

What Do Women Want? by Walter Karp

CDC 00415

# CHANNELS

OF COMMUNICATIONS

1984 SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER \$2.50

THE CRITICAL REVIEW  
OF THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY, COMMUNICATIONS ACT

### The Deregulation Revolution

BY NORMAN BLACK

### Why Deregulation Won't Last

BY LES BROWN



#### SPECIAL PULL-OUT SECTION

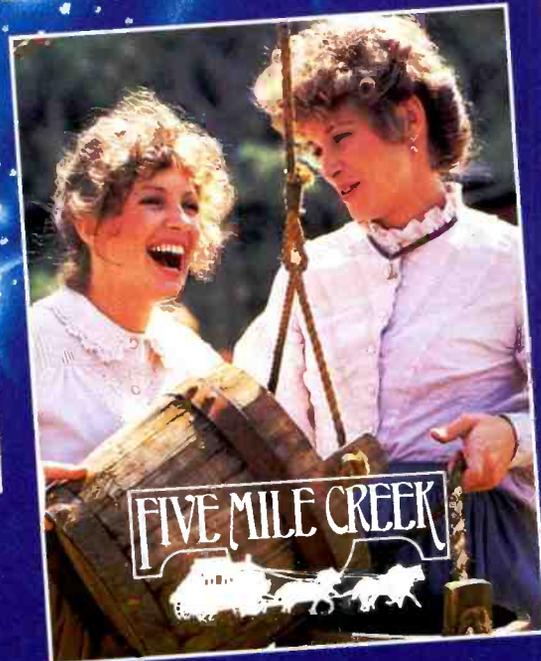
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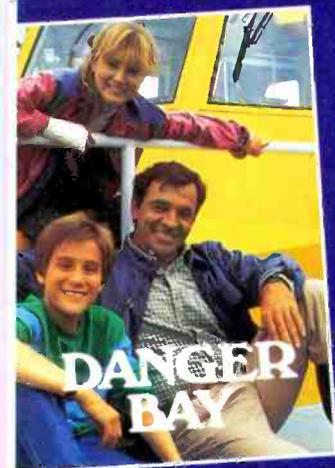
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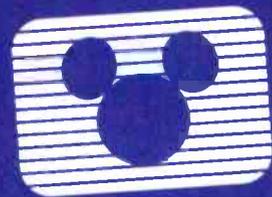
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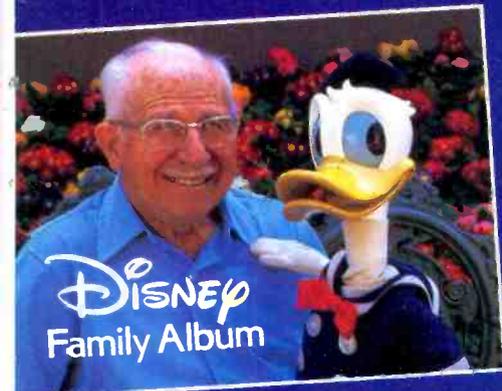
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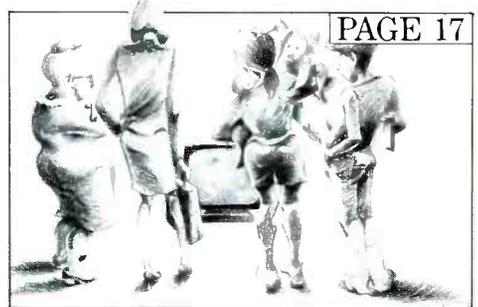
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## What Do Women Want?

To judge by the talk shows aimed at them, women don't feel quite at home, at home.

BY WALTER KARP



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## Sitcom Domesticus

The broad base for broad comedy has split asunder, along with the nuclear family.

BY SUSAN HOROWITZ



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## HAPPY BIRTHDAY, COMMUNICATIONS ACT!

### The Deregulation Revolution

Insisting the days of media scarcity are over, the FCC is chopping off rules adopted during the last half-century.

BY NORMAN BLACK  
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### Why Deregulation Won't Last

Politicians haven't grasped what it means to liberate broadcasting.

BY LES BROWN  
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## Promos Unbound

I READ "THE HOT SELL" [by JIM MINTZ, May/June] with more than pedestrian interest. As ABC-TV's vice president in charge of creative services from 1976 to 1982, I was responsible for on-air and other promotional services.

In today's on-air promotion, the only differences among the networks are stylistic. Some messages are high-style, some low. Madison Avenue might call it hard-sell vs. soft-sell. But labels, and articles such as Mr. Mintz's, are too often misleading.

The primary objective of TV promotion is usually to generate sampling of a show, but in the case of Steve Sohmer's promos at CBS in the late '70s and now at NBC, it appears sampling was a secondary priority. Generating enthusiasm within the network, among the affiliates, and in the rest of the industry was far more important. Steve Sohmer's promotion gave the network and the stations something far more valuable than 30 seconds on a program. It gave them electricity during a brown-out.

I wonder if Mr. Mintz would have written about TV promotion had there been no sex in the story. Or does sex in magazine articles not attract as much attention as sex in TV promotion does?

SYMON V. COWLES

Vice President and Director  
International Development  
ABC Video Enterprises  
New York City

IT IS INTERESTING THAT YOUR ARTICLE ON PROMOTION OF NETWORK TV SHOWS FOCUSED ON STEVE SOHMER, THE "PROMOTIONS WIZARD" FOR NBC. PROMOTIONS ADD TO THE OVERALL ADVERTISING CLUTTER, AND THE DUMB REPETITION OF THE TEASERS MIGHT IMPEL SOME PEOPLE TO TURN OFF THE SET, BUT IT IS DOUBTFUL THEY REALLY DO MUCH TO HELP THE SUCCESS OF NEW SHOWS.

If anything, Sohmer's promotions might be seen as strong evidence of how false or misleading advertising can contribute to the "death" of a product. He used sex to entice viewers to watch *Bay City Blues*. Viewers interested in sexy

shows might have tuned in, but other people, who might have liked the show but saw from the promo that it was more empty-headed soft porn, did not. Those looking for a sexy show would not tune in a second time; all others never got a chance to "discover" the show on their own.

This might help explain why NBC has so many shows that are loved by critics yet die in the ratings. Sohmer makes the mistake of assuming that all viewers will watch shows loaded with sexual innuendo—he assumes that everyone's interests in entertainment are the same as his. Current promotional policies will always result in the sex-interested viewers tuning out after one try and all other viewers never tuning in.

HERBERT J. ROTTFELD

Assistant Professor of Advertising  
Pennsylvania State University  
University Park, Pennsylvania

## A Sharper Irony

IN THE ARTICLE "DAN RITCHIE, TV'S MORAL Minority" [May/June], 1981 is given as the date for Group W's acquisition of WPCQ-TV from Ted Turner. Westinghouse actually entered into a contract to buy the station in 1979 and took active control of it in early 1980.

Ted Turner borrowed the money to start CNN against the sale of WPCQ in Westinghouse. So, to sharpen the irony, the money received by Turner from Westinghouse went not "to keep CNN in business" but rather to start CNN. I think it is fair to say that Westinghouse financed the start of both news networks, CNN and SNC.

REESE SCHONFELD

Vice President, Communications  
Development  
Cablevision Systems  
Woodbury, New York

## Animated Merchandising

BEING INTERESTED IN ANIMATION, I NOTICED some time ago the trend towards commercializing children's programming mentioned in Jan Cherubin's article,

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## A NOTE TO OUR SUBSCRIBERS

Channels took a summertime break this year and did not publish the regular July/August issue. Your subscription will be adjusted to ensure your receiving the full number of issues promised. The interruption in our publishing cycle was temporary; we hope it did not cause you any inconvenience.

One other item of note—we moved during the summer. Our offices may now be addressed as follows:

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304 West 58th Street  
New York, N.Y. 10019

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George M. Dillehay  
Publisher

# When N·I·W·S wanted to retake Omaha Beach...



News photo of D-Day invasion, June 6, 1944

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"Toys Are Programs Too" [May/June].

Animation is one of the costliest forms of production. Paying for animation has gotten especially difficult in recent years, so the marriage of drawing and merchandise was perhaps inevitable.

*Dungeons and Dragons* stands out from the Saturday-morning herd in its look. It was farmed out to Japan's Toei Studios, and is more Japanese than American in style. Animation merchandising in Japan is likewise a vast industry. Those who worry about the interaction of production and program, and how it will affect the audience, might consider doing field work among the Japanese.

PATRICK DRAZEN  
Carbondale, Illinois

JAN CHERUBIN QUOTED THE FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS Commission's Al Baxter, supposedly the chief of something called complaints and compliance. It's fitting that lower-case c's were used for the title because the Complaints and Compliance Division was abolished in 1980. I should know. I was the last chief. The only remnants today are ineffectual bits and pieces scattered around the commission.

Since the dismantling, the FCC has

simply turned its back on enforcement of many rules remaining on the books. The proof is the drastic reduction in the number of enforcement actions under Mark Fowler.

I helped create the FCC's policies on program-length commercials. For many years, we kept that degrading form of crass commercialism, largely aimed at children, off the air. It's too late for radio, but there is still time to salvage something for children out of television.

ARTHUR GINSBURG  
Adjunct Professor of  
Telecommunications  
Northern Arizona University  
Flagstaff, Arizona

### No Access

IN A PIECE IN YOUR "ACCESS" COLUMN CALLED "All the News That Wiggles" [May/June], Alex Raksin replied to a piece of mine that *Channels* ran last January ["The Pow of the Press"].

Mr. Raksin took his title from something an unnamed television executive said: "We like stories that have wiggle." Apparently, Mr. Raksin does too. If not, why write a piece that ties *60 Minutes* to

General Westmoreland when the fact is that *60 Minutes* had absolutely nothing to do with the Westmoreland broadcast?

When I called Mr. Raksin in California to point this out to him, he told me that any references in his piece to Westmoreland had been added by *Channels*. But not only is his original, unedited manuscript laced with references to Westmoreland, it starts out, "Last summer, *60 Minutes* executive producer Don Hewitt ventured into *Newsweek's* My Turn column to defend his show's handling of an interview with General Westmoreland."

Next time, be more careful to whom you give access.

DON HEWITT  
Executive Producer, *60 Minutes*  
CBS News  
New York City

### The Truth About Taping

SANFORD WOLFF'S ARTICLE, "Who Gets Hurt by Home Taping?" [March/April], was interesting, though full of hyperbole, inflated figures, and emotionalized facts. I was left with the impression that home taping is about to destroy the very fabric of the American economy and swell the unemployment rolls.

Let's try to look at things realistically: People usually resort to do-it-yourself methods when what they want is not obtainable. People can be deterred from pirating by the availability of reasonably priced tapes. If a prerecorded movie is affordable—as are the recent Paramount releases, among others—then it makes sense to buy the tape rather than pirate it.

The home taping controversy basically stems from the producers' attitude of "How can we force more money from the public for our product?" If they could shift their point of view to "How could we make the public want more of our product?" everyone would benefit.

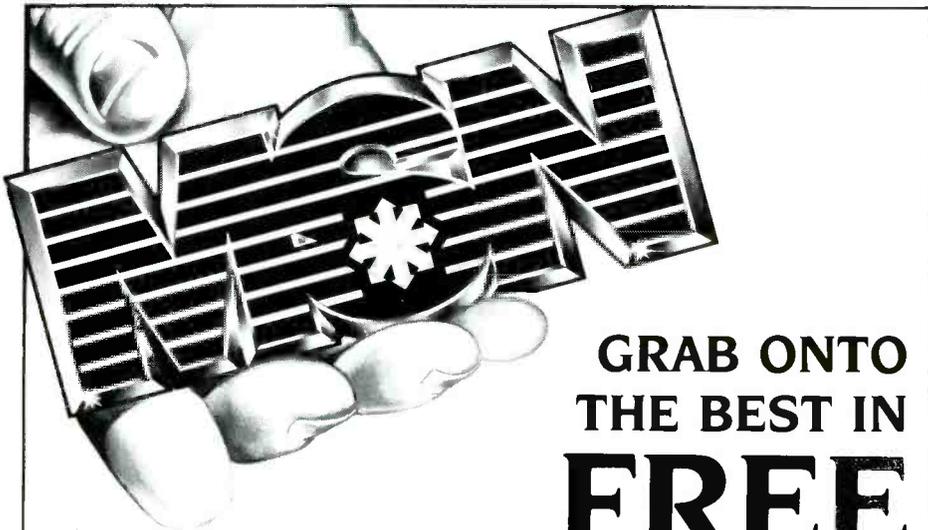
CRAIG ANDERSEN  
Baltimore, Maryland

### TV or Not TV

NO TV IN HUNGARY ON MONDAY NIGHTS [CrossCurrents, March/April] Sounds like a good idea. Unless Hungary has been doing that for some time, it is following in the footsteps of Iceland, which has banned TV on Thursday for years.

We couldn't cancel Thursdays, however: Can't miss *Cheers* and *Hill Street*.

STUART D. BYKOFKY  
Philadelphia



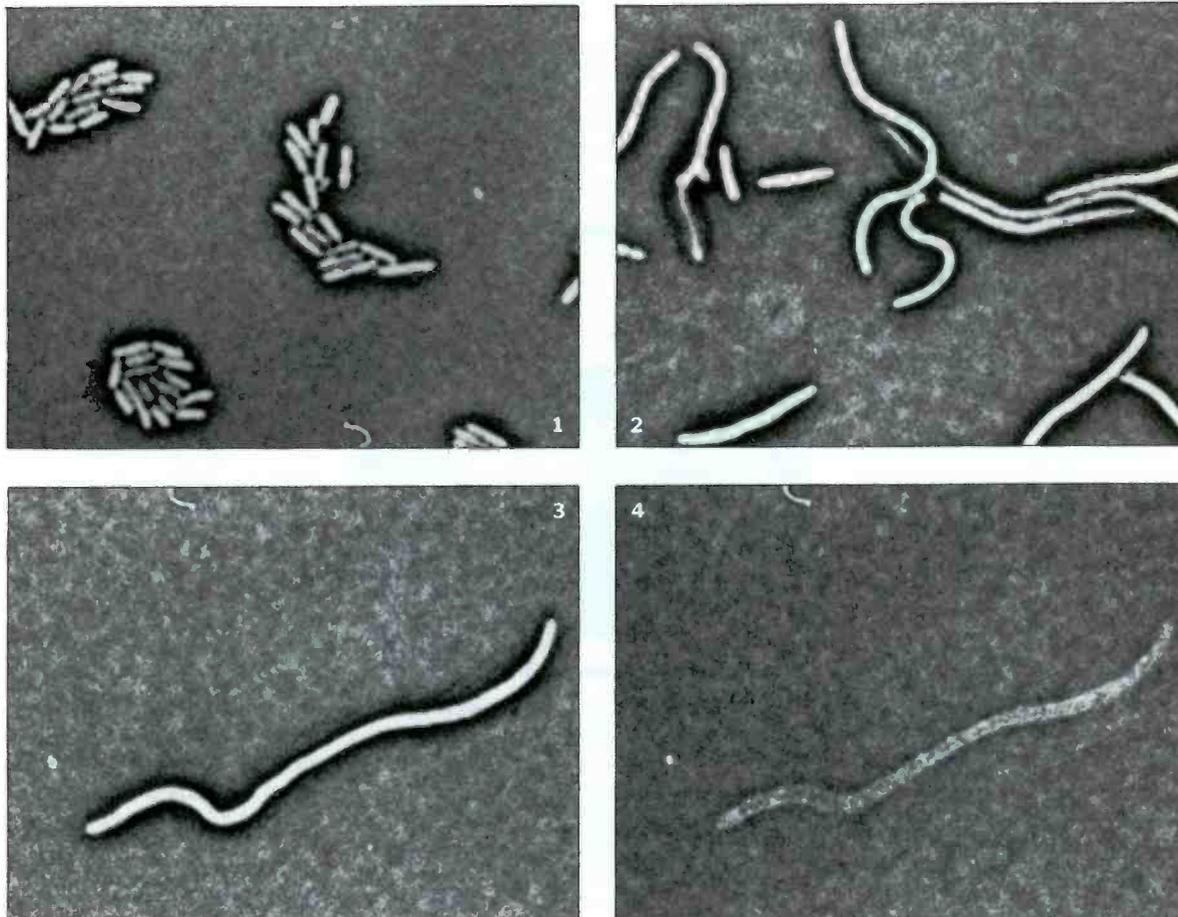
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## ...on infectious diseases.

Infectious diseases are the enemy—ranking fifth among the leading causes of death in the United States. More than two million people require hospital treatment each year for a wide variety of infections, adding an extra \$1.5 billion in hospitalization costs alone to our country's already staggering health-care bill.

Not only do these disease-causing invaders strike swiftly and severely when the body's defenses are weak, but over the years new strains of many bacteria have appeared—strains that are resistant to many existing medications.

Fortunately, research scientists have developed a new generation of antibiotics, including a semi-synthetic penicillin (whose bacterial action is pictured above), to battle against a broad spectrum of life-threatening microorganisms. These rapid-acting antibiotics provide physicians with powerful new weapons for their medical arsenals.

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



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## Over the Rainbow

*Color breathes new life into old monochrome films.*

**B**EFORE THERE WAS COLOR television, many many years ago, there was black and white. It's hard to imagine how we put up with it. Nowadays when we flip past a relic of that epoch, perhaps on a mid-afternoon stroll through the channels, we gawk for a moment and pass on, as we might hurry through Granddad's album. Well, television's neglected antiques are about to stage a comeback. Hal Roach Studios in Los Angeles has developed a computerized coloring technology known as Vidcolor, and is not only tinting black-and-white footage but even providing original color for several current network shows. Vidcolor, says Robert Glaser, former president of Viacom syndication, "is going to absolutely rejuvenate those old prints."

The process works as follows: Black-and-white tape is fed into a computer and projected onto a large screen, known as an electronic easel, connected to a second computer, itself called a Dubner character generator. An artist is seated at the easel, which may be as large as 12 feet across. Before him is a single frame from the tape, blown up so large that each pixel—one of the tiny dots that together compose a television image—can be seen individually. The artist takes in hand his electronic paintbrush—a sleek instrument that can assign any of 4,000 hues to each pixel—and starts coloring hats, skirts, trees, clouds, whatever. Before he even sits down, the artist will have conducted painstaking research into the colors appropriate to the time, place, and personalities of the film or tape. Stan Laurel's brilliant red hair and pale blue eyes, for example, have been restored to him in one tape colored by Roach.

Since it takes about 10 minutes to paint a single frame, it would take months to paint a whole film in this manner—and what an ironic return to the painstaking days of hand craftsmanship that would be. Instead, the computer automatically imparts the assigned color and brightness to the pixels on the following frames that



have remained in the same place. This and several other computerized methods take care of about 96 percent of each frame in a given scene. The artist then colors the remaining pixels by hand. Finally the colors, which have been translated into digital information and stored on a disc in the Dubner, are combined with the black-and-white images in the first computer to form a final product.

A computer-colored black-and-white film can turn into something altogether new. Glaser recalls that he first saw the technology four years ago, in an excerpt from the film *Gunga Din*. "In color," he says, "*Gunga Din* is one of the great epic pictures. There's a scene where the Scot-ties go marching right into a trap with their colors flying and their bagpipes blaring. It brought us right off our seats." The

mere addition of brightness and clarity, not to mention color, can transform an old print. Victor White, president of Hal Roach Studios, recently showed a visitor the original black-and-white version of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and then a new color print. The color was extraordinarily subtle, and the background of a storm scene, black and muddy in the original, suddenly disclosed a mast, the white spray of foam, light glancing off the waves.

Perhaps the most remarkable piece of news about Vidcolor is that it is now being used for several network series. White says that he is not "at liberty" to say which ones, and describes some of the studio's work, rather darkly, as "classified." But he does explain why a programmer might consider Vidcolor better than the real thing. "Usually when you're shooting a foreground, the background is out of focus; but we can bring the background alive with color. We can put in a jillion different shades of green for each object in an outdoor scene—grass, trees, shade, what have you."

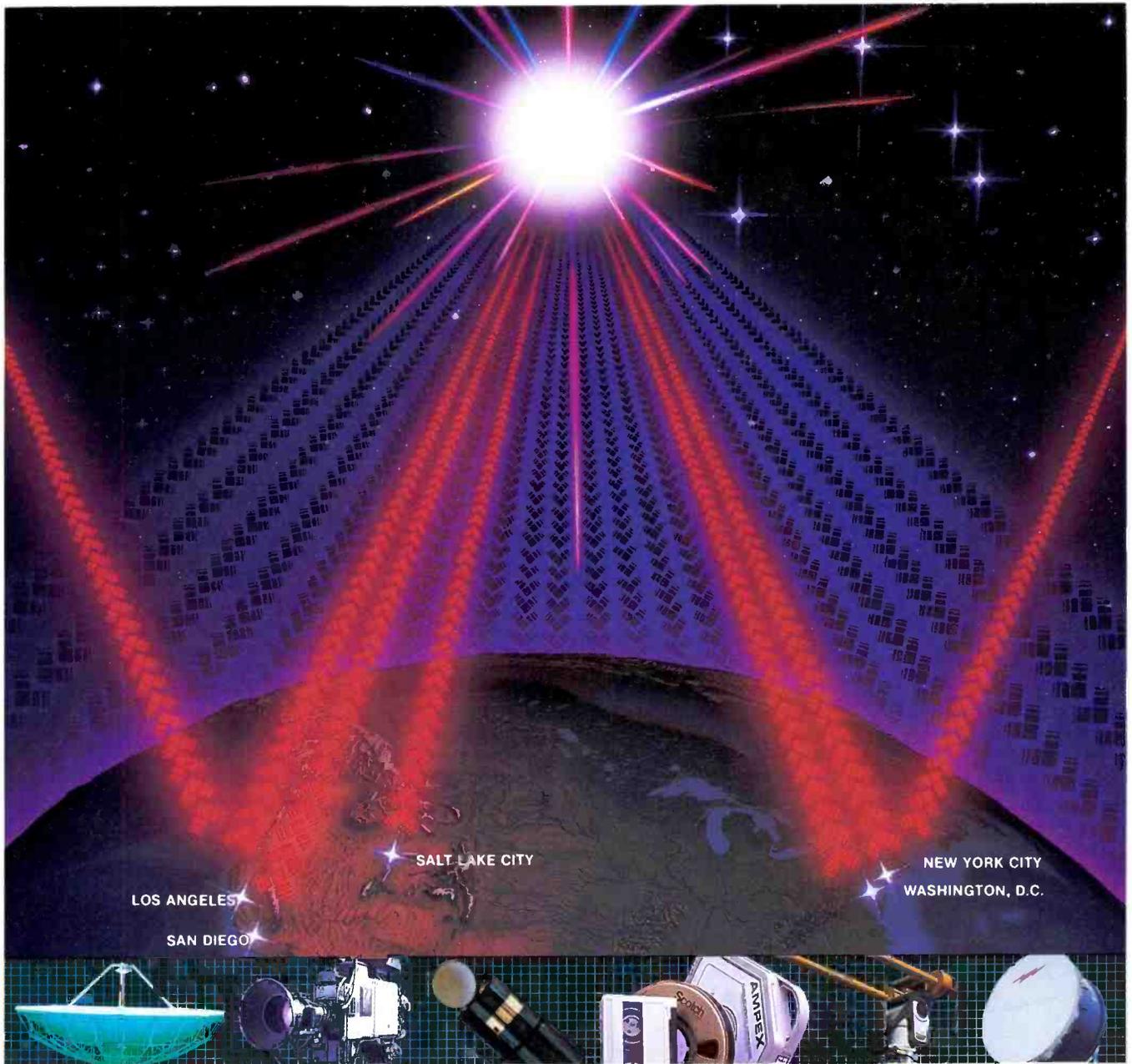
Black and white, as Hal Roach executive Wilson Markle put it in a recent speech, is "unnatural" and "foreign to the human eye." That is, dull. Markle counts 17,000 domestic black-and-white movies and 1,400 black-and-white TV series crumbling into dust in Hollywood's archives. Now the dead shall be raised; *Gunsmoke* may go on forever and ever and ever. J.T.

## Some Like It Taped

*A new self-help video cassette teaches 'Love Skills.'*

**S**INCE SEX and self-help are just about the most popular subjects for video cassettes, it seems only logical that someone would have seen fit to combine them. Sometime this year, MCA Home Video will offer an hour-long instructional program called *Love Skills*. With its \$330,000 budget, the tape will have the additional distinction of being the second most expensive one ever made (after *Making Michael Jackson's "Thriller"*).

Given the lurid content of so many popular cassettes, it is difficult to suppress a smirk at news of this high-toned erotica coming from a major entertainment conglomerate. But the project's principals emphasize its instructional nature. "Everybody bent over backwards to make sure it was erotically appealing without being sleazy," says Dr. Joshua Golden, director of UCLA's human sexuality program and the chief of the five *Love Skills* consultants. Golden delivers speeches on



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sexual problems at the beginning and end of the tape.

Not that the tape will be strictly clinical. David Winters, the Peabody award-winning director who filmed the program, says he made great efforts to show "beautiful locations—poolside locations, bedroom locations." Other scenes were shot in a forest or by a stream. There will be nudity on the tape, and actors will simulate intercourse; but not all the scenes will involve the sex act. Golden mentions a scene in which a couple will be "touching and caressing" while a narrator explains the importance of tenderness and the need to view sex as something more than intercourse. Other segments will deal with positions, "turn-ons," and "obstacles."

The program will conclude with a sequence of five common sexual fantasies shot in what Winters calls a "neon" style. It sounds mighty Hollywood, but Golden says he didn't mind lending his professional prestige to the sequence. The fantasies include a man having sex with two women, and a woman "being coerced in a socially acceptable way," according to Golden. The point, he says, is to counter-

act the view that "you're not supposed to be creative or intelligent about sex, because that would be unspontaneous."

However tactfully it is made, *Love*

*Skills* should have a considerable advantage over the movies and sports events often sold on video cassette: Nobody will bridle at watching it more than once. J.T.

## The Petition Against God

*With 16 million letters, the gospel audience shows its muscle.*

**A**ROUND the Federal Communications Commission they're known as "the letters." They constitute the largest lobbying campaign any special-interest group has ever directed at the FCC: Sixteen million letters. 1.8 million last year alone, all nearly identical in content, have arrived at the agency since 1975. They continue to arrive, at the rate of 15,000 a week. FCC clerks store them in boxes in the mailroom, where they sit for 30 days before being thrown away.

It all began in 1974, when Jeremy Lansman and Lorenzo Milam, two maverick broadcasters from California, filed a petition with the FCC that proposed a

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Gentlemen:

I am an American and proud of my heritage.  
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of this country is well known.  
Therefore, I protest any human effort to remove  
any programs designed to show faith in God or a S

RE: p

Sincerely,

"freeze" on all applications by religious groups for educational television and FM radio licenses. The petition, tagged RM-2493 by the FCC, said that religious broadcasters "thrive on mindless, banal

**"Ninety percent of the businessmen in this country would not pick up the phone when the press calls."**

—John Lawrence  
*Los Angeles Times*  
on CBS' "Business and the Media"

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CURRENTS

programming."

Acting with uncharacteristic swiftness, the FCC rejected RM-2493 only eight months after it had been filed. "The commission is enjoined by the First Amendment to observe a stance of neutrality toward religion," ran the opinion. "No federal law or regulation gives the FCC the authority to prohibit radio and television stations from presenting religious programs." By that time (in 1975), the FCC had already received 750,000 letters opposing RM-2493. But, despite the FCC's unequivocal rejection of the petition, that was only the beginning.

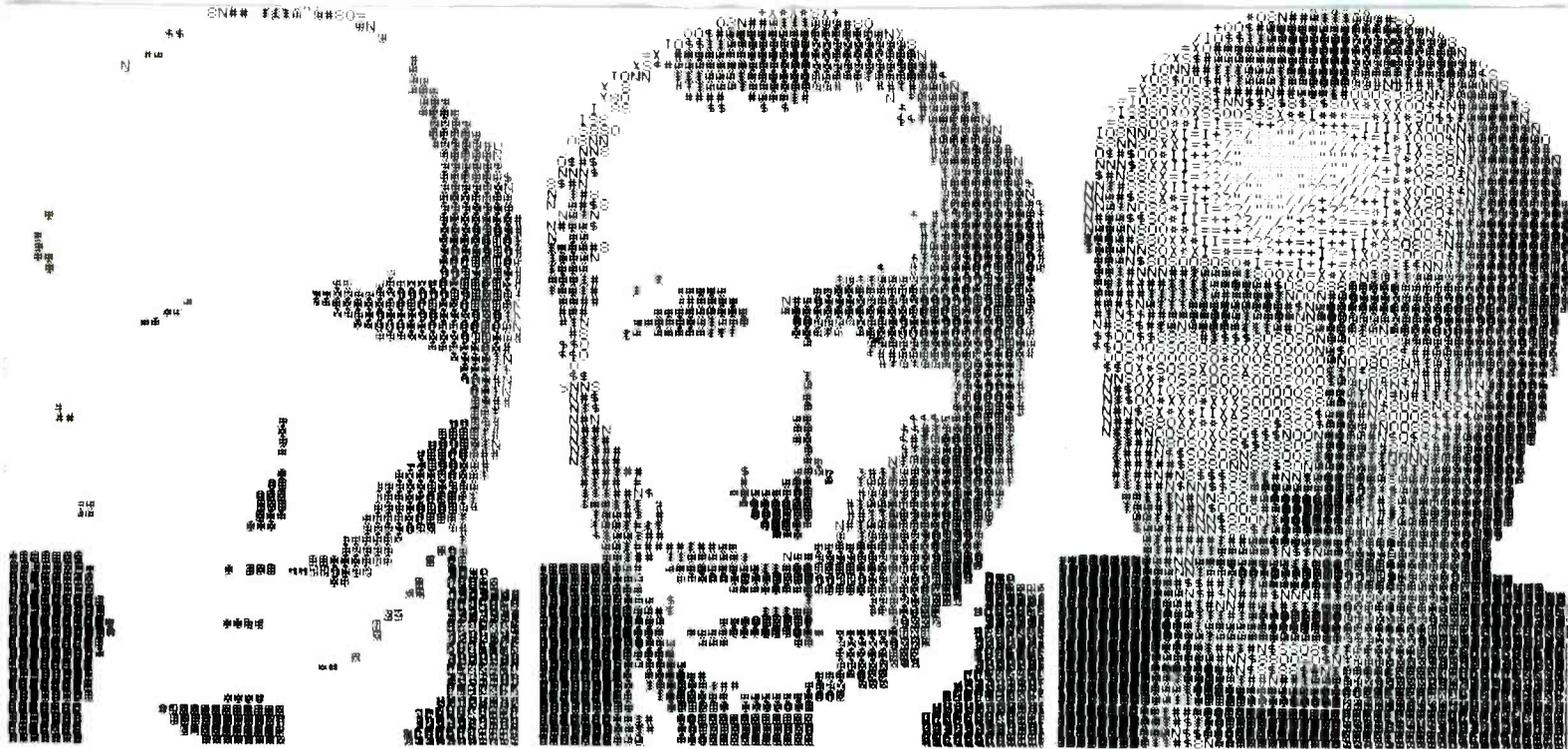
The National Religious Broadcasters (NRB), an association of 679 religious radio and television stations, played an active role in starting the campaign. Two months after RM-2493 was filed, NRB executive director Ben Armstrong sent letters to the group's members urging them to "join together in opposing the forces that would put an end to gospel broadcasting." Armstrong insists that religious broadcasting was being attacked and ridiculed by the petition. "I perceived it as a genuine threat," he says.

The NRB, which called the FCC's denial of RM-2493 a "landmark decision," has been accused of exaggerating the threat posed by the petition in order to solicit bigger donations. Samuel Buffone, the lawyer who filed the petition for Lansman and Milam, calls the NRB's action "a good fund-raising technique." But it also stands as a political warning. John Commuta, the NRB's operating manager, once said the letter drive "continually reminds [the FCC] of the potential clout of religious broadcasters."

Another group that got the letter campaign rolling was the Christian Crusade, Billy James Hargis's fundamentalist sect, based in Oklahoma. In June 1975, six weeks before the FCC issued its rejection of RM-2493, the Crusade's weekly newspaper published a front-page article reporting that Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the well-known atheist, was campaigning in favor of RM-2493. The newspaper said O'Hair was headed for Washington to appear before an FCC hearing. Actually, O'Hair was doing nothing of the kind, but the Christian Crusade's error was not corrected in print for a month.

Nobody will admit originating the O'Hair story. The Christian Crusade identified the NRB as the source in its false report, but Armstrong, who admits that the O'Hair story was "the genesis of the hysteria," claims the rumor began "somewhere out there in the hinterland."

In 1979, Congress gave the FCC a special appropriation of \$250,000 to try to



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## ARBITRON RATINGS



## CURRENTS

stop the letters. The commission responded to about 100,000 of the letters and embarked on a massive mailing of its own, including 20,000 letters to religious leaders, churches, and the media. For a time, the flow of letters subsided. When only 9,000 letters came in during January

1980, the FCC thought it had finally seen the beginning of the end. Soon, however, the letters were arriving again in droves—and they have not let up since. “The well-known petition against God,” says FCC lawyer Jonathan David, “has taken on a life of its own.” R.B.

cut techniques were being perfected, the makers of commercials boasted mastering the art of 30-second drama. *Sesame Street*, with its quick-take mini-lessons, took inspiration from the artistry of television commercials. And now the original *Sesame Street* generation has graduated to the teenage version, MTV.

Television news also picked up the beat. Its growing popularity may have less to do with the importance of content than with the style of presentation—fast, brief, and glitzy, and watch as much as you like. For some people, no doubt, the news is just music video *a capella*.

But it's really cable that is leading the way to the new kind of television. For example, the Weather Channel, which some people think is a dopey idea, could turn out to be a stroke of genius if everyone in the country were to watch two minutes a day. From what's available on cable today, one can do a substantial amount of viewing in only half an hour: a bit of weather, two or three numbers on MTV, a spot of news on CNN, and one of those film fillers on HBO. More or less a balanced diet, leaving the rest of the evening free to spend at the computer. L.B.

## Small Wonder

*In the long run, media abundance will make programming shorter.*

**T**O MAKE IT big today, you've got to make it small: microcomputer chips, compact discs, music videos, the *Watchman*—that sort of thing. The most profitable program in all television today—no joke—is the one-minute network newsbreak in prime time. Without question, small is how programming is going in the second age of television—tailored to the attention span.

When there are so many shows to choose from but only so many disposable hours in a day, the programming that makes the least demands on one's time

stands the best chance of attracting viewers. *Good Morning America* and *Entertainment Tonight* leap to mind as paradigms. Tune in and something's gained; tune out and nothing is lost.

Now the big networks are starting to think small in prime time. The rash of bloopers shows has provided a way to package small things in larger form: Stay as long as you like. Next fall, CBS will introduce a sitcom about an aspiring rock group, called *Dreams*, which is really a way to hang music videos on a story line.

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# What Do Women Want?

To judge by the talk shows aimed at them, women don't feel quite at home, at home.



by Walter Karp

**L**ISTENING TO women's talk shows on television, a man tends to feel like an eavesdropper. Could these conversations possibly be meant for a male's tender ears? Phil Donahue shows his audience a pump-like device that can be implanted in sexually impotent men. He and his guests—implanters and implantees—bat around this harrowing subject for an hour, much to the amusement of the elderly women in the studio audience. They seem to regard the sexual inadequacies of men as Nature's just punishment for male presumption. Sonya Friedman of *Sonya* takes up sexual problems attendant on giving birth. "Try oral sex," suggests a young mother. "I'm glad you brought that up," says Sonya, utterly unabashed, which is more than could be said about me.

On *Woman to Woman* several young women gather around hostess Pat Mitchell to discuss "date rape," the violation of women, not by strangers, but by men whom they know. Several victims tell their agonizing stories—the door to the date's apartment slamming shut behind

Walter Karp, a contributing editor of *Channels*, is now working on a book about the origins of the Korean War.

them; the terrible "look" disfiguring his face; strong hands clamping down on frail wrists; the shocking slap hard across the face. One woman was drugged by a wealthy physician and awoke several hours later sprawled on the living-room floor with her clothes in shreds. The physician was peacefully asleep in his bedroom. As each guest bears witness to the treacherous brutality of her attacker, the others lean forward in their chairs, listening intently with tears welling up in their eyes. The scene is intensely moving, for they all seem to share in their own flesh the pain and defilement each victim has suffered. There is great dignity in this bond of compassion. Nevertheless, it made me feel like a guilty intruder in an exclusively woman's world.

It is a strangely disjointed place, this televised woman's world. Perhaps the most revealing examples of this are the contradictory manifestations of the women's liberation movement. On many shows its influence, quite understandably, seems all-pervasive. Child-rearing is duly called "parenting," even on cable shows devoted entirely to baby care. When one woman guest on *Working Mother* remarks that her own mother, though strongly for women's liberation, did not think young mothers should work

if they did not need the money, her fellow guests gasp in amazement. That mothering might take precedence over making extra money seems a reactionary and by no means welcome idea. The point, however, is instantly dropped, for the precepts of the women's movement are not debated. Disputes break out only on how best to apply them.

"Is man-sharing an alternative to monogamy?" Pat Mitchell asks her 10 or so guests. A complicated discussion breaks out. One woman says she sees several men and they are quite free to see other women. There is no quarrel with that until one woman asks, suppose one of those "shared" men happens to be somebody's husband? Another guest then freely admits to having a "relationship" with a married man. The other women are frankly distressed by this Jezebel, but not because they disapprove of adultery as such. Going out with another woman's spouse, they contended, makes women "competitive" with each other, thereby threatening the solidarity of women. In the long run, "committed relationships" are better for women. This, however, does not settle the matter. There are other scruples to satisfy. What is the difference, asks one woman, between seeking an "emotional commitment" from a

Martha Gradisher

man (as opposed to sharing him) and the old, degrading obsession with "getting a man"? And so the argument rages on for half an hour. Although the women on the show disagree sharply, the entire discussion is couched in exclusively feminist terms, as if no other moral language has any validity any longer.

Perhaps this is only surprising to a 50-year-old man who has failed to keep up with the times. If so, then the real surprise of television's woman's world is the number of programs in which hardly a trace of the women's movement can be found. All-pervasive one hour, it is non-

disparity merely mirror the shows' demographics. It is true that cable television still chiefly serves small towns and suburbs, and that the old-fashioned shows are all cable shows. But *Sonya*, *The '80s Woman*, and *Working Mother* are cable shows, too, and there is nothing particularly old-fashioned about them. More to the point, if demographic differences between city and suburb explained the disparity, one would have to conclude that American women are sharply divided between strong adherents and strong foes of the women's movement. I myself was so sure that such a rift existed that I ex-

more authentic identity. This is certainly an operative assumption of *Working Mother*, which characteristically shows housewives how to puff up a resumé when they enter the job market (if you worked as a volunteer fund-raiser, for example, call yourself a "developmental assistant"). The old-fashioned shows are not really old-fashioned. What they seem to provide is temporary surcease from the rigorous demands that the liberation of women makes upon women, demands the young mothers in the audience regard as just and proper even if they are not living up to them.

If basic feminist goals have indeed been adopted by more women than I had previously expected, there is a complementary shift of attitudes toward the home: Homemaking and child-rearing have simply ceased to represent a fully legitimate life even to those women who are leading that life.

The other major disjunction in the televised woman's world may well spring from the lost legitimacy of the household sphere. This is the striking contradiction between the severe practicality of the women's shows and their extreme subjectivity.

That women chiefly want to hear about real-life troubles and how to surmount them is the assumption of almost every program I watched, however else they might differ. As Donahue warned a guest expert when he began talking abstractly, "This is a practical audience." They want to get down to brass tacks. "Problems" and "help" are the very stuff of life on the women's shows. On a given day, the panelists of *The '80s Woman* discuss with Barbara Feldon the problems of teenage sex. *Hour Magazine* tackles nervous breakdowns. Donahue airs the problem of teenage suicide. Hour after hour, life's problems pass in review: alcoholic couples, the neglect of the aged, May-December marriages, babies born drug-addicted, dangerous exercises, teen-age drug abuse, "one-night stands," lower-back pains, premature births.

The problems demand solutions, and these are often provided by a guest expert—a physician, a psychotherapist, a social worker. The afflicted are urged to seek "professional guidance." Every problem seems to have spawned some kind of organized help, and the women's talk shows act as a referral service. Young mothers who cannot "cope"—a favorite word in the women's-show lexicon—are sent for "support" to a mothers' center. Parents of suicidal children are directed to the American Association of Suicidology. Young mothers who wish to attend college are referred to the Na-




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**Even the shows most concerned with homemaking don't argue against the goals of feminism.**

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existent the next. On shows such as *Alive and Well*, *Hour Magazine*, *Daytime Magazine*, *The Great American Homemaker*, *You!*, and *Mother's Day*, time seems to have stopped around 1953. Women cook and sew, shop and raise children. They fret over hemlines and accessories, kitchen smells and leftovers. They delight in watching beauticians "make over" women's faces and homey chefs demonstrate their recipe for, say, Chinese-style chili. They want "expert" advice about cholesterol and Caesarian section, about "hyperactive" children and how to harden fingernails. Such is the American woman on these shows: a conscientious homemaker and avid mother struggling to stay attractive to her spouse.

What, I wondered, could account for this odd disparity between the powerful presence of the women's movement on so many shows and its near-total absence on others? The obvious explanations do not seem to suffice. The disparity does not reflect, for example, the difference between an audience of career women and an audience of homebodies, because homebodies constitute the audience for all the shows. *Woman to Woman* is on at 10:30 in the morning, presumably for mothers and housewives. Nor does the

pected the old-fashioned shows to take a swipe now and then at careers and day-care centers. These are, after all, the two chief rivals of the mother at home. But nothing of the kind occurred. In six weeks of watching the women's talk shows I never saw a seemingly old-fashioned show so much as hint that a day-care center might be inferior to a mother's care, or that a business career can be considerably less than fulfilling. The liberation of women is neither promoted nor disparaged on these shows; the topic is shunned.

**I**T WAS SUGGESTED to me that perhaps the producers of these shows deliberately deprive their homebody viewers of anti-feminist views, but such a conspiracy of silence, it seems to me, would not long survive the headlong opportunism of the television industry. My guess is that the women's movement is shunned because even the young mothers who watch the old-fashioned shows are deeply committed to basic feminist goals and would not take kindly to seeing them belittled. They, too, hope one day to enter the great world beyond their doorsteps in order to gain independence and a

tional Coalition for Campus Day Care. Parents of missing children are sent to Child-Find.

True to their practical spirit, the women's shows often provide brisk practical tips as well. Viewers learn how to detect incipient alcoholism in a child: Note a sudden drop in his school grades. They learn how to spot potential "date-rapists": Beware of men with a proprietary attitude toward women and men who discuss everything in sexual terms. Such advice comes in addition to the usual tips on skin care, fitness, makeup, bargain-hunting, dieting, and "business manners." (Should you, as a woman executive, stand up when a man enters your office? Yes.) As relief from the grinding practicality of its daily two-hour fare, *Daytime Magazine* offers five concluding minutes of "reflections" on matters more spiritual than cooking and clothing. The five-minute exception proves the rule of practicality.

There is nothing novel, of course, about this severe practicality. It was once regarded as characteristically female. The very word "economy" derives from the Greek word for managing the household—which is to say, from traditional women's work. Moreover, the practicality of the women's shows is said to be based on extensive surveys of women viewers. It was the viewers, reportedly, who insisted on seeing real-life problems aired on daytime television.

Yet, strangely enough, the women who appear in the televised woman's world do not sound like practical people and down-to-earth realists. They talk about "what is real for me" as if there were no such thing as a real world at all. They make judgments in accordance with "my value system" and "my own needs" as if there

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**Help with real-life problems is the stuff of the shows, but the guests do not sound like practical people.**

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were no common solutions to common problems. For better or worse, this is simply not the way practical people talk. The practical spirit is objective and commonsensical. Thinking in the woman's world of television tends to be radically subjective.

The subjectivity is so potent that it can even undermine the precepts of the women's movement. On *Woman to Woman* Pat Mitchell, who is very adept at bringing out this very difficulty, asks her guests to tackle the question of erotic lingerie. Can a modern woman wear the black mesh accoutrements of a Gay '90s courtesan and still retain her self-respect? Absolutely not, insist a few of the guests. It is plainly "exploitative of women." A surprising number of guests disagree. It is only exploitative, they contend, when there is "pressure and programming." Wearing erotic lingerie is not exploitative "if you are pleasing yourself." It all depends, they say, "on how



you feel within yourself." Such extreme subjectivity leaves several guests markedly distressed because it renders the whole issue hopelessly confused. Indeed, it would undermine the integrity of any common code of morality.

Subjectivity even invades the practical sphere itself. Quite often on the talk shows, the problem under discussion is given a sharply subjective twist. The problem of teenage suicide becomes the parents' sense of failure when a child attempts his life. The problem of the elderly becomes the emotional pain of parking them in nursing homes. In this way the desperately unhappy child and the desperately lonely old lady are shoved off the stage by "guilt," a secondary and derivative problem, but one that conforms to the general belief in the higher reality of the purely personal.

Severe practicality and extreme subjectivity exist side by side like two warring modes of thought and feeling. One stems from a shared world, the other from the lack of a shared world. Insofar as the television audience wants to hear about practical problems, it is rooted in the traditional shared world of home and family. Insofar as the viewers believe in "what is real for me" and "feeling good about myself," they live in a void. Household and child-rearing take up enormous gobs of their time and energy, but plainly they do not seem quite real. True selfhood lies elsewhere, and real needs are satisfied elsewhere. It is as if these housewives are determined to do a good job as mothers and homemakers, but their hearts and minds are not in it. According to the hostess of *Woman to Woman*, "The woman at home is alienated." If the televised woman's world mirrors with any fidelity the actual situation of women, then what they seem alienated from, essentially, are their own homes. ■



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REMEMBER THESE TWO  
AND CHANCES ARE**



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Almost two-million American families face the hardship and frustration in caring for Alzheimer's victims. And at least 100,000 deaths are attributed to Alzheimer's annually.

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*"...your coverage immediately mobilized people and was instrumental in the passage of two bills vital to alleviating some of the suffering caused by Alzheimer's..."*

*"I was not only pleased, but overwhelmed."*

We'd also like to think that Don McGannon, former Group W President, and victim of Alzheimer's who died this past May, would be proud, too. Not so much that "The Alzheimer's Project" was dedicated to him, but more importantly, we fulfilled a public service and lived up to being good, responsible neighbors.

For all the hurt that Alzheimer's Disease victims and their families suffer — we hope our effort helped.



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# Sitcom Domesticus

## A Species Endangered by Social Change

**The broad base for broad comedy has split asunder, along with the nuclear family.**

by Susan Horowitz

**B**ACK IN THE 1950s, when television was young and the children of the Baby Boom still nestled in the embrace of the nuclear family, watching the domestic zaniness of *I Love Lucy* was a Monday-night ritual. Lucy's portrayal of housewife as clown/child beset by familiar problems, surrounded by husband and friends, entranced millions of loyal viewers. (The birth of Little Ricky outdrew the Eisenhower Inauguration.)

In the decades that followed, dozens of sitcoms succeeded by playing lightly upon recognizable family situations. As families, and family problems, changed, so did the sitcoms: from *Ozzie and Harriet* to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, whose snug "family" consisted of co-workers and boss. Situation comedies dominated the airwaves to such an extent that 10 years ago they constituted eight of the 10 top-rated shows.

But now, in the 1980s, the popularity of the form is waning. In the 1982-'83 season, there were only three situation comedies among the top 10 shows. Last season, 1983-'84, no situation comedy was consistently able to hold a place among the highest-rated shows—with the exception of CBS's *Kate & Allie*, a midseason entry whose good press and word of mouth helped land four of its first epi-

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*Susan Horowitz, a doctoral candidate at the City University of New York, is writing a book titled Funny Women, about women in comedy.*



sodes in the weekly top 20.

The decline of the sitcom—and perhaps the success of *Kate & Allie*—has much to do with changes that have occurred in family structure in our society. The half-hour domestic comedy, as a form, has barely survived the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family for which it was originally designed. *Kate & Allie*, a show about two divorced women who live together along with their children, is as carefully crafted for the contemporary domestic mood and circumstance as *Lucy* and other successful comedies were for their times.

Network researchers are acutely aware of how changes in the structure of the audience have imperiled the sitcom.

"In the early days, the whole family sat down to watch television together," says Marvin Mord, ABC marketing and research vice president. "Theory was that the woman controlled the dial in the evening, so others in the family who might not have made a sitcom their first choice came along for the ride." The concept of women as the choosers of programming for the family was of major importance to advertisers, and consequently to prime-time schedules.

Though no longer the choosers, women still constitute about 60 percent of prime-time viewers; when it comes to sitcoms the ratio is even higher. "Three out of every four advertising dollars in prime time are aimed at women," says David

Roger Roth

Poltrack, CBS research vice president.

How life has changed from the days when the family watched television together is reflected in the evolution of the sitcom. This longtime staple of television has gotten grittier in its style and bolder in its themes since the sweet, innocent days of *I Love Lucy*.

The divorce rate, relatively low in the 1950s, soared through the '60s and '70s and has continued high in the '80s. Grown children left home and often postponed parenthood and even marriage—trends that promoted the pursuit of entertainment outside the house.

In the days when most households had a single TV set, the sitcom flourished because it was, as CBS's Poltrack puts it, "the best example of a broad-based program. They would take a situation that everyone could identify with, such as a husband, wife, and kids trying to get through the normal toil of daily existence—the *Lucy* shows being the best example—and introduce exaggerated characters and a lot of physical humor that would add comedic elements to the show."

But the sitcom no longer has the natural constituency it once had. According to Poltrack, "there's no intensity of viewer loyalty. They're shows you watch because you're watching television—not shows you go out of your way to watch. This week's audience of a serial drama will generally be back next week; in sitcoms maybe only 33 percent will be back. So when there are more options, a sitcom is vulnerable."

The half-hour comedy of yesteryear was protected from this lack of viewer loyalty by a surrounding "comedy block" of similar programming, creating a mood that carried over from show to show. Today's sitcom, often adrift in a sea of unrelated programming, is forced to create its own viewer loyalty—and may very well fail in the attempt.

Thus the sitcom is more vulnerable than other television forms to today's competitive situation, in which broadcast television vies for attention alongside cable, video cassettes, and the like. "No one is doing 40 shares anymore," says Marvin Mord. "The average sitcom draws only 25 percent of all viewers tuned in at any one time. Performance of all network programs has declined 10 percent, and for sitcoms, it's down 32 percent."

"Sitcoms tended to run in the 8-to-9 period on network prime time," adds Poltrack. "But now, independent TV stations rerun the best of sitcoms, like *M\*A\*S\*H*, *All in the Family*, *Barney Miller*, and *Taxi*, between 6 and 8 o'clock. The one thing the audience (particularly

the children and teens who watch the early shows) is not ready for at 8 P.M. is an untried and perhaps inferior sitcom."

The influence of *M\*A\*S\*H*'s serio-comic tone and multi-character format can be found in many of the shows that now out-rank sitcoms in appeal, such as *Hill Street Blues*, a dramatic series with traces of black comedy about an inner-city police precinct. Another police show, *Cagney & Lacey*, has been able to incorporate much of the traditional female appeal of the sitcoms by providing two women as leads. Its mixed format allows the show to combine domestic life

temporary family life while providing fantasies of a glamorous alternative lifestyle.

But for the sitcom to break loose from the traditional family—the original source of its broad-based appeal—has been more difficult. Even *All in the Family*, for all the controversy it stirred, featured a close-knit group of mother, father, and child. So, despite its superficial provocativeness, does *The Jeffersons*, one of the few sitcoms surviving from the '70s. Even so, the same period saw the rise of such situation comedies as *Alice*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *One*

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## 'I don't know why the shows aren't better written,' says a network executive. 'Maybe writers are stuck trying to figure out what to do with the form.'

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(one cop is single, the other married) and comedy with the action of the police show.

These and other, more lighthearted shows, such as *A-Team*, *Magnum, P.I.*, and *Simon & Simon*—what Poltrack calls "action/adventure with comedic overtones"—have usurped a good part of the sitcom audience. The adventure comedies pull in children, teens, and men (with the macho action), along with a fair number of women who tune in for the handsome, tough-yet-vulnerable heroes. The juiced-up plots of these shows are well served by the promotional spots used to attract viewers, among whom the flashiest package tends to win out. "A high-concept show like *A-Team* can attract more than a sitcom that depends on involvement with characters over a period of time," says Mord.

**E**VEN JUICIER—and more successful—is the recently evolved format of the night-time soaps: *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest*, and *Knots Landing*. The degree of titillation, violence, and cynicism in these shows would be completely incongruous in a family vehicle such as the sitcom. Their melodramatic style engages the crucial female viewers, while their obsession with power and action draws the men. The appeal of the night-time soaps lies mainly in their depiction of family life, exaggerated and disordered though it is. Almost all the serials feature fantastically wealthy, powerful, and corrupt extended families. The shows reflect the disruption of con-

*Day at a Time*, in which single women tried to make it alone, often with the support of a surrogate family of co-workers. With these shows, the sitcom found a way of relating to the increasingly common reality of its viewers, as *Lucy* had in the '50s. That is the line of succession that led to such contemporary shows as *Kate & Allie*.

According to Sherry Coben, creator and principal writer of *Kate & Allie*, "Our show is really a personality comedy—*Mary Tyler Moore* style. The Mary and Rhoda friendship was only a little thing between other scenes, but that's the part I adored—I'd never seen it before. It's like most of the female friendships I've had, where we just talk on the phone or over lunch. And it's probably the strength of our show."

The viewer's identification with the character is the crux of it. This wasn't so vital before, when the viewer could consider *Lucy* an improbable lunatic and yet tune in to laugh at the physical comedy. Even if Archie Bunker seemed exaggerated and obnoxious, you could laugh at his one-liners or get caught up in the moral issues raised on the show. But *Kate & Allie* and its ilk demand that you like and believe in the characters.

*Mary Tyler Moore* was one of the first to depend in this way on audience identification—primarily with Mary Richards, the spunky heroine. To the extent that popular television programs reflect contemporary audience concerns, one might loosely speculate that the largely middle-class, educated, female audience tuning

(Continued on page 50)



AS THE OLYMPIC  
SPIRIT SOARED,  
SO DID THE SPIRIT  
OF AMERICA.



Beyond all the glory, the grandeur, the gold, above the roar of the record-breaking crowds, something very special happened at the Games of the XXIII Olympiad in Los Angeles.

A renewed spirit of pride and patriotism, of brotherhood and a belief in ourselves, echoed across the land—and indeed around the world.

ABC is proud to have brought the Games of the XXIII Olympiad to the world. As produced by ABC Sports, it was the most watched event in television history. And we're proud to have been a part of the Olympic spirit that lifted the mood of our nation, and brought the nations of the world closer together.

**The American Broadcasting Company**



ABC Television / ABC Radio

The Olympic Tradition Continues...



CHANNELS

A

SEARCH

FOR

# Excellence

*OUTSTANDING* is one of the more literal words in the language; excellence, because it is so rare, does stand out.

When the editors of *Channels* decided to initiate a series of articles on excellence in the electronic media, we thought we might be looking for needles in a haystack. But these were needles of distinction, bright and shiny, and surprisingly easy to spot. You simply know excellence when you encounter it.

We found it in five media organizations—companies that adhere to values beyond ratings, profits, and stock digits. These five prove that there is nothing inevitable about banality in the mass media. Banality, like excellence, is a choice. These companies also prove that excellence carries no commercial penalty. All are enviably successful. Most of the companies saluted here express the vision of a single person, usually a founder. Most have had stable management of exceptional longevity. Each has withstood the pressures of the marketplace to preserve its beliefs and traditions. The excellent treat their audience as respected customers; the others treat theirs as demographic units for sale. The excellent are neither elitist nor low-brow, but catholic in their tastes. The excellent, above all, have excellent intentions.

To select the year's best television programming, *Channels* has assembled a circle of writers and critics from around the nation. Their choices also appear in this section.

Our search has only begun. Somewhere exists an exemplary cable system, videotex service, program distributor, satellite operator, or other media-related enterprise deserving notice in our next roundup.

*This special pull-out section is sponsored by the Mobil Corporation, which participated solely as sponsor and did not in any way influence the editorial decisions or the selections.*



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BRITAIN'S Christmas gift to American TV viewers this year is *The Jewel in the Crown*, a dazzling 14-part adaptation of Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet*. Some consider it better than *Brideshead Revisited*. Like *Brideshead*, which kept us in an 11-week state of Baroque bliss, *Jewel* was produced by a small commercial broadcaster, Granada Television.

Granada is also responsible for *Coronation Street*, a wry look at life in the company's own home—northern England—that is undeniably the most popular program in British history. This small broadcaster represents a unique combination of commercial success and commitment to quality.

Granada may be suspected of trying to beat the British Broadcasting Corporation at the game it invented. After viewing *Jewel in*

*the Crown*, Christopher Dunkley, critic of *The Financial Times*, wrote: "It is arguable that Granada aims higher in terms of intellect and quality than the BBC." Americans may find it hard to believe that Granada is in business to make money.

This is a company that once spent a couple of million dollars on a history of Victorian still photography, and now has in production a series covering the history of television throughout the world. This expensive series is being made not because anyone envisions a huge world market for it but because Granada thought it ought to be made. It's a quirky, unconventional company that cherishes its eccentrics but is solid enough to have retained its broadcast license and much of its staff since the origins of British commercial television in 1956, the only outfit to have done so.

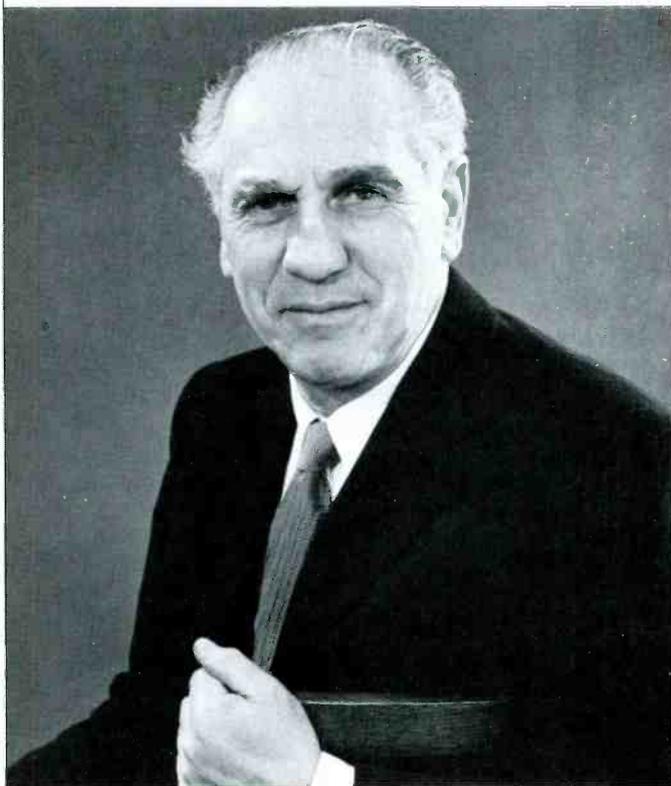
Granada is a mainstream British institution that takes pride in breaking ground and breaking rules. Its high-minded approach to television has been revealed over the years in scores of first-rate documentaries, in Olivier's *King Lear*, in adaptations of *Hard Times* and *Country Matters*, in *Brideshead* and *Coronation Street*.

What's more, while most American network executives rarely see the working side of the camera, Granada executives have almost all been program makers and generally still are. It is, in fact, good form to take a sabbatical from an executive job to work on a show, as Granada chairman Sir Denis Forman recently did when he served in India as executive producer for *The Jewel in the Crown*.

Granada's success is rooted in a felicitous conjunction of economics, history, geography, and—above all—personality. The company still bears the imprint of its founder, Lord Sidney Bernstein. Baron of Leigh. He is retired now, but at age 85 the tall, beautifully tailored man remains a real presence in a company that from the start has been a family affair. His nephew Alex is the chairman of the Granada Group, a thriving conglomerate (1983 profits of \$75 million) that includes music publishing, movie theaters, bingo halls, real estate,

# THE BEST TELEVISION COMPANY IN THE WORLD

BY REGINA NADELSON



LORD SIDNEY BERNSTEIN, founder and president of the Granada Group

Regina Nadelson is currently writing a book about the movies.

an extremely lucrative TV- and video-rental business (now also operating in the United States) and, of course, the television company that not only holds its own financially but gives the group its cultural clout. It is Bernstein's unerring feel for show biz and good business, together with his particular brand of idealism, that has kept the engines at Granada racing.

"Granada works because of its longevity, because it remains essentially the company Bernstein built," says Jonathan Powell, a former Granada producer who is now head of series and serials at the BBC. "Granada," Powell adds, "is the creation of one man based on the idea that television could influence people for the better."

Sidney Bernstein was born, it is said, "with a silver screen in his mouth." Heir to a small string of silent cinemas, he not only loved the business, he had a sense of its future. He adapted his cinemas first for talkies, then color, then Cinemascope.

In 1925 Bernstein helped found the Film Society, which brought Eisenstein and other avant-garde filmmakers to Britain. Soon after, wowed by his visits to New York's Roxy, Bernstein built England's first picture palaces. There were ranks of ushers in white gloves, dog kennels and tea rooms, cut glass and Moorish arches. As his first super-cinema was about to open, he sought a suitably exotic name. Recalling a happy walking trip in southern Spain, he settled on "Granada."

By the mid-'50s Bernstein's career had included movies and music halls, London society and American show business. With his keen eye for the main chance, he was bound to find something new before long. The chance arrived in 1954, when Parliament passed the Television Act, opening the way for independent, commercial television. The opportunity to compete in a market in which only the BBC had existed seemed to be, as Canadian publishing magnate Lord Thomson put it, "a license to print money." The scramble was on. Sidney Bernstein was ready.

He had already applied for one of the franchises in the north of England. In a legendary business decision, he figured that where the population was densest, and the rain heaviest, people would stay home to watch TV. And so in



**G**ranada is an established British institution that takes pride in breaking ground and breaking rules. It remains the company Sidney Bernstein built: 'the creation of one man, based on the idea that television could influence people for the better,' says a former Granada producer.



A street in Manchester masquerades as London's Baker Street for Granada's 13-part *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

1956 Granada was born in Manchester, the capital of England's heavily populated industrial northwest. It also rains a lot there.

The system created by the Television Act forces the stations to take their public obligations seriously, because licenses can be struck down as easily as they are awarded. In the main, commercial television in Britain takes place on a single channel shared by a number of regional companies. Channel 3, or ITV (Independent Television), today is divided among 10 small regional stations and five relatively large ones that serve as the major programmers. (Last year a second commercial channel was added, expressly to serve minorities and to create opportunities for independent producers.)

Some ITV programming is shown on a strictly regional basis. But the five majors must also contend for air-time to show their works nationwide, leading to the curious arrangement of five program controllers meeting every Monday to slice up the weekly schedule. (About half of ITV's weekly 104 hours are produced by the five, and most of their programs are seen nationally.)

The whole of ITV is governed by a central body, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), which superficially resembles our own Federal Communications Commission. Like the FCC, the IBA grants and renews broadcast licenses, and sets certain content-related standards. But there the resemblance ends. The IBA owns, builds, and operates the transmitters that the various companies must lease; as such it is more a landlord than a distant overseer. The IBA takes very seriously its responsibility

to ensure "a proper balance of information, education, and entertainment," as mandated by the Broadcasting Act, which set up commercial television. As recently as 1980 it revoked two of the country's 15 licenses.

Though ITV is commercial television, the stations can be far more independent of their advertisers than American programmers can afford to be. Granada, with its 8 million-plus viewers, enjoys a virtual advertising monopoly in its region, as do the other stations. And the IBA code offers further insulation. Not only are stations limited to six advertising minutes per hour (the FCC recently abolished all such limits here), but sponsors must buy spots in the schedule without knowing which shows will appear there. "That means bad ratings don't automatically wipe out good programs," says Barrie Heads, chief of Granada International.

The '50s: In the brave new Britain flush with postwar idealism, conventions were crumbling, and moribund institutions were battered by those who refused to believe they'd never had it so good. At London's Royal Court Theatre, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*—which Granada televised—shocked audiences with its vitriolic anti-heroics. Working-class bloke and northerner alike began to crack London's middle-class cultural stranglehold. At Granada Television young journalists bristled with a sense of mission.

"It was still an age when BBC TV newscasters wore dinner jackets and opened every broadcast with 'Yesterday, the Queen Mother,'" says Leslie Woodhead, a longtime Granada pro-



Characters compete in the egg-carrying event of an Olympic game on Granada's dramatic serial *Coronation Street*.

ducer. "So the style at Granada seemed very cheeky, very irreverent."

The style, back in the beginning, was also pretty much seat-of-the-pants. No one knew much about television. Most of the engineers had to be hired from radar and the electronics industry. Hardly anyone had ever been inside a TV studio. In fact, Granada's was the first studio in England built for television.

Sidney Bernstein was omnipresent. "Granada, c'est moi," he might have said," wrote Malcolm Muggeridge in 1961. Bernstein had an interest in current affairs and politics, an admiration for American journalism in general and Edward R. Murrow in particular. On-the-spot journalism, virtually unknown in England, became a Granada specialty. *What the Papers Say*, the first show to subject the press to regular criticism, went on the air in 1956 and is still running.

But it was in 1963, when *World in Action* started, that Granada came into its own. This was vivid journalism, shattering the decorous British tradition. "It's still running today, still pursuing evil men," adds Woodhead, who also helped develop the docudrama, a ground-breaking form that has produced shows as diverse as *The Search for the Nile*, *The Naked Civil Servant*, and Woodhead's own *Invasion*, a devastating account of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia which, to his surprise, turned up on ABC.

Controversy, of course, went with the territory. It may not seem particularly earthshaking now, but Granada's coverage of an off-year election in the town of Rochdale in 1958 caused an immense outcry in every quarter of Britain, including Parliament.

Under the terms of the 1949 Representation of the People Act, it was illegal to televise debates between candidates or to interview them on election issues. Granada challenged that act by covering the election, and neither British elections nor British television have been the same since.

Subjects such as homosexuality, corporal punishment, Rhodesia, and the Pill were meat for early Granada documentaries, though those were issues hardly anyone even mentioned. When Granada was attacked, Sidney Bernstein never wavered.

Granada also offered light entertainment, much of it developed by Sidney's brother, Cecil. The most innovative of these shows was *Chelsea at Nine*. A sort of British *Your Show of Shows*, it replaced the familiar girls in spangled tights with Jack Benny, Maria Callas, and Ella Fitzgerald. There was classical music, too, and opera and ballet, for Bernstein had long believed in making high culture widely available. His real passion was drama.

**B**ERNSTEIN had relatively left-wing, avant-garde tastes in theater for those days, and among Granada's early productions were Arthur Laurent's *Home of the Brave* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, with a very young Scots actor called Sean Connery. From the drama department came a huge fund of talent: directors such as Michael Apted (*Coal Miner's Daughter*), writers such as playwright Hugh Leonard, Colin Welland, who went on to win an Oscar for *Chariots of Fire*, and Brian Clarke, who wrote *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* for Granada. Among the most memorable productions

were Olivier's versions of Harold Pinter's *The Collection* and *No Man's Land*, as well as *The Good Soldier*, *Hard Times*, and *Country Matters*, the last two produced by the inimitable Derek Granger.

Bernstein had tracked down Granger at *The Financial Times*, where the latter had started the highly respected Arts Page. "Why not try TV?" said Bernstein. "What do I do?" asked Granger, who recounts how he was promptly interviewed by everyone at the company. (Granada works on a sort of "gentleman's agreement" that everyone ought to get on with everyone else.) Hired as a documentary writer, Granger switched to drama, in an unorthodox career move fairly typical at Granada. He went on to become the head of drama, producing *Brideshead* and nurturing a seemingly endless supply of young directors.

"There are three kinds of directors who come out of television here," says British film producer David Puttnam. "There are directors like John Schlesinger, who have always been America-oriented; the slightly arty BBC directors, and Granada's, who are distinguished by a sureness of craft and a regard for the audience. Because it is commercial television, they're forced to address the marketplace."

And because it's forced to address the marketplace, Granada has launched some of its greatest talents on England's longest-running hit—*Coronation Street*.

"We buy our way into heaven with *Coronation Street*," said one Granada producer, noting that the money and ratings earned from the show have allowed the company to indulge its interests in drama and documentary.

Scores of famous writers and directors point with pride to their stints on the "Street". The show is seen from Finland to Thailand, and when Violet Carson, one of the original cast members, died last year, it was national news. Even the Queen is a fan. *Coronation Street* has rarely been out of the top 10 since its 1960 debut.

It sounds a little utopian, this Dudley Do-Right of TV companies. But can it last? Some critics feel that Granada has grown middle-aged and muscle-bound, that it keeps its talent too long and has too many star producers, too much philosophy. Critics at the

radical Glasgow Media Group and elsewhere argue that increased co-production with America means that, sooner or later, producers will succumb to the tastes of the international market and begin asking themselves, "Will it play in Peoria?" Mike Wooler, a former Granada employee, is head of television at Goldcrest, Britain's booming film company. He gave grounds to this argument in a recent interview, saying that if it weren't for PBS he would find it hard to sell *The Jewel in the Crown* in America. "If we can't sell in America, we can't get a return. We have to work for the international market."

Britain has already embarked on its first all-out, American-style ratings war, fired by the ABC mini-series *The Winds of War*. Shown on ITV last fall, it snatched viewers from the BBC, which quickly retaliated. "You

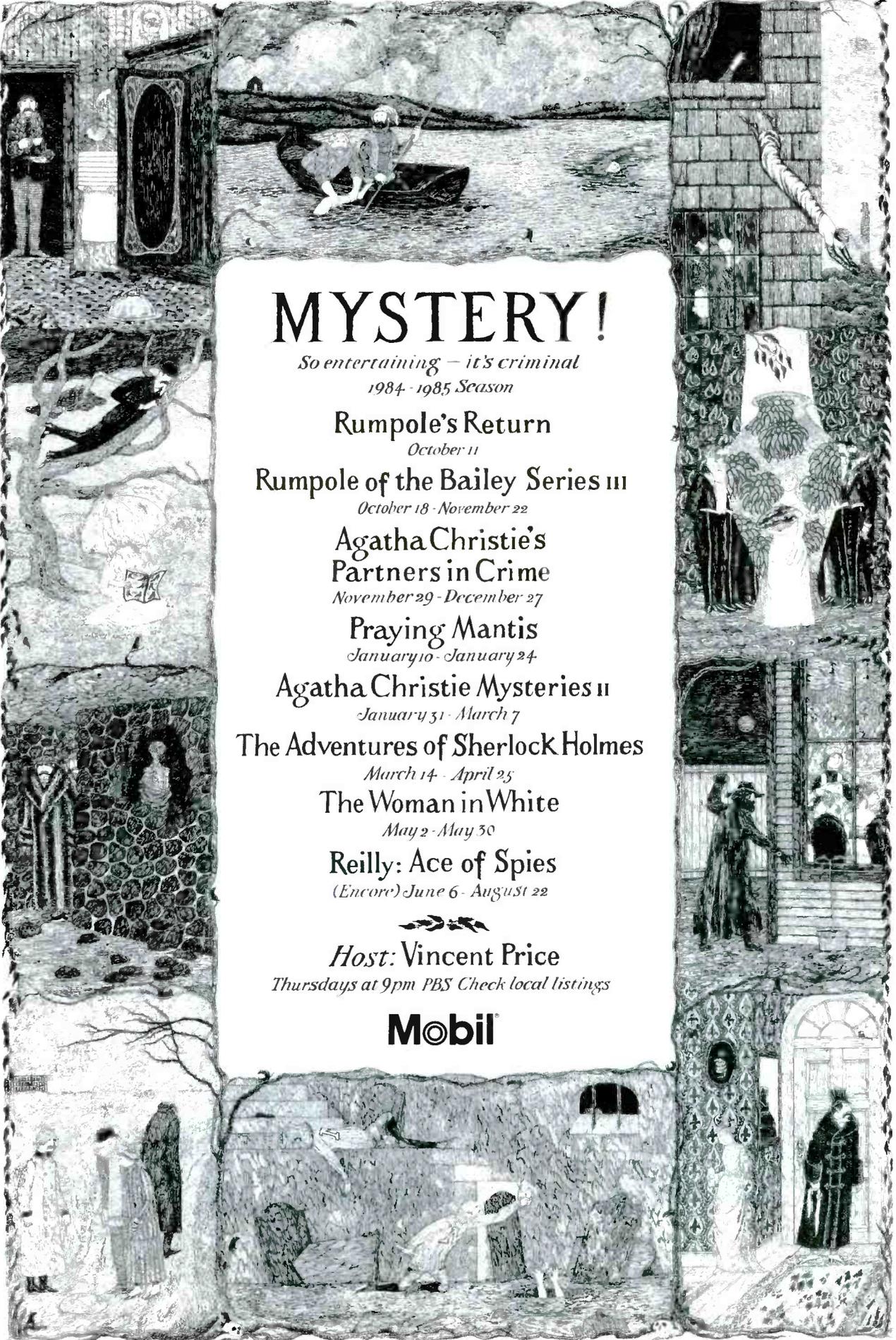


One critic said *Jewel in the Crown* tops BBC for quality.

won't believe this," said Christopher Morahan, director of *The Jewel in the Crown*, last winter. "The BBC has taken *Panorama* [its august documentary series] from the Monday slot and put *The Thorn Birds* opposite the first episode of *Jewel*."

But the real test of British TV's mettle, most agree, will come if Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher succeeds in completely deregulating television, thus precipitating a "snowstorm" of cable- and satellite-delivered programming. Many in Britain view this as a potentially calamitous choice; in a no-holds-barred atmosphere, the traditional values that have governed British electronic media may swiftly become outdated.

No company seems more likely than Granada to survive such a switch intact. With its British faith in intelligence and care, and its all-the-while flat-out appeal to millions of British viewers, Granada seems likely to go on unearthing jewels for a long time. ■



# MYSTERY!

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**Agatha Christie Mysteries II**

*January 31 - March 7*

**The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes**

*March 14 - April 25*

**The Woman in White**

*May 2 - May 30*

**Reilly: Ace of Spies**

*(Encore) June 6 - August 22*



**Host: Vincent Price**

*Thursdays at 9pm PBS Check local listings*

**Mobil**

**S**TATION manager Ray Nordstrand has just finished showing a visitor WFMT's vast music library—a room the size of a handball court packed with 30,000 classical albums and uncounted miles of original concert tapes. In the hallway, the two run into Studs Terkel, chomping on an unlit cigar and looking disheveled, as befits a legend.

"I have just delivered my inau-

gural address," says Terkel foxily. "That was the hardest part. Now I have to get myself nominated and elected." He wanders off. Nordstrand beams. Terkel has been the station's star since he was blacklisted out of network television in 1952. A best-selling author and sometime actor, Terkel has just used his daily hour-long program to engage once again in some flights of whimsy. One day he reads short

stories or invites favorite musicians to play; another he presides over lively discussions of politics or art or, really, does whatever he pleases. "Studs," says Nordstrand, "is the spirit and the soul of this radio station."

Terkel's show isn't typical of WFMT: Chicago's fine-arts station is hard to typify. But the station and Terkel share a number of qualities: They're both revered, successful, and idiosyncratic.

Nordstrand and his compatriots run the FM station as though constantly amazed that it can be done. They're running probably the best all-around radio station in the country. Consider:

- WFMT radiates a singular, complete personality based on consistent excellence, not on a homogenized musical sound. It has won more broadcasting awards than any other commercial station.

- The station's commitment to performance taping is unprecedented. At least a dozen times a week, its engineers go into the field to record concerts, interviews, and events, according to Nordstrand, a three-decade WFMT veteran. The station syndicates—to 400 stations in 23 countries—concerts by the Chicago, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, and San Francisco orchestras as well as performances of the Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Canadian Opera.

- WFMT shows respect for its listeners by limiting commercial time to an average of four minutes an hour, and maintains a high-quality sound by rejecting prerecorded spots and commercial jingles. In return, the audience seems to show a high "gratitude factor" to advertisers. Although the station ranks only about 20th in the Chicago ratings, its listeners, mostly upscale, have helped put it in the top 10 in advertising billings. The station and its monthly program guide, which has grown over time to become the ad-thick *Chicago* magazine, have gross earnings of more than \$15 million a year.

- Cable television operators in 40 states have recognized WFMT's merits, and added its audio signal to cable systems in 292 cities, making it the leading radio "superstation."

# RADIO'S SUPER SUPERSTATION

BY ERIC ZORN



The late **BERNARD JACOBS**, who with his wife, Rita, founded Chicago's FM exemplar and set its unusual policies

*Eric Zorn is a feature writer who covers radio for the Chicago Tribune.*

Such a reputation is secure both in spite of and because of WFMT's relentlessly unconventional ways. There is, for instance, no fixed length for newscasts. An announcer reportedly once skipped the news entirely, explaining that there weren't any reports of sufficient importance. The announcers never become cloying "personalities," or even serve regular daily airshifts, but are uniformly well-spoken, musically knowledgeable, and carefully chosen.

Try out their audition script: *It must by no means be assumed that the ability to pronounce "L'Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire de Paris" with fluidity and verve*



The legendary Studs Terkel, who's had a daily show on WFMT for three decades

*outweighs an ease, naturalness, and friendliness of delivery when at the omnipresent microphone. For example, when delivering a diatribe concerning Claudia Muzio, Beniamino Gigli, Hetty Plümacher, Giacinto Prandelli, Hilde Rössl-Majdan and Lina Pagliughi, five out of six is good enough if the sixth one is mispronounced plausibly.*

WFMT outperforms public radio at its own game. It draws a similarly educated (94 percent attended college), wealthy (average household income \$57,000) audience that rejects the banality of most commercial radio. But WFMT's commercial income makes possible a production budget beyond the reach of public radio stations.

The superstation was started by Bernard and Rita Jacobs in 1951, when relatively few people had FM receivers. The Jacobses, whose distinctive approach still inspires the station, started by expanding the broadcast schedule and the number of live perform-

**WFMT**  
CHICAGO'S FINE ARTS STATION

**W**FMT

shows respect for its listeners by limiting commercial time to an average of four minutes an hour, and maintains a high-quality sound by rejecting prerecorded spots and commercial jingles. In return, the audience shows a high 'gratitude factor' to advertisers. The station ranks in the top 10 in Chicago radio advertising billings.



**RAY NORDSTRAND** (r.), manager of WFMT, and **NORMAN PELLIGRINI**, program director: stewards of the station who have nurtured its original spirit

ances too quickly, and they were forced to beg for donations on the air. But canny marketing helped WFMT survive as dozens of other radio stations abandoned classical music for faster-selling commodities.

In 1968 Bernard Jacobs, in failing health, sold the station to WGN, the *Chicago Tribune's* subsidiary. Listeners were alarmed and fought to save the station's character. Two years and many petitions later, WGN backed off and donated the station to Chicago's major public television station, WTTW. Today, the for-profit WFMT subsidiary funnels more than \$1 million a year to its nonprofit parent. Advertisers are lured to WFMT's affluent audience—the so-called "Classical Advantage"—and the station takes credit within the radio industry for a small national resurgence of classical-music radio.

Six years of satellite transmission to cable systems around the country have given WFMT a national audience and prestige, but have had little financial effect, according to Nordstrand, who says the only gain in advertising has been a few commercials for Billy's Bar and Grill in Key West, Florida. "We still think of ourselves as a Chicago station serving Chicago listeners."

Several years ago, WFMT moved from comparatively modest quarters into offices and studios overlooking Lake Michigan. A soundproofed, two-story concert hall is surrounded by two studios, three control rooms, and three production rooms, each built atop rubber springs and rigged with state-of-the-art equipment. The facilities give the sta-

tion one of the cleanest sounds in broadcasting. *Popular Mechanics* called WFMT the only station in the country "that transmits a signal clean enough to justify the price of the [most expensive] tuner."

The walls of one studio are hung with strange pad-shaped and shelf-shaped things. "We've finally gotten this room right," says Evans Mirageas, the young assistant producer of *Music in America*, WFMT's weekly audio odyssey. "Some of the lower frequencies were bouncing all over the place, so we built this thing. Traps 'em right up."

Mirageas is in the middle of a project for *Music in America*. "I'm going through this ancient Greek music looking for material about the Olympics. We're going to take sort of a travelogue approach to this one." Nordstrand calls *Music in America* the most ambitious project in WFMT's history. Mirageas and veteran producer Jim Unrath crisscross the nation to preview outstanding events in the week's cultural calendar. They have intercepted and interviewed the likes of Mstislav Rostropovich in Washington, Joan Sutherland in San Diego, and Aaron Copland in Milwaukee.

While classical music dominates its schedule, WFMT also airs poetry, comedy, drama, discussion, documentaries, and folk music. It was the first U.S. station to play compact digital audio discs over the air, and also the first to air Bob Dylan and the Beatles. "The only rule we have is to keep faith with the audience," says program director Norman Pelligrini. "Other than that, really, anything goes." ■

A  
SEARCH  
FOR  
Excellence

**T**HERE IS ONLY ONE president of a nationwide television network who could make the boast, or who would even want to. Brian Lamb, head of the C-SPAN cable network, is proud to say, "On any given day, it's totally out of our hands."

As much as possible, Lamb is trying to make the nonprofit, non-commercial C-SPAN—Cable Satellite Public Affairs Net-

work—into a clear window through which the American people can watch the House of Representatives and other federal bodies do our governmental work.

More than any other network, C-SPAN makes good on cable's early promise to offer diverse channels that narrowcast for specific audience interests, and it ignores the dictates of mass-market economics. Lamb has demon-

strated that there are more ways to "do" public affairs on television than the usual format descended from newsreels and radio. Alone among networks, C-SPAN dares to be boring (although it isn't always). Yet it has a healthy and influential audience, which includes C-SPAN junkies who love to stare through the window at Congress. On the average, at any one time, a quarter-million pairs of eyes are peering in—which was reason enough to precipitate a testy little partisan fray this spring. Thanks to C-SPAN, the House will never be the same.

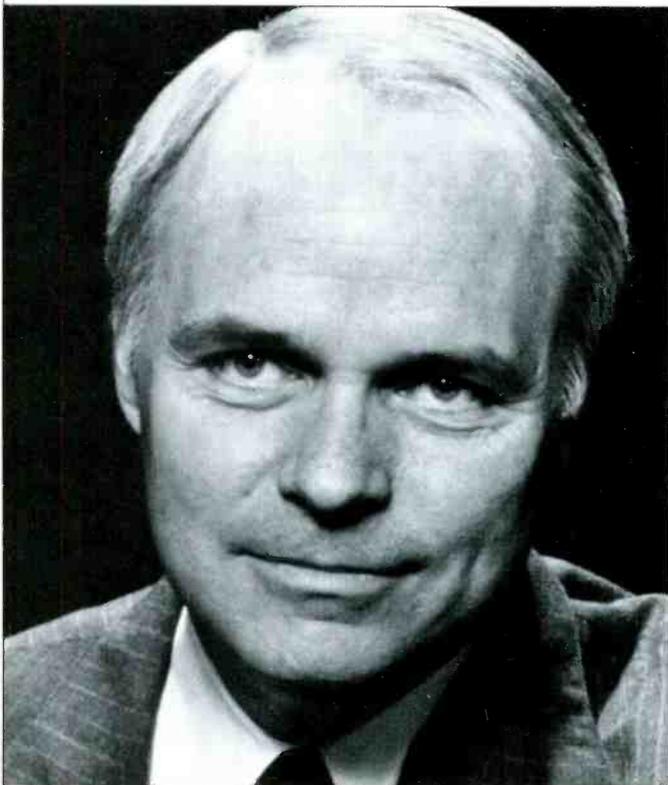
Whenever the House is in session, the unflinching camera is there, pointed at one podium or another. Neatly coiffed Representatives queue up daily for their moments on C-SPAN. Reveling in media exposure unbound by the usual time constraints and advertising rates of television, Congresspeople play to the folks watching on 1,500 cable systems.

The House floor show started last year, when Democratic deputy whip Bill Alexander (Ark.) began taking a nightly hour—which he split evenly with Republicans—to debate such issues as U.S. involvement in Central America. Then, early this year, a group of young, self-described "guerrilla" Republicans led by Newt Gingrich (Ga.) and Robert S. Walker (Pa.) began taking advantage of the House's traditional "special orders" period at the end of the day. They speechify on issues they think have been swept under the rug by the Democratic majority, such as school prayer, abortion, and the death penalty.

Democrats called the tactic "grandstanding," and in May took the offensive. House Speaker Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill (Mass.) quietly amended the House camera operators' instructions. Previously, the camera had always stayed fixed on the podium, lest it catch a smirking or snoring legislator in his seat. But while Walker was speaking May 10, the camera began to pan around the chamber, revealing to C-SPAN viewers a virtually empty house. "It was a sham, what they were doing, and

# CABLE'S OWN PUBLIC TELEVISION NETWORK

BY BROOKE GLADSTONE



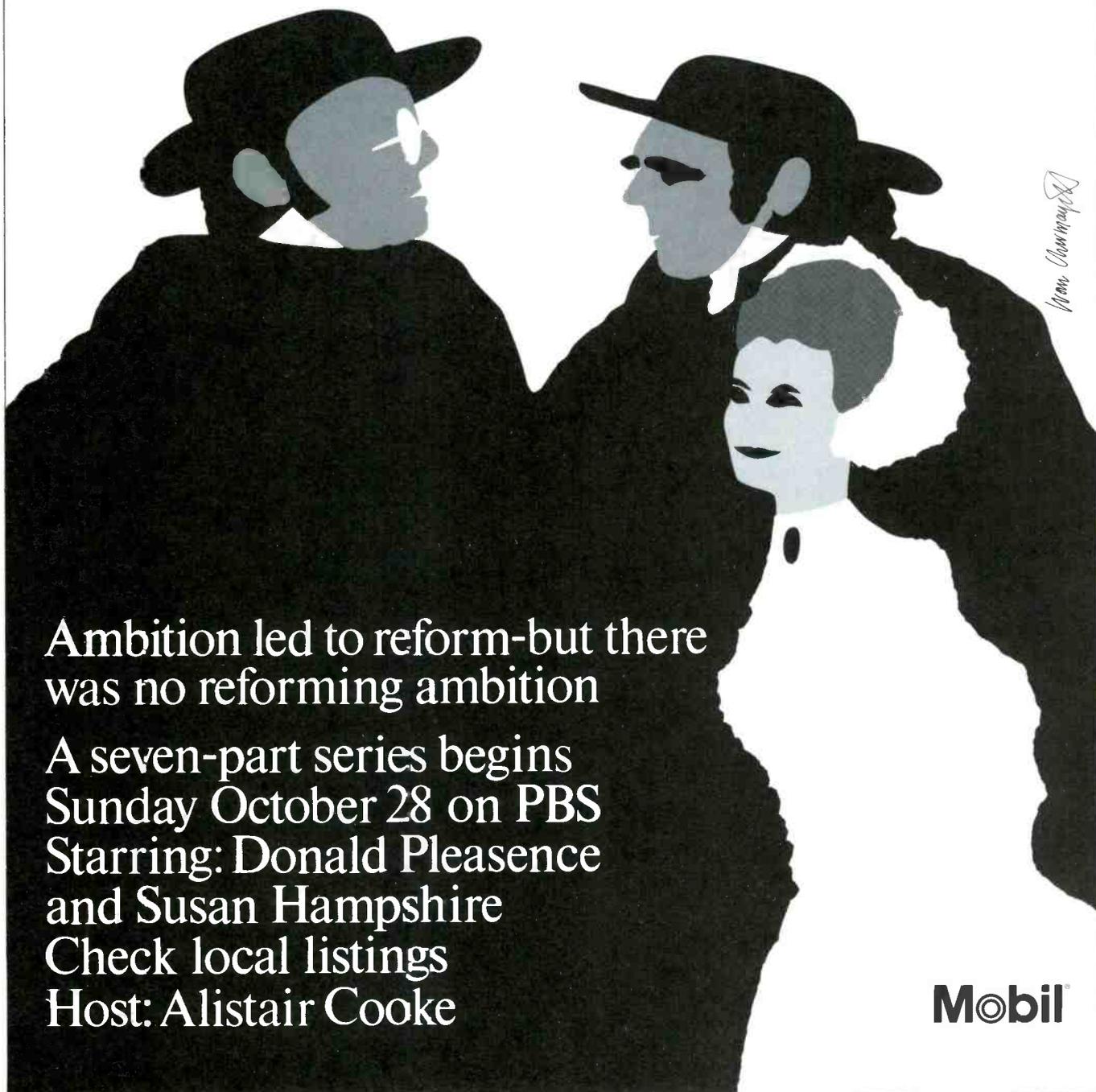
**BRIAN LAMB** founded the noncommercial channel now carried by 1,500 cable systems.

*Brooke Gladstone has covered cable television and public broadcasting from Washington, D.C., and is now associate editor of The Washington Weekly.*

Mobil Masterpiece Theatre presents

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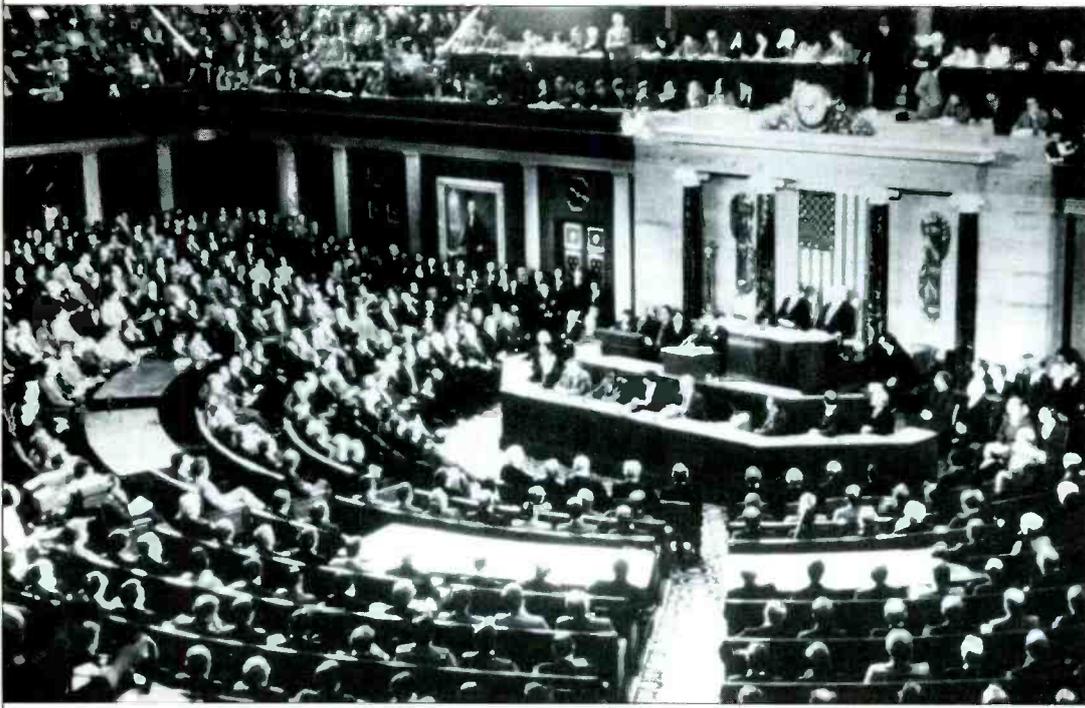
Ambition led to reform-but there  
was no reforming ambition

A seven-part series begins  
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Check local listings  
Host: Alistair Cooke

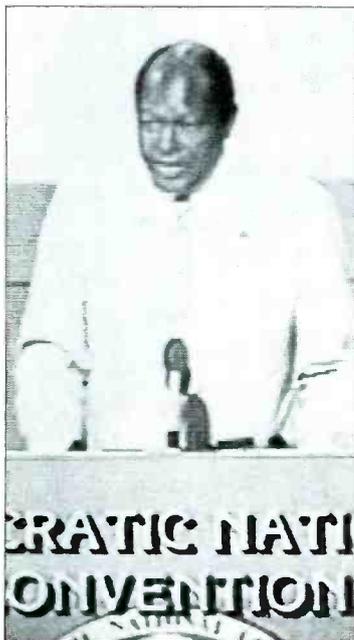
**Mobil**

Available in paperback from Signet Classic

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When C-SPAN started up in March 1979, it carried only the House of Representatives floor action. Now the House coverage makes up only one-tenth of its 24-hour schedule.



Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley's speech at the Democratic National Convention was one of the events C-SPAN viewers saw that network viewers did not.

we just can't stand for that," O'Neill told a reporter.

The C-SPAN audience is an attractive one for speechmakers. In size, it's substantial; some 18 million households receive the network, and a quarter of them tune in with some regularity. Moreover, its composition is bound to set congressional hearts aflutter. Regular C-SPAN viewers are relatively affluent and well educated, according to both a national survey by Arbitron and a local survey in the Philadelphia area. Viewers are more likely than non-viewers to write their legislators, to volunteer for and give money to campaigns, and to vote. They are somewhat independent-minded as well, according to the Philadelphia survey. With equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans, and with almost one-quarter independent, the viewing electorate are less likely than non-viewers to vote along party lines.

Congressmen like to think they're swaying some of those swing voters. "A fellow wrote me that he was a liberal Democrat before watching C-SPAN," says the conservative Bob Walker. "Now he's a conservative Republican. The pulsebeat from my mail seems to indicate that's going on a lot." Yet speaker O'Neill said in a C-SPAN interview that the cablecasting of the House proceedings was a factor in Democratic victories in the last election. According to his mail, even Republican viewers were concluding that

GOP legislators are "really mean, that they're unfair, and that they do support the rich."

Those varying assessments would please Brian Lamb, founder and president of C-SPAN. People are seeing the raw event and making up their own minds. They have "a chance to play journalist," says Lamb, who would have liked to call C-SPAN "the People's Network," except for the political connotations of the phrase. The network has no aggressive or jaded journalists interpreting events. C-SPAN's on-air people are functionaries under strict orders to blend into the woodwork. The network's editorial responsibility extends only to selection of the hearings it covers and the guests for its call-in shows. Lamb polices the coverage for bias, and rarely detects any. Viewers are urged to comment if they detect a drift, and when they do, C-SPAN often adjusts. "Our respect for the audience has never wavered," says Lamb.

In contrast, the kind of political coverage we see on the broadcast networks has infected the public with a low esteem for Congress and Washington in general, according to some politicians and political scientists. Television's typical brief reports from Capitol Hill show a confused, conflict-ridden response to nearly intractable national problems. And often, newscasts zoom in on one scandal. Lamb abhors network domination of television news.

From a front-row seat, he witnessed its impact on two of the most embattled Presidents in recent history: Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.

In 1966, after several years at a Lafayette, Indiana radio and TV station and a couple of years in the Navy, Lamb joined the Johnson White House as a military aide. Hovering near LBJ's shoulder several hours a day was for him "a mind-boggling experience." Late in the Johnson years, Lamb returned to Indiana to head the station in Lafayette. Then, in 1968, he took an irresistible assignment with the Nixon-Agnew campaign: taping a tape recorder across the Midwest, organizing town meetings, stopping people in supermarkets, and otherwise getting them to "Speak to Nixon-Agnew."

"It was a phony show," he says, "but I really thought it was for real. It was a question of trust. At the briefing I asked them—is this for real? They told me an aide boiled down the tapes and shipped the excerpts to the campaign plane. It was all hooey, a gimmick to attract the attention of the evening news and plant firmly in the minds of the public that Nixon-Agnew wanted to listen to the people." He sighs. "Well, the rest is history." (This fall, however, C-SPAN is producing a real voice-of-the-people show, *Grass Roots '84*, going on location in 15 cities before Election Day.)

LAMB went on to other stints—with UPI Audio, as a congressional press secretary, and then to President Nixon's Office of Telecommunications Policy, which had its own complaints about biased political reporting. (He now concedes there were partisan motivations behind OTP director Clay Whitehead's attempt to cut funding for PBS public-affairs programming.) He eventually became Washington bureau chief of *Cablevision*, an industry magazine. From that vantage point, he proposed the idea of C-SPAN to a number of cable industry executives, who formed a nonprofit corporation. Five-and-a-half years ago, Lamb left his *Cablevision* job and took charge of the new network.

The service was begun as an expression of good will on the part of the cable industry, Lamb says. And cable systems still pay the \$6 million budget of the com-

mercial-free service, subscribing at the rate of three cents or less per subscriber per month. (In comparison, cable operators pay 15 to 44 cents per subscriber to carry Cable News Network.) Starting with gavel-to-gavel House proceedings, the network has gradually added coverage of House and Senate hearings, National Press Club speeches, national call-in shows (President Reagan has called twice), on-location programs showing "days in the life" of various congress-people and media organizations, and gavel-to-gavel convention coverage this summer. Last year, C-SPAN expanded to a 24-hour schedule, transmitting one-quarter of it live. More than 200 hours of live hearings and 1,000 hours of taped hearings were transmitted. Now the House floor coverage makes up only 10 percent of C-SPAN's schedule.

As nonpartisan and passive as C-SPAN is, the network's potential political clout has caused concern on Capitol Hill. The Senate has continually refused to allow television cameras in its chamber, and the House still puts its own employees in control of the cameras, under strict guidelines, rather than C-SPAN employees. "The power to give reaction shots on the floor is the power to editorialize, and that's the reason we operate our own cameras," says Rep. Charlie Rose (D.-N.C.), who is so wary of C-SPAN's influence that he has banned the network from Capitol Hill's own cable-television system. "The power to pick what committee hearings members of Congress watch is the power to set your own legislative agenda," says Rose. "I don't want members subjected to any legislative agenda but their own."

The House only let in the television cameras after 30 years of debate, and it is now experiencing nearly every good and bad effect predicted during those many years. C-SPAN gives House members direct access to the public. It provides an alternative to the rush and hype of network news, and helps counterbalance television's disproportionately heavy coverage of the President's doings. It has educated viewers in the political process, and possibly bolstered the sagging image of Congress. But C-SPAN has also greatly increased the volume of hot air generated in an already long-winded body. It has encour-

O n

C-SPAN, viewers see the raw event, and have a chance to 'play journalist,' says founder Brian Lamb. The network has no aggressive or jaded journalists interpreting events. Its on-air people are under strict orders to blend into the woodwork. Lamb polices the coverage for bias, and viewers are urged to comment if they detect a drift.

aged grandstanding on all fronts. It has made politically unpopular decisions tougher to make, and given further advantage to the charismatic politician over the unphotogenic.

For the guerrilla Republicans, or any minority, C-SPAN presents a chance to turn up the heat under their issues. Rep. Walker knows that harsh words build ratings. Lamb told him that the audience appears to swell when things get hot on the House floor. Audience growth due to floor fights "figures into the strategy" of the guerrillas, according to Walker. "If we can make the issue into a contentious one, then we will have a larger audience. C-SPAN is a new tool in the congressional arsenal. Any member

the complexities of some law-making issues cannot be clearly laid out, even in a whole evening of floor debate. So the work is delegated to subcommittees, where representatives' time is used more productively. (Walker contends, however, that the real reason Democrats resent being called to the floor is that it interrupts their basketball games in the House gymnasium.)

Most certainly, C-SPAN is affecting the scheduling of major floor debates. Democratic deputy whip Alexander has proposed scheduling important debates at 9 P.M. "Why do you think the President addresses the joint session of Congress at 9 o'clock? So people can see it." Other Democrats are uneasy about the guerrilla Repub-



Speaker Tip O'Neill changed the rules for televising the House when Republican "guerrillas" began orating directly to the C-SPAN audience.

of Congress who hasn't noticed it hasn't been awake."

C-SPAN may not only increase the amount of invective heard on the House floor, it may also increase the substantive business transacted there. Walker hopes so. For years, floor action has been a pro forma exercise; most of the legislative work has been done in the 139 subcommittees, all under Democratic control. No wonder Walker is glad to predict that "C-SPAN is going to force Congress back to the floor."

But that was one reason television was kept out of Congress for so many years. Any congressional assistant will confirm that

Republicans' grandstanding. They have proposed cutting off "special orders" time. And Rep. Tony Coelho (Cal.), head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, wants a law forbidding the use of House floor footage in political advertisements.

Despite the controversies, C-SPAN has become an integral fixture on Capitol Hill. "Television is here to stay permanently now," Speaker O'Neill told Lamb during an interview last March on the network's fifth anniversary. If the plug were pulled on C-SPAN, he said, "we'd have to find another organization, or go into the business and do it ourselves." ■

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EULOGIES for Los Angeles's home-grown pay-television service, the nonsensically named Z Channel, were being prepared early in 1982. After eight years of operating without competition, Z was going up against the big boys. Its parent company, Group W Cable, had decided to beef up its offerings, to provide subscribers not only with the Z Channel but Home Box Office, Showtime,

and The Movie Channel as well. Most industry observers—even the people who worked at the Z Channel—felt then that it was only a matter of time before the local service withered away. Who would want to lay out up to \$13.95 each month for its odd assortment of current and classic films when many of the same mainstream movies, plus a growing number of first-run programs, were available on the heavily pro-

moted competition?

Two years later, the eulogies have yet to be delivered. Not only has Z survived, it has prospered.

Precise figures are difficult to come by, but cable industry analyst Paul Kagan estimates that Z has about 72,000 subscribers on the Group W system (more than double the figure for HBO) and at least 20,000 on the 16 other Southern California cable systems that carry it. Moreover, the Z Channel is said by Group W to have the lowest rate of subscriber turnover, or "churn" (roughly 2.5 percent per month) of any pay service it offers. At Valley Cable, one of Z's affiliates, the channel's churn rate is so low that it appears the only people who disconnect it are the ones moving from the area.

"It is obviously the single best local pay-television operation in the world," proclaims Mel Harris, president of the video division at Paramount Pictures. "No one knows its community and provides programming for it as well as the Z Channel."

Indeed, in the movie-making mecca, the Z Channel qualifies as a cultural shrine. It is a film buff's treasure trove, as eclectic as the industry it showcases. The programming on Z ranges from art films to exploitation movies, from the best of foreign cinema to the worst of Hollywood schlock, from star-studded blockbusters to no-name pictures that were shelved almost as quickly as they were made.

At a time when the national pay channels are increasingly adopting the commercial networks' philosophy of programming—please as many of the people as much of the time as possible—the Z Channel is sticking to the notion that pay television ought to offer alternatives to broadcast TV.

The Z Channel is also a rarity for another reason: It is a channel programmed neither by committee nor by research but rather by a true movie lover, a man who seems less interested in making money than in exposing people to the widest variety of films.

"I think the programmers in pay are keeping the audience from a lot of things," says Jerry Harvey, the soft-spoken, 34-year-old film addict who is Z's pro-

# THE PAY CHANNEL THAT NO ONE DISCONNECTS

BY LEE MARGULIES



**JERRY HARVEY**, who programs Z Channel for movie lovers like himself

*Lee Margulies writes about television for The Los Angeles Times.*



Z's foreign films, like *Serie Noire*, usually are subtitled.

gramming director and guiding creative force. "Our idea is to invite people to stretch." There is a policy at Z against showing porn films, but other than that, Harvey says, he simply follows his instincts in programming the channel. "This is just the way I'd like to see it if I were a consumer," he explains. A screenwriter with one production credit (*China 9, Liberty 37*), Harvey hooked on in 1978 with the programming department at SelecTV, one of Los Angeles's two over-the-air subscription TV services, then moved over to Z in 1981.

The achievement of which Harvey is proudest is his having persuaded MGM/UA to let Z screen the full-length version of Michael Cimino's critically panned *Heaven's Gate* in December 1982—more than a year after it had been pulled from theaters and written off as the biggest money loser in motion picture history. Harvey felt his subscribers would relish the opportunity to judge for themselves, and he was right: The response was favorable enough to encourage MGM/UA to license the film to other pay-TV outlets. Harvey was elated: it was concrete proof, he feels, that Z "could alter the perception of the viewers; they were willing to listen to us, and give the film a chance. I don't think all of America thinks *Heaven's Gate* is a total failure anymore."

Z Channel's June 1984 lineup gives a good idea of the balance Harvey seeks. The main attraction was one of the channel's occasional special events, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, a 15½-hour series made for German television in 1979. (Like most foreign films on Z, it was shown in the original language, with subtitles.) The rest of the programming ranged from commercial Hollywood films such as *National Lampoon's Vacation*, *Doctor Detroit*, and *Psycho II*, to the French *La Nuit de Varennes*, the Dutch *Mysteries*, and the Italian *Nest of Vipers*, to a "festival" of four Woody Allen movies and a retrospective called



In the movie-making mecca, Z Channel qualifies as a cultural shrine, a film buff's treasure trove. Its schedule ranges from art films to exploitation movies. 'I think the programmers in pay are keeping the audience from a lot of things,' says Z Channel's impresario. 'Our idea is to invite people to stretch.'

*Musicals: Now and Then*, which included *On the Town*, *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *Brigadoon*, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, and *The Decline of Western Civilization*. There was even an installment of what Z calls its *Best of the Worst* series: *Son of Godzilla*.

"Really terrible films can be entertaining," Harvey offers in explanation of this last feature. Besides, he adds, "if all you wanted to put on your service were good films, you wouldn't have much to put on."

Z schedules its movies by the week rather than by the month. Each Friday brings a new slate of 13 to 16 films, which are rotated through the 24-hour-a-day lineup and then, in most cases, retired. Those due for a return engagement are shelved a minimum of six months.

It is this diverse, constantly changing mixture of product that Harvey believes is the key to the Z Channel's success. That is why he professes only minimal concern about Home Box Office tying up exclusive pay-TV rights to a growing number of Hollywood films. "A lot of people aren't going to mind missing the occasional *Tootsie*," he maintains. "We live in the age of video cassettes, so they can go rent it—or they'll have seen it in a theater. The reason we do as well as we do is because we have things they haven't seen in theaters and that aren't available on cassette."

Despite rumors to the contrary over the years, says Norm Nelson, the Group W regional vice president who oversees the Z Channel, there are no plans to expand the service beyond Southern California. "I don't think the appeal would be the same nationwide," he contends. "The marketing effort wouldn't be worth it."

That is also the feeling among cable and movie industry executives, who point to several special reasons for Z's success. Foremost is its location in the Los Angeles area, which provides it with a sophisticated, film-oriented audience. Perhaps as many as 20 percent of the Z Channel's subscribers work in show business.

Compared to HBO and other national movie services, the Z Channel also has a strategic advantage in booking classic films. While the national services have to arrange broadcast-rights clear-

ance in every part of the country, the Z Channel need only clear the rights in the Los Angeles area.

Also important is the special program guide that Group W publishes for its subscribers, *Z Magazine*, a 38-page monthly that not only runs down the day-by-day Z Channel schedule but also provides plot summaries, background information, extensive credits, and critical evaluations of each film.

"The problem for HBO and Showtime," says Greg Nathanson, head of programming for



Z gave its viewers a chance to see Hollywood's biggest loser ever, *Heaven's Gate*.

Golden Crest Television in Los Angeles, "is that their programs get just one line in a multichannel guide, and if it doesn't excite the viewers, they won't watch. Because Jerry controls his guide, he is able to make unknown films or classics sound interesting."

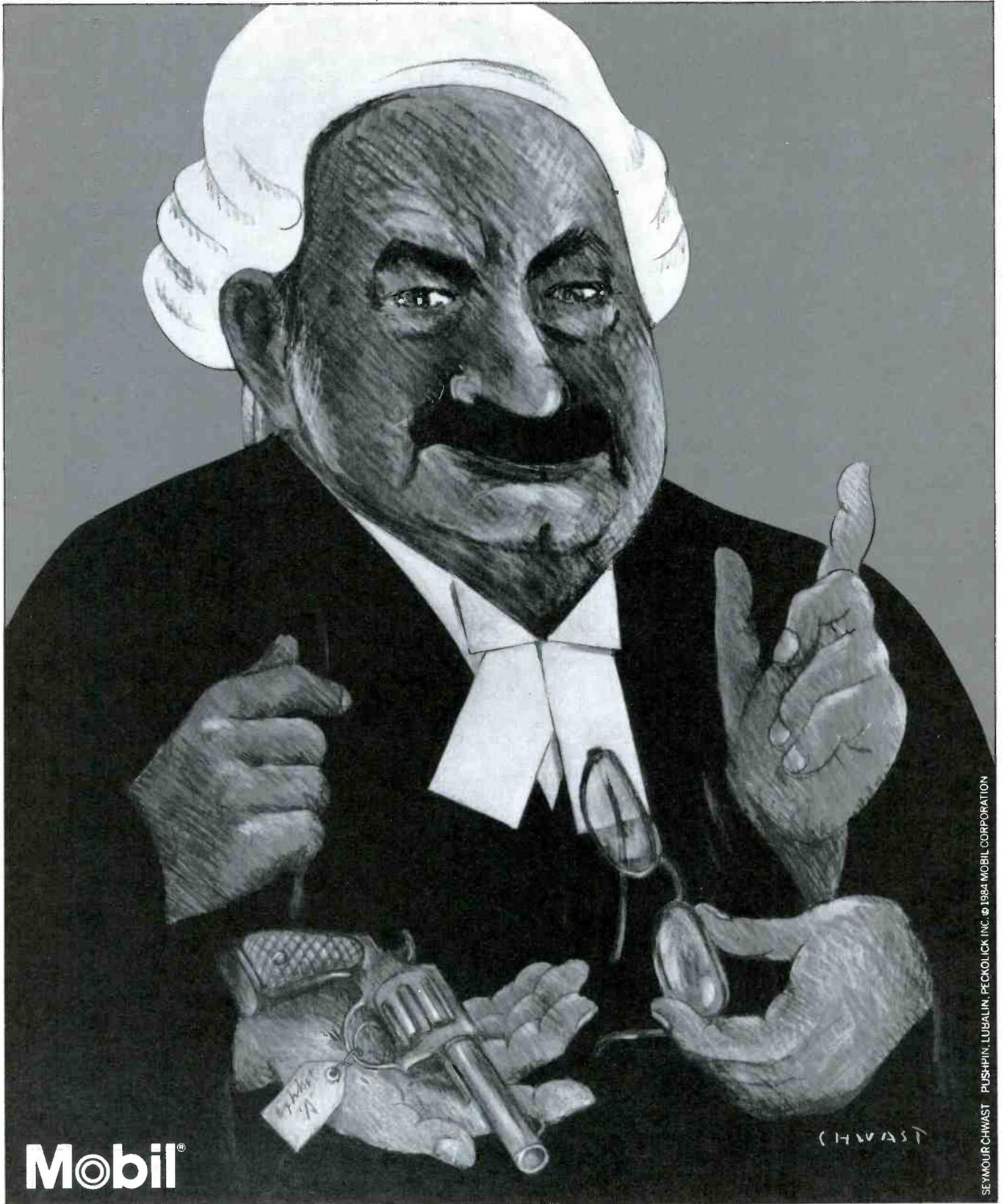
Harvey agrees. "If we didn't have room to explain why we're running some of these films, we'd be in trouble," he says.

Ultimately, though, the Z Channel's biggest advantage is Harvey's own serious attitude toward film. The sheer range of Z Channel films reflects enormous respect for the varying tastes and interests of the audience. So does the fact that the program guide, *Z Magazine*, doesn't try to hype every movie that comes along. As his rivals grow ever more leery of taking chances for fear of losing subscribers, Harvey, with his flair for the off-beat, keeps his subscribers from canceling: He keeps them wondering what they're going to miss. ■

MYSTERY! PRESENTS THE THIRD SEASON OF

# RUMPOLE OF THE BAILEY

CRIME PAID, BUT ONLY A LITTLE AT A TIME



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HOST: VINCENT PRICE

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**M**ENTION Minnesota to most people and they think of the 3Ms: mosquitoes, Mondale, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. But mention the state to people in the broadcasting industry, and they're likely to think of a different set of letters: WCCO. For more years than competitors would like to admit, the call letters have stood for the dominant television and radio sta-

tions in Minneapolis/St. Paul, the nation's 15th largest media market.

What's more, in many circles the two stations are ranked among the finest and most public-spirited local broadcast outlets in the country. The reputation proves to have some flaws upon close examination, but for the most part it holds up.

WCCO—the call letters refer to the Washburn Crosby Corp.,

an early grain-milling firm that begat General Mills—seems to have dominated Minnesota communications since Marconi's time. The AM station is celebrating its 60th anniversary. For years, into the 1970s, the stations were owned by the Cowles, Ritter, and other families prominent in Twin Cities newspapering. Now owned by the privately held Midwest Communications, the two WCCOs remain bound to their public-service tradition.

WCCO-TV, a CBS affiliate, is renowned for the long line of talented journalists it has contributed to the network, among them Phil Jones, Susan Spencer, Bob McNamara, and Susan Peterson. ABC correspondent Bill Stewart, killed in Nicaragua in 1979, was also a WCCO alumnus. On the business side, Thomas H. Dawson went from WCCO to CBS and rose to become president of the television network in the late 1960s.

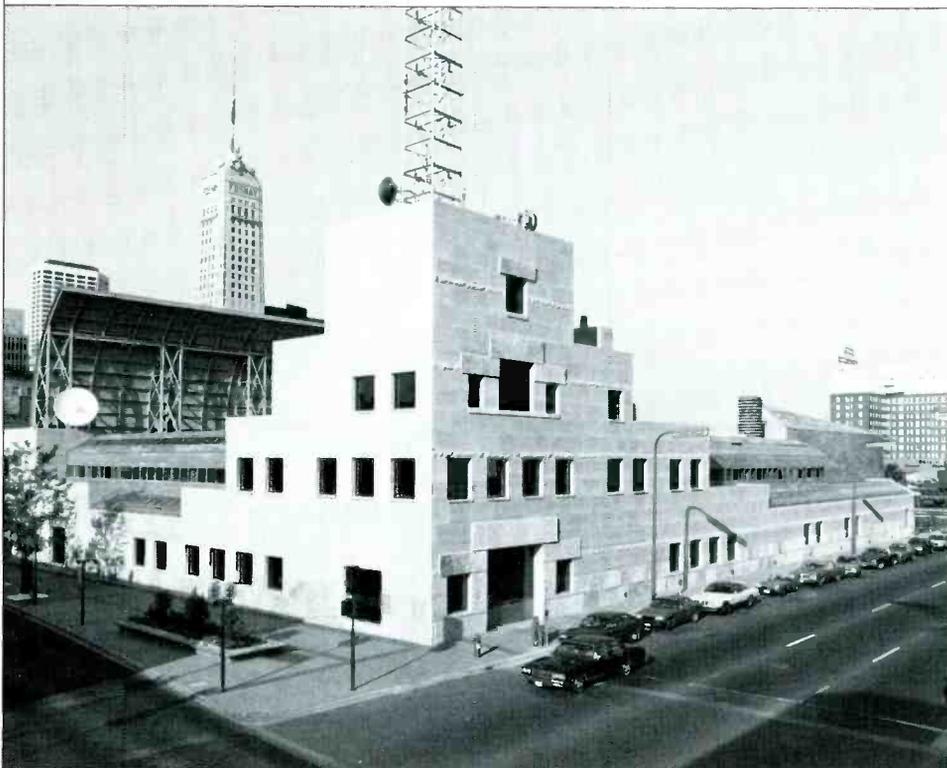
The television station has been recognized for the quality of its local news coverage. Among its awards are an Emmy and a Peabody for work by the respected investigative reporting unit billed as the I-Team. The Emmy last year was for an I-Team series on the sexual abuse of children, which charged that a Minneapolis judge had purchased sex from teenage boys—a charge that led to recommendations for the judge's removal from office. This year, WCCO won a Peabody for an I-Team series revealing flaws in an ambulance-dispatching system that had resulted in needless deaths.

The sister station, WCCO-AM, also won a Peabody this year—the first time in 30 years that both halves of a TV-radio combination have won Peabodies. The radio station's winning series reported on the ordeal of a woman in need of a heart transplant, who died while waiting for a donor. Through the years, the AM station has won five Peabodies, and the television station has won three, which makes it the winningest commercial TV-radio combination in the United States and Canada.

The two stations have succeeded largely because they have become so interwoven in the fabric of Minnesota's daily life.

# THE LOCAL BROADCASTER THE PEOPLE RELY ON

BY NICK COLEMAN



WCCO'S DISTINCTIVE NEW \$18 million quarters in downtown Minneapolis

*Nick Coleman is media critic for the Minneapolis Star and Tribune.*

WCCO-AM's lead in the radio ratings grows greater still in winter because Minnesotans take their weather seriously. November through April, most folks tune to the AM station to find out how bad the snow is, and whether they'll have to go to work. The 50,000-watt clear-channel station frequently devotes two hours or more on the morning after a blizzard to school-closing announcements from all over the state. WCCO also reliably reports on tornadoes in spring, Minnesota Twins baseball in summer, and Minnesota Vikings football in the fall. (Music is such a minor part of the station's schedule that songs often aren't even finished.) For many Minnesotans, WCCO-AM is the local bulletin board, a relic of small-town America that has persisted into the electronic age.

While the AM station two decades ago boasted as much as 68 percent of the Twin Cities listening audience, its share has only recently, and only slightly, dropped below a very respectable 20 percent of the audience. With 19.1 percent of the audience this spring, WCCO-AM was still the second-highest-rated station in the top 25 markets (following



**TOM DOAR**, chairman of WCCO's parent, Midwest Communications

KMOX-AM, the CBS-owned station in St. Louis). Its morning team of Charlie Boone and Roger Erickson remains far ahead of the competition; the duo presides over the second-highest-rated morning show in the nation. Afternoon announcer Steve Cannon still enjoys the country's highest ratings. Although a competing FM station, KSTP, is now drawing a larger share of young adult listeners, WCCO is still an AM survivor, defying the national trend toward FM dominance.

WCCO-TV faces much fiercer



The two stations succeeded largely because they are interwoven in the fabric of Minnesota's daily life. In winter, most people turn to WCCO-AM to hear how bad the snow is. For many, it is the local bulletin board, a relic of small-town America that persists in the electronic age.



WCCO-TV's award-winning investigative unit, the I-Team, includes reporters Al Austin, Larry Schmidt, and Don Shelby.

competition than its AM sister. But that competition, kept at a high level by WCCO's community-service standards, contributes in large measure to the unusually good quality of television news in the Twin Cities. The television station has been in a seesaw battle for years with KSTP-TV, an ABC affiliate and flagship station of Hubbard Broadcasting. (WCCO and KSTP tied in the May Arbitron survey, each winning 34 percent of the viewing audience. The Nielsen survey placed WCCO at 31 percent, giving KSTP a lead of 3 points.)

When the U.S. Marine headquarters in Beirut was destroyed by a terrorist bomb last October, only a handful of local television stations sent crews to Lebanon, and three of those were from the Twin Cities. It's worth noting that WTCN, the NBC affiliate, was first on the scene in Lebanon, and that KSTP's nightly reports from Beirut proved stronger than WCCO's; but WCCO followed its reports with a typically thorough special report anchored by veteran newsmen Dave Moore, a veritable institution in Twin Cities television. WCCO's commitment to news showed again in July when it sent 21 people—apparently the largest contingent from any out-of-town TV station—to the Democratic National convention in San Francisco. KSTP carried glitzier coverage, broadcasting live (via portable satellite antenna) from San Francisco's Telegraph Hill. And WTCN did a creditable job. But WCCO again went the extra mile,

producing a nightly 15-minute wrap-up that gave greater depth to its coverage.

Covering the summer's two conventions cost the station an estimated \$150,000, but news expenditures like that aren't unusual for WCCO. The station maintains a full-time bureau in Washington, D.C., at a cost of some \$500,000 a year. On many nights, the bureau's reports are little but warmed-over versions of the network news, but having the bureau also gives the station a jump on breaking national stories, allowing it to milk the Minnesota angle for all it's worth.

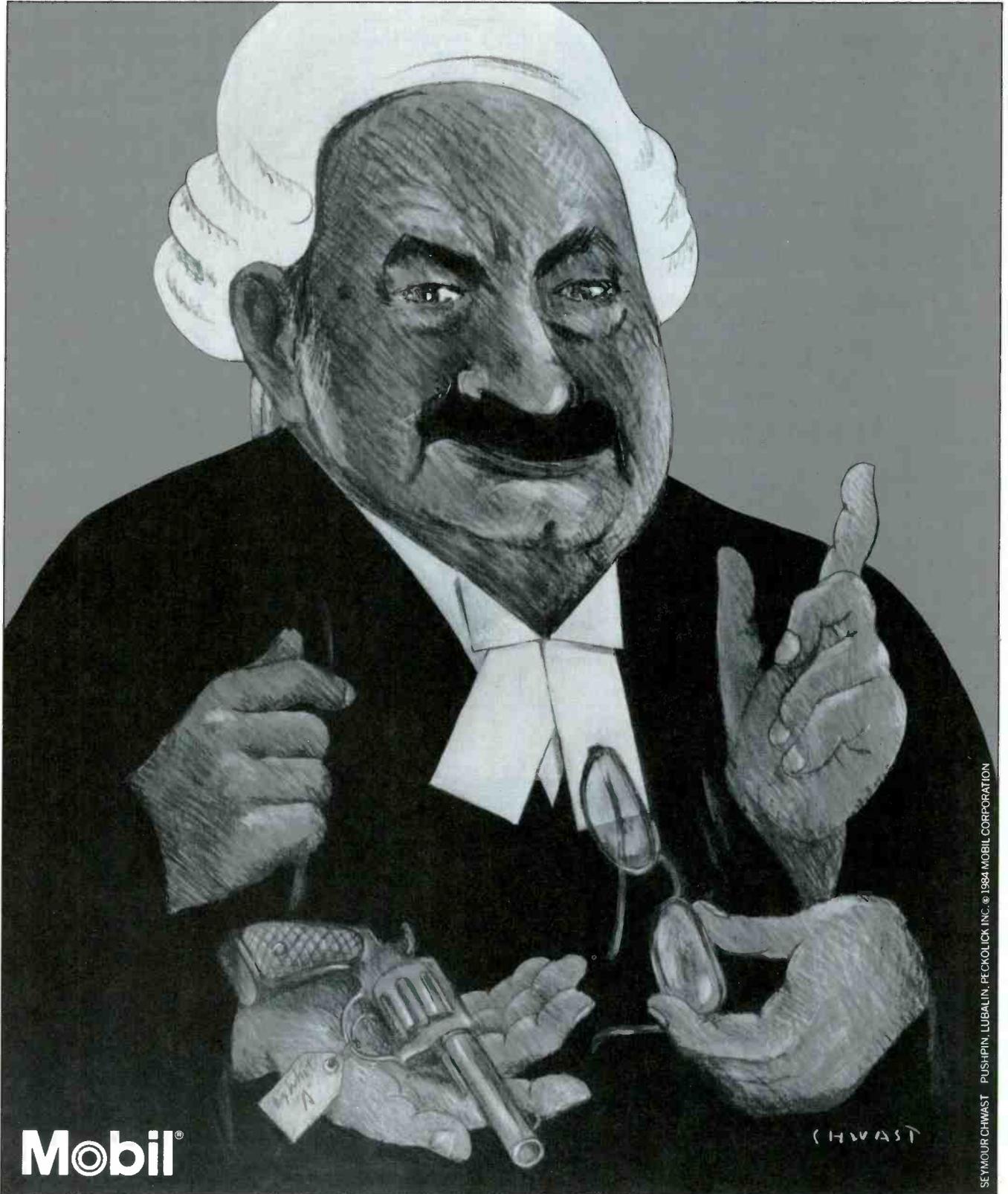
WCCO-TV displays an unusual willingness to open its decisions to public discussion, and to acknowledge its impact on the community. Last spring, for example, the station aired a live debate on its investigative journalism techniques. One I-Team report that came under fire was a series that spent several nights proving the unremarkable fact that bicycles tend to be stolen if left unattended in public places. Another employed a questionable hidden-camera technique to reveal that judges sometimes play golf and tennis when they might be at their desks clearing away the backlog of cases.

But the I-Team has never stooped to report the skin-and-sin-type stories favored by many stations to bolster their ratings. WCCO continues to enjoy a national reputation as one of a handful of local stations that set the standard for television journalism. ■

MYSTERY! PRESENTS

# RUMPOLE'S RETURN

ON THE LAM—FROM "SHE WHO MUST BE OBEYED"



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## THE BEST PRIME-TIME FICTIONAL SERIES:

1. *Hill Street Blues* (NBC)
2. *Cheers* (NBC)
3. *St. Elsewhere* (NBC)
4. *Cagney & Lacey* (CBS)
5. *Kate & Allie* (CBS)

"*Hill Street* had a few weak moments—the forced-looking break-up of Frank and Joyce—but it's still TV's most compelling regular viewing," says Bill Carter. "I like *Hill Street*," says Kay Gardella. "Technically, it's very well put together, but it has become too repetitive and far too violent."

"With all the lightweight fare on TV, CBS needed *Cagney & Lacey* as much as *Cagney & Lacey* needed CBS," observes Rick DuBrow. "It follows in the tradition of CBS's solid, social-oriented drama series of the past, such as *The Defenders* and *Lou Grant*."

The canceled situation comedy *Buffalo Bill* was a strong runner-up. Lee Margulies called it "the most original, most unpredictable series to come along in years." There were also scattered votes for



*Newhart*. "Bob Newhart is still one of the best, but also one of our most underrated comedians," says Don Freeman.

Several panelists were alone in their enthusiasm. "*Night Court* qualifies solely on the basis of its potential," says Bill Hayden. "The episodes aired so far show a steady evolution in the direction of *Barney Miller* or *Cheers*."

At least one panelist had barely enough enthusiasm to go around: "I'm not particularly enamored of any of them, in all particulars," says Bob Knight, "but I can sit through first-run episodes without squirming in my seat."

## THE BEST CULTURAL AND ENTERTAINMENT SPECIALS:

1. *The Kennedy Center Honors* (CBS)
2. *Live from Lincoln Center* (PBS)
3. *The American Film Institute Salute to Lillian Gish* (CBS)
4. *Great Performances* (PBS)
5. *Live from the Met* (PBS)

"Twenty years ago, I would have had much, much less trouble coming up with candidates for this category," says Tom Shales.

"*He Makes Me Feel Like Dancin'*" may have been the most joyful program of the year," says Lee Margulies. "NBC's three *Live . . . and in Person* specials provided excellent entertainment."



# A CRITICS' CIRCLE PICKS THE YEAR'S Best

A SEARCH FOR Excellence

EACH year the three broadcast television networks together send out some 20,000 hours of programming toward the unseen maw of the audience; cable networks transmit additional thousands. Given the demands for quantity and popularity, and the cynical acceptance of mediocrity by so many people on both the sending and receiving ends

## THE BEST NATIONAL NEWSCASTS:

1. *Nightline* with Ted Koppel (ABC)
2. *Evening News* with Dan Rather (CBS)
3. *Nightly News* with Tom Brokaw (NBC)
4. *The MacNeill/Lehrer NewsHour* (PBS)
5. *World News Tonight* with Peter Jennings (ABC)



"*Nightline* is the best news show of any kind on TV," says Bill Carter. "and Koppel is the best interviewer." But David Marc contends that *Nightline* has "degenerated into unwatchability," and laments the passing of *NBC News*

*Overnight*, "the best TV news show I'd ever seen."

Lengthening *MacNeill/Lehrer* to an hour has made it "twice as good," says Don Freeman.

Jim Bawden objects that the American news shows remain

"narrowly parochial." He says. "World news is almost nonexistent at times, and focuses on quaint customs." But Bill Hayden observes that the major newscasts "cram a lot of information into the time available."

## THE BEST TALK SHOWS:

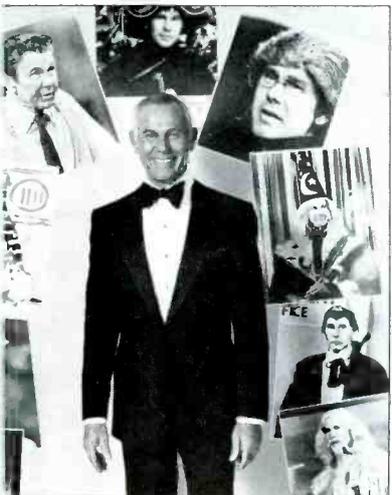
1. *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* (NBC)
2. *Late Night with David Letterman* (NBC)
3. *Phil Donahue* (syndicated)
4. *The Tonight Show with Joan Rivers* (NBC)
5. *Woman to Woman* (syndicated) tied with *This Week with David Brinkley* (ABC)

of television, achievements of genuine quality can be surprising and are doubly encouraging.

Channels asked an informal panel of 22 professional television watchers, mostly critics on newspaper staffs, to choose—based on recollection—the top five programs of the 1983-'84 season in each of a dozen categories. A tabulation of their responses, with some ad lib comments, appears here.

The critics' circle included: Jim Bawden (*Toronto Star*); Dave Bilington (*Edmonton Sun*); Tom Brinkmoeller (*Cincinnati Enquirer*); Stuart Bykofsky (*Philadelphia Daily News*); Bill Carter (*Baltimore Sun*); Rick DuBrow (*Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*); Don Freeman (*San Diego Union*); Kay Gardella (*New York Daily News*); John Goudas (*TV Key*); Bill Hayden (Gannett Newspapers); Ann Hodges (*Houston Chronicle*); Tom Jory (Associated Press); Bob Knight (*Variety*); David Marc (author of *Demographic Vistas*); Lee Margulies (*Los Angeles Times*); Jack Mingo (founder of the Couch Potatoes organization of TV fans); Michael Pollan (*Harper's*); Marilyn Preston (*Chicago Tribune*); Howard Rosenberg (*Los Angeles Times*); Tom Shales (*Washington Post*); Bob Wiselhart (*New Orleans Times-Picayune*); and Richard Zoglin (*Time*).

s t



Panelists admired Carson, Donahue, and the other masters of talk, but several have had enough of it. "The talk era has passed," says Jim Bawden. "The talk things bore me these days," complains Ann Hodges. Richard Zoglin says, "I don't think there are any decent talk shows left," but calls David Letterman "the most original comic talent working regularly on TV."

"Now that everybody is trying to do on TV what Barbara Walters has been doing for years, I feel more appreciative of the superb way she does it," notes Tom Shales.

## THE BEST PUBLIC-AFFAIRS OR DOCUMENTARY SERIES:

1. *Frontline* (PBS)
2. *60 Minutes* (CBS)
3. *A Walk Through the 20th Century with Bill Moyers* (PBS)
4. *Vietnam: A Television History* (PBS)
5. *This Week with David Brinkley* (ABC)



"*Frontline* does some brilliant work, and has some huge misses," says Bill Carter. "Overall, a dynamite show."

Tom Shales calls *60 Minutes* "the most entertaining show on prime-time television," but Bill Carter says it has become "a monster—it still does a lot of good stuff, though it is more aware than ever of its star status."

Several panelists praised ABC's *Viewpoint* discussion program following *The Day After*. "Koppel was at his best," says Rick DuBrow, "and that supporting cast of Henry Kissinger, Carl Sagan, et al. made

it one of the best programs in TV history." Michael Pollan says the program "revealed more about American politics than 10 years' worth of the nightly news."

Jim Bawden asks, "What has destroyed the public appetite for documentaries? It's the balance the networks insist on. That balance frequently means dullness."

The Moyers program has such good footage, says Jack Mingo, that he watches with the sound off.



## THE BEST SOAP OPERAS:

1. *The Young and the Restless* (CBS)
2. *Falcon Crest* (CBS)
3. *Guiding Light* (CBS) tied with *Dallas* (CBS)
4. *Dynasty* (ABC)
5. *Knots Landing* (CBS)

## THE BEST MADE-FOR-TV MOVIES OR MINI-SERIES:

1. *Concealed Enemies* (PBS)
2. *Something About Amelia* (ABC)
3. *George Washington* (CBS)
4. *Reilly, Ace of Spies* (PBS)
5. *The Day After* (ABC)



"This is the one area," says Bill Hayden, "where the medium at least attempts to live up to its promise for the literate viewer." Ann Hodges agrees: "There were more good TV movies than anything else." But Jim Bawden warns, "Mini-series are running out of the old stars to recycle and historical characters to refashion into cardboard TV heroes."

"For all the hype, *The Day After* was believable and frightening," says Richard Zoglin. Adds Michael Pollan. "*The Day After* was noteworthy as a national event—quality becomes irrelevant."

Aside from the top five, there were heartfelt favorites: "*Special Bulletin* dealt powerfully with a number of crucial contemporary issues," says Rick DuBrow. John Goudas notes that "Jane Fonda's performance in *The Dollmaker* is as good as anything she has done for the big screen." To Bill Carter, "*The Ghost Writer* was superb television, the best mix of literature and TV forms that I've ever seen."

## THE BEST CABLE PROGRAM SERVICES:



1. Cable News Network
2. Home Box Office
3. ESPN
4. Arts & Entertainment
5. C-SPAN

Cable News Network's CNN Headline News service "is priceless for people who don't structure their lives around the evening newscasts," observes Tom Brinkmoeller. When HBO and Showtime "stray into original

programming, they usually do it atrociously."

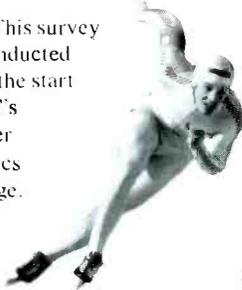
"If it were national, Los Angeles's Z Channel would be my choice for best cable service, hands down," says Rick DuBrow. "It is by far the best and most sophisticated of the pay-TV movie services."

DuBrow also cites C-SPAN and its chief, Brian Lamb. "His story selection and his matching up of journalist guests with phone-callers across the nation amount to a very special all-day newscast—a blend of op-ed column and marvelously in-depth feature."

## THE BEST SPORTS COVERAGE:

1. ABC's Winter Olympics coverage
2. CBS's National Football League coverage
3. NBC's major-league baseball coverage
4. CBS's National Basketball Association coverage
5. ABC's major-league baseball coverage

Note: This survey was conducted before the start of ABC's Summer Olympics coverage.



## THE BEST PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN:



1. *Sesame Street* (PBS)
2. *Afterschool Specials* (ABC)
3. *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (PBS)
4. *Fraggle Rock* (HBO)
5. *Captain Kangaroo* (CBS)

Bill Hayden, who nominates *Fraggle Rock* (HBO) and *Faerie Tale Theater* (Showtime), says that since cable can boast the Nickelodeon service as well, "it has taken over the lead from PBS in providing bright, intelligent programs for kids."

"Having young children compelled me to watch *Sesame Street* for the first time," says Bill Carter; "an amazingly good show. *Mister Rogers* is not for me, but the kids are totally absorbed by him. He's doing something right."

## THE BEST ADDITIONS TO NATIONAL TELEVISION THIS YEAR:

1. *Kate & Allie* (CBS)
2. *A Walk Through the 20th Century with Bill Moyers* (PBS)
3. *Buffalo Bill* (NBC)
4. Harry Anderson, star of *Night Court* (NBC)
5. The growth of music videos

It was a year of ennui to some panelists. "I see nothing 'best' about the year," says Ann Hodges. "It was a very empty year; nothing too good or powerfully bad seemed to surface," comments David Marc.

Marilynn Preston applauds the appearance of "more smart women" in series such as *Kate & Allie* and *Cagney & Lacey*. She also notes a "big improvement in Sunday-morning TV," citing CBS News's *Sunday Morning*.



## THE WORST ADDITIONS TO NATIONAL TELEVISION THIS YEAR:

1. Bloopers shows
2. Shows starring helicopters and other hardware
3. *Thicke of the Night*
4. Mini-series such as *The Last Days of Pompeii*
5. The growth of music videos

The year offered so many wretched innovations that there was little consensus among the critics on any specific program. Several did agree, however, about Alan Thicke's now-defunct show; among the worst. "Nothing even comes close," says Rick DuBrow. "Inspid-



ity run rampant," says Lee Margulies.

Other nominees for the year's worst: the 15-second commercial. Geraldo Rivera interviewing Barbra Streisand, movies about hookers, Joan Collins, Joan Rivers, *We've Got It Made*, and *The New Show*.

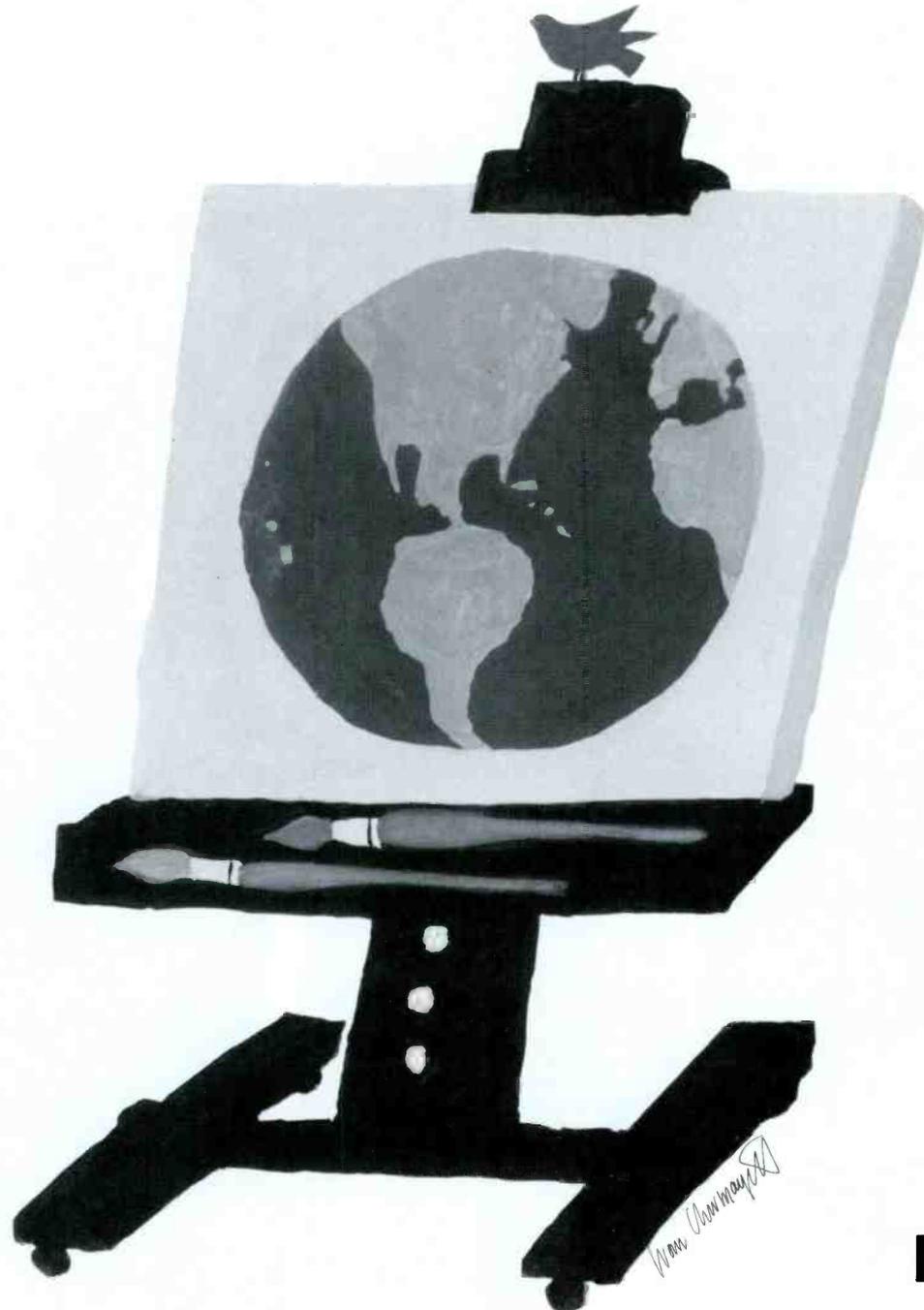
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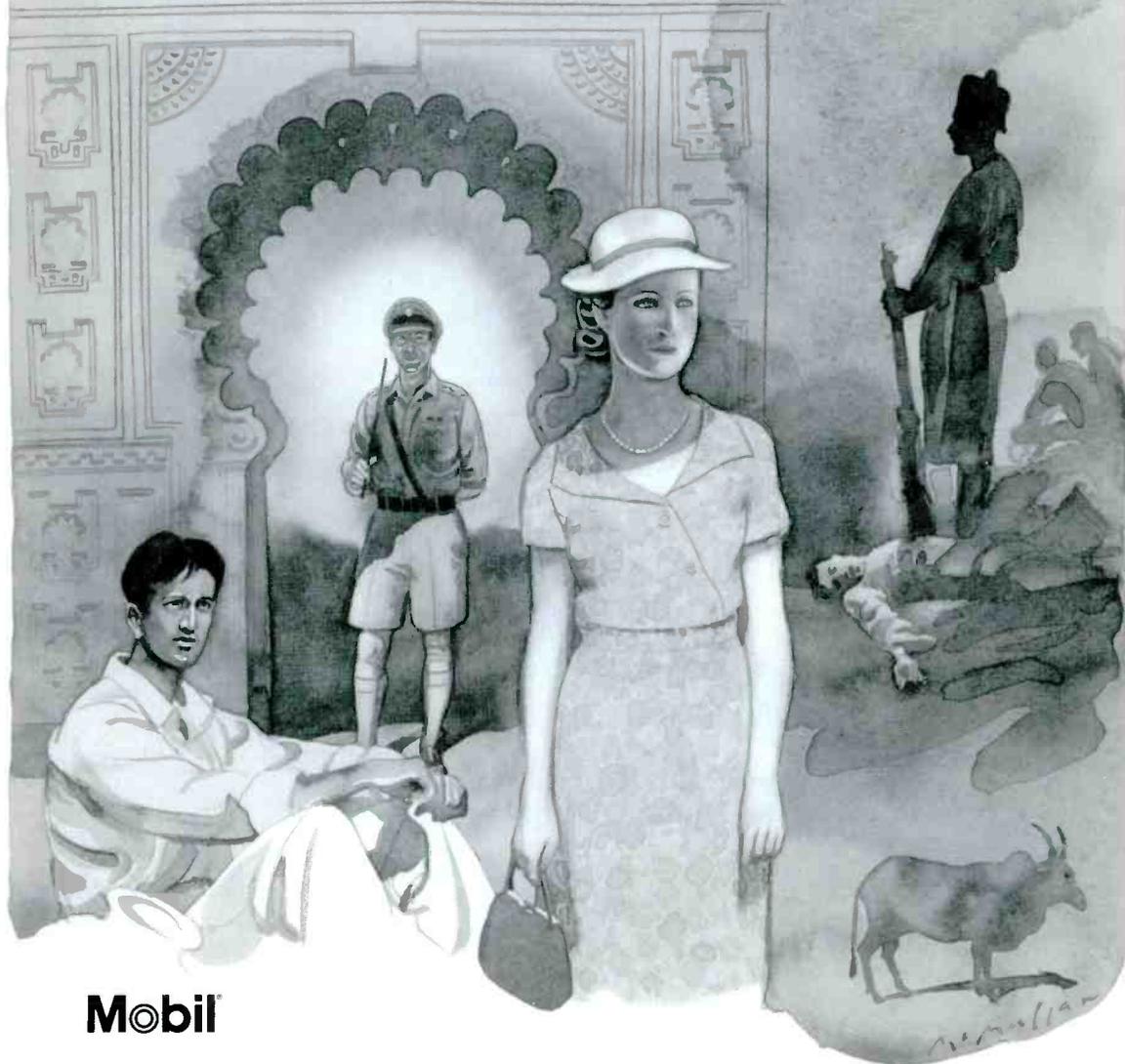
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# SFM entertainment

## SITCOMS

(Continued from page 23)

in to *MTM* in the 1970s now identifies less with the single career woman trying to "make it after all"—as the theme song cheerfully advised us—and more with a somewhat older (mid-30s to 40) divorcee, often with children.

This woman, as represented in *Kate & Allie*, is trying to balance domestic obligations with the need to make a living, and is overwhelmingly concerned with personal relationships. As Coben says, "There are so many issues—the woman without a career; the woman with a career, but not the one she wants; the woman alone with children; the woman looking for a man; the ex-husband who's still around.

"My phone number is listed, and I've gotten at least two calls a day from people I've never met—divorced women with children who say, 'It's about me. How did you know? I've never seen myself on television before.' You touch something that's real raw for a lot of people, and they love to laugh."

If *Lucy* was rooted in the certainty of marital devotion, the household of *Kate & Allie* is founded on the shakiness of marriage in the '80s. Kate (Susan Saint James) and Allie (Jane Curtin) are divorced women with children, who move in together to split expenses and lend each other emotional support. While *Lucy's* basic economic needs (though not her fantasies of a glamorous lifestyle) were supplied by her breadwinner spouse, Kate and Allie must support themselves—Kate by working her way up from an unsatisfying job, Allie by trying to develop some marketable skill.

The safety net of *Lucy's* domestic sta-



**In *Kate & Allie*,  
'reality humor'  
replaces *Lucy's*  
brand of slapstick.**

bility allowed her to bounce off into wildly improbable, comic antics. Getting a job meant conniving her way into a candy factory with sidekick Ethel, and coping with a speed-up on the assembly line by stuffing her uniform, chef's hat, and cheeks with sweets until her eyes bulged, fishlike. Home-baked bread was likely to burst out of the oven in a six-foot loaf, pinning *Lucy* to the wall.

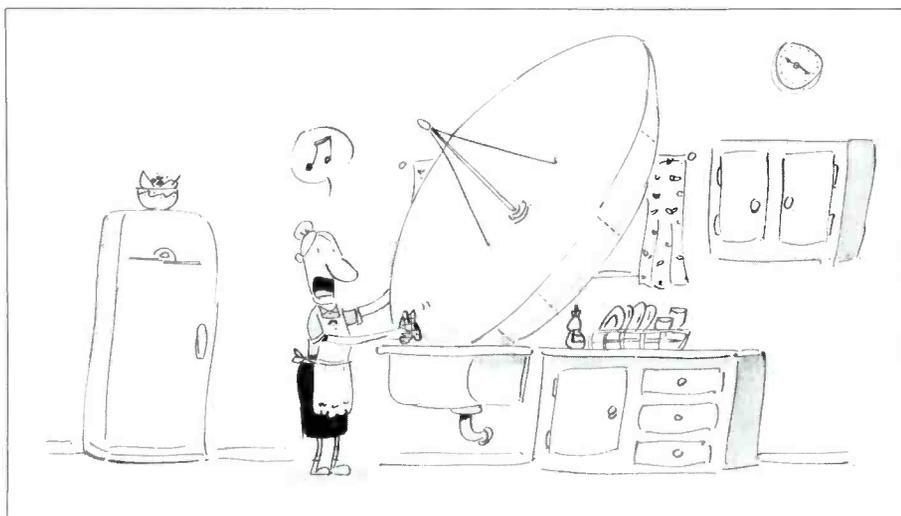
In the most *Lucy*-like episode of *Kate & Allie*, Allie winds up on her own chocolate treadmill. Dumped by her husband, a doctor, and with no career of her own, Allie accepts Kate's advice to start a baking business. She works day and night to

fill orders for a family-recipe chocolate cake, so as not to disappoint entrepreneurial-minded Kate. By the time Kate decides to close up shop, and Allie can toddle off to bed for desperately needed sleep, they have developed a deep aversion to chocolate. But never does a six-foot cake explode out of their stove, nor do they stuff their faces for laughs. Kate and Allie are grown-up (albeit quirky) women in a sometimes painful, sometimes amusing situation from which neither they nor their audience expect an absurd, farcical escape. Coben found even this episode a bit "slapsticky" for her taste. "The more reality humor we do," she observes, "the better off we'll be."

As the typical situation comedy founders in the ratings, network executives protest that they are baffled by the erosion of a genre that has nourished television from the beginning. "I don't know why the shows aren't better written," says CBS's Poltrack. "I have a hard time believing that the writers don't exist. It may just be this transitional period, where the writers are confused about what to do with the form."

**Y**ET THE SUCCESS of earlier sitcoms—no less than that of *Kate & Allie*—should offer some guidelines to perplexed writers. The sitcoms of the *Lucy* era reflected to their viewers a common domestic ideal; those of the *All in the Family* period mirrored the social upheaval of the time. Today, with all the diverging lifestyles, and the splintering of both the television audience and the nuclear family, the sitcom must adjust to the viewers' new realities. Certainly the genre is at a crossroads. Other once-popular television forms have faded from the screen, and the situation comedy may one day be as passé as the western or the variety show. But this year's sitcom ratings slump may be only temporary, as in the 1970-'71 season, when the only such program rated in the top 10 was *Here's Lucy*—a temporary lull that was shortly to be exploded by *All in the Family* and *M\*A\*S\*H*. When Lucille Ball was fêted at the Museum of Broadcasting last spring, we were honoring a great clown and expressing our nostalgia for a classic of a genre now more than 30 years old.

As the television marketplace becomes increasingly competitive, the success of new shows will determine whether the sitcom can be revamped to maintain viewers' interest, or whether the form will become a cult object seen, like *I Love Lucy*, only in reruns and museum retrospectives. ■





**Katz. The best.**

# The Deregulation Revolution

**Insisting the days of scarcity are over, the FCC is chopping off rules adopted during the last half-century.**

by Norman Black

**W**ITHOUT CEREMONY, 50 years ago on June 19, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Communications Act of 1934. It has stood more or less sturdily for half a century, though along the way it has been amply amended by Congress, clarified by the Supreme Court, and embellished by the Federal Communications Commission, the regulatory agency it created.

The FCC celebrated the law's golden anniversary not by popping corks but by

*Norman Black covers telecommunications and the FCC for the Associated Press.*

cutting back the body of regulation created ostensibly to ensure that the public was properly served. And the FCC, as it proceeds to eliminate the rules forged by each previous commission, fans the fires of a revolution. For the changes occurring in communications regulation promise sweeping changes in broadcasting that are every bit as significant as the revolution in communications technology.

The Communications Act designated broadcasters as trustees of the airwaves, obliged to serve "the public interest, convenience, and necessity." The abstract language of the act permits all manner of interpretation, and this FCC, emboldened by the Reagan Administration's faith in regulation by "the marketplace,"

has determined that the public interest is best served by the least government involvement. Considering the history of the FCC as a maker of rules, the idea itself is revolutionary.

The extent of the revolution is told in a recital of the rules the FCC has thus far repealed, modified, or proposed to eliminate, all of which ultimately make it easier than ever for broadcasters to hold onto their licenses. For example:

- Radio and television stations have been freed from government-imposed limits on commercial time, and from having to provide minimum amounts of news and public-affairs programs.
- Television stations will not be forced to provide educational programs for children, and broadcasters can stage their own political debates instead of merely covering those arranged by outside organizations.
- Broadcasters no longer need to own their stations at least three years before selling them.
- The number of radio stations a company may own nationally is being increased from seven AM and seven FM to 12 of each, and the FCC has proposed to loosen the limits in television as well. And there are no more limits on the number of stations a company may own in a part of the country.
- No programming logs need be kept for public inspection, and annual financial reports are no longer required.
- Cable systems may import from other cities virtually any stations they wish. Over-the-air pay television has been almost completely deregulated. And applicants for low-power television stations aren't closely compared on their merits but gain their licenses by lottery.

All these changes have occurred just since 1980, and a lot more are on the way. The three networks will probably be allowed to buy cable systems. The FCC is considering repeal of the personal-attack and political-editorializing rules, and questioning the Fairness Doctrine. And the rule that broadcast licensees must be of good character may soon go by the boards.

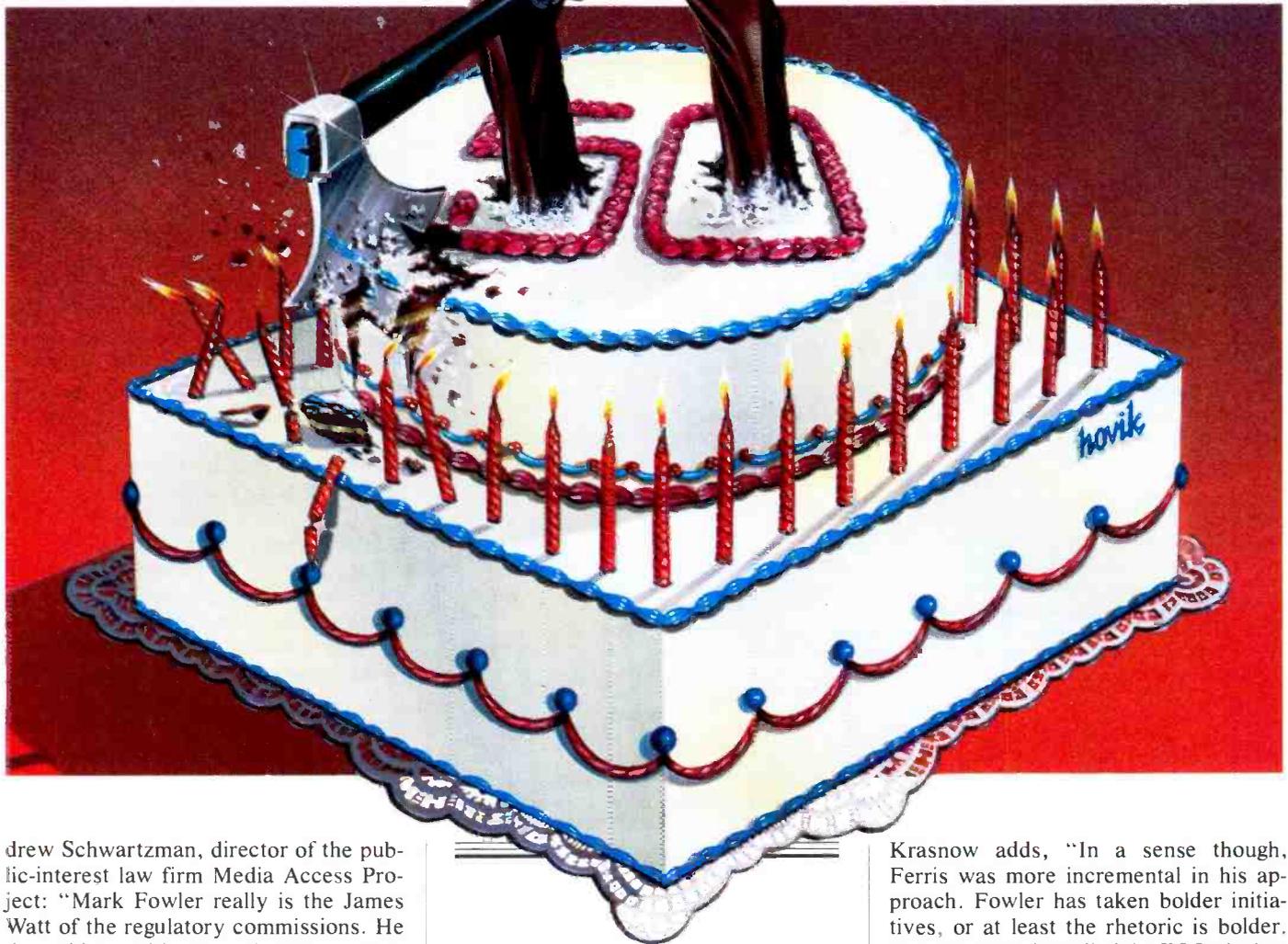
These rule changes enlarge the First Amendment rights of broadcasters but raise this question: Will marketplace competition assure media accountability to the public, which many argue is the essence of the Communications Act?

The FCC says yes, but public-interest advocates say no. The debate over this question has soured relations—to the

point of name-calling—between the current FCC chairman, Mark S. Fowler, and public-interest groups. Samuel A. Simon, executive director of the Washington-based Telecommunications Research and Action Center (TRAC), walked out of an FCC hearing last spring after telling Fowler: “Mr. Chairman, if we had the resources, we would ask the courts to disqualify you. You have demonstrated a clear and unalterable bias. Your ideological bent has become a theological cause.”

Like Simon, other advocates tend to describe the Republican chairman and his colleagues as ideologues. Says An-

celerated during the term of Charles Ferris, Democratic chairman of the commission from 1977 to 1981. Broadcasters didn't like Ferris, says Erwin Krasnow, former general counsel of the National Association of Broadcasters, “but he laid the intellectual roots for this unregulation. He brought in a very talented group of people, particularly economists, and pushed the commission away from looking at things solely from a legal perspective. Ferris had tremendous support. President Carter went into office as an outsider, and there was a real climate for reforming regulatory agencies.”



**‘We’ve got to get away from this public-trustee notion that has confused us,’ says Fowler.**

drew Schwartzman, director of the public-interest law firm Media Access Project: “Mark Fowler really is the James Watt of the regulatory commissions. He does things without moderation and to excess and without regard to long-term ramifications. That’s the revolutionary thing about Fowler compared to his predecessors; he just doesn’t give a damn.”

But Mark Fowler cannot be credited, or blamed, for starting this revolution. Instead, its roots should be traced to the 1974-’77 FCC chairmanship of Republican Richard Wiley, who embarked on a campaign he called “re-regulation,” prodding the commission to reexamine the rules and paperwork burdens that had amassed over 40 years. Deregulation ac-

Krasnow adds, “In a sense though, Ferris was more incremental in his approach. Fowler has taken bolder initiatives, or at least the rhetoric is bolder. He’s the one who called the FCC ‘the last of the New Deal dinosaurs’ and who described the TV set as just an appliance, like the toaster.”

Simon and Schwartzman obviously believe the Fowler FCC is going too far—that unregulation means broadcasters are given a government license to use the airwaves with no deterrents against abusing that privilege. Fowler attacks a basic assumption often used to justify government involvement. He disputes the theory that, since there aren’t enough frequencies to allow broadcasting by ev-

everybody who wants to, the government is justified in allotting the scarce frequencies to those who will best serve the public interest. Where is the frequency scarcity, asks Fowler, when there are now more than 10,600 radio and TV stations on the air in the United States?

"When Fowler counts outlets, he's missing the point entirely," responds Si-

mon. "Scarcity is a function of the fact that two people can't talk on the same frequency at the same time. And it's the government that's picking one over the other."

Fowler opponents have said there are two types of deregulation: "letting in" and "letting go." "The first type is getting rid of regulations that restrict entry

into the market," which would tend to overcome "scarcity," says David Aylward, chief counsel to the House communications subcommittee, whose chairman, Timothy E. Wirth (D.-Colo.), is a Fowler critic. "It was the Ferris commission that really moved to strike down entry barriers and get more competitors in the market." The second, "letting go" type of deregulation affects "regulations that relate to the right to speak on the public airwaves," and that regulate broadcasters' behavior. Unregulators insist that the days of media scarcity are over, and that old behavior rules can be relaxed. But according to Fowler opponents, competition in the marketplace isn't yet strong enough; the government's "letting go" would give overwhelming power to the voices with the most money.

Simon, Schwartzman, and Ferris himself concede that the public has benefited from some of the FCC's recent moves. In actions initiated by Ferris, the agency has "let in" many new electronic voices: authorizing the licensing of up to 4,000 new low-power TV stations across the country, which can serve small geographic areas however they wish; modifying radio-frequency policies to allow licensing of 1,000 or more new FM radio stations in future years; creating a new, multichannel "wireless cable" pay-TV service using microwave transmission, and allocating other channels for the country's first satellite-to-home television.

#### Point of Disagreement

"The idea was to open up the airwaves for more and more participation," recalls Charles Ferris, who resigned the chairmanship to enter law practice after President Reagan's election. The real focus of the current debate, Ferris says, is whether there are now, or ever will be, enough new players in broadcasting to justify repeal of rules prescribing good behavior. "That's where Mark Fowler and I have an honest disagreement," Ferris adds. "Now, we did find evidence that competition in one area—commercial radio—had reached the point where market forces, not the FCC's rules, were really driving broadcasters to behave in the public interest. And that's why we approved radio deregulation. But with TV, the market structure isn't right yet."

Fowler's commission, however, felt television was ripe for deregulation, and unanimously adopted a deregulation package in June. Fowler explained before the vote: "I view broadcasting as a very competitive, very vigorous market now, with lots of voices, lots of players, and even others now waiting in the wings ready to come on board soon, such as satellite-to-home. And the mere immi-

## FCC Rules Going and Gone

### APPROVED

**Radio Deregulation.** (*Approved by FCC, January 1981.*) Eliminated: • detailed reports required for renewal of licenses • formal ascertainment by stations of community programming needs • limits on advertising time • guidelines on minimum hours of news, public affairs, and local programming • requirements that stations keep program logs open to public.

**License Extension.** (*Enacted by Congress, August 1981.*) Extended: • term of radio licenses, from three years to seven • term of TV licenses, from three years to five.

**Children's Programming Rules.** (*FCC modified its 1974 policy statement, December 1983.*) Eliminated recommendations that broadcasters: • schedule children's programs throughout every week • develop more educational programs • schedule programs aimed at specific age groups.

**Regional Concentration-of-Ownership Rule.** (*Eliminated by FCC, April 1984.*) Eliminated: prohibition against owning three broadcast stations when two of them are within 100 miles of the third.

**Television Deregulation.** (*Approved by FCC, June 1984.*) Same as Radio Deregulation (above).

**Multiple Ownership Rule.** (*Amended by FCC, August 1984.*) • Increased from seven to 12 the number of radio stations a company is allowed to own—12 AM and 12 FM. • Delayed similar proposed action on television station ownership until April 1985 or later.

### PENDING

**Cable Deregulation.** (*Passed in Senate, June 1983; passed in House energy and commerce committee, June 1984; awaits House vote.*) Amendments are likely, but version of bill at press time would: • limit cities' authority to regulate basic rates that cable companies can charge subscribers • mandate franchise renewal if cable operator meets original franchise standards • allow cable operators to drop guaranteed services "if circumstances change" • require cable operators to provide a number of "leased access" channels depending on franchise size.

### SIDETRACKED

**Prime-Time Access Rule.** (*Repeal is being discussed by special FCC study group.*) Would eliminate requirement that networks limit their prime-time programming to three hours nightly in the top 50 TV markets, and would reopen the 7:30-8 P.M. time slot to network programs.

**Must-Carry Rule.** (*FCC refused petitions to repeal; refusal is now under court challenge.*) Would eliminate requirement that each cable system carry all commercial, public, and religious television stations within 35 miles of its cabled area.

**Financial Interest and Syndication Rules.** (*FCC proposed to eliminate, August 1983; action since has been delayed at request of President and Congress.*) Would allow three major TV networks: • to have financial interests in the programs they buy • to engage in domestic syndication of prime-time entertainment programs starting in 1990.

### PROPOSED

**Character Requirements of Licensees.** (*FCC inquiry into eliminating began August 1981.*) Would weaken FCC policy that awards broadcast licenses on the basis of "good character."

**Fairness Doctrine.** (*Repeal proposed by Sen. Robert Packwood, and in FCC rulemaking, April 1984.*) Would repeal law requiring broadcasters to devote reasonable time to controversial issues, and to give reasonable opportunity for expression of opposing viewpoints.

RICHARD BARRIERI



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nence of the entry of new players has a profound effect on existing players. We can see that in many ways. We can see local TV stations now putting more money into their news budgets, on the theory that in order to survive in the new video world, they've got to be more deeply rooted in the community." By beefing up news, local broadcasters make the most of their intrinsic local-programming advantage over nationwide programmers. In such ways competitive, "marketplace" pressures are improving broadcaster behavior, Fowler contends. The market has broadened and can be deregulated.

Randy Nichols, until recently Fowler's chief of staff and formerly a top lieutenant of Ferris, has his own perspective on the two men. "Charlie Ferris changed the approach of this commission 180 degrees by trying to create more competition," Nichols says. "Both he and Dick Wiley provided a legacy for Mark. The dramatic change from Ferris to Fowler, though, is that this commission is not going to preclude existing broadcasters from responding to and being part of the new competition. Charlie would have precluded the old guys from having a piece of the action."

There's more than just "Reaganite principles" driving Fowler, according to Nichols. "People have to acknowledge that Fowler honestly and truly and deeply believes that the government shouldn't have a role in regulating content, period. He doesn't just spout First Amendment equality for broadcasters to hide some Republican agenda."

#### Some Rules Untouched

Despite the steady toppling of FCC regulations, not every proposed deregulation has met approval at the FCC. Even Fowler and Nichols are willing to acknowledge the FCC's reexamination of old rules has not been as systematic or evenhanded as it might appear. There are rules untouched by the commission that can only be described as "protective" of one segment of the communications industry or another—rules that remain because broadcasters like them:

- The Must-Carry Rule protects television stations against cable, forcing cable operators to carry the signals of local broadcast stations serving their markets.
- The Prime-Time Access Rule in effect guarantees local television stations control over the lucrative advertising revenue of the 7:30-to-8 P.M. slot, during which the networks can't program.
- The Financial Interest and Syndication Rules also protect certain interests—Hollywood interests—from network power, prohibiting the networks from

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## The question now is whether there are enough new players to justify repeal of rules.

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owning a piece of their old reruns and syndicating those reruns to local stations. The rules also are considered essential by independent-station owners, who fear the networks could deny them all the old series they need to compete against network affiliates. Fowler, despite a well-publicized meeting with President Reagan, who signaled his support of Hollywood, does believe the Fin/Syn rules should be scrapped. But West Coast producers—who depend on syndication revenues for profits—and the independent stations have won enough political support in Congress and at the White House to force Fowler to back off. "The record speaks for itself as to the things that haven't been touched," says Ferris.

"In general, we're more than happy to look at anything, up to the point that it becomes politically impossible," responds Nichols. In fact, there are signs that some of the FCC's recent moves have raised hackles in Congress, possibly to the point of provoking a backlash that would make further deregulation politically less possible.

Several prospective actions have bothered key members of Congress: the proposed repeal of the political-editorializing and personal-attack rules, and an inquiry reexamining the Fairness Doctrine. Last June's vote to extend to television the deregulation that had previously been accorded to radio hurt relations with key House leaders. And in August, House leaders persuaded the FCC to hold off on increasing the maximum number of television stations under single ownership, rescinding an action taken in July.

Even in the Republican-controlled Senate, signs of a backlash can be seen. Barry Goldwater (R.-Ariz.), chairman of the Senate communications subcommittee, said in a recent interview that he doesn't believe the networks are "held in any great esteem" by members of Congress. And early this summer, the Senate commerce committee rejected a bill that would repeal the Fairness Doctrine and the Equal Time Law.

But what if there is no backlash in Congress? Would further deregulation make any difference to viewers and listeners?

"There hasn't been a damn bit of change with radio," asserts Ferris. "We had regulation with no meaning. The radio broadcasters were listening to a different drummer." To keep their listeners happy, for instance, disc jockeys were playing far fewer than the number of commercials allowed by the old rules.

Simon questions how Ferris can assert that deregulation hasn't affected radio programming, since radio stations are no longer required to keep detailed logs of what they broadcast. "Nobody is charting the industry to see how deregulation has affected it," says Simon. "If competition is holding down the number of commercials, that's fine, go ahead and try it. But if you repeal the regulations and walk away from it so you don't ever know if it's working, that's another story."

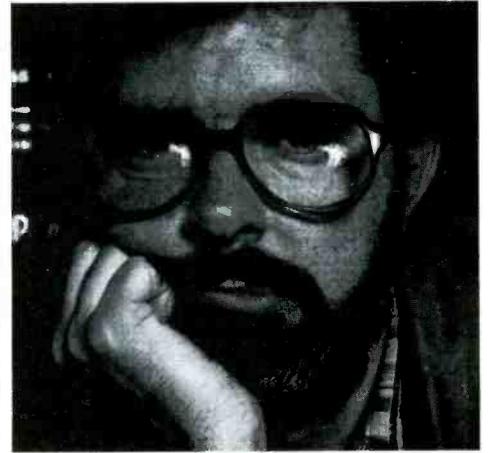
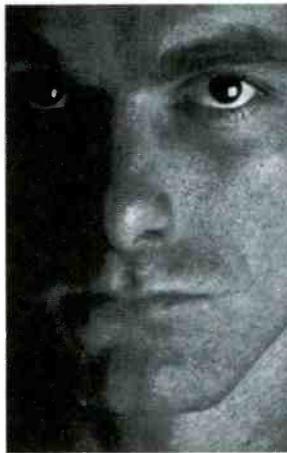
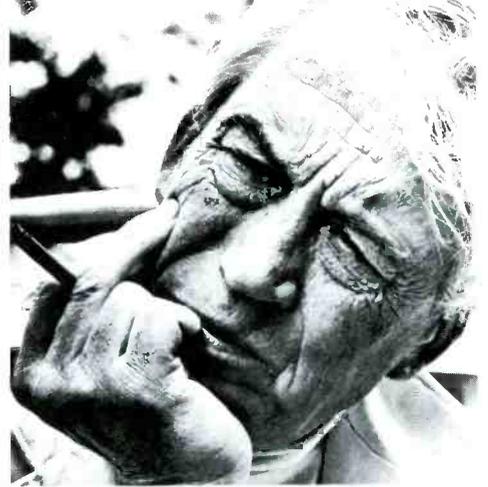
"I don't see any dramatic swings in programming," responds the FCC's Nichols. "And what change I do see is for the better, because any money that broadcasters save by getting bigger, or by not having to spend money on the regulatory process, will trickle down into the quality of programming." And he doubts the rules give the average consumer much effect on broadcasting anyway. The only real recourse they have is through the marketplace, by turning the dial and collectively affecting the earnings of stations they like and dislike.

Fowler says he wants to "restore free enterprise" to broadcasting by putting broadcasters' fates and fortunes more directly in the hands of their audiences. A broadcaster should be able to say, "I own this business, period. And the only way I will lose this business is if I fail in the marketplace, or I sell this business, period." To grant that independence to the broadcast businessman, Fowler believes "we've got to get away from this public-trusteeship notion that has confused us for so many years."

"But there is a fundamental role for government in this area, and there always will be," insists David Aylward. "The government grants certain people the right to speak and thus must recognize its responsibility to those who can't speak."

Today, there's a pervasive public distrust of the media in general, says Schwartzman. If deregulation continues its pace, and people conclude that they have lost the right to demand better service from a broadcaster—"that there is no bottom-line regulation to at least make sure somebody is not walking off with the store"—he thinks the FCC will have set the stage for a public backlash that Congress won't ignore. ■

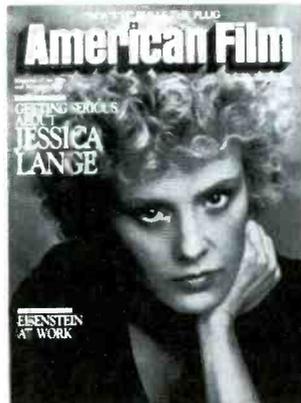
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## American Film

# A Spectrum of Views on Deregulation:

## Wilhelmina Reuben Cooke: Whose Airwaves Are These, Anyway?

**I**T SEEMSONLY TOO appropriate that the Citizens Communications Council, the public-interest law firm that Wilhelmina Reuben Cooke heads, has dwindled over the last few years from five lawyers to one—herself. For Cooke is a member of a vanishing species, the dyed-in-the-wool advocate of telecommunications regulation. In the current deregulatory climate, few pure members of the species remain, and Cooke speaks often, if defensively, of her willingness to yield on superfluous regulations, if she can find any. “The difference between [Federal Communications Commission chairman] Mark Fowler and myself,” she says, slowly and carefully, “is that I don’t think the choice is between government making all of the decisions and none of the decisions.” Fowler, she believes, is throwing out the baby with the bath water.

Cooke feels that a broadcaster’s “public trustee” obligations, rooted in the 1934 Communications Act, are fundamental and should not be bartered for anything—“they are conditions of the privilege” of occupying spectrum space, as she puts it. She concedes that most of the act’s noble sentiments have degenerated into hollow pieties; license renewal, for example, has become a mere formality. But better enforcement, she argues, could make the public-trustee ideal a reality. Failing that, it will still “provide a philosophical basis for how the system should work.”

Cooke rejects the argument that regulations have had no significant effect on the system. Children’s programming, she claims, grew in quantity and perhaps quality for a few years in the late ’70s when the FCC focused attention on it. During the Fowler administration she feels that children’s programming has declined to its original “dismal” level. She found the recent FCC study recommending an end to oversight of kids’ television an exercise in “religious fervor”—a blind declaration of faith in the free market—rather than a rational analysis.

Cable deregulation strikes her as no

less foolhardy than broadcast deregulation. The passage of the deregulatory bill now in the House would have, she says, “disastrous consequences. I think cable has the capacity to become a diverse and truly local kind of medium”—but not if cable operators are left to their own devices. She feels that cities must retain the right to regulate basic cable rates and to subject operators to a serious license-renewal process, if they are to ensure their franchisees’ accountability. And yet, as “a

way of dealing with the realities of the situation”—her powerlessness—she would be willing to trade a good deal of deregulation for a strong program of leased access.

The word “accountability” runs throughout Cooke’s comments—it is itself a kind of compromise with reality. If broadcasters, cable operators, and even phone companies can no longer be constrained to act in the public interest, she feels, then at least their behavior should be open to public examination. To her the most galling aspect of the FCC’s 1981 deregulation of radio was absolving station owners of the obligation to keep pro-

## Henry Geller: A Realist, for All the Good

**I**F A NEOCONSERVATIVE is a liberal who has been mugged by reality, then Henry Geller, public-interest lawyer, gadfly, and thorn-in-all-sides, could be a charter member. As general counsel to the Federal Communications Commission in the ’60s he helped formulate the Fairness Doctrine, and struggled mightily to push through Congress such regulations as percentage guidelines for the broadcasting of public-affairs and educational programming. But when he found himself continually rebuffed by the system, he concluded that the ideal regulatory environment sought by liberals was not to be.

“So in the ’70s,” he says, “I flipped. I have been saying since the mid-’70s that I give up on ‘public trustee’ regulation. I don’t think it’s worked for 50 years. And I think when something hasn’t worked for half a century you give up on it.” He gave up to the point of renouncing the Fairness Doctrine.

Nowadays Geller is a man in the middle—and virtually a minority of one. Like FCC chairman Mark Fowler, he would do away with most of the vast apparatus of broadcast regulation. But he has one typically blunt word for the deregulatory credo that the marketplace will take care of the public interest: “cockamamie.” Broadcasters, he says, will never serve the public interest; “they just want to sell soap.” Instead he suggests

that the broadcaster be permitted to offer entertainment programming in a largely deregulated environment—“which he’ll do to a fare-thee-well”—in exchange for the payment of a “spectrum usage fee” of 1 or 2 percent of gross revenues. That pool of capital would go to fund an independent and robust Corporation for Public Telecommunications, which would supply the educational, cultural, and children’s programming in which Geller devoutly believes.

The idea of trading significant deregulation, including the periodic broadcast license-renewal process, for a spectrum fee, seemed to have a chance in Congress until the National Association of Broadcasters swatted it down. So Geller, for all his reasonableness—“*God*, am I reasonable,” he says sarcastically—is out in the cold. But he’s not waiting for the millennium. Like the liberal regulator he used to be, he’s currently submitting a brief in a court case challenging the FCC’s relaxation of children’s programming rules.

Geller has another realistic, something-for-everyone proposal for cable. It too is based on his guiding principle: “Make the structure work *for* you.” At the moment, he says, cable firms seeking franchises enter a comparative hearing process “where everybody promises anything, and then reneges.” City governments are as

# The Rage and the Outrage

gramming logs, thus making public scrutiny of their performance practically impossible.

Cooke is equally concerned with what are called "structural" regulations (as opposed to "content" regulations). She is especially worried that the FCC's proposed amendment of the Multiple Ownership Rule—to increase the number of radio and television stations a single company can own—will crowd minority owners out of the field, and thus threaten program diversity. On that issue, for once, she might have enough powerful company to carry the day.

JAMES TRAUB

## It Does Him

powerless as the FCC to force public-spirited behavior on profit-making companies. Why not, he suggests, pay the phone company to build the cable system, auction off the right to run it, and let the operator "run a lean, mean tough operation"? The operator would receive a quarter to a third of the system's profits, while the remainder, and the auction fee, would fund a carefully planned public-access system on, say, seven of the 72 channels. Meanwhile, the operator would have to yield up another 15 percent of the channel capacity for leased access, to give other programmers access to cable viewers. The problems with this modest proposal are that cities won't accept an auction, and the cable industry refuses to take leased access seriously.

Geller is nothing if not forward-looking, and he is concerned that emerging media such as the direct-broadcast satellite and new fields such as business data not be subjected to a crippling regime of regulation. In some distant future he feels that the sheer abundance of channels will make most regulation superfluous. But since that time has not yet come, and his own perfectly reasonable schemes have not made much headway, he intends for the time being to fight the FCC, the Congress, and the industry as ferociously as ever.

J.T.

## Eddie Fritts: Let the Yoke Be Lifted

**T**O HEAR EDDIE FRITTS tell it, the whole wrangle over deregulation is little more than a simple misunderstanding, compounded by old-fashioned politics. "There's a universal opinion," says the president of the National Association of Broadcasters, the trade association representing 4,500 radio stations, 700 television outlets, and the three broadcast networks, "that deregulation in broadcasting means a stripping away of every rule and every regulation—including the public-interest standard. And that's not the case at all."

All the NAB wants, says Fritts, is to "eliminate the paperwork burdens the Federal Communications Commission has put on television broadcasters, codify what [the commission] has already done for radio broadcasters, and eliminate comparative renewal. That's it."

Under the heading of "burdensome paperwork" the NAB includes FCC-required ascertainment procedures (the formal surveying of local programming needs), restraints on the amount of time a station can air commercials, and the obligation to keep programming logs. All of that is redundant or irrelevant, say broadcasters.

"Look at radio," Fritts argues. "Radio was deregulated [in those categories] in 1981. Is radio serving the public less now than it was in 1981? Our surveys say no."

Broadcasters don't expect much action on attempts to repeal the Fairness Doctrine, even though they consider it an unfair intrusion on their First Amendment rights. Fritts calls the companion Equal Time Law a "special-interest measure" that has favored the Congressmen who voted for it.

The NAB is also fighting any attempt to repeal regulations favoring its members (such as the Must-Carry Rule, which requires cable systems to carry local TV stations). Those rules

*Ben Brown is the TV editor of USA Today.*

are necessary, says Fritts, "if Congress wants broadcasters to operate by public-interest standards."

The prime battle has been over comparative license renewal, the one issue on which broadcasters want to go beyond the mere extension and codification of the FCC's 1981 radio deregulation model. They'd like Congress to do away with the entire process, in which license-renewal applications are subject to comparative hearings when there are competing applicants for the same frequencies. Practically speaking, incumbent licensees are virtually guaranteed renewal anyway, but since the mid-'60s, when the FCC refused to grant incumbents an automatic preference in renewal hearings, the subject has been a tender one with established broadcasters—who, after all, have fortunes invested in their assigned frequencies.

At several points in the past year, the NAB and the House telecommunications subcommittee seemed ready to strike a bargain involving an end to comparative renewal and the establishment of minimal standards for local and informational programming. But Fritts came to feel that legislators were demanding too much for the swap, and talks broke down.

Even if some deal is finally struck, the NAB wants it to be temporary—"sunsetting," in Fritts's words, by 1990. "Because by that time cable will have essentially wired America; direct-broadcast satellites will be here, low-power television will be here, the multiplicity of additional radio signals will be here. And the competition for our entertainment attention span will be so great, regulation will not be needed."

In this, as in other matters, Fritts feels that the marketplace should be trusted. "The American public has the ultimate decision," he argues. "They can flip the dial. If a station doesn't have an audience, then it won't have advertising, and the programming will change to reflect the needs and interests of the people."

BEN BROWN

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# Why Deregulation Won't Last

by Les Brown

**A** SOBERING THING happened to Congress on its way to deregulating the electronic media. It got mad at the networks for projecting the winners of elections while voting was still in progress.

Determined to end that interference with the electoral process, the House has passed, by a vote of 352 to 65, a nonbinding resolution asking the networks to refrain from announcing the winners of the 1984 races on the basis of their own exit polls, as they did in 1980 and 1982. The House's task force on elections, headed by Al Swift (D.-Wash.), had been warning for several months that if the networks didn't desist voluntarily there would be legislative recourse. The election is, after all, the box office of politics and therefore, in any politician's mind, the ultimate public-interest issue.

While it is hard to defend the networks' preemption of the official vote count, it's harder to defend attempts by government to suppress this or any other form of journalistic enterprise.

Congressmen such as William M. Thomas (R.-Calif.), the ranking minority member of the task force, accuse the networks of putting their own petty competition for news ratings ahead of citizenship and social responsibility. In reply, network officials have argued that reporting the news is itself a social responsibility, and they maintain there is no empirical proof that early projections keep people from going to the polls.

The paradox here is that many of the Representatives who are deeply concerned about the ways in which television might be affecting voter behavior have condoned, or at least tolerated, the Federal Communications Commission's

moves to deregulate the broadcast media; some are even supporting deregulation bills in Congress for television and cable. Senator Robert Packwood (R.-Ore.) is such a champion of "First Amendment rights" for broadcasters that he has been working for the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine and Equal Time Law. Yet Packwood is among those asking the networks to refrain from exit polling.

What is clear from the exit-poll episode is that the deregulation supporters scarcely grasp what it means to liberate broadcasting from the bond of public trusteeship. They are like people suing for divorce who expect to maintain the same regimen as before and be invited to all the same dinner parties. After living for 50 years with broadcast media that are required to behave responsibly for the sake of their licenses, the legislators apparently assume that radio and television will continue to be tacitly accountable, even after they have been set free.

The road to deregulation is paved with unrealistic assumptions of this sort. A chief one is that the broadcast media are up against such fierce competition in the marketplace that government cannot, in good conscience, continue to keep them on a regulatory tether. But, in fact, the competition out there is skinny and frail. Anyone who looks will see that cable has lost its steam and that nothing too substantial is happening these days with Qube, videotex, direct-broadcast satellites, or MDS. The networks, meanwhile, are riding high in revenues and profits. For all the competition that is thought to exist, the television industry overall expects record advertising billings this year of \$14.6 billion. Commercial television

Keith Bendis

**Politicians haven't grasped what it means to liberate broadcasting.**

may have lost some audience, but it is gaining power.

Another naïve assumption held by the policy-makers, and pushed hard by the broadcast lobbyists, is that television and radio are such mature industries today that they can be governed by their own standards of professionalism. The professional broadcaster does indeed have a deeply ingrained sense of public service, along with an abiding respect for his medium; but the professionals are in a constant state of tension with the business-people in broadcasting, who are the dominant force and concerned almost exclusively with surpassing last year's profits.

This tension is most evident in the field of television news. Back when news was a loss leader—a nod by the station owner to his license obligations—the management of the news departments was entrusted to seasoned journalists. But once news blossomed as a profit center, it became too important to be left to professionals. The businessmen took charge, brought in consultants to slick up the anchor team, and shoved out the old pros who put journalistic values first and would not reorder their priorities.

At virtually all the large broadcast corporations, the founders and other veteran executives have long since retired or died. Many have been succeeded by people skilled in business but with no previous experience in broadcasting. CBS Inc. and RCA, parent of NBC, are both headed today by executives who could not, by any stretch of the definition, be called professional broadcasters. The Mutual radio network is owned now by Amway, a company that sells home-care products and had no previous involvement with media. An investment group bought KTLA Los Angeles, for a record \$245 million, and then Wometco Enterprises, with extensive broadcast and cable holdings, for \$842 million. William E. Simon, former Secretary of the Treasury, and a partner have purchased Forward Communications, owner of six television and 10 radio stations. Stephen Adams, a Minneapolis banker, got into broadcasting by buying some stations last year, and this year added the three TV stations that once comprised Springfield Broadcasting in Massachusetts. The new owner immediately fired the management that had run the stations for three decades.

Many of the largest broadcast groups are owned by companies whose main business interests are outside broadcasting. For the business mentality, television represents the opportunity to achieve 60 percent profit margins.

What keeps professional broadcast managers alive in the industry, and allows them to win some battles with the businessmen, is the statutory obligation to

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## Lobbyists push the spurious idea that broadcast professionalism will prevail.

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serve the public interest. You can't achieve the great profit margins if you don't keep the license. Regulation is the support system of the broadcast professional. When regulation goes, so does the notion of professionalism in the sense that legislators think of it today.

There's no stopping deregulation. This is one of those times in Washington whose idea has come, an idea that has gone beyond the reach of reason. The question is not whether television and cable will be set free, but rather to what degree they will be deregulated, and whether the bulldozing of rules will go to the bedrock—the public-trustee concept.

But the sad thing about this drive to deregulate the media is the futility of it—the waste of man hours at the FCC and Congress. Because if deregulation is inevitable today, the return of regulation is inevitable tomorrow—by popular demand, as they say.

If members of the public seem indifferent to what is happening on the deregulation front, it's because they have very little sense of what's at stake. It sounds like a business issue, like the deregulation of the airlines and the trucking industry—bound to carry some jolts, but nothing serious. No one told them deregulating media that deal in ideas, information, morality, and ultimately political influence leads to a huge change in the order of things. (When was the last time you heard a penetrating discussion of what broadcast deregulation means, on the medium from which most people get their information?) Like the Congressmen who are all for deregulation but want to stop the networks from predicting election results through exit polls, people expect nothing to change drastically when television is freed from its public-interest obligations.

For half a century, when radio or television wronged or offended the sensibilities of people, government was there to do something about it. Through government, people felt they had a voice. They knew they didn't have such rights with the print media, because newspapers and magazines were always recognized as

private enterprises protected by First Amendment freedoms. But radio and television, somewhat like the city parks, were thought to be public property.

How does a Congressman explain to his constituents that there is no longer recourse through government, and that Congress and the FCC, without asking permission, have given away the public's right to hold television accountable? At some point, legislators will have to face the fact that most people aren't prepared to make the broadcast media as free as newspapers—or even almost as free.

Tom Krattenmaker, a professor at Georgetown University Law School who worked for a time at the FCC, observes that during the '20s and '30s there were public pressures to regulate motion pictures, and then during the next two decades similar pressures to regulate comic books. The desire mainly was to shelter children from influences that were deemed unwholesome. At a law conference about cable held in New York a few months ago, Krattenmaker cited five programming issues that would raise demands for reform in an unregulated environment: violence, indecency, stereotyping, the broadcasting of false or defamatory information, and the exploitation of the child audience. Calls for such reforms, in fact, have been echoing for quite some time.

One suspects, however, that even before the cries of the people are heard, Congress itself will lead the way back to regulation—when it discovers that the electronic press has more control over politics than politicians have over these privileged, intrusive media.

The rationale for deregulation is that market forces can take the place of government agencies. It is assumed that competition from the new electronic media will keep broadcasting's power in check and force it to perform responsibly for its own survival. If, for example, people don't like the networks' children's shows, they can buy more uplifting video cassettes or subscribe to cable for Nickelodeon. If enough people did that, theoretically the networks would be forced to make better shows for children.

Why, then, don't the lawmakers apply this logic to the exit-polling controversy, leaving it to the consumers to decide whether they want the networks to call the races before the polls have closed? If the people don't approve of it, they can turn off television and wait for the morning papers. Market forces.

Congressmen don't apply this logic, because they know better. This is not fantasy time. This hits right where they live.

Deregulation has hardly happened, and already regulation is making a comeback. ■

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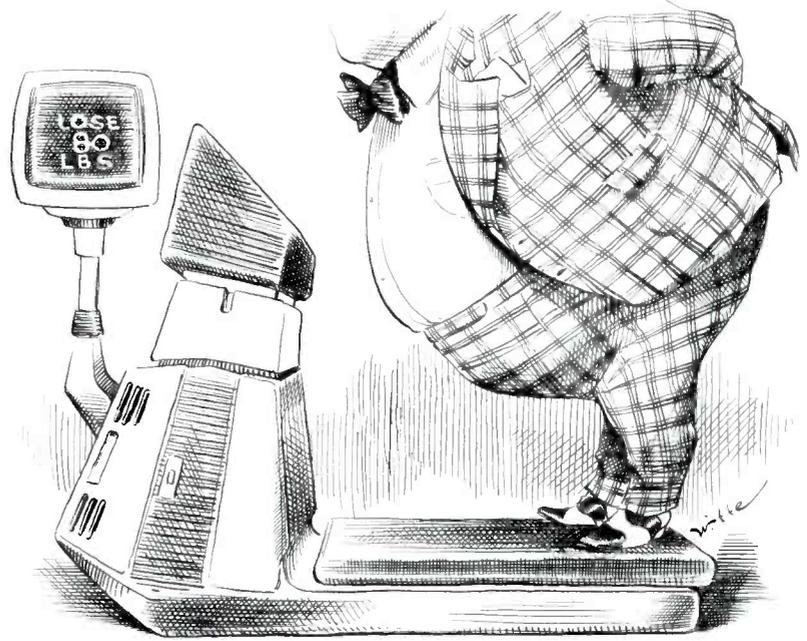
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# TV and My Vast Waistband

by William A. Henry III



**A** COUPLE OF YEARS AGO I was approached about appearing regularly as a critic on *Entertainment Tonight*. No—more than that: I was romanced. I must have received 20 telephone calls from *ET* officials on the West Coast. I wrote three audition pieces and taped each of them six or seven times. I sorted out a schedule, heard offers of salaries beyond my dreams (if not my avarice), and watched the show hour upon hour to get its tone and rhythm. Finally, my tapes were returned to me with a curt if apologetic note. Paramount's senior executives, who retain a right of veto, had decided that they loved what I had to say and the way I said it, but thought I was fat.

Now, my weight is not exactly a secret. Indeed, most people are capable of observing it when I come into the room. I am not quite large enough to require a zoning variance to walk down the street. But if slimness is the standard by which critics are to be judged, I need to find another line of work. In fairness to *ET* and Paramount, I must note that they made noises about proffering a contract if I agreed to lose some specified amount of weight in some limited period of time—80 pounds in three days, or something of the sort. I demurred, and I remain an inkstained wretch instead of a household name.

I thought of my brief brush with glory as instructive. It taught me, if nothing else, cynicism. Since then I have been promised what seems like a hundred jobs as a TV performer. To date, all I have to show for the experience is the studied expression of patient blankness that I take on whenever the makeup woman tries to line my eyes and lengthen my lashes. I have developed a stoic silence as producers confer about how to paint my chins so that their number comes down at least to single digits. I have learned the importance of conquering a stray lock of hair and a curling shirt collar. I can tilt my glasses at the precise angle that minimizes the "bounce" of light off their lenses. I have noticed as well how infrequently anyone ever asks me a question about my phrasing, my judgments, even my choice of topics. The last time I finished an audition, the words of encouragement offered to me were, "That was cute. Real cute."

Although I never became a "series regular" anywhere, I have by now appeared on television, for real, more than 100 times. That is part and parcel of being a journalist these days, and any

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

journalist who specializes in TV topics has to learn to face the camera in self-defense. (How, the targets of one's snippier reviews will ask rhetorically, do you dare to write about a kind of work you have never undertaken?) The first thing I noticed when watching myself in any pre-taped appearance was my self-satisfied smirk on being introduced. I had always thought of my smile as ingratiating, even humble, and belatedly I began to understand a reason for the limitations in my social life. Next it became apparent that I never had a clue which camera I was supposed to be talking to, even though I have been told it is the one with the

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red light on. As a result, I stared off into space, or at the very least looked shifty. And despite all my pained resolutions to forebear, I still cock my head when I talk.

Once or twice I have tried to use a teleprompter, a device that is supposed to make you look natural and conversational even though you are intently reading. All the people we make fun of—those airhead local anchors who are supposed to have such easy jobs—use the teleprompter with aplomb. I don't quite understand the technology. It seems to have something to do with mirrors, although to me it looks as though the script is draped right over the camera. In any case, the times I have tried it, my expression has alternated between a faraway look and a desperate squint when the printing went out of focus. Say what you will about Ronald Reagan, any man who can read alternately from two teleprompters on opposite sides of the room while addressing Congress is a man entitled to my vote.

In some ways I have improved. On talk shows my questions

Michael Witte

used to run longer than a sermon by Jonathan Edwards. My answers were worse. I finally got rid of the preamble and learned to hold myself to two flippant sentences. But I cannot break myself of wanting to follow the two sentences with a dozen more, leading off in four or five directions. In televised press conferences à la *Meet the Press*, I learned the effectiveness of bad manners. If you just keep talking, the other questioners eventually will give up and let you have the floor. In talk-show round-tables, I learned, the best way to hog the camera is to say something that is likely to get viewers angry. The host, in pure self-defense, will follow up with another question for you, hoping you will persuade the audience that you really didn't mean what you just said.

Twice in years past I submitted to features for local evening news programs. More times than I can count, I have been interviewed for documentaries. Hardly ever have my excerpted comments, and the context in which they were placed, borne much relation to my recollections of the hour-long interviews they were culled from. I was amused, moreover, at how slack television's definition of an expert can be. From my third day on the job as a TV critic for the *Boston Globe* some years ago, I started getting calls to come and pontificate on a subject about which I was still unnervingly ignorant. I wondered whether I was being offered some old-fashioned seduction—free publicity—from people I might eventually write about. After I trashed in print the conduct of a video press conference in a Massachusetts gubernatorial primary, I was invited to be one of the questioners in a senatorial primary interview two weeks later. I still don't know whether that come-on was a compliment, a challenge, or an attempt to trap me.

In the case of talk shows, the person who conducts an interview on air is almost never the one who researches it beforehand. Some underling is charged with the real journalistic task—finding out what the guest thinks—in a mock interview, a sort of rehearsal. I have found that if my opinions change between the

time of the phone conversation and the air date, or I don't repeat the same responses in more or less the same phrases, the host is likely to lose track, and the interview may turn out to be disastrous. On the smoother shows, such as *Good Morning America*, the host may grab a moment for a rehearsal of his own: He will explain exactly what exchanges he hopes will take place—not to dictate opinions, but certainly to keep spontaneity under control. One notable exception is *Nightline*: Not only does Ted Koppel insist on being in a separate studio from his guests, even

## Some underling is usually charged with the real journalistic task, learning about the guest.

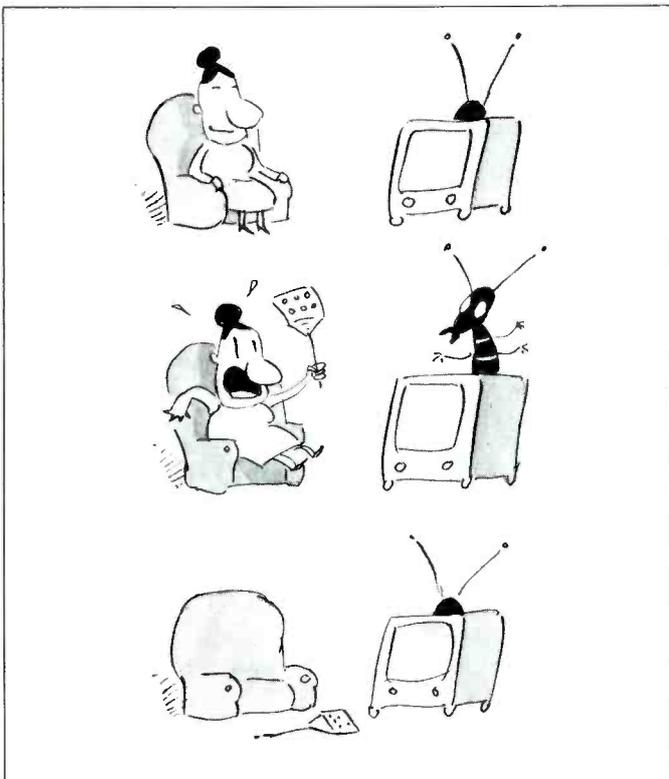
when they are in Washington, he also charts his own path. Although my few minutes of air-time last year were preceded by several hours of conversation and mock interviews, Koppel never once on air asked me anything I had been prepared for.

Given the pressures of live broadcasting, most hosts are remarkably calm. David Hartman seems to like to tease his staff, chatting on the sidelines until he has only a fraction of a second to slip into his seat for another perfectly delivered passage of transition or chat. Producers, on the other hand, are as nervous as old ladies in dark alleys. They want everyone in place an hour-and-a-half before show time. If you come in from out of town for an early-morning appearance, they may call your hotel room well after midnight to see if you are really there. I can empathize with their fears, to be sure. Once I appeared on the leading morning show in Boston, syndicated throughout New England, on a day when a blizzard wiped out nearly all the scheduled guests. A former BBC official and I wound up spending 45 minutes on air discussing the differences between British and American television. Even my mother turned it off halfway through.

Out-of-studio interviews have given me some measure of sympathy for the burdens that TV reporters bear, even in this age of lightweight electronic equipment. They spend most of their time rearranging the furniture, composing the shots, then staging and restaging "reaction shots" to remarks that took place perhaps an hour before.

Perhaps the most sobering thing I have learned is how much preparation goes into any show that is even halfway serious, and how much more the participants and producers know, after the prolonged hammering out of nuances, than ever gets onto the screen. The most extreme example was an installment of public television's *The Advocates* a few years ago. The research staff kept quoting back to me what sounded like nearly everything I had ever written. We talked for seven or eight hours. I had never been that ready for a college exam. Then we taped an hour, which whizzed by. When I watched later, I winced at how much had been left unsaid, at how the scant remainder seemed so aimless, sketchy, and contradictory. I would have given myself one of my sternest reviews.

These TV people may have a phobia about fat, all right. But dammit, some of them really work for the money. ■



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# When PBS Chose Docudrama over Documentary

by John J. O'Connor

**C**ONCEALED ENEMIES, the four-hour docudrama shown on public television's *American Playhouse* series, set out to tell us, as evenhandedly as possible, something about the Hiss-Chambers spy case, which first came to light in 1948 and is still capable of arousing intense political passions. In the end, the production may tell us even more about the programming politics of public television.

The idea for *Concealed Enemies* originated in Britain at least seven years ago. David Elstein of Thames Television commissioned writer Hugh Whitmore to look into the story. Whitmore, whose television credits include *All Creatures Great and Small*, submitted a script for a six-hour mini-series. There was only one major hurdle: The English didn't have enough money to produce it on their own.

Enter, several years later, *American Playhouse*, certainly one of public television's worthier forays into ambitious and provocative drama. With David M. Davis as executive director and Lindsay Law as executive producer, the American series managed to come up with enough funding for the \$4 million *Concealed Enemies* to be produced by WGBH Boston, along with Goldcrest of England and Comworld Productions.

Meanwhile, however, into the picture came a documentary made by a lawyer-turned-filmmaker named John Lowenthal. *The Trials of Alger Hiss* was released in 1980 and had a run at a Manhattan movie theater. In a *New York Times* review, my colleague Vincent Canby said the film "is about a series of events, as they were seen at the time in newsreels and other documentary footage, and as they are seen now in dozens of contemporary interviews with the surviving principal players, particularly Mr.

*John J. O'Connor is a television critic for The New York Times.*



THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

*In the BBC docudrama, Edward Herrmann (above) represents Alger Hiss (right, taking oath at House hearing in 1948).*



Hiss. It's about lifetimes spent in self-justification, about fashions in thought. As the movie proceeds, it's also clear it is about time itself and the uses of history, and maybe even the abuses of history, which is not only what can be documented as having been, but also the way we choose to perceive the documented facts . . . it is a brilliant, sorrowful evocation of a most anxious age."

In one of those little ironic twists that make show business fascinating, the British docudrama producers actually approached Lowenthal in 1978 with a request to see his documentary. In return, he would be hired as a consultant for their dramatization. Lowenthal agreed, primarily for the money that would enable him to complete his project. At the same time, he began submitting his documentary for a possible showing on public television. Save for a few local stations serviced by the Eastern Educational Television Network, his efforts were entirely rebuffed.

Fortunately for public television, *Concealed Enemies* turned out to be high-quality drama, as painstaking and rivet-

ing as *Oppenheimer*, another British treatment of a sensitive American subject that appeared on *American Playhouse*. With the bulk of *Concealed Enemies* restricted to official hearings and courtrooms, Peter B. Cook, the producer, was shrewd enough to recruit as director Jeff Bleckner, an American who has won several awards for directing the series *Hill Street Blues*. Bleckner managed to infuse *Concealed Enemies* with an energy that kept the overall pacing remarkably crisp.

The casting was outstanding. Edward Herrmann as Alger Hiss may have reflected more of the man's patrician elegance than his often-noted arrogance, but the portrait remained totally convincing. John Harkins as Whittaker Chambers brilliantly captured the physical look and mannerisms of the magazine editor and admitted former Communist who accused Hiss of having been a Communist spy in the 1930s. And Peter Riegert as Richard Nixon contributed a carefully restrained picture of a politician who, like many other politicians, is opportunistic and very ambitious.

A great deal of effort was made to cap-

ture period details in clothing and sets. The initial hearings, the first of their kind to be carried on the new-fangled medium of television, were recreated in incredibly faithful detail. But, rather perversely, the success in this area brings into question the docudrama's very nature.

Docudrama has long been a pesky form, sometimes mixing fact and fiction to the point of utter confusion or even calculated distortion. *Concealed Enemies*, as has been widely noted, attempts to go right down the middle on the question of Hiss's guilt or innocence. Neither Hiss supporters nor Chambers supporters are likely to come away from the film with their minds changed. The Chambers contingent does observe, however, that Hiss was convicted and that his subsequent legal appeals have been rejected. So, it argues, in still pursuing a middle-of-the-road, "objective" course. *Concealed Enemies* is taking a position automatically favorable to Hiss.

But the larger question is why a docudrama is even considered necessary when "real" material covering the same subject already exists, in Lowenthal's *The Trials of Alger Hiss*. Why does the television viewer have to watch actors, however skilled, playing the roles of Hiss and Chambers giving public testimony when the men themselves can be seen in archival footage? No matter how objective, no matter how conscientious, docudrama may distort the truth with overt theatrics. The material has to be contoured into emotional peaks and valleys.

Consider one key scene in *Concealed Enemies*. Appearing before a congressional committee, Chambers denies that he personally hates Hiss: "We were close friends but we are caught in a tragedy of history. Mr. Hiss represents the concealed enemy against which we are all fighting and I am fighting. I testified against him with remorse and pity but in the moment of historic jeopardy in which this nation now stands, so help me God, I could not do otherwise." This was indeed an affecting moment in the original hearing, but its reproduction in the docudrama reaches for heightened drama by having Chambers crying considerably more than he actually did. In addition, background music gives the entire scene a more momentous thrust.

To what end? it must be asked. If *Concealed Enemies* had indeed taken a strong point of view on the case, the docudrama could be defended on the ground that it "transcended" mere facts. But the production stuck carefully to its middle ground—as, to a certain extent, did John

## The documentary showed actual events, and also caught the 1940s political scene.

Lowenthal's documentary, *The Trials of Alger Hiss* makes pointed efforts to be fair to Chambers. Ralph de Toledano, an editor and one of Chambers's more articulate supporters, is interviewed at length. Yet public television proved surprisingly reluctant to touch the documentary, even when in the end it was being offered to the system at just about no cost.

Lowenthal has a file of correspondence with public television representatives that dates back to 1979. (He is startled by how "outspoken, or perhaps foolish" they were in committing their opinions to paper.) As recently as February 1983, a letter from the news and public-affairs office of PBS insisted not only that the two-hour-45-minute documentary was too long for the national PBS schedule, but also that there was no contemporary interest in the Hiss case. This was at the very time *American Playhouse* was starting work on its four-hour Hiss docudrama. "I'm a little surprised that they thought I didn't know what was going on," Lowenthal says.

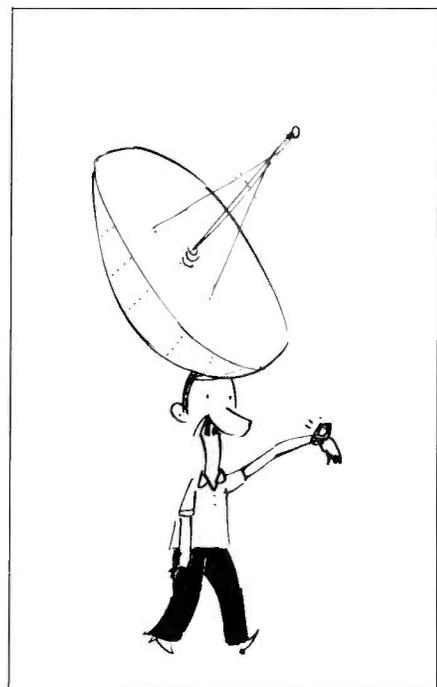
Part of the problem, of course, is that the decision-making processes in public television are so fragmented. The system's proponents can argue that this factor enables the different entities to keep out of each others' way. Outsiders, on the other hand, can charge that such a structure provides a convenient excuse for giving assorted supplicants the run-around. In any event, the system's traditionally cautious stations are more likely to feel comfortable with a carefully balanced docudrama than with a pointed documentary.

In certain respects, Lowenthal's documentary is more thorough than the docudrama, capturing the atmosphere not only of the 1940s but, through interviews, the turbulent rise of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, and the manipulations of the Communist Party as the supposed bulwark

against Hitler. And in the course of his research Lowenthal went even further, getting two jurors, one from each of the Hiss trials, to look at new material—including Chambers's statement to the FBI about his homosexual activities, a suppressed document released in the 1970s under the new Freedom of Information Act. Both jurors conceded the verdict might have been different if they had known all the facts. One declared candidly, "We were hoodwinked."

If Lowenthal's pro-Hiss bias is apparent, it might be argued that it is impossible to make any sort of a film devoid of bias, however subtle. But it also can be argued that Lowenthal makes a sincere effort to be fair. Why, then, did the always financially strapped public television system refuse his documentary for national broadcast and decide to invest considerable sums in a British docudrama? The BBC had no qualms about broadcasting *The Trials of Alger Hiss* in prime time on a Saturday in April 1982.

Perhaps the Hiss-Chambers case remains too sensitive and, as Lowenthal charges, public television is "just too scared." Or perhaps it is simply a matter of a fine dramatic production providing a necessary degree of distance from the issue for liberals and conservatives bent on proving their respective sides virtuous. Whatever the explanation, it would be reassuring one day to be able to see both *Concealed Enemies* and *The Trials of Alger Hiss* on public television. They would make a whale of a "package." ■



# To Err Is Human, If Not Necessarily Funny

by James Traub

**M**AYBE YOU CAN remember the Smothers Brothers, or Red Skelton, or even Sid Caesar. They were sketch comedians; they, or someone who worked for them, wrote funny scenes, and they then acted funny. You can imagine Sid Caesar impersonating a butcher: A customer asks for some nice, fresh steaks; Sid disappears and emerges from a back room leading a cow. While the customer stares in shock, Sid marks off the "porterhouse" section on the cow's flank. Sid leads the cow back off-stage, and then we hear the whine of a power saw. Out comes Sid with a couple of steaks. And all the while he has been cackling like some demon butcher of Fleet Street. His craziness makes the sketch witty rather than appalling.

Sid Caesar never did this sketch. I saw it on *TV Bloopers and Practical Jokes*, NBC's attempt to revitalize the prime-time comedy variety format that Sid Caesar practically created. But it wasn't really a sketch, it was a practical joke. NBC built the butcher shop—in Hollywood, of course—and lured in the customer. *This was really happening*. Since the actor/butcher had to play the scene straight, the gag had no particular wit. This joke—it was funny—was that we knew something the customer didn't know, and the payoff was not a funny line but her monumental embarrassment when she found out she had been had.

Blooper programming, to use the generic term, is television's wave of the next 10 minutes. *TV Bloopers and Practical Jokes* turned out to be NBC's second most popular show of 1983-'84. Seven of the 15 top-rated network specials last season involved bloopers; among 12- to 17-year-olds, six of the top eight were blooper shows. ABC, probably the network least averse to embarrassing programming, put on no less than four bloopers shows during the May ratings sweeps. Nobody's proud of all this blooperizing, it just works. In the course of a 15-minute conversation, an ABC vice president managed to say three times, "I don't know how long-lived these shows will be." The thought of their evanescence seemed not to distress him much.



*NBC's blooper show: Why are these men laughing?*

The bloopers-type show normally includes outtakes from soap operas and news reports (the twin towers of the botched line and the pratfall), old clips of goofball weddings or dumb animal stunts, practical jokes, and interviews with citizens given to strange habits or burdened with unlikely names. The humor of virtually all these segments has to do not with cleverness but embarrassment; they are funny only because they really happened, or at least were really manufactured. The bloopers show thus represents a cross of the comedy variety show with *Real People* (by way of *Candid Camera*), just as practically every new show seems to involve a cross of *Real People* with something—say, courtroom drama. "There's a reality-based programming appetite out there," as Marvin Mord of ABC puts it.

Thus we come face to face with that question so vexing to philosophers of every era: What is reality? It is worth noting that on blooper shows, interviews and practical jokes almost never take place outside of Hollywood, that fabled land from which TV shows and movies emerge. And as any 12- to 17-year-old knows, reality is what happens on TV. In one notable if inadvertent proof of this concept, Dick Clark—the host, with Ed McMahon, of *TV Bloopers and Practical Jokes*—visited an elementary school apparently within walking distance of the studio to ask five-year-olds if they'd heard of Johnny Carson, or Ed, or Dick himself. And they hadn't! It's hilarious. Get real, kids.

The dramatic heart of most blooper shows is the practical joke. Here reality is at its most contrived. In most cases the

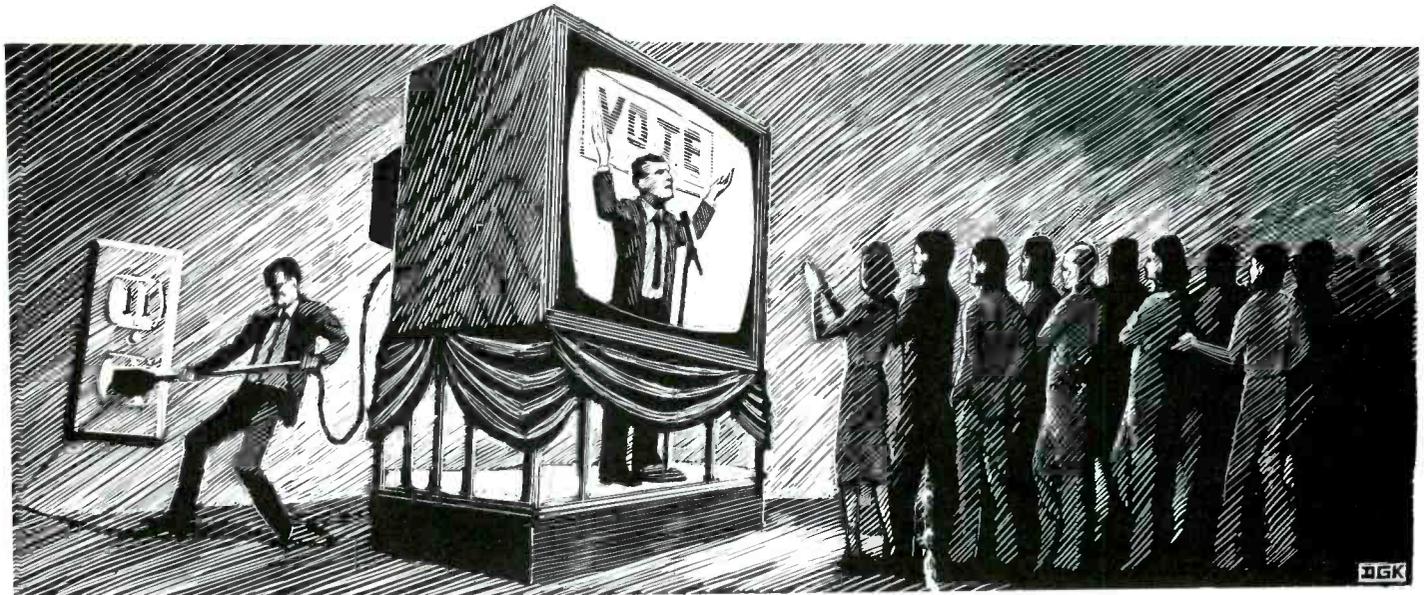
butts of these extremely complicated and expensive inventions are figures of heroic, *People* magazine-type proportions. When Jane Q. Public gets embarrassed by a cow in a butcher shop it's no big deal. But when Connie Sellecca (of *Hotel*) comes home to find that 5,622 pounds of living pig has been delivered to her door, and storms around and even curses (the ostentatious bleep clues in the non-lip-readers), the 15-year-old in each of us feels a terrific vindictive thrill. We get the same feeling whenever a big-time newsman or soap star forgets what he's talking about. Here are the ultimate figures of authority and cool acting just as dumb and clumsy as we do; they're probably just as uncool off-camera, except we never see it. No doubt there is a doctoral thesis here on the problems of fame in a democratic society.

It must be said, in all fairness, that some blooper shows are worse than others. There is no more lugubrious experience available from television than watching Don Rickles and Steve Lawrence, co-hosts of ABC's *Foul-Ups*, *Bleeps and Blunders*, grope around in a murk of witless jests, smiles pinned to their trooper faces. ("Enough of this idle chit-chat," says Steve, all too aptly.) ABC's hour-long May special, *America's Funniest Foul-Ups*, offered a genuine apotheosis of the form: three separate segments on people with dopey names, who were then brought together from all over the country for a finale that consumed about five seconds. "Hi, I'm Santa M. Claus," said one. "I'm Sandy Beach," said another. NBC, on the other hand, makes use of such witty folk as Johnny Carson and David Letterman, and even offered an esoteric segment on "Europe's funniest commercials." A class act in a low class.

It would take a wiser head than this one to explain what the rise of blooper shows tells us about How We Live Today. Maybe we've just run out of good jokes. Anyway, I look forward to the imminent blooperization of TV, including *Battle of the Network Practical Jokers*, *Search for America's Biggest Fools*, *Walter Cronkite's Wacky Home Movies*, and *Dumb Mistakes Tonight*. ■

# The Political Spot: A Necessary Evil

by Edwin Diamond and Stephen Bates



## Banning 'demagogic' effects from polispots would only lessen the public's interest in campaigns.

**I**F SOME LEGISLATION NOW pending in Congress becomes law, the era of political commercials will end in 1984. "Polispots" of the future will show the candidate (or party chairman or political action committee chief) addressing the camera full-face, and nothing else—the classic talking-head ad. And since everybody knows that talking heads are boring, campaigns will shift their resources away from television.

That, at any rate, is the goal of Curtis Gans, director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, and one of the forces behind the "Fairness in Political Advertising Act"—or, as the advertising industry has termed it, the

*Edwin Diamond is adjunct professor in political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and head of the MIT News Study Group. Stephen Bates is a media researcher at Harvard's Institute of Politics. They adapted this article from their book, The Spot: The Rise of Political Advertising on Television, published by MIT Press.*

"Tombstone Bill." In essence, the bill would ban production values from political advertising on television. It would mandate that polispots contain only "the voice and image of the candidate or alternative speaker speaking into the camera for the duration of the advertisement" and certain written material. The backdrop behind the speaker must be filmed at the same time (no post-production trickery); it must be "an actual scene or an actual event," and it cannot include "any staged reproduction of any event or scene." Had the bill been in effect this year, we would have been denied the ads that featured a sizzling fuse (Gary Hart) and a nuclear alert (Alan Cranston), as well as those that showed the candidate walking through a factory (John Glenn) or fishing in a stream (Walter Mondale).

Testifying before a Senate committee last fall, Gans noted that voting has declined fairly steadily as political commercials have increased in number, a correlation he reads as cause-and-effect. Besides that, he contended, TV commercials cost too much; they divert campaign resources from field organizations and

other "people-oriented" activities; they support a new breed of political consultants who answer to no one, and they constitute demagoguery.

"I didn't need demagogic television," Gans says, referring to his experience running Eugene McCarthy's Presidential campaign in 1968. "All I needed was the Vietnam war to be going on, and Lyndon Johnson to appear on the tube. All Ronald Reagan needed was Jimmy Carter's performance, and the public perception of it. Where there is real dissatisfaction with the incumbent, the incumbent can get ousted without these devices. And where the dissatisfaction is created, he probably shouldn't be ousted."

Gans feels that the proposed law has a good chance before Congress. It has been introduced into both houses, but has not yet been scheduled for debate. Gans has swayed the opinions of sitting legislators by arguing, not implausibly, that slickly produced polispots are more likely to be the weapons of challengers than incumbents. Of the other parties, neither ad agencies nor the broadcast industry have any reason to be unduly alarmed by the

David Klein

bill, while political consultants, whose livelihood the legislation would threaten, are scarcely an organized bunch. Yet for all that, the bill is scarcely likely to be given strong priority in either house.

The biggest hurdle for the anti-polispot forces is likely to be the First Amendment. To clear that hurdle, Gans claims that production values are more akin to the "time, place, and manner" of speech—whose regulation is often permitted under the First Amendment—than to the actual content of speech. Current proposals, he points out, would not censor a word or an idea, merely the way ads convey words and ideas. "The demagogic trappings, the props," he argues, "are not intrinsic to free speech, and may indeed crowd out free speech." In general, though, restrictions on political speech (as opposed to commercial communication or entertainment, for instance) have run up against an unsympathetic judiciary. Aware of that danger, Congress may hesitate.

Constitutional questions notwithstanding, the idea holds considerable intellectual appeal for both left and right. Liberals as well as conservatives have strong reservations about the political process and television, though for different reasons. Gans's proposal might appeal to both as a way of restoring some sort of old-fashioned purity to politics.

But we believe the Gans law would be a mistake. During the past year we have viewed and analyzed some 650 polisspots, and we have talked at length with the major political ad makers, as we put together our study of political advertising on television from 1952 to the current campaign. We agree that all is not well with the system. The "Tombstone Bill" solution, however, would create more problems than it would solve.

First, it must be seen for what it is: an effort to remove politics from TV, as much as possible. (Gans initially suggested that political commercials be wholly prohibited. The no-production idea is more feasible, he thinks, and it would have the effect of reducing political advertising considerably.) Yet Gans ignores the fact that television is the most efficient way for candidates to reach voters. A century ago a few thousand people might have learned a candidate's arguments directly, through speeches or leaflets (fewer than 20,000 people witnessed

each of the Lincoln-Douglas debates); today spots can bring the candidate's message to millions of voters, repeatedly. By one estimate, it costs a campaign 25 cents to reach a voter by direct mail, 1.5 cents

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## The danger isn't demagoguery so much as fluff—ads that trivialize elections.

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by newspaper advertisement, and less than half a cent by TV ad.

Of course this means the attack that once might have been carried out through street-corner whispering can now be broadcast in a 30-second flash to millions. But there is a self-correcting mechanism. Because of television's large, undifferentiated audience, candidates' messages are transmitted to everyone—supporters, leaners, and opponents alike. The cheap shot that attracts ill-informed fence-sitters, for example, may repel previously solid supporters.

One might respond that television itself is unique—that, as an intimate and visual medium, it somehow clouds viewers' minds through production values. Certainly there have been gripping, demagogic political commercials; in our study we saw quite a few. But voters are more likely to base their decisions on images gained from TV news or debate—more objective sources—than from polisspots. Moreover, Americans have now had 30 years of experience with TV. They are, we believe, largely inured to the razzle-dazzle of production values. A jump cut may sustain some viewers' interest, but it won't suspend their disbelief. If voters are incapable of recognizing and rejecting demagoguery, the blame cannot be placed on production values, or even on television.

However, it is clear that television *has* created serious problems for the electoral

system. TV has not only amplified the candidate's voice; it has changed, fundamentally, the nature of political discourse. That raises a more difficult problem: The prevalence of high-gloss, high-tech media campaigns may be trivializing politics. They may be not demagoguery but fluff. To the extent that polisspots are made to look, for example, like lifestyle cola ads, they may be taken no more seriously than the rest of television advertising. When polisspots become just one more entertainment to watch, it will become harder and harder for the audience to regard them as important—especially if there is no other campaign visible to the viewer. The result may be a growing distance between candidate and voter. Voting may become just one more activity commended to us by television purveyors of goods and services. We watch the free show, but we don't necessarily get involved; we are passively entertained. The problem, in short, may be more basic than any spot or series of spots; something fundamental may have been lost when campaigns switched to tape.

However, the obvious solution—to divorce politics from television once and for all and thereby to restore voter interest and participation—doesn't hold up. Since the 1940s Americans have increasingly stayed at home to be entertained, a trend fueled by demographics (the suburban migration), improved at-home options (radio and television, and now video-cassette recorders) and, at least partly, fear (the rising crime rate). True, taking politics away from television would take campaigns outdoors again. But, in the absence of broader social changes, most voters wouldn't follow.

The current situation, as one political media consultant put it, stinks. But the solution lies more with politics than with television. When the political process produces a candidate with strong positions and clear identity, voters respond. Jesse Jackson, for example, gained recognition and votes with hardly any television ads. But for candidates without Jackson's clear identity, political ads remain a necessity. Restricting or abolishing polisspots would deprive them of a sometimes abused, generally worrisome, but currently irreplaceable means of communicating with the electorate. ■

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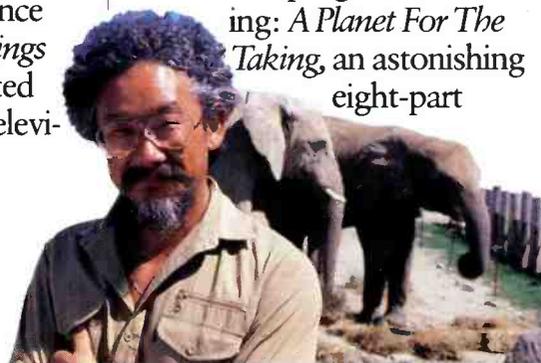
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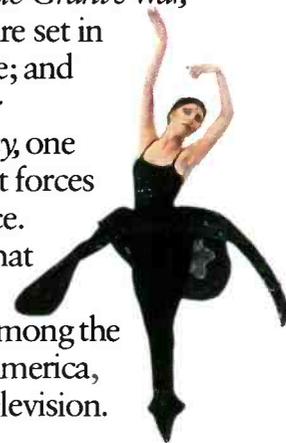
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