

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Marcel C. LaFollette. *Science on American Television: A History*. Chicago: (FeRA) Frankfurter elektronische Rundschau zur Altertumskunde, 2012. ISBN 978-0-226-92199-0.

Reviewed by James Gilbert

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 2013)

M.C. LaFollette: Science on American Television

From the initial days of flickering images barely discernible in a blizzard of dancing snowflakes to the crystal clear and crisp focus of high density projection, television, as a technology has promised to bring the world into the American home. While the steady advance of this technology has made the picture ever clearer, the content, shaped by culture and economics has not advanced this potential with the same relentless improvement. Furthermore, the advent of cable and recording and replay devices, and the huge variety of accessible programming through the internet has exploded choice and destroyed one of the fundamental premises of early television: that broadcasts would reach a mass audience simultaneously. Thus technological evolution has increased individual choice exponentially at the same time that it has splintered the viewers into smaller interest groups. The hope that television could educate through the concurrent creation of an educated public has been transformed into a reality of many audiences, viewing in different formats, primarily for entertainment.

These changes help to explain the few successes and many failures of educational television. But perhaps even more important is the fundamental factor that bears on everything: cost. The production costs of television are immense and always rising, and, particularly in the United States but elsewhere now too, the lack of state subsidy has meant that private corporations or foundations (an on occasion viewer pay-per-show) and advertisers have determined what is and what is not broadcast. Good intentions aside, and there have been many, the bottom line is the bottom line. Those programs that succeed—that is continue for several years—are those that attract significant audiences and advertising. Yet even here, the history of television has proven fickle. Even the most popular programs lose steam, energy, and eventually their most loyal fans, as if there is a cycle of creative momentum that guides their rise and fall.

Given this determining context, the many attempts to

bring science to the public through television have almost always been frustrated by the nature of the medium itself. Nonetheless, the story of the efforts is a fascinating one, full of promise and false hope and instructive failures. Marcel LaFollette's account of this history demonstrates the many difficulties of presenting science on television, from Smithsonian Institution programming, to NOVA on Public Broadcasting, to efforts like "Mr. Wizard" on commercial television. The exploration is thorough, carefully researched and organized, and written in a very accessible and entertaining style. If the story is a discouraging one, in that the integrity of science and scientists was continuously being compromised and distorted for the sake of entertainment values, it offers, nonetheless, a profound insight into the problems inherent in a medium in which even public or non-commercial programming has been largely shaped by commercial values.

The larger implications of this book are, I think, the most troubling, and offer some suggestive insights into what is a current lament among American educators about the poor performance of many students in scientific subject areas. For what is true of television runs parallel to a larger truth: that science popularization and education in science cannot be separated and abstracted from their cultural contexts. For a nation, a large percentage of which does not "believe in" evolution and distrusts and misunderstands the basic concept of a "scientific theory" (thinking that the words means untruth), this is probably no surprise. Add to this the perennial popular depiction of scientists as emotionally and socially stunted, single minded (and absent-minded) or as magicians, sorcerers, or evil geniuses, the problem is obvious. Furthermore, as LaFollette suggests, the task of presenting science is inherently difficult and often tedious. To reproduce an experiment, to suggest the problem of multiple variables and the complexities of mathematics, chemistry, and physics involved in modern experimentation does not make for scintillating television.

No wonder, then, that one of the most popular contemporary American television series is the “Big Bang Theory,” (just ended) in which science is personified in emotionally dwarfed and bizarre characters and where sex eventually redeems the plot.

As LaFollette concludes: “The need to attract the largest possible audience pushed television’s version of

science, whether intended as education or fiction, even more toward sensationalism, politics, celebrities, and representation and away from the discussion of ideas, away from the real, away from attention to the thought and reasoning behind scientific conclusions and recommendations.” (229)

This is a sobering appraisal and, I fear, a just one.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: James Gilbert. Review of LaFollette, Marcel C., *Science on American Television: A History*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39840>

Copyright © 2013 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.