

'Echoes of Spiro Agnew' by Walter Cronkite

CHANNELS

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

1982 JUNE/JULY

\$3.00

Are the Networks Dinosaurs?

BY LES BROWN

The Decline & Fall
of the RCA Empire

Bottom of the 9th
for 'Free TV' Sports

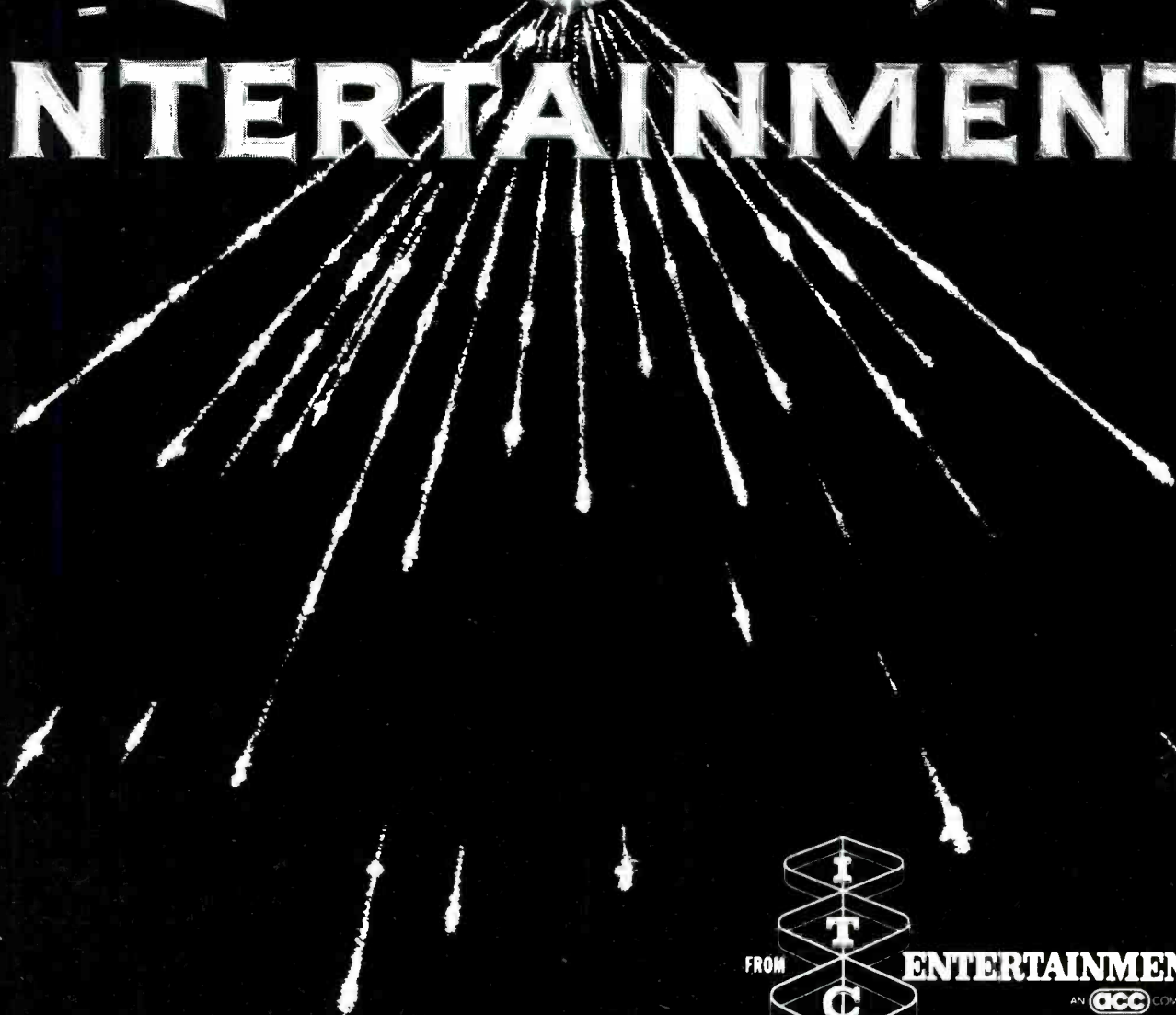
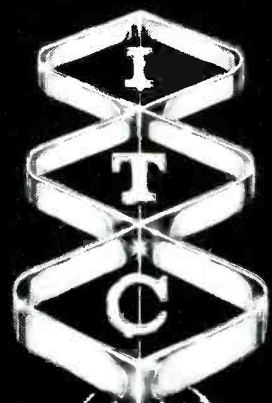
How 2-Way Cable
Can Guard Your Home

Life with a Backyard
Satellite Dish

The Electric
Library



AROUND THE CLOCK
ENTERTAINMENT



FROM  ENTERTAINMENT
AN  COMPANY

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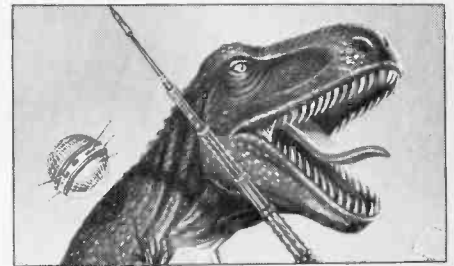
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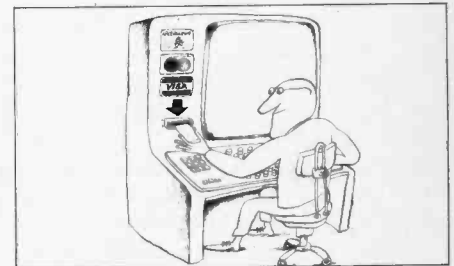
BY LES BROWN



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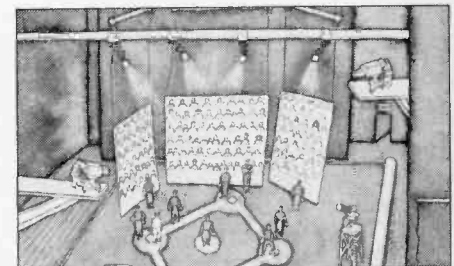
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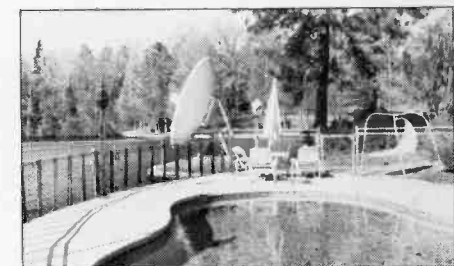
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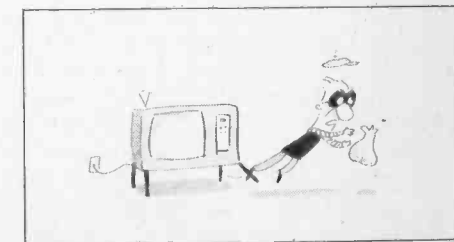
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the foot in the door for
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BY STEPHEN FENICHELL



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Subliminal 'Silliness'

To the Editor:

Was Walter Karp kidding? I thought perhaps he was pulling our leg in suggesting that network news organizations pander to the parties and politics of the nation ["Subliminal Politics in the Evening News," April/May].

Moving from left to right, he relegates CBS to being "virtually a party organ" of the Democrats, finds NBC "traditionally Republican," and places ABC "with Reagan and the Republican right." What about the others? Is PBS secretly socialist? Does CNN scheme to revive the Know Nothings? With proliferating news media, we soon shall need such a profusion of parties as to make the French blush.

Unhappily I concluded, however, that Mr. Karp might be serious. If so, his silly piece has maligned the integrity of three news organizations and libeled the journalists who work for them.

GEORGE WATSON
Vice President
ABC News
New York City

Network Politics

To the Editor:

That was quite an article Walter Karp wrote about the political biases of the networks. Surely we should never trust them again.

The possibility of individual integrity never is allowed by Karp, so I assume there is no chance that some of what he saw constituted the best efforts of honest men. And Karp never indicates that some correspondents and networks might have different strengths than others, so I assume they are all as equal as clones. Surely the different stress at CBS, for example, could not arise because that network thinks it devotes more time and talent to economic matters than do NBC and ABC — a reputa-

tion developed pre-Reagan.

I hope Mr. Karp will do another article explaining the conspiracy behind the late and lazy reporting on all three networks on the Watergate story. I am sure it was because all three news departments secretly backed Nixon; I just don't understand the motive.

PETER FARRELL
Television columnist
The Oregonian
Portland, Oregon

Let's Be Fair

To the Editor:

Re: "Is There a Fairness Doctrine in the House?" by Michael Schwarz [April/May].

It isn't the amount of space that the Reagan Administration gets on the evening news, it is the snide comment or sneer at the end by the anti-Reagan, pro-Democrat stand-uppers that slants television news, and it is slanted against, not for, the Administration.

Five minutes of Administration assertions can be negated by a reporter's innuendo. The current practice: "Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer, and without sneering, teach others to sneer" (Pope). Thus the Reagan Administration victory over inflation is ignored, although at the time of President Reagan's inauguration, inflation was listed as Public Enemy No. 1.

To those television reporters and others who worship at FDR's shrine, but who are unwilling to give Reagan one term to conquer the ills that have been amassing for fifty years, I would point out that inflation at the end of six years of the New Deal was 17.5 percent.

As for the Reagan Administration generating news, that was so under the Carter Administration also, although the news gave us little to cheer about.

TOM HAMBY
Publisher
Times Democrat
Flemingsburg, Kentucky

Valparaiso Reprise

To the Editor:

The reference to Valparaiso, Florida in your discussion of municipal ownership of cable systems ["The War between Cable and the Cities," April/May] is inaccurate and unfair to Warner Amex.

The Valparaiso franchise was awarded to TV Cable Company of Fort Walton Beach in 1966 and was acquired by Warner Amex in 1972 along with larger, adjacent cable systems in the Fort Walton Beach area. In February 1976, despite considerable improvements to the system made by Warner Amex, several members of the Valparaiso City Council determined the city should own and operate its cable system upon expiration of the existing ten-year franchise. In advising Warner Amex of its intention to take over the cable system, the city wrote to us stating: "We wish to express our appreciation for the services you have rendered over the past franchise years and wish to continue this amiable relationship."

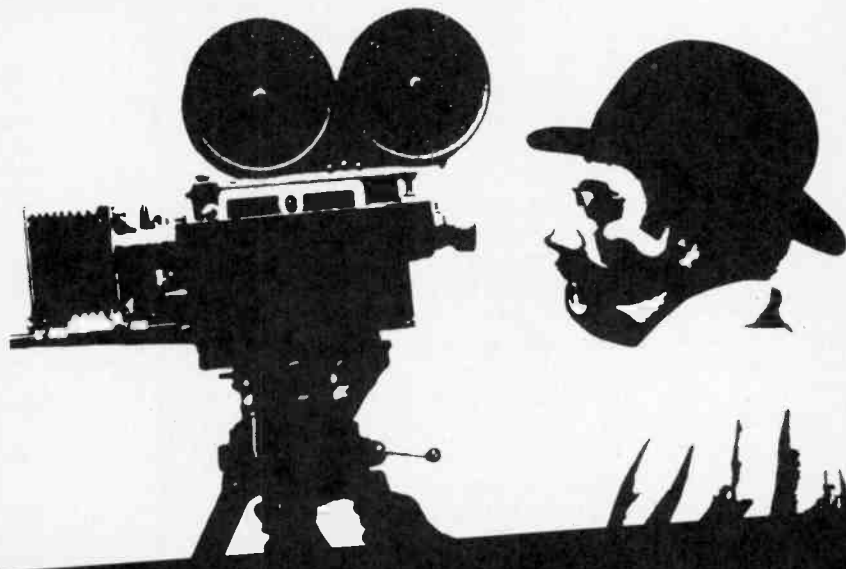
Members of the Florida cable industry as well as citizens of Valparaiso tried unsuccessfully to dissuade Valparaiso and expressed the view that municipal ownership was not in the best interests of the city's residents. The issue of municipal takeover was *not* submitted to public referendum, however, and the city proceeded, without the benefit of public bidding, to develop its own cable system.

Currently, the Valparaiso system is a small operation serving approximately 1,200 subscribers — compared to the 32,000 subscribers served by Warner Amex in neighboring Fort Walton Beach area systems.

Your readers would no doubt have been interested to know that the issue of municipal ownership of cable television arose in the community of Niceville, Florida in 1979. (Niceville is adjacent to Valparaiso, and Warner Amex operates the cable system there.) Niceville resi-

Illustration by Barry Shapiro

FLICKERS



FLICKERS

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Cheermeijer & Geismar

A COMIC-DRAMA OF MOVING PICTURES' EARLY YEARS-
WHEN FILMS WERE SILENT AND SHOWMEN BRASH.

STARRING BOB HOSKINS AND FRANCES DE LA TOUR
MOBIL MASTERPIECE THEATRE HOST: ALISTAIR COOKE
BEGINS SUNDAY MAY 23 AT 9PM CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS

Mobil

dents, unlike those in Valparaiso, were given a chance to vote, and municipal ownership was decisively *defeated*, by three to one. Immediately following the referendum, the Warner Amex Niceville franchise was renewed for fifteen years — which demonstrated Niceville's confidence in Warner Amex's system and our cable service.

RICHARD AURELIO
Senior Vice President,
Government Affairs
Warner Amex
New York City

The Tyranny of Demographics

To the Editor:

Do I note the specter of hypocrisy hovering over your April/May number? Can it be that the same writer who complains (in "The Public Eye") that "no broadcaster is especially anxious to reach the elderly and the indigent because they have little discretionary income and aren't sought by advertisers" also boasts (in "Editor's Note") of *Channels'* own "decidedly 'up-market' " readership?

DENNIS P. WATERS
Binghamton, New York

Noise Pollution

To the Editor:

For years, we've had a wonderful way to deal with those loud, irritating commercials you spoke of in your excellent article in the April/May issue ["Do Not Adjust Your Sets: Commercials Are Louder"]. It's a kind of underground invention we call a "blab-off," or, more casually and in moments of extreme urgency, just "the blab." You've probably seen these devices — just a wire attached to the back of the television, which stretches to wherever you're sitting, has a switch or button attached to the end, and is utilized whenever one wants to have a civilized, quiet few moments before the program continues and the sound goes back on.

I realize that, although we find it extremely effective — indeed necessary — to our enjoyment of television, the "blab-off" will probably remain underground, because it does tend to undermine the purpose of advertising.

But we don't care. We think it's a blessing. Who cares if the commercials are too loud? We can't even hear them!

SUZANNE TOMAN
New York City

We Are Not Alone

To the Editor:

I've noticed in your columns that you've adopted the not-entirely-admirable habit of spelling the word "videotext" without the final "t." You are not alone in this; some other fine publications, I'm sorry to say, do the same. I don't know what the theory is. Perhaps people want us to be reminded of "Kleenex." In any event, it sounds like a proprietary item, which it is not.

My informants tell me that spelling "videotext" without the "t" is the result of a spelling error by a typist at a conference in Europe several years ago. I wouldn't be surprised. In any event, I'm anxious for you to join with New York Zoetrope and Knowledge Industries Publications (one of the leading information suppliers in the videotext field) in our campaign to restore the "t" to "videotext." Every other kind of text has a "t." I don't think "videotext" should be deprived of it.

JAMES MONACO
Publisher
New York Zoetrope Inc.
New York City

(The dictionary is no help on this issue. *Videotex* is the term commonly used in the industry as generic for all forms of data display on television sets. *Videotext*, with the final "t," refers to systems that deliver text via cable or telephone, *teletext* to systems using broadcast airwaves. But Monaco has a point. *Videotext* is descriptive and *videotex* sounds like a brand name. — Ed.)

Taking Sides

To the Editor:

This time I'm writing not to take issue but to take sides: to say your "Living in a Nielsen Republic" [The Public Eye, April/May], is the best essay I've read on television since . . . I don't remember one that comes close.

BILL MOYERS
New York City

Liberals Know Best?

To the Editor:

Your editorial ["Living in a Nielsen Republic"] is a perfect example of what I call the "liberals know best" philosophy. You don't like the idea of the public deciding what it wants via the Nielsen ratings and would prefer a television diet that is "just and healthy."

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Everybody's talking about SIN

Leading national advertisers—Campbell's, Colgate, Johnson & Johnson and Kraft—have been on SIN for years.

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SIN covers 30 million tv homes coast to coast via satellite.

SIN is the only national medium programming specifically for 20 million Hispanics in the U.S.A.

SIN is the only U.S. tv network broadcasting all 52 World Cup soccer matches this summer, live!

What is SIN?

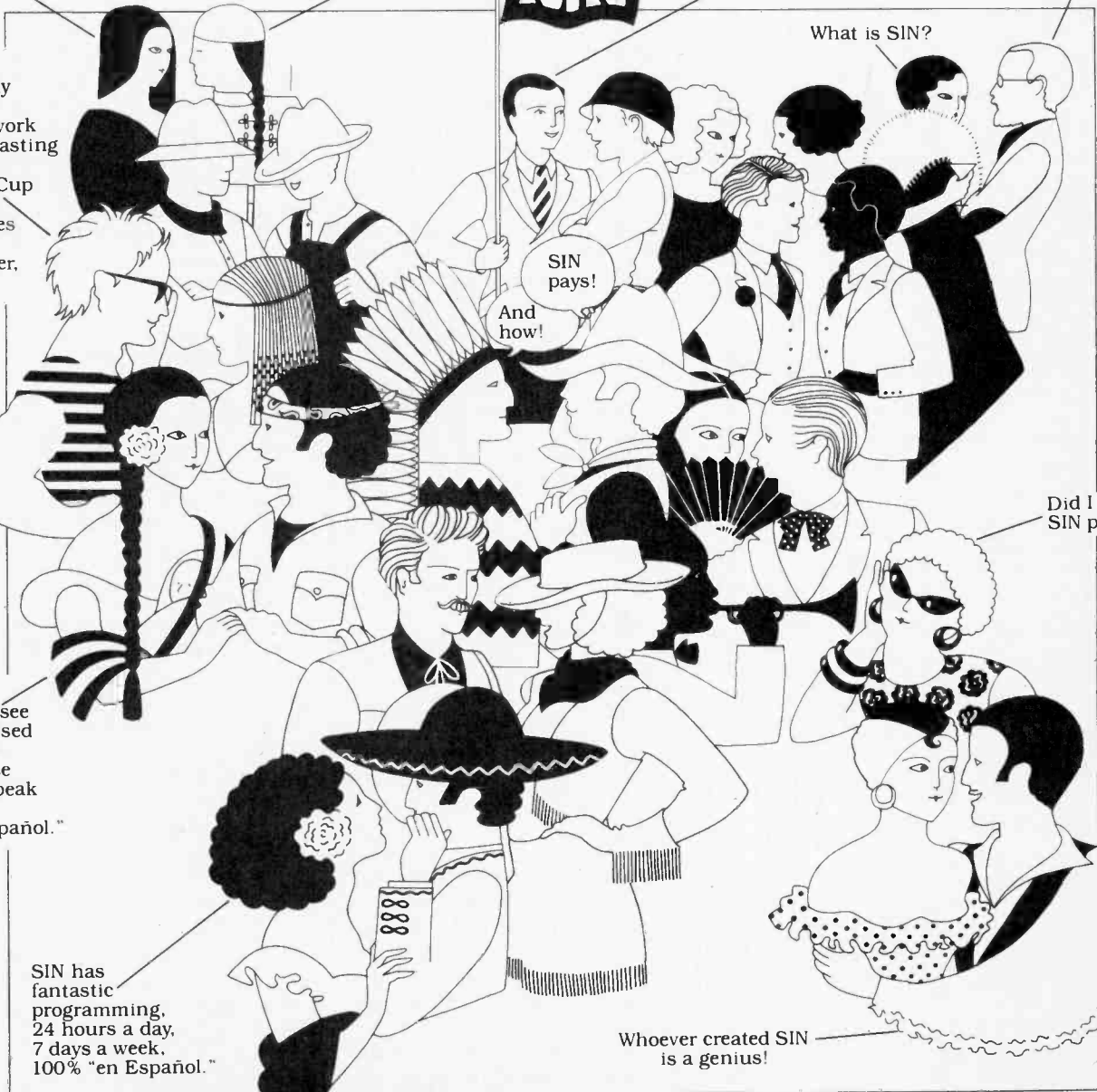
SIN pays!
And how!

Did I hear SIN pays?

I buy what I see advertised on SIN because they speak to me "en Español."

SIN has fantastic programming, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 100% "en Español."

Whoever created SIN is a genius!



DID YOU MISS ANY OF THESE IMPORTANT STORIES?

HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO CATCH A RERUN

PREMIERE ISSUE

- #1 APRIL-MAY 1981**
- 11 *The Birth of a Wired Nation, by Ralph Lee Smith
- 12 *Playing the New Television at Table Stakes, by Martin Koughan

- #2 JUNE-JULY 1981**
- 21 *The Twists in Two-Way Cable, by David Burnham
- 22 *What Harm to the Children, by Robert Coles

- #3 AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 1981**
- 31 *Singing the Salvador Blues, by Loren Jenkins
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- 51 *The State of the Revolution, by Martin Koughan
- 52 *Television and Our Private Lives, by Jeanne Betancourt

- #6 FEBRUARY-MARCH 1982**
- 61 *The Second American Revolution by Benjamin Barber
- 62 *A New World - How Television Will Affect • Hollywood • Money • Farming • The Disabled • Real Estate

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LETTERS

No doubt you would be happy to handle the decision-making on that question.

Somehow I prefer an excess of television trash to the idea of Big Brother Brown deciding what is "good for the public." I suspect that the Founding Fathers felt the same way about government-controlled newspapers when they put freedom of the press in the Bill of Rights. No doubt you find this freedom frustrating and would prefer a more "controlled" situation.

Let me close by paraphrasing Will Rogers with the idea that if fascism ever comes to the United States, it will come as anti-fascism.

STUART A. HOENIG
Tucson, Arizona

Who Was on First?

To the Editor:

I was interested to read the Cross-Currents piece in your February/March issue about New York City's Museum of Broadcasting. Would that we had such an excellent institution on this side of the Atlantic!

Granada Television is researching a series about television throughout the world. This is a major project about a force that affects us all — and we believe it is a story that has not yet been told in full.

The story of the very early days of television broadcasting is particularly complex, with claims from (at least) the Soviet Union, Great Britain, Germany, and the U.S.A. to have been first on the air.

We would be very pleased to hear from anyone who worked in experimental or broadcast television in the 1920s or 1930s, and indeed from viewers of those first television programs.

DAVID WASON
*Granada Television
 Manchester
 England*

Qube Squared

To the Editor:

"The Second American Revolution" by Benjamin Barber in the February/March issue of *Channels* raised interesting questions regarding the response of the telecommunications industry to the democratic process and the citizenry that depends on it.

But we take exception to his casual comment that Qube has failed to "exploit its two-way capability in the area of electronic town meetings." For example, he said that Qube is used

primarily as a "toy" for innocuous programming.

With a little research, Barber would have discovered that within months after Qube was introduced in Columbus, Ohio in 1977, Warner Amex conducted the world's first electronic two-way town meeting and, for the first time in the history of communications, allowed viewers to interact directly with elected officials via Qube on important issues affecting their daily lives, such as public-utilities services, street and highway maintenance, and municipal services.

Since then, Warner Amex has conducted electronic town meetings regularly for communities it serves in the Columbus area. Today, for instance, Qube Cable in Columbus programs three interactive town meetings a month involving various suburban locales. The officials in these towns can well attest to the efficiency of Qube in providing them ongoing, direct access with citizens.

We feel justifiably proud of the many interactive programs we have presented on Qube in the public interest.

LEO J. MURRAY
*Vice President, Public Affairs
 Warner Amex
 New York City*

One TV, One Vote

To the Editor:

Les Brown's "Guilty of Innocence" [February/March] states the most fundamental problem encountered by producers of media and marketing research. That is: How can we educate research users to understand how sample selection practically determines results? As a media researcher, I share Mr. Brown's concern about Qube-type interactions. After ten years of firsthand experience, I know that most media research users (cablecasters included) share a general misunderstanding of the importance of sample selection. In *How to Use (And Misuse) Statistics*, Gregory A. Kimble discusses the problem of sample bias: "... the important thing to understand about a biased sample is that the larger the sample the more certainly the data will point to a wrong conclusion."

Now that entertainers, using the guise of the newscaster, are designing instant research studies, there is an even smaller chance that the public will understand this critical point.

MONICA DIGNAM
*President
 Audience Profile Services Inc.
 Washington, D.C.*



**More than ever,
more than meets the eye.**

The nation's oldest broadcast company has changed its name.

Now we're Westinghouse Broadcasting and Cable, Inc.

A change that follows a series of dramatic steps that have moved the leader in broadcasting into the leadership position in the new technologies and cable programming.

We bought one of the largest cable systems in the world, and it has become Group W Cable.

We established Group W Satellite Communications.

Through that unit, we'll offer

cable viewers their choice of Satellite News Channels I and II. Plus The Disney Channel, created in joint venture with Walt Disney Productions. Plus The Nashville Network.

Group W continues to be the leader in broadcasting. With five VHF stations, one UHF station, seven AM radio stations and five FM radio stations.

Group W Productions is a success story of its own. Producing, among other hits, the successful "Hour Magazine" and the prime-time access smash,

"PM Magazine."

Via the new technologies, we'll provide America with a new choice in rewarding viewing. And via our cable systems, we'll be serving over 1.7 million subscribers in 580 communities in 33 states.

Group W.

The fast way to identify the fastest growing force in the growing world of electronic news, entertainment, information.



**WESTINGHOUSE
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CROSS CURRENTS

A Tale of Two Televisions

IN CONTRAST to the United States, the United Kingdom has acted to safeguard the long-term independence and economic stability of its public television system. Not long after the Reagan Administration slashed its funding for public broadcasting, advising the beggar-child to go out and learn self-sufficiency, Britain acted to give its cherished British Broadcasting Corporation a stake in the new technologies. So the American system enters the future threatened with extinction while its British counterpart has great expectations for decades to come.

What the British did was simply to turn over pay television to public television. The Home Office has authorized the BBC to operate two channels on a direct-broadcast satellite, starting in 1986. One channel would provide a subscription service modeled on America's Home Box Office, sending out movies, sports, and cultural events for a monthly fee; the other would carry foreign fare and reruns of BBC programs. If pay television should prove as lucrative in Britain as it is here, the BBC will have an important new source of income to support its programming. This would ease the economic burden on British citizens, who support the country's public broadcasting operations by buying licenses for their television sets.

Presumably the programs created for the pay channel eventually would find their way to the regular BBC broadcast channels, and the proceeds from the satellite enterprise would go toward the financial support of the two BBC television networks.

Ultimately this could benefit American public television — assuming it can find a way to stay on the air until 1986 and beyond. For typically, when the BBC shines, America's Public Broadcasting Service reflects it.

Meanwhile, American public television is left rattling its cup for private contributions, as the pay-television entrepreneurs court its audience.

The more public television is strapped for funds, the more it will depend on imported programming. As PBS president Lawrence K. Grossman once wryly remarked, "It's hard to imagine what American public television would be if the British didn't speak English."



Abbott Washburn

Banner Day

JUNE 30, 1982 is the day Abbott Washburn's term on the Federal Communications Commission expires. If that doesn't strike you as a red-letter event, consider: Mark Fowler has been busily announcing his plans to "unregulate" broadcasting, yet surprisingly few of his proposals have actually surfaced on the commission's agenda. FCC insiders attribute the inactivity to the fact that Fowler doesn't yet have the four solid votes he needs to push his initiatives through. Reagan has nominated FCC general counsel Stephen Sharp to succeed Washburn. Once Sharp is confirmed by the Senate, Fowler should have his majority, and the unregulation juggernaut can begin in earnest.

This Bud's for You, Eve

MOST PEOPLE — even those who have logged hundreds of hours watching sports on television — are unaware that they've never seen anyone on those beer commercials actually take a swig. We all think we see the actors piercing the foam, but in fact the beer only goes up to the mouth, never into it. Tasting beer is a taboo of long standing under the Television Code of the National Association of Broadcasters.

Budweiser Beer, therefore, has made history with a lively new commercial that shows young people actually quaffing the product. The spot was created expressly for MTV (Music Television), the rock network that began last November and immediately became one

of the hot cable services. Bud's opus for cable, which runs ninety seconds (or 50 percent longer than its familiar macho musicales for commercial television), may not startle MTV's viewers, but it has jolted the advertising fraternity.

It is perceived as the start of something significant. For cable does not answer to the Television Code, even though it is received on the same home screen as broadcast television. Cable has not yet forged its own code of good practices and perhaps never will. Because it is not licensed to serve the public interest as commercial television is, cable is free to present pornography and even to carry cigarette advertising — although the tobacco companies have not as yet been rushing to it. There are reports that liquor companies and manufacturers of contraceptives, barred from broadcast television by the code, have made overtures to cable but so far have been rebuffed. Cable is young and still in the process of franchising the cities; it has a public image to worry about, and that for the moment serves as regulation. But what happens when the new cable satellite networks, most of which are losing millions by the year, if not by the month, become desperate for advertising revenues? And what happens when cable operators begin living by one advertising standard, and broadcasters by another, more restrictive one, on the same television set?

This emerging double standard is powerful ammunition for the advocates of broadcast deregulation. What's fair for cable should be fair for broadcast television, shouldn't it? And so an innocent sip of beer takes on the symbolism of that innocent bite from an apple in the Garden of Eden.

Dream Come True

REMEMBER WHEN Tiny Tim married Miss Vicky on *The Tonight Show*? Well, now you, too, can make it legal with the world as your witness. *Kelly & Company*, a morning talk show on Detroit's WXYZ-TV, selected Judy Ziolkowski and Anthony Catania of Mount Clemens, Michigan from more than four hundred competing couples for its third annual "all-expense paid, televised wedding."

Catania, a potato-chip salesman, and Ziolkowski, a lab secretary, were chosen on the basis of their answer to the

FRANCE INTRODUCES A NEW TELEPHONE SYSTEM THAT ISN'T ALL TALK.



The general telephone system in France is now the carrier for a wide variety of non-speech services designed to bring together the versatility and intelligence of the computer with the ubiquity and convenience of the telephone. This major development—called the "Telematique Program"—represents an integrated and compatible range of products created by a cohesive research and development effort.

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

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

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

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

Intelmatique—the promotional service of the French Telecommunications Administration—is ready to answer your enquiries. For further information, write to: Intelmatique, 98 rue de Sèvres, 75007 Paris, France. Telex: (842) 203185, or telephone in the U.S.A.: (203) 834.11.43.

question, "In 100 words or less, why do you want to be married on television?" They wrote what can only be termed "romantically exuberant" lyrics to accompany the theme from *Romeo and Juliet*: "A time for us/a TV show/the love of two/who share with you/a dream come true."

Said the show's producer, Nancy Lenzen, they were "'just perfect' for Detroit's wedding of the year."

The knot was tied May 21, and true to the American daytime-television tradition, the show's sponsors showered the bride and groom with gifts: "the wedding wardrobe; the bride's choice of a complete set of china, crystal, and stainless flatware; wedding photography, and a Florida honeymoon" — and much, much more.

Tiny Tim never had it so good.



With Hits Like These...

A HIT SERIES on public television can be bittersweet. Witness the impressive achievement of *Sneak Previews*, the weekly movie-review program featuring Chicago critics Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel: In only three seasons, *Sneak Previews* has become public television's most popular half-hour program.

Good news for public television? Well, not exactly. When their PBS contract runs out this summer, Ebert and Siskel head for the greener pastures of commercial television. In September, a syndication deal with Chicago's WGN-TV will make a new version of their PBS hit available to commercial stations, now dubbed *Movie Views*. Ebert and Siskel will also produce occasional specials and regular two-minute film reviews for local news programs. (PBS plans to continue *Sneak Previews* with a new team of critics.)

Where else but on public television are the hits more likely to disappear than the flops?

When Bigger Isn't Better

THE RATINGS SYSTEM that rules television has often been criticized, but rarely as persuasively or constructively as in a recent study by a new nonprofit audience-measurement group. In preliminary research aimed at developing a new, "qualitative" ratings system, Television Audience Assessment Inc. of Cambridge, Massachusetts found that a gigantic audience is not necessarily an attentive one. And more to the point, a distracted audience is bound to miss many commercials. The researchers also discovered that involved, appreciative viewers are more likely to watch the ads. The study's revolutionary implication is that the quality of a television program may directly affect its success as an advertising vehicle.

Advertisers and broadcasters have long assumed that people watch a program because they like it, but the new evidence suggests they're wrong. Millions of the sets counted by Nielsen and Arbitron may in fact be playing to empty rooms. Fifty-six percent of the 1,600 viewers surveyed in Springfield, Illinois said they left the room at least once during a program, and 40 percent left repeatedly. Their inattentiveness reflects their low expectations: Seventy percent of viewers said they watch television primarily as "a way to pass the time," and only 26 percent planned their viewing in advance.

Even when viewers do stay in the room during a show, they're often distracted by other activities: Forty percent said they gave the program "some" or "hardly any" attention. Such findings are bound to give advertisers second thoughts about the impact their messages are having.

Although most people who took part in the survey said they were "satisfied" with television, the viewers most satisfied turned out to be teenagers and the elderly, who often watched just to pass the time. Ironically, the limited purchasing power of this audience has traditionally made it less important to advertisers than the high-spending eighteen-to-thirty-nine-year-olds. The most dissatisfied viewers? Those same eighteen-to-thirty-nine-year-olds.

The study's most encouraging finding

is that one-fifth of the programs watched were identified by "a substantial majority of their viewers as offering 'something more' than a way to pass the time." This may sound a paltry figure, but its implications are far from meager. For the study reports that these programs "are usually seen as providing more intellectual or emotional stimulation and generate greater attention, involvement, and attachment among viewers." People who like what they're watching, in other words, tend to stay in the room.

As a result, claims the study, "Commercials placed in programs to which viewers gave all their attention reached nearly 20 percent more of the audience than commercials in programs that commanded lower levels of attention."

Television Audience Assessment has more than an academic interest in these findings. It hopes to improve television, and reasons its cause will be well served by demonstrating the value of a qualitative ratings system to advertisers. With this in mind, the group began a new study last April of 3,000 people in Hartford, Connecticut and Kansas City, Missouri as part of an effort to develop a prototype system.

Not surprisingly, Television Audience Assessment has found the cable industry eager to support the development of qualitative ratings. Because they're out to improve television? Not entirely: With cable's audiences still puny compared to the networks', cable's attractiveness to advertisers can only be enhanced by changing the rules of the ratings game.

Creative Scrounging

"DISFUNDING" is a ridiculous word, but its meaning is serious: It may cause as much unemployment in the arts as high interest rates are causing in business. But the television industry can do something about it, and one commercial station is showing how.

WBZ-TV, the Group W station in Boston, has launched "You Gotta Have Arts," a campaign that is stirring consciences in the metropolitan area. The station has coaxed the likes of John Houseman and Lillian Gish to make public service announcements, which it airs during prime time. WBZ is donating its studios, manpower, equipment, and expertise to arts groups so they can produce their own ads, which it also urges other stations to air. WBZ has cospon-



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THE MUSEUM OF BROADCASTING

sored and run free spots for ballets by the Joffrey and Alvin Ailey troupes and concerts by the Boston Pops. To put its mouth where its money is, WBZ has also started a monthly arts magazine program and broadened its arts coverage in the evening news.

The campaign is inspiring generosity among the movers and shakers of the corporate sector. Polaroid and the New England Patriots football team have already signed on. With Westinghouse — the station's parent company — matching viewers' donations, WBZ-TV has raised \$160,000 so far, some of which it is sharing with the city to finance recreational programs for youngsters. To administer the rest, the station has established an independent, tax-exempt trust, The Fund for the Arts, and put together a board of advisors to select the arts groups qualified to benefit.

What's in it for WBZ is a nice little payoff in higher ratings and improved public relations. "It's better station promotion than a hard sell," says a spokesman.

The Marketplace Sleeps

CABLE TELEVISION was not invented in response to the consumers' clamor for hundreds of channels, a quartet of twenty-four-hour news services, or the privilege of interacting with remote computers by way of one's television set. No, cable television is largely a supply-side phenomenon, drive by the capital and enthusiasm of corporations convinced that a vast sleeping market could be roused by their efforts.

A new study of cable subscribers in Syracuse, soon to be published in the *Journal of Broadcasting*, suggests that although it's possible to rouse a market for cable television, keeping it awake may be a more difficult matter. Conducted by Vernone Sparkes, a professor at the Newhouse School of Public Communications, the survey — "Public Perceptions of and Reaction to Multi-channel Cable Television" — finds that Syracuse subscribers are giving the television revolution decidedly mixed reviews, and that the changes in viewing habits that were supposed to accompany cable have yet to occur.

Sparkes chose to study the Syracuse

area, which is served by both the Newhouse and Rogers cable companies, because its demographics resemble those of the nation as a whole (Syracuse is a favorite test market for advertisers), and because cable subscribers there receive a fairly standard diet of services: pay-movie channels, Cable News Network, ESPN, C-SPAN, the USA Network, Superstation WTBS, and local-origination channels.

Viewers were questioned first in 1979, when cable was new to the area, and then again in 1981, when penetration had climbed to 58 percent. While initially enthusiastic about cable, subscribers have grown disenchanted with the service as "they find that the reality is not as great as the perceived promise." According to Sparkes, the hype accompanying cable may have created unreasonable expectations. As Syracuse consumers see it, cable merely provides "more of the same."

The study discovered that cable television has had no significant impact on the way cable subscribers watch television: They don't watch more of it than they did before, they don't watch more selectively, and they don't watch with any more enthusiasm.

Sparkes emphasizes that even though "a considerable variety of programming was indeed available to subscribers in Syracuse during the time of the study... this variety, for whatever reason, is not being much exploited." One possible explanation: In Syracuse, as elsewhere, it's difficult to find out what programs are available. Respondents said that they found newspaper guides confusing, and *TV Guide* often inadequate or out of date. Sparkes suggests that when people learn how to navigate their way through all the channels of cable programming, they will better appreciate the medium.

What do these findings portend for the future of cable? Sparkes projects "at least a temporary leveling off of cable subscribers, and a replacement of some older (now 'disillusioned') subscribers with new ones." This is in fact what cable operators around the country are experiencing; they call it "churn." Sparkes questions whether the changes in viewing habits and attitudes necessary for cable to realize its potential will happen fast enough to satisfy the industry's need for rapid growth. "The evolution of the 'wired nation' and the 'information society' certainly does not seem to be linear." ■

Not Ready for Prime Time?

CBS Has Little to Gain by Keeping Its Promise to Bill Moyers

FOR ALL THE NEWS on American television, no network has seen fit to commit itself to a regular series of half-hour documentaries, a form that thrives in other countries. When Bill Moyers moved to CBS last November, prospects for such a program briefly seemed brighter. Moyers' main reason for returning to the network, he says, was an understanding he'd reached with Bill Leonard, then president of CBS News, about their mutual desire "to create a half-hour public affairs program — a commercial version, in effect, of *Bill Moyers' Journal* — that would be given a reasonable chance to prove itself when the time came."

That time still appears far off. Says Leonard's successor, Van Gordon Sauter, "We have no concrete plans in front of us. At this time [Moyers] has a full plate. We've talked, and we all feel he has a busy schedule now. A thirty-minute program isn't at the top of his list, and it's not at the top of our list, but at some time that will change."

At the top of CBS's list of priorities has been the strengthening of the evening news. Though Moyers has appeared as correspondent on several *CBS Reports* documentaries and is producing twenty one-hour programs for CBS Cable, his primary mission has been to deliver two-minute commentaries on the network news.

Does that mean Moyers' desire for his own half-hour program has waned in the face of new challenges? Moyers provided a carefully worded reply: "I am happily contributing to what I can. . . . Nonetheless, I am still committed to the kind of journalism that I practiced for ten years and that I will resurrect when the time comes, whenever the opportunity is available. I am hoping it will be here."

That is putting it delicately. Sources close to *The CBS Evening News* report that Moyers is increasingly dissatisfied with the commentary form, and his patience is wearing thin.

Publicly, Moyers is more politic: "The commentary form," he says, "is professionally challenging. . . . But for



one whose whole career in this business has been with the long form, I do not find it easy to try to communicate something of value to that audience with the respect for the ambiguity, complexity, and subtlety . . . inherent in the nature of events."

This should come as no surprise. Moyers had turned down an earlier CBS offer to become commentator when Eric Sevareid retired. Proud of a reputation for fairness, he worried that the two-minute form wouldn't allow him enough time to build a case for his arguments.

Why then, one wonders, did Moyers not only return to CBS, but also commit himself "for at least the first year" to the reshaping of the *Evening News*? Partly it was the lure of bigger audiences, but mainly it was his willingness to gamble for the prized half-hour: "I made the choice to come even though the thing dearest to my heart was, indeed, a tacit rather than actual commitment."

Moyers may have miscalculated, for the network has nothing to gain and much to lose by giving him what he wants. Moyers and the *Evening News* is a winning combination — and the *News*, says Sauter, is "our front page, where we concentrate our resources."

Under executive producer Howard Stringer, the program has become slicker and more swiftly paced, making Moyers indispensable to its new chemistry. Where the program's presentation is glossy and dazzling, his is straightforward. Where the program is urgent, he is calm and reflective.

In the absence of economic incentives, the only reason for CBS to make good on its commitment to Moyers is a journalistic one. For his greatest strength is not incisive analysis or compelling commentary. It is his exceptional ability to learn, with the cameras running, about the world around him. In his best programs — *The Fire Next Door*, *Anyplace But Here* — he is an explorer, digging for the details that tell stories, and through stories, larger truths. His credibility depends on his apparent lack of preconceptions, and on the honesty of his process of discovery. As Moyers learns, the viewer learns with him. If he expresses his own convictions at the end of a documentary, viewers might disagree, but not without understanding how he arrived at his conclusions.

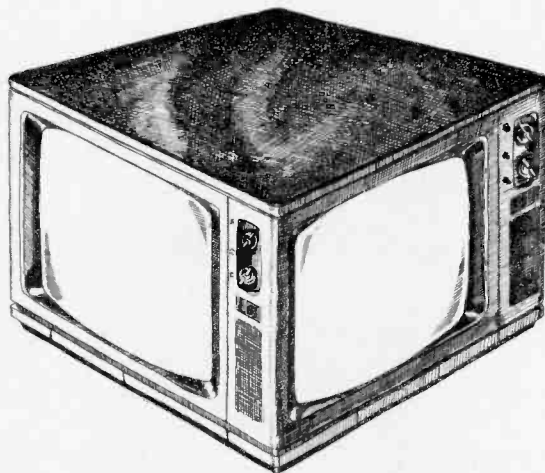
To cast Moyers as a pundit deprives him of these strengths, transforming him from a learner into a teacher. On the *Evening News*, he can only present audiences with conclusions he's reached privately, off-camera, where the evolution of his thinking can't be scrutinized.

It is possible that Moyers' credibility will eventually suffer from this new role. As he notes, "The danger in the two-minute commentary is that, naked of evidence, the commentator will appear biased rather than judicious and reasoned."

But he adds, "this is a peculiar time in the country. . . . Saul Bellow told me recently that it's possible no one can be heard just now who speaks at great length; it may be necessary, he said, to speak in short bursts of truth. I don't know about that, and I would worry about society if it were so for long. And I would worry for the kind of journalism I believe in. But let's see."

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TELEVISION NEWS likes reports from “trouble spots,” since where there’s trouble there are often weapons, and weapons, particularly ones in action, mean good footage. This predisposition to show news footage of weaponry tends to camouflage one of television journalism’s own trouble spots.

With defense budgets rising and fear of nuclear holocaust growing, news stories pay increasing attention to the military — its weapons, their cost, and their effectiveness. Often, the weapons aren’t what the Pentagon cracks them up to be: They cost more and do less than they’re supposed to. Yet reporters covering these stories have to rely on film or video tape of the weaponry that is almost invariably obtainable only through the Pentagon or the weapon’s manufacturers. This footage leaves something to be desired.

For example, the U.S. Army boasts that its new M-1 Abrams tank is the finest in the world. It wants to buy 7,000 of them for \$18 billion. Television news has reported that some Defense Department sources are skeptical of the Army’s new toy: The tank breaks down once every thirty-four miles or so, and consumes fuel at the unprecedented rate of four gallons a mile. But the news reports usually show the tank whizzing along an obstacle course with the agility of a dune buggy. Viewers may hear the lamentable performance figures, but they witness a very impressive piece of high-performance machinery.

The Army also likes to promote the M-1’s “survivability.” A journalist could report that the tank’s highly touted

When TV covers defense, the military lends a hand

by Andrew Cockburn

armor is vulnerable to Soviet anti-tank missiles. But the available footage of the tank under attack shows shells exploding against the hull, mines erupting underneath, and the tank emerging from smoke and flames unscathed. The picture, rather than the voice, may be what registers with the viewers.

These contradictions — between what a story is saying and what it’s actually showing — are difficult to avoid. When television crews film weapons, they’re assisted by the Pentagon’s legion of public-relations cadres. A CBS crew filming a practice launch of a Pershing missile in 1980 was cautioned beforehand that the film would be confiscated and classified if anything went wrong with the launch.

Such intervention is rare, however, for two reasons. First, few reporters are inclined to seek out faults — especially when they’re being escorted by helpful public-relations officers willing to put almost any piece of technology at their disposal. The offers are difficult to refuse: If you like, we’ll put a pilot in that \$35 million jet fighter and have it take off especially for you; or would you prefer us to have a few of those \$2 million tanks rumble past your tripod?

More important, intervention is generally unnecessary because most action footage for defense stories is not shot by

reporters and their camera crews; it comes from the armed services’ own extensive film libraries, or from the corporations that make the weapons. This kind of “news footage” amounts to nothing less than an industrial film. That by-now-familiar sequence of the M-1 skipping along at its testing ground, for example, comes from a promotional film produced by the tank’s manufacturer, the Chrysler Defense Corporation.

By making its own films, the military establishment exploits the natural inclination of a news medium in which visual impact has a higher priority than analysis. (The Air Force even maintains a wartime B-26 bomber with film cameras in its gun pods.) This footage, usually of very high quality, is stored at the Pentagon’s central film library at Norton Air Force Base, California, and is made available to the news or documentary filmmaker merely for the cost of processing.

Much of the time, however, there is no need to go to Norton. Defense contractors produce a great number of short films that show off their products, often using footage shot by the military. These industrial films are professionally produced, and corporations usually supply them to a news organization for little or no cost. That is why excerpts from such classics as *The Hot Performer* (the F-16 fighter, General Dynamics), or *No Points for Second Place* (F-14 fighter, Grumman), or the aforementioned Chrysler film, turn up so often on news programs.

In the end, of course, there is no substitute for honest journalism, otherwise known as hard work. But that takes time and money. “The Nuclear Battlefield,” the second episode of CBS’s acclaimed 1981 defense series, showed U.S. Army troops practicing for nuclear war in

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Europe. The men were cold and disgruntled; plans kept going wrong, and equipment kept breaking down — in other words, the business of soldiering was depicted the way it really is in most places most of the time. But to capture these moments, the director had to spend more than six weeks getting to know the relevant U.S. Army commands both in the States and in Europe, and then another six weeks following events on the ground with a camera crew.

Such dedication is the exception rather than the rule, which is why defense coverage on television will probably continue to be a better indication of the skills of the affable men and women in the military public-affairs offices than of the real condition of our military.

But strive as they may for ever more favorable coverage, these officers are unlikely to equal the propaganda coup scored by the U.S.S.R. with *We Defend the Soviet Union*, one of the most dishonest defense films ever made.

The phony film still plays on U.S. television

Produced by the Soviet Ministry of Defense, this tribute to that country's armed forces depicts an enormous military exercise in Western Russia. Although filmed in 1967, it still appears frequently on American television, since it is some of the most easily available dramatic footage on the Soviet military menace.

The high point of the great '67 war game was a dramatic crossing of the Dnieper river: As Soviet tanks drove underwater on the river bed, amphibious armored vehicles swam across. An impressive display — but the film doesn't show the "friendly" artillery doing such damage to the "enemy" river bank that the amphibious contingent could not get out of the water. The crews had to abandon ship and swim for shore. The underwater tanks performed more satisfactorily, but only because workmen had spent months, and millions of rubles, laying concrete furrows on the river bed to guide them across. One Soviet tank officer who participated in these events pointed out that this trick would be "absolutely impossible in wartime as the enemy would hardly allow you to spend four months splashing about in a river paving its bed." The same officer remarked that the film of the exercise was shown on television and in the cinema, "but only after substantial work had been put in by the Soviet censor."

It is worth remembering, however, that censorship is not solely the prerogative of the Soviet Ministry of Defense. ■

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The Myth of the Media's Political Power

Obsessed with image politics, TV misjudged the 1980 campaign

by Jeff Greenfield

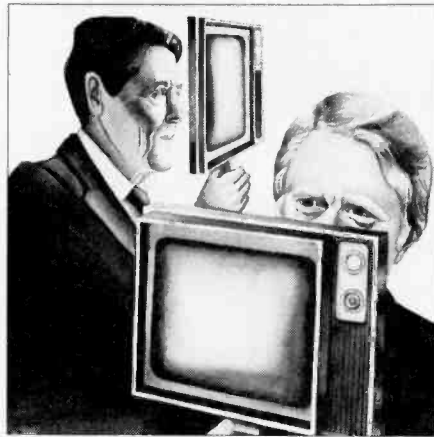
NO ARTICLE OF FAITH is more embedded in current conventional political wisdom than the conviction that the mass media are the most powerful — perhaps the *only* powerful — players on the Presidential political stage. What is most remarkable about this faith is that it survived the 1980 Presidential campaign. For that election demonstrated clearly and convincingly that the influences of American political life are still rooted in political realities affected only marginally by media coverage. To a great extent, the successes and failures of candidates as they battled for the White House cannot be explained by how they were covered, or by their commercials, the efforts of their media advisors, or the biases of the network news and major organs of print.

Across the political spectrum, and up and down the list of “basic rules” of political media coverage, myth after myth was shattered by what happened in 1980:

- The early triumphs of a candidate are supposed to create irresistible momentum. But in 1980, George Bush's campaign demonstrated that momentum means nothing when an opponent such as Ronald Reagan has a longstanding base of political support.

- Charisma is the key ingredient in the age of television. But in 1980, Ted Kennedy showed that a charismatic candidate who cannot explain what he means to do with the power of the Presidency faces an enormous obstacle.

- The gaffe and blunder are, in a mass-media age, supposed to be fatal to a candidate's chances. But Ronald Reagan demonstrated in 1980 that a candidate with a firm political base can commit at least as many disastrous gaffes and blunders as any other candidate, with no ill effects at all. From his



Today show appearance in November of 1979 — when, answering a question about the age of French President Giscard d'Estaing, Reagan replied, “Who?” — to his repeated misstatements of fact, Reagan proved himself as inept in the television give-and-take as any other candidate. But as a conservative folk hero for almost twenty years, he had a loyal constituency.

- Television gives the President enormous power to shape the news and command national attention. But 1980 demonstrated that a President whose underlying record is unappealing may actually hurt himself by commanding so much media attention. In September of 1980, President Carter won three-network television coverage of a press conference designed to steal center stage from the upcoming Reagan-Anderson debate. But the press conference was largely devoted to sharp, continuous challenges to Carter's increasingly personal attacks on Ronald Reagan. Indeed, the more the President's personality and record dominated the media coverage of the campaign, the worse Carter did.

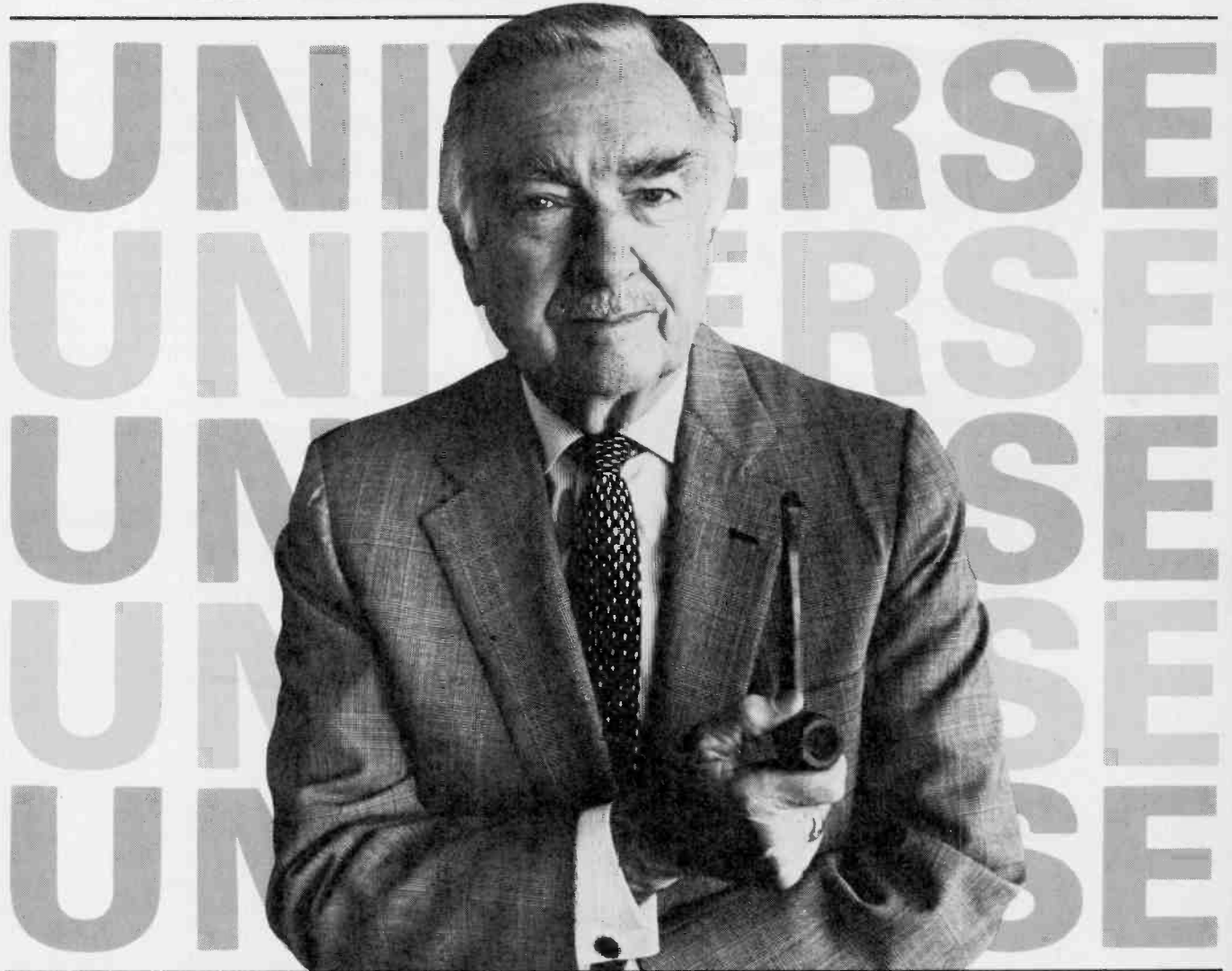
- The dark skills of media manipulators are supposed to be able to bend the passive viewer's sense of reality. But 1980 showed that fundamental issues *cannot* be appreciably altered by image-making, and that image makers risk great political damage in attempting

to move beyond what voters deeply feel to be real. The Carter campaign's attempt to make a vote for Reagan seem dangerous was motivated by Carter's own personal and political unpopularity. As the underlying political terrain made any sort of four-more-years campaign for the President unthinkable, all his campaigners had was the chance to win Carter's reelection by frightening the voter into rejecting Reagan. Hence the California man-and-woman-in-the-street commercials bemoaning Reagan's recklessness.

- Television is supposed to have ended the power of the political parties. But 1980 showed that a party's financial, organizational, and ideological strengths can still have a huge impact on the results. The Republican Party organizations raised eight times the funds of the Democratic ones. They put hundreds of thousands of people into the streets to get out the vote. The GOP commercials appealing directly to disaffected blue-collar Democrats were the most effective of 1980, arguing that to change the country, voters had to change the Congress as well as the White House. Moreover, the unity of the Republicans — in contrast to the Goldwater campaign of 1964 — made it far more difficult for the Democrats to argue successfully that Ronald Reagan was an extremist.

All this shows that the missed story of the 1980 campaign was the media's failure to understand the limits of political mechanics and stagecraft. By 1980, the politics-is-media-and-marketing mentality so dominated campaigns and journalists that ideas, policies, positions, and candidates' records came to be seen as nothing but tinsel. Covering Presidential campaigns, then, was like covering a marketing campaign: Don't report speeches in great detail; report the political strategy behind the speech. Don't examine the policy intentions or track record of a candidate; identify the group to which these policies were designed to appeal, and take a poll to see if the marketing strategy worked. And,

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There is irony in this powerful emphasis on "horse race" coverage: The media spent millions of dollars trying to find out who would win, and almost without exception missed the story completely. Most of the network and press polls predicted a down-to-the-wire race rather than the Reagan landslide.

An analysis of 1980 that ignored the mass media and focused on traditional "political" facts might well have predicted the outcome better than a dozen random-sampling polls. The persistence of double-digit inflation explains the desertion of Democratic middle-class voters better than a raised eyebrow by Walter Cronkite does. And Ronald Reagan's martial posture toward the Soviet Union, and his opposition to the ERA and freedom of choice on abortion, provide perfectly adequate explanations for the remarkable voting split between the sexes in 1980.

For all the campaign coverage, no one saw the landslide coming

Superficial television coverage of a Presidential campaign cannot be said to prevent citizens from exercising an intelligent choice about their vote. What it *does* do is force the choice into a private realm, in which each voter gropes for answers in the dark, unable to find a forum for debate and discussion in which he might join with fellow voters. In an age of mass media, television is in theory an ideal arena for such a debate: free, instantly accessible, bridging barriers of class and education. It is the *agora* of classic Greek democracy, the open market in which public discourse can take place before a national audience.

That television chose overwhelmingly to narrow its focus to the "horse race" question meant that voters were denied this kind of *agora*. This did not happen out of malicious intent or political ignorance, but because of the medium's instinctive preference for the visual images; because the key network news programs are forced by time constraints into twenty-two-minute formats; because of the conviction that the campaign happens where the candidates and their journalistic entourages are.

Politics is not a spectator sport; it touches us directly. As long as the media fail to recognize this, we will be cheated. ■

VIDEO STEPS OUT

by James Traub

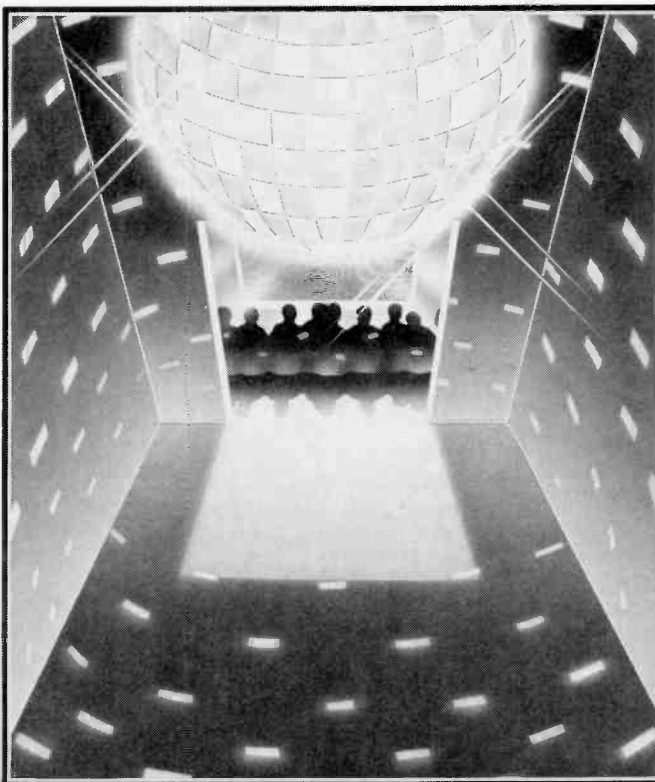
IN THE MUSIC ROOM of New York's venerable rock club, the Peppermint Lounge, the Cramps are shouting and screaming and cranking up the "reverb" until the walls tremble. But next door, in the club's video room, the scene is oddly subdued: Young people with hacked hair and improbable costumes are sitting in the darkness, Heinekens in hand, watching television, of all things. The room is long and low and dark, and would resemble a suburban basement rigged up as a den if it didn't have television sets almost everywhere — behind the bar or off in corners. Two sets of four monitors each have been mounted atop pillars just beneath the ceiling.

What the club denizens are watching feels like television, but it doesn't look like television: There are no programs. Vignettes flash across the screen, often involving rock groups. A man's angry face — it is punk star Ian Dury — fills the monitor as he sings, or rather insists, "Hit me with your rhythm stick! Hit me! Hit me!" A woman inspects her new plateware, in a parody of a television commercial, and then heaves plate after plate over her shoulder to smash on the floor. I've got a Heineken too, but I'm feeling downright alarmed. Television normally has less personality than I do, but on these screens I'm seeing anger and alienation and violence — all without the anodyne background of commercials and pretty hairdos. Shock — that's what it's about. Has television ever been shocking before?

Music video parodies television, but it's watched like television

Five or ten years ago, the owners of the Peppermint Lounge wouldn't have been caught dead with a television screen on the premises, much less fourteen of them. TV means dreck, after all, like TV dinners; a rock club is presumably the edge, the avant-garde.

But the punk mentality, or the New



Wave mentality, or the New Music mentality — the labels become obsolete soon after they're issued — celebrates the shlock of a previous generation, reveling in what once seemed acutely embarrassing. Bouffant hairdos are in; junk food is in; one band calls itself the Polyesters. Take that, culture mavens!

Sweetness and light do not figure very largely in the sensibility of contemporary music. Its aesthetic is one of violation, in which pain and violence are welcomed with a sort of machismo, and the same may be said for the video tapes that illustrate it. Violence is often referred to in the world of the new music as "energy." Paul Tschinkel, a video journalist, calls a Johnny Thunders concert that he taped "an incredibly exciting visual event," though he points out that Johnny Thunders is "a junkie" and behaves like one onstage.

Most video is not so much explicitly violent as subliminally disturbing and disorienting, like a threatening, confusing dream. One of the most famous pieces of music video is David Bowie's *Ashes to Ashes*, which illustrates a song about an astronaut whose endeavors suddenly seem pointless. The tape runs only a few minutes, but seems to go on

for hours, since it contains hundreds of vignettes (it reportedly cost \$120,000 to make), each one appearing and disappearing so swiftly that the effect is almost subconscious: Bowie as a clown on an orange and eerie landscape . . . Bowie with three black-clad figures . . . Bowie back in the landscape . . . Bowie in a huge padded cell . . . the four of them before a fire . . . Bowie in a wet suit in a kitchen, which blows up . . . Bowie as a clown in water . . . Bowie releasing a bird on shore . . . cut . . . cut . . . cut cut cut. The eye records the images, but the mind cannot move swiftly enough to make sense of them. I am amazed, bewildered, exhausted, though an impression remains — of confusion, haplessness, alienation. But this may only be my feeling towards my own experience of the tape.

Record companies commission most of such tapes (see box). Video artists with aesthetic aspirations consider this standard format confining, and usually edit in, or completely substitute, "conceptual" material — images coordinated with the music but not directly related to it. This is the kind of thing that freaks people out, and so offers scope to the imaginative talents, such as they are, of the video artist. On any given evening, video at the Peppermint Lounge features chorus lines, cartoons, airplanes, soldiers, as well as little dramatic sketches and bits of old movies and television. Conceptual material tends toward the cryptic, unsettling the viewer and implying, or stretching for, a connection at some subrational level.

THIS MAY NOT sound like everyone's idea of fun, but music video really serves as a comfortable refuge. "It's something to talk about," says Ed Steinberg, whose Soft Focus Inc. distributes tapes to clubs. "It's a distraction. Say the music is too loud, you can't talk, maybe you want to watch Clash on the video instead." A serious young lady at the Peppermint Lounge, a journalism student from the University of Rochester,

Illustration by Ian Wolpoff

James Traub is a contributing editor of Channels.

said that she found the video "very entertaining," and offered not even a blink to the nude female mud-wrestling sequence of Duran Duran's *Girls on Film*.

Still, there wasn't much pepper at the Peppermint Lounge. Anyone whose notion of a group television experience is a few men watching a sports event in a bar would be disappointed. The baseball game serves as a pretext for sociability, bringing men together to argue about whether or not the Dodgers are over the hill. Music video is watched, by and large, in silence.

Where the Peppermint Lounge is cozy and claustrophobic, the Ritz, at the eastern edge of New York's Greenwich Village, is vast and not a little bit menacing. Built along uniformly grandiose lines, it has an immense dance floor, an immense chandelier and, dominating all the action, an immense screen of fifteen feet by twenty-two.

Being inside the Ritz is like being inside the mouth of an electronic whale. The screen inevitably tends to be worshipped rather than watched, and the club keeps an extremely fancy set of equalizers and oscillators to control and modulate the video material. Practically anything is thrown up on that screen: scenes from B-movies and old, generally banal, television series, music video of all kinds, and vast amounts of "video wallpaper" — patterns and images that do not form any narrative sequence but are just nice to look at, especially in various narcotic states.

AT THE RITZ, as at other clubs, the need to use all this material creatively has inspired a completely new profession — the video jockey, or VJ, who supplies images that complement the music selected by the DJ. (Sometimes the VJ does all the programming, since music-video tapes come with the sound track included.) At a club like the Ritz, where the customer expects a visual bath as well as an aural one, the talents of the VJ are regarded with due mysticism.

"It takes a very strong psyche," says Gil Seldes, VJ at the Ritz. "You've got to *feel* the music." As he shouts these comments into my ear, Gil is juking and jiving behind a glowing panel of lights in the club's video booth, rhythmically pounding buttons — hitting us with his rhythm stick — to change the images on the giant screen from stripes to checks to stripes. Gil — he introduces himself as Gilbert Winchester Seldes — is a twenty-year-old Hampshire student getting "life experience" credit for his work. A former writer, Gil now thinks of himself as a sort of conductor of imagery. "I try," he says modestly, "to

Selling Music on Video Tape

Art form it may be, but music video is largely a creature of the music industry. In the mid-seventies, record companies realized that video tape might prove a far more effective means of promoting a band than a mere recording would be. The first video tape said to have significantly affected record sales — "Bohemian Rhapsody," a tape of a song by the group Queen — appeared in 1975. Three years passed before it occurred to anyone to set up a television screen in a club.

The club is now essentially another source of advertisement for such giant record companies as EMI, and smaller firms as well, which commission promotional ("promo") tapes. Companies normally lay out \$12,000 to \$15,000 for a three- or four-minute tape, some produced by avant-garde video artists. So many promo tapes are being made today that Warner Amex has been using them to program its all-music cable network, MTV.

Many of the tapes simply record the artists in performance, but there is a growing trend to use "conceptual" material — images coordinated with, but not directly connected to, the music. For instance, Merrill Aldighieri's tape of the Monochrome Set (made for a club library, not a record company) involves a succession of cryptic pictures accompanying a song: a torso with a vertical stitch down the center, a man with an eyedropper, shadowy figures crossing a landing. It's this sort of conceptual material that lets you know for sure that you're not watching everyday television.

be as profound as I can." As the DJ flips on "Space Is a Race," Gil puts a tape of meteors in the cassette recorder. Like many a video artist, Gil tends towards the cryptic connection. As the Readymades' "415 Music," with its refrain, "White boys, white noise," booms over the sound system, Gil plays some footage from *General Hospital* because, he explains, "That was about the whitest show there ever was. They even had a token black." Or at least that's what he seems to have said; though the club is almost empty (it is only midnight) the music is so loud that nothing else can be heard. I feel like my notes will be blotted out by the sound. But Gil is unfazed. He chats on the

phone while fiddling with the knobs.

He feels that people like his video show because it gives them "something to think about." I ask him to show me somebody thinking. Gil concedes that not many people come to the Ritz intent on thinking, and that those who do are likely to be thwarted by the volume of the music. Customers (especially singles) say they like the video just fine and are not at all put off by the size of the screen. "It's great," says one young man. "It's so . . . huge."

It's so huge, in fact, that the Ritz's screen does to the organs of sight what the tidal waves of music do to those of sound — paralyze them, and preclude all response. An individual is tiny, and the mega-video stuns him into submission. The club observed the first anniversary of the death of John Lennon with a night-long video tribute, huge Beatle faces looming right up against the screen. The place was jammed, but silent — not so much reverent as passive. The more exciting the clips of the Beatles became, the more subdued grew the crowd. The video built up to a wild climax with a performance of "You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog"; the crowd on screen was yelling and singing and swaying. In the Ritz, nobody sang and nobody danced.

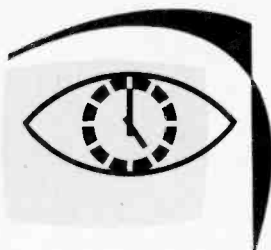
HERE'S the funny thing about music video: Though it's often a savage parody of the television world, and always a radical departure from the television style, people experience it just as they do television. Back in the eerie semi-darkness of the Peppermint Lounge, the clientele sits silently in a gleam of leather, staring up, slack-jawed, as images wash ceaselessly across the screen.

What's going on here? Music video is supposed to be about provocation and shock. Perhaps that's the problem — the aesthetic of the shock. The Dead Kennedys or Johnny Thunders — they're shocking. A giant screen blinking from stripes to checks to stripes accompanied by detonations of music — that's shocking. But a person can only get just so hyped up; then comes the stupor. Thus Quaaludes, the drug most resembling alcohol; and thus video, the little screen — or even the big screen — that lets you painlessly space out. Shock and stupor constitute the twin poles of the rock club experience. And video serves them both. Gaping at David Bowie's tape of a hundred cuts, the viewer is boggled and baffled. No response is possible; he might as well be watching reruns of *Father Knows Best*. Television is greater than we all thought. It even swallows its own rebellious children. ■

The State of the Nielsen Union

THE A. C. Nielsen Company has taken its annual look at our television habits. Among the findings, based on the data for 1981:

- We are watching more television than ever before: an average of six hours and forty-four minutes a day per household. Heaviest usage is in homes receiving pay cable (nearly sixty hours a week).
- Our favorite viewing night is Sunday; most of us tune in between 8:30 and 9 P.M. Friday night used to be lowest in television usage. Now, thanks to the popularity of *Dallas*, it ranks third for the week.
- The leading television watchers are women over fifty-five, who average close to forty hours a week in front of the set. Lightest viewers are female teenagers, averag-



ing only eighteen hours and nineteen minutes a week.

- Black households watch more television than non-black households, which is partly a reflection of the higher levels of unemployment among blacks.
- The most popular kind of television program is the situation comedy. The previous year, "general dramas" were rated highest.

A Video Solution to Rubik's Cube

FIRST there was the cube: solving its riddle befuddled — and addicted — millions. Then came the books: Promising to put the flustered out of their misery, paperback "solutions" topped the best-seller lists. And now, for those still puzzled (who happen to live in England), the solution to Rubik's Cube can be found on television, via Britain's Prestel

videotex service. Allan Thompson is a confirmed cube aficionado and a technician for a company called Metrotech, which supplies hardware to Prestel. He developed his own solution to the riddle, which he then painstakingly adapted for videotex. The complete step-by-step solution takes forty "frames," at a cost of half a penny each.

Dish Blight Hits Suburb

WILLIAM Bosch, a homeowner in the Cincinnati suburb of Amberley Village, ran into unexpected interference recently when he erected a satellite receiving dish beside his house. The town fathers slapped him with a \$25 fine, plus \$13 in court costs, for violating a local ordinance governing the placement of such high-technology "accessory structures."

The ordinance grew out of a 1981 planning-commission

study of the ramifications of new technology on zoning regulations. The commission concluded that the proliferation of satellite dishes could become a blight on the suburban landscape. The 1982 ordinance stipulates that dishes can only be erected where they cannot be seen from the street. "Aesthetics is a prime consideration," explained village administrator Bernard Boraten.

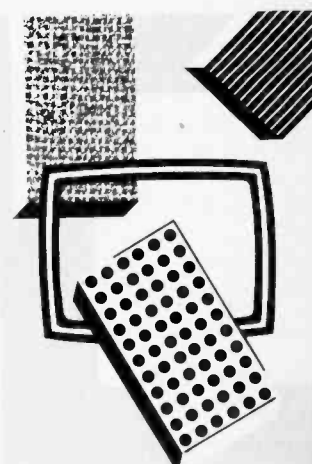
In addition to paying his fine, Bosch was forced to move the dish into his backyard.

Hoard That Tape

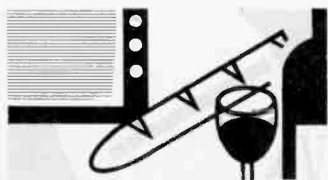
THE GLUT in new forms of television has produced a worldwide shortage of video tape, according to the International Television Association, a trade group for video professionals.

ITVA attributes the shortage to increased demand in both broadcasting and the home video market. Bob Mueller, Sony's vice president for American video communications, recently told *Advertising Age*, "This surprising growth of the video-tape market has exceeded our ability to increase production," adding that "the growth of the home video market in Europe has been amazing." Industry ob-

servers don't expect the shortage to ease any time soon; they do expect it to help keep video-tape prices high.



Raising Brows



THE QUALITY of television is a hot topic in France these days. It seems the programs are, well, too intellectual.

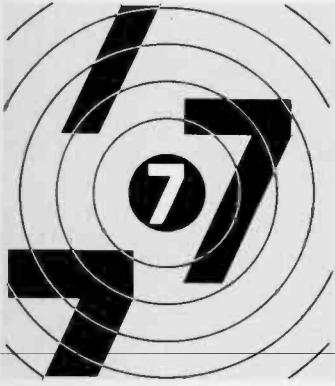
The Mitterand government has been making good on its

promise to upgrade programming on the three state-financed television networks. Many new shows have strong cultural, informational, and educational value.

While viewing hasn't dropped significantly, 93 per-

cent of the people polled in a recent *France-Soir* survey reported that they were dissatisfied with the enlightened fare.

French television may have to get worse before the French think it's better.



The Fair Channel

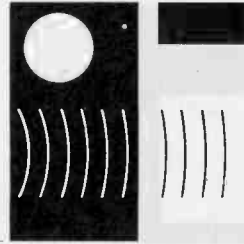
VISITORS to the 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville, Tennessee won't be needing guidebooks. Instead, they can turn to channel 7 for up-to-date information on the fair.

The Federal Communications Commission granted local broadcaster Edward Johnson and a firm called the International Expo Information Broadcasters an experimental VHF license for the duration of the fair, which runs through October.

The channel provides travel information and schedules of each day's events, broadcast in several languages. Besides assisting fairgoers, Johnson will also conduct research for the FCC on the uses of television during large special events.

Night Moves

IT TOOK competition from the new video technologies to make the networks more alert to the potential of that dead time in the middle of the night. In response to the challenge of the twenty-four-hour Cable News Network, CBS will soon be feeding out news from 2 to 6 A.M. But ABC has come up with a more ingenious scheme that will put it, and the affiliates that go along, into the pay-television business. The plan is to sell movies, just like HBO and the other pay services do, but by a different means. ABC's new Home View Network (HVN), scheduled to begin operation early next year, will



broadcast directly to home video-cassette recorders. This is how the plan works:

ABC sends out a scrambled signal during the wee hours. The subscriber's video recorder, preset to turn on automatically at 2 A.M., will tape the feed. A decoder attached to the VCR in the home unscrambles the picture. And the consumer has

the movies, in perpetuity, to watch at any convenient time. On top of a \$100 installation fee, the company intends to charge \$19.90 a month for eight new movies and a variety of cultural, children's, and other special programming. Households without VCRs can lease them through HVN for \$29.95 a month.

Stations must receive Federal Communications Commission approval to enter the pay-television field, but that seems fairly assured: FCC chairman Mark S. Fowler has already expressed enthusiasm for ABC's plan, calling it an "innovative" way for broadcasters to deal with their new competitors.

Reeducating Broadcasters

WITH EVERYTHING in his electronic environment changing so rapidly, the American broadcaster is faced with having to relearn his craft. Recognizing this, the ABC Television Affiliates Association has raised \$500,000 to endow a chair at the University of Missouri School of Journalism and de-

velop mid-career training courses for television executives; some courses run as long as two weeks, others for only a day or two. The chair is named for Leonard H. Goldenson, the entrepreneur who built the American Broadcasting Companies Inc. and still serves as its chairman. A search begins now for the professor who, in all probability, will be someone

from within the broadcast industry.

Says Martin Umansky, the Wichita broadcaster who conceived the idea, worked out the details with the university, and led the fund raising: "There's a need to recharge the people who are on the firing line day in and day out. We need to learn how our stations can get in on the new information technologies."

The Gimmick from the Black Lagoon

HOLLYWOOD kicked off the brief and not-really-all-that-golden-age-of-3-D movies in the fifties to stave off television's raid on the theater audience. Now that television finds itself similarly threatened by the new technologies, 3-D is beginning to look good again.

A Hollywood firm called 3D Video has developed a process to transfer 3-D

movies to video tape, allowing them to be shown, at last, on television. To get the third dimension at home, however, you still need a pair of those special cardboard spectacles with one blue and one red cellophane lens.

That didn't deter television viewers in New Orleans last February, when an independent UHF station, WGNO-TV, broadcast *The Revenge of the Creature* and clobbered its competition. All the

glasses 3D Video could get into local stores — 375,000 pairs — sold out in a matter of days.

Since *Creature's* big splash in New Orleans, 3D Video's business has been brisk. Stations broadcast such 3-D classics as *Bwana Devil* in twenty-eight markets ("from Honolulu to Philadelphia," according to 3D Video vice president Jack Fishman) during the May ratings sweeps. And juicier 3-D fare is selling

on pay television: *What the Swedish Butler Saw* made a respectable showing recently in Los Angeles on SelecTV.

This winter, you may be able to watch the Rose Bowl Parade in all its dimensions, with an added touch: 3D is negotiating with some station groups to televise the event, and plans to sell scratch-'n'-sniff, rose-scented glasses. "There aren't many more senses we could cover," says Fishman. ■



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Are the Networks

BY LES BROWN

It has been a neat, efficient sort of business: three networks pumping out programs and advertising for hundreds of local stations and millions of consumers. No running to the newsstand, no waiting in line for tickets. Bang — television is right there in the home, produced, distributed, and displayed instantaneously.

A beautiful business: three networks in one vast sellers' market, with a captive audience worth billions of dollars. The advertisers line up for air-time. Best damned selling tool ever devised.

But the heartbeat of commercial television has not been the advertising or the programming, it has been the audience: people seeking diversion, or a mental anesthetic, or to be in touch somehow with the outside world; people who habitually go out into the neon-lit electronic village where CBS, ABC, and NBC are the main streets. Unlike all other entertainment and informational media — books, movies, concerts, plays — television has not had to generate its audience. The viewers have simply been there, ahead of the programs, in predictable numbers every hour of the day, growing to a hundred million people at the peak of an evening. The networks' main challenge has been in dividing up the audience, since the network that gets the largest piece of the captive market can charge the most for advertising time. One year NBC ran a poor third and still made record profits. Quite a business — sweet and failure-proof.

And that's the way it has been.

But in the new world of television it is the present, not the past, that is prologue, and the present is a mighty tide of

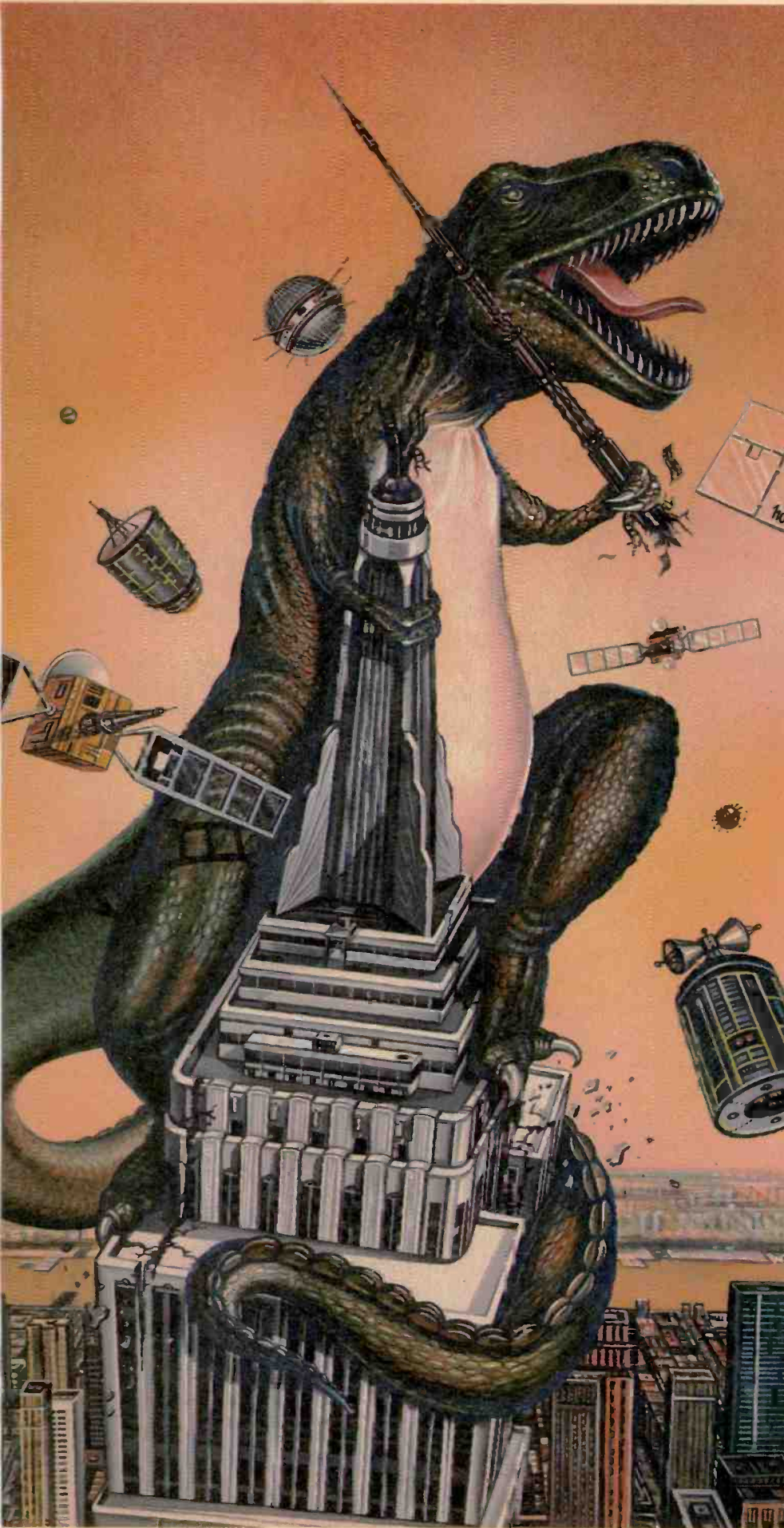


Illustration by Hovik Dilakian

DINOSAURS?

change. If some people have difficulty getting a firm sense of the present, it is surely because they confuse it with the future they have heard about for so many years. This is indeed the old future that was to bring a communications revolution, and now it is doing its work.

The present finds cable penetrating close to 30 percent of American households, with most of the largest population centers still untapped. In Pittsburgh, Warner Amex recently christened the country's first eighty-channel cable installation, signaling what's to come in the wiring of the cities; the system, moreover, is interactive. The cable systems existing today have, on average, signed up only half the households on the streets they've wired, which means that overnight — given the right impetus — the 30 percent national penetration could grow to 50 percent or even more.

If ABC, CBS, and NBC are the main thoroughfares of the electronic village, cable has claimed the side streets. Some forty-seven new networks are in the sky riding satellites that beam down on cable systems. Each of them is pursuing a segment of the television audience, some with movies, sports, or news, and others with services the networks have largely ignored — rock music, the arts, education. Few of these networks are profitable businesses yet, but that hasn't deterred entrepreneurs from seeking satellite space for still more cable services, even at the going rate of \$13 million for a satellite transponder.

The object for now is to stake a claim on the continually expanding cable frontier, perchance to strike some equivalent of oil, gold, or natural gas, as Time Inc. has already done with its pay-cable network, Home Box Office, the most potent rival yet to the commercial networks yet.

Meanwhile, STV — or over-the-air subscription television on UHF channels — is flourishing in urban areas not yet invaded by cable. Video games, the precursors to home computers, have captured the fancy and leisure time of

millions of young people. The market for home video appurtenances — video recorders, video-disc players, video cameras — is moderately lively, and there is always the possibility that elements will come together (as happened with rock, FM radio, and home stereo) to make it a booming market.

The revolution turns on people paying for television; it follows logically that viewers willing to pay will seek to get their money's worth. What makes everything different for the broadcast networks today is that the old sellers' market, on which they thrived for some thirty-five years and which allowed them to take viewership for granted, is rapidly becoming, and will remain, a buyers' market.

The evidence is already clear. Viewers with pay cable watch more television than those without it. On certain nights, Home Box Office is the leading network in the ratings in households with pay cable. Overall, the networks' share of the market is declining, although in total numbers the audience count remains approximately the same because of population growth.

A buyers' market will rule television

Nielsen statistics for prime time reveal a dramatic shift: For the fourth quarter of 1979, ABC, CBS, and NBC together attracted 92.1 percent of the viewers in the peak hours; a year later that fell to 88.2 percent, and for the same period last year to 84.8 percent. For the entire 1980-81 season, the networks' combined share was 81 percent, and there is no reason to suppose the downward trend has been halted in the season just ended.

In Columbus, Ohio, in homes equipped with Qube, Warner Amex's two-way cable system, the networks' prime-time share is only 70 percent. And in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, one of the birthplaces of cable, the net-

works' share is already down to 60 percent.

Independent stations, many of them sending programming by satellite to cable systems, and most of them receiving programs by satellite, are making larger claims on the network audience.

And on the near horizon are direct-broadcast satellites, videotex, and low-power television.

Like the powerful forms of life in prehistoric times, the networks find themselves in a radically changing environment — with viewers liberated from their thrall, new contenders chasing the advertising dollar, technologies emerging that change the nature of the viewing experience. The dinosaurs vanished because they couldn't adapt to the physical and climatic changes on the planet. There is good reason to wonder whether the networks can adapt to the harsh conditions of the new electronic age.

The Vision of Plenty for All

Gene F. Jankowski, who as president of the CBS Broadcast Group sits atop one of the most powerful communications organizations in the world, has fielded the dark question of the networks' survival before. He likes the analogy to main streets. "Be assured," he declares, "CBS will still be one of the main streets in 1990. The doom-sayers have it wrong. The burden to compete and survive is not with the established networks but with the new ones. You can't ignore the differences of scale — our size, experience, and financial strength against theirs. This isn't to say there won't be changes in the next few years, but we'll still have the lion's share of audience and advertising in 1990."

Then what are we to make of CBS's entry into cable and its partnership with Twentieth Century-Fox in new video ventures? Is CBS laying the groundwork for survival in the new age?

No, these aren't survival measures, Jankowski replies. "We have as much reason as any other company to take advantage of the new opportunities. Much

of the time, more than half the homes in the country are not watching television. Obviously, some markets are not being served well. That's why we started CBS Cable as a cultural service."

Jankowski speaks of big television and little television. Big television is the networks. In 1981 they were being watched in 38.8 million homes on a typical evening, while the various pay-cable networks were tuned in by 1.6 million. The CBS network alone averaged 14.3 million homes per minute during the year, while the highest-rated advertising-supported cable service, Ted Turner's superstation, WTBS, averaged less than half a million.

"We shouldn't underestimate the power of the network system, or the difficulty of competing with it head-on," Jankowski says. In his view, the strength of the network system derives from three structural concepts: weekly series, to make the most of popularity; nightly schedules, which viewers carry around in their heads like the map of a neighborhood, and local station affiliations, through which national and local services are directly linked. He considers the relationships with affiliates "the backbone of the system."

The CBS vision of the future is one of plenty for all. The company projects an expansion in the number of television households from the present 80.4 million to 99 million by the decade's end, and also foresees continued growth in hours of television usage. A larger pie for big television and little television to share. According to the CBS forecast, in 1990 the networks will have combined revenues of \$15 billion, pay cable \$5.4 billion, and advertising-supported cable networks \$2 billion.

ABC is also bullish on the future, and more aggressive than the other networks in entering new markets that compete with commercial television. "It's not that we're hedging our bets, but keeping stride with the times," explains Herbert Granath, president of ABC Video, the division created for the new communications enterprises.

A joint venture with Hearst Corporation, known as Hearst/ABC Video Services, has spawned two cable networks — ARTS, a cultural service, and Daytime, which provides a block of women's programming based on magazines of the Hearst group. In another partnership, with Group W Satellite Communications, ABC is revving up two cable news networks that will compete with the two established by Ted Turner. In addition, it has teamed with Getty Oil's cable sports network, ESPN, to deal in pay-television sports events. And as CBS has done, ABC has formed a

motion-picture production unit to turn out this mainstay of pay-cable and commercial-television programming. Last month, ABC Video announced a plan to provide pay-television service during the middle of the night to people with home video recorders. And it began yet another partnership — this time with Cox Cable for the development of pay-cable hardware and software. Granath hints of more ventures to come.

In its latest annual report to shareholders, ABC presents itself as a communications (rather than broadcast) corporation and provides this view of the future:

"Broadcast TV networks and stations will certainly share the largest audiences. If they have 75 percent of the audience in 1990, just 25 percent remains for everyone else (even if the broadcast share were only 60 percent, 40 percent would remain [sic]). But competitors for that remainder already number in the dozens, and may eventually total a hundred or more."

Why would ABC invest so heavily in cable services if the competition is going to be so fierce and the shares of audience so small?

Because, explains the annual report, advertisers will pay a lot more to reach sharply defined audiences on cable networks than they pay for the large, amorphous audience the networks deliver — as much as three times more, by ABC's reckoning. Therefore a small audience can produce a fair profit. And that also holds true for pay-cable enterprises, where a 1 percent share of the audience can be a bonanza when it consists of sports fans paying \$15 for a single event.

The technology that will have the greatest impact on the system is the satellite

So two networks are positioning themselves for any eventuality in the new world of television and have the financial resources to go exploring. But what of NBC, the third player in the network game? It has been running such a miserable third in the ratings race, and so far out of the money, that it can scarcely think about entering the age of Television II. All its energies are focused on scrambling out of the Nielsen depths.

"The way we look at it, we're in a growth industry just staying in broadcasting," says M. S. Rukeyser Jr., the official spokesman for the National

Broadcasting Company. "You realize it's a terrific business when you consider that Chrysler would have gone under if what happened to us had happened to them. Even with our terrible slump we didn't lose money last year. We made about \$30 million. Sure, the other networks made ten times as much, but that just shows what our potential is for growth. We're still in the same medium they're in and playing to the same audience. If ABC could come from way behind, why couldn't we?"

The answer may be that ABC made its surge in a rapidly expanding commercial-television market. It grew in boom times, with a lot of luck. It was helped, for example, by the Prime Time Access Rule, which reduced network schedules to three hours a night; by the death of the old star system (high-paid, big-name celebrities, then considered necessary to the success of a series, wouldn't go near ABC); by the popularity of the 1976 Olympics, and by the creation of the Family Viewing Hour, which caused all three networks to shake up their prime-time lineups. The circumstances are quite different today. NBC is mired in third place and attempting its climb when audiences are falling away from commercial television and program prices are rising. The advertising money that used to support three networks may dwindle to supporting two-and-a-half networks. In the seventies ABC had only two competitors, and even a third-place network could not be desperately weak in a sellers' market. In a buyers' market, however, the bottom is all the way down.

The Affiliate in a Buyers' Market

The optimistic forecasts of CBS and ABC are probably correct, so far as they go. The explosion of channels by itself poses no devastating threat to the networks in this decade. ABC, CBS, and NBC are still the centers of popular programming, and their penetration of households is almost five times that of the leading cable network. Commercial television promises to continue commanding the heaviest viewing for a good while.

But the network forecasts are based on the assumption that no further significant changes are occurring in the electronic environment, and that's where their picture gets distorted. They omit the technology that will have the greatest impact on the network system: the communications satellite. For if cable is creating a buyers' market for the television consumer, the satellite will create a buyers' market for the local television station. And that is bound to alter the relationship Gene Jankowski

calls "the backbone of the system," so vital to the networks' strength, and indeed to their survival.

People tend to think of the television networks as three giant broadcast organizations in New York. In reality, they are webs of stations carrying a common television signal all across America. For more than thirty years these webs have been made of telephone land lines. The networks send out the signal over the lines, each to some two-hundred local affiliates, which transmit it on the airwaves. The networks pay the affiliates for their air-time and provide them with glamorous, attractive programming. It is significant that no independent (unaffiliated) television station has ever been the leader in its market.

That was once also the case in radio; network affiliates were the aristocracy. But with the changes occurring in listening habits during the early sixties, radio stations suddenly found it advantageous not to carry network programming. Important groups such as Westinghouse Broadcasting Company severed all their network affiliations. Radio networks dried up into little more than purveyors of news on the hour.

That could also happen in television — and even in this decade. The satellite, a new kind of delivery system, liberates stations from their dependency on ABC, CBS, or NBC, making all manner of small, ad hoc networks feasible. A television producer like Norman Lear, for instance, could bypass the networks and deliver his series directly to the stations, in effect creating his own part-time network.

The gains in audience made by independent stations during the last few years have coincided with their satellite-receiving capability. Most independents have dishes allowing them to bring in network-like programs, such as *Independent Network News* and *Entertainment Tonight*. *The Merv Griffin Show*, which used to be syndicated by the traditional method of shipping tapes from station to station, now goes out by satellite and airs in many cities just as if it were a network show. Each station carries each episode the same day.

Having switched in 1978 from land lines to satellite interconnection, the Public Broadcasting Service provides the paradigm for a television-by-satellite system. During much of the broadcast day, a public television station will receive two, and sometimes three, streams of programming simultaneously from the satellite. In any time period, it selects from the options the program it will air.

Applied to commercial television,
(Continued on page 57)

THE CRY OF THE PEACOCK

Something besides cable is eating away at the networks — the rising expense of their programming. A half-hour episode of a typical series now costs as much as \$400,000, almost twice what it was four or five years ago. Some of the increase may be attributed to the general inflation, but officials at all three networks blame the hike in costs largely on Fred Silverman's prodigality during his three desperate years as president of NBC.

"Take a fanatic and tell him to bring in hit shows, regardless of the expense, and what you get is what we got — a program market thrown completely out of whack," a programming executive remarked. "Freddie was not going to be judged like the rest of us, on his contribution to company profits. His mission was just to get the ratings up — damn the costs."

Another network executive tells this tale: "Silverman was determined to get Joe Don Baker to star in *Eisched*, and when it looked like he couldn't get him, he made him a fantastic deal. It didn't take long for everyone in Hollywood to know that Baker was getting more for an untried series than Carroll O'Connor got as a big star in a smash hit. If you were Carroll O'Connor, wouldn't you complain about making less than Joe Don Baker? He did, and everything eventually got adjusted, but that's how we got the upward spiral. And we're all stuck with it."

Fred Silverman did not invent NBC's misery; he only exacerbated it. The problem really began in 1976, when Herbert Schlosser, as president of the company, decided to challenge CBS for first place. His program chief at the time was Paul Klein, a former audience-research whiz, who had a theory that television had outgrown the weekly series. He believed the classier viewers could be seduced quite regularly with big, well-promoted specials and mini-series. So he created a catch-all called *The Big Event* and set the schedule so that two-hour blocks on four consecutive nights could be given over to short-term fare, something different, even if sometimes hokey, every week.

As it turned out, Klein's theory was wrong, and *The Big Event* goes

down in history as the big mistake. Series were still favored by television's audience, and with NBC's default, the viewers simply switched to the other networks. NBC is still trying to win back the audience it gave away wholesale.

Schlosser never dreamed that Klein's scheme was an all-or-nothing gamble; he assumed second place was assured, because NBC had always *owned* second place. But the reckless bid to be first threw NBC into third place and caused it to lose affiliation with powerful stations in such major cities as Minneapolis, Atlanta, and San Diego. The dumping of NBC by old, established local affiliates became epidemic. For a network to lose a major affiliate is like Lever Brothers losing a supermarket for its distribution and having to settle for a mom-and-pop grocery store. So NBC is left today trying for a comeback with a weaker lineup of affiliated stations than it has ever had.

To make the situation worse, the lesser stations, always struggling to get their profits up, are given to eschewing the network shows they expect to be losers and substituting old movies or syndicated programs in their place. The third network always has a harder time getting its new programs "cleared" (exhibited) than the others, and this is a severe handicap, since the rating for a network program in a market that blacks it out is zero. A mess of zeroes brings down the national Nielsen average so precipitously for a program that it has almost no chance of succeeding. This resonates in Hollywood, where producers and stars, always fearful of the taint of failure, take their best projects to the networks that can provide strong lead-in support and have no serious clearance problems with stations. So running third in the network footrace is not a simple case of having to make up ground; it means running hurdles when everyone else is running on a flat track.

Silverman's frantic efforts to come up with winners made a travesty of the network business and a shambles of NBC. The final irony is that the network that caused the financial stakes to be raised is the one least able to afford the wild inflation in programming today.

L.B.

A NEW WORLD

A continuing series by the editors of Channels

THE ELECTRIC LIBRARY

Hope for the 'Have Nots' in the Information Age

BY MICHAEL POLLAN

THERE'S A CHILD in Grosse Pointe who already inhabits the "information society." After school, he goes home to his Apple II and dials the data bank to which his family subscribes. Maybe he plays a few games of Adventure, or checks out the box score of the Tigers game. Later, he uses the computer to look up an encyclopedia entry for his homework assignment. Then, if there's nothing on cable, he can always turn to his family's library of video cassettes — which includes, by the way, a few he made himself.



There's another child in the Bronx for whom the "information society" might as well be on another planet. His family can't afford a video-tape recorder, much less an Apple, and the city can't even find a cable company willing to wire his borough, it's so "downscale." Sociologists say this child is one of the "information poor," an emerging class of Americans being disenfranchised by the growing importance of information technologies they cannot afford.

The problem is not entirely new. Information technology was expensive in the nineteenth century too: Only the well-to-do could afford to buy many books. Convinced that the success of democracy depended on well-informed citizens, communities acted to create a system of public libraries to insure that the poor would have access to the same information as the rich.

Today those public libraries offer many Americans their best hope — perhaps their only one — of entering the information age. Acting on the principle that everyone has a right to information — whatever its forms or their circumstances — many libraries are experimenting with the new technologies, both video and computer. If some people cannot afford information retrieval at home, librarians reason, they should be able to get it at the library, whose mission — to provide free information to all seeking it — can no longer be accomplished by the circulation of books alone.

Yet this ambition is easier to articulate than to fulfill. For even as libraries seek to develop into broad-based public information centers, new profit-making information services, abetted by government policy, are rapidly drawing off the library's wealthiest patrons and eroding the institution's traditional sources of support. If the child from Grosse Pointe no longer relies on his public library, his parents are less likely to care about its survival. "In the next few years," predicts one librarian, "the public library will become either more important to society than ever before, or virtually irrelevant."

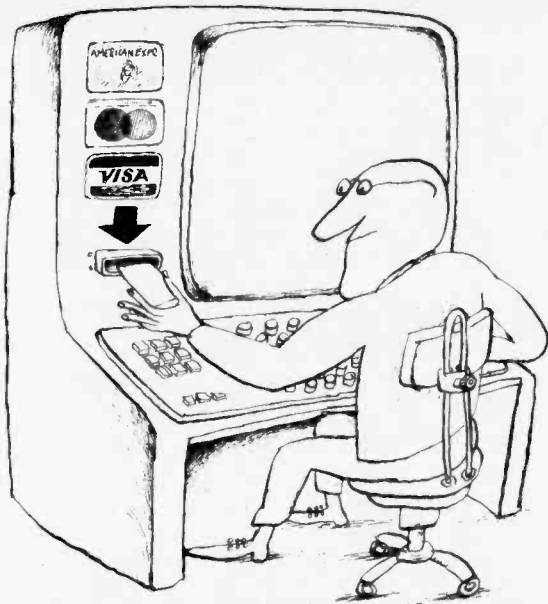
In the mid-seventies, thanks to generous federal grants for the purchase of video equipment, libraries began experimenting with video as a way to enlarge the definition of "library services" and attract new patrons. Several hundred libraries now offer some kind of video capability. Many simply have a few video-cassette recorders and a growing collection of tapes, which are often circulated like books. Others have their own production facilities and trained staffs. These libraries typically lend their equipment to interested patrons, or produce tapes themselves for schools, community groups, and businesses.

In a handful of communities, public libraries have actually joined forces with local cable systems to serve people's needs for information. Several accommodate public-access facilities for cable systems, since few places in a town are as centrally located or politically neutral as the library. In at least forty communities, cable franchise agreements have established channels dedicated to library access. One of the most ambitious of these is in Atlanta, where the public library transmits twenty-four hours a day. It produces approximately five hours of daily programming, filling the rest of the schedule with videotex listings of library services and events.

Many libraries look to video as a way to

Public libraries insure that the poor have access to the same information as the rich.

Illustrations by Jo Teodorescu



decentralize the services they offer. In Atlanta, the library plans eventually to make its card catalogue available to two-way cable subscribers; Atlantans would be able to browse through the catalogue at home and have their choices reserved at a neighborhood branch.

Innovative as these video projects may be, the future of America's public libraries will depend less on video than computer technology. The growth of the private information industry threatens public libraries — but it also makes them indispensable.

A quiet revolution took place in public libraries about a decade ago, when many of them first contracted with information vendors for on-line data services. Since computer time can cost \$100 an hour, libraries had little choice but to pass the expense on to users. Until recently, most librarians and their patrons saw access to these data banks as a boon. But now they have begun to wonder whether these new, fee-based services are really in the library's — or the public's — best interests.

Fay Blake, a professor of information science at Berkeley, recently warned an American Library Association (ALA) gathering that librarians may be "inadvertently contributing to the breakdown of public access to information" by charging for services. Information is being transformed from a public good into a valuable commodity, a trend that librarians may not be able to resist. The profession has been debating whether or not fee-based services are consistent with the public library's traditional mandate; the ALA recently decided they are not.

Many library professionals have begun to view the private information vendors as potentially dangerous competitors. Leigh Estabrook, a sociologist at Syracuse University's School of Information Studies, points out that "the private sector is going to skim

off the most profitable library services and sell them to the home, leaving libraries in a real bind." When upscale consumers can get the information they need at home, the library will lose its most frequent users and strongest political supporters. Estabrook contends that public libraries could commit "organizational suicide" by trying to compete with the information industry for middle-class and business customers. She believes that libraries should instead redirect their marketing effort to those who can least afford private information services.

But such an approach would be costly, and would require the kind of federal commitment to free public information that librarians know better than to expect from the Reagan Administration. In the view of most librarians, the Administration's information policies favor the information industry at the expense of public libraries; *Library Journal* has warned that these policies may be "fundamentally damaging to libraries and to citizen access to information." The damage is not simply budgetary: Reagan wants to dismantle most of the federal information apparatus, turning over distribution of the government's vast output of information to the private sector — to the vendors already encroaching on libraries. The Administration would have us pay twice for the same information — first with tax dollars, and then again with fees to the private vendors. Not only will libraries have to pay for information they once got free; much government information to which the private sector is indifferent won't be available at any price. But perhaps worst of all for public libraries — and for the public — is the damage done to the principle of free access to information when the government, society's single largest producer of information, auctions it off to the highest bidder.

The dilemma in which libraries find themselves today is ripe with irony. What they have been doing quietly for a century — collecting, organizing, and disseminating information — is suddenly big business. As long as public libraries persist in giving away something that's become quite valuable, the pressures on them will intensify. Indeed, copyright challenges to library use of pre-recorded video tapes and computer printouts are already developing. If libraries can persevere in their commitment to give information away, they will be assured of a vital place in a society increasingly dependent on information. But if they acquiesce to the idea that information is a commodity like any other, we may pass up our best hope of equitably sharing the benefits and the burdens of the new technologies. ■

What libraries have been doing quietly for a century is suddenly big business.

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PIPPIN



GREAT EXPECTATIONS



DUDLEY MOORE



BUCCANEER



THE BOAT IS FULL



ANIMAL EXPRESS



PENMARRIC



DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS

operators, was unveiled in May. Called the United States Football League, it plans to field teams in twelve cities next spring and hopes to offer its games to fans over pay television.

While there have been innovative cable deals in hockey and basketball, the most frenetic pay-sports activity is in baseball, where each team, unencumbered by parity rules, is free to make its own television deals. Baseball also has more games to sell to television than any other sport, and with contracts for superstars running as high as \$2 million a year, the need for fresh revenue is keen.

This year the twenty-six big-league baseball clubs will share \$50 million—a paltry amount by NFL standards—from ABC and NBC for coverage of the game-of-the-week. For a package of forty-five midweek games, the USA Network pays another \$1.4 million—less than the 1982 salary of Yankee outfielder Dave Winfield. Understandably, each team owner is frantically trying to make hay in his own backyard.

Broadcast revenues make up only 30 percent of a club's yearly income. To stay in business, "every club has to dip its toe in the pay-TV waters," according to Tom Villante, director of marketing and broadcasting for major-league

baseball. Almost half of the teams are involved in some form of pay television this year, yielding an average of \$20,000 a game. But because of free television's "promotional" value in getting people to the ball park—gate receipts, parking, and concessions remain a club's primary sources of income—Villante doesn't foresee pay television as a dominant force in the near future. Still, "every owner is doing some juggling," he says, "trying to decide whether to give up some promo for short-term bucks."

One team doing its share of juggling is Cincinnati, which is experimenting with several different approaches to pay television. Last year the club put six games on ON-TV (an STV service) and sent several other games out to 127,000 subscribers on its own cable network. The Reds also sponsored the first pay-per-view baseball experiment: two games offered via the Qube system in Columbus, Ohio at \$3 a pop. But unlike Einhorn, the Reds are not taking the plunge yet. This year they have added only one game to their STV package and project only a modest increase in their use of Qube, which has just arrived in Cincinnati.

"It's all an experiment," says Reds broadcast director Jim Winters. "We

anticipate losing money the next couple of years, but down the road, the experience we gain will more than offset losses. To sit back and let the world pass you by is bad business." The Reds do not see television as a primary revenue source but as a marketing tool to sell tickets to Riverfront Stadium. (There will be forty-eight free-television games this year and only seven pay.) Qube fits nicely into this strategy since it can be used to survey fans' attitudes.

The variations on these themes are many: In Milwaukee, fifteen Brewers games will be shown this year on SelecTV, another STV service; the club is in the process of forming an all-Wisconsin sports network with the Milwaukee Bucks basketball team. In Cleveland the owner of the Cavaliers NBA team, Ted Stepien, has formed a regional sports-and-movie network called TEN-TV. Stepien is paying the Cleveland Indians \$460,000 to televise twenty-six of their games this season. He has already yanked all of his Cavaliers games off free television and will present fifty on TEN-TV next year. "If free TV is not paying enough," he advises, "shut it off!"

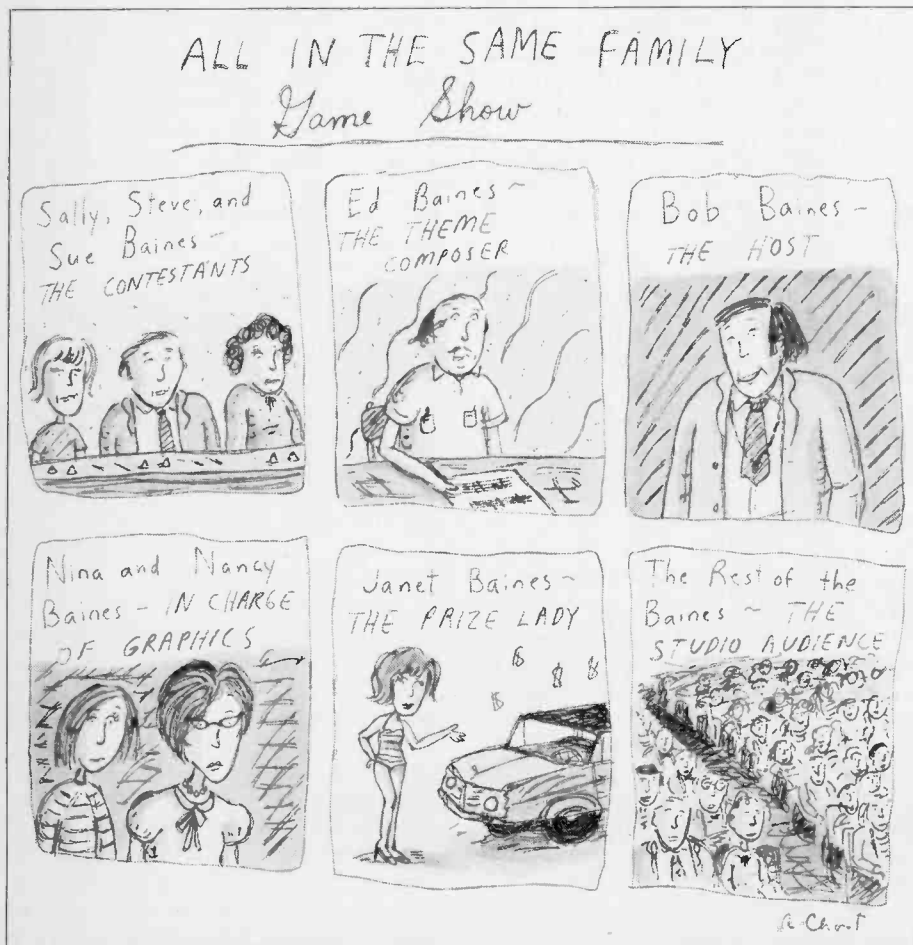
The strategy of most owners, however, is not to ruffle fans' feathers by going pay overnight. Take a few more games off free television every year, and add pay games. Last year, for example, the New York Mets put forty games on SportsChannel, a New York-area payable channel. Under a new contract, there will be fifty pay games this year for the Mets and a hundred free; next year, it will be sixty and ninety. The New York Yankees recently negotiated a pay-television deal under which, it has been reported, the club's current policy of a hundred free games and forty pay would be reversed by 1985.

Al Harrison, a Mets spokesman, explains his team's approach: "Pay TV can be an important revenue item, but you still have to fill the ball park and sell hot dogs." Try telling that to Eddie Einhorn. As Tom Villante puts it: "All of the owners agree that pay TV can only be supplementary—except Eddie."

The Prince of Pay

For Einhorn, doing anything slowly would be out of character. He has a need, as one Chicago *Sun-Times* columnist wrote, "to be on an airplane going somewhere, anywhere, it doesn't matter; this need to make phone calls from moving cars and to hopscotch from one racket to another."

Einhorn earned a law degree at Northwestern University, yet has never practiced; he has made a career out of



packaging sports. While still at Northwestern in the late 1950s, he put together a makeshift radio network to cover NCAA tournament basketball games, and then established a state-wide television network in Tennessee for Vanderbilt University basketball. This rapidly expanded to include all Southeast Conference teams, and in 1961, TV Sports Inc. (later changed to TVS) was born. Before long, TVS was covering several conferences.

In 1973 he sold TVS to Corinthian Broadcasting for \$5 million and 100,000 shares of stock in Dun & Bradstreet, which owned Corinthian. He stayed on at TVS for five years. When his contract ran out he went to CBS as executive producer of the *Sports Spectacular*. It was Einhorn who came up with the *Battle of the NFL Cheerleaders* series.

While at CBS, he was asked by law school chum Jerry M. Reinsdorf, a real-estate tycoon, to become media consultant to the baseball team he was about to purchase, the Chicago White Sox. Characteristically, he decided instead to jump in with both feet: In February of 1981 he and Reinsdorf became principal investors in the limited partnership that paid \$20 million for the Sox.

Reinsdorf and Einhorn promised to give long-suffering Sox fans (last pennant: 1959) a "winner." In modern baseball, virtually the only way to do that is to purchase costly free agents, or at least sign your current stars to multimillion dollar, long-term contracts. So to put more sock in the Sox the new owners had to come up with a lot of new revenue, fast.

Almost immediately Einhorn blasted the 1981 television- and radio-rights packages signed by previous owner Bill Veeck as the least lucrative in the big leagues. He claimed that in 1980 the Sox had made less than half a million dollars from television — about \$4,000 a game. "I'm not going to do stupid things like that anymore," Einhorn vowed. "Unless you have control, you're going to be taken advantage of."

So Einhorn took control. Before selling the Sox, Veeck had granted Chuck Dolan's Cablevision the right to carry games in Chicago's suburbs. (The city itself is not yet wired.) Dolan said the contract was binding through 1982; Einhorn said it ended after 1981, and the case went to court.

Instead of simply jacking up his price for future cable and other television rights, Einhorn decided to go for the long ball. He contacted the owners of Chicago's professional hockey (the Blackhawks), basketball (the Bulls), and soccer (the Sting) teams, plus his crosstown baseball rivals, the Cubs. His

proposal: an all-sports pay-television service managed by the teams themselves. Meanwhile, the Sox purchased slugger Greg Luzinski from the Phillies and lured free-agent catcher Carlton Fisk with a \$2.9 million, five-year contract. (Einhorn's comment on the Fisk deal: "Hell, it was like stealing Acapulco cliff-diving from ABC.") The team's payroll for 1981 climbed to \$5 million.

While the Sox were making a respectable bid for the divisional championship, Einhorn hammered his pay-television scheme into place. Newspaper columns in Chicago buzzed with speculation. A headline in the *Tribune* read: "Chicago team owners move to



Eddie Einhorn: 'The whole sports world is watching us!'

control 'living room' gate." On October 12, 1981, the creation of SportsVision was officially announced.

Einhorn and Reinsdorf moved swiftly and spared little expense. Significantly, they shifted the White Sox front office from historic Comiskey Park — the oldest stadium in the majors — to the Hancock Building on Michigan Avenue. "We want to be where the action is," Reinsdorf explained, obviously not referring to what goes on between the chalk lines on a baseball field. Einhorn then installed the SportsVision staff right across the hall. For his play-by-play announcing team, he hired Don Drysdale away from the California Angels and Ken Harrelson from the Boston Red Sox. To help defray production costs, he pinned down a five-minute-per-game advertising commitment from Anheuser-Busch.

Beginning with the 1982 season, SportsVision is transmitting at least

three hours every night, 365 days a year. The service is carried by cable in three states, and over ON-TV, the STV company, in the unwired Chicago metropolitan area. Einhorn is aiming for 50,000 subscriptions this season; with 40,000 he will break even.

First-year programming breaks down this way: 112 Sox games, 56 Bulls and Hawks, 28 Sting, as well as 150 boxing matches, rodeos, wrestling contests, and tennis tournaments. SportsVision also offers 35 baseball games between other American League teams, presented either in a doubleheader with a Sox game, or when the Sox are idle. At considerable expense, SportsVision dispatches its own production and announcing crews to cover these games.

As part of his master plan for the Sox, Einhorn also negotiated a new free-television pact with WFLD, Channel 32. The contract gives WFLD rights to forty-five Sox games in 1982 (compared to sixty-four last year), and a minimum of thirty the next four years. "Eddie wanted twenty, I wanted forty," says WFLD vice president Robert Hartman, "so we settled on thirty." Hartman thinks that some day Einhorn "might want to capture all the games for pay TV." Hartman believes, however, that there are more "downside risks" than Einhorn recognizes.

"Eddie thinks pay TV has tremendous potential," Hartman says, "but it may also make people stop *liking* baseball." Still, Hartman sees short-term benefits for commercial television, too. "The more money Eddie makes," Hartman says, "the more good players he can get, and the better it is for us."

One of Einhorn's few setbacks has been his failure to persuade the Cubs to join his company. For years the Cubs have operated on a shoestring budget and shared the Sox's non-winning ways. Yet pay television may not be in the Cubs' future: After longtime owner Bill Wrigley died, the team was purchased last summer by the Tribune Company, which also owns WGN-TV, the only independent VHF station in the city. As it has in the past, WGN will carry 140 Cubs games this year, the highest number in the majors.

Einhorn believes that the Cubs' overwhelming commitment to free television represents a "revolting conflict of interest." Cablevision's Chuck Dolan suspects that the Tribune bought the Cubs because the company felt it was the only way to make sure the team didn't stray from WGN in search of greener pastures. But Cubs president Andy McKenna claims that when the club's contract with the station expires this season he will "explore all the options" in

Painful as it may be to fans, we have reached the point where

hopes of "expanding our revenues."

Like sports executives everywhere, McKenna will be watching SportsVision closely. "Frankly, we're open-minded about pay TV," he says, "but the jury is out. It's hard to evaluate — the Blackhawks haven't been popular enough even to be on free TV regularly and now they're going to *charge* for their games?" McKenna expresses concern for the traditional mass appeal of baseball; he is wary of efforts to tamper with what has worked so well for so long.

"Baseball has always been a working man's sport," McKenna says. "I hope that won't be disturbed."

'We should go for broke.'

But Eddie Einhorn would no doubt reply that before he came along, the White Sox were losing both on the field and at the box office, playing this working man's game. The culprit, according to Einhorn, has been escalating players' salaries, which he includes as part of his "production" budget.

"I haven't figured out a way to halt the salary growth," he says, "so instead of worrying about it we'll concentrate on income. We'll still have to pay too much but at least we'll have it to spend."

As the interview in Einhorn's office continues, his voice starts to fade. He slumps in his chair behind the antique desk, occasionally nibbling at a fingernail. The green carpet at his feet looks like Astro Turf. Tieless, in brown slacks and a brown and white sports shirt, Einhorn is an unusually casual executive, especially when the bravado subsides. In the White Sox 1982 press guide, he's just one of the boys:

Officially, it's Carlton Ernest (Pudge) Fisk and Edward M. (Eddie) Einhorn.

Although Einhorn seems tired, his eyes pop open whenever SportsVision comes up. He loves the White Sox — during games he jumps up and down in his booth at Comiskey Park — but he will share the ball club's success with his co-owner, general manager, scouts, players, coaches, and manager. SportsVision, however, is *his* baby.

"My basic philosophy," he explains, "is that pay TV will be the major source of sports revenue, not an additional source. It's an extension of the gate. We're tapped out on other sources. You can only raise ticket prices so high and we can't possibly get more than two million people to the ball park. But the upside of pay TV is incredible! There are no limitations. It's where our major effort should be. We should go for broke."

Einhorn says that even though he has "restricted the product quickly" on free television, he is not worried in the least about a backlash by fans. "We've been honest about it," he explains. "We told them we needed money to be competitive. You can still see a game every night and get good baseball besides. We're not presenting water polo or tiddly winks."

"It kills me when people talk about so-called 'free' TV. Nothing's free — you pay for it because the cost of the products you buy goes up with every commercial. Know what the ad budget for a beer company is? It's just more painless to pay that way than get a bill in the mail every month."

But since there will be beer commercials on SportsVision, as well as a monthly bill, Einhorn's subscribers will

be paying twice for the games they used to pay for once.

"We could be way ahead of our time," Einhorn says, straightening up in his seat and grinning impishly. "But to me everything we're doing is completely *logical*." His eyebrows jump and he turns his palms up in front of his chest. "Really, I can't see why everyone else hasn't done this already!"

The Gentrification of Baseball

Being ahead of your time is not necessarily a good thing.

Cable penetration is still under 30 percent nationally. Only 1.3 million homes are equipped to receive STV signals. And substantial pay-per-view audiences will be available only when the cities are wired with "addressable" cable systems. Until sports owners and promoters can deliver a much larger audience, major national sports events will remain on free television.

Prospects for pay-per-view actually seemed much brighter a year ago than they do today, to judge by the optimism of owners and promoters. Last year, Jim Barniak, a director of Prism, a pay channel, predicted in *Sports Illustrated* that "everything" would soon "go to pay-per-view" and added: "If Prism were to switch from \$10-a-month subscription to, say, \$2 a game, hey, we could take in \$460,000 a night." But a publicity spokesman for Prism says that Barniak later was "called on the carpet," because his remarks conflicted with a change in philosophy at the company.

The current thinking, as articulated by Prism president Jack Williams, reflects part economics, part common sense. "Let's stop kidding ourselves about 'the

From Seattle to the Super Bowl

When the history of the "electric stadium" is written, Sam Schulman will deserve a chapter right next to the one on Eddie Einhorn. Owner of the National Basketball Association's Seattle SuperSonics, Schulman introduced the concept of the "season ticket" to television. Beginning with the 1981-1982 season, he took virtually all his team's games off free television and offered cable subscribers a seventy-three-game package of Sonics games for \$120. He leased channels on eight local cable systems and ordered decoder boxes for subscribers. His

start-up costs: \$1.2 million.

Schulman was tampering with a good thing: The Sonics had led the league in home attendance for the previous three years. But he was so certain of retaining fan loyalty that he signed a contract with the owners of his home arena, the Kingdome, agreeing to pay them for any revenue lost as a result of a drop in attendance.

Schulman's gamble seems to have paid off. Some 17,500 armchair fans bought season tickets, 4,000 more than were needed to break even. Attendance at the Kingdome actually

improved slightly, and best of all, according to the Sonics director of broadcasting, Lloyd Cooney, a survey of subscribers showed that 94 percent said they would renew next year. Schulman says he will add over-the-air STV when it arrives in Seattle; that would "open up another 1.2 million households." He looks forward to getting a quarter-million subscribers and \$30-million-a-year income "just from our channels."

These kinds of numbers — for one market alone — have made a deep impression, even at that bastion of free-television sports, ABC, which

owners like Einhorn routinely refer to their teams as 'software.'

unlimited potential in earnings' from cable TV," Williams says. "The sky is not the limit." He points out that baseball players have vowed to capture a major share of cable-television money in contract negotiations next year: Pay-sports revenue could go in one pocket and right out the other.

"If the day ever comes," Williams warns, "when we are playing professional sports in a TV studio, with applause signs for home teams and boo signs for visitors, when all team earnings come from TV revenues, I submit to you that sports as we know it today will be relegated to the status of grunt-and-groan wrestling, roller derbies and game shows."

This show-biz scenario may be troubling, but it is probably far off. Right around the corner, however, is what could be called the gentrification of baseball. In Chicago, it is already underway.

In Chicago the Cubs have always been the favorites of the North Side middle class, while the blue-collar South Siders have turned out for the Sox. But now Einhorn has created \$9 "golden box seats" (bordered by railings painted gold) at Comiskey Park, which he boasts are the highest-priced seats in the league. And from SportsVision subscribers, he is asking more than twice the rate charged by the two leaders in his field, Prism and SportsChannel. Einhorn admits that he's looking for a different audience — people "used to paying a good price" for entertainment. He says he wants to create an "atmosphere" around the White Sox similar to that surrounding ballet.

Ron Alridge, television columnist for the *Tribune*, feels that gentrification

is the result of owners "going for a quick kill." He predicts that pay television will turn Chicago into "a city of winners," and that the fan will be better off — "If he has a few bucks."

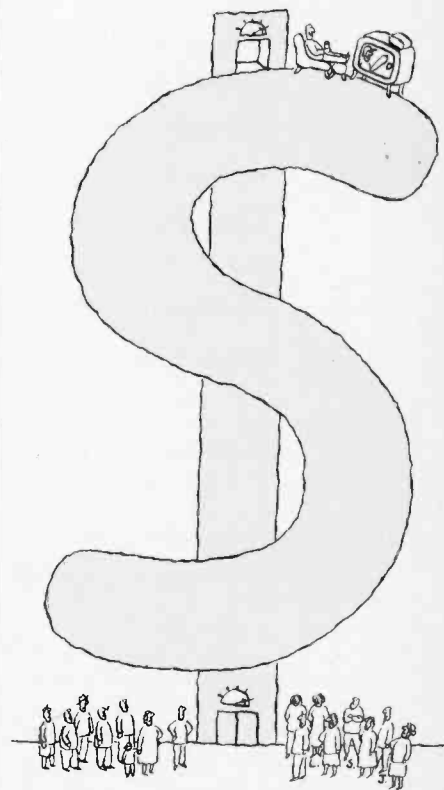
A big *if* when you're talking about the national pastime. "I don't think this trend is good for a society that already flaunts wealth in the face of its have-nots," Alridge observes. "Twenty-two dollars a month is a *lot*. Ghetto kids are already priced out and they're the ones who need sports most for inspiration and escape." These fans may become more, not less, frustrated if the Sox become winners.

Even those who can afford SportsVision may find baseball lacking in the kind of snob appeal Einhorn seems to be counting on. As anyone will testify who has ever seen Greg "The Bull" Luzinski lumber along the base paths, baseball is a long way from ballet. The fan must expect to sit through a half-dozen games before finally seeing Luzinski hit one out of the park or Ron LeFlore steal a base. This is why baseball has traditionally been a sport attracting hard-core fans, sprinkled with those who may drop in only once in a while. But today the owners, the players, and even the fans, seem to be losing the patience on which baseball depends.

Fans everywhere are growing uneasy about the state of the game. They have accepted \$8 box seats and \$1.50 hot dogs as their occasional contribution to the purchase of million-dollar free agents. But kicking almost a dollar every day into the team-owned pay-television pot will transform the relationship between fans and their teams. Baseball fans have always made a tre-

mendous emotional investment in their favorite team; if they also make a financial investment, they become less like fans and more like shareholders.

Einhorn may be right. As in so many areas of communications and show biz, sports on pay television may be able to do quite well relying on upscale demographics. But what if some day they gave a game and nobody came? ■



signed a contract last fall with Getty Oil to form a joint pay-sports venture involving Getty subsidiary ESPN. Henceforth, when ABC buys the rights to a major event, it will have four options: Air it through its own network affiliates; pass it on to ESPN; show part of it on ABC and part on ESPN, or present it via pay-per-view in a special arrangement with ESPN or through a forthcoming ABC pay channel. "The sequence depends on the bucks," says Herbert Granath, president of ABC Video.

CBS promptly signed a similar deal with the USA Network (recently purchased by Time, Paramount, and MCA). Douglas Richardson, a CBS Sports spokesman, admits that this

was a preemptive strike to keep cable outfits from outbidding the networks for certain middle-range events.

So far the only events that have appeared as part of these pacts have been "shared": ESPN has shown the first two days of the British Open and the seven Churchill Downs races leading up to the Kentucky Derby. ESPN hopes to get a small part of ABC's 1984 Olympics coverage. However, the ABC pay-per-view experiment has gotten off to an unexpectedly slow start, due to "technology snags" and doubts about the number of events (aside from a few title fights) that would draw an adequate audience. (Another possible factor in the slow start: ABC affiliates

have protested any loss of good programming to pay-per-view.)

And so it appears the World Series and Super Bowl are safely ensconced on commercial television, at least for the next several years. As Doug Richardson of CBS explains: "We have to do five or six NFL games every Sunday. If we had our way we'd only do the three most attractive games — we can lose money on Green Bay vs. Atlanta. But it's important to [commissioner] Rozelle that every game be covered. He gives us the Super Bowl as a trade-off. The Super Bowl is the dangling carrot that keeps the whole machine rolling down the road."

G. M.

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THE DECLINE & FALL OF THE RCA EMPIRE

BY DESMOND SMITH

THESE SHOULD be bounteous days for the RCA Corporation, its 118,000 employees, and its 242,000 shareholders. Two decades ago, General David Sarnoff, the company's chairman, accurately predicted the arrival in the 1980s of genetic engineering, manned space labs, cellular radio, worldwide weather satellites, palm-sized television sets, laser communications, and television-guided military aircraft. But in the decade following Sarnoff's death in 1971,

the company he had guided to global leadership in electronics has become a prime target for corporate asset-strippers.

For RCA, 1981 was a horrible year. Though the company took in more than \$8 billion, its earnings skidded to a paltry \$54 million from \$315 million in 1980. "It's pathetic," says James Magid, the distinguished research analyst for Wall Street's L. F. Rothschild, Unterberg, Towbin. "It's like looking at a zebra being attacked by hyenas. You've seen a hyena grab one of the zebra's legs, then the rest of the pack racing toward it, and the zebra struggling to get loose. And you know that even if the zebra does get loose, they'll pin it down again."

Last July, RCA launched a desperate rescue mission led by a new chairman of the board, Thornton Bradshaw, previously chief executive officer of Atlantic Richfield, the oil company. He is RCA's fourth chief executive in less than eight years. Working with a new management team, and with help from the management consulting firm of Booz, Allen & Hamilton, Bradshaw has been frantically taking apart many of the policies that have guided RCA over the last decade. "What we must do is return to our roots," Bradshaw told a *Wall Street Journal* reporter not long ago. "Over the years we moved into other areas when we should have been concentrating on areas of our competence and building on them."

Desmond Smith, an economist, has worked as a producer/writer for ABC, NBC, and CBS News. His articles on television and the media have appeared in The New York Times, and numerous magazines.

Among those areas of special competence is RCA Communications, which earned a tidy \$83 million profit before taxes in 1981. From outer space, where RCA brilliantly pioneered satellite distribution for the proliferating cable networks, to global data services, RCA's communications businesses are doing fine. So too — in spite of ferocious Japanese competition — is RCA's television manufacturing business. At the end of 1981, RCA was first in American sales of color and black-and-white television sets. Thanks to the Reagan defense budget, the company's government services (everything from weapons systems to government weather satellites to radio rooms for Trident-class ballistic missile submarines) also registered record sales and earnings. "These are the jewels in RCA's crown," says Magid. Yet despite Bradshaw's optimism that he can turn RCA around, he faces considerable pessimism from the financial community.

Bradshaw's task is a daunting one. Whipsawed by inflation and high interest rates, the company is nearly \$3 billion in debt, and has almost no cash to invest in its chairman's dream of the future. "Circumstances beyond their control are working against them," says Martin Weiss, a West Palm Beach financial analyst. For every dollar of short-term debt coming due, he says, RCA had available only 5.7 cents in cash or its equivalent in December 1981. "It's way out of line with the past. In 1980 it was 8 cents, in 1976 it was 14.5 cents, and the further back you go the higher it was."

In a frenzied effort to save money, Bradshaw has approved company-wide layoffs. In New York, many vice presidents have been forced to take early retirement. To save rent, several floors have been vacated in the RCA Building in Manhattan, and operations transferred to other locations. The Hertz Corporation and CIT Financial (acquired only two years ago for \$1.4 billion) had been reported up for sale at what one Wall Streeter called "steal-a-company prices." Bradshaw recently told shareholders that RCA is negotiating to sell Hertz, but has decided to keep CIT.

The broadcasting industry is nervously wondering what Bradshaw plans to do with NBC, RCA's broadcasting division, which embraces radio and television. Once a gushing source of profits for its parent company, NBC is in desperate straits. The third-place television network has been losing out to ABC and CBS since 1975. In 1977, Fred Silverman was hired as NBC's chief executive officer to reverse the decline. As ABC's master programmer,

THE DECLINE & FALL OF THE RCA EMPIRE

What went wrong? How can an \$8 billion corporation be "in trouble"?



Silverman had been touted by an admiring press as "The Man with the Golden Gut." At NBC, everything he touched turned to dross. Worse, morale, which had been at low ebb when he arrived, sank considerably during his three-year tenure. "In the end," says one senior NBC executive, "it was like the final days of Hitler around here."

Last summer Bradshaw replaced Silverman with Grant Tinker, but several months later, there was little evidence of improvement. Last year's operating profits were down to \$48.1 million — compared with \$299.6 million for CBS and \$316 million for ABC.

Charles Ryan, a Merrill Lynch investment analyst who pays close attention to RCA, thinks Bradshaw should sell NBC. "I believe a third network would not be viable in about seven years. Whoever owns the number three network will have a highly unprofitable and unsaleable business, including the owned and operated stations connected with it, if any are still connected with it."

Since Bradshaw's strategy for NBC will affect ABC and CBS, both rivals have been anxiously monitoring his public remarks. Despite official denials, there is a growing number of reports that Bradshaw might indeed sell the network. A source close to Ted Turner says Turner and Bradshaw have already had preliminary discussions about a possible Turner buy-out. Though Turner spokesmen have no comment, and RCA denies the story, even the thought that RCA would sell one of its basic industries feeds speculation that the company is in far worse shape than heretofore acknowledged.

What went wrong at RCA? How can an \$8 billion corporation be "in trouble"? Why did it happen? To answer such questions it is necessary to detour briefly into the rich, gaudy, and byzantine history of the company.

Bronze Age

On October 17, 1919, the General

Electric Company organized the Radio Corporation of America, which took over the plant, patents, and personnel (including general manager David Sarnoff) of the American Marconi company, an affiliate of British Marconi.

The articles of incorporation stipulated that RCA executives had to be American citizens, that foreigners could not hold more than 20 percent of radio stock, and that a representative of the U.S. Navy should attend board meetings. The first big boost for the company came when the government decided that the development of wireless radio, then a new technology with vital military applications, was essential to the national interest. It vested this responsibility, plus abundant technical and economic assistance, in 100 percent American-owned RCA.

Silver Age

When the home-radio boom started in the 1920s, RCA owned the principal patents and had the advantage over its competitors in research, facilities, and capital. Yet by the end of the decade, RCA found itself trailing such upstarts as Grigsby-Grunow, Philco, and Atwater-Kent.

Marketing its wonderful ideas has rarely been RCA's strong suit. Time and again the pattern has been repeated — with the invention of television, the introduction of computers, the CB radio boom, the video-game revolution — every time, RCA seems to fumble the ball at the crucial moment.

But in the late twenties, almost every radio company was making money. In the last two years of the decade, Americans bought seven-and-a-half million radios and invested \$1.5 billion in radio sets and parts; RCA grossed \$282 million, earned nearly \$36 million in net income, and saw its stock soar to \$400 per share.

On January 3, 1930, David Sarnoff became president of a reorganized RCA. For the next four decades he dominated American broadcasting the way the early railway corsairs dominated transportation. Arrogant, creative, packed with ideas and energy, Sarnoff took control of the board as though he owned it. For decades RCA's common shareholders received only small dividends. The company financed its expansion largely out of its own stock; during the Depression Sarnoff even paid the rent for the RCA Building by issuing preferred stock to the Rockefellers.

According to his biographer, Carl Dreher, Sarnoff was not interested in money for money's sake. Wall Street's opinion of RCA's meager dividends bothered him little.

Sarnoff's peers considered him an unorthodox tycoon, a dreamer interested less in the bottom line than in innovation. To the consternation of Hollywood, which feared sound would ruin the movie business, Sarnoff helped make silent movies talk. When the phonograph industry thought radio would destroy it, Sarnoff suggested that the two industries merge. And in the thirties, despite the protests of NBC's radio affiliates, he poured millions of RCA's dollars into the development of television.

Golden Age

By the 1950s, RCA had become the most exciting, vigorous, and visionary corporation in America. The \$50 million Sarnoff spent developing television enabled the company to reap an awesome postwar payoff.

In 1949 alone, the number of homes with television jumped from one million to four million. A year later, there were nine million; the next year, fifteen million; then twenty million. "The Radio Corporation of America," wrote *Fortune* magazine, "that old charmer of men's imaginations, has again become highly exciting corporate news . . . at this stage of the race RCA appears to have won the pole position in every phase of television manufacturing and exploitation — it's first in receivers, transmitters, and tubes, and first in telecasting . . ."

Sarnoff was celebrated as a modern-day Medici, patron of the new electronic arts, the visionary who hired Toscanini for radio, brought opera to television, and hired programming genius Pat Weaver to run NBC Television. Declaring, "Money is no object," he also ordered RCA engineers to develop an electronic color system.

THE DECLINE & FALL OF THE RCA EMPIRE

Bradshaw wants to take
RCA back to its roots.
Many think such talk is
smoke and mirrors.



A \$100 million company in 1938, RCA was a billion-dollar corporation by 1955. In less than twenty years the value of its plant and equipment had multiplied sixfold, and its staff had quadrupled to more than 80,000 employees.

Not all of Sarnoff's decisions worked out as well. One of the most controversial — RCA's entry into the computer business — was to have disastrous consequences twenty years later. Though Sarnoff correctly predicted that electronic data processing would be the next "estate" in electronics, he badly underestimated the competition.

Soon after RCA's involvement with computers had begun, Tom Watson Jr., the president of IBM, told Sarnoff that he wanted to hire John Burns, a senior partner in the management firm of Booz, Allen & Hamilton. Since Booz, Allen counted RCA among its 800 clients, Watson was concerned there might be a conflict of interest.

According to William Rodgers, author of *Think, A Biography of the Watsons and IBM*: "Sarnoff assured Tom that RCA's primary interest in the field of computers was related to military logistics. . . . He had, said Sarnoff, no intention of trying to wedge RCA into

the computer market across the board."

Satisfied with Sarnoff's statement, IBM put Burns in charge of a major study with access to IBM's inside secrets. Writes Rodgers: "Within two years, board chairman David Sarnoff hired Burns as president in a move that shocked Tom Watson Jr., and shook IBM to its deepest circuits . . . [IBM] salesmen were informed they had 'damned well better not lose an account to RCA.'"

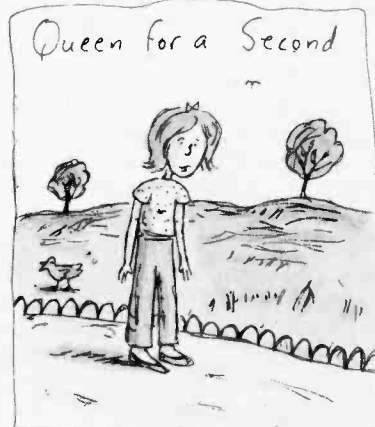
For RCA, this marked the start of an epic twenty-year battle with the Colossus of Armonk; at the end of it, IBM ate RCA alive. In 1971, the year Sarnoff died, RCA took a \$490 million write-off on its computer business, reducing the company's net worth by a quarter.

The Time of Troubles

In retrospect, it is clear that David Sarnoff bore as much responsibility for the company's failure as for its success. Idolized in the business press, he behaved as if his competence were boundless, advising Richard Nixon on Cold-War strategy, bombarding Washington with crackpot ideas for a "radio war" with the Soviet Union, relishing his role as an industrial "statesman."

One of the costs of being run virtually as a one-man show was that RCA became a multibillion dollar corporation in which planning was almost nonexistent. As the Japanese planned their American export offensive in the 1960s, Sarnoff was redirecting RCA's priorities; instead of concentrating on winning the dominant share of the consumer electronics market, he was more interested in battling IBM for computer dominance. With RCA thus preoccupied, the Japanese faced reduced competition when they began their steady penetration of the American con-

The Runners-Up



R. Christ

sumer electronics market.

For even as Sarnoff started committing huge amounts of RCA's already stretched technical and financial resources to computers — a product with which it had little marketing experience — Akio Morita, cofounder of the then tiny Sony Corporation, was moving in on the tiny transistor, which Bell Labs was licensing. Trained as a physicist, Morita had started Sony (then rather grandly known as the Tokyo Telecommunication Laboratory) in 1945 with half a dozen employees and \$500. Paying royalties to Bell, Morita reasoned that the transistor would make possible miniature radios, portable tape recorders, increasingly smaller television sets.

"We realized," he told an interviewer, "that we had to begin by promoting the usefulness of our product in the new concept of a personal radio." Sony also realized that the television boom would eventually create a big market in video recorders: "As long as we had the tape recorder for recording voices, we would need a video recorder for recording pictures."

So while Sony aggressively expanded its world trade in the late sixties, insiders thought RCA was going nowhere. Bernard Vonderschmitt, vice president and general manager with Zilog Inc., a major manufacturer of semiconductors, was a top RCA manager for more than twenty years. "They were in a holding pattern," says Vonderschmitt. "There was just no forward thinking at all."

Vonderschmitt and colleagues lost faith in RCA because they were convinced the company could produce a better consumer product than the Japanese, yet they saw top management as more interested in licensing RCA's technology to the Japanese than competing head-to-head against them. "There were always a lot of arguments between the operating division and the royalty people," says Vonderschmitt. Although royalties are a less important source of revenue now for RCA than in the past, Vonderschmitt thinks his former company's preoccupation with royalty revenue kept it from competing more aggressively in the international markets.

Beaten by IBM in the computer market and ill-prepared for the ferocious Japanese challenge to its major consumer electronics business, RCA began groping toward a better future on January 7, 1970: The board of directors accepted the resignation of General David Sarnoff and appointed his son, Robert Sarnoff, as his successor. Wall Street brokerage houses that year generally listed RCA as a "blue chip" investment; Sony was invariably

THE DECLINE & FALL OF THE RCA EMPIRE

But the hour is late.
Corporate asset-strippers
are already calculating
the company's value.



"speculative." A decade later, Merrill Lynch ranks Sony as "blue chip." It's RCA that is "speculative."

A Decade of Decline

Inside RCA, Robert Sarnoff's appointment was greeted with few hurrahs. Says one recently retired senior executive, "He always struck me as having an abiding sense of inadequacy." Another, Peter Hoffman, former president of Hertz International, remembers the younger Sarnoff as less attentive to business matters than his father. Recalls the thirty-three-year RCA veteran, "I would be in top-level meetings with the General. He would say: 'Summarize the points of view!' Then he'd say, 'Don't you think this is what we ought to do?' And then — not because of his position, but because of his clear insight — people basically always used to say 'yes,' because God! He used to cut through the matter! I never saw that keen insight with Robert Sarnoff, because I never saw his span of attention last that long."

Ask half a dozen senior executives at RCA to describe Robert Sarnoff's single greatest management strength, and you receive silence as an answer. Yet this was the individual chosen by RCA's board of directors to lead it into the seventies, and to do battle against the powerful Japanese challenge.

Investment analyst James Magid describes the shape of that challenge: "The Japanese had targeted television as the forerunner of a major technological onslaught. They launched a three-pronged attack: One, selling product at low prices. Two, selling quality product at high prices. Three, going after the private-label business, and bribing those major accounts through illegal kickbacks and rebates for which penalties were paid by U.S. wholesalers.

"All this undermined RCA's television business, and were it not for what I estimated to be about \$50 million a year in royalties, RCA would have been driven from the field."

To RCA insiders, Robert Sarnoff

seemed less interested in RCA's basic industries — consumer electronics, broadcasting, communications — than in diversification. Peter Hoffman recalls high-level discussions on getting out of color television, a business RCA invented. "There was an antitrust suit against RCA in the 1950s," says Chris Stavrou, a communications analyst with Evans and Company, "and RCA either had to divest itself of color television, separate color television and broadcasting, or give away their color television technology, so their unfortunate state was forced on them." As a result, says Stavrou, "RCA was, and probably still is, the largest recipient of royalty income from Japanese industry." By the mid-seventies, RCA was pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into companies far removed from its traditional business: car rentals, truck leasing, greeting cards, frozen foods, floor coverings, carpets, publishing, and real estate.

Charles Ryan, who follows RCA for Merrill Lynch, says, "The board of directors more and more formed the guiding philosophy for the company, and these were made up of bankers or investment people — not the engineers who guided the other major [electronics] firms in the country."

Among RCA's most senior managers, some of whom had spent thirty or forty years working for the company, there was a growing feeling that Robert Sarnoff had to go. During 1974 and 1975 the commercial electronics group lost nearly \$56 million. Products were created in the operating divisions only to be abandoned by Sarnoff's new corporate marketing staff.

In mid-1974 the company announced that its recently introduced line of radios, phonographs (432 possible combinations of cabinet, speaker, and stereo components), and tape players would be its last. Declaring that its operations had become technologically obsolete and only marginally profitable, RCA gave up its entire audio products business in 1975.

Later that year, Robert Sarnoff was ousted from his \$483,500-a-year job, in what the business press reported as a "palace coup." While Sarnoff was away on one of his frequent vacations, several senior executives whose jobs he had threatened took action. Says one senior executive, "They banded together, and before he could get them, they got him!" Sarnoff left the company with a ten-year, \$75,000-a-year consulting contract.

"You can't run a half a dozen major unrelated businesses from the top of the corporation, unless you have a fantastic

staff," says Bernard Vonderschmitt. "Bob Sarnoff tried to do that and he didn't have the wherewithal to do it. RCA is really a conglomerate, and the defocusing of the other businesses from the main thrust made RCA something he could never cope with."

RCA was beginning to slip out of control. At the company's Manhattan headquarters, Sarnoff's successors continued to play Russian roulette with each other's careers.

Sarnoff's replacement, Anthony Conrad, was forced to resign ten months after taking office, when his failure to file personal income tax returns for the previous five years was revealed. His replacement was executive vice president Edgar Griffiths, another veteran of the RCA Service Company. Though considered a plodding bookkeeper by the many engineers in RCA's electronics business, Griffiths was soon winning plaudits from Wall Street for his tough, bruising management style. In a 1978 article, *Fortune* magazine called him "the best surprise RCA has had in years."

Inside the company the view was very different. Dubbed by his colleagues "Bottom Line Ed," he terrified subordinates, retiring, firing, or transferring seven out of the seventeen operating-division chiefs. One senior executive who survived Griffiths says, "He came in with a meat axe. He fired twenty-three out of twenty-four executives at Hertz, and elevated people who had absolutely no executive background only because they were cronies. He had no appreciation of electronics."

Although he got rid of a number of the companies Robert Sarnoff had acquired in the late 1960s and early 1970s — Random House, Banquet Foods and Oriel Foods, and Cushman & Wakefield, a real estate firm — Griffiths disappointed traditionalists by acquiring CIT Financial in 1980 for \$1.4 billion. The action gave a clear signal he shared his recent predecessors' lack of commitment to the company's root businesses. "If you were sitting there seeing it happen, you could see what a tragedy it was," says Vonderschmitt.

"I had probably the highest technology part of it [RCA's Solid State Division], and it was unbelievable, the fighting you had to do to get any kind of money at all, and the restraints under which you had to work. The ground rules were totally screwed up, and the guys who were calling the shots didn't really understand how you motivate people, how you motivate divisions — particularly in the high-technology business. You can't run a rental business the same way you run a high-technology

business. They are totally different things.

"The electronic divisions had to fight every inch of the way for the attention at the top of the corporation. You couldn't get it because they were on to other things! Sony said, 'We're in the electronics business, as a matter of fact we're in the consumer business, that's what we're going to focus on.'"

The Desperate Hours

Last summer Edgar Griffiths, fifty-eight, retired with a five-year, \$250,000-a-year consulting agreement. Thornton Bradshaw, a member of the board since 1971, replaced him.

Since his appointment, Bradshaw has kept a low profile. Despite repeated requests, he would not be interviewed for this article. He emerges occasionally from his fifty-third-floor office to talk to Wall Street investment analysts about his plans to "restructure" the company, and about getting RCA back to those basic industries — consumer electronics, entertainment, communications — that made the company a household name long ago.

But to many observers such talk is smoke and mirrors. A scant ten years after the death of General David Sarnoff, RCA's consumer manufacturing business has withered, consisting now of little more than television sets and video-disc players. The company no longer manufactures radios, record players, or tape recorders. To be sure, it sells video-cassette machines, but they're made in Japan by a Japanese corporation. A pioneer in CB radio, in video games, in personal computers, RCA has eliminated all these from its product line in recent years.

Of the many products that came out of the solid-state revolution, RCA has only one, the video-disc player, which many consider flawed technology because it cannot record programs. RCA has spent more than \$200 million bringing its SelectaVision video disc to market, with dreadful results. It projected sales of 200,000, but has sold fewer than 70,000 players. (Significantly, the video-disc disaster has occurred without Japanese competition, since the Japanese have their hands full selling video-cassette recorders.)

There is much discussion among Wall Street analysts and RCA insiders that Bradshaw will wind up overseeing RCA's breakup, rather than its renewal. At RCA's stormy annual meeting on May 4, numerous stockholders, including several former RCA employees, sharply attacked Bradshaw and other directors for letting the company stumble while many of them benefited from

high salaries and bonuses. (Bradshaw's current salary is \$938,500, more than double that of his predecessor, Ed Griffiths.) Both *Fortune* magazine and *The New York Times* have criticized the "cozy" retirement contracts and consulting fees.

Noted the *Times*: "Donald B. Smiley, an RCA director, for instance, is being paid \$400,000 as a two-year consulting fee, much of which was for recommending that Mr. Bradshaw, a fellow board member, succeed Mr. Griffiths. Yet Mr. Smiley, a former chairman of R. H. Macy & Company, owns only 100 shares of RCA, while other directors, except for Mr. Bradshaw, also own fewer than 500 shares apiece."

Bradshaw assured the annual meeting that "Any attempt at dismembering this corporation wouldn't be in the long-term interests of the shareholders, and we would resist it to the utmost." He emphasized that RCA is "ideally positioned" to take advantage of the growing markets for new media and communications services.

Bradshaw may wind up overseeing RCA's breakup rather than its renewal.

But despite such optimistic talk, RCA is struggling to survive the effects of more than a decade of management flat-footedness. "At this point," says James Magid, investment analyst, "RCA will either sell [its businesses] selectively, or it will be dismembered, willy-nilly, because the present management has apparently run out of landing strip — there's just no more room."

Not long ago, this kind of talk would have been inconceivable to the 118,000 people who work for RCA. They had pride in their company's splendid American know-how, from RCA Globcom's San Francisco telex exchange to NBC News in New York, from RCA's Kingsbridge Communications Center in Piscataway, New Jersey to the RCA-maintained U.S. Navy Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Facility in Puerto Rico — and now in its satellites.

But the hour is late; corporate asset-strippers are already calculating the value of RCA. RCA's current market value is close to \$1.5 billion. But according to Magid, the company is easily worth three times that price if sold off in individual pieces to other corporations.

Business schools ought to make RCA a compulsory subject for their students, because it represents a classic indictment of American business management as practiced in the 1970s. ■

L I V I N G W I T H A S A T E L L I T E D I S H

BY STEVEN LEVY

T

he Barlow home looks like any other rambling house in rural Connecticut: considerably more than a hundred years old, but well-kept, with a recent coat of white paint. The family is right on the demographic money — Portus Barlow, a thirty-one-year-old executive, wife Kathy, nine-year-old Shanthi, and six-year-old Silas. But my reason for visiting them one recent weekend stands behind their house: a

twelve-foot square apparatus made by Barlow's company, which manufactures satellite receiving dishes. Made of screening and redwood scaffolding, it looks like a giant hibachi. It's called a Skyview 1 earth station antenna; it lists for \$3,995, not including installation, and enables any home to pull in transmissions bounced off space satellites: thousands of choices that allegedly transform an ordinary television into the world's most varied programming source.

I had heard the wondrous stories about the visual options available to those few who had taken the expensive plunge and installed a "dish" beside their hot tub or tennis court. They have free access to dozens of pay-television services, enough sports events to make every day an Olympian orgy, and even some literal orgies to satisfy the most prurient of videophiles. Also, they get voyeuristic looks at network "feeds" not intended for broadcast: disparaging remarks muttered by newsmen beaming their reports to home bases in New York or Atlanta; behind-the-scenes caucuses of sports announcers between innings, and the much-touted antics of Johnny Carson during station breaks. I

imagined Johnny uncensored, uttering pithy, unprintable remarks that convulse the studio audience (as well as the fortunate dish owners watching the NBC satellite feed to affiliates).

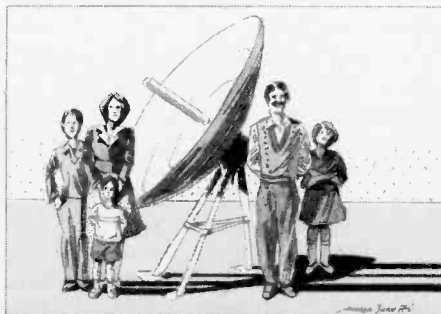
On the other hand, I had my doubts about the joys of dish owning. Earth station reception is a true do-it-yourself alternative to conventional television reception, and I wasn't sure how well it worked, technically or aesthetically. Then there was the cost. Could *anything* justify the price tag of \$3,000 to \$10,000 for a home setup?

Some of my qualms vanished within minutes of arriving at my earth station destination, bucolic Putnam, Connecticut. I headed straight for the family's nineteen-inch color television. Since Portus Barlow is in the dish business, he was only too happy to flick on the set.

After spinning the knobs of the in-home receiver, which is the size of a fat cigar box, we got an image. It looked like any other sharp television image. In fact, I recognized it: the relentlessly cute mug of little Tracy, heroine of *Oh God! Book II*. I had caught a half-hour of this pious calamity the week before, hoping for distraction from work, but I could not deal with mediocrity on such a cosmic plane, and had returned to my typewriter a beaten man. Now, with a helping hand from outer space, I was once again suffering that child's conversations with deity George Burns.

Barlow informed me that I was receiving this signal from Transponder 12 on the Satcom satellite. What this meant, I learned, was that the dish in the backyard could bring in up to eleven satellites, but the horn-like amplifier poised a few feet away from the dish was focused on one in particular: RCA's Satcom I. On that satellite, or "bird," are twenty-four transponders bouncing back signals sent from earth. Each transponder has its own frequency, and I could switch to another transponder — change the channel — by turning a knob on the receiver beside me. Which I promptly did.

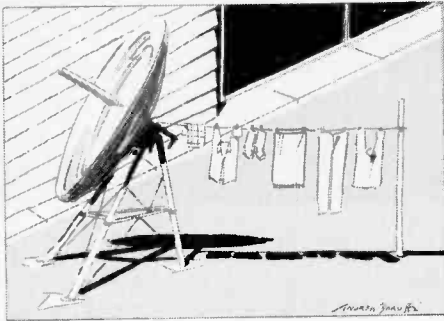
The goodies of Satcom I revealed themselves to me — an all-star squad of



Steven Levy lives in New York City and writes for *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*.

Illustrations by Andrea Baruffi

cable-network services. HBO, Showtime, ESPN, The Movie Channel, CNN, Nickelodeon-ARTS, and USA Network have one or more transponders, as do a few religious networks and superstations. Barlow told me Satcom's lineup was so impressive that he almost never adjusted his equipment to pull in the other satellites. I could see why. A quick switch of the dial yielded Nicholson and Dunaway emoting away in *Chinatown* (The Movie Channel); an ESPN quarterback reading the Ottawa



I came to see the exotica that dish watching is noted for

blitz; Todd Rundgren going through visual changes on Music Television; a CNN report on New York singles; a Christian talk show for kids, interrupted by a message to would-be suicides; a Cinemax French film about a lady cop, with fleeting nudity, and more movies, two commercial-free cartoon shows . . . a virtual cornucopia. All in an area that barely receives the signals of the three major network affiliates in Boston, and has no cable hookup or subscription television.

"I can't remember the last time I watched broadcast television," says Portus Barlow. He confided that, really, he's too busy to watch much television at all. Kathy Barlow told me the same thing, and added that she tries to keep the kids' watching to a minimum. But as the weekend progressed, I found that satellite viewing had perhaps more of an effect on the Barlows than they admitted. As almost every movie came on, or was previewed — and there were scores of them — Portus or Kathy would provide an informed critique. (And the opinion hadn't been formed in a theater — Barlow says he hasn't been out to the movies in years, since they're all in his house within months of release.)

What the parents had not seen, the kids had. During a Showtime presentation of *The Idolmaker*, the teen idol at one point talked a naïve fan into a compromising position in his car. "She's only fourteen!" six-year-old Silas shouted with glee, much as a pre-

space-age child would have shouted, "Watch out for the witch!" to Hansel and Gretel. Silas and his brother were also uncannily familiar with the groups whose promotional clips are shown as the programming mainstay of MTV on Transponder 11. Before a chord is played, Silas will identify the band, be they the Pretenders or some obscure heavy-metal contingent, and voice his opinion on the upcoming visual effects. The opinion is usually favorable; MTV gives kids the same kind of short-term gratification as *Sesame Street*, though it does so somewhat more loudly.

Mostly what the Barlows watch, though, and what I watched while snatching signals from Satcom I, are movies. With the giants of pay television coming in free, this is not surprising. It is also a less varied menu than one might suspect; the repetition can be numbing. For example, by using different transponders, I could watch my old nemesis *Oh God! Book II* not once, but eight times in a little over the first twenty-four hours of my visit. And the aforementioned *Idolmaker* was shown almost as many times. This is not my idea of a brave new world. The system is fine as long as you haven't seen the film yet and need plenty of chances to catch it from the beginning. But after seeing a movie, a dish owner may run across it again literally hundreds of times. This makes the rerun policy of the three broadcast networks seem rather benign.

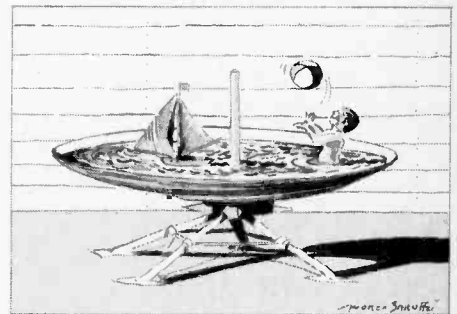
Fortunately, there are always twenty or so other choices to make on Satcom I. And having *all* the movie channels means you won't miss out on some of the modest yet compelling films shown on only one or two services. You get into the habit of twisting the dial rather often, rolling dice for something better than what's presently on. Sometimes you roll lucky seven — a viewing of *Bananas* on Home Theater Network, or Fernando Valenzuela pitching against the Cubs on WGN. Other times, the dice come up snake eyes, and you get George Burns in his Jehovah mode.

To get this kind of variety on cable (and no cable company offers this kind of variety), you'd have to pay steep monthly fees. After shelling out the initial cost, though, earth station owners pay zilch for "premium" services. Even if they *want* to pay, programmers such as HBO and Showtime refuse to accept their money. Pay-television executives have a term for the practice of watching their offerings by dish: theft of signal. The Federal Communications Commission's Wilbert Nixon confirms that the communications code prevents people from picking up direct satellite trans-

mission without the permission of the originator. But earth station activists (who have their own organization, called SPACE) think that this provision will never stand up in court. Who's to stop you, after all, from making use of signals that are bounced into your own backyard? If HBO doesn't want you to amplify the signal, let HBO keep its damn signal out of your yard.

HBO, Showtime, and others say they will eventually scramble their transmissions so only cable operators with decoders will be able to use them. "If people buy earth stations thinking they're in for all this free entertainment, they're going to have a shock — in three years, even the non-premium services will scramble," says Showtime's Steve Schulte. HBO plans to start scrambling its satellite signal by next year. But cynics doubt many others will follow suit. They point out that the relatively insignificant number of earth station owners (around 30,000, according to SPACE) seems too small to justify the cost of developing a fool-proof scrambler and equipping thousands of cable operators with decoders.

The present, of course, is still blissfully unscrambled. And I was getting quite comfortable with Satcom I. But its riches of sports, movies, and polyester preachers were not enough — almost a dozen other "birds" were waiting to be plucked. On these, I hoped to see some of the exotica that dish watching is noted for. But unless your dish is equipped with an expensive motorized switching mechanism (few dishes are), you have



Who's to stop you from using signals beamed into your backyard?

to go outside and repoint the dish or its amplifier until it's aimed directly at the satellite you want. As someone who frequently balks at getting off the sofa to change channels, I find the idea of going outside on a winter's night to switch satellites rather hellish. But it was spring, so Barlow and I went across town to his office, behind which was a dish set up for serious satellite hunting, or "cherry picking."

8

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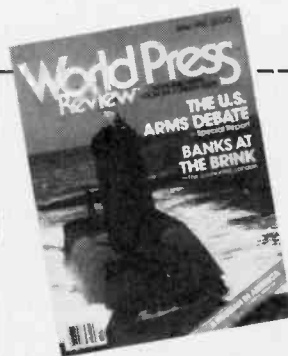
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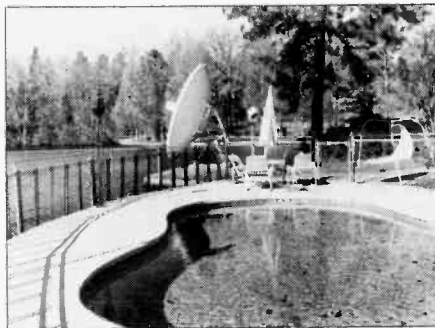
Portus Barlow and I spent Saturday night trying to find orbiting birds. After cranking the dish toward what we thought was a satellite and coming up blank a few times, we finally picked up Comstar II and went inside to watch it. Only three transponders were active: some Christian network, an auxiliary Cinemax channel, and the prize, R-rated Escapade, which at the moment was showing some foreign, grade-Z titillation flick with a dubbing job that must have been done by actors on Quaaludes. Not that I was listening.

On Sunday afternoon we tried again, with much more success. Barlow had figured out that last night's difficulty was due to "reversed polarity," whatever that means. So he reversed our polarity, and things were fine. Using a chart with each satellite's elevation and position on the horizon, we decided which bird we wanted and pointed the dish directly towards its coordinates. Sure enough, we hit the bird each time, and were rewarded with a whole new set of transmissions. This was a rather startling experience for me. I had never doubted the *existence* of these satellites, mind you. It's just that I never expected them to respond to me so personally.

Unfortunately, it was the wrong time for Johnny Carson. But on one of the three Canadian birds we pulled in, we did get a Montreal Expos game with commentary in French. Other Canadian offerings included a show on Chinese cooking (the host wore an apron saying "Eat at Your Own Risk," which I hope does not typify North-of-the-Border humor), a rerun of the television series *Flipper*, a religious show from Vancouver, a flick with modern-day cave-men engaged in terrorist activities, a variety show with a slick French crooner, and a highbrow talk show about classical music. On Satcom II, we got the NBC feed of the Arlington Million horse race, where a flustered announcer (NBC had just identified the wrong winner in a photo finish) asked his director to repeat two simple instructions slowly, then complained, "I need to write that on a card — it's too complicated." Meanwhile, the video portion of this station-break circus showed the race being run at lightning speed — in reverse.

On the Westar II bird, there were sports: the Red Sox against the A's on the Armed Services Network; the ABC feed of the Redskins exhibition game, and a Los Angeles station's feed of the Angel-Oriole game. While waiting for the broadcast to start, announcer Ron Fairly said to his boothmate Don Drysdale: "What are you going to talk about, big boy?"

LIVING WITH A SATELLITE DISH



Did you ever wonder what camera-men focus on between innings of a ball game? Between frames of the Atlanta game sent to WTBS from Montreal, the video showed a tight, *tight* close-up of a foxy woman returning to her seat in the stands. Her progress was faithfully recorded for the entire trip down the aisle.

Meanwhile, another Westar bird was transmitting four PBS broadcasts to various affiliates. On one, a neatly coiffed interviewer was conducting a dialogue with someone in a distant studio — but

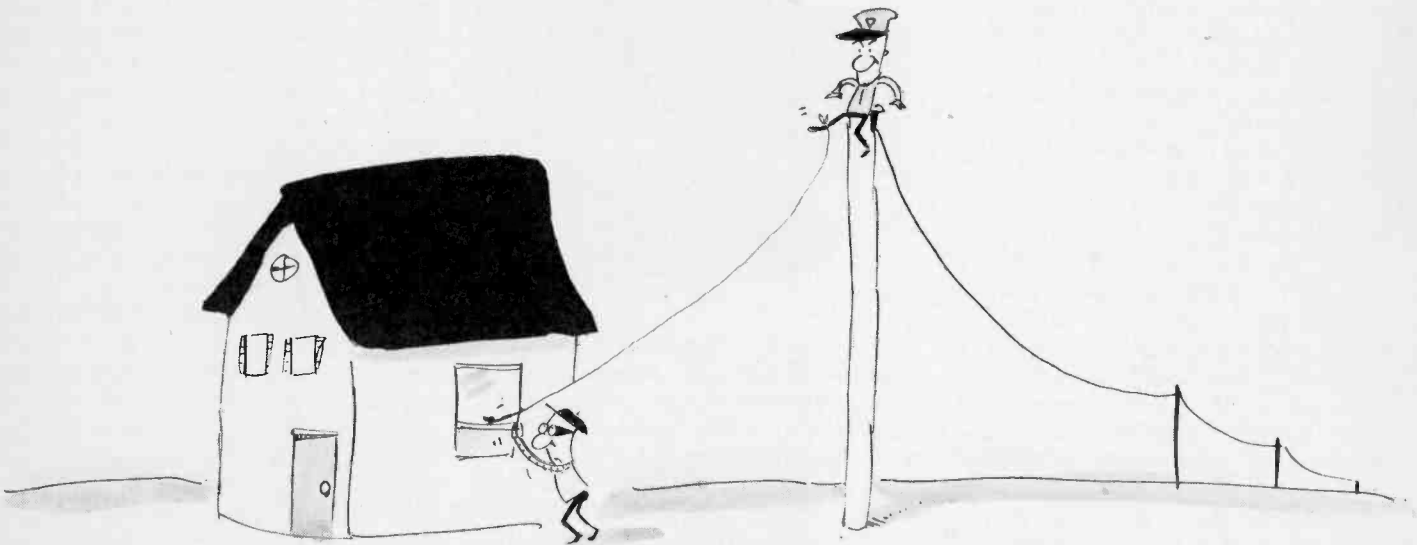
this particular feed showed only our interviewer, nodding sagely in response to a voice that only he heard.

Enjoyable as they are, these "inside" feeds are novelties that I suspect dish owners soon tire of. After a few hours of intense satellite and transponder hopping, I was ready to chuck it all and watch just *one* close baseball game, or just *one* good movie. In two days of almost nonstop viewing, I had seen, aside from a few quirky things, nothing truly memorable — just much more of some of the better or worse things I usually saw. Portus Barlow summed it up when he told me, "No matter how good a delivery system is, it can't make up for a lack of software."

So my conclusion was that for folks living in some obscure corner of Idaho — or any area without cable or subscription television — dish owning might well be salvation, at least until the scramblers come. But for a conventionally wired New Yorker, satellite television is a high-priced smorgasbord. A few rare spices have been added, but the food is essentially the same as what you get at home — only in much larger quantities. I left stuffed, and was glad I came . . . but after all, I didn't have to foot the bill. ■



The Push for Electronic Security



THOUGH CABLE TELEVISION began as a way to improve reception in rural areas, today it is moving into the cities, where many subscribers are more concerned with ghosts lurking outside their windows than those on their television screens.

As it happens, this anxiety nicely answers the needs of cable operators. Having won big-city franchises and installed two-way services, they now need a way to make their staggering investments pay dividends. Americans may not be ready for shopping and banking at home, but they *are* ready for a cable-fed home security system. Ironically, the chief allies of the cable industry in this bold and risky venture are the nation's petty criminals, who commit at least four million burglaries each year. The market in home-protection appliances has become a billion dollar industry, with a growth rate of more than 20 percent per year; that's with less than 2 percent of the nation's homes wired against intrusion so far.

"Security systems have the clearest market potential of any two-way service," maintains Thomas Baldwin of Michigan State University, an early researcher in interactive television. "The technology now being distributed for security purposes can be adapted later to

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

THIS HOME
PROTECTED
— BY —
2-WAY CABLE



by Stephen Fenichell

videotex, home shopping, and home banking. It's largely a question of which one you push first, because eventually the companies will need an aggregate of all these potential services to make these capital investments pay. Security is now in the forefront because it looks like the best way to test the waters."

Mike Carboy, president of Tocom Inc., one of the country's largest suppliers of two-way security hardware

to the cable industry, puts it this way: "It's like we're selling the razors first, and then we'll start selling the blades. The future of interactive is tremendous, but security is *it* for the present."

Home security is indeed a two-way service: It not only protects homes, it also endows the cable operator with a valuable form of personal trust that entertainment companies normally can't attain. The people who buy the cable security service depend on the operator to notify the proper authorities in event of emergency, and to provide them with the relevant personal and household data. Home security is the base on which cable companies can build to become full-service household managers monitoring energy, controlling appliances, and assuming a host of other domestic responsibilities.

The heart of the burglar alarm business for more than a century has been a communications operation known as central-station security monitoring. The alarm at a protected premises is connected electronically to a central location; when the alarm goes off, a signal is sent there, and an operator calls the police. This connection was initially made over telegraph wires, then through telephone lines.

The cable companies' elaborate networks of coaxial cable connecting every customer residence to a central transmitting station are the basis for a vast security system; it uses the same "in-

Illustrations by Patrick McDonnell

trusion detectors" and electric contacts on windows and doors as the security industry does.

First-time subscribers to security systems often choose cable because they're already used to making monthly payments for the better reception and greater program choice the cable wire provides. And cable companies have established a benign image by associating themselves with entertainment services, while security companies still tend to suffer from a somewhat unsavory image, acquired during the days of one-man storefronts where locks and protective grates were peddled. Seizing the opportunity to distinguish themselves from their rivals, cable operators have tried to cultivate a "community service" approach designed to ease their transition into the role of quasi-utilities. Some have even formed separate subsidiaries to deal with the sale, installation, and maintenance of security systems, dressing their operatives in snappy uniforms that complement their "emergency services" image.

Tocom, based in Irving, Texas, became convinced a few years back that security alone held the key to the realm of interactive communications, and in 1970 developed interactive cable security equipment. By 1980, it had installed two-way cable systems in more than forty Southern and Southwestern communities.

The company ventured into its first major metropolitan area — Dayton, Ohio — in 1978, when it joined Viacom, a cable company, on a pilot project called Cableguard. Tocom manages and operates Cableguard, while Viacom provides entertainment and other services. In Park Cities, Texas, Tocom owns one-fifth of the local security system, which it manages on a contractual basis with Sammons Cable.

Tocom's collaboration strategy enables cable companies with little or no experience in security operation to get into the security business. "We started out as an equipment supplier, and gradually evolved into a service supplier," says Tocom national sales manager Sid Prothro. "Not every cable operator is eager or able to enter the security business. They're put off by the need to train new people, to build new plant, to start up a whole new operation. We sell them equipment as a package system, and teach them how to run it."

Even without technologically superior systems, cable security companies are beating traditional competitors by exploiting low overhead and using better

marketing strategies. Because cable operators do not use telephone company lines, they do not have to pay the high phone tariffs that traditional alarm companies do. They can thus undercut alarm industry rates for twenty-four-hour monitoring. Their marketing strategy

Cable Security vs. Conventional Systems

Though cable companies are representing their two-way systems as pushing far beyond the state-of-the-art of the security industry, they do not differ radically from the best conventional systems now on the market.

THE SIMILARITIES:

- Both offer the same basic services: burglar alarms, various sensors for intrusion detection, smoke and fire alarms, medical emergency buttons, and police emergency summons.
- Both rely on a two-way wire between the home and a critical monitoring point. (The cable systems use the cable television line and the traditional systems rely on telephones.)

THE DIFFERENCES:

- Cable security systems sell for an average of \$1,000 or less. Monthly monitoring charges are \$10 to \$15.
- Conventional central-station security systems cost up to \$3,000 or more. Monthly charges range from \$20 to \$50.

(Cable security systems do not pay high telephone tariffs, which partially accounts for the price disparity.)

CAVEAT:

The two systems share one important weakness: They are only as effective as the city services they feed into. No state-of-the-art security system is going to make 911 respond any faster.

enhances this advantage by keeping initial installation costs low; profits are accumulated gradually from monthly revenues. Finally, the conventional alarm industry's neglect of homeowners in favor of commercial clients has left the residential market wide open.

Sensing the opportunities in this new field, Warner Amex installed its Qube

cable security system in Columbus, Ohio in March 1980. Since then, more than 5,000 Columbus homeowners have bought the Qube security service. Warner Amex plans to offer security in Cincinnati within the next few months, then in Pittsburgh, and eventually in Dallas, where it won the franchise despite Tocom's aid to competitors. "Everything is evolutionary in this business," explains Warner Amex chairman Gustave Hauser. "We go from the known and acceptable to the more exotic. Our original product has been entertainment, to be sure, but we are essentially a communications operation. We are pleased with our two-way security services because they represent only the beginning of an entire array of household-management services, including energy monitoring and various forms of appliance control. Using that electronic superhighway into the home, we can do all sorts of fascinating things."

"We're selling peace of mind, as well as a piece of equipment," says Miklos Korodi, president of Warner Amex's security systems division. "People in this country feel the need for more security — not just affluent people, but the average guy with an income of \$15,000 to \$20,000. We're moving into position now to offer that average person a good, solid alarm system, something the alarm industry was never able to do because its prices were too high and its volume too low. We're showing the alarm industry a whole segment of business it hardly even realized was there."

In all two-way cable security systems, a major selling point is a data base on every subscriber household, stored in the memory of the central-station computer. Medical histories and information on household members can be made available instantly to ambulance crews and doctors summoned to the house during a medical emergency. In case of a fire, officials can be given precise specifications on housing design and construction, location of exits and entrances, and other relevant data. Addresses and phone numbers of friends and relatives can be kept on file in case of emergency. Also on file is a special code the homeowner can give the computer if an alarm goes off accidentally.

TO THOSE troubled by the potential publicizing of this private information, Gustave Hauser says, "No invasion of privacy is intended. It's all confidential. It's up to people themselves what information is to



be made available to others. If you don't want people to know about you, don't give out that information." Warner Amex's contract does contain a confidentiality clause, but such restraint is entirely self-regulated. A mature body of law dealing with issues of privacy and interactive television has yet to be created. Cable companies' promises to protect privacy don't satisfy everyone. "If information is stored at a central computer for security purposes," muses Stuart Brotman of Communications Strategies Inc. in Cambridge, Massachusetts, "what's to prevent that information from being merged with data on programming habits and other activities?"

Brotman points out that "interactive communications implies a monitoring function. Cable security is twenty-four-hour monitoring; once someone in central control has access to what goes in and out of that cable, the information can be accessed by others. These data bases are to be furnished to central au-

thorities, such as police, fire department, whomever, in an emergency. Who's to define precisely what constitutes an emergency?" He is similarly concerned at the lack of subpoena restrictions on central records: "A cable bill can be requested by courts, and if it is accurately itemized, quite a lot can be deduced about the behavior of a household from that central record."

Kenneth Gordon, who with James A. Brown has written a working paper on privacy and communications for the Federal Communications Commission, argues for a natural balance between individual rights of privacy and free exchange of information. "Knowing things about other people is the basis of social interaction," Gordon points out. As for the dangers of centralized information, he says that "data collected all in one place can be either conducive to privacy or destructive to it. You could put all your eggs in one basket, and then watch that basket carefully for leakage. Or you could require that information be

decentralized, and worry about leakage from many baskets."

The many people across the country who are investing in sophisticated electronic surveillance systems to protect themselves against fire or theft may find themselves vulnerable to forms of invasion more subtle than any they had anticipated: Advertisers might purchase lists of security subscribers; courts might subpoena records of household monitoring; insurance companies might want to verify that a house has really been robbed. Security services represent only the beginning of a trend toward ever-centralized household operations. As they become established, they transform many previously private activities into relatively public ones, conducted in the murky region between the home and various outside sources of information and intelligence. In effect, they inexorably create a new kind of "open" household.

Aside from the privacy issue, certain factors may prevent the cable companies from dominating the burgeoning market in residential security. Cable operators are reluctant to deal with the technical and management problems created by security services, though this is substantially offset by pressure from the municipalities whose franchise agreements demand security systems. There are technical problems with transmission quality and signal leakage, and there are difficulties involved in endowing many older cable facilities with the two-way capacity necessary for a modern security system.

No matter how effective cable security systems turn out to be, their success will ultimately depend on the ability of municipal governments to respond to alarms. If the police don't arrive when the SOS is sounded, cable-security subscribers may well blame the company, and lose faith in the system.

Despite all the excitement about cable security, there are still fewer than 15,000 cable security subscribers in the country, most of them contracted to Warner Amex or Tocom. General Instrument's Jerrold Division has recently become a competitor, claiming that it has the more rugged, reliable security system. The race to offer security services is merely the first lap in the interactive marathon. But cable operators appear convinced that the first company to establish itself as the Home Box Office of cable security will have the best claim on the ever-widening market for interactive services. ■

WHO OWNS THE AIRWAVES?

Cable, AM stereo, low-power TV, AT&T, IBM . . . telecommunications is in turmoil. In contrast to the short-term patchwork solutions of regulators and legislators, policy analyst Milton Mueller offers a comprehensive approach to the reform of telecommunications regulation. Deregulation, the First Amendment, and the advent of new technologies all point in the direction of denationalizing the airwaves and creating private, freely transferable rights in the frequency spectrum. This study explains how it would work.

Property Rights in Radio Communications

by Milton Mueller

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'Dutch' Reagan Rides Again

by Sidney Blumenthal



RONALD REAGAN'S MEDIA SKILL is usually attributed to his Hollywood experience: He knows how to read a script and peer into a camera because he was an actor. Yet few movie actors are as adroit in public as they are on a sound stage, and few can claim the depth of Reagan's background. When he came to Hollywood he had already mastered a very different medium — radio — in which his popularity depended completely upon an aural presence, not a physical one. Through radio, Reagan learned how to be himself in an artificial environment and how to develop a special rapport with an audience. He has used these skills in successive media arenas — movies, television, politics — with telling effect. In an important sense, his Presidential speechmaking is a reprise of the golden age of radio. He knows the art of cultivating familiarity with unseen masses.

When Reagan's popularity fell precipitously during the recession, he turned to the medium that had launched his career. On ten successive Saturdays, he delivered five-minute speeches on the radio. These were intended to elude the network television commentators whose instant analysis almost always frames the President's messages. Reagan preferred to reach the public directly. Radio gave him the chance to establish his own interpretation of his policies.

Reagan won his first broadcasting job with the Davenport, Iowa station WOC (whose call letters stood for "World of

Sidney Blumenthal is author of The Permanent Campaign, which will be published in an updated version in the fall. He is currently writing a book on the economic and intellectual roots of Reaganism.

Chiropactic") by inventing and narrating a half-hour football game as a test. He went on to broadcast actual games. "I was one of a profession just becoming popular and common — the visualizer for the armchair quarterback," he writes in his autobiography, *Where's the Rest of Me?* Although he was enthusiastic and knowledgeable about sports, he had to develop broadcasting technique. He had to learn, for instance, that the "secret of announcing is to make reading sound like talking." In the beginning, he writes, "I couldn't give it that easy conversational persuasive sell." He had to learn to affect and sustain for hours an air of spontaneity, informality, and authenticity. His voice had to carry affability and warmth.

Reagan's second radio job was to broadcast Chicago Cubs baseball games on WHO, a large Des Moines station. He received sparse telegraphed reports from Wrigley Field summarizing the action; he had to evoke the spectacle. His particular success at this task depended upon establishing an intimacy with his listeners. Competition was heated: At least six other stations in the same area also broadcast Cubs games using the telegraphic report. If a fan didn't feel a broadcaster was speaking to him in an engaging style, he could turn the dial and not miss a foul ball. Reagan was a popular "visualizer," purveying information as entertainment. He knew his persona and his listeners.

Radio was a new medium then, and it was a glamorous attraction for a small-town fellow from a family hard hit by the Depression. But it did not take him away from home or from the life he knew. He was still "Dutch" Reagan, a real person relating real events to his neighbors.

Hollywood, however, was a break. In the movies Reagan

played roles in fictional stories. He was George Gipp or Drake McHugh, not "Dutch." He learned control of his physical presence, how he looked from all sides, coming into and leaving a room. He learned to be so self-conscious that these movements seemed natural. Also, in Hollywood Reagan had to know his lines, whereas in radio he had to know his audience and then could invent his lines. As a cinematic character he could not rely upon "that easy conversational persuasive sell" he used in radio.

Reagan was one of the few movie stars who made the successful transition to television. He was also one of a select group of radio personalities — Jack Benny, for instance — who began working in the new medium. As the announcer for *General Electric Theater* and *Death Valley Days*, Reagan was a talking head. His body was stationary, but he didn't appear rigid because he had learned in the movies how to carry himself. His television success, however, was mainly due to his convincing voice.

His entry into national politics came with a televised speech on behalf of Barry Goldwater in 1964. He was a talking head, just like on *Death Valley Days*. His speech was scripted, a variation of the speech he had given for years as a traveling salesman of free enterprise for General Electric. Reagan spoke with a conviction that wasn't histrionic. He was intense yet relaxed. His words didn't sound like tired material he had delivered a thousand times, but fresh and heartfelt. As a result of this performance, several wealthy entrepreneurs active in Republican politics in California decided to support Reagan for political office. One of them, Charles Z. Wick, a close friend of Reagan's and now head of the International Communication Agency, says, "They recognized that he had a certain magic quality — he didn't lose the audience. You trust him."

As President, Reagan has not abused his prerogative to preempt regular television programming. He has rationed his performances judiciously, attempting to heighten their effect. His appearances are calculated to arouse the public directly by transcending traditional institutions, especially the highly interpretive Washington press corps. Television is his chief method of lobbying Congress. Yet, stylistically, he employs television as radio. Mark Goode, a former Hollywood producer who is a consultant to the President on his television appearances, says, "Reagan uses TV no differently than he would use radio. Cameras don't bother him. He looks into that lens and directs his comments as though he were talking to you."

Reagan needs no practice at this; coaching him seems presumptuous to his White House staff. He knows more about media than they do, and he knows how to communicate the broad themes of policy well. But he sometimes falters on details. His apparent lack of preparation for press conferences may be due to his easy reliance on technique.

He always tries to sound unscripted, even when he is reading from a teleprompter, in the manner of early radio professionals who abandoned scripts to avoid the old-fashioned air of Chautauqua oratory and to strike the more contemporary air of breezy improvisation. Reagan talks as if he were speaking to one person — the essence of radio performance. In his campaign debates he used an intimate tone as a weapon, repeatedly calling John Anderson by his first name and responding to the sallies of Jimmy Carter by saying, "There you go again." This tactic established Reagan as a regular guy while it subtly characterized his opponents as stiff.

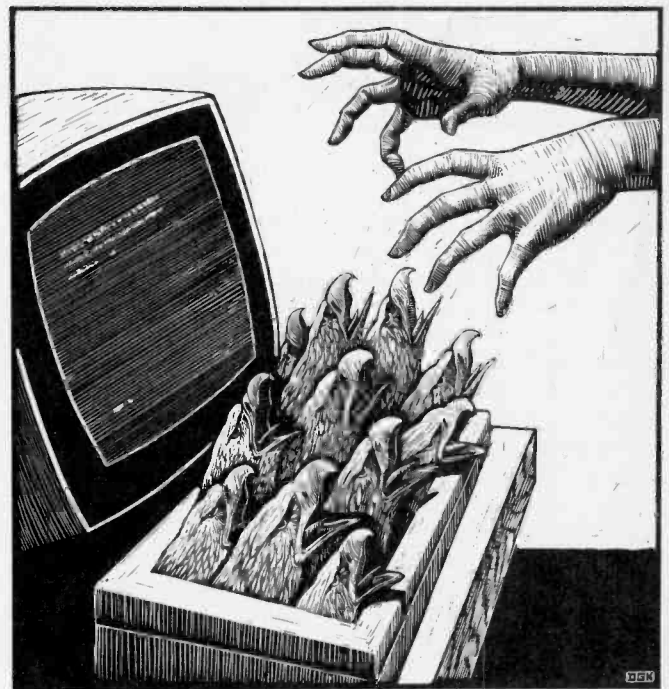
Occasionally, he uses a visual prop, such as a dollar bill, but mostly he relies on engaging parables to illustrate his points.

These moral fables (not always accurate) are the sort of homely fare that used to captivate Midwest radio audiences. (Paul Harvey, the old-time, smooth, right-wing radio commentator, is something like what Reagan might have become had he never gone Hollywood.) Reagan's dependence on fables is intrinsic to his style. In fact, it helped sustain him as a political figure during the time between his leaving the California State Capitol and arriving at the White House. He kept himself before the public as a syndicated radio commentator, and in nearly every commentary he offered a fable as logical proof.

Because of his disarming style he can avoid some of the consequences of his policies. Even when people are hurt by the policies, they often don't blame him. They may blame Jimmy Carter, or the Federal Reserve Board, or David Stockman, or Nancy Reagan. But Ronald Reagan sounds like their friend.

The Rebirth of Mistrust

by Walter Cronkite



HAS ANYONE SEEN Spiro Agnew lately? I keep hearing echoes of him, and it's begun to worry me.

It's time to look with some concern to the First Amendment again — to the process and quality of public information. Consider these quotes:

"A popular government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but the prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or perhaps both." That was James Monroe, some two hundred years ago.

“Without censorship, things can get terribly confused in the public mind.” That was General William Westmoreland, earlier this year.

The two quotes represent fundamentally conflicting attitudes toward public information, toward the idea that an informed people can intelligently govern itself — toward, I think, the very idea of democracy. One vigorously embraces that idea; the other shows a deep mistrust of it. Actually, it’s a dichotomy as old as America. At times one seems to dominate, and at other times the other is on top. Right now, I’m afraid, we’re in the Westmoreland mode.

The general was talking to a college audience in Colorado, saying that the news media will have to be censored in any future war involving the United States. We generally think of wartime censorship as an effort to keep useful information from the enemy. But, of course, it has other purposes, as Westmoreland pointed out. He said the military must have the support of the American people in any future war, and that isn’t possible, he said, unless news is controlled. He said uncensored news media were responsible for the erosion of public support in Vietnam. He singled out television, calling it “an instrument that can paralyze this country.” But so far as I can make out, the general wasn’t talking about World War III . . . not exclusively, anyway. He seemed to be talking about future Vietnams — that is, El Salvador or another such conflict, which might one day involve American forces in limited wars.

William Westmoreland is retired from the Army. The present Administration cannot be held responsible for his remarks or views. But those views are hardly unique to our former Vietnam commander. They are all too common in today’s Washington.

Several of this Administration’s actions should give us concern — for instance, its desires to alter the Freedom of Information Act. It has revoked the Carter Administration’s guidelines, which limited the bureaucratic challenges blocking public access to the government’s business. And it is pushing for legislation to restrict the application of the act particularly in the areas it is most needed — law enforcement agencies and their activities. It also wants to exempt a wide range of business information from the act. With these changes, information about dangerous foods and drugs, unsafe consumer goods, pollution and environmental threats, deceptive advertising — all might be shielded from the public.

In other instances:

- The Administration issued an executive order ending the automatic declassification, after varying periods of time, of government documents concerning foreign affairs. This policy had been instituted by the Eisenhower Administration. The change is a blow to historians; it may condemn us to repeat previous mistakes.
- The Administration has asked universities to restrict access to certain scientific courses that it might consider useful to the enemy, and has suggested that scientists clear any such projects in advance.
- It has proposed that all information gathered by government agencies be copyrighted. Such information could produce its own revenue if user fees were charged for it, but this move would also give the government another way to control the release of information.

The Administration’s pattern of restriction provides a solution to those who feel America has become too open a society

- The Agent Identities Act that the Administration has endorsed, while essentially designed to prevent malicious exposure of our secret agents, is drawn so broadly that it protects all agents from public disclosure no matter what laws they might violate, or how capriciously.
- The Administration issued an executive order permitting the Attorney General to wiretap reporters, and even to monitor press mail and cable traffic, if he deems that necessary for national security.

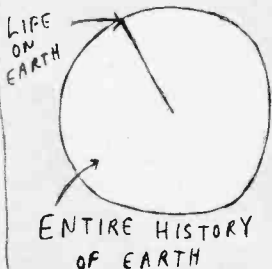
None of these proposals and initiatives may seem all that serious in themselves, but taken together, they form a pattern we should be worrying about — a pattern of restriction. It provides a solution to those who feel America has become too open a society.

The response of many Americans to the proposition of a free press and a free flow of information is, “Yes, but . . .”

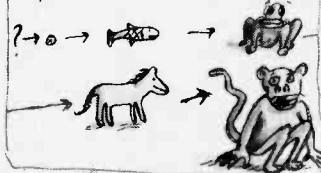
General Westmoreland wants to make an exception in the event of another war. He thinks the lack of censorship in

LIFE ON EARTH

Well, it lasted for about 13 weeks.



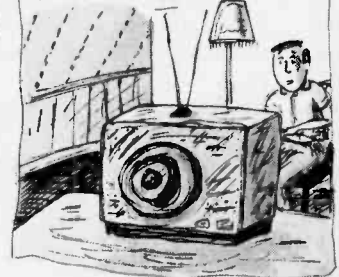
Cells turned into fish; fish into frogs; frogs into horses; and horses into monkeys.



Within a week, those monkeys were men & women.



Now that it's all over, we don't know what to do.



R. Chert

Vietnam was one of the reasons we lost that war.

Actually, there *was* some censorship in Vietnam, of a sort. It was conducted by the general's staff . . . and it had to do with keeping enemy strength estimates down below an arbitrary ceiling. In part, that was done by not counting Viet Cong militia forces. Critics say it was done to maintain the impression of American success.

In a recent interview for *CBS Reports*, the general said he did that because "the people in Washington were not sophisticated enough to understand and evaluate this thing, and neither was the media." In short, Washington was getting skewed figures along with everybody else.

It was against just such tortured wishful thinking, manipulation of figures, and other distortions that reporting by American journalists in Vietnam began to collide. The assertion that Lyndon Johnson might have been better informed if he had relied on *The New York Times* instead of his cables from the front had more than a grain of truth to it.

At such points as these, the so-called credibility gap first appeared and began to widen. It was not bad news from the front that tore public support from that war. It was bad news clashing with official happy lies that shook the confidence of millions in their institutions, and in the process of democracy itself.

Today we may be in for more of the same. I do not intend to liken El Salvador to Vietnam in any way, except in this: that official reports and explanations often are woefully unconvincing, transparently wrong, and in conflict with reports from experienced and reliable American reporters on the scene.

And we are already hearing echoes of that earlier battle between press and officialdom. The reporters are "naïve," "romantic," "leftist," "subversive," "anti-American." "They don't or won't understand the big picture . . . Why the

hell can't they get on the team?" Yes, we've been down this road before.

It will get worse as (in fairness, I should say *if*) the gap widens between what the government reports and what we see in the field.

But it isn't just El Salvador. It is all the exceptions being suggested to the application of the First Amendment . . . all the little restrictions on the people's right to know.

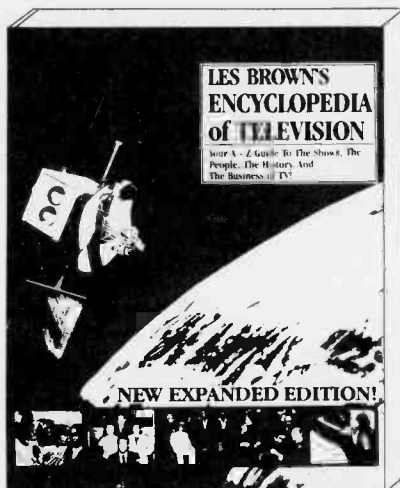
There seems to be an implicit question in all of this: whether we really have faith in the kind of democracy we've evolved in the last 200 years. Are we beginning to suspect it is outmoded in this increasingly complex and dangerous world? Do we need another form — more efficient, decisive, authoritarian?

Well, if the answer is no, then we had better tend the health of what we have. If the people are to govern, then they must have the power that knowledge gives. For, to quote another authority, "When information that properly belongs to the public is systematically withheld by those in power, the people soon become ignorant of their own affairs, distrustful of those who manage them and — eventually — incapable of determining their own destiny."

Spoken by one who should know: Richard Nixon, before the fall.

If we vote for democracy, then we have to defend at every quarter its very foundation, the free and independent flow of public information. That remains democracy's only fail-safe system against both the dangers of its own excesses and the approach of tyranny. ■

This article has been adapted from Walter Cronkite's speech before the sixtieth annual convention of the National Association of Broadcasters in Dallas, Texas on April 7, 1982.



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DINOSAURS

(Continued from page 29)

such a system would give local television stations a choice between programs scheduled by the network and any other offered by independent distributors. While the networks would seem to have the inside track at the stations, outside distributors could gain the time periods they want simply by paying the stations more than the networks do for their air-time.

Since the networks are merely middlemen between stations and program suppliers, they could actually be eliminated if the Hollywood studios should decide to deal direct. Lorimar, for example, would have little trouble lining up two-hundred stations to carry *Dallas* and advertisers to buy the spots. This way, production companies could realize the full financial benefit of a hit. Under the existing system, the studios lease their programs to the networks for a set fee and don't share in the bounty if the program turns into a blockbuster that makes the advertising rates soar. This has been a sore point in their relations with the networks.

The only thing preventing program producers today from circumventing the networks is the stations' slowness to invest in satellite receiving dishes. As soon as there are enough of them to cover the country, television will change radically as a business.

Thirteen domestic satellites are aloft today; more are scheduled to be launched this year and next. Authoritative industry sources predict that by 1984, some 360 transponders (satellite channels) will be available to the television and cable industries.

So the networks are faced at some point with becoming providers of programs to stations, rather than the full-time conduits they have been. What the networks produce themselves is mainly news and sports programming, which is one reason they are striving to expand their evening newscasts, and one reason the three networks together just spent an unprecedented \$2 billion to secure the National Football League rights for five more years.

But even as they struggle to immunize themselves against technological change, the networks have developed organic ailments that can only weaken their resistance. Rising programming costs have upset their economic system. In order to cope with soaring inflation, the networks have increased the number of commercial spots in prime time, which is hardly the shrewdest way to regain robust health, since larger doses of advertising are bound to displease

viewers, affiliates, and advertisers alike.

There is talk now in network circles of finding cheaper ways to develop television series. Co-productions with foreign television companies, scoffed at before, have begun to make sense. So have increases in news and prime-time soap opera programming, as those forms generally cost less than episodic entertainment series.

Even with one network faltering in the competition, the other two are in a sweat to keep profits up. (It only adds to the current panic that, despite huge expenditures for program development, the networks last season came up with the fewest new hits ever in prime time.) The conventional networks' great advantage over any cable network has always been that they do not rely on a wire to enter the home; their signals can move both over the air and through the wire. But even that advantage is fading. Several network affiliates have already begun contracting with cable satellite services to carry some of their programming. Every station in America now knows that, if it chooses, it can substitute the Cable News Network or the Satellite News Channel for the ABC, NBC, or CBS newscast. Affiliate loyalty, the networks are learning, is nothing to count on in a buyers' market.

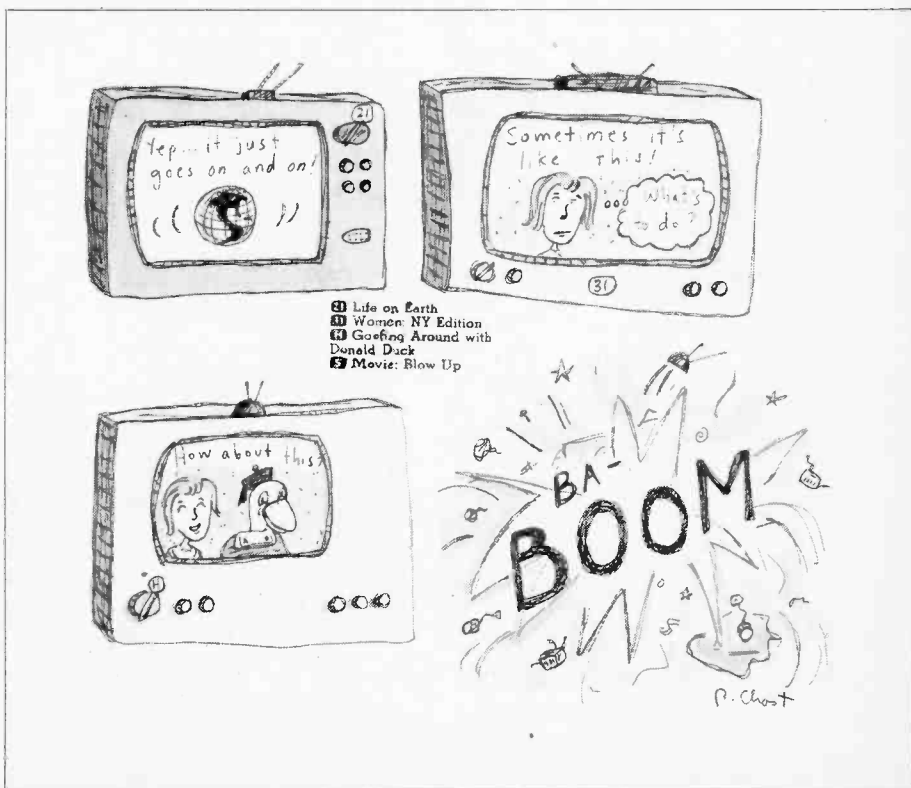
Evidence is accumulating that the old business of network television — the business of webs, affiliates, and nightly schedules — is inexorably in decline. The old business, that beautiful busi-

ness, is the dinosaur. The companies we call the networks, however, are well equipped to survive and flourish in the new environment — two of them, at least.

It is already hard to discuss the networks collectively in the old way, as triplets in a lock step. Each is on a separate course — or, we might say, in a different stage of evolution. NBC remains implanted in Television I, the old-network business, probably to its peril. CBS cautiously straddles the line between the first age and Television II. ABC is venturing boldly over the new frontier, covering all routes to the television set.

If only because they have the running start, the networks may well remain the leading forces in Television II. They also have glamour, know-how, and financial resources. When the present network system gives out because of its dependency on affiliated stations, ABC, CBS, and even NBC could conceivably preserve themselves as networks by feeding programming via satellite to a nation of cable channels. Their options in the new world are as unlimited as anyone else's.

Still, like everyone else, they are on uncharted terrain. Television II is no less mysterious to the broadcast networks than to any other company staking its claim on this expansive frontier. Technology will not stand still, and today's magnificent innovation could be obsolete tomorrow. Nothing is assured — except the death of dinosaurs. ■



The Second God and the Businessman



Media: The Second God
by Tony Schwartz
Random House, \$13.50

THERE ARE SOME VERY SERIOUS PEOPLE who firmly believe that God gave the Children of Israel how-to-do-it instructions on building a radio receiver. Proof of their astonishing idea, they say, is in the Old Testament Book of Exodus, Chapters XXV and XXVI, which describe in curious detail the building of the Ark of the Covenant using gold, brass loops, rods (conductors), and carefully placed golden Cherubim (antennas). God even says, "I will commune with thee from above, between the two cherubim."

If these people are to be believed, it's a pity that Tony Schwartz, author of *Media: The Second God*, wasn't around to give the *first* God some pointers on how to program His broadcasts. After reading Schwartz's latest book, you just know he would have loved to help and would have done a bang-up job.

In a sense the book is a 197-page commercial primarily designed to sell us on the exciting world of electronic media and on Tony Schwartz as their most knowledgeable exponent. Except for a couple of chapters, it tells us everything we already know about the media but have never thought about. Tony Schwartz has thought a great deal about it, and because he is tremendously enthusiastic and highly experienced at making commercials, among other things, the book is well worth reading.

Each of the seventeen chapters is crammed with illustrative personal anecdotes. Do you want to sell frozen food, win an election, or save a supermarket or college from political baddies? Tony Schwartz tells you how to do it — just the way he did it.

The last two chapters, "The Incredible Expanding Telephone" and "Communication in the Year 2000," tell things most of us probably don't know. Schwartz takes us into a world where whiz-bang gadgetry enables disembodied voices to zip around the world with breathtaking speed, and teachers to lecture to vast audiences while sitting at home. And from your command post at home, you, too, will push buttons to do your shopping, banking, voting; technology has created a world secure, convenient, and private where everyone can get everything without having to meet anyone!

The writing style is glib and articulate, but provokes little reflection. Like the media it discusses, it is largely informational and reluctant to make value judgments.

Both Tony Schwartz and Marshall McLuhan, to whom he dedicates this book, describe the world in

the electronic age as it is, not as we would like it to be. We are discomfited because they assert that our ancient moralities and values are no longer relevant. The second god is without a soul. Such virtues as truth and integrity are replaced with other values — winning, selling, promoting. If deception is necessary for success, "Caveat Emptor" is the second god's only commandment.

Oliver Goldsmith said of Edmund Burke, "He was too fond of the right to pursue the expedient." The exact opposite is media's weakness. Tony Schwartz's earlier and more profound book, *The Responsive Chord*, devotes a section to "Truth Is a Print Ethic," a discussion of the old and the new values. He concludes with these words: "At present, we have no generally agreed-upon social values and/or rules that can readily be applied in judging whether the effects of electronic communication are beneficial, acceptable, or harmful. Our print-based conception of electronic media prevents us from making social decisions based on correct understanding of our new communication environment."

While one can't blame the messenger for the content of the message, we had hoped that in the eight years between his two books, Tony Schwartz, a teacher of telecommunications, would have come up with some insight into *why* as well as *how*.

ALFRED PARTRIDGE

Alfred Partridge, now retired, has written and produced many programs for educational and commercial television and radio.



BOOK REVIEWS



**Ninety Seconds to Tell It All:
Big Business and the News Media**
by A. Kent MacDougall
Dow Jones-Irwin, \$14.95

FOR MUCH OF AMERICA'S HISTORY, the media have been a point of controversy, but never more so than today, when a combination of technological and sociological developments continues to augment the media's influence on our lives.

One of the focal points of this controversy over the past decade has been the news media's portrayal of business. Businessmen complain that the media do not understand them, or worse, that they twist the news to suit their own anti-business bias. As a result, businessmen often do not communicate forthrightly. Journalists retaliate that they cannot be expected to report fully and accurately in the face of corporate "secretiveness," and lament the various constraints of format under which they must work.

There is some truth, as usual, on both sides of this argument, and Kent MacDougall's *Ninety Seconds to Tell It All* strives to present a variety of considerations. He blames the media for being too often superficial in their coverage of business affairs and prone to dramatic, confrontational tactics to satisfy a perceived demand for news as entertainment. He criticizes business, on the other hand, for contributing to the bad press it deplors by issuing inadequate press releases and remaining unhelpfully closemouthed about all else.

So far, so good, but it's not the whole story. MacDougall acknowledges that "media coverage is often simplistic, careless, and cursory," but insists that "cases of deliberate distortion remain rare." He describes newspapermen as merely "muddled, not malicious," in their poor business reporting, and bemoans the time constraints that make television reporting so "snappy and superficial. In the end," he writes, "the failure of American newspapers is not that they are too hard on business, but that they are too easy on themselves."

But MacDougall fails to take seriously the important charge that ideology is often the most significant factor in shaping business news, especially at the networks and the major newspapers, whose influence is so pervasive. (Ironically, his perspective is shared by most businessmen, who are often blind to the influence of ideology and insist that they are simply misunderstood by the media.)

Business frequently comes out the loser not because the media don't understand it, but because they don't like it. The new media are run by an elite — people better-educated, more sophisticated, and

higher-paid than most Americans — whose recent upsurge in prestige and power has coincided with a decline in authority of churches, schools, political parties, and business itself. The media are in a position not simply to report the news, but to make it. They can decide what the "issues" are, help one side and attack the other, then stand back to declare the victors and losers.

This power is not compatible with our capitalist system, in which the free market is supposed to be the supreme arbiter. As Irving Kristol discerned in his now historic *Wall Street Journal* essay on "Business and the New Class": "This [anti-capitalist] attitude may accurately be called 'elitist' — though people who are convinced they incarnate 'the public interest,' as distinct from all the private interests of a free society, are not likely to think of themselves in such a way. It is basically suspicious of, and hostile to, the market, precisely because the market is so vulgarly democratic — one dollar, one vote."

MacDougall, a newspaperman himself, pays little heed to the role of ideological bias in business reporting, but his book seems tainted with it. When local editors write in support of business, he appears to think they do so to serve local interests; he never acknowledges that pro-business editorials might rest on reasoned, careful analysis of the issues at stake.

But readers are not as easily seduced as pro-business editors, and believe only what they know to be true empirically: that "business[']s attempts to blame the bad-news boom for turning public opinion against it mostly ring hollow." Indeed, if you've ever "waited in line to buy gasoline, had a flight reservation 'lost' in a computer, phoned in an order only to be put on hold, or put in time for an impersonal conglomerate," you know how richly business deserves criticism.

This much said, I do not wish to suggest that businessmen are devoid of blame for the unflattering light in which they are often portrayed. MacDougall rightly urges them to develop a greater level of sophistication in dealing with the media and to try to adapt to the media's limitations. Business must also put an end to its doubletalk and double standards: making profit reports that appear to be contradictory, for instance, and touting free enterprise one day while running to Washington for a handout the next. But most important, business must understand the nature of the "adversary culture" in which it operates. ■

WILLIAM E. SIMON

William E. Simon, Secretary of the Treasury under Presidents Nixon and Ford, currently heads the John M. Olin Foundation.

PROGRAM NOTES

Signature The Talk Show that Listens

STRIPPED of a studio audience, an on-screen host, a set, even credits, CBS Cable's *Signature* is television's no-frills talk show. For thirty minutes each day, a guest occupies a chair in front of a shadowy white brick wall. In tight close-up, this person answers questions delivered off-screen by an interviewer we know only by voice, and occasionally by the silhouette of his shoulder as the camera dollies behind him in quest of another angle.

At first this studied austerity seems gimmicky; one more way to jazz up a tired format. But watch a few interviews, with guests as diverse as Joe Frazier and Louis Malle, Elizabeth Ashley and I. F. Stone, and you begin to suspect that the producers of *Signature* have stumbled onto something quite marvelous. From nearly all its guests, the program manages to elicit unexpected, often stunning, revelations of character. But most remarkable, these illuminations are not produced by the friction of "tough" questions. They emerge instead seemingly unbidden: in the play between what Elizabeth Ashley says and something very different the camera catches in her face; in the long patient silences in which we are allowed to watch Louis Malle reflect; in the camera's ability to discern eloquence in the face of the inarticulate heavyweight.

Signature is best appreciated in contrast to conventional talk shows; certainly it makes you realize what little interest most talk-show hosts have in their guests. Johnny Carson's personal camera is ever ready to transmit his precious reactions to America. Merv Griffin is so unresponsive to his guests' comments that one wonders if he isn't deaf. And Dick Cavett never finds anyone quite as entertaining as himself. The second-class status of guests on these programs is signaled visually: Rarely do they appear alone, and almost never in close-up.

By contrast, *Signature* pays close, re-



Elizabeth Ashley

spectful attention to its guests: It shows us nothing else. Three cameras tirelessly scrutinize the subject's face, searching out all that words never disclose. *Signature*'s lighting collaborates in this scrutiny, revealing lines, crow's feet, character.

Best of all is the program's tenacious attention to what its guests have to say. Without a studio audience or a screen image to distract him, the interviewer can concentrate on questions and answers. He actually *listens*, sometimes relentlessly, willing to let a good bit of dead air go by — a cardinal sin on television — to make his guests think and to let his audience absorb. As psychiatrists well know, silence is one of the most effective tools of the interviewer's trade. Under the delicate pressure of one such patient interlude, Elizabeth Ashley began to interrogate herself, answering questions more searching than any the interviewer had asked.

The interviewer is especially good at steering the conversation away from the topical — Ashley's latest movie, for instance — toward the more abiding — the distinction, painfully learned, between overnight success and real achievement. *Signature* blithely ignores publicity, the typical talk show's *raison d'être*. Plugs are forbidden, and no one seems to mind. The program is not concerned with the minutiae of celebrities' lives. No one talks about what it's like to be on the set with Marlon Brando, or whether it's annoying when fans ask for autographs in restaurants. Instead *Signature* stakes out more common ground between its audience and these celebrated individuals: Rather than dredge

up juicy new facts about Nixon, John Ehrlichman spoke of the process by which a man loses his moral underpinnings; I. F. Stone testified to the rich satisfactions of an old age alive with the urge to learn, in his case Ancient Greek. "I live now," he told us, an impish glint coming through spectacles thick as bottles, "among the great thinkers."

You can see any of *Signature*'s guests on other talk shows, but never in quite this light. Elsewhere they appear as celebrities: slightly freakish, pruriently fascinating, their celebrity status eclipsing any gift for which they might be celebrated. *Signature* subscribes to an older, probably healthier, notion of fame. It shows these individuals as extraordinary yet not freakish. They are like we are, only more so: more creative, more accomplished, more traveled, more sensitive. Usually the celebrity on television is merely more enviable. Through *Signature*'s lens he is someone we might profitably emulate. For a television program to recall us to this worthy old ideal is an accomplishment. *Signature* deserves a measure of fame.

MICHAEL POLLAN

Couples Behind the Doctor's Door

FIRST you see the words: "For many of us facing problems, counseling is still frightening, embarrassing, or mysterious. With this television series, we hope to remove the mysteries of what actually goes on behind the doctor's door. We hope you can benefit from the real encounter you are about to see — as a couple struggle to resolve their conflicts. Remember — these people are not acting. What you are about to watch is *real*."

Then you see the couples. Linda's and Richard's marriage is endangered because he drinks and beats her. Pat and Don have been married thirty-two years but can't talk to each other about their feelings. Another husband is made jealous by his wife's job as a nude dancer.

Each episode of *Couples*, a new syndicated half-hour program from Alan

Shapiro Productions, presents Walter Brackelmanns, a psychiatrist and family therapist, counseling one troubled couple. If you haven't heard of *Couples*, you're bound to very soon. Within weeks of its debut, the show was airing in eight of the top ten markets. *Couples* is television at its most extraordinary, the sort of program you thought (or hoped) you'd never see.

And it's real. First one partner explains the problems to Dr. Brackelmanns. After the commercials, the other tells the second side of the story. Alan loves his wife and wants to work out their problems. But Phyllis tells the doctor the marriage is dead. Pat says her marriage of thirty-two years is suffering because her husband doesn't understand her feelings and won't show any emotion. Don admits he doesn't give his wife much support. He can't seem to put his arms around her and offer comfort. In the third part of the program, we watch as the couples struggle to tell each other what they've just told the doctor. The setting looks like a doctor's office, supplying the titillation of going "behind the doctor's door," but it's really a television studio.

Couples is spellbinding television, possibly because it balances so precariously between being astonishing and being revolting. It is voyeurism given a social — even a therapeutic — legitimacy.

What makes people expose themselves in such a manner? If they're having trouble with their marriage, why not just go see a marriage counselor? Officially, we're told the motives for appearing are altruistic. In sharing their difficulties, people not only seek help from the doctor but allow others to learn from their experiences.

But something more is going on. *Couples* actually offers viewers a weird kind of security — weird because the security is rooted in other people's hardships and tragedies. The program magically simplifies the complex and deep-rooted problems of people like ourselves, reducing them to simple formulas. And *Couples* goes further, offering the illusion of instant answers. "Maybe that's something we can work on," says the doctor. Or, "You don't have to do anything, just listen to her feelings."

More important, the program stirs hope with each epiphany of renewed contact between isolated partners locked

together in unhappiness. It likes close-ups of hands clasped together. "Tell him something you'd like him to know about yourself," says the doctor. "Tell him. Look at him." He points, she looks, and for the first time talks directly to her husband. It is a spectacle disconcerting to observe on television, these strangers meeting for the first time after living together for years. And when the husband responds, "I tried to tell her she can't feel that way," Brackelmanns scolds: "You can't do that, you can't do that. You must never, never do that. . . . The one thing we're entitled to on this earth is our feelings."

That's something television has always recognized, indeed exploited. *Couples* is the most recent in a long line of programs that not only make suffering legitimate, but positively glorify it. Remember *Divorce Court*? Or *Queen for a Day*? The Queen won the crown by demonstrating her plight to be more pathetic than that of the other contestants.

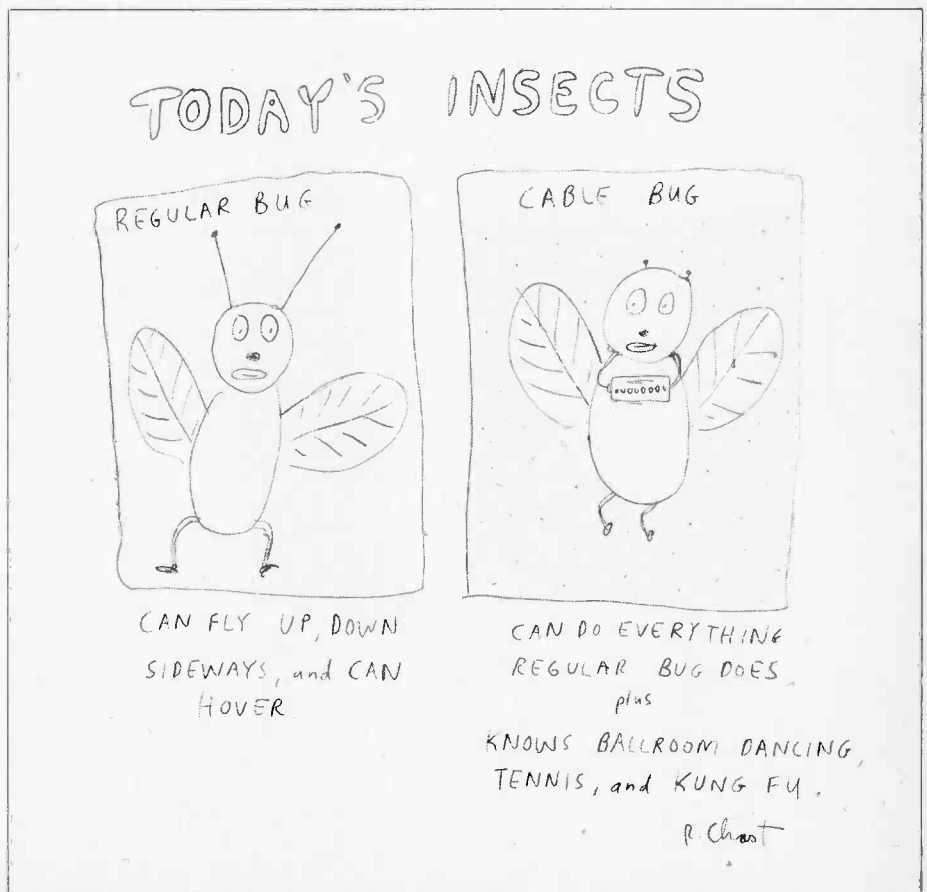
But it's not just the suffering we like to watch. *Couples* also draws on another

long television tradition of self-humiliation — *The Gong Show*, *The Newlywed Game*, *Let's Make a Deal*. All great fun. And all vehicles that allow us to indulge our darkest characteristics: our greed, our jealousy, our insecurity.

Indeed, television's most successful programs seem invariably to meet the strict standard set by a nineteenth-century poet: "If way to the better there be/It exacts a full look at the worst." *Couples* provides the best opportunity in years to observe what's worst in ourselves. How easily we destroy each other, how carelessly we treat our loved ones.

But always there's the doctor, implicitly promising the easy remedy: "Any problem," he says, "can be worked out if you're interested in working it out." Moreover, television adds the hope that public confession will be cathartic, not simply for the couple exposing their pain to an audience of millions, but for all those secret sufferers watching each new episode for new clues to their own salvation. ■

MICHAEL SCHWARZ



WHAT'S THE WORD ON DAN RATHER?



"STEADY"

—Sally Bedell, *TV GUIDE*

"INCISIVE"

—Noel Holston,
THE SENTINEL STAR

"SHARP"

—Mike Duffy,
THE DETROIT FREE PRESS

"TERRIFIC"

—Rick DuBrow,
LOS ANGELES HERALD EXAMINER

"CONTROLLED"

—Tom Dorsey,
THE LOUISVILLE COURIER JOURNAL

"RELIABLE"

—Monica Collins,
BOSTON HERALD AMERICAN

"PROFESSIONAL"

—Lally Weymouth,
PARADE MAGAZINE

"GREAT"

—Marvin Kitman, *NEWSDAY*

**"BY FAR
THE BEST"**

—Tom Shales,
THE WASHINGTON POST

FOR THE
LATEST
WORD
WATCH THE
CBS EVENING
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DIFFERENCE.**

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At Home at the Movies

For films on TV, this is the Golden Age

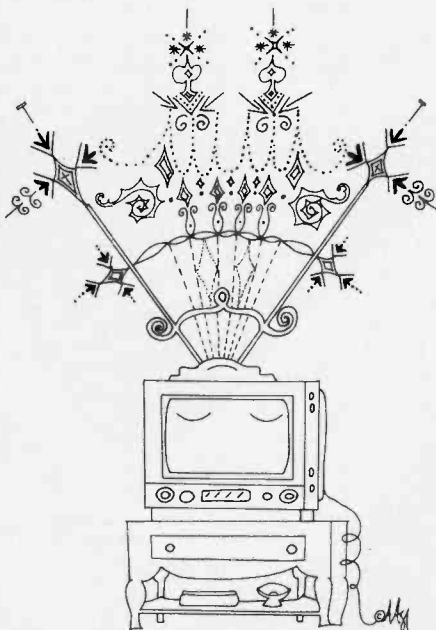
TO A MOVIE REVIEWER who is also a movie addict, the indiscriminate quantity of films available on cable movie channels is nothing less than dazzling. Movie enthusiasts have never been so well served. Along with HBO and Showtime, there's Warner Amex's The Movie Channel; all are on a twenty-four-hour-a-day schedule, with the last showing nothing *but* movies. If I had time to watch all these channels, which I don't, I could see just about everything but the most unspeakable dregs. (Contrary to appearances, cable television does not buy *every* movie on the market.)

Like the old neighborhood theaters, the grind houses, cable allows us to catch films we missed in their theatrical first runs. The great difference, of course, is that cable lets us see movies at home and at our leisure, offering a great range of choice. Not even during those years when the studios were making three hundred movies a year instead of a hundred was the moviegoer able to exercise anything comparable to the lordly power of selection we now enjoy. Ten minutes of one film, twenty of another, a third for its duration, and another possibly recorded for later viewing. And the choice has been extended by virtue of all the recording apparatus now available; the possibilities for the dedicated home movie-viewer are staggering.

Even more significantly, cable changes the way we see films, turning us all into connoisseurs. The most interesting elements in movies have always been the quiet bits of professionalism around the edges, moments that don't always leap out at the spectator on first viewing or in the cavernous space of a movie theater. On television we see the film in a cubistic way, in fragments and pieces. We isolate small pleasures, file them away in our mental storehouses, use them to make connections. We are less concerned with a film's overall flow

Molly Haskell, author of From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies (published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston), is the film critic for Vogue and other magazines.

CABLE WATCHING



by Molly Haskell

and rhythm, which are so decisive in a movie house, and more willing to forgive large flaws in deference to incidental virtues.

Cable enables us to follow the careers of performers in films that come and go so quickly we don't get a chance to see them. With film distribution as erratic as it is, very often an actor or actress becomes a name without our knowing quite how he or she got there — until we discover one or two performances in minor films (or major films in which they had minor roles). Or we will pick up on somebody the second time around. For instance, when the noisy and boisterous *1941* opened, the noisy and boisterous John Belushi and Dan Ayckroyd pretty much eclipsed their supporting cast. But now we see *1941* on cable and notice Nancy Allen who, in the interim, has been turned into a star by husband/director Brian de Palma.

For a monthly critic who wants to

keep up with the year's openings but doesn't necessarily want, or have, to see everything on the first go-round, cable is a godsend. Switching channels is the equivalent of walking out of a screening room, but one is my prerogative, the other an ironclad taboo.

The problem for even the insatiable home moviegoer is that there is so much to choose from, and so little in the way of guidance. The Movie Channel staggers its programming so that each film is shown at least once in every time slot (morning, afternoon, evening, and late at night). Indeed that tactic, and the claim that no two films of the same type are shown back-to-back, are the two selling points that distinguish The Movie Channel's system from the more haphazard scheduling of HBO and Showtime. But in terms of the fare itself, the three are virtually indistinguishable — with just enough differences to whet the appetite. The Movie Channel, for instance, is more likely to offer one or two art-house goodies: recently, *The Last Metro* and John Sayles's marvelous *The Return of the Secaucus Seven*, both apparently too exotic for the middle-of-the-road Showtime and HBO.

Mysteries of scheduling are as nothing compared to the baffling program notes published in each month's booklet of listings. Guides in name only, they provide no information as to a film's director, producer, writers, date of release (if released), and some of its stars. Everything is identified by name and a single phrase tagging the content. "Passion runs free on this island paradise. Nudity" may be all we need to know about *Wild and Beautiful on Ibiza*, introduced on Showtime's "After Hours" segment. But to describe *All That Jazz* without mention of Bob Fosse, to list *Starting Over* without mention of Candice Bergen or Jill Clayburgh, is to reduce everything — the good and the bad — to the same level.

Still, with all its shortcomings in programming and scheduling, this is indeed the Golden Age of movies on cable television. And I, in splendid isolation, will continue my inveterate pursuit of the undiscovered masterpiece. ■

Illustration by Andrea Albahae

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BRIGADOON
2 hrs. — MGM

April 23, 24 & 25
Spring Festival
JESSE JAMES
2 hrs. — 20th Century-Fox

April 30, May 1 & 2
Pre-Mother's Day
THE RETURN OF FRANK JAMES
2 hrs. — 20th Century-Fox

May 28, 29 & 30
Pre-Memorial Day
THE BLACK ROSE
2-1/2 hrs. — 20th Century-Fox

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2 hrs. — MGM

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Pre-Labor Day
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2 hrs. — MGM

October 15, 16 & 17
Pre-Halloween
KING SOLOMON'S MINES
2 hrs. — MGM

November 12, 13 & 14
Pre-Thanksgiving Day
FRIENDLY PERSUASION
3 hrs. — Lorimar

November 26, 27 & 28
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MOGAMBO
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