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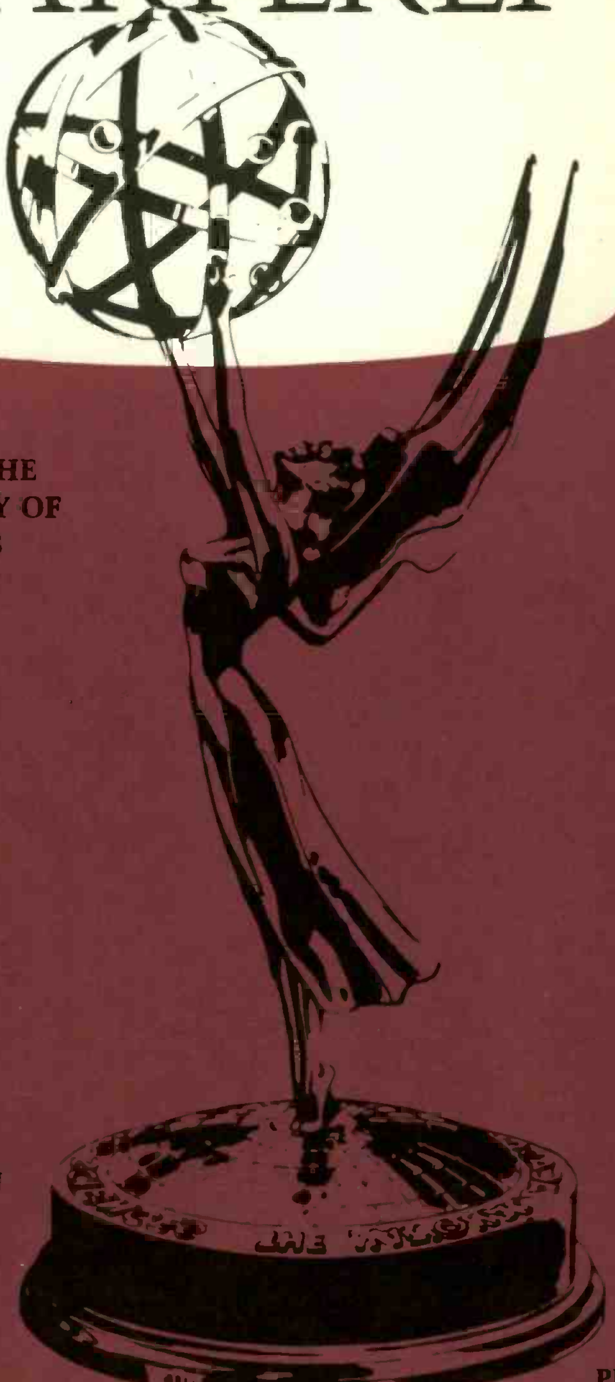
# TELEVISION QUARTERLY



THE JOURNAL OF THE
NATIONAL ACADEMY OF
TELEVISION ARTS
AND SCIENCES

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# TELEVISION QUARTERLY

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# The Late Great Dorothy Parker

**By ELLEN M. VIOLETT**

If Dorothy Parker is so great, why is she so late to arrive on TV?

I've heard a lot of excuses since 1977, when my Parker project began at one of the commercial networks where I've freelanced for thirty years. Until I took my project away to make my own PBS debut in 1980, as the adaptor of *Big Blonde*—the Best Short Story of 1929! If I'm so smart, how come *I* was so late? And where were a lot of other women who've risen to greater power in the media? "Even feminists have left her gravestone unturned, forerunner though she was in giving as good as she got," Ralph Tyler noted in his New York Times piece about Mrs. Parker's belated entrance on the screen.

Of course, it's also true that the aging lady spent her declining years as a writer firing on her rescuers before her lonely death in 1967. Wishing she'd *never* been the life of the party, and determined *not* to be born again as a legend, she laid guilt trips on her survivors, temporarily confusing posterity as to which of her literary rights *could* be used—(until most of them were pre-empted for a musical). Yet all the while she herself had blown her own cover with typical abandon in a long interview she gave the *Paris Review* towards the end of her career.

This published conversation has been sitting around since 1956, uninhibited by her estate's restrictions, and just waiting to be dramatized. It's as tantalizing as her work, which is all too available in paperback. Indeed, only the *World Bible* and the *Portable Shakespeare* have done as well for the publishers as the *Portable Dorothy Parker,* a 1944 collection of her best selling poems, quoted criticisms, and prize stories, expanded and reprinted in the '70's. All of which indicates that the famous funny flapper who made herself a serious name in letters, still retains popular appeal.

That, plus the brevity of her wit, should have made her gem-like gifts a natural for the intimate medium of the home screen. Especially at the property hungry networks, forever exhuming such lost legends,—if only to meet the FCC's culture quota.

But when you count the black sheep brought back from Wild Twenties binges, Fifties blacklists, early graves and late failure, you'll see Fitzgerald, Hammet, Lardner, maybe even Nathaniel West. But not the only girl in the bad boys' club, neglected so long she barely exists for the generation raised on television, some of whom are now running it.

"Dorothy *Who?*" one rising young executive asked me, "Is she the Dorothy who married Sinclair . . . what's-his-name . . . ?" Apparently one had to be old enough for reading glasses to know that Dorothy Thompson and her ex, Sinclair Lewis, had long been in their graves. (Dorothy Parker meantime had the last laugh at her own perversely chosen epitaph: "If you can read this, you've come too close . . .")

Well, we all came close four years ago. For one brief shining season that was Camelot, CBS launched a new limited series of *Six American Classics.* Dorothy Parker, my own first choice to adapt, was also scheduled to be the first classic author presented in a three hour special, featuring *Big Blonde.* This meant I could even add my own choice of favorite stories and poems, linking them together with dramatized segments from that overlooked swan song in my favorite interview from the Paris Review.

It was a dream job—bringing a writer I'd loved all my life to the national audience she deserved. Dorothy Parker is as American as the wisecrack (which she practically invented). Her most serious work reflects sad/funny hangups familiar to all of us, while her lighter pieces are hilarious dialogues, reflecting precisely the way Americans sounded from the 20s through the 50s—as everyone talks, and nobody listens—except Mrs. Parker.

Long before talk shows warned us about not "relating," Parker's theme was the communications gap—between rich and poor, black and white, and above all between the sexes. What is more, under her talk there is a dramatist's sense of structure. Though her stage plays were her only commercial failures, her own favorite, *The Ladies of the Corridor,* at least succeeded in being televised in 1975—also on PBS. Certainly she would have preferred this to late night reruns of her old hit movies, where her shared credits nevertheless remind us that it was Parker—not Fitzgerald—who made a good if reluctant living, writing mass entertainments she affected to despise.

Alas, mass entertainers returned the compliment. The final draft of my script had been approved, and the fun of casting was ready to begin when the boom was lowered from above. "There are no numbers in Dorothy Parker!" thundered some high-up programming executive, who then replaced the Parker special with yet another adaptation of Thomas Wolfe, getting ratings so low the whole *Classics* series was cancelled.

This left me to reconsider *News Item,* as Mrs. Parker titled the following poem: "Men seldom make passes / At girls who wear glasses." The ratings that couplet has achieved make it easier to believe than any excuse about the author being too special for the masses—or not worth a Special since the Golden Age!

Ergo, my agent Shirley Bernstein and I decided to stop being part of

*(continued on page 10)*

# THE EXCLUSIVE
# OLYMPIC NETWORK IN JAPAN, 1980

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the problem, and to become part of the solution. With the help of our friends from the CBS series, Alan Wagner, Bob Markel, and Ted Baer, we regained the rights to my script—against the hope of some partial repayment from a future sale. With the help of Andrew Weinberger, lawyer for Mrs. Parker's heirs, the NAACP, we picked up the CBS options on the stories and poems. And with the help of agent Tim Seldes, we also optioned the *Paris Review* interview. I name all these people because they share credit I've been given for getting the whole package to the last bastion left in television, where producers only buy what they can use—PBS.

So we went to work with our first choice Jac Venza, Executive Producer of *Great Performances* on WNET/13. But his budget permitted only one hour's worth of material to be produced in the 1980 season. Of course, we all agreed we should start with that ultimate Parker classic: *Big Blonde.*

An O. Henry Prize Winner, the story was called a "masterpiece" by W. Somerset Maugham in 1944 when he introduced the first "Portable"—and then, unfortunately, mistook the Big Blonde for a "sloppy wanton." Thus he both proved and missed Parker's tragic point, made into comedy by Anita Loos—"Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," for the wrong reason. (That the Loos movie's star, Marilyn Monroe, is *still* being exploited by writing gentlemen, is the final irony of Sex Objects.) But Dorothy Parker wrote it right first. Being a premature feminist and loyal to her sex, she said it back "when this city was scarcely safe from buffaloes." Now that we're scarcely safe from each other, her message of victims and villains survives, where messages belong—between the lines, from the first page.

> *"Hazel Morse was a large, fair woman of the type that incites some men when they use the word "blonde" to click their tongues and wag their heads roguishly . . . Men liked her, and she took it for granted that the liking of many men was a desirable thing . . . When they liked you, they took you out, and there you were . . . She never pondered if she might not be better occupied doing something else."*

So begins the decline and fall of a great big beautiful doll, a fading model and tired good sport, nearing thirty and needing security when she married a heel for love. If there is less in what follows of the usual Parker dialogue that makes her other stories dramatize themselves, there is more of the author's heart. Years later, in her *Paris Review* interview, when she was aging acidly as her own worst critic (and everyone else's)—she was asked for the source of most of her work. "Need of money, dear" she lied, adding a half truth: "It's easier to write about those you hate. . . ."

Then the interviewer pounced: What about *Big Blonde?* Where did the idea for *that* come from?

For a moment Mrs. Parker seemed at a loss for words, which didn't happen often: "I knew a lady . . . a friend of mine who went through holy hell," she started, and then gave up: "Just say I knew a woman once . . . "

With this introduction now cut from my script, a new opening had to be found to help the teleplay of *Big Blonde* stand by itself. Convinced from the first that it could, producer Ann Blumenthal then found the perfect locations and staff to give the play the authentic sense of period one usually associates with British imports. While her director, Kirk Browning, found a lyric—almost romantic—style to take the curse off realism that might otherwise have been too much of a "downer."

Crucial to this effort was finding the right cast. And how right!—from John Lithgow, whose young Cagney-like combination of pug and dancer made a lovable heel of Herbie, Hazel Morse's anti-hero husband; to George Coe who managed to personify all the generous gents who kept Hazel—for selfish reasons; to Peg Murray, whose 1977 performance in an off-Broadway play, had originally inspired me to combine all of Hazel's big blonde lady friends into one racy, matronly survivor: Mrs. Florie Martin. And so on down the line to Rosetta Le Noire's important closing scene as the sturdy maid who forestalls Hazel's suicide.

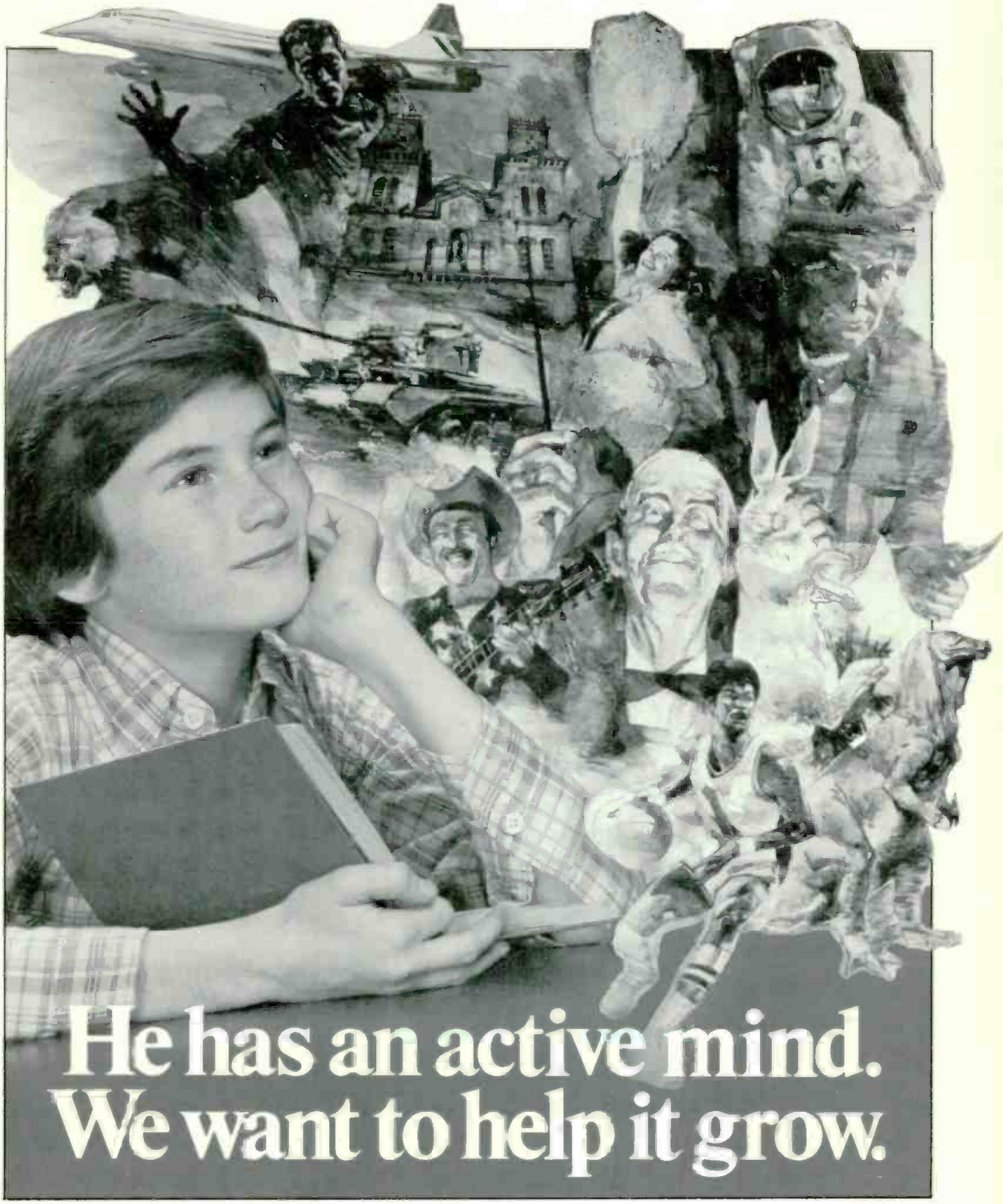
Last, but not least, came the problem of finding the star. Then Sally Kellerman found us! "I'm big and I'm blonde," she said, smiling her sad, good sport smile, so true, so poignant for the part. She knew little more than the title of the story, before reading the script on the plane to Chicago, where she flew to meet us New Yorkers half way.

And now we've all gone the distance. And Sally *is Big Blonde*, giving "one of her most impressive performances" according to John O'Connor in the New York Times. While critics as far apart as Cecil Smith in the West and Kay Gardella in the East, who previously thought Sally too sophisticated for the part, now attest they can imagine no one else as Hazel. "The excruciating portrait," Miss Gardella's review said, "will tug at the same heartstrings that Willie Lohman stirred in *Death of a Salesman.*"

It might shock Dorothy Parker even more than Arthur Miller to hear Hazel Morse described as a female Willie Lohman. But I think the new insight is a real clue to the universality of both characters. For I remember a time in my youth when any discussion about Miller's *Salesman* ended in an argument about someone's father—including mine. And though Hazel Morse may never be everybody's Maternal Image, she belongs in the divorce ridden, broken family of our fiction. Perhaps Parker's *Blonde* is the step-mother of us all.

So now one can look forward to next season's casting of another star part, equal to Hazel—Dorothy Parker, herself, as recorded in that reckless *Paris Review* Interview, as seen in the shorter stories that

*(continued on page 13)*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show her comic range, and as heard in one of the poems that sum up her *"Philosophy"*:

*"If I should labor through daylight*
*and dark,*
*Consecrate, valorous, serious, true,*
*Then on the world I may blazon my*
*mark;*
*And what if I don't, and what if I*
*do?"*

"I'm not being a smart-cracker," she told her interviewer at the end. *"You know I'm not when you meet me . . . don't you, honey?"*

Better late than never. Stay tuned.

---

*Ellen Violett, a graduate of Barnard College, has been writing for television for 30 years. Her 1959 dramatization of Shirley Jackson's famous story, "The Lottery", won a special award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Two other scripts, "The Experiment" (1969) and "Go Ask Alice" (1973) were nominated for Emmy Awards.*

*Miss Violett is also the author of a novel, "Double Take", published by Doubleday in 1977.*

# *QUOTE . . . UNQUOTE*

## No Bloodshed, Please

"For my taste, give me a car chase and a few flying fists. Those who claim that their concern is the sensibilities of children ought to pay more attention to the way children—and, indeed, all of us—use television entertainment. In my experience children quickly learn the conventions of action-adventure shows and accept them for what they are—ways of telling a story through violent action.

"Much more disturbing is the presentation of psychopathic behavior and incipient or offscreen violence. Here the conventions are murkier, the psychological reverberations less well controlled . . . and the opportunities for excess more difficult to avoid."

*—Prime Time America*
*By Robert Sklar (Oxford University Press)*

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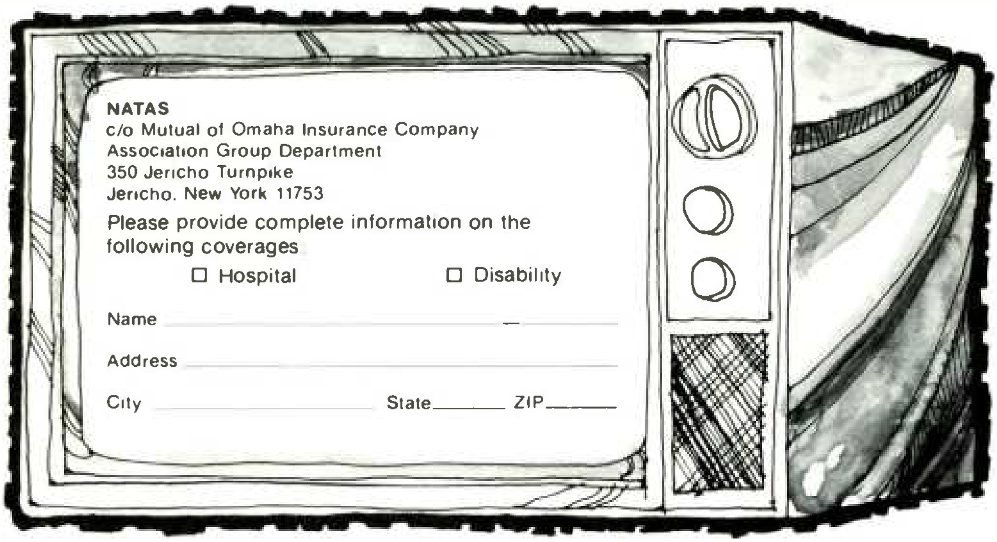

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# Message to the Sports Booth—"Will You Please Shut Up?"

By **BROOKS CLARK**

Looking back on this past season of football, you could fairly say that sports broadcasting is in the midst of a crisis.

True, the ratings remain high, indicating that the crisis is not major. Nothing has changed greatly in that respect over the past decade. But there is grumbling. Something in the *talk* that accompanies a football game has begun to irk, insult and—worse—bore the audience. Fans are saying that there is too much blather and that some of it has the effect of water dripping slowly on the head. In time, it could drive a man mad.

The rhetoric of the sports booth—the idle chatter, the trivia, the ancient statistics—has struck some commentators as a problem calling for drastic remedies.

Writing in *Time*, Frank Trippett recently defined today's TV sports as "an entertainment genre in which an athletic game must compete for attention with the convulsive concatenations of blah-blah-blah that pass for commentary."

TV sportscasters, Trippett added, "are still a long way from mastering the art of the zipped lip."

If there is one headline a sportswriter would like to see atop his essay, it would read, "Loudmouth Announcers Ruin Playoffs—Again."

Last October a sports addict might have noted two items side by side on the sports page of a metropolitan newspaper, forming an argument unto themselves. The first had to do with the NFL game between the New York Jets and the Miami Dolphins, played the previous night at Shea Stadium. It was broadcast by ABC's Monday night crew: Frank Gifford, Fran Tarkenton and, of course, Howard Cosell.

This side story—almost as long as the lead piece on the game itself—described the reaction of Jets fans to what they perceived as Cosell's derogation of their team. Admittedly, the team's record, going into the game, was one win, six losses. Even so, fans felt that Cosell was lashing out at a gallant underdog.

Later in the week, George Vecsey, writing in the New York *Times*, suggested that it was the resentment of the team toward Cosell's mockery that motivated the Jets to a 17-14 victory over Miami. Vecsey even quoted Jet quarterback Richard Todd as saying, "Maybe this will shut Howard up for a while."

Fans at Shea Stadium apparently shared the team's animus. Some gathered beneath the broadcast booth to chant derisively while others threw bottles and cups. Banners denouncing Cosell were hung inside the stadium and later removed by authorities. An armed guard was hired to insure that Cosell departed the stadium without bodily injury. All this, mind you, with a fairly well-behaved crowd on hand, by Monday night standards. There were only 11 injuries and two arrests.

It was soon after this that NBC announced plans to televise the next Jets-Dolphin game (on December 20) *without announcers.* No trivia, no blabber, no twaddle, cackle or gush. The audio aspect of the game, said Don Ohlmeyer of NBC Sports, would be dominated by "the crunch of bodies." You might also hear "pads clashing" and the messages droned over the public address system. In short, the lyrical background sounds dear to every ticket holder in the stands.

On his radio show, a miffed Howard Cosell declared, "This is obviously a move to please the sportswriters, but it will not edify the viewing public."

Cosell was right. The public was neither edified nor satisfied. The silence proved to be anything but golden. Viewers missed the sound of human voices. They also felt a need to have their impressions of the action confirmed by someone sitting in that seat of authority, the broadcast booth.

Is there, then, no pleasing the public that watches football on TV?

In a better-ordered world, perhaps television would provide us with football announcers who delivered colorful, interesting commentary, free of cliches, prejudice, old jokes and bad grammar. Every fan can tell you the cliches that make him wince. "And now, we're about ready to tee up . . .", is a fair example. Or: "This guy is just a super-ballplayer, but what many people don't know is that he's a *great person,* too!" The response to this is usually, "You're so right, Tark, what a great individual!"

Some of us have our favorite gaffes, too. Such as, "And that's Brown, the fullback, into the line for no gain, if any." And the unforgettable, "Yes, this boy's future is definitely ahead of him."

It's easy to sneer from the sidelines, of course. But the failure of the game without sound suggests that we ought to look at the problems of the football announcer. He's maligned and scorned, but let us consider his problems in covering a game.

There's much for a philosopher to ponder in the evolving relationship between words and pictures on the TV screen. Advances in the quality of the TV picture have been spectacular. And nowhere is this more apparent than in the coverage of sporting events. Cameras, nowadays, can do anything, go anywhere, suspend action, reverse it, blow it up, create a collage or pinpoint a tiny moment with X-ray intensity. In consequence, viewers who buy tickets and go to a football game sometimes feel a little cheated. They miss the close-up replay. Some of them may even miss Howard Cosell.

With the action on the field set before us with such clarity—you might even say intimacy—words, unless they are brilliantly chosen, become redundant. All an announcer can offer is a few footnotes confirming the obvious. The rhetoric simply hasn't kept pace with the picture.

There's another problem, one you might label "national exposure." The job of football announcer is not unlike that of the President in one respect. Neither man, no matter how he labors, can please everybody. For the sportsmen in the booth there will always be a certain hostility out front. Some of it comes from fans who think, "I could do as well as that guy—maybe better!"

Keith Jackson, named many times National Sportscaster of the Year, has said, "My philosophy of broadcasting is that if the viewer turns off his TV satisfied, entertained and informed—without remembering that I've been there—then I've done a good job."

In Jackson's view, "The game's the thing, not the chatter. I am there to amplify, clarify, punctuate—and stay out of the way."

Despite Jackson's modesty, no viewer is going to forget that Jackson was there. We may imagine we're immune to the voice on the tube, but we cannot avoid establishing some sort of relationship with that voice. It's there, in our homes, speaking to us, sharing an experience.

Football games, more than basketball or baseball, are dramatic media events. There are so few of them, relative to other sports, and they are intensely physical, even violent. This combination tends to stir an emotional response in the viewer. Sitting in his chair, he feels physically, viscerally involved.

And there's a paradox spawned by the electronic age. Television, the creator of the passive generation becomes a vicarious participant in a game that's all action, and very rough action at that. (Riding home on the subway from the Jets-Dolphin game at Shea Stadium it struck me that the fans on the train felt themselves to have had as much to do with the victory as the players did. They were *there.)*

It should also be noted that fans have their pride, their notion of what's right for their team. If the announcer, whoever he may be, cheapens the spectacle with an inappropriate remark or banal observation, the fan takes umbrage. Sometimes the announcer might best serve the team and the public by keeping quiet. Sometimes, after an inhuman, hurtful tackle or a twisting catch of a "bomb," no words from the booth will be adequate.

Interviewed recently in *Sports Illustrated,* NBC's Don Ohlmeyer deplored the tendency of some football announcers to shout over the top of a big moment. "We tell our guys, 'When something big happens, be quiet. Let the crowd at home savor it.'"

As a media event, football enjoys enormous success. Networks have taken measurements and found that the public thirst for football games is almost unquenchable. Ratings dip only in the early stages of the

*(continued on page 19)*

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Still, there are rumbles of annoyance. "Sooner than it begins to look the same, it begins to sound the same," is a typical grievance. After a decade, it was perhaps inevitable that *Monday Night Football* should begin to lose some of its appeal. In the process the bloom—again, inevitably—had to wear off Howard Cosell. Antipathy to his style, his alleged arrogance, sometimes surprises non-fans. They can't understand why one man should be singled out for such opprobrium.

Early in his TV career Cosell was admired for his devotion to the underdog. He stood up for Mohammed Ali, for players he saw as deserving more respect. The public admired that. But today Cosell is scourged for being "negative," for deriding players who fumble or play less than their best. He will single out a single error by one player and repeat, "That error cost Houston the game." Or Miami or whoever. The point is that Cosell can't let an error or a fumble pass. Viewers, each with his own sense of justice and fair play, now perceive Cosell as a scold and a nag.

From a newsman's point of view, the football announcer may often be wrong. There are 22 specific assignments being carried out on the field. Each team is bent on deceiving, upsetting and confounding the opposition. Who's to say that their tactics cannot occasionally have the same effect on the man upstairs in the booth?

---

*Brooks Clark, a graduate of Dartmouth, is a free lance writer who contributes frequently to sports publications. He resides in New York City.*

# *QUOTE . . . UNQUOTE*

## No 'People Input'?

"Getting someone, anyone, to take responsibility for media power is like forcing him or her to hold the proverbial hot potato. The networks only want to please the vast majority; the advertisers and their agencies only want to get their messages across. They all credit the public with make-or-break power over television content. If not enough viewers like a program, out it goes! But this familiar stance completely ignores the fact that the public can only endorse or reject, it has no access to the process of planning, conception, creation."

*—"Prime Time America"*
*By Robert Sklar*
*(Oxford University Press)*

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# The Video Disc: Its Effect on Programming

**By JOHN CIAMPA, Ph.D.**

For those who may not know, the video disc is a playback-recording system which operates through the home television set. In one of its forms it puts out a high quality video image and two sound tracks which can be used together as stereo, or separately for different levels of information. Or even different languages. The video image can be viewed at high speed, slow motion, forward or reverse, or still frame.

Implicit in these stark facts is the next video revolution.

Consider this: the video disc can hold 108,000 still frames. These could be part of a moving segment, pictorial slides, printed information or all three. A self-contained micro-computer can stitch together these still frames, or moving segments, in virtually any shape or form. In other words, the images need not be played in the order in which they were recorded.

When, you may wonder, will this marvelous mechanism be available?

The answer is—immediately. Video disc players are available in most markets at prices ranging from five hundred dollars to three thousand. The more expensive models contain the micro-computer. The discs vary in cost but are generally cheaper than any preprogrammed video tapes. Prices on both hardware and software are expected to fall as sales volume increases.

I am one who believes that this video disc is more than a communications gadget. It can truly revolutionize television as we now understand it. The reason is not the high quality of picture and sound. It is, rather, the fact that this instrument is *user-controlled.*

Like books and sound recordings, the video disc will serve your pleasure or your professional needs. Programs are chosen by you, they can be stopped or started at your whim and convenience. Finally, there is "segment and still-frame access," an extra virtue unique to the optical video disc. This unique capability—call it interactivity—can radically change the nature of TV viewing, which is completely passive at present.

Now, not all discs are interactive. There are many kinds of video disc systems. We shall explore two of them. First, the RCA or "capacitance" disc, second, the Philips, MCA, Discovision, Pioneer, Sony and Thompson CSF, usually referred to as "optical."

If these details seem heavily technical, they are necessary to understanding the coming video revolution. Bear in mind the potential. The contents of the Louvre can be encapsuled on the optical disk. Great books, scenes from the world's treasury of drama, scientists explaining their theories in their laboratories—all at your fingertips. But the technical details are basic to an understanding of these new systems.

"Capacitance" means that the disc is read or scanned by mechanical means, like an ordinary record player. In this system the stylus bounces over tiny bumps in the disc grooves, causing an electronic switch to go on and off. This sends forth a kind of Morse code which is then converted into a TV signal.

The optical video disc uses a *laser* to scan the grooves of the disc. Unlike the stylus, which must touch the surface of the disc, the laser flashes in and out of the pits in the disc grooves and is then reflected back to a device which interprets these irregularities into a TV signal.

The difference between these two technologies, which appears minimal at first, sets programming for the two systems worlds apart. The stylus cannot be dragged across the disc, hence cannot be aimed with split-second, pinpoint accuracy, at a specific portion of the disc. This means that the program on the RCA-type disc will reach you in pre-ordained sequence. You can, of course, stop and repeat, which does give some user control.

The optical disc offers a vastly wider scope. Because it never touches the surface of the disc, the optical laser can be sent scooting from one segment or frame to another, and in any order you like. Technically, then, the optical video disc may be regarded as the harbinger of the "interactive revolution."

At the moment, it may be difficult to see the potential in the optical disc. Current disc programming is a rehash of old TV shows, and some ancient movies. In general, the rule is conventional, passive, linear programs. But there are visionaries and pioneers among us who are aware of the new medium's interactive potential.

Perhaps an analogy will illuminate the difference between interactive and linear programming. The linear program shows you, let's say, a beautiful forest. The program director takes you through the forest, leading you along a particular path at a rate of speed dictated by his sense of timing.

The interactive program director does not govern your view with any particular sense of timing. The forest is simply presented to you and you may stroll, crawl or fly in any direction you choose. Without the path, there is more room for the trees and you will, by roaming with abandon, see much more.

No doubt conventional linear programming will be around for a long time. We have become accustomed to events coming to us at just the right speed, seriatim. But there is no reason to assume that the laws of perception, cognition and such are immune from natural evolution. This marvelous new invention, the video disc, must resemble some necessity in the human brain where it was born; perhaps a need for a new sense of time, or a new spatial sense, or maybe even a new desire for autonomy.

Of this we may be sure: all the video discs will be addressing a new kind of attention span. The permanence and re-usability of the disc, plus the intimacy of the experience rule out typical television programming where the sequences roll along hypnotically. All this commands, at best, a thoughtful but superficial attention. The experience lacks intensity, total involvement.

The television screen has been the most stared-at rectangle in human history. Up to now it has been dedicated to passive programs. That is, to programs which demand little or nothing of the viewer, other than attention. The video disc and the home computer have combined to present us with a real option.

If you live in San Francisco, let's say, you might take a low-flying bird's eye view of every quarter acre in the city. Whether you are idly sight-seeing or launching an urban renewal project you may, with the flick of a button, move your view from one location to another in a fraction of a second, all via one video disc.

The entire city of New York could be contained on one disc with each frame providing a view of 1.86 acres, roughly two football fields. The entire United States, excluding deserts, could be viewed in 27 square mile tracts—the view from a low flying plane—all on one video disc.

If you are an armchair traveller with an interest in art, you may be interested to learn that the *entire contents* of The Louvre in Paris—every painting, every statue—can be contained in a single video disc. The potential for education is staggering.

Four reference works the size of the *Encyclopedia Britanica* will also fit into a single video disc, one page per frame.

Regrettably, these particular discs are not on sale this week at your local record shop. But the video disc players are available, and the video and computer production technologies are simply waiting for market forces to activate them.

Other developments, bearing upon this new esthetic, come out of the microprocessor revolution. Inevitably, they will erase the line between entertainment and education. I refer to the flood of electronic chips and other microscopic memory devices which are finding their way into video games. One day the video disc and microscopic memory will make digital television a reality—high resolution images printed with tiny dots instead of lines. The video disc already has a band width and a signal that is beyond the capacity of most home TV sets.

Still another stream in the technological revolution bears upon video disc programming. New levels in video production efficiency, computer animation and lower production costs spell autonomy for the video disc authors. Cameras and recording equipment are becoming more efficient, lighter and cheaper. High quality programming is already possible, far from the studio environment. Soon the originator of a program idea will not have to pass it through agents, producers, unions, censors, networks, advertisers—and watch it emerge as an assembly line product, all originality gone.

With the video disc, the originator of a show can produce his own pilot. Even now it is possible to produce original shows on "low format video" at a fraction of the normal TV budget. From low format video (three-quarter inch tape) one can go directly to video disc or some other interactive format such as interactive tape. Sony's Videoresponder and other similar devices make this plan of action entirely feasible.

All these new freedoms will make unprecedented demands on video disc authors and producers. It will soon not be enough to be an engineer, writer, cameraman, director or editor. One must be all these things. In contemplation, this sounds impossible. But video generalists are a new and growing breed, perhaps just in time for the video disc.

One last auspication, and it's a positive thought. User-controlled or interactive programming is going to teach us more about the user than passive programming has. Networks have for years justified their low- and middle-brow programming by reference to the ratings. ("We are giving the people what they want.") This supposedly democratic principle is a convenient shield for exploiters. Is it not possible that viewers, when confronted with a narrow selection of programming, watch what is there because they are denied the sort of programs they would really prefer. Ratings do not tell us what viewers are longing to see, they tell us what viewers are watching. And who can swear to their absolute accuracy?

On the other hand, a program a viewer purchases is subject to a truly accurate poll, i.e., how many were sold? The purchased program need not desperately compete for attention. And it is not an evanescent bubble.

Since production costs in this new medium will be absurdly small compared to the inflated budgets of network shows today, many more programs can be produced. This means that the home viewer will have an enormous field of choice. Eventually, network programmers may discover that "they," the unseen public, want different programs, different avenues of escape at different times. In time the TV audience may no longer be viewed as a lump, a homogenous "they," but as a collection of individuals. At long last, television may be able to create entertainment for persons rather than masses.

The potential is limitless.

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*John Ciampa is president of the America Video Institute, a non-*

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ARS GRATIA ARTIS
Television

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*profit organization concerned with user-controlled programming. He is the author of ten hours of user-controlled programs scheduled for release on Warner's Amex-Qube, as well as on video disc. Dr. Ciampa is currently adjunct professor at New York University's Graduate Interactive Telecommunications Program. Educated at Boston University, with a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, Dr. Ciampa also holds a degree from Cornell Law School.*

# *QUOTE . . . UNQUOTE*

## Good Questions!

"One of the biggest shortcomings of cable TV is the lack of suitable programming for the huge number of new channels. . . . Will these new avenues of communication actually fulfill their promise—or will they offer only more of the same rather dismal 'sitcoms,' with their sophomoric preoccupation with sexual titillation, and other pap which consumes too much network time now, and which network executives insist most Americans want?

"Or even worse, will [cable TV] become the medium for piping superstitution, soapbox oratory and pornography into homes?"

*—Editorial, Christian Science Monitor*

## 'Newsocracy'

"It is becoming clear that the increasingly pervasive power of the media is central to the development of most other American institutions. We are, in fact, becoming what might be called a 'newsocracy.' The technology and substance of today's newscasting combine for an impact greater than that of any other informational force in the history of democratic societies."

*—"The Rise of the Newsocracy"*
*by Louis Banks*
*Atlantic Monthly*

CBS

MCA TV

# Why Do People Watch "The Soaps"?

**By RUTH WARRICK—(Phoebe Tyler of "All My Children")**

In the beginning there was Irna Phillips. This formidable lady is generally credited with having literally invented soap opera, back in Chicago during the Depression years. A high-school speech teacher who had persuaded a radio station to let her read bits of poetry on the air, she was asked if she could make up a continuing story that would interest a wider audience among the many who couldn't afford movies or even magazines for entertainment. She agreed, and in 1930 the drab airwaves of the day were enlivened by a daily fifteen minutes of live radio called *Painted Dreams*, the first of the "family serials" that were to dominate daytime radio in the years to come, and daytime television almost from its birth.

They even invaded the evening hours, normally reserved for dramatic programs or variety entertainment. (*One Man's Family* became so popular that it produced one of the earliest spin-offs, *I Love a Mystery*.) They were not the first shows to feature the same characters and locales: *The Amos and Andy Show, Fibber McGee and Molly,* and many others had done that. But the key to the serials—daytime or night—was the continuing story, which held listeners captive from one show to the next, eagerly awaiting the outcome of some plot development or the resolution of some crisis.

Irna Phillips did not invent the idea of a continuing story, of course. Writers had done that for generations, going back to such literary luminaries as Anthony Trollope, Henry James, and even Dostoevski. Charles Dickens, who cranked out weekly installments of his novels for nineteenth century newspapers, is usually credited with having invented the modern serial form, but the basic structure—the story told in separate installments—goes back at least to Scheherazade. What Dickens knew and the sponsors of the radio serials quickly learned was the power of the cliff-hanger, the reader/listener/viewer waiting avidly to learn what happens next. So powerful was Dickens' grasp of his audience that mid-nineteenth-century New Yorkers crowded the piers to await arrival of each new installment, and some daring souls even rowed out into the harbor to meet the incoming packet from England. As the boat approached, mobs began to cry for news of Little Nell.

I knew the lure of the serial first-hand in my own Missouri childhood. On afternoons when the newest installment of my story was due, you could find me fidgeting on the steps of our house, waiting for the sight of the paperboy's bike. I would snatch up the issue of the *News-Press* the instant it landed and unfold it with trembling fingers until I got to the inside back page of the front section, where an entire half page of my serial spread out before me like a feast. So when fans come up to me and blurt, "You're on *my* story!" I know exactly what they mean. That half page was *my* story, and it did not matter how many thousands of others read it. I lived its plots, and felt suspended in the time between one episode and the next.

Other writers followed Irna's lead, and material was produced in prodigious quantity for a market that grew in size and insatiability. When television came along, the serials moved quite naturally to this visual medium, where their tightly contained worlds fitted quite economically within the walls of a studio. With a kitchen and a living room (and later, when morality grew more flexible, a bedroom), a small cast could spin out weeks of plot that held viewers in thrall. Irna Phillips was the most successful convert to the new medium, transferring *The Guiding Light* from radio and evolving *As the World Turns* and *Another World* specifically for television. In fact she was so successful that her projects quickly outgrew her ability to handle them alone, and assistants were hired to write dialogue. One of these helpers, hired in 1950 to write for a program called *A Woman in White,* was an elfin blonde from Nashville by way of Northwestern University's drama department. Barely out of her teens, Agnes Eckhardt had already decided that writing was to be her career, and three days after graduation she submitted a script to Irna Phillips. She was hired on the spot.

Ted Corday, who worked with Irna, once said that her chief talent was an uncanny ability to "tie the largest number of knots in the shortest possible piece of string." It was an ability the young Agnes Eckhardt shared, along with a firm grasp of character and a sharp eye for the most worrisome and fascinating problems of the day. She quickly rose to the position of head writer on *The Guiding Light* and she created another long-running soap, *Search for Tomorrow,* though she has never received credit for it. Together, she and Irna created *As the World Turns,* though by now Agnes had moved to New York City and had met, and married, a young Chrysler Corporation executive named Robert Nixon.

Irna stubbornly remained in Chicago throughout the remaining two decades of her life, keeping in close touch with her New York-based shows by memos, letters, and almost incessant telephone calls. This is a pattern Agnes Nixon has repeated since moving to Philadelphia early in her marriage. She, too, confers by phone, retaining tight control over her "children" even though she rarely visits the sets. But since Philadelphia is closer to New York than Chicago is, Agnes is on hand for all important meetings and script conferences. In between, she plots and writes the long-term and weekly outlines from her home in Rosemont, near Bryn Mawr, providing the guiding light that makes the world turn for the *All My Children* writing staff.

Jacqueline Smith, the effervescent lady brought in by Freddie Silverman to head up ABC's daytime programming, says she regards Agnes Nixon as "the Dickens of our time," and she is dead serious. But when she first arrived, she was less convinced of daytime's quality.

"At CBS," she says, "I had been Director of Prime-Time Specials and accustomed to working with large film budgets and the most sought-after writers in the television film business. Frankly, I was concerned that daytime drama might be less than substantial, many notches down from the CBS Specials that had been my concern. To my delight, I discovered our drama on daytime at ABC is of no less quality in concept, writing, and performance than the nighttime I'd come from. We're the closest thing to live theater."

Wisner Washam, the show's longtime head writer, and the six dialoguists who work with him to convert Agnes Nixon's outlines into the daily scripts, would all agree. Her inventive mind spins out a constant skein of exciting and relevant plots that have made *All My Children* the leading show in the daytime lineup.

Why so many writers? The numbers will answer that: Five scripts per week, averaging seventy-five to eighty-three pages each, add up to about four hundred pages per week or well over twenty thousand pages per year! Obviously no one person could produce such a prodigious amount of sheer wordage alone (one polished script per week is par for most writers). However, one person *has* managed to produce the basic themes and the intricate interlacing of plot lines, though in recent years Wisner Washam has collaborated with Agnes on those outlines.

And where do those ideas and themes come from? From life, from the world around us, as perceived by a writer highly attuned to the problems and passions that move us all. This, without doubt, is Agnes Nixon's most valuable asset and greatest talent, this finely tuned sensibility both to the moods of the time and to its stresses. If her invention sometimes seems boundless, it is nevertheless highly disciplined. Truth is the criterion against which she measures her fiction—the changing truths of our time and society, the eternal truths of our hearts.

The basic human motives—love, hate, greed, jealousy—have always been with us and have always been grist for the writer's mill, but each moment of history tends to concentrate on certain social and personal problems it considers immediate and urgent. Divorce, for example, once taboo on daytime television, is now virtually epidemic in the serials, as it is in real life. Even more timely is the subject of abortion, which has moved from the back alleys of criminality into a clear light of public contro-

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# "THE NOBLEST MOTIVE IS THE PUBLIC GOOD."

—Vergil

Before the public good can be pursued, it must be defined. This can best be done by an informed citizenry, exchanging ideas in a free and open forum.

Today, broadcasting provides such a forum—the widest, most powerful in history.

For broadcasting, this is more than a noble motive. It is a continuing responsibility.

GROUP W

60 YEARS

WESTINGHOUSE BROADCASTING COMPANY

versy that sharply divides the nation's opinion. This split, between those who regard abortion as murder of an unborn human and those who regard a woman's right to control her own biological destiny as sacred, is reflected in the soaps. When Erica, who was clearly too neurotically immature for motherhood, opted for abortion, all the arguments—pro and con—were given careful and balanced presentation. (Many disagreed vehemently with her decision, but most would have to admit that the question was treated with scrupulous fairness and good taste.) Devon, on the other hand, decided to keep her child, even though her pregnancy had resulted from an immature attempt to get even with one boy by sleeping with another. Devon's choice, aided by Wally's devotion and her mother's loving support, was indeed an affirmation of life, though she (and viewers, one hopes) now sees how self-destructive her immature sexual behavior really was. Perhaps some of the show's young fans will get the message and avoid becoming one of the million-plus teenage mothers produced by this sexually permissive society every year.

Agnes Nixon has often said that she hopes to "open people's minds a little bit" by showing that many of life's situations are not so black and white as they may at first appear. When Donna Beck, the sweet-faced and earnest young runaway who had been coerced into teenage prostitution, became Mrs. Chuck Tyler, many fans condemned Phoebe for her refusal to accept the girl into the family. After all, Donna was trying so hard to straighten out her life and be a good wife. How could Phoebe not welcome her with open arms and a forgiving heart?

"What have you got against Donna?" one large and very irate woman asked me in a New York department store. "Aren't you *ever* going to accept that poor girl?" Her manner suggested that I had better do so, and right away.

I gulped, retreated a step, and then answered honestly: "I doubt that Phoebe ever will, but Ruth does. Candy Earley and I are good friends!"

But why *won't* Phoebe accept Donna? Another woman was very hard on Phoebe at one of our mall show appearances, demanding that I "leave that poor girl alone." Phoebe stared her down and asked her to answer one question with complete honesty: "If *your* grandson came to you and said the girl he was planning to marry was an ex-hooker, a woman who had had sex with hundreds of men for money, how would you *really* feel?"

The woman was clearly torn by mixed emotions. Obviously she would not approve of such a thing in real life, yet she had sympathy for the guileless girl she'd come to know and love on *All My Children.* (Even poor Donna's obsessive attempts to better herself are seen as admirable, though her gaffes must leave viewers with a mixture of amusement and pain.)

We may laugh at Billy Clyde and Benny, too, and sometimes even at Phoebe's somewhat boozy imperiousness, but we feel for them all. And that is the secret of a successful serial: characters. Real people, with real problems and pains you can share, living out their lives as we all must, by trial and error, through tragedy and triumph. They are us, the people of Pine Valley, and their world is a surrogate for ours. The problems we share with them are our problems too, and as we watch them cope we can learn from their mistakes as well as their successes. In fact, in this mobile, often isolated world we now inhabit, where the loving support of extended family and lifelong neighbors is often unavailable, Pine Valley may well be a substitute for those things we have lost.

Because of this realism, and because the characters of *All My Children* are honestly drawn, therapists have found the show an excellent tool in helping patients recognize problems they may have unintentionally hidden from themselves. Watching the stories together in groups and discussing them afterward, patients often unwittingly drop illuminating clues to the underlying causes of their neuroses. A patient may identify with characters and situations that echo his own problems, often without conscious knowledge, and the emotions engendered will point like a compass needle to the hidden trouble.

One remarkable example of this identification came during the examination of David Berkowitz, the notorious Son of Sam killer who had shot young women at random in parked cars around the New York area. Throughout the questioning he remained calm and detached, admitting his guilt but showing no emotion at all. And then one day, while watching television, he began crying and screaming so violently he had to be forcibly subdued. What was he watching? A soap opera called *Days of Our Lives*. And what touched off the rampage? A discussion between two people on the show about committing a child to a mental institution, a threat David Berkowitz might have overheard in his own childhood. If so, Son of Sam's armor, which had withstood all attempts by judges, doctors and even parents of his victims to pierce it, was cracked by a soap opera.

Psychiatric patients are not the only ones who may profit from the soaps, however. According to Dr. Valentine Winsey, associate professor of anthropology/sociology at New York's Pace University, ordinary viewers may also find them helpful. "Learning to cope with problems is a major part of maturity," Dr. Winsey writes, "and soap writers work hard to insure that their characters constantly and overtly cope with problems. Each difficult situation is spelled out, episode by episode, not just from the viewpoint of one character, but from that of each family member and friend. We also hear, at length, from the person causing the problem about his own anger or frustration or helplessness. The 'solution' is skillfully, and often sensitively, detailed, step by step, from cause to effect. As each episode unfolds, viewers are guided on a remarkably clear tour of the many overlapping human emotions that every problem generates. This makes it possible for some viewers not only to achieve better understanding of their fears but perhaps even to resolve confusions over right or wrong, good or bad, in their personal attitudes and behavior. By dealing with some of the most relevant social issues of today, soaps indirectly prepare viewers to grapple with similar problems in their own lives." (Such is the opinion of *Family Health Magazine.*)

Fan letters are almost always interesting, sometimes quite surprising, and occasionally amusing, though the humor is not always intentional. One such letter, unsigned, came from a Canadian viewer who was clearly upset about Phoebe's dalliance with the charming Professor Wallingford. The writer grew quite overwrought and ended by calling Phoebe a "bitch" who thought she had kept her scandalous behavior a secret. "Well, I'm going to write every member of the cast and tell them what you did."

Phoebe, of course, was undaunted, and her relationship with Langley continued.

All of us in soap opera are aware, however, of the small minority for whom the line between enjoyment and outright belief becomes blurred. For me the awareness first came more than twenty-five years ago, during my stint as Nurse Janet on *The Guiding Light,* which was telecast live from that wonderful old concert and recording center, Liederkranz Hall.

In the show I was the confidante of Dr. James Lipton, a resident in the same hospital where I worked as a nurse. He was a man with domestic problems, and as he poured his troubles into my sympathetic ear it was clear that I was slowly falling in love. I even invited him to my apartment for a drink—innocent enough, but clearly the sort of thing that could lead to no good for a man with a hysterical, pregnant wife waiting at home.

A few days later, after I had finished the morning's show, I was rushing through the lobby on my way home. I never made it to the door, because there before me, glowering like a wrathful amazon, was a very pregnant young woman with a rolled-up umbrella and a wild look in her eyes. She advanced on me, glaring.

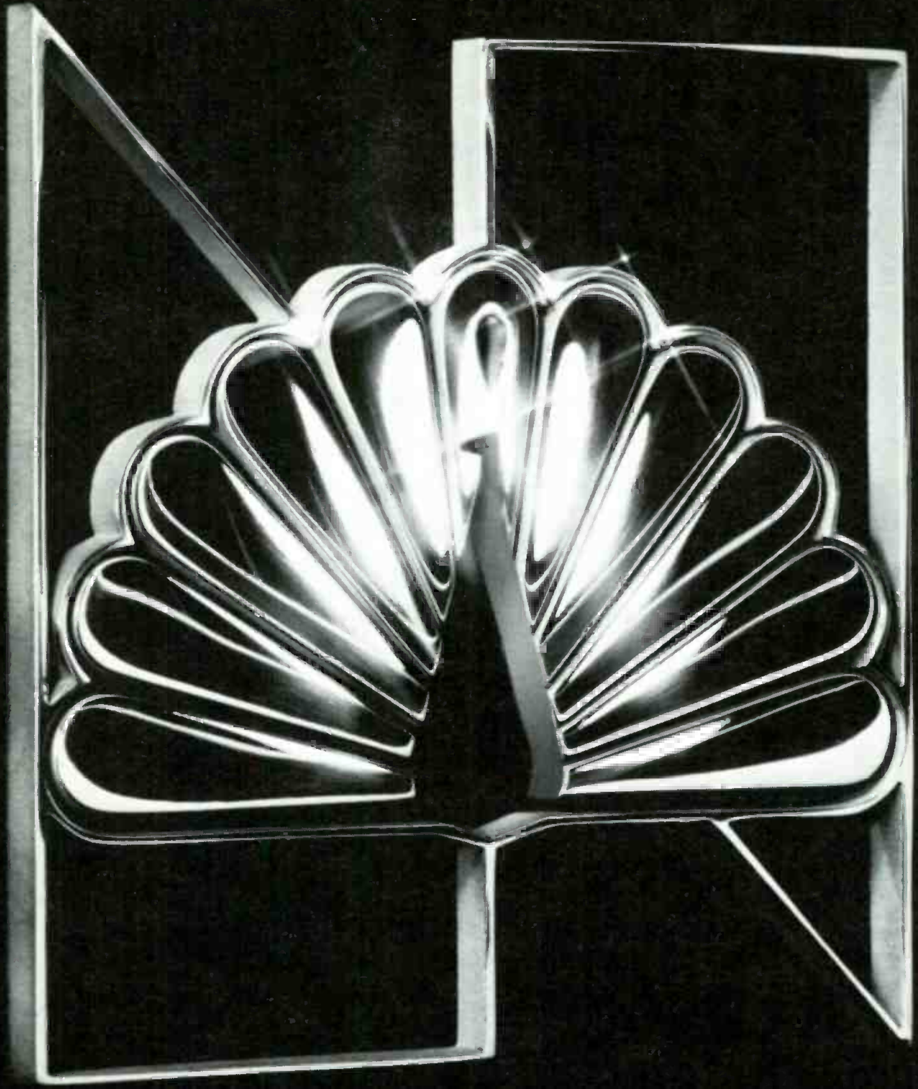
"You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" she screeched.

I looked around for the guard who normally did sentry duty in the lobby, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"That poor woman is expecting a *baby*!" the bulging lady yelled, brandishing the umbrella.

The question of whether the soaps actually reflect the real world has always been hotly debated, though the attacks seem often to come from those who have never actually watched the shows they castigate. "How could anyone have all those problems, one after another and one on top of another, in real life?" We hear that sort of question all the time, and the best answer I can give is: *One* couldn't, perhaps (though considering my own life I'm not so sure), but *All My Children* has at least thirty-

*(continued on page 37)*


We Take Pride In
The Company We Keep.

nine continuing characters, plus dozens that have been written out, killed off, or left in some limbo from which they may or may not return.

Altogether there have been close to a hundred major characters—and uncounted minor ones—on the show during its first decade; and with that many people interacting over that span of time, even real life would have come up with a respectable list of marriages, divorces, deaths, and personal conflicts both petty and tragic.

True, life is rarely placid for anyone in Pine Valley, at least not for very long. (Or not while they are active in the story, anyway. People do move away, usually to Seattle, or "Sea City," and presumably some of them live relatively calm lives there. But maybe not; maybe they are triumphing and suffering, marrying and divorcing and dying out there in Seattle, too, just like their real-life neighbors.) And the reason is obvious, if you think about it: A tranquil life might be nice to live, but most people don't lead tranquil lives; and in any case tranquility would probably be boring to watch. As Tolstoy said, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." It was not the happy families about whom Tolstoy wrote.

When you consider it, isn't conflict the essence of all drama? *Macbeth* is not about marital devotion, and *Death of a Salesman* is not about the happy retirement of Willie Loman after a life of honorable toil, even though many real-life salesmen may be enjoying reasonably happy retirements all around us. It is in the turmoil and conflict of the Loman family that Arthur Miller finds meaning, and it is in his ability to make us feel and understand that turmoil that the play's strength lies. The same can be said of any play, to one degree or another, even of those plays that are lightweight froth. After all, "boy gets girl" would make for a very short and uninteresting evening. Even if we know the boy will regain the girl in the end, it is his momentary loss that keeps us in our seats.

Ironically, those who argue that the soaps are not realistic seem determined to disregard the obvious: The two-hour movie, the three-act play, or the one-hour episode of a nighttime dramatic show or situation comedy simplifies and isolates one set of characters and one chain of circumstances in a way that real life never does. The soaps, with their large casts and broad tapestry of stories, actually mirror at least one important aspect of reality in a far more direct fashion than any play ever could. But the soaps, too, are selective, since we are no more likely to relish dull trivia in a continuing story than we are to applaud if Macbeth spends the evening polishing his armor. But such selectivity is not unreal. It is simply a recognition of what we consider important enough to occupy our time and thought.

Yes, it may be true that the citizens of Pine Valley seem to have more problems than your family and neighbors confront, and they may seem to live at an emotional pitch few of us could endure for long. But look around you: How many salesmen do you know who suffer like Willie Loman, and how many cops face the perils of Kojak? Life contains conflict, and drama is a distillation of life, a prism that refracts the moving and important while omitting the insignificant.

The soaps, undeniably, mirror a very large number of ordinary life's manifold problems. In addition to divorce, marital infidelity, abortion, teenage sex and pregnancy, and prostitution, *All My Children* has touched on such common human afflictions as alcoholism, drug addiction, impotency, mental retardation, various forms of insanity, venereal disease, and a host of medical problems from heart attacks and cancer to euthanasia and crib death. Pine Valley has seen battered wives, rapes, murders, kidnappings, thefts, arson, blackmail, and most of the other antisocial acts that afflict society. Such controversial subjects as interracial romance, interreligious marriage, and even antiwar activism have figured in the story, as they do in everyday life. Mary Fickett won an Emmy for Ruth Martin's impassioned plea to end the senseless killing of youth in Vietnam, a dramatic speech that expressed the feelings of many in the cast and a large part of the American public. Only homosexuality and child molestation remain untouched in daytime television, though neither will surprise me when it does appear. Times change, and the serials change with them. "We are first an entertainment medium," Agnes Nixon says, "but we are also a teaching medium. We don't set the tone, but we reflect the times and we encourage viewers to reflect on them."

Thus, *All My Children* is a teaching medium that neither preaches nor lectures. Rather, it permits viewers to *experience* problems vicariously and to measure their own beliefs against the decisions and actions of the characters. Perhaps this helps to explain why soaps are no longer solely the province of "bored housewives," if indeed they ever were. Recent surveys have shown that nearly forty-five million people watch soap operas daily, and a sizable percentage of that figure represents males, including everything from students to psychiatrists to longshoremen. (*All My Children* boasts one of the highest percentages of viewers of all daytime serials.) In a period when prime time is losing viewers, daytime television has been steadily gaining them. The popularity of soap operas has become so substantial, in fact, that prime time has taken note, not only with such direct take offs as *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* and *Soap*, but also with such continuing stories as *Dallas*.

But if the soaps are popular entertainment, they are also ephemeral in a most literal way. Arthur Miller's plays will be performed and discussed for years to come, and even *I Love Lucy* seems destined to rerun forever, no doubt to amuse the grandchildren of its original viewers. Past episodes of *All My Children*, on the other hand, will never be seen by your grandchildren. In fact, they will not be seen again by anybody; the show's most moving or controversial moments can never be rerun for its critics or its supporters. Because videotape, unlike film, is reusable, and the sobering fact is that all the show's tapes have been recycled many times for simple economic reasons. (Tape is expensive, as is storage space, so only those scenes destined to be flashbacks are preserved even temporarily.) So cherish your favorite memories, because you'll never have a chance to enjoy those scenes in rerun.

The soaps differ from the nighttime shows in another more important way: For mass popular entertainment viewed by millions, they are produced on a remarkably small budget. (Literally hundreds of hours of *All My Children* are brought to you for what was spent on *Roots.*) And yet these shows, without benefit of reruns, account for a disproportionate percentage of network earnings. It has been said that even a popular hour-long evening dramatic show, costing upwards of two hundred thousand dollars to produce, will be doing well if it only *loses* fifty thousand dollars per show.

A daytime serial, conversely, is expected to *earn* a profit (that may amount to many tens of thousands of dollars) each *week*—which *All My Children* regularly does. Thus, although daytime drama may not actually be aired on prime time, it is nevertheless clearly a prime moneymaker.

It has also supported some of the star performers from prime time, as well as a few from stage and screen. Any list I could provide would be enormous and probably incomplete anyway, but a few names that come to mind are: Ellen Burstyn, MacDonald Carey, Joan Bennett, Lee Grant, Warren Beatty, Sandy Dennis, Walter Slezak, Sheppard Strudwick, Joan Fontaine, Joan Crawford, and, of course, our own Eileen Herlie. Others, such as Carol Burnett and Sammy Davis, Jr., have made brief appearances, and Dick Cavett did a guest shot on our show last year to open Erica's ill-fated disco. Many actors have learned what my friend Gail Smith taught me long ago: A regular job not only helps pay the bills, it also allows a performer to work at his or her craft. And to work at acting day in and day out, is the best way to learn.

Now in its eleventh year and among the top three soaps in the ratings, *All My Children* has proven any original doubters wrong and Agnes Nixon, as usual, right. The show was originally criticized for being too family oriented, too old-fashioned in its treatment of complicated relationships among people of several generations, committed to one another by bonds of blood and love. But Agnes Nixon believed in those things, and she made believers of the networks, the sponsors, and ten million loyal fans.

The original prospectus for the show, the famous "bible" written by Agnes Nixon during that vacation on St. Croix, begins with this description: "The community of Pine Valley is almost as important in our story as are the characters themselves. A settlement whose roots go deep into pre-Revolutionary soil, the valley has a distinctive personality and charm which affects all who live in or near it. . . . The Valley will be what everyone thinks of when they think of home. Home, because whether there or not, this verdant valley has in some way made them what they are and is to some extent part of them."

Home. In a vagabond nation where one family out of three moves each year, where two generations seldom live together or succeed each other in the same house, we still cling doggedly to the image of home and our roots.

Years ago, driving along the Pacific Coast Highway toward Malibu, I heard the car radio playing "The Green, Green Grass of Home." I stopped on the side of the road, staring across the semiarid southern California countryside where I often felt myself displaced, a stranger in a strange land. But in my mind I was in Missouri, on a bluff overlooking the gently rolling valley of the Platte River. There, beyond the white frame church and the great dark pines that whispered and sighed around it, lay the green, green grass of *my* home. Briefly in my mind, I was a child again, slipping out of that church to stand with my Mary Janes planted firmly in that grass, eyes closed, listening to the drone of bees, breathing deep, wondering if my great-grandparents and all my vanished great-aunts and -uncles knew I was standing among them. Somehow I was sure they did.

For millions of Americans, Pine Valley is *their* hometown in much the same way, and from it they can draw guidance and comfort and reassurance that a common tie binds us all. As Agnes Nixon's bible for *All My Children* says, "The great and the least, the weak and the strong, in joy and sorrow, in hope and fear, in tragedy and triumph, you are all my children."

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*Ruth Warrick, who has played Phoebe Tyler on "All My Children" for the past decade, first came to national prominence in Orson Welles film, Citizen Kane. On Broadway, she has appeared in "Irene" and "The King and I." She also had a leading role in the TV serial, "Peyton Place".*

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*The preceding article is an excerpt from Miss Warrick's new book, "The Confessions of Phoebe Tyler." It is reprinted by permission of the publisher, Prentice-Hall.*

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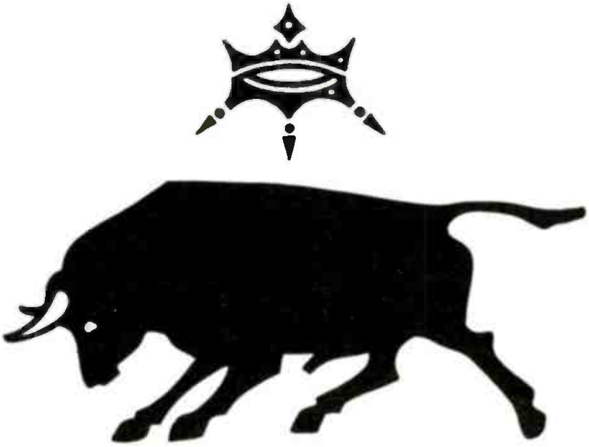
## NOW IN PRODUCTION



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*...to be continued.*

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ABC Television Network

# News, Psyche and Society

**By ARTHUR ASA BERGER, Ph.D.**

How do you explain the passion most Americans have for news—in particular, electronic news? We seldom think about it, but generally from the moment we wake up in the morning until we fall asleep at night, we live in an atmosphere pervaded by radio and televised news. The hours of news listening and news watching we log are simply awesome.

Consider how we spend a typical day.

The clock-radio switches on at 7:00 A.M. with the latest news. We bathe, have breakfast and generally start the day by reading the morning newspaper and listening to the news on radio at the same time. (The bicameral mind seems able to do all this, and also watch some morning TV show without too much strain.)

We start our day, then, with a heavy dose of information about politics, sports, the entertainment world, stock exchange figures, traffic information and a host of other things.

Then we drive to work. During this period, many people continue listening to the news. After work, on the evening "drive time" we listen to the news also. At home, many people watch the news as they eat dinner. If that isn't enough, there's plenty of news on the rest of the evening—on all-news radio stations and on various television networks, including public broadcasting stations.

I happened to check the television log for San Francisco and discovered that between the hours of 5:00 P.M. and 11:30 P.M. the only periods in which there were no news programs were between 8:00 and 9:00 and 9:30 to 10:00 P.M. That means if you are "hooked" on news—what I call a *newsaholic*—you can watch five hours of news each evening, give or take a half-hour or so because of specials, etc.

Few people watch that much news admittedly. But most of us watch (and listen to) much more news than we might imagine. If you watch the morning news and a local and national news program in the early evening and you catch the late evening news you've got two hours of news logged already. Now add another hour-and-a-half of radio news and you've spent three-and-a-half hours watching and listening to the news. Throw in a half hour of reading the paper and a bit of time for an occasional magazine and you've spent about *a sixth of your day on the news.*

Now to return to my question. Why this passion for the news? There are a number of possible explanations.

First, there is the matter of the economics of television broadcasting. Local television stations make an enormous amount of money from local news programs and, naturally, want to broadcast as much news as they can. They are happy to give us as much local news as we can tolerate—and more.

But why do we want so much news? Aside from the fact that people tend to develop a liking for whatever they get (especially when there are few alternatives), it strikes me that news programs help Americans with a problem they face and feel more strongly than people in many other societies—namely a sense of insecurity and anxiety about the future. We have a heritage of individualism and achievement which leads us to be terribly insecure and to feel that we must be "on top of things" lest something important to us escapes our attention.

If you are a "self made man," responsible for your success, you can't afford to miss any opportunity that may arise. You have to know everything that's going on, lest you be caught by surprise. This suggests that we are not merely interested in the news. We are driven by self-interest, fear and anxiety, to keep up with the news. It is an obsession. And an addiction.

One reason we may be so anxious is because we do not have (at least most of us don't have) an ideology which explains the way the world works. Or the way it should work. People with strong ideological convictions don't need to feel anxious about the news. They know that things are turning out the way they must. So why get excited?

Our culture has been described as a "decentered totality." By this is meant the notion that we have no central core of ideas which explains society, which links things to other things. Thus we are always at the mercy of events. Life is exciting, because we never know what will happen.

Another explanation of our news-mindedness is that we all want to "participate in history" to the extent that this is possible, which means usually in a vicarious manner. In other writing on media (namely my *TV-Guided American* and *Television as an Instrument of Terror*) I have suggested that one of the quintessential attributes of the American psyche is a desire to "escape from history." We do not wish to be held down by tradition and custom, which we equate with Europe, with rigid society, with institutions. We opt, instead, for "nature" where we can be free of the past and thus able to create the future as we wish. We see ourselves as "spiritual orphans."

But the price we pay for this so-called freedom is a powerful sense of alienation, a nagging feeling of loneliness. As American society grows more bureaucratic, as our institutions become more impersonal, as our families fragment, we find ourselves with few restrictions and with no sense of direction. We try to make up for our feelings of estrangement by keeping up with everything and by living vicariously, through the news. That's one way to be with people, even if it isn't a particularly satisfying way. "Uncle" Walter Cronkite may be, for many people, the closest thing to a member of the family they can point to. The fact that he is the most trusted man in America must not be taken lightly.

* * *

**Media Utilization in A Typical Week**

| ACTIVITY | HOURS |
|---|---|
| Sleeping | 53.2 |
| Working | 40 |
| Watching Television | 26.4 |
| Listening to the Radio | 21.2 |
| Eating | 8.4 |
| Reading Newspapers | 4.2 |
| Reading Magazines | 3.3 |
| Listening to Records | 1.3 |
| Attending a Movie | .2 |
| Reading Books | .06 |
| Attending a Sporting Event | .06 |
| Attending a Cultural Event | .05 |

*(From CBS Research)*

These statistics show that we spend more time watching television and listening to the radio than we do on anything else—and a good deal of this viewing and listening is spent on news. When you add the 4.2 hours spent reading newspapers, you can see the amount of attention we pay to the news is considerable. It may even be shocking.

### What's New is What's News

What is this thing called news? It's a rather difficult question, as a matter of fact.

One crucial element of news is timeliness. Nothing is smellier than yesterday's fish and nothing is more stale than yesterday's news. Or this morning's news. For most of us what's new is what's news. News is what's going on—at any given moment in time—but *not everything* that's going on. And that's the problem. Obviously, we all have some kind of an understanding that news involves "important" happenings and events—matters that, in some way, affect our lives and about which we should know. (This is the so-called *hard* news; *soft* news is what fills the gossip columns, sports pages and entertainment-life style pages.)

The problem here is that what's important to one person might not seem important to another. And by the "importance" criterion, most local television news programs, most of what's on the radio and most of what's in the newspapers is not worth bothering with.

In fact, most local news (especially local television news) caters not to our desire to situate ourselves in the world more intelligently but rather to our wish to be *entertained.* News programs are basically entertainments that give us tidbits of stories about politicians, celebrities, notorious characters, and the like. In most instances television news does just the opposite of what news is supposed to do. Television news—especially local television news—tends to be sensational and, rather than giving us information which will help us understand what is going on in society, the news programs excite us and give us a distorted view of society and the world.

The reason people trust television is because they think that "seeing is believing" they are not aware of the ways in which different kinds of shots, emphasis, timing and editing, can manipulate opinions.

*(continued on page 47)*

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I would like to suggest that because television news does not do what it is supposed to do (nor do newspapers or news magazines), we become all the more strongly addicted to it. Because we have overpoweringly powerful needs (which I've discussed earlier) we find ourselves in a vicious cycle. We want to know what is going on in the world but don't get really satisfactory answers, and so we become dependent upon the very sources that victimizes us. What we lack in quality we try to make up in quantity and so end up consuming prodigious amounts of information—entertainment that only serve to make us more anxious and, paradoxically, more dependent on the news.

And the more news we watch, the more money TV stations can make selling commercials. Advertising, according to Marshall McLuhan, is always "good news" while news, itself, is always "bad news." (This is an interesting hypothesis that bears thinking about.)

**What Is To Be Done?**

First, we must understand what it is we are generally getting when we get (via television, radio and print) the news—entertainment masquerading as something else. Because we've all been through civics courses in high schools and colleges, in which we were told it is important to keep up with current events, we feel rather good about our being newsaholics. We feel we're being good citizens. Thus we don't feel guilty about all the television we watch.

Second, we must understand that all news involves some kind of a *selection* from all that might be covered by *somebody* who generally has *something* in mind. You don't merely see the world when you watch the news—you see a perspective on the world. News people, in all media, function as "gatekeepers" with the ability and power to shape our perceptions of the world and reality. As Kurt and Gladys Engel Lang pointed out in *Politics and Television* (Quadrangle, 1968):

> Newsmen, in planning the coverage of a public event, make certain assumptions about their medium, about what viewers expect, and about what will hold their attention. An industry that puts great stock in audience ratings wants to assume steady interest. So the MacArthur Day telecast was made to conform to the newsmen's notions of viewers' expectations. In line with the assumed pattern, the commentators steered clear of political issues and avoided offending any viewer. Viewers were expecting a dramatic occasion, so drama it had to be, even at the expense of reality. Camera, commentary, and, to some extent, the spectators' consciousness of "being on television" helped to make the television event dramatic.

Their book shows how the celebrated visit of General MacArthur to Chicago was really a sparsely attended and dull visit which was "blown up" into a big and dramatic event by television newspeople.

It was what we would now describe as a "big media hype." Thus we cannot be confident that all we're getting is the facts or that the facts we are getting are the most important facts when we watch television news or read newspapers. We seldom get the whole story?

Third, I think our understanding of news has to change. Newspapers and other print news media must become more interpretative and analytical. News tends to focus on what might be called "the figure" and neglect "the ground," which means we often get a great deal of information but we have no sense of its meaning or significance.

Because we are a present-minded future-looking people, we tend to focus on the current event and neglect historical matters, sociological phenomena, economic considerations, etc. which explain and give significance to the news. (Fortunately, I detect signs that this is changing.)

It might be well for the national and international news programs to change their formats. Television news is essentially a "headline" service, and if all it did were to give people a glimpse of the personalities doing things and some of the events that seem consequential, that would not be a problem. Provided, that is, people used other sources of news where they obtained in-depth treatments of events.

If people only watched a half-hour or so of news, as a supplement to solidly written newspapers and magazines, television news wouldn't be worth getting excited about. But since many people are newsaholics, then television has to take responsibility for its awesome power and must change its format.

Several possibilities suggest themselves. If the network news shows remain in half-an-hour formats, they should cut down the number of topics they cover and give in-depth treatment to those they do deal with. As things stand now, there are usually some twenty items on a typical half-hour news show. This means that the average story lasts 90 seconds—maximum. There's no time for interpretation and analysis. We may know something about what's happening but we don't know very much about what it means. The other solution is to have hour-long national news programs, but the local stations are fighting this idea. Hour-long national news programs would add on to the amount of television people watch, and I'm not sure that's desirable. So it's hard to know what to suggest.

## News, Psyche and Society

I have suggested, in this essay, that news is culturally determined and the way it is written or broadcast or televised has a great deal to do with such things as national character and historical experience. At the same time that news reflects this character it also shapes it. Our notions about what is real and important determine what we define as news and the news we get determines about what is real and important.

For most journalists, all that I've written about the American desire to escape from history and our present-mindedness would be totally irrelevant. They do their jobs

*(continued on page 51)*

We'd like to interrupt
this Quarterly with
a couple of important
words for people in the
television industry:

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1971 Season
The First Churchills
The Spoils of Poynton
The Possessed
Pere Goriot

1971-72 Season
Jude The Obscure
The Gambler
esurrection
Comfort Farm

1972-73 Season
Vanity Fair
Cousin Bette
The Mo

1973-74 Season
Clouds of Witness
Who Was Hunting Himself

1974-75 Season
Murder Must
Upstairs, Dow
Country Matte
Vienna 1900
The Nine Ta

1975-76 Season
Shoulder to Shoulder
Notorious Woman
Upstairs, Downstairs III

1976-77 Season
Madame Bovary
How Green Was My Valley
Five Red H
rs IV

1977-78 Season
Dickens of London
I, Claudius
Anna Karenina
al Friend

1978-79 Season
The Mayor of Casterbridge
The Duchess of Duke Street
Country Matters
Lillie

1979-80 Season
Kean
Love for Lydia
The Duchess of Duke Street, II

1980-81 Season
Crime and Punishment
Pride and Prejudice
Testament of Youth
Danger UXB
Thérèse Raquin
Edward & Mrs. Simpson

Ten years ago that phrase wouldn't have meant very much. Today, it's become the signature for "Masterpiece Theatre," honored by critics and repeated Emmy awards as one of the most innovative, and exciting, cultural events on television.

This is "Masterpiece Theatre's" 10th anniversary season. But along with celebrating a decade of superbly acted and directed hits—from The First Churchills, through Elizabeth R, The Six Wives of Henry VIII, and, of course, Upstairs, Downstairs—we're also celebrating ten years of support for public television.

Public television and "Masterpiece Theatre" have progressed in tandem since 1970, the year that Mobil announced a grant of $1 million to the Public Broadcasting Service, at the time the largest grant PBS had ever received from the business community. Since then our commitment to PBS has grown substantially; in 1980, it was about $3 million.

Why do we support public television? Mobil chairman Rawleigh Warner, Jr., articulated our goals in our very first season, when he remarked that such sponsorship would be extended to programs that "aim to enrich their audiences. To the extent they succeed, they enrich all of society…what we plan to do is not merely to give money, but also to utilize our resources and skills to build a wider audience for public broadcasting."

And the audiences for PBS stations have indeed grown wider, from a relatively select few in 1970 to the more than 52 million households—68% of those with TVs—recorded in March 1980.

We look forward to future programs made possible by a grant from Mobil.

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with a considerable amount of expertise and often with great integrity . . . and seldom worry about philosophical matters.

They do not realize that they are prisoners of their own, particularly American, sense of reality and what the world is all about. They are prisoners of their own (and it's hard to put a finger on them) categories of thought and assumptions.

And we are their prisoners.

---

*Arthur Asa Berger is professor of broadcast communications arts at San Francisco State College. He was educated at the University of Massachusetts (B.A.), the University of Iowa (M.A.) and received his doctorate from the University of Minnesota. He is the author of several books, including "The TV-Guided American."*

# QUOTE . . . UNQUOTE

## Critics in Agreement

"A few months ago Israeli television scored by far the greatest audience it has ever known, not only at home but also in the neighboring countries. It got hold of *Death of a Princess* from Britain's ITV and gleefully gave this undeservedly famous 'docu-drama' its first airing in the Middle East. (This provoked the Saudis into prohibiting all direct British investment in their country. If they got mad at PBS for running this program in America, just think how they felt about its appearance on Israeli television. The investment prohibition did not affect joint ventures of British capital and Saudi entrepreneurs, and since that's all the law allows these days anyway, the actual disruption of the two economies was pretty small.)

"To give the Israeli critics their due, once they got past their paragraph of gloating over Saudi discomfiture, they slugged the program itself for the same reasons our own critics gave: sleazy piece of goods."

*—Martin Mayer in American Film Magazine*

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*to the "SelectaVision" VideoDisc system...*
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*we make it.*

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# Always on Sunday

**By PEGGY WHEDON**

After the 1960 early November election that sent John Kennedy to the White House, I deluged the ABC executive offices with memos pointing out that we had a new driving force in the country, that the network needed a first-class interview program to compete with *Meet the Press* and *Face the Nation*, already on the air, and that I was just the one to deliver.

It was the national enthusiasm for the new president that helped me convince the network brass that they needed, and that I could produce, a hard-news talk program featuring the individuals who made the world stop, go, and turn a little faster. This was a full-blown boast that only the young and fearless would dare to make. But ABC bought the idea, picked the name *Issues and Answers* (which had not been included in my list of fifty suggested titles), and gave me three days to put together the first show.

*Issues and Answers*, then, was born on November 27, 1960. The first guest was Senator Paul Douglas, Democrat of Illinois. The news story was Senator Douglas's admonitions to the new president to make good his campaign promises. We had made it on the air and in the newspapers—a major network television and radio program.

The news events of the twenty years since that memorable first show have created their own dramas of passion, crime, cruelty, and political change. The Vietnam War; the Middle East wars; the upheavals in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan; bloodshed in Ireland; the new African countries; Watergate; the leadership of five presidents, and the deaths of two. *Issues and Answers* has covered in detail all of these headline stories. And it's added a few of its own: We were part of an earthquake in Chile; a hurricane in Cuba; a bombing in Jerusalem and another in Belfast; and fighting in Beirut, Lebanon, Amman, Jordan, and Soweto, South Africa. We've sampled the glaciers of Alaska and the jungle heat of Rhodesia. My travel agent tells me that I've flown about two million miles. This includes the "great cities"—London, Paris, Rome, Berlin, Jerusalem, Cairo, and Hong Kong—and the off-beat news centers—Saigon, Dar-es-Salaam, Tripoli, Juno, Santiago, Mexico City, Havana, New Delhi, Rawalpindi, and Calcutta.

Every Sunday since the fall of 1960, one thousand Sundays, for twenty years, I've been on hand to applaud a good show and bury a bad one. We've featured every world head of state, every political leader, every presidential and vice-presidential candidate, and some noteworthy free souls. Show excitement, news breaks, and world changing decisions have emanated "live" from the White House; the Speaker's office; convention headquarters; the palaces of Cairo, Paris, and London; and the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. It's all there. It is difficult to convey the anxieties of this nervous lady producer, struggling to make every show the very best and determined to bring out a new dimension in every person she interviewed.

News coverage and television have grown up together during these twenty years. We've been inundated with fragile but stylish and efficient new discoveries. Minicameras can follow a candidate into the men's lounge. Microwave can send a "live" picture from the Waldorf Towers to our New York studios. Satellites can beam half-hour shows from every capitol of the world. Special-effects generators called Quantels can immediately reduce the size of the picture, put it in two, three, or four segments on the picture tube, wipe out one picture and wipe in another to take its place, dissolve one picture slowly into another, and create expanding or diminishing circles, squares, or diagonals—whatever effect you like.

It's a far cry from the early 1960s, when I smuggled film cans in my purse through customs in Beirut—where reporters were challenged at gun point to surrender their film. It's a far cry from Hong Kong, where I defied the authorities who insisted on x-raying the film, or from Havana, where I sneaked through with the film hidden under my coat.

Every trip has had its traumas: The crash and destruction of our charter plane over Amman, Jordan; an explosion that missed me by inches on the Jaffa Road in Jerusalem; a bomb planted in our Belfast hotel; an automobile accident on the streets of Calcutta; gunfire in Soweto, Johannesburg; and tanks and guns in the streets of Beirut. (Fuller descriptions of these adventures follow.)

I won't forget a night in Cairo, Egypt, at the Tulip Hotel. The room was six dollars a night, black beetles scuttled across the toilet room, the bed was a bare soiled mattress, and on the door of the room next to mine, a sign: "Dr. Amar, Specialist in Venereal Disease."

The weekly adventures on *Issues and Answers* have produced tragedy, comedy, hysteria, and the televised rise and fall of world personalities, including all the bleeps, glitches, hits, and blackouts of the media.

Why am I willing to have brushes with death and beetles? Why do I intermittently agree to play the role of set designer, make-up expert, flunkey, diplomat, nursemaid, couturier—anything to get a show on the road? Because, like life, it's a constant challenge and an ever-changing adventure. And the guests are running the world. I remain fascinated by that wonderful hour right before the show goes on: when the guests, front-page stars of the day, symbolically join hands with me, and we move onto the electronic stage together. It is a new moment in the history of mankind, born of television, born of a technology that is revolutionizing human existence.

In many instances the guests and I have been aware that together we were shaping events, influencing the course of history. Together, we always want terribly for it to be a great show, or at least a good show. It's curtain time. It's backstage, and the guest, producer, director, cameramen, reporters like Barbara Walters (who has frequently appeared on *Issues and Answers* since she joined ABC several years ago), Bob Clark, Frank Reynolds, and others are all there waiting for their cue: "On stage, everyone! Two minutes to air."

And I like the ten minutes or so after the show, when it's all been wrapped up, when I've put it all together, when I've done a good job, at best, and at worst, the best I could do. I think briefly about the events of the day and the times. I am alone in the quiet, half-light studio. The pressures are gone, and I feel a thunderous sense of satisfaction. I look at the empty guest chair and think, "There sat a man who controls the lives and the destinies of a nation. He is a king, and he calls me Peggy."

And then sometimes I feel personally dissolved. I wonder if I'm producing *Issues and Answers*—or it is producing me. Perhaps that was what Marshall McLuhan meant when he wondered a few years ago whether the medium and the message had not become the same.

There, in the empty studio, no audience applauds as it would from beyond the footlights of a live theatre. But I am well aware of the number of viewers who have just watched the show that I have produced. It's a great feeling; I like the power involved in this electronic news get-together.

And there's another reason. As I do these shows I see the stars of the moment and perhaps, to one degree or another, stars of tomorrow's history—the public people with public faces—in a very private and informal moment. I have the privilege of seeing them in a very special way. For example: I remember my experience with Mr. Sam Rayburn, Speaker of the House, when he appeared on *Issues and Answers* July 16, 1961. Knowing his aversion to TV, I was eager to make him comfortable. I hunted around and discovered a gold, carved high-back chair with a velvet cushion on which he could sit for his interview. Our switchboard operator baked a cheese cake for him, and we had fresh coffee and his favorite bourbon.

When he entered the studio, the first thing he said was, "Get rid of that ridiculous chair!"

Then he took me aside and whispered, "Don't worry, honey. I gotta gripe about something. Gotta keep up my reputation for hating TV."

There was the time when Richard Nixon came to ABC in New York to appear on *Issues* and arrived at the West Sixty-seventh Street entrance instead of the West Sixty-sixth Street entrance. There was a howling ice and snow storm.

I ran across the street, through another building, and found him standing in the snow on Sixty-seventh Street a block away. I took his arm to lead him to the other entrance. As we stepped out into the snow, he took off his coat, wrapped it around my shoulders, and half-led half-carried me across the street, while the snow swirled around him.

Golda Meir was a favorite of everyone. She had a daughter who was a doctor. . . . I had a daughter in medical school. We had a lot in common. We filmed her in her small two-family house in Tel Aviv. She lived in six tiny rooms and rented out the other half. She asked me what she should wear; looking at the brown and black spidery-print dress she had on, I suggested pale blue with pearls. She went out and bought a pale blue blouse.

A year later, when she was in Washington, and appeared on a competitive show, what was she wearing? A pale blue blouse, the same one . . . with pearls.

And when John Kennedy was our new president, I was hostess for the head table at the Radio Television Correspondents' first black-tie dinner for him. I was wearing a strapless evening gown. As President Kennedy entered the room, I ran up to him with a "Welcome, Mr. President!" He was so startled by my enthusiastic greeting that he split the stem of his glass and spilled his daiquiri all over the bouffant skirt of my white gown. Before I knew what was happening, the president of the United States was kneeling on the floor at my feet wiping off the hem of my dress with his pocket handkerchief.

Despite the fascination of the news business, my most important life role has always been as a wife and mother. My husband, Don, is recognized as one of the leading medical authorities in the world. He is also a gentle, sensitive man who has supported and encouraged my peregrinations. He is the director of the Institute of Arthritis, Metabolism and Digestive Diseases at the National Institute of Health; he is a consultant to NASA and has supervised the diets and medical research on all the space flights from the early Gemini trips to the most recent flights to the Moon and Saturn.

One of the more hectic phases in our lives occurred several years ago when I got approval to go to Cuba to interview Castro. My husband was in San Francisco at the time, so I left a note on the kitchen telephone:

"When you return, I'll be in Havana. Please pick up the cleaning."

When I got back there was a note from my husband: "When you read this I'll be in Japan. You pick up the cleaning."

Scheherazade had her thousand and one Nights. . . . I have had my thousand and one Sundays. She and I have had a single objective in mind: to keep our heads—she, literally; I, figuratively. She satisfied the Sultan, and I'll keep on trying to satisfy the viewers, the network, the guests, the family, and myself.

*(continued on page 59)*

FERRER☆MARTIN SHEEN☆EVA MARIE
ANNE WOODWARD☆RAYMOND MAS
☆JOHN HOUSEMAN☆JOHN GIELGUD☆
EVOR HOWARD☆ELI WALLACH☆JESSI
ESS MEREDITH☆ANTHONY HOPKINS☆
RGE C. SCO ☆CYRIL RIT
WALL☆RIC TH ANDERS
THOMAS M BETTE DAVI
LEEN DEWH RSON WELL
TH EVANS☆ ARD BURT
N ROBARDS GUINNESS☆
YNNE☆EVA LE GALLIENNE☆MAURICE
FONTANNE☆JAMES STEWART☆DAME
S☆SARAH CHURCHILL☆JULIE HARRIS
CHARLTON HESTON☆PATRICIA NEAL
INOV☆ALFRED LUNT☆HELEN HAYES☆
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My first shocked realization that *Issues and Answers* started off in third place as a network show resulted from a television columnist's phone call. Asking for the name of the Sunday guest, he said, "Let's see, you're not *Meet the Press* or *Face the Nation*, you must be . . . er. . . ." It was apparent that shiny new *Issues and Answers* needed a new approach to grab off its share of the Sunday "intellectual ghetto" audience.

Every week all three shows scrambled for the same guest stars: the visiting heads of state, the Senate or House newsmakers, or the Cabinet officer with a problem. Every Sunday, one of us came up with the front-page winner, the back-page quote, or the soon-forgotten pretty face.

Some guests were boring "talking heads," some vivacious "no-news," but we all competed for the man or woman in the center of the breaking news—the one who would grab the audience on Sunday and the front-page newspaper headlines on Monday. The competition was, and still is, fierce. Moreover, I soon discovered that the man on the front page was seldom available while he was hot news. After his story had died, and no one cared any longer about his comments, he would call and offer a guest appearance. Some stars held a press conference on the day before they appeared on the show, taking all the bite out of the Sunday stories. Others wanted to tape days in advance, even though the news story was changing by the second. All three network producers used undercover devices to beat each other to the Monday headliners: hand-delivered notes, as I did with Senator Javits, early morning and late-night phone calls, telegrams, and in-person stakeouts.

It soon became apparent that ABC News' headline hunter must find a new angle. My solution: We had to travel the show, to go where the action was. As soon as my bosses finally said yes to my proposition, I shined up my suitcase, renewed my passport, packed my walking shoes, and with a song in my heart picked up the phone.

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*Peggy Whedon's career in television has included stints on the Kate Smith Show and College News Conference as well as special assignments for ABC News. She attended the University of Rochester. Since 1960 she has been producer of ABC's Issues and Answers.*

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*The preceding excerpt from Peggy Whedon's new book, "Always on Sunday" is reprinted here by special permission of the publisher, W.W. Norton Co. Copyright © 1980 by Peggy Whedon.*

# Fine Tuning.

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METROMEDIA TELEVISION

# Icon: From Sacred Symbol to Video Myth

**By GREGOR T. GOETHALS**

Wherever we encounter images—on billboards and posters in the street, through television screens, or in museums—we are seeing small segments of human experience made visible. The image-maker has turned a selected bit of experience into an "object of contemplation." Whether moving frames or static marks on paper, all images are products of this fundamental symbolizing ability.

The icon is a special example of a symbolic form that is used for the objectification of beliefs and for self-transcendence. Though it may be meaningful for certain individuals, an icon is not generated by self-expression. It may manifest an aesthetic complexity and richness, but it is not motivated primarily by an aesthetic impulse. Its roots are in the Greek word *eikon*, or "image," and in general usage it simply means pictorial representation. However, *icon* also refers to an important kind of image, one that is intended to bring persons into relation with the sacred through visual narration of sacred stories or portrayal of sacred personages. In this sense, icon is comparable to ritual in integrating individuals into a social whole. In the same manner in which ritual has been used, icon can serve as an analogue to help in understanding some of the ways in which contemporary belief systems and values are communicated through television.

Whether viewed positively or negatively, the ritualized news patterns that flow across the screen each evening have contributed substantively to changing our political processes and to shaping our common electronic environment. Moreover, the format of the nightly news, along with other media, has nurtured persistent criticism of government action and of politicians in power.

Today, just as in the past, persons use images to locate themselves in a larger frame of reference. The fact that contemporary American culture is highly pluralistic does not mean that public symbols are unimportant.

While most image-makers in this country have paid scarce attention to traditional sacred images, both "high" and "popular" artists have persistently used certain metaphors in expressing and identifying common visions and sentiments. Without relying on the iconography of institutional religion, American artists have made use of three types of icons: *the common* *life*—family, neighborhood, city, nation; *nature;* and *technology.* These public symbols, deeply rooted in this culture, have become the source for the iconography on television. As TV critic Horace Newcomb has observed, "... we must recognize that the ideas and the symbols that express them on television are not 'created' there. They have a history in American culture. They are 'used' ideas and symbols ..." The three visual metaphors identified have been present in American art from the beginning and were appropriated by artists as they expressed and shaped public loyalties.

**Family**

The most basic and at the same time the most complex orders are those linking us as human beings, one to another, and the one to the many: family, neighborhood, working community, state, and nation. Each of these communities has its own principles of organization, its own convictions and myths. Large communities—the nation, for example—are most easily represented by a conventional symbol such as the United States flag. In the working community, certain groups are designated by symbols derived from their characteristic attire—hard hats or blue collars.

The family has been a major metaphorical image throughout American cultural history. In the early years of this nation, when there was little institutional support for the visual arts, the portrait painter was in demand at nearly all levels of society. Family portraits, seen today in museums, provide a rich mosaic of concepts of American family life. One sees personal possessions, furniture, glimpses of the environment, expressions and gestures of family members. All of these elements witness to those visible entities and invisible values that, taken together, give the modern viewer a concrete sense of what was considered of worth. From the long tradition of family portraits to the Instamatic images and replay movies, the family portrait—still or in motion—is a private icon that most Americans hold dear.

Small enough to allow for dramatic personal interaction, yet large enough to reflect social norms, the family has also been a consistent visual metaphor in television programming. Very early in television history the nuclear family became the subject of dramas, comedies, and soap operas, and it is equally pervasive today. While portrayals of family life in early programs such as *Mama* and *Father Knows Best* are unlike representations in programs of the 1970s and 1980s such as *Eight is Enough* or *One Day at a Time,* the metaphor has remained constant. The family provides a symbolic background of characters and moral principles.

At the same time, it is one of the most easily understood worlds with which viewers can identify. In contrast to nature or technology, the metaphor of the family depicts our closest, most intense interpersonal involvements. Through family relationships we know love, trust, respect, fidelity, nurture, the struggle for independence, and the routine give and take of everyday living. The family can also be the community in which we learn to cope with human suffering—loss of love, distrust, infidelity, or a breakdown of support and nurturing.

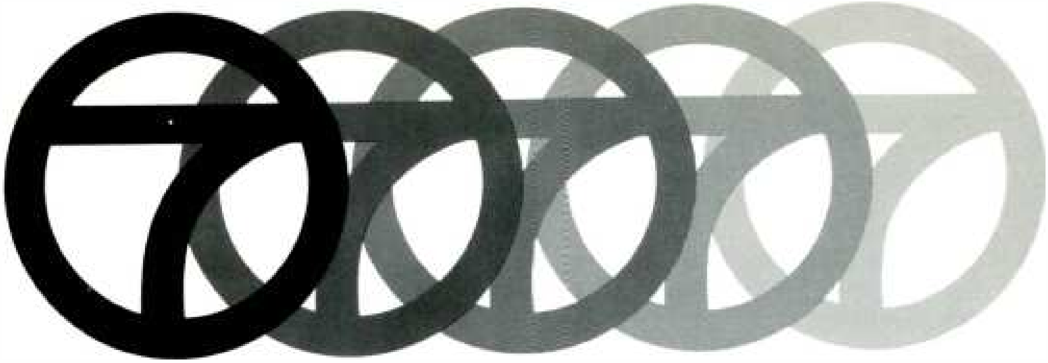
Every TV family show—whether trite or profound—offers concerned viewers an opportunity to analyze the ways in which social norms are implictly or explicitly present. But, since TV images have such a lifelike, intimate quality, one has to make a deliberate effort to see them primarily as symbolic records. Every series has a distinct visual environment that contributes to the portrayal of the family.

The environment of the Bunkers in *All in the Family* was a working-class neighborhood, always seen in the introductory shots when the camera took the viewer on an auto ride past brown frame houses in Queens. The Bunkers' house was a small one, and much of the action in the show took place in the combined living and dining area, separated from the kitchen by a traditional swinging door. Decoration and furnishings helped to establish the taste and personalities of Edith and Archie Bunker. There was a large, ordinary stuffed chair (now in the Smithsonian) that was only for Archie. Parallel to this chair was Edith's, a somewhat smaller one, less suitable for lounging; it was offered to guests or strangers who came in. Both chairs faced the television set. The wallpaper was patterned, and light bulbs on the wall lamps were shaped like candle flames. Near the front door hung a reproduction of a seascape with a sailing ship nearby stood a coat rack. Stairs from the living area led up to the second-floor bedrooms, comfortable but not elegant in their furnishings. There was only one bathroom for the household, and the noise of the flushing toilet could be heard downstairs. The kitchen was Edith's domain and the family meals provided frequent opportunities for interaction among the characters.

There were, of course, other environments. In the early years of the series Archie was a dock foreman for the Prendergast Tool and Die Company. And there was Kelsey's Bar, which Archie was later to purchase. Mike, the son-in-law, went through college; Gloria had a job. All of the characters moved in and out of a variety of places as characters and plot changed. But the major action of the series generally rotated around the Bunker home.

Although Archie's Place later became the primary locus of action, most viewers will remember the front door of 704 Houser Street rattling and banging as Archie burst in, taking off his old red and gray plaid jacket and well-worn hat, shouting all the time for Edith. From his armchair or at the kitchen table, Archie would argue or engage in shouting matches with other members of his family. Through these central characters—Archie, Edith, their daughter, Gloria, and son-in-law, Mike—and

*(continued on page 65)*



The ABC Television Stations.

New York, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, San Francisco.

their interactions, many social issues and values of the 1970s were brought to life. Over the years themes of conflict, prejudice, even violence, were introduced with a kind of vividness that had not appeared in prime-time situation comedy. For many, the Bunkers represented "realism" in family and social life. Actors Carroll O'Connor, Jean Stapelton, Sally Struthers, and Rob Reiner transformed symbolic types into recognizable human beings.

Archie was the symbol of an uneducated, working-class, prejudiced, middle-aged male, whose wisecracks about "spics," "spades," "wops," and "kikes" delineated his character. Mike Stivic, whom Archie referred to as Meathead, was a central character, representing the conflict of social attitudes presented in the plots. Polish-American and politically liberal, he was studying for his degree in sociology while he and Gloria were living with Edith and Archie. Watching the series, one became accustomed to the roles the characters played in expressing and defending particular positions—whether the Equal Rights Amendment or gun control legislation. For Archie "Ms." was a "near 'miss'," and in one episode he went on the air against gun control. Yet, interspersed throughout the series were many dramatic episodes showing nuances of temperament and personality. Particularly poignant were the times when Archie was laid off from work. What he suffered and what befell him in this experience evoked the viewer's sympathy and sense of identification.

The camera work and acting contributed substantially to the authenticity of the major characters. Frequently the full frame of the TV screen was filled with the face of one of the principal actors and drew from his or her expressions an enormous range of human emotions. While one heard the voice of Archie, one was watching the detailed, intimate reactions of Edith. Or the reverse might be true. As Edith chattered in the background, the camera would scan Archie's face for every nuance of emotion—raised eyebrows, incredulity, astonishment, tenderness, exasperation.

Throughout the long-running series all of the characters developed, but perhaps Edith's growth is most relevant to a discussion of secular icons. Her character, in the early days of the program was a negative model. While she was the stabilizing force in the family, she was consistently depicted in a subservient role. Later, Edith changed both in appearance and in the life she began to lead. The hairdo was less wispy, the motions around the house less frenetic. Edith eventually moved into a working world of her own.

Edith and Archie are certainly figures far from the saints' images in the traditional icons. Those solemn, elongated, beatific countenances were sacred objects of veneration for people who believed in a greater supernatural order. The images of Edith and Archie are more like the icons Norman Rockwell created for early twentieth century Americans. The Bunker household produced symbols of particular kinds of human action and beliefs in the secular, technological, democratic world of the 1970s. Whether viewers reacted positively or negatively to the characters, *All in the Family* embodied certain social values and conflicts, and, at the very least, made them accessible for public debate and reflection.

Unlike the Bunkers, TV families in other series have been comfortable, middle-class people who generally have problems that can be worked out in the course of an hour's program. Their economic status, relative domestic tranquillity and lifestyle are similar to those depicted in magazine and television advertising.

Consider, for example, the visions of the good life conjured up on *Eight Is Enough.* The Bradford home has a spacious, suburban elegance with back and front lawns, an ample drive, and a garage with plenty of space for cars, work, and garden tools. There are references to neighbors, but one doesn't actually see any of their houses. Lush green plants and trees apparently screen one house from another. Inside, the Bradfords' rooms are large and well furnished, with lots of paintings and plants. Upstairs are bedrooms and bathrooms, and, though there is some doubling up in the rooms, no one seems cramped or uncomfortable. Downstairs, the kitchen and dining room are gathering places for the family; the study where Tom Bradford occasionally works is the setting for conferences with one or more of the children.

Tom, the father, a newspaperman, is sole provider for the large household. Abby, his young second wife, is independent and high-spirited, exerting a leadership in the family that sometimes makes the father's decision making seem hesitant or conservative. Together they provide a broad, supportive base for all their children, some of whom are in their twenties. Even the oldest son, David, who is married, retains strong ties with the family.

Weekly shows frequently maintain two or three plots. These run parallel through the entire episode and are interwoven visually, with quick cuts back and forth to move the individual stories to a final resolution. The Bradford household itself remains the fixed center, providing equilibrium for the motion and interaction of the dramatic sequences. Through the interrelated plots the activities of the various family members point up simple moral lessons and demonstrate the solid supportive role of the family.

In one episode David, the married son, became concerned about his working wife, Janet, who, he thought, was devoting too much time to her work. He further suspected she might be fooling around with her colleague in the law firm. A parallel motif involved Elizabeth, one of the daughters, who had just broken up with her boyfriend.

As the stories developed, other Bradford family members were drawn into the action. David consulted with his dad who encouraged honesty and open communication between him and Janet. Tommy fretted about his sister and

*(continued on page 69)*

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Ernie, and he and his father waited up for her when she returned home late one night. Dad also worried about Nicholas playing in "that part of town" but was assured by Abby that Nicholas should have a wide range of friends and experiences. The three stories moved quickly along, interspersed with commercials and, by the end of the hour, all was resolved. David and Janet had learned something new about honesty and mutual trust; Elizabeth made it clear that she was only friends with Ernie; Jackson had helped Nicholas see and appreciate his own family in a new way.

While the setting, dress, education, and characters reinforce the concept of the good life of a suburban family, many of the issues depicted in the episodes explore changing attitudes about family roles. Lee Rich, the show's executive producer, has commented on the "realism" in some of the episodes:

> the oldest daughter decided she was in love with a young man. She went off and lived with him for several weeks before she returned home . . . The network had wanted the daughter to say she came back home because she now believes in marriage. That's ridiculous. The reason she came back was that she wasn't ready for it yet. Maybe next time, she says. I told ABC I wouldn't do the series unless I could do it honestly.

The dominant value that comes through all of the weekly episodes is the unwavering family loyalty and mutual, nurturing love. The affections may be tested and stretched, but there is unfailing forgiveness, and the family bond is never really broken. This aspect of the show tilts it perhaps toward "unrealism." But the producer, Bob Jacks, thinks that part of the show's appeal is precisely that it *"isn't real."*

> All across the country, people see the Bradfords and wish their own family were as happy and close knit as we are. This is what people wish life were like.

In another drama, *Family,* the Lawrences opened up for prime-time audiences a melodramatic and complex series of portrayals of family life. Its one-hour format allowed a searching exploration of problems that face contemporary families. The Lawrences were an affluent, middle-class family in Pasadena. The father, Doug, a successful, independent lawyer, was married to Kate, an equally strong, thoughtful, and intelligent person. They had three children of their own—Nancy, Willie, and Buddy—and an adopted child, Annie. They and their extended family faced crises of terminal illness, alcoholism, death, divorce, unwanted pregnancies, adoption, cancer, and accidents. Indeed, the circumstances of the Lawrence family seemed to many to follow the pattern of human travail and grief that characterized many of the daytime soap operas.

What distinguished the Lawrences, however, was the artful portrayal of each member of the family as a thinking individual who could thoughtfully explore ethical issues and action. Through these thorough examinations of value questions, complex sets of options, and alternative attitudes were developed. There were no quick fixes or easy resolutions.

Occasionally, families depicted on television do not conform to this storybook profile. *Skag*, a brief series of dramatic shows presented by NBC in the winter of 1980, portrayed a mining family. Skag was head of a household that differed significantly from the middle-class affluence of the Bradfords or Lawrences. The larger environment was that of a mining community with none of the features of the suburban dream. The background consisted of simple, almost bleak, modestly furnished frame houses and neighborhoods of mobile homes.

The plots explored some of the problems that face low-income families. In one episode Skag's daughter defied her father and moved in with a mill supervisor who treated women irresponsibly. The daughter, Patricia, also asserted her independence by pursuing a modeling career. Her relationship with Whalen, the mill supervisor, was tenuous because she really wanted the glamorous life of a model. In the long run Patricia failed to secure a genuine modeling career but was persuaded to go to New York with other aspirants under the sponsorship of a man who had assured them of opportunities for advancement. The father sensed the seedy future that was in store for his daughter, but felt helpless to do anything about it. The episode ended on a note of foreboding and grief.

While critics and some viewers talk often about the need for more realism in TV families, it is not clear how much could be tolerated by viewers. The realism in some of the long-running series seems to be tempered with considerable humor, and generally their problems are resolved. It could be argued that what most people experience in their day-to-day lives is without resolution, often sad, and with only thin threads of hope. It is unlikely that viewers would be attracted to programs where week after week they look at the painful family conflicts and crises confronted by the poor.

By contrast, the success of the weekly series *Dallas* suggests that viewers are fascinated by the calamities and sins of the superrich. Week after week the Ewing family experiences newer and more convoluted intrigue, grief, and meanness. The fabulously wealthy family endures constant misery, and each episode seems to be energized with a Texas-style abundance of lust and vengeance. The opening camera shots play on the local symbols of power: the Dallas skyline, industries, oil derricks, and the great open spaces. The grandiose house that accommodates the three families is like a citadel, arrived at through long, private drives and surrounded by Ewing property as far as the eye can see.

The Ewing men dominate the show. Jock, the cowboy-rancher-oil man-scheming entrepreneur who has made all the money, presides over the clan. The "good" son,

*(continued on page 73)*

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Bobby, has the frontier qualities of the old man but is basically decent, more like his mother. The other son, J.R., wears boots and a Western hat, but what one remembers about him are the smooth, elegant suits and his sleazy, villainous character. His avarice and hard-living, hard-loving ways keep the show resplendent in sin. Miss Ellie is Jock's wife—a matronly, tastefully dressed woman, never seen in an apron or work clothes. She reigns as the gracious, forgiving mistress of the Ewing compound.

The other major women are J.R.'s wife, Sue Ellen; Pam; Bobby's wife, and Jock and Miss Ellie's granddaughter, Lucy. Their often disastrous personal circumstances are experienced with psychic, more than physical, disarray. They are unfailingly well groomed and stylishly attired. The good life of the Ewings is inexorably bound up with wealth, and huge sums are continuously spent in coping with alcoholism, nervous breakdowns, kidnappings, infidelity, and lawsuits.

Many persons have speculated on the audience appeal of *Dallas.* Some have argued that viewers like it because it shows that the very rich are themselves tormented and unhappy. Or perhaps it diverts attention from the inflation rate and fuel prices. Others reflect that it resembles the tales of gods and superhumans, which almost always include a personification of evil and disorder. The dirty tricks and treachery of the characters help to clarify and identify the heroes and good folks. Another view was offered by Michael Aren in a *New Yorker* article in which he speculated about the unpredictability and destabilized quality of the characters in *Dallas:*

> Its characters don't so much lack manners as lack a stable relationship to manners. Young and old, new rich and old rich, good characters and bad characters share this stripped down, improvisational sensibility.

The "behavioral improvisation," he suggests, may appeal to viewers because the destabilized characters bear a strong resemblance to ourselves.

When it comes to the simpler, old-fashioned values, viewers have to set the dial for shows that depict families in the American past. There one can find families who must do hard, often manual, work to make ends meet. Of all the TV families, *The Waltons* stand out strongly as a source of traditional ideas about right and wrong. Set in the years between the Depression and World War II, the show embodies some of the heroic principles that we like to think of as uniquely American—honesty, hard work, belief in god, fair play, patriotism, and cooperation. And, it is within the family that these convictions are first experienced.

The Walton family, originally consisted of John and Olivia Walton, their seven children, and Grandma and Grandpa Walton. They were a rural family in the mountains of Virginia. Walton's Mountain was itself a steady reference throughout the series of unchanging and transcendent ideals that each member of the family discovered for himself or herself. It symbolized the physical and spiritual qualities that Grandma and Grandpa Walton had sought to instill in their children and that John and Olivia had transmitted to theirs. Over the years the Walton family on television grew and under- went changes. Viewers watched the children mature and assume new and independent roles. When Will Geer, the actor who played Grandpa Zed, died, the Waltons had to absorb their grief and reconstitute themselves as a family. When Grandma Walton had to fight her way back from a stroke, the show incorporated the heroism that the actress, Ellen Corby, was experiencing in real life. Grandma Walton had to learn to regain her equilibrium and speech after being incapacitated.

*The Waltons* presented social as well as personal history. Clustered around the radio the family listened to Roosevelt speak to the nation after Pearl Harbor. Later episodes brought them into the war years. For viewers who remember only the skepticism and disenchantment with patriotism during the Vietnam years, the show reconstructed from the past a different kind of patriotism. It also, in a later episode, combined the motifs of patriotism and racial prejudice. Mary Ellen, the eldest daughter, befriended a young Mexican-American soldier who was on leave from the navy, and was being taunted by local boys. In a scuffle, the young soldier hurt the arm of one of the locals. After being taken in by the Waltons, it turned out that Mary Ellen's husband, who died in action, had saved the young soldier's life at Pearl Harbor. He had come to bring a medal and note from President Roosevelt honoring Mary Ellen's husband.

During his visit with the family, Mary Ellen found that it was possible for her to emerge from her own grief and begin to love again. The young soldier learned a kind of patience and restraint in dealing with the bigots who maligned him.

*The Waltons* persistently made storytelling about the American past dramatically interesting. Like later TV families, this one had its own crises, but the old principles saw the family through. *The Waltons* is a symbolic record of family life, more akin to the creations of Norman Rockwell than to the 1930s photos by Ben Shahn and Dorothea Lange. They bear little resemblance to the Woods or Gudgers described in James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which presented the poor with dignity, though without the physical or spiritual power to overcome the system. In *The Waltons* the old-fashioned values and the strength they provide are portrayed for a contemporary audience. Only such a fictionalized family living in the shadow of history and of Walton's Mountain, could personify such principles.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the Waltons and their values are the ethical embroilments portrayed in daytime soap

*(continued on page 77)*

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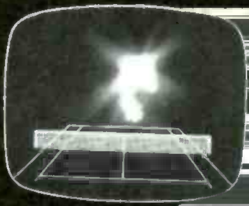

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operas. Over the years some of the longer-running series have developed inordinately complex human relationships that only devoted fans can decipher. Few prime-time shows can challenge the supremacy of the soap operas in the sheer quantity of human value questions that have saturated these fictional families. In fact, the soap opera makes a very specialized use of the family metaphor. Because of the daily dramatization the shows can encompass not just one but a number of interrelated families.

Informed critics say that soap operas confirm as well as question traditional moral values. According to some, soap operas actually inspire adherence to traditional codes of behavior. The wicked are indeed punished or live under unbearable social pressures. Critic Neil Shister even concludes that soap opera families argue for the triumph of innocence and decency:

> Innocence remains despite all. That's the final message one takes from the program before the last barrage of commercials promising that a clean wash or a platter of Oriental vegetables is the sure bet to make a family ecstatic. The pristine promise of youth might get sullied a little in Pine Valley, but it never gets eroded . . . There's no way you can watch for several weeks without getting involved. People get banged around in Pine Valley—most of them have hearts encased in several layers of scar tissue—but they pass through their bouts of tortured anxiety without shriveling up into emotional basket-cases. They are the inspirational icons of TV.

But do they inspire by their perserverance and innocence? Probably not. They may enable viewers to empathize with a wide range of moral predicaments. Or they may lead viewers so deeply into an assortment of human grief and folly that they are hypnotized and at the same time somewhat relieved by the relatively uncomplicated state of their own family lives. Shister admits that part of the attraction of the soap operas is that the trials of the characters make one's own life seem simple by comparison: "When you turn off the set your own life seems like peaches-and-cream. Or at least Ready-Whip."

The rhythm of the soap opera is significantly different from that of the weekly family series. The soaps are both more regulated and more open-ended. On the one hand, the sophisticated viewer can almost predict the commercial breaks and the previews for subsequent episodes. The soap opera fan is locked into a daily habit; the viewing becomes a kind of ritualistic experience.

For television viewers, the family has always been a special kind of visual metaphor. It represents an immediate "world" of parents and children, but at the same time inevitably leads viewers into an awareness of the larger communities of neighborhood, city, state, and nation. Indeed, the size and environment of the family has been so convenient for presenting relationships on television that many shows—*The Mary Tyler Moore Show, M.A.S.H., The Lou Grant Show, The White Shadow,* and others—seem analogous to family groups. Out of a large organization—newspaper office, military hospital, high school—certain key individuals interact with each other in such a way that viewers see them as a kind of family. Sometimes the family image is even applied to an entire network. When CBS observed its fiftieth anniversary, the network gathered family together. Presided over by Walter Cronkite, one of the hosts of the occasion, stars of the past and present celebrated as though at a family reunion. In another instance, during this nation's Bicentennial, Cronkite led viewers on a national tour, at the end of which he delivered a fatherly tribute to our pluralistic national family.

*Roots,* one of the most widely viewed family portrayals in television history, was built around a particular family's history. Developing a sense of ethnic origin and destiny, the series was a significant step in television, inspiring the black family with a world of its own. *Roots* became a spectacular icon with which the individual American Black could identify. Although some parts of the series were criticized for stereotyping whites, the lasting power of the production was its capacity to give to black Americans epic images of themselves. As an icon, it articulated myth in the best sense of the word—explaining who black Americans are, where they came from, and where they are going. *Roots* enabled the black American to have a sense of the whole of which the individual is a part.

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*The preceding article is excerpted from a forthcoming book, "The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Altar" by Gregor T. Goethals. It is reprinted here by permission of the publisher, Beacon Press of Boston.*

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*Gregor T. Goethals is professor of art history at the Rhode Island School of Design.*

# *QUOTE . . . UNQUOTE*

## Give Us Heroes!

"One test of quality in programming is whether television can meet the needs of its audience for stories with meaning and moral. When viewers complain about the quality of television, they do not refer so much to poor workmanship in writing, acting or direction as to the absence of the heroic modes of change and order. The audience will recognize this quality in television programming when it appears."

*—Robert Sklar in "American Film Magazine"*

# *QUOTE . . . UNQUOTE*

## Is Public Broadcasting Nearly Dead?

". . . Cable TV has begun to mount a fearsome challenge by spawning culturally oriented 'programming services' that could undermine everything public broadcasting has built. These new services may sap public TV's audience by televising similar programs. They could draw away money by capturing as sponsors the same corporations that now underwrite shows appearing on public TV. And they will compete in the same marketplace for programming and for talent.

"Today, cable reaches only one-quarter of all U.S. TV-owning homes—but as many as half of all households will be cable subscribers by the end of the decade, and practically 100 percent could be wired by the year 2000."

*—Peter Caranicas,*
*Saturday Review*

## The Whole World Is Watching

"Consider that 150 million people might watch the program (Cosmos), three percent of the world's population. Of these, a million might get excited; 10,000 of these will be youngsters who will be turned in the direction of science. A handful will make important contributions. That's a tremendous impact."

*—Dr. Carl Sagan*
*(Quoted in The Saturday Review)*

## TV and the Voter

"One question has tantalized me for years: Is television implicated in this voter apathy?

"It is a fact that these two decades of increasingly turned-off voters have been two decades of increasingly turned-on television. Just as election turn-out was declining, television was becoming the dominant cultural force in American life and the principal medium of news and political communication. It must be more than a coincidence."

*—Robert MacNeil in the Dial*

# Capital Cities Family Specials

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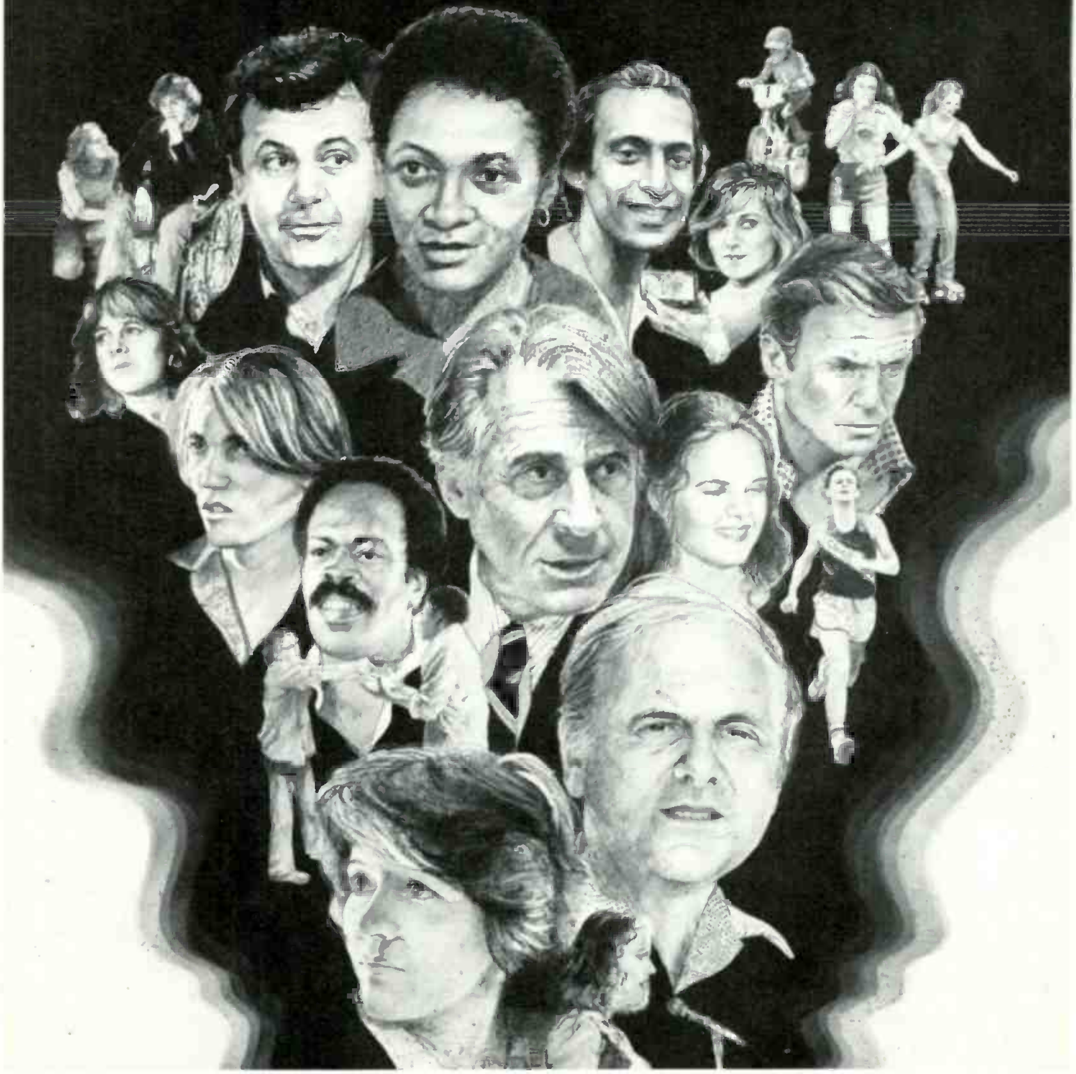

# The Story Behind "A Lady Named Baybie"

**By MARTHA SANDLIN**

When I began work on the documentary, *A Lady Named Baybie*, five years ago, my two subjects were literally in the dark. They had no idea what "film" meant, and they still don't. But being in a film has given them what their lives have lacked since birth—a sense of identity, a fleeting fame, a wholly unexpected delight.

Blind since birth, Baybie Hoover, age 64, and her close friend, Virginia Brown, 62, are unable to grasp the mechanism of film. They cannot imagine how a beam of light, forced through a strip of celluloid, can project an image on a screen. Their world is bounded by their senses—sound, smell and touch. Before they became the focus of a PBS documentary about their lives, their closest contact with the film world was listening to the sound of television and, upon occasion, sitting in a movie theatre and wondering what the audience found so funny during lapses in the dialog.

It was in 1975 that I first spotted Baybie Hoover singing on the streets of New York. I asked if I might photograph her for a course I was taking at the New York University film school. Later I attended services at the tiny Pentecostal church for the blind where Baybie preaches every Sunday.

At first, Baybie could not understand why I wished to make a film about her life. She was worried that the presence of my cameras would interfer with her "street work." To compensate for any loss of earnings, I prepared many meals for Baybie and Virginia.

In preparing for the film, I screened many documentaries and dramas about the blind. Never, I discovered, had a camera followed the daily activities of a blind person, allowing him or her to move freely.

Baybie admitted that she had only the dimmest notion of all that was implied by the world "film." She did hold some video tape in her hand once. "I pecked on it and smelled it and I said, *'That's a picture!'* "

But my two stars learned quickly. During the filming they would often shout "CUT!" when the action wasn't going as they wished. They also asked questions, sometimes highly technical ones.

When talking pictures were still new, Baybie was taken, along with other students at the Kansas School for the Blind, to "see" a Bing Crosby film. "I didn't get too much out of it," she remembers, "because they changed the scenes so fast."

What puzzled Virginia was the idea of projection. "I don't understand why they have to have the projector in the back and the screen up front," she brooded.

When *A Lady Named Baybie* was shown on *Non-Fiction Television* over PBS last December, Baybie's pride and delight were lovely to see. Critics admitted they had come to the project with cynicism. "A film about a blind beggar?" asked one. "Oh, no. Not my cup of TV!"

Viewers seemed particularly touched by the details of Baybie's life. Born blind, abused by a stepmother, impregnated by an uncle, sterilized at the county poor farm, this large, cheerful woman seemed to leave audiences chastened. Critics called Baybie "remarkable" and quoted many of her comments in the film, such as, "God says to me every day, 'You're my treasure, Baybie.'"

Despite her uncertain grasp of film and television, Baybie understood that a picture was, somehow, being imprinted on the eye of the world. "I never had a picture taken of me as a child," she recalled. "My family didn't even own a camera. I don't have a birth certificate. But now, at last, I can prove I was here."

Listening to herself as the film was run off in the editing room, Baybie also felt faintly schizoid, as if the person talking from the small screen were somebody else. "I thought, 'Oh, that precious little woman is trying to get a church for the blind!' But my heart kept saying, 'That's you, Baybie!'"

The 60-minute film follows Baybie and Ginger as they cope with poverty, bad weather and uncaring strangers in a world of darkness. The business of their lives is "pitching," singing hymns and old ballads on the streets of Manhattan, tin cups in hand. Their repertoire is all but endless. They can sing four hours straight and never repeat a song.

Fantasy plays a large role in the lives of these blind women. They play "let's pretend" games, touching, child-like dialogs in which famous persons stop them in the street to praise their singing and drop large donations into their cups.

In the course of the film, we show Baybie buying a doll in a Fifth Avenue store. Caressing it, she remembers the daughter she bore at the age of 19. The child was given up for adoption without Baybie's permission.

On New Year's eve we filmed Baybie, alone in her small room, dancing to the music of Guy Lombardo. At an advance screening, this scene evoked unexpected tears.

Baybie was on hand for that screening and enjoyed every minute of it. To her, the real show was all around her, not on the television screen. Best of all, she felt accepted.

"It felt warm," she said later. "I could hear them laugh. And I heard a few sobs . . . and I know they understood. I was so glad they didn't think, 'Oh, just a blind beggar.'"

Making a film about a blind woman was not without its perils. Thoughtlessly, a member of the film crew would move some personal possession of Baybie's to another area of her room. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, Baybie would call me at home and ask frantically, "Where is my belt?" Or her doll or her comb. On the other-hand, crew members often found small items Baybie had dropped on the floor. It was lovely, she said, to have the benefit of so many eyes. She also saved her mail for the crew to read to her.

One of Baybie's major worries was that we might inadvertently leave a light burning in her room after "a shoot." It happened now and then and, regrettably, the light would burn for days. Baybie worried about the effect of our carelessness on her utility bill. It seemed only natural to include, at the close of the film, Baybie's nightly farewell to me, "Marty, don't forget the lights."

As we were filming, strangers in the street occasionally got into our act. "Did you know a woman is following you with a camera?", a concerned citizen would ask.

As cinematographer Carol Bahoric filmed Virginia groping her way into a subway station, an outraged witness clutched her arm and demanded, "Why don't you help that poor woman?"

Since the showing of the film on PBS, Baybie and Ginger have been "discovered." People who once would have passed them silently now stop and ask for their autographs. Viewers from all parts of the country have sent them Christmas gifts, letters (some containing money) and other tokens of affection.

During the Christmas holidays, Baybie and Virginia visited Kansas, returning by way of Chicago. Visiting Marshall Field's (to add another doll to Baybie's collection), they were immediately surrounded by admirers who had seen the film. Shoppers pressed bills into their hands and offered seasonal greetings.

At a church service in Kansas, a young mother allowed Baybie to hold her five week old twins. Youngsters who had seen the film asked Baybie the names of her dolls and she recited them all. "We've been visiting that church for ten years," she told me, "and none of the children ever spoke to us before."

David Cuspard, a television writer in New Orleans, called Baybie in New York and chatted twenty minutes. Later he sent her a box of pralines and a note in Braille. "It was the first time a sighted person ever bothered to send a letter in Braille," Baybie marvelled.

Baybie and Virginia are back at their old stand, singing hymms, rattling their cups and "pitching," but it's clear that life is different now. After all, they've had their own show on TV.

---

*Martha Sandlin was graduated from Oklahoma University and holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Graduate Institute of Film and Television, New York University.*

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# What Happened to Fair Competition

**By LEONARD GOLDENSON**

In Washington, attitudes toward the television industry are changing. Within the industry, new technologies are rampant. Result: a challenge to traditional broadcasting.

What are the new technologies? They're unlike what preceded them. The new systems all cost the viewer money. They fall roughly into three categories.

One is cable television, sometimes called Community Antenna Television or CATV. Such a service usually provides subscribers with local station signals for a monthly fee. It comes into the home by wire.

A second is pay cable television, which is added on to regular cable and costs more money. Pay cable charges extra for certain channels that carry more current movies and sports.

Third is subscription television, sometimes called over-the-air Pay TV or STV. This system sends out a "scrambled" signal. For a monthly fee the subscriber gets a "decoder" for current movies and sporting events.

The change of philosophy in Washington was gradual. In the late 1960s, when the government first tried to devise ground rules for the new pay-TV development, its premise was that these new services should add to—not replace or damage—the existing system. Our policy makers recognized that cable and pay-TV were media which would never be available to all citizens. The cost of wiring the entire nation was prohibitive, and many citizens could not afford to pay for their television service.

Moreover, without some restrictions, it was feared that the most popular types of programs would gravitate to pay TV. So, in the late '60s, the FCC said that the new pay system could not siphon certain types of programs traditionally offered on free television—such as major sports events—and then offer them to the public for a charge.

The Commission also recognized the importance of local stations. It acted to maintain their viability. First, it limited the number of signals from distant markets which CATV could import. Second, it protected programs licensed exclusively to local stations. Moreover, the FCC—following the dictates of Congress in the 1962 all channel legislation—made it clear that development of UHF channels took precedence over the growth of cable and pay cable services.

From our point of view at ABC, the government in those days was acting within the tradition and intent of the original Congressional charter for television.

But more recently, in the second phase of television history which began in the early '70s, an FCC majority said, in effect: Let's put all systems in the same ring together. But, to balance competition, let's take free television, blindfold it, tie its hands behind its back, and pin it to the mat before we even start the match.

The record of these past few years is highly revealing, as well as troubling. Conventional cable, for example, has become a flourishing multibillion-dollar business in large part because it does not have to pay market prices for its programs. Before the 1976 Copyright Law, it paid nothing for the use of broadcast signals. Even with that law, as one observer has said, "The vast majority of cable operators pay more for postage stamps than for their programs." This is a government-forced subsidy. Cable is being given a free ride. The ones pulling the wagon are the program producers and broadcasters. Yet the FCC, which has the power to act, has transferred the problem to Congress. And Congress has not yet faced up to the matter.

Meanwhile, the FCC dropped two of the last vestiges of protection for the rights that program producers sell to local broadcasters, the so-called "syndicated exclusivity" and "distant signal" rules. With these rules gone, a cablecaster now can help himself to virtually any broadcast program anywhere in the country, regardless of the program owner's intent to limit the area in which the program may be shown.

Congress has declined to address this subject—even though pay cable is moving rapidly to a position from which it can outbid free, over-the-air television for the rights to most popular sports programs. If there is any doubt about pay TV's intentions, let me cite you a recent experience of ABC. In winning the rights to telecast the 1984 Summer Olympic Games, we were very mindful of the fact that the bid from pay TV was not far below our own. And the promoter behind that bid has been quoted as saying, with some contempt: "The American public thinks it has an inalienable right to watch everything free."

Which, of course, raises a basic issue: Does the Congress really want the public to pay for sports and entertainment it now receives free? Does a Congressman, or a Senator, or a President really want to run on a platform that calls for the public to pay for television programming it now receives free? Will the public support such a candidate?

Satellite-to-home broadcasting represents another potential source of conflict. So far, Washington has looked favorably on it. But satellite broadcasting, as now envisioned, would completely bypass local stations, which are a vital source of local news and public affairs programming. Again, neither Congress nor the FCC has faced up to

*(continued on page 88)*

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the economic, social and political consequences of such a drastic change.

For a moment, compare with me this record of unabashed promotion of cable and pay television. Compare it with the regulatory treatment of free television broadcasters.

- A television broadcaster may operate only one channel in a community; a cablecaster may operate 12, 20, 40 or even 78, as is contemplated in Pittsburgh.
- A television broadcaster may operate in no more than seven communities around the country; a cablecaster may operate in as many as he wants.
- A television broadcaster may operate only one national network; a cablecaster may operate as many as he has channels to accommodate.
- A television broadcaster may not own cable where he has a television station. And a television network may not own cable systems at all. A cablecaster may own cable systems and networks wherever he wants. Even a foreign national may now own and operate cable systems and networks in this country, thanks to a recent FCC decision.
- A television broadcaster must present a substantial amount of news and other public service programs; a cablecaster need not present any. On the other hand, we're not permitted to present pornographic material, not that we ever would—but a cable system is free to and sometimes does.
- A television broadcaster—even if he runs a subscription TV station—must produce his own programs or purchase them in the competitive marketplace; a cablecaster, for only a token payment, may help himself to any program a broadcaster has already made or purchased. The money he saves, of course, then can be used to buy the most desirable TV programs for his own pay system.

Clearly, what we have seen is a quiet but profound reversal in government policy. The government is promoting those systems which require the viewer to pay a fee. At the same time, it is placing new and more difficult burdens on free television stations and networks. Washington has tilted the balance—against free television and in favor of pay television.

Some say ABC opposes development of any new means of program distribution just to preserve the status quo. Nothing could be further from the truth.

We do not question that the new technologies can make a positive contribution. They should have an important place in American television. But it is vital to the health of our industry and the service we provide the public that they not prosper by stealing from the system that already exists. Likewise, it is vital that viewers not be discriminated against because of economic status or geographic location and be forced to pay for what they now get free.

Studies show that cable concentrates in the affluent neighborhoods rather than the inner city. This contrasts with free televison which has been available to all for many years. It is the most important source of news, information and entertainment in our society. Also bear in mind that the new technologies—either individually or in combination—are unlikely to be available to all of our citizens even by the end of this century.

We at ABC welcome competition in the television industry, but we believe strongly that in the 1980s the government must move to ensure that the competition be both fair and equitable for all parties.

Today, I propose a six-point program designed to let all parties compete fully and fairly in the television markets of the 1980s:

- First, the government should restore to the producers of television programs and those who buy the rights to those programs the same contractual privileges any other copyright holder enjoys. This can be achieved either by amending the Copyright Act of 1976 or changing the Communications Act. A change in the Copyright Act should provide full compensation when a cablecaster uses a broadcast program. Or the Communications Act should be amended to require the cablecaster to obtain retransmission consent for use of broadcast programs. Otherwise, local stations cannot be expected to continue to support the broad range of services their communities have come to expect.
- Second, the Commission should repeal its multiple ownership restrictions in broadcasting. If cable operators are free to program up to 78 channels in as many markets as they wish, then surely broadcasters should not be limited to one channel in seven markets. If a multisystem operator can own a cable system in every community, then surely there is no justification to restrict broadcasters—or newspaper owners. To restrict one competitor while leaving others free makes no sense and serves no public purpose.
- Third, the FCC should repeal all rules restricting

broadcaster participation in cable ownership. Specifically, it should remove the ban against ownership of both broadcasting and cable facilities in the same market. It also should lift the ban against network ownership of cable.

- Fourth, the Commission should permit any television station the right to offer over-the-air subscription service. Specifically, it should eliminate the present requirement for a minimum number of stations in an area before subscription television is authorized.
- Fifth, the Justice Department should dismiss its antitrust suit against the National Association of Broadcasters. This case boggles the mind. It challenges that part of the NAB Television Code which voluntarily limits the number of commercials on the air. If it succeeds, we'll either have more commercials or more direct government regulation—a classic case of the government stepping in to fix something that's not broken.
- Finally, I propose that the FCC relax its rules that now restrict television networking. Let the networks contribute to further program diversity by offering a second network service—perhaps one of more specialized appeal. In the end, we'll have a more competitive system, and the American people will be the beneficiaries.

The new directions I am proposing would correct the imbalance struck in government policy over the past several years. Such conditions would permit everyone to compete fully and fairly in a free marketplace. Most importantly, all the American public could continue to receive maximum benefits from the traditional free television system, while at the same time the opportunities of the new technologies are becoming more fully developed.

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*Leonard Goldenson is chairman of the board and chief excecutive officer of the American Broadcasting Company.*

*The preceding article was adapted from an address delivered by Mr. Goldenson before the National Press Club in Washington on September 17.*

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