

CHANNELS

OF COMMUNICATIONS

MAY-JUNE 1984 \$2.50

THE CRITICAL REVIEW
OF THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA

THE HOT SELL

How TV Turns on the Viewers

BY JIM MINTZ

**The War of the Wires:
Cable vs. Telephone**

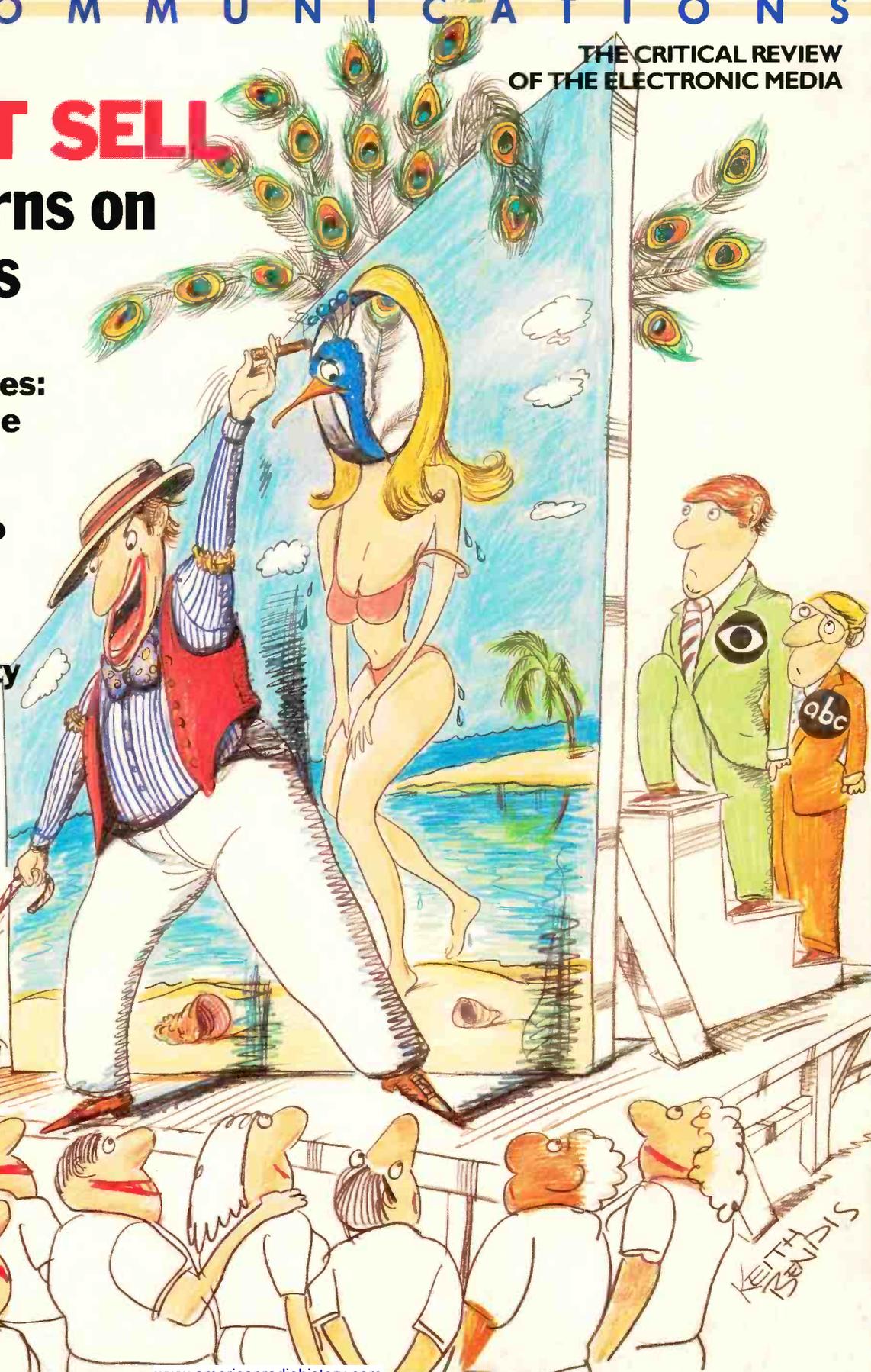
**McLuhan—It's All
Going According to
Marshall's Plan**

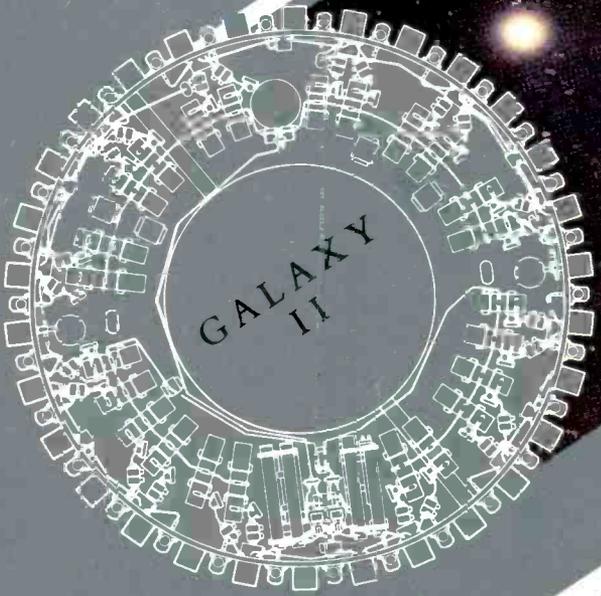
**Dan Ritchie,
TV's Moral Minority**

**Toys Are
Programs Too**

**Whatever
Happened to
Cable?**

BY LES BROWN

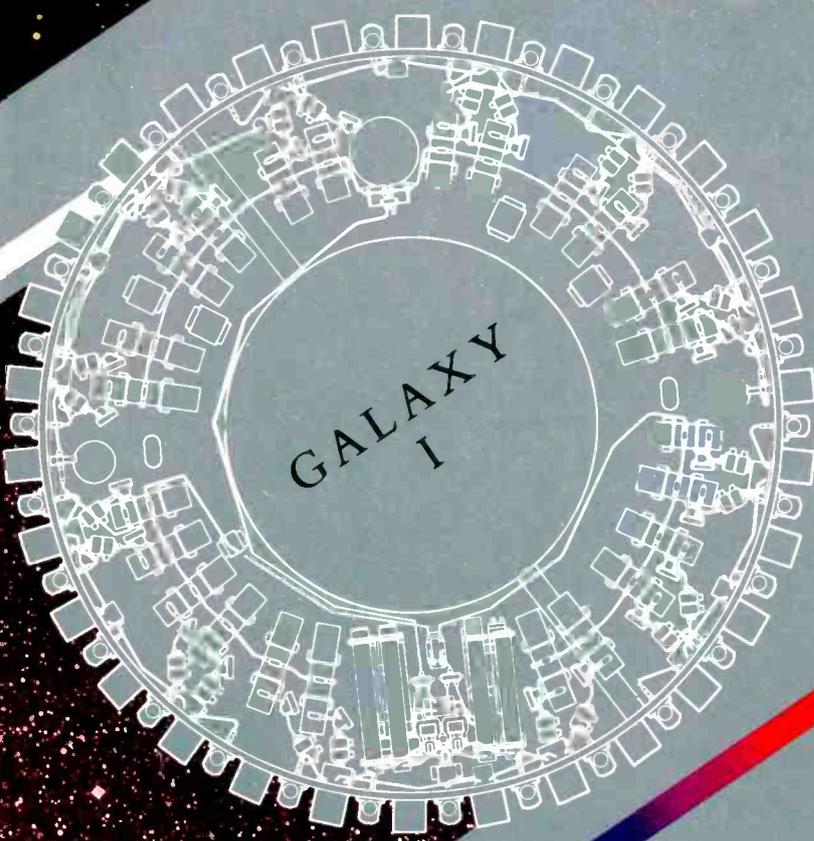




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THE HOT SELL
How the Networks Turn on the Viewers

Network promoters steam up the airwaves with titillating tune-in spots.

BY JIM MINTZ



Toys Are Programs Too

With products as stars, children's programs confuse selling with storytelling.

BY JAN CHERUBIN

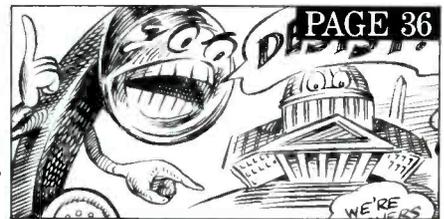


War of the Wires

Skirmishes begin as cable and phone companies trespass on each other's turf.

BY ERIC SCHMUCKLER

Cartoon strip by *Gil Eisner*



Beaming the World to Andhra Pradesh

Forty minutes a day, high tech informs India's rural poor.

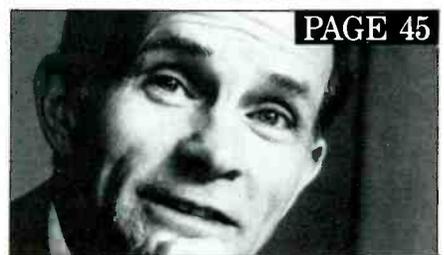
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Dan Ritchie, TV's Moral Minority

Group W's Chairman is something of a heretic in cable and broadcasting.

BY MICHAEL SCHWARZ AND MARTIN KOUGHAN



McLuhan—It's All Going According to Marshall's Plan

The late philosopher's warnings are more pertinent today than in his heyday.

BY MARK EDMUNDSON



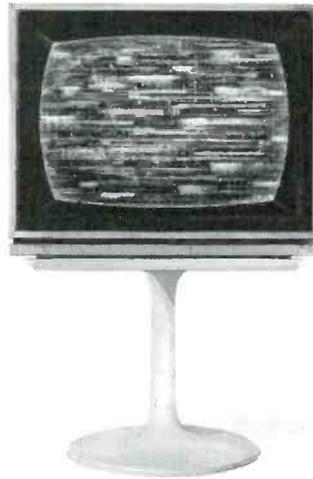
Living with Tele1st

This pay-TV system becomes a form of consumer bondage.

BY P.J. BEDNARSKI



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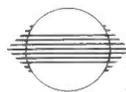
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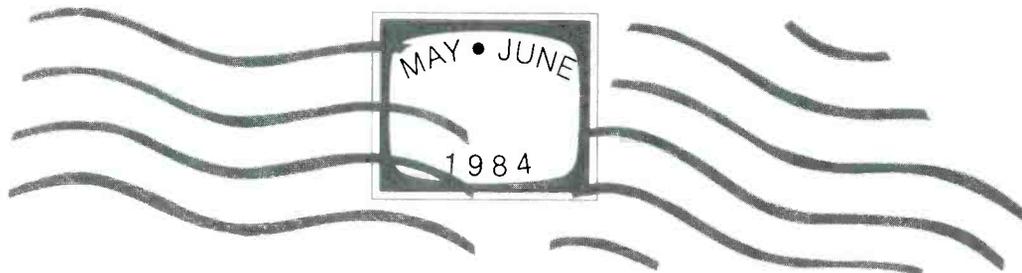
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Rich Man, Poor News

IN ALL THAT'S BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE BIG salaries of network news anchors ["The Pow of the Press," January/February], one aspect seems to have been overlooked. The separation of the Fourth Estate from the Establishment served our country well for our first 200 years. The press was the only group with the interest and the clout to keep things honest.

What I fear in this era of big money is that increasing numbers of men and women will become journalists to get rich. In so doing they tend to become part of the Establishment. The strong and concerned Establishment watchdog may be dying a slow death.

THOMAS H. WOLF
Gaithersburg, Maryland

Impudence Abroad

IN "AMERICAN TV TIGHTENS ITS GRIP ON THE World" [January/February], Peter Caranicas makes some large claims with only minimal substantiation. He seems to think it sufficient to count the number of times *Dallas* has appeared on Bolivian television or *Dynasty* on Australian television to prove that American television dominates the world. He offers no evidence of the "worldwide popularity" of American television exports other than the assertion that they attract viewers wherever they appear, often to the detriment of local productions.

But American imports are passed over, in most countries, in favor of indigenous television or imports from elsewhere. When they do appear in ratings lists, American imports are usually not among the top 10 programs. American television merely contributes inexpensive and dependable products to fill out the TV schedules of other countries.

Some of the points made in this article are valuable. But it is not enough, as Caranicas has done, to present a global perspective without looking more closely

at the experiences of individual countries.

GEOFF LEALAND
London, England

The Fairness Doctrine Lives

AS AN ADVISOR TO MANY ORGANIZATIONS USING the Fairness Doctrine to win air-time for balancing points of view, I was disappointed to read Stuart F. Sucherman's misleading essay, "The Reluctant Doctrine" [March/April].

Sucherman makes several accurate observations. Over the years, the FCC has thrown up numerous procedural barriers complicating the formal complaint process and making it nearly impossible to win a Fairness case. With the courts, the commission has crafted a multilayered array of confusing and often contradictory interpretations of the law.

But Sucherman's conclusions on all this fall wide of the mark. He suggests that the Fairness Doctrine is practically dead because the FCC hasn't used it to penalize offending broadcasters in recent years. But in communities all across the country, the Fairness Doctrine is alive and working. Citizens who know the law are resolving local disputes with stations without "raising the danger of government intrusion."

Responsible broadcasters recognize their obligations and are willing to talk with groups presenting reasonable requests. The FCC is usually a last resort.

Sucherman ends by musing that the FCC has been loath to enforce the Fairness Doctrine because it is "just too dangerous to have lawyers, tribunals, regulators, and judges knee-deep in what, after all, are editorial judgments." That's a rather fuzzy way of explaining away the greater truth that the Fairness Doctrine has not been enforced because the FCC has always been dominated by the industry it was created to regulate.

MICHAEL SINGSEN
Public Media Center
San Francisco, California

Cable's Network Shakeout

I WAS INTRIGUED BY LES BROWN'S "When Cable Clobbered the Networks" [Public Eye, January/February]. I am an operator of two small cable systems in Tennessee, and I stand accused by Mr. Brown of deliberately causing three cable networks to fold (although not conspiratorially).

As one who has been in the cable business for 13 years and taken my share of lumps from broadcasters, I admit to chortling a little bit when the Big Three all failed in the cable business. But alas, I'm afraid that we operators really can't claim any credit for their demise.

The Entertainment Channel failed mainly because in the markets where it was introduced it suffered from the beginning with low penetration and a high disconnect rate. I don't see why we should be expected to use our finite channel capacity on a channel that fails to perform in the marketplace.

CBS Cable may have been a worthy addition, but our system was already carrying ARTS, which is partially owned by ABC. How much culture should we carry on our systems? Have you ever heard of a "cultural" program beating *Three's Company* in the ratings?

Many cable operators (myself included) did indeed succumb to the lure of free earth stations and marketing money to carry Satellite News Channel. But it was viewer loyalty to CNN that spelled its end.

Cable operators don't hate the networks. We just see them as laughably inept. Cable isn't killing the giants off, but we are stealing their eggs.

BOB BARCLAY
Volunteer Cable TV
Gallatin, Tennessee

LES BROWN'S EXPLANATION FOR THE FAILURE of network-initiated cable programming services—the historic animus of cable operators—is intriguing and blessed with a patina of plausibility. While I have no doubt that cable operators have enjoyed a



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good chortle from the fall of the mighty, I would give greater weight to other forces.

Most importantly, the networks displayed straightforward incompetence in their decisions to invest heavily in cable programming. Circa 1980, cable programming was to the communications industry what the Cabbage Patch Doll was to the parent of a spoiled 10-year-old child. Both induced rampant irrationality and aberrant behavior.

First, they assumed that once they had identified a programming niche for themselves, no one else would dare to enter the field: Everyone assumed that their service would be the HBO of culture, or of weather or sports or news. When other

companies had the same general idea at the same general time, the cost of everything—transponders, programming, talent—was driven up, thus destroying the best-laid plans and profitable pro forma financial projections.

Second, no new cable service ever had a market as large as projected, and not all cable operators could receive the signal of all program services. So, instead of a national market of 30 million households, most services started and ended with markets about the size of St. Louis and national-scale costs.

Third, advertiser-supported services expected that the difficulty of measuring cable audiences would be overcome in time. But advertising on surviving program services is not growing fast enough to stimulate new launches or to maintain present services at profitable levels.

Fourth, there simply was not enough programming to go around, and the time and cost of producing new programs set back many launch dates. When actual revenues were contrasted to unrealistic financial projections, panic set in and decisions were made to abort.

Finally, the thesis that cable operators were getting even with the networks does nothing to explain the dismal record of non-network services. Getty Oil, Westinghouse, Warner Communications, American Express, Disney, PBS, and many others have been entranced and then burned by the fool's gold of cable programming.

None of this should suggest that the programmers monopolize business stupidity in this field. Just a glance at the franchise agreements signed by many operators (my favorite is Boston, which offers 40 channels for \$2 per month) indicates that ordinary common sense took a sabbatical sometime in the early '80s.

GORDON A. MACINNES
Summit, New Jersey

Hot off the Presses

I ENJOYED SOME OF MICHAEL MASSING'S VIEWS on the print-broadcast relationship at the national level ["The Network News-casts: Still Hot off the Presses," January/February]. If someone were to pursue the issue out in hometown America I wonder if the reverse wouldn't be discovered.

Arriving at WBNG five years ago, I canceled the news department subscription to the local paper—as my grandmother had kidded me that she knew whether or not to watch the six o'clock news by checking the stories in the morning paper. After a few rocky weeks, we

started cultivating and tracking sources just as my friends in print always had. Eventually, hard work and proper guidance led to an independent and energetic news service.

But now, sadly, the local paper is making ends meet, it seems, by replacing good reporters with college students and interns. And even worse, most nights my grandmother can decide if she'll read the morning paper's local section by watching the six o'clock news the night before.

Walter Cronkite was correct, I believe, when he publicly worried about the quality of local print news.

KERRY DONOVAN
News Director, WBNG-TV
Binghamton, New York

Canada's Difference

IN JOHN MEISEL'S ARTICLE "WHERE CANADA and the U.S. Part Company" [January/February], you allowed that learned Canadian to ask, "Why does Canada's Constitution speak of 'peace, order, and good government' while America's reveres 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'?" Well, of course, it's the Declaration of Independence that speaks of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," not the U.S. Constitution.

I have spent some time in Canada and it seems to me that a basic difference between our two peoples is that Canadians fear disorder more than they fear tyranny, whereas we Americans fear tyranny above all else—which explains our fondness for overlapping, patchwork arrangements that are expensive and inefficient, but hard for any one person or faction to dominate.

The current chaos in our telecommunications is a good example of what we get as a result of our fondness for planless patchwork. Significantly, Canadians have found planning and law-making an affordable way to defend their side of the famous "unguarded border."

SAMUEL HUDSON
Fort Worth, Texas

Basic Fact

I READ WITH INTEREST "CABLE'S POWER Blocs," by Jane Hall [January/February]. For the record and future reference, Cox Cable closed the 1983 calendar year with 1,445,347 basic subscribers—considerably more than Ms. Hall indicated in her story.

DAVID C. ANDERSON
Cox Cable Communications
Atlanta, Georgia

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He Who Says 'No'

When there is a dissenter at the FCC, it's usually Henry Rivera.

THE PRESENT Federal Communications Commission tends to be viewed as a panel of five people and one mind. The commissioners, all Reagan appointees (including James Quello, who was first appointed by Richard Nixon), generally follow the lead of the chairman, Mark S. Fowler, in the wholesale deregulation of the electronic media. But while Fowler nearly always gets the majority he wants on an issue, the vote occasionally runs four to one. The dissenter is usually Henry A. Rivera.

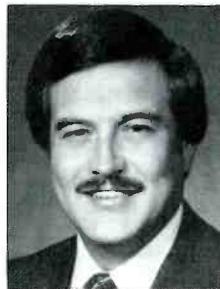
Rivera is a 37-year-old lawyer who in 1981 gave up a lucrative private practice in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for the honor of being the first person of Hispanic descent to serve on the FCC. A Democrat of the conservative stripe, he is not philosophically at odds with his colleagues on the principle of deregulation, but he has opposed them vigorously on specific issues concerning children's programming, media ownership, and opportunities for minorities.

"I favor a type of deregulation," Rivera says, "that benefits consumers, as opposed to deregulation that exclusively favors broadcasters."

Rivera has become the conscience of the commission, its legal taskmaster; he blows the whistle whenever the other members act arbitrarily, or disregard the procedures the agency is obliged by law to follow, or overstep their authority. Recently he reminded the FCC that Congress, not the commission, has the right to decide how much freedom from accountability broadcasters may have.

"[Broadcast] licensees remain, by law, public trustees, whose fiduciary status carries with it binding public-service obligations" that can't be removed by the FCC, he wrote.

As the commissioner responsible for oversight of the FCC's Equal Employment Opportunity rules, which have



greatly improved the status of minorities and women in radio and television, Rivera has twice beaten back industry efforts supported by Fowler to water them down.

Alone among the commissioners, he opposes the initiative to discard the rule limiting the number of television and radio stations companies may own. He sees repeal of this rule as a threat to whatever diversity exists in broadcasting and to the

opportunities for newcomers to enter the industry. He believes that the elimination of limits to ownership will result in monopoly control of stations by a handful of powerful corporate owners.

When the commission voted four to one to remove itself from regulatory responsibility for children's programming, Rivera assailed the legal justification for the action. In his dissent, he called it an abrogation of the agency's responsibility to children, whom he characterized as "unique and vulnerable beneficiaries of the FCC's public-interest charter."

The children's-television decision, Rivera said later, is an example of commission wrongdoing in furthering unselective, total deregulation. "It is very deregulatory," he said of the decision, "but it benefits broadcasters exclusively and harms the public."

Dissenting opinions don't win ball

Bah, Hamburger

Presidential politics enters the fast-food chain.

COLLOQUIALLY the word *beef*, for at least half a century, has referred to a complaint. Today it means substance, as in "Where's the beef?" Only television, aided by the genius of advertising, can change the meaning of a word overnight.

The catchy and now famous line from the Wendy's hamburger commercials, which implicitly praises Wendy's by rapping the competition, was seized by Walter Mondale for similar service against his Democratic rival, Senator Gary Hart. The line now belongs to Mondale as well as to Wendy's, so when the candidate uses it he helps sell hamburgers, and when Wendy's uses "Where's the beef?" it helps sell Mondale. This ends up a good deal for both parties, but especially for Mondale, because no candidate can afford to buy that much advertising.

In hitching his star to a hamburger, Mondale has turned the issues of politics into the issues of fast-food competition.



Television, politics, and pre-fab burgers are joined now. Hart, if he's clever, might claim the endorsement of Burger King by running on the slogan, "Have It Your Way." Which would leave the incumbent Ronald Reagan to align himself with the frontrunner, McDonald's—making his motto "You Deserve a (Tax) Break Today"—even at the risk of becoming Ronald McReagan.

L.B.

games, but with his dissents Rivera is producing a body of literature at the FCC that may have an influence outside the commission. These carefully crafted arguments could provide interested parties with a legal basis for appealing the FCC decisions in the courts. Rivera may have lost in the voting on children's programming, but his dissent buttresses the appeal that Action for Children's Television has filed in court to overturn the FCC ruling. That cogent dissent may reverberate for some time to come. E.C.P.

Holding Action

To stay on cable, public access seeks fighting fans.

ON THE FRINGE of San Francisco, down the hall from the Astrologers' Cooperative, the Foundation for Community Service Cable Television (FCSCCTV) is working to establish cable's stepchild, public-access programming, as a permanent fixture on California cable systems. Kathleen Schuler, director of the foundation, figures she has just five years or less to do it.

Like the idea of public access, the politically savvy little foundation is trying to make itself indispensable to several conflicting constituencies: cable operators, the hard-pressed cities that regard cable as an easy source of municipal revenue, and the poor but vocal advocates of public access. FCSCCTV is a precarious, jerry-built balancing act, based on a last-minute 1979 compromise adopted by the California assembly.

At the time, cable operators were "so desperate, they'd have sold their mothers" to get the state to stop city councils from setting cable subscriber rates. In the compromise, the state gave cable operators the option of setting their own rates. If they take that option, operators must set aside a channel for community-service programs, and support the independent FCSCCTV to the tune of 50 cents per subscriber per year. To date, of the more than 570 California cable systems, 71 have chosen to set their own rates—30 of those within the past year. Operators' contributions now give FCSCCTV an annual budget of \$230,000.

The most visible use of the money is in the community-service programs, made possible by FCSCCTV grants of less than

\$5,000 each. In Marin County, the foundation backed programs for Southeast Asian refugees, explaining in their languages how to use over-the-counter medicines. In Oakland, a tiny FCSCCTV grant brought publicity and a flood of volunteers to a cable group called Women in Focus.

Still, \$230,000 is small change in a state of 24 million people. "In 1979, everyone expected FCSCCTV would grow more than it has," says Helen Weiss, an access activist in Marin County. "As it is, it's just not funded at a level that can make a difference."

FCSCCTV director Schuler admits that the funding is a "weak link," and that the foundation's dependence on the cable industry prevents it from openly advocating access programming. Instead, Schuler wants the foundation's grants to help local programs build their own constituencies. As star example, she offers the Homework Assistance Program, produced by the Irvine School District. Schoolchildren watching at home call in problems to be solved on-air by a team of honor students. An FCSCCTV grant enabled the program to continue a second year. This and other access programs were so popular in Irvine that some families subscribed to cable primarily to receive them, says Don McNutt, general manager of Irvine's

Community Cablevision.

That kind of viewer interest is the key to keeping access on local cable systems. Schuler wants to see those access channels used, and is less concerned about the quality of access programming or the size of its audience. "The question of who watches community programming is a straw man," she says. "This is a First Amendment issue." But the First Amendment will not necessarily have a place on local cable systems unless public access fully uses available channels. "How can a community argue that a channel sitting idle should be held for access instead of given over to Disney?" Schuler asks. "Unless community institutions and access advocates provide programming to fill access channels, and a constituency to fight for them, in five years there'll be a whole range of more lucrative services that will be sufficiently developed to occupy those channels."

It's a critical time for access, Schuler observes, because nearly all communities will have granted new franchises or renewed old ones in the next five years. After that, cities will be locked into long-term contracts that may or may not set aside channels and/or money for access.

The period for FCSCCTV may be shorter still, since both houses of Congress are considering cable deregulation

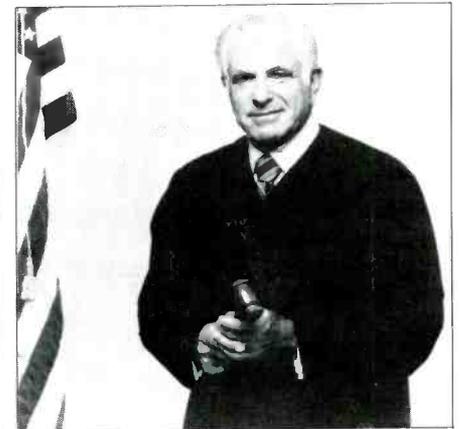
Life Imitating TV

Television show inspires real-life 'people's court.'

ALTHOUGH TELEVISION rarely inspires workable, real-world ideas, one program has: *People's Court*. The successful half-hour syndicated show, which settles actual minor civil disputes on-air, has become the model for a privately operated arbitration service called Judicate. "Our concept of a former judge hearing civil disputes is the same as on the TV show," says Judicate's Bill MacQueen.

The service, based in Philadelphia, heard its first case in January, and 80 more have been filed. Reflecting a national trend toward the privatization of public services, Judicate has the major selling point of efficiency. Its judges usually resolve a case in a few hours. While *People's Court* pays its participants, Judicate receives a \$75 filing fee from customers, who also pay \$600 for a half-day court session.

People's Court recently televised its 500th case. Producers find people willing



to drop their California civil court cases, and pay them a fee for appearing on the show as well as any damages that *People's Court* judge Joseph Wapner awards. Judicate, on the other hand, plans to market its service by promising privacy to its defendants and plaintiffs; there are no TV cameras in its courtroom. R.B.

bills that would forbid state and local governments to impose conditions on cable operators such as the California law that funds FCSTV. The Senate version of the bill, already passed, would give California five years to phase out FCSTV.

FENTON JOHNSON

Picture Perfect

Engineers follow three paths to sharper video.

TWO YEARS AGO, broadcasting executives were wowed by demonstrations of high-definition television, and knew immediately where TV picture quality had to go. Now they are actively debating how to get it there.

When CBS showed off high-definition football footage on a prototype Japanese system in 1982, the wide-screen, ultra-sharp pictures nearly created the illusion of tiny athletes running around inside the box. The detail was so fine that CBS cameramen had to take extra care to keep their cameras precisely focused; viewers could actually tell when they let the picture get a little blurry.

Making the transition to a new generation of video quality involves the same quandary that broadcasters faced 31 years ago, when color came to TV: What about all those viewers with old-style sets? The solution was, and is, to devise a way to make the new technical standard compatible with the old. For the transition to color, electronics engineers developed "compatible color," which could be seen in color on color receivers and in black-and-white on black-and-white receivers.

Now engineers are exploring three distinct routes for the transition to improved picture quality, each being researched by a working group that will report back periodically to the industry-wide Advanced Television Systems Committee. ATSC is an ad hoc body much like the National Television System Committee (NTSC) that settled on the American standard for black-and-white television four decades ago, and for color three decades ago.

The three approaches each offer different degrees of compatibility and picture quality, and each is supported by different factions of the electronics and broadcasting industries:

- The "Improved NTSC" method aims to get a better picture out of the present

TV signal, mostly through electronic processing in the TV set. Old sets would be unaffected, but new ones would have additional electronic chips eliminating the flicker in the picture and probably doubling the number of lines that make it up. Picture detail would not actually increase, but a tiny computer in the television set would analyze each pair of lines and generate a reasonable line to put between them, giving the illusion of greater detail. At the average viewing distance, "the consumer won't be able to tell the difference" between such an image and a real high-definition picture, says Kerns Powers, an RCA vice president who heads the Improved NTSC working group. RCA and other set manufacturers like this approach. "It's the one thing we know will fly. There's no business risk in improving the picture from the existing signal."

- The "Enhanced 525" scheme (named for the 525 lines that make up the standard picture) would use present-day TV sets, but improve upon the electronic format used in transmitting. To receive the enhanced picture, you would install a decoder box between your antenna and set. The approach is particularly attractive for direct satellite-to-home broadcasting (DBS), since its viewers will have to use some kind of decoder anyway to pick up satellite transmissions. Heading the working group is Dan Wells, top engineer at the Satellite Television Corp. (STC), which plans to start DBS service late this year.

- The all-out HDTV approach would require changing the transmission system, allocating extra transmission channels and, for viewers, buying new TV sets. Several HDTV systems are being reviewed, says Renville McMann, a CBS

A Voice in the Wilderness

One dissatisfied cable customer sounds off in an ad.

"IS MANHATTAN CABLE TV making you crazy? They make me crazy. Manhattan Cable TV delivers inferior picture, sound, programming choices, and service to us." That's what Richard Kiernan thinks, anyway. Manhattan Cable made him so crazy that he spent \$600 to vent his spleen in a full-page ad in the *East Side TV Shopper*. Kiernan urged other outraged citizens to send him their complaints. After several weeks he had received only 15 or 20 letters. "Psychically," he says, "it was worth it anyway."

Kiernan unpacks his peevs as follows: First, he writes, minor improvements in services, such as the addition of Christian Broadcasting's CBN, scarcely justify the \$1 increase in premium cable charges levied in January, especially "at a time when my TV picture has stripes, streaks, or herringbones on every channel." Second, he argues, Time Inc., which owns Manhattan Cable, has insured that its own cable channels, HBO and Cinemax, appear on the system while others are excluded, in violation of an agreement with New York's Board of Estimate.

Kiernan really loses thunder on problem number three—service. He describes requests for service in language



appropriate to a Kafka parable. Phone calls are answered by a recording; after many minutes "a real live person" claims that the problem doesn't exist or that "we are working on it." The company offers to send a technician "three weeks from Thursday, and will somebody be home from 6 A.M. until July?" The technician never arrives, or "says the problem isn't with your apartment, it's this building or this area."

Manhattan Cable is treating the ad as an ordinary complaint writ large. A spokeswoman had no comment about Kiernan's allegations, but said a technician and a foreman had responded to his most recent service call a week after the ad appeared—and Kiernan *had not been home*. "We're trying to help Mr. Kiernan," said the spokeswoman. "But he's not keeping his end of the bargain." J.T.

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vice president who chairs the HDTV working group. However, CBS, still championing high definition, has devised a way to make it "compatible." In fact, McMann says, CBS will incorporate this system in the DBS service it now plans as a joint venture with STC. Compatible HDTV works this way: One channel carries an "enhanced 525" picture, which can be shown on regular sets. But new HDTV sets would combine that channel with an "augmentation channel" carrying another 525 lines of extra picture detail—bringing the total definition to 1,050 lines. In addition, the augmentation channel supplies several inches of extra picture for each side, to fill a wider screen. Because a single HDTV channel fills up two regular broadcast channels, CBS thinks its best chance is on the new DBS satellites.

The hope is that ATSC and its three working groups will agree on a coordinated set of technical standards for advanced TV, avoiding the proliferation of incompatible systems, each backed by a different company, that has delayed the growth of such technologies as AM stereo and teletext. "We're starting early enough this time, hoping to discourage a proliferation of incompatible specifications," says Richard R. Green, ATSC's executive director. With luck, the Federal Communications Commission will give its blessing to the new standards, as it recently did a system for broadcasting stereo sound with television.

Although chaos could result if DBS,

cable, broadcast, and receiver-manufacturing companies run off in different directions, that seems unlikely to Green. Even if ATSC can't get a complete consensus, he says, it may get agreement on a set of interrelated standards. One standard could then be readily converted to another by electronic chips. "My personal belief is that these ideas can all fit together," he says. One approach could be used in the studio, another for satellite transmission, and a third for broadcasting to the home—all made compatible through conversion by the little chips.

Whichever approaches are chosen, "consumers will get better pictures," Green predicts.

But in this age of accelerating technological change, it would be "folly," says Kerns Powers of RCA, to expect the forthcoming advanced TV standard to last as long as the ones adopted decades ago by NTSC. Those engineers in the 1940s were clever, prescient, or both, in deciding how television would be transmitted and received. Says Powers appreciatively, "They didn't know how smart they were." S.B.

Not for Boys Only

Female-friendly games may bridge the computer gap.

CASUAL OBSERVATION in computer stores confirms what scholarly studies tell us: that school-age girls care less than their male classmates about computers. This lag in "computer equity" raises concerns about a female disadvantage in the information-age job market when the youngsters reach adulthood.

According to some experts, one source of the problem is the software, often strongly oriented to males. This is particularly true of software used in video games, where young people cut their teeth on interactive technology. Typically, the games use military or sports motifs.

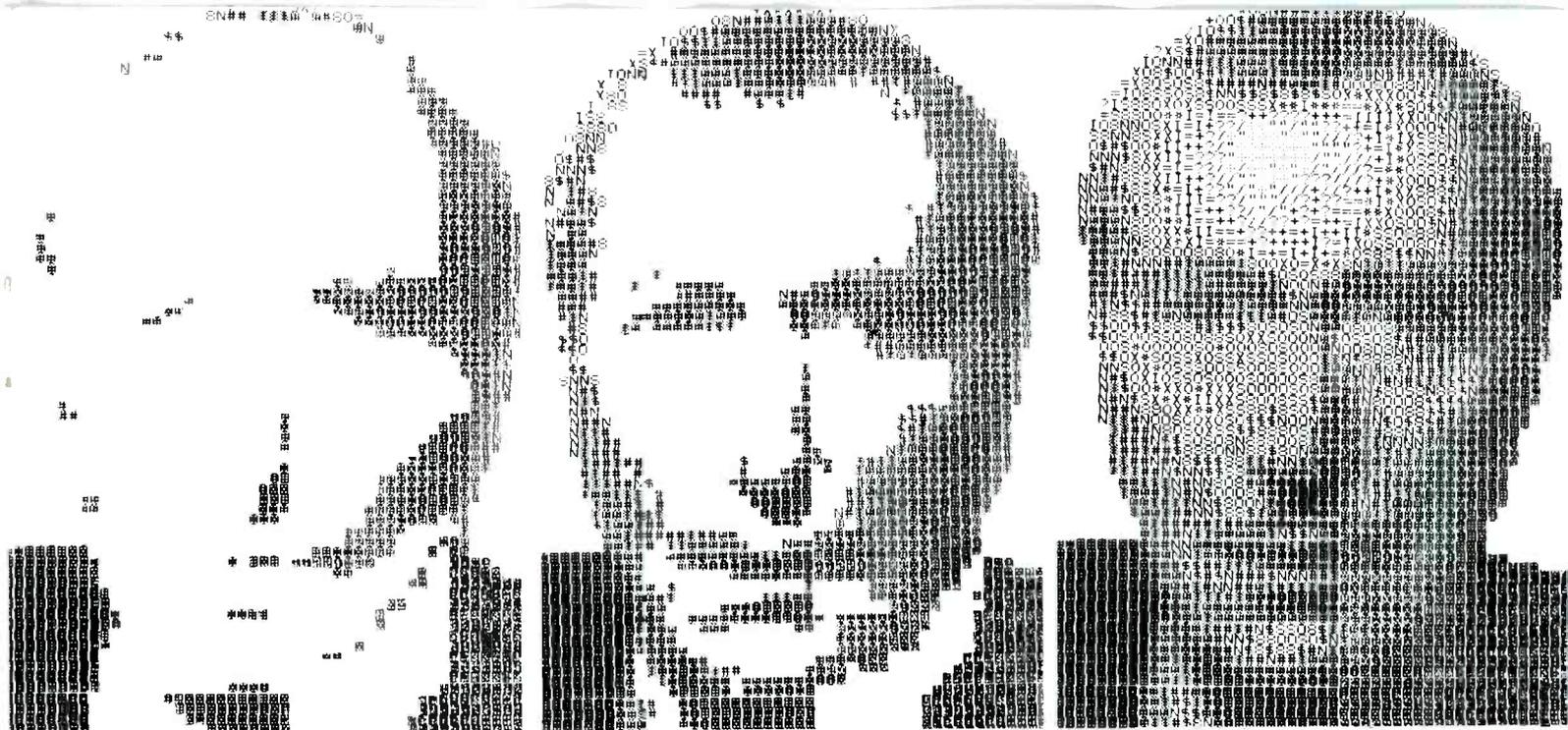
"You're dealing with the subconscious fantasies of male programmers," says Jan Zimmerman of a company called 2-Bit Software. In most computer games the rewards are "totally absurd" for female players, she points out. "You go into an adventure game, and your object is to rescue the blond princess in the cave." In response to this, 2-Bit has developed such computer games as Working Mother's Dilemma and Shopping Mall. Another company, Rhiannon, has developed Cave Girl Clair, a game aimed at girls aged seven to 12. It involves a female protagonist gathering provisions to survive on her own through the summer.

But not everyone is heartened by this counter-trend in software. Jo Shuchat Sanders, director of Computer Equity Training Project in New York, warns that it may not be a good idea "to do things that reinforce gender segregation." And Marcia Freedman of the Women's Computer Literacy Project in San Francisco suggests "degenderizing" all software to make it appeal to both sexes. The way to do that, she maintains, is to eliminate violent themes.

The issue of computer equity thus gets murky. We want the sexes to be equal, but to what extent do we want them to be the same, at the computer or anywhere else? Elizabeth Stott of Rhiannon puts the argument this way: "Surely boys and girls deserve equal opportunities of a lot of sorts, but we are saying by the way we raise our children that we don't want boys and girls to be the same. And then it comes to computers and we say, 'Well how come they're not the same?' when they've been raised since birth to be different." A.G.



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ARBITRON RATINGS



Are the Limits on Station Ownership Fair?

WALL STREET and the deep-pocket communications giants are eagerly watching a rather limp little debate in Washington that could lead to a spree of television- and radio-station acquisitions and mergers reminiscent of recent oil company buy-ups.

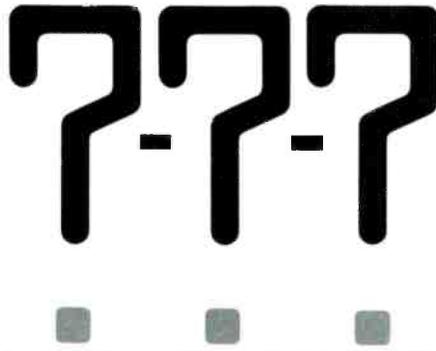
The Federal Communications Commission has already expressed its preference: to lift the so-called 7-7-7 Rule, which for 30 years has limited concentration of ownership in the broadcasting industry.

At a time of increasing concern about multibillion-dollar mergers and the power of the television networks, a vital debate about broadcasting oligopoly would seem particularly timely. But to a certain extent, the debate at the FCC seems to be taking place in a vacuum, with only a handful of citizen groups and a typical anti-network alliance of independent station owners and Hollywood producers opposing the FCC proposal. The Reagan Administration, the networks, and other broadcasters are aggressively pushing to lift the rule.

Adopted in its current form in 1953, the 7-7-7 Rule allows a broadcasting company to own no more than seven AM stations, seven FM stations, and seven television stations, no more than five of which may be VHF outlets.

The networks and the Justice Department argue that station ownership today is anything but concentrated, with 551 firms owning 959 commercial television stations. Most of the companies, 384 of them, own just one station each. Those figures are misleading, however, since big-city stations count for so much in profits, audience, reach, and power. With just five owned-and-operated VHF television stations, each of the three networks reaches more than one-fifth of the population. These big-market stations are so valuable that ABC, CBS, and NBC often earn more money from them than they do from operating their networks. Ownership of choice stations is fairly

Merrill Brown is the New York financial correspondent of The Washington Post.



by Merrill Brown

concentrated. Among the 20 leading station owners, ranked by audience size, four own the maximum of seven stations; seven others own six stations each.

Lifting the 7-7-7 Rule would let the networks buy still more of the major-market stations, thereby gaining firmer control over frequently unruly affiliates, and weakening the market for syndicated programs often delivered through those new satellite dishes adorning so many stations. At the same time, dropping the rule will give other station chains a freer hand in assembling the core stations of the fourth and fifth television networks they clearly want to establish (see "The Race to Be Fourth," March/April).

The case for lifting the rule centers on the same notion that underlies the FCC's "unregulation" campaign: New media technologies are allowing more voices to be heard, and giving audiences more program choices. The same case is being made for another pending FCC proposal, to drop rules that keep television networks from owning cable systems.

"A large number of media voices are available to every citizen of the United States, both on a national and local basis," NBC told the FCC. "Thus, today there is a very low level of concentration in the home video-program distribution marketplace." That contention, though simplistic, is a difficult one to dispute, as the number of licensed television stations, for instance, has grown from 199 to 1,136 since the 7-7-7 Rule was adopted.

In its comments to the FCC, CBS backed the principle of media diversity, saying it is vital that society have media outlets for new ideas, like the "abolitionist publications of the pre-Civil War pe-

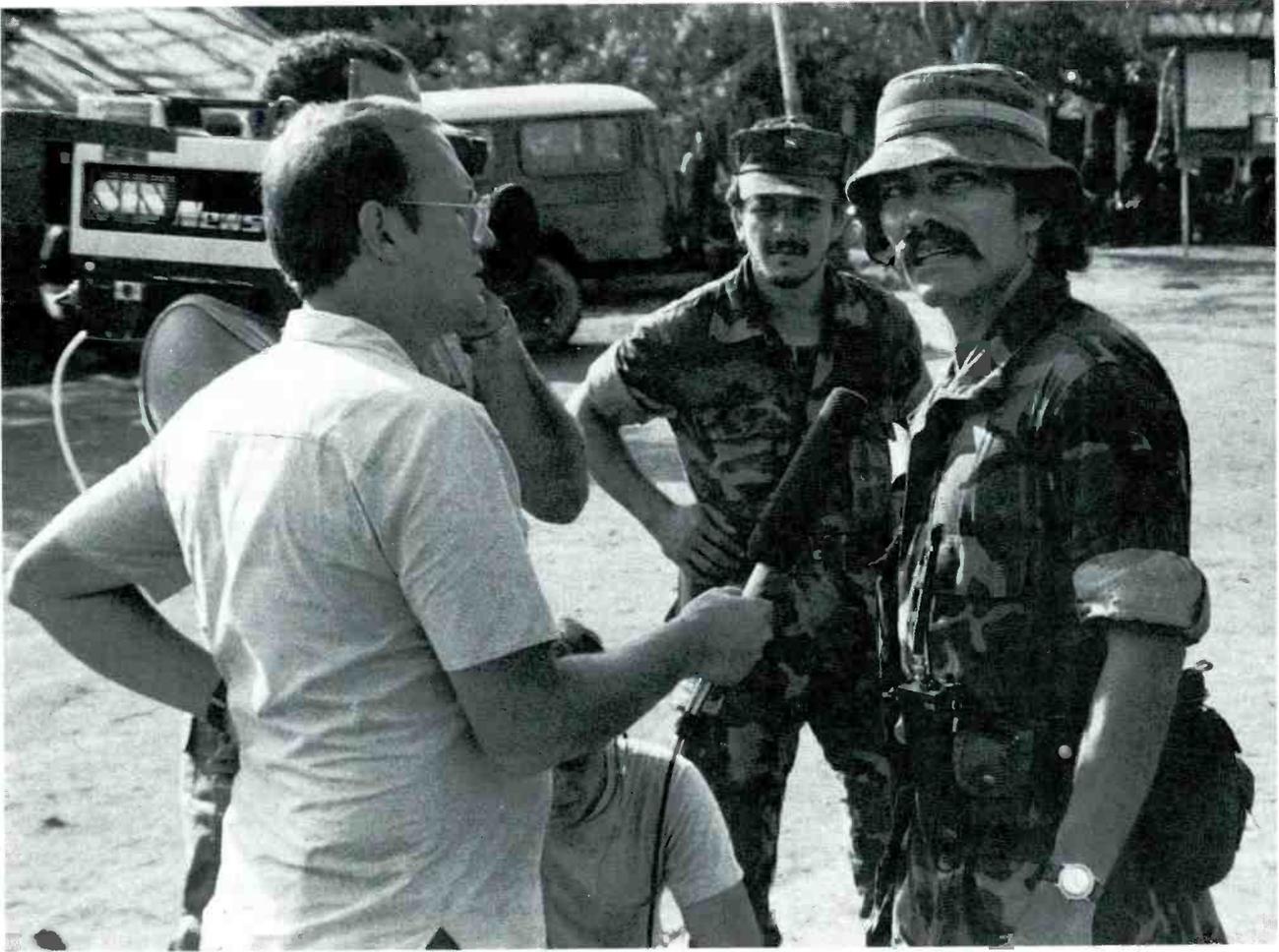
riod or the 'underground' papers of the 1960s." But, the network argued, there is no proper role for the government in assuring that diversity. For years, however, courts have indicated that the role is proper for government by backing FCC rules encouraging diverse station ownership. As FCC member Henry Rivera said in his dissent, repeal of the 7-7-7 Rule would be a "departure from the FCC's traditional approach to media diversity."

CBS went on to argue that "barriers to entry" into the broadcasting business are "so minimal" that it is difficult to justify ownership limitations. But CBS should know that those barriers are rather high when you're a latter-day abolitionist or a hippie. Major-market television stations today sell for hundreds of millions of dollars, and prices are bound to rise when the large broadcasting groups go shopping for more big-city stations.

Ethnic-minority firms and other have-nots would thus be even less likely to own or control transmitters—though CBS somehow thinks repeal of the 7-7-7 Rule will open up large pools of capital for all kinds of buyers of broadcast properties. "The hope for increasing minority ownership lies not in maintaining the status quo," CBS told the FCC, "but rather in removing the ownership constraints that stifle the financial ingenuity of a free marketplace."

The FCC will probably accept that reasoning. But in the political arena, the networks' power is being regarded more uneasily—hence the controversy over their early "declaring" of election victories based on "exit polls." So concerned are some members of Congress about network power that Republicans who earlier opposed them on the syndication issue fear ABC, CBS, and NBC will ignore the 1984 Republican National Convention in retaliation. Network officials call such fears ridiculous, but even CBS chairman Thomas Wyman recently admitted with surprise that many in Congress have a "suspicious and negative attitude about television networks."

There's much concern in the air about the networks' power, but it hasn't manifested itself in the FCC proceeding that could make the Big Three much bigger. ■



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Television's 50 Years in a Bottle

Engineers are striving to invent a new kind of home screen.

by David Lachenbruch



Dr. Vladimir Zworykin holding one of the first of the bottle-shaped tubes, circa 1935.

David Lachenbruch is editorial director of Television Digest.

IF EVER THERE WAS a Rube Goldberg invention, it is the television picture tube. The cathode ray tube's first major use was in oscilloscopes—scientific gadgets designed for graphic display of electrical waveforms. It was pressed into service as the only thing available to show all-electronic television. The two “inventors” of electronic television, Philo Farnsworth and Vladimir Zworykin, specified the tube in their patents of the 1920s.

A picture tube is an unwieldy, bulky glass bottle, the parts of which are fitted together with almost unbelievable precision. In the neck of the bottle is an electron gun that fires a stream of electrons toward a phosphor-coated screen. The phosphors glow at the point where the electron beam lands, the intensity of the glow being determined by the level of voltage applied to the beam. A series of deflection coils around the neck of the tube moves the beam so it “paints” a picture, sweeping from left to right and top to bottom. The phosphor retains its glow momentarily so that what appears on the face of the tube is a complete picture.

That's the black-and-white tube. The color tube seems even more impossibly complicated for such a commonplace family possession. It employs three guns, three different colors of phosphors, and a perforated metal mask inside the tube, to direct the beam from each gun to the proper-colored phosphor. These items also are constructed with microscopic precision.

Since the birth of television, the picture tube has been considered a temporary expedient until something better can be devised, but it soon will be celebrating its 50th year as a TV display device. The search for a substitute has been a continuing and frustrating process. For years, scientists and engineers pursued the elusive “picture-on-the-wall” panel that would free the television picture from its restraints in size, shape, and bulk. The most promising approach in the 1960s and '70s was electroluminescence—the use of materials that glow when voltage is applied. But all attempts were foiled by the immense complexity of the system, its short life, and its high costs.

Pressure to develop a picture-tube substitute will increase dramatically in the

years immediately ahead. Development of high-definition wide-screen TV transmission systems is proceeding rapidly, and one could be ready for use in five years or so. There's general agreement that the proportions of the picture should be increased from the present four-to-three “aspect ratio” to something resembling the proportions of a moviescreen—around five to three. Although experimental stretched-out tubes of this type have been made, getting them into mass production at reasonable costs is staggeringly difficult.

One way around these size-and-shape limitations is the projection TV set. This isn't a new idea; black-and-white projection sets were available as early as 1949. Last year a total of 143,500 “giant-screen” color projectors were sold, and sales are expected to increase to nearly 180,000 this year. The projection set uses three cathode ray tubes, each far simpler in design than those used as picture tubes, and projection is seen as an available, though fairly expensive, method of overcoming the size-and-shape problem. The TV projector also promises in the near future to match the picture tube in brightness, contrast, and resolution.

Scientists continue to seek a simpler, thinner solution. Casio and Seiko are already marketing pocket black-and-white sets with liquid-crystal displays of the type used in calculators and digital watches, and Mitsubishi has demonstrated giant, billboard-size color liquid-crystal panels that display relatively coarse TV pictures. Neither approach is currently practical for home TV. Mitsubishi's costs about \$100,000 and requires a computer, while the pocket black-and-white sets have pictures so lacking in contrast that they sometimes seem invisible. The liquid-crystal idea still has promise, but no one is willing to say it's the answer to the problem of TV picture display.

Another expedient is the so-called flat tube, of the type Sony employs in its black-and-white Watchman. Although big displays could possibly function on this principle—RCA is in fact working on a modular, flat color tube—it's a complicating rather than a simplifying approach to the problem.

Despite the high-stakes effort of many firms to develop a true substitute for the picture tube, it's still possible—unlikely as it seems—that we'll continue to watch our video pictures for the next 50 years on the bottom of a “bottle of fireflies.” ■

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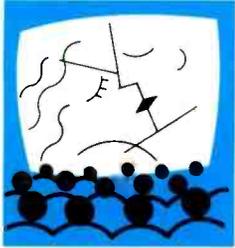


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QUOVIDE

SHORT TAKES ON NEW TECH



If you can't beat 'em . . . Movie-theater owners are starting to compete for the audience that prefers take-out cinema. A California chain, Syfy's, sells \$39.95 video cassettes of popular movies at a "video center" in its theater lobbies.

Help wanted. A study by Arlen Communications, the publisher of *International Videotex and Teletext News*, projects that electronic publishing businesses will provide 5,000 new jobs nationwide in the next three years. These would be available for producers, writers, artists, and administrators.

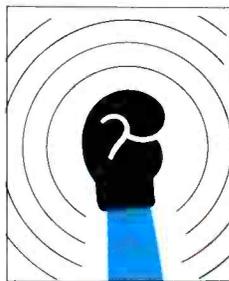
House calls. Just as television created a need for the TV repairman, the growth of personal computers has spurred a new service—at-home computer repair, estimated to be a \$1 billion-a-year business. Some companies, such as Computer Doctor in New York City, are starting national franchise chains.

Enough is enough. About 75 percent of pay-TV subscribers would rather have their cable system carry advertisements between programs than increase monthly charges. This is the finding of a study by Statistical Research Inc., a New Jersey-based firm.

Room service. More than 1,000 hotels in the U.S. now offer videoconferencing services. Among them, they expect to telecast 1.8 million business meetings in the next two years.

Cess poll. Toilets were used by a radio station in Iowa to poll listeners during the February Democratic caucuses. KEMB-FM read candidates' names over the air after asking listeners to flush their toilets when they heard the name of their choice. The station then measured the drop in water pressure to determine the winner. (Mondale won by 800 flushes.)

Where there's a wave, there's a way. World Communications recently crossed hostile borders via satellite, microwave, and undersea cable to transmit international amateur boxing matches to Cuba from Reno. Wold secured permission from the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control to relay the popular fights to Havana.



Time will tell. Mead Data General's information-retrieval system, Nexis, will soon have in its computer data base the full texts of Time Inc.'s seven major magazines, from *Time* to *Discover*. Already on-line in Nexis are *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and numerous other news and information sources. Revenues for the electronic publishing industry are expected to reach \$1.2 billion this year.

Soundtracks. Music programming on HBO and Cinemax encourages viewers to buy *more* records rather than fewer, according to a survey by Paul Kagan Associates. HBO concert-watchers are also more likely than the general public to attend live concerts.

Empty mailboxes. The international electronic mail system set up by the U.S. Postal Service (which transmits letters and messages by satellite and then through electronic-signal facsimile) is a colossal—\$6 million—failure, charged a House panel. The domestic branch of the system has also been unsuccessful. The House's government information subcommittee advised dropping the system, but the Postal Service hopes to hang on by reducing operating costs.



Footloose. Five criminal defendants in Albuquerque have agreed to wear an experimental "electronic monitoring device" on their ankles in lieu of serving jail sentences. The device emits radio signals that inform the authorities if the wearer strays more than 150 feet from his telephone at appointed curfew times.

Dirty words. CBS's prime-time shows contain an average of almost four profanities per hour, according to a study by the Coalition for Better Television, who consider profanity to be words such as Jesus, hell, and damn. The words were said on CBS almost twice as often as on the other two networks. CBT is the national organization of about 2,500 local, largely religious, groups.

Raiding the vaults. Last year Hollywood film studios reached into their libraries and released about 1,000 movies on home video cassettes. These same studios made only 118 new films for the theaters during the same period.

Low tech. Interactive cable was the talk of the media world when Warner Amex's Qube made its debut in Columbus, Ohio, in 1977. But it didn't explode. Today only 71 of the country's 6,000 cable systems have two-way capability.

Looking up. DBS (direct-broadcast satellites) may have a rosy future in Europe. While in America DBS faces stiff competition from other technologies, most European consumers will not have access to cable for another 10 years. Until then, concludes a study by Ogilvy & Mather Advertising, Europeans will have to turn to DBS for new channels.

I want my Mickey Mouse. In the beginning there was MTV; now there's DTV. This spring the Disney Channel joins the music-video wave on cable with songs ranging from oldies to current hits. They'll be illustrated with footage from Disney's library of cartoons and live-action films.

Anders Wenngren

CABLE-SATELLITE NETWORKS
Divisive influence on society?

EARTH STATIONS
Is it really a crime to "steal" pay TV shows? After all, whose backyard — and whose First Amendment — is it anyway?

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CHANNELS

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VIDEOTEX
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Why can't Johnny (or his teacher) program?

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MJH

ENEMY OF THE FIRST AMENDMENT: FORCED UNIONISM

The First Amendment was written nearly 200 years ago to protect the right of all Americans to freely express their own opinions — and the right not to support opinions with which they disagree.

But despite the First Amendment, one group in America has the power to force men and women to financially support political causes and candidates they oppose — or lose their jobs. That group is organized labor.

Federal labor law as well as some state laws permit unions and employers to require working Americans to pay union dues as a condition of employment, regardless of whether or not they want to join or support a union. As a result, the AFL-CIO and member unions collect more than \$3.5 billion per year — \$10 million a day — in compulsory dues.

This massive amount of union treasury money, often called “soft money”, cannot be used for direct cash contributions to candidates for federal office. But federal election law permits the use of “soft money” for a host of union activities for candidates, political parties, referendums and ideological causes.

And spend it the unions do. Political historian Theodore White called the AFL-CIO political effort in 1968 “unprecedented in American history.” It included, for example, the registration of 4.6 million voters, the printing and distribution of 115 million pamphlets and leaflets, telephone banks in 638 localities, 72,225 house-to-house canvassers, and nearly 100,000 volunteers on election day.

Labor columnist Victor Riesel estimates that the cost of organized labor’s unreported, “in-kind” political activities in 1976 was over \$100 million. Allowing for inflation and the dramatic increase in union political action, that figure could top \$150 million in 1984.

In response, more and more union members are speaking out against the flagrant abuse of their First Amendment rights, looking to the nation’s courts for help.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that the use of compulsory union dues for political, ideological and other non-collective bargaining activities is unconstitutional, violating employees’ First Amendment rights. But that hasn’t stopped the abuse.

Last year, a federal court in Baltimore found that officials of one union spent an incredible 79% of employees’ forced dues for non-bargaining activities (*Beck v. Communications Workers of America*). Fortunately, that court recognized this violation of employees’ rights. But how many other workers are still being forced to finance political and ideological activities they oppose?

The issue is clear, the abuse widespread. Rank and file workers, especially those who choose not to become union members, have little or no say as to which candidates and causes their money is used to support.

As a federal appeals court has stated, this wholesale violation of employees’ First Amendment rights damages workers twice: They are forced to “contribute” to political candidates they oppose, and their ability to finance candidates they do support is thereby severely diminished.

Nearly 200 years ago, Thomas Jefferson wrote: “To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical.”

Unhappily, such tyranny prevails in America today in the form of union political spending financed by compulsory union dues. This tyranny can only be eliminated by the combined action of an informed press, an aroused citizenry and a responsible judiciary.

If you would like further information, please write us for a copy of our pamphlet, “The First Amendment vs. Union Political Spending.” Or call Kriss Mussey toll-free at (800) 336-3600. National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, 8001 Braddock Road, Springfield, Virginia 22160.

Whatever Happened to Cable?

by Les Brown



THE GOLDEN AGE OF CABLE lasted maybe two or three years. It ended sometime in 1983. We professional observers on the sidelines knew it was over when the calls stopped coming—the phone calls from people just out of college asking how to get into cable, and from arts organizations, religious groups, and magazine publishers looking for guidance on the cable frontier.

This golden age was marked not so much by the downpour of programming from the satellites and the two-way marvels of Qube as by the excitement the technology itself generated. Opportunities seemed implicit in the new, large-capacity systems of the '80s.

The young college graduates hadn't the least idea what "getting into cable" meant, but they wanted to get in because this was the big new thing; it seemed to offer unlimited possibilities for creative work and interesting careers. The arts people gave thought to building theaters in the air, the mainline churches to creating electronic ministries; the publishers considered adapting print to video. Cable had fired the imagination of the intelligentsia, even as it caught the fancy of the financial world. In 1981 cable was just about the hottest thing going.

How astonishing that in a mere two years or so, cable went from superstar on the media scene to featured player. What happened was that modern cable began arriving in millions of homes with its amazing 35-, 50-, and 80-channel capacity, and promptly exploded its own myth. It turned out not to be the medium that was *more than* television but merely one offering *more* television. And, contrary to expectations, cable was not wide open to new ideas and new practitioners, but rather kept to the conventional forms and the mass-interest mentality. An Englishman who came over to see what American cable was all about may have spoken for our own intelligentsia in judging it "remarkable but not admirable."

Cable had made a serious miscalculation. There is not one market of viewers out there but two—the heavy viewers who are slaves to the box, and all the rest, who have other things to do much of the time but still watch television occasionally. These two markets are reflected in a startling statistic that has been inside knowledge at the television networks for a number of years: Over the course of a day, one-third of the people do two-thirds of the viewing. Cable's mistake was in playing to the

habitual viewer, already "owned" by commercial television, when its natural audience was the other.

The intelligentsia—not to be confused with the intellectuals—is that large number of people who are reasonably well educated, have a wide variety of interests, and tend to earn their living with their minds rather than their hands. They were commercial television's original audience, back in the early '50s when only the affluent could afford to own television sets, and they were re-

**Cable's mistake was in
playing to the
heavy viewers, already
"owned" by broadcast TV.**

sponsible for what we now call "the golden age of television." The networks catered to this audience with drama anthologies such as *Studio One* and *Playhouse 90*, public-affairs series such as Edward R. Murrow's *See It Now*, and frequent prime-time documentaries.

But these viewers, because of their activities, could not be expected to return to TV night after night. So when television sets became widely affordable, commercial broadcasters forsook the intelligentsia and zeroed in on the heavy viewers, the people for whom watching television is a primary activity. Cable wasted its chance to court the audience that television largely ignores, and so it is left now to compete for the one-third of the people who do two-thirds of the viewing. If cable continues on its present course, it condemns itself to surviving eternally on the spillover audience and spillover advertising from broadcast television.

That may not even be the worst of cable's problems today. The aura of promise that surrounded the medium in 1981 has been replaced by a tarnished public image. Cable companies have

Keith Bendis

come under heavy criticism for shoddy service and erratic billing procedures, and the industry as a whole has demonstrated egregious bad faith by renegeing on commitments made to win franchises. Cable's glamour has also evaporated, with the demise of several of the classier satellite networks and the heavy retrenchment at Warner Amex Cable, which includes the shutdown of its six-city Qube network.

Cable's growth depends now on the wiring of the cities, which are vital to its becoming a full-fledged advertising medium supporting a wide range of national program services. But for many reasons, this wiring is proceeding slowly.

It's proceeding too slowly, really, because competing technologies are already invading the uncabled territories. Private miniature cable systems known as SMATV (satellite master-antenna television), which don't require municipal franchises, continue to spring up in large apartment complexes. And this year two newcomers have entered the marketplace—DBS (direct-broadcast satellites) and multichannel MDS, a form of microwave broadcast billing itself as "wireless cable."

All these technologies offer essentially what cable provides today: a bunch more channels of television, including pay channels for movies and sports. The systems differ mainly in their method of delivery. If cable were essentially like these other technologies—if the only thing at issue were the transmission of more televised entertainment—then we might comfortably let the market decide which systems should survive.

But cable only superficially resembles the others; it can be so much more than ordinary television. What makes cable worth caring about is that it has—among all the electronic media—the greatest potential for serving the needs of a democracy. Its vast channel capacity, if opened to all comers, could satisfy every wish for electronic expression. Cable is, besides, the most local of these media. Broadcast stations that are called local are really metropolitan, their signals reaching far beyond the cities into the countryside and often into neighboring states. But a cable system for a suburban town serves only that locality and is capable of becoming an important cultural and communications resource for it, an enhancement to living there. Who would not wish for such a technology to play a part in America's future?

Yet, faced with all the reasons for its own doldrums, the cable industry has lulled itself into believing that salvation lies with the cable legislation now up before Congress, which basically would give operators the power to *exclude* programs from their systems. As for the problem of cable's tarnished image, the industry intends to deal with it by staging a large national advertising campaign this fall. While both these efforts might serve cable's short-term profit goals, they actually work against any prospect for the medium's resurgence.

For cable to give off sparks again, for it to win back the intelligentsia and fire people's imaginations once more, it will have to reinvent itself along the lines dictated by its uniqueness. All these years, cable has followed television's strengths rather than its own, because the medium began as an extension of television and continued to grow with television's values system. As a business, cable models itself on newspapers (deeming its channels the equivalent of newspaper pages) and likes to represent itself as "electronic publishing." The harsh experience of the last three years suggests this could be the wrong model.

The correct model for cable, making the most of its unique qualities, might be real estate. In a utopian view, every cable system would be like a shopping mall—a whole environment that people would come to for convenience and pleasure. Even now, cable more nearly resembles a mall than a newspaper.

A shopping center, typically, is anchored by large national retail chains—Sears, Lord & Taylor, K-Mart, the May Com-

pany, and the like. But in and around these great national stores are smaller shops run by local merchants. Anyone in the community has the opportunity to open a boutique, a necktie shop, or a pizzeria right next door to Macy's. The shopping center thus becomes one of the treasures of the community and an important part of its social and economic life.

Cable could gain a similar distinction. The local system might be anchored by chains like HBO, CNN, USA, ESPN, and WTBS, but designated channels would provide time to anyone wanting to put on programs and sell advertising in them.

This isn't a new concept. It is known as leased access and is, in fact, a sticking point in one of the House versions of the cable bill. Some in Congress would have it mandated for cable systems, but the industry has been fighting mandatory leased access

Cable will have to reinvent itself, perhaps along the lines of real estate.

as an abridgement of the cable operator's First Amendment rights. The concept of leasing channel time may not be new, but the spirit in which it might be accepted by the cable industry—as the right design for its business—would be. If cable were to adopt the real-estate model, it would actively open its channels for leasing to all who would build theaters in the air, because this is something no competing medium can do and because it promises to bring vitality, prosperity, and glory to the cable system.

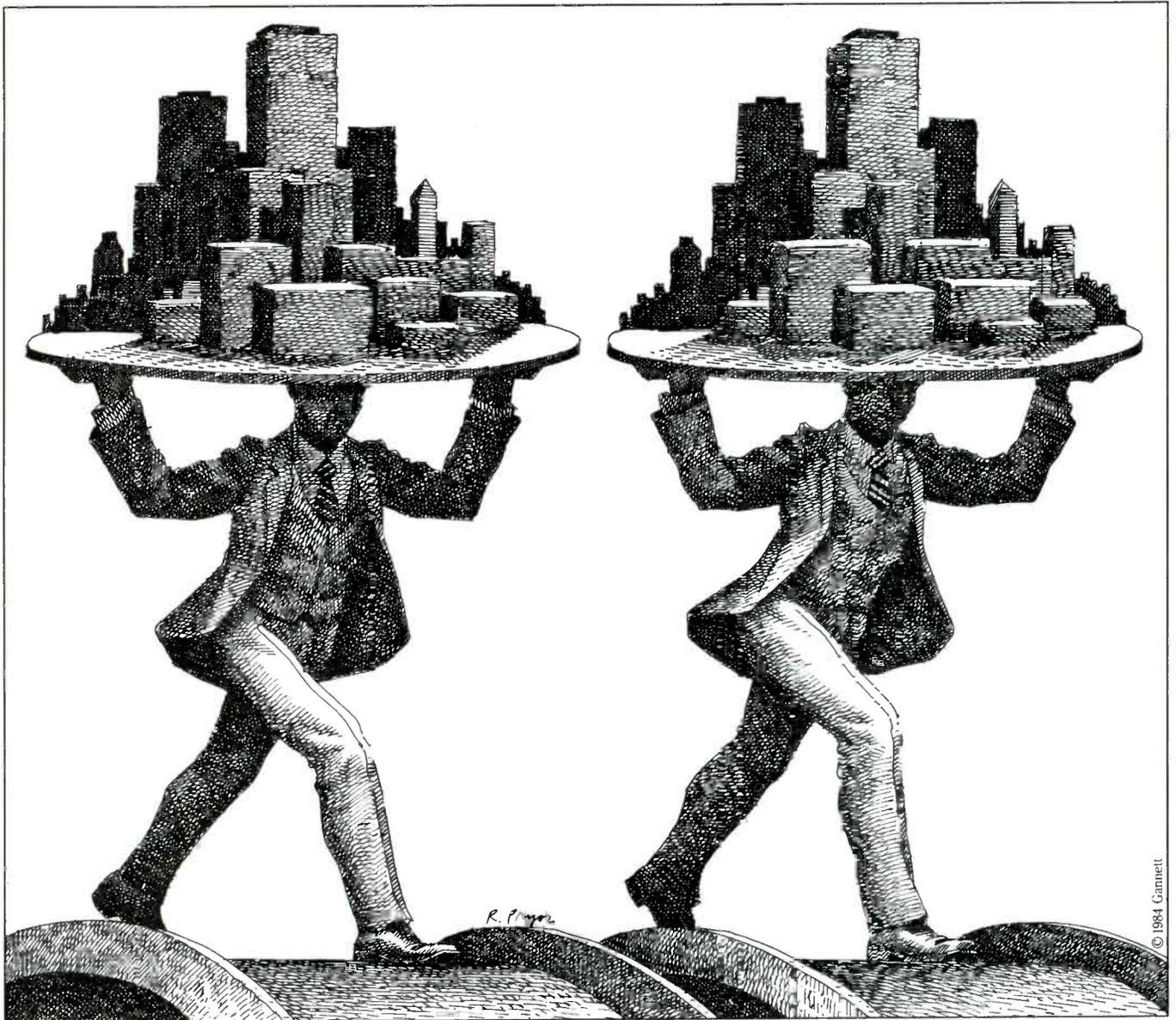
The benefits for the cable operator seem obvious. Instead of paying for programming to fill up otherwise unproductive channels, he receives the programs at no cost and collects rent for the time, besides. And he is sure to profit promotionally, as other entrepreneurs put their energies into producing programs and spreading the word that cable is worth subscribing to.

Of course, if the shows are local and made on a shoestring by novices, they're not going to have the professional polish of the programs on the big national channels. But it's hard to imagine a community's residents being indifferent to an anything-goes kind of television whose stars and impresarios are the people they see every day on the streets or at the supermarket. It's equally hard to imagine a cable operator not relishing the support he might gain from those with a stake in his system as lessees—the arts groups, girl-scout troops, churches, and independent video artists, as well as professional programmers. Leased access is the hometown Fourth of July parade. It is the free-enterprise system in all its glory. It does honor to the First Amendment.

Yes, but is it practical? Can a medium that adopts such a local focus and opens itself to independent programmers hope to compete with such big media as broadcast television and DBS?

There is some evidence that it can. The scores of metropolitan dailies that died in the last 20 years weren't so much victims of television as of the more localized press, the community and suburban newspapers. The city magazines are fatter with advertising, by far, than the national magazines.

And those outlying shopping malls—what a withering blow they dealt to Main Street. ■



HELPING THE TWIN CITIES TWICE

Local public needs call for responsive public service, and in Minneapolis-St. Paul, WTCN-TV, one of Gannett's newest stations, has answered the call.

Minnesota residents have the nation's second-highest incidence of multiple sclerosis, so WTCN produced and aired its own series of public service announcements, "Moments for MS," which raised \$35,000 for multiple sclerosis research.

During the MS drive for contributions WTCN News also aired a 12-part series that provided useful information on this disabling condition. In response, the director of the Minnesota chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society wrote that WTCN's help "shows a willingness to go beyond the traditional role of broadcast media and represents the genuine public service commitment that Gannett Broadcasting obviously has brought to our community."

WTCN's commitment to the viewers also meant lending a helping hand to Santa Claus. When popular one-of-a-kind dolls were unavailable to many parents in December, news anchor Marty Burns-Wolfe designed a new doll pattern, showing viewers how they could make their own dolls for gifts.

When it received more than 6,000 requests for patterns within a few days, the station bought newspaper advertisements that reprinted the

pattern and sewing instructions.

Both the MS effort and the doll patterns were part of the station's increased commitment to local news and information through an enlarged news staff and expansion of the early-evening news program to a full hour.

For Gannett broadcasters from the Twin Cities to Tampa, Denver to Detroit, St. Louis to San Diego concern for the community is an important part of broadcasting's service to viewers and listeners.



GANNETT

**A WORLD OF DIFFERENT VOICES
WHERE FREEDOM SPEAKS**

Gannett Television Stations:

KPNX-TV
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WLVI-TV
Boston

WTCN-TV
Minneapolis-St. Paul

KOCO-TV
Oklahoma City

THE HOT SELL

How TV Turns on the Viewers



Steve Sohmer and his fellow promo wizards steam up the airwaves with titillating tune-in spots, even for the mildest shows.

by Jim Mintz

S PRAWLED ACROSS TWO full pages of *TV Guide* is a young blond woman with her skirt hiked up. A bare-chested man, stroking her thigh, leans down for a kiss. Below this steamy scene, ad copy introduces the characters for a new television show, but it's hard to tell if the blond is the one with the tag line, "always on the prowl," or the one who "demands performance."

This is how Steve Sohmer, NBC's chief of promotion, kicked off the campaign to entice viewers to watch *Bay City Blues*, last fall's new show by the creators

Jim Mintz is a writer living in New York City.

of *Hill Street Blues*. Sohmer's strategy was to obscure the show's plot—about a small-town baseball team—and give it a sexy image. This is called a "hot sell" in the promotion biz, and nobody does it better than Sohmer. You know how it goes: six-and-a-half seconds of fast action, with a breathless script—"A night of passion threatens to destroy a dream!" or, "Watch as Joe and Sunny inch closer and closer to their affair!"

The show's creators at MTM Productions were aghast. Before they saw the lurid *TV Guide* spread, they had hoped NBC's ads for their show would feature spectacular outfield plays and fans standing for "The Star Spangled Banner."

"There was no basis in the scripts" for NBC's promo ads, says a *Bay City* writer. "They were completely misleading." Another MTM insider confides that *Bay City's* executive producer, Steven Bochco, complained to Sohmer, "We know the audience likes illicit sex, but that's not the show we're doing."

The *Bay City* promo provides just one example of what many in Hollywood consider a trend. "The networks have gone promo crazy," says Leonard Goldberg, one of television's most successful producers. "The shows they are advertising don't really exist."

Hot promotion frequently works wonders for a show's ratings, but it seems to have backfired for *Bay City Blues*. The series, which critics favored, is now off the air after less than a season, a flop in the ratings. It may have fallen victim to a crazy network gospel: The image of a prime-time show is more important than its substance.

The leading apostle of this new creed is Steve Sohmer, despite his inability to sell *Bay City* and NBC's other recent bombs. Sohmer was an obscure young advertising executive until a few years ago, when the networks suddenly became convinced that enough promotional hype—the hot sell—can turn any new show into a hit. Now he and the other network marketing men, Roy Polevoy at ABC and Mort Pollack at CBS, have been put in charge of selling shows as if they were bottles of hair tonic. None of the three seems to mind which producers' toes he crunches along the way.

Steve Sohmer is a tough, self-confident, fast-talking 42-year-old New Yorker. He says, slowly, "Hype . . . is not . . . a dirty word."

"Steve is a great huckster," says Lou Dorfsman, who unobtrusively made CBS's promos for 20 years before Sohmer came along. "He would unzip his fly to win."

Seven years ago, when Sohmer quit his own ad agency to head CBS's promotion operation, he didn't even own a TV set. But he had something more valuable—the marketing savvy to sell J.R. Ewing's devilish grin (not to mention the "Who Shot J.R.?" cliffhanger) and help make CBS's *Dallas* the top show in television. With Sohmer's assistance, CBS regained its first place among the networks in 1980, boasting seven of the eight top-rated shows.

Two years later, NBC lured away the whiz-kid of promotion with a staggering deal—including a \$250,000 salary, a \$75,000 bonus for running the annual network affiliates meeting (according to *Variety*), extraordinary "creative freedom" to direct and broadcast without interfer-

ence from above, and an opportunity to take over programming duties in addition to promotion. Sources also report the network promised to work with Sohmer as an independent producer after he leaves NBC.

Networks are willing to pamper promo experts because their on-air house ads have proven the best way to get audiences to "sample" the premiere of a new show. Dull promos mean low sampling and a dead show. A hot 10-second promo for a movie, aired constantly, can send its ratings up 25 percent—often meaning the difference between a hit and a failure.

Normally a behind-the-scenes showman, Sohmer takes his bows at NBC affiliates meetings. Regardless of recent ratings (and NBC's have been dismal on the average), the affiliates cheer lustily for him. Network staffers tell the story, perhaps apocryphal, of NBC chairman Grant Tinker watching his affiliates fawn over Sohmer. "I think this guy wants my job," Tinker remarked to then-president Robert Mulholland—who replied, "I think he already has it."

Talking from behind the cigar that appears permanently appended to his left hand, Sohmer comes on like the announcer in one of his brash on-air promos. He says things like, "When Mr. T turns it on, you know the sparks'll really fly." He chain-smokes the cigars, snuffing out one stubby Macanudo as he fiddles with the cellophane around a fresh one.

Network secretaries find the custom-tailored Sohmer glamorous, from his blue eyes to his dazzling gold-and-diamond bracelet and maroon Rolls Royce. Network writers appreciate his love of Shakespeare, fine wine, and haute cuisine. And local TV executives are simply amazed—at how he finds a limo while everybody else at a convention boards the bus, or how he shows up at a weekend meeting with a beautiful young actress on his arm. One of Sohmer's closed-circuit speeches to affiliates captured his "imperial" style, according to an observer. The network Barnum was escorted into camera range by several "scantly clad" ladies, "like a Hawaiian king."

Sohmer loves beautiful women and has dated a succession of blonds since his divorce several years ago. (Since then he has dropped 100 pounds from his six-foot frame; he now weighs 200 pounds.) Sohmer, though, is no party animal; his dates can expect to spend most evenings in front of his living room's three television sets comparing prime-time shows.

Glamorous women are also the stuff of his promos, along with suggestive come-ons. The announcer insinuates: "Mickey goes all the way—to get a plumber . . .



from one hotbed of excitement to another . . . Laura moves in with Remington and the place explodes . . . Manimal's passion for a wolfwoman really lights her fire . . . tonight on NBC."

There are television veterans who wouldn't mind seeing the hot-sell promos vanish from the tube. ABC's chief speechifier, network president James Duffy, has spoken out against misleading promotion but isn't situated at the right point in the organization chart to stop them. "The shows aren't sleazy," Duffy says, "so why do we need the sleaze look?"

"Promos today are tremendously aggravating. They're mind pollution," says

leading New York ad man George Lois, a network promo-maker in the 1950s. "They're all of a very similar style—boom-bang graphics with no attempt to emphasize substance." Steve Sohmer's promos, in Lois's view, represent the worst of the new style. "He appeals to the most visceral thing, thinking all guys want is tits and ass. That becomes the image of the network, and I can't believe that's what NBC wants."

Sohmer's approach, however, is exactly what NBC went after. "They courted Sohmer and gave him a totally free hand," says Leonard Goldberg, who once headed programming at ABC. "Sohmer at CBS was controllable; he re-



HEE HAW Still at the Top!

PRIME ACCESS

Program	Markets	R/S*
1. Hee Haw	110	14/30
2. Wheel of Fortune	50	13/23
3. Family Feud	127	13/23
4. Wild Kingdom	15	12/26
5. M*A*S*H	106	12/22
6. Three's Company	75	12/21
7. PM Magazine	77	12/22
8. Being with J.F.K.	6	11/21
9. Tic Tac Dough	44	11/19
10. Entertainment Tonight	86	11/19

Nielsen/Casandra Report, Nov. 1983

*Rating/Share

"Hee Haw . . . a foot stompin' success."



TV GUIDE
January, 1984

"Hee Haw, the venerable country music variety show, remained the top share winner among syndicated programs."

BROADCASTING MAGAZINE
December, 1983

"Hee Haw has continued successfully in new production for syndication well after the networks dropped them."

CHANNELS
January/February 1984



Alan Courtney/Peter Alex/Gaylord Program Services · Suite 800, 9255 Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90069 · (213) 271-2193

merriment tonight,' ” and hired an announcer who could say, “The *Lo-o-o-o-ove Boat*.” For an unwatched new show called *Baretta*, “we had the announcer talk street-talk,” and jazzed up the detective’s image with quick shots of his swagger, his laugh, his undercover disguises. Further, ABC superheated the ads with action scenes that weren’t actually in the shows being promoted; this tactic would be considered improper today. “We used a stock reel of car crashes and explosions until Broadcast Standards said it was false advertising,” says Marks. *Baretta*’s ratings shot up among teenagers, who lifted the show’s overall score from 14.3 to 21.1 and ensured its success. Even when it used snippets of actual action and dialogue from a show, ABC pressure-cooked its promos. “We’d

look for the hot, provocative quotes,” says Marks, “and we would always take them out of context.” “For *Charlie’s Angels*, of course, we used as much flesh as we could, but we would also tease the audience with Farrah Fawcett-Majors saying, ‘I haven’t had my photo taken nude since I was six years old.’ ” Adds Larry Sullivan, another ex-ABC promoter, “Sure we tease them. We sell the possibility of tits and ass and the possibility of violence.”

For years, until recently, the networks refused to clutter their air-time with ads for more than one product per 30-second spot, but they didn’t seem to mind hyping five of their own programs in the same 30 seconds. At ABC, Marks bundled four together in 20-second blocks. ABC’s announcer (then and now), Ernie Ander-

son, quick-changes his voice to suit each plug. He once did a block promo combining five seconds for *Donny and Marie* and five seconds for a movie about the Munich Olympics killings. “And it worked,” says Marks. *Roots*, a high point of 1970s programming, was also the greatest sell ever by Fred Silverman and Harry Marks. “There was promo gold in *Roots*,” says Marks, referring to the brutal images of slavery, but there was “lots of trepidation” at ABC about how the audience would react. So the mini-series was sold as the heartwarming saga of an American family, with Chicken George jumping over a fence at the end of every promo. Silverman gave Marks’s team much of the credit for the *Roots* success.

In other ABC shows, there was so little “promo gold,” so little heat, according to Marks, that Silverman’s staff had to tell producers, “We need promo material even if you have to insert it.” Promo people recall a Silverman underling ordering a bar scene re-shot so that a woman, not a man, would be drenched in beer, revealing a fair amount of anatomy under a wet T-shirt.

“I’ve heard lots of horror stories about network promotion in the 1970s,” says Sohmer. “ABC went from third place to first with that rock-’em-sock-’em world of overstatement. But CBS was the last place on earth you’d see that.” Nevertheless, Sohmer’s CBS had to compete in the rock-’em-sock-’em world, and Lou Dorfsman’s low-key traditions had to be broken. Sohmer’s assessment of the history of the promo: “Lou Dorfsman invented TV promotion, Harry Marks perfected it, and I, if I did anything, made it a business.” CBS doubled Sohmer’s staff of promo writers, tripled the promotion budget, and loaded the airwaves with the results. One of his writers remembers, “Before Sohmer, everybody disdained promotion, like they’d never dream of asking anyone to watch their wonderful programs.”

Sohmer chafed somewhat at CBS’s conservative style. He wasn’t allowed to use the word “lovers” in a promo, and he told a reporter that CBS, unlike the other networks, prohibited the use of double entendre and violence. Sohmer did, however, manage to air Loni Anderson, the curvy blond of *WKRP in Cincinnati*, purring, “This is Jennifer, reminding you not to touch that dial—or anything else.”

Dorfsman’s idea of a good promo in the 1970s had been to find a little scene and let it play for 30 seconds, to give a feel for the show. Under Sohmer, says a writer, “There were monumental changes. It was cut, cut, cut—quick lines and gags to support the announcer’s words.” Whenever *All in the Family*’s swinging kitchen

The Hustling of Prime Time

EVERY WEEK, CBS shortens *60 Minutes* by one to put in promotional spots. That is premium air-time which, if sold commercially, would go for \$400,000. All together, during a year, the networks set aside the equivalent of \$1 billion in commercial time in a never-ending campaign to draw us to their programs. They know that the best way to sell television is through television. Watch for these tricks of the promoter’s trade:

Divide and conquer. Ever since ABC did so for *Roots*, the networks have fashioned separate promos for different audiences. A prime-time show often has three distinct “sells”: to women during the daytime, to kids early in the evening, and to men during sports broadcasts. During soap operas last year, ABC included special lines calculated to draw women to *Hardcastle & McCormick*: The announcer described the young hero as “one hunk of American male,” and a clip of tape had the hunk himself saying, “I’m hot.” For ABC stations in big cities, the network prepared promos picturing the hero of *Tales of the Gold Monkey* as a wise-cracking Humphrey Bogart type. For small towns, he was a new John Wayne.

“Counterpromote” the competition. The word was that CBS’s Navy series, *Emerald Point N.A.S.*, would appeal to women, what with all those dazzling uniforms. So NBC set out to cripple *Emerald Point*’s premiere by attracting women to its made-for-TV movie that night, *Sessions*. Instead of emphasizing the bawdy aspect of the prostitution storyline, NBC’s promos showed the prostitute crying, trying to explain herself. NBC beat CBS in the ratings, and

Emerald Point never recovered.

Repeat and repeat again. Network promoters aim to run enough promos to plug each program to a viewer eight to 10 times, in the hope that repetition will awaken the desire to tune in. But repetition can also trigger rage in viewers. During last year’s World Series, ABC saturated its commercial breaks with ads for *Nighthawks*, a movie starring Sylvester Stallone. Inning after inning, game after game, fans heard Stallone growl his hottest line, “I’m gonna kill that stinking pig!”

Let the announcer do the selling. Five seconds of interaction among a program’s characters are too much. Better to show mere moments and add a tease by the announcer. For *Hotel*, the announcer begins, “It’s not easy being a beauty queen.” A female then delivers the sizzler, “He likes to touch me.” Announcer: “Everything has its price.”

Nothing beats sex and violence. In a talk to colleagues in the Broadcast Promotion Association last year, Steve Sohmer praised the CBS promo for the film *Murder Me, Murder You*: “It turned an ordinary cops-and-killers movie into a sensational 36 share.” CBS had opened its promo with quick shots of various female chests while the announcer drooled, “31 delicious flavors of deadly double-dip delight.” It ended with guns firing at the viewer, a switchblade popping open and a tortured girl pleading, “Nooo!” “Double dip indeed!” Sohmer chuckled after screening the promo. The next season, Sohmer’s copywriters used the “double dip” gag in a sexy ad for NBC’s *We’ve Got It Made*. J.M.

door hit Edith, or Archie emitted a raspberry, it made the promo. In the search for punchy material, Sohmer admits, "We ruined a lot of *M*A*S*H* jokes." (Eventually executive producer Burt Metcalfe prohibited him from using clips from the show's second half.) It may not have been subtle, but Sohmer's fast, funny approach helped *Lou Grant* and a number of other new shows catch on.

Sohmer closed the promo gap and helped make CBS competitive again, but within a year, *Washington Post* critic Tom Shales renamed CBS "the Clutter Broadcasting System." He decried the network's "punchier, harsher, more abrasive" promos as "an ecological slur not unlike billboards on a highway."

"Steve did lots of tasteless, brash shit," says Dorfsman, who still works at CBS. "But we climbed out of the cellar and he should get some credit for it."

This year, Sohmer and company will make 8,000 on-air promos, using time that in advertising terms would be worth up to \$400 million. Increasing numbers of the spots, at all times of day, attempt to lure viewers to NBC's low-rated daytime soap operas—a program category that Sohmer himself oversees as well as promotes, along with Saturday-morning and late-night programming. NBC remains in third place in the ratings, but Sohmer has had enough success to retain his reputation as television's hottest promoter. He takes credit for transforming *A-Team*'s Mr. T from "that scary guy in *Rocky*, a monster" into a tough but good-hearted star. "I saw his cuteness," Sohmer says. Overall, NBC's heavily promoted made-for-TV movies have jumped ahead of the other two networks' films in the ratings. And a number of Sohmer campaigns, such as the NBC News "Go Where the News Is" spots are widely regarded as imaginative and classy.

Years ago, a western was promoted with a scene of one cowboy pushing the head of another cowboy toward a campfire. Today, network censors nix such outright violence. NBC's rules allow guns to be fired in promos but prohibit showing who gets hit. But if violence is off limits in promos, that leaves only one way to heat up a show's image. As NBC programmer Brandon Tartikoff once said, "If you can't have Starsky pull a gun and fire it 50 times a day on promos, sex becomes your next best handle."

"Does she or doesn't she?" Sohmer says, "That's the best way to make promos." Ads for NBC's *Jennifer Slept Here*, for instance, usually raise the possibility that something sexy is about to happen between blond bombshell Ann Jillian and her 14-year-old co-star, Joey. When Joey's facing his first date, Jennifer



'Does she or doesn't she?' says Sohmer—'That's the best way to make promos.'

purrs, "Practice on *me*." It's a perfect two-second bite out of the show, Sohmer explains, because it reaffirms the sitcom's premise that Jennifer helps Joey grow up. "She's saying, 'practice your social skills on me,'" Sohmer explains, with a straight face.

Though he inherited some of ABC's editing tricks and brash style, Sohmer says the Wild West atmosphere of the '70s has given way to a more businesslike approach. "Those days are over." NBC is too big a company, with too much dignity, "to take a chicken and call it a gorilla." He acknowledges that NBC's promos sometimes take lines out of context, the copywriting trick that Harry Marks perfected at ABC. He says he only does it "for fun," however, not to distort.

But here's what Sohmer did with a *Bay City Blues* promo:

Announcer: "Tonight, Frenchy tries out and blows it, but his wife pinch hits." (Cut to his wife, Judy Knuckles, and male stranger in a bedroom.)

Judy: "There's lots I'll do for my husband."

(Cut to stranger, facing Judy.)

Stranger: "You're fantastic."

Despite the promo's clear implication, Judy had refused to sleep with the guy. In the show, his line, "You're fantastic," followed a speech from Judy putting him down and asserting her loyalty to her husband. "We were trying to build her up as somebody with integrity," says a *Bay City* writer. A viewer who saw that promo "might be disappointed by not seeing the payoff and disgusted at what was attributed to the characters."

"Why would I want to make Judy Knuckles look not nice?" asks Sohmer. He doesn't remember the promo well, but denies vehemently that it could have strayed from the "spine" of the show. "We don't make things appear as they're

not, period. If you imply something and then don't show it, you lose the audience in two minutes."

Apparently, the audience did falter. The series was canceled. One can only speculate about the ratings the program would have attained if it had corresponded more closely with its promos.

In the case of *Bay City Blues*, producer Steve Bochco wouldn't have been the one to give in. "It would [have been] like talking to a goddam wall," Sohmer imagines. But with other series, it has occurred to Sohmer to intervene more actively. Consider the NBC adventure show *Gavilan*, which came and went two seasons ago. Sohmer's crew concocted promos featuring "a series of women in various stages of undress whispering 'Gavilan' through moistened lips," according to the show's creator, Tom Mankiewicz. "I was totally appalled. *Gavilan* was a loner, not a lover." When producer Leonard Goldberg complained, Sohmer told him, "Your show should be like my promos."

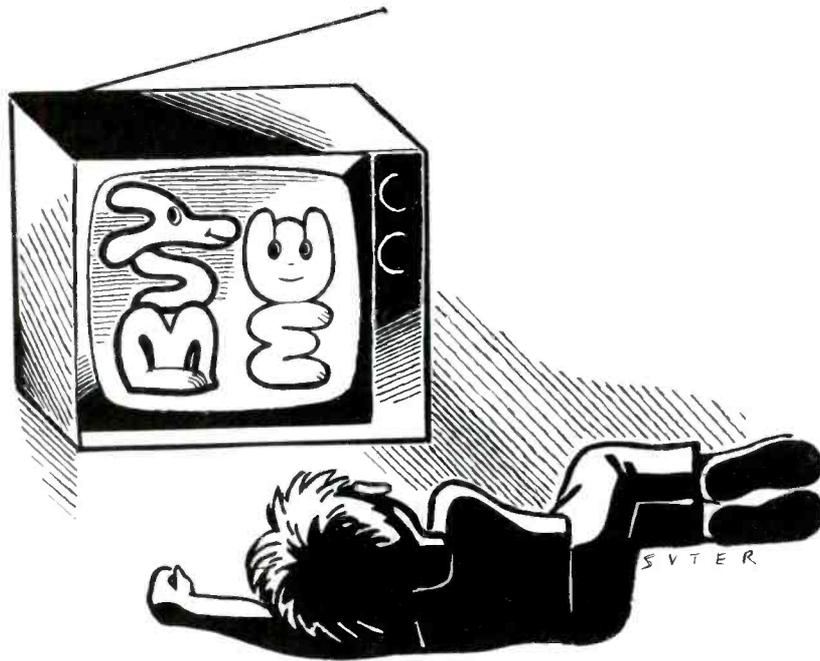
More recently, Sohmer collaborated for the first time with the like-minded Fred Silverman—in a marriage presumably made in ratings heaven—and their offspring is *We've Got It Made*. Silverman's series concerns a beautiful, buxom blond named Mickey who moves in as the maid for two "cute guys" and makes their girlfriends hideously jealous. The guys leer shamelessly, providing a wealth of footage for suggestive promos.

After a hot and heavy campaign, the show opened with a huge—32 percent—share of the audience. No misrepresentation was necessary to heat up the promos. *We've Got It Made* doesn't deal in incidentally sexy plots; the program is *about* sexual tension, Sohmer says.

"It wouldn't surprise me," observes an ABC executive, "if Freddie had said to NBC, 'Here's a hot concept and here's a hot way to sell it.'" Visions of the promos may even have come first in Silverman's mind. He won't comment on such speculation; Sohmer says he himself "saw the show's commerciality" and thought up the promos. In any case, it would be hard to find a sitcom situation better suited to the hot sell.

Media historians may some day footnote *We've Got It Made* and its network kin as examples of a breakthrough form of entertainment derived from advertising. Soon after they appeared, the television industry recognized producers as bothersome middlemen, and eliminated them along with traditional pretensions to artistic creation. Throwing off years of oppression, the true masters of audience manipulation were put in charge, and Steve Sohmer was free at last. ■

Toys Are Programs Too



by Jan Cherubin

PICTURE THIS: You're settled down in front of the television set awaiting the start of *Kraft Theater*. First you are beamed a recipe for tuna salad made with Kraft mayonnaise, and then, finally, *Kraft Theater* presents "A History of Sharp Cheddar."

Or this scenario from Action for Children's Television president Peggy Charren: a new series starring Bette Davis called *Marriott Hotel*, opening with Davis hailing a cab under the Marriott marquee.

Clearly, these examples of the gross commercialization of television are fictitious. Advertisers may wish for them, but programmers know that no intelligent being is going to watch a program-length commercial for Kraft Cheese or any other product. Even though Lucy may have smoked cigarettes on *I Love Lucy* to promote the sponsor, she never said, "Ricky, hand me a Philip Morris."

For children's television, however, this kind of exploitation is already a fact of life. Saturday mornings, after school, and even during prime time in certain weeks, children are shown half-hour ani-

Jan Cherubin is a staff writer for the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner.

With TV characters based on products, children's programs confuse selling and storytelling.

mated programs based on products. On Saturday morning, between those fond old standbys *Tom and Jerry* and *Captain Kangaroo*, you'll find ABC's *Monchhichis* (a Japanese plush monkey), NBC's *Shirt Tales* (a Hallmark greeting-card figure and doll), ABC's *Rubik the Amazing Cube*, and *Pac-Man*. After school there's *G.I. Joe: a Real American Hero* and *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, both syndicated programs about boys' action dolls. Girls' dolls get their programs as well: *Strawberry Shortcake* and *Herself the Elf*. There's even plastic jewelry: *The Charmkins*.

Each one of these programs is actually a half-hour commercial. Peggy Charren insists, and her organization, ACT, has filed a complaint about them with the Federal Communications Commission. "We're not saying there's anything wrong

with commercials. The fact is, some McDonald's commercials are nicer than the programs they interrupt. But *we know they're commercials.*"

If adults wouldn't put up with a series called *Marriott Hotel* for five minutes, why do they let their children watch program-length commercials? One reason is that children's toys are brought to life through animation, and thereby somewhat disguised. Another reason is that since popular television shows have historically spawned merchandise, parents can't always be sure whether it was the toy or the show that came first. From Davy Crockett coonskin caps to Flintstones vitamins, merchandisers have been trading on the icons of popular culture. It is only recently that the trend has reversed itself, with the toy as the *source* of the program. As one toy executive suggested, "We've simply speeded up the process." In essence, the process of love and identification has been so speeded up by the toy manufacturers and licensors that now, in children's television, the cart comes before the horse and the toy is the reason for the show. First the public gets the coonskin cap and then a show about Davy Crockett. Or—more likely these days—a show about a coonskin cap.

Alvin Ferleger, senior vice president of

David Suter



Three of the Care Bears

Taft Entertainment Co., doesn't see anything deceptive about product-first programming for kids. Taft Entertainment owns Hanna-Barbera and Ruby-Spears, television's two major animation houses and the producers of 73 percent of all Saturday-morning children's shows. Ferleger challenges Charren's logic by quoting her this way: "She says, 'If you start with an original on the air and it becomes a toy, fine; but if you start with a toy and it becomes a program, not fine, because then you might be persuaded to buy a toy.' But if a program is successful and inspires a toy, you buy the toy anyway. A three-year-old child today who first experiences *Sesame Street* by having a Big Bird doll put into her bed—well, as far as that child is concerned, she can't tell if the toy came first or the program came first."

But Charren objects to lumping *Sesame Street* in with product-based shows. "They didn't start out to sell Big Bird dolls. That character was created to attract inner-city kids."

Ferleger: "What makes our shows different from a commercial is that the character has a life that is totally independent of what that toy is. The Monchhichis don't sell themselves—they're deeply involved in a plot."

Charren: "Telling a story and giving some character to the toys is still advertising, only with greater effectiveness than a 30-second spot has."

BUT the question of which came first, the toy or the TV character, is not as simple as it seems; the Smurfs, for example, have an extremely scrambled paternity. Americans first discovered them as tiny blue leprechaun-like dolls. Now they have their own Saturday-morning show, and Christmas specials to boot. The Smurfs are on Peggy Charren's hit list. But here's the catch: The Smurfs began as characters in a storybook by Belgian cartoonist Peyo. He sold the characters to an American licensing firm, Wallace Berrie, which in turn licensed the Smurf image to manufacturers of just about everything, includ-



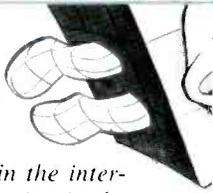
Strawberry Shortcake

ing NBC and its animation producers. Charren now concedes that it might not belong on the hit list.

In 1969, the FCC passed a ruling that specifically addressed the problem of toys as TV stars. The focus of the ruling was a TV program based on Mattel's Hot Wheels. The complaint was filed against Mattel and ABC by the Topper Corporation, a competing toy company. Topper was miffed at ABC for running what amounted to a 30-minute commercial and logging it as a program.

The FCC found that: *There can be no doubt that in this program, Mattel receives commercial promotion for its products beyond the time logged for commercial advertising. Nor is there any doubt that the program was developed with this promotional value, as well as its entertainment value, in mind. The producer designed a format that promotes the product of a major television advertiser of toys; used the trade name of the product as the title of the program, thus identifying the product with the program, and sold the program to a network that broadcasts a substantial amount of advertising for the advertiser. We find this pattern disturbing; more disturbing than the question of whether the commercial time logged is adequate. For this pattern*

Rubik the Amazing Cube



subordinates programming in the interest of the public to programming in the interest of salability. Eventually, Hot Wheels was forced off the air.

In the early '70s, ACT and other children's television watchdog groups gained a number of victories. The broadcast industry agreed that children might be exploited by sophisticated advertising techniques, and adopted a strict code for advertising on children's shows. In 1974 the FCC issued a set of guidelines emphasizing the obligations of television broadcasters to serve the special needs of children, especially with regard to education.

BUT the atmosphere has changed radically since that time. Last December the FCC adopted the industry view that broadcasters should be able to determine how best to serve the needs of children. The commission also rejected ACT's petition for a prohibition against program-length commercials. This year more than 10 programs emulate the old *Hot Wheels* show, and the only action the FCC has taken on ACT's request was to send station managers a letter informing them of the complaint. But Charren is convinced the commission will have to do more. "There is a precedent in law. The FCC will either have to act on this or say that they are doing away with what was policy in the commission."

They might be willing to do just that. "The commission is moving towards deregulation," says Al Baxter, FCC chief of complaints and compliance, wearily and perhaps for the thousandth time. "Of course, if programs and commercials become so intertwined that they can't be distinguished, stations will have to consider their promise of how many minutes they devote to commercial time. And that will be weighed against their performance when their license renewal is considered." However, the FCC is almost certain to abolish the present limit of 16 minutes of commercial time per hour.

Squire Rushnell, ABC's vice president for children's television, defends his network's toys-as-TV-stars approach: "We look out in the marketplace and we see what kids are interested in." ABC's *Rubik the Amazing Cube*, for instance, is about a product, but the show is not exactly a promotional tool because it came to television only after sales of Rubik's Cube crested. "My feeling is that the question of intent is important," says Rushnell. "Is the intent of the program to be entertainment based on an idea with built-in popularity among children, or is

the whole purpose to sell?"

"We can't deny that our TV specials are promotional tools," says Carole MacGillvray, president of General Mills marketing and design services (which, in association with American Greetings, produces the *Strawberry Shortcake* and *Care Bears* syndicated specials. Neither can Kenner, Hasbro, and Mattel, all toy companies now producing programming. Said Jack Chojnacki, vice president for American Greetings' licensing division, when a *Strawberry Shortcake* special aired in 1981, "We told the writer, if you need new characters for the plot, keep in mind characters that can be greeting cards, dolls, merchandise."

American Greetings is second only to Hallmark in the greeting-card business. Like Hallmark, the company maintains a staff of artists who create original designs for their cards. More than 10 years ago, its art director, Tom Wilson, created his own comic-strip character, Ziggy. When American Greetings decided to use Ziggy on a card, it had to license the character from Universal, the newspaper syndicate. Not long after that transaction, Wilson and Chojnacki hit on the idea of establishing a separate licensing branch solely to develop characters with whom the public would immediately identify—characters that would be drawn on greeting cards and licensed to various manufacturers.

Strawberry Shortcake, their first stab, was not a comic-strip character, or an illustration of a storybook character, or an individual artist's cartoon, or a character rooted in folklore, or even a figure on a greeting card. She was a corporate creation, developed expressly for the purpose of licensing, and so far the licensing has brought in more than a billion dollars. It may be no exaggeration to say that Jack Chojnacki and Tom Wilson are two of the great marketing geniuses of the 20th century.

Any lingering doubt about whether American Greetings is devising program-length commercials should be dispelled by the fact that the networks rejected *Strawberry Shortcake* and the *Care Bears*. The networks have a policy against airing product-first shows. "No one at the networks sees *Strawberry Shortcake* as an acceptable program for television," says ABC's Squire Rushnell. "I might agree that some of the syndicated shows are intended to be commercials."

But the cartoon producers insist again and again that, as Alvin Ferleger puts it, "the important issue is not what the source of the program is, but whether it is

Producers object that children can't tell which came first, the toy or the program.



Monchhichi "fashion pets"

valid entertainment, and whether there is socially useful information flowing through the program."

What of the entertainment value of these programs? Does the selling of toys get in the way of a good story line? Might the dramatization of a beloved storybook character actually have more substance than a show about a factory-made, history-less toy?

No fewer than five of the programs on Charren's hit list have the same story line. It goes like this: Very innocent, sweet, high-voiced creatures full of love and happiness and sunshine, (Elves, Monchhichis, Care Bears, Strawberry Shortcake and friends, and little Charmkin girls) live in a land full of happiness. But they are threatened by bad people in a dark land (a swamp, an underworld, or a land of no feelings). One member of the happy land is captured by the dark forces and the other happy creatures risk their lives to recapture their friend. Good prevails over evil, and they all go back to the happy land to celebrate.

This is a basic fairy-tale plot. But for five of these programs to follow identical plot lines calls into question the care with which this programming is produced. No one can take offense at the wonderfully



He-Man in his Attak Trak

moral, though unrealistic, premise of good prevailing over evil—it's pro-social; it's non-violent. Yet it is as if the producers bend over backward with cloying sweetness to compensate for the show's meaner intent: to sell toys. The result is insipid entertainment, even by juvenile standards.

THE ALLEGORICAL PLOTS of toy-based programming are fine in and of themselves, but allegory allows only for one-dimensional characters that can easily be played by toys. The more interesting characters are invariably those nasty beings in the swamps and underworlds—the ones that didn't start out as cute toys. It's quite likely that children will lean toward those more felt characters for identification. So much for moral platitudes.

In an attempt to give obviously characterless characters some personality, the producers have labeled each elf, Charmkin, etc., with a different personality, à la Snow White's seven dwarfs. In the case of the Care Bears, their personalities are emblems "stitched on their stomachs," according to the advertisements. And during the first *Care Bear* special, one bear says, "10 Care Bears are better than one." Yes, and they cost more too.

It's worth noting that in the long-running cartoons of yesteryear, all the foibles and oddities familiar in a child's world were given their due. One-dimensional programming may actually prove to be short-lived programming, a fact that broadcasters might want to consider if they were unmoved by the which-came-first argument or the intent argument. While toy companies don't want programs to last too long—they want kids to throw out their old toys and buy new ones—the networks and syndicators ought to value a show that endures. It would be ironic, though scarcely surprising, if the same programmers who refused to give up toys-as-TV in order to protect the interests of children, did so in order to look out for their own interests as broadcasters. ■

**IN THE LAST
FIVE YEARS
TELEVISION
VIEWERS
HAVE BEEN
GIVEN A
LOT MORE
TO CHOOSE
FROM.**

In 1978 17,135,000 American homes were wired for cable. By 1983, 36,870,000 were.

In 1978 there were 3 pay and 2 basic cable services. By 1983, there were 10 pay and 29 basic services.

In 1978 there were 83 independent television stations. By 1983, there were 179.

In 1978 there were virtually no video tape recorders in American homes. By 1983, there were 9,000,000 of them.

**HERE'S
WHAT
THEY
CHOSE.**

In 1978, CBS NFL Football coverage reached 11,400,000 homes in the average minute. In 1983, it reached 13,990,000.

In 1978, the CBS Morning News reached 1,390,000 homes in the average minute. In 1983, it reached 2,920,000.

In 1978, the CBS Evening News reached 9,760,000 homes in the average minute. In 1983, it reached 10,860,000.

In 1978, the CBS Late Night schedule reached 4,990,000 homes in the average minute. In 1983, it reached 5,340,000.

In 1978, the CBS Daytime schedule reached 4,920,000 homes in the average minute. In 1983, it reached 5,590,000.

In 1978, the CBS Primetime schedule reached 12,550,000 homes in the average minute. In 1983, it reached 13,440,000.

Under the pressure of new and lively competition, CBS has actually increased its audiences. In 1983, with more choices than ever, more homes turned to the CBS Television Network than ever before in its history.

**CBS/
BROADCAST
GROUP**

BAWLING FOR DOLLARS

~OR~
REACH OUT
AND CRUSH
SOMEONE

BY GIL EISNER
(c) 1984

IN THE BEGINNING...



...THEN, 50 YEARS LATER

POOR TV RECEPTION
CAUSED THE INVENTION
OF CABLE TV

TELEPHONE WIRES CONNECTED
US WITH 2-WAY TALK

Cable vs. Telephone

THE WAR OF THE W

Cable and phone companies wired the nation for different purposes, but now they're eyeing each other's turf.

by Eric Schmuckler

LAST FALL, a group of cities in the area around Palo Alto in California's Silicon Valley requested bids to construct a state-of-the-art cable system. At first the usual parties threw their hats into the ring—a national cable-system operator, a group of prominent local citizens. One proposal arrived from a more novel source—a “cable cooperative” promising to divide ownership among subscribers. Then something happened that threw off everyone's calculations: The phone company submitted a bid. Pacific Bell offered 112 channels, including virtually every “information service” provided or even contemplated at the time—up-to-the-minute stock information; home shopping; home banking; whole libraries of data; electronic mail. As if this weren't enough, the \$5 billion-a-year company promised to lease 80 of the channels back to the city, virtually guaranteeing the local government a secure profit as well as control over programming. The city called the proposal revolutionary. Opponents in the cable industry called it dangerous.

Eric Schmuckler writes frequently on telecommunications issues.

A year earlier, and half a continent away, a cable company was horning in on phone-company business in equally spectacular fashion. In June 1982, Cox Communications began offering high-speed data- and video-transmission services to select businesses in Omaha, Nebraska. Cox also began an experimental program with MCI Communications to make long-distance phone service available through the cable system, thus bypassing the local phone network. The phone company, Northwestern Bell, was incensed, and complained to the Nebraska Public Service Commission that Cox's new information system was the sort of “common carrier” service that only utilities like Bell could provide. When the PSC came down on Bell's side, Cox appealed to the Federal Communications Commission for relief. The issue is still pending.

Recent events have made it apparent that cable television and the telephone system are working different flanks of the same territory. The rise of the new two-way services has marked off a scrimmage line between them, and each has begun scrapping, or sniping, to hold on to its turf and capture some of the other's. Suddenly an elementary fact has become obvious: Both services are in the business of delivering electronic impulses door to

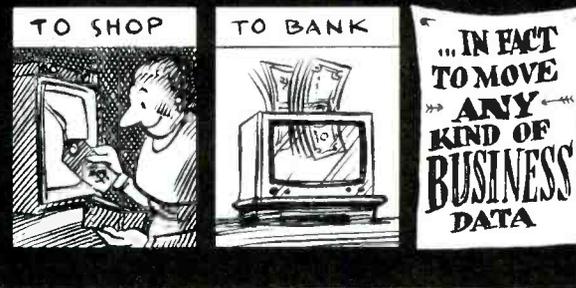
door, and each could be doing the other's job almost as well as its own. Each is laboring mightily to convince governments, businesses, and consumers that its method is cheaper, more efficient, and more dazzling. The struggle presents the almost incredible spectacle of telephone companies—or “telcos,” as they are known—making cable obsolete, or cable dislodging phone companies from what could be their most profitable niche.

The convergence of the television screen, the telephone, and the computer cannot be regarded as a merely commercial phenomenon. In many European nations these crucial information industries are joined in a single body under close government supervision and control. Here they are governed by market forces as well as state and local regulation. Our legal situation is chaotic. Should one industry be protected from the other? If so, at what level—state or federal? Should the phone companies, which already control our information lifeline, be allowed even greater access to our homes? Should information services be placed under the “common carrier” restriction borne by the phone system? Can, in fact, any meaningful legal distinction be made between voice and data transmission? Would open competition lead to an ab-

BY AND BY CABLE BECAME INDEPENDENT OF BROADCAST TV. THEN WITH THE ADDITION OF ANOTHER WIRE, CABLE FOUND IT COULD TALK 2-WAY TOO!



WHEN THIS NEW CAPABILITY WAS COMBINED WITH COMPUTERS, YOU COULD "INTERACT" WITH YOUR TELEVISION SET! (GASP!)



WIRES

surd system in which thousands of miles of redundant wire were laid? All of these questions remain to be answered.

When Ma Bell first crisscrossed America with phone lines, it had in mind only the transmission and switching of two-way conversations. The technology it chose was suited to the purpose: The wires were connected by a series of switches that could handle two-way voice communication, but they did not have enough electromagnetic capacity, known as "bandwidth," to carry video images. The cable industry, likewise, laid coaxial cable to meet its original needs. Traditional cable has the bandwidth to convey video images but can transmit this information only one way, from the operator to the home and not back.

Both sides are now scrambling to provide services they had not originally anticipated. For many years, cable operators thought of their product as entertainment, largely repackaged from broadcast television. But since 1977, when Warner Amex constructed an experimental two-way cable system in Columbus, Ohio, cable operators have begun to see themselves in a new light. The few remaining companies that disdain to offer information services are, says cable pioneer Irving Kahn, "in the buggy-whip

business." Bids for a big-city franchise commonly promise the construction of the far more expensive two-way cable. But in the battle to provide a new, comprehensive wire, the telcos seem to be far ahead. For the past decade Bell has been developing a fiber-optic cable, which can transmit hundreds of video signals simultaneously so that every conceivable service could be made available to users. For this and other reasons—their wealth and their status as protected monopolies—the telephone companies present a far greater threat to the cable industry than the other way around.

At the moment, though, it is cable that is moving most aggressively into traditional telco turf. The most modern cable systems actually comprise two separate "loops"—one that provides entertainment for consumer households, and another, the so-called "institutional loop," linking government offices, schools, businesses, libraries, hospitals, and so forth. These institutional loops can perform Bell's traditional work of handling inter-office phone traffic, as well as pooling data among users, linking computers, and sending mail electronically. One of the oldest major cable systems, Manhattan Cable, now provides such business services to 14 clients, including Chase Manhattan Bank and the New York City government. In Pittsburgh, Warner Amex uses its institutional network to link three Westinghouse offices. Even the relatively quaint 12-channel system in Fishkill, New York has some excess capacity that links computers for IBM.

Institutional cable is also especially well-suited to serving small businesses. Cox's Comline Service in Omaha, which so provoked Northwestern Bell, serves computer-processing firms and small companies that have a couple of cross-town offices. Cable operators can offer services such as word-processing or billing control to companies too small to do it themselves; or they can lease capacity to others, such as data processors, who will do the job.

Phone companies have not taken these

invasions lightly. The new local companies formed by the Bell breakup are no longer as heavily subsidized by Bell's highly profitable long-distance service, now a separate corporate entity. Thus revenue from developing services, such as institutional loops, has taken on additional importance. Telephone companies have preferred to challenge cable companies not in the open market but in the courts and before regulatory bodies, prompting numerous state utility bodies to bring cable's data services under their jurisdiction.

The cable industry has responded to this challenge with one of its own: It has asked the FCC to take over jurisdiction of information services from the state commissions, and has persuaded Congress to include language in the pending cable deregulation bill, H. 4103, that would allow cable companies to compete on their current, unregulated footing. Cable officials have argued that, as data transmission accounts for only 1 percent of local telco business, companies should be allowed to compete without constraining regulations, even though the phone companies are regulated as utilities. But telco representatives have pointed out that cable companies need win over only a few choice customers to make a significant dent in their business. Thirty-three percent of New York Telephone's business revenues, for example, come from only one-third of 1 percent of its customers. Telco executives argue for "a level playing field": Both sides should compete under the same rules. Cable executives consider this metaphor eyewash, since telcos virtually own the playing field.

"Telcos have such a lock on the data business, it's almost a cultural thing," exclaims Gustave Hauser, head of Hauser Communication and former chairman of Warner Amex Cable. Hauser claims that "premature regulation would strangle businesses that don't even exist yet." The FCC, he notes, regulates AT&T more heavily than MCI, since the former dominates the long-distance phone market. Mightn't this be a precedent for data



HERE'S THE BEEF: CABLE COMPLAINED ABOUT THE PHONE CO.'S MONOPOLY STATUS; THE PHONE CO.'S COMPLAINED ABOUT CABLE'S RELATIVE FREEDOM FROM REGULATION.

NO MORE MR



transmission? In any case the FCC seems likely to preempt state jurisdiction, giving cable a regulatory advantage.

Once this hurdle is passed there may be no stopping cable from offering telephone service itself. Cox's arrangement with MCI in Omaha may serve as a model. Much of MCI's costs come from the expensive local interconnection at both ends of a long-distance call. By going through the local cable system, MCI can save money, lower its rates, and benefit the cable operator. Yet it is by no means clear that cable should be allowed to offer unregulated phone service, even if it can offer unregulated data service; the FCC has not addressed this distinction.

Many of the futuristic services now up for grabs don't require a video image at all, and thus can be transmitted as easily over phone wire as over cable. In fact Chemical Bank's home banking service and the Viewtron videotex service currently travel through telephone wires. Interactive services such as pay-per-view and home shopping, on the other hand, require video capacity. Yet even these specialties of cable programming can succeed without a two-way cable system.

While the image that passes from the cable operator to the user requires a cable-sized wire, the message that runs "upstream," from the consumer—"I'll buy this movie or washer-dryer; bill me later"—can be relayed on telephone lines. Despite the fierce rhetorical and economic competition between the telephone and cable industries, it seems that the two are also natural partners.

This mixed marriage is called a hybrid. A rudimentary form of hybrid is already common: Those TV commercials with toll-free numbers to order the miraculous Ginzu knife combine the selling power of television with the ease of response by telephone. The Cablesop Service in Peabody, Massachusetts was a more interactive home-shopping hybrid, in which viewers requested "infomercials" (longer, in-depth ads) about products they desired.

Addressable cable systems can offer

home shopping and pay-per-view, thanks to the ability to deliver advertisements and programs only to interested (and paid-up) households. Addressability is much cheaper than building a fully interactive system (one in which the user can always "talk back" to the operator by pushing buttons on a keypad). Pay-per-view is expected to be highly profitable, and a hybrid system can make it affordable even to financially pinched cable companies. Major cable operators are extremely cost-conscious at the moment.

Many operators consider interactive services little more than a fancy loss leader. Viacom, the only competitor for the Palo Alto franchise with prior cable experience, withdrew from the bidding with the comment that the profitability of two-way services had yet to be proved. Warner Amex is trying to back off from

Cable's 'loops' can handle inter-office phone traffic and computer link-ups.

commitments it made in the heat of franchising wars. Its interactive technology, Qube, won it a host of big-city franchises but has proved to be a money-loser. The industry has barely enough money to string cable that transmits in one direction, much less two. The cost squeeze makes hybrid systems a very attractive option, especially for pay-per-view. Instead of competition, cable may look to telcos for cooperation.

Partnership with local phone companies suggests the next logical step: Lean back and let the telco do it all for you. In

Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., the local phone companies have offered to build the entire cable system and lease it back to franchise winners. These lease-back proposals would provide state-of-the-art facilities to cable operators, who wouldn't have to put out a nickel for them. But even though leasing telco facilities would erase practically all of their hardware investment, cable operators are skeptical of it. Ron Johnson, who runs the institutional cable in Omaha, warns that "if you let the telco build it, the cable operator will be limited to entertainment, and the telco will keep all two-way information services for itself." Indeed, the telco proposal in Palo Alto clearly states that the institutional network is not part of the franchise, but reserved for Pacific Bell's own unspecified purposes. In light of these limitations on what tenant cable operators might be allowed to offer, Johnson asks, "Why lease a system when you can build and own it yourself?"

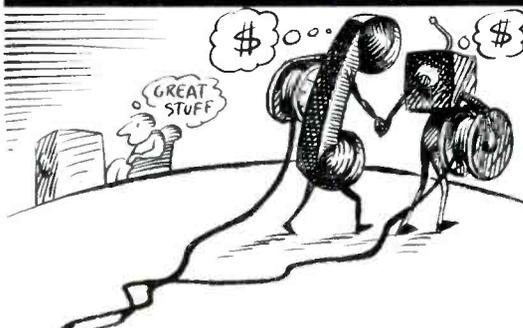
To date only one lease-back deal has been consummated—in the Milwaukee suburb of Brookfield—but this franchise is now tangled in a series of lawsuits.

As long as they remain common carriers, the telcos cannot fully devour the cable business. (Telcos are prohibited from operating cable systems in their service areas.) Common carriers must be accessible to anyone wishing to use them. Beyond their mandate in basic phone service, telcos may only provide transmission systems for hire; they may lease facilities to cable operators, but they may not select or create programming. Common-carrier status thus sets the telcos' outer limit of control. On the other hand, their monopoly status, with rate increases regulated to guarantee their profits, insures their enormous financial strength. The cable companies' trepidation about the phone industry is scarcely unreasonable.

Competitive forces above and beyond cable have continued to check some of the telcos' ambitions. Businesses have been bypassing the phone company, and



YET, THEY FOUND THEY COULD ALSO WORK TOGETHER TO PROVIDE 2-WAY SERVICE



AT THE MOMENT EVERYTHING IS UP IN THE AIR.

1. HOW WILL CABLE BE REGULATED? 2. WILL FIBER OPTICS REPLACE EVERYTHING? 3. HOW LONG BEFORE WE FEEL THE NEW HI-TECH BENEFITS?



thus saving on phone bills, not only with cable transmissions but with microwave and satellite networks. On this ground the telcos have decided to switch rather than fight, and have taken the lead in building private lines for business, bypassing their own local networks. So far, the instances of bypassing are not numerous, but, warns telecommunications consultant Kenneth Donow, "It's more of a threat to telcos in the long run. Things could get quite nasty when the largest bypassers start reselling their excess capacity."

Given that the telcos face any number of obstacles, both regulatory and competitive, they still hold the ultimate trump card—fiber-optic technology. These strands of glass, which can transmit 40,000 phone calls, or the entire broadcast spectrum, at once, are not yet cost-efficient on a massive scale. But they are growing easier to use and cheaper, and even some cable companies—several of Pacific Bell's competitors, for example—are promising to use them. Fiber optics could change everything. Telecommunications consultant Ken Bosomworth imagines a situation in which "fiber could carry five separate cable packagers, each with a different price for HBO." Bell's Picturephone service could become feasible at last. Fiber could even accommodate competing local phone companies, if they each had automatic switching capacity. At the moment, data can be transmitted more cheaply with fewer errors over advanced coaxial cable than over telephone wires. Fiber will make transmission cheaper still.

The phone companies not only developed the technology, but can command the huge pool of capital needed to lay fiber-optic wire on a grand scale. Telephone companies that rebuild their local loops with fiber-optics will be in an ideal position to offer the full range of interactive services, especially if cable operators continue to drag their feet. Cities are getting tired of waiting: Miami fined its cable system \$2,500 per day for failing to introduce interactive services as the franchise required. And, as one cable execu-

tive warned, "The city councils are going to start using the telephone companies as a competitive force against the cable companies to provide [two-way] services." Finally, telcos can simply outbid cable systems for advanced services as franchises come up for renewal.

Pacific Bell's proposal in Palo Alto illustrates the attractions as well as the dangers of the telco entry into cable franchising. To Irving Kahn it strikes at the cable industry's most basic assumptions. "The specter of common-carrier status," he observes, "has hung over the cable industry for ages. Now along comes an entire cable deal predicated on the *benefits* of common-carrier status." Common-carrier status is indeed crucial to Pacific Bell's offer. Since the utility can exercise no control over content, it has offered to give the city, or another cable

specific objections to Pacific Bell's proposal. "Do you want the mayor to spend his time deciding whether to offer HBO or Showtime?" asks an incredulous Gustave Hauser. The city has tried to meet this objection with a plan to set up an independent "access organization" to manage the system. Presumably this autonomous body would keep rates as low as possible, with an eye directed more toward the common good than the bottom line. Or the city might give the 80 channels to a local group that would run the system as a cooperative, bypassing the political problem while retaining local control.

As it begins considering bids, Palo Alto will have a number of questions for Pacific Bell. The company wants a large portion of cable subscription revenues, but will this leave enough income for the city? The CCTA, which has led a lobbying drive against Pacific Bell, claims the phone company has overestimated revenue from information services and underestimated costs. Telco control of the institutional cable prompts the city's cable manager, Jeanne Moulton, to ask, "What is on the city's network and what is on the telco's?" Palo Alto's final judgment seems likely to set a precedent of some kind, especially since Pacific Bell has made similar proposals to other cities in California and Nevada.

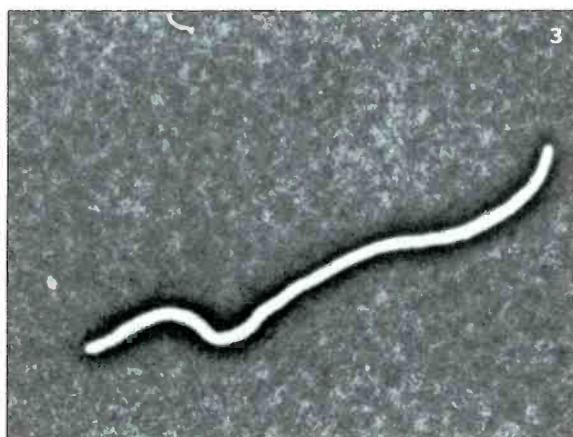
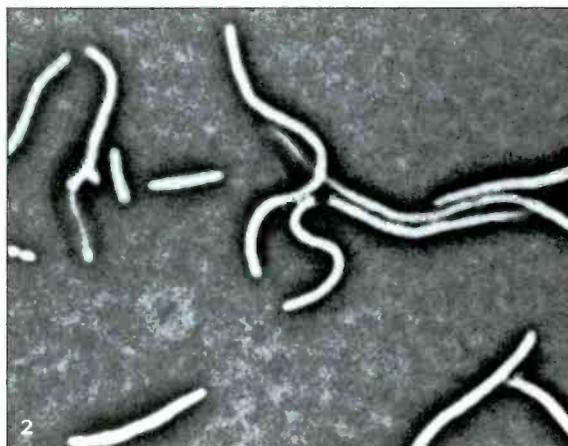
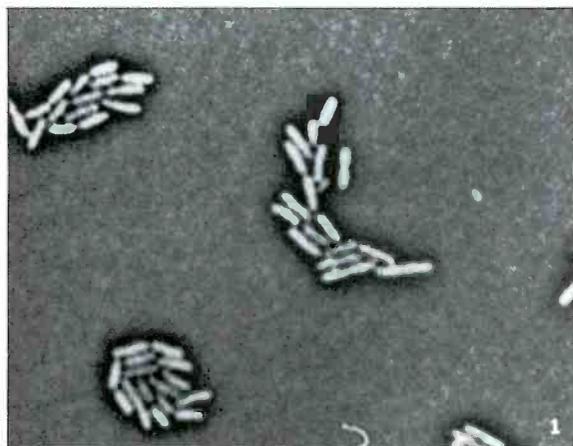
Yet no matter what Palo Alto decides, the telcos have a large future in cable. Fiber-optic technology eliminates the thorny question of channel capacity, and seems destined to replace the current electronic traffic jam with a genuine open marketplace of ideas, programs, and services—the ultimate common carrier. And as cable brings into the home not only entertainment but information that people need to live by, the common-carrier model may seem an increasingly appropriate one, the cable industry's cavils notwithstanding. Until now the competition has benefited only a few large companies; it may not be too much to hope that in the future the benefits will be more widely and democratically distributed. ■

If Pacific Bell wins in Palo Alto, its cable system will operate as a common carrier.

operator, control over the content of three-quarters of the system's channels—a highly tempting offer in Palo Alto. The cable industry, accustomed to the role of programming gatekeeper, fears the phone companies' long experience in the leasing business.

Mike Morris of the California Cable Television Association claims that "telcos are trying to exploit their monopoly position to get into new businesses"—that is, take protected profits from the local phone business and pour them into cable. And there are more spe-

We've declared total war...



Bacteria in lab dish (1) elongate after addition of piperacillin, a new antibiotic (2); the cell wall of the microorganism weakens (3), then ruptures and dies (4).

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But the war against infectious diseases continues and our search for even newer, more effective medications goes on.

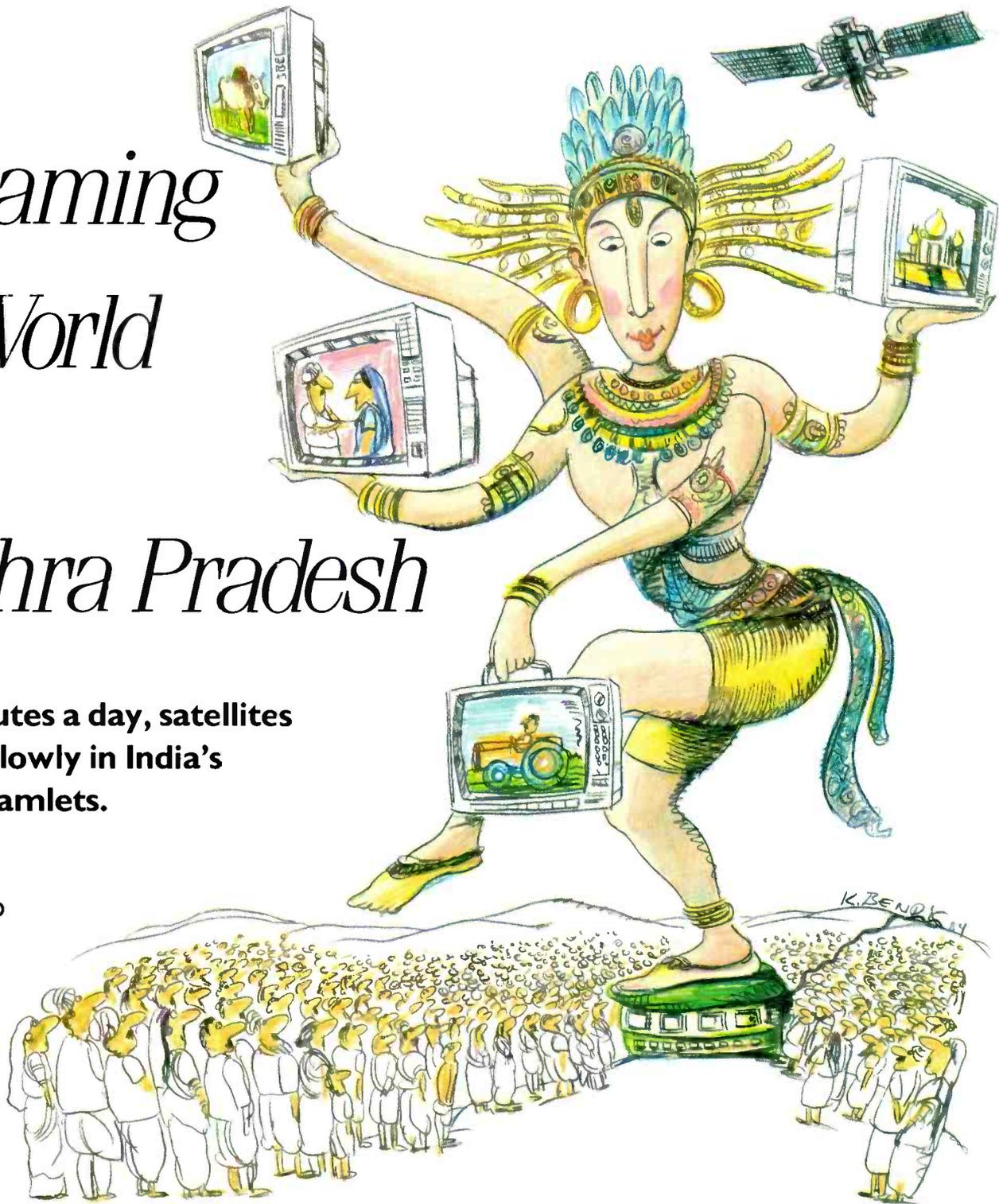


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Beaming the World to Andhra Pradesh

For 40 minutes a day, satellites
inform the lowly in India's
remotest hamlets.

by James Traub



BY THE LIGHT OF A FULL MOON, and by the grace of a 12-foot, chicken-wire-mesh satellite-receiving antenna, the citizens of Amisthapur village, Mehboobnagar district, Andhra Pradesh state, India, are watching television. Not all the citizens are watching, of course. On a normal evening, 300 to 400 villagers sit on the open ground outside the two-room schoolhouse to squint at the tiny screen. But today happens to be market day, and many of the adults have gone to town with their bullock carts. A few others have stayed away because they believe the bad reception that has afflicted the set for the past month will permanently dam-

age their eyesight. The crowd includes 75 to 100 children and about 40 adults. The children, excited perhaps by the white-faced stranger, keep up a constant yammering that prevents the adults from hearing the segment on rice-planting. But when this stern material gives way to a drama, also in their native language of Telegu, the children fall silent, even mesmerized, and the adults experience a 20-minute thrill of pleasure at the end of a day of back-breaking labor.

A machine with its nose pointed into the darkness has brought them an uncountable, marvelous world—though for only 40 minutes each evening. The Insat-

1B satellite will go on broadcasting for another two-and-a-half hours, but it has many other languages besides Telegu to accommodate, and the villagers, alas, don't understand any of them.

Some combination of excitement, perplexity, and frustration captures the mood of these early days of India's "community television" system. In this strange new context, television seems almost reborn, its messy slate wiped clean. Perhaps we should call it "television without TV"—neither glamorous nor garrulous. Its work is instruction and delight. To several hundred thousand villagers, television is as precious a link with

Keith Bendis

the outside world as a road or a bus. But no one can confidently predict what the maturity of this infant technology will bring. Just as Americans now wonder about the uses to which the computer will be put, so must Indians about community television. Already it is confronting technical, cultural, and political problems, none of them trivial.

Until recently, television seemed too frivolous and too expensive a technology to warrant government investment. India already had—and still has—a terrestrial television system broadcasting a little bit of news and a great deal of entertainment

predecessor's intended services.

Insat's two broadcast transponders transmit quite different sets of programs. One distributes the local-language programs back to the several states in which they are produced. At the moment only the state of Andhra Pradesh and the eastern state of Orissa are using the transponder for this purpose. Four more states, speaking among them three more languages, are scheduled to begin producing, sending, and receiving programs in the next year. A traffic jam already exists, since only three hours or so are available for community TV: Villagers are out



India's space chief envisioned a system using satellites and regional studios.

to owners of private sets in the large cities. Most Third World countries have comparable systems. But in the late 1960s Vikram A. Sarabhai, the father of India's space program, convinced the central government that television could be a powerful social force if only its reach extended beyond the cities. The satellite, he saw presciently, might leapfrog the towns directly into India's 550,000 villages.

In 1975 India leased a transponder on America's ATS-6 satellite, and began beaming programs directly to 2,400 sets in six states—eight years before direct-broadcast satellite television became operative in the United States. SITE, the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment, as it was called, satisfied virtually all expectations, and India commissioned a satellite of its own, Insat-1A. Only two of its transponders were to provide television signals; the rest were to relieve the congestion of the country's terrestrial telephone system, create national radio networks, record meteorological data, and provide emergency and offshore telecommunications links. Unfortunately, Insat-1A, launched in April 1982, malfunctioned and was deactivated six months later. Insat-1B, which was to have been India's "spare" satellite, was sent up on the U.S. space shuttle in August 1983, and now provides all of its

in the fields at least until 6 P.M., and generally asleep by 9. To accommodate all the programming, India cut each language's allotment from 60 to 40 minutes per evening, in addition to 45 minutes for schoolchildren each morning. As more states produce their own programs the problem will grow more acute, though there is some talk of adding a third transponder. And information and broadcasting minister H.K.L. Bhagat speaks vaguely of airing more local programs by way of "technological devices that my people have told me about," but that he cannot describe.

The second transponder beams the national and regional programming that urban Indians have been watching since the pre-satellite days. These programs, largely produced in the headquarters of the government-run television authority, called Doordarshan, are to be watched not only in hamlets but in any of the 40-odd cities that now have television transmission; there they reach India's prime TV audience, the 2.1 million private set owners. The programs are broadcast in the "link languages" of Hindi and English, the former understood by about half the country, the latter by perhaps 5 or 10 percent. From 9 to 10:30 P.M., the entire nation is constrained to watch television in those languages.

Only about 800 of the 11,000 villages in the SITE program receive their television through direct reception sets (DRS). The others, located within the range of high-power transmitters in the larger Indian cities, use VHF sets. The reason for this complicated approach is economic. Only in and around cities will the density of television sets be great enough to warrant the construction of a land-line system to feed the local transmitter. But sets tied exclusively to the satellite can only receive the small ration of programs broadcast nationally. B.S. Bhatia, an official at the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), in the western state of Gujarat, concedes that low-power transmitters make a good deal more sense in a country like India than DRS; the latter, he says, is "better than nothing," and will diminish in importance as more transmitters are scattered around the country.

BACK IN AMISTHAPUR, I am slated to meet with the Telly Club—or perhaps it's the Tele-Club—a group of villagers who discuss programs three times a week and send reports back to Doordarshan in the state capital of Hyderabad. In fact, the town's entire television audience has squeezed into the school room, with the children staring at the visitor from a distance of about 18 inches. I ask Telly Club members which programs they recall. A program about artificial insemination of cattle, they say, has many of them contemplating this technique; from another segment they learned to mix pesticides with seeds during sowing, rather than sprinkle them on afterwards. The agricultural programs deal with specific problems and offer practical solutions, from experts as well as farmers, and the villagers normally watch them with great attention. Their faith in the wisdom of televised advice is unshakable, despite the skepticism with which they normally confront outsiders. "When there was a sheep disease in one of the villages," says my guide, Doordarshan official Sanjeev Thomas, "the villagers asked us to do a program on it. I said, 'Why don't you just ask the veterinarian?' They said, 'No, sahib, we don't trust the veterinarian. We want to hear it on television.'"

Community television has been cultivating this faith since the early days of SITE. This most exotic of media has brought itself far closer to the needs of humble folk than either radio or print, with their urban audiences. Several years ago Sanjeev Thomas and a colleague started up a program, whose format had originated in Gujarat, with a name loosely translated as *Ask, and You Shall Get*. Thomas and a cameraman would ask

villagers what their principal problem was, and then film them talking about it as long as they wished. After airing the film on the local VHF network, the two would go to the appropriate government ministry and film an embarrassed official explaining why the problem existed. In a country where dialogue between the poor and the administration responsible for their care scarcely exists, this simple method often proved electrifying. Thomas recalls showing the state health minister a 90-minute clip of villagers who had no access to medical care describing the chronic illness and early, avoidable death with which they were plagued. The minister, says Thomas, broke down and wept; within a few days the villagers were visited by a jeep-load of medical officials. By now, he says, "the villagers feel that television is not an alien technology, that it is there for them to use."

In Gujarat, a group of villagers were asked to write and stage their own play; its principal character was a village-level worker—a state government official—who solicited bribes from the helpless farmers. The village-level workers of the state, outraged, demanded an apology. Instead, says B.S. Bhatia, "We took the program to the villagers and recorded their response. Each one said, 'I have bribed these fellows with my own hands.'"

While locally produced shows hold up a mirror to familiar reality, national programming offers a telescopic view of a dimly imagined larger world. Indeed, in India's diffuse and loose-jointed confederation of cultures, national programming may act as a sort of spine. The Amisthapuris still talk of a broadcast they saw about the Commonwealth conference, held in Delhi in November. "We had never seen Delhi before," said Anjaiah, the president of the Telly Club. "We had never seen the Taj Mahal," added some other voice from the crowd. Nor had they even heard of most of the nations whose leaders were pictured on the screen. So for once the villagers watched the national program, piecing through the gibberish of Hindi and English, and perhaps saw themselves as citizens of a nation, and even of a family of nations.

That's the good news. But most Indian programming is neither bold nor enlightening. Its traditional audience—certainly its most influential audience—has been the urban middle class. What city dwellers want, not too surprisingly, is Hindi films at night and cricket on Sunday, and that's what they get. At 9 every Wednesday night, household activity all across India comes to a halt as *The Lucy Show* appears on the air. Beyond the fun and

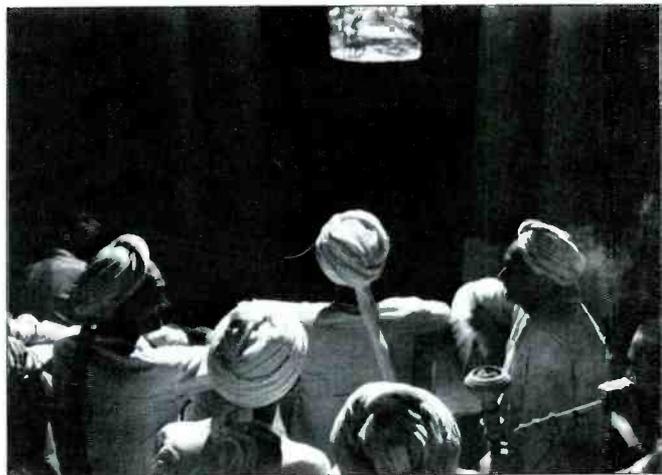
games, India's private viewers have traditionally been fed a thin broth of one-sided news, harmless documentaries, and uplifting cultural fare. Doordarshan has not blocked programming for the masses; the government, after all, is officially committed to slaying various reactionary dragons. But Doordarshan's willingness to take risks is as questionable as that of Prime Minister Gandhi's ruling party, which once promised to *garibi hatao*—"abolish poverty"—and now modestly offers "a government that works."

The special character of non-urban television may itself be threatened. From

Thus, virtually all of the demand will come from middle-class citizens—the rich already have sets—who have paid good money to be entertained, not to examine the virtues of the Ongole cow or the defects of the community health-worker system.

The system seems likely to grow not only more urbanized but more centralized. Only four new production centers are planned, making 13 in all; no new satellite uplinks are in the works. All DRS programs will continue to be sent from their production facilities to Delhi. ISRO officials, who may consider themselves

The villagers had their first view of Delhi and leaders of distant nations.



the outset of the SITE program, ISRO authorities had kept Hindi feature films off the air in Gujarati villages, on the grounds that a steady diet of gaudy fantasy will make adult education, family planning, and the like seem pretty weak stuff. Delhi, however, is now feeding feature films to all earth stations on Saturday and Sunday. And why not? asks B.K. Khurana, Doordarshan's director of audience research, in tones that any American would find familiar. "Should villagers be barred from viewing a program because it is entertaining?"

No doubt such a prohibition would trample on their fundamental rights; but there is a legitimate fear of the imperialism of urban, Delhi-based television. During 1984—until the upcoming national elections, a cynic would say—an immense expansion of the television system is planned. The central government will spend \$68 million to increase the number of transmitters from 43 to 180, so that 70 percent of the population will be in range of broadcast signals. By reducing excise taxes, the government has helped bring down the price of a color set from \$850 to \$550, and of a black-and-white set to \$120. But the government has committed itself to supplying only 2,000 DRS and 2,000 low-power VHF sets by the end of the sixth Five-Year Plan, in April 1985.

the last surviving keepers of Vikram Sarabhai's original vision, speak of establishing a production facility at each transmitter, broadcasting not only in local languages but in local dialects. Yet Mrs. Gandhi has made centralization one of the hallmarks of her reign, with herself at the epicenter. It is highly unlikely that Doordarshan's firm grip on TV, and Delhi's on Doordarshan, will be relaxed.

Most of us have grown so resigned to television's lowly ambitions that it is difficult to recognize it as a powerful force for social good. It can instruct ignorant and impoverished peasants in modern, or at least appropriate, methods of farming, family planning, and health care. It can give them an opportunity to speak to the larger world, to make manifest their sufferings. It can show that outside world to them, and expand traditional, narrow identities. Even at its worst, if television is used to peddle feature films and political propaganda, it will at least bring some fresh light and air to the self-enclosed world of the village.

But might it be used at its best? Community television is necessarily bound up with all that is most hopeful in India today, as well as all that is most wasteful. At the moment its direction is uncertain; the picture, however, should be growing clearer over the next few years. ■

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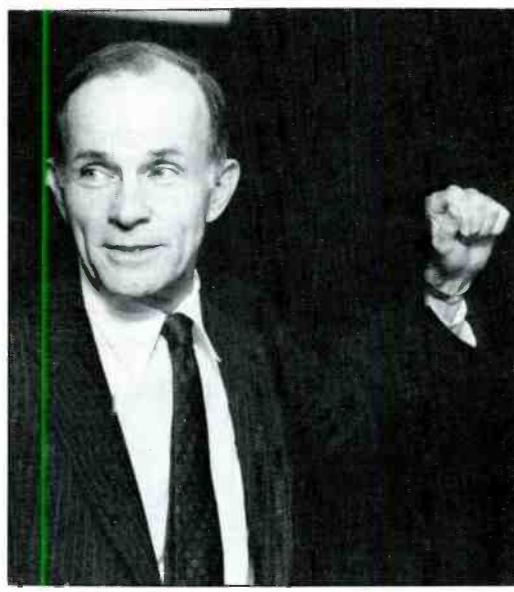
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Dan Ritchie



TV's Moral Minority

Firmly committed to cable as well as broadcasting, Group W is led by a man both industries consider a heretic.

by Michael Schwarz and Martin Koughan

ON A SOMBER MORNING last fall, 40 workers at Philadelphia's KYW Newsradio assembled in a conference room, where they strained to make conversation while nervously awaiting the start of their meeting. The talk stopped when a slightly built, middle-aged man in a loose-fitting blue-striped suit entered the room. This was Daniel L. Ritchie, their boss supreme, from 40th-floor headquarters in New York.

KYW's staffers had kept their station number one in Philadelphia for the past eight years, yet no one expected Ritchie to bear happy news. The day before, his company—Group W (Westinghouse)

Michael Schwarz and Martin Koughan are contributing editors of Channels.

Broadcasting and Cable Inc.—had shut down its ambitious 24-hour cable news network. The failure of the Satellite News Channel (SNC) to compete against Ted Turner's Cable News Network (CNN) cost Group W \$30 million and put 400 people out of work. Added to that blow was still more bad news: Group W would be spending approximately \$1 billion to upgrade or rebuild the majority of its 150 cable systems. These were not the happiest days for a company with vast holdings in both broadcasting and cable. With budgets at KYW already tight, the staffers feared for their futures.

Bounding into this fretful crowd, the wiry Ritchie more closely resembled an eager salesman on his first call than the chairman and chief executive of America's oldest broadcasting organization. He

approached the first person in his path (who turned out to be a janitor), pumped the startled man's hand, and announced, "Hi. I'm Dan Ritchie." He then greeted the other 40 staffers.

None of them need have worried. Ritchie's main concern was not short-term problems but distant, loftier goals. He wanted the low-down on KYW's affirmative action record, for one thing. "How can we hope to fulfill our destiny," he asked, "if we don't have industry leadership as diverse as our audience?"

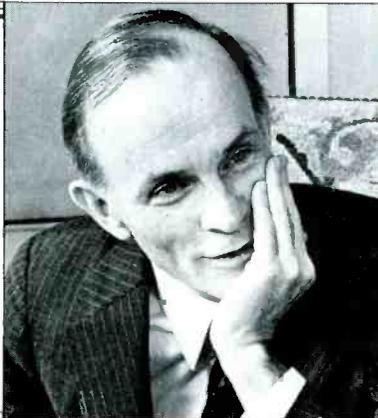
The concern is characteristic of Ritchie, an unusually long-term thinker in a business obsessed by the short-term problems of an unpredictable marketplace. Indeed, he is a maverick among top media executives, not only opposing the communications industry's sacred

ANDREW POPPER

concept of deregulation, but busy orchestrating a rapprochement between the two great warring factions, broadcast and cable. Ritchie occupies a rare position in being a leader of both industries.

But no matter how fervently Ritchie believes in pursuing a new approach, he has yet to convince his colleagues to turn their swords into plowshares. Indeed, the two industries have historically shown about as much trust for each other as America and the Soviet Union. If his associates often treat Ritchie with skepticism, it is because there is scant evidence that this icy tradition of resentment, suspicion, and hostility is about to melt away in a warm embrace. Ritchie's faith in his own vision makes him a virtual heretic.

If the pendulum swings to total deregulation, he warns, 'it will swing back with a vengeance.'



There is also reason for his colleagues to question some of Ritchie's decisions. In 1981, when he took over, Group W bought its first UHF station, WPCQ-TV in Charlotte, North Carolina, from Ted Turner. The company also committed itself to a future in cable by buying Teleprompter, one of the largest cable system operators. Ritchie was willing to bet he could integrate the businesses of broadcasting and narrowcasting into a single, profitable endeavor. But the Charlotte station, although an NBC affiliate in a growing market, turned out to be a \$20 million headache (partly because most viewers could receive the NBC signal on a VHF channel from a nearby city, but also because WPCQ had technical problems).

To make matters worse, Turner not only used the money he made on the sale to keep CNN in business, he then whirled around and sued Group W for barring CNN on its cable systems in favor of its own news service. The network news carried on WPCQ is now doing slightly better than its previous zero rating, and Charlotte has moved from the 34th market to the 31st, but Ritchie's decision to purchase the station remains dubious (WPCQ has been put up for sale).

The Teleprompter purchase was also

problematic. Many of its franchises were first-generation, 12-channel cable systems—a good number of which are coming up for renewal simultaneously. To retain the franchises, Group W has to rebuild the old systems for larger channel capacity at considerable expense.

Finally, there was the Satellite News Channel debacle. SNC's survival had depended on its ability to beat out Turner's CNN, which it seemed to have the resources to do. A Group W co-venture with ABC, SNC was an attractive package to cable operators both editorially and financially. But Ritchie did not count on industry loyalty to Turner, nor did he anticipate that SNC would draw only skimpy ad revenue. Turner, who bought

out his rival, had the last laugh: SNC's demise ensured CNN a place on the Group W cable systems from which it had been excluded.

But overall, Group W has certainly not lacked for success. It is big and profitable: Its many television and radio stations are extremely well run, its profits in syndication are considerable, and some of its cable ventures are meeting with promising results. The Nashville Network, for example, now reaches 12 million homes and claims the fastest growth of any cable service. Beyond all this, Group W retains a sort of moral primacy in the industry, which it first gained under Ritchie's predecessor, Donald H. McGannon.

During his 27 years at Westinghouse, McGannon became a legend, taking stands against the networks as only the head of a powerful group of stations could. He blocked ABC's attempt to jam an extra commercial minute into the half-hour prime-time series *Batman*; he decried poor program quality and declining moral standards, and he lobbied against network dominance over prime time. Largely as a result of his efforts, the FCC adopted the Prime Time Access Rule in 1970, giving local stations control over the 7:30-8:00 P.M. slot every evening but

Sundays. (This arrangement proved profitable not only for local broadcasters but for Group W and other syndicators as well.)

McGannon was such a staunch believer in the public-trustee concept for broadcasting that for several years he had Group W sponsor public-service conferences for the whole industry. He banned cigarette advertising on his stations well before Congress enacted its prohibition for radio and television, and he kept Group W from complying with the National Association of Broadcasters' Television Code when he felt the standards weren't strict enough. McGannon, who had large city stations affiliated with each of the networks, was the industry's Mr. Clean.

McGANNON must have sensed the depth of his ideological kinship with Ritchie, because he hand-picked his successor despite Ritchie's scant experience in broadcasting. The unlikely career of the soft-spoken Ritchie had begun in North Carolina, where his father owned a farm equipment distributorship. The business provided a modest standard of living, but not enough to pay undergraduate tuition at Harvard. Ritchie completed his studies on a scholarship, and then took a graduate degree in business with a view to becoming a financial analyst. With no personal contacts, he walked into the offices of Lehman Brothers and begged for a job, saying he would work for any salary.

Within a few months, Ritchie's bosses had doubled his pay. Two years later, he left Wall Street to oversee acquisitions for MCA, the entertainment conglomerate. There he demonstrated his financial wizardry by turning a \$40 million savings and loan company in Denver into a billion-dollar enterprise. He also became the protégé of MCA chairman Jules Stein, one of the most admired operators in the financial world.

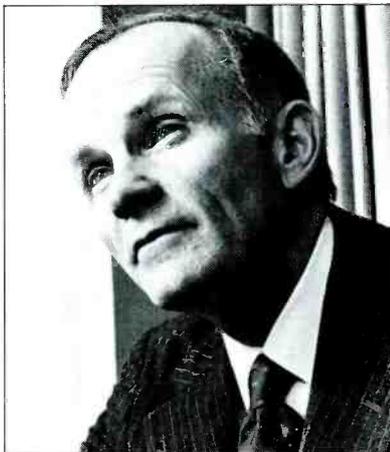
Ten years after arriving at MCA, after attaining the title of executive vice president, Ritchie left the company to start a health-food business with actor Eddie Albert. It took just three years for Archon Pure Products Inc. to parlay its line of food supplements and organic vegetables into a \$40 million business. Ritchie eventually sold his share and retired to a lush 160-acre avocado farm in Santa Barbara.

Many Americans dream of retiring by the age of 40; Ritchie realized that dream, but it didn't suit him. He is a bachelor wedded to business, and the divorce left him feeling incomplete. Within a year he was back in the business world, having accepted McGannon's offer to run the Westinghouse Learning and Leisure

Time division, a catch-all for miscellaneous businesses. Five years later, in 1979, Ritchie was president of Group W and two years later McGannon's successor as chairman and chief executive.

The similarity between the two men ends with their ideological affinity. McGannon, a family man with 13 children, ruled his company rather than ran it and was quick to fire executives, even those of long tenure, when they did not perform as good soldiers. Ritchie has none of McGannon's charisma or dynamism, and his management style is vastly different. So instead of trying to fill his predecessor's shoes in his low-key manner, he set out to lead Group W into a future that bore little relation to its past—a future that would not only include cable ownership but would integrate it philosophically into the existing company. Significantly, Ritchie changed the name of the company last year to Group W Broadcasting and Cable Inc., thereby establishing that they are members of one family, facets of a single enterprise.

At a time when every aspect of telecommunications is changing too fast for anyone to predict the future, the broadcast and cable industries see themselves as mortal enemies. In fierce competition for viewers, advertising dollars, and programming. Yet here is Ritchie, hounding everyone who'll listen with a startlingly unorthodox claim: To survive and prosper, the broadcast and cable industries will have to forsake their clichés about winning a war of attrition and figure out how they can make peace now, before



He nixed the Playboy Channel, saying he wouldn't pay the price: loss of customers' good will.

either one is crippled. "Cable and broadcasting don't compete with each other for advertising," he says. "They supplement each other. Where broadcast is wide, cable is deep. Broadcast is the trawling net; cable is a harpoon."

Ritchie's task is to discern how the differences between cable and broadcasting offer each industry new opportunities for growth.

He argues: "Cable is a consumer marketing business, in which service to the customer is the key. The typical television station almost never has direct contact with the viewer. In cable, however, you interact with each individual. We send two million bills a month to our subscribers, and if they don't think we care more about them than just making a buck, we aren't going to keep them."

This same sense of responsibility to the public was obviously governing when

Ritchie sold Group W's half interest in Showtime, the second-largest pay-television network, because "R-rated movies are not what Group W made its reputation on." They are, however, one of the surest sources of profits known to the cable industry. Group W's alternative, Home Theater Network, features general audience films and is notably less successful than the racier program services. Ritchie acknowledges the Playboy Channel's commercial value, but refuses to carry it on Group W's cable systems. "I don't look down my nose at the revenues Playboy would provide," he explains. "I'm just not willing to pay the price. My personal view is that exploitative sex and gratuitous violence are both dangerous and bad economics, because they threaten the positive attitudes of most of our customers towards the medium. What holds us together, what makes the society work, is a respect for human beings."

Deregulation, he believes, would do another evil against society—as well as, in the long run, against the broadcasters who want it. "It's just unsound to let the pendulum swing towards total deregulation and total commercialism. If it swings too far, it will swing back with a vengeance when people get dissatisfied with it. It will create a reaction that will cost the very thing that everyone thinks they're getting by this, namely more profits.

"Fashionable ideas like deregulation can be dangerous. The industry's position on this is not motivated by the general interest but by narrow, parochial interests. Television is so powerful and intrusive that we need a public-interest framework in which to operate, because the health and survival of society are more important than anybody's bottom line."

DAN RITCHIE is an enigma. He seems too lackluster for the rough-and-tumble world of high-stakes business; too plain

(Continued on page 66)

12 ANGRY MEN



HEY! WAIT A MINUTE. WE'RE NOT REALLY ANGRY. WE'VE MERELY BEEN MANIPULATED BY THE MEDIA INTO A BIT OF A SNIT.

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Don Taffner, Moderator

Ted Knight, Host

Panelists:

Brian Cooke,
Creator and Writer,
"Keep It in the Family" (the UK parent)

Arne Sultan,
Executive in Charge of Production,
"Too Close For Comfort"

Mike Phillips, Managing Director,
Thames Television International

THURSDAY, MAY 24, 9 AM

MCLUHAN

It's All Going According to Marshall's Plan



The late philosopher's warnings are more pertinent to today's media than to those of his heyday.

by Mark Edmundson

WHEN MARSHALL MCLUHAN died on New Year's Eve, 1980, his reputation as a pop prophet and media visionary had been under total eclipse for at least a decade. Even his obituaries were critical. Yet a great deal of what McLuhan predicted, particularly in the pessimistic undercurrent of his reflections on media, has actually come to pass. Many of the more disturbing phenomena of contemporary life begin to make sense when we turn again to Marshall McLuhan. He is more pertinent now than ever.

McLuhan saw that what we call "the

Mark Edmundson is a contributing editor of Channels.

media explosion" is not an isolated blast, but one in a series of detonations that will probably last through and beyond our lifetimes. The account he gave us of the first explosion—radio, television, and film—was not "wrong," as many of his critics thought. Rather, the account almost perfectly anticipated the negative effects of the second media generation—video games and discs, cable, and Qube.

McLuhan helps us to see how what he calls "perceptual numbing," a stubborn insensitivity to all but the most extreme experiences in life, is related closely to our dwelling in the new media environment. This numbness, endemic to large segments of contemporary character and culture, is substantially encouraged, if not created, by what McLuhan calls "the depth experience of media." McLuhan can show us, moreover, how that "depth experience" may be transforming our inner lives, giving new, mass-produced forms to our fantasies and imaginings.

McLuhan's work also clarifies the media's effect on our public and political lives. Through his work, we can come to understand how "depth involvement" in media may be undermining our confidence in the possibilities for first-hand individual experience and reliable knowledge about events in the world.

To grasp these issues fully, we need to turn back to a man whom almost everyone has consigned to the same dustbin as go-go boots, psychedelia, and Sgt. Pepper. Marshall McLuhan, to most of us, is still a man of the '60s, the years he entered the jet stream of high prominence and power. A lowly professor of literature wearing sackcloth suits and pre-tied ties from off the rack at Rexall, he told the corporate communications men their business. "What you're really selling," he said to AT&T, "isn't electricity, it's pure information." He came on free-style, a hectic Irish monologist and intellectual mandarin. A McLuhan pro-

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTO

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REVIEW

nouncement on media might begin with Blake and the Psalmist, cross through Cezanne, Picasso, and Braque, touch on Canetti's ideas about crowds and power, and come to rest finally on an Ajax cleanser ad.

McLuhan was oracular, enclosing his statements in Delphic ambiguity and difficulty. The businessmen simply waited around for what they wanted to hear. "The medium is the message," McLuhan's best-known formula, came to mean that media content didn't matter a bit. *The Flintstones* was as good as *The Bostonians*, so long as it was broadcast over the coolest of media, television. But there was a dark underside to McLuhan even then, though no one heard it.

Prophecy made McLuhan rich. He accepted a \$100,000 professorship at Fordham University, endorsed ABC in a lucrative ad series, jetted out to conferences to predict the coming media age at \$8,000 a speech. In boardrooms all over the country, young businessmen began their presentations, "As Marshall McLuhan has told us, the current modes of such-and-such are already obsolete." McLuhan had a good word for business. He was the first Utopian thinker with any legitimate credentials, it seemed, who said that capitalism had put us on the right road.

Back home at the university, some of McLuhan's colleagues in the field had other ideas about him. Intellectually, McLuhan was chaotic: Hugh Kenner, the literary critic, once took hold of a paragraph by McLuhan and shook half a dozen factual errors out of it.

Things gradually cooled off with business too. The yahoo capitalism that tended to finance fringe acts like McLuhan quieted down in the early '70s. Recession set in like a killing frost; Vietnam went on and on. McLuhan became a relic, banished with all the flotsam and jetsam of the '60s. Since then, his name has been in terrible repute. You'll do well to hold off quoting him in educated company when you have a pertinent adage of Yogi Berra's at hand.

WE NEED TO START LISTENING to McLuhan again. He understood, as no one else has, what it would mean to live in a media environment. He sensed how the "depth experience" of media could transform human nature irreversibly.

The irony of McLuhan's achievement lies in the fact that his description of media's effects applies better to the new, second generation of media than to the initial generation of radio and television he was trying to describe. McLuhan called TV the ultimate depth experience because the viewer had to participate fully in creating the image. From the

MC LUHAN



**Newer, interactive
media involve us
more thoroughly in
the 'depth experience'
McLuhan wrote about.**



three million dots per second on the screen, McLuhan said, the viewer can accept only 70 or so from which to shape an image. To do so he has to plunge in fully, using all of his senses to compose a coherent picture. The image actually becomes a part of the viewer watching it; it becomes what McLuhan felt all media were: "an extension of man."

What McLuhan said is even more applicable to the second media generation. Take video games, which genuinely do become an extension of the player. The pace is so swift, and the anxiety and exhilaration so enfolding as the player fights off the enemy satellites, that the action absorbs him completely. He and the game become, temporarily, one self-contained unit. In the new "role playing" games available on computers, a persona stands in for the player and executes commands, as the player navigates Colossal Caverns or Castle Wolfenstein. Eventually aficionados will be able to manipulate a life-sized persona, projected by lasers, through fantastic adventures. The persona will resemble the player down to the cufflinks. McLuhan would feel fulfilled; this is precisely what he meant by "depth participation in a cool medium."

Of course, it's not just video games that come within McLuhan's prophecies. There are the interactive systems, through which customers can bank, dispatch mail, and shop for clothing and other goods by punching a keypad. Some day, perhaps, a clothes shopper will be able to see, beamed into his living room, a

three-dimensional image of himself in a suit before he buys. Then there are the laser video-disc games. A recent disc lets you choose a suspect in a murder mystery and trace him through the mansion. When you're convinced it's not the butler, press a button and pick up the trail of the next suspect.

The keyboard of a computer, the controls of a video game, even the headphones of a Sony Walkman, bring us to a level of immersion in media that we have not experienced before. And it is not only the intensity that has been compounded; the duration of our exposure to media has increased as well. When McLuhan wrote, the average set was on for about four hours a day. The current figure is close to seven hours. And it's hard to find a middle-class household without an arsenal of communications devices. Something's humming all the time. McLuhan would be right at home.

He saw the media explosion spawning two possible alternatives. One was Utopian, the other almost precisely the opposite. In the Utopian scenario our habitual depth involvement with television did away with our obsolete modes of perception. McLuhan believed that these old-fashioned modes were based in long exposure to the printed word. Print, you see, is the villain in McLuhan's story. Reading divides us within ourselves and isolates us from others.

The depth experience of the electronic media could reunite us, McLuhan thought, because media bring all the senses into play. A video game elicits a complex response that involves sight, hearing, and touch simultaneously. As we become accustomed to that total experience through media, McLuhan said, we will also learn to experience one another openly and completely. Media might recreate the family of man, or what McLuhan called the Global Village.

It is probably apparent that McLuhan's Utopian vision has not come to pass and is not likely to. He would have explained this by saying that we have not prepared ourselves for the change. He once quoted the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead to say that the major advances in civilization are processes that often all but destroy the societies in which they take place. We did not prepare ourselves for the media revolution, McLuhan would observe, and that is the root of our current media malaise. He said that we were no more ready to encounter electronic media in our literate milieu than the native of Ghana could cope with the literacy that takes him out of his tribal world and isolates him. "We are as numb in our electronic world as the native involved in our literate and mechanical culture," McLuhan wrote.

Our inability to welcome the media environment, he believed, would result in a nearly universal "perceptual numbing," an increased threshold to all types of perceptions. We raise the level at which we are affected to such heights that almost all communications fall short. We numb ourselves to guard our human privacy and integrity. Media, on their part, continue to raise the ante with shocking tableaux and explosive special effects. The light-and-laser show in each new installment of *Star Wars* has to top those of all previous high-tech films. The shower killing in *Psycho*, the shock scene of the '50s, became the stuff of parody in *Psycho II*.

The price of perceptual numbing may be the loss of our individual capacity to respond to anything but the most violent stimuli. We sacrifice our capacity to make subtle discriminations among the shades of a Vuillard, say, or the tonal contrasts of a Beethoven quartet. The moral sense may be blunted as well, becoming, by prolonged exposure to film melodrama, attuned to grand issues that encourage unqualified investments of sentiment. The less abrupt ethical distinctions that daily life demands receive correspondingly less exercise and education.

Perceptual numbing is also related to our sense of living in a complete media environment, removed from first-hand experience. As the Swiss novelist Max Frisch has said, "Technology is the knack for organizing the world so we don't have to experience it." If that's true, the media are the monarchs of technology. In politics, for instance, we have become sadly accustomed to election campaigns that are run as competing series of advertisements. Beginning with the Kennedy-Nixon debate of 1960, we have become gradually inured to the idea that the candidate who best manipulates his "image" will win. Almost self-consciously now, we seem to honor the most effective media campaign with our vote, having given up on actually knowing anything first-hand about the issues or candidates. It ought not to be surprising that our current President arose from the media. We all liked his screen performances, and when he asked us to revive his show, we responded.

The media also emphasize their status as a world apart, only provisionally related to actual experience, by their continual self-reference. This past summer, for instance, we saw a spate of programs on the filming of *Superman III*. Thus we had television shows on the sequel to the sequel of a film, based on a former television show that was itself based on a comic book. The medium is a hall of mirrors in which the world is reflected only at the greatest distance and with maximum dis-

MCLUHAN



**Melodrama blunts
the moral senses,
which no longer
can discern
fine distinctions.**



tortion.

The world of communications, McLuhan suggests, has become a second nature to man. We might ask, then, if everything is communications, what will be left to communicate? If everything is mediated, where is the first-hand experience that leads us to feel at home in the world? Living in a media envelope is a prime contributor to the sense of tentativeness and unreality which, according to Christopher Lasch, sends so many patients to their analysts.

The prevalence of cameras and recording devices in our culture adds to this sense of "unreality" in another way as well. As Lasch says, "Modern life is so thoroughly mediated by electronic images that we cannot help responding to others as if their reactions—and our own—were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to an unseen audience or stored up for close scrutiny at some later time." The person who travels with a Walkman or "ghetto blaster" merely extends this logic: He's carrying the soundtrack to his own continuous movie, in which he alone is the superstar. Such perpetual role-playing can quickly crash the barriers between the "media self" and a private selfhood cautiously held in abeyance.

Often the pop styles of a given period express its mood. The styles of the '80s have gone beyond cool into mock catatonia, and media numbing may be one of the prevalent causes. You see sheer numbness in the uninhabited masks that the

punkers wear, hear it in the seamless, anti-naturalistic sounds of New Wave, catch it on the street in the elfin fashions that bring the wearer back into a neutral pre-puberty. It's the numbness of the society as a whole that's getting sent up by punk. Compared to the gregarious styles of the '60s, today's styles seem armored and defensive. As image-flooding of all kinds increases, the psyche raises higher its protective dams.

It's not just external behavior and appearance that are at stake here, though. McLuhan's theories can show us how media saturation can revise our inner lives as well. He believed that all media are "extensions of man." Levers and cranes extend human muscle structures, the wheel extends the legs and feet, and so on. The electronic media, he said, extend the brain and the central nervous system out into the world in a "global embrace." If it is true that, as McLuhan famously said, "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us," how will the new media shape the organs that they extend? What would McLuhan say the effects would be, for instance, of new computer games, such as Castle Wolfenstein, where the player rubs out Nazi guards, or Softporn, where the object is to seduce as many women as possible by any means necessary? First of all, McLuhan wouldn't have been overly worried about the sex/violence content of the games. He would have recognized that their content, modeled on immature fantasy life, constituted a harmless regression. What would worry McLuhan, I think, is that the power to fantasize and imagine is in danger of being transferred from its center in the human mind to video machines. It is a commonplace, but often true, that when we allow another person or a machine to do a task for us, our capacity to do it ourselves atrophies.

Not only may our imaginative powers be weakened, they may also be homogenized. As we ingest more and more mass-produced fantasies, the things we do imagine independently will take on that mass-produced quality. Long exposure to shared media-made images may result in our thinking and feeling in ways that are more and more alike, at the eventual cost of our individual identities. If McLuhan is right, the new electronic image might well be making our interior lives over in its own form. Will the ghostly, uneasy light and the narcotic hum that make up the fundamental language of the electronic media eventually dominate our thoughts and dreams?

Maybe too dire a case is being made here. Many of us feel about the media as Emilia about Othello: "Thou hast not half that power to do me harm/ As I have to be hurt." Who could die of *The Dukes of*

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from Xerox.**

XEROX



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So, please remember that our trademark starts with an "X."

And ends with an "®."

Hazzard? "The medium is the message." McLuhan meant that the overt material, the plots and characters, are just there to divert the conscious mind. He returns us to the form of media, the light and hum that enter into dialogue with our own unconscious and image-making powers. He asks us deeply to consider the effects.

If those effects, especially as they're enhanced by the new developments in media technology, resemble McLuhan's predictions, is there anything to be done? What does McLuhan himself recommend for "perceptual numbing" or, as he also calls it, "media fallout"?

Art, he says, tells us how to rearrange the psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from the media. McLuhan's remark attempts to update Matthew Arnold, the Victorian man of letters, who called art a criticism of life. However, when life is lived within the media environment, we need something slightly different from what Arnold had in mind. Art today is the most radical possible criticism of all the clichés and conventions of the media. There may be no more just rebuttal to Brooke Shields in her Calvins than one of De Kooning's Women, and nothing to tease the triviality of the State of the Union message as quickly into relief as a poem by John Ashbery. Nor is it just a matter of high art. The English spoken in black Harlem can still tickle someone out of a bad case of corporate steno-speak. The burden of the art of the present and coming decades will be to restore our feel for the bright particulars of experience. Media are the art of the maximal, grandiloquent puff. We need a new minimalism to clear and chasten.

But this cure by art is only half a solution. Media are everywhere, and we have to learn to meet them on their own ground. To defend against their pressures we must learn to read them with a skeptical eye, rather than be overwhelmed by their forcefully communicated values. We need to approach them critically, via reflection, the way Perseus reflected Medusa's face in his mirrored shield.

Our reflecting technique goes under the name of "media literacy," and it may begin to do for us what Perseus's polished shield did for him. To use McLuhan's terms, if Perseus had gazed directly into the face of his Medusa, he would have suffered an all-too-permanent case of "perceptual numbing." To prevent being turned to rock by our contemporary Medusa, we need to do some reflecting of our own. We need to reflect continually and critically on media and their effects. The aim of this reflection will be to disengage ourselves, so that media are no longer "extensions" of our powers to think, feel, and imagine. There are a great number of ways to aim the reflecting

MC LUHAN



'Critical reflection' is necessary when considering the depiction of blacks on commercials.



shield of media literacy, and all of them result in our somehow saying "no" to the forms, values, and assumptions implicit in media. Media literacy should remind us continually that what we are seeing and hearing are *representations* of the world, and not the world itself.

For children this means learning some things that, to adults, appear appallingly simple. The child needs to be reminded that the characters he sees on the screen are actors, that plots are fabricated, that "special effects" and not miracles mesmerize him and, perhaps most importantly, that there is a quantum distinction between "entertainment" and advertisement. He needs to know that advertisers sponsor shows, and that they do so not out of affection for him but in order to make money.

For adults familiar with the conventions of media representation, media reflection has to take subtler, less systematic forms. Consider the possibilities for critical reflection on the depiction of blacks on commercial television. The viewer who attempts to practice critical reflection would have found something to interest him in a number of recent commercials. In one, the members of a black family are painting the interior of a house into which, presumably, they have just moved. When they run out of paint, one reaches for the Yellow Pages; there he finds an ad for a local paint store that tells him, "We Mix Colors." In a second Yellow Pages commercial, a black locksmith and his son place an ad: "You're Safe

with Us." A recent advertisement for Visa, structured with the intensity of a Baroque fugue, shows a young black woman applying for jobs in law offices. In one office she spills coffee on her future employer, and then, leaving the office, she closes the door to expose, momentarily, a name plate on which "Black" is engraved. In all of these ads, I would argue, the sponsors' ambivalence over depicting black persons (will it alienate potential white customers?) surfaces in what look like sheerly accidental ways. The socially enlightened premises of the ads and of the advertisers are placed in question by these residues of racial anxiety.

The media reflection I am endorsing here is all based on a single possibility, however. There must be a moment in the experience of the media in which one can assert critical judgment. Perseus needed an instant when he was unthreatened in order to raise his shield. The new media, which provide the "depth experience" that McLuhan predicted and described, are so encompassing that they are nearly overwhelming. There is a critical distance between the reader and his book, between the moviegoer and the screen. The critical faculty can assert itself within that space. But the video-game player becomes his game in a way that the reader does not become his book. The moving images on the screen *are* the video players' thoughts in a way that the film is not the thoughts of the screen viewer. The new generation of media technology does not easily yield the kind of critical distance we need in which to assert our reflective response.

Nonetheless, if McLuhan is right, that distance is worth struggling to achieve. And if we cannot examine the values, forms, and assumptions of the new media while we are engaged with them, we can attempt to do so retrospectively. But this is a less effective form of media literacy; the fact that the new technologies limit us to it makes them more dangerous than their predecessors.

We need to continue, though, despite the difficulties, to attempt to practice critical reflection. The stakes are quite high. The price of media's "depth experience" may include perceptual and emotional "numbing," the reduction and homogenization of our inner lives, and the loss of the possibilities for confident, first-hand experience of the world. Against these dangers we can only pit art and critical reflection. These resources have probably saved us from our own worst tendencies on more past occasions than one. But it is fair to doubt whether any shield of reflection, no matter how brightly polished or deftly deployed, will be able to neutralize the effects of Medusa in her contemporary form. ■

Living with Tele1st

by P.J. Bednarski

This latest pay-television scheme would seem to be liberating, but for one Chicago subscriber it represents consumer bondage.



IN THEORY this should work. ABC Video Enterprises' new Tele1st service, available only here in Chicago so far, allows subscribers to tune to the local ABC station after it has signed off, set their video-cassette recorders, go to bed, and wake up the next morning with a copy of a relatively new motion picture. Subscribers can then watch it anytime they please, as many times as they please. And when they're bored, they can re-use the video cassette to record another movie.

Subscribing to the service since shortly after it began on January 17, 1984, I found the Tele1st reality slightly different. My late-night routine has a new addition. Now it's: Make the coffee and set the Brewstarter timer; walk the dog (she's on her own timer); start the dishwasher to run while I sleep, and set Tele 1st to begin recording, let's say, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* at 3:44 A.M. and stop 143 minutes later. Except for the dog-walking, I'm a totally Time-Shifted Kind of Guy.

Taping is just the beginning, though. If, when I see the movie later, I like it a lot, I can keep the coded authorization to replay it in the permanent memory of the shoe-box-sized Tele1st decoder. Codes for 165 films "fit" in there. If I don't like

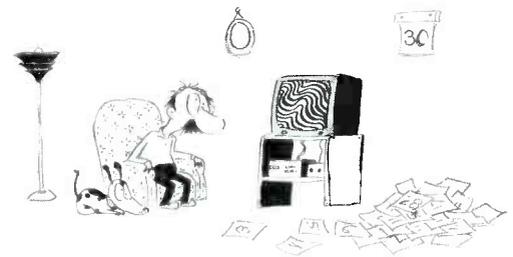
the movie so much, it will stay in the temporary memory, holding codes for only 20 films, all sooner or later to disappear.

But if it is one of the four to six newer films Tele1st offers monthly (called 1st Films, just to keep the confusion constant), it doesn't matter whether I want to keep it or not. My Tele1st box will keep 1st Film codes for only 30 days, after which the recording becomes garbled. 1st Films are available only on a limited basis because that's the only way ABC Video can get major studios to release them early. But the fact that subscribers can see *All the Right Moves* a few months before it gets to HBO is also one of the service's biggest selling points. Of course, in Chicago, where there is no cable, that inducement is hardly necessary.

The lack of cable is why Tele 1st started here. That, and the fact that Chicago has the highest concentration of VCRs of any major city in the nation (19 percent) and is the home of an ABC-owned station obediently willing to sign off at 2 A.M. six days a week. A Tele1st subscriber gets an instruction handbook that seems to have been written by NASA. He also gets the decoder box, which looks like the ones given to customers of over-the-air subscription television (STV). The difference between the two is that *direct view-*

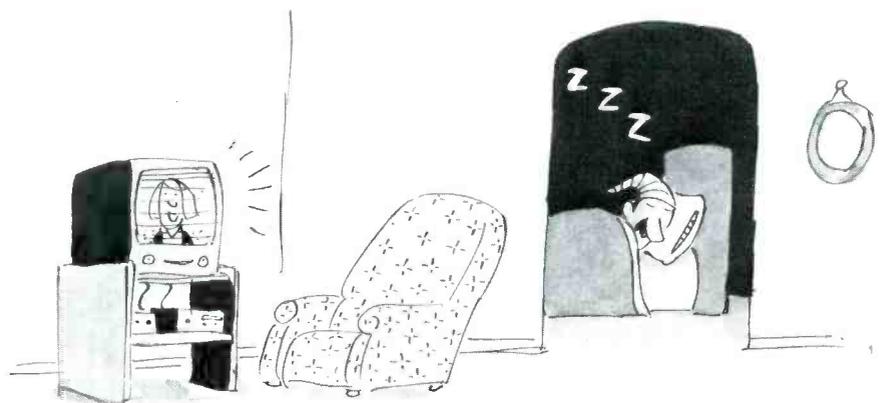
ing of Tele1st is impossible, either with the box or without it. The movie would be all garbled. Instead, you play it back later on your VCR. If the decoder has picked up the authorization code, broadcast at the end of the transmission, it will allow you to watch the film ungarbled.

The biggest news is that the Tele 1st microprocessor, developed by Sony, can also refuse to unscramble a picture. That



is what happens to the special 1st Films after 30 days. Complicating matters still further, Tele 1st sends out a monthly postcard announcing upcoming 1st Films, and credits your account \$2 for every offering you say you don't want. This requires the kind of advance decision-making demanded by the Book of the Month Club.

If it sounds easy, please come visit. Because there are some things you learn about VCRs and time-shifting when both become part of your life. One lesson is



P. J. Bednarski is the television/radio critic for The Chicago Sun-Times.

Patrick McDonnell

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that, as Tele1st president Arthur I. Cohen discloses, 70 percent of all VCR owners never use their timers. Some are frightened to learn how. Tele1st actually sells VCRs, but Cohen obliquely acknowledges that anyone having to master a VCR and Tele1st at the same time will likely be devastatingly frustrated. And there's another thing, which Cohen wouldn't know because he runs Tele1st from New York City: The cold fact is that time-shifting becomes a grind when it's imposed. I may like to watch *Saturday Night Live* on Sunday morning once in a while, but that's because I choose to do so. With Tele1st, and with VCR time-shifting in general, you are forced to find a time to watch what you've taped. While Tele1st sells that as an advantage ("With Tele1st, the entertainment always fits your schedule"), it forgets that most movies aren't worth planning for. I may watch *Blade Runner* or any other thoroughly ordinary movie if a cable service offers it when I'm sitting idly around. But if I have taped it on Tele1st, I am obliged, as a subscriber, to time-shift. What should be liberating becomes consumer bondage.

There's skepticism in Chicago about Tele1st. The operator of the local STV outlet wonders—though it's in his interest to do so—why anyone would pay more for Tele1st to get fewer movies than he offers. Tele1st costs \$25.95 a month plus a \$75 installation fee.

Cohen claims ABC Video is "more interested in analysis of the system than optimization of sales at this point." ABC was expecting Tele1st to be used in a "supplemental way," he says, but users have said in focus-group interviews that they've already taped 15 or 20 movies. Cohen adds that as of mid-March there were fewer than 10,000 subscribers, but that is as precise as saying the average January temperature here is less than 60 degrees. Disconnects are slightly fewer than predicted, and the typical user is an affluent city resident (the suburbs have cable), just as ABC Video had expected.

But by all available evidence, including the fact that I don't know anyone who even knows anyone who has Tele1st, the most exciting thing so far about this new gizmology may have been Cohen's kick-off speech to Chicago business leaders the afternoon following the launch. Titled "The VCR Explosion and the Time-Shift Revolution," the speech predicted radical changes (some of which took place even before Tele1st), just because VCRs give viewers the freedom to plan their own television menu. "Last night," Cohen said, "Tele1st was born. And once again, in our lifetime, television has changed." Most of Chicago, it's safe to say, is still sleeping through it all. ■

Why Satire Dies on Saturday Night

by William A. Henry III



SATIRE, ACCORDING TO AN OLD SAW of the theater, is what closes on Saturday night. But for five glorious years, satire flourished on Saturday nights, live, in a series that was its era's only true popular variety show on television. Nearly all the performers of *Saturday Night Live* became stage or movie stars, and reruns of their series continue to draw audiences across the country—even though many of the sketches have lost their topical bite, and the best lines and mannerisms have been aped into staleness at a thousand boozy parties and fraternity hops. The format of the show was ripped off, with some success, by Second City for *SCTV* and by ABC for *Fridays*. But those shows have been dropped from network schedules. And the true successors to *SNL*—the current incarnation under that name, and the dubiously titled *The New Show* from *SNL* creator Lorne Michaels—are dismal flops. *SNL*'s ratings are down, critical esteem has plummeted, even the cast is contemptuous: Eddie Murphy says he “hates” the current version because it is “not funny.” Michaels's self-imitative *New Show*, also on NBC, consistently ranked among the lowest-rated series in prime time until it was canceled, as of April; tellingly, even among the Young Urban Professionals and Baby Boomers who were Michaels's original core audience, the show was almost never a topic of water-cooler chitchat.

What has happened to the creative spirit, and for that matter the receptive audience, that invigorated the raucous, naughty sketch comedies? Why does television, which had its early successes as an offshoot of vaudeville, in the comedy and variety shows of Arthur Godfrey, Ed Sullivan, Jackie Gleason, George Burns and Gracie Allen, and Jack Benny, now find no spice in variety? And why is satire now what dies on Friday and Saturday nights?

The short answer is that the writing is frequently lousy and the acting often sloppy and self-indulgent, that the casting has failed to produce recognizable, outsized personalities, and that almost every promising topic has long since been explored. All of these complaints are true. Perhaps topical comedy is a genre to which TV can return only cyclically, with rests in between. But there are

broader reasons for the decline of variety and satire.

The first problem for would-be satirists and variety-show producers is that television, as it is presently structured economically, is a mass medium, appealing to the lowest common denominator. That makes satire difficult, because the jokes in satire are funny only in context; they presuppose that the audience knows about congressional politics, or genetic research, or the current trend in bogus social science. On most subjects, however, the viewers are characterized by ignorance and indifference. Satire sails over their heads. Consider how many of them thought that

**Perhaps topical comedy
needs a rest for now,
but there are broader
reasons for its decline.**

Mork and Mindy was just a lighthearted show about a man from outer space, rather than a series of pointed monologues about such topics as race relations, consumerism, and the arms buildup. Moreover, when satire takes on matters that the mass audience knows something about—the President, major organized religions, beloved national figures—it deeply offends too many of them for a network's comfort. *Saturday Night Live* managed to avoid these pitfalls, especially in its early years, by airing late at night, when its audience was small (by prime-time standards, at least), sociologically unified, and smart. But shows that seek to reach a bigger and more diverse crowd, especially in prime time, usually have to downplay satire in their comic mix. Some shows that are remembered for a topical bite, including Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*, Ernie Kovacs's series, and *Laugh-In*, can be seen in retrospective viewing to have had only a soupçon of relevance in a stew pot of recycled Borscht Belt one-liners.

Michael Witte

William A. Henry III is an associate editor of *Time* magazine.

The decline of TV satire is accentuated by the changing nature of the network television audience. The young, sophisticated, well-informed viewers who might provide the support for a worthy successor to *Saturday Night Live* are no longer as loyal to ABC, CBS, and NBC, because their options have expanded. More and more of them have access to pay cable (to which, not surprisingly, *SCTV* has shifted) and video cassettes. Many network executives expect to be left with the audience that regards *Entertainment Tonight* as a news report.

For variety shows, the corollary problem is that the United States no longer has a unitary culture. In Ed Sullivan's heyday, a popular song was one you would eventually hear on *Name That Tune*, and a dance act looked as much as possible like the Rockettes. Today, however, the music business is segmented. The division may not be as bitter as it was in the 1950s and 1960s, when many parents viewed rock music, with some justice, as a device to separate the generations. But few songs, except jingles in TV commercials, become known to all the public. Music and dance are means of asserting one's ethnic, cultural, even social-class identity. Parents listen to soft rock, their children to punk; blacks choose blues, Latins opt for Menudo; the South and West listen to country, which finds fewer followers in the Northeast. In dance, steps based on ballroom dancing are middlebrow and middle-aged; ballet is for women and the sexually dubious; can-can kicking is for the bowling league. All these groups feel some mutual mistrust, even antagonism, and it can be all but impossible to assemble a variety show on the principle of "something for everyone": Appealing to one group automatically makes another feel unwanted. *Saturday Night Live*, which featured rock music nearly every week, scheduled its acts in the confidence that it was meant to attract only one particular segment of the audience, rather than all of it, and it was able to survive in that attempt because it operated on a bare-bones budget, by prime-time standards.

In one respect, the United States does have a unitary culture. The thing that binds this vast and diverse country together is, of

course, television. And television itself becomes the subject matter for a wearily large percentage of TV satire. This is not exactly new. Just as Broadway loves plays about the theater, and Hollywood loves films about the movie business, so television has, from its earliest days, savored japes about TV. The viewer has seen it all before: Every talk-show sketch is merely a gloss on Kovacs's Percy Dovetonsils; every skit about a commercial is a footnote to Lucille Ball's *I Love Lucy* pitch for Vitameatavegamin; every game-show sendup is in debt to Ricky Ricardo's accidental victory on a mock quiz show, and Ralph Kramden's unjust defeat on another, in episodes of *Lucy* and *The Honeymooners*. Carol Burnett skewered soap operas, George Burns westerns.

Today's shows rarely attempt to match these satires, which

**For variety shows
as well as satire, the
problem is that U.S.
culture is so segmented.**

poked fun at a whole form of television. Most of TV's current self-parody is at the banal level of impersonations and borrowed catch phrases. (To be sure, when the shows veer away from television, they can be even worse. A *New Show* sketch that featured Ronald Reagan telling a ghost story about how Walter Mondale assaulted a *Time* magazine reporter was incoherent.) But in parodying television, the shows rarely evoke more than the shallow laughter that comes from recognizing familiar faces in an unfamiliar context. On Michaels's *New Show*, which owed to the 1950s what little it did not owe to *Saturday Night Live*, performers Steve Guttenberg and Candice Bergen were introduced in a long, labored, mock-game-show sequence that had no suspense, indeed, no point. There was little more pith to a pseudo-action-drama called *Chip Masters*, *Organ Courier*. On *Saturday Night Live*, a dreamed-up talk show called *Bad Career Moves* featured a long, one-joke interview with an actor purporting to be Herve Villechaize, who left *Fantasy Island* after a salary dispute. Without the identification as Villechaize, the impression might not have been recognizable, and the one idea, that anyone with a successful TV series ought to stick it out, could not sustain the sketch.

Lamentable as today's *Saturday Night Live* and *New Show* have been, however, there is reason to hope for better. The problems that beset them, and that have virtually barred network attempts to stage a variety show emphasizing music rather than comedy, are not insuperable. What made *Saturday Night Live* a success was the daring of its creators and the raw nerve of network executives. And, in fairness, not every attempt at wit and relevance can be expected to succeed. Even among the affluent, educated theatergoers on Broadway, after all, satire too often still closes on Saturday night, if it ever opens at all. ■



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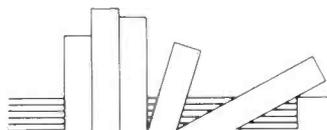


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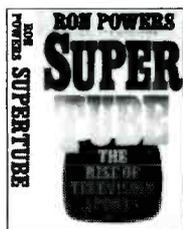
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Sporting With History



Supertube: The Rise of Television Sports
by Ron Powers
Coward-McCann, \$16.95

THIS BOOK has been misnamed. It is not an account of the rise of sports on television. It is, instead, a highly enthusiastic, myopic tale about the ascension of ABC Sports. Woven into this tale, like silver threads through a crazy quilt, are interviews and intriguing details worth reading. ABC's wily luring of National Collegiate Athletic Association football from its longtime home at NBC is quite a winning saga. Ron Powers clearly has done some interviews.

But Powers's chosen emphasis is baffling to me, or any serious sports fan. He apparently can't be bothered to cover any part of television sports in-depth unless its genesis can be traced to ABC and its sports and news president, Roone Arledge. *Supertube* is really about Arledge, credited here with, among other things, "reinventing television," and "inventing the Ultimate Games," the Olympics.

Arledge is only one of several characters in the book who go around "inventing" and "creating," in a flash of inspiration, the achievements of whole decades. For example: "And then one day Harold Arlin invented sportscasting."

Julie Talen is assistant editor of Television Digest.

Likewise, Powers rests the entire history of sports broadcasting on the slim shoulders of a Gillette executive who decided his company should sponsor the 1939 World Series on radio.

Whole chapters are given over to the lives of announcers such as Howard Cosell and Dizzy Dean, and three pages to the old Gillette musical jingle, while the real story of sports on television goes begging to be told—particularly the parts that took place at CBS and NBC, two networks Powers depicts as impediments to the true celebration of sports on television. No matter that it was CBS's duti-

ful Sunday coverage of National Football League games, starting in the 1960s, that made pro football a national passion—not ABC's late-comer *Monday Night Football*.

In Powers's ode to Arledge, the great innovator of televised sports, he gives only one paragraph to the greatest new technique in televising football, the instant replay. In the 1960s, Tony Verna, a football director for CBS, first combined the isolated camera (following individual players) with the slow-motion instant replay—a change that transformed the sport. For two years before that (by Powers's own calculations), Arledge had available a functioning "slomo" machine, but Verna, not Arledge, had the inspiration to use it for instant replays between football plays.

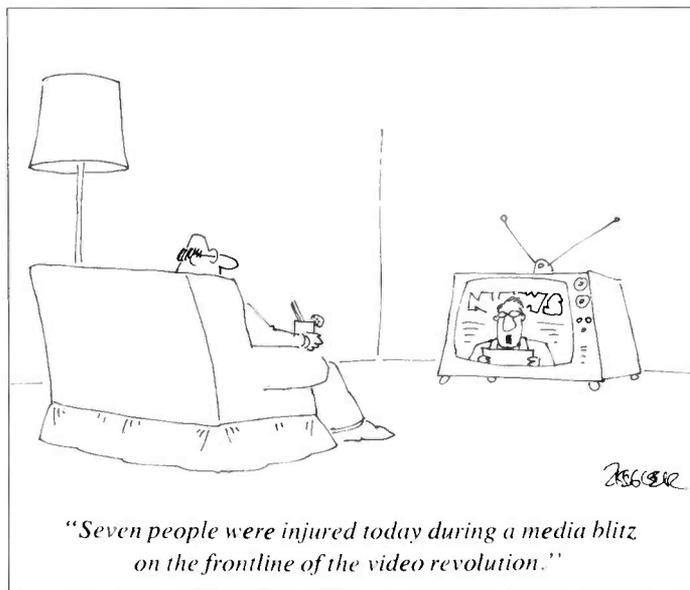
Arledge, no doubt, has an expansive, imaginative mind. He certainly belongs in the industry's pantheon of programmers. He's a showman, a daz-

zler, and he obviously dazzled one Ron Powers. But television sports has had more important, nearly anonymous problem-solvers, such as Verna, or NBC's Scotty Connell and Harry Coyle, who get scant attention from Powers. Connell, for example, took the glare off the hockey rink and put the sport on television by tinting the ice blue. Ironically, Powers neglects Arledge's major contribution to football broadcasting: putting a camera in the end zone to let the audience see whether a kick scores or not. Although Powers doesn't say so, it was the publicity about ABC's end-zone camera that nudged CBS into letting Verna try the instant replay.

Supertube could have used that story, but Powers was at the mercy of his interviews. The book reads like a series of *Playboy* or *Esquire* articles. He picked his particular thread—Arledge and his predecessors at ABC—and proceeded blithely along, secure in the knowledge that few of his readers would know enough about the subject to argue with his approach. Writers commonly and arrogantly treat television as if it has no past at all.

Powers provides some glimpses into a fascinating world of back-room machinations in advertising and network politics. He has a gift for making situations come alive. I just hope no one regards *Supertube* as a serious reference work on the history of the field. Sports on television is one of the visual masterpieces of our time, and the people who created it deserve better.

JULIE TALEN



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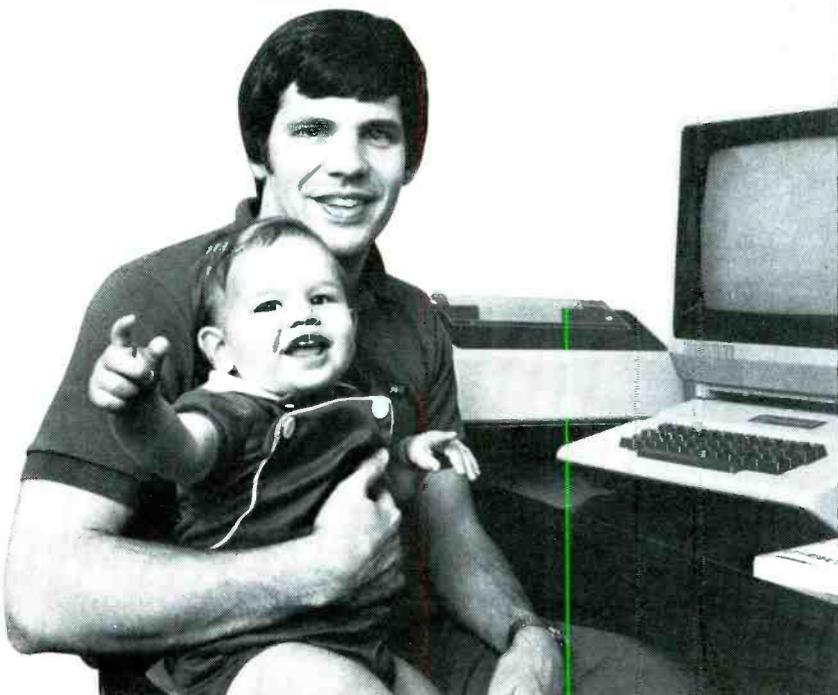


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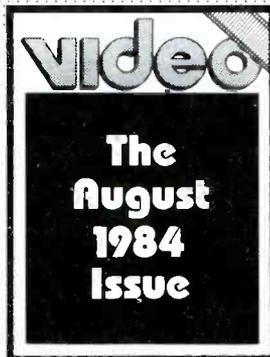
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Only the Fearful Know Television

by Walter Karp



'I learned the medium's appeal in a spell of middle-age panic.'

A BYSMALLY INANE though it often is, prime-time television holds some 100 million viewers in its grip every night. This is almost half the entire population. Yet the reason for such strong and enduring appeal has never puzzled anybody very much. The inanity seems to account for the appeal quite adequately. Between a tasteless, boorish mass audience and its nightly dose of witless jokes, Punch-and-Judy antics, comic-strip drama, and mind-numbing ads there seems to be an obvious and powerful affinity. So, at any rate, I had assumed until recently, when the true secret of television's appeal came to me in a surprising revelation.

It flashed upon me while I was suffering from a spell of middle-age panic. The fleetness of time, a precarious income, and a generally snuffed-out feeling had combined to produce a powerful inclination to go to bed early and switch on the TV. What met my first anxious glance was an ad about "Miller Time." The spectacle by now is doubtless familiar. A band of hearty oil-riggers, stockmen, or construction workers barrel into a bar at the end of the workday and order their

favorite beer. Hitherto mildly irksome, the ad this time displayed an astonishing power to please. The honest outdoor labor, the joyous good fellowship, the well-earned refreshment—how extraordinarily enviable they had become! I had been through "Miller Time" a score of times before, yet never had I felt its vivid charms. It was like a black-and-white movie suddenly turning into Technicolor. Was it possible that I had been seeing television for 35 years the way the color-blind see the world, missing the whole rich spectrum of hues?

That, as it turned out during the next few days, was exactly the case. Failure and fear, like a special set of lenses, brought out powers and charms and colors I never knew television possessed. The stalest clichés of advertising brimmed with moral vitality. I had never noticed them before. Repellent Rosie, who sops up spilt coffee with "the quicker picker-upper," became a figure of strength, oddly reassuring. An endless stream of smiling faces, grinning jackasses I had always thought them, now peopled a neighborly world of kindly store managers and happy young families with nice front lawns.

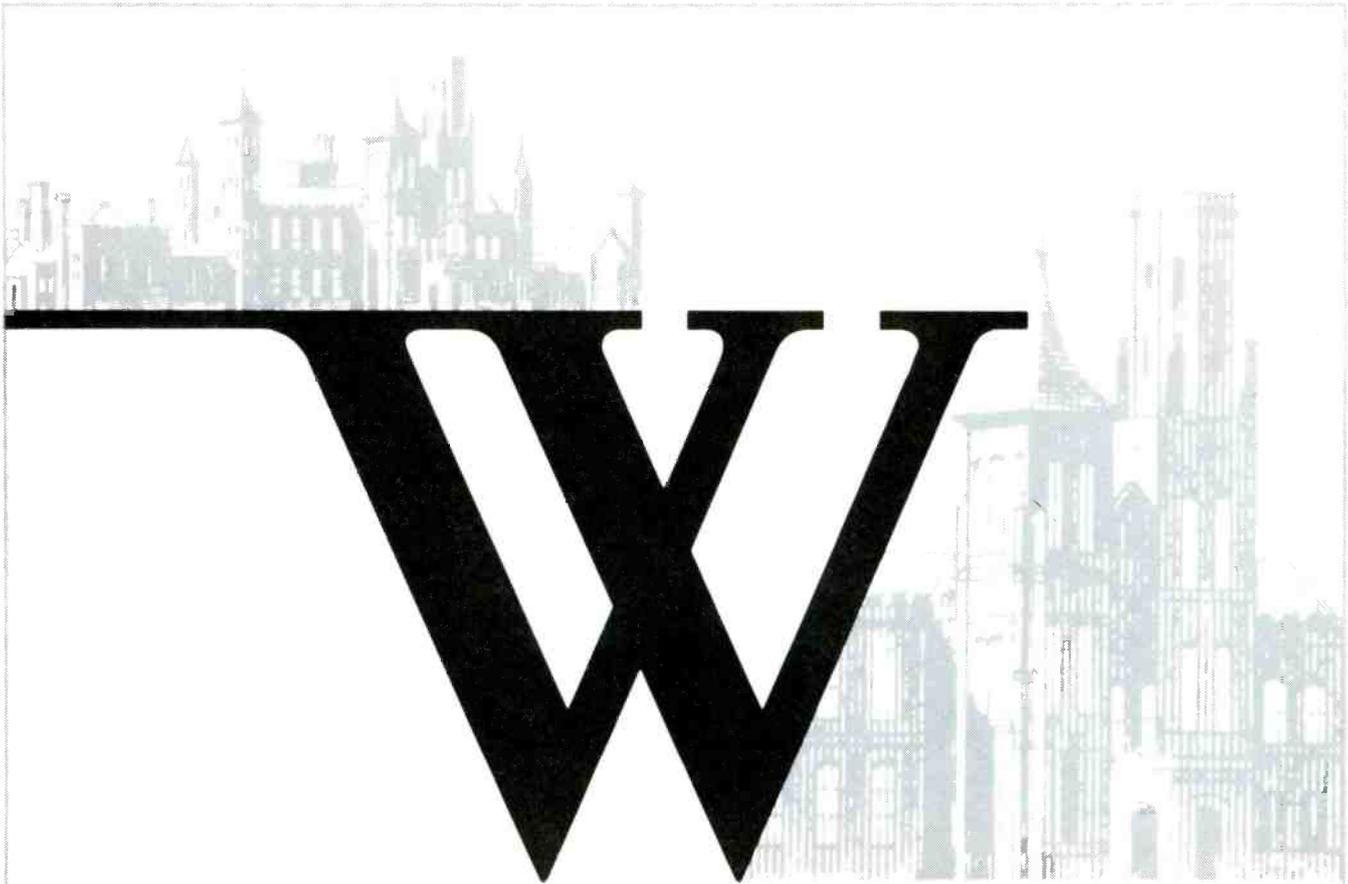
The most banal prime-time shows shared in the transformation wrought by an anxious spirit. The unblemished bliss of the rich, loving Harts brought surpris-

ingly intense delight, undiminished by a tenth-rate mystery plot. Smashing through shrubbery in a souped-up jalopy, the *Dukes of Hazzard* and their moronic activity brought the joy of reckless abandon. I was in prime time's grip for sure. When the sleek white *Love Boat* sailed off on a sun-dappled sea I actually felt a surge of excitement. In television's kindly little havens, where everyone knows one another and decency always triumphs—a diner, a bar, a slack police station—I found heart's ease by the hour, at least for a while.

But the keen delights and sweet consolations that made television so richly alive only lasted as long as my panic did. When the spell passed, the vitality of television vanished completely. All that was left behind was the old gray succession of deadly clichés and half-witted jokes. These, I now realize, form the outward shell of television, a mere container for potent charms not visible to everyone. Perhaps only the lost and fearful know television truly. For them, I suspect, it is chiefly designed. The affinity between television and its nightly mass audience is no trifling matter after all. It is a powerful bond fashioned by television's profound understanding of America's careworn, lonely, and failure-ridden people and of their surprisingly innocent yearnings.

David Klein

Walter Karp is a contributing editor of *Channels* and author of *The Politics of War* (Harper & Row).



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Debate Ruling Was Long Overdue

by Erwin G. Krasnow and William E. Kennard

Following is a reply to "The New Impresarios of Politics," by Les Brown, which appeared in Channels, March/April 1984.

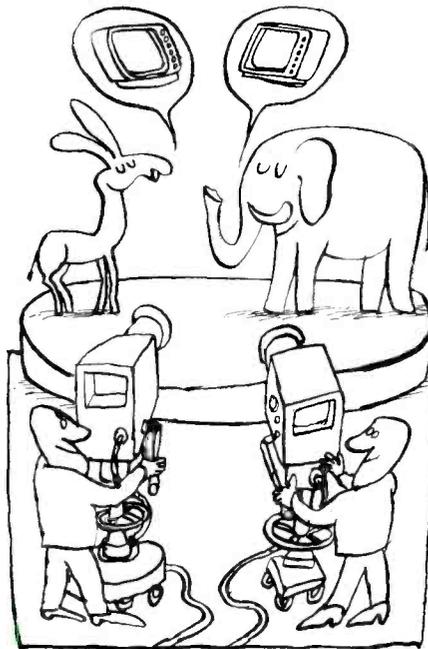
Mr. Krasnow and Mr. Kennard were, respectively, general counsel and assistant general counsel of the National Association of Broadcasters, and now work in the Washington law firm of Verner, Liipfert, Bernhard, and McPherson.

BROADCASTERS MAY WELL become the new impresarios of political debates, and it's a good thing. It's good for broadcast journalism, for the political process, and even (that's right!) for the public. When Les Brown saw the press release from the National Association of Broadcasters headlined "Public Wins With Aspen Rule Revision," he says he "shuddered." But we do believe that the Aspen Rule revision is a modest victory for the public good.

In that revision, the Federal Communications Commission last November gave broadcasters more freedom to sponsor political debates. The commission's ruling was upheld in March when the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia circuit rejected a challenge by the League of Women Voters Education Fund.

Even opponents of the FCC decision concede, for the most part, that it will bring more political debates to the public. The FCC ruled that debates arranged, produced, and aired by broadcasters are now exempt from the so-called equal-time provisions of the Communications Act. In essence, the commission decided that a debate is a newsworthy event—whether a broadcaster invites the candidates to confront each other in a studio, or the League of Women Voters invite them to tangle in an auditorium.

Until this action, broadcaster-sponsored debates were a practical impossibility. Broadcasters would have had to give equal time to scores of fringe candidates, so they were effectively barred from sponsorship. Under the previous



ACCESS is an occasional column open to contributions from readers who have something to add to a current debate in the communications field.

FCC rule, debates were exempted from such equal-time demands only if they were sponsored by a third party, staged outside broadcast studios, and aired live and in their entirety. They became the province of the League of Women Voters and other non-broadcasting groups. But the FCC's decision last fall ended the league's virtual monopoly on the sponsorship of political debates.

Les Brown and others argue that allowing broadcaster-sponsored debates will "weaken the equal-time law" and "subvert the spirit of the law." But they make eminently good sense, both as a practical matter and as a matter of law. In 1959, Congress exempted certain news coverage from the equal-time provisions to assure that the law would not frustrate campaign coverage by broadcast journalists. The exemptions then were for bona fide

newscasts, news interviews, news documentaries (where the candidate's appearance is incidental to the subject of the documentary), and on-the-spot coverage of a bona fide news event. In enacting the exemptions, Congress said it sought to "enable what probably has become the most important medium of political information to give the news concerning political races to the greatest number of citizens, and to make it possible to cover the political news to the fullest degree."

Broadcaster-sponsored debates now fall within the exemption for on-the-spot coverage of a bona fide news event. If Congress wants to allow broadcasters more freedom to cover "political news," and if broadcaster-sponsored debates will further that intent, what is all the fuss about?

One cause is obvious. The League of Women Voters itself has a "clear self-interest" in opposing broadcaster sponsorship of debates, as league president Dorothy Ridings concedes. The league has gained substantial visibility as sponsor of Presidential, state, and local debates. But putting the league's institutional interests aside, there remains a fundamental mistrust of broadcasters. What is *really* at issue here is whether broadcasters can be trusted to sponsor debates or whether, if left to their own devices, they will somehow convert them into a variation on game shows. This mistrust is troublesome, not only as a matter of First Amendment principle, but because it glosses over the very nature of a political debate. The candidates themselves make a debate newsworthy with their on-the-spot responses to the issues and each other—matters not significantly affected by the nature of the debate sponsor. In 1960, Congress suspended the equal-time law to permit broadcasters to sponsor the Kennedy-Nixon debates. Surely, the nature of their auspices did not make the debates less newsworthy or important to the public, or more like game shows, than the 1976 and 1980 Presidential debates arranged by the league.

Candidates invariably protect their

Joe Teodoro/SCV

own interests by agreeing to debate only if the format guarantees impartiality. And broadcasters, as journalists, are uniquely qualified to select the most effective formats for presentation of viewpoints. What, after all, was so terrible about the January debate among the eight leading Democratic candidates moderated by Phil Donahue and Ted Koppel, which Les Brown warns was "barely a hint of what's ahead when commercial broadcasters become the impresarios of political debates"? The debate was indeed bigger, livelier, and even more entertaining than many other televised debates we've been offered. (God forbid that the public actually be *entertained* by a televised debate!) If the FCC decision has any major effect, it will be to increase the number of broadcast debates, which will serve as a useful counterbalance to the barrage of paid political advertising.

It was faith in the journalistic integrity of broadcasters that led the FCC to expand the exemption allowing broadcaster-sponsored debates. And the fairness that has characterized broadcast coverage of political races in general derives from the professional ethics of broadcast journalists, not from govern-

ment-imposed restraints on journalistic discretion. In this sense, the decision is long overdue. More than a decade ago, Chief Justice David Bazelon of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia circuit commented:

Broadcast journalists have grown up. They see it as in their interests to be guided by the same professional standards of fairness as the printed press. There is no factual basis to distinguish the printed from the electronic press as the true news medium.

Thus, the FCC's and the court's decision is a step in the right direction—a small step. Even after the court's ruling in March, equal-time requirements will still inhibit the amount, type, and format of political reporting that radio and television stations can devote to major candidates. The equal-time law and its regulatory progeny spring from a loss of the faith, held by our nation's forefathers, in a free press as indispensable to a free society. Repeal of the equal-time law and other burdens on the broadcast press would, in a single stroke, greatly enhance political coverage and public understanding of the issues, as well as promote the First Amendment goal of a free press. ■

Dan Ritchie

(Continued from page 47)

and slightly too puritanical to take the bold risks necessary to lead a company into an uncharted future. In conversation, he comes across Middle America wholesome: Get him worked up and he might forget himself and mutter expletives like "dang" and "golly."

Ritchie doesn't like flaunting his power the way an executive should: He prefers to drive his own Buick than be driven in the company limousine. He commutes from New Jersey to avoid paying New York taxes. He prefers to load his luggage and do his own laundry. He is the kind of man for whom no detail, especially if it involves money, is too small. As he wheels his car out of the lot after a meeting, for instance, Ritchie tells his aide, an imposing black woman, "Make a note: The parking cost four and a quarter."

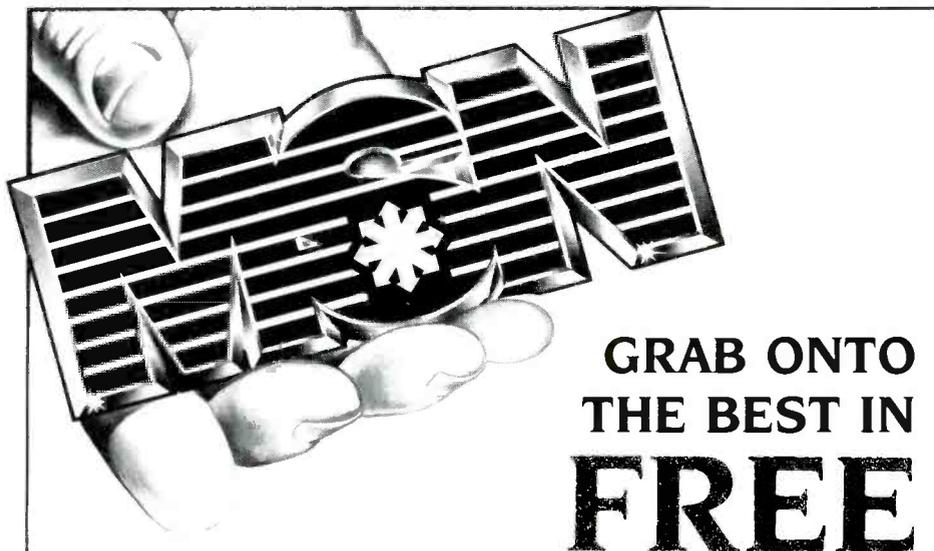
He is in fact a millionaire several times over. In addition to his avocado farm, he owns one of the largest ranches in the country—100,000 acres along the Colorado River—where he delights in roaming the land and checking up on his more than 5,000 head of cattle. That, too, is a profitable business. Ritchie professes he would enjoy a cowboy's life. He has never shod a horse, but insists, "Someday I will."

"Someday" could be a long time coming: Dan Ritchie may have the soul of a frustrated cowboy, but his blood and guts are those of a businessman. He truly thrives in his own special habitat, the corridors of big business. His farm and ranch are only hobbies for Ritchie, like the collection of antiques he maintains. They distract him, but don't seem to challenge him enough to sustain his interest. Dan Ritchie does not know how to toss in the towel and enjoy the rewards of his wealth. He'd much rather make money than spend it.

Some of his colleagues undoubtedly wish he would change—stop hawking ideas that neither cable nor broadcast wants to hear, stop paying so much attention to the good of the public, and start praying to the god of short-term profits.

But Ritchie ignores them all, going right on with his precepts. "The human race can survive almost anything but prosperity," he says. "It's very tough to stay on top, and there's a reason why. You keep doing what worked, what got you to the top, until it no longer works, and then it's too late."

Like a circus acrobat astride two horses, Ritchie must keep his steeds on a parallel course. His performance as a leader of two industries—one young, the other established—may be crucial to their harmonious coexistence. ■



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All the News That Wiggles

by Alex Raksin

Following is a reply to "The Pow of the Press," by Don Hewitt, which appeared in the January/February issue of Channels.

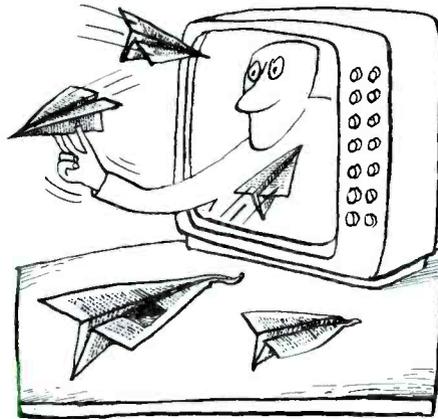
Mr. Raksin is editor-in-chief of the Educational Group Publications, and research and programming director of the International Documentary Association.

DON HEWITT, executive producer of CBS's *60 Minutes*, has offered the highly dubious argument that television presents the news as effectively and thoroughly as the print media do, if not more so. None of his many arguments, however, hold much water.

Hewitt seems especially preoccupied with the profit motive. He reveals that once he himself was a "poor but honest" print journalist—apparently not a very enviable position. Since no sane professional, he cynically argues, would choose to remain poor but honest, broadcasting's better wages will inevitably attract better journalists. "I don't know one," he writes of the print fraternity, "who wouldn't pack it all in tomorrow morning if someone offered him a job in television news."

He also argues that *The New York Times's* criticism of "happy talk" newscasts is invalid because the *Times's* own television station employs a happy-talk format. Yet as a station owner the *Times* has an obligation to its stockholders to show a profit. Happy-talk news, after all, makes money. The *Times* corporation, and certainly the *Times* critics, are not in any way endorsing the journalistic integrity of happy talk.

Hewitt claims a number of times that the differences between the two media have been exaggerated. Of the concern expressed by some newspaper critics about TV news adopting "show-business values," he writes: "Trying to lure viewers to your channel doesn't sound like a capital crime to me. . . . One of the first things they teach you in journalism school is 'makeup' . . . how to make up



an attractive Page One."

Yet makeup employs a small fraction of a newspaper's editorial staff; in no significant way does it affect the editorial content of the newspaper's stories. On the other hand, throughout the process of editorial production the television reporter is necessarily obsessed with makeup. Constructing story lines that will fit a 40-second spot with dramatic peaks and chasms at pre-specified moments, recording visuals and sound, and delivering the narrative authoritatively are but a few of the "makeup" concerns that distract the broadcast reporter from covering underlying issues and events.

The way one element of makeup—the need to conform to a standard dramatic story line—can distort reality is described in Donna Woolfolk Cross's *Mediaspeak*. News topics are routinely dismissed, says one producer, because "it would be hard to tell the bad guys from the good guys." Another network executive tells Cross: "We like stories that have wiggle. Sexy stories. Iran has wiggle. Defectors from the Bolshoi have wiggle. Stories about government agencies have *no wiggle*."

Even the best television journalists can't avoid this "makeup" bias, because deadline pressure and the need for prior technical planning require them to arrive at the scene of a story with a clear notion

of their lead-in and what shots they'll use to begin and end the piece.

Hewitt makes another claim that bears upon CBS's defense of itself in the aftermath of the controversial documentary, "The Uncounted Enemy." General William Westmoreland, the show's principal subject, had claimed the *60 Minutes* segment distorted his comments during an interview. In the hearing, after Westmoreland filed charges against CBS, *60 Minutes* was ordered to turn over the interview footage that was not aired (called "outtakes"). Members of the print media unnecessarily focused their attention on what the outtakes would reveal, wrote Hewitt: "An outtake, my young newspaper friends, is nothing more than the news that isn't fit to print—or to broadcast. Did you ever hear of a newspaper office without a wastebasket? I think newspaper wastebaskets are bigger than ours, and more numerous."

Hewitt underestimates the size of the broadcast "wastebasket." The dramatic framework to which most broadcast pieces must conform "throws out" such crucial elements as history, analysis, and the ideas that motivate action. In *Television Viewers vs. Media Snobs*, Jib Fowles elucidates the reason for this distortion. He cites a report by two communications researchers who found that "TV most conspicuously contributed to the enforcement and affirmation of social norms and values. Faith in the future of the country, belief in the form and continuity of the government"—these were the values reawakened in most viewers.

This reassuring function is a principal reason America's conflicts so often wind up as "outtakes" on the cutting-room floor. It is also one of the many reasons Hewitt's beneficent picture of broadcasting is dangerous. By filtering out information that might allow viewers to participate in the restructuring of American society, television news is not only practicing poor journalism, it is helping to undermine a cornerstone of American democracy.

Joe Teodoro

You Can Fool 48% of the People All the Time . . .

ONE of the more intriguing research efforts of late was undertaken by George Gerbner, dean of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications. He examined the degree to which television's fictions color our beliefs about reality.

Gerbner found that: "The more time one spends 'living' in the world of television, the more likely one is to report perceptions of social reality that can be traced to (or that are congruent with) television's persistent representations of life and society."

Translated into English, that means if we watch a lot of television, we come to believe that the real world is like the world portrayed on the tube. For example, when heavy television viewers were asked how often a police officer draws his or her gun in the course of a shift, 18 percent of the viewers supposed it was more than five times—whereas a majority of cops never fire a weapon once in the course of a lifetime career.

While only some 3 percent of the population are involved in an act of criminal violence in any year, 83 percent of heavy viewers believed the figure was 10 percent. Eighty-eight percent of Gerbner's heavy viewers also believed that 12 percent of their fellow citizens are involved in the commission of serious crimes—

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by Dave Berkman

whereas here, too, the figure is closer to 3 percent.

My own research, which in all modesty I must describe as a landmark follow-up to Gerbner's work, reveals that heavy viewers of television today profess to hold the following views of real life:

- 87 percent of teenage girls are sexually precocious, yet retain their virginity; the others are drug-crazed child prostitutes.
- 96.8 percent of small towns are bossed by corrupt families who live yonder, in the big house on the hill.
- 50 percent of American-made automobiles can continue to speed recklessly through alleys and streets even after jumping over barriers and knocking down an Italian fruit vendor's cart; the other half are driven by bad guys.
- 86 percent of women in their 20s have busts measuring 37C or larger; the others are nuclear-research scientists who wear their hair in buns.
- 100 percent of homicides are

solved.

- The solutions take 56 minutes—give or take 30 seconds.
- In blue-collar bars, at 90 percent of the tables, black men sit drinking light beer with their white buddies.
- 50 percent of beauty-contest winners will become proficient at sports analysis; the other half will be murdered.
- 88 percent of hemorrhoid sufferers and virtually all those with false teeth are eager to talk about their problems with the old man at the drug store.
- 85 percent of today's grandmothers spent the 1950s teaching their teenage daughters how to choose a detergent; the other 15 percent were mixing Kool-Aid.
- 72 percent of major business enterprises are owned by big, colorful families with tendencies toward incest, murder, and unkind language.
- 100 percent of hospitals are clean.
- 86 percent of filthy, lice-ridden bums are undercover cops in disguise.

- 70 percent of household products can talk.
- Instant coffee tastes just like fresh: maybe better.
- 75 percent of ocean cruises lead to marriage; the other 25 percent lead to divorce.
- 83 percent of cab drivers have hearts of gold beneath their tough exteriors.
- Egrets and loons seek out nesting grounds near oil refineries, whence they sense benevolent vibes.
- Psychopaths are easy to pick out of a crowd because they're always skinny and have messy hair, unless they're fat and bald.
- 91 percent of upwardly mobile black families owe their success to the mastery of the one-liner.
- Only 4 percent of Americans can be found dazed in front of the television set, and they all live in mobile homes.
- 100 percent of Americans live above the poverty line.
- 72 percent of male high-school teachers reject a student's sexual advance at least once a week.
- The other 28 percent accept.
- 85 percent of parents with pubescent children are widowed or divorced.
- 25 percent of all Junior Leaguers spend three of every four evenings answering telephones on-camera at the local public TV station.
- 89 percent of children not fluent in computer languages by age 18 are doomed to lives on welfare; the others are already successes in rock bands.
- 96.3 percent of all mean, petty, or vengeful adults will be reformed within 45 seconds after a lecture by any child. ■

Gil Eisner



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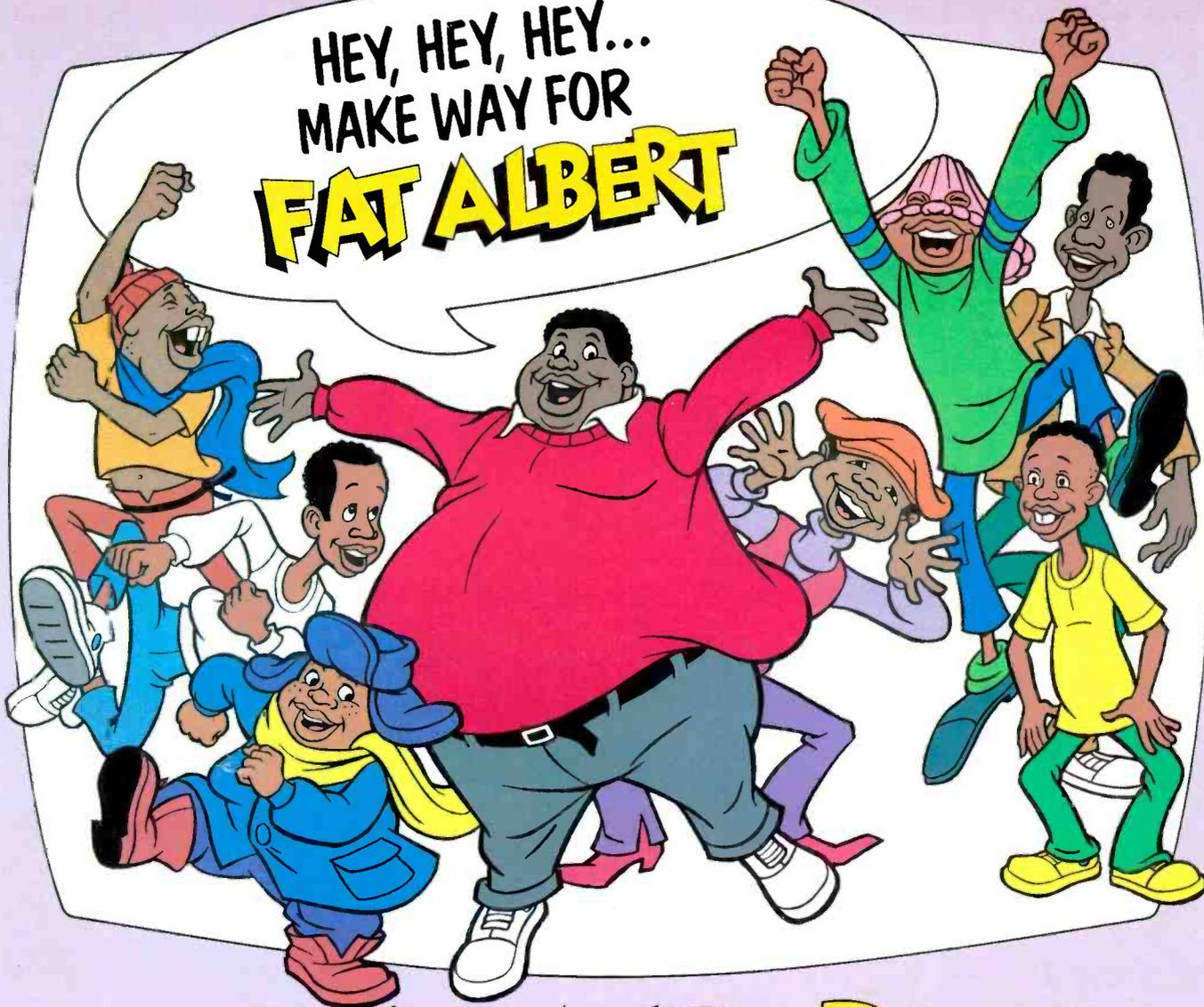
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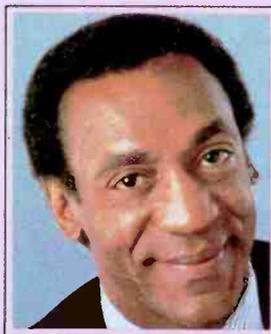
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