

Television and Counterculture

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Although the television technology was in use during the early twentieth century, television sets did not become a popular format for the dissemination of news and entertainment in the United States until the 1940s. The medium's popularity increased quite rapidly thereafter. In 1948, 1 million U.S. households had television sets. By 1969, 95 percent of American homes contained a television and Americans watched an average of six hours of television daily. As a result of its popularity, television programming has often been seen as an extremely effective tool for the maintenance of ideological control and thus as a resolutely mainstream medium. Countercultures, however, wrought significant changes in the structure and content of television; the 1960s, when television was still a relatively young medium and countercultural groups were growing in popularity, was a particularly important period for such changes. During this time, news coverage of countercultures as well as entertainment content drawing from countercultural stereotypes represented efforts to profit upon the public interest in countercultures. Ultimately countercultures of the period changed television, especially by making it a medium more attuned to youth culture. At the same time, television impacted the political strategies of countercultures.

Television is alluring to anyone with a message to spread because its extensive and intimate penetration into the daily lives of Americans makes it an attractive way to share ideas on a large scale. At the same time, many of the practices that have come to

be associated with television, including situation comedies that reinforce sanctity of the nuclear family and heterosexuality, entertainment programming employing racist depictions of minorities, the perceived bias of mainstream news, and the use of commercials to support the costs of most programming, represent values to which countercultures have often been opposed. Furthermore, large corporations owned the three major networks in the U.S. during the 1960s. Therefore, many countercultural groups had very little access to the means of production or distribution for television. As a result, when representatives of a counterculture appeared on television, they were almost always being framed and represented by the forces (capitalist, patriarchal, racist) to which they were opposed.

For example, the youth based movements of this period, especially rock 'n roll, prompted the quest for programming that used rock music to capture the interest of younger viewers. NBC launched *The Monkees* (1966-1968) in 1966 in an attempt to capture some of the hysterical interest in The Beatles; it consisted of actors portraying the members of a band called The Monkees. The series was evacuated of any morally objectionable content, but strove to retain the style of the hip culture associated with rock music. This tendency to repackage the threat of drugs and brazen sexuality that rock represented into a harmless, stylish entertainment product was dominant. Other popular programs that presented a sanitized version of the sordid world associated with rock music included *The Beatles'* Saturday morning cartoon (1965-1968), Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* (1957-1990), and *The Partridge Family* (1970-1974).

The Mod Squad (1968-1973) made clear the way in which the youth counterculture was changing traditional television formats. The show took a traditional

television format, the buddy cop show, and altered it by including both a woman and an African-American character in addition to a white male. The threesome were hip, fashionable juvenile delinquents recruited to do police work to save themselves from jail, and they mingled easily within an exciting Southern California youth subculture in order to fight crime. The show's logline advertised its attempt at a multicultural revision of the buddy cop genre: "One black, one white, one blonde." The show was an instant hit, perhaps because it could not only draw interest from countercultural viewers, but also because it seemed to give a mainstream viewer entrée into youth subculture while still maintaining the strong sense of morality that drove cop shows in the era.

Some television personalities earnestly sought to infuse their programs with countercultural messages, though generally with little success. The Smothers Brothers tried to use the platform of their comedy variety show *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (1967-1969) to come out against the Vietnam War. As a result, the CBS network president vowed to censor the show, and under pressure from advertisers the show was cancelled despite its popularity. Gene Roddenberry, the creator of NBC's *Star Trek* (1966-1969), was likewise prevented from writing shows that implied opposition to the Vietnam War. Because advertising dollars drive television, any content deemed significantly threatening to the status quo tends to be censored to avoid the loss of advertising revenue.

Television programs also lampooned the counterculture for entertainment value. *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959-1963) featured a recurring Beatnik character named Maynard G. Krebs. Krebs was a harmless character who loved jazz and playing the bongos and had an aversion to work of any kind. Rowan and Martin's *Laugh-In*

(1968-1973) was a sketch comedy show that drew on imagery of the sexually loose swinging sixties for laughs. Many other programs had single episodes in which the main characters ran into stereotyped versions of beatniks, hippies, feminists, or Black Power activists who would almost always display markers of countercultural stereotypes without giving voice to any substance behind their style.

The existence of televised media also effected a change in leftist politics, and was a factor in precipitating political certain strategies adopted by the New Left. Organizers came to appreciate the necessity of visual spectacle in their protest events, recognizing that outrageous or unusual events could lead to increased coverage by the televised media. The Yippies were one leftist organization that recognized the importance of the spectacle in protest. The October 1967 march on Washington against the Vietnam War attracted 100,000 protestors, but Yippie Abbie Hoffman's claim that he would levitate the pentagon, accompanied by poet Allen Ginsberg's Tibetan chants and a musical exorcism by Ed Sanders' band The Fugs, arguably made the march a more attractive event for television coverage. Another event that showed the recognition of the power of the visual demonstration of protest in the age of television were the actions of Tommy Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympic games. By lowering their heads and raising their fists on the medal stand in a message of Black Power, Smith and Carlos created a visual image that was reproduced and discussed extensively on the televised news. Despite countercultural groups' tendency to attack mainstream media and embrace alternative media, it is important to recognize that many leaders understood the need to attract the attention of the mass media.

Since the 1960s, television has continued to be a medium that caters to interests of youth culture and tends to represent threatening social movements in a politically neutered manner for its own financial profit. Advances such as color television and the advent of cable have only made television a more profitable and ubiquitous source of information. Countercultures have most recently seen representation on cable networks, whose proliferation has meant an increasingly diverse representation of U.S. cultures on television. Notably, HBO has brought viewers into seemingly realistic depictions of mob life, in the Sopranos (1999-2007), as well as into polygamous countercultures with its program Big Love (2006). Showtime's Queer as Folk (2000-2005) opened up a frank look at gay subculture, and its The L Word (2004) does the same for lesbian culture. Reality television also sometimes attempts to offer insight into the lives of marginalized groups previously unrepresented on television.

Nevertheless, the trend toward consolidation of the ownership of television ownership by multi-national has continued, and as a result television continues to offer little platform for resistance to mainstream culture. The advent of the age of the Internet during the late 1990s has begun to significantly change the business model of television, but for now the medium remains one in which countercultures have a vested interest, but little real control.

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Further Reading

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