

TV Sunday

THE SIMPLE INVENTION THAT...

CLICK

Created couch potatoes

CLICK

Gave advertisers the willies

CLICK

Made channel surfing a national sport

CLICK

Put men firmly in charge of what we watch on TV.

CLICKER



"Laverne and Shirley" pre-date the clicker — and lucky for them. They might not have survived a zap from the lap.



Fickle sitcom fans played clicker ping pong with "Spin City" (above) and "Ant & Dec" (below), bouncing between the rival 9 p.m. Tuesday night shows.

CULTURE

By MICHAEL GILTZ

FORGET the Internet. The most earth-shattering, life-changing innovation of the second half of the twentieth century is... the remote control. It's changed how we watch TV (and we watch a lot — about 25 hours a week, on average). It's also changed the shows we watch, the channels we watch and even the commercials we watch. And, of course, it's given men and women one more thing to fight over.

"It's probably had a larger effect on television programming than anything in TV history — even the VCR," says Tim Brooks, the co-author of *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows and the Senior Vice President for Research at USA Networks*.

David Marans, an ad agency heavyweight at J. Walter Thompson Agency. "The remote is holding both programs and commercials to a higher standard," says Marans, the senior media researcher there.

CLICK! It happens every Monday night. TNT and USA face off with competing wrestling shows. Young men sit in front of the TV. Remote in hand. And they ping pong back and forth

between the WCW and the WWF with a head-snapping speed that would make their grandmothers queasy.

"I've never seen anything like it," says Brooks. "We've done minute-by-minute rating tracks, and whenever one of them bumps up, the other bumps down. They must be sitting there with the remote glued to their hands."

CLICK! The remote has turned the primetime Nielsen battles from night by night campaigns into bitter house-by-house skirmishes. Every half hour is up for grabs now, and no one can take a time slot for granted.

A glance at the prime time winners for Tuesday or Wednesday — two of the most competitive nights of the week — shows a checkerboard of champions, with audiences jumping from ABC at 8 to CBS at 8:30 and NBC at 9.

But don't look for a pattern: the following week might find different winners in every time slot. "You wouldn't have seen that checkerboarding 10 or 15 years ago," says Brooks. "People are reaching too quickly for the remote."

History of the remote control

ZENITH says it gave birth to the remote control in 1950. It called the invention Lazy Bones (what kind of sloth wouldn't get up to change the channel?).

Like any newborn, the remote was attached to its mother — an umbilical cord stretched from Lazy Bones to the TV set.

Zenith offered a truly remote control in 1955 called the Flashmatic. But no one paid much attention.

In the mid-'70s, remotes were only available on 10 percent of sets.

By 1990, about 90 percent of all TVs came with remotes — the rest were probably small portables.

CLICK! Yes, men really do hold on to the remote more tenaciously than women. "The remote represents power and control," explains Dr. Jay Browne, whose syndicated talk show debuts this fall at the same time her new book *It's a Jungle Out There, Jane: Understanding the Male Animal* (Crown) hits the stores.

"Men have a shorter attention span and they've been hardwired to go looking for danger."

So what can women do? "Buy two remotes," she says.

CLICK! Networks — those sneaky devils — are hiding their commercials.

have is with movies," says USA's Brooks, "because we still have to run those interminable credits. You'll notice the credits are getting smaller and smaller. There's even been talk about some networks actually starting the next show on half the screen while the credits are still running for the first one."

CLICK! Back to Tuesday night for a second. "Spin City" and "Just Shoot Me" were in a particularly vicious struggle at 9 p.m. this season. (Come fall, Spin City moves to 8.) One show would dominate for three or four weeks, then the other one and then back again — it was a slower version of the ping-pong that those wrestling fans indulge in every Monday night.

Just when one sitcom thought it had the upper hand, the remote control showed them otherwise.

CLICK! Remote controls have even changed the way TV sets look. "The knob on the TV set used to be a huge prominent dial," says Brooks. "Now most of them are disappearing behind a panel somewhere because the remote is how you're supposed to operate it. I

have a 36-inch large-screen TV and I *guess* somewhere on the set you can manually change channels. But I haven't seen it."

CLICK! Hold on a second; that commercial is really good. "People are very interested in commercials," insists Marans. "There's a myth that they skip them. Young males are the biggest remote control users, but the world is not made up of young males."

OK, but people zap shows they don't like and they'll zap bad commercials, too. That's one reason commercials have become bolder and more entertaining.

CLICK! Laverne & Shirley is lucky it hit primetime before the remote control took hold. No one really liked the show, but it was unobjectionable and it was hampered between the smash hits "Happy Days" and "Three's Company." In today's remote-happy environment, too many viewers would have zapped it away.

CLICK! Here's the story of a lovely lady... "Classic theme songs like that one from 'The Brady Bunch' will stop any channel surfer — at least for a moment.

But, ironically, the remote has turned them into a relic.

The opening theme song is almost completely gone, says Ronald C. Simon, a curator at the Museum of Television & Radio.

They have to jump right into the show with an immediate hook.

If networks don't, they know impatient viewers will be tempted to check out the competition until the show really starts.

And sometimes they won't come back.

CLICK! In 1993, the Cable Regulation Act was a big victory for the broadcaster — and one of their key demands was the right for every station to demand a low channel number ahead of all those punky cable networks. That bumped popular channels like CNN and ESPN much higher on the dial.

Score one for the networks? Nope. People really like those channels, and with the remote they're only a click away. Even worse, when someone starts surfing at channel 37, it takes them a long while to get back to the major networks.

"The broadcasters have in effect created a broadcast



ghetto for themselves," says Brooks.

Big and large it's true that the lower you are on the dial, the higher your ratings.

However, that edge is shrinking in importance every year. "In the early

'80s it used to be a tremendous advantage to be positioned lower," says Brooks. "Within a few years it will probably disappear altogether. And that's because of the remote."

CLICK! POWER OFF!