

Mary Oates

Writing 400

Capstone Project

### **Why Television Matters**

I was born because of a television show. Really, I was. When my mom was in college, she was a big fan of the 80s soap *Dallas*, which is fittingly set in Dallas, Texas and I can only assume is incredibly cheesy. After she graduated, she decided to move to Dallas, in part because of her favorite show. It was in Dallas where she met my dad and Dallas was where they got married. So effectively, I owe my very existence to this show that I've never even seen an episode of. When I say that I believe television is significant, it is because I am living proof.

Television is often decried as a mindless form of entertainment and nothing but a waste of time. People brag that they don't watch TV like it's an achievement. But I think that television is an extremely valuable medium within our society. It brings people together in an amazing way, allowing millions to watch the same broadcast at the exact same time. Over the past 60 years, almost every major event within the United States, whether it was a triumph such as the moon landing or a tragedy like 9/11, was shown on television. Scripted programs, although fictional, tell complex stories with themes that resonate within our modern world. These shows make us think and can spark discussion about important issues. As we become emotionally attached to shows and characters, they become parts of our lives, and connect us to others that have that same investment. In this way, TV unites us, creating communities and friendships that wouldn't be made otherwise. Television serves as a basis for social interaction, and by helping us to better understand ourselves and others, it plays a positive, influential role in society.

Although I've been watching TV basically all my life, it wasn't until my freshman year of college that I realized the powerful impact that television could have. The first couple semesters of college were hard for me. I was having trouble adjusting to my new environment and the rigorous workload, as well as problems making friends. I was homesick, stressed, and struggling with depression. It was during this difficult period of my life that I came across the show *How I Met Your Mother*. It wasn't a groundbreaking show; it was a silly sitcom with a cheesy laugh track, but it made me happy. Sometimes it was the only thing that could make me smile during the day. I remember returning to school after a break, saying goodbye to my parents, and feeling an overwhelming loneliness as I stood in my empty dorm room. I turned on the TV and watched *How I Met Your Mother* as I unpacked, letting it cheer me up with each episode. It was positive, and gave me hope that things would somehow work out. This show about five friends hanging out at a bar became incredibly important to me.

Becoming a fan of HIMYM was the first time I connected to a show so deeply, and it helped me discover my passion for television. As I started to look for recaps and news about the show online, I came across fan communities not just for HIMYM but many other programs. I also started reading TV news sites more regularly and finding out about other shows that I started to watch as well. While watching shows from *Parks and Recreation* to *Orphan Black*, I began to realize how much I loved this medium.

In the past I had recognized television as a form of mass communication, capable of both entertaining and educating. But I started to see it as more than that. Not only can TV tell fantastic, emotionally rich stories from week to week, but it also connects us as a culture. I may

feel a personal investment in a particular show, but so do millions of people worldwide. TV can be both universal and personal at the same time, and at its best, it can say something that really matters. It can reflect our society and resonate with its viewers, and get people talking. This is when I started to consider pursuing the career of television journalist, using my love of writing to further discuss and explore the nature of TV.

Newcomb and Hirsch describe how television functions as a cultural forum, “as a whole system that presents a mass audience with the range and variety of ideas and ideologies,” (508). The arts have always been used to explore issues inherent in society, and television is no different. TV raises questions about subjects such as race, gender, and sexuality, without providing any concrete answers. This allows for a variety of viewpoints and can start a discussion. Viewers interpret TV differently depending on their own experiences. As Newcomb and Hirsch explain, by “bringing values and attitudes, a universe of personal experiences and concerns, to the texts, the viewer selects, examines, acknowledges, and makes texts of his or her own,” (512).

But while television can reflect our personal view of the world, it can also help us see the world in new ways too. Candace Moore is an assistant professor of Screen Arts and Cultures and Women’s Studies at the University of Michigan. She believes that television can expose audiences to cultures and ways of representation that they may not be familiar with. “Often the ways that we understand our identities, how people act, representations of the other are through television, which maybe make us change how we think about that,” Moore said. She mentioned the civil rights movement of the 60s and the portrayal of gay and lesbian characters today as

examples of how television changed the way minorities were represented. “It allows a kind of thinking about who we are and allows a diverse range of representation,” Moore said. “It can have this positive effect in getting people to open up the way they think about different cultures.” By addressing prevalent societal and cultural topics and starting a conversation about them, TV can help us to understand the perspectives of those different from us.

The TV criticism of today is a prime example of how television can serve as a springboard for a discussion of bigger issues. While TV recaps used to consist mainly of what happened in an episode and whether it was good or not, many writers have gone beyond this to consider how the themes of the show relate to society. This willingness to dive deeper into a show and consider its cultural significance can start meaningful discussions in the comment section below the article. Matt Zoller Seitz, a well-known TV critic, notes that these comments “talk about morality, philosophy, sexual politics, the war, and the economy in relation to the show.” He also states that “taken together, the reviews and comments don’t just tell you about what happened on that episode, they tell you what life was like on that particular night. They tell you about life, period.”

Seitz does something similar in his own pieces, such as his commentary on how *Parks and Recreation* mixes humanity and politics. “The series’ laid-back idealism about both government and individuals puts a spring in its step,” Seitz said. “There’s something fundamentally warm and embracing about *Parks and Rec*’s worldview. No current sitcom does a better job of making simple decency seem integral to the fullest enjoyment of life.” Television makes a statement about the world we live in, and TV critics try to determine what that is.

According to Xu and Yan, “television viewing can strengthen an individual’s sense of relatedness with the real world; whether the real world is the immediate social circle of peers and friends, distant unknown others, or a broader social milieu,” (189). Having the shared experience of watching the same show as someone else can establish a sense of belonging. Being able to have a conversation about the crazy thing that happened in the last episode, either in-person or online, creates a feeling of community (Xu & Yan 203).

As an industry, television has gone through some major changes over the years, and this has affected the specific ways in which it brings people together. In the early days of television, there were only three networks: NBC, ABC, and CBS. This meant there were very few options for viewers to watch, and programs had to cater to the widest audience possible. Given the minimal choices and no way to watch the broadcast later, a large portion of the country would be watching the same program at the same time (Johnson 136). “When we talk about early network television, you had people gathering in the home, generally the nuclear family, to view television together in the evenings. The social aspects of television were domesticated to some degree,” Moore said.

The spread of cable in the 80s and 90s allowed for more channels and a greater diversity of shows. This is also when the concept of serialization was introduced to television. Serialized TV meant that plots no longer had to be wrapped up in an hour or half-hour’s time; there was room for story arcs and for characters to develop. These ongoing storylines engaged the viewer and kept them coming back week after week. Cable also allowed networks to target more specific audiences, which led to niche shows. Niche programs attracted a smaller but dedicated

viewership (Johnson 140). These shows required more attention from their audience to follow the plot and the characters. The serial format keeps viewers invested in these programs, watching them over and over again and following them through the years. While it became harder for television to connect the entire country with a single show, each show could appeal to its own subset of devoted fans.

With the invention of DVRs and online streaming, viewers are now in control of when they watch certain shows. Even though technology has made television a more personalized experience, the internet has made it easier than ever to connect with fans all over the world. “Because of the internet we are networking and being social across distance, as fans come together around particular programs and make connections,” Moore said. “Sometimes those virtual connections can become realized when fans are gathering around a premiere, or Comic-Con, or any kind of group celebration of a television show.”

Television shows that don't appeal to mainstream audiences but have amassed a small, very passionate fanbase are often referred to as cult television. The fans of cult shows are usually very active online, even if the show has been off the air for years. Cult TV shows can range from sci-fi programs such as *Doctor Who* to high school shows such as *Veronica Mars*, but they all share common elements. They take place in a highly detailed narrative world, with complex characters and complicated storylines that fans can pick apart (Hills 511). These programs don't explain everything to viewers, they make them think and pay attention to the details to understand what's going on.

Fan practices play an important part in determining whether a show is considered cult. “I think the idea of cult TV is TV that is loved, TV that fans actually almost feel that they possess, to such a degree that they produce art, fiction, and obviously this community around it. I think that the definition of cult TV is tied to those practices,” Moore said. Fans of *Star Trek*, arguably the original cult show, were sending each other fan magazines and attending conventions decades ago. Today, fans connect through online forums, fan sites, and social media. It’s here that they fight to keep their show on the air or try to revive it, dissect the latest episode, create new narratives through fan fiction, and share fan art and other creations. These online fan activities show their devotion to the show and how it plays an important role in their lives.

Costello and Moore argue that the internet is an outlet for like-minded fans to gather and share their opinions, especially if they don’t personally know anyone who watches the show (134). Finding a group of people who are equally enthusiastic can add to the enjoyment of watching the show. According to Costello and Moore, “on the internet, there is literally a true interpretive community, where people discuss their delight and disgust at plotlines, dialogue, and character developments. The information and interaction helps them to think about a program differently,” (135). Instead of being passive viewers, they are actively involved in analyzing the show and therefore getting more out of the viewing experience.

Sheila Machado lives in Brazil and co-runs CommunityThings, a fan blog dedicated to the show *Community*. The quirky and heartwarming cult comedy centers on a group of misfit students at Greendale Community College. Although it might be hard for some people to understand how fans can devote so much time to something fictional, television can impact a

person outside the world of the show. For Machado, *Community* has given her a different outlook on life. “It’s the coolest most genuine show that ever was. *Community* makes my life so much happier and turned me into a much more likeable person,” Machado said in an email interview. “But the show also gave me a more positive perspective on life. That’s because every character goes to Greendale because they failed somehow, and there they find hope and happiness in themselves, in their weirdness. It’s so beautiful!”

Machado said that since she started helping her friend run the blog four years ago, it’s become a big part of her experience as a fan of the show. She’s been able to communicate with fans around the world. “The fans are amazing,” Machado said. “Our fandom is fantastic.” Through these online communities created around TV, fans are able to meet people they wouldn’t have known otherwise and form friendships with them.

Television shows can help people bond with their family and friends they already know as well. It might be two best friends who text during each episode of *The Vampire Diaries*, freaking out over every twist. Or a group of friends that make constant references to *The Office* that everyone gets. Or a busy family that makes time each week to watch *Modern Family* together. My sister and I annoy each other endlessly, but we share a love for *Gilmore Girls*. She can text me “58 seats, 62 Koreans” and I immediately know what she’s quoting. Despite our disagreements, the fact that we grew up watching that show together strengthened our relationship.

But what about the relationships we form with the characters themselves? Even though they aren’t real, as we get to know these characters as our friends. We learn about their lives,

their quirks and flaws, and how they react to certain situations. The term “parasocial interaction” refers to the relationship that one feels like they have with a character, even though they can’t interact with them in person. Rubin and McHugh define this relationship as “a bond of intimacy that is developed with media personalities through shared experiences existing only through viewing of the personality or persona over time,” (282). This bond with a character can be even stronger if one identifies with the character or feels that they are similar to them.

And yes, it might feel silly to care so much about characters who don’t exist, but it’s not silly at all. What separates TV from other mediums is that we come back to these shows week after week, year after year. They have characters we relate to and become attached to as we watch them grow, and even grow along with them. We follow them through happy times and hardships; we laugh with them and we cry with them. We watch them go through changes and experience things that we’ve experienced. They become part of our lives. And with such a dedicated relationship, it’s no wonder that they hold meaning for us, a special place in our hearts. It’s the reason I cried happy tears when Ben and Leslie got married on *Parks and Recreation* and sad ones when Amy and Rory left *Doctor Who*. After spending so much time with these characters, even if it’s through a screen, it’s normal to feel emotional.

And sometimes television can break your heart. *How I Met Your Mother* ended recently after nine seasons. When a show ends and you no longer get the chance to spend time with these characters every week, it’s like losing someone close to you. I thought it was fitting for the show to be ending just a month before I graduated from college, as I finish this chapter of my life and move on to a new one. I thought it would bring things full circle. I expected to watch it and cry

bittersweet tears, saying goodbye to an old friend while thanking it for everything it's done for me.

But life can be unexpected, and so can TV. The series finale was devastatingly horrible. I watched in utter shock, wondering why the writers would choose to destroy character development and concoct an ending that didn't make any sense. There were no tears; there was only rage as I furiously texted my friend. This wasn't the show that brought me so much hope. It couldn't end like this. How could this happen?

I wasn't the only one who was outraged by the finale. Over the next few days, there was extensive online discussion about the way the series should have ended. Some people defended the ending, but many others were upset. This mainstream sitcom, not a cult show by any means, was clearly important to a lot of people. They wanted it to have a satisfying ending. While television can bring a lot of joy, it can also bring distress. Characters die, couples break up, shows get cancelled or don't end the way we want them to. But just like hard times in life, TV-based tragedies can bring people closer together and strengthen friendships. After the HIMYM finale, I went over to my friend's apartment and we discussed our reactions, which was very cathartic for me. The fact that a television episode can cause such an outcry from so many people speaks to the kind of impact it has.

In the comment section of one of the articles I read discussing the finale, someone said it was ridiculous that people were so invested in a sitcom. Another reader wrote a reply that stuck out to me. "When you have a show, like HIMYM or *Cheers* or *Battlestar Galactica* or *Mad Men*, which speaks to the very heart of you, that nourishes your soul, you cannot help but become

invested,” he said. “*How I Met Your Mother* was a show that meant something very personal to me. I related to Ted Mosby. I’ve faced horrible, dream-shattering, soul-crushing moments in my life that have left lasting scars, and yet I persist. No, *How I Met Your Mother* wasn't the best television had to offer, overall, but we can't help what we love.” I think this response perfectly exemplifies just how significant television can be.

It’s taken me a while to reassess my feelings towards HIMYM, and I’m still working on it. Honestly, I feel kind of betrayed. Can the show still hold a special place in my heart after it let me down? I know that the answer is yes. Just because the ending was disappointing doesn’t negate what it did for me. It was there for me during hard times, and even though a lot has changed in my life since I started watching it, it’s remained a constant for me to come back to. I carry a yellow umbrella because it’s a symbol of the show. On every rainy day I can pull out that umbrella and still smile, thinking of that one show that got me through, that could cheer me up no matter what.

Because television is powerful, even when we least expect it to be. Three years ago, my mother, whose life was changed by a TV show, was sitting in a hospital room with my grandfather. She didn’t know it then, but it was the last day of his life. His eyes had been blank all day, his face expressionless. He was unable to recognize anything around him, not even his daughter. Sitting with him, she changed the channel on the TV to *All in the Family*, a show he liked to watch when she was growing up. As my grandpa stared vacantly at the TV, he saw the face of Archie Bunker, the cantankerous protagonist that he personally identified with. Yes, I know that’s not a good thing, but that’s my grandpa for you. As my grandpa stared up at the face

of Archie, my mom swears she saw a brief flash of recognition in his eyes. He saw that crotchety man complaining on the screen and something within his brain clicked. In the last few hours of his life, my mom got to see a quick glimpse of the father she knew, watching a show that he loved. If that doesn't show the power of television, I don't know what does.

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