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Parallels Between The Dawn Of Digital TV and The First Color TV Sets

By Aaron Miller

Today marks the 50th anniversary of the first commercial color television sets to roll off of the RCA assembly line in Bloomington, Indiana. The CT-100 was a large mahogany box with a 15" picture tube and a screen that measured approximately 11" by 9". The price of the CT-100 was \$1000 - the average cost of an automobile at the time.

Due to the high cost of the unit and the veritable lack of color television programming available to the public, sales of the CT-100 were very sluggish at first and only improved marginally in the first few years of production. It wasn't until September of 1961, with the premier of "Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color" - a full-hour Sunday series of color TV programs ranging from nature stories to animated cartoons, famous classics and musical extravaganzas - that sales of color receivers really took off.

The \$1000 price tag of the CT-100 made it a luxury item of grand proportions. Only a very small portion of the population could afford to purchase the unit. As the price of color TV's began to drop and the picture tubes got larger, more of the public was inclined to invest in the new technology. The same can be said about the sales trend of plasma monitors, which hit the market in the \$20,000 range but whose prices have consistently dropped (at approximately 20% a year according to some reports) as production costs have decreased. The premier high definition plasma monitors now sell for approximately half the amount at which they debuted. Although CRT televisions are still the dominant choice of most consumers, plasma TV sales have skyrocketed and the upward trend appears to be continuing.

Another interesting parallel between the introduction of the first color TV's and the digital television technologies of recent years is the marketing of both as presented to consumers. Color TV's were initially marketed as inventions that would offer the purchaser a home theater experience. Essentially, people were told that they would no longer have to visit a theater to enjoy a true cinematic experience. Instead, they could relive the excitement of "a night at the movies" in the comfort of their own home. With only the radio and black and white TV to compete with it, color television captured the imagination of the American public. And as more color programming became available, the color TV set grew in significance as a cornerstone of American family entertainment.

A similar marketing approach was championed when digital television technologies such as HDTV were first introduced to consumers. HDTV offers about twice as many lines of resolution than the standard NTSC broadcast. In addition, HDTV provides higher quality, digitally encrypted five-channel sound as well. These improvements, along with the increasing popularity of larger TVs and DVD players, have once again given rise to marketing strategies that tout the home television environment as a true cinematic experience.

As much as going out to the movies remains an important part of the American social life, more and more people are investing in home theater systems, waiting until movies are released on DVD and enjoying them from their couches. In many cases, modern home theater systems boast superior sound and image quality when compared to public movie theaters - all without the sticky floors, overpriced candy and noisy teenagers talking in the row behind you.

Americans have always been fascinated by the movies - equally so by the ability to bring the experience of the movies into their homes. The recent digital TV revolution is very similar to the explosion of interest that swept the nation in the late 1950's with the introduction of the first color TV's. It's only a matter of time before the next generation of home theater technology is invented and marketed to the American public. It is safe to say that when this technology arrives we will reflect back on the history of television and the home theater experience to see if the pattern plays itself out yet again.