



pare and contrast As you read these articles, look for how watching TV has changed over the years.

#### LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S 6 WORDS IN BOLD

n a cool spring afternoon in 1946, a small truck pulled up in front of the Ross house in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Eight-year-old Karen Ross hurried outside with her parents. Neighbors appeared and watched with

excitement as two men lugged a massive box through the Rosses' front door. The Rosses had been the first on the street to have a dishwasher. Now they would be the first to own perhaps the most amazing household invention ever: the

**Small** Screens, **Big Changes** 

America changed from the 1950s to the 1980s—and so did our favorite TV shows.

## **Bigger Screens**

In those early days, a television cost more than \$400, nearly three months' salary for the average American. The sets were enormous, but the screens were no bigger than a paperback book. The picture was often covered with white dots of static, called "snow." There wasn't much to watch either. Mainly wrestling and boxing matches were shown, as well as "variety shows," which featured dancers, singers, and comedians.

But the quality of television improved

quickly. Sets became cheaper, screens bigger, and pictures less fuzzy. By 1956, there were three big national TV networks: ABC, NBC, and CBS. These networks competed with each other to **lure** viewers with new and more exciting kinds of programs.

Families like the Rosses would rush through dinner so they could sit together for their favorite shows. Karen wished her own mother were as patient and perfect as June Cleaver from Leave It to Beaver.

# **Family Favorites**

As Americans' love for TV grew, some worried about its negative effects. People gave up hobbies like reading to watch TV. Kids didn't play outside as much. Commercials for cigarettes and junk foods encouraged bad habits.

At the same time, TV was becoming an electronic glue for Americans. During the 1950s through the early 1980s, TV was a powerful cultural force that bonded people together.

People watched the same TV shows whether they lived in big cities or tiny towns. They learned about the day's news from the same nightly broadcasts. Children grew up singing their ABCs along with Big Bird, the

vellow-feathered giant of Sesame Street. Kids obsessed over Star Trek and laughed at I Love Lucy. Saturday mornings were the time when TV stations ran cartoons.

## **Tragedies and Triumph**

In the 1950s.

the average

American watched

3.5 hours of TV

per day.

As technology improved, TV brought live news events into American homes. In 1963, Americans watched as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed "I have a dream" from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Later that year, America's most trusted news anchorman. Walter

> Cronkite, held back sobs as he broke the news that President John F. Kennedy had died after being shot. In 1969, nearly 125 million Americans watched Neil Armstrong become the first person to step onto the moon.

These moments of national tragedy and triumph helped unite Americans. People from different

backgrounds could feel connected to one another through shared heartbreak or pride.

TV would keep changing. But even today, more than 70 years later, Karen Ross still remembers the excitement of the day that fuzzy TV screen lit up her family's living room.

"It seemed miraculous."

## **Not Just Perfect Families**

America's first TV families featured parents who never fought and kids who eagerly did their chores. In the 1970s. TV families became more realistic. One Day at a Time was one of the first to show a divorced single mom.





## Taking on Serious Issues

TV made Americans face serious issues, like racism and prejudice. In 1977, the miniseries Roots helped America confront our country's history of slavery. It was one of the most-watched series in history.

More Stars of Color Until the 1970s, few shows featured people of color in starring roles. The Cosby Show was the No. 1 show from 1985 to 1990. But lack of diversity on TV remains a problem.

television.



New technology has changed how we watch TV. But what do these changes mean for us—and our nation?

It's Friday night at 10-year-old Elijah's house in Norwalk, Connecticut, and each family member is enjoying a favorite show. Elijah is on his laptop in his bedroom, watching the New York Knicks get crushed by the Golden State Warriors. His 13-year-old sister, Natalie, is downstairs studying YouTube baking videos on her iPhone. Their parents are upstairs, streaming a movie on Netflix.

Only one set of eyes in the house is not glued to a screen: those of Snowy, the family

cat. But it's not hard to imagine that one day soon there will be a TV channel just for America's cats.

#### **Transformed by Technology**

A few decades ago, when Elijah's parents were growing up, such a scene would have been unimaginable. Back then, there were only three main TV networks showing a limited number of shows. And even if you didn't watch a popular show like *Full House*, you knew all

about the adorable little Olsen twins. There was only one way to watch a TV show: on a TV. Computers sat on desks and were mainly for doing work. As for phones? They were just for talking—and they were wired to the wall.

But starting in the 1980s, television in America transformed. First came cable TV, which brought hundreds of new shows into American homes. Some new channels were **dedicated** entirely to one subject. There was ESPN for the sports obsessed, and CNN for people who wanted news 24 hours a day. Nickelodeon took Saturday-morning cartoons and aired them every day of the week.

After cable TV came the internet, faster computers, and smartphones. These new devices and technologies changed the way we live—and watch TV. Now, in 2017, we can watch thousands of shows and movies at any time, on any device, from just about any place.

More teens watch YouTube than TV.

videos per day.

dwelle

#### **Are We More Divided?**

There is no doubt that TV has improved in many ways since Americans started watching in the 1940s. The number of quality shows

is higher than ever, with far more **diversity**. Families no longer have to fight over what to watch on the family TV because individual family members can simply watch what they want on their own devices.

But some experts worry about what all these changes mean.

Decades ago, people of different backgrounds and beliefs could come together through their shared love of a certain show. No matter where you

Today.

the average

American watches

6 hours of TV and

lived or who you voted for, you trusted news anchorman Walter Cronkite. Families spent evenings together watching "must-see" shows.

Today, studies have found that few shows are popular all around the country. While people in **rural** areas are watching *The Voice* and *Duck Dynasty*, city

dwellers are more likely to tune in to *The Simpsons* and *Modern Family*. There are dozens of news shows on TV and online, each with a different point of view.

Could all these different choices be making our nation—and our families—more divided?

Elijah isn't sure. But he admits that his family is worried about their habits. That's why they have recently committed to a once-amonth family movie night. They'll take turns choosing what to watch.

"I might be bored," Elijah says. "But at least we'll be together."

# WHAT'S THE CONNECTION?

In what ways is watching television today different from the way it was in the past?

What might you have liked or disliked about TV years ago compared with TV today? Use information from both articles and the sidebars in your response.

FIND AN ACTIVITY ONLINE!



Beginning in the 1980s, new shows and technologies changed the way we live and watch TV.



## The Coming of Cable TV

In the 1980s, hundreds of new cable stations were dedicated to 24-hour news, sports, and music videos (like Michael Jackson's "Thriller").





Reality Shows
Take Over

In the 1990s, viewers discovered that reality shows like *Survivor* could be more fascinating than fictional dramas.

#### YouTube

The first YouTube video in 2004 showed elephants at the San Diego Zoo. Now there are millions of channels and superstars, like the duo Smosh.



12 STORYWORKS