# *Unequal Policies in American Television Entertainment in the Second Half of the 20th Century*

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***Abstract.*** Unequal policies shaped American television entertainment in the second half of the 20th century. These policies were rooted in the power of elite culture. After World War II, benefiting from economic prosperity and the rapid development of broadcasting technology, television entertainment programs became the core of the daily leisure life of the general public. But broadcast resources were not shared equally between cities and rural areas. Different ethnic groups also had very different levels of economic power. The cultural tastes of elite groups held a dominant position in the media. So American television during this period did not meet the cultural needs of all groups equally. Instead, it became a tool that kept elite cultural biases in place. In the early 1980s, neoliberalism began to rise. This brought some improvements to the unequal situation in television entertainment. But the deep cultural biases did not go away. They continued to exist through market competition. Studying these policies helps understand US TV entertainment history and reflect on today's societal identity crises.

***Keywords:*** 20th-century America, television entertainment, inequality policies, pluralism

## 1. Introduction

The decades after World War II brought economic growth and rapid social change. These shifts made television the center of American leisure life. Between 1953 and 1962, household television ownership rose from 45% to 90% [1]. The U.S. government stepped in to manage the growing industry. It used measures like the FCC's 1952 Sixth Report and Order and the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. These steps aimed to balance market competition with public interest. At the same time, the civil rights movement and multiculturalism grew stronger. They pushed for equality and cultural recognition. Marginalized groups, especially racial minorities and low-income communities, began to challenge mainstream media. These groups felt that the media ignored their cultural experiences. As the most influential public platform of the time, television was expected to reflect many different cultures.

But television entertainment largely failed to meet diverse cultural needs. It worked within an unequal power structure. This structure supported mainstream ideology. This paper finds the roots of this problem in how U.S. television policy was designed. That design was shaped by pluralist democratic theory and its "politics of prevention" logic. Pluralism carries built-in judgments about social hierarchy. These judgments gave reason to push women, people of color, and the working class to the edges of both formal and informal governance [2]. This paper argues that structural inequality in television entertainment came from elite control over policy decisions. This control showed up in three ways. First, entertainment resources were not shared equally. Second, economic barriers limited who could speak and be heard. Third, middle-class elites acted as cultural gatekeepers.

Scholarship on U.S. mass media inequality is wide-ranging. Chinese-language studies emphasize stereotypes of minorities and women in media representations [3], the erosion of media's public character through money politics and regulation, the utilitarian logic of cultural pluralism, and the role of interest groups in policymaking [4]. International research has examined public broadcasting's commercialization pressures, competing democratic paradigms' expectations of media, structural economic inequality and capitalist ideological hegemony, and "structural pluralism," as well as the media's alignment with elite interests rather than acting as an independent "fourth estate" [5].

Building on this literature, the paper addresses three gaps: insufficient analysis of how policy design interacts with marginalized groups, limited discussion of the dialectic between political participation and resource allocation, and under-interpretation of the political-cultural context of policy inequality. Focusing on the second half of the twentieth century, I analyze policy documents and historical materials on marginalized groups' struggles to identify forms and mechanisms of inequality in U.S. television policy. The study also draws implications for fair media policymaking in China, a more balanced distribution of public cultural resources, and the construction of a more inclusive media ecosystem.

## 2. Elite discourse in American television entertainment in the second half of the 20th century

The United States went through major social changes in the late 20th century. Post-war economic growth raised living standards and changed social structures. The middle class expanded. Workers and people of color developed stronger self-awareness. Social movements like civil rights and women's liberation grew powerful. Marginalized groups fought for equality and cultural identity. These movements reflected the rise of multiculturalism. This ideology promoted respect for cultural differences. It also pushed for equal rights of expression. Its goal was to break mainstream cultural dominance and build a space where many cultures could exist together. But in television entertainment, elite discourse blocked this ideal. Television became a tool that kept unequal cultural policies in place.

Television technology advanced rapidly and spread widely across the United States. Television entertainment grew quickly as a result. Soap operas, Westerns, variety shows, and sports replaced older forms of leisure. They became part of everyday life. But at the same time, elite groups quietly gained control over television's power to shape public discourse.

Throughout the 20th century, U.S. mass media operated under federal regulation. The government justified this regulation through the idea of the "public interest." The Radio Act of 1912 defined the airwaves as a public resource. The government had the right to allocate it. The Radio Act of 1927 strengthened state management to deal with spectrum interference. The Communications Act of 1934 gave the FCC broad power to regulate media in the name of the "public interest." This made the state a key party responsible for media governance [6]. In practice, however, the power to define "public interest" was often held by elites. These elites shared pluralist assumptions. FCC policymakers, television owners, and mainstream commentators formed the core of this group. They were mostly white, middle- and upper-class men. Their cultural preferences shaped policy priorities.

Within FCC policy logic, "public interest" tended to be equated with elite-sanctioned "high culture" and "civic education" (e.g., symphonies, opera, public affairs programming). In contrast, soap operas popular among low-income audiences and women, Black cultural programming sought by African Americans, and bilingual content needed by immigrant communities were frequently dismissed as "lowbrow" and received limited institutional support or resource allocation. As one viewer, Ida B. Erb, wrote in response to Pay-TV policy, "The public interest should be defined by everyone involved, not just experts or those who can afford to pay for the programs" [2]. Such claims, however, were routinely marginalized. The pattern was especially pronounced for African Americans: early television often relied on white-dominated stereotypes, and later efforts to use cable television to represent Black culture and community needs encountered the twin barriers of discriminatory policy and capital monopoly.

This understanding of "public resources" and the "public interest" is rooted in pluralist democratic theory, which in practice has legitimized elite restriction of political rights for the working class, women, and people of color. Unlike elite democracy, which reduces participation to elections, pluralist democracy treats society as a field of irreconcilable interests and defines democracy as a regulated process of bargaining. Pluralism is both a system of checks and balances and a way of life. It maintains stability through hierarchy within and among groups. It assumes that interest-group leaders can slowly reach outcomes acceptable to "all." This process works within an elite-centered power structure [7]. Paul Lazarsfeld applied this logic to culture. He argued that experts with broader perspectives should lead cultural decision-making. He believed that putting the educated minority's preferences above the uneducated majority's does not go against American democracy. His reason was that checks and balances exist to manage exactly these kinds of conflicts [8]. Regulators often used the metaphor of a "balance wheel" to describe their role. For example, the FCC expected stations to air "sustaining" public-service programs. These programs were meant to balance out schedules dominated by advertising.

This pluralist logic shaped real regulatory decisions. In 1952, the FCC's spectrum plan gave commercial broadcasters the better VHF channels. Educational and local services were assigned UHF channels instead. The goal was to maximize local service and national competition through allocation rules [1]. More broadly, policymakers kept commercial and non-commercial programming separate. This separation reflected their low regard for popular entertainment audiences. It also reflected their strong views about the "right" direction for broadcast competition and local programming. In the postwar decades, the FCC favored content made at the local level. This included amateur showcases, local performers, practical knowledge, and news. The FCC also supported programming that elites considered uplifting. Examples include classical music, public affairs discussions led by experts, and historical dramas.

Pluralist policymaking also produced blind spots by privileging abstract normative goals over local realities. The FCC's 1946 *Blue Book* focused on preventing stations from replacing sustaining programs with commercial fare, but paid little attention to the actual conditions of local production or to how community dynamics shaped "public interest" needs. Notably, it failed to confront racial bias in stations such as WBAL and WCAU in cities with large Black populations; relegating the few African American programs to marginal time slots effectively ignored Black majority audiences and undermined any substantive fulfillment of local public interest [9].

The same problem also exists in the FCC's1952 Sixth Report and Order. While the FCC claims that its policy "provides the most effective protection mechanism for non-commercial educational television," it does not take into account actual needs and technical feasibility in channel allocation, but rather discards the necessary flexibility in pursuit of formal fairness [10]. Policy makers have overlooked the technical limitations of UHF television in signal transmission, as well as the reality of the high costs of related supporting facilities and television manufacturing. This has left local TV stations that have access to UHF channels in smaller markets financially strapped, ultimately resulting in UHF channels having almost no audience and no advertising revenue, and being unable to compete with national VHF commercial TV stations that have already occupied the market. The result is that policies intended to serve the local area have instead weakened the actual ability of local TV stations to meet the local public interest.

Beyond formal policy design, elite understandings of the "public interest" were continually promoted through civic training and the creation of targeted broadcasting institutions to shape popular entertainment preferences. Charles Merriam, for instance, urged civic education to help citizens adapt to industrial society and to eliminate habits associated with non-white and minority working-class populations in the name of "integration" [2]. FCC chairman Newton Minow likewise framed "television and the public interest" as a collective obligation: broadcasters should protect children, assume social responsibility, advance education and culture, ensure "acceptable" program content and advertising, and provide uplifting entertainment that cultivates civic-minded citizens [11].

This agenda gained institutional momentum during the Johnson administration's "Great Society." In 1967, the Carnegie Commission's Public Television: The Programme of Action broadened the Ford Foundation–backed concept of "educational television" into "public television," helping pave the way for the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 [12]. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) was created as a nonprofit outside formal government, while PBS, under CPB, developed a hybrid identity—"neither fully public nor private." But the FCC's strong language did not lead to strong policy. The commission talked about programming, local communities, and inner-city groups. But it did not explain how local needs would be studied. It also did not explain how local production would be supported. Because of this, content made for specific communities stayed on the margins. At the same time, CPB governance focused on broad "participation." It did not prioritize diversity in terms of race, class, or gender. This resulted in boards with little real community representation. These boards had limited ability to serve different groups of people [13].

In short, while multiculturalism and expanding television entertainment seemed to widen opportunities for cultural expression in the late twentieth century, elite monopolization of media discourse continued to suppress popular and marginalized demands—often masking inequality through the language of democracy and multicultural inclusion, and thereby further institutionalizing cultural hierarchy.

## 3. The realistic basis of unequal policies behind television entertainment

The unequal policies behind American television entertainment in the second half of the 20th century were the result of the constant interaction between the social environment and group practices. In the realm of television entertainment, the process by which the American elite group monopolizes the discourse power is not a one-way imposition of power, but a cultural shaping based on the existing reality. The uneven distribution of television entertainment resources across different geographical divisions in the United States, the economic disparities among different social groups, and the cultural "tastes" of the middle class together form the real soil for the emergence of unequal policies.

First, the cause of the unequal policies behind television entertainment in the United States during this period lies in the uneven geographical distribution of television entertainment resources. Rural and peripheral areas have long faced the problem of limited television signals and low accessibility to programs. In the 1960s, the FCC took action to promote the popularization of the UHF band, but due to the high cost of equipment and poor signal penetration, many rural areas still cannot enjoy the same level of service. This geographical inequality has directly affected the possibility of access to multicultural content for residents in peripheral areas.

As cable television expanded, disputes over television entertainment intensified. By overcoming the geographic limits of broadcast signals, cable could relay programming from distant network affiliates and offer viewers a wider range of content. Yet this model threatened the economic base of local stations that depended on advertising: cable diverted audiences, reduced advertising revenue, and heightened local stations' survival pressures. A central controversy emerged between broadcasters who framed television as a channel for local community expression and cable operators who defended consumers' "right" to pay for distant signals: should television be treated as a public medium to be widely and fairly distributed, or as a commodity sold to individual users [2]? Although the FCC justified "localist" policies as protecting local public interest, these policies were rooted in an elite-defined, pluralist ideal of "community" and often failed to address the concrete media needs of rural and marginalized populations.

In the early phase of cable development, many remote rural residents—facing weak reception and scarce high-quality programming—built signal-boosting antenna systems to capture broadcasts from faraway cities. Unlike profit-oriented cable systems, these antenna networks were frequently organized through volunteer labor, nonprofits, or public subsidies, functioning as collective action to secure equal access to television for economically disadvantaged rural communities [2]. Rural residents' understanding of television as legitimate, publicly supportable entertainment challenged both cable operators' market logic and the normative preferences of federal officials and social scientists who worried about "vulgar" entertainment and sought to privilege particular notions of pluralist community. For these rural initiatives, television was less a local public forum for building cross-class or cross-racial solidarity than a practical means to redistribute entertainment resources concentrated in major cities. The resulting conflicts—between local businesses and rural residents, and between market and subsidy models—ultimately centered on who could define the economic relations of television and on what terms equality of access would be realized.

Secondly, the economic base differences among different social groups further limit their say in television entertainment. American radio and television have long been regarded as publicly owned, but under the influence of classical liberalism and the tradition of private ownership, American radio and television have adopted a commercial operating logic. The 1960s to 1980s are seen as the golden age of the television economy, with television industry revenues growing from $8.7 million in 1948 to $2 billion in 1963. By the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), the market is dominated by the three major networks, and industry profits remain high [14]. With the rise of cable and pay channels, television entertainment has gradually shifted from a public resource to a commodity. The "pay-per-view" model binds entertainment rights directly to consumption capacity. Only families with the corresponding economic conditions can enjoy richer and better program content, while low-income families and ethnic minority families, unable to afford the cost of paying, can only be confined to free TV channels, further losing their say in the field of television entertainment.

Confronted with stratified discourse power rooted in economic inequality, marginalized groups mobilized to challenge elite dominance and to insist on "equal participation" in defining television's socio-economic order. Because purchasing a television set was itself costly, organizations such as AMVETS argued that viewers, as major "investors" through their purchases, possessed a form of collective ownership and therefore deserved equal rights to use and shape television. Women's organizations similarly raised concerns about the exclusion of low-income audiences. From a racial equality standpoint, African Americans criticized the market logic of Pay-TV, advocated Black-owned cable systems, and called for government subsidies and incentives to expand Black participation and ownership. Organized labor also contested Pay-TV: the AFL-CIO passed a resolution opposing it in 1956, though shifting positions within Hollywood unions contributed to the AFL-CIO executive committee reversing its earlier stance in 1967 [2].

At the same time, debates over television inequality were refracted through mass-culture criticism, where educated professionals were often treated as superior aesthetic arbiters and commercial broadcasting was feared for destabilizing cultural hierarchies. CBS News president Fred Friendly warned that profit-driven cable operators, by catering to popular taste, neglected television's public responsibility and cultural mission; he argued that "public interest" programming should be guided by civic-minded elites [15]. FCC commissioner Nicholas Johnson, a proponent of public-access cable, emphasized cable's value for community expression and civic participation, grounded in television's power to disseminate information. But critics pushed back against the FCC's focus on access rather than ownership. Charles Tate of the Urban Institute was one of them. He argued that access policies could strengthen white business power. They could also weaken minority self-determination. He pointed out that these policies left structural barriers in place. The economic marginalization of people of color was one key barrier. Because of this, public-access channels had limited real impact [16].

Debates over Pay-TV were really disputes about cultural hierarchy. In these debates, middle-class taste was gradually treated as the standard for television entertainment. In 1959, the Tamiment Institute and the Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences held a "Mass Media" symposium. Most participants agreed on a clear ranking of culture. High culture was placed at the top. Middle-class culture came next. "Low" culture was seen as having no cultural value at all. Participants also closely linked taste to socioeconomic status [2]. For Bourdieu, taste is not natural but socially produced: dominant groups, endowed with economic and cultural capital, can treat "disinterested" aesthetic pursuits as a habitus, and their preferences become internalized as legitimate "aesthetic sensibility" [17]. In U.S. television policy, this sensibility aligned neatly with elite promotion of symphonies and other highbrow programming.

Industry leaders and policy entrepreneurs often embraced this elitist aesthetic. Pat Weaver conceded that cultivating interest in the performing arts requires time and money, yet argued that the cultural judgments of the economically advantaged were more "objective," and that inequality in wealth reflected differences in cultural inclination rather than structural imbalance. On this view, the poor could be "uplifted" by exposure to highbrow television, and Pay-TV could simultaneously finance nonprofit performing arts institutions and refine mass taste [2]. In practice, however, public subsidies had not significantly diversified performing-arts audiences, which remained concentrated among white, professional, middle- and upper-class groups; nor did Pay-TV become the promised new revenue stream for classical performance. Ultimately, a hierarchy that framed cultural "elevation" as the route to social mobility helped obscure underlying economic inequality by translating it into differences of taste and cultural worth.

It should be noted that the three realistic factors of geographical differences in television entertainment resources, economic differences among different social groups and cultural tastes of the middle class are not isolated but interwoven and reinforcing each other: The concentration of geographical resources has pushed up the cost of cultural consumption in the core area, economic differences have screened out audiences that fit middle-class tastes, and the hegemonic position of middle-class cultural tastes has further consolidated the inclination of resource allocation and policy orientation. It is precisely this multi-dimensional reality that has enabled the monopoly of the discourse power of the elite to be embedded in the policy framework of television entertainment, becoming an unshakable structural inequality, and ultimately allowing the elite to consolidate their cultural dominance and suppress the demands of marginalized groups through policy tools.

## 4. The transformation of American television entertainment policy at the end of the 20th century

The two oil crises of the early 1970s pushed the global economy into stagflation. In the United States, the postwar economic boom ended. Inflation rose. Unemployment grew. Economic growth slowed down. These problems showed the limits of Keynesian demand management. State intervention and fiscal expansion no longer worked. In this context, neoliberalism grew stronger. After Ronald Reagan was elected in 1981, it replaced Keynesianism as the main framework for U.S. economic policy.

Neoliberalism promoted liberalization, privatization, and marketization. It opposed broad state intervention. It treated competition and market discipline as the main tools of economic coordination. Politically, it valued private property. It downplayed public ownership. It placed individual and market "freedom" above regulatory governance. Together, these ideas formed a clear policy ideology [18]. Television entertainment is part of the broader political economy. Because of this, it went through major policy changes in the 1980s under neoliberal influence.

In media regulation, Reagan appointed Mark Fowler as FCC chairman. This accelerated deregulation and weakened the long-standing requirement that broadcasting serve the "public interest" [1]. In 1982, the FCC removed limits on hourly advertising time. It also abolished the National Association of Broadcasters' (NAB) code governing program and advertising standards. This made market demand the main driver of industry development. Congress also pushed in this direction. The Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984 expanded deregulation. It gave the FCC authority over cable. It lifted rate controls, which contributed to rising cable fees. It also relaxed cross-ownership restrictions and lowered barriers to mergers and acquisitions. These changes increased industry concentration. They strengthened monopoly tendencies. They also laid the groundwork for the rise of large media conglomerates [19].

Neoliberal "market principles" also took hold in Congress and the FCC. This sped up deregulation, especially for cable and satellite. Policy barriers to channel expansion were removed [20]. The number of channels grew quickly. This weakened the dominance of the three major broadcast networks. It also produced a wide range of specialized channels covering news, sports, entertainment, culture, and education. Some of these channels targeted marginalized audiences. Black Entertainment Television (BET) was a key example. It launched in 1980 as the first national channel focused on African Americans. It aimed to counter stereotypical portrayals and promote Black culture and values. But ownership gaps remained large. Minority-controlled stations made up less than 2% of radio ownership. Their representation in cable and telecommunications was even lower. In response, Representative Cardiss Collins introduced the Minority Telecommunications Development Act in 1983. It proposed tax incentives, subsidies, and equal-employment rules to expand minority ownership and jobs in cable and related media [2]. But the results fell far short of these goals.

Des Freedman argues that media deregulation in the U.S. and the U.K. shows a clear shift. Neoliberal norms replaced earlier pluralist norms. These neoliberal norms became the main guide for policy design and implementation [21]. Yet neoliberalism did not simply replace pluralism; both share a commitment to market competition and accept market mechanisms as allocative regulators. Neoliberal arguments also drew on pluralist anxieties that mass culture, racial protest, and civic apathy threatened hierarchy, consensus, and stability—norms historically grounded in within-group hierarchy and elite leadership, which in turn legitimized class, gender, and racial inequalities. From this perspective, corporate liberal critics further contend that marginalized interests—and the public at large—were denied meaningful participation in defining the very property-rights regimes that structure television ownership and control.

Pay-TV advocates treated viewer payment as the market's ideal mechanism for balancing supply and demand, even likening payment to democratic "voting." Cable television's rise in the 1980s and 1990s thus appeared as an evolutionary step toward a "post-broadcast" era: more channels, more niche targeting, and a more "active" audience. In practice, however, many cable networks mainly rebroadcast familiar commercial programs and films, and viewers' remote-control "votes" often reproduce conventional broadcast choices. Neoliberal proponents nevertheless argued that deregulation would fragment mass culture into diverse subcultures, reorganizing pluralism through media consumption and ultimately differentiating audiences along economic lines [2].

For civil rights activists and Black investors, cable ownership was not merely an economic opportunity but a route to democratic status—enabling control over Black representation and supporting urban development. Yet deregulation facilitated the rapid expansion of large multi-system operators with superior capital and infrastructure capacity, which dominated franchise and ownership arrangements and marginalized Black entrants. The Gary, Indiana case shows these structural barriers clearly. In 1972, twenty Black residents formed the Gary Communications Group. They raised $150,000 to apply for a cable franchise. Gary had a majority-Black population. Its city council was also Black-led. But the group still struggled to get public and private financing. In the end, it could not operate fully [2]. This case shows how municipal politics and a deregulated cable sector reproduced structural racism. It also shows how these forces limited Black cable development.

At the same time, some advocates believed cable could bring African Americans into a pluralist order. They supported further deregulation to speed up technological growth in open markets. In the public-access space, access advocates often worked with large operators. These partnerships helped legitimize and expand operator monopolies. This created sharp conflicts with civil rights advocates. Those advocates prioritized ownership over access. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 loosened ownership restrictions. It also reinforced commercial logic. This sped up consolidation further. It also weakened television's public-service role [22].

All in all, the core change in American television entertainment policy under the neoliberal transition is the shift from "elitist inequality" to "market-driven inequality," but it does not change the power imbalance between the elite and the marginalized, only changing the form of inequality. The root cause of structural inequality lies in the monopoly of the elite over the right to speak. Instead of breaking the monopoly, neoliberal marketization and deregulation policies have strengthened it through capital. Communication political economy points out that the inherent logic of capitalism concentrates power in the hands of the owners of the means of production, and the media serves the interests of the elite and big capital. This inequality reinforces class division, racial discrimination, and cultural inequality, hindering the development of multiculturalism in American society.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper examines unequal policies in American television entertainment under multiculturalism in the late 20th century, finding that post-war elites solidified cultural biases into structural inequalities through systematic policy-making. Marginalized groups, such as minorities, low-income families, and rural residents, faced long-term marginalization, from imbalanced TV spectrum distribution to Pay-TV linking entertainment rights to consumption capacity and middle-class elites dominating content standards. Although "public interest" influenced cable TV post-1970s and public access policy brought some improvements, it did not dissolve institutionalized pluralism. The neoliberal media transformation extended pluralism's hierarchical logic. This history leads to the paper's conclusions.

Unequal television entertainment policies in the late 20th century United States were rooted in unequal participation. This inequality came from economic and cultural privilege. U.S. multiculturalism accepted diversity on the surface. But it did not challenge political-economic power. It worked as a framework that tolerated differences only when the existing order stayed unchanged. Carl Ratner argues that American society accepts multicultural diversity "only when people maintain the status quo." It protects the status quo by limiting real transformative activity [23]. Disadvantaged groups hold weaker economic positions. Because of this, their power to shape cultural discourse is also weaker. This produces an elitist hierarchy within the pluralist order.

Television entertainment should work as a public resource. It should serve the equal interests of all people. But the elite-democratic assumptions built into U.S. governance do not ensure that all groups are treated equally. This policy logic makes cultural inequality worse. It also reveals the limits of the American democratic system's ability to balance competing interests [24]. The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 was designed to correct market failures. But public broadcasting did not become an open and equal public sphere. It left the underlying power relations unchanged. It also left the dominant ideas about democracy intact. This gap between the Act's original goals and its actual practice shows this problem clearly.

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[24] In the field of mass communication, "public interest" is regarded as a specific responsibility that the media should fulfill, which is to meet the public's interests, conveniences, or necessities, abbreviated as PICON.