What You Learn from Watching the Soaps, by Walter Karp

CJC 00415

CHANNELS

OF COMMUNICATIONS

JULY/AUGUST 1985

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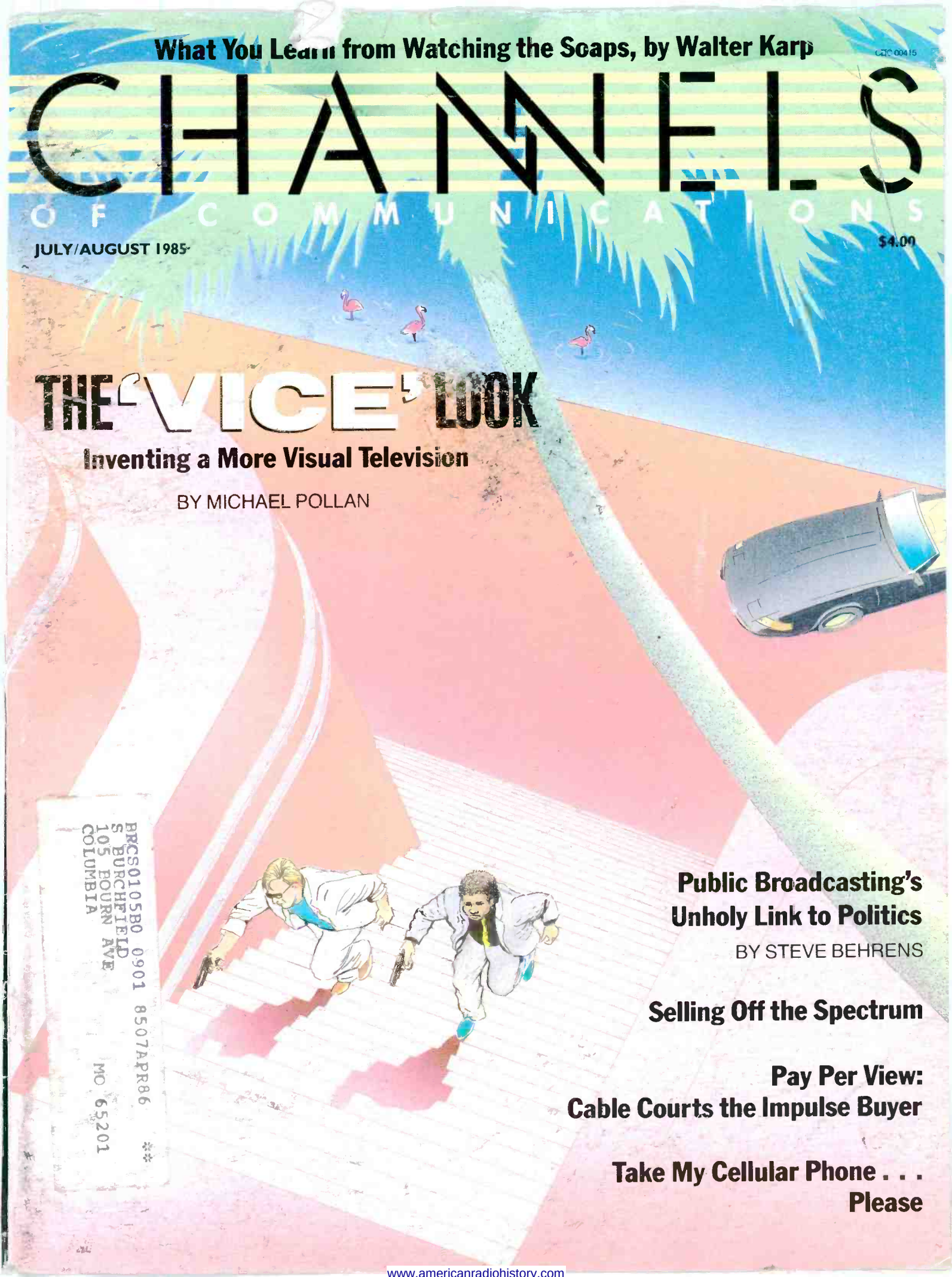
THE 'VICE' LOOK

Inventing a More Visual Television

BY MICHAEL POLLAN



Public Broadcasting's Unholy Link to Politics

BY STEVE BEHRENS

Selling Off the Spectrum

Pay Per View: Cable Courts the Impulse Buyer

Take My Cellular Phone . . . Please

This Birthday, We're Celebra
A Great Growth Rate...

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A BLOCKBUSTER SUCCESS

*According to the 5/21/85 Kagan Pay TV Newsletter. Excludes subscribers gained from Spotlight conversion.

CHANNELS

ISSUES & REPORTS

COMMENT & CRITICISM

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREA BARUFFI

CARTOONS BY NURIT KARLIN

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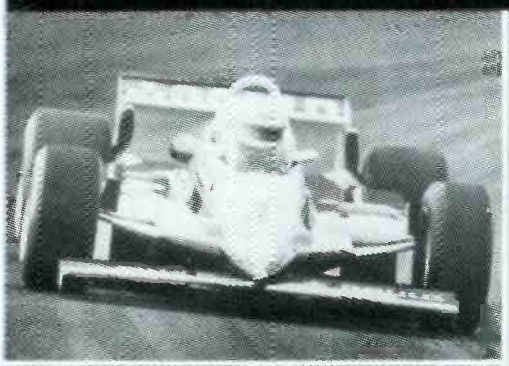
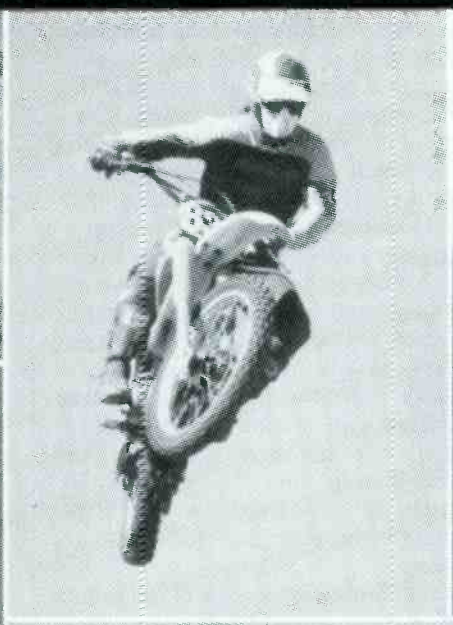
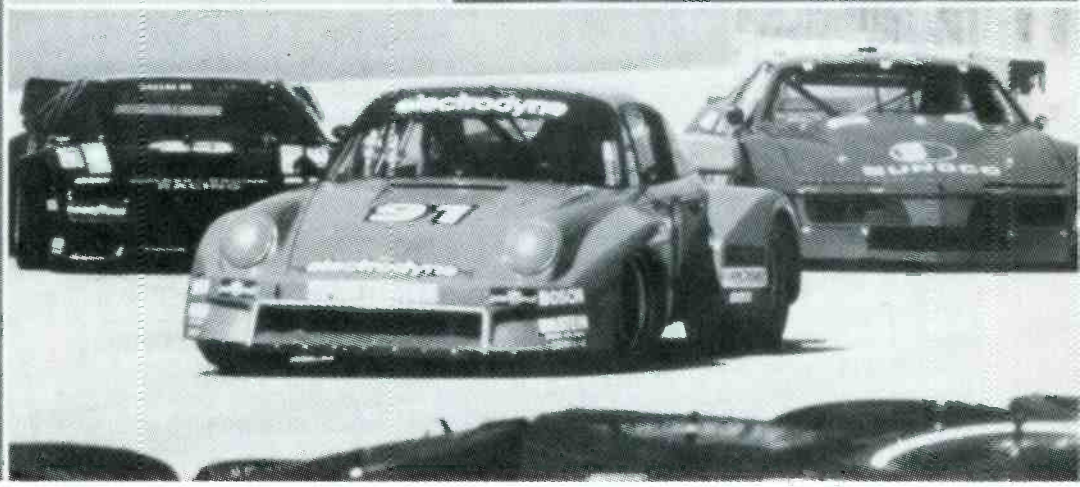
THE DRIVING FORCE IN RACING COVERAGE.







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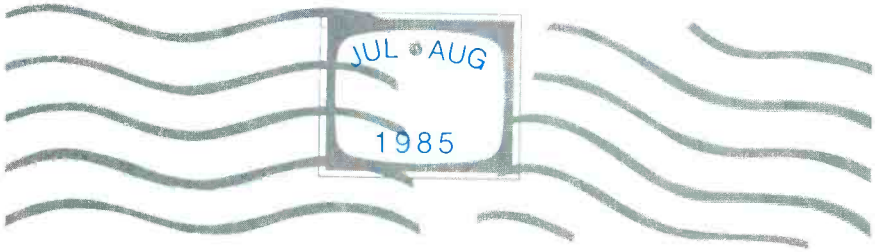


Vietnam: An Elusive History

JAMES TRAUB'S article, "Counterfeit Documentaries" [May/June], provides some good insights but also, due to a certain deficiency of historical knowledge, both of political and cinematic history, misses the mark as a critique of Accuracy in Media's program, *Television's Vietnam: The Real Story*.

Traub places AIM in isolation as a critic of the WGBH series *Vietnam: A Television History* when, in fact, many groups expressed dissatisfaction with the WGBH series. He was provided with historian Richard Raack's trenchant critique of the series published by the *Newsletter of the Organization of American Historians*. Raack attacks the WGBH series for claiming to be objective while actually being a very partisan survey of the Vietnam tragedy. Traub neglects to mention, in addition, that an entire book about the WGBH series exists. James Banerian's *Losers Are Pirates* lays out the many ways in which the 13-part series distorts the Vietnam legacy.

The WGBH series—especially the early programs and certainly all of the shows produced by Judith Vecchione—whitewashes the communist record in Vietnam. We agree with Traub that "the (WGBH) series clearly depicts Ho Chi Minh as more a nationalist than a communist," but our point was that the series ignored basic, available histories which reveal the amount of suffering and death which Ho's regime inflicted from 1945 onward, the kind of suffering which WGBH didn't disclose until its 13th episode.

The AIM program tapped the expertise of WGBH consultants who were very unhappy with the ideologically biased program. It has been a lesson for me to discover that journalists like James Traub—as opposed to Vietnam-studies experts like Douglas Pike and Stephen Morris of the University of California at Berkeley, Stephen Young of Hamline University, and author Huong Van Chi—see no ideology because they share it. How can a program be ideological if it agrees with their own perceptions? As a result of this myopia, AIM comes across in the article as ideologically obsessed while WGBH is merely practicing "balanced journalism."

Anyone who has taken a college course in the history of the nonfiction film knows that social and historical documentaries inevitably reflect the viewpoint of their makers. Martin Carr, a veteran documentary producer, has said that if the viewer goes away from one of his documentaries feeling differently about the subject than he does, he has failed. He says that the closest you can come to objectivity in this genre is "bias openly arrived at."

Given the neutral diction of the article itself, why did you select the snickeringly derogatory title? Also, shouldn't *Channels* welcome innovative programming, rather than set out to quash it?

PETER C. ROLLINS
Producer, *Television's Vietnam: The Real Story*
Washington, D.C.

To Drink or To Think

WITH GREAT INTEREST I read "If Beer Commercials Are Banned" [March/April]. Since Decatur, Alabama recently passed local legislation making it a "wet" city, I am familiar with the arguments Les Brown presented in his article. WBQM was involved in much of the public debate over the issue.

Mr. Brown says that television and radio could be used in a campaign against alcohol abuse, targeting youth as its audience. But I have not yet seen an effective public service campaign that will get today's youth to think about the dangers of alcohol abuse and teenage drunk driving. The appeal of beer and wine advertisements is much greater than the appeal presented by public service announcements. One is an invitation to enjoy, and the other is an invitation to think.

Another great difference between alcohol ads and alcohol-abuse PSAs is the amount of money spent on each. If we are going to be serious about preventing alcohol abuse, I suspect that our priorities are not shown in the amount of money spent on each.

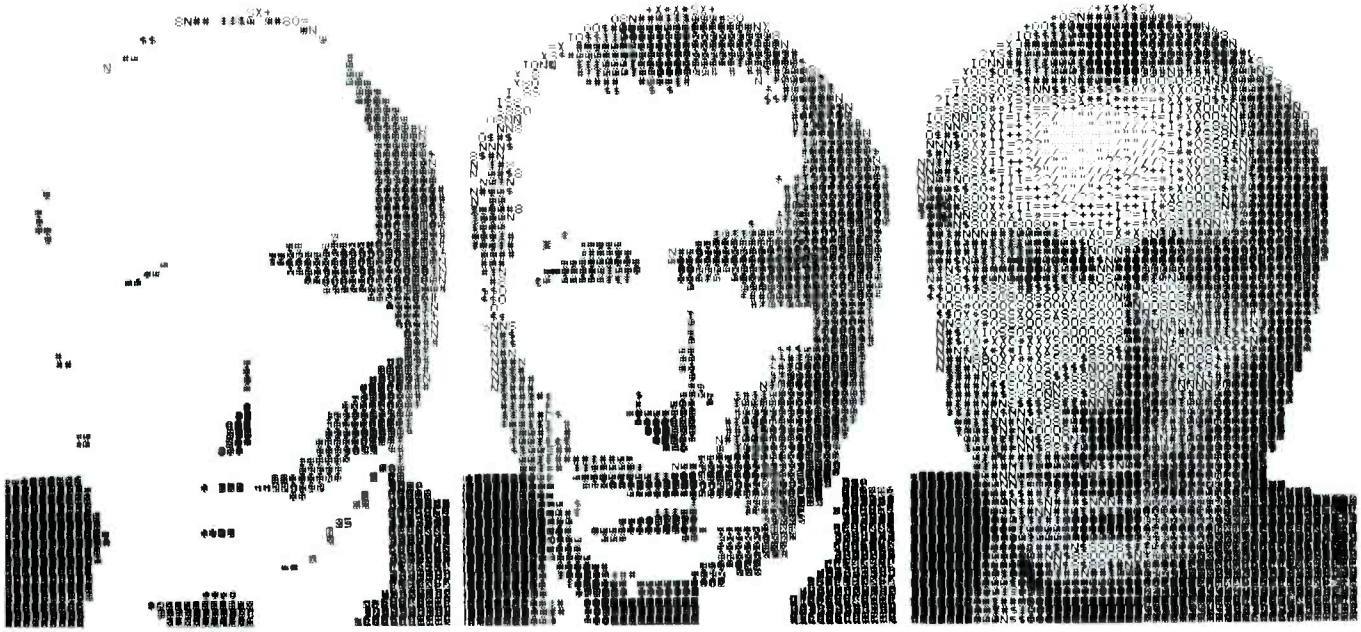
I also wonder if we will ever be able to seriously present an alcohol-abuse campaign, because alcohol interests have too much input and influence over the broadcast media. I realize that the consequences of an alcohol ban could be unimaginable, but I seriously doubt that "young independent television stations might be forced out of business" or that "stock prices for broadcast companies would go into a tailspin." I think those particular conclusions are a reaction of fear rather than fact.

MATTHEW J. ELKINS
Station Manager
WBQM-FM
Decatur, Alabama

TV Not Hooked on Drinking

THE "PUBLIC EYE" by Les Brown on beer and wine commercials [March/April] was a refreshing rejoinder to some of the broadcasting and alcoholic beverage industries' favorite arguments. But while Brown saw through most of the phony arguments, he unwittingly fell for one of them. According to recent figures, only 3 percent of broadcasters' revenues—not 11 percent—come from beer and wine advertisers. Thus, even a total ban, let alone an equal time requirement, would have little impact on the profitability of the industry.

MICHAEL F. JACOBSON
Executive Director
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Washington, D.C.



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LETTERS

Magnum Revisited

HORACE NEWCOMB provides a convincing analysis of why *Magnum, P.I.* is currently the best prime-time adventure series ["*Magnum:* The Champagne of TV?" May/June]. But *Magnum* is not merely "about" Vietnam's "memory and history," as Newcomb writes. On the contrary, the program's "cumulative narrative" contributes to the postwar construction of Vietnam memory itself, and this is *Magnum*'s ideological function.

By ignoring this ideological component, Newcomb missed the significance of this winter's two-part episode, "All for One," in which Magnum and his buddies return to Southeast Asia to rescue "the George freakin' Washington of Cambodia" from the one-dimensionally evil Vietnamese.

Fortunately for them, a "third force" emerges (unlike in the historic version), giving Magnum and others the opportunity to fight for democratic freedoms in an unambiguous context. Tyler McKinney, who lured Magnum back to the jungle for one more "diddy-bop," dies seeking not merely revenge, mind you, but atonement for past defeat, expiation of Vietnam's "bad" memory, and its replacement with "good" memory. This is the longed-for version of Vietnam—longed for in the sense that it was never that way, except perhaps in John Wayne's *The Green Berets*.

I do not suggest that television melodrama should or can be historically accurate. But the ideological gauziness of "All for One," despite *Magnum*'s considerable formulaic innovations, renders the series as predictable as *The A-Team* or the inevitable *Rambo* sequels.

HARRY W. HAINES
University of Utah
Salt Lake City

Commendations

MY HAT IS OFF and my knee is bent, the tap dance I just did was for Horace M. Newcomb and his article "*Magnum:* The Champagne of TV?" [May/June]. For many years I have done a slow burn when *Magnum, P.I.* was referred to as a "hunk show," and I wondered if I was the only person in the world who saw more than beautiful people and was left with something to think about and ponder long after the show was over.

It was through *Magnum, P.I.* that I was first exposed to the struggle that Vietnam vets experience, and it is because of that show that I was inspired to become involved actively in supporting the vets of Vietnam.

And so with another tip of the hat and another bend of the knee, this time for Donald Bellisario and the cast of *Magnum, P.I.*, I'm back off to work, but with a big smile of satisfaction.

JENNIFER LYONS
KCDS-FM
Angwin, California

Overruled

I HAVE READ WITH INTEREST the Ben Bagdikian article on "The Media Grab" in your May/June issue. Although Bagdikian writes very interesting articles, I question the accuracy of his facts.

In his reference to the Horvitz newspaper chain, he fails to point out that, although staff members were ordered by certain directors not to cover or report on the lawsuit, I, as chief executive officer, overruled the directors, and the staff members continued to report the proceedings in an objective manner.

I find his assumptions that the present owners of media are more objective or moral or competent than the persons who may buy them out to be in error. Regarding CBS and the other network news broadcasts, Ted Turner's cable news network is more objective and less one-sided than any of the three national networks, and I would be more comfortable with him owning CBS than I am with the present ownership.

Regarding the *New Yorker* magazine, although I have subscribed for many years, I have found it to be dull, and I feel confident that the Newhouse organization will improve it.

Admittedly, competition would be a desirable plus in all communications areas. However, the same factors that are causing costs to rise in other industries, for example high labor costs, are also present in the media. The ability to compete with existing media giants will grow if entrepreneurs can start new enterprises without the cost-restrictive practices that presently exist.

HARRY RICHARD HORVITZ
Valley View, Ohio

The Embattled Backyard Dish

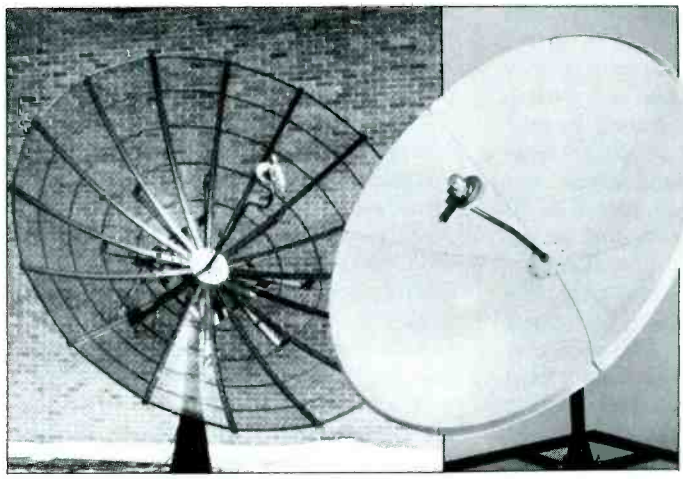
Unreasonable local restrictions have provoked a clash between federal and municipal authorities.

FOLKS WHO WANT to install a backyard satellite dish in Plantation, Florida had better get written permission from the local cable company first.

Absurd as it may seem, that's the law. While zoning ordinances restricting the installation of satellite dishes are increasingly common in the United States, Plantation's is probably the only one that requires residents to clear their dish installation with the local cable operator, which is a little like asking customers to get permission from Macy's to shop at Gimbel's. And the absurdity doesn't end there: Should a resident be lucky enough to get the cable company's permission (and a few have), his request for a dish will immediately be voted down by the city council, which regards dishes as nothing more than high-tech eyesores.

"They look like something from outer space," says councilman John Gibbs, whose sentiments reflect the prevailing aesthetic of the five-member board. But fears for Plantation's appearance only partly explain the city's resistance to dishes. Like many municipalities, the Fort Lauderdale suburb receives revenues from cable franchise fees, which, according to city attorney Donald Lunny, it uses to help pay its outstanding bond issues. Thus Plantation has a vested interest in hindering an emerging cable competitor. "Our responsibility," says Lunny, "is to our bondholders first."

Understandably, Plantation's earth-station enthusiasts do not agree. "The city council is made up of a very obstinate group of people who are ignorant about satellite dishes," says resident Joseph Flanagan, whose request for a dish was turned down after he got his okay from the cable company. Another Plantationite, Clifford Decker, has filed a $5,000 suit against the city, claiming his constitutional rights were violated when the city denied his request to keep his dish. "I'm not about to let those turkeys tell me what I can or can't do," he says.



Many cities ban the reflective satellite dish (right) as an eyesore. But some have begun to allow mesh dishes (left) if they are "properly landscaped."

Though the Plantation ordinance is unusually restrictive, the battle over it is only one of many fronts in a nationwide struggle. As dishes have begun to spread from rural to urban and suburban areas, anti-dish ordinances have proliferated right along with them. Nearly 1,000 communities have passed laws that limit or effectively ban dishes, according to the Society for Private and Commercial Earth Stations (SPACE), a trade association of dish manufacturers and distributors. SPACE claims that these laws directly contravene the government's objective of expanding satellite services, as well as the viewers' First Amendment right to receive programming. Says SPACE lawyer Fred Finn, "What we need is a standard to fairly apprise communities of the line between their interests and the national interest."

Such a standard may be forthcoming. The FCC last March proposed a new rule that would preempt local zoning ordinances that unreasonably restrict home dishes. If the commission adopts the proposed rule (and FCC sources say that's virtually certain), it will become a federal regulation prohibiting ordinances that, in the FCC's words, "discriminate against satellite receive-only antennas in favor of other communications facilities," as the law in Plantation so blatantly does. Meanwhile, Senator Barry Goldwater, who last year successfully sponsored the Satellite Viewing Rights Act, has introduced a resolution encouraging early FCC action against zoning restrictions.

At the same time, the National League of Cities has filed comments with the FCC strongly objecting to the proposed rule. "We're not defending what any local government is doing," says League spokesman Randy Arndt. "We're saying that the FCC does not have the legal right to preempt local regulatory authority. The courts are the place to decide whether a local ordinance is unfair or unenlightened, not the FCC."

However, by the time the FCC votes on the proposed rule, the situation in Plantation, at least, may have resolved itself. City council president Ralph Merritt has proposed a new ordinance that would eliminate the visit to the cable company and permit mesh dishes that are properly screened, set back, and landscaped. Why the change of heart? Well, Merritt attributes it to an earth-station epiphany he had while viewing a properly installed mesh dish. "My feeling was, if they'll keep it unobtrusive, why not let them have it?" he says. "After all, you can park a wrecked car in Plantation, too, so long as you keep it in your garage."

JEFFREY L. WOLF

Slouching Toward Utopia

The dream of local cable channels has been modestly realized on relatively few systems.

IN UTOPIAN VISIONS for cable television, local origination channels were expected to bring localized news programs to communities too small to have broadcast stations. But "L.O." hasn't fulfilled that potential because where it exists at all today, the cable operator regards it as a money-losing sop to civic interests.

A handful of operators nevertheless play the television game the way broadcast stations do—making a profit by selling ads on shows they produce themselves. Colony Communications, for one, has nearly reached its goal of $1.40 in revenues for every dollar spent on the nightly local news shows it produces for its cable systems in Massachusetts, New York, and Florida, according to Colony executive Donald Olson. The company hopes to do as well with high school football in Florida and college basketball in suburban New York.

In York, Pennsylvania, Susquehanna Broadcasting's cable system is looking for $200,000 in its second year of local programming, and executive Ned Lightner expects the channel to make a profit next year. One show, a half-hour automotive "infomercial" sponsored by five car dealers, made a $10,000 profit after paying its $11,000 cost.

In Houston, an entrepreneur named Robert Malloy estimates that he sold between $750,000 and $1 million in advertising on his local channel last year. His channel—which he leases from the cable operator—is available on a system that reaches just 17,000 homes.

The half-dozen or so cable systems where local origination is profitable tend to have certain characteristics in common: They're far enough away from strong broadcast stations to guarantee their identity as the local TV channels, and they promote local programming as a valuable attraction to subscribers.

Yet the idea is still so new that people often don't know what to make of a local cable channel that shows its own programs. Lightner says it took some time, and the allocation of a separate channel, to teach viewers that L.O. is not the same as public-access programming, which has a reputation for an uneven, homemade quality. Malloy's tactic was to name his firm Malloy Broadcasting so that people would understand that he's running a TV station even though it's on cable only.

Viewers expect reasonable production quality, but don't demand network sophistication. The local news show on Colony's eight cable systems around Lowell, Massachusetts has an on-air staff of only four. But the program can cover local stories in considerable depth and reward viewers with visuals of local places and people.

Both viewers and advertisers respond favorably. Colony says most of its Poughkeepsie subscribers watch the cable newscast two or three times a week. And it commands a premium for ad time: $75 for 30 seconds, compared with $25 or $30 for a local spot inserted in a national cable network's program.

Advertisers pay only $10 for a 30-second spot on Malloy's leased channel, with a minimum buy of $210, but when air-time goes unsold he gives it as a bonus to one of his advertisers, reaching more viewers for him. "If an ad doesn't work, he won't come back," Malloy observes.

Malloy keeps costs down by producing only eight hours of programs a week, and airing them over and over. "If you're thinking of building a redwood deck, it's covered on our *Handyman* show," Malloy says, "and there are 21 times this week when you can watch it."

Not too many multimillion-dollar multisystem cable operators (MSOs) will sweat to sell spots at $10 each or entrust production to new college graduates, which may explain why local origination hasn't caught on widely. Most operators rely instead on viewers' subscriptions for the bulk of their revenues, and on national networks for their shows.

L.O. is only one revenue source for the Colony and Susquehanna cable systems, but it was initially the main source for Malloy, who leases a channel on the Centel cable system in northwest Houston. (Now he is also selling local ad "inserts" on national cable channels.) "I personally believe that every MSO should get out of L.O. programming," he says. "They've tried it, they've screwed it up, and they've lost money at it. Their pockets are too deep. They can write it off. With me, if I don't sell ads and get people to respond to them, my kids don't eat."

RANDY WELCH

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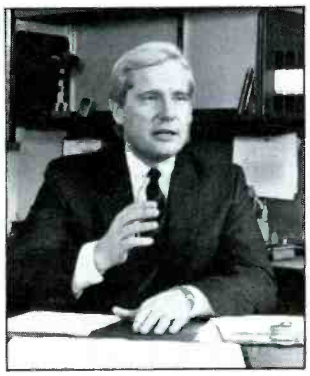
JACK & LIZ

For The Record

"New Englanders are the toughest news audience in the country. They expect you to know not only what is happening now, but what they know . . . the sense of history, the background. That's why I spend so much time out in the community listening to what people have to say."

"If I have a credo, it is preparedness, hard work and caring. As a journalist that means doing a thorough job. It means a sense of trust, honesty, and commitment. And I think that comes through in my reporting."



"I chose New England. I'm not here because I was born here. I chose New England because of its reverence for things past – for family, education and charity. **Wednesday's Child** is something I wanted to do. Being actively involved in trying to improve things - helping children with special needs, foster parents, children born with birth defects . . . it's my way of saying 'thank you' to New England. It's my way of saying this is where I want my roots."

Jack Williams

"I want viewers to know how events impact on them. It's a very intimate thing that I share with my viewers on every kind of story that I bring them. We are humans and we're talking about humans. I work harder every day than the day before. If I can leave feeling that I gave our viewers a little more information and a little more of a choice on how they deal, or think, or how their lives are influenced . . . then I feel like I've accomplished something."

"I do **Positively New England** because I want to continue to learn more about the area . . . the tradition, the values, the good hard work. Boston is an electric city. It's always alive. It fights, it pulls, it yanks. But, it's loyal. New England is loyal."

"In a lot of ways, Channel 4 is like New England. It's all these people with incredible skills, incredible energy. I think viewers turn to us because over and over we've proven ourselves on the big stories. We go that extra step – and we do it every night."

Liz Walker

EYEWITNESS NEWS WBZ-TV 4 BOSTON

The Station New England Turns To.

Music Videos: Programs or Record Promos?

Fledgling stations raise the roof as CBS Records proposes to charge for its videos.

WHEN CBS RECORDS announced last spring that it would start charging for the use of its music videos, many "music TV" stations yanked them off the air. A few operators called for a nationwide boycott of CBS, and one even petitioned local record stores to reduce their stock of CBS record albums.

Not only was CBS driving up the operating costs for these fledgling stations, it was also setting a precedent that other record companies might follow. What became clear in the acrimonious exchanges over the issue was that CBS and the local broadcasters had differing perceptions of the product. CBS spoke of the music videos as free programs, while the broadcasters considered them free plugs for record albums. "The thought that we should pay someone to run their advertisement and promote their product is immoral to me," grumbled Herb Rossin, general manager of a 24-hour music-video station in Greensboro, N.C.

During the past few years, more than 100 local stations have taken to playing rock videos almost continuously; some are UHF stations that previously had offered a subscription television service, some are newly minted low-power outlets, and others are leased-access cable channels. All are small operations, few are making a profit, and most say they can't afford to pay what CBS is asking—anywhere from a few hundred dollars to $2,000 a month, depending on the station's audience size. Such fees "would mean an end to the majority of local and regional" music-video programming, according to a study by Music Video Services, an Atlanta-based research company.

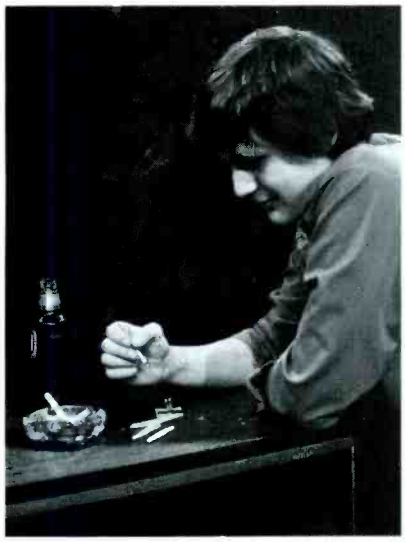
CBS is, in a way, a victim of its own success. As the world's largest record company, it produced almost a quarter of the top 100 records last year, so no music TV station can ignore the CBS videos. Meanwhile, the proliferation of music stations and video nightclubs has raised the demand for cassettes and driven up the expense of duplicating and distributing them. CBS Records now spends about a million dollars a month to produce and distribute the videos, and it wants to recoup some of that. The station operators contend that this is the cost of marketing records today, and is probably a lot cheaper and more efficient than the old way of sending artists on promotional tours to stations around the country.

Music videos hooked up with television in 1981 when Warner Amex started the cable network MTV, a channel entirely programmed with the videos record companies gave away free. The record industry, which was in serious decline at the time, snapped back with the immediate success of MTV, and it was clear that the fate of the pop music business would thereafter be linked to the mass exposure of music videos.

In the meantime, the angry opposition has forced CBS to delay plans to charge for its videos. If the fee is going to cause some of the outlets to go under, CBS might well be killing the goose that laid the golden egg. By feeding videos to the new music stations without charge, the record companies may well be making an investment in their own future, since many believe the future is in retail sales of video cassettes. So far, music video cassettes have not been selling well. Of the thousands of entries, fewer than a dozen "long-form" (one- to two-hour) tapes have surpassed the break-even point of 20,000 sales. But experts believe the advent of stereophonic television will spur the sales of rock videos, just as the arrival of stereo proved a boon to FM radio and to rock recordings. RICHARD BARBIERI

FOR KIDS' SAKE

Children...
our most precious resource. Within them lie our hopes for today and our dreams for tomorrow.



Throughout the coming year, WBZ-TV4 will present a station campaign focusing on the problems young people face today, and providing opportunities to enrich their lives.

The campaign will present daily and weekly special programs, and public events, providing your family with a new look at matters concerning child health, racial and religious harmony, home life and education.

WBZ-TV is committed to this special effort to help nurture our children, provide new ways to look at the problems of our youth, and make the most of the time your family spends together.

Because it's time we recognized kids for what they really are... **the future.**

WBZ-TV 4
The Station New England Turns To.

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Nick at Nite brings you kids and a whole new audience of grown-ups—thanks to programming successes like Camp Nickelodeon, the lunatic new Turkey TV, National Geographic EXPLORER, and the legendary Route 66.

Nick™ is

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The SAP Begins to Trickle

A handful of TV stations are using a new audio channel for bilingual broadcasts and other services.

LAST OCTOBER, station manager Steve Bell of KTLA, Los Angeles gathered members of the Hispanic press for a very special demonstration. As an episode of *Love Boat* unspooled on a stereophonic set, Bell pressed a button on the console. Presto! Captain Stubing and his crew were suddenly speaking Spanish. Bell hit the button repeatedly, switching to English and back again. His audience was suitably impressed.

What Bell introduced was a new system called second audio program (SAP). A bonus of the dawning era of stereo television, SAP is an extra channel the FCC has authorized stereo stations to use in whatever way they wish. To some industry analysts, SAP's greatest potential lies in its ability to give broadcasters and advertisers a way of reaching the more than 17 million Hispanic Americans in their native tongue. But SAP could also be used for the blind, or to transmit beginning and advanced versions of an instructive program simultaneously, or in countless other ways.

Despite SAP's enormous potential, only three stations presently use the channel. Part of the reason is that the future has arrived too fast. Separate generators are required to transmit the stereo and SAP signals; the three U.S. companies that make them have been swamped by the sudden demand and are concentrating on filling stereo orders first. "We have 35 SAP generators on back order," says Eric Small of Modulation Sciences, "but we can only flog one horse at a time." Equipment to *receive* stereo sound and SAP is also in limited supply. Although all of the major set manufacturers are now producing stereo-capable receivers, sales are not expected to take off until there is a sufficient proliferation of stereo stations.

Even when SAP's hardware problems ease, its software problems may not. Right now the technology is caught in a classic double-bind: The networks and syndicators, which would supply the dubbed programming, have hesitated because of uncertainty over the potential SAP market; meanwhile, the market cannot be cultivated without programming.

KTLA, the only station that currently uses the SAP channel for Spanish soundtracking, still has a limited bilingual menu: two rerun episodes of *Love Boat* a day, which the station dubs itself at a cost of $500 per show, and an evening newscast, which is simultaneously translated live. Station manager Bell considers the investment more than justified. "Thirty-one percent of our market is Spanish-speaking," says Bell, "and our responsibility to communicate with them goes beyond profit or revenue."

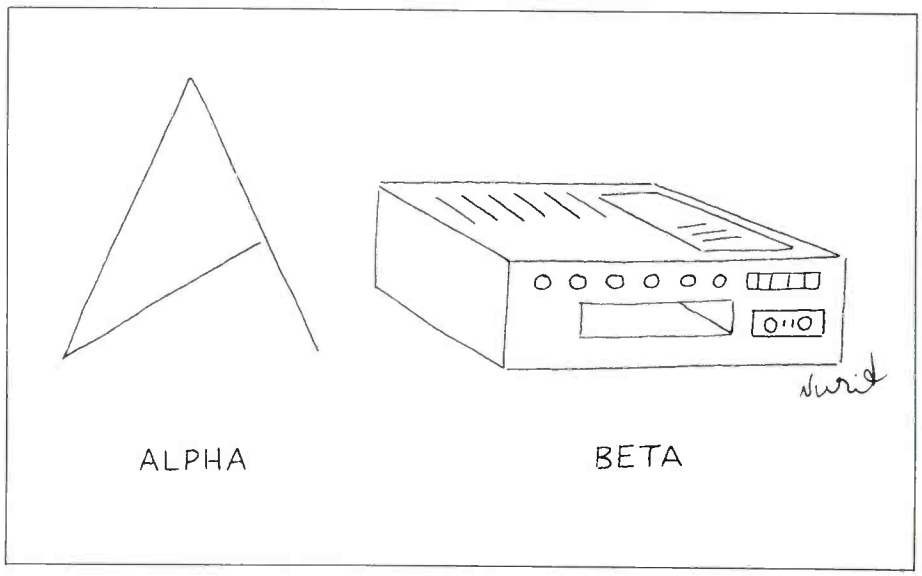
This black box, which adds SAP to a TV station's signal, is in short supply.

Other stations, however, may not want to operate on such a transcendental level. Indeed, at least for the time being, the SAP vanguard may remain a lonely place. "The segment of the Hispanic market that advertisers desire is reachable in English," says Allan Gottesman, an industry analyst with L.F. Rothschild, Unterberg, and Towbin. Other observers point out that the high cost of stereo sets may exclude the very market that SAP promises to engage. If such concerns are valid, then many stations will be loath to pay for the dubbing of soundtracks or the installation of SAP equipment.

On the other hand, SAP adherents point to the success of the Spanish International Network as proof that a strong market exists for Spanish-language programming. Eric Small maintains that lower-income viewers will be able to afford the new receiving equipment: SAP reception boxes, which attach to any set, are available for under $100, he says.

According to Arnold Chase, owner of WTIC, Hartford, another SAP pioneer, any concern about the technology's future is wholly unwarranted. "The revenue potential of the channel is far greater than the cost of putting it on," he says. SAP's problem, he believes, is that too many observers are concentrating solely on its bilingual potential. WTIC is now using SAP to provide an audio program guide, and Chase envisions using the channel for "all kinds of ancillary programming"—weather information advisories, unexpurgated versions of censored films, lottery information, perhaps even a radio station. In addition, he is also planning to introduce bilingual translations of top syndicated shows in the near future. "As usual," says Chase, "it is up to the progressive stations to point the way. If we can prove that SAP provides us with a competitive advantage, other stations will be standing in line to do it."

J.L.W.



Cable as an Audio Medium

A new breed of radio station doesn't use the airwaves.

When the black-oriented radio station in Fort Wayne, Indiana went off the air in 1979, many in the city's black community were disappointed, including one Louis Dinwiddie. "They provided the first and only black programming in town," he says. "That kind of whetted our community's appetite."

Dinwiddie, who was then a clothing store owner, jumped into the radio business, building a new breed of station—one with neither tower nor transmitter. Now it's one of about two dozen radio stations that send their signals over cable television systems rather than over the air. Cable subscribers in Fort Wayne who pay an extra $5 a month for audio channels can pick up Dinwiddie's COOL Cable Radio by connecting their FM receivers to the cable system and tuning in 99.7 on the dial.

Local cable programmers like COOL are part of a new medium called cable audio; they are its counterpart to cable TV's local-origination channels. Likewise, cable audio has also adapted other cable-TV ideas, including superstations, satellite-delivered program sources, and tiers of pay channels.

Around the country, about two million of cable's 38 million subscribing households are believed to have hooked up their stereo receivers or other radios to pick up cable audio. Typically, basic cable audio service brings in the local FM stations, but for an extra monthly fee of $5 or so, premium service includes audio channels imported by satellite. Where it's available on the cable system, 5 to 10 percent of cabled households pay the premium to get it, estimates Dennis Waters, editor of *New Radio: Cable Audio and Pay Radio Report*.

Perhaps the biggest incentive for people to hook their stereo systems to cable has been the rock 'n' roll cable-TV network MTV, which has come with stereo sound since its inception. Now some 15 other cable-TV channels also come with stereo sound.

COOL Cable Radio, like other new programmers in cable audio, doesn't yet reach enough listeners to be wildly profitable. Although his station turns a profit, Dinwiddie concedes that it was "extremely shaky" for a while. One problem was that the dominant radio ratings service, Arbitron, won't publish audience estimates for cable-only radio. "But we stuck with it and it started clicking. Advertisers got good results and people realized that we were the only game in town for reaching blacks." COOL also had an impact beyond advertising. "At one time we had 11 churches using our facilities on Sunday," Dinwiddie says. "During the time of the Atlanta child murders we raised almost $8,000 in a radiothon." He adds: "Half the checks were from white neighborhoods."

Cable audio pioneer Louis Dinwiddie founded Fort Wayne's COOL Cable Radio, one of the first stations to send its signal by wire.

Most of the other cable-only radio stations are in such medium-sized cities as Gainesville, Harrisburg, and Syracuse. Dinwiddie alone has helped launch nine of them. Most took up radio formats not available locally. Others are small AM stations that are required to sign off at dark, but use cable to extend their schedule hours. But local cable radio is only an infant phenomenon compared with cable audio's superstations.

For many subscribers, cable audio has meant getting access to superstation WFMT, the highly regarded Chicago fine arts FM outlet that is distributed to cable systems by satellite along with Ted Turner's video superstation from Atlanta, WTBS. At least two other radio superstations are also being distributed: all-jazz KKGO from Los Angeles (marketed as the Satellite Jazz Network), and fine arts WQXR from New York.

But cable audio's future may really hinge on the growth of satellite-distributed audio networks. Since WFMT became a superstation in 1979, programmers have launched four religious services, two channels of easy-listening music, two of background music, one of jazz, the eight-channel Satellite Cable Audio Network (SCAN), and SCAN's reading service for the blind. There are Italian and Greek audio networks, each available for $12 a month.

SCAN's parent, Satellite Syndicated Systems, is selling a package of seven channels, Star Ship Stereo. And another service called Studioline Cable Stereo, launched in June, offers nine channels with the aural advantage of a "digital quality" transmission system.

Eventually cable audio may become an alternative to the record store. Codart, a company based in northern California, has experimented with a scheme to transmit specialized music or informational audio programs to paying subscribers.

The traditional radio industry isn't alarmed by the slow advance of cable audio, but recognizes the new medium has some distinct advantages, being exempt from Federal Communications Commission regulation. Cable audio can already transmit a higher quality stereo signal than over-the-air broadcasting, thanks to cable's ability to carry a wider band of frequencies, and it also has the flexibility to exploit immediately the digital-sound craze among audiophiles, as in the Studioline service. All this causes *New Radio* editor Waters to wonder whether traditional radio today is a "smokestack industry"—rigid and backward like American steel. "Consider radio's pedigree—a business born in Pittsburgh in 1920. How 'smokestack' can you get?"

RICHARD MAHLER

Scrambling to Make TV Pay

by Rich Zahradnik

NOT LONG AGO television companies asked only one thing from viewers: Tune us in. Nowadays, as Andy Rooney might observe indignantly, some of them demand to be paid, too. And spoilsports that they are, they're having their engineers make it tougher and tougher for nonpaying viewers to watch their programs on the sly. They're using the twin technologies of scrambling and addressability, which have become as important to cable operators as the ticket-taker and locked rear doors are to theater owners.

Scrambling technology has had to work hard to keep ahead of nonpaying viewers, known as signal pirates. When cable operators first offered HBO and other premium services, they didn't use scrambling to dictate which subscribers got the movies. They simply climbed telephone poles and installed (or removed) electronic filters in the cable leading to subscribers' homes. The filters would block the channels not being purchased. But as you might expect, some cable customers figured they could shinny up the poles and remove the filters themselves.

That's when cable operators really began to scramble. One early method used, called video inversion, reversed the picture, making it look like a photographic negative of itself. Another technique, used since the mid-1970s, involves suppressing those television signal pulses that tell a TV set where each horizontal line in the picture should start. Horizontal sync suppression, as the method is called, produces a wobbling picture. To that, add vertical sync suppression, which causes the picture to roll as if the vertical hold weren't properly adjusted, and you've got a hard-to-watch picture, which only a decoder can clarify. But for people who knew some electronics, that simple technology was simple to defeat.

THE COMBINATION OF ADDRESSABILITY AND SCRAMBLED SIGNALS LEADS NATURALLY TO PAY-PER-VIEW TELEVISION

To stay ahead of the pirates, pay-TV threw them a curve in the late 1970s: dynamic scrambling. Previously the key to unscrambling the signal was built into the decoder, but with dynamic scrambling, the key is changed constantly. To receive a clear picture, the home decoder must constantly be told exactly how to unscramble. Those instructions come down the same cable (or other delivery medium) that carries the picture.

Some of today's most advanced scrambling systems incorporate both sync suppression and video inversion, and make both of them dynamic—that is, constantly changing. Small clusters of the 525 lines that make up the picture are inverted for seconds at a time in a seemingly random order. This adds yet another level of security because it can only be unscrambled after going through the complex process of reducing the TV signal to its raw components, collectively known as baseband.

Baseband scrambling makes hash out of the sound as well as the picture, and so can come to the aid of propriety, as in the case of adult channels that feature more moaning and sighing than some nonsubscribers want to hear. But some cable systems choose not to scramble the audio on movie channels because the pictureless sound can act as a marketing tool, attracting new subscribers.

Scrambling nearly solved pay-TV's security problem but for one shortcoming: Whenever a subscriber wants to add or cancel a channel, the cable operator must send a technician to install the appropriate decoder. Each time the service truck rolls out, it costs the cable company some $30 to $50. Since as many as 50 percent of subscribers cancel or change their type of service within a year, rolling out the truck that often can get expensive. Furthermore, an estimated 8 to 10 percent of decoders aren't surrendered when the subscriber stops paying the bills.

What was needed was a remote-control method of turning on or off one particular subscriber's service, or a pay channel or two. The answer was addressability, a technique that enables operators to activate each decoder separately by sending it electronic instructions along with its own identifying number, or "address."

Rich Zahradnik is an assistant editor of Television Digest.

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CHANNELS
OF COMMUNICATIONS

Always something to think about

Addressability is so agile it allows a channel to be turned on for just a single pay-per-view program. In about 500,000 homes hooked to two-way cable systems, the subscriber can order a scheduled pay-per-view program simply by pushing some buttons on the cable converter. The order goes to the cable operator's computer, which sends back instructions to unscramble the channel carrying the requested program. Many more homes—six or seven million of them—have addressable service through one-way cable systems, and usually have to call the cable company by telephone to order a pay-per-view program.

But many people habitually make last-minute decisions and order programs only a few minutes before they start. The result is jammed phone lines and unplaced orders. Technology again promises to solve the problem. Among the companies working on a solution, Pacific Bell plans to begin offering cable companies this year a computerized service that handles a pay-per-view order in 10 seconds. Subscribers call a special phone number for the program they want and are answered by a recorded message confirming the order. Registered by a computer at the phone company, the order is forwarded to the cable operator's computer, which activates the addressable decoder and later bills the customer.

SCRAMBLING HBO ON THE SATELLITE COULD SEAL THE REAR DOOR OF ITS BIG MOVIE HOUSE

With all of their advantages, why are there only six or seven million addressable boxes among the 37 million homes that have cable? One reason is the cost of the boxes, ranging from just below $100 to nearly $200 each. The expense makes sense only for the bigger cable operators who tend to rely on revenues from pay channels such as HBO. Generally, pay-per-view hasn't proved to be a money-maker.

Although scrambling and addressability have been applied most widely in cable television, both technologies are also used to safeguard pay channels sent over the air by subscription television, and are planned for direct-broadcast satellites (DBS). At the same time, HBO, Showtime, and other networks are beginning to scramble their satellite signals sent out to cable systems so that individuals with backyard satellite dishes will no longer be able to intercept the transmissions and watch without paying. The pay services will then start trying to sell subscriptions to those very same dish owners, who will have to equip themselves with $400 addressable decoders. If that works, the pay-cable networks will have successfully sealed shut the rear doors of their continent-wide movie theaters, through which hundreds of thousands of nonpaying moviegoers have entered each week, and persuaded them to buy tickets up front. ■

Sinking the Video Pirates

If there's anything that curdles Hollywood's blood faster than a nonpaying audience, it's an audience that walks off with the movie and, without paying extra, shows it to other folks.

That's why Jack Valenti went on the warpath only one nanosecond after he heard about the double-barreled video-cassette recorder last winter. The machine, which holds two cassettes and copies from one onto the other, represents "a brazen call to thievery," according to Valenti, the movie industry's main lobbyist.

As it happens, dual VCRs are being sold in quantity only in the Middle East, and their manufacturer, Sharp, claims to have no plans to bring them to the U.S. To make sure of that, Valenti has raised an uproar and sought ways to ban the machines. But the movie-copying problem is bigger than the dual VCR, which would be no more than a convenience to those who copy cassettes. Political measures may block this one device, but copying will go on without it.

Technological measures are more likely to do the trick. One new security process foils VCRs trying to copy prerecorded cassettes; another, not yet perfected, is supposed to prevent recording off the air. Neither "copyproofing" technique will stop a professional pirate, according to their inventors, and both will lose some effectiveness if manufacturers redesign their VCRs. Both processes exploit the fact that VCRs are more finicky about the electronic signals they record than television sets are about those they show.

The Macrovision process, used by the cassette distributor of *The Cotton Club* and being considered by others, does its job by fooling the automatic gain control (AGC) of the VCR being used to duplicate a tape. The AGC, which tries to maintain a constant strength for the picture being recorded, interprets the copyproofed picture as three or four times stronger than it actually is. It then turns down the incoming signal, causing the VCR to record a very weak picture. This doesn't impair playback of the original cassette and, in that respect, is an improvement over earlier anticopying techniques, which sometimes interfered with normal playback.

The other copyproofing process, still being refined at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with the support of Columbia Pictures, would make a much bigger dent in the habits of VCR owners: It would prevent the taping—even for time-shifting purposes—of programs that use the process, whether broadcast or sent over cable. The process alternately speeds up and slows down, by tiny increments, the frames of the television picture transmitted. TV sets could handle the deviation and show a clear picture, "but it blows the recorder out of the water," says Andrew Lippman of MIT's Media Lab. FCC permission would be required for the deviation from usual broadcast standards.

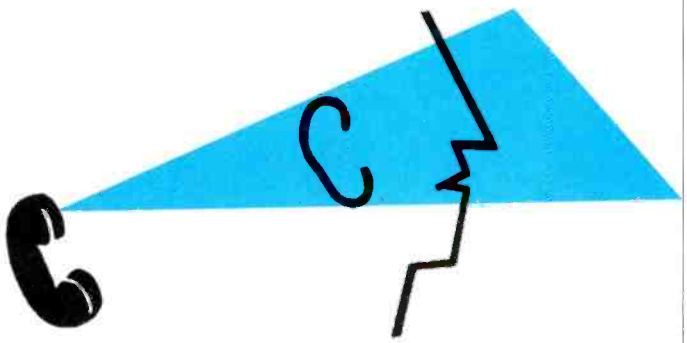
Allen Cooper, one of Valenti's vice presidents at the Motion Picture Association of America, says the studios will only reluctantly resort to copyproofing, and would prefer that Congress impose a tax on blank video cassettes that would be divided up to compensate them for off-air taping of their copyrighted property. But, he adds, "If the law doesn't protect your property, you'd better install your own gate."

STEVE BEHRENS

QUO VIDEO

SHORT TAKES ON NEW TECH

Being sold on hold. Audiocom, a Miami telemarketing company, provides a service called "Promotions on Hold," a mix of music and information that promotes companies' services and products to a captive audience—the waiting caller. Commercial messages, produced by Audiocom's production staff and announcers, are tailored to each company's needs; airlines, for example, may use them to announce special rates. Audiocom claims that the service is effective in reducing caller "hang-ups."



Paperback video. A mail-order video-cassette distributor is marketing 10 movie titles at the groundbreaking price of $5.95 each, or about what it costs to rent a tape at some video outlets. By a process known as "paperbacking," United Entertainment Inc. will copy any of the titles onto the customer's blank cassettes and mail them back within three weeks. The Tulsa-based firm has acquired permission to duplicate and sell such titles as *Attack from Outer Space*, *Dick Tracy Meets Gruesome*, and *White Comanche*.

Linking the chain. Wal-Mart, a national chain of retail stores, is building a $16 million satellite transmission network that when completed in 1987 will link its 750 stores to its Bentonville, Arkansas headquarters. It is one of the first permanent corporate networks capable of transmitting audio, video, and computerized information, and it will replace the expensive long-distance telephone lines that the far-flung chain now uses to transmit data.

Floppy audio. A new device has been developed that turns music into a digital code that can be edited on a personal computer and played back with a "cleaner" sound. Compusonics' $1,500 "DSP-1000" can store up to 45 minutes of sound on the five-inch floppy disc used by many computers. Like a compact disc player, it plays back sounds from digital data, but unlike a CD player it can also record sounds. An "enhancement" feature allows audiophiles to remove undesired noise and improve sound quality. The device can also make recordings from digital "music databases" transmitted over phone lines.

Felicitations. Those who care enough to send the very best can do it now on video cassette. Prime Source Entertainment of Encino, California is marketing a line of four video greeting cards it calls "Cardsettes Giftvideo Greetings." Selling for $14.95 each, the greetings consist of appropriate visuals accompanied by a popular song. The "love card," for example, features couples in various romantic settings with "Happy Together" as the musical backdrop. The company also sells birthday, congratulations, and Christmas video cards.

See no evil. A retired chemical engineer from Greenwich, Connecticut has invented a system that permits a viewer to eliminate unwanted portions of television programs. Subscribers to Henry Von Kohorn's system, which is not yet commercially offered, could choose from a "deletion menu" including, for example, scenes of violence or sex. Operators at a "central monitoring station" would preview programs and transmit commands to special "inhibiting circuits" connected to clients' TV sets, causing the screen to go blank at designated times.

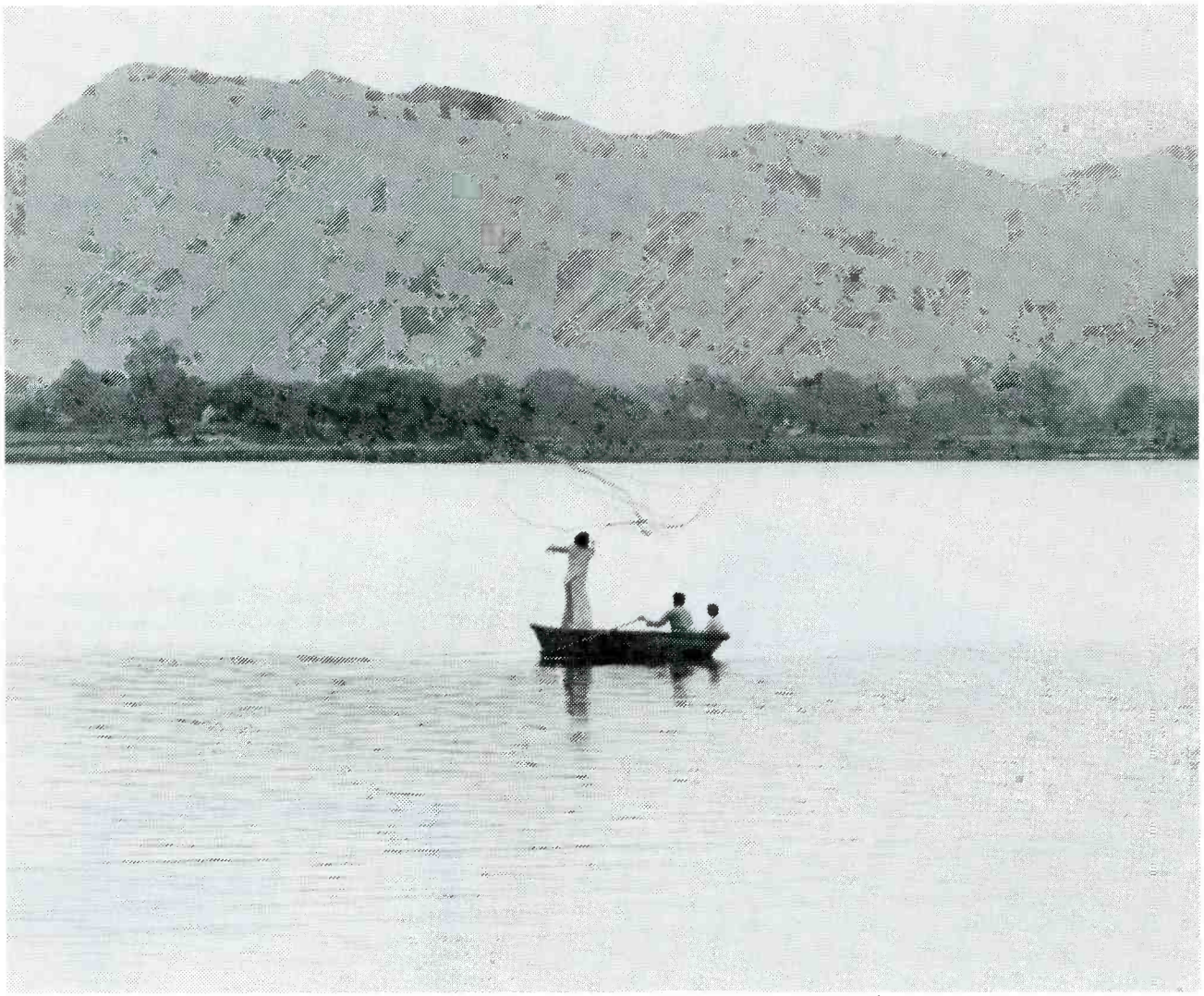
Surround effects. Electronics manufacturers have begun work on prototypes of a device that can "spread" the sound from stereo VCRs around a room. Working like the special decoders that enable theater owners to create the illusion of fuller sound, these devices pick out the "surround" portion of a program's soundtrack—everything but the dialogue—and broadcast it through one or more extra speakers placed behind the listener. The effect, manufacturers say, is similar to full cinema sound.

Multiple choice. A company called Rabbit Systems Inc. in Santa Monica, California is marketing a "VCR-Rabbit" that can transmit sound and pictures from a video-cassette recorder to any TV set within a home. It sells for less than $100 and uses a thin wire to relay programs.

VCR comes of age. In less than a year, "retail" (VCR-generated) television will reach its "critical mass"—becoming, in Madison Avenue's eyes, a mass medium. A recent study by the Young & Rubicam ad agency reports that video-cassette recorder sales in the U.S. increased 81 percent last year, and that one third of all American homes will have at least one VCR by early 1986. One-third penetration made mass media of cable, color TV, and television itself, Y&R points out.

CYNTHIA CATTERSON AND JEFFREY L. WOLF

Marian Chin



THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN

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'...one of the greatest, dammedest things I have ever seen on a screen of any size.' Tom Shales – *The Washington Post*

'...it sometimes seems to me that *The Jewel in the Crown* is not just the series of the decade but the richest television drama of all.' Sean Day-Lewis – *The Daily Telegraph*

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Sojourning in the Vineyards of TV Ordinaire

by Les Brown

I USED TO TAKE SOME PRIDE in having trained myself to watch programs rather than television. This meant tuning in just what I wanted to see and not allowing myself to get hooked on the next thing bobbing along in the programming flow.

My kids were raised on that ethic, although to be honest it was often a struggle. Under the house rules, it was okay to watch programs they specifically wanted to see but not okay to flop down before the set, checking out what was on and just watching *anything*.

This worked fairly well for all of us, until cable came down our street. Now the kids, when they're home, watch MTV, arguing that it's a program and not just television. And I find myself watching television rather than programs, because with 30 channels going at once I can't resist tapping the buttons on the converter to see what's happening elsewhere. Once in a while I get riveted to something extraordinary, but mostly I'm a sojourner on any channel. Two or three minutes of TV Ordinaire is sufficient for me to get the drift.

> NOW WE HAVE FREEZE-DRIED TV: TAKE A SPOONFUL OF STORYLINE, ADD HOT WATER, AND STIR.

Hit the button: A man and woman have stumbled onto a drug ring while trying to find out who murdered the woman's friend. Hit the button: The mother in a sitcom is worried sick about the creep her daughter has brought home, a punk rocker with crazy hair. This is all that needs to be told; I can fill in the rest in my head. In the first instance, the couple will burn up a lot of rubber trying to elude the drug merchants and will wind up in an abandoned warehouse where, in the last desperate moment, they will cut a rope that drops a half-ton anvil on the bad guy just when he has them in his rifle sights. In the sitcom, meanwhile, the punk freak will turn out to be the son of the bank president, who will reward the good mother for the kind advice she's given his scion by letting her skip a mortgage payment on the beauty parlor.

Maybe this isn't precisely how the scriptwriters worked it out on the air, but that's of no importance. It suffices for me. After 30-odd years of exposure to garden-variety television and "B" movies, I can extrapolate the development of just about any stock plot to my liking. It occurs to me that the scripters who turn out these potboilers learned how to spin a yarn by watching endless hours of television in their younger days. So there's every chance that the version in my imaginings will entertain me more than theirs.

My preference these days is for freeze-dried television: Take a spoonful of storyline almost anywhere in the text, then just add hot water and stir. There being no need to invest an hour in a show that resolves itself in predictable fashion, I watch bits and pieces of television, moving ever onward from this to that with the sense of having watched six hours' worth in 30 minutes. If it isn't nourishing, at least it's an active use of television and answers the question of how we're going to find the time to watch all these new things that cable and satellites are sending our way.

It can't be that I'm alone at this; surely there are others who have taken to skimming television, too. What, I wonder with some envy, must the skimming be like for people with satellite dishes who can pull in more than 200 channels? Do they ever stop long enough to watch anything? And what can the future be for TV Ordinaire if this kind of obsessive channel-browsing becomes epidemic?

I may have caught a glimpse of the future at a recent symposium on academic television criticism at the University of Iowa. There, along with some twoscore Ph.D. candidates, I sat in on a frame-by-frame analysis of the famous one-minute Apple Computer commercial that was produced for last year's Super Bowl game. In this bite-sized masterpiece by the Chiat/Day ad agency, entitled *1984*, battalions of enslaved men shuffle into a large auditorium where they stand in regimented file watching Big Brother on a giant screen. Just then a lone female resembling Wonder Woman enters the hall, defiantly swinging a sledgehammer and letting it fly into the screen where it smashes Big Brother in mid-sentence. Then cut to the pitch for Apple.

This was the apotheosis of freeze-dried television—a whole novel or mini-series compressed into less than 60 seconds. Radio drama, in its heyday, used to be called Theater of the Mind; television in this kind of highly distilled form is the modern refinement of that art. What needs to be underscored is that it

Keith Bendis

was art, not technology, that achieved the miracle of time compression.

Sixty seconds is more merciful than three minutes to those of us who have become video minimalists. We are preceded in history, of course, by the audio minimalists who never stop punching the FM buttons on their car radios. It is appropriate to mention radio (one tunes in to radio rather than to its programs) because the radio industry long ago solved the great problem bedeviling commercial television today: how to beat the ever-rising costs of programming.

On network television, a program airs once and immediately becomes used merchandise. Overnight it is reduced to a rerun, its value sharply diminished. Multimillion-dollar mini-series have to hit it big in their initial telecast, because the reruns of ultra-long programs usually do poorly in the ratings. Radio, on the other hand, features records or news reports that are often repeated but never considered reruns; indeed the listener welcomes their familiarity the third or fourth time around. Cable's MTV, with its flow of music videos, has brought radio's efficient use of programming to television. There are no reruns on MTV—yes, there are pieces we've seen before, but we don't think of them as reruns, any more than we think of television commercials as reruns. This suggests a new Law of Diminishing Reruns: The longer the program, the more quickly perishable.

As time goes on, there are likely to be more and more viewers tapping in and out of channels just to get an essence, and more and more economic reasons for operators to go with miniature programs that never become reruns.

Program forms in the popular media aren't dictated by innovative producers but the exigencies of business. The typical movie came to range in length from 90 minutes to 2 hours not for artistic reasons but because theater managements needed the turnover in audience. Popular music recordings often still run three minutes or less not because you can't record longer on a 45RPM disc, but because a great many radio stations adopted the tight-board format in the '50s—a record, a commercial, a record, a commercial—and refused to play anything longer than three minutes because it cut into their commercial time. American television programs run exactly 30 minutes, or an hour, or two hours (British programs are not so enslaved by the clock and may have a running time of 38 minutes or 71 minutes) because sponsors used to buy half-hour segments, and it was considered good business to simplify the schedule for viewers.

If, down the line, business should dictate a scheme of miniature programs that are shuffled and reshuffled in the television flow, then miniature programs will come to dominate television, just as records (who would have dreamed it in the '40s?) have come to dominate radio. The optimist in me believes this will ultimately serve the cause of excellent full-length television programs. Whatever happens, I expect to go on sojourning in the vineyards of TV Ordinaire, making three-minute stopoffs and cheering on the nascent one-minute form. But what I'm actually looking for when tapping around is a discovery, something compelling to dwell with awhile, something worth my time. Full-length programs will never vanish—of that I'm sure—but they will have to meet a higher standard than stock melodrama and stock sitcom to succeed in an age when television's stock satisfactions can be delivered in pill form.

Dealing Murdoch into the Game

THE NEWS that Rupert Murdoch is buying the Metromedia stations has sparked a lot of excited talk about the coming of a fourth network. Murdoch would now seem to have everything it takes to crash the prime-time poker party: an overpowering desire to make it big in the U.S., lots of money to put on the table, a major Hollywood studio behind him (he recently became co-owner, with Marvin Davis, of 20th Century Fox), and a chain of independent stations in key cities on which to build the infrastructure. All the elements seem in place—but let no one get carried away. No company today, not even Murdoch's, can create a network capable of going head-on with ABC, CBS, and NBC.

The established networks have a lock on the audience that habitually watches television, because by now they know how to fulfill viewer expectations. With millions spent each year on audience research, program development, and promotion, the networks have mastered the art of being popular. More importantly, each has a flock of proven hits that guarantees the return of its audiences for years to come, and each is so fat with prosperity that it can cope with the horrendous costs of program failure.

Failure these days comes at the staggering rate of three out of four new series. And, in the process of dumping these failures to try new shows, the networks kill millions of dollars' worth of unaired episodes each season. Ultimately, however, these immense costs work in their favor, because they keep the pikers out of the game. No one can afford failure like the networks can, not because they're so wealthy but because they hold all the high cards.

If Murdoch really took a notion to challenge the networks, he would be starting from ground zero without a base of hit shows, without a stable lineup of affiliates, without a well-tuned promotional apparatus, and without immediate credibility with viewers. In virtually every time period, he'd be facing competition from one or two entrenched hits and a new entry with strong potential from the third network. His failure rate would be colossal. Murdoch's predecessor at Metromedia, John Kluge, made a bid last year to create a fourth network with a mess of shows built around *Thicke of the Night* and two network castoffs, *Fame* and *Too Close for Comfort*. The effort went straight down the tubes. The odds against Murdoch, even with Fox producing the shows, are no less astronomical than they were for Kluge.

What Murdoch might actually succeed in creating, however, is a kind of second-echelon network offering syndicated shows, marginal sports events, and specials. Instead of competing with the major networks, it would go up against superstation WTBS, as well as such cable services as USA and ESPN, and whatever syndicated network is likely to spring from Tribune Broadcasting, now that it, too, has stations in the three largest markets—New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

Even to succeed in this lesser game, Murdoch will have to create programs of some unique appeal. Unfortunately, that is by no means beyond him. He has proved, with his newspaper empire on three continents, that he knows how to seduce the masses. In journalism he is the acknowledged king of the low road, his cynicism about public taste legendary. The very idea of a Murdoch network in an unregulated climate provokes a shudder, because when he wins the rest of us lose. ■

WHO SUPPORTS PUBLIC TELEVISION?

"Commercial interests and their political and other friends would love to be rid of public television....[The public] could tax the large profits of commercial broadcasters. If such funds were available for public broadcasting, public television could provide a broad range of noncommercial programming with a strong signal."
—from a recent letter to the New York Times

In fact, the evidence points the other way: there is a long history of cooperation between commercial and public broadcasters, and we regard them as professional colleagues. That makes sense, because public broadcasting frequently offers excellent programming that simply would not work within the economic logic of the commercial system.

There are three basic parts to American television: commercial broadcasting supported by advertising revenue; cable supported by basic fee, subscription or pay-per-view and public broadcasting supported by contributions from government, corporations, foundations and the public. Each has its own integrity and viability as a *system*.

This three-part system provides distinct services for different interests. The result for American viewers is a wider range of program choice than anywhere else in the world.

The idea of taxing commercial broadcasters to support public broadcasting is an old one. It pops up every now and then because it seems like a quick and easy solution to the problems public broadcasters face in raising funds. But like any quick and easy solution to a complex issue, this one has serious flaws.

For one, crossing the wires among systems could erode the integrity of each. And reduce the diversity. For another, this sort of cross-subsidy involves a basic inequity: why should commercial broadcasters be the only ones taxed for this purpose? We already pay our fair share of taxes. Should GM, Ford and Chrysler subsidize city subway systems?

The broadcasting industry serves the diverse interests of the public in a free enterprise economy. That was spelled out in the Communications Act of 1934, and it holds true today. Our three-part television system promotes diversity, innovation and commitment to the needs and interests of the American people. We stand behind those principles. Let's not compromise them.

Contribute to public television and work for its support. Help others recognize its importance to the American television system. Let public television remain truly public.

abc

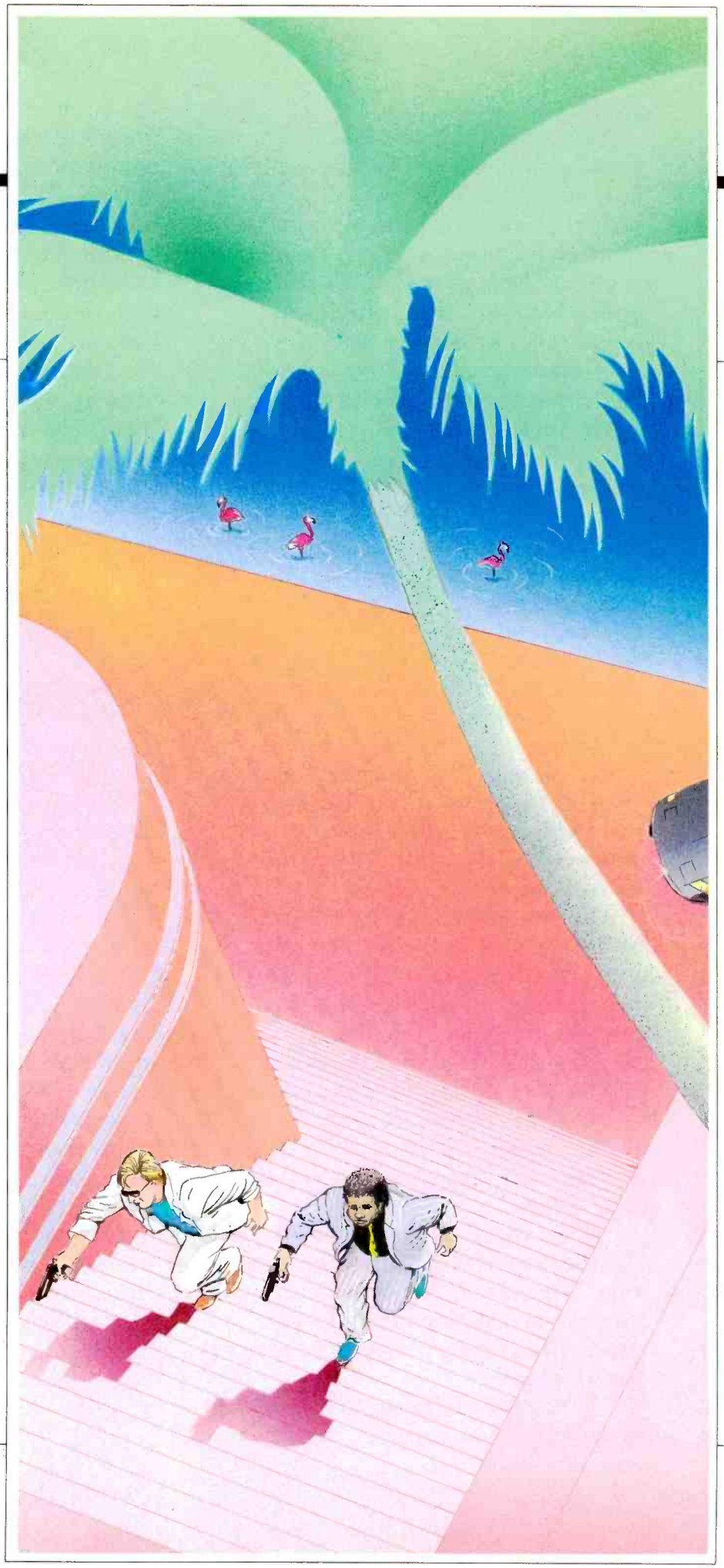
THE PLOT might seem familiar: NBC introduces a cop show that sets off a wave of critical praise for its stylistic innovations and classy production. Though critics hail the show as "state-of-the-art television," the audience stays away. The show spends its first months near the bottom of the ratings, the only good news from Nielsen being robust demographics: The program quickly attracts a following among affluent young city people. The network stands by its *succes d'estime*, and by the start of the show's second season it seems poised to emerge as a hit.

Five years ago, of course, this plot belonged to *Hill Street Blues*, a program that pointed NBC's way out of the ratings morass. Today the plot is being repeated and the cop show is *Miami Vice*.

If *Hill Street* is notable for having brought a new level of realism and literary sophistication to prime time, *Miami Vice*'s contribution may turn out to be much more far-reaching. The Friday-night program has brought a new visual sophistication to a medium that for most of its history has been remarkably word-bound. *Vice* is the first prime-time program to elevate the image above the word and, in doing so, it has invented a television more of sensation than of sense. Whether this is a development to cheer or not is debatable, but "sensation television" is so well-adapted to television's new environment that it seems likely to thrive.

Zapping around the dial, you would be unlikely to mistake *Miami Vice* for *Hill Street Blues*, though both shows, virtu-

Michael Pollan, a contributing editor of Channels, *is executive editor of* Harper's Magazine.



Andrea Baruffi

THE 'VICE' LOOK

A cop show like no other before it, 'Miami Vice' is inventing a more visual television.

ally alone in prime time, are immediately recognizable on the evidence of a single frame. On *Hill Street*, that is almost certain to be a cramped shot of a dingy, overcrowded interior, with a dozen rumpled characters elbowing one another and trying to be heard over the din. The picture gives us the sense, even before a line of dialogue is spoken, of chaos just barely contained. The hand-held camera and the microphone seem to be struggling to catch the action, which, like news, is going on in spite of us.

If *Hill Street* smacks of the *verité* documentary, the typical frame of *Miami Vice* has the easy, pseudo-decadent air of a music video or a high-priced commercial. We are outside, in a scrubbed world of bright sunlight and saturated colors. The camera, firmly in control, frames an exquisite, carefully patterned shot: The freshly painted white slats of a park bench along the bottom of the frame lead your eye to the parallel white slats of a venetian blind in the window of a house in the background. The house—postmodern, with glass bricks and clever deco references—is a soft-pink stucco, which offers just the right backdrop for the man in middle ground, who, under his white, unstructured Armani jacket, is wearing an aqua T-shirt. The aqua and the pink vibrate together just so. Parked next to him is a jet-black Ferrari, and the glint of sunlight off its chrome creates a tiny hot spot, a visual punctuation mark that looks . . . just so. In fact, everything in the picture does: the jacket right out of the pages of *GQ*, the house right out of *Architectural Digest*. Completing the scene—in which no words are spoken, and no sync sound can be heard—is the rock group Foreigner on the soundtrack, singing "I Want to Know What Love Is."

This is not a commercial for Chanel perfume. This is a cop show. The man in the picture is supposed to be a Miami vice-squad detective, the Ferrari belongs to him, and the house is a thriving drug dealer's. If this strikes you as a little peculiar, as cognitively dissonant, then you may not be ready for *Miami Vice*, a place where old-fashioned literary concerns—logic, plausibility, the whole bland business of cause and effect—don't seem to matter very much.

It's a long way from the untidy eruptions at the Hill Street precinct house. Even so, *Miami Vice* would not be possible without the example of *Hill Street Blues* before it. What is striking is that either show has any kind of look at all. *Hill Street* was one of the very first prime-time programs to develop a self-conscious visual style, a texture as important to our sense of the show as its character, action, and dialogue.

It is remarkable that it has taken until this decade for television to come up with such programs, considering the visual sophistication of American movies. But television's visual vocabulary has always been limited. The fact that television, in its early days, was live dictated that the writer and the actors, not the director, held control. The tight schedules and skimpy budgets of early series television also conspired to discourage visual experimentation. Who could set up strikingly composed shots when there was barely enough time in the shooting schedule to cover the script?

The series' stars: Johnson, Thomas, and the Ferrari

Abetted by an unusually long shooting

BY MICHAEL POLLAN

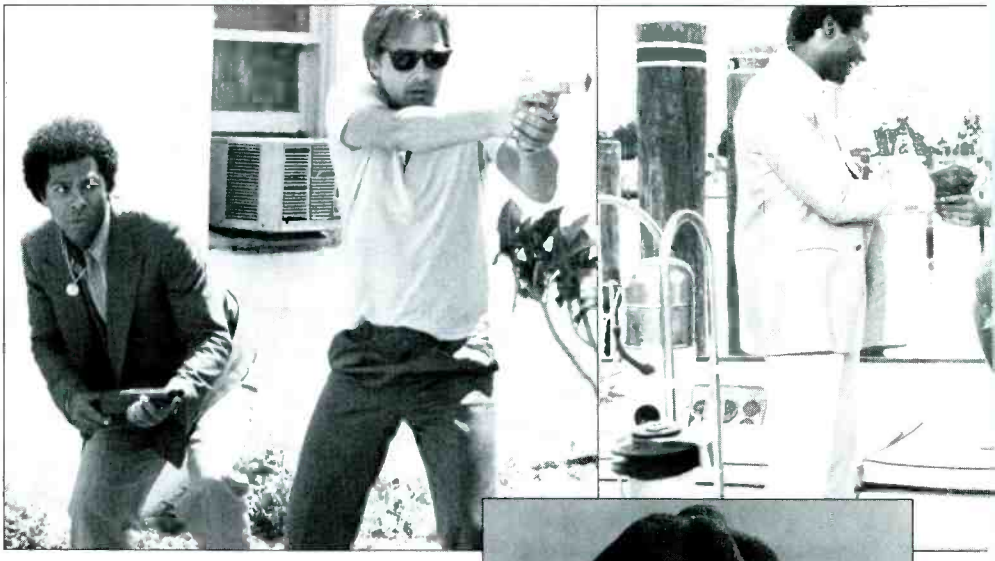
schedule and a lavish budget, *Hill Street* created for itself a distinct visual identity. Yet it has remained a writer's show, its texture clearly in the service of its writers' vision. The crowded frames, overlapping dialogue, and jagged camera work help convey the struggles of characters working against long odds to uphold a bit of order in a world that seems on the verge of coming apart.

Against this late-'70s sense of social entropy, the show posed the appealingly stoic Blues: Clear-eyed, unidealistic yet sensitive, they make the hard choices between the claims of expediency ("Get that monster off the street this minute!") and those of principle ("But we've got nothing to hold him on!"). Neoconservative, genially survivalist, *Hill Street* is Depression Television, realism for hard times. Its gritty, naturalistic style is perfectly matched to its outlook.

You cannot, however, "read" *Miami Vice* this way, interpreting its visual style in terms of its writing to uncover a fairly coherent view of the world. Consider this typical *Miami Vice* tableau, from an episode called "Smuggler's Blues": Vice detectives Sonny Crockett and Ricardo Tubbs (Don Johnson and Philip Michael Thomas) are undercover in Cartagena, Colombia. They have arranged to exchange one briefcase full of money for another full of cocaine. But before they can transact this business, the camera has something else it wants to do. Just back from a commercial, and with no establishing shot or dialogue to orient us, the camera gives us statuary: long, sumptuous shots of angels, a madonna and child in golden morning light, a stone crucifix shot from below to create a halo of sunlight around Christ's head. After what seems like a full minute of this photography, which is gorgeous, the camera draws back to reveal that we are in a cemetery where the deal is going down, so why don't we look in on the plot?

Conditioned by the conventions of narrative, we try to figure out just what the storyteller has in mind. Maybe an ironic joke is being made with the cherubs. Certainly these drug kingpins are no angels. No: too stupid. Maybe Crockett and Tubbs, who have volunteered for this dangerous assignment, are the department's sacrificial lambs, and we are meant to think of them as Christ-like. No: also stupid, and way too heavy. How about this: The pristine shots of statuary at dawn are meant to offer a wry comment on Colombia, where Christian piety exists side-by-side with narcotics and murder. Dubious; "wry" is kind of fancy for *Miami Vice*'s writers.

Eventually you give up, realizing the cinematographic virtuosity probably doesn't mean anything at all. Indeed, it's a good bet that those statue shots weren't even in the script—that the crew arrived at the cemetery to shoot the bag-drop scene, hit upon the statues looking dynamite in the dawn light, and decided on the spot to expose a few extra feet of film. The statues are in the episode simply because they look great. Now you're starting to get it. Just sit back and take in the images. Don't sprain your brain trying to figure out what they mean.

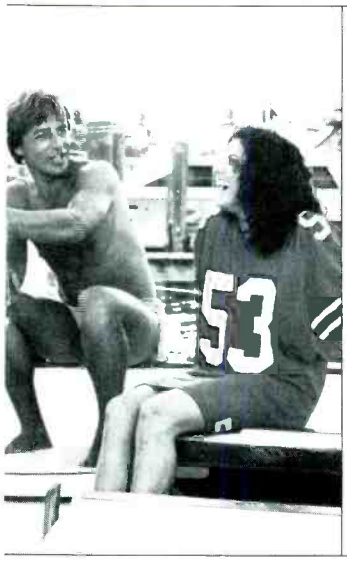


Hill Street Blues—*the precursor to* Miami Vice—*couldn't be more different in style. Detective Belker (above) typifies its grittiness.*

The only thing these shots are meant to communicate to us, as near as I can tell, is that we are in the presence of Visual Sophistication. By the standards of *Miami Vice*, that is a great good in itself. This is an unfamiliar kind of television, a fact signalled earlier this year when Brandon Tartikoff, NBC's programming chief, asked Michael Mann, *Vice*'s executive producer and guiding intelligence, to describe just what was distinctive about his program. Tartikoff expected Mann to say something about the characters, or the show's premise, maybe the Miami milieu. But Mann had something different in mind. With Zen simplicity he replied: "No earth tones."

As Mann's remark suggests, *Miami Vice* overturns the usual relation of a show's story to its visual style. The director clearly has a bigger hand in shaping an episode of *Vice* than its writer. So does the cinematographer. And the editor. And the musical director. Even the costume designer is higher in the *Vice* hierarchy than the unfortunate writer, to judge by the attention lavished on Tubbs's tailored suits and Crockett's Italian jackets. By comparison, the writing is not just flat and clichéd, it's downright negligent. The plots of some episodes are shot through with holes —instances where two characters converge in defiance of physical laws. Implausible turns of event are rife. When, for example, a story calls for Tubbs's true identity to be revealed to the kiddie-porn ring he's infiltrated, the "bug" taped to his chest simply malfunctions and starts blaring rock music.

Of course *Vice* parades its biggest implausibility before its audience in every episode. Where do these cops get off driving Ferraris and wearing $700 Versace sport jackets? Mann has an explana-



Miami Vice *cops Crockett and Tubbs fight and play in a scrubbed world of bright sunlight and saturated colors.*

tion. He says that, under the federal anti-racketeering statutes, the government can seize the assets of drug smugglers it successfully prosecutes. Well, that much is true, but it doesn't mean that the cops on the case get to take the stuff home.

No, Tubbs and Crockett dress the way they do and drive Ferraris simply because it looks cool, and because the producers saw advantages in combining the attractions of a rich-people show with the action and jeopardy of a cop show. The fact that this show, so sophisticated visually, is risible from a literary standpoint is evidently of no concern to its audience. Its creators evince only disdain for the hoary conventions of dialogue, plots, and narrative logic. Even character is an afterthought—which is convenient, considering Don Johnson and Philip Michael Thomas's microscopic range. When an important emotional conversation comes on screen, the Top-40 song on the soundtrack will invariably be turned way up, or something great to look at will show up in the background. Editors cut in and out of expository scenes and dialogue at will, impatient to get on to the next shoot-out or pink-and-blue tableau. If *Hill Street* spent years waging weekly battle with NBC's standards and practices department, *Vice* is after bigger game: It goes to war each week with the entire tradition of Western dramaturgy. The result is television that offers less for the mind than for the eye.

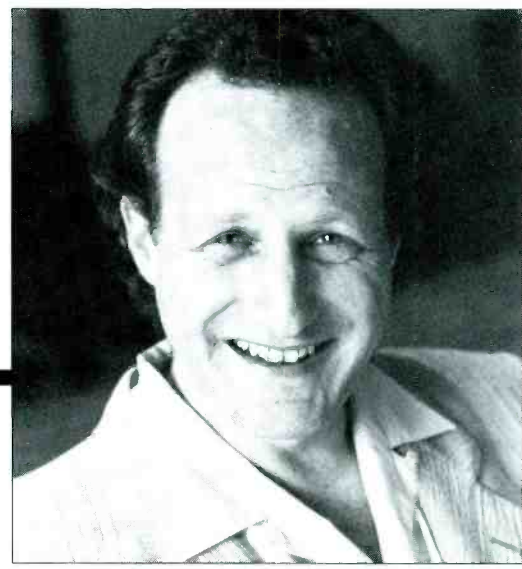
It is probably safe to assume that *Miami Vice* has few fans among owners of 13-inch black-and-white TV sets. To them the show must be unbearably dull. For an action series, the pace is actually quite slow, almost mannered. *Vice* is so self-conscious about its striking images that it likes to stop and admire them at length. The featured colors, as Mann points out, are never earth tones; nor, with the unavoidable exception of red, for blood, are they ever primary colors. They're flamingo pinks, pale Caribbean blues, lime greens: the lush, just slightly ironic postmodern shades favored by trendy restaurants. These colors are photographed in such a way that they "pop"—we are meant to luxuriate in their presence on our screen and compliment ourselves on doing so.

And there is more to gaze at. The show's fashion sense is the sharpest on television. Unlike *Dynasty*, in which women wear ball gowns to breakfast, *Miami Vice* refuses to indulge some off-the-wall Middle-American fantasy of high fashion. This is the real thing. Like a video incarnation of Condé Nast, *Vice* gives its audience reliable, up-to-date information on questions of style. The show's costume designer journeys to Milan regularly to make sure that Tubbs and Crockett are decked out in the latest men's fashions, even before the styles reach New York shops.

Vice's sense of design is equally knowing: The producers go to great lengths to put Tubbs and Crockett into postmodern interiors that design cognoscenti will recognize as the work of Arquitectonica, the very hot young Miami architecture firm. If *Hill Street Blues* sometimes gets preachy about ethics, *Miami Vice* reserves its didacticism for issues of style.

Miami Vice's extreme trendiness could be the show's undoing. To maintain its stylish edge, the producers will have to update everything each season with the astuteness and alacrity of Seventh Avenue. And even if they manage that, there's still the problem of reruns: Syndicating the show in 1990 could prove to be as challenging as moving a warehouse full of bell-bottoms today. Indeed, five years from now we may be comparing *Vice* with another NBC show that also featured contemporary music and was once the hottest thing going: *The Monkees*.

The producers of *Miami Vice* have obviously accepted the risk, because they put style right at the center of the show. Fashion is much more than ornament or social statement on *Vice*. The show recognizes and exploits the way fashion causes people, bodies, even buildings to



Miami Vice *executive producer Michael Mann has come up with a visual corollary to the rock 'n' roll aesthetic.*

'Vice' goes against dramatic tradition in playing primarily to the senses rather than to the mind.

be seen more vividly. It can reawaken eyes that have been dulled by visual conventions and clutter. This form of sensory refreshment goes to the heart of the program's aesthetic.

Television commercials have been playing to our senses for years, and the producers of MTV have based an entire cable network on visual and aural dazzlement. But *Miami Vice*'s debt to its forerunners is more complicated. True, like MTV, it makes heavy use of music (sometimes imaginatively, but often gratuitously) in creating moods without dialogue. As in commercials, songs tell us how to feel about the action on the screen. But the visual styles of MTV and *Miami Vice* differ greatly. MTV's pacing is much quicker, its editing more staccato. MTV also goes in for far more outrageous juxtapositions of images (the girlfriend who suddenly turns into a hamburger, books that burst into flame), the kind of adolescent surrealism indigenous to high school art classes and record jackets. When people lump together MTV and *Vice* they're simply recognizing the fact that both are visually sensational. Visual television programming was so rare before MTV that we immediately liken any exercise in creative image-making to a music video.

More than any particular visual style, MTV's great contribution to *Vice* was the discovery that sensation television can attract an audience. And now that *Vice* has proven that the approach can succeed on a network schedule, we can expect to see more of it. Already, two ABC programs premiering this fall, *Hollywood Beat* and *The Insiders*, are said to lean heavily on *Vice*'s example, and self-consciously visual television is turning up everywhere: in ABC documentaries, on CBS's *Night Heat*, on *St. Elsewhere*, in credit sequences of sports broadcasts, and on *West 57th Street*, the new CBS newsmagazine.

Trendy though it may be, sensation television is probably something more than a passing fad. For one thing, as MTV discovered to its great profit, there is now a substantial audience that does not require its television to tell stories or even to make a great deal of sense, so long as it stimulates the eye and the ear. This is a young audience that has grown up on television and come to enjoy images not as windows on the real world, but simply as *images*. Like musical sounds, television images can be intrinsically pleasing. Appealing to this audience, *Miami Vice* has come up with a visual corollary to the rock 'n' roll aesthetic. If it feels, sounds, and looks good, do it. Indeed, *Vice* even limits all of its plots to the two great themes of rock: Sex and Drugs. Since it is the local effects that matter—the chord progressions, the riff—no one minds if you repeat the same story over and over.

There is another reason sensation television can be expected to last. We are approaching a moment when the prime-time television schedule must aspire to visual brilliance for the same reason commercials have: to break through the clutter on the dial and get noticed. When viewers are zapping among dozens of channels, it isn't the intricate plot or subtle characterization that will grab them; it's the striking image and soundtrack. To survive amidst the clutter, programs may be forced to develop highly distinct visual and aural identities. Certainly MTV doesn't get lost on the dial, no matter how many channels surround it.

Television is such that any innovation is assumed to be improvement, and many critics seem to have mistaken *Miami Vice*'s dazzle for genuine brilliance. But, based as it is entirely upon sensation, this kind of image television cannot be counted as a very lofty development. Sensation *is* something art produces, but usually on its way to something else. Sensation as an end in itself is the province of pornography.

Though a television of sensation may not be interested in saying things about our world, it cannot help but do so. Following the logic of its images you find that *Miami Vice* comes to some surprising conclusions. The program ends up reflecting the times as faithfully as *Hill Street* once did, but in ways it is hard to believe its creators intended. Sure, some of its messages are intentional, and more or less benign: *Vice*'s celebration of cool, artful consumption and detached professionalism must speak eloquently to its Yuppie viewers. (From the *Vice* perspective, the decidedly "hot" characters on *Hill Street Blues*, with their moral dilemmas and sensitive souls, seem hopelessly out of date—so *'70s*.) But *Miami Vice* is sending other messages over which it has much less control.

The program, for example, does not seem to know exactly how it feels about its bad guys, their coke, and their cash. The show comes alive only when Tubbs and Crockett are deep under-cover, living the life of high-rolling porno kings and drug dealers. The clothes, the cars, the heaps of cocaine, the million-dollar homes are all photographed so lovingly that, if not for the dialogue, one might think *Miami Vice* was a 60-minute commercial for the benefits of law-breaking. Yet *Vice* scripts always end with the usual network pieties about crime (it doesn't pay), drugs (they're bad for you), and greed (it leads to crime, which doesn't pay).

Miami Vice's camera tells a very different story. The camera is so smitten with wealth and sensuous surfaces it seems to forget that all the riches passing before its uncritical gaze are ill-gotten. In the same way, Crockett seems to have forgotten that the Armani jackets and the Ferrari are not really his—that they are a costume on loan from the vice squad. It is surely inadvertent, but *Vice* has hit upon a serviceable metaphor for its times. Like Miami, where affluence rests on a great, unsteady dune of cocaine, the national prosperity totters on a dubious scaffolding of credit. Quite by accident, *Vice* suggests that the carnival of consumption may in some way be unfounded—that good times in Reagan's America, like Crockett's lifestyle, may depend on a kind of forgetting.

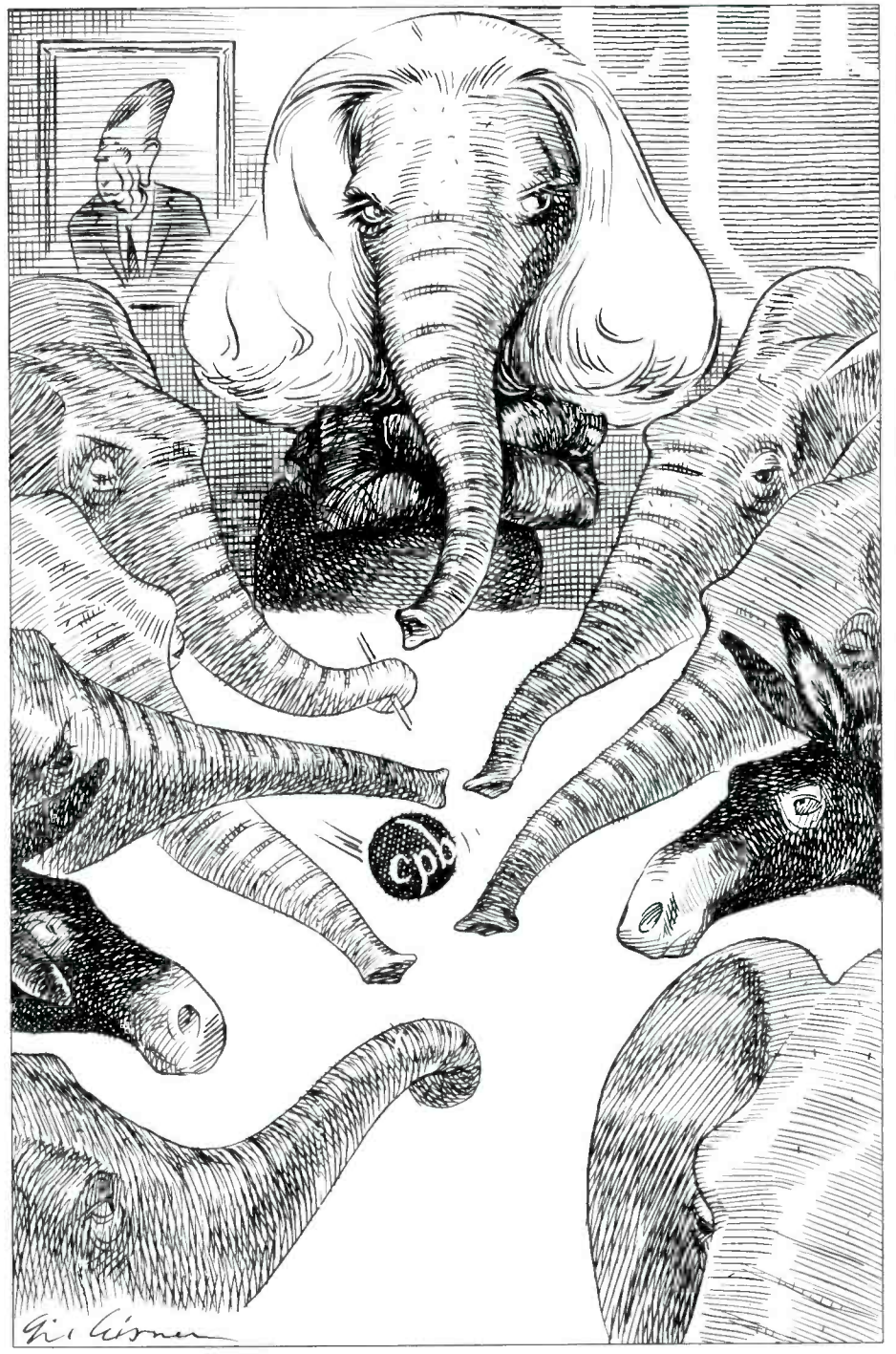
Not to worry, says the camera, and the camera is in charge. Just get a look at this stuff. Go for it.

The problem with *Miami Vice* is not that it has elevated pictures above writing. That may turn out one day to have been a great precedent, when some true auteur comes along to make genuinely brilliant image television. The problem is that, like words, images send messages, and those being sent by the images on *Miami Vice* seem to come from another planet. Do the producers mean to aestheticize crime? If they do, then why do the scripts moralize against it? No, the camera is acting on its own. Critics have cited *Vice* as an example of auteur television, but that is not quite true. The genuine auteur—the word means author—matches words and pictures in an effort to express a coherent personal vision. *Vice* doesn't work that way at all. In the kind of giddy excess that often follows revolution, the camera, having overthrown the word, tramples sense. Which is why there is less to *Miami Vice* than meets the eye. ■

PUBLIC BROADCASTING'S UNHOLY LINK TO POLITICS

A blowup over a trip to Moscow revealed that political animals are again entrusted with shielding public TV from political pressure.

BY STEVE BEHRENS



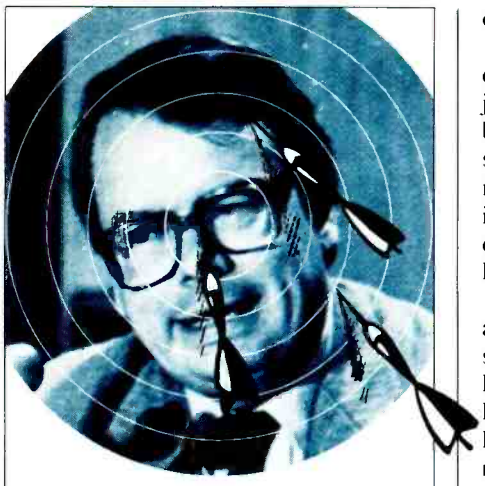
Gil Eisner

THE PRICKLY SCENE played itself out in about an hour, in front of a hushed audience. Then a vote: The board of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting barred its president and another staffer from leading a public broadcasters' trade delegation to Moscow. Onlookers at the shoot-out May 15 had followed the emotional debate intently, but afterwards few could agree exactly how to assess what had happened. What did the episode say about CPB, the conduit for federal support of public broadcasting and the industry's supposed "heat shield" against undue political influence? Was the board's decision truly alarming, inconsequential, or merely accidental?

Many of the public broadcasters present were alarmed to hear White House appointees on the board give ideological reasons for their vote. It seemed a case of the heat shield generating its own heat, one broadcaster observed. CPB president Edward J. Pfister couldn't live with the board's decision; he resigned his

Steve Behrens, senior editor of Channels, *was the founding editor of* Current, *the trade newspaper of public broadcasting.*

STEVE BEHRENS



'Oh, Ed Pfister, you're incredible, just incredible!' chairman Sonia Landau shouted, as reporters took notes. 'You don't give a damn about this organization.'

office the next day.

From another viewpoint, however, the only real consequence would be one less junket to pay for. Sonia Landau, the board's chairman since last September, said the matter would have amounted to a molehill if Pfister hadn't resigned, and implied that he was finding an excuse to quit before the board got around to firing him.

Others were sure they had witnessed an accident. The pieces converged so suddenly and irrationally that the scene held the surprise and fascination of a highway wreck. Two willful personalities had clashed; for assorted reasons, the majority of board members came together to side with Landau.

The subject of the flare-up, the display of emotion, Pfister's resignation—all were unexpected in their particulars. But for politically jaded observers, it had been easy to anticipate some sort of showdown for four years, ever since the election of a President hostile to taxpayer support of public broadcasting. Reagan's appointments to the CPB board last September gave it a solid conservative bloc. (See box.) And in January, that bloc installed as chairman Sonia Landau, who had headed Women for Reagan/Bush during last year's campaign. The vote, by secret ballot, was six to four. Nine months later, the Moscow trip was defeated by the same margin.

That trip would seem an unlikely target for Reaganite assault: It was merely one of a series of respectably capitalist attempts to sell PBS shows overseas. The foray even promised a high cost/benefit ratio for the industry. The most recent overseas trip coordinated by CPB's Office of International Affairs—last October, to Beijing, Tokyo, and Sydney—resulted in sales and coproduction deals worth $387,000 so far. The cost was one tenth as much, and CPB's share was raised from foundations just to avoid the specter of junketing on taxpayers' money. CPB's next planned trip—the ill-fated one, next September, to an Eastern Bloc television market in Moscow—was to cost CPB just $3,700, of which foundation grants would cover more than half.

Plans for the trip had been unquestioned until April. Landau says the board simply hadn't focused on it before. But Pfister says she first raised the issue with him in April after she had lunch with Charles Wick, head of the U.S. Information Agency, the government's overseas propagandist. USIA had sought free rights to distribute CPB-subsidized programs overseas—a request that was turned down by the same CPB office that planned the Moscow trip.

The disturbance over the trip whipped up so suddenly that one board member who later voted against it, Howard D. Gutin, had already signed up to go to Moscow when others warned him they were making an issue of the trip. He quickly cancelled. Gutin, who runs the Texas public television station that produces the country music series *Austin City Limits* for PBS, wasn't certain he wanted to go anyway. "The only thing I've got to sell is Willie Nelson, and I'm not sure the Soviets want Willie Nelson."

CPB's 10-member board usually meets every other month in its own chamber a few blocks away from the White House, but on the ides of May it convened in San Francisco. The idea was to be close to PBS's annual meeting at the St. Francis Hotel there, but CPB's shoot-out ended up overshadowing the larger convention.

Sonia Landau had asked for a staff report, and when it came up on the agenda she made her point directly: "I am concerned that an institution that operates on federal money is dealing with the Soviet government. . . . I am concerned because I am so mindful of our heat-shield requirement, which is, as you know, that we are not influenced by Congress, we're not influenced by the White House. I'd

WELL-CONNECTED BOARD MEMBERS

POLITICAL CONNECTIONS were behind the White House appointment of many CPB board members in the corporation's 18-year existence. So it's not too surprising that most members of the board's new majority have close ties to the conservatives now on top.

Chairman Sonia Landau served in both Reagan campaigns—last year as head of Women for Reagan/Bush—and once ran for Congress as a Republican. Harry O'Connor had produced and syndicated Ronald Reagan's pre-Presidential radio show. Industrialist William L. Hanley Jr. was head of the 1980 Reagan-Bush campaign in Connecticut. R. Kenneth Towery is a political consultant for conservative candidates and was previously a deputy director of USIA and the top aide to right-wing Texas Senator John Tower. Richard Brookhiser once wrote speeches for Bush and is now an editor of William F. Buckley's *National Review*.

The sixth vote against the Russian

like to also think it means we shouldn't be influenced by the Kremlin." PBS could send a delegation, she said, but CPB, which handles federal funds, should not.

David Stewart, the mild, white-bearded director of CPB's international activities, gave his defense: U.S. businessmen are swarming over Moscow, and the BBC and even the Muppets were doing coproductions with Russian television. "For once," American public television should be one of the first on the scene, he urged.

But the board's Reaganite members were looking far beyond public television to the prime obsession of their kind: the Evil Empire, as the President had called it. Board member Richard Brookhiser wanted to know: Would Russian programs be imported to play on PBS?

If the stations wished, Stewart replied. He would serve only as a facilitator.

Brookhiser didn't want any part of it. "I mean, the Bolshoi is fine. You know, ballet is ballet. Nature programs . . . little things grazing on the tundra. Fine . . . But if we are going to be opening the doors to wonderful Soviet ideas on their own history or something, this is just disastrous." He gave examples of how the Soviets view their history and called them liars. "I certainly don't want to be facilitators for that."

That possibility also jarred Ken Towery, a board member who once served as deputy director of the U.S. Information Agency. He reminded Stewart that USIA is forbidden by law from showing its propaganda domestically. Considering that, he asked, wouldn't it be strange to spend tax dollars to bring back Soviet government productions?

Board members began to get argumentative. "I don't see very much difference," said Sharon Rockefeller, "between delegations which have gone to Beijing twice now, I understand, which is a totally Communist country—"

"We're not negotiating an arms treaty with them, though," Landau interrupted.

Rockefeller was unconvinced. If CPB pulled out of the trip, she said emphatically, "I think that some *fundamental* rights will be trampled on, and I think we are really getting into an area in which we *do not* belong."

The central question became whether CPB—a nonprofit corporation that gets almost all of its money from Congress—can spend money as independently as any broadcast firm or must take cues from the government. In other words, is its money "federal" or "private"? Landau's position was clear: "I don't think I want CPB, when I am the custodian of that federal money, to be sending a CPB party there." It didn't matter to her, she said, that most of the trip's cost would be paid by a foundation grant, not tax money. Public broadcasters could still go to Moscow on their own, she said, but she moved a resolution to withdraw CPB from the trip.

Ed Pfister asked to speak, and began quietly: "I guess, ladies and gentlemen, that in many ways this is probably the single most important issue for me as a public broadcaster that you ever discussed in my time here." As usual, he sounded as if he were patiently lecturing his bosses on the board—a trait that could not have endeared him to them. When Congress puts its appropriation in CPB's hands, the federal dollars become private dollars, he said.

CPB's job is to communicate, he said. "Our job is to go around and above almost all of the efforts that are sometimes made to obstruct communication." Withdrawing from the trip would be "inappropriate," he advised.

Accusations that the trip would be a "junket" emerged, possibly adding one or two more votes to the majority. Lee Hanley, a Republican, said he feared that Congress would regard the Moscow trip, during these budget-conscious times, as wasteful. Harry O'Connor opposed any junkets that would divert funds from programming.

Board members Lillie Herndon and

trip was cast by Howard Gutin, one of two public television station presidents appointed to the board last fall. Gutin runs the sister stations in Austin and San Antonio, KLRU and KLRN, and is a retired Army film and television official. Lloyd Kaiser, who backed the Moscow trip, runs WQED, Pittsburgh.

The remaining three board members, originally appointed by previous Presidents, voted for the Moscow trip. Sharon Percy Rockefeller has sterling political ties of her own, as a leader of the Equal Rights Amendment ratification drive, daughter of an ex-senator from Illinois, and wife of a West Virginia senator. Lillie E. Herndon is a former president of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. Howard A. White is general counsel of ITT World Communications.

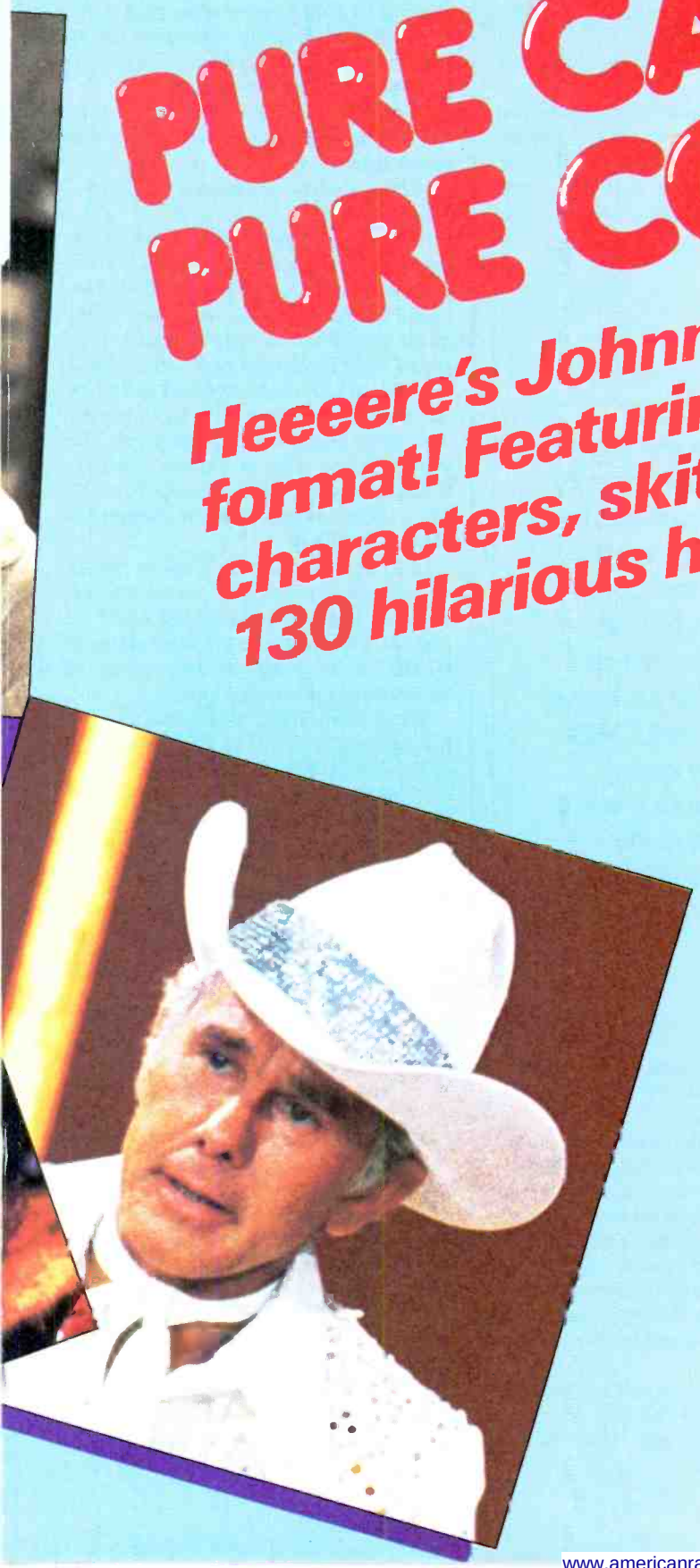
The only political restriction on board appointments is that only 6 of the 10 members can be affiliated with any single party. Six of the present directors are Republicans, Rockefeller and White list themselves as Democrats, and the two station managers are independents. S.B.

RANDY MINTZ/CURRENT NEWSPAPER

The day after quitting as CPB's president, Pfister warned public broadcasters that they couldn't rely on the corporation to protect their independence.

PURE CARSON... PURE COMEDY.

Heeeere's Johnny...in an all new format! Featuring his funniest characters, skits and situations! 130 hilarious half-hours.



"CARSON'S COMEDY CLASSICS"

A St. Cloud Corporation Production distributed by

Columbia Pictures Television
A UNIT OF THE Coca-Cola COMPANY

Lloyd Kaiser joined Rockefeller in defense of the trip. Then the vote was called, the motion passed six to four, and Landau dismissed David Stewart from the table. "We'll be in touch," she said.

IF THIS HAD BEEN just an ordinary board-management dispute, Pfister said later, he wouldn't have resigned the next day.

God knows, there had been enough of those. Pfister often had been either stalwart or stubborn, depending on which board member was asked. While the board was cautiously staying neutral on the issue of commercial advertising on public television in 1982, he vociferously opposed the proposal until the board told him to hush. Both Republicans and Democrats felt he was often unresponsive to his bosses on the board. In January the board argued for four hours in private session over whether to keep Pfister and his vice presidents, says Gutin. "The officers were reappointed, but not without a lot of gnashing of teeth."

The clashes continued, often over minor decisions, but this new dispute was something else again—the board wasn't simply sticking its nose into management details. It was inserting politics. Pfister detected a "current of ideology" running through the May 15 debate—withdrawing from the Moscow trip because of arms negotiations; fearing imported Russian propaganda; worrying about what Congress would think.

"I tried for 12 hours to talk my way out of it," Pfister says. "The answer that I consistently came to was that I could not represent that kind of thinking."

On Thursday, May 16, the day after the board's vote, Pfister announced his resignation and the board accepted it in a quick noontime meeting. The news raced through the PBS convention, where support for his stand was nearly universal.

Pfister was already scheduled to speak to PBS station officials after their Friday luncheon. So when he approached the microphone, they stood and applauded at length, not only for him, but also for the independence of their industry.

It was a fairly typical public broadcasting speech, talking up integrity, the need to be a "civilized voice," and so on. But the words carried extra weight this time. Pfister spoke of broadcasting bringing people together—"even those with whom we may be in disagreement." And he warned the station executives: "With the CPB board's decision this week, more of the obligation to safeguard independence falls squarely on your shoulders."

That was a "cheap shot," Landau later declared to a reporter. As Pfister left the room amid a second standing ovation, she made a thumbs-down gesture for those who were watching her. Within minutes, the two antagonists met at close range outside the ballroom, according to several accounts. As Pfister approached, trailed by a flock of reporters, Landau could be heard exclaiming, "Can you believe that man?"

"Yes, Sonia, I think you should believe it," Pfister replied.

"Oh, Ed Pfister, you're incredible, just incredible," Landau shouted, following him into the convention press room. "You don't know the meaning of the word honest. You don't give a damn about this organization." As reporters took notes, she turned away, hissing, "You're a schmuck."

> Ideology once before intruded into the affairs of public broadcasting —with greater repercussions— when Nixon and his aides conspired to take control of CPB and get liberal programs off the air in the early '70s.

Fortunately for the sake of a complete historical record this exchange took place in San Francisco, where newspapers delight in officials' use of colorful language. *The New York Times* didn't dip into these details, perhaps for reasons of taste and possibly also because its television critic on the scene, John Corry, is married to Landau and was himself hopping mad at Pfister.

"PBS HEAD QUITS IN A MASTERPIECE OF THEATER," headlined the *San Francisco Examiner*, erring more than slightly about who had quit.

PBS AND CPB had shared headlines a dozen years ago, when ideology once before intruded into the affairs of public broadcasting. Nixon aides, some of whom were planning and covering up Watergate during the same period, were plotting to gain control over both CPB and PBS and eliminate what they saw as liberal, anti-Nixon public affairs programming on public television.

In official statements starting in 1971 the Nixon team played on local public broadcasters' fears of a centralized "fourth network" and lauded "the principle of localism."

In private, however, Nixon aides engaged in tough-guy strategizing: They planned to redirect CPB funds from National Educational Television and other major producers of "objectionable programs" and send more funds to the local stations, which they expected would be more conservative and too weak to produce news analysis of consequence. The White House aide in charge, Clay T. Whitehead, estimated in a memo that "local stations' support can be bought for about $30 million."

(At one point Chuck Colson presciently advised other aides to be less explicit in their memos, which could be leaked. The memos were later released by the Carter Administration under the Freedom of Information Act.)

When new Nixon appointments gave his partisans control of CPB's board in 1972, they installed USIA official Henry Loomis as president, and former Republican congressman Thomas B. Curtis as chairman, and announced that CPB would take control over most of PBS's program decision-making. The move was checked in 1973, however, when the stations reorganized PBS as a cooperative under their control. Decentralization had been Nixon's rallying cry, but PBS used it against him. A key strategist for PBS was Ralph B. Rogers, a successful businessman active in the Dallas PBS station, and at his side was a young assistant named Ed Pfister.

Eventually the plotting backfired on Nixon. He had expected Curtis, the new CPB chairman, to be a team player, but Curtis resigned in 1973, citing White House interference. Other board members rebelled, and the White House called off the dogs.

Yet even though Nixon didn't push public affairs off its schedule, public television has never been the same. Some say the experience made it more cautious in its public affairs programming. Certainly the industry took a different shape.

Most decision-making authority over

national program funding has been transferred, piece by piece, from CPB to the stations and their cooperatives. And in the same spirit, the CPB board six years ago took itself out of decisions on individual grants to television producers and gave semi-autonomy to a new Program Fund that distributes the grants. This spring, public radio stations decided to assume nearly full support of National Public Radio in much the same way that the public television stations took over PBS a dozen years before.

The resulting industry is structured nothing like network television, which is streamlined to make money by serving its funders (advertisers). Public broadcasting reshaped itself with a radically different objective: to shield itself from control by its funders. It dispersed its money and power, fashioning a cumbersome structure bristling with checks and balances, layered with heat shields.

"If you stand outside public broadcasting, it's a hodgepodge," says Pfister. "If you stand *inside*, and understand how it has to do its work, it's not a hodgepodge; it's damned near a work of genius."

And when the layers of committees and bureaucrats fail to discourage political meddling, there are still such individuals as Curtis and Pfister who can call attention to a breach by resigning.

Pfister likes the idea of CPB. He believes there should be some kind of intermediary between Congress and the broadcasters who actually make program decisions. But CPB loses its effectiveness, he says, when ideology intrudes. "As soon as that happens, CPB becomes the centerpiece of suspicion and anxiety."

WHEN HE HEARD what happened in San Francisco, John Wicklein, a former deputy director of the CPB Program Fund, admitted to feelings of suspicion and anxiety: "I am afraid this is the start of a campaign to make CPB programs, especially in the area of public affairs, follow the Reagan line."

"To me that's the same kind of chilling pressure tactics the CPB board was using during the Nixon years," says Robert K. Avery, a University of Utah professor who coauthored a history of the Nixon-CPB affair. "When I see this kind of pressure being brought to bear from the top, I cannot imagine CPB being willing to venture far to take creative risks."

That kind of "chilling effect" may very well set in, causing some public broadcasters to watch their steps, anticipating what Sonia Landau thinks appropriate. At the very least, the highly partisan board has shown its potential for mischief. In a number of ways, however, the San Francisco episode, with its farcical moments, was far less serious than Nixon's scheming. No one produced evidence of any conspiracy directed by the White House this time. Programming was not the direct target, and the practical effect was small: Come September, a dozen public broadcasters will go to Moscow anyway—under PBS's sponsorship rather than CPB's.

By that time, the CPB board hopes to have hired a new president. A search committee composed entirely of Reagan appointees has begun to line up candidates. The person they install as president, by his or her priorities, may tell us a lot about whether CPB is again being used as a political instrument. Will Pfister's replacement be strong on communications or on the right kind of politics?

Sonia Landau wants to get on with CPB's future and put Pfister in the past. She resents people who impugn her motives. Richard Brookhiser dismisses charges that the board has been politicized, explaining, "It's the partisan complaints of people who are now in the minority."

He has a point. The Democrats had not been shy about appointing highly political people to the same board: a labor leader and activist attorneys, for example. When Henry Geller was Carter's top communications policymaker, he says, he opposed naming "political animals" to oversee CPB, but Carter did so anyway. Except for Sharon Rockefeller, their terms expired and they weren't reappointed. That's natural; their party lost the White House. That's politics.

But should party politics govern federal support for public broadcasting? Geller thinks not. Some of Carter's appointees were able people, just as some of Reagan's are, but what put them on the board was their politics, Geller contends. Some have not had the substance to resist chances to take partisan advantage. As Geller puts it, the board is and has been a "dumping ground for political favors." The Nixon White House memos reveal how key congressional chairmen could virtually force the White House to appoint favored constituents to the CPB board.

Congress and Lyndon Johnson botched CPB in its original set-up by putting Presidential appointees in charge, according to Geller. Nixon, in his plotting to take control of CPB, only took advantage of that weakness.

A better way of appointing the CPB board was proposed in 1979 by the second Carnegie Commission on public broadcasting. It recommended that a "public telecommunications trust" be created, with its trustees appointed for nonrenewable nine-year terms by the President. But the President would choose names from a slate drawn up by a panel "chaired by the Librarian of Congress, drawn from governmental institutions devoted to the arts, the sciences, the humanities, and the preservation of our heritage," and including two public broadcasters.

As it is, the CPB board is chosen by means of a questionable interaction among White House and congressional aides, whose daily business is politics. Compared to that, the Carnegie Commission's nominating method would be more likely to put nonpolitical persons of substance on the board.

We can hope that fears of CPB's "politicization" are unfounded, as the board majority attempts to reassure us. Yet there is always a next time.

Richard Nixon acknowledged this in 1972, even as his staff connived to get liberal commentary off PBS. As his aide Whitehead recorded in a memo, Nixon told a group of public broadcasters gathered at the White House that "you never know who's going to be sitting in [my] chair next, and that some Presidents might be inclined to use federal support of public broadcasting to their advantage." ■

The Soaps du Jour

What accounts for the enormous popularity of the daytime serials? A political writer immersed himself for weeks in the special world of soaps to unlock the mystery.

BY WALTER KARP

EVEN BY the modest standards of network television, the afternoon soap operas are a pretty artless form of entertainment. This is because soap opera is the only form of drama with no beginning, no middle, and no end. It rolls along like the daily life of the species, without shape, without logic, and without any discernible point. "Soaps" are so artless and humble that when letter-writing fans complain about a character, the scriptwriters obligingly infect him with a fatal blood disease, and when the fans demand to see a good woman married, the writers whistle up a bridegroom. The advice and consent of the parliament of fans plays so large a part in shaping the stories that soaps amount to a folk art, the only one spawned by the electronic age.

Like many other thriving folk arts (which are commonly esteemed only after their demise), soap opera is thoroughly disreputable. When the beautiful and accomplished widow of Anwar Sadat remarked not long ago that one of her favorite diversions in America was watching the afternoon soaps, the *New York Times* thought it was newsworthy. And it *was* newsworthy. Although more than 25 million people can be found watching soap operas on weekday afternoons at 3:00, no distinguished member of that audience ever admits his fellowship with the kind of people who send wedding presents to soap opera brides. Many people would rather admit to stealing nickels from newsstands than confess to a fondness for *All My Children* or any of the 12 other programs that flow like a current of mush through the three major networks from noon to 4 P.M. Even the avowed fans seem half ashamed of their habit. When interviewed by pollsters they commonly say they watch soaps because it gives them something to discuss with their friends, which is more an alibi than a reason.

Soaps are appallingly goofy. That is one cause of their disrepute. Admit to enjoying them and you admit to extracting pleasure from a dramatic world where the prevalent ailment is amnesia, where the most common human activity next to sex is blackmail, and where the question most likely to be posed about murder is how to break the news to the murderer's child ("This will be very difficult for you to understand. Your mother is in jail."). Goofiness, however, is not the only reason for soap opera's bad name. After watch-

Martha Gradisher

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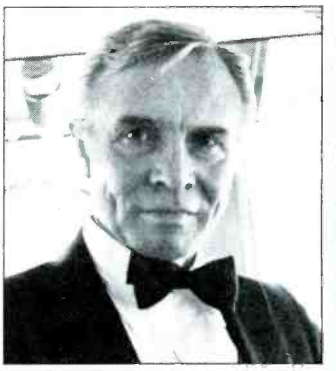
ing for several weeks not long ago I was struck by something else: Soap opera is embarrassingly indiscreet. It seizes upon disreputable cravings and indulges them shamelessly.

This is well illustrated by a quality that strikes the new soap-viewer's eye right away, namely, soap opera's lavish display of remarkably attractive people. Whether the characters are young or old, rich or poor, vicious or virtuous, they are almost invariably a pleasure to look at. Soap opera conducts a kind of democracy of comeliness, where even sidekicks and underlings are handsome. In doing this, soap opera faithfully reflects America's grand passion for physical beauty, which the moviemakers found buried beneath the country's official puritanism many decades ago. It has been a thoroughly disreputable passion ever since, however, for though it was previously enjoyed by ancient Greeks and Renaissance Italians it is commonly condemned by Americans as proof of our culture's immaturity. Since soap opera is as indifferent to "mature values" as an organ-grinder's monkey, soaps indulge the popular delight in carnal beauty with unstinting largesse.

Another shady craving indulged by soap opera is an unappeasable appetite for erotic romance. Roughly twice a day on any given network, for example, the soaps enact the feverish prelude to the first night of love. One afternoon last January, when the snow was falling heavily, three different couples could be seen on CBS, canoodling by firelight and saying such things as "You get all of me," and "I want you," and "I've waited for so long." The next afternoon the firelit couples of the previous day appeared in bright morning light exchanging blissful pillow talk—"There is a certain glow about you"—after which they went to the kitchen for hot mugs of coffee and scrambled eggs. Heavily bracketed by "before" and "after" scenes such as these, love's sweet (out-of-wedlock) consummations have a certain honeymoon quality on the soaps, a tribute, perhaps, to the undeniable fact that life provides us with fewer keener pleasures and none quite so perishable.

A considerably darker passion indulged by the soaps is a notable craving for revenge. Driven by hatred and resentment, a remarkably large number of soap opera characters devote their best energies to wreaking vengeance on Jezebels who broke up their marriages, on rich families who once snubbed them, on unscrupulous business magnates who drove beloved fathers to drink. Sometimes the avengers are evil, but soap opera is not pious: Revenge is too sweet to be enjoyed only by the wicked. Kay Chancellor of *The Young and the Restless*, for example, is a more or less kindly person. To avenge herself against beautiful, sultry Jill Abbott, however, she is prepared to show Jill's wealthy, honorable husband photographs of his wife in bed with his son. This is only right because Jill Abbott is a vicious voluptuary who long ago stole Kay's husband and destroyed his life. Schemes of soap opera vengeance may take so many years to execute that only veteran viewers can remember why, for example, the infinitely slimy Carl Hutchins of *Another World* was so determined to ruin wealthy, honorable Mac Cory, whose wife he abducted the last time I tuned in.

The soaps' revenge motif is personified by slinky Cynthia Preston (above) in All My Children.



Her new husband, Palmer Cortlandt, is wealthy and honorable.

The 13 soap operas shamelessly indulge their constituents' cravings for beauty, romance, emotional scenes, and revenge.

REVENGE, HOWEVER, is also part of the daily routine of soap opera life. On *All My Children*, slinky, tigerish Cynthia Preston, newly married to wealthy, honorable Palmer Cortlandt, encounters an ex-husband at a swanky dress shop. In a furious slanging match Cynthia is bested and promptly vows revenge (and justly so, I thought). "I want the satisfaction of hurting that pig the way he hurt me," she says. No sooner has she completed the first step in her plan of vengeance—the re-seduction of the ex-husband—than she discovers that another avenger is loose in Pine Valley. Wolfish Zach Grayson has secretly photographed the re-seduction scene in order to get revenge on Cynthia, who treats him like dirt. It says much about the secret passions indulged by the soaps that the preferred victims of vengeance tend to be wicked beauties of wealth and position, and the wealthy, honorable gentlemen who stupidly marry them.

What gives soap opera its unique and unmistakable character, however, is its unabashed indulgence of an insatiable craving for emotional scenes. In soap opera the characters are constantly having heart-to-heart talks ("I want you to tell me everything"), constantly baring their souls ("You have no idea what it is like to be alone in the world"), tendering dubious advice ("If you really love someone you stay together no matter what"), declaring their love ("I want to share my life with you"), and unleashing resentment ("Stay out of my life") in furious harangues. What commonly generates these scenes is the unique soap opera art of saponification, or the rendering of action into soapsuds. In Oakdale, home of *As the World Turns*, a tough police detective is assigned night duty helping the FBI crack a bootlegging case. The question is (and only a soap would ask it): How will the detective find time to "make love" to his self-important wife, who works very long hours as an assistant district attorney? On *General Hospital* a murder investigation is stalled for a week in order to exploit more fully the hand-wringing anguish of the woman falsely accused of the crime. "Bobbi is going through hell," her friends keep saying. The real culprit is shown going through hell, too, as the police commissioner of Port Charles closes in on her with wonderful slowness of foot.

On *Days of Our Lives*, the city of Salem is about to be blown to smithereens as the

climax to a monstrous plot. A young man coerced into the plot strives to get his girl friend safely out of town without revealing the secret. His stratagem is a proposal of immediate marriage, whereupon the story marks time for several days—with zero hour approaching—in order to explore the effects of a brusque marriage proposal on a proud spirit.

First, the girl friend refuses to be "rushed" in such a way: "When I get married I want it to be the right time." Next, she complains about her lover's secretiveness: "I feel you have been shutting me out." Then she feels she is being taken too lightly: "I spent a lot of time building up my career," she says, refusing him this time on feminist principles (to which soap opera pays lip service while secretly portraying them as a major barrier to human happiness).

These personal reactions, it is worth noting, are entirely plausible, but only soap opera would make them an important aspect of a major crime. This is because soap opera cares little about crime except as grist for domestic grief. When "the top crime boss" in Genoa City, home of *The Young and the Restless*, flies into a rage that makes his goon squad quake, it is his daughter's desire for an apartment of her own that causes his fury.

The soaps care so little about human action in general that they scarcely bother to make it credible. On *All My Children* a young man leaves his beautiful, susceptible fiancée alone with a known Lothario because, incredibly, he feels "tired" and has to go home. One day on the same show a woman plots to drive a tycoon mad: "Of course I want revenge. Who wouldn't want revenge?" Yet a few days later she accepts his offer to edit a fashion magazine. On *As the World Turns* a handsome young English peer named Lord Cushing settles in Oakdale with his cockney chauffeur for the improbable purpose of opening a "sports center." This, however, is just a ruse. He is really in search of his long-lost mother.

Silly actions of this kind occur constantly on soap operas, although, interestingly enough, they seldom occur in evening television dramas. This is not because evening television is markedly superior to daytime soap opera, but because it is so radically different. On prime time television, action counts for nearly everything and feelings for very little. In soap opera exactly the reverse is true: What matters are the feelings that action arouses. From the point of view of the soaps, ordinary television drama looks rather heartless.

> The programs give daily assurance to their viewers that the only truly unpardonable sin is coldness of heart.

The warmhearted many are the prey of the coldhearted few, such as Reva Lewis and Kyle Sampson (above) of The Guiding Light.

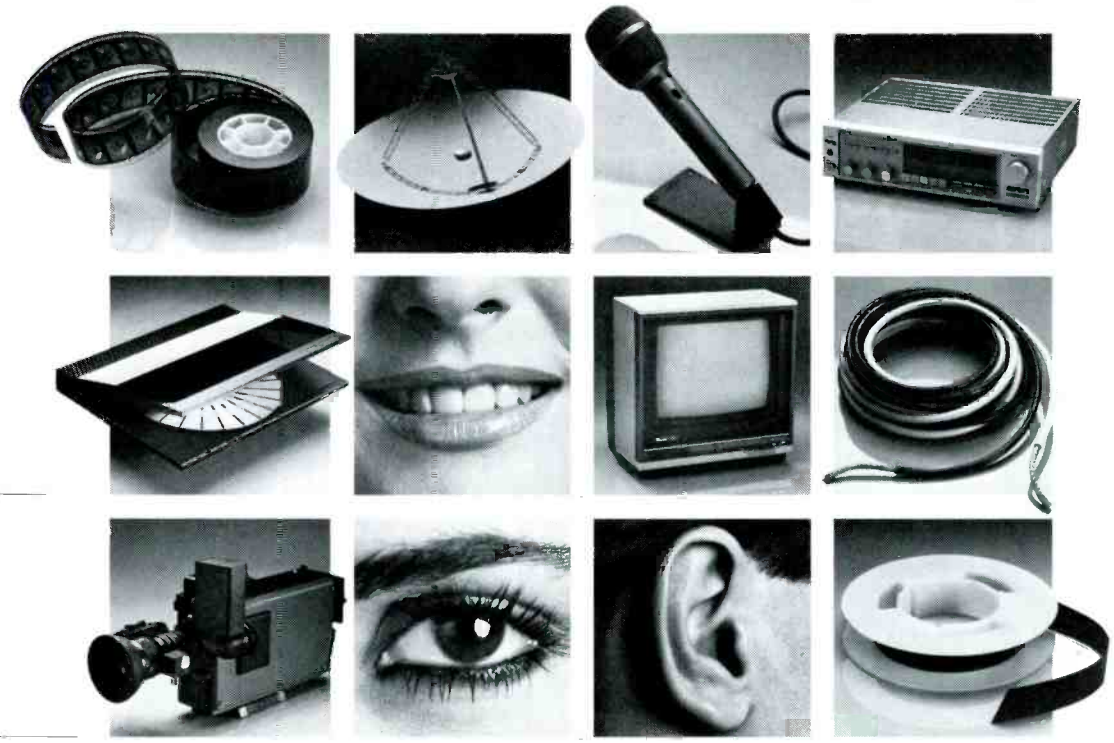
It was just this question of a point of view that had me puzzled as I watched my afternoons wash away in a vast, indulgent tide of soap-opera drivel. For some time I could find nothing in the soaps remotely resembling a coherent viewpoint. To the unaccustomed eye, soap opera seems hardly more than an endless procession of vicarious treats: warm embraces and sweet revenge, happy reunions and dangerous alliances, not to mention the lively companionship abounding in the various swanky restaurants and supper clubs where soap opera society hangs out. Yet the soaps do have a point of view, and since it is both disreputable and indulgent it is perfectly consistent with the genre's general approach to its fans. The point of view derives from the soaps' daily assurance to viewers that the one truly unpardonable sin is coldness of heart.

It is the sin, preeminently, of the truly wicked, who are quite distinct from everybody else on the programs. In soap opera ordinary people often do bad things; what sets apart the truly wicked is that they plot to do those things. Their coldness enables them to be so successful at it. "A man like that can outwit everybody," says a victim of Stafano DiMera, the arch-villain of *Days of Our Lives*. "It's all a game to him. He's like a chess player." Treating life like a game, the wicked are farsighted, resourceful, and unshakably self-assured. They are conspicuously self-controlled in a crisis, like Jill Abbott of *The Young and the Restless*, who can lie with a brazen face to escape the exposure of her depravity. They are single-minded, tireless, and uncommonly resilient. In a word, the coldhearted villains of soap opera possess every quality that leads to success in real life.

The wicked *are* the successful in the real world, more or less thinly disguised. And soap opera makes it clear what relationship is likely to exist between the coldly calculating schemers of the world and ordinary bumbling humanity. It is the relation of oppressor to victim. Ordinary people have too much heart to treat life like a game. On the soaps they take life as it comes. If they are wealthy, honorable gentlemen—stock figures in soap opera—they are likely to be doting cuckolds. If they are women who occupy a humbler social station they get pregnant out of wedlock, throw away promising jobs, fall in love with louts, make the wrong friends, and altogether "get in over their heads." The wicked ferret out the sins of the bumblers and blackmail them into submission. Glib, scheming Kyle Sampson, the evil young oil speculator of *The Guiding Light*, forces a young reformed prostitute to spy on her employer, a good oil man whom Sampson is trying to ruin. Blackmail is so common in soap opera that it almost amounts to an obsession, but it makes its point: The warmhearted many are the natural prey of the coldhearted few, who plan ahead. When the wicked stumble in soap opera it is often because they, too, turn out to have hearts, much to the detriment of their plans.

Coldhearted planners thrive; the warm-hearted stumble from pillar to post. This is not a particularly consoling message to the kind of people who plan ahead. It might even seem to them like a grievously false accusation. After all, if you want to see your newborn baby well-placed in a top-notch law firm, isn't it just common sense to enroll it in a top-notch pre-nursery school? Maybe, but soap opera was not written for middle-class careerists. To a surprising extent it is written against them. In its shapeless, goofy way soap opera champions the point of view of people who find the careful management of ambitious careers more than a little repellent, if not downright incomprehensible. This is because the soaps are popular through and through. On behalf of its parliament of fans soap opera makes a daily plea for the dignity of foolish hearts and feckless lives. Nothing else in the mass media does. Perhaps this explains the enduring appeal of this bizarre electronic folk art. ■

Communication takes many shapes.



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SELLING OFF THE SPECTRUM

by Peter Tannenwald

Unhappy making decisions, the FCC wants to put the airwaves up for auction.

WITH TELEVISION STATIONS selling for as much as $510 million these days, Uncle Sam has cause for pique: He has been giving away the licenses gratis for 50 years. Even though it is those licenses that constitute much of the real value of broadcast stations, Uncle gets no cut from these bonanzas, except for some taxes. Why isn't he in on the bonanza? You'd think he'd want to make a buck on those frequencies yet to be handed out.

Indeed he does. In May the Federal Communications Commission asked Congress to let it auction off new frequency assignments to the highest bidders. The proposal covers many types of licenses, not including those for television or other mass media, but the FCC may be unable to resist the temptation to auction off broadcast licenses as well.

The FCC isn't just grabbing for the money an auction can raise. More importantly, it can't imagine a better way of deciding who should get a chunk of electromagnetic spectrum, or how it should be used.

In its younger days the commission had confidence that, with deliberation and due process, it could figure out what best served the public interest, and hand out licenses accordingly. Today that confidence is gone, and the FCC considers such deliberations presumptuous. Now the commission will be satisfied if it can just perform its original function—preventing destructive interference among spectrum users.

This radical retreat from the FCC's legendary decision-making marathons promises speed and a certain kind of efficiency, but also suggests that spectrum space, like midtown Manhattan real estate, would become even more of a commodity subject to swapping and hoarding, speculating and investing.

Like land, the spectrum is a valuable natural resource in vast but ultimately finite supply. (The frequencies allocated by the government run from 10,000 cycles per second [10 kilohertz] to 300 billion cycles per second [300 gigahertz]. Uses are myriad, such as relaying phone calls by satellite, broadcasting, dispatching taxis, and defrosting a hamburger in a microwave oven.) And ever since people began exploiting the airwaves more than a half century ago, the demand for the

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If the highest bidder will make the best use of frequencies, the thinking goes, why not let him use them as he pleases?

most readily usable frequencies has exceeded the supply. From the start, chaos on the airwaves forced Congress to establish order.

That was the job of the FCC, which developed rule-making modeled on the legislative process to allocate blocks of spectrum for different purposes—categories of use mostly known today by initials such as MMDS, CB, OFS, and DBS. And the commission developed its comparative hearing procedure, modeled on the judicial process, to assign licenses to individual users within each category.

Not everyone was happy with these processes because they took too long and cost too much. Lawyers made out all right, of course, but during the months or years applicants were battling among themselves, no one could accomplish the real objective—getting a station on the air. Moreover, as time went by, savvy lawyers learned the ins and outs of FCC decision-making and began structuring applications strictly to win hearings, not to make good stations. Even when the commission chose what appeared to be the best applicant in a prolonged comparative proceeding, the winner would often sell his station to someone else within a few years, without being held to the promises that got him the license. Observers began questioning whether FCC decisions really made any difference at all in terms of the actual service to the public.

While there were some attempts to alter the process during the Nixon and Carter Administrations, it was not until Ronald Reagan installed Mark Fowler as FCC chairman that anyone really overturned the commission's established ways. Fowler, who devoutly believes that the free and unfettered economic marketplace is the best conceivable decision-making mechanism, promptly turned policy leadership over to economists. One of them, Peter Pitsch, became the revolution's chief philosopher as head of the commission's in-house think tank, the Office of Plans and Policy. And lawyers and engineers had to learn a new language if they wanted the FCC's ear.

Fowler's agenda called for the agency to stop deliberating over decisions, and to issue licenses quickly. The first method that came to mind was the lottery, which was approved by Congress in 1981 and used by the FCC in awarding low-power television and other kinds of licenses. Since then, hundreds of licenses have been awarded on the luck of the draw.

But, alas, lotteries were not ideal because with them the FCC had less reason to ask the many questions previously included on application forms. The new forms were so easy to file that application "mills" cranked out tens of thousands of bids for entry into new communications technologies. There were 5,000 applications to operate cellular telephone systems, 16,000 to operate the new MMDS multichannel "wireless cable" systems, and 20,000 to run low-power television stations. The sheer volume of paper descending on the FCC thwarted the basic aim of issuing licenses speedily.

Moreover, many lottery winners were turning around and immediately selling their freebies the day after they got them—the lotteries were virtually giving away the right to *sell* spectrum space rather than the right to use it.

That gave the FCC another idea. The commission was flooded with applications because it was giving away something for nothing. If it were to sell off the spectrum, putting a price on the frequencies up front, its policymakers realized, only the serious applicants would jump into the game. And the best way to set that price, according to free-market theory, was to hold an auction.

Besides, officials thought, auctions might even relieve the FCC of having to figure out which different users should get chunks of spectrum. After all, if the spectrum space went to the highest bidder, shouldn't he be able to do whatever he wanted with it? And with all that freedom, theory tells us, bidders would bid accordingly. The one with the most economically promising plans would be the high bidder. This, Peter Pitsch would assure us, would be best for society at large. Economics alone would determine who used the spectrum—and for what.

This new twist—the idea of letting pure economics dictate spectrum use—wafted out of the FCC's Office of Plans and Policy (OPP) in 1983. Pitsch's staffers Alex Felker and Kenneth Gordon published a proposal for a "decentralized radio service," a new license category in which the license holder could do anything he liked—transmit TV programs, computer data, or whatever—so long as it didn't interfere technically with other frequency users. Spectrum space would come to resemble land unrestricted by the usual zoning laws that separate one function from another. There would be little impinging on owners' and speculators' money-making possibilities.

But the idea was mostly talk until November 1984, when the commission sat down to carve up the remainder of a reserve pool of frequencies suitable for "land-mobile radio"—two-way radio, cellular telephones, paging signals, and the like.

There had already been some bloodletting on that particular turf in the UHF (ultra-high frequency) band. Most frequencies in the reserve pool were within the 83 channels the commission originally allocated to UHF television in 1952. But the demand for land-mobile radio developed more quickly than UHF television channels did, and 18 years later the commission took channels 70 through 83 away from television and reallocated them for land-mobile radio use. Since then, all but a reserve pool of 41 megahertz (the equivalent of about seven television channels) have been allocated to cellular telephone companies, fire fighters, furnace repairmen, and other land-mobile radio users.

THE COMMISSIONERS didn't relish the prospect of choosing among the many powerful interests wanting a piece of those remaining megahertz of spectrum. The decision began to look more and more like one that should be left to the economic marketplace, so the FCC announced that, within the 41 MHz, it would consider licensing spectrum without restrictions on use. Those who really want it will buy as much as they can afford. Those who need it most will pay the most, presumably, and will finally come out on top.

Meanwhile, the government would collect the auction proceeds and apply them either to reducing the national debt, subsidizing public broadcasting, or helping out wherever Congress chose.

In May, OPP issued a new paper, purporting to show that auctions will meet all

Peter Pitsch, head of the FCC's Office of Plans and Policy, is leading the spectrum revolution for chairman Mark Fowler.

of the commission's objectives: reducing the flood of applications, speeding and cutting the cost of the licensing process, avoiding unwarranted windfalls to license winners, reducing the roles of lawyers and application mills, and—theoretically, at least—making most efficient and profitable use of the frequencies. The commission drafted a bill and Chairman Fowler took it to Congress, where it is now being examined.

Fowler says auctions would be only an experiment. He promises to use them only for assigning new licenses and not for reassigning frequencies already given out. And he says the commission wouldn't use lotteries to assign mass-media channels such as broadcast television and radio, or public safety (fire and police) channels. But it is hard to believe the commission will really be so circumspect.

Note, for instance, that in June of this year the commission struck at the heart of the television business, proposing that any UHF television station operating on channels between 50 and 59 be allowed to do anything it likes with its channels—including abandoning the TV business altogether and using the spectrum for land-mobile radio. The same piece of spectrum that carried one television channel could carry as many as 240 land-mobile radio channels—or perhaps 1,200 of these channels, if new technology is adopted.

The commission won't be deciding these questions for a year or more, but it has already expressed its "tentative belief" that the public interest will be served by giving license-holders enough flexibility to use frequencies according to "locally varying requirements." Those local needs will, of course, be determined by the highest bidder.

But in the end will the commission be pleased with its new decision-making device? There's already reason to believe that auctions could result in decisions contrary to the ones the commission has been making.

The FCC seems to think that the marketplace would allow mobile radio to continue expanding into UHF television territory. Conceivably they could make more money operating hundreds of mobile-radio channels than one UHF television channel, and mobile-radio interests would therefore bid more for the spectrum. But things may not turn out that way.

While mobile-radio users have begged urgently for more frequencies, many have not been willing to spend even the relatively small amounts of money needed for improved equipment to increase twofold or even tenfold the number of conversations possible within frequencies they already have. It's not certain that they would ever pay the millions of dollars required to buy a television station and get its spectrum.

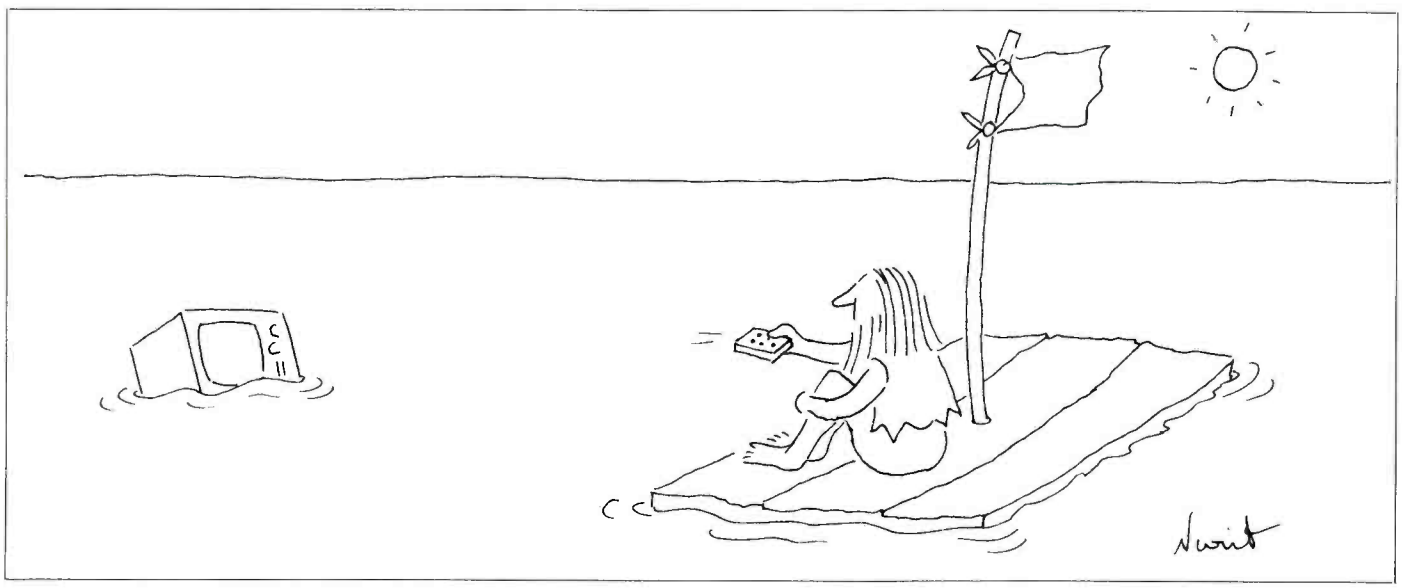
At the same time, the pressure for more video entertainment channels is enormous. Companies have filed tens of thousands of applications for low-power television stations. Video entrepreneurs have struggled mightily to find ways to transmit entertainment on such technically inhospitable frequencies as those alloted to the new "wireless cable" services. Given a chance, television investors could bid stupendous sums for UHF channels, either to use them, to put them aside for the future, or to keep them out of the hands of potential competitors.

So, while the FCC has consistently expanded two-way radio at the expense of television frequencies, the marketplace might very well work against that policy.

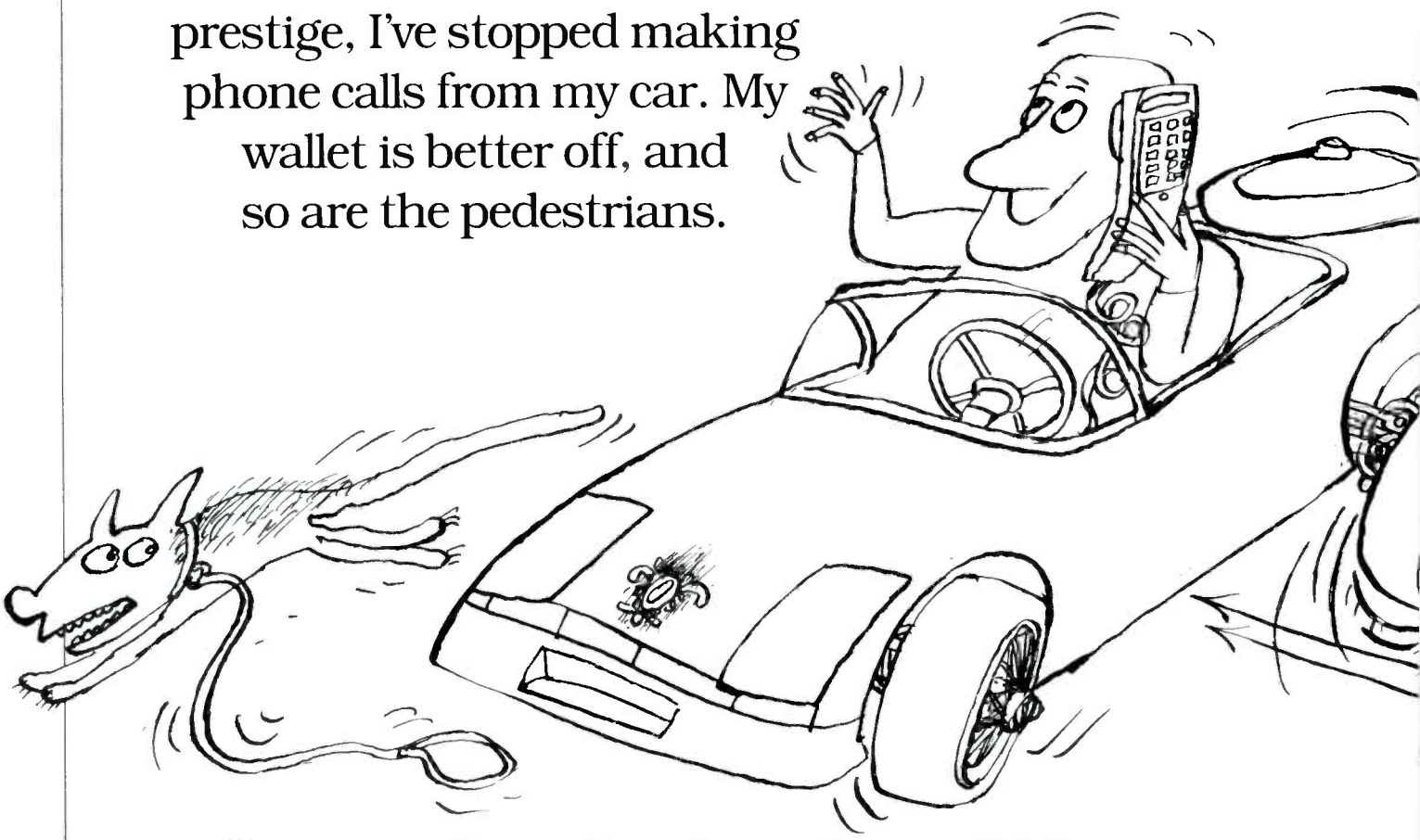
And what if both the FCC and the marketplace favored an expansion of television? Flaws in the workings of the marketplace might not permit it. Mobile-radio operators might be able to take over a broadcast station because they would have to bargain with only one seller. But, in practical terms, a television entrepreneur could never bargain with enough owners of mobile-radio channels to assemble a whole TV channel.

The marketplace, like any decision-making mechanism, has its imperfections—its most severe being its myopia. It can see only the highest bidder, the greatest profits. It cannot recognize the overall public interest or legitimate social and political goals. Only with complex technical rules can it prevent interference among spectrum users. The commission will surely have to continue making some allocation decisions, if not licensing decisions, whether it wants to or not.

And I, for one, am not quite ready to throw away my UHF television antenna—or my lawyer's shingle. ■



At the cost of some prestige, I've stopped making phone calls from my car. My wallet is better off, and so are the pedestrians.



Take My Cellular Phone . .

AFTER EIGHT MONTHS with a cellular telephone in my car, I have yet to: (1) close a million-dollar business deal (or a deal of any size), or (2) save anyone's life by calling an ambulance to the site of a traffic accident.

But I have: (1) impressed people whom I've picked up at the airport, and (2) irritated the receptionist at the office by calling her from traffic jams to find out if I'd gotten any messages. Once, on my way to the supermarket in the evening, I got a call from my wife reminding me to buy butter.

Jonathan Miller is a senior editor at Television Digest.

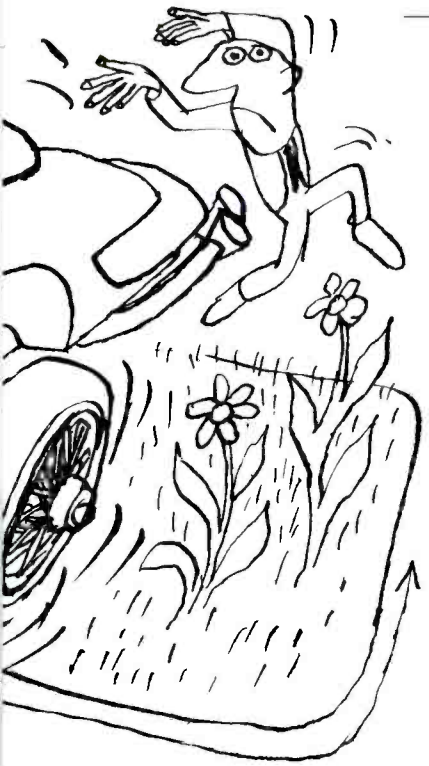
Surely there are fast-track executives who need car phones to continue their transactions in crosstown traffic. But most of us are not in the position to make (or lose) a fortune on the basis of a phone call, whether driving our cars or sitting at our desks. Even for the upper echelon, the phones are often only a dubious convenience. The wife of an executive I know complained that she finds his cellular phone to be a nuisance greater than Sunday football. Her preparation of the evening meal, she says, is not enhanced by his nightly traffic bulletins from the local expressway.

I am as fond of the telephone as the next 20th-century man, but as far as I'm concerned, for the average person, a car telephone is about as indispensable as a sunroof—nice to have but hardly essential.

And the cost of cellular phones seems to validate the notion that the only difference between men and boys is the price of their toys. A bottom-of-the-line model costs about $1,000 just for the hardware—the telephone, the radio transmitter-receiver, and the squiggly antenna that mounts on the car's roof. Add a few hundred for installation and insurance. Add a typical bill for air-time: close to $150 a month (in the Washington area, where I live, calls cost 45 cents to $1 per minute). All of which comes out to about $3,000 for your first year of car phoning. For the same price, you could make 12,000 calls from phone booths.

Naturally, the cellular companies have mounted an aggressively pretentious advertising campaign to persuade us of the virtues of telephoning from cars—and, in particular, the virtues of *people* bright enough to telephone from cars. A cellular service in San Francisco tells its prospects: "Like all new ideas, Cellular One is being first adopted by a small group of people with unusual insight—the 20 percent of society who accomplish 80 per-

by Jonathan Miller



. Please

Jo Teodorescu

cent of the results."

At least a portion of the gadget-loving public is apparently being persuaded. Nearly 150,000 people have installed cellular phones since the fall of 1983, when service began in Chicago, the first of 60 U.S. cities that offer cellular. Forecasts vary, predicting that anywhere from one to seven million Americans will have cellular phones by 1990. San Francisco's Cellular One predicts an impressive future for cellular, proclaiming that within 10 years every third telephone in the country will be wireless, and "the era of the Dick Tracy wrist-watch radio-telephones" will be at hand.

What the ads *don't* tell us is impressive in a different way. The instruction booklet for my cellular phone includes the following warning: "For your own safety, the driver should not use the mobile telephone while the vehicle is in motion. Stop the car in a safe location before answering or placing a call." Yet similar warnings are not included in *any* of the cellular firms' advertising that I have collected. The ads, moreover, often show drivers holding phones to their ears while apparently moving.

The instruction booklet warning was, no doubt, inserted by a product-liability lawyer—and with good reason. Eventually a motorist talking on a cellular phone, perhaps calculating one of those big deals, is going to run someone down. In Washington, where the car phones are often seen, it is evident that the users consider themselves exempt from laws that require them to pay attention to traffic. I have seen pedestrians scatter in terror from the path of a cellular-equipped BMW as its driver—lost in conversation—blithely navigated through a crosswalk.

The supposed answer to the safety problem is the cellular speakerphone. The driver is supposed to wear a throat microphone, or else clip to the dashboard a contraption to allow hands-free conversation. This is all very well for the driver, but not for the person on the other end of the call. Mobile speakerphones are worse than the office variety, subjecting the listener to a background din of tooting horns, revving engines, and, quite possibly, screaming pedestrians.

On another matter, the ads are simply wrong. Ads for San Francisco's Cellular One claim that cellular provides "the same privacy that you presently enjoy with stationary telephones." This is not the case. The fact is that any 13-year-old "scanning" fan, who finds sport in listening to police radio or airport control towers, can easily use certain models of scanning receivers to eavesdrop on cellular.

So insecure are cellular phones that the federal government has warned civil servants to avoid using them for sensitive conversations. Eventually all cellular phones may come with scramblers to prevent listening-in (Bell Atlantic is testing them in Washington this summer), but that will make the phones even more expensive. It will be years before cellular users will have confidence that their calls aren't being picked up by someone with reason to eavesdrop on them—or by someone who is only curious.

Advertising may also have contributed to unrealistic expectations and complaints about cellular's technical quality. In my experience, 9 out of every 10 calls were fairly successful. Occasional calls didn't go through or ended prematurely, but, overall, quality was only a little worse than that of the discount long-distance phone services. Cellular transmission is so fragile that calls sometimes suffer from "green-leaf attenuation" when trees revive in springtime.

Cellular telephones' value will be limited as long as the phones remain anchored in vehicles. New two-pound hand-held models are now available for $3,000 or $4,000, but they are not yet a good solution. Because they depend on small batteries for power, the portables can be used for only about 30 minutes before they need to be recharged. And there's little evidence of imminent dramatic breakthroughs in battery technology to enable such phones to be made much smaller or more efficient.

It would be churlish to write off cellular telephones completely as a gimmick. Some users must genuinely benefit. But the fact remains that the technology is in its infancy. Until the price comes down and phones can be carried in a pocket, purse, or briefcase, the number of users who will genuinely benefit will be very small.

I've disconnected my car phone and, as far as I'm concerned, they can take it away. ■

CABLE COURTS THE IMPULSE BUYER

New pay-per-view networks may give the industry the kind of boost it received from HBO a decade ago.

by Peter Elsworth

AFTER SEVERAL YEARS in the doldrums, its momentum flagging as grand promises fell by the wayside, the cable-television industry believes it has found just what it needs for a resurgence—something new and remarkable to offer subscribers, and something that at the same time will immediately boost revenues. Something called Pay Per View.

PPV, as it's rendered in the professional shorthand, goes the pay-cable networks one better as a device for selling programs to the television consumer. With pay-cable networks such as HBO or Showtime/The Movie Channel, the subscribers' monthly fee buys whatever menu has been prepared by those companies—a kind of pot-luck service. But with PPV the customer pays only for what he specifically wants to see: a movie, play, live concert, or sporting event. Each will have its own price, probably in the range of $2.50 to $10. When it comes to a home box office, this is the real thing.

Pay-for-what-you-see television has been around for some time. Anyone who has traveled this country in the last six or seven years may have seen a version of it in hotel rooms; it has also been a feature of the interactive cable systems that are scattered around the country. But the technology has only recently been refined to make PPV work on a mass scale; and there are now, for the first time, a number of companies seriously working at establishing national pay-per-view services, which may bring forth a whole new type of television network.

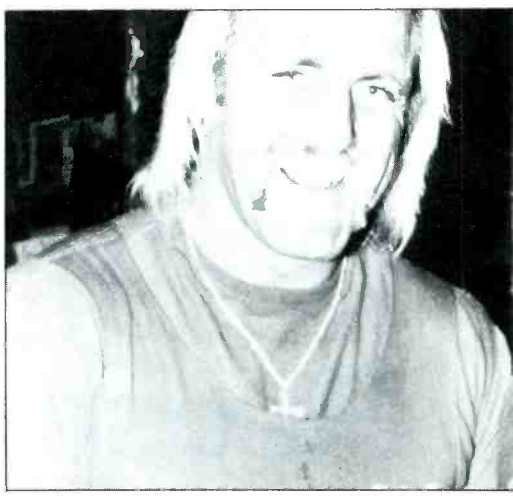
Peter Elsworth writes frequently about business and technology.

Cable operators have high hopes for PPV. They see it as the next big stage in the medium's development and expect it to give cable the kind of rocket thrust HBO provided in 1976. They also see it as their answer to the threat of video-cassette rentals, which is emerging as a consumer's option to pay cable or even cable itself. Such high hopes, and cable's urgent need to counter the video-cassette rental challenge, have smoothed the way for the new pay-per-view services.

The hitch, however, is that PPV requires the installation of a box at the TV set that provides "addressability," allowing the cable operator to transmit the show exclusively to those households that have agreed to pay for it. At present, only some six or seven million of the country's 38.6 million cable homes have addressable units, but the number should expand rapidly when the new PPV networks get going in coming months.

Among the PPV players are two of the large pay-cable services—Showtime and the Playboy Channel. Each will operate its new PPV network separately from its monthly subscription service. Playboy started on a limited basis this summer with a $4-per-night package consisting of 90 minutes of original Playboy programming followed by an adult movie. It's being marketed as "Private Ticket—Let's Spend the Night Together." Playboy's gamble is that the PPV packaging will give it access to communities that have barred its regular pay-cable channel.

Showtime is closer to the orthodox pay-per-view formula in offering programming of more general interest: major



new movies fresh from their theatrical release. Using the model of a movie theater, Showtime will offer a different film every week, running it throughout the day all week long, allowing subscribers to view it at their convenience. It will carry movies as soon as they complete their first-run release in theaters—a good six months before they go to pay cable, and often the same day they're released on video cassette. In past experiments with PPV, a movie was given a single showing and had to capture whatever audience it could right then. The experiments were not successful. But the Showtime approach could deliver a large box office in cable homes, especially with movies that generate favorable word-of-mouth publicity.

"PPV will change the way we feel about television," says Scott Kurnit, vice president in charge of Showtime's pay-per-view operations. "Instead of the checkerboard of choices commonly pre-

sented by the network, Showtime will make it simple—there'll be only one thing to watch, but it'll be something people want to see." Showtime expects to begin its PPV operation in August or September, and will probably charge $4.50 for each of the 52 films it will offer in a year. Subscribers would get only one viewing per "admission fee," of course, but some households will probably want to see some films more than once.

No less eager than cable operators for PPV networks' success are the heads of Hollywood movie studios, for whom the burgeoning video rental market has had the effect of a cold shower. This is because the studios, under a legal precedent called the "first sale" doctrine, receive only a single royalty from the sale of a cassette to the video shop but get no income for the rentals. Conceivably, the same cassette could be rented 200 times, but instead of getting a cut of 200 "paid admissions," the studios get only their

More than 100,000 pay-per-view households paid just under $10 each to see last March's Wrestlemania, *with Hulk Hogan (left) and Mr. T.*

percentage of the original sale. With PPV, the studios now see an opportunity to take the "electronic cassette" straight to the customer and reap a percentage from every showing.

Hollywood's manifest enthusiasm for PPV is what Jeffrey Reiss hopes to harness with his service called The Exchange. Reiss, a founder of Showtime and the Cable Health Network, is setting up a delivery system that would give the studios direct access to cable systems for PPV transmission of their films. His company will lease satellite time and then sublease four-hour blocks of it to film studios to fill with movies as they choose. By allowing only two studios access to the 24-hour channel each week, Reiss hopes to ensure that no more than four different films will be on the channel in any given week. "It's important not to have a lot of clutter in PPV," he says.

Reiss calls his company The Exchange because he expects studios to trade their

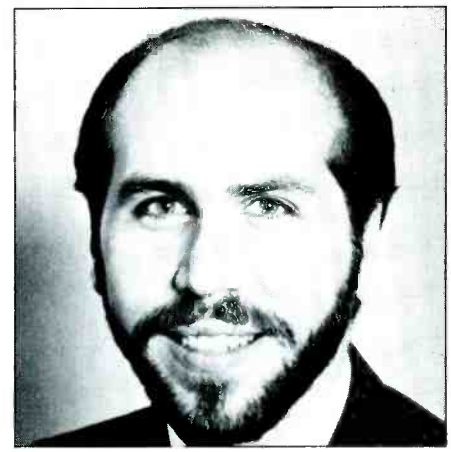
Jeffrey Reiss sees his firm, The Exchange, as a delivery system for movie studios.

contracted time slots (up to 700 hours a year will be available to each studio). The Exchange will maintain an "active trading floor" with an electronic bulletin board where trading will be done on a blind-bidding basis.

Meanwhile, Paramount is expected to initiate a pay-per-view service of its own sometime soon, possibly in partnership with MCA and Time Inc. Although Time has repeatedly expressed the fear that PPV might "cannibalize" pay-cable services, spokeswoman Lyn Herrlinger said HBO is testing PPV on a "very limited" basis with MCA and Paramount.

In addition to those ventures being designed expressly to deliver movies, others are being developed for special events, such as boxing matches and rock concerts. Video Techniques distributed last March's *Wrestlemania*, laden with celebrities including Liberace, Muhammad Ali, Mr. T, and Cyndi Lauper. Jay Merkle, a PPV distribution consultant, says more than 100,000 addressable households paid just under $10 each to see it. Video Techniques has set up four additional *Wrestlemanias* starting in November, and Merkle feels promotion will be the key to their success. "PPV has to get more knowledgeable promotion people," he says.

Choice Channel recently announced that in August it will distribute *Fabian's Good Time Rock 'n' Roll Revival*, a "live" show featuring Fabian Forte, Chubby Checker, and other personalities, and that it expects to charge about $10 per household. It would not predict the possible number of viewers, but estimates a base of three million addressable units. This will be Choice's second offering, its first having been the Hagler-Hearns boxing match last April, which reportedly drew more than 10 percent of the available audience and made a profit for both distributors and cable operators.



Scott Kurnit says that Showtime will make it easy for the viewer by playing one movie a week, continuously.

Before PPV can take off, the issue of profit distribution must be confronted. For the most part, a 50-50 split between distributor and cable operator is envisioned, although Showtime is planning a 40-40 split with a 20 percent cut for itself. However, Merrill Lynch's Falco says it is "preposterous" to expect the movie companies to accept a 50-50 cut, especially when marketing a blockbuster movie. "How can you expect some of the most aggressive profit-maximizing executives of any industry not to squeeze profit margins?" he asks.

Reiss disagrees. The studios won't have the leverage to insist on a larger share of the profits, he believes, since the PPV movie market is expected to be dominated by recent hits, and no single movie, however successful in theaters, will be as important to the cable operators as to the studio that released it.

Showtime's Kurnit sees PPV taking its place, in time, alongside commercial and subscription television. "Ironically, one of the results of PPV will be to bring the family back together again," he says. Instead of each family member disappearing off into a different room to watch his or her favorite show, Kurnit predicts the family will sit down together in its media room to watch the service.

For all the lively interest in pay per view among cable operators and movie studios, no one expects it to be an overnight success. "PPV is currently evolving," says Paul Kagan, publisher of a group of industry newsletters. He likens it to pay cable, which "exploded" in 1978 after a five-year gestation. Kagan estimates that in the next five years there will be 20 million addressable TV households. He says PPV will cater to the spur-of-the moment demand for the latest hits, and believes its success will hinge on the almost unlimited number of paying viewers it can bring to a film at any one time. ■

Japan: THE RITUAL ROOTS OF 'ULTRAMAN'

More than a martial arts genre, the long-running series and its spinoffs make new myths from ancient concerns and exploit the society's profoundly mixed feelings about things foreign.

BY MARK SIEGEL

Just when the situation seems hopeless, when the blimp-sized blowfish with the porcupine quills and elephant feet is closing in on our main reactor . . . Wait! There in the sky! Is it a bird? A plane? *Ultra*man?

Well, he's enormous but kind of skinny, and he's wearing an almond-eyed plastic mask and a red and silver rubberized jumpsuit. Some Americans may remember him from the 36 episodes that were once syndicated in the United States, but after 19 seasons on the air in Japan he has transcended the status of mere television star: He's the prototypical hero of an entire genre of quintessentially Japanese action series.

This good guy has saved society more times than any other superhero flying the earth's airwaves. And he's done it with nary a plot twist nor audience-winning wisecrack. In Ultraman's world the characters and action are straightforward. A monster is threatening Earth—Zazarn, King Joe, Gorgon, or some other recombinant creature from legends and zoos, gorgeous in concept but more like gorged Goodyear in execution. Down come Ultraman's big aluminum-foil feet, and, after a double order of double takes, the two behemoths join in a fight scene as ritualized as a High Mass.

But *Ultraman*, its sequels, and its imitators are much more than martial arts fantasies. To the Japanese they're reassuring rituals deeply rooted in the nation's history, hopes, and fears. The key to *Ultraman* lies in the society's profoundly mixed feelings about things foreign.

For almost 2,000 years the Japanese have been the greatest cultural borrowers in the world. All cultures borrow from others; the Japanese simply do it better and more obviously than anyone else. At the same time, they remain a unique and tradition-oriented society, adapting outside influences to fit their culture and discarding what doesn't seem beneficial.

But in the past century and a half, the Japanese have been shocked into an awareness of their extreme vulnerability to outside forces. Consider: Japan awoke one day in 1853—after two centuries of almost complete isolation under the Tokugawa shoguns—to find Commodore Perry parking about a third of the American Navy in Tokyo Bay. Forced to open their ports and accept a series of colonialist tariffs, Japan began to thrive by adapting Western industrialization to her own culture.

At the same time, the densely populated country, lacking in natural resources, came to rely heavily on trade. Thus, when the West's great depression arrived in the 1930s, Japan believed herself virtually forced into World War II in a hunt for new markets and resources. Even today the Japanese tend to associate their guilt over the war with the notion that military aggression is the wrong way to expand one's economy. In the midst of their stupendous postwar recovery, the Japanese were again reminded of their dependence and vulnerability: The Arab oil embargo of the 1970s temporarily gave them the world's highest inflation rate.

Ultraman borrows from this history a number of elements that have particular resonance for the Japanese. Earth faces inevitable attack by the evil monstrosities that populate various alien worlds. To defend the planet, the benevolent Ultra family comes from a distant nebula and builds a major base in Japan, manned by 300 scientists and monster-fighters as well as a number of elite assistants to Ultraman.

Mark Siegel teaches English and popular culture at the University of Wyoming, and was a visiting professor of language and culture at Osaka University in Japan in 1983 and 1984.

The hero himself gives up his own off-duty life to assume the identity of Iota, a Japanese family man whom he accidentally killed. When crisis comes, Iota changes into the giant in the rubberized jumpsuit to do battle with monsters who can only be defeated by someone possessing similar size and power—and an equally hilarious and cheap costume. Just as the Japanese responded to the oddly dressed barbarians brought in by Commodore Perry, Ultraman adopts the invaders' size and technology.

Ultraman is not quite human or monster or machine, but a union, an android. Likewise, his fighting style is partly traditional Japanese and partly technological hocus-pocus. He doesn't fear the monsters' strength. The Japanese admire strength, and almost always seek to turn it to their advantage through a kind of cultural jujitsu.

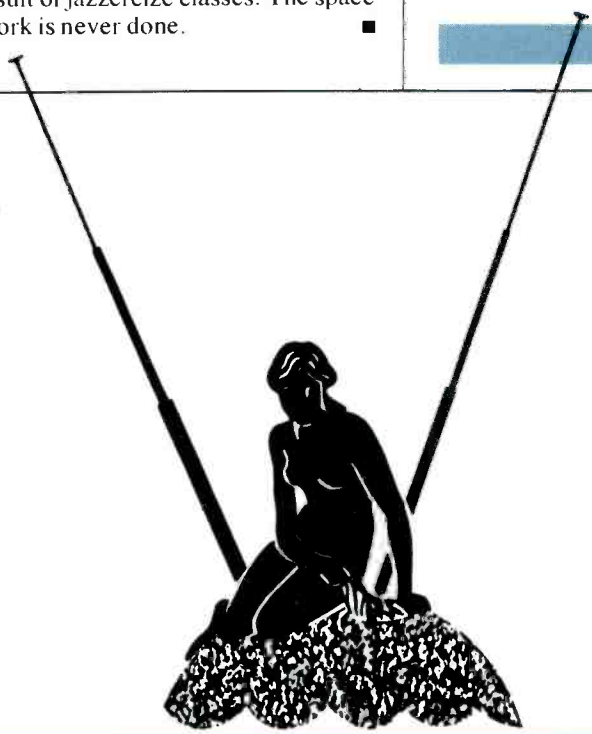
Iota is in many ways typical of the Japanese businessman who comes home from his high-tech work, shrugs off his blue business suit, and sits down on the tatami to a cup of green tea and a plate of sashimi. Society is presented as healthy and stable in *Ultraman* and nearly every one of its dozens of spinoffs. The threat comes from inhuman forces, or forces seen to be of outside origin, such as modern technology. When Ultraman defeats the monster of the week, society is not advanced, improved, or moved in some new direction—it is returned to its original state. Despite enormous progress and change over the last 150 years, the Japanese tend to see their society as continuing in the proud tradition of two millenia, and to see the alien intruders as bizarre and powerful, offering opportunity but threatening disruption and cultural devastation.

When the plot doesn't involve attacks on mankind, it often concerns the alien monsters' never-ending wars of aggression against one another. Several monsters face off, threatening to destroy Japan. The pattern reflects what the Japanese think of their "demilitarized" position in the world: They see themselves as peace-loving pawns of the superpowers' machinations.

Villains in *Ultraman* and its spinoffs are usually trying to weaken, corrupt, and eventually overthrow Japanese society. While the villains sometimes attack the island by causing tidal waves and other traditional Japanese disasters, they just as often attempt to subvert the society's morals. In one favorite plot of *Uchu Keiji Shiaraiban (Space Policeman Shiaraiban)*, the villains hypnotize young brides who then forsake the marriages honorably proposed by their parents in order to unwittingly wed some alien demon. But there is worse in store for the traditional, peace-loving island dwellers, as the monsters brainwash housewives into abandoning their homemaking responsibilities in misguided pursuit of jazzercize classes. The space policeman's work is never done. ■

A team of monster-fighters backs up Ultraman in defending the planet from alien assault.

Scandinavia: SLOW, STEADY, SERIOUS TELEVISION



The Danes and the others stick by the old-fashioned idea that their societies should shape the medium, not the other way around.

BY ALAN WOLFE

Alan Wolfe, who teaches sociology at Queens College in New York, was Fulbright professor of American studies at Copenhagen University in 1984–85.

Scandinavia, so advanced in modern design, sexual liberation, and the welfare state, is, by American standards, hopelessly old-fashioned when it comes to television. Programming seems to be done by committee, emphasizing broad appeal and inoffensiveness. A consensus against any form of star system leads "personalities" to understate themselves to the degree that they seem to merge into the coffee tables around which they're often sitting.

To a foreigner, an evening in front of the screen evokes the old stereotype of the Swede: faithful, authentic, and dull. Documentaries and news programs are filled with talk, as if viewers were capable of concentrating on words for reasonable stretches. The entertainment resembles a middlebrow cross between the Boston Pops and Lawrence Welk. A "serious" concert features Mozart,

After an evening of Danish television, I found myself feeling relaxed instead of hyped-up and vaguely uneasy.

not Bartok, and seldom, even in his own country of Denmark, the great 20th-century master Carl Nielsen (his music is heard on the radio). In an extremely popular detective series, a sleepy old man constantly outwits both the police and the jet-set criminals he inadvertently discovers. Announcers take turns reading the news. Series that are free of excessive violence are the only ones imported—this, of course, rules out most American dramatic shows.

Sunday evenings, Danes watch two soap operas. The first is *Dynasty*, a rare American import. The second, *Matador*, relates, in story-telling form, a history of Danish society over the past 50 years. The American show rushes breathlessly and suspensefully through its weekly quota of crises. But in startling (perhaps intentional) contrast, *Matador* leisurely reveals a subtle, fascinating, and quite informative picture of a real place at a real time. I was surprised to find so much to say in favor of what an American viewer might mistake for dullness.

Life is slow and steady on Scandinavian television. Plots unfold without the contrived crises before commercials and station breaks. Interviewees are allowed to finish their thoughts, for it is considered rude to edit them down. No one talks like Howard Cosell. There are long periods in the day when there simply is no television, as if the whole society were calling for a rest. The 10-minute period before the 7:30 news—very valuable time in America—is filled with music and printed announcements of forthcoming programs. I began to notice all this when I found myself feeling relaxed—instead of hyped-up and vaguely uneasy—after turning the set off.

In Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, people assume that society should shape television, not the other way around. The emphasis on common taste therefore reflects a commitment to treat the airwaves as a resource for all, not as an avenue of profit for some. Both television and radio are off-limits to advertising.

As is the case elsewhere in Europe, a government monopoly oversees broadcasting, and the Scandinavian governments take the responsibility seriously. There are no black-market channels like those found in Italy. Households pay an annual license fee about equal to the cost of a black-and-white television set in the States. Government control of broadcasting goes far beyond regulation; people with an irresistible urge to be entrepreneurs go into other fields.

According to the economic thought prevalent in American government today, the Scandinavian system should be a nightmare of inefficiency and bureaucratic inhibition. That it isn't suggests that life exists outside the "free market."

Scandinavians understand that economic competition isn't the only kind that works. Since air-time is so limited, competition comes about between programs vying to be shown, not between those on many channels vying for ratings. Hence, for all their talkativeness, documentaries are often excellent, probing and analyzing complicated issues.

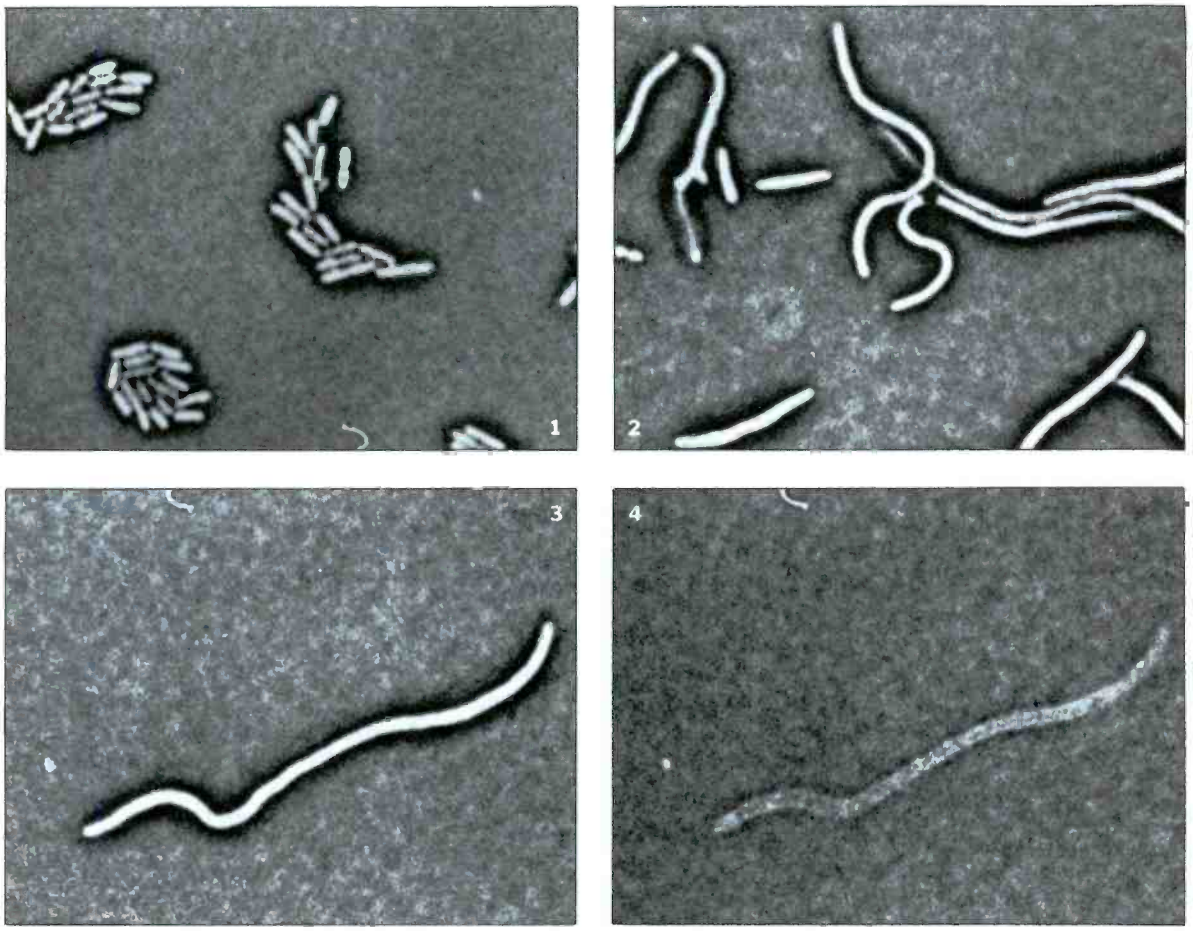
Contrary to the idea that private ownership of media is a prerequisite for freedom of expression, government monopoly broadcasters in these countries regularly provide controversy, diversity, and open access. Scandinavian television can be predictable, but over time it devotes much *less* of its time and resources to routine, standardized programming than American "free market" broadcasters do. The Scandinavian societies—small, with languages of their own—are accustomed to tolerating a world quite different from theirs. Programming is international, and subtitles are deliberately chosen over dubbing since it is not considered unusual here for people to speak a foreign language. I watch the Sandinistas explaining their position directly, without a reporter intervening to "put it in context" for me. I see viewpoints from one end of the political spectrum to the other, not just those within the narrower Democrat-to-Republican range given attention on U.S. television. Controversy is presented with emotion, but not with raised voices and predictable outrage. Just as Scandinavians have basic pension and child-care rights, they have the right to be treated as if they have brains.

None of the three Scandinavian governments could survive if it remade its television in the American style. That is even more remarkable because Denmark and Norway currently have conservative leadership modeled to some degree after Ronald Reagan's. What prevents these governments from "privatizing" broadcasting, as they have done with other industries? It is not just the opposition of the left parties, especially since they are now out of power. More powerful opposition comes from the "value conservatives," as the Norwegians call them—the leaders of the right whose faith in religion or roots in rural tradition lead them to oppose commercial television on the grounds that it would promote atheism and hedonism. Unlike American neo-conservatives who praise tradition while worshipping the profit motive that undermines it, value conservatives have joined with leftist Social Democrats to frustrate efforts by their own coalition partners to bring the "free market" to the air.

Scandinavian television is sure to change, however. No country—ask the East Germans—can regulate airwaves that ignore national boundaries. And so Rupert Murdoch's Sky Channel cable network is transmitted into Norwegian homes—English language, commercials, and all. Since last December, Copenhagen has had a second channel, as Sweden had already; Norway will have a second channel soon. And the Common Market periodically demands that its northernmost member, Denmark, accept commercial television as the price of continued membership.

Yet Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians are not resigned to be passive consumers of whatever technology brings. No one I met here believes the changes that are coming will include an incessant advertising bombardment, goofball plots, packaged frenzy, and shouting announcers. It has been said that every country gets the kind of democracy it deserves. Scandinavia proves the same goes for television. ■

We've declared total war...



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

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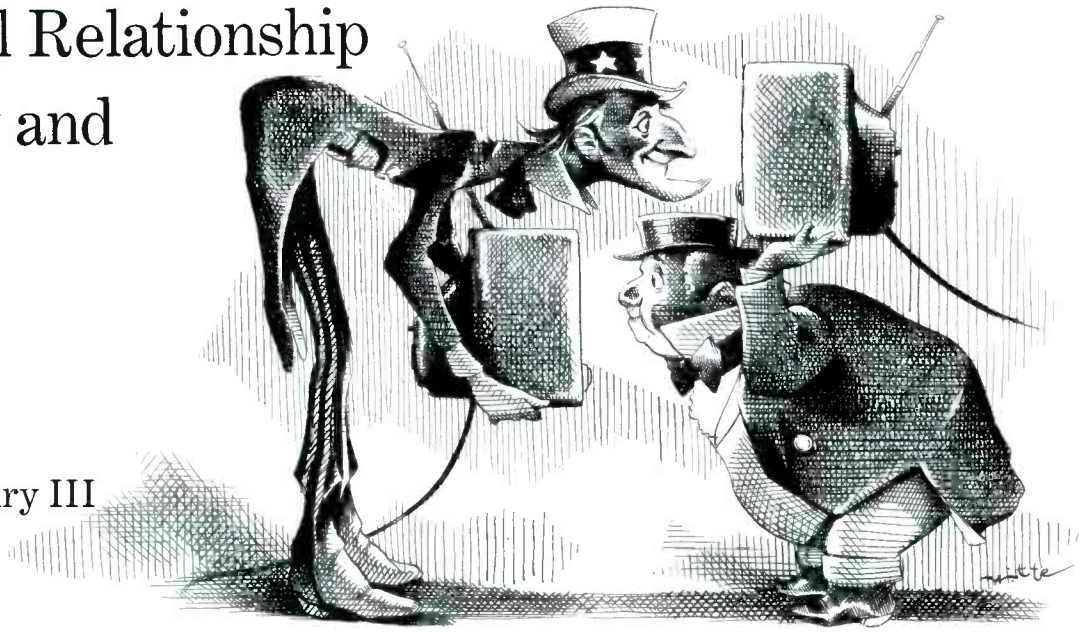
The Special Relationship of the Telly and the Tube



by William A. Henry III

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW A COUNTRY, get to know its television. National character makes itself just as evident on a 21-inch screen as in a towering cathedral. The contentious, didactic French love scholarly programs about movies, incendiary prime-time debates on arcane matters of public policy, and situation comedies in which the humor seems to consist of a man shouting at a hard-boiled egg. The Germans still watch war movies (albeit balancing the grue with ponderous pacifist rhetoric), while the Spanish indulge their unquenchable love of the macabre with dubbed ancient episodes of the Alfred Hitchcock series. The fragmented Belgians receive programs in three tongues; the ideologically and theologically zealous Dutch divide television time among their political parties, some of which are affiliated with churches; and the high-minded Danes make their own television so boring that children passionately study English and German in school to be able to comprehend distant signals and enjoy a little honest entertainment.

The foreign programs that Americans know best, of course, come from the country they know best, Great Britain, the elder but junior partner in what both governments call "the special relationship." In deference to British pride, which far exceeds British consequence on the world stage, Americans have sustained the illusion that the mother country is the font of culture and ideas and civility, while the United States generates the humbler but hardier peasant values of energy, efficiency, and economic drive. The shorthand version of that diplomatic nicety is expressed in terms of television: We send them *Dallas* and *Dynasty* while they send us the Shakespeare series and *The Jewel in the Crown*.

In truth, anyone who has watched the general mix of British television, rather than just the select sample that gets sent over here, knows that their telly can seem just as silly, shrill, and meretricious as our boob tube, and that into the bargain the British shows often look cheap, tatty, and unreal. It was the British, with *Coronation Street*, and not the Americans who pioneered the tawdry prime-time soap opera. The British sustained the mawkish theatrics of *This Is Your Life* for years past the end of the American endurance. Britain's TV may be more prissy about violence (partly because car chases and pileups cost so much money), but it is anything but bluenosed about sex. In the course of a childhood, an American kid may see an estimated 17,000 murders, while a British tyke will undergo a thorough and, on the whole, amoral anatomy lesson.

Like the U.S., Britain is infested with coyly comic commercials, noisy rock videos, prying talkmasters, and, as the last bastion falls, idle chitchat on the once-pristine news. Moreover, there is a paucity of choice: Only four channels operate, and for large parts of the day (and especially night) there is no television at all. Little wonder that Britons have proved even more eager than Americans to get video-cassette players and rent tapes of movies.

> WHILE AMERICAN KIDS ARE TREATED TO VIOLENCE, BRITAIN'S GET AN AMORAL LESSON IN HUMAN ANATOMY.

There is much to love in British television, but it is often lovable in the fashion of a shaggy, slightly unruly dog. The programming is a daffy alternation between the highflown and the ploddingly amateurish, both because of budgets and because the British networks serve as local stations, too. Hence one can see on a national channel in prime time a symposium about abortion, discussed on a subbasement level of alleged discernment that would embarrass even Phil Donahue, and conducted in an all but bare studio among participants who include spotty teenagers, two stiff-necked theologians, and a stern-looking nun. Or one may sit through a documentary about the construction of a grand but architecturally dubious house, Castle Drogo, named for the nonexistent Norman forebear of a foodstuffs magnate. Or see a breathy but hardly breathtaking nature series made by a teenage boy in the West Country. Some of this stuff is sweet, and all of it is earnest.

On the other hand, the lack of pizzazz brings some benefits. Most of Britain's game shows are free of the flashing lights and adrenal screeching required of the genre in Hollywood. My favorite, *Mastermind*, reflects its nation's traditional veneration of eccentrics and obsessives. Although some of a player's score is based on general knowledge (of scholarly matters, not

Michael Witte

William A. Henry III is a critic for Time *magazine. His 1984 campaign book,* Visions of America, *has just been published.*

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trivia), the crucial test is how well he knows his chosen hobbyhorse, which may be as narrowly focused as, for example, the British railway industry during a select few years of the 19th century. And British programmers seem far less preoccupied than Americans with ensuring that everyone who appears on-air has the proper TV face and manner. Contestants on *Mastermind* have often made undertakers look lively; so have some of the interrogators on *Question Time,* which exposes members of Parliament to the probing of ordinary citizens, as opposed to the jargon-talking journalists who are seen pontificating on the Sunday shows here.

Contrary to popular opinion on this side of the water, the British do not have an infallible aesthetic touch in entertainment. True, many American sitcoms, from *All in the Family* and *Sanford and Son* to *Three's Company* and *Too Close for Comfort,* have derived from British prototypes, and some network is bound to copy the cleverest current entry, in which a slightly stuffy father and a slightly raffish son, both rather privileged, decide to share quarters after their respective marriages cease to work. The show offers nothing so depressing as a generation gap, but rather merrily blends elements reminiscent of *Terms of Endearment* with resonances of *The Odd Couple*. Much British comedy, however, is as shrill and confusing as *Laverne & Shirley*. Drama contains too little of real candor and import about family life or social issues, and relies almost as heavily as American counterparts on life-and-death crises, typically embodied in clashes between the familiar lockjawed police detectives and shifty-eyed perpetrators.

> THE EDUCATED ELITE GET JUST AS HOOKED ON *DYNASTY* AND *DALLAS* AS ANY GREENGROCER OR LORRY DRIVER.

Although the British often seem to have perfected the miniseries, they have their flops: *The Borgias* was as brutal, loud, and pointless as any American megatrash—it made *A.D.* look ruminative—and worse, it was absolutely impossible to follow. Moreover, the exquisitely crafted works that we see over here are an exception. In most British TV entertainments, costumes seem to bear the dust of the wardrobe room, and sets appear fragile, often sketchy. Moreover, most shows are shot on video tape, without the time-consuming lighting that is needed to give tape the umbrous, dense visual texture of film. Sometimes film and tape are mixed, one for outdoors and the other for studio shooting; they do not blend well. And for American viewers who are accustomed to seeing video tape used primarily for news, not fiction, entertainment shows on tape send a mixed message to the brain. The more closely the shows resemble the way we are accustomed to witnessing reality, the more reminded we are of their unreality, their made-upness.

The virtues of British television have long depended in significant measure on two financial differences between their system and ours: First, everybody gets paid less, so that productions need not draw huge crowds to show a modest profit; second, most of the channels were chartered to serve the public interest as defined in terms other than mere numerical popularity. The definition of public service has been based on quality and social value, and that standard has been enforced by meaningful government scrutiny. The reason this situation has produced some excellent results is not that good television is inherently less popular; good TV need not be a medicine that people endure only because it betters them. But the creative process that leads to worthwhile television is not generally safe, pat, and predictable; it breaks ground, takes risks, and thus has a greater potential for outright disaster as well as sheer serendipity. The claim of serving some intangible public good shields the competent British TV executive who, by sour luck or the law of averages, produces a flop. Innovation that fails is sternly punished by American networks. The U.S. executive's best defense is not that his project was ennobling, but rather that it followed all the conventional rules and slavishly imitated some current hit.

The austere, Olympian posture of the British networks is becoming a thing of the past, however, as the worst and most greedy-minded TV drives out the best and most uplifting. For this, the British can fairly blame Americans. First, U.S. television provided the model that let corporate tycoons see just how much of a cash cow a cannily run TV network could become. Then American television proved to British corporations the potent selling power of commercials, no matter how many in number, no matter how often they interrupt a show. Third, the gross success of American networks, which have prevailed by appealing to what seemed an ever lower common denominator at a time when public literacy and education were on the rise, demonstrated to British networks that H. L. Mencken was still right: One could not lose money by underestimating the public's taste. Fourth, the sleaziest of American programs took hold of Britons as readily as they did Americans. A couple of years ago the United Kingdom was ruled by *Dallas;* now its honorary nobility are the stars of *Dynasty,* and the educated elite are just as hooked on the predatory machinations as any greengrocer or lorry driver. Thus a process of imitation has been set off: Britain's commercial network, ITV, tries to make programs that can prove as debasingly appealing as the imports from America; the BBC defensively follows suit to maintain its following and thereby protect its political base in Parliament, which sets the TV license fees that underwrite "the Beeb's" programs. Indeed, in Britain, it is the BBC that airs *Dynasty*.

The result of this destructive sequence has been a noticeable coarsening of all British television, accompanied by a clear retreat from rhetoric about public service in favor of an egalitarian approach. British TV executives have by and large begun to adopt the contention of the American networks that popularity should be the one true test of a program's worth, ostensibly because all opinions are equal in the marketplace of ideas, but in fact because maximal popularity normally means maximal income; politicians have proved susceptible to this idea, too, perhaps because aesthetic or intellectual or emotional merit is intangible, while popularity can be semi-scientifically measured. The grand panjandrums of the BBC were laughed at a couple of decades back when they warned that the advent of commercial television would inevitably cheapen and destroy their creation. They were judged old-ladyish and smug. And their doom was inevitable: Labour wanted to give the working man free choice, not the prescriptions of the university toffs; the Tories wanted to promote free enterprise and fast-track capitalism. But the fretful mandarins were right. It is a sad, reductive irony that the residue of their noble era is found chiefly in the extremes: in the endearing if fussy amateurism of the British TV that we don't know and in the meticulous sublimity of the little bit that we do. ■

Cultivating the Cult Market

by Steven D. Stark

Distributors are going after the hard-core collectors with cassette versions of *The Prisoner* and other TV oldies.

HAVING ALREADY TAPPED AND virtually depleted the mother lode of videocassette material—50 years of Hollywood movies—enterprising distributors are turning now to another source: vintage television series, typically those more than 15 years old. The aim is to lure the serious collectors.

The first entire television series to be rereleased on cassette is actually a British production that had an inauspicious run on CBS as a summer replacement for *The Jackie Gleason Show* in 1968 and 1969. Though it made very little impact in its day and its star never became a household word in the U.S., *The Prisoner*, starring Patrick McGoohan, has in the years since built one of the strongest cult followings in television history. The series has a network of fan clubs, its own newsletters, and even its own puzzle.

Now, in an effort to exploit all that enthusiasm, Maljack Productions, a cassette distributor, is marketing all 17 *Prisoner* episodes for $39.95 each. The company is betting that the cassettes will prove irresistible to the kind of viewer who would most want to own a television show: the cultist who collects anything connected with his object of devotion. And not just any cultist: "You want to tap the fantasy-science fiction market," says Alex McNeil, author of *Total Television*, a programming encyclopedia. "Those people are the real collectors."

The Prisoner seems tailor-made for such a market. Created by actor McGoohan and produced by Sir Lew Grade's British commercial broadcasting company, ATV, the series is one of the most cerebral and enigmatic fantasies ever to appear on network television. It concerns a secret agent (at one point identified as "Drake," McGoohan's character on his previous series, *Secret*

Steven D. Stark teaches writing at Harvard Law School and writes on political and cultural topics.

Patrick McGoohan's surreal series, The Prisoner, *is a period piece if ever there was one, but it's also one of television's most enigmatic fantasies. Cassette sales have been averaging 5,000 a month.*

Agent) who resigns from the service, only to wake up one morning in a surreal village on a mysterious island. He is called Number 6 and is questioned repeatedly by Number 2 (played by a variety of actors during the series, including *Rumpole of the Bailey*'s Leo McKern). Number 2 knows almost everything about Number 6, but still wants to know why he quit as an agent. McGoohan, meanwhile, has some pressing questions of his own:

"Where am I?"

"In the village."

"What do you want?"

"Information."

"Whose side are you on?"

"That would be telling," Number 2 says, at which point McGoohan usually screams out something like, "I am not a number! I am a free man!" Admittedly, it's not Shakespearean dialogue, but it's not *My Mother the Car* either. Each episode concerns Number 6's unsuccessful attempts to escape and learn the identity of Number 2's boss—Number 1, of course. Both quests elude him until the final two-part episode.

To be sure, as allegory, the show is heavy-handed; McGoohan obviously has an immoderate passion for Orwell. And—with its secret agents, miniskirts, psychedelic colors, and the "All You Need Is Love" refrain in the last episode—*The Prisoner* is a period piece if ever there was one. Yet it's easy to see now why the series has attracted the kind of fanatic following that could make it a success in the home video market. Like another cult favorite, *Star Trek*, *The Prisoner* blends fantasy and adventure with a hefty dose of symbolism.

Since the program's first episodes were released six months ago, its home video sales have been averaging about 5,000 cassettes a month—not "earthshattering," according to Maljack sales director Jaffer Ali, but enough to keep the company happy. Though simultaneous broadcasts of a series might be expected to undercut cassette sales, Ali claims the show's run on public television in New York City actually boosted sales. "We're talking about hardcore collectors here," he says. "They want the highest-quality copies, not something taped from television."

With *The Prisoner* doing well enough, Maljack has begun selling cassette versions of other shows with potential cult appeal, including McGoohan's *Secret Agent*. The company is also planning to market the 75 long-lost episodes of *The Honeymooners*. Naturally, other distributors are now prospecting the same mine: Paramount has released 20 episodes of *Star Trek* at $14.95 each, and expects all 79 to be in stores by early next year, and Thorn EMI/HBO has released a condensed version of *Upstairs, Downstairs*.

Of course, the tantalizing question for software prospectors is, which other old series would entice the cultists? Such '60s science fiction shows as *Thriller*, hosted by Boris Karloff, or *Way Out*, with Roald Dahl, are possibilities. So is *The Avengers*, the '60s British spy series starring Diana Rigg. McNeil sees a possible market for old rock 'n' roll shows such as *Shindig* or *Hullabaloo* (two episodes of which have already been released), while others think that vintage children's shows such as *Howdy Doody* and *Captain Kangaroo* might sell because children—like cultists—love to watch shows over and over. ■

A Sense of the Sideshow

by Simi Horwitz

THE TEENAGERS GIGGLED at what they saw on the television set in an appliance store. Some began doing accurate imitations of the baseball players on the screen—mentally retarded youngsters competing in what are called "special games." The few adults present tried to hide their own amusement, even as they rebuked the teenagers for lack of compassion.

In both the teenagers and the adults I could sense an almost obscene fascination with abnormality. They seemed titillated by what they saw.

This was surely not the response the show's producers had wanted. They were, I suspect, attempting to "normalize" viewers' reactions to the retarded child by showing, in a matter-of-fact way, that he does just what *regular* kids do. He's one of the gang, not someone to pity.

Yet in making a TV show of these special games, with a view to attracting an audience, they were in fact exploiting abnormality.

Hardly a week goes by without some television program featuring a blind or deaf character, a paraplegic, a person with cerebral palsy or Down's Syndrome.

Most of these disabilities lack any sensational aspect. Fonzie falls in love with a deaf girl; T.J. Hooker has an affair with a blind woman. The viewers feel empathy, perhaps pity, but no distaste or morbid curiosity. They aren't left with a host of unanswered questions and the uneasy sense that the questions should remain unasked.

But when television presents the more severe and congenital abnormalities, many viewers respond with the fascination that once lured crowds to carnival sideshows. And in attempting to bring the disabled into the mainstream, producers often display, exploit, and set them apart.

Consider, for example, an episode of *The Fall Guy* last winter. The episode, "Winners," was the first prime-time program to star a Down's Syndrome youngster, 10-year-old Jason Kingsley. Arriving in Los Angeles for the Special Olympics, the character portrayed by Jason witnesses a murder, is pursued by the killers, and hides in a truck belonging to the series hero, Colt (Lee Majors). Colt discovers the stowaway and asks who he is, but Jason resists, having been told not to talk to strangers. Meanwhile the killers are tracking Jason.

> IN TRYING TO BRING THE DISABLED INTO THE MAINSTREAM, SOME PRODUCERS ACTUALLY EXPLOIT THEM.

Jason is the focus of our attention for nearly the entire hour. And, contrary to what normalization advocates suggest, we never really forget that Jason has Down's Syndrome. It affects the way he looks, talks, and moves. The young actor may be having fun, but in fact he's a display object and doesn't realize that many of the 30 million people watching him are feeling sorrow or revulsion—in either case, feeling superior.

"I know he's different, but I can't quite put my finger on it," Colt says about Jason at one point. He asks a police captain if *he* notices anything different about Jason. The captain shrugs, baffled. "Like what?"

This dramatized lecture is mind-bogglingly implausible—the wishful thinking of old-fashioned liberalism: If society doesn't acknowledge and teach differences among people, the differences won't be noticed.

The patronizing tone continues as Colt learns about Down's Syndrome from his sidekick, Howie. "You mean Jason will never be like other kids?" Colt asks, taking the role of a straight man in a didactic vaudeville routine. "It's not the end of the world," Howie says. "He can do *lots* of things." What saves the scene from self-parody are the naturalistic performances and the underlying pathos.

But there is no saving a later scene when Jason corrects Colt's spelling. Colt's stunningly tacky response: "I wish *I* had an extra chromosome!"

Good intentions also go sour in *The Facts of Life* episodes featuring Gerri Jewel, a young stand-up comedienne with cerebral palsy. She and her writers capitalize on her disability with self-deprecating one-liners. "I'm not drunk . . . I

St. Elsewhere *featured a rare, sensitive portrayal of severe physical abnormality in two episodes about a woman (seated) who has surgery to remove the facial growths of neurofibromatosis, the Elephant Man disease.*

Simi Horwitz is a writer based in New York City.

have cerebral palsy," she says in her comedy act. "When I drink, I walk straight."

Jewel reassures us by saying, in effect, "It's OK to laugh at me. See, I'm laughing, too." She intends to show a refreshingly open, healthy attitude, but I fear her jokes don't change attitudes. They only confirm the viewers' sense of normalcy and superiority. Displays of abnormality often gratify their viewers in that way, says writer and critic Leslie Fiedler in his book, *Freaks*: " 'We are the freaks,' the human oddities are supposed to reassure us, 'not you. Not you.' "

On *The Facts of Life*, Jewel lets viewers write her script; she plays to their preconceptions and the cruelty she knows is out there. As sociologist Erving Goffman has observed, the outsider often assumes the role assigned by the majority. An undercurrent of unacknowledged hostility emerges in Jewel's act. She launches a preemptive strike, telling the jokes to make sure the audience doesn't.

Jewel doesn't always play the cutup who calls leering attention to her illness. In a questionable if not downright dishonest *Facts of Life* episode, Jewel meets an attractive man and within two days is having an affair. Perhaps the relationship could have developed believably over time, but, in this instance, love at first sight strains credibility. The producers are refusing to acknowledge Jewel's differentness. As a result, the man's instantaneous attraction to her raises uncomfortable questions. Is he trying to earn moral merit badges? Is his romantic interest kinky in some way? The questions are unacceptable, but that doesn't make them go away; we can only wish they would.

Professor Phyllis Rubenfeld believes that more television exposure of handicapped people is the answer.

"If audiences saw persons with disabilities in a wide variety of roles and relationships, these questions would vanish," insists Phyllis Rubenfeld, president of the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities and professor of special education at Hunter College. "With repeated exposure, that sense of discomfort will fade as attitudes are reshaped. Look at what's happened to blacks on TV. In the beginning, the black characters all talked about being black and about race relations. Now blacks on TV are commonplace, so nobody has to talk about it. And the audience doesn't think about it either."

Perhaps. But it will take more than a few years of television exposure to overcome viewers' profound reactions to the severely disabled.

"In the same way that Diahann Carroll on *Dynasty* plays a wealthy villainess who happens to be black, I'd like to see a person with a disability play a villain or hero who incidentally has a disability," says Tari Sue Hartman of California's Foundation on Employment and Disability. "But that's down the road, and it can only happen with repeated TV exposure."

The Reverend Harold Wilke, a New York activist for the disabled, admits it will be hard to overcome the deeply felt pity and distaste in the hearts of beholders. But he believes television is nevertheless moving in the right direction.

Two related episodes of *St. Elsewhere* are notable. Both concern a girl with neurofibromatosis, the Elephant Man disease. What makes them significant is the regular characters' honest response to the disfigured girl. When the hospital wag jokes about her ugliness, the other doctors put him down quickly, yet when they first meet her their expressions reveal fascination, revulsion—and shame at their own feelings.

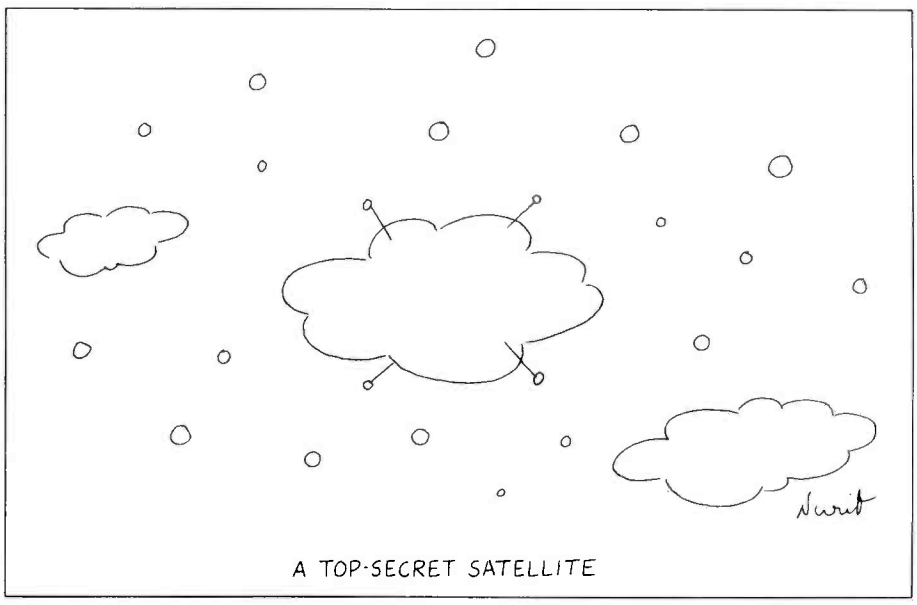
Unlike the *Fall Guy* and *Facts of Life* episodes, the hospital series has no sense of the sideshow. The doctors acknowledge the disabled person's differentness even as they hate themselves for feeling that way. Their reactions reflect the viewers' own, however inappropriate. The horribly disfigured patient becomes more real and ultimately more human.

At the moment such programs are rare. Advocates for the disabled know that many programs will treat the topic with insensitivity, but most would prefer disabled people to be visible on television, even if carelessly portrayed, rather than invisible. Still, the activists contend, even the most exploitative programs may succeed in sending a positive message to part of the audience: the disabled and their families.

Emily Kingsley, the real-life mother of the boy who appeared on *The Fall Guy*, remembers a phone call she received immediately following the broadcast:

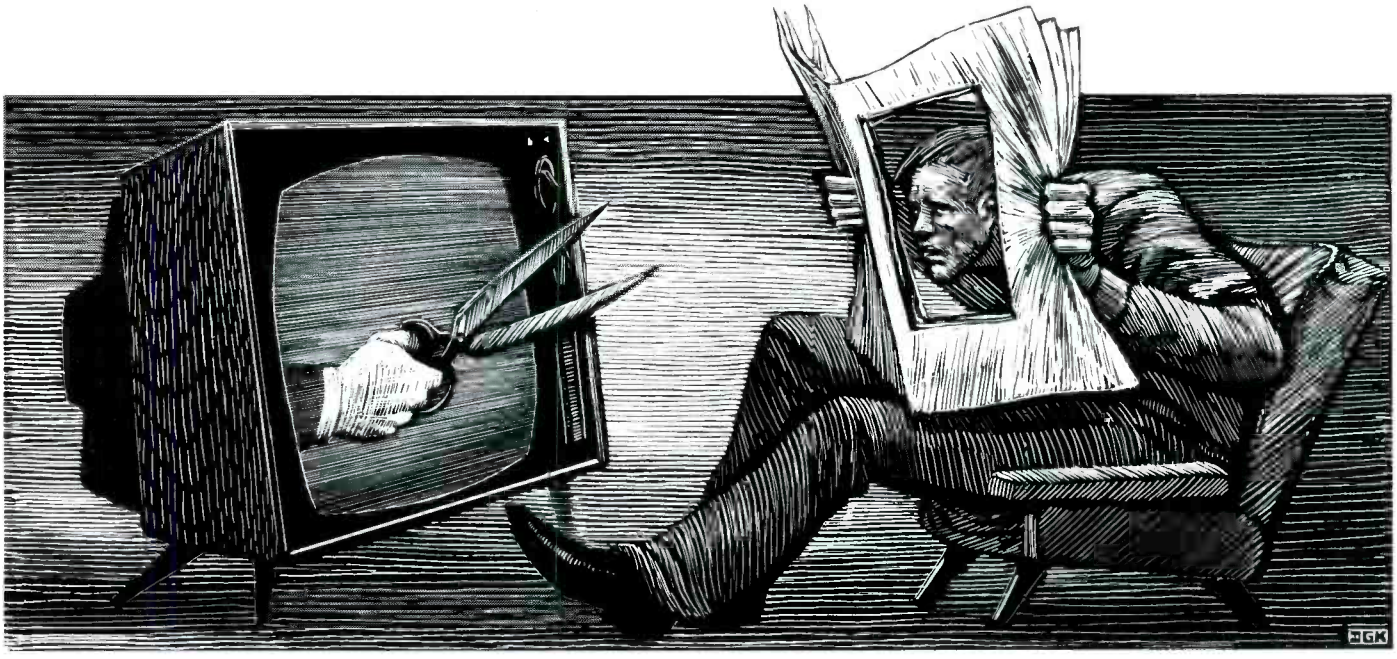
"A woman in Indiana had just given birth to a Down's Syndrome baby. Her friends and relatives were horrified and they were insisting she institutionalize the child at once. She was still in the hospital when she inadvertently flipped onto *The Fall Guy* and saw Jason. She told me it changed her life.

"Suddenly, having a Down's Syndrome youngster did not seem all that tragic or overwhelming, and she decided to keep the baby. If that was the only positive response in the country, that would have been a good enough reason to air it." ■



'Inappropriate for Broadcast'

To ABC, its own views are fit for print—but not for air.



The author, Mobil Corporation's vice president, public affairs, has tried for years to persuade the networks to carry advocacy advertising, including Mobil's. CBS and NBC have refused, and ABC accepts it only late at night. Here he comments on the debut of ABC's own advocacy commercials.

by Herb Schmertz

HAVE YOU SEEN the new ABC corporate-image ads in the newspapers? The first one was headlined, "American Television: Let's Talk About It." Let's do that.

Would you believe ABC says those ads, which they placed in newspapers, are not fit for prime-time television? Here's how I found out.

In its first newspaper ad, ABC told us: "We plan to occupy this space from time to time to talk about" various aspects of television, including "the freedoms and responsibilities associated with it." When I read this in March, I thought it highly ironic that a network would start its discussion of television in print instead of on the tube. But I knew that ABC had also planned television spots as part of its multimedia soul-bearing campaign. I assumed that ABC would eliminate my cynical doubts with its opening TV editorial. But after watching *that* bit of fluff, I realized the stark truth set forth in the headline of a subsequent print ad: "American Television—We Put It in Writing."

And—as I was soon to learn—*only* in writing.

To observe what happens as ABC's campaign goes from print to television is to be in Cinderella's shoes at midnight as the coach collapses to a pumpkin: Any fiber evident in the printed argument becomes a bland mush.

That first TV editorial features Jim Duffy, recently named president of communications for the ABC Broadcast Group, telling us that trying to please viewers "takes some doing in a country as large and diverse as ours." People of kind disposition will hear this as a humble apology—but there's another sense in which the words are a challenge, an attempt to put unhappy viewers off-balance, as though they must be out of step with all those who dote on television as it is.

Duffy then asks us to let them know if we don't like what we see. The options that follow are: "Write to us . . . or change the channel." Here again we get the sense that those not kindly inclined toward television should pack their bags and head for faraway places. And the ad closes with a sign-off used in the electronic but not the print ads: "It's a powerful combination: American television and you."

What is ABC attempting to sell us here?

I, the viewer, am in "combination" with American television? And what's more, in "*powerful* combination"? Surely there is no one outside a network who doesn't radically disagree with that idea.

American commercial television doesn't represent an amalgam, a melange, or any kind of combination of what we want with

David G. Klein

what the networks want: It simply represents the networks' decision about what they choose to air. ABC's implication that there is some sort of democratic combination in the television business is ridiculous. The idea that viewers somehow share in network power is even more so.

A subsequent ad in the ABC print series explains that public television is different because it offers "excellent programming that simply would not work within the economic logic of the commercial system." In other words, the "powerful combination"—we, the viewers, plus the network—is governed entirely at the network's end, by "economic logic." At *our* end, we can . . . well, write to them or change the channel.

In the next of ABC's televised messages I saw, Jim Duffy was telling the world: "Among our responsibilities is heightening an awareness of important issues. Together we can open some eyes." While I listened to all this, I glanced at the first print ad, still sitting on my desk. ABC wants to "generate discussion," it said. "To the extent that we hear from you, we want to discuss subjects that are of concern and interest to you."

I had been trying for many years to get ABC-TV to discuss subjects—both in paid advocacy ads on television and in news programs—that were of concern and interest to Mobil and me. This new campaign obviously signaled a highly visible, and perhaps therefore believable, change of heart. I fired off a letter to the ABC vice president for standards and practices, Alan Wurtzel, in which I welcomed ABC to the marketplace of ideas.

But I was puzzled. ABC had so far accepted advocacy advertising only for broadcast between midnight and 12:30 A.M. weekdays. Would the network, I asked him, permit even their own print advertising to be broadcast—or would it be "too controversial for prime time, and suitable only for late-night viewing?" I wondered in my letter whether we were being presented with "a TV network taking to print with an ad campaign unacceptable on its own airwaves."

That turned out to be precisely the case. Mr. Wurtzel replied to me in May that "the print copy will deal with various issues, some of which could be considered controversial and of public importance and, therefore, inappropriate for broadcast by ABC."

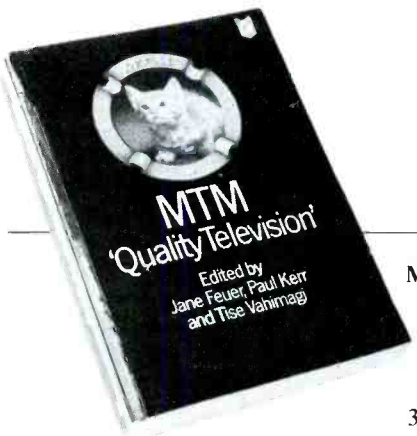
Can ABC have it both ways? Is it ethical to run print ads headlined, "Probing the Crucial Issues: The Role of Network Television," while at the same time one of its officers is writing letters such as Alan Wurtzel's? Is it intellectually coherent to run print ads quoting ABC correspondent Sam Donaldson that "truth is truth, and it's not something that can be measured in an ideological framework," while the vice president for standards is writing a letter that says, "We will not permit announcements which discuss controversial issues of public importance to be presented on our air except at the stated time for advocacy advertising"?

That sort of double standard on the part of ABC is neither ethical nor intellectually coherent. Their print ads seem to cherish and welcome the free discussion of ideas. Their television ads seem to ask for dialogue, an exchange between partners, and to imply "combination" in pursuit of common goals. (And that is to treat the television ads with the utmost charity; when one compares them with the network's actual behavior, they reduce to hot air.) Perhaps both series of ads emanate from some section of ABC that truly wants to discuss ideas. But can that department be unaware of the ABC people upstairs who stand opposed to all such discussion *except on their own terms*?

There cannot be a true dialogue when one party sets the terms, controls the venue, even picks all the *words*. ABC and the other two major networks seem to have great difficulty in comprehending that stark and simple problem. Their message to the viewing public is inherent in that cryptic possessive in Alan Wurtzel's letter: "on *our* air."

It's their air, and they'll do whatever they please with it. If you don't like it, change the channel. But whatever you do, don't make the same mistake I did and take ABC's new ad campaign seriously. ■

The American Studio the Brits Admire



MTM: Quality Television
Edited by Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi
British Film Institute,
308 pages

FIFTEEN YEARS after the MTM studio's kitten meowed its first tagline on American television, that playful logo remains a symbol of a certain style, a classy cleverness. And it is this quality, as well as the international stature of MTM Enterprises, that has inspired an enthusiastic and exhaustive study by British media scholars.

MTM: Quality Television, published by the British Film Institute, examines the ways and works of the independent production house that Grant Tinker created in 1970—and named with the initials of his then-wife—to produce the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

The program's success led to a whirl of spinoffs—*Rhoda, Phyllis, The Betty White Show*—and other comedies, including *The Bob Newhart Show* and *WKRP in Cincinnati*. At other studios, MTM alumni created a new repertory of work: *Taxi, Cheers, Buffalo Bill*. MTM personnel stretched and sharpened the traditional 30-minute format into hour-long series more intent on drama than on laughs: *Lou Grant, The White Shadow, Hill Street Blues, St. Elsewhere*. They stretched and expanded their own ranks, and survived the departure of their company founder, who left in 1981 to become chief executive of NBC.

How did they do it? The editors of this dense study are hot to figure that out. To do so, they explain how networks work and how production companies produce. They define Nielsen ratings and syndication rights, pilots and profits. They explain Fred Silverman. They analyze MTM's public image, and contrast Norman Lear's early sitcoms (vehicles for social commentary) with MTM's sitcoms (vehicles for character comedy). In the characters of Moore's Mary Richards and her Minneapolis newsroom cronies, they find a complexity much "rounder" than the flat, stereotypical limitations of *I Love Lucy*, or even of Lear's politically astute *Maude*. "It is in its conception of character that MTM's central contribution to the sitcom form is said to have been made," they observe, concluding that in MTM's hands " 'character comedy' became synonymous with 'quality comedy.' "

Often the writing, like the growing television scholarship in American universities, takes on the unrelenting dustiness of doctoral candidates who spend too many hours compiling footnotes: "Within the MTM style, intertextual and self-reflexive references have both constructive and deconstructive purposes," writes Jane Feuer when she really wants to say that the plots are damned smart. "MTM's use of what Todd Gitlin calls 'recombination' places its style within the norms of textural construction in American television," she observes. Simultaneous translation: There's nothing new under the sitcom sun after all.

The authors cast Grant Tinker as hero of the MTM hour. At one point they compare his "discourse to an assumed audience" with that of Jean-Luc Godard—a new *frisson*, surely, in structural analysis. (Tinker and Claude Lelouche, I can believe; Tinker and Godard, nix.) Working in Tinker's company, according to all persons interviewed, was paradise. "Shangri-la!" states alumnus James Brooks. "An Algonquin round table!" agrees fellow grad Jay Tarses. You get the picture. Tinker's real talent was in letting the creative types create, serving as a defender, a buffer between the producers and the network execs. (Fred Silverman, let the record show, was the NBC exec who thought *Hill Street Blues* was needed—and who saved it from an early demise.)

With a thoroughness just this side of lunacy, these intrepid English investigators have watched every episode, interviewed scores of participants, gawked at this strange American production house (a tad dumbfounded that Americans should recognize its quality, too). They tell us that the Mary Richards character was originally going to be a divorced woman working as a stringer for a newspaper. That Lou Grant was the longest-running fictional character in prime time. That *Hill Street Blues* was first dubbed *Hill Street Station* in the studio, then (by Silverman) *The Blue Zoo*. An extensive appendix lists every MTM production through 1984, including pilots, specials, movies, mini-series, and a feature film. Footnotes at the end of each chapter read like pop culture hieroglyphs.

The publications division of the British Film Institute is relatively new, and much more likely to turn out books about new technology, science films, or the creation of Britain's new Channel Four. This is their first study of American television and they did it—Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi—because they love Mary, Rhoda, Lou, Dr. Ehrlich, and Captain Frank Furillo. A study it surely is—earnest and unblinking, for an audience that will doubtless be dominated by scholars and students. With a shared appreciation that vaults the Atlantic, one forgives them their goggly fascination and their galumphing prose. LISA SCHWARZBAUM

Lisa Schwarzbaum is senior editor of public television's Dial *magazine.*

IDEAS & OBSERVATIONS

THE APES OF WRATH

From an article by critic John Naughton about British television's coverage of the riot that followed a soccer match in Belgium last spring, at which 38 people were killed. It appeared in the June 6 issue of The Listener, *the magazine of the British Broadcasting Corporation.*

Among the endless TV analyses and postmortems and action replays of the massacre of the innocents in Block Z, two thoughts remain obstinately unspoken. One was how the Brussels nightmare exposed the aphonic incompetence of the team of television presenters charged with covering the match. The moment events diverged from the norm and the smooth routine of half-witted discussions with guest celebrities was disrupted . . . [the announcers became] speechless in the face of tragedy, afraid to give real vent to whatever feelings they were experiencing, alternately flitting from pretenses of normality to half-assed discussions about what should be done about football hooligans. Nothing in their training or contracts of employment ever prepared them for *this*—an event involving real tragedy rather than the synthetic drama of *soi-disant* sporting occasions.

It was significant that televised reruns of the disaster increasingly came to have the BBC radio commentator's voice dubbed over them. Nothing could have illustrated more graphically the differences between the two media. For although human speech is heard on television, its impact is emasculated by the power of the images it accompanies. Provided the pictures are good, an orangutan could do the commentary and, in the case of sport, frequently does. Radio commentary, in contrast, requires an articulate and imaginative commentator, someone who is capable of encapsulating and expressing in words a constant stream of dramatic images.

But what nobody mentioned was the awful thought that maybe the televising of football has something to do with the deteriorating manners of football crowds. Could it be, for example, that increasing television coverage of the sport is leading more of its law-abiding supporters to stay at home and watch it on the box, leaving the terraces to the yobs? Or could it be that the more commentators convert each major fixture into a synthetic telly event, complete with interviews with managers, short profiles of the players' grandmothers, interviews with Placido Domingo (I kid you not—this year's Cup Final)—the more, in other words, that they smother it with floss—the more some of its spectators resolve to reintroduce some real drama into the situation, even if it does mean kicking a few heads? Or, in the case of some Liverpool fans, a few corpses. □

THE MEDIA HELD HOSTAGE

From a postmortem on the TWA hostage episode, which aired July 1 on WNEW-TV in New York City. Quoted here is Lou Adler, president of the Radio-TV News Directors Association.

Every time the terrorists decided that they wanted to make a point, they used us. Because they knew we were going to be there, the cameras were going to be on, the tape recorders were going to be on, and we were going to be live. And they were speaking to the world.

We can't allow them that freedom. We have to maintain the right and reserve the right to make the editorial judgments ourselves and not leave those editorial judgments to the terrorists. If you go live you have no control over what is said and what is broadcast. □

THE PRESS OF BUSINESS

Comments by Richard Salant, former president of CBS News, given May 16 at a Television Academy of Arts and Sciences-sponsored symposium on the Westmoreland-CBS case.

I think this hostility toward the press that juries are anxious to vent is caused by our arrogance. We won't let anybody question us. We close our ears and our doors and don't give anyone a hearing. I heard a great story about the editor of a national newsmagazine. The publication ran a story that Portugal's dictator Salazar had died. Soon afterward, the ambassador from Portugal called and said Salazar was still alive. When the editor got the news, he said, "We stand by our story!"

Well, that's the trouble. There's an automatic reaction: We stand by our story. We don't bother to look into whether the complaint is reasonable, whether there's any validity, whether there's anything we ought to do. . . .

There's one more very important aspect to this. The nature of journalism is rapidly changing. The First Amendment selected it as something special, but the nature of the business is changing so much that the Constitution is colliding with the facts. And the result is that the press is perceived as just another big business out for everything it can get, because it's abandoned its journalistic principles. The test for editors too often is: Is this interesting? Is this going to bring the people under the tent? Is it going to get ratings? We were given the First Amendment because it was assumed that what we would be doing is informing the people. The priority has to be not what is interesting, but what is needed to make democracy work. And that's the game we are losing. . . . What's special about the press is that it's the only business in this country that has constitutional protection, and we can't keep it if we go on behaving this way. □

INSIDE OUT

Remarks by Gene F. Jankowski, president of the CBS Broadcast Group, at a discussion about television with New York University students and faculty. CBS has recently published the dialogue in a booklet called Reflections on Television.

I foresee more informational programming in a new key, perhaps taking forms somewhat different from straight news. . . . Perhaps the information would also have an entertainment aspect.

Entertainment Tonight is a good example. It's a non-network broadcast, but it's one of the more successful new syndicated programs around. This . . . roundup of news, personalities, interviews, and features concerning movies and television . . . years ago would probably have been considered much too "inside" to be of interest to the general public. But today programs being designed for that public deal with rather sophisticated aspects of the entertainment world.

Of course it wasn't too long ago that *The New York Times* had only one reporter covering all television. Now there are six or seven assigned to the communications beat. We are seeing a tremendous awakening of interest on the part of the general public in what's happening in communications. Not just the politicians; not just business people; it's the average citizen who's paying more attention. □

PORTRAIT OF THE FEMALE

From an address by Robert S. Alley at the Iowa Symposium on Television Criticism, held April 26. Alley is professor of humanities at the University of Richmond. His address is entitled "Values on View: A Moral Myopia."

For most of its history television has been the locus of a stereotyping of women that has now become a national scandal. . . . What June Cleaver [in *Leave It to Beaver*] lacked in the '50s was an opportunity to develop her talents in an open market. Her choices were limited. In the postwar mobility of our nation this condition slowly changed, but there was little in television to suggest it. . . . The consistent pattern of female representation in dramas was that of "Sam" in *Richard Diamond, Private Eye* [viewers saw only the character's legs]. This anatomical dissection has been a favorite of advertisers for decades. Paternalism was another device frequently employed. Perry Mason would consistently protect Della from male-type responsibilities. In one scene the two were investigating a crime. It required walking through some tall grass. Perry quite solicitously called to Della, "Don't come with me, you might run your stockings."

In my opinion, the situation is far worse today than it was in the '50s (despite the exception of *Kate & Allie*, which has come to grips with the stereotyping of women). I make this observation on the basis of selected viewing and a close analysis of network advertising policy. The following are quotes from *TV Guide* advertisements running between September 1984 and March 1985.

MacGruder & Loud: "Vice Girls Murdered! Jenny poses as a prostitute to cut off a Cuban connection!" *Cover Up:* "She's the world's sexiest photographer . . . Revenge-hungry model wants Jack dead!" *Paper Dolls:* "These are the paper dolls and these are the people who control them. Racine uses her bed to build an empire." *Love Boat:* "She's beautiful! She's a bodybuilder! And she's got all the guys going overboard!" *Charles in Charge:* "Charles gets more than an education from Douglas' pretty teacher."

And more. In total, the ads I studied offer the following professions for women: five prostitutes, five models, two teachers, a vice girl, a sexy photographer, a killer, a prisoner, a mermaid, a passionate cop, a dancing girl, a bodybuilder, a bikini beauty, a member of an all-girl band, a mobster's daughter, a barmaid, a geisha, a hellcat, a massage parlor employee, and a lizard lady. As one can easily ascertain, the vocational variety was limited. . . . I am not suggesting here that the networks be censored, but I am convinced that their executives must be lacking any real sense of social concern, at least in regard to women. □

PROFILE OF THE MALE

From Ted Bates Advertising's preview of the fall television season, a pamphlet written by executive vice-president Joel M. Segal.

Throughout the '80s, the networks have been losing shares and ratings among important young adult viewers. . . . And men, rather than women, are the greater defectors from network viewing and indeed television viewing of any kind. While network ratings have always been higher among younger women than men of the same age, the gap between the two sexes has never been wider. We believe that younger men are giving VCRs a growing share of their leisure time.

The networks have made herculean efforts to hold onto young men. After all, how else could they expect advertisers to sell cars, cameras, and computers? In 1984 they increased by two thirds the program types that appeal most to men—suspense/mysteries and action/adventures—while trimming their lower-male-appeal situation comedies and general dramas by about 20 percent. It did stop the network share erosion, but couldn't do much about the drop in male (18-49) television usage. . . .

The networks cannot afford to lose these viewers. More must be done to retain them than providing Prince lookalikes, program knockoffs, and prime-time cartoons. There are enough entertainment programs on the air with young-adult appeal to give us hope that network programmers will find a way to return these viewers to the medium. □

THE SHAME OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

From the R. R. Bowker Memorial Lecture, delivered in New York City last April by author and book critic George Steiner.

It looks as if we are now seeing, all of us today, the gradual end of an age of high and privileged literacy. . . . It is now believed that 27 million Americans cannot read at all—that is to say, by the Department of Education's standards, they cannot read "the poison warning on a can of pesticide." A further 35 million read only at a level which is less than equal to the bare survival needs in our society. . . .

But my own worry here today is less that of this overwhelming problem of elemental literacy than it is of the slightly more luxurious problem of the decline in the skills even of the middle-class reader, of his unwillingness to afford those spaces of silence, those luxuries of domesticity and time and concentration which surround the image of the classic art of reading. A figure—it may not be reliable, but it sounds as if it's pretty near the truth—suggests that almost 80 percent of American *literate* teenagers, educated teenagers, and particularly those in universities, can no longer read without an attendant noise, without music or a record player or a very complicated phenomenon which needs thinking about—a television screen, not looked at but flickering at the corner of the field of perception. Now, we know very little about the cortex, and we know very little about what it does with simultaneous conflicting input, but every commonsense hunch suggests a sense of profound alarm. That is to say that the breach between concentration, silence, solitude, and this new form of part-reading, or part-perception against background noise, carries into the very heart of our notion of literacy, that it renders impossible certain essential acts of apprehension, of concentration, let alone that most important tribute any human being can pay to a poem or a piece of prose he or she really loves, which is *to learn it by heart*. Not by brain, by heart. □

IDEAS & OBSERVATIONS

THE BBC'S 19th-CENTURY HANGOVER

From a panel discussion on public television around the world at the Banff Television Festival in June, remarks by David Graham, a British producer who sells many of his programs to Channel Four in the U.K.

One of the things that bothers me about public service broadcasting is that it has imposed a massive cultural conformity on television. I wonder if the British Broadcasting Corporation's real achievement adds up to anything more than, for instance, being the main exporter of costume drama to the North American continent. The BBC has a reputation that is culturally impeccable. . . . Its cultural history began with Matthew Arnold and Walter Bagehot and their anxieties about what democracy would do to the culture of the British nation and its politics. It advanced the theory that if you gave the masses the benefit of the best of human thought you could actually get over the drastic divide between government by an intelligentsia representing a minority, on the one hand, and government by bodies representing a mass electorate. That fear and anxiety was still very much there when the BBC was founded, and is written into its definition of aims.

Today, the BBC represents the cultural priorities of a middle class for whom pastimes of the 19th-century bourgeoisie have been turned into a kind of official art. It hasn't been nearly so good at developing forms of popular culture, and it hasn't been nearly so good at developing itself as a democratic medium. If a major political development of the 20th century is the extension of the franchise to the mass of populations in Western democracies, then the main cultural achievement should be the development of popular cultures exploring the issues that are important to ordinary people, and I don't think the BBC has done this.

When I was home writing this, I knew that I would have to stop to watch *The Cosby Show* and *Cheers*. I asked myself why these programs have sort of a resilient joyfulness that you don't get much in British television, and all I can say is that they remind me of the time I spent at graduate school in Bloomington, Indiana. I sat across from people I could not identify. I just could not tell if they were the sons and daughters of taxi drivers from New York or bankers from Minnesota. There is a democratic enjoyment of the egalitarianism and opportunities of American life that is actually radiant within the popular culture. There is a theory that the best culture can only be identified by a minority, can never be enjoyed by the mass of population, and always needs subsidy. This theory is rubbish. □

THE DOLLARS AND NONSENSE OF AMERICAN PUBLIC BROADCASTING

Also from the Banff Festival, remarks by Jeremy Isaacs, chief executive of Britain's Channel Four.

What the United States has is a hugely powerful and successful system of commercial broadcasting that provides vast enjoyment and satisfaction to mass audiences. It also has a public broadcasting system that is intended to expand the range of subjects covered. This system finds survival difficult enough under a complacent Presidency, and extremely difficult under one which for ideological reasons has it in for the public broadcasting ethic. I personally find the endless appeals for public broadcasting funds demeaning and distressing. It ought to be possible for the richest society in the world to find a better way of strengthening the range of its television. □

WHY AMERICA IS FIRST

From Television in Europe: Quality and Values in a Time of Change, *a monograph by Anthony Pragnell, board member of the United Kingdom's Channel Four. This is part of the European Institute for the Media's report on the cultural values of European television.*

This report makes no imputation of sinister motivation on the part of those in the United States who have, over the years, so successfully and profitably developed an international market for their cinema and television programs. There are some who describe this success as a deliberate process of "cultural imperialism." This implies a concerted and coherent policy on the part of the various, and seemingly disparate, production agencies to spread as widely as possible a favorable, but largely inaccurate, image of the American way of life. From this standpoint, it is possible to raise suspicions about the motivation of even the most apparently innocent program. Thus, showing contentment and harmony in human relationships can, for example, be seen as covert propaganda for American ideals and the political framework which supports them. Again, a program like *Dallas*, which emphasizes conflict both in domestic and business life, can be represented, on this thesis, as promoting as virtues toughness and competitiveness, and as commending the opulent lifestyle which can result from them. Even American football, a popular new element in the United Kingdom's Channel Four service, has been described as a "magnificent visual metaphor for American society."

There seem, however, more random, pragmatic, and probable reasons for the American success. . . . The existence of a television-oriented single-language audience of more than 200 million people, the number of competitive and well-funded networks serving a largely homogenous advertising market, and the 24-hour broadcasting day are all factors leading to the existence of a large number of attractive television programmes for European services to choose from. . . . Their production costs have already been covered before they become available to European broadcasting. . . . To seek more devious reasons, against the more likely ones, for American pre-eminence calls for a strength of political conviction which not all will possess. It is doubtful, too, whether those in European broadcasting who select programs from the wide range on offer in the United States would feel that they were the victims (or agents) of a conspiracy. □

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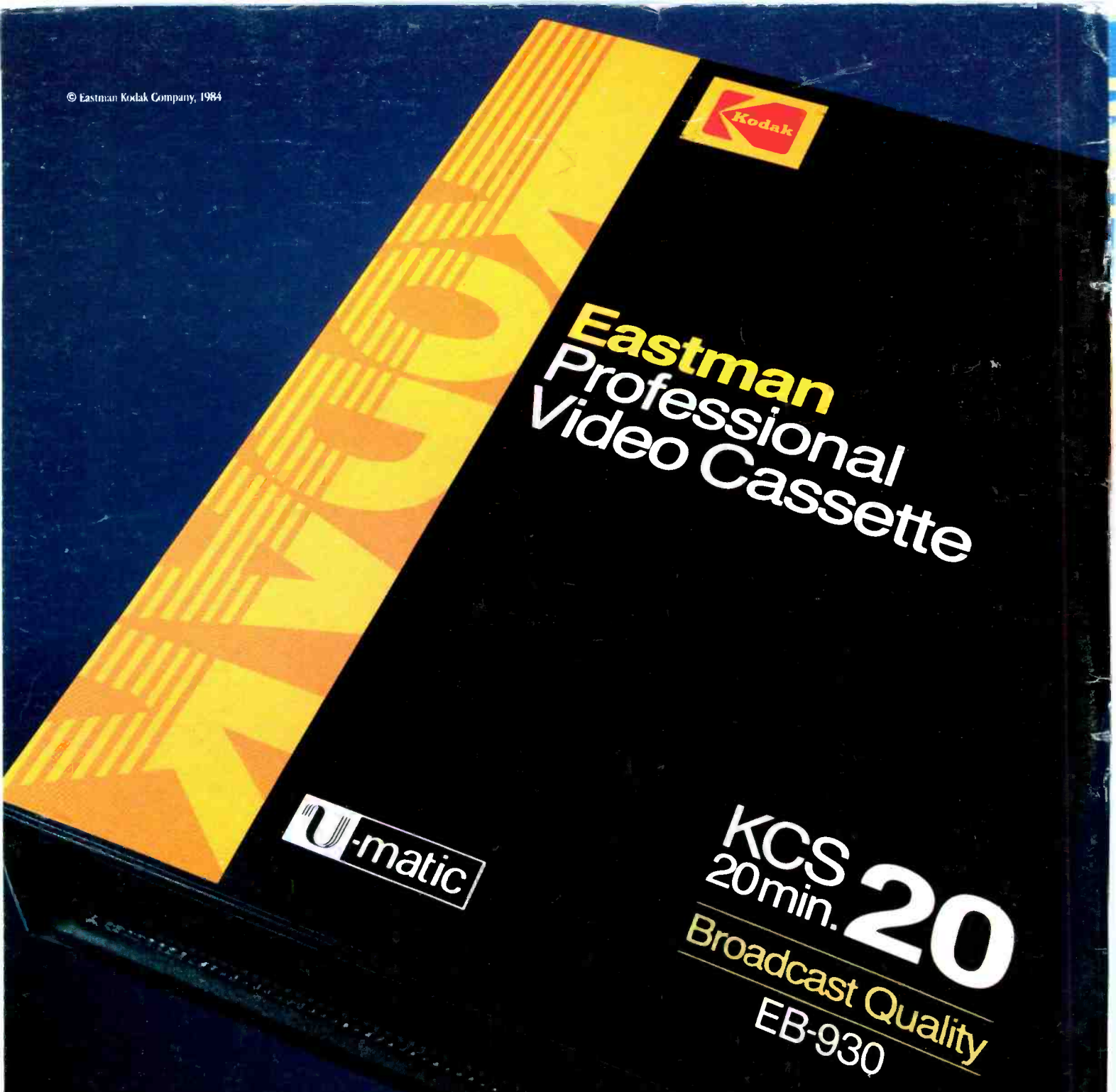

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