Memories of an afternoon of family television: The 60s and 70s

The television: A symbol of progress in Mexican homes.

In the 1960s and 70s, owning a television was a luxury. So much so that it was good business to make them available to the community for a modest fee. Owning one of these devices was as much of an aspiration as owning a brand-new car is today.

In the neighborhoods of Mexico City, an electronic device didn't just mean convenience; it was a sign of success. But the television, in particular, represented an ambition for children.

I remember Don Roque, the owner of the tire shop. For 20 cents, he'd let us watch Miss Cometa feed Chivigón with his bottle. That scene touched even the gruff mechanic. It went on like that for years, until one Christmas, my father gathered the whole family to go, with festive cheer, to the neighborhood furniture store. All to make the down payment on our brand-new television.

The shop, owned by Don Severo—a Galician who sold brass beds, pine wardrobes, and moon mirrors—was a castle of illusions. Behind its display cases, things glittered like multicolored sweets: the old-fashioned washing machine with wringing rollers; the always-white refrigerator; the toaster, useless for Mexican bread; the elongated console;... and the coveted wooden cube with a cathode-ray tube.

After signing the contract and watching Don Severo count the banknotes in the deposit box for the fifth time, the long-awaited moment arrived: transporting the heavy device. My father and Fabián, the rag-and-bone man, placed it on a wooden wheelbarrow and dragged it to our house.

As we approached our street, onlookers swarmed like devotees eager to kiss the Pope's hand. Some tried to touch the wooden saint, though there were a few envious glances.

Television belongs to everyone: Ernestina and the snack dishes.

Watching television as a family became a daily ritual. Everyone occupied whatever place they could or the one assigned to them. In one-room houses, the bed and the floor—protected by a down-filled pillow—replaced the sofa, which was already a privilege in itself.

The audience consisted of aunts, cousins, some neighbors... and Ernestina. She was a doorman at a tenement building, always arriving on time, accompanied by a child she looked after for a mother who went out to work every night. She never came empty-handed: in her mesh bag, she carried the ingredients for a snack worthy of a prize.

Before the programming began, she would take possession of the stove. She was a matriarch with a serious demeanor and a deep voice, accustomed to giving stern orders:

– Pick up the chilies from the ground, kid.

– "You put them there, ma'am," I replied as I obeyed her instruction.

– Then put them back down.

She knew exactly where everything should be. Being her assistant was torture: between

sneezes, you had to endure the spiciness that irritated your eyes and throat, or sadly watch the grasshoppers hopping on the griddle amidst small explosions.

As she cooked, she recounted the stories of her many husbands. Her voice was accompanied by the clinking of necklaces made from antique coins, while the child beside her huddled in a corner, nibbled on a sweet roll.

Child, matron, and troupe enjoyed the shouts of a singing contest, amidst the crackling of tlayudas and Ernestina's pronouncement:

—That artist looks exactly like one of my ex-husbands.

The television was the gateway to a multiverse existing beyond the confines of the neighborhood. It was the means to learn of the world's tragedies, to see social values reflected in the fictional lives of each character. All in black and white, as if it were a dream. For that was what it truly was: a representation of longings, sorrows, victories, games for which no toy existed, and a place to pass judgment, absolution, or condemnation.

A TV schedule for everyone

Each group had a schedule and a television channel. The children's group started on channel 5, shortly after the morning school hours, so it was important not to waste time on extracurricular activities such as: trading stickers from the Pink Panther album, collecting winning marbles, or watching slides on the View-Master.

I still have one of those slide projectors, but none of its cardboard wheels, which made a 'crack' sound when they turned, and whose lever produced a loud bang when released. On those slide projectors, I saw the animals of the African steppe for the first time, and Resortes dressed as a pachuco.

Missing the chance to see Uncle Gamboín's latest toy was unforgivable. It meant going to sleep without dreaming that on Three Kings' Day, it would magically appear at the foot of the bed. However, Uncle Gamboín always warned, with considerable spite, that his toys were unique and impossible to acquire.

They were all adorable, except for the diabolical Pancholín, a matriarchal Gestapo policeman tasked with spying on the children's misbehavior via TV, whose names and pranks were revealed by Uncle Gamboín himself. I

sometimes wished that gossipy puppet would be swallowed whole by the friendly little sausage.

The housewives would take over Channel 2 after serving dinner. They'd gather their neighbors to follow the life of a humble young woman, mistreated by a cruel mother or a wealthy stepmother. The leading man, always immature and submissive, represented for the heroine her dream of a home in the clouds, complete with pink unicorns, cooking pots, and laundry.

During my teenage years, I was captivated by the tragedies of Rina Galeana. I would watch the telenovela with my mother, my grandmother, and two neighbors. A chubby-cheeked little girl would sit next to me, hugging me during the dramatic moments. She would

give me flan and gelatin desserts made with her magical little hands.

The plot of that telenovela was overshadowed by the exclamations and anger of the ladies every time the wicked Rafaela did something wrong. There were moments when I feared I'd see the television screen slashed with one of those terrifying needles used to knit doilies for sofas.

The father had his evening entertainment on Channel 4. After his siesta, he sought relaxation in game shows, variety programs, or Westerns. It was time to admire the blond hero who, mounted on his obedient horse, massacred Apaches with a revolver with an endless supply of bullets. All to rescue a well-groomed lady. She always tried to shower him with kisses, something the hero often scorned or that the show's editors concealed.

Today I celebrate that heroes no longer have to be blond or blue-eyed, that they can have dark skin or wear platform heels. Kindness has no color or size. That stereotype prevented me from wanting to save the world, and that's why—perhaps—I'm still alive.

For days off, it was essential to check the program listings published in the newspapers and consult with the family. If visiting Grandma or any uncle, one had to adhere to their preferences or, at best, participate in a quick vote.

Almost always, unless there was a major sporting event, the children were the winners. The adult men preferred to debate over beers, rum, or brandy. The adult women would pass moral judgment on the absent relative, show

off their embroidery skills, or offer advice on raising children.

Unforgettable melodies

The most popular programs had unmistakable theme songs. Just hearing the first few chords was enough to create anticipation and make people hurry up with their tasks. Nobody wanted to miss the beginning of the episode. Each telenovela had its own theme music, as did The *Flintstones, Siempre en Domingo, Juan Pirulero, and El Club del Hogar* . *Siempre en Domingo* reached an audience of 350 million viewers in the Americas and Europe.

The Home Club was an impromptu program where Madaleno bullied the harmless Caralimpia, sometimes even making him cry. It all took place on a column of Barrera Mattresses, with the complicity of Vil Matraca and a bottle of Santa Clara eggnog.

The melodies were so catchy that it was common to hear them being hummed in the street by people with a distracted air.

The atmosphere in front of the television was warm and inviting. Not just because of the company, but because of the real warmth emanating from the bodies gathered together, the cup of coffee or hot chocolate, the popcorn popping over the fire, the refried bean taco, or the enchiladas. At some point, the ham sandwich appeared, attempting to compete with the reigning champion of the Chavo del 8 torta.

This show also had its own catchy theme song. And I'd bet, without fear of losing, that anyone would recognize it today.

Iconic Mexican TV programs

During these decades, television consolidated its position as the most influential medium, wielding immense power to shape social reality and cultural values. It became a pawn and instrument of the State, the arbiter of the collective voice. However, time proved that for every Goliath there is a David. In Mexico, this David was nurtured on the campus of the public university, with its Marxist indoctrination and the mantra that the people would never be defeated, except, of course, by their own naiveté and ill-informed reality.

Mexican television was both judge and jury in a clash of consciences. It was tasked with broadcasting, by force and by the language of the powerful, the events that darkened—like a black cloud—the fearful and defeated face of the nation on that October 2nd, 1968.

The most influential news program was undoubtedly *24 Horas* , hosted by Jacobo Zabludovsky. The only television station at the time, Telesistema Mexicano, gave little coverage to the event due to censorship and the government's tight control. In 1968, Jacobo limited himself to reading what the newspapers published, without offering his own opinions.

I will not make any negative judgments about this journalist. During his career, he covered events such as the moon landing; the devastating earthquake of 1985; a detailed account of the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio; Che Guevara's entry into Cuba; and he presented an interesting interview with Salvador Dalí.

In the absence of Facebook, TikTok, or X, not even the powerful government could silence

the social networks of that time. News of the repression spread through the factory floors, the chicken shop, and the 30-cent bus. It echoed in the shouts of the riot police who, banging on doors, demanded that no one leave their homes.

The current mobile networks of the world are the guillotine of a revolution that can cut off the head of a tyrant just as easily as that of the innocent young person working at an Oxxo convenience store. Their tyranny reflects a lynching manipulation that incites citizens against one another.

The press, whether paid or unpaid, and with all its flaws, was then—and still is today—the educated and professional conscience of the news. It informs us or manipulates us. All it takes is knowing how to read, watch, and listen to it without missing a single line and

without failing to see what each story conceals.

There's more: Always on Sunday, Zovek and the power of the screen

From 1969 to 1998, the most famous variety show was undoubtedly *Siempre en Domingo* , hosted by Raúl Velasco. Its host had the power to launch or bury careers. Juan Gabriel, Luis Miguel, Thalía, José José, Nelson Ned, and Napoleón all graced its stage. It is said that he hesitated to promote Juan Gabriel due to the prejudices of the time.

Another unforgettable character was Zovek, the escape artist from *Domingos Espectaculares* , the precursor to *Siempre en Domingo* . His real name was Francisco Javier Chapa del Bosque. Born in Torreón in 1940, he overcame polio, obesity, and childhood bullying to become the “Mexican Houdini.”

His aspirations were influenced by heroes like Hercules, so he dedicated himself to exercise, martial arts, self-defense, and acrobatic ballet. He pulled cars with his teeth, freed himself from burning sarcophagi, and stopped motorcycles with his bare hands.

His strength was such that he could drive a truck over his stomach, and he achieved a record of more than 8,000 sit-ups in 8 hours. It is said that he was the inspiration for Kalimán, an iconic comic book character of the time.

Despite his formidable and undeniable effort, some in Mexican society showed a certain reluctance to acknowledge the authenticity of his feats. Some said he stopped doing sit-ups when the camera wasn't focused on him, or that the chains he used were somehow clever. Society preferred to pay homage to the comic

book character rather than the real man who inspired it.

It wasn't until his death in 1972—after falling from a helicopter during an acrobatic stunt in Cuautitlán—that those who had previously denied his achievements showed remorse. Then everyone rejected the idea that he had made a mistake due to a lack of skill. They blamed the pilot, the quality of the rope that held him, and even President Luis Echeverría. Some even denied his death, thereby bestowing upon him a mythical aura that enhanced his memory, just as happened with another popular hero of previous decades: the incomparable Pedro Infante, champion of the poor.

The list of unforgettable programs is long.

Other programs and series that quickly come to mind, both national and international,

are: *The Law of the Revolver, In Family with Chabelo, El Chavo del 8, I Dream of Jeannie, Bewitched, Los Polivoces, Fantastic Theater with Cachirulo, The Lone Ranger, The Munsters, The Addams Family, Lost in Space, The Flying Nun, Bonanza, The High Chaparral, Comedians and Songs, Viruta and Capulina* ...

Soap operas also shone: *Gutierritos, Senda Prohibida, El derecho de nacer, La Leona, Los ricos también lloran, La Zulianita, Mundo de Juguete, La Gata, Angelitos Negros*.

As for children's cartoons, the following stand out: *The Flintstones, Top Cat, Inspector Chip and The Jetsons*.

In the 1960s, a competition began between Telesistema Mexicano (channel 2) and Televisión Independiente de México (channel 8), featuring two puppets vying for the children's audience: Topo Gigio, brought from

Italy in 1969, won over the public against Oso Rubiroso. Topo Gigio triumphed, always accompanied by Raúl Astor, and sometimes by artists like José José or Chabelo.

Shortly after, the two television networks merged. ***Televisa*** was born . And with it, a new media empire.

Antennas, bulbs and cathode ray tubes: Technical challenges and moments of uncertainty

Over time, the television—that wooden cube with a cathode ray tube—became as important as the stove, the armchair, or the bed. It ceased to be a luxury and became the center of family life, present in every home, regardless of its economic status.

But it wasn't all magic. Technical problems were a daily occurrence, which was a source of frustration. The poor signal was a constant inconvenience that required frequent adjustments to the antenna. This necessitated a team effort between someone climbing onto the roof to orient this contraption shaped like a bird's skeleton and others shouting instructions to indicate the correct position for better reception.

— There, there. No, he's gone!

Mechanical failures were frequent. A damaged picture tube, a rebellious dial, or the dreaded moment when the screen showed a thin line that turned into a dot: an unmistakable sign of a burned-out picture tube.

Then, the TV "doctor" was called. His visit was a family event. Everyone anxiously awaited his diagnosis. Sometimes it was enough to replace a light bulb right there, unless it was so special that it would take several days or weeks to find one. Other times, the set had to be taken to the repair shop, like a patient undergoing major surgery.

Voltage fluctuations were silent enemies. So was the junior, who whirled the channel dial like it was a carnival rattle. When the picture went out of sync, everything was tried: hitting the set, fiddling with the tuning knob, praying. For a few seconds it seemed to work... until the image on the screen would rise again as if it had a life of its own.

After the temporary confiscation of the television, there was no other option but to make peace with the radio or, in the case of

children, increase the hours of street games or drag any toy with a string to provoke the house cat.

From magic box to saltine cracker: The evolution of television.

Today's television is as flat as a cracker. There's no longer room to place a porcelain Buddha, nor for the cat to lie on it and scratch the president's face during his solemn state of the nation address.

Today, it's a personal possession that monitors the inhabitants in every room of a home, demanding every second of leisure. An accomplice of the mobile device, utterly selfish, overseer of a single slave. On it, anyone can watch what they want, when they want. There's no longer any excitement for the next episode, no rush to finish tasks. There's

no frustration at missing the show, no speculation about what will happen next.

Television is no longer a shared routine. It's no longer a stage for talented singers showing off their powerful voices, nor for brilliant screenwriters. Small-scale productions are commonplace, and banality is a success. Short-term efforts demand disproportionate rewards.

Before, the wait was long and the moments of laughter, brief. Today everything is short and boring. An individual's space is cramped, their gaze even narrower, fixed on a small screen. Everything is as limited as the number of words needed to express an idea, and even more so the vocabulary to write them. Even words themselves have shrunk.

The television is just another piece of furniture now. But I was lucky, because that old box

taught me to master the saltine cracker and to delve, within its labyrinth of fast food for the senses, into the talents that are worthwhile.