

# CHANNELS

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

## A New World


How the New Technologies Affect

- Hollywood
- Money
- Farming
- The Disabled
- Real Estate
- Trees
- Fascism

Undoing Democracy

by Benjamin Barber





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whose time  
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Page 15

## On Air: Wasted Images

BY TODD GITLIN

## The First Amendment's Second Chance

BY DAVID L. BAZELON

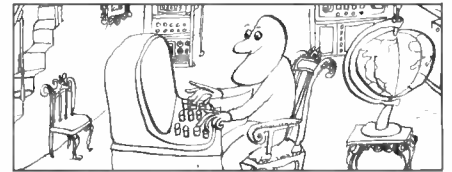


Page 21

## The Second American Revolution

BY BENJAMIN BARBER

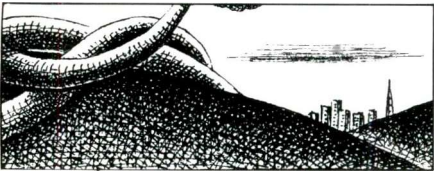
The Wired Republic may prove hazardous to democracy. A political thinker offers three visions of its future.



Page 26

## A New World

The new communications technologies are changing our society. *Channels* measures their impact in areas as diverse as movies and real estate.



Page 34

## The Local Station That Could

BY GREG MITCHELL

Caught between two ages of television, a Scranton/Wilkes-Barre station found the way to survive.

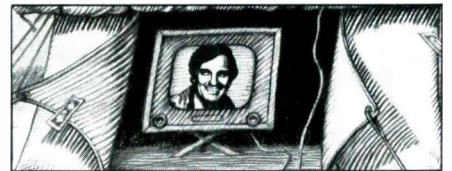


Page 41

## Public Broadcasting: The High Cost of Going Private

BY STEVEN BEHRENS  
AND BROOKE GLADSTONE

Congress wants the system to pay its own way. But selling ads exacts a price.



Page 45

## S\*M\*A\*S\*H

BY EARL C. GOTTSCHALK JR.

The syndication market is about to make a Korean War sitcom the biggest hit of all time.

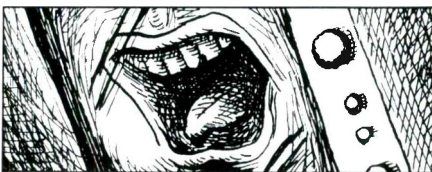


Page 49

## The Guilt Edge

BY CLARK WHELTON

How we were conditioned to link TV with the decline of Western Civilization.



Page 52

## At Issue: Should Advertisers Be Allowed to Sell Ideas?

BY CHARLIE DODGE

Vocal corporations are pressuring revenue-hungry stations to drop restrictions against advocacy ads.



Page 55

## Good Morning, Amerika

BY ARNIE WEISSMANN

When ABC's morning program recently tried to lay a trap for a guest, all it caught was a libel threat.

### DEPARTMENTS

#### ISSUES AND IDEAS

Letters \_\_\_\_\_ Page 3

CrossCurrents \_\_\_\_\_ Page 7  
Essays and Observations

The Public Eye \_\_\_\_\_ Page 18  
"Guilty of Innocence" by Les Brown

#### CRITICISM AND REPORTS

Book Review \_\_\_\_\_ Page 58  
George W.S. Trow's *In the Context of No Context*  
by James Traub

Quo Video \_\_\_\_\_ Page 61  
"WJIM's Long Road to the Woodshed"  
by Alex Kotlowitz

TV Guidance \_\_\_\_\_ Page 64  
"Commercial Expansionism" by Andrew Feinberg

Cartoonist's View — M. Stevens

Cover illustration by Andrea Baruffi

# The Great Experiment

**A**LL THIS TALK of a communications revolution—is it really a revolution or just a figurative use of the word? a Syracuse University graduate student asked me recently.

The question is important, and almost to be expected these days from an intelligent person made cynical by media hype and a language bent out of shape by Madison Avenue hyperboles—Pepsi Generations, Dodge Rebellions, Moral Majorities. The student was asking if this is a benign revolution, in the sense that the White Tornado is benign, or if it is a revolution to be taken seriously, as one that has violent force and that will gather us in whether or not we want to be part of it. He wanted to know whether he was being sold something or being given honest information: it does get harder and harder to tell the difference.

Well, this is a genuine revolution: It involves the overturning of the existing order, some bloodshed (this time in a figurative sense), and radical change in virtually every quarter of the society. Moreover, it is distinctly an American revolution. The United States has invited it by lifting virtually all restrictions on technology and encouraging business to plunge in. Other advanced countries are approaching the new communications delivery systems circumspectly, recognizing that with each of them something is lost for everything gained.

Thus while Britain is bracing for the cultural changes to be brought on by the brave step of introducing a fourth television channel, the United States is treating itself to more than a hundred channels, some in the interactive mode, and wondering how long before fiber-optics technology provides us with a thousand channels.

The other nations are trying to hold back these forces of change until they can adopt sensible policies for the new electronic media. But the United States, on the premise that more is unfailingly better, and consistent with our *laissez-faire* precepts, is pursuing a single policy in this

area—to get out of business's way so that each new technological development has a chance to prove itself in the marketplace. Both the Carter and Reagan Administrations have endorsed this principle, in the hope, apparently, that the explosion in telecommunications will revitalize the economy and make America the world leader in a whole new industrial sphere. We have in this way volunteered to pioneer the new territory at the risk of visiting change on every one of our institutions from sports to religion.

Dedicated to covering the revolution, *Channels* begins a series, "A New World," detailing how the confluence of cable, computer, telephone, and satellite technologies have already begun to make an impact on the American scene. What happens to Hollywood, the capital of the film industry? How is money affected? What do these changes in information-delivery systems mean to agriculture? Why are real estate values influenced? What are the advantages for the disabled? Can it be that even America's forests, those glories of the natural environment, have a stake in the new electronic environment? The editors report on widely different facets of American life, pointing out who benefits and who may suffer.

But nothing counts as much to all of us, and to the rest of the world, as the effect of this revolution on the American democratic system. This is where the bold American experiment with new communications technology runs its greatest risk. We must ask, while there is still time, whether we will truly be a better country for our pioneering effort, or whether we are gambling with the ideals the country was built on. Political scientist Benjamin Barber examines this issue, and outlines three scenarios for the nation's future, in our lead story, "The Second American Revolution."

This new television is not a White Tornado that comes to clean kitchens but one that will rip structures from their foundations. As America plays host to the new age, the rest of the world is watching to see what becomes of us. L.B.

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## Looters of Beirut

To the Editor:

A Palestinian fleeing a refugee camp in Beirut clasping his prized possession, a television set. Seemed like a good peg for a lead (or a leader, as the British say), so Les Brown used it in his Editor's Note of the December/January issue. But to anyone who knows the Middle East, it was grossly naïve.

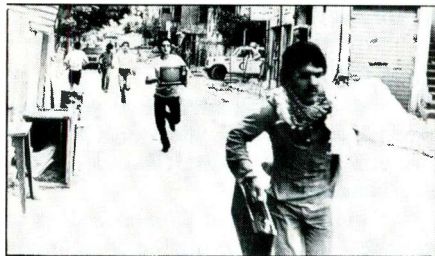
The Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut also is a fedayeen training camp. Those fleeing Palestinians you see in the AP photo, when they're not being bombed by the Israelis, are out in the streets of Beirut in their camouflage suits and carrying their AK-47s. They ransack deserted apartments in the middle-class residential zones. Sometimes they're not deserted when they enter them; they're pretty quiet when they leave, though.

The results of their forays end up on the flea market on Hamra Street—television sets, radios, whatever can be carried from the ransacked apartments.

Those "refugees" you see fleeing with the radio and television set aren't fans of the communications world. They're looters saving their most precious loot—the television set will keep that young man alive for another couple of months even if he doesn't burglarize another apartment in the meantime.

I doubt if he ever saw Archie Bunker in his life.

RICHARD PATRICK WILSON  
Mobile, Alabama



Wide World Photo

## Flight or Felony?

To The Editor:

I guess it's all in how you look at things.

I viewed that AP photo of Palestinian Arabs running with a television set and a portable stereo as looting, not saving either their lives or their own possessions—one person was running in the wrong direction and a cab driver was parked and observing the scene. It looked like hundreds of photos in this country of people taking advantage of broken store windows to help themselves.

LYNNE IANNIELLO  
Rockville Centre, New York

*(The photograph is certainly open to interpretation, but readers should note that AP photos come over the wires with AP captions attached. In this case, the caption reads: "Residents of Beirut's Sabra Palestinian camp flee down the street between Israeli air raids Friday as Red Crescent, the Islamic equivalent of Red Cross, ambulance enters from side street."—Ed.)*

## Nader on Schmertz

To the Editor:

In your August/September issue, Charlie Dodge declares that Schmertz's public-relations strategy has paid off for Mobil Oil. His evidence: Many of Big Oil's policies have been written into law, critics are on the defensive, ABC may be only the first network to start allowing corporate issue advertisements, and stockholders approve of Schmertz's advocacy op-ed pieces and advertising.

Another view is that Schmertz is surfacing the hard edge of corporate power and needlessly antagonizing people in government (President Carter called Mobil "the worst"), in labor, and throughout the consumer and environmental movements. Ask elderly people what they thought when Mobil Oil wrote that oil prices should be higher than they are now. Schmertz may think he is gaining points for Mobil in an ongoing debate. What he is really doing is destroying the bland anonymity that has so carefully camouflaged the historic power of Big Oil. In this respect, Exxon remains far and away more politically astute than Mobil. It rules quietly, while Mobil wants to rule as a boxer in a sports arena. On Capitol Hill in

the late seventies, Exxon's style of lobbying would have had an even easier time of it if so many members of Congress were not riled up by Mobil's extreme propaganda in the newspapers week after week.

Having read his devastatingly deprecating novel on the oil industry, I am beginning to wonder whether Herb Schmertz could be the smartest Trojan horse in corporate history. Keep it up Herb: you've even stimulated some conscientious oil-company insiders to share their information with outsiders. If consumer groups did not have Schmertz, they would have to invent him.

RALPH NADER  
Washington, D.C.

## Hard Questions

To the Editor:

Clearly, you know a good story when you see one. Michael Mosettig's piece ["Ninety Seconds Over the Economy," *Channels*, December/January] is first class, and the graphics treatment is inspired. It has a breezy, easy-to-read style, yet it deals in depth with the tough issue of what makes good economic journalism on television. If there is a weakness in it, it is that it raises hard questions that are never answered. The "troubling questions" on the first page (omitting the first question, which is of a different order from the rest) are at the core of the problem: Television news is so busy telling today's *big* economic stories that it may be overlooking tomorrow's *important* economic ones.

Mosettig's questions—about Reaganomics, social security, the relationship between domestic and world economic affairs, and the cities—are keenly perceptive, and he's performing a service simply by asking them. The answers perhaps are for later pieces.

As Reagan's new federalism makes painfully clear, the important stories for the economy and the society in the next several decades will take place not in Washington but in state capitols and city halls—even in communities and neighborhoods. The significant public-policy debate will center on which urban programs are worth saving and which ought

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to be shut down; on where cities can find new sources of funds; on how cities can form new partnerships and coalitions between the public and private sectors. Television's dilemma is that its journalistic resources are clustered in Washington and New York, while the important stories are taking place in the states, cities, towns, and hamlets across the nation.

With the burgeoning of special-interest groups and the waning of political parties and other consensus-building mechanisms, local television can be a pace-setting influence as a medium of communication and mediation.

SOL HURWITZ  
Senior Vice President  
Committee for Economic  
Development  
New York City

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## Porn Primer

To the Editor:

I thought the December/January issue was great. The piece by James Traub ["Porn on the Fourth of July"] was one of the best discussions of the issues of pornography on cable I have ever read. If I were still teaching, I would make it a required reading.

MARCUS COHN  
Attorney, Cohn and Marks  
Washington, D.C.

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## Births of a Nation

To the Editor:

Kudos to *Channels* for its "Should Contraceptives Be Advertised on Television?" article in the October/November issue.

Several years ago, The Population Institute issued a "white paper" on this subject entitled "The Right to Know." This is the heart of the question. It is clear the public has a substantial need to know about the specifics of contraception. It is our position that under the Constitution, it also has the right to know. Broadcasters, who are the licensed stewards of the public's airwaves, are under the injunction to broadcast in "the public interest, convenience, and necessity." The incidence of unplanned and frequently unwanted

pregnancies, together with the personal and social consequences that they bring, is of a sufficient magnitude to make this issue a matter of public necessity.

*Channels* is to be congratulated for addressing this subject of vital national concern. May your tribe increase.

DAVID O. POINDEXTER  
The Population Institute  
New York City

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## The Man Behind Moyers

To The Editor:

In your recent article, "The Perplexing Mr. Moyers" [*Channels*, October/November], I found one intimation very perplexing. Producer Marty Koughan and the author, Ann Crittenden, suggested that the award-winning documentary *The Fire Next Door* was "pure Moyers." Of course Mr. Moyers adds a certain quality to the programs he stars in, but what seems to have been forgotten is the dedication and hard work put into his shows by the producers and their teams. Tom Spain, who spearheaded *The Fire Next Door*, spent many long hours with his crew documenting the destruction in the Bronx, without Bill Moyers' presence.

It has become clear that some television news people have become "stars," and that their information-gathering abilities have become secondary to their glamour roles. In the race for viewers and getting there first with the fast-breaking story, news departments at times overlook their prime function to inform accurately. And when emphasis switches from information-gathering to stargazing, we forget the hard-working, dedicated people like Tom Spain, out there doing most of the work while others get the accolades.

BILL NEFF  
Department of Film and  
Television Production  
Montana State University  
Bozeman, Montana

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## Loud & Clear

To the Editor:

I read with interest your October/November issue and was intrigued by the convoluted reasoning of Mr. Walter Karp in his article, "Big Business and the Little

Minister." He sees a wonderful nobility of purpose in the networks utilizing "the sitcoms, the specials, and the shoot-'em-up melodramas—the entire province of prime-time network television . . ." to propagandize *against* free enterprise, smaller and less expensive federal government, lower taxes, fewer freebies for those who prefer welfare to work, less government interference with business (which furnishes the jobs and the incomes for the taxpayers), a respectable international posture, and all those other heinous revolutionary ideas that got Mr. Reagan overwhelmingly elected by the voters of the United States of America. He would prefer that we accept the strident socialist advocacy by the networks in prime time as *vox populi*.

Sorry, old buddy, but your network "news" people, your Norman Lear, and about nine-tenths of the people in the entertainment industry that produce or perform for prime time, live in their own little cloistered inbred fairyland. And after buying Jimmy Carter from the networks, the electorate seems to have wised up. If you think that hasn't terrified the networks, just listen to the nightly barrage against Reagan that is peddled as "news" in prime time.

Yes, Mr. Karp, the people voted loud and clear for Ronald Reagan and his clearly enunciated political beliefs. Please stop trying to tell us that they voted for the network's weird precepts, and that viewers should be denied any other fare.

J. M. COFFIELD  
Shreveport, Louisiana

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## True Grits

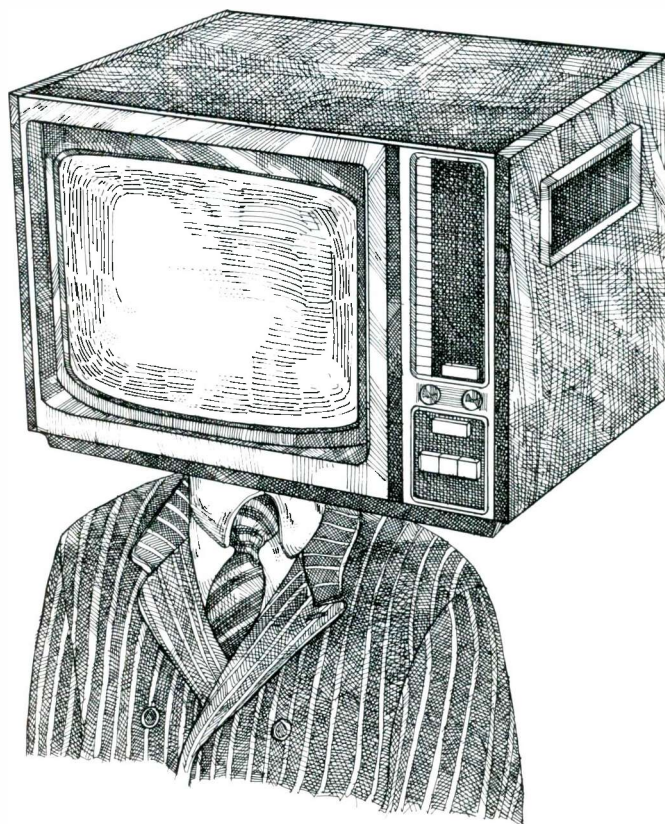
To the Editor:

What a welcome addition to your journalistic menu Mimi Sheraton's "Breakfast at Southfork" was! [*Channels*, October/November]

It's quite clear that *Channels* does an excellent job in covering the communications industry, but the icing on the cake is Ms. Sheraton's musing on what hearty victuals lie secreted on the sideboard.

HARRIET NOVET  
Manhattan Cable TV  
New York City

# VIEWERS ARE THE STARS OF SOME OF OUR BEST PROGRAMS.



Some of the best programs we're involved in never get on TV. That's because they're community programs. And the only stars are the people we help.

Whether it's dealing with the problems of the Black and Hispanic communities, or making Christmas a reality for needy children, or running a marathon to aid retarded citizens, or helping promote community health centers—RKO Television stations know that some of the best programs we run happen when the cameras aren't rolling.

So at RKO, there's always something good on TV—even when it's off.



**WHERE TELEVISION IS A TWO-WAY MEDIUM.**



WOR-TV  
NEW YORK



KHJ-TV  
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WNAC-TV  
BOSTON



WHBQ-TV  
MEMPHIS

# A M E R I C A N PLAYHOUSE

American Playhouse, a new 25-week PBS television series of outstanding drama, comedy and musical entertainment, premieres January 12. With internationally celebrated actors and directors in works by writers that include John Cheever, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and Ray Bradbury.

Closed-captioned for hearing impaired viewers.

Produced by KCET Los Angeles, South Carolina ETV, WGBH Boston and WNET New York. And made possible by grants from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities and Atlantic Richfield Company.

ARCO 





## Sounds Silly, but . . .

**A**NNE JONES, a conservative Republican on the Federal Communications Commission, mentioned to a reporter recently her wish to abolish the regulation that makes broadcast licensing conditional on good character. The focus of her concern, she said, was the RKO General case. RKO is threatened with the loss of all its stations, some \$500 million worth, just because of misdeeds several years ago by executives of its parent corporation, General Tire & Rubber Company.

The reporter reminded the commissioner that good character became licensing criterion partly to keep the electronic media out of the hands of organized crime.

"How would you feel if the Mafia moved in on television and radio?" the reporter asked.

"Well," the commissioner replied, "if they provided a good service . . ."

"If you really mean that, I'm going to quote you," the reporter warned.

"I'm afraid," she said, "it's going to sound silly."

## Zap

**A**TARI, Intellivision. PlayCable — watch out. There's a new game in town, and it's free. Electronic games may have topped the charts this Christmas, but the new age of cable has fostered another video diversion that could some day topple the pay-to-play games.

Ironically, this is one game that's made possible by the very advertisers whose commercials so persistently and maddeningly interrupt regular programming. Only this time the advertisers don't reap a penny for their services.

The name of the game is "Zap." Brought to our attention by Melissa Moore Wilson, a California-based writer, Zap is in fact not just a game but a whole new use of the television set. It's simple, infinitely variable, even children can learn

it, and it's guaranteed never to break down.

The players gather around a television set, pick a channel that doesn't have a commercial on it (if one can be found), and watch. Each person then spins the dial or switches channels by remote-control tuner. The first to land on a commercial is zapped and out of the game. (Certain aficionados reverse the game, jumping from commercial to commercial and declaring players zapped when they inadvertently land on a program.)

The rules are flexible, but the very existence of this new game points to a fragmentation in the nature of our national pastime. There was a time when people watched programs from beginning to end. But now, the onslaught of new viewing opportunities has spawned Zap — perhaps an oblique commentary on the media of abundance.

## Man Bites Media



**J**OEY SKAGGS is an artist who, in his own catchy phrase, "uses the media as a medium." He does not operate a television camera. He does not set up video screens in a gallery, like some impenetrable darling of the French avant-garde. No, Joey Skaggs lets the media come to him. What he does is stage elaborate and highly publicized hoaxes — "plausible but nonexistent realities," in the phrase he used to wring a grant from the New York State Council on

the Arts — and permit print and television reporters to make utter fools of themselves by their lurid coverage. He simply fakes them all out. In his most recent "performance," last May, he posed as a scientist, Dr. Joseph Gregor, whose widely distributed press release claimed he had "synthesized a super-roach extract" to "save the world — from hunger, radiation, pollution, and disease." Though Skaggs strewed the ensuing press conference with hints of his duplicity — plays upon Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis" — almost everyone was taken in. Dr. Gregor's story found its way into 200 newspapers, courtesy of UPI, and a number of television news shows. Skaggs came clean soon afterward, but neither UPI nor any of the programs offered a retraction.

But Skaggs, ironically enough, feels misunderstood. For almost fifteen years, ever since he organized a hippie bus tour of Queens, he has been treated as a *farceur*, a gadfly. To his own mind, and that, apparently, of the New York State Council on the Arts, he is a "performance artist." He organized the "Metamorphosis" hoax as a painstaking, if hilarious, piece of theater. Seventy friends and students from the School of Visual Arts were involved, and Skaggs played to the hilt his own role as cult leader. More important, he insists, "I was saying something by creating a lie: Big business tells lies to the media, the media buy lies, we buy lies from politicians, from government." The art form consists of arranging a situation in which the media will betray their own nature: their banality and flair for the sensational.

Skaggs, who is neat and trim and wears a deadly earnest Fu Manchu mustache, is quick to point out that a less dedicated soul would find an easier way to make a living. This last nonexistent reality cost in the neighborhood of \$3,000 and netted nothing, save publicity. A less tangible but more damaging cost is to Skaggs's good name as a serious artist. He is also a painter, and though he calls his canvases "imaginary landscapes," and claims they concern "multiple horizons, time and space, infinite motion," they are quite concrete. But all the notoriety, says Skaggs, "affects my painting in a negative way. It's very easy to be labeled a liar or a

hoax. And it's a cheap word."

Hoaxing does have its compensations, however. Skaggs probably has a lot more fun than your average studio artist. He gets to sleaze it up a bit, as when he posed in 1976 as owner of the "Celebrity Sperm Bank," wearing rhinestone-rimmed sunglasses and unbuttoned shirt, to announce to a largely bogus audience that the sperm of certain famous rock stars had been stolen. But in his better moments he has managed to hold up a mirror to media reality, and reveal it for the flashy, thoughtless, superficial thing it often is.

Skaggs's most telling moment of deceit may have come when he wound up in an ABC documentary in 1976. The story began when he placed an ad in *The Village Voice* describing his "Cathouse for Dogs, featuring a savory selection of hot bitches—from pedigree (Fifi the French poodle) to mutts (Lady the Tramp)." Another well-written press release produced an avalanche of wide-eyed coverage of a performance involving fifteen dogs and twenty-five actors.

But that was only the beginning. Skaggs loves telling the rest of the story. "As a result of articles and television coverage, ABC became interested in interviewing me and visiting the bordello for dogs. Rather than re-create it again and again for every media source, I told Alex Bennet [who had filmed the performance for cable television's *Midnight Blue*] it was a hoax, and he went in on it with me. We provided ABC with a copy of Bennet's "Cathouse for Dogs" video-tape performance." Video is reality, and ABC was duly convinced of Skaggs's authenticity, despite his utter lack of credentials. "ABC interviewed me in Washington Square Park, and I again supported that there was a cathouse for dogs."

ABC was working at the time on a documentary on cruelty to animals, and the video tape and interview were included in the somber *It's a Dog's Life*. Other segments included dogs tied to railroad tracks, beaten dogs, abandoned dogs. A veterinarian declared that he was "completely against" the cathouse. The show was nominated for an Emmy award, and Skaggs was slapped with a summons by the city for operating his establishment without a license. "And when," Skaggs recalls, "I was finally subpoenaed by

Louis Lefkowitz, who was then the New York City attorney general, I revealed to the print medium and to television that it was indeed a performance piece and did not exist. ABC did not retract the story." Skaggs reports that the producer of the documentary remains convinced that the cathouse existed.

Now that we have done our bit in Joey Skaggs's campaign to be taken as a serious artist, we must wonder whether such a reputation might not constitute another plausible but nonexistent reality. Skaggs brought himself to our attention in a letter requesting an interview; but he also managed to wangle himself a page in *People* magazine, a rather odd place for an artist to make a case for himself. And Skaggs's preoccupations do seem to be rather on the trendy side: After running through Vietnam, religion, inflation, cults, and the media, in his next performance he will highlight world hunger. "I'm concerned," says this unwilling celebrity, "that people who are concerned about media and art, and the dynamics of that, haven't followed up and said, 'Wait a minute, this is more than roach pills.'" But we who ponder media, art, and dynamics must ask, how much more?

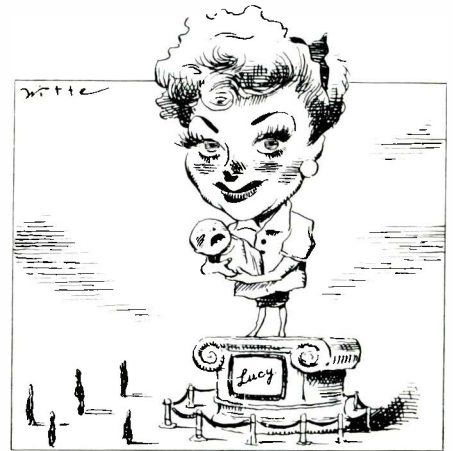
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## Patrons of the Art

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**M**OST MUSEUMS are places where people gather to stare at art, seeking beauty or truth or just a nice spot to fuss around in for an hour. But New York City's Museum of Broadcasting is different. Walk in for a visit and you'll be assigned a private cubicle, a blank television screen, and a videocassette recorder. Order a program of your choice and you're submerged in the psychodrama of Lucy's living room, the anxiety of *The Twilight Zone*, or the muckraking of Edward R. Murrow.

"There are people who practically live here," says Ron Simon, the museum's head of public relations. Two to four times a week, sometimes every day, a small cadre of regular clientele comes to view their favorite shows from the museum's collection of news, documentary, com-



edy, and drama that spans television's fifty-year history. "It's like a little family of members," says Matt Kerbel, the museum attendant. "If they don't show up one day, we wonder about them."

This intimate attitude is a natural aspect of the museum's small size. Perhaps it has also developed because Kerbel and his colleagues are daily witnesses to personal rituals unimaginable in other museums. The regular clients at the Museum of Broadcasting seem less concerned with the universal truths revealed by great art than with discovering something about themselves.

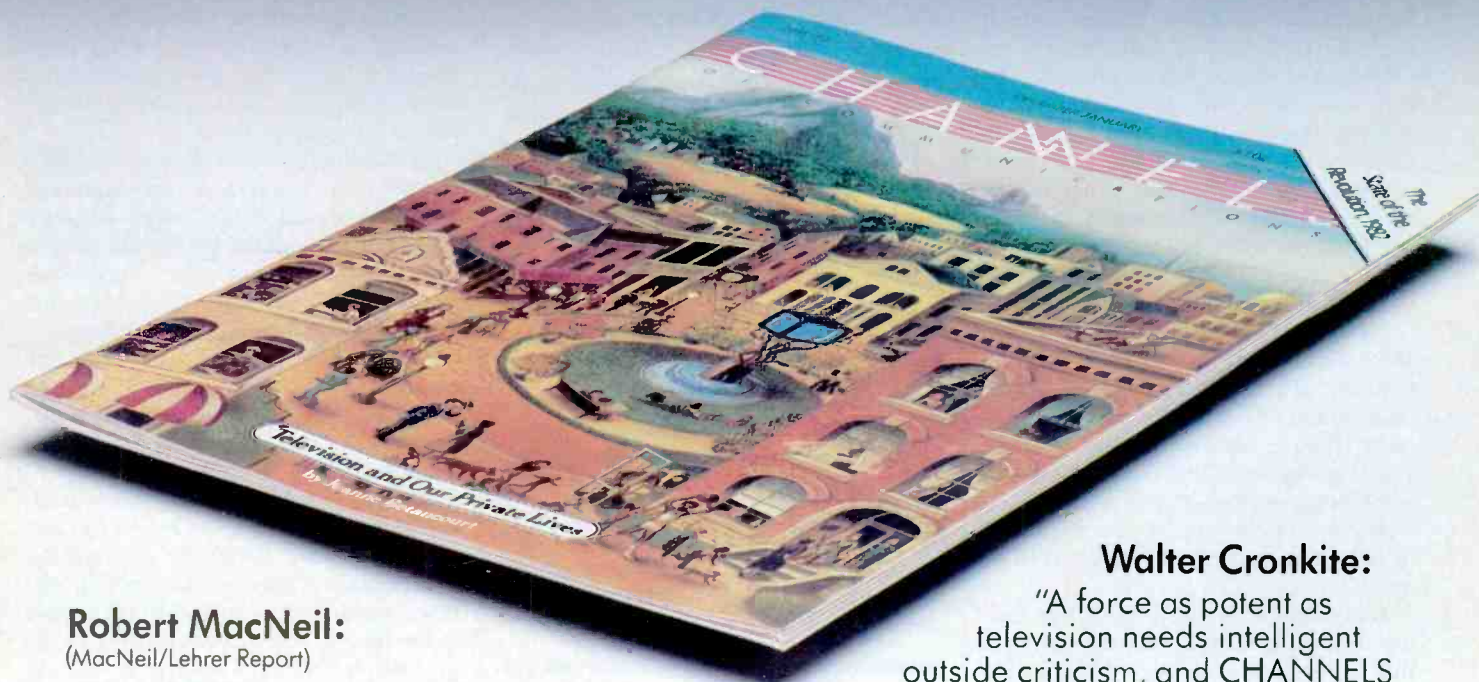
Take Jeff, for instance, who visits the museum almost every day except when he's out of town. "He always wants to see the tape of President Kennedy's funeral, and sometimes he stands at attention when the procession goes by on the screen," says Simon. "Actually, he likes military ceremonies in general. He just loved the Royal Wedding and the Silver Jubilee."

Or there's Bob Wiener, a lawyer just out of school, who comes to the museum twice a week. "I grew up without television because my parents didn't approve of it, and I think they were basically right. But sometimes I felt a loss, especially by feeling the impact it had on my peers. I guess I'm making up time."

However, on his visits to the museum, Wiener's not just watching programs he might have missed as a kid; he's discovering the world he almost grew up in, and is perhaps restoring to himself a culture he didn't quite share.

On one occasion Wiener introduced

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this culture to a fourteen-year-old Vietnamese boat person. The boy had never before seen television. Wiener showed him *The Twilight Zone*, *My Three Sons*, and some of Woody Allen's comedy. The boy was overcome. Since then, says Wiener, "his family has been completely taken over by TV. They have four rooms and five TVs, most of which they picked up off the street and repaired. Sometimes you'll go over there and they'll be watching all of them at once, with their lines of vision crossing several times."

"It's a very personal experience," says Mike Sjoblom, a once-a-week museum regular. "It's much more intimate than these places are generally. It's a positive rather than a negative escape, because you're going out of the house and doing something instead of just soaking up whatever's put in front of you. It's a way of experiencing the past that's sort of an uplift."

Many regulars seem to share this feeling of nostalgic uplift. It's almost as if they're gleaning something that goes beyond "historical interest" or entertainment or even the old escape-from-reality routine—as though watching a fifteen-year-old *Dick Van Dyke Show* somehow takes people back to those days of sitting on the living room floor at their parents' feet eating popcorn and unconsciously building a world concept that will accompany them into adulthood. If so, a trip to the Museum of Broadcasting could be a reaffirmation of their own past, a primal touchstone in understanding the way they've constructed a world view—an experience that is not only reassuring but invigorating. Whatever it is, there seems to be something about the museum experience that makes the regulars feel very all right when they leave.

Anthony Sims, who has been plugging in at the museum once a week since the fall of 1979, describes it this way: "Those old shows trigger such profound memories... one image can bring back a hundred things you used to do or feel when you originally saw it."

Sims speculates on what people of the distant future would make of us if their only exposure to our world was what they found in the museum. "It would be like opening the door to some strange planet—all this contradictory stuff. They would really have to wonder, what were they like, what in the world were these people like?"

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## Breakthrough

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**M**ILESTONES don't have to be big. Take, for instance, what happened at Storer Communications, one of the country's top ten multi-systems operators (which means they own more than a few cable systems). Nobody has made much of a fuss about it, but Storer recently made a historic announcement: that it's the first of the country's major cable companies to sell more pay-cable subscriptions than basic-cable service. (This is possible because some basic-cable subscribers buy more than one pay service.)

This may not sound like much, but it wasn't very long ago that people were confidently saying Americans would never pay for television when they could get it free.

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## Progress Report

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**I**N THE EARLY SIXTIES, a Chicago broadcaster named Red Quinlan created a national fuss when he proposed televising on WBKB (now WLS-TV) video-taped bullfights from Mexico City. He was thwarted by a storm of protest from animal-protection societies, politicians, and private citizens, who accused him of exploiting violence and reminded him that bullfights were illegal in the United States. The matter was settled right then that this cultural spectacle was unsuitable for American television.

The prohibition is implicit in the Television Code, the instrument of the National Association of Broadcasters that enunciates program standards for the industry. "The use of animals," the code states, "shall be in conformity with accepted standards of humane treatment." Not all stations subscribe to the code, however, and many that do have been known not to abide by the letter of it.

Twenty-odd years after the Chicago uproar, bullfights are standard weekend fare on UHF affiliates of the Spanish International Network (SIN) and have been for some time. No one seems terribly upset about it. What happened to the howling that gained such notoriety for Quinlan?

Possibly American viewers, in the two decades since, have been subjected to such egregious exploitations of real and fictive violence on television that it would seem absurd to complain about something as tame, in a relative sense, as the ritual contest of man against beast.

One can only admire the way the Mexican network, Televisa, covers the events. The Moments of Truth, which occur so suddenly and swiftly, usually are given a single instant replay: the sword positioned, the thrust, the matador dancing away, the bull looking stunned, lunging, then collapsing in its own blood. How, one wonders, would Howard Cosell have embellished this drama? How delicious would American television have made these deaths?

Thoughts go immediately to the accidental beaming of Ron Cey by Goose Gosage in the World Series last year, and the interminable replays in slow motion, the fearsome fastball bouncing off the helmet at the temple, the player dropping to the ground, possibly dying, we viewers thought, or maimed for life. Again and again we saw it, as if each showing carried some important new information.

There is nothing pleasant about watching the execution of a bull in a public arena, but we have come a long way in twenty years. As grist for the television mill, the bullfight seems a good deal more civilized today than it did in those innocent days when the worst perpetrators of violence on the tube were Popeye and the Three Stooges.

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## Alda All Day

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**C**ABLE TELEVISION is still such a new and mysterious business that million-dollar ideas may come from anywhere. For example:

A teenage girl read an article in this magazine, about the vertical nature of cable programming, that explained why channels had to adopt formats designated all-news, all-sports, all-weather, all-music, all-movies, all-whatever.

"Do you think," she inquired, "that there will ever be an all-M\*A\*S\*H channel?"

"You mean twenty-four hours a day?" "Well, just the waking hours would do," she replied.

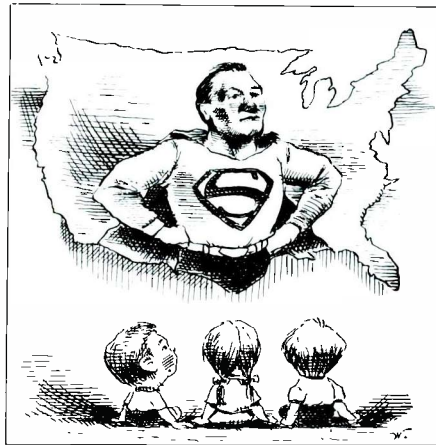
## 'Golly, Superman, how did you do it?'

**Y**OU MEAN the one where Superman has to be in two places at once?" he asks, "and his good friend the professor teaches him how to split his molecules in two?" He grew up in Grosse Pointe, Michigan and went away to school. "No," she says, "I mean the one where Superman had to fly to Greenwich, England to set the international time forward an hour." She went to public schools in Denver and won a scholarship to the state university. "Oh yeah," now he gets the picture, an early childhood memory set in grainy black and white: "Some crook sealed himself up in a concrete bunker for seven years to evade the Statute of Limitations . . ." "That's right," she nods her head encouragingly, "and when he let himself out an hour too soon, Superman arrested him!"

She's a plasma physicist; he's a junior professor of English. Both have been forcibly stranded at a faculty open house thrown by the college that recently hired them. Together now, in rapid-fire succession, they run through the speed-trap town that folded up into a suitcase, the mad professor who invented a lethal explosive while attempting to come up with a postage-stamp adhesive that would taste like chicken soup, and the crook who underwent plastic surgery so he could look just like Superman (and even had the gall to learn to speak like Superman by listening to Superman records). By summoning up the common prime-time matter of their generation, the two have effortlessly bridged the gap between physics and literature, Denver and Detroit, early wealth and early poverty, city and suburb.

For those of us who grew up with pickled-walnut entertainment consoles enshrined like icons in sacred domestic places, the shared experience of even the most bland network fare has constituted a strong generational glue. For those of us born between *Your Show of Shows* and the onset of *Charlie's Angels*, the innocence of popular family drama dovetailed nicely with the innocence of our own childhoods.

Our parents worried that we'd be scarred by television—that we'd turn soft in the head, lose our concentration, lose our teeth to Froot Loops, lose our imagination. But looking back from our current by-no-means-certain posture as a generation, we tend to long for that time when



television shows supported the feeling that we were all one America.

The affable domestic world of Donna Reed and *Father Knows Best*, *Leave It to Beaver* and *Dennis the Menace*, was founded upon a popular and persuasive illusion of nearly perfect conformity. The assumption underlying the most familiar sitcoms was that Americans were becoming more and more the same: more middle-class, more suburban, more "American." And even though the pressure of subsequent events has shattered that illusion, and television itself has become just as likely to point out our differences as it ever was to overlook them, those of us whose perception of the "normal" is still rooted in the image of sitcom land—we and our fellow Baby-Boomers—can still harken back to the naïve, reassuring memories of Ozzie and Lucy and Ricky and Kookie.

We've graduated by now from sitcom land, the grown-up part of us at least, but we somehow recognize that without the stabilizing factor of our common television past, we might be even more fragmented, more finally lost, than we are as it is. And we may soon become as easily worried about what television might do as our parents once were. We know what the cable revolution may yield: the most spectacular variety show of all, more various than Ed Sullivan, sillier than Carol Burnett, deeper than *The Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, sexier than *Charlie's Angels*. And though we don't know what might be gained by all this, we do know what will be lost: that outmoded but not entirely implausible stab at cultural coherence.

The transition will prove particularly painful for us because we knew what it was like before, not through the sporadic

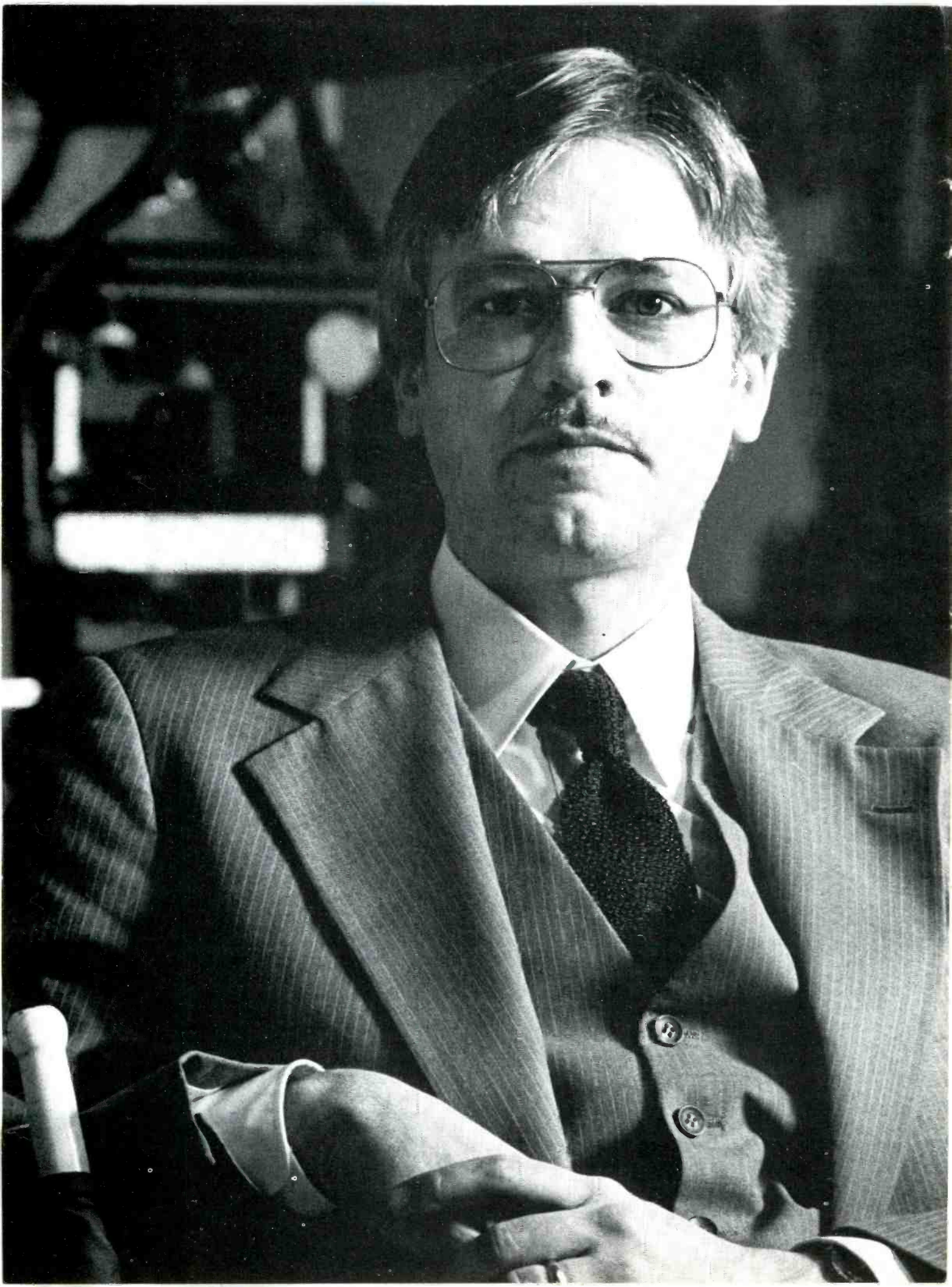
and inevitably skeptical gaze of the adult, but through the eyes of the impressionable young. Watching as the image of America splits into a hundred different channels will seem to some of us like walking through a hall of mirrors, each of them reflecting a different face in a permanently changing society. Because we had so few programs to choose from, we were forced into a collective childhood experience. Because our children are likely to have such an abundance to choose from, they may be forced into a kaleidoscopic enhancement of mere superficial differences.

The cable companies have evolved a canny policy of fragmenting the once-great national audience along demographic lines. We now inhabit multiple Americas, each possessing its "unique" brand of special interests and satisfactions. This notion of narrowcasting, of taking aim at defined segments of a vast restless mass, implies the practical acceptance by television of a status quo long recognized by radio stations, magazines, and (to some extent) movie companies. This weighing of the national mass on sensitive economic scales, as up-scale or down-scale—everything but wide-scale—will undoubtedly lead to a further sharpening and hardening of the dividing lines in an already divided society.

A classics major I knew in college had memorized far more than his mandatory passages from Virgil and Ovid: He also knew by heart nearly every exchange between Lucy and Ricky Ricardo. An archivist by nature, he maintained an uncanny sense of the way in which Lucy and Ricky defined our generational past, in much the same way he understood how Greek and Latin poetry represent the "deep background" of our civilization. In the future, when the classics major or the Arabist or the poet is barraged from an early age by specific signals that effectively keep him on the "right track," the lamentable and pervasive specialization that has invaded nearly every cultural corner will have invaded the last one. The ability of two successive television generations to recall at will entire episodes from *I Love Lucy* will seem hopelessly minor to most of us, until it's no longer there.

STEPHEN FENICHELL ■

*Stephen Fenichell is the author of Daughters at Risk, recently published by Doubleday.*



# CURRIE



*"Incredible opportunities are coming for the local programmer!"*

*Steve Currie, 1981 President of the National Association of Television Program Executives, is Manager of Broadcast Operations, KOIN-TV, Portland, Oregon.*

"NATPE does quite a bit to help improve local programming. Sponsoring the IRIS Awards, for example. They're only for local programming, and there's no question that they've become a major award in the TV industry. NATPE-sponsored workshops and general sessions deal with the problems of local stations and those of the local programmer. The exchange of ideas and information from around the country helps us all.

"The role of Program Director is difficult even for NATPE to define, because responsibilities vary from station to station. It started out, in many cases, that the Program Director was merely an operations clerk who shuffled paper, took the network schedule, and filled in the half-hour hole on Saturday or Sunday. Most of the actual program decisions were made by the General Manager, Sales Manager, or a combination thereof. As Program Director here, I have responsibility for the on-air look of the station. I don't control the journalistic aspect of the news, but I am involved in how the product looks on the air. Attitudes toward the Program Director are changing, too. There is

a great realization that if you have a good programmer who is doing a good job, you're going to get your ratings.

"I think that as our industry develops, the local station with local studio, talent, and expertise is going to become a major supplier to other groups, whether they be a low-powered station in our own market, a cable channel, the video market, whatever.

"Right now it's easier to go out and buy a syndicated series than it is to create your own local programs, but it's not necessarily better. We have a program here called *Northwest Illustrated*, which precedes *60 Minutes* on our station.

It's a magazine half-hour similar to *60 Minutes*—on a local level—and has won a number of awards, including a DuPont Columbia award. This show is, to a great extent, produced on film. We shoot on Kodak film, because we want a clean, finished look—one that sets it apart from some other news programming you see on the air. It's our showpiece and has to have the right look. Kodak film gives that to us. I'm very proud of the show, because the station is not only providing a service—we're doing something of quality.

"If I see any coming trend, it's that of more news and informational shows done on a local basis. This will help local stations maintain their local affinity. And it's a great opportunity for us. Look, it's seldom that a local station can go out

and do a dramatic presentation, a sitcom, or a movie. It's just not in the cards. But here is the chance to have something truly unique for our market. It's where we have our expertise. It's where we have the ability to really excel. There's a lot of opportunity coming for the local station, and I think that's something we all need to keep in mind."

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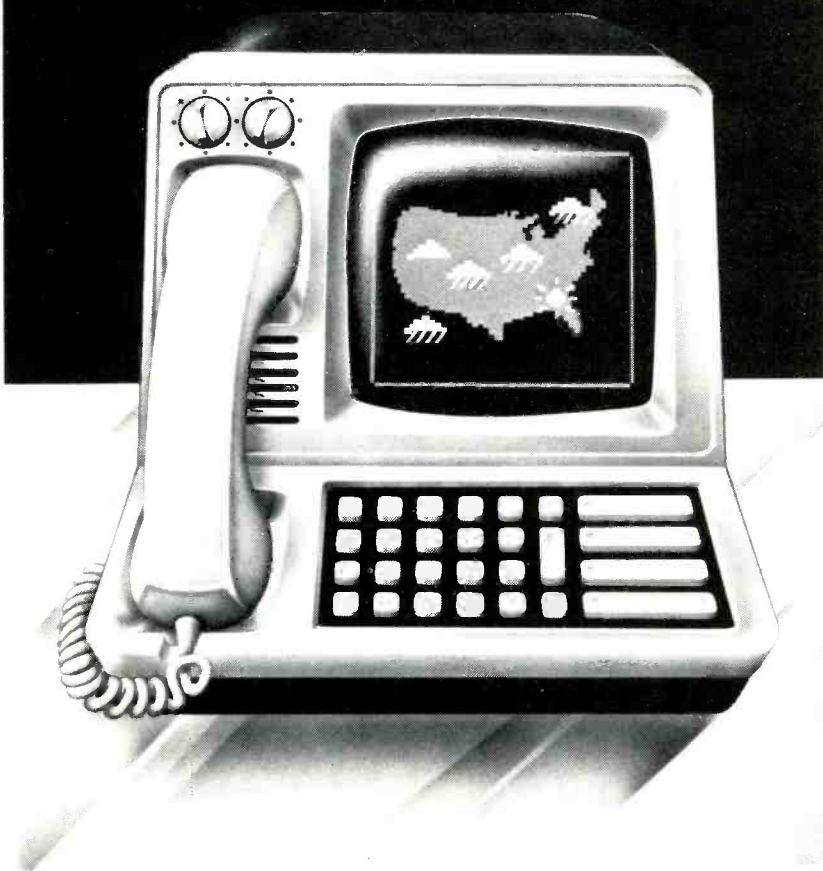
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At the heart of this program is the Teletel videotex system now offering a wide range of services including tele-shopping, electronic mail and reservation facilities, as well as a wide range of information sources supplied by more than one hundred and fifty private organizations and government agencies. Over 2500 families already make daily use of these offerings from the comfort of their own homes. In the next few months, a proportion of these households will have the added value of Teletel "telepayment" services using the advanced technology of the "smart card"—a plastic card equipped with a micro-computer. During 1982, a series of point-of-sale trials are planned in various French cities involving the distribution of tens of thousands of these cards to be used in several hundred smart card POS terminals located in malls, stores and supermarkets.

In addition, a specific application of the Teletel videotex technology has been developed for an electronic directory service which is currently being pre-tested by 1500 telephone customers. The major implementation takes place in the first half of 1982, when a total of 300,000 terminals will be installed to access a database of over 350,000 white- and yellow-page directory entries.

All these and other customer services, including the low-cost digital facsimile terminal, are able to take advantage of the advanced TDM and packet-switching (Transpac) technology with which the French telephone network has been transformed into a multifunctional tool over recent years.

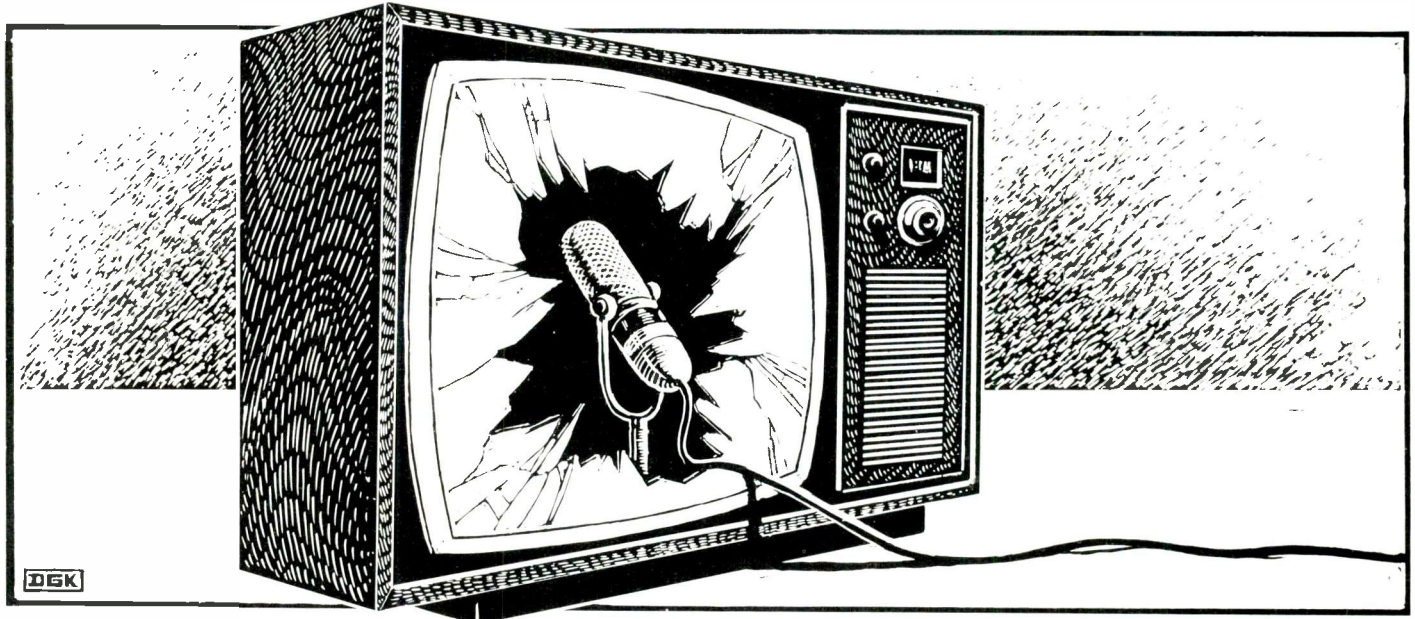
The results of these outstanding activities are now attracting significant international interest. Teletel videotex systems have been sold in the U.S.A., Brazil and Europe, while orders in excess of 130,000 terminal units have been placed for the low-cost directory displays in the U.S.A. alone. This is in addition to the 300,000 units ordered for the French system.

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## Wasted Images

by Todd Gitlin



Illustrations by David Klein

**T**HE NETWORKS' evening news programs may amount to little more than headline services. But at its best, television news gives us something newspapers cannot, namely the look of things, which, besides being memorable—who can forget the look of Oswald doubling over as Jack Ruby fires into his belly?—very often gives us the key to what events mean. Television journalism is to be excused its superficiality, for after all is said, the pictures are supposed to be the point: They render the particular facts of human history universal, simply by showing them to the entire watching world.

But just how revealing are these pictures? It was Stephen Lighthill of San Francisco, once a cameraman for CBS News, who pointed out to me that the typical television news piece is actually an illustrated lecture. The images depend on the narration, not the other way around. Lighthill had gone to work for CBS in 1968 thinking, or hoping, that the camera could convey something of the force of modern life by disclosing what was at stake, visibly at stake, right there, *look*, when somebody made bad decisions and inflicted damage on the world. But he discovered that, through no one's fault, his craft was being squandered. It was partly because his pieces went once over briefly, and partly because there was no network commitment to give pictures their due. He recalled one time getting dropped into Globe, Arizona, where the Forest Service had sprayed the defoliant 2,4,5-T to keep down scrub growth, and where, as a result, mutant plants were growing haywire, a goat was born with three legs; flora and fauna generally were growing out of control. He shot the story in

less than twenty-four hours, stricken all the while by the sight of these deformed creatures. But when the story came on the air, it was only . . . footage: A shot of this, a shot of that, a few more blips of information. The pictures had been reduced to quick illustrations. Oh, the point was clear in a schematic way, if you paid enough attention to the correspondent's voice-over. But the true terror was gone.

In fact, most television news images are slides to illustrate lectures. I understood the force of Stephen Lighthill's point when, a few years ago, I watched a network correspondent put together a piece about social dislocation in a coal boom town. The camera had been set down on the main street of Gillette, Wyoming, and recorded several minutes of tape showing citizens crossing from one side to another. The correspondent left the editor to run through the footage for a while, then came back with his text, which began: "Gillette, Wyoming. It looks like just another scruffy mountain town." On the evidence of the raw footage, it didn't look like any such thing. This population might have been typical of Bakersfield, California, or Clear Lake, Iowa: virtually anywhere west of Chicago, in fact. The folks were kempt and unkempt, Hush-Puppied more than cowboy-booted. But the correspondent told the editor to pick out a few of the scruffier specimens to suit his text. The text came first. It is my impression that this sort of screening is normal, and there is nothing especially heinous about it. Situations are complex, but pieces are short and the points that can be made in ninety seconds are stripped down.

To make matters still more stale, many of the visuals used by evening news programs are devoid of particularity. They are little ritual displays of events themselves made ritual. The Senator strides toward a cluster of reporters, then speaks into the microphones. . . . The monthly increase in the cost-of-living index is flashed over a shot of disconsolate shoppers examining vegeta-

*Todd Gitlin teaches sociology and directs the mass communications program at the University of California, Berkeley. He is author of The Whole World Is Watching, and is working on a book about television entertainment.*

bles in the supermarket. . . . The plane taxis into view; the visiting dignitary walks down the stairs waving, then salutes the honor guard. It could be Menachem Begin arriving in Washington, Ronald Reagan in New York, Leonid Brezhnev in Belgrade. The world's symbols have been engraved one micrometer deeper in granite, but just what useful information has been conveyed?

Speaking of vegetables, I am often cooking when the seven o'clock news comes on, and I have discovered that I learn more from the pieces of news — and “pieces” is the right word — when I don't break off my preparations in order to dash off to the screen only to behold Bill Plante standing in front of the White House, or the black smokestacks illustrating a story about pollution, or the well-dressed corporate spokesman denying responsibility. Hearing is understanding, if not believing.

But the point of pictures should not be to convey blips of information. For that purpose, one short paragraph may be worth a dozen pictures, or a hundred. Indeed, the points of contention in a proposed AWACS sale are not conveyed through a succession of graphics, no matter how crisply focused or colorful. The news gives us pictures because pictures seem to guarantee the authenticity of the report, to confirm what Stuart Hall calls the “having-been-there” of the news. But the ritual is empty.

Of course I don't mean to suggest that news pictures be abolished. A few seconds of a Solidarity convention in Poland

reminds us that rebellion is real. Those weather-beaten faces are a genuine gift to the political spirit, something *new*, and they compensate for the otherwise predictable coverage. Historical footage, too, is eye-opening, especially for the young. An obituary collage can convey quite powerfully the sense of the completed yet incomplete curve of a lifetime.

Television news should encourage its camera operators to use their wits and take their time. Forget the headlines; let reports on tomorrow's developments *review* yesterday's, not repeat them, and we will only end up wiser. Meanwhile, let's have more of CBS's *Sunday Morning*'s use of pictures in *vérité* style, silencing for once that omniscient narrator who cannot trust us with our vision. Let the processors of our news dare more often to use pictures as revelations. Oddly enough, perhaps news pictures are worth the most when they convey images of events that might never take place, or that happen behind our backs. In its excellent five-part series *The Defense of the United States* last June, CBS simulated the look of an atomic blast in Omaha. Words could not have said what has to be said, again and again, about the enormity of thermonuclear war. These most important images give us versions of what is hardest to imagine unaided.

Let television news genuinely see at a distance, let it cease anesthetizing us with clichés, and we shall be genuinely in its debt. ■

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## The First Amendment's Second Chance

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by David L. Bazelon

**T**HE CENTRAL CHALLENGE facing decision-makers in communications — as in so many other fields today — is to determine the appropriate governmental response to the changes wrought by science. Although our vision of the future shifts every day, it is clear that these changes will have a profound impact on our society for good or ill. Should they be left to the marketplace, or should government intervene?

Communications regulation in the United States begins from a set of premises perhaps unique in the world. To an unparalleled extent, our society is committed to the notion that in an “uninhibited marketplace of ideas, truth will prevail,” that political and social justice can best be pursued through robust and unrestricted debate. And to a larger degree than most, our society claims to uphold each person's right to be different, to have opinions of his own and make choices for himself, to seek dignity and fulfillment independently. These twin ideals — the free exchange of information and the right of personal autonomy — are embodied, of course, in our foremost communications “regulation,” the First Amendment. In order to safeguard and promote our democratic values of self-government and individual dignity, the First Amendment protects three distinct liberties: the right to speak, the right to know, and the right to privacy. A forthright effort to make the most of the new communications technology must confront these potentially conflicting rights and make them harmonious.

The information revolution offers great promise of enhancing these rights and their underlying democratic values. More channels of communications could mean more speakers and a greater variety of voices. A greater number of individuals could enjoy a

meaningful right to speak, and listeners could turn to a larger number of sources in the exercise of their right to know.

Yet unthinking promotion of the new technologies has its dangers. Already, the technological capability for collecting, analyzing, and distributing information has surpassed George Orwell's wildest fantasies.

We must ask ourselves what we gain and what we lose by using these tools. Imagine, for example, the benefit to medical practice from a centralized system of reporting, analyzing, storing, and retrieving medical information from around the world. But how can we prevent abuse of such highly personal information? The new information technologies offer limitless possibilities for improving the quality of life. But who will control them? The government? New entrants with no track records? Established broadcasters and common carriers? Before the current clamor for “deregulation” hardens into political sloganeering and facile solutions, we should carefully consider the lessons of the past.

In broadcasting, protecting the speaker's right to say whatever he wants does not necessarily lead to a flourishing of diverse viewpoints. On the contrary, because the licensee can exclude others from his frequency, protecting the broadcaster's right may tend to *suppress* viewpoints — the viewpoints of those who do not have a broadcast license. The right to speak thus runs headlong into the companion First Amendment value: the right to hear from the widest variety of sources. Therefore, the Communications Act made broadcasters short-term “public trustees” and imposed a variety of controls on their activities.

I think everyone would agree that the decision to regulate the content of broadcasters' speech, whether right or wrong, was an exceedingly difficult one to make. No one committed to the American ideal of self-government can be content with the restrictions on free speech imposed on broadcasters in the name of diversity. Content regulation can be embraced, if at all, reluctantly, as the only available means of promoting diversity.

Yet the record of fifty years of regulation reveals that the mandate to promote diversity is unfulfilled. The FCC's recent network inquiry report confirms what has long been obvious.

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*David L. Bazelon is senior judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. This article is an excerpt of his speech at the ninth annual Telecommunications Policy Research Conference in 1981.*

"Past commission policies," it concludes, "have served effectively to limit television to a system dominated by three over-the-air advertiser-supported networks." The blame lies squarely with ill-advised governmental decisions like the 1952 allocation scheme, the intermixture policy, and restrictions on competing services. Nor have the commission's content regulations succeeded in promoting diversity among the few voices permitted by these policies. I believe that the Fairness Doctrine, for instance, has had a significant chilling effect on controversial issue programming.

The teachings of this experience are quite clear. First, the insight of the founding fathers has been confirmed. Even with the best of intentions, government cannot regulate the content of speech and still be consistent with democratic values. Second, we cannot realize the ideal of diversity as long as powerful instruments of communication remain in the hands of a relative few. And third, only at our peril do we sacrifice one First Amendment value for the sake of another.

Before the opportunity passes, we should carefully apply these lessons to the developing services. Should we apply content regulation to the new technologies? Take cable television, the service that appears to be moving most rapidly and that holds the greatest promise of bringing on the television of abundance. Perhaps content-based regulation had some appeal in the early years of cable development. But today, with systems carrying thirty or more channels, with the availability of access channels and leased-channel capacity, does it make *any* sense for the government to pursue diversity in cable through content control?

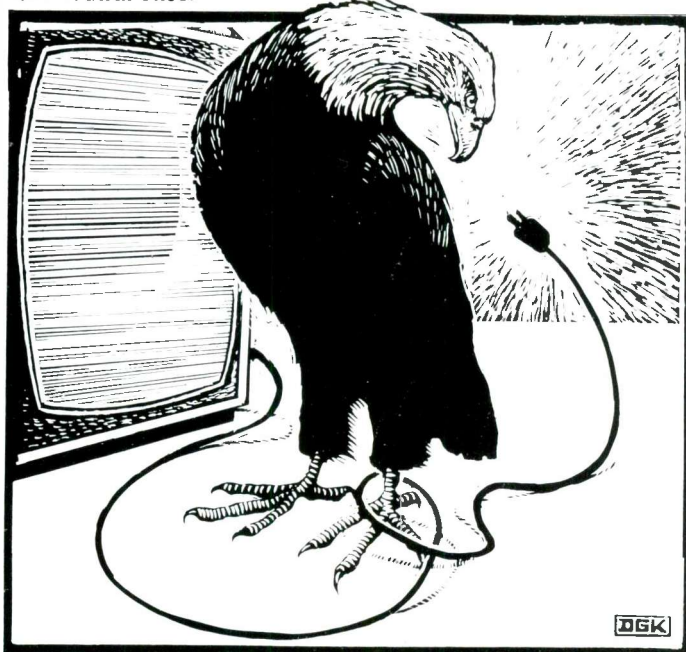
While experience warns us against adopting content controls unless they are absolutely necessary, it also cautions us against giving too much power over the new media to established private interests. Some signs indicate that this second lesson of the past is not being heeded today. The networks, even while fighting cable deregulation in court, are seeking to buy cable systems of their own. Broadcasters are also seeking a prominent role in the new low-power service. Established firms argue that the efficiencies their experience and resources can bring to bear on the new technologies outweigh the dangers of concentration.

The economic arguments made by the existing firms may be sound. I take no position either way. It is important to remember, however, that concentration poses special dangers in the communications area, whatever the economic impact. The Supreme Court articulated one of the guiding principles of communications policy more than thirty-five years ago when it said, "The widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public." Established firms may be able to introduce new services quickly and cheaply, but the price may be to reduce the number of voices.

Clearly, then, we should pause before allowing the marketplace full sway. In an atmosphere of complete *laissez-faire*, it is all too likely that the new technologies will be dominated by the same voices that have brought us today's homogenized fare. Does this mean that, as in 1934, we must reluctantly tolerate a regime of intrusive government regulation? The notion appears to be gaining popularity as a new rationale for separate First Amendment treatment of the telecommunications press. In the face of burgeoning new technologies, it is increasingly difficult to adhere to the scarcity theory on which *Red Lion* relied. Instead, in cases like *Pacifica*, content control seems to be justified by the "intrusive" nature of the media. In essence, the argument is that the telecommunications press is too powerful to be free.

But it is important to distinguish between the power gained by oligopoly in the production of news and entertainment programming, and the power inherent in the medium. The real concern is a traditional fear of monopoly of power. I believe the fear is warranted, but it should be confronted on its own ground and not chased back into the hoary swamps of government regulation of

speech. We have another alternative: "structural" regulation of the media. For instance, the antitrust laws could substantially increase the likelihood of diversity in programming if used vigorously. The FCC has tightened its regulations limiting cross-ownership of media outlets in recent years. With far more potential speakers than outlets, there may be room for even stricter *multiple* ownership rules than presently prevail. Applied to the new technologies, this approach might also encourage a greater multitude of tongues. With many of the new technologies just getting off the ground, a diligent pursuit of structural strategies offers us a real opportunity to avoid the mistakes of the past. Instead of allowing communications giants to grow to a size requiring content regulation, we could encourage a "thousand flowers to bloom" from the outset and limit government regulations to content-neutral ones.



The structural approach has the advantage of promoting *both* the right to speak *and* the right to know. Thus, it would heed the third lesson of the past, by avoiding the sacrifice of one First Amendment value for the sake of another. There is no reason why we should not be able to enhance both the right to speak and the right to know through the new technologies. Both values, after all, are advanced by the free flow of information, and the new services promise an unprecedented number of communications channels. But as much as our open society values the spread and unrestricted use of information, can we encourage these developments without jeopardizing a third First Amendment value, the sacred right to *privacy*? The information revolution means that I may find out everything about anything. But it also means I may learn more about you than you want me to know. Nor can I be sure that I will be able to control who knows what about me. Will we still be able to afford unfettered rights to speak and to know as the pace of technological development quickens?

I have no answer to this agonizing dilemma. I do know that we can never begin to resolve it unless we proceed carefully, openly, and with full awareness of the risks, uncertainties, and the choices at stake. In the early days of communications regulation, we necessarily acted out of ignorance. Today, with fifty years of experience, we have no such excuse.

At the brink of a new era in information capabilities, we can write — perhaps for the last time — on a clean slate. Technology has given us a second chance to act cautiously and with full appreciation of our values, our experience, and what we have yet to learn. Unless we seize this opportunity, the promise of the communications revolution may remain unfulfilled. ■

## Guilty of Innocence

by Les Brown

**A**LTHOUGH I'VE WRITTEN about and studied cable television for many years, I have only just begun living with it. UA-Columbia Cablevision hooked up my home a few weeks ago, installing a converter device with thirty-five buttons for tuning. This is a one-way system, hardly the state of the art, yet sufficient to make the old way of receiving television signals seem crude.

The arrival of cable created a stir in my town: much talk everywhere about whether it was worth getting, and what was on, and whether to buy either or both of the proffered pay networks, HBO and The Movie Channel. Much concern, too, about whether the kids, already overfed with television, will want to watch even more. I found myself marveling at the innocence with which we entered a new age in the history of man.

But if we were guilty of innocence, UA-Columbia could be blamed for something worse—bringing us into the mysterious new age with no more ceremony than attends the serving of coffee in a pizza parlor. A young technician came to perform the hookup, leaving behind, along with a trail of wire cuttings, a drab little booklet with the month's listing of movies on the pay channels. It also contained a grid identifying each of the channels on the system. After that, the subscriber was on his own.

On my own, I have spent more time tapping the buttons on the tuning console to check out the offerings than in watching any single channel. I suspect I will never get over doing this; it has added a new dimension to the television experience. So far, what I enjoy most about cable is being able to flip through television the way I've been able to flip through magazines and books. I don't know whether I do this because I want to watch everything or because I really don't want to watch anything.

In the form that UA-Columbia provides it, cable is quite simply *more* television: more broadcast stations (signals imported from other states), more public television, more sports than anyone could ask for, and an abundance of movies for the indiscriminating. As for cable's own satellite networks, there is a fair repre-

sentation on this system, but there are also some notable omissions. Nickelodeon, Warner Amex's commercial-free channel for children, is absent, for example. Undoubtedly this is because UA-Columbia is part owner of the USA Network, which carries Calliope, a children's feature that poses as a competitor to Nickelodeon. Of course, all the "adult movie" services are absent, but those are bound to come later; on a brand-new system, it is impolitic to introduce pornography until cable itself has found acceptance.

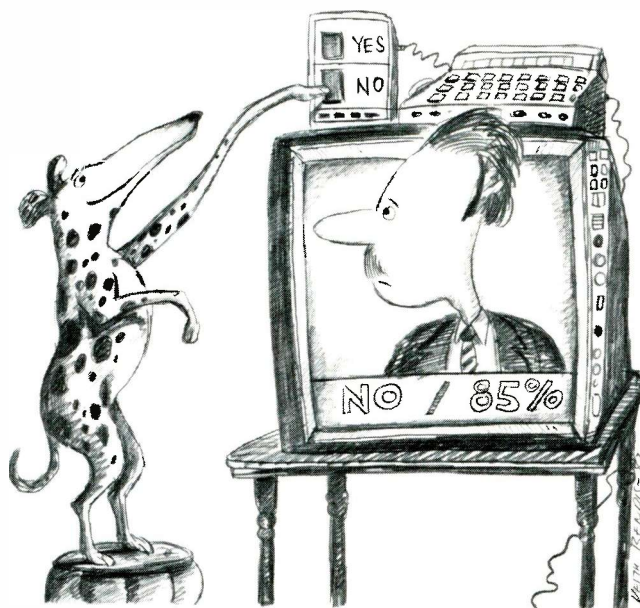
It was at once apparent that the cable company was going to spend no more for programming than was absolutely necessary. Some half-dozen channels on the system carry alphanumeric material—a Reuters wire service, financial reports, a scoreboard, a

community bulletin board, and the like. These are channels almost no one would miss, and they stand at the ready to yield to additional pay services when the time is right.

Traveling across the console buttons without benefit of a program guide provides a mild sense of adventure; the opportunities for discovery are greater than they have been since the early years of television, when commercial broadcasters were still experimenting with program forms. Except that today we look into *programming* rather than programs; the variety comes horizontally, across all the channels, rather than on any single channel. There are no shows, only pieces that fit a format.

Now that I have push-button tuning, I wonder if I will ever again watch a television commercial, time being precious. I wonder if millions of other cable subscribers aren't also ducking out for a quick peek at the basketball or hockey games during the advertising breaks. What will happen then to television's economic system and the marketing strategies of Procter and Gamble, Ford Motor Company, and Miller Beer? I wonder what the browsing is going to be like when we have a hundred channels of cable: who's going to make a living from people like me then?

I wonder what this proliferation will mean to *TV Guide*, America's most widely circulated magazine. Will it be able to produce the equivalent of a telephone book weekly for every zip



# James Clavell's The Children's Story...

but not just for children



A dramatic television program  
without commercial interruption  
Host: Peter Ustinov  
Thursday evening, February 18  
Check local listings

The Children's Story, published by Delacorte Press/Eleanor Friede, available at local bookstores.

Mobil  
Showcase  
Network

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code in the country? Will the need for program information provide the breakthrough for teletext, television's own information-retrieval system?

Meanwhile, the abundance that encourages browsing rather than viewing grieves my wife. Why do we need yet more television, she wants to know? In a brief few weeks, to her chagrin, our household has felt cable's effects. My tapping away at the buttons is like a maddening tic. And our teenage children, who had finally gotten over their addiction to the tube, are back at it again, determined to drain our money's worth from the pay channels. We're not watching television, they argue, we're watching movies.

Our world is changing again. It is strange to think that this is the easy part, the diaper stage — with so much more to come.

**M**Y LOSS OF INNOCENCE with cable, my sense of having entered a new age, came not with the UA-Columbia system I browse through at home but from a different, slightly earlier cable experience. Several months ago I agreed to appear on the Cable News Network's *Take Two* program to discuss *Channels*. *Take Two* is CNN's equivalent of NBC's *Today* except that it is presented at noon.

In a segment budgeted at six minutes, I faced the two co-hosts, Don Farmer and Chris Curle, by television monitor, they in Atlanta, I in New York. They began by asking me to explain why, according to a certain article in *Channels* ("The Twists In Two-Way Cable," by David Burnham), we Americans had anything to fear in the emerging new communications environment. I answered that while there is much to praise in two-way cable systems like Warner Amex's QUBE in Columbus, Ohio, there were serious implications for personal privacy. Two-way systems are hitched to computers that scan each household every six seconds, recording all manner of information. They know what we watch, what we buy through television, how we vote in public-opinion polls.

Farmer then sprung a surprise, sort of a journalistic ambush. It happens, he advised me, that we're hooked up right now to the QUBE system in Columbus. Let's see (I'm paraphrasing from memory) what the folks up there who subscribe to two-way cable think about these concerns.

Wham. I was in the interactive mode, suddenly made part of one of QUBE's patented polls. The host first asked who believes there's a loss of privacy, and then who doesn't. Within seconds we had the result: Some 85 percent, as I recall, had no problem with the privacy issue; the remainder felt otherwise. Farmer made a brief speech, the sense of which was that the people had spoken in rebuttal of the article. My six minutes were up, I was off the line, thanked, and sent back to my office.

On the way back, I relived the episode and found it chilling. So this was the famous instant plebiscite, the remarkable new way to sample public opinion. The host not only controls the questions but also the answers. Since both QUBE and CNN are in the cable business and had an interest in debunking the article and burying the privacy issue; how could we be sure the result they flashed on the screen was the actual result? What if the real computer tally had been the opposite: 85 percent worried, 15 percent not worried — would QUBE and CNN, given their interest, have reported it that way? Well, let's not be paranoid. Let's say they probably would have. But there is no way to be sure. We simply have to trust.

And then this troubled me: What does 85 percent mean? How many people took part in this poll? A thousand? Two hundred? Forty-six? Twelve? This instant poll was taken around noon in the middle of the week on a system that serves only a section of Columbus, 30,000 homes. There were twenty-nine other channels in competition for the audience at that hour — including the three

network affiliates. What kind of poll is it that speaks only in percentages and doesn't reveal the sample size? And what kind of journalism is it that fobs this stuff off as pertinent?

Further: Who were the voters? Who watches television at noon? A few years ago, when I visited Columbus and called on QUBE households, I heard repeatedly that the little children — preschoolers — loved to push the response buttons. So who was rebutting David Burnham's thoughtful and well-researched article without having read it?

It's of no serious consequence, of course, that a sham referendum was held on an issue raised by a mere magazine article. But what is frightening to contemplate is that such polls are routinely conducted on every kind of important national issue, and their results cited as public opinion. You will never hear a cable newscaster say: QUBE took a poll today, and here's what some four-year-olds in Columbus think about the sale of Awacs to Saudi Arabia. . . . But some poor Congressman may think he hears the voice of his constituents.

It is some comfort that Warner Amex Cable Communications itself gave little credence to the QUBE poll that sought to minimize the privacy issue. A few weeks later the company produced a policy paper outlining the ways in which it means to preserve the privacy of individuals subscribing to the QUBE system. It vows to explain to its subscribers the kinds of information it is gathering and to maintain safeguards to insure the confidentiality of this information. This is commendable, but we are still being asked to trust.

#### IN M. STEVENS'S VIEW



"THIS IS DANIEL LIPMAN IN FRONT OF A LARGE PICTURE OF THE CAPITOL. . ."

I confess being relieved that the town I live in lacked the bargaining muscle to negotiate a more advanced cable system than the simple-minded one that just provides more television, more sports, more movies. I am content to browse over bullfights, ballets, and alphanumeric until elected officials reckon there might be something to worry about in cable monopolies that enter our homes to gather information, and then package the information — for sale to other marketers, or as news, or as the public's voice for political purposes. My home is not available for entry yet. It's not that I have an aversion to new technology. It's that I'm unwilling to let technology set the terms. ■

# The Second American Revolution

by Benjamin Barber



**D**EMOCRACY WAS CONCEIVED in an unwired world, one without telephones, computers, or television. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the 1830s, he marveled at its "spirit of liberty," which, he concluded, arose directly out of vigorous civic activity, municipal self-government, and face-to-face interaction. Then, as now, democracy meant government by consent, and consent depended upon consensus and thus upon effective communication. In a society innocent of electronics, communications meant reading local newspapers, forming voluntary associations, develop-

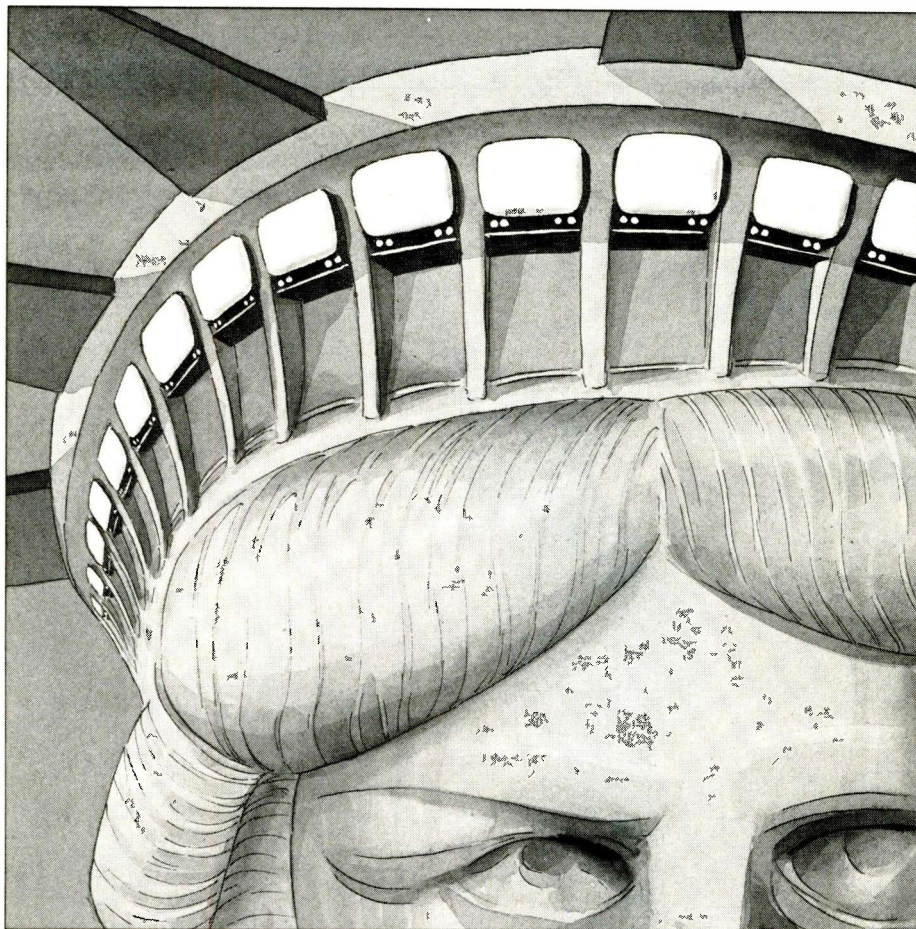
ing public schools, and exploiting the American propensity for endless talk.

Democracy survives, but de Tocqueville's simpler world of self-governing townships has vanished. The community of citizens governing themselves face to face has given way to the mass society, and live talk has been replaced by telecommunications. Once a nation of talkers, we have turned into a nation of watchers—once doers, we have become viewers—and the effect on our democracy has been profound. The average American watches television between six and seven hours a day; he votes just once a year, if that. Indeed, only one of every two Americans votes in Presidential elections.

Although every schoolchild knows that television is the national pastime and politics is only one feature of its coverage, not even university professors have thought very much about the medium's long-term

impact on democracy. Yet we have already passed through one major age of telecommunications technology, and we now stand on the threshold of a second. This may be our last opportunity to turn the technology of the new age into a servant of an old political idea: democracy. Democracy will have a difficult time surviving under the best of circumstances; with television as its adversary, it seems almost sure to perish.

The first age of television—from its pre-war inception through the 1970s—was characterized by the scarcity of airwaves available for television transmission. This so-called spectrum scarcity gave us a system in which three mammoth national networks monopolized public communication, the government regulated in the name of the public interest, and viewers came to perceive themselves as passive spectators willing to leave pro-



Where television once united the nation,  
it will now fragment it.

gramming decisions to network executives and their corporate sponsors.

The effects of this first age of television on America's political culture were mixed. But in one clear sense, network television's homogenized programming benefited democracy: By offering the country the semblance of a national culture and national political norms, it provided a consensus indispensable to national unity. Occasionally this was a direct result of network attitudes—as in the fifties with integration, the sixties with Vietnam, or the seventies with Watergate. But more often, the television consensus was informal and indirect. National debates such as the Kennedy-Nixon exchanges, national media personalities such as Ed Sullivan, Johnny Carson, and Walter Cronkite, and such national rituals as the Kennedy funeral, the moon walk, and the mourning for Martin Luther King—all these bestowed upon the country a legacy of national symbols and myths that cut across our divisive regions, sects, interest groups, parties, races, ethnic communities, and political constituencies.

In a nation as fragmented and pluralis-

tic as ours, where from the very beginning—in the Federalist Papers—the "specter of faction" loomed as the greatest peril, television has offered perhaps the only truly common vision we can have. If there is an American melting pot, it is fired nowadays primarily by electronic means. How else than in front of the communal fires of television could Americans have mourned together their fallen leaders? If *Roots* had not been screened in prime time on eight consecutive evenings, would the meaning of being black in America ever have touched so many non-black Americans? *Roots* is a celebration not only of being black but of being American. Network television, both at its best and its worst—*Roots* and *Holocaust* as much as *General Hospital* and *Family Feud*—has helped us to subscribe to common values and to identify with a single national community. It is difficult to imagine the "Kennedy Generation," the "Sixties," Watergate, the Woodstock Generation, or even the Moral Majority, in the absence of national television. Who we are in common is what we see in common.

One aspect of this television consensus

has been corrosive both to democracy and liberty, however. The dominion of a few media giants over scarce public airwaves has centralized control over information and entertainment. Democracy thrives on dissent, deviance, political heterogeneity, and individuality; network television catalyzes uniformity and homogeneity. Move a program too far off center as measured by the mass audience, and plummeting Nielsen ratings will chase sponsors away. Whether the media's middling vision is seen as the victory of bad taste (as the intellectuals claim), or of an Eastern liberal elite (as Spiro Agnew used to insist), or of crass secular materialism (as the Moral Majority asserts), or of the corporate establishment (as the Left believes), there can be little doubt that it is a safe and complacent vision that offers little hospitality to alternative perspectives. A common vision may also be a homogenized, plasticized, and intolerant vision, one that distorts America's defining pluralism by imposing uniform stereotypes on a heterogeneous people.

To the extent the networks succeed in making Americans think in common, they may destroy in us the capacity to think independently. The great American television consensus of the last thirty years dismissed the aspirations of both religion and socialism (thus the hostility fundamentalists and leftists show the media today). In place of genuine American archetypes, it gave us watery stereotypes: Archie Bunker, your friendly neighborhood racist, who wouldn't do any man real harm; Sanford and Son, who proved that black folks, aside from being a bit more hip, are just like every one else; Mary Tyler Moore, who could gently mock the patriarchal world without ever truly challenging it. There were tough-but-generous cops, misguided revolutionaries, reformed junkies, urbane preachers, and decent bigots—but no vicious detectives or legitimate terrorists or victorious punks or unbending Christians or despicable hypocrites. From the safety of the center, all differences were reduced to matters of style, while the difficult choices and grim polarities of real moral and political life were ignored. The first age of television gave us unity but exacted the price of uniformity.

Disturbing as these dilemmas are, they now belong to history. For we stand, prepared or not, on the threshold of a second television age. This new age, with its own innovative technologies, promises to revolutionize our habits as viewers, as consumers, and ultimately, as citizens.

Although cable television itself relies on a technology as old as communication by wire, the convergence of a group of new technologies has made possible an



entirely new system of telecommunications, one that offers us two-way and multiple-channel cable television, satellite distribution, video discs, video cameras and recorders, and access to remote computers and data banks. These technologies will bring into our homes a vastly expanded range of news and entertainment programming, diverse information services, consumer and financial transaction services, public-access programming, security systems, and television referenda. Twenty-eight percent of American homes now receive some kind of cable service; that number will double by the end of the decade. Already in some places people are using interactive television to relax, look, talk, vote, play, shop, inform themselves, express opinions, secure their homes, and go to school. State-of-the-art systems like Columbus, Ohio's QUBE will be installed in all the major cities now being franchised. The prospect of a "wired society" is quite real.

What will be the likely effects of this new era of telecommunications on American democracy? How will it compare to the first, now seemingly primitive era? What sort of questions ought to be put to the new industry by the federal government, the municipal franchisers, and the public at large?

At present, the government seems disposed to put the new technologies into the hands of an unencumbered private sector. The Federal Communications Commission has consistently argued that cable's multiple channels make spectrum scarcity—and the regulations that issue from it—obsolete. The Supreme Court in 1979 ruled that the FCC is not justified in requiring cable companies to provide public access. And Congress seems inclined to let "market forces" shape the development of modern telecommunications. Consequently, America is crossing the threshold of the new television age without reflection or planning; few seem aware, or concerned, that the new technologies may profoundly affect the nature of our public life and thus the character of our democracy. Yet present tendencies suggest the emergence of one of three distinct scenarios, each with far-reaching political consequences. We might call these scenarios "The New Tower of Babel," "The Corporate Big Brother," and "The Electronic Town Meeting."

**The New Tower of Babel:** From the perspective of the viewer, at least, the new technologies would appear to decentralize television. In a cable system with fifty or a hundred channels, the responsibility for

selecting services and programming shifts from the supplier to the consumer. The passive spectator of homogenized network fare is replaced by the active viewer, who creates his own information and entertainment programming by choosing among the hundreds of local and national program services, pre-recorded discs and tapes, and the various services two-way cable makes available.

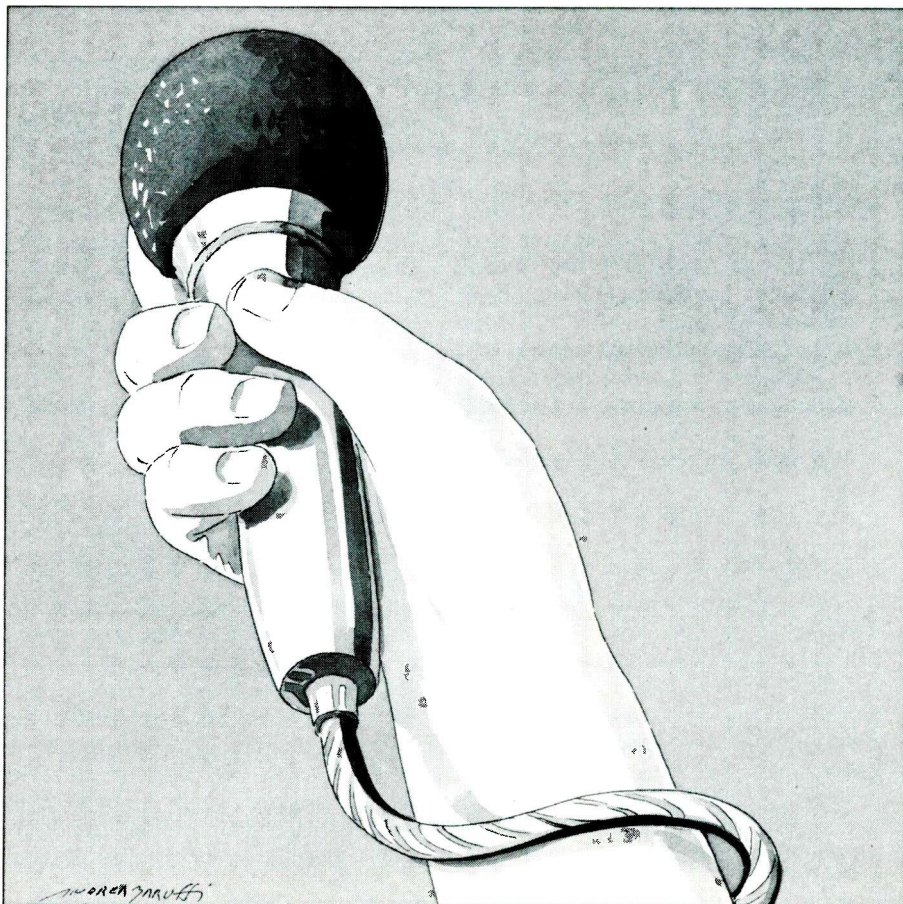
But a political price is paid for this new activism among viewers and the apparent decentralization of television: Where television once united the nation, it will now fragment it. Those it once brought together it will now keep apart. In place of broadcasting comes the new ideal of "narrowcasting," in which each special audience is systematically typed, located, and supplied with its own special programming. Each group, each class, each race, and each religious sect can have its own programs, and even its own mini-network, specially tailored to its distinct characteristics, views, and needs. The critical

Every parochial voice  
will get a hearing, but  
the public as a whole  
will have no voice.

communication *between* groups that is essential to the forging of a national culture and public vision will vanish: in its place will come a new form of communication *within* groups, where people need talk only to themselves and their clones.

This fragmentation is already well underway. Among the proliferating new program services available today are a Hispanic network, several Christian fundamentalist networks, a black network, and a number of highbrow culture networks. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce recently announced plans for the American Business Network, a private satellite television system. "BizNet" will enable the business community to organize and to communicate more effectively—with itself.

In the New Tower of Babel, all this programming diversity and special-interest narrowcasting replaces communication with group narcissism. The tube now becomes a mirror showing us only ourselves, relentlessly screening out any images that do not suit our own special prejudices and group norms. Fundamentalists no longer have to confront Carl Sagan in the course of a day's television viewing. No longer do special-interest groups have to filter their particular concerns through a national medium and adjust their message to a pluralistic nation. Faction—the scourge



of democracy feared by its critics from James Madison to Walter Lippmann—is given the support of technology; compromise, mutualism, and empathy—indispensable to effective democratic consensus—are robbed of their national medium. Every parochial voice gets a hearing (though only before the already converted), and the public as a whole is left with no voice. No global village, but a Tower of Babel: a hundred chattering mouths bereft of any common language.

**The Corporate Big Brother:** The Tower of Babel may be a suitable metaphor for the heterogeneity and pluralism of the new media as they appear to the consumer; but the viewer's perspective is partial, and probably illusory. To examine modern telecommunications at the supplier end is to wonder whether Big Brother may prove to be the more apt metaphor for television's second age.

As abundant in number as these new channels and program services seem, they are rapidly falling under conglomerate control. The potential for leviathan profits from the new industries is drawing the attention of the communications giants. A few entrepreneurial upstarts—such as Ted Turner—may remain on the scene for a while, but they almost certainly will be absorbed or conquered. Diversity at one end of the cable may mask

monopoly at the other.

If this picture of a few corporate elites playing the role of Big Brother under the camouflage of pluralistic special-interest programming seems exaggerated, it should be recalled that cable is a capital-intensive industry. The extraordinary costs of wiring America for cable or leasing transponder space on satellites suggest that only the most powerful corporations are in a position to sustain long-term interests in the cable industry.

Among these powerful corporations will be the networks, which are already actively moving into cable programming. ABC, in partnership with Westinghouse, will launch two cable news services to compete with Ted Turner's Cable News Network, a property in which CBS has expressed interest. Westinghouse's own position in cable is formidable: Not only does the company have several other program services on its drawing boards, but it will have enough transponders (fourteen) and cable subscribers (1.6 million, through its subsidiary, Teleprompter) to guarantee some success. And now that the government has lifted restrictions on AT&T, that company will also be in a commanding position. Even without its local subsidiaries, AT&T has research and development capabilities that could allow it to dominate videotex services.

Westinghouse, AT&T, Warner Communications, Time Inc., CBS, RCA,

ABC: If all the new media are controlled by these few corporate interests, we cannot expect genuine political diversity or a truly free flow of information. Behind all those channels may eventually stand a single, prudent censor. Even if Big Brother is not watching us, we may find ourselves watching Big Brother.

And it does seem likely that if we are watching Big Brother, he will eventually begin to keep an eye on us. The very features of the new technology that make it versatile and exciting also make it frighteningly vulnerable to abuse. Warner Amex's QUBE system scans subscribers' homes every six seconds, recording what subscribers watch, their answers to poll questions, the temperature in their houses (for those who have signed up for energy management systems), and even (for subscribers who buy home security services) their comings and goings. Cable systems offering transaction services such as banking and shopping will accumulate detailed computer files on all subscribers. At present, there are no safeguards to prevent the abuse of such records, other than the good will of cable operators. (Responding to these concerns, Warner Amex issued in December a "Code of Privacy" under which the company promises to keep confidential all information it gathers on individual subscribers. The legal force of such promises remains to be tested.)

## When the TV Set Turns Itself On

**T**ELEVISION SETS in Covington, Kentucky, sometimes take their owners by surprise. The sets might be sitting quietly in an empty room when, suddenly, they switch themselves on, tune in to a certain channel, and hike their volume so high that no one in the house could fail to pay attention.

Covingtonians don't mind the intrusions, however; in fact, they've signed up for them. Their unusually willful television sets are hooked up to the Emergency Alert System offered subscribers by Storer Cable Communications, the town's cable operator. Covington relies on its Emergency Alert System (devised by Tocom, a leading manufacturer of two-way cable hardware) to warn residents of approaching tornadoes.

Tocom's technology is impressive, and suggests other equally benevolent applications. It can warn coastal resi-

dents of hurricanes, alert farmers to frost, or summon volunteers to fires. Presumably, the Emergency Alert System—which is now being installed in communities around the country—will save lives.

Like any technology, however, this one is benevolent only in benevolent hands. Transfer it to a totalitarian state and, instead of a device for convenience and public safety, you have one of the most potent and frightening political tools imaginable. George Orwell did imagine it, of course, in 1984, in which Big Brother could at will project his image and voice onto television screens in every subject's home.

Orwell surely would have recognized the dark side of the new media: The awesome capabilities of two-way cable systems mean that 1984 *could* arrive right on schedule. This is not to say it will; only that the development of Orwell's thought-controlled society no

longer awaits technology.

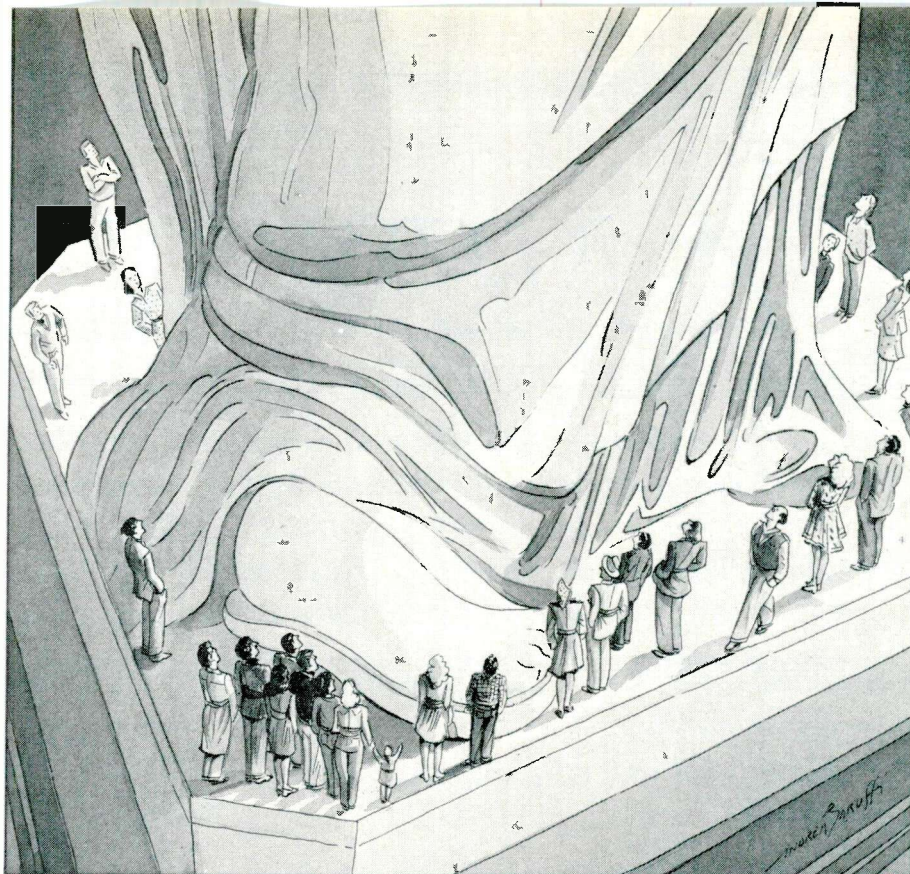
Orwell fully understood the significance of a direct line from the state to the citizen. Both he and Hannah Arendt recognized that successful reign by terror and domination depended on the government's ability to reach deep into the private lives of its subjects: on isolating them one from another; on making their relation to the state the preeminent one in their lives, and on constructing a consistent and seamless—no matter how false—version of reality to rationalize the political order. For a government intent on such goals, two-way cable, linked to computers, is the appropriate technology.

A system modeled on Tocom's Emergency Alert could offer the state an awesomely effective means of intimidation. Should a government want to make sure people were paying attention to its propaganda, it could afterwards ask questions to which citizens would respond by

John Wicklein has elaborated on the dangers this new technology poses to privacy and liberty in *Electronic Nightmare: The New Communications and Freedom*. He argues that the new communications technology will give a few powerful corporations dangerous instruments of social and political control and, should democracy fail, of repression. Total television spells total control, and total control in the wrong hands spells totalitarianism. Indeed, can it be wise to place such information and power even in the "right" hands? Either way, the specter of Big Brother skulks in the shadows, just beyond the glowing tube. The scenario of the corporate Big Brother makes us pawns of a technology that controls us even as its versatility and diversity let us think we have mastered it.

Both this and the Tower of Babel scenario, for all their differences, are equally inimical to democracy. Babel and Big Brother alike subvert citizenship by denying the significance of viewers as public persons with national identities and public obligations.

The Tower of Babel subordinates commonality and public vision to personal choice, private preference, and individual interests. It transforms the most potent medium of public communication the world has known into an instrument of exclusively private concerns. Ironically, it *privatizes* us even as it imperils our pri-



vacuity. It takes us seriously as consumers, spectators, clients, and buyers and sellers, but it ignores us as citizens. It services lust, religious zealotry, special interests, and individual needs efficiently and pluralistically: It helps us relax or play games, exercise or buy goods, pray or

*(Continued on page 62)*

Cable takes us seriously as buyers, sellers, and spectators, but it ignores us as citizens.

pressing buttons on their keypads. Indeed, the state could interrogate citizens regularly on a range of subjects, and store their responses in permanent computer files. With little trouble or expense, everyone's home could be transformed into a quasi-public place in easy reach of the state.

Just as misuse of two-way cable can strip away citizens' privacy, it can also, paradoxically, enforce solitude—an important goal for a despotic government. The state could effectively isolate subjects from one another by requiring them to perform, at home, as many social and economic functions as possible using two-way cable. If, as Edmund Burke said, men achieve political power only by "acting in concert," a people cut off from one another in this way would have that much less power.

An important by-product of a system in which citizens conducted most of their business by cable would be the masses of data the state could accumulate. Computers would record each individual's finances, his purchases and reading preferences, the contents of his

"electronic mail," and even his comings and goings (which cable systems monitor today as part of "home security" systems). These facts could be combined with medical and employment records to create a dossier on each citizen. A French scholar recently reminded an Aspen Institute conference that, had Vichy France been wired and computerized the way some American communities are today, Hitler would have been able to round up the Jews at the push of a button.

One of the most difficult tasks facing a totalitarian government—besides keeping track of its subjects—is censorship. To check the flow of dangerous truths, censors must keep a vigilant watch over scores of editorial offices and printing presses. And information already in print requires wholesale destruction or an elaborate cut-and-paste operation like the one Orwell's Winston Smith painstakingly performed at the Ministry of Truth.

But Winston Smith's job of "updating" the past would have been a snap if printed information had reached citi-

zens of Oceania by means of videotex. No medium has ever been quite so easy to censor. All videotex material must pass through a computer that can be instructed to flag or excise automatically all offending words, names, and ideas. Effortlessly, the contents of "electronic newspapers" can be sanitized. In a society that relies heavily on computers to store information, the truth becomes even more vulnerable. Any data bank can be revised continually to reflect the current needs of the government; when a society depends on data banks for information about the past, for instance, its past becomes mutable.

The fact that such technology exists does not necessarily mean it will ever be exploited in these ways. Yet totalitarianism is firmly established on the political landscape of our times; we would be foolish to expect it to disappear. For that reason alone, we should not take too lightly the emergence of a technology that serves totalitarianism so well.

MICHAEL POLLAN

*Michael Pollan is senior editor of Channels.*

# A NEW WORLD

*The changes brought about by new communications technologies will reach far beyond television to touch almost every sphere of life. In this exclusive report, beginning a series, the editors of Channels examine some of the changes already underway, in areas as diverse as agriculture and Hollywood, the American language and money.*

## HOLLYWOOD

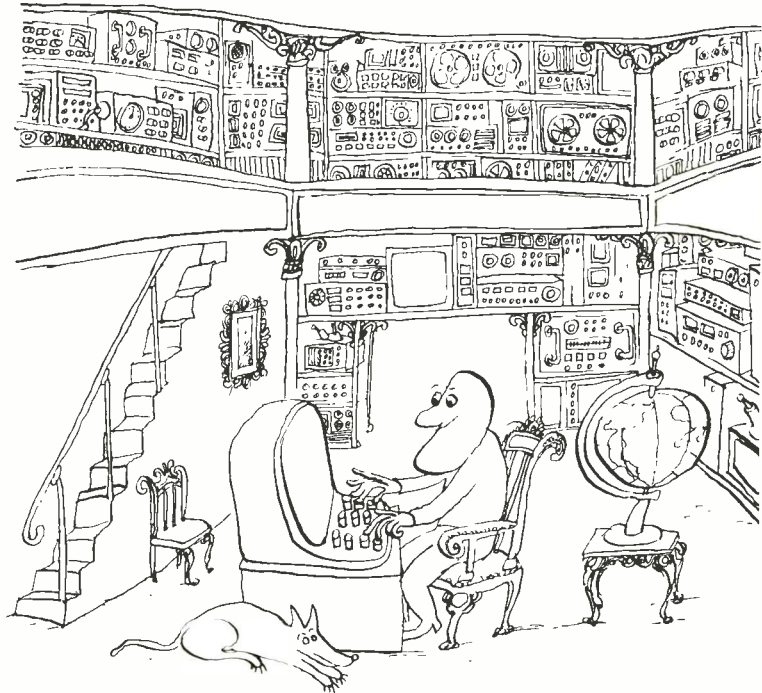
*'Entering an era of unparalleled demand.'*

**J**UST AS Caesar once preserved his empire by allowing his subjects to observe their own religions, the grand dukes of Hollywood are now maneuvering to maintain their audiences' allegiance by accommodating the shift to home viewing. The growing tendency of audiences to stay at home may jeopardize the survival of neighborhood theaters, but Hollywood is discovering that it's more a blessing than a curse.

Where once a studio had only movie theaters or the networks as customers for its product, there is now a whole new set of markets. Michael Rollens, a vice president at International Creative Management, describes the change: "Until a few years ago, all my time went into dealing with the three networks, then getting programs into syndication. Two years ago it became obvious that we had to give more attention to pay cable, home video, pay-per-view television, Home Box Office, Showtime, and The Entertainment Channel. There used to be fifteen or twenty buyers; now we're in touch with more than a hundred."

Seven million Americans spent close to \$2 billion in 1981 for pay television, mostly to watch movies they used to see at their neighborhood theaters. Alan Hirschfield, the chairman of Twentieth-Century Fox, thinks they'll be spending three times that amount five years from now, and he sees boom times ahead. He recently told *The Wall Street Journal*, "We are now entering an era of unparalleled demand, equivalent to the growth of the film business in its early years and the entire growth of television."

But the new technologies mean much more than new markets for Hollywood's shows. They will change almost every aspect of the business, from the way movies get distributed, to how they're made, and even what they are.



Already, the existence of pay television has increased the value of studio libraries. Old films used to sit in syndication vaults until a local television station decided to show them (often at 2:30 in the morning). But last year alone pay services such as Showtime and HBO spent about \$300 million buying the cable rights to movies that had already played the theater circuit. HBO is reported ready to buy the rights to seven hundred more films this year; it recently wrapped up a deal with Columbia Pictures for the rights to all that company's films produced between January 1981 and April 1984.

Most studios are looking beyond the limited pay-television market to seek further profits from the boom in video-cassette sales and rentals. (As if to encourage them, the Electronic Industries Association of Japan announced that, during one period last year,

*We may soon see pay-per-view premiere releases of movies.*

*Illustrations by Jo Teodorescu*

*The future of Hollywood is being shaped by satellites and computers.*

Japanese factories produced more video-cassette recorders than television sets.) Many people would prefer to pay a few dollars to rent a video cassette of the film they want to see, rather than rely on the programming and scheduling whims of the pay-cable service. MGM/CBS Video is offering renters a "first-run home-video season" of films that have just come out of the movie houses but haven't been shown on cable or the networks.

These new ways of using the television screen to show movies have made it possible for the video division at Paramount to grow from a standing start slightly more than two years ago to \$30 million a year in video-cassette sales today. The video division's mandate: to create and develop new programming for video and to distribute existing programs to the home market. Mel Harris, its president, says: "We're marketing aggressively to pay TV, basic cable, video cassettes, and discs. The growth is so rapid that it can't even be put in percentage terms. Instead of trying to figure out which of the many formats will survive, we're trying to make our shows available to people no matter which technology they may have."

The cable rush has prompted Paramount to join Universal and Time Inc. as part owners of the USA Network. Walt Disney Productions has made its own move by hooking up with Group W to create The Disney Channel, which will provide children's and family entertainment. But the studios aren't the only ones looking toward pay television for a rosier future. Big independent production companies such as Tandem/TAT (*One Day at a Time*), MTM (*Lou Grant*), and Lorimar (*Dallas*) are also gearing up to help meet cable's programming needs.

Everyone would like to think that made-for-cable programs will be more innovative and original than their network counterparts—there is much talk about new serials, new plays, concerts, and theater, new variety shows, new made-for-pay-television movies. The audience that watches pay television is older than the one that frequents movie houses; it is staying at home not just for convenience but also because it simply doesn't like the movies offered at the neighborhood theater. Indeed, ICM's Rollens says that the kind of movies that will appeal to pay television's older audience are often rejected by studios because they're not thought suitable for young moviegoers. So as the market changes, the character of the movies themselves may change. Cable offers moviemakers a chance to win back audiences they've all but lost.

There's another, more important reason why programs for cable are likely to look different: The pay services don't have nearly as much money to spend on programming as the

networks do. While a network might be expected to pay \$850,000 for a one-hour variety show, cable does not like to spend more than \$250,000. No one yet knows whether quality programs can be produced so cheaply and, if it is possible, whether it can happen in Hollywood. The discipline imposed by smaller budgets might spark a burst of creativity, but it could also result in boring, ill-produced programs.

Hollywood may remain a film town, but its future is being shaped today by satellites and computers—technologies once thought to have little if any relation to the movies. Cable itself didn't really get off the ground until HBO's Gerald Levin had the daring idea to wed Hollywood movies with cable and satellites. Now, HBO has become not only a major buyer of Hollywood movies, but also an important source of capital for production.

With the invention of computer decoders, a new dimension of pay television came into existence: pay-per-view television, which allows cable operators to transmit and bill subscribers for special once-only cablecasts of events such as the Leonard-Hearns fight. The extraordinary success of that event has Hollywood promoters dreaming about the dollars to be made from pay-per-view premiere releases of movies—even before they hit the theaters or go into cassette distribution.

Satellites are changing almost all the rules governing the distribution game. For instance, Paramount uses satellites to send such shows as *Solid Gold* and *Entertainment Tonight* direct to local stations, bypassing the networks. Independent stations have set up a loose confederation, called Operation Prime Time, which pools money to buy programs directly from Hollywood. According to Dick Block, a consultant, this arrangement could dislodge the middlemen—the three networks and the pay-television services as well.

If Hollywood is increasingly interested in exploiting new technologies to open up new markets, it has been much slower to put them to use in moviemaking itself. Roger Corman's New World Pictures recently announced that it was making an all-video movie (to be transferred to film for theatrical release), but the major studios seem content to let such visionaries as Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas, in San Francisco, and Nicholas Negroponte, in Cambridge, take the lead in learning how to use new video and electronic technologies to change the way movies are made. Coppola and Lucas both intend to go into all-video production after they complete their current films.

For the moment, Lucas is concentrating his efforts on computer animation and special effects. Computers are now capable of generating lifelike images of people that seem to

*Video offers possibilities for developing entirely new forms of entertainment.*



# A NEW WORLD

speak. They can also create synthetic landscapes that could be used in conjunction with live-action taping to eliminate much costly location shooting. Coppola, for his part, wants to transform the filmmaking process itself, by developing all-electronic movie production, from the first draft of a script on a word processor through the final electronic video-tape edit. Though Coppola still relies on thirty-five-millimeter film, he videotapes story boards and rehearsals in order to mock up a rough version of his film before shooting a single frame of costly film stock. The experiment has been plagued by a few bugs, but Coppola is convinced that the techniques he's developing will eventually eliminate the wasteful and expensive filmmaking convention of shooting numerous takes for every scene. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Negroonte is working to discover and extend the limits of video technology itself. His state-of-the-art "Movie Maps" allow viewers to use computer-controlled video discs to "drive" through a pre-photographed town via a route of their own choosing.

But if video offers possibilities for develop-

ing entirely new forms of entertainment, or for changing what a movie is and how it is produced, Hollywood so far seems content to look for new ways of cashing in on established forms. This could in the end be a colossal mistake. For all the excitement in tinsel town about cable and new programming, no one yet seems to have come to grips with what may be the most important development of all: Americans now spend almost three times as much on electronic games as they do at the movie box office. At Warner Communications, that giant of the entertainment industry, the biggest earner is now the Atari division, which makes *Asteroids* and *Space Invaders*. The more people spend their television time using computer-generated missiles to shoot down legions of aliens, the less often they're likely to watch *Star Wars* or *Gone with the Wind*. Technology is changing entertainment so quickly that a challenge to Hollywood's supremacy could pop up when and where it's least expected.

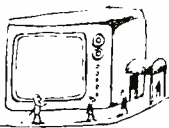
MICHAEL SCHWARZ



## REAL ESTATE

### 'Cable affects property values.'

**T**HE IMPORTANCE of today's cable-franchising activity may well be told in a few years when the quality of communications facilities helps determine where people choose to live. To some degree it already does.



*The most desirable places to live will be those with the best cable systems.*

Manhattan provides a cogent example. The borough is divided by two cable installations, a Teleprompter system serving the upper half, an ATC system the lower half. After ten years of operation, it is abundantly clear that the lower half has more and better program services and is, in an electronic sense, culturally richer than the upper half. Some day, when Manhattan's apartment shortage eases, that discrepancy may be reflected in rents and property values, especially on the streets whose center stripes denote the boundary between the two cable areas. All else being equal, the ATC cable service makes living on the south side of West 79th Street a better deal than living on the north side.

The worth of real estate has always been affected by such considerations as the quality of schools and medical services, police protection, and the availability of shopping and recreational facilities. New developments in technology permit cable systems to improve all these services and to upgrade, besides, the political life of the community, if only by bringing town meetings into the home.

It follows that the most desirable places to

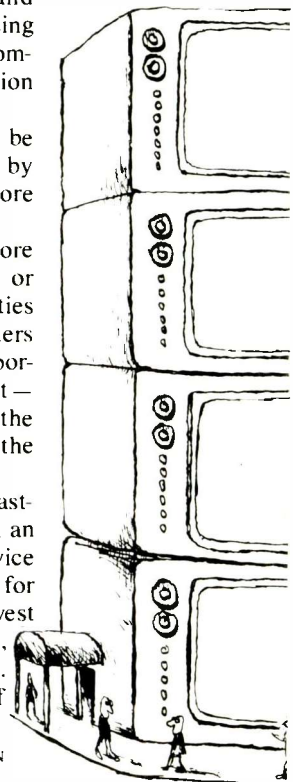
live will be the neighborhoods and towns whose cable operations afford home security services, medical alert systems, shopping at home, continuing-education programs, access to information banks, videotex services, electronic mail, and a range of cultural and community-affairs programming. The rising costs of energy make it prudent to allow communications to take the place of transportation whenever it can.

In contrast, real-estate values can only be adversely affected, over a period of time, by cable systems unwilling to provide much more than an entertainment service.

The genius of cable is that it can be a more local medium than broadcast television or radio. It can serve single, small communities instead of vast metropolitan areas or clusters of towns. Indeed, the character of a neighborhood or town—its cohesiveness and spirit—could be shaped in the coming years by the integration of cable communications into the life of the community.

A house with a modern kitchen will sell faster and at a higher price than a house with an outmoded one. The quality of cable service may matter in much the same way, except for this: The purchaser of an old house may invest in modernizing the kitchen, but he could not, if he wished to, remodel his cable service. An inferior cable system makes victims of all property owners in its realm.

LES BROWN



# A NEW WORLD



## THE DISABLED 'Communications is the great equalizer.'

**I**N MANY WAYS, deaf people were better off eighty years ago. The mail came ten times a day, only a sliver of the population had a new invention called the telephone, and television had scarcely been imagined. It was not until the telephone entered general use and, several decades later, the television set became ubiquitous, that the deaf found themselves profoundly isolated in a hearing world.

*The second generation of communications may solve the problems created by the first.*

For the deaf, the emerging second generation of communications technology promises to solve the problems created by the first. Videotex—printed communication displayed on television sets—should allow deaf people to communicate easily in a written form once again. "When electronic mail is widespread, and we've come to depend on it, the disparity between deaf people and the rest of us will be substantially reduced," says Charles Jackson, a partner in the Washington communications consulting firm of Shooshan & Jackson. That disparity is already fading in the case of television viewing: Inexpensive decoding devices now enable conventional sets to display otherwise invisible captions.

Not only the deaf, but all of America's forty million seriously disabled people have much to gain from the new communications technology. Electronic banking, for instance, is much more than a newfangled convenience for a busy executive: It spells the difference between banking at home in front of a television set and not banking at all. When banking, shopping, sending electronic letters, and visiting "libraries" by way of two-way cable are prevalent, economic and social links can be restored to the disabled.

One of the most important of those links will be with employment, according to Richard Byrne, associate dean of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communications. Byrne sees the communica-

tions revolution as "the great equalizer" for many disabled people. "Computer technology does not require physical strength or mobility," Byrne points out. "Input and output are accessible with one finger." Using computer terminals, disabled people could fill most "information age" jobs at home.

Recent advances in biocybernetics mean that even people whose disabilities put standard computer keyboards out of reach will be able to participate. For the blind, a Kurzweil reading machine adapted for computer terminals can reproduce computer output in verbal form, and practical systems for "voice typing"—machines that convert speech into type—are not far off. Ocular typing will bring computer terminals into reach even for the quadriplegic: An experimental machine called the Optocom follows the eye as it fixes on numbers and letters displayed on a television screen, and then types them out.

The mentally disabled, too, can expect benefits from the new technologies. As Byrne points out, "People are being empowered with abilities beyond their common experience and innate capacities." Today's supermarket checkouts, with their optical scanners and microprocessors, offer one vivid example. Cashiers can tot up prices, give correct change, and monitor inventory, even if they don't know how to read numbers, let alone how to add or subtract them. A mildly retarded or brain-damaged person, too, can perform jobs well beyond his mental capabilities—bookkeeping, various kinds of clerical work—by following a computer program specially designed to reduce complex procedures to a sequence of simple steps. Similar programs could also substantially improve the education of the mentally handicapped, since teaching them demands long hours of repetition and deep reservoirs of patience, both of which computers will uncomplainingly supply.

"When a physically or mentally disabled person learns to use the new technologies, he or she can move from what I call the 'disability economy' to the information economy," Byrne asserts.

While the opportunities held out to the disabled by an information-based economy are indeed impressive, by no means are they insured. Some benefits can be expected to develop willy-nilly, as when two-way cable makes various electronic transactions available to all of us. Other benefits will require more deliberate action. Yet whether or not substantial numbers of disabled people actually make the move from the disability economy to the information economy is no longer a question of technology but of politics: Who pays? And who decides?

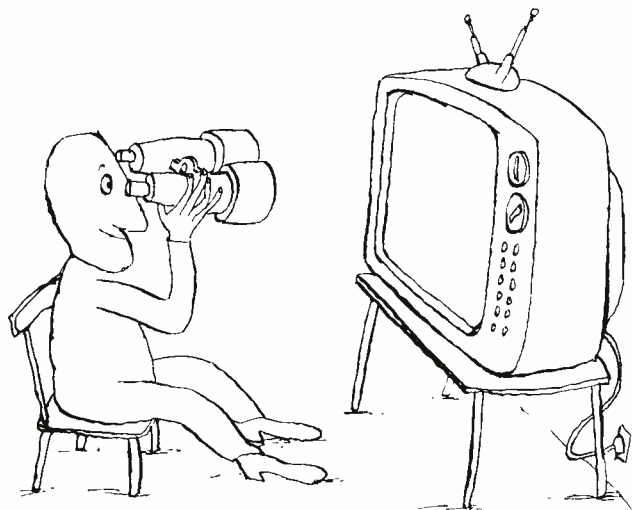
MICHAEL POLLAN

*People are being empowered beyond their innate capacities.*

# A NEW WORLD

## FARMING *'Doing the chores by keypad.'*

**P**LOUGHING, SOWING, and harvesting will always require physical exertion. But some remarkably sophisticated new tools of the farmer's trade should soon unburden him of other jobs. In France, where Intelmatique has begun a five-year videotex experiment, farmers won't have to leave home when they want to buy feed and fertilizer, or discover the species of carrot that grows best in their soil, or learn how much rainfall to expect this summer. Terminals in their homes, hooked by telephone line to a



## MONEY *'It will scarcely exist as we know it.'*

**S**INCE THE DAY a network sold its first advertising spot, money and television have been inseparable. But it wasn't until recently that people could switch on their sets and actually watch their own money. Not only can television viewers now get the news about their bank accounts, but they can also transfer funds from one account to another, pay bills, keep track of mortgages and loan payments, and instantly compare what was spent with what was budgeted—all without touching a single piece of paper.

Electronic home banking promises an end to bothersome trips to the local bank. No more waiting on line for the privilege of getting your own money. No more checks that bounce. And no more frantic searching for receipts at tax time; all the necessary information can be retrieved electronically from the bank's computer.

The convenience of fingertip banking has already been sampled by residents of San Diego, Omaha, St. Paul, Coral Gables, Columbus, and many other cities. But banking by television involves much more than conven-

ience: The technologies that make home banking possible are changing not only the way banks do business, but the business of banking itself. According to one banker, "The new technologies are making it impossible for us to survive merely as a bank. More and more these days I feel like my business is really telecommunications."

group of French agricultural organizations, will render all these chores, and many others, as easy as pushing buttons on a keypad. "Telagri," as the test is called, will ultimately supply two hundred different kinds of information and transaction services both to individual farmers and members of larger cooperatives. Planners expect in the end that the program will increase French agricultural productivity.

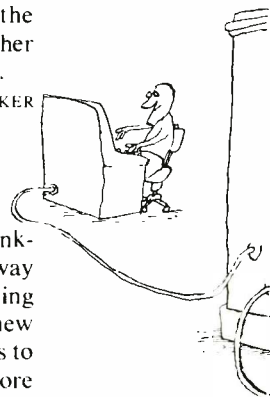
Last fall, the hundreds of farmers participating in the test had their houses outfitted with terminals. These would normally cost \$400, but Intelmatique installed them for nothing. Though farmers don't yet know how or how much they will be billed for "accessing" the information they want, they've been assured it will be cheap.

It should be simple, too. One Intelmatique spokesman explained that using the system is virtually foolproof, as long as you can read and write. Converters built into the system can automatically translate any data bank's information from the various computer languages into French.

It was the Farmer's Almanac, 200 years ago, that first recognized the need for more than seeds, soil, and fertilizer—the need for good information—to produce a good carrot. The Intelmatique system may never match the charm of the almanac, but at least its weather forecasts should be a bit more dependable.

SAVANNAH WARING WALKER

*A videotex program in France is expected to increase agricultural productivity.*





# A NEW WORLD

business that banks can't help but get into if they want to survive.

Banks' main customers are their multi-million-dollar corporate accounts, which have interests or subsidiaries all over the world. To do business profitably, they need to transmit and receive billions of bits of data—about inventories, prices, sale agreements, purchases. Most important, they need to deploy their own money efficiently, for there is nothing so wasteful as money that sits idle when it could be invested somewhere making profits. The more money involved, the greater a company's need to keep track of hundreds of daily transactions that affect its accounts.

With telematics, large transactions are accomplished almost instantaneously. Money, at least as most people understand it, scarcely exists: Bills are paid by the moving of numbers from one computer's memory to another. If a French company, for instance, needs to pay an American firm \$50 million, the transaction will probably be effected through an international payments mechanism called SWIFT (Society of Worldwide Interbank Financial Transactions). On its journey across the Atlantic, the money "travels" through several central computers, but the entire electronic voyage can be completed in less than fifteen seconds. Ten years ago, the same transaction might have taken a day. If that doesn't sound like much of a savings, consider the interest earned on that \$50 million in the course of that one extra day—about \$20,000.

When bankers say the nature of their business is changing, they're usually talking about their use of computer networks and telecommunications to provide customers with electronic cash-management services. Since companies—and, increasingly, individuals—depend on such information to make the most of their cash reserves, a bank must be able to tell customers more than its competitors can, and more quickly. "It's no longer sufficient for us simply to give our customers credit and debit information first thing in the morning," says Irving Trust's du Vair. "Now they want it throughout the day so they know exactly what's happening with their accounts at any given time."

These services may simplify business for a bank's customers, but ironically they make life harder for the bank itself. Before telematics, banks made most of their money by being a source of funds: They loaned money at a rate higher than the one at which they borrowed it, and pocketed the difference. Now, however, the speed and accuracy of cash-management services give banks' clients precisely the information they need—everything from economic indicators to data concerning their own accounts—to keep their money working for

them continuously. And that usually means keeping their money out of bank accounts. Companies can reduce their bank balances to make more profitable investments (in an overnight fund, for instance), or they can reduce the amount they've borrowed (by consolidating money from other accounts to retire debt). Either way, the bank loses. That's why, instead of making money from their money, banks are now charging fees for the computer- and communications-services they provide their clients.

These developments wouldn't worry the banks nearly as much as they do if banks were the only game in town. But telematics has made it profitable for other companies to offer their customers the same financial services that banks alone used to provide.

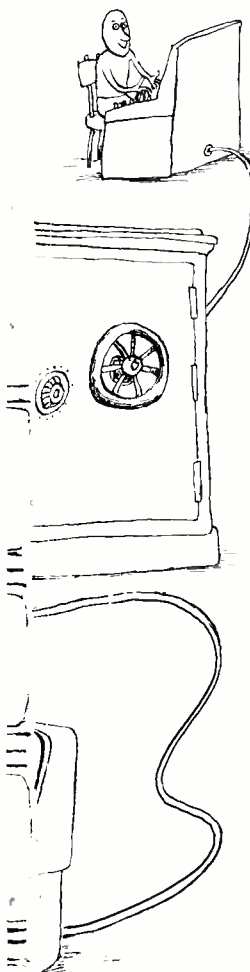
Even more distressing is the fact that their new competitors aren't constrained by federal laws such as the one prohibiting interstate banking. So while Citibank, for example, can offer cash machines only to its customers in New York, American Express has a network of twenty-four-hour electronic terminals that dispense traveler's checks to American Express card-holders nationwide. And the Warner Amex two-way cable system allows customers to shop by cable and bill their credit cards. In addition, it can offer them the services of American Express/Shearson (formerly Shearson Loeb Rhoades, the securities firm), which makes it possible to buy and sell stock using a television screen, two-way cable, a home computer, and a credit card.

Sears is another formidable new competitor: With twenty-four million credit-card customers buying from its stores and catalogue, the retailer is a gigantic lending institution in its own right. What makes the company more fearsome still is its developing capability as a complete financial-services delivery system. Bankers must have lost several hours' sleep when the Sears chairman announced, "Our goal is to become the largest consumer-oriented financial-service entity."

Perhaps the greatest single step toward achieving this goal was Sears's acquisition last year of Dean Witter Reynolds, a brokerage house specializing in cash-management services and money-market funds. These funds were invented in the late seventies by brokerage houses, which recognized that the value of money deposited in non-interest-bearing checking accounts or savings passbooks couldn't keep pace with inflation. So they offered people a low-risk investment that banks, prevented by law from selling securities, couldn't match. Deposit your money with us, they said, and we will not only guarantee you a much higher rate of interest than you can get at a bank, but we'll also let you write checks

*One banker says: "More and more these days, I feel like my business is really information."*

*When it comes to financial services, banks are no longer the only game in town.*



# A NEW WORLD

against the value of your investment. It was a service made possible by the availability of the same large-volume, low-cost data-processing technologies used by banks to keep track of money movements around the world. Except this time, such companies as Merrill Lynch, Shearson, and Dean Witter were controlling the flow of funds, not the banks.

In the few years since money-market funds were started, their assets have soared to some \$184 billion — most of which used to be deposited in banks. Banks now hold one-third less of the nation's total assets than they did immediately following World War II. Indeed, it would not be farfetched to attribute the recent string of savings bank failures to the money-market funds, and to the technology that made them feasible.

The Sears/Dean Witter partnership could offer a home-delivery network allowing the Sears customer to buy from the company's catalogue and pay immediately by having a computer debit his money-market fund. Sears may also offer its card-holders the opportunity to purchase small-denomination notes that would pay interest — an ingenious technique for raising capital when you consider that some 73 percent of all Americans involved annually in stock transactions of \$25,000 or more are Sears card-holders. No wonder Citibank's chairman, Walter Wriston, complains that "new competitors unhindered by archaic laws are rapidly taking over the financial-services business."

Wriston has a story he likes to tell about Eddie Rickenbacker's grandmother, who was concerned to learn that Rickenbacker intended to fly fighter planes against the Germans. If you must go, she advised her grandson, "fly slow and stay close to the ground."

Wriston and other bankers argue that current government regulations constitute the

modern banking industry's equivalent of flying slow and staying close to the ground. The regulations must be removed, they say, so they can fight competitors on equal terms.

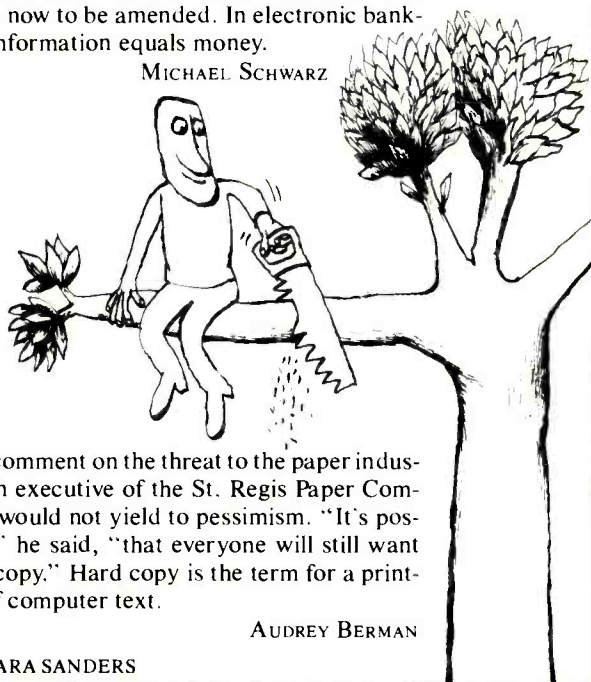
Ironically, some banking regulations are now being eliminated just as the changes in the industry are moving it into new regulatory thickets — those of the Federal Communications Commission, the Justice Department, the Securities and Exchange Commission. Perhaps deregulation is only proper; however, numerous issues remain unresolved, including, notably, those of personal privacy and legal liability (who's responsible, for instance, if a bank's computer fails to carry out an instruction to pay a bill?).

Clearly, for all the conveniences electronic banking offers consumers and corporations, it raises many public-policy questions. Already, billions of bits of financial data travel millions of miles daily on private communications networks, crossing countless national boundaries in their excursions from one computer memory to another. These aren't just abstract exchanges of electrons; they're real financial transactions with resounding economic impact, both domestic and international.

Telematics makes it possible for corporations to exploit fluctuating exchange rates, or even to circumvent a government's domestic economic policy by electronically moving its funds abroad to more hospitable environments. Technology, perhaps more than ever, is the most powerful ally of the corporate free market.

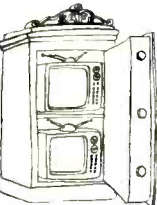
We are only now beginning to glimpse the meaning of banking in a world of telematics. But one thing is already certain: If ever it were true that time equals money, that aphorism needs now to be amended. In electronic banking, information equals money.

MICHAEL SCHWARZ



*Time Inc. paradoxically moves forward on the video front when one of its big divisions is forest products.*

AUDREY BERMAN



*Electronic banking raises many difficult questions of public policy.*

## TREES

*'The paper blizzard is abating.'*

SOMEWHERE a tree stands that will still be standing in the year 2000 and that will owe its longevity to developments in the electronic environment. Each time a newsroom or business office converts from typewriters to word processors, paper consumption is reduced annually by the ton. Computers, videotex, electronic mail, electronic bulletin boards, electronic "yellow pages," and the various forms of video publishing also lessen the demand for paper. Thus the paradox of Time Inc., pushing forward on the video front when one of its biggest divisions has been forest products.

The paper blizzard is abating, as the printed word increasingly goes electric. When asked

for a comment on the threat to the paper industry, an executive of the St. Regis Paper Company would not yield to pessimism. "It's possible," he said, "that everyone will still want hard copy." Hard copy is the term for a print-out of computer text.

SECTION DESIGNED BY BARBARA SANDERS



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# The Local Station that Could

In Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, WNEP reached the top by navigating the difficult passage from one age of television to the next.

by Greg Mitchell

**T**HE YEAR WAS 1948 and television had not yet arrived in rural northeastern Pennsylvania, a hilly region of coal mines and factories bunched around the cities of Scranton and Wilkes-Barre. All the VHF frequencies in the area had been seized by stations in New York and Philadelphia, 100 miles away, whose signals did not quite reach local antennas.

*Greg Mitchell is the author of the recently published book, Truth and Consequences: Seven Who Would Not Be Silenced.*

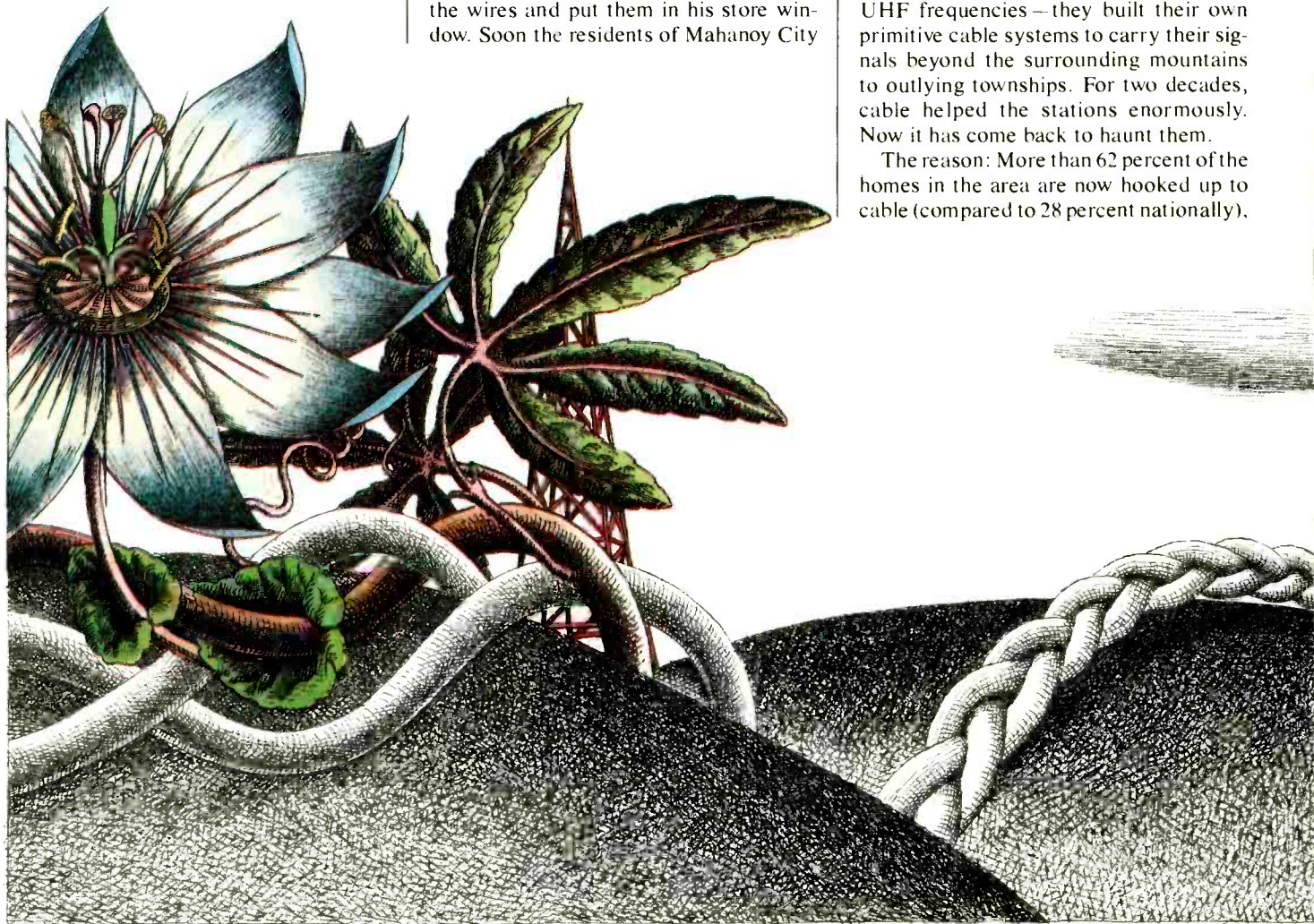
With no television reception, business was bad for John Walson, an appliance dealer in Mahanoy City, thirty-five miles south of Wilkes-Barre. Try as he might, Walson could not sell his big, boxy television sets to people who knew that the surrounding Blue Mountains would prevent them from getting a watchable picture. So Walson erected a seventy-foot television pole on top of one of the mountain ridges, and placed antennas on top of the pole. Then he strung some army surplus wire from the antennas, through the trees, to his appliance store in town. He hooked up several television sets to the wires and put them in his store window. Soon the residents of Mahanoy City

began to congregate in front of Walson's store to watch the fuzzy pictures beamed in from Philadelphia. Walson offered them a deal: If they bought a set, he would hook them up to his reception system, too.

This was probably the first cable operation in America. Walson has been cited by the National Cable Television Association and the U.S. Congress as the "father of cable."

By 1951 several other cables had been installed in the region. When, in 1953, three stations in Scranton and Wilkes-Barre finally began operating—all on UHF frequencies—they built their own primitive cable systems to carry their signals beyond the surrounding mountains to outlying townships. For two decades, cable helped the stations enormously. Now it has come back to haunt them.

The reason: More than 62 percent of the homes in the area are now hooked up to cable (compared to 28 percent nationally).



and cable now does much more than extend local broadcast signals. Local stations find themselves competing for viewers with Home Box Office and ESPN, and competing for advertising dollars with half a dozen sophisticated stations piped in from outside. As more homes hook up to cable every month, the threat becomes more menacing still.

"In the past ten years we've lost one third of our audience to the outside," says David Baltimore, president of WBRE-TV, an NBC affiliate in Wilkes-Barre. "We've gone past the future-shock of cable here. It's a problem others will be facing soon."

Of Scranton/Wilkes Barre's three stations, WNEP, the locally owned ABC affiliate, was the first to face cable's challenge, and its success has been noteworthy. WNEP recognized early that the only way to compete with cable was to produce local programming that would be difficult, if not impossible, for outside interests to match. "We take all the money we save from not buying *Donahue*," says WNEP's general manager, Tom Shelburne Jr., "and put it into news." At WNEP, a reporter works on a vote-fraud story for six months. A camera crew is sent to New York for live reporting on the courtroom appearance of a local gangster. An investigative journalist is hired for four months to put together a prime-time documentary on local mob activities. This kind of coverage may be standard in Chicago or Los Angeles, but is highly unusual in markets the size of Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, which ranks forty-eighth in the nation.

"We passed on *The Muppets* to go with *PM Magazine*," Shelburne says, "because it has local segments. Of course, *The Muppets* has a great track record, so that's a gamble. But I guess you could call us gamblers."

Most of WNEP's gambles so far have paid off—sort of. WNEP dominates its market today in a way few stations do. Its news program beats the competition three to one in the ratings, and WNEP's advertising revenues and profits far outdistance the market's other stations. Yet there is no guarantee that WNEP's success story will have a happy ending. "We don't anticipate growth beyond inflation anymore," Shelburne says. WNEP may be the little station that could, but as one era of television gives way to another here in Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, the terrain up ahead keeps getting harder and more uncertain.

**T**HE CITY of Scranton sits in northeastern Pennsylvania's lovely Wyoming Valley, seventeen miles north of Wilkes-Barre. Though the two cities have a common history, today they are about as different as night—Scranton—and day—Wilkes-Barre.

In the early part of this century, anthracite coal was much in demand for home heating, and this part of Pennsylvania held the country's only known deposits of significant size. Immigrants from Europe poured in and Scranton's heavily Catholic population peaked at 143,000 in 1930. But as gas and oil furnaces proliferated, Scranton declined, and today only 97,000 residents remain.

Coming into Scranton from the north on Interstate 81, you are greeted with the sight, off to the left, of an automobile

junkyard snaking along the side of a hill for more than a mile. On a sunny day, the light reflected off twisted bumpers and hoods is almost blinding.

Wilkes-Barre, population 55,000, has declined along with its northern neighbor, yet it has avoided that city's perpetually depressed state, thanks largely to one person and one natural disaster, each of them named "flood."

Daniel J. Flood, Wilkes-Barre's flamboyant Congressman, was first elected in 1954. He was able to direct fresh industry, mostly textiles, into Luzerne County from his senior position on a couple of powerful House committees. (This, of course, was before a bribery scandal forced Flood to resign in 1980.) Equally helpful to the city was Hurricane Agnes, which swept over the area in 1972, causing the Susquehanna River to overflow and put more than 20 percent of Wilkes-Barre under water. In Agnes's aftermath, more than \$200 million in federal disaster aid flowed into the city. Today Wilkes-Barre is one of the most attractive cities in the East, with historic brick structures standing side-by-side with gleaming new buildings.

Unfortunately for Scranton, the city is situated just outside Flood's congressional district, and well beyond the banks of the Susquehanna. Today, Scranton's downtown is a shambles.

Beyond Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, the television market (which includes 462,000 households) takes in rural routes and tired industrial cities such as Hazleton, Allentown, and Pittston. Blue-collar workers make up about 50 percent of the population; one out of ten people is of Polish or Italian stock. Voters have traditionally been Democrats, but moderate Republicans now represent two local districts in Congress.

The region is not a healthy one. More than 9 percent of the population is unemployed. A recent survey by Chase Econometrics ranked northeastern Pennsylvania last among 108 markets studied for potential economic growth.



To make matters worse, the area is riddled with organized crime. A 1980 Pennsylvania Crime Commission report on organized crime cited Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, Pittston, and Hazleton nearly as often as Pittsburgh. The web of local mob activity extends, according to the report, to at least two local cable-television franchises.

Since they are locally owned (at least for the moment), Scranton/Wilkes-Barre's three television stations are understandably anxious to improve their area's poor image. WNEP-TV is in a position to do the most. But it was not always this way.

**L**OUIS BALTIMORE founded radio station WBRE in 1924. A year later, Frank Megargee started a station called WGBI. In 1948, Thomas P. Shelburne co-founded WILK.

When television came to the valley, the three families applied for licenses. Baltimore's WBRE-TV hooked up with NBC and went on the air January 1, 1953 in Wilkes-Barre as Channel Twenty-Eight. The Megargees signed on with CBS, and in June of 1953, WDAU began broadcasting over Channel Twenty-Two in Scranton. Six months later Shelburne launched WILK, as Channel Thirty-Four, in Wilkes-Barre.

Starting out, Shelburne faced a problem: ABC, the fledgling network he was

and bought WNEP from Taft.

"The investors, and my father, felt that they wanted to get this area going, or die trying," says Tom Shelburne Jr. (The elder Shelburne comes to the office regularly, but "Tommy," as nearly everyone calls his son, is officially the general manager and runs the station day to day.) "The investors all have financial and family interests here," he explains. "That's the advantage of being locally owned. For them to make money the area has to grow. So they said, 'Let's take the most effective tool for growth, and use it. If it doesn't work, nothing can.' Everything we do, we keep that in mind."

But how would the "tool" be wielded? "News is the only thing that matters," according to Tommy Shelburne. "As it goes, so goes the station. Local programming was the only way we could make a mark. We also saw that with cable expanding, we'd have to play up the local angle in order to even survive. So we decided to put everything into news."

"We had a good signal and a good facility but we needed money. We sold some cars to buy cameras. We laid off three or four people in engineering and hired reporters. I built, sanded, and painted a new news set myself. We took people from behind the scenes and put them out front. It was more a question of juggling the budget than a massive investment. When the ratings started to go up we didn't rest. We took the added revenue and spent it on

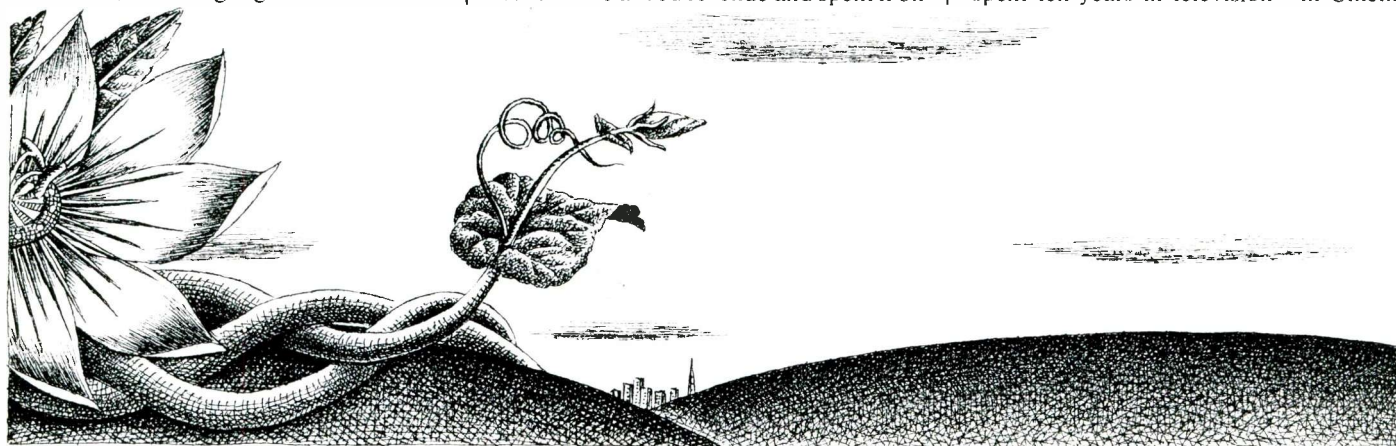
The figures were similar for the six o'clock reports.

How did WNEP do it? With everything from vision to dumb luck.

For local broadcast journalism, the seventies were years of rapid and far-reaching changes. Many stations were discovering for the first time that the right combination of format, technology, personality, and graphics could elevate a local news show from its traditional role of loss leader to that of profit center. But not every station was able to make the change. In addition to investment, it took aggressive management that was aware of the technological trends in the industry, that was comfortable with innovation, and that, at least in its thinking, was youthful. In Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, WNEP was that station.

At WDAU, the Megargee family was not very active in the operation of the station, and news director Tom Powell had been on the job since 1953. At WBRE, Louis Baltimore has been succeeded by his son, David, a man conservative in his politics and in his approach to television news. David brought his son Terry in as vice president, but Terry hadn't worked elsewhere for any length of time.

Parochialism was not a danger at WNEP. Tommy Shelburne, a tall, soft-spoken man of thirty-nine who wears horn-rimmed glasses and a beard, had spent ten years in television—in Cincin-



linked to, had another affiliate in Scranton: WARM. (One of WARM's owners was William S. Scranton, a descendant of the family for whom the city is named, and later governor of the state.) ABC suggested that the two stations merge: in 1958 they did, becoming WNEP, Channel Sixteen. Transcontinent Television Corporation purchased the station that year, but sold it to Taft Broadcasting in 1964. Nine years later Shelburne, who had remained general manager through all the ownership changes, put together a group of local investors, including his son, Tom Shelburne Jr., and former Governor Scranton,

equipment so we could go further. That was a gamble, but by doing it you can double your money instead of watching it collect 17 percent interest in the bank."

According to Nielsen ratings, the WNEP eleven o'clock news had an 18 share of the audience in May 1974, compared to WDAU's 30 and WBRE's 31. But then the ascent began:

	WNEP	WDAU	WBRE
May '75	22	23	33
May '76	23	19	26
May '77	27	18	27
May '78	35	12	30
May '79	43	15	17

nati, Kansas City, New York, and Philadelphia—before returning to Scranton/Wilkes-Barre with many fresh ideas. "The biggest problem with the other two stations," according to Shelburne, "is that they have no outside expertise in management. I've worked for five other stations. My news director and marketing guy have worked in four other markets. We don't have our heads buried in the sand."

Acknowledging the viewer appeal of "live feeds," Shelburne invested heavily in electronic news-gathering (ENG) equipment. To cover a market that

spanned twenty-two counties, he bought mobile vans and even a helicopter, which, besides giving his reporters mobility, gave the station a very visible form of promotion as it hopped around the region. He quintupled the size of the news staff. Then he gave style to this substance by insisting on a personable approach to the news. WNEP's Gary Essex became the first local matinee-idol anchorman, and the first to be paid appreciably more than a regular reporter (forcing the other stations in the market to pay *their* anchors more).

Good fortune was also on WNEP's side—in the form of the ABC network's late-seventies success. With the help of ABC's coverage of the 1976 Olympics, its uncoverage of *Charlie's Angels*, and its record-breaking series, *Roots*, WNEP's ratings surged. Just as important, Tommy Shelburne promoted the surge wisely, creating an overwhelmingly Number-One image for the station long before the ratings proved it. But by 1979, WNEP's news turned what had been a horse race into a ratings romp, suddenly leading longtime leader WDAU by three to one; indeed it had won an audience larger than that of the other two stations *combined*.

"We were outgunned and outmanned," explains WDAU news director Tom Powell. "At the time our ratings came apart, WNEP had us two to one in manpower and was way ahead on the technical end." Tom Bigler, vice president for news and public affairs at WBRE, says: "When

'We've gone past the future-shock of cable here,' says one local broadcaster. 'It's a problem others will be facing soon.'



WNEP was adding things that added to their appearance, we were reluctant. David [Baltimore] kept saying, 'I'm not going to match them man for man, dollar for dollar. Every item has to be essential.' Frankly, we waited too long, and now it's too late."

WNEP's ratings have remained strong. The November "sweeps" showed WNEP with a 47 percent share of the audience at 6 P.M. versus a combined 30 percent share for the opposition, and 44 versus 30 at 11 P.M. During this period the top four week-night shows in the market and six of the top eleven were WNEP news broadcasts.

At a time when the ABC network's programs have often run second nationally, they have always led in Scranton/Wilkes-Barre. Here, for example, ABC's *Good Morning, America* has led NBC's *Today* by about two to one.

**T**HE TWO-STORY, tan-brick building that houses WNEP's offices and studios is located in a remote spot just off Interstate 81, at the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre airport in Avoca. The station's plush \$2-million production facilities occupy the second floor of the airport terminal.

Midway between the two major cities of the region, this setting is significant. WBRE, located in a modern, three-story building in downtown Wilkes-Barre, is closely identified with that city, while WDAU, which operates out of the basement of a prep school in Scranton, is considered "the Scranton station." As local broadcasters point out, this is an unusually parochial area. In an era of single-paper domination of small markets (and even some big ones), this single market supports *four* daily newspapers—two in Scranton and two in Wilkes-Barre. Though just twenty minutes away, Scranton residents rarely visit Wilkes-Barre, and vice-versa. These habits extend apparently to television-watching as well.

WBRE outpolls WDAU in Wilkes-Barre, WDAU tops WBRE in Scranton; WNEP, however, beats both stations in both places, and kills them elsewhere. From its vague position in Avoca, it has an audience in both cities, as well as many more far-flung viewers who tend to see WNEP as the "regional" station.

Inside the WNEP building on November 3, 1981, the newsroom is buzzing: It's 5 P.M., an hour before air-time, on Election Day.

Reporter Bob Reynolds is preparing an update on his vote-fraud series, which had aired two weeks earlier. After spending six months working on the probe—the last two full-time—Reynolds showed how someone in Pittston had forged the signatures of eight voters in the May primary; to prove the charge, he hired a handwriting analyst. (The Pittston *Sunday-Dispatch* took the occasion to denounce WNEP's "steady style of sensationalism.")

A couple of desks away, Michael Brown is on the phone. Author of *Laying Waste*, a landmark 1980 book on Love Canal and other chemical hazards, Brown has been working virtually full-time since July on a one-hour documentary scheduled to be aired two weeks hence. Last May WNEP news director Nick Lawler had learned that a noted organized crime figure—a

native of Scranton who now lived outside the area under a new identity—might be willing to spill the beans about local corruption. Lawler called Brown, whom he had met while at WKBW-TV in Buffalo, and convinced him to take on the story. Lawler budgeted \$30,000 for the program.

Brown soon discovered that the mobster, Gerald Festa, who has been naming names for the federal government under its witness protection program, did not have all that much to say about local crime. What was supposed to be a hard-hitting exposé had turned into a story about how crime doesn't pay. Would the station's \$30,000 gamble pay off? Management did not seem worried: Instead of scheduling the special in the usual local "public affairs" slot—say, 1 P.M. or 7 P.M. on a Saturday—it would air in prime time, preempting the ABC hit *Hart to Hart*. To publicize the program, WNEP had just taken out an ad in the regional edition of *Time* magazine: "Not since Joe Valachi has such a gripping story of underworld terror been told . . ."

(This may have been an exaggeration, but as usual the station's promotion paid off: WNEP's documentary would attract twice the audience of the heralded television movie *Skokie*, and lose to the very popular *Flamingo Road* by only one ratings point.)

"Newspapers won't touch the mob around here," Brown comments when he gets off the phone. "WNEP is the only force that can take on the Mafia and the politicians—they have the power and the resources. I've written for *The New York Times* and it's a lot like that here—when you call someone and you leave a message, boy do they call back fast! Nick [Lawler] has also made hazardous waste a running issue here. Once they got a tip on a dump site, went there in the helicopter, and filmed chemical barrels lying all over the place. The station called in the state, which started an investigation. With the copter and the cameras WNEP actually has more detective capabilities than the state enforcement people."

Approaching 6 P.M. the newsroom suddenly smells of hair spray. Some of the "personalities" are sitting at their desks, reading scripts aloud before they head for the studio. Nick Lawler sits in his office in the corner of the newsroom, his tie loosened at the neck. Slightly paunchy, he has brown hair that curls over his forehead. Lawler is thirty-one but looks younger. A native of Washington, D.C., he had been at the station for a year and a half. (He has since moved on to KOCO-TV, the Gannett station in Oklahoma City.)

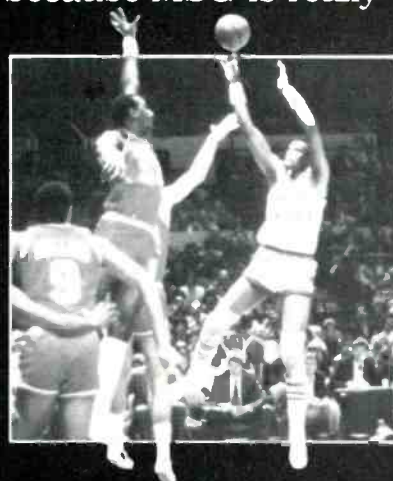
"When you're Number One," he says, settling back to watch the news, "it be-

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*Newswatch 16* begins. The co-anchors are in tight close-up. Behind them is a large window through which an array of screens and blinking lights is visible. "We're the only station with computer vote tabulation," Lawler says. The picture cuts quickly, but smoothly, from live shots of reporters at various campaign headquarters to taped inserts of the Scranton mayoral candidates voting earlier in the day, and then back to live shots. "We're trying to go live to six places at eleven," Nick boasts, as Bob Reynolds appears on the screen. Reynolds, reporting from Pittston, interviews a woman whose vote was forged in the primary and then queries the official who had certified her ballot.

Next to the screen displaying WNEP's news program, another set silently beams the WBRE report. The picture is more static; there are fewer remotes, and what live shots there are run on and on without benefit of taped inserts.

After a commercial break, WNEP returns with standard footage of a fire. A house had burned, and its occupants—a woman and her five cats—were all given oxygen. "Shit," Lawler says, "people have been watching fires on TV for twenty years. Why didn't we get any shots of the cats getting oxygen?"

Now it's time for Mike Igoe and his regular "Action 16" ombudsman segment. Tonight Igoe's helping an old fellow get a ten-dollar refund on a watch. "It's usually something bigger than that," Lawler says. "Mike gets 500 letters a week—the D.A. refers people to him. People approach him at dinner: 'Mike, help me out...' They've been kicked in the ass in this area so long they don't know where to turn. We're making Action 16 the place to turn."

Though Lawler feels it's "great" that WNEP is locally owned, he acknowledges the added pressures. After WNEP did a series on a local department store with blocked fire exits, the store temporarily pulled its ads off the station. WNEP once alleged that local buses were regularly breaking the speed limit, despite the fact that one of the station's investors owns a local Trailways company. "I'm sure the Shelburnes heard about it," says Lawler, "but it didn't filter down to us." Yet the investors "don't want to go to the country club and hear how we messed up. That keeps us on our toes.

"I have friends who are news directors who are constantly complaining about 'lack of support from upstairs' and 'the

bottom line.' Well, I have a crew at a prison right now, a hundred miles away, covering a hostage thing—I have no *idea* how much that costs."

**D**ESPITE WNEP's success, all is not well in Avoca, Pennsylvania. Cable continues to encroach, and the capital needed to compete is scarce. WNEP's runaway ratings triumph has not translated into enormous profits, because the heap the station sits on top of is miles wide and only inches high. Though the market is the country's forty-eighth biggest, it only ranks seventy-ninth in *revenues* and ninety-seventh in *profits*.

The latest edition of *Television Factbook* provides financial details for 1978, when the northeastern Pennsylvania market was ranked forty-second in the U.S. That year the three Scranton/Wilkes-Barre stations brought in \$11.7 million in advertising revenues. Profit was just under \$2 million. At the same time, stations in the Dayton, Ohio market (ranked fiftieth in size) took in *twice* the revenue and yielded more than *three* times the profit. In Johnstown/Altoona, Pennsylvania, a depressed portion of the state that ranked seventy-third nationally in 1978, the stations took in only \$8.4 million—well under the total for Scranton/Wilkes-Barre—but made a million dollars more in profit.

Several factors account for the market's problems. A spokesman at Petry Television Inc. in New York, WBRE's national sales representative, says that many companies now feel that they can reach a large portion of the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre market by advertising on the Philadelphia channels beamed north via cable. He called 1981 a "pretty good" year for WBRE but says each year tends to be radically different, as accounts jump back and forth between the local stations and the cable imports, depending on who is offering the best deal.

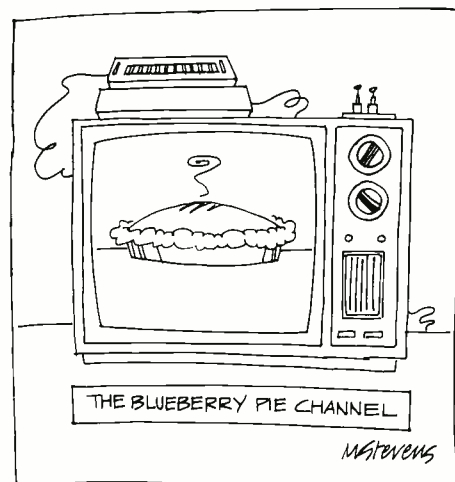
The arch competition has also resulted in relatively low rates for local advertisers. As ratings leader it's up to WNEP to set the standards. But Tommy Shelburne says he can't charge too much more than his rivals; no matter how high his ratings are, his ad rates must remain competitive. He complains that his station's cost-per-thousand is "one of the lowest in the country." WNEP's news program may have twice the audience of other stations but it cannot charge twice the rate.

The final reason for paltry profits involves expenses. Even with 50 percent of the local profits, WNEP spends so much that it is hardly a gold mine. Meanwhile, the other stations have been living some-

what beyond their means in a frantic effort to catch up. It's a television equivalent of the arms race. "We may be spending too much," admits Tom Bigler, WBRE's vice president for news and public affairs, "but we can't allow the quality gap between us and the New York and Philly stations to widen." Without cable, of course, that gap would not be a worry.

But as cable continues to expand its reach, something has to give, and (with the exception of WNEP) it looks like it will be local ownership. The Megareg heirs are awaiting approval from the FCC on the sale of WDAU to a group of outside investors. And in mid-November 1981, newspapers in Wilkes-Barre reported that David Baltimore was looking for a buyer for WBRE.

#### IN M. STEVENS'S VIEW



On the day after Election Night, Nick Lawler sits at his desk watching his station's midday report. Just ninety minutes earlier a young woman had jumped off a bridge and landed right on Interstate 81. An ambulance had rushed to the scene; crossing the highway on foot, the driver was hit by a car and killed. Now WNEP news is there, with live "insta-cam" coverage.

Upstairs, Tommy Shelburne is computing the cost of new equipment he has just ordered. "We spend money like drunken sailors here," he says. "We don't have to answer to anyone outside on the budget, so we can ride out a bad month." But cable is always the dark at the top of the stairs. Latest ratings show WNEP's 7 P.M. entry, *PM Magazine*, with its strong local angle, swamping the fare offered by the market's other stations (including *The Muppets*)—yet 40 percent of the market is now watching cable at this hour. "That figure was 12 percent a short while ago," Shelburne says.

Shelburne evidently feels that the future of his station depends on the success-

(Continued on page 63)

# THE WINNING COMBINATION

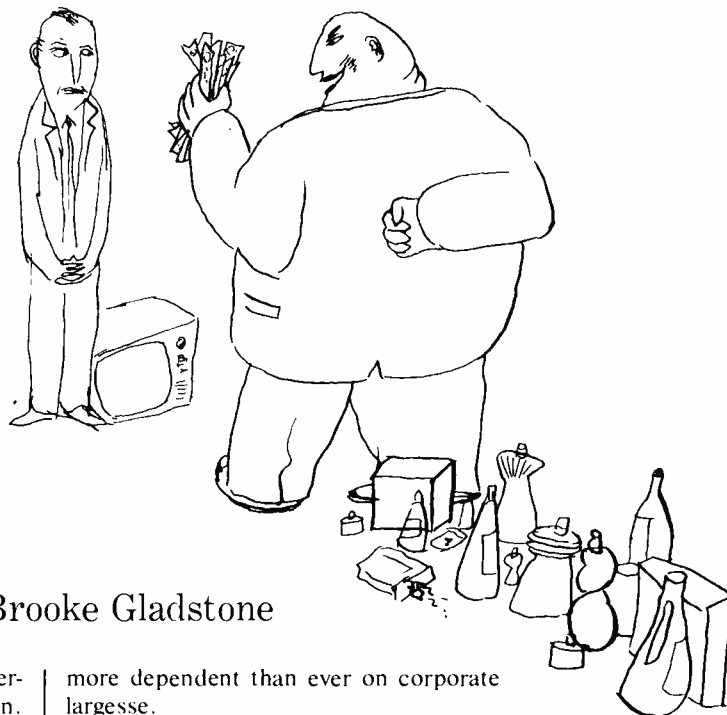


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# Public Broadcasting: The High Cost of Going Private



by Steven Behrens and Brooke Gladstone

**I**T SEEMED a perverse idea: commercials on noncommercial television. Just the kind of "experiment" in governmental policy that could be launched carelessly out of the Reagan-inspired budget wars in Congress and become the final turning point in the history of American public broadcasting. You couldn't tell whether the scheme was adopted because Congress cared so much about public broadcasting, or because it cared so little.

If the plan hadn't run into opposition from a united front of craft unions in December, ten public television stations and ten public radio stations would be outfitting themselves for an eighteen-month adventure in advertising, to hit the air this spring in test cities.

Congress's experiment, however, may be reduced in scale or even canceled, because the cost of going commercial is higher than expected. By opposing the experiment, the performers', musicians', writers', and directors' unions reminded Congress that their members *also* have been subsidizing public television and radio, through favorable contract terms. But the unions were defending more than their contracts. The labor leaders were fighting a redefinition of public broadcasting that could leave it weaker and

more dependent than ever on corporate largesse.

"I have no desire to nourish this madness of Mr. Reagan's Administration," says Sanford Wolff, executive secretary of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). "I see no reason to rape public television and to nourish the notion that if the federal government gets out of all public programs, the rich will take care of us."

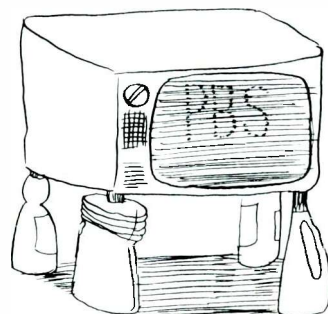
Many, if not most, public broadcasters were secretly relieved that the ad experiment was torpedoed—secretly, because they felt they couldn't say "no" themselves. When the experiment was suggested by some of their best friends in Congress during last summer's budget fight, they swallowed hard and assented. How would it look, after all, for public broadcasters to reject a chance at self-sufficiency—an invitation to join the private sector, in a year when the public sector is being rapidly dismantled? Besides, some

are admittedly willing to abandon their noncommercial identity out of balance-sheet desperation.

The federal treasury provides about 30 percent of the industry's \$700 million annual income. But public broadcasting may lose \$70 million or more in federal grants by 1983. Although Congress didn't cut as deeply as David Stockman wanted, next year's appropriation for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (the system's major dispensary of federal aid) will dive from \$172 million to \$137 million. The following year, CPB's funds could drop as low as \$105 million.

The Public Broadcasting Service could never hawk enough tote bags to recoup losses like those—or to keep up with rising costs. The price tag on last year's market basket of familiar PBS shows, led by *The MacNeil/Lehrer Report*, is up 22 percent this year. Stations' facilities require maintenance at a cost of \$48 million a year. Every station faces layoffs: some will broadcast fewer hours a day or go off the air entirely. Vital flexibility will be lost: More than ever, programming will be skewed to entertain high-income donors, and the prime-time schedule will be determined by oil companies' underwriting choices.

Advertising as an income source had been proposed occasionally through the years in Congress, but never before last



Illustrations by Ahmet Gorgun

Steven Behrens and Brooke Gladstone have covered public broadcasting as the editors of the trade newspaper, *Current*.

summer had the notion taken hold. Once a bipartisan, semi-sacred cow, public television lost its halo with the simultaneous rise of Reaganism and a conventional wisdom about new communications technologies.

The "new technologies" theory may sound familiar by now. Already used during the Carter years to justify partial "deregulation" of broadcasting by the Federal Communications Commission, the gospel goes like this: Cable television and other new media promise enough channels to serve every need. Since channels are no longer scarce, economics will no longer dictate that each channel be used to reach a mass audience, and the government need not protect or promote broadcasting for smaller audiences. There's more: Since PBS was good only for opera and ballet, we don't need PBS anymore, now that classy versions of Home Box Office allow highbrows to pay directly for cultural uplift.

That conventional wisdom, however, disregarded public broadcasting's reach (far greater than cable's in both audience size and geography), its free availability to the poor as well as the affluent, and its many kinds of alternative programming besides the highbrow. Naïve though the theory was, it turned up in nearly every general-circulation magazine last year, usually under a headline like "Is Public TV Dying?"

Soon enough, the theme also turned up in Stockman's budget bluebook: "There is no overriding justification for the funding of CPB." The audiences should pay for it, said the Office of Management and Budget. "Taxpayers as a whole should not be compelled to subsidize entertainment for a select few."

CPB retorted: More than half the households in the country, not "a select few," tune in to public television at least once a week, and the viewers closely match the demographics of the population. Furthermore, if the taxpayers paid only for things that everybody uses, "there would be little justification for programs related to education, housing, highway construction, and the like."

Indeed, many of those undertakings were threatened, too. That was the problem. While Congress was dishing out smaller school lunches, CPB, with its "fat cat" image, couldn't escape damage. Public broadcasting lurched through hearing rooms like the Elephant Man, crying "I am not a frill" while fiscal conservatives jeered. By summer, public broadcasters could only protest mildly that the proposed advertising experiment was risky and inappropriate. The industry's champions, led by Representatives Tim Wirth (D-Colo.), Al Swift (D-Wash.), and Tom

Tauke (R-Iowa), had put themselves on the line against Stockman's cuts, and *they* wanted the experiment.

Tauke, who proposed the experiment, wanted it done in time to give Congress new information for budget decision-making in the fall of 1983. Swift, an ex-broadcaster himself, expected the findings would lay to rest the idea that commercials were public broadcasting's answer.

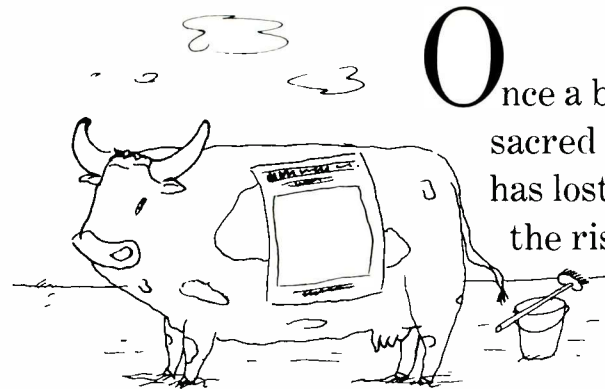
Tauke's approach served as a kind of compromise. Jim Collins, ranking Republican on Wirth's House telecommunications subcommittee, had wanted to authorize public broadcasters to accept ads immediately, without an experiment, and to cut far deeper into CPB's budget. By voting with Tauke, House members could say they were gradually phasing down the CPB subsidy while opening a new door to self-sufficiency for public television. Congress authorized (but didn't demand) the advertising experiment, to be super-

tial ad revenues and audience reaction.

"If we were trying to design a test that wouldn't work, we've found a way," says Tony Tiano, head of the San Francisco station KQED, which declined to volunteer for the test. Tiano says that, as usual, public-broadcasting legislation had been "drawn on the backs of envelopes in the hallway."

Nevertheless, some sixteen public-television licensees (out of 159) volunteered, along with thirteen public radio licensees, in response to a rush-rush plea from the temporary commission. To meet the January 1 congressional deadline for starting the experiment, the commission was planning to pick the fateful twenty before Christmas. Then it hit a solid wall of union resistance.

In a private confrontation December 4, the unions said broadcasters who go "commercial" would have to renegotiate contracts, and might end up losing the valuable right of multiple repeats without



Once a bipartisan, semi-sacred cow, public TV has lost its halo with the rise of Reaganism.

vised by a new Temporary Commission on Alternative Funding for Public Telecommunications. Congress gave itself a breather; for two years, the question would be safely "under study."

Setting aside philosophical problems and union resistance, the experiment has plenty of practical difficulties. Congress so limited the number of stations (ten television and ten radio) and the duration of the test (eighteen months) that general conclusions would be hard to draw. To accommodate commercial clusters between shows, running time would have to be lopped off many PBS programs already taped. Research costs were estimated to be as high as \$400,000, but Congress didn't allocate a penny. And any stations that volunteered for the experiment faced start-up costs estimated at \$100,000 to \$150,000, as well as the risk of offending donors who take the "noncommercial" identity seriously.

Overseers of the experiment, borrowed from the industry and the already short-staffed FCC, expect it to provide at best only "anecdotal" evidence about poten-

paying expensive "residuals" to artists. The unions reportedly threatened to sue if, even during an experiment, contracts weren't changed, and their members' work turned up on any station carrying commercials.

"It was reassuring to those of us who were secretly hoping the whole experiment would be blown up by a grenade," confided one broadcaster after the show-down.

If the broadcasters can't experiment with spot commercials, some want to try stretching the definition of underwriting credits. John Jay Iselin, president of WNET, New York, has proposed giving underwriters time for soft-sell institutional ads—"undertirements," he calls them—to go with programs they assist.

Even if no on-air tests can be arranged, the commission plans a "paper experiment" involving public-opinion surveys.

Most broadcasters had been willing to "go along" with the test, like it or not, as long as they didn't have to risk their own stations: despite many on-air opportunities during pledge drives, they largely

kept to themselves any major doubts about advertising as an income source. The presidents of CPB, PBS, and National Public Radio, for example, went along with the test but opposed the new income source.

An ad executive for some twenty years before joining PBS, president Larry Grossman denies any "knee-jerk" revulsion toward ads. He simply recalls that "What put *Playhouse 90* off the air was *The Untouchables*." If public television comes to rely on ads, he predicts, programmers won't be blind to the advertising dollar. Just as network television has scheduled fewer children's programs, public television will follow. NPR president Frank Mankiewicz also avoids anti-Madison Avenue rhetoric while rejecting advertising. "It's not a bad business, or an improper business. But it's not *our* business."

The most outspoken of the three, the new CPB president, Edward Pfister, is trying to establish his semi-federal agency as a leader in public broadcasting rather than a perennial opponent in cat fights with the stations. If advertising is permitted, he says, "what may result is something that works but is not public broadcasting."

What exactly *is* public broadcasting? Not all public broadcasters would regard "noncommercial" as the key adjective for their stations. Some say "nonprofit" is the more important distinction. Their stations serve excellence, not stockholders. If ads are permitted, there would be only one or two per break, says one big-city station manager. That would be only a small step beyond underwriting. "What's the big deal? The other option is to close down."

Even though the public-broadcasting audience has broadened to resemble the general population, it has enough of an "upscale" edge to attract advertisers aiming at high-income viewers, says Denver economist Paul Bortz, author of the study for CPB. On the income side, he took into account public broadcasting's relatively small audiences (although he estimated ad rates at 150 to 300 percent of the commercial television rates because of the upscale audience). On the cost side, Bortz projected the discouraging burden of setting up an advertising office in every station: 36 percent of gross ad revenues.

If public television aired seven two-minute clusters per evening, and public radio aired four minutes per hour during drive time, and *all* stations participated, Bortz estimated, the annual net "profit" would be \$52 million to \$104 million.

Bortz didn't, however, subtract income taxes the stations would probably have to pay on advertising profits ("unrelated

business income"). One station estimated that taxes would take 44 percent of its profit even though it is a nonprofit corporation. Furthermore, an ambivalent Congress decided that public stations would be penalized for having taxable income by having an amount—equivalent to the taxes paid—subtracted from their federal aid.



Public broadcasting lurched through hearing rooms like the Elephant Man, crying 'I am not a frill' while fiscal conservatives jeered.

Bortz didn't hazard any guesses about the predictable backlash that would occur among public television's current supporters. The unions would be only the first of its angels to withdraw. Music copyright owners could be expected to demand full royalties for broadcasts of their work—another multi-million dollar reversal. Other sources of subsidy could be expected to dry up: the states, state colleges, and local governments that fork out 40 percent of the industry's income; the audiences that directly contribute another 15 percent, and even the underwriters, who supply 10 percent.

"Once a station has gone 'commercial,'" warned Maryland broadcaster Warren Park, it will have forfeited membership drives, and "the pressure on the programmer to increase ratings is going to become *intense* because the survival of the station will depend upon it."

In other words, to go commercial, they would not only have to chase Nielsens, they'd also risk losing some part of \$500 million in aid and contributions to have a shot at maybe \$50 million from commercials. That makes advertising look less like an "alternative" and more like trouble.

While the temporary commission attends to its crippled experiment, it has another assignment from Congress: to report back in July on other funding "alternatives" and changes in federal law that would be required.

Inevitably, some folks answering the commission's inquiry in January and February will suggest that public broadcasters use their talents and facilities to go out and *earn* cash to subsidize themselves, and get off the dole. Some stations are already doing that to a degree. But "going into business" is an unrealistic alternative

to federal aid. To earn profits of \$172 million—CPB's appropriation this year—public broadcasting would have to build a money machine that would rank number 169 among the most profitable U.S. corporations, just after Colgate-Palmolive and just before Anheuser-Busch, ringing up sales in the billions. The poor cousin of the broadcasting in-



dustry would be expected to show greater profits than such media giants as ABC (\$146 million in 1980) and Time Inc. (\$141 million). Unlikely.

It's also unlikely that Congress can get off the hook by conjuring up some hybrid commercial/noncommercial kind of broadcasting. Such an invention couldn't survive commercially without going for vastly larger audiences, and the commercials, combined with mass-appeal programs, would drive away the benefactors of a noncommercial service. We probably cannot have it both ways.

Then how *can* public broadcasting be supported? Congress has shown no interest in exacting license fees from viewers, as is done in Britain to back the BBC, or in exacting "spectrum fees" from commercial broadcasters who use the public's airwaves.

If no adequate alternative can be found, James Quello, the FCC member who chairs the temporary commission, says he already has warned Congressmen that the commission may come back asking for a renewed commitment to direct federal aid.

Then the question of federal aid again will be put squarely before Congress, the way AFL-CIO representative Jack Golodner did it in testifying against budget cuts last year: "If we are going to cut it, then we are going to have to tell the world that we cannot afford a diversified information system in this country. . . . Let's be honest about it. Tell everyone that we cannot afford public broadcasting: we are a poor country and we cannot afford these things. The next thing we will be talking about perhaps is how we can get McDonald's to pay for the textbooks in our schools because we cannot afford them either." ■

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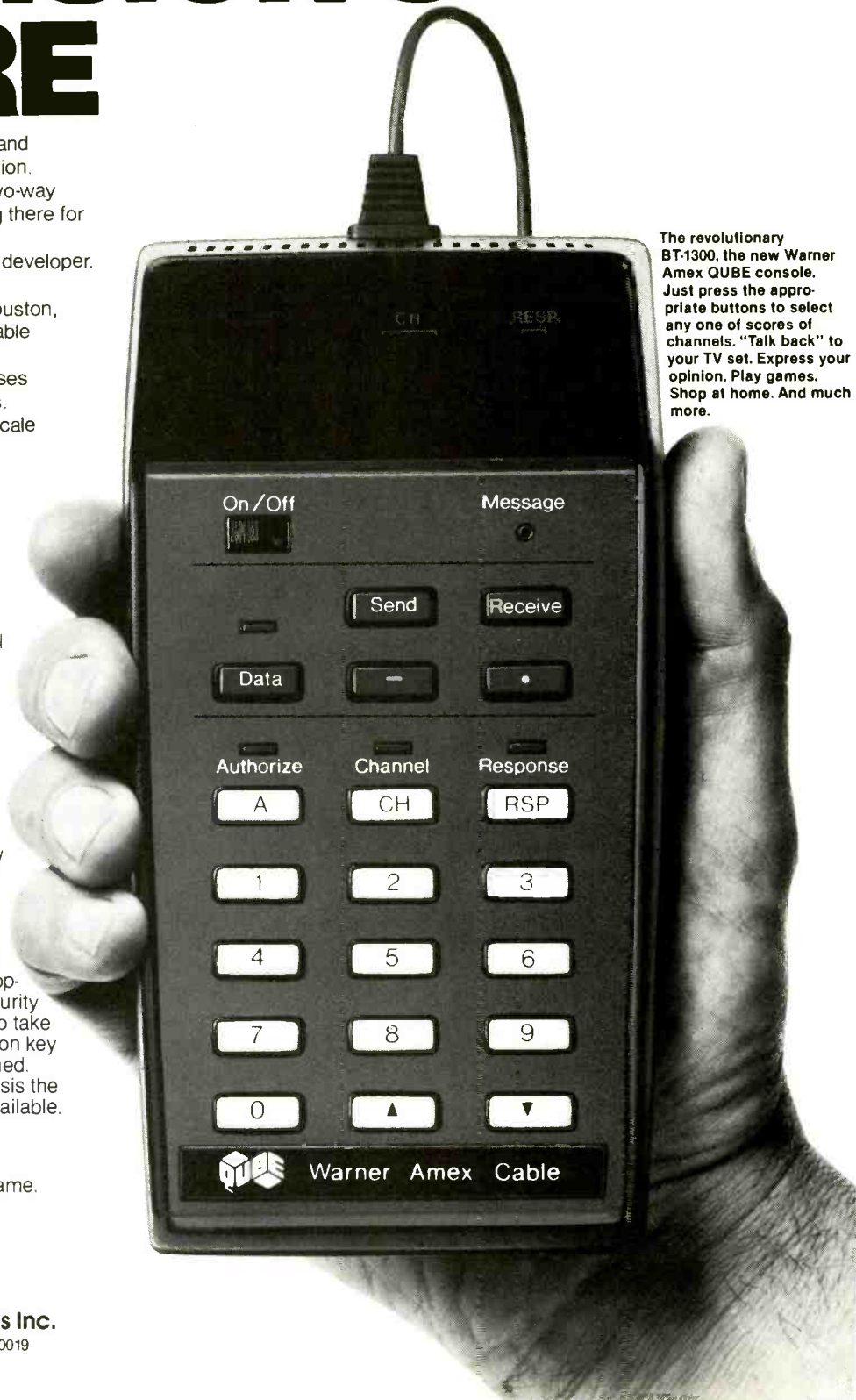
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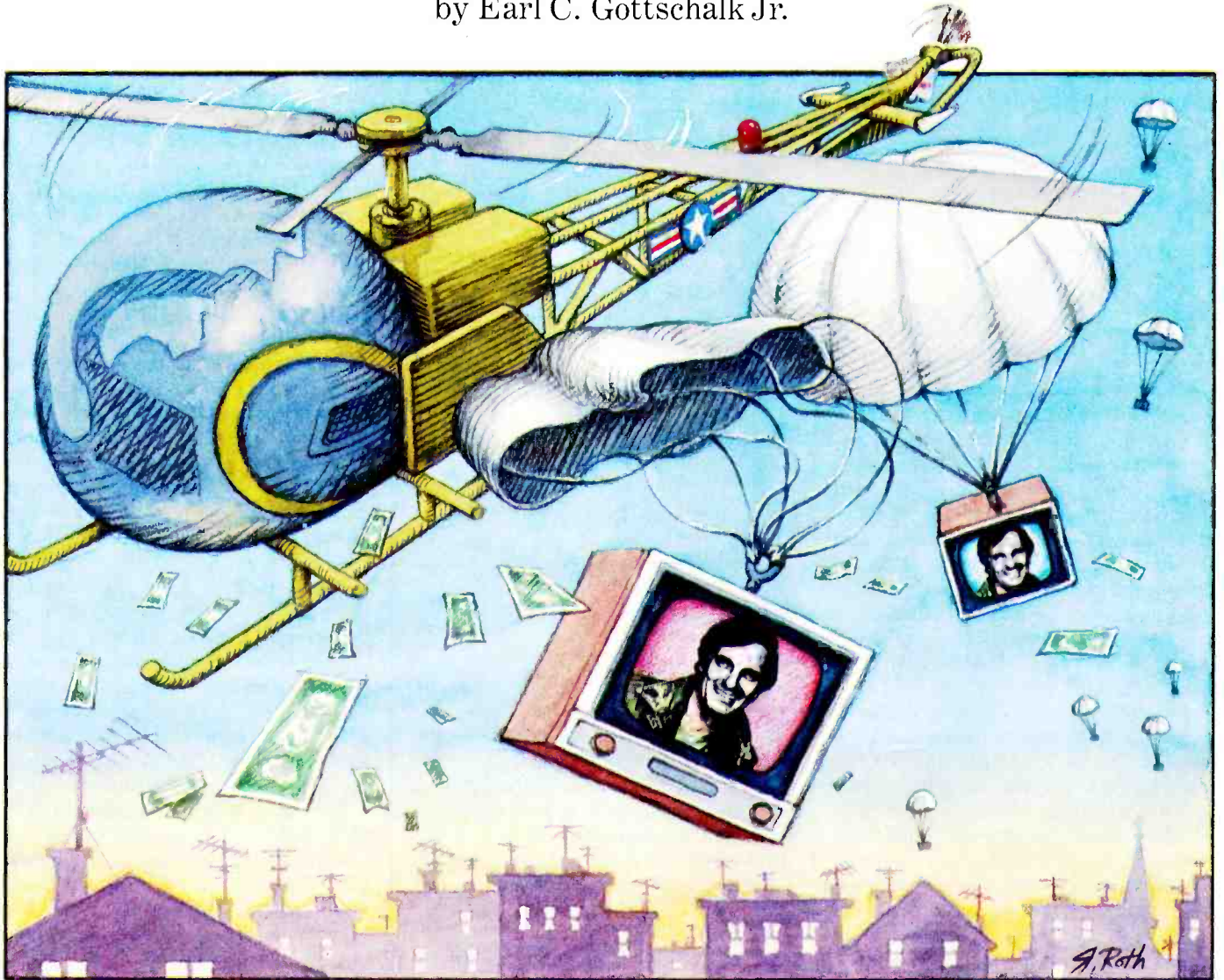


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# S\*M\*A\*S\*H

Ratings winners come and go, but TV's real prize is syndication, which is about to make this unlikely show the greatest hit of all time.

by Earl C. Gottschalk Jr.



Illustrations by Roger Roth

**W**HEN OIL MAN Marvin Davis bought Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation from its public stockholders for \$703 million last summer, one of the assets he prized was a nine-year-old television series that seems assured of several more first-run years on CBS. For *M\*A\*S\*H* is no ordinary prime-time hit show, it is a powerhouse—or in oil men's terms, a gusher.

There is nothing to compare with it in all television today, and rarely has there been a program like it ever. Not only is it widely

*Earl C. Gottschalk Jr. is a Los Angeles-based writer.*

respected for the quality of its bittersweet war-comedy scripts and the deft ensemble playing of its cast, but it succeeds almost anywhere in the schedule, whether in original episodes or syndicated reruns. What Davis acquired along with the studio was what every television producer dreams of: a program that mints money, a property that in fact promises to earn for Davis in the next ten or fifteen years a quarter or even more of the total amount he paid for Fox.

Well before Davis entered the picture, a Fox executive confided that Alan Alda, the star of *M\*A\*S\*H*, who enjoys a sizeable profit participation in the series, would realize at least \$30 million from

syndication alone. "If that's his share," the executive said, "imagine what ours will be."

**T**O LISTEN TO big-time television producers in Hollywood is to wonder why anyone would ever go into the risky business of making television shows. There are only three customers for the product—ABC, CBS, and NBC—and they never pay enough the first year to allow the production company to make a profit. Some series may break into the black the second year, but the real money comes when a



show builds up enough episodes to justify rerun syndication to local television stations. Syndication demands another method of presenting the show: instead of once a week in prime time, every night or afternoon in the same time period. This requires a library of around a hundred episodes, and to accumulate such a backlog, most series have to run at least five years in network prime time. For every one that makes it, there are scores of *Supertrains*.

Making television shows is a chancy game, and the networks keep making it rougher. During the sixties, the practice was to order thirty-nine first-run episodes and to fill out the summer with thirteen reruns. Today, if the producer is lucky, the network orders twenty-four first-run episodes. Often the network will ask for thirteen, or if it is a midseason replacement, only six. The syndication payoff grows more and more distant.

Moreover, a network order of thirteen episodes is no assurance that all of them will be aired. Most series don't survive beyond eight or ten weeks. Programs that cannot hold their own in a time period only feed audience to the rival networks.

Every television season, hundreds of program proposals and dozens of pilots, or sample episodes, are scuttled. Millions of production-company dollars go down the drain before the real action begins. Of the programs that do get on the air in network prime time, only about one in forty takes hold and runs long enough to amass a library of episodes for a syndication sale. "You can get much better odds in Las Vegas," says Alan Silverbach, executive vice president of Metromedia

Plenty of shows are based on movies, but almost never does the knockoff eclipse the original.

Producers Corporation.

Indeed, producers liken the gamble in television programming to playing the Nevada slots. You pump money into the machines and usually lose; only sometimes is there a payoff. Some programs hit for three cherries, or three plums, or three bells. But occasionally, a *M\*A\*S\*H* hits the jackpot, and the knowledge that it can happen is what keeps the players coming back, season after season.

*M\*A\*S\*H* is remarkable for many things; one is that it has made everyone forget the excellent 1970 movie from which it was adapted. The original was a film directed by Robert Altman, which won an Academy Award for Ring Lardner Jr.'s writing. Donald Sutherland, Elliott Gould, and Sally Kellerman performed the roles in the film that are played on television respectively by Alan Alda, Wayne Rogers, and Loretta Swit—all unknowns before the premiere. Plenty of television shows are based on movies, but almost never does the knockoff eclipse the original. *M\*A\*S\*H* does.

It is an unlikely series to be such a gigantic hit, prolonging the Korean War as it does, at a time when people don't want to think about war. Its progenitors as tele-

vision war comedies were *Hogan's Heroes*, *McHale's Navy*, *You'll Never Get Rich*, and *F Troop*, but *M\*A\*S\*H* differs from them because its black comedy springs from life and death, not incidental situations. Its heroes are not clever American fellows outwitting bumbling Nazis from week to week, but members of a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital who do a bloody sort of work, and grow ever more cynical about life and war. *M\*A\*S\*H* is more serious than the typical television comedy and does not labor for laughs as so many others do. People frequently die in its episodes, flouting a sitcom taboo. And it is, by and large, anti-establishment in its point of view, which, in these times, makes it an anachronism.

What may be most remarkable about *M\*A\*S\*H* is that it has managed for so many years to sustain its quality as well as its popularity. This is largely because the program's producers, and its star, have never lost sight of its original concept. Although other principals have left, Alan Alda has remained as star and field captain, and has neither staled nor lost interest in his work. "The idea is to be funny, but to let the pain come through," he explains. "It's to make people laugh and cry at the same time. We don't want the war treated as merely a backdrop for hijinks at the front."

Burt Metcalfe, the current executive producer, who started with the show as its first casting director, attributes the success of *M\*A\*S\*H* to its stubborn adherence to a concept. "This is not just about fun," he says, "but also about compassion and the human spirit. As I watch *M\*A\*S\*H* day after day, I'm always struck by how much less it could be."

The show benefited greatly from the fact that the key people behind the cameras also remained with it a long time. Larry Gelbart, who devised the television series and wrote the earliest episodes, left to write movies and plays—but not until ninety-seven episodes of *M\*A\*S\*H* were under his belt. Gene Reynolds, the original executive producer, remained even longer.

The two of them may be credited with putting the show on its successful track by ignoring the artistic advice of the network and resisting the studio's efforts to hold down production costs. Metcalfe says, "Network executives deal in clichés and formulas. So every hit show necessarily is a pioneering effort. The hits come about when a producer insists that it be done his way or not at all, and the network finally says, 'All right, go ahead, try it.'"

After the battle with CBS came the battle with Twentieth Century-Fox. "They have guys here looking to cut every corner they can," says Metcalfe. "Some of them



would shoot the show in a closet if they could." *M\*A\*S\*H* is filmed out of sequence, like a movie—not videotaped before a live audience, in the manner of a stage play, like *Archie Bunker's Place* and other modern sitcoms. The studio wanted to shoot each half-hour show in two and a half days to save money; the producers resisted, demanding an extra day for rehearsal. "A comedy like *M\*A\*S\*H* is a soufflé," Metcalfe says. "You need a certain level of competence. If you don't achieve that level, the whole thing falls apart."

Despite its initial attempts at meddling, CBS had faith in a show that fared poorly in the ratings at the start. A flop in its original Sunday-night berth, it might have been canceled summarily, as many another show has been that failed to prove an instant hit. The network kept moving the series to other nights and other time slots. "CBS executives got nervous, but they were patient. It took us a year and a half to become a hit," Metcalfe recalls.

**T**WENTIETH CENTURY-FOX began selling syndicated reruns of *M\*A\*S\*H* to local television stations in 1975 on a "futures" basis. That is, they were not to become available for airing until October of 1979, after which they were station property for a five- or six-year period. For station executives, the decision to buy the reruns was a difficult one. They were being asked to make a fairly large financial commitment to an unorthodox war comedy that might hold little interest for viewers four years down the line. It seemed not to bode well that *M\*A\*S\*H*'s ratings on the network were taking a dip at the time (it turned out to be temporary), and that McLean Stevenson and Wayne Rogers had left the show. Still, Fox garnered some \$25 million in total revenues from that first round of syndication, which it later reported as \$20 million in pretax earnings. Prices in each market were considered quite good but certainly not spectacular.

But if Fox was happy enough with its \$20 million windfall, the stations that bought the show were in clover. No matter where it played—at 6:30, 7, or 11 P.M.—*M\*A\*S\*H* creamed the competition: news programs, game shows, other off-network sitcoms. "It's one of the strongest syndicated shows in the field," said William A. Schwartz, president of Cox Broadcasting. In San Francisco, on independent station KTVU, *M\*A\*S\*H* scored higher ratings than the majority of the network shows in prime time. Alan J. Bell, general manager of the station, pointed out that "the show is extra-successful in San Francisco be-

cause the city's free-spirited, young audience devours *M\*A\*S\*H*'s anti-establishment sass and irreverence."

UHF stations, such as WFLD in Chicago, found they were being discovered by new viewers thanks to *M\*A\*S\*H*. Non-network stations in New York and Los Angeles were carrying the program three times a day; with its regular network run, it was airing in those markets sixteen times a week. *M\*A\*S\*H* was boffo in those cities, and in such others as Washington, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Phoenix, Miami, and Portland, Oregon.

"In terms of performance in the market, there really hasn't been a show in television history like *M\*A\*S\*H*," says Anthony M. Hoffman, entertainment analyst for the New York investment firm of A.G. Becker & Company. Ted James, his counterpart at the San Francisco banking firm, Montgomery Securities, calls *M\*A\*S\*H* "clearly the most successful television property ever produced."

With the benefit of hindsight, financial analysts now believe Fox seriously undervalued *M\*A\*S\*H* in its first syndication sale. The program was put on the market just before the advertising boom began at the country's hundred-odd unaffiliated stations. The money generated by the boom subsequently enabled these sta-

*Shirley* the record, \$54,000. Reportedly, *M\*A\*S\*H* had fetched only \$13,000 an episode in New York. Fox had sold it too soon, giving the stations that bought it a tremendous bargain.

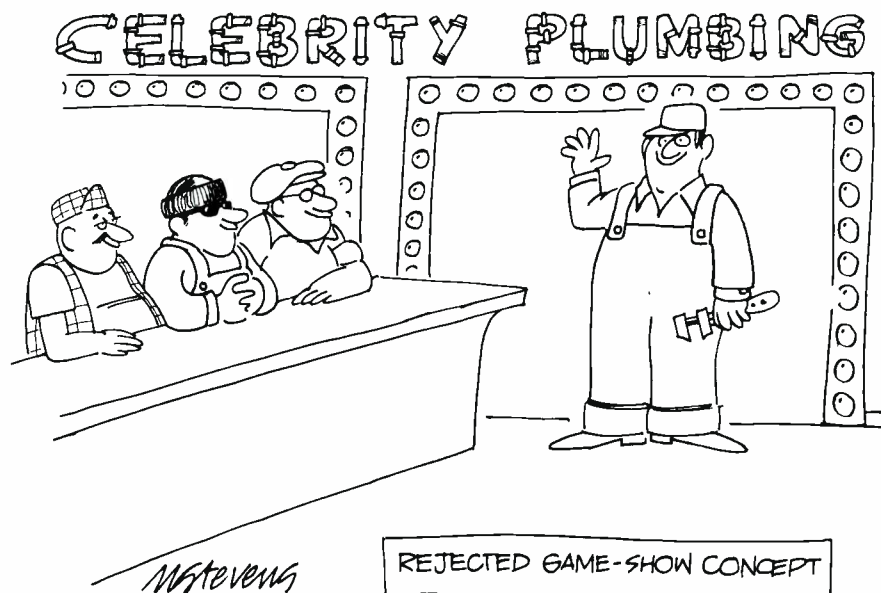
Still, it's hard to blame the company for acting when it did to syndicate *M\*A\*S\*H*. After all, the show was Fox's only genuine prime-time television hit in many years; in fact, the Hollywood wags called the series "Fox's television division."

Now Twentieth Century-Fox has begun selling the second package of *M\*A\*S\*H* episodes in syndication, for delivery in 1985, and the company has blood in its eyes. Robert Morin, Fox's senior vice president for syndication, declares, "We'll get prices in the second syndication that no one will ever get again. We'll make up this time for not getting enough the first time around."

According to Ted James of Montgomery Securities, Fox's asking price for *M\*A\*S\*H* has quintupled for the second round of syndication. He estimates the company will gross \$125 million this time and reap an operating profit of \$75 million. The other \$50 million will go to actors' residuals and to Alda, Gelbart, and others with profit participations in the series.

On top of his fee for the first-run

IN M. STEVENS'S VIEW



to pay huge amounts for the rerun rights to successful series. In 1976, a year after *M\*A\*S\*H* went into syndication, the prices for network reruns began to skyrocket.

WPIX in New York paid \$35,000 each for 123 episodes of *Happy Days*, which at the time was almost twice what any syndicated show had brought before. Then *All in the Family* snagged \$40,000 an episode in New York, and *Laverne &*

episodes, said to be \$150,000 each. Alda's share of the first syndication reportedly was \$5 million. The second round of syndication should gain him an additional \$25 million. His pension could end up being very large indeed.

None of the other actors, writers, or producers share directly in the profits, but all have been rewarded for the success of *M\*A\*S\*H* with hefty salary increases. According to financial analysts, Loretta

Swit, who plays nurse "Hot Lips" Houlihan, receives \$40,000 a show. Mike Farrell (Hunnicut) and Harry Morgan (Colonel Potter) each get \$35,000; Jamie Farr (Corporal Klinger) and William Christopher (Father Mulcahy) \$25,000, and David Ogden Stiers (Charles Winchester) \$20,000. All are in off-season demand for movies, nightclubs, personal appearances, and other television shows.

The lush salaries have made *M\*A\*S\*H* one of the most expensive half-hour series to produce. Needless to say, they have also contributed to the high morale and esprit reflected in the shows.

**A** REPORTER visiting the *M\*A\*S\*H* encampment on Stage 9 at the Fox lot in Beverly Hills watches Harry Morgan, Bill Christopher, and Jamie Farr perform a six-line scene that takes place in the colonel's office. It's a simple bit of action that shows Colonel Potter painting a portrait of Father Mulcahy. Corporal Klinger bursts into the office for a few lines of dialogue.

Director Charles S. Dubin puts Morgan through his lines again and again until he achieves the right emphasis. Dubin sends backstage workers scurrying to find the proper lights to give Father Mulcahy's hair the right effect. The scene is shot seven times, and the whole process takes nearly two and a half hours. Such a prodigious effort on a seemingly inconsequential scene is indicative of the pride the *M\*A\*S\*H* company takes in the quality of the series.

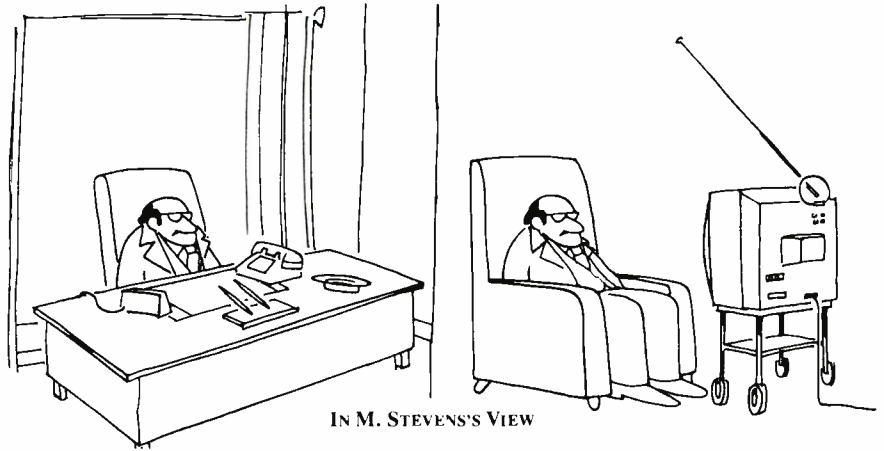
Morgan comments: "On most television shows, a director will do two or three retakes, and that's all. On this show, they'll do retakes until they get it right. We've done as many as twenty-three on some scenes. We're trying to make it perfect; not just good."

Jamie Farr remarks, "None of us will ever again play in a series like this one. We'll never in our lives find this kind of camaraderie and creativity. There are no big egos here. Everyone wants to do well."

That includes the writers. The scripts are always crisp and literate. Executive producer Metcalfe says the secret to attaining this quality is that the producers work with a small group of writers consisting of Metcalfe, producer John Rapaport, and executive story consultants Dan Wilcox, Dennis Koenig, and Thad Mumford. The *M\*A\*S\*H* staff conceives the stories and then assigns each to a member of the writing staff. Practically nothing is accepted from freelance writers.

The *M\*A\*S\*H* team of producers and

## THE OTHER SIDE OF HUGHSON R. CRUMLY



IN M. STEVENS'S VIEW

writers takes pains with authenticity and does extensive research—rare for a comedy series. Metcalfe himself has interviewed some two hundred former MASH doctors who served in Korea, and continues to keep touch with many of them by phone. Last May, he attended a reunion of MASH doctors in Chicago, and came away with material for a number of stories. "We look to them for anecdotes," he said. "No writer, no matter how skilled, can come up with an idea that matches something that really happened in Korea."

Metcalfe points out that the show draws from the same Hollywood pool of writers that all other shows use. Several in the present group of *M\*A\*S\*H* writers had worked previously for a flop comedy series, *Waverly Wonders*, which starred Joe Namath. "If someone hires you for a show and says, 'Write this crap,' you'll do that," said Metcalfe. "But when we say, 'Do your very best,' they'll do that too."

*M\*A\*S\*H* is not the Number One show in the Nielsen ratings; *Dallas* is, and has been for several years. *Three's Company* often ranks higher, and so also does *60 Minutes*. So why is *M\*A\*S\*H* the bonanza, and the others just big hits? Because each episode that airs on CBS has a long and lucrative future life in syndication—the trickiest marketplace in television.

On most stations, the main time periods for syndicated programs are the 4-to-6 P.M. block or the 7:30 slot after the evening news. These time segments draw an appreciably younger audience than network prime time, and to a large extent that demographic skew determines what will succeed in syndication. Such big network hits as *Mission: Impossible*, *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, and *Ironside* didn't perform well during those hours. Neither did *The Six Million Dollar Man*, although it had been designed for young viewers. The

analysis of its failure was that it was a "fad" show on the network, and the fad was over by the time it entered syndication.

And *All in the Family*, for all its great popularity on CBS over the years, has only been moderately successful in syndication, from the standpoint of ratings. Alan Bennett, syndication expert for the Katz Agency, which is the sales representative for some 140 television stations, says this is because "it doesn't appeal to kids." For the same reason, Bennett says, *The Bob Newhart Show*, a solid comedy hit on the network, was just so-so in a syndicated rerun.

In first run, *Dallas* consistently paces the prime-time field, but during the summer rerun season its ratings slip substantially. That seems to be the way with serial dramas; in reruns they become twice-told tales. *Peyton Place*, a prime-time soap opera that was a huge success in the sixties, failed miserably in syndication, and that suggests tough going for the *Dallas* reruns.

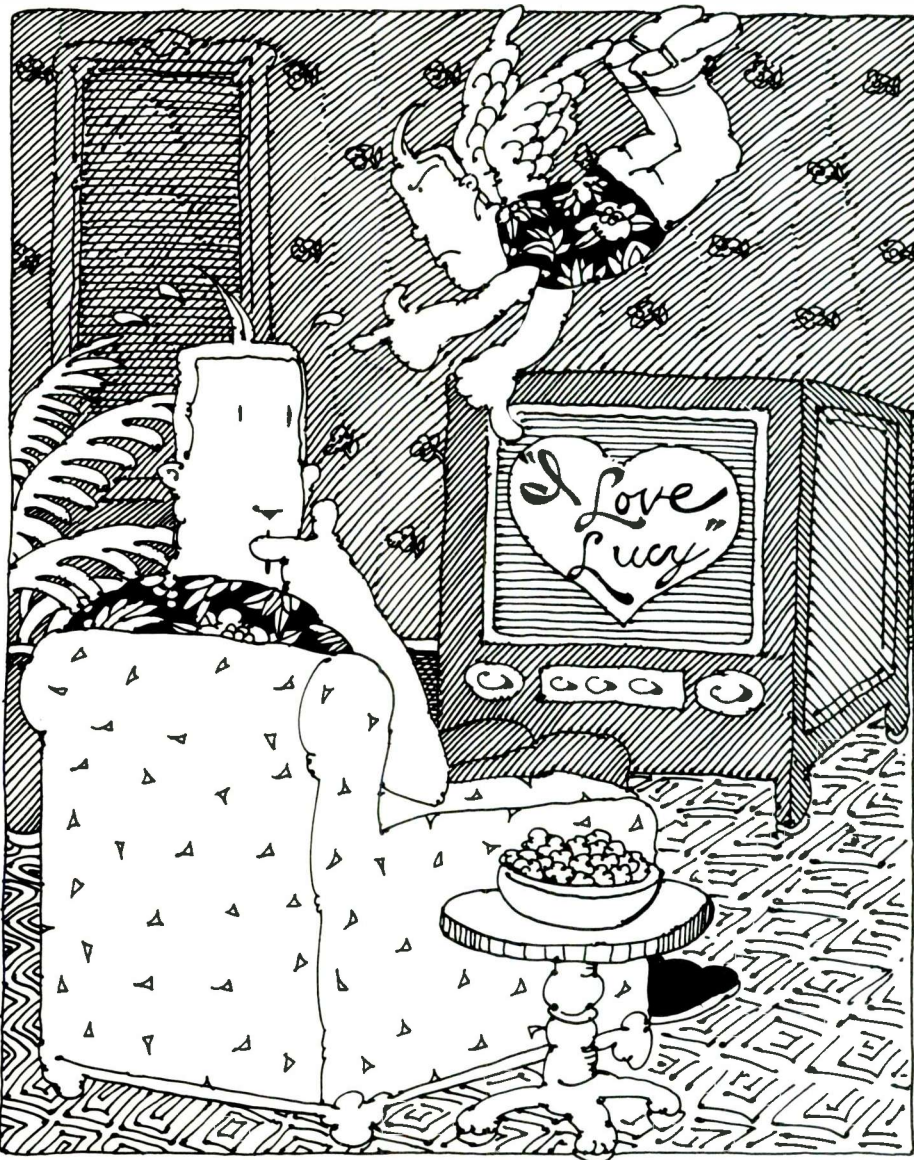
*M\*A\*S\*H*, on the other hand, has exceptional prospects and is the likeliest challenger to *I Love Lucy*'s record as the all-time earner in syndication, despite that program's twenty-year head start. *M\*A\*S\*H* plays three times a day in New York and Los Angeles because it can capture the adult audience at 11 P.M. as readily as the young audience in the late afternoon and early evening.

In the end, the miracle of *M\*A\*S\*H* is not just that it meets the requirements of the main local time periods, but that it transcends the demography of sex, age, and education. It is neither a woman's show nor a man's, neither highbrow nor lowbrow. It is the kind of program a father might watch on the same television set with his teenage son. In popular music today, it is Willie Nelson who has that rarest of knacks: to join all segments of the audience, closing the generation gap. In television, it is *M\*A\*S\*H*. ■

# The Guilt Edge

An old conspiracy of highbrows and newspapers has conditioned us to link television with the decline of Western Civilization.

by Clark Whelton



Illustrations by Kimble Mead

**G**UILT: THE SMALL, INSISTENT VOICE telling you that with a little more effort you could be having a really miserable time.

Guilt. For me it began on May 9, 1961, in a remote and dusty corner of Fort Bliss, Texas. I was watching television in the day room of Company D. The rest of my platoon had trudged off to the mess hall after our evening ritual of watching the cartoon adventures of Huckleberry Hound, but I had stayed to catch the first few minutes of the evening news. The army was buzzing with rumors about American involvement in a place called Vietnam, and I wanted to see if anything was happening that might interfere with my imminent return to civilian life.

But the lead story that night was not about Vietnam, or even about astronaut Alan Shepard, who had grazed the edge of outer space in a suborbital rocket shot four days earlier. Instead, the announcer was talking about someone named Newton Minow. Minow, recently appointed chairman of the Federal Communications Commission by President Kennedy, had delivered a blistering speech to television broadcasters in which he invited them to watch their own programming from sign-off to sign-off.

"You will see," Minow said, "a procession of game shows, violence, audience-participation shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western badmen, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And, endlessly, commercials — many screaming, cajoling, and offending. And most of all, boredom."

There was more. Minow acknowledged that a television western draws a larger audience than a symphony, but scolded, "It is not enough to cater to the nation's whims — you must also serve the nation's needs." The thirty-five-year-old former law partner of Adlai Stevenson cut loose with a condemnation that echoed throughout the country. Television, Minow asserted, is a "vast wasteland."

I cringed, besieged by feelings of shame. If television was a vast wasteland, then I, a founding member of the Fort Bliss Huckleberry Hound Society and television fan extraordinaire, was clearly a vast wastrel. I loved it all, the whole Newton Minow hit list. I loved the game shows, the formula comedies, the unbelievable families, the private eyes, gangsters and gunplay, cartoons, cajoling

*Clark Whelton, speech writer for the mayor of New York, is writing a book on television.*

commercials, the works. I can still sing the Mott's applesauce jingle from 1950, and as far as I know I hold the record for continuous contemplation of a test pattern.

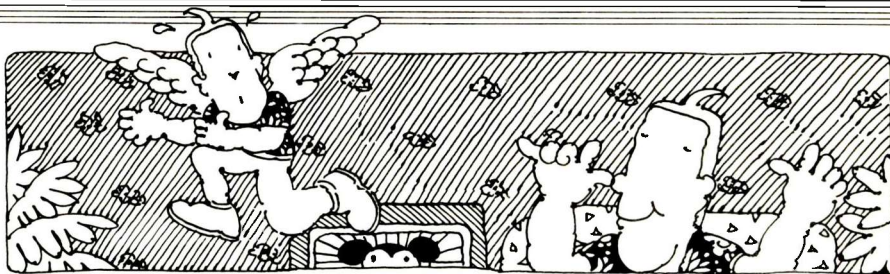
But ever since Newton Minow painted a "wasteland" label on my viewing habits, I have been dogged by doubt. Whenever I settle back for a Mary Tyler Moore rerun or another session with *Family Feud*, I hear that small voice telling me I am contributing to the decline of Western Civilization, and I feel guilty. I have spent more than a little time examining this curious exercise in self-condemnation, and I know there are millions of others who suffer from the same affliction.

How did a mechanical contrivance like television get cross-wired into the American conscience? Did it really start with Newton Minow? In fact, the origins of television guilt go back a long way, and are probably as old as the medium itself. *New York Times* critic Jack Gould had already taken a swipe at television as early as 1948, when sets had tubes instead of transistors. Gould wrote that children's shows appeared to be a "narcotic" administered by parents, who had learned that plunking junior down in front of the Philco would keep him out of their hair for an hour or two. By calling television a narcotic instead of something that kids enjoy watching, Gould helped to establish a pattern of overkill in television criticism that would largely be delivered via television's major competitor—newspapers.

Very early in the struggle for media domination, the newspaper business showed its fangs: It was the summer of 1950. At the editorial offices of the *New York Journal-American*, flagship paper of the Hearst publishing empire, a sudden meeting was called. Among the hand-picked reporters attending that meeting was Atra Baer, daughter of the well-known humor columnist Bugs Baer.

"The editor came right to the point," Baer recalls. "A message had been received from William Randolph Hearst, the chief himself. It seems that Mr. Hearst was very worried about television, especially about the 'deleterious' effect that it might be having on the American public. So a team of *Journal-American* reporters was assigned to canvass the New York City area and come up with some quotes—particularly from mothers—that would focus on the 'bad effects' of television."

Orders in hand, the reporters fanned out. Atra Baer was sent to a nearby suburb, where she asked the requisite questions in the requisite way: "Madam, are you worried about the harmful effect television is having on your children's eyesight? Are you concerned about the harmful effect television has on your children's reading habits?" The sought-after



answers were easily obtained, and a story on the "dangers of television" was easily written. At that time there were Hearst papers in every section of the country.

Merrill Panitt, the editor of *TV Guide*, remembers just how effective anti-television journalism was.

"In our early issues," Panitt says, "we constantly had to answer all the negative stories circulating about television. We ran articles reassuring our readers that no, television is not bad for your eyes; no, television is not bad for your back; no, television does not cause cancer, and it certainly doesn't cause constipation."

Given the newspapers' antipathy toward radio, their alarm at the arrival of television—radio with pictures—can be imagined. The antagonism even extended into press conferences, where newspaper reporters often salted their questions with expletives ("Senator, don't bullshit us, when the hell is Congress going to pass that goddamn tax bill?") so that broadcasters, whose vocabularies are sanitized by their license obligations, couldn't run the footage on the air. When naughty language didn't do the trick, light plugs were pulled, doors were slammed, and coughing epidemics broke out whenever a television reporter asked a question.

"It worked for a while," says a former newspaper reporter who admits to a minor career in sabotage. "But we could see who was winning the war. Politicians wouldn't even let a press conference begin until the cameras arrived."

Newspapers grudgingly accepted the inevitable. The immense popularity of television stars like Milton Berle and Ed Sullivan had helped to sell millions of sets, and the daily papers had to give their readers what they wanted. Bans against television listings were dropped, even though many papers quietly decided that television coverage deserved to be crammed in with the comics or buried deep inside. This snobbery toward television still exists today. A reporter who worked for *The New York Times* in the 1970s recalls an editor saying that the *Times* would not "debase" its culture section with television news. Television reporting was—and still is—relegated to the back pages.

However, it was in the area of television criticism that newspapers made their biggest dent in the competition. Syndi-

cated columnists like John Crosby specialized in scathing reviews of television programs, reviews implying not only that certain shows were inferior, but that television itself was a medium only a lowbrow could love. Although theater critics were expected to love the theater, and dance and movie critics to revere those art forms, television critics were often people who disdained television.

**A**T THE CENTER of this conflict between newspapers and television was a life-or-death struggle. Publishers were well aware that someone who gets his nightly news from the tube is less likely to buy an evening paper. Even before television went on the air, newspapers had been fighting for survival. Dozens of double-barreled logotypes (*Post-Dispatch*, *Herald Tribune*) revealed the many newspaper mergers inspired by the fear of bankruptcy. Fresh competition from television gave newspapers the shudders, especially in large cities where the new medium flourished.

On a national basis, however, there was little reason to fear that television would undermine American literacy. Official figures reveal that the United States had only nine fewer daily papers in 1980 than there were in 1950, and circulation had climbed by more than eight million.

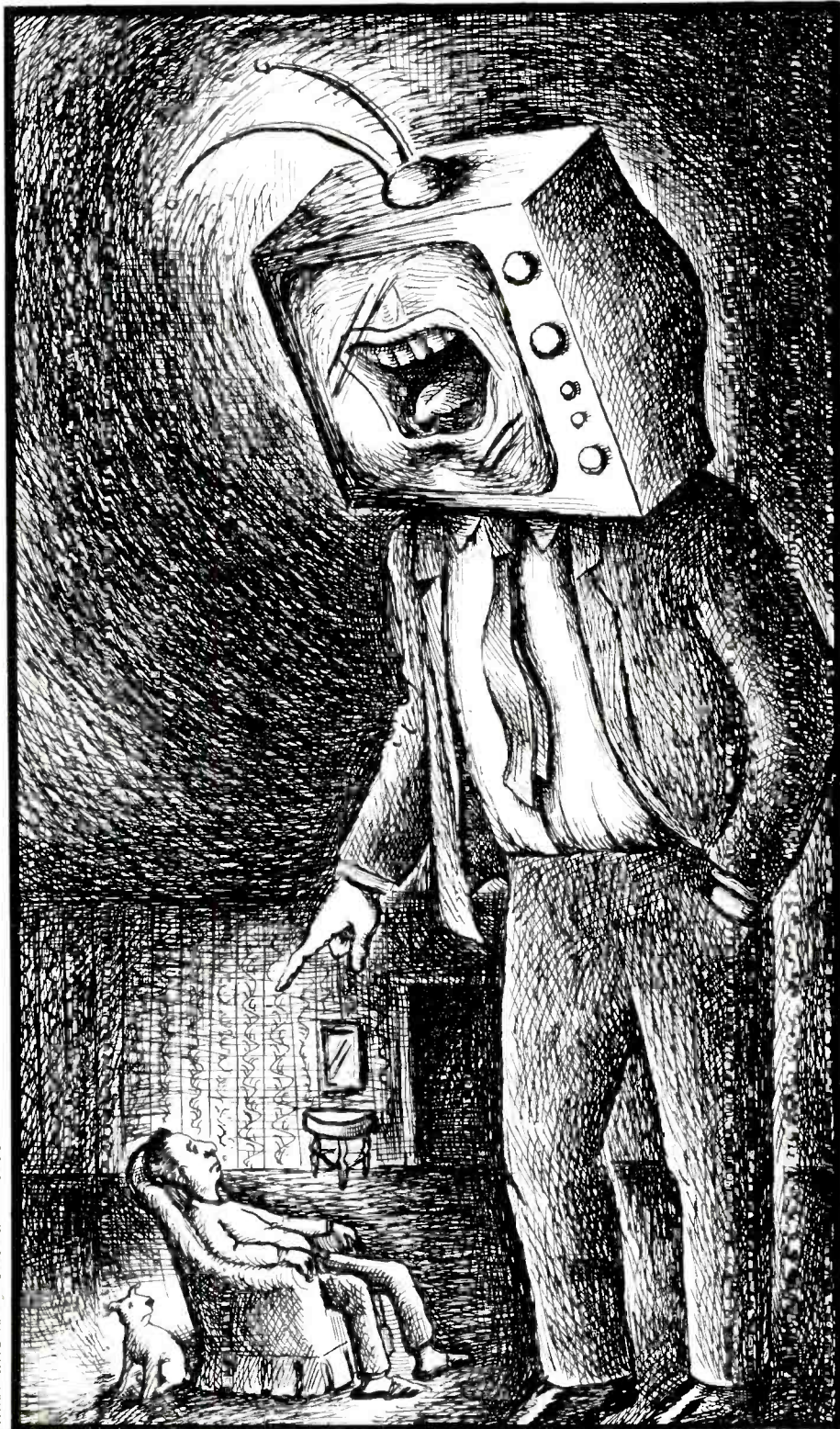
Nevertheless, enemies of television were ever on the alert. In 1963, psychologists claimed to have discovered a "TV Syndrome," which supposedly made kids cranky if they were overexposed to the tube. In the seventies, reports indicated that by the time they reached first grade, television-watching children had spent an average of 5,000 hours in front of the set. A variety of social problems now began to be blamed on television. Low reading scores? College Board scores taking a tumble? Crime and vandalism on the rise? Blame television. And let's not forget the recent news from Tulsa Central Academy in Oklahoma. When English teacher John Zannini's seventh grade class heard that President Reagan had been shot, most of the class cheered. Mr. Zannini blamed it on television.

Television has been subjected to constant scorn and sniping by critics who would have you believe that unless you were watching a show introduced by Alis-



# Should Corporate Advertisers Be Allowed to Sell Ideas?

by Charlie Dodge



Illustrations by Sheba Emerson

**T**HE CAMERA PANS the silhouette of a primitive flying craft set against a bursting dawn sky. Bryan Allen is about to become the first person to cross the English Channel in a manpowered airship. We watch as he pedals his way into the record books. A voiceover, quiet and aqueous, confides, "Bryan Allen illustrates our belief that everyone benefits when individuals have great freedom to pursue personal goals. Unfortunately, neither you nor we can expect such freedom in our daily lives. Not when someone decides the government should protect us from it. Something to think about . . . from the people at Getty."

The people at Getty are in the oil business. Their public-policy ads may have nothing to do with oil, but they are the latest reminder of the push now on to break the lingering barriers to advocacy advertising on television. Advertising agencies and their trade associations, corporations, and lobby groups are working hard to open television up to paid "issue" messages—with notable success: The Television Bureau of Advertising (TvB) predicts television revenues from such advertising will have rocketed from zero in 1979 to nearly \$100 million in 1981.

The Bryan Allen spot—along with similar thirty- and sixty-second stories—is running during prime time in five major cities and on two ABC-owned and -operated stations. ABC approved the commercial as submitted ("It wasn't an advocacy ad; it doesn't espouse a particular view," claims ABC spokesman Jeff Tolvin). CBS rejected it outright ("Their corporate or political opinions are their own business, but they're not going to get on CBS," says the network's Jim Sirmans). And NBC accepted them, but only after the ads had been running for months on ABC-owned stations. The ads are also running on the 85 percent Getty-owned Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN), which reaches eleven million cable homes.

*Charlie Dodge is senior writer for Campaigns and Elections: The Journal of Political Action, a quarterly published in Washington.*

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## Companies are pressuring revenue-hungry stations to drop restrictions against advocacy ads.

Similar commercials are in the works. "We're babes in the woods in corporate advocacy," says Getty public-relations manager Jack Leone. "It's really just a toe-in-the-water thing for us now." It's also a foot in the door, since the Getty spots artfully disarm the Fairness Doctrine. To be subject to a Fairness Doctrine challenge, an ad would have to espouse a position on a "controversial issue of public importance." And what could be less controversial on its face than "the freedom to pursue individual goals"? Getty officials do not admit this strategy is what they have in mind, only that "we're not trying to ram something down people's throats. In sixty seconds you can't articulate a philosophy."

Others disagree, arguing that Getty is espousing, albeit subtly, a philosophy of deregulation and anti-environmentalism. The Getty ads, as well as those by Mobil, Kaiser Aluminum, and a growing list of activist corporations, raise difficult questions—not only for the networks but for the public. There is a danger that the corporate points of view on critical issues—and on more general ones, as with Getty—will come to dominate the media if giant companies are allowed to buy all the air-time they want. Should networks and stations have the right to decide which advocacy advertisements they will carry? Should an oil company's philosophy be entitled to more exposure than a labor union's? Should money determine who speaks loudest on the important issues of the day?

These crucial questions haunt the networks and local radio and television stations, where decisions on whether or not to run a given advocacy spot are becoming increasingly difficult to make. Pressure from advertisers is increasing, the ads themselves are becoming subtle enough to be acceptable, and the ad revenues seem more enticing every day. Reluctance remains, but resistance is quickly eroding.

The Supreme Court ruled that stations have a legal right to reject editorial advertising, and many of them do, usually because they fear having to provide free time for opposing views. In 1977, the Federal Communications Commission decided that a Texaco spot—showing all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle falling into place

when refineries and distributors are added to oil wells—was an attempt to comment on legislation pending in Congress to break up large oil companies. The commission ordered one station to run opposing commercials, produced by a consumer group, Energy Action. "Local stations don't want it to get messy," says Roy Danish of the Television Information Office, an arm of the National Association of Broadcasters. "If there are legal problems, they will back away."

Yet some wonder if the Fairness Doctrine is the real reason some stations, and the networks, are reluctant to run issue ads. "The Fairness Doctrine has essentially atrophied," says Stuart Sucherman,

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### As the ads get more subtle, the decisions facing local stations become more difficult.

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executive director of the Columbia University Media-in-Society Seminars. "If you went over to CBS and said, 'What have you not done over the last few years because of the Fairness Doctrine?' you would get, 'Nothing. We don't even know what it is.'" Indeed, Gene Mater, CBS senior vice president for policy, argues that "if the Fairness Doctrine were abolished tomorrow, CBS policy would remain the same." Local stations, tempted by dollars, are far less likely to match network resolve. At the request of the American Association of Advertising Agencies, the TvB completed a survey in the summer of 1981 that found 93 percent of responding television stations willing to accept advocacy advertising on an "issue-by-issue basis." (That number was up from 89 percent in 1980.) Five years ago in a similar TvB survey, only 50 percent were so disposed. Fifty-six of the stations agreeing to accept the ads are in the top ten markets. In a concurrent survey, Opinion Research reported that 60 percent of the public believes companies should be allowed to buy advocacy time on televi-

sion, although 90 percent consider media coverage of business generally fair. The same study revealed that of the 90 percent who have seen issue ads, 70 percent have seen them on television.

Yet J. Walter Thompson, which bills itself "the agency that takes issues," found a great deal more resistance than the surveys suggest when it went to local television stations with the anti-budget-cut commercial it handled for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Two-thirds of the nearly 100 stations contacted declined to carry it, claiming they do not accept issue-oriented advertising.

On July 1, ABC became the first network to allow corporations and others to purchase "paid commentaries." Time was allotted from the late-night schedule; the price for an advocacy minute was set at \$32,000—8.5 percent above regular late-night rates. But the network had no takers, and only two expressions of interest—from the Conservative Caucus of Lynchburg, Virginia, and upstate New York's Coalition on West Valley Nuclear Waste. "Who wants to discuss issues a minute after midnight?" asks Mobil's Tony DeNigro, noting his company's success in running issue spots during prime time on local stations. Andrew J. Schwartzman, executive director of the Media Access Project, a Washington-based public-interest law firm, offers a different explanation: "They [corporations] are very greedy, and what they're saying is, 'We're not going to buy this restrictive time. We're going all the way.'"

For many local radio and television stations, issue advertising can be an important source of revenue. Sandy Pastoor, vice president for programming at Metromedia's WTTG in Washington, is quick to admit, "It's very good money."

Mobil was the first company to begin spreading some of that kind of money around. The company began its much-publicized struggle for access to network commercial time shortly after the publicity fallout from the oil embargo of 1973. It has been leading the battle against the networks ever since. But Mobil seems to have changed its strategy of late. After trying to win approval for a series of rela-

show, a surprise to Wood. Just before going on the air, he was introduced to Jim Wallgren, a sixteen-year-old from Garland, Texas, paralyzed from the chest down as a result of a high school football-practice accident. Wood silently hoped that nobody would be confused by the fact that he and Wallgren were both from Texas; people could think the youth had been one of his players, and that he had been negligent.

Once on the air, *Good Morning, America* host David Hartman first interviewed attorney Miller about liability problems. Wallgren, in a wheelchair, then told his story. Ex-pro Francis said his concerns centered on kids below high school age who play tackle football. Hartman then asked Wood what precautions he took to avoid injuries. Wood outlined his training procedures and emphasized the importance of proper conditioning.

When Wood finished, Hartman said, "Back in 1974, you participated in an *ABC News Close-Up* about sports violence. Let me show just thirty seconds." Then, as the camera fixed on Wood, Hartman added, "This is back in 1974, and this is Coach Wood with some of his players, seven years ago, so watch this, gentlemen . . ."

Wood was puzzled, and looked toward the monitor. As far as he knew, he had never participated in an *ABC News Close-Up*. Some years earlier, a film crew had come to Brownwood to make a documentary about him, but he did not recall that it had been intended for television; to his knowledge, it had never been released.

As soon as the image hit the screen, Wood was certain a mistake had been made. The team colors were all wrong, and a Brownwood winter would have killed the palm trees lining that practice field.

But if he had worried about people getting the wrong impression about him and the injured boy from Texas, what he saw next on the screen distressed him even more. Wood, 67, watched a man who appeared to be in his thirties jerk, slap, scream at, and shove students during a high school football practice. The obvious age difference between his guest and the man in the film must have bothered Hartman; Wood heard him say, "As I said, this is seven years ago back in 1974 . . ."

When the clip ended, Hartman turned to Wood. "Now coach," he began, "when you say, 'go get 'em, hit, hit . . .'"

Wood tried to interrupt. "Let me . . ."  
". . . how do they back off from that when you tell 'em to go out and try to kill somebody?" Hartman persisted.

"Let me say first that this is the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen in my life."

Wood said. "That isn't me."

Hartman recovered quickly and offered his personal and professional apologies; then he asked for Wood's reaction to what he had just seen.

"If he [the coach in the film] were on my staff, he'd be fired in the morning," the coach replied.

In his letter of apology to Wood, George Merlis, executive producer of the show at the time, said that those responsible for the incident had been severely reprimanded, and that one resignation had been demanded. He stated that Hartman did not have prior knowledge of what was on the film and offered his "abject apologies" for "the embarrassment to you and to David Hartman and to *Good Morning, America*."

ABC spokesman Peter Heller later said that one of the show's writers had "structured the segment . . . to ambush the coach." Heller maintained that the writer did not tell anybody else about her design, not even Hartman. "What happened was,

possible settlement with Stevens before the suit was brought, but no agreement had been reached by the time *Channels* went to press in January. The lawyer says he expects the case will come to trial.

Wood personally believes Hartman "seemed to know a lot about that stupid film clip," and that, if he *had* been the coach on the film, he should have been given advance warning to prepare a defense. ABC's Heller agreed that "even if it had been Gordon, it was unethical and it is against the specific standards and practices of the show to set someone up."

The coach has received sympathetic letters from across the country. Some were addressed to him with a carbon to ABC; others were addressed to ABC with a carbon to him. All invariably began, "As I was eating breakfast this morning," and many revealed a deep mistrust of the media and delight that ABC had been caught in its own trap.

"You really put journalism in its proper light," a viewer in Arkansas wrote.

**T**he bad morning at *Good Morning, America* will certainly make its staff reluctant to venture ever again into confrontational journalism, but probably for the wrong reasons.

we asked ABC News to give us a thirty-second clip to show with Coach Wood," Heller said. "ABC News had done a program some years ago on brutality in sports, and they sent us a film clip of a coach abusing players. We made a mistake at *Good Morning, America* in not knowing the coach wasn't Coach Wood."

The explanation did not keep Wood from instructing his lawyer to file a libel suit against the network. The lawyer, Gary Stevens of Houston, anticipates that defendants in the case would include Hartman, ABC News and Sports president Roone Arledge, and Howard Cosell (Stevens says Cosell participated in establishing editorial policy for use of sports material in such shows as *Good Morning, America*). Wood isn't convinced that more people at ABC didn't have advance knowledge of the clip's contents; Stevens has asked that ABC put his client back on the air, and that the network admit to having known before the film was broadcast that Wood was not in it. ABC discussed

Others wrote:

"Seems to typify the media's appetite for sensationalism . . ."

"TV is always trying to knock down great people . . ."

Many wrote ABC to say that, at the very least, they were inexcusably unprepared. "At least verify facts before crucifying an individual . . ."

And of course, there were some old axes to grind. "Now you have a small taste of what was done to Richard Nixon when he was hounded out of office."

ABC has dutifully admitted guilt, but the question nags: What if it *had* been Gordon Wood in the film? Would the writer have been fired if Wood had been shamed rather than misrepresented? The bad morning at *Good Morning, America* will certainly make its staff reluctant to venture ever again into confrontational journalism, but perhaps for reasons not as noble as those claimed. ■

*Arnie Weissmann is editor of Texas Outlook magazine.*



# LOVE *vs* HATE

**"Outstanding Achievement for Public Service"**

— Columbia University School of Journalism National Magazine Award

**A "rallying cry... above the mellowspeak"**

— Time magazine

**"Inviting graphics, wry humor and colorful writing"**

— Los Angeles Times

**Publisher of "lies, half-truths and distortions"**

— A top Ford Motor executive, after our award-winning story that forced the recall of two million Pintos

**"A libelous reckless attack...by innuendo, lies and character**

**assassination"**

—A top official of the Laborers International Union, recently indicted for racketeering

**"Sleazy"**

— a senior Reagan appointee to the CIA



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## Images from Somewhere Else

### Within the Context of No Context

by George W. S. Trow  
Little, Brown & Co., \$12.95

**T**HE QUESTION IS: Should we consider television with chagrin, or with horror? Those who pay attention to the medium's busy foreground of programming—good, bad, long, short, noble, ignoble—usually consider it with a strained wince. Most television critics seem to feel this way (alone among forms of entertainment, television has almost no discerning critics who like what it has to offer), as does the viewer who “only watches public TV” or old movies, or who restricts the impressionable young folk to one hour per night.

Attend, however, to television's eerie background—a low, electromagnetic hum, a pool of warm light, images from somewhere else, perhaps from within the machine itself, made available, made familiar, to silent people in darkened rooms hour after hour—and you might come to a more categorical conclusion. Marshall McLuhan first broached the secret that television is the water in which all we blithe fish swim, declaring further that the electronic media had replaced linear, “typographic” thinking—that is, logic—with direct, “tactile” experience. And then, with a surprising cry of “in the destructive element immerse,” McLuhan declared television the salvation of the dissociated sensibility, and settled in to wait for the arrival of “the global village.” Most others who have followed McLuhan into the post-Gutenberg world, however, have reached the opposite conclusion—utter dread. In *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, reformed advertiser Jerry Mander calls the medium a “guru-hypnotist-leader,” claiming that it “zombie-ized” the mind, deprived the senses, sought death over life, and made straight the path of fascism.

George W. S. Trow, a *New Yorker* essayist and deadpan satirist in the style made famous by Donald Barthelme, comes down squarely on the side of horror. Readers accustomed to the usual array of psychological and economic would-be facts, however, will be disap-

pointed and probably baffled by this gnomic and altogether brilliant report from the frontiers of modern culture. Trow composes his thoughts telegraphically, with much of the implicit logic suppressed, so that his essay (which appeared originally in *The New Yorker*) reads something like one of Ezra Pound's cantos. Yet because he deals directly with the personal experience of television, and popular culture in general, we may find even his most obscure or adventurous observations familiar: We have felt the same dread at times. “Television has problems with its programming,” he writes, “because the frame of all programs on television is television—nothing else. . . . Daytime stories are just television loneliness. Talk programs are just the television context of no-context. Game shows have come to admit that they refer only to themselves.”

The frame of all programs on television is television—this is “the context of no-context.” In Trow's mind, a context is a setting of shared values or rules within which an exchange, or “transaction,” may take place; for example, the code of gentlemanly conduct that allowed World War I flying aces to know when it was permissible to shoot one another out of the air. Trow argues that the television age, arriving at a time when America's sense of grandeur and historical purpose had lost much of its energy, annihilated all such reference points. Final authorities are no longer available in the culture, nor even is the idea of authority. Look at television. David Brinkley has a sort of context; but so does J.R.; so does *Monday Night Football*. The only remaining contexts are *ad hoc*, unpersuasive. “Things very distant came powerfully close,” Trow writes of television's pseudo-intimacy, “but just for a minute.” True authority provides a shelter from the loneliness of the self, a warm spot in the community; but television deepens the isolation and disorientation of the viewer. It takes him away from home.

Once there was a context of shared judgments, and the shared history that shaped them. In the “New History,” though, judging has been replaced by counting; the “New History” is “the rec-

ord of the expression of demographically significant preferences.” The advertiser, the pollster, the politician—thoroughly modern men—believe a thing is important because it is widely liked or widely believed, not because a man would judge it good, or ill. We love it because it is loved. Trow dwells at length on “The Aesthetic of the Hit,” which “loves you because you love it because it's a Hit!”

Television provides the drained reality that makes it possible to confuse popularity with value, or even fact. Trow fishes up a revelatory illustration on this score, recalling how the host of *Family Feud* “asked contestants to guess what a poll of a hundred people had guessed would be the height of the average American woman. Guess what they've guessed. Guess what they've guessed the *average* is.” What is at issue is not a fact, but merely the *popular impression* about a fact.

Television is a vacuum, but the vacuum wears a smile—the smile of newscasters, Dallas Cowgirls, Johnny Carson. Trow reserves a special hatred for “the lie in the smile.” Rising to his highest level of abstraction, as well as dudgeon (a peculiar combination), he defines television as “Two abilities: to do a very complex kind of work, involving electrons, and then to cover the coldness of that with a hateful familiarity. Why hateful? Because. . . . It has to do with a human being as a human being is weak and willing to be fooled; the human being's eagerness to perceive as warm something that is cold, for instance. . . .”

The need to be warm in the cold, to love what cannot be loved; television speaks to the viewer as the viewer is a child, saying: Love Johnny Carson; love Coca-Cola. It makes no distinction between worthy and unworthy objects of the emotions.

Television's infantilism is an infectious disease: it caught it from a debilitated post-war culture, and passes it on. Trow compares *People* and *Life* magazines at some length. *People*, he points out, is conducted “within the mode of a television talk show.” It gossips about the intimate lives of celebrities and elevates anonymous people to fame, thus creating a spurious sense of unity between the

viewer, alone, at home, and those who "have their home in the grid of two hundred million." This is the magazine's purpose; it offers no other context, such as a particular view of the place or value of celebrities. Trow looks at a copy of *Life* from 1951, and notes that the figures on the cover appear inside a frame, which represents *Life*'s point of view, its unvarying context. *Life* was about the background, the particular view of American life taken by the editors, above all by Henry Luce (a point also made in one of Michael Arlen's musings on television fifteen years ago). *People* is about the de-racinated foreground, the stars who seem to have no existence beyond the pages of the magazine.

What does it all add up to? (The author is fond of the rhetorical question.) One of Trow's favorite headings—each paragraph, or *pensée*, has its own title—is "The Decline of Adulthood." An adult was once someone with the faculty for judging, which was based on the possession of a shared context. But as no context remains to be mastered and inhabited, people turn instead to childish modes, childish "transactions." Trow conjures up a wasteland of alienation and despair, looking at art and finding only the "glumness" of the discovery of the lie in the smile.

Television's critics normally occupy the high ground of books and classical culture (Jerry Mander opts for openness, contact with the earth, Hopi Indians). But Trow implies that modern life offers no such alternative contexts. If the fish realizes that his water is polluted he can either like it, as McLuhan, or lump it, as Trow.

Readers will perhaps glimpse this despair of alternatives in Trow's odd, colorless style. "So one or two of the babies began to experience a problem. Loneliness rose to the surface. It was a problem. No exit for the babies. Dead end for the babies." At times he takes on—adopts, not mimics—the vacuous enthusiasm of his subject matter. His style says: There is no other way. He explains punk art, for instance, as a parody of "an iconography of excrement" by those with no other iconography to refer to. Trow does not so much parody his subject as undermine it with irony. In a moving passage that con-

cludes the essay, he recalls how his father's hat came to symbolize the *haut bourgeoisie* manner that he could never adopt. "I have, in fact, worn a fedora hat, but ironically. . . . A fedora hat worn by me without the necessary protective irony would eat through my head and kill me."

Since Trow is surely right that we can't go backwards to fedora hats and morocco-bound volumes, and we don't seem likely to go forward to Hopi Indians and oneness with whales, we must return to the question of the machine in our midst: Should we consider television with horror, or with chagrin? Trow is something of a patsy for dread. New York City horrifies him, and the New York World's Fair filled him with loathing. Some intelligent people who have to watch television for a living, such as Michael Arlen, consider it appalling and irremediable but do not feel that the fish are being quite so damaged by the polluted water.

And then there are all those happy experiences of television, most of them depending on the medium's most degraded aspects. The previous issue of this magazine carried a series of interviews with ordinary folk whose lives were in varying degrees organized around television. A twelve-year-old learned about life from sitcoms; a basketball player talked about the soaps with teammates, as if the characters were mutual acquaintances; a widow enjoyed the company, the string of

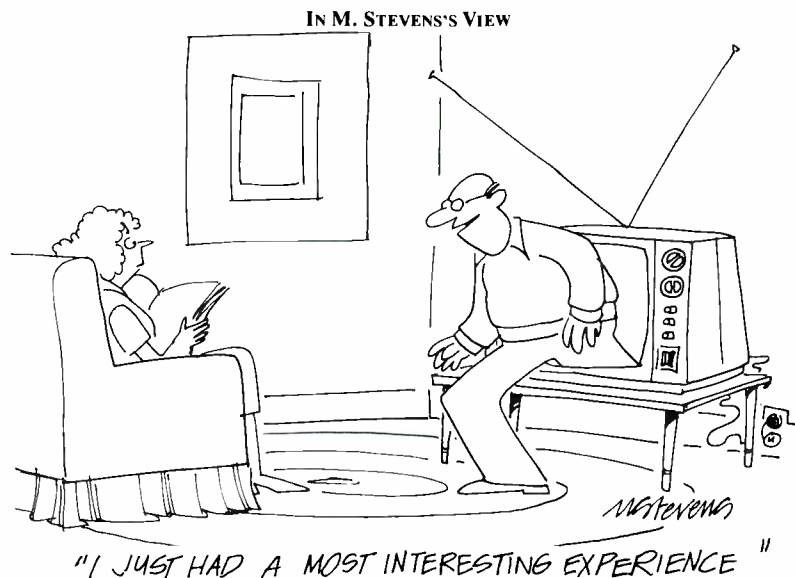
undifferentiated smiles; a Harvard type paddled happily in television nostalgia. The tube gives pleasure in infinitely various ways.

Yet it *is* appalling; watching oneself watch it, one often feels something like nausea, existential if not physical. Any viewer of *Three's Company* could agree with Trow's observation that television is a sink from which all the judgment, conflict, wisdom of a culture is draining. That the true material of television is not "life," but television—"a momentary fabric from outer space," as Trow writes—also seems incontestable.

Two sets of facts stand in conflict. Television gives pleasure to apparently intelligent people, but television is the vacuum at the center of modern culture, the context of no-context. Television's background is altogether dreadful, but its foreground is tolerable to some, attractive to others. The fact is that you cannot gaze too long into the vacuum in the background, because doing so brings a terrible pall of inauthenticity over everything. That the water is polluted really is not a bearable thought, unless you like pollution or believe in the existence of alternative ponds. Since we have to live in the foreground, we might as well learn to tolerate it. ■

JAMES TRAUB

James Traub is a Channels contributing writer.



(Electronic Free Speech)

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# WJIM's Long Road to the Woodshed

by Alex Kotlowitz

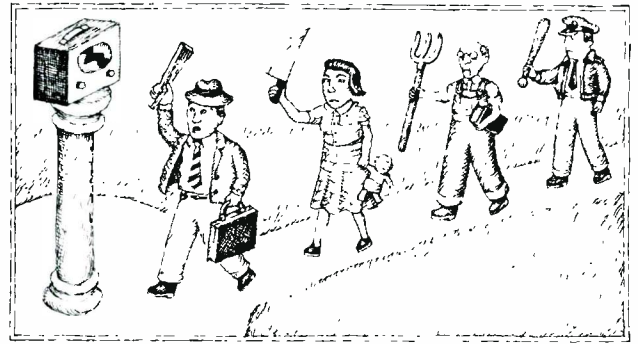


Illustration by Bob Pullin

**V**IEWERS OF LANSING, Michigan's WJIM-TV often missed Merv Griffin's opening monologue or parts of the pregame ceremonies on the National Football League game of the week. WJIM management wanted more time for local commercials. So it squeezed them in—even when they didn't fit, and even if it meant "clipping" network programs.

The practice of "clipping" was one of five violations Federal Communications Commission judge Byron Harrison cited in denying broadcast license renewal to Gross Telecasting Inc. (GTI), owner of WJIM-TV.

If the commission upholds Harrison's ruling, WJIM will become one of the very few television stations in America to have its license revoked in response to citizens' complaints.

The judge's decision was a long time in coming. The Lansing chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union initiated the complaint against the locally owned television station in 1973, charging among other things that WJIM management refused to cover politicians it didn't support, that it was guilty of anti-labor practices, and that it used its FCC license to advance its own private interests. The clipping charge was added to the petition later, after a local viewer wrote the FCC complaining about shortened Merv Griffin monologues. On examining station logs, the ACLU discovered more than six thousand cases of clipping by the station (though only one-tenth of that number were permitted in the record as evidence).

While clipping was far and away the most serious violation by WJIM management, Judge Harrison also cited the CBS affiliate for: ceasing coverage of a local tennis club's activities because it had not paid its bills; taping the 11 p.m. weather report at 6:30 (according to the testimony of a former WJIM weather forecaster, he was told by management to look outside his window for any changes in the weather); firing a reporter who had been trying to organize a union, and using contour maps that exaggerated the station's broadcast area by as much as 32 percent, in efforts to obtain advertising clients.

In his 196-page decision, issued last November, Harrison also chided WJIM for misrepresenting itself to CBS and the FCC. The station's management had repeatedly denied that it was clipping network programs and had written the FCC that the concerned Merv Griffin viewer must have been confused by the loose format of the show back in the days when it was CBS's late-night answer to Johnny Carson. (A CBS spokesperson refused to comment on whether the network would pursue any legal action of its own.)

While Harrison did absolve the station of the allegations that it had blacked out certain politicians, he concluded that "the clear intent of GTI to engage in misrepresentation and outright fraud with representatives of the government, industry, and public further demonstrates . . . that GTI is beyond rehabilitation."

Gross Telecasting intends to appeal Harrison's decision to the three-member FCC review board. The case can then be appealed to the commission as a whole. "It's just unbelievable that he would decide the way he did," says Harold Gross, GTI's chairman. "We trust the commission will overturn it." Gross labeled the case a "witch hunt" on the part of the ACLU: "If they can come in and do this to us, they can do it to anybody."

He defends the station's instances of clipping by saying that "everybody did it," and that the station stopped the practice when it was fully apprised of the rules against it.

Though the ACLU and the Washington-based Media Access Project (MAP), which joined in challenging WJIM, were pleased with Harrison's decision, they were discouraged by the length and expense of the petition process.

The case against WJIM was not heard until two years after the initial filing of the petition, and the hearing procedure itself took another three years. Since the closing of the hearings in the summer of 1978 (after 160 days of testimony, more than 24,000 pages of transcripts, and 917 exhibits), the case has rested in the hands of Judge Harrison.

"It is a long and unusual record; it's just

a lot of material to go through, plus I have a lot of other duties, too," Harrison said in explaining why he took so long to reach a decision.

Such lengthy delays discourage community groups wanting to challenge their local television stations. The WJIM case has already cost the ACLU and MAP an estimated \$200,000, a prohibitive amount to almost any citizens group. The Lansing ACLU has held numerous fundraisers, spaghetti dinners, and solicitation drives to help meet the expense.

MAP executive director Andrew Schwartzman admits that "if we knew then what we know now, I doubt that I'd want to go through it again." But, he adds, "By showing that we can successfully [challenge a station's license], it will make licensees more responsive to the community."

Schwartzman calls the judge's ruling "a reminder that the Communications Act is alive and well," adding hopes that this case will "buck the tide" of the current FCC's deregulatory mood. The commission may indeed be hard pressed to overturn Judge Harrison's strongly worded decision. "We can disagree about the performance of the overall industry," says Schwartzman, "but we have to realize that there are some broadcasters who don't meet the standards."

If the FCC decides in favor of WJIM, the citizens groups will probably appeal in the courts. ACLU officials expect that another two to four years will elapse before the case is completely resolved.

In the meantime, while the various parties await the final outcome, WJIM continues to operate as if it had a license, providing news and programming to Lansing viewers, and earning profits. As it has for the past eight years, it operates without even the obligation of having to file for a license renewal every three years.

But, as MAP's Schwartzman says, "They're a heck of a lot more solicitous than they would be if they were off scot-free." ■

*Alex Kotlowitz is a Michigan-based writer.*

## American Revolution

(Continued from page 25)

learn French; but it does not help us communicate or seek social justice or formulate common decisions.

Corporate Big Brothers are no less privatistic in their methods: They control by manipulating private wants and master by guiding private tastes. Their world, like Babel, is inhabited by atomized and alienated individuals seeking personal gratification in a society in which only individual wants and corporate profits count.

**The Electronic Town Meeting:** Ten years ago, when he was an FCC commissioner, Nicholas Johnson said: "As never before, Americans need to talk to each other. We hunger to be in touch, to reaffirm our commitment to each other, to our humanity, to the continuity of hope and meaning in our lives. . . . The ultimate promise of cable is the rebuilding of a sense of community." The new television technology has at least the potential of becoming a remarkable new instrument of public communication and collective deliberation. From the ancient world to the American founding, the great enemy of democracy has been scale: the repressive effect of mass society on the communication and participation necessary to self-government. Television in its second age *can* be to the problem of scale what drugs were to disease: a miracle remedy. People can be brought together across time and place and be permitted to confront one another in a continuing process of mutual exploration, deliberation, debate, and decision-making.

What I have in mind has nothing to do with the instant polls and uninformed votes that have characterized the QUBE system's dalliance with politics and that politicians rightly fear. Voting without prior debate, polling without full-scale presentation of positions and facts, expressions of preference without a sense of the public context of choice, all do more to undermine democracy than to reinforce it.

But the true promise of interactive systems, public-access channels, and computer information-banks is that they can enhance knowledge as they enlarge participation. They can equalize by informing the poor as well as the rich and, by providing access to the powerless as well as the powerful, they can help to realize the ideal of an active and informed citizenry. But only if they are offered as a basic public utility at minimal cost to all Americans; otherwise, they will only increase the gap between rich and poor by dividing a single

national constituency into two nations: one information-rich and able to participate and influence the national destiny more effectively than ever before, the other information-poor, relegated to still greater powerlessness.

Edwin Parker and Donald Dunn of Stanford University wrote in *Science* in 1972 that "the social goal of [cable television organized as a 'national information utility'] could be to provide all persons with equal opportunity of access to all available public information about society, government, opportunities, products, entertainment, knowledge and educational services." Today, equal opportunity may depend as much on equal information and equal access to communication as on economic equality; with cable television, this becomes a far more realistic aspiration.

interactive systems like QUBE, which can link up thousands of citizens in an electronic town meeting where information and opinions can be exchanged, expert counsel called upon, and formal votes taken. In Columbus, Warner Amex hasn't seen fit to exploit this capability except as a toy: In amateur talent shows, citizens there can use their two-way cable "vote" to yank acts they don't like. Still, the potential exists.

The promise of the second age of television for democracy remains largely unexplored. Among the thousands of cable companies now serving more than twenty million homes, only a handful offer local political-access channels or services, and none have made service to public citizenship their principal product. Cable television is servicing every conceivable constituency in America save one: America's



In some places, the democratic capabilities of the new telecommunications technology have already been proven. In Reading, Pennsylvania, an experimental project sponsored by the National Science Foundation in 1976 (and developed by New York University) used the local cable system to establish an interactive communications network for the city's senior citizens. The elderly in Reading were able to create programming for themselves, and to hold their elected officials more accountable through a series of public meetings held on interactive cable television. Though this particular experiment has ended, cable's role in Reading's political system has not: Today all budget and community development hearings are conducted by two-way cable. Citizens can participate on-camera by visiting neighborhood centers equipped with television equipment; or they can ask questions from home by telephone. As a result, political participation increased dramatically. Reading's experience demonstrates the new technology's potential to create a more informed and active citizenry.

Perhaps the greatest promise lies with

citizenry, the sovereign governing body responsible for the survival of our democratic republic.

Yet if in this conservative era of deregulation it is too much to hope for a national telecommunications service devoted to democratic and public uses of the new technology, it is surely not too much to call for a public debate on the future of American telecommunications. A number of years ago, former CBS News president Fred Friendly suggested America needed an "electronic bill of rights" to protect it from its pervasive new technology. Even more than a bill of rights, today we need an "electronic constitution" — a positive plan for the public use of a precious national resource on behalf of our nation's faltering democracy. Without such a plan, the electronic road to a national democratic neighborhood may be detoured down back alleys that terminate suddenly in the anarchic privatism of Babel, or in a world of corporate Big Brothers willing to share with us the profits won from destroying once and for all democracy's proud, public "spirit of liberty." ■

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## Local Station

(Continued from page 39)

ful accommodations it can make with cable. So far, this has meant establishing a strong local identity for WNEP that cable can't duplicate. But competition isn't the only possible response to cable's challenge; Shelburne is willing to try cooperation, too. He has recently approached two national cable outfits, proposing that WNEP produce a series of programs for them as a way to take advantage of the station's excellent production facilities and staff. This weekend, Shelburne says, "we're taping a concert in Boston for Home Box Office, and we're doing something for Ted Turner in Atlanta. We have to broaden our base to give us some security."

Shelburne leans back in his chair and puts his hands behind his head. "I remember when we used to really sweat out the ratings," he says. "Now we don't have to, but it's hard to enjoy them. We have to keep looking ahead. I wish we only had to worry about what happens downstairs. Stick our news show against any in the country and we'd shine. If we could take it and put it in a place like New York . . . we'd make millions!" ■

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## Commercial Expansionism

by Andrew Feinberg

**N**BC RECENTLY AIRED a one-hour dramatic special called *The Steeler and the Pittsburgh Kid*, based, curiously enough, on the famous and much-honored Coca-Cola commercial starring Mean Joe Greene. The entire project was praised in an *Advertising Age* editorial entitled "The Ad that Grew." Naturally, we wondered what would happen if television programmers—ever alert for passing bandwagons on which to jump—suddenly decided that other ads should be similarly aggrandized. The following new shows might result:

**Dan Sanka, Private Investigator**—In this 97 percent quality-free series, Robert Young (Dan Sanka) refines and extends his relaxing persona. As an operative with Gresham and Murphy, Sanka roams the San Francisco Bay area searching for men and women whose nerves are all ajangle, people who have unwittingly joined the terrifying underclass known as "the unrelaxed." Drama frequently ensues when the relentless congeniality of Sanka is met with shocking hostility and rage, and the worthy detective is badly beaten. In the blood-soaked pilot, Sanka loses an eye and an ear. The second episode, set in California's seemingly mellow Marin County, costs him an arm and a leg. The producers expect the series to have a limited run.

**Babbling Brooke**—Delightful new designer sitcom about a run-of-the-mill teen idol and her imaginary friend, Calvin, the only "person" who really understands her. Calvin is a mischievous sort of acquaintance, often getting Brooke into weird scrapes as well as irreparably distorting her posture. The cast features Dina Farina as Brooke's only corporeal

friend, Vanessa, a girl whose major goal is to fit into Brooke's clothes. (The show's creators exuberantly claim Vanessa is television's first comic anorexic.) Additional weekly whimsy is provided by Brooke's chain-smoking, overbearing mother, played to a fare-thee-well by television veteran Don Knotts.

**That Olson Woman**—In this wrenching drama, Mrs. Olson, distraught after Folger's Coffee insisted on her divorce from Dan Sanka, tries desperately to enter the lives of young couples she meets on the street, at art galleries, and in sixteen-millimeter movie houses. The relationships she forges with these families are often poignant and tender, and in the first episode her new six-year-old friend says to his mother, "She's just like Grandma Crispums, Mom. When is she leaving?" In episode two, coincidence raises its blessed head when Mrs. Olson and Joe DiMaggio meet while making a house call on a family in the throes of inadequate richness. Together they make malicious small talk about a Maxwell House freak named Cora, and Mrs. Olson begins to wonder: "Could this be Mr. Right?" The answer will shock you.

**Q & A**—This shattering drama each week features a different character posing that most harrowing of queries: "Do you know me?" In the first episode, Q (played by guest has-been Vince Edwards) asks this question of many people on the street and is appalled by their unsympathetic response. The show explores the great distances that can separate people in our consumerist society, and Q's problem cannot be solved until he receives a bill from Bloomingdale's. Starring as Alex Dolmades, the tough-minded cop in charge of the Missing Ego Unit, is Telly Savalas, who closes the show with these chilling words: "Your identity: Don't leave home without it."

**Boob Tubes**—This is the first television series ever based solely on an advertising slogan, DuPont's "Better Living Through Chemistry." Irwin Corey plays lab wizard Victor Teflonson, a man with a past he is eager to bury (years ago he invented polyester). Determined to atone for his sins, Dr. Teflonson experiments each week with a new life-enhancing drug, and the result is usually spontaneous comedic combustion. The proud producers say the show will do for science what *Animal House* did for academia.

**In the Chips**—A beautiful, sad-eyed bull is taken in by a fastidious stockbroker (Tony Randall), who lives in a lovely but soon-to-be-dilapidated Manhattan townhouse. During work hours the bull, named Oscar, wanders around the financial district looking for sound investments and solving occasional white-collar crimes, but at night he takes center stage at a country-western bar, tossing co-op cowboys on their urban derrières.

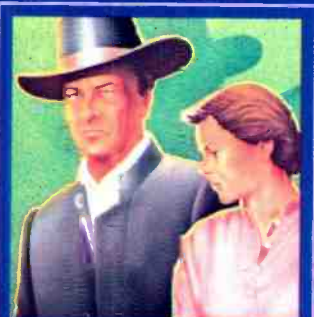
**Whatever Lola Wants**—By day, Norma Niblet is a bland, retiring media planner for a major New York advertising agency, but by night, having been transformed by just a dab of a miraculous aromatic elixir, she leads a life of astonishing upscale sexuality as Lola de l'Aviance, international freeloader. The twist here is that the two personalities have no knowledge of each other. One of the highlights of each episode occurs when Norma receives a dozen roses at work and swears she doesn't know the man who signed the card. But we do, having been privy to all the sensual derring-do in the gauzy flashback that opens each show. Eventually, Norma/Lola begins to get psychological assistance from the local florist's fascinated delivery man, who turns out to be a very sensitive, if unaccredited, lay analyst. Penny Marshall and Raquel Welch star as the title character. ■

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





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