

MDI ALERT

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PRIMETIME: THE WAY WE WERE

Here's a trip to the past, via an old Nielsen pocketpiece rating report for the two weeks ending February 21, 1953, right in the middle of the 1952-53 TV season.

To give some perspective, at the time there were only 22 million TV homes, which represented just under half of all households. The FCC had just lifted its 1948 freeze on new station licenses, which meant that very few stations were available to the average TV home. New York and Los Angeles had seven stations, Chicago and Washington, DC both had four, Philadelphia, Detroit, Atlanta, Dallas-Fort Worth had three, Boston and Memphis were served by only two, and Pittsburgh, St Louis, Indianapolis, Houston, and Richmond only one. Indeed, 45 of the 77 TV markets were served by a single station.

Most stations were either NBC or CBS outlets and some carried the shows of both networks, though not always in their "live" time slots. This left the ABC and DuMont networks with very few stations outside of their own O&Os. ABC had O&Os in the top three markets (New York, Los Angeles and Chicago) and elsewhere, while DuMont had its Pittsburgh and Washington, DC stations. Otherwise, these networks had to scramble to get stations in other markets to carry their fare, which usually meant that it ran on weekend afternoons or at other less than desirable times via a kinescope recording. Kinescopes were nothing more than cameras that filmed the shows as they were telecast from the networks' home station. The filmed version, which was often dark and not as clear, was aired in the local time slot assigned to the show. Frankly, this was not a good situation.

As a result, the sponsors who controlled most of the primetime shows were reluctant to use ABC and DuMont, so these struggling networks each programmed only eight hours of fare weekly. This meant that NBC and CBS were competing only with each other in two-thirds of the time periods. Still, ABC had a hit show in *The Lone Ranger*, which pulled a 31% TV home rating for its sponsor, General Mills, on Thursdays at 7:30 while P&G sponsored *Beulah* on Tuesdays at 7:30 and General Mills and Hotpoint sponsored two sitcoms on Fridays at 7:30 and 8PM, respectively (*The Stu Erwin Show* and *The Adventures Of Ozzie And Harriet*). As for DuMont, it offered wrestling and boxing, an assortment of quiz shows and private eye capers, plus the *Arthur Murray Party* and Bishop Sheen's *Life Is Worth Living*. DuMont also ran the classic kid show, *Captain Video*, but since it aired at 7PM, it wasn't really a primetime show.

At this time Nielsen was converting its 1,500-radio meter panel into TV homes (as they were acquired) and had about 600 homes in its TV meter panel. Most homes had only one set, and Nielsen reported that the average TV home used its set almost six hours per day. Furthermore, Nielsen found that the average primetime show attained an average minute tune-in of 20.6% among all TV homes, which represented about 9 million viewers. That might not seem like a lot, but the average primetime broadcast network show today—with six times more TV homes available to watch than in 1953—reaches only 5-6 million people per minute. In fact, with the exception of football, today's top-rated primetime shows now draw only about as many viewers per minute as the average show did in 1953.

So, what were the viewers of 1953 watching?

The accompanying table shows the 15 highest rated programs as of mid-February 1953, based on their total TV home average minute tune-in. The numbers are, not surprisingly, astronomical. CBS had the three top-rated series with *I Love Lucy*, sponsored by Philip Morris, which reached 69% of Nielsen's TV home panel per minute, followed by *The Pabst Blue Ribbon Bouts*, with a 54.6% rating, and *Arthur Godfrey & Friends*, at 50.7%. As shown, most of 1953's hit shows—as well as most others—were sponsored by a single advertiser, although some featured shared sponsorships. Most primetime TV shows at this time were dramatic anthologies, varieties, quizzes and sitcoms, with very few that could be described as "action" oriented. This would not change until ABC's deal to help fund Disneyland brought a series of the same name, with Davey Crockett and friends, to American TV homes in 1954. Walt Disney's program became a mega hit and spurred Hollywood moguls, who had been fighting TV, to flip flop and become program suppliers themselves, however, that's another story.

Some regard this period as TV's golden age, and there were many classic performers and shows that contribute to this perspective. For example, there was Sid Caesar and his team (Coca, Reiner, and Morris) who made viewers bellow with laughter. And of course, there was Milton Berle and the up-and-coming Jackie Gleason, who started out on DuMont but was lured to CBS where he scored big in the Nielsens. In fact, 1953 TV was loaded with comedy and variety acts like on Ed Sullivan's *Toast Of The Town* and *The Colgate Comedy Hour*, which featured veteran showbiz stars like Bob Hope, Groucho Marx, Jack Benny, Martha Raye, Phil Silvers and Jimmy Durante, as well as newcomers like Wally Cox (of *Mr. Peepers*), Red Buttons and George Gobel. The problem was that many of these personalities came across as repetitive on TV. While they lasted for years on radio—because the audience couldn't see them—their use of the same tricks and mannerisms on TV week after week proved boring, and their success was short lived. The TV public wanted more action and adventure and always something new to feast their eyes on. That was a lesson soon to be learned as advertisers began to relinquish control over TV content and the networks went to Hollywood for more diverse and adventurous programming.

Top 15 Primetime Broadcast TV Network Shows

Two Weeks Ending February 21, 1953

	Avg. Min. Rating	Sponsor
1) I Love Lucy (CBS)	69.0	Philip Morris
2) Pabst Blue Ribbon Bouts (CBS)	54.6	Pabst
3) Arthur Godfrey & Friends (CBS)	50.7	Toni, Pillsbury, Liggett & Meyers
4) Texaco Star Theater/Berle (NBC)	45.4	Texaco
5) Colgate Comedy Hour (NBC)	45.4	Colgate
6) Dragnet (NBC)	44.0	Liggett & Meyers
7) You Bet Your Life/Groucho Marx (NBC)	43.5	DeSoto
8) Fireside Theater (NBC)	42.0	P&G
9) All Star Revue (NBC)	40.2	Pet Milk, Johnson & Johnson
10) Goodyear TV Playhouse (NBC)	38.8	Goodyear
11) Toast Of The Town (CBS)	38.4	Lincoln-Mercury
12) Gillette Cavalcade Of Sports (NBC)	38.3	Gillette
13) Arthur Godfrey Scouts (CBS)	37.3	Lipton
14) Studio One (CBS)	37.2	Westinghouse
15) Your Show Of Shows/Caesar & Co. (NBC)	37.1	Benrus, Lehn & Fink, R J Reynolds, Prudential

Source: Nielsen.