

## Trivia You Don't Need To Know About Television (but you will want to know an...

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Worldwide, television is the most common form of entertainment. It has an interesting and sometimes shady past. Find the home site of author Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

### **Trivia You Don't Need To Know About Television** (but you will want to know anyway)

Don't blame Scottish engineer and inventor [John Logie Baird](#) for the lack of decent programs to watch on the main networks of television today. John only invented the hardware, black and white TV, back in 1926.

While our televisions can transmit digital signals with up to 1080 lines of data, [John's little outfit](#) only managed 30 lines. It looked like a peep show moving picture viewer, which made sense because these were popular in his day. It was cobbled together with scraps of wood, darning needles, string and sealing wax. No chewing gum and binder twine--materials commonly attributed to devices assembled in emergencies in agricultural country in those days--because he wasn't a farmer.

While we think of TVs as being electrical and electronic today, John's was also somewhat mechanical. He used a spinning metal disk with spirals of holes to take images apart for transmission. Kind of a fancy old fashioned box camera.

John showed off his colour television a mere two years later. But commercializing cameras and making affordable receivers delayed the popularity of colour for another two decades.

For many people, watching television in the mid 20th century meant viewing moving things in black and white. So what? People who grew up watching black and white television are more likely to dream in black and white than people who grow up today watching only colour TV. As media guru Marshall McLuhan said, "the medium is the message." And it sticks, even in our dreams.

The U.K.'s BBC was the first network to broadcast regularly using Baird's system. By 1936--well into the Great Depression, remember--about 2000 households had Baird televisions. They cost about £26 each, equivalent to today's US\$7700. Not the kind of data we have been led to think of when we think of the Great Depression.

Television extravagance has not abated. Today you can buy Panasonic's giant (103 inch, nearly 230 cm--greater in diameter than most basketball players are tall) plasma monster for \$70,000, should you happen to not have suffered much from the current economic slowdown. While Panasonic has the biggest set, that doesn't include projection TVs.

Philo T. Farnsworth, who invented the first all-electronic TV, was passionate about his invention. Lest anyone accuse his television of being a product of the devil, he stated firmly that it was a gift from the Lord. "God will hold accountable those who utilize this divine instrument." Where is Farnsworth when we need him today as a TV critic?

Here's a fact you will wish you never knew. By the age of 14, the average child in the United States has seen 11,000 murders on television. Let that sink in. The debate never ends about whether life eventually takes on less importance to a child as he sees death so often it becomes commonplace.

TV commercial time has gone up a bit in cost over the years. Bulova Watch paid nine dollars for a 20 second spot for the first ever commercial, in a baseball game between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the Philadelphia Phillies on July 1, 1941. Today a 30 second spot in a Superbowl broadcast--traditionally the most expensive advertising time on TV--will cost around three million bucks.

With all the ways we have of storing video data these days it came as a shock when NASA announced it had lost all the videotapes of the TV broadcast from the Apollo 11 mission ("That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.")

The longest running talk show is either Ireland's *Late Late Show*, which started in 1962, or *The Tonight Show*, which began in 1954. The reason for debate is that the latter show didn't settled into a regular format until Johnny Carson took over, a few months after the Irish show launched.

To demonstrate that copyright for television was an issue long before today's battles, when Sony launched the first VCRs in the 1970s the film studios took it to court for promoting piracy. The U.S. Supreme Court favoured Sony in the litigation, but the public was not so fond of Sony's Betamax format. While JVC's VHS failed in Japan as Sony dominated the market there, VHS (more accurately advertising for VHS recorders) won the hearts of people in North America. VHS eventually had four formats in different countries and they couldn't play on machines with a VHS format other than their own.

Are TV's days numbered? While networks switch to digital format for large TVs and about half the cell phones sold today have the ability to receive television signals, billions of streams of TV signals are received on computers each month.

Queen Elizabeth II has her [own channel](#) on YouTube. No, she doesn't sing, dance or take her clothes off. I checked.

Bill Allin is the author of ***Turning It Around: Causes and Cures for Today's Epidemic Social Problems***, a guidebook for teachers and parents who want to know what lessons their children need to learn about social skills and emotional coping, stuff kids desperately need but usually don't get at home or in school. Learn more at <http://billallin.com>

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