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Digital Home Entertainment

Special Section:
Guide to Home Theater

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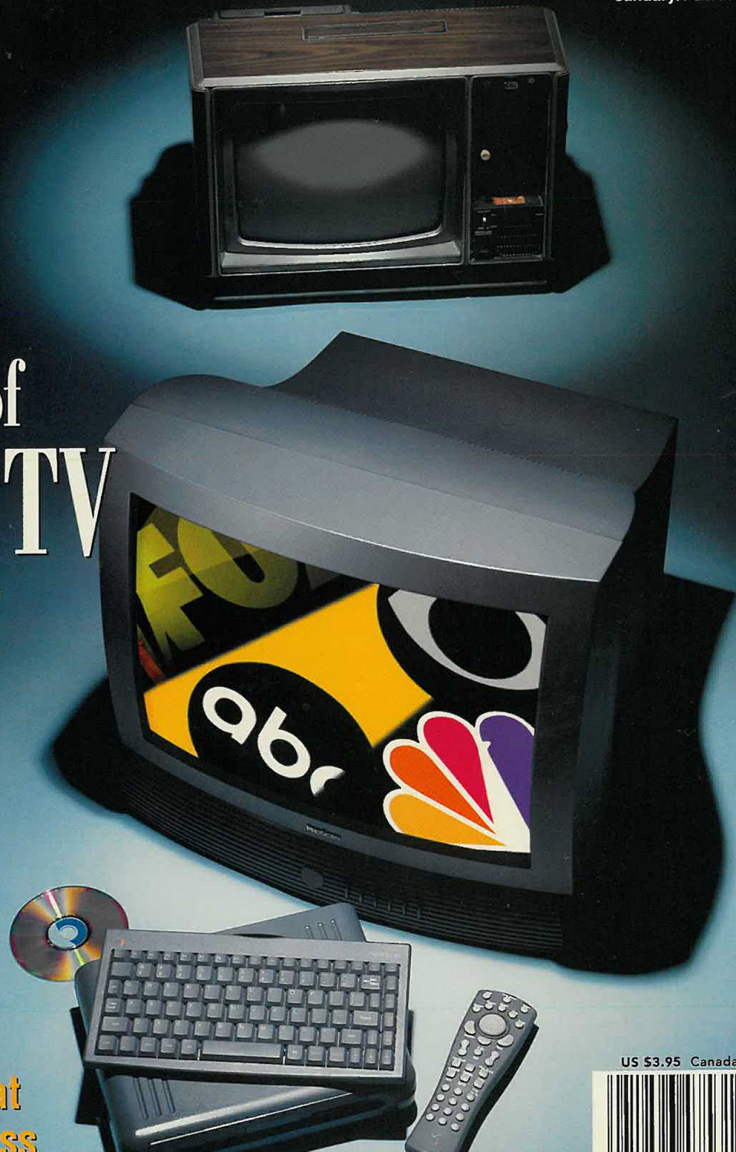
The Brave New World of Network TV

After 60 years on top, how will the Big Four win back the eyes of America?



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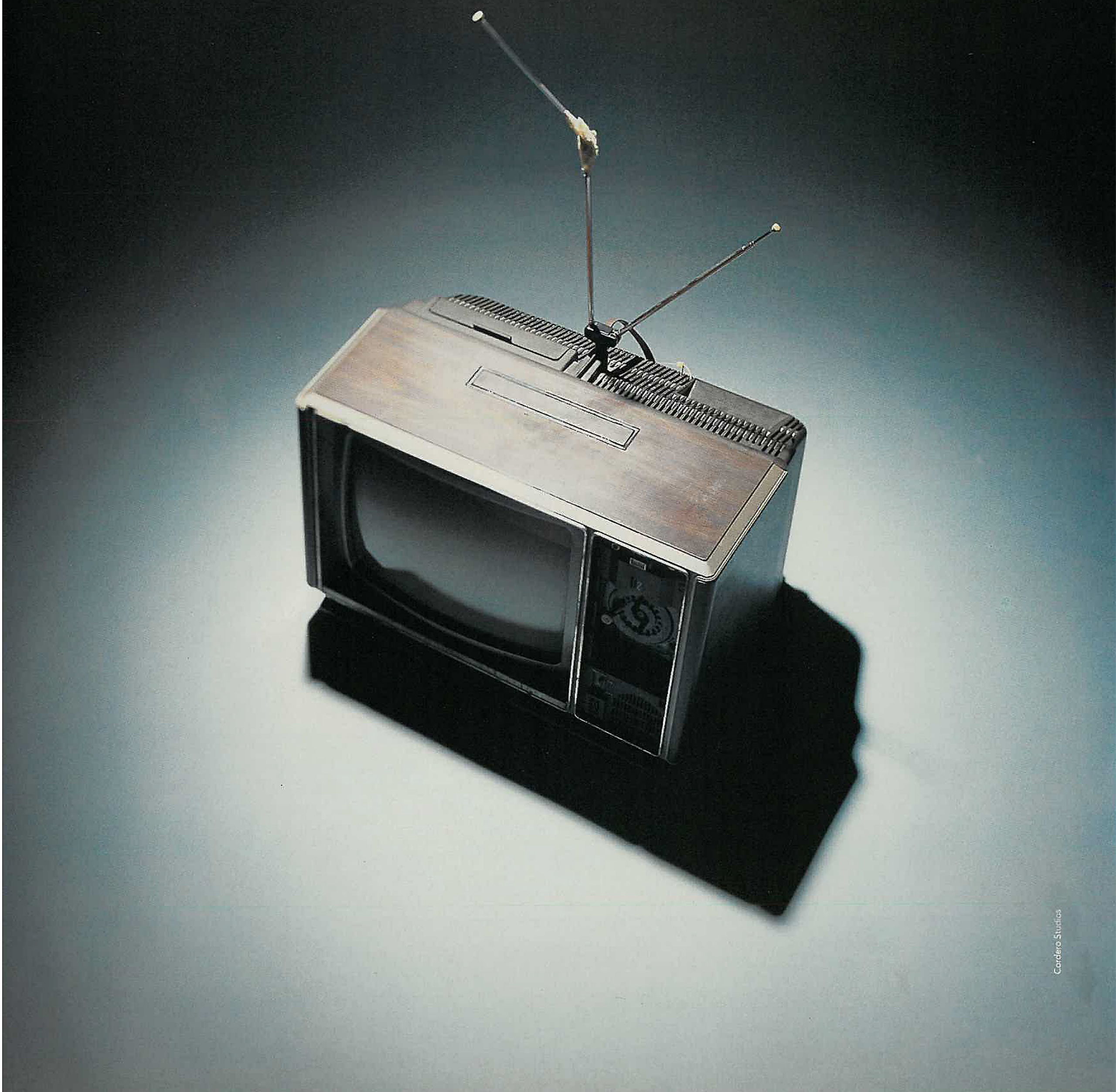
After 60 years of broadcast history, network television as we know it appears to be coming to an end. With cable and satellite channels poaching their primetime viewers, and the Internet aiming to lure away still more, the four major networks face crises at every turn. Or do they? As we enter the new digital era, how will TV's tetrarchy cope with the new competition? *Rob Sabin* offers a prognosis....



Cordero Studios

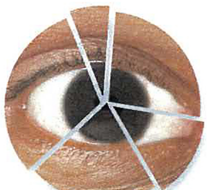
Are the Networks Showing Their Age?

Morning comes hard these days to Black Rock. The slab of dark stone that CBS calls headquarters usually glistens in the sun over Manhattan's midtown, its triangular ribs ringing the skyscraper's perimeter like the studs on a pit bull's collar—the kind that say "don't mess with me." But there's little bite at the house that Bill Paley built decades ago, when TV shone brand new, and the only way to get pictures into people's homes was over airwaves.

Much has changed in 60 years. Cable TV has tarnished the networks' glossy finish, eating away at their blue-chip audiences like rust on an old Chevy. For CBS, number three in the primetime ratings behind NBC and ABC—with FOX gaining ground all the time—the decaying viewership aggravates an already bleeding bottom line: the network bled $46 million in 1996, the last full year for which figures are available, making it the only one of the Big Four whose network operations (sans contributions from company-owned TV stations and cable) lost money. Out on the pavement of Sixth Avenue in New York, this state of affairs is suggested in the gritty soot that has settled on CBS' aging edifice which, for all its timeless modernism, cannot seem to regain its old sparkle. For all the scrubbing of window crews balanced precariously on their catwalks, Black Rock yet remains...red.

Not so with the Eye's brethren. FOX broke even in '96 and unlike its big brothers, has haltingly increased its audience share. ABC's network operation actually earned parent company Disney $75 million the same year. And at NBC, where *Seinfeld* lives with his *Friends*, and where *Frasier* gives free advice, network operations in '96 contributed a whopping $500 million in earnings to parent GE—a sign of its programming strength and the aggressive battle stance that earned the network an occasional unflattering headline in 1997 (not counting those devoted to sportscaster Marv Albert's, uh, panties).

Everywhere you look, you encounter the symptoms of wear—of an industry coming of age in a welter of creativity and growth, then gradually succumbing to the inertia of routine, the lure of easy money, the comfort of the familiar. Yet the world in that span of time has changed, and the old system, with its prejudices and hierarchies, has begun to totter. No event could have better illustrated this shift than the passing of Brandon Tartikoff who, as head of NBC Entertainment from 1980 to 1991, transformed television with then-daring shows whose formulas have since been copied repeatedly: *Hill Street Blues*, *Miami Vice*, *Cheers*, *The Cosby Show*, *Golden Girls*, *Family Ties*, *LA Law*, *St. Elsewhere*, and oh yeah, *Seinfeld*, which he reluctantly signed up for a measly four episodes. More than anyone perhaps, Tartikoff represented the old regime, masterfully guiding NBC from its role as the industry laughing stock to its triumph as the record-setting number-one network. And his death last summer from Hodgkin's disease no doubt has all of the nets reflecting on how—in the shadow of cable's pall and this season's blasé offerings—they could use a man today like Brandon Tartikoff.



The **battle for America's eyeballs** has spread from the hallowed halls of the big four networks out into the streets, igniting a mad scramble among the cable channels, the Baby Bells, and Silicon Valley **for a piece of the action.**

The Battle for Eyeballs

Still, it's questionable whether even Tartikoff, in the prime of his career, could now save the day, given the pressures of new technology and the regulatory changes reshaping the television industry. Consider for instance both the opportunities and calamities made possible by the competing video-delivery systems available today or lurking on the market horizon: cable TV (including interactive TV and services via cable modem); delivery of video by telephone companies; direct-broadcast satellite services; digital terrestrial broadcasting; microwave-based "wireless" cable systems; and of course, the still-embryonic Internet. It's a complex new world.

But why should *you* care about all this?

The number of programs you can tune to, the content of those programs, the devices that bring them to you, and whether and how much you pay for them will all depend—directly and indirectly—on how things shake out over the next few years. The outcome of television's somewhat turbulent present could decide whether the shows you watch are produced by a broadcast network like NBC, a cable network like HBO, a Hollywood studio like Disney, or some wacko in his garage with a camcorder linked to the World Wide Web. The current regulatory clime, in combination with today's budding new digital technologies, could determine whether you'll be watching a high-definition digital signal received over the air from a terrestrial tower or a satellite—or getting your TV, along with a host of interactive services, from a fiber-optic or other high-speed line brought to you by your local cable or telephone company. Nobody knows for sure what the result will be: we know only that the battle for eyeballs has spread from the hallowed halls of the big four networks out into the streets, igniting a mad scramble among the cable channels, the Baby Bells, and Silicon Valley for a piece of the action. Rather than owning the field as before, the networks are now simply another team of players (albeit significant ones), begging the question: whose trophy will your eyes become?

The Cable Guys Cometh

Perhaps you haven't noticed, but these days, you're more likely to tune in to HBO, TNT, or The Learning Channel at any given time than you are to one of the four major broadcast networks or the two upstart networks, Paramount's UPN and Warner Bros.' WB. One reason: cable's accessibility. According to Nielsen Media Research, in 1970, only 6.4 percent of all U.S. TV households had cable TV service. Today, 74 percent of TV homes subscribe to basic cable or another multichannel delivery service, such as digital satellite TV.

Multichannel means more choice. Which means stiffer competition. Ten years ago, Nielson was measuring ratings for fewer than 15 cable networks; today they track 48. The average home has access to 45 channels of television, and viewers are starting to explore. In 1987, affiliates of ABC, CBS, and NBC captured 71 percent of the total primetime audience to the cable networks' 14 percent. By the end of the '96 season, the combined share for ABC, CBS, NBC, *and* FOX had declined to 61 percent, while cable's total share had jumped to 38 percent. Taken alone, ABC, CBS, and NBC's primetime share has dropped from 61 percent in 1992 to just under 50 percent in 1996.

This slide seems to herald a trend. Witness this season's premiere week on the four majors: despite massive promotion, only 62.5 percent of the audience tuned in to the Big Four—their lowest-ever collective share—while cable's dozens of networks grabbed a collective 33.7 percent share with shows no more alluring than *Rugrats*, *Biography*, and a single pro football game.

It's the Programming, Stupid

This viewer falloff is commonly blamed on the programming. Granted, the quality of the best hour-long dramas on network TV has probably never been better, with *ER*, *The X-Files*, *Law & Order*, *Homicide: Life on the Street*, *NYPD Blue*, and others making the grade. But a staggering 61 sitcoms laden the airwaves this season, with hardly a standout beyond *Seinfeld* and *Frasier*. Notes Jerry Isenberg, the director of electronic media programs at USC's School of Cinema-Television and a former network executive, "If you look for creative landmark half-hours, there may be only two or three, and one of them, *The Larry Sanders Show*, is on HBO. After that, it's a lot of 'so what?' "

The incessant repetition of successful formulas of the past has left the large networks vulnerable to the smaller, hungrier cable channels, who offer alternative fare catering to narrower, more individual tastes, enabling them to distinguish themselves from the majors. What's more, the economics of the TV industry make the cable networks stronger than their small audiences imply. Where broadcast networks must pay their affiliates to pass along their programs, cable networks are compensated by cable operators for each household to which their signal is delivered, regardless of who's watching. Advertising, for many, supplements these fees, whereas it's the bread, butter, and—in a good season—caviar of the big boys. Consequently, established cable networks—who might pull no more than a 2 rating (i.e., 2 percent of total TV households) for a popular primetime show, compared with a 15 or 16 rating for a broadcast network hit—nonetheless find themselves with plenty of money to spend on quality programming. Evidence: HBO reeled in 90 primetime Emmy nominations in 1997, more than any other cable *or* broadcast network, and came in second (behind NBC) in total awards won. The 16 nominations for *The Larry Sanders Show* were second only to *ER*'s 22 and set a record for the most ever given to a comedy series in a season. Showtime, TNT, A&E, Disney, and USA Network were among the other cable nets who made their presence felt during last year's Emmys.

Although the majors still took home the big awards on Emmy night, and far larger audiences still tune in to the major network hits than any single cable network offering, that tide may be shifting. Where many people once saw cable and broadcast networks as separate entities, with cable offering inferior fare, the best cable channels have begun to enjoy a new awareness among viewers and, as a consequence, a newfound loyalty. Cable "brands" will likely continue to acquire value as today's younger audiences become tomorrow's wage earners and consumers. Teenagers born in 1980, who entered college last fall, don't know a world without MTV and Nickelodeon and HBO. Unlike the Baby Boomers, who grew up loyal only to ABC, NBC, and CBS, this generation knows only television—television that reaches them through a wire.

Since 1987, **ABC, CBS, and NBC have lost 10 percent** of the total primetime audience, while the cable channels combined have gained 24 percent. Admits CBS senior vice president Martin Franks, "We're being nibbled to death... **in the cable fragmentation world."**

No one is more cognizant of this fundamental shift in viewership than the major networks themselves. "We're being nibbled to death by ducks in the cable fragmentation world," admits CBS senior vice president Martin Franks. "You know, 10 more cable channels come on board, and if combined they get 1 percent of the audience, that 1 percent is coming out of broadcast's eyes. It's not that any of them are a threat by themselves. But taken together, 40 channels each get a fraction of a percent of viewing audience, and over time, that can be a problem."

Broadcast Triage

A problem indeed. Despite the nets' loss of eyeballs, advertising sales for the majors have remained healthy and even grown because the Big Four are still the biggest game in town. But sooner or later, the revenue has to catch up with the declining viewership.

The networks have covered their proverbial backsides by investing in cable networks. NBC owns CNBC and a stake in MSNBC with Microsoft. CBS owns TNN, Country Music Television, CBS Eye on People, and the Spanish-language CBS Telenoticias. Disney, parent company of ABC, also owns the Disney Channel and ESPN. And FOX has FX.

Having a piece of cable real estate gives the nets the ability to specialize, providing the kind of niche programming that's proved such a boon to cable channels. It also provides an outlet for airing valuable reruns of their own network- or studio-owned shows, as FOX discovered this past summer with old *X-Files* and *NYPD Blue* episodes—a move that helped the fourth network gain audience share at a time when its broadcast competitors were floundering.

"All the broadcast networks own cable networks now—they've all hedged their bets to some extent," observes Larry Gerbrandt, senior analyst for research firm Paul Kagan, Inc. "I believe the line is, 'If you can't beat 'em, own 'em.' "

Beyond these far-sighted investments, however, the primary *modus operandi* at the networks these days seems to be damage control, with often questionable results. Remember: it's the ability to achieve the greatest aggregate number of eyeballs that justifies the broadcast networks' charging advertisers a premium. So in a world in which the Big Four's audience is shrinking, it becomes even more critical for each network to hang on to whatever share it has.

This knowledge has awakened the programming executives' most mercenary instincts and spawned scheduling battles. In the past, networks have not gone head to head with hit shows or theme programming on other networks; this cautious approach lets each net maximize its audience and guarantee a couple of hits. Not so this season, as programmers charge down the war path, trying to cut into each other's lineups. This means established shows may not hold their audiences, and decent new shows may fail to get a fair sampling by viewers, resulting in a premature canning. "All these [similar] shows are opposite each other—you've got news magazines running against news magazines," says Steve Sternberg, senior partner for Bozell's media buying unit, BJK&E Media. "It's really splintering the networks, which can only be good for cable."

The Insidious Fin-Syn

Besides carving into one another's schedules, the networks have in recent years added a new and, some would say, potentially dangerous weapon to their arsenals—program ownership. Until 1995, when the Federal Communication Commission rolled back its financial interest-and-syndication regulations, or "fin-syn" rules, these anti-trust laws prevented the networks from owning studios that produce programs and vice versa. Once this obstacle was removed, a frenzy commenced as studios like Paramount, Warner Bros., Disney, and Twentieth Century Fox either launched or acquired their own networks and established networks demanded a piece of the shows they aired, gaining a potential source of lucrative syndication income that previously went to the studio or production house from whom they licensed their shows. The syndication stakes are high—the rights for a big network hit can be worth $500 million or more. And that kind of cash, in combination with the cable revenues the Big Four can now generate and income from network-owned stations, might very well make broadcast-network profitability moot.

"Now that we can be in multiple distribution media and own content, it makes our distribution business that much more attractive, even to the point of being able to tolerate it as a loss leader," observes CBS' Franks. "We're making very good money, thank you, on syndicating *Walker, Texas Ranger*."

It's hardly surprising, then, that the repeal of fin-syn set off something of a gold rush among the networks, who pursued full or part ownership in a total of 29 shows in the current primetime lineup. None, in this regard, has proven more aggressive than ratings leader NBC, which CBS TV president Les Moonves accused last year of employing "Mafioso techniques" in its efforts to pressure studios into relinquishing some show ownership in return for airtime—a charge the network denies. Still, NBC has insisted that it have at least a partial stake in all its Saturday night "Thrillogy" shows.

Network execs insist these moves are necessary to counter the soaring salaries for top stars. "It's a way to cover those escalating production costs, and the only way the networks can stay competitive with cable- and satellite-produced programming," maintains Bob Okun, vice president of NBC's Washington office.

Many producers fear the networks may be biased toward the shows they own when it's time to choose the fall lineup—or to kill a stinker to make room for a fresh offering. Frequently cited examples include NBC's *The Single Guy*, which stayed on the air for two seasons in a favored Thursday-night timeslot despite miserable ratings, and the same network's *Union Square*, which came in to replace *The Single Guy* this year after being roundly panned by critics. NBC Entertainment president Warren Littlefield did not alleviate concerns by admitting openly to the *New York Times* last October that the network's ownership in *The Single Guy* was a factor in keeping it on the air so long.

V-Chip Blues

On top of their programming woes, the networks face governmental pressures that could effect their shows' content and economic fortunes. All the broadcast and cable networks, under threat of legislation, have agreed with Congress to participate at least partially in the voluntary ratings system that ties into the V-chip. V-chip TVs, which should be available by 1999, can be set to automatically block out shows by rating. But no one knows yet how a show's rating might affect audience size. The fear is that hitting a TV-MA rating (unsuitable for children under 17) or TV-14 rating (some material unsuitable for children under 14), for example, may trigger the V-chip in millions of sets that might otherwise have been tuned in—either because parents would have never thought of preventing their kids from watching those shows without the V-chip's passive technology, or because viewers just don't bother turning off the blocking device and so scan through all the TV-G and TV-PG shows first.

While acknowledging the significant benefits the ratings provide parents, and stressing his network's endorsement and participation in the plan, Bill Pitts, vice president for government affairs at ABC, admits that there's a risk of losing some viewers in the wash. And he believes those losses would be more damaging to the broadcast networks than to cable networks, who are paid by the number of households they serve and rely only partially, if at all, on advertising tied to audience. "The V-chip has no effect on cable TV," he says. "If somebody is watching Home Box Office, and the V-chip blues out the screen, it doesn't matter: that show has already been paid for."

Bottom line: if the V-chip costs eyeballs, it could affect the content of the mainstream, early-evening shows as the networks become even more self-conscious about the subject matter they choose to portray. And even without the V-chip, the ratings can become a source of contention between a show's creators and the network. Recall the brouhaha last fall when Ellen DeGeneres threatened to walk away from *Ellen* after ABC brass branded the show with a TV-14 rating because of its gay themes.

> Network **television has succumbed to the inertia of routine,** the lure of easy money, the comfort of the familiar. And as the rest of the world has changed, the old network system, **with its prejudices and hierarchies, has begun to totter.**

The InterNetwork: Coming Soon?

While struggling to maintain the status quo, the major broadcast networks have kept a careful eye on new delivery media that could influence how they'll get their programs into people's homes and how many channels they'll have to compete with. Several high-capacity delivery systems today show promise: digital direct-broadcast satellite, digital wireless cable systems, and digital cable delivery.

So far, copyright and regulatory issues that prevent providers from broadcasting local channels have hampered DBS systems. But terrestrial microwave systems—commonly known as "wireless cable"—may not face the same hurdles. These systems have traditionally been limited to 36 channels, but by using digital compression, providers are now able to send up to 216 channels over the air, as SBC Communications recently began doing in Los Angeles. And as for local programming? Not a problem, suggests Bruce M. Owen, former chief economist for the Justice Department's Anti-trust Division and the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy.

"The wireless cable people are bound by the same 'must carry' rule that applies to cable systems," he says. "They are *required* to carry local signals."

Cable operators, meanwhile, who benefit from theoretically unlimited bandwidth for sending *or* receiving signals, can also go digital, and many have already added lightning-fast cable modem technology to deliver Internet services. This potential prompted Microsoft to invest $1 billion last June in Comcast, the country's fourth-largest cable operator, with the money intended for infrastructure upgrades to support Internet access and what Gates sees as the next generation of interactive digital media.

This nascent generation will probably include, in time, high-quality Internet video, the medium that will really put the "multi" in multichannel. Granted, we're still a couple of years away from real-time "streaming" of TV-quality video across the Web, but even now, there are more than *16 million* host sites to visit on the Internet, and any of those sites might eventually contain multiple audio/video programs. These could be anything from a traditional TV show (complete with commercials) ready to stream to you on demand to a fully interactive experience that lets you follow separate storylines for different characters, or choose endings or camera angles.

Everett Collection

Gil Schwartz, senior vice president for communications at CBS, however, considers the Internet "a cute little toy," referring to talk of watching TV on a computer or a computer-like television as "idiotic Webcentrism." Real TV viewers don't want interactivity, he suggests—a notion bolstered by the recent failures of several interactive TV test markets. "TV is a passive medium where people sit with a clicker and browse like giraffes; and for each person, there are a few shows each week that are 'appointment' viewing, and that's the way people enjoy watching TV," he avers.

Nor, according to some, does webcasting make economic or ergonomic sense today for delivering conventional video. "The World Wide Web is cheap and user-friendly compared to how things used to be with the Internet," says former DOJ economist Owen. "But it is far from cheap and user-friendly compared to television."

An Internet Renaissance

These issues notwithstanding, Owen and others suggest Internet video could still become a successful, if ancillary, video medium if Webcasters offer something *better*—or at least different—than what TV already provides. Something value-added that mitigates the cost of tomorrow's Internet-capable TV—or whatever subscription or pay-per-view fees the medium might entail. And that something extra might just be *creative* programming. Not 61 sitcoms that all look alike, but radically different shows that bear as much resemblance to the major network fare as does a 1963 Ford station wagon to a *Jetsons*-era hovermobile.

That's the scenario envisioned by John Kricfalusi, the animator who created the *Ren & Stimpy Show*, sold it to cable network Nickelodeon, watched the cartoon become a huge success, and then was fired after just 19 episodes over "creative differences." This experience led him to begin webcasting what he says is the Internet's first serial cartoon, *The Goddamn George Liquor American Show*, which debuted last October on the website maintained by his studio, Spumco, Inc. (**www.spumco.com**). In Kricfalusi's view, the Hollywood model—in which a relatively small number of broadcast and cable "monopolies" control distribution for every show—spells the absolute death of creativity. Artists like himself are forced to sell their copyrights, only to be bound by the vagaries of marketing executives. The end result, he says, "is basically dishonest, insincere." And more often than not, unoriginal and boring.

Enter the Internet. "You read about TV and how the ratings have gone down, and they always blame it on diversity—there's too much to search from, too many things to watch," Kricfalusi explains. "I think it's the opposite. There's *no* diversity, it's all the same. But the Internet will allow diversity. It'll allow every kind of style, and let people of every background do what they do best creatively. The audience will decide what's good, and there's no one in between the producer and the audience to mess with it."

Nice idea. The problem, unfortunately, is that there may be no one to pay for it, either. No one seems to have devised a strategy for making money from Internet video. Kricfalusi is hoping to secure corporate sponsorship for his cartoon, following the model used in the early days of TV, when there were shows like *Texaco Star Theater*. Somewhere during the show, the star characters of his cartoon would appear in an entertaining animated commercial (emphasis on the word "entertaining") that might encourage viewers to hit a button to get more information or visit the sponsor's website.

But this approach may prove limiting. "How many of these commercial sponsorships can Chevrolet afford?" asks Jack Loftus, a VP at Neilsen Media Research, which recently signed a deal with Lucent Technology to develop audience metering systems for the Internet. "It's a great idea if there are three people on the board. But when there are 3,333, there are just so many corporations. Somehow, you have to invent a new paradigm—you have to reach an audience and figure out a way to make money at it."

When someone does, millions of independent webcasters may prove to be the Big Four's most challenging competitors yet.

Digital Dreams

The Internet aside, the industry stands on the edge of yet another high-tech frontier, digital TV, which the broadcast networks have agreed to begin transmitting in the country's top-10 television markets this year. Under the FCC's DTV standard, networks can use the second channel they've been granted to send out either a single high-definition signal with superlative detail, widescreen aspect ratio, and six-channel digital sound, or alternately, perhaps as many as six "standard definition" digital channels.

All the networks have committed to transmitting at least some high-definition television programming to fulfill a promise to Congress and the FCC to help seed the market for digital TVs. Even so, from the broadcasters' point of view, the truly pregnant possibilities lie with standard-definition "multicasting." Although choices on how these extra channels might be used are virtually unlimited, the ideas most often bandied about include offering subscription services, 24-hour local news, or dedicated high-school sports channels.

"You can make a strong case for local programming on those channels," says Gerbrandt of Paul Kagan, Inc. "Cable has been slowly eating away at some of the local broadcast revenues, and this gives them a chance to recapture some of that."

Another inspiration that no doubt holds strong appeal for the networks is the ability to timeshift existing programming on these extra channels, broadcasting the same shows two or three times in order to build ratings and counter audience attrition.

For now, most networks are said to lean toward transmitting HDTV in primetime and multicasting during off hours, so as not to further fragment those important primetime audience blocks. Whatever they do, though, it will be a long time before DTV contributes to anyone's bottom line, particularly since digital transmission will require a significant infrastructure investment on the part of broadcasters. On the other side of the coin, you, the consumer, will pay $5,000 and up for your first digital television set, which will deliver, in the beginning at least, relatively few high-definition and multichannel programs. But as hardware prices eventually fall, and the software draw increases, the Big Four might find their digital dreams answered as audiences return to their folds.

The Patient Is...Stable

So where does this leave us? Are the broadcast networks who invented television and served as its patriarchs for 60 years a dying breed? Will there ever be a world without ABC, CBS, and NBC?

Don't count on it. For all the doom and gloom forecasts, the majors have proven surprisingly nimble through the years, and there's no reason to think they won't adjust to the new terrain. As things stand at present, their cross-pollination of cable and their relatively newfound content ownership suggest a model of financial stability that could negate, in years to come, the effects of viewer fragmentation. And to the extent that advertisers continue to value the eyeballs of the masses over the peep shows in which cable specializes, they—the networks—will hold an ace card for the foreseeable future, even if the audiences—if not the stakes—continue to shrink.

"When you can get huge audiences like they can, you can promote the hell out of the rest of the schedule and get the kind of sampling that cable networks can't," notes Neilsen's Jack Loftus. "I think that bodes well for the continued success of network TV. They are, combined, a huge marketing machine no matter how you look at it."

> "The **V-chip has no effect on cable TV** [revenues]. If somebody is watching Home Box Office, and the V-chip blues out the screen, it doesn't matter: **that show has already been paid for.**"
>
> *—Bill Pitts, vice president, government affairs, ABC*

The broadcast networks have not suffered by remaining the last providers of free TV and, through their affiliate stations, the primary source of local programming. As such, they continue, in Washington, to enjoy the rewards of favored-son status. The "must carry" rules that guarantee carriage of broadcast affiliate signals on cable systems appear solid after being upheld last March by the Supreme Court. And the strength of the broadcasting lobby's legendary political might was again demonstrated recently when Congress agreed to significantly extend the timeframe in which broadcasters must eventually surrender their valuable analog channels to the government, when the transition to digital TV is complete.

DTV, meanwhile, could prove itself an advantage to the networks; and judging from speeches and studies issued by the National Association of Broadcasters on the future of the Internet, the networks have thought long and hard about the industry's participation in the online video future. Certainly, they've already put their Internet savvy to use in creating sophisticated websites. You can expect them to be prepared.

Ultimately, the great network franchises will probably live on well into the future, remaining as ingrained an element of our culture as Coca-Cola. The future size of their audiences, the content of their programming, the method by which they will deliver it, the revenue streams and sources by which they will generate their income, the parent companies who own (or will own) them—all are unknown today. But the news of networks' demise, says CBS senior VP Martin Franks, is as always premature. "I've worked at CBS for 10 years and have dealt with this story for 10 years, and in 10 years, it'll still be around," he reflects. "The last time I looked, we were alive and well."

Rob Sabin is editor of Home Theater Buyer's Guide *and senior editor for* Home Theater *magazine.*