8

Television in the Home and Family

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Home life has never been the same since the advent of television, particularly since television began to be considered as *the* household medium in a very large part of the world. None the less, broadcasters, critics, academics, and viewers have never been in agreement about the domestic consequences of television, for many reasons.

Since television entered the home—and each home has had its own family and television chronology—much else has changed besides the mere size of the television audience. The family itself as a unit has been under pressure for reasons of which television has been only one. Changes in family structure and the rise in the number of single parent families have transformed the scene. 'Family values' have themselves been in question. But even before these changes there were many kinds of homes, and many kinds of families. Reactions were not the same. Joseph Klapper, research pioneer, rightly refused in 1960 to draw a sharp distinction between the habits of 'television families' and 'non-television families' without examining whether the differences which were thrown up in family surveys antedated the purchase of a television set.

Taking the world as a whole, it is even more difficult to generalize about the impact of television on the family because of the variety of political, economic, and communications systems. When television was geared to the market and derived its revenues from advertising it was used to tempt viewers to gaze at other consumer goods from automobiles (which took families out of their homes) to better and brighter kitchens (designed to keep them in them). It served as an invaluable instrument in an age of increasing 'consumerism'. When it was geared to the power of authority and was totally dependent on government for finance it was used for political propaganda, and in the process both inculcated values and contributed in the longer run to their subversion. In countries with public service broadcasting systems, organized with varying degrees of independence, television often encouraged critical discussion of the family as an institution. It also illuminated differences between opinion groups and pressure groups, many of the latter professedly committed to 'family values'.

When the first half-century of American television was celebrated at a Smithsonian exhibition in 1989,

Time magazine asked just what the revellers should be celebrating, television as a technological device, as an entertainment medium, as 'a chronicler of our times', as a business enterprise, or as 'a social force'? In fact, the exhibition, which was called American Television from the Fair to the Family, concentrated, as many opinion and pressure groups have done, on the impact of television on the home. Early advertisements for television were shown with elegant models watching the screen in sophisticated surroundings. Television was a luxury then as well as a novelty. Very soon, however, advertisers began to promote television as a force making for family togetherness: 'There is great happiness in the home where the family is held together by its new common bond—television.' Later advertisements had a sharper focus after television became a mass medium. Predictions proliferated. One Los Angeles survey in 1949 even forecast that the divorce rate would fall in America, thanks to television.

The world-wide relevance of this particular American half-century, celebrated in 1989, can be challenged. It was a fact that RCA had introduced 'the modern system of television' at the New York World Fair fifty years before in 1939, but the American television audience, the first of such audiences in the world, did not grow fast until the late 1940s and 1950s. The Second World War had held back the progress of television in the United States and in Britain had brought it to an abrupt halt.

The number of viewers in Britain and Germany was, of course, extremely small. In Britain there were only 20,000 television licences in 1939 and television was serving the needs of only a small relatively well-off audience in the London area. It was Britain, however, with a very different broadcasting system, and Germany with a different political system, that had introduced television services in 1936 before television took hold in the United States.

The main impact of television in Britain before that date had not been on 'viewers', a new term, but on the press, which did much to publicize it among people who never saw it, while its main impact in Germany had been on Nazi leaders who were fascinated by broadcasting technology. None the less, even before 1939, there were occasional revealing comments on the likely impact of television on the home and family. Thus in the class-based society of pre-war Britain a working-class Cockney woman, interviewed after watching a television demonstration in 1937, could exclaim, 'Blimey! . . . if we ever get one of these things at home, we shan't have an excuse to go out to the pictures . . . and we shan't be able to get rid of the men on Saturday afternoons, either. They'll want to sit in front of the fire to watch the football match.'

The fact that the radio set (and in some cases the gramophone) had entered the home before the television set was of crucial importance both in Britain and the Untied States, as it was to be in other countries, and not surprisingly in the early years there were sceptics on both sides of the Atlantic who doubted whether television would ever supplant radio inside the house. For example, Raymond Postgate, writer on wine, food, and history, suggested in 1939 that working-class homes were not big enough to take television screens: there was not enough wall space. In his view television would become an amusement only in homes that had several rooms. 'Not more than ten per cent of the population will take it up permanently,' he predicted. 'But in cinema houses, as a rival feature to films, it may become very popular.'

As late as 1951 Derek Horton, author of a book called *Television's Story and Challenge*, believed that the future lay in big-screen television viewed in special theatres. Television was spectacle. He refused to believe that 'television will ever make families want to stay at home night after night peering at their little screens'.

By then, however, there were many people, at least in Britain, who were convinced that the television set would supplant the wireless set in the home, even in the working-class home. It was already becoming a familiar piece of furniture, often the most expensive piece of furniture that a lower-income-group family had ever bought or hired. As the *Daily Mail Ideal Home* book put it undramatically in 1950, 'Sound broadcasting is already essential to the life of the nation and the family unit . . . It will not be long before television occupies a somewhat similar position.' Two decades later, a more dramatic statement of the by then established power over people of television was that of the authority on pop culture Arthur Asa Berger in 1973. Drawing a comparison between (American) television and drugs he

wrote: 'Once you are hooked on them it is difficult to get off them . . . both depend upon "turning on" and passively waiting for something beautiful to happen.'

In the early years of television in a number of other countries, Italy in particular, television was not a home-centred medium. It was associated with public places. The same is still true of television in some developing countries, where the cost of a television set is too high for most families to afford.

II

Even before television became a mass medium, considerable interest was shown in the habits that it would be likely to induce, foster, restrain, or suppress. How, for example, would it affect other activities both inside and outside the home? Would it make viewers more open to outside influences and therefore better informed or would it simply make them more passive?

Most of the early research concentrated on quantitative assessments of hours spent on viewing. Time-use surveys were collected in different countries, and from them deductions were drawn as to the extent to which television displaced, for example, radio listening in the home and cinema attendance outside it. Japanese time-studies of what happened during each twenty-four hours in a seven-day week, developed during the 1970s, were perhaps the most sophisticated examples of such research. Meanwhile, a long-term American study compared a sample of 2,021 respondents in 1965 with another sample of 2,475 respondents in 1975. During the decade it was found that time spent on work, housework, and leisure showed considerable constancy both across time and across social groups. The largest change in the use of time was within 'leisure': television not only usurped time previously devoted to the mass media that it replaced, i.e. radio and the movies, but also cut into time previously not spent on the media at all.

In Britain in 1993 *Social Trends* could report that 'watching television and visiting or entertaining friends or relatives' had remained the most popular home-based leisure activities over the previous fifteen years. The average number of hours of television viewed per week rose from 16.2 in February 1967, to 19.9 in February 1977 to a peak figure of over 26 hours a week in 1986 (after which the figure declined very slightly). Significantly, the media periodicals *Radio Times* and *TV Times*, which included feature articles as well as programme schedules for the forthcoming week, had the highest circulations of any general weeklies.

The amount of viewing in Britain was lower than that in the United States throughout the period: in 1984, for example, Americans viewed on average 31 hours a week, whilst people in Continental European countries viewed less than the British, with the Dutch viewing least of all, 12 hours a week in 1985.

Such comparative figures of national viewing habits, the reasons for which have been inadequately explored, should themselves be compared with comparative studies relating to economic and social differences within particular countries. In Britain, for example, the viewing figures, as they were stated in *Social Trends*, concealed a considerable range of viewing hours per week, with high amounts being associated throughout the period covered with low social class, old (and very young) age, and unemployment. Members of the managerial and professional classes, among the first to acquire television sets, viewed two hours less a day than those in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. There were also differences between viewing habits at different times of year: *Social Trends* showed that the August viewing figures were always several hours per week less than the winter figures, as people engaged in outdoor activities and went on holiday. The figures quoted above are for February, a prime viewing month.

It is difficult to generalize convincingly about television viewing in different places and at different times, yet some useful comparative studies have been made, particularly by J. P. Robinson, who summarized a range of studies from several countries in 1986. He found that the differences in time spent viewing television between different countries seem to be related less to different amounts of time devoted to necessary household chores and domestic activities than to what he called, with the Untied States in mind, 'the colonisation of leisure'. For him, 'free time' was becoming a marketable commodity and 'so, in one sense, becoming less free'.

From the evidence of both time-use surveys and from direct observational studies it was apparent

that time spent in front of the screen, whether it was continuous or spasmodic viewing, was significant irrespective of the content of what was being shown. Yet the words 'in front of the screen' or 'glued to the screen' obviously became inappropriate as television developed, particularly where 'natural breaks' were devoted to advertising. A study of Germany in 1988 suggested that 'the characteristic look that television produces is the glance'. Likewise, a British time-use diary showed that as early as 1984 'pure' television viewing was relatively rare: people claimed to be watching television and doing other things concurrently, a habit which other studies showed to have been often established in childhood. Conversation was not one of the 'other things'. As Julian Critchley commented in the *Daily Mail* in 1989, 'Silence is golden before the flickering screen . . . The small screen may have reunited the family, but it is generally a silent communion.'

Not surprisingly, the effect of television on the habits—and even the personalities—of children has been the subject of more surveys than any other aspect of the medium. Psychologists, educationalists, moralists, and, of course, parents have taken it for granted that children would be the most vulnerable to the introduction of a television set into the home. Would they stop reading? Would they stop playing? Would they become addicts? Some of them very quickly did.

The conclusions drawn from such surveys have often been contradictory: for example, some surveys suggested that 'quality' children's television programmes gave children more open-minded, better-informed attitudes, while critics complained that children were simply being spoon-fed information which would have been better learned—and retained—the hard traditional way, by reading and classroom teaching. There was argument, too, as to whether children were being stimulated by what they saw on the screen or being made more passive. The most frequently posed question of all—whether television scenes of violence would make children more aggressive or whether they would become indifferent to or even repelled by such scenes—was at different periods answered in different ways in different places.

The first predictions of the effect of television on children were made long before the arrival in 1936 of a scheduled television service in Britain, and long before sociologists began to carry out surveys. In 1928 an advertisement for the *Land and People Encyclopaedia* adopted the 'magic carpet' theme. 'Before your children have grown up, television may enable them and you to "see by wireless" any part of the world.' Horizons would be broadened; windows in the world opened. No drawbacks were foreseen.

When television actually came on the scene, however, the assumption was often made, without evidence, that it would do more harm than good. The social psychologist Hilde Himmelweit, interviewed on the BBC in 1972, spoke about the results of her pioneering study of children's viewing behaviour, *Television and the Child* (1958). She commented that in the early years of television a judge might say: 'It is very clear that this boy stole because he was also an addict of television.'

Himmelweit's first research was carried out in 1955 and 1956 at a time early enough in television history for it to be easy to find a control group of children with no sustained access to television. (Indeed, only about one-third of the children in the schools Himmelweit studied had television at home.) Asked where the time children spent viewing television came from, Himmelweit replied, 'What is displaced primarily is non-purposive activity . . . The time previously spent with other children, in clubs and on activities which were always very much enjoyed, by and large remains.' She commented, also, that television is 'the second thing you turn to: it is never the first'.

Some studies disputed this opinion, and also Himmelweit's finding that television had only a temporary adverse effect on children's reading habits. They also emphasized the multiple functions of television. An American social scientist, Bradley Greenberg, who questioned English children to test some of Himmelweit's findings, reported that children gave eight major reasons why they watched television: 'to relieve boredom; in order to forget school, friends, something; to learn about things, how to do things . . . what was going on in the world . . . or about themselves . . . how to cope with life in a more satisfactory manner; for arousal; to relax—they wanted to sit down and not have to think about anything; for companionship when they were lonely; and, finally, for simple enjoyment.'

Whatever the reason, television was often used by parents to keep children quiet so that the cultural critic Alasdair Clayre could conclude in 1972: 'It's been said that children are our guests in the world. It appears that what we do with our guests at the moment is largely to leave them in front of the television set.' At the time that Clayre wrote children were already spending an average of more than three hours daily in front of the set and many critics blamed television for corrupting children's values and deadening their responses.

The American sociologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, speaking in 1972 in a BBC Further Education series on the impact of television on children, warned of the dangers not of the behaviour television produced but of the behaviour it prevented. 'When the TV set is on it freezes everybody: they're all expressionless, focused on the image on the screen, and everything that used to go on between people—the games, the arguments, the emotional scenes, out of which personality and ability develop—is stopped so when you turn on the TV you turn off the process of making human beings human.'

Twelve years later, Cedric Cullingford in an interesting study, *Children and Television*, was less devastating in his judgements. He claimed that children had their own way of dealing with the effects of too much television. The habits they acquired whilst viewing were themselves important. Actually observing children watching television, Cullingford exploded the myth that learning only takes place through conscious attention to programmes. 'The sophistication children learn is that of being able to ignore the stimulation offered . . . the paradox is that of the gap between children's great capacity to appreciate and to be critical and their frequent boredom resulting from overuse of television'.

Children can, of course, learn other things, or rather, be trained into them. Advertising directed at children works on the assumption, as Jules Henry has put it in *Culture against Man* (1965), 'that the claim that gets into the child's brainbox first is most likely to stay there and, that since in contemporary America children manage parents, the former's brainbox is the ante-chamber to the brainbox of the latter.'

Such studies focus largely on individual child viewers, but there has been a sequence of surveys suggesting that viewing is itself a social as well as an individual act, and that the impact of television must always be related to interaction within the family. Jack Lyle, reporting in 1971 to the US Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behaviour, noted that television viewing in families featured interaction between viewers as well as simple acts of individual viewing as parents and children viewed together. Of course, children also viewed with other children, both siblings and friends, and this aspect of interaction has been less systematically studied.

Interaction concerns adults as well as children and, as in the case of children, friends as well as the family. 'The owner of a television set', wrote one broadcasting critic in 1938, 'should consider it his duty, as a pioneer, to convert friends by inviting them round to enjoy it under domestic conditions . . . take care to choose an evening when there is something good on.' A woman viewer described in 1938 how in her home 'just before nine o'clock chairs are drawn into a circle. Lights are switched off, a screen shuts out any interfering reflections from the fire, and once the tuning signal is radiated silence prevails by common consent.'

Forty years later, across the Atlantic, the agony aunt Abbie van Buren dealt with knotty problems of television manners in the home. Often there were no solutions. 'Dear Abbie, What can be done about friends who drop in unexpectedly while we are watching our favorite TV programs? We hate to be rude, but we would rather watch our programs than visit with them . . .' Another letter to Abbie dealt not with friends but with husbands. 'The minute my husband comes home from work,' a housewife wrote, 'he turns on the TV and watches anything that happens to be on . . . He doesn't talk to me or the children. Abbie, he stays up until 2 o'clock in the morning . . . of course we don't have a sex-life any more.'

Eight years later, Mary Kenny in a *Sunday Telegraph* column headed 'No telly, please, we're talking' (1986), reported an individual case on the same theme. She described a family who had given up television three years earlier: 'Liz and Neville Compton of Leamington Spa felt that TV was having an insidious effect on their family life. "He'd come in from work in the evening, wanting to tell me about his

day", Liz recalled, "and I'd say—shush tell me later—as I hung on for the development in some soap opera." And then there was the effect on their two children. It was nothing dramatic or big and shocking, they both say. It was the gradual clipping away of decent standards, the flip attitudes, the casual acceptance of violence, the trivialisation of love and sex . . . So out the TV went.'

This family had found that the ultimate way of dealing with surfeit and addiction was abstinence, and various studies have examined the effects on families and individuals of watching no television. Some of the earliest of such reports looked at families who from the outset had rejected television altogether, or at those who had renounced it voluntarily after a time, or even, in a few cases, at people who were paid by researchers not to watch for a period. One early Australian survey interviewed householders whose sets had broken down (although the results were misleading, since there was often a second set which could be moved from a bedroom into the living-room). Another Australian survey of 1977 studied 298 non-television-owning families who had responded to an article in a Melbourne newspaper and were interviewed or asked to fill out a questionnaire. The sample was unusual because the participants were 'self-selected, interested and eager to express their points of view' and, one might add, self-satisfied. 'Television steals time, makes people lazier and more passive, and is addictive,' one typical respondent observed. The main reason given by those respondents who blamed television as a waste of time had little to do with programmes and their content but rather with the feeling that time spent on almost any other activity was better used than time watching television: 'there is little to show for those hours'; 'a monster, a lurking presence, exploiting those who watch it'; 'a sedative to keep people in a vaguely somnolent state . . .'.

The results of 'abstinence' surveys have been as contradictory as the results of children's surveys. In both Germany and Britain, where families were paid not to view television for a period, their 'need' for television proved so great that no family was able to continue not viewing despite the payment. In the first difficult week adaptation of various kinds had been achieved, although one of the casualties had been family conversation, a conclusion that set some of the first criticisms of television on its head. A similar American study revealed, however, not surprisingly, that there were varieties of reaction according to a variety of factors, including the age and number of persons in the household and the previous viewing patterns in the home, as well as socio-economic status and the range of other work and leisure activities.

Such reports were illuminating, but most people would reject the idea of total abstinence from viewing, whatever reservations they might feel about the effect of television on themselves and their children. Indeed, a report of 1990 showed that 99 per cent of a British population sample had watched some television during the four weeks before they were questioned. Among this huge group the problem for those families who perceived that there *was* a problem was not whether to view but what to view and there were plenty of would-be family counsellors to advise them.

III

Of course one cannot separate questions relating to viewing behaviour from questions relating to the content of what is seen. The range of television is wide, covering as it does everything from news and current affairs, with a dominating factual content, sometimes violent, to entertainment, presenting various versions of fiction, some of this violent also. News and current affairs programmes have often been concerned with families, not least families in distress in contexts far outside the viewing families' own experience. Entertainment has often incorporated not only fictional families but real families being shown on the screen in quiz and game shows, some of them with glittering prizes, and in other cross-generation contests.

Whether or not all members of the family should have free access to the whole television output has always been contentious. The film industry developed a certificating system. Television did not, although in Britain there was for a long period until it was abandoned in 1957 a so-called 'toddlers' truce' between the hours of 6 and 7 o'clock. So-called 'adult' material has often been reserved until later in the evening. For some time 9 o'clock has been treated in Britain as the 'watershed'. In fact,

empirical evidence in Britain, at least, suggests that all members of the family watch at 'adult' times (just as adults often view at 'children's' times). The 'watershed' policy has always been criticized for being based on unrealistic assumptions about children's bedtimes and parental control.

Who, if anyone, decides what others should watch or not watch clearly varies from family to family, and many research projects have examined programme selection when there are conflicting views within the family. Sometimes the decision to watch a given programme is the result of democratic discussion, sometimes 'spoiled' children have their way, and sometimes the authoritarian father decides. (Of course the mother, if she is at home, may have had the set to herself during the day.) According to Robert T. Bower, writing in 1973, 'In general, the norms of society prevail when family viewing decisions are made: male dominates female, older children win out over younger children, and father dominates both mother and children.' Despite this, Bower noticed that often parents give way to their children, who thus become arbiters of what the whole family watches. Also, fathers who in fact control the set often perceive their partner or children as the controller(s). Research has also investigated who turned the set on, who changed the channel, and who switched it off. The husband and children were much more likely than the mother to alter the set (only 15 per cent of mothers did so in a 1982 survey of ninety-three British families).

For some families choosing the programme was a matter of indifference and apathy. 'You come home at night and you say you're going to watch a little television and, irrespective of the content, you watch and you turn on the dials to watch the least objectionable programme.' So ran the American Paul Klein's theory of Least Objectionable Programming.

Children's viewing patterns show some differences from adults. Most children of 6–10 years watch a mixture of adult and children's programmes. A typical mixture consists of cartoons, children's serials, and 'magazine' programmes and also sitcoms and soap operas (but little news and current affairs). Very young children mainly watch their own children's programmes and bought or rented children's videos, whilst 10–12-year-olds watch few children's programmes, less television of all kinds than younger children, but what they do watch is intended for adults. Boys watch more sport and 'action' programmes, girls more serials, drama, and comedy.

Would-be family counsellors have been more concerned with what ought to be than with what is, and with what ought to be for adults as well as for children. In Britain, for example, Mary Whitehouse, who became interested in television as a schoolteacher concerned about the effect of 'sex' programmes on her pupils, broadened her range of interests to encompass adults when she founded her Viewers' and Listeners' Association in 1965. Her campaign covered bad language as well as sex and violence and inevitably provoked opposition both from people who thought that she did not understand how twentieth-century families actually lived, and from the BBC, which objected to being offered moral guidance from outside.

The BBC's own study of violence on the television screen, which started in 1969 was specifically based on family reactions. Its Audience Research Department invited fifty families individually to Broadcasting House to watch a programme containing violence. Discussing the project afterwards David Newell, the chief researcher, said that he had often had to push the viewing families quite hard before they would even mention violence. Among the results of an expensive and protracted survey, not published until 1972, it was shown that while there was much violence on television, an average 2.2 incidents per hour, many people did not class programmes showing a few violent incidents as any more violent than those showing just one.

Brian Emmett, Head of BBC Audience Research, was surprised also by the number of people who reacted to violent programmes with 'It's not a bad thing to put the boot in when I think it's needed.'

Other surveys, earlier and later, have attempted to analyse the effect of television violence on viewers in terms of subsequent aggressive conduct and attitudes, but conclusions are indecisive or contradictory. To this day there is, for example, no agreement about the nature of the interaction of mass media violence and aggressive behaviour despite what Simon Carey in *Criminal Justice Matters*, issue of Spring 1993, describes as a surfeit of theories investigating the nature of the link. There is not even the most basic agreement on whether the observation

of violence causes the aggression or the aggression causes the observation or whether some other factor such as personality causes both. Nor, given that proofs of causality are not possible, is there even agreement on the *fact* of whether there is a positive or a negative correlation between the viewing of violence and aggression ('arousal' or 'catharsis').

Broadcasters have little control over the flow of events which constitute 'news', but they do have power to decide just what news pictures will be shown on the screen. They have often given warnings, somewhat similar to tobacco health warnings, about items in the news which may not be suitable for whole family viewing.

Most of the studies of violence on viewers carried out since the early days of television have been concerned with fictional violence. Joseph Klapper pointed out as long ago as 1960 that the studies performed for the National Association of Educational Broadcasters 'carefully tally fictional evidence resulting from "act of nature" and "accident" but ignore "because of special problems in definition and methods, violence found in sports, news, weather, public issues and public events programs" '. A study by Leo Bogart in 1956 showed that audiences could stomach, and even enjoy, scenes of violence in a quasi-documentary TV series, provided the shows were prefaced by reassuring announcements.

Whether television violence was fictional or documentary, broadcasters have sometimes, but by no means always, responded sympathetically to the kind of statement made in 1987 by Colin Morris, the BBC's Director of Religious Education, that 'the broadcaster is a guest in the home of the viewer and there are things which guests can be expected not to do whilst enjoying their hosts' hospitality . . . When broadcasters introduce offensive language or images into the family setting, they are guilty of a double offence: they have forced into consciousness issues which may be embarrassing across the generations, and as guests in the home they have breached the laws of hospitality. Hence certain levels of taste and standards in radio and television programmes express the essential courtesies.'

More than three decades after the American sociologist Wilbur Schramm cautiously summed up the findings of a major study, *Television in the Lives of our Children* (by Schramm, Lyle, and Parker, 1961), Simon Carey commented that nothing in subsequent correlational studies suggests any need to modify a single word of it: 'For some children under some conditions,' Schramm had concluded, 'some television is harmful. For other children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children under most conditions, most television is probably neither harmful nor particularly beneficial.' Carey suggests that the failure of massive research efforts to produce clear and useful answers is leading researchers to leave the field of media violence: it has proved, paradoxically, too indecisive and, therefore, too anodyne a subject for systematic study.

This unsatisfactory inconclusiveness has not, of course, prevented many individuals and pressure groups from making judgements. Sex, violence, and bad language on television are subjects on which almost everyone has an opinion.

IV

From inside their own homes viewers saw as a regular item in programmes portrayals of the family itself, fictional or real. They could identify themselves with what they saw, or they could be shocked or envious. Meanwhile, both moralists and sociologists asked, as a leading question, whether what was shown on the screen, fictional or real, reflected or distorted reality. The moralists were also concerned with a second question: did what was seen on the screen affect the real-life behaviour of families?

The family was always at the centre of television thinking and planning: it provided protagonists, situations, and background for sitcoms, soap operas, and contemporary drama. There were as many kinds of families as there were kinds of homes. Yet some homes, whatever happened inside them, came to look reassuringly familiar. As one sociologist put it, 'the narrative space of [these] programmes is dominated by the domestic space of the home'.

Early American television families usually served as comic battlegrounds for farce and slapstick—with henpecked father, domineering mother, and awful children descended directly from seaside-postcard or comic-film stereotypes. By the mid-1950s, however, advertising sponsors grasped that a more realistic —or idealistic—approach could pay, not least in

commercials: viewers could be encouraged to aspire to live in the well-designed and well-equipped homes shown in more sophisticated television series. They might even become well-designed nuclear families.

The American *Father Knows Best* (1955) was the earliest mass-audience television sitcom family, neat and nuclear, with Jim Anderson described at the time as 'the first intelligent father on radio or television' and his wife Margaret 'a contented and attractive homemaker', fulfilled by rearing her children and looking after her husband. The *Saturday Evening Post* praised the Andersons for being 'a family that has surprising similarities to real people'. The show was applauded for making 'polite, carefully middle-class, family-type entertainment'. One feminist sociologist has suggested that there was behind-the-scenes pressure to present such wives as role-models since, after World War II, women's skilled jobs were scarce, and most middle-class women were destined whether they liked it or not to remain 'homemakers'. Marginal as such women were as family earners, however, television sponsors correctly targeted them as the major shoppers for household goods.

Contemporary with *Father Knows Best* (1954–63), were sitcoms *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–63), *The Donna Reed Show* (1958–66), *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961–6), *Hazel* (1961–6), *Dennis the Menace* (1959–63), and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–66). Britain's first television families, *The Grove Family* (1953–6) and *The Larkins* (1958–60) presented a different picture of home and family in a still austerity-bound post-war Britain, a life with which lower-middle-class and working-class viewers could identify rather than a source of aspiration, a significant difference from the United States. Since there was as yet no commercial television there was no sponsors' pressure to show the dream house. Family relationships, however, were shown as traditionally—perhaps nostalgically—warm and supportive. It was a world in which homes were run by down-to-earth 'mum'-style housewives rather than American-model youthful homemakers enjoying the leisure made possible by modern household appliances.

As statistics increasingly showed that the nuclear family was in a minority of household grouping, television sitcoms on both sides of the Atlantic showed families of many different kinds, often less than perfect: the British *Till Death Us Do Part* (1966–75) and its American spin-off *All in the Family* (1971–9), with their bigoted husbands, Alf Garnett and Archie Bunker; *Steptoe and Son* in their non-ideal home behind the scrapyard (1962–6 and 1970–4); the grotesque *Addams Family* (1964–6) and *The Munsters* (1964–5), and the all-male, yet innocent, *Odd Couple* (1970–5). There were sitcoms about black families (Cosby), ghetto families, and all kinds of deviant families, reflecting real life itself. The fictional Lawrences of California were described by a sociologist as 'sitting around waiting for social problems to come knockin' at the door'. By 1980 an American psychologist, Arlene Skolnick, could suggest that the family itself had become 'a media event like politics or athletics, with nightly doses of lump-in-the-throat normalcy and "humorous deviance" '.

Single dramas, too, could, of course, give a picture of home and family life, but the most powerful and still-remembered play was the tragic *Cathy Come Home* (1966, written by Jeremy Sandford and directed by Ken Loach) which brutally laid bare the anguish of families in contemporary Britain who had *no* home.

The soap opera, with its more diffuse structure and longer time-scale, could explore escapist fantasy worlds of improbable plots, extreme passions, and unlikely relationships against backdrops of exotic scenery and high fashion. Adultery, incest, and bigamy thickened many a plot. Yet the family, however extended and deviant, was usually at the heart of the story not only in American and non-British soap opera but in Brazil's *Roda de Fogo* (Wheel of Fire). The hero of *Roda de Fogo*, watched by 50 million people six nights a week, was born into a wealthy family and aspired to become President of Brazil. In France *Symphonie* dealt with an enormously rich watch-making family. In Germany *Das Erbe der Guldenburgs* described a family beer dynasty. In India *Buniyaad* traced the troubles and turmoils of the Gaindamal family over sixty years. *Buniyaad*'s director Kundan Shah believed the show was popular because 'the audience is a voyeur' of the lives of the family.

Such 'voyeurism' could sometimes be the product of loneliness. BBC producer Julia Smith, quoted in *Time* in March 1987, believes 'People watch because they care. There are a lot of lonely people who, owing to the break-up of the family structure, don't live in family groups.' Interviewed in 1992 on the BBC radio programme *Start the Week*, she praised the

soap opera for giving people something to talk about when they don't have their own granny and babies. Despite this analysis, however, most British soap operas have focused on groups and locations other than the family: the hospital (*Emergency Ward 10* and *Casualty*); the office (*Compact*); the motel (*Crossroads*); the pub and the neighbourhood (*Coronation Street*, *EastEnders*). The Australian *Neighbours* attracts millions of British fans, some of them, according to a *Daily Telegraph* report of 1990, 'foetuses tuning in to mother's favourite "soap"; hearing the programme's signature tune before they are born, they associate it with the relaxed time she spends while watching it.'

The broadcasting historian Paddy Scannell has pointed out that most soap opera, however outrageous its characters and events may be, exists 'in parallel with real time': between episodes time is assumed to pass as it does in the real world. And, as in life itself, but unlike the case of the classic novel or play, the soap opera deals with several stories running in tandem or overlapping. Characters age as 'real' people do, and the longest running series actually employ archivists in the production team to avoid discrepancies and anachronisms in the biographies of the characters. Thus, viewers stand in relation to them as they do to people they 'really' know. Like members of their own family who happen to live in a different home they can get to know those characters; and remember past events in their lives.

Comparisons have been made, too, between the 'essentially structureless' nature of domestic work and the disrupted, discontinuous yet never-ending nature of daytime soap opera plots. Home-bound women, it is suggested, therefore feel affinity with soaps.

Research has been carried out on the impact of television's portrayals of family life on children. Are children's notions of what family life is or should be affected by the programmes they watch? Children in one American survey were divided by age and social class and asked questions about whether family members in the programmes they watched 'support, ignore or oppose one another'. The researchers reported that the children derived more positive than negative messages from television, especially children whose parents discussed the programmes with them. In the late 1950s the *Saturday Evening Post* quoted letters from viewers of *Father Knows Best* who praised the programme for being one the *whole family* could enjoy and even learn from. When Susan Sontag noted in *On Photography* the extraordinary powers of mass-produced images to determine our demands upon reality, she might well have added 'and upon our ideas of relationships'. The feminist Gloria Steinem criticized television commercials for seldom portraying men with any relationship to children, and 'it's still only women who care about our spouses' breakfast food'. Television can fix stereotypes of family relationships.

As with most surveys and opinions on the effect of television on viewers, the verdicts of moralists on family television shows are contradictory. Whilst deviant and selfish television families have been attacked for giving bad examples, as was Alf Garnett's family by Mrs Whitehouse, 'normal' families have been charged with establishing impossible aspirations. 'It's the fantasy, the dream of motherhood that carries them along', said the director of an American study of pregnant addicts, quoted in 1972. 'No matter what realities they've had to face, they continue to imagine themselves in typical television family situations—mother, father, baby, house.' Similarly, a *New Yorker* report of the late 1970s quoted the actor who had years earlier played the Anderson brother in *Father Knows Best*. He regretted having taken part. 'It was all totally false', he said, and 'had caused many Americans to feel inadequate because they thought this was how life was supposed to be and their own lives failed to measure up.'

The strictures of some moralists on the materialism, greed, and lack of traditional family values displayed by the wealthy characters in *Dallas* and *Dynasty* have been counterbalanced by other suggestions that it is salutary to show that riches do not buy happiness or virtue. Cynics, indeed, might believe that such a lesson was the underlying manipulative purpose of these series—to provide a moral opiate for the masses. Such programmes are seen in many countries outside the United States, and in one major cross-cultural sociological study of *Dallas* (by Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes), episodes were shown to groups from four different ethnic communities in Israel. A group of Russian Jewish immigrants were asked '(learning that in order to be Israelis they had to watch *Dallas*!), "What is the message of the programme?" Together they answered with the

other groups, "they're trying to tell us the rich are unhappy . . . But, don't believe it, it's a manipulation; it's what they want us to believe".'

After two decades in which programmes for the family and about the family became staple fare, it was inevitable that eventually television cameras would arrive inside the 'real family'. What the BBC has recently called *verité voyeurism* arrived in Britain in 1969 with Richard Cawston's *Royal Family*, the first television film of the Queen and her family at home. Unique in subject, scope, and television techniques, the film, forty-three hours of footage compressed into barely two, was seen by 350 million viewers around the world.

The making of *Royal Family* showed how the Queen's own attitude to television had evolved: in 1958 she and Prince Philip had decided against allowing the royal children to appear on the Christmas broadcast. 'Some of you have written to say that you would like to see our children on television this afternoon . . . We believe that public life is not a fair burden to place on growing children.' Yet only eleven years later *The Guardian* critic (later to become Editor) Peter Preston, reviewing *Royal Family*, could write, 'The Queen has collaborated; the Queen has permitted a year of camera crews peering over her shoulder; for the first time we see the unvarnished happy family at breakfast, just chatting.' 'Absolutely electrifying, staggering', boasted ITV's publicity—the film was made by a BBC and ITV consortium—whilst *The Times* gave the film a calmer blessing: 'there must be a great many people who have a far clearer picture than they ever had before of what type of person, with what type of family, now reigns in Britain.'

Some doubts about the wisdom of exposing the Royal Family to such intimate scrutiny were expressed at the time—to be repeated often over subsequent years: 'as nothing else, television can trivialize and cheapen', warned the *Sunday Telegraph*. 'Now that we have seen the Queen buying lollipops for Prince Edward . . . will the next solemn procession of the Garter Knights at Windsor, with Her Majesty at the head, seem more dignified, or more ludicrous?' Given subsequent popular press obsession with the most intimate and sometimes scandalous details of the royal family, the remark is dated.

Increasingly sophisticated, 'fly-on-the-wall' television techniques were applied five years later, in 1974, to a very different 'real' family, the Wilkinses of Reading, in Paul Roger's documentary series, *The Family*, which was preceded and inspired by a twelve-part American documentary *An American Family* (1973, for PBS) about the rich Californian Loud family, whose marriage had actually broken up in front of the television cameras. In this context, too, worries of a different kind were expressed. Did the presence in a small terrace house of television crew and cameras —the latter at that time still unwieldy—affect the Wilkinses and cause them either to exaggerate or to downplay their normal conversation and behaviour? It was a question—mirroring a well-known problem in physics—impossible in principle to answer.

Richard Cawston, asked for his views on *The Family*, believed that time could solve this problem. The 'law of increasing returns' would set in, he said, 'a process of familiarisation [an interesting word] when the film crew gradually cease to be strangers. . . . The cameraman, Philip Bonham-Carter, was in the Wilkins' sitting-room for twelve weeks all day with the camera on his shoulder most of the time. They didn't know when it was running and when it wasn't . . . the longer you have a camera team in a closed community', he went on, 'the better are the results for two reasons: one is because people . . . gradually forget the presence of the team . . . and the other is that if you're there long enough, something interesting will happen.' (Mrs Wilkins, for example, divulged on screen that her husband had not been the father of her last child.)

Since *The Family*, in its day described as as 'addictive as any soap opera', the 'soap-umentary' has become a familiar television genre, with the most recent Australian example, *Sylvania Waters* (1992), providing Britain with good prurient fun. As Eric Bailey, the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent pointed out in April 1993, 'Television producers have recognised that programmes which are about "ordinary people" can be both cheap to make and powerful in the ratings—and if these people are willing to make fools of themselves so much the better.'

V

The relationship between television and the family has changed as new technologies of communication have arrived. In the early years of television the

gramophone was already a feature in many homes—so, too, was the telephone—but the main comparisons made between the effects of different home communications devices were those between television and the transistor radio, most popular with young listeners for many of whom it became the chief instrument of a youth subculture.

Television commanded special respect in its early years, so that in 1938 a dedicated British television viewer could write sternly that 'you may be a background listener but you can't be a background viewer', adding that 'preparations for watching the television programmes are in our case invested with a certain amount of ceremony'.

Such ideas of ceremony very quickly became obsolete. When hi-fi equipment first entered the home it involved not ceremony but technical expertise. There was room for individual choice—often regarded by the purchaser himself as expertise—in combining different components of varying compatibility to make up the system and later, at home, there were experiments to be made with different permutations of balance and tone.

This self-help element had never been present in the case of television. The television set, technically too complicated to attract the kind of 'hobbyists' who constructed early wireless sets, was a complete object in itself and had by then begun to be taken for granted. It was only after a home acquired more than one television set, however, that the choice of programme to watch on television could become a matter for individual members of a family. By 1985, which was thought of as a turning-point, more than half of British households had more than one television set. By then, too, Barrie Gunter and Michael Svennevig claimed, the television set had in itself become 'almost another member of the family'. But the omnipresent television set and the multi-set household were associated with the decline of family viewing which was itself invested with more than a touch of nostalgia. Laurie Taylor, for example, looked back in 1988 in the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine* to 'the great days of family viewing when, to the delight of everyone round the fireside on a Saturday night, *Dixon of Dock Green* followed hard on the heels of *Dr Who* . . . The second television set and the arrival of more specialist channels', he predicted, would make the box 'as much a solitary companion as that other great focus of family life—the wireless.' This is a recipe for cultural disintegration, say some commentators. 'At the moment television does at least unite us over the goings on in Albert Square [*EastEnders*] or among the neighbours in suburban Sydney.' Taylor concluded. 'In future even that common bond will disappear as television channels divide and multiply and take their specialist audiences with them.'

Television, increasingly international, can now be seen, not in isolation, as only one of a number of information and communication technologies occupying time and space in the home alongside the VCR and the computer and the telephone, the Walkman, the Ansa-phone, the hi-fi, and the radio. Yet, as David Morley and Roger Silverstone have pointed out, 'new media do not simply displace but are also integrated with the old. New forms, such as pop videos, are integrated into traditional modes of communication, such as teenage oral cultures and gossip networks. New technologies may simply displace pre-existing family conflicts into new contexts.'

The biggest changes so far have come with video recording, which gives the viewer the choice of when to see what and, indeed, whether or not to watch the television programmes broadcast on the public channels. Like television sets themselves, videos could be hired and in 1982 the number of shops hiring out video cassettes for the first time exceeded the number of bookshops. 'The image of British families sitting around a television set for an evening's entertainment was no longer true', Britain's Independent Broadcasting Authority stated in January 1986. John Whitney, the Authority's Director-General, who had risen through commercial radio, not television, warned, 'We are no longer the landlords of the screen. The tenants are changing and there will be squatters before long.'

Cable and satellite television added further to the choice. The new cable channels included children's channels and, with more than a touch of euphemism, what came to be known as 'adult' channels. There has been one other use for the television set besides video recording—home computing, including computer games. The Americans used the term 'electronic goodies' to describe what was now on offer to technically sophisticated families. Some of them had been forecast in sketches and cartoons in the early years of wireless before television was invented.

There were new interactions, economic, social, educational, and cultural, as the media became increasingly 'interactive', with buttons, pads, and talk-back. Japan and the United States were pioneers. The Japanese experimented with HIVIS (highly interactive visual information system) which involved the intrusion into every home of a camera and a microphone linked to the studio by two-way fibre-optic cable. It is not yet clear in this case, as in many others, whether what was being made available was merely gimmickry. One of the most interesting and unforeseen interactions in the United States and Britain was the use of family video and earlier home movies, originally produced within the family setting for family purposes, as broadcast television programmes, not simply to record history, including family history, but to provide mass entertainment.

Having proclaimed electronic plenty, the Americans began to be worried about electronic surfeit. Among the means of coping with it inside the home was a new technical device to make children more selective about what they watched on the television screen. One of the hits at the Consumer Electronic Show in Las Vegas in 1993 was a device called TV Space Allowance. Each child in a family was allocated a weekly ration of viewing. They were then given secret codes to activate the television. Once the allotted time ran out, the set automatically switched off and they would not be able to get it to work until the start of the next week. The system could also block out certain times, such as homework periods, or prevent late-night viewing. By pushing a button the children could see how much time they had left. They could trade time with siblings and carry forward unused time to the following week. The system could also be used to control computer games playing. The engineer who invented it offered to pay his children $50 each time they saved fifty hours. He reported that his children were reading more, doing more things outside the home and learning more skills. 'Abstinence', 1993-style, was back.

Research on television and the family has produced contradictory conclusions, and has been strongly influenced by fashion in prevailing *mores*. London's *Independent* newspaper on 21 April 1993 reported that viewers were demanding a return to family entertainment in a backlash against violence. Programme-makers noted at the Cannes Television Festival a big increase in the sales of documentary and drama series at the expense of programmes of violence. In Britain the regulatory authority has given approval for a new cable and satellite television network that will concentrate on 'family viewing'. It was the *Daily Mirror*, one of the largest mass-circulation papers, which had warned its readers in 1950 that 'if you let a television set through your front door, life can never be the same again'.

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