

70+ Years of Television

by

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The first flickering images hit the airwaves on April 30, 1939. President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave a short speech declaring open the New York World's Fair. It was the first public broadcast of an electronic medium called television.

The Radio Corporation of America (RCA) aired Roosevelt's speech. Fewer than 100 sets of the new "picture radio," had been sold. The screens ranged from five to 12 inches.

The Early Years

The first daily broadcast was from Radio City in Manhattan. The first portable black and white TV was introduced in 1956. The first battery-powered set in 1960. NBC became the first network to televise all programs in color in 1966.

Here are few other interesting "firsts."

- First televised sporting event - a college baseball game between Columbia and Princeton on May 17, 1939.
- First televised major league baseball game - the Cincinnati Reds and Brooklyn Dodgers on August 26, 1939.
- First televised newscast - December 7, 1941 as the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) reported the events of Pearl Harbor.

TV's Boom

Over 700 million people, at the time the largest TV audience ever, watched the first men walk on the moon July 20, 1969.

By the early 1980s, 98% of U.S. households were equipped with at least one TV set, a majority with two or three. In 1989 American households averaged 1.9 sets.

In 1989, the average American family was spending seven hours and five minutes per day watching TV. The average individual watched TV for 30.5 hours per week.

Color TV was found in about half of American homes in 1970. Today over 90% have color TV. Over half of all U.S. households were "wired" for cable TV by the end of last century, giving access to about 120 million viewers.

The Future

The 2000s has brought high-definition television (HDTV). These sets offer twice the sharpness of current sets, richer color and compact-disk (CD) sound quality. HDTV sets represented \$1.5 billion in yearly sales in the early 2000s.

Fiber-optic cables are being attached to phone lines resulting in a universal system whereby subscribers may run errands and choose a myriad of programs. It potentially could make network and cable TV obsolete.

Almost science fiction, some predict we will see (1) Imaging - a system whereby viewers could see themselves in clothes without leaving their seats. (2) Holograms - a system whereby small, three-dimensional figures might act out a scene on the living room floor.

TV's Impact on Ministry

In the 70+ years since its formal debut, television has emerged as a primary entertainment medium, chronicler of history, wellspring of popular culture, major force for political and social change, coercive commercial vehicle and powerful spreader of information.

Here is a checklist of ways television has influenced people and ideas on responding in a positive manner.

√ **Immediate Satisfaction:** Products are sold, complex issues are solved and victory is won within 30 minutes on TV. People tend to expect that life will give the same immediate results. The ideas of delayed gratification and a process of spiritual growth are not well accepted. People want patience. And . . . they want it now!

A Positive Approach: Preach character sketches of biblical people. Point out the process each took to mature in their faith. Share examples of people who waited for prayers to be answered, personal problems to be solved and personal growth to occur.

√ **Increasing Boredom:** TV gives the impression that life moves at a faster pace, which has produced boredom and lack of determination when it comes to staying with tasks and learning mundane lessons. People subconsciously compare the real world with the fast paced action-oriented pulse beat of a TV series.

A Positive Approach: Speed up worship services. Schedule classes, small groups and Bible studies in shorter time blocks. Preach shorter sermon series. A six-week series is better than a 13-week series.

√ **Consumer Mentality:** Spending on TV advertising soared from \$171 million in 1950 to more than \$1.6 billion in 1960. It increased to \$3.6 billion in 1970, \$11.4 billion in 1980 and \$32 billion in 1989. Americans have been conditioned to buy what they can and charge what they can't.

A Positive Approach: Stress biblical stewardship of time, talent and treasure. Encourage worshippers to give to eternal values. Provide practical workshops on managing money. Preach a minimum of six stewardship messages a year.

√ **Common Knowledge:** I Love Lucy, The Honeymooners, The Ed Sullivan Show, Gunsmoke, American Bandstand, The Mickey Mouse Club, Father Knows Best and Leave It to Beaver all provided for a common base of symbols, fads and experiences unknown in time past.

A Positive Approach: Illustrate a sermon from TV shows rather than illustration books. Use stories from the Cosby Show, Roseanne and Life Goes On rather than from devotional books.

√ **Short Attention Span:** TV commercials have created short attention spans. Chase scenes and rapidly changing action shots have created a climate where people tend to concentrate for only about 30 seconds.

A Positive Approach: Move away from the pulpit. Preach without notes. Vary your volume and pitch. Use visuals. Organize your worship service into blocks of 7 minutes each changing to something entirely different each block.

√ **Personal Touch:** Relational aspects of communication are up and transfer of content is down. Letter writing is diminishing with the phone call taking its place. The motto "Reach Out and Touch Someone" reinforces typifies this fundamental change in the area of communication.

A Positive Approach: Deliver your sermon from the floor, close to the people, rather than from the platform, removed from the people. Communicate content in one-to-one fashion through stories that touch the lives of people.

√ **Multiple Story Lines:** TV often weaves two or three story lines in a 30-minute episode. Sermons usually follow a sequential 1-2-3 format. We no longer live in a sequential world. People carry on many activities at one time.

A Positive Approach: Weave at least two story lines in your teaching. Use personal stories weaved together with "What would Jesus Say" is the answer.

√ **In-n-Out Mentality:** TV has taught us that we can step into an episode and it will stand-alone. Even the SOAPS with their continuing story lines from week-to-week, have weekly stories that can stand alone.

A Positive Approach: People hate "To Be Continued" endings. Preach a series but keep it short (6 weeks). Make sure each sermon can stand-alone.

√ **Concern for Causes:** A new word "dramady" has been coined to name a new form of comedy and drama which addresses topics like AIDS, drugs and sex. TV has started facing tough issues and trying to provide answers. For example, Down's Syndrome - Life Goes On.

A Positive Approach: Face current issues tastefully. Don't make a habit of dealing with heavy issues each week but don't be afraid of facing them either.