

TV Is Not Dead, Just On A Summer Pause

Television is universal, lots of people watch it and it's getting better

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In the past few days, as people prattled on about the retirement of Lloyd Robertson, the arrival of Lisa LaFlamme as CTV's news anchor and a looming news-anchor announcement by Global, I was often told that nobody is watching TV these days. This opinion was usually delivered with some delight.

The main reason for certain parties to assert that TV is dead is pretty clear. During the first week of July, the U.S. networks had the fewest prime-time viewers in two decades. According to Nielsen data, CBS averaged 5.6 million viewers, NBC, 4.7 million, ABC, 4.5 million and Fox, 4.1 million.

About the same time, The New York Times reported that ratings for the U.S. network news shows were down for the second quarter of this year. Both ABC and CBS had record low numbers for their evening news programs. Even NBC, which has led in the super-time news race for several years, had historic low numbers.

These two news items were widely and gleefully reported online. Well, of course. Any time old media are shown to suffer, online news sources high-five each other and predict the imminent death of newspapers, TV, magazines and, for all I know, the use of pens and pencils worldwide.

Fact is, too much is being made of these two news stories. Reports of the death of TV appear often and are always exaggerated. It's the summer, it's only the networks that suffer significantly. Television isn't dead. Even network TV isn't on its deathbed – it's merely on "pause."

First, there is one interesting footnote to the big story about American network TV ratings being at a historic low. In the key (to advertisers) 18-to-49-year-old demographic, the Spanish-language cable channel Univision finished second behind over-the-air Fox. Call me peculiar, but it could be that, even in the United States, an awful lot of people were watching World Cup soccer. Tell those people, clinging to every move by teams from Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Honduras, Mexico and Uruguay, that TV is dead.

In the matter of the ratings for the network news shows, the continuing decline is no surprise. All-news cable has been slowly torturing network news to death for years. While CBS or NBC will devote a few minutes to the big story – in this case, the disastrous Gulf of Mexico oil spill – CNN, Fox News or MSNBC can devote hours.

Apart from the dubious data and the manic delight of online news sources, there are other reasons to reject the idea that TV is dying. One: Television is what people talk about. It's universal, that's why. Everybody can watch; it's one of the few shared experiences in the world today. Even shows that air on hard-to-find or expensive cable channels have a huge audience, thanks to DVDs. The number of people looking forward to the new season of *Mad Men* (starts this Sunday) is way larger than the ratings numbers for last season would suggest.

Two: There is endless optimism about TV, because it is full of surprises. Last year at this time, only a handful of people had heard about *Glee*. On paper, the show sounded ridiculous – a high-school drama/comedy with musical numbers. It took only weeks for *Glee* to become a phenomenon and both Canada and the U.S. now teem with people who have an opinion on what songs should be sung on the show.

Three: More people watch TV than admit to doing so. Even in the summer, people will seek out and enjoy conventional TV. The Canadian drama *Rookie Blue* (Global, ABC, Thursdays, 9 p.m.) is a hit, both here and in the U.S. It has already been renewed for a second season. It's no masterpiece and I haven't met anybody glued to it, but more than one million Canadians have seen every episode so far.

Four: Television keeps getting better. Seen *True Blood*? Vampires, werewolves and such. It's all that, but there's a deftness in the satire and an intelligent playfulness that makes most Hollywood movies look lame. The same smarts can be found in many HBO and other cable shows.

Five: Everybody wants to be on TV. That might be a bad thing in many cases, but it's a fact. And, you know, as long as that's true, TV is alive and kicking.