

The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States. *By Megan Mullen*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. xiii + 229 pp. Tables, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$55. ISBN 0-292-75272-5.

Reviewed by James A. Von Schilling

Have you ever flipped through the myriad of channels on your television cable box, only to conclude that “there’s nothing good on”? Megan Mullen’s excellent book on cable and satellite TV offers the best explanation yet as to why an abundance of sources has produced a dearth of inspired programming.

Mullen is mainly concerned with the period of cable television history known as “Blue Sky,” roughly the years 1968 to 1975, when a new age in American media appeared. Visionaries back then predicted that cable television would not only diversify the programming available to the public but would reshape our society as well. Our home television sets would become centers for learning and culture, for encouraging health and well-being, and for enabling an active and democratic community life. Mullen shows, step by step, how the Blue Sky vision dissipated, a victim of industry choices, government policies, and public apathy.

In hindsight, we’ve ended up with the television we deserve. The economic system practiced in the United States does not foster a strong, democratic media, and our political establishment is invested in maintaining the status quo. And the American public has clearly voted against the Blue Sky vision with their remotes. Given the choice between programs filled with slick dramas and silly comedies or channels devoted to public access, community affairs, or diversified programming, audiences “flip” for the familiar—those *ER* or *Seinfeld* reruns, for example.

To Mullen’s credit, she is fair minded in her treatment of the disappointing history of cable television since the Blue Sky years. She has not written an antimedia/Big Business diatribe; in fact, she finds promise and creativity in some cable programming of the 1980s and 1990s. Her recognition of the clever scheduling, promotion, and content of cable channels like Nickelodeon and MTV is right on target, although I would like to have seen her focus less on the “flow” and “text” of this postmodern programming and

pay more attention to its artistry and performance. Although she concludes with a eulogy to the “creative inspiration” behind cable programming, she gives little space to the creative and inspired human beings who work in the cable industry, barely crediting either the industrialists who built a mass medium from a lone antenna perched atop a hotel in Oregon in 1948 or the talents who have weaned audiences from their years of dependence on three interchangeable TV networks.

For a journalistic study of some of these cable personalities, readers can turn to *Cable Cowboy: John Malone and the Rise of the Modern Cable Business*, by Mark Robichaux, and *The Billionaire Shell Game: How Cable Baron John Malone and Assorted Corporate Titans Invented a Future Nobody Wanted*, by L. J. Davis. Similar books about individual cable channels are *ESPN: The Uncensored History*, by Michael Freeman, *MTV: The Making of a Revolution*, by Tom McGrath, and *Inside HBO: The Billion Dollar War between HBO, Hollywood, and the Home Video Revolution*, by George Mair. Mullen’s book is more scholarly than these earlier books, as she is concerned with the broader context—encompassing, in roughly equal parts, the media, business, government, and the American public—in which cable and satellite TV developed.

More akin to Mullen’s book is *The Cable and Satellite Television Industries*, by Patrick Parsons and Robert Frieden, a volume within the Allyn & Bacon series in mass communications. Their study takes up, one by one, general industry topics (e.g., daily operations, law, and policy), just as a professor might organize an introductory course in cable and satellite TV. In contrast, Mullen’s book proceeds chronologically, beginning in the early years (pre-1968) of cable television through the “Blue Sky” period, continuing through the revolutionary year of 1975, when Home Box Office first beamed down its satellite signal, and ending in the mid-1990s. Her work stops, somewhat abruptly, before Tony Soprano and TiVo make their appearance, because she believes that the framework for our cable and satellite TV industry was firmly in place by then. That may be true, but I might add an epilogue to Mullen’s book, or a “tease,” as they say on television: on the next “Blue Sky,” a new mass medium confronts America and promises to reshape our society—the Internet.

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