and didactic goals. Then step back and evaluate your suggestions: Do you believe that soap operas can be deliberately made "healthy" without losing "their hold on viewers" (para. 27)?

5. Most of the soap operas that researchers believe can influence viewers' behavior are not American. Research the place that soaps have in foreign TV broadcasting, focusing on the nations Bennett mentions. Use your findings as evidence in which you assess the applicability of researchers' conclusions to American TV audiences. What differences or similarities are there?

NEAL GABLER

The Social Networks

Remember Friends, that sprightly comedy in which no one ever seemed to be alone? Or Sex and the City, wherein busy Manhattan professional women always seemed to have time to share a glass of water and some lettuce? Indeed, wherever you look on television today, Neal Gabler notes in this essay that originally appeared in the Los Angeles Times, you are certain to see "lots of folks spending the better part of their day surrounded by their friends and family in happy conviviality." Yet oddly enough, this sort of programming is appearing "at a time when it is increasingly difficult to find this kind of deep social interaction anywhere but on TV." Clearly, Gabler suggests, television is providing some sort of compensation for the social atomization that it itself has contributed to, and thus, all the simulated conviviality, while being a pleasant "dream," is "pure wish fulfillment," indeed, rather "phony," and, perhaps, sad. The author of An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood (1989), Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity (1994), Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality (1998), and Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination (2006), Gabler is a well-known analyst and historian of American cinema and popular culture.

With the new television season upon us, here are a few things you are virtually certain to see again and again and again: lots of folks spending the better part of their day surrounded by their friends and family in happy conviviality; folks wandering into the unlocked apartments and homes of friends, family, and neighbors at any time of the day or night as if this were the most natural thing in the world; friends and family sitting down and having lots of tearful
heart-to-hearts; Little League games, school assemblies and dance recitals, all attended by, you guessed it, scads of friends and family.

You’re going to be seeing these scenes repeatedly because the basic unit of television is not the lone individual or the partnership or even the nuclear family. The basic unit of television is the flock—be it the extended family of brothers and sisters, grandfathers and grandmothers, nieces, nephews, and cousins, or the extended circle of friends, and, rest assured, it is always a circle. On television friends never come in pairs; they invariably congregate in groups of three or more.

That television has become quite possibly the primary purveyor in American life of friendship and of the extended family is no recent blip. Over the last twenty years, beginning with Seinfeld and moving on through Friends, Sex and the City and more recently to Desperate Housewives, Glee, The Big Bang Theory, How I Met Your Mother, Cougar Town, and at least a half-dozen other shows, including this season’s newbies Raising Hope and Better with You, television has become a kind of friendship machine dispensing groups of people in constant and intimate contact with one another, sitting around in living rooms, restaurants, and coffee shops, sharing everything all the time. You might even say that friendship has become the basic theme of television, certainly of broadcast television, though cable has its own friendship orgies like Men of a Certain Age, My Boys, and It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia. Friendship is what television is about.

What makes this so remarkable is that it has been happening at a time when it is increasingly difficult to find this kind of deep social interaction anywhere but on TV. Nearly a decade ago, Harvard professor Robert Putnam observed in his classic Bowling Alone that Americans had become more and more disconnected from one another and from their society. As Putnam put it, “For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous current.” It was a current that pulled Americans apart.

Moreover, the current that Putnam observed has, according to more recent studies, only intensified in the last decade. One study found that Americans had one-third fewer nonfamily confidants than they had twenty years earlier, and 25 percent had no one in whom to confide whatsoever. Another study of 3,000 Americans found that on average they had only four close social contacts, but these included family members like one’s own spouse. This decline in real friendships may account in part for the dramatic rise of virtual friendships like those on social-networking sites where being “friended” is less a sign of personal engagement than a quantitative measure of how many people your life has brushed and how many names you can collect, but this is friendship lite. Facebook, in fact, only underscores how much traditional friendship—friendship in which you meet, talk, and share—has become an anachronism and how much being “friended” is an ironic term.
Among the reasons Putnam cited for the increasing atomization in American life were economic pressures and anxieties; women entering the workplace in full-time employment by necessity and thus disengaging from their friends and neighbors; metropolitan sprawl, which meant more time spent commuting, greater social segregation, and the disruption of community boundaries; and last but by no means least, the rise of television itself, especially its splintering influence on later generations who have grown up addicted to the tube. It is no secret that watching television is not exactly a communal activity. Rather, we often use it to fill a communal void. But instead of bringing comfort, it seems only to remind us of our alienation. In Putnam's view, based on several studies, "TV is apparently especially attractive for people who feel unhappy, particularly when there is nothing else to do."

It's not that we prefer television to human contact. The laugh track attests that most people don't really want to be alone in front of their TV sets. They want to be part of a larger community. Yet another study indicates that TV provides a sort of simulacrum of community because the relationship between the TV viewer and the people he or she watches on the screen competes with and even substitutes for physical encounters with real people. It is Facebook with hundreds of "friends" but without any actual contact with any of them, only the virtual contact of watching.

But what none of these theories of television has noticed is that TV has learned how to compensate for the increasing alienation it seems to induce. And it compensates not by letting us kill time with "friends" on-screen but by providing us with those nonstop fantasies of friendship, which clearly give us a vicarious pleasure. Watch Seinfeld or Friends or Sex and the City or Community or Men of a Certain Age—the list is endless—and you'll see people who not only are never ever alone but whose relationships are basically smooth, painless, uninhibited and deeply, deeply intimate—the kind of friendships we may have had in college but that most of us can only dream about now. How many adults do you know who manage to hang out with their friends every single day, for hour after hour?

Or watch the incomparable Modern Family or Brothers and Sisters or Parenthood and you'll see big, happy family gatherings with lots of bonhomie and jokes and an outpouring of love. On the last there seems to be a huge extended family dinner every other night where most families would be lucky to have one such get-together each year at Thanksgiving. And don't forget those school assemblies, already mentioned, which everyone in the family takes off work to attend en masse or the weekend birthday parties where attendance is also compulsory.

One feels a little churlish pointing out how phony most of this intimacy is. After all, these shows, even one as observant as Modern Family, aren't about realism. They aren't about the genuine emotional underpinnings of friendship or family, and they certainly aren't about the rough course that almost every relationship, be it with a friend or family member, takes—the
inevitable squabbles, the sometimes long and even permanent ruptures, the obtuseness, the selfishness, the reprioritization, the expectations of reciprocity, the drifting apart, the agonizing sense of loneliness even within the flock. These shows are pure wish fulfillment. They offer us friends and family at one’s beck and call but without any of the hassles. It is friendship as we want it to be.

For the fact is that we miss the friendships we no longer have, and we know that Facebook or e-mails cannot possibly compensate for the loss. So we sit in front of our television sets and enjoy the dream of friendship instead: a dream where we need never be alone, where there are a group of people who would do anything for us, and where everyone seems to understand us to our very core, just like Jerry and George, Chandler and Joey, Carrie and her girls, or the members of the McKinley High glee club. It is a powerful dream, and it is one that may now be the primary pleasure of television.

**Reading the Text**

1. Summarize in your own words what Gabler means by saying “The basic unit of television is the flock” (para. 2).
2. How does Robert Putnam’s research on friendship in America inform Gabler’s argument?
3. Why does Gabler say that “being ‘friended’ is an ironic term” (para. 5)?
4. How does Gabler use concession to strengthen his argument?
5. In your own words, explain what Gabler means by “simulacrum of community” (para. 7)?

**Reading the Signs**

1. Write an argumentative essay in which you assess the validity of Gabler's claim that “instead of bringing comfort, television seems only to remind us of our alienation” (para. 6). To support your argument, you might interview friends or acquaintances about their reasons for watching television.
2. In an essay, analyze an episode of one of the friend-heavy TV programs that Gabler mentions, such as Desperate Housewives, Glee, or Modern Family. To what extent does it confirm Gabler’s assertion that “These shows are pure wish fulfillment” (para. 10)?
3. **CONNECTING TEXTS** Write an essay in which you support, oppose, or complicate Gabler’s belief that Facebook offers “friendship lite” (para. 5). To develop your ideas, read or reread “Students Addicted to Social Media” (p. 483) and Ian Daly, “Virtual Popularity Isn’t Cool—It’s Pathetic” (p. 480).
4. **CONNECTING TEXTS** Read or reread Barbara Ehrenreich’s “Bright-Sided” (p. 532), and write an essay in which you explore whether Americans’ tendency toward sunny optimism contributes to television’s unrealistic portrayal of friendships. Be sure to base your argument on an analysis of specific TV programs.