

**Fox Business
Is Hulu Worth
\$8 a Month?**

**Columbus
Dispatch
Troy
Wolverton
commentary:
Why I
switched TV
service from
Dish to AT&T**

**Centre Daily
Times
Money for
Centre
County
broadband
expansion at
risk after
Verizon
rejects
subsidy**

**Dallas
Morning News
AT&T puts
marketing
chief in
charge of
\$108.7 billion
Time Warner
integration**

**St Louis Post-
Dispatch
Why won't
phone
companies do
more to stop
robocalls?**

As 2016 ends, television, as an industry and a cultural vehicle, has a lot to be proud of and one area it must pressingly address.

Dramatic writing is certainly an asset. I see about 200 plays a year, and almost 100 movies, and I can tell you for incisive, witty, and emotionally adult writing, television has it all over its senior and more respected entertainment brethren in terms of supplying consistently well-crafted, well-worded fare.

Not all television. Eighty percent of what it is aired is drivel. But at 20 percent, television outscores the allegedly higher arts for proportion when it comes to plot building, audience involvement, and addressing issues integral to the show at hand and, often, to the larger world.

Television's obstacle is volume. Given the number of shows that must be programmed to fill a schedule, overall quality will necessarily be diluted. Sitcom fare is particularly bad. "The Goldbergs" might be recognizable to someone who grew up, as I did, near Jenkintown, Pa., but they're more amusing than hilarious and more clichéd than original.

Where television strikes gold and shows its mettle is in the series HBO, AMC, FX, Netflix, Amazon, and PBS, among others, have been airing. Since "The Sopranos," yet a landmark in television history and a lasting testament to what the medium can do, cable networks and streamers have been leading a way the traditional networks abandoned more than a decade ago.

"Homeland," "The Americans," "Breaking Bad," "Better Call Saul," and even shows I don't count among favorites, "The Walking Dead" and "Game of Thrones," set paces that impress as much as they entertain. The first two seasons of " Fargo " and relatively new series such as "Mr. Robot," "The Night Manager," and "Westworld" add to this. PBS does its part by showing how wonderful stories that don't involve skullduggery, obsession, and general survival can be. In 2017, it will follow "Downton Abbey," which by the way will be shown in its entirety during a marathon from 8:30 p.m. Friday to 10:30 p.m. Monday, January 2, on Channel 12, with an eight-part series on Britain's Queen Victoria. It starts on Sunday, Jan. 15. Netflix's "The Crown" is one of the highlights of the season.

Television has cultivated two advantages over the other dramatic arts. One is the series. Stories are not confined to two hours, three tops. They are written for length and complication and can be planned over time. A ten-part mini-series or an ongoing saga such as "House of Cards" is not hacked out episode by episode. A season is conceived as a whole, and plots and character paths are charted methodically and in advance, before any shooting, or even any casting, has begun. TV series can be honed to pull dramatic triggers at various times over an extended period. "Westworld" is an example of a show that kept taking new paths throughout its run, so what looked at first like a concept piece turned into so much more and being so absorbing. " Fargo ," on the other hand, grabbed you from the beginning. Both times. Time is on television's side.

It's already recruited many fine playwrights to its story rooms, and as you will soon read, actors are beginning to follow. People you would not expect to see on series are showing up in droves in early 2017.

Whether dealing with O.J. Simpson ("The People vs. O.J. Simpson," FX), Pablo Escobar ("Narcos," Netflix) political intrigue, or espionage, the better shows on television covered expansive ground and did it with style and, again, fine writing. The best show of the year, HBO's "The Night Of," showed television's talent for interweaving stories, for showing how situations alter characters, and how any of us can find ourselves in a morass of circumstantial evidence that will affect us even if, as the wrongly accused on "The Night Of," a verdict of "not guilty" is reached.

2017 looks to continue the prolific and impressive output of the closing year. "Victoria," based on the novel by Daisy Goodwin as opposed to the bio by Julia Baird, might be most enticing program due early next year, but the it has plenty of company, and not just because of new seasons of "Homeland" and "Better Call Saul."

Debuting Sunday, Jan. 15, like "Victoria," is "The Young Pope," an HBO series featuring Jude Law as an American elected pontiff and taking the name Pius XIII. Some of his infallible pronouncements shock the faithful, thus giving the show some heft.

Law adds luster to the TV world, but he will be joined by several stars in the first two months of 2017. Susan Sarandon and Jessica Lange will pair off in "The Feud," depicting the rivalry between Sarandon's Bette Davis and Lange's Joan Crawford for FX. Drew Barrymore comes to series television in "The Santa Clarita Diet" for Netflix in February. A troupe of luminaries – Reese Witherspoon, Nicole Kidman, Laura Dern, and Shailene Woodley — team in "Big Little Lies" for HBO. For the most action-oriented, Tom Hardy and Jonathan Pryce come to FX on Jan. 10 in "Taboo," one of the creators of which is esteemed director Ridley Scott. Network television is competing with Christine Baranski reprising her "Good Wife" role as attorney Diane Lockhart in a new NBC series, "The Good Fight."

ON THE OTHER HAND

So much for what television does well. Now to the downside.

No matter what one thinks of the result of the 2016 presidential election, or whether one thinks President-elect Donald Trump exaggerates in its attacks on the media, television news did an abysmal job of supplying, presenting, and explaining news in 2016, and this has to be improved if one is to put any faith in our Fourth Estate, at least as broadcast.

News loves the juicy story. But not all stories are juicy. Some juicy stories need to be condensed to get to the real facts and ramifications behind them. Other juicy stories and falsely filled with the stuff of news and need to be ignored or abandoned instead of expanded into gossip, innuendo, partisanship, and one tempest in a teapot after another.

Yellow journalism now reigns throughout the broadcast news industry. Maybe a Charlie Rose or late Gwen Ifill resists being tarred by the plagues, but few others do. I believe nothing I hear on a news report these day, and I disdain most of the alleged experts and pundits who claim to know something when they are only puffing their chests and figuring out how to sell their next biased book.

I don't see any understanding of how anything actually works on the news. Reporters and anchors seem no better than the politicians and pettifoggers they cover. Networks are afraid to be anything but politically correct in the image of their supposed audience, and inconsequential drivel and rampant misinformation makes up the bulk of most news fare.

Standards and practices, perhaps from the Paley/Sarnoff era must be put in play. Someone who knows something and can keep news kosher has to be put in charge of it. Otherwise, you have compromised democracy and coverage of disappointing candidates that is less laudable than either candidate.

TV news is a general source of shame, less on the local level than on the national. But it must be fixed. If it isn't, expect every election year to be like 2016, a disgraceful debacle in news judgment and dissemination. – Daily Times



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