TELEVISION QUARTERLY

$5.00
Volume XXIII
Number III
1988

THE JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF TELEVISION ARTS AND SCIENCES

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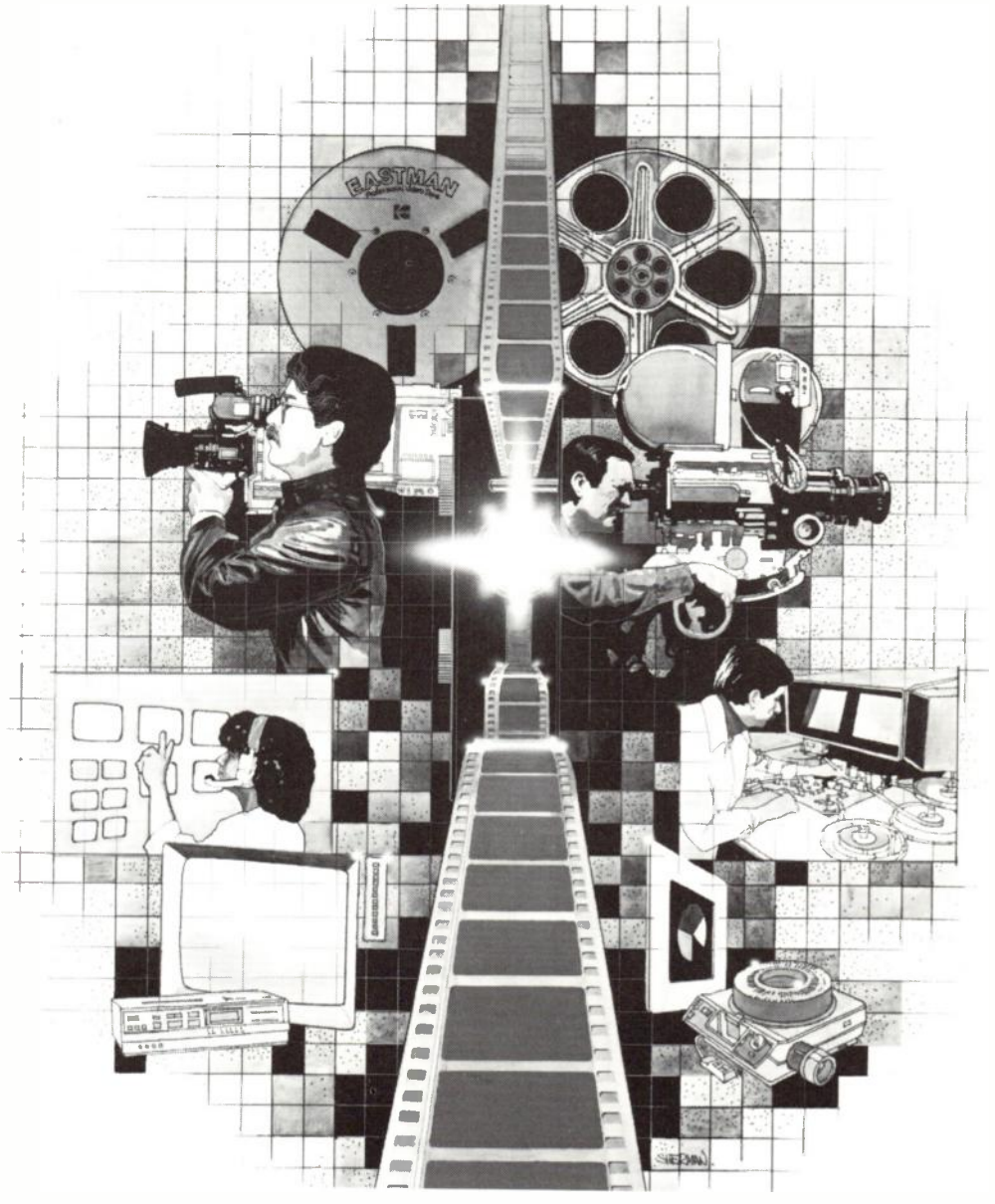

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ARTS AND SCIENCES

TELEVISION QUARTERLY

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Television Quarterly is published quarterly by the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 111 West 57th Street, New York, New York, 10019 (212) 586-8424. Members of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences receive TELEVISION QUARTERLY as part of membership services. Inquiry regarding membership should be directed to the office of The National Academy of Televison Arts and Sciences. BUSINESS ADVERTISING OFFICES: Television Quarterly, 111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019. EDITORIAL OFFICE: Televison Quarterly, same address. The subscription rates for non-members, libraries and others is $18.00 a year and $5.00 a copy in the United States; $20.00 a year and $6.00 a copy in all other countries. Special Student Subscription $14.00. Subscription orders should be sent to TELEVISION QUARTERLY, The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 111 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019.

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THE SHRINKING TV FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT— OR WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE SYSTEM

A critique of American television's coverage of international news by an award-winning broadcast journalist who has covered the overseas scene for more than forty years. Moscow, Rome and Paris were only a few of his beats.

BY BERNARD S. REDMONT

Is the television foreign correspondent an endangered species? This once glamorous profession, regarded as the elite of broadcast journalism, is falling on hard times.

Network foreign bureaus suffer Saturday night massacres. Local stations parachute untrained stars into trouble spots. Burn-out afflicts veterans. A once worthy mission is being devalued, along with the shrinking dollar. "Infotainment" is on the rise abroad, as at home.

It's a far cry from the Golden Age of Edward R. Murrow.

Charles Collingwood, one of the original "greats" of CBS, saw it all coming. He remarked sadly a few years ago that a foreign correspondent's job was no longer what it used to be. The correspondent—as he saw it—was once part reporter, part ambassador, confidant of the great and custodian of inside stories of important events.

Collingwood noted that in other days, a foreign correspondent's beat was the capital to which he or she was assigned. The correspondent was expected to know the language, history, politics and peculiarities of the country, was expected to be on friendly terms with prominent sources—politicians, academics, writers, business people and diplomats.

Correspondents were usually trusted to choose their own stories. The reports often had depth, and they were aired.

Nowadays, it seldom works out that way. Except in a few places like Moscow, a TV foreign correspondent is a peripatetic figure, crisis-oriented, like a fireman, likely to be sent anywhere, at any time, by producers back home, many of whom had never even taken a tourist trip abroad.

ABC's Jack Lawrence calls the business today that of a "jet-age ambulance chaser."

Correspondents use their home bases abroad often as just a place to hang their hats. Their main job is to be ready, at a moment's notice, to cover the latest crisis, coup d'état or earthquake, usually in some unfamiliar place, with an unfamiliar cast of characters. And then, to make some sense of it, despite fatigue, discomfort and often danger.

Typically, Tom Fenton, CBS European correspondent in London, spends at least 40 percent of his time on the road. Bonnie Anderson, formerly with NBC, spent as much as 90 percent of her time away.

The correspondent is now mostly a

generalist, not a specialist. No longer his or her own master.

In the times of Murrow, the correspondent determined how the news should be covered. Gradually, power and direction has been whittled away in favor of the producer, who now runs "the show."

Producers come in all shapes and calibers—some activists, some idlers, and many in between.

"Producer" was a term infelicitously borrowed by television from Hollywood and show business. So contemptuous of the title are many European TV news organizations that they refuse to use it, preferring the more professionally journalistic concept of "editor."

Good producers, in the field and at home, come up from the journalistic ranks, and are in fact genuine journalists like "Jane Craig," played by Holly Hunter in the film *Broadcast News*. Others are show-biz oriented. Many have had no dues-paying training in the news, and still less any background in foreign affairs.

CBS—a commercial network sometimes known whimsically among its staff as "the Tiffany of Broadcasting"—once earned the distinction of having appointed a bright young man as foreign editor, in charge of a professional staff of correspondents around the world, who had never before set foot outside the continental limits of the United States. He is now a producer for another network.

Correspondents used to be appointed as chiefs of bureaus abroad. As the power shifted, networks decided to appoint producers as bureau chiefs. Exceptions are rare.

Producers come in all shapes and calibers—some activist, some idlers, and many in between. A good field producer immeasurably helps the correspondent with planning, logistics, contact interviews, feeds and picture angles. Incompetent ones try to second-guess the correspondent, or even write the story for him or her, often resulting in distortions and sometimes disasters.

I knew a producer—formerly a cameraman—who spent years luxuriating in a European capital as bureau chief without producing a single story. Another producer I knew abroad was superlative when sober, but spent most of his time unsuccessfully fighting an alcohol problem.

Good correspondents often can serve as their own producers, and do, especially in short-handed bureaus like Moscow. Good camera persons, like some I knew in Paris and Rome, were so good that they were often better than the field producers.

So, what if, despite everything, you'd like to be a TV foreign correspondent? If a young William L. Shirer or Eric Severeid should apply for a job as foreign correspondent at CBA today—or at any other network, for that matter—they'd probably be turned down. Even in his day, Murrow had to fight New York brass persistently to hire both of them. The execs back home didn't like the sound of their voices. Severeid, who proved to be one of the great correspondents of all time, like Shirer, was deemed by the honchos to sound "awful"; Shirer was called "not broadcast quality."

Murrow rightly insisted he was hiring reporters, not announcers, and that content and credibility were more important than vocal sheen.

Murrow was once asked why he hired men like Dan Schorr, Howard K. Smith, or David Schoenbrun, none of whom were "pretty boys" with golden-toned voices. His reply was, "I can't teach a pretty face or a pear-shaped tone to think, but I can teach a brain to broadcast."

Smith and Collingwood were Rhodes scholars. Other "Murrow boys" were learned men, well-educated, in languages, history and culture. Today's foreign correspondents, many of whom are talented, hard-working and courageous, mostly are faceless and seldom approach the stature and class of the titans of other days.

Some foreign correspondents are almost globally illiterate. One European-based network star was once covering a story about Prince Norodom Sihanouk and confused the Prince's country, Cambodia, with Laos.

Reporters are often sent by producers into trouble spots for which they are totally unprepared. ABC's correspondent Bill Stewart, a fine reporter, was assigned to civil-war-torn Nicaragua in 1979 with no Spanish-language capability and no background on the area. He hired a young Nicaraguan widely suspected of being a Sandinista. His driver, a Nicaraguan, and his cameraman, warned him not to go through an obviously dangerous area, but he did, and he was killed. All three networks continually send unprepared correspondents into similar maelstroms. The system is unfair to the correspondents and to TV viewers.

ABC's John Quinones covered joint U.S.-Honduran military exercises in 1983 and described a flyover "by four Israeli-made Super-Mystere jet fighter planes." The trouble was that Super-Mystere jet fighters are made by France, not Israel.

Anyone who thinks the film *Broadcast News* is fanciful need only be reminded that a young New York producer once actually turned down the idea of using veteran correspondent Charles Collingwood for an assignment by saying, "The old (obscenity deleted) Who wants him? All I want are young men on the tube, and I will tell them what to say."

The same technological advances that have drawn the world together—fast air travel and sophisticated communication—have also fostered superficial coverage by the TV correspondent. "Parachute journalism" has become routine. The emphasis is on visual impact and what's now known in the business as "bang-bang."

International news is almost always complex, so the result is often oversimplification, if not total lack of comprehension.

Producers, except on public television, have a disdain for what they call "talking heads", but as someone once said, we could all profit from more talking heads, and fewer talking hairdos.

TV reporting often seems to be designed to amuse and divert, as much as to inform. It responds inadequately when suddenly called upon to explain something as complex and menacing as a world economic problem, or hostilities in the Middle East.

Free-spending waste and bloated budgets are legendary among the networks, so it's not surprising that the top brass wields an ax and spills innocent blood.
It is the top heavy executives and producers that are more often responsible for the waste, not the correspondents.

My distinguished former colleague, Charles Kuralt, was right on, when he publicly stated that at the networks, there's an unseemly emphasis upon image and flash and the tricks of electronics, as substitutes for the hard facts, arrived at by hard work.

Back in the 1950s, Murrow observed that "some day we'll be able to talk to our audience from any place in the world, almost any time we want. When that day comes, what are we going to say?"

Murrow, of course, was prophetic. We've reached that point. And we still haven't figured out the answer to his question.

Free-spending waste and bloated budgets are legendary among the networks, so it's not surprising that the top brass periodically wields an ax and spills innocent blood. As any correspondent with a store of memories will recount, it is the top-heavy executives and the producers that are more often responsible for the waste, not the correspondents.

One of the classic examples of useless waste was the Frankfurt hostage stakeout of a few years ago. Against all the best advice of knowledgeable correspondents, the executives and producers, in a fit of misguided intuition abetted perhaps by a copy-cat syndrome, decided that American hostages held in Teheran would be freed in Frankfurt, without advance notice. Ergo: They decided to pour in crews of correspondents, producers, camera teams, "gofers" and assorted other assistants, and had them sit in Frankfurt for interminable weeks, ready for action, lights and camera.

Never mind the absurdity of the idea that American hostages would turn up in Frankfurt with no advance notice, or that there were many other sites that might similarly be covered. The die was cast. Once one network rushed to Frankfurt, others followed. Dozens, then scores, of network people made Frankfurt their home away from home, immobilized and idling their time away for months in luxury hotels, playing poker and eating well on lavish accounts, *au frais de la princesse*, as the French would say.

In the end, the hostages were flown to Algiers first, and everybody had advance notice. The accountants probably would not tell you, but I would be willing to wager that hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of dollars went down the drain needlessly because of the Frankfurt stakeout.

When the time came to economize and cut the budget, again the main targets were valuable veteran correspondents, and they were out on the streets.

Unused to austerity, networks are now going to the other extreme, slashing costs on coverage, with predictable results. In April, 1987, CBS decided it would not staff Pope John Paul II's South American trip, and instead would use freelancers and tape from Italy's RAI network. This worked fine until street demonstrations broke out during the Pope's visit to Chile; CBS hit the panic button and flew in correspondent Bert Quint, a crew, editors and producers, and finally patched together some good stories.

Fewer good human interest feature stories are being done by bureaus abroad—the ones that once filled the "bank" in New York—and more repeats are being noticed. *CBS Evening News* did a feature on the staging of *Aida* in Luxor, Egypt, and a couple of days later, it turned up in a longer version on *Sunday Morning*.

While I was in Moscow for CBS (1976–79), the network aired one or more pieces a week from me of a "life style," or human interest type for an in-depth feature. You rarely see this kind of material on the *Evening News* any more. To its great credit, CBS put together two hours of such pieces in the summer of 1987, wrapped up in a remarkable special called, *The Soviet Union: Seven Days in May*. It was a brilliant and fascinating document, anchored by Dan Rather in Moscow, with most of the CBS stars doing individual segments. But why wasn't it done by the resident Moscow correspondent on a regular basis, and spread over the year?

In the rush to get black ink on the bottom line, the networks (except for CNN) have been cutting budgets for their foreign operations. CBS and ABC have closed several of their foreign news bureaus entirely, and have whit-

tled down others.

Executives don't really like foreign news anyhow, among other reasons because it's difficult as well as expensive to cover. It costs about a quarter of a million dollars to maintain a TV correspondent abroad—when you consider salary, travel, offices, transmission costs including satellites and other expenses.

One of the pioneer CBS correspondents in Moscow, Hughes Rudd, was once asked, in the days when reporters had to cope with censorship and more hardship and harassment than they do now, "What was the most difficult thing about working in Moscow?" His unexpected answer: "The home office in New York."

In TV nowadays, you're dependent on people back home, who often aren't much interested in what *you* want to do, but in what they want you to do.

Experience and wisdom, alas, are prized less than good looks and the ability to move quickly. Producers in New York often ignore available assets like correspondents who know the language and the area, as they did in one major breaking story in Spain, and sent in a younger favorite who looked better on camera.

Everybody has a favorite story about producers back home. Mort Rosenblum of AP reminds us of this one: in Buenos Aires years ago, reporters heard that the body of Eva Peron was about to be brought back to Argentina, 23 years after she died of cancer, and they scrambled to get ready. As the symbol of revolution and the subject of the rock musical, *Evita*, she was perhaps the most famous woman in Latin American history. Even in death, she was almost as important a political figure as her husband, President Juan Peron. When military officers deposed Peron, they spirited Evita's carefully preserved remains to a secret grave in Italy, so Peronists couldn't rally around their martyr.

But Peron had returned to power, after 18 years, and the beautiful waxlike figure of Evita was to be flown home. A television network reporter in Buenos Aires telephoned her producer in New York and reported, "They're bringing back Eva Peron." The producer responded, "See if you can get an interview with her—in English."

In the early 80's one network correspondent in Paris telexed New York at 4 p.m. Paris time that four Communists were being appointed to the French cabinet for the first time and he proposed a story. The first query got no reply. The second, by phone to the foreign desk, elicited the retort that they were going out to dinner, "better let's wait and see." The correspondent then advised that Communist boss Georges Marchais was already coming out of the Elysee palace with an announcement that four Communists were joining the government. New York said, "If we need you, we'll get back to you. Go out to dinner and enjoy yourself, The *Evening News* will pass this time."

At 10:15 p.m. Paris time, a panicky New York phoned the correspondent at dinner at a Paris restaurant, saying "The unexpected has happened—Reds are in the cabinet." The correspondent said, "Waddya mean, the unexpected? We told you about it hours ago and you didn't want it." New York said, "We gotta do a crash piece now. We need a story with pictures. Bird ordered for 11:30 p.m."

Camera man and sound man were rounded up, and a story of sorts was pasted together, barely in time for deadline.

Another correspondent for the same network offered a profile on Socialist candidate Francois Mitterand a week before the presidential elections in 1981, explaining that he might be the winner. New York said, "Don't bother. He doesn't have a chance of winning." When Mitterand, in fact, won, New York scrambled and screamed for a profile on a crash basis.

In 1978, a network know-it-all in New York turned down a story from its correspondent in Beirut because it had not been reported by the news agencies. A day later, when the wire services sent the story, the New York desk screamed for the correspondent to send his story in a hurry. He quit.

The sad reality is that news decisions today often are not made by news people on the spot, and in a position to know best.

When I was in Moscow, hare-brained editors and producers in New York for all networks would frequently awaken their correspondents at 2 or 3 a.m. to ask for Kremlin reaction to some presidential speech or action. None seemed to be aware they were eight or nine time zones away, and that even in the best of times, the Kremlin did not react in the middle of the night for the convenience of the American networks.

When Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev scheduled a meeting with President Jimmy Carter in Vienna, an eager executive breathlessly ordered the Moscow correspondent, "Get on Brezhnev's personal plane from Moscow to Vienna—with our crew." I suspect that this kind of idiocy still goes on today, perhaps more often in the era of *glasnost*.

The sad reality is that news decisions today often are not made by news people on the spot and in a position to judge best, but as David Schoenbrun put it, "by editors and executives in network ivory towers. There has been no decline in the talent of newscasters. But power has passed from their hands into the grasp of producers, management and lawyers. These, in turn, are no longer fundamentally committed to news."

George Herman, a long-time CBS newsman, recently noted that "there is a growing star system of reporters. A handful of favorites is allowed on the *CBS Evening News*. Some of them hardly ever leave the bureau. Stories are covered by less favored correspondents who turn their notes over to the stars, who then write up stories they had not covered. The stars may not have been there, but they have the face and the voice and the manner that's wanted."

A report made for NBC recently corroborated the trend. Of the correspondents on the *NBC Nightly News*, the ten who appeared most frequently were on the air 35 percent of the time, while the ten who appeared least often were on the air less than 3 percent of the time. About 70 percent of the *Nightly News* was reported by one-third of the correspondents.

Joanmarie Kalter in *TV Guide* reports a syndrome called "Foreign Correspondent Burnout." It seems that they're working harder, learning less about the nations they're covering, and enjoying it less.

The revolution in news technology has changed rules and habits. Once stories were shot on film, shipped by plane to New York, then edited and broadcast, perhaps the next day. Now they're shot on videotape with miniaturized electronic cameras, edited in the field, using portable editing packs, and fed in finished form, or nearly so, by satellite. Result: Instant news.

The correspondents have lost control, not only to the technology, but to the field producers and producer-editors at home.

But correspondents have to spend more time in "the frantic technical details of delivering the news" than in the journalistic pursuit of gathering the news," as *TV Guide* put it.

NBC's Miami bureau chief Don Browne, who oversees Caribbean, Central and South American cover-

age, says that, "In a competitive world, where you have the ability to transmit news instantly, most people are opting to get on the air before they really know what they are talking about."

The corresondents have lost control, not only to the technology, but to the field producers and producer-editors at home, and sometimes to hostile foreign governments on whom they depend for satellite facilities.

A foreign news team travels with a dozen cases or more, including time base correctors, vector scopes, batteries, lights, all often amounting to half a ton of baggage. Getting all this to airports and through customs is a challenge no less formidable than getting the news.

The correspondent, camera and sound persons often travel with a field producer and a tape editor. They don't get much time for deep reporting and are fed wire service copy to rewrite. Generally they even eat together, instead of seeing sources. Charles Glass, formerly of ABC, said that this not only "insulates you from the environment you're writing about" but "you hardly ever meet someone from the country you are covering."

During the Vietnam war, a CBS correspondent once changed countries seven times in three days—going back and forth among four cities—and he did a story at each stop. Maybe this is why we TV reporters are referred to as "talent."

Of course, it's an advantage that correspondents can see their own stories before air time, and work up to and even into the program, if necessary. But up at dawn to work on a story locally, the correspondent may toil 18 hours, shooting, cutting, feeding. After doing the evening news spot, the correspondent may have to file pieces for the early-morning news, late-night news, syndicated news for affiliate local stations, and then also service the hourly radio needs. Time zones add complications.

Add to this, problems of equipment breakdowns and transportation, plus visa problems, censorship, and sometimes expulsions. You can also be slugged, arrested, wounded or killed.

One of the little known problems of a correspondent involves the process known as "script approval," in which correspondents must phone or telex their pieces into New York before assembling or airing. Arguments about phrases, or even a story's emphasis or structure are frequent. Many correspondents resent the attempts of producers not on the spot to "second guess" and often distort the story as they see and report it.

Result: Physical and emotional stress has increased, family and social life suffers and burnout thrives. It's no longer the kind of civilized life it used to be—even on salaries of $80,000 a year or more plus expenses, most of it often U.S. tax-free for correspondents stationed abroad.

Looking at the future, with declining network ratings (audience share for the Big Three newscasts dropped in the past seven years from 76 percent to 63 percent according to Nielsen) and a fixation by management on profits above all, one wonders whether networks will continue to be able, or willing, to send correspondents and crews all over the world. Or will they be content to buy footage from free-lancers or foreign networks. Local stations someday may use their own anchors to voice over foreign news, electronically airborne as a result of technological changes.

Don Hewitt, the creator of *60 Minutes*, recently proposed that a television news service be formed to provide overseas coverage for the three commercial networks. His theory is that such a service would help "avoid those awful bloodlettings" in the network news division by reducing costs, and would put TV news executives "out of the money business and back into the news business."

Portable satellite transmission technology now permits on-site live reporting from most of the world, but it's expensive.

There's a growing international exchange of news video, a lot of it from uncontrollable and sometimes unidentifiable sources. TV networks and stations can acquire the coverage at much lower cost without being on the spot. Material fed to stations or networks without the critical eye of an experienced correspondent can be bogus.

The *CBS Evening News* recently used a bit of footage furnished by a freelance which originated with an Afghan *mujahadeen* reporter financed by the United States Information Agency, thus inadvertently violating a federal law barring U.S. government-funded material from domestic use.

When TV news correspondents get together at seminars, they deplore not only the system that produces superficial coverage but also their failure to cover non-traditional stories, especially in the Third World, which constitutes a majority of the globe. Countries like Uruguay or Burma may never even be mentioned on TV. While it's true that many Third World countries are closed societies and shut their borders to news people, others are accessible. Stories like overpopulation, resource exhaustion and illegal immigration are undercovered or badly covered. And for the most part, the producers and executives back home don't much care, or if they do, they decide the audience won't care.

TV reporters, one must re-emphasize, are often well-trained, serious, courageous, and committed to their craft. And television news does a powerful, effective and incisive job, particularly when it gets information to its audience as it's happening.

But we Americans getting "the news we deserve" from abroad? Global events affect our lives more dramatically than ever. We need more international coverage, not less. And we need to choose more correspondents who are equipped with languages and knowledge of the history and culture of the areas they are assigned to cover.

Editors and executives need to know that viewers are interested in more than 15-second sound bites, computer graphics and what Edwin Diamond calls "disco news." Don't underestimate the intelligence and curiosity of the American people. There's a thoughtful and knowledgeable public out there.

For better or worse, the role of the foreign correspondent is likely to continue changing as a result of technological developments and the increasingly easy availability of syndicated TV services. Local stations now have greater possibilities of airing international news in their local newscasts prior to the network news. If they adhere to a soft or sensational approach then we will simply get more of the same, merely with a foreign dateline this time. But quantity can mean better quality, too, if management acts responsibly. The networks, as they look at eroding ratings, can encourage their correspondents abroad to work more analytically and do more in-depth reports for the Evening News. Will they? ■

Bernard S. Redmont is an award-winning former correspondent for CBS News in Moscow and Paris, and in Europe for Group W/Westinghouse Broadcasting Company. After reportorial firebrigade duty in 55 countries, he is Dean Emeritus and Professor of Journalism at the College of Communication of Boston University. He has written analyses of French, Soviet, Chinese, Italian and Hungarian TV for *Television Quarterly*.

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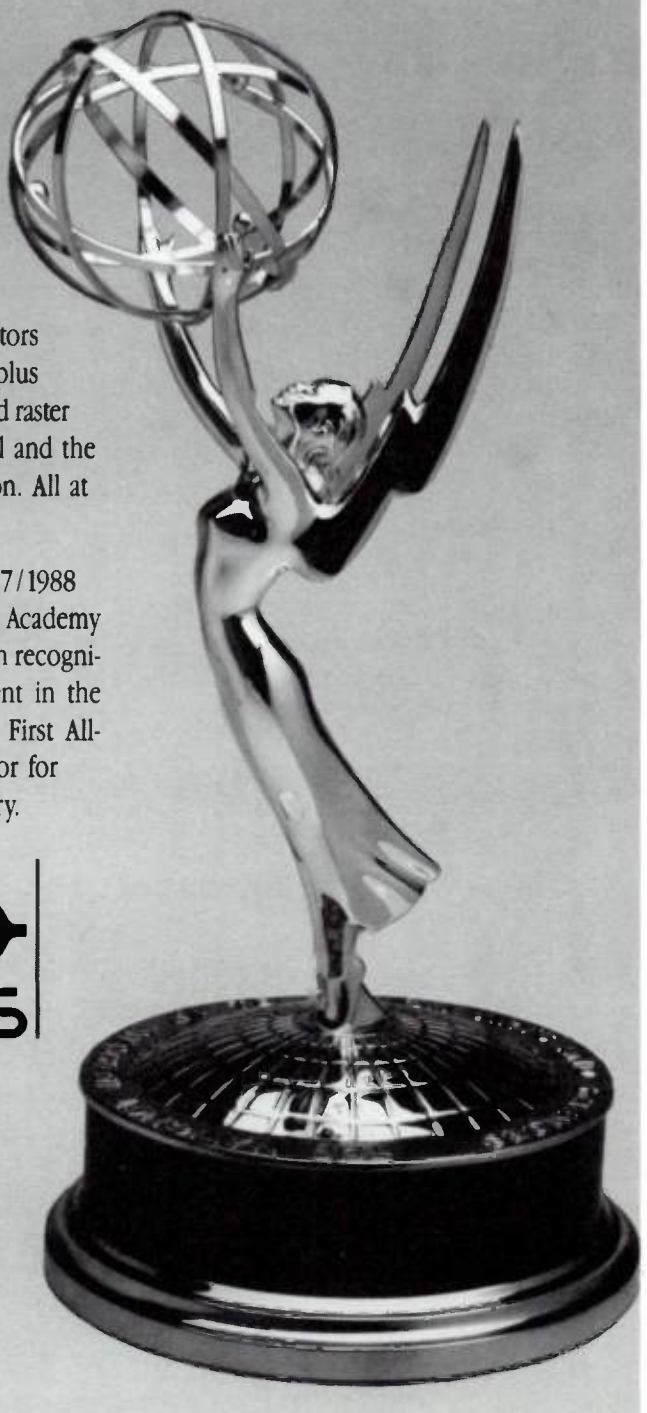

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GLOBAL TV: THE MYTH OF "WALL-TO-WALL *DALLAS*"

BY MICHAEL TRACEY

- There is a widespread belief that US television has traditionally been ubiquitous and popular: not true.

- There is a conviction that the new distribution technologies will readily pour their wares over the populations of the world: not true.

- There is a belief that the production of tv product will become concentrated in a small number of centers, particularly in the United States: not true.

- There is an assumption that national governments and broadcasters will wimpishly collapse before the might of the transnational cultural industries: not true.

- There are assumptions that international tv product is the cultural avenue to the global village, whatever that is: not true.

The reality is that American television was never as popular or even widespread as was assumed; that national populations basically prefer national programming; that the new distribution technologies are in for a very rough ride; that national governments and broadcasters are and will continue to fight back.

In fact the reality of the future of television is that it will not be a seamless robe woven in Hollywood, but a patchwork quilt, with some patches larger than others, marked by variety and size, and dyed in many colors.

One of the central images of modern political analysis—whether engaged

in by allegedly detached social scientists, politicians or ideologues—is that of the export of culture. The idea is that the structures of relationships which have evolved in the modern world involve not just those of economic links, military liaisons, politically inspired coups d'etats and economic domination, but also linkages of culture.

The proposition is that through the export of cultural products—principally, but not only, in the form of TV programs—from a relatively small number of countries to a much larger number of recipients, here is the wholescale transfer of meaning, the generation and shaping of political consciousness with the effect, partially intended, of refashioning the world in the intellectual and political image and likeness of the exporter. This theme has been articulated by a number of key writers and the villain of the piece is usually held to be the United States.

The fact of the matter is that almost all of those writings are conceptually inadequate and methodogically untested. In fact much of the discussion about the role of television in the construction of meaning within modern society rests on a sense of there being two underdeveloped worlds: one defined by geography, (Asia and Africa, Latin America and South America); and the other culturally and intellectually underdeveloped world of the captive populations of the developed societies. Astride these myriad minds are the colossi of the superstates and their ideological arms, the cultural industries. What we have portrayed here is a vision of dominance and cultural imposition, which contains much that has to be explored and worried over, but also much that provides the husk within which one finds the seeds of paranoia.

In the most recent past, we have had a reworking of this theme as new technologies of distribution seemed to translate such dominance into certain and continuing inevitability. In Britain, indeed throughout Europe, we have lived for some time with the widespread belief that two things were about to happen: the sheer "space" for television was "about to expand enormously," and that space would be filled with "wall-to-wall *Dallas*."

It is a thesis which has been spoken of in countless conferences, seminars, books and pamphlets, mouthed so often and so loudly that it has been transformed from postulate to certain truth. It is a thesis which has shaped not just public debate, but the decisions of governments, corporate planners, media moguls and would-be media moguls.

And when the eyes of the interested observer have been raised to take in not the terrain of the so-called first world, but the rest of the two-thirds world, the scenario has seemed to be even more powerful: the swamping of indigenous cultures by a tidal wave of international television spewing forth from the mouth of the volcano which is Hollywood, the only applause at this spectacle being the loud clapping of the new media moguls, producers and distributors of the images and sounds of the global village.

Having looked at the available evidence to support or contest this thesis, I am led to conclude that there can be few moments in the history of man's quest for knowledge and truth, power and wealth when so much time and effort have been put into getting something so utterly wrong.

Hidden within the "inevitable dominance" thesis are, I suspect, two deeply questionable assumptions. The first is of the power of television, the view that it can override all other institutions that go to make up human society, that it can imprint itself like a colossal seal on the soft wax of the global mind. This assumption is of course fed by the sheer ubiquity and visibility of television, while the other threads of influence within people's

lives remain unalterably invisible.

The second assumption is of the ubiquity and popularity of television which originates from within the United States. The significance of that phrase "wall-to-wall *Dallas*" lies precisely in the fact that it captures the vision of hell which is the walking nightmare of many a political and cultural global elite. The truth of both assumptions, however, is that at best they lack conceptual and empirical depth, at worst utterly misconceive the place of television within social influences and the simple facts of what the populations of the world enjoy on television.

It is from within that framework of acute skepticism about the worth of the contemporary discussion of television of any kind, that this article has been written. I was assigned specifically to look at some of the non-economic dimensions to the question of whether it is "inevitable" that the "rich countries" will dominate the global production and distribution of televisual product. I am not quite sure how "rich" is rich in this context, though I take it to mean to a considerable extent the suggestion that a country, not a million miles from these United States, is more likely to dominate world television markets than, say, Burkina Faso, or even that other Third World country-in-the-making, the United Kingdom.

There is nothing inevitable, as distinct from likely or theoretically possible, in such domination. It is anyhow wrong to see "rich countries" in tv terms as coterminous with the United States and to a lesser extent the Anglo-European societies, if for no other reason than the fact of ample evidence of diverse flows of product, with quite complex hemispheric and regional influences, such as Brazil in South and Latin America, Egypt in the Middle East, and between the countries of the Common Market and also within that other 'bloc' in the East.

This plural structure of production and distribution is in its infancy, and will grow as the century proceeds and television markets evolve. I also believe that this global televisual latticework will be nurtured by the sheer force of local and national cultural taste. I am not for one minute suggesting that there will not be much US product whizzing round the globe in future decades. There has historically been an overemphasis on the ubiquity and presence of that material and a gross overestimation of its strategic strength.

SATELLITE TV

The available objective evidence of the considerable and continuing losses incurred by cable and satellite services throughout Europe, point up to the difficulties of developing new television markets. Nevertheless, as Toby Syfret, head of new media for J. Walter Thompson, observed: "The feeling among advertisers is that one way or another satellite television is going to suceed commercially in Europe. The question is, how?" The optimism is born of occasional flashes of success, even if at the moment they are as rare as the flowering of cacti in the desert.

Syfret points out that while program budgets for satellite-delivered programs are small compared to those of the large terrestrial systems, "Audience-research data shows that they compete very successfully against national broadcasters in homes where they can be received. For instance program channels Sat 1 and RTL Plus are on a par with ZDF (in Germany); Sky Channel does particularly well in Scandanavia and is the third most viewed television in the Netherlands. The Children's Channel appears to do better than Breakfast TV (BBC) and TV AM (ITV), British equivalents to the *Today Show* and *Good Morning America*, combined amongst all individuals in the UK, never mind its target audience of children. In short, whatever problems there may be with satellite

television in Europe, viewer demand and acceptibility of foreign broadcasts do not count amongst them."

The vital caveat is that these are figures drawn only from cabled homes, which remain in a tiny minority, and therefore provide a very uncertain basis on which to begin to make judgement. For example, in Germany, which Syfret cites, the average daily viewing in April this year was 134 minutes. This was divided: ARD the first TV channel 57 minutes; ZDF the second TV channel 54 minutes; the regional network 14 minutes; all other channels including SAT 1 and RTL Plus, 9 minutes.

There is no question that if the programming packages put together to be delivered by new media systems—cable, communication satellites, DBS—could restructure the TV audience in key markets such as Europe, then objectively in terms of the amount of potential advertising revenue there is vast wealth to be tapped. Advertising on television within Europe is defined by three main zones:

1. Those countries in Northern Europe where traditionally there has been no national tv advertising—Norway, Sweden, Denmark;

2. Those countries where there has been some advertising, but where it has been heavily circumscribed, such as Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Austria and Finland;

3. Those where advertising is generally available such as Italy, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Ireland and the United Kingdom.

It has been recently calculated that the total amount of current advertising within Europe is about $6 billion, and that if tv advertising were to be "set free" in those countries within the first two zones the figure could be closer to $8.4 billion. According to research commissioned by Sky Channel from Saatchi & Saatchi, expenditure on TV advertising in Europe will have risen 58% by 1990 from 4.7 billion dollars in 1985 (0.17% of GDP) to 7.4 billion dollars could be 0.3% of GDP, ie. 12 billion dollars.

Patrick Cox, a leading figure in the British satellite industry, has argued that the total amount of viewing will increase, particularly on the new advertiser-supported channels: "The problem we've had as a channel is that we are selling a very sophisticated product—pan-European advertising—when the national advertising markets don't really exist."

Presumably the same kind of argument could be made about other parts of the world: the wealth is there, all that is needed is to provide the correct programming strategy, let it be carried within the new distribution technologies and thus is provided the key to unlock the door to the treasury.

Anticipation of the future, with fear and loathing rubbing up against hoping and dreaming, has rested on the assumption that the new technologies will be successful, and that at the heart of the package they will deliver will be US product. Certainly there are some interesting clues that such programming can be used occasionally to gather the treasure. In one particular instance new tv services, using considerable amounts of US material, have had a spectacular success in restructuring the audience and generating advertising revenue.

The example to which I am referring is that of Italy, where the rise of the private television stations, following the 1976 constitutional court's decision to allow unregulated local private broadcasting, led to a dramatic increase in advertising revenue from 33 billion lire in 1970 to 198 billion lire in 1983, a growth of over 500%—370% of this growth occurred between 1976 and 1983.

Total advertising expenditure in Italy increased from 266 thousand million in 1970 to 2666 billion lire in 1983, and as a percentage of GDP from 0.42 to 0.50. That latter figure masks a de-

cline from 1970 to 1976 from 0.42% of GDP to 0.30% in 1976. The new private television stations therefore had the effect of restoring the percentage of gross domestic product to what it had been and then adding some, largely by drawing off revenue from other media and generating new sources of revenue.

I am led to conclude that television services, new or old, dominated by imported, specifically American television, are in for a very rough ride, precisely because they will find it increasingly difficult, politically and culturally, to unlock the wealth which, in objective terms, undoubtedly exists.

Much of the analysis of Super Channel's problems pointed to the institutional trip-wires being placed in front of it—whether by European governments, European cable operators, the trade unions—as being the real basis for its possible, and now perhaps likely, fall. Certainly, these were real problems which should not be underestimated. It is interesting however to speculate as to what would have happened had the channel been given a straight run at the European television audience. In my view, it would almost certainly have been in exactly the same position as it is today.

The Super Channel and its backers were in fact using an expensive means of throwing a uniform program schedule at audiences whose singular characteristic was that they were different in their needs and expectations, moods and manners, histories and cultures.

The ambitions behind Superchannel are by now fairly commonplace: the widespread assumption that in the satellite and cable fields new markets are there to be developed on the wave of the future, deregulated, non-public-service television. What is becoming very clear is that the missionaries of the new age have, in fact, had little grasp of the social dynamics of the European TV audience even though quite clearly such understanding was the necessary design stage to the television architecture of the future European audience.

Indeed it is in the very use of the singular noun "audience" that much of the problem which they face lies, since it is quite clear that the structural weakness of pan-European television is the logical assumption it must make about their being a pan-European *audience*, rather than *audiences*. SC's error was to put together a naive equation: Britain has masses of high-quality television, this appeals to yuppies, there are lots of yuppies throughout Europe, they have lots of disposable income, advertisers like that, therefore deliver those programs and—hey presto—you have yourself an income.

What this equation did not allow for was the fact that it grossly overemphasized social commonalities, underestimated the forces of national cultures acting as powerful definers of national cultural taste (even among yuppies), and ignored the fact that not all those yuppies resided at the end of a cable system. It is an error, not unique to Super Channel, rooted in the hubris so redolent of the so-called third age of broadcasting, the paucity of market research and the beguilement with the Gucci technologies of satellite delivery rather than with the more prosaic, but as important sociology of reception.

The fact of the matter is that there is no decent, comprehensive and comparative, empirically and conceptually adequate model of the TV markets of the future. In fact clues now exist, scattered around, which provide some insight into the likelihood of imported television being successful, or even acceptable, and into answering that mysterious question of what the audience of the future will require fits enlightenment and pleasure.

Thus one needs to examine *how* television audiences already make

their decisions, and to then examine some of the reasons *why* they make those decisions.

CHOICES

The whole debate about international television, whether that debate is taking place inside the boardrooms of multinational corporations, market-research companies or the conspiratorial mind of the academic left, tends to be loaded with sets of assumptions about cultural influences, about meanings and the shaping of consciousness, even about the sheer amounts of TV flows. Yet each equally holds those views in the abstract, outside of any grasp of their place within the individual biographies of the myriad members of more than a 100 TV societies.

I must agree with this observation by the late Ithiel de Sola Pool: "There is, in fact, remarkably little research of any kind on international communication. There is a great deal of essay writing about it. But by research I mean studies in which data is collected to establish or refute some general proposition . . . The two topics regarding international communication that have been most extensively studied, and very badly, I must say, are the balance in the flow of communication among countries, and the cultural basis in what flows. These are topics on which there have been a few empirical studies, though by far the bulk of that literature consists of polemical essays unenlightened by facts."

Well, what do the facts tell us? Let's begin with that famous son of the television age, J.R. Ewing and his "wall-to-wall *Dallas*." Since its launch in 1978 and its export to many foreign countries, *Dallas* has become the exemplar of the global influence of American television, the apparent embodiment of the theory of cultural imperialism. Slick, polished, dramatic, sexy, wealthy, cheap to buy in and so, so popular.

At a UNESCO meeting in Mexico in July 1982 the then French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, identifying *Dallas* as a threat to the national culture of France, called for a crusade "against financial and intellectual imperialisms that no longer grab territory, or rarely, but grab consciousness, ways of thinking, ways of living."

Personally I have long thought that the greatest threat to French culture was Frenchmen, but let that go. Lang's words are surely familiar. What has been almost totally ignored, however, in the debate around *Dallas* has been the relationship between the program and the various audiences who for whatever reasons, in whatever circumstances, with whatever consequences, actually sit down and watch it. Any exploration at that level, no matter how cursory, provides some important qualifications to the idea of its dominant influence. For example, one discovers that in most countries *Dallas* is not as popular as home-produced soaps, and completely ignored in countries as diverse as Brazil and Japan, which nevertheless have well-established and highly popular domestic dramas as part of their main tv program output.

In Britain, whence came the "wall-to-wall" phrase, with the solitary exception of the "who shot JR episode," the program never came anywhere near competing with such long standing popular dramas as *Coronation St.* and *Crossroads*. In Japan, *Dallas* was introduced in October 1981, went to a 10% share, and then to a 3% share by December. This is compared, for example, to the popularity of *Oshin*, a locally produced, six-days-a-week, 15-minute serial drama about a woman triumphing over hardship, with an audience share of 57%, once recording the highest share ever in the history of Japanese tv, at 63%.

In explaining the difference the

Cantors make an extremely interesting observation: "In contrast to *Oshin*, the suspense in *Dallas* arises from greed, self-interest, lying and manipulation—behavior that might be considered objectionable and shameful in a culture that prizes loyalty, self-sacrifice and honoring one's obligation. Thus it is possible that shows which do not conform to particular basic values in a culture might be rejected by that culture." In New Zealand for example, other kinds of imported programming from other countries are more popular than *Dallas* and its ilk.

It is in fact simply untrue to say that imported television programs, from the US or other metropolitan countries, always have a dominant presence within the indigenous television culture. Certainly they do not always attract larger audiences than home-made programs, nor do they always threaten national production. In Brazil for example, the sixth biggest television market in the world, the level of imported television material fell by 32% between 1973 and 1982, largely due to the activities of TV Globo, the major Brazilian network, which captures between 60% and 80% of the television audience. Between 5:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. 84% of the channel's programs are in-house productions. In August 1983 for example, the top ten programs were all Globo productions, including three telenovellas.

As Richard Paterson points out, in Brazil one sees "a television devoted to national culture. TV Globo has fully utilized the possibilities created by these circumstances to develop a different sort of television. The development of an indigenous television puts into question (the) thesis about the inevitability of traditional drama and folk music retreating before the likes of *Peyton Place* and *Bonanza*."

In fact, TV Globo now produces more programs than any other station in the world, reaching 99.97% of TV households in Brazil. In 1986 it had the most popular *telenovela* ever, *Roque Santeiro* (Rogue the Saint) which at times had a 90% share of the audience. Globo exports to more than 100 countries, including China, USSR and GDR. Its production *Isaura, the Slave Girl* was something of an international success. Other networks in Brazil are beginning to compete with Globo with their own productions, such as TV Manchete and TV Bandeirantes. *Dallas*, by the way, in 1982 occupied 69th position in the Brazilian ratings, and 109th in Mexico.

In Singapore, where the government's Singapore Broadcasting Corporation runs three channels, broadcasting in English, Mandarin, Tamil and Malay, and where 60% of the programs are English language the bulk of which are imported, Chinese programs, particularly from Hong Kong, are consistently the most popular.

The Malaysian station TV3 has proved to be particularly successful by transmitting in Cantonese for the Chinese population in Malaysia and Singapore. In Thailand the most popular programs are Thai movies, though as one commentator recently observed, "Chinese plays are the new rage of Thai television with series from Hong Kong's TVB and ATV leading the rating chart." Japanese TV has also proved to be very successful in Thailand, while local Thai producers concentrate more and more on musical variety game shows and comedies which are very popular with country housewives.

In Ireland, which not only imports 65% of its total output, and where the BBC and ITV are readily available to most of the population, the most popular programs for many years have been *The Late, Late Show* on Saturdays on Radiotelefis Eirann, hosted by Gay Byrne, followed by such home-produced drama series as *The Riordans, Bracken*, and *Glenroe*. In countries such as New Zealand and Sweden,

where there are enormous problems facing the local broadcasting services which necessitate the importation of foreign television, home-grown programs nevertheless compete in terms of popularity.

And so one could go on. This is not to say that imported programs are not to an extent an important part of the total structure of many countries' broadcasting, nor indeed that in some cases they are not very popular. It is merely to observe that even a limited glance at the available evidence—which is extremely thin on the ground—about the most simple facts on viewing, indicates that the picture of the role of television in any society is far more complex than is often allowed for. As far as we can tell, audiences do discriminate, and do tend to prefer home-produced television rather than slavishly pursuing imported programs.

What I am suggesting, then, is that one has to come at the question of future television markets from a slightly different angle than that of econometrics and market research. One can only really understand the role and use of television if one understands not how it is imposed on societies, since that is simply not how the process works, rather how it does or does not tap into and feed off the rhythms, moods and moralities that are already present. In Britain, for example, the most powerful television, certainly in the field of drama, have been the hugely successful and long-running *Coronation Street*, more recently *Eastenders* and a long tradition of single drama. No American programming, not even *Dallas*, has come close to competing in popularity and critical success with these programs. And in this, I am suggesting, Britain is far from unique.

The strengths of national cultures, the power of language and tradition, the force that flows, still, within national boundaries, have been grossly underestimated by those who have sought to establish, in this case, pan-European markets. Hence the qualification one has to set against the apparent potential advertising revenue which waits to be harnessed, because as will become clear it is difficult to see how new satellite and cable delivered services could sustain program schedules able seriously to dent that disposition to cast the eyes inwards rather than outwards.

I am not saying that US TV product will not be used by most TV systems, nor indeed that in some instance there will not be a good deal of such programming, nor even that some of it will not be successful. I am saying that alone it simply could not last the course, especially if the new markets are to be created through the use of expensive delivery systems of cable and satellite. The really powerful productive forces within television are, and will continue to be, national. Where it is used US television will be as a kind of televisual polyfilla, plugging the gaps in the schedule but with no seminal influence on the structure of the audience and therefore on the economics of future television.

When one undertakes this Cook's Tour of world television the impression one is left with is not of uniformity, of the single cultural voice and the immersion of all others, but of the increasing assertion of cultural diversity on the part of national audiences. As I grubbed around for evidence, however, one dimension which slowly emerged was of the responses not just of the public but of the established media institutions which are increasingly making strategic decisions to kill off precisely those vehicles of the new media which it has been alleged will dump US product across the surface of the globe.

I am, of course, making the assumption that the only way in which there will be further proliferation of US product will be through the re-creation of the individual global tv markets on

the back of the development of satellite and cable technologies. It could be, of course, that the proliferation will take place through the transformation of the existing terrestrial television systems as they shift and maneuvre in response to the challenges of that cliche, the third age of broadcasting.

Given the vast amounts of money spent on so-called market research, it is extraordinary that the level of understanding of the audience remains so limited and at times utterly confused. There is clearly a crying need, intellectually as well as commercially, to have a much more substantial grasp of what one might call the biography of viewing, and to grasp the minima as well as the maxima of television audiences. If we do that, it is my firm conviction that not only will we come to see that there was more than a touch of myth-making in the week-to-week *Dallas* scenario, but also that we will have to rethink widescale perceptions of the future of television.

One of the more important developments in European communications research is the growth of ethnographic studies of TV audiences, seeing them as richly complex individuals rather than abstract statistics with skins. It is a development to be wholly welcomed. ■

Dr. Michael Tracey is Head of the Broadcasting Research Unit, an independent research body which receives general funding from the BBC, the IBA, the British Film Institute and the Markle Foundation. It is charged with undertaking a wide range of research programs on issues affecting broadcasting and related media, employing whatever methods are necessary and affordable. This article is adapted from a paper he prepared for presentation at a recent conference on "The International Market in Film and Television Programs" sponsored by Columbia Business School's Center for Telecommunications and Information Studies.

"QUOTE UNQUOTE"

"As television news looks for a way out of its identity crisis we need to be clear that our competitive anxieties, which really come down to our personal careers, are secondary to our job, our responsibility, which is mainly to tell what happened. And how it happened. And why it happened. And its consequences.

"The search for identity seems to be ensnared in questions of form: Should we do a lot of short stories or a few long ones? With local stations acting like networks, what is left for the original networks to do? Should we attempt to discover the news ourselves, placing our shrinking resources in the path of events, or should we follow the trend and simply reprocess the work of foreign or regional broadcasters, of freelancers. . .?

"Are we in the news gathering business or the news repackaging business? These are real questions. And they are being collected ad hoc, as we go along. We are collecting, not choosing an identity."

—John Hart, *World Monitor* anchor, speaking to the New York Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

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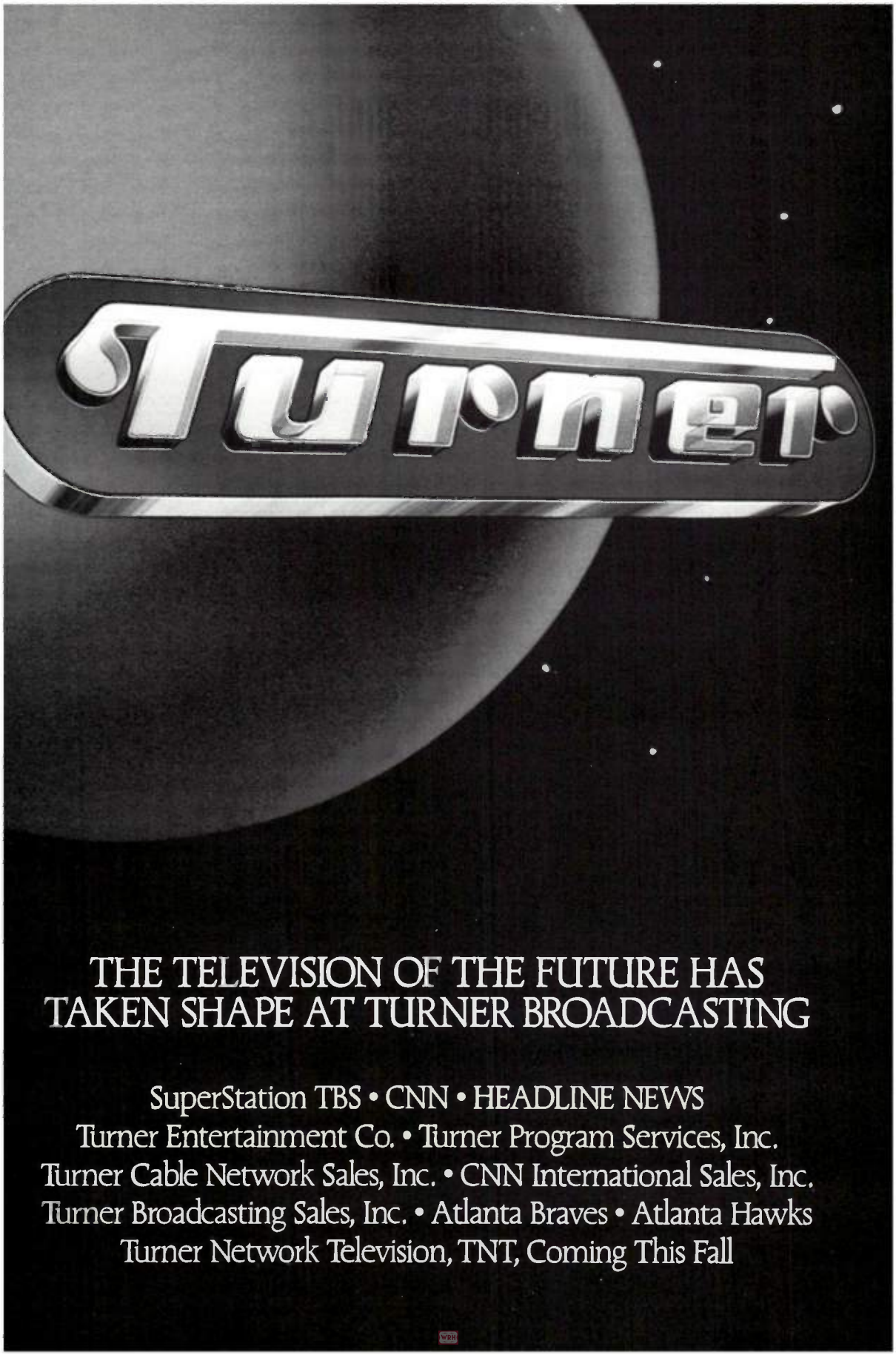

THE TELEVISION OF THE FUTURE HAS TAKEN SHAPE AT TURNER BROADCASTING

SuperStation TBS • CNN • HEADLINE NEWS
Turner Entertainment Co. • Turner Program Services, Inc.
Turner Cable Network Sales, Inc. • CNN International Sales, Inc.
Turner Broadcasting Sales, Inc. • Atlanta Braves • Atlanta Hawks
Turner Network Television, TNT, Coming This Fall

WRH

1987 COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARDS FINALISTS

Operation Understanding
WCAU-TV
Philadephia, PA

What's Going On
WCBS-TV
New York, NY

Eye of the Beholder *
WPLG-TV
Miami, FL

Project Bundle-Up
WTAE-TV
Pittsburgh, PA

Born Too Soon
KPNX-TV
Phoenix, AZ

Family Matters
KIRO, Inc.
Seattle, WA

Beautiful Babies:
Right from the Start
WRC-TV
Washington, DC

What's Killing the Children?
KTTV
Los Angeles, CA

Silent Epidemic
WMAQ-TV
Chicago, IL

For Kid's Sake Campaign
KOMO-TV
Seattle, WA

AIDS Lifeline
WBZ-TV
Boston, MA

There but for
the Grace of God
WNBC-TV
New York, NY

An Evening of Education
AETN (Arkansas Educ. TV)
Conway, AR

Lake Erie:
How Far We've Come
WTOL-TV
Toledo, OH

SIDA, Amenaza Mortal
(AIDS, Deadly Threat)
WXTV
Secaucus, NJ

AIDS in Our Lives
WTTG
Washington, DC

Mammography Series
KTVN
Reno, NV

***Winner**

IT'S HOWDY DOODY TIME

BY STEPHEN DAVIS

Howdy Doody and I were both born late in 1947. Howdy is slightly older. His voice (if not his actual body) was born in a midtown radio studio in the spring of that year, the creation of Bob Smith in his role as host of a kid's radio quizzer called *Triple B Ranch*. I came along in September, arriving at a private maternity hospital on Park Avenue at the corner of East Eighty-Third Street. My father, Howard Davis, was a young NBC employee who had been a major in the Army Air Corps in England, where he met and married my mother, Hana Fischer, an Austrian-born refugee. My parents had settled on Long Island earlier in the year and, like millions of families at the end of the war, set about having children—the Baby Boom.

It was an interesting year to come alive. America was still reeling from the deprivations and heartbreak of the war years. Rationing was still in partial effect, and people lived with Eggless Thursdays and Meatless Mondays. A film about the difficulties faced by returning combat veterans, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, won the Academy Award. And it was a year of grief and funerals, as thousands of American bodies were shipped home from all over the world. President Harry Truman ordered General Marshall, the Army chief of staff, to oversee an immense plan to rebuild the industrial world at

*From *Say, Kids What Time Is It?*, © 1987 by Stephen Davis. Reprinted by arrangement with Little, Brown and Company, Inc.

American expense. America the Victorious was beginning to flex her muscles over her new empire.

Other headlines: the United Nations partitioned Palestine. An English princess named Elizabeth married Philip Mountbatten, Al Capone died, and Bugsy Siegel was machine-gunned. Boss Petrillo of the Musicians' Union banned all recordings as unfair to musicians. General Eisenhower was named president of Columbia University and became the dark-horse presidential candidate of the Republicans. In a widely publicized battle of the bandleaders, Tommy Dorsey punched out the King of Swing, Benny Goodman. Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in major-league baseball and reached the World Series despite a vicious campaign of spikings and beanballs and the threat of a National League players' strike. Babe Ruth's farewell at Yankee Stadium choked up millions of Americans who listened to the Sultan of Swat say goodbye on the radio. New Yorkers were stunned by Mayor Paul O'Dwyer's request for an eight-cent transit fare, as well as the news that Loew's State theater on Broadway was dropping vaudeville and would just show movies!

Those who lived through it remember 1947 as a time of great excitement and innovation. There was a sense that the immediate postwar years marked the end of an old era, and that America, as it approached the midcentury, would lead the world with good intentions and technological expertise. Emblematic of this new technology was television.

Most televisions in use in 1947 were only five inches wide and made their subjects look—according to Fred Allen's famous derisory remark—like a collection of passport photos. But this was the year that television changed from chalk talks and boxing matches to entertainment and news, entering the mainstream of American culture through its saloons. In the four eastern cities where network television service was available—New York, Philadelphia, Washington, and Schenectady (home of General Electric)—there were television screens in every bar. These receivers were usually switched on at seven o'clock in the evening, when network programming began, and bar owners generally reported that business subsequently improved. There still wasn't much to watch, but in some neighborhoods men brought their families into local taverns for the first time to see 1947's historic television firsts, such as the opening of the Eightieth Congress in January and President Truman's speech from the White House that spring. But television service, the bar owners complained in their trade journals, was still a chancy business draw. On some nights there was literally nothing on. CBS didn't even broadcast every night, and at one point even announced it was shutting down its New York studios because the network's proposal for a mechanical, nonelectronic color TV system had been rejected by the FCC.

Yet by mid-1947 there were ten stations on the air around the country and fifteen thousand TV sets in use along NBC's northeast network. Gradually new programs like *Meet the Press* and *Kraft Television Theater* began to attract an audience. These had to compete with the greatest radio talents and programs in America—Eddie Cantor, Jimmy Durante's variety show, and Fred Allen's *Allen's Alley*, with its household-word cast of characters like Senator Claghorn, blustering and pompous, and the fabled Mrs. Nussbaum. Television countered with shows like *Tex & Jinx* (in which New York publicist Tex McCrary and his wife Jinx Falkenburg invented the TV chat show) and *Author Meets the Critics*, a literary free-for-all produced by *Howdy Doody*'s future patron Martin Stone (and occasionally directed by my father in his capacity as a staff director at WNBT, then the call letters of NBC's New York TV station). *Author Meets the Critics*,

hosted by John K. M. McCaffrey, was very primitive and immensely popular: perspiring writers and their critical nemeses harangued each other under the inhumanly hot white lights needed to candle-power an image into

There was that lost early television feeling that *anything* could happen. Once the studio grew so warm that Eugene O'Neill passed out drunk, on camera.

the electronic lines of the Iconoscope cameras. Under the brutal, interrogating studio lights, tempers would flare, and McCaffrey would lose control. There were several shoving and jostling incidents between overheated litterateurs. There was that lost early television feeling that *anything* could happen. Once the studio grew so warm that Eugene O'Neill passed out drunk, on camera. General Sarnoff worried that celebrities mopping their brows was bad for television. It was a hothouse. Conditions behind the camera were primitive as well. Martin Stone remembers that early shows were budgeted at around $150 apiece.

From early 1947, there were a few shows for children on television. The first of these was *The Small Fry Club*, which was shown from 7:00 to 8:00 P.M. on Tuesdays on the DuMont Network, which originated from Channel 5 in New York. (DuMont had been founded by a scientist, Dr. Allen DuMont, who came up with an early all-electronic TV set. He was marketing fourteen-inch versions of these as early as 1948 and, like NBC, had a four-station network in 1947.) *The Small Fry Club* was hosted by Big Brother Bob Emory, a genial disc jockey who narrated old silent films, displayed children's drawings, and later formed the first television "club" for children. A few months after *Small Fry Club* went on the air in March 1947, DuMont debuted another kids's show, *Birthday Party*, on Thursday nights at seven-thirty, hosted by a young New York deejay named Ted Brown. Around the same time, NBC aired *its* first kids' show, *Juvenile Jury*, a problem-solving panel show hosted by Jack Barry that became the first commercially sponsored network series.

The first puppets came to television that summer, although marionettes handled by puppeteer Bernard H. Paul had appeared on experimental station W3XK in Wheaton, Maryland, as early as 1931. Chicago puppeteer Burr Tillstrom had also put his hand puppets through their paces on an NBC broadcast at the New York World's Fair in 1939. But in 1947 ventriloquists and their dummies were among the biggest stars in American mass entertainment. The most famous was radio's Edgar Bergen and his dummies Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd. Also on the scene was the younger and more hep Paul Winchell, who took his dummy Jerry Mahoney onto the DuMont network in June 1947 in a thirteen-week summer replacement for DuMont's biggest show, *Captain Video* on Saturday night. *Winchell & Mahoney* was a hit for DuMont. Over at NBC, General David Sarnoff made a note of it.

It wasn't until later in 1947 that television transcended its image as small and stuffy. Two events helped push television into more American homes. The first was the World Series in October. This savagely fought subway series between the upstart Brooklyn Dodgers and the mighty New York Yankees featured two of the most famous men in American life, the majestic Yankee Clipper Joe DiMaggio and the catlike Dodger hero Jackie Robinson. Every television set in America, many viewed by hundreds of men in saloons, was tuned to NBC the day Cookie Lavagetto broke up Bill Bev-

ens's ninth-inning no-hitter with a double in Ebbets Field. A few days later the same audience gasped with delight and amazement and hubris as they *witnessed* Al Gionfriddo's heroic catch and robbery of a DiMaggio home-run ball in the stands at Yankee Stadium. When people saw this, they had to have a television of their own at home.

Warren Wade announced that NBC needed some puppet show for kids. Not another talking dummy like Bergen and Winchell had, but some kind of marionette.

Another televised sports event in December 1947 gave television a further push. This was the heavyweight championship fight in which Joe Louis, the Brown Bomber, successfully defended his title after being knocked down twice by Jersey Joe Walcott. Again, every television in the country was tuned to this dramatic fight. Pro wrestling was also popular on television, and not only in the bars. In those days the legendary Italian maestro Arturo Toscanini was living in New York's Riverdale section while he was conducting the NBC Symphony Orchestra. Often, when Toscanini's wife returned to Europe for family visits, the maestro, home alone, would invite musicians and colleagues in for dinner. These guests, many of them distinguished, would suppose they were destined for a semimystical evening of European culture and intimate memories of Puccini and other composers. Alas, after dinner the great Toscanini would almost invariably herd his guests into the library and turn on the wrestling matches on his new seven-inch RCA television. As his guests gaped at each other, the maestro would shout approval of a Gorgeous George eye-doink or an Antonino Rocca flying dropkick! Such was television's inherent power that it could turn great artists into morons at the flick of a switch.

Somewhere around mid-1947, Warren Wade at NBC had two new ideas. Wade had run NBC television in the early forties, and when he came back to NBC after the war he brought with him some of the best young technical talent from his command at the Army Signal Corps Photo Center. Wade was famous around NBC for his weekly military-style staff meetings and the bold, imposing physical presence of a full colonel returned to the inconveniences of civilian life. Warren Wade announced in his blustering manner at one of his staff meetings that NBC needed some kind of puppet show for kids. Not another talking dummy like Bergen and Winchell had, mind you, but some kind of marionette, which Wade felt would be better suited to the purposes of the small TV screen. Several NBC staffers of that era remember that Warren Wade was looking for "a Charlie McCarthy on strings." This in itself wasn't such a big deal, and Wade's staff was told to think about it. His other concept was much more radical: he wanted to put the puppet show on in the daytime. No one had done anything like that before. NBC president Niles Trammel told Warren Wade that NBC would consider it.

The creative seeds of *Howdy Doody* were, however, already being sown elsewhere.

In March 1947, WEAF's station management informed their morning jock Bob Smith that they were going to block out the entire Saturday-morning radio schedule for kids' programs. Frank Luther, a children's recording star of the day, was being given the 9:00 A.M. show, and Smith was asked if *he* would come up with something else for kids. With visions of another four hundred dollars a week dancing in his head,

Smith said, Sure. So Bob Smith huddled with his writer, Vic Campbell, who had been an announcer with Bob at WGR in Buffalo and had run General MacArthur's radio command in the Pacific during the war. Campbell had been writing Bob's morning show since the previous autumn, and now came up with a quiz show for Saturday-morning radio called *Triple B Ranch*. Four kids from one school would compete with four from another. The *Triple B* was for "*B*ig *B*rother *B*ob," and the *Ranch* part suggested a Western theme, so each team of four kids was perched on a wooden hobbyhorse and answered questions posed by a cowboy-suited Bob Smith. If a child answered a question wrong, he was off the horse. NBC bought the concept.

Triple B Ranch went on in late March 1947 and was an immediate hit for NBC Radio. Bob Smith wrote a theme jingle—*"I wanna be-be at the Triple B Ranch every Saturday morning"*—and played his omnipresent piano for the commercials. The studio was packed with kids for every show. Eventually Vic Campbell asked Bob to try some comedy sketches. So Bob did Lukie the Polack and Yitzie the Yid and Vic said, No, Bob, like a *Western* voice.

As it happened, Bob Smith did have another voice.

Elmer.

The Original Howdy Doody.

Elmer came from Buffalo. In his local radio days there, Bob had sometimes talked over the air to the engineer of his afternoon show, whose name was Eddie. In his relaxed way Smith might say something like, "Eddie, we gotta find another way to sell these soap flakes today." And of course Smith's listeners would write in: "Who's Eddie?" So Smith would explain that Eddie was the engineer in the control room, who actually played the records they were hearing over the radio. The people out there in radioland wrote back: "Why can't we hear Eddie?" So one day Smith introduced Eddie to the listeners. "Well, friends, you wanted to meet the man who gets the news for you and shares my lunch every day? Here's Eddie! Eddie, I want you to say hello to all our friends."

And Eddie turned a bright shade of crimson and stammered out a horrible yokel laugh: *Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh*! Eddie was an engineer, but he couldn't speak on the radio! He was struck totally *dumb*. Nothing but that stupid laugh. It was the laugh of the oaf, the rube, the idiot. And it was hilarious. It was even funnier than Mortimer Snerd, Edgar Bergen's bumpkin-dummy.

So when Vic Campbell asked if Bob had a Western voice, Bob thought of Eddie the engineer and did the laugh: "Aawwrrgh—gosh, Mr. Smith . . . *Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh*." It was so dumb that Vic Campbell fell over laughing. "That's a *dumb* character," Vic said. "Let's give him a dumb name. How about Elmer?"

Let's put on an old acetate of a *Triple B Ranch* program. Bob Smith is saying, "Say, kids, I want you to meet my ranch hand here at the Triple B Ranch—here's Elmer. C'mon in, Elmer." And he'd say, "Ho *Ho* Mr. Smith and boys and girls, well *howdy doody*. Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh Hoo!" And Big Brother Bob and his Elmer voice would do some corny hee-haw gags.

Now, the kids laughed hard at this *howdy doody* bit. The children, especially the under-nine set, thought this *howdy doody* stuff was a scream. *Howdy* they could relate to, and *doody* was right there, bringing it all back home. The kids knew all about doody firsthand! At the end of the bit, Big Brother Bob said so long to Elmer and again deployed the unbelievably dumb voice: "Well *Howdy Doody*, boys and girls! *Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh*!"

The kids adored it. In New York Fred Allen listened to the show with his children, and the hilarious Mrs. Nussbaum on *Allen's Alley* started using the "howdy doody" line. Soon the whole country was saying "Howdy Doody."

Then the kids in the studio audience

at *Triple B Ranch* started to ask where Howdy Doody was. Big Brother Bob would explain that there was no Howdy Doody, that it was just a voice he did for a character called Elmer. But that seemed like a ripoff to the kids, especially the less gullible older ones. Smith noted disappointment on some faces. "Where's Howdy Doody?" they would chirp every week. Soon Bob Smith realized that there had to *be* a Howdy Doody.

So Bob changed Elmer's name to Howdy Doody and went upstairs in the RCA building to talk to the television people.

At that time NBC television consisted of just a few hands. Niles Trammel was president. Warren Wade was the executive in charge of television. Owen Davis ran casting. Fred Coe was a producer. Ben Grauer was the news editor and reader as well as quiz-show host and all-around on-camera personality. (Old television hands often say that American television was literally invented around Ben Grauer.) Also on the scene was producer Martin Stone, who packaged *Author Meets the Critics* and a quizzer called *Americana*, also hosted by the ubiquitous Ben Grauer.

Marty Stone was a thirty-two-year-old lawyer from New York who had gone to Yale Law and then clerked for Judge Irving Lehman. In the Navy, during the war, Stone had worked for Edward Stettinius in the Lend-Lease program. Afterward he had returned to New York to practice law. Almost by accident he fell into radio broadcasting, producing a book-chat show on an NBC Blue Network affiliate in Albany, New York. A rave review of this show, *Speaking of Books*, in *Variety* caused NBC's Warren Wade to approach Martin Stone with an offer. "Ever heard of television?" Wade asked. Stone said that he had seen some closed-circuit boxing matches on television while in the Navy. Wade, with a vacant half hour to fill on Sunday nights, told Stone to come to the television offices on the sixth floor of the RCA Building, and *Author Meets the Critics* was born. At the time, there were only fifteen thousand sets on NBC's network, but *Author Meets the Critics* caught on. The public liked it, and the celebrities loved the novelty of being seen on TV by their children as well as by the high-income families in the northeast. At the same time Stone was also producing a radio show for WEAF, so he recognized the young WEAF morning guy, Bob Smith, when he ran into him one day in the summer of 1947 on the sixth floor.

"One day I bumped into Bob," Stone recalls, "and he said to me, 'I understand you're in television. I'm *dying* to get into television. Boy, I can play piano, I can sing, I'm a member of the Magicians' Club.'" Martin Stone already knew about Bob, because Stone's six-year-old daughter, Judy, was a regular listener of *Triple B Ranch*, and he thought Bob might be good on television. Stone asked if he could bring his daughter down to the *Ranch* studio that weekend for her birthday, so she could meet Bob. That way, Stone felt, he would get a feeling for Bob's rapport with children beyond the constraints of a radio studio.

That Saturday, Martin Stone and his daughter went down to the *Ranch*, and Bob Smith poured it on. Bob knew full well that this performance was also his audition for television. In the middle of the show Bob brought out the Elmer voice. "Well Hooowwwdy Doooooooody, boys and girls!"

Pandemonium. The children laughed themselves sick in the studio before Stone's eyes. "Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh. Gosh, Big Brother Bob! Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh!" The kids dissolved with joy at how stupid this sounded.

After the show, Martin Stone collared Smith. Together they went into a studio, and Stone got Smith to cut an acetate disk to replay at Judy's classroom birthday party the follow-

ing week. This acetate still exists. Over the scratchy surface noise Big Brother Bob can be heard auditioning his brains out, playing his piano and singing "Happy Birthday." He interviews Judy Stone with the unctuous fervor of a born-again pitchman. Then he brings out the Elmer voice for the coup de-grâce: "Well, *Howdy Doody, Judy!!*" On the acetate Smith says hi to Judy's mom, gets her teacher's name right, and generally shines with corny raw talent. When Martin Stone played the acetate at his daughter's birthday party and the kids heard Elmer say, "Howdy Doody, Judy," they fell apart.

Martin Stone knew he had something. And Martin Stone, as Bob Smith later put it, had a way of opening doors at NBC. Stone was a charismatic and good-looking lawyer/producer who had the ear of some key people at NBC, including General Sarnoff's son Robert, then beginning his career at NBC as an ad salesman.

There were actually many factors working synchronously to produce the first kids' show at NBC. First, Warren Wade wanted to put puppets on television, maybe even in the daytime. Then there was the young NBC staff producer Roger Muir, who had been on Wade's staff at Astoria. Muir had wanted to get a children's show on the air for months. Then there was bob Smith, who had an act that seemed ready for television with only slight modification. Bobby Sarnoff, the son of the head of the company, was also interested. All these men had children who had nothing to watch on their daddies' TVs. One day in the autumn of 1947 Warren Wade asked Martin Stone if there was any place in the home for television in the day-time. "Warren," Stone replied, "I don't know for sure, but I do know that my kids will watch a *test pattern*. And my wife is always telling me to do a show that begins at five P.M. to keep the kids occupied while Mom makes dinner." Stone was speaking the gospel truth.

Sometime that fall, Marty Stone went back to see *Triple B Ranch*. This time he took Warren Wade with him. Wade was of course familiar with Bob Smith from WEAF; anyone who listened to that station in the morning knew that Bob Smith was the perfect disc jockey—warm, personable, honey-voiced, talented and eager to entertain, funny and intimate.

Best of all, Bob was also an ardent and relaxed salesman, as happy to read a commercial with passion as he was to spin a record or tell a story about Mrs. Huffnagel back in Buffalo. But it was Bob Smith's total control and mastery of the *Triple B* audience—both in the studio and over the air—that convinced Warren Wade that Smith could handle the same job on television. Warren Wade saw that when Bob Smith spoke to them, children actually listened, and did so with rapt attention.

Finally, early in December 1947, Martin Stone called Bob Smith and said he wanted to put him on television somehow, in some format. At the same time, Warren Wade and Roger Muir decided to put a kids' show on as an experiment, the Saturday evening after Christmas, one show only. These two factions—the NBC brass and the "team" of Smith and Stone—came together in the office of NBC's casting vice president, Owen Davis, Jr. Davis had also wanted to get children's programming onto NBC and had even begun negotiations to lure Bob Emory and his *Small Fry Club* to NBC. He also had on hand one of the premier professional puppeteers in America, Frank Paris. Paris was one of the great puppetmasters of his generation, and Owen Davis knew that his huge company of lifelike marionettes would be a sensation on television's limited screen.

A week before Christmas, NBC gave Roger Muir the go-ahead for the post-Christmas show, and Muir knew he would have to scramble to put together an hour of children's program-

ming from scratch in two weeks. Fortunately Frank Paris and his crew had a thirteen-part puppet serial called "Toby Tyler at the Circus," about the adventures of a little boy who ran away and joined a carnival. Bob Smith was to act as the show's host, singing at the piano and talking with the children who would sit on folding chairs

Bob Smith did his Elmer voice for the NBC group, and Martin Stone explained the appeal of the character and the audience demand to see a character called Howdy Doody.

and be Bob's on-camera audience. Between Toby Tyler's adventures and Bob Smith's contests and games, they could show old silent films from a library that NBC had bought from Warner Brothers for fifty thousand dollars. These old films, misread by the electronic eye of the Iconoscope and thus speeded up when projected through TV's kinescope process, were seen for years on *Howdy Doody*, thus introducing the Baby Boomers visually to the world of their grandparents. The films included early pictures by Ben Turpin, Charlie Chase, Stan Laurel (without Oliver Hardy), Buster Keaton, and Bobby Dunn, a sort of fake Chaplin tramp character.

Bob Smith did his Elmer voice for the NBC group, and Martin Stone explained the appeal of the character and the subsequent audience demand to see a character they thought was called Howdy Doody. Someone asked Frank Paris if he could make a puppet that looked like Elmer sounded. In his pronounced and exaggerated lisp, Paris said that yes, of course, he could make a puppet that looked like anything, but the puppet couldn't possibly be ready by the December 27 air date. Deciding to go with the Elmer voice and fake it with the puppet, NBC told Paris to build Howdy Doody. The puppet, the network insisted, had to look dumb. It was an oaf, a lout, an imbecile like Mortimer Snerd. NBC and Frank Paris settled on a fee of five hundred dollars for the marionette, with NBC retaining the ownership rights to Howdy Doody. At the end of the meeting Bob Smith asked: "When do we go on?"

"Next week," Muir replied.

As in an old movie, Smith said: "Saturday! Well, gang, we can do it, can't we?"

Of course, it wasn't that easy. First, somebody had to come up with some material, and fast. Frank Paris's act was only good for fifteen minutes. Roger Muir filled some time by hiring vaudeville acts from Radio City Music Hall: a magician, a circus-type dog act, and a quick-sketch artist. But Bob Smith would have to speak and sing for the rest of the show. This is where *The Howdy Doody Show*'s creator and first writer, Eddie Kean, comes into the story.

Eddie Kean was *Howdy*'s chief writer, philosopher, and theoretician for the show's first eight years (until my father assumed those duties). Between 1947 and 1954 Eddie Kean wrote almost every line spoken and every note sung on *The Howdy Doody Show*. And remember that, for almost all that time, *Howdy Doody* was a "strip show," broadcast live five nights every week. For those eight years Eddie Kean came up with every major creative decision, story line, and character on *Howdy Doody*, material today imprinted in the brains of my generation. Bob Smith may have invented Howdy's character, but Eddie Kean created the world Howdy lived in.

In late 1947 Eddie Kean was twenty-three years old and a writer on Bob Smith's morning show as well as *Triple B Ranch*. Related to the actors Paul Muni and Boris Thomashefsky, Eddie

had spent his childhood summers at an upstate music camp called Camp Paradox, eventually becoming a counselor. Part of his job there had been to produce a musical extravaganza at the end of every summer for the neighboring girls' camp. Paradox was a famous music camp, and Kean had been preceded in these duties by the likes of Richard Rodgers and Arthur Schwartz. Like many camps of the day, Paradox indoctrinated campers with local Indian lore and legends. These would also later rub off on Howdy's show.

In 1941, at the age of seventeen, Eddie Kean had enlisted in the Navy, which sent him to officers candidate school and then put him on the bridge of a landing craft. Eddie and his shipmates steamed from Boston to Okinawa in 1944, the 125-foot ship making a maximum speed of eight knots. During this excruciating voyage Eddie often sat the midwatch, from midnight to 4:00 A.M., humming along to the sixteen-inch Armed Forces Radio Service records supplied by the Navy. Every night he listened over and over to a record called "Laura" while he sat in the conning tower and jotted down song ideas. Eddie saw action in the ferocious battle for Okinawa when his flotilla of 120 ships was attacked by kamikaze planes, with devastating results. Eighty ships were lost, and Eddie Kean considered himself lucky to have survived the war.

After his discharge, Eddie finished his studies at Columbia University and then paired with his friend Bob Unger to form a song-writing team. They wrote a novelty song called "Where Is Sam?" but the music business was even harder to break into then than it is now, and the song went nowhere until Eddie wrote a letter to the syndicated columnist Walter Winchell, who answered Eddie in print and told him to keep plugging away. The column was read by a Tin Pan Alley song-plugger named Enoch Light, who called Eddie and published "Where's Sam."

Wednesday was song-pluggers' day at Bob Smith's office at WEAF, the day Bob would buy new tunes and jingles for his daily show. One day Enoch Light showed up and played "Where's Sam" for Smith, who loved it, sang it on his show, and then recorded it for RCA (with the Herman Chitteson Trio). Eddie came to the recording session and met Bob, charmed him with his youth and vigor, and was soon hired to help provide Bob's morning show with chatter and jingles for thirty-five dollars a week. Later on, when Vic Campbell became ill, Eddie began to write *Triple B Ranch* as well. When Bob Smith first went to be interviewed by Warren Wade at WNBT, Eddie went with him just to see what the inside of a television studio looked like.

Eddie remembers the meeting. "Wade said he wanted to do a kids' Christmas show for one hour. There was no thought of a series, and Wade had no awareness of any character like Howdy Doody. He just told Smith that he wanted a kids' show on the tiny budget that he had." At that meeting Eddie Kean was offered and accepted the job a chief writer for the show. Asked for a title off the top of his head, Eddie thought of Frank Paris and the Howdy Doody puppet he was making. "How about *Puppet Playhouse*?" Eddie offered.

Wade met with Bobby Sarnoff and Martin Stone to talk about what time the show would go on. Wade was pushing for a late-afternoon slot, but Stone remembers Bobby Sarnoff saying to him, "*You* pick the time." So Martin Stone suggested 5:00 P.M., and the era of daytime television began.

Feverish preparations for *Puppet Playhouse* began less than a week before the broadcast date. This doubled the workload of Bob Smith's young assistant and gofer, Bobby Keeshan, an ex-marine who had enlisted in NBC's page corps after the war. These uniformed guides, doorkeepers, and

messengers operated on the theory that if NBC's broadcasters were knights of the airwaves, then they deserved to be served by young pages with quiet restraint and politesse. A page had about six months in uniform to ingratiate himself with some office somewhere at NBC and be hired at the end of his term. It was up or out at NBC! Keeshan first met Smith while he was manning the fourth-floor page station outside Smith's office at WEAF. Every morning Smith played different songs on the piano over the air, and gradually Keeshan was assigned the task of going to the library and finding out what year the songs had come out so Smith would have some chatter. Then Bobby Keeshan started handing out prizes on *Triple B Ranch*. When Keeshan's page job expired, Bob Smith hired him as a forty-dollar-a-week office manager. "I had him interview the song-pluggers," Smith said, "and answer the mail. He was just a gofer, a stooge." For *Puppet Playhouse*, Keeshan wrote and rewrote the cue-cards as Eddie Kean's bits of dialogue started to trickle in.

Meanwhile, in NBC Studio 8A, puppeteer Frank Paris set up the low-slung puppet bridge from his touring "Toby Tyler at the Circus" revue, which he had adapted for television. One of Paris's crew was a skilled twenty-year-old puppet handler named Rhoda Mann. Rhoda would later play a key role as the puppeteer who manipulated Howdy himself, but back in 1947 she was both scared and thrilled at the prospect of working on television. In Rhoda's Bronx neighborhood, where she was the only daughter of strict Polish immigrants, she didn't even know anyone who owned a television.

Rhoda was working for Frank Paris, the best in the business, because she could really *walk* a marionette. Rhoda had a kind of family fondness for puppets. Her father painted the faces on dolls for the famous Effanbee Doll Company, for which he also designed the legendary Dydee doll, the first doll that wept. When Rhoda was eight, her father brought home one of the company's nine-string marionettes. When she proved naturally adept at walking the difficult puppet, her father brought home two more. Rhoda Mann was performing on a near-professional level for her schoolmates by the time she was nine years old. She had learned a trick whereby she could make all three of her puppets dance, using a special control bar that let her hold the puppets' bodies with one hand and move the legs with the other. Soon word of Rhoda's talent spread to the small world of puppeteering, an ancient art and a tight-knit fraternity. String marionettes have been found in dynastic Egyptian tombs and were popular with the ancient Greeks. European writers from Goethe to Pepys described touring puppet companies, while in France the great playwrights wrote sketches to be performed by marionettes. In the eighteenth century, popular puppet plays included *Dick Whittington* and *Merry Andrew*. Spectacular puppet theatricals were performed in the London of Charles Dickens. One production of *Noah's Flood* included a flooded stage and puppets representing hundreds of animals. These arts began to die with the advent of film in the twentieth century, but were kept alive in America by puppeteers like Tony Sarg and Frank Paris, until the advent of television almost killed puppeteering completely.

It so happened that Frank Paris had the same agent as Rhoda's exotic neighbor Ali Ben Ali, the Moroccan Wonder Man, a magician for whom Rhoda worked as an assistant after she graduated from high school in 1944. Frank Paris met Rhoda somewhere on the vaudeville circuit and tried her out on his masterpiece, the Carmen Miranda puppet. When Paris saw Rhoda wiggle Carmen's hips, he said, "OK, lady, you got a job."

The job involved touring with "Toby of the Circus," Paris's two-hour spectacular featuring fifty-three different

marionettes. But before Rhoda's father would give his daughter permission to go on the road with two grown men, Paris and his assistant, he demanded to meet them. Later he came home and told his wife there was nothing to worry about. "Frank was *very* gay," Rhoda remembers. "For the next three years I lived through all his boyfriends and crises."

Roger Muir who was directing the program, invented the camera needed to televise a puppet show.

Over the next years Rhoda Mann learned her trade from the best there was. "Not only was Frank the best puppet-builder of all time," Rhoda says, "he could make them come to life! Frank had puppets that stripped off their clothes, puppets that smoked cigarettes and ground them out with their heels, puppets that could blow bubbles. He even had a puppet that could juggle. Even today I still don't quite believe he could make marionettes do what they did. It was unbelievable."

After appearing in vaudeville all over the country and in a triumphant series of shows at Madison Square Garden and Radio City Music Hall, Paris got the first call for *Puppet Playhouse*. Rhoda recalls many tense hours at NBC while producer Roger Muir, who was also directing the program, invented the camera angles needed to televise a puppet show. There was also consternation because NBC wanted a character named Howdy Doody on the show, and Paris was fretting because he couldn't build it in time for the premiere.

Adding to the confusion were the other acts—Prince Mendez the magician, Nino the sketch artist, and the Gaudschmidt Brothers' Dogs. As Eddie Kean watched the Gaudschmidts run their big black Alsatians through their paces in Studio 8A, he had a sensation of *déjà vu*; then he remembered that he had seen this act twenty years earlier when his father had taken him to see some vaudeville at the age of four.

Finally, on the day after Christmas, *Puppet Playhouse* was run through by its cast. Anxiety was very high. Both cast and crew sensed they were on the edge of some kind of breakthrough; none of them had ever appeared on television before, so no one was prepared for what was going to happen.

Puppet Playhouse was scheduled to be broadcast over the NBC Network at 5:00 P.M. on Saturday. It started to snow Friday afternoon and didn't stop for twenty-four hours. The *New York Times* for December 27 reported that a record twenty-five-inch snowfall was crippling New York City and the entire northeast. The *Times* movie page advertised John Wayne in *Tycoon*, Henry Fonda in *The Fugitive*, Gregory Peck in *Gentleman's Agreement*. Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* was playing in Greenwich Village, and *Bambi* was at Radio City Music Hall. Duke Ellington's orchestra was playing Carnegie Hall. At a movie theater on West Fifty-seventh Street, Ronald Reagan was starring in *Voice of the Turtle*. Over on Broadway one could see Ethel Merman in *Annie Get Your Gun* or John Gielgud in *Crime and Punishment*. The original *Streetcar Named Desire* was at the Barrymore. Judith Anderson was featured in *Medea*, and Leonard Bernstein was advertised as the conductor of *The Cradle Will Rock*, Marc Blitzstein's "vivid proletarian drama."

If you turned to the *Times* radio page, you saw what was going to be on TV that night. CBS had basketball, the Knicks against Chicago. DuMont had college basketball—Rutgers versus Seton Hall. And then there was NBC's kiddie program, misidentified in that day's paper as *Puppet Theater*.

Because of the enormous blizzard that

had just dumped tons of wet snow on New York Broadway was dark that night. The movie and vaudeville palaces didn't open for business, and Duke Ellington and his band stayed home. Bobby Keeshan couldn't reach the studio because of the snow and so missed the debut of *Puppet Playhouse*.

But the show went on. Bob Smith played the show's theme song on a ukelele (off camera, to get around a union ban on playing live instruments on television). The song Smith played was called "It's Howdy Doody Time," with words written by Eddde Kean to the tune of the old French cancan "Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-Der-É." Bob sang: *"It's Howdy Doody time, it's Howdy Doody time, Bob Smith and Howdy too, say howdy do to you. Let's give a rousing cheer, 'cause Howdy Doody's here, it's time to start the show, so kids let's go!"* Then Smith billboarded the show—Frank Paris and Toby Tyler! Prince Mendez! Nino the sketch artist! The Gaudschmidt Brothers and their Dogs!

There was no videotape in those days, and if anyone made a kinescope recording of the first *Puppet Playhouse* it has unfortunately been lost. No one remembers much of that first show, except for the moment when, near the end of the hour, it was time for Bob Smith to introduce his friend Howdy.

Since there was as yet no Howdy Doody, Eddie Kean came up with another angle. Bob Smith said something like, "Well, kids, have we got a surprise for you! As an extra-special treat tonight I brought my friend Howdy Doody along. You know, Howdy does the *Triple B Ranch* show with me here in New York, and a lot of you kids have asked to see what he looks like. Well, I wanted Howdy to come on the show today, but he says he's too shy to come out of this drawer in my desk here and say hello." Then Smith leaned over and said to the desk, "Hey, Howdy boy, are you still in there?"

Cut to a shot of the drawer. Then, over the television speaker, came the Elmer voice in all its stupid glory: "Gorsh, Mr. Smith, Ah'm in here but Ah'm too darned bashful to come out! *Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh!*"

Then Smith said, "C'mon, Howdy boy! The kids wanna see you!" But the drawer wouldn't budge. When the camera was off him and on the drawer, Smith had Howdy say, "Aww gee, Mr. Smith. I'm just too bashful. *Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh Hyuh.*" This provoked much mirth from the proto-Peanuts sitting on folding chairs in the audience.

And that was it. At six o'clock the whole cast gathered and waved goodbye as the primitive credits rolled over *Puppet Playhouse*. About a dozen kids in the studio had seen Bob Smith play the piano and do some gags with an invisible puppet in a drawer. They also saw Frank Paris's puppets, some vaudeville acts, and a bit of what Eddie Kean had billed as an "old-time" movie. There had been no commercials. *Puppet Playhouse* was "sustained" by the network, meaning NBC had paid for the show. When they turned out the blazing studio lights in 8A, everyone congratulated each other and commiserated about how hard it was going to be to get home through the driving snowstorm. Of course there was too little applause for anyone—Bob Smith, Roger Muir, Martin Stone, or Warren Wade—to gauge how the show had done. No one had any idea of how many people had watched. In fact, nobody even really knew exactly how many television sets there *were* in the country at the time.

NBC paid Bob Smith seventy-five dollars for that first show, and Smith gave Eddie Kean twenty-five to write it. When they went home on Saturday night—Smith to New Rochelle and Eddie back to his writer's pad on Central Park West—neither of them had any idea of what was in store. ■

Stephen Davis is a veteran journalist, and an original member of the Peanut Gallery whose father Howard Davis directed the *Howdy Doody Show* from 1952 to 1956.

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TV TODAY: IT'S BETTER (AND WORSE) THAN EVER BEFORE

BY DAVE BERKMAN

Despite de-regulation, despite added pressure on the network bottom-lines imposed by takeover debt-servicing or stock buy-backs, despite the popularity of such syndicated mindlessness as a *Wheel of Fortune*, a *Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous*, a *Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling* or the air pollution of shopping networks, Morton Downey Jr.'s fascist claque-cheered physicality and Get Rich-scheme commercials—despite all this American television has never been better.

It's also true, that in many respects, television has never been worse—and to the degree that that is the case, what has become increasingly bad about TV cannot be ignored. Yet, since frequently we *expect* television to be awful, it's the relatively sudden—and surprising—critical mass of improvement in TV which merits most of our consideration.

As one who has worked in, taught, or viewed television for over 40 years—my family bought its first set in February of 1948, the beginning of the year in which television finally took off—I don't recall a time when there has been so much quality choice available to America's viewers. Perhaps this constitutes a temporal aberrance, but for now at least, let's give some credit where credit is due.

There are four major reasons for this relatively sudden availability of quality.

First and foremost is NBC.

Second is the advertisers' new-found concern with upscale demographics, rather than total numbers, per se.

Third, and related, is the aging of post-"baby-boom" America and the concomitant maturing of program themes, plots and characters which increasingly reflect this. (No longer might we just as well be dead when we hit 36 as far as advertisers and agencies are concerned.)

Fourth, of course, is cable.

It was only a few years back that NBC was on the skids. Long-time affiliates such as WRGB, Schenectady, NBC-TV's very first with a relationship dating back to 1939, as well as stalwarts in major markets, such as Atlanta's WSB, were switching to ABC and CBS. WTMJ in Milwaukee, one of the very few NBC stations to maintain decent numbers through those darkest days, was pre-empting network feeds in all dayparts.

This was also the time when many media watchers were uncritically repeating such absurd "new technologies" assertions as how the American TV audience was about to divide itself into scores of special-interest viewerships which would distribute themselves, with ratings of 2 and shares of 3, across 20 specialized cable net-

works. Two percent of us would sit enthralled, each evening, viewing the "Dentists' Hour" on the old Cable Health Network, while another two would sit transfixed, night after night, watching the humidity changes on the Weather Channel.

If the major commercial networks which, for 60 years, had dominated first radio, and now TV—having commanded 90% of the prime-time viewership for television's first 30—were not quite an anachronism, was there really the need, and especially the economic base, to support three? There was even talk that NBC would either fold its tent, or limit itself to what traditional networks in this fractionated, new 'TV-world-a-coming' could do best, by becoming a prime-time, news and public affairs service.

In its desperation, the Number Three network did something so totally unknown in the history of television, it looked as if it *was* giving up. Instead of shooting for the lowest common denominator, NBC stayed with some critically acclaimed, but not widely-viewed, shows. The thinking seemed to be that the costs of launching more *Hello Larry's*, *Supertrains*, or *Manimals*, would probably engender no more audience gain than did those all-time series lows. So why not stay with the quality stuff, and at least garner the praise of the critics, if not the viewership of mass America, and save some money at the same time?

But then some funny things began to be noticed. If NBC's numbers were small nationally, in the major markets they were not only significantly larger, they were disproportionately composed of those upscale, urban types whom advertisers selling more expensive, prestige products and services, such as stock brokerage and ultra-luxury cars, value most.

If NBC was dead last nationally, in markets like New York and LA it was doing quite well. The Emmies were transformed into NBC celebrations. The Thursday night schedule, even before *Cosby*, was a refuge of quality unlike anything seen since those grand Saturday evenings during the early '70s on CBS. And a series like *St. Elsewhere*, could languish in overall numbers—it seldom places among the the prime-time top 30—yet attract so many of the most desirable, upscale viewers, that it could become NBC's second most profitable show.

Another change in advertising psychology (and let's be realistic, if quality makes its presence permanently felt on TV, it will only be through the continued sufferance of advertisers) was the realization that the increasing numbers of us who are older, also have the most to spend, so that those whose years total more than puberty-times-two, suddenly became attractive. In 1984 a seminal event occured. A triune of Beautiful People all turned 50: Sophia Loren, Gloria Steinem and Joan Collins. Growing old was suddenly both economically and socially 'in.' That it was no longer not nice to be over 40, was evident when three prime-time series featuring older characters: one, a charming, Miss Marple type; another a team of two women fighting crime on the streets of New York, while they dealt maturely with the personal crises of their mid-life years; and a trio of ladies each qualifying for insurance pitched by Ed McMahon, all became hits.

Shows featuring mature people tend to have more context and more complexity than did those built around the antics of their teenage and mod squad counterparts of TV years past. Even last season's new, teenage comedy, ABC's *Head of the Class*, marked a significant improvement. Here, for once, we can see intellectually-gifted adolescents, with most of them presented not as the nerds mandated by TV's long-standing, anti-intellectual traditions, but as attractive young people of promise, with interesting and multi-faceted lives.

The result of all these developments? For the first time in the nearly 40-year history of American television, at least a majority of any week's ten highest-rated shows, will be quality programs. "Quality" shows are suddenly drawing more than 'quality' viewers, something which I suspect few of us who have observed the American television scene for any extensive period of time, ever expected to see in our lifetimes. They are getting big numbers. Indeed, for the first time in my memory, all of the top 10 programs in at least two, Spring '87 Nielsens were series which have received general, critical acclaim. There wasn't a *Dynasty* or a *Dallas* in the lot.

As a student under Charles Siepmann at New York University in the early '60s [see *TVQ* XXI:1, 1986], I was never comfortable with his thesis that the reason bad programs predominated in American broadcasting, and seemed to attract the largest audiences, was that Americans had never had much chance to acquaint themselves with quality. After all, quality was always present to at least a very limited degree (e.g., in an *Omnibus*, a *Mr. Peepers*, in a *See It Now*, or in a *Paper Chase*) in any season's schedule; relatively little of it ever drew audience. The opposing theory, that "no one ever went broke underestimating the taste—or the intelligence!—of the American people," seemed far more viable. The major improvements in TV over the past few years, however, have led me to believe that this Siepmann view—grounded in his experience as program director for the BBC during the '30s, where he practiced its paternalistic philosophy of "we'll give them quality whether they want it or not, and soon they'll want quality"—could be proving right.

As a look at the network, prime-time schedule for a week early in the season's second half reveals, there was not an evening this past season where there weren't at least three regularly scheduled, prime-time network offerings that had received general, critical acclaim. *And seven of these series finished in the overall season's top ten!* (These are indicated by the number next to their name in parenthesis, referring to where each of the seven ranked in the overall Nielsen for the season.)

Sunday:
60 Minutes (8)
Murder She Wrote (9)
Family Ties

Monday:
Kate & Allie
Designing Women
Newhart
Cagney & Lacey

Tuesday:
Growing Pains (5)
Wonder Years (10)
Moonlighting
Thirtysomething
Frank's Place

Wednesday:
Head of the Class
Hooperman
Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour
Year in the Life
St. Elsewhere

Thursday:
48 Hours
Cosby (1)
Cheers (3)
Days & Nights of Molly Dodd
LA Law

Friday:
20/20
Beauty & the Beast
Beverly Hill Buntz

Saturday:
Tour of Duty
West 57th Street
Golden Girls (4)

No one individual's list of what she or he judges as quality can be considered definitive, and no reader would

agree with me on every show I've included or excluded; but that even *arguably*, we can now find three hours per night, on average, of quality network fare is, quantitatively, a pres-

What's happening in prime time network television is far from the whole story, for it doesn't take into account the constant quality not available to that fifty per cent of us who are hooked up to cable.

ence of quality never before equalled—even during TV's so-called "Golden Age." But this prime-time network situation is even better than this list suggests, since it does not include the increasingly high-quality specials with their frequent explorations of relationships, conflicts and behaviors, which were heretofore taboo.

Further, what's happening on prime-time network television is far from the whole story, for it doesn't take into account the constant quality now available to that over 50% of us who are hooked up to cable where one can tune at almost any time to an A&E, a Discovery Channel, a CNN, or a C-Span for entertainment or information of a consistently high order, or at almost any moment to at least one basic cable service, superstation or pay service for a movie worth watching. Then, there's also public television (at least when it isn't offering endless investment advice or talk radio-with-pictures to the super-upscale demographics who provide the base of support for its Pledge & Auction Week begathons). Nor does it take into account non-prime time, over-the-air TV, when, on any given day, there will be a Donahue, Oprah, morning news or "ET" segment, a *Nightline*, *Nightwatch*, or a Letterman show, of more than passing interest.

It could well be that "Quality" is the current industry gimmick as T&A/action, westerns, doctor shows, WASP-White, 'warmhearted' suburban families, big-money quizzes, 'social relevance,' or rural comedy each were in past years. In any event, for now, at least, what we *are* seeing is more "quality" than we ever have before.

My major thesis here, that at least as far as prime-time, network fare is concerned, there is more quality available now than ever before in television history, should not be read as an apologia for today's TV—which, when it's bad is very, *very* bad!

The prime-time network schedules still remain predominantly mediocre, or worse. If one accepts my list of quality programs for the latter half of the '87–88 season as definitive, the 21 of the 66 prime-time hours which they comprised, is less than one-third of the total. An NBC schedule still featured the smarminess of a *Facts of Life*, while CBS continued to offer the vigilanteism of an *Equalizer*. And let's not forget last year's ABC paean to the paranoia of the ultra-right, *Amerika*. (As David Letterman remarked the night after that mini-series debuted, what Americans should *really* fear, is a takeover of the country by *ABC*!)

Daytime, network television remains the vastest of wastelands, offering almost nothing more than witless game shows and interminable soaps although the soaps at least dare explore themes which are, for the most part, still no-no's in prime-time. (If gay, miscegenous incest were not an epistemological impossibility, it would be a continuing plotline on at least four daytime serials.)

Local independents—especially those in cabled markets where they face not only the traditional competition of the local affiliates, but the increasing competition from the national superstations as well—are proving more and more willing to give up whole

time segments to anyone willing to pay the bill. Two hour blocks of Falwell or the *700 Club* fill their schedules with promises of salvation for acceptance of Christ and correct political attitudes; not to mention all-night carriage by some indies of shopping networks, along with half-hour-long commercials preying on the gullability of the obese and the financially naive. (I've got a great idea for the ultimate, post-Fowler, Let-the-Marketplace-Decide, television series: it'll be called "Get Thin! Get Saved!—Through Real Estate!")

Worst of all, setting the lowest-lows in exploitation and lack of any moral pretense, are the Saturday morning, network kidvid schedules. It seems a race between those responsible for half-hour-long commercials for Rambo-like toys designed to rot kids' minds, and commercials for sugared cereals designed to rot their teeth. Action for Children's Television's Peggy Charren perhaps best sums up the perversity which obtains here, when she points to the irony of the differences in how recent Kellogg commercials attempted to reach children and adults.

The company, on Saturday mornings, goes all-out in convincing kids to buy Frosted Flakes while in a recent spot aimed at adults and carried in prime-time, a wife tried to show her love for her 43-year old husband by convincing him to give up his sugared, kiddie cereal for a non-sweetened, fortified brand.

"Does this mean you love me," the husband asked. What, then, did this say about the *lack of love* which American women must be similarly manifesting toward their children when they accede to their kids' Kellogg's-induced, insistence that they buy the Sugar Smacks? What did this say about how the networks and the advertisers value children?

In a Reagan-America, the Free Marketplace and The Family are the values which count most. For TV—which seldom leads when it comes to setting social value-agendas, it's clear which, among *these two*, comes first! But then, as those who share the Reagan/Fowler philosophy never tire of reminding us, what sets this nation apart, by way of moral superiority, is that we let the marketplace decide. No wimpy liberals are going to deny even an audience whose median age is six-and-a-half, the right to make its own marketplace decisions. (And so never will we see a close-up of Nancy, in a PSA, telling the youth of America that the next time mom places the bowl of Sugar Puffs in front of them, to "Just Say No!")

Prime-time, network news also is getting worse. As Walter Cronkite used to point out, the copy to fill the 22-minute newshole in a half-hour newscast,

I would still insist that TV on the whole has never been better. This is because the worth of a medium can never be judged on the basis of what percentage of its total output is of merit.

wouldn't come close to filling up the front-page of the *New York Times*. Back when Walter ruled the roost, the soft-feature would run only on exceptionally slow newsdays. As the ratings race between Tom, Dan and Peter has tightened up, it's a rare evening when all three newscasts do not close with the obligatory 'cute' story. This despite polls which consistently show how many of us know so very little—and care even less—about critical public events.

Yet, with all this free marketplace excess, I would still insist that TV, on the whole, has never been better. This is because the worth of a medium can never be judged on the basis of what percentage of its total output is of merit. If that were the case, then books, movies, the Broadway theatre, and the daily

press would all receive failing grades. The true test of a medium's value is not the average or overall quality of its content, but rather the consistency with which one can, at any given moment, find something of quality.

And it is through application of that standard that I'm forced to conclude, that as far as today's television goes, we've never, ever, had it so good!

Postscript:

At the outset I raised the question as to whether the current 'move to quality' in network TV might be merely a "temporal aberrance." As this issue of *TVQ* goes to press, there are some disturbing indications that this may, indeed, just be the case. Gone (or 'on hiatus') from the just-announced '88-89 network schedules are such quality series as *Frank's Place, Slap Maxwell, St. Elsewhere, Cagney & Lacy, The Smothers Brothers' Comedy Hour, Year in the Life, and Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*. The NBC line-up reflects more of a concern with playing it formula-safe than with continuing the innovations which have made that network the current, runaway #1. But perhaps countering this, it must also be noted, is an ABC schedule which does seem to promise some of that risk-taking, quality programming which NBC so successfully pioneered. Let's just hope then, that it's at least a wash! ■

Dave Berkman is Visiting Professor of TV/Radio at Brooklyn College/City University of New York, while on leave as Professor of Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

"QUOTE UNQUOTE"

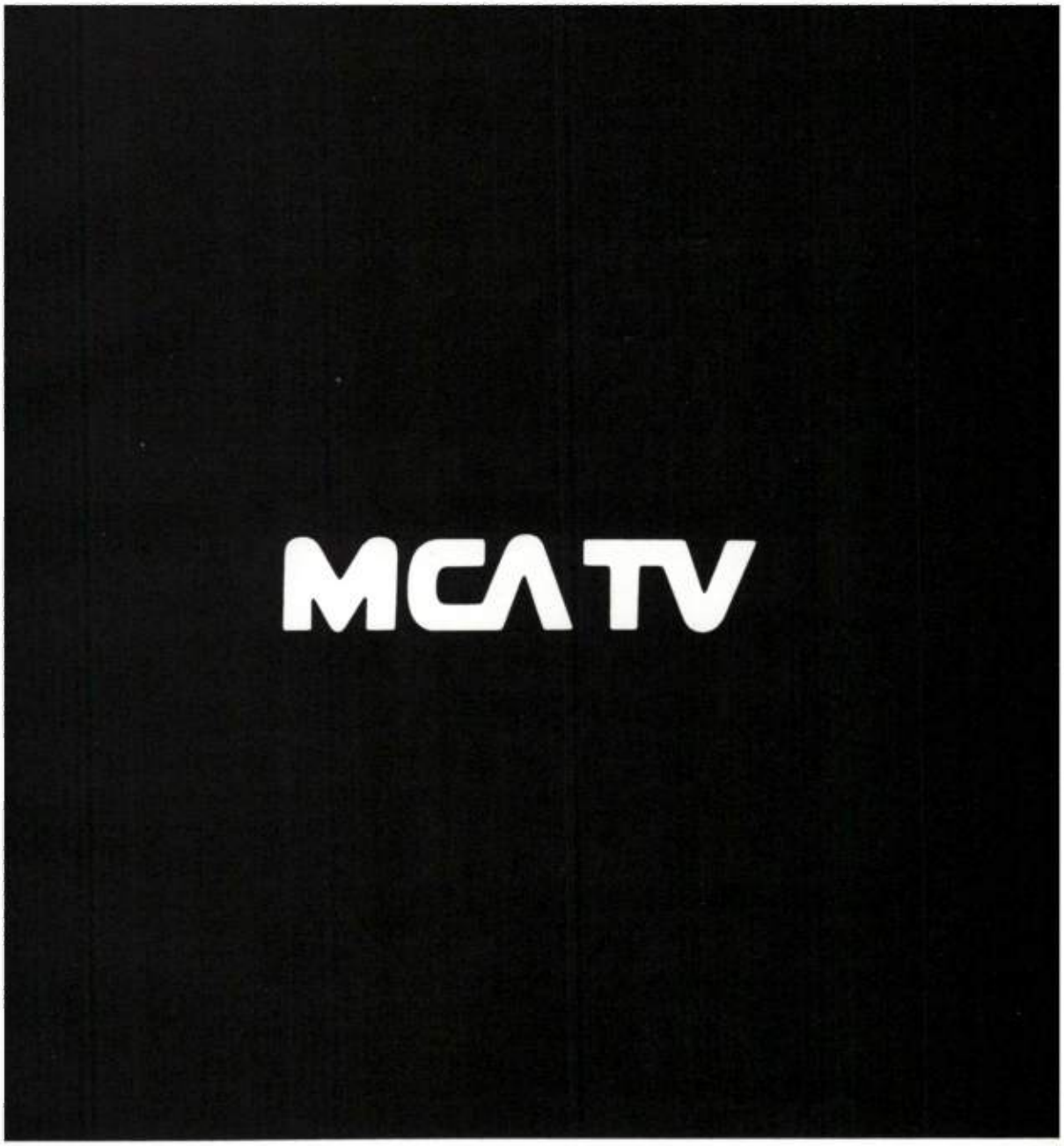
The Vanna Factor?

"Koppell attributes part of the success he has attained to what he calls the 'Vanna Factor', a reference to Vanna White, the letter-turning mannequin on *The Wheel of Fortune*.

" 'Vanna leaves an intellectual vacuum which can be filled by whatever the predisposition of the viewer happens to be,' Koppel told me. . . . 'The viewer can make her whatever he wants.' And so, too, make Ted Koppel."

" 'In theory, I am equally tough on everyone; therefore viewers can project on me their own politics, their own views, their own predispositions. That makes me the beneficiary of a certain public acceptance that I would not have if I were, let's say, a commentator who expressed his own views on subjects, or a politician.' "

—Marshall Blonsky
New York Times Magazine



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NEWS AS DRAMA: MYSTERY AND ADVENTURE IN *60 MINUTES*

A distinguished student of communications and popular American culture offers some new and provocative insights into *60 Minutes* and what makes it tick.

BY RICHARD CAMPBELL

The story unfolds in the streets of Cairo. Diane Sawyer tells us about an alien place, the "city of garbage," within Egypt's capitol. The visuals in the opening shots—troubling to our American middle class consciousness—are difficult to watch. Men, women and children dig through mounds of garbage in search of food and clothing. These are Cairo's outcasts, trash collectors for Egypt's biggest city. They have built their homes and lives atop the rubble they collect.

We meet Sister Emmanuelle, a French nun who has worked as a missionary among these people for 15 years. This October 1987 episode of *60 Minutes* is named after her. Diane Sawyer, in rumpled cotton, khaki and jeans, walks the streets with the nun, who smiles and offers hope. Sawyer interviews her at home—a one-room shack which Sister Emmanuelle describes as better than any Hilton. The missionary shows us her "shower": a pitcher of water she pours over her head. She counsels an outcast couple about their stormy marriage. She practices her English reading Agatha Christie novels. She raises millions of dollars to build a high school. She lobbies Cairo's leading politicians for better conditions. She teaches Diane Sawyer a dance.

By the end of the episode this once foreign place has been transfigured—tamed by the *60 Minutes* narrative which has made the unknown and the foreign accessible to us. This ability of *60 Minutes* to tell stories, to make the unfamiliar familiar, the uncomfortable comfortable, represents both the grace and the sin of the most financially successful news program in American television history. *60 Minutes* both transforms and deforms the world.

Through its mystery and adventure stories, the program enriches by affirming the spirit of heroic individuals—not just Sister Emmanuelle but all of us—who prevail in the face of oppression. But *60 Minutes* also distorts; the on-going experience of Cairo's outcasts is not a 14-minute story. Contradictions persist outside the boundaries of the story's resolution and affirmation. The program takes no social responsibility for the experience it reconstructs as a story. Diane Sawyer and *60 Minutes* leave this place to pursue other stories—and we leave with them. And we'll all be together again next week—same time, different place. We can count on the show to offer mystery and adventure, to tame ambiguity, to unmask villainy, to celebrate integrity, to affirm and sustain us.

60 Minutes premiered in September 1968. It became a Nielsen ratings success during the mid-70s amid a plethora of sitcoms, cop shows, and prime-time soaps. There have been many at-

tempts to account for its hold on viewers and for the meaning of a "popular" news program. Was it the CBS decision to counter Sunday evening children's programming on other networks? Was it the arrival of Dan Rather, fresh from the White House beat and the press' triumphs during Watergate? Was it because, as Mike Wallace argues in his book *Close Encounters*, we discovered the program on Sundays "instead of visiting relatives or going for a late afternoon drive" during the Arab oil embargo. Or was it the program's sense of drama?

Intriguingly, Don Hewitt, creator and executive producer of the program, has offered *60 Minutes*' connection to the storytelling tradition as a key to the program's popularity:

Documentaries were getting the same rating whether they were on ABC, CBS, or NBC . . . the same 15 to 20 percent share of the audience. I said to myself, "I'll bet if we made it multisubject and we made it personal journalism—instead of dealing with issues we told stories; if we packaged reality as well as Hollywood packages fiction, I'll bet we could double the rating."

The program did more than double the rating. In its best year, the 1979–80 TV season, *60 Minutes* won hearts and minds as America's most popular regularly scheduled program.

Hewitt is right, of course. The sustained power of *60 Minutes* rests in its celebration of narrative tradition. In order to make sense of our world, *60 Minutes* adapts familiar story forms long associated with two American fiction genres: the mystery and the adventure story. Within these formulas the reporters of *60 Minutes* perform—not as neutral journalists—but as dramatic characters. Their mission is to make sense of the world through the narrative.*

*My interpretations of *60 Minutes* are based on viewing 75 one-hour programs containing over 210 individual stories—broadcast between 1968 and 1988. Much of my research took place at the Library of Congress in Washington which has a nearly complete copyrighted collection of *60 Minutes*.

NEWS AS MYSTERY

Commercial reporting and detective fiction developed together in the 19th century as products of a gradual cultural and philosophical shift which valued science over religion, realism over romanticism. *60 Minutes* not only advances this tradition of faith in reason—in the individual's ability to figure out "what's going on here"—but one of its story forms has merged reporting practices with the literary traditions of the detective mystery.

The *60 Minutes* mystery formula features characteristics that, on the surface at least, closely resemble those of the classical detective story. This story form identifies a criminal situation and a series of actions to make sense of it: (1) distinguishing victims, villains, and bystanders who provide evidence and obstacles, (2) rebuilding the factors contributing to the criminal violation, (3) revealing the transgressors, and (4) explaining the crime. It is not coincidence that the program precedes *Murder She Wrote*, the only other prime-time classical detective show.

The reporters introduce themselves and the alleged injustices, which may range from political intrigue to deviation from Middle American values to murder. After they identify major characters, settings, and the crime, the reporters often introduce us to other characters who refuse to talk or who try to hinder the search for evidence. But in the end the reporter fits together the puzzle. Like Sherlock Holmes, the *60 Minutes* reporter ends the tale posed in front of the trademark storybook frame, explaining to us at home—armchair Dr. Watsons—the missing evidence, the fate of the villains, and any apparent contradictions.

The *60 Minutes* reporters carry no weapons, but like Jessica Fletcher, rely

on rational instincts and their ability to expose other characters. Like tidy Columbos, they look like detectives, often wearing trench coats when searching for clues. And like their fictional counterpart, the *60 Minutes* detective often succeeds where traditional investigative agencies, victims of mediocrity or inferior intelligence, fail. Finally, following the tradition of the classical detective, we know little about the reporters—about their private lives and values, about their relationship to CBS or to the stories they tell.

Unlike classical detectives, the *60 Minutes* reporters are real; they create and enact TV performances guided by our expectations that detectives solve problems and reveal truth. The character-reporters of *60 Minutes* resolve 14-minute story conflicts and reaffirm that social order is at work in the world. Unlike fictional detectives, these reporters are not lone wolves but employees in a giant media conglomerate. They are dependent on a team of field producers, researchers, editors and others in resolving their stories.

THE CASE OF THE INTREPID REPORTER

Having outlined above the general patterns of a *60 Minutes* detective story, key points can be illustrated by going to sample programs. The mystery episodes of *60 Minutes* often explicitly frame the saga as detective story. For example, in "Warning: May be Fatal" (12/14/75), a story about "potential lethal pollution" of Virginia chemical plant workers, Dan Rather suggests: "What we have here in no small way is a whodunit." Morley Safer describes the "The Julie Affair" (6/10/84) as "one man's horror story of trying to sell the Army a piece of equipment which . . . would save . . . a lot of money." Safer adds that this "saga" is "a Pentagon fable for our time."

Occasionally, reporters make direct allusions to the similarities between their sagas and the classical detective fiction of Doyle or Poe. Dan Rather, for instance, begins "Equal Justice?" (8/24/80), a story about a black New Jersey political candidate allegedly framed for kidnapping, this way: "Tonight the strange case of Mims Hackett." And Mike Wallace introduces "The Stolen Cezannes" (10/14/79) similarly: "The case of the stolen Cezannes is not just the tangled tale of . . . three purloined paintings."

Reporters in these episodes charge off to untangle evidence, stopping first at the place of the violation, where the crime's details and intrigue are recalled. They lead us to areas where clues reside and where the injustice is resolved. In these scenes, *60 Minutes* visually solves one story conflict between safety and danger by displaying the reporter at the scene of the crime, a place once full of peril but now rendered safe by the passing of time and the reporter's presence.

For example, "Land Fraud and a Murder" (3/2/75), a story about organized crime activity in Arizona, involves "dubious land sales" and "shady characters." Morley Safer takes us to a dark stairwell in a public parking garage to reconstruct a murder. He points to blood-stained clues and shows us a newspaper photo with the victim lying in the very place that Safer now occupies. The episode also features safe, intimate interviews where characters reveal clues.

In "The Death of Edward Nevin" (2/17/80), Dan Rather poses on a rooftop in San Francisco to reconstruct the crime: how the government carried out a secret germ warfare experiment in 1950 that led to the death of an innocent man. In a trench coat, Rather demonstrates how villainous government agents collected dangerous bacteria samples. Again the reporter's presence renders this public, once dangerous, place secure. As in most *60 Minutes* episodes, the reporter, fea-

tured in an intimate mid-chest shot on the safe sets of a CBS studio, presents the final summary and explanation.

Another mystery element often includes a segment where the reporter confronts a villain, an unwitting representative of an evil institution, or a bewildered witness or bystander. For example, "From Burgers to Bankruptcy" (12/3/78) tells a story about deception in the food franchising business. Mike Wallace, in a trench coat, confronts an executive from a burger franchising company and tries to spark a response.

When the executive no longer will talk, Wallace stakes out his restaurant and in the parking lot challenges an employee (who nervously tells Wallace, "I'll watch what I'm saying") with information about the executive's past. These dramatic confrontations serve to display the reporter in apparent *danger* so that the tension later can be balanced against the *safety* provided by the reporter's revelation of the crime.

The explanation scene functions as one of the major patterns of action in the detective formula, representing the goal toward which the story flows. That goal: the resolution of the tale's conflict, and the construction of meaningful order amid what at first appears as disorder and chaos.

Some episodes of *60 Minutes* occasionally offer *denouement*—another feature present in certain fictional mystery stories. "Another Elvis?" (8/12/79), for instance, weaves a tale about characters who pay money to shady record companies in return for recording careers. The disreputable president of a Nashville company (who, we learn, had a previous criminal record in forgery and white slavery), is apprehended and subsequently confesses to the reporter, who has caught the villain in a lie. Mike Wallace reports at the end of the episode that this character has "quit the business" and now "thanks" *60 Minutes* for turning his life in an honest direction. In this episode, the reporter dissolves conflict by placing himself between innocent victims and insensitive villains. Ultimately, he wraps up the case, reinstitutes safety, and champions justice as the villain promises to reform.

A major function of the *60 Minutes* mystery formula displays reporters between safety and danger, individual and institution, honesty and injustice. They emerge from these dramatic situations by either resolving the crime or at least presenting a sensible interpretation for us. Implicit in this resolution is the affirmation of moral values such as democracy, individualism, honesty, populism, loyalty, and justice. For example, in "Titan" (11/8/81), where the transgressions are government ineptitude and insensitivity, the narrative constructs tension through a victimized character, a former Air Force sergeant reprimanded by his superiors after he tried to investigate a toxic leak and fatal explosion in a U.S. missile silo. According to the ex-sergeant, "I went down there for God, my country, the flag, my job—everything—I didn't go down there for any other reason. I gave them my all. And what did I get from them [the Air Force]? A letter of reprimand. . . . What about the little guy?"

60 Minutes affirms the ex-sergeant's status as victim by juxtaposing him to the absent Air Force, who as Morley Safer tells us, "absolutely refuses to answer any questions." The reporter repairs conflict between the individual and bureaucracy by supporting the side of the innocent, unsuspecting victim. By affirming honesty and loyalty as individual virtues antithetical to bureaucracy, the story reveals the Air Force as institutional villain.

The previous episode demonstrates an important subconflict in these mystery episodes: the *presence* of victims, heroes, and the *60 Minutes* reporter and the *absence* of villains or menancing institutions. Presence versus absence

generally takes two forms on *60 Minutes*: (1) parties refuse to be filmed or interviewed, and (2) parties simply are not interviewed by *60 Minutes* even though their absence is used as a major story conflict. The absent villain generally represents some form of shadowy business, government, or labor institution.

For example, in "Distressed" (5/3/81), a story about a flourishing Florida county listed by HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development) as an economically distressed area, no top bureaucrat from HUD would grant Safer an interview. He tells us that one institutional representative said: "No way will I sit down for an interview." *60 Minutes* then introduces a General Accounting Office report that criticizes HUD for using 20-year-old statistics to determine distressed areas. Safer's narration, filmed outside the HUD building, displays the agency as a big, insensitive, inefficient bureaucracy under no individual's control.

A second example, "What Killed Jimmy Anderson" (3/2/86), is a story about W.R. Grace, "one of America's largest corporations . . . facing charges it poisoned a Massachusetts community and . . . caused the outbreak of childhood leukemia that killed" a young boy 14 years earlier. The Grace plant appears in distant aerial shots, and Ed Bradley tells us later in the episode:

For more than a month, Mr. Grace declined our request for a video taped interview on 60 Minutes. *No other company spokesman would be interviewed, either. . . . Then on Wednesday, Mr. Grace said he would agree to a* 60 Minutes *interview if it was live and unedited. We declined his offer.*

Once again the villain is absent, kept away in part by a *60 Minutes* policy to control its story. In contrast, the reporter's presence in these episodes, as our representative, affirms values of efficiency, justice, and common sense against the inept, unjust, and garbled countervalues of disembodied bureaucracies.

What empowers detectives with the special ability to find clues and resolve problems? In both *60 Minutes* and classical detective fiction, the power springs from apparent superior intelligence and detachment. Like Sherlock Holmes, the reporters appear in control of the situation and above any kind of personal involvement in the crime under investigation. Reporters assume a more positive position in the story than villains or inept institutions, the counterparts to the bungling and inefficient police of mystery fiction. Their portrayals as *individual* characters—as heroic loners (rather than institutional representatives of CBS News)—grant them superior position in their stories.

A story device best demonstrates the advantageous role of *60 Minutes* reporters. They confront and question characters who are portrayed, at least during a part of the interview, as deviating from Middle American virtues. The reporters use the tough question to call explicit attention to dramatic structure and the role of villains. For instance, "Making of a Murderer" (2/17/85) is a story about a boy who is sexually abused by his adoptive father. The boy later kills the father. During an interview with the social service agency that placed the boy in the home, Morley Safer asks the head of the agency: "Is there a major villain in this tragedy?" She responds, "I think a lot of people share the honor of being the villain." When Safer counters, "And you're one of them?", she answers, "Mm-hum."

Generally, the role of the tough question allows the reporter-detective to express moral indignation against people and positions that violate Middle American values. For example, in "Invade Nicaragua?" (10/27/85), Mike Wallace berates the young chief of staff of Nicaragua's military for naively ac-

cepting weapons from the Soviets. Wallace asks the Sandinista commandante if the Soviets "want a piece of the revolution," and he responds, "No. I don't know what they want . . ."

Like Thomas Magnum, Wallace reacts, "Come on! You know they're not doing it just out of the goodness of their hearts." As hero, Wallace here straddles tensions between communism and democracy, and he re-centers the narrative on the side of democratic ideals. As detective heroes, *60 Minutes* reporters evoke a sense that, in spite of the complexity, they know "what's really going on here."

Another function of the tough question scenes in *60 Minutes* locates the reporter in the middle, between *us* and *them*, between private and public tensions. We perceive the reporter's job as "watchdog" whose role is "to get at the facts" on our behalf. Often these episodes are narrated in the first person point of view where we as audience become part of the reporter's "we." Posing tough questions includes the viewer in the reporter's point of view and clarifies story conflict.

In "Man of Honor" (3/27/83), for example, a story about greed, corruption and murder, Mike Wallace confronts alleged Mafia leader Joe Bonanno about mob killings: "Who orders a hit? Who orders a killing?" Wallace spends much of the episode asking similar questions that reveal criminal values and attitudes antithetical to Middle America. Yet in the final scene—a Bonanno family Christmas dinner—tension is dissolved as virtues of family, tradition and religion displace earlier dramatic confrontations. Bonanno's final words end the scene: "God bless you." And in those words deviance merges with middle class normalcy.

The Bonanno episode offers a narrative framework for transforming the abstract and less familiar categories of deviance and normalcy, tradition and change, into the more concrete and familiar terms of a story structure.

The *60 Minutes* reporter, as heroic detective, champions individualism and integrity in the face of heartless (and often faceless) bureaucracy. As sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues note in *Habits of the Heart*, historically the detective first appeared as a popular cultural hero "when business corporations emerged as the focal institutions of American life. The fantasy of a lonely, but morally impeccable, hero corresponds to doubts about the integrity of self in the context of modern bureaucratic organization." Depicting *60 Minutes* reporters as individual loners, apart from a team of producers, researchers, and editors who construct the story, apart from the powerful CBS media corporation, masks the reporters' institutional identities. This portrayal enhances their story status as resolvers of contradiction, revealers of truth, and affirmers of individualism.

NEWS AS ADVENTURE

Burton Benjamin, the former executive producer of the *CBS Evening News*, contends that *60 Minutes* works because it is "a Western." Don Hewitt argues that his show satisfies because it is about the "adventures" of five reporters. Both Benjamin and Hewitt share a perception of *60 Minutes'* reporters overcoming obstacles to accomplish some moral mission. John Cawelti, author of *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, lists the rich variety among adventure story plots and themes: "the triumph over injustice and the threat of lawlessness in the Western; the saving of the nation in the spy story; the overcoming of fear and the defeat of the enemy in the combat story."

The adventure story formula in *60 Minutes* offers a new variation of the adventure hero: the reporter as tourist. Just as the detective and the commer-

cial reporter grew out of a 19th century faith in science and rationality, the tourist confronts concerns about 20th century America. Historian Jackson Lears notes that at the turn of the century, urbanization and secularization, technology and "prepackaged artificiality" severed connections to "primary experience" and older traditions.

These changes initiated in contemporary America a search for the past, for lost identity, for authentic experience. Just as the detective seeks to resolve problems between honesty and injustice, between safety and danger, the adventure hero of *60 Minutes* tries to fix contradictions between nature and civilization, between tradition and modernization.

Contemporary reporters also search for authentic experience trying to break through the theatrical rhetoric of politicians, the slick PR releases of business, and the spurious handouts of government bureaucrats. *60 Minutes* heightens the drama of this quest by locating its adventure stories either in America's heartland or in the more exotic settings of foreign countries. Viewers, of course, vicariously accompany reporters in this quest to get beyond the artificial.

The adventure stories of *60 Minutes* portray the reporter-tourist (1) acting as our surrogate in exploring and describing the new or unfamiliar, (2) searching for authenticity by trying to recover the past, the natural, and smashing through the facade of contemporary civilization and technology, and (3) confronting villains, usually portrayed as either bureaucracies or modernity itself (often in the guise of modern Americanization).

THE ADVENTURES OF THE ROVING REPORTER

The episodes that portray the reporter-tourist in Middle America often begin by affirming their dramatic structure. For example, Dan Rather as our tourist surrogate, in jeans, travels the country in "Wild Cat Trucker" (2/22/76). He begins the episode, "There's a new brand of folk hero around these days—the wildcat trucker. Like the cowboy and the gold miner and the aerial barnstormer of an earlier era, he's taking his place in Americana." Again in "Charity Begins at Home" (2/4/79), a story about a town that "takes on the state of New Jersey over the issue of welfare," Morley Safer takes us on a tour of small-town America.

Locating the story in the world of fiction, Safer as play narrator begins the tale: "This is one of those *Our Town* kind of stories, and if you were writing it as fiction, there are certain things you'd have to include" such as an ice cream parlor and a hardware store. He adds, "The tale we have to tell is one of those late 20th century American dramas."

Other episodes explicitly connect virtue with these heartland locations. Safer illustrates this connection at the beginning of "The Gospel According to Whom?" (1/23/83), a story about church donations used to fund political causes: "A fairly typical Sunday morning in a fairly typical town. Americans are still among the most church-going people in the world. . . . Logansport [Indiana] is Middle America and proud of it."

In their more exotic travels, *60 Minutes* reporters function in part as tour guides, who take us to unfamiliar, foreign places and remind us of experiences and authenticity elsewhere. To a certain extent, TV news solves the bind experienced by those of us caught in the routine of everyday life; we also seek authenticity and adventure outside our homes. In "Paris Was Yesterday" (4/22/73), for example, when Mike Wallace dines at a Parisian cafe and narrates a sightseeing tour about old and new Paris, he becomes our surrogate, rendering this unfamiliar place accessible and familiar.

In "Oman" (8/24/80), a story about a U.S. military base in the Mideast, Wallace dons shorts and relaxes with a newspaper at poolside. In voice-over narration, he comments about his role in the narrative: "Even Americans aren't especially welcome as tourists," a comment that implicitly includes us in partnership with Wallace—our adventure story hero—as he dares to tour exotic lands.

The episode, "How To Live To Be 100" (7/5/81), illustrates another feature of the adventure-tourist formula. Here Morley Safer notes that a particular community of Russians live long because of their *authentic* lifestyle not covered over with layers of modernity. The reporter lists the community's rules and values: "food from earth, not from a can; hard physical labor, not the so-called leisure years, and above all an unbreakable belief in family life that makes age more important than youth or wealth." A visual counterpart to his narration features a 107-year-old man bathing in the natural setting of a cold mountain stream.

Similarly, in "Yanks in Iran" (1/2/77), Mike Wallace talks to disgruntled American citizens who came to Iran in search of identity and authenticity, but failed. One character, who is leaving Iran after eight years, tells Wallace about other Americans who "think they're coming to the promised land." He then discusses the expenses, drugs, "smog, noise, cars," and other symbols of modernization that have disrupted the Americans' quest. These explicit symbols of *artificiality* pose a set of countervalues to moderation and small-town pastoralism.

In the less exotic heartland tales, part of what is accomplished is not only the authentication of the reporter's presence, but the verification that these places display genuine small-town markers and symbols: the ice cream parlor, the hardware store, the meeting hall, the church, the diner, and main street. The established authenticity and individuality of the small town then is contrasted with the artificiality and impersonality of the big city.

For example, the opening of "Away From It All?" (8/1/76) establishes a quest for an authentic experience that can be found only in a small-town setting. The reporter here asks if we ever had the feeling that we "wanted to get away from it all—pollution, taxes, pressure." Shots of neon signs and congested urban streets, the symbols for the indifferent big city, are then contrasted visually with shots of a lake, a church, an inn, barns, horses, and a waterfall in Dairy, New Hampshire.

Whereas in the foreign-place episodes, the villain is typically modernization or foreign values, in these heartland episodes the villain is more often an institution (located in the artificial city rather than the natural country). Rarely represented visually (as in the mystery episodes), the invisible institution becomes more menacing. For example, in "Rural Justice" (2/22/76), the absent values of the legal profession are opposed to the law and order code of small-town South Carolina magistrates. Contrasted with the urban legal system that demands rural magistrates hold law degrees are these small-town judges, one of whom moonlights as a night watchman.

In emphasizing the importance of humility and individualism, this rural judge tells Morley Safer that he refuses to wear a judicial robe because "it would scare people," and he wants to "make them feel at home. . . . I take this little magistrate's job to heart." While five rural judges are portrayed visually, no one from big city legal institutions appears in this story. The concrete presence of individual magistrates, who connote intimacy and hospitality, contrast here with the law profession, which, reinforced by it menacing absence, connotes unfamiliarity and hostility.

A final aspect of this adventure for-

mula emphasizes modernization or bureaucracy as villain who conceals or destroys authentic experience. In "Rolls-Royce" (6/22/80), which offers us a tour of a British Rolls factory, Safer describes the effects of modernization on authentic experience: "The trouble really is that nothing these days is built to last. . . . We live most of our lives in a junk society. Our durables aren't very durable. But when something is built by hand out of materials given by nature, old-fashioned pride is maintained." Later in the episode Safer, who describes the Rolls auto factory as a "cottage industry" in contrast to the sprawling technology of an American auto plant, questions a British automobile "craftsman": "Well, what's the difference between this and a stamped-out car?" The worker responds, "Well, a stamped-out car is just a stamped-out car, isn't it? I mean, anybody can build them."

In continuing the indictment of the U.S. car industry, Safer asks, "How would you like to work in one of the big auto plants and run a machine that simply punched out one of those doors every ten seconds?" The man responds, "Well, I think it would bore me within two or three hours. . . . I'd sooner use my hands and make it myself." The American auto industry symbolizes bureaucracy and the negative dimension of modernization. A contemporary villain, it holds values counter to tradition and to craftsmanship that Safer finds in another modern corporation but one that preserves pre-modern values.

The tensions between individual and institution, humanity and technology, also play a significant role in the heartland episodes, helping structure our readings of these adventure stories. "Dirty Water" (12/16/84) tells a story about the Prudential Insurance Company allegedly depleting and polluting the water system in a northwest Indiana community. Harry Reasoner dramatically frames the conflict between the "praying mantis" technology of Prudential's fertilization machines and the local farmers and families who see the technology as "a soulless and ominous *Star Wars* creature threatening their heritage, their land, their livelihood."

The adventure episodes, as the above example illustrates, establish central contradictions that organize these *60 Minutes* narratives. The conflict between tradition and modernization is displayed in "Paris Was Yesterday," where Mike Wallace and Janet Flanner, who wrote from Paris for *The New Yorker* for 50 years, recall the authentic Paris of the 1930s. Flanner comments, "Paris was more gracious in its pleasure—more customary. You knew who you were." This authentic, personal vision opposes shots of modern Paris overrun by litter, junkyards, crowds, and quick meal signs; modern buildings are "bogus new towers . . . hatched by vipers" that lack the majesty of the authentic Eiffel Tower. In "Yanks in Iran," shots of traditionally dressed Iranians and plain white homes oppose shots of modern billboards and a sound track of radio ads for Pepsi, 7-Up, Caterpillar tractors, and baseball.

While tension between tradition and modernization generally features events, issues and ideas in opposition, nature versus civilization is a clash of locale where natural settings oppose artificial cities. "The Oil Kingdom" (6/9/74) depicts a tour of Saudi Arabia. Shots of nomadic tribes herding sheep in the desert compete with crowded city street scenes and modern oil rigs. Nature—visually portrayed by the desert, animals, and nomadic tribes—opposes civilization, visually portrayed by a modern city and oil rig technology. In such episodes, symbols for nature often emerge as affirmations of simplicity, purity and pastoralism. Nature is seldom viewed

as wild and menacing but only a positive counterpoint to the evils of modernity.

A minor confrontation in these adventure episodes pits *near* against *far* or *us* (the United States) against *them*—a story device often used in fictional spy stories or in adventure movies like *Rocky IV*. Here generally the villain is some "backward," foreign, or alien set of values. In "Yugoslavia" (2/17/80), for example, Dan Rather interviews a foreign couple who affirm middle class American values in contrast to the apparently more repressive, centralized values of communism. This narrative portrays a view of communist Yugoslavia as a U.S. ally modeled on our own culture. Rather tells the Yugoslav couple, "It strikes me, as you talk, that your life here is very much like middle class life in the United States or England." *60 Minutes* then reveals a scene in a Yugoslav nightclub with the couple out for an evening of dinner and dancing. With "When the Saints Go Marching In" playing in the background, Rather offers this voice-over narration: "The scene is Korcula. It could be Saturday night in Kalamazoo. Dancing to American jazz music mixed with Yugoslav rock. In many other important ways, this is happening in Yugoslav society."

With this episode, *60 Minutes* merges the themes of its exotic foreign land and American heartland formulas. The characters in this story support consumerism and speak proudly of newly purchased middle class conveniences. These individuals from a foreign country appear heroic through association with values of democracy, individualism, and capitalism. The Soviet Union, as the agent for villainous communism, emerges here as a distant institutional force (visually unrepresented in this story). As villain, the Soviets lose the support of individuals or at least the support of this couple who, in spite of life in a communist society, prefer American virtues.

MYTHOLOGY FOR MIDDLE AMERICA

While this essay has concentrated on only two formulas in the *60 Minutes* repertoire, the program generally is much richer and more complex than can be accounted for here. The overall structure of any *60 Minutes* program usually juxtaposes serious dramatic stories with personality sketches, with the comedic monologues of Andy Rooney, and with the "Letters" segment. Reporters seldom perform only *one* role in any individual story. Often a reporter may act as detective, tourist, narrator, social critic, historian, prosecutor, therapist and referee in various episodes. In fact that reporter might enact three or four different roles within the same story. "Mister Right" (12/14/75) serves as a representative example of multiple performances.

In this story, Mike Wallace interviews then presidential candidate Ronald Reagan against the background of his California ranch. In his opening narration, Wallace, as the reporter-tourist, frames the story as a vacation or trip: "*60 Minutes* elected to spend some time with Ronald and Nancy Reagan at home in California." The episode features one interview scene of Wallace in sweater and windbreaker riding in a jeep with Reagan as they analyze the mood and politics of the country.

The choice of setting here suggests an *authentic* American experience—a Western ranch, home to a former movie star who in his films epitomized the mythology of the Western-cowboy hero. *60 Minutes* intersperses clips from old Reagan movies throughout the episode. At one point, Wallace asks him about his presidential plans and whether he could beat Hubert Humphrey. Reagan suggests ("I'd sure give it a good country try") that his own

values rest in the land, in rugged rural settings, away from artificial and big-city modernity.

In addition to his role as tourist in search of an authentic America, an important feature of the adventure story, Wallace wears other hats in this episode. At certain points in his interview with Reagan, Wallace—as prosecutor—confronts him with the accusations that Reagan is a "button pusher," "frightens some folks," "doesn't understand the problems of human beings," and has a "reputation of being insensitive to people at the bottom of the heap."

At another point, Wallace becomes psychoanalyst and asks the Reagans to play a word association game. Wallace tosses out words and phrases—the death penalty, marijuana, abortion, Teddy Kennedy—and asks for the Reagans to respond. At the end of his outdoor interview with Reagan, Wallace in his role as narrator-analyst endows the story with moral meaning. In speaking for "all of us," Wallace comments that Americans are "disillusioned over politics" and "dishonesty" in government. He tells Reagan on behalf of the viewers: "We're always in trouble . . . no matter who we elect." Here the reporter serves as arbiter, suggesting that the value of honesty—the moral antidote to the disease of corrupt politics—is what we seek in our political candidates.

In their role as moral arbiters, the reporters of *60 Minutes* advocate a mythology for Middle America that makes sense of our often contradictory and complex world. The program affirms that individuals through adherence to Middle American values can triumph over institutions which deviate from central norms: allegiances to family, education, religion, capitalism, health, democracy, competition, work, honesty, loyalty, duty, fidelity, moderation, fairness, team play, efficiency, simplicity, authenticity, discipline, common sense, modesty, humility, security, cooperation, and ingenuity. The term "middle" in middle class signifies arbitration of a variety of contradictory social tensions: *us* and *them* liberal and conservative, tradition and change, nature and culture, individual and institution.

60 Minutes stories celebrate the integrity of the individual and affirm virtues that sustain us in the face of contradiction and incomprehensibility. Don Hewitt has argued that a reason for the program's success rests in his own ties to Middle America:

My strength is that I have the common touch. I don't know why this is, because most of the people I hang around with are pretty elite. But Kiwanians, Rotarians, I understand them. . . . Maybe it's because I grew up in New Rochelle, the small town that George M. Cohan wrote "45 Minutes From Broadway" about. It was very Middle American. . . . My mother was a housewife. We were middle class.

Hewitt's small-town middle class history taps into a fundamental impulse in American culture, a nostalgic yearning to retreat from the large scale bureaucracies and institutions that rob our lives of meaning and coherence. We are, each of us, seekers of a moral order that stories often provide.

In its handling of changing social attitudes toward race, men and women, war, the economy, foreign powers, among other issues, *60 Minutes* arbitrates the conflict between tradition and change by applying familiar formulas to a wide variety of experiences. The mystery formula, for example, can accommodate raw experience as diverse as waterfront crime, a Vietnam colonel, spy satellites, racial protests, child pornography, valium, diamond scams, the Teamsters, Brazilian *machismo*, horse doping, art theft, cocaine, and the Nazis, all within repetitive and comforting story forms. Other *60 Minutes* formulas provide similar flexibility in assimilating novel events and issues into a handful of familiar rep-

resentations.

Production techniques also contribute to the story lines and the images of heroic reporters. For example, *60 Minutes* offers its reporters more visual or frame space. The reporters are almost always shot at a greater distance than the characters they interview. Frequently, in the reaction or question shots, characters appear in extreme close-ups—usually with the top of the head cut from the frame. These shots contrast with the medium shots of the reporter, normally shown from mid-waist with space revealed overhead. This greater space granted to the reporters may be read on one level as the print counterpart to detachment and neutrality.

Burton Benjamin, former vice president of CBS News, says the network has a policy not to shoot reporters tighter than interview subjects: "If we did that [i.e., frame reporters in tight close-ups], the reporters would be shown as equal to the figures they're interviewing." But on another level, the greater distance can also be read as support for the function of reporters as heroic. The reporters are endowed with the appearance of more room in the narrative. They have more space within which to operate. They appear in greater control. Victims and villains are shot in tighter close-ups; they appear in less control and often cut off from the place around them.

The preferred shot for the reporters on *60 Minutes* is the *middle* or *medium* shot which symbolically centers the reporter (and us) in a region between close-ups and long shots where story problems are usually solved, where heartland virutes are affirmed. In more recent episodes—Ed Bradley's January 1988 interview with Lee Hart, for example—interviewees and reporters sometimes are juxtaposed in similar close-up shots. This production technique, which enhances intimacy, appears most often in stories in which there are only two major characters—the interview subject and the reporter.

NEWS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Celebrated and admired for their performances in independent roles, the reporters of *60 Minutes* often act as an arm of social justice on behalf of individuals. Mike Wallace in his autobiography, *Close Encounters*, argues that viewers regard the program as a dramatic "unofficial ombudsman":

[B]y the late 1970s . . . I kept bumping into people who jumped at the chance to alert me to some scandal or outrage that was ripe for exposure on 60 Minutes. They would give me vivid accounts of foul deeds and the culprits perpetrating them, and urge me to take appropriate action: "You really should look into this, Mike. . . ."

Certainly a large number of episodes conclude with *60 Minutes* serving explicitly as ombudsman—reporters calling for congressional investigations, redressing government oversights, and championing individual rights in the face of bureaucratic ineptitude. These stories portray a heroic press, a "fourth estate," monitoring abuses of power and breakdowns in our value system. A key dimension of this heroic function is to move people to social action. Morley Safer acknowledges this power in a follow-up report at the end of a December 1979 broadcast:

And an update on our story on Marva Collins, the Chicago school teacher ["Marva," 11/11/79]. That story brought a deluge of mail to both 60 Minutes and to Marva Collins. A lot of viewers sent her money, money enough for Marva to be able to expand and train other teachers in her no-nonsense method of educating.

Another example occurs in an update of a January 24, 1988 episode, "Brown v. Koch," a story about street person Joyce Brown who was committed against her will to a psychiatric ward by the city of New York. Harry Reasoner tells us at the end of the February 21, 1988 program that Brown has been released by the city. She has, in part because of the *60 Minutes* story,an apartment, a part-time job, and "a half dozen book and movie offers to sort through. And last week she lectured at Harvard Law School. The subject—*The Homeless Crisis: A View from the Street.*" While these kinds of updates convey pride in the program's ability to move us or bureaucracies to action and change, this is not an explicitly acknowledged goal of the program; it is only regarded as a happy accident, an afterthought—an "update"—rather than an important mission of the program.

Like much of the news media, *60 Minutes* narrowly conceives its role as responsible ombudsman. Although the program does take pride in its role as watchdog and social advocate, it still exalts in the role of news media as neutral observers of experience—a stance it shares with conventional print journalism. Most reporters acknowledge responsibility for their taken-for-granted techniques and practices, *not* for experiences they routinely transform into news stories.

NEWS AS DRAMA

Cultural products—including television news—perform two important and contradictory functions. On one hand, they provide us with shared values and meanings; they offer a sense of routine and unity through their familiar and accessible structures. On the other hand, they help us deal with the new and different; they provide us with contexts for confronting ambiguity and idiosyncracy. *60 Minutes* ultimately performs both functions in part through its formulaic structure.

As prime-time drama, *60 Minutes* is caught in a bind between its power to both enhance and distort the world. It is the *60 Minutes* reporters who enrich each story through their character performances and who reinstate sense amid contradiction from week to week. The grace of *60 Minutes* is its ability to help us see, to show us complexity and contradiction and still reclaim individual integrity and a moral social order.

The sin of *60 Minutes* is that experiences it reconstructs in its weekly episodes are not fictional dramas imagined in the minds of creative artists. Instead events of actual suffering, joy and human complexity are appropriated and reconceived by a news organization, often as melodramatic tales. In part, *60 Minutes* stories offer reassurance and order in a world where experiences sometimes refuse to cohere.

Melodrama renders our world transparent and soluble; *60 Minutes* often does the same thing. We are often seduced by news narratives which show us a reconstituted moral order without drawing us actively into responsibility for that reconstitution. Like the conventional reporter, we—the audience—are too often detached, comforted by the familiarity of the story and its ability to insulate us from actual experience.

The stories of *60 Minutes* penetrate deeply into American consciousness. The detective taps into our desires for truth, honesty, and intrigue. The tourist cherishes adventure, tradition, and authenticity. The reporters help us interpret complexity. In this way they extend the possibility of enriching rather than merely simplifying experience. What *60 Minutes* offers its large audience through the mystery and adventure formulas is the comfort

of a *touchstone*, a center to go back to (or start out from) each week. The power of the program rests in its ability to both disclose and enclose, reform and deform experience and secure a sense of place, a *middle ground* extolling Middle American virtues.

The great irony of *60 Minutes* is the anti-establishment (actually anti-institution is more accurate) label that is often hung on the program. What is masked in the narrative process is that the reporters—who often appear as heroic loners—actually work for a large news conglomerate and that the program itself has become a cultural institution. In addition these reporters who in real life represent a certain elite, East Coast, upper middle class value system affirm in their stories virtues more central to American heartland sensibilities.

These contradictions are concealed in the transformation of experience into news formulas. But this is what American television is often about. The most important role that *60 Minutes* may play in American culture is the construction, maintenance and repair of a Middle American mythology that holds us together amid all the contradictions.

60 Minutes and TV news are often criticized for being dramatic—for blurring lines between fact and fiction, between information and entertainment. Only on rare occasions and usually in retrospect (JFK's assassination, civil rights, space travel, Vietnam War coverage, for example) do critics acknowledge the power of TV's visual language to reveal, explain and sometimes change the world. But most often TV news is blamed for not being print journalism—as if newspapers have some kind of superior territorial claim on explanation and sense.

The print bias against television mostly stems from our cultural obsession with a romanticized past, with traditional ways of doing things—and TV hasn't been around long enough to suit most reporters and editors. But print has no special language for interpreting the world—it also uses the devices of storytelling. After all, we call them news *stories*. Newspapers, however, often pretend to hide the narrative impulse in the inverted-pyramid, hard-news style of conventional reporting. But that's still storytelling—only with the passion and heart ripped out.

60 Minutes at its best restores the passion and heart. The lesson the program offers for all journalism is that storytelling—with all its limitations—is the best way we have to make sense of our world. And while Joan Didion reminds us in *The White Album* that writers and reporters must take special care in imposing the narrative on experience, she also appreciates that "we tell ourselves stories in order to live." ■

Richard Campbell, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Michigan, holds a Ph.D. in Radio, Television and Film from Northwestern University. He has worked as a print reporter and a TV and radio news writer. His book, *60 Minutes: Mythology for Middle America*, is forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press. He has also written on *60 Minutes* for the journal *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*. **He would like to thank David Eason and Don Kubit for their insights.**

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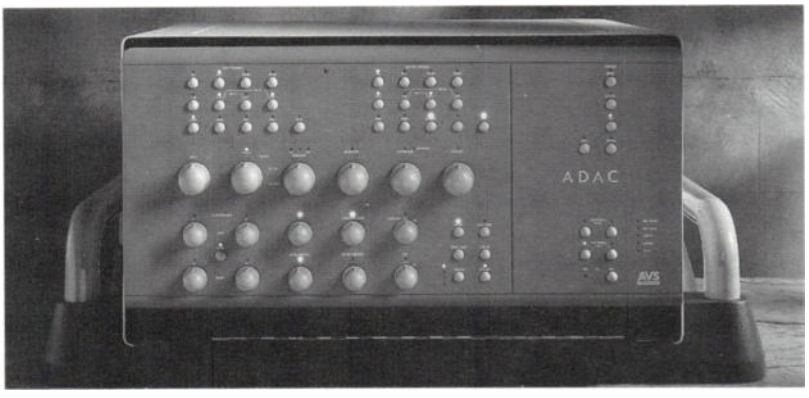

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THE TRUTH ABOUT VANNA

Round and round the *Wheel of Fortune* spins, and a young woman named Vanna White finds fame and fortune. How and why?

BY JIB FOWLES

One of the grander mysteries of these times remains the celebrity of Vanna White. For apparently doing nothing more than being a hostess on the television game show *Wheel of Fortune*, Vanna has become a central personage of the 1980s. Her fame has reached the point that, like Cher or Dolly, she now only needs one name. And yet her performance is highly repetitious, essentially wordless—not the usual star performance at all. What is going on?

It does not do much good to ask Vanna herself. She lightly replied to one interviewer, "I have no explanation. My gosh, I just turn letters on a game show." *Newsweek* magazine, hard put to come up with an answer, decided that her renown was "proof of TV's power to bestow celebrity on absolutely anybody, just as long as that anybody appears on the tube with some regularity."

If the *Newsweek* analysis were true it would surely gladden the hearts of television executives, since it depicts their institution as omnipotent. But it credits television with a might which it demonstrably does not have. Hundreds of performers appear regularly on the screen, yet very few of them have achieved the fame which Vanna has. Instead of creating stars, what the medium does is to offer up numerous candidates for stardom. The viewing public sorts through the ranks of televised performers and selects the few who will be elevated to a high station.

Vanna is one of those rare ones who have been anointed. It took a few years—she joined the show in 1982 and it was not until late 1985 that celebrity struck—but it has indisputably happened. Her personal appearances in cities around the nation draw thousands of wide-eyed fans. Back in Hollywood, the mail pours in; she receives about 300 letters daily. Every day several hundred Americans at home will sit down and carefully compose letters to someone they have only seen on their television sets. They will take the trouble to address their letters correctly, to stamp and post them. They may not correspond with their own mothers, but they will make this overture to their beloved Vanna.

"I still feel like the same person," Vanna has insisted about her popularity. "The only difference is when I walk through airports, I hear people say, 'There's Vanna White.' " No wonder the murmur of recognition goes up. In a nation of some 240 million people, about 40 million turn on their sets daily to watch her nimbly revolve the game's letters.

Again, what is going on?

To understand the reasons behind the public acclaim for Vanna White, the first thing to consider is the context

within which she appears to the audience. She is showcased in *Wheel of Fortune*, the most popular game show on television, the most viewed of all syndicated programs. Both a daytime version and a somewhat fancier nighttime one are produced. When it runs in the evenings, *Wheel of Fortune* often competes with local news programs, usually beating them in the ratings. According to the show's originator, television personality and producer Merv Griffin, "The show drives TV news departments crazy. They live in fear that *Wheel of Fortune* will go against them. The combination of the game and Vanna is awesome competition." The show and the star reinforce each other, and strengthen each other's popularity.

At bottom, *Wheel of Fortune* is about consumption, that singular pursuit of American life.

Should there be any uninitiated left, the show works like this: three contestants, non-celebrities, will vie to be the first to identify a commonplace expression. When his turn comes, a contestant will spin a large wheel to see what the dollar value of a correct letter guess will be. (Or the wheel can bring bad luck by landing on "bankrupt.") Whenever a player correctly guesses a letter used in the hidden expression, Vanna, all 5'6" of her, will stride across the stage in her pumps and turn the letter into view. Enough turns are taken, enough letters are exposed, and one contestant will figure out the expression. The high point occurs when the winner gets to spend his earnings by picking from an array of goods which are displayed with their prices.

It is a simple game involving a modicum of information on the contestant's part, a certain amount of luck, and a pay-off in the form of consumer items. As such, it is a nice little allegory of existence in modern times. The average person, with only everyday knowledge, can by applying himself (and skirting bad fortune) achieve desirable rewards. The game encapsulates the American way of life, but in a wonderfully purified version, since there is always a winner and always prizes. The viewer can vicariously experience a struggle—not too hard to be discouraging—and a triumph.

At bottom, *Wheel of Fortune* is about consumption, that singular pursuit of twentieth century life. Never in all of human history has such a large proportion of a populace had the means to obtain so much, from such a cavalcade of available goods.

The show stimulates purchasing behavior, by holding out goods as the ultimate reward for successful effort and by presenting those goods in a marveling manner to the gaze of the audience. It whets Americans' appetites for the pleasures of possessions, pleasures which are signalled in the gleeful countenances of the winners. According to the show's staff, viewers from around the country call in to inquire where particular items can be bought. The audience of the program increased greatly in 1983 when the release of the evening version coincided with a post-recession surge in consumption.

In this celebration of consumption, Vanna plays an important role, which goes partway towards explaining the favor she has found with Americans. The obstacles to be gotten past on the way to the treasured goods are the quizmaster, Pat Sajak, with his sometimes derisive humor, and what Pat knows—the secreted expression. Vanna appears to be on the contestant's side, encouraging by look and gesture, applauding when letters are correctly identified.

"I think of my job as that of a cheerleader," she has remarked, with accuracy. When she is introduced at the start of each episode with the words

"Oh, Vanna," and steps out from behind the curtain, it is a magic moment, met with enthusiasm on the parts of studio and home audiences, because she is to be the one who will usher people from the immediate world of ignorance and deprivation into the next, that of revelation and largess.

She is the High Priestess of Consumption: in the modern age, there could hardly be a more symbolic figure.

In interviews when she reflects upon her role in the program, Vanna always stresses that she not only "teases" (that is, gestures in an appreciative manner) the prizes, like the attractive females on other game shows, but that she also participates directly in the contest when she turns the letters. Although this might at first seem to be an inconsequential matter, it turns out to have ceremonial significance. Because she is perceived to be assisting contestants through the ritualistic struggle, her association with the treasures at the end becomes even stronger. She is the High Priestess of Consumption; in the modern age, there could hardly be a more important symbolic figure.

For ceremonies to create wonder and awe among observers, it is important that the participants in them be appropriately garbed, and Vanna carries out this duty to the hilt. She is sumptuously dressed, which was part of Merv Griffin's intuitive strategy for her: "I wanted to see Vanna in a great-looking dress every day." Before each taping session she will spend an hour being cosmetically made up. Her hairdo receives even more attention, with the result that, as she once noted, "The main subject of my mail is my hair." Elaborately coiffured and attired, she plays a priestess par excellence.

But all this does not fully explain why Vanna is a star. The pervasiveness of the medium she appears in, the popularity of her particular show, the way her role resonates with underlying dynamics in contemporary life—these factors go some ways towards accounting for her celebrity, but not all the way. Others could be in the same situation and would still not be stars. After peeling away the layers of medium, program, and role, what is found at the core is Miss Vanna herself. And that individual is what makes the difference.

Merv Griffin, who personally selected her for the job on *Wheel of Fortune*, has said, "Vanna's the only person I've ever picked on looks alone. I didn't care what came out of her mouth." But what is there about her looks that is so remarkable? She is a blonde—more blonde as the years go by, in fact—and the American audience has long exhibited a favoritism for that hair color. She has a trim and youthful figure (although she is over 30), something else the public has demanded of its female stars. But the key, as Griffin has occasionally mentioned, is that Vanna has a large head size in proportion to her body: "If you look at major stars over the years—Gloria Swanson, Joan Crawford, Marilyn Monroe—they all had big heads, with big facial features—and the camera loves big features. I told my staff to look at Vanna's close-ups. I said, 'Her features jump out at you.' "

Griffin is offering an important insight. When the film industry was just beginning, movie-makers learned through trial and error that the paying public liked shots tightly framed on the faces of leading performers. The face was to be emphasized because there movie-goers could read the emotions and feelings which so intrigued them. And could go on to develop a sense of intimacy with the performer's personality. It was large visages which lent themselves to this dramatic technique.

Vanna's disproportionately large face is an invitation to the audience to thoroughly know her. And what do viewers perceive? "She's got a wonderful sweetness," as Merv Griffin has pointed out. That says it all. It is the niceness of Vanna that is the essence of her character. There are no complexities in evidence, no quirks. There is nothing at all discordant or strident about her. Vanna White, as her name suggests, is plain vanilla.

Her kind and obliging nature is pantomimed in her actions on the program. Her motions and expressions are of a pleasantly encouraging sort up to the point that a correct letter guess is made. Then she alertly and precisely responds; gracefully she does one's bidding. The deferential quality of Vanna is highlighted by the fact that, with the exception of saying "Bye bye" at the end, her performance is mute. She is the person with whom one would never have to get into verbal exchanges. No utterances can mar her appearance.

This is the type of star the American audience avidly wants now—the quintessential "sweet thing." Some might scornfully comment that her attributes—pretty, diminutive, silent—are those of a Barbie doll, but clearly they represent a definite preference on the part of the public. Why should this be so?

It would come as no surprise to learn that stars, created through public fascination, serve very important cultural purposes. Often whatever is unresolved deep within a culture gets projected upon the ranks of stardom; the stars who are representatives of the vexing issue are also premonitions of the resolution to come. Thus in the 1930s, when the Great Depression caused fertility rates to sink to historic lows, a barren nation developed an ardor for child stars like Shirley Temple (the top box office attraction for four years running). A stymied urge to procreate was partially assuaged through the public's choice in stars. When the birth rate began to rise again in the 1940s, the problem was resolved and the audience lost interest in the tiny performers.

The 1950s similarly witnessed the rise of a type of star who symbolized an uneasiness deep within the culture and who was predictive of social changes to come. In a decade of great social conformity, when the norms for family and national life had stiffened, repressed needs for narcissism and excitement found their embodiment in the Hollywood anti-heroes like James Dean and Marlon Brando. These stars foreshadowed the nonconformist, counterculture ethic which was to rise in the 1960s.

A parallel situation may be at work in the case of Vanna White. She is the epitome of a type of woman slighted over the last two decades but perhaps soon to be in the ascendancy. The 70s and 80s produced female stars like Jane Fonda, Barbra Streisand, Cher—women of some complexity, purpose, determination. They could do it all, and on their own terms. They were the type that American women wanted to be, and that American men wanted to learn to consort with.

The public likes what it sees in Vanna, because she symbolizes traditional norms of behavior; her fame presages their return.

Fundamentally, Vanna's image is the opposite. She is not profound, not driven, not intimidating. She radiates warmth and accessibility. The fact that she is currently unmarried plays into the fantasies of male viewers. Merv Griffin observed, "We were first aware of the Vanna phenomenon in our executive offices, where we got requests for her picture from men—which is unusual for a daytime TV game show."

But it is not men alone who respond to her. The women of America do also, not simply because she is pleasant and open, but because apparently she models what they want to draw closer to.

It is not stretching things to say that Vanna may be the harbinger of substantial social change. The cultural pendulum, having swung far in one direction, is now starting its move towards the other. The public likes what it sees in Vanna because she symbolizes traditional norms and behaviors; her fame presages their return. Her sweet and even temperament is a new personality pattern for women. She signifies interpersonal values, as opposed to the frayed "me-first" personal ones of the last twenty years. Her loyalty to Merv Griffin and Pat Sajak are conspicuous parts of her image. Her beloved mother was the person to whom her autobiography was dedicated.

In that book Vanna affirms that she is a homebody; there is no reason to believe otherwise. She may not presently have a mate of her own, but she radiates companionableness. If Americans are about to begin playing house ever more seriously, then Vanna is ushering the nation into a new era where Barbies and Kens will be seeking each other out.

Finally, in addition to having an open expressive face, huggable proportions, and a congenial disposition, there is the matter—how to put this delicately?—of breast size. When family formation once again becomes a contemplated activity, where fertility is in the air, as happened after World War II, then the public begins to want female stars with a larger bosom. And Vanna, by her own admission, is busty.

Once performers have risen to the top echelon of public adulation, then typically their careers enter another stage, where more details of their lives, past and present, are meted out to the eager audience. These details provide texture to the star's image, and help the public and the entertainer adhere to each other. The supplying of these supplementary bits of personal history is what the best-selling autobiography *Vanna Speaks* accomplished when published in 1987.

Picking it up, the reader learns that she cares for her job. O.K., no surprises there. And that she enjoyed an idyllic childhood growing up in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. That she loved her parents, her brother, her hometown. No news here either. This could get pretty cloying if she is not careful.

Her favorite childhood toy was a Barbie doll; was that an omen? More clearly prophetic was her first trip to New York City at age 14: "Of all the sights, my favorite was our visit to NBC, where we watched a taping of the TV game show *Concentration* with Hugh Downs." And wouldn't you know it, her ambition was to be a model and television star.

But then come the nettling little details, some directly contrary to her image, that bring her story back from the edge of mawkishness. Into the picture of her as the ideal All-American girl must be added the fact that her natural father was Puerto Rican-born. She grew up with a stepfather, and he and her mother eventually separated, so her family life was not flawless.

Once, in a period of desolation, she even got fat! That perfect size five figure distended, bloated? Now she is beginning to sound like a real person.

Also, she has been exposed in photos! Naked! Twice! Well, not really. Shots cribbed from a lingerie modeling assignment ran in *Playboy*. And a photographer with an observatory-size telephoto lens got some blurry snaps of her sunbathing topless in her own backyard. This is hardly Vanessa Williams-caliber scandal. But it does lend piquancy to her image. And this is why readers, in their attempt to get to know

Vanna better, flocked to buy the book.

The two incidents in *Vanna Speaks* which do the most to breathe life into her image concern the death of her mother, and the death of her longtime fiance, John Gibson. Her mother, whom she dearly loved, died slowly and painfully from cancer; Vanna returned to South Carolina from Los Angeles and spent the final months nursing her. Gibson, for five years her constant companion, succumbed in the crash of a small private plane he was piloting. Vanna has known tragedy, and has gotten past it. Recognizing this, the audience feels all the closer to her.

But as Americans sense they are getting to know everything about Vanna, another trait begins to emerge: in the last analysis she is private, even shy. In this respect she resembles a surprising number of other stars who are extroverts in performance but introverts in their personal lives. Being reserved, she cannot be totally possessed. The public's fascination with her will never be entirely satiated.

Having won a spot in the hearts of Americans, Vanna is now in a position to exercise her celebrity just as other stars do. She can use her standing with the public to exert influence. She gives counsel; her advice is sought and taken. Much of it in her book is of a prosaic sort ("Watch that scale!" and "Again, accessories are the key."), but it is prized by many.

As a star, she can have direct influence upon Americans' buying habits. People bring out their wallets to purchase her book or her poster. Her image sells her own lines of jewelry and clothing. She has endorsed a number of other products and boosted their sales.

All this multiplies the reported $100,000 annually which she receives from *Wheel of Fortune*, but it also multiplies her fame. The ubiquitous poster, the pictures of her in merchandising and advertising, reinforce her stature with the public, and her popularity continues to build.

Where will all this end? It is less likely that her celebrity will soon be extinguished, and more likely that she has caught a wave which will roll forward towards the 21st century, carrying her along on its crest. It involves the return of traditional values, firmer allegiances, age-old gender roles, stronger households.

For this massive change in American culture, and for her evolving performance at the front of it, television is the preferred medium. Vanna has always had a strong sense of her own destiny, and when contemplating her future has ventured, "My all-time secret goal is to be in a series like *The Donna Reed Show*." Television producers can line up on the right. ■

A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, Jib Fowles is professor of media studies at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. He is currently completing a book titled *Rising Stars and Falling: The Celebrity Performer and the American Public*.

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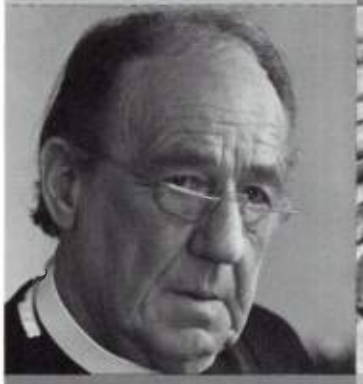

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THE PEOPLEMETER: WHO, WHAT, WHEN AND WHY

BY BERT BRILLER

A little box, smaller than a shoebox, is shaking up television, and changing the way the medium is produced and watched, bought and sold. The introduction of the peoplemeter—the *Box Populi* threatening to become the *Vox Populi*—is having serious consequences, since its introduction into televisions's rating system.

This new electronic device has brought with it chaos and fear. Only a couple of months after its debut, the networks already were estimating a $50,000,000 revenue loss, due to giving advertisers make-good spots to compensate for those that didn't deliver peoplemeter ratings as high as guaranteed.

Not only networks, but performers and producers, gaffers and go-fers are ultimately paid less or more according to the size of the audiences they reach—and if peoplemeters measure fewer viewers, then paychecks shrink.

The three network's peoplemeter ratings for 1987–88 were down 9% vs the previous season's ratings on the old method. Some of the erosion was due to more competition. However, the other competitors were down too. The 25 top syndicated shows declined a sizable 13%. Individual cable networks and the new Fox network did not benefit significantly. The impact of the new measuring system has been general.

Creative people are fearful of things mathematical, and ratings are based on statistical principles with arcane terms and Greek letters. In addition, they are afraid of change, and the technology of audience measurement and its methods are being drastically altered—with significant consequences in how this business operates.

Even research experts are tearful and fearful. Some even more frightened than the rest of us.

So a certain amount of apprehension is understandable. Controversy, for sure. And questions! The name of this game is Plenty Questions, and all are not likely to be answered for months. This article will try to explain the hows and whys of the new systems, with a minimum of technical terms and statistical jargon.

Something New Was Needed

A new method of counting the viewers was needed. For years advertisers have been emphasing the *who* in their marketing and media strategies. Whether the viewer in a home is the 55-year-old father, the 21-year-old daughter or 14-year-old son can make a considerable difference to a program's sponsor. Moreover, marketers have become increasingly sophisticated, targeting very specific prospective customers in terms of education,

occupation, geography and other demographic characteristics.

At the same time, what once was a three-network audience has been increasingly fragmented among more and more program sources—including independents, super stations, basic and pay cable systems and video recorders. The existence of this more diversified audience alone called for a more sophisticated method of audience measurement.

For a generation, the major method of determining the number of homes using television nationally at a particular hour has been through the Nielsen Audimeter. This is an ingenious device installed in the sets of Nielsen's sample homes. Moment by moment a microchip records on tape whether the set is on, and to what channel it's tuned.

Of course, it records what *channel* the set is receiving, but doesn't note *who* is watching—or when folks walk out of the room leaving only Spot or Tabby minding the screen. To keep tabs on just who *is* watching, Nielsen used a supplemental diary method. A member of the family wrote down who was watching what, timeslot by timeslot. And that information was collated with sets-in-use data from the Audimeters.

Weaknesses of Diary System

It's easy to spot some weaknesses of the diary system. Does Mom, who usually inherited the job, know precisely what Sis and Johnny are watching in their rooms? What happens when she is too busy to write in the information and tries to catch up from memory?

Some tougher questions began emerging in recent years as viewing choices multiplied. Most homes can receive at least ten over-the-air signals and cable families get another dozen (or more) channels. Identifying and recording viewers of all these program sources became a very difficult job for the diary system.

Another impetus for a new system is the fact that the more detailed the information wanted, the larger the sample needed for reliability. If you are only interested in tallying households, a sample of 1,700 is sufficient. But when your focus is on narrow groups, such as working women aged 21–35, or older college-educated businessmen, larger samples are needed. So the new systems are aiming eventually to have samples of 4,000 households, more than double the 1,700 Audimeter homes Nielsen had been using.

Each week now Nielsen is spewing out over 38,000,000 bits of data to each of the networks, a ten-fold increase over last year. And the cost to the networks is up 30%, not counting personnel and computers.

A Long Time Coming

The idea of the peoplemeter is not new. Back in 1957, Nielsen engineers developed an ingenious pillow-like device hooked up to the chairs in the living room. It could record when Dad was ensconced in his lounger, Mom was seated in her place on the sofa and the kids in theirs. As John Dimling, Nielsen's executive vice president and group marketing director, put it, this gave new meaning to the phrase "seat-of-the-pants research." But, he adds, by 1977 Nielsen had a new push-button gadget which it tested in Florida. Based on that experience, the research giant developed the device it is using today. This allows viewers to record their viewing by pressing buttons, either at the set or using a hand-held unit.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, competition was raising its enterprising head. AGB Television Research began exploring peoplemeters ten years ago. (AGB stands for the founders' initials, although some sources call it Audits of Great Britain.) The

British invaded America in 1985, launching a 22-month test in Boston. That move triggered Nielsen to speed up its timetable.

AGB has been metering individuals' viewing in European and Asian countries. But the number of channels in those lands is far fewer—and therefore a far less complicated task—than in the U.S.A. Here we have several time zones, competing rating companies, cable as well as over-the-air sources and a host of factors that require more service and capitalization. AGB made an investment estimated at $40,000,000 to start its people-counting system here.

David vs. Goliath

Despite AGB's relatively large investment in this country, it's a David-vs.-Goliath contest. Nielsen is part of Dun & Bradstreet Corp., which had revenues over $3 billion in 1986. Although AGB calls itself the world's fourth largest research company, it is nowhere near D&B in size. Its U.S. operation was reorganized to bring in American capital.

AGB's appearance resulted in both it and Nielsen rushing their counting boxes to work for the start of the 1987–88 season. The opening was something like Pandora's.

One trouble was their hardware, which is intrusive. The AGB system starts with a *handset* (about the size of a VCR remote control unit) with numbered buttons. Each member of the family gets a designated number and presses that button when he starts viewing and again when he stops. In addition, there are buttons for up to nine guests.

There is a handset about the size of a VCR remote control unit for every telly in the home. On top of each set there is a *monitor*, a small box which displays what buttons the family has pressed. If the set is on and no buttons are pushed, it flashes for ten seconds at ten-minute intervals to remind viewers to use the buttons. Meanwhile, the monitor is recording which channel the set is tuned to and which buttons have been pressed.

Each home in the sample also has a *collector box*, which is programmed to gather the information from all the monitors in that household and call the information to AGB's central computer in Columbia, Maryland during mid-night hours. And later that morning the ratings are fed to subscribers.

Nielsen's hardware includes a handset, about the same size as AGB's. It has eight numbered buttons, one for each family member. Viewers can use that or a larger unit sitting on top of the set. This also has the eight numbered buttons, plus two for visitors (male and female) and two for indicating each visitor's age. It also has lights to indicate which buttons have been pressed and to prompt viewers if no button has been pressed.

The viewing data is transmitted to Nielsen's central offices and by morning the ratings are relayed simultaneously to the networks in New York and Los Angeles. In those offices and at ad agencies and program production companies, reputations rise and fall and important decisions are made depending on "the numbers."

Potential Benefits

The new technology has other advantages and possibilities. Both AGB and Nielsen have equipment that can monitor the recording and playing back of network programs by VCRs in the home. This includes the ability to determine when commercials have been zapped or zipped fast-forward. It will soon be possible to report on when a VCR is playing back any over-the-air or cable programming through use of an encoding system.

In the AGB method, which it calls "fingerprinting," a special meter is placed behind the VCR and when it is taping automatically records the date,

time and channel number on a continuous basis. During the playback the program and channel "fingerprint" is identified along with the persons-viewing data. Fast-forwarding of commercials is also noted. The good (or bad) news is that ad agencies will know if their commercials are being zipped.

By September 1987, just before the new television season started, there was a head-to-head slugfest, with each company issuing its overnight peoplemeter ratings. As might be expected, the results differed.

For the first full week of reporting, AGB showed NBC in first place, followed by CBS and ABC. But Nielsen's peoplemeters showed ABC in first, NBC second and CBS third. And the old Nielsen audimeter/diary system showed NBC in the top spot, with ABC and CBS following.

Actually, the differences were relatively small in prime time, with no more than three share points separating the contenders. And the data were not too significant, as most of the programming was still repeats. But every rating point counts for 886,000 households and big advertiser bucks.

Worth noting was the fact that the combined three-network ratings totalled 33.4 under the old Nielsen system, compared with 31.9 under Nielsen's new system and only 30.4 as reported by AGB. This points up one of the complaints the networks have with the new method—the smaller audiences it credits to the webs. Network audience has been eroding, but not as much as peoplemeters indicated.

Button, Button . . .

A question the networks ask is, are all viewers equally buttoned up in pushing the buttons? Do kids use the handset conscientiously? Does Mom pick up the new technology as enthusiastically as she picked up the diary?

Nielsen conducted a large, extensive test, together with the Committee on Network Television Audience Measurement which includes network and industry representatives. The tests showed differences between the old sample and the peoplemeter sample in some parts of the broadcast day. For instance, in prime time, the viewing levels were extremely close, but during daylight hours the viewing level reported in peoplemeter homes was lower than that shown by the older method. This meant, of course, smaller numbers for the serials and quizzes—which translates into smaller investments by soap, cereal and other daytime advertisers. On Saturday mornings kidvid shows got drastically lower ratings.

Some Eyebrow-Raising Results

David Poltrack, CBS marketing and research veepee, astutely tore into some anomalous Nielsen data. For example, he pointed out that *Smurfs II* (NBC's show generally deemed a children's program) turned up in peoplemeter's test period with only a *minority* of youngsters. Surprisingly, the meters said that one-third of *Smurf* viewing homes during the test had no child watching, just grownups!

Nielsen admitted it was having difficulty keeping tabs on children's and teenager's dialing and said it is working on getting young people to push its buttons more diligently. Psychological consultants suggested "make pushing the buttons more like play."

There's also the unpushing-the-button problem. When a viewer leaves the room, the button stays on if he doesn't unclick it.

The difference between the audience composition profiles reported by the old diary method vs. peoplemeters is seen in a "smoothing out" of viewers-per-set figures. The new system reports much smaller differences between programs. Shows which had few viewers per set get somewhat bigger

numbers now in peoplemeter data, while programs which had high viewer scores get somewhat smaller scores. Here, too, there's a need for additional study.

Actively Seeking Passive Devices

A solution to the button-pushing problem is a *passive* device which doesn't require viewers to push buttons. A partial solution may be a unit using infrared technology, now in the developmental stage; it senses the number of "warm bodies" in front of the set, although not identifying them. It's "passive" because viewers do not need to lift a finger to indicate they're watching. By mid-1987 infrared sensors had been installed experimentally in 30 households and their reports are being evaluated. Another study showed the sensors to be only 80 percent accurate, however.

A different passive sensor uses a sonar or echo principle to check how many people, big and little, are in the room.

R.D. Percy & Co. of Seattle used a novel method of validating its push-button and passive meters. As an experiment, it installed cameras in the homes of its New York sample to monitor who is or isn't pushing the buttons and how accurate their reporting is.

There are also ideas for having people in the sample wear coded bracelets that tell the meter when each person is within the TV set's range.

How Representative A Sample?

There are other complaints. Poltrack was highly critical of the Nielsen sample's demographic composition. For example, he charged, Nielsen over-represented households headed by college graduates. And it also had a higher representation of small households (i.e., with just one or two persons) headed by an adult under 50 than the old Nielsen panel. As a group, these people tend to watch less television than other population segments.

Analyzing Nielsen test figures for CBS's *Dallas* and NBC's *Miami Vice*, Poltrack found they didn't conform with earlier data. He questioned the psychological or behavioral profiles of the people in the new sample. The people who agree to take these meters, he argues, behave differently from those who refuse them.

Those who cooperate most in the new sample tend to be "innovators" to a greater degree than the typical individual, Poltrack asserted. They are more likely to be experimenters, to buy electronic gadgets, to live on the West Coast, to be concentrated in younger and all-adult households, to use VCRs and try new TV programs. In effect, they're more likely to watch *Miami Vice* than *Dallas*.

A High-Tech Bias?

"The current Nielsen peoplemeter sample does not effectively represent the total U.S. television audience," Poltrack declared last year. "Its high-technology character is reducing cooperation, disproportionately representing the relatively small segment of the overall audience that is comfortable with—no, *fascinated* by—the technology. While this bias may not be obvious on an overall viewership basis, it is certainly obvious on a program-by-program basis. The industry requires something better."

CBS signed with AGB and held off Nielsen until quite late. In September 1987 it did sign a three-year pact with Nielsen (with options for another two) but included three stipulations. Nielsen agreed to these guarantees:

(1) the sample will be balanced geographically;

(2) it will be balanced by age of head

of household; and

(3) as the sample grows from 2,000 homes to 4,000 over the next year, Nielsen will maintain a 55% cooperation rate as it adds new homes.

The significance of cooperation or acceptance rate is that the households selected for the sample are more likely to be representative of the general population than the households that are substituted for the refusers. Substitutes who accept peoplemeters (and the chores entailed) may be atypical.

One remedy is offering the designated family more money to accept the meters. This raises questions, too. If the money makes a difference, is it skewing the sample towards the lower-income bracket?

NBC also put pressure on Nielsen to make methodological changes. NBC President Robert Wright declared the network would be prepared to launch a cooperative research company, competing with Nielsen and AGB.

Bill Rubens, NBC research chief, said "I hated peoplemeters when I heard about them, hated them when I studied them and I hate them today." As the 87–88 season started, it looked like neither NBC nor ABC would sign with Nielsen. However, they eventually did, also asking Nielsen to meet certain conditions. For example, NBC had Nielsen agree to turn over its sample during a two-year period to avoid "burnout."

After all, since the peoplemeter box is another gadget to add to the viewer's electronic equipment will it eventually become a small nuisance? Will a sample home "burn out" in two years, or sooner, or later, as the sample family, or individual, becomes bored or annoyed and loses interest in pressing the button accurately?

The unavoidable question is, How long will each peoplemeter family's data be valid?

The last network to sign with Nielsen was ABC. It paid $5 million for the first year, $500,000 more than NBC or CBS. The higher fee persuaded Nielsen to guarantee that its sample will meet 11 minimum standards. It agreed that the number of men and women 18–49 and children 2–11 in its sample will be proportional to those age groups' percentage of the U.S. population, within a 7% variance. Other standards included getting usable data from 85% of homes and 80% of persons in the sample.

Jankowski vs. Nielsen

Early in 1988, the then CBS President Gene Jankowski fired off a letter to Nielsen pointing to the networks' heavy losses, and calling for validation of the meter method and an overhaul of the system. Dimling replied, defending Nielsen's accuracy and adding that he was willing to have its procedures checked by an industry group.

Ad agency researchers tended not to support network critics of peoplemeters. "We're tired of all the noise and whining," said Bob Igiel of N.W. Ayer. Helen Johnson of Grey Advertising said they aren't "perfect yet, but I am suggesting that peoplemeters are clearly superior to the system they replaced."

Research Expert Sees "Chaos"

The late Hugh M. Beville, former head of NBC Research and a dean of broadcast audience research, protested that peoplemeters were in operation while many questions were still unanswered. "Three years ago I said that peoplemeters would reduce TV research to a shambles, and they have done so," he told me shortly before his death last spring. "We are very close to chaos. Nielsen has done some testing, but the complete results have not been made available yet. And what has been released has not been subjected to a really rigorous analysis."

He did foresee some advantages from

metering people, such as developing repeat viewing figures. Under the old system, repeat viewing data was available for *households*. You could learn how many episodes of a sitcom a family watched per month. But you didn't get the information on a *person* basis—whether Dad watched three or whether Mom, Dad and Sis each saw a single episode. This new information on individuals' "loyalty" can be significant for programmers and advertisers. However, after five months, this kind of data had not yet been released by either Nielsen or AGB. Admittedly, they have more serious problems to wrestle with.

By summer '88 AGB faced a crisis. ABC and NBC hadn't signed with AGB. CBS, the only network to do so, indicated it might not go beyond August. AGB had seven large agencies accounting for over 40 percent of network billings, plus syndicators like Paramount TV and D.L. Taffner, and R.J. Reynolds/Nabisco, TV's third largest advertiser. They weren't enough to keep AGB from losing money at a tremendous clip.

AGB therefore in June of this year told the networks that unless all three bought its service it would end its operation. Typically, rating services get 35–40% of their income from the three networks. Without web support, AGB President Michael J. Poehner said, "it makes it difficult for a firm to continue to come up with the required revenues to continue."

CBS's Poltrack said he hoped that the other networks would subscribe to AGB, because competition between the two services would speed the development of "the most cost-effective measurement system. The worst thing in the world is to have a sole supplier of anything."

If NBC and ABC go along with AGB, some national rating service will emerge that pleases all segments of the industry, Poltrack believes. "By 1990–91 if the two systems are not identical in providing the same results, we'll have had time to figure out which one is right." And if the results are the same, clients will chose the most cost-effective.

If AGB drops out, Poltrack said, leaving the field to Nielsen, in three or four years when the Nielsen contracts come up for renewal, the networks would be "totally at the mercy of Nielsen."

While there are bugs in the new systems, they are being worked on. Since the days of Crossley, Hooper and Trendex there have been glitches—but they have been discovered and removed. In radio's golden era I reported in *Variety* that Hooper ratings for the N.Y. Yankee games and *The Goldbergs* had mysteriously plummeted—and traced the decline to Hooper's eliminating The Bronx from his New York sample, to save phone costs. After the publicity, Hoop quickly restored The Bronx.

Watchdogs are Watching

The stakes are too high and the competition too strong for broadcasting to tolerate a noticeable degree of inaccuracy. Each network fights to get a fair appraisal of its audiences; advertisers complain if they are being charged for viewers that are not delivered; cablecasters and other media raise a fuss if over-the-air delivery is overestimated. And watchdog organizations such as the Electronic Media Rating Council blow the whistle if research practices fall below standards.

The EMRC, formed back in 1964, represents the broadcast, cable and other electronic media. Its aim: audience measurement services that are valid, reliable and effective. For a rating service to be accredited by EMRC, it has to meet certain criteria and ethical, operating and disclosure standards.

EMRC executive director Mel Goldberg, who has been a senior research executive at the networks and Group W, stresses the need for the most ac-

curate ratings, since some $25 billion dollars of advertising decisions are based each year on "the numbers."

EMRC has been studying peoplemeters for some time. In 1986 it hosted a conference which raised many questions for the research companies to answer. At the 1988 National Assn. of Television Program Executives meeting Goldberg chaired a discussion of the new systems's impact on the industry. At presstime, an audit was in progress for EMRC's accreditation of Nielsens's system (a process that takes several months). AGB had not applied.

An example of how EMRC works was its adopting new guidelines to curb rating distortion. These draw a distinction between rating hype and distortion. During "sweeps" periods when local ratings are taken, "contests, advertising, special programs or other promotional activities may be considered hype." Since most stations engage in them, they tend to be equalized.

By contrast, distortion includes "those activities aimed at the actual households or people in the rating service samples that have the potential to influence respondents to increase their viewing or record more or different viewing than normally." An example: running a contest in a sweep period with significantly more lucrative prizes than usual.

The sweeps hoopla is primarily a local phenomenon, because network rating are taken year-round, and the local markets are measured only a few times a year—frequency depending on market size. Naturally, networks load their schedules during sweeps months.

Peoplemeters for Local Ratings?

At present, on the local scene, peoplemetering is only a small cloud, because of its cost. Most likely, for a long while meters will be limited to major markets. Nielsen recently postponed using the system locally because users want larger samples than the projected 600.

Seattle-based R.D. Percy & Co. plans to launch local peoplemetering in New York. Starting with a sample of about 500, it expects to have 1,200 NYC homes metered by 1989.

Arbitron, a big local rating arbiter, has ScanAmerica, which began nosecounting in Denver in April 1987. Arbitron has bought out its partner in ScanAmerica, Time Inc.'s SAMI-Burke. Currently, only two Denver stations had subscribed to the service, but Arbitron is hoping to launch its version of peoplemeters in Fall of 1989.

ScanAmerica is also working toward a goal of a "single source." This would combine rating information and household use of specific products in a single source. Families in the sample would be given a "wand," an electronic device with which they would scan the bar codes of the items they bought at the supermarket. The purchase data would be correlated with viewing numbers, and the marketing experts for, say, decaf instant coffee, could see a program's rating among decaf drinkers. Brand managers love the idea.

Nielsen also plans to provide product purchasing data for its national service, but will use a separate sample, not the same peoplemeter homes.

Single-sourcing will likely happen not too far down the road. Like other aspects of peoplemetering, it introduces the observer problem: when the observer, or a gadget like a wand, gets into the act it can distort reality. What's more, how much can you ask the viewer to do?

Meanwhile, we're seeing differences between the old and new ratings. A CBS Newsman said "We love peoplemeters" when Rather moved ahead of Brokaw. ABC's *Good Morning America* cheered when the new system put it a bit ahead of NBC's *Today*.

For most of the season, AGB's rat-

ings were close to Nielsen's in network averages. The differences are seen mostly on the program level. While Nielsen gave ABC's Super Bowl a 41.9 rating, AGB's number was 37.6. For the season, *Rags to Riches* was 18% higher on AGB, *West 57th St.* and *Our House* were each 13% higher on AGB. But *Monday Night Football* was 13% lower and *Dynasty* was 17% lower on AGB. In general, AGB showed higher ratings for older and female audience programs.

Inconsistencies occur because the two systems use different methods and samples.

The Significance for Viewers

What do peoplemeters mean for the home audience? How will they affect program quality?

Some artistically interesting programs die because they fail to achieve a commercially viable audience level. That will continue to happen. As long as commercial TV is driven by advertising, sponsors and broadcasters will count viewers, evaluate demographic data and check the charts to determine how much to charge. Peoplemeters will give them a more precise tool.

But whether that will raise or lower program quality depends on: (1) your definition of "quality," and (2) what programs attract the audiences individual advertisers are targeting. It's the tyranny of boxoffice marketing. But it will be done on the basis of persons, not homes.

To the extent that audiences are being fractionalized, and that some identifiable audience segments are marketable, peoplemetering may help develop more "narrowcast" commercial programming—more age-specific shows, for example.

People involved in program content, producers, writers and directors, may be able to use peoplemeters as a diagnostic aid. If an episode of a drama series appeals to older women but not to senior men, that may provide an insight on script approaches. If a program lead-in is heavy on teenagers, but very few stay for the next show, more youth-appeal elements may be indicated. When minute-by-minute audience flows are available on a person basis, producers will get a feel for how specific segments of a program appeal to different members of the audience.

Of course, public and educational stations also should find peoplemeter data useful in finetuning programs to target audiences and in finding segments of the population that are under-served.

Wanted: Greater Accuracy

The key need is for a more accurate measurement system. Peoplemeters promise to provide that, despite all the current controversy and transitional confusion.

If it did noting else, AGB brought competition to national television ratings, speeding up the process of improvement. In almost all the U.S. media—local television, radio, magazines—there are two or more companies counting audiences. That's different from the cost-effective single-measurer situation in Europe. But Americans thrive on competition, which is pushing all segments of our industry to look more carefully at the ratings, how the data is gathered and how it is analyzed.

There has to be a lot more general understanding that ratings are only approximate—that a 19.0 rating should not be considered necessarily bigger than a competitor's 17.5. The margin of error (which depends on sample size) has to be taken into consideration.

Once the meter methodology is debugged and the sample has the validity required, the system should offer many potential benefits. It can develop data on viewer loyalty, on the reach and frequency of individual pro-

grams and commercials in terms of specific viewers. Creative researchers will find a Comstock Lode in which to dig.

Where Do We Stand?

AGB's entrance undoubtedly forced Nielsen to move too rapidly. In turn AGB had to enter the fray with insufficient testing. Both tried in Poltrack's phrase "too much too soon."

There should have been a longer period of parallel operation and comparison of the old and new systems. More study should have been made of who accepts the machines and how they use them. A great many basic questions still need to be answered.

For instance: "Is there room for two services?" Another is "What happens if there is only one wheel in town?"

Nielsen chided the nets for their "self-interested" criticism of its system. But the television industry should also be wary of the self-interest of competitive media which like to bad-mouth TV—and of advertisers who would like to push down TV rates. Devaluation of TV prices can result in cut-rate programming, which in turn reduces audiences—a vicious downward spiral.

Right now there is still a cornucopia of questions to be asked. And more will emerge as the television spectrum becomes more diversified.

But an industry that knows more about its measurers can provide better service. And a public that knows more about how audiences are counted and priced will demand better service. And deserve it.

POST SCRIPT:

On July 29, AGB announced it was suspending its rating operation in the U.S. after dropping $67,000,000 on its people meter venture here. A week earlier, trading in its stock was halted as it negotiated a deal with Mediamark Research Inc., a large market research firm, that raised the possibility of the companies combining information on what products people buy with what programs they watch.

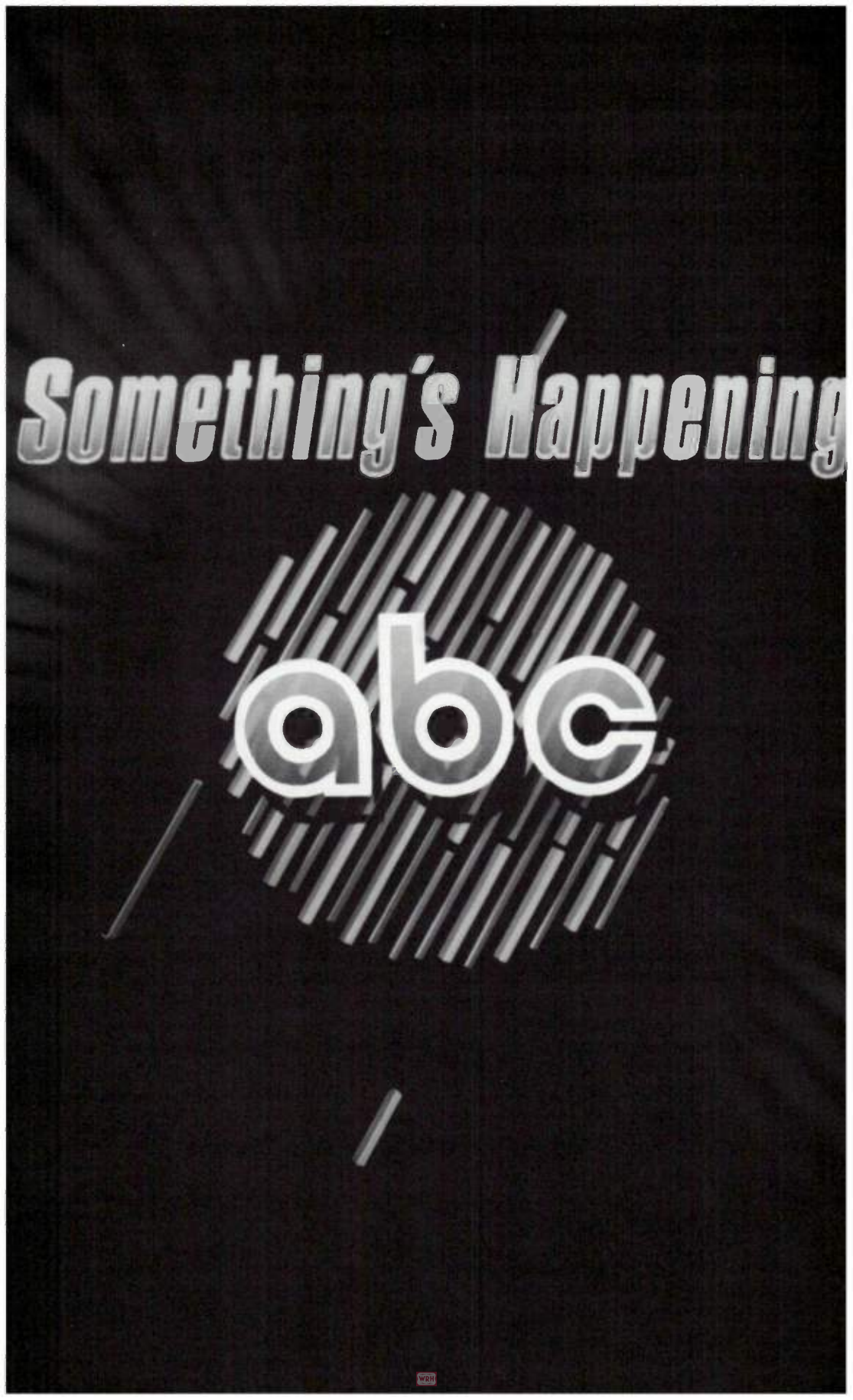
AGB did acquire Mediamark, but is not likely to come out with a "single source" viewing-plus-purchasing service soon. AGB keeps that option, as it announced "suspension" rather than abandonment of its peoplemeter project.

CBS was willing to continue footing a $3,500,000 annual bill for AGB ratings, but not if the other networks didn't subscribe. NBC and ABC decided that AGB's data wasn't needed. In a time of budget cuts, they were concerned not only with paying for AGB, but also for analysts to process the numbers. In any event, networks' fees totaling $10,000,000 would be a small fraction of what AGB needed.

Disappointed at AGB's folding its service here, CBS's Poltrack commented, "Obviously, we will not have a competitive environment [in the national network ratings field] in the near term."

On learning of AGB's surrender, some Nielsen executives expected a couple of years without rivals. However, Arbitron is still planning to launch its people meter and ScanAmerica product purchase service in 1989, which would revive the competitive environment. The prospect of competition from Arbitron and others and the specter of AGB's re-entering the lists with a scaled-down service should keep Nielsen on its toes. ■

Bert Briller's first adventures in the complex world of ratings systems came while he was a reporter and critic for *Variety*, and later as a Vice President of sales promotion for the ABC Television Network. For many years, he was chief editor for the Television Information Office. He is currently a free-lance writer and consultant.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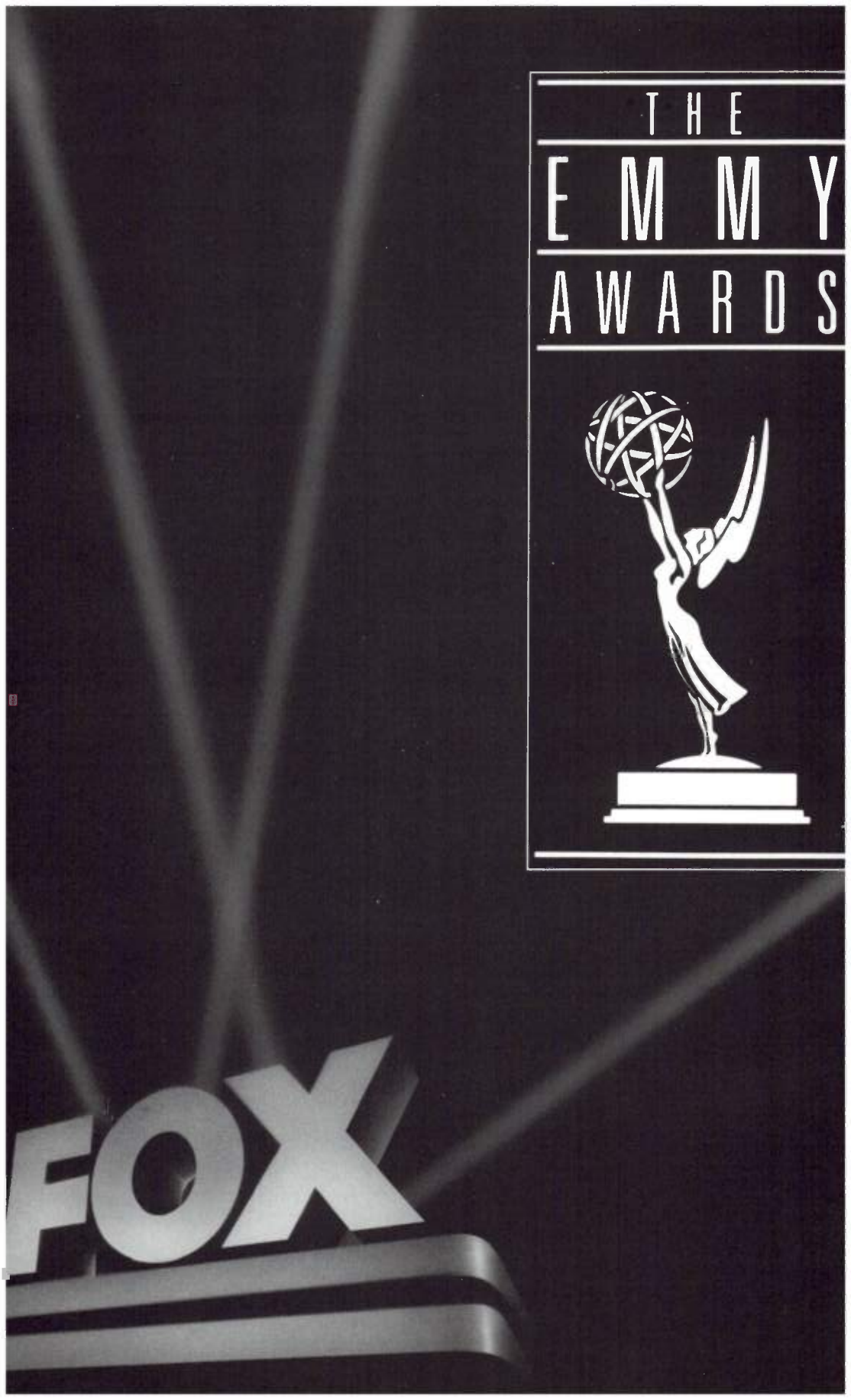
THE
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"DID THEY EVER CATCH THE CRIMINALS WHO COMMITTED THE ARMED ROBBERY ON PEOPLE'S DRIVE?": *HILL STREET BLUES* REMEMBERED

BY ALBERT AUSTER

It's hardly inaccurate to say that for many people, this writer included, there has been a black hole in the TV schedule ever since the night of May 12th, 1987. For that was the evening that NBC, which introduced the show in January, 1981, rang down the curtain on *Hill Street Blues*. Bringing to a close what surely was the most innovative and imaginative television show of the eighties and as some might even venture since the so-called "Golden Age."

Of course it can be argued that for those suffering *Hill Street* withdrawal there are always its syndicated re-runs which should presumably make fans of the show delighted, since they can see their beloved *Blues* practically every night of the week. However, watching a show in syndication, is still a bit like looking at an ancient Chinese vase. It's beautiful, filled with reminders of past glories, but utterly familiar and static (except for episodes you might have missed before the advent of the VCR). But missing is the one ingredient that makes series television so compelling; seeing characters grow and change over time.

Nor is the void filled by *LA Law* which could logically lay claim to being *Hill Street*'s legitimate heir; what with occupying its old time slot, and even co-created by *Hill Street*'s co-creator and long-time executive producer, Steven Bochco. In addition, it uses many of *Hill Street*'s techniques (multiple plots, numerous and sometimes zany characters) and aspires to the latter's moral and intellectual *gravatas* (mercy killings, the death penalty) which made it, as its predecessor, the darling of so many TV critics and the Emmy awards.

However, *LA Law* is brighter and cleaner than *Hill Street*, whose motto was "Make it look messy." Moreover, it is addressed to and is about life's winners. Indeed, upon many occasions it is hard to muster up much sympathy for characters whose problems include whether or not to buy an expensive new sports car, or the trauma

of a young associate who learns that a recently hired colleague is receiving a higher salary. Furthermore, perhaps taking a cue from the success of its much publicized "Venus Butterfly" episode the show has recently been more concerned with what goes on between the characters' bed sheets than their legal briefs.

Needless to say, with no current show even moderately approaching the kind of inventiveness displayed by *Hill Street*, it would finally seem appropriate to reflect upon the legacy of *Hill Street Blues*.

Unfortunately, in rendering such a judgement what might be most vivid in many people's minds may be the slippage of quality in the series' last two seasons rather than the freshness, exuberance and excitement associated with the program's early years. A decline which probably had less to do with the departure of its co-creator, Bochco, or even the waning of the shows wonderful sense of ensemble after a number of series regulars left, than the inevitable tendency of any long-running, but embattled program, to fall back on the tried and true in its struggle to survive.

However, even by these standards *Hill Street* managed to maintain a relatively high level of creativity and originality even in its final seasons. For example, there was the addition to the regular cast of that premier sleaze, the rule bending, troublemaking, survivor, Lt. Norman Buntz (Dennis Franz) and his always amusing sometimes even moving relationship with the ever-on-the-look-for-an-edge Sid the Snitch (Peter Jurasik). Furthermore, there were guest scripts by well known writer-fans of the show like *Washington Post* editor Bob Woodward and Pulitzer Prize winning dramatist David Mamet (*Glengarry Glen Ross*). Nor had the series lost any of its power to jolt us emotionally, as it did on the night when one of the shows regular's, Officer Joe Coffey (Ed Marinaro), was brutally murdered.

As a matter of fact nothing illustrates this high standard better than the show's final episode ("It Ain't Over Till its Over."). Resisting the temptation to wrap things up neatly, *Hill Street* remained true to its finest traditions by leaving things at fairly loose ends. Thus, in the series finale, the stationhouse burns down, Sgt. Mick Belker (Bruce Weitz) is audited by the IRS, a series of prostitute murders is solved, and Lt. Buntz, after being cleared of a theft of evidence charge, loses his badge when he punches out Police Chief Fletcher Daniels (Jon Cypher). "All in all" states public defender Joyce Davenport (Veronica Hamel), both summing up the day's events and what could have been the show's philosophy, "a break even day."

Indeed, this little epithet comes as close to putting into a nut-shell the moral universe of *Hill Street* as anything in its seven year history. For ultimately the best the "Blues" might hope for in their unceasing battle against crime, urban decay, and public apathy and alienation *was* a "break even day."

The first thing to be noticed by anyone watching *Hill Street* for the first time was likely to be the look of the show, which was different from anything previously seen on commercial prime time television, cop shows or otherwise. And although techniques such as hand-held cameras, overlapping sound and dialogue, and multitudinous characters and plots were familiar to anyone who had seen the films of Robert Altman (e.g. *M*A*S*H, McCabe and Mrs. Miller, Nashville*) or to the fans of daytime soap opera, they were a revelation to the audiences of prime time television, where to *Hill Street*'s credit, they had rarely been so effectively fitted to the needs of a genre and its characters.

Besides its innovative look, what was

probably equally impressive at first glance to its primarily upscale, well-educated audience, was its startling content. The most controversial element—at least to network censors—was its frank (for television that is) sexual content. There were reportedly

The sexy stuff was hardly the quality that gave *Hill Street Blues* its distinctive stature, or held out the promise of any far-reaching consequences for serious TV content.

some angry viewer objections to many of the shows endings which took place in the bed or bubblebath of the program's sexy public defender Joyce Davenport and her lover then husband, the program's central character, precinct Captain Francis "Frank" Furillo (Daniel J. Travanti). For if Davenport had trouble deciding between Furillo and Miranda during the day, she showed no such difficulties at night.

Similarly, in the early years of the series, cop-father-figure Sgt. Phil Esterhaus' (the late Michael Conrad) affairs with a teenage cheerleader and the libidinous Grace Gardner (Barbara Babcock) had NBC's standards and practices office very upset.

However, the sexy stuff was hardly the quality that gave *Hill Street* its distinctive intellectual stature, or held out the promise of any far reaching consequences for serious TV content. Undoubtedly, this had to be the program's treatment of minorities and ethnics. Something that Sgt. Esterhaus in one of his more rhetorical flights cited when he referred to the precinct as a, "tenuously balanced social microcosm." A social universe that *TV Guide*, in its own hyperbolic way, was quick to add was, "a gathering of human beings who just happen to have widely different last names."

Without a doubt, the center of that group was Capt. Frank Furillo. Beseiged not only by the flotsam and jetsam of the streets, but at least initially by a usually irate ex-wife, Fay (Barbara Bosson), who badgered him at first for alimony and child support payments, and then later for emotional support, Furillo was still able to combine the pragmatic and idealistic in his decisions.

In addition, though Furillo might be called "pizza-man" by his second wife, he belied the stereotype of the Italian in that he was warm, but not emotional; handsome, but not flashy; humanistic without being simplistic and a thinker rather than "street smart." Clearly, hardly a person you might put in the same category as Tony Manero (John Travolta's character in *Saturday Night Fever*) or a Jake "Raging Bull" Lamotta.

Similarly, to a large extent the Jewish characters—Lt. Henry Goldblume (Joe Spano) and Det. Mick Belker (Bruce Weitz)—although somewhat touched by the stereotypic brush, managed to escape the extremes. Thus, Lt. Goldblume began the show as your "typical" Jewish liberal, whose idea of fighting crime seemed to be with a combination of psychobabble and the "Bill of Rights." An officer whose willingness to negotiate and compromise was the bane of the gun-toting S.W.A.T. team strawman Lt. Howard Hunter (James B. Sikking), who referred to the street people as "geeks, weirdos and genetic mutants." However, as if to challenge the cliché that if you scratch a neo-conservative, you will find an ex-liberal who has been mugged, Goldblume has been mugged, his car stolen, his ex-wife raped, a lover murdered by a mob hitman, and his best friend killed after he turned vigilante—all this without losing his basic idealism.

By the same token, plainclothesman and the precinct's chief undercover cop Mick Belker began the show as a kind

of combination "Serpico" and "Katzenjammer Kid," whose stock in trade seemed to be referring to criminals as "hairball" and "dogbreath." But Belker was also the cherished and loving son of an off-screen Jewish mother who might have given pointers to Mrs. Portnoy. Moreover, he had an enormous capacity for *menschlike* warmth and support for group that ranged from oddball "perps" like a man who called himself "Captain America," a mixed-up homosexual who fell in love with him, to his Italian cop girlfriend, later his wife and the mother of his child, Robin Tataglia (Lisa Sutton).

Despite all of this, however, the show's real success has been its non-stereotypical depiction of minorities. Here in terms of crime, according to its longtime executive producer, the show had a policy of being an "equal opportunity offender." As a result, in contrast to the post-*Godfather* attempt to prevent stereotyping ethnic groups with criminality, *Hill Street* was practically a rainbow coalition of Black junkies, Hispanic rapists, and Italian hit-men. Yet balancing this off was perhaps the most positive picture of Black men and women to be seen on TV until the advent of *The Cosby Show*.

For instance, in the relationship between the plainsclothes detectives Neal Washington (Turean Blacque) and J.D. Larue (Keil Martin) it was the Black man who was both principled and professional, while Larue was depicted as feckless, emotionally unstable (He was an alcoholic, who was ultimately able to climb painfully on the wagon), and more than willing to bend the law upon occasion.

Perhaps the most compelling salt and pepper relationship among the cops was that between officer Bobby Hill (Michael Warren) and his partner Andy Renko (Charles Haid), who were a ghetto Black and a White redneck respectively. Nonetheless, from their first tentative coupling they emerged as a team, which despite clear cultural and racial differences, related humanly as well as complementing each other professionally. And in the case of Warren, his *Hill Street* role enabled him to depict the Black man, "as someone who can feel, become compassionate, be enraged and cry." Furthermore, Bobby Hill was able to emerge during the course of the series from something akin to sainthood into the complex figure of a man who had to face his own demons when he won a lottery; and to confront his ambiguous feelings toward a philandering father.

Unfortunately, not every minority fared so well on *Hill Street*. For instance, until he was kicked upstairs (and out of the permanent cast) the show's lone Hispanic representative was Lt. Ray Celletano (Rene Enriquez). Certainly no malapropism-spouting Ricky Ricardo or free-spirited *CHIPS* patrolman àla Erik Estrada, Calletano was a loyal, efficient and responsible officer, whose prickly ego hid a highly vulnerable self-doubting human being. But except for one particularly shining moment at a banquet in his honor when he denounced the assembled cops for having Mexican food and thus assuming "we're all alike," (he was supposed to be Colombian) he seemed to spend much of the time he was on the show spouting lines like, "Call on line six, captain."

Though *Hill Street* did represent the effects of poverty and environment on crime, it generally gave short shrift to the effects of racism.

On top of this, balancing Calletano was the almost series regular (at least in its first years)—gang leader then turned lawyer—Jesus Martinez (Trinidad Silva), who was as flashy as Calletano was subdued, manipulative as

Calletano was loyal and had charisma to boot. So much so, that when he greeted Capt. Furillo with his amiable "Frankee," it was usually the prelude to a sub-plot of intelligence, tension and humor.

Despite this, *Hill Street* won deserved plaudits for its depiction of minorities. Nevertheless, there were still elements in the series' representation of them that upon reflection, deserve criticism. As a matter of fact, because of its determined efforts not to stereotype or see things through Aaron Spelling colored glasses, a number of the values that the program ascribed to minorities were certainly problematic.

For example, in Captain Furillo, we had almost the perfect middle management type. A character for all seasons, who though flawed (Furillo was an ex-alcoholic, who even to the shows finale was still taking it one day at a time) is someone who in the words of one sociologist, "no social engineer" could do better than. For despite a highly unpredictable and volatile social microcosm within and without the stationhouse's walls—unscrupulous politicians, opportunistic higher-ups, and a second wife who sometimes couldn't decide whether she was a yuppie or a feminist,—Furillo can retain his integrity during the day and his sex appeal at night.

This exaltation of middle class values also extended to the depiction of middle class Blacks. For though *Hill Street* did represent the effects of poverty and environment on crime, it generally gave short shrift to the effects of racism. For instance, in its first season, Neal Washington worked to clear a white racist cop of murdering a Black teenager while on a stakeout, even though the cop had killed two other Black teenagers previously, and baited Washington mercilessly with racist epithets like "sunburn". Nevertheless, Washington worked diligently to clear him because as Washington's partner J.D.'s work deteriorated because of alcoholism, Washington more and more felt the need to prove himself. Thus, professionalism took priority over racial consciousness.

The same values came into play in a series of shows in the 1985–86 season in which a Black rookie cop, Garfield (Mykel Williams) teamed with a white veteran Jack Steger (Sandy Ward) was accused of planting a gun on a criminal who was killed by the rookie in a shootout. The gun, however, was planted there by the veteran when it seemed at first as if the criminals weapon wouldn't be found. Then, when the rookie refused to lie to protect him when the second gun was found, the veteran turned on him and claimed the rookie planted the gun. Subsequently, in an ensuing scene the rookie was about to quit the force because he felt that the word of a Black rookie cop would never be taken over that of a 27 year white veteran.

Needless to say, it was the very same Washington who pleaded with the rookie to see the investigation through and to tell the truth because to do otherwise would be to indulge in a form of self pity that could be ultimately crippling for a Black man. Certainly, Washington's plea was clearly a humane one, but so is the notion of the tooth fairy. Indeed if in the accompanying investigation Capt. Furillo hadn't stepped in with a series of deductions worthy of a Sherlock Holmes it is clear the Black rookie cop would have been found guilty. And ultimately a very large part of the reason would have had something to do with racism since the other two internal affairs investigators—both white—were prepared to believe the white cop.

Invariably what these shows did was to make a strict dichotomy between professionalism and race consciousness. What they failed to recognize was the fact that Black cops may often have to be twice as professional as White cops because they are always under

some kind of scrutiny because of their race. It is the kind of distinction that even a centrist Supreme Court Justice like Harry Blackmun understood when he wrote that, "to get beyond racism we must take account of race."

The same criticism might also be leveled at *Hill Street*'s determined efforts to avoid ethnic stereotyping, or if they did use them to give them a different spin. For clearly the effort to refrain from using stereotypes leaves something out. Which is not meant to imply the old cliché that either stereotypes have some virtues or that there is some truth in every stereotype. What it does mean is that there are ethnic traits, national characteristics and regional variations that do effect character and sensibility. In the past these were always used as a means of eliciting cheap laughs or as a narrative hook. But understanding a character's history and culture and how it effects their attitudes and behavior is very different from merely laughing at the results.

What is even more important is that these elements are often likely to be left out of most Americans conceptions of themselves. So much so, that it may be one of the reasons that the miniseries *Roots* had such a startling and profound impact on so many non-Black Americans. For they too undoubtedly recognized in the story of Blacks searching out the basis of their history and culture their own lack of knowledge about the same thing. Thus, in a book that closely parallels the Haley phenomenon for the Jewish experience, Paul Cowan (interestingly enough the son of a former CBS President) wrote *An Orphan in History*. In this book, Cowan traced his family background back to a famed Lithuanian Rabbi; a past his father, anxious to rid himself of the ghetto image, fled from.

Following up on the tragedy of assimilation Cowan not only traced the path of his own lineage he saw it as part of the problem faced by most Americans. For example, during one of his journalistic assignments he went to Lawrence, Massachusetts the scene of the famous 1912 IWW led strike. Yet he found few Italians there who remembered or even knew about the strike (even those whose parents and grandparents had played a major role in it.) A fact which prompted Cowan to write:

What if they had retained Italian as their language so that they could have access to writers like Dante, composers like Verdi, thinkers like Gramsci. What if they'd been allowed to feel they weren't Italian versions of the 'greenhorns' but were the heirs to a culture finer than that of the Yankees who defined them as brutes.

Most of us—Jews and Italians, Irish and Greeks, Blacks and Hispanics—have sacrificed an enormously important treasure, our history, to become part of the melting pot that doesn't exist. We have amputated our histories, surrendered memories that intertwined with tradition—bright pebbles on a familiar beach, things you love because you know them so well.

It is clearly this kind of history and culture that weighs so heavily upon what we do and what we are—a fact that has not eluded generations of artists and writers. Just two will serve as examples here. Thus, Alfred Kazin in his memoir *New York Jew* recalled quite vividly how during a teaching stint at Amherst he and his wife were always seen as too "New York" by which people meant, too Jewish, too radical, and too much the secular humanists. It was the same recognition that prompted novelist Richard Wright to write of his leaving the South in his autobiography *Black Boy*:

Yet deep down, I knew that I could never really leave the South, for my

feelings had already been formed by the South, for there had been slowly instilled into my personality and consciousness, Black though I was, the culture of the South. So leaving, I was taking part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and perhaps bloom.

Only when television sitcoms, dramas, or melodramas have achieved such an understanding and ability to portray this kind of influence of history and culture on human beings will they have attained the level of what artists have been doing for centuries. Indeed, it is not merely the avoidance of stereotypes that is important, but working through them to what Jean Paul Sartre called "authenticity"—or not having to deny what one really is.

These criticisms far from diminishing the significance of *Hill Street Blues* contribution to American television actually serve to highlight its importance. For despite any failures to acknowledge the full effect of racism and history on its characters, its understanding of how the eccentric played hide-and-seek with the respectable in the American landscape, and its awareness of the fact that holding on to ones principles in a world gone amuck, is an act of heroism, it rescued the depiction of America's diversity and variety from the rut of one-liners and one-dimensionality. As a result *Hill Street*'s most lasting legacy is to remind us, as John Leonard once did in praising the show, of television's potential to be watched not only to escape, but because nothing else in life is as compelling. ■

Albert Auster taught at Brooklyn College. He is currently a writer for the Television Bureau of Advertising, and is the co-author of *How The War Was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam*, published by Praeger.

V I E W P O I N T

"These days TV is doing a better job of giving characters geographic roots and a sense of place. From *Murder, She Wrote* in Cabot's Cove, Maine, to *Designing Women* in Atlanta, programs are set in cities other than L.A. and viewers can actually catch glimpses of Boston, Seattle, Miami and Dallas.

"TV is also doing a better job creating characters who, like most Americans, are identifiably ethnic. On both *A Year In The Life* and *thirtysomething* this season, Jewish/Christian couples have struggled with differing religious traditions and belief—how to celebrate the holidays, how to raise the baby, how to create new family traditions. These traditional 'women's issues' are front and center."

—Sally Steenland
Media Values Quarterly

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Review and Comment

SPECIAL EDITION: A Guide to Network Television Documentary Series and Special News Reports, 1955–1979

by Daniel Einstein
Scarecrow Press, New Jersey

BY TOM MASCARO

The television documentary is often the subject of perfunctory eulogies or the victim of audience inattention. Yet, over the years the three commercial networks have given American viewers a rich and varied schedule of TV documentaries. Their performance is verified in painstaking detail in *Special Edition: a guide to network television documentary series and special news reports, 1955–1979.*

The information found in this more than one thousand-page reference book has been compiled by Dan Einstein, Television Archivist at the UCLA Film and Television Archive. Einstein sifted through TV listings, network records and archival footage and refined the product into a valuable resource in its own right. When used in tandem with other books, however, *Special Edition* sparks a synergistic study of the documentary.

A small collection comprises the core of comprehensive writings on television documentaries. Other works add texture, but these few provide the infrastructure.

A. William Bluem's *Documentary in American Television* traces the roots back to photos and film, the dramatized radio series *March of Time*, the semi-dramatic documentaries of Norman Corwin and the transition to hard news documentaries. Charles Hammond Jr.'s follow-up, *The Image Decade, Television Documentary 1965–1975*, takes a similar course, enriching the record with vignettes and personal comments that humanize the discussion. Hammond also expands the history of the newsmagazine.

Erik Barnouw's *Tube of Plenty* rounds out the record by describing documentary development in the context of television history. An understandable limitation common to all of these efforts, however, is that they focus on the exceptional. They leave out the discussion of *ordinary* documentary programs. The one-shot deals, the series flops, the tried and retried series.

Academics at least have access to Ray Carroll's doctoral dissertation—*Factual Television in America: An Analysis of Network Television Documentary Programs—1948–1975*, (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1978)—which lists titles for every documentary programs aired in the period. In his conclusion, however, Carroll calls for further study to analyze the *content* of documentary programs. Accepting this challenge is now facilitated by *Special Edition*.

The book is arranged in three parts. Part I contains network television documentary series. There is no list of titles—which would be a helpful scanning aid—but entries are arranged in alphabetical order. Part II is an eight-page tribute to the innovative Hollywood maverick David L. Wolper. And Part III lists one-time-only network news specials and reports, in chronological order by year. Also included are a brief introduction, an Index of Personalities and an Index of Production and Technical Personnel, which are often accessible, but not generally categorized as they are in *Special Edition*.

Readers accustomed to cursory reviews of documentary series will find relief in skimming the content of *Special Edition*. The book includes the air dates, broadcast times and subjects for every edition of the familiar series, such as *See It Now, Bell & Howell Close-Up!*, and *CBS Reports* and *NBC White Paper* through 1979. Also listed are episodes for *The Barbara Walters Special, Person to Person, Project 20, Saga of Western Man, 60 Minutes* (through 1979), *The Twentieth Century, The Twenty-First Century* and *Victory at Sea*.

More than 120 series are listed; 7000 programs. Dates of the first and final telecasts, air times and a historical blurb head each program list. Program entries are numbered, which serves as the index reference. They include the air date, title, a nugget of the content—including each segment for newsmagazine shows—and the major technical credits, usually the executive producer, producer, narrator, writer and reporter.

Even without benefit of viewing programs, readers can use *Special Edition* to approach the study of documentaries from various angles. For example, although television doesn't have a particularly solid tradition of self-reflection, there are examples of looking within. Part of the record of self analysis can be traced through the listings of *Special Edition*.

The series *ABC News Close-Up* included "Prime Time TV: The Decision Makers" in 1974, a critical look at primetime entertainment. "The Fort Wayne Story" appeared on NBC's *Background* in 1955 and offered a look at what happened when TV arrived in an American town in 1953. And CBS aired documentaries on television and politics, the television commercial and the news story.

Throughout *Special Edition* there are examples of the link between documentary series and technological innovation. For instance, NBC's 1954 series *Background* used a newly devised electronic film editing process, and the 1963 series *CBS Town Meeting of the World* used the recently launched Telstar II communications satellite for broadcasting a series of transatlantic discussions.

The merits of newsmagazines versus the long-form documentary often stimulate debate. Yet the shorter form has its own heritage of development worthy of examination. *Special Edition* documents the newsmagazine series, many short-lived, that might otherwise be overlooked.

The Reasoner Report is one. ABC's answer to *60 Minutes* and *First Tuesday* was a combination of hard and soft news and Reasoner's wry commentary. Einstein writes, the series "never really got the recognition and attention it deserved." This was in large part due to its poor time slot and disinterest by one-fourth of the ABC affiliates.

CBS's *Magazine* was designed specifically to appeal to women. It was a daytime informational series that ran from 1974 until 1980. And children, too, have been the target of several newsmagazines, among them the Emmy-winning CBS series *Razzmatazz*, introduced in 1977 in cooperation with *Scholastic Magazines*. For teenagers, NBC's *Update* ran for two seasons, beginning in 1961, and in 1978, CBS offered *30 Minutes*, which aired on

Saturday afternoons.

In addition to an index of on-air personalities and those who were program subjects, *Special Edition* carries an index of production and technical personnel. It includes program producers, whose visions ultimately appear on the screen. Readers can use this index to trace themes in their work.

For example, CBS broadcast a series in cooperation with the Museum of Natural History in New York City. *Adventure* ran from 1953–1956. It covered animal and nature topics, and also world cultures, religion and programs on American Indian nations. One of the reporters on *Adventure* was Robert Northshield, who later produced several other documentary series and specials that dealt with cross-cultural and ecological issues. More recently, Northshield was producer of CBS *Sunday Morning*. Regular viewers of the program recognize the sign-off signature for each edition, which is a nature segment.

Special Edition unfortunately lacks a topic index. This would be a useful supplementary publication that would lead to researchers and students asking more expansive questions about documentary programming. Still, through careful searching, the book is extremely helpful for readers who want to review documentary coverage of specific issues. Major topics such as the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement stand out, since entire series and numerous specials were devoted to their coverage. The researcher interested in more limited subjects, perhaps health issues or religion, will need to scrutinize the listings more carefully, but the information is there.

Embedded in the content of *Special Edition* are programming trends that offer insight on the national mood of a particular period. For example, the bitter lessons of the 1960s may have stirred a new consciousness in America about mortality, limitations and the quality of life. This is reflected in the raft of specials broadcast in the early 1970s, including "How to Stay Alive," on heart disease, "Alcoholism: Out of the Shadows," "Cancer the Next Frontier," "Life, Death and the American Woman" and "Pain! Where Does It Hurt Most."

Industry professionals will no doubt find other uses for this book. Documentary researchers can easily determine how proposed topics have been addressed in the past. Or, it can be a guide to thinking about the production of new compilation style documentaries.

One point about the book should be mentioned. Though not a flaw, the section which isolates the work of David Wolper seems to stand out in an awkward way. Many of the program entries are references to listings elsewhere in the book. This same treatment could be used to highlight the contributions of other distinguished documentarians as well.

Dan Einstein's book is already on the shelves of several university libraries, and should become a standard reference. It is an impressive tribute to an important body of television work that will undoubtedly heighten appreciation and enrich the historical consideration of the documentary in American television. ■

Tom Mascaro is a graduate student in the Department of Communication at the University of Michigan.

ALMOST GOLDEN: Jessica Savitch and the Selling of Television News

By Gwenda Blair
New York: Simon & Schuster

BY MARLENE SANDERS

The rise and fall of anchorwoman/reporter Jessica Savitch spanned a relatively short period of time. She was hired by NBC News after a career at

several local stations, in 1977. By 1983 she was dead, a victim of a freak automobile accident.

After reading this gripping and skillfully done book, a reader is hard-pressed to figure out how her life could have had anything but a tragic ending.

If a fictional character had been created in her image, readers would have scoffed and said it was overdrawn, too much like a soap opera or Gothic paperback. It had everything: humble beginnings, uncontrollable ambition, an irrational drive for TV stardom (doing the news could be one route to achieve it), bizzare relationships with men, two failed marriages, a demanding temperament more appropriate to a 1940's Hollywood star, drugs, rumors of Lesbianism, ardent fans, contemptuous network colleagues, and finally death at age 36. Under all of it, Savitch was an insecure, anorexic, lonely person, constantly on the lookout for a man, or friends, to provide the support denied her by the early death of her father.

Savitch was ill-prepared to be a journalist, but was enthralled with television, and developed an over-riding desire to be on screen. By college, she was determined to become a network anchorwoman to get the kind of national recognition she needed. At local stations in Houston and then in Philadelphia, she learned how to play to the camera, evidently with great success. No matter how insecure or how deficient her reporting, the camera loved her.

As Blair puts it: "She had a red-light reflex to die for; when the scarlet light went on over a studio camera, signaling that she was on the air, Savitch summoned up every ounce of her 100 pound frame and projected herself straight through the television set into the viewer's living room". When she finally made it to the network, however, Savitch failed to win the approval of NBC News executives. "They had chosen Savitch for her abilty to look like she knew what she was talking about—on air, she seemed coolness itself, the essence of a great reporter—but could never reconcile themselves to the show business implications of their action."

At 23, Savitch began her reporting career at KHOU-TV, Houston. It was 1971, and news consulants were beginning to be influential. There, and at KYW-TV in Philadelphia, where Savitch came into her own professionally, the new style "action" and "eyewitness" news formats proved to be ideal for her kind of reporting. It was an era when what was wanted was "reporter involvement", including the reporter as a visible part of the story itself. Her series on child birth, the singles scene, and rape contributed to her success in Philadelphia. News stories themselves were rapid fire, and brief. The personality cult inspired by the consultants and the other gimmicks used to build local news are mercilessly described.

The early 70's were also the years of affirmative action, which helped fuel Savitch's goal of a major anchor role. She had succeeded locally, and in 1977 was able to accept an offer from NBC. Despite her success with emotional issues, she was assigned to Capitol Hill. However, she got star treatment for a neophyte network correspondent, and contractually won perks such as a limousine, first-class travel, her own hairdresser, a clothes allowance, and a highly prized office.

Her colleagues were not appreciative. The trappings were there, and now she had to produce. Blair writes: "Savitch was her truest self in front of a camera; off camera, she was always scrambling to come up with what she considered an appropriate self-presentation". She was not up the reporting, and stage presence alone was not enough. Her success at the network was not on the reportorial beat in Washington where she was in over her head, but as week-end anchor, and anchor of the prime time *News Up-*

dates.

Career goals were all, and Savitch's personal life encompassed two failed marriages in rapid succession, culminating in the suicide of her second husband, whose body she discovered. Pill-popping and reported cocaine use took its toll, culminating in a disasterous live performance during a *News Update*, where she was almost incoherent. It was not long after that, as her career began to fall apart, that a freak auto accident took her life as well as her companion's.

The book is more than a portrait of a pathetic, driven woman, torn apart by the contradictory messages about what her professional role was supposed to be. It is a picture of the confusion that has still not been resolved over the direction of network news itself. Show business vies with journalism. In her own brief life, Savitch embodied the debate. ■

Marlene Sanders, a broadcast journalist with WNET-TV, New York, is co-author of *Waiting For Prime Time: The Women of Television News* just published by the University of Illinois Press. She is a former ABC and CBS correspondent.

R E P L A Y

The Creative Opportunity

"Television is a mass medium. Its overwhelming characteristic is its size. The advertisers whose dollars provide the major share of its support make products designed to reach those masses. Mass sales are the blood stream of their existence. Anyone who loses sight of that basic condition is losing sight of the bulls-eye; he is ignoring not television's greatest creative handicap, but its greatest opportunity and challenge. Any creative team—producer, director, writer, cameraman, performer, designer—that has something worth saying can say it more compellingly than ever before in the history of man. But as communicators they must realize the tender in which they deal has to be designed to attract, hold and engage the mass audience."

—Hubbell Robinson, article in *Television Quarterly*, February, 1962

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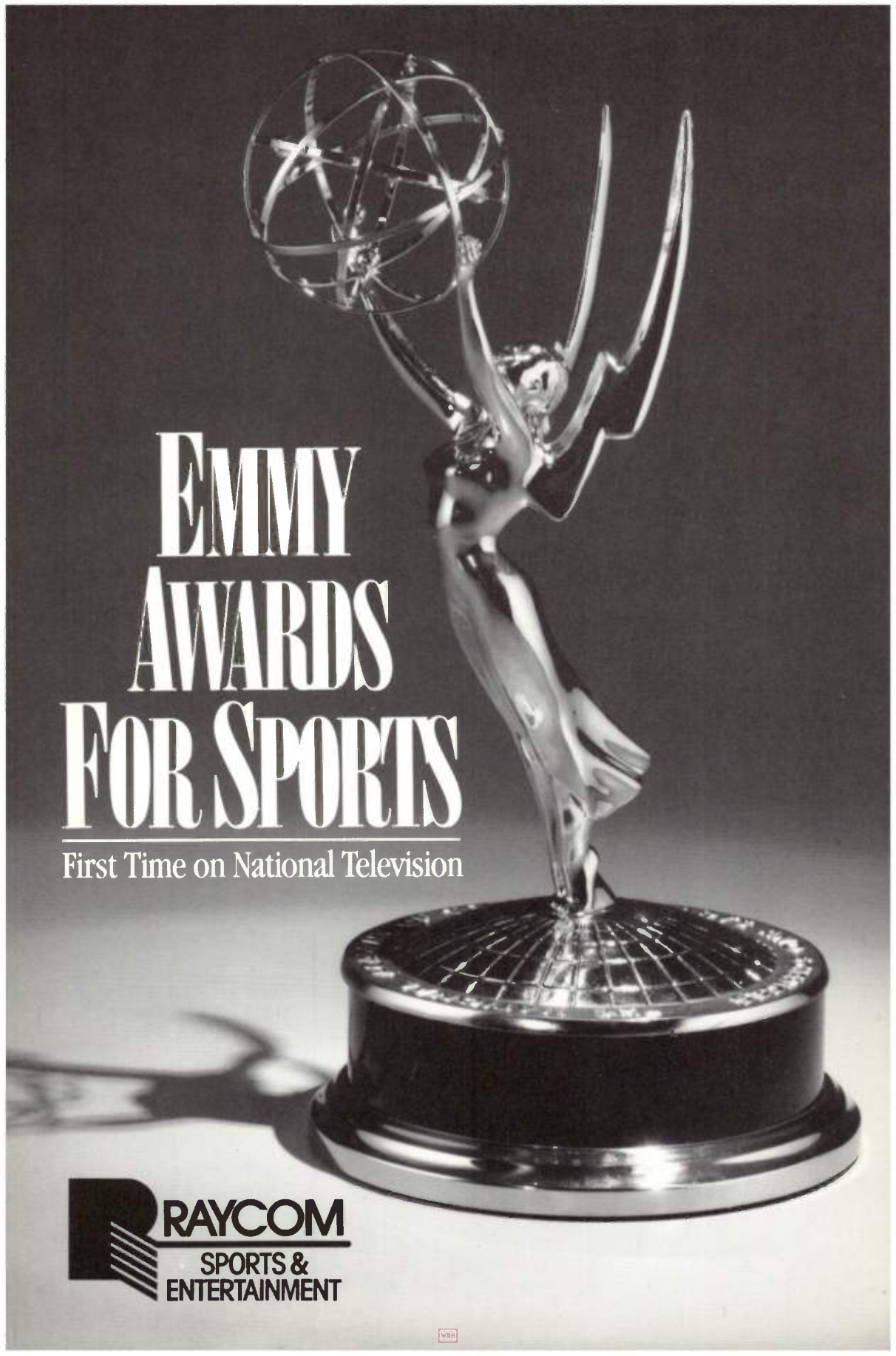
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