

Television, Sandinista Style, by T.D. Allman

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CHANNELS

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

1983 SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER

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SUPERNEWS

Journalism in the High-Tech Mode

BY ROBERT FRIEDMAN

Pop News—TV's Growth Industry

BY REESE SCHONFELD

The New Season: Autumn of the Networks' Reign

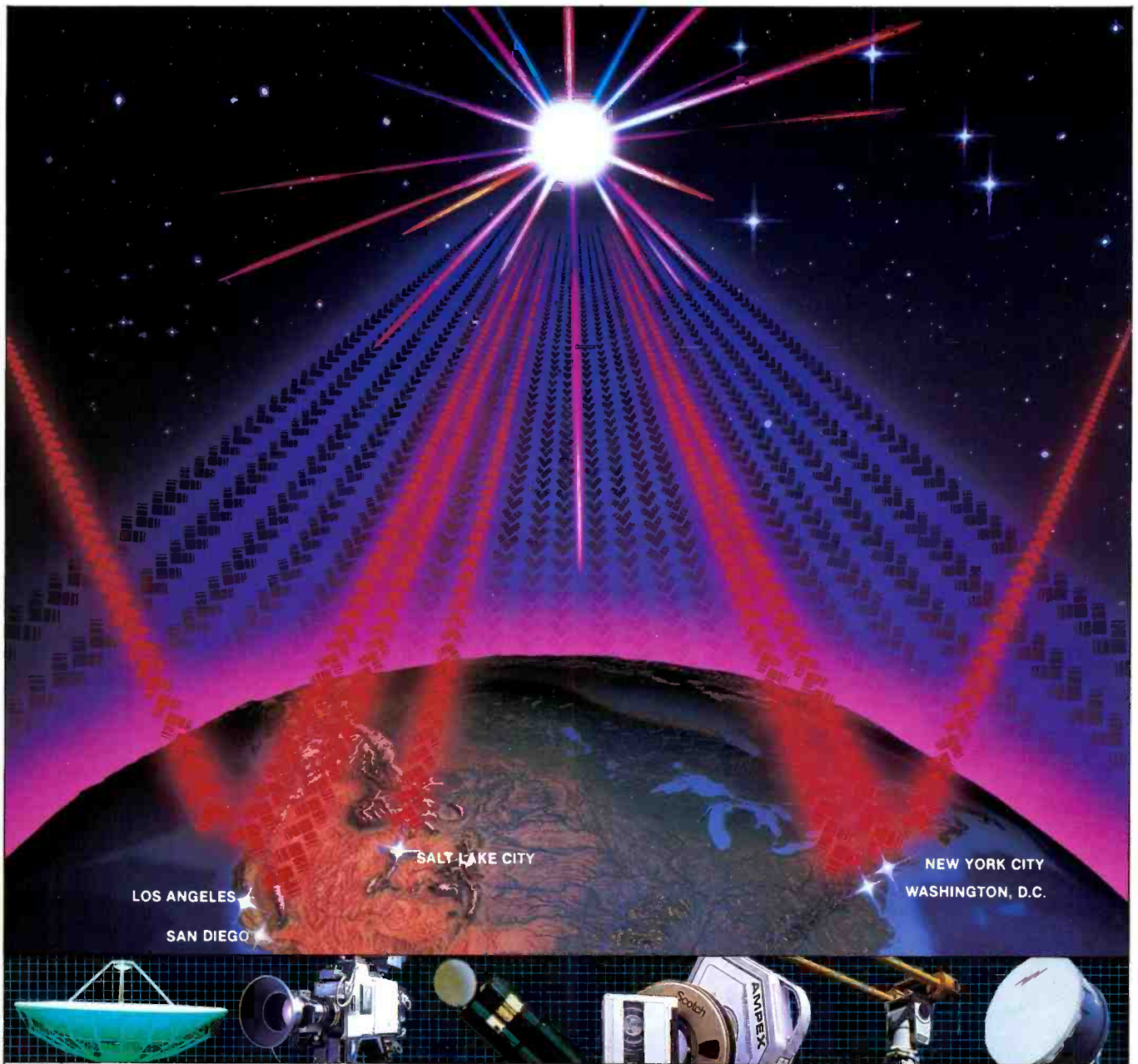
Rep. Tim Wirth Holds Back the Tide



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At the Threshold of 1984





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SEPT/OCT 1983

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SUPERNEWS

Journalism in the High-Tech Mode

Technology is giving reporters data banks in the field, computer graphics, and a million-mile reach.

BY ROBERT FRIEDMAN



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TV's Growth Industry

It's light, easily digested, in increasing demand—and lots more is on the way.

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Rep. Tim Wirth Holds Back the Tide

Why a key Congressman continues to thwart the broadcast and cable lobbies on deregulation

BY JAMES TRACIB

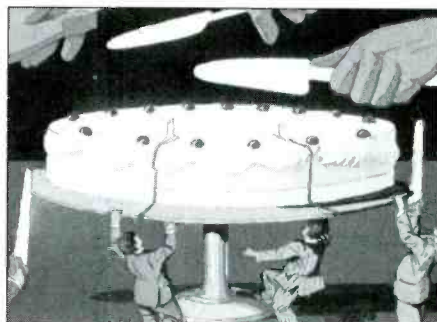


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THE NEW SEASON:
Autumn of the Networks' Reign

With *Fame* and *Too Close for Comfort*, ad hoc networks are changing the rules of the television game.

BY LAURENCE ZUCKERMAN & LES BROWN

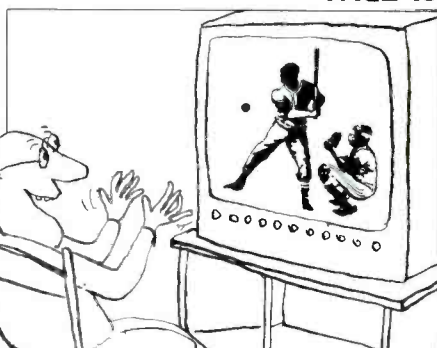


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Television, Sandinista Style

Marx and Lenin would not be amused: Nicaragua's TV system is surprisingly pluralistic.

BY T.D. ALLMAN



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What's Up at UPI?

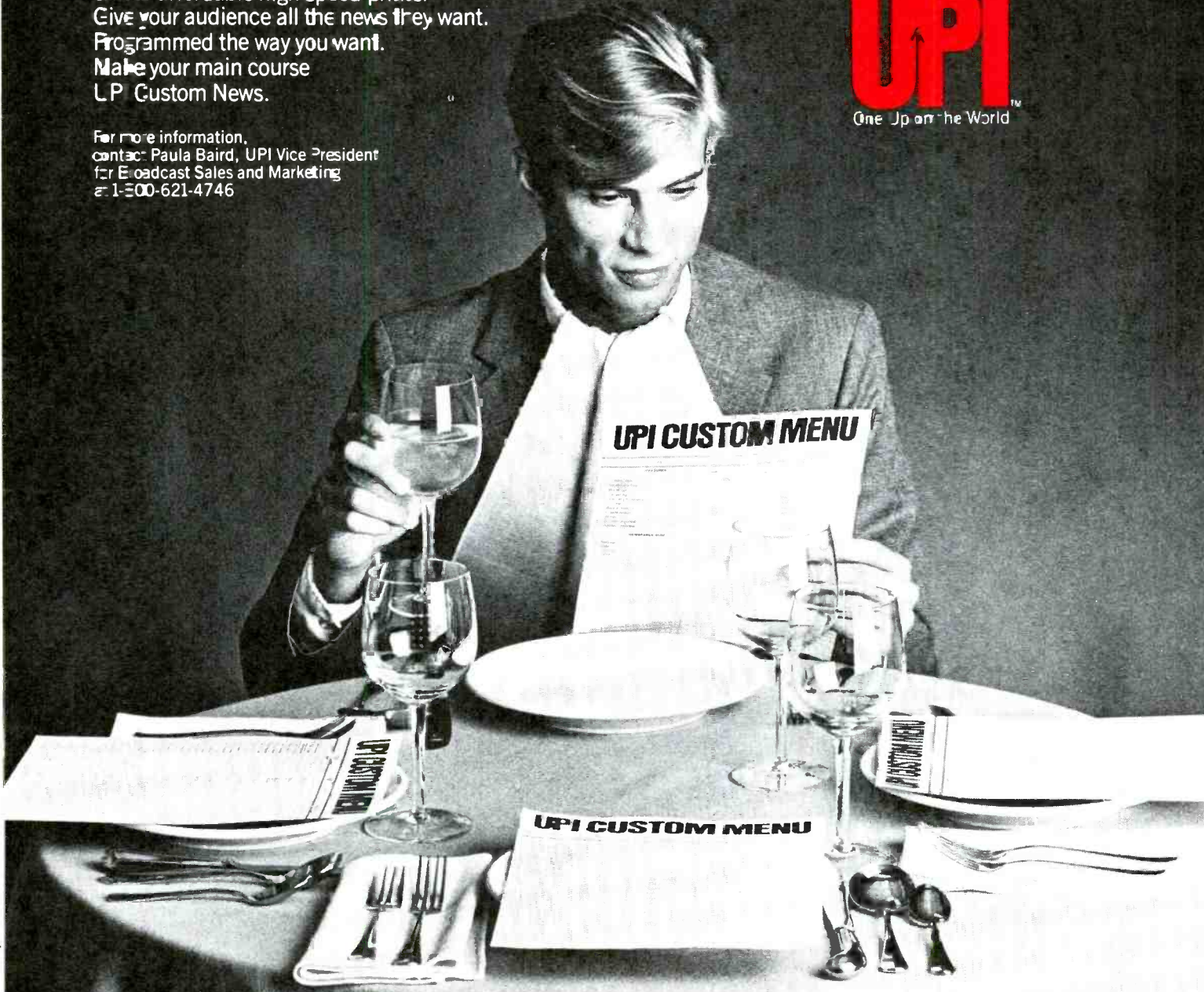
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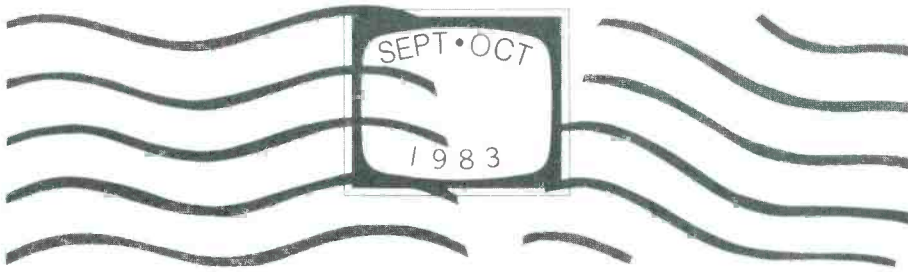
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At the Fore Front

WILLIAM FORE'S ARTICLE, "WHEN GREED Masquerades as Principle" [On Air, July/August], offers misguided arguments against loosening government's regulation of broadcasting.

Can one reasonably claim TV signals are scarce? A.C. Nielsen reports 58 percent of our households can receive nine or more over-the-air signals. Already, 12 percent of homes can receive 20 or more channels. On the horizon are low-power television, five-channel MDS, and direct-to-home broadcasting. Contrast this with newspaper competition; only a handful of cities are served by more than a single daily paper.

Fore equates selling price with scarcity, citing transfers in Boston (\$220 million) and Los Angeles (\$245 million) to make his point. But those are hardly typical sales, as they include other substantial assets. In 1982, the average price for a VHF station was \$16.2 million, and for a UHF, \$4.8 million.

Pursuing Fore's line a bit further, how would he account for the \$22 million sale of *The Oakland Tribune* in a city of 362,000 when in Jacksonville, Florida, with a population over 500,000, a television station went for \$18 million? The reason is not hard to find: Oakland has one newspaper while Jacksonville has five television stations.

What can one make of Fore's comparisons of spectrum space to more familiar public resources? Forests have trees, fisheries have fish, rivers have water, and public parks offer beauty and space. But a sliver of spectrum space is empty and useless until a broadcaster fills it with programming that attracts, interests, entertains, and informs an audience. And that costs money as well as organization, creativity, and enterprise.

First Amendment questions are knottier, but Section 315 of the Communications Act stifles debate. In Presidential campaigns it can mean literally dozens of candidates must be given equal time. The Fairness Doctrine has been abused by

people in government and special-interest groups, who have used it as a tool to squelch opposing views. No matter how benevolent one may believe government to be, its access to the control of program content squares very awkwardly with some Americans' notions of how best to insulate our means of expression from the good intentions of our regulators.

Fore is an admirably sincere social commentator. In his sometimes vitriolic arguments, however, he has not only stepped out of character but also away from the facts.

ROY DANISH
Director
Television Information Office
New York City

Less News Is Better

I SAW A NEWS REPORT (*DES MOINES REGISTER*) relating to the RTNDA study done by Dr. Vernon Stone of Southern Illinois University [CrossCurrents, July/August]. The headline writer took the viewpoint opposite to James Traub's, and declared, "After Deregulation, 9 Percent of Stations Cut News Time."

As an old war horse who has traversed the jousting arenas of journalism, I think *more* than 9 percent of the stations should cut back their news. Some do it so poorly, with such untrained, unqualified people, that it undermines the credibility of the others.

Let us not require that news be done, no matter how poorly. Perhaps your laudable desire to have both more and better news creates an illusion that more *is* better.

GEORGE LIPPER
General Manager
KDTH-TV
Dubuque, Iowa

The Cities and Cable

THE GARY ROTHBART AND DAVID STOLLER article, "Cable at the Crossroads" [July/August], raises many questions about the

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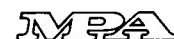
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CAREERS IN THE NEW MEDIA

The Complete Transcript

Which field to enter? Where does it lead in career terms? What skills are required? Where are the best opportunities today?

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The program was organized and moderated by the editors of *Channels of Communications*. More than 200 people enrolled, many of them interested in making a mid-career change.

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wiring of urban areas for cable.

However, you mentioned Cleveland only briefly. An exciting possibility being discussed here is *city ownership* of a cable service, much like any other utility. Cleveland's mayor has proposed that the municipal electric company be enfranchised to wire our inner city. If this happened, it would be a bold solution to the problems outlined by your authors—and it's the type of answer that merits more support and discussion in your pages.

LARRY BRUNER
Cleveland, Ohio

USA Everyday

TO SAY THAT *USA Today* IS A MERE "distillation of television news and talk show" is a travesty [CrossCurrents, May/June].

I don't know of any TV news that gives me such up-to-date details about last night's sporting events. My local channels' weather reports are done by clowns and therefore aren't as comprehensive as *USA Today's*. Neither local nor network coverage gives me such a quick, but still thorough, scan of the business news. My stations don't give me a crossword puzzle tougher than the *New York Times* puzzle.

RICHARD J. VESELY
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

A "Leap Forward"

DAVID LACHENBRUCH DID AN EXCELLENT report on "Digital Television—the Great Leap Forward" [July/August]. Unfortunately, two misconceptions exist in the article.

The statement that "Within two to five years, all major broadcast studio functions could be digital" is misleading. In fact, probably not one major broadcast studio will have all functions digital in the next two to five years. The Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE) has for the past two years had several groups working on digital video standards and studio implementation. The complete formats for the digital television signal have not been arrived at, and no agreement has been reached on major screen parameters. No broadcaster is likely to render a working analog facility obsolete, or attempt to build a non-standard new facility, until there is

industry agreement concerning the makeup of the digital television signal and its transmission characteristics.

Less significant is Lachenbruch's assertion that the pickup device in the camera will remain analog by necessity. Digital pickup devices do exist, and cameras utilizing these charge coupled devices (CCD) are available.

IRV ROSNER
New York City

YOUR ARTICLES ARE ALWAYS TIMELY AND informative. David Lachenbruch, however, should be awarded a special industry medal and perhaps should be appointed the only person to write about television techniques.

Wherever his articles appear, it is obvious that he has a very special talent for explaining these mysteries in the most concise, informative, intelligent way, while using the English language to perfection. "The Greap Leap Forward" is no exception. It couldn't have been better or, for that matter, shorter.

K. KALSER
New York City

Paying the Sports Piper

I DON'T KNOW WHICH GURU TO BELIEVE.

At the end of "The Great American Hype Machine" [Public Eye, May/June], Les Brown predicted that the Super Bowl would never be put on pay television because years of hype had raised it to the status of a "quasi-national holiday." He went on to state that, more than a championship game, "it is the ritual service for Super Sunday."

The religious imagery seems appropriate in light of the recent comments of one of our age's great iconoclasts, Ted Turner. In the April 25 issue of *Multi-channel News*, he said the Super Bowl and the World Series "belong on pay-per-view as soon as we can get them there."

Who is right, Brown or Turner?

Since so much money is involved, I think Turner will be right. I also predict that one of the coming hypes will be from the pay-television people and the sports franchise owners, as they attempt to sell us on the "benefits" of putting the Super Bowl and the World Series on "pay-as-you-view." Soon, Super Sunday services will be attended only by those who can afford them. The rest of us will be allowed

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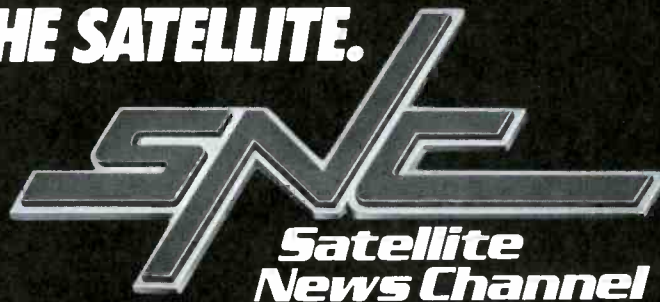
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in only after everything has been decided . . . all the incense burned, all the mystery gone.

SHERMAN TARR
South Windsor, Connecticut

Origin of the Species

I ENJOY YOUR MAGAZINE A GREAT DEAL; I particularly liked the article on Ted Turner ["Reaching for Conquest," July/August].

I must point out, however, that in the same issue, "Cable: Stop 'n' Shop for All Services" [Quo Video] implied that Austin Cablevision originated the idea of a "retail type" outlet for cable services. Cable TV Puget Sound has had such an outlet since early 1981, the first one in the country.

EVAN C. ARESVIK
Cable TV Puget Sound
Tacoma, Washington

Of Copyright Rights

IN "IS HOME TAPING A CRIME?" [LAW REVIEW, May/June], Eric Scheye concludes his analysis of the home recording debate with the odd implication that compensating copyright holders for home recording could conceivably conflict with the First Amendment. It is a peculiar thread to leave hanging at the end of an otherwise nicely woven overview, particularly because the protection of copyright is a vital adjunct to the First Amendment.

Copyright, like the First Amendment, is enshrined in the Constitution. Neither right is absolute. Congress grants copyright monopolies limited in duration and subject to certain "fair uses" justified by social purposes. The First Amendment also has its limitations: Because electronic speech is restricted by a scarcity of broadcast frequencies, we have such phenomena as the Fairness Doctrine and licensing in the public interest.

Copyright and the First Amendment are hardly antagonistic: Both contribute to the free flow of ideas, to the enrichment of public debate. Ultimately, copyright infringement chills the right and the ability of creative artists, journalists, and others to speak; correspondingly, copyright infringement must harm our "right to know," because those who cannot be secure in their copyright will prefer to remain silent.

Compensating copyright holders for home video recording is no different in principle (or in its First Amendment implications) than compensating publishers

and authors for their books. The claim by some copyright opponents—that the distribution of a movie or TV show through the "public airwaves" somehow deprives the copyright holder of his right to control copying of the product—is plainly wrong.

The fact that the airwaves are the means of distribution in no way vitiates the claim to copyright. When a cable TV system picks up a "distant signal" and redistributes it for local viewing, it is liable to those holding copyrights for the programs shown.

Those who would attempt to interpose the First Amendment "right of access" in defense of uncompensated home recording ignore the fact that those who must, for financial reasons, rely on advertiser-supported broadcast television stand to lose the most from the reduction or withholding of product from broadcast television.

The focus of the debate should not be on the "criminality" of home video recording, but on reconciling new technologies with traditional principles of copyright. Legislation introduced by Sen. Charles Mathias (R-MD) and Rep. Don Edwards (D-CA) would allow unrestricted home recording for personal use,

while assuring that copyright holders are equally compensated through a blanket license mechanism: Manufacturers and importers of recording machines and tapes would pay annual license fees for their blanket license, and these fees would be apportioned to copyright holders who can support their claims.

JOSEPH W. WAZ, JR.
Special Counsel
Coalition to Preserve the American
Copyright
Washington, D.C.

The Smell of Success

I SMELL A RAT . . . OR SHOULD I SAY PIG? I'm referring to your story, "Smelling is Believing" [CrossCurrents, May/June].

This boss does not wear Brut, Carter Hall, etc. It's more like Chanel, Norell, or Lauren. Obviously I disagree with you—I do not need to meet you in person, for you have already "produced warning signals to potential sex rivals."

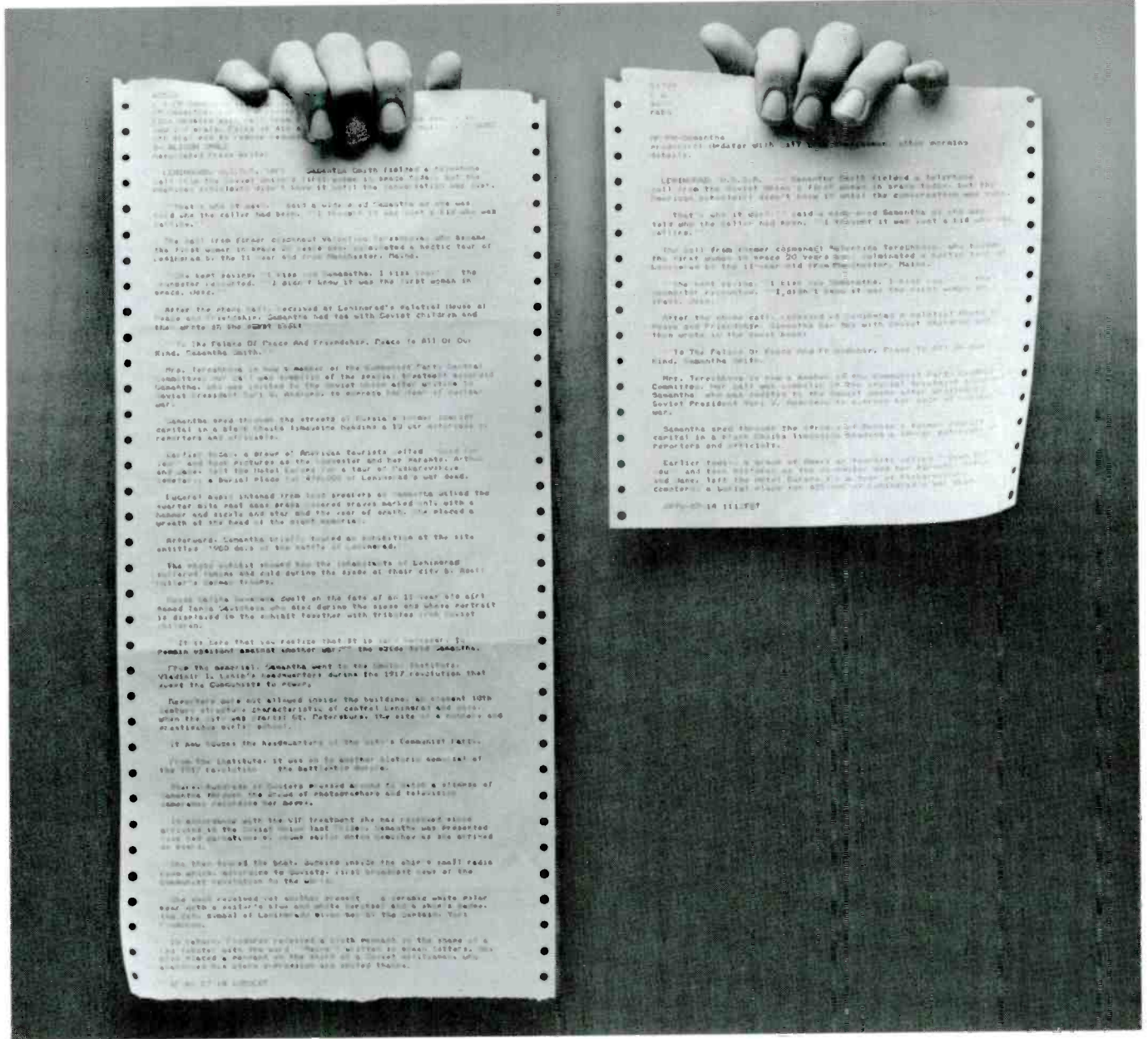
Here's whiffing at you.

LISA RESNICK
Woodbury, New York



"I suppose it was inevitable."

Joseph Farris



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CROSS CURRENTS

Lead Kindly PBS

Commercial television has often followed public broadcasting's lead. The miniseries, for example, was introduced to the United States by the Public Broadcasting Service in 1970, with *The Forsyte Saga*. CBS's *60 Minutes* owes a large debt to the Public Broadcasting Laboratory, which in 1967 developed the first Sunday-night newsmagazine, *PBL*. During the San Francisco newspaper strike in 1968, public station KQED created a program that sparked the "Eyewitness News" trend in local television. And now, although it didn't originate the idea, PBS will be first with a one-hour newscast in the early evening, when *The MacNeill/Lehrer Report* assumes its expanded form.

For news innovations of this sort, the rules in commercial and public television are much alike. The network cannot simply impose its will on the local stations. A longer *MacNeill/Lehrer Report* was the expressed wish of PBS, MacNeil and Lehrer, and the corporate underwriter, AT&T, but in the end it came about only because the PBS member stations voted for it. The three commercial networks, in contrast, do not have the hour newscast—although all desire it—because their affiliates have rejected the idea. Not that local public broadcasters are so much nobler; they were motivated by their own peculiar business imperatives, just as commercial broadcasters were when they shot down an hour news broadcast for themselves.

What appear to have clinched the longer news for public television are several studies that indicated a *MacNeill*

Lehrer hour could improve the economic condition of the stations. One study, conducted in New Jersey, found that eight of ten contributors to public television were appreciative *MacNeill/Lehrer* viewers. Another revealed that the program attracts more local underwriting than any other national show. Still another discovered that when the shows are in progress during the membership drives, more pledges are phoned in while MacNeil and Lehrer are on the air than at any other time. To double the length of the program, then, is to double the opportunities to make hay.

In their zealous pitch to the station managements last fall, Robert MacNeil and James Lehrer pointed out that although their average nightly audience is only four million viewers, some 15 million people watch at least one installment every week. They attributed this differential to the fact that the old half-hour *MacNeill/Lehrer* broadcasts covered a single topic each night, and they surmised that viewers checked in on the topic and switched out if it didn't interest them. The new version would deal with a variety of stories, they noted, increasing the chances of the 15 million weekly viewers staying tuned each night.

If they are right, and more people take to watching the PBS evening news, then public television will make a larger claim on the commercial television audience, and that would call for retaliation. The network news divisions would be ecstatic at having to answer in kind. And so arises the absurd situation of the networks rooting for a competitor, because *The MacNeill/Lehrer Report* has become their best hope of fulfilling their own wish for an early-evening news hour. L.B.

Different Strokes for Different Blokes

Two men dressed in natty bow ties and vests pace along the edges of a green baize table. They carry long, thin sticks, which they use to strike a small, white ball. When that ball hits a colored ball into one of six pouches on the surface's perimeter, the player scores points and continues his turn. The game is snooker, and it is perhaps the slowest sport in the world. It is also the rage of British television.

When the BBC's second channel recently broadcast 90 hours of the two-week World Professional Snooker Championship, viewers flocked to their sets. The first week, the channel nearly tripled its normal share of the audience. The second week, nine of BBC-2's top 10 programs were snooker telecasts. The slowest game on television has become, in the words of BBC official Jim Dumigham, "a broadcasting phenomenon."

What's the fuss about? Why are Britain's commercial TV companies now clamoring to offer their own snooker programs, when for the past 15 years they've been content to let the sport wallow in the backwaters of the BBC? The answer is simple: The British have discovered that snooker and television are a perfect match.

Snooker is a more subtle version of pool, played on a larger table with smaller balls. Each player attempts to "snooker" his opponent by tucking the cue ball behind another ball, thereby leaving an impossible shot. The drama peaks when only a few balls remain, and the match could go either way. Snooker demands strategy, imagination, and—with championship rounds lasting 10 hours or more—consummate patience.

Most of the time nothing seems to happen in televised snooker. There's that same rocksteady view of the green baize table dotted with small colored balls. Once in a while the camera captures the subtlest tic of apprehension in a contestant's face. It is a program with all the production values of an American public-access show.

Snooker doesn't call for expensive production. Most sports are played at a



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much faster pace in a much larger space. To make sense of a fast-action game on television, producers need instant replays, slow motion, and various other effects. And to cover the great space of, say, a football field, many cameras must be deployed to pick out the important plays for the viewer. The goal is to make watching sports on television even better than being at the ball park.

Snooker, by contrast, works on television without technological tenderizing. The entire "playing field" fits perfectly on the screen, which enables the viewer to enjoy the game much as if he were in one of the parlors or billiard halls where snooker has flourished for more than a century. The lack of fast action helps



draw the viewer into the game: A snooker victory is, above all, a feat of concentration that multiple angles and special effects would spoil. The viewer, along with

the player, wants to be able to scrutinize every possible combination of shots on the table, then choose the sequence the player is likely to execute. Few spectacles on television rival snooker for its ability to mesmerize, and none can do it so cheaply.

Will snooker ever make it on American television? It seems doubtful that a network would wait 15 years, as the BBC did, for snooker to catch on. The audience for a game requiring such close attention and patience would probably not be vast. But perhaps there is some place on cable, which can spare much more airtime than production money, where snooker can find an American home.

ROBERT RONNING

All Ads, All the Time

Are we Americans ready for a nationwide, all-advertising channel? The results of a nine-month market test of something called the Cablesop say—believe it or not—yes. The all-ad channel scored as well in the field research as any cable programming outside of the pay services, and about as well as the popular Cable News Network and ESPN, the sports channel.

The experiment, conducted last year on the 54-channel cable system operated in Peabody, Massachusetts by the Adams-Russell Company, featured 17 specially created commercials running three to seven minutes in length. Most were prepared by the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency. Adams-Russell's partner in the project. Moreover, the Cablesop channels (there were four) were optionally interactive, permitting viewers to select the commercials they wanted to see. This was made possible by the use of telephone lines and a computer hookup at the cable transmission center.

The test's findings punctured the most commonly held assumptions about the public's attitudes toward television advertising. Six out of 10 Peabody cable subscribers—there are 8,000 overall—said they had checked out the Cablesop's programming. Were they tuning in just out of curiosity? Apparently not: More than half the households that looked in on Cablesop said they had turned to the advertising channels at least once a

week. One out of five used the system's "call-in" feature to choose a selection of commercials.

Particularly significant, from an advertiser's standpoint, was the positive reaction to the test's longish, unpolished, almost folksy commercials. A majority of Cablesop viewers gave these high marks while disparaging the conventional 30- and 60-second television spots as "not at all useful." And—brace yourself—about half the respondents who watched the Cablesop regularly said they found many of its commercials more interesting than network entertainment programming.

The Cablesop experiment may appeal to national advertisers who have been bemoaning the decline in network audience shares and its possible consequences for the continued effectiveness of television advertising. The price is right, too. The average Cablesop commercial cost a tiny \$1,000 to \$1,500 a minute to produce.

Adams-Russell now plans a national debut in four upscale suburban areas September 1. By the end of 1984, Adams-Russell looks to make Cablesop available in several million homes, and projects national revenues of around \$5 million.

If the study in Peabody can be believed, we may yet see the day when a fancy Hollywood show has to worry about competition from, of all things, a low-budget commercial.

MEL FRIEDMAN

Videos at an Exhibition

White words flash on a black background: "To choose a subject, press the number of your selection." The young woman standing before the screen presses number two, Aztecs of Mexico. More white words pop up.

"Now choose a topic?" cries the woman. "Oh my God!" After biting a fingernail and making a few tentative stabs at the keypad, she chooses history.

The screen informs her that this topic is without sound. She and her companion look somewhat crestfallen. They approach the keypad—can they pick something else?—then turn away, slightly bored, as images and white words succeed each other, flicking soundlessly behind them.

The video-disc display at the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art began late in 1982, after a donation of equipment by Pioneer Video. It is a courageous experiment. According to one spokesman, the Met is the first American art museum using the interactive video disc to educate patrons about exhibits; as such, it is meeting more than a little resistance: The program, designed to foster "understanding and appreciation" of the Rockefeller Wing's stunning primitive art collection, demands more of most museum-goers than they are used to giving.

For one thing, the video display's physical setup—three triangular kiosks, each equipped with one keypad that operates the three screens on its exposed sides—is a little intimidating, because it's unfamiliar. Not only are American viewers



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So contact Planned Parenthood in your community, or call Communications, at (212) 541-7800.

After all, who else but you has 19½ hours of a teenager's undivided attention every week?

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trained to expect a high level of technical sophistication from TV images, they are trained to sit and wait for those images, not ask for them by pressing buttons.

For another thing, people must actively hunt for this "information room," located, a bit too unobtrusively, at the far end of the exhibit near the ladies' lounge. People who do find it are usually looking for something else.

The mingling sound tracks emanating from the three kiosks, the repeating lists of white-lettered instructions and notations, the successive images, some moving, some stationary—all, combined, are slightly jarring to the uninitiated. Slightly frustrating, too, is the fact that you can't "change the channel"—i.e. press another button—once you've chosen a topic (though clearly, frequent "channel changing" would defeat the program's purpose).



But the project is worthwhile, especially in an exhibit collected from other worlds. The art of the Asmat of New Guinea, Aztecs, Northwest Coast Indians, and West Africans of the Cameroons inevitably lacks a context in the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The Met's video goes some distance toward re-creating that context. Each culture is subdivided into categories—"Art & Everyday Life," "Environment," "Cultural History"—and each category is illustrated, either by short narrated films and photo sequences, or by slides and archival photos interspersed with text. The viewer sees the art in creation and in ritual use, gaining, through this space-age tool, some appreciation of aboriginal society.

Thomas Newman, supervisor of the museum's educational media, likes the video disc's versatility and plans to exploit that feature in another interactive exhibit, an adjunct to the Met's Ming-era Chinese garden. Created by Chinese artisans, as the first "permanent cultural exchange" between the United States and

the People's Republic, the garden is replete with the symbols of Chinese culture. Newman envisions an interactive board "with keypad locations all around the garden," each responding to a viewer's touch and activating a short video display.

There's no telling how much a museum-goer actually benefits from watching such a program. But it's clear how much he loses by missing it: One fellow, waltzing past several West African pieces in the Rockefeller Wing, unaware of the "information room" and its video program, turned to a companion and observed, "What a tremendous conglomeration of junk." S.W.W.

Condos in the Sky

What you miss when you see a rocket launch on television is the strange incongruity of high-tech activity in a no-tech environment. Cape Canaveral is a wildlife refuge, a haven for rattlesnakes, wild pigs, egrets, and ibises. Moments before the launching of the first Hughes Galaxy satellite last summer, a young deer wandered into the clearing and stared not at the majestic Delta/PAM-D rocket poised for the lift-off but in the other direction, at the group of photographers and journalists standing on a mound a mile from

Beating the System

Maybe it wasn't the end of the world last March 15, when the copyright fee paid by cable system operators for carrying distant signals was jacked up as much as 15-fold; but it was, after all, the Ides of March. The cable industry screamed bloody murder, and the fee hike forced scores of system operators to drop the TV stations imported from other cities.

But now Eastern Microwave, the relay system for WOR-TV in New York, has come up with some calm and practical solutions depending on the canniness, the ingenuity, that the desire to evade regulations seems ever to produce. Some of the trickier maneuvers might not enjoy the protection of the law, but nobody's proved anything yet. A sampling follows:

- The standard pass-through. Most cable operators would think of this without prodding from Eastern Microwave. The cable operator can simply pass his additional costs on to the subscriber, though some franchise contracts prohibit this arrangement. The additional fee should come to no more than 35 cents per subscriber, according to Gil Korta, Eastern Microwave's sales manager.

- "Re-structuring." This takes us up a notch in subtlety. The copyright fee is assessed on revenue gained from both the basic service and the particular "tier" of services on which the distant signal is located. So if you take the distant signal off a money-making tier and include it in the basic service, you've diminished the revenue base on which the copyright fee is calcu-

lated. A system in Suffolk County, New York, has already gone this route (as have perhaps half a dozen others), precipitating a copyright-infringement suit from the Motion Picture Association of America, whose members number among the copyright holders.

- "De-integration." Now we begin to get devilishly clever. The copyright rate hike applies only to systems with gross annual revenues over \$214,000. So a big system can "de-integrate" into teeny-tiny sub-\$214,000 bits and declare each one a separate system. Fritz Attaway, an attorney with the MPAA, says that he'd be "more than pleased to take that one before a judge."

- The final expedient sounds, well, brazenly devious, but Korta says "the lawyers threw this one out to us." If, instead of receiving a distant signal directly from a satellite or an interstate microwave relay system, a cable operator routes it through a local broadcast system, why then, it's a local signal. Or so the lawyers think. And local signals fall under a system's "must-carry" obligation, in which case they are exempt from copyright fees. There's only one catch, according to the unappeasable Attaway: The operator needs the distant signal owner's permission to rebroadcast the signal locally, and the signal owner needs the copyright holder's permission. The copyright holder seems likely to ask for compensation.

If all else fails, of course, a system can actually *pay* the increase. But it seems so unnecessary. J.T.

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the launch site waiting for the ignition.

As a denizen of the Kennedy Space Center, the deer had surely witnessed more launches than anyone on that hill. But for all the magnificence of the blast-off—the burst of smoke and fire, followed moments later by the most exquisite thunderclap—he found us earth-bound humans more curious and amazing than anything our race was about to send heavenward. Probably with good reason.

Rockets and satellites are truly things to marvel at, but some human business transactions are equally wondrous. This one is a perfect example. The genius of the Galaxy enterprise is that it borrowed the condominium concept from real estate: Don't rent, buy. Its transponders were not leased in the common-carrier fashion of the other communications satellites already in orbit, but were sold outright to a number of users for the entire life of the satellite, which is estimated at about nine years. Home Box Office took six transponders; Group W Broadcasting and Cable four; Viacom, Turner Broadcasting, Spanish International Network, and Times-Mirror two each.

In all, 18 of the satellite's 24 transponders were spoken for well in advance of the launch; the other six will be held in reserve as back-ups for a while, in case any of the declared transponders should fail. There would be no problem filling up the satellite; orders are hanging fire for other transponder purchases or for leasing.

Hughes Communications has built many, if not most, of the satellites now aloft, but they were all for other companies. The Galaxy satellite marked Hughes's entry into the field of satellite real estate. A tour guide for the Kennedy Space Center dispensed some ballpark numbers on costs: To build a satellite, he said, would run you about \$70 million today; to send it into the sky and park it in geostationary orbit another \$75 million, which includes the hefty tab for insurance. So Hughes seemed to be on the hook for \$145 million.

But one of the users confided that each of the 18 condominium transponders went for about \$15 million. That comes to \$270 million, which means that Hughes made a profit of \$125 million the moment its Galaxy I satellite went into orbit. Galaxy I has thus just about paid for Galaxy II, and there is also to be a third satellite in the series. Meanwhile, there are still the six bankable unsold transponders on the original satellite.

The young deer stood looking at the hedge of people on the hill, and one could almost imagine his thoughts: Why are those fools just standing there and not rushing off to get into the satellite business? L.B.

Cellular Radio Meets the Spacephone

No communications medium, no matter how technologically innovative, is safe in today's volatile environment. A new technology need only enter the market for another to jump in and challenge it. Take, for instance, the case of cellular radio.

This new mobile telephone service, which promises ultimately to put a phone in every car, has been tagged the next billion-dollar telecommunications industry. But even as plans are made to construct cellular-radio systems in the largest cities, proposals are being weighed at the Federal Communications Commission for yet a newer form of mobile telephone, which would use high-powered satellites. It goes by the name of LMSS, land mobile satellite service. Not only does LMSS want a piece of the market, it also wants a hunk of the UHF spectrum that is being held in reserve for cellular radio.

Cellular radio was developed by American Telephone & Telegraph in the '70s, but was on hold until last year, when the FCC authorized it and allocated the 40 megahertz frequency for the service on the UHF radio band. The cellular-radio technology divides a city into areas called cells; a computer-equipped base station in each cell can handle as many as 666 two-way mobile telephones and as many as 222 calls simultaneously. One pre-set channel in each city continuously tracks the whereabouts of each mobile phone so users can be notified when they have a call. The calls can be switched, or "handed off," from cell to cell around the city. Expectations are that cellular radio will raise the number of mobile telephones in the United States from 55,000 today to 1.5 million by 1990.

By using satellites, LMSS can provide a service very much like cellular radio for anyone who can afford it, with phones that resemble walkie-talkies. But where the ground-based cellular-radio system is made up of small geographic cells, each with its own transmitter, LMSS will use satellite "footprints" of about 300 miles in diameter. Calls will be routed through a base station servicing the region within a satellite's footprint. The larger coverage area makes LMSS especially suitable for rural service.

Among the organizations applying for LMSS authorization at the FCC is the

National Aeronautics and Space Administration. NASA's filing asks that an 8 mHz chunk of spectrum on the UHF band, between the allocations for cellular radio and other private land-mobile services, be designated for LMSS. The fledgling cellular-radio industry has voiced opposition, arguing that it eventually will need that additional frequency to meet



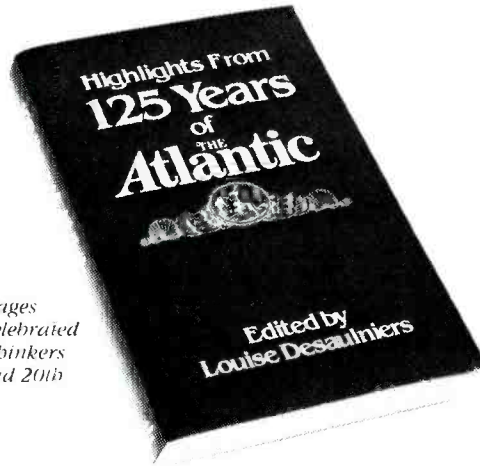
the demand for its mobile service. AT&T, which has pumped more than \$190 million into cellular-radio technology, calls NASA's proposal "repetitive." NASA maintains, however, that LMSS will not supplant but complement cellular radio, and that without it only the cities will have mobile phone communications. NASA proposes to build and launch satellites that would then be turned over to private concerns for operation and management. The NASA proposal has gained strong support from such prospective users of LMSS technology as the trucking industry, the U.S. Immigration Department's border patrols, and hospitals' emergency medical teams.

The World Administrative Radio Conference, the international congress concerned with the use of the electromagnetic spectrum, urged the adoption of LMSS technology in 1979. Since then, no one has doubted that satellites would be used for private mobile communications. The current FCC wants to encourage competition in all fields and would find it hard to justify not allocating spectrum space to LMSS. Cellular radio will have company in the mobile telephone field, if not indeed competition. The question, most agree, is not whether but when.

RICHARD BARBIERI

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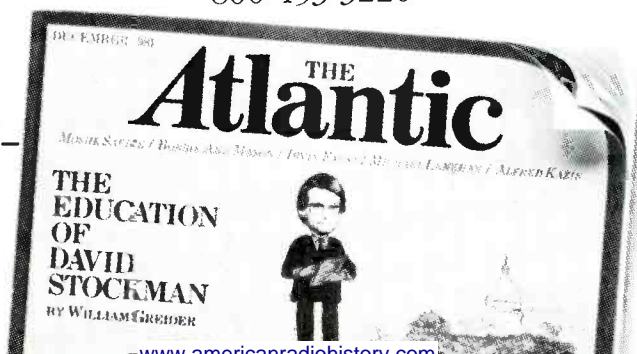
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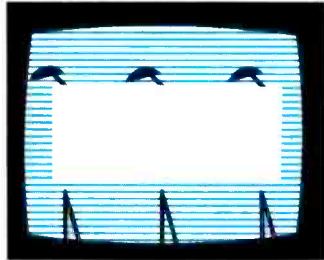
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Teletext al Fresco

KCET-TV Los Angeles provides teletext news for the hearing-impaired as a public service, something one might expect from a noncommercial station that pioneered in teletext. What no one expected was that this service would spin off a tidy little commercial sideline for the station.

It happened when an electronic billboard company called Silent Radio purchased



the secondary rights to KCET's "Newsline" service. Some 250 electronic boards are already operating throughout Southern California, and Silent Radio plans to install an-

other 450. Any area with "heavy foot traffic" is a natural spot for one, according to company president Sy Gaiber. Each billboard receives KCET's teletext signal by means of a simple television antenna. The news bulletins are interspersed with advertising sold by Silent Radio.

KCET gets a percentage of Silent Radio's profits as payment for providing its "Newsline," so the billboards represent revenue at absolutely no extra cost.

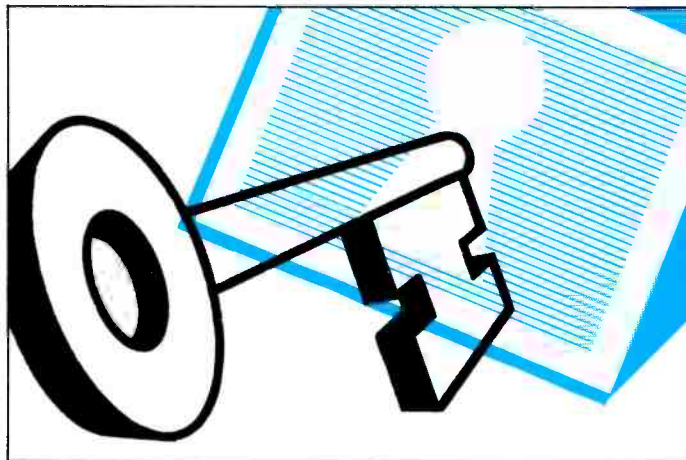
Video Discs: Look, Listen, and Learn

GROLIER'S *Academic American*, the encyclopedia you can browse through on a computer screen instead of a library lectern, is proving a runaway success among the 90,000 data-base subscribers who receive it. Delivered over phone or cable lines by Dow Jones News/Retrieval Service and Bibliographic Retrieval Service, the encyclopedia is especially popular among students, who use it at the 200 subscribing public and college libraries.

As much as they like the *Academic American*, students may be wowed by Grolier's audiovisual supplement—a laser video-disc "library" that will chronicle historic words, music, and images in many fields.

The project, a joint venture with the Longman Group, is only in its preliminary stages now: A prototype disc will be ready for testing later this fall. Grolier spokesman John Cole says the discs will exploit every potential of the new technology: "Our creative people are going crazy on this."

Teletext: Here Come Decoders



CBS's Extravision and NBC's Teletext are both new textual services broadcast onto the vertical blanking interval, the black line framing the picture on your TV screen. But viewers can't avail themselves of the services without a decoder that translates the tiny bits of information in the blanking interval into text on the picture tube. Hardly anybody has the decoder: It costs \$300 and is not widely marketed.

So it came as welcome news at both networks that General Electric plans to begin test-

marketing color TV sets with built-in teletext decoders later this year, leading a wave of manufacturers that includes Sony and Panasonic. Like NBC and CBS, GE will follow the North American Broadcast Teletext Standard, chosen "because it offers better graphics," says GE publicist Judy Ziegler. "Teletext will need commercials to survive, and commercials need good graphics."

Any television set with a built-in decoder should, as Ziegler puts it, "improve the marketability of the teletext technology"—if the prices of the new sets are kept down.

Computers: Birth of the Wired Home

IF YOU'RE TIRED of waiting for the "computer age" to arrive, why not move to Benicia, California? There, some 30 miles north of San Francisco, in a subdivision called Southampton, sits the first "computer-ready" community.

At an average cost of \$150,000, the Southampton home comes equipped with a fully wired family room and a bedroom closet ready to accommodate a computer, a printer, and the necessary accessories. Telephone lines allow for the sending and receiving of computer information—as well as for human contact. And if you just add \$3,500 more to your mortgage, Southampton's developers will supply your computer-ready dream home with the computer itself. (Otherwise you can supply your own.)

The developers see the scheme as uniting home and office—thus saving the busy professional a tedious daily commute. It will also save residents trips to the bank and the grocery store. In their spare time, one assumes, Southampton homeowners will take up computer games.



Anders Wenngren

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Geraldine James Rosemary Leach Judy Parfitt Saeed Jaffrey
Zia Mohyeddin and Charles Dance

produced by Christopher Morahan

directed by Christopher Morahan and Jim O'Brien

made by GRANADA TELEVISION OF ENGLAND

The Jewel in the Crown has been acquired for the USA by WGBH Boston
It will be shown on *Masterpiece Theatre* in 1984,
which is made possible by a grant from Mobil Corporation



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THE FIRST AMENDMENT

V.

UNION POLITICAL SPENDING

The First Amendment was written nearly 200 years ago to protect the right of all Americans to freely express their own opinions—and the right not to support opinions with which they disagree.

But despite the First Amendment, one group in America has the power to force men and women to financially support political causes and candidates they oppose—or lose their jobs. That group is organized labor.

Federal labor law as well as some state laws permit unions and employers to require working Americans to pay union dues as a condition of employment, regardless of whether or not they want to join or support a union. As a result, the AFL-CIO and member unions collect more than \$3.5 billion per year—\$10 million a day—in compulsory dues.

This massive amount of union treasury money, often called “soft money,” cannot be used for direct cash contributions to candidates for federal office. But federal election law permits the use of “soft money” for a host of union activities for candidates, political parties, referendums and ideological causes.

And spend it the unions do. Political historian Theodore White called the AFL-CIO political effort in 1968

“unprecedented in American history.” It included, for example, the registration of 4.6 million voters, the printing and distribution of 115 million pamphlets and leaflets, telephone banks in 638 localities, 72,225 house-to-house canvassers, and nearly 100,000 volunteers on election day.

Labor columnist Victor Riesel estimates that the cost of organized labor’s unreported “in-kind” political activities in 1976 was over \$100 million. Allowing for inflation and the dramatic increase in union political action, that figure could top \$150 million in 1984.

In response, more and more union members are speaking out against the flagrant abuse of their First Amendment rights, looking to the nation’s courts for help.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that the use of compulsory union dues for political, ideological and other non-collective bargaining activities is unconstitutional, violating employees’ First Amendment rights. But some courts have strayed badly in their interpretation of the legal precedents.

This fall, the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation will seek from the Supreme Court a strict definition of collective bargaining and a uniform remedy to protect the

constitutional rights of American workers against the use of their compulsory dues for union political spending. (**Ellis/Fails v. Brotherhood of Railway, Airline and Steamship Clerks**)

The issue is clear, the abuse widespread. Rank and file workers, especially those who choose not to become union members, have little or no say as to which candidates and causes their money is used to support.

As a federal appeals court has stated, this wholesale violation of employees’ First Amendment rights damages workers twice: They are forced to “contribute” to political candidates they oppose, and their ability to finance candidates they do support is thereby severely diminished.

Nearly 200 years ago, Thomas Jefferson wrote: “To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical.”

Unhappily, such tyranny prevails in America today in the form of union political spending financed by compulsory union dues. This tyranny can only be eliminated by the combined action of an informed press, an aroused citizenry and a responsible judiciary.

If you would like further information about this fundamental abuse of the First Amendment, please write us for a copy of our pamphlet, “The First Amendment vs. Union Political

Spending: A 26-Year Legal Battle for Employees’ Political Freedom”, and more information about the landmark case, **Ellis/Fails v. BRAC**. Or call Joanna Boyce at (703) 321-8510.

National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation
Dept. CC
8001 Braddock Road
Springfield, VA 22160

Throwing the Bull in Barcelona

by Les Brown



FREEDOM WAS NOT THE ISSUE when a group of American producers, journalists, and executives arrived in Barcelona early last summer for a week-long colloquium on the television revolution in the United States. But by the time it was over, freedom had become the issue, at least for some of us. American freedom.

The event was arranged by the Institute for North American Studies, an independent educational organization in Barcelona, which had in mind an exchange between Spain and America on the subject of television. Spain was preparing for a television "revolution" of its own at the time, with the introduction of a third channel, the first to broadcast regionally. The big news in Barcelona, capital of the Catalonian region, was that the new channel would air all its programs in the Catalan language. But this was as much innovation as Spain would allow for now. Although the third channel would have some local autonomy, it would be, like the other two, government-controlled. The contrasts between Spanish and American television today are so staggering that it became difficult at times to realize we were discussing the same subject.

Spain, which emerged from 40 years of stern authoritarian rule with the death of Franco in 1975, is striving to become a model European social democracy, and television is just beginning to find its role in the new scheme. So it was significant that many in the audience were intensely interested in the American developments that promise to democratize television: public access, interactive cable, and independent video production. To the Spaniards, these were enviable signs of American liberty that might help open up their own system. One would like to have reported to them that these developments were flourishing in our country but, sadly, could not.

The theme of freedom was sounded by the least expert member of the American contingent, Bruce Fein, who was initiated to the field of television a scant six months earlier when he gave up a job in the Justice Department to become general counsel for the Federal Communications Commission. Since he had little to offer on the subject from practical experience, the boyish-looking and fiercely bookish lawyer simply voiced the official line. As a soldier of the Reagan Administration, he talked up the *laissez-faire* approach to the electronic media.

In a paper distributed at the seminar, Fein advocated "regula-

tion by consumer choice" and denounced the idea that government in a free society may regulate the speech of broadcasters. He termed the Fairness Doctrine, which requires broadcasters to air all sides of important controversial issues, a form of government oppression. In short, he was saying, in his lawyerly prose, that the essence of a free society is that it trusts its speakers and listeners. The government should thus keep at a distance from individual expression.

Bravo, for the sound of it. But in his first chance to demonstrate what the words meant, Bruce Fein flunked. In one of the more spirited exchanges at the seminar, Fein attacked an anti-

Our government sent its own speaker to offset the "wayward" views of other Americans.

nuclear documentary because it failed to present the pro-nuke side of the issue. He also faulted the documentary for neglecting to mention that the Soviets are also deeply involved with nuclear power. The audience of Spanish broadcast professionals, intellectuals, and college students must have wondered what to make of it. Not only was this minor government official passing comment on program content, something he professed to deplore, he was also offering a rationale for the Fairness Doctrine, which he professed to despise. The program in question didn't even air on one of the media Fein was anxious to set free from government regulation; it had played on one of America's bonafide free-speech outlets, a cable public-access channel.

A day or so later, in his formal address at the institute, Fein was back into high-sounding rhetoric. Citing the cases of Galileo and Socrates, he noted that truth is in grave danger when government interferes with the content of speech. He suggested that the American government had to get out of broadcasting's way to avert a situation like the one in the Soviet Union, where an employee of Radio Moscow was fired for saying on the air that his country invaded Afghanistan, instead of using the accepted

Keith Bendis

euphemism. "The idea of self-government is at war with the theory that government must protect the people from wayward or ill-considered thoughts," Fein said.

Bravo again, for rhetoric. But again the words are empty. For the other eight Americans in Barcelona had just learned that Bruce Fein was not so much asked to speak at the institute as sent to speak there: Our government paid his way, because some Americans in the group were considered to have wayward and ill-considered thoughts on communications policy. His name was added to the list a few weeks before the event, we learned, at the behest of the information officer at the American embassy, Jack Barton. In confirming this, Barton told me there was particular concern with offsetting the views of Nicholas Johnson, the liberal activist and onetime FCC commissioner who carved out a reputation as an anti-Establishment maverick. The institute complied because there seemed no point in crossing swords with the embassy on the matter.

It was probably just as well, for the sake of America's image abroad, that the Spanish audience was never told how Fein came

to be included in the program. The other American participants had no objection to his being there or to the idea of his offering some contrast and balance to the presentation. It was the spirit in which he joined us, the reason why he was forced upon the institute, that was disturbing. Our own freedom of expression, the very kind of freedom Fein boasted for America, was being compromised in the process.

How interesting that our government is comfortable with broadcasters having the freedom to speak at home but not with critics speaking freely abroad. Perhaps this Administration finds it so easy to advocate free expression for the owners of American broadcast stations because those owners are known to be politically simpatico. Most station licensees are solid conservative businessmen and pillars of the Establishment. I wonder now whether this government would be so avid to deregulate radio and television, and confer the gift of unbridled free speech on the owners, if the field were overrun with ultra-liberals, dissenters, and social critics of the Nick Johnson stripe. After the experience in Barcelona, I would doubt it. ■

The Buck Starts Here

NICHOLAS JOHNSON makes his living today teaching communications law at Iowa State, writing a weekly column for the Gannett chain, and doing a bit of on-screen television work. He appears to be doing okay from his base in Iowa City, Iowa, his hometown. But he resembles a poverty case next to others who have served on the FCC in recent years.

Not long ago, the trade press carried the news that Newton Minow, who made a big national name for himself while serving a mere two years on the commission (1961-63), had been appointed a director of CBS Inc.—a company he had represented, after leaving the commission, through the law firm of Sidley & Austin. But before he could join the CBS board, Minow had to seek a waiver from the FCC because of his equity interests in a number of cable companies. He got the waiver. At around the same time, Laurence Harris resigned from the commission as head of its broadcast bureau to become president of Metromedia's new telecommunications division.

Anne Jones, who recently resigned as a commissioner, and Joseph Fogarty and Stephen Sharp, whose terms ran out while the commission was cutting back to five members, all were snapped up by leading law firms. Charles Ferris, FCC chairman during the Carter Administration, immediately afterward became a partner in a large law firm. Kenneth Cox, who had served on the FCC with Johnson, has in the years since handled a number of lucrative cases, including the MCI suit against AT&T.

One scans the listing of lawyers practicing before the communications bar and finds the woods full of former FCC commissioners and key staffers, many of them with firms representing the largest corporations in the field. Dean Burch, who was chairman during the Nixon Administration, and Richard E. Wiley, who succeeded him, recently were pitted against each other on a key regulatory issue. Burch represented the Hollywood producers, and Wiley CBS.

An FCC commissioner earns \$58,000 a year and the

chairman \$60,000—small potatoes against earning power after a stint at the agency. Serving on the commission not only provides experience but also contacts and visibility in the industry. It's a great stepping stone to the big money in communications law.

Ordinary citizens take it on faith that the members of a federal agency will act in the best interests of the American public, but the flow of FCC officials to the industries they regulate, or to the law firms representing those industries, suggests something else. More often than not, it would seem, commissioners and FCC staffers are acting in their own best interests, with the next job in mind. This may explain why virtually all policy decisions by the current FCC are transactions made directly with the industries concerned, with hardly any public involvement.

The public doesn't give a commissioner his or her next job. Nick Johnson is living proof. He saw himself as the public's representative on the commission and made himself highly unpopular with broadcasters. Apparently he thought he had earned the public's gratitude, because he ran for Congress from his district in Iowa when he left the commission. He lost.

Mark S. Fowler, the current chairman of the commission, doesn't have many dealings with the public because he doesn't believe in the public-interest standard specified in the Communications Act. He has managed successfully to flout his mandate and become a champion of deregulation. He has in a brief time made himself the FCC chairman most popular with the broadcast industry.

In an interview with *Television Digest* at the start of his third year on the commission, Fowler bragged that the Reagan FCC has been good to broadcasters. "We believe the pie's going to get bigger, it's going to get richer, and that healthy profit margins are in the public interest," he said.

Before his appointment to the FCC by President Reagan, Mark Fowler was a partner in a small law firm, Fowler & Meyers. His future in the land of the big bucks would seem already assured.

L.B.

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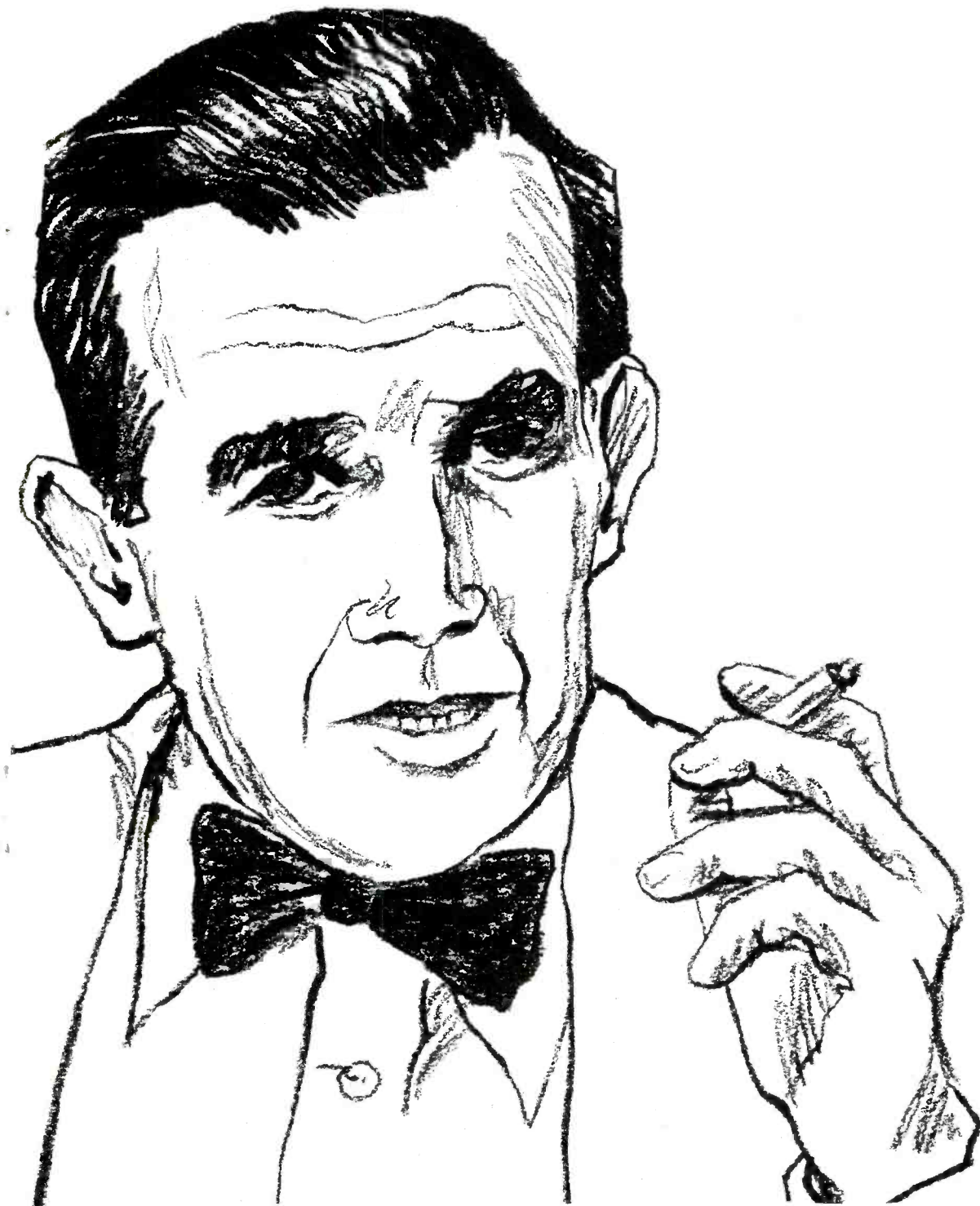
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CNN—Award for Cablecasting Excellence (ACE)

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SUPERNEWS

Journalism in the High-Tech Mode

Satellites, miniature cameras, and computers have virtually collapsed space and time. But television's million-mile reach may exceed its grasp.

by Robert Friedman

ON A THURSDAY AFTERNOON in June, the last day of the Pope's visit to Poland, a half-dozen people were seated around the seventh-floor newsdesk of the ABC broadcast center in Manhattan deciding the menu of stories for that evening's news show. A gray box was perched on one end of the table—an open telephone line to the ABC bureau in Warsaw—and every once in a while a tinny voice from Poland would report on the status of an anticipated Peter Jennings piece. Two wire-service teletype machines on either side of Jeff Gralnick, then the executive producer of *World News Tonight*, disgorged an unending stream of paper through two slots in the desk. Directly in front of him was a small keypad that allowed him to call up on a nearby monitor any piece of footage from the tape room downstairs. At the moment—two hours before air-time—he was watching CBS reporters Tom Fenton and Bert Quint on a satellite feed from Warsaw, keeping abreast of the competition.

The technological power at Gralnick's fingertips was indeed awesome. Here he was, able to pull together filmed reports from dozens of correspondents around the world, talk to Warsaw without even dialing a number, pluck pictures from

ABC's new 24-hour-a-day satellite link with London, order up computer-generated graphics to accompany those pictures, and stay in constant communication with anchormen in three different cities. It all seemed so routine, yet just 20 years ago none of this would even have been conceivable.

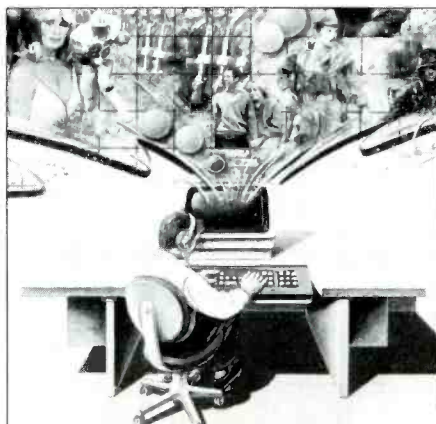
A More Primitive Age

IN AN EFFORT to assess the impact of two decades of technological development on the shape of television news, I recently visited the Museum of Broadcasting in New York. There, where it is possible to travel back in time and rediscover the medium's forgotten past, I watched a CBS *Special Report* on the Cuban missile crisis. The black-and-white images flickering on the tiny screen seemed of a more

primitive age, a time when information, as well as lethal weapons, traveled at a more leisurely pace. It was 1962, President Kennedy had just announced a quarantine on Soviet ships entering Cuban waters, and the only footage available from abroad was several days old.

But for all the technological crudeness of the broadcast—block letters clumsily superimposed over a map of Cuba, reporters reading from hand-held notes, the disembodied voices of far-flung correspondents piped into the studio as anchorman Douglas Edwards listened in on a telephone receiver—the essential elements of the modern television news program were already in place. There was Roger Mudd, live at the Pentagon, informing viewers that a showdown was expected within a matter of days. There was the "quick switch" to Richard C. Hottel at the United Nations. There was anchorman Edwards, seated at the desk in New York, talking by phone to Marvin Kalb in Moscow and Daniel Schorr in Berlin about the prospects of war.

What all this suggests, as much as it goes against popular notions of technological determinism, is that the dazzling array of scientific advances over the past 20 years—satellite broadcasting, lightweight electronic equipment, computer-generated graphics—have not so much changed the basic nature of television news as reinforced it. Where television



Robert Friedman, former editor of More magazine, writes frequently about the media.

Rafal Olbinski





was always strong, most notably in covering major events, it has become even stronger; where television was weak, most notably in making sense of those events, the immediacy afforded by the new technology has in many cases made those weaknesses even more glaring.

Technology, as ABC's Jeff Gralnick puts it, "has given us a reach that's a million miles long." But that reach sometimes exceeds television's own grasp: The ability to bring any news story in the world into America's living room has not necessarily meant the ability to communicate more intelligently. The creature that technology built, with arms a million miles long, still has a brain the size it had 20 years ago.

IT WAS IN 1962, three months before the Cuban missile crisis, that the experimental communications satellite Telstar I was launched by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. On July 10, during the 18-minute "window" in which the satellite was in the direct line of sight of both the transmitting and receiving stations, the first live pictures were broadcast from one side of the Atlantic to the other.

Before long the first geosynchronous satellites were orbiting 22,300 miles above the earth, allowing overseas broadcasting 24 hours a day. And, by the late 1960s, satellite transmission of television news (and sports) was becoming a fairly routine occurrence. Where film once took hours or days to reach the networks' New York news production centers—CBS News correspondent Bruce Morton recalls a five-day lag getting footage of the Congo's 1961 civil war from the jungle to the studio—pictures could now be sent instantaneously from the nearest satellite ground station.

Time and space were suddenly collapsed. Television could cover events while they were still news (i.e., before they appeared in the next morning's papers) and, in some cases, given enough warning, while they were actually happening. During the Vietnam War, the first to be covered in the satellite age, the battlefields were only a few hours away (the time it took to fly footage to Tokyo), and every international crisis since then seems to have gotten a little closer. If the Vietnam War were being waged today,

portable ground stations would make it possible to cover the fighting live.

At about the same time satellite broadcasting was becoming commonplace—the first domestic satellites, in the early 1970s, allowed greater flexibility in trans-

Cheaper satellite transmission ended the network news monopoly.

mitting from remote locations—another technological revolution was occurring. This was the development of electronic news-gathering equipment (ENG), which quickly displaced the traditional film cameras and sound-recording machines that had been around since the days of Movietone News. The proverbial two-thousand-pound pencil that television journalists had been condemned to carry was whittled down substantially, thanks to the wonders of solid-state electronics. This not only gave television crews greater mobility, it also liberated them from film, which has to be developed, by introducing video tape, which doesn't. Where once shooting had to stop by 3 P.M. so the footage could make its evening deadline, now a story could be fed live to the studio and broadcast immediately.

The first demonstration of ENG's effectiveness occurred in the fall of 1972, according to Joe Flaherty, the CBS engineering vice president who pioneered the system's development. Covering Henry Kissinger's "peace is at hand" press conference with video-tape equipment, CBS was able to broadcast footage of the event long before the other networks. "That was the crumbling of the dam," Flaherty says. In 1974, the first local station—St. Louis CBS affiliate KMOX—switched to an all-electronic format; by the end of the decade, film had virtually disappeared from television news operations. (Some

network documentary units and magazine shows, most notably *60 Minutes*, have less intense deadline pressures and still film the bulk of their material.)

THE COMBINATION of satellite communications and electronic equipment transformed the television news business in many important ways. Not only could events be covered closer to air-time, they could be covered more cheaply as well. The equipment itself was less expensive, the cost of processing was eliminated, and the camera crew could be reduced from three people to two. In addition, domestic satellites enabled broadcasters to bypass the costly AT&T long-lines that had been their principal method of transmitting pictures. Since satellites were not "distance-sensitive"—that is, it made no difference how far the pictures were sent, only how long it took to send them—the new space-age trigonometry was often more economical than the old, linear route.

Relatively inexpensive satellite communications also made possible a greater diversity within the television news business. Previously, the three networks had a virtual monopoly on the use of AT&T long-lines. But domestic satellites enabled more specialized news services to compete. Twenty-four-hour-a-day television news became a reality; there is even a cable network providing live coverage of the House of Representatives.

The third major component of television news's technological revolution was the development of computer-generated graphics. The mid-'70s saw the arrival of microprocessors that could digitize a television signal, store that information in a computer memory, and recall it at the touch of a button. It thus became possible to shrink pictures, flip them on edge like the sides of a cube, reposition them on the screen, or display them as multiple images. Even then, recalls Julie Barnathan, ABC's vice president for broadcast engineering, the network news divisions showed little interest. Resistance only began to melt when Roone Arledge became head of ABC News in 1977, after demonstrating how live sports coverage could be enhanced by Chyron character generators and Quantel digital-effects systems. "The boss wanted technology,"



Barnathan explains, "so suddenly everybody else at ABC wanted technology." And what one network had, the others soon coveted. By the early 1980s, then, although technological refinements were still being introduced, television news had been stretched to fit the contours of the modern age.

Deciding the Menu

THE NEWS PLATE that Thursday evening at the ABC broadcast center was particularly full. Not only was the Pope winding up his trip to Poland, but the space shuttle was in its last day of orbit, and the Supreme Court had just ruled the practice of legislative vetoes unconstitutional. *The New York Times* would play the Supreme Court decision under a four-column banner headline the next morning and run the Pope on page four, but in Gralnick's mind there was never any question about which story to lead with. The pageantry of the Pope's farewell clearly made for better pictures than the Supreme Court's edict. Although Gralnick later denied this had anything to do with his decision to run the legislative veto story near the bottom of the broadcast, ABC's heavy investment in covering the Pope's visit (some \$600,000, according to one report) almost surely skewed its news judgment.

What Erik Barnouw once observed about the early years of television news seems no less appropriate now: "A favorite pronouncement of the day was that television had added a 'new dimension' to newscasting. The truth of this concealed a more serious fact: The camera, as arbiter of news value, had introduced a drastic curtailment of the scope of the news. The notion that a picture was worth a thousand words meant, in practice, that footage of Atlantic City beauty winners, shot at some expense, was considered more valuable than a thousand words from Eric Sevareid on the mounting tensions of Southeast Asia."

To some extent, thanks largely to the technology of computer graphics, this formula is breaking down. It is now possible to run whole pieces on complicated subjects that have hardly any pictures. A shrinking dollar bill can illustrate a story about inflation; a colorful graph can depict rising interest rates; even a few lines of text can highlight a point when pictures are unavailable. While some skeptics

have commented on the phenomenon of information overload—"With Quantels and spinning cubes, there is so much coming at the viewer it's a wonder he understands anything," NBC's Roger Mudd told a symposium at Harvard last

During the Falklands war, the evening news looked like Pac-Man.

year—most people in the industry believe graphics have improved the quality of television reporting, especially in the area of business news. "Computer chips," Gralnick says, "are allowing us to communicate better, communicate more, and communicate in a range of areas where we just couldn't before."

Even so, television news remains captive to certain types of stories—the spectacular (earthquakes, floods, airplane crashes, and wars) and the predictable (press conferences and other events arranged for the benefit of the news media)—and no amount of technology is likely to free it from these biases. What technology has done is provide television with a faster way to satisfy its appetite for visual excitement. This has its obvious advantages: When President Reagan was shot in 1981, for example, footage of the assassination attempt was on the air only eight minutes later.

But what television has gained in immediacy it has lost in time—time to report, time to edit, time to reflect. Gone are the days when, as NBC's John Chancellor puts it, "You could spend two or three days thinking about a story and then, speaking metaphorically, go down and catch the packet boat to the United States with a dispatch." It is now so easy to go live, observes Bruce Morton, that "sometimes we do it just because it's there." And when television does go

live—when it does its reporting, editing, and broadcasting at the same time—it leaves itself open to error and manipulation. Being on the air live during the Reagan assassination attempt, Gralnick believes, is what led all three networks to report erroneously that White House press secretary James Brady was dead. Morton sees other, more pernicious, consequences. "The White House keeps up with all this," he notes. "They know they can put a story out at 6:15 and still get it on the air. Now, if you've got something embarrassing to do, you do it at 6:15, because you give the television reporters no time for reflection, no time for a detailed look. You just dump it on them at the last minute, and they tend to scramble on the air with your version because it's the only one they've heard."

The ability to broadcast stories quickly may warp television's news judgment in another, more subtle, way. Jeff Greenfield, ABC's on-air media critic, thinks there's a tendency in the business to downplay events that can't be reported on right away. "The more you are able to get data out instantly," he says, "the more you rely on instant data to define what the news is. Going back five days later to reexamine a story may seem like a silly thing to do."

STILL for all the dangers inherent in the new technology, the network news programs are unquestionably far more efficient, far more sophisticated, far more informative than they were 20 years ago. And watching the news being assembled that afternoon at ABC, I saw just how much of this improvement was owing to technology itself. Even at the level of electronic tape-editing, the technology has, contrary to what might have been expected, put the reporter more in control of his material. Editing can be done in the field now with portable equipment—Peter Jennings's story from Poland that evening was transmitted in finished form just 15 minutes before air-time—or it can be done back in the studio, where the correspondent can keep a closer eye on his story. "The whole process is much more accessible to the reporter now," says Pat O'Neil, who oversees the six editing rooms at the broadcast center. "It makes for better craftsmanship and better story-



telling.”

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about all the technology is that it makes television news seem so effortless. Watching the CBS *Special Report* on the Cuban missile crisis, one could almost hear the engineers groaning, almost feel the reporters straining under the burden of their equipment. Of course, there are still plenty of glitches in any news broadcast today. In ABC's TV2 control room that evening, five minutes into the 6:30 feed of *World News Tonight*, Gralnick suddenly had to reshuffle his carefully planned lineup because Sam Donaldson wasn't ready with his report from the White House on the purloined Carter campaign documents. The Donaldson story aired a few minutes later than originally scheduled, but the home viewer never knew the difference. All the frenzy in the control room was filtered out before it reached the television screen at the other end. "That's just the way it should be," Gralnick said after the broadcast. "You turn it on, and there it is."

What's Next

"THIS QUARTER OF A CENTURY has been so dazzling in its change," observes John Chancellor, "that I just have no idea what's next. It's very tempting to say we've gone as far as we're going to go. But that's the greatest trap of all. Every time you say that, you're wrong."

Indeed, television has hardly gotten to the end of its technological revolution. As long as men like CBS's Joe Flaherty are still frustrated by all the stories television *can't* cover, there is likely to be further improvement. One significant development currently in the works is a truly portable satellite ground station. It now takes a truckload of equipment to beam a television signal 22,300 miles into space. But within the next few years, Flaherty believes, it should be possible to fit the necessary gear into a few suitcases and set it up in less than an hour. This would make it possible to broadcast from literally any location in the world, a boon to foreign correspondents now dependent on state-owned satellite facilities, and a timesaving device for all television journalists.

At the same time transmitting equipment is getting smaller, television cameras are shrinking. Four years ago most

news footage was recorded on two-inch video tape. Now all the networks use one-inch or three-quarter-inch tape and, within the next few years, will probably convert to half-inch or quarter-inch tape, which is just coming on the market. The

Newsmen may soon carry videotext terminals and cameras as small as a Sony Walkman.

smaller the tape, of course, the smaller the camera. With quarter-inch tape—the same size used in most audio cassettes—a camera can be made as small as a Sony Walkman. Indeed, such devices already exist and are obviously valuable in situations requiring unobtrusive, or even surreptitious, reporting.

Another development made possible by miniaturization, which is already available though not widely used by television correspondents, is the portable videotext terminal. With a keyboard, display monitor, and telephone modem that can fit into a briefcase, a reporter in the field can not only keep in touch with his editors, but can tap into any data base in the world via satellite. Having a library at one's fingertips while on assignment in, say, Central America, can help compensate for a reporter's lack of specialized knowledge about whatever country he happens to be covering that week.

Of far more concern to engineers like Joe Flaherty, however, is finding a way to cover stories reporters either can't get to until after they've happened (an airplane crash or a bridge collapse) or can't get to at all (the Falklands war). The solution to this seemingly intractable problem, Flaherty believes, is the development of something called real-time graphics—computer-generated, three-dimensional animation of the sort used by George Lucas in his *Star Wars* films. In order to re-

create an airplane crash, Flaherty explains, one would simply call up preexisting footage of the runway on which the crash took place, superimpose a photograph of the plane, and then program a computer to generate pictures plotting the aircraft's descent. The same thing could be done for battle scenes off-limits to television cameras.

The concept of real-time graphics is disturbing to some. CBS correspondent Bruce Morton thinks the networks went too far during the Falklands war trying to compensate for the lack of pictures—"Everybody's evening news looked like Pac-Man, with little boats and helicopters moving across the screen"—and he's worried about what the future might bring. ABC's Julie Barnathan, one of the pioneers of television graphics, is also concerned that such innovations might be abused. "What technology can do is frightening," he says. "I can take a 'paint box'—that's an electronic easel—and make Reagan look 28 years old. I can take a mountain and make it disappear. Anything we can do to make the news more meaningful to the viewer is good, but we've got to assure that we don't overdo it."

What effect is all this super-technology likely to have on television news? Nearly everyone I talked to said pretty much the same thing: It depends on how it's used. To John Chancellor, technology doesn't have any morals; people do. To Jeff Greenfield, who describes himself as "technology-neutral," the issue is not whether the machines are good, but whether the people using them are. And to Julie Barnathan, it's a question of aesthetics. "I could give the same easel and paint box to Miró, Picasso, you, and me," he says, "and we'd all come up with different things. There's no question: Technology simply prepares easels."

That sounds like an easy answer to a difficult question, but it seems to stand up to the test of time. If technology had some logic of its own, if it actually shaped the course of history, then the basic form of television news would probably be a whole lot different than it is today. That it hasn't really changed in 20 years is a clear indication that all the dramatic technological developments have served the needs of those who've used them, and not the other way around. ■

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Source: May 1983, NSI Reports. Station Total HH, Sunday-Saturday 7 am-1 am. Data are estimates and are subject to qualifications in reports used.

POP NEWS

TV's Growth Industry

by Reese Schonfeld

THE RULES of television news programming are changing beyond recognition:

- At 3 in the morning a cable subscriber in Atlanta, like myself, can watch five different news programs—the Cable News Network, CNN Headline News, Satellite News Channel, CBS's *Nightwatch*, and *NBC News Overnight*. By 6:30 A.M., when ABC joins up, there are six newscasts to choose from.

- CBS News, for years the temple of journalistic seriousness, is now run by a

Reese Schonfeld, director of development at Cox Enterprises Inc., was the founding president of the Cable News Network.

confirmed popularizer, Van Gordon Sauter. Under his guidance, CBS network news, morning and evening, has come to look more and more like entertainment, and less and less like traditional news—and in the process, has consolidated its dominant position.

- At 10 P.M. all four independent stations in Los Angeles show news—suicidally. The news audience supports two stations, more or less; the other two fail abjectly.

These disparate facts carry two crucial messages about television: first, that this entertainment medium, the heritage of Milton Berle and *Gunsmoke* and Johnny Carson, is becoming more of an information medium, and second, that the partic-

ipants in this new environment are only beginning to adjust to it. News-as-entertainment—*60 Minutes*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *PM Magazine*—has become a hot item. Viewers can now watch network news programs nine hours a day. Three cable channels offer news around the clock. At some times of the day, news programs are piling up into traffic jams.

At first glance it seems there's just too much news on television. But there's not; television can support even more. In their battle with cable and other new technologies for viewers, the networks have a powerful weapon in information programming. But first they will have to create a new kind of news show—one that caters to the mass audience they are trying to keep.



E. Salem Krieger



Anyone who reads the Nielsen numbers carefully can see the outline of the future: Although the Big Three's share of viewing time has been steadily eroding, it is the entertainment programs that suffer most; the audience for the new network news programs increases almost nightly. When their overnight news shows first appeared, CBS earned a 1.2 rating and NBC a 1.4. Now the figures stand at 1.6 and 1.8. At first, advertisers shunned these novel ventures. Now the programs are making back their costs, and more. And they are beating the cable networks at a game cable invented. CBS has a better rating at 2 A.M. than CNN has at 2 P.M.

INFORMATION programs have successfully invaded the local stations' half-hour slot at 7:30 P.M. In most markets *Family Feud* runs on one affiliate, and *PM Magazine* and *Entertainment Tonight* run on the others. Although *Family Feud* is usually the ratings winner, *Entertainment Tonight* is coming on strong, and *PM Magazine* shows no signs of weakening. Local television stations prize that half hour; when they run information programs at 7:30 it is because such shows draw a large and attractive audience.

Programmers are discovering that at least 20 percent of the audience will watch information programming at any time of the day, including prime time. In New York, independent stations WNEW and WPIX show news at 10 P.M. and split a 15 share between them; at the same time the four Los Angeles independents split 20 points among their news programs. *Entertainment Tonight* and *PM Magazine* between them win more than half the audience in markets where they go head-to-head at 7:30.

It is in entertainment programming, not information, where the networks are most vulnerable to the new competition. Cable homes have an entertainment glut—movie channels, porn channels, "family programming" channels. With cable siphoning off those viewers, there is scarcely enough audience left for the three networks' afternoon soaps (at 3 P.M., NBC ratings practically vanish) or for prime-time sitcoms (especially during rerun season). In cable homes, two out of five entertainment viewers are watching non-network channels. Yet only one out

of 10 information viewers defects from the Big Three.

As each bite diminishes the entertainment audience, the idea of playing to the information audience grows more sound. Information programming is popular and,

The entertainment shows are losing viewers, but the audience for news is growing.

by network standards, cheap (as little as a quarter the cost of entertainment programming). With rare exceptions it cannot be bought on tape, which eliminates serious competition from home video. Commercial television has thus begun a shift, almost unconsciously, towards news-related programming.

The networks are, of course, mass-market programmers. Information programming will prove successful not because it is enlightening but because it is entertaining.

For 35 years at the networks, the news providers lost out to the entertainment programmers for air-time. One half hour at 7 P.M. and an hour or two in the morning amounted to a sandbox for the news people while the entertainment side went out and made the money. News people were television's nobility—purists making programs too good for the average guy.

Such was not the situation in local television. By the late 1960s it was clear that news was a business—that it could actually make money. Before long, station managements decided that news was too important to be left to the journalists. In came consultants and audience researchers. Attention shifted away from content toward fancy sets and happy talk. The profits flowed.

Meanwhile, the networks were acting as though they *wanted* to lose money on news and documentaries. Indeed, money-losing news performed an important function for the networks: They

could justify hours of *The Beverly Hillbillies* by arguing that all the fluff subsidized unprofitable news divisions.

Then *60 Minutes* happened. *60 Minutes* was the creation of Mike Wallace and Don Hewitt. They were not news purists. In fact, 20 years ago CBS nearly refused to hire Wallace because he had appeared in cigarette commercials. Hewitt had always been a little too flashy for CBS News's taste. The two became the first of the network news popularizers. They proved that ratings and information were not mutually exclusive. By the mid-'70s, *60 Minutes*' profits were so great that CBS had to admit its news division was no longer losing money.

If the new purpose of introducing information into network program schedules is to make money—rather than merely to win prestige—then the networks will bring in more Hewitts, more Wallaces. CBS is already in the midst of this shift. Richard Salant and William Leonard, both purists of the old school, were succeeded as president of CBS News by Van Gordon Sauter, who had learned the value and techniques of popularizing as a local news director and station manager. Sauter has recast CBS News, and the network has strengthened its position as the dominant news provider. Sauter has replaced aging CBS perennials with younger and better looking people who project energy. He has traded experience and insight for youth and vitality. If the question is not "Is this good journalism?" but "Is this good television?", the answer seems to be "Yes." And if information programming is used to build a mass audience, then good looks, high energy, and simplicity of style are necessities.

CBS also seems to be applying different editorial criteria in the selection of stories for the *Evening News*. Today the show reports more crime news, more medical news, and less international news than it did when Walter Cronkite was in the chair. Fewer stories originate from Washington. It has more light pieces and fewer think pieces.

Over the past year, the *CBS Morning News* has been transformed (largely by producer George Merlis, formerly of ABC's *Good Morning America*) from what had been the most serious and, to my taste, the most literate of the morning news shows, into a popular program. Gone is the graceful writing, the expressive delivery of Charles Kuralt. Instead



there are headlines every 15 minutes. Gone is the graying, witty weatherman, Gordon Barnes. But Bill Kurtis will now answer your questions on camera, if you "Ask CBS." Gone is the erudite Ray Gandy, whose essays ranked with the best sports reporting ever done on television. In his place is Warner Wolfe, whose "Plays of the Week" may represent the best use of tape on sports television. If I sound both admiring and regretful, I am. I regret the loss of grace and intelligence; I admire the organization and energy generated by Merlis (who has since moved to *Entertainment Tonight*).

ABC took its first steps into popular news in the late '70s, when it chose Boone Arledge to replace William Sheehan as president of its news division. Arledge accomplished a swift news revolution by introducing modern technology and graphics into news production, quickly making the "ABC look" standard for modern news programs. But Arledge also surprised many people by remaining faithful to the principles of good journalism. ABC's evening news broadcast is a better product both in look and content than it was when Arledge took over. But if he was brought in as a popularizer he has not succeeded. Considering the improvement in its station line-up and its successes in entertainment programming, ABC's network news is doing only slightly better than when Arledge started with it.

In June, ABC signaled its intention to expand its information programming when the network hired James Bellows away from *Entertainment Tonight*, where he had been managing editor. A proven news popularizer, Bellows is developing a new, 90-minute magazine program that will compete with *60 Minutes*.

Alone among the networks, NBC has not yet moved into the next news generation—which may account for the declining ratings of its evening news broadcast and the *Today* show. Reuven Frank, NBC News president, is a purist by training and inclination. Yet many interpreted his decision to drop Roger Mudd from the evening news as a sign that the news division was elevating the values of show biz above those of journalism.

If commercial television is to thrive in this new environment, it will have to do more than popularize information programming; it will probably also have to tear up the old rules of scheduling. Six

newscasts at one time is suicide.

There is a better way, as the English have discovered. Britain's two main networks, BBC and ITN, schedule news in different parts of prime time—BBC a half hour at 9 P.M., and ITN the same at 10.

CBS has led the networks in popularizing the news, and its ratings show it.

Between them they have better than a 35 rating. BBC's second channel schedules its news from 10:40 P.M. until 11:30. The second ITN channel has its main news at 7 P.M.

In New York, WPIX spent 10 futile years battling WNEW at 10 P.M. But then the station added a half hour of hard news at 7:30 P.M. and discovered a moderately large and upscale audience that wasn't at home to watch the networks at 7. The WPIX news budget went up, the content of the program improved, and the audience continued to grow.

The networks themselves were once forced into the same healthy flexibility. When the National Football League first wanted to do football on Monday night, all three networks passed. A group called the Sports Network agreed to carry the games and got as far as setting up its own Monday-night network, composed mostly of network affiliates.

The conventional networks faced reality. Had the Sports Network plan been realized, none of them would have had a complete national affiliate lineup on Monday. Something had to be done. ABC, the number-three network, bit the bullet and agreed to carry the NFL on Monday. And the rest, as Howard Cosell might say, is history.

The networks now face much the same dilemma. Cable diversity is breaking their hold on the total audience, but some network executives still want to stick to the familiar. Bud Grant, president of CBS

Entertainment, told *Time* magazine recently, "The best thing we can do is what we've done best in the past." I would suggest that this is not the case. The best thing the networks can do is diversify among themselves—stop programming in lockstep, begin to program in checkerboard fashion. What immutable principle says that certain times must be set aside for news, and that each network must select the same slot? The networks could, if they wanted to, break the traditional schedule wide open and scatter information programming across the day.

ALL THREE NETWORKS have valuable news resources that they do not use. CBS, for instance, has Walter Cronkite and 15 years of *60 Minutes* that have been aired only once or twice. If *60 Minutes* were a sitcom, it would have gone into syndication eight years ago. CBS could program all the original *60 Minutes* at 11:30 P.M., in lieu of a typical rerun. These original episodes could be updated by Walter Cronkite, who would place them in the context of the world as it was then—a combination of *60 Minutes* and *See It Now*. The three-segment format of *60 Minutes* makes perfect late-night programming. The viewer in bed could turn off after any 20-minute segment of the show. CBS might challenge Johnny Carson for the first time, and might even drive *Nightline* out of its 11:30 time slot.

ABC has a problem at 11:30 A.M., where it now airs a new soap opera, *Loving*. Suppose that, instead of scheduling one more soap, ABC decided to try information in the morning. In Barbara Walters they have a formidable figure who has all but vanished from daily television. Walters may be unique in her appeal to both the "liberated" woman and the "homemaker." ABC might give her a show that combines a brief block of news with interviews, and she just might leave Phil Donahue in the dust. But that isn't even the point. Since Donahue is on at 9 A.M. in most markets, the viewer could watch both programs.

The network that stands to benefit most from diversifying is NBC. It certainly has the least to lose. In certain markets NBC News has almost disappeared: in Charlotte, North Carolina, Mudd/Bro-

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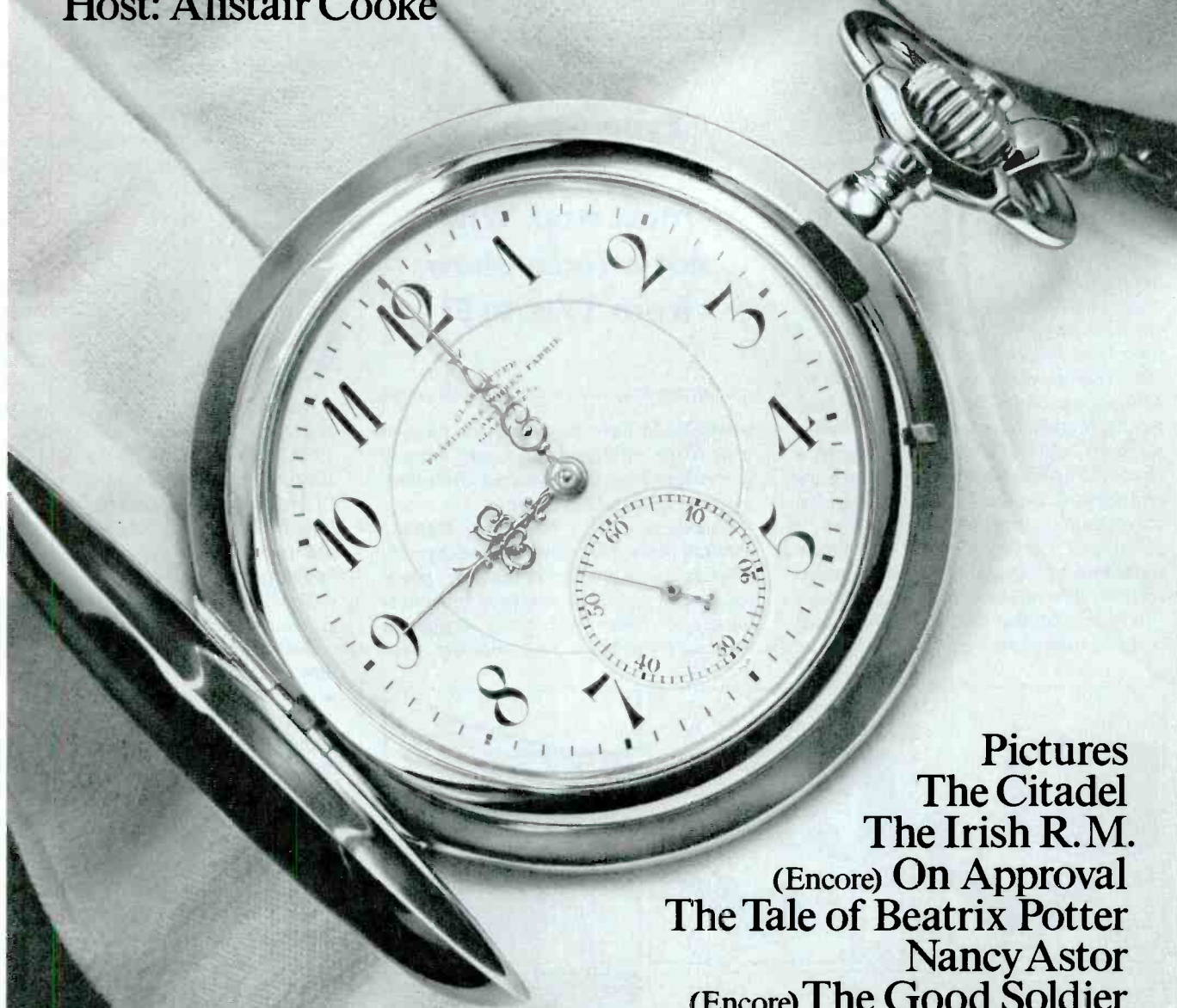
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kaw's rating fell below 2, and the NBC affiliate, WPCQ, dropped all news from its early-evening schedule. In Philadelphia and Minneapolis, the *Nightly News* had a 4 rating, in Pittsburgh, a 5; the advertising rule of thumb is that a news rating of less than 4 is not worth buying. In all of these markets the local news programs that precede *Nightly News* do as badly as the network. Such ratings are not acceptable to local affiliates.

Suppose NBC were to make a truly significant break from conventional programming. The network might begin prime time at 7 and end it at 10 (instead of 8 to 11), if it could ever convince the affiliates to go along. The news ratings of CBS and ABC would jump, at least at first. But NBC's ratings should do even better. If NBC were to offer first-run series between 7 and 8 while independents were offering sitcom reruns, the advantage would pass to the network. Fresh programming beats reruns almost every time.

At the other end of prime time, NBC could offer the first 10 o'clock network news. A renovated *Nightly News* anchored by Roger Mudd would be different from any other newscast. Liberated from head-to-head competition with the other two networks, it could adopt a more deliberate pace and thoughtful style, thus putting Mudd's talents to best use. In this scenario NBC affiliates would have a chance to do local news at 10:30 and bring on Johnny Carson at 11, when a considerably larger audience is awake than at 11:30. At 11, Carson would be the sole entertainment program, while the other network affiliates divided the news audience.

NBC might also turn to informational programming to revive its dismal daytime

schedule. In August, the network experimented with a magazine show—*Personal & Confidential*—in place of its 3 o'clock soap, which had been dropped by so many affiliates that it reached only 80 percent of television homes. *Personal & Confidential* comes out of the entertainment division. But what if the news division did a program called *Later Today*, from 3 to 5 P.M.? The show could wrap up most of the world news before dinner time, and could become just as important to American television as *Today* was 30 years ago—if NBC lavished as much care on it as it once did on *Today*. (The net-

Programming in lockstep must stop. Why not a *Today* show from 3 P.M. to 5?

work would have to return one hour of time to its affiliates, but could happily surrender 10 to 11 A.M. when it now offers *Facts of Life* and a game show.)

Sooner or later, I venture to predict, national news will be available via broadcast television 20 hours of the day. Only 8 P.M. to 10 P.M. will be reserved for entertainment, with local news programs claiming 6 and 11 P.M. And when that hap-

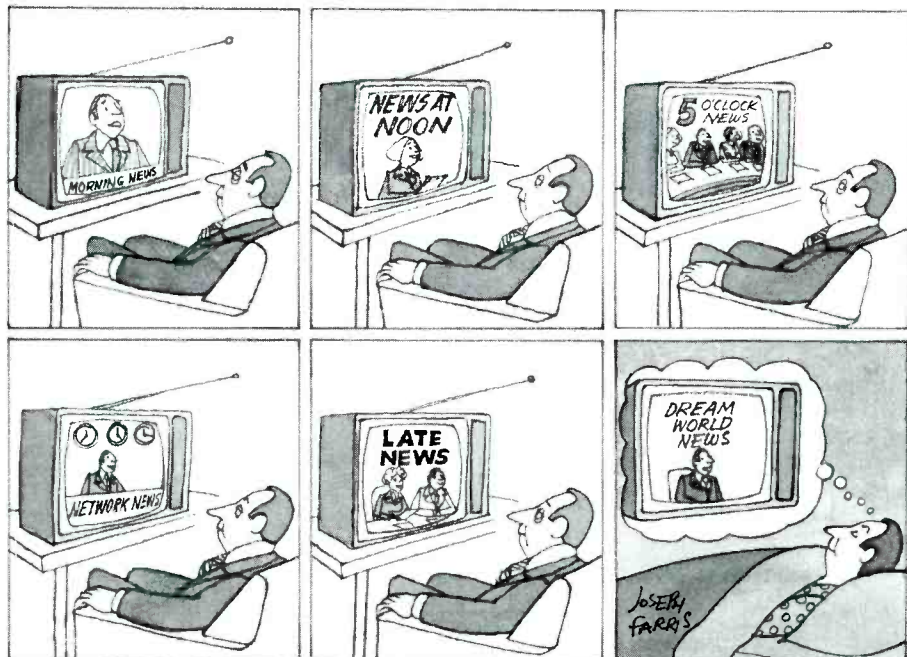
pens, television news coverage will get better. On television, time is money. The more time news has on the air, the more commercials it will sell, the more money will go into the news department budget. If that money is wisely spent, television might become a truly *original* producer of news and information; it might finally free itself from its dependency on the print media for source material.

This is where cable and other new delivery technologies come in. If the popularizers took control of the news at the three networks, the purists would find a happy home at Cable News Network and similar services. When we at CNN surveyed our viewers two years ago, we found that most people cited the depth of coverage and the lack of bias as the principal reasons they preferred our news. In other words, the better we got journalistically (as I understand the term), the more people watched us.

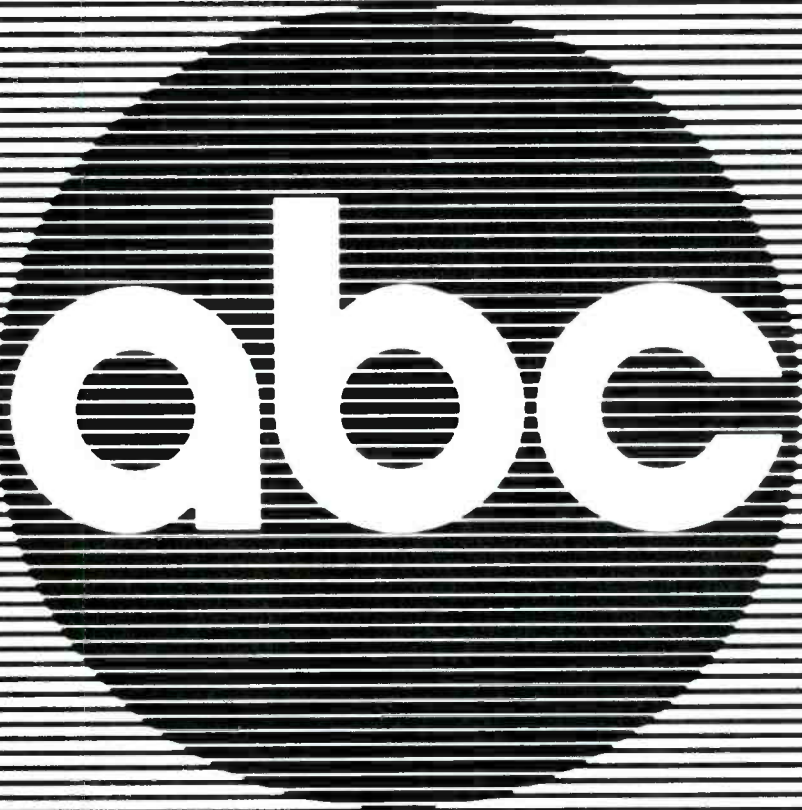
CNN may be proving the inverse of this law right now. From May 1982 to April 1983, its ratings fell from 1.1, on a 24-hour-a-day average, to 0.6. During this time its coverage, it seems to me, became more superficial (though, since I left in May 1982, I must admit personal bias). In June, Ted Turner admitted to me that "CNN is not a business." Indeed, unless long-form news clearly distinguishes itself from popular news, it will not be a business.

The three network half-hour news programs are already the best tabloid journalism ever done; as they devote more time and money to this style of news, they will get still better. But this only makes it clearer that the future of the networks' competitors lies in providing intelligent, long-form journalism to an upscale audience. If the networks are TV's tabloids, their rivals can carve out a niche as TV's *New York Times* or *Washington Post*. Someone may even test the size and appetite of this upscale market by providing a pay news service. Would you pay \$6 per month to see thoughtful journalists like Charles Kuralt, John Chancellor, and Jeff Greenfield if you could not see them for nothing on a network? If viewers in only 5 percent of homes agreed to do so, pay news would be a \$150 million business.

In this perhaps idealized vision of the future, we can foresee such a variety of information programming that no part of the audience will be neglected. And we can see that increasing the volume of news need not dilute its quality; there is room enough for diversity, sophistication, and skill. ■



Joseph Farris



ABC TELEVISION NETWORK

Rep. Timothy Wirth Holds Back the Tide

by James Traub

“Were it not for Timothy Wirth, broadcast deregulation would be the law of the land today.”

IT MAY NOT be entirely true, this heroic image painted by one of Wirth's ardent boosters, but it is a sobering thought. The huns of deregulation—if we follow this particular insider's line of reasoning—had wheeled their artillery within firing distance of the Communications Act of 1934—broadcast's governing law. Limits on advertising minutes, the “comparative renewal” process (which keeps stations on their toes lest they lose their licenses), and the obligation to serve the public interest “affirmatively”—all were about to be laid waste. Then Timothy Wirth, chairman of the House telecommunications subcommittee, sallied forth and scattered the enemy.

Wirth himself denies, at least in public, that he was instrumental in preventing the Tauke-Tauzin deregulation bill from coming to a vote last May; but perhaps he doth protest too much. Even his foes concede his power, and to his partisans he is the best, perhaps the only, bulwark of the public interest at a time when the broadcast, cable, and telephone industries are in a mood of militant expectation. One more grandiose image sums up his status in some quarters: “Tim,” says Roberta Weiner, the subcommittee's press aide, “is standing there, alone, holding his finger in the dike.”

Melodrama scarcely seems suitable to Wirth, a 43-year-old Democrat from Colorado with a finely modulated, low-key, and cerebral manner. Yet his personal convictions and his persuasive powers



figure largely in the future of telecommunications. With once discrete technologies—telephones, satellites, cable, broadcast—blending into and struggling with one another, the role of referee has become crucial. That role is shared by the Federal Communications Commission and Congress, where Wirth's subcommittee has jurisdiction over virtually all telecommunications matters in the House. And "you can't get anything through that subcommittee," as one lobbyist readily acknowledged, "without Wirth."

But Wirth is hardly lord of all he surveys. Last year he introduced a landmark bill to dismantle Ma Bell and thus throw the data transmission business wide open to competition; he assembled a constituency ranging from Ralph Nader to ITT, shepherded the bill carefully through subcommittee—and then watched AT&T descend on Congress with the force of three million angry shareholders.

Wirth, even less a martyr than he is a crusader, scuttled the bill. It was a boring, abstract issue, and nobody cared about it except a powerful special interest and Timothy Wirth, who feels quite cozy with boring, abstract issues. That's the way it is with telecommunications. "There's no constituency for it," he says—meaning common-carrier legislation, broadcast reform, cable access issues. He's powerless to initiate anything, be it ever so intellectually elegant or socially just, in the face of industry opposition; but he has refined the prevention of catastrophe into a virtual art form.

It is safe to say that Wirth inspires the envy, as well as the respect and occasional exasperation, of his colleagues. He is six foot five, though he has no trace of gawkiness: he is quite handsome, though his face has gone just gaunt enough to suggest experience and dignity; he has a broad smile and a quick laugh, which he has the politician's trick of deploying even while his mind is elsewhere. He is affable, and yet reserved. He recounts a childhood story with a shout of glee, and a moment later he is slouching back in his chair, smoking, gazing out with an air of cool detachment.

This reckoning gaze is the outward sign of Wirth's powerful analytical intelligence. His colleague Al Swift (D-OR) calls him "astonishingly bright and capable," and his eagerness in absorbing facts and doctrines is considered something of a phenomenon. Wirth proudly notes that he comes from a long line of educators, and has a Ph.D in education from Stanford University (as well as a bachelor's and master's from Harvard).

He enjoys playing the schoolmaster to his colleagues on telecommunications issues. "Nobody on the Hill knows what

these things mean," he jokes. "We give everybody a set of 100 flashcards when they arrive." A Wirth hearing is a cross between a symposium and an inquisition. On a recent afternoon, when Wirth was gathering testimony on the possible conflict between telephone and cable companies in providing data transmission services, the Congressman listened keenly, and skillfully summarized his witnesses' comments. He then began his

the Fairness Doctrine and Equal Time Rule, since competition now exists in all but small markets. Wirth has a strong faith in the redeeming social value of free markets.

Yet he has little patience for what he calls "the simple-minded rhetoric that has been flowing from the White House"—the deregulatory litany. He does not believe that the private sector, left alone, will cure all social ills, and he

He favors cable deregulation— if cable operators agree to lease channels to outsiders.

questioning by subtly misrepresenting the argument of a phone company executive, and then knocking down his own straw man. When the witness tried to protest, Wirth swiftly cut in to say, "We're not being contentious here."

Not being contentious, Wirth believes, should be a mark of his subcommittee's deliberations. "These are not partisan issues in any way, shape, or form," he insists. The Congressman is often praised for his skill at assembling a consensus, a talent that he prizes. But his ideal of consensus may come closer to the seminar leader's, who draws students to the "right" answer, than the politician's, who keeps swapping until everyone is satisfied. Wirth is considered an adroit, but not very happy, log roller. Asked if he finds the chairman "stubborn," Al Swift rolls his eyes and replies. "Yup, yup, yup."

IN A MORE MODERATE SEASON, Wirth's "neo-liberal" views might bind up warring factions, as they occasionally have. He shares some of the conservative's distrust of government intervention in the marketplace and believes, according to Andrew Schwartzman, director of the Media Access Project, "that changes in technology may provide solutions that heretofore others have obtained through regulation." Wirth is generally sympathetic to cable deregulation—a bill's first priority, he has announced, must be to "ensure an environment in which the cable industry can flourish." And he has suggested that radio can be partially deregulated, possibly even to the extent of dropping such "content" regulations as

argues that "there are broader responsibilities that come with the use of the spectrum and ought to be honestly discussed and addressed, and not ducked." Given his druthers, Wirth says he would inquire into these broader issues, such as whether "television is disturbing time that used to be, or should be, spent on other kinds of skills—reading, writing, arithmetic." Indeed, Wirth sometimes gives the impression that his concern with deregulation has more to do with political necessity than ideology, and that he would be quite happy as a traditional liberal, if only anybody would let him be one.

It is almost universally agreed that Wirth is his own man—to an unusual degree impervious to the subtle and unsubtle special-interest bribery now rampant in Congress. Yet he has been trapped by his agenda and forced to take some harsh lessons in the art of the possible. Wirth has not, of late, been able to choose his battlefield. Both broadcast and cable deregulation bills were shaped by the industry, passed in the Senate—where there is no Timothy Wirth equivalent—and then deposited in his lap. He has had to retreat and fight simultaneously. This increasingly fractious struggle—especially concerning broadcast deregulation—offers a clear view of the alignment of forces in Washington, the limits of Wirth's power, his peculiar mingling of intransigence and compromise, and his capacity for the partial victory and the limited defeat.

The broadcasting industry's longstanding campaign to shed many of its public-interest responsibilities, which it considers cumbersome and superfluous, gained a powerful boost when the FCC largely deregulated radio in January

1981. Over the next year-and-a-half, the Senate kept passing deregulation measures, and members of the House kept proposing similar legislation only to see it languish in Wirth's subcommittee. The chairman's commitment to consensus was beginning to look strictly hypothetical, and his fellow members grew increasingly restive. Al Swift says that he and others felt somewhat "shut out" of the legislative process. Wirth tried to deal with this pressure by negotiating a compromise measure with Senator Bob Packwood (R-OR), deregulation's most fervent advocate. Wirth agreed to end the comparative renewal process—a system that fosters insecurity, broadcasters feel, by raising the possibility that their licenses might not be renewed—in exchange for the payment of spectrum fees to support public broadcasting. But the broadcasters' reaction to this proposal, according to lobbyist Steve Stockmeyer of the National Association of Broadcasters, "was not just 'no,' but 'Hell, no!'"

At this point all parties had effectively stymied one another. And then began the sort of hatching of plots, shifting of alliances, holding of secret meetings, and slinging of mud that makes Washington resemble a bickering plutocratic family in a soap opera. Within days of the convention, Representatives Thomas Tauke (R-IA) and Billy Tauzin (D-LA) approached the NAB with the idea of bypassing Wirth by attaching a deregulation measure to a routine FCC funding bill. (Or perhaps, as some skeptics darkly suspect, it was the NAB that leaned on its good friends the Congressmen to attempt this end-run.) It was, in any case, an audacious scheme. "If it fell apart," says one participant, "there would be hell to pay." The NAB's

involvement meant that association president Edward Fritts had "lied"—Wirth's words—when he pledged to the Congressmen that they would work together. And the rebel Congressmen had provoked Wirth's ire.

After a few days it became clear that the Tauke-Tauzin bill did not have enough votes to pass the full committee. So its sponsors agreed to incorporate "quantification," a concept long opposed by the NAB but favored by Al

demand for spectrum fees, hold wide-open hearings on quantification, and produce a bill by October 15. From one point of view it was a defeat: Wirth had finally been forced to consider seriously a broadcast deregulation measure. But around Washington Wirth's concession is viewed as a masterstroke. Not only did he regain control of a bill over which he had had no influence, but he positioned himself to explore in public the radical idea that television licensees—and possi-

Wirth has strong faith in the market, yet he denounces "the simple-minded rhetoric" of the Administration.

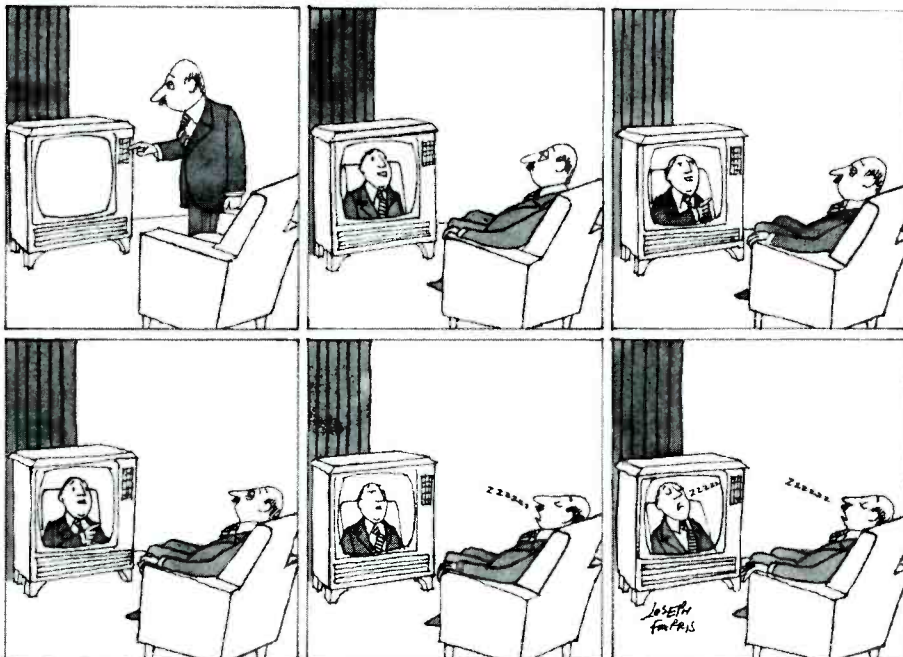
Swift, himself a former broadcaster. Swift argues that "broadcasters are not doing as well as they can, considering the profits," in providing socially valuable programming. So he favors "quantifying" that responsibility in minimum requirements in the areas of news, public affairs, locally produced shows, and non-entertainment programming. Swift agreed to join the Tauke-Tauzin rump faction, and an informal deal was struck. But the agreement was subsequently rejected by the NAB's executive committee. Had it been approved, broadcast deregulation would, to paraphrase Wirth's booster, probably now be the law of the land.

At this point, Wirth shrewdly re-entered the picture. He offered to drop his

bly radio licensees—should be held to specific programming standards. Wirth has a long-time interest in children's programming, and he may add that to the list of standards, along with programming for minorities. And the minimum amount to be required will almost certainly be substantial—"in the high end of the range of existing performance," says Swift. The NAB and its supporters might find that the elimination of comparative renewal, which may be all that is left of deregulation by October, is a poor trade for stiff quantification standards—and they may thus stymie a deregulation bill once again. There is a joke going around Washington, repeated with immense relish by Tom Rogers, general counsel to the telecommunications subcommittee: At the last NAB convention Senator Packwood ridiculed the trade group for being unable to "lobby its way out of a paper bag in the House." Now, Rogers says, the NAB has "proved that it can lobby its way into a paper bag in the House."

Wirth has a good deal more to worry about than broadcast deregulation. His subcommittee also oversees consumer protection and finance, including the Securities and Exchange Commission, and he is himself the co-chairman of the Democratic National Committee's economic policy group. He is among the most powerful, and busiest, young men in the House—a leader, after nine years in office, of the new generation of Democrats.

But even in the smaller world of telecommunications, Wirth has his hands full. After the subcommittee has dealt with broadcast deregulation and possibly phone service, it will move on to a cable bill. Wirth has advised the industry not to hold its breath, as most members of Con-



Joseph Farris

gress can think of many more important things to consider than cable legislation. But the cable industry considers the bill its "organic" statute—its Communications Act—and is setting great store by Wirth's leadership.

The subcommittee will be working on a version of S. 66, a bill passed by the Senate after a compromise between the National Cable Television Association (NCTA) and the National League of Cities. The bill offers cable operators what the deregulation measure would give broadcasters: automatic license renewal, so long as contractual terms are fulfilled. It also prohibits cities in most markets from regulating the rates operators can charge for programming services (though existing contracts would be "grandfathered" for five years) and from demanding specific services (with the exception of three public-access channels).

The apparently pro-industry tilt of S. 66 has outraged public-interest groups as well as a number of dissident cities. Wirth, however, has generally been more sympathetic to the cable industry's cries for relief than those of broadcasters. Wirth is eager to prove that he is not simply another knee-jerk regulator. He also sees cable as a growing—and still fragile—technology, and his first goal, as mentioned earlier, is to promote that growth.

But Wirth's second goal, he said in a recent hearing, is to assure "the American public the widest possible diversity of programming and information sources." He argues that "cable has enormous promise . . . for delivering all sorts of diverse programming," and that growth itself will encourage that promise by making large cable systems profitable. But Wirth insists on extracting a quid pro quo for cable deregulation, as well as for broadcast. He will consent to the significant reduction of the cities' power so long as safeguards are erected to protect cable's ultimate virtue—diversity. The cable operator's monopoly on his multi-channel system is, Wirth believes, an "infringement" of the public's First Amendment right to a diversity of sources of information. So, as a condition of supporting a cable bill, Wirth is demanding commercial leased access—that a percentage of a system's channels be made available to programmers for a fee.

Some in the cable industry consider mandatory leased access a form of theft, as well as a sneaky introduction of common-carrier-type obligations. But the industry desperately needs Wirth's support, and NCTA president Thomas Wheeler promises to be "flexible" on the issue. The Congressman and the trade group will have to stand shoulder-to-shoulder to fight off their common en-



Al Swift (D-OR), left, a pivotal figure on Wirth's committee, favors "quantifying" the responsibilities of broadcasters.



Thomas Tauke (R-IA) and Billy Tauzin (D-LA), below, nearly succeeded in slipping a broadcast deregulation bill past Wirth by attaching it to a routine FCC funding measure.



emy, the telephone company. S. 66 permits cable operators to enter traditional common-carrier territory—data transmission, security systems, internal corporate communications—on an unregulated basis. Local phone companies, which will be divorced from AT&T by court order as of January 1, 1984, claim that cable operators will "cream off" their business customers, thus diminishing their revenue base and—The Threat—forcing them to raise local rates.

The argument, like practically everything about the phone companies, brings Wirth's blood to an uncharacteristic boil. He points out that these data services comprise an insignificant part of the phone companies' business, and that cable operators control but a trivial sliver of that trivial business. The phone companies narrowly failed in their attempt to have cable systems regulated after a tense battle in the Senate. In the House, predicts Tom Rogers, "they'll be back in spades."

Some time before tackling the cable bill, the telecommunications subcommittee may turn its attention back to the telephone industry. With local phone rates all over the country suddenly shooting up, the world's most boring subject has acquired a sudden relevance. Ma Bell has made itself an attractive target, and Wirth, along with a great many other politicians, is taking his shots. In June he ac-

cused the company of "gouging" the public by requesting massive state rate increases. At last he has a buzzword with which to awaken the sleeping millions—to the immediacy of telecommunications—universal service. "If you're going to have a doubling or tripling of the telephone bill," he notes, "you're going to price a lot of people out of basic telephone service."

Buzzwords, slogans, and rallying cries are all in short supply in Timothy Wirth's domain. Telecommunications issues hit very few people where they live. Everyone has a telephone, everyone has a television; who cares whether or not broadcasters have to submit to the comparative renewal process? The industry cares. A few public-interest groups care, but their role is strictly hortatory. Several Congressmen care, but most of them are committed to the industry point of view. So Timothy Wirth is handing out his flashcards, fighting his rear-guard actions, spinning out his elaborate arguments to a select audience. Wirth clearly enjoys being right, and enjoys being righteous—denouncing his foes with a sharp rhetorical snap. Should the climate shift in a few years, he may finally get to conduct his colloquium on the Big Picture, delving far beyond the buzzwords; but for now he'll have to keep marshaling his wobbly consensus, holding the line on the vast wasteland. ■

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THE NEW SEASON

Autumn of the Networks' Reign

by Laurence Zuckerman and Les Brown



“Ad hoc” networks are cutting into the giants’ share by bringing movies, mini-series, and even such former network sitcoms as *Fame* to a mass audience.

WHEN THE NETWORKS had television all to themselves, the conceit of every new season was that it would revitalize our popular culture. Every September a score of newly minted series promised, in the promotional slogans, to raise enjoyment to greater heights if we but reorganized our nightly viewing regimen.

The pitch is the same this year, but times have changed. The future of our popular culture doesn't so much ride with the fate of the networks' heavily hyped new offerings as with the destiny of two shows the networks canceled last spring and gave up for dead. For those two

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shows, *Fame* and *Too Close for Comfort*, in defying the old laws of survival by continuing on special satellite hookups of their own, could upset the whole television system, diminish the power of the three networks, and change forever what a new television season is all about.

In the past, with very few exceptions, when a network series was canceled it went out of production. If it was lucky enough to have had a run of at least five seasons, it would have amassed a library of reruns sufficient to give it an afterlife in syndication on local stations. In this kind of syndication—which is where the production companies make their big profits—there have to be enough episodes for a station to “strip” the program into the same time period five days a week. Any canceled series that falls short

of affording a full season of stripping can forget about an afterlife and all the residuals that go with it.

Fame, an hour-long comedy-drama series with music, was cut loose by NBC after two seasons of generally lukewarm ratings. But for MGM/UA, the producing company, it seemed a pity to let the program fade away when it was so popular in Europe and Australia. So with a foreign sale assured for a third season, but no network interest here, the studio decided to try a new route to keep the series going and expand the precious library of episodes. *Fame* will continue in production for distribution on a so-called “ad hoc network,” one that has lined up its own stations and advertisers.

Too Close for Comfort had had three respectable seasons on ABC when it was

Andrea Baruffi

axed; producer D. L. Taffner wasn't going to let it go at that and miss out on the lucrative syndication market. He too elected to resume production of the sitcom for an ad hoc network, betting that *Too Close*, as a known quantity, would appeal to enough stations to cover most of the country, and that viewers would continue to think of it as a network show.

Ad hoc networks are not a recent invention. They date back to the '50s, when certain advertisers created their own temporary networks built around programs they wished to place in select markets. They are, in fact, a form of syndication. The 1975 David Frost interviews with Richard Nixon went out over an ad hoc network, put together especially for those broadcasts. Mobil Showcase Network, which has presented such serials as *Edward and Mrs. Simpson*, *Ten Who Dared*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*, is an ad hoc network. So are SFM's Holiday Network and Paramount's daily soft-news magazine, *Entertainment Tonight*.

Perhaps the biggest and best-established ad hoc network is Operation Prime Time, which has presented such distinguished programs as *A Woman Called Golda*, with Ingrid Bergman, and *Smiley's People*, with Alec Guinness. This fall, OPT will offer *Sadat*, a four-hour docudrama on the late Egyptian leader, and *Helen Keller: The Miracle Continues*, a two-hour made-for-television movie.

But if ad hoc networks are nothing new, their significance this season is that there are more of them than ever and that, for the first time, they are carrying genuine network programming on a weekly basis, posing direct competition to the networks—in many cities, their programs air on network-affiliated stations. If *Fame* and *Too Close for Comfort* succeed in the fall, with their scattershot scheduling, the three big networks will have something to worry about besides competition from HBO, direct-broadcast satellites, and video recordings.

You cannot start an ad hoc network without a base of stations in the country's largest markets, and there is no better base today than Metromedia Television. Metromedia has something only the three networks have: owned-and-operated stations in the three largest cities—New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. As this has been the key to the networks' strength, it is also the key to Metromedia's strength. Metromedia owns seven television stations in all, which together cover around 25 percent of the nation's television homes.

Most of the Metromedia stations are independents—that is, they have no network affiliation. This means they're relatively free to take on, or initiate, interesting projects. At a time when most other media companies are diversifying into cable, videotex, direct-broadcast satellites, and other new forms of television, Metromedia has been concentrating on expand-

Metromedia is positioned to emerge as the fourth great force in television.

ing in old-fashioned broadcast television. When it acquired Boston's WCVB-TV for a record price of \$220 million in 1981, it also acquired the president of that exemplary station, Robert Bennett, and promptly made him president of Metromedia Television. More recently, it purchased the Chicago independent, WFLD-TV, clinching its entree to the top markets.

Metromedia is positioned now to emerge as the fourth great force in commercial television, after CBS, ABC, and NBC. It has been laying plans to distribute movies, news, and first-run entertainment programming in prime time and daytime, and will make an important competitive foray this fall into late-night entertainment, as part of a consortium producing the 90-minute nightly variety show, *Thicke of the Night*. As part of another consortium, it is also behind a new weekly talent-scout series, *Star Search*.

The vehicle carrying Metromedia into television's major league is the ad hoc network. "If *Fame* and *Too Close for Comfort* can work," says Bob Bennett, "then the producer of every show that gets canceled is going to say, 'Wait, see if we can sell it through Metromedia.'"

The trick in setting up an ad hoc network is getting a substantial number of network affiliates to buy programs; otherwise, it would be impossible to achieve the national coverage most television advertisers require. The independent stations around the country are sufficient to reach only 65 percent of the homes, so it

is necessary, in markets with no independent outlets, to enlist affiliates willing to preempt their networks in prime time. This is relatively easy to do on a sporadic basis, with shows like *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Blood and Honor*, but it is extremely difficult for series that are intended to have a protracted weekly run, such as *Fame* and *Too Close for Comfort*.

Bonded by years of tradition and handsome profits, the major networks and their affiliates have a symbiotic relationship. Affiliates give the networks access to the local airwaves; in return the networks pay these stations for the use of their air-time, and give them a core of popular programming around which to sell advertising. Nevertheless it is a business relationship, and stations, like the networks, are under corporate pressures to increase their profits.

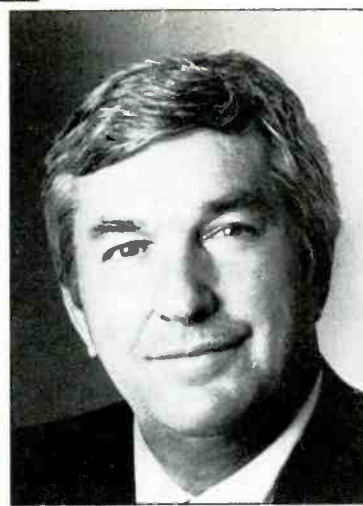
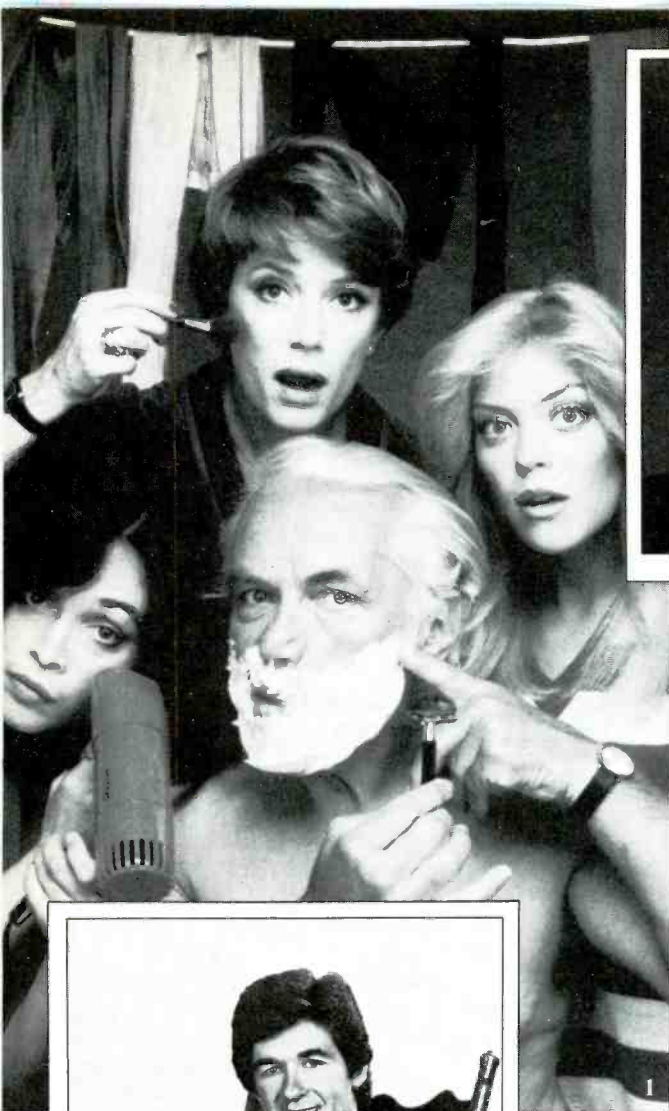
Presented with an opportunity to join an ad hoc network, an affiliate is usually faced with the paradox of improving his own revenues by weakening the network that sustains him day by day. It is a bit like risking a good marriage for a night on the town. But when a network falters in the ratings, as NBC has the last few years, affiliates find it easier to slip away.

At the NBC affiliates convention in Los Angeles last spring, the network's top officials repeatedly implored their "local partners" to air as many NBC programs as possible. The network's clearance of programs in prime time had fallen to 97 percent of all television homes, one percent behind ABC and CBS. In daytime, NBC is off by as much as 5 percent. As the network's president, Pierson Mapes, pointed out, that translates into millions of dollars in lost revenues each year.

Don Taffner, whose company produces *Too Close for Comfort*, which will be reactivated early next year, expects most of the affiliates joining the ad hoc network to carry the program in a fringe time period, perhaps 7 P.M. Saturdays. "No one can preempt the networks in prime time," Taffner says. "They're just too strong."

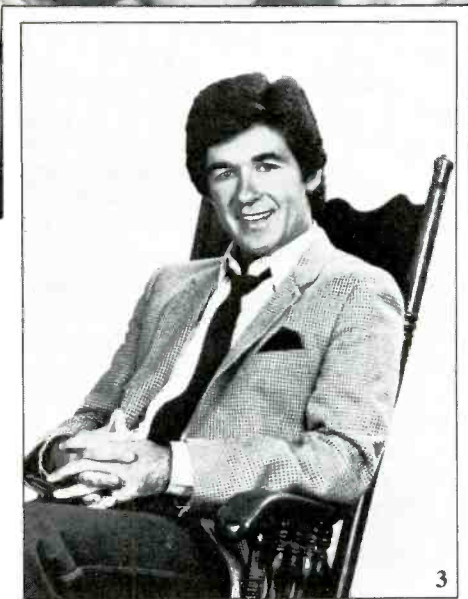
Metromedia's Bob Bennett disagrees: "If a guy is sitting with a network show that is doing poorly at 10 o'clock and wrecking his lead-in to the local news, he just might want to put *Fame* in there."

Some observers of the scene believe *Fame*, as a one-hour show, will find its niche on affiliated stations at 7 P.M. Sundays, where it would compete head-on with *60 Minutes*. This time period carries a restriction imposed by the Federal Communications Commission more than a decade ago. Under the Prime Time Ac-



Bob Bennett, Metromedia's impresario, (left) is at the hub of this season's major ad hoc ventures:

- 1., 2. *Too Close for Comfort and Fame: Returning to haunt the networks who gave them up for dead last season.*
3. **Alan Thicke:** *Fred Silverman, Metromedia, MGM/UA, and more than 100 stations are betting he's the next Johnny Carson.*
4. **Ed McMahon:** *Signed to host Star Search, which has already been picked up by 170 stations.*



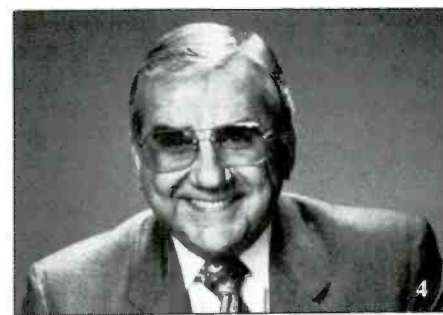
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against *60 Minutes* appear highly vulnerable to preemption, especially since neither network's Sunday-evening program choices have had much success against the CBS newsmagazine in the past.

Monitor is the obvious soft spot in the NBC schedule. It had fared poorly in the ratings last season and now has been shifted into competition with *60 Minutes*. A number of affiliates have indicated a desire to live without the network's newsmagazine.

While the fortunes of *Fame* and *Too Close for Comfort* in network-dominated prime time remain to be seen, there is no doubt about the potency of *Thicke of the Night* as an ad hoc offering. A coproduction of Metromedia, MGM/UA, and Fred Silverman's company, Intermedia, the 90-minute late-night show starring Canadian comedian Alan Thicke has already cleared 85 percent of the country's television homes on more than 100 stations. Along with the independents, the stations include 24 ABC affiliates, 11 from NBC, and 6 from CBS. At least two of these, WMAR-TV in Baltimore and KTWO-TV in Casper, Wyoming, have elected to bump Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* for *Thicke of the Night*.

If the new entry should prove popular



4

with the viewers, the lineup of stations for *Thicke of the Night* could double in a matter of months and place the profitable late-night franchises of all three networks in serious jeopardy.

And if *Thicke of the Night* looks like a network show, is distributed like a network show, and is sold to advertisers as a network show, who's to say it is less than a network show?

To set up an ad hoc network for *Nicholas Nickleby*, Mobil sent a sample tape and proposal to every station in the largest television markets. Mobil's method is to buy the air-time on the stations it chooses. There were more than a hundred responses, and Mobil selected 61 stations. More than one-third were affiliates of ABC, CBS, or NBC that agreed to

preempt their networks for nine hours of prime time on four consecutive nights. The networks, which hate to lose any links in their great chains even for a few nights, were not pleased. When WEYI-TV, a CBS affiliate in Flint, Michigan, accepted an offer to carry *Nickleby* and suddenly reneged, Mobil vice president Herb Schmertz sent a letter to CBS Broadcast Group president Gene Jankowski protesting alleged network pressure against the affiliate. "I can sympathize with your inability to sell your program," Jankowski replied, "and I suggest you try other stations in the marketplace."

The *Nickleby* network proved to be something of a watershed. Within weeks of its telecast, four different proposals for new ad hoc networks were floated. Two were from movie studios and two from station-group consortiums.

The idea of an ad hoc network is especially attractive to film companies because this method of television distribution allows the studio to share in the advertising revenues. In the long run, this could be more lucrative than simply leasing movies to the big networks for a flat fee. Certain film companies have proposed offering their films on ad hoc networks soon after their exposure on pay cable.

"If the networks can each have their *Night at the Movies*, why can't we?" says Gary Lieberthal, president of Embassy Telecommunications, which plans to air one of its theatrical features each quarter via an ad hoc network. "If we can line up the stations and sell directly to

Any soft spot in a network's schedule is suddenly vulnerable to preemption.

advertisers, we don't have to pay the middleman."

The irony of the matter is that the proliferation of ad hoc networks has been spurred not by technology but by the actions of the Big Three networks themselves. For many years, ABC, CBS, and NBC have enjoyed a sellers' market. With the demand for advertising time consistently exceeding the supply of 30-second spots, the networks have routinely hiked their rates every year. Last season, the ad rates went up a record 13 to 16 percent, with the average 30-second prime-time spot on ABC selling for \$91,000. This season's rates are reported to have risen another 15 percent. Advertisers have been driven to finding less expensive ways of reaching national audiences through television.

Meanwhile, ABC, CBS, and NBC have been lobbying hard in Washington for repeal of the financial-interest and syndication rules, under which they are barred from owning even part of the programs they buy, and from engaging in the

domestic syndication of programs. Independent stations have flourished under this rule, since it allowed them to buy the reruns of shows like *M*A*S*H* and *Laverne & Shirley* while those programs were still running on the networks and still at the peak of their popularity. Fearing now that repeal of the rule would let the networks again control the flow of programs to the syndication market and impair their ability to compete, Metromedia and other independent groups have begun to seek new sources of programming, and are even producing shows themselves.

The needs of the advertisers and the independent television operators have thus converged, elevating the ad hoc network to a new position of power in commercial television. According to Henry Siegel, chairman of Lexington Broadcast Services, a leading company engaged in what he calls "advertiser-supported syndication," the revenues in this field have grown from \$30 million in 1972 to \$300 million in 1982. Siegel believes the market will be worth \$1 billion by the end of this decade.

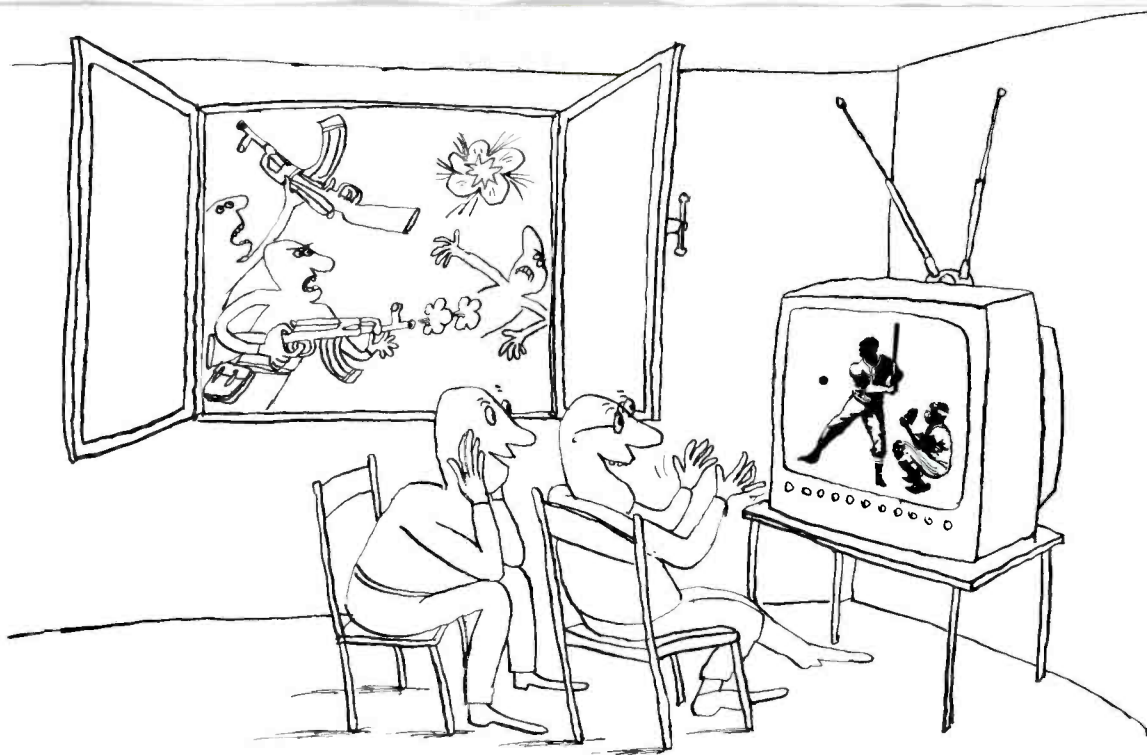
A new entry this fall, *Star Search*, illustrates the reasons behind the growing advertiser enthusiasm for ad hoc networks. The weekly hour-long talent-scout show, laden with guest stars, has lined up more than 170 stations—less than 30 short of the number the big networks generally provide. The stations pay nothing for the program, but in exchange for carrying five minutes' worth of national advertising in the show, they receive an equal number of commercial spots to sell locally. And here's why it all works: A national advertiser can buy a 30-second spot on the full ad hoc network for around \$42,000, or less than half the price of a spot on ABC, CBS, or NBC. This clarifies why the bulk of the advertising time for *Fame* and *Thicke of the Night*, as well as *Star Search*, was sold months before the shows' ad hoc premieres.

Independent stations may not have the resources to go head-to-head with the networks in producing first-run programming, but they do have the advertisers' blessings and a strong show of interest today from the more venturesome production companies.

With *Fame* and *Too Close for Comfort*, the networks are being challenged by their own castoffs. And if nothing else comes of the refusal by those two shows to die in the time-honored way, it should at least make the networks less cavalier about canceling programs that still show signs of life. ■



Joseph Farris



Television, Sandinista Style

Marx y Engels and beisbol have both found a place on Nicaraguan television.

by T.D. Allman

WHAT DO Felix the Cat and Ronald Reagan have in common with Flipper and Karl Marx?

Along with the Detroit Tigers, *Planet of the Apes*, and *Battleship Galactica*, they make regular appearances on Nicaraguan television. According to the Reagan Administration, Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution is only a Central American rerun of totalitarianism, Soviet-style. But Nicaraguan TV—like Nicaragua itself—exhibits a pluralism one simply doesn't find in Cuba or Eastern Europe.

"We start with the premise," says Iván García, the young director general of the Sandinista Television System (SSTV), "that television is an educational tool working to increase cultural levels and political consciousness." But he adds: "It is also our duty to fulfill the people's legitimate right to entertainment."

Most of the time, especially during prime time, the "right to entertainment"

is a lot more visible than the need to raise political consciousness in this Georgia-sized nation of 2.7 million people, where the per capita income is less than \$1,000 a year.

Indeed, watching *Lou Grant* and *Barnaby Jones*, *los Vikingos* and *el Rey Arturo* on television here, one might suppose Fred Silverman, not guerrilla revolutionaries, had taken over Nicaragua four years ago.

"In poor Third World countries like Nicaragua," explains one Western diplomat, "most people can't afford to own cars or take foreign vacations. TV is their passport to a bigger, more exciting world."

Nicaragua has two television channels, and both—as in most of the developing world—are government-owned. Yet channel-flipping viewers don't lack for choice. *Marx y Engels*, an East German docudrama, occupied the 8:45 P.M. slot on Managua's Channel 6 one recent Tuesday. But everyone in the lobby of my hotel was watching the Channel 2 presentation of *Telenovela*, a Mexican-produced melodrama complete with errant sons, weeping daughters, and last-minute rec-

onciliations. "It's hard to run culture on one channel," concedes García, "when you're competing against *Charlie's Angels*."

The following Sunday, in fact, Kenneth Clark's *Civilización* and a National Geographic wildlife feature might as well not have been broadcast at all. They were opposite *Beisbol de Grandes Ligas*—major-league baseball broadcast live, via satellite, from the United States. In the bar in the small town of Moimbo where I watched the game, the beer-drinking crowd seemed to have quite forgotten about Marx and Engels in its enthusiasm.

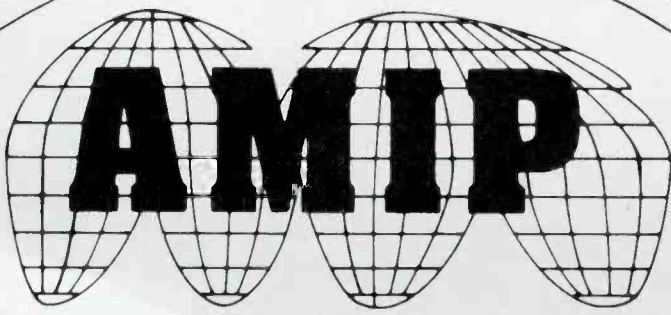
But the most popular show in Nicaragua is a locally produced program called *Septimo Libre*, which might loosely be translated as *Saturday Afternoon Fever*. Its main attraction is a disco-dance competition. While Nicaraguan teenagers gyrate across the dance floor, disco lights flash "Libre, Libre, Libre"—Free, Free, Free. Marx and Lenin would not be amused.

In one area Nicaraguan viewers have no choice at all. *Noticiero Sandinista—Sandinista News*—is the one and only news program on both channels. Does

Jo Teodorescu

T.D. Allman's book on U.S. intervention in Central America, *Unmanifest Destiny*, will be published by Dial Press next year.

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this mean the Nicaraguans get an unremitting diet of communist propaganda? Overt criticism of the government is nonexistent on Nicaraguan television as it is in many other Latin American countries, including El Salvador and Guatemala, which enjoy strong U.S. support. News embarrassing to the government is also almost never aired. When the Reagan Administration ordered Nicaragua's six consulates in the United States closed last June, for example, the five returning consuls were treated like heroes here. But SSTV did not broadcast the news that the sixth consul, stationed in New Orleans, had refused to come home and sought asylum in the United States.

When it comes to the big international news stories, however, Nicaraguans often see exactly what U.S. viewers do—because the Nicaraguans use so many American network reports. President Reagan himself appears, uncut and unedited, on *Noticiero Sandinista* frequently, perhaps because, as one Nicaraguan diplomat put it, “Reagan’s superficiality is as obvious here as it is in the United States.”

In fact last April, when Reagan gave a major speech on Central America, Nicaraguan television ran the address in its entirety—even though Reagan denounced “Nicaragua’s dictatorial junta” and accused the Sandinistas of “helping Cuba and the Soviets to destabilize our hemisphere.” The only difference was that the address was televised one day late. Why the delay? “The Nicaraguans didn’t tamper with what the President said,” according to a public-affairs officer at the American embassy here. “But they added video footage to his address that wasn’t there when we broadcast it to them.

“For example, when the President accused the guerrillas of terrorism in El Salvador, the Nicaraguans showed footage of U.S.-made helicopters machine-gunning campesinos. I can’t say the Sandinistas censored the President’s address, but they broadcast it in a way you wouldn’t see on U.S. TV.”

Nicaraguan TV news also differs considerably from the kind one sees on television in the Soviet Union and other communist countries, where controversy or misfortune is neglected or glossed over with euphemism. Coverage of the fighting along the Honduran border is quite blunt. The Nicaraguans see graphic film footage of the war, not propaganda shots.

In spite of the official line that prevails on news broadcasts, average Nicara-

Nicaraguan TV is equally baffling in Marxist and American terms.

guans—and even foreigners—do get a chance to speak their minds. The U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua, Anthony Quainton, recently appeared on one Managua talk show—and not even the U.S. embassy suggested that the ambassador was not allowed to say what he wanted. Indeed, anti-Americanism (as opposed to criticism of U.S. government policy) plays no role on Nicaraguan television.

Sandinista television, whatever its peculiarities, has no monopoly on how Nicaraguans perceive the world. About half the population watches local television at least one hour a day. But in the border areas, Costa Rican, Honduran, and Salvadoran television can also be received. AM radio broadcasts from Mexico, Cuba, even the United States itself, are heard all over the country. And the Spanish-language short-wave broadcasts of the Voice of America and the BBC have an immense audience here.

THE POROUSNESS OF Nicaragua’s frontiers, so far as the electronic media are concerned, may be one reason the Sandinistas make no attempt to restrict programming severely. “If we lie, people know we lie,” García concedes. “If we don’t cover their realities, the people will know we’re deceiving them and rise up against us.”

A more direct explanation is that the Sandinistas seem genuinely committed to the philosophy that revolution can be pluralistic and at the same time effect fundamental change. “There is no ‘official revolutionary’ art, cinema, or television,” says Rosario Murillo, who is head of the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers and a niece of August Sandino, the insurgent leader of the 1920s after whom the ruling movement is named. “There are only revolutionary artists, filmmakers, and producers of television. No one style or idiom can define what a revolu-

tion is.” A survey of current Nicaraguan art, film, and television seems to bear her out: “Socialist realism” is notable entirely by its absence.

Discussions with Nicaraguans involved in communications also reveal that ideology has repeatedly taken third place to two other concerns: programming independence and popular input, from the bottom up, in what is broadcast. “Our microphones and cameras go to the people, and ask people what they think,” added Marlen Chow, director of the People’s Broadcasting Corporation. “That never happened in Nicaragua before.”

Nicaraguan producers also have some concerns their American counterparts share. “Before the triumph over Somoza,” says García, “Nicaraguan television gave a most superficial impression of life. Now we’re trying to reduce the role on TV of drugs, crime, and violence.”

What about sex? “This is Nicaragua,” he replies.

The face of Nicaragua that emerges from the cathode tube suggests a more complicated interpretation than the standard American one; and while television has an extraordinary capacity to simplify, manipulate, and indoctrinate, it also possesses an astonishing, unerring, and perhaps involuntary capacity to expose the society that “controls” it.

What could more dramatically reveal the limited choices available to us Americans—in spite of all our wealth and belief in “diversity”—than the inevitable tendency of the three networks, all without censorship, to report nightly on the same plane crash, the same Presidential news conference, the same bang-bang from Central America?

And what could be more revealing of the situation here in Nicaragua than the fact that this small, underdeveloped nation nonetheless has managed to conjure up a medium that really is incomprehensible in either American or communist terms?

Perhaps Nicaragua will turn into the Bulgaria of Central America. Or maybe the CIA strategy will pay off, and Somoza-style “freedom” will once again ring through the land.

Or—even more strangely—Nicaragua may manage to develop a system that reflects that country’s own peculiar hopes, follies, strengths, weaknesses, contradictions, and dreams.

Stay tuned for the next episode. Nicaraguan television will show the answer—whether or not that is the intention of those in the control booth. ■

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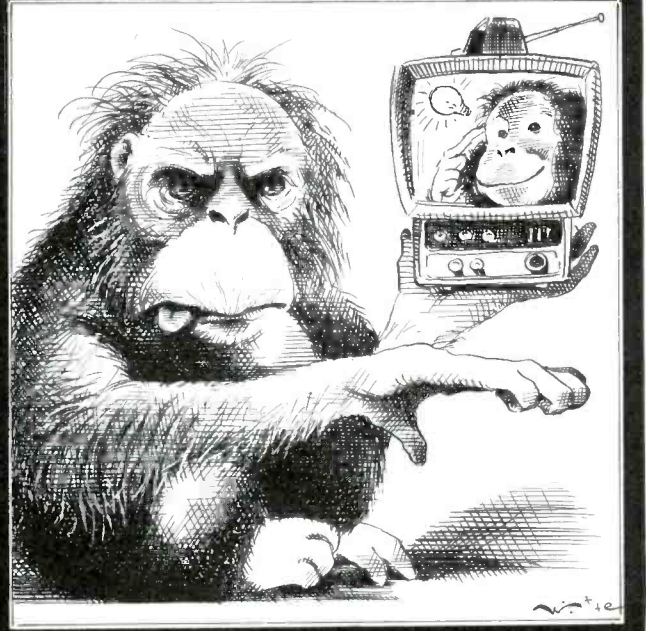
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Another Season, Another Reason, for Making Sitcoms

by William A. Henry III



"TELEVISION started off mediocre and went steadily downhill."
—Dave Garroway

NOTHING is ever entirely new in storytelling, but if television is to claim it has made a contribution to narrative form, its best evidence is surely the series—especially the situation comedy. The weekly series is fundamentally unlike the one-shot stage play; with the exception of the Dagwood-and-Blondie and Andy Hardy movies and their ilk, it is similarly unlike film.

In place of catharsis, the series offers continuity. Instead of characters whose lives are transformed, it gives us characters whose lives evolve gradually, like ours. Instead of asking us to substitute ourselves for the protagonists and imagine their griefs and triumphs as ours, the series gives us a circle of surrogate friends whose world coexists with our own. Not all dramatic series make that attempt. In police and hospital shows, and other programs about life-threatening situations, the story revolves around characters who appear for one episode and undergo a traditionally apocalyptic change, while the supposedly central characters merely perform their chosen jobs. Sitcoms serve the goal better, because the action happens to the central characters, not merely in their vicinity. Thus, although drama is conventionally considered "serious" and comedy trivial, the history of American television is foremost the history of sitcoms. From Lucy Ricardo and Ralph Kramden to Barney Fife and Rob Petrie, to Mary Richards and Archie Bunker and Hawkeye Pierce, many of the memorable characters of American television have evoked a rueful smile.

It is a commonplace of television criticism that the forthcoming season looks particularly dreary. That judgment results partly from the roseate view we take of the past, partly from our inability to project the happier aspects of the future. One of the satisfying things about a good television series is that, for several seasons at least, it keeps on getting better. Even so, there are undeniably up times and down times in the creative climate of Hollywood, and this fall seems a sour time for the sitcom, after a decade in which writers learned how to handle such topics as death, disability, and diaper-changing with candor, taste, and

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feeling. No topic was taboo, no honesty too uncomfortable: Archie reminisced about being abused by his father, Hawkeye was driven crazy by the little cruelties of war. This fall Archie is gone, Hawkeye is gone, and in their places we are getting a genie, a ghost, and an orangutan with a 265 I.Q. To judge from screenings, publicity statements, and the remarks of network executives, the affecting, even tragicomic, sitcoms of the 1970s seem to have given way to piffle—or to silence.

CBS, which styles itself the Tiffany of networks, built much of

**The fall shows bear out
Fred Allen's observation that
"Imitation is the sincerest
form of television."**

its reputation on comedy. It showcased everyone from Jack Benny to George Burns and Gracie Allen, to all the characters cited above and many more. Yet it has placed no new comedies on its fall schedule. Officially, CBS is holding its new sitcoms in reserve until mid-year, after the initial commotion of baseball, football, and big-name movies dies down. Perhaps that does give the new half-hour entries a better chance, although *After-M*A*S*H*, a spinoff picking up several characters and perhaps some of the ambience of the celebrated original, would not seem to need such protection. To the television industry, the CBS scheduling gambit is a confession of weakness.

ABC pioneered some of the most successful, and least ambitious, comedies of the 1970s: *Happy Days*, *Laverne & Shirley*, *Three's Company*. All were in the ultimate sense childish. The principal characters were unmarried and pretty much unattached romantically; they resembled nothing so much as 14-

Michael Witte

year-olds who had completed their growth spurts. Some of ABC's clownish characters did mutter meaningful phrases sotto voce: Henry Winkler tried his best to make the Fonz something more than a deadbeat; Robin Williams, especially in his monologues, managed to have *Mork and Mindy* talk about racism, capitalism, and a lot of other isms with iconoclastic wit and uncommon decency. But ABC executives shuddered at the thought of making a "statement."

They still do. This fall ABC is introducing four comedies, of which two hold the faintest promise of significance, and none seems particularly fresh. Daring and nervy during the brief delirium of the late 1970s, when their network scrambled to the top of the heap, ABC programmers now seem determined to prove the truth of Fred Allen's dictum, "Imitation is the sincerest form of television." The one potentially adult comedy, *It's Not Easy*, features Ken Howard (*The White Shadow*) and Carlene Watkins (*Best of the West*) as yet another divorced couple trying to get along for the sake of the kids. The situation is fundamentally unhappy; so, of course, was a field hospital in Korea, but that did not hit quite so close to home. Howard helped make *The White Shadow* perhaps the best series ever about school life. He will need all his creativity to make the conflict of no-longer-married parents, over the rearing of their child, bearable without being bland.

ABC's other comedy entries are even more derivative. *Webster* is a shameless ripoff of *Diff'rent Strokes* (perhaps on the theory that he who steals trash steals my purse); it features Emanuel Lewis, who cut his acting teeth hawking Jello, as a cute six-year-old black kid adopted by a white couple, played by Alex Karras and Susan Clark. Presumably in that situation there is something interesting to be said about race in America, but ABC is unlikely to risk offending its audience by showing a six-year-old getting his feelings hurt by bigots. *Oh, Madeline* features Madeline Kahn as a housewife whose husband is having a midlife crisis and who decides to have one of her own. Over time, *All in the Family* mined this feminist territory intimidatingly well; ABC hopes to make *Madeline* seem fresh by emphasizing sex, a staple of ABC comedy for the past decade. That approach could easily trivialize the deeper yearnings of a woman who fears she has missed it all. Perhaps the tawdriest and most tired of ABC's new shows is *Just Our Luck*, which blends a broadcast setting (shades of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *WKRP in Cincinnati*, *Buffalo Bill*, and *Goodnight, Beantown*, to name a few)

with a supernatural visitor who has useful magical powers (*My Favorite Martian*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, and too many more). A TV weatherman who saves his job with the convenient help of a genie from a bottle is unlikely to experience many of the everyday stresses that beset the rest of us.

NBC, long known as the unfunny network, has scheduled 10 or so sitcoms for the fall, of which three are entirely new and five more have been on the schedule for only a few months. Under Grant Tinker, NBC has tried to regain its image for classiness and stability, qualities not associated with Tinker's erratic prede-

TV's best comedy today is in dramas, not sitcoms.

cessor, Fred Silverman. Yet Tinker seems to be following Silverman's trail: Talk at first about quality programming and one's trust in the audience, but if that fails, bring on the junk—or, in the current Hollywood jargon, shows that are "high concept," meaning, apparently, that their premises can be readily understood from a 10-second promotional ad.

Perhaps the prototypical high-concept show is *Jennifer Slept Here*, a sexual fantasy as cunningly devised as any letter to *Penthouse's* "Forum" section. Blond bombshell Ann Jillian plays the ghost of a movie star visible only to her one chum, a 14-year-old boy. What teenage male has not dreamed of a secret lover, devastatingly attractive, whom he does not have to introduce to anybody in his awkward world? *Penthouse* might also have devised *We've Got It Made*, a show from none other than Fred Silverman that spins out the fantasy of nearly every 22-year-old boy: Two bachelors, told to clean up their apartment by their girlfriends, hire a housekeeper who turns out to be a smashing blond. It is hard to get much higher in concept, or lower in aspiration, than NBC's third comedy, *Mr. Smith*; the title character is a talking orangutan who is a consultant to the federal government. By the yardstick of "relevance," this series will have meaning only to that handful of people who believe they go through life accompanied by a seven-foot-tall white rabbit.

What has brought on this deluge of dreck? Part of the answer is fear: Cable, pay, and independent broadcast rivals have eaten into the networks' share of audience, especially in the upper reaches of income and intellect. The networks have grabbed for whatever they think has proven mass appeal. But another perhaps larger factor is a fundamental change in the nature of dramatic series, which have occupied much of the ground that a decade ago belonged to venturesome comedy. *Hart to Hart*, *Remington Steele*, and *Magnum, P.I.* are slickly funny, in the style of William Powell or Cary Grant thrillers. *The Dukes of Hazzard* and *The A Team* are comic-book violent, light-hearted in the face of heavy weather. *Hill Street Blues*, *St. Elsewhere*, the departed *Fame* (soon to appear on independent stations), and at least one new entry, *Bay City Blues* (about a minor league baseball team) are gritty and realistic, but they relieve tension with broad buffoonery. In place of the increasingly serious comedies of the 1970s, we have increasingly farcical dramas in the 1980s. Perhaps that is only a cyclical experiment in form. Perhaps it is instead a tribute to the sitcom, which is being reinvented at one-hour length. In any case, it is a powerful argument for watching reruns of the kind of comedies that they just don't make like they used to.



"There's a fifty percent chance of rain, a fifty percent chance of sunshine, and a fifty percent chance of neither."



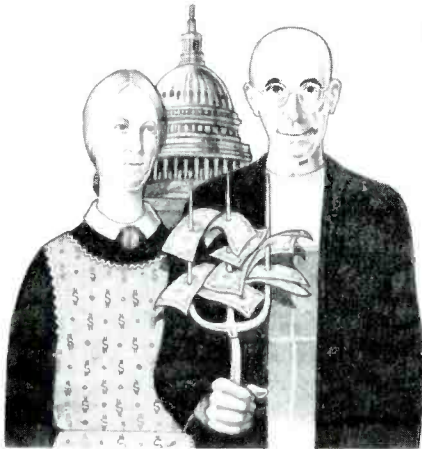
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When Television Turns Itself On

By Sylvia Rabiner

BESIDES DOCTORS, cops, private detectives, and Machiavellian kinfolk plotting against one another in sagebrush splendor, television's favorite characters are media folk: newscasters, talk-show hosts, reporters. Television loves its own, as well as its kissing cousins in print journalism and radio. Judging by the popularity of such shows as *Lou Grant*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *WKRP in Cincinnati*, viewers love them too. America has elevated a celebrity aristocracy composed not only of the political figures, movie stars, athletes, criminals, and trick ponies who *make* the news, but those who report it as well. We know them well, after all, since we watch them every day. And having enthroned them, we take perverse pleasure in toppling them, thereby reassuring ourselves that the men and women who influence our opinions and tastes are as variously hard-working, ethical, sincere, pretentious, self-serving, and incompetent as the rest of us.

A plethora of new programs revolving around media folk is scheduled for the fall season, after some auditioning this summer. There's NBC's *Buffalo Bill*, the tale of an insufferably self-promoting talk-show host, CBS's *Goodnight, Beantown*, which stars an alternately competitive/cooperative boy/girl news anchor team, and ABC's *Just Our Luck*, which pairs up a weatherman and a genie. Sniffing a trend, Norman Lear is working on a mid-

season replacement for NBC entitled *Good Evening, He Lied*, about a man and woman who work on (you guessed it) a local TV news program. Not to be left off the bandwagon are the soaps: In ABC's newest entry, *Loving*, the central character, Merrill Vocheck, is (you guessed it again) an anchorwoman. Completing the inventory are the news-show parodies: *The Generic News* on public television, and HBO's entries, *Not Necessarily the News*, *Stopwatch*, and *Over Here, Mr. President*. Given the contemporary style of TV news as entertainment, viewers may find it increasingly hard to distinguish between the ersatz and the genuine article.

Satirizing the deeds and misdeeds of those who govern is a venerable Anglo-American tradition. In the manner of the Swiftian proposal that the Irish end their famine by consuming their infants, critics have often given vent to their most serious concerns and criticisms of society through humor. The progenitor of today's TV news satires was an American version of the British production, *That Was the Week that Was*, which ran as an NBC series from January 1964 to May 1965. The premiere performance was graced with a remarkable cast: Henry Fonda, Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Gene Hackman, and Henry Morgan. But this ordinarily sharp-witted, sharp-tongued crew appeared to have had their claws clipped and jaws muzzled. True, a few ascerbic darts were pelted at the undeserving rich

(John Paul Getty), the corrupt (Billy Sol Estes), and Republicans in general, but on the whole, the tone was one of good-humored twitting. Consider the following mock exchange between a reporter and President Kennedy:

Reporter: "Sir, how much money was spent on Caroline's sailboat?"

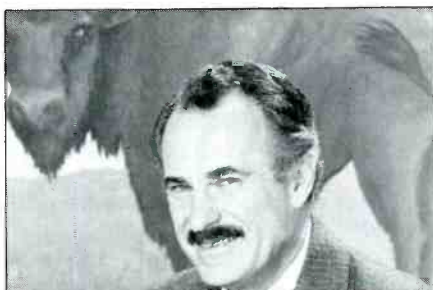
Kennedy (in a film-clip insert): "One million dollars was allocated and we're dredging the harbor now."

Oh well, those were the days of Camelot. The show was not only benign, but slow. This can be attributed to the pacing, which was downright lumbering compared with the current rapid-fire cutting. Back then, the viewer was not expected to get the joke in one-tenth of a second, a consideration those of us with sluggish cerebrum can appreciate. Finally, cast members in their roles as reporters played it straight. There wasn't any grandstanding of *their* personalities. This view of the television reporter as public person without public persona lasted until the advent of the dippy gang at *Saturday Night Live*. Chevy Chase's goofy mugging, Jane Curtin's barely suppressed irascibility, Bill Murray's sublimely smarmy celebrity interviews, Gilda Radner's monomaniacal monologues, and the antics of others on "Weekend Update" recast newspeople as irrepressible egotists.

The irreverent young cast of HBO's *Not Necessarily the News*, like the crew at *Saturday Night Live*, often goad one



Over Here, Mr. President is HBO's contribution to the media-folk genre.



Dabney Coleman plays *Buffalo Bill*, an insufferably self-promoting talk show host.



Goodnight, Beantown may have been inspired by the Reasoner/Walters match.

another into reckless, ingenious looniness. The show speeds down the fast lane, each joke obliterating the last like a blip in a video game. In technique, it brings to mind the running gags on *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*: Remember Arte Johnson in his yellow slicker, tumbling from his tricycle, or Ruth Buzzi slugging the masher with her purse? Well, on *Not Necessarily the News*, there's a running bathroom joke. Nothing scatological; just a fractious towel machine which, among other things, dispenses music instead of paper towels. There are loads of the kind of visual gags not everyone finds funny. (I do, but let me warn you that the memory of Woody Allen, in *Sleeper*, jetting across a lake dressed as a giant inflated fruit remains, to me, a moment of consummate hilarity.)

The cast take potshots at everything from U.S. policy in El Salvador to the current exercise craze, for which they have created television's first "aerobic" news team: Pete and Frosty Kimmelman bounce, jog, and high-kick their way through a grisly recital of child abuse and ax murders. Another of my favorite bits was a commercial for *Charlatan Romances*. As a silky female voice purrs, "Enter a world of deranged hallucination where bare-chested men on horseback ride out of the ocean and into your life for no reason at all," a sultry 15-year-old in Calvin Kleins is abducted by a gorgeous horseback-riding hunk in Foster-Grants. A second trailer advertises the inspired mating of two major motion pictures: *Gandhi Loves Tootsie* features the love-besotted little fellow in a dhoti and his coy, klutzy sweetheart in a playground romp, as they take turns on the swing and shimmy—one behind the other—down the slide.

Many skits have the sublime adolescent wackiness one might find at a high-school "sing." (This is meant as a compliment. Some of the most exuberant performances I've ever seen have been in high-school auditoriums.) There's one in which a young couple release their pet chihuahua, Sheba, into the wilderness. To the strains of "Born Free," the tiny beast, decked out in a cherry-red sweater, pitter-patters into the long grass, where she's met by a similarly sweated mate.

Moving from impromptu lampooning of news and news people to more sustained attempts at parody, I found the new fall sitcom called *Goodnight, Beantown* to be as charmless as its title (derived from the nightly salutation of Bill Bixby's character, Boston newscaster

Matt Cassidy). In an effort to jazz up the news show's ratings, the station hires Jennifer Barnes (Mariette Hartley) to co-anchor (The premise might have been inspired by the disastrous Harry Reasoner/Barbara Walters match-up, but the resemblance ends there.) In the first epi-

The power of TV has made the messenger as interesting as the message.

sode, by the unlikeliest coincidence, Jennifer moves into Matt's building, thus becoming his neighbor as well as his TV partner. The more interesting of the two, Jennifer is a divorced career woman with a 13-year-old daughter whose deepest desire is to see mom happily reunited with a man. (This is a twist on *Eddie's Father*, in which Bill Bixby played a widower with a match-making son.) Predisposed to dislike the partner he hasn't yet met, Matt fancies the arrangement even less when he learns his new anchorwoman is none other than the neighbor whose armoire is wedged in his entranceway, requiring him to climb through her window not once, but twice. And both times he tears his pants.

Jennifer begins by informing Matt that she didn't go to journalism school to do food, fashion, or the lighter side of the news. She's publicly competitive—but privately conciliatory. On-camera, she challenges Matt over an issue of sexism, but off-camera she disarms him by admitting that she is a bit pushy, but *he* can handle it. She doesn't want to do the show alone. She needs him. They're a team. In the second episode, having one-upped Matt on a story, she invites him to dinner. He arrives to find her alluringly dressed, setting out a banquet of salmon mousse and roast pheasant—ordered in, of course, but proffered in an environment romantic, yet domestic. Jennifer is an amalgam of career woman, cover girl, and Betty Crocker Bake-off winner. She can bring home the bacon and fry it up in a pan. She's the *new* new woman.

Strutting into the lineup next is that sitting duck of parody, the talk-show host. In one interview, *Buffalo Bill* star Dabney Coleman described his character, Bill Bittering, as "an arrogant, self-centered, and self-serving human being," and worried that "we have something very different from anything that's now on the air; how the public will respond is a flip of the coin."

Bill, unlike Archie, Maude, and others, has a brash exterior that does not conceal a heart of gold. (Perhaps he merely expresses the vitriol that we sense lurking beneath the surface on real talk shows—and that we secretly crave more of.) He is altogether bigoted—he snuffs out the gay-rights plea of an American-Indian guest by asserting that he, Buffalo, doesn't care to endorse a bunch of fire-water-drinking, homosexual Indians who'll start driving through the streets hitting people. He's childishly stubborn—one show revolves around Bill's refusal to apologize after haranguing his long-suffering stage manager. He's utterly uninterested in his guests except as foils—an actress promoting a film can't get a word in once Bill decides he should have an important part in it.

Can you grow to love this man? Well, maybe. It's hard to resist a fellow who, getting the cold shoulder from his colleagues for his intractable pride, dons a tuxedo and hoofs it around his living room crooning, "I'll go my way by myself." Or one who's willing to cuddle up on the casting couch with the libidinous, obese female movie producer from whom he hopes to wheedle a part. (After she has her way with him, he's written out of the script.) *Buffalo Bill* may never replace *Barney Miller* in my affections, but it's a sitcom with more than the usual wit.

This infatuation with media folk suggests that the power of television has made the messenger as interesting as the message: His hairstyle, wardrobe, and mannerisms are fair target for the lampooner. And finding the news itself funny is, perhaps, the healthy impulse of a society that recognizes the mess it's in. As Latin America slips into chaos, crime and unemployment rise, the world economy teeters, the polluted planet sickens, and the people in charge bungle and blunder, our jocularity may be the flip side of despair. "There's villainous news abroad," wrote Shakespeare. Indeed there is, and always has been. Laughter is one way of coping.

Sylvia Rabiner is a New York writer and teacher.

Prime Time's Vietnam Vets

by Stephen Fenichell

NEARLY A DECADE after the fall of Saigon, Vietnam has finally made it to prime time. *Magnum, P.I.* (CBS) and *The A Team* (NBC) are two of television's hottest shows. Both are grounded in the ambiguous legacy of our most recent war, and they reach a far broader audience than might be indicated by their choice of subject, the adventures of Vietnam vets.

Neither show has much to say about what made Vietnam unique in our national experience. The two programs present us with a memory of war in which all the ancient, hallowed qualities of heroism and patriotism survive untainted.

In *Magnum*, Vietnam has been transformed into a sort of psychological trial: The psychic trauma caused by the war must be overcome in order for a new life to begin. Thomas Magnum, played by that nearly perfect piece of beefcake, Tom Selleck, has recently retired from Naval Intelligence to pursue a career as a private investigator. He now lives the veteran's ultimate fantasy life, quartered on the magnificent Hawaiian estate of "best-selling author Robin Masters," a character who may well be based on Robin Moore, author of *The Green Berets* and a hero to the more hawkish vets.

Magnum is implausibly surrounded by his old "teammates," who continue to wear cute baseball caps emblazoned with the insignia "Da Nang" and signet rings embossed with a French croix: talismans of war signifying honor. This crack team, whose members we frequently see in combat flashbacks rescuing each other from near-fatal explosions, continues to hang together in civilian life. Most *Magnum* episodes seem to involve some person known to Magnum in 'Nam, who has miraculously turned up in Hawaii and now needs help.

Magnum is sublimely imperturbable, "well-adjusted" in the extreme—in



The A Team tells us that the men who fought in Vietnam are winners after all.

sharp contrast to his clients, who are haunted, if not completely paralyzed, by memories of the war. His task in a case is usually twofold: to find out "the truth" that will ultimately bring about justice, and to comfort the victim of war.

In one episode, the victim is army nurse Karen (Marcia Strassman), whom Magnum rescued in 'Nam from an exploding hospital tent (shown in hazy flashback, replete with thumping chop-ers and flaming jungle).

Karen has since become a doctor, and an administrator she works with is accusing her of having murdered a number of patients. It turns out the accuser had known her while she was confined to a veterans hospital with some unspecified variety of shell-shock. Magnum's determination to clear her name is reinforced by the world's belief that her stay in the hospital defines her as crazy. And Karen doesn't exactly help her own cause by constantly referring to her war experiences: "Remember in 'Nam when the B52s had hit? That's what it was like at the hospital the day those patients died." When Higgins, the British majordomo on the Masters estate, tries to tell her that her "war is over," she replies movingly: "Maybe it's never over. Maybe we all carry it around inside us, like a time-bomb waiting to go off."

In the end, of course, the "truth" is revealed: The villain is another—male—doctor. Karen's "war" is over; Magnum has helped her rise above the past by coming to terms with it.

The A Team offers no such solutions to the troubling legacy of war. These guys are sure crazy, but they're fun-crazy, rebels now fighting for personal causes, men who've been shell-shocked into states of free-wheeling violence and escapism.

Magnum's detective-hero is a determined nonconformist, clearly thrilled to continue the fight unrestricted by superior officers. But the boys on the *A Team* take this much further. They are basically outlaws suffering from a kind of Fugitive Complex: Imprisoned for crimes they supposedly did not commit back in 'Nam, they broke out, went AWOL, and "knocked off the bank of Hanoi." In the intervening years—before surfacing in prime time—they were a part of the "Los Angeles underground." This explanation is far too ambiguous to make sense of during commercial breaks.

None of them were at all traumatized by Vietnam. In fact, these warriors, unlike Magnum, seem to draw their inspiration from the subculture hungrily devouring *Soldier of Fortune* and *Gung-Ho* magazines every month, exchanging classified ads with legends like: "Have not had a good time since the Tet Offensive: Will fly anywhere." The infamous Mr. T is a bad black dude (the initials in his TV name—B. A. Baracas—are said to stand for "Bad Attitude") who has since come out good: He now teaches young kids arts and crafts between his assignments as a mercenary.

As with Magnum, the pursuits of the *A Team* nowadays are unqualifiedly admirable, usually involving the bringing to justice of various authority figures who hide behind their rank while committing heinous crimes.

In both *Magnum* and *The A Team*, the Vietnam War is much like any other—searing, traumatic, personally devastating. Magnum's flashbacks consist typically of heroic acts. In *The A Team*, too, 'Nam is a traditional training ground, a dangerous place where boys are turned into men.

Both shows tell us that the men who fought in Vietnam are heroes and winners after all. The shows may well owe their popularity to their effective presentation of a comforting illusion: that Vietnam was no different from World War II or all the other conflicts in which Americans fought and died so others could live free. ■

Stephen Fenichell is a frequent contributor to Channels.



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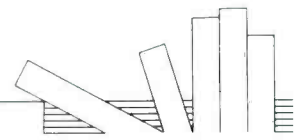
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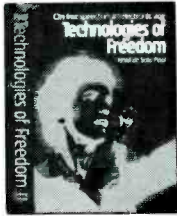
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The First Amendment Goes On-Line



Technologies of Freedom
by Ithiel de Sola Pool
Harvard University Press, \$20.00

OF ALL the questions swirling around the “information revolution,” none can be more important than this: Will the new computer and communication technologies prove a boon to free speech, or a threat? The technologies themselves would seem to argue for optimism, for what could bring more to the free marketplace of ideas than hundreds of new channels of television? Although it is to this real promise that the title of Ithiel de Sola Pool’s new book alludes, his purpose is to alert us to a threat—not from the technologies themselves, but from the decisions we are making (and not making) about how they will be organized.

Since their invention, the electronic media have posed vexing challenges to the First Amendment. Peculiar characteristics of the technologies—the scarcity of broadcast frequencies, the natural monopoly of telephone service—led to a galaxy of laws that would never have been tolerated in the realm of print. Communications in this country came to be organized along three very different lines: In print, where access to the medium is unconstrained, strict First

Amendment freedoms apply. In broadcasting, where access is limited, the government licenses and regulates all speakers. And in telephony, telegraphy, and the mails, where monopoly prevails, a “common carrier” structure was devised, under which anyone can buy access on a first-come, first-served basis.

As rickety as this three-legged table is, it has at least supported genuinely free speech in print, and a fair semblance of that on the common carriers, even if it has compromised the First Amendment rights of broadcasters. But under the weight of technological change, this structure is now breaking down—in ways that threaten the freedom of *all* communications, including print. The cause of this breakdown, Pool explains, is the fact that all of the media are converging. The language of digital electronic blips in which computers speak is quickly becoming the universal language of communication. Print, as much as television, will move through the air and along wires—and right into the lair of the electronic media’s two-headed monster: government regulation and corporate monopoly.

The bulk of Pool’s book is a well-documented history and

anatomy of that monster, with an eye to its designs on such hybrid new media as videotex, data-base publishing, and cable television. From the perspective of the First Amendment, the history of the electronic media is a bumbling affair that inspires little confidence in the current labors of our legislators, courts, and regulators. Pool shows how, each time a new form of electronic communications came along, the laws devised to regulate it were based on generally bogus analogies to old technologies, and conceived with little regard for the First Amendment. When the telegraph came on the scene, for instance, it was likened to the railroad, and regulated as if it were a common carrier of goods. The telephone, in turn, was compared to the telegraph. Thus the credit for winning equal, non-discriminatory access to the telephone system should go not to any civil libertarian, but to the grain farmers and hog shippers of the Midwest who fought the railroad monopoly for what we now call “access.”

The First Amendment has not always been so lucky. Pool describes at length the historical accidents and misperceptions that gave us a system of broadcast regulation he considers a travesty of free speech. But Pool is no Mark Fowler. “Deregulation,” he writes, “is something much less than the First Amendment.” A genuine libertarian, Pool divides his scorn equally between the public-interest types who encourage the government’s “benevolent” in-

terference in media, and the knee-jerk free marketeers, whose notions of corporate freedom court monopoly.

Pool examines two alternatives to these conventional views that would protect free speech in broadcasting without government involvement. One of these, a common-carrier system, was actually tried by AT&T in the ’20s. But since few people owned radios at the time, who but a radio manufacturer had any reason to broadcast? It wasn’t long before RCA took over AT&T’s station (which became WNBC), and the idea of divorcing ownership of the medium from control of its content soon died. (Fear of AT&T’s monopoly power also helped kill it.)

The second alternative, never seriously considered, would have had the government simply sell or lease frequencies with no strings attached. Broadcasters could then have enjoyed full First Amendment rights, and a free-wheeling market in air-time would have opened broadcasting to numerous voices. But the goal in the ’20s was to promote the nascent technology, not burden it. Congress opted for a system in which the government chooses licensees who may broadcast for free as long as they observe government regulations. So instead of an economic burden, broadcasters in this country bear a political one. (And for all their First Amendment rhetoric, broadcasters show no interest in making a trade.)

Pool takes us through this messy history to illuminate

our current predicament and inspire our vigilance against the two-headed monster. He is particularly worried about the fate of the printed word in the electronic age. Pool sees electronic publishing taking two forms, one of which appears vulnerable to government control. Long-lived information, he says, will be sold in the form of computer and video discs, which resemble books closely enough that they probably will enjoy full First Amendment protection. But more perishable material is now being "published" over electronic communications networks, and so has inadvertently fallen under the thumb of the government. The fact that the Federal Communications Commission has so far declined to regulate such networks is not, for Pool, the important point; the government retains the authority to do so.

"Networked computers will be the printing presses of the 21st century," Pool writes. "If they are not free of public control, the continued application of constitutional immunities to . . . mechanical presses, lecture halls, and . . . sheets of paper may become no more than a quaint archaism, a sort of Hyde Park Corner where a few eccentrics can gather while the major policy debates take place elsewhere."

Pool's first concern is the threat to free

speech posed by government, but he is not blind to the monster's other head—monopoly control. The most important free-speech question of our time, he suggests, is how we choose to organize cable. The medium's abundance of new channels can be the salvation of free speech in the electronic age, but not if a local monopoly decides who gets onto those channels. Pool argues for common-carrier status: "Sooner or later it must become possible for anyone who would publish over cable to lease a channel . . . and charge the public for viewing it. If not, the market in ideas will be controlled by those privileged to hold a franchise to the cable." (Pool ridicules the industry's contention that it has plenty of competition from other new media: "One can imagine a railroad owner in the 19th century denying being a monopolist because anyone refused a train could use a horse and buggy.")

Pool knows his history too well to think a common-carrier structure for cable will be adopted any time soon. Cable's recent adventures in Washington bear out Marx's observation that history appears first as tragedy, and then repeats itself as farce. Lately we have been busy seeking the right analogy for cable. First it was broadcasting, which made little sense. Now it is publishing, which makes none

at all (unless of course Doubleday is the *only* publisher from whom one can purchase books).

As happened with broadcasting, perceptions of a medium in its infancy are hardening into laws we will have to tolerate long after cable has evolved into a very different, and far more formidable, creature. The idea of cable as a common carrier has been rejected because cable, today, looks like just one entertainment medium among many. Thus our "debate" over cable regulation addresses little more than the economic "rights" of cities to collect franchise fees, and of cable operators to get rich. Once again, we seem to be backing into momentous questions of free speech.

This repetition of media history might make for amusing farce if the stakes were not so great. As once-discrete media converge on a single wire, the old margin of safety vanishes. No longer can we tolerate the pinched freedoms of one medium on the grounds that another—print—remains completely free.

Taking the long view, Pool is optimistic, if one can call it that: Cable, like every monopoly before it, will eventually abuse its power and be brought to heel. For the First Amendment, then, things will have to get worse before they can get better.

MICHAEL POLLAN ■

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Death in Prime Time

by Julie Talen



I DOUBT I would have noticed death on television if my mother hadn't died the summer I turned 24. After her suicide early in June, my two younger sisters and I wordlessly dropped whatever plans we'd made for the summer and stayed home. The Minnesota summer was peaceful, quiet. We didn't do much. Wandered around the house, drove into town for the mail, went to the grave. The world seemed to have stopped at the point of her death, poised eternally on a summer afternoon.

It was a few weeks after she died, or maybe a few days, that I noticed a death on television for the first time. It was in the middle of some cop show. A man ducked out of an alley. A cop took aim and shot. The man dropped. The cops came around, grunted at the body.

After a commercial, the program resumed back at the police station. I waited several seconds to hear more of this man. Several more seconds passed before it

Julie Talen is a reporter for Television Digest.

TV's deaths whipped past my eyes like a missed bus.

occurred to me: This was it. A man had died; there was nothing more to tell.

So. That was death. The same event that had stopped my sisters' and my lives had just whipped past my eyes like a missed bus.

Deaths occur often on television, so often they aren't meant to be noticed. For if we took at face value all the carnage we saw on television each night we'd go berserk. One night's worth amounts to more death than we'll confront in a lifetime. No, death on television is more a device than anything else, at least on the staple action shows—a kind of punctuation for the plot, like a swell in the sound track or a cut to a new scene. Audiences enter into an unconscious pact with the set not to register death as death, just as they leap with TV plots through commercials, and sustain a hundred other small fictions that

let the tube make its magic. Like mirrors in a Manhattan efficiency, death on television gives the illusion of depth to small places; it crams drama into the claustrophobic confines of the weekly series. One 10-second murder and presto! danger looms, stakes rise, characters turn vulnerable or menacing. Its credentials are impeccable. A crime isn't a crime, a villain isn't a villain, until somebody dies.

But—I blinked at the program grinding on—where was the rest of it? Some 30 action shows reran that summer, and every night someone on each of them died. But I never saw anyone plan a funeral—never saw anyone pick up the phone and start dialing the relatives. For all its deaths, television spares its audiences the mundane, literal details of one. No one brings lipstick to the undertaker. Or pauses on a corner, weeks later, thinking that's her, now, coming down the street. There was death, plenty of it, but no loss—nothing, at any rate, that I could recognize as my feelings.

No one important to the audience, for example, ever dies. These TV dead are nonentities, minor characters with an in-

David G. Klein

sect's life span, whose sole purpose in the script is to be killed off. Any baby-boom kid raised in front of the set can recognize one of these hapless creatures a mile off—the new secretary, the rookie cop, the corner junkie. We not only don't miss them when they go, we confidently expect them to. Television is filled with characters who live only to die, sacrifices to the plot.

The heroes, of course, can't die. Kojak won't bleed to death in the street. Quincy won't drown. The transient extras succumb while the heroes live on, impervious to the forces that strew their sets with corpses. Because they have to be back next week, they are immortal.

Death on television makes perfect sense. It fits into stories without a ripple. That sense of the inconceivable, abrupt gap in the world that opens with a sudden death is rarely visible. Everyone dies with the luxury of a reason. If the cause isn't known right away when some poor soul is discovered strangled in the bed sheets, then it's the hero's duty to ferret it out. He always does.

And he knows just what to do. Everyone recovers from the death during the commercial, and when the show returns we plunge on to television's single emotional reaction to death: revenge, monotonous revenge. Get the killer.

Television did not invent this form—the detective genre has had a long life in movies and books. And not every program is guilty of this clichéd treatment. *M*A*S*H*, *The Waltons*, *Archie Bunker's Place*, and most recently, *Hill Street Blues*, have dared to dispense with conventional treatments of death, in grim experiments with deaths that are important, harrowing, or genuinely pointless—and that leave survivors.

Death on television is precisely everything that death in reality is not. Life, it turns out, doesn't proceed blithely along; everything stops, relationships irrevocably alter, the world is different. After you finish planning the funeral and feeding the relatives, you just—wait. What a relief it would be to have some kind of logical response—to pick up a gun and do someone in. But who is to blame? On television, there's always someone to blame.

Paradoxically, the shows that seem to be about little but death are actually all about wishing it away or conquering it. Here is death defanged, death made safe and easy, death that doesn't hurt for more than a few seconds. Death keeps only enough of its sting for cops, detectives, lawyers, and doctors to celebrate their

victory over it.

On television, we are in control of the thing that, in fact, has ultimate control over us. The message proffers enormous security: No one important to you ever dies; powerful people out there will find out the cause of death and will stop it before it gets to anyone important, and finally, these powerful people are on your side.

To call this an immortality myth may

TV confers immortality: Old heroes never die; they go into syndication.

seem farfetched, until you consider how unvarying that configuration is—and how, night after night, we accept it so unthinkingly that it doesn't even seem askew until a real death comes along. The subliminal message of comfort is spun out season after season, in an elaborate charade that offers the grieving person nothing, but appears to offer everything. If television is the marketplace of fantasies, then one of the better-selling fantasies of all time—and one harder to indulge in our secular times—is the lure of life eternal, the triumph of life over death. Every culture has some explanation for the human fear of finality. Perhaps this has become ours.

And perhaps it explains why there are no mourners on television. Those who grieve have no place in the logical order of this mythical world. Their presence would rob the tube of its power—death can be allowed no random victories. Television, I decided that summer, is far from trivial. Nightly it does battle with the angel of death—and wins.

You can hardly blame the writers. Probably without being aware of it, audiences demand immortality on their screens. When the NBC soap opera *Days of Our Lives* televised an episode in which its favorite heroine was supposedly strangled, viewers actually picketed NBC's Burbank studios and demanded she be brought back to life. The studio

hastily produced the actress to reassure them that she was all right, and further assured them that the whole thing had been a trick, the character hadn't really died after all. When, several seasons ago, the writers of *M*A*S*H* wrote Col. Blake out of the series by having him die in a plane crash on his way back to the States, hundreds of *M*A*S*H* fans wrote in protest. This was not the reason they watched the medium, to have their favorite characters die. People die often enough as it is.

Even when real life plucks an actor from the set, television is loath to break its own code, and will hire other actors to fill the part, or rewrite the tale to make the actor's disappearance explicable some other way. When Jake Davis, who played the patriarch of CBS's *Dallas*, died at the end of one season, subsequent episodes were ridiculously ambiguous about his absence.

But these reactions are perhaps understandable in a medium that, by its very nature, confers a sort of immortality. When we know an actor is no longer living, TV takes on a supernatural power by keeping his image alive, and so mixes up the meaning of his death. The person has died, but we have him still—exactly as we always have. Life is impervious to death. Old series never die—they go into syndication. Bob Crane is found dead in a Nevada hotel room—what difference does it make? *Hogan's Heroes* is still on every afternoon at 4. The Beave never graduates. There is great comfort in things that never change.

I remember one thing my sisters and I did after Mom died. We watched her soap, *Another World*. She herself had once dubbed it "Another Bore," and one of the delights of vacations had been to curl up on the sofa with her and get caught up on six-month lapses in the plot during the commercials.

Another Bore. It proved the strangest, saddest comfort that summer. Outside, the crickets would hum, the day would sit, hot and still. Inside, the three of us would stop whatever we were doing at 1 and seat ourselves in front of the set. If TV's deaths robbed us of the reality of our pain, this balm, inadvertent, inchoate, could soothe us. The images flickered and spoke while everything else about my mother—her eyeglasses, her cigarettes, her magazines—waited, untouched and still. We watched like addicted housewives, and didn't stop until a year later, when our schedules finally got in the way. ■



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| | | 5:30 PM A LONG | | | |
| | THEATRE | 8:00 PM A VOY | | | |
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| | | 5:30 PM KIDNAP | | | |
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| | | 2:30 PM THE HAPP | | | |
| | | 5:30 PM I KILL, HE K | | | |
| | THEATRE | 8:00 PM I DON'T PL | | | |
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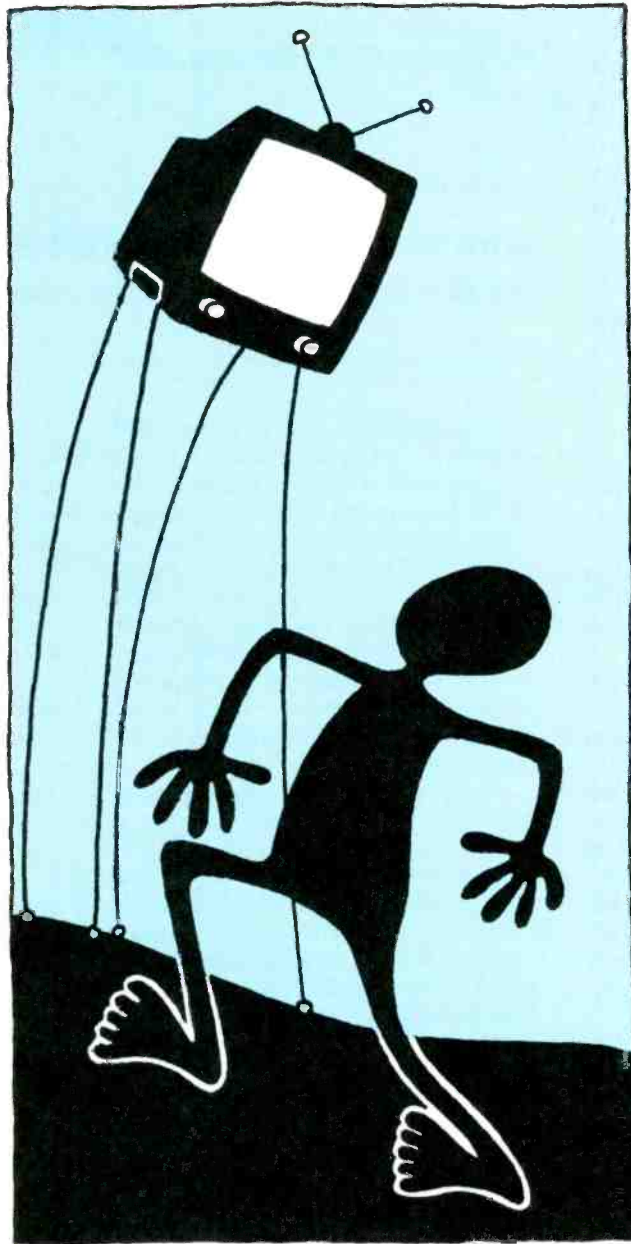
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At the Threshold of 1984

SPECIAL REPORT

The fearsome technology with which George Orwell's fictional tyrant, Big Brother, kept a nation enslaved has passed out of the realm of fantasy and into daily usage. Computers record and store our purchases, our visits to the doctor, our bank statements; interactive cable television watches us as we watch it. The approach of 1984 has thus focused deep anxieties on a new race of machines—and the uses that the state, and large corporations, may find for them.

In the Special Report that follows, Peter Elsworth, an Orwell scholar, argues that these fears are well-founded. The



new technology has no will of its own, but it can be shaped into a powerful weapon in the pursuit of corporate or political power.

Communications specialist Paul Mareth, on the other hand, argues that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* should not be read as prophecy, and that its author wished to warn, not of machines, but of men. Technology serves tyranny, but cannot cause it.

The question of whether we should seek to control the machines, or only the men, cannot be definitively resolved. But it must be explored if we are to guide our future rather than merely await it.

Illustrations by Charles Barsotti

IS "THE ORWELLIAN society" just a cliché? Ever since 1949, when *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published, Orwell's fateful date has been a landmark on the Western cultural horizon. In it has been embodied our fear of losing our individuality to the machine and to the few who control it. Now here we are, on the eve of 1984, and despite the increasing numbers of articles and books on the subject, Orwell's nightmare vision seems as far away as it ever has. But is it?

Recent developments in communications technology, in particular the combination of the computer and television, are presenting the same problems that lie at the heart of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Regardless of the public interest in safeguarding the individual's right to privacy, commercial development of these technologies may move ahead in the name of profits. Moreover, government access to detailed computer files on individuals may permit easy identification of dissidents and racial or religious minorities for the purposes of surveillance, harassment, or worse. The political problem is, simply, how can we trust governments not to misuse the new technology when so many of them, including at times our own, have been unwilling fully to institutionalize political opposition?

Part of *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* success can be attributed to the fortuitous choice of title. Orwell merely transposed the last two digits of 1948, the year he wrote the book. The result, whether intended or not, was to render his dystopian portrait a prophecy whose fruition was tantalizingly close.

But as Irving Howe has observed, Orwell's book, unlike traditional utopian literature, is not so much a description of an imaginary world as it is a description of the totalitarian frame of mind. Whereas the inhabitants of Aldous Huxley's dystopian *Brave New World*, published in 1932, are motivated by pleasure and programmed complacency, those of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are motivated by fear. The political events of the 20th century have given more credibility to Orwell's vision than to Huxley's.

The political structure of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is dominated by Big Brother and the Party, to whom absolute loyalty is demanded. To ensure political orthodoxy, everyone is under constant surveillance by the Thought Police, whose two-way "telescreens" are everywhere, including the stalls of the lavatories. The only refuge is in the countryside, but even there microphones are hidden.

In addition to its constant blare of propaganda, the Party falsifies all public docu-

The Menace of the Machine

by Peter C.T. Elsworth

With two-way cable and vast computer banks, we are putting in place the machinery for a despot.

ments to guarantee that the historical record fits in with its current line. It is even engaged in the systematic breaking down of the language to its simplest components. Any deviation from the Party line is labeled "Thoughtcrime," and its perpetrators are subject to arrest, torture, and brainwashing. The Party's aim is not so much to purge the society of dissidents as to make dissidence impossible to contemplate. Orthodoxy, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is unconsciousness, and power is not a means but an end.

Nineteen Eighty-Four can be read not as prophecy but as a powerful vision of Orwell's own world—a world still very much with us. Governmental use of propaganda and euphemism to disguise the truth has become so thoroughly a part of our lives that we scarcely notice it. We are all guilty of "doublethink," which Orwell defined as the ability to hold two contradictory opinions at the same time. We know, for example, that the United States was founded upon the principle that all men are created equal, just as we know that it was largely founded upon the genocide of the American Indians and the slavery of Africans.

It is true that we have reached the threshold of 1984 without establishing the kind of police state described by Orwell. Yet recent developments in communications technology have lent immediacy to

many of the apparently farfetched threats of *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* world. With the advent of interactive television, for example, Orwell's "telescreen" is no longer a figment of his imagination.

Computers are now used by banks, credit-card companies, doctors, department stores, employers, and insurance companies to collect, collate, and file an immeasurable wealth of personal information. The Internal Revenue Service's computers scan our tax forms; hospital computers record our entire medical and psychiatric histories. All this information is stored away in computer files, as is any record we may have with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, or the National Security Agency. Indeed, the wealth of computerized information available has led to the development of credit-rating companies whose sole job is to collate these data.

The joining of computer and television to create interactive TV offers great opportunities. Through it we will be able to shop, bank, borrow library books and tapes, make travel arrangements, contact each other, even vote. Linked to fire and police stations, interactive television can even monitor our homes against fire and theft by scanning them for heat and movement every six seconds.

All very well; yet in the interest of efficiency this diffuse information is likely to



be coordinated and centralized into vast data banks incorporating the minute details of our private lives. Everything we buy, how we arrange our payments, what we read, where we go, whom we know, how we vote—to say nothing of what we watch on television—will be recorded.

Who should control these files? Who should have access to them? And to what extent should they be cross-referenced?

John Wicklein, in *The Electronic Nightmare*, sees potential problems stemming from both commercial and state use of these new technologies. He argues that if commercial interests are afforded free rein to develop communications technology, an awesome power would effectively be handed over to about 10 faceless entities whose essential aim is to manipulate individuals as potential consumers.

Demographic data are the lifeblood of modern marketing, and the buying and selling of mailing lists is already big business. Since profit is the object of private corporations, writes Wicklein, they cannot reasonably be expected to safeguard personal privacy if such protections render their technology less competitive.

State control over the new technologies poses equally fearsome prospects. The potential for government abuse is magnified, of course, in dictatorships and one-party states—which is to say, most

of the world. Yet even America has a disturbing record of intolerance to critical thought. The anti-communist hysteria of the early 1950s, for example, led to an atmosphere that was essentially totalitarian. Hiding behind various federal loyalty programs, as well as Senator Joseph McCarthy and the infamous House Un-

tion, but many crucial issues have not been addressed.

Three elements of a solution keep cropping up in the debate over an Orwellian society. John Wicklein, for example, argues that ownership of the means of communication should be separate from control over content. He argues for the creation of a “backbone system,” independent of direct state control. This quasi-common-carrier entity would reduce the chances of a government using the media as a tool of repression.

Experts also agree that the individual should not be tagged with a single number, or “universal identifier.” Although it would be efficient to cross-reference all files on an individual, many argue that the dangers of abuse far outweigh the benefits.

Third, Wicklein argues for the kind of government ombudsman now used in Sweden. There, an independent Data Inspection Board gives citizens the right to see their files, to know who has access to them, to correct them if necessary, and to have corrections automatically sent to recipients of incorrect information.

The story is told of a French delegate, at the 1981 Communications Policy workshop at the Aspen Institute, expressing puzzlement when the conversation turned to the individual’s right to privacy.

“Privacy? What’s that?” she asked. Someone explained, and in a minute she understood:

“Ah! In France we call that ‘freedom.’”

What if McCarthy had had access to all the data on individuals that computers store today?

American Activities Committee, the FBI acted as a virtual secret police force, throttling free expression through economic, social, and political intimidation and harassment. And during the Nixon era, the executive branch of the government used the FBI, the CIA, and the IRS to burglarize, wiretap, and discredit its critics.

What if HUAC had had access to the wide range of information on individuals that is now available? What about Nixon and his enemies list? It seems clear that some form of government regulation is needed to prevent possible abuses. Both the Privacy Act of 1978 and the current cable bill, S. 66, provide some protection against the misuse of personal informa-

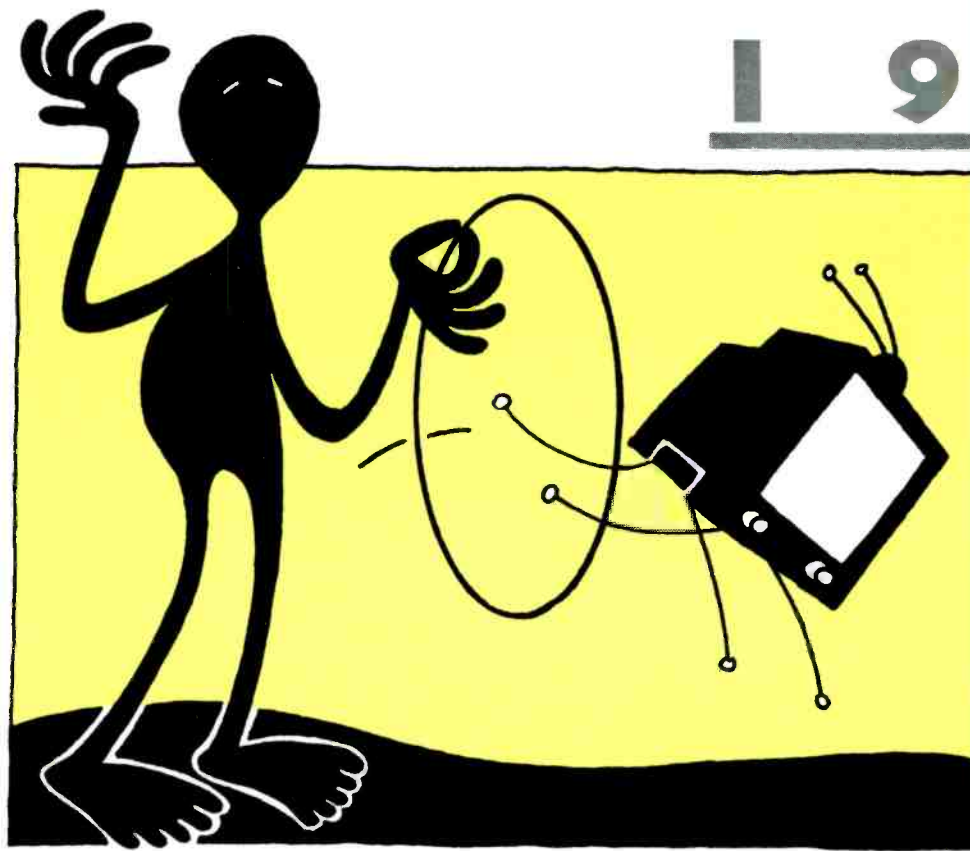
But Orwell’s greatest statement in defense of freedom goes one step beyond the right to be left alone: “If liberty means anything at all, it is the right to tell other people what they do not want to hear.” It is simply not enough to dismiss Orwell’s vision as an overly feverish nightmare. Information is power, and keeping power from evil, greedy, or stupid people is one of the enduring problems of political thought. Unless we can be sure that we have strict safeguards against government misuse of the new communications technologies, our doubts will lead at best to the climate of fear and distrust described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. At worst, our fears could quite easily be realized.

In the last analysis our only claim to victory is that if we win the war we shall tell less lies about it than our adversaries. The really frightening thing about totalitarianism is not that it commits "atrocities," but that it attacks the concept of objective truth: it claims to control the past as well as the future.

George Orwell
Column in the *Tribune*
January 1944

THERE IS A STORY about a brilliant German professor who gathered his family around him on a peaceful evening in the spring of 1929 and announced that the world was coming to an end. The cataclysm would begin within six months: The booming American economy would suddenly collapse, plunging the entire world into the worst depression in history. Democratic nations would totter. Totalitarian dictatorships would seize power all over the globe. The bloodiest regime of all would arise at home, in Germany. Butchery and evil in all their forms would be practiced on an unimaginable scale, culminating in a war that would kill more than 50 million people.

No one could dissuade the professor from his vision of the apocalypse to come. He resigned from his prestigious position, sold his lovely home, and moved to the most remote and tranquil corner of the globe that he could find—the tiny and idyllic Pacific island of Iwo Jima.



nature and essence of tyranny.

Like many people of my generation (I was born in 1945, the same year as the novel's hero, Winston Smith), I first read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the early '60s. Then, the future tense of the novel illuminated every sentence with both threat and warning. Today, the threats are very

in present reality.

Nineteen Eighty-Four's terror is not in the nature of a speculation about what might happen some 35 years hence, but rather in an acknowledgment of history. Every event in the novel was familiar to a generation that had come of age with Hitler and Stalin. The book has the force of a nightmare, and nightmares are based on memory. In short, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the opposite of science fiction.

I stress this point because it has become common to discuss Orwell's novel as a warning against the encroachment on liberty by an increasingly refined technology of surveillance, control, and terror. Thus, each advance in technology—particularly in computers, telecommunications, and television—is seen as yet another indication of how "right" Orwell was, how much our autonomy, freedom, and privacy have diminished in the face of all-invading technology. Technological progress is seen as leading to the decline of civilized values. Worse still, each advance will inevitably increase the power of the state, because technology, by its very nature, brings about centralized and authoritarian control.

Many attempts have been made to graft this viewpoint onto Orwell's novel, some more insistent than others. Here is one illustration: an article by John Lukacs called "It's Halfway to 1984," published in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1966.

We can't prevent totalitarianism simply by controlling technology.

The story is apocryphal, of course, and its smug historical hindsight is precisely what undermines its credibility. If we could see the future and alter it, it would no longer be the future.

George Orwell's position in the pantheon of social prophets has often been misperceived because of this paradox. The extraordinary force and tenacity with which his vision has taken hold of readers' imaginations has very little to do with any ability to predict the future accurately. After all, here we are right on the brink of his dreaded date, and it's perfectly clear that 1984 is not going to be anything at all like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The continuing power of Orwell's vision is not based on prediction or prophecy: It lies rather in his abiding insight into the

different from the ones that were perceived when the novel was first published, but the warnings about the loss of personal will and freedom are still clear and deeply affecting.

Nineteen Eighty-Four isn't "futuristic" at all. Indeed, its contemporary reality was immediately recognizable to Orwell's readers. No other novelist of the immediate post-war period captured the feel, the grit, the very smells of London's drabness as well as he did. The apprenticeship he served writing of life among the outcasts of Paris and London, of life as a front-line fighter in the Spanish Civil War and, above all, of life among unemployed coal miners in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, all ensured that "Oceania's" wretchedness would be firmly grounded

Technology Is Innocent

by Paul Mareth

Tyranny and freedom are the products not of things, but of people.

The author writes: "... the danger is not, as Orwell envisaged it, that entire generations of once-prosperous countries will no longer know such things as wine, oranges, lemons, and chocolate; it is, rather, that our traditional tastes and table habits may be washed away by a flood of frozen and synthetic foods of every possible kind, available to us every hour of the day."

Lukacs goes on to describe his own vision of 1984: a suburban shopping center. "It is a man-made moonscape. Here is the look of 1984 in the mid-'60s."

In short, the political basis of Orwell's novel, the biting attack on totalitarian ideology, the Swiftian satire, have all been replaced by a vaguely Romantic, almost Luddite, attack on technology itself. The result is as if Hobbes's *Leviathan*, that great predecessor of Orwell's work, had been judged on the basis of the 17th century's progress in navigation or warfare rather than for what it says about liberty and the social contract.

The terrible irony of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s success is that Orwell's great virtues of simple and precise prose, clear thinking, and faith in the common man have been altered beyond recognition. Indeed, the very adjective "Orwellian" has falsely come to stand for an implacable alliance between technology and tyranny, both advancing in equal measure. During his lifetime, Orwell never will-

ingly lent his name to such a notion.

Some of the confusion may have resulted from the following passage in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "... in the past, no government had the power to keep its citizens under constant surveillance. The invention of print, however, made it easier to manipulate public opinion, and the

pushed aside. But it is only as parody that the book makes sense—as Orwell himself repeatedly insisted. That is why it is absurd to add up every Abscam conviction, every two-way cable system, and every product bulletin on the development of a large-screen television, and imagine that the sum of all their parts equals "Big Brother Is Watching You."

Tyranny exists outside technology; they touch each other tangentially but not causally. Future tyrannies will inevitably embody some of the mechanics of "the future," but that does not mean we can protect ourselves from them by controlling or limiting the inventions on which "Ingsoc's" oppression is based. Oppression, to the extent that it comes, will exist independently of those inventions. We cannot claim the right to control communications technologies on that pretext.

In any event, memory holes and other paraphernalia of Oceania are already antiquated; devices far more oppressive wait only for the appropriate madman to give them life. That is why Orwell emphasized that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a political satire whose central theme is not control of the future, but of the past. As O'Brien, Orwell's Grand Inquisitor, ordered Winston Smith while torturing him:

"There is a Party slogan dealing with the control of the past. Repeat it if you please."

"Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past," repeated Winston obediently."

Orwell expounds on this theme at

Film and video tape can keep a despot from rewriting the past.

film and the radio carried the process further. With the development of television, and the technical advance which made it possible to receive and transmit simultaneously on the same instrument, private life came to an end."

It seems curious that, for so many, this passage should embody Orwell's "message." Not only is it historically untrue—the invention of print made possible the very existence of "public opinion"; prior to Gutenberg one can speak only of dogma and heresy—more importantly, it does not represent Orwell's thoughts at all, but rather those of "Emmanuel Goldstein," the dreaded enemy of Big Brother and an obvious parody of Trotsky.

Indeed, the importance of parody to Orwell's design has constantly been

greater length: "The mutability of the past is the central tenet of Ingsoc. Past events, it is argued, have no objective existence, but survive only in written records and in human memories. The past is whatever the records and memories agree upon. And since the Party is in full control of all records, and in equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it."

History is written by the victors, and the past has always been obscured by distortions and lies. No one has yet succeeded in lying on a scale envisioned by Big Brother, but that does not mean the complete burial of truth is impossible.

It appears today that the widespread

**George Orwell,
The New
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and Personal
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1984

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private possession of such visual historical materials as films and video tapes, which is becoming almost as commonplace as the private possession of books, would offer some degree of protection against a systematic rape of the past. However, this process, while encouraging, certainly offers no guarantee against that possibility.

In fact, there are no guarantees of any kind, for tyranny and freedom are not products of things, but of people. They are a function of human behavior, not a byproduct of human artifacts.

Orwell himself emphasized this fact throughout his career, and without it *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ceases to exist as a great humanist work. Without this central axiom, the novel would be reduced to the level of a comic book, a mere repository for the gadgets and debris of a fictional society that has been only too ingenious in the manufacture of its artifacts of torture.

In 1940, eight years before writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell published a wonderful essay on Dickens, which illuminates the great bond between the two and which ultimately provides as clear a portrait of Orwell as of his subject:

"He has no constructive suggestions, not even a clear grasp, of the nature of the society he is attacking, only an emotional perception that something is wrong. All he can finally say is, 'Behave decently,' which, as I suggested earlier, is not necessarily so shallow as it sounds. Most revolutionaries are potential Tories, because they imagine that everything can be put right by altering the *shape* of society; once that change is effected, as it sometimes is, they see no need for any other. Dickens has not this kind of mental coarseness. The vagueness of his discontent is the mark of its permanence. . . . I see a face which is not quite the face of Dickens's photographs, though it resembles it. It is the face of a man about 40, with a small beard and a high colour. He is laughing, with a touch of anger in his laughter, but no triumph, no malignity. It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is *generously angry*—in other words, of a 19th century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls."

Hatred of the future was one "smelly little orthodoxy" that Orwell never shared; to attempt to restrain and control it—or to retreat—would have struck him as preposterous. We have no cause for sanguineness, for none of us knows what awaits us in 1984 and beyond. All we know is that our fate will be our own, and not of Orwell's creation. ■

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