

## To the Student

**YOU ARE PART OF** an audience. Because you and most other Americans watch television, advertisers spend over \$50 billion each year for commercial time. Obviously, television broadcasters have a tremendous financial interest in delivering this audience to their advertisers. They deliver this audience by creating and broad-

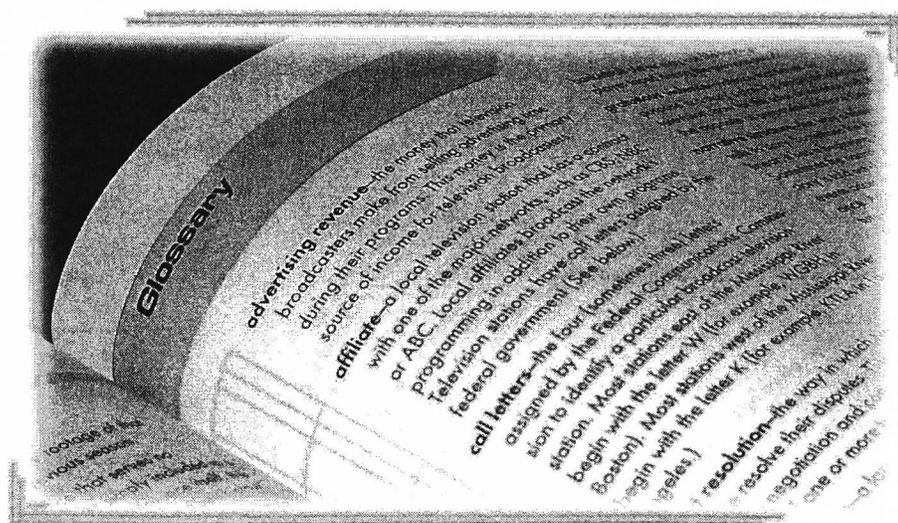
casting programming that gets people to turn the television on and pay attention. With *Media Literacy: Thinking Critically About Television*, you will examine how the television industry maintains its prominent position in American culture, and what the positive and negative effects of television might be on our communities and us.

The purpose of this book is to

- develop critical-thinking skills for evaluating the quality of the information that television provides us
- encourage you to investigate your relationship with television
- help you become more knowledgeable about how the television industry gets you to watch television, what messages it wants you to receive, and, sometimes, what the television industry doesn't want you to know about television.

There are probably several words in this book that you are not familiar with. You will find a glossary at the back of the book. Words that are

defined in the glossary are highlighted in bold type when used in the book.



The objectives of this unit are to help students

- develop a historical view of television in American society
- understand the causal relationship between the commercial focus of the television industry and the types of programming available to viewers
- look beyond the entertainment television offers and consider the reality that the television industry maintains an economic agenda driven by its reliance on advertising
- understand that television constructs “reality”
- realize that television programs are laden with value messages

This unit provides students with the social, economic, and political contexts of the rise and sustained success of commercial television. There is often resistance from those who insist that material of this type overanalyzes television programming that is merely intended to entertain its audience. However, television has been from the outset a commercial venture supported by advertisers. The firms that own television stations cater to the needs and desires of their advertisers, delivering audiences with programming designed to attract particular groups of people.

#### **In this Unit. . .**

**Changes in Television** requires students to interview older people to discover how television programming has changed over the years.

**Synergies** introduces a key strategy in the American entertainment industry. Students examine how television conglomerates discourage competition.

**No News Is Good News?** looks at the socio-political agendas of television conglomerates. Students confront the reality that television news is often shaped by the commercial interests of the television industry.

**United States Television Abroad** addresses the issue of cultural colonialism—the use of television to advance American interests in other countries. Students are placed in a situation opposite that of Americans.

**Your Local Cable System** examines the relationship between television program providers and government regulators. This activity requires students to learn the identity of their local cable system and the local regulating authority. Students then write a letter to the regulating authority, suggesting ways in which local cable service can be improved.

**Who Has Control?** has students examine the efforts of broadcasters to overcome the power of the clicker. Students’ creativity is called on as they generate novel ways to maintain viewers’ attention.

**Can Television Be Avoided?** asks students to confront the pervasiveness of television in American society. Students are asked to identify and evaluate reasons why some Americans avoid television.

AN AGENCY OF the United States government, the **Federal Communications Commission**, issued the first television station license on July 1, 1941. That first license, and most other television licenses, was issued for commercial television stations. The government had decided from the beginning that television programming would be paid for by the sale of advertising time. World War II, in which the United States was involved from 1941 to 1945, slowed the development of television, as the nation's industries focused on the war effort rather than developing a new means of entertainment for civilian life.

#### Television Becomes Popular

When the war ended, soldiers began to return home from Europe and the Pacific by the thousands. Many of them married and began starting families, creating the famous "baby boom" of post-World War II

**"Television quickly became Americans' preferred source for entertainment and information."**

America. Government programs helped veterans buy homes. This led many Americans to move away from inner cities to new suburban areas. American industry's switch to peacetime production after the war meant that there was a huge supply of automobiles, home appliances, and other consumer goods available for sale. The economic boom in the late 1940s and 1950s was driven in part by advertising of new consumer goods. Television, which already had proved to be a popular new entertainment medium in the early 1950s,

benefited from the optimistic attitudes of the American public.

Television quickly became Americans' preferred source for entertainment and information. News seemed more interesting when one could see the moving images that newspapers and magazines could not provide. Television could also report news more quickly than most other media. Many Americans seeking entertainment turned on the television set in their homes rather than going out to a theater. In 1949, only 2% of American households had a television set; by 1955, more than 64% of households had at least one television set. By the mid-1960s, 93% of households owned a television set. Advertisers did not ignore the fact that so many Americans were watching television. Some major magazines and newspapers failed as advertisers shifted more and more of their spending to television.

#### Networks and Affiliates

Three television networks quickly emerged and controlled most of television programming in the 1950s. These were the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC, which had split off from NBC in 1943). These networks already dominated radio during the 1930s and 1940s. They were organized around a network and **affiliate** structure that continues today. This structure is based on most local stations (local affiliates) being owned by people or companies other than the networks. By contractual agreement, networks provide programming such as situation comedies, dramas, news shows, and sporting events to the local affiliates. (This was originally done through

### TV Buzz

telephone lines, now by satellite.) The networks also broadcast advertisements placed by advertisers directly with the networks. For example, the CBS affiliate in El Paso, identified by the **call letters** KDBC, broadcasts CBS shows, in addition to its own local shows, including local news and sports events.

Besides network programming, local stations also broadcast movies that were first shown in theaters. Local stations also buy the right to broadcast syndicated shows. These can be older shows that were once broadcast by the networks, such as *Seinfeld*. Syndicated shows also include game shows such as *Jeopardy* and talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Local stations also run advertisements sold by the stations to local or national advertisers. These local advertisements are called spot advertisements.

#### Cable TV

Cable television began in 1948 in small, rural communities that had trouble receiving the transmitted signals from the television stations broadcasting in cities. This was either because they were too far away from the station, or because of geographic features such as mountains (this was before the use of satellites). Community Antenna Television, as it was then called, featured very large antennae. These received the broadcast signals and transmitted them to local homes through cables. Later, businesses realized that there was also a demand for cable in cities. In addition to existing channels, cable networks added "premium" programming that viewers had to pay for. The first premium cable channel, Home Box Office (HBO), began in 1972. Today,

more than 64 million households have cable television.

#### The Players

Over the past few years, the broadcast and cable television industry has come to be dominated by just a few companies:

**Viacom:** CBS, MTV, MTV2, UPN, Nickelodeon, UPN, Comedy Central, TNN, CMT, TV Land, BET, the Jazz Channel, and Showtime (Viacom also owns the Blockbuster video store chain.)

**The Walt Disney Company:** ABC, ESPN, ESPN2, ESPN Classic, ESPNEWS, Disney Channel, Lifetime, E!, A&E, the History Channel, SoapNet, the Biography Channel

**AOL Time Warner:** HBO, TBS, the Cartoon Network, Cinemax, Turner Classic Movies, CNN, CNN Headline News, TNT, and the WB Network (Also, AOL, and many magazines including *Time* and *People*.)

**General Electric:** NBC, CNBC, The History Channel, A&E, The Biography Channel, various shopping channels

Each network is allowed by the federal government to own some of its own local affiliates. The networks tend to own local stations in the nation's largest cities. Thus, GE owns WNBC in New York City, and Disney owns KABC in Los Angeles.

One other television company should be mentioned. Congress formed PBS, part of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, in 1967 to provide for educational programming. PBS receives some sponsorship money from private companies. It also relies heavily on donations from viewers to pay for programming and other expenses.

### TV Buzz

#### Television and Money

Unlike PBS, most other television broadcast companies in the United States are in business to make a profit. Most of these companies are corporations, owned by their stockholders. Stockholders can be rich people and other big companies, but they also include ordinary people. (For example, money that people save for retirement is often invested in corporations.) Corporations have a responsibility to generate a profit for their stockholders. Thus, most of the stations on television are in the business of entertaining and informing us for one purpose: to make money.

The more viewers who watch a particular television channel, the more the owners of that channel can charge advertisers for advertising.

Ultimately, we pay for advertising. When we buy a product we see advertised on television, part of the price we pay for that product covers the cost of advertising that product. In fact, for some breakfast cereals and soft drinks, the most expensive part of the product for the manufacturer is not the ingredients in the box or can—it's the cost of advertising the product. And advertisers spend more money to advertise on television than they do in any other medium.



## Changes in Television -----

INTERVIEW an adult or two in their forties (or older) about how television programming has changed over the years. Record their answers below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. How have the types of programs changed? What types of shows that used to be on television are not seen today?

What types of programs are on television today that were not shown during the earlier years of television? What do you think are some of the reasons for these changes?

2. How have the activities and attitudes of male characters changed over the years? What do you think are some of the reasons for these changes?
3. How have the activities and attitudes of female characters changed over the years? What do you think are some of the reasons for these changes?
4. How are television commercials different today from the commercials of earlier years? What do you think are some of the reasons for these changes?

## Synergies

CORPORATIONS often try to develop and promote “synergies” between the different companies they own. A **synergy** is a coordinated interaction between two or more companies, designed to create a combined effect that is greater than the results those companies each could have had on their own. (It’s not as complicated as it sounds! Think about making a large bed. If two people make the bed instead of one, it should take half the time, right? But when you have the combined efforts of two people making the bed, you will find it actually takes less than half the time that it takes one person. There’s a synergy at work when two people make the bed instead of one.)

Companies in the television industry pursue these synergies. For example, AOL Time Warner owns the Atlanta Braves baseball team. Many of the Braves’ games are broadcast on TBS, which AOL Time Warner also owns. Braves’ games provide programming for TBS. Fans who follow a team on television will often attend games, so showing Braves’ games on TBS helps sell tickets to Braves’ games. Disney promotes ABC’s *Monday Night Football* on its ESPN sports channels. Disney also shows the *Wonderful World of Disney* on ABC, which can be viewed as a long advertisement for Disney’s resorts and other Disney products. *The Country Music Awards*, shown on Viacom’s CBS, helps promote the country music programming on TNN and CMT. We call the result of a group of companies joining together to form a bigger company a **conglomerate**.

Record your answers below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. Refer to the list of television channels and their owners provided in the background information. Now watch some television! Look for examples of cross-promotion of different channels or companies with the same owner, other than the examples given. List three that you observed.
2. Many television and other entertainment media are owned by just a few companies. Do you think this makes it harder or easier to start a new television channel? Why do you think so?
3. Many television networks earn billions of dollars each year. If television is so profitable, why are there so few television companies?

#### No News Is Good News? -----

NBC is owned by General Electric (GE). GE is one of the world's largest defense contractors. GE sells billions of dollars worth of military equipment such as airplane engines to the U.S. military as well as to the governments of other nations. GE makes high-quality products. But, despite a company's best efforts, things can occasionally go wrong. Suppose that there was a problem with a type of GE jet engine that was being used by the military. This problem could be potentially life-threatening to soldiers. It could also be expensive for American taxpayers. This situation may pose a conflict for the company. GE wants to avoid negative publicity while its NBC subsidiary wants to report the news fully and accurately.

Record your answers below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. How do you think that NBC would handle the problem?
2. What do you think is the right way to handle the problem? Explain.
3. How do you think that one of NBC's competitors, such as CBS, might handle the problem at GE?

The Walt Disney Company owns ABC as well as Disneyland and Walt Disney World. Millions of people visit Disney's theme parks each year. Disney works very hard to keep all of its visitors safe. Unfortunately, sometimes things can go wrong, and people get hurt while visiting a Disney theme park.

4. What conflict do you think there could be between Disney's problem and ABC's desire to report the news fully and accurately?
5. If something very serious happened at Walt Disney World or Disneyland, how do you think ABC's news department would deal with the story?

Viacom owns Paramount Studios, UPN, and CBS. It also owns several local UPN and CBS stations. Most television stations have entertainment reporters or movie critics. These people often review new movies. Movie reviews help us decide whether or not those movies are worth seeing.

6. Suppose Paramount Studios released a new movie that wasn't very good. What do you think the television critic at a television station owned by Viacom would do?
7. What do you think a television critic at a television station owned by one of Viacom's competitors would do?

## United States Television Abroad -----

WE HAVE ALREADY seen how economic and social conditions helped the rapid development of television in the United States in the late 1940s. As a result, the television industry grew here faster than it did in most other countries. Television programming can also be very expensive. Because of these two factors, many other countries have come to rely on American television shows for at least part of their programming. In countries with non-English speaking people, many of these American programs are "dubbed" in other languages. Foreign actors replace the English dialogue in what is called an audio voice-over.

This situation does not always cause problems in other countries. However, some people in other countries are concerned that American programming can produce some negative effects on local cultures. Many Americans share this concern. Television has a strong presence in people's lives. This may cause unreasonable expectations between what American television programs depict as the normal behavior of people and what is considered normal behavior in other countries. For example, the way that American men and women dress may be considered inappropriate or even immodest in some other nations.

Some people also say that television presents unrealistic images of American life. For example, we see very few poor people on American television programs. This may give a false impression about American society to television viewers in other countries.

Record your answers below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. Let's make up a foreign country that does not exist—we will call it "Notmycountry." Let's suppose you are an American living in the United States. If most of the television programs that you were able to receive on your television set at home were from Notmycountry rather than the United States, how would you feel?
2. Suppose you lived in another country and watched a lot of police dramas that were created in the United States. Would you think the United States is a violent nation? Why or why not?
3. Imagine that you are a businessperson in a foreign country. Suppose that the television networks in this country showed lots of American television programming. Suppose that they also carried lots of advertisements for American companies.
  - Would you be afraid to start a new soft drink or fruit juice brand in your country? Why or why not? How about a new car company? Why or why not?

## Your Local Cable System -----

FROM THE BEGINNING of television, the federal government decided to regulate the medium. This is because the bandwidth for commercial television signals was limited. Even if everyone who wanted a television station could afford one, there wasn't enough room on the dial for everybody. Since there are a limited number of broadcast television channels available, only a few people or companies can own television stations. In exchange for awarding a broadcast license, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) imposes restrictions on what types of things can and cannot be seen or discussed on television. For example, certain displays of violence and sexuality are specifically forbidden.

Cable television has the technical capacity to allow more channels than broadcast television. The growing popularity of cable television means that many more channels are now available than in the early days of television. However, most communities have only one cable television company serving that community. This is a monopoly—a local industry that has no direct competition. The American legal system usually strives to avoid monopolies and encourage competition as part of the United States' free market system. When monopolies do arise, government agencies carefully regulate them. As a result, both local governments and the federal government regulate cable television companies.

Record your answers below.

1. Find out the name of your local cable television company, and write it here.
2. Find out the name of the local government agency in charge of regulating the local cable television company, and write it here.
3. Now write a letter to the local government agency in charge of regulating the local cable television company. In your letter, explain how the local cable company could improve its service. (Even if you are generally satisfied with the channels, prices, and quality, how do you think your local cable service could get better?) Use the space below or another sheet of paper on which to write a rough draft.

**Who Has Control?** -----

UNTIL ABOUT TEN years ago, remote control devices for television were fairly rare. Today, most new televisions sold in the United States include a remote control feature. Remote control and expanding choices of channels on cable and satellite systems have led television viewers to be less faithful to a particular station or network. For example, when a program stops for a commercial break, many people are likely to change the channel. Advertisers are very important to television broadcasters' profits. Our use of remote controls to avoid commercials thus makes broadcasters very uncomfortable.

Record your answers below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. How do television *broadcast companies* try to keep viewers tuned to a particular channel and not change channels during commercials?
2. Watch some television advertisements. How do *advertisers* try to keep your attention while you watch television?
3. In your personal television viewing, have some of these efforts worked or not? Explain.
4. Using your imagination, describe a practical way that broadcasters could encourage viewers not to change the channel.

#### Can Television Be Avoided? -----

IT IS ESTIMATED that about 98% of American homes have a television set. Basically, everybody in the United States who wants a television set has one. However, for many different reasons, some people try to avoid watching television. This avoidance can include refusing to buy a television set. It could also be as simple as owning a television set but rarely turning it on.

But televisions are not only in people's homes. They are in restaurants, taverns, stores, barber-shops and hair salons, airports, and probably in your school.

Record your answers below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. Why do you think some people who can afford a television set refuse to buy one? List three reasons.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Do you think any of these reasons are good ones? Why or why not?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. If a terrible tragedy happened in the world, it would make many people sad. If some of these people wanted to avoid hearing anything more about the tragedy, could they? Explain.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Suppose something really embarrassing happened to you and it got shown on television. How long do you think it would take before most of your friends knew about it? How does this make you feel?