

62. Ground Zero

THE AIRPLANE ATTACK ON THE TWIN TOWERS of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001, was a stunning television event. Because it took place in one of the most wired media cities in the world, the suicide assault was guaranteed a huge audience. The first plane hit without warning and in comparative obscurity at 8:46 A.M. Eastern time. Even so, there was a video camera that caught the action. Documentary filmmaker Jules Naudet, part of a team chronicling life at a New York City firehouse, had been taping members of the company in a routine call nearby when he heard the roaring sound of a plane. He instinctively turned toward it and, with his camera running, captured the moment of impact as American Airlines Flight 11 struck the North tower of the World Trade Center, instantly killing everyone aboard.

At the time, no one was certain that the crash had been deliberate. There was an almost eerie detachment to the network commentary that accompanied the initial pictures of the World Trade Center, smoke rising from a gaping black hole between the 96th and 103rd floors of the North tower. Had something happened to the pilot? Had there been trouble aboard? At 9:03 A.M., with cameras from all the networks trained on the scene, a second plane, United Airlines Flight 175, slammed into the South tower, creating a fireball and another gaping hole. Instantly, everyone knew that this was no accident. Network news correspondents who had been moving into position to follow a tragic aviation mishap suddenly found themselves covering a far more frightening story. This was a deliberate attack on the home soil of the United States.

With President George W. Bush far from the White House (visiting a school in Florida), news organizations automatically turned to other established sources of official information in Washington, primarily the Pentagon. Suddenly, correspondents on the air from that location reported that they were being told to leave. The Pentagon itself had been struck at 9:41 A.M. by another hijacked passenger plane, American Airlines Flight 77, though that crash had not taken place live on television.

The situation was unprecedented. It was the equivalent to being in a war zone, but not knowing where the battle lines were or the identity of the enemy. Clearly there was a coordinated attack aimed for maximum visual and symbolic impact. Network correspondents struggled to remain calm and informative, determined not to feed potential fears but to pass on the latest information as quickly and accurately as possible. They were also careful not to focus on (or show in identifiable close-ups) images of people in

flames or those falling to their death from the World Trade Center towers. Still, the correspondents were haunted by uncertainty. How many more hijacked passenger planes were out there? Were there targets in other cities apart from New York and Washington? As the minutes ticked by, the story grew even more grim. At around 10:00 A.M., after burning for an hour, the South tower of the World Trade Center collapsed, live on television. Network anchors could barely contain their horror, while viewers at home sat stunned. Just before 10:30 A.M., the North tower fell as well. Everyone knew that rescue workers who had rushed to the scene to help save lives were in the towers and were now presumably gone.

In less time than it took to run a typical made-for-TV movie, television had shown a devastatingly effective act of real-life terrorism that had left thousands dead. By bringing these stark images of destruction, live, to viewers throughout the country (and the world), television had amplified the impact of the attack, transforming seemingly unassailable symbols of U.S. power into starkly vulnerable targets. These pictures were not after-the-fact images safely edited into a montage of distant smoldering ruins (often the case in coverage of virtually any disaster). This was a story that had unfolded in excruciating and uncertain detail in real time before millions of viewers. They had seen both towers of one of the world's tallest structures crumble before their eyes. In the television echo chamber of live reporting, the magnified impact of these actions was deafening.

Yet, at the same time, the non-stop television coverage also immediately saved lives. Most dramatically, it helped to stave off another attack by a fourth hijacked airplane. United Airlines Flight 93 had been seized after taking off from Newark, New Jersey, and was headed south, probably to another site in Washington (such as the U.S. Capitol). It was running later than the other three planes. More important, the passengers on board were armed with information. Soon after the hijacking, some passengers had telephoned the outside world and were immediately given a blow-by-blow description of the events at the World Trade Center from those watching the coverage. The passengers realized this was no ordinary hijacking and that they were probably destined for a similar fate and certain death. They quickly huddled together, settled on a strategy, and stormed the cockpit. The plane crashed in an empty field about eighty miles southeast of Pittsburgh, killing everyone aboard. Those passengers came to be honored as heroes who prevented an even greater number being added to the day's death toll.

Television coverage continued all day September 11, with the



As the events of September 11, 2001, unfolded, live, on television, network anchors such as ABC's Peter Jennings delivered their reports with deliberate, measured tones. (Courtesy of ABC News)

networks not only canceling all regular programming and all commercials, but also putting aside their normal competitive practices. Primarily at the urging of CBS's Don Hewitt, all the networks agreed to an almost unprecedented sharing of information for the rest of the day, sending feeds and stories back and forth as events unfolded. News reports also appeared all across the cable dial, even though most of the entertainment cable channels did not have their own news departments. In a snapshot of corporate ownership, network news reports were simultaneously fed to other properties controlled by the same companies, so that the CBS news coverage appeared on MTV, VH1, and UPN; ESPN picked up ABC; NBC fed Pax, MSNBC, and CNBC; Fox had FX, the Family Channel, and Fox News Channel; and TNT and TBS carried CNN's coverage. Other cable channels such as the Food Network, Home & Garden, and the shopping networks stopped their normal programming and instead displayed simple, respectful messages. A few channels, such as Nickelodeon (and Nick at Nite), deliberately stayed with their normal programming, serving as an alternative for both kids and adults to the frightening intensity of real life.

The television news coverage continued non-stop through the night of September 11, then into the next day, and the next, for seventy-two hours. This was the longest continuous period devoted to a news event in television history. (Previously, in November 1963, the networks had devoted four days to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and its aftermath, but had signed off overnights.) Running commercial free, this cost the networks about \$100 million per day in lost advertising revenue. On the first day, there were frequent replays of the second plane's crash into the World Trade Center's South tower and of the collapse of both buildings, but that was toned down significantly thereafter. Instead, the primary focus was on the dramatic rescue efforts, attempts to identify who was responsible for the attacks, and discussions of the possible U.S. response. There were countless individual stories of heroism and also of tragic final moments. As a group, New York's firefighters and police officers became the unquestioned heroes of

the day. In searching for those behind the attack, the trail soon led to the international terrorist organization, al-Qaeda, and its leader, Osama bin Laden, based in the country of Afghanistan. Though neither name was a stranger to anyone closely following international news, for most viewers such information had been buried in a television world awash in increasingly trivial stories. The attacks of September 11 dramatically demonstrated that there was indeed a place for "real" news.

By September 15, though, it was almost a relief for viewers to see television edge back into an entertainment schedule, beginning with comedies and dramas produced long before September 11. On September 17, David Letterman was one of the first to face the recent events in a newly taped episode, opening his program with a heartfelt monologue that artfully balanced sadness, astonishment, and a determination to press on, even if he was not sure exactly what came next and how easy it would be to get back to comedy. He was not alone. No one was certain what would be appropriate and in good taste after the September 11 attacks. Still, by then President Bush had urged the country to begin a return to normal activities, and television was willing to lead the way. To open the September 29 first episode of *Saturday Night Live*, producer Lorne Michaels asked New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, "Can we be funny?" prompting the ice-breaking response, "Why start now?"

The attack had occurred just as the broadcast networks were about to launch their fall premieres. As a result of the extended news coverage, most of the new shows and returning season debuts were pushed back at least a week. Even then, the networks as well as viewers had difficulty in focusing on entertainment programs, which gave an almost "who cares?" tone to the delayed season.

Aside from postponing the start dates for shows, the September 11 attacks also resulted in some last-minute adjustments to schedules and program episodes. Reality shows seemed particularly frivolous and self-indulgent, so most of those were quickly put on hold. (Being "brave" enough to eat exotic bugs on TV paled in comparison to stories of real-life heroics.) ABC found that viewers

FALL 2001 SCHEDULE

	8:00	8:30	9:00	9:30	10:00	10:30		
M O N	Who Wants To Be A Millionaire		ABC NFL Monday Night Football (to 12 Midnight)					
	The King Of Queens	Yes, Dear	Everybody Loves Raymond	Becker	Family Law		ABC	
	Boston Public		Ally McBeal		local		CBS	
	The Weakest Link		Third Watch		CROSSING JORDAN		FOX	
	The Hughleys	ONE ON ONE	The Parkers	Girlfriends	local		ABC	
T U E	7th Heaven		Angel		local		UPN	
	Dharma & Greg	What About Joan	BOB PATTERSON	Spin City	PHILLY		WB	
	JAG		THE GUARDIAN		Judging Amy		ABC	
	That '70s Show	UNDECLARED	24		local		CBS	
	EMERIL	Three Sisters	Frasier	SCRUBS	Dateline NBC		FOX	
W E D	Buffy The Vampire Slayer		Roswell		local		NBC	
	Gilmore Girls		SMALLVILLE		local		UPN	
	My Wife & Kids	ACCORDING TO JIM	The Drew Carey Show	Whose Line Is It Anyway?	20/20		WB	
	60 Minutes II		THE AMAZING RACE		WOLF LAKE		ABC	
	Fox Family Comedy Wheel	Grounded For Life	BERNIE MAC SHOW	Titus	local		CBS	
T H U R	Ed		The West Wing		Law & Order		FOX	
	ENTERPRISE		Special Unit 2		local		NBC	
	Dawson's Creek		Felicity		local		UPN	
	Whose Line Is It Anyway?	Whose Line Is It Anyway?	Who Wants To Be A Millionaire	Primetime		ABC		
	Survivor: Africa		CSI: Crime Scene Investigation		THE AGENCY		CBS	
F R I	Family Guy	THE TICK	Temptation Island 2		local		FOX	
	Friends	INSIDE SCHWARTZ	Will & Grace	Just Shoot Me	ER		NBC	
	WWF Smackdown!				local		UPN	
	Popstars 2	ELIMIDATE DELUXE	Charmed		local		WB	
	The Mole II: The Next Betrayal		THIEVES		Once And Again		ABC	
S A T	THE ELLEN SHOW	DANNY	That's Life		48 Hours		CBS	
	Dark Angel		PASADENA		local		FOX	
	Providence		Dateline NBC		Law & Order: Special Victims Unit		NBC	
	UPN's Night At The Movies				local		UPN	
	Sabrina, The Teenage Witch	MAYBE IT'S ME	REBA	RAISING DAD	local		WB	
S U N	ABC Big Picture Show						ABC	
	Touched By An Angel		CITIZEN BAINES		The District		CBS	
	Cops	Cops	America's Most Wanted: America Fights Back		local		FOX	
	NBC Saturday Movie						NBC	
	local						UPN	
S U N	local						WB	
	The Wonderful World Of Disney		ALIAS		The Practice		ABC	
	60 Minutes		THE EDUCATION OF MAX BICKFORD		CBS Sunday Movie		CBS	
	Futurama	King Of The Hill	The Simpsons	Malcolm In The Middle	The X Files	local	FOX	
	Dateline NBC		The Weakest Link		LAW & ORDER: CRIMINAL INTENT		NBC	
UC: UNDERCOVER						UPN		
local						WB		
Ripley's Believe It Or Not	The Steve Harvey Show	MEN, WOMEN & DOGS	Nikki	OFF CENTRE	local			

...had no time to follow the return of its spring 2001 "find the imposter" mystery reality series, *The Mole*, and the network wanted the show after just a few fall episodes.

By coincidence, there were a number of new espionage dramas that had already been slotted in the fall lineup and, before some adjustments had to be made quickly to specific scenes filmed before the attack in order to avoid offending viewers or treading too close to reality. The first episode of *24* (on Fox) was to show a passenger airliner exploding in flight from a bomb on board, so the scene was re-edited to eliminate images of the plane exploding. On CBS, the pilot episode of *The Agency* had shown CIA agents foiling a fictional plot by Osama bin Laden, so that episode was pulled. Later, another *Agency* episode had to be shelved when a story involving anthrax as a weapon proved too close to real-life events in October, when anonymous letters containing anthrax spores resulted in several deaths in the Eastern United States.

Much to the relief of programmers, viewers eventually seemed ready for a guarded return to entertainment offerings, with familiar firms and programs being the early favorites. Shows celebrating police, fire, and other rescue workers were particularly relevant, boosting the already-growing popularity of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* on CBS as well as NBC's *Law & Order* franchise. With the increased emphasis on the president of the United States as commander-in-chief, *The West Wing* on NBC also assumed added stature. Producer Aaron Sorkin quickly wrote a special episode ("Isaac and Ishmael") as the season opener. He obliquely dealt with the issues of September 11 by breaking from the series continuity and having the *West Wing* characters in a brief security lockdown, using that opportunity to discuss international issues with a group of high school students touring the White House.

The already-planned new espionage series packed extra punch in light of the September 11 attacks, as plots involving political duplicity, ruthless killers, and innocent bystanders seemed to possess added credibility. The two classiest new adventures were *Alias* on ABC and *24* on Fox. Conceived by *Felicity* creator J. J. Abrams, *Alias* cast Jennifer Garner as Sydney Bristow, a graduate student who was secretly a spy for the CIA. Unlike *Felicity*, who took four years to decide between two college boyfriends, Sydney made split-second decisions while on dangerous missions throughout the world, especially against the ruthless Arvin Sloane (Ron Rifkin), head of the SD-6 terrorist organization. Abrams also made the adventures personal by teaming Sydney with her estranged father, Jack (Victor Garber), and establishing romantic sparks between Sydney and her main CIA contact, Michael Vaughn (Michael Vartan). The stories were fast-paced and genuinely exciting, with Sydney (inevitably wearing a sexy disguise) constantly racing the clock to escape some complicated trap. Sometimes stories ended with a cliffhanger tease to the next episode.

The series *24* was even more consciously a cliffhanger because it was structured as a single story played out in twenty-four episodes, each one representing a single hour of a single day, unfolding in real time. Though admittedly a gimmick, the structure worked surprisingly well thanks to clever writing and a strong ensemble. The situation was deceptively simple: Special counter-terrorist agent Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) was trying to protect presidential candidate David Palmer (Dennis Haysbert) from an assassination plot on the day of the California primary. However, Bauer had to deal with one or more moles in his own organization, a kidnapping plot involving his daughter Kim (Elisha Cuthbert) and wife Teri (Leslie Hope), and a scheme to turn Bauer himself into the assassin, beginning with the shooting of his own deputy, Nina (Sarah Clarke). The series took full advantage of the drama inherent in a race against time and usually played out three or four

story arcs simultaneously, with a clicking digital clock often appearing on-screen to remind viewers of how compressed the storyline was. Cell phones and split screens tied the action together in what Bauer described as "the longest day of my life." Filled with complicated plot threads and character machinations, the intensity of *24* highlighted how intelligence, instincts, and luck were needed for any espionage mission to succeed. Though both *24* and *Alias* scored only moderate ratings in their first season, they attracted ardent fans, won renewal, and reassured viewers with the thought that sometimes the good guys won.

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, though, it was sitcoms that emerged as television's true "comfort food" viewing, particularly those with positive, supportive ensembles. These ranged from the "mom and dad next door" setting of *Everybody Loves Raymond* (anchoring a CBS Monday night lineup of family comedies) to the extended social family of *Friends* (which scored its highest ratings in years with a storyline following the announcement by Rachel that she was pregnant). ABC found its greatest comedy successes with *My Wife and Kids* (a carryover from the previous spring, with Damon Wayans almost *Cosby*-like in dealing with his TV family) and *According to Jim* (a by-the-numbers family comedy pairing of Jim Belushi and Courtney Thorne-Smith as a lovable slob and his indulgent wife). On Fox,

September 26, 2001

Enterprise. (UPN). This fifth *Star Trek* series picks up the story thread from the 1996 "Star Trek First Contact" movie, with Capt. Jonathan Archer (Scott Bakula) commanding the first starship *Enterprise*, a century before Captain Kirk.

November 6, 2001

UPN extends the running time of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* an extra ten minutes for a heavily promoted musical episode, "Once More, With Feeling," penned and directed by series creator Joss Whedon. The cast members do their own vocals on more than a dozen original Whedon tunes.

November 10, 2001

Two weeks after Disney/ABC's purchase of cable's Fox Family channel, the new owners rename it ABC Family.

December 19, 2001

AT&T announces that its Broadband division, the country's largest cable company (after acquiring Telecommunications Inc. and MediaOne), will be spun off and merged into Comcast Corporation, the number three cable company.

January 8, 2002

Last Call. (NBC). Carson Daly, host of MTV's hip *Total Request Live*, comes to NBC as host of a new post-Conan O'Brien late, late night interview show.

February 26, 2002

Watching Ellie. (NBC). Julia Louis-Dreyfus is the third *Seinfeld* alum to star in a solo sitcom. She plays a frazzled nightclub singer and, unlike her *Seinfeld* brethren, her show is renewed (though just barely), returning with a second batch of episodes in March 2003 before being canceled.

March 27, 2002

Milton Berle, hailed as "Mr. Television," dies at age ninety-three.

April 12, 2002

NBC buys Telemundo Communications Group, Inc., which operates the Telemundo Network (the number two rated Spanish-language TV network in the U.S.), for about \$2 billion. Along with the network come ten new O&Os.

May 7, 2002

Barry Diller, who, in 1998, bought Universal's U.S. television operations (including the USA and Sci-Fi cable networks), sells virtually the same assets back to Universal's new owner, the French conglomerate Vivendi, for more than twice what Diller paid for them. Diller will continue to run the networks on behalf of Vivendi, under the name Vivendi Universal Entertainment.

May 16, 2002

Richard Parsons succeeds Gerald Levin as chief executive officer of AOL Time Warner. Eight months later, Parsons also gets the title of chairman of the board.

May 17, 2002

Bryant Gumbel leaves CBS's *Early Show*. Five months later, CBS installs Harry Smith, Hannah Storm, Julie Chen, and Rene Syler as the new anchors.

May 19, 2002

In the two-hour series finale of *The X-Files*, Fox Mulder learns that the final and complete alien invasion of the Earth will take place on December 22, 2012.

June 2, 2002

The Wire. (HBO). Former *Baltimore Sun* newspaper writer David Simon, whose nonfiction work had previously been adapted into *Homicide: Life on the Street*, returns to the Baltimore setting to create a series of demanding, complex, and thought-provoking stories of modern urban America. Each season's episodes focus on a different aspect of Baltimore life: government, law enforcement, education, the media, and the realities of "the street." The program offers no reassuring easy answers, but consistently delivers outstanding scripting and powerful ensemble performances.

September 7, 2002

In the first move growing out of the NBA's new six-year TV contract, *NBA Inside Stuff*, the league's weekly showcase, shifts from NBC to ABC, the broadcast network that will begin carrying the NBA finals in 2003.

The Bernie Mac Show put a less sentimental front to its family comedy setting, as successful black stand-up comic Bernie Mac (playing his fictional alter ego) found himself surrogate dad to his drug-addict sister's three children. While she entered rehab back in Chicago, they moved into "Uncle Bernie's" swank Los Angeles home. Unlike a typical squishy TV dad, Mac regarded this as a major disruption to his life that had to be kept under control. Frequently sharing his thoughts with direct-to-the-camera monologues, Mac explained that he and his wife, Wanda (Kellita Smith), loved the children, but he also regarded them as invaders to his kingdom, noting, "This is my house. *Mi casa es mi casa*." His most important rule: "Don't touch my stuff without permission." Though such declarations were doomed to failure, Bernie Mac believed in and practiced "tough love," making the comic and sentimental moments more believable.

There were some shows that did seem particularly out of sorts immediately after September 11. *The Education of Max Bickford*

(Richard Dreyfuss as a college teacher and widower facing a midlife crisis) and *Danny* (Daniel Stern as a newly divorced community service worker facing a mid-life crisis) came off as self-important and preachy. Off-beat or cutting-edge comedy (a tough sell anytime) also did not play well in the fall. The Fox series *The Tick* (Patrick Warburton as a dumb superhero) and *Undeclared* (a wry look at college life from Judd Apatow) drew modest audience support, while ABC's *The Job* (returning after a brief tryout in the spring of 2001, starring Denis Leary as a blunt, harsh, and troubled New York City cop) was the wrong attitude at the wrong time. The comedy bomb of the season, however, was *Bob Patterson*, starring Jason Alexander as a famous self-help/motivational speaker who, in his personal life, was whiney, insecure, and self-centered. Though these traits were just like Alexander's George Costanza character on *Seinfeld*, in this context they came off as plain obnoxious. ABC quickly canceled *Bob Patterson* and, as part of an early November program shuffle, moved in the long-running *NYPD Blue*, which found renewed audience interest in the exploits of hardworking New York City cops.

Though references to the September 11 attacks and the subsequent U.S. "war on terrorism" would continue to turn up throughout the season, by the end of 2001 viewers and programmers seemed to have regained their balance. While delayed, the fall premieres had played out. Major League Baseball had shut down for six days after the attacks, pushing back the rest of the season (and the playoffs). As a result, the World Series (on Fox) aired in the November sweeps and wound up going a full seven games as the Arizona Diamondbacks topped the suddenly much-beloved New York Yankees in the final inning of the final game. News programs, especially cable talk shows, had wrapped themselves in a new cloth of seriousness, with red, white, and blue graphics and a clear mission: Cover the war against terrorism. Even CBS's *Survivor* returned, first for another round beginning in October with *Survivor: Africa*, and then in February with *Survivor: Marquesas* (set on an island in French Polynesia). The program's continued ratings success showed that it might be safe for the other reality shows to begin reemerging. The Super Bowl on February 2 (also on Fox) provided a symbolic national transition "back to normal." It was the last major television event rescheduled in the aftermath of September 11 (like baseball, the National Football League had temporarily shut down, suspending all games for one week and delaying the rest of the season). The musical guests at the Super Bowl included Paul McCartney and U2, who both paid tribute to those who had lost their lives.

By mid-season, the on-air television atmosphere had become less self-conscious. In remarkably short order, programmers and viewers began to pick up where they had left off before September 11. The reality shows were proving particularly popular among 18- to 49-year-olds, so the networks were eager to bring them back, and not just as cheap summer filler. NBC's *Fear Factor* returned. ABC played the remaining episodes of *The Mole* that had been pulled from the fall schedule. That network also tapped producer Mike Fleiss to revive and revise the idea behind his ill-fated "Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire" with *The Bachelor*, featuring eager young women vying for the attention of a handsome and eligible guy as a potential husband. On March 5, MTV launched *The Osbournes*, a "family comedy" reality show edited from tapes made from multiple cameras placed at the home of veteran heavy-metal rocker Ozzy Osbourne and his family. Alternately goofy, antagonistic, warm, and incoherent, the Osbournes were part dysfunctional family, part guerilla theater. Their program became the most popular series in MTV's history to that point. Its April 30, 2002, edition drew enough viewers in the 18 to 49 demographic to

tie with ABC's *NYPD Blue* for third place in the time slot among all television channels, both broadcast and cable.

The fact that ABC had a cable program breathing down its neck illustrated the depth the network had tumbled in just two seasons. In the final ratings for the 2001-02 season, ABC was down about 20% from the previous season (in both total audience and among viewers aged 18 to 49) and more than 30% since the recent heyday of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. ABC had indeed ended up depending too heavily on that one program (which was taken off ABC's weekly schedule at the end of June), and it never developed a strong and coherent identity beyond that show. Apart from *Monday Night Football*, ABC's most successful series were, at best, in the middle of the overall ratings pack. For the future, the network looked to reestablish the family comedy identity that had worked so well in the past by developing more shows like *My Wife and Kids* and *According to Jim*. ABC also instituted much stronger cross-promotional ties with corporate parent Disney, even at the theme parks. At the same time, the network continued to look for short-term solutions. During the summer of 2002, ABC broadcast reruns of the new cable detective series *Monk* a few days after the program first played on the USA network. This was a dramatic and symbolic reversal of program migration: A broadcast network was now trying to cash in on the popularity of a cable offering.

Yet the changing relationship between broadcasters and cable was not limited to ABC. The success of *The Osbournes* as a popular programming choice signaled the fact that television itself had already crossed an important line. It was now generally assumed that, when people watched television, they were watching it through cable or satellite, rather than with an antenna limited to the local broadcast stations. Reflecting that change, April 2002 became the first non-summer month in which the aggregate average rating of the basic cable networks topped the aggregate average rating for all six of the major broadcast networks in prime time.

Even that understated the scope of the change. For more and more viewers, there was no practical distinction between one of the broadcast networks and one of the cable channels. The broadcast networks were there as part of basic cable, distinguished only by lower numbered channel positions. This point was underscored in microcosm by New Yorkers who were transfixed by television's coverage on September 11. Nearly every New York City-based broadcaster transmitted from the World Trade Center, so when those buildings were hit and then collapsed, the over-the-air signals were gone. Most Manhattan viewers did not notice. They were receiving their signals via cable. Statistically, only about 15% of the country still relied on over-the-air signals, while 85% was connected either to cable services or satellite transmissions. That threshold was so high, though, that the entertainment industry had simply started acting as if 100% of the country could receive cable channels. So did most viewers.

As a result, the expectations people brought to watching television reflected their cable experiences, especially among younger viewers who had grown up with cable much of their lives. Lists of favorite television series would inevitably include such broadcast favorites as *Survivor*, *Friends*, and *ER*, but also such cable hits as *The Osbournes* on MTV, *The Shield* on FX, *Trading Spaces* on The Learning Channel, *Soul Food* on Showtime, and such HBO series as *Six Feet Under*, *Sex and the City*, *The Sopranos*, and a classy new summer offering, *The Wire*. It was all part of the same world. So, when the NBA announced a new national television deal in January 2002 that sent the bulk of professional basketball games to cable, there was no great outcry among fans. It seemed perfectly sensible. The concept of multiple runs was also entrenched on cable, so a key component of Fox's strategy for 24

was to air the series first on the Fox broadcast network, and then several more times each week on FX. After ABC took over the Family Channel in the fall of 2001, one of its first special features was a marathon rerun of all the episodes of *Alias* to that point.

This enhanced status for cable channels was also reflected in the perception of the broadcast "netlets," UPN and the WB. NBC and CBS might have dominated the top twenty ratings charts in overall viewers, but (like many cable channels) the smaller networks could tout their success in reaching the right slice of the targeted 18 to 49 age demographic. As a result, when UPN lured *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* from the WB in the fall of 2001, it was considered a major coup. In addition, new programs such as UPN's *Enterprise* (a *Star Trek* prequel) and the WB's *Smallville* (a retelling of the Superman legend that featured a cool teenage Clark Kent) were considered hits without ever landing near the top in the overall broadcast network ratings. With the increased emphasis on demographics and targeted audiences, some programs were being considered hits by using more nuanced views beyond the raw numbers.

Nonetheless, there was no mistaking the hard numbers that hit the broadcast networks throughout the summer of 2002, as cable continued to register stronger and stronger ratings. In part, this reflected the fact that the total viewing audience was distributed among more and more channels, resulting in shrinking numbers tuned to the broadcasters. However, the numbers for cable viewing were truly rising. MTV's annual video awards show in August won its time slot, beating the competition on both cable and broadcast channels. On September 5, for the first time, the NFL began its season with a game airing on cable (ESPN), and the prime time Thursday night telecast averaged more than 12 million viewers, enough to have been ranked tenth among network programs for that week, had cable been included on that list. Immediately topping that was the return of HBO's *The Sopranos* on September 15, 2002, at the cusp of the new fall season. There had not been a new episode of the series for sixteen months, and HBO hyped the event incessantly, from billboards to magazines to TV guest shots by members of the cast. It paid off. In the final summer weekend of mostly rerun programs and specials on the broadcast networks, the fourth season premiere of *The Sopranos* easily won its time slot and (had it been included in the weekly ratings list) placed sixth for the entire week against all other prime time programs, cable and broadcast. This was the first time that an original cable series beat all the broadcast competition in a prime time slot. Making the achievement even more impressive was the fact that, as a separate pay cable service, HBO started out with a built-in numerical disadvantage: it was seen in only about one-third of the 106.7 million homes with televisions in the U.S.

This was the new state of television. A pay cable service could outdraw all comers, including basic cable and free broadcast TV. What made this particularly troublesome for the competition was that while they depended on ratings success in selling commercials, HBO did not, collecting a monthly fee instead of selling ads. However, the commercial programmers had to deal with the long-term fallout of losing to pay cable competition. In essence, the underlying assumptions that had driven television for six decades were no longer in effect. The days of only a handful of broadcast television stations in most markets was over. Cable and satellite delivery systems were now entrenched, with generations of viewers knowing, and expecting, a wide range of channels. They would even pay outright for a handful of favorites, then channel surf for anything else.

The broad television status quo had changed and it seemed as if the FCC's long-sought goal of increased viewer choice had become a reality.