

Revolution In a Box

by Charles Kenny

*It's not Twitter or Facebook that's reinventing the planet. Eighty years after the first commercial broadcast crackled to life, **television** still rules our world. And let's hear it for the growing legions of couch potatoes: All those soap operas might be the ticket to a better future after all.*

The **television**, science-fiction writer Ray Bradbury lamented in 1953, is "that insidious beast, that Medusa which freezes a billion people to stone every night, staring fixedly, that Siren which called and sang and promised so much and gave, after all, so little." Bradbury wasn't alone in his angst: **Television** has been as reviled as it has been welcomed since the first broadcasts began in 1928. Critics of **television**, from disgusted defenders of the politically correct to outraged conservative culture warriors, blame it for poor health, ignorance, and moral decline, among other assorted ills. Some go further: According to a recent fatwa in India, **television** is "nearly impossible to use...without a sin." Last year, a top Saudi cleric declared it permissible to kill the executives of **television** stations for spreading sedition and immorality.

So will the rapid, planet-wide proliferation of **television** sets and digital and satellite channels, to corners of the world where the Internet is yet unheard of, be the cause of global decay such critics fear? Hardly. A world of couch potatoes in front of digital sets will have its downsides--fewer bowling clubs, more Wii bowling. It may or may not be a world of greater obesity, depending on whom you ask. But it could also be a world more equal for women, healthier, better governed, more united in response to global tragedy, and more likely to vote for local versions of American Idol than shoot at people.

Indeed, **television**, that 1920s technology so many of us take for granted, is still coming to tens of millions with a transformative power--for the good--that the world is only now coming to understand. The potential scope of this transformation is enormous: By 2007, there was more than one **television** set for every four people on the planet, and 1.1 billion households had one. Another ISO million-plus households will be tuned in by 2013.

In our collective enthusiasm for whiz-bang new social-networking tools like Twitter and Facebook, the implications of this next **television** age--from lower birthrates among poor women to decreased corruption to higher school enrollment rates--have largely gone overlooked despite their much more sweeping impact. And it's not earnest educational programming that's reshaping the world on all those Tv sets. The programs that so many dismiss as junk--from song-and-dance shows to Desperate Housewives--are being eagerly consumed by poor people everywhere who are just now getting access to **television** for the first time. That's a powerful force for spreading glitz and drama--but also social change.

Television, it turns out, is the kudzu of consumer durables. it spreads across communities with incredible speed. Just look at the story of expanding TV access in the rural areas of one poor country, Indonesia: Within two years of village electrification, average **television** ownership rates reached 30 percent. Within seven years, 60 percent of households had TVs--this in areas where average surveyed incomes were about \$2 a day. Fewer than 5 percent of these same households owned refrigerators. **Television** is so beloved that in the vast swaths of the world where there is still no electricity network, people hook up their TVs to batteries--indeed, in a number of poor countries, such as Peru, more homes have televisions than electricity.

As a result, the **television** is fast approaching global ubiquity. About half of Indian households have a **television**, up from less than a third in 2001; the figure for Brazil is more than four-fifths. (In comparison, just 7 percent of Indians use the Internet, and about one-third of Brazilians do.) In places like Europe and North America, 90-plus percent of households have a TV. Even in countries as poor as Vietnam and Algeria, rates are above 80 percent. But the potential for real growth in access (and impact) is in the least developed countries, like Nigeria and Bangladesh, where penetration rates are still well below 30 percent.

If an explosion of access is the first global **television** revolution, then an explosion of choice will be the second. By 2013, half of the world's televisions will be receiving digital signals, which means access to many more channels. Digital broadcast builds on considerably expanded viewing options delivered through cable or satellite. Indeed, nearly two-thirds of households in India with a TV already have a cable or satellite connection. And in the United States, a bellwether for global **television** trends, the spread of cable since 1970 has meant

an increasing number of broadcast channels are sharing a declining proportion of the audience--down from 80 percent to 40 percent over the last 35 years. The average American household now has access to 119 channels, and a similar phenomenon is spreading rapidly around the globe.

The explosion of choice is loosening the grip of bureaucrats the world over, who in many countries have either run or controlled programming directly, or heavily regulated the few stations available. A 97-country survey carried out a few years ago found that an average of 60 percent of the top five **television** stations in each country were owned by the state, with 32 percent in the hands of small family groupings. Programming in developing countries in particular has often been slanted toward decidedly practical topics--rural TV in China, for example, frequently covers the latest advances in pig breeding. And coverage of politics has often strayed from the balanced. Think Hugo Chavez, who refused to renew the license of RCTV, Venezuela's most popular TV network, after it broadcast commentary critical of his government. He regularly appears on the state channel in his own TV show *Aló Presidente*--episodes of which last anywhere from six to a record 96 hours.

But increasingly, the days when presidential speechmaking and pig breeding were must-see TV are behind us. As choices in what to watch expand, people will have access both to a wider range of voices and to a growing number of channels keen to give the audience what it really wants. And what it wants seems to be pretty much the same everywhere--sports, reality shows, and, yes, soap operas. Some 715 million people worldwide watched the finals of the 2006 soccer World Cup, for example. More than a third of Afghanistan's population tunes into that country's version of *American Idol*--*Afghan Star*. The biggest **television** series ever worldwide is *Baywatch*, an everyday tale of lifesaving folk based on and around the beaches of Santa Monica, Calif. The show has been broadcast in 142 countries, and at its peak it had an audience estimated north of 1 billion. (Today, the world's most popular TV show is the medical drama *House*, which according to media consulting firm Eurodata TV Worldwide was watched by 82 million people last year in 66 countries, edging out *CSI* and *Desperate Housewives*.)

Ghulam Nabi Azad, India's health and family welfare minister, has even taken to promoting TV as a form of birth control. "In olden days people had no other entertainment but sex, which is why they produced so many children," he mused publicly in July. "Today, TV is the biggest source of entertainment. Hence, it is important that there is electricity in every village so that people watch TV till late in the night. By the time the serials are over, they'll be too tired to have sex and will fall asleep." Azad is certainly right that **television** helps slow birthrates, though experience from his own country and elsewhere suggests that it is by example, not exhaustion, that TV programs manage such a dramatic effect.

Since the 1970s, Brazil's Rede Globo network has been providing a steady diet of locally produced soaps, some of which are watched by as many as 80 million people. The programs are no more tales of everyday life in Brazil than *Desperate Housewives* is an accurate representation of a typical U.S. suburb. In a country where divorce was only legalized in 1977, nearly a fifth of the main female characters were divorced (and about a quarter were unfaithful). What's more, 72 percent of the main female characters on the Globo soaps had no kids, and only 7 percent had more than one. In 1970, the average Brazilian woman, in contrast, had given birth nearly six times.

But the soaps clearly resonated with viewers. As the Globo network expanded to new areas in the 1970s and 1980s, according to researchers at the Inter-American Development Bank, parents began naming their kids after soap-opera characters. And women in those parts of the country--especially poor women--started having fewer babies. Being in an area covered by the Globo network had the same effect on a woman's fertility as two additional years of education. This wasn't the result of what was shown during commercial breaks--for most of the time, contraceptive advertising was banned, and there was no government population-control policy at all. The portrayal of plausible female characters with few children, apparently, was an important social cue.

Cable and satellite **television** may be having an even bigger impact on fertility in rural India. As in Brazil, popular programming there includes soaps that focus on urban life. Many women on these serials work outside the home, run businesses, and control money. In addition, soap characters are typically well-educated and have few children. And they prove to be extraordinarily powerful role models: Simply giving a village access to cable TV, research by scholars Robert Jensen and Emily Oster has found, has the same effect on fertility rates as increasing by five years the length of time girls stay in school.

The soaps in Brazil and India provided images of women who were empowered to make decisions affecting not only childbirth, but a range of household activities. The introduction of cable or satellite services in a village, Jensen and Oster found, goes along with higher girls' school enrollment rates and increased female autonomy. Within two years of getting cable or satellite, between 45 and 70 percent of the difference between urban and rural areas on these measures disappears. In Brazil, it wasn't just birthrates that changed as Globo's signal spread--divorce rates went up, too. There may be something to the boast of one of the directors of the company that owns Afghan Star. When a woman reached the final five this year, the director suggested it would "do more for women's rights than all the millions of dollars we have spent on public service announcements for women's rights on TV."

TV's salutary effects extend far beyond reproduction and gender equality. Kids who watch TV out of school, according to a World Bank survey of young people in the shantytowns of Fortaleza in Brazil, are considerably less likely to consume drugs (or, for that matter, get pregnant). TV's power to reduce youth drug use was two times larger than having a comparatively well-educated mother. And though they might not be as subtly persuasive as telenovelas or reality shows, well-designed broadcast campaigns can also make a difference. In Ghana, where as few as 4 percent of mothers were found to wash their hands with soap after defecating and less than 1 percent before feeding their children, reported hand-washing rates shot up in response to a broadcast campaign emphasizing that people eat "more than just rice" if preparers don't wash their hands properly before dinner.

Indeed, TV is its own kind of education--and rather than clash with schooling, as years of parental nagging would suggest, it can even enhance it. U.S. kids with access to a TV signal in the 1950s, for instance--think toddlers watching quality educational programming like *I Love Lucy*--tended to have higher test scores in 1964, according to research by Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro of the University of Chicago. Today, more than 700,000 secondary-school students in remote Mexican villages watch the Telesecundaria program of televised classes. Although students enter the program with below-average test scores in mathematics and language, by graduation they have caught up in math and halved the language-score deficit.

Similarly, evidence that **television** is responsible for the grim state of civic discourse is mixed, at best. Better **television** reception in Javanese villages in Indonesia, according to research by Ben Olken, comes with substantially lower levels of participation in social activities and with lower measures of trust in others. Villages with access to an extra TV channel see a decline of about 7 percent in the number of social groups. Similar outcomes have been found in the United States. But improved **television** reception did not appear to affect the level of discussion in village meetings or levels of corruption in a village road project undertaken during Olken's study. And an examination of the early history of **television** in the United States by Markus Prior suggests that regions that saw access to more channels in the 1950s and 1960s witnessed increases in political knowledge, interest, and turnout, especially among less-educated TV viewers.

What about **television's** broader impact on governance? Here, it's the level of competition that seems to matter--a hopeful sign given that the future of global TV is likely to be considerably more competitive. If the only channel that viewers watch is biased in its coverage, then, unsurprisingly, they are likely to be swayed toward that viewpoint. Brazil's Globo channel, for all its positive impact on fertility rates, has played a less positive role in terms of bias-free reporting. It has long had a close relationship with government, as well as a dominant market share. In Brazil's 1989 election--a race in which Globo was squarely behind right-leaning presidential candidate Fernando Collor de Mello--the difference between people who never watched **television** and those who watched it frequently was a 13 percentage-point increase in the likelihood of voting for Collor, scholar Taylor Boas found. But with channels proliferating nearly everywhere, **television** controllers may have much less power to sway elections today. In the choice-rich United States, for example, there is no simple relation between hours watched and voting patterns, even if those who watch particular channels are more likely to vote Republican or Democrat.

Then there's corruption. Consider the bribes that Peruvian secret-police chief Vladimiro Montesinos had to pay to subvert competitive news-making during the 1990s. It cost only \$300,000 per month for Montesinos to bribe most of the congressmen in Peru's government, and about \$250,000 a month to bribe the judges--a real bargain. But Montesinos had to spend about \$3 million a month to subvert six of the seven available **television**

channels to ensure friendly coverage for the government. The good news here is that competition in the electronic Fourth Estate can apparently make it more expensive to run a country corruptly.

Corruption is one thing, but could **television** help solve a problem we've had since before Sumer and Elam battled it out around Basra in 2700 B.C.--keeping countries from fighting each other? Maybe.

U.S. researchers who study violence on TV battle viciously themselves over whether it translates into more aggressive behavior in real life. But at least from a broader perspective, **television** might play a role in stemming the global threat of war. It isn't that TV reporting of death and destruction necessarily reduces support for wars already begun--that's an argument that has raged over conflicts from Vietnam to the Iraq war. It is more that, by fostering a growing global cosmopolitanism, **television** might make war less attractive to begin with. Indeed, the idea that communications are central to building cross-cultural goodwill is an old one. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels suggested in the 19th century that railways were vital in rapidly cementing the union of the working class: "that union, to attain which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their miserable highways, required centuries, the modern proletarians, thanks to railways, achieve in a few years," they wrote in the Communist Manifesto. If the Amtraks of the world can have such an impact, surely the Hallmark Channel can do even better.

The fact that Kobe Bryant (born in Philadelphia, plays for the Los Angeles Lakers) sees his basketball shirt considerably outsell those of Yao Ming (born in Shanghai, plays for the Houston Rockets) in China suggests something of that growing global cosmopolitanism at work. The considerable response of global **television** viewers to images of famine in Ethiopia, or the tsunami in Asia, also shows how TV is a powerful force for shrinking the emotional distance between peoples within and between countries. In the United States, an additional minute of nightly news coverage of the Asian tsunami increased online donation levels to charities involved in relief efforts by 13 percent, according to research from the William Davidson Institute. And analysis of U.S. public opinion indicates that more coverage of a country on evening news shows is related to increased sympathy and support for that country.

Of course, the extent to which **television** helps foster cosmopolitanism depends on what people are watching. People in the Middle East who only watched Arab news channels were considerably less likely to agree that the September 11 attacks were carried out by Arab terrorists than those exposed to Western media coverage, researchers Gentzkow and Shapiro found, even after taking into account other characteristics likely to shape their views such as education, language, and age. Similarly, the tone and content of coverage of the ground invasion of Iraq was notably different on Al Jazeera than it was on U.S. and British network broadcasts in the spring of 2003--and surely this helped sustain notably different attitudes toward the war. But with the growing reach of BBC World News and CNN in the Middle East, and the growing reach of Al Jazeera in the West, there is at least a greater potential to understand how the other side thinks.

Just because soap operas and reality shows can help solve real-world problems doesn't mean the world's politicians should now embrace TV as the ultimate policy prescription. There are of course a few things governments could do to harness **television's** power for good, such as supporting well-designed public service announcements. But for the most part, politicians ought to be paying less attention to TV, not more. They shouldn't be limiting the number of channels or interfering in the news. A vibrant, competitive **television** market playing Days of Our Lives or Días de Nuestras Vidas on loop might have a bigger impact even than well-meaning educational programs. And competition is critical to ensuring that **television** helps inform voters, not just indoctrinate them.

In the not-too-distant future, it is quite possible that the world will be watching 24 billion hours of TV a day--an average of close to four hours for each person in the world. Some of those hours could surely be better spent--planting trees, helping old ladies cross the road, or playing cricket, perhaps. But watching TV exposes people to new ideas and different people. With that will come greater opportunity, growing equality, a better understanding of the world, and a new appreciation of the complexities of life for a wannabe Afghan woman pop star. Not bad for a siren Medusa supposedly giving so little.