1 An Introduction to Television Structures and Systems

Ebb and Flow in the Network Era

Television is dead. According to various pundits, it was killed by cable TV and the VCR in the 1980s; by the Internet and video games in the 1990s; by Netflix, TiVo, and the iPod in the 2000s; and by smartphones and the iPad in the 2010s.

Considering its multiple deaths, television's corpse is remarkably active. The "television household universe," to use a TV-rating term, still contains 118.4 million homes in the United States—accounting for 96 percent of all U.S. households.[1] Perhaps surprisingly, the number of TV households has actually increased during most of the twenty-first century—dipping during 2010 to 2013 but then resuming its growth.[2] And upwards of 20 million Americans continue to watch TV's most popular recurring programs on conventional broadcast networks each week. This dwarfs the numbers that go see a particular movie, play a video game, check out individual videos on YouTube or Netflix, or stream a movie to a cell phone. Despite assaults on their primacy, broadcast networks—ABC, CBS, CW, Fox, NBC, and PBS—and cable/satellite networks—ESPN, AMC, USA, Lifetime, TNT, HBO, and so on—are not prepared to concede defeat. Television remains the principal medium through which most people obtain visual entertainment and information and through which advertisers reach the largest audiences.

Yet, there is no denying that overall viewership is declining precipitously, television-viewing habits are changing rapidly, and advertisers are getting very nervous. While the number of TV viewers remains enormous, it is dropping quickly as viewers find other screens—principally, of their digital devices—more compelling. Advertisers are particularly anxious about new technologies that grant viewers increased control over programming. The remote control and VCR were just the beginning of this trend. TiVo and other digital video recorders (DVRs), as well as video-on-demand (VOD) services streamed via the Internet, not only let viewers time-shift programs; they also permit the pausing and rewinding of live broadcasts and fast-forwarding through commercials. And **Internet-distributed television** supports both time-shifting and *location*-shifting as viewers can watch *Walking Dead* while commuting on a bus instead of parked on their living room couch, tuned into the AMC channel at 10:00 p.m. Sundays.

What does all this mean for the study of television? Is a book such as the one you're holding useless and outdated? Obviously, we do not think so. As Lynn Spigel writes in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*,

> [W]hile mutated in form television remains a central mode of information and entertainment in our present-day global culture, and it appears that it will continue to do so for many years to come. Understanding what is new about the medium thus demands an understanding of both its past and present.[3]

To this end, we begin our study of television with a consideration of the medium's structure circa 2018, which still greatly resembles how it has worked for the past 60 years. This is an "age of uncertainty" for television, however.[4] And so Amanda D. Lotz will offer some thoughts on the impact of Internet-delivered TV in the next chapter. It is inaccurate, however, to assume that Internet-delivered TV has wholly replaced **network-era television**. We are not yet in a post-network era, as some scholars have suggested. Once the dust settles after this current stage of upheaval, it may even be that network-era TV and other **legacy media** survive as choices among a profusion of other options. After all, in the 1950s television usurped many of radio's functions (and a lot of its advertising revenue), but radio persists in various forms in the present day. Fortunately, most of the analytical methods in the following chapters may be easily adapted to whatever form television takes in the future.

Television's Not-So-Distant Past: The Network Era

"Network-era television" refers to that time, in the not-so-distant past, when television broadcasting in the U.S. operated through a system in which three networks dominated general programming. Over the years, the number of networks multiplied—exploding to dozens of channels in the 1980s, with the widespread acceptance of cable and satellite delivery. For the sake of convenience, we will initially lump together TV shows that originate on over-the-air (a.k.a. "terrestrial") broadcast networks with those that come into our home via cable and satellite systems. Viewers born in the 1980s and after likely grew up receiving both broadcast networks and cable-originating channels from cable and satellite distribution services such as Comcast and DirecTV, respectively. Although the rules governing broadcast networks and the nature of their businesses are very different from cable channels, they are all based on the idea of "casting" a single program at a time toward their viewers and attempting to entice those viewers to tune in while that broadcasting is actually happening. Programs are *pushed* toward viewers, and the viewers then decide whether to accept the networks' invitations to watch at a particular time. Internet-distributed TV, in contrast, is where an individual viewer seeks a show and then *pulls* it toward them—on-demand, whenever they wish. Within the television industry, these two types of viewer experiences are known as **linear** and **nonlinear television**. The former consists of programs broadcast toward viewers at a specific time and as part of an ordered schedule of other individual programs—one after another, as in a line. The latter denotes programming that is acquired with no regard for the order in which it was provided on VOD services such as Netflix, YouTube, and Hulu.

The principles behind linear television are illuminated by the program guides displayed in cable/satellite user interfaces and printed in newspapers and magazines such as *TV Guide*. These venues find it convenient to represent the television schedule as a spreadsheet-like grid. In most of them, the channels run vertically down the left side of the grid, while half-hour time slots run horizontally along the top. (Table 1.1 shows one such grid—limited to over-the-air, linear channels—for a typical Sunday evening in November 2016.) The reasoning behind this array is obvious. At a glance, we can fix our location in the grid, noting the axis of channel (say, channel 9) and the axis of time (say, 7:00). After figuring that location, we can quickly see what will follow the current program in linear time (horizontal) and what is happening on other channels at that same time (vertical). Interactive, on-screen grids provided by Comcast, DirecTV, et al. also allow us to scroll horizontally and vertically to explore our current and upcoming options.

Grids such as these may help us understand the basic structure of network-era TV and the current experience of today's linear television. Most listings emphasize programming time slots as much as the individual programs themselves. Television programs are positioned by network programmers and experienced by viewers as one program within a linear sequence of other programs in an ongoing series of timed segments. Further, programs are also associated—potentially linked—with other programs by their shared time slot. During the time that a television set is on in American households—over five hours per day, on average—we are carried along in the horizontal current of linear television time, flowing from one bit of TV to the next. Equally important, we may move vertically from one channel to another, creating

associations among concurrent programs. A listing grid depicts visually these two axes of television's structure: sequence (one thing after another) and association (connections among simultaneous programs).

We begin with this brief consideration of program listings because it illustrates the fundamental principle of network-era television's linear structure. As Raymond Williams first argued in 1974, television differs crucially from other art forms in its blending of disparate units of narrative, information, and advertising into a never-ending **flow** of television.[5] Although we often talk of watching a single television program as if it were a separate discrete entity, during the network era we more commonly simply *watched television*. The set was on. Programs, advertisements, and announcements came and went (horizontal axis). Mere fragments of programs, advertisements, and announcements flashed by as we switched channels (vertical axis). We stayed on the couch, drawn into the virtually ceaseless flow. We watched television as television more than we sought a specific television program. Or, at least, that is how TV watching worked during the peak of the network era and how linear TV can still work in numerous situations today. The pursuit of flow underpins linear networks' programming of similar programs in succession—as when ABC scheduled four comedies in a row for Tuesday and Wednesday nights during the 2017–18 season. Many viewers—especially older viewers accustomed to network-era television—continue to experience linear TV flow in their homes, and TV sets in public spaces such as restaurants, doctors' waiting rooms, and airport lounges flow programming in the direction of their captive audiences. As we'll see in the next chapter, DVRs and Internet-distributed VOD TV challenge and disrupt this essential concept of flow, but its conventions refuse to be eliminated entirely.

The maintenance of television flow dominates nearly every aspect of the structures and systems of network-era television and its descendants. It determines how stories will be told, how advertisements will be constructed, and even how television's visuals will be designed. Every chapter of this book will account in one way or another for the consequences of television flow. Before we start, however, we need to note three of this principle's general ramifications:

1. polysemy
2. interruption
3. segmentation.

Polysemy, Heterogeneity, Contradiction

Many critics of television presume that it speaks with a single voice, that it broadcasts meanings from a single perspective. Sometimes television's significance becomes part of a national debate. During the 1992 presidential election campaign, Vice President Dan Quayle repeatedly advocated a return to traditional "family values," an ideologically loaded term for conservative beliefs about the family. In one frequently discussed speech he singled out the TV pregnancy of an unwed sitcom mother—Murphy Brown (Candice Bergen)—as indicative of television's assault on the family. He claimed she was "mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another 'lifestyle choice.'"[6] For Quayle, the meanings presented on TV had systematically and unambiguously undermined the idea of the conventional nuclear family: father, mother, and correct number of children; the father working and the mother caring for children in the home; no divorce; no sex outside of marriage; and no single or gay parenthood. The phrase "family values" quickly became a rallying cry for conservatives, and today, over twenty years later, it is still invoked by right-wing politicians such as Sarah Palin and former President George W. Bush. Such individuals often accuse television of eroding family values. One conservative lobbying organization, the American Family Association (AFA), contends that television and other entertainment media have "played a major role in the decline of those values on which our country was founded and which keep a society and its families strong and healthy."[7] Television's discourse on the family has become too liberal—even decadent—according to Quayle, Palin, Bush, the AFA, and their supporters.

What these individuals and organizations fail to take into consideration, however, is the almost overwhelming flow of programs on television. *Murphy Brown* (1988–98) is but one show among the hundreds that comprise TV flow. And its endorsement of single parenthood, if such indeed is the case, is just one meaning that bobs along in the deluge of meanings flooding from the TV set. The many meanings, or **polysemy**, that television offers may be illustrated by excerpting a chunk of the television flow. Look at the Sunday-night prime-time schedule reproduced in Table 1.1, which we selected largely at random. A typical household could have started its prime-time viewing with *Bob's Burgers* (2001–) and *The Simpsons* (1989–) on Fox, caught a bit of NBC's *Sunday Night Football* (2006–; the Kansas City Chiefs at the Denver Broncos), but become bored with the game and returned to Fox for *Family Guy* (1999–) and then the second half of ABC's *Secrets and Lies* (2015–16). The household might have concluded its prime-time viewing by bouncing back to the football game when Mom saw on Facebook that it was a nail-biter that went into overtime (the Chiefs won with a field goal that bounced off the goalpost before going through). What meanings surrounding the U.S. family, we might ask, do these programs present? Or, in Quayle's terms, is television destroying family values?

Let's start with a program that has frequently been attacked by conservative groups: *Family Guy*, an animated show that is rated TV 14 DLSV for "suggestive dialogue, [coarse] language, sexual situations" and "violence" and is not intended for viewing by children under 14. Considering the program's rating, the lyrics of its theme song are obviously presented with heavy irony:

It seems today that all you see
Is violence in movies and sex on TV.
But where are those good old-fashioned values
On which we used to rely?
Lucky there's a family guy!
Lucky there's a man who
Positively can do
All the things that
Make us laugh and cry.
He's ... our ... Fam ... ily ... guy!

Produced as a parody of a splashy song-and-dance number, with the cast wearing top hats (Figure 1.1), the theme song sets us up for a show that ridicules "family guys," in particular, and "those good old-fashioned [family] values," in general. The Parents Television Council (PTC), a conservative advocacy group, has often taken issue with *Family Guy* and has filed numerous indecency complaints against it with the Federal Communications Commission. Indeed, the PTC website's "Action Center" features prepared electronic forms to enable its users to automatically submit a complaint with the FCC.[8]

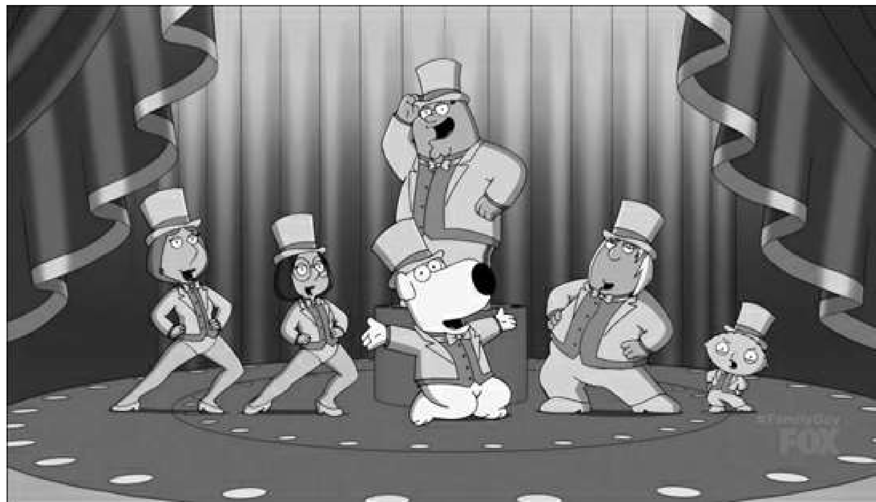

Figure 1.1 The Griffin family sings and dances in the overblown title sequence of *Family Guy*.

The episode that aired on our sample Sunday, "The Peanut Butter Kid," contains enough references to anal sex, defecation, and drug use by a child to rankle the PTC, and in terms of polysemy it presents a radically dysfunctional family.[9] The storyline centers on the parents exploiting their infant son, Stewie (Seth MacFarlane), by forcing him to perform in commercials. They prepare him for auditions by giving him "acting juice," which contains enough cocaine to make him bounce off the walls. At one audition, Peter (Seth MacFarlane), the father, adds "a little molly" [the drug MDMA] to the acting juice, saying to Stewie, "We'll go out clubbing afterwards." Lois (Alex Borstein), the mother, warns Stewie, "If you screw this up, Mommy is going to kill all of your toys." The show's anthropomorphic, talking dog, Brian (Seth MacFarlane), reveals to Stewie that he's being used. Stewie then intentionally screws up his next commercial shoot, ruining his budding career. After seeing the disastrous results of

Stewie's performance, the parents come to realize their mistakes and acknowledge that giving cocaine and MDMA to a baby might be a bad idea.

The show clearly exaggerates bad parenting in order to parody it, to wring humor from the extremely inappropriate behavior of its parents. Underlying the parody, however, is an undeniably dark view of the conventional nuclear family. The father is an incompetent dolt who engages in child abuse. The Griffin family members don't support each other, but, rather, they do terrible, violent things to one another. In this episode, Peter is thrown through a plate-glass window by his other son, Chris (Seth Green), with little provocation, and later Peter generates a live wolf with a 3D printer to attack Chris. In both instances, the characters appear battered and bloodied, but no remorse is shown for either attack. "The Peanut Butter Kid" ends with the parents regretting their behavior toward Stewie, but the damage has already been done. Stewie admits, "That acting stuff was a bit much for me, but I did quite enjoy the dancing and the cocaine." The scene then flashes forward to a future in which Stewie is a heavily tattooed weight lifter, addicted to cocaine. *Family Guy* presents a world in which family life is perverse, brutal, and abusive. Its many layers of parody still cannot effectively counteract this negative perspective on family life. The PTC tends to focus on specific instances of indecency in the program, but it's clear that they should be fundamentally appalled by the show's representation of the American family.

Family life is equally troubled on the drama that overlapped with *Family Guy* on our sample Sunday night. In the *Secrets and Lies* episode from that night, "The Racket," two brothers are at each other's throats because one, Eric (Michael Ealy), erroneously believes the other, Patrick (Charlie Barnett), killed his wife, Kate (Jordana Brewster). In fact, the entire second season of *Secrets and Lies* is about a family in severe crisis. Brother is pitted against brother, and, by the time of the season's finale, we learn that the brothers' father was a bigamist with a secret second family and that, furthermore, Eric accidentally killed his own mother while he was a child—pushing her down a staircase while trying to protect his sister, Amanda (Mekia Cox). Even worse, it is eventually revealed that the murderer of Eric's wife is not his brother—or his stepbrother from his father's other family—but instead it is actually Amanda. The season finale reveals that she and Kate were in a shoving match on a roof and Kate fell to her death. *Secrets and Lies* is a melodrama—a genre known for conflict among family members. In a sitcom such as *Family Guy*, bad behavior has few consequences; when people do wrong in a melodrama, they are punished for it. The finale of *Secrets and Lies*' second season follows the conventions of its genre. Most of the evildoers are in jail or under arrest and most, but not all, feel remorse for their actions. In the episode shown during our sample Sunday night, however, the final reckoning is still two episodes off. Instead, in this episode we are presented with arguments and conflicts within a wealthy, successful family. The episode suggests that the elite American family is breaking apart, that money and success inevitably lead to secrets and lies.

Our sample Sunday night contains a show that contradicts the bitterly satiric and darkly melodramatic representations of the family in *Family Guy* and *Secrets and Lies*, respectively. *Bob's Burgers* centers on members of a middle-class family—mother, father, and three kids—who run a small hamburger restaurant. In this show, the nuclear family is far from disintegrating, dysfunctional, or oppressive. There may be occasional friction within its quirky family, but in the final analysis family provides an enclave, a safety zone, of affection and

nurturing. “The Last Gingerbread House on the Left” episode, which aired on our sample Sunday, tells two Christmas stories and emphasizes the Belcher family’s low economic status and lack of funds for gifts. It begins with the kids obsessing greedily over gifts and the father, Bob (H. Jon Benjamin), feeling very anxious about their long wish lists. The mother, Linda (John Roberts), tries to cheer him up, which leads to this exchange:

Linda: “Know what the greatest gift of all is? Family!”
Bob: “*You* say that to the kids with a straight face.”
Linda: “Yeah, I know. I was just trying it out. What about ‘Christmas is for closers’?”
Bob: “Um, needs a little work.”

After gently poking fun at the common Christmas homily that family is the greatest gift, the episode tracks two story arcs. Bob attends a strange gingerbread-house competition hosted by his landlord, Calvin Fischoeder (Kevin Kline), while Linda, the kids, and their friend Teddy (Larry Murphy) go caroling in an unfamiliar neighborhood. The participants in the competition refer to themselves as the “Gingerbread Gentlemen”—an eccentric group of wealthy men with no emotional attachment to their families. When Bob asks them what their Christmas plans are, one replies, “I’m going to treat myself to a new penis!” The Gingerbread Gentlemen wind up destroying each other’s gingerbread houses in a blaze of gunfire and Bob wins the competition by default. The prize is a special visit to the local zoo to cuddle with a rare albino polar bear, which Bob shares with his kids and thus provides them with the “best Christmas ever,” as Linda exclaims. Bob provides the final moral of the episode, though, when he addresses the Gingerbread Gentlemen at the end of the competition (sentimental music underscores the scene): “Under that rich loner exterior, you’re all a bunch of softies who care about each other. You’re like a weird little family.... I mean, it may sound cheesy, but you know what the greatest gift of all is? Family.” *Bob’s Burgers* contains genuine moments of sentiment, even though it hedges its bets slightly—as when Bob qualifies his sentiment by saying, “it may sound cheesy.” Still, it would be accurate to say that the Belchers signify much that is positive about the conventional nuclear family structure. *Bob’s Burgers* often tells stories of the family members’ misadventures that, in the end, confirm their love and affection for one another.

If we assemble *Family Guy, Bob’s Burgers*, and *Secrets and Lies* as a group—as elements within an evening’s flow of linear television in a hypothetical household—we can identify stories that confirm “family values” as well as those that radically subvert them. If we add *The Simpsons* to this list, we’ll find a show that has an ambivalent relationship to the conventional nuclear family. Much like *Family Guy*, which has been accused of plagiarizing *The Simpsons, The Simpsons* has numerous examples of bad parenting and children misbehaving. Indeed, in its 620 episodes (and counting!), one can imagine few terrible things that Homer (Dan Castellaneta), Marge (Julie Kavner), Bart (Nancy Cartwright), Lisa (Yeardley Smith), and Maggie have *not* done to each other—especially if one includes the show’s annual, bloody Halloween specials. This has led some conservatives to condemn the program. Early in its run, Republican president George H. W. Bush singled it out, contending that “We’re going to keep trying to strengthen the American family, to make them more like the Waltons [from a homespun TV show of the ’70s] and less like the Simpsons.”[10] However, a more nuanced viewing of *The Simpsons* reveals a mother who is a thoughtful, caring parent, although she

must often undo the parenting catastrophes caused by her husband. And the Simpsons' middle child, Lisa, is a voice of reason that is frequently counterposed to Bart's unruliness.

"Orange Is the New Yellow," the episode rerun on our Sunday night, illustrates these dynamics when Marge, the responsible parent, is wrongly accused of being a negligent mother because she allows Bart to go to the playground unsupervised. In a direct critique of overly protective laws and policies regarding the safety of children, she is incarcerated for her "crime." Ironically, she enjoys her time in prison as it gives her a break from the drudgery of housework and childcare. Of course, Homer quickly proves to be incompetent at taking care of the kids on his own. As he explains in court, he is an awful father—so terrible that his "email password is 'bad dad.'" Eventually, Marge returns home to a family that is freshly appreciative of all she does. In an image of family love, they all wind up together, hugging in their pantry (Figure 1.2). In this manner, *The Simpsons* is able to contain seemingly contradictory meanings (good parenting vs. bad parenting) within a single episode.

As this small portion of the television flow illustrates, network-era television contradicts itself frequently and haphazardly. It presents many heterogeneous meanings in any one night's viewing. This polysemy contributes to television's broad appeal. As Lauren Graham, an actor in the family-centered program *Gilmore Girls*, has said, that program's "strength is that it's a family show that does not pander or condescend to families. It's not so soft that your grandmother could watch it with her dentures out."[11] That, in a nutshell, illustrates the power of polysemy: conflicting meanings reside within the same program and facilitate the viewing pleasure of a broad range of individuals. With so many different meanings being signified, we are bound to find some that agree with our world view. Does this mean that television can mean anything to anyone? And how are these meanings constructed? Three axioms will guide our approach to linear television.

Figure 1.2 The Simpsons share a moment of family togetherness after Marge is released from prison for the "crime" of letting her children play unsupervised.

Axiom 1

A segment of the television flow, whether it be an individual program, a commercial, a newscast, or an entire evening's viewing, may be thought of as a television **text**—offering a multiplicity of meanings or polysemy. We may interpret the Belchers' actions as signifying,

among other things, "an unconventional family can nurture loving relationships." In its broadest sense, a "text" is any phenomenon that pulls together elements that have meaning for readers or viewers or spectators who encounter it. Just as we read and interpret a book's organization of words in sentences, so we view and interpret a television program's sequence of sounds and images. Thus, narrative and non-narrative structures, lighting and set design, camera style, editing and sound design, and so on, may be thought of as television's textual elements—those basic building blocks that the makers of television use to communicate with their audience. This book will present ways for students to better understand how these textual devices mount potential meanings for the viewer's consideration.

Axiom 2

The television text does not present all meanings equally positively or strongly. Through dialogue, acting styles, music, and other attributes of the text, television emphasizes some meanings and de-emphasizes others. When the Simpsons family is seen hugging in a closet, the text is obviously suggesting that family togetherness and generational harmony are positive meanings. But although television is polysemic, not all meanings are equal. TV is not unstructured or infinitely meaningful. Or, as John Fiske writes, "[Television's] polysemic potential is neither boundless nor structureless: the text delineates the terrain within which meanings may be made or proffers some meanings more than others."[12] The crucial work of television studies is to analyze the medium's hierarchy of meanings. Which meanings does the text stress? *How* are they stressed? These are key questions for the television critic. To answer them requires an awareness of the cultural codes of class, gender, race, and such that predominate in a society. As Stuart Hall has noted, "Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. This constitutes a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested."[13] Television always has been a medium encoded with the meanings prevalent in the society to which it appeals. In contemporary American society, many meanings circulate, but some are given greater weight than others by the dominant cultural order. Correspondingly, although television is polysemic, it must be stressed that it is a **structured polysemy**. There is a pattern or structure implicit in the meanings that are offered on television. That structure tends to support those who hold positions of economic and political power in a particular society, but there is always room for contrary meanings.

Axiom 3

The act of viewing television is one in which the **discourses** of the viewer encounter those of the text. "Discourse" is a term that can have many meanings. We will here rely on Fiske's definition:

> a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area. These meanings serve the interests of that section of society within which the discourse originates.[14]

But what does he mean by this? Let's examine his definition in detail.

Fiske's discourse is a group or "set" of meanings: for example, a working-class discourse

might include the meanings "unions protect workers' rights," "capitalists are evil," "the economy is based on workers' labor," and so on. Discourses contain meanings that arise from a certain segment or section of society. Unions and other representatives of workers, for example, are sources of many meanings associated with working-class discourse, and those meanings serve their interests. Thus, we come to a TV text with belief structures—discourses—shaped by the social environment in which we grew up: schooling, religion, family, class, gender. And the TV text, too, has meaning structures that are governed by ideology and television-specific conventions. When we "read" the text, our discourses overlay those of the text. Sometimes they fit well, and sometimes they don't.

Discourses do not advertise themselves as such. As Fiske suggests, discourse "works ideologically to naturalize those meanings into common sense."[15] He contends that the dominant discourse is so pervasive that it disappears into common sense, into the taken-for-granted. Consider the common presumption that in America everyone can become financially successful if they work hard enough. Most Americans believe this to be a truth, "just" common sense—despite the fact that statistics show that the economic class and education level of your parents virtually guarantees whether or not you'll succeed financially. The notion of "success for all" thus has a rather tenuous connection to the real world of work. However, it has a very strong connection to the discourse of corporate capitalism. If workers, even very poor workers, believe they may succeed if they work hard, then they will struggle to do good work and not dispute the basic economic system. So we may see that the commonsensical "truth" of the Horatio Alger success story is a fundamental part of a dominant discourse. As critics of television it is our responsibility to examine these normally unexamined ideals.

Interruption and Sequence

Up to now we have depicted television as a continuous flow of sounds and images and meanings, but it is equally important to recognize the discontinuous component of linear TV watching and of TV itself—the ebb to its flow.

On the Sunday-night grid in Table 1.1, we can move horizontally across the table and see, obviously, that an evening's schedule is interrupted every half hour or hour with different programs. One program's progression is halted by the next program, which is halted by the next and the next. Within programs the flow is frequently interrupted by advertisements and announcements and the like. And on an even smaller level, within narrative programs' storylines there tend to be many interruptions. A melodrama such as *Secrets and Lies*, for example, often presents scenes in which characters are interrupted just as they are about to commit murder, discover their father's second family, or consummate a romance that has been developing for months or years.

The point is that linear television is constantly interrupting itself. Although the flow that gushes from our TV sets is continuously television texts, it is not continuously the same type of texts. There are narrative texts and non-narrative texts and texts of advertising and information and advice, and on and on it goes. Furthermore, we as viewers often interrupt ourselves while watching television. We leave the viewing area to visit the kitchen or the bathroom. Our attention drifts as we check Snapchat or Twitter or argue with friends and family. We doze.

All of these forms of interruption—from television's self-interruptions to the interruptions we perform while watching—are not a perversion of the TV-viewing experience. Rather, they *define* that experience. This is not to suggest, however, that television does not try to combat the breaks in its flow. Clearly, advertisers and networks want viewers to overcome television's fragmentary nature and continue watching their particular commercials/programs. To this end, storylines, music, visual design, and dialogue must maintain our attention to hold us through the commercial breaks, to quell the desire to check out another channel, or, worse still, to turn off the TV or wholly direct our attention to our phone's screen.

Table 1.1 Sunday, November 27, 2016, Prime-Time Schedule CST, Broadcast Networks

Network	6:00	6:30	7:00	7:30	8:00	8:30	9:00	9:30
ABC	America's Funniest Home Videos		Once Upon a Time…		Secrets and Lies		Quantico	
CBS	NFL Overtime	60 Minutes		NCIS: Los Angeles		Madam Secretary		Elementary (until 10:30)
Fox	Ice Age: A Mammoth Christmas	Bob's Burgers	The Simpsons	Son of Zorn	Family Guy	The Last Man on Earth	Local News	Local News
NBC	Football Night in America		Sunday Night Football					
PBS	Masterpiece Classic: Downton Abbey				Masterpiece: Poldark		Inside Poldark (until 10:30)	
CW	The Big Bang Theory	The Big Bang Theory	To Catch a Thief (1955 movie)					2 Broke Girls

In today's atmosphere of proliferating screens and constant distraction, interruptions have become more intrusive and more frequent; but they were also a part of television during the

time when the broadcast networks were predominant. Many of the strategies used by network television to keep our eyes glued to the TV screen are still implemented in the contemporary media environment where video-on-demand has radically disrupted the premise of television flow. When viewers actively seek programs and *pull* them down to their screens, the traditional linear flow that networks *pushed* toward us during their primacy is ruptured and has to be reinvented. YouTube and other VOD services, for example, immediately transition into a new video when the one you're watching ends. This is one example of a twenty-first-century form of flow. In our next chapter, Amanda D. Lotz will further consider how the ascendency of Internet-delivery technology has significantly altered, but not destroyed, what Spigel calls network-era TV's "industrial formations, government policies, and practices of looking."[16]

Segmentation

Network-era television's discontinuous nature led to a particular way of packaging narrative, informational, and commercial material that persists and is heightened by the abundance of screens in today's media environment. The overall flow of television is segmented into small parcels, which often bear little logical connection to one another. A shampoo commercial might follow a *Family Guy* scene and lead into a station identification. One segment of television does not necessarily link with the next in a chain of cause and effect. In Fiske's view, "[Television] is composed of a rapid succession of compressed, vivid segments where the principle of logic and cause and effect is subordinated to that of association and consequence to sequence."[17] That is, fairly random association and sequence—rather than cause and effect and consequence—govern TV's flow.

TV's segmental nature peaks in the 30-second (and shorter) advertisement, but it is evident in all types of programs. News programs are compartmentalized into news, weather, and sports segments, then further subdivided into individual 90-second (and shorter) "packages" or stories. Game shows play rounds of a fixed, brief duration. Narrative programs must structure their stories so that a segment can fit neatly within the commercial breaks. After all, to the television industry, programs are just filler, a necessary inconvenience interrupting the true function of television: broadcasting commercials.

The construction of these television segments and their relationship to each other are two major concerns of television's advertisers, producers, and programmers. For it is on this level that the battle for our *continuing* attention is won or lost. We should also be mindful of TV's segmental structure because it determines much of how stories are told, information presented, and commodities advertised on linear television. Moreover, video has only become shorter and more segmented when presented on Internet-delivered television—as YouTube's reliance on short videos confirms.

Summary

Television flow—Raymond Williams's term for television's sequence of diverse fragments of narrative, information, and advertising—defines the medium's fundamental structure during the network era and in our current experience of linear television. This flow facilitates the multiplicity of meanings, or polysemy, that television broadcasts.

Our consideration of television flow grows from three rudimentary axioms:

1. Television texts (programs, commercials, entire blocks of television time) contain meanings.
2. Not all meanings are presented equally. Textual devices emphasize some meanings over others and thus offer a hierarchy of meanings to the viewer. TV's polysemy is structured by the dominant cultural order into discourses (systems of belief).
3. The experience of television watching brings the discourses of the viewer into contact with the discourses of the text.

Linear television flow is riddled with interruptions, despite its progression of one thing after another. TV continually interrupts itself, shifting from one text to the next. And as often as the text interrupts itself, so too do we disrupt our consumption of television with trips out of the room or simple inattention. These constant interruptions lead linear television to adopt a segmented structure, constructing portions of TV in such a way as to encourage viewer concentration.

The aspiration of this book is to analyze television's production of meaning. We set aside the evaluation of television programs for the time being in order to focus on TV's structured polysemy and the systems that contribute to its creation: narrative and non-narrative structures, mise-en-scene, camera style, editing, sound. The chapters that follow analyze television's implementation of that polysemy and those systems—recognizing its roots in the network era but aware of how network-era conventions have been disrupted in the twenty-first century. An important challenge to linear television's supremacy is currently evolving: the potential for viewers' increased interactivity and agency in a video-on-demand media environment. We believe that much of what holds true for network-era television will also hold true for future mutations of it. There is, of course, no way of knowing for sure, but in the next chapter Amanda D. Lotz provides some thoughts on where television is now and where it is going.

Notes

1 "Nielsen Estimates 118.4 Million TV Homes in the U.S. for the 2016–17 TV Season," August 26, 2016, *Nielsen*, tvcrit.com/find/nielsen2016, accessed November 22, 2016. "Nielsen's national definition of a TV household states that homes must have at least one operable TV/monitor with the ability to deliver video via traditional means of antennae, cable set-top-box or satellite receiver and/or with a broadband connection."

2 "Number of TV Households in the United States from Season 2000–2001 to Season 2016–2017 (in Millions)," *Statista*, tvcrit.com/find/tvhouseholds, accessed December 23, 2016.

3 Lynn Spigel, "Introduction," *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 1.

4 John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2000).

5 Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 86.

6 Dan Quayle, "Address to the Commonwealth Club of California (On Family Values)," May 19, 1992, *Vice President Dan Quayle*, tvcrit.com/find/quayle, accessed December 22, 2010.

7 "General Information," The American Family Association, January 13, 2006, tvcrit.com/find/afa. They continue:

> For example, over the last 25 years we have seen the entertainment industry 'normalize' and glorify premarital sex. During that time we have suffered a dramatic increase in teen pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS and abortion as a means of birth control.
>
> (Ibid.)

8 For example, a form at the following URL is populated with complaint data about a *Family Guy* episode from November 10, 2013 titled "A Fistful of Meg."

9 "The Peanut Butter Kid" was the 11th episode of *Family Guy*'s 14th season. It was originally broadcast on Fox on January 10, 2016, and rerun during the 15th season on November 27, 2016.

10 Nick Griffiths, "America's First Family," *The Times Magazine*, vol. 5, no. 16 (April 15 2000), pp. 25, 27–28.

11 Ibid.

12 John Fiske, *Television Culture*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2011; originally published in 1987), 15–16.

13 Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andre Lowe, Paul Willis, eds. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 134.

14 Fiske, 14.

15 Ibid.

16 Spigel, 2.

17 Fiske, 105.

Further Readings

The basic principle of television flow stems from Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken, 1974). This short book is one of the fundamental building blocks of contemporary television studies.

John Corner, *Critical Ideas in Television Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), devotes an entire chapter to the notion of flow. John Fiske, *Television Culture*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2011; originally published in 1987), and John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television: Video* (Boston: Routledge, 1992), both elaborate upon the concept. Fiske is also concerned with articulating television's meanings and how they may be organized into discourses. Todd Gitlin confronts television's role in advocating a society's dominant or "hegemonic" discourse in "Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment" in *Television: The Critical View*, Horace Newcomb, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 574–94.

Further discussion of how meaning is produced in television texts may be found in the writings of British television scholars associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (University of Birmingham, England). This school of analysis is summarized in Fiske's *Television Culture* and in his "British Cultural Studies and Television" chapter in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, Robert C. Allen, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). Students interested in the seminal work in this area should read Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, Paul Willis, eds. (London: Hutchinson, 1980).

The implications of Dan Quayle's comments about Murphy Brown are examined in Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "Reproducing Reality: Murphy Brown and Illegitimate Politics," in *Feminist Television Criticism*, Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D'Acci, Lynn Spigel, eds. (New York: Clarendon, 1997). Walkowitz is concerned with the ideology of "family values" and the representation of women working in television news.