

Television's Reality... and My Own, by William A. Henry III

CDC 00415

CHANNELS

O F C O M M U N I C A T I O N S

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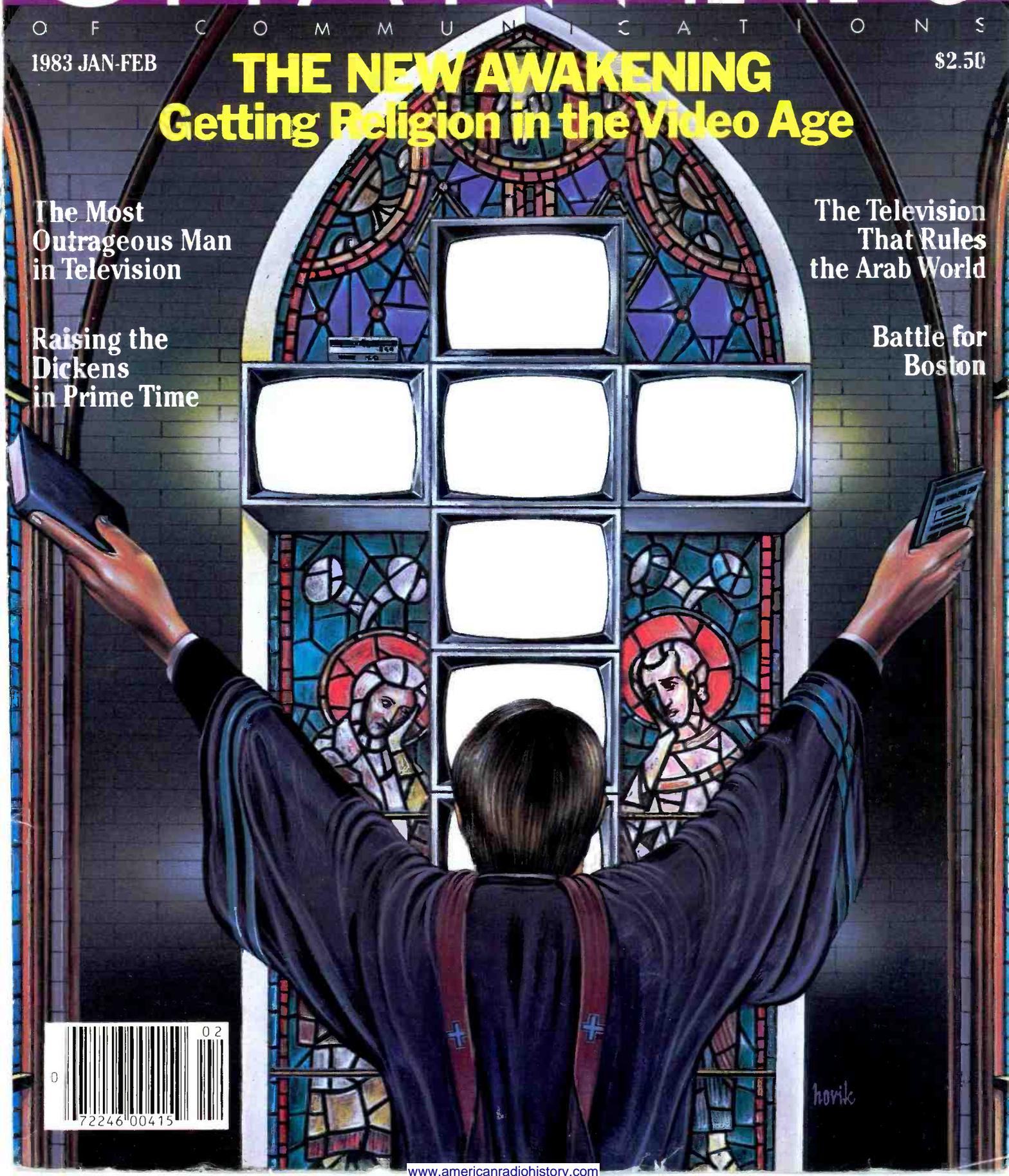
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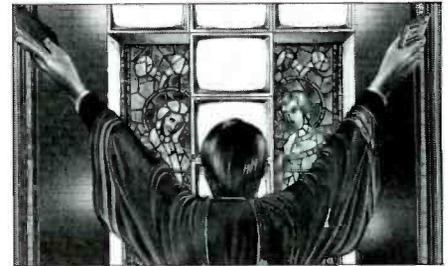
A SPECIAL REPORT ON EDUCATION AND
THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES
Will America Have to Re-Educate Its Teachers?

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY HOVIK DILAKIAN

The New Awakening

Challenged by the prime-time preachers, many mainline churches are looking to the new media for salvation.

BY MARGARET O'BRIEN
STEINFELS and
PETER STEINFELS



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The March of Klein

Paul Klein, who honed his outrageous theories about TV at NBC, is now putting them to work at the Playboy Channel.

BY JAMES TRAUB

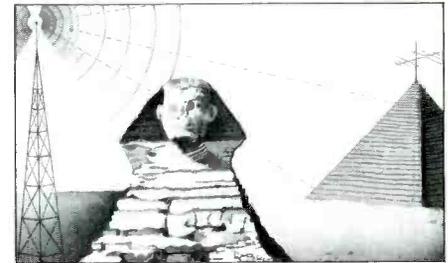


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Television That Rules the Arab World

Political disputes aside, the Arab nations buy their dreams from Cairo, the Hollywood of the Middle East.

BY MILTON VIORST



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Battle for Boston

Under the rules of the new television, the old-fashioned ratings war becomes a fight for survival.

BY GREG MITCHELL



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TV's Revolting Kids

In today's sitcoms, it's the children who know best —about sex, marriage, race, and politics.

BY SIMI HORWITZ

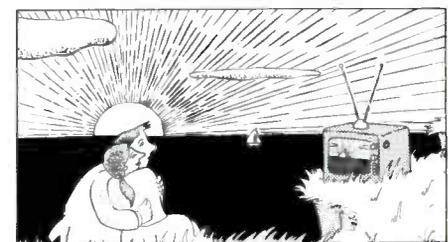


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Television's Reality . . . and My Own

With this essay, *Channels* introduces "Private Eye," a new column of television criticism.

BY WILLIAM A. HENRY III



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They're Singing Our Praises.

In awarding WCVB-TV, Boston the 1982 award for broadcast excellence, the judges of the Gabriel Awards used such words as "superior"... "wonderful"... "variety of creativity"... "community concern"... and "excellent."

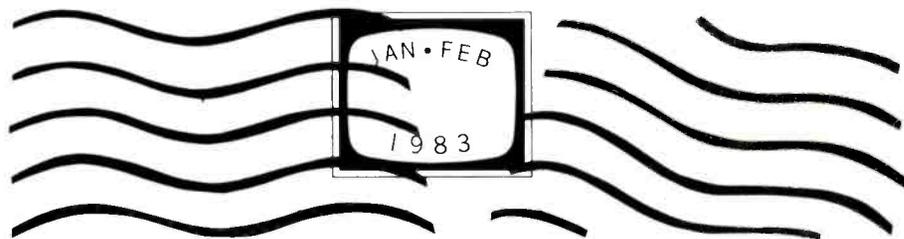
Channel 5 is honored to receive this prestigious award an unprecedented fourth time and is dedicated to maintaining its commitment to excellence in community programming.



CHANNEL 5

MVI

CHANNEL 5 WCVBTV BOSTON METROMEDIA, INC.



The Myth of Independence

Re "The Ouster in Gloucester" [Sept/Oct]: While you gave lip-service initially to Simon Geller's representing an endangered species, the one-man radio station, your inquiry somehow failed to uncover the fact that the kind of independence he represents has always been protected by the FCC—until now.

Recognizing the First Amendment need for diverse sources of information and entertainment spelled out by the Supreme Court, the FCC has always given points to the competing applicant who has proposed the most unusual programming, to the applicant who has the fewest other media ownerships (Geller has no other media ownerships; Grandbanke's principals have licenses for two other FM stations, one of which they are not even using), to the applicant whose owners will be most closely involved in running the station (Geller you know about; only one of Grandbanke's owners would work at its station), and to the applicant with more local residence and experience in broadcasting (Geller lives in his station in Gloucester and has been a broadcaster since 1942; only one of Grandbanke's owners would live in Gloucester—which would require that he relocate to Gloucester—and his experience with broadcasting is limited).

Yes, Grandbanke was entitled to points for offering more news and public affairs, but why were the FCC's programming-diversity and ownership-diversity points not given to Geller? (He was entitled to more than enough to win.) The FCC took the position that because Geller had broadcast a relatively small amount of news and public affairs, he was not contributing to First Amendment diversity, and was therefore not entitled to points for an independence he was not exercising. Of course, to reach this result required redefining First Amendment diversity to exclude cultural diversity, or else Geller's unique, "all-symphony" format would have qualified. (These days, the best way to be sure the FCC thinks you're a "diverse source" is to become a news/talk station like all the others.)

Specifically, the FCC denied Geller his points by referring to its recommended

levels of news and public-affairs time. This was surprising, as the FCC had previously repealed those recommended levels, and had repeatedly granted renewal applications from Geller in which he promised levels of news and public-affairs time that he had always met or exceeded.

This was no routine decision. It required a deliberate misinterpretation of the law to overturn the decision of the administrative law judge who had, at local hearings, heard at length from residents who wanted Geller to continue broadcasting.

When the Reagan FCC shuts down an independent local operator so that an out-of-town group operator can come in and take over the frequency, all this talk of "the free market" rings hollow indeed.

JACOB A. BERNSTEIN
Chairman, Committee for
Community Access
Boston, Massachusetts

Fowler: Praise and Blame

Re On Air, "Congress Shall Make No Law . . ." [Sept/Oct]: Thank goodness for Mark Fowler. What a breath of fresh air. Let the rest of our government follow Fowler. White House take note. Well, Fowler began it all right here in Broward County, at WMMB.

BILL MASCHMEIER
WKKO-AM
Cocoa, Florida

We are a group of concerned parents who have organized to improve the quality of broadcasting content in America. Because of our great desire to protect our children from obscene and indecent broadcasting, we were distressed to read Mark Fowler's article, in which he stated he "does not accept" the argument that broadcasting's "impact" on "shaping values within the home" means that broadcasting content should be regulated.

We strongly disagree. Congress has enacted a prohibition against the broadcasting of "obscene, indecent, or profane material." This law was tested in *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation* (1978), and the Supreme Court held that the FCC could, under the First Amendment, regulate obscene and indecent broadcast material:

"The ease with which children may obtain access to broadcast material amply justifies special treatment of indecent broadcasting."

What Fowler has stated in *Channels*, and thus to the networks, is that the "watchdog agency" empowered by Congress to protect our children from obscene and indecent broadcast material will not, in fact, do its job. He has given a clear signal to the networks that an "anything goes" philosophy will prevail in broadcasting in America.

If Mark Fowler is unable, or unwilling, to enforce the law as it is currently written and interpreted, we respectfully urge that he resign as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission and make way for the appointment of someone who will act to protect America's children.

JOHN R. PRICE
Chairman, Decency in
Broadcasting
Carmel, Indiana

Field Guidance

I congratulate you and your staff on a concise and well-written overview of the rapidly changing field of telecommunications.

I would like to use the Field Guide as an introduction to my mass communications class. Do you have plans to publish it independently of the magazine?

JONATHAN DAVID TANKEL
Assistant Professor
University of Maine
Orono, Maine

(Yes, the *Channels* 1983 Field Guide has been printed separately and can be ordered individually or in bulk by writing to: Field Guide, *Channels* magazine, 1515 Broadway, New York, NY 10036. —Ed.)

Errata

Through a typographical error, credit for the photograph on page 16 of last issue's Field Guide was omitted. The photographer is David Wagner.

Also, an error crept into the Glossary of Initials. There is no affiliation between the American Satellite Company (ASC) and Comsat.

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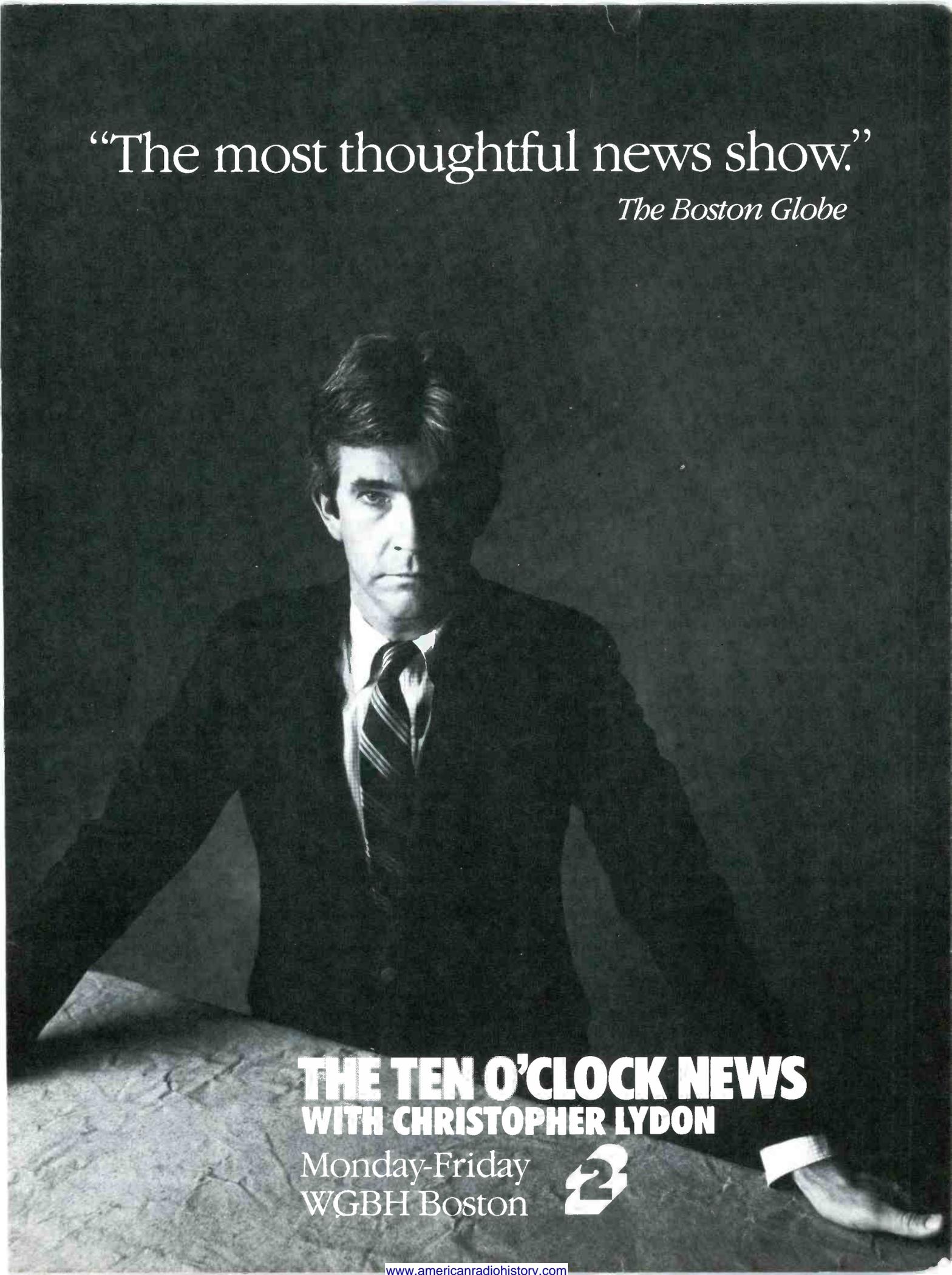
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CROSS CURRENTS

Taste Test at the FCC

THE PEOPLE who operate WTCO, an FM station in Arlington, Illinois, evidently took Mark Fowler at his word. The chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, determined to "unregulate" broadcasting, has said repeatedly that the government has no right to question the business judgments of broadcasters.

So the owners applied to the FCC for a change in call letters—and in light of Fowler's rhetoric, they've been understandably disappointed at the commission's reaction. The station wanted a glitzier designation than WTCO: it sought to change its name to WSEX. Request denied. The FCC cited a section in its rules that requires call letters to be in good taste.

WTCO fired off a petition for reconsideration, in which it held that this decision was "totally at odds" with current commission policy. And in words that would seem perfectly at home in Mark Fowler's mouth, WTCO argued that "a statute which allows action to be withheld upon a regulatory agency's determination of what is or is not 'in good taste' is unconstitutionally vague." M.P.

Slipping from the Nets

NO ONE HAS to conduct a special survey to confirm the obvious—that people who pay a monthly fee for a channel are going to watch it some of the time. The surveys are done to determine how much time people really spend with these new channels and whether that affects the complexion of commercial television.

On the basis of such a survey, conducted in a single metropolitan area—Tulsa, Oklahoma—the Ogilvy & Mather advertising agency is prepared to declare pay cable the equivalent of the fourth network. That means, in effect, that the pay channels claim about as much audience in homes with cable during the prime evening hours as a conventional broadcast network does.

In Tulsa, where United Cable operates a thirty-six-channel system, the pay channels (Home Box Office, Cinemax, and Playboy) garnered 20 percent of the audience in prime time, while ABC, CBS, and NBC had only 56 percent to divide among them. The dimensions of the audience erosion become clear in a comparison with Tulsa's non-cable

homes; there, the broadcast networks command 90 percent of the viewing in prime time.

In the neighboring communities served by twelve-channel cable systems, the pay channel gets 7 percent of the audience in the prime 6:30-to-10 P.M. period, compared with 74 percent for the three networks. Not as impressive for pay cable, but as the ad agency points out, the thirty-six-channel Tulsa system represents "the kind of viewing alternatives that will be in over 50 percent of U.S. homes in 1990."

The Tulsa findings are generally supported in a study commissioned by the National Association of Broadcasters, in the Nielsen Pay Cable Report published last fall, and in the Qube data from Columbus, Ohio. The Nielsen survey shows that during the May sweeps, HBO came close to achieving parity in prime time with the three major networks. The broadcast industry study, based on Arbitron sweep ratings, found that the network affiliates' shares of audience have dropped an average of 29 percent in pay-cable homes. In the Columbus homes subscribing to Qube, the networks' share dropped to a low of 49 percent during June.

If pay cable, with its limited penetration in the country, is already making such sharp inroads on network audiences, it does not tax the imagination to consider what happens when pay television—whether by cable, subscription television, multipoint distribution service, or direct-broadcast satellites—becomes available to 100 percent of American households.

Ogilvy & Mather researcher John Hunt flatly predicts that because of pay television and the proliferation of ad hoc commercial networks by satellite, "network television will no longer be the exclusive domain of ABC, CBS, and NBC." His prediction does not reach ahead to 1990. It's for the year 1985. L.B.

A Little Simulation

AN EIGHTIES INCARNATION of the old driver's ed simulator has arrived—but it's a little too fancy for use in a high school. Neiman Marcus, true to form, has unveiled a \$20,000 laser optical video-disc exercycle with a forty-five-inch screen that simulates, as you pedal, a bike ride down a shady country lane—or through the Southern California canyons—or past Beverly Hills mansions—or up and down dunes on West Coast beach bikeways. Pedal faster, and the scene speeds by; slow down and you can take in

the sights. Pedaling becomes more difficult as you go uphill (though happily, the apparatus does not jerk when you hit potholes), and the digital calorie-counter/speed-timer console attached to the handlebar of your "bike" keeps you constantly informed of how hard your body's working. Of course, if you get tired of all that tough pedaling, you can turn off onto level ground—to the left or to the right—as soon as you come to a fork in the road, merely by pushing a button on the digital console. And if you get tired of the exercise-tour altogether, hop off the bike and use the disc player to watch a movie on



the same large screen.

What links the fancy footwork to the movement on the screen is a computer that responds to the cyclist's stimulus by directing a laser beam to "read" the appropriate frames of information etched on the disc's surface.

The exercycle—and each of its components—may have amazing abilities, but its price puts it well out of reach of ordinary mortals. Still, it represents one of the first attempts to market such a sophisticated device. According to its manufacturer, Perceptronics of Woodland Hills, California, the exclusiveness will not last long. "People say that the start is slow for home use of laser video discs," says Gershon Weltman, president of Perceptronics, "but it's actually a whole lot faster a start than the personal computer had. People [before long] will have a laser-disc player the way they now have a turntable. After all, nobody knew what you'd want a home computer for at first."

At the moment, not many Americans know what they'd want the laser disc for, either. But Neiman Marcus has obviously had a rather imaginative idea, and so, by the way, has the United States Government.

The Defense Department commissioned Perceptronics in 1980 to develop a simulator

Admit it. Whether you're spending your company's ad money or just spending your own precious time, you probably feel a little guilty now and then about some of the television you're involved with.

Your commercial in THE DUKES OF HAZZARD may have been seen by a lot of people, but in what kind of environment? And your stolen moments with THREE'S COMPANY didn't do you any lasting harm. But you probably won't discuss the plot at your next cocktail party.

There is an alternative—a television

network you can spend money on, or time with, and feel good about. Cable News Network. High quality broadcast journalism. Reporting that's as exciting as the world it covers. Television that informs. That contributes. The kind of advertising environment you can be proud to be a part of.

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TELEVISION WITHOUT GUILT.



A Service of Turner Broadcasting System, Inc.

for military personnel learning how to wage war from inside a tank. The simulator uses scenes filmed during actual tank maneuvers: Enemy tanks move evasively, dust clouds billow forth, and the noise of surrounding crew members distracts. According to Weltman, this training becomes invaluable in the battlefield. "Overtraining is extremely important in stressful situations. If you've never done it before, you're not going to do it under stress."

Perceptronics is working at linking up a group of simulators to create "command networks" for trainee tank gunners, with a view to enhancing the immediacy and realism of their "battles." The technique will also be incorporated in a video-arcade game called Simutron, which Weltman and his associates are developing for a company of that name. He calls it "a next-generation game that involves eight to sixteen people all hooked together in a specialized environment."

Arcade denizens, would-be tank gunners, and wealthy exercise freaks do not exactly represent the mass of American consumers. But given the laser disc's extraordinary potential to teach and entertain, the rest of us are going to make a fairly easy target for an entrepreneur worth his salt.

S.W.W.

Arcadia

IF YOU HAVEN'T been there in the last few years, you're in for a surprise. The old penny arcade has been through a sea change. Gone are the colorful rows of Bally and Gottlieb pinball machines with their flashing lights and spinners, and their mechanical quirks that took a handful of money to figure out. Gone too are those old novelty coin-eaters: the Madame Zerbo fortune-telling machine, the miniature crane digging for prizes beneath a pile of jellybeans, the foot massager, the grip-testing device with its list of put-downs. They've all been swept away in a tide of microprocessors and silicon chips.

The penny arcade deals in quarters now. It has moved up from that seedy hall next to the bowling alley into relatively plush digs at the shopping center. It is a place crowded with kids working out on computers.

On a rainy Saturday night, the Funway Freeway, an arcade in South Jersey, is overflowing. The decor is cool and dark, the floors carpeted. A life-size poster of Darth Vader glares from a wall, and rock music throbs over hidden speakers. No one stands around making small talk. Serious business is transacted here. A machine, not a man, makes change, inhaling dollars and shooting back four of the plastic tokens that operate the games.

The games are played on video screens, and they have come a long way in a short time—which is to say they did not dwell long in their age of innocence. Many have a nightmarish quality. *Tempest*, for instance, requires that the player revolve around a three-dimensional grid and fire at a host of deadly objects emerging from its center. The game demands that you kill or be killed, and it goes at a furious pace. *Battlezone*, in 3-D, simulates tank warfare with startling realism.

Some of the computers talk. A game called *Thief* keeps up a running dialogue with the contestant: "Congratulations," it remarks sarcastically to a dejected-looking kid who's used up his tokens very quickly, "that was one of the worst games ever played by anyone." Another machine declares, "Our sensors detect another quarter in your pocket."

The newest type of video game requires the player to climb inside—where he will find hand and foot controls, an enlarged screen, and no distractions. The arcade manager says the higher cost of this game has so far been justified; the game is very popular.

To move through the arcade is to feel the intensity of the players. If anyone speaks, it's either to himself or to the machine. One hears the percolating noises of the games and the thumping of the canned music, but

no social conversation and no human laughter.

B.J.

Between Rock and a Hard Place

AMONG TEENAGERS, the audio technologies of choice are the portable stereo box and the Walkman, both of which play cassette tapes and can be carried around from room to room and out into the street. Tapes are made quite easily and inexpensively by recording off the radio or a friend's album. Slightly younger kids who aren't yet interested in music spend their time feeding their weekly allowances to the video games in electronic arcades. The upshot of both these lifestyle trends is that the record business is in deep trouble.

Popular music is probably the first cultural field to feel the brunt of the technology explosion. The structure that financed it so effectively for more than thirty years has been blown apart. The pop industry depended on radio stations promoting its new releases and thirteen-year-old kids rushing out to buy the singles. Hits were made on the money being inhaled these days by video games. As for the stations that were so tightly linked to the charts, most were on the AM band, which has lost out in popularity to the stereophonic FM band. For survival, many that used to be big pushers of new pop releases—including the biggest of them, WABC in New York—have gotten out of the Top Forty game and into talk formats.

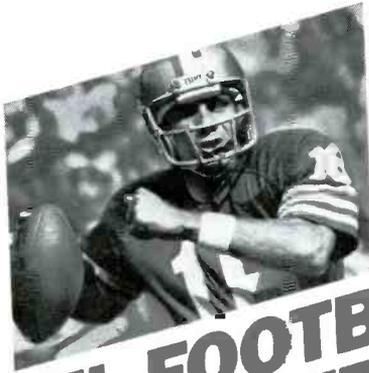
FM's rock-music stations, for the most part, show little interest in hustling the new hits, and are content to play last year's classics. Thus there is a crisis in the propagation of new songs that has prompted the record divisions of such companies as CBS and Warner Communications to lay off scores of employees.

But there will always be a pop-music industry, and in time it is bound to find a new structure. One suspects the pieces are already in place; like Warner's Music Television (MTV), cable networks will promote rock-cum-video creations, and video discs will catch the sales. Neither has great penetration in households yet, but that should change when the pop industry discovers it cannot live anymore by sound alone. Eventually, it will get the picture.

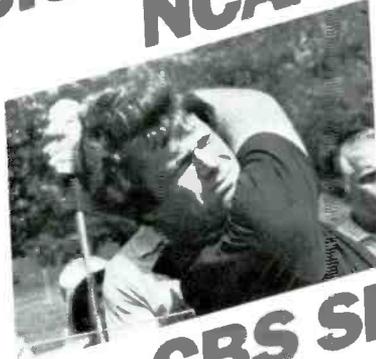
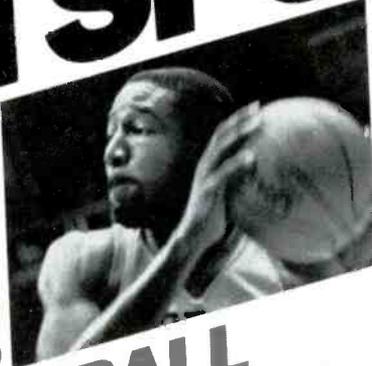
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Designer Dishes

LIKE SOME MUTANT variety of mushroom growing out of control, satellite earth stations are sprouting up around the country, blighting backyards, motel parking lots, and industrial parks. Already some 50,000 homeowners have installed the big white dishes in their yards in order to receive the dozens of television signals raining down from orbiting satellites. These alone aren't numerous enough to disfigure the countryside in any serious way. But a year or two from now, with the advent of direct-broadcast satellites, hundreds of thousands of dishes, each the size of a large pizza, will spread across the landscape. It will be enough to make us nostalgic for those old fishbone antennas on rooftops that cable is rendering obsolete.

Concerned about dish blight, some communities are already banning earth stations that are visible from the street. One fellow in suburban Cincinnati was forced to move his dish to his backyard and pay a \$25 fine. It's unlikely, however, that such draconian measures will stand up in court; the dishes are probably here to stay, the latest incursion of the electronic environment into the natural one.

Does this mean we'll simply have to get used to the sight of white whales beached permanently on everyone's lawns?

Not necessarily.

Certainly the ugliest, most conspicuous thing about these dishes is their *whiteness*, which blends in with nothing save blizzards. But according to electrical engineers, there is no technical reason why the dishes have to be white. In fact, they can be painted in any but the darkest colors (which tend to heat the dishes in sunlight, thus hampering reception). This information could inspire a whole new field of exterior decorating.

Discreet dish-owners might decide to

paint their dishes pale green, to blend in with the lawn, or perhaps cerulean blue, to lose them against the sky. Or, like a tank, a dish could be camouflaged in a random pattern of greens and browns and ochres. Eventually, there are bound to be *trompe l'oeil* dishes, intricately painted to simulate shrubbery, say, or a reflecting pool complete with goldfish and lily pads. Rooftop dishes might effectively be disguised as shingles or, painted in brick patterns, as chimneys.

The neighbor you don't want to get stuck with is the one who views the satellite dish as a status symbol. A few years ago, Detroit enlisted a few leading couturiers to do a line of designer cars. Once America's status-hungry latch onto dishes, it won't be long before we see dish designs by Gucci (green-and-red stripes, or gold initials), Oscar de la Renta (bright and billowy, just perfect for lawn parties), and Ralph Lauren (sturdy, classic dishes in earth tones, made of only the best materials).

M.P.

Signing On

"AND NOW THE NEWS for the hearing-impaired." So Garrett Morris of *Saturday Night Live* solemnly intoned—before screaming into the microphone. The audience loved it. But then, they could hear.

Television for the deaf or hard-of-hearing is no laughing matter. Twenty-two million Americans are deprived of television—except for some forty hours a week of programming accessible only through closed captioning, the electronic system that puts subtitles on the screens of those who've paid around \$300 for a special decoder.

Something new is on the horizon for the hearing-impaired, however: the Silent Network. The brainchild of Sheldon Altfeld, a television producer once rendered deaf for eighteen months in an army accident, the new cable service will employ sign language on all its programs. While Altfeld was deaf, he learned first-hand "what it is like not to be able to communicate."

He conceived the idea of television for the deaf after seeing a theatrical production of *Equus* performed in sign language. He began making television specials using hand language and expanded the idea, creating a network that the hearing-impaired can call their own. Scheduled to begin in March, the Silent Network will debut on cable systems in Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and a handful of other cities. Having failed in his attempts to gain advance commitments

from the large national cable companies, Altfeld intends to build the network "piece by piece." He says that forty systems "have written us into their franchise proposals" and that there has been an encouraging response from several advertisers.

Altfeld says that more than a hundred hours of original programming in sign language, using actors and producers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, have been aired on commercial and public television to date. And he says numerous other productions for broadcast and cable television are in the works: game shows, talk shows, comedies, and soap operas, the kinds of shows people with normal hearing can always watch.

The important thing, says Altfeld, is that television will speak to these people for the first time. "The language of the hearing-impaired," he points out, "is not closed captioning. Their language is signing."

E.S.

Cable's Marauders

THE A.C. NIELSEN COMPANY estimates cable penetration in the United States at around 35 percent, but the figure is actually higher than that, although no one can say for sure by what amount. Some believe that more than 40 percent of the country's households now have cable service.

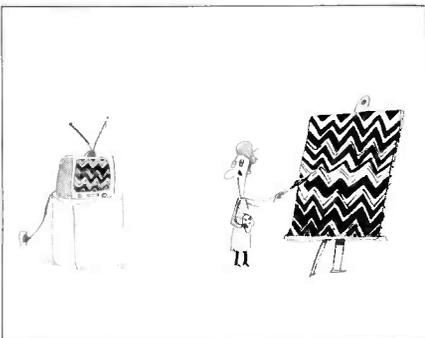
Nielsen's census falls short because it represents the number of paying subscribers; the unknown increment is among the households that don't pay, that tap into the cable lines illegally. Cable thievery is rampant, especially in urban and suburban areas, and this has become a matter of serious concern to cable entrepreneurs.

Citing a survey conducted by his company, Showtime senior vice president John Sie suggests that cable operators may be losing \$290 million a year through theft of service. If that figure is on the money, it means that as many as five million homes are snitching a free ride on the cable. Beyond that, says Sie, the cable networks that charge for their programming are losing around \$79 million a year to the electronic rip-off artists.

Much of the pilfering is due to the negligence—even to the clandestine cooperation—of cable employees, so to a certain extent thievery can be contained by tighter management controls. But cable operators are calling for local laws carrying stiff penalties to deter cable thieves, until technology comes up with a better solution. Meanwhile, the bright side is that cable advertisers get a phantom bonus from the uncounted audience.

L.B.

Patrick McDonnell





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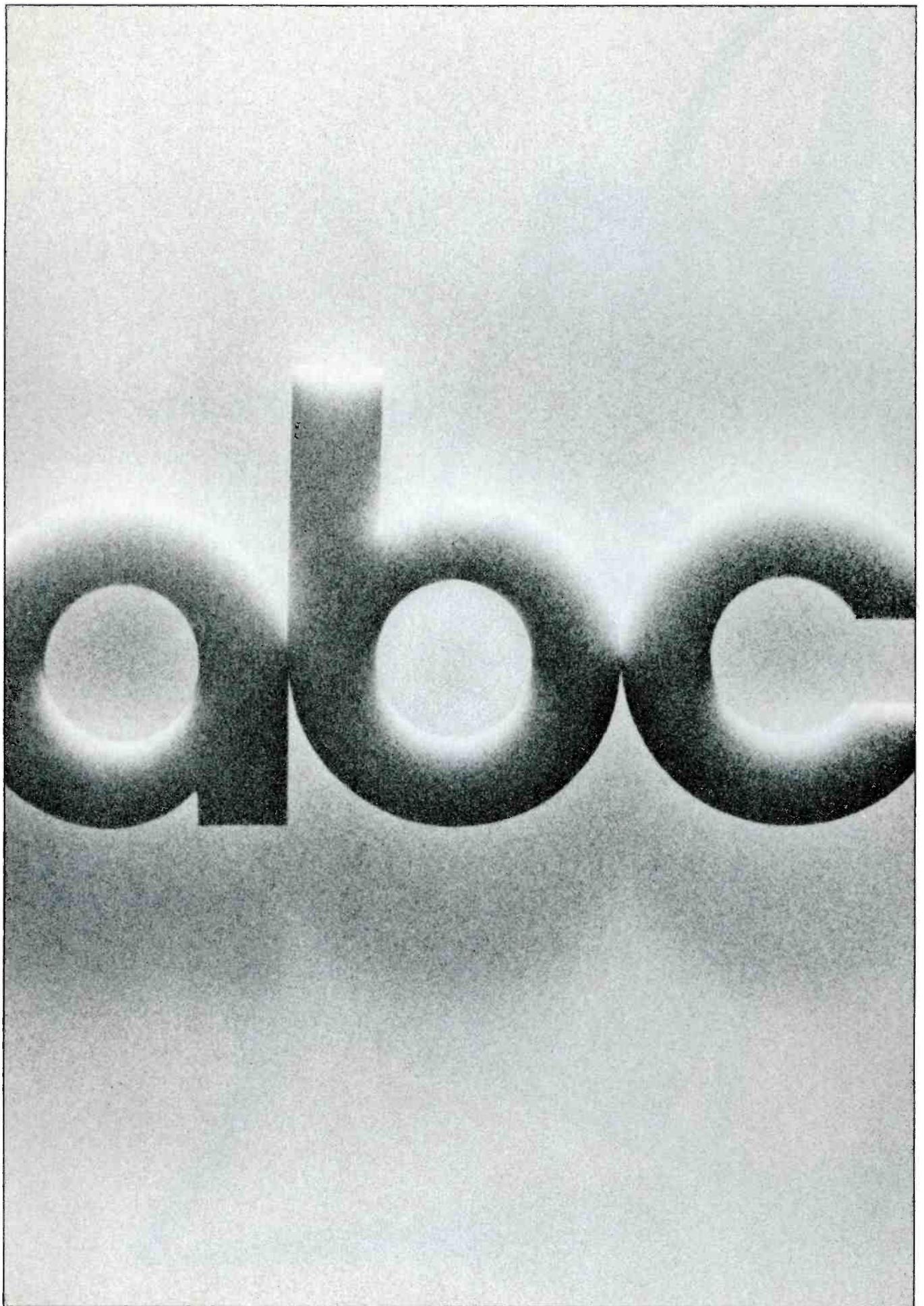
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The Last Stand of the Welsh

by Doug Hill

IT WAS TO BE Gwynfor Evans's last great battle for Wales. Nearing seventy, he had put in long years of service in Parliament, but the struggle to save the ancient culture and language of his beloved homeland had to be to the death. His final and most implacable enemy: television.

For thirty-five years, Gwynfor Evans has led the 30,000 members of the Plaid Cymru, a passionate group of Welsh nationalists dedicated to preserving their Celtic heritage against the absorbing onslaught of the Tories from the north. They are losing ground fast. At most, only one in five people in Wales today still speaks Welsh, half the number that spoke it just two decades ago.

Evans and his supporters are certain that English-language television broadcasts from Britain are chiefly responsible for that decline. To the Plaid Cymru, television is an "Anglo-American culture machine" more insidious in its effects than the dreaded Welsh *not*, a wooden board tied to children caught speaking Welsh by modern-minded teachers of the nineteenth century. By mandate, the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Independent Television Network have for years sprinkled a few Welsh programs into their schedules each week, but for most of that time the Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Language Society have agitated for a channel that would belong to Wales alone.

Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party, in its election campaign manifesto, promised, at last, to give them one. After the election, however, the government changed its mind. Betrayed, the Plaid Cymru swung into action, launching a campaign of civil disobedience for the first time in its history. A London columnist called it "the Druid protest." Hundreds of viewers refused to pay their television license fees, and fourteen people occupied the offices of the Independent Broadcasting Authority in Cardiff. The office of the home secretary in Carlisle was ransacked and his family threatened; three professors from the University of Wales broke into a TV transmitter station one night and sabotaged it. "It is a time of crisis for the Welsh heritage," said one of the academic commandos. "If I were a

military man, I would consider it a state of war."

The turning point came when Gwynfor Evans himself threatened to settle into the library of his home on the edge of the Black Mountains and to subsist only on a mixture of glucose and water, either until he starved or the government backed down. "Anyone who knows Gwynfor Evans," wrote one journalist, "knows he is quite capable of killing himself."

The government backed down, in what was reportedly its "first demonstrable U-turn on any issue." Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C for short) went on the air in November, preempting ITN's new Channel 4 for twenty-two hours each week, mostly in prime time, to offer programming in Welsh. Among the Welsh offerings: the animated adventures of *Wil Cwac Cwac*, a mischievous farmyard duck; *Ar Log Ar Log*, which follows the fortunes of a Welsh folk group touring America ("packed with live action," says S4C's program guide), and the detective series, *O Efrog Newydd i Landdona* (*Guilty Party*).

The crucial question now is whether Sianel Pedwar Cymru will end up hurting the Welsh cause more than helping it. For a start, there are doubts that S4C can ever come close to earning back the 30 million or more pounds it will cost taxpayers, Welsh and English, each year. Advertisers have been understandably reluctant to produce commercials in Welsh for programs that may be watched and understood by an average of only 70,000 people at a time. Furthermore, many observers believe the channel will actually isolate the language more than it was before. Indeed, though many of Wales's English-speaking viewers—the majority of the population—are angry that the programs of the new Channel 4 can't be seen in prime time, they are nonetheless delighted that they no longer have to put up with Welsh shows on the BBC and ITN schedules.

For those who feel, as one Cardiff teenager does, that Welsh speakers "talk as if they've a sock in their mouths," S4C will make the language of the Celts that much easier to ignore.

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- Arts for Young Audiences: An ACT Handbook, Recommendations for stimulating more arts productions for children's TV – \$2.50

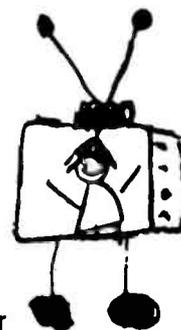
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The Gospel According to Cable's Tooth Fairy

by Les Brown



THERE IS A GROWING SENSE in the Western world that a country without cable television risks becoming a Third World nation in the information age. It is like not having highways in the age of the automobile. And now that the other industrialized countries are preparing to take the plunge into cable, a keen interest has blossomed abroad in what is widely referred to as the American Experience.

As the first nation to become fully immersed in the new video technology, the United States for the last few years has been the world's laboratory. Cable was invented here and grew to become something more than a retransmission service for television signals. Two-way interactive cable also was born here. The United States was first to create new networks by hitching cable to the satellites, and first to unleash all the varied forms of pay television. But most significant to foreign countries, we were first to consider the daring move of setting the electronic media free.

For the past fifty years the scarcity of broadcast frequencies argued for government regulation. Today, however, some key government officials consider that problem obviated by cable, the medium of plenty, with its dozens of channels and scores more to come. Where there is no scarcity, the reasoning goes, there must surely be diversity and a robust marketplace of ideas—both of which go straight to the American ideal. Such thinking has brought us to the point of abandoning all cable and broadcasting regulation in favor of a policy that would trust to wide-open competition and the beneficence of market forces.

This idea is intriguing to a number of nations, including some that used to deride American television for yielding constantly to commercial imperatives. A country anxious to get its cable systems built quickly, with private capital, knows that the entrepreneurs need incentives—and a powerful one is the assurance of minimal government oversight.

The present governments of England and Australia, having a certain ideological kinship with the Reagan Administration, seem eager to follow the American free-market example. But they are being challenged at home to prove that our model is all it professes to be and that it serves the society's best interests.

Well, how indeed is our system faring? What is the American Experience really?

Foreign journalists, broadcasters, bureaucrats, and members of royal commissions have been coming here in droves to find

out. They do their field work by interviewing industry leaders, government officials, and other experts. I wonder what they make of all the confusion, since, from what I've observed in this country, everyone's lens is colored with an interest. Facts become entangled with old myths, business hype, and political wishful thinking.

Executives of the cable industry, for example, like to boast to foreigners that their medium has already fulfilled its promise of diversity. The proof, they point out, is that the satellites are bulging with cable program services providing for virtually every need and taste: three networks carrying news around the clock, two devoted to cultural fare, and others committed to health information, weather reports, public affairs, education—some fifty services in all.

The abundance of programming on the satellites bears little relation to what enters the home

The fact that these services exist is indisputable; the myth is that cable is therefore bountiful. The suggestion that all these worthy services are available on all modern cable systems, to every subscriber, is grossly misleading. In reality, the new networks must contend at every receiving point with gatekeepers—the local cable operators who decide, with profits in mind, which of these services they will offer. Usually they offer only a few. The abundance on the satellites bears little relation to what enters the home.

Where I live, nearly half the slots on our local thirty-five-channel cable system are given over to standard broadcast stations—the local ones as well as independents imported from other cities. Only seven of those vaunted cable-satellite networks are available to us, and two are pay services specializing in movies. Ours is a fairly modern cable installation, barely a year old, and typical, I think, for a system its size. To the people in my community, such services as the Satellite News Channel, the Cable Health Network, The Entertainment Channel, MTV, Nickelodeon, Bravo, ARTS, Showtime, and The Learning Channel don't exist. Short of installing a huge, unsightly satellite receiving dish in our backyard to pirate the signals, there is

Keith Bendis

simply no way to tune them in.

On a scale of thirty-five, then, I must rate cable a scant seven for diversity.

Most of the cable program providers striving to make a go of it will never have a proper test before the public because cable operators are denying them exposure. Without a reasonable penetration of households, these services cannot hope to be supported by advertising. It sounds right to say that CBS Cable died because people weren't watching the channel, but the larger problem was that the gatekeepers shut it out.

One may argue, as the cable lobbyists do, that all magazine editors have the right to pick and choose what they will publish. But magazines are not monopolies as cable systems are. An author rejected by one publication may find another to publish his work, but a cable-satellite network has nowhere else to go. Besides, the magazine metaphor is the wrong one for cable. It is more like a magazine rack. There is neither authorship nor editorship by a cable system; there is only display. The local gatekeeper exercises no judgment over the movies carried on Showtime or The Movie Channel, and he assumes no liability for them. He simply provides shelf space for them, as a magazine vendor provides shelf space for *Newsweek*, *House Beautiful*, and *Channels*.

While it is a fact that fifty program services are on the satellite, the uncomfortable truth about the American Experience is that only three services—HBO, Showtime, and superstation WTBS—are making a profit. The others are not likely to survive if they are denied access to the large-capacity cable systems or are relegated to the fourth tier of service on an eighty-channel system, where they may be received only in the few households buying the whole package for \$50 a month.

The dirty secret about the American Experience is that the free-market system isn't working. There may be wide-open competition among the delivery systems, but that does not apply to the programmers. By their actions, the gatekeepers have already made it clear that this marketplace will have to be structured, by the government, if it is to serve the cause of diversity.

I suggest the structure proposed during the Nixon Administration by Clay T. Whitehead's White House task force. It was, I believe, the most enlightened practical policy yet advanced for cable: It would allow the cable operator to control many of the channels but not all of them: some would have to be set aside for leasing. Thus, a cable network might circumvent the gatekeeper by buying its way onto the system. The cable operator loses no money because he collects the rent for the channel; all he loses is the extraordinary power to control every channel of information, which he shouldn't have in the first place.

There is no government interference here, no one dictating what should be carried, but merely a limitation on the gatekeeper's power and a provision for access. Leased access has the additional virtue of letting any citizen buy a time period on a cable channel and become a programmer himself. Such a struc-

ture has ample precedent in America; it is known as common-carrier status, and it is how this country has traditionally handled monopolies mandated by technology.

I hope some of the visitors from abroad were able to differentiate between the professional rhetoric on the American Experience and the actual experience itself. Britain's Hunt Commission seems to have missed it; the commissioners went back gung-ho with recommendations for a loosely structured cable setup modeled somewhat on our gatekeeper design.

One could wish, even more, that our own government officials could sort out the difference. But Senators Bob Packwood and Barry Goldwater are still pushing bills that would only increase the cable operator's power, to the detriment of the citizen, while the Federal Communications Commission is so ab-

The structure proposed during the Nixon Administration may be the most enlightened policy yet advanced for cable

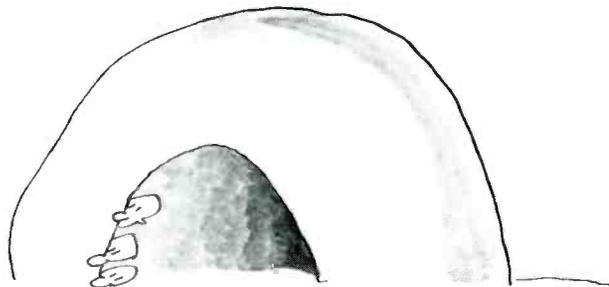
sorbed in its lunatic fantasy of having created a better world that it appears totally to have lost touch with reality.

A few months ago, Commissioner James Quello, invited to speak in Venice to a group of European broadcasters hoping to learn from the American Experience, gave one of those blue-sky talks about cable that seemed to have been pulled from the files of the early seventies. He portrayed American cable as an industry so eager to provide for every narrow interest that bridge players, stamp and coin collectors, antiques enthusiasts, and artists would each have a channel. Anyone in touch with the American Experience would know that's not how it is, or how it can ever be. Television programming is far too expensive to produce for minuscule audiences, and it is preposterously naive to assume that a bridge buff would give up all other options on the tube to stay with a channel expressly attuned to his vice. But more to the point, cable systems in the real world are not disposed to accommodate such limited interests.

In one sense I hope Quello really believed what he said, because I would hate to think an American bureaucrat went all the way to Venice for the purpose of deceiving people. On the other hand, I shudder to think he believed it, because we in America can't afford such ignorance at the policy-making level in such a critical time. Quello is in his second term at the FCC, which makes the rest of us two-time losers.

Anyone who lives with cable in America, who has really experienced the American Experience, can see quite clearly that the byword in the industry, no matter how many channels there may be, is mass appeal. What worries me is not that Quello still believes in cable's tooth fairy, but that his view of reality may be shared by his fellow commissioners.

Patrick McDonnell



◦ "BEFORE TELEVISION" ◦

THE NEW AWAKENING: Getting Religion in the Video Age

by
Margaret O'Brien Steinfels
and Peter Steinfels

FOR MILLIONS OF AMERICANS, JERRY FALWELL IS NOT A REAL PERSON.

He is the symbol of an explosive mixture of fundamentalist faith, right-wing politics, and modern technology. People who wouldn't know the difference between Rex Humbard and Mother Hubbard, people who might well assume that Oral Roberts was a toothbrush manufacturer, are nonetheless worried about the power of the "prime-time preachers." Not even when Bishop Fulton J. Sheen scored a hit with his prime-time series in 1952 was there such a furor over religion and television.

The resources—and resourcefulness—of the so-called electronic church are indeed impressive. Not only have the fundamentalist evangelists on television created a single but effective TV message, they have mastered the means of delivering it. They produce their own shows in their own studios with their own production facilities. They own TV cameras and transmitting equipment, and have begun to acquire transponder time for satellite transmission, enabling their programs to run on a growing number of cable systems across the country. They pay for their own broadcast time, and they've developed extensive support organizations to build their "congregations" and raise funds.

Religious networks are springing up. Pat Robertson, one of the most successful of the TV preachers, has organized the Christian Broadcast Network (CBN), headquartered in Virginia Beach, Virginia, which uses a twenty-four-hour-a-day transponder on Satcom IIIIR and computerized production and transmitting facilities. CBN owns four UHF

Peter Steinfels, executive editor of Commonweal magazine, is the author of The Neoconservatives (Simon & Schuster). Margaret O'Brien Steinfels is an editor and writer, and is business manager of Christianity and Crisis magazine.

television stations and five FM radio stations, and keeps a staff of more than seven hundred busy. It operates seventy-one regional call-in centers, staffed mainly with volunteers who follow up on financial pledges and provide prayerful counseling. CBN University offers graduate training in communications and theology. Recently Robertson has spun off a secular counterpart, the Continental Broadcasting Network, which will transmit general programming suitable for family viewing.

It is the political potential of establishments like Robertson's that has stirred so much controversy—at least since 1979, when Jerry Falwell used his *Old-Time Gospel Hour* television program as a base for organizing the Moral Majority, and even more so since 1980, when the Religious New Right not only contributed to Ronald Reagan's victory but was widely regarded as a decisive factor in the defeat of several leading liberal Senators. At the same time, the media success of the fundamentalists has posed a direct challenge to the other churches, giving a new urgency to longstanding questions about organized religion's approach to television.

Not that the churches have ever lacked individuals aware of television's power—critics who worry about the medium's destructive or trivializing impact on personal values, enthusiasts who hope to exploit its hold on mass audiences for explicitly religious purposes. But the success of the prime-time preachers, linked as it is to the advent of new technologies, has added fuel to old debates. To some, the electronic church is further evidence of television's distorting effect on authentic religion. To others, it is an implicit call to "go and do likewise."

Swaggart in the Morning

Getting perspective on the electronic church itself is not easy, in view of the political passions it has stirred. In an effort to raise funds to combat TV evangelists, Norman Lear has claimed, "The ability of moral majoritarians to shape public attitudes and to influence the climate of public debate is unprecedented and poses an enormous danger. The leading 'television preachers' alone have an audience approaching 40 million." In sum, says Lear, "The moral majoritarians have over-

powered America's airwaves with their messages of hostility, fear, and distrust."

The casual viewer of these programs might be hard pressed to see why Lear was so incensed. For a start, few prime-time preachers actually appear during prime time. In most major markets, they are still likely to be found early in the morning, late at night, or in the Sunday-morning "religious ghetto." Lear also fails to acknowledge the sheer variety of the programming—everything from fire-and-brimstone preaching pitched to stir fear in the backsliding Christian, to staid Bible-study programs sending all but the truly devoted into a stupor.

In the morning, Jimmy Swaggart pedantically explains God's views on first and second marriages: in the evening, he paces the platform, conjuring up pathetic scenes of the alcoholic so wretched that he stole the shoes from his own child's corpse to buy liquor.

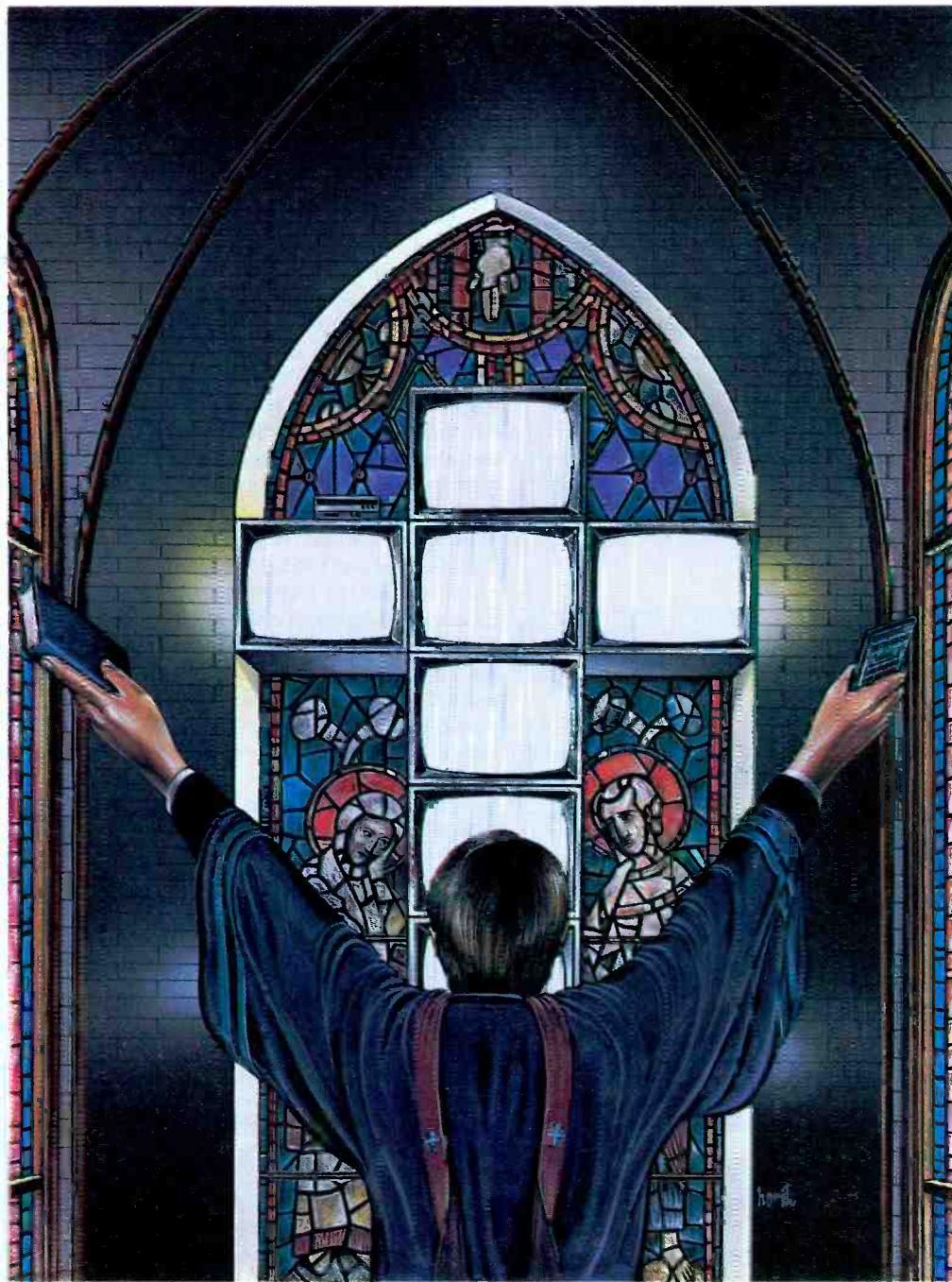
Jim Bakker, one of the born-again, gesture-for-gesture imitations of network talk-show hosts, publicly shares the domestic dramas of his marriage to gospel singer Tammy Fay.

Ben Kinchlew, Pat Robertson's athletic-looking black co-host, presides over a slickly produced edition of *The 700 Club*, featuring:

- the author of a book claiming that low liquidity among major corporations lies at the root of our economic troubles;
- a reformed workaholic who, but for seeing the light and being saved by Jesus, would have lost his wife and children;
- a clip of a conference on cable television and "narrowcasting," from which *Screw* magazine publisher Al Goldstein's remarks had to be deleted because of his language;
- a woman, once gay, who turned to Jesus and now offers a ministry to homosexuals.

Not to everyone's taste, certainly, and clearly laced with political conservatism. But have the TV evangelists truly "overpowered America's airwaves"?

If audience size is any measure, the evangelists have hardly been a resounding success. During the 1980 elections, normally skeptical journalists were reporting that Jerry Falwell reached anywhere from 18 million to 30 million people each week; by contrast, the Arbitron and Nielsen reports revealed that Falwell was actually reaching fewer than 1.5 million viewers. Contrary to Norman Lear's assertion that the "leading"



preachers alone had an audience of 40 million, the 1980 Arbitron figures showed a combined audience of half that size for all sixty-six syndicated religious programs. Furthermore, as Jeffrey Hadden and Charles Swann reminded the readers of their book, *Prime Time Preachers*, not all the top syndicated religious programs were conservative, not all the conservative programs were political, and most of the religious and conservative programs, at least during the greatest public uproar, were losing rather than gaining audience. (More recently, the top programs have recouped their losses, although without any startling growth.)

None of these facts should lead one to underestimate the power of the Religious New Right, but they do suggest that the television component in that power is easily inflated. In this tendency to overrate the influence, critics like Lear mirror the atti-

RELIGIOUS AWAKENINGS HAVE OFTEN BEEN TIED TO NEW FORMS OF COMMUNICATION: THE BOOK, THE REVIVAL MEETING, AND NOW TELEVISION.

tude of the right-wingers themselves, who commonly attribute the successes of liberalism to the media power of a small number of established liberals—including Norman Lear. It is easier for all of us to believe that unpopular ideas prosper because their advocates hold some “unfair” technological advantage than it is to think they actually resonate with the experience of large numbers of people.

Quite apart from the appeal of their right-wing ideology, the evangelical programs have more going for them than their willingness to invoke the Lord’s name. The talk, the accents, the clothes, the tragedies and comedies of God’s people have a touchingly real quality about them—a quality they retain even amidst their studied imitations of “real” television. The electronic church is, if nothing else, one of the few places on television where you encounter genuinely homely people. Neither the stars nor the guests hold back: They exhort, they preach, they laugh, and they cry—oh, do they cry! Not for them the deep-chested authoritative of Dan Rather, the cool mien of Barbara Walters, or the impish *savoir-faire* of Johnny Carson and Dick Cavett. These programs remind viewers that most of the country is not, after all, so slick, so professional, so well-dressed, and so damnably *in control*.

Despite the claims of Falwell and others to a truly national audience, the TV congregants are still predominantly female, Southern, small-town or rural, and getting on in years, according to Hadden and Swann. To see people like themselves, or at least like someone they know, confirms their sense of reality. If the guests on some of the shows—ex-alcoholics, former drug addicts, widows with young children, victims of unhappy marriages and miserable childhoods—routinely strike a maudlin note, the viewer can nonetheless identify with these all-too-familiar casualties of ordinary life; this is something every successful soap-opera writer understands. And the casualties are always repaired, with the help of friends, of the church, and above all of Jesus. Though the world’s problems can seem insoluble, viewers may take some small comfort in the apparent capacity of individuals and small groups to deal with their own problems.

Obviously the electronic church trades in a kind of unreality of its own. Indeed, it is

Hovik Dilanian

commonly accused of misleading people about the true nature of the human condition. According to the Reverend James M. Dunn, "The quick, certain, black-and-white ideologies so made to order for television are inadequate for life in the real world."

Dunn's criticism is especially interesting because he is a leading staff member of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs—an agency sponsored in part by churches that many Americans might fail to differentiate from the electronic church itself. Even Carl F. H. Henry, elder statesman of evangelical Protestantism, has echoed this criticism. The strongest reproof, of course, has come from the mainline Protestant churches, generally those belonging to the National Council of Churches (NCC). Their leading complaint is that electronic churches twist the Gospel into a quick fix, promising a painless life, and aping, rather than questioning, the values of secular culture. If you accept Jesus, you will enjoy immediate relief from suffering. Success, prosperity, and earthly happiness will be yours. This presents an odd contrast to Jesus' message, but it bears more than a faint resemblance to the run of TV commercials.

A Far-flung "Congregation"

The religious critics' second objection is that Jesus called people into a church community—a fellowship of worship and service. The electronic church, however, substitutes for this a pseudo-community of isolated viewers. Finally, TV evangelism fosters the cult-like following of a single leader. In 1979, a habitually measured and good-humored commentator on American Protestantism, University of Chicago church historian (and Lutheran pastor) Martin E. Marty warned that "the electronic church threatens to replace the living congregation with a far-flung clientele of devotees to this or that evangelist. This invisible religion is—or ought to be—the most feared contemporary rival to church religion."

But isn't that rivalry only the latest chapter in an old story? Religious "awakenings" have frequently been tied to new forms of communication—like the printed book in the sixteenth century or the open-air revival in the eighteenth and nineteenth—and on each occasion the established churches have warned that the new techniques were altering the character of the faith. In a sense the established churches were right. Certainly the Protestant emphasis on "scripture alone" derived from both Renaissance humanism and the new power of the printing press. Likewise, the simplified theology and emotional fervor of American Protestantism sprang from the needs of the faithful in the camp meeting. And church structures could no more escape alteration than church doctrine. When so many more people could read and own their own Bibles, the need for

a teaching hierarchy diminished. Revivalism put a premium on showmanship and platform oratory, rather than theological training, as a path to religious leadership. The electronic church is not terribly sophisticated about answering the establishment's criticism, seeing it mainly as a reflection of the mainliners' lack of fervor and enterprise. But paradoxically, if it wanted to, it could defend its innovations as nothing new.

To the Electronic Collection Plate

But the tension between independent evangelists and the mainline churches is also part of a larger story—that of broadcasting in America. The early days of radio saw all kinds of religious groups not only buying

THE LEADING MAINLINE COMPLAINT IS THAT THE TV EVANGELISTS TWIST THE GOSPEL INTO A QUICK FIX, PROMISING A PAINLESS LIFE.

time but frequently owning stations—which were often used as weapons against one another. By 1934, however, when the Federal Communications Act established a "public interest" obligation for licensees, a less chaotic pattern began to develop. Led by NBC, most major stations—and eventually the other networks—provided free time to broad, ecumenical groups, which in turn produced religious programming of a non-divisive kind. (NBC, for example, worked in partnership with the Protestant Federal Council of Churches [now the NCC], with the National Council of Catholic Men, and with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.) As they were providing free time to such mainline groups, NBC, CBS, and ABC actually refused to sell others any time for religious broadcasting, and many local stations followed suit. The Mutual Broadcasting System did sell time, but in 1944 it forbade soliciting funds on the air—a sharp blow to paid-time preachers. In short, the new arrangements left independent evangelicals to fend for themselves—buying time where they could, or owning and operating

their own commercial stations.

With the advent of television, a consortium of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish groups divided free network time on a 3,2,1 basis: Of every 6 hours the networks allotted, the Protestants would receive 3, the Catholics 2, and the Jews 1. The networks subsidized the programming, and local affiliates carried it free. This arrangement allowed the stations to meet their public-interest obligations and avoid sectarian strife, while the major religious groups controlled their allotted time (mostly on Sunday mornings, when audiences were small and advertisers few) and benefited from network expertise and technology.

Richard Walsh, former director of communications for the National Council of Catholic Men and producer of *The Catholic Hour* from 1953 to 1968, remembers the arrangement as highly practical and conducive to good relations between the churches and the networks, as well as among religious groups. "The purpose of network programming for the religious groups was not to convert, and they did little direct preaching *à la* today's electronic church," says Walsh. In his view, the point was to foster dialogue. "*The Catholic Hour*, though addressed to Catholics, was on subjects that might be of interest to others." While financial support varied with each network, Walsh recalls enjoying great independence from the networks in producing a variety of programs—talk shows, operas, plays, documentaries.

Though generally comfortable, the relationship between the networks and mainline religious groups did have its share of ups and downs even before the electronic church hove onto the scene. Some Protestant groups continued to complain that the NCC did not represent the totality of Protestant views—and NBC, for one, provided time to the Southern Baptists. By the end of the sixties, network funds began to shrink and affiliates to be more reluctant about providing free time. Some of this may have been due to a perception, perhaps exaggerated, that religion was no longer, in the cant term of the day, "relevant," a view that declining church attendance figures supported. Bill McClurkin, director of broadcast and film for the NCC, adds another factor: The increase in Sunday sports broadcasting narrowed the time boundaries of the Sunday-morning "religious ghetto." In any case, when enterprising evangelicals proposed to pay for air-time that affiliates had been giving away—why, that was an offer the affiliates could hardly refuse.

More than ideology, program content, or style, money may be the key to the electronic church's rise. As Hadden and Swann point out, 1970 to '75 were years when the costs of video production dropped. They were also the years when the evangelists'

audiences doubled, often at the expense of the mainliners' programs. The fact is that mainline and evangelical programs have never gone head-to-head, on the same terms. Would the mainline shows have been dropped by so many stations if they, too, were paying their own way? The TV evangelists, having been forced to wander in the paid-time wilderness for so long, have simply played by the free-market rules and won.

Money may also prove to be the Achilles heel of the TV preachers. Secular critics dwell on the huge sums the electronic church rakes in: the "electronic collection plate," they call it. But the TV ministry not only draws in support; it has to pay it out as well. Television is an expensive habit to maintain, and the TV preachers are hooked. Also, large amounts of money flowing in and out of the coffers are a constant temptation, even to the righteous. With or without scandal, the moderately prosperous lifestyle of most TV evangelists sits uncomfortably with their constant solicitation of funds and the panoply of memberships, pins, study guides, and booklets that they dangle before their followers. Some preachers resolve the incongruity by emphasizing their own versions of Save the Children campaigns—relief and missionary work in impoverished areas of the globe. But that appeal has provoked further demands for accurate accounting of how much money really goes where.

Jerry Falwell has joined with Billy Graham and some other evangelical ministers in establishing an Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability to insure financial self-regulation. Most of the other TV preachers have kept their distance.

Television's Calling

The success of the electronic church has given the established denominations the "feeling of being outflanked, threatened," according to Stewart M. Hoover, TV producer, lecturer on mass communications, and author of *The Electronic Giant*, published by the Church of the Brethren. Why, then, don't they simply start paying their own way too?

The question ignores the important *organizational* consequences of church involvement in television. With the electronic church, what you see is pretty much what there is. Television is at the heart of these ministries. "My specific calling from God," Jim Bakker has written, "is to be a television talk-show host. I love TV. I eat it. I sleep it." Most other church organizations are complex and their activities highly decentralized. Most of their personnel serve local congregations; most of their financial resources are invested in church buildings, community centers, schools, hospitals, and so on. The major churches all have skilled, respected individuals dealing

with television. But enlarging their activities would mean switching substantial funds and energies from other areas.

For reasons of theology, propriety, and concern for the effect on other church activities, most of these churches object to soliciting funds on the air. Accordingly, they're not ready to give up on the free-time tradition. In the face of FCC deregulation policies, many church groups have defended the practice of free air-time for public-interest programming, and not just that of a religious nature either.

The cause is not lost. Free air-time does continue to be available. *Insight*, a drama program produced by the Paulists, a Catholic order of priests, is shown free

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by about a hundred stations. In 1980 it was among the top ten religious programs in the Arbitron ratings, and in 1981 it won three Daytime Emmy Awards. *Davey and Goliath*, a cartoon series for children produced by the Lutheran Church in America, continues to be re-run in free time slots—and to gain quite respectable ratings.

The networks, however, no longer seem interested in supporting these kinds of shows, so without giving up entirely on free time, the mainline churches know they have to explore other alternatives. Basically there are three:

1. to follow the lead of the electronic church by building their own production and distribution apparatus for religious programming;
2. to concentrate on influencing the effects of non-religious television on public and personal morals;
3. to reject using television entirely.

The last, most radical course has been proposed by Harvey Cox, a noted Harvard theologian. Suppose, he argues, that

"all the mass media of all the countries of the world could be turned over to the churches for one whole week, or one whole month, exclusively for making the Gospel known. At the end of the month, do you really think the world would be much better off, or the Kingdom of God be appreciably closer?"

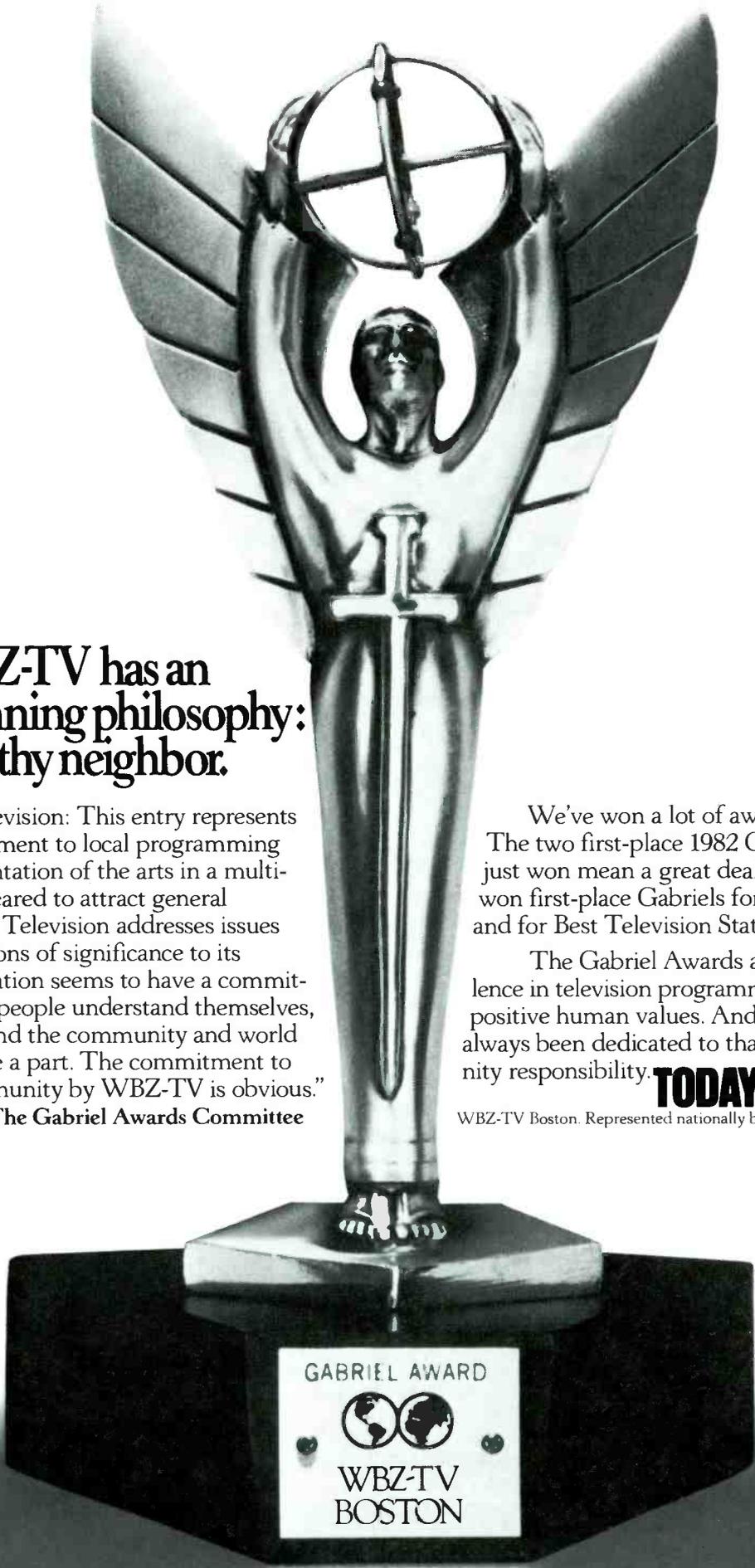
The problem, says Cox, is that the mass media are one-way, hierarchical systems inherently incapable of eliciting the profound belief the Gospel demands. The media "are controlled by the rich and powerful," while "God comes in vulnerability, and powerlessness. The message of the Gospel is essentially incompatible with any coercive form of communication. All 'mass media' are one-way and therefore inherently coercive."

Cox derides Christian "communicators" who want to infuse the networks with "a new and spiritually significant content. The churches should not be wasting their efforts trying to pilfer a few minutes of time from the reigning Caesars of the 'communications industry.'" Instead, "the Christian strategy *vis à vis* mass media is not to try to use them but to try to dismantle them. We need a real revolution in which the control of the media is returned to the people and the technical development of media is turned toward accessibility, two-way communication, and genuine conversation."

Less radical than Cox's approach, but still having something in common with it, are the efforts of some individuals concentrating on influencing non-religious television. Dr. Everett Parker, for example, is director of the United Church of Christ's Office of Communication, a veteran of religious broadcasting, and a leader in struggles to widen access to the airwaves. Under his leadership, the United Church of Christ has tried to influence the values communicated on television by insuring that all community groups are represented on the air. Parker's Office of Communication is a leading critic of FCC deregulation plans, and a sponsor of educational efforts and consulting services. The church-launched Community Telecommunications Service, for instance, has developed a workshop curriculum to teach local churches how to produce cable programs, and another to teach community and church leaders how to negotiate cable contracts, assure public access to cable, and enforce fair employment practices.

Other church programs try to influence the impact of television on values by educating the viewers: The Media Action Research Center, a body sponsored by several denominations and headquartered in the National Council of Churches

(Continued on page 62)



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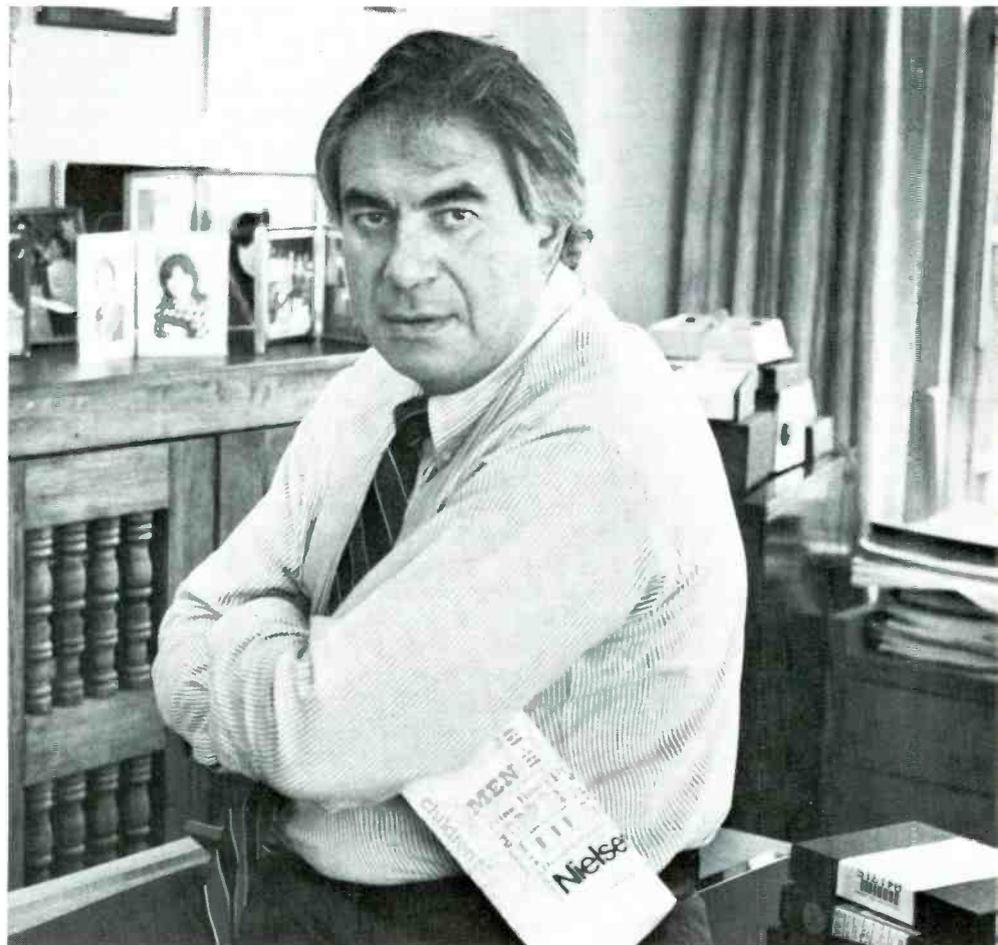
WHEN MARSHALL MCLUHAN appalled the civilized world with his announcement that the medium—not the message—was the message, the broadcast community, though flattered by the scholarly attention, turned its back on this apparently transparent piece of idiocy. What, after all, do broadcasters *do* but transmit messages—funny messages, romantic messages, even an uplifting message or two? Were their variegated tunes mere Muzak beneath the medium's incessant drill?

Paul Klein, then the head of audience research at NBC, saw, as usual, the light. Only Klein—well, not only Klein, but *mostly* Klein—recognized that McLuhan offered not a challenge but an absolution. If people watch television itself, not television programs, then all that junk on the air—and junk is one of Klein's tamest words—*doesn't hurt anybody*.

Moralists and children's activists can wave their arms until they fall off. "Everybody says that television makes people violent," says Klein. "It doesn't do *anything!*" Good programming, bad programming, it doesn't make any difference. McLuhan's apocalyptic dictum simply justifies television's ugly little secret: A good program is one that delivers an audience to an advertiser. The message is the means. Network executives don't spill those sorts of beans at Aspen Institute seminars, but Klein, the garrulous Diogenes of television, glories in brute candor. He sometimes sounds like the networks' most sardonic critic, but really, as a longtime colleague and admirer says, "Paul Klein is the incarnation of commercial television."

Klein doesn't *look* like commercial television. Television moguls often look like television stars. Klein could star only as

BY JAMES TRAUB

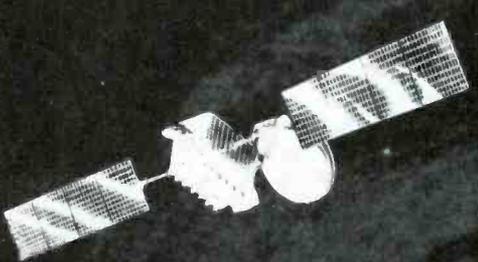


Paul Klein in his office at the Playboy Channel.

Phil Berkun

James Traub is a Channels contributing editor.

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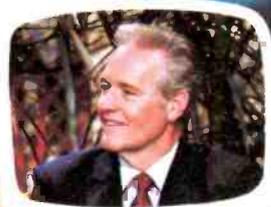
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hanks to the media, Egyptian Arabic is spoken throughout the Middle East.



Popular Egyptian actress Nagawa Abraham on the set of her show, *Birds of Paradise*.

The Egyptians will explain their success in the entertainment industry by insisting that they alone among the Arabs have a flair for drama, music, and dance, which is probably true. They will boast that their dramatic tradition dates back to the time of the pharaohs, which is surely exaggerated. They will say they learned drama long ago from the Romans and the Greeks who dominated all the Mediterranean basin, and there is plenty of evidence to support that claim.

But the real impetus to Egyptian drama came with Napoleon's invasion in 1798, which turned the country toward the West and stimulated upper-class Egyptians to search for new styles of expression. Long before other Arabs, Egyptians were going to Western universities and bringing back with them a taste for Western art forms. The British occupation in the late nineteenth century made Cairo a center of Western culture in the Middle East, and when movies were invented the Egyptians were ready for them.

Egyptian film paved the way for Egyptian television not only by promoting the faces of its stars, the voices of its singers, and the tales of its writers in every Arab city and town. Even more important, it spread a familiarity with Egypt's dialect. Thanks to the movies, the Arabic spoken by the Egyptians has come to dominate a language spoken in a hundred different

ways in the Middle East. This dominance now virtually precludes any other Arab country from successfully establishing an entertainment industry of its own.

The center of Egyptian television is a huge building on the right bank of the Nile in congested downtown Cairo. Like almost everything else in Egypt, it is a bit run-down. The elevators work sporadically. The toilets were cleaned last week. Through the soiled windowpanes of the upper floors, you see the acres of Cairo slums, with their trash-covered roofs.

But after you pass down a bleak corridor and through a set of flimsy doors, you enter a wonderland, a television studio two stories high, with wall-to-wall scaffolding from which to hang equipment. The set to the right is an oak-paneled library, the set to the left a sparkling kitchen full of modern gadgets. Milling around are dozens of handsome men and pretty women waiting for the cameras to roll. My guides told me this was the largest television studio in the Middle East, but only one of twelve in the building. All are constantly in use.

Youssef Marzouk is in charge of Studio 2, and my half-hour with him was somehow what I would have expected. Marzouk has white hair and glasses, and a permanent look of harassment on his face. His tenth-floor office is narrow and dingy and, for reasons I failed to understand, was crowded during our entire meeting with men and women drinking coffee, and with children running back and forth at play. The phones—four of them sat on his desk—rang constantly. Minions hastened in and out with papers for him to sign. An air conditioner in the window made a huge amount of noise, but otherwise did not work.

Marzouk talked to me of the competition for money, the search for good scripts, the scheduling of crews and studios. He told me that the average soap opera consists of ten to fifteen episodes of forty-five minutes each, but that he has the flexibility occasionally to produce dramas lasting for several hours. He left no doubt that he was proud of his work, and of its popularity wherever Arabic is spoken. Marzouk has a simple explanation for the success of Egyptian drama. "The other Arab countries," he said flatly, "have no culture."

Marzouk's boss, the head of Egyptian television, is Hemat Mustapha, a blondish woman, probably in her late forties. She worked her way to the top from a post as radio announcer. In a culture

where women are routinely consigned to secondary roles, it is paradoxical that women are not only among the most prominent but among the most powerful figures in Egyptian television. After the radio work, Mustapha became a television reporter, then an anchorwoman, then, consecutively, head of Egypt's two channels, then director of programming, then head of the state television itself. She is esteemed for her headline-making interviews of Arab kings and presidents, and still keeps her face before the public by anchoring the news three evenings a week.

Mustapha remembers the early days of Egyptian television, in the fifties, when Egypt went abroad in search of technical training. Soviet-bloc countries were only too happy to help, especially since Egypt's president at the time, Gamal Abdel Nasser, tilted politically toward the East. But Egyptians soon learned that Western training was much better, not only in television technology but in production, direction, and other creative areas. The European networks, state enterprises themselves, were generous with their facilities, according to Mustapha, who has studied television in both Britain and Germany. Even now, Egyptians train regularly in Western Europe or the United States, and foreign experts come to Cairo periodically to provide assistance on the scene.

Egypt's virtual monopoly of Arab-language television, however, does not mean that its state television has no competition. Many Egyptian production teams, complete with stars and writers, have gone off to do their work in other countries. They began the exodus in part to avoid Egyptian taxes and government regulations. But after 1977, the flight took on momentum, for many Arab governments had decided to stop buying Egyptian products in an effort to punish the country for negotiating a peace with Israel.

Much of the money for this "off-shore" production has come from wealthy Arabs, particularly the oil titans of the Persian Gulf, but some of it has come from Egyptians and even from Europeans. To Mustapha's dismay—for her empire is being nibbled at the edges—there are new Egyptian production companies in Jordan, Tunisia, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi in the East, and in Greece, West Germany, and Britain in the West.

In a way, this diaspora has been a good influence, enriching Egyptian work by foreign contact. The Egyptians them-



selves admit that their dramas tend to be slow-moving, which my own inexperienced eye can confirm from a few sessions with Arab screens. Western television—particularly action-packed series from the United States—is extremely popular with the Arabs, and Egypt is not the only Arab country that sets rigorous quotas on air-time for Western programs.

By international standards, Egyptian television is in fact improving. Its dramas have begun receiving respectful attention in international competition, though they have not yet won any major prizes. The state television companies of France and Spain have each talked of doing co-productions with Egyptian companies on such Arabic themes as *A Thousand and One Nights*. Still, it is likely to be a long time before Egyptian drama realizes Mustapha's dream and penetrates Western markets. Happily for the Egyptian companies, however, they do not need Western audiences. For the time being, the Arab world is willing to snap up almost everything Egyptian companies are able to produce.

After the Camp David accords, Mustapha said, her company anticipated a serious crisis, and for a time every Arab country but Oman and Sudan boycotted Egyptian productions. The offshore studios were swamped with orders, she said, but it soon became apparent that they could not keep up, either in quality or volume, with the demand. Gradually, and without fanfare, the Arab governments began returning to the Cairo market. "They had to admit that Egyptian TV was indispensable," Mustapha said, and now even Libya and Syria, two hard-line countries, are buying again.

Mustapha readily conceded that Egyptian state television, like the offshore companies, must tailor its dramas to meet the tastes of local Arab audiences. Aside from the sagas of everyday life, Egyptian companies produce many dramas with religious or patriotic themes. They take care not to violate codes of modest dress, and despite a preoccupation with romance, they present little overt sexuality. They also stay away from political themes that might offend one regime or another. Nonetheless, Egyptian television is far more Egyptian than it is Arab, conveying an image of the world as seen uniquely through Egyptian eyes.

Mustapha was not comfortable with the notion that the Egyptian government uses the state television as an instrument of propaganda. "Of course, we want to

transmit a good idea about our country," she said. But she insisted that the United States does the same thing, and oddly, she cited the exportation of *Dallas* as an example. "We want our dramas to be a mirror of Egyptian life, but we want to show our modern side. We don't want to preach but, after all, television is an ambassador for us." She stated firmly, however, that the dramas made by state television do not distort reality for political ends.

Youssef Marzouk, the producer, was more direct on the subject. "Naturally, we're trying to promote Egyptian culture," he said. "We're part of a government plan to do this. We want them to love Egypt in Tripoli and Riyadh."

Not all Egyptians approve of the state's aims, of course. Youssef Chahine is president of an independent film-making company called Misr International Film, which has an office in downtown Cairo. A potential seller to state television, he admits that his relations with Mustapha's office are not good.

Chahine says she is a total autocrat, and that, as head of the state television, she allocates funds whimsically, abuses her powers of censorship, and buys arbitrarily from independent producers like himself. He says her purpose is to promote conformity and convey the impression that "everything is just fine" in Egypt, and that, in doing this, she is wrecking Egyptian sensibility and creativity.

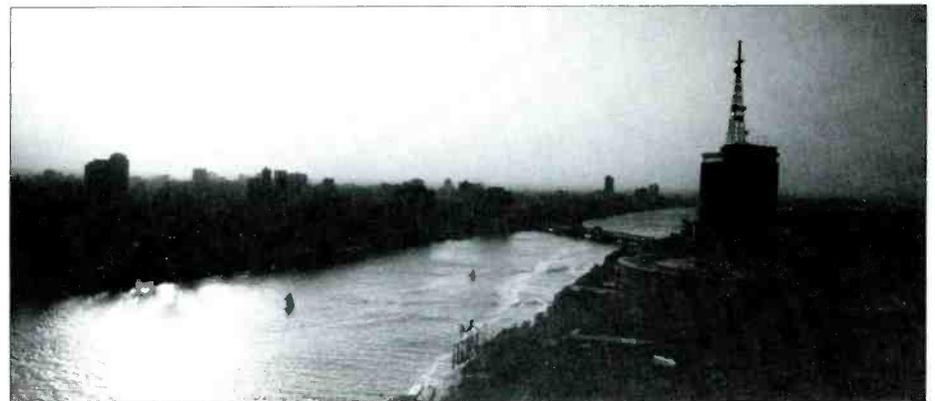
"Egyptian soap operas," said Chahine, who acknowledges being to the government's left in politics, "try to persuade people that all their problems are love and sex. You're not supposed to talk about the workers or worry about politics on TV. If you can focus the audience on artificial problems, they won't be concerned about the real ones."

"Remember that the rich markets for state TV are in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, and she will not produce anything that will alienate the Saudis. The Saudis only want things that could have been shown in the Middle Ages. Like all Arab governments, they want to promote the status quo. So that is what we give them."

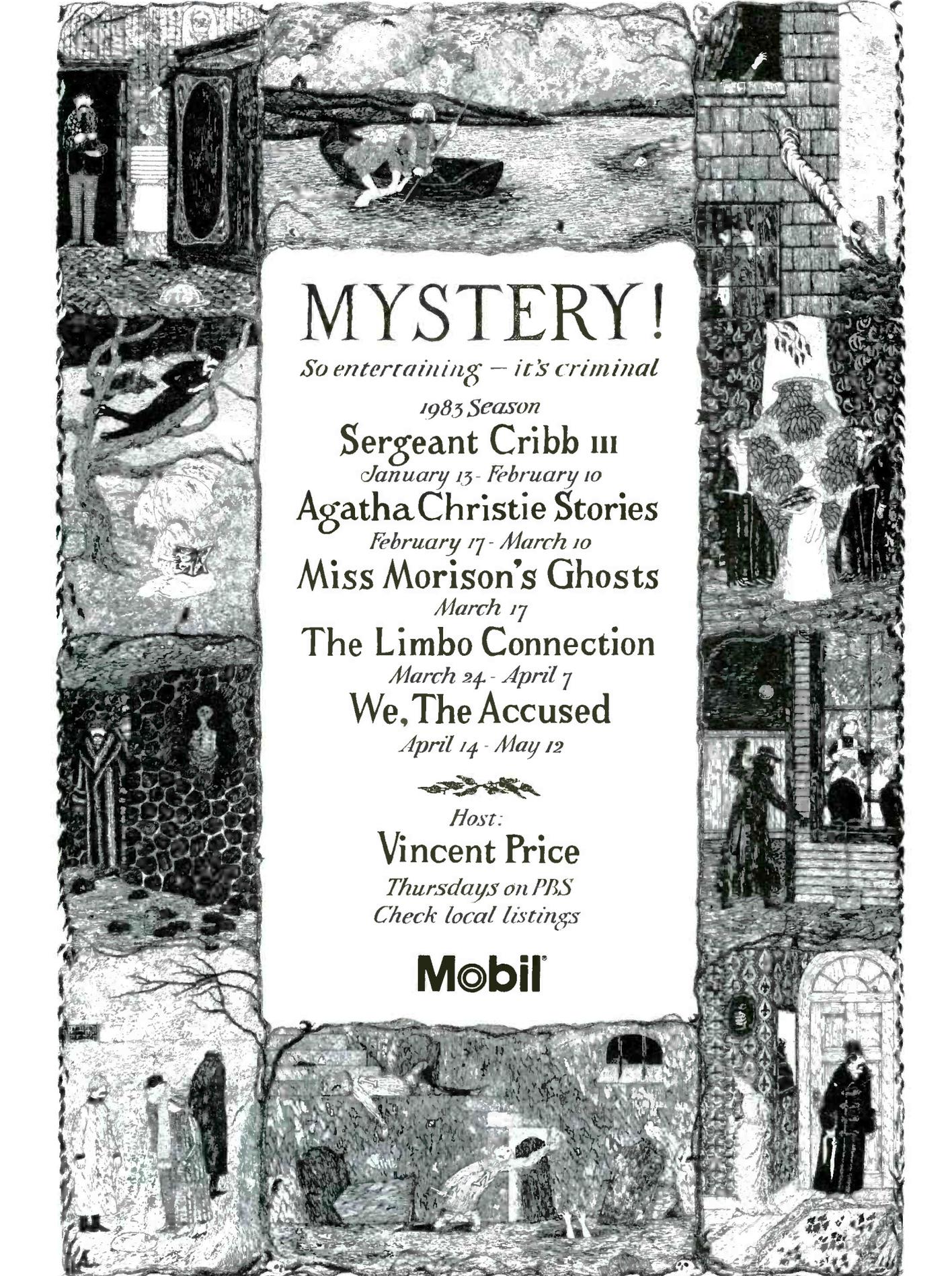
Yet even Chahine admits that Egyptian television has a turbulent, unpredictable quality when it is let loose in the Arab world. It has introduced Arabs to a new relationship between men and women, based on Egypt's more relaxed practices. It has popularized a new view of public education, based on Egypt's aspirations. It presents a materialistic world, only now becoming known among Egyptians, that sharply contrasts with the living conditions of most Arabs.

"It is creating a new Arab dream" said Chahine. "It is unquestionably a liberating influence. We don't know what that influence will ultimately be. It may turn out to be quite different from what the government and Mrs. Mustapha expect. But it is surely sowing seeds for the future." ■

The materialistic world of Egyptian TV belies the living conditions of most Arabs.



Egyptian television headquarters, on the right bank of the Nile in downtown Cairo.



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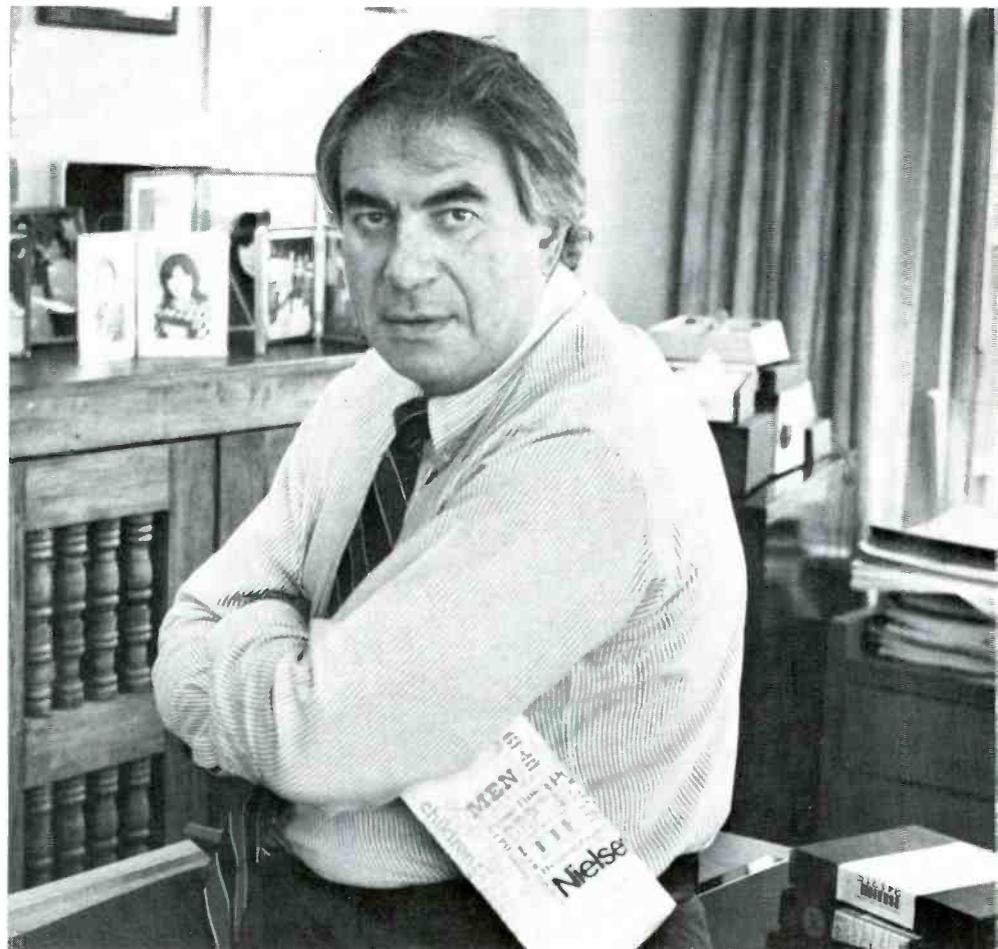
WHEN MARSHALL MCLUHAN appalled the civilized world with his announcement that the medium—not the message—was the message, the broadcast community, though flattered by the scholarly attention, turned its back on this apparently transparent piece of idiocy. What, after all, do broadcasters *do* but transmit messages—funny messages, romantic messages, even an uplifting message or two? Were their variegated tunes mere Muzak beneath the medium's incessant drill?

Paul Klein, then the head of audience research at NBC, saw, as usual, the light. Only Klein—well, not only Klein, but *mostly* Klein—recognized that McLuhan offered not a challenge but an absolution. If people watch television itself, not television programs, then all that junk on the air—and junk is one of Klein's tamest words—*doesn't hurt anybody*.

Moralists and children's activists can wave their arms until they fall off. "Everybody says that television makes people violent," says Klein. "It doesn't do *anything!*" Good programming, bad programming, it doesn't make any difference. McLuhan's apocalyptic dictum simply justifies television's ugly little secret: A good program is one that delivers an audience to an advertiser. The message is the means. Network executives don't spill those sorts of beans at Aspen Institute seminars, but Klein, the garrulous Diogenes of television, glories in brute candor. He sometimes sounds like the networks' most sardonic critic, but really, as a longtime colleague and admirer says, "Paul Klein is the incarnation of commercial television."

Klein doesn't *look* like commercial television. Television moguls often look like television stars. Klein could star only as

BY JAMES TRAUB



Paul Klein in his office at the Playboy Channel.

Phil Berkun

James Traub is a Channels contributing editor.

Yogi Bear—overweight, rumped, shambling, with a nasal growl and a rather cheerless way of inserting vulgarities in unlikely places. While his colleagues were selecting shirts, Klein was getting to the bottom of the television business and solving its riddles.

In the 1960s, Klein worked in audience research for NBC. He left his cushy job there in 1970 to form Computer Television, a company that set out to provide pay television to cable operators through an unused frequency called the mid-band. Cable operators weren't interested back then, although today the equipment developed by Klein's company is widely used. After Time Inc. acquired Computer Television, Klein worked for the Public Broadcasting Service as a consultant, developing the immensely successful schedule for its national on-air fund-raising effort. He returned to NBC in 1976 for a three-year stint as head of programming. He left the network in 1979—Fred Silverman had arrived the year before and the network wasn't big enough for both of them—and put together PKO Productions. Last August, he became president of cable's Playboy Channel.

To hear Klein tell it, he started figuring out the rules of broadcasting soon after he joined the industry. In 1964, he told NBC that RCA would sell more color sets if the network broadcast everything in color; he was right. He taught Madison Avenue to buy programs that had good demographics, not just high ratings, turning NBC's second-place standing to an advantage. When he left the network in 1970, he announced, with his McLuhanesque flair for the willfully provocative, that cable and the other new media would "bury" commercial television—and he may yet be proved right. His current job at the Playboy Channel allows him to exercise his penchant for the ugly truth. Now he insists that the sort of people who buy good Scotch and foreign cars will pay to watch Playmates race through the mud with their costumes falling off. He may well be right again.

Klein has been right since he was twelve. He recalls a junior high school teacher who "taught me that I was born with reasoning power, that I could use it. My father said to me at that time that I

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Paul Klein's 20 years in TV have given him a thorough grounding in 'mass ignorance.'

was doomed, because nobody else knows how to reason. Therefore, I was going to look like an asshole for my entire life." Although Klein's career has not borne the stamp of doom, his twenty years in television have given him a thorough grounding in mass ignorance. The networks' inability to adjust to a transformed world proves McLuhan's adage that everyone, with a few exceptions, of course, lives in his or her own past. "They're immune to reason," he says of network executives. "Once you start on a life of illogic, ill-reason, there's no returning." And television viewers have offered ample proof of their intelligence by lapping up what Klein has aptly called "warm nonsense." "Illogic," says this connoisseur of disgust, "is the basis for all human beings."

So television, Paul Klein's lifelong business, is a transaction among fools? No, actually, it's a charade of a transaction. Klein explained it all, after he left NBC, in a notorious *New York* magazine article. First, he pointed out, television seems to be about programming, but it's not. Its product is the viewer's time and attention, and its customers are advertisers. Second, viewers are not watching programs, anyway, they're watching television. McLuhan was on to this. The same number of sets are tuned to prime-time television at a given hour every night, no matter how dreadful the programs are. Third, the programs are dreadful, and the programmers know it—they "like most of the stuff they put on as

much as you do." Fourth—and here's the heart of darkness—viewers don't watch what they like. They may not like anything, but they're still parked in front of those sets. No, viewers "watch that program among all those offered at a given time which can be endured with the least amount of pain and suffering." That's Paul Klein's Theory of the Least Objectionable Program, "the only theory," says its modest author, "ever to come out of television."

Klein gave away the game, and you'd think the network gendarmerie would have slapped on the cuffs. But you'd be wrong; after all, Klein was considered a virtuoso at manipulating the rules of the network game. So NBC rehired him in 1976—as head of programming. No hard feelings. As Klein says, "Nobody cares about shit like that. Everybody just cares about money."

Colleagues at NBC remember Klein not as a rebel, but as a brilliant innovator and an occasional nuisance. Klein is memorialized, if anything, for the comic fervor with which he baited the competition, issuing a stream of wildly insulting letters to his opposite numbers at CBS. But the important thing about Klein is that his mastery of the rules of television made him a steamroller of persuasion. Bud Rukeyser, NBC's executive vice president for information, says of Klein's research phase in the 1960s, "Paul was the numbers guy [the resident analyst of audience ratings], but because he was so smart, and because he had such a forceful way about him, he had an importance here that was far beyond what the numbers guy would normally have had."

Consider, for a moment, those numbers. In the 1960s CBS had built up the most extensive network of affiliate stations and routinely trounced the other two networks in the ratings. Its programming appealed particularly to the millions of Americans who lived in small towns and rural areas—what Klein called "Uncle Fudsville." Klein knew that NBC had a larger fraction of its audience in urban areas than CBS did. Although it could scarcely overtake CBS in the quantity of viewers, NBC could offer advertisers a better *quality* of viewers. Klein set out to sell this fact. According to Rukeyser, "Paul single-handedly popularized and sold the idea of demographics to Madison Avenue. One of the immediate results was that CBS did a complete revamp of its schedule at a time when it was still leading in homes." Klein, in other words, was instrumental in bringing the Uncle Fud era to a close, sending *Petticoat Junction*, *Green Acres*, *Hee Haw*, and their ilk into the wilds of syndication.

A devotee of the unassailable logic of the ratings numbers, Klein calmly aligned

Patrick McDonnell



himself with the heretical. Why, for example, should television programs be organized into series? Series are cheap, goes the rationale, and they build an audience. But what kind of audience? Klein noticed that series appeal primarily to a "bimodal" group, as he called it, of old people and children, groups that have an almost infinite tolerance for repetition and familiarity. He argued that television's standard fare—such as the raft of rural sitcoms—failed to attract the most desirable viewers. When he returned to NBC in 1976 he set out to capture a quality audience through movies, specials, and mini-series—what he called "event television."

Klein's tenure as head of programming at NBC was not notably successful, an assessment that, Klein insists, depends on the eye of the beholder. He is quick to list his high-minded ventures. He did *The Godfather Saga*, *Centennial*, and *Holocaust*. ("Six million Jews had to die for you to get a forty share," said his wife.) Even a ruthless logician like Klein can be excused a sentimental attachment to intelligence and originality, and for a brief period he was known as a force for better programming. "Maybe," guesses Gerry Jaffe, head of research at NBC, "he had a change of heart. Maybe he thought it was a losing battle." Maybe he just followed the numbers, into good programming and out of it. Klein's campaign seemed to work at first, but weekly series continued to capture the largest audience.

"I put on a lot of mini-series," Klein says, "and I got *slaughtered* for it. We made money, we made an *enormous* amount of money, but we were getting perceptually *killed* in the papers because we didn't have such big ratings." So Klein, in the Klein view of things, once again suffered from invincible ignorance—this time that of the press, its head stuck in the old ground of ratings. "If you don't live in your past," to quote another Klein *pensée*, "you will be alone and subject to all sorts of criticism, and you'll lead a miserable life."

Even when he was recognized as a force for better programming, Klein was scarcely a martyr to quality. All those mini-series, specials, and movies, he points out, didn't have to be good. Good is not the point; least objectionable is the point. Good is simply a lucky byproduct. Event programs, in the Klein formula, work because the right kind of viewer finds novelty and change less objectionable than familiarity and repetition. Nor did Klein lose sight of the mass audience which, he had noticed, swallows junk without a whimper. He gave the masses *Supertrain*. And he also gave them the notorious episode of *James at 15* in which the main character loses his virginity on

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The terrible sword will fall on the networks, Klein feels, if HBO begins accepting advertising.

his sixteenth birthday. The show was plunging swiftly in the ratings and, recalls Klein, "I wanted a hype with it." (Says the proud father: "My son was having his sixteenth birthday at the time.") It was, in any case, a bad moment, and Klein grows uncharacteristically reticent when asked about it. Novelist Dan Wakefield, the show's creator and chief writer, first balked at the change, and then inserted into the script a discussion of birth control. Klein, knowing that the network would put up with adolescent sex on the air, but not with contraception, removed the passage. Wakefield quit.

For a time after he left NBC, Klein made a living producing his own banal programming at PKO Productions, which he formed in 1979. Among PKO's products were an instant docudrama on the Jean Harris trial, which discomposited a number of critics, and a five-part "adult" soap opera, *Love at the Crossroads*, produced for the Showtime cable service. The plot is so contrived as to imply a disdain for the principle of causality. Klein himself appraises the series with his favorite epithet, "shitty."

Love opens with the hero's bride-to-be suffering a gratuitous, but nevertheless fatal, car accident on the way to the wedding. So the hero, a moviemaker, decides to become a priest. So his father, a real s.o.b., hires a beautiful, though virtuous, girl to seduce him. So he changes his mind, and comes to love his father, whose own wretched marriage is also magically transformed. The series exploits both sex and the expectation of sex. The first three episodes lead, with a fine sense of calibration, to a scene in which the heroine rises topless from a hot tub, like Botticelli's *Venus*. The last two episodes apparently lead to a torrid scene adumbrated at the opening with two lovers rolling around in bed. But the scene never appears; the tease was inserted just to keep you watching. The joke's on you, dope.

The joke is, it really did get people to watch, according to the gleeful producer, even when one of the episodes ran against *Hill Street Blues*. Why? Random viewing; good female appeal; "a little nudity, a few dirty words."

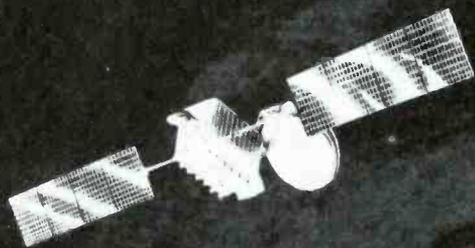
Pallid, Brainless Skin Show Scores Well Against Intelligent Drama: Kleinism Triumphs Again.

Klein has studied the television audience, and he knows it's dumb. The proof is abundant. When CBS played *Notorious Landlady* with the reels reversed, it received only three calls of complaint, and got a quality audience. Klein notes that Bill Cosby's zany series bombed out because Cosby forgot that "the production of warm nonsense is the only way to maintain a loyal audience of sitcom fans." Finally, Klein knows that the people out there are not only dumb; they also love slime. Home Box Office, says Klein, in his casual, everyone-who-isn't-a-babe-in-the-woods-ought-to-know tone, "makes a living off of dirty words and nudity. People buy it for the erotic material." Once again, Paul Klein holds up his mirror to America.

For Klein, programming is not the point anyway. It's boring. "Don't make critical judgments about the content," Klein admonishes in a downright growl, "because I'm not interested in content." What Klein wants to talk about is the competitive holy war, which he once conducted by vilifying CBS and now conducts by ridiculing all the networks. Need it be pointed out that the networks are living their past? They'll tell you that themselves. "God created the three networks, therefore there should *always* be three networks." Klein is picking up steam; ignorance crushed excites him. "Now, with people in cable homes doing this"—bap bap bap, he hits imaginary buttons on his table—"they don't give a shit about any network!" The networks are being decimated by a lust for new choices. Klein recently predicted that *Smiley's People*, playing on independent stations, would "wipe out" CBS and ABC. So *Smiley's People* got an eleven share in New York; CBS got a twenty-eight. But you see the general point.

Klein makes an important distinction. The networks sell viewers to advertisers, not programs to viewers, but the big cable services, such as HBO, do the opposite. Many hold that there's no direct competition between network and cable television. But this, Klein insists, is a fool's paradise. "When you're vulnerable, you can still say how great you are, and make money, money, money, and it's *natural*, and it's *God's law*. But as soon as you get competition when you're vulnerable, you're *finished*. Soon as you get competition"—Klein smacks his hands together,

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as if crushing a fly—"you're dead!" The terrible swift sword will fall, Klein feels, if Home Box Office, now virtually accepted as the fourth network, begins accepting advertising.

Meanwhile, he feels cable programming will continue to make major inroads into the network audience, as will over-the-air pay-television systems. "I think the next two years will see a tremendous upheaval in these kinds of delivery systems. Cheap delivery is the name of the game."

Klein's convictions go back to his days at Computer Television. He loves recalling his unsuccessful attempt to sell NBC on the systems he was developing. He squares his sagging Yogi Bear frame, plunks his forearms on the table, and says, "The smartest guy there was named David Adams, the corporation's executive vice president. And he said, 'Paul, that was one of your greatest presentations.' (I used to give great presentations.) 'But you know, Paul, people will never pay for what they get for free.' And I said, 'Yeah, but they pay for water.' And he said, 'But that's when the water is bad.' And I said, 'Yeahhh.'" The bearish sigh holds an early Klein revelation: Programming on the new media can be just as polluted as network programming, and people will still pay for it.

The question of content, in fact, has so dwindled in Klein's consciousness that it scarcely even figures in his vision of the new media. But Klein has lately decided that the new era of abundance has rendered obsolete his own McLuhanesque principle that the content of television is the medium itself. "When you buy tiers of pay television and things like that, you're going into selective television." (This startling observation may owe less to a change of mind than to Klein's propensity, noticed even by his friends, to provide theoretical justification for whatever may be his present job.)

With this new "product orientation," one would think that cable might herald a

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Being president of the Playboy Channel allows Klein to exercise his penchant for the ugly truth.

new age of non-embarrassing television. A number of observers have expressed hopes that the new media would bring in new viewers, emigrants from print. Klein disagrees; the same television audience, he says, will be drawn to cable's manifold services. Some radical change.

Klein positively gloats over the demise of CBS Cable, a venture that in his view tried to play fast and loose with the numbers. Klein had called the channel "a joke" in an interview back when CBS Cable started, and predicted that it would be dismantled after a year. "Dumb me," he says cheerfully, "they went out of business in ten months."

Klein blithely delivers his melancholy message to the most unsuspecting audiences. When he recounted the story of his exchange with David Adams to an audience of young independent producers, they apparently missed the point, and laughed heartily. Klein is a very witty and irreverent public speaker, and he had the crowd of earnest young creators, idealists of the message, laughing throughout the early part of the evening. He ridiculed the networks, above all for their opposition to "access"—the proliferation of innumerable programming sources, each offering opportunities to the eager young

filmmakers. Klein and the audience were on the same side, wherever that was.

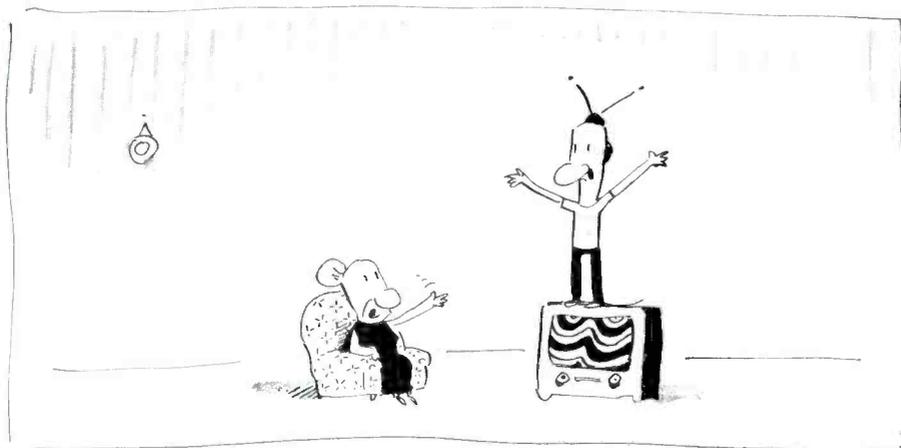
Then something went wrong. Klein began talking about the Playboy Channel, mocking his own material: "And the incredible thing is that we got a distinguished director to direct this piece of junk." The audience continued to ask questions about the opportunities in cable, but everything came back sex, loaded with words like "hot" this and "tough" that. Isn't there something else cable programmers want? Comedy, said Klein, comedy about sex. The young filmmakers fell silent. Klein got hot beneath the lights. He took off his jacket, then his tie; his blue shirt was soaked with sweat. He stood there, a sweaty, overweight cynic, talking about sex.

Finally, a woman in the back stood up and said, "You've talked about the failures of the networks, and you've talked about access on cable, but now you've abandoned the idea and talked about how we should change our work in order to sell to your system." The young filmmakers buzzed agreement. Klein flushed and mounted an unsuccessful counterattack: He's put all his own money into the new media; when he was growing up, his parents were on public assistance in Brownsville; he's *suffered* for his beliefs. It was not a convincing performance.

This is embarrassing; this is just too blunt. Here we have "arguably the most original thinker that we have had in television," to use Bud Rukeyser's words, defending the beleaguered garrison of sexual junk against the Huns of creativity, self-sacrifice, and aesthetic rigor. Klein is clever, but he failed to understand that the filmmakers he was addressing were dedicated to good content, a concept he had abandoned years before. Possibly he doesn't know what good content is, but you don't hear anyone disown him.

Let's leave the final judgment on Klein to Lawrence K. Grossman. He worked with Klein at NBC, expected no more from television than he did, and moved out of the neighborhood altogether to become the president of the Public Broadcasting Service. "One of the things that I think infects an awful lot of commercial television," Grossman says from the side of the angels, "is a kind of hypocritical justification. The one thing about Paul that is most redeeming—is that he does not delude himself or anybody else. Too many others in the business are trying to figure out a way to justify what they're doing with some higher reasoning, and that is nothing more than trying to save face at cocktail parties." ■

Patrick McDonnell



The Television That Rules the Arab World

by Milton Viorst

Putting politics aside, the Arab nations buy their dreams from Cairo.

DRAMA THAT CONVEYS the dream world of the Cairo bourgeoisie: the incredibly popular Egyptian soap opera, embodying the fantasy of Arabs from Casablanca to the Persian Gulf.

No veils, no slums, no camels. The women patronize hair-dressers and read fashion magazines. The men carry briefcases and look often at their wristwatches. The children have their own bedrooms, with tape decks and bookshelves. Even without understanding Ar-

Milton Viorst is a Washington-based writer who reports frequently from the Middle East.

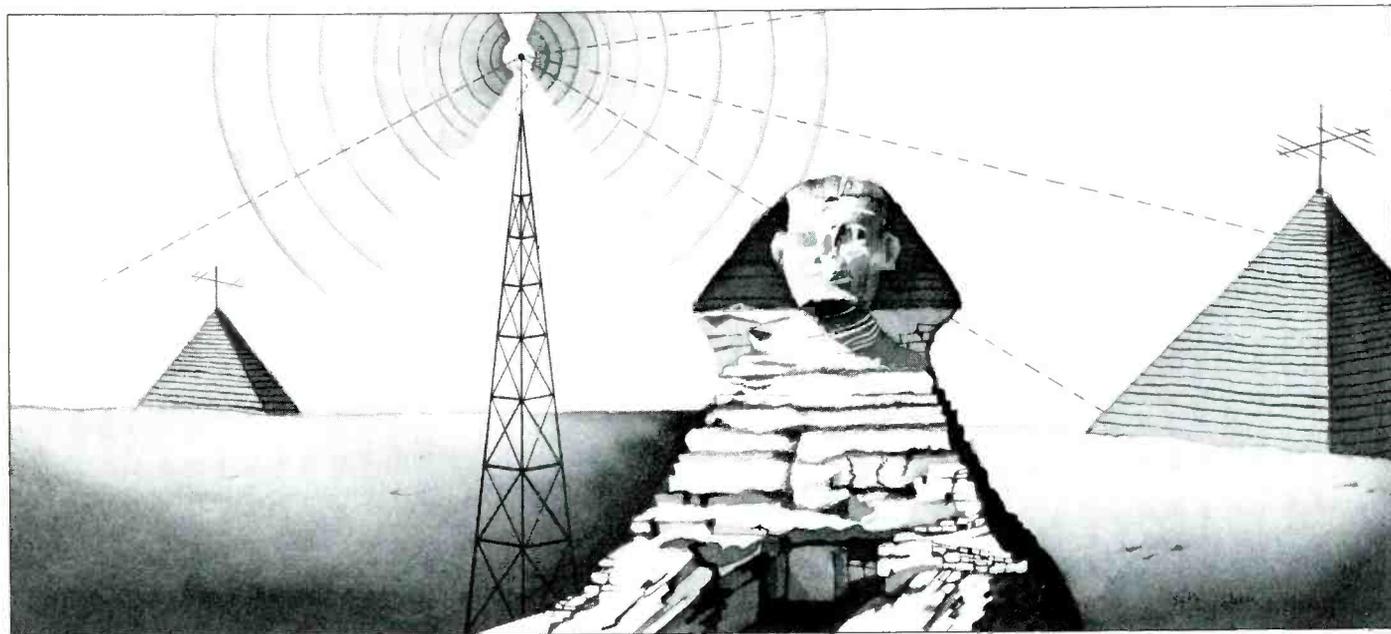
abic, it is easy to tell that there is much talk about love, duty, and success.

The soap opera is a product of Cairo, the Hollywood of the Arab world. For the Occidental visitor, Cairo may be crowded, dirty, and noisy, but to a villager in remote Syria or Sudan, it is the hub of glamour, the home of the stars, the pinnacle of all that glitters in Arab civilization.

For Egypt, the glitter pays, with a few million dollars a year in earnings for the state television and with a more valuable commodity, prestige. In the tumultuous arena of Arab politics, the soaps are a soft-sell commercial for Egyptian values,

and thereby a vehicle for Egyptian influence. They are a reminder to the Arabs that even when Egypt's political course is in disrepute, Egypt is still Number One among the Arab states.

Now into its third decade, Egyptian television drama is the full-blooded progeny of the country's movie industry. Egyptian filmmakers produced their first documentaries as long ago as the early 1900s. During the golden days of Hollywood before World War II, Egyptians were turning out full-length dramatic productions by the dozens. And whatever the political turmoil in the region today, their movie industry still flourishes.



Seth Jabon

T

hanks to the media, Egyptian Arabic is spoken throughout the Middle East.



Popular Egyptian actress Nagawe Abraham on the set of her show, *Birds of Paradise*.

The Egyptians will explain their success in the entertainment industry by insisting that they alone among the Arabs have a flair for drama, music, and dance, which is probably true. They will boast that their dramatic tradition dates back to the time of the pharaohs, which is surely exaggerated. They will say they learned drama long ago from the Romans and the Greeks who dominated all the Mediterranean basin, and there is plenty of evidence to support that claim.

But the real impetus to Egyptian drama came with Napoleon's invasion in 1798, which turned the country toward the West and stimulated upper-class Egyptians to search for new styles of expression. Long before other Arabs, Egyptians were going to Western universities and bringing back with them a taste for Western art forms. The British occupation in the late nineteenth century made Cairo a center of Western culture in the Middle East, and when movies were invented the Egyptians were ready for them.

Egyptian film paved the way for Egyptian television not only by promoting the faces of its stars, the voices of its singers, and the tales of its writers in every Arab city and town. Even more important, it spread a familiarity with Egypt's dialect. Thanks to the movies, the Arabic spoken by the Egyptians has come to dominate a language spoken in a hundred different

ways in the Middle East. This dominance now virtually precludes any other Arab country from successfully establishing an entertainment industry of its own.

The center of Egyptian television is a huge building on the right bank of the Nile in congested downtown Cairo. Like almost everything else in Egypt, it is a bit run-down. The elevators work sporadically. The toilets were cleaned last week. Through the soiled windowpanes of the upper floors, you see the acres of Cairo slums, with their trash-covered roofs.

But after you pass down a bleak corridor and through a set of flimsy doors, you enter a wonderland, a television studio two stories high, with wall-to-wall scaffolding from which to hang equipment. The set to the right is an oak-paneled library, the set to the left a sparkling kitchen full of modern gadgets. Milling around are dozens of handsome men and pretty women waiting for the cameras to roll. My guides told me this was the largest television studio in the Middle East, but only one of twelve in the building. All are constantly in use.

Youssef Marzouk is in charge of Studio 2, and my half-hour with him was somehow what I would have expected. Marzouk has white hair and glasses, and a permanent look of harassment on his face. His tenth-floor office is narrow and dingy and, for reasons I failed to understand, was crowded during our entire meeting with men and women drinking coffee, and with children running back and forth at play. The phones—four of them sat on his desk—rang constantly. Minions hastened in and out with papers for him to sign. An air conditioner in the window made a huge amount of noise, but otherwise did not work.

Marzouk talked to me of the competition for money, the search for good scripts, the scheduling of crews and studios. He told me that the average soap opera consists of ten to fifteen episodes of forty-five minutes each, but that he has the flexibility occasionally to produce dramas lasting for several hours. He left no doubt that he was proud of his work, and of its popularity wherever Arabic is spoken. Marzouk has a simple explanation for the success of Egyptian drama. "The other Arab countries," he said flatly, "have no culture."

Marzouk's boss, the head of Egyptian television, is Hemat Mustapha, a blondish woman, probably in her late forties. She worked her way to the top from a post as radio announcer. In a culture

where women are routinely consigned to secondary roles, it is paradoxical that women are not only among the most prominent but among the most powerful figures in Egyptian television. After the radio work, Mustapha became a television reporter, then an anchorwoman, then, consecutively, head of Egypt's two channels, then director of programming, then head of the state television itself. She is esteemed for her headline-making interviews of Arab kings and presidents, and still keeps her face before the public by anchoring the news three evenings a week.

Mustapha remembers the early days of Egyptian television, in the fifties, when Egypt went abroad in search of technical training. Soviet-bloc countries were only too happy to help, especially since Egypt's president at the time, Gamal Abdel Nasser, tilted politically toward the East. But Egyptians soon learned that Western training was much better, not only in television technology but in production, direction, and other creative areas. The European networks, state enterprises themselves, were generous with their facilities, according to Mustapha, who has studied television in both Britain and Germany. Even now, Egyptians train regularly in Western Europe or the United States, and foreign experts come to Cairo periodically to provide assistance on the scene.

Egypt's virtual monopoly of Arab-language television, however, does not mean that its state television has no competition. Many Egyptian production teams, complete with stars and writers, have gone off to do their work in other countries. They began the exodus in part to avoid Egyptian taxes and government regulations. But after 1977, the flight took on momentum, for many Arab governments had decided to stop buying Egyptian products in an effort to punish the country for negotiating a peace with Israel.

Much of the money for this "off-shore" production has come from wealthy Arabs, particularly the oil titans of the Persian Gulf, but some of it has come from Egyptians and even from Europeans. To Mustapha's dismay—for her empire is being nibbled at the edges—there are new Egyptian production companies in Jordan, Tunisia, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi in the East, and in Greece, West Germany, and Britain in the West.

In a way, this diaspora has been a good influence, enriching Egyptian work by foreign contact. The Egyptians them-



selves admit that their dramas tend to be slow-moving, which my own inexperienced eye can confirm from a few sessions with Arab screens. Western television—particularly action-packed series from the United States—is extremely popular with the Arabs, and Egypt is not the only Arab country that sets rigorous quotas on air-time for Western programs.

By international standards, Egyptian television is in fact improving. Its dramas have begun receiving respectful attention in international competition, though they have not yet won any major prizes. The state television companies of France and Spain have each talked of doing co-productions with Egyptian companies on such Arabic themes as *A Thousand and One Nights*. Still, it is likely to be a long time before Egyptian drama realizes Mustapha's dream and penetrates Western markets. Happily for the Egyptian companies, however, they do not need Western audiences. For the time being, the Arab world is willing to snap up almost everything Egyptian companies are able to produce.

After the Camp David accords, Mustapha said, her company anticipated a serious crisis, and for a time every Arab country but Oman and Sudan boycotted Egyptian productions. The offshore studios were swamped with orders, she said, but it soon became apparent that they could not keep up, either in quality or volume, with the demand. Gradually, and without fanfare, the Arab governments began returning to the Cairo market. "They had to admit that Egyptian TV was indispensable," Mustapha said, and now even Libya and Syria, two hard-line countries, are buying again.

Mustapha readily conceded that Egyptian state television, like the offshore companies, must tailor its dramas to meet the tastes of local Arab audiences. Aside from the sagas of everyday life, Egyptian companies produce many dramas with religious or patriotic themes. They take care not to violate codes of modest dress, and despite a preoccupation with romance, they present little overt sexuality. They also stay away from political themes that might offend one regime or another. Nonetheless, Egyptian television is far more Egyptian than it is Arab, conveying an image of the world as seen uniquely through Egyptian eyes.

Mustapha was not comfortable with the notion that the Egyptian government uses the state television as an instrument of propaganda. "Of course, we want to

transmit a good idea about our country," she said. But she insisted that the United States does the same thing, and oddly, she cited the exportation of *Dallas* as an example. "We want our dramas to be a mirror of Egyptian life, but we want to show our modern side. We don't want to preach but, after all, television is an ambassador for us." She stated firmly, however, that the dramas made by state television do not distort reality for political ends.

Youssef Marzouk, the producer, was more direct on the subject. "Naturally, we're trying to promote Egyptian culture," he said. "We're part of a government plan to do this. We want them to love Egypt in Tripoli and Riyadh."

Not all Egyptians approve of the state's aims, of course. Youssef Chahine is president of an independent film-making company called Misr International Film, which has an office in downtown Cairo. A potential seller to state television, he admits that his relations with Mustapha's office are not good.

Chahine says she is a total autocrat, and that, as head of the state television, she allocates funds whimsically, abuses her powers of censorship, and buys arbitrarily from independent producers like himself. He says her purpose is to promote conformity and convey the impression that "everything is just fine" in Egypt, and that, in doing this, she is wrecking Egyptian sensibility and creativity.

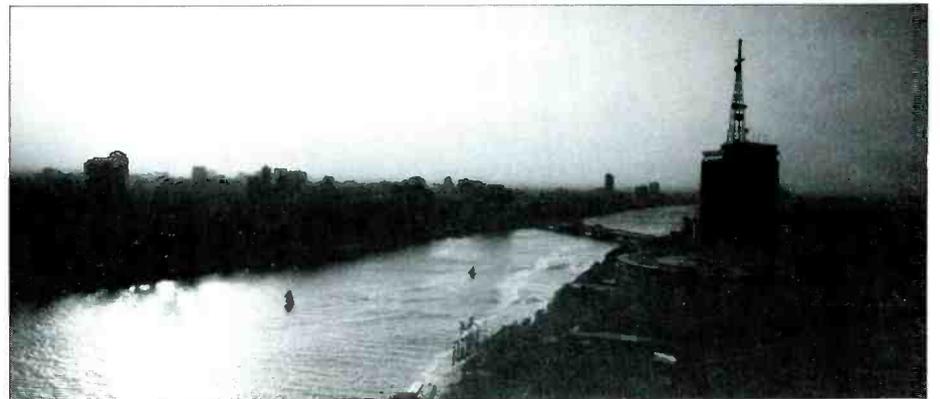
"Egyptian soap operas," said Chahine, who acknowledges being to the government's left in politics, "try to persuade people that all their problems are love and sex. You're not supposed to talk about the workers or worry about politics on TV. If you can focus the audience on artificial problems, they won't be concerned about the real ones."

"Remember that the rich markets for state TV are in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, and she will not produce anything that will alienate the Saudis. The Saudis only want things that could have been shown in the Middle Ages. Like all Arab governments, they want to promote the status quo. So that is what we give them."

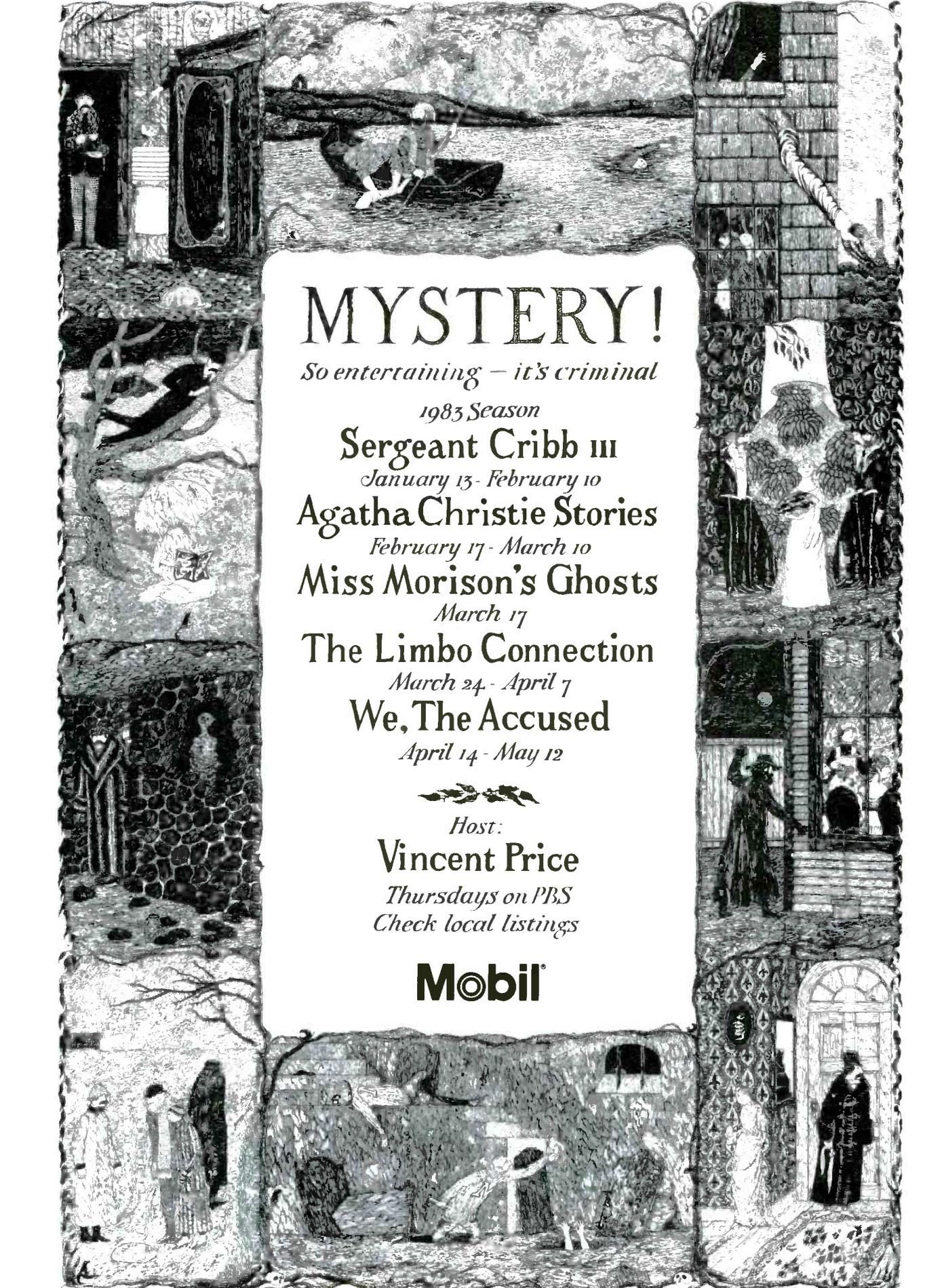
Yet even Chahine admits that Egyptian television has a turbulent, unpredictable quality when it is let loose in the Arab world. It has introduced Arabs to a new relationship between men and women, based on Egypt's more relaxed practices. It has popularized a new view of public education, based on Egypt's aspirations. It presents a materialistic world, only now becoming known among Egyptians, that sharply contrasts with the living conditions of most Arabs.

"It is creating a new Arab dream" said Chahine. "It is unquestionably a liberating influence. We don't know what that influence will ultimately be. It may turn out to be quite different from what the government and Mrs. Mustapha expect. But it is surely sowing seeds for the future." ■

The materialistic world of Egyptian TV belies the living conditions of most Arabs.



Egyptian television headquarters, on the right bank of the Nile in downtown Cairo.



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THE BATTLE FOR BOSTON



Under the rules of the new television, the old-fashioned ratings war has become a fight for survival.

WINTHROP P. BAKER has declared war in Boston, and WBZ-TV and WCVB, two of the best television stations in the country, are preparing for battle.

Baker is the operating head of Boston's newest station, WNEV, which won the license for Channel 7 that had long been held by RKO Television's WNAC-TV. He was an important catch for the new owners, since he had had a sparkling career at Group W Broadcasting, rising to the presidency of its stations division. It astonished the industry that he would give up that job to run a new local station whose predecessor habitually ran a poor third in the market. Baker took on WNEV with the fierce determination to make it first in the ratings within two years.

Baker is driven by an almost apocalyptic vision of broadcast television's future, a vision shared at least in part by some of his fellow broadcasters, including his rival *Greg Mitchell* is editor of *Nuclear Times* magazine.

by Greg Mitchell

vals in Boston. "I start from this premise," Baker explains. "Local stations will eventually suffer the same plight as daily newspapers suffer today. The new technologies will take business away, and by 1990 or '95, there will be fewer stations." For Baker, then, what's at stake in Boston's battle is not just ratings victory, but survival. He has set two years as his deadline because, beyond that, cable and direct-broadcast satellites could make being the number-three station in any market very dangerous.

To accomplish his goals for WNEV, Baker has raided talent from his competitors; spent staggering sums of money; launched the most costly local program in television, and hired a controversial news director as his "war strategist."

In the course of all this, Baker has earned the enmity of the local press, made his own staff edgy and fearful of the ax, and forced his rivals—the once comfortable managers of WCVB and WBZ—to behave aggressively themselves. One rival likens Baker's presence in Boston to a "garter snake thrown into a garden with

white mice." Others see parallels with Fred Silverman's arrival at NBC in 1980: lots of action, lots of program changes, lots of fur flying—everybody put on notice that things are going to be different.

Baker is not new to Boston. He was there when things started to get interesting, in 1972. Baker was then doing nicely as general manager of Group W's prestigious WBZ, maintaining the station's twenty-year dominance of the market. But that was the year the upheaval began. New owners had just taken over Channel 5. And Channel 7 became the target of a license challenge that was in fact setting the stage for Baker's dramatic return to Boston in 1982.

Two local groups had filed challenges against RKO Television at WNAC's license-renewal time. Their bids for the license were based not only on WNAC's lackluster performance, but on the failure of the station's corporate owners to meet the "good character" requirements for broadcast licensees: RKO's parent, General Tire and Rubber, was under investigation by the Justice Department for illegal trade practices. The challenges would

Andrea Baruffi

drag on for nearly a decade.

But 1972 was the year WCVB took over Channel 5 and began its rise to leader of the Boston market, gaining national acclaim as one of America's best local stations. WCVB was also the child of a license challenge: Three years earlier, the Federal Communications Commission had awarded the license to Boston Broadcasters Inc. (BBI), a group of prominent Bostonians. The decision marked the first time an applicant had been awarded a license over an incumbent whose record was not egregiously poor.

The *Herald-Traveler* newspaper had previously operated Channel 5, then called WHDH, under a temporary license. The license had been an unsettled case for twenty-five years, and probably would have been awarded long before to the Boston daily if the president of the newspaper company had not been caught having lunch with the chairman of the FCC—improperly, since the issue of the station's ownership was pending at the agency.

The insurgent group, BBI, made an unprecedented pledge to the FCC in 1969: If awarded the license, the group would provide fifty hours of local programming a week. The FCC was favorably impressed with the pledge, even though it suggested it might be "unrealistic." Nevertheless, the commission awarded the license to BBI, citing as a major factor the issue of concentration of media ownership, which at the time was an important FCC concern. Besides owning the Boston newspaper, the *Herald-Traveler* Corp. also owned an FM radio station in the market.

Robert Bennett, general manager of Metromedia's WNEV-TV in New York, was brought in to run the new station, rechristened WCVB. Bennett took a cut in pay in exchange for 3.5 percent of the stock and the freedom to make good on the local programming pledge, which was to make him something of a prophet in the television industry.

Under Bennett's management, WCVB became the only station with a locally produced sitcom and a live late-night talk show. In the early-evening slots, WCVB aired only original programs, many of which were directed at minority and community concerns. Total weekly hours of local programming surpassed BBI's pledge to the FCC, finally reaching sixty-two.

It went so well that by the end of the



WNEV's Win Baker:
He came in like a George Steinbrenner, and shook up Boston.



WCVB's Jim Coppersmith:
"Hurdy-gurdy men shouldn't be doing the news."



WBZ's Sy Yanoff:
"Baker's no Steinbrenner. He hasn't given viewers anything new."

decade, the station was earning a profit of \$10 million a year, including \$1 million from the syndication of its own programs to other stations. WCVB overtook WBZ in the ratings, as well as in prestige, winning a slew of awards.

Imagine the surprise in Boston, and in the television industry generally, when it was announced in July 1981 that WCVB, which had built its reputation as the "little guy" that addressed community concerns, had been sold to Metromedia for

the record price of \$220 million. Bob Bennett, whose share was in the range of \$5 million, became Metromedia's Boston-based vice president for programming.

While Channel 5 was going conglomerate, Channel 7 was heading in the opposite direction. Although the FCC had upheld RKO's license in 1974, the local insurgents had fought on. Assisted by Terry Lenzer, a former Senate Watergate Committee counsel, and Scott Armstrong (who later co-wrote *The Brethren* with Bob Woodward), one of the license challengers delivered to the FCC in 1975 a 640-page report detailing a "plethora of corporate misconduct" by owner General Tire. In 1976 the Securities and Exchange Commission filed a civil action against General, but the FCC dragged its feet. In 1978, the two challengers—one led by Star supermarket heir David Mugar, the other by Bertram Lee, a black businessman—merged to form the New England Television Corp., a move that improved their position, since the Carter Administration was encouraging black ownership in the industry.

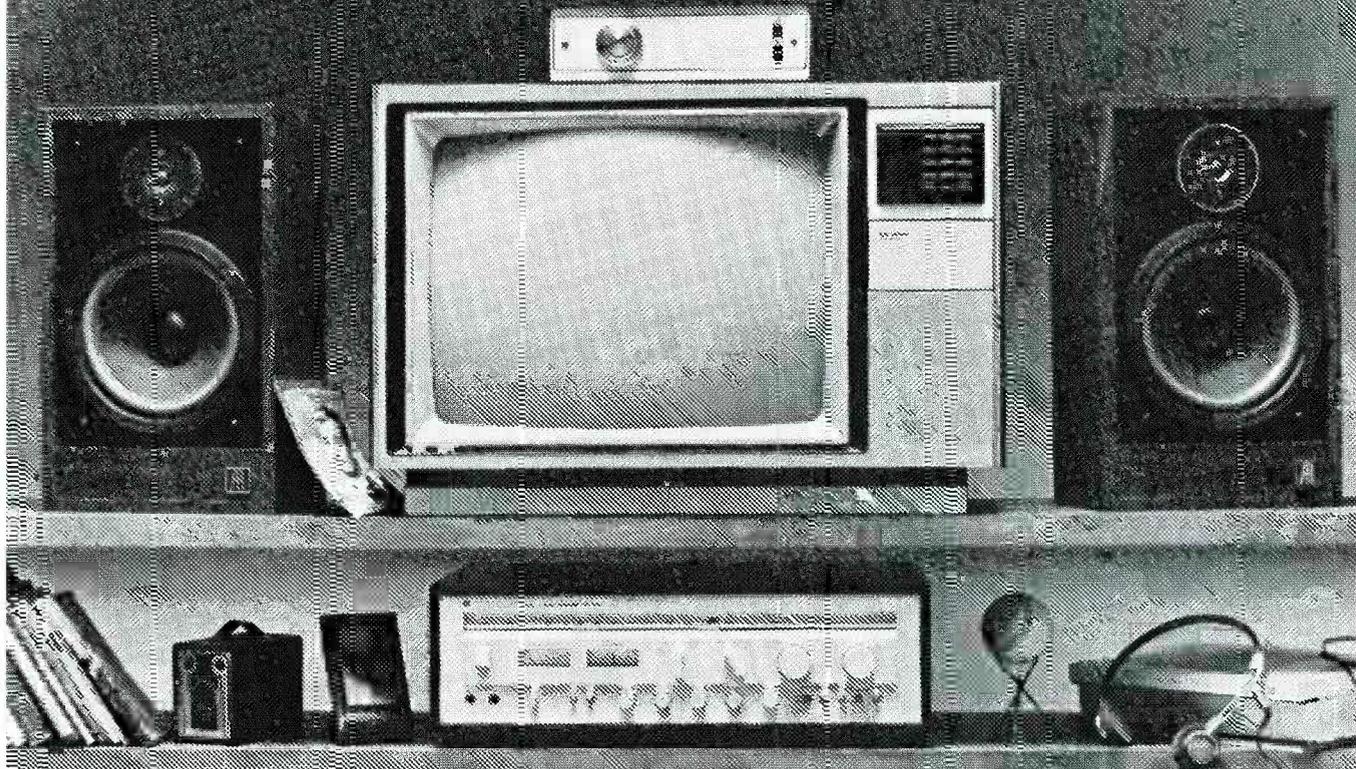
In a four-to-three vote in January 1980, the FCC finally ruled that it would not renew RKO's licenses in Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. RKO appealed to the Supreme Court, which on April 19, 1982 upheld the FCC's ruling as it pertained to Boston. (RKO is still fighting to retain WOR in New York and KHJ in Los Angeles.)

On May 22, 1982, the thirteen-year struggle culminated in the arrival of the new Channel 7—now called WNEV—under the promotional banner, "There's a New Day Dawning." All of Boston, it seemed, hailed the station's arrival, including its competitors. With the sale of WCVB to Metromedia, everyone liked the idea of at least one station being locally owned. And in Boston, where race is no small issue, many welcomed the fact that WNEV has the highest percentage of minority control of any major station in the country, with 13 percent of its stock owned by blacks.

WNEV's predecessor on Channel 7 had been something of a laughingstock. For a time, the station didn't even carry its network's seven o'clock national news. And its local news operation was a mess. (A WNAC news anchor once ended a segment saying, "We'll be back with more alleged news in a moment.")

One of Mugar's first moves was to hire Win Baker as his general manager. The bait, reportedly, was 6 percent of the stock in the New England Television Corp. Baker thus stood to profit, like Bob Bennett before him, from another rags-to-riches story in Boston. Mugar felt that Baker brought a thorough knowledge of

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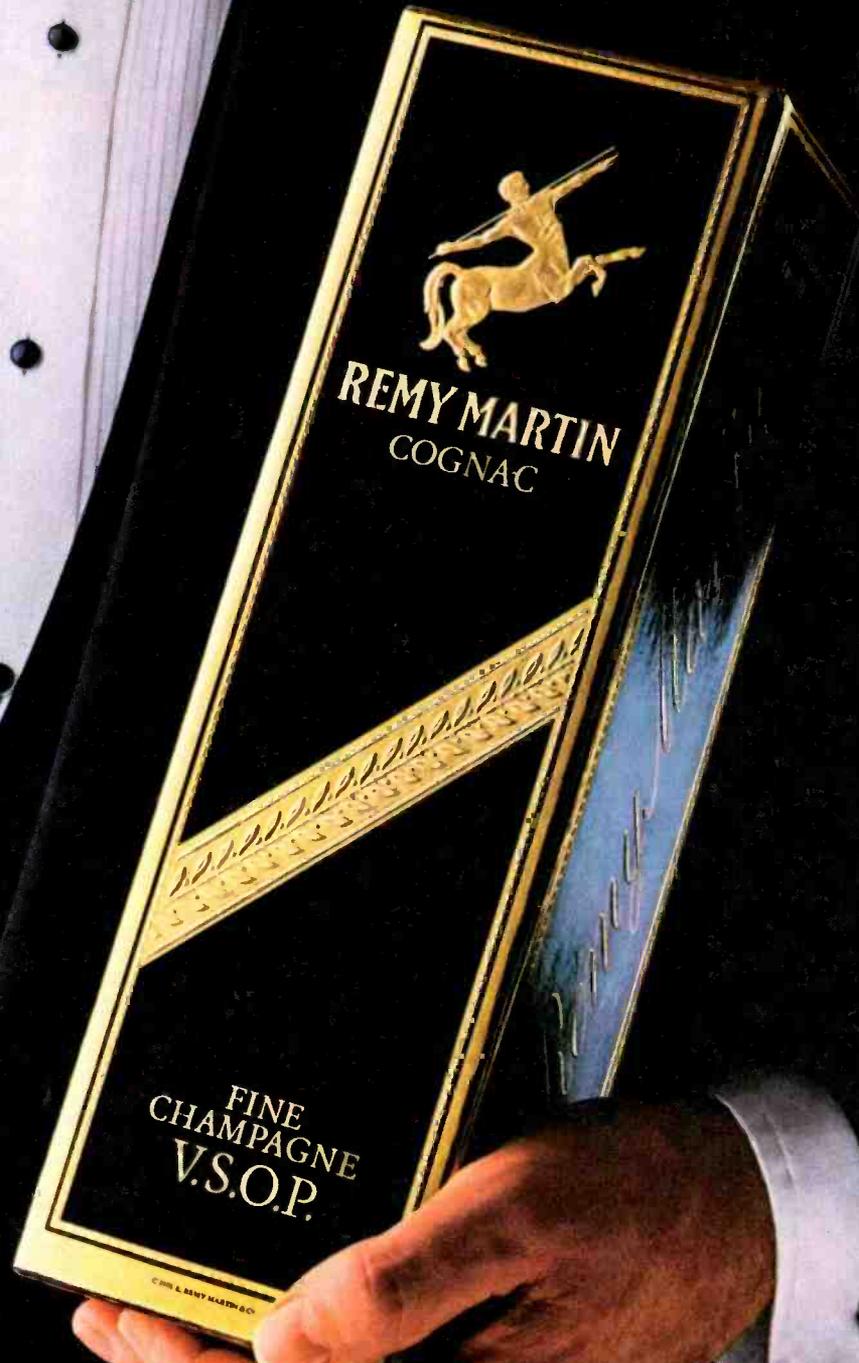
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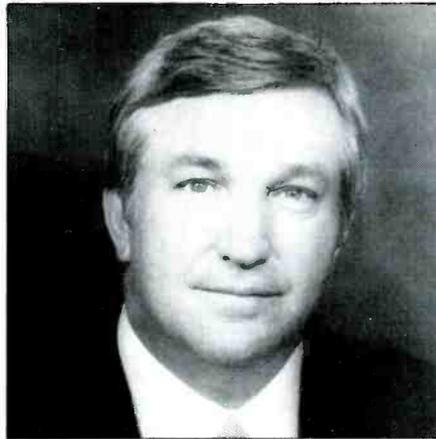
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the Boston market, as well as a strong background in news, which has become vital to any local station's success. Baker was bound to stir things up. At WBZ and WCVB, which had perhaps grown a bit complacent in what had become a two-and-a-half-station town, staffers sort of liked the idea that things would get a little more interesting in Boston television.

They had no idea just how interesting things would get, or how quickly.

The fun began on June 11 of last year, when WCVB's long, tall Texan, Tom Ellis, the most popular anchorman in Boston, left a little note for Bob Bennett, his boss: "I am leaving the station effective immediately." Ellis, it was reported the following day, would be taking a couple of months off, and then would head the all-new WNEV news team when it debuted in September.

A handsome fifty-two-year-old news personality not known for his reporting skills, Ellis was a Boston television mainstay. He had worked at WBZ from 1968 to 1975. After an unimpressive stint at New York's WABC-TV from 1977 to '78, he returned to Boston and helped lead WCVB to the top of the news ratings for the first time. With a \$165,000-a-year salary he was the best-paid anchor in Boston, and its only genuine "star," but he was working without a contract. When WNEV made him a fat deal, he jumped ship.



The success of WCVB made Bob Bennett something of a prophet in the industry.

Outraged, WCVB countered by promising Jacobson and her husband, Chet Curtis (who had replaced Ellis), a package worth \$800,000 a year. Rebuffed on that front, Baker quickly signed an attractive free agent named Robin Young.

Young, thirty-one, had made her name in Boston as co-host of WBZ's *Evening Magazine* before she moved to NBC as an occasional replacement for Jane Pauley on *Today*. Now she would be returning to Boston as Tom Ellis's co-anchor at \$2 million for five years. WNEV's deals were beginning to sound like baseball contracts, and people were beginning to refer to Baker as George Steinbrenner. The local newspapers had a field day with what they called Boston's "Star Wars."



When the "dream team" of Tom Ellis and Robin Young debuted, WNEV's ratings soared. But a week later, it was back in third place.

What surprised everyone was the size of WNEV's offer: somewhere between half a million and \$600,000 a year, a salary unheard of in local news outside New York and Los Angeles.

But Baker had barely begun. He next wooed Ellis's former WCVB co-anchor, Natalie Jacobson, who was then making \$100,000, with a gargantuan contract.

and with WNEV's new "Dream Team," as the *Herald* had dubbed Ellis and Young.

Another bombshell exploded on June 21, when Jim Thistle, WCVB's respected longtime news director, suddenly quit. Thistle said he was "disturbed at the direction, at the monstrous salaries that a few people are making, which

widen the gap between the so-called stars and the rest of the soldiers. I wouldn't mind if they wanted to spend a million dollars and upgrade the technical equipment."

But Win Baker was also doing just that. He laid out a couple of million dollars on digital video graphics, cameras, and vans. And he hired forty new "soldiers," including several captured from enemy camps, such as WCVB's popular political reporter, Joe Day.

WNEV's competitors were no longer feeling much goodwill toward the new kid in town. "Yeah, my competitors are hollering. They're trying to buy instant credibility," Baker said. "To that I say, 'You bet your sweet ass I am.'"

Baker, who is actually a soft-spoken gentleman, seemed to go out of his way to antagonize not only his rivals, but his own employees. At one point he announced that he had received resumés from eighty-eight people at WBZ who were just dying to work for him. Longtime WNEV staffers began talking of a "reign of fear" at the station.

Baker hired as his vice president for news (at a reported salary of \$140,000) a man known for wielding a heavy ax himself—someone who, Baker said, "makes me look like Casper Milquetoast."

"I fix sick news operations for a living," is how Bill Applegate describes himself. And he does: Group W's KPIX in San Francisco and WKBW in Buffalo had been his most recent cases.

The local press, already hostile to Baker, found in Applegate another quotable fellow. He said that the rival news broadcasts were "not well-produced," and that their reporters were "not top-notch." He also said he couldn't bear to watch his own station's news because it was "so bad," an observation unlikely to endear him to his staff.

But Applegate became best known as the man who referred to his office as his "bunker," who hung on his wall a huge banner blaring "THIS IS WAR," who periodically strode through the newsroom shouting reminders of the war to his "troops." Of his rivals, Applegate said to a reporter, "I'm going to hit 'em so fast and so hard they're not going to know what hit 'em. You bet it's war."

Baker was really taking it on the chin from the press. Boston reporters tend to revere WBZ for tradition's sake, and WCVB because of Bob Bennett. As a result, officials at the two stations often get away with a certain sanctimoniousness in the local papers. For instance, in knocking Tom Ellis as a lightweight, news executives at WCVB made it sound as if they would never hire the guy, which of course they had already done. WCVB

manager Jim Coppersmith said he loathed stations that employ “hurdy-gurdy” men to do the news, yet he is best known in Boston as the man who once hired a striking blond anchor named Jay Scott and then, Hollywood-style, ran a series of ads announcing that Scott had been discovered “in a Denver motel.” (Coppersmith himself had been in a Denver motel room when he first saw Scott on television.) And WCVB was not above heavily promoting the pregnancy of anchorwoman Natalie Jacobson; indeed, some credit Jacobson’s baby girl with lifting WCVB to the top of the news ratings for the first time.

While publicly decrying WNEV’s bunker mentality, executives at the other stations were quietly preparing for battle by purchasing new sets and electronic gadgetry, and raising the salaries of key employees. A week before the debut of the Ellis and Young “Dream Team” on September 13, a two-hour tape of their dress rehearsal turned up at WBZ. “We didn’t steal it,” said news director Jeff Rosser. “I don’t think it’s espionage. There was no money involved.”

On September 7, WNEV threw a \$100,000 coming-out party. Laser beams etched the station’s new logo, “SE7EN,” on the night-time sky. David Mugar provided \$40,000 worth of fireworks.

A few days later, staffers over at WBZ retaliated with a “War is Hell” costume party. One news anchor wore an Army helmet, the other came as the Red Baron; the two were making fun of Baker and Applegate. “We didn’t ask for this war, but remember this line,” the WBZ staffers sang. “We’re going to stick 5 and 7 where the sun doesn’t shine.”

WNEV’s million-dollar anchor team—and equally expensive news set—could not possibly live up to expectations. As expected, WNEV’s viewership soared on opening night—but then it plunged the next day, and by the following week WNEV news was right back in its accustomed position: a distant third.

WNEV executives said they weren’t surprised: they had always contended that they would not see any real progress until March 1983, and didn’t expect to take the lead in the ratings until at least a year after that. Obviously, however, their product had been oversold.

Unrest was still a problem in November, when several staffers were fired, including the news director Applegate had brought in only the previous July.



Baker’s lavish spending may seem insane today; it could prove visionary in 1990.

With the trauma of launching an overhyped news show over, WNEV dug in for a long winter. The news team took a back seat for awhile as WNEV prepared to introduce what Win Baker calls “the most expensive program in the history of local television”: a daily, two-hour, late-afternoon magazine show called *Look*, scheduled to start November 29. In launching the program, Baker has spent \$3 million for equipment, hired a staff of seventy, and even purchased the logo of the defunct magazine of the same name. Baker characterizes his strategy as “throwing millions at the 4-to-6 P.M. period.”

Look, it is hoped, will feed audiences into the six o’clock broadcast. As with the other Boston stations, WNEV’s progress—and about half of its profits—hinges on the success of its 6 and 11 P.M. news programs.

Of Boston’s three commercial stations, WNEV is the only one actually located in Boston. It’s based in a reminder of its past, the RKO building, a four-story red-brick structure just outside Government Center. Upstairs, the cavernous ultra-modern third-floor newsroom houses a small, bustling army. Posted on the newsroom bulletin board is a sign: “They Don’t Call Him *Win* for Nothing.”

In his office just off the newsroom, Bill Applegate sprawls on his white couch and chats about his plans to turn WNEV around. Though he is supremely sure of himself, he says he sometimes wonders if “this place, during thirty-five years, has poisoned the minds of the population so deeply that nothing will work, short of dynamite.”

Applegate calls WNEV “the biggest fixing job in the country.” At KPIX in San Francisco, Applegate says, he took the news shows from last to first in no time flat. The claim is slightly exaggerated, but the ratings books do show that KPIX made strong, undisputed progress during Applegate’s tenure.

Applegate describes the style of his revamped newscast as “dynamic, aggressive, professional, direct—none of that green-grocer crap. Strong on investigative reporting, and also quasi-investigative reporting.” If this suggests shallow or sensational journalism, it is meant to convey a message to the viewers: Applegate wants them to know that WNEV not only can but *will* do almost anything to cover a story. He’ll send a reporter to Washington for one day; rent a boat for \$1,000 so his crew can cover an ocean search; go to Minneapolis *live* to cover a local girl’s arrival for a liver transplant.

The content of the news programs at WCVB and WBZ is not radically different from that at WNEV; the real difference is one of style. The rival newscasts are much more low-key, sometimes even dull: what WCVB’s Jim Coppersmith calls “the Perry Como approach to news.” In this age of high-tech news sets, WCVB’s backdrop is absolutely plain, and WBZ’s features a flat map of the world that looks like something left over from the Douglas Edwards days.

With its flashy set and almost frenetic pacing, WNEV’s news gives the impression it’s leading the race, when in fact it is the one playing catch-up.

WBZ general manager Sy Yanoff once worked for Win Baker and now occupies an office that belonged to Baker at WBZ. Yanoff says he owes a lot to Baker and respects him highly; he says he disagrees with people who call Win Baker a George Steinbrenner.

Then Yanoff smiles. “The Yankee fans loved Steinbrenner for buying players and making their team a winner,” he points out. “I don’t see viewers here loving Win for spending \$600,000 to bring them Tom Ellis. They were already watching Tom at another station!”

With Baker taking his lumps in the press and in the ratings, executives at the other stations don’t hesitate to criticize him and his appointees. WBZ news director Jeff Rosser calls Bill Applegate a “coarse, hard, tough human being.” WCVB news director Phil Balboni insists that his news team will never be beaten “by people of that sort.”

Sitting in his huge office at WNEV, responding to questions quietly and thoughtfully, Win Baker does not come across like a Steinbrenner. He does not

(Continued on page 58)

Andrea Baruffi

TV's

R e v o l t i n g



by Simi Horwitz

Compared to his descendants, Dennis was hardly a menace.

YET ANOTHER CURIOSITY has hit the airwaves—the *new* revolting sitcom child. Hip, self-aware, wise, even self-mocking, these kids make Wally and Beaver Cleaver seem like . . . well, like kids. The Cleaver boys, Dennis the Menace, and all the others were naughty, but nice. Every episode, they'd undergo a learning experience, with a wise parent or teacher summing up the lesson: A mischievous deed is not really funny; a mean-spirited thought can come to no good. And by the end of the show, order would be restored to family and moral universe. Everyone was pleased.

It was pat, perhaps, but at least it was benign. Beaver and Dennis and the whole *Father Knows Best* brood were fundamentally innocent. Today's television children are not. They are, in fact, miniature adults who know everything about everything. Smooth and witty talkers, they're quick with the one-liner, and quicker still when they're putting someone else down.

The prototype for these little monsters was probably Mason Reese, the boy with the carrot top and elderly features who made some commercials and did the talk-show circuit a few years ago. Reese's rightful successor, and the television child who best typifies the current breed, is Gary Coleman, who plays Arnold, the eleven-year-old on *Diff'rent Strokes*.

Arnold is the master of what passes on television today for wit. He deploys it to control his environment and undermine adult authority. In one episode, for instance, when Arnold begs to be taken to the movies, his father asks, "What about your pride?" Without missing a beat, Arnold cheerily says, "Fortunately, I don't have any!" No adult is going to

teach a child any lessons in *this* sitcom.

Though Arnold is skilled at evasive verbal maneuvers, he can also be painfully direct. Upon encountering a derelict in the park, he asks, "What's it like being a bum?" Then he catches himself and recovers: "I mean . . . a happy wanderer?" This is not the blunt candor of an innocent: Arnold's playing the hipster here, more David Letterman than Dennis the Menace. The effect is not pleasant.

In appearance, too, Coleman is a peculiar cross between child and adult. Like Mason Reese, he's a fairly unprepossessing little boy—very small, with a bloated face. Perhaps to some he looks cherubic. But Coleman's appearance is the result of a kidney disorder, because of which he will never grow very much. He is destined to play an elfin creature who looks real cute propped up on someone's lap. For *Diff'rent Strokes* to exploit Coleman's handicap is grotesque.

Although Coleman takes the prize as the most bizarre child on television today, paler versions of his Arnold character populate a host of prime-time comedies, including *Silver Spoons*, *Family Ties*, *Star of the Family* and *Joanie Loves Chachi*.

Family Ties zeroes in on the adventures of a decidedly peculiar family: The parents are former sixties radicals, and their children contemporary conservatives. The five-year-old daughter talks about

preparing for the job market while her teenage brother extols the virtues of Reaganomics. "I just love Milton Friedman," he croons. "He's my favorite economist."

Beaver Cleaver's world extended no further than his block, or perhaps his elementary school. But as the strange son in *Family Ties* suggests, today's sitcom children are well-versed in a range of contemporary issues. Economics, politics, human relations, fashion, and sexuality have taken the place of pranks and paper routes in the minds of the television adolescent. The *problems* on which the new shows turn are of a very different magnitude and, significantly, the kids, not their childlike parents, are now the ones with the solutions.

In an episode of *Star of the Family*, a teenage daughter has a heart-to-heart talk with her newly divorced father. The man is upset; he's just been on an awkward date. The girl advises him: "You're not ready. Pop. You've only been divorced seven months. It takes time to get over this. Wherever you look, you see Mom. Give it time, Pop."

Dad, a fire-department chief, asks his daughter what he should do in the meantime.

"It seems to me you're doing fine."

A touching moment follows:

"How did a clam like me get a beauty like you?" he wonders.

Can an adolescent ever be quite this detached? People in their twenties and thirties, and even older, experience pain and conflict when parents divorce. Here, a much younger girl has adjusted to the situation, apparently without undue stress, and is now in a position to give sound advice to her father.

And where did that advice come from, anyway? Certainly not from experience. Has the world of "Dear Abby" pervaded

Simi Horwitz writes regularly for Harper's Bazaar, Self, and Glamour, among other publications.

Is it moral to cloak real-world issues in TV-land clichés?



Ricky of *Silver Spoons* Jennie of *Star of the Family* Jennifer of *Family Ties* Alex of *Family Ties* Arnold of *Diff'rent Strokes*

the entire culture? Is there any truth in such a portrayal, or is television really just pandering to children's fantasies?

It's probably a little of both. Children do seem more like adults today; the naïveté of the Cleaver boys would not be credible in modern prime time (if indeed it ever was). In his recently published *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Neil Postman makes a convincing case that, in our culture, the very concept of childhood has been eroded. In large part, he lays the blame on television, arguing that the medium lets children in on all the kinds of knowledge that used to be contained only in books—knowledge children could not share before they learned to read.

Since television makes children and adults privy to the same information about the world, they now all belong to the same club. It is no accident, Postman asserts, that children today are sporting designer clothes, committing adult crimes, becoming addicted to both alcohol and drugs, and even committing suicide in record numbers.

Clearly we have come a long way from the days of *Make Room for Daddy*. But just because new programs flirt with real-world issues doesn't necessarily mean they're realistic.

Consider the case of *Silver Spoons*, a new series about a wealthy ne'er-do-well and his twelve-year-old computer-whiz son. The premise of this comedy is the complete reversal of roles between father and son; over and over again, Ricky Stratton, by dint of his mental agility and maturity, bails his father out of trouble. On one occasion Mom arrives home unexpectedly. Unaware she's in the house, Dad bounds into the room dressed in an ape suit. Since Mom is contemptuous of Dad's childish ways, Ricky has to think fast. He turns to the leaping simian and says, "Have you seen my father? Will you please go and get him?"

Dad figures out what's up and waddles out of the room; he returns a few moments later as a properly dressed father (complete with pipe and smoking jacket),

accompanied by his secretary, who has obligingly donned the ape suit.

Rarely, if ever, is a twelve-year-old this masterful except in his wishes and dreams. And that's exactly what *Silver Spoons* seems to be: extended fantasies, rich with oedipal undertones, about a child's mastery of his family.

There's a good, if somewhat cynical, reason why television programmers would want to offer such a fantasy of youthful omnipotence to their viewers. In the last few years, the networks have seen their adolescent audiences drift away in increasing numbers to video-game arcades and movie theaters. The current crop of sitcoms probably represents their attempt to woo this audience back to television.

Movies lately have been drawing the young teen with sex fantasies, and though the networks can't match the explicitness of a *Blue Lagoon* or a *Private Lessons*, there's always innuendo.

"Are you a monk?" Ricky asks his dad. "Since I've been here you haven't gone on any dates. . . . I understand that a man has needs."

"You do?"

"Yes. I do too. . . . Only I'm too young to do anything about them."

There's something unwholesome about the way these shows handle sexuality; they wink and leer at it. The source of humor, such as it is, is the spectacle of children trying to act like adults or, more precisely, like adults on television.

In one *Silver Spoons* episode, Ricky falls in love with a girl at school and, to impress her, swaggers and brags. One of his school chums refers to Ricky's performance as "stud time." After each of his awkward moves (and, predictably, there are many), Ricky bangs his forehead with the palm of his hand. Of course, this is not the gesture of a child—or anyone else, for that matter—but a cliché that situation comedies use to depict embarrassment.

Evidently the fact that all Ricky's moves are derived from television doesn't bother the girl he's trying to im-

press. On the contrary, it turns her on: She agrees to go out with him. And Ricky, in his moment of triumph, purrs, "Pick you up at noonish."

The scene is supposed to be fetching, but it comes across as sleazy. Sophistication comes with time; a prepubescent boy cooing, "Pick you up at noonish" is obviously an imposter.

Postman writes that television gives kids answers to questions they haven't asked yet, and thus helps to speed their maturation. This is probably true enough, but what is even more worrisome is the quality of those answers. To explore budding sexuality on television is one thing; to cloak it in unctuous sitcom clichés is quite another. According to programs like *Silver Spoons*, growing up is really a process of acquiring the stupid mannerisms of television's adults.

Soon after Alex, the teenage Reaganite on *Family Ties*, has his first sexual experience, with a college girl, she loses interest in him. The woman dumping the man after a sexual encounter is a switch on an old theme. But when Alex moans, "I feel so cheap," the writers have reduced a potentially interesting situation, and the authenticity of Alex's pain, to a mere gag.

This phony treatment of real-life issues is the most disturbing aspect of the new sitcoms about children. For despite the endless, self-conscious contemporary references, these shows are finally no different in structure from *Leave It to Beaver*.

That is the real problem. For today's sitcoms subject their youthful heroes to conflicts and experiences that are much more complicated and painful than any Beaver Cleaver ever had to go through—divorce, first love, sex discrimination, racial tensions—yet the heroes emerge unscathed, self-satisfied. Such issues do not lend themselves to glib answers and happy endings. But that doesn't mean television should stay away from such subjects and retreat to the unreality of previous TV shows. To subject children to adult issues is not necessarily immoral; to lie to them about those issues is. ■

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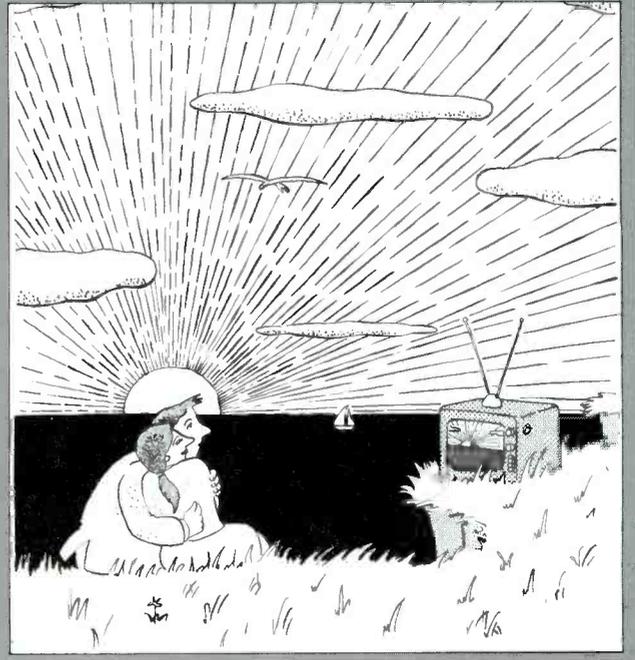
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Television's Reality . . . and My Own

by William A. Henry III



ALL MY LIFE I have been told that I am “a child of the television generation,” a phrase that seems to have become part of the vernacular without anyone quite defining its meaning. Are those of us who cannot remember a time without television really so different from the generations that preceded us? If so, how has television changed us? What is new and unique in the way my age-mates view the world?

One thing I know for certain is that I, and most of my friends, instinctively speak of “television” doing this or that as though the medium were one all-embracing force rather than a reflection of individual minds. Indeed, most of us seem to feel we have a fully developed emotional relationship with television, as though it were a family member—perhaps the lovable but slightly tedious uncle who on every holiday tells the same corny jokes.

As a child, I ran to my mother whenever catastrophe struck, not only to have my physical or psychic wounds bound, but also to have the calamity explained. As an adult I run to television for solace. In times of personal turmoil it provides familiarity, emotional connection, and the promise of resolution. In times of national or world trouble it provides information, a soothing sense of being in touch—the same sense, deep down, that I got at my mother’s knee.

When I ponder how to characterize this all-seeing surrogate parent, the phrase that comes to mind is “normal.” Television may bring me the words and images of kooks, showboats, even enemies of my country, but the intelligence that delivers such eccentricities is itself the essence of normalcy; more clearly than any voice I hear in any other part of my life, the voice of television rings with absolute self-assurance about what normalcy is. There is, of course, a conundrum inherent in my feelings. Does television’s view of what is normal strike some deep resonance in me because of the awesome knowledge possessed by the people behind the medium? Or is television so persuasive simply because I know it is the one experience shared by virtually all my contemporaries, and therefore, of necessity, the source of my

With this essay, William A. Henry III begins a regular column in Channels. An associate editor of Time magazine, Henry received the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for criticism while covering television for the Boston Globe.

generation’s norms? In other words, does television recognize what is normal, or does it define what is normal and compel us to recognize its view?

I don’t think I know my own psychology, let alone anyone else’s, well enough to answer that question. But I tend to believe it is impossible to overestimate television’s instructive power. I am a writer, and therefore a reader; so are almost all of the people I have worked with at every job I have ever had. But when my co-workers and I chat over lunch or while indulging ourselves in writer’s block, conversation almost inevitably turns to television, or at the least to metaphors and allusions that presuppose an intimate knowledge of television. As much as Shakespeare and the Bible, *I Love Lucy* and *The Honeymooners* are the archetypes of my generation’s culture, the wellspring of our vision.

Some critics and social thinkers have professed great horror at people’s emotional attachment to television and its individual characters: television, they say, provides the delusion of a relationship, when in fact the object of an audience’s love is either wholly fictitious or utterly unacquainted with the members of his or her adoring throng. The same, of course, might be said of every character in every play, poem, or novel, and of nearly every hero in war or politics. The relationship that is real and important is not between the admired and the admiring, but among the admiring. Culture gives us a common emotional shorthand. When I describe someone as Falstaffian or Puckish, people readily understand what I mean. Even more people understand, more quickly, when I say someone is an Eddie Haskell, or a Ralph Kramden, or a Ted Baxter, or an Archie Bunker. Having come to the same conclusions about those characters gives me and my peers a sense of shared values and morals. That emotional unity may have political virtues in a country so big, so diverse, and so mobile. Without some common culture, I would have almost no basis, except suspicion, on which to relate to a Texas oilman, for instance. Our lives coincide at almost no other points. But *Dallas* gives me the conviction that his America is also, in some way, mine; *Fame* and *Love, Sidney* and *Lou Grant* give him the certainty that my America is also his.

Looking closer to home, I know that I, a suburban New Jersey go-getter who broke into journalism in his early teens, and my wife, a laid-back New Hampshire farm girl, could never have

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transformed our misfit attraction into a lasting love without a sense of common culture, of which television was the strongest bond. It enabled us to overcome our differences and discover, in our shared responses and memories, the subtle ways in which we are much the same. Sara Teasdale's poetry or Renoir's paintings or Beethoven's blasting symphonies may have performed the same task for generations gone by. But I cannot believe that any other common experience can give quite the sense of union that television does.

I do not mean to suggest that I spend long hours in front of the television set. My job does not afford time for that, and my social tastes are still for crowds, friends, evenings out. But as anyone who has ever had a romance (or a lasting palship) knows, frequency of contact is not the only measure of devotion. My mother, who is not part of the television generation, actually watches far more television than I do, and has abiding attachments to many more shows. But television is not her reality. It does not provide for her a sense of being linked to a larger world. Her world is tangible, and close to home—the school where she teaches, her friends, her neighbors, her civic groups and gossip circles. She does not look to television to explain human nature, to teach norms, to give her common ground with strangers.

This difference may in part reflect our contrasting levels of ambition: Mine is still a raging blaze, hers the easier warmth of embers. But I think it was television, and the world it opened to me, that filled me with dreams. Richard Nixon listened to trains at night; Jimmy Carter heard Franklin Delano Roosevelt accept renomination on the radio; I and my driven age-mates actually saw the great and near-great, close up, the camera inches from their faces, and we too yearned for glory. More than money, more than power, more than happiness, the brightest minds of my generation seem driven by the urge for fame. Television provides so perfect a vehicle for the famous; it assembles an unimaginably large crowd, then makes the fame-seeker the center of attention. For those of us who came to know the world by watching, being watched is the ultimate expression of success.

I still come to know the world in large part by watching, and television has shaped the way I think. The journalism I write, the popular literature I read, depends increasingly on the evocation of sight and sound, on anecdotes and snippets of quotation and the world-spanning juxtapositions that the camera and the satellite have taught us to expect. The only academic subject over which I ever struggled in a state of hopeless incomprehension was mathematical logic. It required a tight, lockstep chain of reasoning that I found alien. It was deductive; television is inductive. Storytelling on television, whether in news or in entertainment, leaves out large chunks and expects the audience to fill in the blanks. Television glosses over lacunae in the plot, and we willingly suspend our disbelief. It gives us actors whose personalities and quirks define their roles; as a result, even actions that seem faithless to the character as written are made acceptable in the playing, and we learn to accept illogic and inconsistency without protest. This style of narration did not arise newborn in the 1950s; in many ways it is drawn from the whimsical and multiple plots of eighteenth-century picaresque novels. But when Fielding or Richardson wrote, the continuing thread was the voice of the narrator, giving the story shape and context. When watching television, we fulfill much of that role ourselves, and thus make the lapses in logic our own.

Perhaps the most deeply felt impact of television, and almost

certainly the most often noted, is that the television reality of an event becomes its only reality. When I attended a live performance of *Saturday Night Live* a few years ago, sitting in one of the best seats in the house, I found that watching the actors perform on stage was distant, unsatisfying. I, and everyone around me who had begged, wheedled, cajoled, pleaded to get these hottest of admission tickets, looked instead at the dozens of television monitors strung around us. The urge to watch the screen instead of the event extends far beyond happenings conceived for television. At both the 1976 political conventions, I used my array of passes to traverse the corridors, wander in to listen to the speeches, chat up the dozens of political and media figures I had met while covering the campaign. But I felt I had no real sense of what was happening. Finally, frustrated, I retired to my hotel room, turned on the television, and at last felt I was back in the flow of events. At football games I involuntarily wait for the instant replay; a technological boon that has, alas, taught my eyes to be lazy, allowed my attention to slacken, because there will always be another chance.

I still come to know the world in large part by watching, and television has shaped the way I think

As we await the much-heralded television revolution, with its promise of glorious choice and its threat of fragmenting our global village into many small constituencies of taste, we have to wonder whether the second television generation will be much like our own. If video experiences are no longer so widely shared, if television no longer seems a window upon the whole world, will its emotional hold diminish? Or will it become, in another aspect of the parent's role, an instrument of personal, private, even self-absorbed gratification? Whoever can answer these questions with confidence deserves a place of pride on Wall Street. I know only that I still revel in my sense of television as a telescope, and that the thought of television as a mirror seems to me alien—as alien, perhaps, as it was for my great-grandparents to think that a man might fly. ■



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Socialist Realism on the Czech Evening News

by Jan Novak



WHEN I ARRIVED in America from Czechoslovakia, NBC News announcer Roger Mudd was the third person to welcome me—just after the immigration and customs officers. I smiled at the face on the monitor at the airport, as I had at the officers, because I was looking forward to watching “objective” Western news at last. I heard a flood of incredibly speedy phrases and saw scenes changing more quickly than I’d ever witnessed before. I had the impression that the announcer was rushing to tell his story in the five scant seconds remaining before his death. And, indeed, he quickly disappeared, replaced by a commercial.

Startled by this American news broadcast, I couldn’t avoid recalling the last one I’d seen at home in Czechoslovakia. The newscaster, whose name I’ve never known, was sitting in an empty room, reading in the monotonous tone of a schoolteacher reciting a compulsory lesson. I could have switched to our other channel, but I knew I’d only be seeing the same news in the same words and images.

The differences between American and Czech news broadcasts do not reflect a disparity in technical standards. They stem from television’s differing political and social roles in our societies. The

Jan Novak is a pseudonym for a citizen of Czechoslovakia.

Czech anchorman is the visual incarnation of our government’s pervasive authority—with all its rigidity and incontestability. To me, his American counterpart represents one of many alternative opinions. The Czech is rigid, bureaucratic, impersonal, and serious; the American, in contrast, seems relaxed, original, and above all, persuasive.

Czech television is also supposed to be persuasive, of course. More than 80 percent of Czech families have a television set. It is our most influential medium, even with only two channels (though neither broadcasts for a full twenty-four hours, and just one is in color). Television is strictly controlled because Communist Party policy stipulates that it is a crucial part of a citizen’s ideological education.

Indeed, the present government has never forgotten television’s decisive role in the “Prague Spring” of 1968. For the ideas about freedom of expression and cultural independence that inspired the reform received their main national exposure on television. In 1968, Czech television reached its peak of independence; journalists articulated political concepts that never would have been permitted earlier. Student meetings criticizing the government were broadcast, and previously taboo subjects, such as the suicide of Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk, were investigated. Czech citizens, suddenly aware of their right to speak, demanded to be heard. The emergence of their

voices gave Czech television a new and refreshing credibility.

But on August 21, 1968, Soviet tanks entered Prague. Television went off the air completely for several days. When broadcasts finally resumed, the old familiar mode reasserted itself, signaling far more than a stylistic change. The Czech government had reimposed its control over television. Most journalists who’d been active before the Soviet invasion were fired and banned from resuming their work.

Today’s television journalists have learned that self-censorship is necessary if they expect to keep their jobs. The limits of “what is permitted” never need be codified, for fear dictates its own immutable guidelines.

Czech news now puts a political slant on reports by means of none-too-subtle subject choices and story juxtapositions. Unemployed people demonstrate in the streets of Paris; peace marches sweep through Germany; inflation ravages living standards in Belgium. Invariably following such reports from the West are pieces about record wheat harvests in the Soviet Union, or reports on newly automated assembly lines in one Czech factory or another. No news broadcast is complete without obligatory testimony from contented workers about the methods they’re using to increase productivity.

Czech news also pays special attention

David G. Klein

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The Test of a Good Show

by Richard F. Shepard

to the vocabulary accompanying its images. Reports on the West describe "the impoverishment of the working class" or "the suppression of the basic human right to work." Reports from the East praise "further improvement in the standard of living" or "the completion of the construction of socialism."

This attention to language was particularly evident during the Polish unrest in 1980. On Czech television, references to the Solidarity Union were always preceded by the phrase "so-called." Strikes were called "interruptions of work," and strikers were "provocateurs." (The term "strike" was reserved for Western workers struggling for their rights.)

Czech television showed no scenes of Polish demonstrations, and sought to weaken Solidarity's credibility by showing long lines waiting at empty shops, or meetings between Solidarity leaders and Catholics. (Many Czechs, especially in Bohemia, are traditionally anticlerical.) And when a Solidarity leader, captured on Czech soil after the imposition of martial law, told a Czech interviewer that he didn't care about his own father's fate, the scene was often replayed as evidence that "monsters" lurked behind the Solidarity movement.

These simplifications, however, work against television's own credibility. For the "facts" on television rarely equate with people's daily experience, or with other more trusted sources of news, such as the BBC or the Voice of America. If there are such successful socialist harvests, Czechs wonder, why is there so much invective against the U.S. embargo on grain sales to Russia? Why is there so little food in the shops?

Contradictions such as these undermine almost completely the average Czech's trust in television news; often, in fact, Czechs believe precisely the opposite of what television tells them. They are likely to have glorified ideas of life in Western countries, commonly underestimating, for instance, the extent of Western unemployment. Unfortunately, citizens wind up as poorly informed as if they believed everything they were told.

Czech television has succeeded in its aim of creating a falsely informed, or misinformed, populace—though in a way it surely never intended. For rather than believing in a black-and-white image of the world, the people place their faith in a white-and-black one that is little closer to the truth. Still, with no way of verifying any of the alternatives, they are condemned to living in a state of perpetual uncertainty—in which the possibilities for political action are all but eliminated.

TELEVISION may be one of the most surveyed fields in civilization, but one aspect of it invariably goes unpolled: There is no common knowledge of how intently a viewer is watching, although we are minutely informed of *what* he is watching. We know there are programs that the masses tune in; we know that people switch their dials from one telecast to another, and that at certain moments of high tension and emotion in news or drama, attention is at a peak. But how long can a viewer be that attentive? Few are the households that can batten down the hatches for more than an hour of uninterrupted concentration on the screen.

For instance, a Shakespeare play, splendidly acted and beautifully produced in a three-hour production, may enthrall you in the theater or screening room, but it competes with the cycle of life in the home. Gone are the days when rooms were blacked out and the new medium was enshrined in the parlor—where the unaccustomed spectacle of entertainment kept audiences, quiet and rapt, on folding chairs set up as though for a meeting. Today, one lolls while watching. Lights are on, telephones ring, work is done, and uninterested members of the family may even speak while others attempt to savor the luxuriant Shakespearean English being uttered by the finest cast ever assembled in the Greenwich mean time zone.

There has been much talk about television news giving us only headlines. But consider trying to synthesize the information in a three-part report, in as many nights, on such topics as pollution, nuclear energy, disarmament, or the economy. The report may be accurate, reasonably full, and well explained, but it defies absorption, requiring as it does that the mind retain last night's information and juxtapose it with tonight's.

As a former third-string television reviewer, I am keenly aware of the distinction between concentrated viewing and relaxed watching. I felt called upon as a reviewer to watch as though I were scanning a diamond for the most minor flaw. There were Westerns to be candled like eggs and situation comedies to be studied as though they were rare comets (such was the fare for third-string reviewers in the 1950s). Reviewing then was done

right off the screen, and reviews were written that night for the morning edition. Concentration was everything.

When I ceased this pursuit, I found I enjoyed television much more because I did not have to concentrate on it. What a pleasure to be able to read a book or a newspaper once I had glanced at the screen and set the scene! At that point television began to function for me as radio had when I was a youngster—as something to be listened to while I was doing something else. The test of a good show was in whether it made me give it my complete attention. Now *there* was a concentration rating.

Today, I look forward to certain programs so much that I won't take telephone calls while they are on. Even so, the telephone does ring; someone else in my household, less riveted than I am, usually answers it, and my concentration is destroyed until I learn who, what, and when about the caller.

Occasionally others in the house will observe that although the set is on, carefully tuned to what appears to be the least of all evils in the program listings, I do not seem to be watching at all. This is only partially true. One part of my mind is following the action, but the other parts are far from it. Perhaps it is because I grew up in the city, with the need to be enveloped in a cocoon of noise.

Television has become part of our lives, although we concentrate on it no more than we do on wallpaper. In hospital sickrooms and even in waiting rooms, the television is on, flashing meaningless images that do no more than anchor us, in our anguish, to the world outside our own fears and worries. We don't concentrate, but we depend on it as intravenous nourishment for our depressed senses.

Why should this be a subject for research? At the moment, it would not appear to have much significance in terms of profit: Advertisers have long since learned that successful commercials must hammer viewers over the head in hard-sell staccato, separating them from the body of a program in intensity and loudness. But it might tell us something about ourselves and our way of life. Concentrate on that for a second before the commercial comes back on. ■

Richard F. Shepard is a cultural news reporter at The New York Times.

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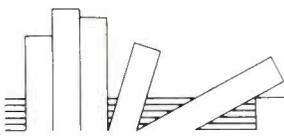
The 1983 Field Guide to the New Electronic Envi-

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Revenge of the Teenage Role Models



**TV and Teens/Experts
Look at the Issues**
*by the staff of Action for
Children's Television*
edited by Meg Schwarz
Addison-Wesley, \$13.95

WHEN THIRTY-FOUR "EXPERTS" on teenagers and television converge to "look at the issues," you can start waving your forefinger in time to the moral music. The melody is played in the sociological key by Action for Children's Television. You've heard the number before: Television promotes ageist, sexist, racist stereotypes; it fails to present accurate news, or adequate information on careers and health, to adolescents. What's needed? Shows dramatizing conflicts that young persons encounter in daily life—realistic stuff. Enough of J.R. and the Fonz; time for uplifting dramas, lucid and compelling, on teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, drug use (not to forget the shallower adolescent abysses, getting acne and being shorter than your girlfriend). Here's the right idea: an ABC *Afterschool Special* in which "a shy boy learns that color and age difference have no meaning among friends." No meaning?

Remind you a little of Socialist Realism—boy meets girl meet tractor? The favored genre in *TV and Teens* is Liberal Romance, in which girl/boy meets prejudice, humiliates bigot, and succeeds. Ah, the pleasures of propaganda filming: "The pilot was short on emotional clout. The youngsters...understood the messages presented and believed them to be true but did not feel emotionally moved to change their personal lives by adapting the attitudes and behavior modeled." Goebbels to Leni Riefenstahl? Rather the research team's report on *Freestyle*, a show for adolescents that advocates "gutsy, nontraditional behavior choices." Choices to which the show attempts "emotionally" to direct its audience. Choices?

The thirty-four experts who wrote *TV and Teens* misunderstand television's power to influence its viewers because they subscribe to the "monkey see, mon-

key do" theory of motivation, thinking that simple emulation accounts for most human action. When a kid steps to bat and yells, "Hey, I'm Reggie Jackson," and another puts on a Cosell drone, the social scientist is sure they're "adapting attitudes" from the tube. On the contrary, television has spawned a generation of kid skeptics, kindergarten Diogeneses. What ten-year-old would uncritically "model behavior" on a medium regularly displaying a small man boating in a toilet?

The social scientists think otherwise. Television contributes "to viewers' attitudes and behavior in terms of violence and victimization, sex roles, age roles, academic achievement, family life..." And they have surveys to prove it.

But the surveys give bogus proof. After watching a series portraying women as judges, a group of adolescents is asked what percentage of judges in the United States is female. The viewers suppose the numbers to be higher than do those of a similar age who haven't seen the show. But the survey only addresses the conscious mind. What we'd really like to know—the viewers' unconscious attitudes toward women in power—isn't accessible to direct questioning. Such attitudes are lived out, but are not likely to be what the respondents consciously believe they are. Television does affect its viewers, but as yet we simply do not know how. *TV and Teens* is no help in finding out.

Instead the book gives us that stale sociological conceit, the "role model." Do the young model their behavior on figures they admire? External behavior maybe, and then only briefly and sporadically.

Genuine influence involves ambivalence: a powerful love-hate bond with an admired figure. Under actual influence we struggle to maintain our individual character while incorporating what's desirable in the other person or image. Such influence occurs internally and is largely unconscious. "Role modeling," as the name suggests, means acting, getting up a calculated identity. Under the least pressure, the role slides away. So far there is little reason to consider television capable of the powerful influence that shapes a character.

The book is politically as well as psychologically naive. Though network television is legally bound to serve the public, one can hardly ask a commercial medium to go therapeutic. The sort of meliorative programming *TV and Teens* seeks is compatible with public, noncommercial ownership of the networks, which the group may not be quite ready to urge. Instead it has a portfolio of healthy ideas it wants transmitted to the young. Sol Gordon, Ph.D., tells teens that, "Of the ten most important things in a relationship, sex is number nine. Number one is loving and caring. Two is a sense of humor. Three is communicating, and ten is sharing household tasks." What about four through eight?

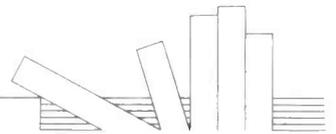
Doctor Gordon aside, the only sense of humor to be found in the book belongs to Richard Peck, whose article, "Teenage Stereotyping," suggests that he's talked to a few adolescents in the last decade. The thirty-three remaining experts no doubt have tried; perhaps the shrill grinding of axes close by has drowned the kids out.

MARK EDMUNDSON

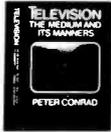


Patrick McDonnell

Mark Edmundson teaches English at Yale University, where he is completing work on his doctorate.



The Small Screen Strikes Back



Television: The Medium and Its Manners
by Peter Conrad
Routledge & Kegan Paul
\$12.95

WHY DO WE LOVE to hate television? Our resentful infatuation with the medium forms the kernel of inquiry in this refreshing book. Englishman Peter Conrad strongly allies himself with his readers when he admits that he will go on watching television and that he will go on feeling guilty about doing so.

Conrad calls *Television: The Medium and Its Manners* an "inquiry into the relation between form and content." His approach is semiological, and the tools he uses are imagination, argument, and (God bless him) wit. Given that his previous books include *Romantic Opera and Literary Form*, and *Shandyism: The Character of Romantic Irony*, and that he is currently a lecturer in English at Christ Church, Oxford, the overriding impression is of an erudite nonexpert sitting in front of the television, asking himself, Just what the devil is going on here? (But this should not be played up too much; journalist Conrad contributes regularly to the *Observer* and to the *Times Literary Supplement*.)

In the course of separate chapters discussing the medium's staples—talk shows, soap operas, game shows, ads, news programs, and drama—he shows how television is the most modern of modern appliances, in that its offer to free us from the chore of entertaining ourselves is in fact an invitation to slavery.

As Conrad writes, "The original technological revolution was about saving time, shortcutting labor; the consumerism which is the latest installment of that revolution is about wasting the time we've saved, and the institution it deputes to serve that purpose is television." Thus, while the hero of capitalism was the miser, the new hero of consumerism is the big spender, and through a variety of forms television serves to persuade us to do just that—spend.

The game shows in particular are not only celebrations of affluence—wherein the players are whipped into a frenzy of

Peter Elsworth is a British writer living in New York.

avarice and "bounce, squeak, and gibber like wind-up toys manically out of control"—but many, such as *The Price is Right*, are tests of consumer competence.

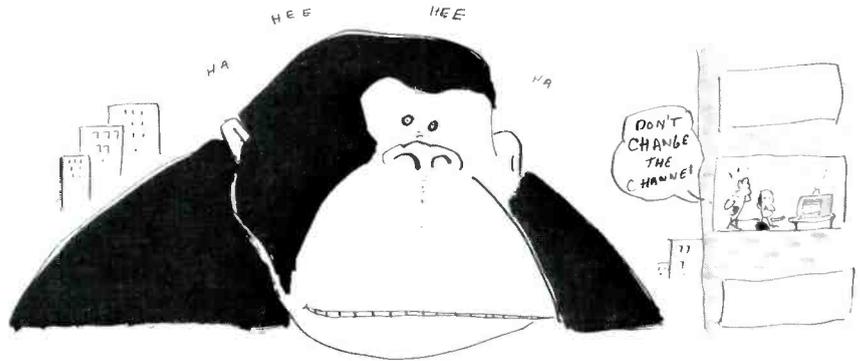
Television advertising has also changed, from the peddling of utilitarian goods, which will do something for us, to the marketing of feelings and sentiments, of objects that will do something to us. Conrad cites two examples: ads offering the metaphorical restoration of innocence, which for us all means childhood, typically through such images as grandma's farmhouse cooking, and ads offering to "Westernize" the suburban majority of us through such images as automobiles thundering through wide-open landscapes or perched improbably on the edges of mesas.

Conrad gets in the usual licks against

Overall, Conrad argues, television tends to domesticate (diminish, trivialize) its content. He cites the example of the opera *La Gioconda*, which was offered to television viewers as an improvement on the live performance. Just "sit down, settle back, and watch"—and avoid the detracting extra expense, jostling crowds, and noisy chaos of the real thing.

This example underscores Conrad's argument that television's "form encroaches on or determines content." Television's form, essentially, "deprives people of their individuality, flattening and reducing them . . . down to fit its small screen."

One of Conrad's most interesting observations concerns the medium's aim "to contrive an equation between what happens on television and what happens



the talk shows: "celebrations of visibility" for the "repertory company of the professionally famous." And he points out a number of interesting differences between American and British news shows: While American news studios are designed to look like planetary nerve centers, in which the anchors serve as "totems of paternal trust," the British news shows "cosily confirm tribal unity."

Likewise, the difference between Britain's familial myth of an ascribed hierarchy with assigned places for everyone, and America's log-cabin-to-White-House myth of democratic opportunity, is mirrored in the respective nations' soaps. American soaps are "preoccupied with psychological grief or sexual torment," while British ones are "preoccupied with social cohesion, about which they are patronizingly conservative."

in front of it." Thus, during her own "endless afternoon," the bored and lonely housewife can engage in fantasies playing on "the dissolution of the enchainning family" by watching the soaps. Later, together with her family, she can watch the sitcoms, which "celebrate the family's regroupment at the end of the day." The evening news shows, with their grave announcements of the day's events, are similarly counterbalanced later on by Johnny Carson's satiric bedtime banter about the self-same events.

Whether television will continue to reflect its "miniaturization of ourselves" despite the advent of cable remains to be seen. For the time being, according to Conrad, the medium remains governed by its own "electronic definition of good citizenship"—the Nielsen ratings.

PETER C. T. ELSWORTH

Patrick McDonnell

BOSTON

(Continued from page 44)

seem terribly disturbed by all the criticism, perhaps because he views the past six months as only a small part of a grand vision.

The plan, which Baker says he has been developing for years, involves eliminating all syndicated programs from the station's line-up, filling all non-network slots with local shows, developing *Look* to the utmost, and sparing no expense on his news shows. A skinflint station, Baker feels, could remain Number One through the 1980s, be exceedingly profitable, and then see the bottom drop out a few years later. Baker's lavish spending may seem insane by 1983 standards; it could seem visionary a decade hence.

"Network viewing has passed its peak," Baker says. "We've seen constant erosion of the network share in prime time. Cable and pay television are chipping away and it's all downhill from here. At the same time the members of the 'triopoly' [the networks] are seeing their costs skyrocket. This is a bad combination.

"I believe that one of the Big Three will fold. If one of the networks bites the dust you'll have 200 stations out there without a source of programming. Most are just

button-pushers. If the traditional distribution system breaks down they won't know what to do. If a lot of original cable programming has come into an area, if satellites are sending shows directly to homes, and sports goes mostly pay cable, there'll be no place for these stations."

"I agree completely with Baker that only one station will survive," says WCVB's Phil Balboni. "It's like with newspapers. One by one, stations will fold and leave one giant in each major area. It's like the *Globe* in Boston. As the other papers fell away the *Globe* was able to improve itself in every department so that now it meets the needs of practically everyone. It was always Number One but now it's *unassailable*. "That's why this is such an important time for all of us."

When the ratings for October came in, WCVB's Bob Bennett could barely contain his glee. They showed, he said, that WNEV's position had actually declined since the Dream Team's debut. (For the month of October, WNEV had a thirteen share of the audience at six o'clock.)

"If that happened to me," Bennett says. "I'd be ready for the booby hatch. But we developed credibility you can't buy overnight. No one's going to come in here, throw a rock through our window, and take that credibility away."

Perhaps, but it is too soon to count

Baker out. One of the lessons taught by Bennett's own success at WCVB is that the Boston viewer prizes a station with strong roots in the community. And the fact is that today, WNEV is the only locally owned station in Boston. As WNEV executives readily admit, this is their strongest card, though they have misplayed it up to now.

So the question becomes, can WNEV beat WCVB at localism—a game WCVB virtually invented? Certainly Baker has been dealt a difficult hand; localism is *already* so powerful a force in Boston that it has made the market a national anomaly: Where else does the CBS affiliate—WNEV—run last while the NBC affiliate—WBZ—runs near the top?

How can WNEV possibly build a stronger local image than its rivals have?

With money, local ownership, and time. Baker is betting. But as he himself is keenly aware, there may simply not be *enough* time. Cable will soon come to Boston (it's already in the suburbs), and it will probably come with a vengeance, since Cablevision promises to charge only \$2 a month for basic service. WNEV will surely make a move on its rivals within the next two years; the question is whether it can move to the front of the pack—no longer just a good place but, if Baker is right, the only place for a local station to be. ■

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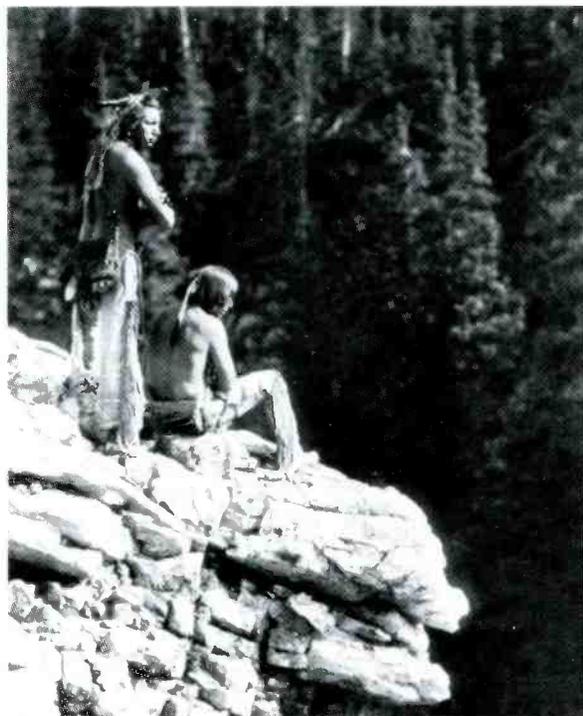
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Roland Heed; Courtesy of Kramer Gallery

P R O G R A M NOTES

Nicholas Nickleby

Raising the Dickens in Prime Time

CHARLES DICKENS, for the second time, is changing the way people get their popular entertainment.

The first time came in the early 1830s, when books were so expensive that only the affluent could afford them. Dickens's first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, was issued in serialized form, each installment contained in a cheap monthly pamphlet. This innovation worked so well that it revolutionized publishing and built a vast new audience for the novel.

The second time will come the week of January 10, when *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*—which, at \$100 a ticket, only the affluent could see on Broadway—reaches American audiences free, by a route that directly challenges the network system. To bring Dickens to television, a fourth network will take to the air for virtually an entire week of prime time. Ordinarily, this would not cause much loss of sleep among network executives, who scarcely consider Dickens a ratings threat. But the fact that the temporary network will steal dozens of NBC, ABC, and CBS affiliates, many in major markets, has, in the words of *Variety*, cast a Dickensian pall over the big three.

The ad hoc network, which will carry the nine-hour Royal Shakespeare Company production over four consecutive nights, is being assembled by SFM, the program distributor, on behalf of the Mobil Corporation. SFM is persuading affiliates to defect by paying them more for the use of their air-time than the networks do. Not surprisingly, those most willing to jump ship have been NBC's affiliates, for whom the network's standard fare has been something less than lucrative. NBC affiliates in such important markets as Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, Hartford/New Haven and Charlotte have



Nicholas Nickleby (Roger Rees)
and *Wackford Squeers* (Alun Armstrong)

signed on to carry *Nickleby*. This does much more than embarrass the network: It means that NBC's prime-time shows will earn ratings zeros in each of these cities for the greater part of a week. Average all those zeros into the national ratings, and NBC has a disaster on its hands.

NBC is not the only network worrying about Dickens. Scott Michels, CBS vice president for affiliate relations, has also been busy trying to stem a tide of defections. He recently said in the trade press, "We've told our stations that nine hours is an enormous amount of time, and would cause a serious disruption in normal viewing habits. We're usually introducing new programs during that period and beginning our promotional buildup for the February sweeps. *Nickleby* would wipe us out for most of a week." If *Nick-*



"Dickens' stock characters, eccentrics,
and grotesques take to the small screen
as if they were prime time regulars."

leby establishes the viability of ad hoc networks on so grand a scale, Dickens will have jeopardized far more than a week's ratings.

A stage production of a nineteenth century English classic, bereft of any stars or "production values," might seem an improbable vehicle with which to storm the network battlements. It isn't. *Nickleby* works wonderfully as television, but not because it departs so radically from typical prime-time fare (though certainly the writing and acting here are of a higher order). In fact *Nickleby* is great television precisely because of all it has in common with the shows it's preempting. Indeed, once viewers get accustomed to the frank theatricality of the production (when the script calls for snow, actors are seen dumping buckets of white flakes from catwalks overhead), they will discover that earnest Nicholas and his fair sister Kate, their heartless uncle and hysterical mother, are quite as comfortable in American living rooms as the most durable prime-time regulars.

That *Nickleby* works so well on the small screen shouldn't surprise anyone: serial publication imposed many of the same conventions as series television, and the adaptation turns them to its advantage. Perhaps the most important is the episodic structure: The Dickens reader, like the television viewer, had to be able to pick up and put down the story repeatedly without becoming lost. Like the premises of a hundred sitcoms and melodramas, the plot of *Nickleby* is really just a rickety contraption for getting the central characters in and out of a variety of situations, treacherous and humorous by turns. Nicholas is exiled to Dotheboys Hall, Kate poses for Miss LaCreevy, Nicholas does a stint with the Crummles acting troupe. Indeed, the whole of this *Nickleby* is much less than the sum of its parts. But the company makes the parts dazzle so, that we scarcely notice the coincidences, wills, codicils to wills, and other improbabilities Dickens carts in to conclude his story happily.

Dickens survives the transit to television in much better health than, say, Shakespeare or O'Neill, because he doesn't

ask us for the kind of sustained, close attention they do. American television has no patience for careful, gradual characterization, and neither did Dickens, who has never been accused of subtlety. The RSC actors introduce us to his teeming gallery of eccentrics, grotesques, and assorted stock types with sure, swift strokes. There's nothing subtle about the vile, spluttering Wackford Squeers, or the giant-hearted Newman Noggs, for whom, it's instantly clear, life has proved too stern a match. As television would have it, each character remains scrupulously faithful to our expectations; we feel confirmed every time Squeers, the school-master of every child's darkest dreams, whips the air with his cane, or Noggs tries to clear it of his confusion with a wipe of his hands.

Certainly the most powerful character in *Nickleby* is Smike, the boy Nicholas rescues from Dotheboys Hall, a living hell for unwanted children. Dickens and his Victorian audience had a well-developed taste for the helpless victim, preferably a child. That taste is by no means foreign to us, but one suspects that even the made-for-television movies would stay away from Smike, who could jerk tears from a stone. Dickens has burdened Smike with everything he could think of: retardation, a misshapen skull, a speech impediment, a limp, a case each of rickets and tuberculosis, and, of course, a soul as pure as the driven snow. But astonishingly, David Threlfall has shaped a credible character from this dubious material. Our tears and moral outrage flow, and never do we feel we're being manipulated.

If *Nickleby* and American television seem like one of those "marriages made in heaven" that Dickens cooks up to end his novel, the people who adapted the stage version for television deserve at least part of the credit. The video version leaves nothing out, but neither is it a slavish record of the stage production. Although we see a theater audience at the start and end of each act, most of the taping was done without one, over eight weeks at the Old Vic, and then cut together like a film. Television director Jim Goddard has wisely availed himself of the close-ups, reaction shots, and swift scene changes that tape makes possible. But the smartest decision he made was to have the characters speak directly into the camera whenever they had addressed the audience in the theater. The idea here was to preserve large portions of Dickens's own narrative voice—the humor, irony, and anger of which is typically the first casualty of any adaptation. The tech-

nique worked well on the stage; it works brilliantly on television.

It figures. As television viewers, we like nothing better than to break the theatrical illusions and bid our favorite characters—the news anchormen, the talk-show hosts—to step forward and address us directly, drawing us into what, compared to theater or cinema, is an intimate transaction among friends. When the players in *Nickleby* turn and speak to us, they strike up the kind of comfortably familiar relationship Dickens enjoyed with his readers, the kind we prize from television.

So Charles Dickens, the entertainer who has made himself comfortable in peoples' living rooms for a century-and-a-half, seems to have a flair for television. The programmers who decided to take a flyer on *Nickleby*, giving *M*A*S*H* and *Archie Bunker* and *Little House* the week off, haven't been nearly as daring as they probably thought. For all those sitcoms and melodramas that *Nickleby* will preempt, with their stock characters, implausible plots, and crude sentiment, are really just Dickens writ very, very small.

MICHAEL POLLAN

Kids' Writes

Children's fare with no ulterior motives

“ONE DAY A ROBBER got bored, so he decided to rob a house.” “Our car was broken, so we went into a haunted house.” These are typical first sentences from short stories written by children, and performed by actors and musicians, on *Kids' Writes*, a new weekly program on the children's cable channel, Nickelodeon. The show is based entirely on the stories, poems, letters, and dreams submitted by children. And though the material by itself is not remarkable (unless of course your own child has written one of the selections), the amazing five-



player troupe hardly ever misses turning the kids' scripts into prize performances.

Kids' Writes is remarkable among children's television shows in not having any ulterior motives. It's not meant to teach anything in particular, and it's not trying to plant visions of Pac-Man or Smurf dolls in kids' minds. *Kids' Writes* wants only to entertain, by ingeniously staging the fantasies of a few children in front of several thousand others.

And it does entertain. The show is very, very funny, the original music is infectious, and the pace keeps somersaulting forward. Each of the actors has a striking talent for inventing character and finding drama and comedy in what at first seems unpromising material—and without changing even one of the kids' words.

Kids' Writes starts with a snazzy theme song, and at least two numbers in each half-hour show are musical. Although the show is meant for children from ages nine to twelve, the music's good enough for anyone. In a skit titled “Dog Party,” the actors sing and dance to a tune that could, if released, move its way up the hit parade. The story was written by a five-year-old, and tells of a little boy who wanders downstairs in the middle of the night and crashes the dogs' party he finds swinging in his living room. Steve Riffkin and Jim Mairs, the troupe's two composers, supply live music for the party as Wynn White (the only female performer) and John Rousseau are down on all fours barking and boogying in sync. The little boy is played by Carlo Grossman, who does a child's face impeccably. He gets down with them, and the three dance their hearts out. The scene comes off as though it were carefully choreographed, but it turns out to have been the result of a slightly reworked improvisation.

In fact, *Kids' Writes* takes its premise from a touring theater company that's been directed by Mairs for the past ten years—a luxurious gestation period for a television show. When the program was adapted for Nickelodeon, the performers kept the improvisational feel. At the beginning of each episode an audience of children are asked what animal they would like to see. “A dolphin,” “a cockroach,” “a piranha,” they shout. Without even the equivalent of a football huddle, the actors, clad in two-toned spandex jump-suits, scurry off to bring to life an expressive insect, fish, or beast. When the actors do conspire and rehearse beforehand, a sense of spontaneity remains, but the performances become more lavish, aided by careful use of lighting, set,

and harmonized music.

Although the performers are usually the ones responsible for the high quality of *Kids' Writes*, the stories themselves are sometimes wonderful, following a serendipitous logic available only to children. "The Stardust Conspiracy," for instance, is about two farm boys who feed a bunch of squawking turkeys some unidentified grain, which they don't realize is stardust. They then stand back, amazed, as the turkeys grow seven feet high and ten feet wide. The staging effects are perfect: As the turkeys (off-stage) grow bigger, their noises get deeper and louder; the stage vibrates and the camera draws back as if to take in enormous new dimensions. Terrified, the boys call their uncle Jonathan, who goes into a long ramble about how stardust has strange effects on things when Halley's comet passes the Ethiopian sector of the Universe. Meanwhile the turkeys have eaten the barn. But fortunately, it turns out cranberries counteract the stardust. The turkeys resume their normal size after eating some.



Just as inventive is a story about the gargoyles that ornament the front of Notre Dame Cathedral. Jealous of the attention sightseers give the lovely cathedral bells, the gargoyles conspire to climb off the church façade and jangle the exalted bells night after night, waking up everyone in the city. By destroying the good reputation of the bells, the gargoyles figure, they'll make themselves look better in comparison.

The parents of the child who wrote the gargoyle piece, both lawyers, at first refused to allow *Kids' Writes* to use the story. They felt their child deserved more than a T-shirt and a dictionary for the use of his composition on television. Perhaps he did. But for the most part, the credit for this show's success goes to the performer-creators who, by entertaining rather than trying to teach, bring a refreshing kind of integrity to children's programming. ■

ELIZABETH DENTON

Elizabeth Denton is a writer living in New York.



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NEW AWAKENING

(Continued from page 27)

office in New York, developed television awareness training in the mid-seventies. Its *Viewer's Guide* shows "how we can take command, use TV intelligently and creatively, instead of mindlessly letting TV use us."

Finally there is the first option—getting into the TV business in a big way. There are three outstanding examples of this besides those of the electronic church.

The United States Catholic Conference (USCC) has taken two steps toward keeping its hand in the game. First, an annual Catholic Communications Campaign raises about \$5 million a year, 50 percent of which remains in the local dioceses where it is collected; the other half is used to support the USCC Office of Communications and to award grants to a range of communications-related projects.

Second, the USCC has formed the independent, for-profit Catholic Telecommunications Network of America (CTNA) to provide local dioceses with a variety of satellite-transmitted services: news and photo services for diocesan newspapers, electronic mail, videoconferencing for church leaders, administrative and educational materials, and TV program redistribution. The network, which began transmitting last fall, is supported by voluntary affiliation and maintenance fees from local dioceses—and by the sale of its services to commercial users. As of November 1982, 33 out of 172 local dioceses had signed affiliation contracts. Wassyl Lew, head of CTNA, expects that a number of religious orders, Catholic colleges, universities, and hospitals may eventually affiliate with it. Lew emphasizes the word "telecommunications" rather than "television" in describing the network: Its primary purpose is to provide a communications service for the bishops, though TV programming provided by the network will be available for redistribution to local TV stations or cable systems.

The fifteen hours of programming per week that CTNA currently plans to redistribute include programs on marriage counseling and enrichment; an interview program called *Christopher Close-Ups*; several Bible and theology programs; two Spanish-language programs; a missionary program produced by the Maryknoll religious order, and a variety of magazine-format and entertainment shows. All of this will be produced not by CTNA but largely by religious orders and local dioceses. Lew anticipates that as the system becomes fully operational, some of its downlinks will also serve as uplinks, thus allowing dioceses to be senders as

THE ELECTRONIC CHURCH IS ONE OF THE FEW PLACES ON TELEVISION WHERE YOU ENCOUNTER GENUINELY HOMELY PEOPLE.

well as receivers of TV programming. In the meantime, programs will go out from CTNA's New York transmitter.

CTNA is an attempt to meet the diverse needs of a decentralized church organization with the capacities of the satellite for coast-to-coast transmission. As such, the network might become a model for other church groups. Yet it is unlikely to increase the number of Catholic TV shows available to a large television audience.

One reason that telecommunications will always play a less important role for the Catholic church than for TV evangelists is that it "just doesn't fit with what Catholics think of as a church," argues Richard Hirsch, head of the USCC's Office of Communications. "The electronic church is not a church; it is a pulpit." The point applies to a number of other churches as well—those that consider sacrament and ritual as important to their worship as preaching, in particular the Episcopalians and Lutherans. It is interesting to recall that Bishop Sheen's famous programs had nothing of a church service about them. The bishop was dressed in resplendent episcopal garb, but *not* in his vestments for celebrating mass. The format was one of teaching, not preaching or prayer: a blackboard was the chief prop. Sheen's example suggests the distance that the "ritual" churches are apt to see between effective television and the central acts of their faith.

The Eternal Word Network, another of the three noteworthy efforts by religious groups to build a television base, also depends on satellite technology. Mother Angelica, a Franciscan nun whose convent in Birmingham, Alabama specializes in preparing and printing religious pamphlets and other materials, made the leap from the printing press to a satellite transponder on Satcom IIIR with four

hours of programming seven nights a week. From a converted garage, she produces her own show. *Mother Angelica Talks It Over*, makes time available to other religious programs, re-runs old favorites, and subleases unused transponder time to the First United Methodist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana. She reports that forty-two cable systems, reaching up to 800,000 homes, carry her programming. The network is supported by direct-mail donations, unsolicited contributions, and foundation grants.

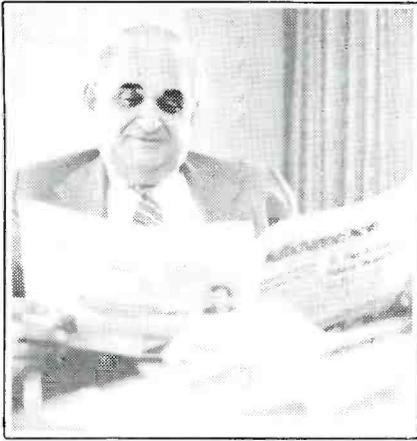
The United Methodists tried a different approach: In 1980, they launched a fund-raising drive to buy a TV station. The church group planned to produce its own religious programs with the projected \$1 million profit from the station. But ownership of a commercial station posed conflicts between the values of Methodism and the values the station would be communicating much of the time. The sheer expense of the project has also deterred some church members, who have asked, "How many hungry people can you feed with that money?"

The pitfalls encountered by the United Methodists illustrate the dangers for mainline churches that might be tempted to emulate the fundamentalists. According to Stewart M. Hoover, writing in *The Electronic Giant*, "The mainline churches could probably not 'beat the electronic church at its own game'; they probably would not really want to."

But it should be remembered that the electronic church itself was not born yesterday—which is when it first began getting national attention. It was more than two decades ago that Pat Robertson managed to put back on the air the defunct UHF station he had bought. Jerry Falwell went on the air in Lynchburg, Virginia, six months after he started his church there—in 1956. Oral Roberts first appeared on television in 1954, and his current TV format dates from 1969. At that time, the other churches were comfortably ensconced on the networks; twenty-five years later, they are groping. The outcome of that groping may not be clear for another quarter-century. ■



Patrick McDonnell



Irving Kahn, Broadband Communications



Daniel Ritchie, Westinghouse Broadcasting



Bob Johnson, Black Entertainment TV



Kay Koplovitz, USA Network



Burt Harris, Harriscope



Ted Turner, TBS



Gustave Hauser, Warner-Amex



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Deface the Nation

by Andrew Feinberg

I KNOW THE FOLKS at ABC are very proud to have replaced that aged turkey, *Issues and Answers*, with *This Week with David Brinkley*. But they've still got a gobbler on their hands and seem to have missed the basic point. I mean, no one is going to turn down a brunch invitation just because Paul Volcker or Jack Kemp is going eyeball-to-eyeball with Mr. Brinkley, no matter how curious his diction.

The networks must learn from other TV successes and profit from some of the devices that have kept the public glued to the screen even while the chicken has blackened in the oven. There is great raw material in those Sunday interview shows—power, fame, hot issues, conflict of interest, obvious lying—and it's being ignored. Pretending that these political guests are statesmen is fine for the *noblesse oblige* crowd but just won't cut it for fans of *The Love Boat*. Let's think of the honchos as real people and treat them accordingly.

And where are people most real? Why, on game shows. Couldn't we learn from them? Let's reward the participant for that rare achievement, the direct answer. If Senator Bob Dole tells the truth, and this truth actually bears some relation to the query lobbed in his direction, he could be given a choice between a black bag filled with cash and whatever is in the box with Richard Allen's picture on it. On the other hand, if a politician is caught lying, bells will ring, lights will flash, and the wheeler-dealer will think he's the political version of the secret square. Will his face be red! Candor could be further encouraged if the networks, at the end of each year, erected a monument in Washington to the politico who spills the most beans.

Questioners on these programs, who generally treat the guests with a respect few of us can fathom, would receive prizes for aggressiveness and sarcasm. The object for them would be to get the guest to blurt out, "What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?"

But questioners might get even better results by relaxing the interviewee. Why

Andrew Feinberg's humor pieces appear frequently in Playboy and other national magazines.

not capture him in his element, the way Barbara Walters does it? Interview Tip O'Neill in a crowded bar, Caspar Weinberger in a Trident submarine, James Watt in an erstwhile forest, or Donald Regan at Fort Knox. (State Department employees could be questioned at Bechtel headquarters.)

To pacify the guest further, why not express deference by donning an appropriate costume? For Labor Secretary Donovan, hard hats should be soothing. For Agriculture Secretary Block, it would be fitting if reporters dressed as tomatoes, radishes, beets, and carrots. It would help as well to ask these worthies questions modeled on Walters's style, such as, "Mr. Secretary, if you were a dessert, what kind of dessert would you be?"

One TV staple that is underutilized on these shows is the sidekick. Such performers can be marvelous at providing comic relief. Ricardo Montalban has Herve Villechaize, Jackie Gleason had Art Carney, the Lone Ranger had Tonto, and Johnny Carson is saddled with Ed McMahon. Remember how well Joe McCarthy did on television with Roy Cohn in tow? What if each guest had next to him a trusted, if somewhat acerbic, aide-de-camp who could say things like, "Nice footwork, boss," or "How d'you get out of this one, Mr. Fancy Pants?"

The resolutely somber proceedings might also be dappled with wit if the hosts followed another television tradition, that of the roast. Instead of reminding us of how things used to be in the eighteenth century, for instance, George Will could begin a question thus, "Prime Minister Begin, have you heard the one about the minister, the priest, and the Israeli leader?" Why be so solemn? Everyone appreciates a good laugh; it is a great ice-breaker, especially in the middle of a peace-keeping action.

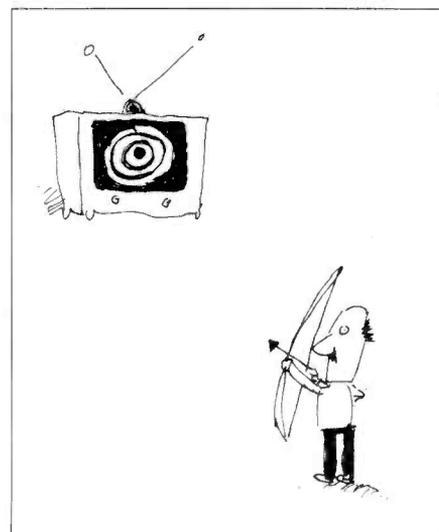
And that's to say nothing of another popular technique, the instant replay. Millions of viewers fascinated by human nature would sit transfixed while the set replayed the action as a politician prepared to lie and then executed the prevarication. By studying this in slow motion, Americans might better learn how to spot dishonesty in their daily lives. The hushed, reverent, this-must-be-golf

voiceover could also pique interest: "Tom, there you see it, the Senator's lower lip starts to tremble, it moves into a slight twitch right there, and now he begins to give us the story that he didn't know there was a milk lobby. Nice try, Senator."

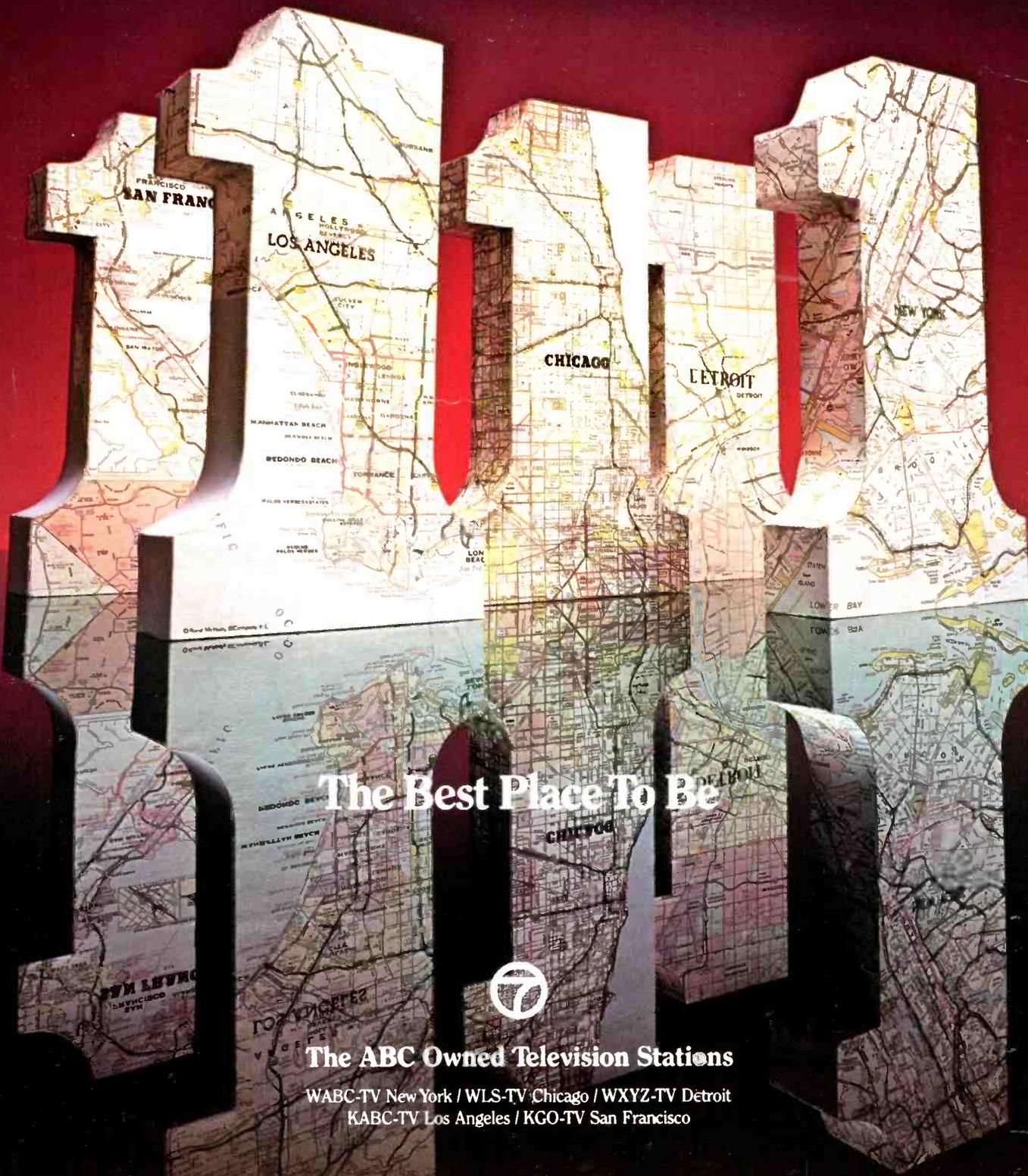
Sex is a much trickier issue. One way to toss in some jiggles: Rely on that cornerstone of the political process, the "trial balloon," a proposition of little or no validity that is put forward to smoke out a response. Here's how it works. Vice President George Bush is chatting on about government regulation when a dewy brunette in a bikini waltzes out and says, "Hi, Georgie, remember me? I'm Linda, and during that weekend at Delmarva you promised to get me into show business." Bush's response to the situation will help the nation determine his mettle as a public servant.

All these devices would not involve pandering to the audience so much as they would serve to extract better answers from the people who profess to be qualified to lead us. Nowadays, almost every interview with a political figure seems to make the electorate more cynical and apathetic. Each week viewers accumulate still more evidence that "all politicians are the same."

Ironically, that is because the verbally elusive politicians are in control of these interview shows. I would like to alter the balance of power somewhat, as a public service. ■



Patrick McDonnell

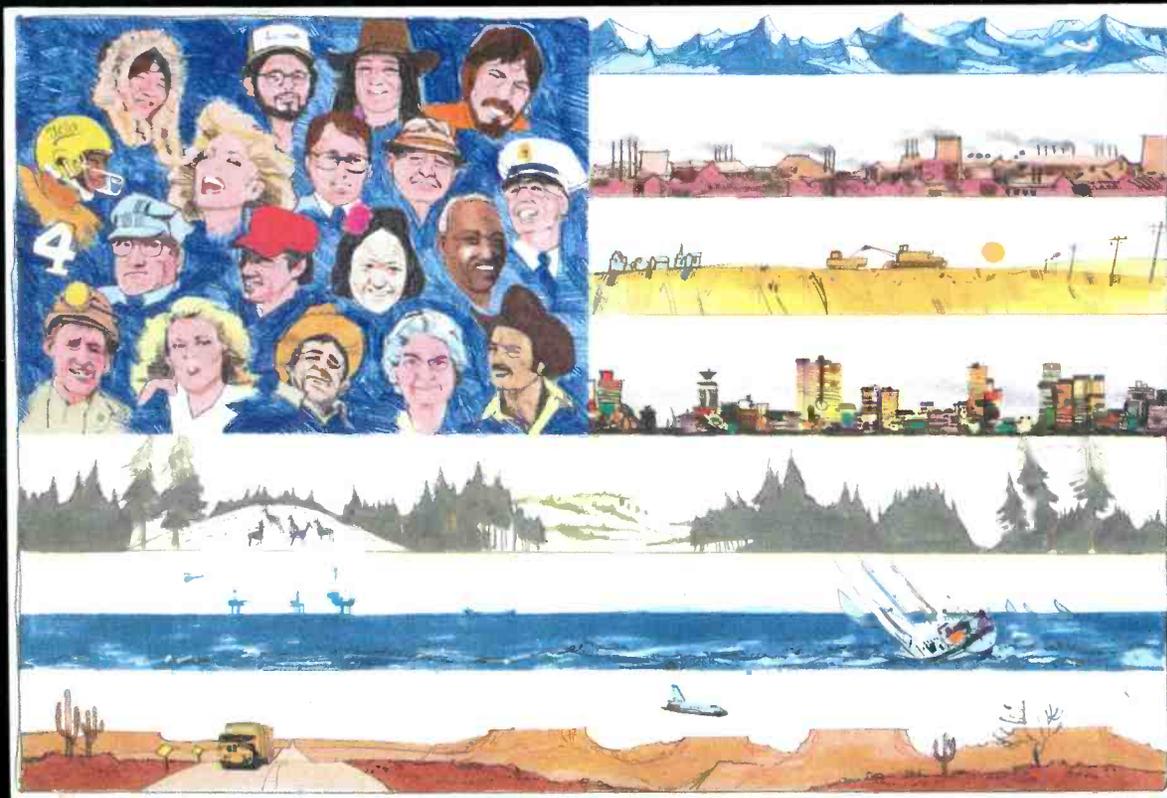


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