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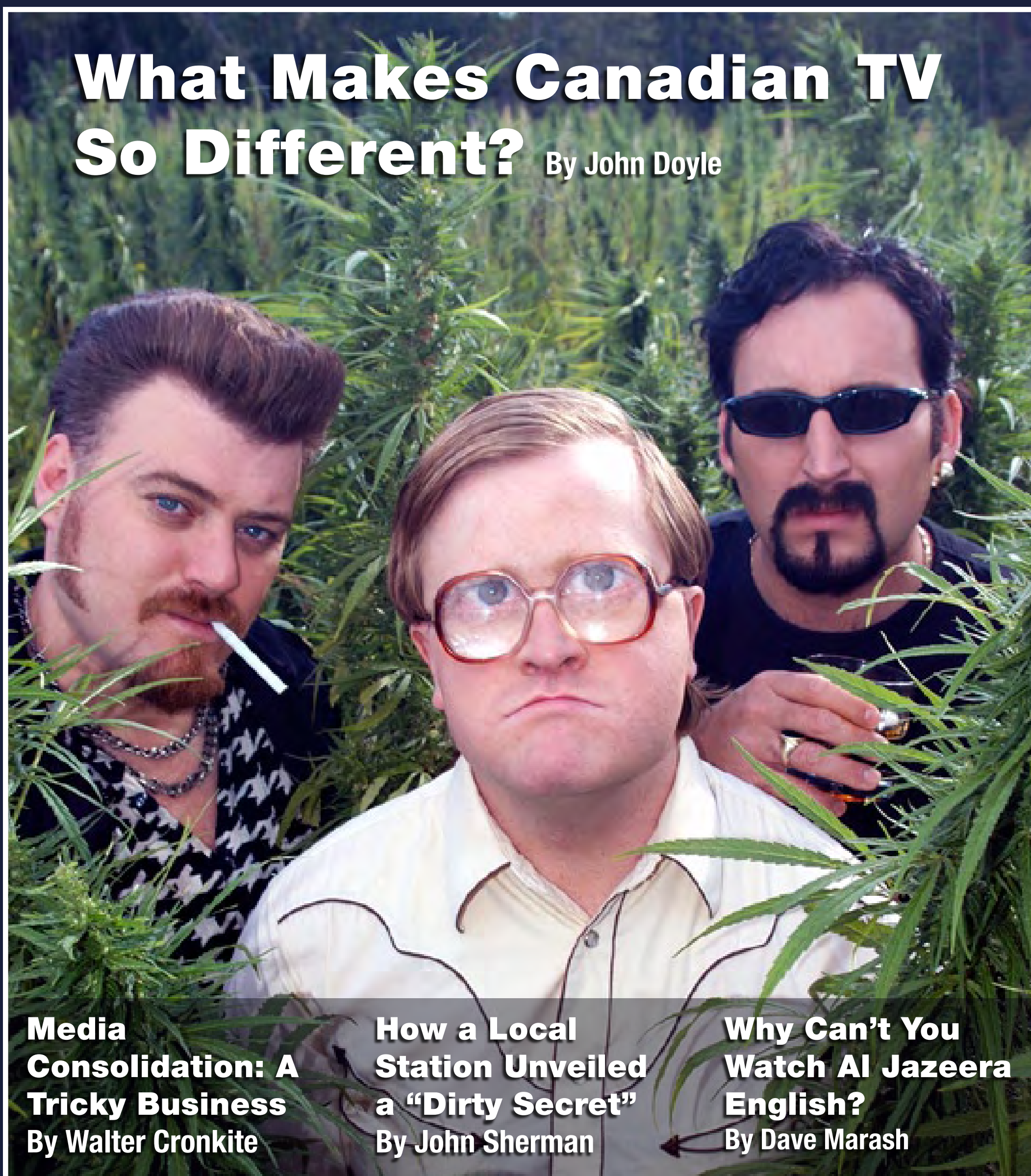

What Makes Canadian TV So Different? By John Doyle

Media Consolidation: A Tricky Business
By Walter Cronkite

How a Local Station Unveiled a "Dirty Secret"
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Why Can't You Watch Al Jazeera English?
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COVER: Canadian TV’s *Trailer Park Boys*, photo by Mike Tomkinson

What Makes Canadian TV So Different?

A distinguished critic reveals that it rejects the common ingredients for comedy or drama on American TV and cooks up a distinctly indigenous television culture. | **By John Doyle**

In early 2007 Canadian television was the subject of a sudden surge of attention in the United States. A single show, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, generated news stories on CNN and NPR radio, and in *The New York Times, USA Today* and many other newspapers. This surge of attention was shocking in its intensity. Canadian television is rarely on the radar of the major U.S. media. In the main, that's understandable. The U.S. media is insular in its approach to TV. What happened in the case of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and the reasons why it generated attention offers a convenient opening into the strange, complicated world of Canadian TV drama and comedy.

Little Mosque on the Prairie made the American media curious because it has a comic premise that's outrageous in the context of mainstream U.S. network TV — it finds comedy in the lives of a group of Muslims living in a small prairie town where many of the locals are suspicious of them. The locals, including the police and the town's media, tend to think of all Muslims as terrorists and see the Mosque as a place were suspicious activities occur. The humor arises from both the exaggerated prejudices of the locals and the fact that most of the Muslims aren't as devout as they'd like others to believe.

What intrigued the U.S. media was the very idea of distilling comedy material from tensions between Muslims and others in the community, from jokes about terrorists and Islamic fundamentalism. This was not material that could be mined for comedy on mainstream American television. The idea was avant-garde. But, in a nutshell, that is the strength of Canadian television — the best of it, by instinct or design, rejects the common ingredients for comedy or drama on American TV and cooks up a distinctly indigenous television culture.

Canadian television is in a permanent state of crisis. The industry in Canada is probably the most beleaguered in the

Rayyan (Sitara Hewitt), the new Imam Amaar (Zaib Shaikh) and the town's original Imam Baber (Manoj Sood) argue about the partition that keeps men and women separated during prayers in the mosque, in a scene from *Little Mosque on the Prairie.*

Sophie Giraud

world. In Canada there are four major over-the-air broadcasters and even that number is shrinking, as conglomerates converge. Of the four, three are commercial channels and approximately 80% of what they air originates with the major U.S. networks. Like Americans, Canadians watch *CSI, Law & Order* and *Grey's Anatomy*, and the list of Top Ten shows airing in Canada is very similar to list in the United States. For years, there were mandated Canadian content regulations but those regulations were relaxed somewhat in the late 1990's. Between 1999 and 2004, the number of continuing hour-long drama series airing on Canadian TV dropped from 12 to 4. Now a wider variety of material, including entertainment news and variety programs, count as Canadian content. There is less outright drama and comedy.

There are numerous cable and digital channels too, but many of those also take material directly from their equivalents in the U.S. For what remains in Canadian-made drama and comedy—in series, mini-series or TV movie—funding is available from a complex system of money-gathering which involves government funds and money that both cable companies and over-the-air broadcasters are required to donate into one central funding body. Even that, the Canadian Television Fund, is now in crisis as two major cable companies have made a spirited argument that they are not obliged to donate money for the production of shows that fail to find a large audience.

In Canada we also have the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, a public broadcaster like few others in the world. Unlike PBS, CBC is a hybrid of public and private broadcasting. It receives government funding but also carries advertising. It has a main network in English, another in French and also has all-news channels in both languages.

The entire service in French and English receives about $1 billion (Canadian dollars) annually from the federal government to support programming and news-gathering. In prime-time, CBC TV is almost 100% Canadian in content, with a mixture of dramas, comedies, documentaries and news programs.

Little Mosque on the Prairie is a CBC show and has been a significant success for the broadcaster, drawing more than 2 million viewers (Canada has a population of 30 million) for its first episode. After the international media fuss, some of those who watched were probably taken aback by the show. While it deals directly with Muslims living in a largely white, Christian and conservative town, it is a mild-mannered, absurdist comedy. It's the idea that is avant-garde in the U.S. context. The show itself has a gentle quality and it finds humor in the small conflicts and intricacies of behavior that arise out of Canada's multi-cultural society.

Gentle comedy is our forte. Few Canadian shows feature gun-toting cops, violent criminals or various branches of the military using high-powered weaponry. There is simply less violence.

In many ways *Little Mosque* carries on a tradition established in Canadian TV by the *Degrassi* franchise, which began in 1987 as *Degrassi Junior High*, continued as *Degrassi High* and later with *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, the latter being a current success on the N network in the U.S. All three series are about kids living in an emphatically multicultural society and the casting reflected that. The storylines deal very directly with both cultural gaps and cultural unity under the safe blanket of Canada. Through all its incarnations, *Degrassi* emphasizes humor rather than confrontation and has a distinctive ordinariness and sincerity that sets it apart from U.S. network series about children and teenagers. It has never been glib about such issues as birth control, abortion, rape, drugs, alcohol and other issues that teenagers face. The secret of *Degrassi*'s success is its low-key cordiality, utter lack of glamour and affable humor. In the international market and in the U.S., *Degrassi* has stood apart because it distinctly sets itself apart from the tone and techniques of American-made models covering similar territory.

Gentle comedy is our forte in Canadian-made TV. Few Canadian shows feature gun-toting cops, violent criminals or various branches of the military using high-powered weaponry. There is simply less violence. Aggression is under the surface. We see ourselves as a gentle people, proud of being peace-keepers, not war-mongers. Once, in a column about the gentle, absurdist comedy that characterizes Canadian TV, I described Canada as "a nitwit nation" and said that when these shows are exported and seen around the world, we don't care if that's how the world sees us. Call us beer-swilling hockey nuts and we don't care. Call us doughnut-eating and dreary, and we don't care. Nobody disagreed with me.

Corner Gas is one of the standout Canadian series of recent years, and typifies much of the Canadian TV style. Both a critical and popular success for the commercial CTV network, it is the most-watched comedy on Canadian TV,

and that includes all American sitcoms. The show—which will be widely seen in the U.S. starting this fall when it goes into syndication—is our kind of humor and its success is also an inconvenient truth for some people in the Canadian TV industry. Some in the industry believe that to succeed with audiences, Canadian TV shows should mimic the U.S. network style and content. There's a tendency to think that anything else isn't smart. The deft, light sophistication of *Corner Gas* escapes those people. *Corner Gas* is set in the tiny prairie town of Dog River, Saskatchewan. Main character Brent (Brent Butt, a stand-up comedian who created the show) runs a gas station, eats at the diner run by a former big-city gal and puts up with his intrusive parents. It's an engaging, observational comedy about everyday small-town people. One reviewer in Australia, where it's also popular, summarized it thus: "Think *Northern Exposure* morphed into a sitcom."

The eight characters affably swap absurdly daft jokes. Somebody makes a remark about Brent's dad Oscar (Eric Peterson) always "bickering" with his wife Emma (Janet Wright). Oscar mishears, and agitatedly declares that he never dickers. He always pays full price. Then he calls somebody "a jackass." There is no laugh track to tell us that is funny. It just is. The series is not made on a sound stage and the actors are not gorgeous in the conventional U.S. TV manner. There are two police officer characters too, but crime is non-existent in Dog River and the cops occupy their time on trivial matters. The humor is absurdist, never mean-spirited. The look and feel of *Corner Gas* is distinct from the U.S. network style and that might well be the secret of its huge success—it feels Canadian, without everyone talking about being in Canada

Brent Butt, star of Corner Gas on CTV and The Comedy Network.

(l. to r.) Robb Wells, Mike Smith and John Paul Tremblay of the *Trailer Park Boys*

Photo credits (l. to r.): Courtesy of CTV, Mike Tomkinson

and making local references.

Perhaps the most extraordinary series to emerge in Canada in the last decade is *Trailer Park Boys*, a show that has aired on BBC America in the U.S. It's a mock-documentary series about life in a Canadian trailer park and it looks vaguely amateurish and cheaply-made. The main characters, Ricky (Robb Wells) and Julian (John Paul Tremblay) get out of jail every season and return to Sunnyvale Trailer Park, there to indulge in thieving, smoking dope and getting drunk. They've always got a scheme to get rich. Inevitably, it goes awry. They might squabble, but their friend Bubbles (Mike Smith), a sweet-natured dimwit who is devoted to his plethora of cats, is what binds them. They've got a recalcitrant nemesis in Jim Leahy (John Dunsworth), the permanently drunk supervisor of Sunnyvale Trailer Park. Everybody swears a blue streak. That's about it.

Yet for all its simplicity and coarseness, *Trailer Park Boys* is a Canadian cultural phenomenon. Ricky, Julian and Bubbles are among the most recognized and adored people in Canada. They are mobbed in public and each new season of the series brings a record number of viewers to the Showcase cable channel. At the same time, just as in the case of *Corner Gas*, the popularity of *Trailer Park Boys* mystifies some Canadian industry observers. In a peculiar juxtaposition, if *Corner Gas* is gentle, *Trailer Park Boys* appears, on the surface, to be aggressively boorish and about utterly uncouth characters. Ricky is permanently stoned, Julian always has a drink in his hand—driving a car, holding a child, committing a crime—and every character uses the f-word freely. While the adults smoke dope, the children smoke cigarettes. Park supervisor Jim Leahy is not only an alcoholic, he also has a gay lover, Randy (Patrick Roach), who is addicted to cheeseburgers and is always seen without a shirt, the better to show off his enormous burger-and-beer belly. On paper, the characters and premise of *Trailer Park Boys* seem repulsive.

The reasons for the enormous popularity of *Trailer Park Boys* are rooted in its stark separation from the ingredients that are used in American television…It's an anti-bourgeois soap opera, a cheerful and loving celebration of life at the bottom.

But the show is enormously popular and is now considered culturally important. It has spawned a theatrical movie, and that was a rare hit for an English-language movie business. The reasons for the show's popularity are rooted in its stark separation from the ingredients that are used in American television, especially comedy. The Canadian filmmaker and scholar Ryan Diduck, writing in the on-line magazine *Offscreen*, said of *Trailer Park Boys*, "The anti-social, indeed violent nature of *TPB* and its characters may be interpreted as a typically Canadian reaction to American cultural hegemony. It is not active, but rather, an indirect attempt to assert a unique cultural manifestation into the marketplace historically dominated by American corporatists and their generic products. Recently, Canada has given the undiplomatic finger to our American cousins through our relaxed marijuana laws, and the legalization of same-

sex unions, despite repeated political pressure from Conservative government representatives. Let us observe that the themes of the show include habitual criminality, addiction and homosexuality, garnished with a vernacular of profanity; themes that brashly oppose all that are traditionally deemed appropriate for American audiences." There, succinctly expressed is the reason for the success of *Trailer Park Boys*. It's a weird and wonderful, but uniquely Canadian phenomenon. It's an anti-bourgeois soap opera, a cheerful and loving celebration of life at the bottom. In Canada we feel that, as a society with government-supported, universal health care, and a host of other social benefits, we embrace those at the bottom of the social ladder. It's that embrace that makes us who we are.

Further, within the structure of *Trailer Park Boys* can be found the core theme of the show—the need for friends, family and community. As asinine as the main characters might be at times, they are forgiven by community in the trailer park and loved by their pals and family. They all form a supportive commonality. The characters might be losers, but they are loved. This aspect of the show is recognized even by viewers who might be less than enamored of the show's foul language and the unending criminality of Ricky, Julian and Bubbles. Once, when the show was dismissed as vulgar by a writer for my newspaper, a reader responded with a rejoinder in a Letter to the Editor: "The Park is us. We are the Park."

While it is nothing as overtly scurrilous as *Trailer Park Boys*, the Canadian drama *Da Vinci's Inquest* (now widely syndicated in the U.S.) shares common themes with the comedy. Essentially a police procedural about a crusading city Coroner, Dominic Da Vinci (Nicholas Campbell), the drama is really about victims—the wrongly convicted, the persecuted, the addicts, the hookers and the dispossessed of a big city. Of course it is a Coroner's job to investigate what happened to a victim, and the show (which ran for five seasons on CBC in Canada and is seen in more than 40 other countries) exploits the whodunit formula, the Coroner tends to use each case to call for such enhancements to his city (the show is set in Vancouver) as needle-exchange centers for drug addicts and an official red-light district where prostitutes can carry on their trade free from harassment and exploitation.

On *Da Vinci's Inquest* the melodrama has been drained out of the script and the action. The main characters—the Coroner and his staff, the cops, the dug addicts and hookers—talk an unemphatic dialogue and there are never scenes of histrionic behavior. In its quietness, the series has a mesmerizing quality. The show's creator, Chris Haddock, has also worked in U.S. network TV. He created and produced the CBC drama *The Handler*, which aired on CBS in the 2003/04 season. It featured Joe Pontiliano as Joe Renato, an FBI agent who trains and "handles" undercover agents in Los Angeles. A central issue in *The Handler* is the thin line between the undercover cops and the criminals they associate with. Some go over to the criminal side and all are tainted by their work. The point, similar to the point made in *Da Vinci's Inquest*, is that those viewed as criminals are often as much victims of a ruthless society as they are a scourge on that society. Under the constraints of network TV expectations, Haddock's *The Handler* failed to find its feet as a truly great drama. But Haddock returned to Canada to continue with *Da*

Vinci's Inquest, and then create a spin-off series, *Da Vinci's City Hall*, in which the crusading Coroner is elected Mayor of Vancouver and sets about changing the city. Recently Haddock has launched *Intelligence* for CBC, a new series about the intricate connections between Canada's secret service organizations and organized crime. Again, it is about the thin line between criminals and authority figures. The central, heroic figure is Jimmy Reardon (Ian Tracey), a drug baron with a stronger ethical sense than the cops and spies who attempt to thwart him. *Intelligence* stands as another example of a Canadian TV series with characters whose heroic, benign qualities would not likely be tolerated or find acceptance on mainstream American TV.

Sometimes, it seems remarkable that indigenous Canadian television exists at all. But from constant crisis about funding and regulation has come a new creativity—a genre of TV that is detached from the American TV prototypes. Canadian television, in both comedy and drama, rarely has the superficial, feel-good sentiment that has always been the core of prime-time American TV. The dramas are not about revenge and triumph. They're about survival, and Canadians are drawn to them because in Canada there is a collective assuredness that we acknowledge and support victims. We believe that we share an understanding that all of us can be victims and believe that even in that state we are safe in the snug embrace of this country's tradition of collective help, equality and cooperation. We do not respond to each other through the rules of spite, envy and triumph. We think of ourselves as a decent people. Often, when Canadians are asked to articulate what these beliefs mean in pragmatic reality, they resort to explaining that Canada is not the U.S.A. and that Canadians are not Americans. That view and those beliefs are now clearly articulated in the television we make.

John Doyle is the television critic for *The Globe and Mail* newspaper in Toronto, Canada. He is the author of *A Great Feast of Light: Growing up Irish in the Television Age*, published in the U.S. by Carroll & Graf and reviewed in the Winter 2007 issue of *Television Quarterly*.

Media Consolidation: A Tricky Business

By Walter Cronkite

The major problem I see today has to do with unrealistic expectations that consolidated corporate ownership puts on working journalists. My generation of journalists knew we would have to work hard. We knew that our job was to expose truths that powerful politicians and special interests often did not want exposed. And we anticipated that the resources we would need to do our difficult jobs would be given to us. For the most part, we were right.

Today, I do not believe most journalists have that luxury. Instead, they are saddled with inflated profit expectations from Wall Street. They face round after round of job cuts—and cost cuts—that require them to do ever more with ever less. In this "Information Age," and the very complicated world in which we live, the need for high-quality reporting is greater than ever. It's not just the journalists' jobs at risk here—it's American democracy—it is freedom's future.

In recalling my early days as a journalist, I am acutely aware of the effect some of these changes in the media business have had on the quality of news reporting today.

My first job was with the Houston *Press*—and our competitor was the Houston *Chronicle*. We each put out several editions a day. Each time the *Chronicle* put out a new edition, a copy boy ran eight blocks to its loading dock to bring back a copy—literally hot—or at least warm—off the press. My editor would then spread it out on his desk to compare what they'd written with what I'd written. I can still hear him holler out: "Cronkite! The *Chronicle* spells this guy's name S-m-**Y**-t-h. We've got S-m-**i**-t-h. Which is it?" Or: "The *Chronicle* says it was **1412** Westheimer—we say it was **1414**. Who's right?"

That kind of check on our work several times a day sure made us better reporters! But how many towns have that kind of newspaper competition any more? Most towns today have only one newspaper. And the result is just what you'd expect: the accuracy in news reporting is no longer the same.

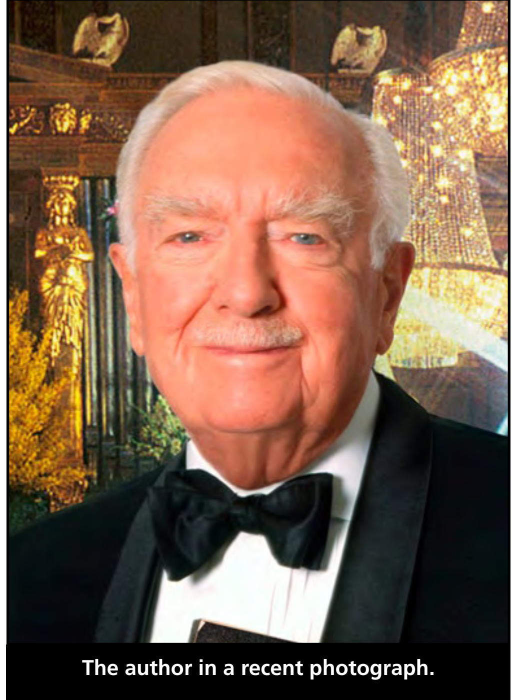
No matter how devoted editors may be, (and most of them are), they don't have that competition by which to monitor the accuracy of their reporters.

Nor do readers have the means by which to judge the accuracy of what they read in the single newspaper in their towns. Now that's not the sort of calculation that a publisher makes when deciding to fold a newspaper—or to sell to a big chain. But it has a big effect on the quality of the news business and how well journalists do their job.

As for radio, where I got my start; and TV, where I spent most of my career, things have gotten even worse. There isn't much news on radio anymore, except for the few bright spots like National Public Radio. And I never have felt that TV news was a genuine substitute for a good newspaper. The number of words spoken in a half-hour TV broadcast barely equals those contained on two-thirds of a page in a standard newspaper!

Of course, with the right resources, TV news could raise the floor of knowledge—and the viewers' understanding of the world. But news of that sort is expensive to gather and report—and the news budgets that we've got today just aren't up to the task.

Furthermore, TV network news cannot possibly do an adequate job of covering this nation, let alone a very complicated world—in a half-hour broadcast. In real time—with 'ins' and 'outs' and commercials, that leaves our news people only 17 or 18 minutes of hard news time. It is woefully inadequate! What we are left with is a sound-bite culture that turns political campaigns into political theater. And the media business has been a willing accomplice in this deterioration.



The author in a recent photograph.

Joe Sinnott, Thirteen/WNET

Now, with all this doom and gloom, you may ask: What can be done to improve the state of the news business? Business people need to understand that ownership of a news company involves special, civic responsibilities. Consolidation and cost-cutting may be good for the bottom line in the short term, but it isn't necessarily good for the country or the health of the news business in the long-term.

To my mind, what best would serve the country and the free press, is to encourage ownership by entities that are dedicated to *public service:* Companies that invest for the long haul and will serve their communities rather than just ever-greater profits.

America is a powerful and prosperous nation. We certainly should insist upon—and can afford to sustain—a media system of which we can be proud.

After more than 70 years in journalism—19 of them as anchor man and managing editor for the *CBS Evening News*—Walter Cronkite continues to produce documentaries for the Discovery Channel, PBS and other networks. The foregoing is adapted from his keynote address to the Columbia Journalism School forum on Media Ownership last February.

Media Consolidation: Not in the Public Interest

An FCC Commissioner raises the alarm that we have enabled cartels to control the broadcast media.

By Michael J. Copps

What can and should government do to ensure that the broadcast media system continues to serve the *public* interest rather than just the financial interests of media corporations and their shareholders?.

No serious observer can doubt that journalism is currently experiencing rapid and even destabilizing change. The Hutchins Report—written 50 years ago, but still eerily relevant today—demonstrates that change has been a hallmark of the profession for a long time. But the pace of change has accelerated to warp speed in the last decade with the coming of new technologies and capabilities and, especially, the Internet that is bringing such profound changes to every information-based industry. The question then is: Will this change be for the better or for the worse? The answer is: It's up to us.

Regarding broadcast journalism, the answer won't be good for the profession or the country if we continue down the same road we've traveled for the past quarter century. Beginning in the 1980s, with a few hints even before then, those of us who believe that public policy has a role to play in securing public-interest performance by our broadcast media were told to get out of the way. A fundamental shift in our approach to media regulation was needed, we were told. And they sent us a new Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission who famously stated that a television is nothing but "a toaster with pictures." And that's how he treated it. Turns out that he was the toaster and what his approach made toast of was the public interest. Of course he didn't do this alone. He had plenty of accomplices, some in very high places. Over the next two decades nearly every explicit public-interest criteria we had to measure a broadcast station's public interest performance was eviscerated. No

longer did station owners need to consult with the citizens of their communities about what kinds of programs they wanted. No longer were they required to cover controversial public issues and to foster the healthy clash of antagonistic viewpoints so essential to decision-making in a democracy. No longer were they required to come in every three years and demonstrate their public service contributions at license renewal time; all they do now is send in a post card once every eight years and we don't generally even open up their public file to see what they're up to. And, to gild the lily, we removed the constraints that separated program distribution from program production, and opened up the way for cartel control of the broadcast media from one end to the other.

Simultaneously came the great tsunami of media consolidation. Ownership caps were loosened and media behemoths gobbled up local outlets. One company grew to more than 1,200 stations. We know the results now. Closed or amputated newsrooms. Entertainment passed off as news. Homogenized entertainment, national music play lists, no coverage for local talent, local music, local creativity. Too much of media using us, not enough of using media for the common good. Our country is paying a dreadful cost for this quarter century fling with government abdication and media irresponsibility.

Our country is paying a dreadful cost for this quarter-century fling with government abdication and media irresponsibility.

But of course even that wasn't enough for big media and their friends in high places. They wanted more—and they almost got it. In 2003, then FCC Chairman Michael Powell rammed new rules through the FCC—over my strenuous objections and those of my colleague Jonathan Adelstein—to allow a single company to own up to three television stations, eight radio stations, the monopoly local newspaper, the monopoly cable provider, even the Internet service provider, in a single market. I asked how that would serve local and community interests, independent journalism, minorities and local creative artists.

Thankfully, three million citizens contacted the FCC to express their outrage at this near-disaster for our country. I didn't know 3 million people even knew there was an FCC! But it was a true grassroots, bipartisan movement that made a difference. Congress went on record with its opposition, and then a federal court found the rules both substantively and procedurally flawed and sent them back to us to rework. That's where we are now: In spite of their spin messaging, big media is still pushing to loosen the caps even more, to allow more duopolies and triopolies and to do away with the present constraints on newspaper-broadcast cross ownership. I've read their pleadings and I can tell you they are still marching to the tune of their Pied Piper of Consolidation.

Looking back at where the FCC has been and where it is today, I think we can reach three conclusions:

First, the consolidation we have seen so far and the decision to treat broadcasting as just another business has *not* produced a media system that does a better job serving most Americans. Quite the opposite, in fact. Rather than reviving the

news business, it has led to *less* localism, *less* diversity of opinion and ownership, *less* serious political coverage, fewer jobs for journalists, and the list goes on.

When TV and radio stations are no longer required by law to serve their local communities and are owned by huge national corporations, viewers and listeners have become the products that broadcasters sell to advertisers.

Second, I think we have learned that the purest form of commercialism and high-quality news make uneasy bedfellows. As my own hero, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, put it in a letter to Joseph Pulitzer, "I have always been firmly persuaded that our newspapers cannot be edited in the interests of the general public from the counting room." So, too, for broadcast journalism. This is not to say that good journalism is incompatible with making a profit—I believe that both interests can and must be balanced. But when TV and radio stations are no longer required by law to serve their local communities, and are owned by huge national corporations, viewers and listeners have become the products that broadcasters sell to advertisers.

It's not just what FDR thought. Listen to Herbert Hoover, who was present at the creation of our broadcast media: "It is inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility for service, for news, for entertainment, for education and for vital commercial purposes to be drowned in advertising clutter." Maybe I shouldn't be surprised that the grassroots call we hear today for media reform has such a bipartisan ring to it!

Third, we have seen that the death of the news business is often greatly exaggerated. Even though I understand the serious challenges and uncertainty that media companies face, the truth remains that many—if not most—local newspapers and broadcasters continue to be extremely profitable compared to other industries. Do these papers need new models to survive in the Internet Age? Of course they do. Will they find them? I'm convinced they will. Meanwhile they remain, along with television, the primary source of news and information for the huge majority of Americans. And the Internet won't be competing with them in such areas as investigative journalism or broad global coverage in my lifetime—and I plan to live a long time.

So what can government do to reverse these trends and produce a media environment that actually strengthens American democracy rather than weakens it? The time for action is now. "The times they are a-changin'" and the months just ahead may afford us the best chance in a generation to bring public-interest standards back to broadcasting—and the spirit of the public interest to other media, too. For openers, of course, the FCC must be blocked from passing any destructive new media-ownership rules like those approved in 2003. But we can do more than that now and I, for one, am tired of just playing defense. It's time for those of us who share a commitment to the rebirth of public-interest stewardship to go on the offensive. We need not settle for defending journalism against bad *new* rules—now we can, we must, revisit those bad *old* rules and laws and decisions that eviscerated long-standing public interest obligations. I don't want to paint too rosy

a picture, but I believe we have a special chance right now to make a difference. Recently my fellow Commissioners and I were called before the Senate Commerce Committee for a general oversight hearing. And despite all the astonishing changes and policy issues facing the telecom industry today, about 80% of the questions from both sides of the aisle were about how to return the public interest to broadcasting. Was I encouraged? You bet I was!

Every American is a stakeholder in how our broadcast media develop. Fiduciary responsibility to corporate stockholders is one thing; public-interest obligations to stakeholders is quite another. So far stockholders have totally trumped stakeholders. This is not a sound investment in America's future and we must find a way to fix it. I want—and we need—a thriving broadcast industry where stewards of the airwaves continue to make a good living. But our notion of good stewardship must expand—or return—to putting some real muscle into the obligations that broadcasters undertake in return for their free use of the public's airwaves. It's a big quid pro quo, to be sure. But those airwaves are a big gift, too—to the tune of, conservatively, $500 billion. The American people expect a return on *their* investment, too.

I don't have any silver bullet to restore public-interest airwaves. But I do want to start that conversation. Is the answer a stronger license-renewal process, which would require stations to prove every few years that they have actually served their local community? Is it a community-discovery requirement, which would force stations to actually solicit input from the local community about how programming might change to better serve that community? Might it be tax incentives to encourage long-term investment in broadcast journalism or other types of media? Encouraging a more active role for foundation investment? More public resources?

Building a media environment that truly reflects and truly nourishes our diversity and democracy may be our nation's greatest calling now, because, without that, all the other huge issues we confront won't receive the kind of true journalistic scrutiny they need if they are to find satisfactory resolution. The best way to do this is together—the public as well as the private sector, stakeholders as well as stockholders. But, for heaven's sake, let's get away from all the endless, mind-numbing prattle about how this is somehow a question of regulation versus deregulation, or of being for or against business. This is about the *people's business*, about citizens acting together. Isn't that how we built this country of ours? It wasn't just that we declared our independence in one glorious document; it was that we made a declaration of inter-dependence, one upon the other, to win and sustain our freedom and to build our country. This isn't about ideology, it's about ideals. Our challenge is to find ways to combine the genius of our great enterprise system with the things people expect their government to do. This is how we built America, and this is how we are called to redeem the Promise of America in every generation.

A Federal Communications Commissioner since 2001, Michael J. Copps has served as Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Trade Development and as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Basic Industries, a component of the Trade Development Unit. This article is adapted from his address to the Columbia Journalism School's forum on media ownership last February.

Why "Generation Next" Won't Watch Local TV News

By Richard Campbell

Teaching Journalism 101 at Miami University forced me to dust off my old introductory notes on TV news—the part where I talk about major differences between print and broadcast styles of writing and storytelling. In the last 15-20 years I had stopped teaching TV newswriting, concentrating instead on doing research, writing textbooks, teaching media survey classes, and taking my turn at administration (and interviewing more than 40 reporters over the last 10 years, many of them looking for a way out of journalism).

What struck me in the JRN 101 course was that my TV news notes from 25 years ago hardly required any changes. TV news is still about VOs, VO-SOTs and "packages" that are just 90 seconds—the same time constraints as in the 1970s. And as the class examined the local Cincinnati and Dayton TV news, neighborhood crime stories still dominated the news rundown. There were the same co-anchor teams (one man, one woman) along with weather and sports segments—but a little less time for news and more for ads/promos. About the only big changes had to do with really cool Doppler radar effects and slick opening graphics.

Despite being a news junkie with research interests in broadcasting, I quit watching local TV news after 9/11. It was just too awful, too formulaic, too predictable, too provincial, and too unimaginative. In a world that had changed dramatically after 2001, most local TV news that I watched didn't seem much interested in how the local community fit into the big global picture. But I didn't realize until I started teaching 101 that smart young students aren't watching local TV news anymore either – but for different reasons. That's a big change from 25 years ago, when most of my students had a favorite local TV news anchor or sports guy. In anecdotal class surveys about their news preferences (in which Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert have certainly displaced the local anchor crew), students tell me today that early-

evening TV news seems like something that their parents and grandparents watch, or something they remember from childhood. It seems almost incredible that in a world that now provides all this specialized and personal media —24/7 cable, Internet blogs, and social-networking Web sites—that storytelling in local TV news hasn't changed at all. It's just a new group of young, good-looking anchor men and women – just like in the 1970s when news consultants made sure that anchors looked as good as the actors in the TV ads that the news "interrupted." (I've actually started telling my students that Will Farrell's "Anchorman" movie is a documentary not a comedy.)

There is a reason, of course, why local TV news is pretty much the same. There's no economic incentive to change. In spite of losing as much as half their audience in many local markets, TV stations in today's fragmented media world are still getting large audiences compared to cable and Internet sites. Name another business that can lose half its market share and still make money. Of course, this can't keep up. Yearly Pew Research Center surveys show a steady decline among young people turning away from traditional TV news for information, especially about politics. One 2004 PEW study focused on the presidential election found "just 23% of Americans age 18-29 say they regularly learn something about the elections from the nightly network news, down from 39% in 2000. There also have been … declines in the number of young people who learn about the campaign from local TV news (down 13%)." And the overall drop in viewers continues. The "State of the News Media 2006" report from Project for Excellence in Journalism found the average ratings for early-evening local news declined "a starting 13%" within the last year across all stations in its study. The local TV news graphs available on PEJ's web site (www.journalism.org) also show a steady decline in general news audiences over the last 10 years. So, with most young people no longer watching and viewership eroding, cable or DBS alternatives and Internet sites that are less formulaic, less predictable, more global, and much more imaginative are capturing the coveted 18-49 year old demographic. All the while, the older dependable local news viewers are dying off. (See also the new study released by Pew in January 2007 on "How Young People View Their Lives, Futures and Politics: A Portrait of 'Generation Next.'")

TV news directors and reporters will be forced to invent story forms that are as complex and compelling as their fictional counterparts.

So what should local TV news stations do? First, they should probably start hiring some outsiders that are not trained in the tired old news formulas and get some fresh ideas on how to tell stories that don't look like "their father's Oldsmobile" (and we all know what happened to that brand and GM). Second, they need to figure out how to tell stories—not just about individual heroes, individual criminals, and individual events (which mainstream journalism is very good at) —but about our shared interests and problems, and how individuals live and work together to make up institutions, communities, and a nation. For example, we have all known for years—from the accumulated individual stories told in individual

communities by individual TV stations and newspapers—about the poor mental-health treatment for a returning soldiers and the woeful under-funding of VA hospitals. Yet journalists, pundits, and politicians at the outset of 2007 acted as if revelations in the *Washington Post* about the Walter Reed Army medical center were big "new" stories. They were not. But the reporting and writing in this case featured two capable journalists—Dana Priest and Anne Hull—who found a way to tell compelling and complex stories not only about individual soldiers but about larger institutional failures in both the military and in government.

Stephen Colbert on the set of *The Colbert Report*.

©Joel Jefferies/Comedy Central

Third, and most importantly, in imagining new ways to tell both individual and institutional stories, TV news directors and reporters will be forced to invent story forms that are as complex and compelling as their fictional TV counterparts. In fictional network TV, for example, storytelling has evolved over time, becoming increasingly complicated, challenging audiences to keep up. Local (and network) TV news could take its cue from prime-time drama. As Steven Johnson argues in *Everything Bad is Good for You*, one of the most complex social networks on popular television in the seventies [referring to CBS's popular drama *Dallas*] looks practically infantile next to the social networks of today's hit dramas." In this 2005 book, he was referring to *The West Wing, Alias, The Sopranos* and *24*, among others. Today we could add House, Lost, Grey's Anatomy and HBO's Deadwood and Entourage, among others. Johnson also throws in the challenges of video games to this mix, where young players control and shape their own complex stories digitally.

So if fictional storytelling has developed and adapted, why has TV news—especially locally—remained entrenched in old formulas and time constraints that are virtually unchanged over the past 30 or 40 years? Remember, someone invented TV news in the first place—these formulas weren't brought

down from the mountain by Moses. Why are local TV news packages still 90 seconds and still so addicted to crime? Who says this is the best way to do local news—especially at a time when people are running away from their local stations? And at the national level, why has Don Hewitt's 40-year-old detective mystery formula for *60 Minutes* remained the gold standard for doing magazine news? Aren't there other ways to tell stories? Amazingly, Hewitt's legacy and Ted Koppel's *Nightline* format are the last big narrative innovations in network TV news. All the action and all the innovation today is on cable or the Internet. (Keith Olbermann on MSNBC's *Countdown* going after Fox's Bill O'Reilly is one of the best news stories on television.)

Given that *60 Minutes* draws TV's oldest audience, it's really no mystery that young people are looking to Comedy Central and the Internet for news innovations. These "new media" offer other ways to tell stories. Maybe, though, we all need something that's an alternative to tired TV news formulas, something that better matches the more complicated world around us, something as demanding as contemporary TV drama or our children's interactive video games. Hasn't the world grown more complicated and interconnected? Shouldn't we demand news stories that better present and represent that complexity?

If local news directors and station managers think they are going to recapture the smart young affluent viewer using the old formulas, there are wrong—mostly because this "generation next" has grown up watching mostly parody versions of TV news. It's not just *SNL*'s "Weekend Update" any more. Weaned now on *The Onion* on the Internet and Comedy Central's late night hits on cable, most smart young people today see traditional TV news mostly as a joke.

Although a 2006 study of *The Daily Show* concluded that the program's college-age audience developed cynical views about politicians and that the "negative perceptions of candidates could have participation implications by keeping more youth from the polls," this research misses the point. The political system for many young people is broken, with two wealthy established parties—beholden to corporate special interests and their lobbyists—who control the nation's government. (Since George W. Bush took office registered lobbyists increased by 100 percent in Washington—from 17,000 in 2000 to more than 35,000 in 2006). Ninety-eight percent of Congressional incumbents get re-elected each year—not necessarily because they've done a good job but because they've used their time in office to do favors for the lobbyists and interests that helped get them elected in the first place. And they buy lots of TV time to run cheesy patriotic ads or mean-spirited attack spots. So why shouldn't young people, then, be cynical about politics? Aren't they drawn to *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* not only because of its edginess but because the program tells them something that seems truthful—and funny—about politicians and the news media that cover them?

***The Daily Show* routinely parodies the narrative conventions of the evening news…It even parodies mainstream journalism's most cherished ideal—objectivity.**

Despite this research, politicians from the national chairmen of the two parties to presidential candidates like John Kerry and John McCain have sought an audience with Stewart. Former North Carolina Senator John Edwards even announced his 2004 presidential candidacy on Stewart's fake news program. They know that half the college-age students in the nation now watch Stewart. In fact, a 2004 Annenberg Public Policy study showed that regular viewers of *The Daily Show* "know more about politics than the average viewer." As the *New York Times* reported in February 2007, even serious writers are going on these shows because there are so few venues on TV that consider serious books. And these fake news shows boost sales because the viewers for news satire are readers.

In critiquing the limits of news stories and politics *The Daily Show* routinely parodies the narrative conventions of the evening news: the truncated 7-second "sound bite" or the formulaic "stand up," which depicts reporters "on location," apparently establishing credibility by revealing that they were really there. It even parodies mainstream journalism's most cherished ideal—objectivity. In a 2004 exchange with "political correspondent" Rob Corrdry, Stewart asks him for his opinion about presidential campaign tactics. "My opinion? I don't have opinions," Corrdry answers, "I'm a reporter, Jon. My job is to spend half the time repeating what one side says, and half the time repeating the other. Little thing called objectivity; might want to look it up."

Unlike the regular evening news (which is fixated on what happened yesterday), *The Daily Show*'s researchers often compare what a politician or president said yesterday with an opposite stance from one to a few years earlier. While national news operations like MSNBC thought nothing of appropriating the Pentagon's slogan, "Operation Iraqi Freedom," as its own visual, *The Daily Show* countered with its satiric "Mess O' Potamia." Even before the days of CBS's Walter Cronkite signing off the evening news with "And that's the way it is," network news anchors have offered a sense of order through the reassurance of their individual personalities. As a news satirist, Stewart argues that things are actually a mess. He does this with a much greater range of emotion—more amazement, irony, outrage, laughter, and skepticism (a range that may match our own)—than we get from our mostly detached, objective "hard news" anchors.

Much of the unimaginative quality of the conventional news stories that *The Daily Show* critiques has to do with TV executives and news producers finding it easier to repeat the familiar rather than challenge their comfortable formulas or invent new story forms. Although the world has changed, local TV news (except for those splashy opening graphics and Doppler weather screens) has virtually gone unaltered since the 1970s, still limiting reporters' stories to less than two minutes and promoting stylish male-female co-anchors, a sports guy, and a certified meteorologist as familiar personalities that we invite into our homes each evening. The basic problem with mainstream news today – especially on local TV—is that a generation of young voters has been raised on the TV satire and political cynicism of "Weekend Update" on *SNL*, Jay Leno, David Letterman, Conan O'Brian, *The Simpsons, South Park*, and the fake news programs of Comedy Central. The slick and formulaic packaging of political ads

or the canned and careful sound bites offered in news packages do not persuade them.

Viewers (and readers) are now primarily conceived—not as citizens—but as consumers, private individuals and focus groups.

Since the 1990s, the social definition and role of a reporter has been in question and in transition. Giving third-party candidates like Ross Perot a platform, Larry King's talk show on CNN played a key journalistic role in the1992 presidential campaign. During the 2000 and 2004 national elections, the 24-hour cable news prime-time talk shows and the Internet became major venues for political stories and national debate. The 1990s and early 2000s also saw furious competition for younger readers weaned on moving images in a digital culture. Because most major newspapers are now available via interactive computer services, the old battle lines between print and electronic-digital culture have collapsed and need to be redrawn. For better or worse, journalism today encompasses a host of resources that perform news, entertainment, and other cultural functions. How will local TV news stay competitive? Not by offering a week of 90 second packages during May sweeps about kids "gone wild" over spring break (after all, we can order much more explicit versions of this "soft core" news on late night cable).

News outlets today—whether TV or print or online—are working to compete in a world overloaded with de-contextualized information where data has become abundant and fragmented. Amid this, traditional journalism has lost its bearing. The best journalism, however, continues to sustain its democratic traditions: making sense of important events, telling a community's main stories (in less formulaic ways), watching over our central institutions, and serving as a check on power. And this latter function is crucial at a time when mainstream journalism's power has diminished. As Andrew Card, George W. Bush's chief of staff, warned the press in 2004 in *The New Yorker*: "[The news media] don't represent the public anymore than other people do. In our democracy, the people who represent the public stood for election. … I don't believe you [the press] have a check-and-balance function." This is heresy for many of us who believe that good journalism indeed has a check-and-balance role to play in a strong democracy.

Fewer and fewer "old media" stories today address readers as citizens engaged in keeping our democracy vital and as members of communities with a stake in that democracy. Instead we have stories mostly dictated by panicky TV executives and their market research on viewers (and readers) who are now primarily conceived – not as citizens – but as consumers, private individuals and focus groups. So, for example, we get TV labor stories, not about the nature or work or the decline of unions, but on how consumers and viewers are being inconvenienced by greedy or absent workers. But until the "story" changes, none of this research-driven news addressing the audience only as customers will get our smartest kids watching TV news again. They already know their identity as consumers. What

they need help with is their identity as citizens. Where are those stories? Isn't there a First Amendment obligation for the only business ("the press") recognized by our founders to create and produce such stories?

As a teacher, I'm not optimistic. Raised on the satire and political cynicism of "Weekend Update," Conan O'Brian, *The Simpsons,* David Letterman, *South Park, The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, Generation-Next is not buying what TV news stations are selling. It's time for change, and it should be every bit as dramatic as the difference between *Dallas* and *Desperate Housewives*, *Marcus Welby* and *House, Magnum PI* and *24,* and *Little House on the Prairie* and *Deadwood*. Paraphrasing Don Hewitt (whose autobiography is aptly named *Tell Me A Story* and who in the 1960s created in *60 Minutes* the most profitable program in the history of prime-time television), "It's the story, stupid."

Richard Campbell directs the journalism program at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He is the author of *60 Minutes and the News: A Mythology for Middle America*; co-author of *Cracked Coverage: Television News, the Anti-Cocaine Crusade and the Reagan Legacy* and lead author of *Media and Culture*, the nation's top media-survey textbook.

From High-School Disc Jockey To Network News Anchor

Tom Brokaw tells the story of his life and lists his role models. | **By Morton Silverstein**

In the last issue of Television Quarterly *we traced the first half of Tom Brokaw's broadcasting career from high-school disc jockey in Yankton, South Dakota, to NBC News where he became White House correspondent and ultimately anchor of NBC's* Nightly News.

In this second half of the conversation Brokaw talks about the rest of his career at NBC: Who his role models were and what he really thought about the Presidents he interviewed—from Nixon to Carter to Reagan to Clinton. He also focuses on the history of network evening news and speculates about its chances of survival.

MORT SILVERSTEIN: Who were your role models or influences?

TOM BROKAW: Most of mine were within NBC. David Brinkley was always a great model for me. He was a wonderful writer; he had such ease on the air, and cut through everything, and told the news in narrative form. He would so skillfully weave a story about what was going on.

But I admired John Chancellor for his sophistication as a correspondent. We had a terrific broadcast correspondent by the name of Tom Pettit, who knew how to use all the tools of broadcast journalism. He was a great writer; he had a great eye for the visual. So I learned from him as well.

But I didn't ignore the guys across the street at CBS, and I'd watch them. Roger Mudd was terrific on the Hill. And I paid a lot of attention to that. So I would kind of take from everybody; whatever I could learn, along the way.

And I had the great fortune of moving in next door to [*New York Times* columnist] James "Scotty" Reston. My next-door neighbor. Think about that. And he loved our family. And he'd lean over the back fence and share things with me. I would think, how can this be true? I'm living next door to Scotty Reston!

MS: Some career highlights: rogues and presidents, sometimes not mutually exclusive. Could you evaluate them for us, the relationships with the press, from small talk off camera to serious answers; your one-on-one questions? We interviewed Judy Woodruff at CNN. And she had told us that President Carter didn't quite get the way one is supposed to play the game in Washington. But that President Reagan, whether through jokes...

TB: Was a master.

MS: …[just charmed] the notebooks and lavaliers right off one's lapel.

TB: Obviously, Nixon was the worst. He hated the press. And it, it came out in his best efforts to try to be friendly; it just would fall flat. But we knew the rules with him. I don't think there was venemous hate on the part of the press toward him. But I do think that there was always great skepticism about what he was trying to sell to the public, on one hand, and what we knew was going on behind the scenes, on the other.

He is then replaced by Gerry Ford, who was probably the most popular president with the press that anyone can possibly imagine. Only two years in office. But he'd come from the Hill; he was as comfortable as an old slipper.

I remember [CBS News's] Bob Schieffer and I had really hammered him in a news conference out in Ohio somewhere. And he was angry at us. And on the way out the door, he wheeled, and said something to us. You know, you guys won't give that up, or something like that.

And Bob and I made a semi-smart-aleck remark back to him, saying: Hey, Mr. President, we're just out here tryin' to make a living. We gotta eat tonight.

And he turned around and looked at us, and burst out laughing. And said, what am I gonna do with you guys? And walked out the door.

It was so winning. You can't imagine other presidents doing that.

Jimmy Carter — whom I've gotten to know well since he left the presidency — was a very reserved man. He'd not been around Washington. He didn't know how to play the game.

Reagan was a master at the theater of the game. But there was very little small talk with Reagan. He knew how to walk into a room and say, hi, fellas, how's it goin'? And make you think that he was just paying attention to you. Then he would shut it down. All of his public appearances were just the best I've ever seen. But no one was better at all of that than Bill Clinton. He was Elvis. He was the guy who could switch it on. He'd been around a long time. Also, his handlers had a good relationship with the press. And others who'd worked for him really knew how to work the press.

MS: A couple of last questions. One will complete, or more accurately, continue the arc of Tom Brokaw at NBC News. Now here's a pantheon you know,

but our viewers don't. I want to ask you to help us encapsulate and put a signature on two eras of broadcasting; particularly evening news.

In the beginning of television news, 1948, it was Douglas Edwards with the news at CBS, almost simultaneously followed at NBC by John Cameron Swayze and *The Camel News Caravan*. In the fall of 1953, ABC begins its broadcast with John Daly. And in 1956, Chet Huntley and David Brinkley were teamed by NBC's Reuven Frank.

But all were replacing, or succeeding Swayze. All were 15-minute broadcasts. So the era of a half hour, which still obtains, is CBS with Walter Cronkite, in 1962. Huntley-Brinkley quickly follows. ABC, still struggling financially and journalistically, waits until 1967, with anchor Bob Young, who was succeeded by Howard K. Smith and Frank Reynolds, and then Harry Reasoner in '71. And in '71, the anchor chair at NBC is editorially and ergonomically a good fit for John Chancellor until 1982. You're in '82. You are on with Roger Mudd. And then a year later, you're on your own. Frank Reynolds dies in 1983, and is succeeded by Peter Jennings.

How would you attempt to put a signature on the evolution of evening news?

TB: I think a lot of people wrote that we were the end of an era; Dan, Peter and I, in a variety of ways. Three solo anchors; white males; all the same generation; grew up in the same tradition. We were the first generation of the founding fathers, so to speak, to come along afterward.

I do think that Dan, Peter and I reinvented the form in a reasonably important way, in that we were all reporters before we were anchors. We loved reporting. And the new technology allowed us to take our jobs on the road, which we did, all over the world.

So I think that's the big signature; that we were people who had earned our bond with our audiences first as reporters; took those instincts and interests to the anchor chair; and took the anchor chair to where the news was.

Now the universe is greatly expanded. And the form of the evening news is evolving. It's still pretty much the same here at *Nightly News*, and with great success, with Brian Williams. It's his instinct and it's the pattern that we had in place when he took over for me.

The young people are not watching the news. They're going online. They don't read a newspaper. The challenge for over-the-air and cable networks is to find a way to be integrated with the Internet.

I do think that the next 10 years will bring some profound changes. But I'm happy I had the time that I did, both as a junior correspondent, then a senior correspondent, and then finally as the anchorman. First of all, I hope it survives as a form. I think that's the big issue. It still delivers the biggest audience, on a daily basis, print and electronically. Brian Williams gets 10 million people to watch him, every night. There's no other circulation like that in America.

The disquieting, development is that the audience is off. Five percent some weeks; little more than that some other weeks. And we know, generationally, the

young people coming up are not sitting down at 6:30 and watching the news, or 5:30 in the Western part of the country. They're going online., They don't read a newspaper anymore. They get their news online; from their favorite Web sites, or their bloggers, or whatever. And I think the challenge for these over-the-air networks, and even cable institutions, is to find a way to be integrated with the Internet. Because the Internet, as remarkable as it is in our time, it's just in the seminal stages. We'll look back on this as not the Dark Ages exactly, but as the dawn of time. And a lot of change will come.

I grew up in a culture in which you were measured by what you did, not by how you looked.

I am not one of those who goes around saying, woe is me; the business has gone to hell. Because I don't believe that. [ABC News anchor] Bob Woodruff was not in Iraq on a publicity stunt. He was reporting an important part of the story, and he paid a terribly tragic price for it. I'm going to Pakistan 48 hours after this interview is over to report on the earthquake zone. And the political consequences of that — whether or not the United States gained any ground with the rank and file Pakistani people.

You can go to CSPAN every day. You can get very sophisticated, analysis off our Web site on a daily basis. *Meet the Press* is now an hour, and it's also joined by *Face the Nation*. There's an expanded universe out there of news.

MS: It's indeed a long way from home as the eponymous title of your book states. I'll ask you to elaborate on that wonderful closing, in which you said: "It has been for me an evocative and instructive expedition. I could not be the man I am today without the boy I was yesterday, in a far off place and a long time ago."

TB: By that I mean that I was surrounded by people who worked hard and had an innate curiosity about the world around them, I was encouraged by schoolteachers and other mentors in the community to go exercise my curiosity beyond the borders of my home state. And as important as anything, I grew up in a culture in which you were measured by what you did. Not by how you looked; not by how you described what you did; not by how you promoted what you did. But in fact, measured by what you did, at the end of every day.

I always think, it's so much more fun to be here, doing all of this, given where I came from. That's a long journey. But I was prepared, every step of the way, to get to this place, by those humble people back there, where I began my life.

Morton Silverstein is an eight-time Emmy Award documentary filmmaker whose television career began with *Nightbeat* with Mike Wallace and continued at all the networks. At National Educational Television he produced *Banks and the Poor, What Harvest for the Reaper, The Poor Pay More* and *Justice and the Poor*, among many other investigative reports. He is today Senior Writer/Producer at the Independent Production Fund where with Executive Producer Alvin H. Perlmutter he continues to produce for Steven H. Scheuer the series *Television in America: An Autobiography*, which can be seen on many public-television stations. The foregoing interview has been excerpted from this series.

Quote:

To the extent that we're now judging journalism by the same standards that we apply to entertainment—in other words, give the public not necessarily what it ought to hear, what it ought to see, what it needs, but what it wants—that may prove to be one of the greatest tragedies in the history of American journalism.

In the very early days of television news, the FCC still had teeth and still used them once in a while. There was that little paragraph, Section 315 of the FCC Code, that said, "You shall operate in the public interest, convenience and necessity." What that meant was that you had to have a news division that told people what was important out there. They didn't expect the news divisions to make money.

Then one day along came this new program on CBS, *60 Minutes*. It was not an immediate success, but after two or three years it started to do something no news program had done before: It began to turn a profit. And now, making money became part of what we did.

—Ted Koppel on the PBS Frontline *series* "NEWS WAR"
February 27, 2007.

Unquote.

How A Local Station Unveiled A "Dirty Secret"

WBAL Baltimore attacked a composting plant that was masquerading as a friend to the environment, put it out of business and demonstrated the power of television as a force for good. **By John Sherman**

Sometimes on stories things just seem to break your way. Three years ago WBAL-TV, NBC's Baltimore affiliate, began an investigation into the pollution of the Chesapeake Bay. Every time photographer/producer Beau Kershaw and I took a risk, we found big rewards, leading to dramatic results that have fundamentally improved the lives and safety of our viewers.

We began by focusing on an overburdened wastewater-treatment plant surrounded by rampant development. As a result of our more than 20-part series, more than $100 million dollars in new home construction was put on hold for 10 months while a new treatment facility was completed.

The series, *Dirty Secret*, spotlighted a composting plant that was masquerading as a friend to the environment and led to the actual closure of the company. Both of these projects earned television's most prestigious accolades—and most importantly, demonstrated the power of local television can have concretely benefiting the community.

Since the whole thing started, we have seen one recurring theme: People standing up to polluters, saying they're getting little help from their governments. They turn to us when they believe their government is failing them. That is the one call we as journalists are duty-bound to answer.

At both the county and state level we found time and time again government oversight lacking any bite whatsoever in the best cases, and intentionally neglectful in the worst cases.

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest natural estuary in North America, home to blue crabs, terrapins, clams, oysters and a bounty of more than 3,600 fish and plant species. It touches six states with more than 18 million people living in its watershed.

But tragically, the Chesapeake Bay has been dying for decades, and now more than 75% of its water is officially classified as a "dead zone." The cause is

simple to understand but nearly impossible to stop—too much of a good thing—overnutrification. Too much nitrogen and phosphorus cause the plant life to grow out of control, creating miles-wide swaths of algae that block out the sun and kill the fish, crabs and oysters due to low oxygen levels.

Beau and I believe television only really takes full advantage of its potential when great content meets great crafting. We are only a two-man crew, but we believe in the basic building blocks of crafted television news. Memorable characters. Lighting. Sequencing. Pacing. Natural sound. Creating this kind of news takes more time, more thought and most of all more sustained daily physical effort.

New Earth Services became a big part of the Bay's pollution problem and the State of Maryland allowed it to fester and grow out of control...The pollution wasn't just accidental. It was planned.

Our first report ran just over seven minutes, it led our 11 PM newscast and we held our viewers and beat the competition that night. That was just one in a series of decisions made by our news director Michelle Butt that made the series what it is. We didn't set out to make a seven-minute package, but when it was clear the content demanded it, Michelle had no problem granting such unusual airtime. Again and again throughout the series our packages ran three, four or five minutes. Not many news directors would have aired a seven minute package in a thirty minute show. Our viewers wrote dozens of enthusiastic emails supporting that decision.

Dirty Secret is the second major chapter in our probe into Bay pollution, focusing on a composting plant that was masquerading as a friend to the environment. This series of nearly 20 reports led to the eventual closure of the company.

New Earth Services began as a novel and seemingly beneficial enterprise. The composting company sought to convert crab and chicken waste into fertilizer and mulch products to be sold at retail garden centers. Maryland's eastern shore is dominated by the crab and poultry industries, and there is an undeniable need to dispose of the parts of the crabs and chickens that don't get used in food products. In the early 1990's lesions began showing up on fish, and there was concern it could be

WBAL-TV

Pollution in action: this was the *Dirty Secret.*

from direct land applications of nutrient rich poultry and crab waste. New Earth Services was in some ways a response to that concern, but the execution of the composting business never came close to matching its promise.

New Earth Services became a big part of the Bay's pollution problem, and the State of Maryland allowed it to fester and grow out of control. The designers of new Earth's site never really figured out a way to deal with excess rainwater. With no way to effectively channel it away from the site, large pools formed, and those became ponds growing to significant size. The ponds were nestled right next to the piles of rotting chicken and crab waste, creating a situation where extremely nutrient rich water would leach from the piles into the ponds.

We detailed the lack of oversight from Maryland's Department of the Environment…and began seeing real results from our efforts almost immediately.

But it was more purposeful than just that. New Earth Services cut culverts in the ground to direct the water into a stream that feeds into the Chesapeake Bay. The pollution wasn't just accidental. It was planned.

On the first day we spent shooting *Dirty Secret*, we hit the jackpot at the company site and then again in an even bigger way at the owner of the company's house. Being truthful but not completely disclosing our motives, we called up the company and told them we had read on their website how they helped the Bay and asked them if they'd give us a tour and show us. The owner's brother enthusiastically agreed, assuming our story was sure to be positive. He let us on-site and showed us around, giving Beau extensive time to shoot video of the site that would help sustain what would grow to be a 20 part series.

The key moment in the whole investigation came on our first day of shooting on the front lawn of the company owner's home. Still assuming we were buying his helps-the-environment line, he agreed to an interview. When I asked him about the ponds, he paused, then asked "Uhh...you filmed ponds?" What followed was an extraordinary 52 seconds of video, where he looks down, up and anywhere but at me as I asked him again and again about how the ponds work. We aired the whole 52 seconds uncut.

The company is required by Maryland

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law to get permits for any ponds, but because the ponds were polluting the stream, Maryland's Department of the Environment couldn't issue a permit. So instead, MDE simply let the pollution continue unchecked.

Field report after field report from well-meaning inspectors documenting the pollution went ignored at MDE headquarters. The needs of big business took priority over the land and the people. We first found out about the story from Sveinn Storm, an environmental activist who has played a critical role in all of our Bay-pollution investigations. His ability to find out about problems and his dogged pursuit of the details made our stories possible. Beau and I spend most of our time assigned to general assignment news (crime, politics, etc.) so Storm's ability to spend hours doing detailed research was invaluable to our work.

In the end, the polluter shut down when government stood up and did the right thing.

We went on to detail the lack of oversight from Maryland's Department of the Environment and how MDE had known about the pollution for years but only issued the company a $50,000 fine days after we first asked about it. Not only that, but New Earth had been receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars in state and federal grants intended for small businesses helping the environment.

We began seeing real results from our efforts almost immediately.

It took the Federal government less than 24 hours to react to our first story. The very next day the EPA sent field inspectors to the New Earth site, and a week later a scathing 14 page EPA report found "that New Earth has been and continues to be in violation of the Clean Water Act, since at least 1999" (EPA Report 08/10/06). The EPA also found New Earth "may be endangering the health of persons thru the introduction of pollutants into an underground source of drinking water" (EPA Report 08/10/06).

Many of our follow-up stories dealt with just that difficult question: Did the composting plant pollute the groundwater of the people living nearby? While it's a simple question, finding the answer proved to be a real challenge. The biggest initial obstacle was that the state, and then even the county governments, stunningly did not appear in any way interested in finding the answer. We were told that liability concerns hindered their enthusiasm, but we were shocked when citizens repeated calls requesting well tests went unanswered. When we kept hammering away on air about the lack of response from local government, finally the county began testing people's wells, and nearly one third of the wells within a square mile of the site tested positive for bacterial contamination.

But bacterial contamination was not what we were expecting. We had been expecting to find high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus in the soil, but it can take decades to move through a water table. That would have been clear-cut. What we found was much more enigmatic. We met many people whose drinking-water wells would test positive for bacterial contamination one day, negative a week later, and then positive again the following week. We were never able to say with certainty what the impact on the wells was, but the residents told us again and again how much they appreciated our giving

John Sherman (r.) with WBAL-TV photographer Beau Kershaw, at last year's National Capital Chesapeake Bay Regional Emmy Awards

them a platform to raise the question. Their questions would end the company.

The New Earth site was leased from Dorchester County. Even before New Earth was prosecuted in court, the county council had the opportunity to vote on continuing the lease. After all of the revelations about what was really going on out at the site, the council voted unanimously to deny the new lease request. They also approved a moratorium on similar composting businesses, preventing the company from moving down the road and reopening under a different name. New Earth Services was finally forced off the site and filed for bankruptcy. After that, MDE finally came after the company for fines it had been avoiding paying for years. New Earth was assessed more than $100,000 in fines for polluting the Chesapeake Bay.

Our next series of follow-ups focused on the clean-up and costs associated with restoring the site to its natural condition. The polluted soup that made up the illegal ponds was disturbingly pumped out of those ponds and trucked a few miles away to a very old wastewater treatment plant in a poor neighborhood. The residents there questioned why what was not OK for one stream, was OK for theirs after minimal treatment. Again, we gave the people a platform to question their government from.

Clean-up had been estimated in the millions, and the county was stuck with the bill after the company went bankrupt. In a shrewd move, the county decided to bag and sell the remaining compost on the site, which is undeniably great fertilizer. That offset the costs tremendously, leaving about a half a million for the county to pay. It was still a lot of money though; the whole county's annual budget is just $39 million.

In the end, the polluter shut down when government stood up and did the right thing. The disturbing thing about it is that twice now, in two counties on two entirely different investigations over three years, we've had to push and probe and shine light into murkiness to get the just response governments universally promise. Sometimes they can fail to deliver, and when they do, the power the media possesses is immense. We have a responsibility to use it.

While it is highly gratifying that our three-year-long investigation has won for WBAL all of television's most prestigious honors—the Peabody, a National News and Documentary Emmy and, most recently, the Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Award—I am most gratified by our contribution to the community: People are safer, the Chesapeake Bay is cleaner, and we have demonstrated the power of local television as a force for good.

John Sherman, 31, is a general- assignment reporter at WBAL-TV, Baltimore, MD. He previously reported for WTVD-TV, Durham, NC, having begun his reporting career at WVIR-TV, Charlottesville, VA, in 1998. A native of Washington D.C., he is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

First Impressions Matter:
The Framing of Katrina Coverage by CNN and Fox News Channel

By Owen Hanley Lynch

On September 14, 2001, standing near the rubble of the World Trade Center, President George W. Bush declared, "I hear you; America can hear you; and soon those responsible will hear from you." With these words, he successfully captured and framed the immediate social emotion, or *zeitgeist*, of the moment, creating the foundation of his 2002 State of the Union address, the cornerstone of his post-9/11 popularity. But in his response to another tragic event, Hurricane Katrina, the president failed to duplicate this triumph. He was sharply criticized for what was widely interpreted as a disjointed, uncompassionate reaction to the horrific aftermath of the Katrina disaster, and the problem was compounded by an initial decision to remain on holiday. Bush's personal response appeared to be completely at odds with the image—and the image frame—of the Katrina disaster that was presented to tens of millions of viewers by the 24-hour cable news channels on their live coverage.

In an attempt to compensate for this public-relations blunder, Bush decided to visit the site of the catastrophic event, New Orleans, as he had visited Lower Manhattan after 9/11. On his flight to the Gulf Coast, the president viewed a DVD consisting of clips from the round-the-clock television news coverage of the Katrina aftermath, the purpose of which was to connect him with the immediate frame of the disaster that had been presented to the public. The larger lesson of Bush's first-reaction error was clear: a failure to recognize the crucial influence of the narrative or thematic frames created by round-the-clock live news coverage in shaping public perception of a national crisis.

To examine these frames, 65 college students were asked to conduct analyses of the coverage of the Katrina aftermath presented by two prominent 24-hour television news channels: Cable News

FOX framed the Katrina story as a catastrophic loss of property caused by an awesome force of nature, compounded by irresponsible acts on the part of residents. CNN, by contrast, framed the story as a result of systematic dysfunction and incompetence on the part of government agencies, which tragically endangered trapped, helpless citizens.

Network (CNN) and Fox News Network (FOX). Their responses provided compelling evidence of differences in the patterns of coverage practiced by the two organizations to frame the immediate news into a consistent story. In short, the study showed that FOX framed the Katrina story as a catastrophic loss of property caused by an awesome force of nature, compounded by irresponsible acts on the part of residents. CNN, by contrast, framed the story as the result of systematic dysfunction and incompetence on the part of government agencies, which tragically endangered trapped, helpless citizens.

The study presupposes that the nature of the "live" or "unfolding" coverage of an event by a 24-hour news service gives viewers the impression they are eyewitnesses to a crisis as it is happening and that the experience is shared by millions, thus playing a major role in forming public opinion of the crisis. The results of the study beg several important questions that were beyond its purview: How much are viewers willing to question a news channel's round-the-clock framing of a "developing news story," when the visceral sense of immediacy created by that frame makes the story attractive and gives it a high level of credibility? Do news producers covering such stories have time to consciously frame the story in service to a political agenda? Are viewers aware of political motives or do they constitute a naïve, passive, or ignorant audience? Whether or not any political motives are behind them, implicit frames are politically potent. They form an audience's first impression, establish criteria for public diagnoses, and become reference points for public dialogues on such questions as who is to blame, who deserves sympathy and help, and what needs to be done to better cope with similar situations in the future.

How the Research was Designed

A sample group of 65 college-student viewers was assembled for the purposes of the study. Their self-identified political views broke down as 36% moderate; 44% conservative; and 4% far right. They examined 18 hours each of FOX and CNN prime-time coverage of the Katrina aftermath. The 36 hours were broken into five segments. A single time period was selected for both channels: 5-10 p.m. (Eastern), which covered prime-time viewing hours for most of the United States, on three successive days, August 31-September 2. The dates were selected based on the chronology of the event: Katrina made landfall on August 29 at 6 a.m.; the city and region flooded that evening and throughout the day on August 30; the realization that residents

remaining in New Orleans were in life-threatening peril and that assistance had not yet arrived was reached on August 31. Drama accelerated on the 31st, with New Orleans Mayor Roy Nagen calling for a forced evacuation of city, and George Bush deciding to cut his holiday short to fly back to Washington to convene a federal task force. Sixteen short post-study interviews and two focus groups were conducted to gauge the confidence the viewers had in their analyses.

A total of 378 five-minute segments were coded along 12 distinct content indicators to test a research hypothesis of a patterned difference between FOX and CNN. The content indicators provided data for three broad questions:

1) How was impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans framed?

2) How were the residents of New Orleans who remained in the city framed?

3) Who was given voice to frame the story of the aftermath?

The impact of the hurricane on New Orleans: FOX emphasized the physical devastation and de-emphasized human plight. While CNN emphasized the human plight over property damage.

Research Hypothesis: FOX will emphasize the physical devastation of New Orleans and de-emphasize human plight, while CNN will emphasize the human plight over property damage.

Results: Viewer content analysis supported this hypothesis. CNN's coverage of the physical devastation (i.e., property damage) that occurred in New Orleans over the three-day period accounted for 28% of air time, less time than FOX's 35% of air time. The percentages, by themselves, are less significant than the difference between the patterns of how such coverage was used on each channel. As flooding conditions stabilized and dangers to trapped residents (including lack of food, medical supplies and sanitation) intensified, FOX coverage of the physical damage to New Orleans, effected through heavy use of aerial shots, went from 19% of coverage time on August 31 to 45% of coverage time on September 2. CNN coverage shifted focus toward the developing human story, with coverage of physical property damage decreasing from 40% on the 31st to 24% on the 2nd.

How New Orleans Residents Were Framed

Research Hypothesis: CNN will implicitly frame the story of the Katrina aftermath as a tragedy exposing cracks beneath the veneer of American equality, and FOX will avoid this emotional frame. To test this hypothesis, an analysis was made of how residents were presented to viewers. Specific attention was given to answering this question: Are residents shown on camera as discernible individuals or as parts of large crowds?

Results: During the course of the three-day period, both channels decreased coverage of crowds (FOX, 32%-26%; CNN, 20% -15%), with FOX use of crowd shots higher than CNN's on average (28% vs. 21%). Again, the more telling data is found in the pattern of coverage choices

over time as events unfolded. FOX's use of close-ups on residents was virtually the same as CNN's on August 31 (14% to 13%). But as conditions worsened for the people in New Orleans, FOX decreased close-up coverage to 11%, while CNN almost doubled close-ups to 24% of air time. On September 2, when conditions hit a critical point for suffering residents, FOX was more then twice as likely to depict images of crowds (28%) than of close-ups of residents (11%). The opposite trend emerged on CNN, where coverage of crowds dropped to 15% and close-ups of individuals rose to 24%. Based on this evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that FOX and CNN viewers developed different emotional commitments to the New Orleans residents. This emotional difference, in turn, likely influenced the degree of responsibility for the problems of the aftermath that a given viewer placed on residents and helped shape the viewer's opinion of the appropriateness, adequacy and competence of federal response. In sum, the pattern spoke directly to the question of "blame."

CNN viewers were much more likely to recall the voices of residents and remember their comments than FOX viewers, who tended to recall images of looters.

Research Hypothesis: FOX will devote more airtime than CNN to images of looting.

Results: New Orleans looting was depicted in 22.2% of FOX coverage and 14.7% of CNN coverage of the 378 segments studied. On August 31, with the continued reports of looting, both spent significant amounts of time on looting: FOX, 33%; CNN 24%. The next day, FOX moderated to 27%, while CNN dropped looting coverage significantly, to 5%. On September 2, FOX went down to 8.6% and CNN rose slightly to 6.6%, about 20% less time than FOX. It is important to note the dramatic difference between looting coverage on September 1. Most property-crimes stories appearing on both CNN and FOX on September 1 and 2 were taped repeats from August 30th. Significantly, FOX choose to continually repeat the same scenes of looting on September 1. A prevalent example of FOX coverage showed African-American men carry goods away from a store, smiling and rejoicing in the act. In the focus groups, FOX viewers referred to looters in far more negative terms than CNN viewers. Having viewed the looting scenes so many times, some FOX viewers, including those who watched on different days, were able to reference a particular looter: "the smiling man with the cart."

Research Hypothesis: CNN will give voice to people undergoing the experience and FOX will refrain from doing so. This was tested by measuring if CNN would conduct more on-location interviews of New Orleans residents than FOX.

Results: FOX interviewed residents on location in only 3.3% of segments; CNN did so in 17.5% of segments, a five-fold increase. In interview questions asked on FOX, journalists defined or referred to the "tragedy" of the hurricane aftermath in terms of irresponsible actions of residents. This occurred with particular clarity in

interviews of a hotel owner (September 2) "How is your hotel? How did you get a bus up to the window [bus was used as barricade]? How have you kept safe?" when questions were asked about safety issues versus the lack of aid. In contrast, CNN conveyed the terrible conditions and emotional distress experienced by the residents. CNN journalists tended to ask the residents open-ended questions, including these: How do you feel? How are you going on with your life? Can you describe the conditions at the Convention Center? FOX journalists tended to ask fact-oriented questions that called for quantifiable or tightly focused responses, including these: How have you kept safe? How long have you been at the Convention Center? How long have you been here [the location of the interview]? In multiple instances, CNN aired residents' comments that were not responses to interviewer questions, in some cases airing those comments repeatedly. CNN showed residents yelling remarks at the camera, including "people are dying here," and "we have lost everything." These inclusions created an impression that CNN coverage was less structured and less controlled than FOX's. CNN viewers were much more likely to recall the voices of residents and remember their comments in focus group sessions than FOX viewers, who tended to recall images of looters.

Research Hypothesis: FOX will give airtime to more "expert" voices than CNN to frame the news, narrate events, or "spin" stories. FOX will use these experts to shift the focus of the story away from the plight of the people trapped in New Orleans.

Results: FOX used experts to frame news in 75% of segments studied. The most frequent topics of discussion for experts were looting and lawlessness (41%); effects of the hurricane on the national economy (13%); price gouging on consumer items, such as gas (11%); and various types of informational comment from Gulf Coast state officials (11%). CNN used experts to frame the news in 45% of segments, most often in reference to these topics: response assessment (i.e. how well prepared federal, state, and local governments were for the crisis (24%); public health issues (18%); and informational comment from Gulf Coast state officials (18%). There was a patterned difference in when and how these experts were relied upon to frame the news. As conditions worsened, FOX shifted from devoting half of every five-minute segment to expert framing on August 31 to devoting 89% to expert framing on September 1 and 87% on September 2. CNN began using experts to frame the story as frequently as FOX, but declined from 50% of the time on the first day to 25% on the second day, rising back to 44% of September 3. Even after the rise, the practice was used only half as much by CNN as it was by FOX

The study's content analysis of the "expert" segments demonstrates clearly that "looting and lawlessness" was the primary focus of FOX experts. During the three-day period, FOX journalists interviewed the Miami-Dade (Florida) chief of police on separate occasions, and asked questions about looting and violence of guests whose expertise was unrelated to the subject. For example, Franklin Graham, a clergyman interviewed for a September 2 segment whose putative subject was the role of charity in providing relief to hurricane victims, was asked to comment on "the rape, murder, shooting, looting, and mayhem." In the

36 hours studied, FOX devoted more air time to experts discussing looting and lawlessness than CNN spent with all of its experts on all topics combined. FOX's focus on looting supports assertions that it attempted to shift focus away from the plight of the residents. It is worth noting that FOX's use of experts to frame the story through other topics, such as gas gouging or effects of the hurricane on the national economy, seemed at times trivial in contrast to the enormity of the immediate situation, and its strategy may have worked against its goals.

CNN chose to pursue the human suffering developments while FOX chose to maintain and even intensify coverage of damage caused to buildings, infrastructure and other physical property.

This study found significant differences between FOX and CNN in implicit and immediate framing of continuing live coverage of the Hurricane Katrina aftermath. As the story became less about physical devastation by natural disaster and more about relievable human suffering, CNN chose to pursue the human suffering developments while FOX chose to maintain and even intensify coverage of damage caused to buildings, infrastructure and other physical property in New Orleans. As conditions deteriorated for residents in the unfolding story, FOX refrained from using close-ups (the signature shot of human-interest stories) or conducting on-site interviews of residents, and opted for aerial shots of physical devastation and pans of crowds. CNN focused to an increasing degree on individual residents, presenting more than twice the number of close-ups and five times the number of on-site interviews seen on FOX. CNN allowed residents to participate in framing the Katrina aftermath story by airing their descriptions, in some cases unsolicited by questions, of their pain and frustrations.

When FOX chose to focus on individuals, the apparent purpose was to emphasize the negative social consequences of their actions, without putting those actions into larger context. In its focus on looting and lawlessness, including repeated used of sensationalistic images, FOX offered no distinctions between the actions of a starving persons taking food and a common felon taking advantage of the disaster to steal a consumer item. The absence of focus on the issues of human survival was complemented by FOX's pervasive reliance on experts to frame looting, violence, and lawlessness as the primary elements of the aftermath story. CNN reported looting and violent incidents, but as the story developed, chose to explore the deteriorating conditions that were causing lawlessness.

In reviewing the patterned differences between FOX and CNN, the major question that emerges is not which frame is accurate, for both serves their own editorial views of events, as all journalistic enterprises do. However, it is clear that FOX chose to refrain from coverage of the emotional human aspect of the story as conditions worsened for the people trapped in New Orleans. It is difficult to understand why, as this human tragedy became more obvious, a news agency would choose to use fewer close-ups, air fewer interviews with

victims of these conditions, and instead rely more on expert framers, repetitions of images of looting, and long shots of images of property devastation. As a story of deep and widespread human suffering emerged, CNN engaged and FOX disengaged.

It is important to note that framing research shows that viewers generally attribute causes to personal actions rather than systematic problems. This leads to simplification of problems as we over-focus on the effects while ignoring possible causes. This tendency is most likely accentuated as viewers react to the news frames provided by their immediate sources and form personal frames of a crisis. But a 24-hour news service ought to be held responsible for reporting an entire story for two reasons. A democratic society's ability to address complex systematic problems, and prevent future crises of this scale, requires more than sensational focus on the individuals in the event. Secondly, the fact that the 24-hour news services have the time, resources and audience to do so, are they compelled to fulfill their responsibility? It became clear during three days of live coverage that systemic problems—including the inability of local government to evacuate people and the failure of federal agencies to respond to a situation they were created to address—were contributing to the severity of human suffering that began with the landfall of Hurricane Katrina. Why did FOX, with all its resources, including experienced journalists, fail to inform the public of this part of the story? What were the internal mechanisms by which this choice was made?

Owen Hanley Lynch, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the department of Corporate Communications and Public Affairs at Southern Methodist University, received his doctorate and his M.A. in organizational communication from Texas A&M and a B.A. in communications from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

"Dumbing Down" by Sports Announcers

A fan voices his irritation with the bravado, bombast, ranting, chortling and crude language that draws attention to the perpetrator not to the action.

By Greg Vitiello

"They're stumbling and bumbling out there… Stag-NATION is causing them devas-TATION… Robinson is beginning to percolate… …David Lee continues to bound and astound…They're leaders in hacking and whacking…He's put some fire and DE-sire in them…They're cruising and bruising."

Want to guess the subject of these on-air quotes from a prominent New York television announcer?

If you guessed professional basketball, you win a Walt "Clyde" Frazier bobble-head doll. Frazier, formerly a star point guard with the New York Knickerbockers, has taken rhyming to new lows as a regular television analyst on Knicks games.

An analyst? That's a bit of a misnomer, since Frazier is so intent on verbal "moving and grooving" that he barely seems to watch the games. And yet Cable Vision, owner of the Madison Square Garden Network, retains him—at large sums—to parody the job of sports analyst.

Ask yourself why Frazier continues, season after season, to cruise and bruise our sensory apparatus. Or merely look at his performance as part of a broader dumbing down of sports announcing. For Frazier is far from alone in his penchant for sacrificing substance for shtick.

Dumbing down takes many guises in sports announcing: bravado; bombast; ranting; chortling; crude, inappropriate, or suggestive use of language, and otherwise drawing attention to oneself rather than the action on the court or field. When Bill Walton, another basketball star turned broadcaster, says that "Tony Parker just made the worst pass in the history of Western civilization," what are we to think? That a measure of Western civilization is how well a basketball player passes? That Walton is simply showing off? Why not tell us what's going on instead than exaggerating a mistimed pass, Bill?

When Walton isn't decrying the decline of Western civilization, he often resorts to classic Walton-speak, such

as "Throw it down, big fella! Throw it down." This injunction is usually directed at a basketball team's big man, sending off vibrations of nostalgia in Walton, who at 6' 11" was a dominant player in his era. If you listen to Walton or Frazier long enough, you might wonder if their era ever went away. Is it "dumbing down" or mere self-involvement that makes them talk incessantly about their days of glory? Perhaps the point is that both see themselves as entertainers promoting a brand – in one case, Walton; in the other, Frazier.

The master of branding is John Madden, a celebrated football coach turned announcer. Madden is a highly astute commentator who can drive a listener to paroxysms of rage as his voice seems to rise uncontrollably, and he emits an onomatopoeic "BOOM" to approximate the collision of two bodies on the field. Madden resembles a once excellent actor who has slipped into a mannered performance. Still, he keeps his audience, as evidenced by the success of his annual best-selling, eponymous football video game.

Not surprisingly, Madden does more than his fair share of commercials. Playing to type, he booms out his message in a kind of sales overkill.

The increased "dumbing down" of sports announcing mirrors the approach on many of the commercials that accompany sporting events.

In fact, the increased "dumbing down" of sports announcing mirrors the approach on many of the television commercials that accompany sporting events. Take, for example, the spots to sell beer, which are filled with giddy pratfalls and testosterone. Not coincidentally, the target audience of both the sports broadcasters and advertisers is young males in the 21- to 34-year-old range.

And this is where much of the dumbing down originates. Sports-loving but highly distractible, often more intent on fantasy sports than the real thing, the prototypical 21-to-34-year-old male represents a likely, if fickle sports viewer. The growing affluence of this age group doesn't hurt either.

It may be fair to say that sports broadcasters cared less about the young male market back in my halcyon days (the 1950s) because we made less money. Or was it that sports viewers spanned a greater age range? Probably a bit of both. During my 20-something years, sports broadcasting carried forward the high standards of the best radio broadcasters, who were masters of diction, grammar, timbre and delivery. Some of these radio broadcasters – such as Red Barber, Mel Allen, Ernie Harwell, and Marty Glickman—moved seamlessly into television booths. There, they learned to talk less because, as Glickman liked to point out, viewers could see the action and only needed the commentators for sports nuances and background. A new generation of sports announcers—including Vin Scully in Los Angeles and Curt Gowdy in Boston—adhered to the same high standards that had motivated their predecessors.

Then along came "Dizzy" Dean. "The Diz," as he was commonly called, excelled at dumbing down long before it swamped broadcasting. A smalltown Arkansas boy, Dean became a brilliant pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals

(l.to r.) Dick Vitale, Rece Davis, Hubert Davis, Digger Phelps, Jay Bilas at ESPN's College Game Day 2007

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before injuries cut short his career and drove him into the broadcasting booth. His colorful language and frequent malapropisms found a receptive audience in St. Louis but didn't endear him to New Yorkers when he came there in 1950-51 to cover the Yankee games. He rebounded in 1953 as baseball's first national television broadcaster on ABC's (and later, CBS's) *Game of the Week*. In Diz's vernacular, batters "swang," runners "slud" or returned to their "respectable bases." Dean once explained a pitcher's secret to success as a case of "testicle fortitude."

Sometimes funny, sometimes embarrassing, Dean lasted with the *Game of the Week* for over a decade. When he left the airwaves in 1965, there was little evidence that his personal brand of dumbing down was about to become a fashion. In fact, many of the sports broadcasters who emerged over the next two decades were clearly in the Barber-Allen mold: Marv Albert (a Glickman protégé) in basketball, Bob Costas and Al Michaels in various sports and Mary Carillo in tennis are a few of the best. Women continued to have fewer opportunities, but some fine female broadcasters emerged, such as Leslie Visser, Kathrine Switzer, Donna De Varona and Gayle Gardner.

One sports broadcasting trend involved an ever-greater number of former athletes and coaches. Some were excellent; others less so. As "analysts" or "color commentators," their job was to provide insight and the inside scoop on teams and their players. They also brought name value to a broadcast. Spectators remembered a star like Bill Russell (as superb an announcer as he'd been an athlete) or Phil Rizzuto (see my earlier comments on dumbing down). Were

spectators more apt to tune in because an ex-star was in the booth? Probably not. Still, the stations were attracted to the glamour.

In recent decades, sports broadcasting has become a growth industry for former players and coaches. With the vast increase in sports programming, especially among cable stations, a myriad of opportunities has opened up to ex-athletes and coaches who make up in enthusiasm for what they may lack in voice training and other broadcast skills.

The key date for this new world of sports journalism was September 7, 1979, when ESPN went on the air as television's first 24-hour sports network.

ESPN stands for Entertainment and Sports Programming Network. And the staff of ESPN has never forgotten the potential of sports programming as entertainment. Not that its early roster was all that entertaining. In its first months of broadcasting, ESPN took what it could get: Australian Rules football, high-school soccer, ping- pong tournaments, a world Frisbee championship.

The network took some risks, such as broadcasting the entire National Football League draft (a long and tedious experience, even for NFL diehards). And as it edged into coverage of the major sporting events, it sought announcers who could add credibility to this cable neophyte. Dick Vitale was one of its most memorable catches – and a past-master at dumbing down.

A former college and professional basketball coach, Vitale is garrulous, knowledgeable, affected, corny, and LOUD. "GIMME THE ROCK, BABY," is a classic in Vitale's repertoire, the "rock" being the basketball and virtually any player being "baby." Grating? Oh yes. And yet as ESPN expanded its coverage of college basketball, he developed a large following. Never mind his somewhat toadyish preference for the Duke "Blue Devils" and their coach, Mike ("Coach K") Krzysewski.

Relentlessly inflicting his persona on viewers, Vitale calls to mind the biggest ego of them all – Howard Cosell. A larger-than-life posturer whose delivery brooked no argument, Cosell was a major force in sports broadcasting for almost three decades, beginning in the late 1950s. When he died in 1995, Richard Sandomir wrote in the *New York Times* that Cosell would be remembered as "the commentator-showman who helped transform the toys-and-games world of sports into a legitimate wing of journalism." Cosell knew he was smart and kept reminding us of it with often abrasive commentary and pomposity. Vitale also knows his sport and makes us aware of it – and of himself – with relentless chatter.

ESPN's Dick Vitale, a past-master at dumbing down, calls to mind the biggest ego of them all—Howard Cosell—who knew he was smart and kept reminding us of it with often abrasive commentary and pomposity.

"Vitale's shtick was immoderate in every sense, too loud, too wordy, too full of superlatives," writes Michael Freeman in *ESPN: The Uncensored History*. "His on-air persona sometimes overpowered his smart analysis, a criticism that would stick with him."

Freeman added that with his "frenzied alter ego," Vitale "walked a fine line between showman and serious analyst." What's unclear is whether ESPN acknowledged that fine line. Vitale remained its most prominent broadcaster of college basketball for more than two decades, entertaining some but irritating many. Whatever appeal he may have had for fans in the 1980s and '90s seems to have worn thin if one can go by the vast numbers of bloggers whose opinions I read in recent weeks. Many bloggers praised a Duke student (Yes, baaby, Duke!) who was able to mute Vitale's voice by blocking the front channels of his television set, leaving only crowd noise, public address announcements, and the sound of sneakers on hard wood.

Vitale set the tone for ESPN. Other of the network's sports broadcasters adopted his grating style without benefit of his knowledge. They raised the decibel level, traded witticisms, and parried with each other in performances that routinely strayed from the subject at hand. Freeman justified the approach, writing: "The humor and wisecracks hooked viewers, creating an intense fan following perhaps unprecedented in sports journalism." Unquestionably, ESPN's audience was growing. Pre- and post-game shows proliferated, giving more ex-athletes and coaches their chance to kibbitz, joust and talk over each other.

Greg Gumbel, a talented broadcaster who cut his eye teeth with ESPN, says: "I realize people are trying to make their mark and I realize the trend is, especially in sports, to be noisy, to be spectacular, to be loud, to be boisterous, to be outrageous. I have always suspected that is a cover-up for a lack of knowledge."

To be fair, many of ESPN's commentators are knowledgeable, speak in crisp, understandable sentences, and don't shout. The same might be said of local news broadcasters: some do their jobs without acting as if they are in a corny buddy movie. Still, the widespread "dumbing down" is disconcerting—whether on sports shows or the news.

During the 1990s, ESPN expanded into new ventures, including ESPN2, ESPN Classic, ESPNEWS, ESPN Radio Network, ESPN International, ESPN The Magazine, ESPN.com and ESPN Zone. With this expansion came an ever-more feverish pursuit of young male viewers.

The network faces a heated challenge from Fox, which started sports broadcasting in 1987 and quickly acquired rights to National Football League games and other major athletic events. Fox hired away several broadcasters from ESPN and taught the cable network a few things about "dumbing down." The titles of some Fox series are telling: There's "Fox's Best Damn Sports Show Period," "The Best 50 Damn Blunders in History," "The Best 50 Damn Unforgettable Moments." Have I made my damn point? Clearly, Fox has made its point: During an NFL conference pre-game show, there were "analysts" bellowing at each other, then erupting into laughter. No, this wasn't a course in anger management. Just business as usual. I was saddened to realize that the loudest of the group was Terry Bradshaw, a savvy broadcaster who'd formerly played at being a Southern country boy. His performance that day was like a parody of a parody.

A few pointers for the diehard fan

So, what options do you have if you're a diehard fan? Here are a few pointers:

1. If you insist on watching pre-game, half-time or post-game shows, turn on TNT's "Inside the NBA" with Charles

Barkley, Kenny Smith and Ernie Johnson. They're every bit as boisterous and outspoken as any of the culprits who regularly "dumb down" ESPN and Fox. But the key difference is in their wit and savvy. A bruiser during his basketball days, Barkley is a particular delight as he toys with his rough guy image, always with tongue firmly in cheek. You'll enjoy them.

2. Never judge an athlete by his or her response to an interviewer's boring, predictable questions. Ask yourself how you'd feel if an interviewer repeatedly asked "How do you feel?" – and then supplied the answer for you. ("As the first African-American coach to win a Super Bowl, how do you feel, proud or what?" is an all-too-typical "softball" question.)

3. When the camera switches ever so briefly to the sideline, listen carefully to the women reporters whose only job is to give a 30-second sound bite on one of the teams. Note in particular that they don't tend to bluster or speak in rhyme. And repeat to yourself, their day will come. Sportscasting has been an almost exclusively male preserve. But it doesn't have to be.

4. If you're suffering from insomnia and tune in to a call-in sports program, don't be manipulated by the announcer's trashing of the local team. He's just trying to get as many contentious calls as possible. It's a cynical way of appearing to be controversial when you have nothing else to say.

Or, better still, write to your favorite station and tell them it's time to bound and astound you by finding broadcasters with intelligence.

Greg Vitiello is a New York-based writer and editor whose books include *Eisenstaedt: Germany, Spoleto Viva, Twenty Seasons of Masterpiece Theatre* and *Joyce Images*. A life-long sports fan, he was curator of the National Track & Field Hall of Fame at the Armory (in Washington Heights) and writes frequently about various sports. He ran the New York City Marathon six times.

Why Can't You Watch Al Jazeera English?

Required viewing at the Pentagon and the State Department, it's otherwise virtually invisible. **By Dave Marash**

Know anyone who works at the Pentagon?

Ask them if they've seen Al Jazeera English, the new global television news channel. If they're anything like the people I've talked to, they'll tell you its pretty good. "Straight-ahead quality news reporting," one civilian employee at DOD gratifyingly said to me. That's what I say, too. Of course, I'm biased, being Al Jazeera English's Washington news anchor.

Dave Marash

As this is being written, the Pentagon, the State Department and Burlington, Vermont have the only three cable systems which carry AJE in the United States, which is a shame. But, I'm convinced this will change soon, because the two plausible reasons why cable-system operators and satellite networks have kept us from you, don't look very plausible any more.

All it took to refute them was going on the air November 15.

We started "broadcasting" via cable and satellite, mostly in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa to a potential audience of 88 million homes. And early returns indicate Al Jazeera English is watched in millions of homes every day.

In the United States, the only access for most viewers is via the Internet, and there, the first of the plausible excuses for cable-system operators shunning us is dissolving daily. Before launch, it seemed reasonable to doubt there was real viewer demand for another news channel. But daily logs suggest the www. aljazeera.com\english website is visited

more than a million times a week, and more than half of the visits are from the United States. So, yes, Comcast, there is hard evidence: an audience for high-quality international news does exist in the USA.

The product consistently proves the lie in their hysterical predictions: Al Jezeera English is not "terror TV," not anti-Semitic.

The second excuse for our effective cable and satellite distribution lockout was the brandished menace of right-wing agitation. A well-watered "grass-roots campaign" apparently convinced some cable-system operators they would be risking their reputations, not to mention taking on a lot of public criticism, if they offered us to their customers. The threat was buttressed by the blatant hostility of the Bush Administration, particularly former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's incessant attacks for allegedly lying and proselytizing for terrorists.

Then we went on the air. The reviews were terrific. Literally every reviewer who watched Al Jazeera English said they saw real news, taken seriously, done professionally, with, as advertised, a different perspective, or to be more accurate, a different set of points of view. Now the White House has nothing bad to say about our news. In fact, top spokesmen like the President's Tony Snow and the State department's Sean McCormack, have given us exclusive interviews. And within weeks of launch, one of our top stories was Rumsfeld's election-forced resignation, the credibility of his criticisms of Al Jazeera reduced commensurate to his credibility on more general issues from Iraq to Guantanamo.

From our other pre-launch adversaries, since launch: near silence. Because the product consistently proves the lie in their hysterical predictions: Al Jazeera English is not "terror TV," not anti-American, not anti-Semitic.

It is a news channel different from all its competitors. Different from the American news channels and network news divisions in this: they concentrate 80% of their news-gathering, 80% of their reporters, crews, producers, bureaus, and attention on North America and Western Europe. We concentrate 80% of our news resources and attention everywhere else.

We are different from our more global competitors like CNNi and BBC World because our news people are not mostly Americans or Brits, but are mostly citizens of the states, or at worst, the regions they report from. Going local in our staff gives us a tremendous advantage over foreign or "parachute" correspondents in authenticity, local knowledge, and above all, in sourcing.

And we are also different from all our news-channel competitors in two more definitive ways: first, our pace is slower, closer to what I like to call "news at the speed of thought." We do fewer stories in our bulletins, which allow us to do reports each half-hour of greater length, and, we hope, greater depth as well. And, as our division of news resources indicates, we look at the world from a variety of perspectives, but for the majority of our air time, Al Jazeera English reports the world from the bottom up, or to be more politically-geographical, from South to North.

With the rise of Al Jazeera, the Global Axis of Information has changed. A global information flow which had for centuries

been DC, Direct Current, flowing strictly North to South, from the enlightened salons and studios of Western Europe and for the last 60 years, overwhelmingly from North America, to the rest of the world is now AC, Alternating Current, with impulses, attitudes and analyses pulsing from every point of the compass; in our case, from Doha, London, Washington and Kuala Lumpur.

The information explosion that saturated "the First World," in CNN, Sky and their many competitors by the mid-90s had hardly touched the Al Jazeera audience, whose only sources of televised news were state-controlled and numbingly self-limited.

Think of the principle of parallax: People standing the same distance from a single object, separated along an arc, will see the object differently, simply because of where they are placed. Al Jazeera English, with its four news centers, presenting the news of the world as seen from their differing regional points of view is an exercise in perpetual parallax, an endless reenactment of world-ranging freedom of inquiry expressed in freedom of speech.

What makes this rotation of points of view work is the informed, well-executed reporting of stories from around the world. The aims here are transparency, accuracy and insight. These reports from the front are then refined with added context, analysis and discussion dominated by, but not limited to, the interests and logic of our home regions. Doha covers and represents the Middle East and Africa; London, Europe; Washington's responsibility is the Western hemisphere; while Kuala Lumpur has Asia and the Pacific. To each region, every story has its own meaning, reflected, we hope honestly and intelligently, in how each news center prioritizes and links stories as well as how they are reinterpreted around the clock.

This introduction of true multi-polarity to the world of English-language information exchange is far less revolutionary than the alternative charge Al Jazeera Arabic's news brought, in October 1996, to the Arabic-speaking, mostly Islamic world concentrated between Mauretania and Iraq.

The information explosion that saturated "the First World," in CNN, Sky and their many competitors by the mid-90s had hardly touched the Al Jazeera audience, whose only sources of televised news were state-controlled and numbingly self-limited. And beyond television, media and journalism, culturally, almost all information, all wisdom was to be trickled down from religious tradition and its authorities or from the often self-protective powers of autocratic rulers and their designated representatives. The Arab world had become a culture turned in upon itself, cut off from the social and scientific advances of the outside world, and stripped of everything that leads to independence of mind and spirit.

Enter Al Jazeera and its radically American-style news. By American style, I mean, unlike many European and Asian news outlets, not deriving from some religious, ideological or partisan point of view, but from a belief in the facts first, without fear or favor other

than to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Al Jazeera Arabic was about one thing, asking questions, often rude questions, but more often intelligent, important questions. Its news programs probed reality, challenged officialdom and illustrated popular self-empowerment. Its talk shows questioned everything. Participants questioned one another as well as the pronouncements, policies and personalities of what had been unexamined Arab power elite.

By serving Arab viewers as a single audience, by asking the whole Arabic-speaking world to engage with the same set of rigorously reported stories of the real world surrounding them, Al Jazeera recreated its audience. Now as rarely in history, Arabic speakers could unite around widely shared events, trends, ideas, perspectives, interests, which themselves all derived from honest looks at reality.

The Al Jazeera formula is simple: ambitious, accurate presentations of news, and as close to perfectly free analyses, discussions, even arguments about the news on talk shows. This is an approach I would call specifically not only American, but Jeffersonian. Democracy through information: multitudes of facts, carefully observed, then organized through analysis, endlessly and publicly articulated and re-considered from every social and political angle. That's Thomas Jefferson's formula for effective citizenship.

"The opinion and its opposite," Al Jazeera's slogan gave Jefferson a contemporary twist. But mortal combat between ideas X and Y wasn't the whole package. With the point/counterpoint, came some crucial, if unspoken, imperatives, civic and existential. Watching Al Jazeera meant accepting a daily dose of personal challenges: To think: What about these opinions? To decide: Which opinion works for me? To act: To validate your judgment through familial, community or political involvement, at the very least, to vote and to make voting a meaningful exercise. This long, glorious path in intellectual liberation can start with a single "shout-fest," or better, a single, arresting news report on some event, condition, or moment in human reality.

As Jefferson knew and loved, facts are democratic.

Over our first three months in office, Al Jazeera English already made potentially significant contributions to democratic debate, world-wide, if not in the proud democracy of the United States of America.

In the Middle East, Al Jazeera English correspondent Nour Odeh's courageous coverage of the near civil war between militants of Fatah and Hamas in Gaza was accurate and even-handed enough to bring death threats from both sides. It was also moving enough in its portrayal of the tragic impact of this warfare on civilian life in Gaza to prod regional powers like Egypt and Saudi Arabia to intervene and impel a "unity government" that immediately reduced the bloodshed on Palestinian streets.

In the Horn of Africa, Al Jazeera English's Mohammed Adow and Haru Mutasa offered consistent frontline coverage of the war in Somalia to oust the almost-government of the Islamic Courts Union. They beggared our competition, while we in Washington excelled our rivals in examining the important role American planning, financing and troops on the ground played in this conflict.

Even veteran diplomatic and military

analysts were stunned to hear on Al Jazeera English, confirmation from Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Michael Mullen that "a mixture of small numbers of US Army Special Operations troops, perhaps a few private military contractors and a regional ally, in this case the Ethiopian Army" offered a possible model for future American interventions abroad. "I consider this to be one of the arrows in our quiver," was the way the Navy's representative on the Joint Chiefs of Staff put it. This revelation was major news for anyone who pays attention to American foreign policy and military activity, but it was unnoticed everywhere else in the U.S. news media. This report also went unheard by almost all Americans, who might have wanted to consider and debate its implications.

In South America, Al Jazeera English correspondents Mariana Sanchez, Lucia Newman and Teresa Bo penetrated the barrios of San Salvador and Tegucigalpa, and the favelas of Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro to portray the criminal lives of children recruited into gangs or scrapping on their own. Stories of the unreported people of an underreported region; something new and different for the mix of news and discussion; the life's blood of democratic politics.

And then there are the largely ignored connections. The gangs of Central America were formed by the backwash of people driven to Los Angeles by the wars of the 1980s. Political unrest in Oaxaca, Mexico drives migrants to farms in Fresno, California.

Ignoring the world breeds only ignorance, and ignorance of the world and how its many peoples differently see it, is dangerous. If there is no other lesson for Americans from Iraq, let it be this: Ignorance kills.

Know anybody at your local cable company?

Ask them why Al Jazeera English, the news channel that has become not only an option but required viewing at the Pentagon and the State Department, and is growing a huge new audience most other places on earth, isn't available to you.

Dave Marash is the Washington anchor for Al Jazeera English, a global news channel. He served for 16 years as a correspondent for ABC News' *Nightline with Ted Koppel* and before that as anchor and correspondent in New York City and Washington, D.C. Marash has won major awards for his reporting from Zimbabwe, the Balkans, Nicaragua, Granada, the Netherlands and the U.S.

48 HOURS: The Birth of an Unconventional Magazine Show

Creating a new way to tell a story on television.

By Tom Flynn

It is not possible to hold a camera steady if it is on a shoulder and the cameraman is running full speed down a hospital hall following nurses and doctors who have just heard the urgent call, "Code Blue."

I hope that puts the lie to an often-asked question, "Did you guys do that shaky camera thing on purpose?" No. While *48 HOURS* is credited (or blamed) for inventing the shaking-camera look, it was a result of substance over style. We followed the action and sometimes that meant the camera shook. It was also the result of improvements in technology. The cameras were no longer tethered to bulky recorders and were portable the way they had never been before. The sound was recorded over radio hook-ups that were first used by *48 HOURS*(in fact invented by one of the sound techs for*48 HOURS*). Really, it was more like that old dog joke...it was because we could. No one had ever followed the action like that on TV before. They may have wanted to, they just couldn't. We could and we did.

It will be 20 years ago this fall that a small merry band of young but experienced CBS News hands started the weekly version of *48 HOURS* (We were mostly in our 30s, the veterans, but half the staff was in their 20s.) If you had asked any one of us to bet that the broadcast would live for two decades, not one would have put up personal money on that wager. Even a bet on two months would have taken some guts. In fact, we were on the air on Tuesday nights in the winter of 1987/88 then off in no time, only to return on Thursday nights against Bill Cosby, the number one rated show on television. Then we were off again, and finally proved ourselves to everyone in 1992 and haven't missed a show since. Some run, huh?

That broadcast deserved to be on the air. It was substantive, compelling and really good story-telling in an altogether

(l. to r.) The author, Dan Rather and producer Steve Glauber (back to camera) working on one of the first shows in *48 HOURS*.

Photo courtesy of Tom Flynn

new way. Not just shaky-camera new either.

The keys to the quality were: (1): We reported news that no one else in television did (or could do really). For the most part, we took social subjects for our hours. The prototype had been "*48 HOURS* on Crack Street." Those first years, we did reports on AIDS, the homeless, welfare, runaways, adoption, obesity in children, cocaine, spouse abuse, urban gangs, the rise of evangelicals (and fall of some) and race relations. But we also looked at subjects like college basketball, weddings, rodeos, Madison Avenue's world of advertising, the Vatican, the Olympics and the 24-hour auto race at LeMans (which included Leslie Stahl as a correspondent. I mean, how creative is that casting—a Stahl at an auto race?) And a fan favorite was an off-the-wall look inside the Westminster Dog Show that paired correspondents Charles Kuralt and Charlie Osgood in one hilarious broadcast. (Charles actually proved in that broadcast that you can read the phone book if you are good enough when he just read the names of some of the competitors from the guide, ending with, "Champion Boog-a-loo Down Broadway" followed by a perplexed look over his half glasses.)

It is safe to say that those were subjects that you did not see on the evening news or elsewhere for that matter. Especially in the depth that we could do with one hour on one subject.

Then (2): We created a new way to tell the story. We chose a subject and then found five or six aspects to it that would become separate and distinct yarns. In each, we would find and follow

a character, a person in America who was going through some sort of crisis that had to do with the subject. By arranging the stories like spokes in a wheel, we gave the viewer a well-rounded look at a different subject each week.

Then (3): We encouraged the talented people in our business to take flight. I mean the editors and camera people who in news are by and large relegated to pointing and shooting what the producer said to shoot, or cutting and pasting what the producer said to cut. Now, we asked them to become full partners in the process and that was one of the best ideas to come out of the early days.

For example, though he still to this day denies it, I once brought editor David Small a script for a piece. I knocked on his edit-room door and offered him the script filled with natural sound pops, sound bites and narration. He looked at the six or so pages and said, "Thanks for the road map." And then he closed the door, with finality.

It was sort of that way and we were the better for it. After all, the editors had hours and hours of tape that they knew intimately. They could and did pull some wonderful sound and pictures that yanked the viewers into our stories more than anything I had ever seen before on a news broadcast.

The cameramen and -women who did the shooting (and the sound people) were part of the field meetings before the shoots. They were fully read-in on the stories and when shooting real life, they had to be. They were on their own when rolling since there are no second chances at a shot. I remember once in Las Vegas, we were following a character who worked in a casino. She was checking out at the local grocery store and the cameraman saw, against the wall across the way, a young mother with a baby on her shoulder. The woman was mesmerized with the slot machine and seemed little interested in her infant. That shot said worlds about the effect of slot machines and the cameraman was right to make the move from the casino worker paying for her groceries to the other woman spending her money on a one-armed bandit with a baby to feed. A cameraman who did not know the story or had to listen to the producer for every direction would not have taken, even seen, that shot.

After the show got going, cameramen like Darrel Barton from Oklahoma kept coming up with newer and cleverer ways to put the viewer into the action. It was Darrel who started putting cameras on and inside cop cars to get a point-of-view shot of the action. I don't recall any of those early shooters who used a tri-pod—it was almost illegal.

Finally, there were our two guiding principals at *48 HOURS*: Howard Stringer and Dan Rather. Dan and Howard, then president of CBS News, had been looking for new opportunities for news magazines. They had put together that special two-hour broadcast earlier in 1987, "*48 HOURS* on Crack Street." It was a huge success both in ratings and in praise, winning a basketful of awards. That fall Howard told Dan, "this is the time." The CBS fall schedule wasn't strong as it is now and Stringer believed the opportunity for a weekly slot existed for us.

Stringer, now chairman of Sony Corp. and known as a pretty good businessman, was a devilishly creative producer. It was his concept to push a half-dozen producers and correspondents out the door to shoot one issue in a variety of aspects, all shot at the same time. The old

way, he noted, was to allow one producer and one correspondent several weeks to track a story. This was new and it brought the viewer a rare perspective on the subjects we reported.

Dan, of course, lent us instant credibility. Imagine being called by a producer and asked, "Can we spend two days and nights with you for a TV show?" We didn't say that. We said, "This is *48 HOURS* with Dan Rather...can we…" Viewers knew Dan; they didn't know the broadcast in those early days. Most often, people said yes because of Dan.

So off we went to Miami in mid-December 1987 for our first shoot. We thought that to be true to the concept, we would start a clock and all the shooting would begin then and stop 48 hours later. No shooting before or after. No file film, no graphics, nothing else. We would shoot everything in those two days. We did it. That first night, we shot out on Miami Beach, then in transition from a crime area to the posh and expensive place it is today. We shot an armed attack in one part and some young beautiful people in the upcoming part at a place called Club Nu. We shot drug patrols on the high sea, did an interview with resident writer James Michener about the city... the capital city of Latin America was his point and we profiled a young Cuban who had come to Miami in the Marial boat lift. He had set himself up in a sandwich shop and was doing well. So it wasn't just a pretty post card but the hour reflected the true Miami and brought the viewers a look behind the sunsets and past the pastels that they would not have seen anywhere else.

(We didn't stick to the strict-48 hour clock for long but we did shoot each element within two days and all were completed in a week. After all, we had a show each week and needed to bring one to market each week.)

And the viewers saw Miami in a way they would not have seen before on any news broadcast. That was clear during a shoot in Milwaukee. We were there to do an hour on welfare. One story, we called it the "Governor and Gloria," focused on an idea of then-governor Tommy Thompson's. He was unhappy with the whole workings of the welfare programs in the state. While this is old hat now, his ideas were cutting-edge then. He welcomed us to Wisconsin to record his efforts and was generous with access.

We followed Gloria, a single mother who had retired from the U.S. Army, who could not make ends meet and had to move to welfare. The governor's plan was to pay for training and full support while Gloria and other welfare recipients were in class. Then, with that training—in Gloria's case it was computer training—the welfare recipient could get a good-paying job and get off welfare. Good for Gloria; good for the taxpayers of Wisconsin. We did find a flaw and presented it to Governor Thompson in the back seat of his car (in true *48 HOURS* style) as it sped toward a news conference. Gloria wouldn't be able to make it off welfare, we showed him, if she had to pay for child care. The governor was surprised and later took our findings to his staff. That part of his welfare plan was changed as a result.

But the point about the way we shot came in the news conference. The *48 HOURS* cameraman followed the governor from the car to the room for the press conference. We shot Mr. Thompson chatting with the businessmen there and shaking hands and so on. The viewer could see that not only did he enjoy his job, but also that people liked and trusted him. They were personal moments,

usually unseen, that told you more about the character than a press conference. In that room, the local stations had set their cameras to face the podium (on tripods, all of them) and did not start shooting until the governor and the others stepped to the podium. They did get their sound bites for the news broadcasts that night. But they did not capture what went on in that room. We did.

That first year, we were rewarded with some astonishing notices and awards and an audience. But the folks in Hollywood still saw us as cannon fodder to fight for our lives against top-10 shows. Finally, we asked to be treated like a grown-up broadcast. "Allow us a good time slot," we begged, "and let us prove ourselves." We knew it was a chance. After all, there is some protection losing to the top shows, we had an excuse. If we showed mediocre numbers in a good slot, we'd be history.

A hurricane proved our point. When Hurricane Andrew hit south Florida in 1992, we headed out. With Dan on scene for us and our own style, we produced an hour in two days that was the number one rated show of the week. Two other shows that fall ranked #2 in all of television. Hollywood took note and left us on the air from that point on.

After that, *48 HOURS* took its viewers to war (the first Gulf War) and on the road to peace (with Gorbachev in Tiananmen Square, and to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians) and on summer vacations in the U.S. parks including Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon.

It was a most flexible way to tell a story. Follow the characters; follow the action; stay on the subject.

Tom Flynn, a writer and producer at CBS News for more than a quarter-century, was a founding member of *48 HOURS*, for which he served as anchor producer and writer for nine years. He has been nominated for 15 Emmy Awards and won six. He is co-author with his wife, Nancy Reardon, of the recently published *On Camera* (Focal Press).

REVIEW AND COMMENT

Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's Media

By Eric Klinenberg

Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, New York
(352 pages, $26.00)

By Bernard S. Redmont

Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis warned decades ago of "the curse of bigness." Today, the helmsmen of the big media conglomerates ignore this now classic caveat and plunge full speed ahead toward the rocks and shoals of disaster.

The residents of Minot, North Dakota, consider Clear Channel Communications a prime example of such a disaster—a fatal demonstration of the dangers of media consolidation. On Jan. 18, 2002, a toxic spill occurred outside of the town. A train derailment sent a cloud of poisonous gas over the area. But emergency services were unable to advise residents what to do and when to evacuate. All six of the area's non-religious commercial radio stations, owned and operated by Clear Channel, were ghost studios, empty of humans. Their playlists and disk jockeys originated several states away. The result was one death and over a thousand injuries.

With the apparent blessing of the Federal Communications Commission, Clear Channel owns 1,240 radio stations, 41 television stations, 246 foreign radio stations and more than 144,000 advertising displays (including billboards), and 655,000 displays in more than 60 countries around the world.

The extraordinary story of today's media concentration, the industry's co-optation by financial interests, and the dangers to the public, are described in chilling detail by a remarkable new book, *Fighting for Air*.

In it, sociologist Eric Klinenberg makes a reasoned but alarming call for the restoration of local journalism and why and how it is needed, to create informed and engaged communities.

It's quite an indictment.

Klinenberg puts it this way: "Concerned citizens may disagree over whether the media are biased (and, if they are, whether they tilt left or right); whether coverage of the war in Iraq is sanitized to promote its popularity or dramatized to undermine the campaign; or whether Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert offer more penetrating analysis than Tucker Carlson and Bill O'Reilly. But they share one widespread conviction: that the distinctively local voices, personalities, and sources of news and entertainment that used to animate radio, television, newspapers and alternative weeklies have been crushed by an onslaught of cookie-cutter content from conglomerates that is estranging Americans everywhere from the sights, sounds and cultural styles that once made their home towns feel special, like home."

Klinenberg is an associate professor of sociology at New York University. A scholar bolstered by copious research footnotes, he writes lucidly, having been published in *The New Yorker, Rolling Stone, The Nation* and *Slate*. His first book, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, caused a major stir, and *Fighting for Air* deserves even more attention.

While investigative reports often tend to accentuate the negative, Klinenberg refreshingly gives us inspiring accounts of citizens who are fighting back and in many cases winning the fight for a strong, independent, quality media. He reports how a new generation of media activists, an unexpected coalition of liberals and libertarians, conservatives and progressives are demanding and creating the local voices and quality content they need and merit.

The concentration of media ownership has coincided with a further decline in serious political news and civic information on local TV.

It seems incredible to anyone but broadcast professionals in the know that we now routinely get "news from nowhere" and even remote weather reports that sound local but aren't. The Sinclair Broadcast Group's cheerful meteorologist Vytas Reid delivers weather news in Buffalo, New York as if he were there, and at the very same time, he is in the picture in Flint, Michigan, Baltimore, Maryland, and Raleigh, North Carolina—all as the "local" weather man. By 2004, Sinclair owned and operated more U.S. TV stations than any other company—62 channels in 40 markets.

The concentration of media ownership has coincided with a further decline in serious political news and civic information available on local TV, and, as the book notes, "the rise of fake local news broadcasts and the increase of canned content such as infomercials and video news releases promoting commercial products or political propaganda."

As another example of media conglomerates, the Chicago-based Tribune Corporation operates in five markets where it owns both television stations and newspapers. Three of them are in the top three national markets, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. Tribune also owns radio, cable, magazine

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and other outlets.

Klinenberg finds that "Today an unprecedented number of Americans have taken up the cause of media reform, in hopes of reining in the local media outlets that slipped into the hands of distant corporate overseers. In the last decade ordinary people who—of all things to fight for—never thought it would be access to local news and culture, have begun to engage in activities as diverse as volunteering to assemble wireless networks, teaching classes on 'media literacy,' forming watchdog groups to monitor news and entertainment content, producing independent journalism about under-reported topics, and simply writing letters to express concern about proposed media policy regulations.... The project of challenging media conglomerates, demanding content that serves the public interest, and restoring more public and democratic control of the airwaves has become the fastest-growing bipartisan social movement in the United States."

It's a wake-up call for big media and the FCC. A decade ago, relaxed ownership caps in radio and television resulted in what Klinenberg calls "a feeding frenzy, with giant companies like Clear Channel, Viacom and Disney gobbling up small broadcasters and minority-owned stations while showing little interest in local content, whether it be news reporting or music programming." Broadcast companies also acquired $70 billion worth of digital spectrum—with which they planned to expand the number of radio and television stations they operated—for free.

But the public is no longer sitting back mutely. Conservatives like William Safire and Trent Lott now speak out against consolidation and FCC indifference to media monopoly. Sen. Ernest Hollings accuses the three Republican FCC commissioners of turning the FCC into "an instrument of corporate greed."

Members of both major parties report that, after the war in Iraq, media reform is the issue that their constituents cared about most, ahead of health programs, education, social justice and taxes. When the National Rifle Association and Common Cause join improbably in the same social movement for media reform, you know the issue is gripping the public.

Still, it hasn't won out. In the course of Klinenberg's five years of research, a number of journalists and broadcast personalities confided that they had long wanted to produce stories about how media consolidation has devastated their own profession, but could not because their editors or producers refused to cover the state of their own industry, or because they feared career repercussions. He says that people in the industry are all too aware that "a dwindling number of companies employ a dwindling number of reporters, editors, DJs, music programmers, and anchors, and the resulting job insecurity means that most media workers—from top national television news anchors to interns in small-town newspapers—are reluctant to speak out or write about how chains and conglomerates are quietly compromising the quality of American democratic and cultural life."

This is not simply a hard-hitting investigative work. It boldly goes further to make an advocacy case statement. The author does not entirely ignore big media's side of the argument, but bigness is more efficient, profitable and better for the

public, but this assertion isn't persuasive. Bigness is still a curse.

Nevertheless, the picture is not all dark, and history shows some bright spots. Klinenberg's book does not mention early media reformers like Newton Minow or Action for Children's Television, or the educational broadcasters, foundations and lawmakers whose efforts led to Public Broadcasting and NPR.

Overall, one would have hoped for more attention to television and less to the other media. But *Fighting for Air* gives us a comprehensive view of the way things are, and the way they ought to be.

Bernard S. Redmont is Dean Emeritus of Boston University College of Communication, and a former correspondent for CBS News and other media outlets. A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, he is also the author of *Risks Worth Taking: The Odyssey of a Foreign Correspondent*.

The Man Who Would Not Shut Up: The Rise of Bill O'Reilly

By Marvin Kitman

St. Martin's Press, New York
(318 pages, $25.95)

By Fritz Jacobi

Marvin Kitman, for 35 years the television critic of Long Island's *Newsday*, is one of the world's funniest writers. This reviewer, a former NBC publicist, has always chuckled and/or guffawed over Kitman's columns. So it comes as a real surprise that Kitman, a self-avowed liberal, tries to portray Bill O'Reilly, a famously cantankerous right-wing "newsman," in a favorable light.

"My liberal friends assure me that I am insane to have spent so many years on this book and still like O'Reilly," Kitman says. " Listening to him makes my friends blow gaskets. I have taken a lot of heat for not hating O'Reilly. I don't care. I am a TV critic and they're not."

What is best about *The Man Who Would Not Shut Up* is the author's characteristic and endearingly smart-ass phrase-making. "What they practiced in these media mud-wrestling contests is what I call yeller journalism," he writes. "O'Reilly is different from the others. He didn't scream as much. Prince Charming, he's not. He's evenly balanced—he has a chip on both shoulders."

What is cleverest about this book and what enables the author to claim that he still likes O'Reilly is that Kitman lets everybody else—former school

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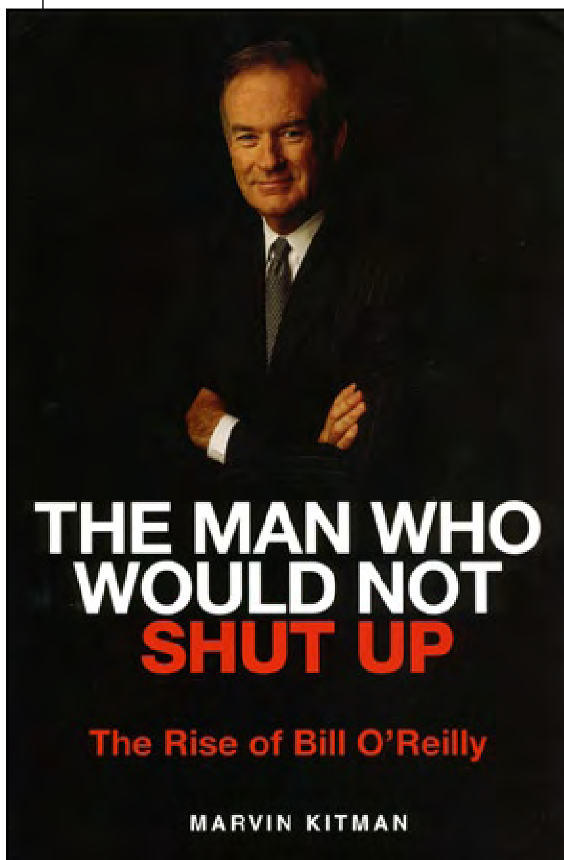
and college classmates, former fellow-employees and colleagues—pillory him. "He never threw a bad pass in his career," says a former high-school football teammate. "There were many that weren't caught, but it wasn't his fault. The receiver ran a wrong pattern, he didn't run fast enough, he didn't run slow enough." A former editor of the Boston University student newspaper noted that O'Reilly "strutted into our offices demanding a regular column. He's nine feet tall, and he starts telling me everything I'm doing is wrong. He could strut sitting behind a desk."

Former television station colleagues were virtually unanimous about O'Reilly. "In the collegial atmosphere of a typical television-station newsroom, he rubbed people the wrong way very often… There was a kind of never-ending chatter from Bill about ideas, stories, what was good, what wasn't good, what we should do, where we should go, how we should do it. He never stopped. And then when the decisions were made, he would never stop criticizing the decisions. He never shut up."

Other television colleagues said he was terribly smug, he felt he knew more than anybody else, he was universally hated, arrogant, mean-spirited, that he had "a charisma bypass." Marvin Kalb, with whom O'Reilly studied at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, said: "If he came upon research that contradicted his basic views, he would ignore it."

Kitman helpfully examines the relationship O'Reilly had with his father, a World War II veteran who hated his postwar job as an accountant. "No matter how well O'Reilly did on his way up the ladder, his father concentrated on what he didn't do," Kitman writes. "Every time Bill called with good news, his father perceived a potential weakness,'" an old friend said. And O'Reilly reported that "most of the time I didn't figure out where my father was coming from. I was just afraid of him."

The amount of research Kitman put into this work is mind-boggling: he conducted 29 interviews with O'Reilly over a three-year period. There are 41 pages of notes, index, bibliography and 125 sources who include the likes of Mike Wallace, Walter Cronkite, Reese Schonfeld, Gene Shalit, Morley Safer, John Cleese, Joan Konner, Geraldo Rivera, Av



Westin, Debby Norville, Peter Jennings, Alan Alda and Christopher Lehman-Haupt.

So it is a pity that this book has been so sloppily copy-edited. Quotation marks are often missing so the reader doesn't know who is talking, Governor Schwarzenegger's name is misspelled, "commandeered" is spelled "commandered," "weaselette" is spelled "weasellete"—and these are only a few examples of bad or non-existent copy-editing.

Admittedly O'Reilly is a success: his Nielsen numbers for FOX News are astronomical and consistently beat the competition, in particular the more balanced and responsible CNN. "No wonder [FOX News] is so popular in the United States," wrote Toronto *Globe & Mail* television critic John Doyle (O'Reilly isn't seen in Canada). "It is superbly entertaining in an old-fashioned, operatic way. It's camp, it's dramatic and as a viewer you are in a constant state of bless-my-soul excitement, because you're wondering just how angry the people playing journalists on FOX are going to get." Doyle's comments engendered a war between O'Reilly and Canada, focusing in particular on *The Globe & Mail*, which O'Reilly accused of being "on the far left."

While *The Man Who Would Not Shut Up* is enormously entertaining, Kitman lost me when he put O'Reilly in the same class as Edward R. Murrow, who was also opinionated, but courteously so. While Kitman does not claim that O'Reilly is the new Murrow, he says O'Reilly may be the prototype for the new journalism based on the Murrow model.

Sorry, Marvin, I simply do not believe that such an arrogant, abrasive, egomaniacal, self-reverential, pompous blow-hard can be mentioned in the same breath or even in the same sentence with Edward R. Murrow. But I could be prejudiced.

Fritz Jacobi is the editor of *Television Quarterly*. He was a senior writer in the NBC Press Department when the network's most obnoxious performers were Milton Berle and *Howdy Doody*'s creator. But that was more than a half-century ago.

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It's Good to be the King: The Seriously Funny Life of Mel Brooks

By James Robert Parish

John Wiley & Sons
(321 pages, $25.95)

By Earl Pomerantz

I met Mel Brooks once. It was in 1967, after he'd completed his first film, "The Producers," and before he made his second, "The Twelve Chairs." After persistent efforts to obtain an interview for the newspaper I was working for, Brooks finally relented. "Come over right away," he instructed. When I asked him why he'd changed his mind about seeing me, Brooks explained, "I used to be you."

I headed for his office, my heart pounding. In minutes, I'd be meeting one of my all-time comedy heroes, an irrepressible writer for the classic Sid Caesar variety series, *Your Show of Shows*, and the soaring spirit behind the cosmically inspired character, the Two Thousand Year-Old Man.

When I arrived, Brooks sat me down and immediately began talking:

"I was a drummer in the Mountains but I kept dropping the sticks. The comedian got sick and I went on. I came out and said 'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,' and a guy in the front said, 'Oy, English.'"

Brooks continued in this fashion for two hours, a hilarious performance for an audience of one. When it was over, he walked me to an elevator. As the doors were closing on an elevator packed with people, Brooks sent me off with these memorable parting words: "Next time you're in New York, don't call me." The last joke was on me.

I'm recounting this story to say that I actually met Mel Brooks. In James Robert Parish's well-researched but impersonal biography, there is little indication that the writer ever did.

Maybe I'm mistaken, but certain clues suggest doubts. The book's "Acknowledgements" section offers an extended list of thanks, which conspicuously exclude the principals

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in the story. Every chapter starts with a Brooksian pronouncement culled from previously published interviews. The "Bibliography" cites dozens of secondary sources. What I'm missing is a sense of any interaction between James Robert Parish and Mel Brooks. It may have happened, but I don't feel it.

Help me out here. Is this what biographies are like today—a cobbled-together collection of borrowed observations and lifted quotes? Where's the provocative thesis? Where's the newly unearthed information never previously revealed? Where's the worthy-of-its-subject writing style? Nothing in *It's Good to be the King* seems original or fresh. Even the book-jacket picture is a Photo-Shopped composite.

Facts, we've got plenty. Giving credit where it's due, gathering facts is a lot of work, and for readers who are unfamiliar with Brooks's story, *It's Good to be the King* generously delivers. The writer's efforts are certainly timesaving. It's like he's saying, "You want to know about Mel Brooks? No need to Google, I'll do it for you. For twenty-five ninety-five. Thirty ninety-nine in Canada."

The information is all there: The poverty-stricken Brooklyn boyhood, the early family tragedy, the stint in the army, the Big Break (*Your Show of Shows*), the theatrical flops (*Shinbone Alley, All American*), the sitcom hit (*Get Smart*), the breakthrough cult movie ("The Producers), the follow-ups, both worthy ("Young Frankenstein") and not so ("Spaceballs" and numerous others), all culminating in the spectacular Mother of all Comebacks ("The Producers," the musical).

Mel's personal life? You get that too. Brooks was the doted-upon baby of the family. His quicksilver nimble mind and "make 'em laugh" audacity were his ticket to acceptance. There was a troubled first marriage, which produced three children, and a happy second one, which yielded one. Show business dominates throughout. His wives were, respectively, a dancer and an actress. Nothing regular.

Scattered throughout are "insights," delivered primarily in Brooks's own words, concerning his unconscious motivations. I don't want to give away any surprises, but the words "short" and "Jew" repeatedly appear. As Brooks amplified in 1978, "To be Jewish, Brooklyn-born, fatherless, impoverished, and below average stature—no more classic recipe could be imagined for an American comedian. Or, one might suppose, an American suicide." I note at this point that I have just reproduced a quote from a book where the author is reproducing a quote from an interviewer who is quoting Mel Brooks. If you repeat it, it will make it a fifth-hand quote. Hardly the hoped-for intimacy of a spanking-new biography. More importantly, Mr. Parish makes no effort to explain why Brooks chose the funny path suggested by his background over the one where you commit suicide. The author apparently doesn't see that as his job as biographer. He simply gathers the quotes.

Errors and oddities: A television writer named John Boni is identified as John *Bonny*. A comedian I've always heard introduced as Charlie Callas is uncharacteristically referred to as *Charles* Callas. And most oddly, at least to me, is a "left hanging" the writer quotes from the Hollywood trade paper *Variety*

quoting courtroom transcripts from the Brooks divorce proceedings charging that "Brooks committed adultery with 'many women of various repute while in Hollywood.'" Was the charge true? Was it false? If the writer takes no further steps to either substantiate or disprove the accusation, what is it doing in the book?

Here's where the book especially misses for me. An argument can be made that every person in the public eye is crying for attention. By his own admission, Mel Brooks is the proverbial Poster Boy for "Look at me!" The question *It's Good to be the King* leaves unanswered is what places Mel Brooks among the neediest of the needy? And, more importantly, how does he turn that neediness into gold?

Drive? Everybody in show business has drive. Looks? Eh. Brooks looks like my Uncle Benny who became a minor celebrity letting pigeons sit on his shoulder and snatch peanuts out of his mouth. Was it performing talent? Not really. Brooks was a pilferer of earlier styles – borrowed burlesque bits and Al Jolson recreations. Although Brooks, not so secretly, believed he was a natural comedian, he was wrong. Sid Caesar was a natural comedian. Mel Brooks is an endearing "talker."

What's unique is the way his mind works. Fast. Basic. Down to earth. Has anyone ever spoken more eloquently in praise of the lowly nectarine? And is not his Two Thousand Year-Old Man's cave anthem: "Let 'em all go to hell except Cave 17!" the essence of nationalism in a nutshell? On occasion, Brooks can rise to poetic heights as, when referring to his songwriting proclivities, he confides, "Music draws the dust off my soul." As friend and collaborator Carl Reiner opined, "Mel hits the absolute truths." Anyone who's marveled at his comic virtuosity would enthusiastically agree.

Sure, Brooks revels as the self-proclaimed "lovely Rabelaisian vulgarian that I am, and admittedly, even his finest comedic efforts are uneven and disturbingly taste-challenged. But can anyone watch the "Blazing Saddles" – forgive me – "Farting Scene" and not be worn down and finally succumb? Come on. It's a classic!

We are told that in 2003, Brooks agreed to write an anecdotal memoir. Now, that would be a *book*! Unfortunately, this effort has yet to materialize. Until it does, the accumulated facts of *IIt's Good to be the King* will just have to suffice

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A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly,* Earl Pomerantz was executive producer of *The Cosby Show*. His comedy-writing credits include *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Cheers*. He has won two Emmy Awards, a Writers' Guild Award, a Humanitas Prize and a Cable Ace award.

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Crime Television

By Douglas Snauffer

Praeger, Westport, CT
(260 pages, $49.95)

The Best Seat in the House: How I Woke Up One Tuesday and Was Paralyzed for Life

By Allen Rucker

HarperCollins, New York
(230 pages, $24.95)

By Ron Simon

So much of television, prime-time and public-affairs, tries to provide answers and some comfort to terrible tragedies: Why do horrendous things happen to good and not-so-good people? Every night since the dawn of the medium, viewers have been confronted with some crime or medical tragedy and asked to ponder the consequences and deeper meanings. These two new, but very dissimilar books, *Crime Television* and *The Best Seat in the House*, try to bring perspective to the unthinkable, one from a safe mediated distance and the other, chillingly real.

Crime statistics have fluctuated over the years, but not the number of detective and police series on television. In *Crime Television* Douglas Snauffer brings insight to the genre that began with *Dragnet* and now continues with the forensic investigation of the *CSI* franchise. Usually authors concentrate on the private eye or the beat cop, but Snauffer embraces them both as crime solvers. The author is no academic or police sergeant, but a producer whose work has been featured on the Sci-Fi channel. From his experience in commercial television he knows how to tell a good story, and the book is chock full of breezy accounts of TV production.

Snauffer divides his work into decades and for each era he has been able to find a new voice connected with the programming, making the entire tome fresh and surprising. Every book on the history of television cites *Dragnet* for its groundbreaking just-the-facts realism, but Snauffer interviews writer Ken Kolb who began his career with Jack Webb, auteur and star of this defining police series. As every TV viewer knows, *Dragnet*

was based on the files of the Los Angeles police department, but Kolb points out that 85 per-cent of the real cases he read were "solved by the cops paying informers for what they knew." He admits that the grittiness of *Dragnet* was largely invented; money changing hands from cop to a bad guy does not make for a compelling or uplifting episode—so much of realistic details was fictionalized.

Snauffer is adept at locating the creative catalyst of the series that he documents. Peter Fischer, who learned the crime genre under the tutelage of William Link and Richard Levinson, creators of *Columbo*, gives Peter Falk much credit for the development of his iconic detective. Falk not only fretted over every line of dialogue, he also demanded the character's growth. Most of the signature trademarks came from Falk: "So the car, the dog, the raincoat, these are all things that . . .were Peter's idea." Some great characters were developed by happenstance. Roy Huggins and Steven Cannel needed to create a gumshoe quickly as a supporting player for their hit police series *Toma*, whose star, Tony Musante, hated the pace of television acting. Huggins chose a name randomly out of the Universal directory, Rockford, and Cannell broke an unstated rule of detective fiction by giving this character a family. In fact, he modeled Rockford's dad on his own. Rockford became more than a quick fix when James Garner agreed to the role. Their improvised detective series, *The Rockford Files*, lasted six successful years, while *Toma* disappeared after one season.

Beginning with *Law & Order*'s breakthrough in 1990, the last two decades of TV have been especially crime ridden. There have been so many series and franchises that Snauffer does not have the time to devote to the inner working and creative impulse of each series. The last third of the book seems a bit rushed, as Snauffer struggles to define the lasing impact of series still in production. A few programs that contributed to the recent wave of crime drama are notably missing, including *Twin Peaks* and *The Wire*. Snauffer pays no attention to the crimes committed on PBS, which have been primarily on such British imports as *Mystery!, The Singing Detective* and *Prime Suspect*, all of which had an impact on the Hollywood crime genre. Still, despite also lacking an over-all sociological framework to understand why every era in television history has been absorbed by fictional wrongdoing, *Crime Television* remains thoroughly entertaining because of its deep research and rich anecdotes.

Confronting real crimes is another matter, especially a crime of nature. From the outset, comedy writer Allen Rucker admits that being a victim of transverse myelitis, a rare neurological disorder that left him paralyzed from the waist down, is not like television at all: "Living with paralysis is not like the disease-of-the-week TV-movie in which the Robert Ulrich character, having wrestled with his demons to the ground for two commercial-filled hours, bravely gets off the floor and Frankenstein-like walks across the room. . ." Throughout his painfully honest and wryly humorous account of dealing with paralysis, Rucker rebukes those media images of disability that we all carry around in our heads.

The Best Seat in the House reveals how Rucker totally reevaluated his life after

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becoming a permanent wheelchair user. Before the illness, his writing career was at a crossroads, being over 50 in Hollywood is at best a tenuous position. He had started as a member of the groundbreaking, but decidedly fringe, video collective TVTV, but blazed his own path in commercial television by writing such specials as "The History of White People" with Martin Mull. Although he had a "long if spotty résumé" the humorist-philosopher Rucker understood that an illness in middle age has its advantages: "I was close enough to the ninth inning to call the game and retire to the barn."

But Rucker did not go off with a whimper; his playful but penetrating smarts give us a needed insight into this setback. Inspiring and hilarious, Rucker outlines the etiquette of dealing with the paralyzed. Above all, he reminds the reader in his Wheelchair Dos and Don'ts: "Don't shout in their ears. They are not deaf; they just can't walk. That is an important distinction." As importantly, Rucker asks that the public refrain from using words that make illness a death sentence; terms like "afflicted," "confined" and "crippled" make the handicapped feel much worse than they actually are. Rucker defines his new condition literally, as "not a curse or the pockmark of eternal damnation. It's just a physical change."

Now for the concrete justification that ties these two disparate books together. After his paralysis, Rucker eventually found his calling in crime . . . writing. Mobster *auteur* David Chase spotted Rucker's work on a documentary about actors who specialize in gangster roles and asked him to write the companion book to the hit series *The Sopranos*. By the late 90s, crime dramas were more than just television, the brand extended into books, games and new media. Rucker's work became the gold standard for tie-in books; so thoroughly researched that the reader was given enough information "to set up his own mob operation." Rucker went on to write the tongue-in-cheek *The Sopranos Family Cookbook*, which made it to the top of the *New York Times* miscellany best-seller list for many weeks. Rucker has updated an old adage for the 21st century: crime pays, especially in the latest forms of television merchandising.

Ron Simon has organized several retrospectives dealing with crime and medicine at The Museum of Television & Radio, where he serves as curator for both media. He also teaches at Columbia and New York Universities.

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Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader

Edited by Gary R. Edgerton and Brian G. Rose

The University of Kentucky Press (368 pages, $40.00)

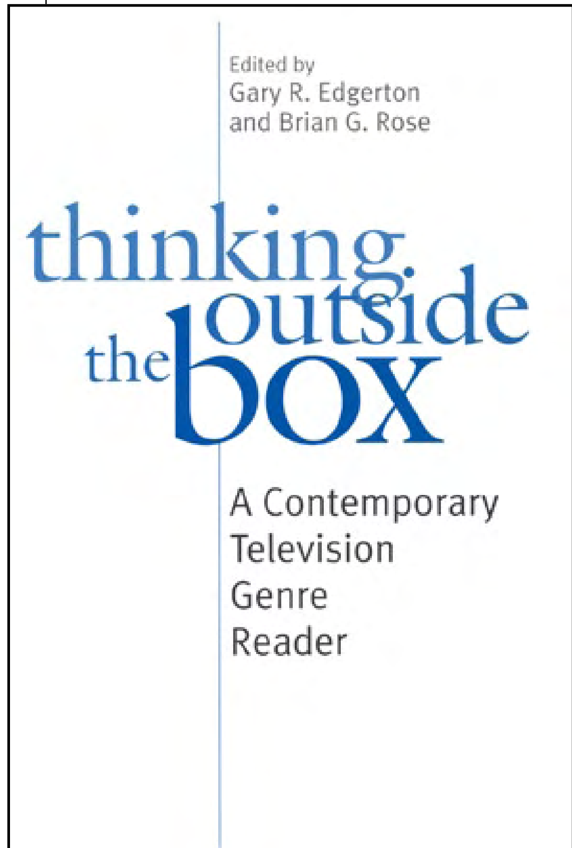
By John Cooper

The television landscape of the current century has some strong similarities to that same landscape of the previous century. There are significant differences, as well. Nowhere are the differences more evident than in the evolution of television genres. In *Thinking Outside the Box*, editors Gary Edgerton and Brian Rose have assembled a thoughtful and useful roadmap to navigating this evolving landscape.

The book is organized into four sections. Part One, The Contemporary Agenda, sets the stage for the importance of genre studies. Part Two, Traditional Genres in Transition, uses longitudinal analyses to explore the changes in sitcoms, soaps, children's television and the talk show. Part Three, New Directions in Television Genres, examines the "new' genres of reality television, the HBO formula, and niche programming. Finally, Part Four, Television Genres in Global Perspective, brings welcome insight to the increasingly important international aspects of genre scholarship. The book concludes with an epilogue from Rose in which he describes the past, present, and future of television genre study.

As a teacher of a media-history and criticism course, I find this book to be an important tool in framing genre study. As Edgerton and Rose state in their introduction, this "interpretive and detailed" analytical approach suits their "second stage" examination of generic evolution. The editors open the volume with a Horace Newcomb essay in which he revisits his "cultural forum" then outlines new directions of generic analysis.

The remaining two essays in Section One of the book build on the framework for genre study described by Newcomb.



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Mittell's essay suggests television is more a cultural practice than a cultural forum. Indeed, that practice can become a cultural exchange through his idea of generic study by thinking of genres as "discursive clusters." The section concludes with a detailed tour through current generic practices in drama programming and how those practices fit the corporate mission of the networks. Anderson's piece is predictive of not only shifts in programming practices (the half, or split-season), but the role new genres play in the reorganization of networks like the creation of the CW. Taken as a whole, this section is a splendid introduction for the new student to the fertile area of generic study.

If I were taking my students through a study of genres in flux, then Part Two of this book would provide me with four approaches as to how genres have evolved as a result of the cultural exchange mentioned above. The first essay is a trenchant observation on how children have become the real commodity of children's television. The newer technologies of cable and VCRs have helped to cement the relationship between advertisers and children by adding additional sources for commercial messages. In the second essay, the author suggests that although characterizations may have changes in the majority of sitcoms, class distinctions have remained constant over the years—perhaps to the detriment of the genre. The common claim made by many who teach generic analysis is that sitcoms of the current stripe show characters of all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and that is a step forward. However, according to the author, certain stereotypes of class persist counter to conventional thought. The essay about the re-invention of soaps describes how that venerable genre has survived through specialization (the supernatural soap, the teen angst soap) and an assist from cable. The authors (correctly) suggest that the proliferation of narrowcasting via cable has made the repeat showing of the soap's serial form practical. And, speaking of cable . . . the concluding essay in Part Two is an examination of how the talk show transcends genre. Again, because of the multiplicity of program outlets, talk has become an integral part of news, comedy, variety, etc.

The new developments in generic evolution make up Part Three. The first two essays describe first the recent emergence of reality, or unscripted, television and, next, the re-emergence of "unreal" television, or programming where fantasy is integral. Each is useful, but the real "Aha!" moments come in the third and fourth essays. Auster's examination of how HBO has transformed certain generic formulas is an incisive examination of how the economics and operational structure of a media outlet can influence content and programming practices. Finally, Edgerton and Nicholas's piece about genre "branding" is quite timely. As the concepts of "channels" and "content" continue to blur and change, branding as an operational practice by media institutions has grown in importance. The essay here is an appropriate call for more study regarding this new dynamic.

The final section of the book deals with genres from a global perspective. The essays study not only content, but the effect of international distribution

on generic texts. Television genres are now global "cultural practices" and the opportunities for insightful scholarship here are quite rich. As more and more university programs include a global component in their curricula, studies of this nature are increasingly important. *Thinking Outside the Box* is an important volume to those interested in furthering the scholarship of television genre studies. The ideas that Edgerton and Rose have assembled here deserve to be discussed again and again by media scholars and students.

John Cooper is a professor of Electronic Media and Film Studies at Eastern Michigan University. He has archived thousands of hours of television from the 1940s to the present.

REVIEW AND COMMENT - DVDs & FILM

Carnivàle: The Complete Seasons 1 and 2 DVD

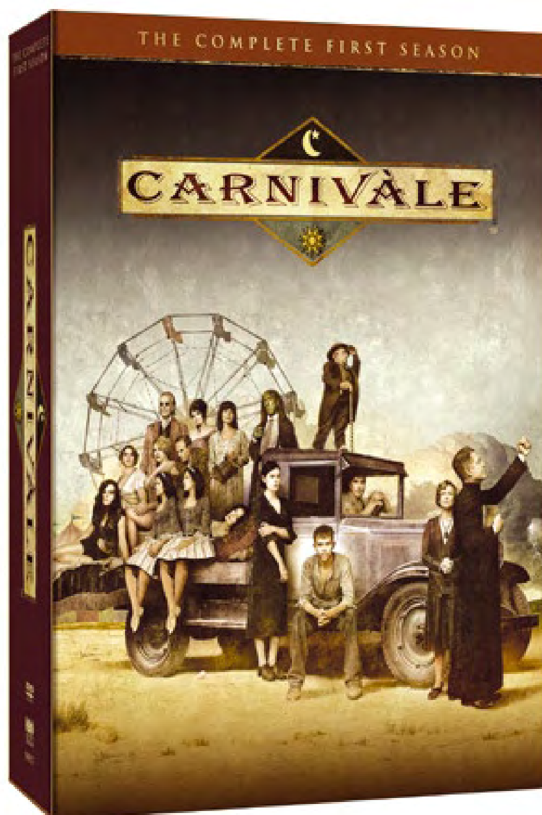
Daniel Knauf, creator and executive producer

HBO Films, 2006.
($199.92, $99.98 each)

By David Marc

In May, 2005, HBO issued a press release announcing its decision to end production of its original series, *Carnivàle*. HBO Entertainment president Carolyn Strauss is quoted as saying, "We feel the two seasons we had on the air told the story very well and we are proud of what everyone associated with the show has accomplished." Strauss's phrase, "told the story very well," was a curious choice of words to describe a drama whose narrative technique—especially its unencumbered ebb and flow across conventional boundaries dividing fiction and history—is more suggestive of a Borges short story or a Buñuel feature film than just about anything ever made for television (with the arguable exception of *Twin Peaks*). By standards usually applied to almost any kind of drama, not much had happened in *Carnivàle* during the course of its 22 one-hour episodes. No protagonist was DOA due to tragic flaw; no cosmic harmony achieved through discovery of the capacity to love; not even a moment of existential relief through shared human identity in the face of the void. The protocols of cancellation being what they are, it would have been unreasonable to expect Strauss to say, "We are canceling *Carnivàle* because most viewers couldn't figure out what the hell was going on and changed the channel." But that probably would have been closer to the truth.

If a defining feature of successful television drama is that it requires of its audience as little exposure as possible to anything but the contemporary popular culture of which it is a part, *Carnivàle* fails the test, two thumbs down. To



follow even the basic mechanics of what Strauss so gingerly calls "the story," a viewer would have to bring to the couch a working knowledge of such historical events as World War I, the Great Depression, the rise of American radio broadcasting, and the failure of the Crusades to reclaim Jerusalem for Christendom. And that's not all. A passing familiarity with Western literature and art from, let's say, the Bible to Todd Browning's *Freaks* (MGM, 1932), would help fill in a lot of the blanks. Since the cancellation, Daniel Knauf, *Carnivàle's auteur,* has returned to writing scripts for prime-time network series, including CW's *Supernatural* and FOX's *Standoff*. Despite his good work on these shows, one can only hope Knauf will have the chance—and the will— to make the mistakes of *Carnivàle* again.

Meanwhile, the two seasons of *Carnivàle* are available on DVD, either separately or in a single boxed set, and viewers who do not count "following the plot" as among the great rewards of watching TV are likely to enjoy it even more than those who think themselves capable of explaining what the hell is going on. In its best moments, and there are plenty, *Carnivàle* demands that the viewer stop stumbling among the contradictory stories of universe, species, tribe, and family that are delivered via mass media, the classroom, the dinner table and the dark night of the soul, and make some decisions about what is real and what is fantasy. It may be comfortable to sit in the vast middle between religious zealots preparing for Armageddon and the nonbelievers who mock them as nut cases, but making the commitment necessary to take either of those positions may be a nobler course than settling for a self that is merely the sum of confusions.

In a monologue that opens the series, Samson (Paul J.Anderson), the line boss of the carnival , warms up the audience (in the tent and on the couch) for the show it is about to witness: "Before the beginning, after the great war between Heaven and Hell, God created the Earth and gave dominion over it to the crafty ape he called man. And to each generation was born a creature of and a creature of darkness…" Samson warns that recognizing the difference between the two creatures, never easy, has become even more difficult with the advance of reason, which he calls "a false sun [that has] exploded over the Trinity," distracting man from the real mysteries of existence. Reason has given us the dazzling gadgets of technology, but if we accept these things as "miracles," we are worshipping the power of humans at the expense of searching for the divine. *Carnivàle* begs a question outside the American loop: are the pleasures of indoor plumbing, automobiles and MP3 players smokescreens that blind us to a struggle between good and evil that is taking place within us and about us at every moment of our lives? If so, the quest for material things might lead us astray from the moral purpose of our lives. We might even allow ourselves to be led to war or to tolerate mismanagement of our habitat in defense of a way of life so utterly materialistic as to discount the possibilities of divine punishment for

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such actions.

Whatever one's operative narrative, things are not going well for Ben Hawkins (Nick Stahl) when we encounter him in "New Canaan," the name of the premiere episode and his Oklahoma town. Out the window, the topsoil of the family farm is blowing away in a dust storm; across the room, his mother lies dying. When she gives up the ghost, he slings her body over his shoulder, picks up a shovel and begins to dig a burial hole a few feet outside the front door. Can things get worse? As if to response, a giant bulldozer, operated by an appropriately unfeeling driver, arrives to flatten the pathetic Hawkins shack by order of its new owner, First Persons Bank of New Canaan.

An Okie with neither land nor a social utopian vision to guide him to California, Hawkins is easily recruited by a traveling carnival that happens to be passing through the dust storm. A carnival from hell? Despite all appearances, not likely. Samson staves off the bulldozer and orders his crew to help Hawkins give mom a proper burial. (One need not be an English major to know what a good thing that is.) If fans of naturalistic storytelling think Hawkins a bit on the scrawny side to be chosen for work among the brawny roustabouts, they are, as usual, correct. Management, as Samson calls the disembodied guiding force of the traveling show, sees a rarer talent in Hawkins—and on Earth, as in Heaven, Management prevails. Over the next dozen episodes, Hawkins gradually reveals the potential of his contribution to the carnival: he heals the sick.

There is a parallel plot in *Carnivàle* that gets almost as much screen time in the 22-hour drama. In it, Brother Justin (Clancy Brown), introduced as a socially conscious Methodist minister at the podium of a respectable middle-class congregation, gradually reveal himself as an agent of Satan, possibly the Evil One himself. Brown, whose best known role is the voice of Mr. Krabs on Nickelodeon's *SpongeBob SquarePants*, gives an exceptional performance as a demonic mole who has invaded the body of the church in the 20th century to check out the use of radio broadcasting as a weapon against god in the war for human souls.

"The clock is ticking, brothers and sisters, counting down to Armageddon," Justin tells his loyal listeners. "The worm reveals himself in many guises across this once great land, from the intellectual elite cruelly indoctrinating our children with the savage blasphemy of Darwin, to the craven Hollywood pagans corrupting them in the darkness of the local Bijou; from the false prophets cowering behind our nation's pulpits to the vile parasites in our banks and boardrooms and the godless politicians growing fat on the miseries of their constituencies." Satan displays his show business savvy by quickly moving into radio. By contrast, the seedy carnival rolls across the country in rickety wooden wagons pulled by sputtering old trucks, at the mercy of corrupt sheriffs and redneck hooligans in every town they stop at.

Carnivàle's disappointed audience, though too small to force a third season, remains loyal. The show's official

website remains active two years after production ceased and unofficial sites and blogs keep its memory alive. The early cancellation of the show and the early cancellation of *Deadwood*, as well as HBO's indifference to the outcry for keeping *The Wire* in production after its stunning fifth season, are reminders that whether paid for by commercials or by viewer fees, television is a business that has not yet created a safe space for the development of television art.

David Marc is currently working on his sixth book, which concerns eros and cable. His most recent book, *Television in the Antenna Age* (Blackwell), was co-written with Robert J. Thompson.