# Radio and television

The 1920s also saw the birth of a new mass medium, radio. By 1928, the United States had three national radio networks — two owned by NBC (the National Broadcasting Company), one by CBS (the Columbia Broadcasting System). Though mostly listened to for entertainment, radio's instant, on-the-spot reports of dramatic events drew huge audiences throughout the 1930s and World War II.

Radio also introduced government regulation into the media. Early radio stations went on and off the air and wandered across different frequencies, often blocking other stations and annoying listeners. To resolve the problem, Congress gave the government power to regulate and license broadcasters. From then on, the airwaves — both radio and TV — were considered a scarce national resource, to be operated in the public interest.

After World War II, American homes were invaded by a powerful new force: television.

The idea of seeing "live" shows in the living room was immediately attractive — and the effects are still being measured. TV was developed at a time when Americans were becoming more affluent and more mobile. Traditional family ways were weakening. Watching TV soon became a social ritual. Millions of [people](http://people4people.ru/) set up their activities and lifestyles around TV's program schedule. In fact, in the average American household, the television is watched 7 hours a day.

Television, like radio before it focused on popular entertainment to provide large audiences to advertisers. TV production rapidly became concentrated in three major networks — CBS, NBC and ABC.

A 30-second commercial on network television during prime evening viewing time costs $100,000 or more. A single half-hour show costs hundreds of thousands of dollars to produce. Viewers also have the option of watching noncommercial public television, which is funded by the federal government, as well as by donations from individuals and corporations.

Television has emerged as the major source from which most Americans get the news. By its nature, TV has proved most effective in covering dramatic, action-filled events - such as man's walk on the moon and the Vietnam War. As TV viewers become direct witnesses of events. The focus of TV news is the network news shows watched by an estimated 60 million Americans every night. These huge audiences have made newscasters such as Walter Cronkite, Dan Rather, John Chancellor, Barbara Walters and Peter Jennings into national celebrities, far better known than print journalists.

At first it was thought that the popularity of TV and its advertiser support-would cause declining interest in the other media. Instead, TV whetted the public's appetite for information. Book publishers found that TV stimulated reading. Though some big-city newspapers closed others merged and new ones opened in the suburbs. And while a few mass circulation magazines failed, hundreds of specialized magazines sprang up in their place.

Technology continues to change the media. Computers are already revolutionizing the printing process. Computer users also have access to on-line newspapers for up-to-the-minute information on general or specialized subjects. Cables and satellites are expanding ТV. Already half of American homes subscribe to cable TV, which broadcasts dozens of channels providing information and entertainment of every kind.

In addition to the 1,140 television stations offering programming in 1990, there were 9,900 cable operating systems serving 44 million subscribers in 27,000 communities. These subscribers paid an average fee of $15 per month to watch programs not offered on commercial channels. One cable network offers news 24 hours a day. Some communities have publicly controlled cable television stations, allowing, citizen groups to put on programs.

Still, the long awaited dream of a home completely "wired" with computer and cable TV links is a long way off. Cable TV, for instance, has not provided significantly better programming, only more of the same. The reason critics say, is economics — the relentless pressure of seeking large audiences in order to attract advertisers.

This pressure for profits has caused concern over one оf the most important trends in the media today: The ownership of the news media, experts say, is being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Chains — companies that own two or more newspapers, broadcast stations or other media outlets — are growing larger. They are forcing out independent, often family-owned news media. That means that most American communities are served by news media owned by outsiders.

American radio and television

The problem of describing American radio and television is simply this: there's so much of it, so many different types, and so much variety. In 1985, there were over 9,000 individual radio stations operating in the United States. Of this number, over 1,000 were non-commercial, that is, no advertising or commercials of any type are permitted. These public and educational radio stations are owned and operated primarily by colleges and universities, by local schools and boards of education, and by various religious groups.

At the same time, there were close to 1,200 individual television stations, not just transmitters that pass on programs. Of these TV stations, just under 300 were non-commercial, that is nonprofit and educational in nature and allowing no commercials and advertising. Like the non-commercial radio stations, the non-commercial television stations are supported by individual donations, grants from foundations and private organizations, and funds from city, state, and federal sources. In short, if someone wanted to describe what can be heard and seen on American radio and television, he or she would have to listen to or watch close to 10,000 individual stations. There are similar types of stations, but no one station is exactly the same as another.

All radio and television stations in the United States, public or private, educational or commercial, large and small must be licensed to broadcast by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), an independent federal agency. Each license is given for a few years only. If stations do not conform to FCC regulations, their licenses can be taken away. There are several regulations which should be noted.

Although the FCC regulates radio and television transmissions, it has no control over reception. As a result, there are no fees, charges, taxes, or licenses in the United States for owning radio and television receivers or for receiving anything that is broadcast through the air. This also means that, for example, anyone who wishes to build his or her own satellite receiving antenna — that metal dish now seen in many gardens or on rooftops of houses — may simply do so. No permission is needed and no fees are paid.

Laws prohibit any state or the federal government from owning or operating radio and television stations (stations such as Voice of America may only broadcast overseas). There is also no governmental censorship or "reviewing" on programs and content. There are no governmental boards or appointed groups which control any radio or television broadcasting. Rather, the FCC ensures that no monopolies exist and that each area has a variety of types of programming and stations. It also regulates media ownership: no newspaper, for example, may also own a radio or TV station in its own area, nor may a radio station also have a television station in the same area. No single company or group may own more than a total of 12 stations nationwide. These and other FCC policies work to prevent any single group from having too much influence in any area and to guarantee a wide range of choices in each.

Another FCC regulation, the so-called Fairness Doctrine, requires stations to give equal time to opposing views at no charge. Likewise, all commercial stations are required to devote a certain percentage of their broadcasting time to "public service" announcements and advertising. These range from advertisements for Red Cross blood drives and for dental care to programs on Alcoholics Anonymous and car safety. This broadcasting time given to public service messages is free of charge.

With this "something-for-everyone" policy, even communities with only 10,000 or so [people](http://people4people.ru/) often have two local radio stations. They may broadcast local stories and farming reports, weather and road conditions in the area, city council meetings, church activities, sports events and other things of interest to the community. They also carry national and international news taken from the larger stations or networks and emphasize whatever might be the "big story" in the small town.

The big cities, by contrast, are served by a large number of local radio stations, often by more than 25. [People](http://people4people.ru/) who live in cities such as New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, for instance, have a choice of up to 100 AM and FM stations and many different "formats."

Most commercial radio stations follow a distinctive format, that is, a type of programming that appeals to a certain listening audience. Some of the most common radio formats are given below with the approximate number of stations in the U.S. for each type (some stations have more than one format). To change from one format to another, stations need permission from the FCC.

There is also a great variety among television stations although there are fewer overall. Smaller cities and areas have one or two local stations, and the larger cities ten or more. In Los Angeles, for example, there are 18 different local television stations. Ninety percent of all American homes can receive at least six different television stations and more than 50 per cent can get 10 or more without cable, without paying a fee, or any charges of any type.

In Louisville, Kentucky, for example, there are 16 local radio stations and seven local television stations for a population of about 300,000 [people](http://people4people.ru/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank). Three of the TV stations are affiliated with one each of the three major commercial networks, ABC (American Broadcasting Company), CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System), and NBC (National Broadcasting Company). These networks are not television stations or channels or programs: they are not licensed to broadcast. Rather, they sell programs and news to individual television stations which choose those they want to broadcast. These affiliated stations, of course, also create some of their own programming, produce their own state and local news programs, purchase films from other sources, and so on.

Two of the TV stations in Louisville are "independents." As their name suggests, these are commercial stations which take their programs from a wide variety of sources, but also produce their own programs. The other two local television stations are educational. They stress cultural programs and features, including local, state, and national as well as international news and current affairs. There are also two cable systems serving the city.

Allowing just about everyone "a piece of the air" has resulted in a tremendous variety. It has meant, for example, hundreds of foreign-language radio stations including those broadcasting in Chinese, French, Japanese, Polish, and Portuguese. About 160 radio stations throughout the U.S. broadcast only in Spanish. About half a dozen or so radio stations are owned by American Indian tribes and groups. There are some 400 radio stations operated by university students. Many of these stations are members of a nationwide university broadcasting network which enables them to share news and views.

The National Public Radio network (NPR) is an association of public radio stations, that is, of noncommercial and educational broadcasters. NPR is known for its quality news and discussion programs. Another public radio network, American Public Radio (APR), created The Prairie Home Companion. This commentary and entertainment program quickly became a national cult program, and a book growing out of this series, Lake Wobegone Days, was an enormous best seller in 1985.

The largest television network is not CBS, NBC, or ABC. Nor is it one of the cable networks such as CNN (Cable News Network), which carries only news and news stories, ESPN, the all-sports cable network, or even MTV, which is famous for its music videos. Rather, it is PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) with its over 280 nonprofit, non commercial stations sharing programs. The growth of public television in the past two decades has been dramatic. This is especially noteworthy when one considers that these stations must often survive on very limited budgets, on viewers' donations, and on private foundations. Their level of quality, whether in national and international news, entertainment, or education, is excellent. Children,and parents in many parts of the world are familiar with Sesame Street, a series that was a breakthrough in children's programming, The Muppet Show, or Reading Rainbow.

The majority of commercial television stations receive most of their programming, roughly 70 per cent, from the three commercial networks. The networks with their financial and professional resources have several advantages. They are able to purchase the distribution rights, for example, to the most recent films and series. They can attract the best artists and performers. Above all, they are able to maintain large news-gathering organizations throughout the nation and throughout the world. They also have a considerable income from selling news and video material to other international television systems.

All of the networks have nationwide news programs which also stress feature stories in the mornings, throughout the week. All have regularly scheduled news series. Among the most popular are CBS's Sixty Minutes and PBS's The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour. The world's most durable TV show is NBC's Meet the Press which has been aired weekly since 1948. This show, in which important political figures or leaders are interviewed by journalists, now has imitators in virtually every other country.

Local television stations also have their own news teams, reporters and film crews. Usually, local television stations will offer between half an hour to two hours of local, city, and state news, weather and business information in addition to the national network news programs. In a city where there are three stations, for example, viewers will also have a choice of three local, city, and state news reporting programs and series. The local stations are also in competition with one another for getting the most recent news. If their programs are watched by many [people](http://people4people.ru/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), they are more likely to attract more money from advertisers.

Numerous books, studies, and popular articles have been, written about American commercial television and its programs, their quality or lack of it, their effects, real and imagined, their symbols, myths, and power. There are enough pressure groups in the U.S., however, — religious, educational, and those representing advertisers — so that what does appear on commercial television programs probably represents what the majority of people want to see. Most of the commercial series and programs which have been successful in the United States have also been successful internationally. They have been regularly purchased and shown even in nations that only have government-financed or controlled television systems. No commercial network in the U.S. thinks that Dallas, for example, is fine drama. But they've watched foreign television companies such as the BBC and ITV fight over the broadcast rights, and others hurry to make their own imitations. They conclude, therefore, that such popular entertainment series are in fact popular.

There is less concern today than there once was about how much influence advertisers might have on television programming. The U.S. liquor industry did not stop the commercial stations from voluntarily banning all liquor advertising and commercials from TV in the early 1950s. And the strong tobacco lobby could not stop cigarette ads being banned either. All three commercial networks gave extensive, and strongly critical coverage to the war in Vietnam. The Three Mile Island nuclear accident was widely reported in depth, as were and are airplane crashes or industrial pollution stories. The commercial networks have discovered what the newspapers did earlier: good critical investigative reporting on important issues will attract viewers. If one advertiser is offended, another will not be.

Commercials take up about ten minutes of every 60 minutes during "prime-time" viewing. This is the period in the early evening when most viewers are watching television. Commercials range from those that are witty, wellmade, and clever to those that are dull, boring, and dumb. Advertisers have learned that unless their commercials are at least amusing, viewers will either switch to another channel or use commercial "breaks" to get up and do something else. With the rising popularity of public television and commercial-free cable TV, viewers can, if they wish, turn to stations that do not have commercials. Experience in those countries which lead in the amount of television programs available — Canada, the United States, and Japan, in that order — seems to indicate that even with other choices available, commercially-produced programs are still popular with many [people](http://people4people.ru/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank). Here it is interesting to note that Britain's commercial ITV channel now attracts more viewers than does the BBC. Many Americans, who pay no fee for either commercial or public TV, simply accept commercials as the price they have to pay if they choose to watch certain programs.

At present, no one seems quite sure what will come out of the cable television, video, and satellite or pay television "revolutions." There is no nationwide system or policy on cable television.

Local communities are free to decide whether or not they will have cable television. There are many different types of schemes, systems, and programs. Some offer top-rate recent movies on a pay-as-you-watch system, some offer opera and symphonic music. All are willing to provide "public access" channels where individuals and groups оf citizens produce their own programming. It does not appear, however, that the hopes once voiced for cable television will be realized.

Cable firms must be able to offer something special get many [people](http://people4people.ru/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) to pay for what they can normally see free of charge through regular public and commercial stations. It will also be difficult to get people receiving satellite programs with the help of dish antennas to pay for all the programs they simply grab out of the air.

A few remarks on how much television that "typical American" watches should be added. Obviously, there is a lot to watch and a great variety of it. Live sports events are televised at full length and attract a lot of viewers. Recent full-length movies are popular and there is always at least one station that has the "Late Late Movies," often old Westerns or Japanese horror films that start after midnight and go on until 3 or 4 a.m. And quite a few viewers in the United States and elsewhere enjoy the many television series and made-for-television specials which seemingly never end. Statistics show that the number of hours spent watching television are highest for women over 55 years of age, and lowest for young men between 18 and 24 years.

The popular press is often not very careful when reporting statistics of television-viewing times. The U.S. statistics published each year tell how long a television set in a typical American household is, on the average, turned on each day (and night), not how long an American is actually watching television. Such differences are important. The household might include parents who watch the local and national news programs each evening. The older children might watch a program, say the Bill Coshy Show, the most popular show in 1986. The teenager might then switch to the cable MTV, the famous channel featuring rock and modem music videos. What is counted, then, is the total time the TV set is turned on (now just over 6 hours a day). In fact, the number of hours of television the so-called average American watches has been stable for the past three years at around 4.5 hours a week. Furthermore, a Galiup poll found that while 46 per cent of Americans chose television as "their favorite way of spending an evening" in 1974, only 33 per cent did in 1986.

Television sets in America are turned on in much the same way and for the same reasons that radios are, as background music and noise. Life does not stop in either case. Many morning and daytime programs are only viewed intermittently, while other things are going on and demand one's attention. The television set is only watched!,, in other words, when something interesting is heard. If our typical Americans were actually "glued to the tube" an average of six or seven hours a day, seven days of the week, very few would be going to school, earning university degrees, raising families, working, running businesses, or even getting much sleep. And few would have time to read all those newspapers, magazines, and books.