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—DAN RATHER

THE NEWS-CASTERS

THE NEWS BUSINESS AS SHOW BUSINESS

BY PULITZER PRIZE WINNER

RON POWERS

STARRING

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BARBARA WALTERS • DAN RATHER
JOHN CHANCELLOR • MIKE WALLACE
AND OTHERS

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THE NEWSCASTERS

The News Business as Show Business

Revised Edition

RON POWERS

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A LEISURE BOOK

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This book is for my father and mother,
Paul and Elvadine Powers

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1

Faces and Places

The biggest heist of the 1970s never made it on the five o'clock news.

The biggest heist of the 1970s *was* the five o'clock news.

The salesmen took it. They took it away from the journalists, slowly, patiently, gradually, and with such finesse that nobody noticed until it was too late.

By the 1970s, an extravagant proportion of television news—local news in particular—answered less to the description of "journalism" than to that of "show business." This transformation, carried out by sales-oriented station managers in an unbounded quest for profits, bore the profoundest implications in the way Americans were to receive information and perceive political choices. Many local newscasts ceased serving the public (at best, they served the public only incidentally) and bequeathed their primary allegiance to the advertisers. No longer did a station manager judge a news program on the basis of how diligently it informed citizens of economic events and social developments, or acted as a watchdog on government. The fashionable criterion for judging the sleek, antiseptic news "package" became the size of the audience it could attract to view the main event—the commercial. Local television news, in fact, scarcely bothered to maintain the fiction of addressing "citizens" at all; it ingratiated itself instead to members of some vague society called "the 18-to-49 age group"—the purchasing bloc of

Americans most coveted by sponsors. John Coleman and Joel Daly in Chicago; Chuck Scarborough, Ernie Anastos and John Tesh in New York; Brent Musberger in Los Angeles; the pseudonymous "Jay Scott" in Boston—these were the new symbols of the new, processed, cybernetic news. Anchormen, weathermen, and reporters all, each represented a radical discontinuity with journalistic tradition. Each was a curious hybrid of personal magnetism, looks, showmanship and —in some cases—newsman. Each, to the degree that he was successful, was a bigger audience "draw" than the news he reported or read. Each had been selected in the first place according to a standard unique to video journalism: his presumed ability to personify a shared viewer fantasy, a collective need.

But the usurpation of television news reached a far deeper level than that of anchormen's personalities. It attained the status of a covert and insidious reversal of the very journalistic process itself. Instead of striving to impart information *to* the viewers, the salesmen-managers of television stations were engaged in a tacit conspiracy to extract information *from* the viewers—information that would serve the managers in their efforts to maximize audience size and thereby establish their respective newscasts as the top-dollar advertising draw in the market.

What did people *want* (not need, but *want*) under the rubric of "news"? What pleased them most? Amused them? Gratified them, charmed them, or provided them with the sort of vicarious cheap thrills that kept them mesmerized during prime-time entertainment? What colors did they like? What faces, voices? Conversely, what did viewers *not* want to know? What sort of news displeased them, threatened them, bored them, impelled them to switch *away* from a disturbing confrontation with harsh reality and into the lulling glades of television torpor?

The managers, the salesmen, would find out. There were ways. New ways. New Chaldeans had arrived in

the global village. The managers sought them out. Diffidently, at first—speculatively—then with a gathering whoop of abandon as their innate superstitions took hold, the managers flocked like leisure-suited catechumens to that most orphic and esoteric witch doctor of the corporate tribe, the consultant. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, unnatural television adores a panacea. The consultant beckoned with a jeweled finger; he invoked the sweet, mysterious patois of behaviorist psychology and then preached the ringing, pure gospel of profit swift and certain. Done, said the managers. They had their astrologer, and his sign was the dollar. Armed with questionnaires, with the rudiments of Gestalt—and, in some cases, with electrodes—the consultant set about to spy on the viewing audiences for the managers, to pry into behavior patterns, to pilfer the unconscious if necessary; but above all, to find out which stimuli (faces, voices, colors, names, jokes, bedtime stories, charades, or, God help us, *ideas*) would serve as the best bait to lure the viewer before the Client's Channel.

It was a uniquely American dance, this torrid tribal twirl between manager and consultant. But in this case, it was something more. When market research (the consultant's divining rod) invaded the TV newsroom, it threatened to change the course, if not the very definition, of American journalism.

For it was an inescapable fact of advertising competition that as television news went, so went the newspapers. For the last decade, American dailies had weakened under television's drain of the advertising dollar. The demise of more than one newspaper (the Boston *Herald-Traveler*, the Chicago *Daily News* and *Chicago Today*, the short-lived New York *Trib*) was attributed in large part to TV's stranglehold on revenues.

If American newspapers (which already had been tending toward market research for years) were to survive the threat of annihilation, they would survive partly by emulating television news. Hence the lemming-like

trend to "People" features in newspapers in the mid-seventies; "People" was (as opposed to *were*) discovered by the consultant to be a major growth area for TV audiences, and soon no station manager or city editor could open his mouth without "Pee-pull" escaping it like a paternoster.

The station managers soon devised a high-sounding justification for their burglary of the viewers' minds. They said they were giving the Pee-pull What They Want.

People did not *want* complicated, disturbing newscasts any more, the managers told themselves and each other. The Vietnam War was over. Watergate was over. People were "sick" of unpleasant news. The new "mood of the country," they discovered to their delight, was no longer "issue-oriented" but "People-oriented." The very term "Pee-pull," to denote a news genre, became oracular; it was spoken in hushed italics; it bore the tintinnabulation of cash-register bells.

People in the News. Faces and Places. Personalities. These became the new staples of the local newscast, with the items themselves being delivered by People with beautiful Faces in wondrous Places (the futuristic, color-coordinated new sets), People who were themselves Personalities, People who were members of News Teams, who wore identical tailored blazers (or smart designer blouses and scarves); or, in some cases, People who dressed conspicuously apart from the rest of the Team and thus were certified as Personalities apart. People who grinned wryly at one another; who traded banter about their personal lives (golf games) at the commercial break; who, by their very dress and manner and sense of fulsome consumer-well-being, spoke a new national language of comfort and assurance, of a peace that passeth for understanding.

To be sure, social and governmental stories were still being reported on the local newscasts. In fact, few if any of the traditional *categories* of news had been

eliminated. What had changed was the degree of emphasis, the amount of thoroughness, the method of presentation within those categories. The television crews were unfailingly present at political press conferences, at ceremonial appearances, at political party dinners, presentations, dedications, and other official events. Sometimes, during one of these soirees, an enterprising reporter might work in a "tough" question: "Mr. Mayor, what *about* that proposed Crosstown Expressway?"

And certainly, the cybernetic newscasts carried summaries of the *results* of official government action: new taxes, new budgets, new ordinances, new measures to control crime, stop drugs, create jobs.

What was emphasized in all this was the *personality* of the newsmaker—his style, his degree of histrionics before the camera, his performance as a figure in opposition to another personality.

What was lacking was a sense of the abstractions of government, of the way government impinged on the private life in the absence of the galvanic personality—a sense of forces and dynamics in city life.

Local television news did not fall victim to the salesmen-managers overnight, of course. TV news's vulnerability to ratings considerations is endemic to a medium designed primarily to move goods. The "Camel News Caravan" designation that graced John Cameron Swayze's reports in the early days is testament to that truth.

The tyranny of advertiser interests escalated in the late sixties largely because of TV news's booming popularity; in that sense, the TV newscast was a victim of its own success. The suddenly "visual" nature of the news —footage from the Vietnam War, student demonstrations, ghetto riots, the Democratic National Convention in Chicago—all converged to attract nightly viewers in unprecedented numbers. This sea-change in audience size took the TV newscast out of the category of something that *had* to be done (to please the Federal

Communications Commission) and into the heady realm of profitable programming. Maximized profits were an inevitable next step in an industry that recognizes no badge of achievement *except* maximized profits. Newscasts grew from 15 minutes in the old days, to half-hours in the early sixties, to hour blocs in the late sixties, to the sophisticated two-hour national and local packages on many network-owned stations today. Along with that growth in air time came a growth in audience-building expertise.

Station managers today are fond of pointing to the very bulk of the contemporary newscast as evidence that the station is not in the news game just for the money. They are correct in arguing that a local newscast is an expensive operation, much more so than plugging into a network game show. (Overlooked in this argument is the fact that the local station had *better* do news, or risk having its license successfully challenged.)

And it cannot be denied that superior news operations exist in television. Some station managers are enlightened; they are concerned about the news and are willing to stake their reputations on integrity and thoroughness as well as profits. Electronic journalism is by no means the exclusive province of the second-rate journalist, the empty-minded pretty face. The profession is attracting some of the ablest young reportorial talents in the country.

Those truths, however, can and do exist alongside the unavoidable evidence that TV journalism in this country —local TV journalism, in particular—is drifting into the sphere of entertainment. Its propellant is cybernetics, the comparative study of the human nervous system and the human brain, toward the end of determining what gratifies, as opposed to what is useful or necessary.

American television has entered the era of cybernetic news.

2

Walter To Roone—Over!

Exit Uncle Walter. Enter Captain Success.

In those six words are contained the past and the future of network television news.

"Uncle Walter" is Walter Cronkite, the mythical President of the United States of Television and CBS's living embodiment of stately broadcast journalism for more than 25 years.

"Captain Success"* is Roone Arledge, creator of the Instant Replay and Humble Howard for ABC Sports, and subsequently the alchemist who propelled ABC News into a high-tech era unimagined even a few short years ago.

It was Uncle Walter who instilled TV news with its early respectability; for whom the term "anchorman" was invented; who in 1963 inaugurated the modern network newscast; those late-60s criticisms of U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam turned a hawkish President's thoughts toward a negotiated settlement; who ratified America's Apollo mission to the moon with his blast-off yelp of "Oh boy!" Cronkite's stature as a para-statesman surfaced again on November 14, 1977, when he arranged a dramatic satellite interview with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, thus orchestrating the first dialogue between the two leaders at a timely juncture in the Middle Eastern crisis.

More than any other figure since Edward R. Murrow, Cronkite has defined and helped to safeguard TV

* Credit for the apt nickname belongs to the perceptive media critic and author Edwin Diamond.

news's ideals of objectivity, relevance and independence from ideological pressures both political and commercial. When TV news has failed these ideals, most notably during the Nixon era of press intimidation, Cronkite has been the first from within the ranks to proclaim the fact.

Such metaphysical broodings, however, do not exactly fit the style of the emerging icon in network news. . .the open-collared, bush-jacketed, aviator-spectacled push-button genius known as Captain Success.

It was Roone Arledge who dared to grasp the Cronkitean respectability of network news and interfuse it with the pragmatic, phenomena-oriented values of the 1980s. Arledge created the first network newscast in which the real "anchorman," the true star, is the technology itself. ABC's "World News Tonight" is in fact a rapid deployment force built around transatlantic satellites, helicopters, high-mobility minicams, regional hook-ins, and dazzling on-screen effects created by hip computers with names like Chyron and Quantel.

With Arledge at the controls, ABC News has become a true pop-cultural artifact. For better or for worse, it ranges easily up and down a scale of news categories that are as diverse from one another as, say, *The New Republic* is from *People*.

On one evening, "World News Tonight" may present a sophisticated report on interest rates as they affect the credit-card industry, with the Quantel flashing up visual charts and spelling out the correspondents' key phrases for emphasis. On another, this same newscast might be off to the races with a glitzy "examination" of the Elvis Presley cult, or a lingering profile of a celebrity killer. One never knows.

In 1979, Arledge engineered his news department into the forefront of a controversy over what has come to be called "television diplomacy." No network devoted as much time or money to the on-the-spot coverage of the hostage crisis in Teheran. And there are observers who

believe that ABC's reports, anchored by Frank Reynolds, went far to provide the American public with the greatest crash course in the sociology of an unknown culture that a mass medium had ever undertaken: in addition to late-breaking reports, ABC correspondents provided history lessons complete with maps, charts, and visual representations of Islamic terms.

This saturation coverage ("America Held Hostage" was Arledge's characteristically swashbuckling title) cost ABC more than $100,000 a week in its first three months. Still it contributed to an over-all media performance that left deep misgivings in the minds of several experts in international affairs. Writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the academician Edward W. Said charged that *all* of the mainstream of U.S. media—of which ABC News was a part—oversimplified the issue to the point where Islam was "always, without exception, represented as militant, dangerous, anti-American," and where "the iconography of Islam is uniformly the same: oil suppliers, terrorists, mobs."

Said added this ominous note, which contains grave implications for the role of network television coverage in delicate diplomatic crises:

"It is not an exaggeration to say that the feeling of 'national impotence'. . .resulted from the temporary eclipse of one kind of American power by another—the military's to the media's. After the occupation of the embassy, the military found itself stymied by a force which seemed outside the range of direct American power.

"This same force, however, remained vulnerable to the limits placed on it by the rich symbolizing powers of the American media."

Whatever the interpretation, it is clear that Captain Success's era of network TV news will be quite different from the era of Uncle Walter.

The intersection of these two figures defines the current climate of transition in the medium that informs a combined audience of nearly 60 million Americans

each night. It is a transition so sudden and so profound that it might be compared to the replacement of an existing civilization norm with a newer, more technologically sophisticated one.

In the last half of the 1970s alone, network news has shed so many of its traditional standards of form, style, and content that many media critics have foreseen its ultimate merging with TV entertainment. In February 1980, *Time* Magazine proclaimed: "News is suddenly the hot act on TV. Information programs are beginning to rival sit-coms, shoot-'em-ups, and other fictive fare for viewers and advertising dollars."

The major upheavals in network news's Great Awakening are by now a familiar litany in pop-cultural folklore:

—Spring, 1976. ABC, the weakest network in news programming, stuns the broadcast industry by luring superstar Barbara Walters away from NBC and the "Today" show for a $5-million, 5-year contract to co-anchor its nightly newscast with Harry Reasoner. Columnists, cartoonists and headline-writers bemoan the intrusion of "show business" into the network news.

—May 2, 1977. Show business intrudes into the network news. ABC's then-president, Fred Silverman, in an audacious shattering of unwritten law, installs Arledge, a career sports programmer, as president of ABC News. Arledge retains his presidency of ABC Sports, thus erasing the venerable line between news and other programming. Arledge dismantles the Walters-Reasoner team and creates the first decentralized anchor desk since NBC's "Huntley-Brinkley" team made its debut in 1952, covering the Democratic convention: anchormen in London, New York, Washington and Chicago.

—December, 1976. CBS, still the dominant name in network news, generates a journalistic upheaval of its own: "60 Minutes," since 1968 a high-prestige, low-rated newsmagazine, crashes into the charmed Top Ten

programs in Nielsen's prime-time ratings. Two years later, on November 26, 1978, "60 Minutes" actually becomes television's No. 1 rated show. By this time ABC and NBC have hastily assembled their own imitations of "60 Minutes" (ABC with "20/20," NBC with "Prime Time Sunday," later "Prime Time Saturday"). Neither program hints at the genius of "60 Minutes" producer Don Hewitt, either in artistry or journalism. Nevertheless, the presence of three newsmagazine shows in network prime time is a milestone: proof that the American public is more receptive to information programming if it's appealingly packaged than it was nine years ago, when a producer for NBC's ill-fated "First Tuesday" was heard to scream: "If 'Marcus Welby' (ABC's competition) treats venereal disease on his show, the viewer knows he'll cure it. If 'First Tuesday' treats venereal disease, the viewer is afraid he'll *catch* it."

—November 8, 1979. ABC News pre-empts regular programming at 11:30 (eastern time) for the first in what is to be an historic series of nightly news specials. "America Held Hostage" costs the network more than $100,000 a week in its first three months. But in return, ABC receives proof to its satisfaction that an audience exists for late-night news. In March 1980, ABC begins its first regular 11:30 newscast—and the rival networks begin scrambling to map similar formats of their own.

—November 4, 1979. A network public-affairs broadcast enters the annals of American history. CBS's Roger Mudd, in an hour interview with Presidential candidate Edward Kennedy, seems to throw the Massachusetts Senator into incoherence with his probing questions about Chappaquiddick and Kennedy's innermost personal feelings. The interview is widely believed to have changed the course of Kennedy's campaign, appearing as it did to penetrate the Senator's glib and confident public image.

—February, 1980. Walter Cronkite (who many had assumed would continue his anchor role at CBS beyond

customary retirement age) startles the industry by confirming to the Washington Post's John Carmody he will step down early in 1981, at age 64. Speculation as to his successor immediately centers on Correspondent Mudd, who at 52 had understudied Cronkite's role for nearly 10 years.

—February 14, 1980. CBS announces that Dan Rather, not Mudd, will succeed Cronkite at anchor in 1981. Credit for the surprise decision, oddly enough, belongs as much to Captain Success as it does to anyone inside CBS. In a sense, Roone Arledge "decided" his rival network's issue by vigorously attempting to lure Rather into the ABC News family in the interim following Cronkite's announcement. Recognizing Rather's threatening potential as a competitor, CBS has little choice but to offer him the ultimate assignment—with a five-year contract estimated at $8 million.

But now a strange phenomenon happens—or does *not* happen. In a conspicuous reversal from 1976, columnists, cartoonists, and headline writers do *not* bemoan the intrusion of "Show Business" into network news, although Rather's salary is higher than those of most prime-time entertainment stars. One reason, of course, is that Rather is a newsman of unquestioned credentials: White House Correspondent during the Nixon years, a tour of duty in Vietnam, and, of course, investigative reporter-cum-superstar on "60 Minutes."

But another reason for the indifference to Rather's salary may simply be—to borrow Walter Cronkite's famous tag line—"That's the way it is."

The American public seems to understand that network television news is in a different geologic age than it was in 1976, when ABC tendered that pre-inflationary $5 million to Barbara Walters.

If salaries are more grandiose in the 1980s, so are the overall network budgets. In 1976, CBS spent $80 million on its news operations—a mere 10 times the amount of

Rather's 1980 salary package, by the way. In 1980, each network was funneling an estimated minimum of $130 million into news. And ABC's budget, inflated by the Iranian coverage costs, was believed to reach as high as $170 million.

The money was hardly being thrown away. The pool of regular TV newswatchers increased by some 7 million in 1979, allowing the networks to bill sponsors at correspondingly steeper rates. Since newscasts involve far less fixed costs than prime-time entertainment series, this burgeoning popularity is turning red ink into black in news departments that only a few years ago were famous as loss-leaders within their parent networks.

These high budgets and soaring profitability suggest that in a real sense, all of network news has become "Captain Success." After decades of low-keyed sobriety and self-effacing professionalism, the strange and complex phenomena known as TV news has taken root in the public imagination as an entertainment form unto itself. Whether the secret lies in the post-Watergate glamorization of reporters as Redford-Hoffman knights-errant, or in Arledge's infusion of showmanship, or in the indiscriminate bally-hoo of the *People* Magazine era, or in Rather's personal magnetism, or in the galvanic fascination of events in Iran and Afghanistan—or in some combination of all these factors—network news *is* approaching an intersection with show business.

It must be stressed that the networks' flirtation with showbiz has, to date, been confined largely to *form*. Although more pop-culture and celebrity items are finding their way lately into network news, the fundamental *content* of the newscast has not changed radically. The government, political campaigns, the economy, the energy picture, regional news, natural disasters, the cities, and the rural picture—all these topics continue to form the essential agenda at CBS, NBC, and ABC. (To what depth these stories are covered is, of course, another issue; one to which we shall return.)

But if the late 1970s saw increasing showmanship within the *national* newscasts, the picture at *local* TV news shops around the country was (with some exceptions) one of showmanship rampant.

Local TV news, after all, had about a 12-year head-start on the networks down the road to ratings riches. In many major cities, such as New York, the local newscasts are so slickly produced and so entertaining that audience levels actually go *down* at 7 o'clock, when the network news comes on. A veteran WCBS anchorman, Jim Jensen, has a larger following in New York than does Cronkite, his corporate colleague.

But Jensen may no longer have the largest following *at his own station.* In February, 1980, WCBS reportedly agreed to pay a sportscaster named Warner Wolf $450,000 to come over from rival WABC—making Wolf the highest-paid local electronic journalist in the city.

What kind of competitive climate would allow for that inversion of journalistic values? Well—as Warner Wolf himself would put it in one of his trademark phrases. . .

Let's go to the videotape!

3

Our Top Story Tonight. . .

The date is Friday, Feb. 22, 1980: one of those awkward days for New York's WABC "Eyewitness News."

Friday, Feb. 22, 1980 has produced—well. . .*news.*

On Friday, Feb. 22, 1980, the financial health of the United States has become a matter of official doubt. The Labor Department released figures showing that the Consumer Price Index has climbed 1.4 per cent in January—or 18.2 per cent, if projected at an annual rate. Gasoline prices alone have jumped 7.4 per cent, the largest rise in modern history. The prime lending rate has reached 16.5 per cent on the strength of a three-quarters-point increase by Morgan Guaranty Trust Company, the largest one-day increase in a decade.

A director of the Council on Wage and Price Stability has remarked for the record that "the underlying rate of inflation has started to explode." Economists perceive a breakdown in public confidence that the government has the will or ability to control inflation.

A sobering dose of hard, vital public information by anyone's standards. Nevertheless, "Eyewitness News," New York's top-rated local newscast, manages to adjust and proceed according to its own curious priorities.

Anchorman Roger Grimsby opens the hour at 6 o'clock thusly:

"It was murders in Manhattan. Two men in an expensive East Side apartment. . .an apartment *visited by 'Eyewitness News' once before.*"

Grimsby introduces reporter Anna Bond, who "knows the place. She was there just last week for an

'Eyewitness News At-Home' report. Tonight. . .her report focuses on violence."

The scene shifts to Bond, decked out in a dramatic broad-brimmed white fedora, tailored pearl-gray trenchcoat. . .and elbow-length red gloves. As Bond ruminates about nude-from-the-waist-down corpses and the irony of her visit to the site only a week before, the real world of inflation and energy shortages and painful choices by consumers (many of whom live in New York) seems to fade before a fantasy world: a world of exotic murders committed in fashionable neighborhoods against a backdrop of expensive antiques, and reported by elegantly garbed TV reporters who—in an almost surrealistic twist of Eyewitness mythology—*had been to the apartment a week before!*

Against this glittering confection of blood, riches, glamor, and mystery, the economy never had a chance.

To be sure, "Eyewitness News" does not ignore the inflation story: fifteen minutes into the hour, co-anchor Bill Beutel mentions it—as an "item":

"The year is off to a poor start with inflation. . . *that's not news* (italics added) but the figures are. . . consumer prices up 1.4 per cent last month." Beutel goes on briskly to report that subway fares might rise, that a local telephone call might soon cost 20 cents. There is a story, with footage, to the effect that Shell Oil might soon be selling gasoline by the litre. (What this has to do with, say, the price of gas, goes unexplained.)

And then—serious business over—it is back to what "Eyewitness News" does best. A filmed report by Anna Bond, this time in Lake Placid, N.Y., playfully watching TV cartoons with Olympic athletes. Tracy Egan with the fourth report in a series called "Sparring With Your Partner" (in which she interviews Henny Youngman, the comic who joked, "Take my wife—please." The "Eyewitness News" team does not flinch in the face of cliche). A reporter named Jane Wallace, assigned to cover the recent snowfall in Central Park, heaves a snowball at the camera and giggles.

Weather and sports follow.

A postscript to the "Eyewitness News" "inflation" coverage:

By the following week, New Yorkers—along with the rest of the country—are beginning to grapple with the implications of the money crisis. How will it affect their lives—their ability to meet housing costs, to travel, to educate their children? And it is at just this time—Monday, Feb. 25—that "Eyewitness News" finally gets around to tackling the economic situation on an in-depth basis.

Again, however, the approach is uniquely Channel 7's own. To the strains of a Frank Sinatra tune and accompanied by footage of millionaires cavorting at a charity benefit ball, Roger Grimsby, who earns $400,000 a year, files the first of three six-minute "Special Reports—from Palm Beach, Fla. The title of the "Special Report?"

"Being Rich."

Of course Roger Grimsby's "Special Report" had nothing to do with journalism—that is, in this case, with timely information that would enable viewers to cope with an urgent social problem. Nor was its timing even meant to be blackly ironic. Like much of what passes for "news" on local television in New York and around the country, "Being Rich" was in fact an entertainment feature: produced well in advance of air date, promoted heavily in the newspapers (advertisements showed a hand holding a microphone that had an enormous diamond for a head) and timed to coincide not with viewer needs but with the station's own needs. February is one of the most important rating "sweep" periods of the year. Advertisers fix their budgets for months to come on the basis of how competing stations fare in the February ratings. That is why promotional stunts like "Being Rich," and snowball-throwing newswomen, and glamorous crime stories, and interviews with Henny

Youngman choke the agendas of local TV newscasts.

In that sense, Roger Grimsby's "Being Rich" was not a peripheral story at all. "Being Rich" is what local television news is all about.

Local news has become the competitive lifeblood of the contemporary television station.

In New York, news can generate between $15 and $30 million gross revenues annually into a network-owned station's overall profits. WNBC general manager Robert Howard acknowledges that fully 35 percent of all his station's earnings come from advertising placed with the early and late editions of "NewsCenter 4." (By way of comparison, the second-largest single revenue source—the 57 or so local station-breaks each night in prime-time programming—account for 26 per cent.)

Whether the gross figure is a "low" $15 million or a high $30 million depends on two things: the relative amount of news time each station allocates—and the ratings. Rule of thumb has it that each rating point in New York is worth a quarter of a million dollars, with premium value in the higher points. In other large cities around the country, the rule is similar.

It is for this reason that—as mentioned earlier—the salesmen-managers of most stations no longer feel that they can stake their competitive lives on a commodity as treacherous and unpredictable as "journalism."

It is for this reason that most local television news departments, most of the time, no longer deal primarily in "news." They deal, rather, in "programming."

"News" is what informs. "Programming" is what sells. It is true that good "programming" can, and often does, contain legitimate "news." It is equally true that there are many outstanding reporters and anchor-people at work in local TV news, producing work of superior and useful quality.

But it is also true, in the tough and pragmatic battle-field of television, that programming takes precedence over news with such regularity that the traditional

understanding of "news" has been virtually re-defined.

Consider the words of Bill Kurtis, who along with Walter Jacobson comprises one of the best local anchor teams in the country. Kurtis, of CBS-owned WBBM in Chicago, is an anomaly among the new breed of anchormen-showmen. Educated in the law (he passed his examinations for the Kansas bar) and as a journalist, Kurtis has covered more major trials than any other electronic newsman in America: the Chicago Seven, Angela Davis, Daniel Ellsberg, Richard Speck, Charles Manson. In the summer of 1974, Kurtis flew to Saigon to photograph and report the story of children who would not be rescued by the massive orphan-lift preceding the fall of Vietnam.

Kurtis is troubled about the lack of attention to difficult, abstract stories on local television news. He spoke of his concern one spring morning in his tiny, cluttered office inside WBBM's barn-like broadcast complex.

"I see a fork in the road," he said, "and we are heading in the wrong direction in television news. There are a lot of things that dictate to us that we stay with the superficial. The direction is not toward substance in local television news, but to a more superficial coverage.

"We're living in decaying cities. We have seen our metropolises rise and decay. We have seen a population migrate from the rural areas to the big cities, and we are now seeing the cities disintegrate. This is a pattern that is not going to turn around for 25 years.

"I think there are myriad stories that could be done that document the death of an inner city, and at the same time suggest alternatives. What is going to bring a family back from the suburbs into Chicago? How are people going to live together? What is going to happen to the South Side and West Side, where dope is being pushed, where we have more vacant buildings than after the bombing of London? What is happening there? What is the pattern of growth?

"Look," continued Kurtis, a tone of frustration in

his voice, "here is the story I would like to see covered. Why isn't open housing a fact in Cicero and Berwyn [two predominantly white Chicago suburbs]? Why have federal prosecutors, as well as local, all steered clear of that? We all know why: because it would be committing World War III. But there's got to be a time when we come to grips with that."

Kurtis shrugged. "But you see, by their very definition, stories like that are not 'visual.' They don't revolve around one or two personalities. It takes so much talent and time to visualize a story like that on television. We do visual stories best. Newspapers do in-depth stories best—investigative stories best."

One reason Bill Kurtis (who correctly prides himself on being a reporter) did not have time to put together a story such as the one he outlined was that, all too often and especially during ratings "sweep" periods, his management preferred him to be tackling such vital assignments as riding along the highway with a truck driver, investigating the social appeal of the soap opera, and covering the phenomenon of runaway wives.

Unfortunately there are all too few journalists of Kurtis's calibre on the local news scene. In fact, if Edward R. Murrow, the patron saint of TV news, had returned to life in the late 1970s and traversed the nation to find what had happened to his legacy, here are some of the strange and wondrous sights he would have seen:

—A few days before the Presidential election of 1976, the "Eyewitness News" team at WLS in Chicago, the ABC-owned station, welcomes a distinguished visitor. The visitor is President Gerald R. Ford, in town to campaign for his re-election. President Ford is seated at the "Eyewitness News" anchor desk. He is being interviewed by members of the "Eyewitness News" team. A sample question, from weatherman John Coleman: "Mr. President, what kind of weather would you like for Election Day?"

—On the eve of the New Hampshire presidential primary in February 1980, WCBS (New York) sent

anchorman Rolland Smith—one of the Ten Best-Groomed Men of the Year in 1975—to that state for "a series of special reports." (WCBS is calling its correspondents "Newsbreakers" these days, by the way.) Against a background of pealing church bells, Smith limns "quaint, clapboard villages tucked into rolling hills." He describes "kids in small corner ponds," playing ice hockey. He cites Robert Frost. He takes us inside Frost's farm. He shows us *Frost's dictionary!* He mentions that Frost once wrote, "good fences make good neighbors" (a line the experienced newswatcher might have sensed would be invoked). He interviews a judge. He interviews an "average couple."

What Rolland Smith does *not* do in the entire 3 minutes and 10 seconds of his report is utter the name of a single candidate in the New Hampshire primary, Democrat or Republican. Nor does he mention a single issue at stake in the Presidential race.

—In St. Louis, in April 1977, CBS-owned KMOX is giving live, on-the-scene coverage to one of the most bizarre helicopter flights ever to take place in the city. The helicopter's flight covers a straight-line-distance of 200 yards—from a launch pad on the Mississippi river-front to a small park a couple of blocks away. The helicopter's passenger? One Ollie Raymand, an anchorman who is returning to his old position at KMOX. This live "news" coverage is in fact a public-relations stunt: Raymand supposedly is arriving "just in time" for the 5 o'clock newscast (although he has actually hit town earlier in the day). Nevertheless (as described later by Joe Popper in *St. Louis* Magazine) KMOX was trying to make it all seem real, aiming its cameras to suggest the tiny crowd was "respectable." Reported Popper: "when the crowd (at the park) had not grown beyond some 75 people a few minutes before Raymand's scheduled arrival, several zealous KMOX employees went from door to door: 'Hey, want some free cake? Wanna be on television? Wanna meet Ollie in person?' The greeting throng finally numbered roughly 100."

—In Boston, in 1976, station WNAC hires a personality for its newscasts who soon comes to be known—unfortunately—as "Anchorboy." His name is Jay Scott. (Real name: Joe Hugh Sprott.) At the time he begins anchoring the WNAC news, he is 23 years old. At the time he leaves, six months later, he is still 23.

WNAC's promotion campaign for Scott is something of a textbook case in TV news values. It emphasizes the fact that he had been "discovered in a Denver motel room"—a somewhat salacious way of saying that a WNAC talent scout had watched Scott, then a Denver anchorman, on his motel TV screen. He is depicted in suggestive, soft-focus photography. Laureen Devine wrote in Boston's *Real Paper*: "Before he ever appeared on the air, the executives went to work on his appearance, personality, and professional demeanor—changing him from a person into a salable commodity. . .the promotional campaign was successful in attracting attention to Scott, but failed because Scott had no credibility as a sex symbol. He is a 23-year-old kid with tremendous potential and he let them work him over."

—KYW, Philadelphia's Westinghouse station, titles its 6 o'clock newscast "The Direct Connection." The newscast opens with a disco theme written for KYW by a composer who has also created material for Donna Summer. The newscast theme is such a hit that KYW considers releasing it as a single.

—Back in New York, in the summer of 1979, WABC is covering the gasoline crisis. Reporter-anchor Joan Lunden (a former Sacramento model whose real name is Joan Blunden) offers this piece of insight to New York's distraught commuters:

"History sometimes gives us some help in putting things in perspective. . .in the old days, *sled dogs* stood in line for *hay*."

Lunden pauses for a "wry" beat. "'Yukon' bet on it," she sums up.

And a bit later in the same newscast, reporter Gloria Rojas interviews a New Jersey man who rides a horse to

work.

—Again at WCBS, on November 14, 1979, the station "teases" an upcoming report from its Health and Science Editor, Earl Ubell. The tease reads: "Good News About Cancer."

A viewer might plausibly infer—given the great public concern over the progress of cancer research in the United States—that someone has discovered a cancer cure.

But the story that follows has nothing to say about a cancer cure. It consists mainly of film clips of Health and Science Editor Ubell swimming and playing tennis doubles with cancer victims who have survived.

Ubell's message consists of little more than the remark that "cancer still takes many lives, but doctors are winning more and more."

"*Good report*," exhorts 25-year-old anchorwoman Michelle Marsh. (The WCBS "Newsbreakers" are famous for telling one another, "Good report!") But exactly what constitutes the hard news element in this "good news" "good report" does not seem immediately clear.

And there are still other bizarre scenes:

—At KNXT in Los Angeles, the CBS-owned station, a woman reporter in a wet suit plunges awkwardly into a tank of water. She begins playing with a large porpoise.

—At KTTV in Los Angeles, an independent, co-anchormen Chuck Ashman and Charles Rowe are reading the night's lead stories. The lead stories include an item about a bill in the Tennessee legislature advocating a state fossil and a misprint in the Azusa *Herald* announcing the appointment of Mary Hartman to the town planning commission.

—At WMAL in Washington, a woman reporter named Betsy Ashton is announcing a story on Howard Hughes's will. She is sitting in a cemetery.

—At WMAL's competitor, the *Post-Newsweek* station WTOP, the "Eyewitness News" team is temporarily unable to continue. It is collectively trying to

recover from a case of the giggles engendered by the mispronunciation, by one of them, of "Silver Spring," Maryland.

—At KSTP in Minneapolis, NBC-affiliated, the comedienne Judy Carne pops into the newsroom during the newscast and begins playing with sportscaster Tom Rather's ears.

On a subsequent newscast at KSTP, Dave Gilbert, the station's "action" reporter, is covering a demonstration of canoe safety for high-school students on one of Minneapolis' city lakes. Gilbert wittily capsizes his own canoe; then, in an attempt to pull himself from the water, he overturns the canoe with the KSTP camera and film crew.

—At WKYC in Cleveland, the NBC-owned station, reporter Del Donahue is broadcasting from inside a lion's cage. The "angle" is that Donahue is "learning how" to train a lion. Donahue sits down upon the supine lion's haunches. The beast, who lacks a sense of humor, springs up and begins to maul Donahue, who suffered cuts requiring 60 stitches before he is pulled to safety by the real trainer. Journalism is served in the end, however. WKYC's camera records the entire grisly episode, and it is shown on several stations—as a news event.

Murrow would have seen rank upon rank of "news teams" in matching blazers and coiffures like so many squadrons of "Up With People" teenagers, all fixed with standardized wry smiles behind their "Star Trek" desks. He would see news teams that begin their evening's duty by strutting on camera en masse (at WABC in New York, they sort of *cascade* onto the set, like the Angelic Messengers taking the stage for Part Three of the *Dybbuk Variations*).

He would have been puzzled by full-page newspaper ads that trumpet a news team as though it were a new kind of low-tar cigarette, and by TV "promo" commercials that show anchorman, weatherman, sportscaster, and principal reporters riding around in cowboy

suits on white horses or passing inspection dressed up like doughboys. (Los Angeles' KABC has a reported yearly budget of $1.4 million for this type of advertising alone.)

What the hell, Murrow might understandably have asked, has all this got to do with *news*?

He would have seen news, all right—in a manner of speaking. (And the manner of speaking would have been strange to Murrow's ears indeed). Modern TV journalists not only entertained, they covered "serious" news as well.

That is, it would be safe to say that on any contemporary nightly TV newscast, a viewer would be exposed to the three or four most important stories that graced the front pages of his local newspaper. Most large-city TV news departments offered, in addition, a noble-sounding catalogue of secondary news services: consumer tips; perhaps a mini-documentary, in several parts, on some civic issue; an "action" reporter who was a conspicuous participant in the stories he covered; often a minority advocate, handsome/beautiful and vaguely ethnic, along the lines of Geraldo Rivera; an "ombudsman" reporter who checked out complaints made against local businesses and services.

But there was something missing at the core. Amidst all the self-consciousness, the preening, the ingratiation and the bonhommie, Murrow might have noticed that in very few cases was there a sense of *mission* about the TV newscasts: a sense of continuity in the life of the city (or "market") covered; a palpable willingness to perform the vigorous, adversary, check-on-government, intervening role that American journalism has traditionally performed.

There was little feeling of real partnership with the viewer, only a vague, disguised condescension. There was little evidence that any of the coiffed anchorpersons or "action" reporters or "ombudsmen" on the air shared—or were even aware of—the Jeffersonian notion that an informed public will make its own best

decisions if given the hard facts on which to judge.

To put it into practical terms: had Murrow stuck around a station, chosen at random, for six or eight weeks (or months or years), chances are good that he would not have seen one piece of journalism, initiated by that station, that sent a corrupt politician to jail. Or that resulted in widespread and lasting structural reform. Or that forced a change in official policy. Or that prepared citizens for an impending crisis (as in inflation, municipal bankruptcy, educational funding, environmental shortages, union-labor negotiations).

He would, however, have witnessed unending reports on sex fantasies. And runaway wives. And UFO's. And celebrities. And fires. And murders. And accidents.

And, oh yes, the weather and sports.

4

Starship News Center

Who's in charge here?

It seems a reasonable question.

Surely someone is responsible for permitting the mockeries of journalism that we have been examining. Anchorpeople and correspondents do not assign themselves to behave like Ted Baxter under a full moon. In fact, most of the people whose antics filled the preceding chapter are quite a bit more intelligent and dedicated than their on-air behavior would indicate. Rolland Smith, for example, is an instructor in journalism at a New York college.

A TV newsperson's choice of stories, as well as his or her on-camera behavior, are imposed from above. There are bosses: executive producers, who report to news directors. These are the people most directly accountable for the look and the content of the nightly product as it appears on the home screen. But being "accountable" is one thing. Being *responsible*—that is something else.

In theory, executive producers and news directors are the journalistic backbone of the TV news department. They are the "Lou Grants" of the business, whose judgment and training and imagination are meant to assure a high-quality informational package.

Then. . .*why is it all as dreadful as it is?* Why the snowballs, the sleazy crime stories, the political-reports-that-are-not-political-reports?

The answer is that—in the majority of cases—there is no real authority in the news director's chair. True

responsibility for the key choices in a local news operation lies above him—in the station's executive suite.

It is the station manager (or "vice president and general manager" as he is usually called at network-owned stations) who holds the power that counts. And, as we have pointed out earlier, this breed of executive cat is typically a stranger to journalistic theory. Most often, he is a salesman. (Sorry—there are no "she's," to the best of this author's knowledge.) But the newscast is *his baby*, the most highly visible identifying mark of the station that he runs. This is why far too many news directors function, really, as middlemen—factotums, high-salaried messengers between the executive suite and the newsroom.

As for station managers, they have their own galley of pressures to contend with. They must answer to their own higher authorities: station-group vice presidents, if their station is owned by a network; the owner himself if the outfit is independent. Their prestige, their self-esteem, their rarified financial status hinge almost completely on keeping their "team" up there in the ratings. (No. 1, as it happens, tends to be the preferred position.) And since their counterparts across the street —equally motivated, equally aggressive and equally terrorized—are clawing and grasping at the same goal, the tendency to produce great *programming* instead of great *news* is all too sadly apparent.

Television management, as it influences the quality of TV news, is one of the great catastrophes of modern telecommunications.

Let us look again, briefly, at the exquisite absurdity surrounding the average real-life "Lou Grant"—the news director.

For starters, his job has more similarities to that of a baseball manager than of a middle-management business executive. His average length of stay with a given station is shockingly short—only a little more than two

years, according to a recent study by the Radio-Television News Directors Association.

In such a brief time it is next to impossible to absorb the texture and the character of a strange city, or to develop an instinct for its informational needs. But even if he had time, a news director *is not expected to be thinking about those needs.*

He is immersed in budget decisions. Personnel problems. Competitive strategies. All the responsibilities, in short, for which he is *not* trained. (Most news directors come from the ranks of working reporters; very few have had any exposure to management theory or other specialized training.)

Like a baseball manager, his primary task is to carry out the front-office's competitive mandate: get (or keep) the team up there in the standings. Now. Yesterday. If he fails, it is back to the road.

Many news directors have knocked about in two, three, and four cities by age 40—and by then, they have "lost their legs," as the saying has it. They are tired. They have seen it all. They have absorbed so many humiliations, tolerated so many compromises, that they have nothing left except their own pet "formulas"—which are, usually, the same "formulas" that everyone else is using.

There are exceptions. There are news directors who perform long and splendid service for their communities. Ralph Renick, the gifted and statesmanlike news chief of WTVJ in Miami, has held his job since 1950. As Walter Cronkite is the conscience of the network news, Renick is the conscience of local news—as we will see later.

But he is a rarity. Almost a freak of nature.

Just about every large city in America contains at least one TV station whose news department has been thrown into chaos by convulsive management changes.

One of the classic cases in recent years has been the crash, the dramatic rise, and the long slow slide of "NewsCenter 4" in New York.

"NewsCenter 4" might be thought of as "Star Trek —The Newscast." Blazing and shimmering out of the late-afternoon ether in all of its two-hour glory, it has indeed sent critics scurrying to their science-fiction collections to find apt comparisons. When it first loomed in 1974, its enormous set resembled the flight deck of some benign intergalactic battlestar, with its chrome and its exposed TV monitors and its "compartments" for weather and sports and interviews—and, of course, the anchor desk.

In fact the NewsCenter set *was* the creation of a Hollywood designer: Fred Harpman, whose credits include "Fantastic Voyage" (starring Raquel Welch) and the TV series, "Search." In "Search," it may be recalled, Hugh O'Brian portrayed a futuristic secret agent who got himself out of tight scrapes by murmuring. . .to his tooth. Imbedded in O'Brian's tooth, you see, was a miniature microphone that hooked him up with Burgess Meredith and the rest of his superiors back at Search Control.

One fine evening in the early 1970s, as he relaxed in front of his home television screen, NBC News executive Lee Hanna watched an episode of "Search" with gathering interest. Hanna found himself fascinated at all the flashing lights and gleaming consoles and modernistic data panels that comprised Search Control. Finally Hanna leaped to his feet with the triumphant declaration: *"That's my news set!"*

Harpman was commissioned for the task immediately. His resulting concept was so unabashedly theatrical, so maniéré. . .that both "NBC Nightly News" and the "Today" show rushed modified versions of it into service.

Striding the anchor bridge in those early days was none other than Tom Snyder himself—he of the laser eyes and the smoldering intensity. Snyder's co-anchor

was golden-haired Chuck Scarborough, boyish and staunch. Scarborough in fact survived into 1980—one of a veritable parade of "NewsCenter 4" anchor people.

A typical Snyder-Scarborough exchange—of the type that presumably had "NewsCenter 4" fans coming out of their chairs in excitement—was this discussion of a report called "Sex Fantasies."

SCARBOROUGH: Thomas, last night we, we, uh, took people a bit unawares with our Part One of that, and we got a few phone calls complaining about it, so. . .

SNYDER *(irritably):* We had *several* phone calls.

SCARBOROUGH: Yes. Perhaps we should warn the people.

SNYDER *(turning to the camera):* Last night there was explicit *sexual material* in that report, or piece. And I suppose I'm allowed to go in and see it before we go on the air, but nobody *says* why don't you go in and look at it so you can *do* something, so I don't know *what's* going on tonight.

SCARBOROUGH: I presume there's more of the same, and at least you can get the kids out of the room if you don't want them to see it.

SNYDER: You know, it's a funny thing, and we could probably spend the rest of the hour just *talking* about this and let people come in and talk about it with us. And I understand how people don't want their children to see naked bodies on television; I-I-I *guess* I understand that, a person's home is their castle. *(Pause)* But yet they go down to Forty-second Street and see it *there,* and they complain about seeing it *here*, and last night we had a picture which I thought was a little extreme, a guy in a car with five bullet holes in his *head*—and, and nobody complained about that, but they complained about seeing a woman's *breasts* on television.

SCARBOROUGH: Well, it's. . .

SNYDER: *(snappishly):* It's *confusing!*

SCARBOROUGH: I think we should just give 'em the option, that's all. They have the option of going to Forty-second Street.

SNYDER: Exactly. Anyway, it comes on at 6:45 and, uh—that's it. It's called Sex Fantasies.

Indeed, letting the eye sweep over the majestic span of molded-plastic architecture dotted with these proto-genetic masterpieces, the anchorpeople ("*Anchroids,*" one awestruck insider called them) that comprised the "NewsCenter 4" colony in those days, the viewer might —forgivably—fail to grasp just how great a fantasy-come-true it all was.

For this was nothing less than a postwar civilization. This was an imperial video power that had sprung from the ashes of a devastation seldom before unleashed upon a flagship television station.

This was a TV-news superpower that had arisen from the horrors of. . .the *Asterisk.*

The Asterisk is not a topic to be mentioned lightly within the corridors of a broadcast station. Many career television people have never actually seen one. Nevertheless, everyone knows that the Asterisk is out there, a black hole, a very real and menacing negative-energy mutation of broadcasting's audience measurement system. Normally, the Asterisk visits only the weak and the helpless—"Stock Market Today" on Channel 68, say, or the third rerun of Dick Cavett interviewing Debby Boone on the public station.

The Asterisk strikes the ratings book when a program's audience is *too low to create a measurable number.*

In 1972 the Asterisk devoured WNBC News.

Not that the calamity was any kind of surprise. The exquisite horror was that all hands at WNBC could *see it coming*. . .feel the slippage. . .and just stand by in a

kind of corporate paralysis as the dreamlike progression built—cause and effect—in slow motion at first and then faster until *schluuuuuup!* WNBC's news audience, for all practical purposes, vanished.

A goodly number of them could be found—when the smoke cleared—whooping and hollering with delight at a new type of news-as-funfest over on Channel 7. There, men with matching blue blazers and matching white grins were starting to rewrite local television history.

This revolutionary programming concept had actually been on the air for four years, gaining momentum with each ratings book. In November 1968 a slick and trend-wise fast riser named Al Primo, then just 32 years old, had sprung the notion on New York: an ingratiating, personality-oriented kind of presentation that he called "Eyewitness News."

His format spread with solid-state quickness to ABC's four other owned stations. In Chicago, somewhat by accident, it ignited television's version of a nuclear blast. The news team at WLS began playing with the motif, experimenting with it like jazz musicians improvising on a theme—and before long they had audiences mesmerized. It was a spontaneous combustion— a loosey-goose format, taken up by four guys who had this chemistry with each other—and suddenly American TV had its biggest bust-out formula since *I Love Lucy*.

A Chicago correspondent for *Variety* named Morry Roth dubbed the format "Happy Talk." Its features will be examined in great detail later in this book (not that any sentient American has by now escaped exposure to the concept). For now, let us say that "Happy Talk" news pivots on a bit of camaraderie among the news team: a smile, a joke. A laugh.

Back in New York, "Eyewitness News/Happy Talk" simply caught WNBC amidships. There it sat, this great, wealthy super-station, the pride of NBC—even then, swollen with more staff, more technology, more film crews than any other station in New York City—

perhaps the world. There was no way WNBC could react to the shock waves caused by WABC's sudden tactical change.

For one thing, WNBC's news department *was not an organizational part of the station itself.* Rather, it functioned, as with the other owned stations, as a subsection of NBC News. (This was true of all the networks for a time. NBC was the last to return control of local news to the stations themselves.) Thus WNBC's news department displayed all the stuffiness and rigidity for which NBC's network bureaucracy is justly famous.

What the network brass had mandated for WNBC, with all its bounty, was a traditional, down-the-middle news broadcast anchored by Gabe Pressman,* a street-smart but decidedly unglamorous newsman. "An illustrated newspaper" was the way Laura Lawrence, the station's former manager of news operations, described it—and not at all disrespectfully. In 1969, WNBC News dominated the local ratings both at 6 and 11 p.m.

And then suddenly, over on Channel 7, there were these *wild men*—these happy-go-lucky jackanapes in their matching dark-blue Sigma Chi blazers, eyes a-twinkle as they traded jests about golf scores, neckties, and good times galore, pausing now and then to draw a breath and read an item or two about the world situation. In September 1969 WABC expanded its early newscast to one hour. The scurrying of viewers toward Channel 7 "Eyewitness News" was as a human tide.

In the meantime, trouble was building from another flank. In March 1966, the CBS-owned station, WCBS, made its own decision to mobilize. Channel 2 hired as its station manager a small, lean and intense broadcast pro-

*Pressman returned to WNBC after a 7-year absence on July 7, 1980. During that time he starred for the independent station WNEW as a hard-driving street reporter and political expert—establishing a reputation as one of the most aggressive and knowledgeable electronic journalists in the city.

fessional named Lee Hanna† to bring its news department into full competitive strength with the others.

Hanna, whose dark, correct suits and near-whispering speech mannerism masked a ferocious competitiveness, had a way of inspiring strong loyalties and lingering enmities—a trait that was believed, in later years, to have blunted an otherwise promising chance at the very top command of NBC News. At Channel 2, Hanna immediately set about building an elite cadre of specialists: Earl Ubell as science editor; Jeanne Parr as consumer reporter; Jerome Wilson, a former New York State senator, as political reporter; Ed Wakin, a professor of education at Fordham University, as education editor; Chris Borgen, a former New York City detective, as police reporter—and, as sports editor, a former New York Giants wide receiver named Frank Gifford.

"I created that staff," Hanna said later. "We built the single largest local news staff in the country at that time. It was my conviction that we had to get away from 'daybook journalism'—just keeping up with the agenda of events. Local news broke open in those years, and we helped make the break."

In fact it was Hanna's WCBS, and not WABC, that first zoomed past WNBC in the ratings. That was in 1968. Within a year, WABC's Happy Talk "Eyewitness News" had thundered out of obscurity to surpass everyone.

For WNBC, the Asterisk lay ahead—unavoidable as one of "Eyewitness News's" big sloppy snowballs.

† In October 1976, after completing work on the first edition of *The Newscasters,* the author joined WMAQ, the NBC-owned station in Chicago, as a critic-at-large. Lee Hanna was vice president and general manager of WMAQ at that time. In the course of some 14 months' work under Hanna, I admired him as a man of integrity, imagination and superior news judgment. If this experience has in any way colored my own critical appraisal of Hanna, the relationship is here noted.

WNBC management's response was to remain calm. Well—almost calm. Anchorman Gabe Pressman was replaced. So was the executive producer. So was Pressman's successor, Bill Ryan. So was the executive producer's successor. So was Ryan's successor, Robin (now Robert) MacNeil, of public television fame. So was the executive producer's successor's successor. So was MacNeil's successor, Frank McGee. And on it went—through uncounted middle management executives and through subsequent anchormen Lou Wood, John Palmer, Sander Vanocur, Carl Stokes, Paul Udell, Jim Hartz.

In fact, the only change the station's management had not hit upon was a change in presentation of the news. To this extent, WNBC's executive brain trust indeed resembled the ownership of a second-division baseball team: discarding this manager and that in the frantic hope of stumbling upon magic. In fairness, there was one important difference: a baseball team usually gives the manager most of a season.

At last someone arrived with sufficient imagination to examine WNBC's newscast itself: Bernie Schussman, a news director who entered the scene in the fall of 1971. Schussman hired more and better-known reporters. He changed the set and added a co-anchor to the format. He hired additional film crews. He tried to construct the newscast around a cogent discussion of the events of the day, backed by pertinent film.

Schussman's reward was the appearance of the Asterisk.

Now WNBC was something of a laughingstock. And the parent corporation—the mighty RCA/NBC, one of the world's great conglomerates and a bureaucracy that rivals the State Department's in complexity—does not have what one could call a bubbly sense of humor when it comes to laughingstocks. The corporate leaders drew in a breath, looked the other way, and did the necessary thing:

They hired one of their most mettlesome adversaries,

Lee Hanna.

Hanna had left New York for an executive position at the Herald-Traveler Corp. in Boston, but in November 1972 he returned—to compete against his own format, as well as WABC's. Installed as vice president for news, NBC owned-and-operated stations, Hanna set about stocking WNBC with key members of his old Channel 2 team.

Earl Ubell, the onoe and future science editor, became news editor. Within a year came Sheldon Hoffman, Hanna's brother-in-law, a man addicted to chicken broth and Broadway show tunes, and something of an electronic-engineering wizard. Hoffman immediately seized upon a little-understood piece of computer equipment called Chyron—it superimposed letters and numerals on an existing video picture—and used it to perfect an on-screen look of balance and cleanliness that was for years to stand as state-of-the-art in the field. The familiar use of bold white lettering to flash traffic conditions and stock market reports is a Hoffman signature.

Hanna walked into a dream assignment. NBC—angry and embarrassed—was determined to recapture a measure of prestige for its beleaguered flagship station at all costs. And "all costs" was just about what it came down to: Hanna's annual budget began at $12 million a year and reached a peak of more than $15 million—unheard-of purchasing power at the time.

Hanna deployed the money in several ways. He gave Ubell free rein to augment the demoralized staff with more reporters, field producers and camera crews. In a vast cavern designated "Studio B," up on Rockefeller Center's sixth floor, workmen began hammering and sawing away at The Set—a fantasy-construction that would cost, by itself, more than $300,000. And then there was the research.

Most of the audience research done before the launching of "NewsCenter 4" was conducted *by WNBC itself.* This is an important distinction. The news

consultants who will be examined later are all independent business organizations, commissioned by stations to analyze audience needs. NBC does not go in for this highly questionable practice. Virtually alone among big-time TV news operations, the NBC empire resists "farming out" its news-related management decisions.

In the first 18 months of Hanna's tenure, WNBC's in-house research efforts were massive. Hanna himself told his staff that it was "the most comprehensive and expensive research operation in the history of the world."

There was some measure of outside help, however. Edwin Diamond gave evidence of this in his 1975 book, *The Tin Kazoo.* Reported Diamond: Emmanuel "Manny" Demby, the audience research consultant for "NewsCenter 4," has been using a questionnaire technique he calls "psychographics" to get at the connection, if any, between the personalities of viewers and elements of the news. Demby often uses a "test facility" —a tastefully furnished room at the offices of Demby's Motivational Programmers, Inc., at 770 Lexington Avenue in New York. There, Demby and his NBC clients can observe, through one-way glass, a roomful of unsuspecting people as they watch "NewsCenter 4."

Much of this testing involved viewers' reactions to potential anchorpeople. Various personalities, and combinations of personalities, were "auditioned" in front of sample audiences until the tandem of Snyder and Scarborough registered the highest viewer approval. WNBC dipped into its super-budget for an unprecedented $500,000 to lure Snyder away from Los Angeles, where he enjoyed a strong viewer base. (This fee also included compensation for Snyder's "Tomorrow" show.) Scarborough came aboard for $100,000.

But as important as Snyder-Scarborough were to Hanna's strategy for lifting WNBC out of oblivion, they were not quite as important as the architectural behemoth taking shape in Studio B: designer Fred

Harpman's. . .*The Set.*

The Set would be nothing less than "NewsCenter 4's" *statement* of itself. *We are here,* The Set would say. *We are big and we are rich and we mean to take over.* Its symbolism was profound. In a way, *it* was to be the star of "NewsCenter 4." With its seeming acres of brightly lighted space, its businesslike monitors visible behind the anchormen, its over-all sense of disembodied electronic energy, The Set was a fantasy made real. It seemed not to *evoke* New York as much as to *hover over it*—suspended in a space-time continuum of its own. In this sense The Set tapped the iconography of every futuristic movie, every TV show concocted around the theme of *information as power.*

Watching "NewsCenter 4," every viewer could, in some far outreach of his imaginings, be Hugh O'Brian communing with his secret, technological tooth.

Seventeen months after it began, the WNBC masterplan produced its miracle. "NewsCenter 4" stood at the top of local newscasts in New York. Head-to-head against Channel 2 and Channel 7 at 6 p.m., the second hour of its two-hour newscast drew an average 708,000 viewers. WCBS was second with 696,000. WABC was third with 610,000.

These numbers did not hold constant. The lead changed hands frequently as the months went on. But the important point was that "NewsCenter 4" had brought WNBC back from The Asterisk. *And it had not sacrificed solid journalism in the process.* The newscast earned critical honors as well as rating points.

There is no way to tell, of course, how long "NewsCenter 4" could have maintained this golden mean—artistry and audience—had the management remained intact. The ratings war is an endless shifting of fortunes, a cycle of ascent and decline that sometimes seems to fluctuate according to its own secret dynamics. Often a viewership will increase or erode because of factors so subtle and so slow to betray themselves that the

momentum is unstoppable by the time they are understood.

Certainly it is true that Lee Hanna, for all of his adherence to journalistic values, did not have a universal Midas touch. In 1976 NBC management dispatched him to Chicago, where WMAQ was sending up distress flares similar to those of the "old" WNBC. Some observers believe that this assignment was Hanna's final test for graduation to top management of NBC News. Had he succeeded, these insiders feel, the network news vice presidency would have been his reward. Others are certain that this was a Mission: Impossible; that Hanna's capacity for abrasiveness had earned him powerful enemies within NBC, and that Chicago was a pointed detour off the corporate ladder.

In the event, Hanna could not duplicate his miracle of Rockefeller Center. He tried. He installed an even larger NewsCenter set inside Chicago's Merchandise Mart building. He pulled together another mammoth staff of young, trained specialist-journalists. He appointed brother-in-law Hoffman as his news director.

Perhaps meat-and-potatoes Chicago did not relate to the glittering, somewhat effete NewsCenter set. Perhaps, unlike New York, there simply is not an audience for an extended newscast in the afternoon, the timeslot into which Hanna poured most of his budget. (The early local news in the Midwest ends at 6, just when the prime demographic group is beginning to trickle home from work. The real sweepstakes out here are in the 10 p.m. half-hour battle.)

Perhaps viewers became unconsciously fidgety over the almost anal precision that was believed to be among NewsCenter's biggest selling points: the scheduling of a given feature or report at the *same* time every day: education news at 4:37, health report at 5:13, consumer news at 5:41, and so on. This routine produced a sense of rigidity at NewsCenter, a hint that the newscast could not pry into its own format to cover fast-breaking stories.

Perhaps it was hopeless in any case to expect quick victory against the original "Happy Talk" team on competitor WLS, the ABC-owned ratings leader then.

Whatever the reason, Hanna's starship never sustained a rise above third place in a three-way race. It languished there for more than a year, despite anchor shifts and heavy promotion campaigns. And then Hanna's bright epoch in TV news played itself out in Chicago. The end came with surgical precision. Chicago style, one might almost say.

One day early in 1978, a plane landed at O'Hare Field bearing two dark-suited emissaries from the home office. The two men took a taxi to the Merchandise Mart and went directly to Hanna's suite.

There they remained for less than half an hour. They re-emerged, caught a taxi downstairs and were on the next flight back to New York.

And Lee Hanna no longer worked for NBC.

Meanwhile, things had started to come apart back at "NewsCenter 4" in New York. Ubell had left his position as news director for a network assignment; he would later resume his on-camera career at Channel 2 as Health and Science reporter.

His replacement was a large, bearlike man named Norman Fein, slow of movement and deliberate of thought, who peered through thick-lensed glasses at a suddenly troubled newsroom.

Fein had joined "NewsCenter 4" as a producer in 1972, but his early training had been with the high-energy, cosmetic-oriented "Eyewitness News" team on Channel 7. Under Fein's stewardship, the tone and the direction of "NewsCenter 4" began to change.

It began to seem as though his station was attempting to out-"happy" the Happy Talkers. Fein bought into the orthodoxy that women are the main consumers of late-afternoon TV news. He waded after this sector of the audience with a vengeance that earned his program a reputation as "*The Ladies Home Journal* of TV News."

He hired more women as staff reporters. There was

nothing wrong with that philosophy—in fact, it was admirable in theory—but observers began to get the feeling that some of his hirings were not totally based on the journalistic expertise of the applicants. One example was a former fashion model named Heather Bernard. With no experience on the beat, she was made police reporter. (To her credit, Bernard has worked diligently to learn the trade she found herself plying.) Another example was Liz Smith. While no one can accuse Smith of getting by on looks, the regular presence of a newspaper gossip columnist made critics wonder just where Fein's news priorities lay. He assigned Chauncey Howell, a glib and dapper essayist of the boulevardier style, to report a regular segment on fashion. The segment was sponsored by businesses within the fashion industry—a practice long out of favor in most news shops because of its implications on sponsorship and news content.

None of these baroque practices, by the way, had ever fallen under the scrutiny of "NewsCenter 4's" own resident television critic, Katie Kelly. Kelly, the only on-air broadcast critic working in local commercial television, was—how should one put it?—not exactly a thorn in the industry's side. On October 30, 1979, the day the Federal Communications Commission announced that American television had failed to meet its responsibility to children, Katie—dressed in a black sweater crested with a rainbow of colors that resembled the NBC Peacock's tail—chose as her commentary topic the weekly prime-rate ratings race.

Suddenly the ambience of "NewsCenter 4" resembled that of a soignee late-afternoon house party, crammed with movie reviews, whimsical features from Central Park, droll items about designer clothes for poodles, mindless on-the-scene interviews with average citizens ("What do *you* think about the gas crisis?" "It's bad!" "Bad?" "Bad!") and just plain poor taste. One merry afternoon, just after Liz had delivered an item about a four-hour film on Adolf Hitler, Chauncey—fresh from his own report on flower-

arranging—wondered aloud whether Hitler had ever been a flower-arranger. New York, with the largest Jewish population in America, presumably slapped its thigh.

The strange part of it was that "NewsCenter 4" *did* have some first-line newspeople within its ranks: consumer affairs specialist Betty Furness; political correspondent Carl Stokes; beat man Bob Teague, among others. They were often difficult to locate amidst the good-time throng.

After Snyder fled the anchor desk in 1977 for Los Angeles, real fissures began to appear. Sitting upon what was still the largest news deployment force in the city—200 staff, 28 on-air reporters, fourteen film and videotape crews (twice the standard inventory) Fein turned his attention instead to "image." There ensued a frantic period (contemptuously called the "mix 'n' match era" by one staffer) in which Fein shuffled through various anchor combinations: Carol Jenkins and Jack Cafferty? No. How about Carol and Chuck Scarborough? Nope. Well—Pia Lindstrom and Chuck? Uh-uh. Pia and Jack? Noo—Melba Tolliver and Chuck! No. Melba and Jack? Not really. . .

The show settled on Melba and Pia at 5, followed by Chuck and Jack at 6. . .for a time. Then "NewsCenter 4" hired additional high-priced anchor talent: Sue Simmons from Washington, Jack Hambrick from San Francisco. In March 1980 it was conceivable that the combined salaries of WNBC's seven-person anchor staff approached the total news operating costs of independent station WNEW, which squeaked by on less than $3 million annually.

By this time, Fein was long since departed. His successor was Ron Kershaw, a 35-year-old former cameraman who most recently had run the news operation at WBAL in Baltimore.

"I am breaking the mold of the past," Kershaw remarked a few weeks after he had assumed command. Kershaw vowed to put an end to sponsorship of indi-

vidual news segments. ("Our sales department was virtually formatting the news as the management got weaker," he declared) and to toughen "NewsCenter 4's" over-all approach to news.

In this area Kershaw appeared to have the support of his boss, general manager Robert Howard (WNBC news now reports to station instead of network management). Howard, a former NBC president, has stated his commitment to new directions in hard news—including the opening of bureaus in New Jersey and Long Island to meet the informational needs of New York's rapidly dispersing suburban population.

As of late March 1980, it was not clear whether Kershaw could immediately reverse "NewsCenter 4's" ratings decline. The show's average audience languished under 500,000, as WABC's topped the three-quarter-million mark and WCBS's surged toward 640,000.

But on one promise, at least, Kershaw had made good: he had broken the mold of the past.

"NewsCenter 4" now broadcast from a smaller, more economical set.

Studio B, on the 6th floor, stood in darkness. In the shadows were the stripped remains of what appeared at first to be some kind of intergalactic scrap metal—a vestige of a bold and bizarre epoch, the likes of which would never be seen again.

It had been, in its own way, a Search. And a Fantastic Voyage.

5

Tom Swift And His Electric Poll-Taker

Despite its futuristic aspects, market research is hardly a new phenomenon in American business. Along with its companion systems of political polling and public-opinion sampling, market research reaches more than 150 years back into the country's history.

In July of 1824 (according to Jack J. Honomichl, writing in the April 19, 1976, *Advertising Age)*, the Harrisburg *Pennsylvanian* printed a report of a straw vote taken at Wilmington, Delaware, "without discrimination of parties." In that pre-Voter Profile Analysis poll, Andrew Jackson received 335 votes; John Quincy Adams, 169; Henry Clay, 19; and William H. Crawford, 9. (The Harrisburg *Pennsylvanian* was the Chicago *Tribune* of its time: John Quincy Adams, playing Truman to Jackson's Thomas Dewey, was elected President.)

Other evidences of market research surfaced in 1879, when N.W. Ayer & Son surveyed state officials around the country on grain production, and thus wrapped up a nifty agricultural-machinery account with the Nichols-Shepard Company; and in 1895, when one Harlow Gale of the University of Minnesota mailed out questionnaires to obtain public opinion on advertising.

The science—and in its purest state, market research is a scientifically valid tool indeed—began to take hold in American commerce around 1910, when several businesses were formed for the purpose. The following year,

reports Honomichl, R. O. Eastman, who was then advertising manager for the Kellogg Company in Battle Creek, Michigan, organized a joint postcard survey to determine magazine readership. This undertaking inspired Mr. Eastman to begin his own company, the Eastman Research Bureau, whose first clients included *Cosmopolitan* and the *Christian Herald*. A bit later an organization known as the General Electric Company joined the fold. GE designed a consumer survey to determine whether people liked its "Mazda" trademark. The ever-hopeful Chicago *Tribune* plunged into the field in 1916, with a door-to-door survey of consumer purchasing habits in Chicago.

The business-happy 1920's, that decade of foredoomed Babbitt-like ebullience, saw the founding of some of the dynasties in market research and opinion polling today: men such as Dr. Daniel Starch, Dr. George Gallup and Arthur C. Nielsen were toying with their methods and staking out their territory. Starch first used the "recognition" method for measuring readership of advertisements and editorial content in papers and magazines in 1922. Gallup, whose name was to become synonymous with opinion sampling, entered the field through advertising readership measurements in 1923; his Gallup Poll was first published in 35 newspapers in 1935.

There is an irony in the presence of A. C. Nielsen in the list of antecedents for today's TV news consultant. After entering the field in 1922, the Nielsen Company provided the science of market research with some of its most important innovations, and ultimately became a national byword for the measurement of broadcast audiences.

And yet market research for television programming —including news—is one area that A. C. Nielsen scrupulously eschews.

The company tells the network and local stations how many people are watching a given program, and how that audience is characterized by such traits as age, sex,

race, education and income levels. There is no attempt by Nielsen to "analyze" this data, nor to draw conclusions as to what sort of programming is likely to attract audiences, nor to advise its television clients on how to improve their ratings. Nielsen differs from such firms as Frank N. Magid Associates in that it simply counts and sorts the audience; it does not attempt to read their minds.

Nielsen's breakthrough in broadcast audience measurement was achieved through a device called the Audimeter, developed in 1936 by two professors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Robert F. Elder and Louis Woodruff. It took six years of experiments and improvements with the Audimeter—during which time the Nielsen Company was often on shaky financial ground indeed—before the invention was introduced as a commercial service for network radio. By 1950, the Audimeter was such a success that Nielsen sold the service to network television; the radio arm was discontinued in 1964.

The Audimeter (proper name: the Storage Instantaneous Audimeter) is a small, unobtrusive electronic box that rests in the closets, basements and cabinets of 1,170 households around the United States. (Nielsen selects the households based on a gigantic survey operation that starts with U.S. Census listings of all the households in the country; from this raw data, a "sample universe" of all America's cities, towns, farms, neighborhoods, and housing units evolves. Each household in this "sample universe," having agreed to cooperate with Nielsen, provides information on its TV-watching habits for a period of five years.) As members of a Nielsen household turn the set on and off and switch channels, their viewing patterns are recorded in the Audimeter's electronic memory. Each Audimeter is connected to a special telephone line used only by Nielsen. At least twice a day, a Central Office computer dials up each home unit and retrieves the stored information. This instantaneous capability enables Nielsen to

provide its fabled "overnights," or morning-after ratings, in major cities.

The Audimeter thrust Nielsen ahead of its audience-survey competitors, such as Hooper and the American Research Bureau, because the machine eliminated for the first time the uncertainties of memory and the temptations of deceit. However, to this day, Nielsen augments its Audimeter service with diaries in 2,100 additional households. The diary supplements the Audimeter by telling Nielsen not only what programs were watched and for how long, but also who in the family was watching, by age and sex. Ever vigilant in its search to eliminate human error through the application of control systems, Nielsen attempts to offset the inherent fallibility of diaries in several ways: its recruiters visit the households several times; demographic information is obtained in person; there is a systematic 33 per cent sample turnover each year—a turnover so demographically accurate that it takes into account families in newly-constructed houses.

What emerges from this computerized mulch of American patterns of mesmerism is an intelligence-gathering operation perhaps unexampled in modern technology. Nielsen can arm its clients with such infinitesimal data as:

—The number of households tuned to each network program during the average *minute* of a telecast—an estimate based literally on the metered measurement of every minute of the telecast.

—The percentage of all U.S. television households using TV by half-hour segments. (The figure is strategically important for broadcasters, since it identifies the available audience for programs that compete with one another during the given time period.)

—The share of audience. This concept is a Nielsen signature. It first appeared in the 1920's as "share of market," an item which businessmen have spent more money to pinpoint than any other single piece of intelligence in the marketing-information field. Audience

"share" is based on the assumption that not every set in the U.S. is in use at once. Thus the "share" concept makes it possible to compare the ability of programs to attract the households *using* TV during their respective time periods, even when TV usage is at different levels at these different times.

The care and comprehension of Nielsen survey techniques suggest a degree of exactitude almost beyond the attenuation of human error and, in fact, the Nielsen methods are recognized as clinically sound when judged by the yardstick of statistical science. (Nielsen's closest competitor, the American Research Bureau, has not attained the national stature of Nielsen, and is primarily a comparative service for local stations in major cities.)

But no theory of probability has yet been able to overcome the variable of human free will, and so the precise degree of accuracy of Nielsen's TV audience projections will always remain a mystery. Some critics have pointed out that Nielsen has other, more practical, limitations, not necessarily a fault of its own structure.

Because television advertisers (and hence, television programmers) are not interested in attracting the "fringes" of television viewership—that is, the very rich, the very poor, the very young, the foreign-language immigrants, and others whose buying patterns are not in the mainstream of American commerce—these categories are not proportionately represented in the Nielsen sample. The broadcasting establishment is Nielsen's client; the client can and does, in ways both subtle and direct, influence the perimeters of the market area to be surveyed. The very fact that Nielsen's Audimeters and diaries are found in *households* (as opposed to college dormitories, saloons, hospitals, prisons, and other aberrant environments for watching television) indicates a bias, for example.

Imperfect as they are, however, Nielsen's techniques represent a quantum leap above those of the researchers-consultants who regularly, and in increasing numbers, presume to tell television *what* to program.

The one consultant whose visionary genius eclipses Nielsen's plodding, methodical efficiency—the one thinker whose extraordinary perception beggars the absurd posturings of those self-important "authorities" who have created the cybernetic newscast—is not available to the narrow province of television news. His clients are governments, educational programs, corporations. His name is relevant here because he invented the concept of consultancy as corporate America knows it; he is, although many news consultants may *not* know it, their progenitor. He is the Viennese-born philosopher, writer, and post-industrial prophet, Peter Drucker.

It is impossible, in the space of a few paragraphs, to adequately convey Peter Drucker's impact on American management systems, or the scope of change he has wrought on business and industry through his devastatingly simple approach to consultancy. Suffice to say here that Drucker invented the *concept* of "management" as distinct from general business efficiency, decision-making and executive discipline. John J. Tarrant, in his definitive study *Drucker: The Man Who Invented Corporate Society* (Cahners Books, Inc.), asserts:

> The manager of today may never have met Peter Drucker, never heard him speak, never worked with him as a consultant. He may have read some of Drucker's books and articles. But even if he has never come into contact with Drucker's work in any form, the businessman's life, day-in-day-out, year-in-year-out, is profoundly affected by Peter Drucker. What Drucker dreamed of thirty years ago, the manager now takes for granted.

Why be concerned, in this examination of journalistic practice, with the influence of a man who devotes his own attention to business, to "management"? Because television news *is* a business, in that it is perceived as a

profit tool by network presidents and by the career salesmen-turned-station-managers who govern its form and content. And yet, except in a few enlightened instances, the problems of television news have never been treated as *structural* (or management) problems, only as cosmetic ones. "One of the greatest changes," remarks Drucker in Tarrant's work, "has been the growing consciousness of the importance of structure." He adds, "I have learned to be very conservative. Reorganization is surgery. One doesn't just cut." A cursory glance at the wholesale firings—of anchorman, news director, reporters, assignment editors—that frequently accompany a dip in station ratings is evidence enough that most TV stations are innocent of Drucker's warning. (The ordeal of CBS-owned KNXT in Los Angeles, to be described later, is an excellent example of this innocence.)

There are other facets of Drucker's insight that commend themselves—vainly, so far—to television news. Drucker is the high priest of "management by objectives," of the demand that organizational roles be clearly defined. He has also remarked that "the average businessman, when asked what a business is, is likely to answer: 'An organization to make a profit.' And the average economist is likely to give the same answer. But this answer is not only false; it is irrelevant." But television news departments are by and large negligent in devising coherent expressions of what their goals are (the one exception to that negligence is, significantly, the profit motive); they are far more interested in employing research-consultants to outguess the *public's* definition of news.

Drucker, in many other ways, is in direct opposition to the style and methodology of news consultants who will be described in this book. Nearly all of them, for instance, make a great argument (and present a large bill) for the preliminary audience research that, supposedly, leads them to their recommendations. Tarrant quotes Chris Argyris, of the Harvard University

Graduate School of Education:

> Some social scientists may fault Peter for not being more of an empirical researcher. I do not, for if he were, I wonder if he could have made the conceptual path-clearing contributions that he has made. If I were to fault Peter, it would be that he never seemed to realize that embedded in his "nonscientific" consulting-based methods of inquiry were the seeds of a new methodology for social science—one that it needs desperately if it is to become genuinely acceptable.

Most broadcast consultants have staffs, the largest one employing more than 100 people. Drucker works alone. Most consultants pride themselves on their strict secular rationalism—what they are pleased to call their "pragmatic" tough-mindedness. Drucker, writes Tarrant, finds himself giving much thought to the confrontation between God and man in today's society. Most broadcast consultants are men of narrow backgrounds; an alarming percentage of them are career broadcasters themselves, and others are products of utilitarian educations. Drucker, a multinationalist, has written about American and European history, philosophy, education, religion, and the arts.

Clearly, Peter Drucker is a man apart from his fellows in the field. but his monumental achievements, beginning with his legendary assignment with General Motors in the mid-1940's (in which he defined the corporation in America as a self-renewing, permanent institution, placed it in a superior position to the transitory stockholder, and generally honed his characterization of Industrial Man) and continuing through his commentaries on multinational corporations and his concept of the "global shopping center," suggest that he personifies a standard by which others in the field may be judged.

As we shall see, that arm of the broadcast industry mandated to keep America informed about itself scarcely requires its own consultants to approach that standard.

6

"Least Objectionable"

By the mid-sixties, local newscasts were coming out of the Stone Age. They were building audiences, looking more professional, and becoming assets—rather than liabilities—to their stations.

One major reason was the explosive nature of the news itself. The Vietnam War, urban riots, political assassinations, student protests, the civil rights movement, a general landscape of confrontation that made for exciting "visuals" and theatrical reportage—all these helped create an enormous new audience for television news.

Another reason had to do with default. As the networks grew in power, they absorbed programming creation from their affiliates. By paying station rebates for accepting a network feed (and then sharing in the commercial revenue), the networks made it more profitable for stations to relay national programs than to create their own.

Soon the local newscast was the *only* original programming most stations did on a regular basis, outside the obligatory Sunday-morning and post-midnight "public service" throwaways.

Suddenly the newscast was no longer just a write-off. It performed two vital competitive services, neither of which had anything to do with journalism. First, it served as the station's "signature," its collective personality (and as the major local attraction for commercial time-buyers). Second, the early-evening newscast took on an enormous show-business obligation: assembling a large audience to be delivered into the parent network's prime-time schedule.

This second function was a by-product of the more rarefied levels of strategic television theory. In the 1960s, an unorthodox but brilliant thinker named Paul Klein, then an audience research executive for NBC, formulated a concept that he called "Least Objectionable Programming." The theory was so simple, so clean in its apparent logic, that it gained immediate acceptance in the industry, where it became universally known by its initials.

L.O.P. argued that people did not watch *programs*, they watched *television*. Therefore, the task facing a given network (or station) was not to get the viewer to turn her set on so much as it was to attract the viewer to the desired channel. Klein believed that some human law of inertia rendered a viewer passive in her chair once she had tuned in to a given channel and that a viewer tended to switch channels only when inspired by negative stimuli: when the program she was watching aroused her anger, inflamed her prejudices, offended her morality, challenged her political beliefs. (The use of the feminine pronoun here is not just a bow to feminist sensibilities. It has long been an article of faith among broadcasters that women, not men, control the viewing choices in the household—an assumption that, in itself, yields interesting aspects of sexism.)

Therefore, the trick to retaining audiences was two-fold and simple: build them up early and don't offend them. The early-evening local newscast figured prominently in both elements of this theory.

Thus, without ever quite intending it, television station managers began turning their principal liability into an advantage. Local news became part of the L.O.P. By 1965, the day of the local newscast as a "profit center" was at hand.

Three years later, the first cybernetic newscast was to follow.

The natural attractiveness of the medium was reflected in many audience surveys. By the late 1960's, Roper polls were beginning to show that upward of 64

per cent of Americans relied on television as their "primary" source of news.

And the fifth Alfred I. DuPont *Survey of Broadcast Journalism*, published by Columbia University in 1975, had this to say about TV news's "prestige":

> In April 1974, *U.S. News & World Report* asked 500 U.S. "leaders" to rate organizations and institutions "according to the amount of influence. . .for decisions or actions affecting the nation as a whole." TV came in first with a score of 7.2 on a scale of 1 to 10. The White House tied the Supreme Court for second place, and newspapers came next.
>
> . . .In a special study of public institutions done by Louis Harris for the Senate Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations, TV news was found to have made by far the greatest gains in public confidence since 1965—overtaking the military, organized religion, the Supreme Court, the U.S. Senate, the House of Representatives, and the executive branch of the federal government.

There was another factor in the impact and appeal of television news, one that added an unwelcome ethical consideration to the commercially-oriented medium: Americans, in increasing numbers, were *obliged* to watch television for their information. They were forgetting how to read.

23 MILLION CALLED ILLITERATE

Thus ran the headlines on Oct. 29, 1975.

The U.S. Office of Education had just released the results of a four-year study which indicated that more than 23 million U.S. adults were functionally illiterate—unable to read help-wanted ads or make the most economical purchases.

The Associated Press quoted the report as saying: "It is surprising, perhaps even shocking, to suggest that approximately *one of five Americans* is incompetent or functions with difficulty and that about *half of the adult*

population is merely functional and not at all proficient in necessary skills and knowledges."

Earlier studies, by the National Center for Health Statistics, had indicated the problem was not confined to adults. One million American youths, aged 12 to 17, were found to be illiterate—almost 5 percent of that age group's total.

"It offers new evidence," wrote Eric Wentworth of the Washington *Post*, "that the United States has a serious literacy problem despite the more than $40 billion spent yearly on public school operations."

And where are the illiterate most likely to turn for information? To the beguiling device that flickers for nearly seven hours a day in the average American household; the device most often listed as the "primary" source; the device with the "Number One amount of influence"; the device that had made "the greatest gains in public confidence"; the device that, by 1976, was tapping unparalleled resources of behavioristic science to offer amusing, ingratiating, titillating, "least objectionable," and otherwise nonessential "news" as a bait to the army of affluent viewers, to hook them for the main event—the commercial.

7

Rhinestone Cowboys

We take you now to the single most profitable television news operation in the United States—WLS, Channel 7, in Chicago, Illinois. WLS, an ABC-owned station, was a consistent ratings leader in local news through most of the 1970s. By mid-decade its nightly audience had topped the *million* mark—more viewers than watched any single station in New York. In comparison, the Chicago *Tribune,* the city's largest-circulation newspaper, reached 747,715 readers daily at that time.

In fact, with the demise in 1977 of the Chicago Daily News, WLS's "circulation" rivaled those of the two surviving papers combined. All of which made WLS arguably the single most influential news outlet in the Midwest's largest city.

In 1976 WLS realized a net profit of $15 million—compared to $5 million each for CBS-owned WBBM and independent WGN, and $3 million for NBC-owned WMAQ.

And how well does Channel 7 "Eyewitness News" serve the informational needs of its viewers in a city distinguished for its political corruption, learning disabilities in its public schools, healthcare scandals, ghetto alienation, and patterns of crime?

Here is a good example. Here, in 1976, is Channel 7's John Coleman standing by in North Dakota with a report on his "never-before-published pictures of flying saucers":

COLEMAN: *(thrusting pictures toward camera):* I want you to take a look at 'em. Look as closely as you can and make up your own mind. And listen to what J.

Allen Hynek, the Director of the Center for UFO Studies, and Philip J. Klass, UFO skeptic and debunker, have to say about pictures of flying saucers.

KLASS: Every still picture that has been shown that I have seen—a still picture—that shows a solid, craftlike object, is a hoax. Uh—the reason that it is so easy to—to make a hoax photo—uh, is that all one needs is a little imagination. One can carve out a little model out of plastic; you can take a hubcap, you can suspend it from a thin thread. Then you defocus the camera a little bit, so the eye cannot see this thin thread. And then you have a beautiful UFO—uh, picture.

HYNEK: I'm quite sure in my own mind that not all of them are Frisbees or hubcaps or these things, sure, that is the thing that is done by some pranksters and (sic) will go out and try that. But we have them, the same sorts of things from all sorts of countries. When you get the same kind of thing from Peru, from Australia, from Japan, from Brazil, from Canada, as well as the United States, and under very strange circumstances, in very rough country sometimes, I just don't think those are all Frisbees.

COLEMAN *(wheeling toward the camera and speaking in his best This-Is-London voice):* You have now seen some good, clear pictures of flying saucers. The best that there are. We don't know whether these pictures are the real thing or hoaxes. We can never get a good clear story to go with the good clear picture.

Tomorrow, I'm going to give you another look at these pictures. And you'll hear what our Air Force has to say. After all, if nuts-and-bolts flying saucers are in our atmosphere, shouldn't we detect them with our spy satellites and radar? That story about UFO's tomorrow, when our series continues.

WLS has taken cybernetic news far beyond any major station in the country, even beyond the limits of its sister station in New York, WABC (which has fashioned some pretty weird newscasts in its own right).

WLS is the original Happy Talk station. In 1976, its basic news team—anchormen Joel Daly and Fahey Flynn, weatherman Coleman, and sportscaster Bill Frink—were the same men who introduced the format to the airwaves in 1968. (Coleman joined the ABC network exclusively in 1979; Frink left for a rival station in 1978.)

Happy Talk and cybernetic news should not be confused. They are not interchangeable terms, although Happy Talk is compatible with the behavioristic assumptions of the cybernetic newscast. The term "Happy Talk" was coined to describe the aura of exaggerated joviality and elbow-jabbing comradeship evinced by the Flynn-Daly-Frink-Coleman team night after night. Once it had proved itself as a salable gimmick in Chicago, Happy Talk quickly spread across the country, imitated by grinning, lantern-jawed news teams from New York to San Francisco and most stops in between. (WXII in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, was an outstanding exponent for a while, with its news team dressed "like refugees from the Sunday morning gospel hour in matching lemon yellow blazers," according to the Winston-Salem *Journal and Sentinel*.)

"Happy Talk" is virtually the signature of ABC-owned stations around the country. They have brought the technique to its fullest flower. In fact, New York's flagship ABC station, WABC, owns the dark distinction of having broadcast the ultimate "Happy Talk" gambit—an ill-chosen utterance by veteran weatherman Tex Antoine on Nov. 24, 1976, that ended a broadcasting career begun in 1944.

Anchorman Bill Beutel had just read a news item about an alleged rape attack on an eight-year-old girl. Roger Grimsby then came on the air and introduced Antoine and his weathercast.

Antoine's first words, presumably spoken in the lighthearted spirit that flavors all Eyewitness newscasts, were of such blatantly bad taste that they even exceeded

ABC's permissive notions of propriety—a spectacular achievement in itself.

Quoth Antoine:

"With rape so predominant in the news lately, it is well to remember the words of Confucius: 'If rape is inevitable, lie back and enjoy it.'"

Later that night, WABC apologized to its viewers for what it called Antoine's "inexcusable lapse of judgment." Antoine was suspended until Dec. 20 of 1976; when he returned, he was allowed to work in the WABC weather department, but was prohibited from appearing on the air.

Not that Antoine's censure made much of a dent in Eyewitness News's consciousness. Early in 1980, anchorman Grimsby was reprimanded by the station's management for a sneering commentary on another rape story. After he announced that Ed "Too Tall" Jones, the professional football player-turned-boxer, had been arrested on a rape charge, Grimsby volunteered the following witticism: "The woman says she had gone to sleep when suddenly there he was, all 6-foot-9 and 255 pounds. It could have been worse. He was 270 when he played football."

Happy Talk owes much of its identity to this type of bantering remark made among anchormen, reporters, weathermen, and sportscasters during transitions from topic to topic. But the concept has a broader scope. It defines a newscast that is weighted toward the trivial—curiosity-stories of the type that Fred Friendly refers to as the "two-headed calf"—and away from the abstract, the disturbing, the vital, or what Friendly calls the "complicated-dull."

Coleman again, with another segment in his ten-part *(ten-part!)* North-Dakota-based series on UFO's:

COLEMAN: Something significant happened at this spot on Interstate 94 on the early morning of August 26, 1975. At three-thirty in the morning, Sandy Larson, her daughter Jackie, and a friend Terry left Fargo, North Dakota, headed westward along this Interstate. What

happened next, when they reached this point about 39 miles west of Fargo, is Sandy Larson's story.

SANDY LARSON *(a middle-aged blonde woman shown standing next to Coleman, vaguely confused, her hair blowing in the wind):* Well, first we heard a big noise, a rumble it was, louder than any thunder imaginable. . . .

COLEMAN: But was it louder than that truck that just went by?

LARSON: Very definitely.

COLEMAN: Could it—uh, what kinda noise? Like an explosion or a jet roar?

LARSON: More like thunder. 'N' 'nen the sky lit up an' eight or ten glowing objects came down out of the sky. . .they were round, orange, glowing balls. [At this point, Ms. Larson's voice began to tremble.]

COLEMAN: Were they—were they frightening?

LARSON: Very definitely. Then we realized there were taillights in front of us. So we pulled up alongside of 'em, and I rolled the window down, and I said, "Didjou see that?" and the guy said, "Yeah". . . .

Enough.

Is it fair to single out John Coleman's North Dakota expedition as an example of the level of his station's newscast? One could, on the other hand, point to the headline stories read by Daly and Flynn (a dignified broadcast veteran who has contributed most of Channel 7's limited journalistic prestige) or to the "in-depth" stories developed by members of the WLS reporting staff. And one will. One will.

What makes Coleman's flying-saucer-Frisbee fandango interesting is its insight into the station's priorities. All news outlets do light feature stories. They are plentiful in newspapers, in *Time* and *Newsweek*. But they seldom constitute a major drain of money and personnel on the outlet's news-gathering resources.

And there is an even greater fallacy inherent in comparing "soft" material in a newscast with light features or circulation gimmicks in a newspaper.

This comparison implies that an entire newspaper

should be judged against an hour (or two-hour) newscast. But the judgment should in fairness be measured on the basis of total newspaper content against the station's total broadcast day, the sum of all its offerings: news, entertainment, commercials. It is instantly apparent that the newscast is a minuscule fragment of a daily outpouring that includes game shows, soap operas, sports events, movies, "The Bionic Woman," "Starsky and Hutch," "S.W.A.T.," "Charlie's Angels," "Happy Days". . .and up to five hours' worth of commercials.

Back to Coleman.

When he was not combing the Dakotas for flying-saucer enlightenment or tripping off to the Caribbean for a five-part "report" on the Bermuda Triangle (as he did a few weeks later) or making regular appearances on the ABC network's "Good Morning, America," Coleman was the WLS "Eyewitness News" weatherman.

As such, he was the Number One personality in WLS's Happy Talk mythos; the Prime Card, the bright wrapping on the news-cum-entertainment package that Channel 7 had successfully hustled for eight years. Newscasts in the Midwest are built around the weatherman-jester to a much greater degree than on either coast. And WLS misses not a single trick in merchandising its meal ticket.

The weathercast comes midway through the production, and is the emotional climax of the show. Periodically throughout the opening minutes, the anchorman works the audience like a carnival advance man, hinting, teasing, tossing off a one-liner here and there to build up a state of mirthful anticipation.

When Coleman takes the stage, it is ham's holiday, with gaudy cartoon visuals and chroma-key sleight-of-hand that require hours of careful preparation. (Chroma-key is an electronic process that allows a director, using two cameras, to superimpose a foreground image—say, Coleman—against an unrelated

background field—say, a cartoon igloo.) At WLS, the weathercast can run a whopping three and one-half minutes (this in an era when "a minute-ten" is the rule for any story short of World War III), with Coleman doing a star turn that would boggle the crowd at Reno Sweeney.

Even the regulation opening of the Channel 7 "Eyewitness News" leaves no doubt as to the show's headliner. It is Coleman, and Coleman alone, who is allowed to wander nonchalantly onto the "Eyewitness News" set under the opening credits; the others are already seated and beaming. Coleman strolls into view from somewhere among Us—from among the cameras—and with elaborate casualness attaches his neck microphone as he takes up a standing position at far Stage Right, next to the sportscaster.

Although we cannot yet hear the "Eyewitness News" team, we see Coleman's mouth moving; we see the sportscaster grin. And we know that for the duration of the newscast, no matter how grim the headlines, no matter how bloody the footage, no matter how moodily soul-searching Joel Daly's commentary—we know that nothing is really wrong in Chicago or in the Republic.

Coleman is smiling. Later, Coleman will make us laugh. There are no structural flaws in our universe. A climate of assurance has been smoothed about us, like a warm blanket.

And, in gratitude, assured and off the hook, relieved of the world's worries by comfortable Coleman and the "Eyewitness News," we will tune in again. And again.

JOEL DALY:. . .And in California, first it was no rain, then it was too much rain. John McDonald gets some help trying to dig his car out of a mud-swamped garage near Los Angeles. This is not the kind of picture that the Chamber of Commerce likes us to see, John.

COLEMAN: No, Joel, but I'm very proud. Because, let's see, it was Friday morning I was on the network, I predicted mudslides for the Los Angeles area.

DALY: And you're gonna take—

COLEMAN *(loudly):* I don't care how bad it is, just so it's the way I predicted! You know what I mean?

If John Coleman is the complete buffoon on camera (he paraded about the Channel 7 weather set with a large yellow "Peace" sign the night that U.S. involvement formally ended in Vietnam: he stood on his head during a forecast as he promised he would do if the weather got below 40 degrees, or something), off-screen he is a different person entirely. Now he is Pagliacci, the misunderstood poet of meteorology, the sober-sided intellectual who must don the trappings of the fool in order to make himself noticed by the rabble.

There is a certain condescension here, if you care to take notice of it, a condescension that redounds throughout the assumptions of cybernetic news.

Consider these excerpts from an interview I conducted with Coleman for the Chicago *Sun-Times* a few years ago. Is it hard, I asked professorial Coleman, to get into the mood for video Coleman?

"I'll be candid with you," said Coleman. "I don't know how to lie. It's work. The 'me' you're talking to now is more the 'me' than that guy on television. When I came into the Chicago market, I looked at the competition. And I chose the role I felt would have the best chance of succeeding."

Coleman sighed. He is a plumpish middle-aged man (one rap that nobody could make stick against the Channel 7 team was that they were beautiful), with sad eyes arranged around a generous beak, whence derives his slightly nasal basso profundo.

"I would say," Coleman continued, "that the weatherman is much maligned from all sides. He is greatly misunderstood by almost everybody but the public.

"You become a comic character. Now—with this image in the community's mind, you're constantly trying to rise above it, yet you know you can't be

perfect; that you're going to have those embarassing days and weeks, so you mustn't be pompous about yourself."

And how does Coleman feel about Happy Talk?

"If you really studied it," he said, "you would realize that it's not a discredit to journalism. And maybe, in fact, it is a real step forward in journalism. I personally feel that's so. Let's start with the fact that almost half a million more people watch the Channel 7 news every night now than they did in 1966. I don't care how good a news service is, it's only as good as its communication job accomplished."

That is where one usually winds up when speaking with a member of Happy Talk news team. The Orwellian inversion of values: Happy Talk is not just a slightly gamy fact of competitive life in broadcasting; Happy Talk is good for you. Happy Talk puts more people in front of the TV set so they can receive the important news ("You can't save souls in an empty church"). And, if somehow the "important" (read: "disturbing") news does not ever get delivered to these augmented hordes, or is not delivered in the depth and scope it has traditionally deserved—why, then, an equally important service has been rendered to the community. People are still drinking beer. Laughing. The "framework" has been established. Life is going on.

Oh, perhaps it is not going on as pleasantly as it might, because the laughing beer-drinkers have delivered another demagogue into public office (in-depth political reporting is complicated and dull and often disturbing); or because they are, suddenly and without warning, in the midst of an economic crisis (financial reporting tempts yawns, and nips at deep-seated uneasiness); or because their neighborhoods are under siege by members of an enemy race (race stories are best covered at the point of picketing and rock-throwing; the "visuals" are much more exciting, and no one has to think much about the abstract, unpleasant root causes); or because, being good television-trained

consumers, they have not examined many of the alternatives to drinking beer.

There are interesting similarities between Happy Talk news's sense of mission as articulated by Coleman, and U.S. public schools' goals as perceived by the radical education critic, Jonathan Kozol.

Kozol believes that "the first goal and primary function of the U.S. public school is not to educate good people, but good citizens. . .manageable voters, manipulable consumers and, if need be, in the case of war or crisis, willing killers."

In *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far From Home,* Kozol goes on:

> The first objective and the most consistent consequence of public school is the perpetration of a U.S. value system: one that dominates both how we think and how we feel about those people who do *not* live in this land, or else who *do*, but live here in those Third World colonies which are the non-white ghettos. The goal is self-protection in the face of activating guilt and shame . . . The surfeit, over-fullness, over-richness we enjoy, exist somehow upon a plateau of untouched and non-malignant privilege.

Granted, TV news lacks a malign ideology of the sort that Kozol perceives in the public schools. The effect is essentially the same.

In their frenzy to invest their news team with a hard-core lowbrow persona, the WLS promotional department in 1976 tried every trick except opening the newscast with Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man." (They probably would have done *that* had they not thought it too highbrow.)

What the Channel 7 image-makers did attempt was the hillbillization of Joel Daly. It was a difficult task. Daly, the anchorman and Coleman's straight man, had —like Coleman—delusions of profundity. A gentle-mannered soul, accessible and easy to like personally, Daly on-screen was a study in schizophrenia. He duti-

fully carried out his Dr. Interlocutor role with Coleman, but he never really seemed comfortable in the part.

A more reliable clue to the Daly self-image came at the close of every newscast. This was the segment reserved for Joel's "Commentary," and it was generally a pietistic blend of O. Henry, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale and Erich Segal, delivered in stately cadences and accompanied by a tilted-head, sad-eyed expression on Daly's honest Howdy Doody face.

Daly was a *magna cum laude* graduate of Yale University, the professor of a $100,000-a-year salary, a familiar personage nationwide on ABC as occasional anchorman for the network's "Weekend News" out of New York—hardly the kind of guy you would imagine in Levis, puffing a Lucky Strike and humming, "I Turned 21 In Prison Doin' Life Without Parole."

And yet this is exactly the fiction that WLS sought to bestow upon their amiable, compliant anchorman-intellectual.

Full-page advertisements began appearing in Chicago newspapers. They featured handsomely-wrought pen-and-ink drawings of Daly the Plain Cuss: Daly—in a country-western jacket, string tie, and hand-tooled cowboy boots, with a guitar resting on his knee—grinning out at the reader like Porter Waggoner. Daly in work jeans, behind the wheel of a semi-trailer truck. "TONIGHT JOEL DALY RIDES WITH THE LAST AMERICAN COWBOY." Daly, in a T-shirt, balancing a can of pop on his thigh, the can cunningly labeled "Seven."

The apex came on Sunday, February 1, 1976. The occasion was a country music concert at Chicago's Arie Crown Theater. Chicago *Sun-Times* columnist Bob Greene, now with the *Tribune*, was present and told the story in his Tuesday column:

> . . . Midway through the concert, the master of ceremonies—one Stan Scott—broke into the program and announced that a special guest would be coming onto the stage.

And with that, from behind a curtain, strode a tall man wearing a western suit and cowboy boots.

It was not, as first glance might have indicated, a Tennessee singing star or a rodeo cowboy.

It was, instead, Joel Daly, the Channel 7 news anchorman.

Now, Channel 7 has always prided itself as the folksy "Happy Talk" station in its quest for higher and higher ratings, but as far as I could tell, this was the first time that a television journalist had ever appeared on a country music concert stage to entertain the fans in person. It was tantamount to seeing Walter Cronkite on "Hee Haw."

The thousands of people in the audience whooped and cried as if it were Merle Haggard instead of a news reporter. Dozens of men and women rushed to the front of the stage with Instamatic cameras and flashed bulbs in Daly's direction.

And then, Greene reported, "a silence settled over the house" as Daly began to read a poem he had composed about how it feels to be a hillbilly:

A hillbilly is not just one who lives in the hills,
Who drinks from the stills
Or works in the mills.

A hillbilly is not just one whose neck is red,
Whose tail is lead
Or is by a shotgun wed.

No, a hillbilly isn't just a mountaineer ready to feud,
A hillbilly isn't merely a person,
It's an attitude.

Daly's poem went on to extol the alembic advantages of hillbilly love, hillbilly joy, hillbilly grief, hillbilly laughter ("the key to relief"), hillbilly tears, hillbilly loneliness. As the Arie Crown rafters echoed his oratory, Channel 7's Yale *magna-cum*-hillbilly brought the transfixed crowd to a celebratory pitch of Whitmanesque brotherhood:

So call me a hillbilly;
Make me part of that crowd.
At least I know when music is good and not just loud.

And if my poem sounds corny and just a little bit silly,
What the heck do you expect?
I'm just a hillbilly.

The very day on which the Daly column was published, Bob Greene received a memo, delivered by messenger, from John Briska, WLS's manager of press information.

Was the memo castigating? Did it reprimand Greene for unwarranted and out-of-context ridicule of a fine television newsman? Did it petulantly riposte that print journalists had been known to do some pretty foolish things too? Did it threaten a meeting with the *Sun-Times* editor?

No. Here in its entirety, was what Briska's memo said:

> BOB: Went good and turned out same way. Many thanks. Hope we can keep you in touch to other goddies [*sic*], especially now that you have more to write.
>
> Best,
> John Briska, Manager Press Info.

It would be pleasant to report that the travesty stopped there, that everyone concerned came to his senses and put an end to the foolishness. That is not the case.

Buoyed by his superstar reception at the Arie Crown Theater and by his critical acclaim in the press, Joel Daly made a recording of "The Hillbilly." It was aired on some of the Chicago country-western stations, one of which reported in November that it had risen to Number 23 on the charts.

There is still more. On the flip side of "The Hillbilly," Daly made his commercial yodeling debut. The tune in question, written by Daly himself, was titled, "The Difference in Me Is You."

That particular side of the record received considerably less air play than "The Hillbilly." Nevertheless, it is an indisuptable footnote to the saga of electronic journalism that Joel Daly, of WLS-TV's "Eyewitness News" team, became history's first anchor-yodeler.

A crucial ingredient in the value system taught in U.S. public schools, believes Kozol, is a sense of impotence. The pupil must feel that he is powerless to effect change —to take an intervening, ethical stand—because of the overwhelming vastness of the social forces at work.

Kozol quotes John Kenneth Galbraith as saying, "It is the essence of planning that public behavior be made predictable," and asserts:

> What the teacher "teaches" is by no means chiefly in the words he speaks. It is at least in part what he *is*, in what he *does*, in what he seems to *wish to be*. The secret curriculum is the teacher's own lived values and convictions, in the lineaments of his expression and in the biography of passion or self-exile which is written in his eyes. . .
>
> By denial of conviction, he does not teach *nothing*. He still teaches *something*. He teaches, at the very least, a precedent for nonconviction.

Thus we have television's "teacher," John Coleman (and many others like him), the man who "doesn't know how to lie," choosing a didactic TV "role" that belies his own, self-confessed true nature for the sake of persuading viewers nightly that things are generally okay, that there are no deep structural flaws in the society they live in, that laughing and drinking beer are the accepted responses to the American community in the seventies.

None of this is to suggest that local television news stations (and their station managers) were systematized, conscious, and ideological agents of the counterrevo-

lutionary forces in America. They were not. They were businessmen, good citizens, probably a bit more "civic-minded" than their management contemporaries at, say, Xerox or IBM or Exxon.

But in their pursuit of a competitive edge—and in their resultant and largely innocent embrace of cybernetic techniques for audience manipulation—they had managed to form a lock step pattern with public education goals as Kozol sees them.

8

Stepchild on the Make

Alone among the three major television networks, ABC is a stepchild. It is the smallest network. And until the 1975-76 prime-time season, it had been the weakest in the ratings.

To understand these three facts, which are interrelated, is to understand why ABC became the first television network to hire outside consultants for large-scale advice on the appearance and, to a degree, the content of its network newscast. (Both Frank N. Magid Associates and McHugh & Hoffman Inc. were on the network payroll in the 1970's.) And it is to understand why ABC's owned and affiliated stations, most notably WABC in New York and WLS in Chicago, were in the vanguard of the razzle-dazzle newscast style of the late 1960's, the style that came to be known as Happy Talk.

ABC was born of excess and grew up in deprivation. The network evolved from the National Broadcasting Company; until 1943 it was NBC Radio's Blue Network. To forestall a monopolistic threat (it is strange indeed to consider that mighty CBS was, through its first quarter-century, a weak and vulnerable challenger to NBC) the government ordered NBC to release its Blue division; it was allowed to retain the Red, which is the NBC of today.

In 1952, ABC was purchased by the Paramount Theatres chain. By this time, CBS and NBC had established themselves as America's pre-eminent broadcasting empires, and, between the two of them, had acquired the largest and most powerful local outlets as affiliates or owned stations.

This pre-eminence shared by CBS and NBC put ABC at a grave competitive disadvantage from the outset. Large, well-known urban stations generate large audiences, and it is on the basis of audience rating points that network revenues are set. Through the years, ABC has trailed its two older rivals, not only in ratings competition in cities where the three networks were head-to-head, but also in the crucial category of total affiliate stations. You can't get ratings unless you turn on a transmitter, and in cities with fewer than three TV stations, ABC often did not have a transmitter to turn on. "Catch-up" became the operative ethic at ABC.

There was a further obstacle to the youngest network's struggle toward parity: the broadcasting inexperience of ABC's early chieftains. When Paramount Theatres took over the network, Leonard Goldenson, a career theater man, became president of the complex. His executive vice president was Simon B. Siegel, also a product of theater management. As Les Brown points out in his book *Television: The Business Behind the Box,* Goldenson and Siegel "were not intuitively broadcasters. Their approach to the business was to keep an eye on what CBS was doing."

As the 1960's progressed and ABC's leadership passed to younger, more competitive hands, ABC's catch-up absorption intensified. The network acquired a certain opportunistic penchant: a willingness to gamble, when the odds seemed favorable, for a quick solution to competitive problems. This tendency gave ABC a mercurial aspect that was, by turns, the hope and the bane of the industry.

On the one hand, it led the youngest network into brilliant bursts of experimentation: *Wide World of Sports*; the airing of professional football on Monday nights beginning in 1970; "Roots"; "ABC Theatre." On the other, it prodded ABC into expedient programming philosophies, often critically deplorable, or self-destructive, or both: the opportunistic spate of "relevant" prime-time series around 1970; its

historically questionable series of "docu-dramas" in the late 70s; its launching of the "jiggly" era ("Charlie's Angels," "Three's Company").

Les Brown sums up ABC's vicissitudes most accurately:

> In network society, ABC is the parvenu, wealthy as a company through its vast chain of motion picture theaters and its ownership of television and radio stations in the largest markets, but as a television network somewhat out of its class. ABC is the climber, and it has been a hard climb. It is hard to catch up with the network leaders who are entrenched, hard to beat them at the game they invented, hard to convey a public impression of respectability without a history of it, and hard to win the full cooperation and support of affiliated stations which, through the lean years, have operated from short-range goals.

ABC's opportunistic instincts found expression in many ways. Among the most conspicuous was its strident self-portrayal as the Network of the Young. Until NBC's administrative bumblings and CBS's lassitude finally allowed ABC to "win" the 1975-76 prime-time entertainment programming race, the network had seldom been able to coax the required numbers of viewers away from its two grown-up rivals. Perhaps as the result of some feverish delirium born of perennial frustration, ABC began to tantalize itself with the notion that there was a huge, untapped multitude of potential television viewers "out there somewhere." This horde, the fantasy had it, was possibly attractive to advertisers. Brand-conscious. Affluent. Trendy. And young.

In the late 1960's, when the "youth culture" was rampant in the land, ABC, with the touching absorption of some gigantic Elmer Fudd, set about to construct a series of gaudy "youth-oriented" programs—electronic wabbit-twaps in which to snare all those prodigal Bugs Bunnies. It was dimly apparent even to the Gucci-

slippered minions of the ABC executive suites that something of a revolution was being perpetrated by those selfsame bunnies, a revolution that rejected the very consumer culture of which network television was a life-support system. It doesn't matter, the minions told themselves; they'll all come to their senses in a few years. And when they do—when they put down their Vietcong flags and get around, finally, to shopping for pantyhose and Hamburger Helper and cat chow—they'll remember that we are the Network of the Young.

So ABC began its attempt to ingratiate itself to the young consumers and consumers-to-be "out there." Some of the programming results were on target; "Mod Squad" was the under-25 hit of the late sixties. Most were just plain dreadful: transparent, painfully transparent, in their tendency to give lip service to radical values, then pull back at the last minute to reveal their (moderately) long-haired, (sort of) disaffected young heroes and heroines to be closet Defenders of the System. In this category fell such groaners as "The Young Lawyers," "Matt Lincoln," and perhaps the all-time champion of hypocritical television fare, "The Young Rebels." This last piece of gaucherie, which premiered in the troubled autumn of 1970 and died quietly some weeks after, concerned the fortunes of a bunch of Revolutionary War "activists" who worked for the American cause behind enemy lines. The implicit parallels to the radical youth movement were all but announced on idiot cards at the beginning of each episode.

But ABC got better at this game as time went on. Slowly but surely, it began to be evident that the network's "fantasy" about a large, untapped young audience was not such a fantasy after all. Whatever their artistic merit, the prime-time series being aired over ABC in the mid-70s were finding their mark with an emerging audience.

And then in 1975 ABC got born again.

Freddie Silverman and ABC were destined for one another. As director of daytime programming for CBS, Silverman had scored impressive successes. He was later to assume top command at NBC, where the fruits of his peculiar genius were to prove excruciatingly slow. But during his two golden years at the Network of the Young, Silverman found his true spiritual home. He was the ultimate maverick at the one network that relished mavericks. He changed the rules—not just for ABC, but for all of television.

Silverman received his greatest public notoriety for the stunning prime-time ratings victory that culminated in March, 1976—when the network vaulted from last place to first on the strength of such hits as "Happy Days," "Laverne and Shirley," "Bionic Woman," and "Charlie's Angels." And there is no minimizing the scope of this achievement.

And yet the move that may very well prove to be Silverman's longest-standing legacy was all but lost upon the general American public amid the prime-time ballyhoo: his appointment of Roone Arledge to head the network's news division while retaining his command of sports.

No one else could have done it. No other president, and no other network, would have thought to defy this most sacred of all television's unwritten rules: *News shall be separate and distinct from all other programming.*

Nor would anyone else have dreamed of putting a career *sports* programmer at the head of one of America's most influential news services. At the time he took over, Roone Arledge had had exactly as much on-the-job reporting experience as a TV newsperson as Rona Barrett.*

* Years ago, CBS appointed a non-journalist to head its news division. Richard Salant had been a corporate lawyer for the company at the time of his ascension. Salant went on to preside over perhaps the most distinguished electronic journalism department ever assembled.

It took a maverick. At a maverick network.

With the result that news—or something very much resembling news—bade fair to become the No. 1 network programming form as the 1980s began.

Silverman/Arledge could not claim sole credit for this super-popularizing of the news. If there was one program that fixed, in the public mind, a relationship between romantic fantasy and hard journalism, it was CBS's "60 Minutes"—a news-adventure series so intricately crafted that no competitor, not even Arledge at CBS, could duplicate its mystical appeal to audiences. Arledge's best shot, "20/20," has achieved respectable ratings, but nothing like the excellence of its prototype.

By early 1980—after it had hit the No. 1-rated spot for a string of 22 straight weeks—critics were calling "60 Minutes" a "modern-day Western." Dan Rather, its most dashing correspondent, was repeatedly described in terms of the archetypal frontier hero: "Matt Dillon," as one columnist gushed.

The show's detractors could grumble that "60 Minutes" had "bought" its ratings supremacy with an influx of cuddly show-biz features (Morley Safer interviewing the Muppets) and celebrity-type interviews (Mike Wallace chatting up Johnny Carson). But it was hard to detract from a show that would expose one of its own main sponsors, as "60 Minutes" did with a hard look at the safety failings of Pinto, or defy strong Administration pressure to air a searing report on victims of the Shah's secret police during the height of the hostage crisis in Tehran.

Earlier, this book established a distinction between *news* (that which informs) and *programming* (that which sells). "60 Minutes" is the classic blend of the two concepts. It informs *and* sells.

And yet there are no news consultants in the "60 Minutes" brain trust. The show remains a testament to one of the first—and perhaps last—great individual visionaries of broadcast journalism. Don Hewitt invented "60 Minutes," and Don Hewitt runs it. The

only contact his show has had with consultants—as we shall see later—has been to investigate *them.*

But if Roone Arledge could not decode the "60 Minutes" success formula, he was a great deal more successful in tapping other CBS veins in his overhaul of ABC News.

He raided CBS for talent—both on-camera and in production. Established stars such as Sylvia Chase, Hughes Rudd, Barry Serafin, and Jack Laurence crossed over to Arledge's high-salaried ranks—the most prominent of some 17 defectors from CBS.

Other unlikely hirings—Washington *Post* superstar Carl Bernstein as head of the 350-member Washington bureau, former John F. Kennedy press secretary Pierre Salinger as a correspondent—have helped to define "World News Tonight's" eclectic, unorthodox aura.

And this aura, in turn, has helped "World News Tonight" vault into contention with NBC "Nightly News" (it has passed Nightly on several occasions) and set its cap for an assault on a Cronkite-less CBS.

When one considers that "World News Tonight" has established itself as one of ABC's most important profit centers (*The New York Times* reported that it billed $103 million in sales last year, compared to $38 million in 1975) the recent economic history of network news seems eons in the past.

As recently as 1976—the first edition of this book—it was possible to report the following:

> ". . .the news divisions of the networks are not profit-makers. Budget breakdowns within a network's divisions are guarded secrets, but it is generally agreed that although the evening newscasts *themselves* generate big revenues, the profits are plowed back into such loss-leading enterprises as convention coverage, space shots, election-night marathons, and news specials.

That was long ago. There are no more space shots.

Election coverage has since created its own audience of poll-junkies, which translates into greater revenues. And although convention coverage and other special events are expensive, this cost is partly neutralized by the comparative expenses of *non-news* programming, which has spiraled well ahead of news in the last four years.

Still, news-as-profit-center is a very contemporary development. Historically, the question may still be asked: if all the expense, energy and anguish of newscasting did not generate profits, why did the networks bother?

Adding to the paradox is the matter of the networks as corporations. The most useful kind of news tends to be insurrectionary: exposés of official malfeasance, corrupt diversion of taxpayers' funds, scandal, illegal use of power in both the public and private sectors. As corporations, the networks have a self-interest in maintaining the status quo, the appearance of a calm and orderly business-political universe. As corporate kin, how does CBS News report a payola scandal at Columbia Records, or ABC report the motion-picture industry's vested-interest lobby against cable television? As entities of the government (through the Federal Communications Commission's licensing power), how do the networks report a Watergate, especially under the eye of a malign Administration that is demonstrably willing to use its license removal power as a club?

Not too well. Television news has had its moments as an adversary "press" in terms of criticizing government, starting with Edward R. Murrow's McCarthy broadcast in 1954 and continuing through Walter Cronkite's commentaries, "The Selling of the Pentagon" and "Justice in America" in 1970. The moments have been few. As a watchdog on corporate power, TV network news has been, at best, myopic.

Given these limitations—some of which are shared by newspapers as well—network newscasts labor diligently to give the viewer a reliable, if encapsulated, nightly

summary of the world around him. Why is this so?

Three answers suggest themselves:

Tradition. For this word, read: "Murrow." His imprint on television news is impossible to overstate, despite the fact that he was primarily a radio man. The history of network news is in many ways the history of CBS News, and the legacy of CBS News is World War II. As CBS Radio's European director beginning in 1937, it was Murrow's duty to put together a foreign correspondent staff, and, as David Halberstam indicates, he chose the best and the brightest:

> The CBS men hired by Murrow became what one colleague, not entirely admiringly, called a special kind of philosopher-king-intellectual-statesman-journalist. They included such men as Charles Collingwood, Eric Sevareid, Howard K. Smith, William L. Shirer. After the war, this coterie held together as a radio news elite. When television came into being, they lent it an early stamp of journalistic legitimacy. Murrow never became a television "newsman" in the strict sense of covering hard news or anchoring a newscast. But his "See It Now" series of documentaries, produced superbly by Fred Friendly, provided a standard of toughness, pertinence and intellect that the medium found hard to ignore.*

Self-interest. Because government and broadcasters are so often in conflict, it is easy to forget that TV news owes its existence partly to the nobler visions of government. The Communications Act of 1934, which sets forth the powers of the Federal Communications Commission, provides restraints against the pure profit motives of the businessmen-station owners. The Act articulates the concept of serving the "public interest" as a fundamental price for owning a license.

* "CBS: The Power & the Profits," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 1976.

Edward Jay Epstein, in *News From Nowhere* (Random House, 1973), provides a good definition of "public interest":

> The concept of the public interest which emerged in FCC and Court decisions rests on three central assumptions about the role of a communications medium in a free society. First, it is assumed as "axiomatic" that the "basic purpose" of broadcasting is, in the words of the Commission, "the development of an informed public opinion through the public dissemination of news and ideas concerning the vital public issues of the day." The "foundation stone of the American system of broadcasting" is then the "right of the public to be informed, rather than any right on the part of the government, any broadcast licensees or any individual member of the public to broadcast his own views on any matter." The broadcasting of news and information on matters of public importance is thus presumed to be an indispensable element in fulfilling the "public interest."

Thus, television networks are more or less stuck with doing news, whether they like it or not. Since the network news is largely concerned with the affairs of national government (and is therefore closely scrutinized *by* government, including influential senators, congressmen, and administration aides) it makes sense to present the news with a patina of sobriety, dignity, and detachment.

Identity. Until ten years ago, the three networks each had a distinct personality. NBC was the network of variety; it was Milton Berle, Bob Hope, Dinah Shore, Jack Paar. CBS put itself on the map, competitively, by raiding NBC in the late 1940's of much of its talent, including Jack Benny and Red Skelton; it subsequently became the network of comedy, and later (with Jackie Gleason) of situation comedy. ABC slowly evolved into something of an alternative network, unpredictable, provocative, and it attained a certain identification with sports.

But in the last decade, the old star system began to

fade; the Hopes and Skeltons became vestigial. Entertainment fare grew standardized, a product of the same centralized formula factories: Universal, Screen Gems, and the like. With the advent around 1970 of Norman Lear and Mary Tyler Moore Productions, CBS was able to change that mold somewhat, but even then, the distinctions were marginal—and quickly imitated on the other networks.

So it was that the *news* divisions filled the void as the networks' identifying signatures. Cronkite, Chancellor, Brinkley, Reasoner, Walters—each became, in his or her way, something of a symbol for a network's collective persona. And the news these people reported had to look responsible; it had to exude a certain feeling of integrity and earnest professionalism. It was each network's coat of arms.

9

Follow That Helicopter!

As the crown prince of CBS News, the reigning knight-errant of "60 Minutes," Dan Rather may well be the prototypical TV journalist of the 1980s.

He has vowed to be an activist anchorman when he succeeds Walter Cronkite in 1981, claiming an affinity for "the cutting edge" of breaking events, instead of the isolation of the anchor desk.

Each week on "60 Minutes" he may be seen dashing to the far reaches of America, or even the globe, to pin down the facts of an investigative report and to confront the alleged perpetrators of dastardly schemes.

His image is one of boundless energy for his job—an old-fashioned, hell-for-leather abandon despite the salary that places him among a tiny elite at the top of America's income scale.

A natural question: is the "real" Dan Rather quite as gung-ho as his video persona suggests? Or is it all artifice—a skillfull blend of selective camerawork and the unsung efforts of overworked, underpaid field producers doing Rather's "leg" work behind the scenes.

I had a chance to view Rather's reportorial style first-hand in 1974, during the last days of Richard Nixon's Presidency. Specifically, I found myself an observer in a three-cornered journalistic shell game involving Rather, Tom Brokaw (then NBC's White House Correspondent) and presidential press secretary Ron Ziegler.

As we shall see, Rather proved that his esprit is hardly faked. And the encounter illustrated some of the impressive strengths, but also some of the built-in weaknesses, of TV news as a total informational tool.

I had accompanied Rather to the press headquarters near San Clemente for a magazine interview. On the last day of that visit, a Friday, Ziegler called a news conference to announce the resignation of Nixon's chief economic adviser, Herbert Stein. The resignation was the latest in a week-long series of embarrassing developments for the Administration, and Ziegler knew that if the story could somehow be kept off the networks' Friday evening newscasts, its impact would be softened. With the savvy that marked the Nixon regime's understanding of electronic media, Ziegler was aware that the news audience dropped sharply on weekends. He also knew the White House correspondents' daily deadlines. At 3:00 P.M., Los Angeles time, it would be 6:00 P.M. in New York—one-half hour from air time for the evening news.

The press conference was called for 1:00 P.M., in press headquarters, a large cabana on stilts that overlooked the Pacific Ocean beach. One P.M. passed, with a roomful of reporters and cameras, and no Ziegler. No Stein. Rather fidgeted. One-thirty came and went. Brokaw's jaw tightened. Two o'clock arrived, and two-fifteen. Rather squeezed his way through the crowded aisle and whispered to his cameraman. The cameraman nodded.

At two-thirty, Ziegler and Stein entered the press room and took the low stage in front of the camera lights. Ziegler, for the first time that week, appeared immensely pleased with himself; he had a tight, private smile for Rather and Brokaw. The cameras began to record Stein's lengthy apologia for the collapse of his economic recommendations.

After about 15 seconds of this, I felt Rather's elbow in my ribs. "Get ready," he murmured to me. "We're leaving." He made his way again through the crowd of reporters to the camera area. He snatched the spool of videotape from the CBS camera and beckoned to me. Along with Bernard Kalb, another CBS correspondent, we made our way to the rear door of the press room and down the back steps of the cabana.

I wondered what insanity Rather had in mind. The nearest transmission site for videotape to New York was at the CBS bureau in Los Angeles—some 60 miles up the coast. It all seemed rather vainglorious.

We bundled into a four-door cab which was waiting in the parking lot, complete with driver. The engine was running. Rather took the front seat by the window. The car screeched out onto the blacktop highway, north toward Los Angeles, with Rather, his head hanging out the window, yelling, "Clear right! Clear right!"

About a mile from the cabana, the car wheeled off the main highway and onto a mountain road. We roared up the mountain road. Rather, his left arm draped over the seat, was looking smug. At the top of the mountain a helicopter waited. We piled out of the car and into the helicopter, which rose and flapped up the California coast, toward Los Angeles.

During the flight Rather relaxed enough to play the role of rubbernecking tourist. "That area down below us," he said, pointing to a gleaming harbor, "that's where H. R. Haldeman lives."

We landed on the roof of the CBS building in Los Angeles. Rather dashed out of the helicopter and ran to the makeup room. Two minutes later he emerged and took his place behind the desk of a small studio before a single camera.

At three-fifteen—15 minutes before air time in New York—Rather fed his account of the Herbert Stein resignation, complete with videotape, to the "CBS Evening News." It made the newscast.

Later, as I boarded the jet that would take Rather back to New York, where he would anchor the "CBS Weekend News," I realized that Ziegler had not been Rather's only opponent for the Herbert Stein story.

Across the aisle from us sat Tom Brokaw. He had had his own helicopter.

Dan Rather's triumph against time and Ron Ziegler rekindled some of the old dash and glamour of Ameri-

can news-hawking. But there are critics who would point to the incident as an example of network news's limitations. The end result of Rather's (and Brokaw's) careful advance planning, split-second timing and considerable energy, after all, was the airing of a staged, ceremonial event. Rather did not—could not—go behind the scenes. As conscientious and resourceful as he is, he did not—could not—*predict* Stein's resignation, or offer viewers an inside account of the discussions and processes that led up to it. What CBS and NBC news produced, finally, was the symbolic and ceremonial result of political choices that took place beyond the range of the cameras' scrutiny.

To extend the example a bit further: though Dan Rather and his competitors became nationally recognized journalistic "stars" as Watergate developed, though they became identified in the public mind with the reportage of Watergate, they—the White House "regulars"—did not break the original story. Nor did they pursue the main thread of that original story into the developing saga of corruption, illegal surveillance, and Constitutional abuse. Watergate coverage followed a consistent pattern from first to last: uncovering and development of facts by the print press (and for "print press," read: "Woodward and Bernstein of the Washington *Post*," because the rest of the nation's newspapers largely sat on their hands) and *amplification* of these facts by TV news. Certainly the networks contributed some original material to Watergate, but it was, in the main, ancillary.

When I asked Rather why he and his colleagues—some of whom had been around the White House since Nixon's first inauguration—had not broken Watergate, his response was characteristically forthright.

"I still ask myself that question every day," he said. "We had plenty of inklings. It was around, sure. We saw it in the attitude of Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. Charles Colson. We knew in a vague, general way, if not specifically, that they had brought to the White

House a new attitude; that they didn't operate in the way previous staffs had operated. When Agnew began the early attacks on the press in late 1969, we knew this was part of a carefully orchestrated campaign within the White House itself. Sometimes you don't want to believe what you know in your own mind and heart is true. I know it ought not to be that way, but it is.

"We were lazy. We didn't follow up as we should have. *I* was lazy. And consequently, we didn't get the story of a lifetime."

Rather paused to think for several moments, and then continued in his clipped Texan's delivery: "There were, though, some more practical reasons. The story was broken by two Washington *Post* reporters who were basically police reporters. The Watergate break-in itself, which was the crack that threw the door open, was a local story that required local contacts to break. We didn't have those, since we are a national news organization.

"But I still can't and don't excuse myself and my colleagues at the White House. We should have been smarter. We should have gotten onto it. When the *Post*, through its local contacts, began to break the story, our lack of follow-up was glaring. The break-in was the lead item on our Saturday evening newscast. But we didn't follow up, and we quickly got very far behind the *Post*. The problem then became one of bringing in information on our own. We couldn't find a single source."

That Dan Rather and his colleagues were "lazy" in reporting Watergate is unlikely. Rather struck closer to the heart of TV news's dilemma when he pointed out that CBS, NBC, and ABC are *national* news services. A different way of stating this is to say that TV news is set up to report and record the *expected* behavior of national *newsmakers*: the ceremonial comings and goings of politicians and their formal opposition. Conspiracies, payoffs, and forgeries do not take place in the

White House press room. Yet that is where the cameras and the correspondents must perforce station themselves in order to assimilate the numbing quantity of daily briefings, statements, and official "handouts" that constitute the bulk of Washington news. To cultivate a network of sources, as Woodward and Bernstein did, would be to court dismissal as a Washington correspondent, since the daily ceremonial news would have to be left uncovered.

Perhaps the classic study of network news's interior organizational imperatives was produced by Edward Jay Epstein in his book *News From Nowhere.* Epstein argues that TV networks do present a limited and distorted picture of world reality—not because of some ideological bent or professional ineptitude, but because of the nature of the beast: encumbered by its own bulky electronic apparatus, cramped by budgets, aware of government's stern eye, TV news tends to be self-censoring, stereotyped in its subject matter, unrealistically tied to available news pictures, underresearched, predictable, and simplistic.

In Epstein's words, the self-limiting process works this way:

> Network news. . .is forced by the cumbersome business of setting up cameras and shuttling camera crews between stories to seek out the *expected* event—that is, one announced sufficiently in advance for a film crew and equipment to be dispatched to the scene. . . Assignment editors, producers and executives focus their search for news on the stories that can be depended on to materialize as "news stories" because, as one NBC assignment editor explained, "We regularly only have nine or ten crews a day assigned to domestic news, and we need a minimum of nine or ten stories to feed the news shows." This leads to coverage of "routinized events," as the assignment editor put it, such as press conferences, Senate hearings, and speeches by important newsmakers, which are usually conveniently located and "wired for television". . . .

Thus the networks, insulated though they are from the crass considerations of cybernetic news, must live with built-in shackles that prevent them from digging beneath the surface of predictable events and acting as true ombudsmen for the viewers.

And thus there exists a vacuum in electronic journalism. Somewhere between Washington and other capitals (the networks' territory) and City Hall (theoretically the purview of the local station) exists an invisible realm of political and corporate power, decision-making and policy-setting, economic theorizing and personal ethics that simply does not get monitored on a day-to-day basis by television news.

Since all elected representatives come to Washington *from* somewhere in America, and since corporation presidents and financiers operate not on some national Olympus but in city buildings with addresses and telephone numbers, it would seem that local television news departments could take up some of this reportorial slack —could act the role of the Washington *Post*, not to uncover a Watergate, perhaps, but to increase the accountability of powerful men and women whose ultimate influence is funneled to Washington.

It would seem that way. But the local newscasts have other things to do.

10

Eyewitless News

On April 7, 1976, I tuned into the six o'clock "Eyewitness News" on Channel 7, the ABC-owned station in Chicago. The evening was chosen at random. Here is an item-by-item account of the stories that were broadcast in the ensuing hour.

The newscast's lead story, the equivalent to a newspaper's banner headline story, dealt with a manhunt by Chicago police for a murder suspect. There was lengthy on-the-scene film footage of policemen dashing along sidewalks to surround a South Side school building where the suspect was reported to be hiding. There were quick-cut close-ups of cops wearing sunglasses and brandishing shotguns. The Channel 7 cameras panned along the excited faces of neighborhood crowds who had gathered to watch. Then the action cut to the story's "climactic" moment: close-up footage of a suspect being forcibly escorted from the school building by two policemen, in a scene reminiscent of Al Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon.*

At the conclusion of all this drama and excitement, the Channel 7 "Eyewitness News" reporter provided the story's true denouement: the suspect was not the real murderer. He was an innocent man. The real murderer was not at the school building, after all—something that the "Eyewitness News" producers knew, of course, before they put the footage on the air. The lead story had amounted to a few minutes of meaningless titillation.

Co-anchor Nancy Becker read an item stating that Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley had introduced a

"prostitute ordinance" in the City Council. Behind her appeared an orange drawing of a woman in an elaborately flowered hat.

Anchorman Joel Daly narrated a report that FBI agents had secured indictments against 12 persons dealing in stolen goods. There was a film clip of a United States Attorney holding up a captured automatic weapon.

Reporter Rosemarie Gulley, in the field, interviewed a small boy who had overheard a telephone conversation among crooks at a grocery store and had turned the crooks in. Beneath the boy's face was superimposed the legend "Kid Hero." Gulley concluded that the boy's performance demonstrated that "little people can be big people."

There was a report on a controversy involving the chairman of the Chicago area's Regional Transportation Authority and suburban RTA board members, who wanted the chairman thrown out. In separate film clips—taken at news conferences—the chairman and the suburban group's spokesman were shown making disparaging remarks about one another.

A field reporter narrated a lengthy on-the-scene story, with a heavy larding of "wry" humor, on the failure of the Michigan Avenue bridge to rise and allow a small sailboat to proceed down the Chicago River. There were numerous shots of pedestrians along the bridge rail, and of the lines of stalled traffic. There was a long concluding shot of the small sailboat turning in a circle.

Weatherman John Coleman strutted on camera. Behind him was a chroma-key shot of a forsythia bush. The camerawork made it appear as though Coleman were standing beside the bush. Coleman expressed comic wonderment that the forsythia bush was taller than his head. He pretended to cut a branch from the bush, and by sleight of camera a real cutting appeared in his hand. Coleman presented the cutting to Nancy Becker, who shook her head in wry amusement. Then Coleman proceeded with the weather forecast, standing

before a backdrop that included a cartoon drawing of a clown.

This segment—from the opening, bogus "manhunt" footage to Coleman's forsythia-clipping performance—consumed 15 minutes of the hour-long newscast. There followed the first commercial break.

After the break, Coleman completed his forecast. A bit of Happy Talk ensued, in which anchorman Daly (in the role of Dr. Interlocutor) allowed as how he didn't care about the weather; he had already planned his next trip to New York. Coleman (Mr. Bones) rolled his eyes skyward and silently beseeched the heavens to deliver him from this madness. The rest of the "Eyewitness News" team whooped it up at this uproarious exchange.

Daly then read off a series of brief items: an old-time Chicago train station had burned down; an early-morning explosion had "ripped through" a building; work crews had righted an overturned truck on an expressway (there were film clips of work crews "righting" the overturned truck); a roadway was closed while firemen washed gasoline off. Commercial break.

Feature reporter Frank Mathie was next. He did an on-location "standup" from the South Shore YMCA, about an instructor who teaches children to swim by tossing them into the deep end of the pool.

Daly then read off a series of brief items: an old-time recent addition to the "Eyewitness News" team) who, in turn, introduced a film report from Augusta, Georgia, concerning the Masters Golf Tournament. In the report, an ABC newsman asked a golfer whether he was going to get the ball up higher before the tournament started, or if he had got it up as high as he wanted it. The golfer commented favorably on the blooming of the flowers about the golf course.

Back in Chicago, said Nolan, City Hall was saluting the state basketball champions. There was a filmed vignette of Mayor Daley presenting a trophy.

"Action 7" reporter Bob Petty was up next. Petty interviewed a man described as an "auto buff."

"Action 7" is, putatively, WLS's consumer-ombudsman feature.

There was another commercial break. Frank Mathie returned to the screen in his role as Channel 7's "Gee, I'd Like to Try That" reporter. Mathie—who had been seen in the various roles of housewife, bartender, country-western singer, and so on—was now trying out for stage manager of the Evanston Concert Ballet. In a film clip, the *real* stage manager, Nancy Sawyer, showed Mathie how to call for light cues. The clip concluded with Mathie calling for light cues and ending up in total darkness. Mathie's punchline: "This is Frank Mathie, Channel 7 'Eyewitness News'—*I think!*"

The camera returned to Coleman, who was doing a pirouette, with his hands clasped high above his head. Coleman lisped to no one in particular: "Did you notice? Topless ballet in my home town! What's this world coming to?"

Not even the WLS "Eyewitness News" team—normally responsive to a degree bordering on the feral—could think of a rejoinder to that remark, so Coleman continued with yet another weather report, which included some information on a "stellar eclipse."

"Is there anything in the stars for *me?*" Mike Nolan leaned forward to ask, with a suggestive wink at Coleman. Nolan, curly-haired and the possessor of a prognathous jaw, had quickly been cast as the "Eyewitness News" team's resident roue. Coleman and Daly responded to Nolan's question with wry shakes of their heads, accompanied by knowing chuckles. Nancy Becker looked away; she was the long-suffering (but amused) feminist foil in scenarios such as this one—sort of a latter-day Jane Wyman.

Joel Daly recapped the results of the Wisconsin and New York presidential primaries.

To properly appreciate what happened next on America's most profitable television news program, a little background is in order.

As mentioned, the newscast in question occurred on

April 7, 1976. At that time, the presidential campaign of Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter had already begun to be the object of controversy. Newspaper and magazine articles were critically examining Carter's inconsistency in his public pronouncements on civil rights, welfare, public housing, and other touchy domestic issues.

In fact, the March issue of *Harper's* had published what proved to be the litmus of this developing skepticism: an article, by Steven Brill, titled "Jimmy Carter's Pathetic Lies." In the ensuing public debate over the accuracy of the article, it became clear that the supposedly humble Man of the People had built a coolly effective public-relations machine to perpetuate a public image (down-home, ingenuous, a romantic outsider) that was substantially at odds with the private man (a sophisticated, aggressive politician savvy to power).

As Carter's campaign surged forward from victory to victory in the early months of 1976, the need for a clear accounting of his policies became increasingly apparent. How did he answer the contradictions listed in Brill's article? What did he have to say about his own staff's orchestrated effort to discredit Brill as journalist and thereby discredit the allegations Brill had made? What were the points of departure between his stands on, say, farm price supports, and those of Henry Jackson?

On April 7, the day after Carter won Wisconsin, Channel 7 sent its veteran "political editor," Hugh Hill, along with a camera crew, to probe the former Georgia governor's *Weltanschauung*.

Hill caught up with Carter at the Milwaukee airport. In true *Front Page* tradition, Hill buttonholed the great man. Viewers of the "Eyewitness News" saw their nightly source of political wisdom and insight, trench-coated and looking serious indeed, right there on TV with a prospective future President. It was a grand and dramatic moment.

Hill had the opportunity for one question. Though brief, it constituted a veritable textbook on "Eyewitness

News" assumptions, values, and priorities.

"At this point, Governor," demanded Hill, "after you've won in Wisconsin, is there anybody who can beat you?"

Carter opened his mouth to answer, then paused a beat as if in disbelief. This question was not just a "soft ball" of the type Carter often received from the electronic press. This one was a medicine ball.

What was he expected to answer? "Yes, I expect to be defeated on the first ballot by Hubert Humphrey?"

Carter studied Hill with amusement in his glittering blue eyes. Then he smiled his as-advertised smile and explained into Hill's hand-held microphone, as patiently as though he were a father answering a child's query as to why the sky is blue, that it was too early to tell, but that he was definitely ahead.

Back in the Channel 7 "Eyewitness News" studio, there were more items: a radio personality was dead; the Wall Street Dow Jones averages; a quote from a suburban town president.

Rosemarie Gulley did a brief report, with film footage, about a program to combat drug abuse in Chicago elementary schools.

"Stay tuned now," concluded Joel Daly, "for 'The Bionic Woman.'"

Daly, who prided himself on irony, undoubtedly missed the exquisite irony of his suggestion. What better lead-in to "The Bionic Woman" than the Bionic Newscast? The hour just concluded in the name of journalism was in fact a glistening example of cybernetic news.

In every important area, on this night as on most nights, the WLS "Eyewitness News" team had followed a meticulous and familiar blueprint for audience-building, in which journalism played a secondary role at best.

The blueprint, as we will discover, is almost infinitely thorough: it offers procedural recommendations for virtually every second of an electronic newscast. A few of its major requirements are instructive as they relate to

the newscast just described:

—A high story count, with a short amount of time devoted to each story. Including John Coleman's various weather appearances, the sports items and the features, Channel 7 covered 24 stories in that hour. Subtracting 16 minutes for commercials and another two or three of the opening, for transitions, and for clipping forsythia bushes, the average time allotted to each story was something under two minutes.

But this average was misleading. Weather and sports consumed a disproportionately large amount of time, as did the opening "murder suspect" piece. These elements reduce the average story time to little more than one minute.

—The use of "visuals," preferably film footage, wherever possible. Film footage creates "audience interest" and adds "color and vitality" to a TV newscast. This explains why WLS used as its lead "story" a film-accompanied report that was long on visual excitement —cops and crowds—but utterly devoid of hard news value (nothing happened).

—A "team atmosphere" among the principal news personalities, emphasizing warmth and friendliness. The incidents described in the newscast are self-explanatory.

—Use of an "action" reporter to create a feeling of the station's "involvement" with the community. Bob Petty's interview with the "auto buff" was a poor example of his ombudsman role, but Frank Mathie, acting as a surrogate viewer in his "Gee, I'd Like To Try That," series, personified a refinement of the technique.

—Simple stories; an effort to stay away from the "stiff and formal" approach; a style that is easy to understand. Hugh Hill's "interview" with Jimmy Carter is a classic embodiment of that principle, as well as of most of the others described above.

In all, the April 7, 1976, early-evening newscast on WLS was distinguished less by what it *told* viewers than

by what it *appeared* to tell them.

WLS appeared to deliver information about (among other things) a major criminal search in the area, a mayoral assault on prostitution, a transportation crisis, the duties of a stage manager at a suburban ballet (responding to the well-known shortage of information on that subject), and the thoughts of a presidential candidate.

In fact, WLS did almost nothing of the sort.

It did not deliver information about a major criminal search (assuming such information would be of any use to a viewer); it showed disconnected film footage of police and crowds in one specific neighborhood. Moreover, the pointlessness of the film was concealed until the end.

It delivered limited information on Mayor Daley's prostitute ordinance. But in doing so, WLS overlooked Daley's companion proposal, one which was soon to eclipse the prostitute legislation in civic debate: an ordinance aimed at movies that would ban not only obscenity and nudity, but also filmic violence such as "cuttings, stabbings, floggings, eye gouging, brutal kicking, and dismemberment." This controversial proposal was to be described by *Variety* as a potential national "model" for legislating violent films. Perhaps the prostitute ordinance lent itself more easily to a striking "visual."

In its transportation-crisis story, WLS built its emphasis around pictures of personalities in conflict: the RTA chairman against the suburban board members. Missing was an explanation of the abstract issues that forced the confrontation.

The suburban ballet "stage manager" story was really the story of likable Frank Mathie, the viewers' surrogate, proving himself once again a klutz.

And in the Hugh Hill-Jimmy Carter vignette, what counted was not so much what Carter said—Hill could as well have asked him about the pennant chances of the Milwaukee Brewers—as the visual imprint of Channel

7's Hill *being there,* on the scene, on the case, alongside celebrity Jimmy. Again: the *sense* of Channel 7's involvement without the substance.

The newscast amounted to a good deal of self-aggrandizement for the Channel 7 "Eyewitness News" product, and little in the way of useful information—little sense of community, of ongoing, integrated issues and concerns, of attempts to dig beneath the surface for more enduring truths and subtle shadings. It was a big, succulent but empty calorie of a newscast—a Quarter-Pounder of the airwaves.

But perhaps WLS had a plausible excuse. Perhaps it was just a bad day for news.

An examination of the following morning's edition of the Chicago *Tribune* indicates that this was not the case.

The April 8 *Tribune* did not mention the manhunt "story" that WLS had led with—not surprising, since there *was* no story apart from Channel 7's home movies. The *Tribune* did give front-page display to two items on the WLS newscast: the report on FBI agents' obtaining the 12 indictments against persons dealing in stolen goods as the banner headline, and the RTA transportation feud was prominently displayed.

Inside, the *Trib* gave a fuller and more coherent account of Mayor Daley's anti-prostitution ordinance (actually, as the newspapers made clear, a move against massage parlors) and explained the national significance of the mayor's attempt to legislate violent films.

There were no items on Kid Heroes or bridges that would not rise or swimming instructors who tossed kids into the deep end of the pool. There were, however, some other stories that were missed by Chicagoans who depended on the WLS "Eyewitness News" for all their information.

Among these stories were:

—A detailed analysis of suburban Oak Park's controversial school reorganization plan, which had significant racial implications in that it would (1) create two new junior high schools out of existing grade

schools, causing pupils who had attended those schools to enroll outside their immediate neighborhoods, and (2) redistribute the suburb's black pupils for greater racial balance.

—A report that taxpayers in the eight-county Chicago area paid more federal income tax per taxpayer in 1974 than did taxpayers in any other of the nation's 30 biggest metropolitan areas—the thrust being that the older productive American cities are being short-changed, if not swindled, by the flow of federal income taxes.

—A prediction from the paper's environment editor, Casey Bukro, that Illinois would become the twenty-third state in 1976 to challenge the growth of nuclear power in the United States. Bukro reported that a state representative planned to introduce a bill calling for a five-year moratorium on nuclear-power-plant construction. The significance of such an issue was to become dramatically clear with the advent of Three-Mile Island.

—A piece, by "blue collar" columnist Mike LaVelle, that detailed the efforts of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America to organize bank employees in the Chicago area. LaVelle reported that a Labor Department study of the Chicago area had revealed "glaring evidence of discrimination" against women in banking jobs: women held 99 per cent of bank clerical jobs, as against only 1.7 per cent of computer-related jobs; and their average weekly salary was $118.27, compared with $199.39 for the mostly-male computer operators.

None of these stories was particularly "colorful" or "vital." None lent itself to illustration by "visuals"—certainly not film footage. None could be adequately reported in a minute and 30 seconds. None could be enhanced through a "team atmosphere" among reporters or by an emphasis on "warmth" and "friendliness."

What the stories had in common was a connection

with the ongoing, everyday concerns of the people in the *Tribune*'s coverage area. Without being ultimately spectacular or dramatic or "effective" in the sense of uncovering scandal and sending rascals to jail, the stories nevertheless had utilitarian value. They were reference points, indicators of the way things were, should anyone care to try and change them (or to manage more equably within the status quo).

Does anybody care?

John Coleman—if one judges from his remarks earlier—thinks not; thinks that people would rather laugh and drink beer than involve themselves in America's social processes. His attitude seems to prevail throughout the electronic broadcasting establishment.

That attitude represents an amazing extreme of fatuity. One thinks back upon the era that was the crucible of local television news, the late 1960's, when America was being rent apart by people from all sectors of what television is pleased to call "the 18-to-49 age group": by blacks, by middle-class laboring whites, by radical students, by police, by priests and nuns, by Vietnam War veterans, by urban housewives—by all the caring Americans who formed what Garry Wills has called "a confluence of poisons," people whose cares were inexpressible to an indifferent medium and who at length found expression through violence, through marches and picketing and slogans and screams of hatred (hitting at last upon an idiom that interested the TV cameras)—people who, in their final scheme of priorities, could not give a good sweet damn whether the Michigan Avenue bridge stayed up or down.

Fred Friendly has had some experience with caring. After helping define the nobler calling on television news as Edward R. Murrow's producer in the early 1950's, Friendly got out of the business in a huff of bitterness. He resigned his position as president of CBS News in 1967 after higher-ups deleted coverage of Vietnam War debates in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in favor of an *I Love Lucy* rerun.

Now the Murrow professor of communications at Columbia University, Friendly—still a keen observer of the American broadcast scene—turns the question of "caring" around: "Are *they* really interested?" asks Friendly, meaning the TV news personalities themselves. "Is that what they think of when they get up in the morning—do they *care* about their city? That's something that the great newspapermen of history have all had in common. I mean, you go back to Tom Paine. Or you go back to H. L. Mencken, for all his cynicism. Or Walter Lippmann. Or Mike Royko. They *cared desperately*. . .

"I don't think these guys care about anything. Except how their hair looks."

And Michael J. Arlen, the brilliant broadcast critic of *The New Yorker*, expressed it this way in a January 1975 essay:

> Admittedly, it used to be a truism that the public wasn't "interested" in [abstract news], and doubtless that's still so to a degree. Neither was the public "interested" in Europe in the early nineteen-thirties, or in Southeast Asia in the middle nineteen-sixties, or in the complexities of the Arab world for much of this century. The public, one is told, prefers football games, craves entertainment, and is obsessively concerned with its own neighborhoods—and all that is true.
>
> But, on a deeper level, this is the same republic that sent grain to Lenin's Russia, and died on French and Italian beaches, and airlifted supplies to West Berlin, and trudged through Philippine, Malayan and then Vietnamese jungles—and at all times it has counted on *others* to provide it not just with snippets of information but with a coherent picture of its real connection to the larger world.

But caring is one of the few variables that is not factored into the blueprint for the cybernetic newscast. A close look at some of the blueprint-makers may provide some clues as to why this is so.

11

Blueprint

"It is not surprising. . .that research indicates ratings rise when the broadcaster is successful in exposing the listener to what he wants *to hear, in the very personal way he wants to hear it. In terms of news, this means ratings are improved not when listeners are told what they* should *know, but what they want to hear."*

In that quotation is the essence of the blueprint.

The passage is from a "Summary of Findings" made by Frank N. Magid Associates of Marion, Iowa, for radio station WMAQ in Chicago. In 1974, Magid was hired by WMAQ at a cost of $25,000 to survey the "attitudes and opinions toward radio in the Chicago area." Bypassing what listeners "should know" in favor of "what they want to hear" in the news was one of his prime recommendations. It is his veritable signature.

Although the quotation was taken from a radio-station survey, not a television one, it is consistent with the philosophy Magid has imparted to more than 100 TV news departments since he began consulting for broadcasters in 1970. In 1976, Magid was the pre-eminent broadcast news consultant in the United States. He was Number One because his stations moved up in the ratings, not because of good-journalism plaques that appeared in their lobbies.

In fact, after Magid's people had visited Channel 8, the CBS affiliate in San Diego, in autumn 1973, the station manager had been moved to tack up this burst of newsroom Babbittry:

"Remember, the vast majority of our viewers hold blue-collar jobs. The vast majority of our viewers never went to college. The vast majority of our viewers have never been on an airplane. The vast majority of our viewers have never seen a copy of The New York Times. *The vast majority of our viewers do not read the same books and magazines that you read. . .in fact, many of them never read anything. . ."**

Ergo, keep it short, keep it simple, show them lots of pictures, make them giggle, throw in plenty of stuff about crime and flying saucers and sex fantasies. They are, after all, children. Alongside this brand of paternalism, the British colonialists in New Guinea treated their minions as equals in Socratic debate.

Frank N. Magid Associates is perhaps the most influential of some two dozen consulting groups in the country. Along with its arch-rival, McHugh & Hoffman Inc. of McLean, Virginia, Magid defines the "traditional" wing of news consultancy.

The field is expanding. Behavioral psychologists, former news directors, even rock 'n' roll record-testers armed with electrodes to measure "galvanic skin responses" have plunged into the lucrative waters. Just as the media consultant has played an ever-expanding role in the strategy of political campaigns, so has the news consultant gained increasing influence on the newscasts that cover those candidates. There is perhaps an irony there worth contemplating.

But clearly, the Big Two in news consultancy—and the principal architects of the cybernetic newscast—were the fiercely competitive Magid and McHugh & Hoffman. In 1976 these adversaries found themselves sharing the ultimate power trophy: all five of ABC's owned stations retained *both* firms so that no competitor in any of the cities would have the benefit of

* The fifth Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University *Survey of Broadcast Journalism*, Apollo Editions, 1975.

either's strategic wisdom. Not that it was that hard to get a bearing on the thrust of a given station's marching orders; they were not exactly distinguished by their subtlety, and all a war-game-happy competitor had to do was flick on Channel 7 and begin counting UFO stories and charting the weatherman's choreography. But television executives have always been a little like Balkan archdukes, and a rating-point advantage on a New York newscast *is* worth a cool million—so what's $50,000 protection money?

What does a station get for its money?

From Magid and McHugh & Hoffman, it gets a systematic survey of audience "attitudes and opinions" in the station's coverage area. (Magid's staff of more than 100 does its own interviewing of sample audiences; McHugh-Hoffman, with a permanent staff of only four men and five women, farms out the research chores to private firms.)

The data is then analyzed—Magid's firm feeds it through an IBM 1130 computer in its futuristic plant in an Iowa meadow—and presented to the station manager in an impressive bound volume. A typical Magid summary may run 500 pages; it is bound in black with gold trim, and its crisp white pages yield substantial-looking tables and charts of "attitudes and opinions" as a Linn County corn field yields roasting ears. At $25,000 the copy, the volume makes an imposing coffee table display in the station manager's office.

Such a summary, though, is about as appetizing to the average broadcast executive's reading tastes as *The Gulag Archipelago*. ("Uh, that's all very well, Mr. Magid, your boys sure did a bang-up job on this here study, but truth to tell, like the man says, I was sort of hoping that the Secret to Business Nirvana here could be boiled down a little bit; I mean, we like to do things in a minute-ten around here. . . .")

Obligingly, Magid has anticipated this request. There is a second bound volume. It usually arrives about ten days after the first. It is slim, about the width of an anchorman's attention span.

It contains a tightly condensed version of the thick volume—the brass tacks.

Most news consultants cheerfully admit that their mandate is mercantile, not journalistic: they are hired to move broadcast news operations ahead of competitors in the ratings. Nothing wrong in that, they point out. The consultant's self-described role is that of a combination elocution coach and cosmetician: he advises on the production values of a newscast, the attractiveness of the set, the "atmosphere" among the "personalities," the lucidity of the writing. He may comment on the appearance of this anchorman or that sportscaster. He may—on the basis of his surveys of "attitudes and opinions"—suggest some broad ranges of interest among the viewing audience; he may act as a sort of fine-tuned Nielsen service, telling exactly who's out there, how old, how well educated, how affluent, with what cares and what concerns. His handsome bound volumes may contain snatches of vox-pop interviews with viewers—"My folks changed to Channel 7, and I got to like it better." "I just recently became interested in baseball in the last year, and Channel 9 has a better line of information on local baseball." "Channel 2 goofed up the news with poor continuity."—and tables showing "Identification of Channel on Which Preferred News Team Appears."

But never, *never*, say the consultants, do we get involved in the journalistic process itself. Never do we intrude into the area of content.

That criticism—that they are involved in the area of news content—rankles consultants the most. Running a close second is the charge that their recommendations are identifiably similar from market to market, no

matter who the client or how extensive the audience research—that they sell, in the words of one station's news chief, "franchised news—like McDonalds."

Confronted with the question of content-involvement during an interview with me, Frank Magid replied: "Well, let's just look at that. Let's look at it from a very practical point of view. In the first place, even though we have a rather large staff, it is absolutely impossible for us to be present in the newsroom on a daily basis in all the client stations that we serve.

"The decisions, as I think all of our client news directors will tell you, are made by them, as to what is going to be incorporated in the news each night. So let *alone* the fact that it is patently false. In terms of just thinking of it logically, the fact that we are not present every day and the fact that the decisions that have to be made day in and day out are made by the news director there—I think that belies what has been said."

It was an interesting response, elliptic and carefully worded as a politician's—but it contains evasions. For one thing, it is not the *news director* who is a consultant's client. The news director (as we have seen earlier) is merely a salaried employee of a TV news department—like the news team itself. Rarely does a news director have managerial discretion. It is the *station manager* who hires consultants. And station managers are, in the overwhelming majority of U.S. stations, salesmen. Having risen through the business ranks of the broadcast hierarchy, they are demonstrably the most aggressive and competitive of their breed, and they have been rewarded with the ultimate bonus: management of a TV station. They are career businessmen suddenly entrusted with immense journalistic discretion, for which they frequently lack both temperament and training. They seek direction from fellow businessmen—the consultants.

There is a second evasion in Magid's reply about involvement in content: true, he and his staff *cannot* be in their clients' newsrooms on a daily basis. But their

"Summaries" and "Overviews" can be. And are.

And their "Summaries" and "Overviews" contain such maxims as, "In terms of news, this means ratings are improved not when listeners are told what they *should* know, but what they want to hear."

Such a sentence is dedicated to the very definition of content.

There are good reasons why the consultants wish to keep a nominal barrier between themselves and journalistic decisions. One of the best was articulated by Dr. David LeRoy, director of the Communication Research Center at Florida State University. There is a possible intrusion, believes Dr. LeRoy, "upon the programming responsibility of the licensee in meeting his obligations and responsibilities under the 1934 Communications Act and its subsequent amendments. In these days of license renewal challenges, any material that suggests a delegation of the licensee's programming responsibility to an outside contractor should be eschewed. It should be made clear at all times that the outside firm's responsibility is to advise and inform, and not to dictate personnel, program, or other changes. Further, specific comments about how the news should be collected, edited, and presented, as well as what stories should or should not be covered, must be avoided by the consulting firm."

To see how scrupulously consultants respect the sanctity of content, it is necessary to look only as far as the WMAQ Radio survey prepared by Frank Magid:

"Many journalists make the error of assuming that good factual reporting alone will involve typical 'concerned' citizens. The truth is that there aren't too many 'concerned' listeners out there. . .

"First, we suggest that the writer avoid starting a newscast with a stark fact. Begin instead with an evocative line which will catch the ear of the listener, arouse his curiosity, and begin to 'pull' him into the

newscast. . .

"For example, instead of beginning with the words, 'Ralph Botts has been fined $10,000 for his part in an alleged. . .,' you might begin with, 'Is the FBI nosing in on Chicago?' or, 'He'll have to cough it up. . .' or, '*Ten thousand dollars* and the poor guy is penniless. . .'

"The whole idea is to set the listener up so that he becomes interested and must listen for more."

The listener as junkie. It is a touching and noble point of view. Leaving aside the question of whether "Ralph Botts's" $10,000 fine would have anything to do with the FBI "nosing in on Chicago" (a seemingly prodigious leap of logic, but then we're dealing in hypothesis), let us flip a page or two and find some other examples of how Mr. Magid's employees restrict themselves to cosmetics and piously avoid involvement in news content.

Under the heading "Use of Recorded 'Beepers'," we find this advice (a "beeper" is a segment of tape-recorded telephone conversation): "It is important that 'beepers,' whether they be actualities or voicers, also have a very *personal* orientation. Actualities, for example, should be taken from an enraged parent, a scared child, a marching picketer."

It makes sense. Enraged parents and scared children are, on the face of it, far better equipped to put a highly emotional event into perspective than a disinterested reporter. Besides, they sound so much more entertaining to the listener-junkie (who is likely to reach a shaky hand for the dial at the first disinterested syllable).

But there is even headier strategy to come. Hammering home the point of "personal involvement" as the key to marketable news stories, the Magid analyst indulges himself in a euphoric pipe dream: "For example, at one point in the newschecks we monitored, there was a rather lengthy actuality of an attorney explaining all the detail of rape trial procedures. Instead of this institutional, bureaucratic approach to the

issues, imagine getting an actuality from someone who had been through the rigors of an actual rape trial."

Yes, imagine! One can almost see the Magid analyst, face flushed, rubbing his hands with excitement as he surrenders himself to his rape-trial-rigor reverie.

And yet a question asserts itself here: *How does such an approach serve journalism?*

A rape victim may indeed provide instructive conversation regarding rape-trial procedure. Then again, she may yield to the understandable impulses of bitter outburst, self-pity, histrionics. (And if the "enraged parent-scared child" exhortation is any clue, we can be sure which option the radio reporter will root for and encourage.) She may not be articulate. She may not *know* what happened to her in the courtroom.

On the other hand a lawyer, burdened though he or she may be with an "institutional, bureaucratic" temperament, just may shed some valuable light on what women may expect in the volatile and humiliating arena of the rape trial. It is not entirely beside the point that, within the last five years, women's paralegal groups have been forming in several major cities to try to disseminate advice and guidelines for rape victims. One can only guess at the frustration of these groups should they look to a "personality"-oriented station for a conduit.

Not that it would matter much, in the end, whether the interviewed rape victim spoke with calm reason or went into frothing verbal seizures. The very next paragraph of recommendations makes it clear that a sustained idea is not the point of the exercise anyway: "Both actualities and voicers should be kept fairly short. Some very effective actualities can be delivered in *ten seconds* [italics mine], or a series of two or three five-second actualities might be tied together with copy in a very powerful way."

Edward R. Murrow was lucky he got out when he did. It used to take him the better part of ten seconds to say,

News consultants have been at least a peripheral part of the broadcast scene since 1962, when Philip McHugh and Peter Hoffman formed their partnership in Birmingham, Michigan. McHugh (now the company's president) had been a radio newsman-network program director at CBS in 1946—and later an advertising executive at Campbell-Ewald in Detroit. Hoffman (the vice president) had been with Campbell-Ewald since 1954, specializing in research.

When the two men joined forces, their aims were innocuous enough. News in itself was but an incidental element in their inquiries. The men had it in mind to advise TV and radio stations in a broad range of categories—their entire daily output, which in those days still included several locally-originated entertainment shows: music, variety, and children's programs.

Only as the years went on and local stations surrendered more and more program origination to the networks did McHugh and Hoffman find themselves gradually limited to the newscast as the target of their advice.

Thus, the emergence of the "news consultant," the specialist in broadcast journalism, was an accident of evolution.

In 1968, McHugh and Hoffman got their main chance. WABC in New York was reorganizing its TV news department under a *wunderkind* out of Pittsburgh, Al Primo. The nervous ABC top brass summoned McHugh and Hoffman to oversee Primo's efforts.

Magid entered the field in 1970. The former professor of social psychology at the University of Iowa was no stranger to market research; he had been providing it to broadcasters for 12 years, in the form of raw data.

With Magid's ascendancy as full-fledged broadcast news *adviser*, cybernetic news had come of age.

The resulting transformation of TV news in the early 1970's was electrifying. Boom times were in, the greatest boom in local-station history. A National Association of Broadcasters survey of 383 stations showed that average TV stations profits for 1973 had zoomed 19.4 per cent over 1972. The lists of clients for Magid and McHugh-Hoffman lengthened. Other consulting groups entered the field.

Meanwhile, a sense that something was awry in electronic journalism had begun to spread among critical observers of the media. TV-radio columnists, whose normal subject matter for TV reviews is prime-time entertainment, devoted increasing space to chiding local anchormen for their insouciant style—for Happy Talk.

That the newspaper critics were diverted by Happy Talk from the more substantive issues of cybernetic news is not hard to understand. For one thing, the presence of news consultants was a relatively well-kept secret outside the industry for several years after their 1968 breakthrough. News consultants' "summary" books are still regarded as confidential and are extremely difficult to obtain. For another, to attempt analysis of a TV newscast's content requires time and thoroughness. A daily critic would have had to spend precious time transcribing tapes and making meticulous comparisons with the content of daily newspapers, news magazines, *and* the general sense of the city as the critic perceived it. His editor, in the meanwhile, would have been pressuring him to concentrate on sit-com reviews and "personality" interviews with starlets. Editors and publishers in this country have limited expectations of daily TV columns—a sad comment on print journalism itself.

Nevertheless, by 1974, content analyses were being produced—and they indicated that television news, until so recently the foundling of television, the sober-sided

exercise of license protection under the eyes of the FCC, had become a three-ring circus (news, weather, sports), with the cash registers clinking like cymbals.

In May 1974 the American Association of University Women (AAUW) monitored half-hour news programs at 262 local TV stations across the country. Among their findings were these:

—Newscasts had an average of fifteen commercials, totaling an average of eight minutes per half-hour. (The National Association of Broadcasters Code allowed a maximum of 16 commercial minutes to the hour outside prime time.)

—Forty-three per cent of the stations exceeded the NAB guidelines; one station had a staggering 15 minutes and 45 seconds of ads in its half-hour newscast.

—An average of five and one-half interruptions per half-hour was reported for commercials.

Clearly, the local newscast had transformed itself from loss leader to profit center. The rest of the findings showed why:

—Weather portions of local news programs averaged two and one-half minutes per half-hour. Sports averaged three minutes, leaving an average of exactly 16 and one-half minutes per half-hour for news items, transitions, openings and closings, light features, and the ever-popular Happy Talk, of which the following example is prime:

JOEL DALY: Well, what kind of cat-and-mouse games do you have for us in the weather, John?

JOHN COLEMAN: I'd be willing to discuss the weather, Joel, if I knew that nursery rhyme. "Ding, dong, dell. . ."

DALY: "Pussy's in the well."

COLEMAN: Go on.

DALY: I don't remember the other. . .

COLEMAN: I never heard that nursery rhyme, did you, Mike?

DALY: Sure. Oh, that's a famous one.
MIKE NOLAN: Oh, yeah, I heard it.
DALY: That's right. "Who put him in?"
COLEMAN: Who?
DALY: Little. . .Johnny. . .*Coleman!* *(general laughter)*
COLEMAN: Aw, now, cut that out. Well—I'm sure we're not experts on nursery rhymes, but I am reasonably well informed meteorologically at this moment, and a one-word comment would be, YAH-HOOO!. . .

The AAUW survey concluded that a trend to more short items was reported at 32 per cent of the local stations; more funny items were reported at 31 per cent, and human interest stories were increasing at 56 per cent of the stations.

By 1975, the news consultants finally met their all-out nemesis. He was Marvin Barrett, the director of the Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University Survey and Awards in Broadcast Journalism. In the fifth edition of the survey, titled "Moments of Truth?", Barrett devoted an entire chapter to a low-keyed but devastating case against the emergence of news consultants. (This in a year in which the major survey items included coverage of Watergate and the energy crisis, and the relationship of government and broadcasters.)

Barrett's chapter on news consultants was titled "The Trojan Horse," derived from a remark by Ralph Renick, who was then vice president for news at WTVJ in Miami and a man disenchanted with cybernetic news.

After Renick had convinced his station to terminate the services of Magid, he told the DuPont survey:

> They are really a Trojan horse. They roll it in and suddenly the enemy troops are in your camp. Too often the service is put to political use to permit management to get control of the news when the news director is in conflict with management . . . These agencies have

taken hold of many stations and virtually dictated news policy "in absentia," by the use of their research techniques. Too often stations with consultants end up trying to present news only as the research results suggest the people want. But lost in this concept is that a professional journalist should have the ability and news judgment to determine what is important and significant.

Renick's remarks were among those of 1,500 broadcast-news directors who responded to a questionnaire Barrett had sent out across the country. Renick was not necessarily typical; Barrett also printed responses praising the consultants. The following came from a news director in the Southwest:

I feel fine with the recommendations and our ratings have increased considerably. However, some members of our staff feel that they have somehow prostituted themselves. They are (amazingly enough) more concerned about having their peers pat them on the back for their great principles than telling the viewing public what is happening in their own area of interest. Some members of the staff think we are here to teach rather than inform and that we should decide what is important for the public to know about rather than finding out what the public is truly concerned about and telling them about that.

It was Barrett who commissioned the AAUW survey, and it was Barrett who published, for the first time, a sample of how coolly the consultants operated within a news department, how thorough was the blueprint.

In "The Trojan Horse," Barrett reproduced a "Summary of Recommendations" that Magid had made for Renick's station, WTVJ, in 1971. With names of station personnel deleted, the summary suggested:

1. Replace _____.
2. Tandem format on both early and late news.
3. Replace _____ with certified meteorologist.

4. Replace _____.
5. Include opinion with sportscast, but not as separate segment.
6. Develop team atmosphere through conversational interchange, perhaps at head of show but certainly in transitions. Develop atmosphere which will produce genuine spontaneity.
7. Change title on both early and late newscast. Same title for both. ("The World Tonight" or something similar.)
8. Use voice-over credits for promotion preceding newscasts (particularly late evening), including at least one headline and standard.
9. Develop production opening for both newscasts. (Similar but not identical.) A production close should also be produced. Audio emphasis in open and close on complete coverage.
10. Lead anchorman should introduce himself at the top of the show.
11. New, distinctive set allowing personalities to be shown sitting together.
12. Participation format, rather than sponsored reports. (Already in effect.)
13. Tease upcoming stories before commercial break.
14. Use bumper slides before commercials. (Already in effect.)
15. Headlines at top of show presented by the personality involved.
16. "Kicker" at conclusion.
17. More stories should be covered; a number of stories should be shortened.
18. More use of voice-over explanation of film stories with background sound from the scene.
19. Use field reporter as extensively as possible.
20. Use of some national news in early newscast.
21. Make every effort to avoid duplication of early newscast by late newscast.
22. Broward County news should not be reported in great detail.
23. Serialized mini-documentaries should not be used.
24. Minority group stories should be used only when really news; should be presented by a member of the minority group.
25. There should be news *analysis* on a regular basis.

26. Neither editorials nor analysis should last more than 60 seconds.
27. No repetition of editorial. No use of editorial and analysis in same newscast.
28. Both analyst and editorialist must be someone other than the newscaster.
29. Initiate Action Reporter feature.
30. Initiate consumer protection feature—once/week, one minute.
31. Initiate environmental feature—once/week, one minute.
32. Utilize brief, rapid-fire newsworthy items on *well-known* people.
33. Utilize stories on new and unusual products.
34. Weather should concentrate on *Miami* area with brief summary of rest of the country.
35. Weathercast should end with understandable forecast for next 24 hours.
36. Long-range forecast is desirable if viewers can be persuaded of accuracy.
37. Weather radar should be promoted heavily.
38. Sports action film should be used frequently, but restricted primarily to major events.
39. Coverage of participation activities (hunting, fishing, boat shows, camping equipment) should be included.
40. Promotion should emphasize the advantages of WTVJ news—what is special about it.
41. Promotion should concentrate on "Channel 4" rather than "WTVJ."
42. A slogan emphasizing friendliness and warmth of WTVJ news should be employed.

In that list are contained some of the most pernicious elements of cybernetic news.

A few of the suggestions are simple, common sense (10, 34, 39). Some are in the interests of good journalism—in terms of the topic suggested, if not the time limit suggested (18, 19, 30, 31, 33, 35, 39). Some are innocuous (5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 28, 37, 40, 41).

The rest are either superfluous to good journalism or else explicitly anti-journalistic. They are included for their supposed audience-building value. And a heavy

number of the suggestions, including some of the good ones, quite clearly transgress the realm of cosmetics and enter into the realm of content.

Magid's exhortation of brevity (an admirable enough virtue in itself, but not as a pretimed absolute) comes through in suggestions 17, 26, 30, 31, 32. Suggestion 22 —"Broward County news should not be reported in great detail"—is part of this ethic, but its sheer anti-journalistic brazenness entitles it to a separate mention.

Suggestion 24, dealing with minority-group stories, would have been fashionable shortly before the fall of Richmond.

Suggestion 29—the Action Reporter—is a Magid trademark, and lends credence to those who argue that his firm propagates "franchised news."

Suggestion 36 provides an instructive insight into Magid's behavioristic instincts. Note that the sentence reads, "if viewers can be *persuaded* (italics added) of accuracy," rather than, "if accurate."

A list such as this might be expected to curl the lip of a professional newsman. And indeed, some lips were curled. CBS News president Richard Salant told the New York *Times* in early 1975: "Market researchers are an abomination. Perhaps I'm square, but I think our function is to determine what we *ought* to be doing. A journalist doesn't make a survey to find out what people want. You can do that in entertainment but not in news."

All too few of Salant's counterparts at local TV stations agreed. One year later, in April 1976, Marvin Barrett was obliged to report in the *Columbia Journalism Review:* ". . .The balance of opinion among station execs has shifted from a substantial majority against to three to five in favor of news consultants in the latest survey."

Barrett's finding was in an "Interim Report" on American journalism in the period from summer 1974 to fall 1975—the sensitive period immediately following President Nixon's resignation. Concerning news consultants, Barrett added:

> Further evidence of the impact of the consultants on the nation's news operations was indicated. . .particularly in the increase in number of news items per broadcast. . .and the increased use of film and tape on TV newscasts. . .four out of five stations increased their total news budget, and nearly two-thirds reported an increase in the size of their news staffs and the amount of time allotted to local news.
>
> In too many instances, however, these increases were tied to implementing a news consultant's ideas for popularizing the news rather than improving coverage.

Almost as if in divine confirmation of Barrett's demonic apprehensions, a memo began making the rounds of ABC News at about the same time the *Columbia Journalism Review* article appeared. (ABC, both at its network and owned-station levels, has been the most unabashed booster of cybernetic news.) The memo was signed by William Sheehan, then the network's news president.

After paying lip service to the verities of journalism ("Our basic task is communication. . .our NUMBER ONE mission is to cover the day's news. . .") the memo arrived at the main item of business:

> After the major news stories of the day we must go after the stories that grab people where they're involved. And people are involved in a lot of things these days *that they are close to only vicariously.* [italics added] A recent poll in England showed that only 14 per cent of the people knew who U Thant is while 80 per cent correctly identified Mick Jagger. (He's the leader of the Rolling Stones.) I'm not suggesting that we slight U Thant, but I am suggesting that the Mick Jaggers of the world shouldn't be ignored. *I want more stories dealing with the 'pop people.' The fashionable people. The new fads. Bright ideas. Changing mores and moralities.* We should be quicker to jump on the muck-rakers' bandwagon and even do some ourselves.
>
> I'm suggesting that Truman Capote is news. So is William Styron. . .
>
> The back of our show must be different than the

competition's. Provocative. Funny. Interesting because we're getting to the subjects that people are interested in, and people are interested *in many things that are not intrinsically important.*

Laughing beer drinkers. Life going on.

Sheehan's call for more stories about "the pop people. The fashionable people. The new fads. . ." had an ennobling patina of anti-elitism about it (although one may quibble that Truman Capote and William Styron are not big objects of gossip and speculation down at Joe & Mabel's Twelfth Street Bar and Grill). But his motive becomes evident when one considers that "the pop people. The fashionable people. The new fads," are not exactly overlooked by the rest of television. They are in fact the *stuff* of television, created by television, defined and examined by television, elevated into global notoriety by television, then digested and spat out by television to make room for the next pop idol, the next fashion, the next fad. Many of ABC's own regular network programs, including "Good Morning, America," are among the most consistent and enthusiastic showcases of the pop people, the fashionable people, the new fads. Why then, are they rebundantly courted by the network news—unless the network news is striving to look more and more like the rest of television, for the sake of building pop-fashionable-faddish audiences?

"People are involved in a lot of things these days that they are close to only vicariously," notes newsman Sheehan, and evinces a deadpan lack of skepticism about the value of this peculiar sort of involvement, or about the reasons for its existence. (One good reason, for the sake of argument, is television.) Sheehan's response to the phenomenon? Give them more vicarious involvement; they seem to like it; and if pop people and new fads intrude on a network newscast's limited time to report and explain complex issues—well, that's life.

12

In the Palace of the Ice King

Marion, Iowa, is the diamond pinkie ring on the outstretched hand that is Cedar Rapids. It lies south and east of its host city; one of those curiously seamless American bedroom suburbs, the bedrooms comfortable enough, encased in crisp white two-story frame houses that genuflect toward Iowa's heritage of agrarian plenty. But the genuflection ceases with the traditional architecture, the weather vanes, the cedars on the lawn, the occasional American flag drowsing from a rooftop like a war horse put to pasture. Like its host city, Marion is ambitiously addressing itself to the future: it is expanding, busy with subdivisions, billboards rampant, scraped earth where corn once grew. Here sleep the go-getters.

At the tip of one of these uncompleted subdivisions, at the end of a newly-poured street with no visible name, its back to a sloping ("unimproved") meadow that soon will be improved with ranch-style houses, rests a flat, featureless, single-story building. Look at it, then turn away; you will have trouble remembering what you have just seen. There is a suspicion of brick, of windows that yield no information. No cornerstones of chiseled granite here, no emblems of company pride. The building is seamless, as Marion is seamless. It suggests anonymous modularity; it will open its flank to a new wing as easily as Marion will surrender a corn field for one further subdivision (as easily as Cedar Rapids will scrape the earth of homesteads for one more Marion).

The building could be a hopeful savings-and-loan branch or a medical-association office. It is in fact One Research Center, the home of Frank N. Magid Associates, and thus the philosophical fountainhead for much of American telecommunications.

One Research Center manufactures the blueprints for cybernetic news.

At first it seems wildly improbable that America's largest and most influential broadcast consulting firm should operate, not in the Mies van der Rhoe chrome and glass of New York's Sixth Avenue, but in the loam of Iowa. It is not improbable at all. In a sense, One Research Center is one with Rockefeller Center. It is among the first edifices to appear on the skyline of the Global Village. As Marion reaches to Cedar Rapids, Cedar Rapids reaches to New York. The standardization of style, the uniformity of vision, the managed idea—all the benchmarks of the Magid blueprint for television, the great leveler—are inseparable from the motivating mentality of Cedar Rapids itself. One Research Center and Cedar Rapids each represents a different manifestation of an America trying to shake off its past, to jettison its regionalism, to amalgamate, in the name of cost-efficiency, of profit.

Disembark from a jetliner at the Cedar Rapids airport, and you will likely encounter a cab driver who will quote you a price of $5.60 to the Hotel Royale and bring you in right on the dime while delivering a Chamber of Commerce lecture about the city. For a few miles, charmed as the compact, finite skyline rises at you out of the plains, lulled as the cab driver banters in his hometown pride, you find yourself willing to reinvent the hope of Main Street—the hope that America's strength still lies in its diversity, and that its diversity is expressed in the idiosyncrasies of its towns and cities, each its own shading of the national mosaic.

The fantasy soon breaks down. Cedar Rapids is urbanizing the loam. The city of 105,000 is drawing its earth-mover claws across the adjoining earth. Fast-food

chains have captured the land once held by homesteaders. Downtown, from a window of the Hotel Royale, you can see that the clean, sensible line of the central business district is still intact—Woolworth's, J. C. Penney, the railroad tracks all in fine right angles—but there are alien forces.

A MOVIE ARCADE/ADULT BOOKS establishment flourishes right next door to Postal Finance. The Cedar Rapids *Gazette* informs you that construction of a new community center is assured—with purchase of $7 million worth of obligation bonds from a Chicago financial firm. Cocaine valued at $85,000 was seized in town. The Hotel Royale bar, a triumph of nonindigenous design, with its wrought-iron grille and Spanish menu-ese, was even sophisticated enough to have its own floozy (a very *nice* floozy, it must be added; she turned aside every proposition I witnessed over a two-hour dinner).

Given this ambitious, eastward-looking context, this stripping away of the old verities of the Republic, the hum of Frank Magid's IBM 1130 computer out there in the Marion meadow is not exactly an anomaly. It is not the voice of the turtle, but then the voice of the turtle has not been heard in this land for some time.

Frank Magid, approaching 50, is neither typical of his chosen environment nor atypical of it. He was born and reared in Chicago, the son of a chemical engineer and a member of an intellectually ambitious family (Magid's brother, Gail, is a neurosurgeon practicing in Santa Cruz, California).

Magid came to his meadow in the mildest and most domestic of circumstances—a fact that is characteristic of the man. He is the Pillar of the Community incarnate: Patron of the symphony; Rotarian (until his travels east and west forced these simple pleasures into neglect—he logs 250,000 business miles annually);

indulgent father of "Chip," 15, and Brent, 12; accommodating husband who settled in Iowa so his wife could find a teaching job. Magid tells the story with a disarming, almost American Gothic modesty.

"I had been on the faculty at the University of Iowa," he recollects, "and my wife had gotten her degree—she had wanted to be a doctor—and was looking for a job, and we wrote to all the school systems because we were in Iowa City, and of course every instructor has a wife who can teach, so the school system has more teachers than they know what to do with, or can hire. So we wrote all the places that we could find within a 30-mile radius, and the Cedar Rapids school system was one of those who answered. She applied for the position. They accepted her, but on the condition that we live in Cedar Rapids. And then when I decided to go into commercial research, I thought, well, we might as well try here, so we began to do work here and began to expand and after a while, we began to do work nationally, and we found that we were situated in, I think, a geographically advantageous portion of the country and there are other things that I think are important to me and our people, and that is in many cities the commute is so long that it takes a toll on not only the number of hours you can spend working but on your attitude toward work—and here, research, being unlike a manufacturing operation where you can count on the machine producing *x* number of widgets within a number of hours, here there are many considerations to be taken into account. We're only five or ten minutes away from anyone's home. Somebody can always be here on a Saturday or Sunday. We have here the opportunity to give a great deal of thought without being hassled, bothered, you know, by the effects of big-city problems."

It is a remarkable performance, this bucolic reverie—evocative more of an old country doctor looking back on the rewards of honest, simple labor and a virtuous family life than it is of a ferociously contemporary

sociologist-businessman at the peak of his power in shaping the informational style of a nation's electronic journalism.

What's more remarkable is that the performance does not seem contrived. There is an ingenuous side to Frank Magid, an unqualified belief in the self-evident worth of motivational research that balances his shrewd grasp of station managers' needs and mentalities, and his slick ability to persuade. It is not enough to dismiss Frank Magid as one-dimensional agent of cybernetics, the caricature of the futuristic man-as-automaton. Part of his soul is rooted in Main Street, in the very vestigial values of Iowa life that Cedar Rapids is busily scraping off the soil. He *cares* about the symphony. He *believes* in the Rotary. He has a Babbitt-like faith in the limitless efficacy of Yankee know-how; and if that know-how produced statistical research, why, then, statistical research is a good enough field for Frank Magid. It is not, paradoxically, the sophisticated and intellectually skeptical side of Frank Magid that supplies his power and his potential menace. It is his evangelical side: the side that elevates the very individualistic, exhortative values that his research-consultancy empire is leveling.

I visited One Research Center in March of 1976. A late-winter freezing rain had coated the city with ice. As the taxicab headed cautiously out of Cedar Rapids on East Post, past the Christian Science Church and the Country Kitchen (open 24 hours) and the Ample Lady Dress Shop (featuring a Red Tag sale) and the Hy-Vee Food Store, the approaching wooded avenues of Marion took on a surrealist aspect. Everything was encased in ice: branches, telephone wires, cars. We were in an Ice Universe, beautiful and spiked. One Research Center—when the cab driver finally located it, the landmarks being spare—was in the middle of an ice meadow; and I could not shake the half-joking fantasy that I was on my way to visit the Ice King.

Frank Magid received me in an office that did nothing to dispel the fantasy. It was a cool, correct, seasonless office, brightly lighted (the iced branches outside the windows served as mirrors to the sun) and noncommittal. There was an arching fern in one corner of the room; in the other, chrone-and-velvet chairs. Magid was seated behind his desk—a large, simple antique wooded desk. The surface of the desk was nearly bare, save for a telephone and a crystal decanter half-filled with Vitamin C tablets.

I sat at the far end of the office, away from Magid. We were to have begun the interview on the previous day, but when I telephoned to warn him of a touch of flu, he tactfully suggested that I stay in my hotel room and rest. Influenza germs were an unwelcome variable on Frank Magid's orderly agenda. Now he had unobtrusively placed me as far away from himself as possible; his desk, if not an "authority barrier," was at least a hygienic barrier. The crystal decanter of Vitamin C tablets sat gleaming between us like a sentinel.

Magid wore a white button-down oxford shirt, buttoned at the cuffs, a tie of muted burgundy and blue stripes, and the trousers of a glen-plaid suit. He looked somewhat like a junior Republican senator, with his iron-gray brush-cut hair and his clean, open features. The voice was a trifle high-pitched, and there was irritation in it. Magid has not been treated with unalloyed kindness by the press. The *Columbia Journalism Review* has displeased him particularly, and there have been less-than-flattering interviews in the *National Observer* and *The New York Times*. Part of the difficulty may lie in Magid's peculiar discursive style. When he is not talking about his family or his personal feelings —and he resists talking about these—he speaks in an almost Kafkaesque tumble of convoluted, purposefully oblique sentences, as though he were composing a prepared statement on the spot. He does not supply direct answers. He is a difficult man to interview.

I began the session by asking Magid why he thought

he had been dealt with so critically by the press.

"My feeling," he said, "is that, because reporters are essentially a part of the journalism fraternity, there is a preconceived notion on behalf of those who are reporting that we are guilty of the sins that have supposedly been ours and have been laid at our feet by some of the individuals in the news business, the news directors. I'm amazed and in many cases appalled to see the lack of objectivity that supposedly those people who are supposed to be the most objective are exercising.

"This is our nineteenth year in the business." Magid went on, "and I'm curious as to why, all of a sudden, some of the critics. . .and, incidentally, I find that there are not as many critics as I think the public is led to believe, and that among news directors, as an example, throughout the United States, the number of critics could be counted on one hand."

It was a sentence that wandered off into nowhere, Magid beginning by stating a curiosity about "some of the critics," but losing the point somewhere along the way. Fine points get buried in his associative process: for instance, although Magid would refer repeatedly to his "19 years" in "the business," the fact is that he did not become a consultant for broadcast news departments until 1970. Previous to that, his firm had limited itself to providing market research for such clients as Coors, Schlitz, Harley-Davidson, and several universities and publishing houses.

But Magid was still groping to make a point about his unfavorable press. "Actually, our work began," he was saying, "if you want to go back and look at the record, at least two, perhaps three years prior to the time the first, quote, notice, unquote, of it appeared in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Now, if these people are so sensitive to what's going on around the country and are so appalled by what is taking place, it seems very strange to me that for two or three years not a word was said, and that only until something surfaced in print and there was supposedly a rallying point, did individuals

begin to talk about it. The same accusations, the same misinformation, and I just wonder, I really wonder who is writing these things, and who is believing these things?"

"What sort of misinformation?" I asked.

"Why, I think that there are a number of things. I did not bother to answer the *Columbia Journalism Review* article because I frankly did not feel the article was worthy of gaining an answer, but it was fraught, I thought, with inaccuracies.

"My memory may be a bit fuzzy and you might check it, but the article said you can always tell a Magid newscast by virtue of the fact that it is called 'The World Tonight' or some such title. And at the time, in serving close to 100 stations or what have you, we checked, and I think two stations used that title, so it meant that the vast majority, better than 90 percent, you know, were not. Now, that's a gross inaccuracy."

(I later did check the article Magid had in mind. It was written in the November/December issue of *CJR* by Edward Barrett, former dean of the Columbia University graduate school of journalism. It did not, as a matter of fact, say that "you can always tell" a Magid newscast by virtue of the title. It stated that "a fairly common title" for a Magid newscast was "The World Tonight." Does that statement amount to a "gross inaccuracy"? It is a fine point—but then, one finds oneself enmeshed in pursuing fine points after a conversation with Magid.)

Magid continued: "I think probably one of the more prevalent allegations has centered around the fact that we suggest that news stories be no more than ten seconds in length and there be, if possible, 100 of them in any half-hour newscast, and of course, the longer this goes on, the more absurd, you know, those figures become."

(Of course. The figures had become absurd enough by the time Magid enunciated them. No critic of Magid had ever seriously suggested his stations carried ten-

second news stories, 100 at a time. But the short-length, high story count has been an issue indeed. By exaggerating his own critics' claims, Magid defused them.)

But by this time, Magid was moving along to yet another example of his critics' "unfair" and "grossly inaccurate" charges against him. "It was just like the other night," he was saying, "in the question-and-answer period following my speech at a Sigma Delta Chi chapter. There was a student who rose and said, 'What about your suggesting to stations that they include blood and gore and things of that sort in order to gain audiences?' And I became quite angry and said, 'Now, look, I will pay your expenses to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and if I can gain permission from each and every one of our clients to have you read through every set of recommendations we've produced in 19 years that we've been in business, and if you can find in there one statement to that effect, I will personally come back here and present to you a check for $1,000 or whatever sum you choose. . . .'"

Again, Magid was defusing the substance of a legitimate concern by exaggerating the charge—or, in this case, allowing a simplistic student to do it for him. There is little likelihood that a Magid list of recommendations would ever naively propose that a station go out and film "blood and gore." The process is more complex than that, and at its core is the crucial question of how a station manager *interprets* a given summary. If the summary suggests a higher emphasis on "actualities," or "visuals," it is likely that vivid film footage will be stressed. "Blood and gore" happens to fit the description of vivid footage.

I suggested to Magid that the student had oversimplified the question, and was in fact guilty of hyperbole, but that he had the nugget of a point.

Magid's response was vintage. "But wait a minute. The hyperbole seems to be going a bit far, and the fact of the matter is as you probably saw. . .and I was a bit disappointed, I think, in the article that appeared in the

National Observer. . . ."

He went on to bemoan, in great detail, the *National Observer* article—leaving the Sigma Delta Chi student holding his bag of blood and gore—and then circled back for a counterattack on the critics themselves: "Now, I just believe, as an example, that a great deal of what these people are talking about is so much rubbish and I believe that it stems from the fact, as I have said time and time again, that these people's toes have been stepped on, and that they feel that they can take on this mantle of journalistic expertise and somehow try to shoot it out at the O.K. Corral, looking as if they were carrying on in the form of a white knight for those things that are pure and good in journalism, and I think that it is most unfortunate that so many people have fallen for this."

So—the bottom line at last. Magid's detractors are covetous, jealous souls who have suffered some obscure slight at Magid's hands, and are determined to wreak their revenge by holding up the red herring of "those things that are pure and good in journalism." The train of thought was taking a Nixonian turn.

I raised the question of content—whether Magid's surveys influenced the substance of nightly newscasts. I reminded him of the New York *Times* interview of October 12, 1975, in which he was quoted as saying, "We do not in any shape or form recommend the content of what the news should be." Magid replied with his "practical-point-of-view" remark: that it was "absolutely impossible" for him or his staff to be present in the newsroom of every client every night—therefore, the question of content interference was absurd.

I drew Magid's attention to the fifth DuPont *Survey of Broadcast Journalism*, which had reprinted his 1971 list of recommendations for station WTVJ in Miami. The recommendations had included, "Broward County news should not be reported in great detail."

"An interesting piece," was Magid's reply, "because

I think it is inaccurate, false, and misleading."

The list was a false list?

Magid: "Well, now, wait. I think that if you were present at the discussion. . .and again, it depends upon the way you interpret that. If Broward County news is going to, in effect, preclude the reporting of other kinds of news that may be as interesting or important or what have you, and I don't recall the meeting and I cannot say and I would not, you know, certainly go to court about it, but I don't think that what we are saying is that you should not report Broward County news. Even what you have read to me was not that. There is a limited, a finite period of time on the air that you have to use in the best possible way and so that may have been reported there so we are able to get in other things and make the newscast more complete."

The point, I reminded Magid, was not that Broward County news *deserved* or *did not deserve* a given amount of coverage at WTVJ. The point was that the judgment on the question arose explicitly from the Magid staff's survey—not from the WTVJ news management. (It should be noted here that, in any case, WTVJ did not capitulate to the suggestion. Ralph Renick, the station's vice president for news, eventually succeeded in terminating the Magid group's services, and later characterized the service as "franchised news —like McDonald's.")

Magid's reply: "Well, no, but you see, what they do is, they hop on something like that, and say, you see. . . It's just like I read in the broadcasting article when I was quoted as saying don't do something about political news in Boston. It was kind of an interesting piece of reporting there, too. In the first place, the fellow who claims that I said that to him, the general manager up there, Mr. Coopersmith, is a man whom I've never met. So I couldn't have said that to him, number one, and it came perhaps secondhand from a disgruntled news director. . ."—and on and on in that vein for several minutes.

I was beginning to see that an interview with Frank Magid was about as productive—although, admittedly, certainly as interesting—an exercise as a conversation with the Cheshire Cat. Dutifully, I plunged ahead at the "content" question one more time: "Granted, what you say about Mr. Coopersmith [whatever he said about Mr. Coopersmith] may be true. But to return to the original question: Even if your intentions vis-à-vis Broward County news were the most benign in the world, and produced the best possible journalistic results, is it not at least a *semantic contradiction* to say, on the one hand, 'We don't involve ourselves in content,' and on the other to recommend a value judgment on a given category of news?"

It was at this point that Magid abruptly shifted ground, conceded the content question and, in doing so, revealed himself to be Frank Magid, Friend of Journalism.

"I think," he said, "that if we can be accused of dealing with content, the accusation might be more accurate if it, in effect, said, 'What they're trying to do is make the news extremely broad in its concept or context.' And I think," Magid continued, magnanimously agreeing with his own interpretation, "that that's quite correct: that what we are trying to do is say, 'Look, the people are entitled to know all we can give them.' And that it is not our judgment or our concern that they have not been given that sort of thing, but our research shows that they are interested in more than you are providing them, and so therefore, if a television station exists, if a news department exists for disseminating information, then *please consider your audience* and disseminate more information than you are doing at the present time."

(A point well taken, on the face of it. Judged against UFO series, reports on bridges that wouldn't go up, sex fantasies, and porpoise-splashings, even the barest mention of the *existence* of Broward County should be deemed worthy of a George Foster Peabody Award. But

it does not come to one's attention that television stations are exactly erring in the direction of over-covering local-government news. Be that as it may, I wearied of the subject and yearned to change it. Magid, however, had a last, ennobling interpretation to apply.)

"We say to people," he said, " 'look. You have a show of 30 minutes' length time. *Let's not waste those precious minutes.* Let's make sure that it contains all we can possibly produce and we have a *responsibility to the viewers* to make sure that we provide them with every bit of our ability instead of taking a passive, you know, approach.'

"So, I suppose if we are accused of formulizing, then our formula would be that we want to see every one of our stations produce news of the very highest quality and to have people who are the very best people doing it. So I will accept that sort of thing."

Now Magid seemed preoccupied with this theme. He talked on, and as he talked, I realized how stunningly accurate were the broadcasters who had described him as "a super salesman." With no discernible leap of logic, Magid was suddenly the passionate defender of pure journalism against those who would deny the public its deeper, nobler interests.

"I'm troubled," he was saying. "I'm troubled by value judgments and who makes them and why. I'm troubled by what values or concerns the television journalists have. Those who seem to be against us appear to have, in many cases, *complete lack of regard* for the public they seek, or so they say, to *serve.* Now, you know, when they talk about the 'lowest common denominator'—I find that to be a little elitist. They are saying that 80 per cent of the people respond well and want certain kinds of things, and they are referring to the 80 per cent as the lowest common denominator. I find that very difficult to understand and I find it, frankly, a bit repulsive. Because *they are looking down* and are dictating and are saying that this is what they feel the public should have.

"You see, the critics are always saying that what we are doing is appealing to the lowest common denominator. How big *is* that lowest common denominator? It so happens that in many cases it is 80 per cent of the general population."

The populistic note was—as are so many notes that Magid strikes—a convincing and dramatic one. It takes a supreme effort at concentration to digest the above passage, and then consider that this is the same man whose organization told station WMAQ in Chicago that ". . .In terms of news, this means ratings are improved not when listeners are told what they *should* know, but what they want to hear." It's surprising to recall that this is the same man whose organization suggested that "Some very effective actualities can be delivered in ten seconds," and that an "enraged parent, a scared child, a marching picketer" are to be favored as on-the-scene news sources over a "disinterested" reporter.

"And why," I asked Magid, bringing the conversation back to TV news stories of murder, riots, fires, "why is there a preponderance of the easy, high-action film story?"

And this is what Magid replied: "Look. *I think you'd better turn to your journalism schools for an answer*, because that's what they consider to be hard, late-breaking news. As a matter of fact, you cannot find it, find one word that we have written about having, you know, fires, that sort of thing, and look at *19 years of recommendations,* and I don't think you'll find one reference to that sort of thing. But that seems to be standard in terms of what people coming out of the journalism schools think is news."

As it happened, I had come to Cedar Rapids directly from New York, where I had done exactly what Magid suggested—turned to a journalism school for an answer. Columbia University has perhaps the best-known graduate school of journalism in the United

States, and Fred Friendly, the former CBS News president, is the Murrow Professor of Communications there. I had asked Friendly about his reaction to TV's emphasis on fires, crimes, and sex as news. His answer did not indicate that journalism schools were setting up these categories as standards of news.

Said Friendly: "Television is becoming the tabloid, the instrument of the yellow journalist. It is doing the very thing that Hearst used to do, that the New York *Graphic* used to do. *The Front Page* is coming back, in television form.

"What's happened is that the newspapers have gotten pretty good. The newspapers that have survived are really quite good today. Television has taken over the crappy role.

"You get fire after fire after fire. One obvious reason besides audience-building is that those stories come right into a news department off the police wire. They're easy to cover. And, of course, it creates in this city, among older people especially, the feeling that this is a terribly unsafe city and you have to stay locked up in your room. And it isn't that way at all.

"News has traditionally been an anticipator of events, not just a voyeur of the sensational. If you can't anticipate, you can't report at all. What a journalist has to be able to do, is to see slightly beyond the curvature of the earth. To know what tomorrow's story is going to be. Not to go answering that fire alarm. Television is terrible about that.

"But among the local TV stations here in New York, you almost have—in a figurative sense—Nero fiddling while Rome burns. You should see how they were doing 'happy' news and fires while the biggest story since New York got sold for $24 was developing—the financial breakdown of the city!"

Magid was glancing at his wristwatch; he was scheduled to deliver a speech that afternoon, and wanted to bring the interview to a close. I decided to

skip ahead to a topic I was very much interested in hearing from Magid's point of view: his role in developing "AM America."

"What were the differences," I asked Magid, "between your recommendations and ABC's execution of them?"

"Well," he said, "you see, there are a number of people in the creative end of any program development, and oftentimes these people have an innate distrust of research because they feel you cannot research certain things. *We* feel that you cannot research everything, but that research is a very, very valid instrument for doing certain things.

"I know that when we talked about Stephanie Edwards, as an example, the research which had tested her indicated that she would not be appropriate. And these people [at ABC] said to us, 'Look, give her time. She has to grow on you.' Things of that sort. We said, 'Look. Research says that *this* is the case,'. . .and that's where some of the differences seem to exist.

"I mean, we're all products of our environment, and we're all products of things we've learned, and that sort of thing, and what we do in research is try to take a view of what the public will respond to. And these people are not privy to that information unless research provides it for them. But, you see, there is this distrust of research."

So far, Magid's account—boiled down to its coherent essentials—provided a substantially different view from Stephanie Edwards'. According to Ms. Edwards, ABC blindly embraced the recommendations Magid had provided. According to Magid, the network was a reluctant dragon.

"Did your differences," I asked him, "turn on the Edwards issue?"

"No, I think that there were a lot of things. As an example, the set was inappropriate. It looked very small and people looked uncomfortable on the set. I don't know whether you remember those first few days, but

there were legs and shoes and things dangling beside it, and when the people look uncomfortable, those who watch the people are going to be uncomfortable."

"There were stories," I reminded Magid, "to the effect that your organization had called desks 'authority barriers'; hence, podiums instead of desks."

"Aww, you know, I wish that people would really come to grips with some of these facts."

"Did you recommend podiums as opposed to desks?"

"I don't recall that we did, no."

"That the notebook paper should be orange?"

"Oh, yeah. That one. Some of these things are absolutely ridiculous. The fact of the matter is that, frankly, I thought the show was, right from its beginnings, too much of a carbon copy of what the 'Today' show was doing very well. We were not providing, as the research indicated we should provide, a viable alternative to the 'Today' show."

"How should it have been different?"

"Well, first of all, there are other things that people wanted to know about. The 'Today' show rests very heavily on political news, on interviews with political personages and other individuals, newsmakers. The show on ABC was designed to provide a different kind of news. . .different *kinds* of information with different kinds of people, whether it be experts on plants or animals or weather or things that you do in terms of coping with problems on a day-to-day basis. Lifestyles. Divorce and marriage. The sex situation. All of those things that people, you know, read about and are interested in. So it was designed to be, again, a different show, concentrating on different things."

Plants. Animals. Weather. Lifestyles. Divorce and marriage. The sex situation. Different things. Different from the "Today" show's emphasis on "political news, on interviews with political personages and other individuals, newsmakers." *("Broward County news should not be reported in great detail.")*

Frank Magid is very close to an absolutist in his acceptance of statistical research as a determinant of human impulses, tendencies, preferences, behavior. He is a true believer. And he is both dramatically right and dead wrong.

Magid's research for "AM America" produced the unsurprising information that television watchers prefer plant information over politics; lifestyles over newsmakers; day-to-day basics over foreign affairs. Perhaps a television show arranged around such categories can be a commercial and artistic success—as the improved performance of "AM"'s successor, "Good Morning, America," would indicate.

But Magid is not a consultant primarily for morning "magazine"-type formats. His principal area in television is the newscast. And the principal flaw, of both Magid and his rising army of consultant-imitators, is the assumption that light news, cute features, gossip, and folksy "how-to" information are all that people want, that such categories plumb the depths of the American public's curiosity, social concern, and attention span. (The principal flaw of Magid's clients, the station managers and one network news president, has been to turn such an assumption into news judgment. Recall William Sheehan's memo to the ABC news staff.)

No matter how stridently Frank Magid denies it—and he can, when he is in full rhetorical cry about "responsibility to viewers" and "disseminating more information," sound like a combination of Horace Greeley and Daniel Ellsberg—his thrust is basically anti-journalistic.

The best American journalism has traditionally proceeded from the assumption that it is mining areas that the public *did not even know existed.* How could any motivational survey, no matter how perfectly worded, yield the information—in advance—that Americans wanted to read the Pentagon Papers? Or that Americans wanted to know about the secret Constitutional assaults of the Nixon Administration? Or about illegal

massacres in Vietnam, or faulty automobile-safety standards, or the rise of multinational corporations, or CIA involvement in Chile, or the Black Sox scandal, or Boss Tweed, or Teapot Dome? In none of these cases did the public (that is, a small sector of it) have the opportunity to "vote" on such coverage in advance—because the coverage *created* the category; made it visible; created and legitimized its own audience interest.

The reason why investigative reporting is anathema in the cybernetic newscast is self-evident: it is a revolutionary element (in that it commends radical change) and thus is counterproductive to audience-building. Yesterday's radicalism, to quote Garry Wills, "becomes today's common sense." But while a muckraking news story is in its "radical" stage, it upsets and annoys people; it activates hidden fears, biases, guilts; it creates in the TV viewer the strong preference to think about something else. The viewer is likely to switch to "Least Objectionable Programming."

This is why television has had to be dragged screaming by the hair to nearly every important "investigative" story of the past ten years: the developing awareness of official deceit in Vietnam policy and strategy (David Halberstam in Harper's); My Lai (Seymour Hersh in *The New York Times*); the inadequacy of automobile safety standard (Ralph Nader wherever he could find a forum); the Pentagon Papers (Daniel Ellsberg and *The New York Times*); Watergate (the Washington *Post* and Judge John J. Sirica); the various current resource shortages and fiscal crises (a noble except being the three-hour energy-crisis documentary produced for NBC by the late Fred Freed in 1973).

There are strong parallels between investigative reporting's maverick role in the conventional news process (especially in television) and radicalism's role in the conventional political process, as articulated by

Wills:* "All the initially unpopular political causes—labor, universal suffrage, Prohibition, civil rights, the antiwar movement—had their origins in the streets, or in back alleys, not in electoral contests. They were of questionable legality at the outset, or of open illegality. The first organizers did not end up in electoral office, but in jail [Note—for TV reporters, instead of "jail", read: "oblivion"]. Every strenuous moral effort begins with a handful of oddballs—the crazies, freaks, and street people; the prophets, the martyrs, the saints. . .

"Prophets are a scandal in democracies. They are not representative. They cannot be controlled or called off by their 'constituents,' because *no constituency sent them. They create their audience, and compel it. They do not follow or submit to it.* They make a claim because it is right, not because it is wanted, even by its putative beneficiaries—normally it is not wanted."

As it is with the prophet in a democracy, so it is with the persistent, digging reporter of unpleasant truths in the electronic news media. No "constituency," in the form of an audience survey, sent him snooping in the county assessor's office or through the alderman's payroll. He creates his audience by presenting it with unexpected facts; and if he compels it, he often leads it as well. The investigative reporter does not "follow or submit to" the viewing audience—and, as a consequence, he is frequently reassigned, or else replaced by someone who is willing to follow and submit. (More typically, he is not hired by a TV station in the first place.) The dollar stakes are simply too enormous for TV news departments to play Russian roulette with their viewers by consistently taunting them with new threats to their comfortable suppositions about public ethics, official sanity, the degree of illness and starvation among fellow men, the proximity of catastrophe.

* "Feminists and Other Useful Fanatics" *Harper's*, June 1976.

The use of audience research in TV journalism—any journalism—has the effect of turning the newsman's head backward, into the past. What "worked" before? What got results? Plant news? They like plant news? Good, we will devote time each week to plant news (come hell or high crimes and misdemeanors). Weather? Ah, we will give them a plethora of weather, more weather than they can possibly remember or repeat five minutes after having heard it. The "action" reporter? Get him on the air, every night. Sports; we have to have sports. Perhaps a "baby doctor" once a week. Celebrity notes—they always work. Faces and Places. The ombudsman, the "problem solver." The viewer-surrogate reporter. A little commentary by the co-anchorman.

And, if there is any time left, we will cover some news. That is, after all, our noble calling, our knightly mandate. We must remember our "responsibility to the viewers," and "disseminate more information." It says so right here, on Mr. Magid's survey.

Of course, we have to place news in its proper perspective. For example, Gloria Rojas, now a feature reporter at WABC, fled to the New York station from Chicago's WLS after a series of indignities, the most notable of which occurred when a report she had prepared on rape victims was pre-empted on the ten p.m. newscast so that Coleman and Company could have a few extra minutes to celebrate its eighth anniversary on the air. The same station lost Larry Buchman, a talented investigative reporter, to NBC radio, after the station's management told him they were not too interested in investigative work.

Dr. Lendon Smith is a good example of how this sort of soft, feature-oriented compartmentalization is replacing hard news on local stations. Dr. Smith is a 55-year-old pediatrician, popularly known as "The Baby Doctor" on the radio call-in and TV talkshow circuit. Dr. Smith is regularly seen and heard on "Good Morning, America," and on local stations in such cities

as Cleveland, Washington, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle.

In early 1976, "The Baby Doctor" added another step on his rounds: he began appearing every Thursday on Channel 7 "Eyewitness News" in Chicago.

Before his series of "visits" on Channel 7 began, Dr. Smith candidly told a Chicago TV columnist: "I try to be reassuring, cheerful, intelligent, and informative. The people want information, but they want it cheerfully presented."

How, the columnist politely asked Dr. Smith, would he manage a "cheerful" report on, say, leukemia or cerebral palsy?

"Well, of course, you don't," was the doctor's frank reply. "You just give it straight and get it over with. But I'd say my stuff runs 5 to 1 light to heavy."

Dr. Smith's penchant for the "light" was gloriously conspicuous in one of his first appearances. The subject was "hyperactivity in children"; it was, in the event, hyperactivity in Dr. Lendon Smith, and devil take the viewer seeking to squeeze a drop of information from the raffish doctor's verbal mulch.

Here, word for word, is how the segment proceeded:

NEWSMAN JOHN DRURY: Lendon Smith, author and pediatrician, is back with us again today. A subject that is on the minds of many parents is the subject of hyperactivity in children.

Uh—address yourself to *that*, okay?

SMITH: Uh—my mother wondered about this, but they had some other name for it. Like, uh, "My, he's a touchy little thing." Or, "Isn't he sensitive?" is what was often said then, because I'm sure I was hyperactive. I think the only thing that saved me was that I was raisin-ably—uh, *reasonably* bright in school, and the teacher knew that my father was a, you know, a nice doctor; they said, well, let's not bug little Lendon, because he's got this nice father.

And I would smile. And I was *cheerful*. And I think that makes a difference. But as far as I'm concerned,

hyperactivity is only a diagnosis, or is only meaningful if it interferes with a child's getting along in school. If he's, uh, if he's active but he gets his work done and he doesn't disrupt the rest of the class, why, you know, *leave him be.* Now, uh, I found, however, that, um, some children are hyperactive only in school. This is sort of really the best definition. If they're hyperactive at home and not hyperactive in school, there's something wrong with the home situation. And not at school. 'Cause hyperactivity is defined as a child who is unable to disregard unimportant stimuli. [*At last—the doctor defines what he is talking about.*]

If he's sitting in a class and a car goes by and he's WHHHHSISSSSSHHHT—off to the window, and telling everybody there's a car out there. Somebody drops a pencil three rows over, and he's the first one over there to pick up the pencil. That's called—uh, an *approacher.* He notices everything and he has to respond to it in a motor way. Now, if it's that sort of a child, then something, uh, could be done. Uh, if the teacher's upset with his behavior, then he may need medication, we're finding that other things, uh, red food-dye, uh, has something to do with this; we've all heard of studies. . .

DRURY: Izzat important?

SMITH: You bet it is. Yeah. But it's not the whole answer. Sometimes fluorescent lights, uh, are enough to freak out these kids. There's a whole bunch of things that can—that have to do with it. A tough teacher, too many kids in the classroom. . .we'll talk about it again some other time.

DRURY: Children grow out of this, don't they, Doctor?

SMITH: You bet, and become, uh, uh, uh, news, uh, hosts and, and pediatricians.

That is, apparently, a working example of "different *kinds* of information with different *kinds* of people": a slickly commercial, self-consciously fey pediatrician-personality, an authority—but also, at least on this oc-

casion, a facile monologist babbling on about his father, his teacher, red food-dye, fluorescent lights, a whole bunch of things. An approacher. May need medication. We've all heard of studies. We'll talk about it again some other time.

Frank Magid is "troubled," he says, by journalists who "look down" and "dictate" what they feel the public should have. He finds such behavior, such talk of "the lowest common denominator," to be "a little elitist."

And yet, at up to 100 of the most influential television stations in the country, Frank Magid and his associates are doing most of the "looking down," the "dictating." And to proclaim that among the 80 per cent Magid considers to be the lowest common denominator, "there aren't too many 'concerned' listeners out there"—as the Magid survey specifically informed WMAQ Radio—itself smacks of elitism.

The interview was drawing to a close. "I'm going to give a speech this afternoon," said Magid, "to the Iowa Sociological Association, and many of my former colleagues will be present and I'm looking forward to giving the speech because what I'm going to say is something they probably won't like, and that is that when I left the university both as a student and as a teacher and went into the commercial, that I felt that much of what I had been taught was not applicable to the real world.

"Now, I am going to lay the blame at the foot of the real world, so to speak, because I came in only partially prepared, you know, to deal with the things I found out, in terms of research methodology and what have you. Of course, I'm going to urge them this afternoon to, in effect, poke their head out of the cocoon and to see, you know, what's really there.

"But the fact of the matter really is, I must take it upon myself, as I hope I have over these past 19 years,

to build a better situation; to learn more myself and not, you know, lay it at the foot of something as these people are laying it at the foot of commercial television. I will say that, to a large extent, the individuals who are employed today lack a great deal of imagination. They lack the ability to go beyond the supposed parameters that exist at the present time."

"Do they," I asked Magid, "lack the ability to understand what you are telling them?"

"Yes. And, as a matter of fact, they confuse and misconstrue, and as I think I've mentioned in a number of articles that have been written or at least I've been quoted, I speak of a sign I saw once in the office of a college president. It said: 'New ideas are always in danger of being beaten to death by those of insufficient knowledge, or by those whose apple cart they would upset.' And it's so true. Because we are a purveyor of new ideas. We come in and we, in effect, as we walk in the door, come in with a large sign that, in effect, says, 'Change.' We represent change. The only thing is, we don't know what it's going to mean until the study is through. And people are resistant to change because it can be a very unsettling thing. The news director worries whether, you know, this or that or the next thing. I think that's wrong. Because we should be regarded as someone who is going to give us some information about what people are responding to, and if we work together we can make this a more effective newscast."

"Why are you in the business?" I asked Magid.

"I am, I guess, inquisitive. And I'm curious as to why people do the things they do. And I suppose I am a student of human behavior. I'm intrigued. I'm interested. And there is, to my way of thinking, a great deal of satisfaction that one gains, aside from any monetary remuneration there may be.

"And I do honestly believe that seeing a station grow in its news ratings. . .and I know this comes back again to, 'All we're interested in is ratings.' *Well, that's what we're retained to do.* A station is interested in gaining

ratings, but I really don't know of any station that is dominant in the ratings that doesn't do a good job. Now, you and I may travel all over and we have a broader view of news than the person in any given market that sits home or watches television news in his market. Everything is relative."

I asked Magid what his own news sources were.

"Personally? I enjoy reading newspapers. As a matter of fact, and because I travel so much, I read daily such things as the *Wall Street Journal*; I'll read the newspapers that are available in the given market. I try to read the national news magazines. We take quite a number of magazines. I enjoy such things as *Atlantic* and *Harper's* and *The New Yorker* and *New York*. I listen to radio only when I'm in the car because that is the only time I have available outside of when I'm in hotels or things of that sort. I try to watch a bit of the morning news in terms of comparing how they look so you get a full spectrum of everything. And then, wherever I am, because I'm interested in television news, I watch television news."

It was an interesting set of informational priorities for the anti-elitist, the booster of television as the best disseminator of American journalism: newspapers first, and particularly the quintessentially Establishment *Wall Street Journal*. Magazines second, with a nod to the eastern, low-circulation, high-prestige periodicals such as *Atlantic*, and *The New Yorker*. Radio *third*—only when he is in the car. Television news *last*, and then with a pointed qualifier: *"Because I'm interested in television news"* (as its architect).

Magid was warming to the subject.

"You know, I enjoy reading a great deal. For instance, I was intrigued with Tom Wolfe's book *The Painted Word* because I am interested in art as well, and I was interested in what he had to say about the art establishment, so to speak. But I'm also interested in the philosophy of ideas. I was intrigued with Saul Bellow's book *Humboldt's Gift*. Such things as *Nightwork*, by

Irwin Shaw, or whatsisname's very enjoyable book—Doctor. . .*Ragtime. Ragtime* I especially enjoyed because I enjoyed the style. *And there was a very interesting amalgamation between fact and fiction. . . .*" [emphasis added]

Magid was speaking with real animation now. The formality was gone. For the first time in the interview he seemed at ease, friendly; the defenses down. The carefully oblique businessman-academic in the starched oxford shirt was giving way to a more *spontaneous* man; and, for the first time, it occurred to me that there was a clear correlation between Frank Magid's distinct lack of personal spontaneity and the same lack that comes through so painfully on Magid-counseled newscasts.

But now Magid was reminiscing; the memory that followed offers perhaps the most revealing, and poignant, insight into Frank Magid's identity. "If I may recall the days that I went to school," he began almost shyly, ". . .I recall one thing that impressed me very much. I had just gone into graduate school and I had to take a course in statistics, and I really had a very poor background in algebra and things of that sort.

"And the first day, the professor gave a math test, and I got about 20 out of a possible 100. And I went up to him and said, 'Look. Will you tell me the name of a tutor; I have to pass this course to get a master's degree, and I know my limitations in math and I want to do well, and please.'

"And he said, 'Why don't you sit down.' 'No, you don't understand. I have to; if I don't do it now, I'm going to fail.' He said, 'Why don't you sit down.' I did —and that professor *made statistics so meaningful, so important, so wonderful.* He was so facile, so able, and that sort of thing, that I was intrigued, and I did extremely well in that particular course. I went on to take every statistics course that he offered, and ended up taking my Ph.D. qualifying exams in statistics, and ended up teaching statistics at Coe College here in Cedar Rapids."

That Frank Magid, the reserved, bookish don, the diligent acolyte of charts and graphs and abstract data —that this austere Ice King received his motivating inspiration from the *personal style of a charismatic mentor,* is one of the master paradoxes of the Magid empire. But Magid was absorbed in still another reminiscence. "I have a minor in anthropology. And the professor at the time was David Stout, a fellow of the Royal Society, probably the world's foremost authority on the Kuna Indians of Panama, that sort of thing. And I never took a note in that class—and worried—and yet, on the other hand, didn't, *because he brought everything so much to life every time he spoke,* whether it be of one culture or another, that I could visualize everything. If we were talking about South American Indians, or whatever it is, I could visualize them in front of me. *I could see tribal rites. I knew precisely what the homes were like.* I knew everything he was describing, and it was there in living color, right before my eyes. It was wonderful, and most of those things, believe it or not, I can still recall today.

"Now," continued Magid, and his voice was softer, "there were others in that university who were teaching statistics. I tried it when I taught at Coe College. . .but I know I failed, I mean, in my own mind, I'm sure that no student was. . .uh, enlightened and enthused and concerned and wanted to do something with it as David Gold made me. The same with Dave Stout and a few others." He paused, and looked up; spread his hands, a trifle embarrassed by what he had revealed. When he finally spoke, it was with a shrug and a sense of anticlimax: "But there is a difference in terms of what I received by virtue of their enthusiasm, their manner of preparation. All of the things that they did."

The interview was over. Magid had to make his speech before the Iowa Sociological Association. He gave me a brief tour of the research center; we inspected the IBM 1130 computer, met some of the young Ph.D's on Magid's staff. And then we shook hands.

As I left Cedar Rapids ($5.60 from the Hotel Royale to the airport) I found myself trying to place Frank Magid in the repertory of American archetypes. It was an elusive game. Magid has few distinctive edges. The effect of his startling authority within electronic journalism is clear, but it wants a personal stamp. The most influential television theoretician since Marshall McLuhan (save, perhaps, Paul Klein), Magid is, like McLuhan, an academic; but he lacks McLuhan's fantastic idiosyncrasy and playful synthesizing. More important, McLuhan—though his historical premises could be faulted for accuracy and his historical analogies be endlessly debated on grounds of logic—*has* a historical sense. It is Frank Magid's peculiar fascination that he seems cut off from history. Just as his strange modular research center has nothing in common with Iowa's agrarian history, no organic continuity with the historical *fact* of Iowa any more than with the Kuna Indians of Panama, so Magid's vision for television news has nothing in common with the inquisitive, disinterested history of American journalism. (Yes, Magid builds on "what has worked" in past TV newscasts; what has worked within the relatively few minutes of television's tenure in the American life. And, yes, One Research Center builds on the recent ambition of Cedar Rapids go-getters. History, for Magid, extends back approximately 19 years.)

If not a McLuhan, who then? A salesman? Yes, but no Willy Loman, way out there in the blue riding on a smile and a shoeshine, whining about getting some seeds in the ground. Magid is a breed of salesman Willy never dreamed of.

George F. Babbitt? Magid has something in him of the smalltown booster, the Rotarian, friend of the symphony, but he is far more patrician than Babbitt in his innocent coarseness. Professor Harold Hill? Some hope there: Magid knows the territory, all right—but he isn't in Iowa just to organize a boy's band, he's there to orchestrate a national cacophony into the ultimate

negotiable hum, the one perfect note that will have the 18-to-49 age group marching in perfect consumer-cadence behind him, past the advertisers' reviewing stand. More Paid Piper than Music Man.

If Frank Magid conforms to any national type, it is likely the Self-Made Man—the Emersonian self-improver, the Horatio Alger out to fill up the empty spaces in the world, and, in the process, the empty spaces in himself. Such men and women tend to regard life as a series of arenas in which one tests and improves one's soul by meeting and defeating obstacles, or "opponents," or "competitors." Incentive is all; expansion an unquestioned virtue; rating points are the merit badges of moral worth.

As a medium conceived for the purpose of moving goods, television is a natural breeding-ground for this marketplace definition of an ethical system. It is no contradiction that Frank Magid and his rival news consultants are consummate masters of audience-building subtleties, and yet stumble into incoherence and contradiction when led into the subject of news "content." "Content" is, after all, incidental to the game. It is someone else's worry. Let the moral weight of "content" fall back on those millions who choose one newscast over another. If they choose the entertaining newscast over the serious-minded one, is that not evidence enough of the rightness of the course? (Never mind that the millions have not been let in on the rules of the game: have not been told that they are not the *objects* of television programming but *commodities in it*, to be turned over to advertisers en masse like cattle; and that the entertaining newscast does not *signify*—although it manifestly *implies*—that the world is free that night from more significant stories, deeper crises, more and various impending agonies.)

Magid's sharp, sophisticated, fatuous "researchers," out there in the communities, gathering their foreordained "attitude and opinion summaries" for their use toward rating-point merit badges, are on a fixed and

sterile course. They are as surely enmeshed in meaningless charade (for all the good they do for public enlightenment) as are the eighth-graders described by Jonathan Kozol:*

> It is conceivable that eighth grade children in an innovative and experimental junior high *might*, in the course of "field work," hear at least a couple of divergent views on urban problems, welfare, trade, taxation, voting age. They will hear, perhaps, from those who favor low-cost housing, those who feel that water-fluoridation is a good idea, and those who think that smog is a bad problem. They will hear from Democrats. They will hear from Republicans. They will hear from liberals, from moderates and from conservatives. They will hear from those who favor health insurance as a national priority, and those who think the whole thing can be handled better by Blue Cross and by Blue Shield. They will hear of "know-how," "in-put," "out-put," "programs," "structures," "systems."
>
> What we must ask, however, is what they will learn about starvation? Needless hunger? Conscious exploitation? Purposeful injustice? What will they learn, not of the friendly Mayor and City Council, but of real power? What will they learn of the accountability of public officers to those in corporation offices and private-interest lobbies, "funds" and "fronts," whose cash donations make their re-election possible? What will they learn about the power and control of schools *themselves* [read: "TV stations"] and of the ways in which the schools, the publishers and the educational consulting-firms labor together to expropriate the candor and the courage of the pupils who are locked within these schools? How much of *this* will get to children, unassisted, undirected, unprovoked, by "random" accident of "open" access and untutored inquiry? I think we know when we are in the presence of overt deceit.

* *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far From Home*, Houghton Mifflin Co.

Kozol is close to the point of Frank Magid here, with one important distinction: Magid, whatever else he may be, is not a practitioner of "overt deceit." He is not a dishonest man. In a peculiar way, he is as much marionette as he is puppeteer.

And, in the field he has perfected, he is surrounded by a vast and growing community of competitors—many of whom would be only too happy to cut his strings.

13

Colors In A Diamond

As far as Phil McHugh is concerned, Frank Magid is an upstart, a Johnny-come-lately, and a lot of baloney.

The fact that Frank Magid has soared past Phil McHugh as the nation's most influential news consultant has not done much to temper McHugh's judgment.

"Magid never was a consultant," growled McHugh in the high-rise executive offices of McHugh & Hoffman, Inc. Communications Consultants. The offices are at 7900 Westpark Drive, McLean, Virginia, a rapidly-expanding little oasis of urban glass and steel rising out of the lush forests about 20 miles south of Washington. Ten years ago, the land on which McHugh's high-rise offices rest—an area with the quaint name of Tyson's Corner—was a farm. In another ten, given the present rate of expansion, it will be inner city.

"Magid was always a research man," continued Phil McHugh, a squarely-built, feisty, balding fiftyish bulldog of a man whose voice can fill a room to bursting. "I know he likes to use that '19 years' figure, but for most of that time he was a research man. When Magid *became* a consultant, he hired Les Atlas' son [Atlas was a Chicago broadcast baron] and it didn't work out worth a damn. He then turned around and hired Lee Stowell from us, about four or five years ago, and Lee Stowell set up the consulting division for Magid in broadcasting. Now, that's a fact. Magid has been doing research in broadcasting for a long time, but he had never been doing consulting."

Perhaps Phil McHugh can be forgiven his animosity toward Magid—an animosity that has tinges of a

modern-day Hatfield-McCoy feud, fought out with computers and questionnaires instead of Kentucky long rifles.

For if Frank Magid perfected the business of news consultancy, it was Phil McHugh who invented the damn thing—way back in 1962, along with his partner, Peter S. Hoffman.

At that time, McHugh had already been in what he calls "the radio, television, agency field" for 26 years, starting out with a radio directing job at the University of Notre Dame in 1936. Two years later he joined the CBS Radio Network in New York in *its* research department, but quickly moved into the broadcasting side as an associate network producer.

After World War II, McHugh held a variety of radio jobs, some of them news-related, and in 1950 he began a long and profitable career in the "agency" arm of his chosen field. He joined the Campbell-Ewald advertising agency in Detroit; under his management, the company's radio-television billings rose from $4 million to $40 million a year. In those days, companies and corporations still sponsored individual TV shows in their entirety—as distinct from the "spot buying" of air time in practice today—and McHugh proved to be a cagey operator indeed when it came to purchasing "commercial vehicles." He bought and supervised, for clients such as Chevrolet and Delco, such "commercial vehicles," as the Dinah Shore and Bob Hope shows, "Eyewitness to History," "High Adventure," "My Three Sons," "Route 66," and "Bonanza."

All the while, McHugh, a hardheaded businessman from first to last, was getting more and more curious as to why people developed loyalties to certain TV shows—curious as to why the ratings turned out the way they did.

He had, in the meantime, met Peter Hoffman, who had joined Campbell-Ewald's research department in 1954, upon being discharged from the army at the close of the Korean War. (Hoffman, the smooth and

persuasive Dartmouth gentleman-salesman, was also tough enough to have been an infantry platoon leader and a Ranger.) Hoffman's main fascination was research; at Campbell-Ewald, he organized the TV-radio research section, which became a pioneer in the pre- and post-testing of radio and TV commercials.

The careers of McHugh and Hoffman became intertwined in 1957, when Hoffman became McHugh's assistant as an account executive for Chevrolet, General Motors, Firestone, Kroger, and other large clients. Hoffman also coordinated TV and radio research for these clients.

In 1962, the two men resigned from Campbell-Ewald to form their own research firm. McHugh & Hoffman, Inc.—its offices then in Birmingham, Michigan—became the first consulting company to employ the techniques of social research to make specific recommendations for improvement in radio and television.

And, from the first as now, "improvement" was defined as upward movement in the ratings. At the time I visited with McHugh, his firm was working for 31 television stations around the country.

"The concept that we're consultants for news, and news only, is one of the misapprehensions that's sprung up about this business," said McHugh. "Certainly, we *evolved* into a greater concentration in news. But that was a result of several things.

"We started out consulting for stations in all the areas that were outside network control. Now, back in those days, you have to recall, there was Bozo the Clown, there were the morning shows, the cooking shows—a lot more programming under local-station control. All kinds of things in the early sixties. We would study all of these things. Over the years, we became very much aware that the primary relationship between a station and its audience was established, really, through its news. That was where the dependency began to develop."

I asked McHugh if he would explain what he meant

by "dependency."

"We began to develop," he said, "what I call a 'home-station' relationship. We were interested in finding the reasons why viewers kept coming back to a particular station to find out what happened today—to find out the news. We were looking for the elements that made a given station more attractive than its competitors. We studied all the stations in a market at the same time. And, as we studied, the news itself became a more and more important factor. It went from a 15-minute format to a 30-minute format to an hour, and now, in some cases, to a two-hour format.

"The late 1960's—the time when local TV news made its big move—was a major period of transition. It was probably most notable for the fact that the visual content of a newscast began to improve significantly. Editing began to improve. The coverage of stories began to improve. And the audience began to feel that it was much more at the scene of what was happening, rather than being told what was happening with a silent picture."

"Was this," I asked McHugh, "a result of the unrest going on throughout America in the late sixties—the riots, the demonstrations, the Vietnam War protests?"

"Yes," he said. "I think the news became more important in the daily routines of viewers. We had never had a war going on in our living room before. We had never been as close to events. And, too, color television was then beginning to make its big impact."

I asked McHugh to explain the principal differences between his company and Magid's.

"I've always said this," replied McHugh. "If colleges and universities are similar—if Antioch, Harvard, and Johns Hopkins are alike—then Magid and we are alike. But you know the kind of education and the approach to education at Antioch. So we don't have to go into it. But we are different from Magid.

"Frank Magid runs a tremendously big company. I have no idea what percentage of his income comes out

of his consulting part of the company, but he's got a whole lot of bodies to work on.

"We, by contrast, are a very small company. There are four men and five girls, and the men are the only ones who consult and travel. Our whole concept is not to spend our lives looking at tapes and visiting a station only once. I think Magid's plan is to visit only once a quarter. Ours is entirely different. We go every six weeks, sometimes every three weeks, sometimes every other week, depending on the problem.

"And the principal executives of our company are always involved with the client. The principals of Magid's company—with the exception of one station—sell. They sell beautifully; they're master salesmen. But they are not around afterward."

"What do you mean," I asked McHugh, 'by 'sell'?"

"They go out and make sales presentations and persuade stations to come with them. Then they are hardly ever seen again. Frank has been able to accomplish it; it's no discredit to him, but I don't know that I would. I don't know if I'd want to. He has set himself up in such a way that, really, other than selling —and the servicing of ABC—he's really not that much involved."

Selling and servicing—it all sounded vaguely like a feud between two competing automobile dealers. " 'Involved' in what?" I asked McHugh.

"In service. I suspect that Frank Magid reads a very small percentage of the studies. I read every study. He doesn't. He claims to handle 100 stations on a consulting basis. We know that he handles a maximum of 50. That's a fact; I know it because we are in negotiations with a man from his company who was going to join us just two weeks ago.

"Their system of consulting is very different from ours. We're all-involved. They assign an individual from the company, and he becomes responsible for, let's say, 13 stations. Now, those stations tend to assume a look and a feel, a certain common denomi-

nator of things that is very much the point of view of that one guy.

"Magid has a tendency to be—which he hotly denies—much more formulized than we are. You can, if you spend enough time at it, go into almost any city and pick out the Magid station."

McHugh & Hoffman, to compensate for the smallness of its staff, does not perform its own audience research—the distribution and collection of surveys that supposedly provide the basic insights into the public consciousness. Rather, the firm farms out this task to one of several research companies on a contract basis.

"We tend to have far less computer information than does a Magid study," said McHugh. "We started out that way. We think you can get more of a subtle understanding of why people feel the way they do, and why they're reacting the way they do, than you can ever get by compounding statistics.

"Magid is very big on statistics. In fact, his concepts go way beyond our concepts. He's in a lot of areas we don't necessarily feel that we should be in."

For instance?

"We don't coach talent. He coaches talent. I think it's a highly specialized thing, the coaching of talent. There's nothing in the world wrong with it, but we don't see that as our job. Another thing Magid does is a tremendous amount of bicycling tapes around, from station to station among his clients. This leads to a movement of talent from station to station. We don't do that. We don't run around brokering talent. We're not a clearinghouse."

McHugh paused, clasped his hands behind his head. He leaned back in his chair and sighed. Then he went on.

"There is an inherent susceptibility among broadcast people," he said slowly, "to rely on the quick answer. Some people in the research field tend to promise more than they can actually deliver in terms of panaceas.

"Changing somebody's mind about something they like is the most complex and difficult thing to do. What you have to do is come up with something so much better that they become uncomfortable about a habit that they were very comfortable with." McHugh paused again, and when he resumed, he chose his words carefully.

"I think," he said, "that if there is a selling distinction between Magid's organization and our own—and, God knows, it has cost us clients—it is that some of Magid's clients were promised, literally, that within a year they would be Number One. This is based on conversations with some of their former clients that we now have.

"Almost all station managers are former sales managers. And what they want to hear is that it's going to be a great next year. What *we* say is, if you really want to know the truth, if you do everything right, it'll take about three years, because that's about what it takes to change somebody's mind.

"It's not like prime-time situation comedies. It's a whole different thing. A prime-time relationship is only good for that one show, only good for a year or two or three at the most. But the news relationship is much more dependent on the relationship between the community and the station. News viewers are not as fickle or easily swayed to change, and since a tremendous amount of the station's total image is dependent on news, you can't expect overnight miracles. It's a hard job."

If blunt, plain-talking Phil McHugh wastes little love on enigmatic Frank Magid, he wastes less on anyone who questions the propriety of news consultancy. I found this out when our conversation turned to the reasons why the business has been criticized so severely. "Could it not be," I suggested to McHugh, "that there is an unreasonable pressure on TV news to assemble large audiences not only for itself, but for the parent

network's prime-time schedule? Is not TV news being asked to perform a business function that no other news organization. . . ."

"That's outrageous!" snapped McHugh.

How so?

McHugh leaned forward at his desk, folding his arms and drawing his bullet head down between his shoulders.

"What do you think the Washington *Post* is? Don't you think it's a business organization? It's in business to make money. That kind of thing is pure bull. They are out to fight the bloodiest fights for circulation the world has ever known! They redesign their formats for circulation.

"If there isn't show business and claptrap in Ann Landers, which is your highest traffic page, and the comic page and all this stuff. . .

"You know, this is the biggest illusion that print journalists have ever heaped upon themselves—that they're so pure and the other guy is so bad. They are in show business *up to their very tails!* When that poor girl in Boston and her baby dove off the fire escape, the Washington *Post* ran the picture boom-boom-boom down the front page, as did lots of other editors. Is that show business or not? Or is it the truth? Is it a dramatic way of presenting the truth? You decide. I just say it's a lot of baloney. Secondly, newspapers, from the beginning of time, have used consultants. All of them."

Discounting the hyperbole—I doubted that Tom Paine ran the mockups for "Common Sense" through a battery of smart cookies from Ye Colonie Consultants, Ltd., or that Nast looked at a "Summary of Community Attitudes" before drawing his Boss Tweed cartoons—discounting that, I told McHugh, I agreed with him. Nevertheless, I suggested, the point is that television—which is primarily an advertising medium, a mover of goods, and a federally-regulated entity as well—perhaps has been saddled with an unfair burden. Perhaps television, unlike the print press with all its faults,

is simply not a news medium. Why, if this is true, even keep up the pretense of television news?

McHugh got up from his desk and crossed the room. From behind a file cabinet, he pulled forth a large cardboard square. On the face of the square was drawn a diamond. The interior of the diamond was segmented by several horizontal layers, each a different color.

"I will tell you something about the television viewing patterns of people in this country," said McHugh, as he propped the cardboard square on top of his desk. It was clear that he was about to launch into a favorite lecture. He turned to the board and pointed toward the top.

"This," he said, "is a visualization of the social-class structure of the U.S. population. This diamond is in proportion to the numbers of people in each of several classes—so where it's fat, there are the biggest number of people. Where it's pointed, there are the smallest numbers of people.

"Up at the top here, you have the 3 per cent. Now, this three per cent—which, oddly enough, has diminished to about 2 per cent since I drew this chart—this is the social elite. This is the control segment, socially and business-wise. This is where the money is and where the real power is.

"When we come to their attitudes toward television, we don't talk about them at all, because the only influence they have on television is financial. Television is not something they watch or care about. Nothing in their life is planned around television. They may be upset if the symphony isn't on at four o'clock on Sunday afternoon, if they haven't anything else to do, but that's about all. They have a lot of power relative to television, as they do to newspapers. This is where the advertiser power, the manufacturer power, the owner power is.

"Now," McHugh went on, dropping his hand to another color area, "when we get to this 12 per cent, which is the upper-middle, we are getting to the managers, the middle- and lower-level executives and

professional people. In *their* attitudes toward television, they watch less than the rest of the people on the diamond. They are the most selective and the most critical. The three per cent don't use it; these use it, but they tend to use it for the things they want to. Their wives are involved with the upper end of the PTA, and complain about television as no good. This class, however, performs one very valuable role: they are the communicators to these people''—he lifted his hand to the 3 per cent—"of what the rest of the people are doing.

"The pieces of paper pass through their hands on the way up—whether they're profit-and-loss statements, or audience and circulation figures, or whatever. They are the bridge between this and the lower classes. The 12 per cent *carry up* to the 3 per cent."

McHugh dropped his hand another notch. "Then you come to the lower-middle and the upper-lowers—and for the most part, you can treat them interchangeably, because you have the white-collar, the small businessman, some semiskilled professional people and the top skilled workers.

"And in their attitudes toward television, it's a primary source of information and entertainment. They are somewhat selective and becoming more selective, but their selectivity comes from picking up the newspaper supplement or *TV Guide* and looking at the plot lines and deciding what they're going to watch tonight. This is particularly true in the case of movies, specials, and so forth. Very often, they measure the plot line of a favorite show of theirs against the movie plot line and make a decision that way.

"But television is a very heavy element in their lives—the upper-lowers, particularly."

The hand dropped again. "At the bottom is the unskilled 20 per cent. In this category are the unskilled, the unemployed, the unemployables—some people who are incapable of working for a whole lot of reasons: schooling, recent immigrants, or the poverty-stricken. *Tremendously* heavy users of television. And they

watch, for the most part, entertainment rather than information, and they are the least critical."

McHugh turned away from the cardboard chart and folded his hands in front of him. "Now," he said, "for a TV station to be successful, it has to succeed in the lower-middle class, which is 30 per cent, and the upper-lower, which is 35, so there is almost 70 per cent of the population in the middle that a station must be able to communicate with in order to really perform the function of mass communication.

"When you're doing this, communicating at levels which these people can understand, and relate Vietnam or Angola or whatever to their lives, it needs a special kind of communicator to put it in focus for them."

McHugh returned to his chair behind his desk.

"Edward R. Murrow," I remarked, "did not seem to have any special trouble reaching those same people 20 and 25 years ago, without the benefit of consultants. Why, now, a generation after the age of Murrow, do newscasters have to be coached by outside agencies on how to communicate?"

"They are using far more complex tools than Murrow was using. Murrow was just talking, and for the most part, Murrow's biggest success was during World War II, standing on the roof of a building in England and saying, 'Look at the damn bombs falling while people are spending another night.'"

"Yes," I said, "but he went on from there to distinguish himself in complex television stories. The McCarthy broadcast. 'Harvest of Shame'. . . ."

McHugh waved a hand. "Yes, but the things he was known for later were 'Person to Person'; his one-on-one kind of interviewing of *relatively famous people, celebrities.* Lowell Thomas and I were talking one time, and Lowell said, 'One of the things the public understands but the broadcast executive has never understood is that *I never give them the news, I tell them human-interest stories in the news.*' You must be able to communicate in ways that people can understand. . . ."

There it was again: the notion, so frequently encountered in Magid's maxims, that there is this big, amorphous bulge of people in the United States, squeezed between the very rich (who don't count because they know better) and the very poor (who don't count because they can't buy), and that this big bulge cares only about celebrities and "human-interest stories." If American schools are not teaching us to read, to the tune of 2 per cent functional illiteracy, American television is compounding that shabby omission by adding an active element: it is encouraging us not to think.

To trivialize Edward R. Murrow, a founding father of television journalism, as nothing more than a celebrity interviewer, a sort of intellectual antecedent to Rona Barrett, is to badly misunderstand the history of the genre. More to the point, it reveals more about the meretricious elitism behind McHugh's endeavors than perhaps he would like to reveal.

Phil McHugh, with his neatly-colored diamond-shaped chart showing a United States firmly partitioned among castes labeled "upper" and "upper-middle" and "lower-middle" and "upper-lower" and "lower"; McHugh dismissing, with a drop of the hand, the "lowers" as being the "least critical" (though they are, by his admission, the most faithful users of television); McHugh deigning to treat the "lower-middle" and the "upper-lowers" interchangeably—all this suggests news consultancy as an agent of American broadcasting's most imperialistic instincts.

The Communications Act of 1934, under which radio and television stations are to this day licensed, recognizes no social or class priorities among the American citizenry which collectively owns the airwaves.

It does not stipulate that the "lower-middle" or the "upper-lower" classes become the primary target of broadcasting, any more than it legitimizes the will of the "3 per cent" above that of the rest.

The Federal Communications Commission grants

and renews licenses on the condition that broadcast stations serve "the public interest, convenience and necessity." This philosophy, as Fred Friendly points out, derives from a 1929 decision of the Federal Radio Commission, which stated: "Broadcasting stations are licensed to serve the public, and not for the purpose of furthering the private or selfish interests of individuals or groups of individuals. The standard of public interest, convenience or necessity means nothing if it does not mean this. . . ."

To isolate a lucrative buying group from the total pool of American television viewers, and then to create programming that supposedly meets the specific tastes and interests (needs be damned!) of that group, is to discriminate against groups both "above" and "beneath" the target audience.

In entertainment programming, this practice is merely unfair and counter to the intent of FCC licensing policy. In news programming, it is pernicious. Television managers and owners have a right to make a profit—yes. But as has been pointed out before, profit-making has never been seriously threatened as a way of managerial life in American TV. At what point does this right to profit interfere with the public interest, convenience, and necessity? At what point is the process reversed, with the public serving the interest, convenience, and necessity of television?

But the really ludicrous aspect of a Phil McHugh, with his diamond-patterned chart, fat with its "lower-middles" and "upper-lowers"—the really ludicrous aspect of a Frank Magid prattling on about "the 80 per cent"; or of John Coleman celebrating the laughing beer drinkers; or of a Joel Daly pretending to fraternize with truck drivers—the really ludicrous aspect of all this is its transparent element of slumming.

Phil McHugh doesn't hobnob with truck drivers and steelworkers. He lives in burgeoning, expensive McLean. His peer group is the 12 per cent on that little

diamond chart. How does *he* presume to know the precise manner of speaking down to those social underlings? Magid, with his interest in art and the Kuna Indians of Panama and the symphony, is hardly a proletarian. Whence comes his special insight into "the 80 per cent"? Coleman's only brushes with the laughing beer drinkers have occurred on the Chicago elevated trains to and from work; he, like Daly, lives in the exclusive suburbs, and when his fans from the common herd have approached him on the train to "do" his weatherman persona, Coleman, by his own admission, has recoiled.

Robert Wussler, when president of CBS, maintained a family home in Winnetka, Illinois, and commuted to New York weekly. Why? Because he wanted to "keep the common touch; to know what people outside New York are saying and thinking." Ho. Have you ever been in Winnetka? Placed there blindfolded, you would not be able to tell for sure, from the clinking of ice cubes, that you were not in Scarsdale.

It is a beautiful picture: our great defenders of middle-class needs, tastes, and interests, perched up there on the comfort of their 12-per-cent bar, gauging the motivational pattern of the rest of us by baiting a hook with a questionnaire and dropping it in the waters of "lower-middle" and "upper-lower."

Phil McHugh and Frank Magid would argue that, through their surveys, they *are* in fact discovering the true interests of the public, and in doing so, are acting in the service of the Communications Act.

Such sophistry begs the question of the various levels of "interest" within a human being, the range of complementary and contradictory needs any person may experience at one time.

It is human nature to turn toward pleasure and away from pain; to prefer the sweet to the bitter; to respond to the cheerful and shun the severe; to lament "all the bad news" in the media and demand more "good news."

This is the level of human behavior on which the news consultant makes his entrance—and his exit.

The questionnaires cannot express the duality of human nature—not that the survey-takers would be inclined to deal with it if they did know how. The questionnaires cannot reconcile the respondent's willingness to be entertained *and* his active, legitimate, and proprietary curiosity as to the safety, the financial security, and the political state of the world around him, his demand for accountability among his leaders.

"What is it about the news on Channel 8 that you don't particularly care for?" asks a survey question, and in asking, it stacks the deck: for it implies that the news, like any other consumer commodity in America, can be restructured, improved, smoothed out, bolstered with miracle ingredients, and topped off with a hearty, rich flavor that the whole family will enjoy. Finger-lickin' good.

And that's the way it isn't.

Nevertheless, the "questionnaire" mentality continues to spread upward through broadcasting's executive suites.

In January 1979, a man named Roy Meyer was appointed vice president for news of all five NBC-owned stations.

Meyer is a former "news doctor" on the staff of McHugh & Hoffman.

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Researchthink: The Rise and Fall of "AM America"

Around ABC, you are likely to hear a lot more gestalt-type jargon about "feelings" and "perceptions" and "image" and "chemis-try" than you are at the other two networks combined. This is perhaps because ABC has learned to survive on the art (or science) of sensing out people's "perceptions" through research, and then creating programs that provide the necessary "feeling."

At any rate, on February 15, 1980, ABC's office complex facing Lincoln Center in New York was a haven of good feelings indeed.

David Hartman's floppy lapels had just scored a major victory.

In fact, this marked the fifth consecutive week that Hartman's lapels, with their usual assistance from a sadly mis-knotted tie, had taken the measure of Tom Brokaw's trim Calvin Klein silhouette. And yet another of ABC's ancient dreams of dominion was being realized.

The weekly Nielsens revealed that "Good Morning, America," with Hartman as co-host, had just achieved its highest rating ever, and had again edged out NBC's the "Today" show and Tom Brokaw for the No. 1 spot in the early morning. Through the first two months of 1980, "GMA" averaged 5 rating points and a 28 share of the audience, compared to a 4.9 rating and 27 share for "Today." (CBS's "Morning" and its second-hour follow-up, "Captain Kangaroo," were well behind at 2.9 and 19.)

The significance of ABC's triumph went well beyond "good feelings." The burgeoning national craze for news-information programming had spilled into the morning hours in the late 1970s—creating a "second front" battleground where none had existed even five years previously. Then, the "Today" show was generally considered unassailable as a morning fixture—to everyone but some gung-ho young commandos over at the Network of the Young.

In early 1973, ABC began mobilizing against "Today." Characteristically, the network's first instinct was to produce market research—massive market research. It was nothing less than television's version of the Manhattan Project. The chief arm of this operation was to be Frank N. Magid Associates. Magid's mandate: produce the blueprints for a television program that would rival—in as short a time as possible—the reigning lyceum of the TV network airwaves, the "Today" show, even then earning an estimated $10 million yearly.

Seven years later, ABC had its winner. But early in the process, ABC came close to unmitigated disaster. The first manifestation of its research project, a fiasco of a program called "AM America," gave ABC a sobering lesson in the limits of its power to probe the collective consciousness of the American people.

But in 1973 all of this was still to be learned. With Magid Associates churning out the raw data, ABC plunged into its Manhattan Project.

It was an undertaking unrivaled in the history of television. Certainly, the idea of audience testing was nothing new. For years, prospective prime-time entertainment series, before hitting the airwaves, were routinely subjected to the tender mercies of "sample audiences" at test centers on the West Coast. Groups of men and women, selected at random from shopping centers and on the street, sat in darkened auditoriums and viewed "pilot" episodes of the fledgling shows. As they watched, they pulled or pushed levers attached to

electronic graphs that recorded their "responses" to what they saw—whether they felt the impulse to laugh or frown, how much they liked each character, whether they generally approved of the total "package." This raw data was collated and delivered to network vice presidents, who could be found each spring worrying at their desks over strips and reams of what appeared to be readouts from seismographs—which, in a manner of speaking, they were.

Through the wonders of audience testing, such creations of manifest destiny as "Me and the Chimp," "Needles and Pins," "The Cop and the Kid," and "Planet of the Apes" found their way forever into the hearts and minds of America.

But this project was going to be different. This project was going to be to previous prime-time testing apparatus what the Apollo II mission was to the flight of Wrong Way Corrigan.

In the past, the testing came into play only after a given piece of work was completed. But in the case of "AM America," there would be no such variables in the completed piece of work. For the first time, the research would be an *integral part of the work in progress.* Nothing would be left to chance. Magid's minions, with their sophisticated questionnaires backed by that humming IBM 1130 computer out there in the Iowa meadow, would probe into the psyche of consumer America and uncover the mysterious chain of conditioned responses that would lead to the collective switching to the ABC channel at seven o'clock in the morning.

It was a brave, new, worldly undertaking indeed. . . .

Seldom in the annals of broadcasting have two more differing forces been arrayed against one another than in the case of "AM America" *vs.* the "Today" show.

It was the steam drill against John Henry; Astro Turf against infield grass; the urban planners against Piccadilly Circus.

The "Today" show is a comfortable vestige of the

early days of television. A perfect tomato, ripe and lovingly cultivated, it has roots going deep into the soil of human intuition, enterprise, trial and error, tradition and continuity.

NBC is not innocent of audience research, to be sure; the network has perhaps the largest in-house research department in broadcasting. And the "Today" show staff is as fiercely competitive as any in television.

The point, however, is that "Today" had been allowed to develop, sharpen, and modify its personality over a period of years that stretched back to 1952, to the serendipitous era of Dave Garroway and his chimp, J. Fred Muggs. (Question: Would J. Fred Muggs have passed a modern personality-preference test? If so, would he have been history's first anchor-chimp?)

"AM America," by contrast, was coming in as the complete cybernetic challenger. In comparison with the "Today" tomato, it was to be a hothouse hybrid, more perfectly round and of a hue scientifically predetermined to catch the consumer's eye. Magid's technicians were allotted two years to produce a blueprint that would have the same effect as (correction: a more efficient effect than) a quarter-century of natural growth.

Dennis Doty, then the brash and youthful (at 33) vice president of ABC's morning programming, and a man wholeheartedly at ease with the wisdom of cybernetic research, had no doubts that "AM America" would succeed where another assault on the "Today" show had failed.

Doty had in mind the infamous experiment by "The CBS Morning News" in August of 1973, with the unlikely anchor team of veteran newsman Hughes Rudd and Sally Quinn, the glamorous Washington *Post* feature reporter. Following a graceless publicity buildup that suggested a personal rivalry between Ms. Quinn and the "Today" show's Barbara Walters, Ms. Quinn endured six disastrous months of critical scorn and her own compulsion for malapropisms before retiring from the field.

Nevertheless, it was not the bungled show-business approach of "The CBS Morning News" that inspired Doty's disdain. The program, he told a reporter early in 1975, had erred in trying to counter-program the "Today" show with an emphasis on journalism!

"AM America" would not be so naive. "AM America" would offer the sweet-toothed American public what it really wanted: more entertainment.

First, there was the small matter of determining the audience itself. Magid's expeditionary forces ventured forth—and came back with good news. ABC was in luck. There was a whole untapped morning-show population out there, a Lost Tribe of potential viewers not being reached by the "Today" show. Better yet, they were the very people that advertisers wanted; they were bona fide, card-carrying members of that most desirable group around, the 18-to-49 age group.

The "Today" show, the reasoning went, appealed mainly to an audience of women aged 50 and over—a group outside the mainstream of American spending. Therefore, the "AM America" counterpunch would not be more of what "Today" did best—news and news-related interviews and features—but kicky-trendy material of which the 18-to-49'ers are so fond. Pop people, fashionable people, new fads, as it was later to be expressed in another context.

A young audience naturally called for kicky-trendy hosts to match, and ABC plunged into a highly-publicized nationwide talent search for the genetically perfect blend of personalities, the ideal "chemistry," as it is charmingly called in the trade.

ABC executives studied hundreds of candidates. Out of the mix came three: Bill Beutel, then 48, the co-anchorman of the Channel 7 "Eyewitness News" team in New York; Peter Jennings, then 36, a lean and dashing newsman who had proved his mettle as Beirut bureau chief for ABC News; and Stephanie Edwards.

Ms. Edwards, who would eventually take the fall for the failure of "AM America," was in many ways the

show's brightest promise. At 31, she had the requisite bright good looks—she is a tall, slim, red-haired woman with high cheekbones and flashing eyes—and she also had a proven record in a morning-show capacity similar to her "AM America" assignment: she had been co-host for three and one-half years of "AM Los Angeles" for KABC, along with Ralph Story. Crisply intelligent and humorous, Ms. Edwards had been trained as an actress and musician. By her own admission, she had limited experience as a journalist. But then, journalism was not to be emphasized. Stephanie Edwards was an inspired choice. A computer couldn't have done better.

As these personnel selections were being made, Magid's team was hammering and chiseling away at the show's concept. No nuance was overlooked for possible subliminal content. For instance, the research somehow determined that the colors orange and yellow were good "morning" colors—so various and sundry articles of the "AM America" set were done up in yellow and orange. These included the notebook paper for Stephanie and Bill. (Stephanie's hair, by one of those fortuitous strokes of nature, nearly matched her notepaper.)

Jennings would anchor the show's newscasts from Washington and would speak to Bill and Stephanie through a "news window". Bill and Stephanie would operate out of the ABC studios in New York. Would Bill and Stephanie sit behind desks, as TV hosts would have done since Jack Paar descended from the trees? No, they would not. Desks, the Magid researchers declared triumphantly, were "authority barriers." Bill and Stephanie would perch on stools behind podiums.

It did not occur to Dennis Doty, or to anyone else on the ABC staff to ask for a definition of "authority barrier," or how such a barrier would be overcome by a podium.

The blueprint expanded. Magid's surveys discovered, as they had so often in the past, that Americans go gaga over celebrities. A regular feature entitled "People"

was decreed. Another maxim held that viewers fall hard for practical information, such as home economics and beauty tips. Another regular feature: "Coping."

An original musical score was commissioned and wrought in the Standard Consumer-American Uplift genre of a hamburger ditty or an airline fight song. Sam Ervin, the grandfather in the successful daytime drama "Watergate," and John Lindsay, the movie star, were hired to do political commentary.

The advertisers found it all too wonderful. The first three months of "AM America" were sold, in advance of the premiere, at $3,000 a commercial minute. ("Today" commanded rates of over $12,000, but one must not be unseemly impatient. Wait a few weeks.)

On Monday, January 6, 1975, this failure-proof epitome of cybernetic technology, this electronic Big Mac, made its debut to a waiting world.

On Tuesday, January 7, 1975, the following remarks appeared under my by-line in the Chicago *Sun-Times:*

> "AM America" is not a new television series; it is a new stage of human evolution. As I watched its premiere Monday morning on ABC, I had the strange sense that my television set was watching me as well: It knew, or thought it knew, exactly what sounds and colors and faces and personality mixes and thematic rhythms would please me the most, would make me the most disposed to march trancelike to the marketplace and buy Era detergent and Mazola corn oil.
>
> . . .The two hours of its telecast Monday were an Orwellian tour de force. There was not one second of spontaneity; not one remark, one ad-lib, one gesture, one twitch was left to chance. From the careful timing of co-host Stephanie Edwards' opening giggle (my TV set wanted me to believe that she and Bill Beutel had enjoyed a casual, lighthearted joke a split second before air time) to the color of Stephanie's and Bill's note paper (orange, to match the orange sunburst behind them) to the researched and rehearsed wisecracks (Stephanie said that weathermen keep their money in cloud banks) to the stopwatch-segmented interviews ("Forty-five

seconds," Beutel muttered to guest Tom Corcoran), the program was marked by fake reality; by synthetic enthusiasm.

What other process could hit on trendy-kicky-handsome John Lindsay, the former New York mayor, as a "guest contributor"? Lindsay, presumably in the role of newsman, began an interview with British Home Secretary Roy Jenkins by introducing Jenkins as a man "who happens to be a very old friend of mine." And his first question was a capital specimen of investigative incisiveness: "What is your outlook on the state of the world?"

. . .Normal courtesy might require that a few days pass before any final judgments are handed down on a show such as "AM America," to allow "bugs" to be "shaken out." "AM America" is beyond such folksy considerations. It is a new and unsettling element in morning television. In a strange, Researchthink sort of way, it is beyond criticism.

But it was not beyond failure. Four months later Stephanie Edwards, the finest flower of a sophisticated nationwide search, was off the program. The ABC publicity department let it be known that she had left "to get married." Ten months later, the program that had been given a grace period of two years by ABC was —ah—neutralized, replaced by an entirely new format called "Good Morning, America."

The Manhattan Project had run true to its nickname. It had produced the biggest bomb in the history of television.

David Hartman's lapels did not bloom overnight.

The robust product that grew from the ruins of "AM America" took time. Three years of painstaking trial and error passed before "Good Morning's" revenues began to show signs of dramatic expansion. In 1979, "GMA" finally began to break through: its profits soared 45 per cent higher than in the previous year, and

market analysts were predicting even higher gains in 1980.

If there is one quantum difference between "Good Morning, America," of 1980 and "AM" of 1975, it lies in the relative emphasis on news. Besides serving as a showcase for Roone Arledge's satellite technology that brings early reports in from Europe and points east, "Good Morning" has challenged "Today" at its strongest point: coaxing newsmakers of the moment into the studio for exclusive—or at least *the first*—interview.

So intense is the competition for newsmaker interviews, in fact, that producers of each show keep a box score on who has the edge.

But if "Good Morning" stresses news, it does so with ABC's patented stamp—once again, shrugging aside the traditional barriers that have separated news from other programming.

Just as "World News Tonight" is a cross-breeding of news content and sports style, so is "Good Morning, America" an amalgam of ABC News and ABC Entertainment. (Both CBS's "Morning" and NBC's "Today" are strictly news-division creatures.) When co-host David Hartman, the former prime-time actor, and news anchor Steve Bell hunker down across the coffee table to conduct a news interview, there are certain video parallels to Russian and American troops hunkering down across the River Elbe at the close of World War II: Not. . .*enemies*, exactly, but not blood brothers either.

(Hartman and Bell insist that they are personally the best of friends. "Steve and I have great respect for each other," Hartman says. Their joint appearance symbolizes the uneasy "oil and water" relationship that still exists between their respective departments. "They have always had this sibling rivalry," acknowledges Squire Rushnell, ABC's morning programming chief.)

About those Hartman lapels, by the way: reassuringly

out of fashion, suggestive that the big guy only has two blazers in his whole wardrobe—one blue and one brown—they are in fact a perfect example of a fundamental ABC maxim that has not received the critical appreciation that it perhaps deserves. Although this maxim is doubtless unwritten, it pervades nearly every sector of this network's programming assumptions—to say nothing of its self-identity as a corporation.

The maxim, if codified, might echo the Sister Sledge anthem of the Pittsburgh Pirates:

We are family.

Talk to the people who run "Good Morning, America," and you will hear incessant references to the cast as a "family." "Eyewitness News," with its chummy interactions, might be looked upon as a "family" ploy. So might "Monday Night Football." "World News Tonight's" anchor team, spanning as it does two continents, is nothing if not an *extended* family. Among prime-time series, "Happy Days" and "Eight is Enough" project the family ethic—and so, in a curious sort of way, does the ultimate "jiggly" series, "Charlie's Angels." Among this show's most ardent fans are young children and their—well—families. They see a sisterly relationship among the three young women beneath all the surface flash and skin, to say nothing of an avuncular kind of appeal from Charlie himself.

What makes this "family" ethic so intriguing is its stark contrast to ABC's behind-the-scenes operational style: probably the most sophisticated, behavioral-oriented approach to programming that exists in television today.

George Merlis, the young executive producer who coaxed "Good Morning" to life out of "AM's" dying gasps, projects the opposite image of Hartman's corny haberdashery. Merlis favors tinted aviator glasses and jackets of shiny leather, and he is a savvy operator indeed.

"When 'AM' was in its death throes, I was a producer at ABC News," Merlis recalled not long ago. "I

and my staff had a massive three weeks to get the program back on its feet. I saw it as a challenge—to provide a new kind of information that people will need as the 80s progress.

"Given the absence of governmental and academic leadership, what people want is basically *help*. We are delivering it to them in unique ways. One thing we've been successful in is *compressing* information into shorter time segments. Commercials have shown us that you can cram an awfully lot of information into 30 seconds. *Sesame Street* on public television picked up on that idea first, and now we have."

Merlis believes that "Good Morning, America" and its two competitors might well be what he calls "the future of American television in network form. With cable and home video replacing the networks' entertainment functions, information is what the networks will be able to uniquely offer."

But if "Good Morning, America" has avoided the worst market-research excesses that choked off its predecessor, there is still evidence that some of the old infatuation with the tool persists.

"One of the things that helped us," recalls Squire Rushnell, "was changing the color of our logo slides from blue to green. Green is a warmer color."

And Merlis himself points out:

"There are no tables, no barricades, no desks between our people and the audience. There is no 'school situation.' We are *people*. In our home. In our kitchen."

Uh-huh.

15

Victim: Stephanie Edwards

In the early spring of 1976, a year after she had departed "AM America," I met Stephanie Edwards for breakfast in the sidewalk cafe of the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles. The giggling redhead who had seemed so giddy and frivolous as Bill Beutel's co-host was, I discovered, an intense and articulate woman, a serious professional who was an unlikely source of jokes about "cloud banks."

I asked Stephanie Edwards—who was both a creation and a victim of cybernetic research—to recall her experience with "AM America."

It wasn't all bad. There were interviews that worked wonderfully well, and there were moments on "AM America" that I'm proud of. But there were not very many. What I eventually came to realize was that they did not have any new ideas. If they'd had a new idea, I think they'd have done it. . .but the people who were responsible for putting "AM America" on the air literally did not have anything new to say. But let me back up a little bit and start at the beginning.

First, I should make clear that my very career in broadcasting had started out as a fluke. I came to California from Kenyon, Minnesota, aspiring to be an actress. And I learned that 99 per cent of the women out here were aspiring to be actresses. So I'd gone from being a secretary for an advertising firm to working for a Lutheran church to teaching modeling when I spotted Ralph Story on KABC. I thought to myself: If there's a man who can help me find something, that's the man. I wrote to him—and he hired me as his secretary.

While I was working as his secretary, Ralph learned to know me well enough to feel that I had a performer's spark. So when KABC offered him this morning slot, which at that moment was sort of 90 minutes of bare air time for Ralph to fill whatever way he wished, he said to me, "If you like, let's do this thing together."

I was co-host of "AM Los Angeles" for three and a half years. It was the show that came to be, as I understand, the prototype for "AM America." When the ABC people in New York began discussing "AM America"—I guess they'd been chewing on the concept for a couple of years—they came out here to talk to Ralph and intimated that his show was the prototype they'd like to base it on. I was an observer at this point. Nothing was said to me about whether or not they would wish to use me—but eventually, by a kind of osmosis, I began to recognize that they were considering me.

This, I was to discover, was pretty much the way people communicated at "AM America."

Nothing was explicit. Nothing specific was mentioned at all. At first, I decided I was not available, because I had never felt particularly comfortable in a journalistic endeavor. But later I realized I might be looking a gift horse in the mouth—it might be the easiest route to finding where I did belong. So I contacted ABC and said, "If the job is still open, I would be very happy to talk to you about it."

Within a week they had hired me.

But the vagueness, the mystery never stopped. Even after I was hired as a co-host, I had trouble discerning what it was that ABC wanted me to do. They told me they wanted me basically to carry myself to New York and do what I'd already grown comfortable doing in Los Angeles. *We did not ever speak of particulars.* There was never any definition of whether or not I would do interviews or features, or whether I would review films or not. Whether I would write my own material or read whatever someone else wrote.

I was told as the weeks progressed toward air time that "it would all come together," and, "We do know what we want of you, Stephanie, but at the time when we can begin to talk particulars we'll let you in on it. Right now we're involved in technical problems. We're dealing with how the set should be designed."

At that point, I began asking a question that I was to ask many, many times before we went on the air: "Wouldn't you like those of us who will be on camera to be involved in these meetings as well? Maybe we can help you figure out what would be a comfortable chair for the on-camera talent to sit on."

There was a resistance. And I think that part of it had to do with the research they had already done. Research that they kind of wanted to look into. As I look back on it now, I believe—in fact, I know, because I've heard it several times—that there had already been a very tight summary and analysis made of me by Mr. Magid and his associates, telling ABC what my character was and how best it might be used. That research was never discussed with me.

To this day, I don't resent them for asking Mr. Magid to make that analysis. I do think they made an error in not bouncing it off me before we went on camera, so I would know either what they did expect of me or did not expect.

So I went on the air that first day, in January, having been through many hours of production meetings, *still not knowing what I was expected to do.*

There were hints of what was to come beforehand. Once, in all innocence, I ran across some files—I was trying to find some space for my own papers and books—in which there was a letter that was addressed to me, but that I'd never received. It was from a group of women ABC employees. It said, basically, "Stephanie, we've seen your closed-circuit introduction to our ABC affiliate stations. And we are concerned that, during the interview, you talked only about what kind of clothes you'd be wearing and how your hair would look and the

lighter issues, while Peter and Bill were asked the heavier questions. We hope you won't let us down and that you will push for the discussion of issues as weighty as those discussed by the fellows."

Well. Pinned to the top of that letter *addressed* to me was a note from one of our executives to another saying: "I'll let you decide whether or not Stephanie should see this. I wouldn't want her to overreact. . . ."

Had I not stumbled on that letter, I never would have seen it. So I think there was a secretiveness to a degree that was not necessary, and was indeed harmful, from the beginning.

That first day on the air—the one you reviewed so negatively—was a nightmare. I was told, I can't tell you how many times, to "have fun and relax." No one around me was relaxed. Indeed, I think everyone was as close to urinating on the stage the moment we went on the air as ever they were again. The production people. The minds behind the show. And I don't mean necessarily the floor producers, I mean the big minds in the sky—they were obviously petrified. And that fear showed itself.

I don't think they would have had to have been that frightened if they had sat down weeks before and admitted, "We have to have the 1-2-3's, *and we don't know how to do it.*"

I remember there was an amazing amount of concern over the most incidental questions. I had a pants suit on that first day and it came up gray instead of brown on the monitor screen. *Thirty seconds before I was on camera that stage was an absolute uproar* over Stephanie not being allowed to go on camera in a gray suit.

And there were other things that were of much more import. It was that kind of problem that continued, and I realized by March that my inquiries, suggestions, demands, and supplications were simply never going to be heard. I was horrified, and later infuriated, at the lack of ability to make a decision among those people

who were hired to do so.

By this time, also, I had begun to get a lot of mail. I found that people all over America were not different from people in southern California; they wrote the same kind of letters. And they were very sharp, contrary to what you hear in the halls. They are not Neanderthals. They know the difference between a person who is being dumb because she is dumb, and a person who is a fish out of water because she's doing what she is not good at doing.

That was the one flaw. I think that was the basic problem. ABC decided to do things the way they did because they did not trust the audience to *identify*. They kept saying, "They'll not understand. The audience has to get to *know* you, Stephanie, before they'll *understand* that kind of remark, or that kind of an interview."

I can give you one example of this: I can remember specifically a feature that was written *for* me by one of the staff writers, having to do with calling women "persons." They used, as an example of how ludicrous the feminists' requests were, the fact that a song like "I want a person just like the person that married dear old Dad" just really wouldn't sound right.

And my angry response, after I read that feature, was that, one, it had nothing to do with the logic behind the request of the women's liberation movement or anything else. Women were simply tired of being called "chicks." Two, it was ill-written. Three, it was grammatically incorrect. It was a feature that, if I were to do it, would have been better written by me, from my point of view, rather than by a writer whose words I was supposed to mouth.

When push came to shove, I was told to either go on the air with that feature or not do the feature at all.

I could have easily written the piece myself, but for some reason they did not want it—even though one of the criteria for having hired me was that *they were impressed with my ability to write!*

I did it—to my undying distress. And I got letters. From people who said that the feature didn't make sense.

The people were writing, "Why are you doing that? Why do you look like this? Why are you sitting like you are stuck on the top of a flagpole?" I said to the ABC people: "You know, they are giving us suggestions. Why don't you listen to them, to the response from the people?" And the executive staff said, "Well, how many letters have you got there? Fifty? A hundred? Three hundred? *We've got surveys that were taken all over the country.*"

And there's no way you're going to fight that.

And here we were, on the air with a set that looked like a Buck Rogers reject, and it cost many thousands of dollars. It looked like it had been culled from some alleyway from behind a hardware shop, and I said, "Can't we at least put a plant on that set to warm it up?" They said, "No, Stephanie, this is not a local show any longer, this is a network show. *Plants look local!*"

Now, of course, David Hartman on "Good Morning, America" has to fight his way through what looks like a tropical rain forest.

But it was this preoccupation with that kind of minuscule piece of junk that prevented all of us from doing what that show really could have done: bring issues of substance to the public.

And if our mandate was to do something different from the "Today" show, surely, in wading into the same bailiwick, we'd better do something *better* or not be on the air. They were describing "AM America" as vastly different from the "Today" show. Those of us on camera knew full well that we were not only pretty much like the "Today" show, but much less good at what they already did well.

And for someone like myself, who is not a producer, to see the realities of those simple facts—and then have highly-paid executives say, "That's not true"—was

such a puzzlement, that finally, after the end of March, I just left. I knew there was nothing I could do.

"The news stories at the time," I pointed out to Ms. Edwards, "announced that you were leaving the show in order to get married."

Unfortunately, that was one of the pieces of publicity that was very early released. I'll go to my grave only having a guess at how it was released, and it's just too bad, because all that junk was not necessary.

When I finally was given permission to leave, I was asked not to discuss in particular why I was leaving. And I, on the other hand, made very strong requests that ABC would not release inaccurate publicity. Inaccurate publicity was very definitely released. I *did* get married—to Murray McCloud, who's an actor and musician. But that wasn't the reason I left "AM America." If a man had left a show like that, and at the same time married, there would have been no attempt to link the two events. Both my husband and I love this business, and we would really love to be a part of the best of it.

"Are you bitter?"

I'm fighting it, because I realize bitterness is really useless and, in fact, detrimental. But I do resent what happened, not only for my sake but for the sake of the public who tuned in, thinking they might see something innovative after 15 years—and I resent that one of the best opportunities to broaden television in the last 15 or 20 years was badly botched. I resent that on the part of all of us who invested so much in it, and on the part of the public, who, I think, was given a piece of drivel when there was really no good reason for it.

16

Prime Mover: Al Primo And The "Beat System"

The progenitor of "Eyewitness News"—the Prime Mover in ABC's version of the local newscast as it looks today—was a young news director with the prophetic name of Al Primo.

As we have seen earlier, "Eyewitness News" hit the big time in November 1968 at WABC in New York (although, in keeping with its show-business heritage, it had a successful tryout in Philadelphia).

In that month, in that year, as the "laughing beer drinkers" were setting about to elect a media-packaged President who had shown great insight into the manipulative potential of television, the newscast that would form the prototype for his Administrative era was in its genesis.

Today Al Primo is himself a news consultant. When I interviewed him for this book, he was winding up his career at ABC.

I met with Al Primo in the spring of 1976, during his last days at ABC. Just eight years after he had scaled the heights with WABC's news team, turning it into the pre-"NewsCenter 4" New York ratings leader, Primo was a forgotten man at the network. He had lost a couple of internal power struggles; he had developed major philosophical differences with William Sheehan, the network's news president. He was cleaning out his desk at 1330 Avenue of the Americas to embark on his new career.

At 40, Primo looked and talked like a younger, thinner Hal Holbrook. The hair was prematurely white, the eyes dark and knowing. Seated behind his desk in a half-cleared office, Primo was still dressed in the uniform of the television executive: a charcoal pin-striped suit over a white shirt and noncommittal tie.

I was interested in the notion that most TV news executives developed their broadcast experience in the sales departments, and I started the interview by asking Primo whether that was true in his case.

I started out at a station called WDTV in Pittsburgh in 1953. WDTV was owned by the DuMont Television Network—shows you how far back *that* was. I started out there as a switchboard operator, newsroom assistant, copyboy, whatever. Within the year, I was working in the newsroom, doing everything that one did. There were only three people in the newsroom: me, the anchorman, and the cameraman.

I started out learning the trade from the people there —total television. I never had any print experience at all. I went out on stories, I did telephone checks, I did the police beat, the whole routine. In those days you filmed the stories, you edited the film, you put the film together, you worked with the director, you had exposure to every aspect and element of the television broadcasting experience. I was a cameraman, I was an anchorman, I was a reporter, I was a producer, I was a director, I was a writer, assistant news director, news director. All of these things over a period of 12 years in Pittsburgh.

So to answer your question: no, I did not start out as a salesman.

In 1965 I went to Philadelphia, to KYW, and was news director there until 1968. That station, basically and really and truly, was where the "Eyewitness News" format came into being. And it came into being in a very interesting way. Through a quirk.

When you come to a television station as news

director, the very first thing you do is pull out all the labor agreements, all the past history, and try to familiarize yourself with what the rules are, the ground rules, what you're committed to, what you're not committed to.

I found in the KYW contract that everybody in the news department belonged to the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists—AFTRA. Writers, reporters, producers, anchormen, sports men—*everybody*. And there was a master contract which said, among other things, that *any member of this union* could, in pursuit of news coverage, write, report, and present over the air news material without extra compensation over their base pay—which was, I don't know, $200, $300 a week.

Prior to this point in time in the history of broadcasting, anytime anyone went on the air, he had to be paid an extra amount of money—a small amount, $5 or $10 or $20, but when you add that up times five or six or ten times, it amounts to a lot of money.

In my experience, and I think in the experience of most television stations at that point, the only people who were ever on the air were the news person, the weather person, and the sports person. So the fees were kept to a minimum.

So I see this contract, and I say to myself: *"Wait a minute. Does this mean what it says?"* I called my lawyer in New York, the station's lawyer, and sent him the contract. . .and he said, "Yes, it does. What do you have in mind?"

"Well," I said, "I think that I'm going to be able now to use any person I want on the air." He said, "That's right."

That day, the day I got the permission to do that, there were 16 people in the news department. We had a meeting, and I said, "One person is going to produce the early news, one person is going to produce the late news, and one person is going to be the assignment editor—*and everybody else is going to be a reporter.* So,

on that day, KYW got 13 reporters.

So here I was, in 1965, with 13 reporters, four film crews—an army! What to do with them? I decided to create a "beat" system, organized along print journalism lines.

I tried to find the guy who had the most contacts at City Hall, and he became the City Hall reporter. Another guy had medical/space interest; he became the science reporter. There was a labor reporter, a transportation reporter. . . .

I had a very long session with each and every reporter there. I said, "This is what we're doing. You're going to be given a reasonable amount of money to go out and take people to lunch, and I'm expecting you to work more than eight hours a day, to call people at home, and do the whole routine"—*and they did this!* They did this with an eagerness and an incentive, because when they got these stories on the air, they'd be on the air themselves. And lo and behold, we found that within a very short period of time—less than a month—we were breaking stories well ahead of the Philadelphia newspapers. We were filling a tremendous void in the Philadelphia community, because they had two fairly docile newspapers.

I tried to generate a certain amount of excitement in the community. I got into a little controversy with the city editor of the Philadelphia *Bulletin*. We used to call each other names. He'd say, "They're not really serious," and I'd say, "They haven't broken a story in years and we're going to show them how to do it." That sort of thing.

So that's how "Eyewitness News" began—largely as the result of this quirk in the contract. It led to a basic approach to journalism which I believed in and still do believe in.

We went on this way at KYW for three years. And then one day I got a call from someone at WABC in New York. He had heard about what I had done, and could I come up and talk to him. I did. Like any good

newsman, I came a day ahead of time, looked the place over, watched the news—just got scared to death. Because I never saw anything so bad in my life.

ABC had a horrible reputation, even then, of not having a commitment to news. So the general manager and I had a meeting, and I said, "What the hell would I want to come here for, with this kind of product? There's no commitment here; I can see that on the air." He said, "You don't understand. We *have* a commitment; we must win." This man, in effect, telegraphed to me that his job was on the line unless WABC improved. So I asked for a certain salary, and they said okay, and I came here. That was in 1968.

Now, let me tell you what it was like in those days. Roger Grimsby was already working here, as anchorman. It was Grimsby, Tex Antoine doing weather, Howard Cosell on sports, Rona Barrett doing what she does, and one other person from time to time who would do theater reviews.

It was jokingly called, "Roger Grimsby and the *Noise Makers,*" and it was the most horrible, humiliating. . .I mean, I've never seen anything like it in my life. All these strange-looking people. Roger's a little strange-looking; Howard is certainly not the matinee idol; Rona, back in those days, was a little raggedy; Tex, with his red hair and his *smock*, and he used to have this artist's brush and that whole thing. Remember that?

So this is what I had. A zoo. It was a real zoo. I set about to decide how to approach this. . .problem. I told myself, "What a marvelous opportunity. I have no one here, but I do have the budget to go out and hire whom I want—so I can not only *have* 13 reporters, I can *hire* all 13 of them."

I set a couple of rules for myself: the only people I will hire at this station as reporters are people who have had at least ten years' experience in broadcast journalism, and who'd had anchor experience.

There were a lot of problems in that original group—Cosell, Grimsby, Antoine. First of all, Howard Cosell

would only work the early news. And he would only be on the early news when he *could* be here, because he had baseball, football. . .so many days of our sports consisted of Howard Cosell on this very raggedy, tacky film that they used to film right in the newsroom: "A story from Howard Cosell." No scores, no nothing. That was our sports report.

We made a number of changes. One of the things, as I mentioned, was that everybody was so seedy-looking; this was a raggedy station. *And here's Tex Antoine with that smock*; that's part of his "image" and all the rest of it. So I said, "All right. We will buy dark blue jackets for everyone to wear so that there will be a certain uniformity." They could all wear their green pants or whatever; the audience couldn't see *that*, but they'd all have a nice look for what the audience *was* able to see. So we did that. Tex Antoine gave us a tremendous amount of trouble about this.

I always laugh about the Antoine business. I really, in fact, did say this, and I don't know how I had the smarts to say it at the time: Tex Antoine had said, "I can't do this. I can't spoil my image"; I said, "Tex. . .we're either all going to wear *jackets*, or we're all going to wear *smocks*." Which is the funniest thing I've ever said. I still laugh at it.

So, at any rate, we began. And, as I say, there were lots of problems. Howard Cosell wasn't going to wear the jacket. Howard Cosell wasn't going to be there live. And finally I said, "Look, there's going to be one rule here: that no one is going to be on the air on film. We're going to approach this from a real point of journalism." And, of course, Howard liked to come around even then and say that he was the first *journalist* in sports reporting. And I just used to say, "Well, fine. Be that on the *air*. We'd love to have that. We *don't* want, 'I can't be here tonight because I have to speak' or 'I have to do a network thing.' *There's nothing more important to this company and to this station than this local news program.* And that's the spirit that was built.

There was one other revolutionary thing we did on that station. For the first time on a local station, we had two men sharing the anchor role. It was done for very realistic reasons.

One reason was basically that Roger Grimsby projected such an I-don't-give-a-damn, seedy, nonchalant attitude, and had such a cold, austere look that I felt it was a major problem. The first thing I thought was, what the hell, let's get rid of him. No one was married to the fact that he was here. But I thought I saw in him something that was good. He was in fact a journalist. He was a good newsman and did have a certain dedication to what he was doing; he just had been shell-shocked and brain-damaged to the point where he just didn't give a damn.

So I thought, let's get someone who is exactly the opposite of Roger, and we'll put the two of them together and they'll read the news in tandem. Obviously, the Huntley-Brinkley thing was in my mind; I knew it had worked at NBC. So we hired Tom Dunn, who had been let go by WCBS. The two of them worked together fine, and we were on our way.

(I asked Primo at what point McHugh & Hoffman—the news consultants hired by WABC—became involved in the planning.)

I came to the station in September 1968. November 17 was when we had the set built, the reporters hired, and went on the air. Up to this point, *I did not even know we had a McHugh & Hoffman.* I guess the first inkling I had that there was a research organization came at a meeting in January. The manager called me in and said, "Hey, we've got these people, name of McHugh & Hoffman." And I said, "What are they and what do they do?" "Oh, they're researchers." "Well, call the research department." I didn't know what this was all about. They said, "No, they work with the news program. They're going to do a study of our program to see

and measure its impact." And I thought, gee, maybe that would be good. So we had a meeting. They introduced themselves. Phil, Pete. Nice guys. They were very complimentary. The thing really looks good, first-class, nicely done, and so on.

Phil McHugh then began his attack on using reporters in the studio. He said, "There's one thing you have to understand and that is, you don't know anything at all about show business or this business, television. But I do. One basic premise is that you never supplant the star performer, and what you have done by putting all these people on the air is that you are draining the strength and impact of your anchorman."

And I said, "*You* don't understand. It's exactly the opposite. All these people in the studio are going to build the anchorman because the anchorman alone can't do it all by himself. We've already had the experience; we know he can't do it all by himself."

McHugh said, "Well, look, I'm just telling you. . . ." I said, "Fine."

I got through that meeting. I had to really go into a very strong attack mode to get through. After McHugh and Hoffman left, we agreed that they would do a study of the program. They did a study. Two or three weeks later, they came back with a big folder. "This is the impact of 'Eyewitness News,' and this is what's happening." A number of things came out of that.

One was that the audience was sensing that there was a change in the air of WABC, and a positive one. We were being sampled.

Two—according to McHugh and Hoffman—was that Roger Grimsby cannot, based upon his "popularity charts," make it. They recommended that he be fired. Three: reporters in the studio aren't useful; in fact, they're screwing things up, and so forth.

When you looked at McHugh and Hoffman's report, and cut away all the jargon, *they were saying that this newscast was a failure.*

Okay, fine. They carried me out of the room quietly

or whatever it was, and McHugh & Hoffman let us alone, and we did *not* follow their recommendations, which, in fact, was to tear down the "Eyewitness News" format as conceived and operated and developed at this station. That's how close this thing came to never existing, to being aborted.

It was incredible—and what happened next was even more incredible. Strangely enough, WABC allowed them to do an unprecedented third study, and on the third study, it came back that everything was terrific. McHugh & Hoffman said, "Yeah, well, you changed and that's great, and you have listened to our suggestions"—when, in fact, *we didn't do anything different.*

"Based on this experience," I asked Primo, "do you feel that news consultants are good or bad for television news?"

It may surprise you to hear this, but I think that consultants generally have been good for many television stations, because they have done a number of things. They have created an awareness of the importance of the news effort of a station to the news department and, as a result, have provided the incentive for stations to do better in their news.

So, in that regard, I think they're just terrific.

It's a shame that this industry has had to have outside forces bring its attention to this vital area. It should have been for all of us in television to meet this public trust on our own, meet the responsibility head-on. But we didn't.

"Why not?" I asked.

Because—I don't know. I've never been in top station-management; I've always been in the news, a newsman. The general feeling is, it's been a big pain in the ass; it costs money, made problems with the

sponsors, and all the rest of it. I think that is what the real reason is.

But back to the consultants. As far as the negatives are concerned, I think that in the desire to make news programs have a larger circulation, more watchability, the consultants have tended to concentrate not on the basics of journalism, but rather on the other elements connected with the programs. So it's entirely conceivable that consulting companies oftentimes would recommend as the anchorman some guy named Joe—an actor, a pretty face, not a journalist. I think there are enough dedicated journalists around to avoid that kind of approach.

I quoted to Primo Fred Friendly's characterization of the "complicated-dull" story, and asked whether consultants tended to steer stations away from that kind of journalism.

This is where I disagree with Fred Friendly tremendously. The type of story you have just described is what has *always* been the prime motivation for someone like me, and anyone who has ever worked as a news director. That's why we put people in City Hall; that's why we have investigative reporters.

There is no such thing as a complicated-dull story in television. There is no such animal as being dull about covering the way government operates. The trick is to find people with the expertise to illustrate, to visualize, to conceptualize, to tell the story. We've had a lot of bad writers in a very good medium.

There is nothing better than a man sitting there, live on camera, telling the viewer a very interesting, compelling story. You don't need "visuals" with it. You don't need pictures if it's right.

I don't think there's any question that a number of things that we see today on local television news are a direct result of the input of television consultants, and the input is of little or no journalistic value.

I believe that the next thing in television news is going to be news. And, as a consultant myself, this is what I intend to suggest to my clients.

There is some support for Primo's concluding optimism. Certain of the country's larger station have, in the past few years, shown evidence of a renewed commitment to substantive journalism.

But the men who make the decisions in TV news are still hardheaded pragmatists, not crusading idealists. And within the arcane fraternity of broadcasters, only a broadcaster can appreciate fully just how coolly and ruthlessly these decisions get made.

17

"Salesmen Selling Salesmen": An Insider Speaks

We will call him Ishmael.

In the late 1970s, he was one of the most dramatically successful broadcast executives in the United States. He had assumed control as station manager of a network-owned operation that had for years been a punching-bag for its competitors. Within a year, Ishmael had turned the station into a highly profitable winner.

He achieved his success by an outrageous combination of talent-raiding, ferociously aggressive promotional campaigns, and a highly sophisticated system of audience research that he had devised with the help of his youthful, brilliant staff.

Ishmael is far from an altar boy in the back-alley brawls of broadcast competition. He is a quick, tough, arrogant, intelligent, and supremely confident veteran of the ratings wars; a nomad, a soldier of fortune who has taken on challenges at several stations and won more than he has lost. A large man, still young after 20 years in the business, he has shrewd, owlish eyes, a booming broadcaster's voice, and a habit of slapping his desk to emphasize his frequent pitches of anger and humor.

He has no illusions about the realities of airwave competition. He accepts cybernetic research with the fatalism of the born pragmatist—but the hustler in him sees beyond even the slick pretensions of the major research firms themselves. He will deal with them—and has—but he knows when to draw the line.

On the stipulation that his real name not be used—his parent network employs some of the big firms at various points in its corporate structure—Ishmael agreed to provide an insider's appraisal of cybernetic news.

You asked me why stations need to hire news consultants in the first place, when presumably the men running TV news departments know something about journalism. Let me answer you this way: without a shadow of a doubt, broadcasting is the worst-managed major industry in the country. Stop and think about it. You are given a limited monopoly. The product is in high demand. Television stations in major markets make a 30 to 40 per cent profit. Radio stations make 50 to 60-100 per cent profit in some cases. In terms of return on capital investment, it's unbelievable: 50 to 60 per cent net profit on sales!

Does it sound like I've just made a contradiction—broadcasting is mismanaged and yet highly profitable? Listen, you've got to be an idiot—*a raving idiot*—to lose money in television. I mean, some of the biggest idiots in the world run television stations.

I'm not kidding you. Because what happened was, in 1948, all the big newspapers applied for TV-station licenses, and when they got them, they said, "Oh my God, we've got this new toy over here and what are we going to do? Look, George is a drunk and he's not doing too well in the classified department. Have him go over and sell some television time." And then ten years later, George was the general manager of the television station supporting the newspaper. That's exactly what happened.

It was like any tremendous growth business. The people in it, all of a sudden, were getting these fantastic ratings and were unbelievably successful, and they said, "Oh, look how smart I am." Not "How lucky I am to be here," but "How smart I am." The people at the Harvard Business School will tell you that, generally speaking, the top management people in television and radio are *just now* getting into professional management sciences and that sort of thing. That's one of the major points of the whole story you're after: they are incredibly poor managers, and their instinct is to turn to outside research.

Now, the best audience research is research that reflects people's behavior. *Not* what they *say* they want; not what they *say* their attitudes are, because people lie to you. The first part of audience research, the quantitative part, the demographics of it, is easy. Nielsen and the American Research Bureau do a good job on that. When you get into qualitative matters is where you get into terrible problems. It is the most difficult kind of research to do.

So here's where the problem comes in: many of the executives in this business come out of sales. Most of them. And salesmen have learned to manipulate research to suit their own needs. That's their job. I mean, I would not hire salesmen who could not manipulate research to sell time because that's all research is for, really. That is the kind of stuff the ad agencies want. They are the ones who say, "We want to know how many people 18-to-49 are watching. Or listening." So we pay for the research, and we give it to the agencies. *But I wouldn't hire salesmen who didn't have enough sense to manipulate the research in order to go out and sell time.*

I asked Ishmael exactly what he meant by "manipulate."

It's just exactly what the newspapers are doing with "Markets in Focus." You write for the Chicago *Sun-Times*. Okay. Well, the Chicago *Tribune* will run a double-page ad in *Advertising Age* that will say, "We're Number One in Chicago." Well, pretty soon, the *Sun-Times* will come out: "Number One in Chicago." What they're doing is playing with figures and facts, to make themselves look as positive as possible. Maybe the *Tribune* is Number One in the total market area, and the *Sun-Times* is Number One in the city itself. So they both have a claim to "Number One."

In broadcasting, a salesman can take a rating book and say, "See? We're Number One in audiences

18-to-49." His competitor can say, "See? We're Number One in audiences 18-to-34, and that's a more powerful buying group." Manipulating.

My point is that salesmen are trained to use research to reinforce their position. Okay? That's the point I'm making.

Now, a salesman becomes a station manager. What is he trained to do? He is trained to use research to reinforce his own position. So if he has a gut feeling that he needs a new anchorman for his eleven o'clock newscast, and the research comes up and says, "You need a new anchorman for the eleven o'clock newscast," why, that manager says, "Of course!" He's just seen some research that corresponds to his own built-in bias.

Take it a step farther: outside consultants, primarily, are *also excellent sales people.* Frank Magid is one of the slickest salesmen who ever lived. That *ever* came down the pike. Willis Duff of Entertainment Response Analysts is one of the slickest salesmen you would ever want to talk to. I mean, he will sit down and tell you about ERA and the galvanic skin response and how it works and what it means and the whole thing and you're *mesmerized.* You feel like you are *crazy* not to take it. He has given you the greatest opportunity of your life to make millions of dollars for your business. The same thing is true of the McHugh & Hoffman people. Peter Hoffman went to Dartmouth, and he's a very well-educated, very slick guy.

But they're *salesmen* first. So you've got a *salesman selling a salesman!* And one thing that salesmen are trained to do is find out what the guy they're selling to wants. There is this subtle little gyroscope inside that tells a salesman just what his client wants. A good salesman can sit down across from a guy and read him like a book inside of 15 minutes.

So the research people will interview the station manager. Then they'll interview his staff. The department heads. *Then* they put their researchers in the field, and it is fascinating to see just how reinforcing the data

is that comes back. Fascinating.

What do I think of Magid and McHugh & Hoffman? In my opinion, ABC is crazy to pay for them. Research companies have systems, just like anyone else. Once you get the system down, you know that 90 per cent of the surveying is going to show consistent truths. So you just organize. It's the McDonald's principle. Once you get something that works, you organize it beautifully. Standardize the parts. It's mass production.

I will say this in defense of the big research firms, and it is an extremely important point: the ultimate responsibility for the quality of a newscast, or a total station, lies *not* in the research, but *in the interpretation of it and the way management uses it.* That, plus execution. That's more critical than anything else. I think the most common misuse of research is in the fact that a station manager will take it literally. A summary of recommendations might say something about, "Many stories can be done effectively in less than 90 seconds." And a memo will go around the newsroom: "NO STORY IS TO LAST MORE THAN 90 SECONDS."

The suggestions become ironclad, and that is crazy. You see, most of these station managers don't have the confidence of saying, "Well, this part of the Magid report is useful, and the rest of it is crap." They can't throw the crappy half away. And this gets us back to our point of salesman-selling-salesman: the consultant gives the general manager what he wants.

The consultant tends to be the reinforcement of the desires of management.

There is nothing immoral in using research. There is nothing immoral, there is nothing sinister, about putting something in a very attractive package. Where you can criticize a network or a station—where I do, in fact, criticize ABC—is when they go a step too far. When they start making decisions on news based primarily on its attractiveness.

"What," I asked Ishmael, "do you think the next big phase of market research in broadcasting is going to be?"

"Better," is all he answered.

18

". . .Such Anger!": Barbara Walters

Early in 1976 the emerging national debate over television news as show business coalesced around one personality: Barbara Walters.

In April of that year, Ms. Walters—who for 12 years had been a principal member of NBC's "Today" show "family"—resigned to join ABC as co-host of the "Evening News" with Harry Reasoner. Her position (as the first regular anchorwoman in the history of network television), her salary ($1 million a year under a five-year contract), and her public image as celebrity-in-her-own-right (highest-rated substitute host of the "Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson," sometime luncheon partner of Henry Kissinger) all blended into a single and powerful symbol of TV news's drift toward entertainment.

The brotherhood's most sagacious chieftains themselves beheld the symbol and were sore afraid. CBS's Walter Cronkite, for years a gallant defender of the integrity of television news, and normally the most courtly of men, set the tone for qualified Solomonic rebuke. "The Barbara Walters news did shake me up at first," he told a CBS affiliates conference in New York shortly after Ms. Walters' salary was announced. "There was a first wave of nausea, the sickening sensation that we were going under, that all of our efforts to hold network television news aloof from show business had failed."

Cronkite went on to acknowledge that "after sleeping on the matter, with more sober, less hysterical reflection, I came to a far less gloomy view of the matter."

With what might be interpreted as tending toward faint praise, he pronounced Ms. Walters' qualifications as "not all that lacking—it is not as if ABC had hired a singer, dancer or ventriloquist to share the 'Evening News' duties with Harry. . .She is an aggressive, hard-hitting interviewer. She does her homework."

Nevertheless, the terrible label "show business" had been uttered and hung around Barbara Walters' neck. For Cronkite, the reservations probably had less to do with Ms. Walters' sex or her salary than with her credentials for admission to electronic journalism's Olympus.

Walter Cronkite and the men of his generation, who came to television news after years of grassroots training in the honorable field of "print," regard as interlopers those who ascend to the anchor without such apprenticeship.

"Her background is not what I would call well-rounded," ex-UPI ace Cronkite candidly submitted to the affiliates. "—newspapers, press services, the police, county courts, statehouse beats. But," he conceded, "who is to say that there is only one route to a career in journalism?"

Cronkite also allowed for a certain amount of "hypocrisy" in linking Ms. Walters' salary to the threat of "show business." "My friends," he said, "if salaries alone are the criterion, we in television news have been in show business a long time. . . ."

But Walter Cronkite's carefully balanced demurs had little counterpart in the rest of the journalism community—either electronic or print. Most people reacted as though a topless dancer had just been appointed to the Supreme Court.

"Yecch," muttered Richard Salant, then CBS News president. He added: "I'm really depressed as hell. This isn't journalism—this is a minstrel show. Is Barbara Walters a journalist or is she Cher? In fact, maybe ABC will hire Cher next. If this kind of circus atmosphere continues, and I have to join in it, I'll quit first."

Even august Fred Friendly, hardly the stereotype of a male chauvinist pig, could not resist a reproving cluck: "We make all kinds of statements about the right of the public to be informed. Those things can't get mixed up with million-dollar-a-year personalities. It's sort of a throwback to the days of Walter Winchell, when news was done by name people with a lot of money—but there wasn't much journalism in it."

Ms. Walters' colleague-to-be, Reasoner, was reported to have considered quitting. A salary raise, extending his own $400,000-plus compensation, quenched that desire, but it did not stop Reasoner from moaning about injured "personal pride." From John Chancellor, who might have found himself sharing anchor duties with Ms. Walters had she remained at NBC, there came equally vague intimations of threatened mutiny (Liz Smith, writing in the New York *Daily News,* reported as much in an "exclusive" column.) For the record, Chancellor said, "Happily, I didn't have to do any soul-searching on the question."

The flow of sarcasm poured in from unexpected sources. *The New Yorker* magazine, that soul of civilized compassion, that torch of considered reason, published a cartoon of Walters in a chorus line, holding a hand mike and telling viewers, in mid-kick, of the latest news from Beirut.

And Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Paul Szep, in the Boston *Globe*, caricatured Ms. Walters (who was reared in Boston and attended Sarah Lawrence College) as a torchy tease in a low-cut evening gown, holding a script captioned "Barbie's Evening All Newsy Show, With Harry What's His Name." "Barbie" was saying, "But first, a word from *my* sponsor."

Most scabrous of all were the newspaper headlines. As Judith Hennessee put it in the July/August 1976 issue of *Columbia Journalism Review* magazine, newspaper coverage generally "left the reader with the erroneous impression that Walters, not ABC, had set the fee."

"BARBARA LEAVES JIM FOR HARRY," giggled the San Francisco *Examiner*. *Newsweek* styled her as "THE $5 MILLION WOMAN" (which, as Hennessee pointed out, brought to mind two ABC potboilers, "The Six Million Dollar Man" and "The Bionic Woman"). *Newsday* called it "THE NEWS, STARRING BARBARA WALTERS." Even the staid *Christian Science Monitor* could not resist a deaconly simper at its subject's gender: "TWO NETWORKS WOO BARBARA WALTERS."

It was left to the New York *Daily News*, however, to summon up the ultimate condescending graffitous: "DOLL BARBIE TO LEARN HER ABC's."

Coldly true to form for network competition, NBC, the organization Ms. Walters had served so long, bothered little to discourage this accelerating public ridicule. To the contrary: after NBC News president Richard Wald had tried to retain his star with a series of hastily improvised counterproposals, and after she announced her final decision, NBC suddenly turned abstemious. The network let it be known that it had "pulled out" of negotiations before Ms. Walters made up her mind because it was offended by the "carnival atmosphere" being created. (Salant's circus is Wald's carnival.) NBC sniffed that its ex-employee's demands "were more fitting of a movie queen than a journalist." The demands in question, said the network, included a hairdresser, limousine, and press agent. (NBC never did explain how those "demands" could be reconciled with the fact that Ms. Walters already had one of each.)

Clearly, Barbara Walters was looking down a double barrel of public (or media) opinion. One barrel was labeled "Show Business." The other was labeled "Women." Symptomatic of the times and of the industry, the two barrels tended to fuse.

If Barbara Walters was the most publicized anchorwoman of 1976, she was not alone in her hazing. In the last two or three years, the important question of news-as-show-biz had repeatedly been reduced to a discussion

of women's place in the news. CBS's 1974 experiment with Washington *Post* reporter Sally Quinn, as co-host of its "Morning News" (and the attendant hysteria of her imagined Armageddon with Ms. Walters) is already a legend, an epic travesty. Stephanie Edwards' Ordeal by Silence at ABC was another chapter in the same epic.

Such nationwide farces overshadowed the fact that, in every major American television market, local anchor positions were suddenly being offered to women on an unprecedented scale. That market research helped clear the way for such hirings by discovering that women anchors were "acceptable" to viewers, there can be no doubt.

ABC officials insisted that Frank Magid had nothing to do with testing the market prior to the hiring of Ms. Walters. Be that as it may, the move was classic Magid: the bold, extravagant, highly visible, "personality"-oriented gesture, rather than any systematic, patient attempt to improve structural or organizational weaknesses in the news division. ABC had one "weakness," and one "weakness" only: it was third in ratings. Irrespective of her legitimacy as a journalist, Barbara Walters was acquired to repair that weakness.

ABC News president Sheehan himself gave the lie to any question of higher purpose in the selection of Ms. Walters. Magid may not have dictated the move, but even so, Sheehan announced, ABC *had* commissioned "a series of surveys" that analyzed the reactions of sample audiences to the hiring of a female anchor. One sample, he said, showed 20 per cent of the audience in favor, 10 per cent against—and an imposing 65 per cent that did not care. With the leap of logic that is peculiar to the cybernetic mentality, Sheehan concluded: "We figured that added up to 85 per cent of a potential audience."

Since about 1970, citizens' groups have been discovering

a previously obscure tool for making TV stations receptive to public demands: the license challenge. Station licenses are renewable every three years (the specific renewal year differs according to regions of the U.S.) and the renewal is granted, at least in theory, only after a station has demonstrated to the FCC that its programming has met the public "interest, convenience and necessity."

Station licenses had been challenged on infrequent occasions down through the years, on a variety of complaints. Few challenges were successful, but the very specter of the license challenge and its long-shot potential for turning off a station owner's profit-spigot had a chilling effect (or, to be more accurate, a thawing effect) on stations' restrictive practices.

In 1970, citizen "watchdog groups" in a number of American cities began challenging broadcast licenses on the basis of inequality in hiring practices.

This trend—accompanied by "affirmative-action" programs throughout industry, the advent of the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, and women's heightened self-awareness generally—sped the dissolution of the all-male enclave in broadcast journalism, and opened the ranks to women reporters and anchors: Melba Tolliver and Norma Quarles in New York; Jane Pauley, Terry Murphy and Susan Anderson in Chicago; Sandy Hill, Christine Lund/and Diana Lewis in Los Angeles, to name a few. (Pauley, of course, later moved on to the "Today" show; Quarles to Chicago, and Hill, to "Good Morning, America."

The curious thing about women's ascendancy in TV journalism is the degree of hostility they have encountered among critics as well as their male colleagues. Granted that the sins of motivational research apply as much to women as to men—only the most beautiful are hired, and no one looks too closely at Cronkite's standard of "credentials"—still, many critics react as though women alone are the interlopers, as though the very *presence* of a woman on a newscast constitutes a

sellout to show business. Thus Jane Pauley was scored by a Chicago critic, weeks before her debut on the air at WMAQ, as "having the IQ of a cantaloupe." ("I looked in the mirror and cried," the rather extraordinarily self-contained young woman admitted later.) On the air, anchorwomen are often presented with bouquets by weathermen-clowns seeking to make a baggy-pants comic's point about femininity.

Into this sunlit garden, in the summer of 1976, stepped Barbara Walters.

Her apartment, in an old but graceful building not far from the television plexus in midtown Manhattan, does not reflect the personality of a Barbie Doll or a chorus-line kicker. The living room is comfortably dark and substantial, anchored by a grand piano in one corner and a cluster of tall, potted plants diagonally opposite. The furniture—mostly small, black-and-white patterned sofas—is clustered in intimate, right-angle groups about the room.

The glass-topped coffee table adjoining the sofas nearest the window is heavy with jeweled cigarette cases, music boxes and, on this day, a vase of one dozen fresh yellow roses. Around the room, displayed with a sense of pleasure rather than ostentation, are some other mementos of Ms. Walters' travels with the "Today" show: a grouping of miniature earthenware jugs, one of which bears the inscription: "To Barbara Walters, All Best Wishes, Moshe Dayan—4000 B.C."

On the wall are a signed Andy Warhol dancing slipper and a signed Calder print.

Scattered on the various coffee tables are commemorative medallions from Russia and Greece, a crystal camel, a turquoise elephant, a few intricate antique clocks. Propped up on the surface of the grand piano are 20 or so black-and-white snapshots of Barbara Walters with her relatives—principally, her eight-year-old adopted daughter, Jacqueline. Opposite the piano, on a round table, is an outsize apothecary jar

filled with candy in twisted wrappers.

The bookshelf, which covers the wall at one end of the living room, is filled with titles that are respectable almost with a vengeance. There are volumes of Chaucer, Ibsen, Balzac, Thackeray, Swift. There is a life of Renoir. There are *The Second Sex* and *How to Raise a Human Being* and *Wines and Spirits* and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's *Life of Christ.* There is—for mad reading, possibly—*Haji Baba.*

I visited Ms. Walters during the week of the Democratic National Convention in New York. She had completed her duties for NBC, and would not assume the ABC assignment until September. The subject of TV news-as-show-business was very much on her mind, as was the subject of women's treatment in electronic journalism. Just a few weeks previously, her long-time colleague on the "Today" show, Frank Blair, had added a sour-tempered denunciation of Ms. Walters to the already blazing bonfire. From his retirement home in South Carolina, Blair had grumped that Barbara Walters was cold, hostile, no fun to work with, and that NBC was glad to be rid of her.

Now, dressed informally in a lime-colored cotton pants suit, a bandanna wrapped about her head in lieu of a coiffure, Barbara Walters sat in her living room and nibbled at a celery stick coated with onion dip as she sorted out her feelings about the tumultuous past months.

"It staggered me when Frank said what he said," she began, speaking softly, "but it didn't amaze me.

"I know that Frank was bitter. I think he was bitter about the show—and, I think, particularly bitter about me and my success. After all—well, he knew me when I was a *writer.* You know: 'Why should she make it and not I?' We were friendly enough on the show, I thought, but we were never very close friends off camera.

"I called him after it happened. I said, 'Frank, *why* did you do this?' I said, 'You lived in South Carolina for a whole year. How do you know how NBC feels

about me?' He said, 'That's what I heard.' I said, 'Frank, do you know they offered me the same kinds of things that ABC did?' He said, 'Well then, why did you leave?' And I told him. I said, 'There was *this* opportunity, there was *that* opportunity. . . .' And he said, 'Well, I'm not the only one. Have you seen the cartoons about you, you're fair game.' I said, 'Frank, the day I left the show you sent me flowers.' He said, 'Yeah, you know how much those flowers cost?' And I laughed and said, 'Look, never mind.'

"I think he was bitter about the show, and I think the fact that this *girl* could make it. . . ."

Barbara Walters hesitated, as though she were reluctant to continue the thought toward its obvious, political conclusion. Through her years at NBC, Ms. Walters had kept silent about her ideas on the condition of women in broadcasting. But Frank Blair's gratuitous broadside had apparently crystalized a number of accumulated resentments. With a certain studied matter-of-factness in her voice, she went on.

"That episode hurt me. And it hurt me because if it had been something *nice* Frank had said, it wouldn't have been in all the papers. If it had been something about Jim Hartz or Gene Shalit, it wouldn't have made any of the papers. But because it was *me*. . . ."

She paused, head lowered, and scraped at the onion dip for several seconds. She was down near the nerve now, worrying at the edges of old wounds.

"I think," she said at last, "that there is this image, in part sustained by the press, of my being very cold and very difficult.

"I *am* aloof. I *don't* become very friendly. I don't drink; I'm not a drinking buddy. Frank loves to drink a little bit. But I can't offer that kind of camaraderie. As I said, I can appear cool, aloof. . .I am somewhat shy."

Barbara Walters glanced up, and for a moment there was a trace of defiance in her gaze—an oddly anomalous quality in the temperament of a woman paid $1 million a year for her ability to attract viewers to a

network. A vulnerability.

"Look," she said. "When I left the 'Today' show we got 5,000 letters. 'Wherever you are, we'll watch you.' So supportive. And this business of, 'Gee, she's so cold,' and 'Gee, she's so aggressive,' I think that's the kind of thing that's come up because I'm a woman; because I was the *first* woman to really go in there and ask some tough questions." She gave a shrug. "A lot of people don't believe I'm so tough. Tom Snyder said, 'I don't think you're so tough. I think you're too *easy*.'

"I think it was because I was very *businesslike* on the 'Today' show. 'Aggressive,' perhaps, is the wrong word. 'Businesslike'—it's the first time I ever used it. I *wasn't* just a girl who was there to be cute and charming."

What came next was a startlingly blunt appraisal of someone soon to be her network colleague.

"Now," she was saying, "I look at 'Good Morning, America' on ABC, and they have Nancy Dussault, who is lovable and sweet and warm. But there's no *businesslike*, there's no *crispness*, nobody takes her too seriously. *Most* of the women on television shows are like that—somewhat in the pattern of Dinah Shore.

"And *here*"—fingers flying back to tap her shoulders—"was a woman who was crisp and cool and businesslike, and they thought, 'Aha! Therefore she has to be ice cold'. . .and I think that is why the Frank Blair thing hurt me so much. Because I thought, *this is what* people are going to think."

I reminded her of Walter Cronkite's speech to the CBS affiliates.

Barbara Walters nodded. "I felt bad about that," she said, "because. . .first of all, Walter Cronkite gets three months a year vacation. Does anybody complain about that, or say he's not entitled?

"Look, there is one thing about my salary contract that has not been made clear. Let's say Cronkite makes $400,000 a year; I believe that's about right. Every time he does anything else—space shots, election-night

coverage, conventions, radio, special interviews—*for every single one of those things he gets paid extra.* I don't know what Cronkite's total salary is, but I dare say that it is not too far below mine. Plus three months' vacation. Great! He deserves it! And Walter Cronkite, of all the correspondents, of all the anchormen, is a kind and lovely man.

"But *nobody* is going to talk about my working hard. My base pay for anchoring the ABC news will not change, no matter how much extra work I do. Who else does 12 'Issues and Answers,' one every month? Who else is doing four prime-time specials? And whatever I do, I won't get any more money. That's it. That's the blanket fee. I'm not *complaining* about it. But, I mean, this *anger,* this. . .'Who does she think she is?'. . . You would not have had that with a man. And this business of, 'Oh, she's going to be show biz.'" Barbara Walters raised her eyes again, and again there was in them the trace of defiance, at least a wariness. Her visitor, after all, was a man. And Barbara Walters—undoubtedly like countless other, less famous women in broadcasting—has kept to herself her reactions to male jealousy, to male condescension. Now the feelings were beginning to spill over, and the voice was taking on an edge.

"Why?" she demanded. "*Why* show biz? If you make $500,000 a year as an anchorman, that's *not* show biz? I mean, you know, the *hypocrisy* of it all." She jabbed another celery stick into the onion dip.

"It is *still,*" she went on, "in this day and age, such. . .*anger.* I have, in many ways, bent over backwards not to wave the feminist banner. I thought of it this week at the convention: I didn't go to any of the women's caucuses; I don't want to be categorized just in that orbit.

"But there still is this picture of the strident female: 'Who does that bitch think she is?'—and that's what comes out."

I recalled an interview with some "Washington

wives" during the time of the Representative Wayne Hays—Elizabeth Ray scandal. In it, the wife of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas observed that although women have learned to regard men in a professional sense, men cannot yet deal with women in any way other than a personal sense.

"Well, I think so much of the reaction to me when I made the switch to ABC was personal. Suddenly all my credentials were examined. Is she a journalist? All the years of the Kissinger interviews, the Nixon interviews, the Haldeman interviews—everything I'd done: Cuba, China—that was all down the drain. Suddenly I was a female showgirl. They immediately believed the makeup and the hairdresser and the limousine, even though, logically, they knew it had to be untrue. . . ."

I was considering Barbara Walters' remark about not waving "the feminist banner." For much of her career, I pointed out to her, there was no feminist banner to wave. Without having had the benefit of foresight in the early years—without knowing such a cause as "feminism" would be institutionalized—did it rankle her that she was placed in a special category, that of the "girl interviewer"?

"It didn't rankle me then. I rankled me later on, when I was excluded from the serious interviews on the 'Today' show. Frank McGee, when he was host of the show, had an agreement with the producer: he had the right to say *what interviews he wanted to do.* I didn't; I was *assigned* interviews. He could pick any interviews he wanted to do; let's say, four interviews a week—which meant that he could take the four major political interviews.

"Furthermore, in an interview in Washington, where we would be talking to somebody in our Washington studio and where they are almost always political interviews, *Frank could decide whether or not I would participate.* And if he decided I would, I couldn't *unless or until he had asked the first question.* And if he did not ask the first question, or if he chose not to ask a

question [allowing the NBC News correspondent to do so instead], I could ask one.

"This never showed on the air.

"And this is why I used to go out on my own and get my own interviews. I got Haldeman, Nixon, Dean Rusk, Kissinger, that way. I got them when nobody else could get them. I would take the film crew, I would edit the film, and bring it in.

"If the guest came into the studio, I would be excluded. If I *arranged* it, and the guest came into the studio, the interview would be done by Frank McGee or Hugh Downs, and I would *join*.

"It was only if I went outside the studio and got the interview myself that I ever had the opportunity to *do* it myself. And that's why I tried so hard to get them, and that's where I gained the impression of 'She's so aggressive, she's so pushy.'"

"The question of your salary aside," I asked her, "do you think there is any merit to the charge that television news is entering the realm of show business?"

She gave a curt nod. "We saw some of that this year during coverage of the presidential primaries: NBC spending what they said was $50,000 just to make a *set* —a mobile set to take from New Hampshire all the way through to California. Now, they didn't *have* to, they could have gone in and used whatever set there was. But there was this wonderful, red-white-and-blue set that must have cost them several hundreds of thousands of dollars to move every time they did it. By the end of the primary, it must have cost them a million dollars just to have this glorious *set*. What is that? Is that show business or is that news?

"Look. As soon as you *talk* about television, and people who put on makeup and go on the air, you are talking about people who are to some degree performers. When David Brinkley tells a little anecdote and laughs at the end of it, he's obviously heard the anecdote before; that laughter is the laughter of someone who is to a degree doing a performance.