade and the coming third TV era. Though Prestige TV is more often associated with later award-winning, high-production-value cable TV series, such as HBO’s *Oz* (1997-2003) or *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), the movement towards such programs first occurred on network television, with new Emmy-winning reiterations of traditional formats, including crime drama [*NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-99)], courtroom drama [*L.A. Law* (1986-94)], medical dramas [*ER* (NBC, 1994-2009)] and primetime soap operas [*Thirtysomething* (ABC, 1987-91)], among others. Several essays in this collection also focus on landmark dramas of the 1990s that stressed this movement toward more “cinematic” network productions, the impact of which would carry over into the TVIII Era. In his essay “*The X-Files* : aux frontières du fantastique”, Julien Achemchame focuses on the impact of Chris Carter’s *X-Files* (FOX, 1993-2002) and the hybrid nature of both its plot-driven and its visual storytelling. Achemchame studies the show’s masterful game of mutually exclusive points of view by the two protagonists, its dialectic of self-contained episodes and of long-term story arcs and its perpetually unresolved plot points, all visually reinforced by Carter’s remarkably cinematic visual storytelling. The lasting impact of the series into the TVIII Era seems to be confirmed by the recent revival of the series on FOX from 2016-18. Two other essays in this collection focus on another landmark series, *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-91; Showtime 2017), whose cinematic bona fides stem from the very fact that it was the product of a feature-film director, David Lynch, and whose avant-garde nature and impact on the current TV era are also confirmed by its recent cable-TV revival. In his essay “‘C’était le monde de David et nous ne faisions que vivre à l’intérieur’ : *Twin Peaks* et l’empreinte de David Lynch,” Briac Picart-Hellec stresses the ambiguous notions of authorship and showrunning regarding the series, in order to explain the complex interactions that came from the (questionably) coordinated efforts of film-maker David Lynch, co-creator Mark Frost and writers Harley Peyton and Robert Engels. Picart-Hellec thus shows how this avant-garde series broke barriers through a rather chaotic production process, and stresses, in the end, how differently things functioned when Lynch and Frost revived the series in 2017. Louise Van Brabant, in her own essay on *Twin Peaks* and its revival, entitled “La femme invisible : les cas de Laura Palmer et Diane Evans”, cleverly compares and contrast the visual and narrative representations of two key female characters in both iterations of the series. Van Brabant denotes a game of female absent-presences and pervading female aestheticization in the initial series, stressing how the TVIII revival flips the script on the representation of these two women, both multiplying their physical presence through their added on-screen depictions as “tulpas” or doppelgangers, as remnants of an alternate timeline and as “real” characters trapped in foreign bodies – thus exploring the differing treatment of the female body in the two iterations of the show, which were sixteen years apart, and the implications of this in terms of gender representation.

The final essay in this collection also tries to bridge the gap between the 1990s and the 2000s, between the second and third TV eras, by focusing on the breakthrough NBC medical drama *ER*, which had begun in 1994, and on a landmark TVIII network series, *LOST* (ABC, 2004-10). Through a close analysis of two key *ER* episodes in season 8 which stage the death of the moral center of the show, Dr. Marc Greene, Sarah Hatchuel’s study, entitled “La mort de Mark Greene en saison 8 d’*Urgences* (*ER*, NBC, 1994-2009) : fin d’une ère et préfiguration de *LOST*”, shows how these late episodes marked a
transition on Network TV on several levels, notably from the much-lauded realism of 1990s drama to the coming surreal trend of *LOST*, uncovering unexpected connections and numerous features that could allow us to see the later series as a direct continuation of the 90s network series.

**Are the Networks Still Relevant in TVIII?**

16 Few media scholars today focus on the role of network TV in the current Third TV Era, which covers the first two decades of the 21st century, for now, and understandably so, as TVIII is at its heart defined by a sharp break from the network TV model of the 20th century. TVIII began with the “Prestige TV” phenomenon of the early 2000s, in which cable channels invested heavily in new serial production that broke the network mold (no censorship rules barring profanity or nudity or explicit violence, no commercial breaks within episodes, cinema-quality filming and editing along with million-dollar budgets per episode, etc.). This was the heyday of Emmy-winning series like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-08) or *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-13), among so many others. The more recent phase of TVIII, called “Peak TV”, is another break from the Network model, this time in terms of distribution and viewer choice, for it has been characterized by the rise and multiplication of streaming platforms providing vast series content that can be viewed at any time or even binged all at once (a far cry from the weekly scheduled broadcasts on network television), and by the sheer number of programs on offer, making for niche audiences and an upending of the Nielson-ratings-based methods of judging the success of a series [gone indeed are the days of only three major channels, which could hope for a 75% U.S. audience share for a given episode, such as one in which Little Ricky was born on *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-57) in 1952 (S02E16) or the series finale of *M*A*S*H* in 1983 (S11E16)]. Even the most recent trend in streaming services – that is, its transnational effect stemming from the sharing of content made in countries outside the U.S. with all countries of the world, including the U.S. – would seem to be in direct contradiction with the network model.

17 However, U.S. Network TV should in no way be seen as an irrelevant mastodon of a by-gone era. On the contrary, the study of network television, then and now, is still a pertinent topic in today’s media studies. For one thing, network series have evolved in the past two decades as well, pulled forward as it were in the wake of the success of Prestige TV on cable. Even if cable networks and streaming services have steadily eclipsed the traditional networks in terms of Emmy wins, the “Big Four” networks have offered award-winning series since 2000. Emmys have gone to dramas such as *The West Wing* (ABC, 1999-2006), *LOST* (ABC, 2004-10), *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009-2016), and *This Is Us* (NBC 2016-22), and even some non-winners still clearly pushed the limits of what network television had hitherto been allowed to show [Take for example the onscreen violence of a series like *24* (FOX, 2001-14) or especially the aestheticized gore of *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-15), unheard of on network TV]. Recent network comedy series have also swept the Emmys, either by using the traditional sitcom model to speak to new audiences [e.g., CBS’s *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) and *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-14)] or to address contemporary social issues more squarely [as with the two iterations of NBC’s *Will & Grace* (1998-2006; 2017-20), which have bookended the TVIII period with more open treatment of homosexuality]. Yet other award-winning network comedies have redefined the traditional sitcom format, either by using mockumentary
filming techniques [The Office (NBC, 2005-13), Arrested Development (FOX 2003-06), Modern Family (ABC, 2009-2020), etc.] and/or by mocking the network TV industry itself [e.g., 30 Rock (NBC, 2006-13)].

In addition, it is hard to claim that today’s streaming services have completely eclipsed network content when, firstly, the platforms provide vast archival accessibility for past network television as a whole, and, secondly, the “Big Four” networks themselves have joined the streaming service offer. NBC co-founded Hulu with Disney in 2007 and eventually launched its own streaming platform in 2020, Peacock, this time with Universal Studios. CBS was the first to go it alone in the streaming world when it launched CBS All Access in 2014, which was rebranded Paramount+ in 2021 through a merger with the major studio. Finally, when Disney+ launched in late 2019, it had already acquired ABC in 1995 and FOX Corp. earlier in 2019 (not to mention its acquisition of other studios like Pixar in 2006, Marvel in 2009 and Lucasfilm in 2012). The traditional Networks have indeed evolved with the changing times.

In fact, from the very beginning, TV networks have always evolved with the times. As many of the essays in this collection show, the networks have changed with every decade, either countering or reflecting the culture and politics of its period, and they are a testament to the changing face of American culture and politics since the late 1940s. In pendulum swings to the political left and right, the overall movement of network television, particularly since the 1960s, has been one of steadily increasing diversity and inclusivity, of lessening censorship and of more open discussion of hot-button issues (racism, antisemitism, homophobia, misogyny, abortion rights, LGBTQ+ issues, etc.). And if network television can be seen as a chronicle of America’s social and political development of the past 75 years, it also established nearly all the programming formats we still use today, both in the U.S. and around the world, be they on broadcast, cable or streaming services. Crime drama, courtroom drama, medical drama, teleplays, soap operas, sitcoms, variety programs and late-night talk shows, daytime talk shows, game shows, reality shows, sportscasting and news programs – the list of storytelling and media formats established by network TV that carry on today is indeed long – and most of these templates were created in the 1950s!

As a final word on the relevance of Network TV, one could look ahead to the pending “fourth era”, the coming product of the current explosion of streaming platforms and the transnationalization of production, distribution and viewing of content. Media scholars such as Mareike Jenner have stressed how streaming services like Netflix have been marketing themselves as a new form of quality cable television, often seeing such services as an outgrowth of trends started by the likes of HBO (with its famous tagline, “It’s not TV... it’s HBO”). However, it might be more appropriate to see “Peak TV” and the coming TVIV period as the “new network era” – or TViBis – as the parallels between the creation and rise of the networks decades ago on a national scale and that of international streaming platforms today on a global scale are striking. For example, early networks beat out the competition through technical prowess and savvy business deals with new affiliates to get the TV signals to all reaches of the U.S.; similarly, today’s streaming platforms like Netflix and its competitors seek technical advantages (such as better algorithms and interfaces) and try to reach viewers worldwide through complex deals with each new country it hopes to stream content in (often involving investment in local productions and package deals, much like deals made Paley and Sarnoff with their radio and broadcast TV affiliates). In the new world of intense streaming
competition, the CEOs of the biggest streaming services like Netflix (Reed Hastings), Disney+ (Bob Chapek) and Amazon Prime Video (Andy Jassey) are acting very much like the first presidents of NBC (David Sarnoff), CBS (William Paley) and ABC (Samuel Goldenson) once did, notably by trying to buy out and absorb smaller competitors, to outdo their main competitors in terms of content and subscribers, and to get exclusivity on the most talented stars and content creators through huge financial deals [for example, in 2019 Netflix signed nine-figure contracts for future projects with the creators of both their own hit Stranger Things (the Duffer Brothers) and those of HBO’s Game of Thrones (David Benioff and D.B. Weiss), while rival HBO secured rights for the adaptation of G.R.R. Martin’s source material]. Such intense competition has led to rival, blockbuster adaptation projects aimed at the same target audience, such as 2022 late-summer release of both HBO’s House of Dragons (a prequel to Game of Thrones) and Amazon Prime Video’s The Rings of Power (a prequel to Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings) – released only days apart to great hype and with record production costs (over $20 million per episode for House of Dragons and a whopping $57 million per episode for The Rings of Power). Such rival projects occurred in the early days of network television as well, notably in 1964 with the much-hyped simultaneous release of two landmark “monster sitcoms” – The Munsters on CBS (1964-66) and The Addams Family on ABC (1964-66 as well). This one-upmanship between major streaming services on flagship series has even led the services to break with their habit of releasing an entire season at once for audiences to binge at their leisure, returning to a weekly release of one episode per week on a given day, most often a Friday, worldwide (much like the traditional networks’ weekly line-ups) in order to build up expectation from week to week and make the show’s global hype and popularity last. The more things change, the more they stay the same, it seems, as the current streaming explosion looks and feels an awful lot like a global reboot of network television...

NOTES

1. This notion of “quality” is a debatable one as it hierarchizes TV series following criteria which are difficult to determine and often undermines the qualities of older TV series and, precisely, of network television. Thus our approach of TV series steps away from this notion, in order to analyze all kinds of TV series on an equal basis.
4. Note that this collection of essays is an open volume on Network Television for the online journal TV/Series. The introduction references the original eleven contributions to the edition; subsequent contributions may be added after initial publication.
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DENNIS TREDY

Dennis Tredy is an associate professor of American Literature at the Sorbonne-Nouvelle in Paris and has been teaching literature and film adaptation at Sciences Po Paris since 2012. He is co-founder of the European Society of Jamesian Studies and has published three volumes on Henry James: Reading Henry James in the Twenty-First Century (2019), Henry James and the Poetics of Duplicity (2014) and Henry James’s Europe: Heritage and Transfer (2011). In addition to his publications on James and other American novelists, Dennis has published numerous studies on film and television adaptations of the works of British and American authors, including James, Poe, Forster, Austen, Orwell, Burgess and Nabokov, among others. He has also published works on American TV series past and present, notably on the early sitcom and on the passage from radio to television, along with the media representation of American culture, gender, diversity and counterculture in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.