

**Demetri Kofinas:** What's up, everybody. Welcome to another episode of Hidden Forces, with me Demetri Kofinas. Today we speak with famed historian of television and culture, Gary Edgerton. Professor Edgerton is Dean of the college of communication of Butler University. He has published 11 books and more than 80 book chapters, journal articles, and encyclopedia entries [00:00:30] on a wide assortment of media and culture topics. He is also co-editor of The Journal of Popular Film and Television. His award-winning book, The Columbia History of American Television, happens to be one of the most outstanding reads you will find, not only on the subject of television, but as a valuable historical work in its own right.

In this episode, we cover the history of television as a technology that fundamentally transformed American society and culture from the end of World War II until [00:01:00] the very early parts of the 21st century. We cover the ways in which the growing aspirations of Americans, their changing norms, their victories as well as their tragedies, all played themselves out on that flickering vacuum tube, an object that, perhaps most fittingly, we now see represented only as the sharpest of images displayed on our latest high-definition monitors and LED screens.

This is a discussion near to my heart, as I, like many who grew up in this country, heard most of my [00:01:30] stories about manhood, courage, humor, sex, from that gorgeous, magical flashing box. If only we could've talked longer. Here's that conversation.

The way I view this subject is that television pretty much, for all intents and purposes, began in 1946, after World War II, because the install base was, I think, below 0.2% right after the war, and then it just escalated [00:02:00] and grew from there. And then it really peaked in terms of the network ownership and reach of audiences in '74, '75.

**Gary Edgerton:** That's right.

**Demetri Kofinas:** And then we had the beginning of cable, which was really the infrastructure that had already been in place marginally for rural areas. Malone, I think, was sort of a pioneer in that area, and then of course Dolan. I actually worked at Cablevision. That was where I did application development and design, so I know some of that history. I know the history of HBO and the Dolans and all [00:02:30] of that. And of course, then cable, CNN, Turner, Fox came in with Murdoch and blah blah blah, and we get to this sort of place that we were in the 2000s with, like you say, Sopranos.

And we are in this golden age of television for sure in terms of content, but in terms of television the way I view it, I actually see that as being an era that's over in the way that I think of it. And I think of it as ending somewhere between 2006 and 2009. And I [00:03:00] think from then on, we're in a new world, where we've gone from this old broadcast model where content is created according to certain very clear parameters of size of screen, location of screen, distribution pipelines, to where we are now, which is really just a jungle. And also, hypersegmentation. The narrow casting of cable is just nothing compared to what we have today, which is these algorithms that are increasingly personalizing everything,

which is something we [00:03:30] do talk about on this show. So that's sort of my view of television for the purposes of our discussion. Do you more or less view it that way?

**Gary Edgerton:** I do. I see a lot of similarities. And in fact, I would say the ... I always tread lightly that when we talked about golden ages and renaissance and everything, they're metaphors, and metaphors explain some things. But they also over simplify things that I think the kinds of changes in terms of programming [00:04:00] and taking chances, content, really beginning with the Sopranos into for the next 15 years or so, has never been the wealth of invention and innovation in programming and in terms of scripted. But of course, I think what you're alluding to, which is certainly true, is OTT, is over the top distribution of programming. So, when you talk about television, [00:04:30] television is many things. Television is a business and industry. Television is a technology. It's also a social practice. It's also an art form. So, depending on how you talk about it, but certainly in the last 10 years, there probably has been more change in television than there had been in the previous 30 or 40 years, and I would agree with you that in the last five to seven [00:05:00] years, things have been especially turbulent.

**Demetri Kofinas:** Okay. And in fact, there are actually ... I'm glad you mentioned that, about how you broke that down a little bit, because there are three really major areas. One is the technology of television. One is the business model, sort of ecosystem. And the other one is the content ecosystem. That's what I'm really most interested in, in the limited time we have. I really wanna get into really how television ... This idea [00:05:30] of television as historian, television as the participant in the shaping of culture as America moves through these last 60 years. This has been a tremendous period for this country. We're talking about really lapping three generations. And television is at the center of it.

There are some things that you say in your book, which I'm gonna quote here for the purposes of our discussion. One was a reference you made to children. I find this really fascinating and [00:06:00] amazing, because the same sort of tumultuous changes happen during the introduction of the railroads, and people sort of change of time and space and seeing the world blurring as it's moving by them. And you quote some things in this book, some of these early signs of addiction, people talking about this one quote from a Gary Steiner survey in 1960. "I went from house to house to watch TV, lost for something to do." There were children reportedly asking for station breaks [00:06:30] instead of recesses, which I found hilarious.

And I think also you make another point, and then I wanna open the floor to you. You talk about how this was not just something that we can think of. We really have to understand that television didn't exist after people came back from World War II. It wasn't something that people were accustomed to. And then all of a sudden, boom, here it is. They did have radios. They were accustomed to that, but boom, here's this box that now is [00:07:00] in the home. They have to figure out where to put it, change the furniture, arrange themselves around it, change their norms, their behaviors, when they eat, how they come, where they go, where they get their information. And through all of that, of course, are the networks, which are figuring out what to put on these boxes. Which at first were like variety programs, kinda stuff based off of what people experienced in the world or off radio. Hear

[00:07:30] it Now became See it Now with Edward R. Murrow. And there was a lot of experimentation with the quiz shows.

So I guess I'd like you to just talk to us about what that was like, the experience from what you've been able to understand, having studied this period, what that was like for an American who was coming back from the war, or who was waiting for her husband to come back, or who was just coming of age, where it was a child, for these people to experience television as this disruptive [00:08:00] force in their life in that early period, sort of '46 to '60 or '63.

**Gary Edgerton:** Yeah. I don't know whether as they experienced it thought of it as disruptive, because in a lot of ways, it became what their environment was. Because what we were also seeing was a major shift in post-war America to suburbia. And where America, especially with immigration always being [00:08:30] important, not only in urban centers but rural farm centers, the extended family was so crucial in American life. And what happened in post-war America is you had really the rise of the paradigm of the nuclear family moving to the suburbs, being somewhat disconnected from the ethnic neighborhoods that their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents [00:09:00] lived in. And in that way, what television became for them was an anchor to share with people of their same generation, and television proliferated to the degree that no one anticipated. As you mentioned that 1946 is when commercial television started in '44 and the networks starting in 1946, [00:09:30] that from that period through 15 years, it literally went from this side diversion ... I think for people alive today, they can think about when the personal computer came in, or if they're younger, even when the iPhone came in, and within 15 years, it became so ubiquitous that television really by 1960, '63, was the centerpiece of American culture. [00:10:00] That people at the very beginning were watching television a couple of hours a day, and by the early 1960s, it was between five and six hours a day.

**Demetri Kofinas:** I was looking at the numbers, and I was just trying to find a parallel. You bring up the iPhone. I was trying to find an appropriate parallel, and I looked at cell phones. I think the first cell phone was introduced in 1985. I'm not entirely sure, but based on what I looked at, this was a far more radical adoption [00:10:30] curve than cell phones were. There were more cell phones early on in their introduction than there were televisions, and televisions I think became more ubiquitous faster. But I may be wrong, but certainly it's that level, and I think also your cell phones offer that type of disturbance. And again, I use that term disturbance not pejoratively.

**Gary Edgerton:** Right. Although I would, in being a media historian, I would see it even broader. I would suggest we even widen [00:11:00] our view. What I see this as part of a communication revolution that began really with the telegraph in 1844, and you just had one wonderful medium after another that was invented and really changing life.

Television, what it did was it combined some of the functions that previous media had done, and it actually built, from a technical [00:11:30] point of view, it built on the physics of what some other media did. The really revolutionary thing though is that what it did was

it came into the home. It brought movies, with the similarity of technology of radio, into the home, and once that happened, then the amount of time that we devoted to television just continued to escalate. That even today, that we're in the age of the internet today, and [00:12:00] people may think of the internet as crowding out television, but the truth of the matter is television is different than what television was in the '50s and '60s, but television is alive and well and very compatible to the internet. And that's when we're seeing OTT, that we're getting most of our television content streaming in one way or another.

**Demetri Kofinas:** And the technology component and the information revolution aspect is itself a tremendous [00:12:30] story, what you touch on. I wanna bring it back to this cultural thing, because there are a few, I think, significant recalibration of norms and behaviors. No one can really say with any certainty, but I wonder to what extent they were driven by and to what extent they drove television content.

But one of the early ones, I think, the one that sort of ... We can try to follow these by decade as well. I think consumerism, which is something that fascinates [00:13:00] me in general with the innovations that occurred throughout sort of the early 1900s in terms of bringing consumerism into America and into capitalism. But I think an entirely new level of consumerism was able to manifest as a result of television. And I'm interested in how you see this sort of unfolding, how it unfolded during this early period. Obviously, you had game shows like The Price is Right. You had the quiz shows, which offered monetary awards, [00:13:30] which at the same time, those fascinated me as well. There I think that one movie was called Quiz Show with the Englishman from Columbia. Infomercials and commercials also, the whole new sort of creation of the advertising industry using commercials on television.

Talk to us a little bit about what you've learned from looking at this period, and how consumerism came into its own, and how that all sort of changed with [00:14:00] the ... not the advent, the sort of installation of television in the home.

**Gary Edgerton:** Sure. We just experienced the potential of television and consumerism with the latest Super Bowl. That I think when you go back, what really happened in the late 1940s, and it was built on the structure of radio, but television could do it so much more, [00:14:30] because it was built on an advertising structure. And it's different today, but advertising's still a part of television. But what as a result became the content of television is the audience rather than the programs that we watch, that basically what was happening were the networks were selling audiences to advertisers, and they were using programming as bait. And that's one of the reasons why [00:15:00] programming didn't quite reach the potential that it has lately, now that the advertising structure really has broken down.

When you're thinking about the Sopranos, for example, you're talking about HBO, and you're talking about those kinds of services that are more subscription oriented. But I think when you're looking at television as a whole, where culture really comes in and where the change happens ... and you mentioned this at the very beginning of our [00:15:30] conversation, that the beginnings of television from about 1946 to the peak of really the

network era in 1975, '76, what you were really talking about was it being dominated by three networks: ABC, CBS, and NBC. And most of America, especially during prime time, just watched those channels. So, there was much more of a common culture that people shared. That there might have been diversity underneath [00:16:00] the surface, but I think the movement within the culture was really for people to watch the same things, think about the same things, and in a broad general sense, draw the same kinds of conclusions.

What happened with cable, you started going to the average household having 29 channels, having 50 channels, by the early 1990s having 100 channels. [00:16:30] America now has 650 networks, where the average American household has access to 189 channels.

**Demetri Kofinas:** That's insane.

**Gary Edgerton:** The segmentation that you alluded to is a result of that. None of us has time in our own households to, no matter how big our access is, whether it's OTT streaming or whether it's cable, to watch not only 100 channels but 50 [00:17:00] channels. We tend to, what the research shows, that as individuals who we are, we tend to pay attention to 12 to 16 channels themselves. And my wife may pay attention to some that I do but also a different kind of mix. Her 12 to 16 is different. My kids, the same kind of that. But what you have then is a segmentation. [00:17:30] We were talking about Lucy, although Lucy is sort of mass entertainment, it directed towards everyone. But there are programs that my demographic gravitates towards, and there are programs that my demographic does not. And that level of segmentation, which is in a sense the media in general is a catalyst to this happening, has played itself out in culture. And [00:18:00] the fact that we're a divided culture, there's lots of reasons for that, and our media habits is one of the big reasons.

**Demetri Kofinas:** Yeah. So that's actually great. So why don't we just play with that thread, because that's something that I was thinking about. Which is this sort of monoculture or the capacity for broadcast medium, specifically television, to perpetuate and create norms and a common [00:18:30] sense of identity, a common shared experience, I think is actually a significant one because of the fact that you simply could expect that most of the people in the '70s were watching Happy Days. That's what they were gonna be watching, or they were gonna be watching All in The Family. Or people, like you say, in the '50s, if they were watching a sitcom, it was I Love Lucy. And there was sort of an expectation that we were all on the same page. And of course, that's changed dramatically. And also, significantly, I should point out.

And in fact, we might [00:19:00] as well bring this into the conversation, which is the news divisions of these broadcast corporations and subsequently the cable networks and where we find ourselves today. Because I think those things are even more significant when it comes to shared narratives and story telling's. We experience the landing of the moon in '69 via Walter Cronkite. And we experienced the assassination of JFK as well through Walter Cronkite. That was right after CBS had gone from 15 minutes to 30 minutes, that evening [00:19:30] news broadcast. So, we had this sort of communal culture, and that has been breaking down in fact. And I wonder, let's continue with that a bit. That world that we

experienced between 1946 and, I suppose, at some point before Dan Rather left, to where we are today, are dramatically different. To what extent do you feel that the disharmony, disconnect is in [00:20:00] part a result of the fact that we don't share common narratives and myths. Because I don't wanna ascribe some sort of objective reality or truth to the narratives that existed on television in the years past, but the fact that we were sort of sharing those.

**Gary Edgerton:** If we're going back with common experiences to say like the moon landing in '69 or the assassination of JFK, not only did we get it from Cronkite, but the [00:20:30] three other channels that might have been on, including National Education Television or PBS, what it eventually became, were showing the same kinds of ... They actually used similar feeds. But they had different talent on presenting it, but they didn't present it with an overly aggressive point of view, which was different than the others. I would say also too, when you're talking about news, [00:21:00] it used to be ... and I think this is cultural. It goes beyond television, it goes to America in general. But there was a real separation, but television is a good example of it. There was a real separation between news and entertainment, and in fact what the jargon within the industry is, there's a separation between church and state, that the news was sacred.

**Demetri Kofinas:** News was a loss leader, I think, almost entirely, right?

**Gary Edgerton:** Especially at the beginning. [00:21:30] It was considered a public service to present it, and the first time it really became lucrative ... it was not the first time it made money, but it made money hand over fist, was really into the '70s and into the '80s, and it was really ABC News. ABC was at the bottom-

**Demetri Kofinas:** Rooney. Was it Roone Arledge that ran ABC at the time?

**Gary Edgerton:** Exactly. And what he did was, [00:22:00] he took what was the sort of Wide World of Sports ... He didn't have an anchor to the level that CBS and NBC had, so what he did is, he came up with multiple anchors. But what he did was Roone Arledge presented a picture of news that was visually more stimulating. [00:22:30] The movements, the sound, the pictures were much more compelling. That the news programs on the other two networks were more established, was much staid. People started to tune in. ABC actually became the top network.

**Demetri Kofinas:** They were also leading the charge in sports, correct? And also-

**Gary Edgerton:** [crosstalk 00:22:50] absolutely.

**Demetri Kofinas:** ... from Barbara Walters' biography, she went to ABC, right? That was a big deal back then, because she got a huge contract.

**Gary Edgerton:** Right. She had really tough times [00:23:00] that they were-

**Demetri Kofinas:** Big time.

**Gary Edgerton:** The culture was very sexist, and the news person who she was paired with-

**Demetri Kofinas:** Harry. What was his name?

**Gary Edgerton:** Harry Reasoner.

**Demetri Kofinas:** Harry Reasoner, right.

**Gary Edgerton:** Was an old-school news person.

**Demetri Kofinas:** He was a Murrow boy, maybe. I don't know.

**Gary Edgerton:** Right. And he didn't really work with her in everything, and her experience was such that ... and as you can see, what happened at ABC is, she was given the sort of human interest profiles, and she had her specials [00:23:30] where she talked to celebrities, but it was still an era that even though she was a path breaker, that they did not give women hard news. And they basically bought her away from the Today Show to anchor the Nightly News with Harry Reasoner, and the relationship between the two was so strained that they found ... and obviously she had a long and productive career [00:24:00] at ABC in a variety of different roles, but still it was in different positions than hard news, 'cause the culture wasn't ready to have a woman in that position yet.

**Demetri Kofinas:** But I wanna make sure to get to this transition into the cable news industry, because what happened with CNN was tremendous and with Ted Turner. And then with Murdoch, Fox, and that transformation to what you were alluding to early on, which is this sort of overt bias and segmentation of audiences, where you're speaking to your audience [00:24:30] niche, whether it's CNBC, or MSNBC, or Fox.

**Gary Edgerton:** Sure. And when you're really talking about this shift is happening at the same time is ABC is really peaking in terms of what is the potential in terms of network news, meaning broadcast networks, is the same time that cable is getting off the ground. And HBO goes on the satellite in 1975 and 1976, and [00:25:00] HBO's really the engine that drove cable. And other networks went on, and CNN was created in 1980 with Ted Turner and was not-

**Demetri Kofinas:** An amazing story.

**Gary Edgerton:** Yeah, and it was not taken seriously. You probably know that people within the business referred to it as Chicken Noodle News, in the sense that it was just cable. But you can say the same thing about ESPN in terms of sports. Now it is television sports, but at the [00:25:30] time it wasn't taken seriously. But CNN really had the whole brand of cable news. From 1980 really until 1996, it was the main source for news on cable, and it continued to grow in stature, in performance all the way through. And really when it became part of the big leagues was the [00:26:00] first war in Iraq-

**Demetri Kofinas:** Oh yeah. Gulf War I. That was a staple of the culture. That's how we remember that war.

**Gary Edgerton:** Right. And people in the United States experienced the war through television.

**Demetri Kofinas:** Even H. W. Bush says that he learned about the fall from CNN, which is a remarkable fact.

**Gary Edgerton:** Absolutely. And what you have then is CNN, and Ted Turner was probably at the peak of his powers in the early 1990s. But what happens with a good idea is that, [00:26:30] when it comes around, it gets copied, in the same way that once HBO was established in terms of pay cable and getting movies, Showtime came two years later. You had CNN, and then not by coincidence, Fox News and MSNBC were both created in 1996. But they had to differentiate themselves from CNN. And what they did, [00:27:00] MSNBC floundered for a while, but Fox came in with their brand of fair and balanced, but a very conservative view on news events in that, and it was a distinct contrast from CNN. Also, in terms of the idea of news changed. Instead of trying to package news ... facts are always not facts. They come with a particular point of view, but trying to at least get a more objective rendering [00:27:30] of the news became old hat once you had something like Fox that was taking a really hard particular point of view like what newspapers did. And as you know, into the George W. Bush years, MSNBC found its footing by becoming the liberal counterpoint to Fox. And CNN was lost in the middle in terms of ... it still held onto its old-fashioned, old- [00:28:00] school way of doing news.

But the problem I think from our point of view and our vantage point in 2017 is that people get in their silos now. That unless you study media, people like me, who makes a concerted effort to look across different networks just to see what's going on and to be able to evaluate and assess, most people depending on they watch [00:28:30] what reinforces their point of view, so you have those people who watch cable news, which actually when you're talking the entire population of the United States is quite small. You're really talking a 1 to 2 to 3 million people for any of these particular shows. But the influence that they wield, because once they sort of set the tone, then all of a sudden broadcast news became [00:29:00] much more entertainment oriented. The so-called news magazines that are on broadcast are much more entertainment oriented, so the old-fashioned divide between church and state, between news and entertainment, has totally broken down. And the people are sort of cast adrift in terms of trying to find legitimate information [00:29:30] to make decisions on as opposed to just tuning in to networks that tell them what they want to hear.

**Demetri Kofinas:** Yeah. And a lot of people ... I think it's interesting, which I have to bear that in mind, many people don't know much else than this. I meet a lot of people out today who were born ... they certainly don't remember anything other than the post-911 world. I mentioned a few points for our audience. The [00:30:00] story of CNN, we won't be able to cover it here, it's a fascinating story, and Ted Turner in particular, the way in which he not only made CNN successful but also in general his strategy as a businessman, the way

that he, as you I'm sure know, Professor, he bought up the rights to many sort of shows in syndication, and took huge advantage of that. He also did the same thing with the Atlanta Braves.

**Gary Edgerton:** Which became America's team, because [00:30:30] he put it on WGN. Or, excuse me, on TBS. GN's another superstation. But put it on WTBS, then an independent local station in Atlanta became a national station, and the Atlanta Braves became America's team throughout the 1990s when they had those great teams.

**Demetri Kofinas:** He's such a brilliant businessman, and it's a remarkable story. And I'll mention one other thing for our audience as well, since we wouldn't be able to get into [00:31:00] this, but you could do a deep dive in terms of Fox. Fox is a fascinating story, not just Fox in general in terms of the network but specifically the news division, Roger Ailes obviously. And then we could move on to something else. You mentioned Fox and how you were sort of alluding to, you were biting around the edges of how they made it profitable to sort of just have someone sort of, for lack of a better word, bloviate on air. Sort of just provide [00:31:30] opinions without really anything other than just talking. And that's very much a talk-radio-style format, and Fox really capitalized on that, that existing sort of market. Roger Ailes was a brilliant operator, and that's also a tremendous story.

**Gary Edgerton:** What you're really talking about, again, is opinion being packaged as news.

**Demetri Kofinas:** Yeah.

**Gary Edgerton:** And [00:32:00] a lot of times, I think, most viewers don't think of it that way. They think that they're actually getting the news without the whole idea that it is ... you generally are not getting any new information, you're just getting opinions about information that's widely known.

**Demetri Kofinas:** And propaganda as well, because the parties tend to align with either network, and they sort of get their messaging out from ... If it's the Democrats, they use MSNBC primarily as a messaging platform, [00:32:30] and the Republican Party has traditionally used Fox News. Although that's now changing, and it's actually a remarkable time to study what's happening in the media industry with respect to Fox, and Breitbart, and the Trump administration, and the segmentation of voters there, because there are a lot of shifts happening.

**Gary Edgerton:** And I think what you're getting at too, Demetri, is television viewing isn't what it was before, even as recently as the mid-2000s. Because [00:33:00] what you're talking about, when people watch television, you can't disconnect it from the internet, and you can't disconnect it from social media. So, the kind of segmentation that we watch in our channels also comes into play in who our Facebook friends are and the kinds of tweets and who you have as followers and who you're following. So, it is a continuum of digital media that we watch when we watch [00:33:30] television, of which television is still a central part of it. But I define television now ... we can be watching television on our cell phones.

We can be watching television on our iPads. You don't have to have a conventional. It's screens of all sizes and shapes. It's screens that are not only stationary in our homes, but it's screens that move with us in our pockets.

**Demetri Kofinas:** One of the things that I kept noticing in a lot of the shows that I really liked [00:34:00] from the 80s, and then I sort of just noticed this in general, was this obsession ... obsession is a hard word to use. This constant recurrence of Vietnam backstories and sort of military, secret-agent backstories to characters, Knight Rider, MacGyver, A-Team, Magnum PI, and of course Quantum Leap, which was not Vietnam but it was, again, secret government lab, very like quintessential 1980s.

And I think actually Stranger Things [00:34:30] recently is a Netflix show. I don't know if you've seen it, but they really did a great job of capturing that sort of '80s vibe through the ... like for example, M\*A\*S\*H was ... and that's a great show to bring up, because its season finale in the early '80s had 125 million audience members tune in, I believe, which is the highest certainly of any sitcom in history. But also [00:35:00] M\*A\*S\*H at the time was, I suppose, a bit of an allegory for the war in Vietnam. Even though it was the fictional presentation of war was in Korea, it was taking place during the course of the war in Vietnam.

And then after the war ended, what I noticed ... and this is sort difficult because it's not just in television, it's also in film. But you had this sort of cross-pollination television and film, where initially the interpretation of the war was dark. It was very much [00:35:30] Apocalypse Now, Platoon. And then you saw this sort of transformation, particularly with characters like Rambo and Predator with Arnold Schwarzenegger's character. This sort of transformation from this dark interpretation of loss of what it was for Vietnam to something of, "We're going back, we're kicking butt, we're taking over." And then I think of that also in the continuum of CNN, [00:36:00] and the Gulf War, and just the entire way that that war was processed, and thought about, and covered by the media. And I don't think I could understate this, because when I looked empirically into this period, I see that Vietnam dominated the culture in television, both on the news and the sort of fiction side. So, can you comment a little bit about that?

**Gary Edgerton:** Sure. I think Vietnam, especially for the baby boomer generation, [00:36:30] was such a seminal event. And if we're talking about the way that it played out on television, we get back to what I was talking about. There was a time in which there was a separation between news and entertainment with church and state, that there was almost a schizophrenia during the height of Vietnam during the 1960s and into the evacuation from Saigon [00:37:00] in 1975, in which the news media every night had news stories about how many, what was happening in terms of the conflict, how many American soldiers especially were being killed, and then all of a sudden prime time would kick in at 7 o'clock and 8 o'clock, and it was almost as though the Vietnam War didn't exist.

And what happened with All in The Family ... [00:37:30] actually, where it all began was with the made-for-TV movie, because they were sort of one off's, that they dealt with more relevant, contemporary themes, the TV movie really taking off in about 1969, 1970. All in

The Family coming in '71, M\*A\*S\*H I think coming in '72. That when we're talking about those kinds of conflicts hitting, in [00:38:00] an entertainment context, they became highly stylized. M\*A\*S\*H of course was an adaptation of the Robert Altman movie M\*A\*S\*H, which was very successful. And when it was transferred to television, it was somewhat cutting edge for television, but it really domesticated the black humor and the irony that was part of the original movie.

[00:38:30] But what you had were more relevant content that started to come into TV from the 1970s and continued sort of as a backdrop in terms of entertainment programming. You can look at, in a lot of ways, television critics and historians are cultural anthropologists, because what they do is they look at programming, and [00:39:00] they analyze the programming, they're able to also see the kinds of patterns and trends that are happening in culture at the time.

When you talk about Rambo in the 1980s, what you're really talking about is the Reagan era. We were starting to get a distance as a culture from Vietnam, and in that way, Reagan ... don't wanna just use clichés, but Reagan's whole campaign when he came in was "It's Morning [00:39:30] Again in America." And what it was in a certain sense was a conservative reaction to the '60s and the counter culture and the changes that happened in the culture at the time. And if you look at the Rambo stories, what Rambo really did is he went back and re-fought the Vietnam War, only this time, America won. Only happening in a cultural context, and of course that's what popular culture is all about, that [00:40:00] we deal with these ... People think of what's on prime-time television or what's on the movies, and all of the other kinds of popular forms, is this pure escapism. But human beings are very, very complex, and even when we entertain ourselves, and we go into escapism, there's a lot of content and a lot of substance there that we're still working out the kinds of things that really affect us deeply as [00:40:30] individuals and as a culture.

**Demetri Kofinas:** I was gonna say, classic case is Jack Bauer, 24, after 9-11.

**Gary Edgerton:** Right.

**Demetri Kofinas:** And I should also say for our audience, another though not American culture, the allegory of nuclear war in Godzilla for the Japanese is I think for me the richest existing sort of film metaphor in that case.

**Gary Edgerton:** And if you talked, let's say, taking Jack Bauer [00:41:00] with 24 coming in 2001, actually after 9-11, it is an object lesson in how television deals with current events, that what you had were probably all the various strains of culture in terms of the fear of terrorism, what's gonna happen, the uncertainty, the rise in militarism [00:41:30] within American culture during that period, were all played out in prime-time series in terms of who is the villain, what the narrative structure was all about. As you know, Jack Bauer, that whole series was dedicated to him making the world free for democracy.

**Demetri Kofinas:** Torturing people. It dealt with all of those issues of enhanced interrogation, extra-judicial killings. And I think it understates [00:42:00] really the extent to which it had an influence.

There is something I do wanna get to before we go. You devote an entire chapter in your book to the Cosby Show. And I remember when I first read that chapter, it fascinated me. And then I took a look back at some of the sort of programming that existed on television that was or dealt with race, was race related or dealt with race. I had never watched Amos and Andy until I did this. I was shocked [00:42:30] at how sort of, by today's standards, racist really it was. Not in malevolent sort of way, but just the depictions were incredibly stereotypical of a particular type of black man. In one episode, I saw where he was sort of just resisting getting work, which was just this sort of typical stereotype.

I grew up in an immigrant family, and the only show we watched was the Cosby Show. And I never thought [00:43:00] about it. I never thought about why that was. Why did a white family, for lack of a better stereotype, white, but we were Greek immigrants? Why did we laugh and sort of connect so much with the Cosby Show, which was this black family in Brooklyn? And we weren't even in Brooklyn at the time. We were living in New York at the time. And so, I find some of your points about that fascinating, why people connected. Not just in the United States, but this was one of the most highly syndicated shows [00:43:30] globally in the history of television, which is a remarkable fact.

There're some theories about sort of the expressive nature of Bill Cosby. Because that's another fact. It's a comedy show, which is another remarkable thing. It's not Baywatch, where you get it. Baywatch is popular in syndication globally because it's Baywatch. You have a lot of beautiful men and women running around in bathing suits. Easy to translate to a foreign audience. But here is the Cosby Show. It's humor. So that's an interesting thing I'd like you to talk about.

But there's something in terms of the race component which I found fascinating [00:44:00] in particular, and you cited some studies, and it dealt with this idea that in general, white culture has always had a fascination with black culture in America. And they've seen it as tribal, primitive, sexual, and that it speaks, if anything, more to what's repressed in white culture than what is prevalent in black culture. And this idea that we've had these, in certain cases, I suppose maybe not in the Cosby show, because this wouldn't be as applicable, but [00:44:30] this idea that black culture in television has been shaped in many ways to reflect something ... well, of course, it's been shaped heavily by white culture in how it's presented in television, but that it's sort of representing much of what sort of white culture is repressing in and of itself. Do you remember that particular citation?

**Gary Edgerton:** Sure. And I think it isn't only ... it goes way back in American [00:45:00] culture prior to television and prior to the 20th century, and it also is part of European culture as well in terms of being able to lose inhibitions and project that onto another culture. But there's lots of things when you're talking about it. If we were just talking about the Cosby Show [00:45:30] and its contribution in how to make sense of it now, it's even more problematic with the difficulties with Bill Cosby as a person himself

and all of that, which really runs counter. But you sort of started by talking about Amos and Andy, and Amos and Andy really date back to the late 1920s. It was a huge radio program, and it was actually performed, even though radio is [00:46:00] not visual, in the studio it was played by two white guys in blackface. And the level of-

**Demetri Kofinas:** There you go.

**Gary Edgerton:** The level of popularity of it, that it used to be channeled in the 1930s. It used to be channeled into movie theaters, because 90 million people a week went to American movies say in 1930. But when Amos [00:46:30] and Andy came on from 7 to 7:15, they'd make sure that's when a break was in the movie, and they'd literally pump the show into the movie theaters. It was hugely popular and hugely popular because it played on some of the most onerous stereotypes of African Americans. And when television started in 1946, it was just logical, as it happened with a lot of popular radio programs, that they would just [00:47:00] adapt Amos and Andy to television, which they did. And of course, they had an all-black cast at that point. But lots of African Americans fought in World War II too, and the kinds of things that the culture was willing to tolerate and put up with, especially African Americans, were the beginnings of civil rights right after World War II and is very much related to that, that the [00:47:30] NAACP and other organizations really protested against the stereotypes of Amos and Andy.

Amos and Andy is really a good springboard then to see the Cosby show, because as you said, the plot you saw of one of them was-

**Demetri Kofinas:** Him not wanting to get a job, being dragged to the unemployment line.

**Gary Edgerton:** Being shiftless, being lazy. All those stereotypes. Then [00:48:00] when you look at the Cosby Show, what you had was a high-achieving yuppie family. Claire was a lawyer, and the character that Bill Cosby played was a physician.

**Demetri Kofinas:** Cliff was a physician, yeah.

**Gary Edgerton:** And so, they were high achieving. They had high-achieving kids that they were right out of a sociology textbook of the nuclear [00:48:30] family. Happy. Even the extended family, the grandparents came over at various times. The only difference between what their presentation was, and it was quite innovative at the time, and what happened before with Amos and Andy, that this family just happened to be African American.

**Demetri Kofinas:** And they caught a lot of flak for that, as well, for the fact that they ... in the black community, in certain parts of the [00:49:00] black community, because they were seen as not representing it, not presenting the culture accurately. I do want to say though-

**Gary Edgerton:** But although I would say, yeah, I think you can't be in mass culture and not get some criticisms. But I would think in retrospect, the Cosby Show got much, much more accolades than they did criticisms. Certainly, they got criticisms, and certainly from the black community by some that they were compromising. [00:49:30] And I think that's the case whenever you have ...

And as you point out, the Cosby Show was so popular that cable was already in, but from 1982 to 1984, it was the most popular program in America, the most popular program of that decade, and 65 million Americans tuned in for every episode, episode [00:50:00] after episode. It wasn't just one episode. It was just hugely popular. And then when you get into the next decade, the name of that chapter is The Greatest Show on Earth. It became the most popular show in the world, which was crazy in the sense, as you point out, because humor doesn't travel as well as action and violence. And the fact that it was a humor show, but the idea that you had this family that [00:50:30] got together, it was an extended family, it was aspirational. It really became a symbol of the best ideals that America tries to project about itself. And it was successful in that way.

Let me just end by saying the tragedy really of the Cosby Show is I don't know if people will ever ... it certainly was one of the breakthrough programs in the history of television, but I don't know whether people will [00:51:00] ever look at the show the same again, that we've had in popular culture a number of different scandals. And let me give you another television character with Charlie Sheen. And we know Charlie Sheen's had his troubles in the media. But I think the difference between someone like Charlie Sheen, or someone like Tiger Woods or other people where there's been sort of major kinds of scandals is that ... which someone like Charlie Sheen, it might've [00:51:30] been a bridge too far, but it was somewhat consistent with his artistic persona, in terms of the kinds of characters he played.

With Bill Cosby, Bill Cosby projected himself as America's dad, as being the epitome of old-school values, and the tragedy of [00:52:00] the whole situation, first and foremost, are the victims of what happened. But in terms of from a cultural point of view, that the kinds of things that have come out afterwards is that what occurred is diametrically opposed to the persona that he projected on television, not only in the Cosby Show, his breakthrough. He won three Emmys for I Spy, so he was [00:52:30] a path breaker in terms of presenting more pro-social and positive images of people of color on American television as well as anyone.

**Demetri Kofinas:** And you know, the other thing I wanted to say in this conversation, and it's also I think true, perhaps equally true, very true of women. Looking back, [00:53:00] and I've always sort of known this intellectually and to some extent viscerally, but even more so going back and preparing for this interview and looking at some of these programs over time. Amos and Andy was a great example. But in general, when you see how particular groups, in this case African Americans, or in the case of women on certain programs. I Dream of Jeannie, what was it? Or like Charlie's Angels. [00:53:30] These are such powerful stereotypes, and when they are delivered through the medium of television, and then you wonder ... when we talk about implicit bias in whatever it is, I think what we

miss, and I would hope that our audience can really take this into account, what we miss in the debate today is we have a lot of these sort of hashtag Oscars So White, or hashtag Equal Pay, or whatever it would be, the analogous sort of conversation. And [00:54:00] there's no real context for a deep understanding.

And I think if you really put yourself in a position to understand that it's not that we're just sort of autonomous people creating stereotypes out of thin air. We live in a world where we are constantly absorbing messages and information and value systems and sets from, in particular in this period we're reviewing, television, which was such a profound, powerful medium.

**Gary Edgerton:** Yeah. And I think when [00:54:30] you're talking about stereotypes, television is also a good barometer to let us know how far the culture has gone. That when you look at what the images were like in the '40s and '50s and '60s, I think a lot of people still today are very discontented. And we do have a long way to go, but clearly you can see the change. I was talking [00:55:00] about how the Sopranos-

**Demetri Kofinas:** Oh, for sure.

**Gary Edgerton:** How the Sopranos changed television, and you had the whole decade of male anti-heroes from the Sopranos to Breaking Bad to Mad Men and on. But if you look at the Sopranos, Tony is the protagonist, but the majority of all of the more interesting and complex characters [00:55:30] in the Sopranos are all women. And what you had after Mad Men is then you started to get women anti-heroes with shows like Homeland and The Americans in that, that the level of complexity in terms of characterization and plotting that is available today has never been better on TV, and actually there are more scripted [00:56:00] shows on television today than there ever has been. In fact, last year they just broke the barrier of over 400 scripted shows. When you think of that, they're not all shows that people going to revisit 50 years from now, obviously, but the best of television today is as good as television ever was.

**Demetri Kofinas:** Well, I was actually speaking with one of my actors before this interview about that, about the depth. And [00:56:30] I have to credit him with the way he phrased it. He made the point that it used to be that the characters were responding to their environment sort of, and that was a great point. You watch the show, and the environment occurs, and then the character responds to this new stimulus each time. Whereas today, and a classic example is Game of Thrones, which is immensely popular, you've got these characters who are developing over time, and they're really being driven by the writers, and they're evolving, [00:57:00] and they're really deep. And that's something I think ... and please let me know, especially because of what you're studying of HBO. It seemed that this is really, if anything, driven not by the culture but by the changing business model, the subscription model that allows risk taking. Like HBO was willing and able to take huge risks in terms of trying to create quality programming.

**Gary Edgerton:** That is true. But you can even go back to ... what you're [00:57:30] really talking about is the quality of memory. That because of the economics of television,

the characters never developed because where all the profits were I television, what the honey pot of television was, was syndication.

**Demetri Kofinas:** Right.

**Gary Edgerton:** And what they wanted to do was to have 120 episodes. And if you showed episode 66 and then episode 47, it didn't matter, because it was-

**Demetri Kofinas:** So true.

**Gary Edgerton:** And [00:58:00] then all of a sudden, what you had where really ... there were a couple of shows that experimented with it, but the show, and this may be a good way to end in terms of because she just passed away, but it happened in a situation comedy. Where it happened before is in soap operas, which were considered the lowest form of television, but in situation comedy with the Mary Tyler Moore Show in the early 1970s, the innovation that it brought in was all of [00:58:30] a sudden all of those characters developed. Lou Grant became less of a stereotype. His wife left him, that you had all kind of development there. And then all of a sudden in the late 1970s, the soap opera format was brought up to prime time. And the shows were highly stylized, very popular. But stylized at the time with Dallas and Falcon's Crest. But what they started ... I [00:59:00] think Dallas came in 1978. But then Hillstreet Blues in '81. And St. Elsewhere in '82. And the soap opera format in terms of developing memory that a character could develop over time was an innovation that came in. And as in any art form-

**Demetri Kofinas:** So fascinating.

**Gary Edgerton:** You get one generation; the second generation can build on it. The third generation can build on it. And now we've had multiple generations [00:59:30] since the 1970s, and we're really reaping the benefits of those kinds of innovations that were planted then in the kind of programming that we're watching today.

**Demetri Kofinas:** I'll say this. I mentioned that I grew up in an immigrant family, and I spent all my summers in Greece. And all my family's practically in Greece. And my grandmother would always watch. And by the way, and we didn't even have a chance to, and I really wanted to. What a shame. I wanted to get into 90210, [01:00:00] because that was a mainstay of sort of my culture growing up. But you had shows like 90210 and some of these other shows I mentioned. But you had, in terms of soaps, my grandma watched The Bold and The Beautiful. And she's Greek, and this is ... and Baywatch was obviously huge. But yes, and the soaps, and of course the soap pioneered the close-up, right? And of course, the close-up was very much something that was driven by the technical constraints of a small screen. You couldn't do a close-up in theater. You didn't have. You had epic [01:00:30] sort of scenes like in gladiatorial shots for film, but I television, you had these close-ups.

**Gary Edgerton:** Well actually what the main innovation of soap operas was, was taking the emphasis off plot and putting it on character. In the sense that when you talk

about prime-time programming at the time, there was a main character who was the most prominent. Let me just use Rockford Files, 'cause Jim Garner, or Maverick. And Jim Garner were very charming [01:01:00] and one of the most popular actors ever on television, but the character was absolutely the same, and you had sort of a ritual plot that played itself out. It's not that it wasn't innovative and they had, but the emphasis really was on this story form that just featured this particular kind of character.

And if you think about the soap operas, everybody made fun of it, because the goofy plot lines that this person would get married and get divorced, [01:01:30] marry someone else, someone had an abortion, someone had a baby over here. And people used to laugh at it, because from a plot line point of view, it's absurd. But the real appeal was that people tuned in to watch characters that the immediate, as you're saying, the close-up and the medium shot that they really became addicted to these kinds of personalities. Plus, these personalities would go from being heroes to villains [01:02:00] to heroes to villains. There was lots of character development that not only happened over one year or two years, but five years or some people followed these soaps for decades.

So, what you then did is have that character-driven aesthetic brought to prime time, and you had richer, deeper characters who actually changed, and then by the time you got to the Sopranos, they not only had these deep [01:02:30] characters, but then they also started to do innovation in plotting, so you got it from both ends. So, the level of scripted shows, whether they be dramas or whether they be comedies again, are better than they've ever been on TV.

**Demetri Kofinas:** That's fascinating. You know what? If I didn't feel bad, I would just pretend like you didn't have to go, and I would just continue the conversation. But I know you have to leave. All right. So then let's let it go. I have so many other things [01:03:00] that I wanted to talk to you about, Professor. Maybe another time. Thank you so much for coming on.

**Gary Edgerton:** Yeah, Demetri, it was a pleasure talking with you. Thank you for the invitation, and good luck with your program.

**Demetri Kofinas:** And that was my conversation with Gary Edgerton. I wanna thank the professor for being on my program. Today's episode was produced by me and edited by Connor Lynch. For more episodes, you can check out our website at [hiddenforces.io](http://hiddenforces.io). Join the conversation on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at @hiddenforcespod or send me an email. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next week.