

Burma Shave To The Beatles: Television Media Influence in the Golden Age

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The Academic Setting

I am a Social Studies and U.S. History instructor at Jefferson Middle School, a well-established school centrally located, at 712 Girard NE, near the University of New Mexico. Many students live in various areas of Albuquerque, but choose to attend Jefferson because of its many enrichment opportunities. Our school population of nearly a thousand students performs well on standardized tests, and our ranking is among the top in A.P.S. middle schools.

The JMS mission statement is as follows: "Our mission statement is to provide a safe and positive learning environment in which all students can obtain an effective and motivated education that will enhance their lives academically and socially."

The class this curriculum is designed for is a U.S. History eighth-grade class. The inclusion model at JMS utilizes varying degrees of student learning capabilities at all grade levels. Inclusion is an instructional model whereby regular education and special education students work together in classrooms. Special education students include gifted students, as well as students with learning issues. Our goal in this course is to develop an awareness of the freedoms and responsibilities in our society.

It is a widely held belief-one to which I subscribe-that the electronic mass media, particularly television, exerts increasing social, intellectual, and emotional influences on early adolescents. Because middle school Social Studies aims to prepare students for citizenship in American society, it is important to teach students skills to deal with the power which television has in their lives. Students currently in middle school have grown up with television viewing as a daily routine. I would hope my unit of study will prepare them to be more media-literate as we explore the Golden Age and how it helped TV progress to the indispensable part it plays in our lives today.

"Content and background"

"TV consumes us much more than we do it", according to Pico Iyer, author and essayist for *Time Magazine*. In his article in the May 14, 1990 issue of *Time*, he refers to the inability of children who have grown goggled-eyed around the electronic alter (i.e. TV) to believe

that anything is real unless it comes with a laugh track; they organize their emotions around commercial breaks and hope to heal their sorrow with a PAUSE button. History, for them, means syndication; ancient history: the original version of *The Brady Bunch*" (Baran 37). Television saturates our daily lives. We are exhorted to buy this product and fly on that airline by ads on television. Many households have a television in nearly every room today. Because of the vast power television wields in our lives, I would like to concentrate on a curriculum that explores television literacy today, and compare what TV was like in the beginning, in what has come to be called "The Golden Age of Television" of the 1950's and 1960's, to what it is today.

For students to achieve television literacy, they must be aware of how television programs, movies, and ads affect them. "The controversies about television programming and the quality of shows are real public issues, and the classroom discussions about such issues can promote cognitive development. Probing questions can train students to interpret and assess the impact that television has on what they know and what they think and do." Key questions are, "What is the message that we get from that news story? That ad? What did I learn?" (Baron 188).

In my twenty-five years of teaching middle-school students, it has been my observation that most of today's middle-school students assume that TV has always saturated our lives to the degree that it does today. But, in fact, it wasn't always that way. There was a time when it was not nearly the all-pervasive and ubiquitous companion to our daily lives that it has become. Though television today shapes many aspects of our lives, in the early 1950's it was a luxury item, present in only the more affluent households. It was a time of three channels and two colors. Previous to the Fifties, a longer workweek made leisure time a meaningless concept. As the early Fifties wore on into the mid-Fifties, the forty-hour work-week made it possible for even the average family to gather around the TV in the evenings and watch their favorite shows. Daytime TV was filled with soaps, children's shows and game shows. If you woke up before the beginning of the broadcast day, you found yourself staring at a test pattern. The playing of the "Star Spangled Banner" began each broadcast day with military color guards standing at attention. "Taps" was the saddest song, played at the end of the evening, when we watched in disappointment as the flag was lowered and folded, and the announcer came on and bade us farewell at the end of another broadcast day. But he always asked us to tune in tomorrow, and we always did.

Why have I chosen to focus my project on the 1950's and 1960's Golden Age of Television? Daily use of TV in all types of American households averages seven and one-fifth hours a day. In homes with teenagers under eighteen, the average viewing time is fifty-five hours weekly, or about seven and four-fifth hours a day. The Nielson rating system in 1999 reported this.

"Nearly every household (99%) has at least one television. Three-fourths (75%) have several sets, and more than half of American students have a television in their bedrooms. TV has become as indispensable in the home as a bathtub or a refrigerator, and probably garners much more attention than either of those appliances. Furthermore, the public's fascination with TV now extends beyond the home. A recent Nielsen (1998) survey found that about twenty-three million Americans watch TV when in restaurants or bars, and more and more are watching TV in airports, hospitals, and other public places. Television is now the main source of news, information, and entertainment for the overwhelming majority of Americans" (Baron 188). How did the beginnings of these popular media help shape where we are today?

How do the mass media convey the priority of an issue to the public today? It occurs mainly through repetition, which cues the public as to the relative importance of an issue: "Repetition sets the public agenda through the continuing hammering away of the media on the same issue." (Dearing 42). Of course, each news story about any single public event is a variation on a theme, as each story describes some particular facet of a broader issue. What was the agenda for TV in the Fifties and Sixties, and how were major issues such as segregation, busing and the Civil Rights Movement affected by the media agenda of that time period?

G. Ray Funkhouser, a professor of communication at Pennsylvania State University, was the first to investigate the role of real-world indicators in agenda setting. Funkhouser, in an article published in 1973, found what other scholars have discovered since: "The news media did not give a very accurate picture of what was going on in the nation during the Sixties." (Dearing 43). This general lack of a one-to-one relationship of media coverage with real-world indicators occurred because of "artificial news," called "pseudo-events," in which news events such as civil rights demonstrations and Earth Day are staged to create news coverage of an issue, and because it is perceived as "news" after extensive media coverage (Dearing 44). In his published article, he compared the public's agenda with the media agenda, and found them to be highly correlated. He noted that in the 1960's a number of new issues appeared on the national agenda,

perhaps because of social unrest and protest. "So the media agenda influences the public agenda for an issue through a gradual and incremental process. As the cumulative effect of media messages about issues increases over time, the public becomes persuaded that the issue is important. Slowly, the public agenda for an issue builds up." (Dearing 62).

Students currently in middle school have grown up with television viewing as a daily routine. In fact, during the years of schooling, more time is spent watching television than attending school. By graduation from high school, a student will have spent only about 11,000 hours in school but between 15,000 and 20,000 hours watching TV (Minow 1996). But how did we get here from the beginning? Was this the original intention, and what agenda does TV set today for teenager. Was it the same in decades past?

In 1946 there were only about seventeen thousand TV sets in existence in the United States of America. Throughout the 1950's almost seven million sets were sold per year. By the end of the decade, it was a common feature in most American homes. It was a time of black and white, not only in the color of the set, but in the attitudes of the viewers as well. Life was simpler, or so we thought. Americans began to schedule their lives around their favorite weekly shows. Families sat in a central location--preferably the living room--to view together. No one could afford two sets! Lucky was the family that was the first on its block to own a TV and thus show off its wealth to the neighbors.

As the Sixties rolled around, the color of television changed, and so did society. History in the making was viewed not weekly or daily, but now on an hourly basis. From our living rooms, the world was in full view.

Television made the connection then, and it still is a major focus in the lives of our students. The middle school Social Studies curriculum aims to prepare students to be active and involved citizens in today's complex society. It is important that they learn the skills to deal with the power that television wields in their lives.

"From exploding H-Bombs to the hip-shaking Elvis Presley, Americans watched the images of the Fifties flicker by on black and white television sets. The small-screened televisions in lacquered wooden boxes permanently changed how Americans saw the world, and how the world saw America." (Kallen 26). It brought news, sports and entertainment into our homes daily. There was something for everyone. For the first time Americans could see live national political debates. *American Bandstand* brought the latest rock and roll stars to

teenagers. The children enjoyed westerns, and quiz and variety shows. For better or worse, television had become a major influence in American life.

"Like the black and white images on the screen, life in the Fifties was a time of stark contrasts." (Kallen 44). In 1950, one hundred and eight stations were broadcasting to seventeen million television homes. By the end of the decade, there were five hundred fifty-nine stations, and nearly 90% of U.S. households had televisions. In the 1950's more television sets were sold in the United States, seventy million, than there were children born, forty and-a-half million (Baron 216-217).

What was being watched? As a carry-over from the radio networks, TV genres included variety shows, situation comedies, dramas (including Westerns and police stories), soap operas and quiz shows. Two new formats appeared: feature films and talk shows. This was a great opportunity for radio personalities to be seen for the first time. CBS's Edward R. Murrow brought TV news and documentary broadcast journalism to a powerful force. Huntley and Brinkley's 1956 coverage of the major political conventions gave audiences a glimpse of the power TV had to cover news and history in the making (Baron 217).

The big Quiz Show Scandal of 1959 changed advertising, and brought about the 60-second spot commercial. Prior to this, an advertising agency would hire a production company to produce a program for a client. The agency would then pay the station to air the program over its national network of stations. This system worked for radio, so why change it? But advertisers and producers of the Fifties-in order to ensure that favored contestants would defeat unpopular ones, and to artificially build tension where a mismatch was anticipated-had rigged the shows "*\$64,000 Question*" and "*Twenty-One*". It shocked viewers to learn that the answers had been given to picked contestants before broadcasts. The ensuing embarrassment for networks led to the elimination of advertisers and ad agencies from the production and distribution processes. Because audiences held the networks responsible for what appeared under their names, the networks argued that they were obligated to control their schedules, and so the networks themselves began commissioning or buying the entertainment fare that filled their schedules. This has been the case ever since, and some critics argue that it was the sixty-second spot commercial-which came about as a result of this change of control-that brought an end to television's Golden Age.

Spot sales reduced the willingness of the networks to try innovative or different types of content. Their justification for such an approach was

that familiarity and predictability attracted more viewers and, therefore, more advertisers.

In 1951 Lucille Ball made the move from a radio show *called "My Favorite Husband"* to television. It is still viewed on syndication as *"I Love Lucy."* Of the many demands she made-such as using her Cuban husband in the show and working with three cameras and a live audience-the biggest was to move the show to California. That zany redhead transformed the business and the look of television. Filmed reruns are now possible, something that was not possible with live TV. The television industry moved from New York, with its stage-drama orientation, to Hollywood, with its entertainment-film mindset. More action and more flash came to the screen. Weekly series could be completed in twenty to twenty-four weeks, saving money on actors, crew, equipment, and facilities. In addition, the same stock shots-for example, certain exterior views-could be used in different episodes (Baron 220).

What were the families like in the Fifties, as presented on TV? Millions of mostly male, white wage earners were supporting their families, buying new cars, and sending their children to college. On the other hand, minorities were not sharing in the American dream. Their lives were shaped by discrimination and segregation, and they began to expect equality and a fair share of that American dream.

The roles in society were also as simple as the black and white on the TV screen. The nuclear family was played out in all productions as the same. The working father returned home daily to find the Fifties stay-at-home mom. Her basic needs were being fulfilled in being a wife, mother, and happy homemaker. Many of these moms volunteered for charity drives, were Boy and Girl Scout leaders, served on the PTA (Parent Teacher Association), and taught Sunday school in their spare time.

Teenagers of the fifties were the best-fed, best-educated, and best cared for generation in history. In contrast, juvenile delinquency bloomed into a real problem of the era: "Teen-agers of the 1950's were stronger, smarter, more self-sufficient and more constructive than any other generation of teenagers in history." (Kallen 56-57).

The perfect American family was portrayed in the sitcoms. Stay-at-home mom had perfect homes. Milk and hot, fresh cookies were always waiting at the end of a school day. Teachers were always single, young, well-mannered and good-looking females. A popular sitcom of the period was *"Ozzie and Harriet."* Ozzie never left the house (How he made a living was anybody's guess!), so he had plenty of time to give well-listened-to advice to his devoted sons, who hung

on his every word.

Many great TV entertainers performed live. The most popular shows were in the same time slots as today (7:00, 7:30, etc...). The news, only fifteen minutes long, was on two channels in the evening, and there were no live location broadcasts. Soap operas filled the daytime hours, and everyone sat in on the variety shows, such as "*Sid Caesar*" and "*Ed Sullivan*." It was on Ed Sullivan's famous stage (used today by David Letterman's "*Late Night*") that the world viewed Elvis for the first time-from his waist up! The Beatles topped the Sullivan Show's ratings in their February 9, 1964 appearance, with an estimated audience of 73 million viewers. Along with their screaming fans, they helped lead the youthful, long-haired rebellion of the Sixties.

The Fifties will always be remembered as a time of conformity and political apathy, while the 1960's are seen as a time of radical protest. But, according to Terry H. Anderson, a Vietnam veteran and a professor at Texas A&M University, the problems that existed in the Fifties had been perhaps ignored for so long that people reacted more violently when they finally did react.

In the Sixties, television continued with sitcoms and variety shows that continued to amuse, entertain, and reflect certain innocence. Foul language was strictly prohibited, and sex did not play a major role in any of these shows. Most were family entertainment with formula plots punctuated by commercials. Watching TV, it was difficult to imagine that any Americans were discontented with their way of life (Holland 101). Television came of age with color for the first time. The proportion of U.S. households with one or more television sets rose to 75% in the 1960s.

An appropriate and incisive characterization of television, as it defined itself in the 1960's and the decades that have followed, was given by Newton Minow, speaking as John Kennedy's chairman of the FCC, who in 1961 called television a "vast wasteland."

Keeping that in mind-and keeping in mind, as well, the vast influence that television, along with the other media, has come to exert over us as a culture and a civilization-it is incumbent on us as educators that if we are to survive as a culture and a civilization media literacy as a skill must be addressed by our public school-systems.

In the textbook used in my eighth-grade Social Studies class, World War II (a period of three-and-a-half years) is presented in six chapters, while the period of 1950-1970 (a period of twenty years) is glossed over in a single chapter. I would like to develop a unit of daily

activities to explore the new growth and development of the media during these two decades, and examine how they have shaped the lives of people in this time period.

Implementation

I propose to spend one week on the 1950's, and one week on the 1960's, during which time I will present film and television footage of historic events of the periods, and portions of television episodes portraying the nuclear American family of the period, such as "*Leave It to Beaver*" and "*I Love Lucy*." I will invite speakers who grew up in this time period to come into the class. Students will present historical essays for discussion and create commercials with popular people and inventions, possibly even incorporating popular music of the periods. I will oversee classroom discussions of advertising and common propaganda techniques used by business and government, then and today. Also, the students will report on an event or person, and dramatize historical events, as well as being exposed to visuals, memorabilia, and trivia of the time periods addressed.

Lesson Plans for the 1950s and 1960s

This plan includes reading, activities, and discussions centered on the basic principles and strategies of decision making about the media as it affected the 1950s and 1960s. The order of activities is up to the teacher's discretion and availability of video and computer labs. I listed the activities that could be presented in a two-week plan. Depending on class size, extra days may have to be assigned for student presentations.

Assessment

Six written activities will be scored on a scale of 100 points each to total 500 points each week. Grading scale (total 500 points): 450-500= A, 400-449 points= B, 350-399 points= C, 300-349 points= D, 299 points and below= F.

A teacher will keep a daily chart of points earned for participation in class in all activities and discussions. A single grade in points will be given for narrative essays, reports, commercials and decorated kites or T-shirts. A possible 500 points will complete each week.

This unit will seek to address content standards for the New Mexico State Content Standards for Social Studies. The following standards and benchmarks will be used: Standard One - Students will use Knowledge and cultural understanding to explain how the world's people cope with ever-changing conditions, examine issues from multiple perspectives, and respond to individual and cultural diversity

(media systems). Benchmark for Standard Three - Interpret and report social studies information from diverse sources (people, media, technology, computers, and libraries); and design and participate in civic projects in the school, community and beyond. Benchmark for Standard Four- Identify and understand varying perspectives in historical writing; and develop critical sensitivities, such as empathy regarding attitudes, values, and behavior of people in a variety of historical contents.

1. TV Viewers Survey: The goal is to introduce the unit. Students will complete a survey on their current television viewing habits and favorite commercials. Through class discussion, students will contribute knowledge of how much they understand about the beginnings of television history. This will give an introduction to our two-week unit on the beginnings of television in the 1950s, and begin the process of awareness in media literacy.

2. Narrative essay: What Was Life Like Growing up in the Sixties? The goal is for students to bring to class a completed questionnaire about the history as told to them by someone who lived in the time period. All students will be assigned an historical narrative essay to be completed by one or more family members or friends who lived during the 1950s decade. The survey is a guide, and the student can add more questions.

3. 1950s Fashion List: The goal is for students to experience the culture and fads of the 1950 by creating an outfit to wear to class. The students will brainstorm a list that will be a guide to dress on the last day of our 1950s decade. A list of suggestions on how to dress for the "Fifties Friday Dress-up Day" will be generated in class on the computer and distributed so students can plan their outfit at home.

4. 1950s Happy Daze video: The goal is for students to view and discuss a portion of "The Century" a video collection written and narrated by Peter Jennings. We will use Tape five "*The Fifties-Happy Daze*." It will take 40 minutes to view. Footage will include Levi-town, the growth of the suburbs, the love of the car, birth of commercialism and beginnings of TV (This set of tapes is available through APS and needs to be reserved). Students will be encouraged to bring in memorabilia of the 50s. Items may include any photos, yearbooks, etc.. for display in the classroom and to be presented on Fifties Dress-Up Friday.

5. Who are the 1950s stars and why did they shine? The goal is to research the people and events that shaped the 1950s. Students will participate in a Web search in our library computer lab to research a person and /or event in the Fifties, and collect information for a

one-page report to be presented to the class. The one-page report must also have a picture. The report will be completed for homework.

6. Commercials: Just Try One! The goal is for the students to discuss common propaganda techniques of persuasion used in virtually every piece of media, and create one of their own. A list of ten commonly used terms will be discussed and distributed. Students will create a commercial using the techniques and incorporating people and/ or events, products, prices, and popular culture of the 1950s decade. Ads with fashion, music, and food items popular during the period will be encouraged. Students will create a storyboard or present a demonstration of a commercial to the class.

7. 1950s Dress-up day: The goal is for students to dress in Fifties styles, read their narrative essays, and present their commercial of a person or product of the 1950s.

Plans For The Sixties Week

1. Groovy! It's the 1960s. The goal is for students to complete a survey about the sixties that will introduce events of the 1960s in continuation of our plan. We will view taped footage of "I Love Lucy" and "Leave it to Beaver." Both shows are readily available in syndication. Plans to complete a personal interview of a parent or friend living in the time period will begin. This will be shared at this time to be completed for Friday. Let the 1960s scavenger and memorabilia hunt begin! Students will brainstorm a list to share with the class on how to dress for the 1960s. Dress up day will be Friday.

2. From the war in Vietnam to the War at home: The goal is for students to view "*The Century*" video narrated by Peter Jennings showing some footage of the turbulent times of the 1960s. This is on tape five, "*The Sixties*." It will concentrate on the social unrest of segregation, the Vietnam War, and campus unrest of the decade. This will last 40 minutes.

3. Who were the stars of the 1960s and why did they shine? The goal is for students to participate in a Web search for information about a person or event that helped shape this decade. A photo should be included. Share photo for classroom exhibit, and share report and photo from search.

4. Catch that t-shirt: The goal is for students to use their propaganda advertising techniques to decorate a kite or T-shirt, depicting a person or event of the 60s. Kites can be made from plain white paper and old white T-shirts work best.

5. Far out duds! The goal is for students to dress-up in 1960s outfits and present personal interviews. Their T-shirt or paper kite with an event or person will also be presented at this time.

Documentation

Book lists for teachers:

Baran, Stanley J., *Introduction to Mass Communication: Media Literacy and Culture*. Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2001.

Burrows Terry, ed. *Visual History of the Twentieth Century*. London: Carlton Books Limited, 1999.

Dearing, James W., & Everett M. Rogers. *Communication Concepts 6: Agenda-Setting*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999.

Hepburn, Mary A. *Media Literacy: A Must for Middle School Social Studies*. Clearing House Jul/Aug 99, VOL. 72 issue 6. p 352-355. Academic Search Elite. CD-ROM. 1999.

Holland, Gini, *A Cultural History of The U.S. Though the Decades of the 1960s*, San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, Inc., 1999.

Jennings, Peter, & Todd Brewster, *The Century*, New York NY, Doubleday. 1998.

Kallen, Stuart A, ed., *The 1950s*. San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press Inc., 2000.

Web Sites for Teachers:

ABC <http://www.abc.com>.

CBS <http://www.cbs.com>

Fox <http://www.fox.com>

International Radio & TV Society <http://www.iris.org>

NBC <http://www.nbc.com>

TV Internet Resource <http://www.ultimatetv.com/interactivetv.html>

Book List for students:

1. Holland, Gini, *A Cultural History of the US Through the Decades of the 1960s* San Diego, CA: Lucent Books Inc., 1999.

2. Kallen, Stuart A., *The 1950s*. San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press Inc., 2000.

Web Sights for students:

"TV Variety Shows of the 50s-Classic" <http://www.fiftiesweb.com>

"Golden Age of Television" <http://www.aentv.com>

"Televisions Golden Age" <http://history.sandiego.edu/gen/>

Student Survey: How Much Television Do You Watch?

(Sample questions, add some of your own.)

1. How many hours do you watch daily?

List viewing times.

2. List your favorite shows.

a.

b.

c.

3. Do you watch TV in one central location with other family members or on a set alone in your room? Explain.

4. Do you think there is too much violence on TV?

5. Do you have restrictions on any programs?

6. List what old re-runs you are familiar with in syndication.

7. Do you watch news on TV?

8. Which advertisements are you favorite and why?

9. Which are your least favorite advertisements and why?

10. What activities would you do if the TV was off for a week?

Make your own commercial:

Prepare a commercial, using common propaganda techniques, for a product or a service. It may be created on a storyboard and presented to the class.

Ten propaganda techniques (Add more to the list):

1. Repetition-Repeat, repeat, repeat.

2. Nostalgia-Forget the bad parts of the past; only remember the good.

3. Beautiful people-Use good-looking models in ads to suggest that we'll look like the models if we buy the product.

4. Bandwagon-Everybody is doing it!

5. Scientific Evidence-Use the paraphernalia of science (charts, graphs, etc...) to "prove" something that's often bogus.
6. Maybe-Exaggerated or outrageous claims are commonly preceded by "maybe," "might," or "could."
7. Symbols-designs, places, ideas, music, etc., symbolizing tradition, nationalism, power, religion, sex, family, or any concept with emotional content.
8. Testimonials-Use famous people to sell a product (voice overs are currently popular).
9. Humor-Make them laugh to persuade.
10. Name calling-direct or indirect, audiences love it.