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HOWARD STRINGER CLOSEUP: Arthur Unger
THE NEW SITCOM REALITY: Dave Berkman
PROGRAMMING 500 CHANNELS: Brandon Tartikoff
ROCKIN' & ROLLIN' MIAMI NEWS: Paul Steinle

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WHO'S ON FIRST?

PROGRAMMING IN THE 500 CHANNEL UNIVERSE

**BY BRANDON
TARTIKOFF**

In 1980 when I was offered the head programming position at NBC, people told me not to take it—that the two previous occupants of the job had lasted a cumulative 18 months. *Undaunted*, I accepted and ran the Division for close to 12 years. Last summer when I was approached to be the keynote speaker at the annual convention of the National Association of Television Executives, I knew it was a great honor, but I also knew that the past two NATPE keynote speakers were out of their jobs within two months after delivering their addresses. Again,

undaunted, I accepted and read a few days later in *Variety* that by so doing I too could soon fall prey to *The Curse of NATPE*. But as I did at NBC, once again I reversed the trend. I was out of my job two months *before* I delivered my address.

I left Paramount this past November to move to New Orleans where my daughter needed to be for the most critical phase of rehabilitation from the head injury she suffered two years ago. And I'm happy to report it's going right according to plan. Meanwhile back in Hollywood people kept looking for the real reason I left. I felt that if I was Gary Cooper playing Lou Gehrig in the last reel of *The Pride Of The Yankees*, delivering my "I'm The Luckiest Man Alive" speech, the

tinseltown types would be whispering on the sidelines "Yeah. I know they say Gehrig is dying. But you know this season he was only hitting .290."

So, now I am a mogul without portfolio, an executive without an "In" box, a person who can't buy anything from syndicators, and has nothing to sell you except maybe a few notions about where this television thing needs to go. My theme, *Who's On First: Programming in the 500 Channel Universe*. I chose that title because my original—"Amy Fisher: The Real Story" has already been used three times.

Now many predict that having 500 channels of programming will be Nirvana for viewers, an unlimited amount of video choices. But I seem to remember somebody once saying that hell is the place where you get everything you've ever wanted. For me personally, hell would be a place where all of my most glaring programming failures would run endlessly on a loop. That's what I used to think the 500 Channel Universe would represent.

Until the other night when I was home and I spied by chance *The Manimal* on the Sci-Fi Channel, and I knew I didn't need to wait for digital compression and John Malone to make my worst nightmare come true. (No, it was not a show ahead of its time. Yes it was Jeff Sagansky's idea, and thank you Kay Koplovitz for letting me get back in touch with the pain.)

Well, digital compression is coming. And so is High Definition Television. And they'll probably get here just as cable regulation and the final decrees on Fin-Syn are resolved. All this, plus the end of the worst recession to hit this country in 50 years, and the begin-

ning of a new administration in Washington. Yes, it does seem that this year television is about to enter a New Frontier. Now I know people are always saying that our medium—that television like Madonna feels compelled to re-invent itself every semester. But this year it does feel we're at the gates of this *New Frontier*.

In 1980 I was in San Francisco presenting *The David Letterman Morning Show* to the NBC affiliates. Saddam Hussein wishes he could drop a bomb as big as the one we did that day. Just as David's status in the industry has changed considerably since that day, so I guess has mine. I wish David Letterman well at CBS. I also wish he would approve my loan.

Give my current indeterminate state, (although most high school graduates can find Louisiana on a map), I probably qualify these days as a bi-partisan who can approach the problems and opportunities before us with some degree of objectivity. What I won't be doing is attempting to predict the future—a fool's mission if there ever was one.

Remember the classic award-winning Braniff commercial made in 1967 that projected what air travel in the future would be like? Everything from pneumatic glass tubes that would transport us from terminal to gate, to robots that would replace flight attendants as well as porters, to the most far-fetched idea of them all—edible airline food!

Well, the future came. It bore no resemblance to the commercial. And try calling for a reservation on Braniff Airlines these days. They don't exist. My mission is simpler. To shed some light, and maybe point the way I think

My basic premise is that television has always been a business of ideas, and whoever has the best ideas wins. That will remain true no matter what technological advances are made.

we should be going. My basic premise is that television has always been a business of ideas, and whoever has the best ideas wins. That will remain true and sacrosanct no matter what technological advances are made, no matter what regulatory rules we play by. Let me begin by a quick read of where we are right now.

Recently I perused the latest Yankelovich monitor survey which declared "The American Dream Is Dead", and that the prevailing morality for the remainder of the decade would be "victim ethics"—of people saying "I will do whatever it takes to keep me from being a victim. How can I be sure I will keep whatever I've got?" Whether the current mood of optimism, re-dedication and renewal of the Clinton administration can sustain and wash away this cynicism so pervasive in our culture remains to be seen.

We've already seen how that cynicism, like a cancer, can attack the very core of our country's blue chip "blue sky" industry—show business, and in particular, the television business. The television business has always had the innate ability to create *New Wealth*—to generate new programs, program forms, new personalities, and sandwiched in between all of that—launch new products into the consumer marketplace. But lately the conviction, risk-taking, and investment necessary to do those things seems to be at low ebb. Over-the-air television has been a mature business for quite some time. And it is only natural that the proprietors of a mature business feel threatened by anything new to feel that they need to keep a tight hold on whatever they've got.

Movies and radio were once threatened with extinction by television, and they have managed to survive quite nicely and profitably. They

ceded some forms, some staples to the new kid on the block, evolving distinctive product and redefining their respective businesses as they went along. Interestingly enough, the most threatening developments on the broadcasting front in the last year came not from outside forces like cable, home video and pay-per-view, but from forces within the business. First there was what I'll label the "Salhany Decision"—the decision made by the newly installed chairperson of a major television studio to pull the plug on the remaining episodes of a situation comedy, *Anything But Love* that was far closer to 88 episodes than it was to the starting line. This was a seller saying to the buyer—ABC—"No mas!" These shows won't command much in syndication, so we no longer want to suffer deficits just because you—ABC—think you may want the show for another season."

The second development took place last January when we at Paramount announced the launch of two mega first run hours, *The Untouchables* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. Both series had budgets higher than any first year series on any of the four networks, principally because of their pre-sold global attractiveness and the studio's credible track record in domestic syndication hours, thanks to *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Under the leadership of Kerry McCluggage, Paramount decided to forego the standing offers of 13 episodes from several networks on these programs to go it alone in these fairly uncharted waters of first run. If nothing else, this move once and for all dispelled any lingering prejudice that first run hours were necessarily second class citizens. Sort of what Joe Namath did for the AFL by winning Super Bowl III.

The last development that bears mentioning is the final tote on the individual networks' bottom lines at season's end. In the old days it was not uncommon for the then three

networks, regardless of their win, place, or show finish, would show a profit. However, at the end of the '91-'92 season, the first and second place networks—CBS and NBC—lost money, while the third and fourth place networks—ABC and FOX—were in the black. Call it the softness of the marketplace, or overspending in Sports, but clearly the network game was operating by new rules and different economics.

Some television critics and media investment analysts were quick to glean from these startling developments that the handwriting was on the wall for the networks. Barry Diller, newly arrived at QVC after leaving FOX, was quoted recently in the *Los Angeles Times* that "The network business is still good business, it's just been badly managed." My own take is that the handwriting is on the wall, but it applies to everyone—network, local, syndication, and cable, and that handwriting reads "Are you relevant?"

Are you continuing to provide your viewers with what they want to see—with a service that they can't see anywhere else? What can't they see anywhere else? How about all of the fare that viewers have watched to good-to-great numbers in the recent past—smart adult drama from *Moonlighting* to *St. Elsewhere*, to thirtysomething to prime-time serials like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, to important Big Event Mini-Series like *Lonesome Dove*. It's been a long time between sips for products like that because at present we haven't been creative with the other numbers—the fair-to-poor ones pertaining to their production costs and aftermarket value.

The viewers' taste hasn't changed, nor has the availability of the writing and producing talent for executing this product; only the appetite of production entities for making it. Somewhere, not over the rainbow, but in that burgeoning global marketplace there's a viable solution to add these savory ingredients back into the programming stew, which has been a bit bland of late.

Why is it that as the brave new world of 500 channels comes rushing towards us, our programming choices seem to be getting more and more timid? Why is it that with the exponential explosion of channels that the number of appointment television series (what I believe shows need to be today) is less than it was 10 years ago when we were in the 20 channel universe still governed by the Principle of L.O.P.—Least Objectionable Program? Why is it that as commercials combat

zapping by getting richer, denser, and quicker, most of the programs they surround have diluted production values and consequently play slower and slower?

I believe the answer to all those imponderables has to do with our collective conviction and

confidence about this business. I'm not naive, I'm not somebody stuck in a time warp of those good ole days of the mid-80's. I know that a lot of the pots of syndication gold out there have disappeared; that the economy has gone south, perhaps giving some nervous nelly advertisers the momentary upper hand when it comes to program content. But I also know that a little long-term thinking and some creative and fiduciary vision can turn that glass from being half empty to one bubbling to the brim point before you can say Joey Buttafuoco.

Why is it that as the brave new world of 500 channels comes rushing towards us, our programming choices seem to be getting more and more timid?

All right, maybe not that quick, but I just love saying that guy's name in mixed company. Anyway, it requires a different mindset than we're employing these days. If you rely on just conventional wisdom to get you through your programming day, with competition being what it is and knowing what it will become, in the long run you're playing a losing hand.

Consider three conventional programming tenets presently enjoying too much popularity:

1. Programming for trends:

Nothing new here. You can go back to Fred Allen's famous quip "Imitation is the sincerest form of television." In an expanding universe of channels, this me-tooism immediately hits the wall with diminishing returns. The recent spate of twenty-something hardbody shows and the latest generation of low cost reality magazines attest to that. You'd be better off programming against the trends, going against the grain.

It wasn't that long ago that NBC righted its course with a landmark police drama, *Hill Street Blues*, even though there were no cop shows in the top 10. And that same network vaulted to first place for the first time in 30 years with *The Cosby Show*, a show developed at a time when the prevailing wisdom was that comedy was dead. Today more than ever we need original ideas—shows with new stories to tell like *The Simpsons*, *Northern Exposure* and *Seinfeld*. And we could also use some just plain originals—performers like Roseanne, Tim Allen, and Oprah.

2. Programming for demographics:

I've always felt that demographics are the last refuge of a programmer. The mass pursuit of the tiniest of targets, the 18-34 year old viewer, is ill-conceived to begin with. They're

the least likely group to be at the set, the most adept at spotting a Hong Kong knockoff, and the least responsive to being pandered to. Have we forgotten that programming truism that "the hits get everybody"? I was there at the inception of such disparate shows as *The A-Team* and *The Golden Girls*, and as they soared to the Nielsen top five every advertiser wanted in. It is after all called broadcasting, and if you're an entity blessed with close to full coverage of the nation, why not use it to try to get as many people in the tent as possible?

3. Programming by committee:

This tenet is sometimes dressed up in fashionable 90's lingo like "It's a true programming partnership". I'm not a very big proponent of democracy when it comes to programming, and have generally fond that the breakout shows fly in the fact of research, break the rules, and usually come from one or two people's passionate hunch that something far-fetched could actually work. I'm all for feedback, consultation, and dialogue between networks and affiliates, stations and studios, but ultimately this is a game of gut's ball, not everybody polling each other. By definition "vision" is someone seeing something that most others cannot. And vision, not consensus, is what we need more of right now.

We need more of what Ted Turner envisioned when he saw the possibilities for CNN, and Barry Diller for FOX becoming the fourth network. The King Brothers took a lukewarm network game show, *Wheel of Fortune*, put it in prime access where everyone said it wouldn't work—and now Roger and Michael are to syndication what Baskin and Robbins are to ice cream.

Some more recent successes took place at NATPE the past couple of years. Some of you in your hearts

knew a guy named Rush Limbaugh was right, and are feeling pretty smart right now. Keith Samples quit his job and started a distribution company because he believed in a Saturday morning show we produced at NBC Productions. You know it as *Saved By The Bell*. But at the Company and in the community it was considered "The Peacock's Folly". Everybody knew that live action could never compete with animation, and that a show with such a slim audience base could never succeed when taken out into syndication. So much again for conventional wisdom!

For most of commercial television's first four decades we've gotten by on evolution, gradual refinements—improvements effected in a viewer universe that promised profitability at every turn. But with the technological wave now cresting on the near horizon, and the money-gushing propositions harder to come by, evolution is no longer sufficient, revolution is what is called for. A radical-re-thinking of how we do business, and how we define ourselves. Without that, all of us—big and small—will be nibbled to death by the piranhas of encroaching new channels and services.

Like it or not, the world has changed forever, and there's no going back. I used to get the distinct impression that networks were generally regarded as the rain forest. That if, they didn't have a particularly healthy year, if they didn't grow their usual quota of projected hits, then there would be a commensurate drought hitting three or four years hence in another part of the world—i.e., syndication. Not so anymore.

Off-network product is not the only

game in town, or necessarily the most important. Networks and their principal suppliers know this too. They also know they can no longer rely on local stations to fund their deficits and, therefore, their business. More and more these giant companies are trying

to crack the code on how to burn clean on their network run, regardless of the length of that run.

The sheer cost of making shows is going to necessitate networks and studios to look at series play patterns. Should some series episodes air twice a week as they do in syndication? Can economies be realized by recon-

ceiving series order patterns? Some recent positive steps were taken with ABC's multi-year renewal of *Home Improvement*, and NBC's first-round buy of *22 Sea Quests* from Steven Spielberg.

With the proliferation of more and more channels playing more and more re-runs, it is imperative that networks remain first-run theaters if they want to remain the audiences' primary focus in the future.

With the proliferation of more and more channels playing more and more re-runs, it is imperative that networks remain "first run theaters" if they want to remain the audiences primary focus in the future. The playing field is level enough already without leveling it further with recycled cable movies or vintage series re-runs. Otherwise, a channel surfer in the Sea of 500 will not be able to identify a network picture from the others.

The same goes for low-cost reality programming that resembles the stuff on the narrowest of niche cable services. And as for those true-crime Movies of the Week, if the networks choose to let this genre degenerate into celluloid ambulance-chasing, then why don't the big three or four get

out of the made-for game and concentrate on what they do best: weekly television series.

In this age of informational overload, confusion over where weekly series are scheduled is beginning to sound like the old Abbot & Costello routine: "Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know's on third". Is it just coincidence that the regular inhabitants of the Nielsen Top 10 are all part of clearly defined, discernible programming blocks? With cumulative promotional weight and awareness, these shows cut through the clutter to get their address known and remembered. But that concept of theming—that nightly persona—needs to be extended to the overall network service.

Why is it that the newest of the networks—FOX—has the most clearly defined identity. No matter how much multi-plexing of network services transpires in the 500 channel universe—estimates generally range between five to ten—a brand identity is crucial for just getting the bombarded viewer to even look in; to have an expectation or anticipation of what you might be offering.

Stations know the value of identity. Up until now, local news and public affairs operations have been sufficient to root them in the community. But as the channels grow around you, your local production needs to grow as well. Just as a network needs to look like a network to the itinerant grazer, so must a local station seem local. Your signature shows/productions may need to multiply by the same factor as channel capacity does. These programs don't necessarily have to "out-Hollywood" Hollywood when it comes to look and production values anymore than a local newspaper has to outshine *USA Today* or the *New York Times*. They just need to tap into local idiosyncracies, and remind people where they live.

• • • • •

Since December, I've been trying to put this theory into practice in the New Orleans market with several different formats in varying stages of development at a couple of stations there; everything from a kid show to a game show to a topical serial. For me, it's a return to my roots—local television—but I hope some of my experiments can lead to programs that will not only prosper locally but could be rolled out regionally or nationally.

George Burns once remarked that with the death of vaudeville, nobody has any place to be bad any more. George, I invite you to drop in on me some day in the Bayou.

Wouldn't it be wonderful though if a significant number of those 500 channels could be devoted to a cornucopia of unique, local and regional productions that are as diverse and colorful as this country truly is? My sense is the talent is out there, ready to be asked, able to rise to the occasion.

Meantime, I'm having the most fun in years, probably since the 80's. The 80's, of course, was the decade where the "television" generation—those people born into homes that already had a television set—came to prominence and power.

In the 90's, that generation—myself included—is by no means ready to step aside, but it will be joined by a new generation of programmers and producers—call it the "MTV/ Computer" generation, a group that grew up in homes that already had cable and a computer. These people come with a first language facility to think digitally. They and others are already helping to harness computer technology to television and film production, reaping initial budget savings of around 10%. Obviously, the pay-per-view industry, the home shopping networks, and the advertising industry are all panting at the prospect of a nation of addressable homes. And when we broaden this

vision to include the world of global partnerships and true co-productions, I wish it were here already.

I remain very optimistic about this somewhat scary world of 500 channels. While I can't guarantee when the exact touch down date will be, or what this universe will totally resemble, I can guarantee you this:

If somebody in that future puts on a good show, one that is *different, well made, and compelling*, and it is left in one place long enough for the American television audience to find it, that audience will support the show and make it a success.

They always have and they always will!

To be ready to join this brave new world, we've got to get brave. We've got to stop taking the easy way out—to stop pandering, and start reclaiming the high ground. ■

One of the projects Brandon Tartikoff is developing is a children's series called *Big Time TV* originating at WNOL-TV, New Orleans. He is also producing a sitcom series *Under New Management*, set in New Orleans and produced there with WYES. This article is based on a talk by Tartikoff delivered earlier this year at the NATPE convention in New Orleans.

“ QUOTE UNQUOTE ”

Tribute to a Critic

"The New York Times used to promote its classified ads with the slogan 'I got my job through The New York Times.' The death of Jack Gould your television critic and reporter from 1944 to 1972 reminded me that I got my job through The Times as FCC chairman in the Kennedy Administration.

"After John F. Kennedy was elected in 1960, he asked me to join his administration. I declined because my wife and I had a young family with three small children...

"But Bob Kennedy knew from my constant quoting of Jack Gould's column that I was deeply concerned about television, especially television's impact on our children. Jack Gould's reporting had influenced me deeply; his role as the conscience of television led me to change my mind and go to Washington. We need to remember his sense and vision of what television could and should be."

—Newton Minow
letter to the editor of *The New York Times*
May 25, 1993

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WHO WILL WIN THE VIETNAM MARKET?

BY JOHN L. HESS

Hanoi

Half a dozen big satellite dishes identify the Hanoi compound of Vietnam Television—VTV. "We built a couple ourselves," says my escort, Nguyen Phuong. "This one was given us by the French, this one by Ted Turner, this one by the Japanese, and that one ... [a smile for the punch line] is a gift from the U.S. Government." It is evidently an old jest, referring to a huge rooftop web converted from a military radar antenna captured in Saigon in 1975.

The other gift dishes are easily explained.

The French and Japanese, like nearly everybody else, want a foothold in the fast-growing, poor but eager market of 68 million Vietnamese consumers. Ted Turner's CNN has the added incentive that it faces stiff competition from the Hong Kong-based Star satellite network, which includes BBC in its full array of five-channel programming and is already dominant in

India and very strong in mainland China, Taiwan and even Israel. CNN has one advantage, that Hanoi would rather do business with Americans, but one disadvantage, that Washington wouldn't let Americans do business with Vietnam.

Businessmen from Taiwan, Singapore, France, Germany and even Russia had been active here for years. On the complaint of American inter-



Photo by Martha Hess ©

ests, the Bush Administration last year told American firms they were free to open offices there, but not yet to do business—hang your clothes on a hickory limb, so to speak, but don't go near the water. Significantly, the big ad agencies Young & Rubicam and J. Walter Thompson were among the first to set up shop, hoping to tap a virgin market.

The Bush move was clearly a signal that the trade embargo would soon be lifted. Many expected this to be announced in connection with a meeting of the International Monetary Fund last April 30, but another

MIA scare story surfaced in Moscow on April 11 and President Clinton (nervous about looking soft on Vietnam, according to some reporters) said it all would take a lot of looking into. Those American branches would not be closing any deals for a while.

Meanwhile, British Petroleum and Castrol, a French oil company, put up billboards in the big cities and placed the first commercials on Vietnamese television. (They are also among half a dozen companies exploring for oil in Vietnamese waters; the Russians already are pumping from their concession.) A VTV official said the commercials were "experimental"; and an ad man in Hong Kong told the *Far Eastern Economic Review* that VTV had quoted him "stupidly low" rates of a few dollars a throw, but he expected them soon to go "unreasonably high."

CNN lets VTV use anything it wants from its feed, in exchange for the right to use VTV's product. In interviews, however, Pham Khac Lam, VTV's director general, and Bui Duy Han, its chief of staff, volunteered freely that their output was just not of export quality. They attributed that to their

primitive gear, an explanation confirmed by a tour of the studio, which looked like a former school.

The ground floor was strewn with prop junk. In a bare room upstairs, two cheerful young women were rehearsing their news script before a small Sony camera on a flimsy tripod,

with a single reflector, two spots and no Teleprompter, no insulation and no ON AIR warning light. In other rooms, editors were cutting and doing subtitles on what looked to this old pencil-pushing correspondent to be home video thingamajigs. Foreign

newscasters do use some VTV footage in special situations, and hire some help from local staff on assignments, paying in cash and/or leftover tape stock, both of which are welcome.

Hanoi began experimenting with TV in 1970, and began scheduled broadcasting while the bombs were still falling, in 1972. Technical help was given by the Soviet bloc and Cuba, and later from Japan and France, which is trying to restore the French language to some of its colonial eminence. (During my tour of the Hanoi studio, though, an editor was working on the tape of a home-made English-teaching broadcast segment.)

Now, VTV was broadcasting five or six hours a day from three major stations and 53 relay transmitters. The government says it reaches 60 percent of the population. With an estimated four million TV sets in the country, this seems plausible, for throughout Southeast Asia one glimpses clumps of people watching, or ignoring, the TV set, often in huts where it is the only furniture in sight. To serve this

Throughout Southeast Asia one glimpses clumps of people watching, or ignoring the TV set, often in huts where it is the only furniture in sight.

huge monopoly audience, VTV operates on a tiny budget: the equivalent of \$1.9 million a year for everything but what it can cadge from foreigners. Most of that goes to sustain a staff of 512, who draw a flat \$30 a month, plus a modest allowance for modest make-up and bao dais for the announcers. (To be sure, the rate of exchange is a misleading measurement of buying power, but still ...)

Director General Lam said VTV's programming was 60 percent homemade. Imported matter is mostly documentaries and cultural and nature shows, rather like the PBS diet. My brief observation suggests a conscious determination by management to bar sexually and politically provocative matter. Indeed, Vietnam's press law bars copy that is "harmful to the policy of all-people solidarity" or "licentious, lewd" or gruesome.

For director Lam, that goes without saying. A wiry, dark man in a business suit—the mark of a high-level functionary—he was old enough to be a war veteran, and to speak French. His juniors were in shirtsleeves, and spoke, or were learning English.

"As a journalist," Lam told me, "I believe more and more that correct information is critical for everybody, and distorted information creates many troubles." Although Vietnam's political leaders do not hog the screen and indeed are almost camera-shy, he indicated, VTV does not air criticism of their policies, nor is it set up for call-in shows, though it has done street interviews for its edited economic development programs. Still, it is clear that the flood of economic growth is rapidly undermining the dikes that protect the Vietnamese from subversive influences.

With the arrival of thousands of

businessmen and tourists, scores of nightclubs have appeared, prostitution has visibly returned and AIDS has arrived, especially in HCM-Ville, formerly Saigon. Near my hotel in Hanoi, some 40 young people are watching the Japanese import called

Karaoke, a sing-along music video shown on a 40-inch screen while a live entertainer sings the lyrics into a mike-disco on the cheap, very "in" with a young set starved for entertainment.

It is estimated that there are 1,500 video rental shops in

Hanoi, offering a wide range of contraband movies; I've been told that action flicks showing super-Yanks mowing down little brown men are much enjoyed.

Private satellite dishes are banned in Vietnam, as they are in China, Malaysia and Singapore, to protect the public from visual contamination. Enforcement is something else again. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, 4.8 million homes in China can receive Star's signal. In Hanoi, I was told, one can buy a satellite dish without much difficulty. A Foreign Ministry spokesman told me he had one at home to catch the news on CNN—adding that his son watches the shows all day.

Vietnam's leaders face a dilemma, and it's pretty clear which way they are going. The war that caused their people to accept incredible sacrifices for generations is over, and they want the good life in a hurry. That calls for opening the gates to foreigners bearing money and goods, and advertising that whets the public's appetite for more. Although we Americans last came with bombs, napalm and Agent Orange, the Vietnamese clearly would rather do business with us than with their ancient and still hostile enemies,

Private satellite dishes are forbidden in Vietnam, as they are in Malaysia and Singapore... Enforcement is something else again.

the Chinese—even, it would seem, the Chinese from Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong, whence video imports were banned last year.

Symbolically, Hanoi officials welcomed General Norman Schwarzkopf, a veteran of the American war in Vietnam, on a visit in April with Dan Rather. But a throng of ethnic Chinese businessmen, loaded with cash and eager to gamble, is knocking at the door. A syndicate from Singapore wants to build a second TV network, commercial of course. Hanoi looks wistfully toward Washington as a less dangerous partner, or at least an alternative bidder. But the Americans were only making contacts, while the competition was dangling contracts. The shape of Vietnam television for the decade to come was waiting on Bill Clinton. ■

John L. Hess is a television and radio commentator, syndicated columnist and a former *New York Times* overseas correspondent. New York City is now his home base.

“ QUOTE UNQUOTE ”

“Television is a theft of time. When children watch for hours on end, they are not doing any number of things that in the long run may be vastly more important in terms of their development. But television is more than a theft of time; its content in programs and advertisements deeply influences children’s attitudes, beliefs and actions.”

—John Condry
Dædalus
Winter, 1993

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CBS'S HOWARD S THE MAN WHO RE THE TIFFANY NET

The president of CBS/ Broadcast Group is the man who restored the luster to the Tiffany Network. Here he chats with *Television Quarterly's* special correspondent about the role of the network in American broadcasting today and tomorrow. "It has held the nation together," he says.

BY ARTHUR UNGER

An interloper from Wales is guiding the "Tiffany Network" back to its former pre-eminence in American television. Howard Stringer arrived at the helm of CBS Broadcast Group in 1988 with ambivalently unique qualifications: Cardiff Wales-born, public (read that private) school educated in England, an MA in Modern History from Oxford, truck driver, Vietnam veteran, executive producer of news programs; acknowledged by all who deal with him as "irresistibly smooth ... a man who uses charm to disguise a will of iron." Under the direction of Stringer CBS finished the 1993 season in No. 1 spot for the second consecutive season, with earnings estimated at around \$170 million. Only two years ago CBS lost an estimated \$400 million mainly because of a CEO Tisch-inspired purchase of major sporting events.

The interview was conducted on a high floor of Black Rock. As I waited

in the reception area, I noted a sculpture of two gentlemen on a bench titled "The Old Codgers" by Carol Anthony. Somebody had placed a British flag in the hands of one of a pair of the gentlemen. The receptionist regaled me with tales of the wonders of working for several decades at CBS and the glory of knowing William S. Paley.

Inside Howard Stringer's grey-flannel-walled, chintz and greenery-filled inner sanctum I noted another sculpture, this one a Western motif by Proctor with a plaque which read: "To Howard Stringer, the only network president I can hang out with and still love ... Burt Reynolds, 10/15/91."

"Is he still hanging out with you?" I asked, aware of the sometimes rapidly changing nature of network relationships.

"Well, we're still talking," Mr. Stringer responded.

Stringer was wearing a striped shirt with white collar and cuffs. "I see you are wearing your ubiquitous striped shirt," I joked. "Just about every picture I see you in you are wearing a striped shirt. Is it always the same

'RINGER: POLISHED YORK



shirt?"

He laughed. "I do have more than one, Arthur. But I buy them in London and somehow they always seem to be striped."

I looked around the office. In addition to several TV monitors, there was a lineup of 9 Emmys near a bust of Robert Kennedy. Hanging on the walls were an Oxford Poetry Society certificate of merit issued to Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, a map of Oxford and a genealogical chart of the British royal line of succession.

"Do you still maintain close ties with Wales?" I asked.

"I'm now an American citizen," he explained, "but I have two passports. British and American. I like to have a foot in England from time to time. My mother's there, my brother's there. I didn't flee England, you know. I left temporarily and I stayed here rather longer than I thought I was going to. But I am very happy here."

Stringer's wife is Dr. Jennifer A.K. Patterson, a dermatologist at N.Y.U. Medical Center. Beside their residence in New York City, Dr. and Mr. Stringer share a house in the very

social Hamptons on Long Island where their name often appears in the social gossip columns. They have recently adopted a son.

According to Stringer, he does what millions of Americans do with his VCR: laboriously tapes favorite movies and carefully writes the names down. "I've got drawers full of those tapes and I have never looked at them again," he chuckles. "I think videotapes are eventually going to provide the world's most effective land-fillers because every house is full of those wretched things ... and people will be eager to get rid of them. They'd be better off buying books."

When he first took over as President of the Broadcast Group, Stringer was looked at with terror by many staffers since it was clear that he was delegated by CEO Laurence Tisch to cut back personnel and he proceeded to do what he was hired to do ... see to it that the CBS ledger returned to profitability. Since he was perceived as an extension of Tisch's "bottom-line mentality," he was regarded, as one CBS old-timer told me with a sardonic grin, as "shrewd, opportunistic ... and

yet utterly charming as he did Tisch's dirty work." However, nowadays with CBS in the black and some re-hiring accomplished there is more admiration for what he has accomplished, and Howard himself regards that downsizing period as a painful part of his past which he has since managed to overcome.

While some broadcasting industry observers sneer at the CBS demographics which indicate that CBS has become the network of the 25-54 year-olds with the emphasis on the upper level, Stringer proudly refers to his CBS as "the baby boomer network."

But what he is most proud about is the way that CBS has weathered the storms of the late 1980's and has played a key role in the network system which, he feels, is "tying the nation together, one that is increasingly fragmented."

He warns against tossing aside the network system, finding an apt analogy in New York City's experience in destroying what it had before it knew what it was going to get: "New York tore down Penn Station and replaced it with Madison Square Garden ... but now we're nostalgic for Penn Station. And Madison Square Garden turned out to be obsolete in a decade .. flimsy and fragile."

So, the charming and ambitious young man from Wales has become a tough executive with a mission .. a double vision: to keep CBS on top in order to satisfy its stockholders and to safeguard the network system in order to help maintain a cohesive American way.

So far he seems to be succeeding in both missions.

Following is a record of my chat with Howard Stringer. While there has been some tightening and a few later additions, some changes in chronology, all of Mr. Stringer's answers are verbatim:

UNGER: So, Howard, what is it you do now for a living?

STRINGER: Well, I'm president of CBS Broadcast Group. We used to own many groups—record groups, publishing groups, book groups, toy groups, and now the only one left is the broadcast group, hence the title. But that means eight division presidents report to me, including entertainment, sports and news which are the three main programming elements as well as public relations and sales and so on.

UNGER: And what is your exact role as president?

STRINGER: Essentially I'm in charge of all our on-air programming—getting programming onto the air and making it successful both in ratings terms and running the television network effectively.

UNGER: At one point you have said that your role was to motivate and inspire.

STRINGER: Well, that's part of it. Television works best in a grand collaboration. And it's not an autocracy anymore, most particularly in these rather uncertain and anxious times. It is really giving a place stability, bringing out the best in it, motivating it and, if possible, inspiring it and setting the tone for its programming which will bring it success and, hopefully, appreciation and acclaim.

UNGER: How much of an input do you have on specific shows?

STRINGER: Well, when it comes to the prime-time programming, in the main meetings when we set the schedule, I go out to California and look at all the pilots. And then with Jeff Sagansky [Pres. CBS Entertainment] and the development staff we argue about which ones we like. And then we bring most of them back to New York with a schedule in mind—usually seven or eight shows get on the schedule. And we've already got a pretty good sense of what the seven or

eight are. But again, it is a collaboration. I mean, I don't put everything on the air that I alone like because it really can't work that way. Our best people will fight for the shows they believe in and since it's a very subjective line of work, unless the show is irresponsible or unfeeling or not attractive in some fundamental way, we decide together what's going to go on the schedule and alternatives. But Larry Tisch has the last word.

UNGER: *How much does your personal taste influence what goes on the air?*

STRINGER: Well, I think Jeff Sagansky has a pretty good idea of what my tastes are, and I've always made it clear what I liked. For me, the Sunday/Monday night combination is my kind of programming. The adult, sophisticated programming which I would watch—I watch Sunday and Monday. In the quest for the all-purpose 8 o'clock family show, then my tastes are less valuable. Succeeding in terms of ratings built into the system. It's important to do well, but at the same time, it's good for Jeff to know what I like. I don't hedge my bets in terms of what I like.

Does this mean occasionally I put a show on the air which I don't like but Jeff says to me that it'll work? Yes, it does. I think, particularly in this year where for all the right reasons, violence is a question that has been raised by many critics and by viewers, it's more important than ever that I establish with Jeff and so forth a feeling that we ought to be responsible and careful about the kinds of programs we put on.

UNGER: *You have said, "Ratings aren't the only way of measuring quality." What else is there?*

STRINGER: Well, ratings are not all. There's your own taste. Taste is a way of measuring quality. Ratings, after all, gets a broad number, so if ratings are the only guide for quality,

you would have to exclude Shakespeare and ballet and opera and most of the serious arts. So the measurements that you use—initially ratings—are an imperfect guide to the future of a program anyway whether it be *Cheers* or *Murphy Brown* or *Hill Street Blues* or *All in the Family* or *Mary Tyler Moore*. None of these shows—*M*A*S*H* in particular—came out of the box with enormous acceleration.

They had to find an audience. And quality television as you saw lately like *I'll Fly Away* or *Picket Fences*—they had their difficulty in finding a mass audience initially, and you have to decide in your own head that these shows represent something more important for the network than just ratings and that you stick with them and hope that the audience eventually finds them. But these are the general criteria of quality—a beautifully written show, a show that has something to say, a show that is thoughtful, a show that is well performed. A lot of shows fall into that category.

UNGER: *Which are the CBS shows that you believe fall into that category?*

STRINGER: Well, *Picket Fences* is performing—if we thought that *Picket Fences* would stay around its current share level indefinitely, we would be very nervous. On the other hand, we know that it is well written, and a careful, and thoughtful show—so there is enormous internal pressure from ourselves to persist with this show despite its ratings performance. We're bringing *Brooklyn Bridge* on the air again. *Brooklyn Bridge* has won viewer-supported television awards, and was favorably treated by the critics. We put it back on the air. And hoped and prayed that it would show some significant something in the way of an upturn given all the publicity.

UNGER: *How about Monday night shows?*

STRINGER: Well, *Northern Expo-*

sure was a mid-season start. And *Northern Exposure* started quite successfully. I mean, it didn't open to a big number but there was clearly something going on with the audience. And, by the way, you can take growth in many ways. As long as the show is growing quietly, it doesn't matter how fast it's growing as long as it's growing. With *Northern Exposure*, it didn't take long to get rolling. We got considerable critical acclaim and then after one season, it was on Monday nights with a good lead and it was doing very well.

UNGER: *Some of the very things that you mentioned as quality are things we never see—opera, ballet, etc. Do you think there'll ever come the day when networks will again do that kind of show or is that now PBS' domain?*

STRINGER: Well, I think in a world in which there are potentially 500 channels which would redefine "niche" down to the smallest microscopic component, we'll have an automobile engineering channel or a home cooking channel or a gardening channel or whatever. I think for the networks, it's very important that we stay broadcasters. We really define popular taste around the world and it's the only way we can make a profit considering that we are not like cable, paid by the channel—we're paid by advertisers—we're stuck with the mass broadcasting label. And as such, opera and ballet are probably never going to be mass taste. In the past, Ed Sullivan had his moments with opera singers and dancers, and so forth, and we use *Sunday Morning* for that quite considerably.

UNGER: *I remember years ago when Omnibus brought great classical artists to TV.*

STRINGER: But those were the golden days of broadcasting monopoly. You could do what you liked then.

UNGER: *Let's go back a bit to your background: Wales, public school, Oxford. How did all that prepare you for this job?*

STRINGER: Public school is an English term, you know that. It's boarding school. How does it prepare me? Well, it's an old-fashioned arts background in the days when English education was fairly elitist and if you're part of the elite stream as I was, through assorted fellowships, you could do very nicely. Yet the social problems of an English boarding school were enormous.

There's nothing that a classical arts education doesn't prepare you for in this kind of life. I mean that was a traditional part of British television. It is an all-purpose, broad-based liberal arts education which teaches you to write, teaches you to think, teaches you to argue, teaches you to debate—on top of that, I traveled all over the place, so I came over here with just a classic, broad-based education.

UNGER: *And did you come here directly after Oxford?*

STRINGER: Yes, pretty much. I decided I was going to come to America and to earn enough money, I worked for six months as a long-distance truck driver all over England, and saved enough to get on a boat in '65. I rode on the S.S. United States steamer, arrived and stayed in a youth hostel on the Lower East Side, kind of a dark, gloomy part of New York. I then started applying for television jobs. I didn't have one when I came.

UNGER: *Later, while you were working in a low level job at CBS, you were drafted into the Army. You could have avoided that by going back to England.*

STRINGER: Yes.

UNGER: *Why didn't you do that?*

STRINGER: Because my fascination with America hadn't ended. And

I, being young, was naive enough to think I could talk my way out of it. Because it had happened so quickly, my assumption was that there had been a mistake or it seemed unfair. I came to the country in February, I was drafted in May.

UNGER: *I didn't know they did that.*

STRINGER: Well, neither did I. Neither did anybody else but it was a bad time in Vietnam, and there was a massive draft and a massive movement of troops to Vietnam. That was the time of the build-up of half a million troops. And I was living in the Lower East Side, not an area where many recruits were able to pass the physical or the mental examinations. But I didn't expect to go to Vietnam because there was a rule then that aliens didn't go to Vietnam, but then they changed the rule while I was in the Army, and so I went.

UNGER: *I know you were not in front-line combat... on the whole, was it a good experience for you?*

STRINGER: Like most people remember their Army experience, you wouldn't necessarily want to repeat it. At the time, it seemed like an eternity—two years of my life. It didn't seem like a great career move, but on the other hand, I was extremely well treated in the Army. I got to know America and Americans in ways which people who haven't been drafted can't. I think that as an experience, it is both fascinating and rewarding. As long as you don't get killed.

Like all those experiences when you're a child, you remember the good times and you forget the bad times. But it is a rich experience. It is time-out from the ordinary, regular flow of life. It's a moment which is finite, has a beginning, middle and an end in which you can find out something about yourself and experience different things.

UNGER: *And also I imagine it gave you the chance to mingle with non-elitist people.*

STRINGER: Absolutely. I mean, '65 was following the early success of the civil rights movement. Black soldiers had something to prove and did extremely well in all the tests and in all the contests that you have in basic training. There was a camaraderie that existed on the way to Vietnam that doesn't exist in many other circumstances. And, in a sense, that also is a collaboration—war. Because you collaborate in order to survive and if you have a successful collaboration, you've got a better chance of surviving.

So it's also pretty good training for this line of work. The act of surviving in Vietnam gives you a perspective on the rest of your life that few others could possibly understand or have. When I got off that plane in San Francisco on my return from Vietnam, the sky never seemed bluer and the air never seemed sweeter. It was the kind of exhilaration that came with surviving the experience.

UNGER: *When you left, you were working at CBS, right?*

STRINGER: Yes.

UNGER: *And when you came back, you went back to CBS.*

STRINGER: Still in a minor job.

UNGER: *Were they required to give you the job?*

STRINGER: They weren't because I hadn't been in CBS long enough to qualify for reinstatement, but the personnel chief at the time felt clearly some personal obligation to bring me back and I came for my interviews in my uniform—so, I thought I had it anyway—decorations and all. And I said, "I'm back for my job" and they really tried very hard to find me a job and did indeed get me a job on local radio. When WCBS went all-news in '67, I was on the staff at the time.

UNGER: So you went to a local radio job?

STRINGER: Well, then in '67 and '68, I went to work for the election unit as it geared up. Then I worked my way up at CBS News until I was given my current job.

UNGER: I see you have a map of Oxford. Do you maintain close ties to England and Wales?

STRINGER: I have two passports. I always have a foot in England from time to time. My mother's there. My brother's there. I didn't flee England. I left temporarily and I stayed rather longer than I thought I was going to be and I am very happy here.

UNGER: Would you have trouble working at BBC?

STRINGER: I can't imagine they would ask me. It would depend on what category. I've always thought I'd like to go back and host a book or garden show or something—something small and unsequential.

UNGER: We mentioned cultural programming and the fact that networks must go for the big, broad audience. Do you think PBS still has a mission?

STRINGER: Oh, PBS obviously gets some challenge from A&E and Discovery on cable. They tread on its turf much the same way as HBO and all the others tread on our turf. But PBS has a strong identity. If it was centrally organized more effectively, PBS clearly does have a niche—does have an identity. I think it has a tone and a personality that the cable channels certainly don't have which are, after all, like all cable channels, into endless repeats. So, I think PBS is very valuable. That's why I send money to them.

It was the first niche. It raised the tone of television culturally. It knew what it was about. It put programs on the air that it knew an intelligent audience would appreciate. It's been the creative force in a lot of children's

television and has always offered alternatives that remind us that television isn't all sitcom shows.

UNGER: Do you think that since PBS is performing this function of presenting the cultural things which the networks can't really afford to offer, that the networks should be supporting PBS?

STRINGER: I think part of the formula today is that we all ask the networks to do everything. It's pretty hard at the moment to expect us to support PBS when the money is not rolling in generally to network television. We have a lot of responsibilities. After all, we're a network. We have standards and practices that cable companies don't have. We have responsibilities to equal time. The cable companies don't have that.

UNGER: Are there parts of the deregulation of the past 10 years that you think should be re-regulated?

STRINGER: No. I think we've been strapped down for years like Gulliver on the beach by the Lilliputians.

UNGER: Will there still be a place for network television in the future?

STRINGER: I think that network television has performed an important role. It's been a wonderful whipping boy for the studios, for the politicians and for audiences from time to time, because of its mass market goals and its common touch. But it is its value in the shared experience, in tying a nation together that is increasingly fragmented, that is more valuable now than ever. We have not done a good job of explaining that. Our news divisions have been unpopular over the years as is their wont and as is their role with politicians. That hasn't endeared us to Washington.

We've had entertainers and so forth that we cancel—that doesn't endear us to parts of Hollywood. But the reality is that we have launched mass programming, distributed it, and

produced it, performed it, promoted it—whatever you want to call it—and in some way or another it has been the best around the world. We've set an international target for most television programmers and, at the same time, held a nation together.

One is tempted at the moment to say network TV is dying. People always tend to ask too much of network television. It's always dying. It's always a dinosaur. It doesn't deserve to stay alive. It's this, that, and the other, but in truth, it satisfies an enormous amount of the audience and it is entertainment. It's popular entertainment. There's nothing wrong with those two words together: popular entertainment.

UNGER: *So you think that it performs a major function in holding the country together.*

STRINGER: I think that's because this is a country already fragmented into groups of one kind or another—into regions, in some instances, into ethnic groups, into genders. It's a country strapped together by forces that have been around for 200 years, but which are weakening under the stresses and strains of late 20th century life. When people watch network television, they're experiencing a shared value and something they can have in common with their neighbors. That's not all bad in this day and age.

UNGER: *Along those lines, do you think what used to be called consensus television is on the way out? Are we ever going to have huge audiences watched by 70% of the TV sets?*

STRINGER: I don't think there'll ever again be those vast numbers for something regularly programmed. Specials like the Superbowl, perhaps. The last Cheers program, got a colossal audience on the order of M*A*S*H. But I don't think so in the future. I think it's fragmenting. The technology is charging headlong into the future

and dragging us behind before any of us have decided what the utility of technology is; what it can do for the audience; or whether it will do anything to the audience.

I mean, in *Time Magazine* everyone talks about the "road to the future" and the "500-channel universe" without anybody searching to ask what is on that 500 channels. And the reason is that television in this country is now a pyramid. The bottom of the pyramid is the programmers. The top of the pyramid will either be technicians and technologists and scientists whose mission it is to sell the hardware and drag us whether we like it or not into 500 channels when we can't create enough original programming for the ones we've got. By the way, audiences seem quite content with nine or ten channels.

So, it's a complicated world we're going in, and it's not difficult to imagine that you can destroy what you've got before you decide what it is you're going to get. And that's a bargain that is not necessarily in the best of interest of the era. You know, you could tear down Penn Station and replace it with Madison Square Garden—but now, we're nostalgic for Penn Station. And Madison Square Garden turned out to be obsolete in a decade.

UNGER: *Do you think in an era of 500 channels, people are going to be feeling nostalgia for the Golden Age of Television when there were only four channels?*

STRINGER: They won't be very nostalgic because those 500 channels will be flooded with yesterday's network programs. The money that these people make off the channels is mostly repeating it *ad nauseum*—and what they'll be repeating is the programs that we are all together at the studios and the affiliates created over the last 30-40 years. I mean, there is money in repeats. The gold in those hills is used over and over and over

again. And the question is: Will there be a common mass audience to create a successful program in the first place that you'll be able to repeat 40 years from now, or will the television of the 21st century be regurgitation?

UNGER: *Some people think that although this period which is mainly entertainment television interrupted occasionally by news or a documentary, maybe the future will be just the reverse such as 24-hour news programming interrupted occasionally by entertainment.*

STRINGER: No, no. CNN's audiences have pretty much leveled off. It's what it is. It's an important utility. You can turn it on when you need it. It's objective, it's fair, it's responsible and when there's a big event—international, anyway—the audience flows to it. If you had another news channel, it would sub-divide that audience; if you had still another news channel, it would sub-divide that audience. The cable companies made it very clear that they don't want another all-news channel. The word is already out that there's enough news on CNN.

People generally want entertainment. Most people want passive entertainment. They want to come home, collapse at the end of the day which everybody says is longer that it ever used to be. Two members of the family are now working, and they stagger home to their instant meal in the microwave and collapse in front of the television set.

Programmers of the future, the technologists, tell me that we're all going to sit there and go digital and let our fingers do the walking and try to find a program out of 500 channels, some of which will have 2000 movies, 2000 sitcoms, 2000 dramas. I'm telling you that in the end, there'll be a reaction to that. At some point, the core programmers with a brand identity will be just as valuable as ever. They still must be in places where original programming is needed.

UNGER: *Will we be able to press the button for the topic we want?*

STRINGER: Well, that's true, but that assumes that you don't want to miss something. You miss something new. I mean, the idea that it's sort of a library of yesterday's mashed potatoes that you can wander through with a fork at will and nibble away is true for a percentage of the audience. But it's not true for the vast majority.

UNGER: *Your idea of a shared experience is a very important factor. People want to be able to talk about the shows they watched the night before with their neighbors who also watched the show. Do you think we're ever going to develop a core of people who know how to use their VCR's?*

STRINGER: I may be wrong in the numbers but I'm sure there are at least 10 million people who can't program their VCR's.

UNGER: *I would like to see a survey on how many people actually look at the VCR tapes they have recorded. I know people who record enormous amounts of TV and never look at them.*

STRINGER: Absolutely. You also know people who, when they first had them, laboriously taped favorite movies and things and wrote the names down—I've got drawers full of them, a whole closet full of these tapes—I haven't looked at them. I think cassette tapes—videotapes—are going to provide the world's most effective landfills as years go by because every house is going to be full of these wretched things. They would be better off buying books.

UNGER: *You're known for your slogan: Patience is easier to preach than practice. At one time you had it translated into Latin.*

STRINGER: I had it translated when I first took over because it was clear to me that while everybody said that we had four years to turn the network around, there would be enormous pres-

sure on us to make a quick fix, to do something drastic and to respond to the enormous pressures you get when you're in third place. I wanted to tell the staff in effect that we're going to be stable, we're going to be calm, we're going to be confident. We're not going to throw out the baby with the bath water in the search of an instant solution. And that became our slogan. It's an effective one.

UNGER: *CBS is going after older viewers. Is it the Baby Boomers vs MTV audiences?*

STRINGER: I've said all along that NBC and ABC were ready to go after young viewers and all the rest of it, and we were going to go after a broad-based audience—a 25 to 54 base audience which is the baby boomers. And now, they're all doing it. And the reason they all do it is because advertisers can wax lyrical all they like about the 18-49, or the 18-year-olds and the 19-year-olds and the 20-year-olds harking back to the Golden Age of Television when the baby-boomers were then 18 and they had pretty much decided taste—they were the laboratory for early advertising. Well, those millions and millions of baby boomers now have the greatest buying power of the population. They are the ones who have jobs, who have families. They're the ones with the spending power. They're the ones with taste for the most part and they're relatively conservative in their taste. That's network television's audience.

I've maintained all along and will maintain that advertisers who ignore the baby boomers are ignoring the obvious and will be punished in the marketplace by their shortsightedness.

UNGER: *That makes CBS the baby boomer network.*

STRINGER: For the most part, yes. I think that's about right. You know, we're not as old as we used to be, but we're 25 to 54. We pick up some 18-year-olds along the way who stumble

on our programming and find that they're smart enough to accept it and we're thrilled to have them, but we're right there with the hard-core broad-based audience.

UNGER: *CBS has the very successful 60 Minutes and 48 Hours and Street Stories and Connie Chung's One on One. Are you going to do more?*

STRINGER: I don't know. This is the question of the day. ABC is coming on with another show and it has three on the air now. NBC has one and wants more. Another one is in the works. They are cheaper to produce than drama shows and performing better than drama shows. So, these are two compelling reasons for putting them on the air. There will eventually be a point of diminishing returns, I'm sure.

UNGER: *Do you think the line between those shows and the tabloid news shows is being blurred a bit?*

STRINGER: Well, it runs that risk. There is a significant difference right now, and that is that the tabloid shows and the syndicated shows are happily paying money for interviews. And so, we have the ghastly spectacle of abused children, abused mothers, runaway fathers, all getting \$5,000, \$10,000 for their stories—which raises questions about the credibility of all those broadcasts, and if we stoop to that in the white-hot heat of competition, then we'll drag the whole industry down.

And, if indeed, you have nine or ten established news magazines on the networks competing against syndicated shows spilling money all over the highway, then we change the nature of the beast quite significantly. And it's catastrophic. It's bad enough that we're diluting the product as it is. I mean, there are not enough producers to go around; there aren't enough writers to go around.

The MTV generation is going to be producing all these news magazines

before very long. And it's not fair, not only because they haven't had the seasoning, and they haven't had the experience and the time to discover that journalism is a bit of a cause as well as a profit center.

UNGER: *What will be the effect of the recent ruling about networks being able to syndicate their own shows?*

STRINGER: It's a step in the right direction. It reverses a longstanding trend which is to develop monolithic studios which are vertically integrated and have revenues in excess of \$10 billion, owned by foreigners. The trend is over and while the studios and the big companies can argue about it, the balance of power at least is now level and that's helpful.

UNGER: *Do you think it might result in the long run in the elimination of the independent producer?*

STRINGER: No. This is the biggest myth of the industry. The independents have a better chance of working in harmony with the networks than they do of working in harmony with the studios. And there are a lot of independents that have gone out of business lately. Almost all our shows that we own or that we have a partial ownership, we share with independents. I think we are much kinder to the independents than the monolithic studios.

UNGER: *Will CBS go back into the cable business at some point?*

STRINGER: Well, we were one of the pioneers and had we stayed in, we would have benefited. But no, I think we're still single-minded in our pursuit of broadcasting. And I think we have an advantage in that single-minded focus. It is the reason we're in first place. The reason we're not running around dipping our toe in waters all over the place. If there's a target of opportunity down the road, we'll take it, but only after measuring its value to us and the affiliates.

UNGER: *How about the competition of the carriers? I was wary about AT&T for a long time. I thought it was somebody's long range thinking to tie AT&T's name to news by underwriting McNeil-Lehrer. And whoever thought it up was thinking rather well. I think that's really what has happened.*

STRINGER: You're asking the million-dollar question: for whom does Ma Bell toll? Does it toll for the cable companies or does it toll for diversification? It's awfully hard to say. We are essentially on the sidelines in that struggle, watching and hoping that somebody realizes just what our value is. Obviously, with the cable retransmission, we try to persuade the cable companies that we have a value to them—65% of the audience wouldn't watch cable television if we went off their channels and the same would be true of the telephone companies. So, at the moment, we're kind of bystanders in that fight.

UNGER: *Now that you've got Letterman, how about expansion into later night television?*

STRINGER: Well, we're focusing on Letterman at the moment. We've still got crime time after prime time, so we're not moving swiftly in that department.

UNGER: *How about expansion in the areas of Afro-Americans and women?*

STRINGER: On the air or off the air?

UNGER: *Both.*

STRINGER: Well, on the air, clearly CBS is not moving as fast as it should. There are not many shows and the black population doesn't think that CBS is the network of choice. I would say FOX is. But we continue to try and improve our standing with black audiences and we will continue to do so. That was one of the reasons we bought *Heat of the Night*. That goal is worth pursuing. As for executives, that's another goal we'll pursue.

UNGER: *Let's go back to the FCC*

which reacted to the high cable prices and asked for a reduction. How do you feel about that, and do you feel that in the Clinton administration, we may see more FCC regulation?

STRINGER: The FCC has responsibilities which I suspect the Clinton administration will take very seriously. As for challenging the cable companies, that was long overdue. The cable monopoly was well on the way to Citizen Kane-like proportions and needed to be stopped in its tracks and re-examined. They can't keep making us the *bete noire* indefinitely. There are other *betes* out there even more *noire* than us.

UNGER: *What about the increasing importance of talk and call-in shows? Do you think that's a temporary situation?*

STRINGER: I think the fact that Presidential candidates have used the talk shows was significant. It's an informal format; some of them are much friendlier than others and every politician likes a friendly interview and not a hostile interview or a tough interview. So they have some value in that respect. The mainstream daytime talk shows are the king of extended national conversation about everything from their worst nightmare to their most idiotic thought and that's all. That also is a kind of national catharsis that I think is mainly harmless.

UNGER: *Watching C-SPAN during the last pre-election period, I was constantly amazed at the quality of the questions that came over the phone. Ordinary people. Do you think that technique might constitute three to five-minutes of viewer call-ins on network news shows?*

STRINGER: Audience questions are invariably interesting particularly during a political year because their anxieties provoke more interesting questions sometimes than the journalist can muster. I think that was

evident in the last campaign. But do I think it needs any more than it has? I don't think so. I worry about the instant poll or the instant response to everything, because most things that are worth discussing require reflection, not instant analysis.

UNGER: *Do you think that the dinner-hour news may be a vestigial part of television.*

STRINGER: There's no evidence of it. CBS Evening News and the NBC Nightly News and ABC's Eyewitness News combined have about 60% share of the audience. They're essentially similar shows, so they're satisfying 60% of the audience in a fragmented universe that can watch anything else it wants. So you have to say that there's still a demand for those programs. People understand that national and international news has value.

UNGER: *How about CBS' venture into sports?*

STRINGER: Well, our venture into sports has generated enormous audiences but precious little revenue, mostly losses and I think as an experiment in programming, it worked. As an experiment in profit, it was disastrous. We liked the audience but we'd like to skip the losses, so that our future attempts at sports programming will be governed by the dictates of the marketplace and not by audience requirements. We'd like to try and actually make a profit in sports which is getting increasingly difficult.

UNGER: *How big a part does Mr. Tisch play in programming.*

STRINGER: He has the last word in programming and he is enormously interested. In our superstructure, he's the steel foundation. On day-to-day programming we don't consult him on everything, but as we set the schedules and make the big—certainly all the expensive—decisions, sports or news and so forth, we consult him.

UNGER: *What are you proudest of that you've done at CBS?*

STRINGER: Well, there was a time when I was going to be remembered as the proponent of the lay-off in an era of that ghastly euphemism called down-sizing. We went through considerable pain to bring this network away from the brink of economic disaster. The fact is that I tried to rebuild the network and bring people back into the institution. Hiring in the news division offsets some of those lay-offs that were so painful years ago. So, I think it's reversing that trend and making the news division energetic, exciting and creative again, and looking into the future instead of looking over its shoulder at the past. And then making the network itself slowly but surely recover its sense of identity and its sense of confidence, so that the typical image is not just a passport for the past but a blueprint for the future.

We haven't done all that yet. These things are incremental and these advances are sometimes slow, but in the face of the kind of competition we have now, I guess I'm proudest that my colleagues have rallied to that particular cause and have made the network rebound and look to the future with some degree of confidence— and at the same time recapture its spot as the Number One network. In the small term, I'm proudest of some of the programming I've done.

UNGER: *Is there any particular one that symbolizes it?*

STRINGER: The five-hour *The Defense of the United States*, the documentary series that at the time, I think, was timely and thoughtful and comprehensive. I was very proud of that. It was kind of the apex of my documentary career.

And then my hours with Bill Moyers were among the most rewarding. The *Evening News* with Dan Rather were

the two most exciting years of my career. And the special nature that Bill Moyers brought to *CBS Reports* when we were the dominant documentary source. Those are great memories.

UNGER: *Any particular entertainment shows?*

STRINGER: The two entertainment shows which I was first associated with: *Angela in Murder, She Wrote* which was almost going to go off the network, and wrestling that and bringing that back from the brink even stronger than ever. And then to be present at the creation of *Murphy Brown* even if I can't take any credit for it because Diane English and Candice Bergen are very special.

UNGER: *Let me just quickly run through these references to you which I've culled from clippings. Could you give me quick one-word responses? I'll do the positive ones first: "charming." That comes up very often.*

STRINGER: It does. I don't know what I think about that as an adjective. It's better than the opposite.

UNGER: *"Brainy."*

STRINGER: In television, people think that if you merely finished college ...

UNGER: *"Accessible."*

STRINGER: That's more important than ever because of the nature of our society. These are anxious times. You can't hide.

UNGER: *"Self-deprecating."*

STRINGER: Well, I have much to be self-deprecating about.

UNGER: *"Remembers his roots."*

STRINGER: Yes, because understanding the creative process is at the root of everything we do.

UNGER: *"Affable, funny, with a warm sense of humor."*

STRINGER: Well, if you don't keep a sense of humor in this business ... Having a sense of humor is tantamount to having a sense of respect. You need it in these competitive times and you have to enjoy.

UNGER: *Here's an interesting one: "Too sensitive for the tough decisions his job requires."*

STRINGER: Well, sensitive to criticism is probably not as good as sensitive to people.

UNGER: *I think this is meant to be sensitive to people.*

STRINGER: Well, I think you have to be sensitive to people. This is a very tough business and because there's so much competition, if you forget the needs of the people who work for you, then what's the point of it all?

UNGER: *"Believes that if you do good work and treat people in a decent way, you'll get ahead."*

STRINGER: I think that's true.

UNGER: *"TV is not his whole life."*

STRINGER: Well, that's true.

UNGER: *You view it as a positive thing.*

STRINGER: Well, that's because when I leave here—when I was on the evening news, it was a 12-hour day and it was a long day and it was tough on relationships ... and my marriage. I've learned that I've got to take time to have my own interests which are book collecting and reading, and opera, and sporting events, and so on. And to find time for a family, because if you don't have that ...

UNGER: *You have recently adopted a child?*

STRINGER: Yes. A boy. Also a dog.

UNGER: *Okay, now some negative things: "shrewd?" I don't know whether that's negative. It was paired*

with "slick."

STRINGER: "Slick" is unappealing. "Slick" is the negative side of charming. I can't love an adjective like that, can't stop people from using it. "Shrewd"—it isn't the easiest thing in this world to survive in this type cauldron, so I have to be shrewd.

UNGER: *"Over-ambitious."*

STRINGER: Well, I'm over-ambitious for the company. I don't think I'm over-ambitious for myself. I've achieved most of the goals I set up for myself.

UNGER: *"Opportunistic, adept at playing along." In other words, becoming familiar with the right people at the right time. That comes up a lot.*

STRINGER: Yeah, yeah. "Opportunistic", the David Letterman maneuver was opportunistic. I think in this kind of competition, you have to be opportunistic otherwise you miss. You cannot be complacent. If you're not opportunistic, you run the risk of being complacent and arrogant.

UNGER: *"Uses charm to disguise a will of iron."*

STRINGER: (laughter) Somebody said that? Well, you watched me go through the wars in the 1980's. You have to have a certain amount of steel to get through that experience. There were a lot of times when I did not think I would survive. The only way you do survive is not worrying if you fall. And I always think, having been a producer, it hasn't worried me to that extent, so it's less "iron will" than it is a realization that I have roots I can return to if necessary.

UNGER: *"Does Tisch's dirty work."*

STRINGER: Well, I work for the owner—the CEO and some of it's good, some of it isn't. It depends on how you define it. My job is to make tough decisions. I say "no" a lot in this job and people would call that "dirty work." I have to lay people off—a miserable experience, but it has

become the American way. But I've put a lot more people back to work than I've laid off.

UNGER: *"just another Teflon president."*

STRINGER: Well, in order to be Teflon, you have to say what is it they think hasn't stuck. We're in first place. You know, in this job you get judged by your success. There's nothing Teflon about that anymore. When I fail, I'll be flung out. That's the way it should be.

UNGER: *And this one, I'm not sure whether it's positive or negative. "Thinks he can convince people of anything and is right 80% of the time."*

STRINGER: There's no point in convincing people of wrong. You've gotta convince people when you think it's right. Eighty percent of the time, maybe I'm right, the other 20% I'm wrong.

UNGER: *Where do you think network television will be in a year?*

STRINGER: Well, I think in one form or another, it has to succeed and survive. And I think it probably will because it's still the greatest distributor along with its affiliates of original programming. And no matter how many channels, the need for original programming, the thirst for new programming and original programming will still be as strong as ever. The question will be whether we will be allowed to create—by regulations, by circumstances beyond our control. But I think that as long as we make programs, the program makers will always be needed.

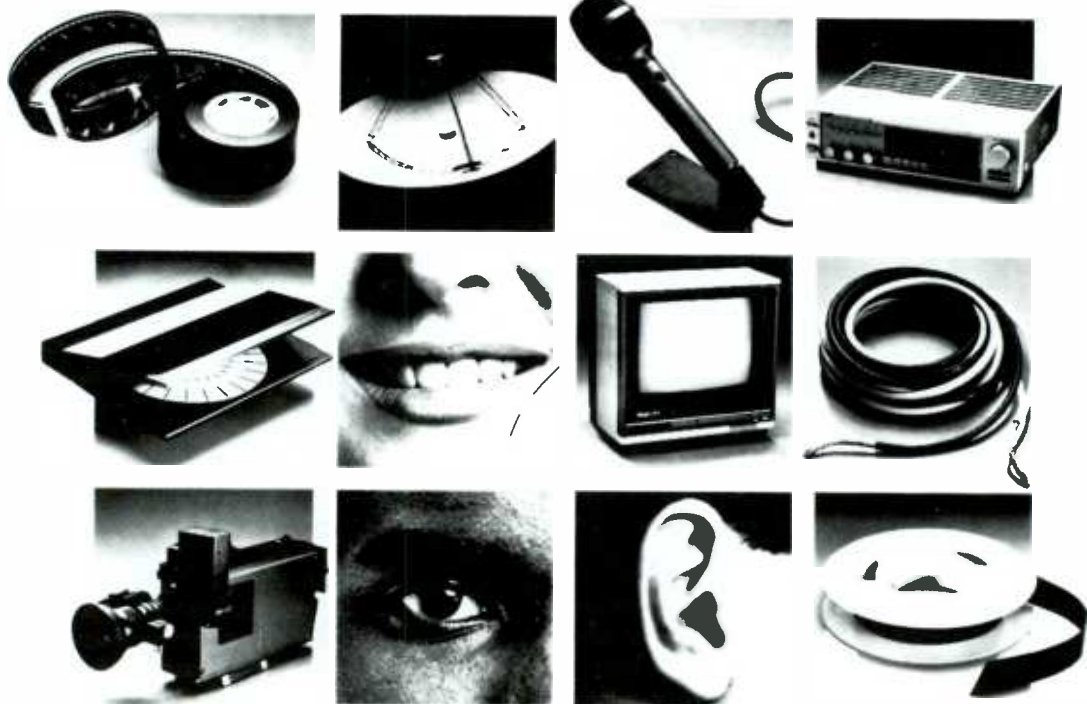
UNGER: *How would you describe yourself, if you had to use an adjective on yourself? Happy? Cheerful?*

STRINGER: Yeah, I think at the moment, happy. You're hitting me at the most cheerful time of my life. You've known me a long time. I consider myself as a cheerful collabo-

rator whose work is part creative and part collegial. I think what makes me happy in this environment is that I am blessed with first-rate collaborators. And I think anyone who thinks you can be old-fashioned and autocratic and still succeed in this business is wrong. Maybe happiness is succeeding the way you want to with the people you want. And that includes family life as well as corporate life. If that's true, then I'm happy. ■

For seventeen years Arthur Unger served as Television Critic of *The Christian Science Monitor* where he won recognition as one of the nation's most influential critics. He is also known for his revealing interviews with entertainment and news media personalities.

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INTERACTIVE TELEVISION: HYPE OR HYPERMEDIA



**BY PATRICK
O'HEFFERNAN**

Whether it's COMDEX, the giant computer trade show in Atlanta, or the National Cable Television Association convention and trade show in San Francisco, the exhibit halls this year are packed with gigantic booths buzzing and whirring with the blockbuster-multimedia-interactive-hypermedia-television-computer-telephone technologies of tomorrow. To listen to the sales reps—or the presidents of major firms like TCI or AT&T—the information superhighway is headed for our living rooms, bringing with it an interactive television (ITV) revolu-

tion. Is it hype; or is hypermedia finally going to be a reality?

While the picture still has a lot of snow, the answer appears to be yes, but the outcome will likely not resemble the predictions of the technologists. The answer also seems to be that much of ITV will not be much different from the present, but that the parts that are may have profound impact on the audience and on nature of television entertainment and news. And, although the ITV revolution is coming largely through the cable side of the industry, broadcast networks will not escape the changes.

This is not the first time we have been told an interactive revolution in television is coming. Over the past decade, several firms have tried to

introduce so-called interactive teletext newspapers delivered through computers or TV sets, or telephone/television combinations to enable viewers to shop, play games and call sports plays on the screens. None have been successful. The reason ITV will happen this time is that the three key ingredients needed for success are now coming together: the technology, the financing, and the leadership.

On the technological side, the engineers have just about got it right. The systems displayed at this year's trade shows are for the most part well-thought through, user-friendly and appropriately nifty. The hit of the shows this year is the "airmouse," a hand-held radio antenna in the form of a wand with a comfortably-located track ball and an activate button. With it, viewers can not only control their set and their VCR with just one button, but they can interact with various kinds of programming on the screen. The air mouse is really controlling a set-top computer that in turn controls the VCR and the TV (and eventually the telephone). Viewers can operate simple icon-based menus and click orders to the screen without moving from the couch.

Part of the marketing secret is that nowhere does the airmouse or the set top say "computer." From the viewers perspective it is a cable box with a simple, powerful remote. Standing behind the airmouse and the other technologies that viewers see, are the ones they don't: video compression engines, digital switches, fiber optics, and smaller and more powerful computer chips. Together, these technologies can make the ITV

revolution technically possible.

Betting on this technology are companies with very deep pockets who are fully committed to spending the billions of dollars it will take. Leading the pack is TCI, a \$3.5 billion multiple cable system operator(MSO). TCI is pushing it's \$2 billion fiber "Infrastructure Network" now 25% complete, which will provide customers the ability to interact with programming. Other companies investing heavily include AT&T, Bell South, Microsoft, Apple Computer and IBM—all firms with the resources to wait for an interactive television industry to become profitable.

The profits they see could be substantial. One research firm has calculated that just a 10% shift of consumer dollars from existing forms of entertainment and information (not counting video games) could bring \$7.2 billion annually to a new interactive industry (Probe Research in the publica-

tion *Convergence '93*); and adding a shift of video games from retail to TV-delivered could almost double that. Of course, the firms now investing in ITV are thinking far beyond a mere 10% shift in existing consumer entertainment and information spending.

Along with the big companies are a host of high-tech start-ups which, as in the personal computer industry,

may actually form the heart of the industry that does finally emerge. One of the best examples of these is TV Answer, Inc., a Virginia-based company that has been assembling the technology, capital and regulatory approvals since 1986 to be one of the

Although a great deal of research has been done about interactive TV, there is a conspicuous absence of solid market research and little experience with consumers and their needs and desires. What there is, is mixed and somewhat suspect.

first companies with a commercial interactive television system. TV Answer can now provide technology and radio and satellite services that turn an ordinary television set into a two-way communication device similar to a cellular television network without the need for cable or fiber optics. Close behind TV Answer, are dozens of other well-financed start-up firms selling their own technologies to cable operators, creating a tremendous pressure for ITV to emerge as quickly as possible.

Finally, the leadership is there now, from John Malone, President of TCI, to Jerry Levin at Time Warner and Ted Turner. Joining them, are a host of Hollywood moguls who have jumped to the television or computer industries, like former Fox executive Barry Diller. Top computer executives like Apple's John Scully, James Clark, Chairman of Silicon Graphics, and Microsoft's Bill Gates are leading the charge in their industry, both in rhetoric and in joint ventures with cable operators and television and film companies.

But despite the availability of technology, capital and leadership to launch an ITV industry, there is still slight evidence that people will pay for it, or pay as much for it as it will cost. Interactive or multimedia (the terms have become interchangeable) television is currently a technology-driven, not a market-driven industry. Although a great deal of attitude research has been done about interactive TV, there is a conspicuous absence of solid market research and little experience with consumers and their needs and desires. What little has been done is mixed and somewhat suspect.

TV Answer fielded one of the most comprehensive market surveys in the summer of 1992 to test the two-way multifunctional television concept. The test, a random sample of 1,465

television viewers and VCR owners with household incomes over \$25,000 and 456 consumers interested in or owners of state-of-the-art consumer electronics, supports the industry's position of a positive response from viewers if the technology is introduced. Respondents generally liked the idea of television interactively, with 66% saying that "television should be made more interactive." They also noted that the convenience, control and personalization of television offered by ITV and particularly the TV Answer system were perceived benefits.

The TV Answer survey, however, does not reveal if respondents said they would buy the system and if so, how much would they pay for it. And that is the question: what, if anything will people pay and will it be enough to justify the investment?

A CBS/*New York Times* poll taken a year later supported the TV Answer study results: over two-thirds of the respondents told interviewers that they are interested in some kind of television interactivity, especially reruns on demand and video games. CBS/*NYT* pollsters did ask what they would pay for ITV services, and a third said that they would pay \$10-\$25 per month depending on the services, the amount varying with the age of the subscriber (younger respondents were willing to pay more than older ones). However, over 40% said they would pay less than \$10 or nothing at all for interactive services.

The industry has focused on the results of this and other polls showing over two-thirds of Americans are interested, not on the 40% who will pay less than \$10, or nothing at all. There are few if any published, detailed studies of what actual viewers would be willing to pay for specified services in a competitive environment. Without this kind of information, relying on the attitude polls is dangerous because actual buying decisions will depend on the economy, other needs

and desires, and the services offered—and the competition for the entertainment dollar.

Relying on opinion studies, also ignores the popular outrage over cable TV costs which may have a major impact on subscribers willingness to pay more to the cable operator for anything, regardless of how interactive it is. While 70% of Americans like the idea of interactivity, and 35% say they will pay a realistic amount for it, 77% of Americans tell pollsters cable rates are too high and they will not pay more for television (*Cable World*, June 7, '93). These two findings do not add up to a rosy future for ITV paid for directly by the consumer. Profits, if any, may have to come from advertising revenues and hidden charges.

The industry also needs to keep in mind that the only currently operating ITV system, Videoway in Montreal, charges only \$6.50 a month. If one third of the wired cable households in the United States signed up for ITV at \$6.50 per month, the gross income to the industry would be only \$1.6 billion annually, not \$7 billion and certainly not the tens or hundreds of billions discussed as the cost of providing fiber optics and digital switching nationwide for ITV. Premium services, video games, higher United States ITV rates, equipment and software purchases could increase this figure, but the numbers should provide a caution about the hype in hypermedia.

To remedy the dearth of market information, several actual market tests of ITV are now planned or in a

start-up phase, including Time Warner's Full Service Network planned for several hundred homes in Orlando, Florida; TCI's test in Colorado; and four cable-telephone company joint ventures in England.

In Montreal, the commercially operating interactive television service, Videoway, offers some insight in actual viewer response to the availability of interactivity. Over 160,000

people in Montreal are willing to pay a small premium on their regular cable fees for the service. However, the majority of viewers use the system primarily for games and reruns.

Home banking, home shopping, premium services, classified ads, sports scores, etc. are not especially popular. But viewers in Videoway-equipped households are willing to

spend about 8.5 hours per week with interactive programs, including about 3 hours with video games—not quite a revolution, but a 20% increase in viewing time and a modest change in habits and an indication that viewers may be trained over time to use new services.

The Videoway market test confirms one trend that has been increasingly evident in the entertainment marketplace: the dominance of video games. The video game industry in North America has grown to \$6 billion year (more than movies) with 14 million installed machines in homes and still growing. It is not surprising that video games took the lion's share of viewing time on the Videoway system, delivering a product conveniently and cheaply that already has a large and fanatically-devoted customer base. It

The Videoway market test confirms one trend that has been increasingly evident in the entertainment marketplace: the dominance of video games. The video game industry in North America has grown to \$6 billion a year—more than movies.

is also a product that creates a strong "repurchase tendency"—i.e. video game players tend to be heavy users who are constantly searching for new games and better quality games and are willing to pay for them.

What does this all mean for the shape of the changes interactive technologies will bring to television? While the picture will not clear for some time, five key points emerge from what we do know. First, the emergence of an interactive television system in North America will be led by video games. The Sega and Nintendo Channels and companies associated with them will make money and probably fairly quickly. The technical capability to deliver video-quality games to the home TV set has an immediate and large built-in market, based on the number of installed games now in the United States. It also has a growth potential in the millions of people of all ages who although not willing to pay \$150 for game equipment that delivers cartoon-like figures, will pay \$30-\$40 for a joystick and a small monthly fee to play more realistic games delivered to their existing television at home.

Second, movies on demand will also prosper and eventually dominate the movie distribution system, but the growth will not be the immediate blockbuster some in the industry are predicting. The reasons are simple: the video store industry will fight back with lower prices, home pickup and delivery, and competitive pricing. Plus, video shops will specialize in adult XXX, foreign, and specialty genre's for niche markets too small for national cable channels.

As movies-on-demand are offered in cable systems—likely with giveaways and low introductory pricing—the services will penetrate a significant number of homes, but as the video stores fight back, growth will not skyrocket. Eventually, video-on-demand will find a price and selection level that gives it access to most

homes, and the video tape industry will be relegated to niche markets. It will take years but eventually, the home VCR will be used almost exclusively for home movies (until a digital format replaces that too).

Third, the television set will not become the electronic shopping mall. People do not want to do their non-impulse shopping by television. Shopping is more than a family logistical need; it is an adventure and a social environment. and the shopping malls will fight to insure that it stays that way. With exception of a small specialized market of high income working singles who can afford the delivery charges for the convenience, people will not buy groceries by television. They want to squeeze the tomatoes, smell the melons and use their coupons at the store. The spectacular growth of price-competitive do-it-yourself grocery warehouse outlets the past 5 years is a strong indicator that home-shopping for food is not the wave of the future for most American families.

Nor do most Americans want their newspapers and magazines on television; you can't take a teletex newspaper to the bathroom. Nor can you soak up your pet's accidents with ITV-delivered news or clip ITV-delivered recipes and stick them in your Betty Crocker Cook Book. While a small segment of the market will use television-delivered information services as a curiosity or a business supplement, the convenience, artwork, low cost, serendipity, and (dare I say it?) multifunctionality of paper-delivered information will insure that ITV will not make much of a dent in the print market.

What ITV may provide, depending on the marketing strategies of the providers, is information services by subscription to schools, universities, and other institutions. Although they will have to compete with existing

computer-delivered services like America On-Line. The successful use of cable networks to enable students throughout Georgia's public schools to see and talk with scientists on a Jason Foundation research submarine demonstrates the power that ITV can have in institutions.

Fourth, video programming on-demand has the potential to devastate the cable industry and network programming departments. If people can sit down and chose to see whatever program they want when they want to, they will. The result will be that viewer loyalty will shift away from both broadcast and cable networks to individual programs. The carriers, be they CBS, ABC, NBC, FOX, Lifetime, Bravo, or AMC will become transparent to the viewers. The programs will all be that they remember, making them in the minds of the viewers virtually independent from the networks that carry them. Follow-on audiences, now being undercut by the remote "clicker", will disappear as viewers move from one chosen program to the next with no regard for program lineups.

The result may be that eventually television could resemble the United States Congress—hundreds of independent programs each struggling for viewers' attention. The only programs that will stick in the minds of masses of viewers when they sit down each night and decide what to watch will

be the most popular network and syndicated series like *Murphy Brown* or *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

In this new world, the national audience would be fragmented into three major segments: many tiny, marginally profitable clusters of viewers watching speciality programs; a few very large audiences watching the major prime time shows offered by the

networks, and heavily promoted in other media, merchandising tie-ins and direct mail; and continual small audiences who regularly tune into 24-hour service channels.

A serious consequence for the cable industry will be the death of channel grazing. Currently, many of the smaller, more specialized cable channels do not have sufficient popular recognition to attract profitable tune-in audiences. But they do capture enough viewers to pay the bills from people who are grazing through the cable box, see something they like, and stay with it. Programming-on-demand will kill the

need for or desire for channel surfing (especially in a cable system equipped with an "intelligent" on-screen program guide that customizes its program lineups to the viewer tastes.) Gone will be the serendipity that can enrich the viewing experience and keep new and smaller cable networks on the air. With the ability to pick individual programs, viewers will forgo channel grazing and order up exactly what they want. The result

As TVQ goes to press in early September, there's news about GTE's ITV test in Cerritos, California; it demonstrates vividly that interactive television is a technology looking for a market. A handful of the 53,000 residents used the interactive features. An AT&T test in Chicago did much better, but showed that a saleable ITV system must be mindlessly simple and look like plain old television.

—Patrick O'Heffernan

could be the disappearance of more than a few cable networks, and lower ratings for all but a handful of service channels. The broad choice of programming promised and delivered by cable will dry up, making the medium less diverse, less interesting, and more consolidated.

Given this scenario, it's reasonable that some cable networks will either try to block programs-on-demand, or find a way to replace channel surfing with another viewer habit that retains their opportunistic viewers. Direct mail and other forms of individually-targeted marketing, free customized on-screen channel guides with the sponsoring cable channel listed first, and more product-ties with retail, fast-food and other mass merchandisers are likely responses. However, in the end, the diverse eclectic programming that cable has brought us is likely to become a casualty of the ITV technology, and we may all be poorer for it.

Fifth, the "be-your-own-news-director" features touted by the interactive sales representatives may do to news what video-on-demand can do to cable networks. Studies routinely show that the American appetite for news tends largely to domestic stories and either "good news" or lurid scandal, and to news that has a direct impact on the viewer. Fairing poorly in studies of viewer preferences for news, are international stories; news-in-depth features; news of governmental or social problems; and complex interpretive reporting. Interactive systems that provide the capability for the viewer to call up the news stories he or she wants, puts at risk reporting of "bad news", international news, in-depth features, and stories about national problems. It may turn the persistent debate in news rooms over giving viewers what they want vs. what they should know into a life or death struggle.

One outcome of this struggle could be a new viewer-selected news format consisting mostly of an increase in

local news at the cost of international and national news. Today's news programs on both the networks and CNN might be transformed by the viewers into thousands of mini-news magazines, most with little reporting on government waste and fraud and international economics and politics. New ratings technologies that deliver share information in 15 minute increments will enable news executives to track which categories of stories boost ratings and which do not.

The result would go far beyond which anchors have the best "Q" scores; but instead would indicate which kinds of stories will sell and which will not—and therefore won't be reported. In this environment, news categories could take on independent status with their own sponsors and marketing. Categories that don't attract a break-even audience share may be dropped altogether.

The changes would force realignments of agendas and staffing in newsrooms and then move out to the wire services and news syndicators who in turn could shift their reporting to match the market.

None of these scenarios will happen exactly as described, but something is going to happen and cable operators, MSO's, investors, news directors, and broadcast executives need to remain flexible. There will be winners and losers as ITV/hypermedia/multimedia works its way into living rooms, cable head ends, and studios across the country. Hopefully, there is some truth in the rhetoric of ITV's boosters who claim that the real winners will be the viewers who get a vastly expanded set of television choices. But that picture is still very snowy. ■

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PHILIPS

"LIVE FROM SOUTH FLORIDA": LOCAL TV NEWS UNDER SIEGE

BY PAUL STEINLE

NNNEEEEEOOOOOWWWWW!

The WSVN electronic sound machine is percolating ... *"Liiiiive* from South Florida's news station, W-S-V-N, seven ... *thisssss* is Seven News at Ten."

Check you doors. Latch your windows. Lock and load your .45. Miami's Channel Seven News is on the air. This latest paradigm in local television is rockin' and rollin' the nooze.

NNNEEEEEOOOOOWWWWW!

"She wanted her son to have a new life in America and for that she gave her own life. That's a mother's ultimate sacrifice. It's a story of hunger, thirst, coma ... and now death."

NNNEEEEEOOOOOWWWWW!

"Dramatic new details tonight in the Gainesville student murders case. Court documents *just released* reveal that Edward Humphrey, one of the original suspects, may in fact have had a hand in the killings. Police saw another side of Humphrey—a dark

and perhaps diabolical, twisted alter ego ..."

Cops, courts, fires, crashes, and the continuing saga of Cuban refugees. Channel Seven News nets a fresh, nightly catch of mayhem and pathos and dumps it wriggling and gagging onto your living room rug.

This chronological rundown of leads and story summaries from a single Channel Seven 10 p.m. newscast was chosen at random during the 1993 May sweeps.

NNNEEEEEOOOOOWWWWW!

"Tonight, a confession from a man police say killed a Pompano Beach minister back in 1990. And tonight you'll see that confession, *only here*, on Channel 7 news ..."

NNNEEEEEOOOOOWWWWW!

- Police arrest a rapist in Coral Gables.
- A Cuban exile has chained himself to a tree in protest of Castro's government.
- Two men try to escape from the Metro Justice building. One's caught. One surrenders.

•The coroner shows, "in graphic detail," where the bullet entered the head of Clement Lloyd in the William Lozano trial.

•A jet with 134 people on board has crashed in Columbia. "No word on any survivors yet."

•Four crewmen are dead when one of President Clinton's helicopters crashes.

•Two people are "killed" after a bridge collapses on an interstate highway in Alabama.

•A toxic chemical cloud was loosed in Palm Bay, Florida. (No injuries.)

•Fire destroys a two-story apartment building in Tampa. "The only way out was for people to jump." (No injuries.)

•Tonight some "wicked weather" in North Carolina. "We're told, tonight, no one was seriously injured."

•Peonia, Colorado is flooding ... because "the snow packs in the mountains have been melting."

It's a jungle out there! Or so Miami (and the world at large from Columbia to Alabama to Peonia) is portrayed to the regular viewers of Channel Seven News.

"Thousands of Florida home owners are being saved by the state tonight. Insurance commissioner, Tom Gallagher, says, as of today, insurance companies cannot cancel homeowners insurance until future notice ..."

Sixteen stories and thirteen minutes into the newscast, the insurance story is the first report with any significant public implication larger than the personal impact of families and friends of the victims described. There is no action video to support the insurance story. Is that why this story is buried so low in this newscast?

Taken as a disturbing local phenomenon, Channel Seven News deserves only passing interest, but the creators of this newscast may affect a larger venue.

Channel Seven, an independent station, has the second-highest rated

newscast in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale market. General managers at local television stations nationwide, under exceedingly frantic pressure to produce revenue, are going to notice that.

Cable TV is fractionalizing the marketplace, and news ratings for over the air TV are slipping. Many half-hearted local newscasts tend to look alike. Channel Seven has taken a new direction, differentiating itself by emphasizing crime news and frantic production, and by deemphasizing anchor personalities (thereby deescalating their high salaries demands). So imitators of this lower cost, higher energy news format seem likely to spawn.

Also Edmund Ansin, the owner of WSVN, Channel Seven, recently purchased WHDH-TV, Channel 7, in Boston. And the news director, Joel Cheatwood, has been discussed as the leading candidate to shape a new network newscast for the upwardly mobile FOX network. What news values may Boston, the FOX chain, and other cities where this formula might be copied, encounter?

The soul of the Channel Seven News' machine is *production-driven news*. If anyone at Channel Seven was asking him/herself—"What happened in our community and the world today, and how should we report it?"—taking this newscast as an example (and every night provides an equally ripe specimen), he/she didn't have much influence on what went on the air.

Channel Seven is hooked on hot-wired video. Its implicit operating philosophy is, "What god-awful events can we get on tape?" When an event isn't exciting, the Channel Seven camera-people are trained to jerk the camera around, like a Burger King commercial, to simulate action.

Any crime, death and any sort of destruction (no matter how trivial) leads its news. Seven focuses on fear and plays on emotions. How else do

you rationalize a program that gives greater prominence to "wicked weather" in North Carolina and the threat of flooding in Colorado, before it reports news about the state's fight with 33 major insurance companies who want to cancel most of the homeowners' policies in South Florida?

Pictures of the North Carolina storm, pictures of the Colorado flooding, police video of a mentally disturbed black man offering a confession to a crime which occurred in Pompano Beach three years ago (" I hit him in the head. I hit it wide open. Bam.")—that takes precedence in this newscast.

Almost no story appears that hasn't been spiked with multiple, moving supers, bold eye-catching graphics, and throbbing, electronically originated sound.

• • • •

**NNNEEEEEEOOOOOWWWWW!...
"The Night Team!"**

This supercharged video bumper is inserted between the studio lead to a field report and the story itself on most every new story on the 10 p.m. news. It's there, interdicting the flow of the lead-in, in no particular context, a permanent MTV-like intrusion, to signify—this is new ... this is new!

The use of electronic music at the beginning of almost every story and throughout many stories is another Channel Seven signature. This technique is a 1990's spill-over from *The March of Time*, NFL Films, local TV sports, and, unwittingly, *The Triumph of the Will*. We can't blame MTV this time.

Seven is so committed to its own sound, it employs Chris Crane, a 27-year old keyboard and computer hacker, in its creative services department to write music. Crane produces the themes, which he describes as "wild and in your face to something more subtle." Crane has no formal music education, and admits he "couldn't read a score." He was discovered by Seven's former creative

services director in a Miami sound studio where he was producing music and sound effects for such Italian films as *Let Sleeping Corpses Lie*.

Seven's music establishes a frenetic pace and maintains it. The bulk of this newscast, no matter the nature of the story, is underlined with an electronic throb. It's the same attention-getting device local news programs all over the country have been using for decades on themes and bumpers to crank up an audience's pulse rate at the beginning and end of the news. The difference is Channel Seven mainlines this throb under almost all the news.

Let's be candid—this newscast looks simply marvelous. It's eye-catching. the energy level never flags. Its weakness lies in its central conceit: that we live in an incredibly dangerous and deadly world where the only compelling interest is crime, crime-fighting, death and destruction, and that production values should supersede reporting values.

Channel Seven News begins to fall apart when you listen to it, carefully. No story is clearly attributed. "Cops said" or "officials said" is the most a viewer is likely to learn about from whom the information they are hearing came. Other sources remain anonymous. Sources are lacking and speculation is rampant, but there is no lack of AMAZING hype.

Their news pictures are "incredible" ... "stunning video"—the anchors show no compunction in saying what you are seeing is REALLY IMPORTANT, while the director juices the video with an electronic pulse ... "This story is breaking now" ... **BOM BOM BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA BOM BOM!** [Another electronic bumper theme punctuates each phrase.] ... "It just came in off the satellite!"

Channel Seven News has a very busy satellite, but it never seems to receive anything until a news program is already on the air.

Pictures often are used without any

indication where they came from or when they were recorded. Today's news is mixed with tape that may have been shot yesterday or a year ago without any acknowledgement of that fact. File footage—the super most stations use to disclose that historical video is being used—is the only super you're never likely to see on Seven. And footage from feature films is often integrated into news specials without any credit.

To further appreciate the substandard quality of the writing and reporting that characterized channel Seven News, consider three special assignments which were broadcast during the same May sweeps week when the selected newscast appeared.

BOM BOM BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA BOM BOM. . . "Psychic Sleuths!"

"More and more police are turning to psychics. They are moving away from the fringe and into the main stream. Crime specialist Derek Hayward reports. Lisa was beaten, stabbed, and dragged by the neck with a rope tied to the back of a car ..."

BOM BOM BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA BOM BOM. . . "What would you do if you caught your husband cheating? ... Stay tuned for Seven News for Women."

BOM BOM BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA BOM BOM. . . "The Year 2000: Will the World End?"

Provocative stories are delivered with lofty proclamations of their worth but with little substance. Here's the punch line from a report from crime specialist Derek Hayward's series on **Psychic Sleuths**: "Why does it work?" asks Hayward. [The camera, held at waist level, follows Hayward as he walks towards a screen door, and opens it. A German Shepherd emerges sniffing up to the camera.] "Well, you know, the secret, it has been suggested, may be as simple as

the difference between my nose and his nose. *Think about that. Derek Hayward, Channel Seven News.*"

The *News for Women* special lasted sixty seconds. It was a post-production masterpiece—sound bites of seven women of different ages, apparently interviewed at random, showcased in triple-imaged, medium close-ups, all superimposed over an earth-toned matrix:

• "If I caught by boyfriend cheating he probably wouldn't be able to walk anymore."

• "He'd have to leave immediately. Pack your bags and get out!"

• "(I'd) Probably wring her neck, and then I'd wring his neck."

• "Strangulation? Yeah, strangulation."

• "That would be it. Yeah, that would be it."

• "Steal his credit card and then buy a few things on it."

• "At this stage in life I don't think I would do much, I'd forgive him."

These bites were intercut with movie clips: Groucho Marx, *The Three Stooges*, Peter Boyle and Gene Wilder in *Mel Brooks' Young Frankenstein*, Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, and an unidentified couple embracing from a 1930's film—none of them credited—all laid over a bed of bluesy, electronic music.

The Channel Seven no-holds-barred style rarely varies, from fluff to serious subject.

BOM BOM BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA BOM BOM. . . "Special Assignment!"

"Millions of people believe the turn of the century will mark the end of life as we know it on this planet," says anchor Rick Sanchez. "But even if you don't believe this, and no one can convince you of this, you are going to be affected by these doomsday predictors. Patrick Frazier reports this

Special Assignment."

TCCHUNGG!... "2000: the end of the world?" [Scenes from *Ghostbusters* appear.]

"In the movies they love the idea of the world coming to an end. [Scenes of a hydrogen bomb exploding.] To some it's humorous. To others it's deadly serious."

[Unidentified white, middle-aged woman]: "It could be any time."

[Young, black woman]: "I say now."

[Hispanic, 50-ish man]: "It's in the Bible, and what's in the Bible is the truth."

[A graphic depicts a Bible opening to Revelations; a Christ-like figure appears in a hazy close-up. He is blond with long unkempt hair; he looks like a surfer Jesus. Lava flows. Buildings collapse. John Fitzgerald, "Bible scholar," says the New Testament refused to give a date for the end of the world. Scenes of a Lake City, Florida grave yard unfold, a city where a cult is refusing medical treatment, Frazier's voice-over]: "That may be why 12 of their children died in the last 12 years."

[Photos of doomsayer Elizabeth Clair Profit fill the screen; she has built bunkers in Montana to protect her followers. Frazier appears before a large chroma key screen with stars in space in the background]: "Let them head into their bunkers is what you are probably thinking," Frazier says. "Let 'em believe what they want to believe."

"There is a little problem. As we get closer to the year two thousand [the letters—2000—zoom toward him] you can bet more and more people will begin to believe the world's about to end. And, you can also bet, like the other believers, those people will begin to quit, to give up ... on living."

[Betty's mother tells of her daughter, a cult member who is refusing medical care]: "I don't think any mortal here on Earth knows exactly and when, per se, if the world is going to end," Betty's mother says.

[James Ober, science writer]: "Enjoy, perhaps, the predictions, and the people who make fools of themselves. But don't get panicky."

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" [A medium close-up, from an unidentified movie—a woman is screaming at the top of her lungs as she falls away from the camera.]

[An animated shot of an exploding planet appears, its shock waves emanating forth; soothing electronic new age music plays under, Frazier's voice-over]: "But if we're wrong and the world does end. Look at the bright side. There won't be anyone to say, 'I told you so.' Patrick Frazier, Seven News."

• • • •

The sanctimonious, air-headedness of this *special assignment* typifies Channel Seven's commitment to quality reporting. Channel Seven News delivers packages pregnant with post-production values and void of substance.

Lack of attribution, cynical story selection, breathless reporters, unsourced video, jerky camera moves, INCREDIBLE hype, melodramatic leads—these are the characteristics that differentiate Channel Seven's news. When Kimberly Bergalis, a nationally known, local AIDS victim died in 1991, a Channel Seven anchor intoned: "If there is a Heaven, Kimberly Bergalis is there tonight."

See the incredible, stunning, late-breaking nooze!

In the hands of this Miami news organization, technique and style predominate and the news becomes a carnival sideshow. This is television more interested in pandering to the public than serving the public's interest.

But before sinking into further depression about the future of television news, let's consider an alternative approach—*journalism-driven* TV news. Producing journalism-driven

TV news is more challenging than cranking out the production-driven species, but it has the benefit of being truthful; it speaks to a much larger segment of the public and when you practice it *you'll feel better in the morning*.

Journalism-driven TV news looks beyond the police blotter and closeups of body bags. It's effective, not because some fuddy-duddy journalism professor says it works, but because it targets a community's needs and interests and speaks to them.

Journalism-driven TV news has only two central principles—speak consistently to your community's needs and interests, and report truthfully.

Since commercial television operates in a communication environment with constantly improving production values, you can practice these fundamental journalism principles and remain competitive—incorporating the same production flair and graphic impact that a Channel Seven produces, or whatever the next technology delivers.

The nuance is that in the journalism-driven mindset, your organization keeps its eye on the ball (*It's solid reporting and relevant story selection, stupid!*). This approach ensures your focus remains consistently on the audience's long term goal—obtaining truthful, useful information about its central interests and needs. Don't let ENG, mico-wave feeds, betacams, satellites, live remotes, computer graphics, and whatever the technology delivers next, obscure the dominant reason people invite you into their homes—they are seeking the news.

Targeting a community's needs and interests forces your news organiza-

tion to look beyond crime news. Enterprise reporting is more than features on water-skiing puppies and light-fingered typists. Enterprise reporting means examining (and/or interpreting the performance of) local education, government, health care, business, your local institutions and the cultural and intellectual life of your community.

Enterprise reporting should never be boring; it's *interest-focused*. Enterprise packages need to be well reported and well produced. The tough part

is that story assignments aren't delivered to the newsroom over a police radio. Assignments are developed with planning and foresight. ("We do it the old-fashioned way—we earn it!")

Crime is covered, and from time to time crime will drive other news off your video front

page. But are there really enough spectacular murders and incredible natural events to lead two or three hours of local newcasts 365 days a year?

"Slow news days" become those equally compelling viewing days when your enterprise reporting attracts viewers for whom crime and calamity is not the number one interest. Appealing to the broader interests of your community is not only good journalism, it is sound marketing because you can attract and retain a broader segment of the public.

Truth-telling is also a sound business approach. (Wouldn't you rather do business with someone you trust?) Credibility, sincerity and honesty are cherished ideals. In this unique medium where reporters and anchors *look into their public's eyes and deliver what they know*, these esteemed qualities create audience

Journalism-driven news looks beyond the police blotter and close-ups of body bags. It targets a community's needs and interests and speaks to them.

loyalty, confidence and repeat viewing. That's a foundation for good journalism and good business.

Channel Seven and its ilk succeed by niche marketing. They have targeted all the folks who think the-world-is-going-to-hell-in-a-hand-basket (and apparently there are quite a few of them in Miami). Then Seven News force-feeds their stereotypes ("2000: Will the World End?").

Seven News utilizes all the video, graphic and sound techniques it can conjure up to create a news spectacle. But this slavish commitment to production is not matched with an equally slavish commitment to news-gathering. Their production-driven mindset has led to a misallocation of resources. It gives Seven interesting video impact, but weak reporting and low credibility.

Eric Braun, the manager of consulting and research for Frank Magid Associates who monitors local news around the country, says that "It takes a special kind of petri dish" to cultivate support for a Channel Seven style newscast. From his national perspective Braun, who also consults for Seven's competitor in Miami, WTVJ, believes that "only in Miami do you have the kind of frenetic energy" that would nourish a Channel Seven News.

Miami may be doomed by its demographics to a Channel Seven style news, but the implication is that other cities might not support this formula with viewership. Seven's hot-wired news may only illustrate a local fad. If Braun and his colleagues are correct, Seven's style is not necessarily the precursor of a tidal wave that will lead inevitably to the further degradation of TV news everywhere.

Even so, crime, fires and accidents are likely to remain a staple in local TV news. John Quarderer, the director of research for Frank Magid Associates, examining reams of research studies from cities across the country reports that viewers retain the "expec-

tation" that local TV should be delivering "hard news." Viewers want to know "what happened and was the perpetrator dealt with?" says Quarderer. And viewers in urban areas particularly are interested in "how you can prevent yourself from becoming a victim of crime."

But viewers asking for crime coverage aren't asking their news stations to become obsessed with it. What viewers are encountering at Seven is slavery to "TV news of the visual", and an unhealthy preoccupation with the underside of the community. Research also indicates that as audiences' tastes mature and viewers acquire a larger stake in their community, they typically look for a broader more balanced news report.

Stations wishing to compete against a Seven-style news should carefully consider how large the *world-is-going-to-hell-in-a-hand-basket* segment of their community is, and whether it makes sense to compete head to head with a station that already has a franchise on death and destruction.

By following the journalism-driven model, any news organization has the potential to assemble a much larger and more diverse audience. But it needs to determine the broader interests of its community and consistently address those interest. TV news organizations can't provide all things for all people, but by analyzing their community and serving its main interests, a local TV news organization can compete successfully, make the stockholders a profit, and truly serve the public interest in the manner that was envisioned when broadcasting licenses originally were allocated.

For the news people who practice the art of television news by following the journalism-driven model, there is also the wonderful satisfaction of learning more about your community, helping to provide your community a

better future, and seeing the beneficent power of this medium self-actualize.

Like it or not, TV news has been elevated to a leadership position in the community by advancing technologies, changing lifestyles and the declining impact of newspapers. That means whatever path its practitioners follow may influence the fundamental values of its viewers for years to come.

So it is sobering to contemplate the further degradation of community values that may occur should newscasts patterned after Channel Seven with its crime skewed news agenda, its weakly-attributed reporting and its fear-mongering proliferate.

Think about that ...

NNNEEEEEOOOOOWWWWW! ■

Paul Steinle, adjunct associate professor at the School of Communication, University of Miami, has served as director of the journalism and photography program, and director of the graduate, professional journalism program since 1991. Steinle was president of UPI and the Financial News Network, a TV news director at KING-TV, Seattle and WIXT-TV, Syracuse, and a foreign correspondent and TV reporter for Westinghouse Broadcasting.

POSTSCRIPT!

Monkey Business in Florida

"MIAMI—... On a recent balmy evening, local viewers settled in for WSVN's 6:30 p.m. newscast and saw... Two plane crashes. Three rapes. Three hit-and-run accidents, two of them fatal. A wild monkey attack. An antigay protest in Washington. A white plot to blow up blacks. The theft of fake breasts—possibly by a band of transvestites. Children who murdered a grandmother. A ten-year-old crack dealer. A wife stalker. A train accident. And those were just some of the 25 stories on Channel 7's news before the first commercial break..."

—Elizabeth Jensen
The Wall Street Journal
July 30, 1993

“‘Tabloid’ came into the English lexicon back in 1884—
trademark for a tablet of compressed medicine. In other words,
a tabloid is something small, easy to swallow and good for you.”
—Terry Murphy, co-anchor, *Hard Copy*

THE TAO OF TABLOID TELEVISION

Syndicated magazine shows are attracting big audiences and influencing both network nightly news and stations’ local journalistic practices.

BY BERT BRILLER

Tao is the Path according to the ancient Chinese religion. When the *Book of Tao* was written 2500 years ago, it explained, “People can know good as good only because there is evil.” Focussing on the battle of good vs. evil is the quintessence of the syndicated tabloid magazine shows. Their increasing success is leading other forms of television journalism to follow that Tao. And it is bringing controversy and concern.

The three programs that epitomize syndicated tabloidism are 20th Century Fox’s *A Current Affair*, which started in 1988 and pioneered the genre, King World’s *Inside Edition* and Paramount’s *Hard Copy*, both launched the next year. All three are consistently among the top 15 shows in syndication and one spot on the three would reach almost 20 million homes. At *Television Quarterly* editor’s request, I watched them for six

weeks this year.

An essential element of the tabloid’s appeal is the genre’s devotion to the story. When traditional journalists say “I’ve got a great story,” they usually mean they’ve uncovered a newsworthy development. But the tabloid journalist thinks of the story as story, a narrative with plot, characters, conflict, emotion, and a moral.

Black Widow’s Web

Take the case of the Black Widow Spider, whose story was spun recently on *Inside Edition*. It began with the mysterious and nearly fatal illness of a minister, whose wife was a respected and motherly Carolina woman. It led to her being accused of not only attempting the arsenic poisoning of the minister, who was her second husband, but also of having murdered her first husband and a previous boyfriend.

The program pointed up the irony of the woman’s being deeply religious and a pastor’s daughter. It also

invoked the appeal of the detective story, covering police investigations of the deaths of others around her. One death diagnosed as due to a rare disease was found, after the body was exhumed, to be from arsenic poisoning.

The Black Widow case is the stuff of drama, and it did indeed inspire a two-part television movie. In effect, *Inside Edition's* segment was an enticing trailer for the network docudrama. Footage from the movie was incorporated into *Edition's* piece, which proclaimed it was bringing viewers "the real people behind the television drama."

It was interesting, I admit, to see and hear the real-life minister-husband describe his feelings for the wife convicted of feeding him massive doses of arsenic. It was fascinating to see her brother declaring to the TV reporter why he believes his sister is innocent. Another dimension was added by observing the woman as she was videotaped in the courtroom and in news footage, side by side with clips from the TV movie version. One sees the story from different perspectives and in layers—from the more factual to the sensational and the fictional.

Myth of Perfect Crime

Another detective story piece involved the murder of his wife by a professor whose high IQ earned him membership in the genius Mensa society. The mythic aspect pointed up here was that his "perfect crime" was exposed by his slipping up on some little details—and we ordinary people can take comfort in the tripping-up of a highbrow who is also addicted to the high life. To conceal the time of the murder, he had

set the air conditioner on maximum, and to establish an alibi he called home and faked a conversation with his wife. But diligent police work turned up one child who revealed it was a faked dialogue and another who said the professor had talked about seeing the air conditioning trick in a movie.

A subject that embodies some of the tabloids' favored appeals—unspeakable evil and heroic struggle against the misery it brings—is the story of David Rothenberg. When David was just six, his father, embroiled in a custody suit with his ex-wife, poured fuel around David's bed and set him afire.

David was terribly burned and disfigured and has since had some 200 painful operations.

The crime was unspeakable, but not untelevisable: For example, the arson scene was a dramatization. *Hard Copy* did a report on David, which co-host Terry Murphy told me is one of her most satisfying assignments. David wanted to meet basketball star Michael Jordan, and Murphy accompanied him to meet the Chicago Bulls star and sit on the bench. She says the program was able to go beyond the tragedy and show "the real person behind the victim's scars."

A Victim's Resilience

More recently, *A Current Affair* retold David's story. It was powerful material. Now 16, David was shown shooting baskets and doing an autobiographical videotape at school. He called his burning "an accident—because I had nothing to do with it." He said he doesn't "want to ever again see my father. I have to call him father ... But he's a sick man."

Tabloids tell a story, often from different, conflicting perspectives and in layers—from the factual to the sensational and the fictional.

In an interview, the father, whose prison term is ending, was shown in tears. A *Current Affair's* reporter derided that demonstration of remorse; instead, she underlined David's resilience in struggling for positive goals. Contrasting the tearful father and the I'm-getting-on-with-my-life son, she tagged the piece "tough guys don't cry."

The Cautionary Tale is another staple of the tabs. *Hard Copy* highlighted the short but tragic life of Gia Carangi, the beautiful super-model whose career crashed when she succumbed to drugs. She died at 26—reportedly one of the first women to die of AIDS. Viewers saw magnificent film footage and still photos of Gia's stunning face and seductive body, her street-smart toughness and youthful vulnerability.

Photographers, models, *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown and Gia's mother commented on her life and their loss. A friend called her "a female James Dean with a heart of gold." A home video stripped away her mask, revealing her scrambled, confused drug-drenched thoughts. An associate explained that the modeling business pushed drink and drugs. And the reporter underlined the message, "We hope this serves as a warning ..."

Another *Hard Copy* morality playlet exposed Hollywood as a dangerous place for hopeful young actresses. The big bad wolf of this tale was an agent who allegedly lured 11 starlets to his casting couch, asking each to improvise a scene in which she acted sexy with him. Two of the women reported him to the Screen Actors Guild.

A police woman then posed as a role-seeking actress, and recorded the man's advances over her protests. He was convicted of six felonies. The anchors emphasized the women's "disillusionment with Tinsel Town" and the vulnerability of those longing for the glamour of a movie career. The police videotape was the attention-getter.

Exploiting Sex

Flesh and the Devil are big in the TV tabloids. When a news director at a network I worked at was told the news ratings were low, he jokingly answered, "If all you want is ratings, I can just turn it into the *Dirty Hour*." To a considerable degree, the tabloids are doing that. One evening's fare on *Hard Copy* consisted of three sexy subjects.

First up: a piece on Le Trapeze, a New York club where for an \$80 admission charge swinging adults can act out their fantasies with anonymous partners. A *Copy* producer went into the "orgy room" and chatted with a few of the couples who'd been coupling and uncoupling on a 500 sq. foot mat. A *Village Voice* reporter provided background on "reckless sex making a comeback." The video shot in the club revealed nothing, and if it had done so would have been technically masked. However, the audio indicated that the clientele, screened by the high admission charge, is upscale.

The second segment focused on a psychiatrist who studies sexual behavior and who has testified as an expert witness in court. However, *Copy* profiled him when he was on trial himself—charged with trying to arrange for the murder of the mother of his child and her new lover. A police tape caught him in the act of hiring a "hit man"—actually an undercover cop.

"Bambi's Secret Sins" was the third segment, dealing with allegations that Diana, an exotic dancer, conspired to hire the club's doorman to kill her rival, Bambi Love. It was a messy tale, because it was charged that Diana and Bambi were also sex partners and so too was the doorman. Bambi's "secret sin" was an "XXX-rated video." It is so torrid, the anchor said, that *Copy* could only show a short clip of a seductive dance scene. The seamy and steamy report

included the doorman's statement that Diana not only liked whips but rough sex.

More sex was promised for the next broadcast. This would include a tour of the "naked West" guided by Miss Nude International. Also a segment linking prostitution and economics, titled "Recession Hookers."

Another night, *Hard Copy* had a special edition titled "America Exposed," with libidinous material from a number of locations, including scenes in the (un) dressing room of a New York strip club; a tour of the bed chambers and whirlpool baths of a swing and swap club; a drug bust in Hialeah; cops talking about crime problems in Texas, and so on. But most of the footage was devoted to the work of Los Angeles cabbie Robert Vogues, videotaped by his buddy Dave Brown with home equipment.

Sex, Crime & Videotape

During the Los Angeles riots of 1992, Vogues had taped scenes of looting and then, pulling out a gun, had forced some looters to drop the booty. This year, driving around the city he and Brown caught segments that the anchors called "a video diary of a dreamland that becomes a nightmare."

The cabbie talked to transvestites, prostitutes, a pimp, fares looking for drugs, dealers who keep the stuff in their mouth in case they are caught by cops.

Vogues tries to be a good guy, for example, offering a young homeless girl money for a room. But the overall effect is, as the intro put it, exposing the country's dark (and depressing) side. Later in the week, the program used more footage from "The Crusad-

ing Cabbie". He was also called "The Videotape Vigilante" for his exposes of sex and sin.

The tragic fire of the Branch Davidian compound at Waco provided the tabloid programs with vivid material for a week. They aired the same kinds of flame-filled footage as the Rather-Brokaw-Jennings newscasts, but added some dimensions the network

programs did not. Primarily, these were segments that showed people, giving viewers a sense of the personalities and characters involved in the cult and in the community.

A *Current Affair* had interviewed cult leader David Koresh

long before the tragedy. On the day following the fire, *Affair* interviewed Koresh's mother who declared the attack should never have happened. She said that her three grandchildren, who perished in the fire, were "my joy," and that she might start a support group for survivors.

Hard Copy had co-host Barry Nolan reporting from a helicopter, an overly-dramatic setting. He interviewed paramedics who described the survivors' apparent malnutrition, and hospital spokespersons who said the burn victims are treated as patients before they are deemed prisoners.

Just Right for Tabloids

Inside Edition purple-prosed Koresh as the man who "said he would lead his flock to Heaven but who led them to Hell." It interviewed Koresh's grandmother, who expressed doubt that he had ordered a mass suicide. A female cult member said that no one in the compound would have started the blaze, and declared that Koresh "would come back from death."

Cautionary tales, morality playlets and stories with gut-grIPPING emotions are the tabloids' stock in trade.

The show reprised a tape interview with a former member who seven weeks earlier had predicted that if the besieging forces acted aggressively, it would end in violence. The clip indicated that, as in several other events, the tabloids had been on the story earlier than the traditional newscasts.

By Day 3 the concept of *Apocalypse* was firmly established. *Hard Copy* played the same classic dirge that was movingly used in the film *Apocalypse Now*.

A *Current Affair* interviewed Koresh's brother who expressed concern over the conflict of interest of having official lawyers determine who caused the conflagration. An interview with a man whose daughter was a survivor gave a picture of some of the people who fell under Koresh's spell.

The questions and the controversies Waco aroused made the story worth considerable time, and it was still getting heavy coverage in print news media and the standard newscasts. Significantly, the Times Mirror News Interest Index, which measures the interest the public takes in specific news subjects, reported a 50 for Waco and 47 for the second Rodney King beating trial—both among the highest scores in the four years the Index has been operating. But a large percentage of the public faulted the media for giving the two stories too much coverage.

However, the Waco conflagration was still hot on the tabloids even three weeks later. A *Current Affair* had one of the survivors, David Thebodeau's first interview after his release from prison. I found myself trying to assess his credibility. His comments were matched against videotape clips. Thebodeau, whose wife and children died in the fire, said there had been no plans for suicide, but that if he had been trapped and had a gun, he might have chosen to shorten his suffering.

I was especially interested in the

second part of the show on "who really started the fire?" This included an interview with Paul Gray, who conducted the official investigation which concluded that the fire started within the compound. Gray claimed that there were 65 windows through which those inside could have escaped if they wanted to. A *Current Affair* had its own investigator, who had earlier worked on the World Trade Center bombing. His comments, based on viewing the videotape, tended to support the inside-arson finding.

Concern Over Crime

It's not news that crime and personal safety are people's paramount concerns, and the tabloids devote a great deal of attention to those areas. Two thirds of one broadcast of *Inside Edition* was devoted to law breakers and the inadequacy of punishment. The first segment, "Deadly Drivers," took off from the deaths of three New York children hit by autos driven by men whose licenses had been suspended dozens of times. The program showed a long list of drivers who have amassed over 100 violations but are still behind the wheel.

Attention was focused on a problem that calls for action, and action did result. The following day's *New York Times* reported that the police are arresting individuals who violate a traffic regulation and who have had more than two license suspensions.

Inside Edition's second segment was on the growing use of electronic ankle bracelets for convicts confined to their homes in lieu of incarceration in prison. *Edition's* compelling footage included a recording of a teenager calling 911 because her parents were shot by a youth despite his wearing the electronic device; surveillance footage of a convict about to commit burglary and murder; reports on murder, rape and robbery

committed by convicts beating the electronic bracelet system. Both segments called attention to troublesome problems.

Investigative Reports

The tabloids do some investigative reporting, often in consumer advocacy. An example was a piece faulting General Motors for its side-mounted truck gas tanks—courageously carried after the flap over the *Dateline NBC* rigged test. Another was a kind of sting, videotaping a psychologist who tried to peddle a confidential list of major Hollywood stars who have AIDS. The producers turned down the offer as immoral and invading the celebrities' privacy.

An *Inside Edition* investigation, following the World Trade Center bombing, resulted in a strong segment showing that in some states it is easier to buy dynamite than a gun. In Indiana, an under-cover *Edition* team taped the purchase of 51 sticks of dynamite by a man who merely showed his drivers' license and answered three questions. They also taped the purchase of a case of dynamite in Arkansas, just 60 miles from Little Rock, where the President visits. The state is one of 20 that has no special laws regulating the sale of dynamite.

In a political/ investigative piece, *Inside Edition* exposed a secret society called "The Machine" at the University of Alabama, with beatings, break-ins and wire-tapping. A pretty young woman had been beaten up for opposing the secret group in student elections. As a result, the U. of A. suspended student government and postponed the elections indefinitely.

A typical tabloid fable is the coming

of evil to the peaceful rural community—the snake sneaking into the Garden of Eden. A *Current Affair* did a piece "The Demon and the Duffys," set in the quiet town of Boulder, Montana, pop. 1400. The "Demon" was a teenager, sodden with beer and liquor, who was called a punk and told to leave the bar owned by Mr. and Mrs. Duffy—the parents of actor Patrick Duffy. The teenager returned with a shotgun and killed them.

The grim shootings, including the menacing shotgun pointed directly at the camera, were presented in dramatization. Interviewed by *A Current Affair*, the killer (serving 180 years) admitted he had perjured himself by implicating his buddy—although the latter was actually in the men's room during the shooting. Now repentant and confessing, the "Demon" expressed his sorrow and his acceptance of the punishment.

Symbiotic Promotion

There are strong symbiotic ties between entertainment television and the tabloids. This is especially true with the networks' made-for-television movies. Some stations indulge in back-pedaling promotion announcing "You'll meet the real-life character in tonight's prime time movie on our 11 o'clock news."

A few days before NBC aired the made-for-TV movie *Woman on the Run*, *Inside Edition* aired

a segment on the same case. It dealt with a woman, nicknamed Bambi, who escaped from prison where she was serving time for killing her husband. *Edition's* take on the story of this former model and policewoman was based on the first interview grant-

A major problem is the blurring of lines, between news and entertainment, fact and interpretation. Disclosure is needed. If an event is dramatized, viewers must be told.

ed by the man who helped her escape.

Dominick, a blue-collar worker who was visiting his sister in the same prison as Bambi, began corresponding and visiting with her. He helped her flee to Canada, where authorities eventually caught up with them. However, Bambi (whose flight got national media coverage and women's rights support) was granted political asylum, while Dominick was sentenced to a year in prison and fined \$3,000.

A *Current Affair* aired a segment which borrowed from and promoted *America's Most Wanted*. The latter had filmed in a Salt Lake City tavern called the Green Parrot, because the killer of an employee there was still at large. While the segment was broadcast, almost all the workers there were watching intently. In a strange coincidence, they also saw a wanted spot for a man accused of child molestation. The fugitive was working in the kitchen, but didn't see the notice asking for information on his whereabouts. *Wanted Host John Walsh* called it the most unlikely coincidence in the program's 245 "captures."

Zooming in on Emotions

The tabloids show powerful emotions close up. One caught the pain of a mother whose teen-age daughter was killed by a stalker. Anguish distorts her face, chokes what she wants to say, is finally expressed in words, in tears, in biting of lips. I think this may be invasion of privacy. (But if I were an actor I'd study the tape to see how to create and communicate the emotions of grief and loss.)

In a courtroom, where a young man tells the angry father of the girl he loved and killed of his tremendous remorse, the extreme closeup of his face compels attention. The downward contortion of his lips projects his emotions more forcefully than his words.

Terry Murphy, co-anchor of *Hard Copy*, comes from a background in local news, as an anchor at network affiliates in Cincinnati, Chicago, Los Angeles and Detroit. Winner of two Emmys for news, she feels the tabloid format offers more opportunity for depth than the time-bound newscast. However, she sees local TV news becoming more and more like the tabloids.

"Basically, we tabloids are in the entertainment business, rather than information media," Murphy says. "But three-quarters of our staff comes from broadcast news, the other 25 percent coming from magazine shows, film or documentaries.

"We put a personal emotional touch on much of what we do. When Magic Johnson announced he was HIV positive, my producer said, 'Isn't your son a Magic fan?' My eight-year-old Justin idolizes Johnson, practically has a Magic shrine in his room. And so the producer had us do the Magic/HIV story through the eyes of Justin, who's like many kids for whom Magic is a hero. Viewers said they were really touched."

During the four years she's been co-anchor, Murphy says *Hard Copy* is doing less sexy and sensational material and is doing more stories linked to news. While the format generally uses three stories, "We have the option of throwing them all out and devoting the entire show to a single event, as we did with the Waco tragedy. That's something the traditional news show cannot, and probably should not do."

At times, an even-handed approach is both journalistically correct and adds to dramatic effect. For example, *Hard Copy* did a cult expose in which the allegations against the cult were followed by footage taped within the group (the cult did its own taping simultaneously). The sect had been called "The Children of God" and in 1968 it was accused of using sex and prostitution in a "Hookers for Jesus"

policy. Today its followers call themselves "The Family".

Spokespersons for the group, former members, and representatives from the Cult Awareness Network presented their conflicting points of view. The group, using the latest communications techniques, produces its own videos—clips of which were shown. The current news peg is public interest in the Waco tragedy and fear it could happen again.

The Problem of Blurring

How should the tabloids be assessed? First, we should look at their history. In print they came into being shortly after World War I. The smaller format was easier to handle by the lower and middle class strap-hangers jammed into big city subway trains. Since many were immigrants, not fully literate, tabloid headlines were bold, the copy terse but accessible, the pictures plentiful. Like their present-day video counterparts, their favorite subjects were Love Nests, Scandals, Crime, the Rich and Famous.

Intellectuals and culture snobs tended to look down on the papers

that catered to the masses with "funnies". Yet the tabloid format was adopted by an experimental, advertising-free daily I worked on, *The Newspaper PM*, which was started in 1940 by Ralph Ingersoll who assembled a staff of distinguished journalists. Similarly, when Dorothy Schiff was publisher of the *New York Post*, it was a quality daily, using tabloid format. Content, not format is the crucial factor.

A major problem is the blurring of lines, between TV news and entertainment, between fact and interpretation, between actuality and drama. I have no quarrel with a dramatization, if it is clearly labeled as dramatization. I don't think interviewees should be paid, but if a program resorts to checkbook journalism, the public has a right to know. The operative concept is *disclosure*. Presenting both a news clip and re-enacted footage is not great professionalism, but it can be acceptable if the viewer is told what is real and what is re-enacted.

As things stand, it's getting harder to tell the media apart. A story about couturier Bob Mackie, "sultan of sequins and guru of glitter," allegedly having taken a loan from

WASHINGTON POST SURVEY FINDS TABLOIDISM GROWING IN LOCAL NEWS

The tabloid virus has gravely infected the news stream of local television. That's the conclusion of a recent *Washington Post* article headlined, appropriately, **MURDER! MAYHEM! RATINGS!**

"Night after night, local newscasts around the country are going tabloid," according to

Howard Kurtz's survey of five weekdays in June.

"Click the remote control in most major cities and chances are you will find at least one station building its newscast around blood, guts and gore. While crime news has always been a staple of local television, a news sensationalism is sweeping the airways as once-

sedate network affiliates highlight sex and violence in search of big ratings."

The Post's report focused on five big-city stations, sampling only the first half of hour-long late-night news, at ten or eleven p.m.—defining tabloid as those involving crime, sex, disasters, accidents or public fears. The stations: WRC-TV,

the Mafia, broke in the tabloid *New York Post* and the slick *Vanity Fair* before being picked up by *Inside Edition*.

To some extent, the TV tabloid boom stems from the expanded holdings of Rupert Murdoch in American newspapers, television, magazines, films, and books. The style introduced by his *A Current Affair*—spread by imitation and incestuous “musical chairs” hiring—appears to be influencing network nightly newscasts and news-magazines.

Andrew Lack, CBS News producer who recently took over from Michael Gartner as president of NBC News, is sensitive to the problem. “I’m going to try to work on more stories on our news magazines that are definably not tabloid,” he recently told the *Los Angeles Times*. “I hope the audience will follow us. But I worry that it will be a tough sell.”

Tabloidism Spreading

With ABC and CBS having some four newsmagazines each, and NBC developing some, with police and other “reality” shows proliferating in syndication and locally, the competition for view-

ers will intensify. And that may lead to greater reliance on the gritty and gruesome at the expense of serious treatment of important social issues.

The story of the Hollywood agent accused of harassing actresses, which I first caught on *Hard Copy*, was revisited a month later on CBS’ *48 Hours*. The casting couch piece was expanded to include charges by some of the women that they had informed the Screen Actors Guild two years earlier. The union had taken no action despite the offer of some women to go public. *48 Hours*’ report was a commendable indictment of sexual harassment, but in the tabloid tradition.

The fact that Dan Rather not only co-anchors CBS’ nightly news strip but anchors *48 Hours*, disturbs journalism purists who feel that association tarnishes the credibility of the network’s flagship newscast. The same is said of Tom Brokaw’s assignment on NBC’s magazine and Connie Chung’s on CBS’ *Eye to Eye*. If their participation on the tabloids doesn’t lower the major anchors’ journalistic stature, it raises the status of the magazine programs.

A recent CBS *Street Stories* program spent a good deal of time on a battle

Washington; WWOR-TV, New York; WSVN-TV, Miami; KCBS-TV, Los Angeles and WBBM-TV, Chicago.

Their headline graphics included “Voyeurs Murder”, “Tollway Murder”, “Wheelchair Murder”, “Rap Music Murder”, “Serial Rapist”, “Serial Killer”.

Kurtz noted that after depleting the supply of death and destruction, “Several stations turned to such lesser fare as a snakebite victim, a

woman bitten by a deadly spider, a public school flasher, a third-grader hit with a BB pellet, ‘satanic’ activities involving cats and dogs and, inevitably, Jennifer Flowers, Joey Buttafuoco, Madonna and the death of Elvis Presley.”

On the five newscasts the proportion of tabloid stories ranged from 74 percent on the Miami station to a “low” of 46 percent on the Washington station. The five station average was 58

percent tabloid. Weather and sports were excluded.

Tabloid news “gains a sliver of the audience”, according to David Smith of Frank Magid Associates. “It tends to be a minority audience because that news is happening in their neighborhoods,” he told the *Washington Post*. “But it can be very disorienting and alienating to a broader audience.”

—Briller

over "Frozen Assets"—vials of sperm a wealthy industrialist willed to his lover before he committed suicide. His family is contesting the gift and claims the woman failed to alert them, although she knew he was planning suicide. His children, ex-wife and companion were shown in emotionally-charged interviews. The tangled tale is making its way up through the courts, but meanwhile we're treated to personal dramas involving suicide, mental illness, new legal interpretations, marital dispute and sperm. Would CBS have explored the case if the bequest had been frozen in a Swiss rather than a sperm bank?

ABC's *Prime Time* did a big takeout in June on how government agencies are wasting the taxpayers' money. It exposed entertaining follies by Uncle Sam—junkets by Senators paid for by us or by lobbyists, the "giveaway" of 28

valuable Government airplanes, and similar shenanigans. I applaud exposing the myriad ways in which the U.S. is squandering the public's hard-earned bucks. *Prime Time* was right on the money in doing its extensive report on the very night that Congress was considering the Super-Conductor Super-Collider. But the report included a healthy helping of showbiz ballyhoo.

One of the wasteful Super-Collider expenditures was to compose songs about the atom smasher for school children to sing. Sam Donaldson introduced a segment in which a score of kids sang the juvenile ditty. That, however, was not actuality, but a group of tots brought together to make the program's point. Superimposed on the bottom of the screen were the

lyrics, with the old fashioned sing-along bouncing ball marking the words. It was stagecraft—not reportage, although it forcefully underscored the questionable paying of thousands of dollars to romanticize the multi-billion-dollar research project.

The tabloid virus also shows up on the nightly newscasts. On the last day of Dave Letterman's broadcast for NBC, Brokaw's newscast saluted him and included footage of Tom and Dave fishing. It was fun and timely, but a

hoked-up segment more properly belonging on *Entertainment Tonight* than stealing valuable time from the 22-minutes of news that's squeezed into a half-hour.

With the tremendous complexity of so many issues in the news, incursions into the major newscasts' time are a disservice to the public. Even when the features are helpful, as

CBS' "Money Crunch" generally is, they seem more suited as consumer information on programs like *This Morning*, *Today* or *Good Morning America*, where they wouldn't take time from more significant news reports.

A wave of the future may be spotted in *Front Page*, FOX's new Saturday evening news magazine which reflects input from Van Gordon Sauter, former CBS news chief. *Front Page* keeps everything short and frenetic. The premiere opened with a report on two men who allegedly bilked investors. However, they had connections with Hollywood producers, which provided the occasion for including some movie clips—not central to the scandal but good visual come-ons.

***Too much murder,
mayhem and smut can
turn off viewers.
Audiences become fed
up with a monotonous
daily diet of dirt.
How long before too
many people ask:
"What ELSE is news?"***

With music-video pacing, *Front Page* uses quick cuts, tilted full-screen captions and five reporters. A brief roundtable discussion by the reporters gives a bit more perspective on some of the issues. Three or four quick editorial or commentary inserts by columnists around the country add an Op Ed note. For example, Anne Taylor Fleming, who comments on the MacNeil/Lehrer hour, contrasted the styles of Pat Nixon (who died the previous day) and Hillary Rodham Clinton. Though brief, these opinion pieces were cogent.

Another edition of the show, whose hyperactive pace is pitched to younger viewers, had a hard-hitting piece on the growing number of bombings in the U.S. (1900 in 1992). It blasted the spread of how-to books and videos on making explosives. An interview with the arrogant author of *The Poor Man's James Bond*, who published bomb-making recipes, raised the thorny issue of public safety vs. free speech.

Local TV newscasts are also adopting tabloid features and techniques and not just during sweeps periods. There are disturbing trends: excess coverage of crime, disaster, violence, sex, scandal and scares. One's world and neighborhood loom as terrifying, confounding, overwhelming. In their frantic pursuit of sensational stories many news directors appear to be lowering their judgment.

They forget that excesses of murder, mayhem and smut turn off viewers. The road to bigger ratings is not always paved with dirt; audiences can become fed up with a daily diet of sleaze, of bodybags and blood. The gatekeepers of local news had better keep tabs on how much tabloid stuff they air before too many viewers ask: "What else is news?"

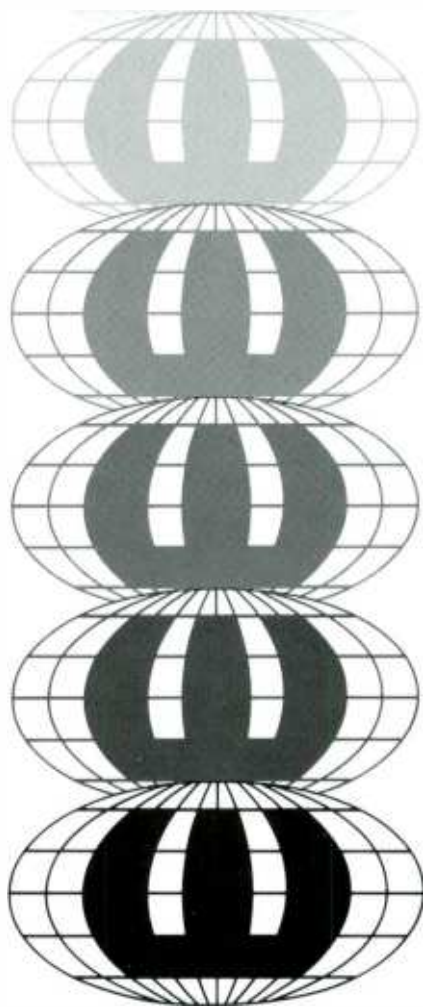
"Without going outside, you may know the whole world," the Book of Tao stressed in the Sixth Century B.C.—the Twenty-Sixth Century Before Television. The Chinese sage could

not foresee the technology which could make TV our "window on the world." But television can only be a real window if it presents a balanced picture.

The TV tabloids have greater freedom in selecting subjects than the traditional newscasts (which need to cover the day's top developments). They could offer a broader range of material, beyond the crime and sex, the gossip and gore they so often feature. These tabloids, "small and easy to swallow," are not always good medicine.

Although they are not the sole source of news, because of their emotional impact they have a significant effect on people's attitudes and feelings about what's happening in the world. Dealing with more meaningful subjects without losing their audience's interest is a difficult Tao—but important for the staffs, the producers, the personalities and the syndicators of the tabloids to explore. ■

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SITCOM REALITY

The facts of life—sexual, domestic and economic—as reflected by TV comedy serials are getting to be a lot different from the never/never world of the Beaver and Ozzie and Harriet. What's going on?

BY DAVE BERKMAN

- A bimbo mom.
- A dad obsessed with self rather than family.
- The social consequences of passing wind.
- Consummated teenage sex.
- The first family in television sitcom history to experience, on screen, the daily pressures resulting from the depressing economics which dominate American, lower middle-class, blue-collar life...

Such is a partial litany of the heretofore tabooed realities which underlie the appeal of *Married With Children*, *Roseanne* and *The Simpsons*—the three comedy series which have changed the face and nature of sitcom TV.

Compare the contemporary realities as seen on these programs, with what transpired in earlier years in all those status quo never/never lands whose settings provided the plot premises for the blue collar existences depicted on *Life of Riley*, *The Honeymooners*, *LaVerne & Shirley* and *The Flintstones*. Such comparison suggests that *Married*, *Roseanne* and *The Simpsons* represent a significant opening up in the realm of sitcom possibilities.

However, before focusing on each of these series, a brief examination of the social and political climate which made possible this expansion, is in order.

How is it that situation comedies which dare dwell on the unpleasantnesses which define so much of today's existence have achieved such popularity? And how have they managed to do so in the face of so

much overt hostility—e.g., the condemnation of a Dan Quayle; the boycott threats of a Rev. Donald Wildmon?

The answer is that, in its values and beliefs, America in the 1990s has become two separate nations. We saw this in the past Presidential election. On the one hand, the Republicans played to a coalition of those who adhere to "traditional family values." These comprised that segment of the populace devoted to the fantasies represented by those too-good-to-be-true, traditional families of television's past as portrayed on *Ozzie & Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, *Donna Reed* and, of course, *Leave It to Beaver*. Conversely, the Democrats addressed that segment of the electorate—and TV viewership—whose lives increasingly accept non-traditional social and economic realities which contradict such ideologically-embedded mythos. The Democratic victory provided strong indication that there are many more willing to accept reality, than those denying it.

In fact, those who might be termed "the tolerant," have always been with us. But until relatively recently, broadcast advertisers gave no recognition to this. The reasons are twofold: first, those who control American's consumer product and service corporations naturally tend to uphold conservative views and values which underpin their own personal success; second, the old advertising maxim that everyone uses toothpaste—and therefore, if you offend some people, you risk losing sales. But then—to somewhat truncate history—along came the counter-traditional values of the '60s which at least planted some seeds of doubt over the previously unquestioned "intrinsic rightness" of conventional social conduct and political and economic belief.

If the old mainstream, 3-network-dominated television was slow to realize this, in the mid and late '80s there came those alternative cable

and FOX network services which broke the ABC/CBS/NBC oligopoly which had previously commanded audience and controlled content. Most especially there came FOX. And from FOX, which could only gain a foothold as a successful fourth network by carving out an identity which distinguished it from the old triumvirate, there came *Married With Children*.

Married With Children:

Forget how overdrawn *Married* is in its characterizations and plot premises. It gained notice—for both itself and its nascent network—by doing the unthinkable: admitting that an ostensibly traditional family—right down to a son named "Bud"—might include people who cannot only barely suffer each other, but who suffer extreme degrees of sexual frustration. (Just how far have we come? Until its demise in the late '60s, the TV industry's Code of Good Practices, required that neither non-marital sex nor divorce could ever be considered as plot possibilities, except to be condemned!)

It is not surprising that *Married* soon attracted the wrath of the traditionalists. This was an anger that attained national prominence when a Michigan mom, Terry Rakolta, found herself discovered on the same day by both the *New York Times* and Ted Koppel, as she vented her horror about watching an episode of *Married* with her eight-year-old daughter—to whom "I hadn't even explained sex between humans"—in which jokes were made about both bestiality and Peg Bundy's ongoing affair with her vibrator. Rakolta, who would immediately team up with that self-proclaimed guardian of American morality, the Rev. Donald Wildmon, was represented as symbolizing an alleged majority of decent, God-fearing Americans appalled by a television series which would make light of all that. But it soon became clear that maybe

the "decent" people might not quite be that always assumed majority, because *Married* became the first series on FOX to attract not just large number of viewers, but viewers in that younger demographic which advertisers most value. These younger tooth-paste users, cola drinkers and movie goers, were not going to boycott products which bought time in a show whose very perverseness they so eagerly anticipated each Sunday night.

At this point, it should at least be conceded that not all thematic content barriers have been breached. There still remain the last two "no-no's" of opting for abortion to end a pregnancy, and any hint of physical contact between homosexuals. Those who produce TV sitcoms either can't, or won't be allowed by their networks, to forget what befell that episode of *Maude*—over 25 years ago!—in which she elected to have an abortion: mass sponsor desertion and the refusal by some 20 CBS affiliates to carry the show. Ditto, that episode of *thirtysomething* two seasons back, which lost its sponsors because it included a scene in which two gay lovers were merely shown reclining together on a bed. But these remain as the last two areas where television—and especially the sponsorship which ultimately dictates what TV can carry—lag behind public opinion.

These two exceptions aside, however, what *Married With Children* showed, is that family fare TV—not just those shows aiming for a golden upscale demographic such as *Hill Street*, *LA Law* and *Northern Exposure*—can violate conventions, and because they are doing so, attract and hold those viewers who have always comprised television's most loyal and consistent viewership.

It was this acceptance of an almost deviantly off-the-wall, *Married With Children* which paved the way for *Roseanne*.

Roseanne:

A major reason why *Married* could get away with so much was because of the heavy-handed strokes with which it was painted. But it also demonstrated that America might just be ready for a series which gives serious exploration to others of those dark elements of American family life in addition to sex—especially the economic pressures which dominate the day-to-day existence of so many American families, and most particularly, job dissatisfaction.

Roseanne would provide these explorations through a realism of plot, and with characters far better drawn and realistically developed than the crude caricatures on *Married*. (Compare, for example, the personae of the sexually active female adolescents on the two shows: Kelly the blonde, fantasy bimbo of *Married* and the infinitely more complex, if still somewhat ditzzy teen queen, Beckey, together with her sexually experimenting younger sister, the often darkly brooding Darlene.)

Let's look at some of the themes which *Roseanne* has explored.

Sex. Specifically adolescent sexuality. And virtually unheard of in previous TV sitcom history, consummated teenage sexuality.

Auditory allusions; at least to marital sex, came upon us with the sounds of the creaking bed from the upstairs at the Bunkers when the married Gloria and Meathead went at it. Sexual titillation came in profusion with series like *One Day At a Time* in which, on every third show, it seemed, the Valerie Bertinelli character's virginity was threatened, except that at the show's consummation it would always turn out that the sex had not been. Although surveys show that some three-quarters of adolescents have experienced sexual intercourse by the time they graduate high school,

on television adolescents were limited to temptation. (Recall the furor in the early '80s when it looked like James might have sex at 16?) But suddenly, here we have Roseanne's older daughter daughter Beckey, still an adolescent, getting initiated in a most poignant show in which her parents are forced to accept the fact, of her intercourse, and her mother's reaction rather than fear, turns out to be one of resigned acceptance; plus with some practical advice to Beckey that if she is to remain sexually active, she'd better get some birth control ... Parental ambivalence toward their kids—and vice versa.

Roseanne summed up the parental side of this reality—up to now all but buried in the lovey-dovey togetherness of sitcom fairyland—in that classic line she delivered in the series' very first episode, when she turned around to her battling kids and snapped, "Now I know why some animals eat their young!"

Any parent of an adolescent child on this side of the tube knows that the only thing more embarrassing than for a 14-year-old to be seen with a parent, is for a 14-year-old to be seen with a parent in a K-Mart. For the pre-, and early-adolescent set, the ideal is the "Charley Brown existence", a world in which adults, and especially parents, are never seen. Thus the ultimate unreality of family sitcoms used to be the way in which parental figures, such as the senior Bradys and Partridges, got so involved and fit in so well in their kids' social circles.

It was almost a slap in the face to the millions of parents who've experienced the rejection-filled realities of trying to get publicly close to a teenage kid. But then, along came Roseanne and Dan Conner determined, on the basis of the latest "parenting" psychobabble, to share some "quality" weekend time with their kids by accompanying them on a trip to the mall; the kids' candid reactions every time Roseanne and Dan

were out of earshot, represented among the most true-to-life moments in the history of American television.

Wind. Farting's not that big a deal, something we almost all do, often with profoundly embarrassing consequences—but never before considered in TV series which depict "family." But here's the quintessential teen queen, Beckey, her big moment in front of the student council, desperately trying to impress the hunky guy she lusts after, and she breaks wind. Funny? Yes, but also poignant in the painful shame Beckey feels as the story becomes neighborhood gossip topic #1.

The same shame, it seems, which Roseanne experienced at the same age when one of her breasts floated out of her swimsuit bra. And so we saw a realistically wise mom ease Beckey's hurt through mutual commiseration. Compare that to the levels of embarrassment we were expected to identify with in the family sitcoms of the past where the teen queen found herself wearing a gown identical to that worn by her nemesis to the senior prom.

Spousal—or more accurately in this case, "Significant Other"—abuse. True, this has been a hot topic on TV since the early '80s, but only on 'made-for-TV-movie specials' which assumed that while the titillation would attract viewers for one-time treatments, the nature of such material would prove too depressing on a weekly sitcom series.

However, until now there haven't been any sitcoms creatively controlled by a former mobile-home dweller who, based on her first-hand experience, could observe that while "There is Beach Party Barbie [and] Malibu Barbie, ... where is Single, Abused Trailer-Park Barbie?" And so in a sitcom multi-parter, Roseanne's sister is abused by her live-in lover; Roseanne's husband, a usually gentle giant, beats him up and is put in the slammer; the sister, because of her

ambivalent feelings about the guy, is ready to go back for what will almost certainly be further bashings—and Roseanne succeeds in convincing her sibling that there can be worth and meaning in life for women without the presence of a man.

Economics. Most of all the New Reality, as the last election demonstrated, is increasingly the major concern for most Americans—and especially for that lower socioeconomic demographic which comprises the bulk of television viewership—personal economic status.

Throughout the history of television's sitcom focus on the family, family economics have never been a matter of concern. Somehow, people always seemed to earn enough to live at that level which they accepted without complaint. Take, for example, that prototypical blue-collar couple, *The Honeymooners*. Ralph Kramden and his wife Alice couldn't seem to afford any furniture beyond a beat-up kitchen table and a couple of chairs in what looked like a cold water flat. Although Ralph was always falling for get-rich-quick scams, neither he nor Alice ever seemed to complain about the limitations of his pay as a bus driver.

Most TV sitcoms, however, have taken place in solid suburban middle class settings, in which solid suburban dads all seemed to hold solid suburban white collar jobs which paid solid suburban upper-middle class salaries and perks. Television, after all, is supported by a corporate America which certainly does not want to see its advertising dollars supporting programming which might raise questions about such matters as poverty and maldistribution of wealth.

Then along came an unusual prime time liberal, Roseanne Arnold, who given her clout as star of the top-rated program on TV, could insist that a series which purported to provide a realistic picture of a working class American family in the late '80s/early

'90s, could not ignore how a deteriorating economy was devastating such families. It was this insistence which led to programs such as the episode in which Roseanne takes her younger daughter's Home Ec class to a supermarket, and we see that the real reason working-class families buy so much packaged meat extender is not because they provide the culinary delight those Hamburger Helper spots insist, but because they make it possible to survive.

Then, in a nation where a political leadership extolls the promises and joys of small entrepreneurship in a free market economy, we see Roseanne's husband's futile attempt to realize the American dream when his motorcycle repair shop fails—because, as the *Roseanne* scripts never drew back from pointing out, of the false promises of a Reagan/Bush economy-gone-to-hell. In a television system whose programs and commercials otherwise represent women only as '50s-like, pristine moms, or high powered execs by day who revert to a supermom status by night, we see a Roseanne who, as a mother to three kids, is forced to work at non-fulfilling, near-minimum wage jobs so her family can afford the Hamburger Helper.

If in the quality of its writing and the exquisite correctness of its casting, but most of all its never-blinking focus on the hellishness of what life is too often like for that downscale one-third who account for two-thirds of TV viewing, *Roseanne* represents such a significant advance in situation comedy, why have the mainstream media missed so much of this?

Why, despite both the commercial, and artistic success of *Roseanne*, have the news media given so little of their attention to the social, political and cultural breakthrough this series represents? Why has so much of their attention been focused on such irrelevancies as Roseanne Arnold's weight, her tattooed moonings, her butchering of the national anthem, her carryings-

on with Tom Arnold—and what is always portrayed as her aggressively “bitchy,” take-charge style with which she controls her series?

Why has such carping superficiality been the focus given the series and its star in print, ranging from the super-market tabloids up through the *New York Times*; and by the TV trash news and gossip shows? What were the resentments which have resulted in her colleagues in the industry persisting in their petulant Emmy award snubs?

Might it be, because she is a woman, and a not particularly physically attractive woman, at that? It was one thing, after all, for a widely acclaimed show about an aggressive woman, such as the '70s series *Maude*, to have received all sorts of media and collegial plaudits—but while *Maude* may have been aggressive, she projected this persona within a series conceived, crafted and controlled by Norman Lear: that is, by a man.

Might it be, in the case of *Roseanne*, that is is the lack of any clear demarcation between the fictional Roseanne Connor and the real Roseanne Arnold which explains the lack of serious consideration *Roseanne* has received? Doesn't this treatment represent a classic example of what Susan Faludi, the author of *Backlash*, has documented of how a male-dominated media establishment increasingly finds itself uncomfortable with what few gains women have made since the launch of the modern women's movement thirty years ago? (*Roseanne's* receipt of a Peabody—the first time a comedy show has received this most prestigious of broadcast awards—indicated that those who look seriously at television, understand the significance which this series represents.)

Whatever the negative publicity focus Roseanne Barr may have suffered because of her creative success, that success, embedded as it

is in the bold reality which is the hallmark of her series, prepared television audiences to accept what could be seen—it it weren't for its cartoon format—as the most darkly revealing of the reality sitcoms: *The Simpsons*.

The Simpsons:

Marge as the mom who suffers masculine boorishness; Homer as the dad—far more representative of real dads than was any Ward Cleaver—who places self over family; and Bart, the absolutely normative, pre-adolescent boorish-male-in-formation. But most of all, Lisa, the little sister who can no longer ignore the conventional hypocrisies and is forced to accept that as mean, empty and intellectually meaningless as reality is, it's the reality most of us prefer! (It's no accident that *The Simpsons* is the creation of a Matt Groening, whose career began with a comic strip syndicated to the alternative press: the medium most dedicated to confronting unpleasant reality rather than affirming the fictions of the status quo. Significantly, its title is, “*Life in Hell*.”)

Has there ever been a primetime series which has so mercilessly exposed the hypocrisies and the clichés which provide the fragile underpinning of American society and the beliefs which hold it together? To cite just four examples: self-centered child-rearing; screw-your-fellow-man religiosity; environmentally-abusive, corporate greed; and that which has made *The Simpsons* so popular with adolescents: —its uncompromising exposure of the deceits perpetrated by American education.

And what a delicious, industry-in-joke is the device *The Simpsons* has chosen to show this: could anything better capture the cant, the hypocrisy and the dishonesty which comprise so much of the rhetorical justifications underlying contemporary American capitalism, religiosity and education

than the unctuous voicing of these justifications by the town's leading industrialist, the family's minister and Bart and Lisa's elementary school principal?

Whereas much of the realism of *Roseanne* is a function of its visual reality (*Roseanne* and husband Dan are, like most of us, not the most physically attractive specimens. And their surroundings, whether home or hang-out, are not far removed from the grungy) there is an even more devastating reality to *The Simpsons*, one which succeeds only because, as a stylized cartoon, it is visually unreal.

On American television where one of the three major networks, NBC, is owned by General Electric, the biggest builder of nuclear energy plants, where but on *The Simpsons* could TV get away with the Dickens-like cartoonish depiction of those who own and manage nuclear power as openly articulating their acceptance of physical, life-threatening risks to workers and nearby residents; as not important when revenue and profits are at stake?

It is only in a cartoon series that those who are urged "to get a life" because TV is their life, are seen to have the life they truly prefer.

Where but in a cartoon series could it be admitted that the ultimate joy in viewing pro football is beating the point spread?

What other than the inherent detachment of cartoon stylization would permit us to accept a Lisa as the ultimate realist forced to accept that a public school music teacher has no choice but to be disturbed when he encounters a true talent such as she demonstrates in her sax-wailing?

And what medium is better than the cartoon itself to show how cartoon-dominated children's TV knows no limit in how low it will go to grab kids so that they can also be reached by advertisers who know no limits in how nutritionally low they will sink to entice them to purchase junk foods?

For only a series produced as an unrealistic cartoon can express such realities as that no matter how potentially devastating the labor we perform; no matter how nutritionally unhealthy the foods we eat; no matter how mind-dulling the TV we watch; no matter how hypocritical the religiosity we claim fulfills us, that we accept all of this—not because we have to, but because it's what we like!

With *Married With Children* we saw a first probing of the dark side of the American family. But it was one we could accept because, despite its exposure of such painful realities of domestic existence, we would also find denial in the unrealities of its overdrawn characters.

With *Roseanne*, we see each week a reality forced on us by failing economics and anachronistic social values.

Perhaps most painful of all, is what is revealed to us about ourselves on *The Simpsons*; here we discover that a reality characterized by crassness and lack of meaning is the one most of us prefer.

Forty-six years after television's first sitcom made its debut—it was the DuMont Network's *Mary Kay & Johnny* series—through these three current programs a genre of television programming which, it can be argued, has been America's major socializing agent for over four decades, has finally confronted reality. Will there be others? ■

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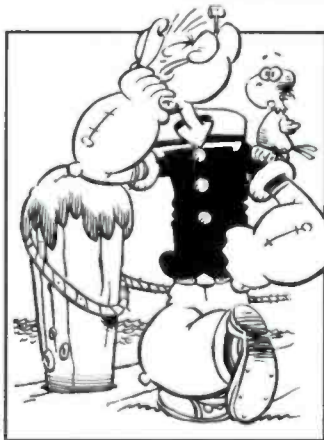
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"CAUSE THERE'S ONLY ONE NEW YORK"

East side, West side and all around the town, New Yorkers now can get 24-hour news service from a new cable channel. A closeup of how it works.

BY PAUL NOBLE

New York City's news audiences have been supported in recent years by expanded television programs, widened cable penetration, and increased radio information services. To outsiders, New Yorkers' appetite for news might be considered almost prurient. In America's greatest metropolis, it's imperative to know everything first—and to have an opinion about it, too.

Appropriately, this capital of communications now has its own full-time news cable channel. Time Warner, which controls cable franchises in Manhattan and three of the "outer boroughs"—Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island—inaugurated *New York 1 News* at the beginning of September, 1992. Cablevision Systems Corporation has the cable franchise in the fifth of the city's

boroughs—the Bronx—and has not yet agreed to deliver the all-news service to its customers. "It is our hope that they will affiliate with us," says Paul Sagan, vice-president for news and programming, the chief at *NY1 News*. Even without the Bronx, with 885,000 subscribers available in the four other boroughs, a large pool of viewers was possible right from the start. Five months after its debut, 41,000 rooms in 143 hotels were also receiving the channel. The slogans "'Cause there's only one New York," "If it's happening in your neighborhood, it's on *NY1 News*," "We take the time to do it right," and "New York City news for New Yorkers, 24 hours a day" began to appear everywhere.

NY1 News, of course, faces a highly competitive array of broadcast media, some long entrenched and others newly-developed. In the fifties, when New Yorkers depended upon seven daily newspapers and a wide range of powerful radio network affiliates and independents for information, the

network-owned television stations provided only quarter-hour local news programs at 6:30 or 6:45 and at 11:00.

Network news is recalled for its *Camel News Caravan*, with John Cameron Swayze, "hopscoching the world for headlines." At the end of the decade, after the inauguration of *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* and Walter Cronkite's program, NBC and CBS affiliates began to produce companion early evening newscasts, incorporating locally-produced film stories. *The Pressman-Ryan Report*, a half-hour nightly program on NBC's owned-and-operated station, was the first expanded local show.

The seventies brought WABC-TV's *Eyewitness News* "happy talk" format. In 1980, WNBC-TV's *Live At Five* kicked off a two-hour news bloc from 5 to 7 as a lead-in to its network newscast. In 1982, WCBS-TV followed suit with a two-hour program for two pre-Cronkite hours. Over at radio, both Group W's WINS ("Give us twenty minutes, we'll give you the world") and CBS's Newsradio 88, built substantial audiences.

Cable had come to New York slowly. In the late sixties, two cable companies struggled with construction problems. They slowly gained viewers, but only in Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Staten Island had to wait until the mid- or late-eighties before franchises were awarded and construction started. By the time of the Gulf War, Turner's CNN and his *Headline News* were positioned to take advantage of their huge potential audience, which now included New York City's cable viewers.

Television's information explosion of the nineties may be just beginning. In New York City, in addition to the three network owned-and-operated stations' network and local news programming on WCBS-TV, WNBC-TV and WABC-TV, there are strong news departments producing hours at 10 p.m. on the FOX network station

WNYW, the Tribune-owned independent WPIX and the Chris-Craft-owned New Jersey-based indie WWOR-TV.

At the turn of the decade, local cable news in New York City was not yet a reality and the few experiments conducted were scrapped after several months. One project included hourly five-minute newscasts, inserted during a portion of CNN's daily programming, as a joint production of Fox's WNYW, Channel 5, and SNN, a Group-W co-venture.

The Beat Goes On

NY1 News is the brainchild of Richard R. Aurelio, president of Time Warner's New York City cable group, who decided to put a news channel at "1" on the dial, for reasons of access, promotion and distinction. He sees NY1 News as an asset to the cable franchise.

With an annual budget of close to \$10 million, the model for NY1 News is a composite of CNN, *Headline News*, and all-news radio, and the newspaper "beat" system of reporting. Because NY1 News went on-line a few years after other total news services had premiered, there were lessons to be learned, ideas to be explored, and formats to be borrowed or modified.

A regional news service, *New England Cable News*, serves 750,000 cable subscribers in six states—Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Maine. This channel went on the air in March 1992, a partnership of Hearst Corporation and Continental Cablevision.

In California, Orange County NewsChannel, owned by Freedom Newspapers, which owns newspapers and TV stations, began operation in September 1990, with a 510,000 cable universe. Washington, D.C.'s NewsChannel 8 began in October 1991 and reaches a potential of 850,000 viewers.

Since December 1986, in New York's

own backyard, is *News 12 Long Island*, a Cablevision service for 650,000 subscribers in nearby suburban Nassau and Suffolk Counties. Its successful operation, under the direction of its creator Norman Fein, has been responsible for first-rate coverage of Long Island politics, social issues, and economic problems, usually slighted by local television stations, all of which are New York City-based.

Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island, and the Bronx have also suffered under Manhattan-based newsmaking decisions. *NY1 News*—with borough correspondents, with twenty field reporters and cameras, fiber-optic feed networking, and with the desire to cover purely local issues and people—hopes to right that wrong. New Yorkers from all boroughs, including Manhattan, have unhappily followed local happenings in New Jersey, Westchester, and Long Island for years because the New York stations are licensed to serve outlying areas.

Time and crews at broadcast channels 2, 4, 5, 7, 9 and 11 devoted to local stories focus often on Newark, New Jersey, White Plains in Westchester and Mineola on Long Island rather than the five "home" boroughs of New York. Brooklyn's Borough President Howard Golden has been one of the most outspoken critics of local New York television's ignoring his country's people, issues, progress and problems.

NY1 News studied other factors during its development phase. Sagan and news director Steve Paulus decided to make the newspaper style of "beat" reporting the focus of their channel. Perhaps the most unusual

step was the creation of one-man reporting units.

"I was getting increasingly frustrated with the traditional technician/editorial separation, the way television news commonly runs virtually everywhere now," says Sagan, a veteran of many years as News Director of WCBS-TV, in New York. He believes the distinction between the "shooter" and the reporter "is a huge negative, and I don't mean just economically. There's an intellectual split, destructive to the process and not cost-effective."

The journalist can't be tied down to when he can or cannot have a technician "or whether or not the technician was or was not having a good day," continues Sagan. "People say we did this to be cheap. If we wanted to be

cheap, we wouldn't have twenty reporters. We have more reporters than Channel 2. We have more reporters than the entire New England News Channel."

Training in on-air performance in shooting with the 13-pound Hi-8 equipment (not too different from inexpensive home video

equipment available to amateurs) and in editing took place in the spring and summer of 1992.

Sagan believes that both reporters and viewers are more satisfied. The reporters "are not at the whim of the desk scheduling them or a crew. It's their beat and they know what's important and they're not doing the story *du jour*. They're not working cafeteria-style, where they come to the assignment desk and someone ladles on a story with a setup sheet and even driving directions."

The reporters find the story, shoot it, write it their way, and then they edit it

The anchors and reporters are mostly New Yorkers, which adds hometown authenticity to the channel, often lacking at the network stations.

themselves. Sagan says there is very strong editorial supervision of the assignment, the scripting and the final approval of the pieces "for editorial and legal reasons."

The anchors and reporters are mostly New Yorkers, which adds hometown authenticity to the channel, often lacking at the network-owned stations in town. The *NY1 News* team has a lot of journalistic experience on the streets of Flushing, Flatbush and Fordham.

Transit buff Paul Fleuranges rides the trains and buses daily from his home in Corona, Queens. Barbara Wood of Brooklyn, Adele Sammarco of Staten Island and Gary Anthony Ramsay of Queens know their home turf. There are specialists on politics, the environment, the arts, health, sports, and many other fields.

Anchors Brad Holbrook, Leslie Devlin, Lewis Dodley, Elizabeth Kaledin, Roma Torre and reporters Linda La Vergne, Andrew Kirtzman, and Chauncey Howell reflect the demographics, ethnic mix, attitudes, intellects and temperaments of New Yorkers.

NY1 News' anchors and reporters—intelligent articulate and well-trained—are not glamorous personalities. The reporters, who shoot their own stories, are seen on camera much less often on *NY1 News* than they would be on local broadcast stations, partly because they are shooting as well as producing and reporting.

There is a definite lack of on-camera personal involvement transmitted to viewers. It is the news, however, presented in a balanced and relatively unemotional way, which is the focus. This is both a virtue and a drawback. While you can always depend upon *NY1 News* for a clear and factual presentation, the neutral delivery and production requires viewers to listen—viewers who normally are bombarded with hypertensive and heavily promoted personalities and headlines.

Re-inventing The Wheel

Each of the cable news operations—national, regional, or local—has developed its own on-air format. "We're closest to Orange County cable's operating structure," says Sagan. *NY1 News* produces repeatable segments instead of shows. Each hour is a wheel resembling the familiar format of all-news radio, with "weather on the 1's"—one minute after the hour, eleven minutes after the hour; twenty-one minutes after the hour; and so on.

In each quarter-hour, there are headlines (sometimes called "New York One Minutes"), news segments and features. Sports appears at regular times (17 and 47 minutes after the hour). There are seven commercial "pods" of 14 minutes in each hour.

The crucial decision was made early on to program the channel by the story and not by the hour. Each element is programmed separately. Fresh units are added every quarter-hour. Most are repeated and some are revised, updated or dropped as breaking news, weather conditions and programming considerations dictate. In this manner, adjacent hours always appear to have a fresh order, impact and selection. Other news cable channels, however, program entire hours which are repeated, unless there are major developments.

Each story is introduced with a specially-prepared graphic, not only to highlight and headline it, but to allow programming changes without noticeable jumpouts or visible editing. *NY1 News*, with its Sony "video jukebox" and Apple Macintosh computers, changes the lineup of its stories from a desktop computer.

Another important policy is to downplay sex, crime and violence which are the lurid staples of local television newscasts. The Amy Fisher-Joey Buttafuoco story, for example, was the top of the news for

weeks on all New York channels. It received scant attention on *NY1 News* except as a New York-based media story.

"We don't do every spot crime story in the city," says Sagan. "The difference is when we do a serial rapist on the loose, it's not presented as a general interest story to attract viewers, but as a service to people in our specific area." So, while local broadcasters—especially during sweeps months of November, February and May—heavily promote lurid or titillating stories, features and interviews on their news and information programs, *NY1 News*' low-key presentation contrasts with the overplaying of crime news on the regular broadcast outlets.

A basic principle is to allow sufficient time to tell news stories in greater depth than other broadcasters. Reports at *NY1 News* are more likely to be two to three minutes in length, perhaps a minute longer than standard pieces on New York's 0-and-0's and on the indies.

"We tell the reporters to write and edit them for what they are worth," says Sagan.

Among the many "enterprise" stories which made news or had special impact in New York were the exclusive announcement of the appointment of a new police commissioner; a shocking investigative report on the accidental death at a local hospital of a radio station executive; a series on deceptive begging masquerading as assistance for a homeless organization; and reports on a Bronx school board election in which a previously-fired, non-resident member was running for re-election. And when New York Mets manager Jeff Torborg was fired in May, 1993, the only live coverage appeared on *NY1 News*.

Outside The Wheel

NY1 News has also stepped into areas usually the province of New York's public television station, WNET, its municipal broadcaster, WNYC, or the several public access services on cable. New York is more than a city for theater, arts, concerts and ballet. It is also a vast resource of community activism, with a rich diet of forums, hearings, debates, conferences and semi-public events such as memorial services. That potential treasury of material is just beginning to be tapped for television, and *NY1 News* has shown those first steps.

Memorial services for tennis star and AIDS victim Arthur Ashe and for jazz great Dizzy Gillespie were presented in their entirety. *NY1 News* aired hearings on the Civilian Complaint Review Board and the dispute with New York City Schools Chancellor

Joseph Fernandez over sex education. And there were also forums on issues ranging from the recruitment of black police officers to bridge, tunnel and transit problems.

NY1 News can most effectively fulfill its promise to tell

the news "in-depth" through its nightly issues programming. At 11:15 P.M., urban columnist Sam Roberts and editorial board member Joyce Purnick of the *New York Times* anchor a consistently on-target discussion, *New York Close-up*, a forty-five minute look at the issues of the day with other journalists and with personalities from city government. Excerpts are repackaged as news stories the following morning and afternoon.

Recently a second program, *The Road To City Hall*, was developed to "give viewers in-depth coverage of the

Another important policy is to downplay sex, crime and violence which are the lurid staples of local television newscasts.

issues and candidates from the start to the finish." *New York Newsday* called the series the "60 Minutes of New York."

Put To The Test

Two major events occurred in New York during the first few months of operation at *NY1 News*. The unique and devastating hurricane-like winter storm of December 11-13, 1992, and the World Trade Center bombing of February 26, 1993, put the staff, equipment and management of the channel to the test. ratings peaked at 6.0 on both of the afternoons of the storm and 6.2 on the afternoon of the terrorist blast. These ratings were achieved despite the fact that all of the local broadcasting stations and both CNN and *Headline News* were also providing extensive coverage. During the storm, 50% of all the homes available to *NY1 News* tuned in.

"We became known and identified much more quickly than we had expected," says Sagan. "Our ability to gain acceptance and awareness outstripped anything we had predicted."

Sagan also points to the three major pluses which Time Warner provides: "deep pockets", the immeasurable assistance given by promotion announcements inserted on 17 other cable networks, and "synergy" by which news stories are developed with the help of the editorial staffs of *Money*, *Fortune* and *Entertainment Weekly*.

Audience research in spring 1993 showed that after three months, 44% of cable homes had already sampled *NY1 News*. Three months later, a half-year after its debut, 62% had watched. And two-thirds of the samplers had become regular viewers, watching *NY1 News* "every day or two," according to Sagan.

Management declines to give sales figures and projections, but the chan-

nel's array of national and local advertisers contribute to an image of a solid economic foundation. British Airways and TWA, Shell Oil, several HMO's, New York Telephone, automotive sponsors such as Infiniti, Anheuser-Busch and Procter & Gamble, as well as local department stores like Galleries Lafayette give the impression of a New York news channel with the support of the advertising community.

Year Two And Beyond

Throughout the first half-year, the wheel has been modified slightly, with news segments being lengthened and lifestyle segments—but not stories—shortened. This development permits the insertion of more local stories in each half-hour. And the weather now includes a regular borough-by-borough breakdown of temperature, humidity and wind conditions.

But these are minor adjustments. Here are some major considerations which this regular viewer offers for Year Two of *NY1 News*:

(1) There is no New York-based regular program on the arts now on broadcast or cable. All of New York's boroughs, as well as Manhattan, have resources which have barely been acknowledged by television. *NY1 News*, with its staff and contemporary technology, could fill this need.

(2) Ethnic diversity as well as neighborhood event coverage would provide valuable program material, a significant addition to regular beat reporting.

(3) The most difficult elements to add to traditional news programming are the commentary or editorial features. Despite the high rate of failure and lack of support for commentaries and editorials in current New York broadcasting, *NY1 News* should experiment in that direction. This form invites controversy, excitement, and impact; it also can stimulate discussion and potential break-

throughs in the understanding and treatment of neighborhood, county and city problems.

(4) Education is broadly covered by *NY1 News'* Roma Torre, and the channel would benefit from added coverage of local schools.

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The urban complexities and diverse interests of New York are effectively reflected in *NY1 News*. But competition from so many other available news and information channels, and the repetitive nature of its wheel format, may prevent it from becoming a "must-see" resource for a majority of viewers.

As television changes in the nineties, and as the appetite for news programming increases, this channel is one example of the way in which successful formats of the past can be adapted to suit present technological innovation and serve as a model for the future development of electronic journalism. It's obvious that local and regional news—distributed by cable, fiber-optic networks, and satellites—will spread across the United States and throughout the world. It will take imaginative and creative journalists and managers to make these new alternatives popular and compelling news services. ■

Paul Noble, a former president of the New York Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, also served on the Academy's Board of Trustees. For thirty years at New York's Channel 5, WNEW-TV (Metromedia) and WNYW (Fox), he produced many Emmy-winning documentary and public service series.

“ QUOTE UNQUOTE ”

"Los Angeles, August 2—

"Television violence is contributing significantly to real life violence.

"Television violence is contributing minimally to real-life violence.

"Television violence should be viewed in the context of video-game violence, movie violence and rock lyric violence.

"Television violence is a no-lose cause for opportunistic politicians.

"All these views and many, many more, were offered here today as several hundred of the nation's top television executives met in a hotel ballroom here for an unusual seven-hour exercise in self-examination. If nothing else, the conference . . . proved just how potent the issue of television violence has become.

"Although no concrete resolutions came out of the day's many speeches and panel discussions a clear message did emerge: the television industry can either reduce violence in its programming or risk stricter government regulation."

—Elizabeth Kolbert,
The New York Times

THE FLOW OF MEMORY AND DESIRE: TELEVISION AND DENNIS POTTER

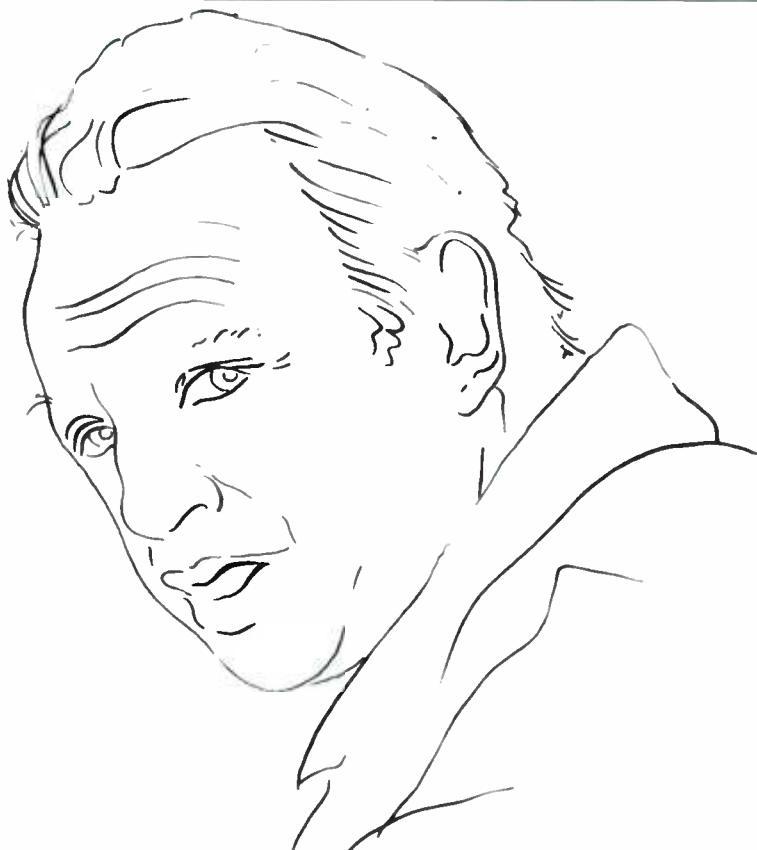
A critical analysis of Britain's prolific, experimental Dennis Potter, who grapples with this age's deep questions while meeting the needs of popular television.

BY RON SIMON

Perhaps more than anyone else, Dennis Potter has brought the twentieth century—its anxieties, its rootlessness, and its self-consciousness—to the twentieth century's predominant medium of expression, television. And similar to artists in other disciplines, Potter has fought off the anomie and intimations of the wasteland with an unrelenting search for the self in his art. If the outside world offers little comfort, (things falling apart for Yeats and only an abiding filth for Potter), then the knowledge and meaning unleashed by art promises some type of unity and redemption. We see throughout Potter's body of work the same type of experimentation and themctic

concerns that have been the hallmark of other arts. But as Potter has grappled with the contemporary angst, he has also resolutely tried to define what makes television unique, both in structure and content.

One of the major investigations in all modern art is how to depict multiple layers of awareness as a way of discovering the integrated self. It is not enough for the artist to render the world in luminous detail, but as Edmund Wilson noted in analyzing the contribution of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, it is to show us "the world as the characters perceive it, to find the unique vocabulary and rhythm which will represent the thoughts of each." From Virginia Woolf's treatment of consciousness in the novel to Alain Resnais's representation of memory in film, artists have wanted to approximate the inner flux of the mind, its thoughts and desires, as it interacts with the



concrete realities of daily life.

Beginning with the semiautobiographical *Nigel Barton* plays on through *The Singing Detective* and beyond, Potter has used the television narrative as a journey into the human psyche. Potter strives to encapsulate the full texture of a man's thought in a given moment (and Potter's explorations are truly limited to the male psyche). He uses the rhythms of television to explain where his characters have been and where they long to be. To communicate his vision of the sovereign human being, Potter searches for the medium's techniques – ingenious flashbacks, complex cross-cutting, time discontinuities, expressive music – to approximate this flow of memory and desire.

Potter has abolished the present tense in his dramas. His protagonists are forever trying to reconcile their past actions with their troubled and

unsettled present. Nigel Barton, ambivalent about his current status at Oxford, must come to grips with his working-class background; throughout *Stand Up, Nigel Barton*, he mentally relives his ragged school days in a mining community (with adult actors playing the children). In his six-part miniseries on Casanova, Potter wants his libertine to speculate on the consequences of religious and sexual freedom. He presents most of the amorous escapades as recollections of an imprisoned Casanova, languishing in a single cell for moral offenses. But memories for Casanova (and Potter) offer a release: "The only way to dissolve these walls around us is to use the magic of our minds. Magic, the magic of memory. Pictures. Sounds. Smells we once experienced. Pleasures we once felt. Shapes that haunt us still." Life for Potter is a negotiation with many eras of one's self.

Potter is passionately concerned with "the interiorizing process," a consideration of how people's fantasies and desires inform the landscape of their outer lives. Consequently, Potter has supplemented the realistic conventions of television drama with non-naturalistic techniques to reveal the psychology of his characters. When struggling salesman Arthur Parker first bursts into song, miming a rendition of "The Clouds Will Soon Roll By" by Elsie Carlisle, we see an eruption of a man's subconscious longings during his morning ritual. In that moment we see dual images of Arthur Parker: a man burdened with a failing business and marriage, yet still hoping that life can mirror the dreams of a song. We the viewers experience, as scholar Erich Auerbach has written on the spirit of modern literature, both the interior and exterior representation of the moment, "nothing less than the wealth of reality and depth of life in every moment to which we surrender ourselves without prejudice." Throughout Potter's drama there are always such epiphanic scenes that wed the outer facts of life to the inner process of mind.

Popular culture for Potter is a touchstone of real emotion, a signaling of aspirations, memories and regrets. Throughout his work he has tried to delineate the integration of mass culture into the private core of self-definition. For Potter old songs and movies are not nostalgia, but a vital way to define character: clips of old westerns signify an alternate world of heroics for Willy in *Where the Buffalo Roam*; the songs of crooner Al Bowlly create a romantic ideal that personal experience betrays for David Peters in *Moonlight on the Highway*; and forties music serves as an emotional continuum between Philip Marlow's two worlds, the real experiences of childhood and the imaginary adventures of his alter

ego, in *The Singing Detective*.

If Potter's characters do not have a private dialogue with their past or their inner desires, they are often visited by embodiments of their most hidden guilt and fears. In fact, Potter has crafted his own subgenre of the television play, the visitation drama, in which the domestic patterns of a complacent (but usually loveless) couple are overturned by the arrival of a mysterious stranger. One is never sure of the provenance of the unexpected guest: he may be a messenger from heaven (*Angels Are So Few*); an agent of the devil (*Brimstone and Treacle*); or a projection of shame (*Schmoedipus*). These confrontations with "the other" suggests a religious experience in what Potter views as a godless world. After the metaphysical encounter, the characters are driven to redefine their notions of faith and identity.

Increasingly, Dennis Potter is concerned with another nonnaturalistic mode, how the contours of imagination produce an alternate internal reality. So often Potter's creative characters, many of them writers, are in the throes of personal and professional despair. With the creative juices blocked, the characters are forced to summon up secret selves to help resolve their torments. Authors Martin in *Double Dare* and Philip Marlow in *The Singing Detective* use snatches of dialogue, momentary sights and sounds, as a catalyst for their dark, but ultimately revelatory musings. In the process, the audience is challenged to determine the meaning of these fictions within fictions. In the recent *Blackeyes* Potter brings reflexive games like those of Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino to television. The series is a battle, for control of the destiny and identity of a fictional character (the model Blackeyes), between a bombastic litterateur and his niece, from whom he has stolen the story about her modeling career. Potter in his directorial debut also serves as a

postmodern referee, providing sly commentary.

Each Potter drama is an inquiry into the human condition, a search for transcendence and redemption in a seemingly bleak world bereft of meaning. In Potter we see the same spiritual quest that permeates so much of the films of Ingmar Bergman. Potter's spiritual journey began with a humanistic interpretation of the Passion, *Son of Man*, in which his Christ wrestled with self-doubts about his divinity and mission. Potter's fictitious characters are equally tormented, plagued with an original sin of their own making. Their anguish is often pushed to extremes, a dramatic equivalent of the portraits of Francis Bacon. The yearning for Potter is "the radiance of the religious sense of the world once glimpsed as a child," a motif that permeates all of his work.

Philip Marlow in *The Singing Detective* summed up Dennis Potter's own take on life: "All clues. No solutions.

That's the way things are." For over twenty-five years Potter's search has been conducted within the shadowy realms of human consciousness, between past and present, conscious and unconscious, memory and desire. In this first complete retrospective of Potter's work, we see an artist grappling with the contradictions of the twentieth century while still remaining true to the entertainment imperatives of popular television. Dennis Potter's oeuvre is a testament to an individual vision and to the artistic possibilities of the medium. ■

The Flow of Memory and Desire: Television and Potter by Ron Simon was written for and originally appeared in The Museum of Television & Radio's exhibition catalogue, *The Television of Dennis Potter* (1992).

Ron Simon is the television curator of The Museum of Television & Radio.

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OUR VIOLENT CULTURE, B.T.— BEFORE TELEVISION

BY JOHN LEONARD

Did you spend Monday watching the talk show on TV violence, attended by 600 defensive industry executives, carried in part by CNN? A spectre haunted the International Ballroom of the Beverly Hilton, and it wasn't the Scarlet "V"—that preposterous "Parental advisory" agreed to by networks, syndicators and cable systems. It was the batwings of Senator Paul Simon's bow-tie, describing Congressional resolutions: "All or none of these may pass," said Simon, "but I can tell you that none of the sponsors of these initiatives is losing votes back home with these ideas."

Otherwise, while moderator Jeff Greenfield rose gallantly to the defense of *Roadrunner* and then wandered around like Phil Donahue, panels of opinionizers—a professor here, a producer there, a child

psychologist and a vice-president of program standards—couldn't agree on which was worse, "happy" violence that sugarcoats aggressive behavior, or "graphic" violence that at least suggests there are consequences.

They couldn't even agree on a definition of violence: Is it only bad if it hurts or kills? Nor were they sure what our children really see when they sit down to the tube while their parents aren't around, if they have parents. The Parental Advisory "V," anyway, doesn't apply to cartoon, or to afternoon soaps, or to news programs.

Since I watch everything on television, including the May sweeps, I am reluctant to come to the defense of an industry just as rife with bad-faith ratings-grabbing buck-grubbers as Congress itself. But we need perspective. Most primetime network entertainment isn't violent; it's sitcoms. Has any academic ever toted up the number of hugs vs. the number of punches?

Frankly, I prefer violence on *Homi-*

cide, *Picket Fences* and *Miss Marple*; in *Roots* or *Jewel in the Crown*. And however much we badmouth TV movies, more of them pertain to genuine social concerns like gun control, ecology, child abuse, battered women, rape, racism, homelessness and AIDS than anything produced by Hollywood or voted by Congress. Likewise most cable TV isn't violent either. For all the splatterflicks on premium cable there's a Disney Channel and a Family Channel; Discovery and Comedy and Nickelodeon; sports and courts and shopping.

You want some violence? I'll show you some. (Bosnia, Lebanon, Somalia montage) or how about the local nightly news? For "glamorized" violence, it was hard to beat the "smart" bombs and "dumb" Iraqis of the Gulf War. If we are interested in what traumatizes our children, how do you suppose they felt Monday afternoon when the violence summit was interrupted every half-hour for a CNN "Newsbreak" obsessively repeating the lost child stories of Jessica and Kimberly?

We were a violent culture before TV, from Wounded Knee to the lynching bee, and will be one after all our kids have disappeared, by video games, into pixels of cyberspace. Before TV, we blamed public schools for what went wrong with the Little People back when classrooms weren't overcrowded in buildings that didn't fall down, in neighborhoods that didn't resemble Beirut, and whose fault is that? *The A-Team*? We can't control guns, or drugs; and two million American women are assaulted by their male partners every year, usually in an alcoholic rage, and whose fault is that? *Miami Vice*? The gangs that menace our streets aren't home watching Cinemax and neither are the sociopaths who make bonfires in the parks of our homeless, of whom there are at least a million; a supply-side migratory tide of the deindustrialized and dispossessed, of angry beggars,

refugee children and catatonic nomads, none of them watching *Roadrunner*. So cut Medicare and complain about Amy Fisher movies.

Children who are loved and protected long enough to grow up to have homes and jobs and respect don't riot on the streets. It's a violent culture that measures everybody by his ability to produce wealth, and morally condemns anyone who fails to prosper, and now blames television for its incoherence. Why not recessive genes, angry gods, and lousy weather? Or the Mafia, the Zodiac, and the Protocols of Zion? Or probability theory, demonic possession, and sun-spots? We need a parental and Congressional advisory label: "S" for stupid. ■

This piece is adapted from a broadcast by John Leonard on the CBS *Sunday Morning* program with Charles Kuralt on August 8, 1993. John Leonard is their regular commentator on television, books, theater and film.

REVIEW & COMMENT

THREE BLIND MICE: HOW THE NETWORKS LOST THEIR WAY

By Ken Auletta
Random House: New York

PRIME TIME, PRIME MOVERS

By David Marc and Robert Thompson
Little Brown: New York

BY LAWRENCE LAURENT

Ken Auletta is one of those rare journalists who has managed to combine a career of daily journalism with writing articles for the best magazines, plus churning out a series of excellent books while handling a radio interview series. He is now covering the communications media for the new version of *The New Yorker*, along with working for other publications.

This is a classic, but only in the sense of Mark Twain's definition of a "classic" as "a book that everyone wants to have read, but no one wants to read." Still, it commanded enough attention in hard cover to warrant a recent release of a paperback version. Typical of the kind of complaints that greeted this book was a review by Peter Bart, the editor of *Variety*, who wrote that while "Readers and reviewers alike respect the book, but very few can boast they've actually finished it. 'A terrific book,' they will say, 'but I can't quite get through it.'"

Bart also described Auletta's daunting volume as "meticulously researched—but also quite impenetrable." Just in case anyone had missed Bart's point, he added: "Reading it feels like being stranded on a desert island with people whose company you find acutely tiresome."

I must confess at the outset that I read the entire book, often with teeth gritted, some times with eyes watering and frequently with hand-muscles aching from the long hours of supporting this heavy volume. One can admire the collection of "factoids," meaning the compilation of factual material that is—somehow—unrelated to the fascinating subject that I have been studying since the age of 12. What is missing is "context," the capacity of relating the facts to the lives, concerns and events in which those factoids occur.

One immediate concern is that Ken Auletta shows the reader none of the

excitement and romance that accompanied one of the great success stories of this century. Does everyone already know that the spread of television in the 1950s provides a rate of consumer acceptance of a new product that is without parallel in American economic history? Commercial television appeared, spread, and began dominating many facets of life in the United States at a rate that confounded the Federal Communications Commission and astonished the regulatory committees of the United States Congress. Within its first ten years of existence, the American consumers invested \$15 billion in receiving sets. That success story carried the three networks that concern Ken Auletta to high plateaus of commercial success, but anything that good in the United States is never going to be confined indefinitely to three companies.

Cable television began as an "antenna service" to carry the pictures and sounds where the electronic patterns couldn't reach. Within 20 years, some cable companies moved into the biggest cities and while attracting customers with programs from commercial broadcasters, soon decided that they could also profit from selling advertising within off-network re-runs, old motion pictures and, occasionally, a production done solely for the cable viewers. They closely followed the independent TV stations' programming, right down to running the same series twice a day and never missing an opportunity to lobby Congress with coverage of the Congress, itself.

What had been a mass medium began to fragment. The three commercial networks had enjoyed a share of the audience that ran as high as 92 percent, on average. That was chipped away with specialized programming offered by the non-network stations; then by cable's pay-

per-view inroads, the pricey "premium" channels; the basic service cable chains like USA, TBS, ESPN, LIFE and CNN; and the narrow-gauge, targeted program services that found small audiences for such things as comedy and courtroom, so-called super-stations that made local stations into national programmers with satellite-delivered sports and movies.

A fourth network, created by Rupert Murdoch, joined the party in the 1990s. The non-commercial stations had formed a loose alliance in the 1970s, giving the population a choice, immediately and over the air, of five daily national services. A dying form of business, Mr. Auletta, rarely experiences new competitors and even more are on the way with the perceived inter-active television forms.

So, the battle isn't over and those "Three Blind Mice" for all the whining and crape-hanging have neither lost their way nor decided to go into Chapter Eleven bankruptcy. The stocks of General Electric, which owns NBC, Capital Cities (the parent of ABC) and CBS continue to do quite well. Besides, if one believes testimony before Congress, the networks—as networks—were never all that profitable. A steady stream of Congressional witnesses assured Congress for about 30 years that their "real profits" came from the operation of the owned-and-operated stations, not from the networks. (Yes, this did require some remarkable footwork and some very creative accounting, but the "real profits" did come from station profits.)

For example, when Republican Senator John Bricker of Ohio investigated in the early 1950s, he found that NBC's New York flagship was making an 800 percent profit, annually, on its investment, while WCBS-TV New York was doing even better, a cool annual return of 1200 percent on investment. Network spokesmen, ever agile in matters, quickly countered that "return on investment is an unfair measure; look at the percentage of profits on

sales." Good point. But major corporations have been judged by profit on investment for over 200 years.

Still, a good reporter of broadcasting can successfully remind all of us of things that we already knew. For example, the networks were—and are—largely populated with employees that are inter-changeable. Auletta writes (Page 207): "In many respects, the three new owners are triplets. They shared investments—Loews, GE and Berkshire Hathaway's Warren Buffet were major investors in Macy's. They shared a pre-occupation with costs, a determination to transform the network cultures they inherited and to put "stars" in their place. They shared a value system. 'They're all alike,' remarked Billy Tisch admiringly."

Thus, did the new owners discover what economists had known for centuries—that a major problem with oligopolic competition is that the few competitors identify more closely with each other than with expansion, dominance or pursuit of higher quality; that's one of several reasons that free enterprise, requiring "unlimited access to the marketplace" is the preferred American model, if only in textbooks and in patriotic speeches by highly subsidized American business leaders.

Auletta gets closer to the truth, however, when he turns to a polished, seasoned network executive, the very wise David Adams, former NBC Vice Chairman, who once wrote that a network is like "a flywheel consisting of many parts it does not control ... It is a business that requires the reactions and sensitivities that grow from long experience in the field, and an outsider can be effective only after a period of high-level apprenticeship, learning the nuances of a very singular business.

In summary, the "Three Blind Mice" may have lost their tails to a carving knife, but they are very much alive with a longevity expectancy that surpasses you, me, or Ken Auletta.

• • •

Another volume that promises much is called *Prime Time, Prime Movers* by David Marc and Robert Thompson.

Marc teaches at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California. Robert J. Thompson teaches at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication, Syracuse University. These two gentlemen take one of the most fascinating subjects in the universe, the mostly men, and a few women, who create prime time television entertainment and provide the reader with some of the dullest material about television recently published.

One approaches this book happily, expecting to learn just what makes a successful creator of programming, but finds, however, that they mostly adapt successful formula into something slightly different. The authors, for all their credentials, seem not to understand that only three major programming breakthroughs mark major changes in television's 40-plus years of national existence.

The first is the properly honored *I Love Lucy*, which propelled the ingredients of radio situation comedy into a television staple. The second came with *Laugh-In* in the 1960s when "bench editing" made possible the split-second cutting of video tape with a precision that had previously been possible only with film. The third major change came with *All in the Family*, which wiped out the "rules" of television entertainment holding that TV performers were "guests" in the American home and had damn well better behave like guests. That notion ended when Archie Bunker flushed his toilet and began grousing about "the coloreds, the Hebes and the Spics." We entered a new phase of sitcom, known as "hostility" and two decades later we haven't gotten out of the hostility mode.

Every network programming executive knows that the leading TV

network is the one with the most popular situation comedies. The formula has thousands of variations and new ones are still being sought. How many children, who talk like 40-year-olds, can be put into a sitcom? How far over the invisible line will FOX go with such shows as *Married ... With Children* and the sexual proclivities of students in *Beverly Hills*? Sitcoms have given us "talking" babies, talking horses, talking dogs and, in the scripts by Larry Gelbart and Gene Reynolds, talking human beings with compassion, gentleness, ribaldry and understanding.

So much honest compilation went into *Prime Time, Prime Movers* that this book is quite useful as a kind of entertainment history. One also may take a certain delight in reviewing the events of television history. The least satisfying feature of the book, however, is that the material on the program creators reads like network press releases. I know all too well that most producers of TV programs are essentially salesmen, liable to begin sentences with "Can I be honest with you on this?" They are also capable of creating their own mythology and spreading the myths with joy.

Producers should not be blamed for this; that is a way of life in film and television. But writers can be faulted for accepting such nonsense about what is advertised on the cover of this volume as covering "From *I Love Lucy* to *L.A. Law*—America's Greatest TV Shows and the People Who Created Them." Anyway, *Prime Time, Prime Movers* should provide an eager reader with some of the reasons that these are the persons who are successful in providing prime time entertainment. ■

Lawrence Laurent is the Television Critic Emeritus of *The Washington Post*. He currently teaches "Critical Writing and Reviewing" at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

THE EMMYS: STAR WARS, SHOWDOWNS, AND THE SUPREME TEST OF TV'S BEST

By Thomas O'Neil
Penguin Books: New York

BY TOM MASCARO

Fipping through the pages of *The Emmys: Star Wars, Showdowns, and the Supreme Test of TV's Best* is a fun romp through television's past. Laced with some engaging photographs and a season-by-season list of winners, this is any Emmy trivia lovers dream book.

Author Thomas O'Neil is a New York freelancer who usually writes for publications like *Architectural Digest*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Travel & Leisure*. A self-described "shameless TV junkie and admitted awards fanatic," O'Neil decided to put his avocation to good use. He compiled a record of the medium's best with the hope that the book "will guide TV programmers in filling up those dozens of empty cable channels with more of TV's finest hours."

TV buffs with a proclivity for nostalgia are sure to enjoy O'Neil's *People*-magazine style recap of every Emmy Awards program from 1948 through the 1990-91 season. O'Neil culled day-after clippings of the broadcast post-mortems and resurrected some of the excitement of the shows and the panache of their participants.

After being nominated nine times, for instance, Ted Danson finally scored for Outstanding Lead Actor of the long-running hit series *Cheers* for

the 1989-90 season. O'Neil writes that Emmy-winning co-star, Kirstie Allie, had taunted Danson during the show by comparing his success with Mr. Emmy to the "misfortune of a guy who takes a 'tease' to the drive-in movie." The victorious Danson acknowledged the crowd's enthusiastic ovation: "This is exactly what happened to me at the drive-in when I first got lucky. They all stood up and applauded."

Those who saw it firsthand would certainly recall a more poignant moment from the Emmy Awards program in 1969, when presenter Coretta Scott King was a picture of grace under pressure: "No matter how you measure it, 1968 was a most extraordinary year ... the shock and tragedy of two assassinations, the violence of riots and demonstrations, the first rays of hope for peace, and the first orbit of the moon."

And then, alluding to the medium her slain husband had mastered instinctively, she said, "What made it still more extraordinary for the American people was the fact they virtually participated in every event by virtue of television news."

TV's Most Outstanding Personality for the 1950 season was the devilish Groucho Marx, who, recalls O'Neil, scooped up the presenter and "carried her off the stage, leaving his golden statuette behind him of the table."

Comedian Phil Silvers and his show *You'll Never Get Rich* had a big night on St. Patrick's Day in 1956. Silvers reportedly told *TV Guide*, "Having an Emmy Award is like having a gold searchlight in a sea of confusion, reminding you to rehearse, rehearse, rehearse!"

Years later, Emmy's "Golden Girl" would shine her beacon on another troop of actors who were nearly lost in the sea of prime time.

During the 1980-81 season, the fledgling *Hill Street Blues* was mired in the ratings basement—87th among the 96 prime-time series on the air. But on a September night in 1981, in the

Pasadena Civic Auditorium, the cast and crew collared a record twenty-one nominations and won nearly every major category. O'Neil recalls that Daniel Travanti whooped, Michael Conrad roared "Wow!," and Barbara Babcock wept, a range of emotions duplicated in millions of homes across America on Thursday nights thereafter.

Some of the snapshots in *The Emmys* will tug at heart strings, such as the one of Robert and John Kennedy with Lyndon Johnson from *The Making of the President 1960*, which won Program of the Year for the 1963-64 season; or of James Caan and Billy Dee Williams, who teamed up in the story of Brian Piccolo and Gale Sayers, *Brian's Song*, which won Outstanding Drama Program of the 1971-72 season; and best actress Meryl Streep shown in the grasp of a Nazi soldier in *Holocaust*, which won eight awards for the 1977-78 season.

But there's also a showcase of the happy faces of celebrated entertainers: David Letterman enjoying a victory stogie; *Taxi's* adorable Carol Kane posing with Alan "Hawkeye" Alda; Louis Gossett, Jr., smooching *Roots* co-star Olivia Cole; The Monkees shown backstage with The Schnoz himself, Jimmy Durante; Rob, Laura, Buddy, and Sally, and Lucy and Desi.

Another nice feature of *The Emmys* is the inclusion of all of the nominees for each award category. A little more care by the typesetter when arranging these columns—especially in the records for later years, which are quite lengthy—would have made the tables more readable. Nevertheless, this is a far better representation of how the Emmys acknowledge the richest of televisions talent and programming than simply documenting the winners.

Embedded in these ledgers of Emmy finalists are shows that might entice a curious researcher or TV writer to reexamine a forgotten show. For instance, one of the nonwinners of the

1958-59 season was the *Playhouse 90* story *A Town Has Turned to Dust*, which racked up nominations for three television gems: Rob Steiger for Best Single Performance by an Actor, John Frankenheimer for Best Direction of a Single Dramatic Program, and for Best Writing of a Single Dramatic Program, Rod Serling.

Feature writers who are searching for context or a quick take on upcoming awards are likely to make good use of O'Neils summations, like this one: "Don Knotts would go on to win five of them throughout his career for his portrayal of Deputy Sheriff Barney Fife on *The Andy Griffith Show* (compared to none for Griffith, an irony mirrored by the fates of Art Carney and Jackie Gleason in earlier years.)"

Readers interested in the history of the industry will especially appreciate O'Neil's reporting on the evolution of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences formed in 1946 by Syd Cassyd. With Edgar Bergen as president, explains O'Neil, the Academy sought to "promote the cultural, educational, and research aims of television."

The first Emmys—the name was derived from the nickname of the early image orthicon tube, which was called an "immy"—were given out in 1949. But only shows produced in Los Angeles were eligible.

In 1955, Ed Sullivan in New York City, together with the organizing Committee of 100, founded the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. O'Neil provides his version of the issues which eventually contributed to the evolution of the two Academies, some twenty years later. 1955 was also the year the annual awards ceremony aired on national television for the first time.

The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, based on 17 chapters, representing 97% of American local television, oversees national awards in daytime, sports, news and

documentaries and international, plus local Emmys across the country.

The Hollywood-based Academy of Television Arts and Sciences handles the prime time awards.

Unfortunately for the author, and his readers, something must have happened to the index between original pagination and printing. Many of the page-number listings are askew, and some of the index items are missing.

Despite minor flaws, however, *The Emmys* does what its author sets out to do, which is to offer a useful light-hearted reminiscence about television's greatest hits, along with some enlightening history. ■

Tom Mascaro has taught university courses on radio and TV and is currently researching news and entertainment television of the 1980s. His writing has appeared in the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* and *Electronic Media*.

WRITING SCRIPTS FOR TELEVISION, RADIO, AND FILM: THIRD EDITION

By Edgar E. Willis and Camille
D'Arienzo

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York

BY CHRIS CAMPBELL

Anyone fortunate enough to have heard Camille D'Arienzo's religious commentary on New York's WINS radio knows that she has mastered the art of writing for the ear. Her insightful observations of current events are related in a crisp, succinct language that brings to mind the most gifted of broadcast writers—Morrow, Cronkite, Severeid.

But D'Arienzo's talent does not end with her own writing. She also has a knack for spotting effective broadcast writing elsewhere, a talent which is reflected in the text she co-authored with Edgar E. Willis.

The latest edition of their popular textbook has been substantially revised to include samples of outstanding recent script-writing; among the many are a Spike Lee spot for Nike, a Bill Geist feature for CBS *Sunday Morning* and a scene from the highly acclaimed series *Law and Order*. The book also provides analyses of the latest trends in broadcasting—from MTV and music videos to Rush Limbaugh and the call-in radio show phenomenon—and how those trends have affected opportunities for writers.

As a text for college broadcast writing courses, the book is second to none. It provides intelligent and realistic guidance for prospective writers as well as excellent script and storyboard samples which demonstrate

how to do what broadcast writers do.

The book is more than just a good textbook—it is a good book. It includes engrossing behind-the-scenes historical and anecdotal accounts of the broadcast and film production processes. For the revised edition, the authors interviewed a number of writers, producers and executives whose thoughts on script-writing give the book an angle which makes it great reading for anyone with an interest in the business.

A chapter on writing commercials and public service announcements, for instance, discusses the odd success of commercials of disparate types, including the Miller Lite "tastes great/less filling" campaign, the Energizer bunny commercials (we see a storyboard for one of these) and even Charmin's much-loathed "Mr. Whipple."

A chapter on interview, talk and call-in shows includes a discussion of the diverse interviewing styles of Mike Wallace, Bill Moyers, Barbara Walters and Phil Donahue, and how the writers and producers for these stars go about preparing those interviews. The chapter also includes a fascinating analysis of an interview Jane Pauley conducted with Oprah Winfrey for Pauley's *Real Life*. A transcript of the interview is included, but we also get an insightful look at how the show's writers prepared the script.

Other chapters in the first half of the book—which deals with "nondramatic" material—cover documentary, feature, magazine and reality programs; educational and corporate programming; editorials and commentaries; news; sports and special events; and music, variety and game shows. Each of those chapters includes samples of outstanding writing, among them a *60 Minutes* report on the American prison system, an hilarious edition of *The Osgood File* and an Andrea Joyce feature on Jimmy Connors.

The second half covers dramatic

material. The authors again enlist the advice of seasoned writers in describing techniques for developing plots, characters, themes and dialogue. Again we see outstanding script samples to illustrate those techniques: excerpts from episodes of *Law and Order*, *MacGyver* and *Lou Grant* among them. This section also includes chapters on creating comedy material and programs for children.

This book is superior to other broadcast writing texts, not only in the insight it provides into the writing process, but also in its inclusion of current script samples. Students have actually seen and heard broadcasts of much of the material, so it is easier for them to visualize the conversion of a script into its final production. The samples which are included are reproduced in proper script and storyboard formats which students can follow in writing their own.

For anyone—novice or seasoned veteran—who is interested in the art of script-writing, this is an especially valuable book because it includes the wisdom of experienced professionals and provides samples of America's best script-writing.

D'Arienzo and Willis—drawing on their considerable backgrounds as writers and teachers—also incorporate references to important novelists and dramatists, reminding us that the traditional techniques of storytelling are essential to the contemporary script-writer. As they advise in the book's preface, "This is not just a book about writing for television, radio and film. It is a book about writing in general." ■

Chris Campbell is an instructor in mass communications at Xavier University in New Orleans.

PLAYBACK

"As I read of the plans for Public television in 1969 and beyond, I fear a repetition of failure to be crystal clear on roles, mandates, goals and priorities. Golden dreams will not become reality because convention speeches say they will. Television producers know that a single broadcaster's outlines must be well defined before a single foot of film is turned. That rule certainly applies to a new network's plans."

—Av Westin
Television Quarterly
Spring 1969
Vol. VIII No. 2

THE PAPER

TRAIL

From time to time, TVQ plans to focus on a recently published paperback edition of an important book whose original publication in hardcover was not reviewed here. We start off with a book which already is on its way to becoming a classic.



NOW THE NEWS: The Story of Broadcast Journalism

By Edward Bliss, Jr.
Columbia University Press: New York

This is a book that fills a real need. As the author points out, he was motivated to write this story because "...every source to which I turned when teaching broadcast journalism treated the subject piecemeal."

However, this is not a textbook, although it can be an excellent classroom tool. His scholarship is not pedantic or superficial, and his lively

narrative is enriched because it is the mature work of a distinguished professional whose own career documents this history.

Before turning to teaching, Bliss worked many years for CBS News at its best, as a reporter, writer and producer. He might be called one of "Ed's Boys," since he wrote and produced for Murrow; as a newsroom and studio working guy, he never achieved the celebrity of an on-the-air personality.

Perhaps it's one of the reasons this is such solid history; it's not self-serving or gossipy like many of the I-was-there, Now-it-can-be-told books by corporate survivors gushing with inside stuff about boardroom and newsroom intrigues. Bliss sets out to write a history of the broadcast news medium—and business—that avoids the fragmentary treatment he abhors, and instead covers the entire panorama from the earliest days of

"wireless" news, to the emergence of network radio news, through its great pre-World War II years and exciting war reportage, to the formative years of television journalism; and later also explores cable, and the new high tech marvels.

There is plenty in this book to interest the general reader, as well as the student and the professional. In fact, some of the junior generation of TV journalists who think that everything began with *them* might profit by learning how it all started, long before tabloids, talkshows, and minicams and mergers.

How far we've traveled is described in passages like this: "Early television news was a hybrid obtained by the cross breeding of radio and film. If early television had a newsreel look, it was understandable. Most of the film came from newsreel companies. NBC bought 35mm footage from Fox-Movietone. Telenews, an arm of Hearst-MGM News of the Day sold 16mm film to CBS...live reports were rare."

Bliss takes us on the remarkable electronic path that led from John Cameron Swayze and Doug Edwards, to Huntley/Brinkley and Walter Cronkite, John Chancellor, MacNeil/Lehrer to Peter Jennings, Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, and all the rest. There's also vivid retelling of television's unforgettable on-the-scene coverage of the Civil Rights struggle, the JFK assassination and its sequel, the Moon landing and all that came later; down to live reporting on three wars, the presidential campaigns and elections and to the New Age in which Bliss points out "computers and satellites broke the boundaries."

Key figures whose enterprise and leadership skills played such an important role in the development of radio and television news are given credit they deserve—among them Paul White, Abe Schechter, Bob Kintner, Roone Arledge, Julian Goodman, Dick Salant, Edward Klauber, William

R. McAndrew, Sig Mickelson and Pat Weaver.

In this New Age, which is for some the era of the bottom line obsession, *Now The News* should be recommended reading for the new breed of managers, news directors and assorted corporate executives to remind them that television journalism does have a history of achievement. Its best people, on the air and off, now and in the past, are dedicated to their craft, to the medium—and to serving the public. There is Life after Sweeps. ■

—Richard Pack

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 April 28-30 8PM

Move over, Tim—it's Patricia's show, too, as ratings soar for a 'Home Improved'

Patricia Richardson
Tim Allen
Home Improvement

TV GUIDE THE TREK CONTINUES
PATRICK STEWART
 PICARD LETS HIS HAIR DOWN
 July 30-Aug. 6 8PM

MARILYN AND RFK
 THE TV-MOVIE MATH

A SNEAK PEEK AT TIM ALLEN'S 'INVISIBLE' NEIGHBOR

TV GUIDE Supermodels take on TV!
 Are They More Than Pretty Faces?
 June 26-July 2 8PM

Bill got's it! Will...
 Nilla's got a...
 So we gave...
 Large...
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 re...

Christi Brinkley, *Laraine Hilton*, *Joan Collins*, *Barbara Johnson* & TV's upcoming Supermodel...

TV GUIDE KATIE COURIC TODAY
 Feb. 6-12 8PM

"If I hear 'berky' one more time, I'll..."

America's aid sister speaks out on the show, her ambitions, and why she loves to slug Bryant

TV's Top 20 Report Card
 PLUS
Andy Griffith
Gleenn Close
Reba McEntire

TV GUIDE CLOSING TIME AT CHEERS
 Adding it all up...
 May 15-21 8PM

ON THE SET WITH THE CAST:
 • Who Cried
 • Who Laughed
 • Who Mugged
 • Who Didn't

TV GUIDE Ros, Pego's Latest—A TV Show with Ballot
 March 20-26 8PM

James Garner Tall: About *Married... With Children*, *Hillbilly*, and the *Barbarians*

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