Examines the relationship between Jews and American mass entertainment, especially television, during the twentieth century. At a time when Jews were actively involved in both the business and creative ends of the new media that came to dominate fields as seemingly diverse as popular culture and political discourse, Jewish leading characters were largely absent from prime time network television. How did Jewish involvement in mass entertainment, the simultaneous absence of Jewish characters onscreen, and the role of television in American culture relate to each other? What, if anything, do those relationships reveal about Jewish identity and American society in this period?

In the first decades of the twentieth century, wireless radio transmission, the moving image, and, eventually, broadcast television emerged from the workshops of tinkering, perhaps visionary inventors to become new means of communication and entertainment. Before long, they had become central to the very way Americans lived, consumed, communicated, and spent their leisure time. Television, in particular, came to play an enormous role in facilitating the “imagined
community” that united Americans. During the same time period, the Jewish world underwent a complete demographic transformation, eventually making United States home to the largest Jewish population in the world. Among the Jewish immigrants, who brought Yiddish-language culture and entertainment traditions with them to the New World, were individuals who would play critical roles in shaping the new mass entertainment industry, and in creating its programming. And, indeed, as one might expect, in the 1920s, ‘30s and ‘40s, audibly “ethnic characters,” including Jews, were prominent in network radio programming, a trend that continued into the post-World War II birth of broadcast television.

Then, for three decades, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, leading Jewish characters rarely appeared on prime time television. For the first fifteen years or so of that period, on-air fictional characters were overwhelmingly suburban, white members of nuclear families. But the absence of Jewish leading characters from the small screen continued for another fifteen years after Norman Lear’s All in the Family, and a barrage of other like-minded shows, had burst the suburban bubble. In this course, we examine the paradox of on-screen Jewish absence from television, during a time of simultaneous Jewish involvement in so many other of its working parts.

This paradox is all the more important given the central role of broadcast network television during these years. For several decades, approximately from the 1950s through the 1980s and well into the 1990s, network television had an extraordinary hold on the American public. Some hailed the new opportunities of this “democratic” medium (a term also applied to the movies), replete with the potential to educate the masses and provide an easily accessible shared public sphere over vast geographic divides, while others denounced its nefarious effects on intelligence, education, political deliberation—to name just a few perceived foibles (dangers, some said).

Using Jewish characters as a case study of representation and self-representation of identifiably “ethnic” identities on American television, we will consider the both the changing world portrayed by network television, and the simultaneously evolving role of television in American life. We will focus primarily on television as an entertainment forum, with occasional attention to its news and non-fiction broadcasts.

To put broadcast America in sharper relief, we will also look briefly at Jews in cinema during this same time period, and occasionally refer to Jews and mass entertainment in Europe and in Israel. Why was the disappearance of the Jewish character more marked on prime time, entertainment television than in other media? What does this phenomenon suggest the relationships among broadcast television, ethnic and religious minorities, and public life in the
United States during the twentieth century? What does it suggest to us about American multiculturalism in a post-broadcast age?

**Student Responsibilities**

Assignments are outlined below. Each one will be discussed in class, and full detailed descriptions and explanations distributed. The percentages of the overall course grade assigned to each are approximate. Additional weight may be assigned for improvement over the course of the semester, for example. *All information on the syllabus is subject to change; if you miss a class, please check with the instructor or a responsible classmate to be sure you are on track.*

*Participation.* Students are expected to arrive punctually at all class meetings, having read and viewed assigned material, and to participate actively in discussions. 20%

*Viewing Responses*, Due: weekly, posted to the course web site by Wednesday at 9 pm. The five best response papers over the course of the semester will be counted. 10%.

*Assignment 1.* Short analysis of a show or film vis-à-vis course themes. (approx. 2 pp). Due: Sept. 17. 5%

*Assignment 2.* Historical “reading” exercise. Due: Oct 22. 20%

*Assignment 3.* Review of David Zurawik, *Jews of Prime Time*, or a similar work, with instructor approval (approx. 6 pp). Due: Nov. 5. 15%

*Final paper or project.* Analysis of a show, preferably an expansion of assignment 1 or 2 (approx. 10 pp). Rough draft, for those who wish to submit one, due electronically: Dec. 3. *Final paper due: Dec. 15.* 30%.

Letter grades will be computed as follows: A+ 98-100; A: 93 – 97.9; A−: 90 – 92.9; B+: 88 – 90; B: 83 – 87.9; B−: 80 – 82.9, and so forth.

**Collaboration Policy**

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of assignment topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices in this discipline and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work.

If you would like to collaborate with a classmate, or in a small group, on any written assignment, please contact the Professor or TF. One paper will be submitted by all the participants together, and one grade will be assigned. Collaboration of this type requires prior authorization of the teaching staff.
Course Materials

**Required texts:**


J. Hoberman, Jeffrey Shandler, eds., *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*

**Recommended texts:**

Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen*

Neil Gabler, *An Empire of their Own*

David Marc, *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture* (revised edition)

Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism*

Course Outline

The following course schedule is subject to change. Pay attention in class, and if you miss a class, check with classmates or the instructor as to whether there may have been changes in the reading assignment or topic for the following class.

**Class 1.** September 10. **Two Introductions:** The Disappearing TV Jew and Broadcast, Narrowcas, and Twentieth-Century American Democracy

**Class 2.** September 17. **The Early Years:** Radio to Television

**Read:**

David Marc, “What Was Broadcasting?”

Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 3-105

*Entertaining America*, 15-43, 100-135

**Listen to:**

Radio clips

**View:**

Goldbergs episode
YooHoo Mrs. Goldberg, minutes 1-58:05 (chapters 1-9)

**Recommended**
Read: Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism*, 135-207
View: Ken Burns, *Empire of the Air: the Men Who Made Radio, Television: Window to the World (the History Channel)*

**DUE:** Assignment one, brief analysis of a show or film.


**Read:**
*Entertaining America*, 76-99.
Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish*, 1-30, 40-48
Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 3-18

**View:**
The Jazz Singer

**Recommended**
Sarna, *American Judaism*, 208-271

**Class 4. October 1. The Hollywood Jews**

**Read:**
Bial, *Acting Jewish*, 30-40
*Entertaining America*, 15-57, 71-76
Neil Gabler, *An Empire of their Own*, 1-78

**View:**
*Gentleman's Agreement*

October 8 – [tentative] Library meeting
Class 6. October 15. **Anti-Communism in the Entertainment Industries 1:**

**Read:**
*Entertaining America*, 58 – 70
Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 105-148
Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America*, pp. 249-268 (ch 15, "Hollywood at War for America and at War with Itself") (Reserve)

**View:**
*YooHoo Mrs. Goldberg*, minutes 58:05 - end (chapters 10-12)
The Front
Edward R. Murrow: *The McCarthy Years*

**Recommended:**
Sarna, *American Judaism*, 272-293

Class 7. October 22. **The Beaver’s World**

**Read:**
Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 149-340
*Entertaining America*, 136-149

**View:**
The Dick Van Dyke Show, separate instruction sheet to be distributed

**DUE:** Assignment 2. Reception history exercise

Class 8. October 29. **Fred Silverman, Norman Lear and Revolution at CBS**

**Read:**
*Entertaining America*, 220-243.
David Marc, *Comic Visions*, 130-171 (ch. 5, “The Sitcom at its Literate Peak”)
Richard Adler, ed. *All in the Family: A Critical Appraisal*, selections
Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 341-490
Jack Kugelmass, “First as Farce, Then as Tragedy: The Unlamented Demise of *Bridget Loves Bernie,*” *Key Texts in American Jewish Culture*, ed. Jack Kugelmass
View:  (selections to be announced)
Bridget Loves Bernie
The Mary Tyler Moore Show
All in the Family

Recommended:
Sarna, American Judaism 306-323
View: Clips from Archive of American Television

Class 9. November 5.  "Issues" Entertainment + the Place of Television

Read:
Barnouw, Tube of Plenty, 491-547
Entertaining America, 192-195, 204-219, 258-263

View:  (selections to be announced)
Thirtysomething
Northern Exposure
Seinfeld

DUE electronically: Assignment 3, Book Review


Read:
Paula Hyman, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History.

View:  (selections to be announced)
Mary Tyler Moore Show
Rhoda
Sex and the City

Class 10. November 19. Normalization of Jewish Characters on TV

Readings and Viewings to be announced
November 26 - Thanksgiving


Read:
Hollinger, *Post-Ethnic America*, selections
Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America*, selections

Viewing: to be determined. Possibilities include but are not limited to:
*Entourage, Rugrats, Glee, New Girl, Girls, Transparent, Black-ish, Off the Boat*

DUE (electronically): Rough draft of final paper, for any students who wish to receive feedback on it before submitting the final version

Class 12. December 10. Wind-up, Review, and Student Presentations

Reread: David Marc, “What Was Broadcasting?”

DUE (electronically): Tues., Dec. 15. Final Paper or Project.