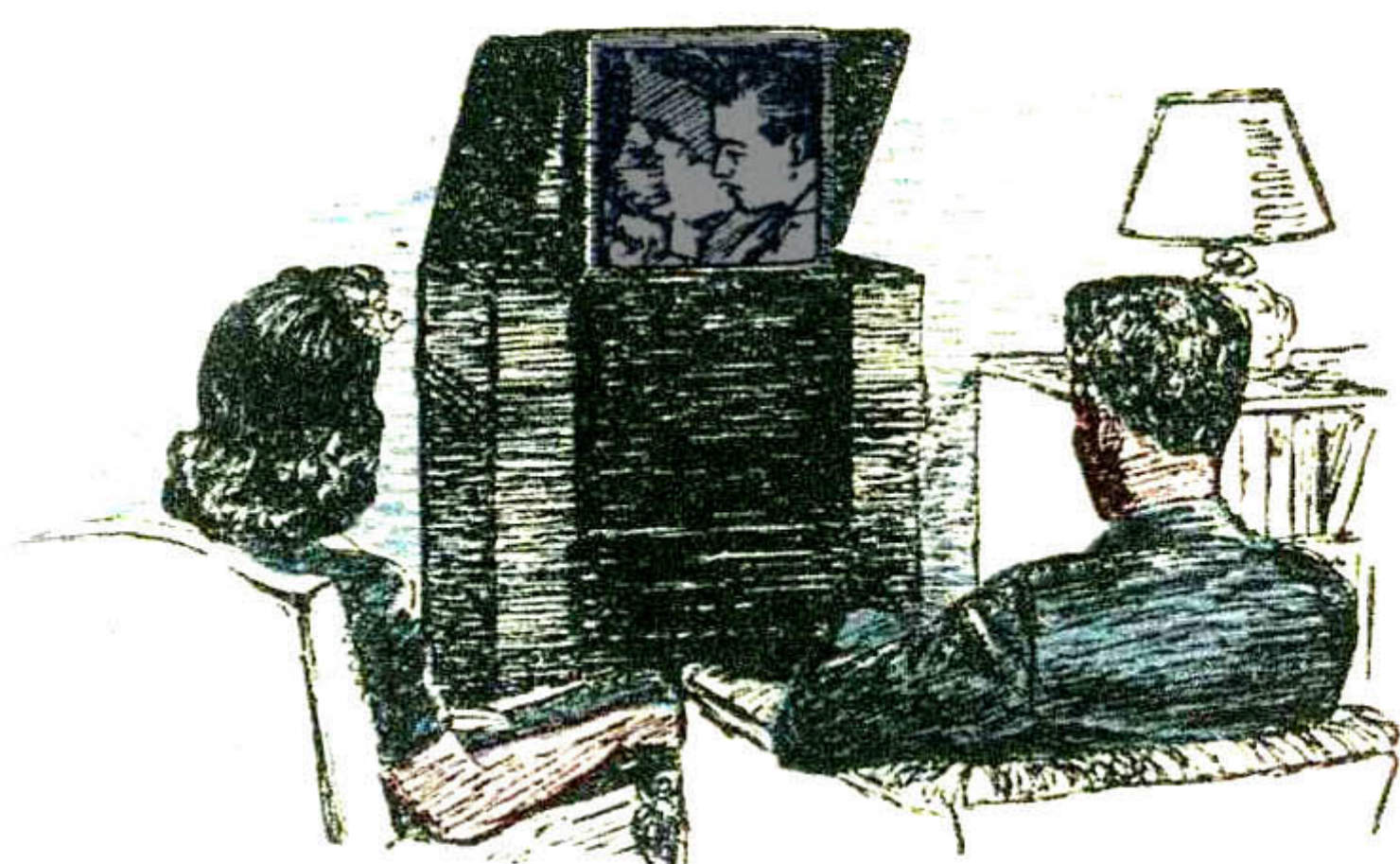


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Report on Television

Television is not just around the corner. It's here! But what it will be like and when we will have it depends on many things



by MAURICE ZOLOTOW

TELEVISION IS ONE of those wonderful post-war dreams we've all heard much about and with which we've had little firsthand experience. Yet recent surveys indicate that from 40 to 60 per cent of the population will want television sets when merchandise of all kinds is again available.

Leaders in television circles predict this new industry will help sparkplug the reconversion years and give jobs to 500 thousand men. DuMont, Farnsworth, Philco, General Electric, RCA, Zenith and other manufacturers will be able to provide your home with tele sets within 12 to 18 months after the war's end. Small table sets with a six-by-ten-inch screen will sell for 150 dollars; RCA has a 395-dollar job, a low-slung streamlined model, with a 16-by-20-inch screen, reflecting images projected by a cathode-ray tube in the base.

Tuning a telecast isn't quite the simple matter of snapping on your radio. About 15 minutes of twirling and adjusting are necessary. It takes the neophyte a week or so to get the knack of it. There are six knobs on the set, the first two controlling the image. As you tune in, your screen suddenly becomes filled with a scramble of what seem like dozens of wriggling, squirming, agitated worms; you calm down the squiggles by playing with the knob marked "horizontal hold," and then you work another knob marked

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“vertical hold.” Gradually, the wavy, nervous lines come into focus and become an image. It is like the image on a photograph taken by an amateur on the average camera. Around the edges of the screen the figures are blurry, and in the background the figures are frequently distorted and dwarfed. But engineers have overcome the flickering, jerky quality of pre-war telecasts, and today a television program—if it is at all smoothly produced—is exciting entertainment. You have to sit pretty close to the screen and you have to darken the room for best results.

The other knobs control the sound, the various station channels (your set will probably be able to get five stations), the contrasts of black and white, and the amount of brightness on your screen.

The tele set is, from every angle, a more complicated contraption than the radio. It has—not including the cathoderay tube—more than 30 different small tubes, and it contains a miniature power-station which steps up the house current to a high-voltage of 25 thousand volts, enough to murder any household electronicist who tries to fool around with his set and fix it himself. The tele set is so involved that 90 per cent of the radio servicemen will have to go to school for several months to learn how to repair and service these sets.

SINCE LATE in 1943, nine stations have been telecasting from six to eight hours every week.

Recently, I have watched several telecasts. There are only seven thousand tele sets in the country, and probably less than one thousand were tuned in to the telecast I watched. These programs are produced at great expense to train technicians, program producers and actors in this new medium.

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Staging a television show is more like movie-making than radio broadcasting. Television has its directors, lighting experts, sound engineers, cameramen. In tele circles the camera is called the iconoscope or ike, and it is set on a dolly, or moveable tray. A tele engineer will say, "The ike dollied down on the actor." Actually he means that the camera moved in for a close-up shot. But, unlike a Hollywood studio, television doesn't have a cutting-room, or editing of film, or retakes of badly done scenes. Like a radio broadcast, a telecast is final.

You immediately feel the contrast to radio broadcasting as we have known it. For one thing, the control room is in total darkness so that the engineers can study the three screens on their desks. Below them is the studio, a huge, high-ceilinged room, with the proportions of a grand ballroom. On this are sprawled the sets for various scenes, two television cameras which can be rolled in any direction, a movable overhanging boom microphone, dozens of reflectors hanging from the ceiling, which contain hundreds of long fluorescent bulbs providing what must be a blinding glare for the performers.

From where I stood in the glass-enclosed control room of a television station in New York, I could look down and watch the performers gesticulate and walk around. And then, by merely taking a few steps back to the rear of the control room, I could look at a television receiving set and get an idea of how the action would look in the home. It was an exciting experience. Television projects a sense of intimacy and close realism which no other form of art has ever been able to develop. The iconoscope gives you life itself: the creases in the taffeta gown of the girl singer, the self-conscious smile of the pianist whose fingers have slipped and smeared a chord, the quivering lip of the news commentator as he stutters while losing his place in the script.

The slightest slip or *fluff* is immediately magnified by the microscopic ike. Nor can there be any editing or revision of a telecast. A stage actor—keyed up though he is during a performance—knows that

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if he makes a mistake he can either cover himself with an *ad lib* or, at the worst, will only be shamed before several hundred spectators. The radio star, when he stumbles, falls on his face before many million listeners. For this reason, the atmosphere during a radio broadcast has always been tense. This characteristic of radio is carried over into television and intensified.

Television requires more rehearsal time. A half-hour show, like Bob Hope's, is rehearsed for three hours. On tele, it will require from eight to twelve hours because every performer must be letter-perfect and have memorized every word of his script down to the slightest flicker of an eyelash.

JOHN F. ROYAL, NBC vice-president in charge of television, says that telecasting will change the complexion of radio entertainment more than sound movies transformed Hollywood. "A tele actor," says Royal, "will have to be what we call a 'quick study,' a person who can memorize his lines quickly and remember the director's instructions and all his cues. Doubtless this means the end of the five-times-a-week daytime serial, for no actor on earth can memorize a new script every day in the week. The stage actor memorizes his part and then plays that same part with the same words for six months or a year. We shall have to adapt this 'long run' idea to television. When a successful play or show has been

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staged on television, we will repeat it many times. Television cannot stand the wastage of radio.”

Already the technicians have begun to solve the problems of this new medium, to invent little tricks. They use all sorts of optical illusions—silhouettes, dioramas, balopticons, magic lanterns. Bud Gamble, producer of tele shows, has experimented with light fantasy—ballet girls appearing to dissolve into ocean waves, a boy and girl riding on a magic carpet in a sky of clouds. Films have been used to give a scenic background.

The director, who has a complex script marked with video and audio cues, keeps about 30 seconds ahead of the action. He talks into a small mike. The mike is hooked up to earphones worn by the cameramen, the man in charge of the boom microphone, and the “floor manager,” who darts about trying to keep things under control. The director gives his directions rapidly. He tells his cameras to move slowly in for a close-up or a fade-out. He tells the floor manager to prepare for a shift of action, a change of scene. He tells the boom mike to back away or to shift to another part of the stage. He tells the announcer to be prepared for the station-break. He is also whispering instructions to his assistants, and to the engineers who regulate the volume of sound and the focusing of the image.

With Gilbert Seldes, the noted critic, in charge of programming, one television station in New York is gradually groping its way to the sort of programs that best lend themselves to telecasting. During the two-hour program I witnessed, there were 15 minutes of commentating, in which the cameras traveled from the commentator's face to one of three maps on which moveable pointers indicated the places being discussed. Then followed 15 minutes of vocalizing by a singer-pianist, assisted by a rhythm quartet and a tap dancer. Although I had begun to grow restless during the commentating, I found every moment of the music fascinating.

Then came a half hour quiz, by far the most entertaining part of the entire program. The master of

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ceremonies prodded his contestants, who blushed and said foolish things. There was a live duck swishing its tail, and quacking loudly. The contestants had to guess how many feathers the duck had. One man was blindfolded and rubbed the noses of three women; he had to guess which of them was his daughter's. All this, and the self-conscious, smirking answers the contestants gave to questions about their occupations was funny.

Programs like Ralph Edwards' *Truth or Consequences* will be very popular in television. Also, slapstick comedians like Jimmy Durante, whose routine is based on a certain amount of crude spontaneity, rough-and-tumble, throwing things around, kicking the piano, ripping up the orchestra's music. Less convincing, I think, will be the type of program that has to be carefully and scrupulously rehearsed, because television starkly reveals every mistake. "I have not seen a satisfactory teledrama yet," says Mr. Seldes. "We will have to evolve new forms of story telling."

TELEVISION, of course, will bring new kinds of programs. One New York station has done Arthur Murray giving dancing lessons to WAVES. Other stations have done fashion shows, magic tricks, acrobats, ventriloquists and art lectures.

From the viewpoint of the spectator, television may bring about some startling readjustments in his entertainment habits. The odd thing about radio has always been that you could listen to it and go about your household affairs.

Television, however, demands as much—and possibly more—active concentration on the visual impression as the movies. You can't watch a telecast while you're knitting or reading the evening paper.

It is likely that the very nature of visual entertainment *in the home* will preclude the successful presentation of any kind of lengthy dramatic show. When the spectator is in a position to casually get up at any time and walk to another part of the house to get a cigarette, the fabric of illusion so cunningly created by dramatist, director and actors is easily torn apart. Even a motion picture doesn't hypnotize

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as well as a stage play because in the motion-picture theatre there are always people moving around and ushers walking back and forth.

The men who invented reserved seats, separate acts, and intermissions, contributed as much to the illusion of the theatre as did the men who developed costumes and scenery.

Unless people get into the habit of setting aside one room in the house as a miniature theatre, television will never successfully do plays. It can never be the sort of all-day phenomenon that radio is in many homes, where the radio never ceases from morning till night. People will tune on their television sets to hear a specific program or to watch a specific personality. The fatigue point in watching television is quickly reached—I should say in about 90 minutes.

Television, therefore, is far from a threat to the movies or the stage. People who want the dramatic illusion will still want to go to a theatre. Neither is television a threat to magazines or to books. Talking, lecturing, the communication of abstract ideas is boring via television. The ability to go back and reread a difficult passage in a book or an article is not possible here, nor can you ask questions or heckle as you can in a lecture hall.

Television won't put the night clubs out of business, either. The pleasure you feel in a night club isn't entirely due to the floorshow—there is also the sense of community celebration arising from your being part of a large group of people.

How about symphonic music or opera? Televised opera seems to face the same obstacles as tele-drama, although one station in New York is very proud of a 48-minute condensed version of *Carmen*, staged by Dr. Herbert Graf of the Metropolitan Opera Company. And my guess is that people who like to listen to a Beethoven symphony want to listen to the pattern of the music and not to see close-ups of a violinist sawing away at a fiddle or a tympanist beating a kettledrum. The musician tends to distract from the music. In order to make a Kate Smith type of telecast interesting, you've got to weave a little story around the singer and give her an

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excuse for singing.

Television, then, while it will be a tremendously warm and pleasant form of entertainment with a flavor of immediacy unique to it, will not be the post-war revolution that many people in show business have been predicting it would be. Television can do certain things very well: spontaneous quiz and other "audience participation" programs, round-tables at which argumentative intellectuals can shout each other down, rough-and-tumble comedy programs, short musical selections, mainly swing or light classical. Most important of all will be the "special events" telecast, in which ike and mike go out into the real world and communicate something which is actually happening and which has an inherent drama: a boxing-match, a race, a political parade, a session of Congress.

My guess is that many television programs will eventually tend toward the variety formula of vaudeville, in which there was a quick succession of acts, each no more than 10 minutes in duration, and each very different from the one before. All the acts, jugglers and acrobats, who were driven into hiding when technology killed off vaudeville, will soon, by another quirk of technology, find themselves prospering.

It's a nice sort of poetic justice.

