

The End of Television as We Know It; On Emmy Sunday, former TV academy chairman Bryce Zabel peers into the future of his industry-- and finds a technological blur

Bryce Zabel. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 19, 2004

Most nights in our house, I'd like to think that everyone in the family--two parents and three kids--is present and accounted for, but that would require a room-to-room search. It was so much easier keeping track of people in the nuclear family of my childhood. Eight o'clock meant prime time. Everyone huddled around our hot new color TV watching the same episode of "Mannix" or whatever was on. The last time that family group thing happened in my house was, well, I can't remember--not even on an Emmy Sunday like tonight.

It's not technically "television" we're watching these days, and we're not "watching" it so much as interacting with it. The prime-time "network" programs weren't scheduled in offices in Burbank or Los Angeles, but here at our house, by us.

On Bryce TV, I'm glued to my computer monitor, streaming evening news clips from six sources, simultaneously Googling how to turn a boat upside down and keep it floating, and writing this essay.

On Jackie TV, my wife, also a screenwriter, is in the bedroom, engrossed in a DVD that she had Netflix mail to our house.

On Jonathan TV, our just-graduated high school senior is playing the latest incarnation of "Final Fantasy" on the PlayStation 2 in between watching "The Daily Show" on a VHS copied from the TiVo, all while working out on the elliptical trainer.

On Lauren TV, our teenage daughter has a movie selected from the DirecTV home page, downloaded off the satellite, now screening with her posse on the big screen downstairs.

On Jared TV, our 12-year-old is finishing last week's episode of "Monk," then switching to "Smallville" 15 minutes late so that it's already recorded on the DVR hard drive and he can skip through the commercials.

My grandmother was born into a world without airplanes, but she lived to see man walk on the moon. By comparison, many of us today were born into a world of black-and-white, three-channel, no-remote, single-TV households. When my father chaired our TV universe from his Barcalounger, we had network loyalty because it was easier than getting up to change channels. We bought certain products because we saw their ads. If we missed a show, we had to hope it would re-air in the summer. If you missed a movie, forget it; you had to wait for college and hope to get it in a film class. Quaint, isn't it?

Today my youngest child probably has as much control over his viewing options as CBS

patriarch William Paley did. Everywhere Jared turns, he makes choices: what he wants to watch, when he wants to watch it, which set he wants it on and so forth. There's a lot more than good old-fashioned TV competing for his interest. In our technology-crazed house, his attention can get hijacked by an iPod (maxi and mini versions), cellphones that take photos or download music or send instant messages, GameCube, the CD stacker, Xbox, broadband network, wireless this and that, PlayStation 2, TiVo, DirecTV, Netflix, the big screen, TVs in five rooms, five desktop computers, one laptop, cable, satellite music and all the piled-up screening tapes sent out by the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

There's so much stuff coming at us so fast, from so many angles, that it's shocking to see our oldest son, Jonathan, now exhausted from his time on the elliptical, curled up with a good book. He's our household anomaly. Did you know that the number of Americans who even cracked open a book of fiction in the last year was only 47%? That's down 10% in 22 years. Not all that surprising, though, as we see this avalanche of alternatives rolling toward us.

Broadcast pundits try to get us to call these new choices by the important-sounding term "convergence." Around our house, the only thing converging is kids with outstretched palms looking for cash to buy DVDs, CDs, PCs, music downloads, cellphones and every other new piece of hardware needed to play all of the software. For me, it's not a state of convergence that we are entering in this digital age but something a little more metaphysical. All of the information overload is ganging up on our senses and coming together into something else:

The Blur.

By that I mean the lines and boundaries that once kept things in their nice little compartments are washing away like a sand castle at the beach. Yes, we have phones that are cameras, computers that are TVs and televisions with satellite music, but it's really more than that. In the military, soldiers have a phrase to describe what is really happening versus what the generals and others are telling them is happening--they call it the "ground truth." When the press release says we're winning the hearts and minds, but the boots on the ground are taking incoming fire? That's ground truth.

The corporate view often heard is that digital video recorders, or DVRs, won't catch on with the masses. Don't take that bet. The ground truth, in my household, is that people are willing to embrace a new technology faster than they used to. Cable took a while to catch on, but satellite TV is going gangbusters. The VHS took a while, but the DVD had 'em at hello. If you have one of these DVR devices, then you know how your world has changed. You no longer watch television as you once did. The VHS promised time-shifting. The DVR delivers it.

With the DVR, you become a network programmer, picking a little here and a little there, watching it on your terms. My family has become passionate about our TiVo. Nobody ever says in our house, "What's on TV tonight?" We do, however, check to see what's on the DVR. Even when I was chairman of the TV academy, I usually had no clue what night my favorite programs were on. A good night of television might be "24" (Fox/Tuesday/9 p.m.), "CSI" (CBS/Thursday/9 p.m.) and "The Sopranos" (HBO/Sunday/9 p.m.). But I had to check the network websites to tell you that. In the DVR world, times are irrelevant.

In fact, if you have a DVR you can start recording the Emmys tonight at 8 p.m. but not start watching until 9, which will give you enough time to zip past the commercials without catching up to the show "live" before it ends. How do you spend that hour between 8 and 9? How about watching this morning's "Meet the Press" or last week's "Without a Trace"? I know, I know.

Sedition from a former chairman of the TV academy, but this is reality, folks. That giant sucking sound you hear is not just jobs going to Canada. It's the shattered pieces of the old system going down the drain.

In the late Brandon Tartikoff's memoirs, the whiz kid programming chief for NBC called his time in television "the last great ride." It wasn't all hyperbole. He was the last network programmer who could claim dominance. Today Les Moonves, the head of CBS, still rakes in bushels of ad dollars, as Tartikoff did with his "Cosby Show" and "Cheers"-fueled viewing frenzies. But CBS' hit "CSI" only pulls in 16% of American homes with TV sets. This means, if you do the math, that about 84% of viewers are doing something else. And this is the No. 1 rated network show for prime time. We're far past the days when we watched "Bonanza" together.

So what does this mean for the future? Television, you all know, is run by people who tell other people what to watch and when, while cramming in more and more ads to pay for it. Plug in a device that short-circuits the system--and watch out.

Already the lines between advertising and content are blurry. Increasingly the ads aren't just between programs, they are in programs. Just ask the starved "Survivor" munching on his bag of Doritos. And, by the way, while we're zapping past ads on our TVs, have you noticed the one place where the number of ads keeps increasing? Your local Cineplex.

Kids, especially young men, spend more than twice as much time playing video games and surfing the Internet as they do watching TV. Other than his daily dose of Jon Stewart, my oldest son only watches Japanese anime that he TiVos or gets from Netflix, preferring instead to play Web-based role-playing games with friends all over the world or participating in a LAN "frag fest." He's minoring at USC next year in Video Game Design because he refuses to "waste his genius" on screenwriting like good old mom and dad. My teenage daughter watches TV, instant messages her friends, listens to music and does her homework all at the same time. Television has competition for our kids' attentions, even as they evolve to instinctively filter out whatever input they don't want to focus on.

My neighbor and friend down the street works at Sony Pictures. He says one of the next big things for Sony is the "media server." It's a single hard drive somewhere in your house that stores all of your digital clutter: music, films, video games and TV shows. Then all this content gets distributed to whatever monitors you have, wherever you have them. Eventually you'll have access to every film, TV show, video game and song ever made. On demand.

Here's what I want to know: Will kids who can no longer appreciate the difference between a broadcast network and a cable network, or a pay network and a satellite feed, really appreciate the distinctions we currently draw between all of these delivery systems? My daughter is an MTV fan, but to her that cable network is on par with CBS--they're both viewed on a TV set, which is just a monitor to her. Throw out all of the frustrating-to-open DVD boxes and CD jewel cases, and pretty soon it's just a screen with choices on it, like computers. It's one giant, indistinct, amorphous hard drive of blur.

That's the future. And it is pretty much here, no matter what anybody says.

Now for those of you reading this magazine who work in the entertainment industry, here's a late-night fever inducer: When viewers have the ability to skip a commercial, they generally will. A recent survey of more than 600 DVR owners says they use the machines for 43% of the TV shows they watch precisely so they can fast-forward past commercials. So when DVRs and media

servers have penetrated enough households, what exactly is the business model that pays for the commercials, which pay for the programs we write and produce, which pay our salaries, which feed our families? Former Coca-Cola President Steven Heyer told an Advertising Age conference last year that "if a new model isn't developed, the old one will simply collapse."

The best model to replace what's on the way out may be TiVo meets iTunes. As another friend of mine says, it's all coming down to who "aggregates" the bill. Oh, broadcast TV will have ads for a few decades--maybe--and lower-income consumers will watch them. The higher-income households with DVRs will have to pay to download content. People have a certain figure in their head that they're willing to pay to bring content into their homes and use it on their monitors, provided that number doesn't get too outrageous. Our media bills will look more and more like just another utility bill. You consume a lot of water and electricity, and you pay more. You consume a lot of digital downloads, it's gonna cost you.

Will there be advertising? Naturally. As for what it will look like, and how you'll get it, I'm going to have to get back to you on that. But we can say this much: the Last Big Thing was the 30-second commercial. Take a moment to watch them fading away in your rearview mirror.

Yet amid the uncertainty, there is a positive role model. Remember Bob Hope? He thrived through vaudeville, radio, movies and television. He knew his content and he molded it to the evolving delivery systems.

Well, those of us in entertainment have been creating content since the storytellers gathered around nice warm campfires. And we will be doing that for as long as there are people who want to know what the folks are like at the campfire on the other side of the river. Just don't forget to throw another download on the digital campfire.

Whatever's playing on your network tonight, I'm sure it will be just perfect--for you.

Credit: Bryce Zabel served as chairman and CEO of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences from 2001 to 2003, the first writer in that post since Rod Serling. Zabel's current project, a miniseries adaptation of "The Poseidon Adventure," is now in production in South Africa, and he will write and produce "Fall from Grace" for USA Network.

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