

**PAIRED TEXTS**  
stories that share a  
topic or theme

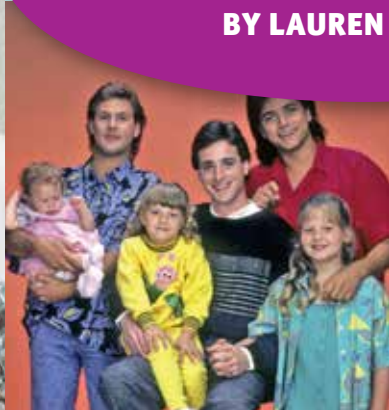


# The Amazing History of American Television



How have the shows we watch changed  
our ideas—and our country?

BY LAUREN TARSHIS

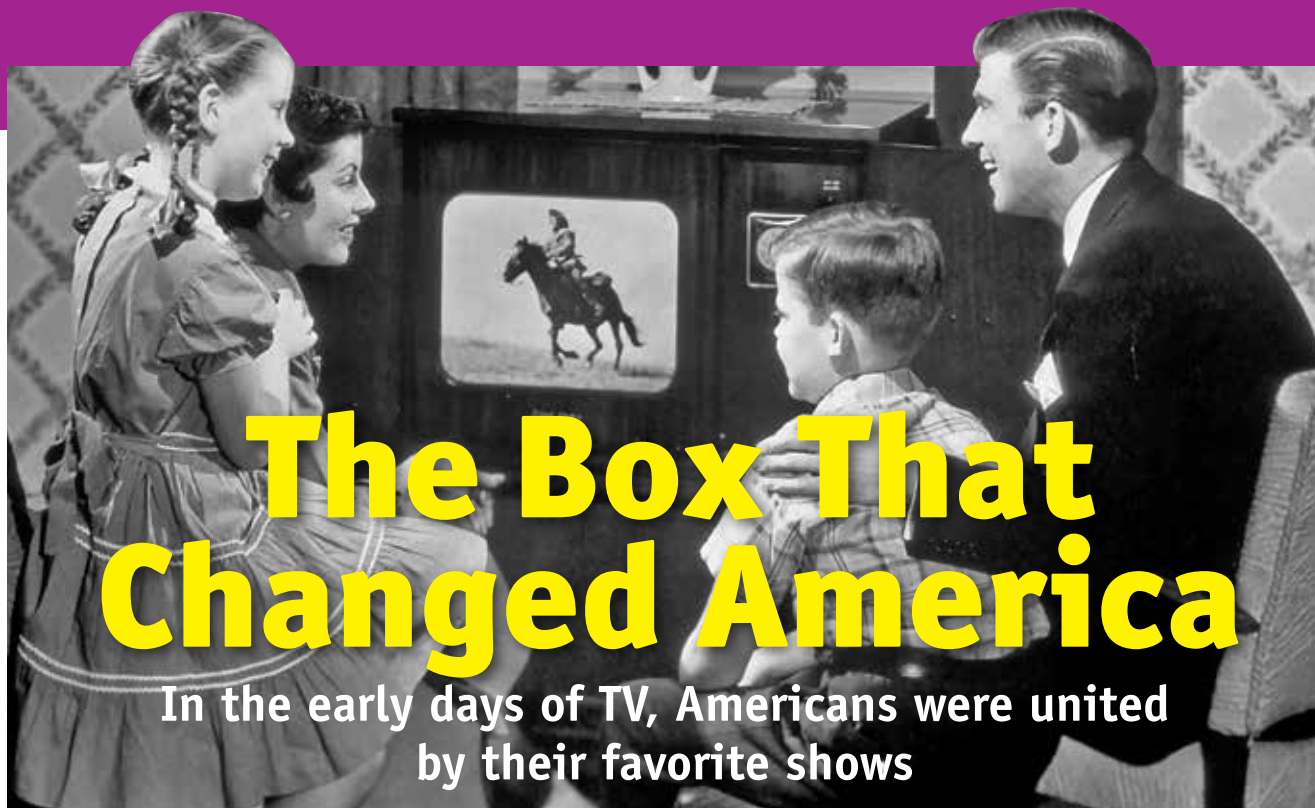


**FROM LEFT TO RIGHT**  
**Row 1:** *The Howdy Doody Show*,  
*Texaco Star Theater*, *I Love Lucy*,  
*Father Knows Best*  
**Row 2:** *Lassie*, *Gunsmoke*  
**Row 3:** *Leave It to Beaver*,  
*Sesame Street*  
**Row 4:** *Diff'rent Strokes*, *Full House*,  
*SpongeBob SquarePants*, *The 100*  
**Row 5:** *The Voice*, *Teen Wolf*,  
*Rosanna Pansino*



Turn  
the page  
to find out more!





# The Box That Changed America

In the early days of TV, Americans were united by their favorite shows

## AS YOU READ

How has TV changed over the decades?

**O**n a cool spring afternoon in 1946, a small truck pulled up in front of the Ross house in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Eight-year-old Karen Ross hurried outside with her parents. They watched with excitement as two men lugged a massive box through their front door. The Ross family was the first in the neighborhood to own one of the most amazing inventions of all time: a television set. “It was an incredible night,” Karen Ross recalls. “My mother made fancy snacks and set up chairs in the

living room. My father turned the set on. The picture was terrible, but we didn’t care. We were thrilled.”

### Bigger Screens

In the early days of television, a set could cost more than \$400—nearly three months’ salary for the average American. TV sets were big and bulky but with screens often no larger than a paperback book. White dots of static, or

“snow,” **obscured** the black-and-white picture. There wasn’t much to watch either—mainly wrestling, boxing, and variety shows featuring dancers, singers, and comedians. Sometimes, the picture would cut out; the technology wasn’t reliable, and even a simple storm could disrupt TV service.

But soon, the quality of television improved. TV sets became cheaper, with larger screens and sharper

## Small Screens, Big Changes

America changed from the 1950s to the 1980s—and so did our favorite TV shows.



### More Stars of Color

*The Jeffersons*, which debuted in 1975, was one of the few series with a mostly African-American cast. The show was wildly popular—but lack of diversity on TV remained a problem.

pictures. Color sets came along in the mid-1950s. By 1956, there were three big national TV networks—ABC, NBC, and CBS—competing for viewers with new and increasingly entertaining programs.

Families like the Rosses would rush through dinner so they could sit together for their favorite shows. Karen’s dad loved Westerns like *Bonanza*, with tough-as-nails cowboys taking on cruel outlaws. Karen’s little sister was **entranced** by *The Howdy Doody Show*, which starred a 2-foot-tall puppet. Karen loved the star of *Lassie*—a big collie dog with glossy fur. Sometimes Karen wished her own mother were as patient as June Cleaver, the mom on *Leave It to Beaver*.

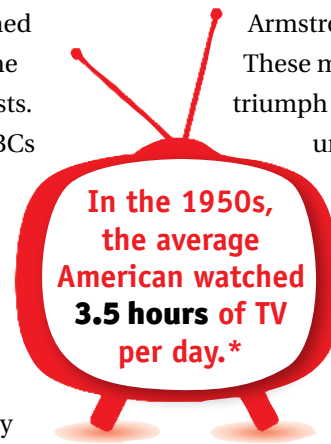
### Family Faves

As Americans’ love for TV grew, so did concerns about the impact of television on American life. People were reading less. Kids weren’t playing outside as often. Commercials for cigarettes and junk food encouraged bad habits.



### Not Just Perfect Families

America’s first TV families featured parents who never fought and kids who eagerly did their chores. In the 1970s, TV families became more realistic. *One Day at a Time* was one of the first programs to show a divorced single mom.



\*THE COLUMBIA HISTORY OF AMERICAN TELEVISION

At the same time, TV was becoming a powerful **cultural** force that brought Americans together. Whether you lived in a big city or a tiny town, you watched the same shows. Everyone learned the day’s news from the same nightly broadcasts. Children sang their ABCs along with Big Bird from *Sesame Street*. Teens obsessed over the latest *Star Trek* episode. On Saturday mornings, kids across the country tuned in to watch cartoons.

### Triumph and Tragedy

As technology improved, TV was able to bring live news events into American homes. In 1963, Americans watched as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed “I have a dream” from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Later that year, America’s most trusted news anchor, Walter

Cronkite, held back sobs as he broke the news that President John F. Kennedy had been **assassinated**. In 1969, nearly 125 million Americans watched Neil Armstrong walk on the moon. These moments of national triumph and tragedy helped unite the country, connecting people from different backgrounds through heartbreak or pride. In the coming decades, TV would continue to evolve. Those original three networks would soon

be joined by hundreds of cable channels. The rise of streaming services like Netflix and Hulu would make it possible to watch shows whenever viewers wanted.

Yet even today—more than 70 years later—Karen Ross still remembers when that fuzzy TV screen lit up her family’s living room for the first time: “It seemed miraculous,” she says. ➔



### Taking on Serious Issues

TV challenged Americans to face serious issues, like racism and prejudice. In 1977, the miniseries *Roots* helped America confront our country’s history of slavery. *Roots* was one of the most-watched series in history.

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# Television Transformed

New technology has changed how we watch TV. But what do these changes mean for us—and our country?

It's Friday night at Ella's house in New Jersey, and each member of her family is enjoying a favorite show. Ella, 13, is downstairs studying YouTube baking videos on her iPhone. Her 10-year-old brother, Elijah, is in his room on his laptop, watching the New York

Knicks get crushed by the Golden State Warriors. Their parents are upstairs streaming a movie on Netflix.

Only one set of eyes in the house is not glued to a screen: those of Snowy, the family cat. Perhaps Snowy doesn't know that she could be bingeing on an endless number

of YouTube bird videos made just for kitties like her.

## Transformed by Technology

Not so long ago, when Ella's parents were her age, such a scene would have been unimaginable. Back then, computers sat on desks and were mainly for doing work, and

phones were just for talking. If you wanted to watch a show, you had to watch it on a TV set—at the time it was aired. Plus, there were a limited number of shows to choose from.

In the mid-1980s, however, television in America began to transform.

First came cable TV, which brought hundreds of new channels and shows. Some of these new channels were dedicated entirely to one subject. There was ESPN for sports fans, CNN for people who wanted news 24 hours a day, and MTV for music lovers. Nickelodeon took Saturday-morning cartoons and aired them every day of the week.

After cable TV came the internet, faster computers, and smartphones. These new technologies changed the way we live—and the way we watch TV.

Today, we can choose from thousands of shows, videos, and movies whenever we want. And we can watch our favorite programs on a variety of devices—from just about any place we want.

## More Divided?

There is no doubt that TV has improved in many ways since Americans started watching in the 1940s. The number of quality shows is higher than ever, with far more diversity in casting. Families no longer have to fight over what to watch because

individual family members can watch what they want on their own devices.

But what do these changes mean for our culture?

Decades ago, people of different backgrounds and beliefs would come together through their shared love of a particular show. No matter

where you lived or for whom you voted, you trusted news anchor Walter Cronkite. Families spent their evenings together watching “must-see” shows.

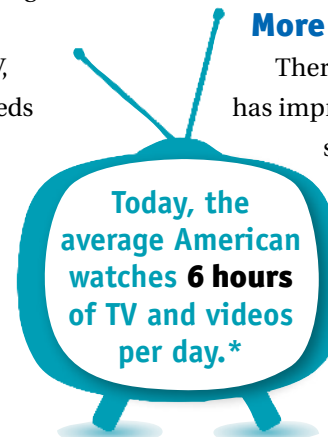
Studies have found that today, few shows are popular everywhere. While people in rural areas are watching *The Voice* and *Duck Dynasty*, city dwellers are more likely to tune in to *The Simpsons* and *Modern Family*. And there are dozens of news shows on TV and online, each with a different point of view.

Could all these choices be making our nation—and our families—more divided?

Ella isn't sure.

But she admits that her family is worried about their habits. Watching their favorite shows alone means Ella's family spends less time together, even though they are all in the same house. That's why they committed to a once-a-month family movie night. They'll take turns choosing what to watch.

“I didn't like the idea at first,” Ella says. “But it's more fun than I expected.” ●



\*NIELSEN TOTAL AUDIENCE REPORT 2016 AND STATISTA

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## How TV Has Transformed

Since the 1980s, new shows and technologies have changed the way we live and how we watch TV.



### The Coming of Cable TV

In the 1980s, new cable stations showed content ranging from 24-hour news and sports to music videos (like Michael Jackson's “Thriller,” shown below).



### Reality Shows Take Over

In the early 2000s, viewers discovered that reality shows like *Survivor* could be just as entertaining as fictional dramas.

### The Rise of YouTube

The first YouTube video, in 2005, showed elephants at the San Diego Zoo. Now there are millions of channels and superstars, like the duo Smosh.



## WRITING CONTEST

In a well-organized essay, explain how TV has impacted American culture over time. Use text evidence to support your ideas. Send your essay to **TV CONTEST**. Five winners will get *Game World* by C.J. Farley. See page 2 for details.



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