

Growing Up with TV

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Perhaps one of the reasons that it is so hard to discuss, analyze, or write about the influence of television is that it's so pervasive, so much a part of our lives -- both past and present. Our TV memories parallel our actual life in so many ways and at so many times that often our memories are framed by TV itself. It has become in a very real sense, a part of us.

In one of our classes last year the professor asked us what our very first memory of TV was -- the first time we can remember TV actually touching our lives. A few older teachers in the class recalled the McCarthy hearings; others remembered the time the whole school stopped to watch Alan Shepard or John Glenn take off into space. Others recalled early morning cartoons. One very young teacher's earliest memory of TV was coverage of the Kennedy assassination.

The first time I can remember television touching my life directly was when I was six and the Mickey Mouse Club program (with Annette and Cubby and all the Mouseketeers) was pre-empted from its late afternoon spot by some stupid political convention that took a whole week to nominate some guy named Eisenhower and Nixon to run the country. I suppose I've never really forgiven the Republicans (or Nixon) for coming between me and Annette.

Other events can slip away, but we can recall in detail little things about our TV lives. For example, I can't tell you the name of my first or second grade teacher, but I can tell you about the night my father brought a TV into our bedroom (it was, as I recall, so small that it came with a magnifying filter permanently attached over the screen).

I grew up with not only my brothers and sister, but also with Big Brother Bob Emery (we would toast the President of the United States with our glasses of milk), Rex Trailer (probably New England's only "cowboy"), Jack Chase, Don Kent (icons in the Walsh house), Captain Kangaroo and Howdy Doody.

I'm one of millions of Americans who saw Jack Ruby kill Lee Harvey Oswald live on TV; I can tell you where I was and what I was doing (as can we all) on that Sunday morning 32 years ago.

I spent my teenage years with Dick Clark (How come I look older and he doesn't?), Hullabaloo, and Shindig. Yes, I recall every Sunday night those four longhairs (?) called the Beatles appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show.

I adopted Walter Cronkite as a trusted uncle, and actually believed him when he said, "And that's the way it is . . ." I watched countless conventions with Uncle Walter and saw a man land on the moon one hot July night many years ago.

In college I sat in a dormitory TV room and watched the Vietnam War every night on the news, and later saw the demonstrations bring the war home.

My buddies and I hated Nixon, but we never missed one of his speeches (nor the chance to make fun of it afterwards).

I spent an entire summer "wallowing in Watergate," entertained and enlightened by Sam Ervin and Howard Baker, transfixed by James Dean and Tony Ulasciwicz. It was the most satisfying soap opera I'd ever seen (and the only one, it seems, which had a happy ending).

All of this makes TV harder to study, to think about, and to discuss. It is sometimes very personal. It would be going too far to say that TV is like a friend or that we have a "relationship" with television. But on the other hand, it is still something more than just a bunch of wires in a box.

Yes, I believe in media literacy, in studying and understanding the pervasive and powerful effects of this technological marvel, but I do not wring my hands in panic nor worry endlessly about TV's effects on the coming generation. My generation turned out not so bad (I think), and we were raised with the tube.

TV does not (should not) define or shape our lives, but in thinking back, perhaps we realize that it has framed the lives of most of us. It has been there at most of the important times we remember.

We have grown (if not "grown up") together.

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