

## Blurring fiction with reality: American television and consumerism in the 1950s

On the evening of 15 October 1958, veteran correspondent Edward R. Murrow stood at the podium and looked out over the attendees of the annual Radio Television Digital News Association gala. He waited until complete silence descended, and then launched into a speech that he had written and typed himself, to be sure that no one could possibly have had any forewarning about its contents. What followed was a scathing attack on the state of the radio and television industries, all the more meaningful coming from a man who was widely acknowledged as not only the architect of broadcast journalism but also a staunch champion of ethics and integrity in broadcasting.<sup>1</sup> This was the correspondent who had stood on the rooftops of London with bombs exploding in the background to bring Americans news of the Blitz, whose voice was familiar to millions of Americans. This was the man who had publicly eviscerated the redbaiting Senator Joseph McCarthy, helping to put an end to a shameful period in America's history (see e.g. Mirkinson, 2014, Sperber, 1986). And it became apparent that evening that this was also a man bitterly disappointed with the "incompatible combination of show business, advertising and news" that the broadcasting industry had become:

Our history will be what we make it. And if there are any historians about fifty or a hundred years from now, and there should be preserved the kinescopes for one week of all three networks, they will there find recorded in black and white, or color, evidence of decadence, escapism and insulation from the realities of the world in which we live.  
(Murrow, 1958)

The generation of Americans represented at that gala had lived through the 1930s, a decade dominated by the effects of the Great Depression. They had also survived the 1940s, overshadowed by the uncertainties of war. No one series of events, however, clearly stands out to easily characterize the 1950s. Rather, a decade that opened with the Korean conflict drew to a close one year after Murrow's speech with a debate between the Soviet Premier and a future President in which the esteemed American statesman vociferously defended the merits of consumerism as being one of the greatest advantages of democracy. Perhaps more than anything else then, the 1950s are marked by the development of a general perception favoring the overwhelming importance of 'things' and the joy that may be derived from buying and owning them. This chapter examines how consumerism came to play a role in the

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<sup>1</sup> Details of the evening are provided by journalist Norm Brewer, who attended the gala as the news director of a Memphis radio station (see Jacobs, 2009).

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American society of the 1950s important enough as to be equated with the fundamental achievements of the United States. The discussion focuses on the interplay between consumerism at home and consumerism on screen – the ‘decadence’ which so incensed Murrow. Central factors include the historic development of a new suburban lifestyle and the widespread acquisition of television, together with the dominance of that new medium by advertising agencies and sponsors eager to sell their products. These facets are explored here, after an initial look into exactly how the many popular dramatic series of the 1950s served blatant lessons in capitalism and consumerism. Links between the fictional portrayals of family life as seen on television are then drawn to the real-life Kitchen Debates of 1959. Finally, the late 1950s quiz show scandals and their consequences are explored. Did the bubble of consumerism then burst, or did it only slightly deflate?

By the mid-1950s, the family melodrama had become one of the most popular types of television programming available. Week after week, real-life families tuned in to watch the exploits of the Cleavers, the Andersons, the Nelsons, and the Stones on the well-known shows *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963), *Father Knows Best* (1954-1963), *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966), and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966). Remarkable about all these show was a certain ‘sameness’ in plots and settings, together with a central role of consumer goods in the lives of the characters. The homes of these well-known television families were fairly indistinguishable from one another. Always located in the suburbs, each home contained a formal dining room, living room, kitchen, dinette, formal entryway, a den, a few bedrooms, and a backyard complete with a picnic table. These houses were filled with books, comfortable furniture, and the latest consumer appliances, as well as a car of the latest make and model parked in the garage (Leibman, 1995, pp. 230-231).

Not only were the starring families suburban, they were decidedly (white) middle-class, with middle-class common sense. No maid for these families; Mom made the family’s meals and cleaned the home. Each family was financially secure. Neither Mom nor children had to earn money to help support the family, although occasionally a child would work (boys would take a paper route, girls would baby sit) to earn extra money for some especially attractive purchase. Although the Puritan work ethic was valued, home and its accompanying pleasures were more important than any job. Workaholic fathers were to be pitied, and the father protagonists all managed to return home from the city in time to effectively and fairly deal with their children’s various transgressions. Unlike most real-life fathers commuting between the suburbs and city (see Halberstam, 1993, p. 157), Jim Anderson and Ward Cleaver

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were usually home before school let out; Ozzie Nelson was shown only on weekends, and Alex Stone conveniently maintained his pediatrician's practice at home. Extravagant wealth was disapproved of, since one clearly cannot appreciate any particular commodity if one has much too much; poverty too was fairly ignored because the poor were still trying to meet their basic needs and therefore lacked the purchasing power to buy gadgets. All these suburban families led a sheltered life, with no deprivation (Leibman, 1995, pp. 231-247).

The material necessities of these TV families being thus easily met, stress was laid upon material desire and the need to purchase products with discretion. Besides their ubiquitous presence, 'things' formed the basis of one out of every eight plots, although buying for its own sake was typically frowned upon. In order to best appreciate what one buys, one must be discerning in choice of products. Moreover, consumer items were frequently used as incentives or tests of character. The girl must show her determination to buy that dress by working in the store; the boy must demonstrate frugality by saving money to buy that boat. Consequently, these television shows sent the message that although hard work is its own reward, hard work also enables one to buy (particular) consumer goods which are in themselves important for their reward function (Leibman, 1995, pp. 234-236). An effective way to shock the family was for the teenage girl to announce that she wanted neither party nor gifts on her eighteenth birthday.

The targeted audience for such dramatic programs with their message of continuous consumption consisted of a new breed of American: the suburbanite. With both the Depression and the Second World War in the past, young people turned towards other preoccupations. The marriage rate increased significantly after the war, with the average age for marrying dropping to twenty in the 1950s. A baby boom, which had begun during the hostilities, continued until 1964; the nation's birth rate by the end of the 1950s almost surpassed that of India (Macdonald, 1988, pp. 321-322). Americans faced a severe housing crisis at the beginning of the 1950s, brought about the decline in residential construction that had begun during the Depression and continued throughout the war-time years, and which had been further aggravated by the needs of returning GI's to establish homes for their young families. In response, a new model for living quickly gained popularity: mass produced tract houses. This suburban development started in 1947 with the establishment of Levittown on Long Island, where William Levitt first adapted Henry Ford's technique of mass production to housing. Unable to send the product through an assembly line, Levitt in effect brought the assembly line to the product. Specifically, he broke the construction process down into 27

separate steps, each of which became the designated speciality of a single mobile team whose job then became to move from house to house to carry out their particular task. In this way, a community offering roughly 17,000 affordable Cape Cod colonials and ranch houses virtually grew overnight within easy reach of Manhattan, in what had until then only been farmland (Halberstam, 1993, pp. 131-137). Thanks to help from the Federal Housing Administration and veteran mortgage loans, these quintessentially identical houses offered newly-established families the chance to afford their slice of the American Dream (Marling, 1994, p. 253). President Eisenhower's ambitious highway program further spurred the attractiveness of the suburbs, as families living there could still enjoy ease of mobility (Boyer, 2005, pp. 104-105).

This mass movement away from the cities created new communities of primarily young, middle class adults who were cut off from the traditional community life available in urban areas. Suburbia provided an alternative sense of community, giving people a new sense of belonging and identity; television did the same, as fictional TV families came to be more frequent visitors to the home than now-distant relatives (Cross, 2000, pp. 95-96, Halberstam, 1993, p. 195, Spigel, 1992, pp. 100-101). An American identity soon came to be realized through a pressing need to 'keep up with the Joneses' through acquiring a "standard package of consumer goods" (Marling, 1994, p. 254), made possible in a society that not only had more disposable income than ever before but also had access to easy lines of credit (Halberstam, 1993, pp. 473, 505). Reservations about indebtedness held by earlier generations were swept away as a post-war Americans no longer felt they should deny themselves immediate gratification, even when purchasing big-ticket items (Halberstam, 1993, p. 505, Young and Young, 2004, p. 6). The 1951 launch of the first modern credit card that came to enjoy widespread use, Diner's Club, proved to be a sign of the times. BankAmericard (now Visa) and American Express later followed suit in 1958 with the introduction of their cards (Rosenberg, 2014, VISA, n.d., Woolsey and Gerson, 2009).

Popular media throughout the 1950s glorified this frenzy of acquisition, and the dream of a suburban house with all the accompanying modern appliances became central to the American concept of success. Appliances came to represent more than simple tools; they became statements about a household's possibilities and aspirations. Indeed, modernity and technology became focal motifs of the postwar American identity, as the Americans of the 1950s bought three-fourths of all appliances then produced in the world. Foreign critics maintained that the United States underwent a shift of values, towards materialism: "The only way to catch the spirit of the times is to write a handbook on home appliances" (Marling,

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1994, p. 267). Manufacturers, eager to take advantage of a market which they hoped would never be saturated, advanced a number of different strategies to stimulate purchases. In the early 1950s, cars and kitchen equipment were decorated with ‘gorp’, chrome ornamentation that was supposed to identify a deluxe product. Later, fearing that the market might be filled, manufacturers dropped the gorp and instead featured trendy shades, emphasizing the importance of a color-coordinated, integrated kitchen. Such design changes, plus product development and “heavy doses of psychology” all combined to part Americans from their income (Marling, 1994, pp. 255-265).

Television was undoubtedly the 1950s product which best represented the crowning expression of societal advancement and which also proved the perfect tool for manufacturers’ psychological maneuverings. Although television was virtually unknown at the start of the decade, both its availability and popularity increased dramatically in the course of the 1950s. A rarity in American households at the beginning of the decade, television sets were commonplace by its close. By 1960, 90% of all households had at least one set and the average viewer watched an average of five hours per day (Cohen, 2003, p. 302, Cross, 2000, p. 100). Magazine advertisements promoting the sale of television sets suggested that television was a means to bring the family closer. Sets were often pictured as a replacement for the traditional hearth, depicted as surrounded by contented family members sitting in a semi-circle. Some 1950s studies showed that many Americans optimistically believed that television would strengthen family ties, bring back romance, and cure juvenile delinquency (Spigel, 1992, pp. 43-45).

Along with the proliferation of television sets appeared a slew of related products such as the TV tray table, introduced in 1952, to allow the family to enjoy dinner while not missing a moment of television entertainment. The convenience and portability of the toaster was promoted, as it allowed the housewife to make nutritious snacks for her family in any room of the house. TV dinners became popular after their 1953 introduction by Swanson because they allowed viewers to “dine in the company of TV stars” (Marling, 1994, pp. 232-235). Furniture manufacturers designed special furniture and lighting to enhance the family’s sense of being in a theater while watching television; even western motifs on wallpaper were created as TV tie-ins (Spigel, 1992, pp. 106-109). Girls of the 1950s were encouraged to knit the ‘Saturday Night TV Sweater’ for Dad to enjoy while watching the tube (Macdonald, 1988, p. 330). And the Western-Holly Company went so far as to design a combination television/stove in 1952, allowing the housewife to keep an eye on her roast and her TV screen at the same time

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(Spigel, 1992, p. 73). Television entertainment thus came to influence nearly all aspects of American social lives, in a way that was unprecedented in consumer history: Swanson, “after all, [...] had not tried to market Radio Dinners” (Edwards, 2004).

Quick to recognize a potential gold mine, advertising agencies and the sponsors whom they represented did their best to influence the new medium. In the past, the home had served as a barrier to the enticements of commercialization, as nothing beyond print advertisements and the occasional door-to-door salesman had managed to penetrate its outer façade. The home-as-sanctuary ideal first changed with the advent of commercial radio in the 1930s and 40s, but the persuasive powers of television in the 1950s came to rapidly surpass that of any other medium (Young and Young, 2004, p. 39). Studies conducted after the completion of the first national coaxial cable had been laid showed that toilets flushed across households on cue immediately after a popular program ended, indicating that Americans were adjusting their habits to accommodate the broadcast schedule (Halberstam, 1993, p. 184). Television networks and sponsors also learned from past experiences in radio broadcasting. Whereas the first advertisements in radio (in 1922) had sparked protests, advertising on television had been a foregone conclusion. Rather than asking *whether* advertising on television should be permitted, debates revolved around *how* advertising should best be carried out. Would a TV audience tolerate commercial interruptions? Would television require a darkened room and the viewer’s complete attention? Could television possibly replace radio, or would the housewife continue to listen to radio broadcasts as she performed her daily chores (Boddy, 1990, pp. 18-20)?

The initial task of television producers was therefore to teach the family how to consume television itself. The industry targeted the housewife, whom it was assumed was the primary purchaser for the entire family, and designed programs to fit into her day. Television soap operas proved to be one solution; their constant reiteration of previous plots together with abundance of repetitive dialog permitted women to divide their attention between television and work. By 1954, *Search for Tomorrow* was the second most popular daytime television show, where viewers followed the ups and downs in the life of a Midwestern housewife. Another solution was found in the segmented variety show, which allowed women to tune in or out of the different segments. And the magazine format, which debuted with NBC’s *Today* in 1952, perfected the integration of advice on housekeeping with sales messages (Spigel, 1992, pp. 75-83).

By making housework pleasant, television sponsors hoped to instill the habit of television viewing. And if Mom discovered that she was missing out on prime-time because of her chores in the home, then the sponsors were the first to suggest “a corrective cycle of commodity purchases” - of buying a dishwasher, for example - to allow her the luxury of enjoying her evening in front of the set with the family (Spigel, 1992, p. 92). As ABC Vice President Alexander Stronach Jr. exclaimed, “It’s a good thing electric dishwashers and washing machines were invented. The housewives will need them” (quoted in Spigel, 1992, p. 77). Television seemed particularly suited to small-ticket consumer items like those of Proctor and Gamble and General Mills, because it stimulated impulse buying of brands which were already ‘pre-sold’ through advertising. As a consequence, the type of television advertisers shifted in the course of the decade away from manufacturers like Ford, RCA, and GM, who produced expensive (and recession-sensitive) products (Boddy, 1990, pp. 157-158).

While striving to ensure an addicted day-time audience, sponsors and networks also devoted more energy to targeting audiences during the prime-time television hours of 7:00 - 10:30 pm because so many sets were then in use, and there were more viewers per set than during the day. However, disputes between the networks and the sponsors over control of prime-time programming were rampant during the 1950s. Sponsors, who paid production costs, were eager to have their programs shown at the optimal hours; as a result, programming became almost haphazard, with no clear direction. Networks strove to remedy this and gain control over program scheduling to create ‘block programming’ of a logical succession of programs designed to entice the viewers to stay tuned, to allow for ‘counter-programming’ competing with another network’s shows in the same time slot, and to work towards ensuring long-term commitment to successful series. This conflict was often put in David-versus-Goliath terms: the broad network interests who wanted nothing more than to provide balanced programming as a public service versus the narrow-minded sponsor who was solely interested in the lowest cost-per-thousand (the cost of reaching one thousand viewers) (Boddy, 1990, pp. 95-96).

Despite network attempts to control television broadcasting, sponsor influence was enormous when it came to both sales messages and program content: “We’ll continue with *Father Knows Best* just as long as the sponsor continues to be happy with it,” explained actor Robert Young in an interview (TV Guide, 1956). Although it was illegal to specifically advertise a particular product in a sitcom, subliminal advertising was pervasive. Ozzie Nelson, for example, recalled that Hotpoint appliances furnished the kitchen for *The Adventures of*

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*Ozzie and Harriet*, and were in constant display. He added, “The Listerine people, of course, were not so lucky. We weren’t quite ready to write in any gargling scenes – not that they didn’t try to coax us (in a nice way, of course)” (quoted in Leibman, 1995, p. 110). Similarly, Robert Young recalled that in the five years that Scott Paper Towels sponsored *Father Knows Best*, the cast members were “encouraged to use a lot of paper products” (Leibman, 1995, p. 112).

Furthermore, the starring families of the television melodramas provided idealized versions of family life and served as role models, not only for the troubled guest or neighbor family but also for the viewing family. The press was encouraged to conflate the real-life actors with their fictional families by writing about, for example, the maternal credentials of the actress Barbara Billingsley from *Leave It to Beaver*. Robert Young, who had four real daughters in addition to his three fictional children, won the 1956 TV Father of the Year award, having come to symbolize an American father through both his show and his personal life.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the line between reality and fiction was sometimes blurred, since real-life couples such as Lucy and Desi, *Ozzie and Harriet*, and Burns and Allen played similar television counterparts. Product tie-ins further confused the boundaries, essentially enabling viewers to buy elements of the stories (Spigel, 1992, p. 158). Hotpoint commercials were broadcast throughout the decade, for example, where viewers were invited to purchase the same kitchen appliances that helped Harriet Nelson care for the men in her life (see e.g. adson, 2014). The networks often received letters from fans who were convinced that the television families were both real and praiseworthy. Consequently, these respectable middle-class, and above all, *consuming* television families set the example for real-life families to both acquire and obsess about things. In 1950s America, the endorsement by the TV Nelsons of paint-by-numbers kits – a hobby criticized as “turning Americans into a race of morons” – carried weight (Marling, 1994, pp. 64-65).

The proliferation of television in the 1950s, however, did not escape criticism. Fearful that people would become slaves to machines, some used the language of dystopia to warn about the potential negative consequences of television viewing. Television, with its invasive nature of entering directly into the home, was criticized as having the capacity to disrupt family life either by becoming ‘the other woman’ or by playing the role of an Orwellian ‘Big Brother’. Early social scientific studies particularly focused on the effects of television

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<sup>2</sup> Explained by *What’s my Line* host John Charles Daly during Young’s 1957 appearance as the mystery celebrity guest on that program (*What’s My Line?*, 21 April 1957).  
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viewing upon children. TV was blamed for a new disease, “spectatoritis,” whereby children addicted to the new medium neglected other aspects of life such as play, household duties, and homework. The effects of television violence upon children also became a source of worry (Spigel, 1992, pp. 46-50 and 113-120): concern over the impact of television violence prompted three congressional hearings in the 1950s to determine whether government control would be required to curb any negative effects or whether the television industry was capable of self-regulation in this regard. Before the first hearing in 1952, the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters (today the National Association of Broadcasters) compiled a manual called the Television Code. Meant to forestall federal intervention, the Code provided producers with voluntary guidelines to significantly reduce the portrayal of violence on television. Whenever criticism about the level of violence was leveled against the broadcasters, they were then able to point to the Television Code as the solution to the problem (Hoerrner, 1999).

More effective than the Television Code, however, was the sponsors’ decidedly allergic reaction to controversy or criticism of any sort. As the live television which had been so characteristic of the television of the early 1950s gave way to filmed Hollywood series, script writers were faced with growing censorship as sponsor involvement dramatically increased. By the mid-to-late 1950s, most advertising agencies had on-set representatives who read the scripts in advance of filming in order to make changes on behalf of their clients. Because the sponsors footed the bill for the programs, producers were expected to bow to such demands. The result tended to be blandness in television programs. Burning issues of the day were watered down or ignored. For instance, the U.S. Steel Hour script “Noon for Doomsday,” intended to be a fictionalization of the Emmett Till lynching case, finally ended up set in a New England town with no hint of racial violence (Boddy, 1990, p. 195 and 201).

Sponsors felt much more comfortable with the ‘formula’ show such as *Leave It to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*, where “there is a character that is already created; they (the writers) must write to those characters. The whole thing is laid out. Anybody can fill in” (Boddy, 1990, p. 194). Indeed, one freelance writer was able to use the same plot on seven different television shows: ‘the little kid accused of stealing when he’s innocent’ plot. With sponsors averse to any sort of true controversy that might offend potential viewers, scriptwriters were often forced to have the characters react in exaggerated, hyperbolic ways to rather trivial stimuli (for instance, teenage girls scream at their mothers when deprived of a country club dance). By deliberately avoiding any thought-provoking material, sponsors

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hoped to neither offend the audience nor excite them so much that they might not pay attention to the commercial message (Leibman, 1995, pp. 53, 57, and 109). As writer-producer R.A. Authur explained, “drama is something that goes on in between the commercials and will be sacrificed at any given time for that purpose” (quoted in Boddy, 1990, p. 196). Pop-culture specialist N.C. Leibman (1995, p. 112) notes how sponsor censorship enormously influenced the representation of television family life; in retrospect one might conclude that such families, who experienced major breakdowns over minor problems such as too much housework, were actually disturbed. This thought becomes all the more striking when one considers the more pressing matters of the day, such as the ongoing Korean conflict, the beginnings of American involvement in Vietnam, the red scare at home, and the looming fear of an atomic holocaust.

Besides amending plotlines, sponsors also chose to alter any reference that would shed a negative light on their own products, or any positive light upon those of a competitor. Perhaps the most grotesque example is that of the advertising agency representing the American Gas Association which sponsored a drama about the Nuremburg war crime trials: any mention of the word ‘gas’ in connection with the death chambers was forbidden (Boddy, 1990, p. 198). Writer Rod Serling complained, “they continually and arbitrarily delete from the English language any word that suggests a competitive product. You can’t ‘ford’ a river if it’s sponsored by Chevy (quoted in Boddy, 1990, p. 201).

But perhaps more insidious than the sponsors’ outright interference was the scriptwriters’ self-censorship. By the late 1950s, scriptwriters anticipated the taboo subjects and simply did not put them in the scripts at all. Any experienced writer could foresee that in *Father Knows Best*, for example, Kathy would never wind up becoming an engineer, and that Mom would wipe up a coffee spill with a Scott paper towel rather than a cloth. As Shelby Gordon, a former CBS script editor and producer, commented in 1959, “Today there’s no censorship problem to speak of. New writers who are attracted to television generally have nothing to say. The rest of us have forgotten how to say it” (quoted in Boddy, 1990, p. 203). The main complaint of 1950s television critics thus concerned the growing mediocrity of television. Once the pilot episode of a program had been aired, the plot ideas for the entire series were evident. Every other episode was merely a carbon copy of the first, and there was only so much to say about the series. Television had, in essence, become insipid. There was nothing left to write about. Broadcasters were quick to reply with their own acerbic comebacks, claiming for example, that the critics’ complaints were merely “an effort of the

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few to impose tastes upon the many.” By the late 1950s, the television industry set the so-called elitist critics’ tastes against the democratic tastes of the majority of viewers; “television is a mass medium – a medium for the masses” (Boddy, 1990, p. 237).

This odd equation of television, consumerism, and democracy culminated in a well-known confrontation at Sokolniki Park in Moscow in July, 1959. A 1958 protocol agreement had prompted exchanges of science, technology, and culture expositions between the United States and the Soviet Union. The year 1959 thus found an American exposition in Moscow which featured all sorts of American products: from labor-saving devices, make-up, pots and pans, frozen dinners, twenty-two different cars of the latest make to Pepsi, with 795 American corporations represented. Even a complete model of an American home could be toured. This gaudy display represented some of the decade’s most powerful icons; “they were somebody’s, everybody’s, definition of the good life in the affluent 1950s” (Marling, 1994, p. 250, see also Carlson, 2009, pp. 26-27).

At the same time, the Captive Nations Resolution, passed by a Republican Congress every year since 1953, required the President to proclaim a week of prayer for people living under communist tyranny. The 1959 legislation passed just as Vice President Nixon flew to Moscow. With a whole nation of Americans therefore effectively praying for the downfall of the USSR, Nixon found Nikita Khrushchev to be in a surly mood as they toured the American pavilion together, while he himself faced a dilemma: as a candidate in the 1960 presidential election, Nixon needed to convince the American public that he could stand up to the Russians, yet he was bound by strict instructions from President Eisenhower to maintain a ‘cordial atmosphere’ with Khrushchev. What resulted was a serial conversation, where modern appliances served as anti-communist propaganda devices. Nixon equated choice of design to liberty, and alternatives in styles to potent symbols of difference:

To us, diversity, the right to choose, the fact that we have a thousand different builders building a thousand different homes, is the most important thing. We don’t have one decision made at the top by a dictator.  
(Carlson, 2009, p. 23)

In a piece of logic that must have delighted American manufacturers no end, Nixon connected ‘idle consumer fetish’ to ideology. The housewife’s choice, whether or not it was irrational, nevertheless still constituted a choice; the habit of making such choices lay at the heart of democracy. In other words, pure consumerism was identified with the virtues of democracy (Marling, 1994, pp. 243-250 and 270-279).

Khrushchev argued that such an abundance of choice exemplified bourgeois extravagance; function should be valued over outward appearance: “Don’t you have a machine that puts food into the mouth and pushes it down?” he mocked (Boddy, 1990, p. 128). And many Americans, who recognized that the American economy had come to depend upon materialism and a cycle of perpetual consumption, agreed with Khrushchev in this respect. For instance, the novelist John Steinbeck wrote in 1959, “If I wanted to destroy a nation, I would give it too much and I would have it on its knees, miserable, greedy, and sick” (Marling, 1994, p. 252). And as headlines about the quiz show scandals broke in the late 1950s, greed did indeed appear to have taken the overhand in the broadcast industry.

From the mid-1950s, both sponsors and networks had found the quiz format to be extremely attractive. Advertisers were responsible for paying the production costs of the programs, but such shows were inexpensive to produce because they required no writers, professional actors, or multiple sets. Therefore, the cost-per-thousand was low. Additionally, sponsors paid the networks for air time. The price a network charged depended upon the popularity of the show as evidenced by television ratings. A cycle was consequently sustained whereby the profits of the network were determined by the success of the show televised, which in turn was reflected by the success of the sponsor in selling the advertised product. High ratings became the common goal for both sponsor and network (Boddy, 1990, p. 218, PBS Online, 1999b).

And the quiz shows were nothing if not popular. The first television quiz show, *The \$64,000 Question*, which premiered on June 5, 1955, benefitted from the earlier popularity of radio quiz shows as well as the materialist 1950s American Dream. The rags-to-riches concept, where anyone could win, proved exceedingly attractive. The top prize of \$64,000 (quadrupled in 1957 in response to falling ratings) was an astonishing sum to most people of that decade. By comparison, machinists earned \$4,000 per year and stenographers \$2,800 annually (PBS Online, 1999d). Additionally, the sense of real-life drama and suspense, evidenced by the contestants’ nervous wringing of the hands or furrowing of the brow, captivated the public who routed for their favorite contestants week after week. Indeed, the contestants themselves proved to be an attraction, as producers searched for people who possessed an odd area of knowledge: the cobbler who was an opera expert, the policeman with an expertise in Shakespeare, the female psychologist with a superior knowledge of

boxing (and to the sponsor's chagrin, also of boxing referees).<sup>3</sup> Winners became overnight celebrities, invited on lecture circuits after their run on the show.

*The \$64,000 Question* proved to be such a spectacular hit that in one evening, 55 million Americans – approximately a third of the nation – watched the show. The crime rate dropped around air-time, as did the number of long-distance calls; restaurants and theaters noted a decline in patronage on the evening of the show's broadcast each week (PBS Online, 1999c). But most importantly for the program's sponsor, Revlon, sales of its products increased by 54% in the first six months of airing and tripled in the following year. The producers therefore decided to capitalize on this phenomenal success as well as on the fame of the contestants by launching *The \$64,000 Challenge*, where winners of *The \$64,000 Question* returned to face new challengers. By July 1956, these two shows were rated number one and two on television (PBS Online, 1999a).

The sensation created by the two shows provoked a string of others, produced by advertisers eager for easy profits. By the peak season of 1958-59, twenty-four quiz shows, such as *Dotto*, *Twenty One*, *Tic Tac Dough*, and *The Big Surprise*, were airing (Boddy, 1990, p. 218, Van Doren, 2008). Of these shows, it was *Twenty One* that provided viewers with one of the most exciting duels of the quiz show era, between Herb Stempel (a know-it-all contestant whom viewers loved to hate) and Charles Van Doren (a clean-cut professor in English who made eggheads look good). After a series of ties, Van Doren managed to vanquish his opponent and was thereby catapulted to both fortune and fame. Afterward, the disgruntled Stempel came to reveal to the public how the show had been rigged.

The first premonitions of the scandal to come were already evident in 1958, when *Dotto* was suddenly cancelled by Colgate and CBS after Edward Hilgemeier was able to provide a registered letter proving that a fellow contestant's pre-show notes corresponded exactly with her answers on the show (Bro, 2014). Stempel was thus neither the first nor the only whistle-blower; he was simply the most famous. First during a 1958 New York grand jury investigation and later during a congressional hearing, it was gradually revealed how the public had been duped. Everything about the quiz shows had been faked. Contestants had been provided with the answers in advance and had even been coached on how to behave to create maximum suspense. Even their movements had been choreographed down to the most minute detail; Stempel, for example, was explicitly instructed to pat his brow rather than rub

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<sup>3</sup> The psychologist referred to is Dr. Joyce Brothers, who outwitted the producers when they wanted to bump her from the program. She legitimately won the \$64,000 and came back for a rematch on *The \$64,000 Challenge* (PBS Online, 1999c, PBS Online, 1999e).

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it, so as not to smear his make-up (Van Doren, 2008). Advertisers, such as Revlon or Geritol (who sponsored *Twenty One*), had decided which contestants would prevail based upon whom they designated as best able to increase ratings and consequently help sell their products (PBS Online, 1999f).

The viewers' reaction was seemingly one of shock and surprise; their faith in the medium itself was severely weakened (Marling, 1994, p. 185). President Eisenhower claimed to share "the general public's bewilderment, astonishment and dismay that anybody 'could conspire to confuse and deceive that American people'" (Hartmann, 5 November 1959). Polls revealed that 87-95% of the American public was aware of the scandals, and that the viewers' anger quickly spread to other aspects of network television, including the influence of the sponsors, as well as "everything from irritating commercials to program content" (Boddy, 1990, pp. 219-220). Even Edward Murrow was not immune to a backlash, after it came out that the celebrity guests on his talk show had been provided with interview questions in advance (Museum of Broadcast Communications, n.d.). Yet despite expressions of dismay and even outrage, the revelations of quiz show rigging led to few enduring consequences. Although most quiz shows were cancelled in the late 1950s in favor of westerns, no one person involved suffered any serious legal consequences. The actual rigging of quiz shows had not been illegal before these revelations, so the only indictments were for a handful of people - including Van Doren - convicted of second degree perjury, a misdemeanor. All but one of those people were contestants, leading broadcast researcher Charles A. Siepmann in 1959 to remark that "the bag, to date seems to comprise a large number of frightened rabbits, not a few skunks, and innumerable rats. But the big game seems, by some odd coincidence, to have escaped the targets of the noisy gunfire" (quoted in Boddy, 1990, p. 220, see also Stone and Yohn, 1993, p. 321).

The quiz show scandals did lead to an amendment of the Communications Act in 1960 whereby fixing the outcomes of any contest of skill or knowledge was made illegal. Another amendment making illegal the practice of on-air promoting of products of non-accredited sponsors was triggered by the concurrent 'payola' scandal in radio. As if the breach of public trust in television was not enough, it also turned out that hundreds of disc jockeys had been taking bribes (so-called 'consulting fees') in exchange for playing particular records and thereby sway the music preferences of American teenagers. Even Alan Freed and Dick Clark, two of the most influential disc jockeys, were implicated in the scandal; Freed was eventually charged with 26 counts of commercial bribery, while Clark emerged relatively unscathed and

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went on to a long career to become ‘America’s Oldest Living Teenager’ (History Channel website, 2014a, Hutchinson, 2013, PBS Online, 1999b). The new decade thus opened with a scathing speech in 1960 by the new FCC chair Newton N. Minow, promising change and condemning the then-current state of television programming as a cesspool:

But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your own television set when your station goes on the air and stay there for a day without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit-and-loss sheet or a rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe a vast wasteland. You will see a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western badmen, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence and cartoons. And, endlessly, commercials--many screaming, cajoling and offending. And most of all, boredom. (Minow, 2011, see also History Channel website, 2014b)

Yet despite amendments and speeches by those in the know, television remained popular. It turned out that viewers’ disappointment in the broadcasting industry competed with apathy and the belief that such manipulation was simply out of the average person’s control; the most common reaction was just to change the channel (Venanzi, 1997). Some viewers expressed outright cynicism: “My only regret is that I didn’t have a chance to get on one of the shows before they were discovered rigged” (Boddy, 1990, p. 227). Many former contestants sued the networks, producers and sponsors because although they had won some money, they could perhaps have won even more had the programs not been fixed (Stone and Yohn, 1993, pp. 318-319). Indeed, the group that most benefited from the quiz show scandals turned out to be the networks, who managed to wrest production control away from the sponsors for good. Rather than paying for the entire production of a show, advertisers would henceforth pay for single commercials. The dilution of power of the single sponsor did not, however, lead to more controversial programming. Network executives had the interests of their advertisers at heart, and claimed that the influence of sponsors in programming was helpful, not detrimental. In an odd stretch of logic, an NBC network executive argued that because the sponsor responds to consumer demands, it was actually the public who controlled programming (Boddy, 1990, pp. 244-249).

To conclude, the rise of suburbanism coupled with a higher disposable income provided fertile soil for manufacturers of consumer goods. And the proliferation of an incredibly popular medium, television, gave these producers a highly effective means to influence potential customers. Some manufacturers capitalized on television’s success by designing popular tie-in products, such as the TV Dinner. Others, who became the sponsors of [Author’s copy] Nacey, S. (2015). Blurring fiction with reality: American television and consumerism in the 1950s. In Alison Hulme (Ed.), *Consumerism on Screen*. (pp. 1-20). Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishers.

1950s programs, gained an unprecedented stronghold over the broadcasting industry; they naturally used this influence to improve their own positions by aggressively stimulating a preoccupation for possessions among the general public, to the detriment of quality programming. Through both overt commercials as well as subliminal advertising in popular programs, advertising agencies and sponsors managed to increase sales of their own products by capitalizing on an image of how the typical American family should ideally appear. So pervasive was this image that Vice President Nixon successfully used it in the propaganda war against communism, thereby greatly enhancing his chances in the upcoming presidential election.

Yet there were signs that the viewing audience was not merely a naive group that simply absorbed and obeyed commercial messages. Complaints abounded concerning the possible negative effects on children of the portrayal of violence on television; such criticism escalated in later years and is a source of furious debate today. Many also recognized the insidious influence of the sponsors and disparaged television programming as being overly bland, not daring to tackle controversial issues such as racism or poverty. Others, such as John Steinbeck, criticized the enormous degree of materialism prevalent in the 1950s America.

The aftermath of the quiz show scandals indicated the direction that American society would take in the future. Although in the uproar immediately following the revelations of rigging many expressed their dismay and disappointment in the television industry, the lasting effects (or rather, lack thereof) display that the public was not really so concerned about having been deceived after all. Moreover, the networks, which had argued throughout the decade that they were more concerned with public welfare than the sponsors could be, came to show their true colors after the scandal. Although networks gained full control over production, the television line-up in the early 1960s remained as bland as ever. The networks shied away from controversial themes just as the sponsors had done before them; no viewers were to be offended for fear that they might decide to change the channel.

The patterns of conspicuous consumption set in the 1950s continued throughout the rest of the century. The quiz show scandal was relegated to being only the first and (perhaps) least important of a series of scandals: the standard '-gates' (Watergate, Contragate, Nipplegate, etc.), and the trendier '-ghazis' (Benghazi, Bridgeghazi, Self-ghazi, etc.) (see Seitz-Wald, 2014). Network television remained popular; only in recent years with the development and expansion of cable television and streaming services such as HBO, Hulu and Netflix have questions about the viability and future of broadcast television surfaced (see

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Stelter, 2014). Thus, although many of us today might laugh at the triviality of Beaver's problems or be outraged that Kathy chooses homemaking over a career, very few question (or perhaps even notice) the overwhelming love of 'things' which was so heavily promoted in television of the 1950s and which continues to permeate the American society of today and has arguably spread beyond the borders of the United States.

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