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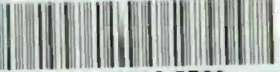
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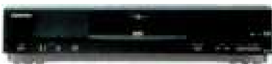

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The JFK, Jr. Coverage: It's as if Nothing Else Was Going On

By John Corporon

JOHN F. KENNEDY JR. MISSING
PRINCESS DIANA KILLED
TWA FLIGHT 800 CRASHES IN ATLANTIC

When Americans see headlines like these they should expect television news, network and local, to go into overdrive and for days center on a single story to the virtual exclusion of other significant news. Such headlines signal battle stations for an impressive mass mustering of television's high-voltage anchors and reporters. News operations at such times see an opportunity, and perhaps a real or imagined obligation, to give the public what news executives think the public wants and will respond to. Television coverage of the deaths of John F. Kennedy Jr., his wife and her sister displayed the best and worst features of the electronic medium hot after the "big one." On the Kennedy story the print medium also had its ups and downs, but in general offered more balanced fare.

What was so good about television's coverage? As always, the immediacy of the coverage dazzled. Television's ability to swarm a major story was brilliant.

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Anchors, editors, reporters, producers and cameramen took an impressive array of technical tools and put them to work. Satellites, microwaves, digital cameras and graphics, video tape, cellular phones, archives, insider contacts and institutional memories of veteran journalists were blended into such massive coverage as to satisfy the appetites of citizens hungering for minute to minute updates as to the fates of Kennedy, Mrs. Carolyn Kennedy and Lauren G. Bessette.

The three had gone down in a single-engine plane in the Atlantic ocean off Martha's Vineyard. From the search for the missing plane to the various memorial services after the the three bodies were recovered, local and network television provided details, personal recollections, background and a lot of speculation about what Kennedy's future might have been. Also, television provided a universal electronic wake for citizens who mourned the premature deaths of the three attractive young people.

Such detailed coverage, excellent as parts of it were, raised problems. For one thing, when the medium puts all or most of its coverage eggs in one basket, other news of local, national and international significance gets lost. It's as though nothing else is going on when, in fact, there was a lot going on about which the public needed to be informed. The print medium has the advantage and luxury of covering the "big one" AND providing other news of importance. But because most citizens get their news from the electronic medium today, such concentration on a single story creates something like a blackout on other news. Not a healthy condition in a democratic society.

During the four days of intensive focus on the Kennedy story, Washington was grappling with Social Security's future, debating health-care issues, arguing over higher vs. lower taxes and more. These are issues which will have a major influence on the 2000 presidential and congressional elections. Internationally, Kosovo was off the medium's coverage map.China's menacing of Taiwan went without analysis or context. What was happening with Middle East peace talks? What was stirring in the Russian pot of political and fiscal intrigue? Local stations in New York likewise gave important area news short shrift. Oh, they rarely missed an opportunity to reveal that traffic was backed up on major roadways, just like it was the week and the year before. The no-coverage condition permitted the city fathers and the mayor to give themselves substantial raises with little public scrutiny. And while local television newscasts pay pitifully little attention to the colossal woes of public education, the stations gave none while wallowing in the overheated Kennedy coverage.

The public interest was not fully served by concentration on one story.

Thus, we see the public interest was not fully served by concentration on one story, important as the one story was.Criticizing the extensive live coverage after the fact is pretty easy. Live TV often means flying by the seat of the producers' and news directors' pants. Still, it must be said the medium needs to acknowledge that when there is nothing new to report it's time to move on to another story or regular programming. Too often this was not done during the four days of search and retrieval of the Kennedy plane. Too often when there were no fresh developments, reporters, anchors, historians, man-on-the- street and pals (and ex- post-facto pals) of the Kennedys resorted to the

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wildest kinds of speculation about who Kennedy was and what he was to become. His media-conferred titles ranged from saint to senator to president. Kennedy did possess qualities of kindness, gentleness, generosity and good breeding. He was well brought up and appealed to friend, colleague and the public alike. With his background and intelligence he may well have opted for and succeeded in some higher calling involving public service. But he was accorded an almost religious reverence that might well have embarrassed him had he been listening and watching television.

Television rightly acknowledged Kennedy's many good works for which he sought no recognition. He gave money, he devoted time to a number of good causes, mostly to organizations serving needs of the underprivileged. But it was media excess to elevate him into the pantheon of American heroes. He laid no claim to such elevation, nor did his activities appear to point him in the direction of becoming a national political celebrity. Anchors and guest historians on television at times detached their thinking from reality. It was said the torch had been dropped; the Kennedy dynasty was in danger, Camelot might go into eclipse On and on went the emotional and often groundless and subjective observations. Purportedly serious questions were asked: would Kennedy's sister pick up the torch? Boiled to its essence, television news was filling time when it had but little to say. The observations were doubtless made in good faith, but they took the medium out of the role of objective reporting into the realm of subjectivity and at times mindless, chattering speculation. Doubtless there was genuine sadness on the parts of those who were telling the public of the tragic deaths and the aftermath. The excesses, though, resulted in part from over-coverage and illustrated one of the perils of non-stop coverage.

Why not this approach? Give the public the facts and appropriate background, then go back to regular programming with the promise to come back on the air the minute pertinent and new information which advances the story materializes? One answer may be that networks and stations believe they must ride the "big one" because the competition is going with wall-to-wall coverage. Networks have long agonized over how to meet the competition from 24 hour cable news. It's easier for NBC, for example, to pull back on prolonged, redundant coverage because Tom Brokaw can simply announce: we're leaving the story temporarily, but if you tune to (NBC-owned) MSNBC live coverage continues. Perhaps in the future ABC and CBS will find their own brand of MSNBC which would permit them to take leave temporarily of a story that has for the moment run short of facts and pertinent information. Fox News Network does not as yet go to the extended live coverage as often as the Big 3 , but if and when it does it, too, can throw the coverage to its 24-hour cable news station.

How far can a reporter or a camera go before the privacy of survivors is violated?

Post-mortems within the networks address this issue and are not sure what the answer is. Countering the argument for limiting live coverage to reasonable intervals is the indisputable fact that ratings for networks, local stations and cable news networks jump–often dramatically—when they opt for live, breaking news. Thus, the probability is that so long as the public rewards the medium with its surge of tune-ins, the likelyhood is that the

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next "big one" on a par with the Kennedy plane crash, Princess Diana's untimely death in Paris and the crash of TWA flight 800 in the Atlantic will find the electronic medium resorting to its tried and true (and in some regards successful) full-bore live coverage.

The 24-hour local cable news channel, NY1, in New York covered the Kennedy story competently but still managed to cover other local, national and international stories during those long periods when the Kennedy story ran out of information. .

When world-famous figures die the media in general may face the twin problems of ethics and good taste. How far can a reporter or a camera go before the privacy of survivors is violated? When celebrities die the media at times go right up to the edge of violating privacy and sometimes step over the line. In the Kennedy coverage the line was crossed on a number of occasions, but not excessively. Kennedy's sister, Caroline, sought solitude and privacy after he was killed. Still, the cameras were trained on her home and yard when it was obvious she had nothing to say and no reason to appear publicly. One anchorman was live when he asked his on-site reporter: "Have you seen her yet?" It was as if the station was on a bird watch or pushing the hounds to corner the fox. Networks, some local stations and cable alike managed to invade the privacy of a family-only mass being held at the Kennedy compound at Hyannisport. Another live shot went in close on bedroom windows where the occupants had pulled down the blinds.Telephoto lenses make possible picture taking when the subject is totally unaware. Such picture taking can be appropriate for spotting Mafia felons, mass murderers or celebrities and public figures who court video coverage, but surely not private citizens in a grief mode who signal: please leave me alone!

It would be useful if media—print and electronic—would step back and reflect on the Kennedy coverage in anticipation of the next "big one." Whether the public wanted to be media-blitzed or not in the aftermath of the Kennedy tragedy, it's media's obligation to offer balanced reporting from the sidelines, not from the stage. Media types are not cheerleaders; they are observers who owe the public the greatest amount of objectivity they can muster. A strong dose of reflection and self-analysis is needed.

The print media, while lacking the immediacy and impact of television, have other advantages which at times work to the public's advantage. Newspapers and magazines have longer time to reflect and to separate the wheat from the chaff.Furthermore, print can cover the "big one" and at the same time cover other news of importance. When television goes live for long periods of time other news is lost in the shuffle. Newspapers also like to twit television for its excesses and occasional sins. Massive TV coverage becomes fodder for the critics' mill in newspapers.

What is the cure for the excesses inflicted on the public by television during big stories?

(At times print trashing of TV could be construed as all being yellow to the jaundiced eye.) Print enjoys its advantage over electronic in that the reader who finds too much ink has been expended on one subject can turn to page 3 or 22 and get other news.

In any event, no post-mortem of the Kennedy coverage would be complete without sampling the print medium's wares in the sphere of columnist and editorial opin-

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ions. Suffice it to say, on the news pages the New York newspapers provided great depth. *The Times*, of course, reported thoroughly but with restraint. *Newsday*, the New Jersey and Staten Island papers offered complete and balanced coverage. *The News* and *The Post*, as expected, provided vast, razzmatazz coverage.

A sampling of nuggets from columnists and editorials indicate print observations varied as widely as those opinions offered on television. A *Daily News* editorial went way beyond what even the most devoted tv observer eager to canonize Kennedy would go. Under the headline GOOD NIGHT, SWEET PRINCE, the editorial concluded with this purple prose: ."The lights of Camelot have now gone dark. Something has been subtracted from the American dream. We mourn not only for the lost man but for our own lost hopes." Caryn James in a *New York Times* column wrote: "With this death television has not served the useful function of communal mourning so much as it has provided communal mind control and illusion."

She further quoted Peter Jennings of ABC: "I wonder if we're not imposing a burden on him [Kennedy] in death that he would not have appreciated in life." John Tierney of the *Times* wrote: "The nation's media executives know precisely who deserves special treatment in death; whoever sells copies and increases ratings. This week the press is demonstrating that Mr. Kennedy sells." Jonah Goldberg, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, said: "[Kennedy]would be horrified by the caricature the press has made of him..isn't it cruel to make him a political martyr? His death was a stupid, horrible, tragic and human accident.." Brian Kelly of *U.S. News and World Report* responded to a question on CNN: "You suspend normal news judgment" when you talk about the Kennedys.

What is the cure for the excesses inflicted upon the public by television during big stories? For certain, citizens with any sense of history and appreciation of the first 10 amendments to the Constitution reject government guidelines which would set up standards for media, print and electronic. And journalists are divided sharply in opinion when it comes to industry-adopted rules and self-imposed guidelines. Steve Brill, publisher of the media's hair-shirt magazine, *Content*, wants news organizations, on their own initiative, to refrain from showing pictures of grieving families, especially children. Brill wants reporters and photographers to voluntarily refrain from aiming questions and cameras at the bereaved and to make funerals off limits, unless families invite or request coverage.

It's a good bet editors, reporters and cameramen will chew on Brill's proposal for voluntary restrictions to protect privacy and then conclude in the main: we will make our decision on our own when the next 'big one" breaks and we will be guided by circumstances at that time. To many in the news business, Brill's proposal smacks of a code and, even if voluntary, is anathema to many news executives. Still, if Brill's idea stirs reflection in news rooms it may prove useful. That the Kennedy coverage excesses are even being discussed by journalists confirms that portions of the coverage went overboard.

Between the Scylla of industry-adopted rules and the Charybdis of government-imposed regulations lies an opportunity for self-discipline. If reputable electronic news organization decision makers would look in the mirror and ask themselves questions, a happier middle ground might be found the next time the "big one" faces them.

Question one: Is my organization's coverage tasteful , accurate and propor-

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tionate to the event being covered?

Question two: Are we engaging in overkill ?

Question three: Does it violate common sense to cover a single story to the exclusion of virtually all other news?

Question four: To what degree do we provide a curtain of privacy to those who deserve it and who are not seeking coverage?

Question five: If during those long periods of live coverage no new information is forthcoming and we lack the means to advance the story, would it not be wise to limit the coverage to updates and bulletins?

Question six: Is my motive to keep the public informed or am I driven to excess because cable networks are doing it and I must prevent cable from further encroachment on my turf?

Question seven: Where does the public interest lie?

There are no quick fixes, no easy formulas for moderating out-of-control live coverage. However, if the existence of the problem is recognized, the men and women who stir the news pot can adjust the coverage compass and set a new course. On the other hand, if producers, reporters and anchors think all is well and God is in his heaven, then the public can expect business as usual when the next "big one" materializes. ■

The immediate past president of the Overseas Press Club, John Corporon served as vice-president/news director of WPIX, New York, for 24 years before his retirement in 1996. He had previously been news director at WDSU/TV, New Orleans. During his tenure both stations won many honors for their news coverage, including the Edward R. Murrow award, the Radio & Television News Directors Association and Associated Press awards, as well as several national and local Emmys.

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Jenny Jones Takes it on the Chin

With a $25-million verdict, a Michigan jury sends a message: "You're Responsible Too"

By Mary Ann Watson

Live television doesn't get much more compelling than last spring's high-stakes interrogation of talk-show host Jenny Jones. And Court TV has the numbers to prove it.

For nearly six weeks, the network covered every aspect of the trial in the negligence lawsuit brought against the *Jenny Jones Show*, its parent company Warner Bros. and the production company Telepictures. The plaintiffs were the family of Scott Amedure, a 32-year-old bartender who, in March 1995, responded to a solicitation on the *Jenny Jones Show* for participants on a "Same-Sex Secret Crush" episode. That phone call set in motion a horrible chain of events that led to his death.

The contempt was palpable between the star witness and Geoffrey Fieger, the pit bull of an attorney representing the Amedures. Clearly, this was personal. During three days on the stand, Jones scored a few good licks. When Fieger accused her of hiring people to probe into his background, she jabbed back, "We didn't have to look far." Jurors laughed out loud because during Fieger's unsuccessful 1998 gubernatorial campaign in Michigan, his alleged marital problems and drunk-driving arrest were big news.

Much of the on-air commentary by various legal experts focused on the marked difference in Jones' look and demeanor compared to her appearance at the murder trial of Jonathan Schmitz in 1996. Schmitz was a 24-year-old waiter when he was contacted by the *Jenny Jones Show*, a program he had never seen. After initial reservations, he ultimately agreed to appear on the program, hopeful that his

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secret admirer would be a lovely young woman—perhaps his former fiancee.

But it was Scott Amedure waiting on the stage for him, along with mutual friend, Donna Riley, a young lady who was playing the role of matchmaker. Instead of a joyful reunion or a new chance for romance, Jonathan learned that Scott had vivid sexual fantasies about him, which he had just described to a hooting studio audience on a television show recorded for national broadcast.

Three days after the taping, March 9, 1995, Schmitz discovered an anonymous, sexually suggestive note left on his doorstep. He assumed Amedure was the author. Schmitz then purchased a 12-gauge shotgun, drove to Amedure's mobile home and fired two shots into his chest at close range. Moments later, a distraught Schmitz called 911 from a nearby gas station to turn himself in.

"I just shot this guy," he told the dispatcher amid sobs and unintelligible phrases. "Why did you do that?" she asked. "The guy was on national TV," he told her. The dispatcher continued to extract as much information as she could, ascertaining that the weapon was still in the car with one remaining shell. "Just try to relax," she told Schmitz. "You did the right thing by calling me, and we will help you. Okay? Catch your breath a little. Okay? Can you tell me again why you shot the man?" She could only make out two words in his answer: "Jenny Jones."

Within hours it was being called the "Jenny Jones murder." The sensational story captured world-wide attention and sparked vigorous debates about whether Trash TV had gone too far. Schmitz was charged with first-degree murder and Jenny Jones was called by the defense to testify in the 1996 trial. Instead of the vivacious vamp of daytime television, she assumed a subdued persona. Wearing a white pantsuit, light make-up, and a short, plain hairstyle, Jones sat with slightly slumped shoulders throughout her 90 minutes of testimony.

Defense attorney Fred Gibson highlighted several factors in his client's life that might have contributed to the deed Jonathan Schmitz had committed—the thyroid disorder Graves' disease, suicidal tendencies, manic-depression and even the shame of being spanked once by his father with a belt in front of his sixth-grade class. That incident, Gibson suggested, created in Schmitz a fear of public humiliation that drove him to homicide. In other words, if not for the *Jenny Jones Show*, the killing would not have occurred.

The sensational story captured world-wide attention and sparked vigorous debates about whether Trash TV had gone too far.

Gibson's systematic questioning about the purpose of the show and Jones' role in it seemed to fluster the witness. "I'm not sure I understand that question," she said numerous times. Unwilling to accept any responsibility for the day-to-day decisions on the program, Jones testified that others were in charge—"I don't produce the show, I don't book the show." She didn't write the scripts, she said, nor could she recall any time in which she determined that a topic was inappropriate for air.

Her "see-no-evil, speak-no-evil stance," as the *Detroit News* called it, didn't play well with the jury. "They could have saved the airline ticket," one juror said in a post-verdict press conference to convey his belief that Jones' testimony was irrelevant to the murder charge.

What she did or didn't know about the workaday logistics of the program was beside the point. Instead of first-degree

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murder, Schmitz was convicted of murder in the second degree because the jury believed the slaying would not have occurred if the *Jenny Jones Show* had been honest and not led him to believe his secret crush was a woman. "We saw the show as a catalyst in a young man's life who had a lot of problems," one juror offered. "It sent his life back into an emotional tailspin."

To distance herself from the shooting and redeem her reputation, she wrote *Jenny Jones: My Story* in 1997 and went on a media blitz to promote the book. She talked to Matt Lauer, Larry King, Tom Snyder and Howard Stern. Jones was a guest on local TV shows in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit and Chicago and visited two dozen more stations via satellite. Local radio shows too were targeted and several newspaper and magazine interviews were part of what the Associated Press dubbed her "image rehabilitation tour."

The key point of the press tour was to clear up what Jones believed was the public's misperception about her show. She criticized her critics. "They don't watch talk shows and they group all the shows together," she said, and aggressively defended her work. "Most of our shows are fun—makeovers, talent shows, children's talent shows, reunions. It's a show for real people. I'm proud. I don't apologize."

My Story also takes a swipe at nemesis Geoffrey Fieger: "He's a poster boy for attorney misconduct: fined thousands of dollars by various judges; accused of lying in court documents; even singled out in an August 1997, *USA Today* article about 'an outbreak of rude, crude, and downright uncivil behavior by lawyers in the nation's courts.'"

By the time Jones returned to the courtroom in 1999 for the civil trial, she was no longer the timid witness. She knew she would be fending off ferocious attacks, directed not only at her show but also at her personal integrity. Jenny Jones was ready to spar.

Most of the viewers watching the legal prizefight had already decided in their hearts and minds who was on the right side. I was no different, except that I probably felt a little more invested in the outcome than the average viewer.

Several months before, I received a call from an associate of Geoffrey Fieger asking if I would consider serving as an expert witness for the plaintiffs. I was told that as someone who studies and writes about media history and media ethics, my testimony might be useful in building the case. I assumed—correctly, as it turned out—that a wide net was being cast for possible expert witnesses and the likelihood of my actually appearing in court was fairly slim. But I agreed to review materials pertinent to the case and to be put on the witness list. Soon, FedEx boxloads of documents and videotapes began arriving on my front porch.

First I watched the entire show featuring Amedure and Schmitz, taped on March 6, 1995, but never aired. It was a shameless display of vulgarity happily orchestrated by a beaming Jenny Jones.

The first of six secret crushes involved a transsexual-in-progress, a cross-dresser promising to give the object of his desire—the former bartender at a favorite club— "the best sex of his life." The audience reacted with cheers and guffaws. Their questions for "Jennifer" included: "Say you do all get intimate. What do you suppose Richard gonna do when you pull down your pants?"

As the unsuspecting crushee walked out, the tittering escalated. When all was revealed and he chose to pass on a love connection, Jones reminded Jennifer that "you said even if it couldn't be a relationship, you would settle for just one night."

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"I'd settle for a one-night fling," the guest agreed. "We'll let them talk about it as we continue the show," the hopeful host said as a segue into the commercial break, as if that just might be a grand compromise.

Next came a young man from Georgia who was fiercely attracted to "Mr. Hotlanta," winner of a gay beauty contest in the capital city. "He has a great butt," the guest gushed, "I want to grab it really hard." "Give me your fantasy," Jenny Jones probed. "If we sent you to the beach, what would you want to do to him?" "Well first we could have like a two-minute romantic dinner and then I could just attack him right there," was the reply.

By this time I was thoroughly perplexed why various homosexual organizations, such as the Triangle Foundation, a gay group based in Detroit, seemed to believe that Jenny Jones was actually a friend to the cause. Ostensibly she presented herself that way. In her autobiography she wrote, "I'm always looking for ways to include gay people in our shows." But this was, plain and simple, a show about promiscuous sex. It was meant to titillate and shock, not to illuminate gay issues. If a heterosexual man said about a woman to whom he was attracted, "then I could attack her right there," it would not be a source of amusement.

Next it was Scott Amedure's turn. The first time he saw Jonathan Schmitz, Scott explains, Jon was lying under Donna Riley's car working on the brake linings: "I only saw the lower half of him, so you can imagine. He was hot." Again, Jenny Jones encourages the graphic details of a sexual fantasy. Scott seems a bit embarrassed, but obliges. "I thought about tying him up in my hammock," he reports. "And...." says Jones, trying to get him to offer more. "It entails like whipped cream and champagne and stuff like that."

Jones asks Donna if she has any reason to think Jonathan is gay. "Not really. He said his family kind of questioned him on it," Riley responds. "He's a very open person, so it really wouldn't surprise me."

Still trying to elicit more detail, Jones asks Scott, "Give us a physical description. What is it that's so exciting about him to you?" "He's got a cute little hard body. One you just want to pick up and put in your curio cabinet and dust him off every once in awhile," Amedure answers. "You want to physically pick him up?" Jones continues. "Oh he's just a tiny little cute thing. He's gorgeous."

Donna Riley's deposition filled in some detail on how they had been prepared for this fateful segment. The show's associate producer met with Donna and Scott in the hotel bar the evening before. Donna was uncomfortable with the suggestion that she give flowers to Jon to give the impression that she had the secret crush. She was also concerned with the seating arrangement on stage: "I was asking, you know, 'Am I going to be in the middle of stuff like that?'" "Don't worry about it," she recalled the associate producer saying. "Have a few drinks, loosen up."

The next morning, she reported, she and Scott "had breakfast, got ready for the show, and then went down to the bar and started drinking." Scott ran across the street, bought a bottle a vodka, which he took with them in the cab ride to the show. Once in the green room, she said, "Well, that's when Scott broke out the vodka and we got juice and pop . . . and we were drinking." Donna Riley remembered the producer's pre-show instructions: "She told us to be outrageous. . . . She wanted us to be as outrageous as we could."

When Schmitz walks out on stage, he gives Donna a hug and a peck on the cheek. But when Scott puts his arms around him in an embrace, Jonathan turns away. "Did you think Donna has a crush on you?" Jones asks. "Well guess what?

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It's Scott that has the crush on you." "You lied to me," Schmitz says to the duo.

Jones directs Jonathan to watch a replay of Scott's hammock fantasy and Schmitz covers his face with his hands in embarrassment. Jones then asks, "Could you tell us what your status is? Are you involved with anyone?" "No," says Schmitz, "but I'm definitely heterosexual I guess you could say." The audience cheers his declaration.

The show is now half over and Jonathan Schmitz has to sit on the stage as the final three segments play out. The next secret crush, judging from Jones' glee, is undoubtedly the highlight of the program. Erika, who is engaged to a male postal worker, wants "a hot and steamy night" with one of his female co-workers. "I never thought that I'd be so turned on by a woman," the guest confesses, "but when I seen her I just did a double take."

"Does he know about this, your fiance?" Jones asks. "Yes he knows and I bug him to bring her over for dinner so we could get closer. . . . He says as long as it's not another man." The well-briefed host poses the key question: "What's his interest in all this?" "He wants to join in," Erika laughs and the audience is worked up to fever pitch.

The penultimate segment introduces Roney, a man smitten with a casual acquaintance from a dance club. "What's your fantasy? Give me your fantasy if you could have whatever you want with him," says Jones to get the ball rolling with her seemingly bashful guest. "I would, like, take him into the shower and rip his clothes off. You know, dunk him into a tub of champagne."

"What do you hope to happen out of this when you finally tell him today?" the host wonders. "Either one night of hot steamy sex, or we just become friends. One or the other," he answers. "Oh man," Jenny responds, "you'll just take anything you can get. Right?"

When the handsome crushee, Jim, walks out on stage, he looks disappointed when he sees who is waiting. "Your reaction didn't look so good," Jones points out. "Well, you know what, I didn't place you at first," he says to the other guest to undo some of the awkwardness. But it gets even worse when Jones asks, "Do you know who this is?" and Jim can't even remember Roney's name.

But this doesn't dissuade Jones from playing her own brand of Cupid: "He says he'll take one night of hot steamy passion with you tonight if you're interested." But even though Jim is gay and available, he says he's looking for "someone that takes my breath away" and tells Roney "you're really not my type." "What's your type?" Jones asks. "I like handsome Latino men," he says, apparently unaware Roney's last name is Perez.

A question for Jim from a girl in the audience adds to the grinding humiliation Roney must be feeling: "Can't you give him one night of hot steamy sex?" "We could give it a shot," Jim teases. "Do I get dinner out of it?"

Finally, Jones introduces Erik, a young Sammy Davis, Jr. look-alike, who believes his straight friend Dave is the "perfect package." The two once worked at the same mall and have gone to the movies together. "What happens when you sit next to him in the dark?" Jenny asks. "Dirty thoughts, dirty thoughts," is the reply.

When Jones looks to the audience for questions or comments, a young man with an Irish brogue, who seems unfamiliar with the genre, attempts to inject the voice of reason: "After listening to everybody here today the message that comes across is no one has a problem sleeping with anybody on the first night or with complete strangers."

Instead of exploring that idea, the host

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does her best to quickly dismiss the wet blanket: "I think they're saying if that's all they can have, they're really, really attracted to these people. And, assuming of course, that if something happens, that you are talking about safe sex—that goes without saying these days." And with this impromptu public service announcement out of the way, it was back to the salacious stuff and the final tally of who might sleep with whom.

My next task was to read all the production materials. When producers or producers' assistants make initial contact with potential guests, they fill out a "plug sheet" with comments on each person. All of the plug sheets for this particular program indicated it was a "same-sex show." The name "John Schmidt," rather than "Jon Schmitz," appeared on the sheet dated 3/2/95. An arrow extended from his name to the margin of the page where a note read: "Don't want a guy saying this to me on the air." And then, "Thinking about it."

It seemed logical to conclude, had he been told the truth—that it was definitely going to be a man who had the secret crush—Schmitz would have declined the offer. He agreed to "think about it" because the false possibility that it might be a woman was dangled before him.

This theory was confirmed by the "Dear Jenny" letter included in the packet. The day before each show, the producer provides Jenny Jones with a rundown of the guests and circumstances in each segment. "John is nervous about this and is hoping that his crush is a woman," the letter read. "I think John is going to die when he sees it's Scott." A fair-minded person would have to surmise that Schmitz's discomfort was of no concern to the *Jenny Jones Show* and that clearly the more uneasy he felt, the better it would be for the broadcast.

Included in my many piles of paper was also voluminous documentation of Jonathan Schmitz's fragile psyche. The statements of mental health professionals, family, friends, and co-workers added up to a portrait of a troubled, struggling, hard-working and engaging young man who never revealed a jot of malice toward homosexuals. His aversion was being made into a public spectacle.

There was convincing testimony from four of Schmitz's female co-workers at the restaurant that the *Jenny Jones Show* falsely assured him his secret crush would be a woman. One overheard him talking to a representative of the show on the phone at work: "If it's a guy, tell me it's a guy; if it is I'm not coming." The second said she took him shopping for clothes because he thought there was good chance the crush would be his former girlfriend—and he was certain it was going to be a woman. The third woman said she overheard him on the phone in another conversation with someone from the show indicating he would not come if it was a man. And yet another who had seen the *Jenny Jones Show* the day the Same-Sex Crush solicitation had aired tried to warn him what he might be in for. "No, it's a woman," he told her. "Don't worry."

Time and again, throughout thousands of pages of depositions and transcripts from the criminal trial, Jenny Jones, the executive producers, the show producer and the associate producer all denied the true and obviously sordid nature of the show. They called it "lighthearted" and "fun." One of the executive producers had the audacity to refer to the Amedure-Schmitz segment as "cute," "romantic," "a love story."

In her 1995 deposition, Jenny Jones was queried about Jonathan Schmitz's appearance on her program: "Did it ever occur to you that it could be embarrassing?" Under oath she said "No." Although I'm no expert on reading juries, I had a

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pretty good hunch most anyone would find that answer hard to swallow—and might even be a tad bit angered by the gall it displayed.

I continued to read all the fantastic testimony indicating that no one connected with the *Jenny Jones Show* ever strove for sensationalism—they just wanted to tell

The conduct of the staff, by lying to Jonathan Schmitz, was unethical and negligent.

good human interest stories. It struck me as such a cowardly—and foolish—defense. They didn't have the guts to say, "Yeah, it's what we do—sleaze. Highly profitable sleaze. You wanna make something of it?"

Even though I had read a good number of depositions by this time, when my turn came to be deposed, I wasn't sure what to expect. I met with Ven Johnson, a young attorney from Fieger's office, for about 30 minutes before the defense attorney arrived. Johnson warned me that James Feeney was brilliant and aggressive.

It was a tiring session, almost six hours long, during which the validity of my opinions was repeatedly—at times haughtily—dismissed as unscientific. The bottom line was I believed, based on my review of the materials, that the conduct of the staff of the *Jenny Jones Show*, by lying to Jonathan Schmitz, was unethical and negligent. It appeared to be an intentional deceit with reckless disregard for the consequences. A responsible producer, realizing Schmitz did not want to be put in that situation, would have thanked him for his time and told him he was not a good candidate for the program. And had that simple act of professionalism—not to mention human decency—happened, two families would have been spared unrelenting grief. But instead, they were destined to meet again at a second trial and relive their traumas.

Among those on the plaintiff's expert witness list was a University of Miami professor of criminology who had telephoned the *Jenny Jones Show*—before the death of Scott Amedure—to warn the staff that it was dangerous to surprise people with emotionally charged information in front of a TV audience. A social worker, whose company provides "after care" for talk-show guests, and whose services were declined by the producers of the *Jenny Jones Show*, also testified.

I was in the category "if time allows." And when the fireworks began and objections started flying every which way in the Oakland County Courthouse, it was clear this was not a trial that was going to run like clockwork. With more relief than disappointment, I took up my position in front of the television set and awaited the showdown between Geoffrey Fieger and Jenny Jones.

She looked so pretty when she took the stand, but seemed to have an odd plastered-on smile. I soon speculated her newfound feistiness was a strategic mistake.

Fieger accused Jones of putting "manifestly unfit people" on her program for the "prurient entertainment of others." When asked if she was aware that Jonathan Schmitz suffered from bipolar disorder, had attempted suicide and was on medication, Jones said "no." "Would you have put him on the show had you known?" asked Fieger. "I wouldn't want to discriminate," she quipped.

Her sass didn't wane as the pummeling continued. "Is there anything you would find embarrassing or humiliating?" Fieger asked near the end of his direct examination. "Being seen naked publicly, I guess," she responded. "It depends on the situa-

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tion."

But all of Jenny Jones' scrappiness could not change the facts. And Geoffrey Fieger's closing argument was persuasive. "This is a case about exploitation, and ultimately responsibility," he said in asking the jury to award the Amedure family more than $70 million. The deceit of the *Jenny Jones Show* led to Jonathan Schmitz's "descent into madness," and there was no doubt, he said, that the video ambush led to the shooting. Although the First Amendment grants talk-show producers the right to put on this type of episode, Fieger conceded, when they lie to their guests to do it, they must be held accountable.

The five-woman, four-man jury deliberated for six-and-one-half hours during two days and decided eight to one in favor of the Amedures. There was little disagreement among the panel members on the liability of the *Jenny Jones Show* in the wrongful death. Most of the time was spent arriving at the amount of the award, which they set at $25 million.

It was a hard blow for the defense team, but they vow a rematch on appeal. Jenny Jones, still denying her show did anything wrong, kept slugging away in post-verdict interviews. Punch-drunk, without the grace to be humbled by what had transpired, she continued to claim "this is about homophobia" and promised no changes would be made in the production practices of the program.

Jones told Jane Pauley on *Dateline* that Jonathan Schmitz knew "what he was in for" by coming on her show. Charging her detractors with "elitist snobbery," she took on the mantle of a populist crusader. On *Today* she insisted to Katie Couric: "We have a right to give a venue to real people—gay, straight, tall, short, fat, thin—we don't discriminate."

But a jury box is the ultimate venue for real people and their job *is* to discriminate—between truth and lies, right and wrong. Real people, not elitist snobs, sat in judgment of the *Jenny Jones Show*. And they decided that in exchange for the great American freedom to make a huge amount of money from a tawdry television show, a modicum of responsibility and respect for guests is not too much to ask. ■

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How to Tame That Trojan Horse: The Story the Media Won't Tell

by Joanne Cantor

When I was growing up in the 'fifties, we were the first family on our block to have a television set. I vividly remember watching the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, with most of the neighbors crowded into our tiny den. What a marvelous convenience! All these free programs came into our homes automatically, and all we had to do was turn on the set to get information and entertainment. We even had the choice between three channels! Before too long, everyone on our block had a TV, and I don't recall any of them questioning whether it was a good idea. Of course, television programming was of a different sort then. For the most part, TV producers behaved as though they were invited guests in America's homes.

Although I've been doing psychological research on the impact of television on children for the past 25 years, we don't need social-science methods to conclude

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that television has changed and that it is no longer on its good behavior. As the other media have done, television has increasingly used violence and sex to attract audiences, and the most recent trend has been to add explicit gross-out humor to the formula. It's not hard to explain why there are audiences for these themes. Sex and violence automatically attract our attention; our species would hardly have survived if they did not. They also arouse us, prompting an adrenaline rush, and distract us from our mundane problems. And as for gross-out humor, it's no wonder kids are thrilled to hear and see all the words and actions we tell them they must control. Freud was on to something when he said that the essence of humor is the expression of "repressed instincts" camouflaged by "joke-work" to make it acceptable – and the two basic elements he identified were hostility and obscenity (For children, obscenity included what I will politely call "potty issues"). The fact that young males are the most valued by advertisers and the fact that TV producers tend to be young males themselves, probably exaggerates the trend toward these themes.

Producers know easy ways to get our attention, they know sure-fire ways to arouse us and they know how to get a cheap laugh. And sex, violence and crudeness usually translate pretty well to other cultures, making them easily exportable and much more profitable. It doesn't take a lot of creativity or artistic genius to get ratings this way. And now that there are so many channels that have to be programmed, the shortage of creative artists can be met by cranking out movies and TV shows with these themes. I am not saying there are no wonderful programs that probe issues involving sex, violence or even crudeness. But I am saying that there's a lot of stuff that makes money just by parading these elements for their own sake. Clearly, members of the entertainment industry are going to continue making their own choices based on what they think is important (which in many cases is simply making money), and nobody can stop them. That's The American Way.

But let's look at this situation from the perspective of parents. Here we have a device (more often several of them) that brings some good programming into our homes. Research in fact shows that educational television really makes a difference in children's success later on in life. But if we want that wonderful stuff, all the rest comes into our homes automatically, too. Certainly, if 50's parents had known what television would become, this automatic delivery system would not have been so readily adopted. That wonderful device has become a Trojan Horse, leaving us with no way to stem the tide of violence, sex and profanity into our homes – short of constant vigilance and repeatedly saying "no, you can't watch that."

Parents have very good reasons to want to exercise control. The consensus of rigorous academic research is that repeated exposure to media violence promotes desensitization, encourages aggressive attitudes and behaviors, and often causes repeated nightmares and enduring anxieties. Television news (which increasingly mimics entertainment television) has become a prominent player in these effects as well. But even putting the research aside for a moment, parents ought to have the fundamental right to choose what makes up their home environment. If they want to let in *Sesame Street* and *Blues Clues* while keeping out Jerry Springer, Howard Stern and Sally Jesse Raphael, they should have that freedom.

Here's where the v-chip should come in, but unfortunately, this device has been shunned by the industry. The v-chip is

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potentially so revolutionary that it should be A REALLY BIG, CONTINUING STORY. But it's a story that the industry is loath tell. The v-chip gives parents unprecedented power, power they richly deserve, but they cannot use their power if they don't hear about it. Is it a coincidence that this story is not getting out? I don't think so.

Being the author of *Mommy, I'm Scared,* a book that tells parents to be cautious about their children's television exposure, I know how difficult it is to get TV to help you promote such a message. But even before I was a book author, I came to see how the media felt about parental empowerment when, in May of 1997, I participated in a taping of *The Leeza Show.* The show was set up to invite parents to express their views about the television rating system, which had been introduced in January of that year. What happened at the taping was that parent after parent blasted the new age-based system, saying that it didn't give them the information they needed (did the program have sex, or violence, or what?) and that it enticed their children to watch programs designated for older kids and adults. NBC never permitted that program to air. Not coincidentally, NBC was and still is the only major network to refuse to go along with the subsequent agreement to modify the ratings with content letters.

The result of the media's reluctance to tell the story is that few parents know the basics about the v-chip: That it is available in new TV sets now and that it permits them to block programs automatically based on their ratings. And although many have heard about the TV rating system, practically none of them know that the FV stands for "Fantasy Violence" and the D stands for "Sexual Dialogue and Innuendo."

But there are even more important aspects of the story of the v-chip that the media are virtually silent about. One is that some v-chips permit parents to block unrated programs. When the FCC approved the electronic standard for the v-chip, many child advocacy groups urged the Commission to require the device to permit unrated-program blocking. The FCC decided not to mandate this option, but of course, it did not exclude it either. In my book, I encouraged parents to seek out the ability to block unrated programs in buying a new set or a v-chip set-top box, and I suggested they lobby manufacturers to provide this option. I read in the trade papers that the television industry was pressuring manufacturers not to provide unrated-program blocking. But fortunately, some manufacturers listened to parents rather than the television industry, and are giving parents this choice.

Of the few parents who have heard about unrated-program blocking, still fewer are hearing how powerful this choice makes them. First, blocking unrated programs allows parents to protect their young children from the news, which is not rated. By blocking unrated programs, they can prevent their child from stumbling into horrific images of victims of mass shootings or gruesome stories of child molestation and murder. (This seems like a no-brainer to parents, but it is incredibly controversial to almost everyone who works in news.) Second, blocking unrated programs gives the parents of very young children the power to turn normal television reception upside down – they can block everything except programs designated as TV-Y (the most child-friendly rating), something that comes the closest yet to having a child-proof cap for their TV. Third, blocking unrated programs allows parents to pressure distributors who are reluctant to rate their programs. Producers are not required to give their programs ratings, but if enough parents block all unrated

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programs, producers may decide it's a wise business decision to provide this information to parents. This is not censorship, it's capitalism.

And parents have another great tool that they're not hearing about. Many new TV's have the option of blocking entire channels. When I recently discovered that my v-chip was not blocking *South Park*, which according to *TV Guide* has a TV-MA rating, I simply started blocking the entire Comedy Channel. This doesn't mean we will never watch that channel. What it means is that my husband and I will select programs on that channel on a case-by-case basis. After all, it's our home and it's our ten-year-old child that we're concerned about.

Some members of the entertainment industry call this censorship. But let's be fair: The First Amendment was never intended to force anyone to listen or watch as somebody else exercised their right to free speech. Parents have a fundamental right – indeed a duty – to ensure that the environment in their own home is healthy for their children.

Why is the television industry so uptight about the v-chip and agitated about parents' ability to block unrated programs? Is *NYPD Blue* really dependent on a sizeable audience of child viewers? And does the nightly news really need to target the preschooler demographic? Of course not. What worries the media is that TV's enormous advantage is its automatic entry into homes. So much viewing is unintended – people just drift into watching programs because they're "on." Anything that interferes with this unthinking approach to television exposure may cut into revenues, they fear. This may be true to a certain extent. But it's hard to believe that parents who would block unrated programs during the day would forget that they can unblock them at night when they want to watch news and sports.

Parents who want to protect their children from what Hollywood and New York are selling to advertisers are not exercising censorship, but I'll tell you who is: It's the news media who won't provide adequate coverage of the v-chip or TV ratings, and won't give parents the honest story about the risks of exposure to television violence. When I speak to national conferences of parent groups, they are hungry for this information and bewildered by the fact that Jack Valenti, who is paid to support the media's interests, gets more air time than child advocates, mental health professionals and academic researchers. Most parents are shocked to hear that the v-chip is actually available now, and thrilled with the option of blocking unrated programs. And they wonder why they haven't been told before.

So my one request to the industry is, Please! Let the message out. Let parents know about about the risks involved in TV exposure and about the powers they have already won to control the content that enters their homes. You'll still make your profits on programs adults want to see, but parents who care will be given a choice. And maybe our kids will grow up a little bit healthier. ■

Joanne Cantor is Professor of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin and the author of *"Mommy, I'm Scared": How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them.* Harcourt Brace, 1998.

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A Post-Mortem Time for Racial Imperialism

With the cancellation of NBC's Homicide, network television viewers may have had their last reflective look at cultural diversity in America.

By Christopher Campbell

In an episode that first aired during the seventh and final season of the NBC drama *Homicide: Life on the Street*, Detective Meldrick Lewis (portrayed by Clark Johnson) tells his white partner to stand back as he enters a crowd of African-Americans gathered at a crime scene in an effort to collect information. One of several black detectives in the cast of the most racially reflective drama in television history, Lewis engages the group in a humorous, street-smart conversation, and he good-naturedly handles the teasing directed his way. Despite his hipness, he is unable to garner the crowd's cooperation in providing information about the murder that has taken place. Lewis walks off in a huff, shaking his head and muttering, "Black folks." Later in the episode, he finds himself trying to solicit clues on the same crime from a Caucasian crowd. This time, the rancorous group is not about to cooperate with Lewis or any other black cop. Again he exits, frustrated

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and mumbling, "White folks."

The scenes were not terribly significant to the development of the plot in the episode, nor did they mark any kind of milestone for the critically acclaimed series. In fact, they were just two of many scenes that made *Homicide* unique as a prime-time network program that regularly dealt matter-of-factly with race and racism. With NBC's decision to cancel the program after a remarkable seven-year run, network television audiences were left without a fictional prime-time TV show that regularly challenged them to think about the state of race relations in the United States. Considering the program's legacy — a critical success but a ratings failure — network audiences may never again see a program like it.

The program's racial candor was just one of several factors that set it apart from other prime-time dramas. It was shot on location in Baltimore with a hand-held camera, giving it a singular look. The writing and direction regularly strayed from the standard formula for network drama, and the program's producers constantly battled NBC censors in an effort to include dialogue and sequences that echoed the reality of big-city life. The show was about police work, but as *Washington Post* TV critic Tom Shales once observed, "*NYPD Blue* is about cops. *Homicide* is about life." The program's high- caliber soundtrack featured an eclectic blend of obscure hip-hop, jazz and roots rock. Its gritty realism made it a favorite with critics, and a *TV Guide* cover once dubbed it "The Best Show On TV You're Not Watching."

While critics across the country frothed over the show, mass audiences never found it. Barry Levinson, a Baltimore native and *Homicide*'s co-executive producer (along with Tom Fontana), told a PBS documentary crew in 1998, "We all know that we're not going to be in the top 10 [in the Nielsen ratings]. That's just not how the show works ultimately. It pushes too many buttons and has a little bit too much of an edge." The show regularly finished behind its primary network competitors, ABC's *20/20* and CBS's *Nash Bridges*. It also produced less advertising revenue than any other drama on network TV. Many factors – including its 10 p.m. Friday time slot (the under-30 crowd the program might have attracted had better things to do at the end of a work-week) – contributed to *Homicide*'s failure to find a major audience. Unfortunately, it may be that the program's demise will be used by network executives to discount future programs that push the edges and actually acknowledge the continuing existence of racism in America.

The show's cancellation in May of 1999 was more disturbing when a few weeks later the networks announced their prime-time line-ups for the following fall. Not one of the 26 new programs to air on ABC, CBS, NBC or Fox featured a person of color, prompting the NAACP to call for a boycott of the big four networks during the November sweeps. Actor-producer Tim Reid told *USA Today*, "There's more to it than just putting more people of color in front of the camera. I'll know things have changed when there are a lot more [people of color] in real decision-making positions in the executive wings of the networks." The only remaining network programs to feature predominantly African-American casts were situation comedies, and most of those on mini-networks UPN and WB. If there was to be any serious consideration of race and racism on prime-time network television, it was left up to news programming and a handful of network dramas with token minority presence.

Homicide addressed issues of racism in both direct and indirect ways. Unlike any other drama on network TV, the program's dialogue routinely included references to

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the race of characters and how their race affected their work, their lives, their perceptions. Some other ensemble-cast dramas include African-American cast members — usually just one, sometimes two, and forget about Native or Latino or Asian-Americans. (The casting directors of prime-time hospital dramas must be a healthy bunch because it seems doubtful that they have ever actually been inside a hospital). The programs generally ignore the fact that the race of the characters might have some impact on their lives. When the lead character in Fox's *Ally McBeal* dated an African-American man for several episodes during the 1998-99 season, the program never made reference to the issue of interracial dating, as if it had become an accepted part of life in the United States. (In reality, fewer than three percent of white women marry across racial lines, and relationships between white women and black men are probably the most controversial. CBS's *Murphy Brown* once backed off a story line that had the show's main character dating a black man after being inundated with complaints from black women.) The black cops, lawyers and doctors on *NYPD Blue, Law and Order, The Practice, ER* and *Chicago Hope* confront racism on an occasional basis (usually in a sub-plot), but they seem to live in a world where race is not much of a factor, a world created by producers who likely fear offending audiences and losing ratings points. The only recurrent prime-time racial conflict is that between *NYPD Blues'* Lieutenant Arthur Fancy (James McDaniel) and racist detective Andy Sipowicz (Dennis Franz). The view of race and racism on the show occasionally rivals the complexity and depth of *Homicide*, and McDaniel and Franz are two pros who bring a healthy dose of realism to scenes that go to the heart of their racial attitudes. But those scenes are infrequent, and Sipowicz – a bigot with a heart of gold – is not that far removed from Archie Bunker, the target of critics who argued that despite its efforts to promote tolerance, *All in the Family* largely worked to provide audiences with an excuse for racial hatred.

Homicide also provided a rare platform to showcase the talents of some of the best African-American actors. In 1997, James Earl Jones starred in a three-part episode as a Baltimore entrepreneur and community leader. Those episodes include sequences in which the program's black detectives struggle with the potential impact on the African-American community as they reluctantly pursue Jones' character as a suspect. Later that season, Alfre Woodard was featured as Dr. Roxanne Turner (a character resurrected from Fontana's *St. Elsewhere*), who is investigated for murder after administering a fatal dose of morphine to a cancer patient. That episode culminates with a remarkable debate in "The Box" (the Homicide unit's interrogation room) on the ethics and legality of euthanasia. Dr. Turner faces off with Detective Frank Pembleton, the character played by Andre Braugher during the first six seasons of *Homicide*, in a scene as powerful as any — ever — on network television. Pembleton wrestles with his Catholic morality as Woodard's Dr. Turner expounds on life, death, pain and mercy.

Braugher-as-Pembleton was responsible for many of the show's finest moments, and he was hailed by *Washington Post* critic Tom Shales as "the hands-down, all-out, drop-dead best actor in episodic TV." Certainly, the program's writers chased Braugher's talent, designing programs that would allow him to exercise his formidable acting muscles. In the early seasons, his intense interrogations of suspects in The Box were downright scary. The fourth season ended with Pembleton stroking out during a particularly fierce grilling. The following season,

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a medicated, stuttering Pembleton returned to work, and Braugher excelled in playing the once-fiery detective as a specter of his former self.

The 1998 PBS documentary *Anatomy of a Homicide* included a case study of an award-winning episode dubbed "The Subway," which aired during Braugher's final season with the show. In that episode, he spends most of the show in dialogue with a man (portrayed by film actor Vincent D'Onofrio) whose lower body is trapped between a train and a subway platform. Pembleton (like the audience) knows that when rescue workers remove the train and free his body, the man will die. In true *Homicide* fashion, the episode is hardly the tear-jerking, Hollywood-style schmaltz that such a plot might hatch. Instead, Pembleton spends the episode in a compelling conversation with a victim who does little to evoke any sympathy. The jerk-as-victim scenario allows Braugher to once again stretch the character of the multi-faceted Pembleton.

The program's other African-American cast members included Johnson as Lewis, Yaphet Kotto as Lieutenant Al Giardello (whose interesting Italian roots were regularly made a part of the show's events), Toni Lewis as Detective Terri Stivers, and, during the final season, Michael Michele as Detective Rene Sheppard and Giancarlo Esposito as FBI Agent Michael Giardello (who was cast as Lt. Giardello's estranged son after producers read that Esposito, a film actor, complained he never got any parts that alluded to his own Italian roots). The program's black characters regularly dealt with issues about race and race relations, but they also sprang from the scripts as complex and fully formed human beings who deal with the full gamut of emotions. *New York* magazine television critic John Leonard, a major *Homicide* fan, told PBS, "It's not just that you have lots of black characters, every week, who are all-powerful, but that they are complicated. They aren't there to teach white America a lesson in good behavior. They aren't there to be cautionary examples. They aren't there to be symbolic. They have their own complicated lives."

Some of *Homicide*'s finest episodes dealt head-on with issues of race. In an episode that originally aired during the 1997 season, a police officer is shot and killed during an armed robbery at the restaurant where he is working a security detail. As the story unfolds, viewers find out that the killer is actually the cop's partner. She is black. He is white. The other victims are members of the Vietnamese family that owned the restaurant. The episode includes dialogue in which the black cop shares her racist sentiments about the Vietnamese community, and the dead cop's white wife shares – with two black detectives – her husband's opinion of the black woman with whom he had worked. "She was affirmative action," she tells them. "Really," responds Pembleton, glancing at an uncomfortable Lewis. "Felt she was entitled. Everything on a silver platter. Big chip on her shoulder.... Lazy. No other way she could have gotten on the force," she says, echoing the convictions of the millions of white Americans who have voted to outlaw affirmative action in even the most liberal parts of the country. Ace detectives Pembleton and Lewis stand in telling contrast to the cop-gone-bad, leaving audiences to grapple with the subtleties and impact of contemporary racism. Eric Overmyer, a supervising producer on the show and the author of the "Saigon Rose" episode, says the program's racial consciousness "was part of the texture of the show because of the number of African-Americans in the cast." But he doesn't think that it was just race that contributed to the program's cancellation.

"The show's demographics were pecu-

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liar," he said. "The ratings were strong in the 'overnights,' which are based on the number of viewers in the top-25 markets, and we always beat *Nash Bridges*. But when the national ratings came in we would lose. I'm not sure if the problem was that the show was somehow 'too black,' but it may have been 'too urban.' People who live in big cities liked it." Overmyer thinks that people who live outside of large urban areas either couldn't identify with the program or simply dismissed it as a way of life they weren't interested in: "Maybe the problem was that it was racially more complex and nuanced than audiences in a lot of places could relate to. But it was also the subject matter and maybe even the title. *Homicide* just doesn't sound like a fun evening. For people who weren't familiar with the show, it might have seemed a little grim and depressing." Infrequent viewers possibly missed the program's darkly comic edge. "We had a very loyal but small audience, and we just couldn't build on it," says Overmyer.

With the program now existing only in reruns on Court TV (and NBC did sign on for a *Homicide* movie set to air during the February, 2000 sweeps), network television audiences cannot expect to see much racial introspection during prime-time programming. Indeed, honest discussions of race in American popular culture are pretty much limited to Spike Lee and the rap music industry. Television viewers willing to pay for premium channels have access to the only dramas being produced that feature predominantly African-American casts. HBO subscribers can see *Oz*, a grim prison drama also produced by Levinson and Fontana, and Showtime's line-up includes *The Hoop Life*. But neither show has the same kind of creative intensity as *Homicide*, nor do they deal with issues of race with the same kind of intricacy or authenticity. Meanwhile, on the major networks, programs are nearly as white as they were in pre-Civil Rights America, and the dominant, comic image of African-Americans on contemporary network programming is only a step or two beyond the 1950s stereotypes of *Amos 'n' Andy*. Prime-time is ready for African-American comics, singers and athletes, but as Bill Cosby once observed, "There is constant cycling and recycling of the message that [African-Americans] are not really real, that we are not real Americans."

In an era of increased cable competition, network television audiences are becoming more and more segmented; programs are designed to attract audiences by race, and it is working. Since 1998, the top ten programs viewed by African-American audiences have no overlap with the most-watched programs of white Americans. Last year, only two network dramas were in the top twenty of both white and black viewers: *Touched by an Angel* on CBS and NBC's *ER*. In the 1950s, radio survived as a medium by adapting to the competition from television by shedding its network, mass-audience identity and recreating itself as a target-audience bonanza for advertisers. Network television is now in a similar mode, and the big four networks seem to be writing off African-American audiences in an effort to keep a firm grip on the larger pool of white viewers. This leaves the mini-networks primed to draw audiences to black-cast sitcoms. Like their white-cast counterparts, the programs fit the highly predictable formula of 30-minute TV, and the black sitcoms in the late 1990s are descendants of a tradition begun in the 80s in which blackness is simply an aside to the programs' comic events. Sociologist Herman Gray, author of *Watching Race*, said that while *The Cosby Show, 227* and

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Amen were staged in black settings, they "seldom presented black subjectivities and cultural traditions as alternative perspectives on everyday life. As a cultural and experiential referent, blackness was seldom privileged or framed as a vantage point for critical insights, guides to action or explanations for what happens to African-American people in modern American society."

The potential for prime-time television to serve as a meaningful, shared cultural experience appears to be waning. Not that the networks ever learned much from their infrequent efforts to provide viewers with more broadly painted cultural hues. When *Roots* drew 80 million viewers for seven consecutive nights in 1977, TV executives did not see this as an indication that white viewers might actually show up for shows with predominantly African-American casts; instead, they looked at *Roots*' success only in terms of the potential for future miniseries. As *Los Angeles Times* TV critic Howard Rosenberg observed, "The gaudily profitable miniseries was viewed as watershed TV, something whose impact would endure. And it did. [*Roots*] and its more moderately successful sequel helped usher in an era of marathon miniseries. What didn't materialize was the Big Black Breakthrough in weekly drama that many were predicting."

Television's history includes only a few programs that have rivaled *Homicide* in their efforts to feature a realistic look at life outside of the mainstream. In 1963, a short-lived program titled *East Side, West Side* demonstrated the potential for the medium to explore issues of race and class. Described in Marlon Riggs' documentary *Color Adjustment* as a program that focused "not on The American Dream but on The American Nightmare," it survived just one season. It would be more than 20 years before another regular prime-time program would address race with any sense of realism or candor. In 1987, CBS aired *Frank's Place*, a half-hour program that blurred the lines between drama and comedy. It starred Tim Reid (who produced the show along with Hugh Wilson) and featured a predominantly African-American cast. Set at the Chez Louisianne, a New Orleans neighborhood restaurant, the program was described in a 1989 *Television Quarterly* article this way: "Unlike *Cosby*, which is essentially a show about class – a show supportive of both white and black middle-class values, and therefore safer and less threatening – *Frank's Place* is a show that was supremely about region and race. The show often filtered what it is to live in mainstream America through the viewpoints of folks who live in the margins – in a black working class section of New Orleans." The victim of poor promotional and scheduling efforts on the part of CBS, the show was a ratings disaster and also lasted just one year. Two Fox sitcoms that aired in the early 1990s – *Roc* and *South Central* – showed promise to continue the legacy of *Frank's Place*; both also quickly became victims of the network ax. The only two network dramas to ever feature black casts came and went after only a handful of episodes: NBC's *Harris and Company* in 1979 and, in 1993 on CBS, a James Earl Jones-led family drama, *Under One Roof*.

Considering the fate of other programs that openly addressed racism, *Homicide*'s seven-year run is remarkable. But networks will likely continue to avoid anything like it, especially in an era in which the mass audience is splintering. Prime-time network TV has likely missed its opportunity to provide America's multi-cultural audience with anything that might enlighten the mainstream about life on the margins. The civil rights era spawned two programs that featured African-American actors — Cosby in *I Spy*

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and Diahann Carroll in *Julia* – and these programs were the true predictors of what would dictate the role of race on network TV: Black characters who had smoothly assimilated into white America and whose race was barely even a factor in the scripts. Gray says such portrayals "appeal to the utopian desire in blacks and whites for racial oneness and equality while displacing the persistent reality of racism and racial inequality or the kinds of social struggles and cooperation required to eliminate them."

The 1970s marked the era of the "ghetto sitcom" (reruns of *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times*, the slightly more palatable progeny of *Amos 'n'Andy*, remain hot properties in syndication), but it was *The Cosby Show* that became the primary influence on African-American television programs since the late-1980s. Programmers piled onto the bandwagon of the hugely successful sitcom that moved black people into television's middle-class, and the networks have never looked back. The fact that many black Americans still lack the social, economic and educational opportunities needed to move out of the underclass is a fact that goes unnoticed in the world of the prime-time sitcom. The fictional success of African-Americans on TV has likely contributed to conservative public policy, especially the backlash on affirmative action. In their book *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream*, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis argue that for many audience members the perceived success of the fictional sitcom characters translates to a warped perception of American society. "After all," they write, "if the world is like it is on *The Cosby Show*, what is the problem?" The authors contend that for many white audience members, successful black TV characters reinforce the attitudes of the contemporary racism: "Although television portrays a world of equal opportunity, most white people know that in the world at large, black people achieve less material success, on the whole, than white people.... How can this knowledge be reconciled with the smiling faces of the Huxtables (the fictional *Cosby* family)? If we are blind to the roots of racial inequality embedded in our society's class structure, then there is only one way to reconcile this paradoxical state of affairs. If white people are disproportionately successful, then they must be disproportionately smarter or more willing to work hard."

With *Homicide*'s exit from the network schedule, American audiences are left with a very white prime-time world, one that is virtually void of racial consciousness. Perhaps the program would have survived in a better time-slot. NBC once considered moving *Homicide* to its best time slot — Thursdays at 10 p.m., following a group of highly rated sitcoms – but opted instead to try out a new hospital drama that had tested poorly in focus groups as a summer replacement series: *ER* became an immediate hit, and *Homicide* remained doomed to Friday nights. Who knows what might have happened? Overmyer thinks the Friday time-slot might have actually helped keep the program on the air for more than just a year or two: "The network didn't expect much out of that time slot, so we lasted a little longer than we might have, considering our ratings." He said that a shake-up in the executive ranks at NBC was the final blow for *Homicide*. When Don Ohlmeyer and Warren Littlefield left the network, the program was left without any major support at the network's highest level. Both liked the program, but new, younger executives had no investment in it. "The network television business is perplexing, and what happens only makes sense when you actually meet the people at the networks." says Overmyer. "They are run

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by younger and younger people who have gone straight from college to the network, so basically their whole lives have been in the television business, and they have no real life experience. The programs are becoming more and more derivative, and they just keep coming up with pale copies of other shows."

The economics of television made the cancellation of *Homicide* easy to predict. The program was expensive to produce – probably $200,000 more per episode than a new drama would cost the network — and NBC stood to reap superior advertising revenue from programs that cost less to produce. The network told Levinson that the decision "was not based on a creative choice. It was a business choice." Overmyer doubts the wisdom of the executives responsible for prime-time programming: "The networks are not just looking for the largest audience they can get. They're looking for the young, white, upscale audience that the advertisers want. It's all about getting the audiences with the most money, so they want programs they can market to the zip codes that have the highest income. They've always written off the Latino audience, and now they've ceded the African-American audience to WB."

Not only is it puzzling that the networks would write off minority audiences when the United States is predicted to be less than half white within 25 years, but they may be underestimating the very audience that they are trying to attract. *Miami Herald* columnist Leonard Pitts argues that white people are probably not as racist as the network executives seem to think, and that they actually will show up for shows that feature people of color: "I'm not arguing that enlightenment has struck mainstream America like lightening, but is it fair to say that white people will reflexively reject any programming that features nonwhite performers?" Pitts cites the success of Cosby, Oprah Winfrey and hip-hop music in questioning the whitewashing of prime-time on the major networks.

"Their thin rationalization reveals the same failings their programming often does," he says. "Timidity. Lack of vision. Creative impotence. We are seeing, in other words, a vintage display of the tired, pusillanimous 'thinking' that makes them repackage old shows under new names every year and trot them out as if we don't know the difference. And they wonder why they're losing viewers to cable."

When pressed, most television executives will admit that programming decisions are based on instincts as much as on market research. It could be that – when it comes to decisions about the role of race on prime time – those instincts will continue to lead to cancellations of programs that push the envelope, leaving audiences with weaker, whiter programs that won't necessarily translate to larger revenues. ■

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TV on the Internet: Dawn of a New Era?

By John V. Pavlik

Television pioneer Ralph Baruch knew the newly invented medium of television would exert a profound influence on society when, half a century ago, he saw a crowd gathered in front of a Manhattan storefront watching a test pattern, and three hours later, after Baruch had enjoyed dinner in a midtown restaurant, the crowd was still there, still watching. What Baruch couldn't have known then was how television and the more recently invented Internet would converge a half-century later. Today, anyone with a high-speed connection to the Internet (what is called broadband) will find television (or at least video and audio programming) increasingly integrated into their online experience. As digital television and broadband services roll out over the next decade, this integration will become increasingly seamless and ubiquitous.

Many television stations and all major networks maintain a site on the World Wide Web. Some of them provide at least some of their programming via the Web.

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A small but growing number of these and other programmers (such as CNN as well as some Internet-originals) provide near-broadcast quality programming via the Web, and some of it on demand. Audience members can view this programming at near-broadcast quality as long as they have a broadband Internet connection. What does this mean, exactly?

Delivering TV via the Internet

Let's start with an example. KRON in San Francisco, the local NBC affiliate station, is one of a small but growing number of stations providing programming, in real-time or on-demand, via the Internet (www.kron.com). Viewers can go to the station's web site and select from a variety of news and information options, including stories reported in text, audio or video format, what we might call "television," although this is an inadequate term to accurately describe the video programming accessed via the Internet.

One of the new twists to emerge in this "television on the Internet," Columbia University journalism professor Steve Ross points out, is that much of the video KRON puts online is really "tv news without the b-roll." B-roll, the video material used in television news to provide background or context for a current news report, is replaced online with more efficient text content that can not only provide the same information as in the b-roll, but can do so in even more depth, yet is not necessarily forced upon all viewers, whether they need or want that additional background. Ross, who has teamed up for five years with communications professional Don Middleberg on the definitive study of online media, the annual "Media in Cyberspace" study, in August offered the author a preview of the 1999 edition of the study focussing for the first time on the use of the Internet among broadcast news operations. The study, which is targeted for late 1999 release, surveyed more than 1,200 television news stations across the nation, and found that some 400 now maintain web sites. Although a great many of them provide online video, most of that is largely promotional material. Only 32 (or less than 3%), as of August, 1999, actually delivered on-demand video news content online.

Many stations are offering their programming via Internet-webcaster Broadcast.com, or directly via their own "servers" using RealPlayer or Windows Media Player software. KRON uses RealPlayer. Broadcast.com provides the necessary server hardware and software (the equivalent in the traditional broadcast television world of the transmission tower and frequency), and the station provides the digital content, audio and video. Depending on the audience member's technical setup (i.e., what kind of computer, software and network connection, or speed, aka bandwidth), he or she can connect to a live or a recorded program and begin watching and listening via computer. There are two basic ways s/he can access the program via the Internet. One can download the program, which means transferring the entire audio/video file, storing it on a local computer storage device, and then watching it whenever one likes, as often as one likes. Because video files can be very big (depending on the compression algorithm, a minute of video can take 10-100 megabytes of storage), downloading can be very slow, even with a broadband connection. That's why DVD is more popular for entire digital movies.

A second option is to stream the file of audio/video, also known as the television program. In the case of streaming video, a software program known as a codec (compression/decompression) buffers a few seconds of the video, and then the program begins playing on the client's (audience member's) computer, with a few more seconds of material continually

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being sent via the Internet. The viewer doesn't need to wait to view the program this way, but can't necessarily view the program again on demand unless s/he connects to the Internet and to the television station's web site. If there's a great deal of demand on the server or the network, streaming may not always provide an uninterruptable video flow in today's network. As the network improves, as consumers get access to more bandwidth, streaming media will continue to improve in quality and reliability (one good source of news about streaming media is the Streaming Media Newsletterr, available at http:// www.streamingmedia.com). On today's Internet, streaming media are the more common alternative for delivering "tv" via the Web. Most of the video, or "tv," streamed via the Internet today is fairly poor quality. It is often fuzzy, only a few frames per second, and only a few inches in image size, and often breaks up or is interrupted by "network congestion."

Costs and Benefits of Online TV

One of the major reasons many stations have lagged behind in developing television on the Internet is cost. Jim Topping, former general manager of KGO-TV (KRON's ABC-owned competition in San Francisco) and now senior vice president at ABC Owned TV Stations, notes that the installation of a powerful video server cost KGO-TV some $9 million. Other technology to help the station go digital cost another $12-14 million. Although this investment has established KGO-TV as probably the most state-of-the-art television station in the nation, with the capability to deliver any of its programming at high quality and on-demand via the Internet or other broadband media (e.g., asynchronous transfer mode, or ATM, is an alternative high-speed communications service capable of delivering broadcast quality video), it's also demonstrated the financial challenge faced by other stations in the process of going digital and going online with their video content. Of course, a $9 million investment is the high-end approach, and is not necessary to start transmitting digital video on the Internet. Many operations have launched their efforts for far less, with perhaps $100,000 for equipment and that much more for the technical staff to run the server. This low-cost approach is what has opened the door to many independent producers who are now transmitting television-like programming on the Internet, a subject that will be examined in detail later in this article.

One technology that is redefining the cost structure of digital programming is nicknamed "MP3," which refers to MPEG-1 Audio Layer III (MPEG stands for Moving Picture Experts Group), and is known colloquially as the compressed-file format for near-CD quality music delivered via the Internet. It is also known as the format for pirated music, and has been a thorn in the side of the established recording industry for more than two years. This technology emerged as part of the MPEG compression standard (for digital video and audio) originally developed under the leadership of Leonardo Chiariglione, the Italian new-media guru. Chiariglione, who heads the Multimedia Services and Technologies division of CSELT, the research arm of the Telecom Italia group, also heads FIPA, the Foundation for Intelligent Physical Agents, and was named the executive director of the Secure Digital Music Initiative (SDMI) in the spring of 1999.

Launched by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), SDMI is a non-profit organization of more than 130 companies and organizations covering a wide industry spectrum: recording industry companies, information technology

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companies, web companies, telecommunications, etc. Some might say Chiariglione's task is to put the genie back in the bottle. Another way to look at it, however, and perhaps a more accurate way, is that SDMI is designed to add a layer of intellectual-property protection, sort of a digital wrapper, to the content contained in the compression layer called MP3. Importantly, this wrapper can be extended to protect all online digital content, including video.

MP3 compresses audio files (whether music or any other audio) at high quality (near CD quality, but close enough for most human ears). College students, and many other young people, typically have a computer and Internet access, and a love for music. The one thing they lack is a lot of money (at least for now). MP3 offers a perfect solution to the college student dilemma—how to get all the music they want at the quality they want without paying much money for it. MP3 music files are relatively small, a couple megabytes, which can be downloaded quickly, or streamed almost instantly and very reliably, and played back either on a computer or a portable MP3 player, such as the popular Diamond Rio. Established recording companies, especially the major studios, have vehemently objected to MP3, because it provides a means of infinite duplication and dissemination of music, sometimes at no cost, and thereby undermines the existing business model for recorded music distribution.

People can transmit files easily and perfectly, contributing to what is called "piracy," costing the studios a great deal of revenue (although some contend that MP3 will help the overall recording industry grow, and despite some piracy, even more profits will result). In addition, many artists, including everyone from rapper Chuck D. of Public Enemy to Peter Cetera of Chicago to Alanis Morissette have all signed on with MP3, not just because they are drawn to the technology for its own sake, but because the revenue split is much more favorable to the recording artist. MP3 offers musicians the ability to take in 50% of the gross revenue for their music, compared to the standard 10% offered in recording industry contracts. Today, SDMI promises to offer a viable competitor to MP3 that the major labels will find acceptable. Ultimately, however, the question may be whether the consumer sees value in a technology (SDMI) that can insure the quality, authenticity and ownership of the programming they receive online.

The growth of MP3 suggests that Internet delivered programming may be a viable business; it also charts a possible course for TV on the Internet. Chiariglione

People can transmit files easily, contributing to "piracy"

argues persuasively, however, that the MP3 phenomenon does not demonstrate the viability of an Internet delivered programming business model. "The way I see the prevailing use of MP3 is the following," he explains.

"There is a wealth of assets that history has made openly available and that now technology allows people to take away for free. Exploiting those assets, people, not the legitimate owners, are making money. To me this looks like 16th-century Rome, where the Popes plundered the remains of imperial Rome to build their palaces: *quod non fecerunt barbari fecerunt Barberini* (what barbarians did not do, Barberinis—a family that provided some Popes—did)."

Those who are feeling an immediate MP3-class piracy threat are the major movie studios. They have traditionally made their money from a business model

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not that different from the music recording industry. Consumers pay for their own copies of the program, or pay to view/listen to a performance or exhibition (e.g., in a theater or at a concert). Pirated copies of movies or music threaten this business model.

Commercial broadcast television typically practices a different business model. Programs are usually offered at no cost to viewers with revenues coming from program sponsors or advertisers. Subscription television or fixed media (e.g., DVD, videotape) TV are much more akin to film and music. Pirated first-run movies are already being distributed via the Internet. College students and other young people have already obtained or produced digital copies of The Phantom Menace and begun sending them illegally via the Internet. Concerns about intellectual-property theft as well as unwanted competition have limited some programmers' forays online. Also, existing distribution agreements with traditional television programmers have also limited some online video transmission.

On-Line Program Guide Benefits Everyone

One area where everyone benefits from the development of TV on the Internet at virtually no cost is the introduction of the online programming guide (similar to what are called Electronic Program Guides,EPGs, in digital television or video). As the "million channel universe" rapidly replaces John Malone's antiquated "500 channel universe," the online program guide is more than a luxury, however; it is a necessity. Leading the way in the online program guides today is tvguide.com, the online version of TV Guide. Tvguide.com offers viewers a fully interactive and keyword searchable guide to the coming week's programming on broadcast (whether delivered terrestrially, via satellite or the Internet) and cable television.

In addition, the articles and other content of the weekly magazine are posted online at no cost to the viewer. The site also features daily news about television and other media, a database on more than 40,000 movies, and digital video. One thing tvguide.com doesn't provide is a comprehensive listing on Internet-original online tv programming. Some regional and online programming guides are attempting to do this. One of the best is FasTV (www.fastv.com), which offers both an online video program guide (categories include news, sports, business, entertainment and lifestyles) as well as a keyword search engine (i.e., type in what you're looking for, and it will find online video that matches your search; I searched for Serena Williams and got 12 clips from the U.S. Tennis Open Championship and more). The site offers a variety of intriguing digital video tools, including fast forwarding through a clip, a clickable scene change frame bar, and a full-text transcript of each video clip.

Thanks to the tiny southwest Pacific Ocean island nation of Tuvalu (part of an archipelago in eastern Micronesia), one issue that may soon get much simpler is finding television content on the Internet. Because of the spelling of its name, Tuvalu has been assigned the new .TV top-level Internet domain name (TLD). The .TV domain name functions just as other Internet domains such as .COM, .NET and .ORG. The .TV Corporation (internet.tv) of Toronto, Canada is the exclusive worldwide registrar for the .TV top-level domain (TLD), under an agreement signed last year by Tuvalu's Prime Minister Bikenibeu Paeniu. Now, any program provider anywhere in the world can purchase a .TV domain name for its site, making it considerably easier for those interested in Internet TV to find online video programming. The initial price to register a .TV domain

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name is US$1,000 for the first year with a $500 annual renewal fee, although companies competing for names may bid up the price. "The majority of revenues from the .TV domain registry are used to help develop Tuvalu," the .TV Corporation reports.

Programming Online

The development of television programming on the Internet has given rise to at least three types of online programming (see Table 1). First is the transfer of off-line television programming to digital format served up directly and on-demand via the Internet. This type of programming is perhaps most common, although there is no definitive study yet available to test this hypothesis. There are examples from virtually every type of programming category on traditional, or classic television (over-the-air, cable, or direct-to-home satellite), ranging from news (regional, national and international), to sports, to entertainment, but among the most frequently encountered "television" programming of this type is promotional.

Whether they are transmitting movie trailers, soap opera clips or sitcom excerpts, many stations and other program providers have put short segments of their upcoming television programs online to promote viewer interest. A good example is Warner Bros. (www.warnerbros.com) with video clips from a variety of television series, including *Seinfeld*, and *Babylon 5* and other WB programs. Warner Bros.' forthcoming new online programming channel, Entertaindom (http://www.entertaindom.com/flash2.html), promises extensive original online video programming, however, with *Superman* and at least five other TV series slated to run on its Multipath Movie Channel (www.variety.com). Clips from NBC TV series, including an archive of video clips from 1998's *Saturday Night Live* season, are also available online (www.videoseeker.com).

The most common type of non-promotional programming thus far from over-the-air television stations is news and public affairs. CNN.com, MSNBC.com, CBS News, ABC News and NBC News are among the leaders in providing online video news, with the CBS Boston affiliate WBZ providing exceptional regional online video news, as well as Seattle CBS affiliate KIRO also a leader. A notable feature of CNN.com's online video offerings has included an advanced digital video search tool from "Virage," which enables the viewer to search through a video based on keywords in the audio transcript of a video, instantly accessing and playing the relevant video segment.

Last September ABCNews.com launched the first regularly scheduled network television-quality live Internet-only video news program. The 15-minute show is anchored by veteran journalist Sam Donaldson and airs on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 12:30 p.m. EST. The program offers news reports on a range of topics "from politics to business, special features, debate, analysis and occasional newsmaker interviews," says ABC News. The debut Webcast featured FCC Chairman Bill Kennard, and Rob Glaser, founder and CEO of RealNetworks, a leading provider of streaming media on the Internet (http://www.realnetworks.com/). The show also offers real-time chat with Donaldson or his guests (i.e., you can submit questions via e-mail).

NBC San Francisco affiliate KRON is another outstanding regional online video news provider. A third regional star is the Tribune Company, whose flagship newspaper *The Chicago Tribune* and flagship television station WGN are part of a converged news operation providing considerable quality online video news. A leading provider of international video

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news online is the BBC World Service, which provides live video news feeds online. Video news from other parts of the world is also available, including Japan, where Tokyo Broadcasting and Web Gendai are among the leaders in a country with fairly advanced digital and high-definition television programming. Other specialized business and technology video news is provided online by Bloomberg, ZDTV and PC Week. Online sports video leaders, especially sports news, including CNNSI.com, ESPN.com, CBSsportsline.com and Fox Sports. The online video entertainment arena is led by a variety of internet-originals, who are discussed later in the article. Most traditional television entertainment programmers prefer to provide only online promotional video feeds, as is the case with HBO. One exception is Comedy Central, which provides much of its television programming online on-demand. Some educational video content is provided online, as well, with WGBH of Boston providing live video feeds and other video programming online. The Weather Channel is the premier provider of online video weather reporting, with live and on-demand (recorded) programs available. Music videos, including live and recorded performances are also available online, including from Sonicnet.com and others.

The recently announced merger of Viacom and CBS is likely to open up much greater opportunities for television, or video, on the Internet, although there has been no such official announcement of such possibilities from Viacom or CBS yet in this regard. With its new Internet division, MTVi, including both MTV and VH-1, as well as its recently acquired SonicNet (a premier provider of online music), Viacom CBS is positioned well to provide not only online music but also online music video. Its Nickelodeon, already one of the most popular children's destination on the Web with 2.4 million registered users (The Industry Standard, www.thestandard.com), also is well positioned to bring more online video. Combined with CBS video news strength, the Viacom CBS empire is poised to take a leadership position on many online television fronts. Competition is coming in many areas, including (http://jamtv.tunes.com/)which offers more than 12,000 music video clips, music news and features via the Internet.

The second broad category of online video programming is Internet original programming. This began with so-called "web-cams," which have enjoyed enormous popularity around the world (literally thousands of web-cams have provided typically live feeds of everything from a coffee pot at Oxford to a seemingly endless series of web-cams observing people's private lives uncensored). This early experimentation, however, has given rise to much more serious online-original video programming in recent months.

The Internet opens TV to thousands of new program providers

Television programming has traditionally been provided to the public by a limited set of program providers. They have made their programming available on a scheduled basis, packaged for mass audiences and broadcast according to a controlled schedule. Just as MP3 opens the music recording industry to potentially thousands of new artists (i.e., program providers), the Internet opens the TV business to thousands, perhaps millions, of new TV program providers. These providers might be the traditional providers of TV programming, or they might be everyone from content providers from other media, such as radio or news-

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papers who wish to expand their programming into the multimedia realm, to not-for-profit or commercial institutions that wish to produce and distribute their own programming. Programmers could range from The Freedom Forum, a large media-oriented foundation that now produces extensive content delivered via its Web site, Free!. to such specialized industry-specific technical content providers (e.g., in health care, insurance) and adult-oriented content providers (e.g., the pornography industry, which has found a ready, willing and lucrative market online with an insatiable appetite for video delivered on-demand), to programming produced by individuals who yearn for self-expression and have finally found their own, nearly free, global medium.

The types of specialization of Internet TV go even beyond these, however. Perhaps most interesting is the rise of online TV shows unique to the Internet—programs produced for the Internet and available online. One of the most interesting examples is Pseudo TV (www.pseudo.com), a leading source of live and on-demand (accessed from digital archives over the Internet) Internet-TV programming about the world of Internet technology. Founded by Josh Harris, Pseudo offers a variety of some 55 programs, including Biztech TV (www.biztechtv.com) and Jason Calacanis' Silicon Alley Reporter TV show (www.siliconalleyreporter.com), which focuses on the social, cultural and economic impact of new media technology.

With a talk-show format, the Calacanis' weekly program features guests from New York's Silicon Alley and draws an increasingly global audience numbering in the thousands. This may be small by conventional broadcast TV standards, but is not so different from TV in the late 1940s, when TV was a new medium, and signals the coming specialization of TV online. Moreover, programs like the Silicon Alley Reporter TV show draw sponsors to support free programming, and offer viewers online participation through chat services. This is a model very similar to that already under development for WebTV. A June 1999 Arbitron NewMedia Internet study shows that almost three-quarters of Internet users in the U.S. spend up to 30 minutes a week watching streaming video. Nearly half plan to watch more streaming video in the future. The survey was conducted by Northstar Interactive, an Arbitron NewMedia company and based on Web-based interviews with 1,527 Internet Webcast users through random intercepts at the broadcast.com and Vtuner.com web sites.

Foreigntv.com is another fascinating Internet TV original. Foreigntv.com offers its online viewers an expanding slate of programming from around the world, beginning with cultural programming (such as documentaries independently produced about life in Cuba) and now expanding into news and public affairs, much of it with a distinctly non-U.S. point of view. One of the reasons foreigntv.com has captured a great deal of mainstream media attention is that one of the founders is Peter Arnett, a former CNN correspondent who made his fame during the Persian Gulf War as the only U.S. correspondent to report from Baghdad. Another online-only TV venture was also founded by a former CNN correspondent and celebrity. Lou Dobbs, known for his business reporting acumen, recently founded space.com, whose programming features original reporting about developments in space. Also entering the marketplace are universities (both traditional, such as Columbia University, and virtual, such as International University), which are not only bringing video programming into their distance-learning efforts but also delivering video via the web to general audiences with an interest in the intellectual life of the world's great centers of

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learning and knowledge.

One of the most innovative developers of quality programming in the online arena is also one of the best independent program producers in the off-line television world. The Broadcast News Network, or BNN, is a 15-year-old company with roots in so-called "old media" but embraces a philosophy that is much more tightly in tune with the redefined rulebook of new media. Founder and BNN executive producer Steven Rosenbaum says, "Old rules had the power in the hands of the content distributors—because distribution was the bottleneck. Today, with digital cameras making broadcast TV pictures for less that $4,000.00, and web server technology and pipe (see section below on "broadband") growing each day—the pivot is changing. Quality content will rule—and by quality I mean content that users/viewers want and engage."

Since its founding, BNN has grown with network clients including CBS News' *48 Hours*, A&E's Investigative Reports, Court TV, The Sci-Fi Channel, the History Channel, MTV, Fox Family, MetroChannels and VH1. BNN's objective is (www.BNNTV.com), Rosenbaum explains, "to empower viewers to make television, and act as an agent to package and polish this content to enhance value." Hence MTV Unfiltered—which BNN helped launch in 1996—"was slightly ahead of its time. We had viewers call in, request cameras, and shoot their own stories. The results were extraordinary. We believe that user content will demand stations to rethink the broadcast paradigm. With projects like CameraPlanet (www.cameraplanet.com) we're creating new communities around digital video and storytelling. We'll let the audience tell us if that's what they want." Rosenbaum believes this new mode of "participatory programming" will expand far beyond news and information. "We're now in the pilot phase of a daily entertainment/comedy program in which viewers will get to script the lines of one of the main characters in real-time."

Another online original program provider generating considerable attention in the online world is the Digital Entertainment Network (DEN, at www.den.net). DEN introduced its first slate off online video programs May 10, 1999, including 30 interactive television pilots. DEN's programming is available via RealPlayer, Windows Media Player and QuickTime. As of August 1999, its shows included a slate of 11 programs streamed online, including *Hip Hop Missive* (an original production on hip hop culture), *Rated DG* (a movie review program), *Exoticom* (a travel show) and *Royal Standard* (a serial set in the 21st century, where "the descendants of the Titans go head to head with the incarnation of immortal evil...but Evil has gone Corporate"). With programming that brings to mind the WB, DEN has clearly targeted the under 35 generation. DEN has also captured two charter-member advertising sponsors, Pepsi and Ford.

A third online original program provider generating considerable buzz is ON2 (on2.com). Unfortunately, at this writing, the site had not yet actually put any of its content online. But promises to offer "a revolutionary network of web channels developed exclusively for the growing number of broadband-connected Web users. On2.com provides (or promises to) full-motion, television-quality video; incredible-sounding audio; plus the informative, interactive content that you expect from the Web."

Reflecting the growing abundance on original online video entertainment, wirebreak.com is an interesting provider of off-beat comedy fare (http:// ww1.wirebreak.com/home/index.html). Among wirebreak's offerings are a series of short video programs, typically in three- to five-minute segments accessed on demand and run via RealPlayer G2 at network speeds

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of 56k, 100k or 300k; the faster the speed of the network connection for the user (or the greater the bandwidth), the better the quality of the video. Running at 300k, the video shown in a small window is quite good, with crisp resolution and about 15 frames per second, and the audio is very good; at full screen, there is some pixelation in the video. Typical original programs include *Girls Locker Room Talk*, featuring women talking frankly mostly about sex. It's reminiscent of HBO's *Sex in the City*." A show I found myself watching and interacting with at some length was *Welcome to Venice*, a comedy set in California, not Italy. The segment I saw opened with about a three-minute clip, followed by a choice for the viewer, either (a), to train in the martial arts with "Barry," or (b), to train with master "Bruce Levi." I tried, and enjoyed, both options. More viewer options were available at the conclusion of these clips. Accompanying the video programming was an interactive, animated advertisement from Gillette Mach 3 that ran as the video program was loading.

An interesting government provider of online video is NASA, whose NASA.gov site offers live video web casts of various NASA missions. In fact, these live video feeds have become increasingly valuable in both education and journalism. Dan Dubno, producer and technologist for CBS News Special Events, reports that, "For a journalist who is used to watching live NASA feeds via satellite, it is now even easier to watch the live feeds on my desktop via the Internet."

The Importance of Sports Online

Sports is an important entertainment area where online video is taking off. On September 26, 1999, NFL.com began live transmission of video of selected games in progress (including the matchup of the Green Bay Packers and the Minnesota Vikings) to three locations outside the U.S. Online fans with high-bandwidth Internet access could watch NFL games live via the Internet in the Netherlands and Austria, and on a two-day delayed basis in Singapore. The video feeds are available to subscribers to "chello broadband," Europe's first broadband internet service provider, and SingTel Magix, a digital subscriber line service in Singapore.

More venues are likely soon. Not to be outdone, on November 2, 1999, coinciding with the start of the National Basketball Association season, the NBA launched its own online television network via the Internet. Commissioner David Stern says, "NBA.com TV represents the convergence of the Internet, television and basketball. By combining the immediacy and depth of information from NBA.com with current and historical television programming from the NBA, NBA.com TV will offer our fans complete, round-the-clock coverage of the league." NBA.com TV provides live game "look-ins" (brief video of games in progress), studio shows, archival video on demand and more. The 24-hour sports video network will initially be available only on DirecTV, the direct-to-home satellite television and Internet service provider (http://www.nba.com/news/nbacom_tv_launch.html).

One site that is something of a hybrid of original Internet video programming and an aggregator of digital video originally aired on television is the Alternative Entertainment Network TV (AENTV, http://www.aentv.com/). Los Angeles-based AENTV was named one of the ``10 Great Video Sites on the Internet" by Broadcasting & Cable magazine (the others are all discussed elsewhere in this article; see http://www.broadcastingcable.com/search/article.asp?articleID=692233997 for the full list).

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Table 1

Selected Online Video Program Providers*

Online Programmer	Programming	URL (Web address)
AENTV	Aggregator, some original	www.aentv.com
NBA.com TV	Sports: Basketball	www.nba.com
NFL.com	Sports: Football	www.nfl.com
NASA	Original space science	www.nasa.gov
Wirebreak	Original Entertainment, adult comedy	www.wirebreak.com
Digital Entertainment Network	Original Entertainment, arts, culture	www.den.com
Pseudo TV	Original programming, entertainment, news, culture	www.pseudo.com
MTVi	Music video, music news	www.mtvi.com
Tunes.com	Music video, music news	http://jamtv.tunes.com/
Broadcast News Network	Original programming	www.cameraplanet.com; www.bnntv.com
CNN (including CNNsi)	Original and repackaged cable news	www.cnn.com
MSNBC	Original and repackaged cable news	www.msnbc.com
NBC (and selected affiliates)	Original and repackaged TV programming	www.videoseeker.com
Wamer Bros.	Repackaged TV programming, movie trailers	www.wamerbros.com
ABC (and selected affiliates)	Original and repackaged TV programming, news	www.abc.com
CBS (and selected affiliates)	Original and repackaged TV programming, news	www.cbs.com
FasTV	Online video aggregator, directory, search engine	www.fastv.com
Space.com	Original programming on space news, features	www.space.com
ForeignTV.com	Aggregator, some original international news and features	www.foriegntv.com

**Note: Not every site mentioned in the article is included in this table.*

AENTV owns or has aggregated hundreds of hours of programming of a diverse range of TV talent, including Sonny & Cher, the Smothers Brothers, the Academy Awards archive library and television classics from the "Golden Age," such as the Burns and Allen show, the Frank Sinatra Show (I enjoyed watching and listening to Frank sing Cole Porter's classic, "I've got you under my skin") and the $64,000 Question. The shows are all available on-demand for watching at no cost to the viewer. The site is advertising sponsored. iNEXTV Corporation, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Ampex Corporation, recently acquired a majority interest in AENTV.

One extensive area of online video that won't get much exposure here (because it is so vast it warrants an entire article itself) is sexually explicit, erotic or pornographic programming. Adult sites have been heavily involved in online video probably as long or longer than any other area of online programming, and have been doing so profitably. Their users have a high demand for online video, on-demand, live and interactive. If you're interested in viewing any of this content, some of it is available free, but it is increasingly available on a pay-per-view or members-only subscription basis. It's easy to find; simply do a keyword search under any of a variety of terms (which you can easily figure out) using any of the standard search tools or directories (e.g., Yahoo!, Google.com, lycos.com). Just be careful: once you visit one of these sites, you're likely to start receiving unexpected e-mail from a wide range of commercial interests.

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Directions in Online TV

Three developments suggest where television on the Internet is headed. The first is the advent of the next generation of streaming media products. Second is improved video compression technology. Third is the coming widespread rollout of broadband communication services.

Streaming media have been delivering poor quality video, and reasonably good quality audio, for some two years. But the introduction of Apple's Quicktime 4.0 and Digital Bitcasting's thinned MPEG dramatically transforms the quality of streaming video. Apple's Quicktime 4.0 is already fairly widely known and used. Building on earlier versions, QT 4.0 delivers high quality video and audio via the Internet. It's nothing like the small video windows most computer users are used to seeing when watching Internet TV. The most dramatic use of QT 4.0 to date was not for television; rather George Lucas used QT 4.0 to deliver the trailers for his eagerly awaited Star Wars prequel, *The Phantom Menace*, to millions of eagerly awaiting fans in the Spring of 1999. The video was available in either streaming or downloadable format, for either Apple or Windows computer users. Depending on one's Internet connection, one could view the trailers in high resolution, 24 frames per second video windows as large as 8 x 4.5 inches (approximately the 16:9 aspect ratio of film). Moreover, the audio was of very high quality, using the MP3 technology to deliver near-CD quality stereo sound. Watching the trailer via a 12-year-old friend's computer equipped with Dolby sound, the author can attest, was very near the theatrical experience (at least compared to some of the multiplex cinema's I've sat in), and certainly as good as watching on a regular TV set. And watching the trailers for *South Park* was even better than in a theater, because I could easily turn it off.

Digital Bitcasting's thinned MPEG video format offers a second glimpse into the future of TV on the Internet. MPEG-2 is the compression format for delivering broadcast- quality video, and is what is used for DVD and direct-to-home satellite broadcasting, and will be the format for terrestrially delivered digital video broadcasts. Although MPEG is technically not quite the equal to MPEG-2, it is a close second, at least to the untrained eye. Digital Bitcasting's thinned MPEG is a technical solution for delivering MPEG quality video over the Internet today, and provides a natural upgrade path from MPEG1 to MPEG2 or MPEG4 as bandwidth improves in the next five to ten years.

"The Bitcasting thinned MPEG solution is being deployed right now by high-speed cable providers like Comcast and Road-Runner and DSL service providers like France Telcom and Hong Kong Telcom," reports Bitcasting's president, Peter Dougherty. If one has an Internet connection of at least 300 kilobits per second, thinned MPEG can deliver full-screen, 30 frames per second, high resolution video, as well as streamed MP3 audio. The key difference between streamed MPEG and QT 4.0 is the size of the video window. To the viewer at home, who may be used to watching video on a 13-inch screen delivered via either a roof-top antenna or via a standard analog cable system, the difference in quality between Internet-delivered video and over-the-air TV may be imperceptible. There will, of course, be a substantial difference in video quality between Internet TV and HDTV, but it will be many years before most viewers are able to view HDTV in their homes. Moreover, the on-demand, interactive nature of Internet TV are added values simply not possible via conventionally broadcast TV

Both QT 4.0 and Digital Bitcasting's

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players are downloadable free to the end user, although not to the program broadcaster. The Bitcasting server is sold as an upgrade to Real Player G2, an emerging platform for streaming media. Windows Media Player also incorporates its own full-screen video viewer, with MP3 sound, and thus offers a third alternative for near broadcast quality programming. Pixelon.com is a new fourth option.

Broadband Internet refers to high-bandwidth, or high-speed, communication services such as the cable modem or the telephone companies' T1 and Digital Subscriber Line (DSL is the general name of the technology to digitize the telephone subscriber line; xDSL refers to Asymmetric DSL, or ADSL, and Very High Bitrate DSL, or VDSL, which are even faster than basic DSL). Classic analog television and radio services are broadband, but they are not interactive. Bandwidth available for Internet service has traditionally been narrowband, or slow via dial-up modems typically delivering anywhere from 28 kilobits to 56 kilobits per second. Video at these narrowband rates is very limited, usually a small window of jerky motion, low resolution imagery and marginally better sound (which requires less bandwidth).

All This is Set to Change

All this is set to change as low-cost bandwidth begins to roll-out nationwide and low-cost digital consumer access devices roll out ubiquitously. Broadcast.com among others is already testing broadband content delivery via cable modems. Cable modems are roughly 174 times faster (about 10 megabits per second) than 56k modems. The early winner in the bandwidth battle may be the cable companies that are rolling out nationwide their digital set-top boxes and modems. Cable programmers such as HBO have launched a major initiative (March 6, 1999) with a regular schedule of movies in HDTV.

These companies are in a strong position to deliver low-cost broadband services and digital programming to the home. @Home, Time Warner's RoadRunner and Cablevision's Optimum TV are already delivering high-speed Internet access and broadband DTV services in a growing number of markets. Road Runner, the high-speed online service jointly owned by MediaOne Group, Time Warner, Microsoft Corp., Compaq Corp., and Advance/Newhouse, has more than 100,000 customers in fourteen states served by Time Warner Cable and MediaOne (www.timewarner.com, March 4, 1999). Optimum TV serves 15 markets, including parts of New York City, Long Island, and Cleveland, Ohio (www.cablevision.com) and @Home, a derivative of cable giant TCI, mainly serves suburban Denver, Colorado. AT&T has acquired TCI for $48 billion , breaking the barrier between voice and video services.

Telephone companies have lagged somewhat behind in their delivery of high speed Internet and broadband digital video services to the home, with the most promising technology, Digital Subscriber Line (DSL), available in only a handful of markets. Leading Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs) rolling out DSL and xDSL services include Bell Atlantic (http://www.bellatlantic.com/), Southwestern Bell (http://www.swbell.com/), US West (www.uswest.com) and others. Top DSL speeds are somewhat slower than the top cable modem bit rates, with high-end speeds for DSL some 25-50 times faster (about 2 megabits per second) than typical dial-up modems (56k). The major problem with cable modems is that the bandwidth is shared among users, so that if there is a large number of subscribers in a given area, the actual bandwidth available to any one user can be significantly

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Table 2
Broadband Alternatives

Broadband Services	1998 Subscribers	1999 Subscribers	Homes Passed
DSL North America	439,000	748,000	34.7 million
Cable Modem/total	535,000	1.5 million	22 million
@Home (TCI/ATT)	330,000	850,000	
Road Runner (TW)	180,000	550,000	
Other	25,000	100,000	
Satellite			Universal
Home DirecPC	90,000	300,000	
Business VSAT	220,000	400,000	

Sources: Telechoice (http://www.telechoice.com); DirecPC (http://www.direcpc.com/), company information; Kinetic Research; Satellite Industry Association; Interactive Week, March 8, "US West Readies Video-On-Demand", page 12; "Telecentury Transitions: Wireless Telephony, Electronic Commerce, and Digital Television in the Global Marketplace," A Publication of the Japan-U.S. Telecommunications Research Institute, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA, 1999: 100.

reduced. In contrast, DSL is not shared; it operates over the switched telephone network, so the subscriber always has the maximum bandwidth available. Thus, in the short-run, cable modems may do quite well, but over time, as more subscribers sign up, and network congestion increases, DSL subscribers may have an advantage.

Both cable modems and DSL services can be left on continuously, so customers don't have to dial in every time they want to send or receive e-mail, surf the Web, or order on-demand digital video. This capacity is central to the development of broadband Internet service devices as "information and entertainment appliances." Conversely, leaving one's computer connected to the Internet raises new security considerations never an issue before for most home Internet users. When continuously connected, the user's computer is subject to the same type of hacker or cracker attacks that sometimes plague office and other institutional users. When one dials up, your computer is assigned a new "IP" address (the Internet protocol address) each time. This makes it much harder for hackers to break into your computer. Plus, hackers sometimes work at odd hours, when many home users might not even be logged on. Once on a dedicated line, however, your computer becomes more vulnerable to attack.

Table 2 summarizes the broadband services in North America and world-wide for selected services. DirecTV's PC product, DirecPC, delivers high-speed Internet access (for downloading content) via direct broadcast satellite at 400Kbps, three times the speed of ISDN, but several times slower than DSL and cable modem service; cable modems and xDSL, the accelerated digital subscriber line from the phone company, both deliver roughly 10 megabits per second. DirecPC provides upstream communications via a standard modem connection, which means upstream bandwidth is whatever the speed of the modem is (i.e., the consumer can't webcast high quality video). Broadcast.com has worked with DirecPC on trials of delivering digital video via the Hughes satellite system. Interactive Week (www.interactive-week.com, March 22, 1999) notes that negotiations are underway to deliver on-demand, customized digital video programming and interactive programming on a regular basis over the two-way satellite system. Cable modems

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and xDSL both provide upstream capability of roughly one megabit per second.

Wireless broadband services are also on the horizon in what is sometimes referred to as the third generation of wireless technology (3G). A number of players are planning broadband 3G services (two megabits per second or faster), including Qualcomm's CDMA (Code Division Multiple Access) 2000, the Universal Wireless Communications Consortium and the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM).

One of the most interesting options for wireless broadband is via low-earth orbital (LEO) satellite (DBS is in a higher orbit), perhaps through the coming launch of Teledesic, the Gates-McCaw LEO satellite constellation designed to bring ubiquitous, low-cost broadband wireless services around the world by 2006. Another proposed system is the high-speed satellite data network dubbed Spaceway from Hughes Electronics, of El Segundo, CA, a $1.4 billion plan for a North American satellite network to offer high-speed bandwidth for data, Internet access, videoconferencing, and other applications on demand. The rollout is planned for 2002 and will be the first step in Hughes' plan for a global broadband satellite network. The recent bankruptcy of Iridium, the proposed Motorola satellite system, may signal more than a bump in the road, however.

New opportunities to restructure the television industry and how programs are produced

A competing interactive, high-bandwidth satellite system called SkyBridge is also planned (http://www.alcatel.com/press/current/1998/06_02.htm) for operation by 2001. SkyBridge Limited Partnership is a multinational collaboration whose general partner is Alcatel. The Alcatel web site reports the other partners include: Loral Space & Communications of the United States; Toshiba Corporation, Mitsubishi Electric Corporation and Sharp Corporation of Japan; SPAR Aerospace Limited of Canada; Aerospatiale and CNES of France, and SRIW, a Belgian investment entity. Alcatel intends to use a constellation of 80 LEO satellites, to deliver global connectivity to business and residential users worldwide with performance comparable to that of future terrestrial broadband technologies. Downstream speeds will be up to 10 Mbps and upstream speeds will be up to 2 Mbps. SkyBridge LP predicts 20 million users worldwide in its first year of operation, and 400 million by 2005. Whether they achieve this goal may depend largely on the successful launch of the necessary rockets bringing the satellites into orbit—a number of recent commercial launch attempts have failed, signaling trouble in the industry.

The development of a widespread, affordable broadband Internet infrastructure does more than bring commercial television online for consumers. It presents new opportunities to restructure the television industry and how programs are produced. Consider one company's foray into the fray. Javu Technologies is introducing a new Internet-based approach to non-linear video editing on the web. Most television program producers are used to working with nonlinear video editing systems such as the Avid Media Composer, or the popular software-based non-linear video editor, Adobe Premiere. These systems permit the human video editor to sit down at a workstation and edit digitized video in a non-linear fashion, much as one might use a word processor to edit words "non-linearly" on a computer, cutting and pasting content (words or video) anywhere in a file for later linear consumption (by the

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reader or the viewer).

Javu's non-linear video editor for the web permits this same functionality but via the Internet. In other words, the digital video is placed on a server, and then an editor, who might be anywhere in the world, can edit that video. As Javu's web site reports, the implications are dramatic: "as footage is stored and edited on remote servers, individuals will not have to invest in state-of-the-art hardware or worry about clogging their hard drives with megabytes of video footage. In addition, the editing technology has been developed with user-friendly graphic user interfaces, allowing even the newest of computer users to easily store, edit and enhance their own video footage, pictures and music." Of course, the technology today is still quite limited and slow, and it may take years before the commercial use of this technology is viable.

Transforming Television

Television on the Internet is not just television anymore. Via the Internet is not only a new way to deliver television programming; it begins to chanage fundamentally what we know as television. Moreover, it raises the question of just what constitutes television. Prior to today, understanding television was fairly straightforward. In fact, most four- year-olds could probably tell you what television was, at least in the common vernacular. Television can be described in many ways, but perhaps most relevant to a discussion of TV on the Internet is the view that TV is the audio and video programming delivered to a device typically equipped with a cathode ray tube, although increasingly with flat screen or projection devices, and a mono or stereophonic sound system. This programming has come in either of two basic options: 1) transmitted electronically either through wireless (terrestrially over the air or satellite) or wired (mainly via cable, although in some places via telephone lines); 2) delivered on fixed media (including optical digital versatile/video disk or DVD), or on magnetic tape (i.e., videotape, typically VHS format).

The Internet also brings the possibility of new video formats. Traditional video is based on a visual paradigm dating to at least the 1890's work of American Thomas Edison and the French Lumiere brothers, who developed motion-picture cameras that captured images in a narrow field of view and made possible sequential narrative on film. Today's digital video technologies, available for viewing via the Internet and in other digital media, offer the possibility of unusually large fields of view, up to 360 degrees, much like the panoramic paintings and photographs of the late 18th and 19th centuries.

Digital video can also offer what is called synchronized multimedia, or non-linear multimedia content that is embedded within a linear video. For example, imagine viewing a crime-scene video recorded in 360 degree format. As you use the mouse, or even voice command, to pan, tilt or zoom anywhere in the 360 degree view, you see what appears to be a damaged portion of a wall. You zoom in and click on the damaged area, and a message appears, explaining that you are viewing one of the bullet holes left behind by the police when they opened fire on the suspect. Does this sound impossible? It's already been done in a collaborative project between the New York City crime news service, APBnews and the Center for New Media at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Visit APBnews.com to explore the collaborative video reporting about the 1999 slaying of west African immigrant Amadou Diallo by four undercover police officers in the Bronx. APBnews also offers a video center with extensive video and audio online reporting about a variety of crime reports,

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from a police pull-over for a speeding arrest that got out of hand to a drug investigation that began on the Web and lead to a real-world arrest. Full-motion 360 degree video is also available on the Web today. A growing number of companies are providing the necessary technology, including BeHere, which has an operational system delivering 360 degree motion video via the Real Player. See www.behere.com for a live or recorded sample in which you can use a mouse to pan, tilt, zoom throughout a 360 degree motion video (at the time of this writing a 360 degree motion video was available from ESPN.com of "aggressive in-line skating"). Tools from companies such as Veon (www.veon.com) and Virage (www.virage.com) add a variety of other functions to Internet video, including "hypervideo," or interactive links from video (including 360 degree video), and powerful video search capabilities (including real-time indexing, search and retrieval of video).

Digital video can also be viewed using a variety of alternative displays connected to the Internet. One intriguing device is the headworn display, which allows the wearer to be completely immersed in a three-dimensional video environment. Once the domain of games and virtual reality, head-worn displays have increased enormously in quality, dropped in price and now represent a viable means of delivering video news and other TV programming via the Internet.

All of this threatens the demise of local programming produced by traditional television stations. In its place we are witnessing the rise of specialized programming produced for national and international audiences. It is a process somewhat akin to the specialization of magazines in the 1950s and '60s. But there are three important differences: 1) the content of Internet TV is available on demand; 2) it is interactive and available in new formats; and 3) it is frequently free (ad and partner supported).

With the coming of broadband connectivity for the mass public, these developments will not only continue but increase. The falling cost of the technology needed to produce broadcast-quality programming will contribute to the increasing diversity and specialization of programming on the Internet. However, the creative talent needed to produce quality programming will still be expensive. But, as with MP3, there are thousands, perhaps millions, of young, and perhaps not so young, people with talent and a camera and computer eager to program for a niche audience on a global stage. Moreover, established program providers will find opportunities in the Internet environment. They can repurpose their existing products. The international market is opening up. There are new, credible entrants joining the fray, as well. Public radio stations are starting to produce television for the Internet, independent producers are designing quality, interactive programs. Television on the Internet is rapidly becoming video programming for a networked world. ■

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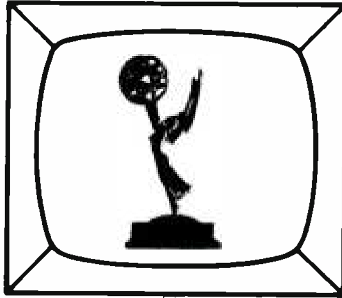

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The Battle Over TV Resolution—History Repeats

by Dave Berkman

The battle that will dominate television over the next decade will erupt from the requirement that come December 31st, 2006, America's 100,000,000 families will have to scrap their 300,000,000 TV sets— ostensibly to receive the higher definition TV that digital technology makes possible.

We can expect, however, that as it sinks into public consciousness around 2005 that all of its TV sets are about to become junk, the public will inundate Congress with demands that the present 525-line analog system be retained. Reaction will be intensified when it's learned that the reason we're being told we must scrap our present receivers comes down to a lie. For what has received almost no attention so far is that the legislation mandating the switch to a high-definition digital system also allows broadcasters the choice of either transmitting a single, high-resolution picture, or a multiplicity of digitally-

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compressed, and much lower-resolution images. Scrapping our average of three-sets-per-household so that broadcasters can increase their channels five-fold may not be a rationale eagerly embraced by most Americans.

But this is not the first time that a battle over picture definition has shaken American television. Such a battle, in fact, took place at TV's dawn.

The story of that struggle— and especially how it was treated by the press of the day— is worth recounting.

In this age of megamedia corporate conglomeration, the American press has been condemned by such critics as Jeff Cohen, Ben Bagdikian, Noam Chomsky and Michael Parenti for identifying too closely with its behemoth big-business brethren. But as such media critics of that era as George Seldes have documented, this was no less the case during the New Deal.

What distinguished that era from the current age when our political leadership, Democratic as well as Republican, unquestionably accepts the beneficence of a deregulated, free market, is that the FDR years were among the few periods in American history when government occasionally took the public's side against corporate greed. This was not, however, something which a reactionary New Deal-era press accepted.

Perhaps no better example of this can be cited than the role the press played in the defeat of one of the few attempts by the Federal Communications Commission to take seriously its legislative mandate to regulate broadcasting in the public interest. Had the Commission not been forced to cave in— in large measure because of press-generated pressure— it is quite possible that American television could have been launched a few years later with an image far superior to the technically and visually inferior picture with which we've been saddled for over half-a-century. It might also have taken off as a color system.

An experimental electronic television service was inaugurated by RCA's NBC station, W2XBS (now WNBC-TV) at the opening of the New York World's Fair on April 30th, 1939. By the end of 1940, W2XBS and seven other outlets—operating in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago and Schenectady, NY—all transmitted a 441-line picture, a standard which, while viewable, provided a level of visual detail which a rapidly advancing, state-of-the-art video technology would soon prove capable of significantly improving.

But RCA, which had invested over $10,000,000 in developing electronic TV, was getting impatient. Until the FCC approved an advertiser-supported commercial service, there would be no return on its investment.

Such a go-ahead would benefit RCA in a number of ways. It would make it possible for the company, through its NBC subsidiary, to charge advertisers for TV time. Even more important, the assurances that "TV had finally arrived," which an FCC approval would imply, would result in a large increase in set sales— which, at the end of 1940, stood at only 4,000. Here, RCA would benefit not only from increased sale of its own receivers, it would also receive fees from other manufacturers, because RCA held the key patents on which the technology was based. As television network broadcaster and equipment manufacturer, RCA would benefit in two additional ways: The increase in new stations would become the basis of an NBC-TV network, while the equipment these stations required would, as with receivers, either be purchased directly from RCA or from other manufac-

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turers who would pay RCA patent fees. Thus, as *The New York Times* reported in October 1939, "telecasters...are living in hope that the FCC will lift the ban [on TV advertising] in 1940 so that revenue can be gleaned from the illustrated wavelengths...."

But there was a risk in such an FCC action. Suppose RCA were successful in increasing sales? In that case, the threat that these receivers would become inoperable were the Commission to later adopt standards designed to produce a higher quality image would, as a practical, political matter, effectively preclude the FCC from taking such a step. Any change in TV standards would, as *Nation's Business* stated, "overnight...junk [the] public investment in television receiving sets [already sold]."

Few FCC decisions have occasioned so much criticism

The direction the FCC was moving in was indicated in the Fall of 1939 when an FCC subcommittee, chaired by Commissioner T.A.M Craven, recommended that the full Commission approve new regulations to permit limited program sponsorship— i.e., ad billings would be used "primarily for the purpose of experimental program development," but would preclude charges for air time. However, such an action, the sub-committee stressed, "must protect the public from costly overpromotion" of the kind which might result in a rush to buy TV sets which could only receive signals employing the 441-line standard.

This concern was reiterated by Commission Chairman James L. Fly who, *The New York Times* reported, "does not believe telecasting has reached a stage where it can be placed on an outright commercial basis....[since] any substantial change in television [technical standards] would make obsolete all present receivers at a loss to the public."

At hearings which the full Commission held in January 1940 to consider its subcommittee's recommendations, the *Times* reported a divergence of views

[which revealed]...that the time is not opportune for complete standardization.... The general warning...was that no steps should be taken...which might "freeze"...development through premature adoption of technical standards....[As CBS] explained...even minor changes...might well produce...obsolescence...of television sets in the hands of the public.

While opposition was also expressed by manufacturing interests not allied with RCA— most notably Zenith— the handwriting was on the wall. As RCA vice-president Thomas F. Joyce stated, "A practical fool-proof television service is no longer around the corner. It is here."

The day after the full Commission approved its subcommittee's recommendation, RCA launched an advertising campaign clearly designed— in almost taunting contravention of the FCC's warnings about aggressive TV marketing— to promote receiver purchases. Its specific goal, according to *Newsweek*, was "to expand the number of sets within the [New York City] area from the present 2,500 to 25,000 within the year." As *Time* described the RCA ads, they took the form of

full page advertisements in Manhattan papers, [in which] RCA offered its massive, modern receiver for $395, "10% down and 18 easy monthly payments," [and] invited the "participation of the public in this effort of American private enterprise to create a new art and a new industry."

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The result was an immediate FCC crackdown. Its limited-commercial permission was rescinded with a strong admonishment to RCA for its ad campaign.

Few FCC decisions have occasioned so much criticism. In looking back on the matter some years later, the-far-from anti-business *Fortune* noted how many "Newspaper editorials...cried 'dictatorship.'" But given that so many mass periodicals were committed to an anti-New Deal, anti-regulatory, pro-"free enterprise" stance, it was not surprising that they'd be quick to oppose an action which a majority of FCC Commissioners felt was required by their legal obligation to act in the public interest. Among the few exceptions— as might also be expected— was the liberal *Nation*, which noted that the FCC "evidently feel[s] that a few companies are about to recoup their television-research costs from an unsuspecting public by exploitation of the half-ready art of visual broadcasting."

More representative of the tack taken by the preponderance of the press, was a page 1 news story in the April 7, 1940 Sunday *New York Times* about the criticism of his fellow Commissioners by Commissioner Craven— a member of the minority which had opposed the go-ahead recision. The article focused on a letter he'd written at the request of Congress members opposed to the FCC's decision. Craven branded its reasoning as "'absurd on its face.'" He was particularly critical of the emphasis it placed on RCA's advertising, arguing that "'there is 'no way to secure a public trial of television without selling receivers to the public.'"

"'In my opinion,'" Craven continued, television

"has advanced to the stage where an initial public trial is entirely justified.... There is no need...for a commission in Washington to substitute its judgment for that of the public. The public is the wisest judge of scientific achievement and will be most effective in securing the technical improvements it desires."

Craven then went on to insist it was false to assert the public as a whole would be hurt if the Commission were later to opt for a new set of technical standards, since it would only be receivers purchased by the rich which would be rendered obsolete. "[T]he burden of experiment," he insisted, "falls on wealthy people, as it should."

But Craven was at best disingenuous in his arguments for at least four reasons. First, it was, after all, the TV subcommittee he himself chaired which had explicitly cautioned that it was necessary to "protect the public from costly overpromotion." Second, it was clearly *not* the "wealthy" whom RCA was attempting to reach. The company had reduced the price of its most expensive receiver by more than a third, and that of its cheapest to under $100. Even more indicative of this was the stress RCA gave to the ease with which sets could be purchased on easy payment credit terms. Third, despite the seeming democratic appeal of the assertion that "'[t]he public is the wisest judge of scientific achievement,'" when it comes to such technically complex matters as standards governing electronic technology, there's serious doubt that this is really the case. Fourth, and most serious, in accapting that the Commission could act as a free agent anytime it wished to change standards, Craven ignored the political reality that once large numbers of sets had been sold, there was no way the Commission could adopt a new set of technical standards which would make obsolete those receivers already in the public's hands.

A lead "Radio Pages" piece inside the same *Times* edition with the front page, Craven letter-story, bore the by-line of

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radio editor Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr.— who, given what he wrote, one can't ignore the fact that he would leave the *Times* in six months to become director of public relations for RCA. In his article, Dunlap asked,

[w]here would [radio]...be today if that "fluid art" had been frozen...? Would Americans have bought 9,000,000 radios in 1929?....Would television be where it is today if $15,000,000 had not been pumped into research?...Such are...the questions which radio men are asking on the eve of the new [FCC] television hearing.

Quoting an unnamed "[b]roadcast official," Dunlap then asserted that the FCC action was merely an attempt by the Commission to add to its bureaucratic powers: "'Is it to become the role of the FCC to protect the public from spending money?...[O]bsolescence of receivers is no concern of the FCC.'" All of which disingenuously— or dishonestly— ignored, as FCC Chairman Fly stressed in an adjoining piece, the mandate placed upon the Commission by the Federal Communications Act, to "regulate the kind of apparatus to be used as public interest...requires."

The story presenting the views of Fly and the Commission majority stressed the Chairman's concern

that the stripling television should not be "sold down the river for a few pieces of silver"....Television is too important a thing, Mr. Fly said, to rush to gain an immediate shortsighted advantage of financial interest. He forecast substantial improvements just around the corner.

The article also included Fly's explanation of his fear about changes in technical standards: "The television transmitter fits the receiver by means of a synchronizing signal like a key in a lock," explained Mr. Fly. "Suppose the lock is changed. Where does that leave the key?..."

The immediate condemnations by *Newsweek*, *Nation's Business*, *The Saturday Evening Post* and the editorial page of the Sunday *New York Times* were typical of the critical firestorm which greeted the FCC clampdown. To whatever degree these were orchestrated by RCA, it constitutes one of the most successful campaigns in the history of American corporate PR.

The Astor family-owned *Newsweek* was, in 1940, a strongly conservative periodical which each week prominently featured a back-of-the-book column by former New Deal "brain truster," but now right-wing columnist, Raymond Moley. Moley railed against what he saw as a bureaucracy running amok:

Is it a proper function of government to "protect" prospective buyers of a product against statements which are not false...or misleading...? This seems to be a basic position of the FCC.... [Yet t]o attempt to regulate [advertising]....would involve an examination of the relative drawing power of different kinds of advertising copy. It would call for careful study and supervision of the personal budget of every American citizen. Possibly the time might come when a man of moderate means who bought an expensive mattress would have it snatched from under him....

Nation's Business, as might be expected of a U.S. Chamber of Commerce periodical, was also critical of the FCC— but its criticism was considerably more tempered than Moley's. After initially charging that "the F.C.C. has followed a devious course in [its] handling of the matter," it conceded there was at least some merit to the Commission's concern over obsolescence, since "[a]s Chairman Fly has pointed out,...a television set would be useless if standards were changed."

A *New York Times* editorial, however, was unwilling to concede any merit to the Commission's action— a stance more

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than indicated by its head, "Strangling Television":

For the first time in the industrial development of this country a government agency decides whether or not an invention has reached a...stage where it may be offered to the public....Extend this principle of government control and free competitive enterprise becomes impossible. A revolutionary product like nylon would have to be rejected because of some undisclosed fiber in the offing. Away with changing styles in shoes and hats!...[The FCC] took particular umbrage at [RCA president] David Sarnoff's dictum that "We thrive on obsolescence. What industry does not?...Woe to the industry that knows not obsolescence." If this were not true we would still be riding around in horses and buggies....

Alva Johnston was the *Saturday Evening Post's* expert on TV. And in keeping with the strongly anti-New Deal, archly-conservative, pro-business positions so frequently espoused by the *SEP*, Johnston was furious with the Commission. If mere hyperbole would not suffice to express his outrage, then personal vendetta, distortion, half-truths and untruth would be employed to make his points. "Television," Johnston asserted,

was ready last March to sweep the country when its progress was suddenly checked by Washington's discovery that Americans in ordinary circumstances were too poor to buy television sets and must be protected from the temptation by the Federal government.

He then proceeded to launch an attack against FCC Chairman Fly which went on for almost two pages. Fly had taken on RCA, he charged, because "[n]othing increases an official's prestige in Washington like cracking down on a man like [RCA president David] Sarnoff." Fly, it seemed, "sees signs of big-business conspiracies in the most innocent words." Fly had once described an industry representative's testimony before the FCC as "'Rotary Club talk. That's just a Rotary Club talk.'" (Could Fly have committed a greater sin in the eyes of the solidly middle-American *Saturday Evening Post* readership, than to cast aspersions on the Rotary!) "Fly's campaign to protect the poor against luxuries is to be found in the records of the Seventeenth Century trials in Boston, where women were convicted and fined for wearing silk unless their husbands were worth more than $1,000."

In at least two instances Johnston played loose with the truth. He was guilty of gross exaggeration when he asserted that thousands of new jobs and hundreds

In at least two instances Johnston played loose with the truth.

of existing ones had been lost because of the FCC's decision. And he was blatantly dishonest when he went on to insist that Fly's "lock-and-key" analogy was a "figure of speech [which] evaporates, however, because the television is a versatile instrument, which can be adjusted to any practical type of television now in existence or promising to come into existence." The TV picture tube, it's true, could display any image— regardless of the standards to which it conformed— but the modifications required by the rest of the receiving set's circuitry would have rendered the receiver obsolete.

Given this critical barrage, the FCC found itself only too eager to hand off the TV standards hot potato to the very commercial interests which had opposed it. The broadcast receiver manu-

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facturers' trade organization, the Radio Manufacturers Association (RMA), was invited to study the matter and recommend a set of technical standards which it was generally assumed the Commission would officially adopt. Thus, in early June, the *Times'* Dunlap could report that

Washington observers report that from quarters close to the FCC that they hear predictions whispered that the radio industry will get together during the Summer, agree on uniform flexible standards, so that possibly before Jan. 1, 1941, the way will be paved for the "go ahead" signal.

Dunlap erred in two respects: he was off by exactly a half-year on his date; and the "uniform" standards would prove to be *fixed*— not "flexible."

The RMA-appointed body, the National Television Systems Committee (NTSC)—chaired by Dr. W.R.G. Baker, a scientist and executive with RCA ally General Electric—had to formulate a series of recommendations which essentially gave RCA what it wanted, while also calling for a slight improvement over the 441-line standards as a face-saving device for the Commission. By November, Baker could safely predict that "all is well, and that television will be given to the public on time....'[T]he green light for black and white views [sic] on the air will shine early in 1941. There is no other plan afoot.'"

In early May, the *Times* reported that the Commission had accepted the NTSC recommendations. Beginning July 1st, a TV service utilizing a 525-line standard and FM-, rather than the previous AM-transmitted sound, would commence operation. This, despite that fact that Philco had already demonstrated a picture with over 600 lines— with even higher definition in the offing. Further, it would be *full* commercial service— not the limited form which had been authorized in 1940.

Television, of course, did not take off with the adoption of the July 1941 standards. By the time, five months later, that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, fewer than 10,000 sets had been sold. Production of new receivers was suspended for the duration of the war. And even though there were fewer than 250,000 receivers at the beginning of 1948— the year TV can be said to have "taken off"— and despite a caveat that the July 1941 standards were to be "considered more or less a test," the Commission consistently sided with RCA in refusing petitions by Philco, DuMont and CBS to advance those standards.

The outcome of all this was that America has been saddled for almost 60 years with the lowest resolution TV pictures in the world. It's a situation which may well repeat if the TV industry once again has its way, this time with digital compression. ■

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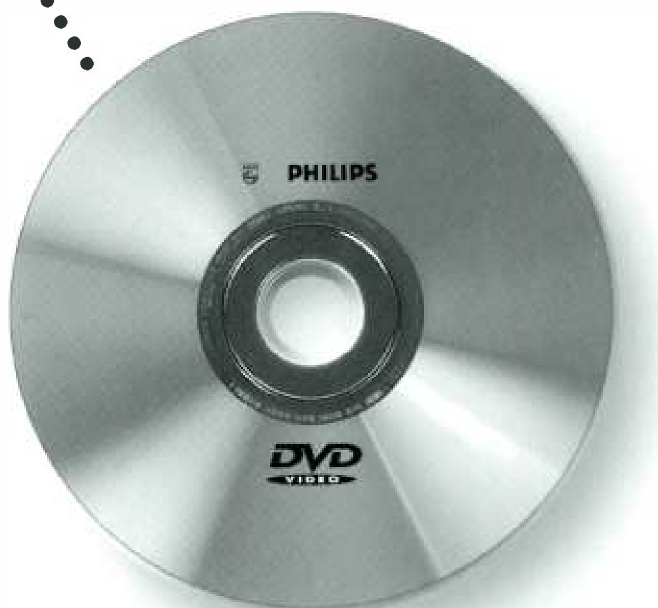

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A Station of Their Own

The Story of the Women's Auxiliary Television Technical Staff (WATTS) in World War II Chicago.

by Cary O'Dell

Jean Minetz was 19 years old in 1941 and, like the majority of the world, had never heard of "television." But that didn't stop her, as she says now, from "answering this funny little ad in a newspaper . . . and it changed my life forever."

Soon she, along with six other women, would form the Women's Auxiliary Television Technical Staff (WATTS) and would not only find out what TV was but would learn how to light it, stage manage it, shoot it, write it, broadcast it, produce it and live it. In the process—and almost by accident—they assisted the war effort, nudged forward the women's movement, and, on top of all that, aided in the creation of the world's greatest communication tool, in the process helping to build an entire industry.

W9XBK-TV, Chicago, was licensed by the Federal Radio Commission in 1937 to, among others, two business partners named Balaban and Katz. B&K owned a chain of Paramount subsidiary theaters in the Chicago area, making their TV station the only one in the country with any links to the larger movie business. Deemed an "experimental" station by the FRC, the station, operating at 1,000 watts (on a good day), was completely noncommercial with the sole, singular purpose of trying to discover what this thing called television could become. W9XBK had its first broadcast occur in 1939, the same year TV had its "official" debut at the World's Fair in New York City. By this time, however, television was already becoming an awkward but semi-steady presence in other parts of the world. The BBC began its first regular programming in 1929. In America, stations like W3XE in Philadelphia, W1XG in Boston, W2XBS in New York and others already dotted the landscape and filled the airwaves. And Chicago could count by the end of the 1930s (in fact, for almost a decade already) three rickety stations all its own: WXAO, owned by Western Television; W9XAP, owned by CBS radio; and W9XZV, owned by Zenith.

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Newscan with Fran, a program operated by WATTS.

But these three earlier Windy City stations would quickly be overshadowed by upstart W9XBK, entirely due to the electronic savvy of its dynamic founding director Captain William Eddy.

Hired by B&K, Bill Eddy was a square-jawed, pipe-smoking, hard-of-hearing technical wizard and visionary. A protégé of Philo T. Farnsworth, the recognized inventor of modern, all-electronic television, Captain Eddy, a retired naval officer, instigated numerous broadcasting breakthroughs which were important and long-lasting. He was one of, if not the, first to utilize more than one camera for one production, make use of miniature sets, and experiment with lighting specifically designed for television. Some of his innovations were close to genius in their simplicity and usability—like putting a TV camera on a barber-shop chair so that it would go up and down with ease.

Having gotten an early start in the 20th century, television would no doubt have been a much more powerful force during the entire century rather than just the latter half of it, had World War II not slowed its development. As soon as the war was underway, TV had to take to the back burner. Overseas, the BBC, which had been at the forefront of TV technology and entertainment, ceased broadcasting in the middle of a Mickey Mouse cartoon as soon as the blitz began. In the US, production of equipment needed for television was quickly curtailed so that factories could devote their energies to the war effort. And the men who were working in television found their expertise of greater need in the military, especially in the field of radar technologies.

That's what happened to all the men then working for W9XBK. Fran Harris,

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who was a WATTS along with Jean Minetz, remembers, "World War II was definitely on the horizon and Captain Eddy flew to Washington, DC and volunteered the station as a radar school and then came back to Chicago to convince B&K that that's what they should do."

Thanks to Eddy's push, B&K did agree to aid in the war effort and they turned half of the station's floor space over to the US Navy, making it into classrooms and study halls for an efficient, necessary, and state of the art radar school. They also turned over nearly half a million dollars worth of electronic equipment to the armed forces for use in the school and they turned every member of their all-male staff into ad-hoc radar instructors. By the end of the war, Eddy's school would graduate more than 86,000 military men.

The staff of the Women's Auxiliary Television Technical Staff.

But the new Navy school left the television station sitting like a ghost town, still able to broadcast, but completely without people to run it. To keep their TV license, B&K had to continue to broadcast at least three hours a day. Additionally, Balban & Katz had a very personal reason to stay active in television. Says Fran Harris, "B&K wanted very much to have a successful television station. [Earlier] they had had a radio station license, had rented space in a hotel and started a station. But radio was slow to take off and they decided that it was not here to stay. So they sold off their license. They learned a hard lesson and when television started they decided they were going to be among the very first, *no matter what.*"

Determined not to repeat their earlier mistake—being asleep at the switch at the start of the radio boom—B&K refused to hold off or lay low on TV technology even during a world wide war. So, needing to keep the station running but wanting of men to staff it, someone at B&K had the radical, novel idea of recruiting a group of women to "man" the station. Fran Harris believes B&K's decision was somewhat reluctant, saying now with great sarcasm, "They thought it might be possible, by the furthest reaches of imagination, to train some women—or 'girls' as we were called—to manage and run the station."

In September of 1942, W9XBK placed a short and somewhat oblique want ad in Chicago-area newspapers:

"WANTED: Telegenic talent girls for technical work in television studio. Mechanical experience unnecessary. Apply Box 151."

A native Chicagoan, Jean Minetz, had dreamed of being a writer while in school

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but necessity and, as she calls it, "luck" intervened. Ms. Minetz recalls, "My mother was a widow and money was tight, so, since I was the oldest, as soon as I graduated from high school I entered the work force to help the family." That's when she answered the ad.

Fran Harris, born in the Bronx, raised in Chicago, and 27 years old at the time, saw and answered the same ad. Having begun her radio career while still in high school ("Anything that would get me anywhere near performers I was going to have my nose in"), Ms. Harris, after graduation, parlayed her talents into additional radio work and touring with WPA projects and with the precursor to the USO. And though she had only a tiny knowledge of television, it didn't seem to matter to the station. "I had this very varied background and that was important to W9XBK. Everyone was going to have to be interchangeable. They wanted people unafraid to try new things."

More than 100 women answered the newspaper ad. Each applicant was interviewed by the station's acting director Helen Carson. Carson (who was nicknamed Kit as most Carsons usually are), had been in advertising in Omaha and had worked with Eddy for years before agreeing to follow him to Chicago and serve as his secretary. She'd been on the job in Chicago for only nine months when, in his absence, he assigned her the task of reviving the channel.

After meeting with Carson each applicant was given a written test to judge her "TV aptitude." Aptitude, it was said, was more important than any prior technical know-how; people with real aptitude ("a mechanical turn of temperament," as they called it) are people who can be taught anything, even something like TV.

Finally, eight women were chosen. Remembers Jean Minetz, "I don't have a clue how or why we were chosen. Our backgrounds were so diverse. Enthusiasm, affability, and a desire to learn appeared to be the real criteria."

And so these young women became the WATTS. They remained at W9XBK (later WBKB, now WLS) from March 5, 1942 to, approximately, August of 1945. The originals were: Fran Harris, former radio actress; Jean Minetz, former typist ("my only skill then," she says today); Pauline Bobrov, former commercial artist; Jean Schricker, former office worker; Esther Rojewski, former electric appliance worker; Margaret Durnal, a onetime film router; Rachel Stewart, a former soda-jerk at Walgreen's; and Marcia Howser, who died of a strep throat soon after she was hired.

Jean Minetz remembers, "I was one of the younger ones. There were college graduates. We all answered the same ad but came from different areas." Jean, at 19 was the "baby" of the group.

For Jean, arriving at the station every day meant coming by bus or via the streetcar system that existed in Chicago at the time. She usually worked from noon to nine p.m., but, she says, "My life seemed to revolve around that studio. I didn't keep in touch with too many of my classmates. I didn't have much of a social life."

Jean remembers of her first day at her new job: "The first thing they had us do was get our uniforms. Balaban and Katz had decided to dress us all alike. We had these blue uniforms with a little white blouse underneath and then a badge. We went across the street to the dime store and got our picture taken for the badge. The badge would get us admitted to the station and the training school. I didn't mind the uniform. I had attended a Catholic all-girls high school—Josephinum—where we wore the obliga-

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tory uniforms, so it was no big deal to change into a uniform for work.... So that was the beginning: the uniform and badge and we felt like we belonged somewhere." That official WATTS uniform also came with a pair of moccasins with rubber soles so the women could move about the television studio as quietly as possible during a broadcast.

Then the women were sent off for TV training. Fran Harris remembers, "We had no 'formal' training and anyone who says we did isn't remembering correctly!

"We were taken on a tour through the station and were shown each piece of equipment and how it worked, and that was our training. And then we went to work."

Whatever "training" did take place was under the direction of Archie Brolly, the station's chief engineer and the only man still with the station and not the naval school at that time. It was from him that the WATTS got crash courses in how to handle cameras, "ride" microphones, govern slide projection, adjust shading of the picture, regulate sound and anything else that would be necessary to go from show idea to final air. Remembers Jean Minetz, ". . . the boom mike, the two cameras, the control room. . . . We were just deluged with information. The engineer would brief us as fully as he could. Of course, pictures through the air were quite a thing in those days. . . . "

Jean continues, "My mother was very dubious about 'radio with pictures.' She just didn't understand what I was doing, because we didn't own a television set. But she tried to understand so she knew where her daughter was going everyday; that I wasn't typing, that I was moving cameras, working in *television*.

"But she sensed I was happy and even visited the station on one occasion."

Says Fran Harris, "[After that first day], I felt like I was Alice in Wonderland. I went to bed that first night and thought, 'Did all of that happen to me?'"

After two weeks as a WATT, Fran and Jean and the others got their first pay checks from W9XBK. They were paid $20.00 each, with 20 cents withheld for taxes. As Jean Minetz has noted, "It was high frequency, low salary."

Due to the low wages, Fran Harris found it necessary to share an apartment with fellow WATTS Rachel Stewart. And all of the women found other ways to keep themselves financially afloat. Says Fran, "By the end of the week we would all pretty much be broke. There was this sandwich shop across the street and we'd pool our nickels and dimes and buy from them a turkey carcass, a loaf of bread and a quart of milk and then we'd all have dinner . . . sometimes on the roof of the building, late at night, after we signed off."

The station had estimated that it would take the WATTS a year to be up to speed and the station back on the air. However, they began broadcasting just three months after they were hired. Eventually they would keep a weekly broadcast schedule of Monday and Wednesday afternoons and Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday evenings. Originally the station was active only in the evening but, says Fran Harris, "We eventually began doing daytime programs so that the stores selling televisions would have something to demonstrate."

WATTS broadcast fare consisted of quiz shows, talks shows, dance recitals, newscasts, war-bond rallies and puppet shows all produced by, and usually starring, the women of the WATTS. Some of the early titles: "Newsroom Close-Ups," "Musical Serenade," "Storytime with Trudy," "Stella White: Television Job Reporter," "Flashes from Life," which were "true life stories torn from the headlines," and "Tele-Slimmer" (perhaps the world's first exercise program). Tuesday night was cooking

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night with a specially produced food show. Says Fran, "Whatever the need was we would fill. We were really very lucky, people were always coming through Chicago on their way to New York or on their way to California. And everyone wanted to visit the station. It was a great curiosity and very important since it was owned by B&K." In addition, since one of B&K's theaters was right across the street, it was easy to ask for vaudeville talent to come over and take part.

Jean Minetz, pin-up, B&K Balabanner

Being experimental, however, meant no commercials. And no advertising meant very little revenue. Still the women of the WATTS found a way to make that work to their advantage. Fran Harris relates, "There was no advertising as such. But people could promote whatever their business was. Like we would do a fashion show by a store and the store could use their name. The most important selling we did though was to promote the sale of war bonds." Harris proved so good a war-bond sales woman on the small screen for bonds that she was eventually awarded a silver medal by the US Treasury Department.

The WATTS did much for the war effort. Good and optimistic news for the home-front was always needed . Seven young and fetching women working in a new and "manly" business like television attracted a good share of wartime publicity. Reporters from the *Chicago Sun* and the *Chicago Tribune* and other area papers wrote articles on the WATTS, calling them everything from a "fem staff" to a "petticoat revolution," to show the country that Rosie could do more than rivet.

The WATTS also did what they could to cheer on "the boys" overseas. *The Balabanner*, B&K's own magazine, was sent to service people all over the world. For one issue Jean Minetz was drafted to pose as the publication's monthly pin-up. Remembers Jean of her innocent and sweet photo, "The photographer shot me in his living room, with his very nice mother looking on in the background. My legs are propped against what looks like a country scene.

It was actually simulated grass over a kitchen chair."

The photo ran with the following caption:

Eugenia Minetz is no bigger than a "!" A B&K Television Studio WATT [sic], she is 20 years old, five feet three inches tall, has blue eyes and brown hair. A graduate of the Josephinum Academy, her hobbies are television, dramatics and writing. She MUST be MUCH younger than 20, but inquire yourself at 1242 N. Leavitt Street.

Remembers Jean, "My mother was flab-

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bergasted, but I did get two fan letters—and never responded to them."

Back at the station, each of the WATTS would eventually develop her own special expertise. For example, Fran Harris acted as stage manager and, most frequently, as mistress of ceremonies. Says Fran, "I would come on at the beginning and tell people what was going to be on air that night." (But, she adds, "What I really wanted to do was direct.")

Jean Minetz usually handled audio, usually with the aid of a Bill Eddy invention called a "micrometer drop." Jean remembers, "It permitted me to work two turntables simultaneously and segue background music as needed, without holding the transcription and dropping the needle down. But don't ask me for a technical explanation."

WATT Margaret ("Marge") Durnal was the technical whiz of the group. Eventually she went on to get her engineering license and operate the transmitting room.

Ultimately, however, all of the WATTS received the same training, so they could easily step into each other's roles. Being Jacks—or Jills—of all trades was deemed necessary because there were so few WATTS and live TV was so unpredicatable. Before a broadcast it was not uncommon to see Fran serving as make-up artist for a performer and that meant applying brown lipstick so that tones would look "normal" when broadcast. (Color was always an issue even in black-and-white TV; dark blue shirts were considered a necessity for -all male newscasters.)

And most on-air talent usually performed in front of a set built and painted by Jean. Says Jean, "I'd buy the big, big brown wrapping paper and paint our scenery. There were no unions in those days so we could and did do everything."

With time, the WATTS were even depended upon to create their own programs, making them probably the first female station programmers in TV history. They were expected to come up with programs, presenting them in meetings or one on one with Kit Carson. Carson eventually had final say in what went on the station. Says Jean Minetz, "I didn't even know I had ideas. You don't at that age unless someone pulls them out of you and then you realized you do. There was always a hunger for new material, then as now. Very few ideas were turned down if they were feasible and cost little to produce. Kit Carson was very open-minded about talent and telecast possibilities." She adds, "We were hired to keep the station on the air . . . and that was part of it."

Fran Harris adds, "We didn't have any money for paying royalties, so I sat down and wrote something. Then would direct it. So [suddenly] I became a writer/director. I wrote and directed comedy, drama, mystery . . . yes!"

Sooner or later all of the WATTS took their turn as on-air talent. Fran Harris would along with her hostess duties also have her own show, "News Scan with Fran" (reading off wire copy) and Jean had a couple of series including "Minutes with Minetz" and "Pic-tales." "Pic-tales" was a children's show where Jean read stories and drew cartoons, no doubt on brown paper.

Later, other WATTS-produced programs included "Burr Tillstrom Presents Kukla, The Patriotic Puppet" and Guy Savage's "Human Side of Sports" and other fare listed on the station's mailed weekly program schedule, the "TV Guide" of its day. Along with listing the time of the station's shows and even their test patterns and sound checks (each occurring for fifteen minutes before sign-on), the bulletins also listed such interesting and necessary statements as:

In order that these experimental trans-

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missions may be better evaluated in the development of a satisfactory program service, we would appreciate your candid opinion of the shows listed above. Address your replies to....

And at the bottom of each schedule, the foreboding words were also always printed, "All programs subject to change without notice."

Regardless of what was on, W9XBK—like all TV stations at the time—was largely broadcasting in the dark. Only about three to four hundred sets existed in the Chicago area, most of them in taverns or in store windows, the idea being to entice passes-by to purchase them and not just stare at a fuzzy picture.

It was all a lot of work for a potentially small audience; everything in television was catch-as-catch-can for the women of the WATTS. Says Jean Minetz, "The lights were intense. It took two gals to work one camera. . . . [Before broadcasting], we would actually call viewers and ask, 'How's the picture? Is it coming through?'"

Fran Harris, as stage manger, was known to crawl on her tummy if necessary to go from one set to another to get her hand signals in front of the on-air talent. And as "mistress of ceremonies" she was known to do even more, like the time she was hostess to a hypnotist: "They were looking for someone on the staff for him to hypnotize and no one wanted to do it. So, they eventually came to me and said, 'You're it!' I really didn't think I could be hypnotized but I knew I could make him look good and that's what I was there to do. So I had to stretch out on three chairs, just lie there. And I really didn't believe I could be hypnotized but he succeeded mightily and levitated me in mid-air. Then . . . he pulled the middle chair out from under me and then stood up on my diaphragm. [Afterward,] I didn't remember any of it, but then the crew told me that that's what happened."

Fran's most personally memorable on-screen moment, however, was with the U.S. military: "They had made me the official mistress of ceremonies, but I had no experience working without a script, ad-libbing. But a new program was starting promoting the U.S. Marines and different officers were to be on it. Well, about twenty minutes before going on the air the officer who was to host got cold feet, and they asked me to hostess the program. Well, I didn't know anything about the U.S. Marines other than they had different uniforms than the Navy or the Army! So I was a little nervous myself and when I introduced this Marine major, I turned to him very sprightly and said 'Welcome abroad!'. . . . Well, so much for ad-libbing."

Still, Fran fared better than at least one actor who, during a live performance, walked into a scene in a speakeasy. Harris remembers, "He walked in and asked for a drink, 'What's your poison?,' so he picked up the glass and drank it and then grasped his throat, fell to this knees, and then to the floor. Everyone was thinking, 'What a splendid performance.'" That was until the performer managed to choke out the words, "I'm not kidding." Everyone in the studio then realized his prop glass had been borrowed from the dark room and had previously contained chemicals, not water. The show went on but without the actor, who was rushed to the hospital. Says Harris, "He was a good actor really, but I think he stopped appearing in television after that."

Others had an equally confusing, if not potentially fatal, time in the early days of the small screen at WBKB. When gossip legend Louella Parsons took part in a broadcast she asked innocently afterward, "When do we see

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the rushes?"

Later, silent screen diva Gloria Swanson stopped by for an interview which, supposedly, garnered the WATTS its biggest audience ever: an unprecedented 2,000 people were said to have tuned in, though proving that fact, in those pre-Nielsen days, wasn't possible. Nevertheless the program made a significant enough splash to earn a mention in Irv Kupcinet's newspaper gossip column the next day. And it got a favorable notice in *Billboard* magazine, where the reviewer noted, "Miss Swanson . . . was a little less poised than Fran Harris, the gal who interviewed her. . . ."

As the WATTS most often seen on camera, Fran became something of a celebrity in her own right, "I became somewhat known and sometimes people would come up and criticize the show or the lighting on last night's show. Everyone is a critic. But we were expected to listen to them and answer their questions or postcards or letters."

Most of the reviews for the WATTS were very good. *Billboard* wrote in 1944 "The director, Kit Carson, and the girls who handled the cameras and lights deserve much credit. . . . [And] Fran Harris took a one-act play for the stage, adapted it for television, rehearsed her cast for about seven and a half hours and came up with television that would be satisfactory video entertainment even ten years from now."

But, adds Fran, there wasn't a lot of time to bask in good notices, "We worked long hours. Kit Carson—the mother of us all—was a tough taskmaster, every night we were told at what hour to be back the next morning. We didn't sit around the green room. We had a station to program, scripts to write, sets to be built, people to find."

According to Fran, there was "amazing" camaraderie ...among the WATTS women. Only on one occasion was there dissent in the ranks. Harris recalls, "An advertising agency from New York decided to experiment with TV so they came to us. And they brought in a director from back East, well the girls felt . . . slighted. And the man, who had come from NBC, was having such a time because everything was different from what he was used to. He was used to a lot more space than our little cramped quarters. And the girls were resisting being cooperative. And that was the only time I ever broke line and I went to them and said, 'If he succeeds, he'll get the credit. But if he fails it will be considered our fault.' And I asked them to come on down and be the team that we were and help him.

"Well, the show ended up being a great success. The director then went to the ad agency later and said, 'If you ever start a TV department at the agency, that's the girl I want you to hire.' And that's how I later went into advertising."

Neither Jean or Fran knows how the WATTS eventually came to an end or even it it was ever "officially" disbanded. Over the years, since the hiring of the original WATTS, a few more women had been added. As the war ended, and the men returned from overseas, the station began hiring them, making the need for the WATTS no longer so immediate or necessary.

Fran Harris left the station in 1945 to pursue a long and successful career in advertising. She got her ad job thanks to her TV expertise, "They thought it was easier to take someone who knew television and then teach them advertising rather than the other way around." Fran Harris, now Fran Harris-Tuchman, would go on to become the first female director of a television and motion picture department for a national advertising agency, Ruthrauff & Ryan, Inc. Later, in Holly-

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wood, she founded Fran Harris Productions and, after that, Harris Tuchman Productions, Inc.

Jean Minetz left the WATTS at about the same time, saying today, "I probably should have stayed longer." Jean also went into advertising, again due to her WATTS record. "Very few people had a knowledge of video and what it could do, so I had a leg up...." A couple of agencies, a side career trip to New York, a stay in Florida, and her marriage came in her years after the WATTS. Later, in her early sixties, Jean surprised her family—and perhaps herself—by joining the Peace Corps. She came to that vocation she had come to television: she had seen an ad in a newspaper. Jean says, "It said, no age limit, so I applied. And when I got accepted and they told me I was going to the Marshall Islands I realized I would have to brush up on my geography. It was a two-year stint. It was a very positive experience for me."

Today, Jean Minetz-Downie says about her role as a WATTS, "I didn't realize how interesting it all was, what I was in." She says with humor, "[I wasn't] aware of the importance of what I was working in as I painted scenery backdrops on brown wrapping paper. Not in full scope anyway. However I began to suspect we were on to something when people such as Myron [Mike] Wallace of CBS radio would spend time in our control room, in a learning mode. I also sensed that I was part of what might someday be big when advertisers such as Commonwealth Edison, Marshall Field's and others started exploring the medium."

Says Fran Harris-Tuchman of her time in the early days of television, "I'm not sure we all had the same vision that B&K did, but we knew it was new and exciting and fun to be a part of."

One WATT said at the time in an article in *The Chicago Sun*, "I'm crazy about my job; I can hardly wait to start it every day. This must be the most thrilling, most fascinating work in the world. Why, even my friends are beginning to avoid me because all I want to talk about is television."

Fran and Jean have always kept in touch over the years. They eventually, though, lost contact with their fellow WATTS. Jean says, "People become a Christmas card and then, if you aren't actively in their lives, you lose track of them."

But Jean still has a letter from Rae Stewart that she sent to her from Florida in 1954. Rae wrote to Jean: "Can you believe that people are still calling TV an 'infant medium'?" By that time, it had been twelve years since Jean and Fran and five other women answered an ad, became a WATTS and went to work. ■

Cary O'Dell is former Archives Director for the Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago and the author of *Women Pioneers in Television: Biographies of Fifteen Industry Leaders* (McFarland, 1996). He is currently with cable TV's Discovery Channel.

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The Rise and Demise of Howdy Doody: A Backstage Story by a Real Insider

By Howard L. Davis

The summer of 1998 took a heavy toll on the pioneers of American children's television. Buffalo Bob Smith, whose *Howdy Doody Show* ran for thirteen years on NBC between 1947 and 1960, died in August. He was followed to TeleValhalla by Shari Lewis, queen of the sock puppets. Roy Rogers, King of the Cowboys, died later in the month. Bob Smith and Howdy Doody, Sheri and Lambchop, Roy and Trigger — household words in Eisenhower's nation.

Smith's death made the front pages, coast to coast. Lesser known, but an important part of our story, was Martin Stone, whose death preceded Smith's by ten days. Stone was one of the first and more interesting of the independent producers and promoters in the fledgling art and business of television in the late 1940s.

In 1946 NBC brought Bob Smith to New York as the early-morning entertainer

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Bob Smith and Howdy Doody

on its owned-and-operated radio station WEAF. In short order he was holding his own against pre-television Arthur Godfrey on CBS, and Mutual's first John Gambling of "March Around the Breakfast Table" fame. Bob had started his career as a teenager, singing with a regional trio in Western New York State. He got into radio in Buffalo (hence Buffalo Bob), where he set rating records with his on-air patter, record spinning and above all his singing and piano playing. Bob was an impressively extroverted and entertaining radio performer.

A few months after his arrival in New York, Bob Smith added on a Saturday morning kids radio show called *Triple B Ranch.* (Triple B for Big Brother Bob, of course.) Smith invented a cast of characters and did all the voices. One of his cast was a country bumpkin named Elmer, whose weekly greeting — "Well, Howdy Doody boys and girls, hyuh, hyuh, hyuh" — always made the studio audience laugh out loud. Kids out there in radioland lapped it up too.

Martin Stone was a 33-year-old Yale Law graduate with a taste for show business. A few years before his death he told this writer, "You'll remember I started with shows that were definitely educational, like *Americana,* my quiz show, and *Author Meets the Critics.* For a time I thought even Howdy might serve an educational purpose, but I guess money got in the way. Still, it was a force for good, don't you think?"

Author Meets the Critics consisted of literary debates among current authors and critics, a format which sometimes became heated under the blazing lights of early television. Stone, who was large, well-tailored and imperiously handsome, soon knew everyone who could make things happen at NBC, including president Niles Trammel, TV head Warren Wade, and "Bobby" Sarnoff, the son of Gen. David Sarnoff, who founded the company. NBC Sales was trying to convince reluctant companies to advertise on this cutting-edge medium of network TV. One suggestion was that they start broadcasting earlier in the evening with a kids' show, so that Mom could have a half hour to herself while preparing supper. It would be an almost guaranteed audience, and air time might be easy to sell.

On a fateful day in 1947 Stone stopped by the radio studio where *Triple B Ranch* was being broadcast. With him was his six-year-old daughter, who had become a fan. After the broadcast Smith took Stone and Judy into the studio and cut an acetate disk to play at the child's birthday party.

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Bob Smith knew exactly who Stone was and what he might be able to do for a talented young radio guy in a hurry to move on to television, still shunned by many radio stars such as Red Skelton and Fred Allen. Soon, with a management contract in his pocket, Stone was, in effect, a partner with Smith and NBC.

Add Warren Wade to our story: during World War II this NBC executive, who had headed the tiny pre-war group trying to develop NBC's television capability, had become Colonel Wade, running the U.S. Army Signal Corps' Film Center in Astoria, Queens. When he returned to NBC the ex-colonel brought several of his officers and enlisted men with him. One of the officers was Roger Muir, a tall, bright and ambitious young man who took immediately to the new medium. Wade chose Muir as one of three producers assigned to develop kids shows, in competition with each other, for the chosen time slot in late afternoon. Martin Stone put Muir together with Bob Smith and the writer of his radio show, a young Navy veteran named Eddie Kean. Together they came up with a format featuring puppets and variety acts, performing before a live studio audience. *Puppet Playhouse* — their chosen name — was set to try out on the network on Saturday evening, December 27, 1947 at five o'clock.

No show in any medium ever had a luckier launch than *Puppet Playhouse*. The Great Snowstorm of 1947 had in fact started on Friday evening December 26. By morning several inches were on the ground, by noon more than a foot. The inches — the tons – of snow kept descending. Fifth Avenue was deserted as post-Christmas gift returners gave up and tried to find transportation home. Saks closed at two. Macy's and Gimbel's probably checked with each other before following suit. Broadway closed down. Young Marlon Brando was himself that night, not Stanley Kowalski of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Ethel Merman never fired a shot for there was no *Annie Get Your Gun*.

Then wonder of wonders. Almost every television set in the country was turned on at five o'clock, and most of them to the show that was advertised as kids' fare, *Puppet Playhouse*. Children in homes lacking TV rushed uninvited to their friends houses or apartments. Adults turned the set on because it might be better than watching the test pattern while the snow descended.

Clarabell

By all testing methods then in use, the audience was phenomenal! Videotape was still uninvented. If a grainy kinescope recording was made, it no longer exists. There is no video record of the first show of what would soon be renamed *The Howdy Doody Show*.

Howdy himself wasn't there except for the Elmer-related sounds made in the voice box of Bob Smith. Frank Paris, the puppeteer hired for the show, hadn't had time to finish a puppet to match the Elmer voice. So the first *Puppet Playhouse* consisted of some music, animal acts, and other turns, and Bob Smith trying to coax an extremely shy Howdy Doody out of a desk drawer. The voice in the drawer became a mystery, and the show's young audience came away panting to see Howdy Doody.

The snowstorm was the luckiest ingredient of the first show. Most of the 15,000 sets in New York (all with seven-or ten-or twelve-inch screens) were tuned in to the amazing fare of puppets, dancing dogs and a likable adult who spoke to children as though he thought they were as smart as he was. The powerful TV critics from the

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New York *Times* and the *Herald Tribune* were convinced. A few days later *Variety* chimed in, pointing out that Howdy's success would really take off when American moms realized they had a free babysitter when they needed one, just before supper. NBC canceled the other kiddy-show contenders. Stone, Muir, Bob Smith, Eddy Kean and Howdy Doody got the job!

On top of the world, they went to work. Paris,whittling furiously through three January weeks, completed the marionette Howdy Doody. The wooden creature he produced, his conception of the Elmer voice incarnate, was ugly as sin. Its acceptance, by the powers that were, lacked enthusiasm. Howevere, Howdy could not stay in that drawer forever.

Against the odds, the kids liked it The ratings kept growing, as did sponsorship. However, in the first week of April a bitter dispute broke out as to who owned the puppet and its valuable merchandising rights. When negotiations were at an impasse, Paris walked out of 10 Rockefeller Plaza in a snit, with the puppet under his arm. Neither came back. And when they walked it was three hours before air time.

As shameless as he was creative, Eddie Kean rose to the challenge. The face of a substitute puppet was bandaged beyond recognition. Buffalo Bob gravely announced that Howdy had had a face lift!

A Star is...Carved!

Word went out to the Coast that a new Howdy was needed. A friendly red-headed cowboy-like figure was drawn by an artist from Walt Disney Studio and handcrafted by puppet-maker Velma Dawson in Burbank. A month later the Doodyville Gang --Buffalo Bob, Marty Stone, Roger Muir, Eddie Kean, plus new director Bob Rippen — also a Signal Corps graduate — uncrated the puppet in Muir's office. Everyone breathed easier when they saw the smiling ten-year-old boy in his western shirt, bandanna and blue jeans: It was freckled Howdy Doody as we remember him. A new star had been...carved!

It happened to be a national election year. Eddie Kean ran Howdy Doody for President to the kids of America and made the first premium offer on childrens' TV, an "I'm for Howdy Doody" button in return for a stamped envelope. The NBC mailroom got 6,000 requests the first day, then 50,000, more than double the number of TV sets in the country (most were still in bars). The sales department at NBC had to stop taking orders as Howdy Doody's available commercial time quickly sold out.

It stayed sold out for years. Buffalo Bob Smith, super salesman, contributed to the fortunes of Welch's Grape Juice, Wonder Bread, Blue Bonnet Margarine, Poll Parrot shoes and Hostess Twinkies. As the main performer and part owner of the show, Bob Smith was said to be making about $300,000 a year, which would be several millions today.

Eddie Kean would go on to write the first seven years of the show, thousands of live scripts, most or all of the songs and lyrics (including the instructional "Cross the Street With You Eyes") and even the comic books and the Little Golden Books that were generated when Howdy's popularity was at its peak.

Clarabell the mute clown, with two bicycle horns and a notorious seltzer bottle, was played by a young NBC page, Bobby Keeshan. He had started out in his page uniform, handing prizes to the kids in the audience. It was also his job to quiet them down, sometimes with threats, just before air time. Smith added a few dollars to Keeshan's page salary, and later NBC threw in $75 a week and the clown suit, making Keeshan the first salaried actor in television. Any time a Howdy script needed a boost, Eddie Kean wrote in a

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Buffalo/Clarabell seltzer chase, causing such pandemonium in the studio that soon Howdy had to face down his first backlash when stories began to appear in the press that the show was getting children too excited before dinner.

The actor and puppeteer Dayton Allen did all of the voices except for Howdy's, which was Smith's own Elmer-descended parody of a country bumpkin. Dayton's live characters included Ugly Sam the wrestler, Oil Well Willie the prospector, and Sir Archibald the explorer. Imagine Seinfeld's Michael Richards on LSD and you'll get some idea of Dayton's madcap personality. He provided the voice of Mr. Bluster, Doodyville's resident mayor, villain and curmudgeon, as well as the Flubadub, who only ate flowers until the nation's mothers complained *en masse* that their kids had started to eat them too! Eddie Kean then changed the diet to meatballs and spaghetti.

Rounding out the early permanent Doodyville cast was Bill Lecornec, an actor and singer who was the puppeteer and voice of Dilly Dally, Howdy's hapless sidekick. Lecornec's live characters included Dr. Sing-a-Song and beloved Chief Thunderthud, whose famous war-cry, "Kowabonga," has echoed down the generations and recently made it into the Oxford English Dictionary.

Rhoda Mann was another regular in the studio, a clever and talented young puppeteer responsible for manipulating the difficult, top-heavy Howdy puppet, which had to be in perfect sync with the Buffalo's voicings. Rhoda also did the voice for the Princess Summerfall Winterspring puppet when Kean introduced that new character in 1951.

A Puppet Princess Comes to Life

For three years *Howdy Doody* had been mostly a show directed at little boys. But eventually Howdy merchandising got so huge – with literally hundreds of products from lunchboxes to toys on the market – that Marty Stone and NBC let merchandise considerations become an element in running the show. Someone suggested they could sell a lot of dresses and makeup if Howdy got a winsome little girl on the show. The new Indian princess puppet failed to catch on. Within a few months Stone, Smith, Muir and Kean were auditioning teenage girls to bring the puppet character to life.

Which is where Judy Tyler comes into our story.

Judy was 17 years old in 1951. At 15 she'd been a dancer at the Copacabana nightclub. She was already married to her pianist and vocal coach, Colin Romoff. The

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Judy Tyler as Princess Summerfall Winterspring

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young couple survived as a nightclub act in the clubs and bars along 52nd Street while Judy prepared for a career on Broadway. When Romoff heard that NBC was auditioning for a girl for *Howdy Doody*, they turned up at 30 Rockefeller Plaza one morning. "She was sensational," Marty Stone said many years later. "She sang 'Over the Rainbow' and got the job. Then she sang 'The Trolley Song' and 'I Got Rhythm' better than Merman." In a much-hyped, nationally broadcast ceremony the Princess puppet was transformed into a stunningly lovely and shapely girl. Suddenly kids noticed that their dads were tuning into *Howdy* too! TV critics duly noted that Judy's princess was a breath of fresh air which took the edge off some of the sometimes crude slapstick and relentless selling that characterized the show.

Even before I went to work in Doodyville in 1952 as one of two co-directors, I knew that *Howdy Doody* could be a raucous place to work. The afternoon rehearsals often dissolved into hilarious parodies of the show, with sexy puns and blue lyrics to Howdy standards like "The Goodbye Song." At my first rehearsal Dayton Allen had the Bluster puppet peering down Judy's decolletage, which broke everyone up. I was told that producer Roger Muir had been leery about bringing a teenage girl into this locker- room environment, but she quickly turned out to swear like a sailor and easily laugh off the after-lunch jokes. Judy Tyler fit right in. The new Princess was an overnight success all over America, and all of us who worked on the show loved her.

For this writer, it was a real thrill to join NBC's elite group of network directors after two years as a local director on WNBC, doing as many as four programs a day at about half the network salary. However, I was surprised to discover an undercurrent of rebellion. Howdy's puppet bridge and the bleachers of the Peanut Gallery were tucked into a corner of the big room. Almost he first words of greeting I received were from young Bobby Keeshan, whom I knew slightly. "You're taking a big chance, Howard," he said, and let it go at that.

Here comes Judy Tyler to greet me...18 years old now...be still my heart! Her tight sweater happily displayed the full maturity of her awesome figure. Her smile is hotter than the studio lights. "Hi," she says. "I hear you're a nice guy which is OK because everybody's a bit of a shit around here." She said Bob Rippen and Bob Hultgren (with whom I would alternate as director) were good enough guys. Muir was apparently Smith's creature. Smith was God unless Stone was and Smith had Muir to do the dirty work. She wished me luck.

The Issue was Money

The issue, of course, was money. Anyone even remotely connected to the show could see that *Howdy Doody* was a money machine generating millions for NBC and KAGRAN, the holding company that owned the show and controlled its lucrative merchandising. Bob Smith and Marty Stone were on their way to becoming millionaires. Bobby Keeshan and the other actors, making a respectable $750 a week including commercial fees, felt shortchanged in an environment with all that lucre being flung about. This led to the first major crisis of Doodyville's 13-year history, the Great Cast Revolt of 1952.

It happened in December, just before Christmas, which was a big deal on Howdy's show. Bobby Keeshan is said to have been the ringleader of a group that included Dayton Allen, Bill Lecornec and Rhoda Mann. They hired an agent who went to NBC and demanded a thousand a week for each of them. Meanwhile, they had some new puppets built and approaches were made to other networks

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about their doing other shows, or at least commercials. But NBC, Bob Smith and lawyer Marty Stone said no, and told the group that if they didn't get rid of their agent, they would be off the show. The actors were already covered under the AFTRA contracts. Their little union-within-a-union was illegal, a secondary boycott under collective-bargaining rules.

The negotiations went on in great secrecy, amid much nail-biting among management and the technical crew. But the four rebelling people had miscalculated their chances of success.

On Christmas Eve the cast were ordered to gather at noon in the studio. One version (I was not there) is that Roger Muir and/or Bob Smith asked the rebels to give up and stay with the show, and, with their refusal, asked them to leave. The story told by the departing artists was that they were summarily and unreasonably fired.

"Come on gang! We've got a show to do!" Bob either did or did not shout for the dispirited quartet. Sure enough, Eddie Kean had a Christmas script ready to be rehearsed, cue cards and all else ready.

Did the recalcitrant rebels in effect resign for not getting what they wanted? Or was it in truth The Christmas Eve Massacre? To this day, I have no idea.

In any case there was a new Clarabell already in the cast. Bob Nicholson was a talented musician from Buffalo, an old friend of Smith's. He had been hired to add a needed musical element. This had been a sore point with Bob, who claimed that Keeshan was so tone-deaf that he could not play NBC's three-note signature on a toy xylophone. Nick, as the new player was called, could write songs and play a variety of instruments. He was hired as Carney Cobb, proprietor of Doodyville's general store. Two weeks after Keeshan left, Clarabell turned up suddenly playing a mean slide trombone, and much lighter on his feet.

A new man was in charge of the puppet bridge. Rufus Rose had for years operated his own puppet theatre in Connecticut. His wife Margot would build the rest of the show's puppet cast until the end. Another excellent puppeteer, Lee Carvey, was hired for the Howdy Doody marionette, the tallest and most difficult to "walk" of all the wooden cast.

The next question was: Without Dayton Allen, what about the puppet voices? We all thought that Dayton was irreplaceable – until we met Allen Swift, "The Man With a Thousand Voices."

"I asked for recordings of Bluster and Flubadub and took them home for the weekend." Allen said. "Of course I didn't need Howdy since he was a variant of Smith's normal voice. On Monday I did them for Smith and you guys. I believe Stone was there too. You all said you couldn't tell my version from Dayton's."

That left Chief Thunderthud and the puppet Dillydally, two of the most beloved characters on the show. I knew that Bill Lecornec had joined the rebellion reluctantly, not to make waves. With Muir's and Rippen's agreement I took Bill to lunch and asked him what it would take to get him back. "The resumption of my salary," he said, though he added that he felt like a traitor to the other three. But the bachelor Lecornec had an extended family in California that depended on him.

With Thunderthud and Dillydally back in place – and with Allen Swift's amazing ability to duplicate the other voices– the crisis was ended.

June 1953. *Howdy Doody* still topped the Trendex ratings as number-one daytime show in America. It was said that Howdy and Milton Berle supported the NBC network. That month we temporarily moved Doodyville out of Radio City and into Billy Rose's Ziegfeld Theater at Sixth Avenue and 54th Street. Rippen, Hultgren and I spent several days looking at new "color compatible" stage sets with designer Elmer Tagg. Then we took

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Howdy on the air as the first regularly scheduled network show produced and broadcast in color.

We Lost the Princess

In November we lost Princess Summerfall Winterspring. Judy Tyler had turned 19 and Martin Stone (still an important vote) thought it was time for her to go. Outside the avuncular gaze of Muir or Stone, Judy sometimes behaved in an un-Princess-like fashion. Dancing on tables had been reported. Judy's friend Bob Rippen recalls, "Judy could really turn your head. She was almost too much for us to handle." Martin Stone added, "Judy was pure magic. The person outgrew the character. But it was OK because she wanted to move on with her career."

So Judy went forth in her own persona, to guest appearances on *The Milton Berle Show* and Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows.* Followed then a starring role on Broadway and, in Hollywood, the love interest to Elvis Presley in *Jailhouse Rock.* A career that promised to be stellar was tragically cut short by her untimely death in an automobile accident on a stretch of desert road in Wyoming. Judy Tyler was 22 years old.

Late in 1953 Eddie Kean was feeling the strain. He began buying scripts from freelancers, usually in story lines of one or two weeks.

As a member of the Writers Guild who had sold scripts to a number of other shows, I submitted story lines to Kean and was rewarded with four weeks of *Howdy Doody* scripts over a period of four months, though I continued directing the show.

In January 1954 NBC sent the entire *Howdy Doody Show*— cast, crew, puppets and props – out to California to help open the new Burbank Studio. Up to that time California kids had seen *Howdy Doody* episodes only on grainy kinescope recordings, a week or so later than the kids back East. Now these disadvantaged children were going to get a live dose of *Howdy Doody.* While in Burbank the second of my story lines was produced, introducing a new live character for Allen Swift. He was a Scot named Sandy McTavish, dressed in kilts and speaking with a marvelous burr. He was funny and endearing and could be written into any Doodyville plot. Bob Smith particularly liked that series. I was rewarded with the job of chief writer and script editor, I believe to the relief of Kean, who stayed on at KAGRAN to develop new shows.

For some time Bob Smith had expressed a desire to go back to adult entertainment, while keeping *Howdy Doody* as principal moneymaker. NBC gave him the valuable 10 AM radio slot for *The Bob Smith Show,* a lively musical program, with a band of fine network side men directed by our Bob Nicholson. This was an immediate hit, and now Bob was performing on ten shows a week. Soon the TV brass invited him to repeat the radio show 45 minutes later on television. The ratings were good from the start. Muir and Rippen produced both shows. Hultgren and I directed *Howdy Doody* and the musical alternately. Busy as we were, Smith was busier. He did a total of 15 shows a week, ten on TV and five on radio. The Buffalo's dream had come true!

But another crisis – really a near tragedy – was in the making. Early one Sunday morning in September 1954, Bob suffered a massive heart attack that almost killed him and the program as well. He was off the show for months. Guest hosts included the lovable old man of Western films, Gabby Hays, and New York disk jockey Ted Brown, whom I dubbed Bison Bill when he subbed for Smith.

A major problem was the voice of Howdy Doody. Nobody but Buffalo Bob had ever done it. Once again, Allen Swift was called to the rescue. His version was a bit less bucolic than the Elmer/Howdy voice the kids were used to, but it did the

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job amazingly well.

Yes, the show did go on, though our thoughts and prayers were with Buffalo Bob. It wasn't the same without him, and soon the advertisers started to complain. Nobody could sell products to kids and their parents like Bob. Almost as soon as he could get out of bed, Bob came back to the show. NBC built "Pioneer Village," a one-camera TV studio in the basement of Bob's home in suburban New Rochelle so Bob could do remotes while Howdy was on the air. When it was time for Bob to start working in the studio again (in mid-1955), David Sarnoff ordered *Howdy* to be the first daily network show to be regularly broadcast in color. Out went the old beige buffalo suit; the new one was eggshell blue.

Overshadowed by a Kangaroo and a Mouse

It was the beginning of a new era, but *Howdy Doody's* reign at the top of kids' TV was starting to crumble. Around this time Martin Stone sold his large share of KAGRAN and the show to NBC, severing his ties to Doodyville. His friendship with Bob Smith had ruptured over money. Bob was bitter, feeling that Stone's departure was ill-timed and hardly conducive to his own recovery. Another oblique blow to Bob Smith was Captain Kangaroo's brand-new show on CBS, a new type of kids show, gentle, almost quiet, precursor to *Sesame Street* that came along almost 15 years later. Instead of Howdy's frantic commercialism, the Kangaroo spoke to children simply, with genuine sympathy. That he spoke at all was a shock to us in Doodyville because the Kangaroo was our voiceless ex-Clarabell, Bobby Keeshan, who Bob Smith always maintained had no talent at all. Keeshan's Kangaroo stayed on CBS for the next *30 years*, still a record television run.

We tried to replace Judy Tyler when she left but found it a tough job. To keep a young girl in the show we wrote in a new puppet, a cousin of Howdy's named Heidi. The puppet made by Margo Rose was a delight, and most of us felt that Heidi Doody quickly found her place in the cast. The well-known songwriter J. Fred Coots provided her with a singable signature song.

Then *The Mickey Mouse Club* happened!

It was with total dread that we learned sometime in 1955 that ABC had bought a show from Walt Disney, one that would air at 5 PM, and run a full hour, right through Howdy's half hour. The new interloper would feature an attractive gang of child actors, and of course the irresistible Disney cartoons. There was no way that Howdy, Bluster and the Flubadub could compete with Annette Funicello and her fellow tap-dancing Mousketeers, instant role models for American kids. For the first year of the Mouse, Howdy's sponsorship held surprisingly well, but as *The Mickey Mouse Club* began to win the ratings wars some of Howdy's clients jumped ship. We knew things were bad when we noticed that our own kids were watching Mickey instead of tuning in Doodyville.

To survive, *Howdy Doody's* producers took cost-cutting measures, including cast reduction. Still, the Mouse's inroads progressed. Finally, in June of 1956, the network lowered the boom and relegated Doodyille to its Saturday-morning line-up of kiddies programs. Bob Smith, Bob Nicholson and Bill Lecornec remained in the cast, as did Lew Anderson, the talented musician who, a couple of years earlier, had taken over the Clarabell role. Roger Muir stayed on as producer and Bob Hultgren as director. Bob Rippen, for all of the program's long tenure a valuable and calm participant, left to follow an academic career at Rutgers University. I had been hired a few weeks earlier to direct *The Today Show*, then starring Dave Garroway. Allen Swift was let go at the end of his three-year contract. With the satisfaction

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of having saved the show twice – in 1952 by duplicating all of Dayton Allen's roles, and again in 1956 by his unique ability to match the Howdy Doody voice when its owner Bob Smith suffered the heart attack. ("Fired like a hod carrier," Allen explained to an interviewer later.)

Reduced in size, *Howdy Doody* chugged along on auto-pilot for another four years. But in 1960 NBC pulled the plug, citing Howdy's still high budget compared to small-cast shows and movies that could be repeated many times. Howdy's time slot went to...Shari Lewis, a quieter, gentler one-woman operation. Durable Roger Muir was her producer.

After 13 years *Howdy Doody*'s era was over. Tape had come in by then. Instead of watching the last episode at home – an episode which ended with Clarabell, for the first and only time speaking, gasping out "Goodbye kids" — Bob Smith is said to have taken a long walk.

We all went on to new assignments or other businesses. Bob Smith, a wealthy man, never really returned full time to using his gift of entertaining people. An attempt at a *Howdy Doody* revival in the 1970s ended in failure. Bob donned his pioneer uniform occasionally for the rest of his life at gatherings of baby boomers nostalgic for their own Doodyville-enriched childhoods. He was often accompanied by Lew Anderson made up again as Clarabell. These appearances were as close as Bob was to come to show business. The aging members of Howdy Doody's fan club prepared for the network to mount an on-air celebration of his 50th anniversary in 1997. They waited in vain. NBC didn't move a muscle.

The three hand-carved "original" Howdy Doodys have done well. One recently brought $125,000 at auction. Another remains in the Bob Smith family until its legal ownership is determined.. The third is on display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, rightfully treated as an artifact of consequence in American history.

If you chance to see him there, you'll agree he's quite a freckled sight. Whatever time has done to us, Howdy Doody hasn't aged a minute. ■

After leaving NBC in 1957 Howard Davis joined N.W. Ayer, the nation's oldest advertising agency, where he served sequentially as a creative director, international account manager and assistant to the chairman over three decades.

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Why NBC Killed Arlene Francis's *Home* Show

By Bernard M. Timberg

Arlene Francis was one of the most prominent woman talk-show hosts of the 1950s. She set a standard for "intelligent" programming focusing on public issues as well as issues of domestic life in America. Her career also illustrates the importance of power and control in the role of a 1950s talk-show host, and the uphill battle faced by a woman host during this time.

In 1960 Arlene Francis wrote:

I was born in Boston, raised in New York and died in daytime television. Well, that is not absolutely the truth, but it does have a humorous, self-deprecating rhythm. The truth is that I had four enriching years on daytime television on a program that carried me to all parts of the world.

For three and a half years she was the nationally acclaimed host of the *Home* show, one of the most successful public service information shows of the 1950s. She was, along with Godfrey, Murrow, Garroway and Paar, a founder of one of the basic forms of television talk.

Many women played significant behind-the-scenes roles in fifties television—women like Mili Lerner Bonsignori, Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly's film editor, who shaped many of Murrow's most important *See It Now* shows and television documentaries from her editing bench. But one place women were highly visible in the early days of television was in their roles as talk-show hosts. By the early 1950s there were many well known women hosts. Faye Emerson, Wendy Barrie, and Ilka Chase, for example, hosted widely viewed shows out of New York.

(In an acidic review, Philip Hamburger,

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writing about these three women in *The New Yorker* magazine, distinguished the "new-type woman" who had recently come on television from the dominant image of women in previous years. "American women are no longer the cool, calm, gingham-clad matrons of the big color advertisements-the all-electric kitchen, all-wise mothers who can simultaneously baste a duck, pull a fishhook from Junior's hand, tell Sis the facts of life, and read the Book of the Month. No, siree! After studying the quarter-hour programs of Miss Faye Emerson, Miss Wendy Barrie, and Miss Ilka Chase, I should say that the new-type woman belongs to an entirely different breed. She is chic, tense, commercially minded, out all night, has that highfalutin manner of speech generally associated with imitators of British actors, and speaks, for the most part, nonsense.")

Faye Emerson was a particularly important early host. An actress who became active in politics after marrying Eliot Roosevelt, the son of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, she was one of the five Emmy nominees for outstanding television personality of 1950. (The other nominees that year were Sid Caesar and Groucho Marx.) Other well known women hosts of the fifties were Dinah Shore, who hosted a variety hour sponsored by Chevrolet, and Eleanor Roosevelt, whose first guest was Albert Einstein and who fought, unsuccessfully within the climate of virulent anti-Communism in the early 1950s, to have Paul Robeson appear as a guest on her television show in New York.

Network officials and advertisers were well aware that women constituted a large part of the audience, especially during the day. The women hosts listed above were chosen to appeal to that audience. Articles appeared in the popular press about the appeal to this female audience of male talk show hosts like Godfrey, Murrow, Garroway, and Paar. The *Home* show, however, was the first major effort by a national network to capture the daytime audience of women with a woman host and a serious informational format. Pat Weaver's "Communicator" would now be a woman who relayed to other women the world's latest information using the most advanced television technology.

Arlene Francis' career as an actress had begun in the thirties on stage and in film and among early television talk show hosts, only Edward R. Murrow is now represented by more programs in the Museum of Television and Radio collection. At the Museum one can listen to her radio work in 1937 reading a poem by Keats on the Columbia Radio Workshop, or tune into shows she hosted like *Blind Date*, a panel show featuring servicemen that broadcast during World War II and was a forerunner of *The Dating Game*, on which six servicemen competed for a blind date with three "lovely girls" and an evening at New York's Stork Club.

Arlene Francis was also one of the first panelists of *What's My Line?*, joining the Goodson/Todman production on its third show and remaining with it throughout its 25-year run on the air. Each week Francis would trade witty repartee in her distinctive, theatrical Broadway voice with such figures as columnist Dorothy Kilgallen, publisher Bennett Cerf, and poet Louis Untermeyer. In September of 1950, shortly after she joined the panel of *What's My Line?*, Arlene Francis also became the first "mistress" of ceremonies for *Saturday Night Review: Your Show of Shows*. She appeared throughout the 1950s as guest or guest host on numerous shows, including Mike Wallace vs. *Nightbeat*, Edward R. Murrow's *Person to Person* (with husband Martin Gabel, a producer, and son Peter), and in a *Hallmark Hall of Fame* production of "Harvey" with Jimmy Stewart. Later in life Francis was a frequent commentator,

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narrator and guest on broadcasting tributes and retrospectives.

What is of interest to us here, however, was her role as host and managing editor of the *Home* show, the third of Pat Weaver's trilogy. It was a role that made Francis, in a mid-1950s poll, the third most recognized woman of her time. The first *Home* show on March 1, 1954 reveals the structure of the show and its ambitions. Here is announcer Hugh Downs' introduction:

Good morning everyone, and it is a good morning. You're looking at NBC's newest television studio in New York: a studio especially designed for 'Home.' And from this television laboratory—which is what it really is—each week day at this hour [11:00 AM], a staff of electronic editors is going to bring you news and information that applies to your home and your family. Now I'd like to let you meet the editor-in-chief of our electronic magazine, Arlene Francis.

As Downs speaks a circular platform revolves revealing *Home* show staff members—over 120 people worked on the show—one or two at a time in tableau-like settings shaped like wedges in a pie. Each section of the revolving platform contained a segment of the show—health, cooking, fashion, education and current events. The revolving set cost NBC approximately $200,000—an astounding figure for a television set at that time. As managing editor, Arlene Francis always had a firm hand on this "electronic magazine of the air," and as the first *Home* show opening suggested, the show covered a wide range of topics, including such controversial fifties social issues as divorce, the "menace of tranquilizers," the "blackboard jungle" and "crisis in the schools." It featured newsmakers like Senator John Kennedy, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Vice President Richard Nixon, and Maine Senator Margaret Chase Smith.

When Senator Margaret Chase Smith appeared she spoke about what the term "home" meant to her ("a symbol of our family ties and our family life..the place where we store far more important things than furniture...where we store our hopes and our fondest memories") but she also talked about hard policy decisions she had to make in office. Like *Today and Tonight*, *Home* traveled: to Japan (where Francis appeared in a kimono on New Year's Day), to Monaco and Holland (where she visited a houseboat), to Paris (where Francis went on a trip to the Eiffel Tower with actress Jean Seberg), to Nassau in the Bahamas (where Francis went diving with son Peter and water skiing on one of the world's fastest speed boats).

The decision to take *Home* off the air in 1957 was a shock to the staff and many of its viewers, and the decision is still somewhat shrouded. Though Francis was told the program was a victim of ratings decline, it may just as well have been a victim of NBC founder General Sarnoff's desire to "clean house" and purge the slate of programs promoted by Pat Weaver, who Sarnoff had replaced with his son Robert Sarnoff a year before *Home* was taken from the air. Weaver himself thinks this is the case, pointing out that the show's ratings were still strong when it was taken off the air, bringing in over $5 million in bookings by its second year. This is Weaver's own statement about the demise of the *Home* show.

As a professional, I always figured, first, how much does the show cost? Then, how much does the interconnection cost? Then, how much does the station compensation cost? And what was left was the gross amount of money that you had from that

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attraction. On that basis [Home] was a very successful show.and the idiots took it off. All of the advertising money immediately went back to the women's books. None of it stayed in television. It was a show built for the women who were not watching soaps, game shows, daytime stuff, and we knew already from radio and television research that almost half of the women in the country do not watch or listen to that stuff. So this was a show for them, and we got good ratings.It was a purely childish, stupid, idiotic thing and a reprehensible act.

The last *Home* show, broadcast August 9, 1957, was like Johnny Carson's last *Tonight* show in 1992, an emotional experience. It reveals quite a bit about the show and its appeal to viewers.

In the opening of the last *Home* show, Arlene Francis appears before the camera.

Three and a half years later, we are starting the final edition. [She gestures to Downs.] My left hand, right hand, my all around man about 'Home,' Mr. Hugh Downs....After all this time he still continues to amaze me about how much information he carries in that little head. [She looks toward Downs.] And you certainly do. And maybe that is why some of your hair is falling out. [Downs replies good naturedly off-mike, 'Could be.'] But it is a good, solid level head, and if I've embarrassed you—I'm glad!

It is rather startling even in the mid-1990s to see this a woman talk-show host ribbing her male second banana. Now Downs steps in. "It is the names of television programs that are mortal," he says. "The programs and the ideas are immortal—like people are..." The final *Home* show featured highlight clips from many of its past shows, and at the end invited a long-time viewer and contributor to the show to appear: the editor of the *Cleveland Free Press*. He is known to his followers and fans as "Mr. Cleveland," Francis says, a "citizen philosopher" who had given *Home* many thoughtful opinions over the years. The editor from Cleveland says that in times of stress and the breakdowns that accompany change—changes between management and labor, parent and child, husband and wife, government and people—the most important thing is that relationships remain solid. He speaks of his relationship to the "Home" show. It has been "truly magnificent," he says, and he regrets, "as do millions of others" that it is going off the air. Arlene Francis fights back the tears:

Yes, Mr. Seltzer is right. "Home" is going off the air. After 893 hours, editions, adventures, hellos and goodbyes and see you tomorrows, "Home" is going off the air in 113 cities and 4 time zones, plus Alaska and Hawaii. When I said, what are we going to do the last day, they just said, Arlene, the most important thing is don't weep. Well, I don't want to weep, certainly. I know that I'm just supposed to feel wonderful and gay, and everything will go on—but this is a big family of 120 people we have all gotten very attached..."

She closes the program with inspirational music and a prayer that the Lord would make her an instrument of peace: "Where there is hatred, make me so love/Where there is injury, pardon/Where there is doubt, faith/Where there is despair, hope..."

NBC eased the transition by giving her a thirty-minute daytime show for a while, a blend of "chitchat" and features called *The Arlene Francis Show*. It lasted only six months. Afterwards Francis went back to her usual busy schedule of theatrical work, guest appearances, and her regular panel duties on *What's My Line?*.

What happened to Arlene Francis' *Home* (1954-57)? Was there any way the show could have remained on the air, as *Today* and *Tonight* did? Francis' autobiography

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intimates unresolved power issues, and gives us an idea of just how hard it was to be a woman talk show host in the 1950s with no real power and authority within the network system. Her description of the end of the *Home* show also indicates how important the business side was—how the talk show hosts who remained on the air had to speak the language of television business, as Weaver did, to maintain their positions on the air.

An interview Arlene Francis did with Mike Wallace on *The Mike Wallace Interview* in 1959 is particularly revealing. Wallace begins the interview by saying that a lot had been written recently about what happened to career women in America, "not you particularly, but others." He asked her if she could explain what "happens to so many career women that makes them so brittle? That makes them almost a kind of third sex?" Do you "never find yourself losing your identity then as woman in the—let's face it—male dominated world of television."

Francis thinks before replying and then answers. "What happens to some of [the women] who have these qualities you've just spoken of, is that I suppose they feel a very competitive thing with men and they take on a masculine viewpoint." They "forget primarily that they are women...Instead they become aggressive and opinionated." She goes on to deliver her own theory on the different genders. "While men do it, it is part of the makeup of a man, and a man has always done it all his life. Therefore he has other qualities that soften the edges. Whereas women are maybe doing it for the first time and they go farther ahead, and they are so determined and they are so sure that they know everything, so that they can win the race...." Her own position, she says, is that it is not "a woman's position to dominate. I have no desire to do some great world's work, except through my own family and my own peace, and to connect that back with the world."

Francis' position seems quite clear here, but her memoir reveals that the pull between private and public life for Francis was filled with tension and ambiguity. In the early 1960s, David Tebet and a group of executives from NBC came to Francis and made her an offer to succeed Garroway as co-host of the "Today" show, working with her old "right hand man," Hugh Downs. "I heard them out," Francis says, "and said flatly no, no, no. (And of course, thank you.)"

> *It was bad enough getting up at four in the morning when we did remotes on* Home. *I felt (rightly or wrongly) that it would have caused too great an upheaval in my relationships with family and friends....I thought about Martin being on his own most evenings—what sort of life would that be for him? (Maybe marvelous, which would make it even worse!) Thus, although I had always been accustomed to talking such career decisions over with Martin, this was the time I decided to make my decision independent of his advice. I was afraid that in his desire not to stand in the way, he might try to be `gallant' and persuade me to do something he didn't want me to do.*

Furthermore, Francis adds, "It was a time during which I was riding the crest of a wave—guest appearances, *Woman of the Year*, award shows, and "What's My Line?"...I saw no reason why I should be a `co-host'!" That decision became, however, one of what Francis calls the great "If Idas" of her life ("if Ida done this or Ida done that"). Barbara Walters got the job, and though most of the time Francis felt happy for her, she had severe twinges afterwards when, for example, Walters accompanied President Richard and Pat Nixon on their groundbreaking trip to China.

Lacking a firm grip on the business

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side of her show (she relied on her husband for that), Arlene Francis was not able to manage her career as Barbara Walters managed hers in the 1960s and 70s. The "If Ida" story of Arlene Francis reads like a cautionary tale. In the Mike Wallace interview Francis recounts a dream she had repeatedly and she ends her memoirs with the same dream. "I pick up a phone to make a call, and discover it has no mouthpiece. I seek another phone, and it is the same—there is no mouthpiece. In panic, I go from phone booth to phone booth, in and out of rooms, unable to find a telephone with a mouthpiece, frantic in my drive to communicate with someone—anyone." She felt earlier in her life, she says, that the dream represented her anxiety about her career as an actress, but by the time she wrote her memoirs, she felt it meant more than that. "I realized how deeply my inability to express myself without becoming apprehensive about what 'they' might think had affected me. In short, my 'don't make waves' philosophy had inhibited my life to an incalculable extent...I had forgotten that a few waves are necessary to keep the water from becoming stagnant..." ■

Bernard Timberg is an associate professor in the communications arts department of Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina. This article is adapted from a chapter in his book, *Television Talk: The History, Subgenres and Stars of the Television Talk Shows*, to be published in 2000 by the University of Texas Press.

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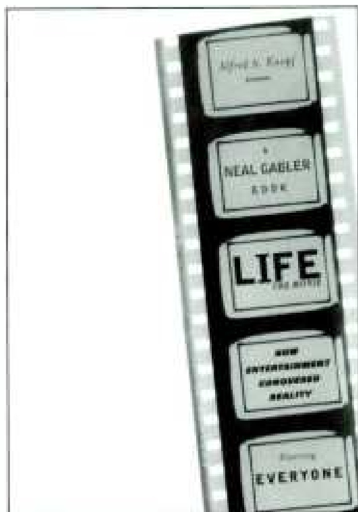
Life the Movie

by Neil Gabler
Random House, New York

Richard Campbell

I was actually about halfway through reading Neal Gabler's book *Life the Movie* when I heard the news of the Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colorado. In the aftermath of that April 1999 tragedy, which claimed the lives of 12 students, a teacher, and two twisted teenage killers, young eyewitnesses compared the slaughter to a violent movie scene.



Such powerful eyewitness accounts probably should have given some credence to Gabler's one-note argument — that "life is a movie and all of us performers in it." Instead, I grew increasingly frustrated with this book and how Gabler trivializes our daily experiences by claiming they are nothing but "lifies" — an annoying term that he uses to reduce the complexity of our lives to celebrity-inspired plot lines. (I'm still trying to recover from Gabler's ludicrous comparison of Pope John Paul II's public performance— or "lifie" — to the staged dramatic antics of soul singer James Brown.)

The problem with reviewing this book is where to begin. Let's start with definitions. Gabler, who says that life has been converted "into an entertainment medium," refuses to define entertainment. Then he uses the term many different ways. Sometimes it means escapism, sometimes it means anti-information, other times it means narrative, and then it means "the primary value of American life" (which is news to most of us who regard individualism as the premiere American value). But the sloppiest use of the term comes on page 10 of the introduction — the point where I first knew the book was in trouble. Here, Gabler says that he uses the concept of entertainment as "a tool of analysis." What does that mean?

But the weakest part of this book is the specious way Gabler mounts his argument. By parading before us an anecdotal procession of clips about movie stars, famous politicians and celebrity wannabes, Gabler tries to make their fragmented stories stand in for the whole of life's experiences. In Gabler's view, some how we are all like Michael Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor, Madonna, Andy Warhol, even Zsa Zsa Gabor — all of us struggling to figure out how to a play ourselves in a world that has become a giant movie set. Gabler constantly writes about celebrities as if they were metaphors we live by. Just because Ronald Reagan did his job as if he were playing a movie role does not mean that the rest of us live this way. This is insulting.

Gabler does not prove his point in *Life the Movie*; he does not marshal the evidence to demonstrate what his grand

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theory means to most Americans who are not famous and are quite content living life outside the media and movie spotlight. Not only does Gabler make the mistake of thinking that media-made celebrities represent mainstream values, but he makes frequent shaky claims. He argues, for example, that during the last Olympics the audience was more interested in personal stories about the athletes than in the competitions themselves. How does he know this about such a vast audience? He certainly didn't interview them or run a study. At the very least, Gabler needed badly to talk to a few regular folks to test whether entertainment indeed has become America's main value.

When Gabler does occasionally talk about regular folks — "the public" — he says stuff like, "The public demanded; the media supplied." He's talking about entertainment here. And at the very least, the relationships between audiences and media industries are mutually dependent. But in his worst use of invoking the public, he blames us for journalism's retreat into sensationalism at the expense of its investigative tradition. Gabler just comes right out and claims, "The cause [of media sensationalism] was the public's hunger for entertainment." In such statements, which offer no support for claiming a cause-effect relationship, not only does Gabler let journalists off the hook but he also fails to recognize the market forces and economic competition driving journalism toward the bottom line.

Gabler's book is full of hyperbole. He loves using disaster nouns like "flood" and "deluge" to dramatize the media's awesome power over us. Even worse, however, are the fallacies in his reasoning. He makes broad unsupported claims such as "life was increasingly being lived for the media," or "If the primary effect of the media in the late twentieth century was to turn nearly everything that passed across they screens into entertainment, the secondary and ultimately more significant effect was to force nearly everything to turn itself into entertainment in order to attract media attention."

Nearly everything? Does this include brushing my teeth? Talking to my dean? Discussing school with my children? Later he claims, "Almost everything in life has appropriated the techniques of public relations to gain access to the media." Almost everything? Does this include taking out the garbage? Driving to work? Teaching my classes? How do PR techniques figure in what novelist Walker Percy referred to as just getting through a typical Wednesday afternoon?

The problem, of course, is that for Gabler movie plots have become the templates for how life really works. This kind of reasoning becomes most troubling when pop-psychologist Gabler arrogantly diagnoses the "true cause" of the death of Robert O'Donnell, the heroic fireman who pulled young Jessica McClure from that narrow Midland, Texas, well back in 1987. O'Donnell later took his own life. Disregarding other possibilities like depression, Gabler charges that O'Donnell had become "addicted to fame" and later ruined by his declining celebrity status in our entertainment culture.

Another problem with this book is Gabler's decision to take one-page scattered cheap shots. Two examples. He discredits academia for employing its own star system in hiring academic superstars. While this is certainly true of a handful of elite institutions, Gabler implies that this is going on in public and private institutions across the land. It's not. Later in the book, for some inexplicable reason, he

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also goes after an America "overrun with twelve-step programs," which he sees as some sort of recent therapeutic fad. The last time I looked, twelve-step programs, around since the 1930s, are still the only effective resource for helping recovering alcoholics and addicts rebuild their lives.

Gabler has done just enough reading of other media critics and a few academic scholars to look smart and write dangerously. But he is not discriminating in his uses of secondary materials. He throws quote after quote at us — most of them out of any context. He also uses old arguments — leaning heavily on Neil Postman's 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and historian Daniel Boorstin's *The Image*, a 1961 book. For the most part, both tracts represent a culturally conservative, gloomy view of popular and visual culture along with a nostalgia for the "good old days" when culture was better, people were smarter, conversation was clever, and democracy was less messy. And when exactly was this time? Was it in the 19th century when women and minorities could not vote or pursue formal education? Or was it in the 18th century when slavery ruled, when most Americans could not read or write, and when small elite groups controlled politics? Although Gabler occasionally pretends to be an even-handed populist, his choice of old-line elitist arguments reveals his true colors. He exposes his own nostalgia for some imagined "good old days," and he willingly takes part in what media sociologist Michael Schudson calls the "rhetoric of decline."

There are some strengths here. Gabler is generally a competent writer and points convincingly to some of the problems of our celebrity culture. The early parts of the book also do a solid job of examining the history of 19th-century popular culture. Although mostly Gabler reviews and popularizes the histories of others, he does it well, demonstrating the longstanding tensions between popular and elite forms of culture in America's brief history.

But in his single-minded focus on "lifies," Gabler forecloses any examination of other issues, especially the relationship between entertainment industries and the spread of global media conglomerates. By reducing everything to entertainment, he fails to make careful arguments about differences between politics and culture or between information and entertainment — and the inadequacies of this latter worn-out dichotomy to explain anything.

It seems clear that if one is going to write a book like Gabler's, there are other ways to go. For example, what are the media's role and responsibility in overemphasizing celebrities? What does the celebrity-driven part of our culture have to do with the way we over-value American individualism? And what is the role of citizens in demanding the best from our mass media and popular culture?

Mass media have an impact beyond telling tragic stories or maintaining celebrity culture. Although the growth of specialized channels and products has fragmented the audiences for media, many people still share interests in movie characters, talk-show topics and sports figures, as well as the big story on the evening news. At their best, mass media reflect and sustain the values and traditions of a vital democracy, not only by engaging and entertaining diverse audiences, but by watching over society's institutions, making sense of its important events and chronicling the ebb and flow of daily life.

But Gabler's book does raise questions. What are the social implications of new, blended and merging cultural forms and styles? On this sprawling media terrain, public debate and news about everyday life now seem as likely to come from Geraldo Rivera, *Ally McBeal* or popular

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music as from Peter Jennings, *The New York Times* or *Newsweek*. Clearly such change challenges us to reassess the standards by which we judge media culture. With access to book contracts from a big-time publisher, Gabler should be leading this reassessment.

Besides helping people explore the border between the familiar and the unknown, cultural forms such as novels, television, music and movies can promote important relationships among individuals and their society. Given our increasingly diverse world with its growing channels of specialized media, people are pulled in different directions. Examining diverse forms of culture, though, can push us to discover not only what we value but who our neighbors are what they value, and what our shared ties might be. We can find such ties in everyday conversation, in religion, in education, in favorite authors and musicians, and in sports stories, soap operas and daily news. Despite Gabler's arguments and anecdotes, we will not find a lot of clues to our own lives by studying the sagas of Zsa Zsa Gabor or Michael Jackson.

At its best *Life the Movie* disappoints by focusing on a peripheral but noisy (and visual) issue—entertainment culture. But at its worst Gabler's book is irresponsible. To claim that all life has become a movie set is to claim that celebrity stories have consumed us — that everything is a narrative. And our lives, no matter how hard Gabler argues, are not merely stories — they are more complex than that. Here in middle Tennessee where my students struggle to balance work and school, family and career, they pay less attention to media than I sometimes would like. They certainly don't fit this profile Gabler offers: "In the life movie Americans had become Method actors mastering the art of playing themselves by, as Elizabeth Taylor described it, making their fiction reality."

Such sweeping statements bring me back to Littleton and the dangers in thinking that the victims of that violent crime imagined themselves as Method actors trying to make their fiction reality. This makes no sense. Clearly, the April 1999 mayhem in Colorado implicated the media in several ways. That tragedy resulted from a number of intricate factors — some explainable, some senseless. The media played roles as part of teen culture, as reporter of tragic events and as definer of social issues. The Littleton story points to the media's presence in daily life - and that life - as distinct from "lifie" - has many more dimensions than its celebrity/entertainment influences.

Gabler *is* right about how important stories are. But this has been true for almost every society throughout history. Stories are the ways we representat our lives — they are the stuff of art, culture and popular entertainment. They often simplify life. They can eliminate the tedium and inject drama. But to claim that all of life has turned into one big entertainment narrative does not come close to describing private and public life for most Americans. For such a book, skip Gabler. Instead, I recommend Michael Schudson's *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*, which makes the connections between politics, mass media and public life. Or Alan Wolfe's *One Nation, After All*, in which the author actually goes out and talks to citizens about what they value (and it's not entertainment). Reading Schudson and Wolfe make Gabler look like he leaned on *People* and *Vanity Fair* as his touchstones for what's going on in America.

In the end, *Life the Movie* tells us more about Neal Gabler's values and psyche

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than it does about the life and spirit of our nation. In observing how out of touch he seems to be with normal folks and regular citizens, I can only conclude that Coast-bound Mr. Gabler has spent entirely too much time hanging out with media celebrities. And he has probably watched way too many movies.

When I ran his ideas past my middle Tennessee undergraduate students, they did not share Gabler's belief that there were no longer distinctions between media and life. One student suggested that Gabler was suffering from what media scholars call the "third person effect" — believing that he alone is too smart to be duped by the media, but that all the rest of us are saps. Another student suggested the Gabler's next book should focus, not on the triumph of entertainment, but on what's really going on — the power of American individualism and the consumer marketplace. ■

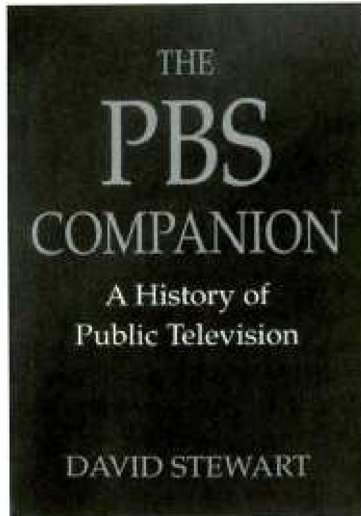
Richard Campbell is director of the School of Journalism at Middle Tennessee State University. He is author of *Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication* (St. Martin's Press, 1997) and *60 Minutes and the News: A Mythology for Middle America* (University of Illinois Press, 1991).

THE PBS COMPANION: A History of Public Television.

David Stewart
TV Books, New York

By James Day

Ever wondered what's wrong with public television? It's the television critics. In David Stewart's view they've given the inaptly-named noncommercial medium an easy pass. Not all critics. Some — Tom Shales, David Denby and Robert Coles among them —get passing grades. But hundreds of others "seem intent upon trivializing the outpouring of a medium that frequently fosters superficiality without anyone's assistance."



The call for "more intelligent critics" is the rare moment in his *The PBS Companion: A History of Public Television* when Stewart's voice is raised to a critical pitch. For the most part, the book is a collection of uncritical essays, gently remembered programs from public television's past and present — but mostly past — moments when the medium apparently fulfilled its promise of lighting our screens with something worth remembering.

The book's subtitle is misleading. *The PBS Companion* is not a history. Stewart's eye is on programs and the people who made them — often against odds that would scare off a weaker breed. True, his program selections span the unsteady arc of public television's 50 years,

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from educational television's first "hit" series, Frank Baxter's *Shakespeare on TV*, through today's more sophisticated offerings in the *Frontline* and *American Experience* series. Stewart, however, makes no effort to dig into the medium's troubled history nor its tangled relations with Congress. In fact, he takes pains at the outset to warn those eager to learn about the medium's complex institutional development "to look elsewhere."

What Stewart does provide is a collection of essays, each offering a behind-the-scenes portrait of 16 well and favorably remembered public television program series plus one pioneer public station, KQED in San Francisco. Interestingly, fully one-third of his 16 selections originated outside the public system he surveys. One, *Shakespeare on TV*, came from commercial KNXT in Hollywood and later aired on public television. Another four — *An Age of Kings; Upstairs, Downstairs; Brideshead Revisited;* and the contents of *Masterpiece Theater*— were produced and first seen in Britain. Stewart, whose Anglophilia is glaringly apparent, credits the British imports with generating and nurturing viewer expectations in this country. The result, he argues, is the "surprisingly high" standard of PBS productions. .

Contrary to what he feels is needed by American public television, Stewart's perspective on these shows is considerably less pointed than the television critics he scores for letting the medium get by with mediocrity. His essays are loving, even sentimental, recollections of past pleasures. We learn that *Masterpiece Theater* had three putative fathers, each claiming exclusive paternity; that when *The French Chef* began, Julia Child was paid $50 a show, did four a week and depended on husband Paul to haul the groceries up to the makeshift kitchen; that *Nova* grew in the creative imagination of Michael Ambrosino while he was interning with the BBC; and that Fred Rogers, in his first children's series, *The Children's Corner*, worked behind the scenery as a producer-puppeteer before emerging before the cameras to don the sneakers and sweater that became his hallmark. Thumbnail sketches of the people behind the shows — "an attempt to celebrate their achievements" — provide amusing insights but leave us wanting more (though only those sharing Stewart's interest in literature — he once taught it — will find his exploration of Evelyn Waugh and the provenance of *Brideshead Revisited* wanting). The chapters read like features culled from the pages of a periodical, as well they should. Each first appeared, in a somewhat more abbreviated form, in public television's semi-monthly newspaper, *Current*.

Wittingly or not, Stewart lays bare some of the fissions in the institution itself. (I prefer to think wittingly. Stewart spent more than 40 years inside the public television bureaucracy before his retirement last year.) He cites instances of the system's legendary resistance to innovation and change. The *MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour* achieved acceptance only after the two principals travelled the country putting the squeeze on reluctant stations. "The politics of the system nearly destroyed us," Lehrer told him.. Fred Wiseman, praised by critics as "one of the greatest nonfiction filmmakers who ever lived," slammed against a bureaucratic brick wall when he sought funding for his documentaries from the public system. And when Mobil first proposed the British-produced series

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Upstairs, Downstairs for inclusion in *Masterpiece Theater*, staffers rejected it, saying it was unworthy of the series, too "soap opera." Luckily, the underwriter's taste prevailed.

The 16 programs Stewart chooses reveal another aspect of the public system's resistance to innovation. Of those nine still in the PBS schedule and aired nationally, all but three — *American Experience, Frontline* and the *NewsHour* — have been around for at least 30 years, a full generation.. And the youngest of the three exceptions debuted on PBS eleven years ago. Stewart scoffs at the notion that lack of money explains the failure to innovate. That PBS offers so few programs "characterized by wit, elegance, hilarity, or what in other times and places has been known as 'dash' . . . simply reflects the social, economic and intellectual interests of those professionally associated with public broadcasting." They are "relatively conservative, reasonably well-educated people who seem quite comfortable with serious documentaries, mainstream music and dance programs, an earnest nightly news service, and programs to improve their cooking, homes, and gardens." No chance here for sophisticated comedy, serious drama or fare that breaks new ground, challenges accepted order.

The PBS Companion appears in a season in which the book titles on public television range from a funeral dirge to a eulogy on past glories. The latest, Robert McChesney's *Rich Media Poor Democracy* (1999), drops a wreath on the medium's grave with morbid finality: "for the most part, public television, in the true sense, no longer exists in the United States." James Ledbetter pronounced its demise two years earlier in his *Made Possible By . . . The Death of Public Television* (1997), while William Hoynes took note of its toxic brush with the corporate demons in *Public Television For Sale* (1994). In the interests of disclosure, it should be noted that the title to my own *The Vanishing Vision* (1995) bears more than a hint of public television's diminishing vitality. In such despairing digs, *The PBS Companion* puts a finger on public television's vital signs, reminding us there is life there still, with much to be preserved and savored.

The PBS Companion will find its most devoted readership among those able to summon up the memory of the medium's early shows — and share in Stewart's regurgative pleasure in them. Some readers, however, may feel cheated that Stewart does not develop more fully several ideas he lets pass with only tantalizing allusions — why, for example, he thinks the narrowly-focused education and training of most of public television's people, both creative and administrative, puts limits on the medium's potential, leaving it in the dust behind its more imaginative and daring British counterpart.

James Day was founder and president of KQED, San Francisco, and is the former president of WNET / Channel 13, New York.

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The Control Room: How Television Calls the Shots in Presidential Elections

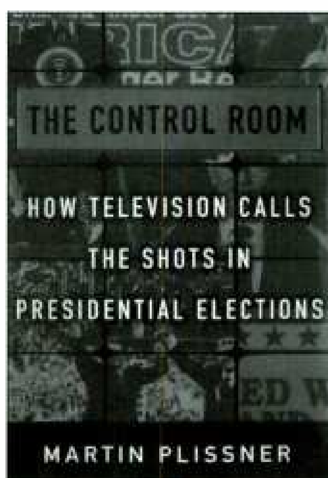
By Martin Plissner
The Free Press, 1999

The Sound Bite Society: Television and the American Mind

By Jeffrey Scheuer
Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999

By Ron Simon

Has the electronic media made politics and elections more democratic? That question has haunted commentators since the beginning of radio. More than 70 years ago analyst Katherine Ludington made the most far-reaching claim that "If the future of our democracy depends upon the character of our electorate, the crowning glory of radio, transcending all its other miracles, will be to make ours the first permanent democracy in the world." Whether radio and then television has made politics a haven for democrats or demagogues is open to debate, but the media have continually transformed the political process. Every fours years now we not only hold a presidential election, but also conduct a national soul-searching to try to understand what broadcasting (and cable and the Internet) have done to our political arena.



"Thirty-five years ago, sad to say, CBS, NBC and ABC created the modern New Hampshire primary." So states a veteran of many political broadcasts, Martin Plissner, as he documents how a once obscure political event was transformed into a television showcase for aspiring presidents.

The primary process, a quadrennial theatrical event, has created a market for reminiscences and critiques about the system, generally published as candidates begin to congregate in Iowa and New Hampshire. So much transpires every four years, thereby changing the rules of election mechanics, that these new volumes chart the last political landscape before it changes once again.

Martin Plissner, who recently retired as Executive

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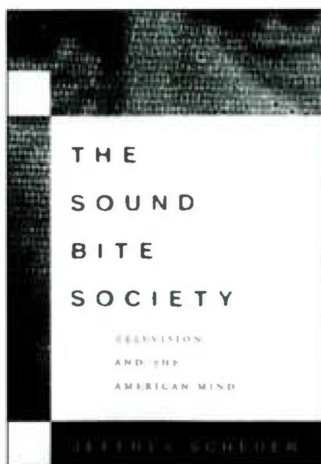
Political Director of CBS News, was responsible for the coverage of every presidential campaign since Lyndon Johnson's rout of Barry Goldwater in 1964. His anecdotal accounting of his behind-the-scenes career, *The Control Room: How Television Calls The Shots in Presidential Elections*, shows how the electronic eye has become the Boss Tweed of campaign politics. Plissner, the TV insider, argues that television has overwhelmed the entire race to the White House—from photo- op primaries to condensed conventions to exit poll election nights. In the long courtship between broadcasting and politics, Plissner is convinced television has the upper hand.



The thesis of Plissner's book is that network news executives do not have a political agenda, but are motivated only by television principles. The honchos are concerned about two goals: "the largest viewership at the lowest possible cost" and any victory over their network rivals. To achieve either goal the networks want to make everything a scripted TV spectacle and are ready to sacrifice the quality of their reporting. During the 1972 Republican convention Dan Rather and Walter Cronkite were aghast that David Gergen and his operatives had staged the proceedings down to the very last second. In the nineties news directors and political managers negotiate what and who they will cover. Time is advertising money and network television will cover only carefully choreographed events. The raucous, freewheeling conventions from television's earliest days, epitomized by Robert Taft's battle with General Dwight Eisenhower, have gone the way of the Washington Senators baseball team.

Plissner in his very readable style also documents why presidential debates do not summon up the ghosts of Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. With television's backing, the not-so-great debates have turned into glorified talk shows, sometimes closer, in Plissner's thinking, to *Crossfire* or *Rivera Live*. There are little chances for follow-up questions and conversations between candidates are severely limited. A candidate will be rarely challenged on misleading or wrong information, unless it is totally outrageous (*e. g.* Gerald Ford's categorical statement that there was no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe).

The Control Room is collage of personal accounts and old war stories about the power that television wields over our democratic life. The often-lively stories are not woven into a deeper reflection on how television can make us better citizens rather than more adept viewers. In fact, Plissner ultimately has a benign view of television's impact on politics. He is enjoyable at telling us how the game is played, not how it should be played. A deeper, more provocative analysis is provided by Jeffrey Scheuer in his polemical *The Sound Bite Society: Television and the American Mind.* A graduate of the London School of Economics and Political Science as well as the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, Scheuer's free-lance criticism has appeared in a wide array of publications, including the *New York Times, Washington Post* and *Dissent.* His first book pulls no punches in exploring television's erosion of political dialogue.

Scheuer's major attack is on the alleged liberal bias of the media. Instead of dissecting the content of television news, quantifying conservative and progressive slants, Scheuer analyzes the medium's ability to deliver complex messages. Updating a familiar position against television, he argues that the essence of

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television is grounded in the immediate and personal. The medium devours the superficial sound bites and arresting images in place of logical discussion and intricate connections. Scheuer summarizes: "TV likes action and dislikes thought. It favors conflict and spectacle, and disfavors ambiguity, irony, and analytic or abstract thinking; loves violence and detests rational argument." Writing in a clear, non-academic style, he synthesizes the ideas of many scholars, including Neal Postman and Mark Crispin Miller, to view the language of television as simple and reductive.

Scheuer states that this one-dimensional message of television is best exploited by conservative politicians who rely on simple truisms. Thus, he is not surprised by the success of Ronald Reagan and Rush Limbaugh in the eighties. The liberal ideology, he argues, is rooted more in interconnections and interdependence as well as a tolerance for complexity, all of which are difficult to visualize. One of Scheuer's basic tenets is that it is easier to televise the libertarian simplicity of laissez-faire over the complexity of retribution and market regulation. He maintains that it is more difficult to create slogans and buzz words for "investment in education, child care, or health care."

Scheuer's intriguing hypothesis is based on the contemporary practices of the electronic media. During the first half of this century, certainly more activist, conservatives dismissed the easy, populist appeal of the working-class photographs of Jacob Riis, Lewis Hines, and Dorothea Lange. Their passion and conviction were translated to television in such documentaries as Edward R. Murrow and David Lowe's *The Harvest of Shame* and in the continuing coverage of the civil rights movement in the sixties. Dr. Martin Luther King praised the "glaring light" of television, the ability of the medium to convey the emotional scars of inequality. Thirty years down the road, what has changed—the essence of television? the contours of liberalism? the concerns of the populace? *The Sound Bite Society* is impassioned criticism that will get an argument going about where television and liberalism is headed.

A constant refrain in many books on politics and media is the promise of future technology and the possibility of greater democracy. Any book published in the late nineties must grapple with the effect of the Internet on the political process, and certainly Plissner and Scheuer take the web into account. Plissner envisions the Internet as the possible death of his "control room" where "there may eventually be little off-line politics for the soon-to-be dinosaurs of network television to cover." On the other hand, Scheuer does not think cyberspace offers any new information, but "new ways of storing and moving it." Certainly, both authors do not share the technological utopianism of a Katherine Ludington that began the century with such hope.

Ron Simon is television curator at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York and an adjunct associate professor at Columbia University

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Don't Shoot The Messenger: How Our Growing Hatred of the Media Threatens Free Speech for All of Us

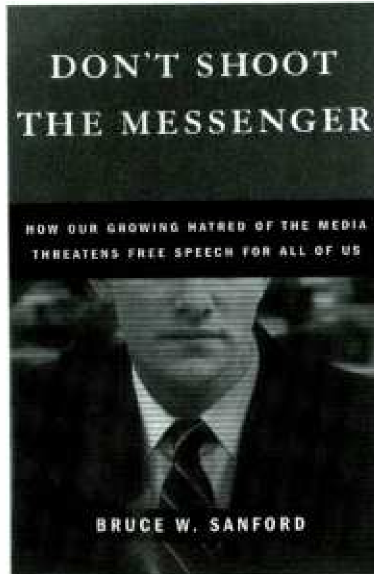
By Bruce W. Sanford
Free Press, New York

by James Ledbetter

If you work in, with, or anywhere near the U.S. media, you'd be hard pressed not to have noticed the public's growing dislike for the industry. In the latter half of the 1990s, opinion polls have shown levels of mistrust and dislike for the press that are downright alarming.

Bruce Sanford, an accomplished media lawyer, has written the most comprehensive book to date that documents and tries to explain this phenomenon. His analysis is not encouraging: Sanford believes that the burned lines of communication between the press and its consumers are more than a public relations problem—they now undermine the very principles behind a free press.

"Loathed and distrusted by the public they hunger to serve, the media are discovering that their crumbling credibility with the public is reflected in the courts," writes Sanford. "Judges, dismayed by the media's newsgathering practices, are cutting back on constitutional protections for the press."



Typically, critics trying to dig to the origins of declining relations between press and public point to Vietnam and Watergate. Sanford's history goes deeper, with an engaging chapter on the history of twentieth-century American media criticism.

When Sanford reaches the modern period, he hits a number of well-known media controversies. But one of Sanford's unique contributions is that he provides detailed analyses of some less celebrated but important media trends. His chapter on *The Ride-Along*, for example, is almost certainly the most sweeping roundup of the difficulties that arise from programs like *Cops*.

Having the book written by an attorney has both benefits and drawbacks. On the plus side, Sanford is able to argue eloquently and persuasively on the media's behalf without appearing to have a vested interest in any given story or media organization. He can discuss topics like the quest for ratings and the arrogance of some reporters in the courtroom unhindered by any sense that he is betraying his profession.

At the same time, however, a lawyer's arguments are intrinsically one-sided. Sanford's

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accounts of juries' approbation of contemporary media practice are well documented, but they carefully navigate through what are often the most clear-cut cases. Few impartial readers will disagree, for example, that ABC's exposé of evidently unsanitary conditions in Food Lion supermarkets was a public service, even if the network had sensationalist motivations and used murky methods to obtain its footage. For that reason, Sanford spends a lot of time on the details of that landmark case (coincidentally, most of the Food Lion case was overturned on appeal after the book was published).

But what about examples where the public has been misserved? Take poor Richard Jewell: Here is a man who, by all rights, should enjoy hero status for saving lives during the 1996 Olympic bombings. Instead, thanks to reporters who unquestioningly transmitted some law enforcement leaks, Jewell's life was ruined and his reputation trashed. Not only was he hounded and tarred with a crime for which he was never formally accused, but he found himself psychoanalyzed on national television by people who'd never spoken to him. Jewell seems the perfect poster boy for a book about media excess.

Yet Sanford mentions Jewell only in passing, and implies that NBC and others should have done more to fight Jewell's libel suits. Is it possible that as fine a legal mind as Sanford never grasped that those who settled quickly with Jewell did so because the sourcing and reporting of their stories were nearly indefensible? Clearly it isn't, and thus Sanford's elision around the Jewell case reinforces a sense that he's more interested in finding winning arguments than in getting a full picture of media behavior.

Instead, Sanford's chosen media martyrs are Donna Rice and Dan Quayle. Media treatment of Rice admittedly constitutes a kind of gray area: No one deserves to have a Scarlet B (for bimbo) permanently attached to her. But Rice did, after all, have an affair with a married presidential candidate. If the public holds lasting scorn for Rice (something which Sanford assumes but never demonstrates), it has at least as much to do with American attitudes toward adultery as it does with anything the media did to Rice.

As for Quayle, the argument falls apart even before it's made. Sanford spends a morning at a Quayle book signing, and observes that one could "detect virtually no basis for the caricature that has been drawn about him by the American media." From that he concludes that: "Nothing has been more destructive of the bonds of faith between the press and the public during the last quarter century than our unspoken understanding that the media create myths about public figures in order to improve the drama of our public life."

It's a valid and rarely made point: too many reporters, editors and producers treat public figures like the raw material for casting a melodrama (or sitcom). But it's difficult to avoid the conclusion that Quayle has gotten as much as he deserves out of public life—quite possibly more. Yes, there are millions of Americans who've concluded from media focus on Quayle's public gaffes that the man is no intellectual giant. But that's the price of running for high public office: no one in the media forced Quayle to perform poorly in his 1988 debate with Lloyd Bentsen, no one forced him to misspell the word potato. If there were truly a pro-Quayle, anti-media backlash, then surely it would have propelled him above the asterisk level in the current presidential contest. It's mildly insulting for Sanford to insist that a Senator and vice-president has lacked the ability to shape his own media destiny.

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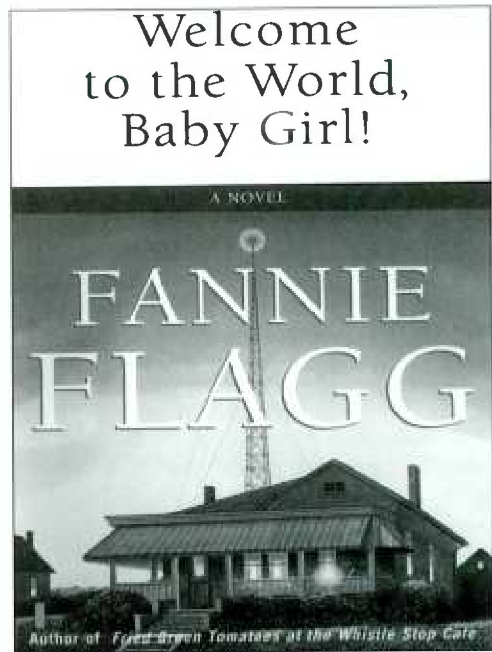
A second weakness of the book is that Sanford is short on prescriptions. Essentially, Sanford's recipe for fixing the media mess is for large media companies to fund more foundations that explain the way the press works. Such education may be a good idea, but it hardly seems sufficient to battle the beast that Sanford's book describes. In the end, *Don't Kill The Messenger* is probably best read as a case study of how the media feeds the very dragon that would kill it; the tools for how to slay it await another volume.

James Ledbetter is New York bureau chief of *The Industry Standard*, a newsweekly that covers the Internet Economy. For eight years, he wrote a weekly column of press criticism for *The Village Voice*. He is the author of *Made Possible By: The Death of Public Broadcasting in the United States* (Verso, 1997).

Review and Comment: Books in Brief, reviewed by Frederick Jacobi

Welcome to the World, Baby Girl!

By Fannie Flagg
Random House, New York



Despite her success as the author of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, Fannie Flagg is essentially a terrible writer. Dena, the heroine of this novel, combines the achievements of Leslie Stahl and Diane Sawyer in one protagonist who, despite being on stage throughout the story, is never fully realized. . Flagg's prose is glib, banal, slapdash. Her grammar is often atrocious. She never met an antecedent she couldn't ignore or an infinitive she couldn't split. "He wasn't really different than most men," she writes. "As the capital of the state, they certainly had a rental place…".

The plot focuses on the mysterious disappearance of the heroine's mother when Dena was a teen-ager. The denouement of this mystery is out of focus, tacked on, a separate synopsized novella, unbelievably melodramatic, totally unrelated to the rest of the story. The characters are mostly caricatures. The network news chief is a paper villain, as is his disgusting legman. Dena's original boyfriend is a cypher. The ultimate outcome of the convoluted plot is telegraphed early on.

There are, however, some redeeming features: Flagg has a feeling for dialogue, especially for that of her small-town Missouri folk; she has a sense of comedy, best exemplified in a scene—written, no doubt, with the screenplay in mind—featuring a perceptive highway patrol officer; her skewering of TV tabloid "news" programs and her

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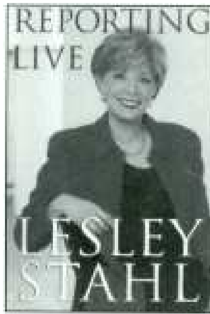
disposal of the arch-villain are gratifying. But the reader gets no sense of who the heroine really is. You can't say that about the real Leslie Stahl!

Reporting Live

By Leslie Stahl
Simon & Schuster, New York



This is something else. You really get a sense of Leslie Stahl's persona in this hard-hitting, no-holds-barred, wonderfully gossipy memoir by one of CBS's leading news personalities. "I was born on my 30th birthday," she writes. "Everything up till then was prenatal. By 30 I knew two things for sure. One was that I wanted to be a journalist, which would mean, in the environment of the early 1970s, surmounting my femaleness and my blondness."

Surmount them she did, in the process coping with an incredibly bossy, constantly managerial mother, defending herself against some early sniping from hostile CBS News staffers and balancing the demands of a preadolescent daughter with those of a sometimes seriously depressed husband. The writing is crisp, strong, punchy. She never minces words (her feelings about Dan Schorr and Roger Mudd are undisguised). News chief Van Gordon Sauter "wanted a feel-good broadcast; it's the ratings, stupid." Her assessement of Larry Tisch is scathing: he "was destroying Paley's mansion."

Her candor is utterly refreshing. Her insights into the Carter and Reagan presidencies are unique. "The Reagan White house was more riven with palace intrigue and machinations than anything I've ever seen...While many of the rivalries were personal, they were played out as ideological crusades...Nancy Reagan's nose was deep into everything. Over the years I've grown to appreciate her, even to admire her, but back then, I had little sympathy for the Imperial One...In the case of one senior official she found insufficiently effusive about the President at a congressional hearing, she denied him privileges to the White House tennis court."

Immensely competitive, she rankles at pressure from CBS headquarters to tame her political copy in order not to jeopardize pending legislation that would benefit the network. A tough interviewer on *Face the Nation*, she infuriated former Attorney General Ed Meese with her probing questions, cornered George Schultz on the subject of arms for hostages and barked at Yasser Arafat like a drill sergeant when he tried to use the program as a propaganda vehicle. Leslie Stahl's book is a bracing blast of fresh air.

Saturday Morning Fever: Growing up with Cartoon Culture

By Timothy Burke and Kevin Burke
St. Martin's Griffin, New York

Dubbing psychiatrist Frederic Wertham a "paranoid goofball," the authors tip their contrarian mitt right from the beginning of this absurd screed in aid of TV's Saturday-morning cartoon onslaught and never convinced this reader of the validity of their cause. They are equally dismissive of every expert who claims that television foments violence in children, from Peggy Charren, Garrison

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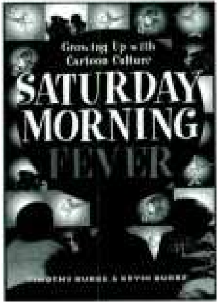
Keillor, Marie Winn and Newton Minow to Erik Barnouw and Fred Rogers. They refer to critics as "stuck-up prigs;" a *TV Guide* writer "offered a semidelusional description of these characters from these cartoons."

As far as cartoons being advertising vehicles for toys, the authors claim that "trying to shield children from commercialism and then dropping them unprotected into the maelstrom at age eighteen is about the worst possible strategy imaginable for creating informed and critical perspectives among a media-literate adult publication. If ACT or groups like it were in charge, kid-vid would almost certainly be stultifyingly phony and alienating.."



A 75-page-long chapter describing the shows in stultifying detail is turgid, tedious, without purpose or direction. Lifting this material to artificial heights of edifying entertainment is unconvincing. And a search for hidden meanings is almost admittedly sappy and irresponsible. The authors' historical perspective is skewed. In spite of the length of their bibliography, they have ignored several key publications about TV violence and children. Altogether, in attempting to defend the indefensible, they have painted themselves into a corner.

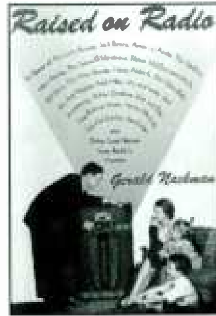
Raised on Radio

By Gerald Nachman
Pantheon Books, New York

As the spawning ground for countless television programs—from *Gunsmoke* to *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*—radio is an appropriate focus for anyone interested in its electronic progeny and Gerald Nachman handles the subject with enthusiasm and, for the most part, accuracy. He notes that Jack Webb "shot the first 52 [*Dragnet* television] shows straight from the radio scripts, with no changes whatsoever."

He captures the spirit of such oldtime comedians as Ed Wynn, Eddie Cantor, Jimmy Durante, Jack Benny and Fred Allen. Benny's secret was that he was a comic actor, not a comedian ("You could get big laughs by ridiculing yourself instead of your stooges." Allen failed on TV because he was too verbal and not a "neovaudevillian." George Burns and Gracie Allen "relied almost exclusively on Gracie's illogical logic and on Burns's unfailingly good-humored, loving, equally deadpan responses."

Despite evidence of exhaustive research, there are occasional confusions and inaccuracies: treating Will Rogers and Alexander Woollcott afer Henry Morgan and Bob and Ray ("fifty years after they began in Boston, they are still contemporary and funny") seems like very odd chronology. Walter Damrosch didn't conduct the NBC Symphony (Toscanini did); David Sarnoff's rank as a U.S. Army general was not self-proclaimed; and the Columbia University riots erupted in 1968, not 1964. But otherwise this amiable book is vastly entertaining, even about programs which this reviewer had never listened to, such as *The Lone Ranger, Vic and Sade, Lum 'n' Abner, Fibber McGee & Molly* and *Amos 'n' Andy.* There are such gems of arcane information as Ozzie Nelson's Phi Beta Kappa key from Rutgers and his law degree, gossip about Bob Hope's womanizing and his enormous writing staff. This is altogether great fun, as are the many unusual photos of these memorable performers.



Frederick Jacobi is the editor of *Television Quarterly*.

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