Meanwhile [in the 1930s] daytime serials had developed an extraordinary hold over home audiences. Sociologists studying the phenomenon found that women looked to such serials as Ma Perkins and Just Plain Bill and The Romance of Helen Trent for guidance on personal problems. Many expressed a dire dependence on serials. Thanks to this devotion, many businesses were making a financial comeback through radio sponsorship.

Televized serials, at least, receive their own paragraph.

Weekday mornings and afternoons were increasingly profitable [in the early 1960s]. Daytime serials had at first seemed a failure on television. But when they were expanded from the 15-minute form inherited from radio to a 30-minute form, success followed. By 1964 daytime serials were an addiction comparable to the radio-serial addiction at its zenith, and were the mainstay of New York activity in television drama. They were especially profitable for CBS-TV.1

Barnouw’s treatment of soap operas tells us much more about their peculiar position in academic mass media discourse than it does about them as historical phenomena.

There has been one serious book-length historical study of soap operas, Raymond William Stedman’s 1959 dissertation, “A History of the Broadcasting of Daytime Serial Dramas in the United States.”2 It is valuable as a sort of prehistorical, year-by-year chronicle of individual soap operas and of the critical response their popularity engendered, but Stedman’s historical analysis is much less illuminating. Basically, he attempts to explain the “lastingly” of the daytime serial form, and he concludes that “the durability of the form of the daytime serial drama seemed to be related strongly and principally to the continuing narrative.” This is accurate enough, but not exactly a blinding historical insight.

Stedman’s work, along with much of American writing on broadcasting history, is informed by the historiographical variant of empiricism. Empiricist history depends for its explanatory force not so much on regularity as upon the empiricist separation of subject and object. To the empiricist, history consists of the collection and arrangement of “facts.” These facts are presumed to exist entirely apart from the consciousness of the historian who collects them (they are extradiscursive). The historian’s role is that of disinterested, “objective” recorder. Knowledge is directly related to the
amount of facts presented us by the historian: the more facts we have about a historical phenomenon, the more we "know" about it and the more it has been explained, since, properly arranged, the facts "speak for themselves." A "theory" of history is unnecessary, and interpretation is to be avoided as an unwarranted intrusion of subjectivity into the historian's objective project.

Empiricist history is frequently couched in narrative terms, a story related to the reader by the historian/narrator. Narrative has been a mode of historical writing for thousands of years, of course, and to the extent that historical explanation involves the description of a sequence of events bound by cause-and-effect relationships, all history is narrative history. As Hayden White has shown, however, empiricist history often takes on the trappings of traditional fictive narratives as well. The historian retreats into the position of narrator, and the relationship of the historian to the events described is rendered unproblematic. The reader is asked to presume that the narrator, through whatever means, "knows what happened." History is presented as precast and already known, as a tale to be told with a beginning, middle, and end. Narrative transitions are allowed to displace causal explanations. History becomes a story "about" a finite set of characters, whose actions constitute the stuff of history.

The combination of empiricist ontology and epistemology and narrative historical form produces what we might call naive empiricism, to distinguish it from the philosophically informed empiricist history proposed by Carl Hempel, William Aydelotte, and others. Both, particularly the former, have been thoroughly critiqued for more than fifty years. As early as the 1930s, Charles Beard challenged his colleagues in the American Historical Association to rethink their empiricist assumptions:

History, as it actually was, as distinguished, of course, from particular facts of history, is not known or knowable, no matter how zealously is pursued the "ideal of effort for objective truth." . . . The historian seeking to know the past, or about it, does not bring to the partial documentation with which he works a perfect and polished neutral mind in which the past streaming though the medium of documentation is mirrored as it actually was. Whatever acts of purification the historian may perform he yet remains human, a creature of time, place, circumstance, interests, predilections, culture.

The vital philosophical debates in historiography and the philosophy of history, within which Beard's remark is but an initial provocation, do not seem to have seeped into American mass communications history, however. Perhaps because it is less reducible to regularity, American mass communications history has taken a back seat to empiricist sociological research. Barnouw's pioneering attempt at a comprehensive history of American broadcasting stands virtually alone.

The historical model offered by traditional aesthetics is equally theoretically impoverished. Since it assumes that artists produce art and that potential artworks are to be evaluated according to historically transcendent standards, traditional aesthetic history regards its role as the chronological assessment of the lives and works of great artists and, thereby, the establishment of an eternal canon of "art."

Thus, oddly enough, the greater the work of art the less historical it is, and the more it transcends the boundaries of its own historical conditions of production and consumption. Because it values timelessness over historical specificity, traditional aesthetic history marginalizes both historical context and change. What we are left with is "history" in traditional aesthetics, as Droysen pointed out long ago, is little more than a Sonntagsstrasse der Kunstgeschichte—a Sunday afternoon stroll down the main boulevard of art, along which the reader pauses with the historian to peer into chronologically arranged art works as into so many decorated shop windows.

Among reader-response theorists, Jauss has perhaps been the most historically oriented. Jauss insists that, as virtual semantic structures, literary works in and of themselves have no history except as they are received and responded to by successive waves of readers. Each new literary work is read against a historically specific horizon of expectations. "History of literature is a process of aesthetic reception and production that takes place in the realization of literary texts on the part of the receptive reader, the reflective critic, and the author in his continuing productivity." Thus understanding the "history" of a particular work would entail a grasp of the text's use of previous aesthetic strategies and allusions, the horizon of expectations against which it was initially read, the articulated response the work engendered, its subsequent assimilation into or distancing from the reader's horizon, and textual changes brought about in other texts of the same form or genre by the resultant feedback process between readers, authors, and cultural institutions. Although Jauss is concerned with the connection between literary history and more general historical processes, in the end his model of literary history is largely insular and evolutionary. Furthermore, while Jauss attacks the view of literary history as the chronological assessment of a preordained body of great works, his own examples
tend to be drawn from that same body of works whose status as art is unquestioned."

The soap opera is and always has been a narrative text in service of an economic imperative, in a much more direct fashion than those works Jauss and other reader-response critics discuss. Thus, our consideration of the soap opera as historical phenomenon must proceed along two parallel tracks: an examination of the functions served by soap operas within the institution of American commercial broadcasting (including the changes in those functions over time) and (insofar as they are historically discernible) an examination of the origins and development of the soap opera as a textual system as received by successive generations of readers since the early 1930s. This chapter takes up the former of these tracks; the next considers the latter. It should be pointed out that while our examination of these two historical aspects will appear as parallel, in their historical relationship they cannot be separated out so neatly.

The general historiographic perspective from which this inquiry will be conducted is one based on realism, an ontological and epistemological position developed within the philosophy of science principally by Roy Bhaskar and Rom Harre. Although a fully developed position within the philosophy of science, realism has only begun to make itself felt in historical disciplines. Extrapolating from basic statements of realist ontology and epistemology, we can construct a basic outline of realist historiography. A realist history would posit a historical past existing independently of the mind of the historian. Knowledge of this past comes through extant historical evidence, but in no sense does this evidence, or the "facts" of history to which it refers, speak for itself. Historical evidence forms the partial, mediated, yet indispensable record of the past, but in the realist view the historian’s primary interest is not in this record or the chronicle it can be made to form but in the generative (causal) mechanisms that lie behind it. These generative mechanisms are multiple and interactive. Furthermore, they operate at a number of conceptual levels and with uneven force, so that historical events seldom provide illustrations of covering laws. The realist regards history as an open system, and, where history concerns human agency, an open social system. Thus Bhaskar finds all realist social science, including history, to be incomplete rather than definitive, epistemologically "open" rather than closed. The reassuring certainty that is the goal of empiricism is denied at every turn by the very nature of historical inquiry—if not by the nature of social systems in general.

The Origins of Soap Opera Production

The principal generative mechanisms responsible for the soap opera's origin and perpetuation are easily discernible: as was noted in the last chapter, soap operas function within advertiser-supported broadcasting as advertising vehicles—to attract a particular audience at given times for the purpose of "selling" their attention to product manufacturers. Insofar as they share this function with soap operas, all instances of commercial broadcast programming can be "explained" by reference to their role in this economic system. But to leave the history of soap operas (or broadcasting) here would be the worst sort of reductive economism. We must account not only for the soap opera's general function as advertising vehicle but also for its particularities as a textual form. Why was the serial form employed in this fashion? Why did soap operas take on the character of asymptotic worlds? Why were they directed almost exclusively toward women? Why did they originate when they did? To answer these questions we must take a closer look at the generative mechanisms responsible for the soap opera. Here it is possible to see the initial development of the soap opera form and its dissemination over network radio as the conjunction of several distinct lines of causal force."

The Development of Network Radio

American Telephone and Telegraph initiated the linking of geographically separated radio stations by telephone lines to form a network for the purpose of attracting national advertisers in 1923. Rather than use programming as an inducement for people to buy radio sets (as Westinghouse had done) or as an advertisement of other interests of the station owner (the call letters of the station owned by the Chicago Tribune stood for “World’s Greatest Newspaper”), AT&T offered its Newark station, WEA, and its monopolistic control of telephone long-lines to any corporate client that wanted to pay the “toll.” After three years of industrial warfare between RCA, GE, Westinghouse, and AT&T over access to telephone lines and patent issues and three years of indecisiveness by various federal government agencies as to what, if any, power they had to intervene in the struggle, advertiser-based commercial network radio was firmly established by an agreement between the industrial parties to launch the National Broadcasting Company. The September 1926 newspaper ads announcing the for-
nation of the network admitted that its principal interest in developing “quality” programming stemmed from the parent company’s (RCA) desire to sell radio sets to every American family. The ads also implicitly acknowledged the more permanent basis upon which network broadcasting eventually would be established. Eager not to appear monopolistic, RCA generously offered other radio set manufacturers “the facilities of the National Broadcasting Company for the purpose of making known to the public their receiving sets... on the same terms as accorded to other clients.” By 1928 NBC was operating two networks (“Blue” and “Red”) and had been joined in the network broadcasting field by the Columbia Broadcasting System. Barnouw points out that, with the institution of advertiser-supported network radio, broadcasting became a servant of American industry to a degree unrealized in any other aspect of cultural production:

Born of a military establishment, and still closely linked to it, it had now also acquired a special relationship to a wide spectrum of big business and its advertising agencies. No such constellation had ever planned and controlled a nation’s popular culture. Most programs were being produced by advertising agencies, as an activity parallel to the planning and designing of billboards and magazine advertisements. The network, having “sold” a period, seemed to regard it as sponsor property, to be used as he designated. Sponsors were, in effect, being encouraged to take charge of the air.13

The parallel Barnouw suggests between radio and billboards as advertising media in the initial phase of network radio needs qualification. Most advertisers were slow in accepting network radio as an effective medium for the direct sale of products on a national basis. Wanting to be seen as serving “the interest of the listening public,” NBC made certain that its first programming efforts were “high-brow” and sedate: classical music, historical dramas, adaptations of literary classics, and poetic recitations were standard fare. Advertisers sponsored much of this programming, but more with the aim of attaching the company name and image to such a prestigious endeavor than of selling the sponsor’s product over the air. NBC forbade its sponsors to mention prices in their advertising messages until competition with CBS forced them to change this policy in 1932. There were also doubts as to how large the audience for any particular program really was. The first regular ratings service did not begin until 1930. Programs could not be broadcast simultaneously from coast to coast. While the number of radio sets in use grew enormously in the late 1920s, the 1930 census revealed that 60 percent of American families were still without radios.12

Ironically, the Great Depression contributed considerably to the growth of network radio and, as a result, to the development of radio as a direct-sale advertising vehicle. Most other entertainment industries were damaged by the economic contractions and dislocations of early 1930s. By 1931 RKO, Fox, and Warner Bros. were all operating in the red, and in 1933 movie box office receipts were but 40 percent of the already-sagging 1931 level. The recording industry was kept alive only by the use of records in juke boxes. Although the number of general-interest magazines in circulation nearly doubled between 1929 and 1933 (from 61 to 109), the advertising revenue generated from them was cut in half over the same period. All of these entertainment industries depended upon direct and repeated consumer outlay. Once the initial investment was made in a radio receiver, however, the consumer could enjoy, in the words of Broadcasting magazine, “the least expensive form of entertainment ever made available to man.” The expiration of key patents in the 1920s and economies of scale in production had reduced the cost of radio receivers by 1930 to the point that most Americans could afford one. Faced with a choice of making one expenditure for a radio receiver, with which one could then enjoy unlimited “free” programming, or of paying each week for a new record, magazine, or movie ticket, many Depression-era families chose the former. Between 1930 and 1932 Americans purchased 4.6 million radio receivers. In 1934, CBS estimated that 90.9 percent of all nonfarm families owned radios and the following year figured the aggregate audience for radio at 71 million persons out of a total population of 125 million.14

NETWORK PROGRAMMING: THE SERIAL FORM

In order for radio to expand its advertising role beyond that of corporate image-enhancer and to develop as a national mass-marketing medium for large corporations, advertisers needed to be assured that millions of Americans were listening to particular programs at particular times with habitual frequency, just as they knew that each new issue of a magazine would be read by its subscribers. Advertising agencies eagerly accepted the challenge of developing programming that listeners would tune to week in and week out, and local stations and networks quickly acquiesced. When NBC was launched in 1926, only a few programs were produced by agencies. By 1931 only a few network shows were not. Between commissions paid by
the networks for sale of airtime and fees paid by sponsors for program production, an advertising agency could easily earn twenty-four hundred dollars per network program hour. The longer the show ran, the fewer staff-hours had to be devoted by the agency to developing new program ideas and securing talent, and, thus, the more profit the agency realized for each hour of programming produced.

Since audiences were larger and ad rates and commissions higher during evening hours, it is not surprising that prime time received the lion's share of programming attention during the first years of network radio. One model for attracting a large audience at the same time each week was offered by vaudeville and the movies: build audience interest and loyalty on the basis of stars. The demise of vaudeville in the late 1920s (in part a result of the introduction of sound motion pictures) left a large pool of stars and journeyman performers upon which radio could draw. By 1933, Eddie Cantor, Ed Wynn, Ken Murray, Al Jolson, Rudy Vallee, the Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, Fred Allen, and George Burns and Gracie Allen had all made the transition from vaudeville or the movies to radio. While the structuring of comedy and variety programs around already recognized stars succeeded in attracting large audiences, this strategy had an obvious disadvantage: the cost of the talent the audience had tuned in to hear. Performers who made thousands of dollars weekly in vaudeville or the movies expected salaries for radio work commensurate with their already established popularity.

By 1929 another programming model had been established, one which relied for its appeal upon audience interest in character and narrative rather than stars. Undoubtedly one program, Amos and Andy, was crucial in convincing advertisers that such a programming strategy would work. Developed for WGN in 1926 by two former minstrel performers, Amos and Andy was by 1929 a radio programming phenomenon. With an estimated weekly audience of forty million listeners, it provided its sponsor, Pepsodent toothpaste, with an advertising vehicle of hitherto unimaginined proportions. Amos and Andy comic strips and phonograph records were “spun off” from the network program. Some contemporaneous commentators even went so far as to credit its overwhelming success for making radio a national advertising medium. Amos and Andy also demonstrated the appeal of the serial radio form. The misadventures of two southern black men transplanted to the south side of Chicago (the show was written and acted by two white men), which formed the focus of the show, were continued through each “week-daily” episode. A breach-of-promise suit brought by Widow Parker against Andy Brown was drawn out for weeks. While some broadcasters feared that such narrative indeterminacy would frustrate listeners, it proved to have the opposite effect.

The success of Amos and Andy also helped to establish Chicago as a center for the production of radio drama. The variety-show format, dependent upon stars for its appeal, was developed in Los Angeles and New York. Proximity to movie or theatrical stars was much less of a factor in dramatic programming, however, which relied for audience appeal upon narrative rather than personality enticements. Advertising agencies and broadcasters found in the Chicago area a large pool of potential radio actors available at lower cost than on either coast.

Here and there, local stations also recognized the listener interest and loyalty to be secured through the serial format, particularly when applied to a “real-life” situation. In 1930 Kansas City station KMBC began running Happy Hollow, a nightly (except Sunday) “true-to-life portrayal of happenings in any small town in the United States.” The leading denizen of Happy Hollow was Uncle Ezra, the town’s mayor, principal shopkeeper, and station agent. He was frequently pitted against city slicker Harry Checkervest in comic repartee. Variety elements were introduced into the show via the mechanism of a twice-weekly town hall talent show. The show’s writers were happy to oblige sponsors by placing their goods on the shelves of Uncle Ezra’s store and having him extol their virtues as he sold them to the residents of Happy Hollow.

Happy Hollow, picked up by CBS in 1931 and broadcast throughout the Midwest, illustrated a basic radio marketing principle born out by early empirical research. In 1931, Robert Elder of MIT surveyed 14,061 families in ten American cities to assess the effect of radio advertising on product preferences. He found that brand preference increased directly with the number of hours listened to radio each week, even controlling for family buying power. Furthermore, he concluded that the more frequently a program was on the air, the greater its power to establish and maintain preference for its advertised product. Taking Elder’s research one step further, Fortune magazine urged the prospective radio advertiser to “go out and get himself a popular serial.”

**"DISCOVERING" DAYTIME RADIO**

If broadcasters and sponsors could not be sure how many people listened to a particular program during prime time, they had very little idea of the
prospects for daytime radio. Common sense and a few audience studies showed that most people who listened to radio did so between the hours of seven and ten in the evening and that since these hours are traditionally associated with leisure activities, the listening audience in prime time was an eager and receptive one. In 1930 no firm data existed on how many people were available to listen to radio before 6:00 P.M., who they were (except that they were female), whether or not they were disposed to listen to radio at all during the day, or if they would attend to advertisements broadcast during the day. Networks and local stations simply set their advertising rates at one-half that charged for prime time, figuring that, whatever the audience for daytime radio, it was at most one-half as large as that for prime time.

By 1932 there was some evidence that daytime's potential for advertising had been underestimated. A&P, the national grocery chain, had been an early radio advertiser, sponsoring a music program, The A&P Gypsies, since 1924. In 1930 the company used daytime radio for direct advertising through the sponsorship of several morning programs directed toward women at home. All of them featured cooking tips, food preparation ideas, and sample menus tied to products sold at A&P grocery stores. Even in the midst of the Depression, A&P's sales increased. In 1932 A&P attempted to test the extent of radio's power to "sell" particular products. Between May and November selected items were advertised only on radio and only on Monday programs. Sales for these items on Monday and Tuesday were then compared to their sales levels on other days. When the price of the item was not mentioned, sales increased 29 percent the days following its being advertised on radio; when price was announced, sales increased an astounding 173 percent. A&P was convinced of the efficacy of daytime programming and advertising.

When the manufacturer of Oxol, a liquid laundry bleach, introduced it in 1931, it decided to advertise exclusively on radio via The Oxol Feature, a fifteen-minute music and humor program carried by CBS at ten o'clock on weekday mornings. The question this strategy asked was, Would women listen while they worked in the home and would they pay attention to the ads? The campaign met with success, but the company wanted some further indication of audience attentiveness. Its advertising agency devised what came to be called a "mailhook": the offering of some sort of premium during a given radio program. In this case, listeners could receive a free rag doll by mailing in an Oxol label. More than seventy thousand requests were received. Once again, research data soon supported anecdotal evidence. In 1932 a study of nine hundred Pennsylvania women concluded that "the program sponsor should realize that the housewife in a majority of cases is the member of the family who has the most influence upon family purchases and is the one who spends the greatest amount of time in the home. She is, therefore, the member of the family most easily reached by radio broadcasts."

INDUSTRIAL IMPERATIVES: THE CASE OF PROCTOR AND GAMBLE

The observations of this study were of greater relevance to some industries than others: soap, toiletry, and foodstuffs manufacturers all oriented their advertising and marketing strategies toward the female consumer, since women tended (and still do) to make most of the purchases for those categories of items. Thus, a further generative mechanism that needs to be considered in the origins of the soap opera arises from the position of those industries and their constituent companies in the early years of the Depression. The situation of one company, Procter and Gamble, is particularly illustrative, since by the late 1930s it had become the principal sponsor of radio soap operas.

From its mid-nineteenth-century beginnings as a Cincinnati chandlery, Procter and Gamble by the mid-1920s had grown into a major international corporation with a diversified product line of food products, household supplies, and toiletries. Gross sales in 1928 exceeded $202 million, with profits of $19 million. Procter and Gamble's success was based upon the mass production of consumer products that sold at relatively small unit prices and generated relatively low unit profits. The large corporate profits were secured through volume sales, and volume sales through heavy product advertising. In the mid-1920s Procter and Gamble decided to introduce new products in competition with those it already produced, reasoning that intracorporate competition kept management on its toes and, more important, that multiple products within a product line would keep total market share up and opportunities for market entry through innovation by other firms low. Thus, by 1929 Camay competed against Ivory, Oxydol against Duz, and Ivory Flakes against Chipso—all of them Procter and Gamble products. Different advertising agencies handled competing products, a strategy that provided a built-in test of relative advertising effectiveness and discouraged agency complacency.

The idea of using the serial narrative form as bait to attract consumer
attention to advertising messages was familiar to Procter and Gamble well before it contemplated using radio as a vehicle for those narratives. By 1921, the annual advertising budget for Ivory soap had already reached $1 million per year. For decades it had been Procter and Gamble’s policy to advertise Ivory in a long list of general-interest magazines in full-page ads facing the first page of editorial content. Since the 1880s Ivory had been advertised as “pure,” unadulterated soap, safe for all washing purposes from clothes and dishes to babies. These full-page magazine ads illustrated the purity and wholesomeness of Ivory through paintings depicting its use in idyllic, domestic settings. At the end of 1922, however, Procter and Gamble gave the Ivory account to another agency and charged it with the task of devising a new ad campaign for the product. Mark H. Wiseman of the Blackman Company suggested the creation of a comic-strip family to advertise Ivory in the Sunday rotogravure section of major newspapers. The Jollyco family—Mom, Dad, Sally (age sixteen), Bobby (age ten), and baby Teehee—was “tested” in New York, where sales of Ivory went up 25 percent in six months. By the end of 1923 newspaper readers across the country were following the domestic saga of the wholesome Jollycos, who, of course, used Ivory soap, and the meddling of the snobbish Mrs. Percival Billington Folderal, who used colored, perfumed soap. Readers even wrote to Procter and Gamble to suggest plot lines for the comic strip.

Procter and Gamble turned to radio advertising early in the 1920s. In 1923 Crisco sponsored the Radio Homemakers’ Club on Monday nights over WEAF. Camay soap was the first Procter and Gamble product to be advertised on network radio. The company’s brand of perfumed, colored toilet soap (but certainly not that used by Mrs. Percival Billington Folderal). Camay sponsored a Friday-morning Radio Beauty School over NBC in 1927.

Many companies responded to the Great Depression by cutting back on advertising budgets. For Procter and Gamble, however, advertising was central to its strategy for combatting the effect of economic constriction. Since its profitability was based upon volume sales, the company reasoned that in a period of reduced consumer buying power advertising efforts had to be increased if sales levels were to be maintained. Its advertising agencies no doubt noticed that daytime network radio rates were one-half those during prime time. Given the fact that Procter and Gamble’s customers were overwhelmingly female, daytime radio seemed a logical and cost-effective advertising venue.

Between 1930 and 1932 the daytime programs sponsored by Procter and Gamble were of the self-help and advice genre. Its initial daytime programming strategy was to run a different show in the same time slot each weekday. Chipso laundry powder sponsored Ruth Turner’s Washing Talks one day. The following day at the same time, audiences could hear Ivory’s Mrs. Reilly chat about baby care and fashion. The rest of the weekday slots featured Emily Post for Camay, Crisco’s cooking show, Sisters of the Skillet, and a monologist. Procter and Gamble stayed with this plan for two years. By the end of 1930 Procter and Gamble had daytime programs being broadcast over a twenty-station hookup on the NBC Red network, over eleven stations on NBC Blue, and over twenty-two stations on CBS. The first Procter and Gamble program to be presented five days each week was Mrs. Blake’s Radio Column, an advice column of the air programmed in the time slot immediately preceding Ruth Turner, and the other programs. It went on the air in 1931.

Procter and Gamble was not the only company with products in the food, toiletry, or household supplies line to see the benefits of radio advertising in the early years of the Depression, nor was it the only company to turn to the self-help genre as an advertising vehicle. The accompanying chart indicates radio advertising budgets for selected companies in 1930 and 1931.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>1930</th>
<th>1931</th>
<th>Percentage Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Procter and Gamble</td>
<td>$255,168</td>
<td>$499,261</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A&amp;P</td>
<td>345,318</td>
<td>914,606</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kellogg</td>
<td>34,275</td>
<td>118,343</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Dairy Products</td>
<td>5,121</td>
<td>123,104</td>
<td>2,303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Coast Borax</td>
<td>25,799</td>
<td>145,074</td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By 1932 drugs and toiletries accounted for 20 percent of all radio-advertising time sold. The largest single purchaser of radio time was the PepsiCo Company, almost all of whose $1.7 million radio budget went for Amos and Andy.13

The household-advice programs that many of these and other companies sponsored were part of a larger programming trend. Barnouw points out
that the unprecedented social and economic pressures upon most American families caused by the Great Depression were eagerly capitalized upon by advertisers, who offered "free" radio solutions to listeners' every problem. Cries for help were answered by astrologers, numerologists, success experts, and palmists, provided, no doubt as a public service, by toothpaste and nail polish manufacturers. When in the early 1930s R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company decided that women constituted an unexploited market for cigarettes, it devised a program of philosophy and inspirational verse, hosted by the ethereal-voiced Tony Wons, who reminded his female listeners at every opportunity of the pleasures of smoking Camels. In 1932 sales of Haley's M-O laxative more than doubled during the first months of its sponsorship of The Voice of Experience, which received upwards of twenty thousand letters of desperation each week.20

The First Soap Opera: Painted Dreams

A Dayton schoolteacher turned radio actor, Ima Phillips, is usually credited with "inventing" the first soap opera, Painted Dreams, for WGN in 1930. Stedman notes that Phillips "was hired as an actress and did an extemporaneous talk program that was called Thought for the Day. Then the station asked her to use her writing talents. She did; and the result, as far as this writer could determine, was the first daytime serial, Painted Dreams."21 Because the historical import of a first is a retrodictive judgment of historians, contemporaneous accounts are frequently fragmentary—leaving plenty of room for historians to quibble years later over who really was the first to do something and what that person's motives really were. Phillips's "creation" of Painted Dreams is detailed in more than fifty-nine hundred pages of first-hand testimony, not because anyone was historically prescient but thanks to a copyright dispute between Phillips and WGN, initiated in 1932 and eventually adjudicated in 1941. The documentary evidence in the case demonstrates the convergence of the generative mechanisms discussed above in the genesis of the soap opera form and, for that reason, the futility of trying to assign the creation of the soap opera to the genius of a single individual.22

The court records show that in the spring of 1930 Henry Selinger, station manager of WGN, approached the advertising firm of Lord and Thomas with the idea of developing a daytime serial story that would be of special interest to women, and, hence, to manufacturers of products used in the home. He assigned a staff writer and actor to implement the idea in a series of experimental scripts for a serial entitled The Sudds, in hopes of attracting the sponsorship of the Super-Suds Company. When that company turned down the idea, the show was renamed Good Luck Margie and pitched—again unsuccessfully—to the Jelke Oleomargarine Company. In both versions the serial dealt with an Irish-American mother and her daughter and was set primarily in the mother's home.

In the midst of this process (May 1930), but initially quite apart from it, Ima Phillips became an employee of WGN. At first she read inspirational verse on WGN's amateur hour; then over the summer she was given several small acting roles, for which she was paid five or ten dollars each. During this time she constantly importuned Harry Gilman, assistant station manager, for a more permanent job as a staff writer or actor. In August she suggested to Selinger that she might be assigned to the "Sudds" project. Selinger asked Phillips to draft ten scripts for a daytime serial to involve "an Irish woman, her household, her daughter, and the daughter's friend." The program, now entitled Painted Dreams, was auditioned for several sponsors, but the as yet untried idea of a daytime serial generated little interest. In October, Selinger decided to launch Painted Dreams as a sustaining (nonsponsored) program, hoping that audience response would persuade a sponsor to take it on. Phillips was hired as its writer and one of its two regular actors, at a salary of fifty dollars per week. She played the roles of "Mother" Moynihan (named for Gilman's mother-in-law) and Sue Morton, the Moynihan's boarder. Painted Dreams premiered on 20 October 1930 and ran as a sustaining program daily except Sunday for a year.

During this year without a sponsor, Gilman, Selinger, and Phillips attempted to build a case for the show's popularity and advertising potential. Mailholes were introduced into the narrative, encouraging fans to write letters to the station. In 1931, Phillips drafted a proposal to adapt the narrative of Painted Dreams "to the peculiar requirements of Montgomery Ward & Company, so that [its] value . . . will be that of a direct sales agent, rather than a mere agent of sustaining or creative good will." She argued that "any radio presentation which is sponsored, in order to be of utility to its sponsor, must actually sell merchandise; otherwise the object of radio advertising has failed." The accommodation of the "peculiar" needs of Montgomery Ward was to be accomplished through the marriage of either Irene Moynihan or Sue Morton: "It is then my plan to have an engagement,
the wedding (in June), the trousseau, the furnishing of a home, actually occur via the air. This is the first step in developing the feature as a merchandising vehicle, and this plan opens an avenue to merchandize any article which may be sold by mail order or through the other retail outlets of Montgomery Ward & Company. Montgomery Ward did not take on Painted Dreams as a "merchandising vehicle," but in October 1931 Mickleberry Products Company, a Chicago-based meatpacker, did. It sponsored the program until April 1932, when the dispute between Phillips and WGN over ownership of the show erupted.

Interestingly, the basis of the suit reveals that even in this embryonic stage of the development of the soap opera form, it was viewed as a set of structural principles that motored narrative and character development. In her initial chancery suit (1932) to restrain WGN from broadcasting Painted Dreams after her departure from the station’s employ, Phillips had her attorneys argue that “she had never relinquished to defendants [WGN], by contract or otherwise, her author’s property rights in her creation which consisted of the intangible common-law right of proprietorship—not in the general or basic idea—but in the set-up, the scene, and the characters, which she alone worked out and into which she had breathed her created brain conceptions [sic].” WGN found another sponsor for Painted Dreams and hired another writer-actress to take over from Phillips. Most of the original characters were written out and a new actress found to portray “Mother” Moynihan.

On 16 June 1932, Phillips returned to the air as writer and actress in Today’s Children over WGN’s chief competitor, WMAQ. Mother Moynihan became Mother Moran; Irene, her daughter, became Eileen; Sue Morton became Kay Norton. Even Mother Moynihan’s dog Mike, who barked in protest at the excesses of his mistress’s homespun philosophy, was transferred to Today’s Children as Mickey, although this “spectral canine stooge,” as WGN’s attorneys called him, was no longer the voice of Phillips herself but was “done by a ‘sound-effects man’ using a mechanical barker—in deference either to the world trend toward mechanization or else to the increased artistic stature, dignity and opulence which plaintiff has now attained as Mother Moran.” Having learned her lesson from Painted Dreams, Phillips refused employment from WMAQ, preferring instead to act as the independent producer of Today’s Children and bearing the entire costs of the program for four months of nonsponsored broadcasts.

In August, Phillips attempted the first mailbook for Today’s Children.

The 3 August episode, in which Mother Moran’s son celebrated his wedding anniversary, closed with the announcer saying:

Ann: I’m sure all our friends join with me in wishing Dorothy and Terry many happy returns of the day. And now, I’m wondering about that anniversary picture. I know I’d like to have one of them and perhaps some of our listeners would like one too. Pardon me just a moment. Oh, Mother Moran. . . .

Mother Moran: Yes, Mr. Saks?

Ann: Mother Moran, would you send a copy of this anniversary picture of yours to any of our friends in the audience who wanted one of them?

M.M.: Why . . . Why . . . do you think anyone would be wantin’ a picture of my Today’s Children, Mr. Saks?

Ann: Yes, I do, Mother Moran. I’m sure that many of your friends would like very much to have this picture.

M.M.: Well, then, Mr. Saks . . . you tell them please, that I’ll be happy to be sendin’ this anniversary picture of my family to anyone that would be wantin’ it.

Ann: Thank you, Mother Moran, thank you very much. And now, if any of our audience would like one of these pictures of Mother Moran’s Children, just write a note or a post card to Mother Moran, care of Station WMAQ, Chicago.

Phillips claimed that ten thousand requests were received for pictures of Mother Moran and her Today’s Children.

By November 1932, Phillips had secured General Foods as the sponsor for Today’s Children. Insofar as her program’s function as an advertising vehicle was concerned, Phillips was more royalist than the king. She immediately suggested ways in which Mother Moran and friends might more directly promote the sale of General Foods products, to which the company’s advertising director responded:

. . . I want to say that you can proceed further with this story without regard to the special plugging or working up to any merchandising offers on La France or Satina [both General Foods laundry products]. . . . The subject of commercial announcement is one that concerns me a lot. I would like to see everything done that would give them all the cutting edge that we can get into them, yet not interfere with the entertaining feature of the program itself.
When, in January 1933, General Foods was ready to test the appeal of *Today’s Children*, Phillips proposed that the mailbook be even more directly tied to the story than was the picture offered in August:

In our story, as it is now on the air, Terry Moran is a salesman for a wholesale hardware concern. I would develop this angle of the story to have Terry put in charge of the distribution of a new product—an inexpensive laundry accessory. I have in mind for this purpose, a wire coil spring, used to keep the ironing cord out of the way during ironing. Any inexpensive novelty of this sort would serve as well.

Terry is told by his employer that on his success with this new product rests his job. Either he sells them, or out he goes. Terry brings one home to Mother Moran, who tries it out in the script, and finds it a great thing. During ten days or two weeks of buildup on this novelty in the daily episodes, Terry becomes increasingly worried over his results in outside selling of this item.

Mother Moran takes it on herself to help Terry. She comes to the mike at the end of one episode and starts to appeal to her radio friends to help Terry. The announcer interrupts her to give her the good news that “La France” has just contracted to buy many thousands. It is unknown whether General Foods agreed to run Mother Moran’s desperate appeal or, if it did, how many listeners responded.

Later in 1933, the Pillsbury Company took over sponsorship of *Today’s Children* and arranged network broadcast of the program over NBC. It was with the network dissemination of the program that the true dimensions of the soap opera’s appeal became apparent. After *Today’s Children* had aired on NBC for a new months, Pillsbury offered a brochure outlining the history of Mother Moran and her problem-prone brood in return for a Pillsbury flour label. More than 250,000 labels were received in only a few weeks. “The amazing allegiance,” wrote *Broadcasting*, “of hundreds of thousands of women not only to the members of the cast but to Pillsbury products is a constant source of wonderment even among those professional people who for years have been working with radio.”

Procter and Gamble Turns to Soap Operas

At the same time that Pillsbury was discovering the “amazing allegiance” of listeners to soap operas, Procter and Gamble was independently confirming the advertising potential of the daytime serial. With increasing amounts of advertising needed to maintain sales levels and market shares of its products in the first years of the Depression, Procter and Gamble instituted an unparalleled program of market research to assure that its advertising budget was spent as efficiently as possible. Much of this research was aimed at pretesting new products and advertising campaigns before investing in full production. Marketing surveys also revealed that women at home during the day preferred to be entertained, rather than instructed, by the radio. Procter and Gamble saw the opportunity of creating favorable associations between entertaining programming heard while the listener performed household tasks and the Procter and Gamble products that could be used in their accomplishment. With these possibilities in mind, Procter and Gamble began experimenting with daytime dramatic programming for women in 1932.

The first Procter and Gamble programming venture, *The Puddle Family*, was a serial domestic comedy perhaps inspired indirectly by the Jollycos Broadcast over WLW in Cincinnati in 1932. *The Puddle Family* had but a brief life as a vehicle for Oxydol. When in 1933 the Oxydol account was given to another advertising agency, an account executive there suggested a serialized radio drama that might incorporate elements of the self-help genre. *Ma Perkins*, the story of a self-reliant widow whose family and friends were constantly in need of her advice, went on WLW during the summer of 1933, and was much better received by Cincinnati listeners than had been *The Puddle Family*. By December daytime listeners along the NBC Blue network heard a baritone-voiced announcer intone:

And here’s Oxydol’s own Ma Perkins again. The true-life story of a woman whose life is the same, whose surroundings are the same, whose problems are the same as those of thousands of other women in the world today. A woman who has spent all her life taking care of her home; washing and cooking and cleaning and raising her family. And now her husband’s death has pitched her head-foremost into being the head of her family as well as the mother. And we’ll hear her true-life story every day at this time, except Saturday and Sunday. Before we hear from Ma Perkins today, though, I want to tell
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you about something else for a minute that will be of vital interest to
every housewife listening: about a remarkable new laundry-soap
discovery that . . .

Early in 1934, eager to measure the extent of Ma Perkins's listenershipeand its geographical distribution. Procter and Gamble devised as a mail-
hook the offer of a packet of flower seeds in exchange for ten cents and an
Oxydol box top. More than one million requests were received. By comput-
ing the number of dimes received per geographic area, Procter and Gamble was able to arrive at a rough cost-per-thousand for its advertising mes-
gages. The flower seed experiment made it clear that serialized narratives offered during daytime hours to female listeners constituted the most effec-
tive advertising strategy for Procter and Gamble products ever devised.39

Ma Perkins was conceived and written by Frank and Anne Hummert, the husband-wife team responsible for nearly half of all daytime serials intro-
duced between 1932 and 1937 and for seven of the first eleven. In 1927, Frank Hummert had left his job as an account executive with Lord and
Thomas to join the Blackett-Sample agency. According to James Thurber, Frank Hummert was inspired to develop daytime serial programming after reading a serialized story in the Chicago Daily News. He hired its writer, Charles Robert Douglas Hardy Andrews, to do a serial for radio. Like its
newspaper antecedent, The Stolen Husband, broadcast locally in Chicago in
1931, appears to have been a closed, serialized narrative. It was read by a
single actor, who altered his voice for each character. It did not attract
sponsorship. The Hummert's first network daytime serial, also written by
Andrews, was aired in October 1932. Betty and Bob, a narratively open
story of a stenographer who marries her boss, was sponsored by General
Mills for eight years. In the fall of 1933, Betty and Bob and Ma Perkins were joined on network radio by another Hummert soap, The Romance of
Helen Trent, which ran continuously on radio until 1960.

The Hummerts were in an excellent position to capitalize on the first
stages of the soap opera's popularity. Unlike Phillips, who before writing
Painted Dreams had had only a few months' experience in commercial ra-
dio, Frank Hummert was already a successful advertising executive before he and Anne Hummert attempted a daytime serial. As an advertising exec-
utive, Frank Hummert knew that the key to success lay in servicing a
number of accounts, rather than pouring one's energies into a single
project. Thus the Hummerts were the first soap writer-producers to employ
dialogue writers.40

Diffusion of the Soap Opera Form

Between 1933 and 1937 serial drama became a staple of daytime program-
mimg, and companies like Procter and Gamble, Pillsbury, American Home
Products, and General Foods came to rely more and more upon the soap
opera as their primary radio advertising vehicle. By the end of 1935 Procter
and Gamble was the largest user of network radio in the world and NBC's
most important client. On that network alone, Procter and Gamble spon-
sored 778 program hours in 1935—664 of which were daytime programs.
By 1937 its radio advertising expenditures were $4,456,525, with over 90
percent going to daytime programming. "Oxydol's Own Ma Perkins" was joined in advertising Procter and Gamble products by Home Sweet Home
(1934), Dreams Come True (1934), Song of the City (1934), The O'Neill's
(1935), Pepper Young's Family (1936), The Guiding Light (1937), The
Couple Next Door (1937), Road of Life (1937), and Kitty Keene (1937). At
CBS daytime advertising volume doubled between 1933 and 1935 and had
trebled by 1937.41

For sponsors, daytime advertising remained a bargain during these years—rates continued to be set at one-half that during prime time, despite
indications that the daytime audience had been greatly underestimated. In
1934 CBS reported that among all income groups radios were in use in
more than half the homes with radios some time before 6:00 P.M. That
same year a McCall's magazine survey asked one thousand New Jersey
homemakers to name their "most essential household appliances." The re-

results were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>iron</td>
<td>68.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>radio</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vacuum cleaner</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refrigerator</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1938 CBS research concluded that the audience for daytime radio
might be as much as four times as large as that reported by the widely used
Crossley Ratings. The Crossley Ratings were based upon telephone inter-
views in thirty-three cities and gave an average day-part (fifteen-minute
period) listening figure for the week. Crossley placed the ratings for leading
daytime programs at 5 to 8 percent of the total number of households with
radios. However, telephone surveys in the 1930s were not very reliable. This
was particularly the case in surveys of radio listenershipe, since there were
26 million American households with radio in 1938 but only 11 million
residential telephones. Furthermore, by presenting only average weekly figures, the Crossley Ratings did not take into account the cumulative weekly audience for a program that was broadcast every weekday. By attaching an automatic recording device to radios in a sample of households, CBS found that a daytime program with a Crossley rating of 3 percent actually reached 12 percent of all radio homes during a given week.32

The Soap Opera Boom

During the years in which soap operas went from being sporadic experiments to a permanent and vital feature of daytime commercial radio programming, few people except for those immediately involved in the phenomenon (broadcasters, advertisers, and, of course, the millions of women who listened each day) seem to have noticed. The term “soap opera” itself was not coined until the late 1930s. As Stedman points out, between 1932 and 1937 no research on daytime serials was published. Yet, thanks almost entirely to the success of Ma Perkins and its successors, daytime radio had developed faster during this period than any other form of advertising. In 1937 daytime advertisers spent $22 million, more than three times the amount spent in 1933. While its print advertising budget remained static, Procter and Gamble’s radio expenditures increased from $2 million in 1935 to $4.5 million in 1937. Estimates of the number of households with radios that year ranged from 78 percent to 86 percent. Whatever the figure, Broadcasting claimed that nearly 60 percent of those radios were in use sometime each day before six o’clock in the evening.31

As the country began to recover from the Depression, Procter and Gamble, along with other soap companies, used radio not only in an attempt to hold its market share but also to introduce new products derived from synthetic detergents. Whether the product being sold was the old reliable Ivory or the new synthetic shampoo Dreine, advertisements for it continued to be integrated into the soap opera world as tightly as possible. Writers like Irna Phillips kept uppermost in their minds the function of their stories as advertising vehicles. In 1934, Phillips proposed to several cosmetic companies a soap opera entitled Masquerade, in which a young, handsome painter realizes that while he possesses considerable talent, his work can be art only when he is able to discover the real, the natural that lies behind the masks of his subject. “The artist’s search takes him from place to place, from the lowest to the highest strata of society. His experiences bring him into association with women of all ages and all classes, and gradually he comes to recognize true values, a recognition that begins to manifest itself in his paintings.” The program’s title, character, and basic situation were all devised to relate to the propounded virtues of the cosmetic product advertised. Phillips wrote in her prospectus: “Sincerity, honesty, genuineness—true values. If the woman listener is made conscious of these standards in the story itself, how little effort it would take to make her conscious of these same standards in connection with the product advertised. Once you have gained her confidence, nothing will swerve her from her loyalty to the program.” A 1933 proposal for Office Girl suggests as a frame for a serial drama the young heroine seated at her dressing table cleansing her face using Kleenex tissues, just prior to recording the day’s events in her diary. “Thus,” Phillips suggested, “the transition from commercial announcements to the story can be practically painless, and a great deal of actual selling can be done in the story itself.”

In January 1937, Phillips introduced The Guiding Light, sponsored by Procter and Gamble’s White Naphtha Soap. The show’s title referred to the example provided by its central character. Dr. John Ruthledge, minister of the nonsectarian church in the “melting-pot community of Five Points.” After The Guiding Light had been on the air for a year, Procter and Gamble devised a novel mailhook in the form of a refrigerator giveaway—one in which Dr. Ruthledge himself took part. The script for the 16 May 1938 episode begins:

Chords
“The Guiding Light”
Chords
“Brought to you by the Makers of P and G White Naphtha Soap—largest selling bar soap in America today.”
Music . . .

Dr. Ruthledge: I suppose most of you kind people recognize my voice. If you don’t, I would like to introduce myself. I’m Dr. John Ruthledge, a Minister in the Community of Five Points. Now, as you know, we have been telling our story of “The Guiding Light” to you for over a year. Still, in all this time, it has never been our good fortune to show you how much we appreciate your most thoughtful loyalty. You can well imagine, therefore, how happy we
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are to tell you that with the program, today, you are to hear some news about which we are all genuinely excited...because it brings you such a splendid opportunity. Obviously, I can't go into all of the details, so I'm going to ask a gentleman I have come to admire, Fort Pearson, to tell you about this opportunity. Would you do that, Fort?

Announcer: Thank you, Dr. Ruthledge...and indeed I am happy to tell our thousands of loyal listeners about this thrilling opportunity we are offering. So listen carefully, please.

Everyday, for thirty days, the makers of P and G White Naphtha Soap will give away TEN OF THE FINEST AUTOMATIC REFRIGERATORS MADE! Yes, ten beautiful new SERVING ELECTROLUX REFRIGERATORS will be given away in the easiest contest ever! That's TEN REFRIGERATORS...EVERY DAY FOR THIRTY DAYS, beginning Friday, May 20, and continuing through July 1st—excepting Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays.34

Entrants were asked to finish the sentence “I like P and G White Naphtha Soap because...” in twenty-five words or less and to attach five front panels from packages of White Naphtha Soap.

According to Stedman, between 1937 and 1942 seventy-four new sponsored soap operas were introduced on network radio. By 1940 the sixty-four serials being broadcast each day constituted 92 percent of all sponsored daytime broadcast hours. The ten highest-rated daytime programs in 1940 were all soap operas, and between 1939 and 1943 only Kate Smith was able to break the serial's hold on the top-ten list.35

Ironically, the initial critical discourse on soaps in the early 1940s, as well as the firestorm of controversy generated by Dr. Louis Berg's denunciation of soap operas in 1942, came after the realization by advertisers and broadcasters that daytime listeners were being inundated by serial drama and after the total number of daytime quarter-hours devoted to serials was already in decline. Soap operas introduced after 1937 suffered a much higher mortality rate than those already established with listeners. Between 1941 and 1943, the total number of daytime serials declined by one-third, and only twenty-one new serials were introduced in the five years after 1942, compared with seventy-four debuts in the previous five-year period. In 1941, for the first time since Painted Dreams went on the air, more daytime serials were canceled than were added. This retrenchment was not, however, a product either of reduced listener interest or of pressure brought to bear upon broadcasters and advertisers by Dr. Berg and his fellow soap opera critics. By 1940, the number of daytime hours devoted to serial drama had reached the saturation point. In 1933 the soap fan had to scan the dial to search out Today's Children or Ma Perkins; less than a decade later her attention was being vied for nearly every quarter-hour period between breakfast and dinner by two or three competing serials. In 1943 NBC research found that while 53 percent of all households with radios tuned in serials during the day, more than one-third of these listeners felt there was a surplus of serial fare.

Just as the soap opera had provided broadcasters with an instrument of innovation amidst the self-help and inspirational programming of the early network period, the superfluity of serials by the 1940s offered opportunities for innovation in nonserial formats. The NBC Blue network, in particular, regarded the domination of the daytime hours by soap operas as a chance for program differentiation. In 1943 it initiated a new programming form, the morning variety-talk show, with Breakfast at Sardi's and Breakfast Club—the precursors of The Arthur Godfrey Show and, ultimately, Today and Good Morning, America, as well as a host of local “breakfast” programs.36

Although Breakfast Club provided some competition for morning soap operas and Kate Smith Speaks became a ratings rival for afternoon serials during the war years, the spate of audience studies conducted during this period confirmed the continued popularity of soap operas among American women. And while a nonserial program might outdraw the soaps in its time slot, no alternative form of programming could match the serial in cost effectiveness. The production costs for Kate Smith Speaks amounted to $609.76 for each rating point it obtained. Ma Perkins, whose overall ratings were nearly as high, cost but $164.56 per point. On a weekly basis, Kate Smith Speaks required a production investment of $5,000; Ma Perkins, only $1,600. It is little wonder, then, that much of Procter and Gamble's $15 million radio budget in 1945 went for eleven soap operas, most of which were produced by its own production subsidiary, established in 1940. Even when wartime materials shortages brought the production of synthetic laundry products to a halt, Procter and Gamble continued to advertise Dreyf on its soap operas—so important had soap operas become in maintaining product recognition among consumers.37
The Transition to Television

In the years following the end of World War II, commercial radio was joined by a new advertiser-supported mass medium, which within a decade would supplant it as the primary leisure activity in America: television. The development of the television industry had been interrupted by the war, but by 1948 television sets were again being mass-produced, nearly one hundred television stations were on the air, and the regulatory door had been left open for advertising agencies and their clients to dominate American television as they had American radio. In the years of transition between one medium and another, radio soap operas continued to prosper; the competitive effects of daytime television would not be felt until 1951. Soap operas also held their own against nonserial radio programming. In 1948 the ten highest-rated daytime programs were all serials; Arthur Godfrey could manage but a twelfth-place showing. Of the top thirty shows, all but five were soap operas.36

The enormous potential of television as a medium of popular entertainment and mass advertising was quickly demonstrated. Large cities in the Northeast experienced declines in restaurant business, taxi receipts, library patronage, book sales, and sports attendance—all attributable to television. In 1950, Hazel Bishop, a cosmetics manufacturer with sales of fifty thousand dollars annually, began advertising exclusively on television. By 1952 revenues had reached $4.5 million. Perhaps the most striking indication of the nation's fascination with television was its effect upon the motion picture industry. Between 1946 and 1956 weekly movie attendance was cut in half, most of the reduction caused by television.37

Companies that had relied heavily upon radio advertising looked to television as a new means of reaching an expanding postwar population, whose pent-up buying power fueled a strong peacetime economy. Advertising was particularly important to Procter and Gamble in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The company needed a return on its investment in developing synthetic detergents, whose marketing had been halted by the war. A new synthetic laundry powder, Tide, was introduced in 1946, and a new synthetic dishwashing liquid, Joy, in 1948. Not only did these new products have to be established among their potential consumers, but name recognition had to be maintained in the face of competition from other companies which had also benefited from breakthroughs in “cleaning chemistry.” No sooner had Tide hit supermarket shelves than Colgate-Palmolive countered with its synthetic detergent, Fab, and Lever Brothers with its Surf. Moreover, new companies, familiar with industrial chemistry but not with traditional soap manufacture, entered the consumer market. Between 1948 and 1952 the consumption of synthetic detergents in the United States doubled. Also Procter and Gamble expanded its product line in the postwar years, particularly in toiletry items likely to be purchased by women: Prell shampoo, Lilt home permanents, and Gleem and Crest toothpastes were all introduced during this period.40

Hence it is not surprising that by 1949 Procter and Gamble was a regular television advertiser, or that it produced the first network television soap opera, The First Hundred Years, in December 1950. The transition from radio serial to television serial was hardly unproblematic, however, and not everyone associated with radio soap operas viewed television as a new horizon. In a 1948 letter to Procter and Gamble executive William Ramsey, Ina Phillips expressed both her doubts about television serials and her fascination with the marketing possibilities they might afford.41

As you know, I have had very little interest in television from a daytime standpoint, and unless a technique could be evolved whereby the auditor could be followed without the constant attention to the visual as far as the home maker is concerned, I see no future for a number of years in televising the serial story. . . . The intriguing angle, of course, is the commercial angle where the product could be seen and used but not announced as much as it is announced today. In looking over Today's Children, which would be renamed These Are Today's Children, it seems to me that most of our action took place in the kitchen of Mother Moran. . . . It would depend entirely on the ingenuity of a writer to indirectly show the product and its use. Offhand I can see two girls washing out sheer hose in a hell of a dramatic scene. On the other hand, I can see making an announcer more than an announcer by becoming almost part of the cast. I'm thinking at the moment of Point Sublime, which had a short run on the Coast. It was sponsored by an insurance company, and the insurance salesman was part and parcel of the half-hour drama.41

For the first few years of full-scale television broadcasting, it was unclear whether daytime radio would be adversely affected at all. Again following the historical pattern set by the introduction of network radio, television broadcasters initially concentrated on prime-time programming, where the largest audience could be generated. It was not until the beginning of
the 1951–52 television season that networks began to experiment with regular programming for daytime viewers. The first major network daytime programming efforts involved not soap operas but a television adaptation of the soaps' chief radio competition in the 1940s: the variety-talk show format. In the fall of 1950, NBC launched a television version of Kate Smith's radio program, calling it "the first daytime program of nighttime proportions." Its success prompted CBS to move Garry Moore and Arthur Godfrey from radio to daytime television and fledgling ABC to introduce the Frances Langford—Don Ameche Show on weekdays at noon. Through the 1951–52 season the most ambitious network daytime venture was NBC's *Today* show, which debuted on 1 November 1951 with Dave Garroway as host and with a production budget of twenty thousand dollars per week. Noting that network executives were unsure whether set owners could be persuaded to watch television in the early morning hours, *Newsweek* pointed out that *Today* "will thoughtfully remove any necessity for looking at the show continuously during the shaving and breakfast hours."  

The radio soap opera's success as an advertising vehicle was based upon its cost-effectiveness: huge numbers of listeners could be secured with very low production budgets. In the early days of television, not only was the number of potential daytime viewers small as compared with the radio audience, but production costs for a daily television serial proved to be two to three times that for a radio serial. Television required sets, props, and costumes, all of which radio left to the listener's imagination. The production apparatus for television was vastly more complex and, in the early days, uncertain. The production staff for *Ma Perkins* consisted merely of a director, announcer, actors, and perhaps a sound-effects technician. During its two-year run on television, *The First Hundred Years* required a crew of thirty, exclusive of actors. Because of rampant exploitation of radio actors in the 1930s, the American Federation of Radio Artists (AFRA), formed in 1938, fought for and by 1940 won a standard contract with the radio networks that set a minimum fee for actors (according to the length of the program in which he or she was to appear) and a maximum amount of rehearsal time per program. Radio soap producers could accommodate themselves to these time limits, but television serial producers could not. AFRA allotted two hours of rehearsal for a fifteen-minute radio drama; *The First Hundred Years* required four and one-half hours per fifteen-minute episode. Radio actors had no need to memorize their lines; television actors, obviously, did. Many observers, both inside and outside the broadcasting industry, believed television soap operas would never attract the audiences of radio serials for the simple reason that listening to radio soaps could be integrated into the performance of household chores in a way that watching television soaps could not. As Gilbert Seldes put it in 1953, "The daytime serial was perfectly adapted to the actual circumstances in which it was heard. And it seemed to us who were looking for a parallel in television that these devices were unsuitable."  

Thus the establishment of soap operas as regular television fare did not occur until television's ability to attract daytime audiences had been demonstrated and, concomitantly, when sponsors had reason to fear that the decline in listening that had affected prime-time radio (already apparent in 1950) would be felt by daytime radio as well. In conjunction with its overall expansion of daytime offerings for the 1951–52 season, CBS introduced three television serials in the fall of 1951: *Search for Tomorrow, Love of Life,* and an offbeat serial adaptation of the popular novel *The Egg and I.* The last was short-lived; the first two, however, proved to be extremely popular among daytime viewers and helped quickly to establish CBS's lead in the soap opera field.

On 30 June 1952 *The Guiding Light* became the first radio soap opera to make the transition to television, and the first to be broadcast over both media. Already the leading advertiser on network television ($12 million in 1951), Procter and Gamble had seen the first signs of ratings deterioration for its afternoon radio soaps during that season and decided it was time to test the television soap waters. But the company did not want to lose the 3 to 4 million radio fans of *The Guiding Light* in the process. The radio version continued to be broadcast at 1:45 P.M. in the East, and, as of 30 June 1952, the same episode could be seen on CBS television at 2:30. The same script (with some minor modifications; see appendix D) and actors were used for both versions, thus defraying some of the eight thousand dollars in weekly production costs for the televised version. By the end of 1953, some 3.5 million persons were watching *The Guiding Light* and only 2.6 million were listening. Simultaneous broadcasts were discontinued in 1956.

It was not until the 1960–61 season that television serials completely supplanted their radio antecedents. Prime-time network radio succumbed to the competition from television within a few years, but, thanks in large measure to the loyalty of serial listeners, daytime network radio remained a viable national advertising medium for a decade following the initiation of regular television service. Between 1955 and 1960 soap operas were frequently the most popular shows on radio—prime time or daytime. In 1959 radio soap operas seemed to Stedman to be holding up well in a television-
dominated media environment. Sixteen radio soap operas had survived. In 1957 CBS radio boasted that a single fifteen-minute serial broadcast five days per week could reach 6.4 million different listeners at a cost per thousand impressions of $0.49.46

The prosperity Stedman observed was but a swansong, however. During the 1959–60 season CBS dropped three of its ten radio serials and NBC canceled its one remaining radio soap. ABC had discontinued its radio soaps the previous season. On 25 November 1960, Virginia Payne gave her 7,065th and final performance as Ma Perkins; the four remaining radio soap operas, *Mary Noble: Backstage Wife*, *Our Gal Sunday*, *Road of Life*, and *Ma Perkins*, all on CBS, were canceled. Three principal factors were responsible for the radio soap opera’s final demise. First, many were still owned by their sponsors (including Procter and Gamble), who saw television soaps as a better advertising vehicle and abandoned radio soaps to “spoil” advertising by other companies. By November 1960 only 25 percent of the advertising time was being sold. Second, as network radio deteriorated, local radio flourished. Station managers discovered they could make more from spinning records and selling airtime to local merchants than from running network programming. Thus by 1960 affiliates were pressuring networks to make more time available for local programming. “Third, the popularity of and audiences for television soap operas continued to grow. Between 1951 and 1959 thirty-five television soaps were introduced, and since then the number of soap operas running during any given year has never dropped below ten.

Since 1960 television soap operas have survived changes in network programming strategy, regulatory upheavals, innumerable network management regimes, cyclic economic fluctuations, and the entry of millions of American women into the paid work force. Part of the soap opera’s success on television can be attributed to its “invisibility” to male opinion leaders, legislators, and regulators. Once the hysteria over soap operas in the early 1940s died down and the novelty of television soap operas wore off, they sank into a comfortable obscurity. As we have seen, until the 1970s few academics bothered studying them, few commentators wrote about them, and the trade press found the seasonal prime-time network crapshoot more exciting to cover than the much more static (albeit profitable) world of daytime programming.

One illustration of the soap opera’s ability to survive by going unnoticed is the so-called quiz-show scandals of the early 1960s. During its first decade commercial television followed the pattern of network radio in turning programming control over to sponsors. This relationship was called into question by the revelation in 1960 that the Charles Revson Company, manufacturers of Revlon cosmetics, had “rigged” the outcome of its highly rated prime-time quiz show, *The $64,000 Question*, in order to make the program more exciting. Congressional investigations, lawsuits, and an FCC inquiry followed. Fearing increased regulation by the newly appointed “interventionist” FCC chairman, Newton Minnow, the networks took control of prime-time programming away from sponsors and their advertising agencies and created internal “standards and practices” divisions to assure that programming gave the appearance, at least, of serving the public interest. Since 1960 the networks have either produced prime-time programming themselves or secured it from independent producers. It has then been offered to advertisers, usually on a “participating” basis: several companies purchasing advertising time within the same program.

This major shift in programming practice affected every aspect of network programming except soap operas. In 1960 the four highest-rated television soap operas were owned by their principal sponsors: *As the World Turns*, *Search for Tomorrow*, and *Guiding Light* by Procter and Gamble and *Love of Life* by American Home Products. When in 1963 and 1964 NBC decided to challenge CBS’s domination in the soap opera area, it did so by adding two sponsor-owned soaps: *The Doctors* (Colgate-Palmolive) and *I Love a Woman’s* *Another World* (Procter and Gamble). A decade after the furor over sponsor involvement in network programming, Procter and Gamble owned six soap operas, and today its six soaps are the only regularly scheduled network programs owned by their sponsor.

The soap opera’s longevity and remarkable resilience derive from its ability to serve the same economic function today that it first served nearly a half-century ago: it provides access to a huge audience of heavy consumers (women eighteen to forty-nine years of age) in a cost-effective manner. Networks have from time to time experimented with other programming forms, but no functional replacement for the soap opera has yet been discovered. As ABC executive Edwin Van de Velde admitted in 1977, “Efforts to change the face of daytime have gone largely unrewarded.” Game shows occasionally have produced higher overall ratings than soap operas, and they are cheaper to produce, but soap operas consistently draw more viewers in the target demographic group.

The soap opera’s narrative openness endows it with a unique ability to respond to social and demographic change. By the mid-1970s the portion of the soap opera audience that had begun watching *Search for Tomorrow*
or As the World Turns in the early 1950s began to pass out of the demographic target range of eighteen to forty-nine years. To make matters worse for soap opera producers, the baby boom of the immediate postwar years had ended, and women had begun working outside the home in numbers unprecedented in peacetime. Soap opera ratings declined in 1977–78 as part of an overall drop in daytime HUT (households using television). Soap opera producers responded by introducing younger characters, injecting plot lines with social controversy, and making more female characters career oriented. In 1975 ABC’s General Hospital could manage but an 8.2 rating and a 26 share. Two years later its figures were even worse, and the network considered cancellation. Gloria Monty was hired in 1978 in a last-ditch attempt to save the show. She fired some of the older actors, focused the narrative on two younger ones (Luke Spencer and Laura Baldwin), initiated a romance between them with a rape, and borrowed, admittedly, from the work of Alfred Hitchcock and Frank Capra. By 1980 General Hospital had become the highest-rated daytime program. Underlying Monty’s strategy and that of other producers who followed her lead was the need to reorient soap operas toward younger viewers, not only to add viewers but also to establish soap opera viewing as a regular activity among women just entering their “prime” as consumers. When asked in 1977 if he was afraid the presentation of “liberated themes” might drive away older soap opera viewers, CBS executive Michael Ogilvie responded, “I’d rather gamble on staying up to date... These [older] women have daughters who watch too.” By 1982 soap opera producers had succeeded in attracting more than 3 million college students as soap opera viewers, 70 percent of them women. In a brochure aimed at prospective soap opera advertisers, ABC noted that not only were college students “prime purchasers, particularly of leisure products,” but, “equally important, many of these college students—by forming the serial viewing habit early—are likely to remain loyal viewers for years to come.”

There is little doubt, then, that the primary generative mechanisms responsible for the origination of the soap opera form and for its perpetuation over nearly fifty years can be located in the institutional requirements of American commercial broadcasting. Despite the obvious and important contributions to the soap opera form made by Irna Phillips, Frank and Anne Hummert, and, in the television era, Agnes Nixon, it is clear that the idea of presenting continuing stories focusing upon domestic concerns on daytime radio was the result of the conjunction of corporate desire to reach a particular audience (women eighteen to forty-nine) and broadcasters’ need to fill the daytime hours with revenue-generating programming. The soap opera represents a form of cultural production that has been fully penetrated by capital since the moment of its conception, a form driven and sustained by corporate imperatives. From the beginning, writers and producers of soap operas have harbored no illusions about the sole criterion by which their work would ultimately be judged: could it secure and maintain an audience of soap or flour consumers at a low cost per thousand. The adversarial relationship we traditionally assume to exist between artistic and economic interests under capitalism simply does not obtain in the case of soap operas (nor, I would venture, in many other cases of contemporary cultural production).