“Homebody TV: Tele-hospitality in a Pandemic”
Lynn Spigel

Watching TV in the midst of a pandemic is disorienting, even for those of us lucky enough to be home, sheltering in place. Of course, home is always relative, and orientations to it—as well as to TV—depend on where you are. Viewers in the U.S. first encountered Pandemic TV as a thing from elsewhere—something happening in China, Italy, Spain. Or at least that is how the US news media first described it. Next, newscasters began a vast orientation campaign. Where would the virus go viral? Could the pain of “others” become “our” pain? By mid-March the paranoia turned deadly. The virus had come home, and America was becoming its most welcoming host.

Pandemic TV is all about this reorientation—this move inward—literally as TV shows move into celebrities’ homes. Faced with studio closures, late night hosts were among the first to go. In a clip that went viral, Stephan Colbert did his monologue from his bathtub in full suit and tie. Other TV shows (from the Voice to Amy Schumer Learns to Cook to the CBS special America Gets a Haircut) now appear against the quotidian backdrop of living rooms, kids’ rooms, and kitchens. Lifestyle media and reality home shows are the templates for this new production culture of homebody TV. But unlike the staged homes on HGTV, or the Bachelor’s romantically lit mansions, the homes of Pandemic TV are full of Zoom lag and glitch. Still, it is this glitchy performance of everydayness that makes pandemic TV so inviting. Pandemic TV is all about simulated acts of hosting and visitation, welcoming audiences in to see the ordinary affects of someone else’s life.

To put this into a more conceptual framework, Pandemic TV and its homebody hosts are part of what I call the rhetoric of “tele-hospitality.” Tele-hospitality is the name I’ve given to a larger project I’ve been working on for the past few years. My interest is inspired by Derrida’s Of Hospitality (1996) in which he considers the question of the “foreigner” and the host.¹ Derrida
unravels the derivation of the word hospitality, showing how the root word “hostis” (foreigner, stranger) generates a series of ambivalent opposites—host (as in they who welcome) but also hostility (as when a guest is treated as an enemy). For Derrida, the ambivalent meanings of hospitality turn onto questions of inclusion and exclusion: the rights of nations, the rights of citizenship, the rights of migrants and guests. While Derrida mostly proceeds through philosophical inquiry and the analysis of classical texts, in various passages, he also links hospitality to the media. In 1996, he spoke of television and the then newish media of cell phones, email, and the Internet. He considered how media blur boundaries of private and public, home and elsewhere, foreigner and citizen; and he discussed phone tapping, surveillance, and cyber-terrorism—issues that have become increasingly vital today.

Drawing on Derrida, I use the term tele-hospitality to capture the way in which screen media simultaneously welcome and exclude publics, and I’m interested in how media make certain bodies sovereign while disempowering others. Historically, discourses of tele-hospitality have been central to broadcasting. In the 1950s, regulators and industry executives often referred to TV as “a guest in the house,” and they recommended that TV performers and studio audiences should abide by polite domestic decorum. For much of 1950s and 60s, the host-guest logic of television was also central to the racism of the guest star system; for many years people of color could be guest stars but not hosts on network TV. Tele-hospitality (and its hostile flip side of exclusion) persists in digital media, not only via state surveillance but also on quotidian platforms like blogs, shopping websites, and Zoom. Tele-hospitality regulates who is welcome online—who “hosts” a Zoom session, who is an invited “guest,” who gets a password vs. those who get locked out. As Derrida argues, hospitality is about conditional and provisional welcomes—the host can always exile the guest.

Not coincidentally, the root word of hospitality is also the root word of hospital—and during the pandemic TV’s association with illness is never far away. After all, TV is something you do when you are home with a cold in bed. Perhaps this is why watching TV in a pandemic feels like
living through one long sick day. And, despite all the cozy scenes of kids, spouses, and pets, we know that celebrities like Colbert and Schumer are home because they—like us—are afraid of the virus. Suffering a bad case of COVID19, CNN newscaster Chris Cuomo broadcast for nearly three weeks from his basement. The news room had morphed into a sick room. There is something fundamentally uncanny about homebody TV. The most familiar of places—the home—becomes a stage for fright and the performance of contamination.

What, then, does Pandemic TV and its homebody performers tell us? Unlike catastrophe TV (for example, 9/11), Pandemic TV isn’t organized around a singular traumatic event. In her oft-cited essay on catastrophe television, Mary Ann Doane discusses how catastrophes disrupt the flow of TV time. Then crisis management sets in as newscasters come up with explanatory frames. But in the Trumpian era of “fake news,” newscasters can’t form narrative explanations that everyone believes. And despite his daily White House briefings, the President wasn’t up to the task. Instead, Trump was the ultimate TV homebody picking fights with newscasters and late night hosts. While Trump’s rise to fame on reality TV is often noted, it seems to me just as important that Trump owns hotels. He is the ultimate tele-hospitality president—at once hospitable and hostile, a president who uses the pandemic as an excuse to further exile immigrants and antagonize anyone who does not accept his conditional terms of welcome into his (less than half the country) voter base.

Pandemic TV has given way to a range of hostilities—and not just from the White House. There is also a growing public backlash against the celebrity TV homebodies and their luxury homes. Rather than sympathy, hate viewers tweeted into Cuomo, ridiculing him for showing off his house and access to healthcare. Speaking to the backlash against celebrity home porn, late night host Conan O’Brien gave viewers an ironic house tour by placing himself against virtual backgrounds of palatial mansions with ocean views. Pandemic TV may borrow conventions from lifestyle bloggers and HGTV, but the discrepancies of wealth and privilege have some viewers on edge.
If there is a bright side to Pandemic TV, it rests in critical dialogues now taking place about class, race, gender, and all things that make a difference to how this pandemic affects differently situated publics. Responding to Derrida in a conversation published in 2012, Stuart Hall and David Scott argued that his theory of hospitality operates from the point of view of the empowered host nation and not from the disempowered guest or migrant. In other words, they remind us of the terms of cultural power at the heart of tele-hospitality in the world of social distancing and homebody culture. What bodies get to stay home? What bodies get to welcome us into their virtual screens? Who gets to screen out unwanted others? And what else was happening in the world that Pandemic TV screened out during its obsessive cycle of virus coverage and homebody genres?

Now, as states give up on quarantine, TV news has moved back into the streets. By May 26, newscasters began covering the uprisings in Minneapolis after the brutal police killing of George Floyd. As I finish this essay (on June 14) protests persist across the globe. As news coverage reorients itself away from the virus, the world outside the home contains all the same struggles that it did before the pandemic. I’m sorry to end with such a bleak forecast. But I’m glad that vast groups of people are protesting in the streets. After all, a nation of TV homebodies can only last so long.

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Notes

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